



Fenland Community Church

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Version 1.2

1. Introduction

This document is a tentative trial at articulating what we do and how we do it.

The reasoning behind it is that we tend to just keep going, and it seems that there is value in stopping and taking stock of what we are doing.

2. Our ethos

“We go to them”

In our behavioural approach, and linguistically, we attempt to “go to them” meeting them where they are, irrespective of their level of ability. Trying to find the person behind the disability, and attempting to communicate with that person. See ⁱⁱⁱ

We also “go to them” in their homes. We do not expect them to come to us. Many of them cannot come to us anyway, but it is our way of bringing Jesus to them.

We have a Sunday meeting on three Sundays in the month. Throughout the rest of the month we go into five different homes. Numbers vary from 3 – 30 or more

“We work with weakness in weakness.”

Our weakness is constantly trying to make sure that we are meeting their needs.

For example:

- Are we reaching them – as far as we can tell?
- Is this a good way of reaching them? Is there a better way?
- Is our language appropriate?
- Are our activities appropriate?
- Etc.

Their “weakness” creates a parallel “weakness” in us.

We do not assume a spiritual weakness at all. Indeed, we are of the opinion that the spiritual life in them is no different to the spiritual life in anyone else.

Their weakness is the visible and invisible part of their humanity that sets them apart from mainstream society to a large extent.

In using the phrase “weakness” we are not implying a lower form of existence in any way at all.

Indeed we value and respect them as they are.

Expectation v expectancy. ⁱ We have an expectancy that we will meet with God. We meet people where they are – in their weakness. That is our expectancy. However we try not to have any expectations as to behaviour, visible response, way of worship, way of prayer etc. All we can do is to give our best shot at presenting them with Jesus. Their unique response is vital, vibrant and precious in its own right.

This has the effect of freeing them up to be themselves, and frees us from the tyranny of the pressure of “Success”. ⁱⁱ

Their way of expressing themselves in prayer, worship and involvement is rarely what we see in a main stream church. It can be noisy, chaotic, disjointed, apparently incoherent etc., but it demonstrates real life. We do not have any other expectations. In fact we have come to value this expression.

We do not believe the folk are ill and in need of healing. God loves them as they are – in their weakness. Unless we accept them as they are, there will be a constant struggle between what we see, and what we think we want to see. Again the tyranny of perceived “success”.

And we are painfully aware that we do not have any intrinsic skills. There is a constant questioning of all that we do. Really feeling weak on occasions!

3. Ethics

No collections

No alter calls – i.e. no pressure to be what we think they should be, or what they think we want them to be.

Explicit statements that people do not have to join in if they do not want to. They can sit and watch. I also feel that this is a relevant stance for all our churches. For many folk, it is too threatening to “get involved” so we need to let them watch until they are ready.

We are here to give them our best shot at presenting them with Jesus. Although we run an organisation (we have to or nothing will happen!!) we are not interested in them joining the organisation. We are interested in friendship with them. trying to enter their world, and showing them Jesus.ⁱⁱⁱ

Basic behavioural rules are required, but we have never had to exclude anyone, or even make the rules explicit.

We try our best to deal with everyone. We have not yet needed to turn anyone away due to “difficult” behaviour. All we ask is that the carers make a decision based on their experience of the person, and bring enough staff to manage the people they bring.

For whom is the behaviour “difficult”?

Often the behaviour is difficult for us, not the person concerned. Violence is a different matter. We have not had to deal with that yet.

Noisy people can make it hard for others to hear, but we always try to keep going, and not make an issue of it. One very noisy lady triggered us to buy a wireless mic! Thanks!

Does “difficult” behaviour offend our religious sensibilities? Probably! But it should not. Do we think God minds? I think not!

What have we done:

- Become very tolerant within boundaries but we have not yet needed to articulate those boundaries!
- Tried to distinguish between behaviour that, as far as we can see cannot be helped, and behaviour that can be helped. But this also requires a non-condemnatory approach for two reasons: 1) Our assessment as to what is involuntary and what is voluntary may be wrong. 2) Condemning behaviour that can actually be helped, is not necessarily helpful.

It is so easy to judge and condemn. Behaviour that is clearly involuntary is obviously accepted, and NOT just tolerated. This behaviour is part of them as a human. It is often an attempt to communicate and we need to listen.

We remain very tolerant of all behaviour. Perhaps we are too lax.

HOWEVER we do what we can within the above limits to encourage folk to join in as much as they can – flags, instruments, “dance”, “drama”, prayer etc.

We are very aware that folk could simply be doing what they think we want them to do or say. Gauging this is probably impossible, so we simply go with it. We also try not to put words into their mouths.

To facilitate a relaxed and welcoming atmosphere, we meet in a semi-circle facing the screen. There is space in the rest of the room for moving around, and we ensure that wheelchairs can be easily slotted in at the front, without a lot of hassle.

4. Issue of Language and “things”

In many churches so much revolves around ability to write / draw / read / discuss / and the ability to make or manipulate things etc.

Similarly the use of things – like art materials. Many people cannot manipulate things due to disability and/or incomprehension. However this is very popular despite the varied output as, in my opinion, the result can be seen and touched.

Also much of what is done in the wider church relies on verbal skills, verbal reasoning, and the use of language to imagine and meditate. In our church almost all are non readers. Those that can read – just – find it hard to read and understand at the same time.

So we have been challenged by the requirement to examine our language and its use.

Language ideas

We try to use simple language, but not childish. Not confusing. e.g. when telling a story, be clear who is talking to whom! So try not to use many “He said,” and “they did” and “he went” Define who the “they” are and who “he” is!

We will do our best to use short sentences. Try not to use allegories, or “religious jargon”. This is not as easy as one might think!

Use of a consistent language pool. Should this be developed or is it limiting? For example

- Disciples are “Jesus' special friends”
- Blessing is “Do good things for”
- Sin is “the bad things we do”
- Being a Christian is someone who loves Jesus

We do not exclusively use these alternatives, but try to use them to explain what we mean.

We try to use consistent photos / clip-art etc. to aid comprehension. Also using pictures (on screen or on largish pieces of paper) we use pointers, to explain what we are doing. Prayer / Worship / Listening and so on. I own up to being rather haphazard on this. Must do better!

We rarely read straight out of the Bible, as, in our opinion, whatever version we use is too complex to follow. We unashamedly alter it to be as simple and as straightforward as possible.

All this needs to be balanced against the need not to alienate non disabled folk. However, what we seem to be doing is to simplify and remove the jargon, and I suspect that many people are crying out for just this even in main stream churches!

So far we have never had a carer complain at the style of presentation.

We need to concentrate on the need to switch to using the senses – cf Multi-sensory Church!^{iv} We are not too good at that I regret!

The big question is ‘how much is understood?’ We do need to recognise that intellectual understanding is not the same as Spiritual understanding. We understand that God is able to use our attempts at communication despite our lack of ability! However, we do want to do all we can to make what we do truly accessible.

Use of language to imagine? Is imagination impossible without language? Big question to which I do not know the answer!

5. How do we check on individual personal spiritual growth?

Should we focus on individual spiritual growth and if so how? This seems to be an important part of mainstream church “monitoring”. Is this actually up to God? I suppose it can be useful so long as it does not become an end in itself. And what is individual spiritual growth anyway? How do we measure it? Sorry – no clear answers in our context. But here are a few pointers:

External behaviour – behaviour at home, not directly related to “church” activity. This is NOT synonymous with being middle class!

Given that each of us have a lifetime behaving and living in a particular way, what is a reasonable expectation of change? This is not to excuse sinful behaviour. We do teach basic right and wrong, but tend to focus on things that can be done or not done. For example we are clear that most people can be kind to each other and their carers. They can say “Thank You”, can help carers where possible, can help each other by picking things up, helping each other with coats/zips etc., smiling and not being grumpy, telling the truth and so on. In other words we emphasise the simple things people can do, explaining that even these simple things will bring Jesus into their lives and the lives of others, and make Jesus happy.

Is behavioural change a valid measurement? Perhaps, but we do not emphasise it. We would never say or imply, “You have been coming to this church for many years now and we do not expect you to behave like that!” We focus on them as people as they are, rather than as we think they should be.

What else could be a valid measurement? It would be great if we got feedback from the carers that behaviour had changed at home. As far as I am aware we have not had that.

However we are regularly told that the residents really enjoy coming. To that end some homes are prepared to drive their residents for 30min or more to get to our Sunday meeting. We are welcomed into some homes with open arms, and in one home in particular it may well be the carers that gain the most from our visits, although I guess they would never admit it!

Behaviour in Church

Observed interaction in Church such as praying, worshipping etc. After many years some people are now able to articulate that Jesus lives in them or in their heart. We are aware that this could be a simple rote learning of a phrase, but we do feel that in many cases this is a genuine statement of what the person believes.

Is this a valid measurement? Maybe this is more valid than in a main stream church, because our folk are much less adept at play-acting. This is not to say that they do not play-act, but their ability to sustain it consistently is limited.

In our setting we tend to measure growth using all of the above. We are thrilled when someone prays out loud, when someone gets involved with a flag, or tries to sign, or gives us a positive smile or shout/shriek etc.! Once again our expectations are low, but our expectancy is high.

We are very clear that acceptance into the church is not dependant on any visible change.

As a fellowship we have grown in:

Our understanding of what we do, why we do it, and some ways of doing it better than we did before.

The scope of what we do has increased over the years. We started small, but have been invited into homes in the area, people are prepared to travel in to our Sunday meeting etc.

If we had more staff/helpers, we would probably be able to “Go to” even more homes in the area.

We also have an increasing realisation that only God can do this. This is no different from a main stream church, but it seems more stark and pronounced as there is often no clear and easy way to interact or relate or gain feedback from the people. This minimal feedback allied to the reduced or almost non-existent communication skills, maybe limits what we can do.

Maybe getting hung up on this is not profitable. ⁱⁱ

6. Issue of choice and the role of the carers

Much of what we do is dependant on the carers and their attitudes. How much choice do the folk have if the carers are against us or apathetic?

Do carers have the right to prevent attendance or involvement? Is this just part of the current anti-Christian trend? Even if it is, the problem is that the person is not taking the decision for themselves – the carer is. However this needs to be balanced against the carers' requirement to care for the person, and the very real question as to whether the person is capable of making a choice, especially if not given or not being able to understand the full issues.

How can someone reject what we do if they have never experienced it? Telling them what we do may not help them, as they may not have the language / imagination to turn the words into something that they can comprehend. Perhaps carers need to take them to us a few times, to assist this decision making process. Carer's use of language is also important: take these two sentences, “Would you like to go to church?” “Would you like to go with Ed & Marilyn to a Christian meeting where they sing, use instruments and flags?”

Can we / should we insist in some way?

But there is a genuine problem of lack of staff in homes, or a lack of a driver. This often prevents people coming.

So actually how autonomous are the folk?! This is an area that borders on the political, and is something that we need to explore in the future.

7. Things we do

Have fun! A number of carers have commented on this aspect of what we do.

Prayer

We encourage folk to bring prayer requests. We set an example by bringing our own prayer items. We help them pray. If asked, we will give them words to say that they copy. We accept even the most muddled, garbled and seemingly hopeless prayer as being acceptable to God.

Use of cards with photos, or projected to screen, to help remind our folk who it is we are praying for.

We often use simple responsive prayers in the Celtic genre. However these sorts of prayers require considerable alteration to make them intelligible in our environment. Such prayers are often matched with clip art / photos.

Visual stimulation for the “Talk”

We use projected photos, clip-art, Makaton symbols, diagrams, occasional videos etc. The aim of this is to create a layer of communication that can assist and enhance our speech.

We use things. Where at all possible we try to use items that are tangible, tactile, visible, obvious, sometimes smelly (!) and, if possible, not symbolic unless the symbolism can be easily explained.

For example for Good Friday we now have a crown of thorns, a spear, a bottle of vinegar, some dice etc.

We have used bulbs in pots. Sand trays to demonstrate how God can forgive us. Burning paper to show how God forgets the bad things we do. Pass the parcel – each layer has something in it to emphasise the point being made

... and so on

Worship

We use *flags* in a range of sizes. Even those with profound disabilities will often enjoy holding a small flag. I can recall a wonderful example of progress when a lady managed to wave a flag once or twice before her arm tensed up again!

Dance. This is rarely initiated on an individual level, but is popular when we initiate it as a group dance, such as an action song, the conga, or a circle dancing round etc. We also help and encourage those in wheelchairs to be involved. Once we know they are willing, we will push them out into the centre, spin them round, back and forwards etc.

Instruments. We have a collection of percussion instruments that are very popular. These are mainly ones to shake, as instruments that require hitting are found to be much more difficult to manipulate. In some cases the use of an instrument is the only way that some people can get involved.

Large sheets of material. We occasionally use large sheets of material. We started with sheets approx 3feet square and simply got two people to hold it and gently sway it up and down. We have now obtained a huge sheet of thin material about 20feet long and 4 feet wide. We have gathered folk around this, and together waved it up and down, making sure that blind and wheelchair users are involved if they want.

Noise. Singing in the traditional sense is virtually never heard! There are grunts shouts and shrieks of all sorts, allied to the percussion instruments that create a true cacophony of sound. Add people with flags, people signing and you have almost 100% involvement in what seems to be a chaotic soup.

Makaton signing. The popularity of this comes and goes. However it is another tool in our tool-box.

People walking around. We do not insist in any way that people remain in one place!

We are not too good at the quieter side of worship. I suspect this is something we need to find a way of developing! I still wonder if people without speech are able to imagine things!? So asking people to imagine this or that, may not be a good idea!

Candles, incense – but some folk hated the smell!

We previously had a person with very limited sight. We tried to explain to and involve him so he was not left out. We encouraged him touch things and we went out of way to explain to him what was happening, and what was on the screen.

Puppets – ours and another group come in to tell stories.

We try to tell stories as a way of teaching. We try to relate to their lives as much as we can – making it relevant to them. We do all we can to avoid the abstract.

8. What about main stream church?

In all that we have said, it is worth noting that other main stream churches are doing similar excellent work with people with a learning disability. No one has a monopoly!

The relationship between what we do and what happens in main stream churches is something that we ponder on. Some of these issues are:

- If it is acceptable to have low expectations but high expectancy with our folk, is it not acceptable for main stream churches?
- If it is acceptable to have the very low level of pressure with our folk, why not with main stream churches?
- If prayer in our folk is acceptable even at the incredibly low verbal level, why is prayer in main stream churches so often expected to be so fluent?
- If our worship which seems so chaotic, is acceptable, why in main steam churches is worship sometimes so formal and non-involved?
- If our use of non verbal communication is acceptable with our folk, why is it not in many main stream churches?

What we are pondering is this; It is easy to say it is OK for our folk to do all sorts of “odd” things because they are, well, you know, not the same as us. But if our approach is acceptable to God, then it has to be acceptable to God for everyone!

This does not mean that mainstream church life has to be dumbed down. Perhaps the options need to be widened.

9. Links

- 1 <http://www.fcc.uk.net>

- 2 <https://www.counteveryonein.org.uk/>
- 3 <http://www.makaton.org/>
- 4 <http://www.easyenglish.info/>
- 5 http://www.plainenglish.co.uk/free_guides.html

- i My understanding of this was sharpened by a section in “The Shack”, William P Young, Hodder and Stoughton 2008 p205.
- ii What is success. We feel it is simply doing what God wants when He wants it, where He wants it. We do not believe that success is equated with size or numbers or visible “results”.
- iii We need to distinguish between the outside that can be shocking, and the inside where the real person is. Inside that person is a “... person, story, a 'living despite the odds' epic tale ... as if trapped within a flesh and blood machine that doesn't function” Quoted from, A mother like Alex, Bernard Clark, Harper/True, 2008, ISBN 978-0-00-727167-2 pp175-184
- iv Multi-Sensory Church, Sue Wallace, Scripture Union 2002. ISBN 1 85999 667 1 We have used a number of ideas from this book and its sister publications Multi-sensory Prayer, Sue Wallace, Scripture Union 2000, ISBN 1 85999 465 2, and Multi-sensory Scripture, Sue Wallace, Scripture Union 2005, ISBN 1 84427 166 8