

Making space for others

Overcrowding

Have you ever got on a bus, tram or train and found it was standing room only? Uncomfortable, isn't it? Your personal space encroached on. That feeling of total strangers being far closer than you'd like them to be. Claustrophobia kicking in. It's a reminder that we are all very fond of our own personal space these days. That's true in our personal lives, in which increasingly so much of our time is spent in retreat behind a closed front door. We don't like to be overcrowded. And yet, often our church life has become crowded, cluttered and busy. So many more things to do, a lot less people to do them. So many things we want to add, so few we want to stop. So much more time spent behind the four walls, rather than in taking the gospel beyond to the four corners of the world.

FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

Q. Describe a time when you felt your personal space had been encroached upon. How did that feel?

Might it have been the same for the first two passers-by in Jesus' story of the Good Samaritan who encountered the man who had been robbed and beaten? It was no accident that Jesus cast them in the roles of priest and Levite, busy, committed members of the church establishment of his day. Did they really have the time to make space for this man and his needs? Did they really

have space to love their neighbour as much as they loved themselves? Maybe the even more searching question is, did they really have space in their hearts to love him more than they loved their nice, neat, tidy, timetabled church life?

FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

Q. Talk about the balance of time and energy in your congregation's life. What proportion of it is expended on church members compared to others? How do you feel about what you see?

Creating space to read a familiar story once again

The story of the Good Samaritan in Luke 10:25-37 is one of the best known in the Bible. In it, Jesus is answering a question from an expert in the law of the Old Testament about how to inherit eternal life. In conversation with Jesus, he shows himself to be a bit smug about how good a follower of Jesus he is. He knows all the right answers about loving God and others. But Jesus unmasks his choosiness about who he regards as

his neighbour, who he is willing to make space to love, with the story he tells.

As ever, Jesus never wastes a word in the telling of his story. Every scene has something to convey. But we miss that by allowing our minds to rush ahead to what we know is going to happen next. So, slow down. Create a little space. Linger in the story. Notice the details.

READ LUKE 10:25-37

Making space in our church life vv31-33

Maintaining church life can so stretch us that any space to think about others is squeezed out. We have worship, fellowship, Bible study, prayer and pastoral care to organise. Harvest, Christmas and Easter services to take care of. All of it can so turn us in on ourselves that there is no space in our church life to reach out in love to others who God brings us to encounter. However unintentionally, like the priest and Levite in Jesus' story, we create the impression that we are too busy caring about church to care for them. We replay the tragic side of Jesus' story and fail to show his love.

FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

Q. Space to love others in any church's life will not appear by accident. It has to be created, usually at the expense of the expectations of some members. What areas of church life occur to you that could be streamlined or even stopped to give a better balance between "loving our neighbour and loving ourselves"?

Making space to care vv33-34

It takes a while to really care about others. In this story, Jesus sets out three things that need to happen if we are to create space in our hearts to care for others. We need to go, see and feel. The Samaritan comes “to where the man was”. If we are to care for others, we can’t do it from a distance. We need to go to where they are. Put ourselves in their place. Get a sense of what it feels like to stand in their shoes.

Then, he also “saw him”. Unlike the priest and Levite, who also saw this man, the Samaritan allows his gaze to linger on the scene. He doesn’t quickly, or easily, turn away. If we are to care for others, we too need to have eyes that are open to need. Eyes that see beyond the immediate situation to the story that has unfolded in another person’s life over a period to bring them to where they are today. Eyes that see what might be done to enter into the situation with judgment suspended and love sustained.

Thirdly, the Samaritan “took pity on him”. He empathised with the wounded stranger. His heart

went out to him before his hand reached out to him. Isn’t it always that way around?

These three things – going, seeing, feeling – moved the Samaritan into action to care for the wounded stranger with what he had: a makeshift bandage, some oil and wine as antiseptic.

FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

Q. In what ways through your church’s life have you come to better inhabit, see and feel what it is like to stand in the shoes of someone whose background, life or experience is very different from your own?

Q. Give some examples of how your church is trying to meet the practical needs of non-members.


Making space at our own expense vv34-35

Let’s not miss the final details of Jesus’ story. They are little acts of kindness all offered at the Samaritan’s own expense. Firstly, he walks while the wounded man gets to ride on his donkey. Secondly, he is undoubtedly slowed down on his own journey, maybe even taken out of his way, to get the man to the inn. When he gets him there he pays for his keep and care and even that’s not all. He promises to come back to pick up any further expenses. This is no one-off foray into ‘do-goodary’. Making space to care costs in the moment and for the longer haul. Care for others that counts and makes a difference in their lives always does. We shouldn’t expect that rising to

Jesus’ challenge to “go and do likewise” offers anything less today.

FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

Q. Talk about a time when caring for someone else seemed inconvenient and costly. How does Jesus’ story of the Good Samaritan both challenge you to care and encourage you as you pay the price of doing so?

 Watch this short clip where one congregation describes how they have made space for others by both reshaping their church building and their approach to Sunday worship.



FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

Q. How might your congregation make its physical space more welcoming and homely for those coming in from outside?

Q. How might your congregation create pathways from the first point of contact at the tea table to the coming to express faith at the Lord's Table? What barriers might make that journey longer and more difficult than it needs to be?

Q. "On a Sunday when we explain everything that we are doing, when we work hard to explain what it means... we are doing the hard work so that people who aren't used to coming in know that they are welcome." What are the parts of our church and worshipping life that we might need to work harder at making understandable and accessible to others?

POINTERS FOR PRAYER



- Pray that we would learn to love our neighbours, whoever they are, and develop eyes to see, hearts to feel and ways to care for them.
- Pray for the particular activities in which our congregation tries to rise to the challenge of Jesus to "go and do likewise", expressing God's love to others who are not members of our church.
- Pray for a better balance in our church's life between how we express love for ourselves and how we make space to express it to others. Ask God to give us the love, courage and sensitivity to take the necessary steps to achieve it.
- Pray for those who walk alongside others with Christ's love, that he would sustain them in the costly realities of mirroring his love which never fails.