

St James Worship Review Day, Pencaitland

Plenary Session - feedback from small groups

25 Sept 2010

1. Moments and Spaces

Meeting in the round feels positive, although from time to time we could experiment with moving the layout. It helps to foster a feeling of community.

Sitting opposite others can make it difficult for those who are grieving or troubled in some way. It's difficult to know what the alternatives are. Part of being a community is that sometimes it can feel safe enough to show your vulnerability.

There is little scope for a quiet space, say, after the service where people can be quiet or have someone pray with them. What may be required is a mechanism for doing this rather than a space as such.

People like using the sanctuary for receiving communion, even though, theologically, the action has taken place around the centre table. People like the sense of pilgrimage, of kneeling, and of being served - none of which would happen if the bread and wine were passed around.

The transformation is viewed as a massive enhancement to our worship, a point at which the other parts of the service all join up and give a point to it all. It is seen as essential to who we are at St James. Perhaps we could be more explicit in discussing and explaining it to one another, so that more people feel they understand what we are doing and why we are doing it.

It is also valuable as a shared community activity - and something which is an easy way to talk about church with people who are not familiar with what we do.

We need to think about how we can all own it more.

Some discussion went on around the possibility of sharing this model with others, but the conclusion came that it was enough to just be who we are.

The children's space was acknowledged as more difficult to change.

It was felt important to keep the seasons as a framework for our worship.

The high investment required to maintain the transformations was observed, and some wondered whether transformations could evolve incrementally sometimes, rather than starting from scratch each time. Equally, is it necessary to do so many?

It was asked whether the seasons could be expressed more obviously in ways other than the art work.

We wondered whether the lectionary needed always to be used, or whether we could ring the changes with a focus on a theme sometimes.

People felt that many of the special events were special and meaningful for them, such as Maundy Thu and Ash Wed. The Carol Service last year felt a bit flat. Advent, Christmas and Easter services were seen as invitation services, and this could be thought about more.

The building as a whole has the potential to be transformed into a more welcoming space.

2. People and Participation

After church during coffee, it was observed that there is a potential conflict between different needs - the need to build community on one hand, and the need to welcome newcomers on the other. It was observed that there have been more students in the past - are we looking out for them to welcome them? Likewise, are we engaging well with our L'Arche members and their carers?

Decent coffee would help here!

Eating breakfast together from time to time was suggested (before or after the service?!)

Lunches after church in homes work well over the summer, and this could be done more often. Likewise, bring and share lunches work well, and we should keep these going.

Likewise, going together to a local pub after church has been enjoyed by some - this could be made more public and others welcomed, to avoid the sense of there being a closed club.

Some form of welcome after church is vital - could some people even be on a rota to do this, some wondered?

Children continue to be welcome at St James.

At times could the adults go out, and the children stay?

Having the children in with no connection to what's going on up front doesn't work well and leads to "unnecessary torture".

It is good to link what's going on with the children with the theme among the adults. Likewise, it is important that the children can bring in what they have been doing and share it with the adults.

Could there be a 'children's address' slot more often - not necessarily a talk, but something that engages them before they go out?

Could there be a service led by children once a year?

All age services have a tendency to be too long. We need to work at keeping them simple.

Art and Soul can be a good context for preparing for a coming transformation or all-age service.

Attendance at St James can be variable. There was a certain nostalgia for the days when church going was formed by habit and you didn't have to think whether to go - now it seems to be more of a choice. That is 'the way things are' in the modern world. St James adapts itself to these circumstances by, for example, doing 'scratch' plays, which require little rehearsal.

It was acknowledged as a good thing that there are lots of people involved in the services. This can create a relaxed, informal feel; but which, paradoxically, requires more preparation to do well. Sometimes there is a feeling among contributors that no-one is in charge 'orchestrating' or 'conducting' the participants. Participants need to feel supported. Folk who are not confident in their role need training, especially children.

In our prayers we could be more responsive, liaising with the music group, say, to arrange sung responses.

A tension was observed between polished performances and inclusive community - it is not always easy to know where to draw the line.

Some felt it is important that people arrive on time.

3. Liturgy and Music

Broadly people were happy with the use of liturgy. The familiarity can be comforting, even if, at times, it can be over-wordy. People like the fact that the liturgy we use is more resonant and inclusive than some others. More freedom to depart from the liturgy would be good - for example, do we always need three readings? It was noted that our use of the space was quite radical, but our use of liturgy was not. We can afford to be more creative and experimental with our liturgy. Some explanation of the liturgy may be worthwhile. We need to guard against gendered language when possible, when referring to God.

The instrumentation we use tends to result in more of a 'folk' sound, even when playing hymns. On the whole, people are comfortable with the 'folk' tradition, but there is scope for parallel streams such as music from Taizé, Northumbria, and others. The use of songs from around the world is important for some as it connects us to the wider church. It can be valuable at times to explain why a particular song has been chosen. Pleasing everyone musically is very difficult; perhaps we could ask people if there are particular songs they would like to sing.

There are not many other musicians in the woodwork willing to come out. Sometimes the competence of those already playing can discourage others.

Whole-congregational parts-singing is good. Despite some vehement voices on the survey, many felt practicing a song before the service is good - but perhaps we need to explain why we do this, and address concerns. Any practice needs to be kept short.

A more extended time of praise or meditation would be valued sometimes.

We are fortunate to have a range of speakers, but again, competence can be off-putting for others. Could reflections have more of a practical theme or focus? It is also good to follow through on a theme with one voice, giving a series. There was some discussion on the difference between a sermon and a reflection. For children's addresses, there could be scope for more 'active learning' approaches.

The DIY sermon was remembered as a good example of changing how we do things. There could be scope for discussion as well as reflection. People would like to hear more of the Rector.

Led prayers are generally good. There could be scope for open prayer, or silence, if managed well. Prayer for individuals might be offered during communion. For some, there are issues of audibility, especially when children are present. Prayers need training to speak up and clearly. When children are praying, it might be best to use some form of PA. It can be helpful to use particular symbols in prayer.