

4. Belonging made real by welcome & involvement

‘Church with no walls’ implies visibility & openness. People should be drawn by what they see and encounter, to feel that they can belong. Being welcomed just for who they are and encouraged to do what they can echoes God’s affirming love & call in Jesus

Core Texts

Matt.9:9-13, 1Peter 2:4-12, John 1:12, Rom.1:6, 1Cor.6:19, 20, 2Cor.1:22, Eph.4:1-16

Core Teaching

- ❖ 2 distinct meanings & shades of belonging
 - The sense of being owned
 - The sense of feeling part of something
- ❖ Church Perceived as
 - Institution > inaccessible: you have to ‘be good’ to enter
 - ‘Pilgrim People’ > accessible: many ways in from where you are
- ❖ Belonging by Readiness
 - People ready to come, seek, watch, travel for a while...
 - Our role to welcome, befriend but not ‘crowd’
 - The example of Jesus with the Tax Collectors
- ❖ Belonging by Right
 - Faith in Jesus >> right to be called ‘children of God’ [Jn.1:12]
 - Part of God’s people yet, *whose service is perfect freedom*
 - Spaces of belonging: Celebrations/Clusters/Cells/Covenants
 - Key responsibility is witness of our relationships as a church
- ❖ Belonging by Role
 - All Christians gifted to be part of Body of Christ [1Cor.12]
 - Satan loves to disable by scaring us from our role
 - No greater belonging than fulfilling your place in the Body

Some Initial Questions

- Do you have good ‘belonging places’ within this church?
- What gifts do you see in yourself and are you using them?
- Can you help further anyone who is ‘belonging by readiness’?

Value 4 – Belonging made real by welcome & involvement

- There are at least two distinct meanings & shades of belonging.
 - The sense of being owned: *This car belongs to me*
 - The sense of feeling part of a group: *I feel I belong here*
- When we talk about a church and about belonging what might we mean? Our Value implies that belonging is not a static thing & that it is something that can be made real or moved from feeling to fact in some way. I think that’s right. I wonder if you can recall joining a group or organisation either in a formal sense (like joining a club or team) or in an informal sense (like joining a group at a party or joining a queue). Maybe you can remember what it was like when you first came to a church service! Just for a moment go back to one of those experiences and recall the feelings, and how these changed in time, and what others did or didn’t do that affected you...
- For many people, a Church is a place you can only come to if you’re good. It looks like an institution and you don’t get into a school, or job, or gym... without fulfilling certain criteria. I know we would say that’s not true of church because Jesus welcomes people without showing favouritism and without condemnation, but the threshold to a church is about 10 feet high to many people who’ve never come before. Maybe, over the years, we’ve allowed that perception to grow by our expectation that people who believe will want to come to church, and by the way we lay down what those beliefs have to be?
- I’m delighted that 21st century church is taking on a more organic sense. Meeting together is important but where church happens and how it happens are far more flexible. The phrase I love from the Baptism Service about us being a ‘Pilgrim People’, is much closer to how we are meant to be seen as a church. It’s not about having arrived but where you are journeying towards.
- And we are seeking to become more accessible. That’s about physical changes to our building so that it’s easier to transition into it. It’s about going to where people are and creating portals into our faith community there. It’s about enabling people to rub shoulders with Christians in activities and places where they are comfortable. In time it will be about creating church where people

are rather than expecting them to come to another place. In short, it's about how church comes to them in an accessible way & yet without losing the distinctive qualities of Jesus.

- Having said that, I do want to track the progress of someone who, by whatever route, is making the journey for themselves into a church, into our church and, for simplicity I am going to describe that in terms of coming to church on a Sunday. And I think the principles will apply in most of the other ways I've begun to suggest. Despite our cultural baggage and that sense people have of needing to be good before they come, for many, a Sunday service is still the flagship place to come and find out what the Christian faith is all about.
- Who might such a person be? Someone whose moved into the area and wants to make contact with others, someone whose just had a shock in their lives and is seeking a place of comfort. People seeking a baptism for a new baby, others exploring marriage. Friends and spouses coming along to show support, people coming out of habit or loneliness, people who've had a spiritual contact or conversation that's sparked off curiosity, parents who've been persuaded by their kids to bring them to Ju:C or Sunday Club... You can all add to that list.
- These are people who come tentatively seeking a place, often a temporary place, sometimes a hidden place, in a church community. Most will want to be acknowledged and put at ease but not be over-fussed or made to stand out. I'll describe these as *belonging by readiness*, because they are ready to come but their expectations are either low, or simple, or as observers.
- Our role in helping them to belong at that level is to make sure they are welcomed and able to mingle inconspicuously. The Welcomer outside the door and in the entrance makes crossing the threshold that much easier. People willing to sit with them, smile, introduce, help when the baby gets restless, explain where the loos are, linger after the service to invite to coffee... The leader of the service that doesn't make them stand up if they are new but does say who they are at the start.
- And it goes on after the service. The person who gives them a Welcome Leaflet or introduces them to someone with similar

- That doesn't happen in a perfect church. Nobody is picked as the makeweight because all of us have gifts to use and these gifts are all for building up the body of Christ and bringing Glory to God. One of Satan's ways of neutralising a Christian who belongs by right is to scare them from belonging by role. It's the responsibility of us all to recognise these gifts in ourselves and others, and to encourage one another to use them and grow them. In a football team its no good crossing the ball if nobody's there in the centre to strike it home! In motor racing its no good coming into the pits if there's nobody there to refuel the car!
- If we aren't using the gifts Jesus has given us by the Spirit that means parts of the body are not functioning as they could and, possibly that other people are doing more than they should to compensate. Belonging by Role is crucial to the health and life of the church and its effectiveness for Jesus. The role may change in time. My experience personally and by observation is that God gives us each more gifts than we can use at any one time but calls out a different balance in different phases of life or different places he calls us to serve Him.
- There is no greater place of belonging than in fulfilling what God has called you to be in Christ by playing your part through the Spirit within His church, His body on earth. Going right back to what I said last week, God made us for relationship with Him and with one another. Although Satan messed that up through Adam & Eve by temptation and deceit, in Christ we see God's new kingdom restoring creation to its former glory. So relationships with God & one another are restored.
- The Value of *Belonging made real by welcome and involvement*, covers Belonging by Readiness, Right and Role. It reflects our place as Christ's Pilgrim people and tracks the movement from belonging with a church to belonging to a church. While I think you do move from belonging with to belonging to, belonging by Readiness, Right and Role are cumulative rather than sequential phases. Those who Belong by Right remain those who Belong by Readiness, and those who belong by Role remain those who belong by Right. For at all times we are those who continue to seek, those who depend upon what Christ grants us by faith, and those who serve in our lives the one to whom we belong.

interests. The people who don't leave them alone in the hall as they drink their coffee but neither do they press in insensitively... This is about all of us and it is as sensitive and spiritual a work as anything else any of us may do.

- The theology is quite simple. Jesus came all the way to meet us without condemnation. He let people come to him and made himself accessible to them, like with Matthew's tax-collector friends [Matt.9:9-13]. He lived in community and accepted around him those who wanted to seek and watch and learn however close to the edge of the crowd they chose to stand. Christ's *Pilgrim People* will draw to ourselves others who will walk with us, watch how we are and choose how long they will stay and how deep their seeking will go. That will be true of fresh seekers, returning prodigals and weary Christians. Never underestimate the power of Christ within his people to draw, challenge and heal those who come alongside.
- *Belonging by Readiness* is about belonging with God's people, & being accepted for who you are. It's a place of watching and receiving from which you may move on to a place of asking more deeply. If they stick around for some time that may be provoked by friendships that grow, by the deepening sense of belonging and even by taking on certain tasks. I know of a husband who came to church for a while and was then asked if he'd help hand out the books. That step was part of the chain of events that brought him to faith as his belonging by readiness drew him towards a deeper sense of belonging.
- I've called what happens when you become a Christian *Belonging by Right*. We know from John's gospel that by faith in Jesus we gain the right to be called children of God [Jn.1:12]. St Paul calls Christians those *who are called to belong to Jesus Christ* [Rom.1:6]. Peter tracked our progress from being no people to becoming a people who belong to God [1Pet.2:4-12].
- In 1Corinthians 6:19 & 20 Paul says, *You are not your own; you were bought at a price*. In 2Corinthians 1:22 we read that The Spirit is Christ's *seal of ownership* upon us. This belonging sounds as if Christ possesses us, which in once sense He does, but this speaks more about the security of love than of an impersonal master-slave relationship.

- One of the church collects speaks says of Christ, *whose service is perfect freedom* – and I think that picks up the paradox and truth of our relationship. In the wedding service it is said of husband and wife that in marriage they *belong to one another*, and I think this sense of mutual acceptance and mutual support comes closer to what is meant in a Christian's relationship with Jesus, and certainly of Jesus and his church.
- Our relationships with one another and with Jesus are an expression of belonging and a witness to our identity as Christians. That doesn't happen in one place only. Jonathan Couper spoke of 4 spaces of belonging – Celebrations all together, Clusters around hobbies or mutual interests, Cells for study and fellowship and Covenants of deeper accountability with just a few others.
- Whereas *Belonging by Readiness* is about belonging with God's people, *Belonging by Right* is about belonging to God's people. But belonging to any organisation or body carries responsibilities as well as attributing rights. When Paul spoke about our being bought with a price he was using it as an argument to make sure our behaviour reflected that enormous privilege and responsibility. Being clothed with Christ, putting on his uniform, means taking on the responsibility.
- One key responsibility is our relationships as a church. Indeed it is these relationships between those who belong by right that have a huge effect upon those who belong by readiness, who are watching and observing. A church of bad relationships will not draw anybody to want to belong.
- The next stage is *Belonging by Role* and this is every bit as tricky a step as moving from readiness to right! Becoming a Christian makes you spiritually alive and alive in the Spirit. The church is called the Body of Christ and the Bible makes it clear that every member of the Body who belongs by right also belongs by role. You recall how it was to be the last one picked for the team – you were not so much chosen as inflicted upon the others and given a place as far from the action as possible so that you would have least chance of spoiling things [Rachel in *Friends* at the Football Game!]