

Flourishing Congregations; what do flourishing congregations look like and what steps might we take as ministers to provide the best environment and opportunities for congregations to flourish?

Just to begin with terminology, in all of this by congregation we might mean a variety of communities, a small missional group, a FX or a regular congregation. Second, there are quite a few resources out there to help congregations to flourish in particular ways. Take the Suffolk FX community – ABCDE Good list. Or Leading Your Church into Growth course – has some eminently sensible suggestions about becoming a more loving community for example

1. *Establishing a family culture/atmosphere*
2. *Creating a good welcoming/entry experience*
3. *Finding the right sort of small group pattern*
4. *Maintaining effective pastoral care, primarily of church members*
5. *Caring for children and teenagers*

I'm for all of that, but I want to start a bit further back than this.

I want to begin by questioning any presumption that by providing the right sorts of structures, projects and strategies we will generate a flourishing Christian community. Indeed one of the reasons we are confused about community is we make it primarily about us – we labour under the illusion that by what we bring to the table we can create community – by a compelling vision, the right small groups, jazzy worship, food with everything....and then we're disappointed when things fall apart or relationships fail to satisfy. After all, as Mary Karr put it, "a dysfunctional family is any family with more than one member". Dietrich Bonhoeffer says "innumerable times a whole Christian community has been broken down because it has sprung from a wish-dream...but God's grace speedily shatters such dreams. Just as surely as God desires to lead us to a knowledge of genuine Christian fellowship, so surely we must be overwhelmed by a great disillusionment with others, with Christians in general, and if we are fortunate, with ourselves".

This sounds strange doesn't it, but the more one thinks about it, the more it makes sense – CHRISTIAN community is not and never can be about ourselves and fixing ourselves however clever our plans ...when our dreams about community are dashed on the jagged reef of human limitations and failure to live up to one another's needs and expectations, then and probably only then might we be ready to accept the fact that Christian community is not about us at all. It is about the transforming presence of Christ – all HE can do in and through us, together. So Bonhoeffer can say "the very hour of disillusionment with my brother or sister becomes incomparably salutary, because it so thoroughly teaches me that neither of us can live by our own words and deeds, but only by that one Word and Deed which really binds us together...When the morning mists of dreams vanish, then dawns the bright day of Christian fellowship".

Of course there are plenty of people, even within a Christian community, who do not want to grant hospitality to Jesus and be bound together in Him. I imagine this is why in Benedictine communities as well as in the early Wesleyan bands of believers the operative question for those wanting to join the community was "do you seek God?" What draws people to such a community is reciprocity of desire, God's desire and their desire. Having been touched by God's desire, they want to make their desire for God the determining factor of all they do and they recognise this needs others' help...shared desire to be transformed in and through Christ's presence is the essence of transforming community – it is the "one true thing" for each individual and for the group as it gathers – as Augustine put it "the entire life of a good Christian is never less than holy desire". Of course we are not all good Christians in our churches, we ourselves are not, but a truly flourishing congregation keeps in one way or another coming back to the one true thing, and learn to ask each other penetrating questions and support one another in responding faithfully to God's invitations; not least this is a community which underneath the activity, the noise the drivenness of life, helps them to pay attention, paying attention to the God who is with us.

And underneath this there is an important distinction between presuming the community is here to serve my needs – bad assumption, and the presumption that the community exists for us to be shaped by God and to shape one another, and thus provide encouragement and accountability for each of us – good assumption.

What does Heb 10.24-25 say? "Let us consider how to provoke one another to love and good deeds, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another". "Let us consider" – ie we need to think about how we could encourage our fellow Christ-followers, indeed we carry a responsibility to one another to lead one another towards godliness, towards the one true thing.

That's why somewhere, some time we need space for conversations with one another that have some depth, whether in missional groups, cell groups, huddles, whatever. Take the two disciples on the road to Emmaus. They had just had their wish dream about what life with Jesus was like shattered – violently ripped from them, and yet in granting hospitality to the stranger who walked with them a new future dawned. Those two disciples are instructive – they were willing to walk together and speak honestly about all these things that had happened – a willingness to walk together and speak honestly about the fundamental issues of their lives ...which very activity sees Jesus drawing near. The disciples on the Road to Emmaus were discussing the stuff of their lives ...what had happened that was having such an impact on them spiritually and in every other way – and something about the nature and quality of their conversation opened up space for Jesus to draw near...and through a slow process of recognition resulted in an encounter that was life-changing. This is of the essence for a flourishing Christian community – before Jesus draws near we merely have a human community but as Jesus draws near it becomes a Christian community...as we discover ways to open to Jesus' transforming presence on the road between the now and the not yet, it becomes a transforming community.

So let's look at some ways that we begin to allow the Word, the person of Jesus Christ to bind us together, whereby the "one true thing" is what we return to continually.

First Jesus and his teaching are truly central. You know, taking loving our enemies and other stuff Jesus says seriously.

I find out that Joan Smith hates my guts and is attacking me behind my back – only through the Word can we say “Lord, at last an opportunity to realise your command to love those who despise me”, strengthen me so to do, to seek the good of Joan. But it needs the transformative presence of the Spirit and our hospitality to the Spirit.

The Church is about Jesus at the centre and our willingness to let Jesus sound through us and to see Jesus in those around us, it is about following Jesus. Loving enemies, loving Joan Smith. John Wesley in one sermon offered 5 ways we can show love for those with whom we differ or disagree;

1. Treat them as companions
2. Do not think or speak evil of them
3. Pray for them
4. Encourage them to do good
5. Collaborate with them in ministry

When that begins to happen Jesus is beginning to take centre stage and the bright day of Christian fellowship is beginning.

You may say, “oh I wish I was in a different community then” but you know rarely is the grass greener “over there”; if you don’t work out your problems with this person, you’ll only have to work them out with that person. That’s why the discipline of stability as a part of discipleship is important – having to work things out, which demands growth, change and pain....maybe this stability and faithfulness within a community stops us running and enables us to encounter God self and other right here, right now ...ironically it might be the failure to commit ourselves that blocks creativity in the spiritual life, in the relational life.

Another feature of this making Jesus central might be to understand ourselves as sent by him, as in Luke 10, to be Good News and to proclaim it to others. An example I gave at Synod last week was Louisa, a community nurse working in a medical practice in England’s East Midlands. She knew that an unusually high proportion of young mothers had postnatal depression. She mentioned this to fellow Christians Charlie and Charlotte, who lived in the neighborhood. During the conversation, the idea emerged of inviting the mothers and their young children to Charlie and Charlotte’s home once a week. The mothers could form a support group, with Louisa in attendance.

It soon became clear that the mothers would value meeting for mutual support without their children. So they were invited to a regular evening meeting, were offered a menu of formats, and the mothers decided to watch a video about lives that had been changed by God. Step by step, this group then evolved into a new form of church.

If you had asked Louisa to plant a church, she would have run a mile! But start a support group as part of being a community nurse was easy. It did not require lots of extra time and work. It added value to what she was already doing, enriched her and others.

But in whatever ways, we are taking Jesus seriously as the One who knows what He is talking about and on whose words we are to hang.

Second, and relatedly developing culture of care, care beyond the politeness or niceties of your average golf club or pilates class, a culture of care. We each have a responsibility here.

The staggering growth of Christianity is partly down to the care and compassion Christians exhibited, not just for one another, but for pagans too, especially in situations of epidemics when others fled for the hills, Christians stayed and nursed the sick, care.

Care, really care for those around you – or in business parlance value people. You look at Jesus and compare him with other religious leaders, the character of Jesus stands out in how he related to his followers. He's pretty much out on his own as a leader willing to die for his followers. And indeed who sought to engender in His followers the love he himself embodied – a love amply described in 1 Corinthians 13.

Valuing each other in ways which find concrete expression. For members of the community to be thinking of ways to value the people around them. The Christian writer John Maxwell tells of his 7 yr old grandson who decided one day that he would hold the door open for people whenever he could that day and say to them "have a great day" as they went through. On the phone to his grandfather that evening he said " grandpa, I held the door open 44 times". We see what we're looking for – and he was looking for people to add value to them and their day. Think of ways to add value, look for ways to add value, act to add value and by so doing we encourage others to add value.

And how we look at people can help or hinder us in this. In his biography *The Pastor* the Presbyterian minister Eugene Peterson says that after he and a company of local church leaders had been meeting together for 12 years for prayer and conversation the question was asked, "what's the most important thing we've learned together". One church leader said immediately "to look at and understand my congregation as a holy congregation. That has revolutionized the way I have gone about my work. Treating my congregations with respect and dignity. I think 'holy' is the right word". Consensus was immediate. What's interesting about this is how changing way those pastors saw those around them transformed the way they went about their work – what's the frame that enables you to value others?

Now you might say "oh yeah, this is obvious – caring – and of course I do that". But wait a minute, we all internalise the cultures of which we are a part – that's how cultures exist, by our propagating them, and there are plenty of communal cultures that are not what you might call "caring". As one of the great scholars of organisational culture, Edgar Schein, says, "if you want to understand an organization's culture, go to a meeting" Who speaks and who does not? Who is listened to and who is not? Which issues are addressed directly and which are ignored or addressed tacitly? All powerful clues to how an organization functions and which we need to look at and address if particular values such as caring are to be cultivated. And of course hidden behind these remarks are another responsibility we each have, which is about the willingness and ability to step back and check out the culture, the

system that is operating in the community and consider what might need addressing, subverting or constructively disrupting..

Third, being other-focused rather than self-focused.

Notices are a dead giveaway....

I once asked a pastor, "if the life of discipleship of Jesus really takes root in a community of people, in a local church for example, how would you know if it was really making a difference?" He said "in committee meetings". One way he meant was you could see from such a meeting whether the dominant desire of a community was its own needs OR the needs of others, the point being that a flourishing congregation has confidence in a great future – in God we are safe and secure and released from self-focus to focus on others. The flourishing congregation is not marked by its longevity but by its love, its success not by its size but its service; we are founded by a person who came and served and then died for the good of others – be an interesting mission statement for a church to say "we exist to serve others and then die, just like our Founder, and rise with Him".

What is the single most important task of a Christian? I remember a theologian I had studied closely, saintly man, giving a talk and was asked this at the end. My mind raced through his works – "hmm, he'll say holy habits, scripture memorisation maybe, silence and solitude..." but no, he leaned into the mic and said "the most important task we have, especially for those in church leadership, is to pray for the success of our neighbouring churches". Hmm, really? What about the poor, prayer, mission, blah blah blah. Later he explained when we pray for the success of churches in our proximity we are breaking the narrative of selfishness and entering into the mind of God, who is also praying for the success of those churches...puts us in sync with the Kingdom of God. So pray for your RC church, that small Pentecostal Church and bishops, pray for Norwich Diocese, Ely diocese.

This being other-focused is picked up in our developing Suffolk Fresh Expressions Community. The values we espouse are ABCDE, All Involved, Becoming Disciples, Creating Community, Doing Evangelism, Encountering God and in different ways all of these are outward-focused. To some extent it's easier for a new FX to be outward-focused because its whole DNA starts off with this in mind, reaching out to others. For more traditional ways of being church the shift from an inward focus to an outward focus depends on a number of shifts, not least in language and attitude. Is my gift to the Church "to pay the bills" or is it a response to God's generosity wanting to join in with God's work? In terms of the building – is the question "how can we keep this building going?" or is it how can we share love of God with those around us and what does our building need to be to aid that?" Is the question "how can we keep all these activities up?" or "what and who in particular is God sending us to and how do our programmes reflect that?" Is the decision-making about pleasing the insider or engaging the outsider. Are we saying by our welcome "prove you're one of us and we'll consider engaging with you?" or "enrich us by who you are?"

Developing this outward focus is challenging. Some churches start by getting people to go away together on a course like LYCiG or even a mission. Or organise a survey of people on the street about their views as way of engagement. Some develop a Fresh Expression or community engagement project. One leader of a large church notable for its evangelistic effectiveness said that congregations don't need to be exhorted to do evangelism but in

their terminology rather to have cultivated and prayed into them a heart for the lost. This echoes the pastoral model of the Good Shepherd – a model consistently preoccupied with the lost, underlined in Luke with the lost coin, lost son as well as lost sheep. To be pastoral is to be concerned for finding the lost. And behind the approach is the question related to our earlier theme; namely “do we really care?”

User-friendly worship is of course another aspect of this – a willingness to forego my tastes for the sake of others - something which will only happen if we have a heart for the lost, the outsider, those not here. This is a key conversation and a moment of some significance – even to own the fact “I have no heart for the outsider – does that mean my faith is fraudulent?” is the start of a new and fresh conversation and possibility.

In all of this we need to remember that not everyone will be on board with outward-focused approaches. Benjamin Franklin said there are three types of people, the immovable, the moveable, and people who move – won't have all movers in your congregation but stats suggest if 20% are movers, things will move.

Fourth, a flourishing congregation is characteristically more grateful than grumpy. We understand we live in a world numinous with the presence of God, basking in the love of the divine, appreciating all is gift and there is yet always more being given by our inexhaustibly generous God. As we imbibe the Good News of what God has done, is doing and will do in our lives we will be thankful. But me saying this won't make gratitude happen, endless sermons exhorting people to be thankful won't make it happen, what makes it happen is by doing it - gratitude is not automatic, it is one of those characteristics which only grows as we exercise it, like a muscle, as verified by neurologists in their examinations of the neuroplasticity of the brain.

In fact more grateful people become even more grateful people – this is partly what Jesus is getting at when he says “to those who have more will be given”. So we need to practice it and provide people with training – C25K in gratitude – deepening such grooves in our minds by various practices (individually especially at the end of the day or the beginning of the day....words of thanks, vocally expressed). We need to think as well as feel gratitude, becoming dissatisfied with dissatisfaction, crave non-craving. If you or the people around you are consumed with complaint or grudge or dissatisfaction then realise the very recognition of this is a grace – as is the awareness that, as a habit of heart and mind it delivers nothing but misery. Look for good examples of gratitude – get them speaking more, promote them. Try a Lenten discipline of thankfulness to someone every day. Contribute to the graffiti wall of thankfulness – OVER THERE! Register how in different ways your church building is full of gratitude, in the memorials, the dedications, the plaques and so on.

Prayer too often omits the crucial component of gratitude so why not require intercessors to have prayers of gratitude in there.

A Jewish traditional prayer of gratitude is sung every Passover, recounting the events by which God freed them from Egypt and led them to the Promised Land. The refrain of the song is in Hebrew Dayenu, which can be translated as It would have been enough. If you had only led us to the edge of the Red Sea but not taken us through the waters, it would have been enough. If you had only taken us through the Red Sea but not led us through the desert, it would have been enough.

If you had only led us through the desert but not taken us to Sinai, it would have been enough. And so on. We could use this in our own communities too, If I had only been born but not had a baby sister, it would have been enough. If I had only had a baby sister but not my first friend, it would have been enough. If I had only seen one snowfall, but not the pink sky over a blue sea, it would have been enough.... And to construct such a prayer for your community..

Fifth characteristic and incidentally this is the characteristic which is true of nearly all growing congregations I've come across and statistically verified too, whatever the tradition. It's joy, which includes laughter and celebration. Crafty way of getting people smiling; one quick trick discovered by Fritz Strack in 1988 is that you find things funnier if you are forced into a smile by having a pen in your mouth.(SLIDE)

And I place it after gratitude because it is not joy that generates gratitude you know, but gratitude that generates joy. For example, in his book *How Pleasure Works* the author Paul Bloom argues that what matters most for pleasure is not the simple impact on our senses but what it means in relationship to other people who matter to us. So a painting we think is an original by an admired artist gives less pleasure when we find out it is not. A chair may be comfortable, but if it is our mother's favourite chair from her sitting room, it will give us even more pleasure. To use theological language " we enjoy things most when we experience them as a sacrament – as carriers of the presence of another". We will enjoy life all the more for associating it with the One who enables it to happen. In short, to see all things as a free gift from our Father and a foretaste of the glory and goodness to come deepens our joy when truly entered into; attachment to God amplifying and deepening our enjoyment of the world, not diminishing it.

If you read Desmond Tutu's and the Dalai Lama's "book of Joy" you'll find eight different elements which they call the pillars of joy, including compassion, generosity, humour, sense of perspective, humility and others. Again a flourishing congregation is simply exuding the gospel in being joyful, where by joyful I mean a pervasive and constant sense of well-being that is infused with hope because of the goodness of God. (Willard)

It might be difficult to cultivate joy in a direct way in a congregation, but an element of contentment and joy one can cultivate is **celebration**. Jesus says heaven is a place of joy, not least when one sinner repents, and his stories are marked with celebration whether it be the result of finding a lost coin, a lost sheep or a prodigal coming home. Did you know that research suggests that marriages are more influenced by how you celebrate than how you fight? That is to say, if you take pleasure and enjoy and savour one another's successes, that means you're more likely to have a strong marriage than if you're the greatest conflict resolvers. It's a big deal. Your partner comes home and says "I got promotion at work today" then do not say "what's for dinner?" but "Fantastic, we've got to celebrate, how about that Mexican place you said you wanted to try?".

Knowing how to party is a sign of flourishing and again, bespeaks the gospel oozing out of a congregation.

Sixth Getting our thinking right, about money, worship, prayer etc.

Take worship. A flourishing congregation is not one that does not see worship as an obligation we owe to God but an invitation given by God, yet another gift from the gracious God who bids us come and enjoy His beauty and goodness. If when we think of our God we are not joyful then there remains something wrong with our understanding of God. Delight yourself in the Lord Ps 31.4, Be glad in the Lord and rejoice Ps 32.11, "these things I have spoken to you so that my joy may be in you and your joy may be full" Jn 15.11 and so on. C.S.Lewis got it right when he said

It would seem that Our Lord finds our desires not too strong, but too weak. We are half-hearted creatures, fooling about with drink and sex and ambition when infinite joy is offered us, like an ignorant child who wants to go on making mud pies in a slum because he cannot imagine what is meant by the offer of a holiday at the sea. We are far too easily pleased. We have accustomed ourselves to meagre, short-lived pleasures such that our capacity for joy is shrivelled. We hear those words of Mt 6.19-20 Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal; ²⁰but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal. And what do we think? Oh dear, I need to forgo pleasure now for pleasure in heaven. NO! you bankers, you hoarders, you greedy gobble gannets you are not nearly hedonistic enough – don't we realise the deeper joy that it is more blessed to give than to receive (Acts 20.35), that as we are swept up into God's life, infinite waves of compassion, generosity, celebration, forgiveness rolling over us, deepening our joy way beyond what the world claims as our sources of joy.

But we will only get our worship of God right if we think appropriately of God – getting our thinking right about God. scripture is replete with commands to praise God, not least because when you think of the most wonderful, magnanimous, thrilling, vibrant personal company and multiply by infinity and you get a glimpse of what God is about and what He was before foundation of earth was a twinkle in his eye, and what he'll continue to be for ever. The old criticism that God must have a fragile ego to require praise and reassurance does not hold. The reason for our celebration of God, our praise of God is because by it we more truly apprehend God's reality and by it we respond to the beauty of that reality and are transformed by it. Think of Jesus – incomparable because in Him we meet infinite glory and lowest humility, amazing majesty and incredible meekness, deepest reverence towards God and equality with God, pure goodness and greatest patience to suffer evil, supreme authority and exceeding obedience, divine power and child-like trust – wow!

If we think right about God we'll praise and this completes our joy. We can't help but praise and rejoice in what we most enjoy, whether it's a beautiful view, a great meal or a wonderful new baby. The enjoyment is stunted if it is not expressed. The praise as C.S.Lewis puts it, does not merely express the enjoyment – it is its appointed consummation. God's pursuit of our praise is not weak self-seeking but the epitome of self-giving for our joy! Our satisfaction in God is incomplete until expressed in praise of Him and so God seeks to elicit our praise as the most loving thing he could do for us! We are made to celebrate, celebrate our life and world in conjunction with our faith and confidence in God's greatness, goodness and beauty.

I've focused here on characteristics of the flourishing Christian community but there are other ways of framing flourishing communities – for instance those that provide for the four dimensions of engaging with God - Connect (Sowing1), Nurture (Sowing 2), Commit (Reaping), Grow (Keeping)

OR

- One - About our relationships with each other
- Holy - About Our Relationship with God - Obedience to his Word and Expectancy in Worship and Prayer
- Catholic - About our connectedness with other expressions of church down the ages and across the world and in our locality with those different in style
- Apostolic - About being sent in God's mission, including evangelism and reproducing