

BCAN Homeless Forum

Discussion Paper:

Church for the Homeless

Introduction

At the BCAN Homeless Forum meeting 13 May 2004, several people wanted to explore the question of church for homeless people in Bristol. They felt that our projects are generally more successful at addressing the physical and material needs of our clients ('feeding the body and the mind') than the spiritual needs. There were several related questions.

- If someone is interested in attending a church, which churches could we recommend?
- Which churches welcome homeless people?
- Which churches are experienced as welcoming by homeless people?
- Should we explore the possibility of setting up either (or both?) a place of prayer for homeless people, or a new church that would explicitly target homeless people – that would be accessible, culturally relevant, addressing their issues, etc.?

It was agreed to have a short discussion on the subject, circulate the details of the discussion to some key church leaders in Bristol, explore the subject with them, and come back to the BHF with some more specific ideas and suggestions.

This paper describes the initial discussion. Please send any feedback or other comments to Paul Hazelden at the CCM office (12 City Road, BS2 8TP) or email paul@crisis-centre.org.uk.

The Spiritual Need – Background

In the past, churches have traditionally been seen as hierarchical institutions, with members belonging to one congregation, the congregation belonging to one denomination, and the denomination probably having its own internal hierarchy – district, province, diocese, nation, etc.

The reality today is that many Christians are functioning as members of several churches, and are rarely asked or expected to give up membership of one church in order to be active in another – several examples of this were given, describing people who go to one church on a Sunday morning, another on a Sunday evening, and perhaps to a third church's homegroup or social activity during the week. Also, churches often belong to groupings that are more important to them (at least in some ways) than their denominational link. So instead of a neat 'tree-structured' hierarchy, we see a complex network of inter-relating individuals and groups.

The denominational structures are still important in many ways – paying salaries and administering pension schemes, undertaking safety checks on buildings and CRB checks on individuals; but new projects and initiatives are increasingly being undertaken on the basis of relationships that flourish between (often like-minded) people within the intra- and trans-denominational groupings.

Some Current Activities

Crisis Centre Ministries deliberately operates Bridgehead Church within the networking framework, rather than adopt the traditional hierarchical approach. One reason why it meets on a Wednesday is so that the members can be encouraged to attend a more traditional church on the Sunday. Bridgehead members eat together and then go into worship, short prayer, interactive teaching with questions, answers and discussion, then more prayer – people ask for prayer and then pray for each other. Membership of Bridgehead is not exclusive of membership (or significant involvement) in any other church; rather, the opposite is the case.

The Methodist Centre has similar aims: they have held a number of services that have been attended by other members of other congregations. They see these as joint services, and believe that they should be regular and focus on the healing aspect of the gospel. They do not, however, want these services to operate in a vacuum and would like them to be more clearly part of something larger and more integrated with the rest of the Church in Bristol.

The Salvation Army runs similar services including evangelistic talks, which are having an impact with their clients. They feel that some clients want to go further but are not ready for a formal church. They feel there is an opportunity for something that is more like a traditional church to bridge the gap. They believe this would need its own pastor, who would take pastoral responsibility for the congregation: it would not be viable with just a visiting pastor.

Issues

We are at the starting point of exploring how BCAN can meet (or help the Church in Bristol to meet) this spiritual need, and at this stage we need to explore it without getting bogged down in the usual issues of doctrine, liturgy and governance. If we do explore this possibility more fully, we will need to listen to what our clients say about their needs, and probably experiment with our existing services. One question is whether it is helpful to meet in a traditional church, or in a non church building, which may be less threatening.

It was suggested that we probably need to have our understanding broadened concerning what makes a church and the necessities of congregational life. We were encouraged to think less of the ceremonies involved, and more of the pictures, stories and images used to convey the Christian faith.

It was also suggested that there would need to be a strategy to prepare people to move on from this service into a more traditional church, but it is not clear at this stage whether encouraging people to move on is a necessary part of the plan: if the new church or service continues to work for people, why not allow them to remain?

All of these questions and issues have been faced by Christians in the past – most obviously by the Salvation Army, but also by many smaller urban missions and church plants – and also from others who are working with vulnerable people today. We need to find ways to learn from their experience, without getting so bogged down in the research that we fail to take appropriate action. There was a general feeling that it is better to do something, even if it is less than perfect, than to aim for perfection and achieve nothing.

Different Approaches

In the context of 'aiming for perfection', Paul suggested that it is not achievable in any meaningful sense. He described three distinct ways in which people approach faith.

- Some people operate largely at the level of the senses: they respond to images, smells and beautiful architecture; familiar and traditional symbolism speaks powerfully to them.
- Some people respond well to certainty: they like clear, simple and dogmatic preaching and understandable rules of behaviour.
- Some people are put off by the dogmatic approach, and want the freedom to explore issues of faith and spirituality.

Each approach is catered for most obviously by one of the three major branches of the church: the Catholic/Orthodox tradition appeals to the senses, the Evangelical to the need for certainty, and the Liberal to the need to explore. All three approaches, of course, are perfectly valid. On this basis, it is unlikely that any one congregation will satisfy people in all three groups, so it is likely we will need several congregations if we are to serve the interests of all our clients.

However, Paul's experience at Bridgehead Church is that most of the people who come there respond to the second approach: they see the world around them in very black-and-white terms (even if they don't evaluate their own behaviour in the same simplistic way!), and want to be told 'the truth'. Even where a Bible passage has been interpreted in different ways by different groups through the ages, they will still ask which is the right way to understand it.

Possibly this says something about the people attracted to Bridgehead Church – after all, the people who respond to beautiful choirs and architecture are unlikely to be drawn to Bridgehead! But possibly, as people grow in faith and develop as human beings, something of the variety of the wider community may become evident.

Certainly, if we fail to provide an adequate range of suitable churches for our clients, there is an increased likelihood that one or more weird sects may fill the gap, causing major difficulties. A couple of years ago, it seemed that this was actually happening, and it could easily become a more serious problem.

The Methodist Centre's mission statement describes the centre as a 'Christian community'. This is a major factor in their self-understanding, but it is difficult to be inclusive of people on the edge who are atheists or agnostics and yet have a desire to be included. It is hard to see what can be done about this: they face a real challenge in seeking to live out this vision, over and above the usual problems of working with a group that includes 'difficult' people.

The Next Steps

Andrew Kellett suggested it would be good to explore Woodlands' thinking on this as our clients like the relaxed atmosphere at their church. Hope Chapel is another church that aims to be open to our clients. Paul suggested speaking to the leaders at Woodlands and Hope Chapel, to discover their views about how they are meeting this need and their view of this type of service. This was agreed. We should also approach Bishop Mike, and ask about his views on the subject: would he support the development of a new congregation for our clients?