

Xpressions Café—Looking Forward

Part Two: Discipleship

This is the second of three papers looking at Xpressions Café. The first laid out the principles underlying the design of the Café and tried to make explicit the nature of its 'target audience'. The third paper will look at some aspects of how we attempt to provide an experience which will connect with that target audience. In this paper I want to consider how we might help those who come to the Café to progress as disciples of Jesus.

In order for Xpressions Café to become an authentic expression of church in its own right we need to enable discipleship and growth. Below I offer some thoughts about how we might start to do this, based on the 'Believing-Belonging-Behaving' model. This model became popular after a book by Grace Davie, subtitled *Believing Without Belonging*, in which she pointed out that lots of people claim belief in God without ever belonging to any organised religion.

Traditionally, it was accepted that people came first to belief, then joined a church (belonging) and after a time started to behave like Christians living in the kingdom. But those working in fresh expressions of church began to notice that many people seemed to belong before they believed, with behaving coming later still. More recently we have come to see that the unchurched may start behaving before belonging or believing (by joining in with a Christian social action project, for instance) and that actually people's entry point into Christian faith may come through any one of the three Bs. For this reason we need to pay attention to all of them.

Believing

Graham Tomlin (Spencer & Tomlin 2005:126ff) suggests that the early church offered three different kinds of instruction: doctrinal, moral, and spiritual. We are attempting to do this in Xpressions Café but in an unsystematic way. By basing each Café on a theme (usually based on the set readings for the day) we offer exposition of basic doctrine, morality and spirituality each time we meet together. Indeed, Xpressions Café offers an example of 'sermonless preaching', also found in some forms of alternative worship (Baker 2009) and in scripture-based liturgy (Tarrant 2003)

However, we need to ask if there is a need for more explicit and systematic teaching. I think that there is, if only to help people make sense of the teaching they may have absorbed during sessions at the Café. How, though, should we do this? We have offered the Alpha course but the take-up has been small and probably always will be. I think that it feels like quite a commitment to many of the Café congregation.

Could we offer little instructional sessions at the Café? If so, how might these work—and would anyone come to them? Perhaps ten-minute 'taster sessions' might appeal: some simple teaching on key issues of interest such as, "Does God exist?"; "Is the Bible More Than a Collection of Fairy Stories?"; "Where is God When it Hurts?"; "How Can a Good God Allow Bad Things to Happen?"; "Did Jesus Really Exist?"; "What Did Jesus Really Say?". It would need care and prayer to prepare such sessions but they could be worth while.

Behaving

Discipleship was at the heart of a proposal to invite the Xpressions Café congregation to participate in some kind of social action. Although aimed especially at the Café core, it was felt that some others—especially non-attending partners of Café people—might be drawn in to help as well.

The specific proposal, intended only as an example of what might be done, was to choose a street and a day and to visit houses on that day and ask them if we could help in any way. The intention was to leaflet the street before the day, outlining the scheme and suggesting areas in which we could help (gardening, odd jobs, filling in forms, help with a computer, and so on). At the end of the day the whole team would finish with shared tea and cakes. In this way we could start acting as a kingdom community while also building up our own sense of identity.

There was a suggestion that we introduce the idea at the first Loddon Café (largely because of the *Committed to Growth* theme) but there was some opposition to the proposals and they were dropped until a greater consensus could be reached. Nevertheless, the possibility of joint action is one which might well help build discipleship within the Café congregation and it is worth exploring further.

Belonging

We have inadvertently created a very complex form of church. (Indeed, we could say that Xpressions Café is a mixed economy Fresh Expression of Church, with multiple overlapping congregations!) That is because there are those whose only form of church is Xpressions Café (mainly the unchurched and dechurched) and also those who attend other Sunday services, usually in the Chet Valley (core and fringe).

Within the core, Café-only, congregation there are some people who come regularly; some who come occasionally; and some who have been only once. Not only that, there are some core Café people who come only to Xpresso; some who come only to Xpresso and Xplore; some who come only to Xpresso and Xpressions; and some who come to all three. The common factor is Xpresso but our policy decision to keep this as a neutral zone means that it is not an easy place or time in which to build an intentional Jesus-focused community. Given all this, how might we help build a sense of real community among the Xpressions Café core?

A number of possibilities occur to me:

- Events such as those Alison runs for Xpressions. The video screenings have been particularly good in bringing together a range of churched, dechurched and unchurched people.
- We could set up an Xpressions Café website (xpressionscafe.org is currently available).
- We could create an Xpressions Café group on Facebook.
- We could have membership cards or a membership list (voluntary of course) for which people sign up.
- We could do a survey about the Café.
- We could create a mailing list (voluntary) and keep people up to date with Xpressions Café events.
- If we look at Alternative Worship communities we see that leadership is shared in a way which doesn't yet happen in Café. There is still a 'them and us' to a great extent and those who come tend to be consumers of Café rather than true participants. Could we do more to involve the Café congregation in its leadership? We have had some success in this area; I would like to see us do more to encourage people in the core Café congregation into leadership, in Xplore as well as Xpressions.

Conclusion

Henry Venn, who was honorary secretary of the Church Missionary Society from 1841 to 1873, argued that a mature church should be self-propagating, self-resourcing and self-governing. Given this, we can see that Xpressions Café has a very long way to go before it could be considered a mature expression of church. This should not surprise us or discourage us but it does offer a challenge to take discipleship seriously.

References

- Baker, Jonny 2009, *Transforming Preaching: Communicating God's Word in a Postmodern World*, Evangelism Series Ev86, Cambridge: Grove Books.
- Davie, Grace 1994, *Religion in Britain Since 1945: Believing Without Belonging*, Oxford: Blackwell.
- Spencer, Nick & Tomlin, Graham 2005, *The Responsive Church: Listening to Our World, Listening to God*, Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press.
- Tarrant, Ian 2003, *Scripture-Based Liturgies*, Worship Series W175, Cambridge: Grove Books.