Presentation of Walking the Way at Southern Synod

‘This is Discipleship’ 2 minutes

I have been invited to explain some thinking that the denomination has been doing about ‘Walking the Way – living the life of Jesus today.

Four years ago, I set out on a long walk from St Jean Pied de Port on the French side of the Pyrenees to Santiago de Compostela in NW Spain. It is one of the pilgrimage routes walked by many pilgrims over the centuries. People of all faiths and none travel by this route for many different reasons.

Along the way they are guided by scallop shells (like this) which mark the way.

People of all ages from all parts of the world are drawn to follow countless numbers of pilgrims before them. All we share is the journey. Along the way as we walked, we talked with one another, we shared food together, cautiously we revealed just a little bit more of ourselves to each other. It was the way which enabled new and deeper understanding and new relationships to form.

Following Jesus is meant to be like that – a shared journey – in company of others each looking out for the other and together trying to ensure that we don’t take wrong turn. In fact a frequent and early designation of those men and women drawn from every group in society was that they were followers of the Way.

So how did the URC get here ?

During 2015 the Mission Committee were thinking about how to embed evangelism in the life of the Church and concluded that it would best be done as part of an emphasis on missional discipleship.

At the same time the Assembly Education & Learning Committee following a Big Picture meeting (which brought together people involved in education from across the church) and a review of TLS concluded that it wanted to carry the best of TLS into a new resource for the church which would aim to develop discipleship. The two Assembly committees agreed that their aims were so close that from henceforth it would be a shared journey and a Missional Discipleship Task Group was established.

At the same time we recognised that we must take soundings from people in the wider Church that have built up considerable expertise in this area and a number of meetings were set up to test our thinking against others.

Recent initiatives of the URC can contribute to our growing confidence in making and releasing disciples in all our congregations. To name but a few – the Faith and Order Report – What is the Spirit saying to the Churches? The 20 – 40s Task Group set up by General Assembly to think how the Church can reach out to the ‘missing’ generation. The Vision 2020 statements we believe offer a framework within which we hope that churches and individuals will find space to grow in their journey with Christ.

Taken together we feel that for some time now the URC has been asking some quite profound questions about what it means to be church in 21st century, about how we express our faith in a globalised culture and a society in which worship takes place in many different places. Questions have arisen about the shape of the church, and how our inherited models of church and our traditional models of ministry may have to change.

You probably have heard the saying:

People cry out to God when the ground under their feet is shaking – only to discover that it is God who is shaking it!

Perhaps it feels like that from your perspective. Well it is easy to rehearse the difficulties but what I want to do this afternoon is to share our thinking and see what you have to say about it.

First of all let me begin with this.. (OAK TREE)

The oak tree has been an image which has impressed itself on our thinking.

It has a deep and developed root structure which has grown down deep for the water and nutrients the tree needs to grow. Let’s think about roots for a moment. How would you identify the roots of your own faith? Initially, they are often unseen, for many they will be found in prayer and what happens as you look at the world around you. For many the Bible will play an important role in starting them out on their journey with Christ. We have recognised the importance of a good role model, someone who exhibits wisdom, kindness, and speaks truth with gentleness. For many of us that might be a parent, a teacher or minister.

Sooner or later the trunk of the tree begins to emerge and develop. For us this trunk is common to all of us to all of our growth as Christians. I had the opportunity 36 years ago to plant oaklings at Lea Abbey. It was with delight I was able to go back some years ago on a ministers’ refresher to see how those oaklings had grown. They had grown in height and they were beginning to gain some girth.

I thank God for the many people I have met in the company of the baptised who have both demonstrated unself consciously a growing maturity in discipleship and have by so doing enabled me to develop and grow. We believe that this is the main part of the tree. People we have met along the Way who have inspired us not to give up or to get stuck but have inspired us to venture out in fresh ways out of love for Christ and his Community.

Then we come to the branches. As this growth goes on, branches develop growing out of the trunk. Some are called evangelists, some teachers, some have the gift of inspired utterance. In this way people have pursued their distinct calling MoWS, CRCWs, Lay Preachers, now being complemented by Pioneers, family and children’s workers, community chaplains, local church leaders, pastoral workers, worship leaders and so on. But what we must not get confused about is that the branches grow out of the trunk not the other way round.

Our aim has been to look for resources which we think might help people in the URC to be built up in faith and given confidence in sharing. In the course of considering this question, we have come across ‘Holy Habits’ written by Andrew Roberts of the Methodist Church. The book has just been published and taking as his biblical starting point Acts 2, Andrew has worked with the Birmingham Methodist Circuit to begin to develop materials for churches to work with in order to practice habits of faithfulness. We are delighted that the writing team has offered a place to the URC and that Stuart Scott lay training officer in West Midlands synod will be representing us on that.

There are many other discipleship materials available as the slide illustrates.

Preparation for recognised ministries within the church and the way we deploy ministers are closely related to the question of Walking the Way. We are trying to be more joined up in our thinking. This emphasis is intended to support, encourage and help local churches to be built up in their faith journey. Therefore since our contexts vary so widely, we need to be as flexible as possible both in offering content and in the way that content can be offered to local churches. The first disciples simply walked, talked and put into practice the kind of life that their rabbi Jesus encouraged them to adopt.

As many of you know TLS has served the Church well for 26 years offering people with a way of learning and growing as disciples. The time has come for us to take the strengths of TLS into a new form at which, whilst preserving much of the methodology, will offer a new way for us all to learn as we continue to walk Christ’s way.

The image of the oak tree prompts the question how we might recognise growing maturity in our communities? It is easy to see in a tree. Our response to the question is to look at the ten statements of Vision 4 Life and to say we shall know if growth is taking place if we are able to see some development against those bench marks.

(Vision 4 Life - 10 statements)

* What do you understand by ‘Walking the Way’?
* What would you find helpful as you develop in your discipleship?
* What ‘holy habits’ might be modelled in your local congregation?
* What steps could be taken to make faith sharing a priority in your church?

How do we encourage change?

Sir Frances Drake’s prayer

Disturb us, Lord, when

We are too well pleased with ourselves

When our dreams have come true

Because we have dreamed too little,

When we arrived safely

Because we sailed too close to the shore.

Disturb us Lord, when

With the abundance of things we possess

We have lost our thirst

For the waters of life;

Having fallen in love with life

We have ceased to dream of eternity

And in our efforts to build a new earth

We have allowed our vision of the new Heaven to dim.

Disturb us Lord to dare more boldly

To venture on wider seas

Where strorn will show your mastery

Where losing sight of land

We shall find stars

We ask You to push back

The horizons of our hopes

And to push into the future

In strength, courage, hope and love.