

The value in putting these thoughts down will be greater if there are others like me; I suspect there are; certainly amongst men. So I will explain why I, as a believing Christian, find church, and particularly Sunday worship generally unhelpful, and consider separately the question of reaching out to people outside the faith. Different, but related issues.

But first, I intend no criticism at all of the "ministerial team" at SPC. The business of putting together regular services and getting people involved is very demanding and everyone from Margaret "downwards" does a really good job. For me the problem lies with traditional structures and expectations, as well as with myself.

My Barriers

1: I am not really a gregarious person. I enjoy solitude or the company of a small number of good friends for whom I feel a genuine and shared affection. I tried Spring Harvest once and had to escape early! I deepen my understanding in conversations with other Christians whom I respect; usually one on one, sometimes in a slightly larger group.

Traditionally we seem to "form relationships" in the post-service mingle. Now although it is nice to see people whom you have not seen for a week or two, mingling is not something that feels natural; it is not a

way to deepen relationships; it is maintenance. Although friendship cannot be forced, if we can create opportunities for friendships to become more easily formed and deepened, then people will grow in faith.

2: The exception to my aversion to crowds is when I have a clear role to play. Then I don't mind a lot of people at all. But if I am just one of a passive crowd then I would rather be elsewhere.

Traditionally, the role of the congregation is passive. We stand up, sit down, listen to readings, sermons, prayers, sing a few hymns and receive a blessing. Can we find a form of worship/church management where more people have responsibility?

3: I am getting older! When I was a new Christian sermons and liturgy were also new, and fresh. When we changed churches through travelling, we experienced some different approaches to the faith; different liturgy, different approaches to what being a Christian might mean. At that time Sunday worship, and particularly sermons, could be sometimes illuminating. But increasingly for me, God and Christ is mystery, obscured by words rather than revealed by them; paradoxically obscured because words make meanings too precise. Most of my life I have drawn closest to God in solitude, when my thoughts are free to roam undirected and this becomes increasingly true.

The "open space" event allowed both solitude and, with some of the "exhibits", an escape from words. Highlights were the candles and the labyrinth which, despite my initial scepticism, I found to be very thought-provoking. A typical presbyterian service is full of words and generally lacks space for quiet, personal reflection.

4: I probably have ancient ancestors who came from Laodicea. It seems my spiritual DNA is to blow both hot and cold, so I shall blame it on my forbears.

The problems with the church today cannot just be solved by changes to buildings, service delivery, innovative means of worship. People like me also need help from God to get us kick started.

I think the most important of these three points is the last one, but I will expand briefly on the first three.

1: Perhaps one form of "service" might be an opportunity for members simply needing company to meet up and talk/pray/study together. Or such an opportunity might be advertised during some services.

2: In any event, by introducing more varied worship we may create opportunities for writers, artists, dancers, thespians, counsellors ---. Let's ask people what THEY would like to see, what THEY might feel

comfortable leading, how THEY might help us to find God in the things that inspire them. And don't put barriers in the way: "you must first undergo theological training to ensure the purity of the message". Yes there will have to be some kind of vetting, but actually, within the church, members know already who is a safe pair of hands and who is a bit off the wall.

3: If dancing in the aisles seems a step too far, at least offer alternative styles of worship: sermons for some/silence for others/a space for gathering and a space for retreat. If services were to become more varied, then either the space would need to be divided so that different things could occur concurrently, or services might be held at different times, or there might be a rotation of different styles.

Reaching out

If we are to reach out to others, and new converts come to the church, then we still need a teaching ministry; we still need a building. I firmly believe we have to **go out**, because "outsiders" are not voluntarily **coming in**. To that extent I think all community initiatives are to be encouraged which means engaging church members in whatever projects come up. It has to be more than just giving money to support a worker or two.

Our building is a great asset but it has to be made more welcoming and less institutional looking. The big wooden doors have to go and should be replaced with glass doors, behind which everyone can see the words "ALL WELCOME". There should be a "menu" clearly displayed showing what is available inside for single mums, lonely pensioners, the idle passer-by. Inside there should be a space which is multi-purpose and not strikingly similar to old Sir Walter Scott's Court Room on the High Street. A space which says "Come and Enjoy" rather than "Come and be taught" or even "Come and be Judged"! We have to surprise people; they will come and say, "What a lovely space; I wasn't expecting this", because so many unchurched people today have cloudy notions of church based on The Vicar of Dibley and Father Brown.

Finally, we have to collaborate far more with other congregations. I clearly remember as a student being struck by the divisions between the various Christian students that I met. Their lack of agreement seemed to me clear evidence that all this stuff about Jesus' love was not very real; why would the baptists be competing with the presbyterians? Why did the wee frees think the Pope was the antichrist? Clearly they were all bonkers: and that part of the Hymn sheet that they all shared, (the Jesus loves you bit), was partly lost, and significantly undermined by their lack of trust/co-operation with each other. So the issue is wider than SPC; there has to be a coming together of

all Christians in Selkirk to identify what needs to be done and how the work should be shared.