

Being GOOD NEWS in your community



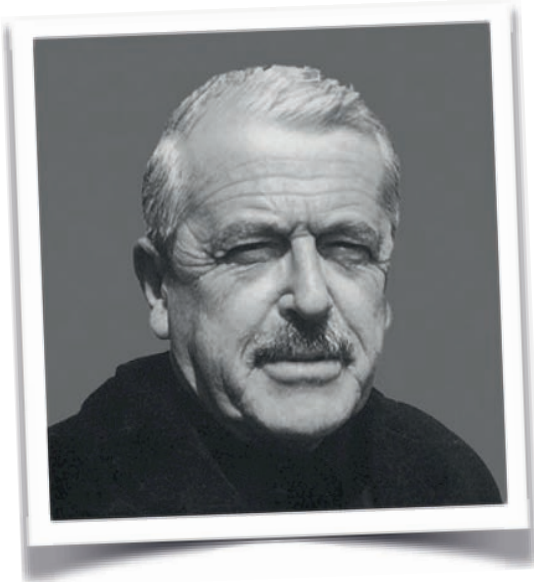
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I simply argue that the Cross be raised again at the centre of the market place as well as on the steeple of the church. I am recovering the claim that Jesus was not crucified in a cathedral between two candles, but on a cross between two thieves, on the town garbage heap ... because that is where he died. And that is what he died about. And that is where church people should be and what Church should be about.

George Macleod

founder of the Iona Community

Section 1:

The church and the community

Christian faith is a public affair. Jesus' mission was not to create churches that would be places of escape from a hostile world, but signposts pointing to a world transformed into all that God intended it to be. He called this the Kingdom of God. Church buildings are supposed to be a visible declaration of hope that say, "God is here! God is near! God will not abandon us! God is with us in every area of our lives as people and communities!"

Of course, putting up a building is all very well, but it means nothing unless the community of Jesus-followers that inhabit it are also a visible sign of God's love and concern. They do that when they are involved in every aspect of the community's life, making a Jesus-shaped difference that people experience as Good News. That is especially true when they are involved in the very darkest, most difficult places, among the most isolated people, as Jesus was.

That is what George Macleod means when he argues that "the Cross be raised again at the centre of the market place as well as on the steeple of the church".

People and communities are hungry for that sort of Good News. Jesus-shaped churches, filled with Jesus-shaped people, making a Jesus-shaped difference to the lives of the people and their communities: that is what Jesus intended.



Section 2:

“I’ve got some Good News and some Bad News”

Churches that are “holy huddles” don’t touch the lives of those outside. All too often, the message they convey is of dwindling congregation desperate to persuade people to join so that they can survive. It isn’t an attractive message. It doesn’t inspire or challenge. It doesn’t ignite passion and commitment. Put starkly, it doesn’t matter. And people have voted with their feet – which is why so many churches are nearly empty and teetering on the brink of oblivion. How different from the reactions of people to Jesus in the gospel stories and the stories of the early church!

Research is showing that behind all the statistics of church decline lies a very simple fact: Christianity in today’s society no longer looks like Jesus. A piece of research carried out by the Barna Group among people aged 20-30 in the US found that 84% see the church as Bad News. Overwhelmingly, church was viewed as:

- ▶ Judgmental (87%)
- ▶ Hypocritical (85%)
- ▶ Old-fashioned (78%)
- ▶ Too involved in [right wing] politics (75%)
- ▶ Anti-gay (91%)

Note: the problem is the church, not Jesus! The same research found that when the people talked about Jesus, they were smiling, animated, and enthusiastic. When it moved to the church, by contrast, they were angry and negative. The difference in response amounted to this: the problem with church is that it wasn’t recognisably like Jesus. It claimed his name, but didn’t walk the walk. Jesus is Good News; the church that bears his name, by contrast, is very definitely experienced as Bad News.

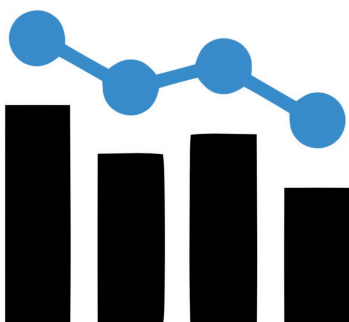
Section 3:

Survivalism: what really matters?

Why aren't churches, as a matter of course, recognisably like Jesus? Why is it the norm that church and church people *don't* remind people of Jesus? To be faithful disciples, sharing in Jesus' mission of transforming the world into the Kingdom of God, and making Jesus-shaped differences in communities that are experienced as Good News is almost impossible for a church locked into a survivalist mode.

Survivalism is the opposite of faithful following. Jesus calls us to take up our crosses and follow him. In fact, he says, we cannot be his disciples unless we do so! Following Jesus means following him along the Way of the Cross. The one obvious aspect of this call is that it is *not* call to survival! The discipleship question is, "How can I/we live and die in ways that make a Jesus-shaped difference?"

For a church in survival mode, concerns focus inwardly: how can we get more people? The community is viewed as a pool of potential church saviours. So intercessions never mention, "Today we're going to pray about what's happening in 9th Street, or for how the people will be affected by the forthcoming Council cuts etc. Survivalism is concerned primarily with how long dwindling resources of people and money can be eked out. It is unable to take risks and make costly decisions. This is a church that has lost sight of the Jesus it set out to follow.



Section 4:

“Meanwhile, back in the market place ...”

What really matters to the community? What’s going on in their lives? They’re certainly not wondering how they can be a resource to the church! The church, by contrast, ought to be agonized and inspired by the question of how it can be a blessing to the community. The church is an organisation and institution that *doesn’t* exist for the good of and in the interests of its own members!

The more deeply churches have immersed themselves in questions and concerns about their own future and survival, the more inward-looking and ghetto-ised they will have become. Being a blessing – becoming Good News – therefore requires first a period of intentional, sustained listening to the community. It involves listening with a particular “set of ears” – ears attuned to the community and its needs; ears that are listening very particularly for the voices and silences of the people who are always passed over.

It is a process of listening without self-interest. That is desperately difficult to do. And yet it is vital if we are to discover how to be a blessing to our communities – how to be part of the Good News we proclaim.



Section 5:

The BIG Listen:



There are many ways of conducting a community audit. The way we are going to do so is through a process of attentive, structured, intentional listening. Not only do we expect to learn a great deal about our community, and how we might be a blessing, but we will learn a huge amount about Jesus-shaped listening.

That isn't being fanciful! Jesus-shaped listening has some particular characteristics:

1. Its purpose is to listen for opportunities to be a blessing, rather than being on the lookout for possibilities for recruitment.
2. It is servant-listening: it assumes that we need to learn, and will do so by attentive listening.
3. It is incarnational listening on several levels: we are listening for the voice of God, who is present in the community and the people, opening up our eyes and ears and hearts. It is also in the sense that the gospel we proclaim takes concrete shape for the people who, previously, had not encountered Good News in their midst.
4. It is particularly attentive to the people on the marginalised – the ones whose voices are silenced and whose concerns are trivialised and ignored.

We believe that we will hear God's voice in the community voices. At the same time as we are listening to the community, we are listening for God's call: "*This is how you can be Good News! This is how you can make a Jesus-shaped difference. This is how you will be transformed, even as you are engaged in transformation yourselves. This is how you can follow more faithfully.*"

Space:
for your thoughts and reflections



Walking the Way

Living the life of Jesus today



The Northern Synod of the
United Reformed Church, 2017

Discipleship

