



A Mission Opportunity

by Daniel Cooke

A few years ago I was invited to speak at a meeting of a local uniformed youth organisation. I had met the main leader at a Remembrance Sunday service. The leader said that the young people in their group had shown an interest in the sermon that I gave within the service, so he was wondering if I could go along and talk a bit more about Remembrance with their members.

At this evening session I met people from our local community who I had never met before, including a significant portion of the young people who made up the membership of the group. I had a thoroughly enjoyable evening. The staff and volunteers were good fun, the young people were insightful and we had a really interesting conversation about the topic I was there to speak upon. The group spend much of their time engaging in camping, walking, and other outdoor activities which I like to do in my spare time. So when the main leader asked if I'd be interested in joining them on a regular basis I jumped at the chance!

Since then I have become a regular leader in the group, attending and exploring spiritual and ethical topics with the group on a monthly basis. I have met many, many people from our local community that I doubt I would have otherwise met. I have taken weddings, funerals and baptisms for families linked with the group due to our shared link with the uniformed organisation. Members and adult leaders from the group have attended courses our church has run, and some have become regular members of our worshipping community. And once a month I get to explore faith and spirituality with a group of teenagers and young adults who would have been more likely to sprout wings and fly than they would be to have voluntarily crossed the threshold of a church building.

This uniformed organisation is a “network” within my local missional context. There are many networks in our local contexts. You may remember from an earlier session that a “network” is a specific grouping of people with similar interests, engaging in similar activities, or who purchase similar products or services. The regulars at the Red Lion. The members and families of the local guide/scout groups. The parents at the school gates. The community allotment society. An exercise class who meet in the local community centre. The local Weight Watchers group. People who walk their dogs in the local park. The list goes on and on and on.

There are networks of people within our communities who “move in the same circles”, they meet each other on a regular basis, they socialise with one another, they get to know each other, they share stories with one another... And in many of these networks the church will be present. Most of the time this presence will simply be that someone who is a member of the church is also a member of a particular network. The vicar does assemblies at the local school. One of the churchwardens is also on the local community centre committee. Most of the older members of the church shop in the local shops and visit the post office once a week. The church Sunday school leader is also a leader in the local guide group. One of the members of the PCC works in one of the local GP surgeries.

There are also networks within our local contexts which have little to no Christian presence within them. No-one from the church ever has anything to do with the local Wargaming club because it’s full of teenagers. No-one from the church ever goes into the King’s Arms for a pint because its a bit of a dive. No-one from the church serves as a governor at the local primary school because the meetings clash with Coronation Street. No-one from the local church is a member of the local walking club because we set up our own twenty years ago and none of them joined our club when we had one.

It seems so simple and so obvious; we live and work and enjoy our leisure time within “networks” of people. The church is called to be a Christian presence in every network. Yet we miss so many opportunities for mission and evangelism in the networks which are present in our local contexts. We don’t always see our other “non-church” networks as places where we should be expressing our faith. We overlook and neglect some networks in our local context because we are simply not aware of them. We see some networks as “inappropriate” places for Christians to be.

In my late teens I had long hair, wore a lot of black, I played in a rock band, and I listened to music which my dad referred to as “whack-it-ty whack” music. I was a part-time member of what some refer to as “goth” subculture. I was also a committed Christian and church goer who was exploring entering the priesthood.

One October I attended a church away weekend at Sneaton Castle near Whitby. I had a pleasant weekend of prayer workshops, worship alongside the resident nuns, some interesting conversation with other PCC members about the future mission and ministry of our parish church, and we had lots of fun in the evenings playing games and chatting away in the bar until the small hours.

A few weeks later, over Halloween weekend, I was back in Whitby, but this time for "goth-fest". While enjoying a pint with my mates in the bar of one of the big hotels which were being used as one of the venues for "goth-fest" I felt a tap on my shoulder. I turned around to see Sister Anne, one of the nuns from Sneaton Castle. "Hello Daniel," she said, "lovely to see you again." I was a bit taken aback... This was the "goth" weekend. What was one of the nuns doing here?!

"Lovely to see you too Sister, but what are you doing here? This doesn't seem the sort of place nuns hang out..." Her reply floored me and changed my perception of mission and evangelism forever; "God's Holy Spirit moves in the heart of all these people here whether they know it or not. Someone here might be looking for Jesus Christ and I might be able to help point them in the right direction. Plus I really like heavy metal music." In my head I'd separated my "goth" life from my "Christian" life... but my "Christian" life should be a part of my whole life.

We all live lives out in the world. We go to social clubs, we take part in leisure activities, we encounter a wonderful variety of different people in the various networks that we belong to. This is where the "real" work of being Christians should be taking place. This is the where the mission field is. God is present in the lives of every single member of every different network within our local contexts, our calling is to find where God is moving in these networks and join in.