

Pathways to Faith

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Introduction

Ever since John Bunyan wrote Pilgrims Progress we have had a sense that coming to faith is a journey, a pathway, and many books have been written about the nature of this pathway and the nature of the people who go along it and our understanding of this pathway has changed. Previously we would have thought of the pathway as starting with the preaching of the word. In recent times we realise we need to do good works and reach out to people on the basis of their needs and how to be their friend.

So if we look at pathways to faith before the Covid-19 pandemic we would have been encouraging church members to make friends and get to know people, invite friends to church and services into the life of our church community and then perhaps an invitation to Alpha. The pandemic has caused all this to change. This document looks at these changes.

Chapter 1 – COVID-19 changes

Colossians 4.2-6

‘Devote yourselves to prayer, being watchful and thankful. And pray for us, too, that God may open a door for our message, so that we may proclaim the mystery of Christ, for which I am in chains. Pray that I may proclaim it clearly, as I should. Be wise in the way you act toward outsiders; make the most of every opportunity.’

In the above verses the apostle Paul asks the church in Colossi to pray that God would open the door for the word. Now Covid is not from the Lord but God is using it to bring change and opportunities and here are four ways that Covid is affecting us and the church.

Change!

In one short year Covid has brought more change to our culture and more shock to the way we live than anything we have seen in the last 40 years. Now change is a very interesting dynamic and one of the things that change does is cause a shaking of old ideas and old prejudices as it creates openness in people's thinking.

Missiologists have always known that change can create spiritual openness. When Pol Pot ruled Cambodia with such terror and violence hundreds of thousands of Cambodians fled into Thailand and were held in refugee camps. Historically, Cambodians had not been open to Christian faith but in this time of change and over a period of five to six years in these camps many thousands came to faith. Church leaders were trained and when these refugees were dispersed around the world many Cambodian churches were started. In my own personal journey, growing up in England in the 50s and 60s, I gave no space to church or Christian things but, in moving to Australia when I was 20, which created a huge change, I became open to all sorts of new experiences and new freedoms. But I also met Christians who I accepted in a way I would not previously have done and this took me on a journey of faith. So we can be sure that during this Covid crisis this is a positive aspect and an opportunity for the Christian message.

Community!

This is also a positive dynamic of Covid. All over the country in almost every street there is a greater sense of community. The use of WhatsApp, for example, in terms of connecting in our street and other similar ideas means that we know our neighbours far better than we have ever done before. As the Queen in her Christmas broadcast said "the streets are empty, but filled with love". In my own cul-de-sac we have got to know each other at a far greater depth. We have cared for one another, shopped for one another.

This kind of community creates a great platform for us as members of that community to live out our faith and make a difference and share our faith where possible. Again missiologists will tell us that it is in close communities that the Christian message has historically often had the most impact.

Church!

So we have looked at two positive dynamics of the Covid pandemic but here are two challenges. The first is, historically, the church in this country and around the world has been centrally driven from our Sunday services and all this happens in our church buildings. Much of this had to stop and for many churches this has been an enormous challenge because we do mission by attracting people to the central church and our pathway is focused around our building and our activities and all this is currently not available. So the challenge is that we have to go back to the central teaching of the new testament; it is church members who are the work force, the front foot of church, not Sunday services and we have to empower and train our church members to be the first line of our pathways to faith and our pathways will begin with the relationships and the conversations of our church members.

Activities!

The second challenge is that so many of our activities are no longer available but new ones have quickly grown up. Many churches around the world and in the UK now have church services that are streamed online in one way or another and it would appear that hundreds and perhaps even tens of

thousands of people are watching church through the internet. And here is a challenge - that we have to create new pathways to these invisible people, to serve them in their journey of faith.

So Covid creates two positive changes and two challenges. As we continue through this booklet we explore what we need to do.

Chapter 2 – Pathway – Encounter Engage Embrace

Colossians 4:4 'Pray that I may proclaim it clearly, as I should'.

The apostle Paul says here that he is asking for prayer to make it clear and it is our challenge to help make the journey of faith clear so that our friends can walk along it. It needs to be clear in the sense of the pathway and the content in the pathway needs to be understandable so that our friends have a positive opportunity to respond to Jesus.

As we said in the last chapter pathways have changed and we need to think through the different ways people can be helped on this journey. If we look at John 3.16 we can see three ways how a pathway might work.

1. Encounter. God so loved the world so he sent his son is the biggest encounter in history.
2. Engage. Jesus said 'whoever believes in me'. In other words people have to understand what it means to follow God, what he is like and what it might mean to be a follower of Jesus.
3. Embrace. If we read on to verse 21 of John 3 we see that '*whoever lives by the truth comes into the light, so that it may be seen plainly that what they have done has been done in the sight of God.*' This is the point where we go from understanding to an active choice. We, in the words of C.S. Lewis, surrender ourselves and allow God to be an essential part of our lives.

Historically, all three aspects of this pathway were supported and strengthened by central church activities. We made friends with people and we could invite them into the life of our church, activities, and coffee mornings and then as they wanted to engage with Christianity we invited them to guest services, carol, and Easter services. If they wanted to take a further step to embrace faith there was Alpha and other similar courses. So, central church played a very significant part in how people came to faith in the pathway that they were on.

Since Covid we have opened up new areas such as the internet with services being streamed online, so we need to think through a pathway for those who have encountered us in this way.

So let us look at this in more detail.

Encounter

This is about what I can do as an individual, so that when people meet me they are encountering a little bit of Jesus through the way I live, serve and talk. And as I said earlier Covid has helped us in some ways by creating a greater sense of community and so now we know our neighbours with a new intensity by looking after one another and caring for one another. This is certainly true of my street where, yes, I knew a lot of people by name but through WhatsApp we have looked after one another, shopped for one another and cared for one another.

Also, many Christians around the country have been at the forefront of serving and volunteering whether that is helping in a food bank or going shopping for someone who is shielding or unable to go out. In this time of Covid, when we encounter people who care for us, who bring food to us, or in some way serve during this difficult period, it has an impact and if these folk are from a church background and they are coming with their faith this has a very positive impact on people as they see Christianity not as a jumble of words but as people who love and are seeking to make a difference.

With churches streaming their services over the internet this has unexpectedly caused a new kind of encounter, that as we go through the challenge of the pandemic some folks are looking for reassurance, for hope and allegedly thousands of people have watched Christian services on a Sunday which is both encouraging and slightly amazing.

Engage

So it is wonderful that through all these different encounters we have got to know a lot more people and made a lot more contacts. But the second part of this is that we have to help people engage and understand what it means to be a Christian and this process takes time, maybe months, maybe years for a number of reasons. Historically, when many people went to Sunday school and there was a lot more Christianity in our culture the underlying level of understanding of what faith is and what it meant was really quite high but that is not the case today. Over 40% of the population are not convinced that Jesus is a real person and they doubt his historicity. [Talking Jesus research 2015](#). So therefore we must think how we are going to help them gain some basic understanding. As I said before this was often historically done through inviting people to many of the central experiences that our churches run but when this is not available we need to do two things.

First of all, we have to encourage our churches to say and speak more and when we encourage them to do this, we must help them to do this in language and metaphors that make sense to people and are easily understandable. Colossians 4 reminds us that we must make the message clear and we need to speak it softly, graciously. We will say a little bit more about this in the next chapter of this booklet. The second thing that can help us at this stage is the use of materials and things we can give people. Over the years I have had numerous conversations with people who have pointed out that there is not enough good quality booklets, books that we could give people that help them engage and understand Christianity and those which were available were often expensive.

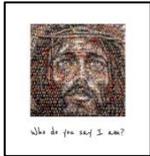
HOPE Together, under the leadership of Roy Crowne and now Rachel Jordan-Wolf, realised that there was a space that needed filling and over these last four or five years have created a number of different resources that are not only good quality and have great content but they have also been made available at very competitive prices so church leaders can buy several hundred and give them to their church members who in turn can offer them to their friends. The first example of this was a booklet called 'The Queen and the King She Serves' which used words the Queen has said from her Christmas speech and her own speeches at other times. This was a good quality product sold to churches for £1 per copy and over a million were sold. This showed us the importance of having good material and Hope Together has made available a further three excellent resources that we can give to people.



'Mark's Gospel'. An attractively printed book available to churches to buy for £1 for their church members to give to their friends.



A small booklet called 'HOPE in Uncertain Times' which is again a very good quality picture based booklet that deals with difficult times, has testimonies and encourages people to look to God for hope. It's an excellent resource.



'Who do you say I am?' Again a high quality book that looks at who Jesus is, what is real and what did he say and there are comments from professors and individuals on the authenticity and the reality of the Jesus story. These are great resources to help people engage with faith.

[HOPE Together](#)

So these resources cannot only be given to church members who can give them to their friends but also whenever we have internet based activities that the general public are listening to we can offer one of these to them over the air free and they just need to ask by email and we will send them a copy. Now as soon as that happens we have taken an important step to draw these unknown people who have some interest, out of the ether as it were, but now they can be followed up because we have a street address and we can send them the resource and invite them to get involved in others ways to answer any questions that they might have.

Embrace

How people make a personal step to faith has changed over the decades. In the 1950's it was going to a Billy Graham conference and walking forward, but in recent years Alpha has taken the world by storm and it has developed a 12-week course which is very user friendly and unthreatening. It is where people have a meal, they listen to a talk and they discuss that talk and this gives them an opportunity to engage and at several points through the course they have an opportunity to embrace Christianity for themselves. Obviously, since the pandemic, these courses have had to go onto the internet and there was some nervousness as to whether they would work in that format. But the good news is that they have worked very well and many people have enjoyed the anonymity that the internet gives them while they explore spiritual faith. And so we can let our friends know and churches can let people know that these courses exist and how they might join them.

This is an important way to embrace faith but there are other ways. There is a little booklet called 'Try Praying' and this takes the concept that if you ask people to talk to God as if he was there even if they may not actually believe in him it creates an opportunity for God to step into their lives. My friend told me a story of how his daughter had become unemployed and she asked her father what she might do and he said to her 'try praying' and so this young lady did this and to her amazement she had people getting in contact with her and offer her work who she was not at that point actively involved with. So if we encourage people to pray and talk to God this opens up a space, a possibility for them to encounter God.

It has been true for a number of years that many people come to faith by themselves. They don't need to go to a Billy Graham conference or go to Alpha; they have encountered Christianity in some other way. God turns up in their lives as they have explored on their own. For many of these this

could be quite an old fashioned experience, perhaps kneeling by their bedside or walking out in the wonder of nature, but they engage with God in a personal way and my research shows that this could be as many of 30% of those who come to faith on their own.

So now we understand a little bit more about this pathway, encounter, engage, embrace.

Chapter 3 – Conversational tennis

Colossians 4:6 'Let your conversation be always full of grace, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how to answer everyone.'

Over my many years of evangelism I have often noticed that when we share our faith, in our enthusiasm, it can have a lot of intensity and punch to it. David Smith, the leader of Kingsgate Church in Peterborough said that often we are trained to reach people who are far away from us. This is a one off encounter, you may never see them again but when we reach people who are near us we are going to see them, again, and again, and our style of language needs to be different.

When I saw these words 'be gracious', I realised that this is how we should speak in a post-modern culture. Not pointing the finger, not saying I am right you are wrong, but putting a proposition, this is what I am thinking, what are you thinking? Graciousness and softness are important skills for us to learn in conversations with people who are close to us which are most of the people we will be sharing our faith with.

Let me introduce you to the conversation gospel or, if you like, 'conversational tennis'. Imagine a conversation is like a game of tennis. When someone knocks the ball over the net, they ask you a question, you can reply. If they knock it back you can reply again but if for whatever reason they don't, and then we stop talking. Our goal is to leave them positive for the next Holy Spirit encounter. Sometimes we can take the initiative, as it were, and toss the 'ball' over the net to see if they want to 'play' It might be that you mention something about your church life and if they ask a question normal rules apply; if they don't, we move on. Simple everyday language, graciously spoken, not putting pressure on people, is perhaps the way forward.

I am a member of a club, as many of you might be, and people there often ask me what I do. I try to respond in language that is helpful and say that I am a consultant who helps churches understand post-modern culture and how they might make their message relevant for today. I am often asked questions on the back of this, but I follow the conversational rules. Because I meet these people regularly and I sit next to them at functions, I don't want them to look at my name label and think: 'Oh no, I am sitting next to Laurence the Bible-basher!'

We ourselves also have the opportunity sometimes to lob the ball over the net to see if people want to play tennis. Someone might ask you, 'Have you had a great weekend?' You can say, 'Yes, I particularly enjoyed church on Sunday.' You have just lobbed the ball over the net and can now wait to see if they want to play by returning it to you. If they do, they might knock it back with, 'Really, you enjoyed church?' and a conversation could ensue from that. So, by adopting this habit of communication you become a safe person to talk to. People will not feel you are forcing your faith upon them because every time you speak they have given you permission to do so. They have

remained in control of the conversation throughout the process and therefore feel safe. In turn, if they feel safe, they will be more open to the content of that conversation.

Chapter 4 – Gospel Content

Colossians 4:6 ‘And pray for us, too, that God may open a door for our message, so that we may proclaim the mystery of Christ, for which I am in chains.’

In Colossians 4:2-6 the apostle Paul asks the Colossian church to pray for him that he might make the gospel clear. I believe this is the great challenge of today that we need to encourage and train ordinary Christians to share their faith and the gospel message with simplicity and clarity with graciousness and using language that people understand. Amongst those who have done overseas mission work it says this: that the language of the speaker should be shaped by the hearer and not the speaker. In other words, if I use words like sin, repent, give your life to Christ, these and many other expressions are meaningful to us but not to the people we are speaking to and therefore should not be used.

So, if not these words, what words? One of my favourite passages of scripture that helps us with this is 2 Corinthians 5.15, ‘*And he died for all, that those who live should no longer live for themselves but for him who died for them and was raised again*’. Now this verse is used by the apostle Paul while he is writing to the Colossian church and who were mainly from a pagan background and didn’t understand some of the language he might have used. In speaking to Jews he seems to use a very simple format.

‘*Christ died for all.*’ This extraordinary phrase is used by most speakers/preachers one way or another and it focuses around the person of Jesus who is central to the story. But he goes on to say that we should no longer live for ourselves. So here, Paul, instead of using words like sin, has taken a word that means a lot in modern language. Living for ourselves equals self-rule, equals selfishness. In the old testament, in the story of the garden of Eden are two trees; the tree of life which speaks of God at the centre, and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil which speaks of man at the centre. And we are forbidden to eat of that tree because God knows that when we are in control we choose what is right and wrong. The principle of self-rule will dominate everything and selfishness will destroy.

Now why is selfishness a good metaphor? Because everyone has experienced it, we have all been hurt by somebody or some organisation and if we are honest we have all hurt somebody. So, selfishness like sin is universal and where the word sin can often be perceived as an offence by people most people will acknowledge that selfishness is a part of the human condition and they are not offended in quite the same way. The apostle goes on to declare that the answer to the problem is that we no longer live for ourselves but for him who for our sake died and was raised. This speaks to me of surrender and what we are asking people to do is to acknowledge their selfishness, realise they can never be free from it in their own strength but if we surrender to the love of God and he becomes the centre of our lives we have embraced a new direction and can be separate.

It has been said that this post-modern generation is the most lived for themselves generation the world has ever seen. So, we have a simple message - don’t live for yourself but place Jesus at the centre. I think this creates a simple format, a clear format for ordinary Christians to share their faith in a new way.

Chapter 5 – Make a new friend – rebuild community

Pray

We all know prayer is important and is a foundation to seeing God at work through our words and actions and in our nation. When we pray, we don't make God love us more, but we create focus and this love God can change and influence what he is focused on.

Luke 10:2 gives us an interesting mandate for prayer: 'The harvest is plentiful, but the workers are few. Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field.'

The mandate here is that prayer begins with us as a Mission Champion: we pray for our own hearts to be big, so that we might be motivated to reach out to others. We know that real mission is not a method but it is the expression of our hearts, so we pray for our fellow church members that, as our church becomes more missionary-minded, it is not just about adopting good ideas, it is about asking God for big hearts and to be motivated to love people in words and action.

We have been encouraged through the Archbishops' initiative 'Thy Kingdom Come' to think of five people close to us and pray for them. As a Mission Champion we want to encourage fellow church members to be praying on a regular basis for the people close to them – their friends, their neighbours, their family, asking that the power of God's love would influence them towards knowing God personally.

Speak

The Talking Jesus research showed us that 36% of us who are practising Christians said that a conversation with a Christian was key in our coming to faith. So we need to be people ready to speak well and in a way that engages with those currently outside the faith. 'Let your conversation be always full of grace, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how to answer anyone' (Colossians 4:6) is a marvellous scripture, which encourages us to have good faith conversations.

Most of the people you are going to talk to are your friends and family, your neighbours, people close to you, so we don't need to be under pressure to tell them everything all in one moment. (See Conversational Tennis - Chapter 3.)

Give

There are three ways we might embrace this word 'give'. Firstly, we give of ourselves to people in friendship and hospitality. We open our houses and open up our lives. We all have a birthday once a year, so we invite our friends both church and unchurch to celebrate with us. Simple kind gracious hospitality impacts people. We become a friendly people making friends as we can. This is about as powerful a form of mission as you can do.

Secondly, we can give ourselves in service. Our churches run foodbanks, parent and toddler groups, senior citizens' lunch clubs...there are many ways we can serve in our communities.

Thirdly, we can give gifts, materials and books. HOPE Together has sought to create new resources that are a pleasure to give and to receive: magazines that are available at Christmas and Easter; books that are written without Christian jargon to help spark conversations about what it means to be a Christian.

Invite

Are we confident enough to invite people to events in the wider life of our church? We have made friends; we know our neighbours and every Christmas we hope our church will have a high-quality Christmas carol service and other events at this important moment in our calendar. At Christmas people are more willing to accept an invitation to a festive event at church. We can be confident to invite our friends or neighbours when we know the event will be of good quality with only a small amount of gospel content.

At Easter we can also be invitational, inviting people to our services. Perhaps we have already invited friends to a Christmas event. At Easter we can build on what they have heard about Jesus, so they begin to understand who he was, what he said and what he did. We can give people an opportunity to reflect on the historicity of Jesus, his message and his life.

Lastly, we might think of being invitational in the context of the Alpha course or a similar event where people are invited over a period of time to explore a spiritual journey and find out what it really means to be a Christian.

I think we all find being invitational a challenge, but it is one we must face. We must become invitational people.

Make friends

The Talking Jesus research showed us that 67% of non-Christians in this country already know one of us, a practising Christian, and they know us really well; we are their friends and family. That leaves 33% of the population not knowing a practising Christian. What if we all prayed to get to know someone new, someone different from us, someone from a new network? If we pray and think creatively God will help us to find those who are furthest away from his Church.

If we all embrace these five missional practices and they just become a simple part of our lifestyle – we pray, we talk in an appropriate way, we give of ourselves, we are invitational and friendly, think how much further the gospel will go through your church and through each of us.

Action points

1. Pray for five friends or family members who are not yet following Jesus.
2. Speak – try ‘conversational tennis’.
3. Give of ourselves – give ourselves in service and find appropriate gifts to give, which help people understand more about Jesus.
4. Invite – become an invitational person.
5. Make friends – increase the circle of our friendships and give the Holy Spirit space to work.

Cell UK Resources available from celluk.org.uk



Printed on attractive postcards and presented in a high quality durable tin, these ideas break down into eight themes each taking your small group on a journey, renewing minds and creating new rhythms for life.



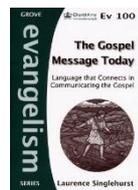
These fantastic worship ideas are each printed on a card with a lovely picture and presented in a set of 40 in an attractive durable tin. Anybody in a small group will find them helpful.



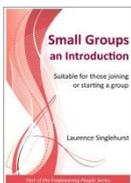
This is a practical resource essential in helping small groups with a missional heartbeat. It starts by looking at some of the challenges we face as Christians in the UK as we share our faith, how we can think differently about this and what this means for us. It moves to thinking through some of the practicalities and translates these concepts into actual things we can do in our small group to become missional.



This book will help us explore what it really means to love people and fulfil our responsibility to share what we believe. It is not full of technical terms and complicated methods but simply explores what it means to sow the seed of faith, to reap the harvest and to nurture the fruit as it grows. Sow, Reap, Keep.



In a postmodern, unchurched, multi-faith and multi-racial society, it is more important than ever to articulate the enduring message of the gospel in language that can be understood by the culture around us. In this booklet Laurence Singlehurst makes the case for the adoption of contextually appropriate language in order to communicate the truths at the heart of the gospel.



This booklet seeks to give some biblical background and framework along with a practical understanding of what it might be like to be part of a small group. Suitable for those joining or starting a group or to refresh your understanding of what it means to be in a small group.

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