

WAY OF DISCIPLESHIP: JOINING IN WITH THE SPIRIT



Session 4: Joining in with the Spirit in being a blessing as a community

What is the joint calling of God's people?
What does it mean to be a blessing and how is it helpful in mission?
How does the Holy Spirit help me to be a blessing?
How do we receive the Holy Spirit in our lived experience?
How can our life together be a form of blessing?
In what particular ways could being part of the "Church of England" help us be a blessing?
How might we start to discover where we can be a blessing together in our communities?
How might we go to others?
How might we grow in the practice of hospitality?
How might we work with other church communities to be a blessing?

What is the joint calling of God's people?



As we have seen, the end point of discipleship, and the purpose of God for our lives is 'to continue the opera' - to faithfully do the same things that Jesus did, in the manner in which He did them, for the same ultimate goal - the restoration of all things, "the re-creation of the world, when the Son of Man will rule gloriously." (Matthew 19:28)

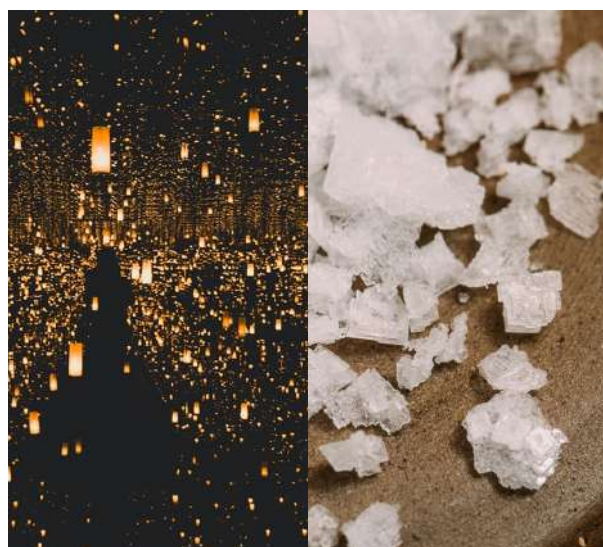
Our worship and mission are intertwined, the one naturally leading to the other. We are not a tribe who look after ourselves, but to live out God's purposes in the world. It is not that the church has a mission, but that 'the mission of God has a church'.

The more we have a sense of joining in with God's mission, the more we will be being true to the nature of what 'church' means. To recap, our task is not to grow the church - Jesus said, "I will build my church". Neither is it to do God's mission for Him - we get to join in with where He is at work. Our commission is to "make disciples." (Matthew 28) "If you make disciples, you always get the church. But if you make a church, you rarely get disciples." (Mike Breen)

As we grow in discipleship, we will be paying attention to where God is at work and equipped and led to join in with His mission. And as we join in with His mission, the community of worshipping people called out (church) by God will be shaped around His purposes.

This is reflected in the four words used to describe the church in the creeds: one, holy, catholic and apostolic. Of these, being "holy" means we are 'set apart' for God's purposes. Being "apostolic" means we have inherited the work of the first apostles (meaning 'sent ones').

As God's called out people (church) we are both scattered in various places, but also sometimes gathered as one.



We have already looked at what it might mean to join in with God in our scattered places and everyday lives, and we have explored what it means to share faith with other people. In these next two sessions we look at how and why we can join in with God's mission together, as a gathered church.

This understanding of being both scattered and gathered as God's people is seen in Jesus' use of being "salt" and "light" of the world to describe His disciples. Sometimes they will be like salt - scattered throughout the world, influencing and bringing life in less visible ways. Sometimes they will be like light - gathered in one point as a visible sign showing God's life together.

In this session we explore this by looking at how, in the power of the Spirit, we can talk about living out God's mission as seeking to be a blessing to others as together we "respond to human need by loving service" (the third mark of mission).

In the next session we look more specifically at marks four and five: "4. To seek to transform unjust structures of society, to challenge violence of every kind and to pursue peace and reconciliation. 5. To strive to safeguard the integrity of creation and sustain and renew the life of the earth."



What does it mean to be a blessing and how is it helpful in mission?

In its simplest use, to bless someone is 'to speak well of them'. But in a deeper sense when we bless someone (whether formally or informally) we are communicating that we want for them what God wants for them, what God sees as good for them.

When we bless someone, we communicate in a way which brings God close. Bonhoeffer said blessing is communicating a “visible, perceptible, effective proximity of God.” The early church was good news in their local community, bringing healing that brought people running (Acts 3:11) and signs and wonders which led to them being “highly regarded by the people”. (Acts 5:13) Tabitha is an example of a disciple who “was always doing good and helping the poor”. (Acts 9:36)

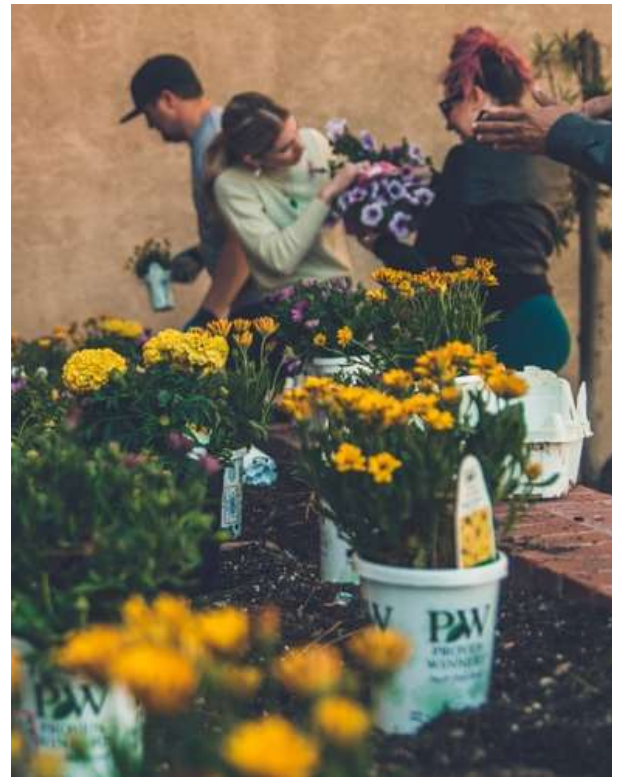
Before they communicated good news in words, they were good news. Blessing people is communicated through actions as well as words.

Maturity in our discipleship will be expressed as we bless other people, and it will also involve giving away something of ourselves so that others can have life. Using the language of being a blessing, particularly as a way of describing the last three marks of mission may help us to:

Connect with God's early calling to human beings.

In Genesis 12 God speaks to Abram and promises that through him God will create and bless a great nation. But the purpose of this nation is that “all peoples on earth will be blessed through you.” (Genesis 12:3).

God's blessing is not only for the benefit of those who receive it, because as the story begins to unfold as to how God will begin to bring the world back to Himself, we see that He will do it chiefly through a people who are blessed, but who then can go on to be a blessing for others.



The restoration we receive through Christ helps us live once again in the full sense of God's blessing. But the call to Abram to then be those who will bless others remains.

See the impact of who we are as a gathered community in new ways.

In the Church of England, the aim of working for the 'common good' has become increasingly highlighted in recent years. (On the Church of England website there are 59 results for reimagining ministry, 560 results for evangelism and 1800 results for common good.)

During the pandemic one writer reflected how, while we might be experiencing declining church attendance (as few as 1 percent of 18- to 24-year-olds now identify as Anglican and only 2% of the population attend Anglican worship), nevertheless as a church we remain at “the beating heart of the nation's socioeconomic infrastructure, with an ever-increasing contribution of food banks, homeless shelters, and a range of community support.”



She reported how the vast majority of churches (89%) report having engaged in some form of social action during lockdown, and a National Churches Trust report estimated the value of church buildings to the UK economy at £12.4 billion pounds a year.

Church activities include night shelters for the homeless, lunch clubs, debt advice centres, and toddler groups. (How smaller congregations are still showing up to support their communities through growing social action. Hannah Rich|November 24, 2020.)

Whether through formal activities or informal help offered spontaneously it has been calculated the church members in England give more than 23 million hours of volunteer time every month outside of the regular work at the church.

Change what we count as our significant activities

One church continues to make a weekly count of how many people attend services, how much money is given and how many are baptised.

But they also report how many people are being blessed through their addiction recovery scheme; being counselled through their counselling facility; how many bags are being given away through a food pantry each week; how many expressions of church they are involved in developing; how much money is being given away to the local community; and how many prison visits are being carried out through their visiting scheme.

They are not counting who is coming to them, but who are they able to be a blessing towards. Counting and sharing these figures reinforces the sense that what they truly value in their life as a gathered community is how under God they are able to join in with His mission and be a blessing in many different ways.

Find a way of talking about mission that everyone feels included in.

One of the gifts of being part of the church is the huge range of differences we have – in our personalities, gifts, traditions and stories. This can make sharing an understanding of how we live out God's mission complicated. In addition, we can lack confidence in the idea of what being 'on mission' means, and how we go about it.



Talking about blessing other people, as a way of describing joining in the God's mission, opens up possibilities for anyone. No matter what our background or level of confidence, we can hopefully all respond to the question, "How can I be a blessing to others?"

Be a healthy church community

Pope Francis has said that, "We need to avoid the spiritual sickness of a church that is wrapped up in its own world: when a church becomes like that it grows sick. It is true that going out onto the street implies the risk of accidents happening but if I had to choose between a wounded church that goes out onto the street and a sick withdrawn church, I would definitely choose the first one."

Just as the origin of the word "Mass" is the Latin word for sending out, so we end the Eucharist with the words, "Go in peace to love and serve the Lord," the more we are able to be a blessing to others, the healthier our sense of being God's worshipping, sent people might be.

This session introduces several ideas about how we can be a blessing, offering a toolbox of extra resources. For example, how knowing my gifts helps; how understanding Anglican identity can be a resource; how to bless communities; different forms of church; hospitality and welcome; working with other churches. In all of this we will not be talking about 'the church' as something separate from ourselves because as disciples we are the church – rather than thinking about how 'the church' can be a blessing, we will always be reflecting on how God is calling all of us to grow into this.

How does the Holy Spirit help me to be a blessing?



If the “chief actor in the mission of the Christian church is the Holy Spirit, (and) mission is not just something that the church does; it is something that is done by the Spirit” then being a blessing will be about God’s Spirit doing His work in the world through us (rather than us doing His work). It is God who gives the growth.



We have explored how practices such as prayer, worship, or stillness can become opportunities for us to allow the Holy Spirit to influence the desires of our hearts, and to change our character to become more like Christ.

We have also seen how Jesus’ whole life and ministry was led by the Holy Spirit, how He was “full of the Spirit” (Luke 4:1), and how John said that He would “baptise with the Holy Spirit and with fire”. (Luke 3:16) For the early Christians it was natural that they “prayed for the new believers there that they might receive the Holy Spirit”. (Acts 8: 14-17)

Christian disciples always have known this in a general sense, but in the last century there has been a re-emphasis across many church denominations about what this might mean in our lived experience.

For example, Father Raniero Cantalamessa is a Capuchin monk who was sent by the Vatican to be an observer at a conference. During it, he asked ‘a lay Protestant’ to pray for him to experience more of the Holy Spirit. As a result, he reports that he experienced God’s love for him in a new way. He found himself speaking “in a manner like speaking in tongues”. The Bible came alive in a new way. He received a new ministry. In 1980, he was made the preacher to the Papal Household.

While most Christians know that we need God’s Spirit to empower us, we might have different understandings and expectations about how this might happen, and what our experience can be.

Some expect there to be two distinct stages, in which someone can be baptised in the Spirit at a later stage to coming to faith. (“When they arrived, they prayed for the new believers there that they might receive the Holy Spirit, because the Holy Spirit had not yet come on any of them; they had simply been baptised in the name of the Lord Jesus. Then Peter and John placed their hands on them, and they received the Holy Spirit.” (Acts 8: 15-17))

Some might emphasise being filled with the Spirit as something that may result in receiving particular gifts in order to be a blessing, but which is also an ongoing journey and not a once-for-all experience (“Keep on being filled with the Spirit.” (Ephesians 5:18))

Others might emphasise that a disciple receives the Holy Spirit when they first say they have faith in Christ (“...no one can say that Jesus is Lord except by the Holy Spirit...we were all baptised by one Spirit” (1 Corinthians 12:3;13)) and that there may be moments where the work of God is strengthened in them through the Holy Spirit. For example, a bishop will particularly ask for this at someone’s Confirmation.

While these differences can cause confusion, and at worst a reluctance to seek the Holy Spirit, they all point in some similar directions:



As we saw in Session 1, **“The Spirit is more than just one of God's gifts among others; the Holy Spirit is the unrestricted presence of God in which our life wakes up...**the greatest and most wonderful thing which we can experience... We feel and taste, we touch and see our life in God and God in our life.” Jesus spoke about the Holy Spirit as the best gift anyone can receive saying, “... how much more will the heavenly father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him?” (Luke 11)

The Holy Spirit always brings strength for something new to happen. St Aquinas put it like this: “There is an invisible sending of the Spirit every time any progress in virtue or increase in grace takes place... when someone enters upon a new activity or into a new state of grace: for example, when a person receives the grace to work miracles, or the gift of prophecy, or when spurred by the fervour of love a person risks martyrdom or gives up possessions or undertakes some difficult or exacting task.”

The Holy Spirit always sends us to be a blessing and enables us through giftings. The writer Andrew Murray said,



We must not pray, 'Come Holy Spirit', unless we are prepared to go with the Holy Spirit.”

Throughout the New Testament, receiving the Holy Spirit results in energy and motivation for mission. Disciples will not put the Spirit to work for us (that is the characteristic of occult practices) but experience that the Spirit puts us to work for him. Just as in the Old Testament the Holy Spirit anoints people for specific tasks, now we are anointed for the task of Christ's mission in the world.

This is why the Holy Spirit gives, or strengthens, particular gifts. They are “...given for the common good” (1 Corinthians 12:7) and “for the service of others”. (1 Peter 4:10) They are not called “spiritual gifts” in the sense of people having them permanently, like a superpower, but rather a list of things (called charisms) that the Spirit does in a variety of ways through gifting us. The picture is that over a lifetime the Holy Spirit can gift and use the same person in a variety of different ways.

The Holy Spirit is promised to every disciple – there are not different levels of Christian. Whereas in the Old Testament the Holy Spirit anointed certain people at certain times, at Pentecost Peter preaches, “Repent and be baptised, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. The promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off—for all whom the Lord our God will call.” (Acts 2: 38-39)

There are three ways in which the New Testament describes how the Holy Spirit comes to us, but they all speak of a complete dependence on Him. We can be baptised with the Spirit, clothed with the Spirit be full of the Holy Spirit or be filled by the Spirit. When Paul talks about our relationship with the Holy Spirit he is describing how it is about yielding control and allowing the Spirit to guide and empower what we say and do. (“Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit.” (Galatians 5:25))

Reflecting on Paul's words, “For the kingdom of God is not a matter of talk but of power.” (1 Corinthians 14:20) John Stott writes that depending on the Spirit is what makes the difference in being a blessing: “What we need is not more learning, not more eloquence, not more persuasion, not more organisation, but more power from the Holy Spirit.”

People and communities experience the Holy Spirit in different ways.

Reflecting on Jesus teaching Nicodemus, “The Spirit blows where it pleases” (John 3:8), Tim Mackie from the Bible Project says, “...the Spirit doesn't have to work in the same way at every period of history and in every culture. ... And there are many times in church history where these kinds of experiences and activities have marked the life of local churches and people, usually in connection to new movements of the Jesus' people into new cultures and new places.”

How do we receive the Holy Spirit in our lived experience?



The way that people are empowered by the Holy Spirit who “blows where it pleases” fittingly resists formulas. The Spirit can come upon people. He can fall upon people. He can be poured out on people. People can receive the Spirit or be filled with the Spirit.

The early disciples experience the Holy Spirit at Pentecost in a powerful way, with wind and fire (reminding us of God’s holy presence and temple) but also more gently as Jesus breathes on them in the upper room (reminding us of God’s creation of human beings).

In terms of how people are prayed for sometimes people have hands laid on them, and sometimes they don’t. It’s worth remembering that the dramatic stories in Acts of people receiving the Spirit are collected from many places over twenty years and are placed alongside describing being filled with the Spirit as an ongoing everyday experience.

What is clear is that we are constantly encouraged to depend on the Spirit: “eagerly desire spiritual gifts” (1 Corinthians 14:1) and that growing an awareness of the Holy Spirit in our lives is part of everyday discipleship. Because the Holy Spirit is a “Comforter” and “Helper” (John 14) He stands alongside us in “fellowship”, meaning that He never forces us to do anything against our will.

This means that God offers us a partnership in which we have a part to play. Paul tells us in one chapter to walk by the Spirit, be led by the Spirit, live by the Spirit, and keep in step with the Spirit (Galatians 5: 16, 18, 25).

The practices of discipleship are our part in doing this.

Paul assumes that it is possible for us to be in step with the Spirit, but also to get out of step with the Spirit. While every human being is alive because of God’s Spirit, and the Holy Spirit never leaves a disciple, our attitudes and practices are important in how much we experience being in tune with God. We can choose to allow God’s Spirit to have more or less influence in our lives.

Whether we seek to be immersed in the Holy Spirit through the quiet practices of our daily lives, or through specific moments of laying on of hands, or in the context of worshipping or praying together, or any other way, the method is far less important than the attitude of our hearts.

If we want to be individuals or communities who seek to be a blessing empowered by God’s Holy Spirit, these questions may help keep us open:

How am I or how are we receiving from God before we give?

Am I/are we experiencing a balance between my/our effort and relying on God?

Do I/we have the humility to know that it is God’s work that matters and not mine/ours?

Where am I/are we stepping out into situations in which I/we need His Spirit?

St Bonaventure said, “To whom does the Spirit come? He comes to the ones who love Him, who invite Him, who eagerly await Him.” Am I/are we prepared to give space to wait for God before acting?

Am I/are we open to being used by God for His purposes?

Am I/are we thirsty for His presence?

Am I/are we able to trust God’s love and goodness so much that I/we can surrender to His control?



How can our life together be a form of blessing?



Before considering how we might be a blessing to others, as we have already said, simply living as God's family (Galatians 6:10) or as members of God's household (Ephesians 2: 19) can help us to grow into being a "dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit". (Ephesians 2:22)

As this happens, we can become a "sign of God's reign and a foretaste of His rule," a way in which others might see what life looks like when God's healing life is present, a vision of God's blessing lived out in real lives.

Clarence Jordan founded a community in Georgia, USA, in 1942, which sought to bring blacks and whites together in a way of life which spilled over into their community. He called their life together a "demonstration plot for the kingdom of God".

Despite growing opposition, the way of life they displayed was a sign as powerful as the bus boycotts which started the civil rights movement, and out of it was birthed the vision for 'Habitat for Humanity', which has housed 2.5 million people. For Clarence, it was the modelling of a life of blessing that included anyone, and put God's kingdom on display, that was the basis of the church community.

This calling to be a blessing by demonstrating together a life marked by the values of Christ's self-giving love (see module 2, session 4) is illustrated powerfully by an early teaching document called "The letter to Diognetus":

"Christians are indistinguishable from other people either by nationality, language or customs...With regard to dress, food and manner of life in general, they follow the customs of whatever city they happen to be living in, whether it is Greek or foreign. And yet there is something extraordinary about their lives..."



“

They pass their days upon earth, but they are citizens of heaven. Obedient to the laws, they yet live on a level that transcends the law. Christians love all men, but all men persecute them...They live in poverty, but enrich many; they are totally destitute, but possess an abundance of everything.”

In a similar way, Paul writes to the Philippians that they are to be "citizens of heaven." (Philippians 3:20) But the idea is not that they ignore the world but that they live out the life of God's kingdom within it. When people form colonies of their own country within a different country, they create communities which can start to look and feel like the country they truly belong to and through which others can experience something of the life of that country.

In the same way Paul says that the more "citizens of heaven" can live out God's values together, the more others will see His blessing on display.

So he encourages this small group of "citizens of heaven", living under the Roman empire, to live in a way which is "blameless and pure" so that they will "shine among them like stars in the sky as you hold firmly to the word of life." (Philippians 2: 15-16)

While there are as many ways to explore what living out the life of heaven on earth might look like as there are church communities, in our time and context three themes have become particularly significant in helping every church become a community which demonstrates what God's blessing looks like:

Encouraging everyone's gifts.

'Setting God's People Free' is a title of a Church of England report which longs to see our life together as one in which we are "recognising the gifts and callings of all people, whether ordained or not, and encouraging all people to use these skills for the good of God's Kingdom."

God gives gifts to each of us for building up the church, acts of service and for ministries in the church and world. A church in which people don't see a difference between those 'up the front' and those who are not, in which everyone knows "...you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it." (1 Corinthians 12:27) and that our church "grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work" (Ephesians 4:16) will be a community which can bless for at least two obvious reasons.

Anyone coming into contact with that community will feel able to participate. The energy of that church will be all the greater the more people are involved.

Knowing and celebrating the gifts of everyone involves creating opportunities for people to discover and use their gifts. The Checklist in the handouts section offers an easily accessible resource for this, and the 'Way of Servant-Leadership' offers two sessions aimed at equipping everyone to know and embrace their giftings.

Seeking to celebrate diversity.

While Jesus prayed that we could be one, alongside this the more we are committed to celebrating people's diversity, the more we reflect the blessing of God's rich and varied world. In the Bible our cultural, linguistic, racial, and ethnic differences are gifts from God which can broaden our own worship, life together, and ultimately the way we can be a blessing to the world.

In the next session we look more specifically at mission as struggling against forms of unjust exclusion in the world, but as far as being God's household is concerned, Revd Sharon Prentis would encourage us to look at our church and ask, "Who are we missing?"

This may lead us to look at how easily accessible our life together is, how varied our culture of worship is, the language we use, how we are modelling diversity or who is in leadership roles. In an ever-increasingly mobile and diverse world, where many are far from home, the more we can pay attention to becoming intercultural the greater the blessing for the world.



Being honest about being a work in progress.

As we have seen, while we can love and comprehend God through creation, looking at ourselves and most specifically through Christ, no disciple would claim to be able to have the complete picture of God's truth. Paul says, "Now I know in part, then I will know fully." (1 Corinthians 13:12) In addition, while we are "God's holy people", we are still being made holy. Our ability to love, to forgive and to always choose what God wants is incomplete.

As a result, throughout history we have continued to wrestle with big questions as a community, sometimes with great difficulty. Because we are still learning, this journey never stops. Reformers in the church famously said, "the church must always be reformed".

If we are humble enough to know that continue to learn and wrestle should be normal, we will be able to continue the difficult work of being changed. For example, the 'Living in Love and Faith' process reflects deep differences on how we understand human sexuality and relationships. In its introduction it gives us 'pastoral principles', asking us to address our ignorance, acknowledge prejudice, admit hypocrisy, be brave (cast out fear), listen honestly (speak into silence) and pay attention to power. As difficult as this is, the more we are characterised by humble growing and learning, the more our life together may be a blessing.



In what ways could being part of the 'Church of England' help us be a blessing?



If you belong to a Church of England (or Anglican – meaning 'of England') community, you are part of an expression of God's church with features which have the potential to help us be a great blessing together for these reasons:

Being a blessing by being set up to serve the whole country.

The Anglican Church's mission has a geographical reach, with the country being divided up at various levels to ensure everyone can be served. These areas are the result of historical decisions, and, while the idea of splitting the country up continues, the shape of some of these areas will be changing to respond to, for example, changes in population.

There are two provinces, north and south, based in Canterbury and York.

Between them, these provinces are divided up into 41 areas, based around cities with cathedrals, known as dioceses.

Each diocese has a bishop, who oversees the ministry of the church within it. There are often other area bishops (known as suffragans) within a diocese. In Birmingham we have a Bishop of Birmingham and a (suffragan) Bishop of Aston.

The Bishop is supported by an Archdeacon ('servant-leader') who is his/her "eyes on the ground". In Birmingham there are two.

Each Diocese is divided up into smaller areas named deaneries. Each deanery has someone who oversees and serves it called an Area Dean. In Birmingham we have six.



And each deanery is divided up into parishes. The parish serves a local area, and usually has one or more church buildings within it.

Historically, every home in the country is in a parish, and every person has a parish church and priest.

We live in a time in which there is rapid change in how this parish vision is experienced, as resources and populations change.

Overall, throughout England there are 16,000 church buildings (12,500 of them are 'listed' meaning they have architectural value and protection) organised into 13,000 parishes, with around 10,000 clergy (3,000 of whom are self-supporting) and about 6,600 licensed Readers.

Weekly attendance at services is just under one million and there are 42 cathedrals with around 10 million people visiting them each year.

(The Diocese of Birmingham was formed in 1907, serves a population of around 1.5 million, has 188 church buildings and one cathedral, organised into 150 parishes, and about 15,000 regular worshippers).

Being a blessing by having an emphasis on serving those who are not 'members'.



The Anglican Church has a legacy of serving the wider community, and the whole community, whatever the circumstances. This can be seen in various ways:

A commitment to all... Anglican churches give financially towards the diocese, instead of simply paying their own way (through a 'Share'). This means the church can seek to be a blessing by being able to offer a presence in every area, whether rich or poor. A loose sense of membership.... Anyone can be on a list of people who can elect various parish officers every year (the list is known as the electoral roll.) Apart from that there is no official membership of an Anglican church.

Investing in the good of the community... Before the NHS, many Anglican churches employed medical staff for the community. Before the Education Act many Anglican churches ran schools outside of the government provision. A legacy of this is that the Church of England remains heavily involved in providing education across the country. There are 4,700 C of E primary and secondary schools with approximately 1 million pupils. Around 15 million people alive today went to a C of E school. 1 in 4 primary schools is a C of E school and 1 in 16 secondary schools. (In Birmingham there are 48 C of E primary schools and 2 secondary schools).

These commitments reflect the original meaning of the word 'parish', as a place of refuge for those on the outside.

Being a blessing by seeking to be open and diverse.

While acknowledging we still have a long way to go in order to be truly diverse, the Church of England is part of a wider global family of churches (known as the Anglican Communion) with a shared identity. There are 38 provinces in the Anglican Communion active in 165 countries, with 77 million members.

This means that the average Anglican is a black woman in her 30s, an evangelical, who has at least 3 children and is someone who lives on less than a pound a day.

As well as this geographical and cultural reach, the character of being Anglican offers a breadth which might be a blessing to a large variety of people by holding different things together in being:





Continuous *and* new: Those who founded the Anglican church in the 16th century did not see themselves as leaving the “one, holy, catholic and apostolic” church, but were seeking a fresh expression of its life. We continue to be 'Reformed and Catholic' – seeking to change but also drawing from our roots.

This balance can be very difficult to hold together but is helped by the fact the language and traditions we use for worshipping together are the main source of our shared identity than any formal statement of belief.

Rooted *and* varied in worship: The first Anglicans looked to the earliest Christian churches to shape its worship - Anglican worship has a lot of resonances with Eastern Orthodox traditions. It is also rooted in Scripture – almost all the liturgy (written down worship) we use is drawn from the Bible, and we can commit to reading through the Bible together through using a pattern of readings (a lectionary).

At the same time there is creativity and flexibility. Our worship can be expressed sacramentally to different degrees, holding the experience of Eucharist with God's word. Our worship can be both formal and spontaneous. Because the readings and words we use reflect different seasons of the year, they can give room for many different life experiences and emotions to be brought before God.

Led *and* democratic: The Anglican church has 'mixed leadership', meaning there can be a sense of direction but also involvement from a lot of people. This means while some decisions can be made in the moment, other, more significant decisions are made over time and with discussion.

This is done through a combination of bishops, who lead on the ground in their dioceses, and elected groups of people called synods.

There are around 41 Diocesan Bishops and 74 Suffragan or Area Bishops. The main synod (which means “people together on the way”) is called the General Synod, with people (bishops, clergy and lay) elected from each diocese. It meets twice a year and people stay on it for 5 years.

Being a blessing by being rooted in everyday life.

Anglican worship has a great emphasis on everyday life – with services and provision for many stages of life – and for everyday people. The first prayer book was for “common prayer” and was designed to put the kind of praying that had previously been done in monasteries into language that could be used in the world of daily work.

Anglican worship celebrates both the world that God has made and the way He is redeeming it. This valuing of God's creation has inspired a lot of creative art and poetry.

The Church of England also has a legal relationship with the state. While this creates some tensions, it is a sign that Anglicans want to be engaged in the world.

Finally, Anglican ministers are set apart to serve in churches, but also in many other contexts, being a blessing by engaging people where they are – there are around 1000 Chaplains in prisons, the armed forces, in education and hospitals.

In the complex world in which we live, all these factors – serving the whole country, those who are not members, being diverse with open boundaries and being rooted in the everyday – have the potential to enable Anglican mission to be a blessing to a wide variety of people.



How might we start to discover where we can be a blessing together in our communities?



The researcher Hannah Rich has travelled all over the country looking at how churches are being a blessing in their communities. She concludes that “The loving outreach of social action (can) deepen faith because it brings congregations into meaningful relationships with those they would not otherwise have come into sustained contact with (and even) can lead to growth in numbers.”

“When the church is engaged in social action, it looks most like what people outside it expect it to be at its best, and this integrity is attractive to them.”

The ways in which we can be a blessing can make the good news *plausible* for people who might find our teaching or worship hard to understand.

She writes, “Throughout the research, I heard countless stories of individuals drawn to the church community not because cerebral curiosity drew them but because they were attracted by the goodness that they saw in its action. In a church that has grown a reputation locally because it supports refugees and asylum seekers through coordinating aid trips to the camps on the French coast, one individual told me:

“I saw a Facebook post about this church. It was about the collection for the refugee aid trips. I just thought, ‘This is a church that’s actually living out the gospel. I have to go and see what’s happening.’ So we did and we never left.”

She adds, “This is not to say that churches should engage in social action solely because of its potential to draw people in.



These activities are good in their own right and are a response to the biblical call to love our neighbours, regardless of the activities’ evangelistic outcome.”

Another writer comments: “One inner-city church put aside a weekend and many pots of paint to brighten up a dank, urine-soaked subway nearby, inviting local residents to join in, and generating no small stir in the area. In a wealthy area, another church youth group put on a concert and performed music in a local shopping mall to raise money not for themselves or their church, but to enable the digging of a well in a village in Nigeria. A group of Christian students borrowed their college’s dining hall and invited their friends to a simple African meal with music, yet charging them a high price, so that the profits could go towards the rebuilding of educational prospects for young black South Africans.

“These things can be done not for effect or to impress, but just because they were the kind of things Jesus did. They are the kind of things that happen in the kingdom of God - creation is renewed, the thirsty are given water, and the poor are given hope. Actions like these have their own integrity as a sign of God’s rule. Although not performed for evangelistic effect, the inevitable result is that when it comes to direct evangelism, such churches tend to find it works better. There is a clearer sense of what people are being invited into, and into the kind of life that Christian faith involves.” (Graham Tomlin, *The Provocative Church*)



Before anything else, being a blessing to others is a way we can show our love for God. Martin of Tours (AD 316–397) was Bishop of Tours, France, from AD 371. One very cold night, riding on horseback, he passed a beggar. Martin got off his horse, tore his robe in two and gave half of it to the beggar. That night, Martin had a dream in which he saw Jesus wearing the robe that had been torn in two on his shoulders. When asked where it had come from, Jesus replied, “My servant Martin gave it to me.”

One key question is where to focus. We have a certain sphere of influence, people we interact with or our parish, and God calls us to love our neighbour, rather than the whole world. Whether we are wanting to be a blessing as a whole church, or as a small group within the church two helpful questions might be:

To whom are we called?
With whom are we called?

As we try and listen for the answers to these questions together to see what the possibilities might be we might find one of these five strategies or resources helpful:

Having a vision planning process.

The handout 'Developing Vision: Questions and Activities for Each Stage' offers a complete process from forming a team, to discovering a vision, to seeing it put into practice from start to finish. It enables us to discern what the 'main thing' is, and results in a plan, which may include blessing others, which can be followed over a time period to see this come about.

Within C of E Birmingham Transforming Church Action Planning supports this. For those working towards a fresh expression of church, the Godsend app <https://freshexpressions.org.uk/2018/12/27/growing-new-christian-communities-godsend/> is a stage-by-stage process to help the group focus on how to develop, offering lots of ideas and helpful questions.

Doing a few things well.

Natural Church Development <http://ncd-uk.com/> offers a framework of eight qualities of a healthy church community, based on international research. One of the qualities is needs-based evangelism – focussing on blessing others. By using a diagnostic tool churches can be helped to work out what their next steps might be.

Researching the needs of our area effectively.

Know Your Church, Know Your Neighbourhood (KYCKYN) is a facilitated process that was designed by the Church of England Birmingham to help churches think about themselves in relation to the local communities they seek to serve, and make prayerful and informed decisions about their mission in those communities.





It is a seven-session process which gives a small group of church members the tools to reflect on how their church is seen by others, to listen to the wider community, celebrate its strengths and have a deeper understanding of its needs.

The hope is that we can develop a vision for our neighbourhood, as we begin to think about what a flourishing neighbourhood might look like and how God might be seen in it; understand the place of our church within the community; learn about their local neighbourhood; develop an active response.

Discovering the gifts of our area we can join in with.

As we have seen, mission is about finding out where God is at work and joining in. The chaplain general to the prison service said that when he first went into the prisons, he thought he would take Jesus in with him. He soon realised that Jesus was already there. He said that from then on he went into the prisons in order to encounter Jesus.

Asset Based Community Development starts with looking for the gifts and talents God has placed in your neighbourhood, and starting from there. It helps individuals, associations, and institutions to come together to realise and develop their strengths. This is a different approach from identifying and meeting needs. Rather than the church being a blessing to others, we seek to become a blessing with others in our community.

<https://www.nurtureddevelopment.org/asset-based-community-development/>

Joining in with others to learn and plan together.

Learning Community processes, in which teams from different church communities join together every six months over two years, to discern vision, learn from others, and report back, can enable us to focus over a shorter term and in a flexible way. They are focussed around the three questions, "What is? What could be? And What will be?" helping us under God to find achievable active steps in being a blessing.

Various organisations offer this process nationally including Kairos Connexions <https://kairosconnexion.org/training/learning-communities-communities-practice/> and Partnership for Missional Church <https://churchmissionsociety.org/churches/partnership-missional-church/>



How might we go to others?



At the heart of being a blessing is serving others and demonstrating through action the good news we have received. Underlying all of this is a fundamental attitude in which we want the mission to shape the church, rather than our shape of church to dictate the mission.

This means putting the needs of others before our own in order to bless them. In the way that Christ left His place of power to become human and come to us, Paul gave up his rights, becoming a "slave to everyone", and said, "I have become all things to all people so that by all possible means I might save some. I do all this for the sake of the gospel, that I may share in its blessings." (1 Corinthians 9: 19-23)

While potentially risky and uncomfortable, Andrew Roberts tells a wonderful story of a church that was willing to abandon its comfort zone to go to others: "A group of Muslims bought a piece of land next to Heartsong Methodist Church in Memphis, Tennessee, to build a mosque and community centre. The church thought hard about how to react. They put up a big notice outside telling them as their neighbours that they were welcome. The Muslims were so surprised and pleased they went to talk to the minister, who asked what his church could do to help them. They asked if they could rent a little room as temporary accommodation- he let them have the biggest room they had.

"When they had a church barbecue they bought halal meat so they could invite the Muslims. They began to work together on neighbourhood projects to help the poor. The story was covered on TV in a 90 second video. A few days later the minister had a phone call from Kashmir. The caller said that he and his friends had been sitting in a cafe watching CNN when the story about the Muslims and the Christians came on. They were speechless when they saw it because they had been told that all Americans hated Muslims. They did not think Christians could get on with Muslims.

"They talked about what they could do in response to what they had seen and decided that they should take care of the little Christian Church in their community.

They went and cleaned the church inside and out, washing off the offensive graffiti which had been daubed there. They made the minister a promise that, for the rest of their lives, they would take care of the Christians in their community as the people at Heartsong had taken care of their Muslim neighbours."

Over the last couple of decades there have been many church initiatives which have at their heart the vision that, rather than expecting people to come to us, we bless them by being prepared to shape the way we do things as much as possible around going to them.

The report 'Mission-Shaped Church' (2004) tracked this shift, noting that a majority of people in the UK now have no prior church background. It asked the question, "What makes a church?" and argued that much like the life of discipleship, church happens wherever people are OF something bigger than themselves, look UP to God in worship and look IN by being in relationship.





Crucially as well, church happens when we are sent on the journey OUT – the meaning of being an apostolic (sent) church.

Across the country, there is a growth of new Christian communities, which start with a desire to be a blessing, asking questions such as, “Where is God at work and how can we join in?” and “How might our life be shaped around the needs of others?”

While they all share this common vision to start with going out to others in blessing, the way new Christian communities can be shaped is very different. A few terms have emerged to describe what this might look like.

Churches begin congregations in new areas, largely based on an existing church’s way of operating, and still in relationship to that church. This is **church planting**.

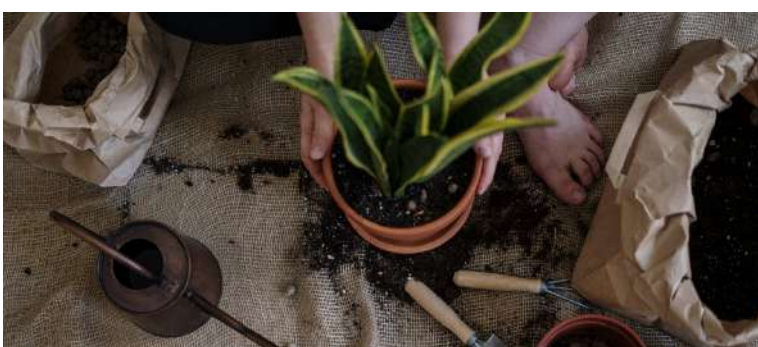
Churches start a new form of church that emerges from activities or ways of life in our culture and engage primarily with those who do not go to church – for example, church based on crafts, sports, the outdoors, café environments. These are called **fresh expressions**.

Groups within churches start to gather, regularly, with a balance between up, in and out. They will start by identifying an area or network they want to bless, and then organise activities and time together, which includes worship and fellowship. They might be part of a larger congregation. These are known as **missional communities**.

Along the same lines as missional communities, churches may give opportunities for people in very small numbers (from 2-10) the opportunity to be a blessing to a group of people or area. They will gradually build Christian community around that activity. It is small, flexible, informal in style, and has the intention to expand its blessing by establishing new groups around an area of blessing others when possible. This is called **micro-planting**.

Other initiatives are **resourcing churches**, which simply means churches that plant other churches; **revitalisations**, in which a small congregation will welcome people from another church to help build up its life again, and **new congregations** in which an existing church begins a new worshipping service over and above any existing worshipping service – this could be on the same premises or within the parish.

While some of these new Christian community definitions overlap, what is clear is that whereas the days when people “come to us” might be largely gone, where church communities start to look outwards and think of how to go to others, there is often significant growth.



How might we grow together in the practice of hospitality?



Linked to this idea of serving others by going to them is the practice of hospitality. This practice is not so much something we do, but more a way in which we live.

When Hannah Rich researched how churches were making a difference in their communities, she identified hospitality and generosity as two of the defining characteristics of churches growing through their social action.

The practice of hospitality is more than entertaining, it is a reflection of God's character, a response to what we have received from Him, and an attitude of heart we have towards other people. It is an offer of friendship and welcome to guests and strangers.

The early church devoted themselves extravagantly to welcoming and caring for others. It was a way in which they demonstrated God's welcome: "Dear friend, when you extend hospitality to Christian brothers and sisters, even when they are strangers, you make the faith visible." (3 John 5 (The Message))

Practically speaking, hospitality offered by a church will involve thinking through how we welcome people into the community, how we reach out to others in kindness, and how we might be able to receive graciously.

Growing in being a hospitable people may involve:

Being willing to give and to change unconditionally.

"Jesus said to his host, 'When you give a lunch or dinner, do not invite your friends, your brothers or sisters, your relatives, or your rich neighbours; if you do, they may invite you back and so you will be repaid. But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind, and you will be blessed.

Although they cannot repay you, you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous.'" (Luke 14:13-14)

In the same way that God's hospitality is offered to us regardless of our response, Jesus teaches that the more hospitality is offered to those who cannot repay, the more we bless in the way God has blessed us.

As a gathered community, being hospitable may include a willingness to adapt our way of doing things for the sake of others. For example, in his book '*Distinctly Welcoming*', Richard Sudworth talks about how Christians have to adapt to help those from other faith backgrounds to find a home in our churches.

For example, he describes the experience of Kumar, who was brought up a Hindu but converted to being a Christian and who is now a minister. Kumar reflects how difficult it was for him to find a home in a church and offers some tips to help churches become more hospitable to people from different faiths.

For example, having inclusive worship and teaching, making the presence of ethnic minorities visible in the life of the church, having flexibility about church commitment bearing in mind that people have different pressures on them, being able to understand others' backgrounds, thinking about the images we use and the prayers we pray and how they represent others, helping people to understand church life by giving them a sense of induction into it.





Being willing to listen patiently.

The more we can understand others, the more effective hospitality will be in being a blessing. Offering the time to listen to others is a gift and learning to listen well a skill which can be developed. Phil Knox offers a list of questions to help us reflect on how to listen well, including:

Are your questions open? (Tell me about your day / what keeps you busy / about your hobbies?) Closed? Imaginative and interested? Only asked because you want to give your answer to that question?

Being willing to be equal and to be changed.

Hannah Rich notes that “Genuine Christian hospitality, rather than charity or evangelism, offers both in a way that is transformative for all those around the table. It is the difference between feeding people and sharing a meal with them, offering them charity or building a relationship.”

If blessing others always empowers them in some way the practice of hospitality will enable me to create a situation where the other person or people feel themselves as equals, rather than only recipients. It is striking how Jesus brought transformation to Zacchaeus by receiving his hospitality, or dignified the woman at the well by asking for her help.

Particularly as a church community, this may mean that we can be open to being changed through the gifts God brings to us through other people. For example, Hannah notes that “at its best social action is a two-way relationship that can be transformative for both parties as equals.”

The practice of hospitality is so transformative, for both us and others, that for Paul it was essential to being a disciple, and a blessing: “Reach out and welcome one another, to God’s glory. Jesus did it. Now you do it!” (Romans 15.7 (The Message))





How might we work with other church communities to be a blessing?

Unity not only within churches, but between churches is a doorway to being able to bless others together. Paul encourages the church in Philippi to be “united in spirit, intent on one purpose”. (Philippians 2:2)

Unity is less about the absence of conflict, and more about the presence of a shared purpose – it grows through churches serving together, as we can put aside our differences and instead be focussed on joining in with God together.

But what would such a network focus on? Nic Harding of Kairos Connexions offers a framework for churches seeking to work together across an area.

Foundation

Underpinning any serving together will be unified relationships – with opportunities to meet together and nurture genuine relationship.

Prayer together will need to be coordinated and 'catalysed' – in other words, given life and energy.

Actions

As these two grow, Nic suggests there can be four areas in which churches might work together to be a blessing to a wider community.

Resourcing community action projects.

Helping people be confident in their witness through training and inspiration.

Working together on ways of being church that reach out to others.

Connecting people who are involved in the wider life of a community's “market place”, seeking to reflect God's Kingdom there.

