

Servanthood, risk and doing church in today's world

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I am from a non-churched family and I was introduced to Jesus through the ministry of a local church. I trained to be a Baptist Minister because I believe that the church has a crucial role in pointing people to Jesus and being an agent of God's Kingdom.

But I have grown up in a generation in which the church has been in constant decline in Britain. I am an advocate of something which appears not to be working very effectively, and that is a difficult place to be. I have friends in other countries where church seems to be thriving and people seem to be finding Jesus with relative ease, but here it just seems to be different.

It means that the subject of church has become a popular and crucial subject for us in Britain and will continue to be so I think for a few decades to come.

I was asked to speak at the November Youthwork Conference about the church and servanthood and what follows comes from that talk.

Urban Expression, the urban mission agency I help to co-ordinate, is now ten years old. It has also just started employing people for the first time and as such our structures are having to adapt. It was no surprise when the inevitable subject of risk management came up and this was welcomed with huge groans from those of us who believe that risk is at the very core of Urban Expression's mission.

However someone helpfully explained to me that good risk assessment is not about engineering risk out of the equation, but understanding risk and managing it effectively. It is not about making us safe but ensuring that we are seeking the best for others. This made me think how as church we so often appear to want to engineer risk out of the equation.

In the newspapers last month there were articles urging vicars to stop wearing Dog Collars because it made them a target for crime. It makes them too vulnerable. It made me wonder when our own personal safety became the paramount issue of our ministries and when vulnerability became a dirty word?

I have friends who have gone to the Middle East as missionaries. Within their training and preparation they were given opportunity to consider the risk they were taking and to decide, in the event of tragedy, who would receive their body bags. Risk is not engineered out of mission abroad, so why should we expect it to be engineered out of mission and youth work here in Britain?

Mission is not safe. Christianity is not safe, and to be honest I am not sure I would want to be part of it if it was.

In Revelation 3 the church is accused of being lukewarm and at risk of being spat out by God. Could this be one of the reasons people – especially young people – are leaving church? Is it all just too tepid for passionate, adventure-seeking, dynamic young people?

'Teenagers are heat-seeking missiles. They are drawn to fire. They yearn for experiences that will channel their passions. And by and large they are not detecting many signs of life in the church'. (1)

Too many people 'tip-toe through life in order to arrive at death safely...run, hop and skip through life with a reckless abandon...so that you can honestly say that you have lived life in all its abundance...encourage young people to live revolutionary lives of love...[that is their calling!] (2)

A friend of mine told me how he opened the door late one evening to a 12 year old boy he knew on the estate. The boy was completely hammered after drinking a huge bottle of White Lightning! The boy looked ill and was scared his dad would knock his lights out if he went home in that state, as he came from an abusive home. He turned up at this door because he trusted my friend. My friend let him come in and tried to sober him up. His efforts to give him some food to soak up the alcohol only served to help him puke up his guts over the sofa! But eventually, after some black coffee and a good talking to, the young boy sobered up enough for him to walk him home.

When my friend returned home he sat and pondered what he had done. In one fell swoop he had probably broken every child protection policy going. What if the boy had collapsed in his house? What if he had died? Would he have been sued? Often there are no clear-cut answers for how to avoid risk, but what I admire most about my friend is that he didn't even ask these questions until after the event. He was more concerned about the risk the boy was in than his own risk.

In an age of safety obsession our job *is* to keep young people safe, but not to keep *ourselves* safe. I gave that right up when I was 13 and gave my life, lock, stock and barrel to Jesus Christ who wooed me with his love and sacrifice and invited me to follow his example.

But what would it really mean to serve as Jesus served?

1. Jesus served in weakness

From birth to death, Jesus served in weakness. It is untrue that we can only serve from a position of strength. When we have enough money, the right buildings, the right staff...then we can serve well. Nowhere is Christ's strength of humility more adequately demonstrated perhaps than when he was in the wilderness and was taken to the highest point and in his vulnerability of hunger, thirst and physical weakness was offered the kingdoms of the world by the enemy. But Jesus chose to trust that his weakness had purpose and meaning and that through his vulnerability his genuine lordship over the earth would be recognised.

I guess many of you might be making plans to transform peoples' lives and communities, but you know only too well that when you take a good look at yourself you see that you are in need of transformation too, that your life is broken and messed up, and you wonder how God might use you with all your baggage to help others.

The good news is that even though Jesus did have all the strength and all the answers and all the know-how in the world, he didn't lord it over people – he got alongside people in very real ways – he laughed, he cried, he drank, he partied, he went to work, he helped his mum, he had a game of footie (surely!), he got hungry – and in the midst of real life, revealed God to people and gave us an achievable example to follow. We are the Body of Christ, but it is a broken body. We don't need to pretend otherwise. In our weakness Christ is our strength.

2. Jesus served with purpose

Jesus knew his purpose and would not let anyone, no matter how well meaning, distract him from that focus. He was confident in who he was and what he was called to do. He went to certain places, he held back from going to certain places; he saw certain people and he refrained from seeing certain people, because he knew what his focus was. Even when Peter challenged him about his impending death, Jesus chose to focus on his purpose more than his dear friend who was trying to advise him against going head strong into the impending dangers of Jerusalem.

How many ministers, youth workers, Sunday School teachers, Girls Brigade Captains, youth club leaders start off radical and focussed and end up having their passion washed out of them? Perhaps their passion is washed out by well-meaning deacons and church members who suggest that they refocus their energies on things that are less challenging and safer? Perhaps it's washed out by disappointments or failed expectations. Maybe this doesn't relate to you, but I wonder how many of you feel less passionate or less focussed about what you are doing now compared to when you started out? Or how many of us have had our focus swayed by well-publicised things that other churches are doing which we are tempted to imitate but which are not actually relevant to our context at all so end up leading away from our focus?

The Pharisees told Jesus that he was breaking their religious law, he was hanging out with the wrong people, he wasn't doing what they expected him to do. He was stirring up trouble, getting people to ask difficult questions. He was defending those they felt deserved judgement and judging those they protected. He was fighting battles about issues they felt were unimportant and promoting peace where they wanted war. Fortunately for him he wasn't employed by anyone, so he didn't worry about being sacked! But then again he never seemed to worry about where he was going to get his next meal from either. Maybe if we all stopped being paid for our ministries we would all be a bit more radical in what we do! Jesus wasn't too worried about being excommunicated either – in fact it seems that he and his followers needed to be thrown out of the synagogue in order for their message to be lived out to the full. There is no doubt that Jesus was passionately focussed. How passionately are you focussed today?

There is a danger that if we are unfocussed and simply cruising along in our Christian walk, people around us will see that there is nothing to focus on – nothing to live for and drive them – and will not give church the time of day. We need to regain our focus in order to sustain our own faith and in order to inspire others that faith is relevant to their lives too.

3. Jesus served in relationship

Jesus didn't institute a programme of salvation for Earth; he came to be with us. He could have given us a book on '40 days of Salvation', or a manual on 'How to become a Gentile-Sensitive Synagogue', surely that would have had more chance to bring about more change across the world more quickly?! But he didn't. He came to be with us. The most influential youth leaders in my life were not young or trendy, but they loved us and nurtured us through lots of things that are now illegal – a lift home in the car was always an opportunity for them to ask me one-to-one how I was, what Jesus was teaching me, and an opportunity for them to pray for me.

I have met some youth workers recently who have complained that they are being asked to spend so much of their time running programmes for young people, that they have little time for building relationships with them. Their churches want to see large numbers of teenagers coming along, and the Christian parents want to see their children being 'catered' for. And so young people are attracted...but what are they attracted to if there is no opportunity for meaningful relationship?

We all crave relationship – that is why social networking websites like Facebook are so popular and we all compete to have the highest number of friends! Even in our rushed, disconnected, TV dinner lives we want to know that we are liked and appreciated, that we are OK. If young people do not feel they have that depth of acceptance and relationship in our churches, then they will certainly invest their energy in whatever comes next on their list.

Our God is at His very essence a relational, Trinitarian God. And relationship is something that should mark us out from other youth 'service providers'. We are not simply providing a service for young people, we are inviting them to join the Body of Christ in which we are all equal members, equally

called to follow Jesus with all our heart, soul and strength, equally called to model Jesus' passion for vulnerability, purpose, relationship – a passion which he modelled to the point of death because he is:

4. Sacrificial

What greater love can we have than that love which causes us to lay down our life for another? In an age when the preservation of life is rapidly becoming an obsession we are won over by the one who said that sacrifice is the greatest love.

'Passion of Christ is good news for young people:...it demonstrates that Jesus loves them with such wild, passionate hope that even death on a cross cannot stop his determination to win them.' (3)

We may not all be called to martyrdom (although some of us may, and many of our brothers and sisters abroad have been already), but we are all called to serve sacrificially. A visitor to Mother Teresa and the sisters in Calcutta noticed one day how sore and deformed the Mother's feet were and asked why. The sisters explained that sometimes they would receive boxes of shoes, donations to the sisters and those they served. Mother Teresa would go through the boxes and sort the shoes out in order of quality...and then she would take the worst ones for herself.

What would it mean for you and me to choose the worst pair of shoes in our daily life? To prefer one another before ourselves? To sacrifice ourselves for one another?

Perhaps it is time to ask a question:

When did you last do a risk assessment on your life as a follower of Jesus?

In my experience, the best 'youth workers', (and this would probably apply to the best ministers and church leaders as well) whether they are paid or voluntary, are the ones who go the extra mile, who reveal their passion for Jesus, who put themselves at risk and invite young people to join them in living on the edge.

What might a church look like which is genuinely seeking to serve like Christ? Let us all join in the adventure of finding out.

(1) *Cuyler Black*, Jesus, Britney and Thermodynamics, *Fellowship Magazine*, June 2001

(2) & (3) *Kenda Creasy Dean*, *Practicing Passion: Youth and the Quest for a Passionate Church*