

MISSION AND EVANGELISM MODULE - ASSIGNMENT 2 - STEPHEN DUNNING

Introduction

For Assignment 2, I have decided to explore further a mission opportunity called 'Frontline Sundays', developed and provided by the London Institute for Contemporary Christianity (LICC). Frontline Sundays is a suite of materials to plan and lead five services, and possibly small group studies, that will inspire a congregation for their Monday to Saturday lives, and Sunday too. The ethos of this programme can be summarised in the following statement in the sermon notes for Frontline Sunday 1:

"We are the church in mission – gathered and scattered – and we make all the difference in the world. The church is a body of people living a rhythm of gathering and scattering; usually gathering on Sunday and scattering for the rest of the week. Despite being a minority, Christians make all the difference in the world for Christ – wherever they are, whatever they do, whoever they are – Monday through Saturday. And to grow as disciples for these frontlines, we need one another; we need to be together as a worshipping community."

The imagery used in the LICC materials draws on the fact that approximately 6% of the population of the UK go to church once a month. These are initially depicted as six red dots separate from 94 grey dots, i.e. the worshipping community. These six red dots then move to be scattered among the 94 grey dots in varying configurations. This represents Christians functioning in their daily lives in various capacities and environments, for example worker, volunteer, member of a club, family carer etc. In other words, the scattering is their frontline.

The themes of the five services are ...

'All the difference in the world. The church is a body of people gathering together and scattering out into the world. Despite being few, Christians can make a difference wherever they are, whatever they do, whoever they are. We are the church on mission – gathered and scattered – and we make all the difference in the world.'

'Wherever we are. Everyone has a frontline – a place where we do life or work and where we encounter people who don't know Jesus. We don't need to go looking for these, we are already there. We just need to see these places with fresh eyes.'

'Whatever we do. Whatever we do – the 'work of our hands', however small and insignificant it may seem – matters to God. It's part of our worship and how we serve others and bear witness to God.'

'Whoever we are. Whoever we are – however insignificant we feel – we make all the difference in the world because we are on our frontline first as a son or daughter of the King; a child of God. Our value, our worth, our significance, and our life on the frontline flows from this identity. This is liberating.'

'Together we grow. We need one another to 'stay red' in a sea of grey dots and continue to have an impact on our frontlines.'

Why have I chosen this mission opportunity?

The fundamental concept of *Missio Dei* is that mission is God's, not the church's. But the church is the people of God and so people who claim to be Christians have an obligation to further God's mission in their daily lives.

The Five Marks of Mission are the core of the methodology of mission and the criteria by which a church's missional health can be measured. Frontline Sundays appear to meet three of the five marks:

- To proclaim the Good News of the Kingdom
- To teach, baptise and nurture new believers
- To respond to human need by loving service

In the report 'Shaping Strategies for Mission and Growth in Rural Multi-Church Groups'¹, the authors found that "... mission and growth become possible when the right conditions are created for that mission potential to be unlocked and sustained." It goes on to say that "Discerning and releasing lay leadership contributes to ministry, mission, evangelism and ultimately growth."

My parish - Christ Church, Hulland - is part of the Hulland Benefice of five parishes within the Carsington Deanery. From observations and conversations with fellow church members - casually, at meetings, and as part of our Mission Action Plan process - it is clear to me that many members find it difficult to talk about their faith to others. Some have got into the habit of seeing church as something they do on a Sunday and forgetting about the rest of the week. This observation does not apply to all of our congregation and is not intended to be judgmental. It is just a fact of life for many rural parish churches. However, these same church members are often involved in working for charities, caring for neighbours or family members or taking part in various recreational activities with others. These Monday to Saturday activities are a fertile mission field but the challenge is to find a way to alter perceptions to enable church members to view their lives in this way. Frontline Sundays appears to be worth exploring as one way of trying to make this happen.

What are the benefits and strengths arising from Frontline Sundays?

Whole-life disciple making. Whole-life discipleship matters because God's people find themselves in places and situations where they can grow more like Jesus, and where they can demonstrate the reality of Jesus to others. They feel affirmed by the church community in what they are doing in their daily lives, and they are better equipped to follow Jesus into whatever each day might bring. Frontline Sundays should be an effective tool for focussing attention on whole-life disciple making in a friendly, non-pressurising way.

Presentation. The materials available from LICC are usable 'out of the box'. This means that the worship leader would have all of the resources she/he would need to deliver the programme. The material includes short films and slides that could be projected on our large LED screen; notes for sermon preparation; small group study guides; song suggestions; and a scatter pack containing relevant giveaways (e.g. coasters and pencils)

¹ Shaping Strategies for Mission and Growth in Rural Multi-Church Groups. Church of England 2017

to help remind participants of what they have learned. All resources except the scatter packs (50p per person) can be downloaded for free.

Affirmation. Rather than being told that they should be doing more to further God's Kingdom through active mission, Frontline Sundays aims to affirm what many members of the congregation are already doing in their daily lives and give them the tools to develop this into a missionary approach. As Archbishop Rowan Williams once said: "Mission is about finding out what God is doing and joining in." Many churches struggle to find volunteers to for the numerous tasks that need doing to maintain the church building and run services and events. Leaders feel guilty that more mission work is not done. Frontline Sundays could be a catalyst to remove this guilt by reviewing and refocusing current activity.

Good practice. Frontline Sundays would help to fulfil three of the Five Marks of Mission referred to earlier, and would be in harmony with the findings of the 2017 report 'Shaping Strategies for Mission and Growth in Rural Multi-Church Groups.'

What are the challenges in introducing Frontline Sundays to Christ Church, Hulland?

Resistance to change. Like many rural churches, Christ Church, Hulland has an ageing and declining congregation. Average attendance at Sunday services is about 30. Engagement with social and fundraising events is good and several members also have roles in the wider village community. The church sponsors a successful baby and toddler group called Hulland Hippos and Messy Church is provided in the village hall approximately every two months. However, engagement with spiritual matters is much more limited with only a handful of people attending prayer and bible study groups which are usually organised on a benefice-wide basis. There is a danger that Frontline Sundays will be seen as another initiative that the leadership are trying and not something important to be grasped enthusiastically. To counter this, it would be necessary to present the initiative in a light which is non-critical and non-threatening.

People. As with all new opportunities, enthusiastic and capable people would be needed to manage the process. Worship leaders are already committed to maintaining the current pattern of services so, to create capacity, some existing services would have to be suspended while the programme takes place. This would be necessary anyway as the congregation would be unwilling to attend two services on one Sunday. It may be possible to have a different worship leader take each of the five services, thus spreading the load.

Lack of desire. For any new initiative to succeed, there has to be a desire for it to happen. Most people find comfort in continuity of practice which provides certainty in regular lifestyle patterns and rhythms. Some do relish change but they are in the minority. However, these same people will lament the lack of 'bums on seats' in church. Frontline Sundays would not directly lead to an increase in attendance at Sunday services. Previous experience shows that any change at Christ Church needs to be gradual so the selling point for Frontline Sundays could be that it is a way of looking at what already happens differently, celebrating what we already do and encouraging each other to do more of it.

Some theological reflections

Most of the reflections that follow are based on bible passages suggested in the Frontline Sundays service guides.

Any theological reflection on mission and evangelism must surely start with the Great Commission in Matthew 28: 18-20. 'And Jesus came and said to them, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.'" (NRSV) In the context of Frontline Sundays, it can be argued that 'all nations' encompasses wherever we are and whatever we are doing. We are to go and make disciples - whether that be next door or in another country. So the question arises: Does the concept in Frontline Sundays of gathering on Sundays and then scattering Monday to Saturday fulfil the command to make and baptise disciples? On one level, it clearly does not as the programme may not lead directly to someone becoming baptised as a Christian. However, great things often come from small beginnings and the example of living out our daily lives, and having fruitful relationships with others, as a *Christian*, can and does lead to conversations and invitations to find out more. This argument is enforced by the parable of the mustard seed (Mark 4: 30-32).

1 Peter: 1-2 reads: "To God's elect, exiles, scattered throughout the provinces of Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia and Bithynia, who have been chosen according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, through the sanctifying work of the Spirit, to be obedient to Jesus Christ and sprinkled with his blood: Grace and peace be yours in abundance." (NIV) The concept of being scattered (other translations use the term 'dispersed') was familiar to the early Christians. They were usually a minority sect facing opposition, abuse and persecution and Peter was sending them words of encouragement. Modern Christians are a minority too, scattered among non-Christians, so the use of this imagery in Frontline Sundays' materials is useful.

In Genesis 28:15 God addresses Jacob with the words: "Know that I am with you and will keep you wherever you go, and will bring you back to this land; for I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you." (NRSV) God's covenant with Jacob, fulfilled through our crucified and risen saviour Jesus Christ, is available to all Christians (and indeed all people) wherever they go. This is a key theme in Frontline Sundays.

Paul's letter to the Colossians, chapter 3 verses 17 and 23-24 state: "And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him ... Whatever your task, put yourselves into it, as done for the Lord and not for your masters, since you know that from the Lord you will receive the inheritance as your reward; you serve the Lord Christ." (NRSV) Doing 'everything in the name of the Lord Jesus' means bringing honour to Christ in every aspect and activity of daily living. As Christians, we represent Christ at all times, whatever we say or do. Frontline Sundays encourage us to ask ourselves what impression people have of Christ when they see or talk to us.

Matthew 6:5-14 contains Jesus's instructions on how we should pray. The beginning of the Lord's Prayer makes it clear that we are all children of God, whatever our gender, race, ethnicity, age or sexual orientation; whether we are a top athlete or disabled (differently abled); a carer, in employment, volunteer ... the list could go on. We sometimes feel

inadequate or insignificant but we all have our part to play and gifts to use. Frontline Sundays validate our role, as Christians, in the world and in our daily lives. Indeed, it is on the frontline that we can potentially make the most difference in spreading the Good News.

Frontline Sundays places great emphasis on working together to grow our faith and mission, so that, when we are scattered in our daily activities, we still feel encouraged and supported. Hebrews 10: 24-25 wonderfully epitomises this: "And let us consider how to provoke one another to love and good deeds, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day approaching."

Conclusion

Frontline Sundays looks to be a great programme for developing mission. The resources are clear, accessible and engaging. The challenge for Christ Church, Hlland would be creating a desire for change to happen. This would require a paradigm shift in the church's current culture from passive to active mission. The LICC notes that accompany the services caution that the programme should not be implemented until discussions have taken place with worship and church leaders and they have bought-in to the concept of frontlines as a key plank of the church's mission action plan. A corporate approach is needed.

The programme should not be seen as something to do, say, next Lent and then forgotten about for the rest of the year. For real change to take place, a sustained plan would be needed that committed to follow-up the programme and maintain the momentum, possibly by creating opportunities for congregation members to report back regularly on their experiences putting Frontline into practice. The aim would be to encourage each other not to fear talking about our faith to others and be comfortable doing this in any setting.