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**WIILIAM LEECH PARTICIPATORY ACTION RESEARCH PROJECT 2013-1015**

**BLESSING AND CONVERSATION AS LEADING THEMES IN RENEWING THE LOCAL CHURCH**

The process and outcomes of this participatory action research project is to be published by SPCK in January 2016 as *Sharing God’s Blessing: A resource for renewing the local church.* The aim is not to make a set of practical proposals but to engender critical reflection in different settings to discover what fresh energy and direction emerge when local congregations participate in structured conversation, in this instance on the theme of blessing.

**PURPOSE OF THE PROJECT**

The primary object was to walk as “companion” with several local churches (ecumenically) primarily in the North East of England – though others (ecumenically) further afield joined in – to experiment with approaches to building confidence and capacity for being Church in transitional and challenging times. It was intended as an antidote to churches living with failure, nostalgia and pathos as a negative response to lost certainties and assumptions.

**METHOD**

My basic epistemological position has been to engage on research *with* rather than *on* the churches that agreed to collaborate. Acknowledging the participatory educational theory/practice of Paulo Freire, John Dewey and Parker Palmer, my aim has been to work from a profound respect for all involved in a learning situation. This perspective draws together action and reflection, theory and practice, in mutual participation, to seek practical solutions to issues of vital concern to people and communities. The project also challenges the assumptions connected with the expression “strong leadership” by suggesting a way of personal face to face vulnerability and a dismantling of self-protective and adversarial traits within the institution.

My espoused ecclesiology encourages a move away from a modernist or positivist approach (with the fiction that it’s possible to be a detached observer) and supports a facilitative, intuitive, holistic and contextual approach to personal and corporate learning and development. Rather than proposing a blueprint or models for what Church should be, I have offered a light structure, rooted in a theology of blessing and an inclusive pedagogical assumption to assist transformation, in the midst of anxiety engendering situations, to find new perceptions and points of departure. Implicit has been the recognition that deep transformation is not fostered by formulaic, prescriptive or mechanical approaches. Rather, it comes from trusting the *presence,* the genuine participation of everyone with God, within the distinctive life we call “Church”.

It’s not been a surprise that teaching groups to use dynamic ways of reading scripture (*lectio divina)* has become a vital element in the work.

**BLESSING AS AN ECOLOGY: LIVING AS BLESSED AND BLESSING**

1. **The first leading theme was the scriptural experience of God creating newness through blessing Christian communities and inviting them to be a blessing to others.**

The scriptural notion of blessing is about knowing deep in our hearts, minds and bodies that we are spoken well of, by God, so as to thrive. Song writer, Bernadette Farrell brings to mind the psalmist, “For the wonder of who I am I praise you”. Creation Blesses God, God blesses creation, God blesses us, we bless God, other people bless us and we bless them and so on. Often recipients of blessings, sometimes we are the origin of blessings – in the Beatitudes Jesus is saying “Yes, go on, be a blessing to the poor, those in need, the prisoner, and the hungry…by being a blessing you will know just how much you are blessed. However small your faith – like a tiny seed it can become something beyond your imagining and be of benefit to society and the wider world”.

1. **Secondly I took the concept of conversation – which goes a long way beyond mere discussion.**

“Discussion” is debate; it’s competitive – it’s about cutting your opponent to pieces – *discutio* is its Latin root- to show your position as the most correct. Conversation is about being really *present* listening carefully to God, to one another and to the stranger so that there can be transformation of people, church and society.

Whatever the Holy Spirit was saying to our church yesterday, today he moves us on, asking, “so what is God calling out from you now and tomorrow?”

**TENTATIVE CONCLUSIONS: A JOURNEY JUST BEGINNING**

*“Perhaps most important, help people commit to living the principle of Appreciative Inquiry and positive change. In particular, use inquiry, storytelling, and narrative analysis to make decisions – and to consider, introduce, and recognize organizational changes. Tell and retell the stories behind systemic changes that have since become a way of life” (Whitney and Trosten Bloom p.119).*

**Values and practices**

If conversation-based change is valuable holistic discipline for churches in transition, what further resources are required? Rather than attempting to match up reality to idealized “models” I have found it more productive to introduce to churches the notion of enquiring into their core values. How do you follow Jesus in this place? What are the values you would die for? How do they become a new culture and ethos that will continue to guide your mission action planning? How would you test your performance? What are the habits and practices that could be seen and experienced to check out your core values? Are they just the aspirations of a few people or one pioneering area of work? How can these values and habits be illustrated in every dimension of a diocese or group of churches acting together?

**A culture change**

Currently church synods, leadership courses and websites demonstrate a sustained concentration on organizational change. As I have made clear I am convinced that our approach has to be holistic and multidisciplinary. My years of working on church development and especially the two years of this William Leech research project encourage me to list the following moves to resource transformational change.

1. **To live from blessing**. Through worship, sacraments, scripture, and practising Spirit-led community to learn to recognize the abundance of God as a gift. Whatever difficulties churches are facing, in terms of the attitude of society, problems of money and buildings or apparent lack of ministers, nothing seems the same when we find God’s blessing – through pursuing agendas of justice and mercy or sharing in praise, scripture reading, Eucharist or contemplation. Unlearning habits of self-protection must be a gift we demand from God.
2. **To know we have more than enough.** Jesus’ feeding of the crowds or his sending out of disciples in training tap into the long scriptural theme of believing we have what it takes to demonstrate God’s own generosity. The practice of being neighbour, agents of healing, disturbers of complacency in the face of poverty, and like Jesus being self-givers, is what creates church. It is not a linear process – we’ll share faith and justice when we have enough –but the recognition that like Jesus coming up out of the Jordan after his baptism by John, we know who we are: God’s beloved.
3. **Travelling in conversational change.** As the disciples experienced on the Emmaus road or Philip and the Ethiopian official on the road to Joppa, conversation can reveal unexpected newness from God. Persuading cerebral Christians to experiment slowly with the emotions and respectful listening could be part of the blessing churches need today The detailed steps illustrated in this book will hopefully inspire and encourage further experiment in multiple situations.
4. **Fostering companions.** Dioceses or mission areas might recognize in a few people the charism of facilitation or companioning. To provide regular opportunities for local churches to flourish through this ministry requires first of all the recognition the vital importance of this by those with influence. As with all ministries there needs to be a balance between the needs of the church for wise and effective companioning and discernment of the attitude and skills of those offering to meet that need. In the book I have highlighted the need for companions to have the maturity to know how to fulfil the role in an assured but vulnerable and humble manner.

The companion is one who helps the group to listen to stories, while recognizing that this is just one narrative among many; to persuade and show people how to listen deeply; to encourage positive questioning; and to help a group observe themselves in growing in mature relationship. Observing where the role of companion has been fruitful could be the way to knowing who to recruit and how to resource those called to a very distinctive role. The difficulties however should not inhibit regional leaders from taking practical steps to increase the number of available companions and arrange for their deployment and support.

1. **Leader formation**. Given our churches’ history and the usually high age range of congregations, whoever today is called to be pastor, leader, priest, Reader or Bishop has a disproportionate influence on the values and practices of the local church. If that is a given it is likely that most people concerned with the dynamics of local churches remain most comfortable with various forms of hierarchy, debate, and discussion rather than with mutual patterns of working, holistic culture and listening the voice of all.

It must be of immense importance therefore that the recruitment, discernment and formation of women and men for church ministries now offers a deliberate counterbalance.

Churches urgently need in leadership those who can lead and manage through conversational practice and who are committed to increasing their competence in planning and being trusting companions to adult Christian learning. Training courses for clergy and Readers are notoriously overloaded with “essential” elements that must somehow be crammed in, as though that were the end of all learning. Colleges and courses could learn more from change management theory/practice to trust more in teaching students how to prioritize the slow but determined fostering of values and habits in the whole church. Yes, society is degrading and the churches at risk of losing their identity. So we now require leaders, not to tell others what they know or should know, nor to fix things that are broken, but to believe in processes and be effective in creating and generating conversation-based transformation.

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