

Where next??

Phil Jump asks whether 'church' can be more effective by offering advice, support and challenge to a wide range of community groups which are already engaged in seeking spiritual wellbeing and doing good works.

I'll never forget my first visit to Anglo Felt, a small manufacturing company situated in one of the mill towns strung along the once disputed Lancashire/ Yorkshire Border. I was there to find out more about the recently established chaplaincy, put in place by Managing Director Simon Macaulay¹.

Simon had recently moved to the North West after inheriting his father's company, and by a varied sequence of events found his way onto an Alpha course, through which he had become a seriously committed Christian. Through that experience, he was challenged to explore how his new-found faith should impact his daily life – no small consideration when you've just taken over the family business!

But he had risen well to the challenge, and the chaplaincy was more than just a regular call from a member of the local clergy, but a key element in the spiritual wellbeing of the workforce. In fact, one or two people I met there had discovered or re-discovered faith in a way that was not so much attributed to the endeavours of the chaplain alone, but by being part of the workforce at Anglo Felt.

However, there is one particular line in our conversation that I have never forgotten. It was as we discussed the spiritual well-being of employees that the Managing Director stated, "What concerns me is who looks after these people spiritually at weekends when the mill is closed!"

In response, I managed to point out that there would probably be several churches around who at the very least were likely to be open on Sundays. But it was a true moment of realisation through which it became clear that, while there was absolutely no animosity between the company and surrounding churches, they had never before considered each other as part of the broader Christian community in the town.

I found myself recalling that conversation as I reflected on our experience of the recent Covid Pandemic, and in particular the response of churches, businesses and communities alike to the realities of lockdown. Church buildings had closed, in common with pubs, restaurants and many other public spaces, while at the

same time all manner of organisations had stepped up to the plate and begun to organise the kind of things that churches might once have assumed to be pretty much their sole concern.

What particularly struck me in this respect was not simply what was being done, but the reasoning that lay behind it. So, for example, the legendary morning workouts with Joe Wicks were presented as more than just a matter of keeping in physical shape, but a key element in our wellbeing and a source of cohesion for isolated families. It could easily be described as a social-media enabled chaplaincy – checking in on millions of households (or at least creating that impression) to check that everyone was OK. There was very much a spiritual agenda underlying these physical activities.

And while in one place, a community might rightly celebrate the crucial work being done by a church-based foodbank, in another a similar enterprise sprung up through the collaborative endeavours of a group of local pubs and restaurants. Whereas in decades past, the Church – or at least a recognised faith community





– might be seen as the key initiator of such acts of human kindness, we found ourselves portrayed in a very different light, just one of many examples of the goodness and care that the human spirit is able to foster unaided.

Boundaries seemed to have become very blurred as churches ceased doing many of the activities they had traditionally done, yet still saw themselves as the Church – while all kinds of business and community groups began to arrange such activities without anyone ever describing it in the remotest of religious terms. It left me with some serious questions about the role and relevance of Church in broader society once the crisis was over.


It is with some hesitation that I describe us as now moving into a post-Covid era, but it does feel as if we can at least now manage the pandemic and begin to imagine a world that is no longer defined by its spread. It is a world into which many churches are emerging with big questions about their purpose and in many cases, sustainability. This in turn raises questions for those of us engaged in parachurch groups and networks including Faith in Business and ICF.

1. See FIBQ 19.1, pp5-12 for an article on Anglo Felt by Peter Riley

As local congregations increasingly struggle to sustain and organise local church life (partly through decline and partly because for many, the experience of lockdown has left them asking why they invest so much time and energy into the organisational and institutional aspects of their Christian service) perhaps we need some radical and creative thought around what partnership or indeed what “church” might look like in the future.

The world of business has not only shown itself quite capable of embracing a more holistic agenda when confronted by the needs and vulnerability of their communities and workforce, but if we’re honest have often shown themselves to be better at it than many religious institutions. But while that may be true of the world of business and commerce, at the same time, Church continues to show itself as highly susceptible to ethical misdemeanours, uncertain about how and when to be involved and can often cause as much harm as good through its misplaced endeavours. All of which I would argue is more often because of ineptitude than malicious intent.

As someone who works within the trans-local institutions of the Church, is it too radical to imagine that our role in future generations might not be so much about sustaining stand-alone local congregations, but enabling expressions of “church” within other existing institutions? Are we more likely to nurture an effective Christian presence by offering advice, support and challenge to a wide range of community and commercial groups as they seek to nurture spiritual wellbeing and do good works within their communities, rather than struggling to maintain a mass of stand-alone charitable structures and unaffordable buildings that we have inherited from previous generations? If I can now purchase Marks and Spencer’s sandwiches in my local Costa, could I do church at work?

My visit to a mill in Lancashire many years ago exposed me to one such expression of that, and while I believe there is much discussion and debate required before it becomes a more widespread reality – is this a way of nurturing and sustaining “church” in the “new normal” that needs some serious consideration? 



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