

The Power of Pizza and Presence

Clare Hooper

I tried my best - I really did. I'd become a Christian through reading the Cross and Switch Blade so the power of the Holy Spirit was a given from the start. I knew that the dangers of relational youth work meant that you can become dependent on your own presence and not on the presence of God and I was constantly challenged by Paul telling the church in Corinth that his teaching wasn't with wise and persuasive words but by the power of the Holy Spirit.

So with faith the size of a mustard seed we prayed for the young people we met on streets. When we asked God to heal, the silence at the end of the prayer was broken by nervous laughter. A young lad wanted to be prayed for, he said he was seeking God and when we prayed for him - not a lot happened. He now feels that God's not interested in him. Not quite the ending we'd been hoping for!

The truth of the matter is, in practice we've seen more young people encounter God through pizza and the presence of concerned adults than through what might have been more obvious demonstrations of God's power.

September 11th 2005 - that's when it hit home. Two young lads from my town got murdered. We weren't thinking of any long term strategy when myself and another youth worker spent all day and every day for a week sitting with the young people that had gathered to lay flowers and remember their friends. We were just trying our best to love the young people, to show them that we cared, that God cared. The only way we knew how to do that was to be there for them and to order takeaway pizza as they all kept forgetting to eat. And we prayed. Loads of people prayed.

Was God there? Of course, but in such a gentle and quiet way that it's only with hindsight that we recognised that we'd been in His company and that it was Him that was guiding us and giving us strength. Dave Andrews refers in his book 'Not religion but Love', to Christ's compassion as a strong and gentle power. I suppose I'd never fully understood compassion as power before. But power, God's power doesn't dominate and dictate: it's a strong but gentle power that transforms.

So did pizza and presence lead to transformation? Here's some of what happened next. It meant so much to me when the group asked would we mind if they could use the church to put together their own memorial for their friends. There was a risk in giving them permission to do whatever they wanted. Another risky thing happened when they were all hanging out in the kitchen drinking tea and chatting when I asked if they wanted to put together a nativity play for the church Christmas service. Christmas 2005 saw a male Mary and three rasta/hippie wise men. I was proud of the church as they congratulated the young people after the service, thanking them for their contribution.

Some of the group joined us on a youth Alpha course. They loved the food and chatting, they loved the small groups where they could ask questions and discuss their views. At the awayday when we learnt about the Holy Spirit, admittedly it took a while to move away from spiritual gifts not meaning a nice car. After the chatting we created some space for reflection and gave everyone a chance to talk about where they were at with God and to be prayed for. The Gentle Power was there. And on July 2006 and October 2006 I had the great delight of baptising two of the young people that we met during that dark time. On the anniversary of the murders Adam,

one of the young people stood up in a packed church to tell them that some of the group had found God at a time when others might be blaming Him.

We've found that by responding with compassion God's story of love falls on ears that know what love and grace look like in reality. In its mission the church should not be an idle onlooker in society or, to bring it closer to home, in its local community but it should engage with it. For the church to have an impact it cannot just be a symbol of God's grace but it needs to be active and relevant in its demonstration of it.

Talk May 2007