



Engaging in On-going Discipleship with Those on the Margins (Gateway Church, Final version, 17/06/13)

This paper has been written in response to God's calling to the church to make disciples of all people, no matter what cultural, social or economic background they come from (Matthew 28, Acts 1). God Himself is longing to see some of the poorest and most marginalised people in our city become 'oaks of righteousness' (Isaiah 61), contributing to the Gateway family and the Kingdom of God. However, the challenges in seeing this happen are huge and must not be taken lightly. This paper aims to highlight some of those challenges, while simultaneously suggesting practical ways in which we as a church can move forward to see more fruit in this area.

Practical outworking

The practical outworking of this vision to see impoverished people becoming Christians, going on to become disciples of Jesus and playing an active part in the life of Gateway church is a complex process. However, it's safe to say that in order to see more people welcomed into the Gateway family, resources must continuously be going out to meet people where they are in their everyday lives. It's important to recognise that Gateway is already releasing resources in a number of different ways, but the challenge is to see a greater capacity released into this mission field.

Here are four ways in which Christians in Gateway are already reaching those on the margins:

- Gateway's own initiatives – Hope in Woodhouse, CAP Money Courses and Hear from Heaven evenings are all examples of Christians from the church showing God's love to those living on the margins.
- Cross denominational initiatives – Gateway currently has people volunteering and doing paid work in organisations such as Kidz Klub, St. Georges Crypt and Christians Against Poverty.
- Mainstream initiatives – There are a number of people who either through paid employment or volunteering are serving impoverished people in the city. Some examples include working in probation, youth offending and working with Asylum Seeker children.
- Living in a deprived area – Living in a deprived area and taking a proactive interest in that community can be a very effective way of doing mission. It is important to state that there is a significant difference between simply living in an area of deprivation for practical reasons (e.g. cheaper housing) and living in an area to intentionally reach that community.



The Challenges

As has already been said, it is very important to state that there are tremendous challenges regarding the field of discipling those from the margins of society. It is because of these challenges that churches across the United Kingdom seem to struggle in seeing sustainable fruit in this area. This next section aims to briefly detail some of those challenges in order that we may know what we have to face if we are to see God move more in this area.

Cultural challenges

It's safe to say that there are challenges for most people who have just become Christians and are trying to integrate into church. This can be even more difficult when your cultural background seems to be very different from that of the church you are attending. In order to recognise the depth of this challenge, I passionately believe that God calls us to a place of humility, where we are willing to accept that as a church family, we can at times develop a culture that to many can seem very middle-class. This can mean that the natural, organic flow of Gateway's discipleship is something which has a much greater success when discipling new Christians who are from the same cultural background as most of the rest of the church. When it comes to being family to those who are from poorer backgrounds, it can be the case that there are a number of areas where, unintentionally, we can actually exclude people, by our words and actions. Here are some further examples of where cultural differences can bring about significant challenges:

- Education – Many of the people who are part of Gateway are from educated backgrounds. We have had the privilege of going to a good school, usually a private, Grammar or a comprehensive school in a good catchment area. To contrast this, people who are from a much more impoverished background have not always had this privilege. They often leave school with few qualifications and do not go on to higher education. Literacy and numeracy abilities are usually low and people's ability to perform basic IT skills can be very limited. There are a whole range of challenges this can pose when welcoming people into a church like Gateway. For example, if you've been to University and are used to one hour lectures, you may find that listening to a talk of thirty or forty minutes is something you are fairly used to. However, if you are not used to listening to someone for a long period of time, you may find the talk on a Sunday a dull and unfulfilling experience. You may suffer with a condition which makes sitting still a huge challenge, for example, Attention Deficit Hyperactive Disorder (ADHD). This means that in order to sit still and engage the brain in a listening exercise it takes the individual a significant amount of effort. One could also say that conditions such as addiction can make it harder to engage fully in the activities that take place at our Sunday gathering.
- Conversation – It's safe to say that developing a flow of conversation amongst people who are from different cultural backgrounds can pose some big challenges. Someone from Gateway may naturally talk about their place of work or the course they are studying.



Someone from a poorer background, who hasn't been in work or education for many years, may not feel they have anything to contribute to the conversation and may even feel inferior to the person they are trying to engage with. Also, someone from Gateway, may feel awkward about trying to engage with someone from a poorer background because they are afraid that, because they don't have much in common, they won't know what to say or they may say the wrong thing.

- Regular gatherings – Gateway, like many other churches, functions through regular gatherings and meetings. These spaces, which are created by the church, such as our Sunday gathering, Power House prayer evenings and our Community Groups are central to enabling Christians to grow in their relationships with each other and with God. To many of us who are already in Gateway, attending different gatherings / meetings comes fairly naturally. However, for many people who have grown up in a life of poverty, attending these meetings can be something that feels very strange and counter-cultural compared to what people have experienced previously in their lives. Many people who grow up on the margins live a life where activities often happen randomly. They don't tend to have order and routine. Therefore, when it comes to developing relationships with other people and with God, because these are so dependent on attending these gatherings, you often find that discipleship development is fairly limited. The people who are living on the margins often don't get to the meetings in the first place.
- Embracing an unknown geographical venue – Following on from this, its important to state that many people who are impoverished, who may live on council estates often don't leave the area where they live. To give you one example, Heather MCleen, who works for South Parade Baptist Church in the area of Little London, says that many people there rarely go into Woodhouse. This is despite the fact that Woodhouse is right next to Little London. This could pose a problem for us as a church, should we seek to invite someone from the Little London area to our gathering on a Sunday. For the person in question, going into another geographical area may be a very strange experience and is one that we as a church should not take for granted.

Other Challenges – the chaos of individuals

Having talked about some of the cultural challenges that we face as a church, it is essential to acknowledge that there are many people living a life in poverty who have incredibly challenging and chaotic needs. If we are to see more people being made into disciples and becoming part of the Gateway family, then seeing victory in areas of addiction, homelessness, debt and broken relationships will be absolutely key. It is the chaos that is caused by these different forms of brokenness, which so often stops people building relationships with other Christians and developing their relationship with God.



Moving forward

The suggestions below provide a general framework in which we can move forward. They are not a set of action points which will be carried out in a specific timeframe but more there to help stimulate people to think differently and act appropriately. These suggestions can be underpinned by a general acknowledgement that Gateway needs to **“Grow As We Go”**. We need to learn from each other and be able to listen to other Christians in the city to develop a more cohesive strategy and proactive culture, in order to better disciple those on the social and economic margins. An increase in discipleship in this particular area will happen over time and is not going to take place overnight. To add to this, it’s fair to say that things are already happening which are encouraging and should not be discounted.

Increasing prayer for the poor

In order for Gateway to see more impoverished people becoming Christians and being added as disciples to the church, it is going to be crucial that we can see more prayer for those living on the margins. I would say that, as in any church context, it can be very easy to forget to do this. It seems that being intentional and stating very clearly that we are going to pray for the poor is crucial in helping us as a church to be more effective in this area.

Specific Prayer regarding discipling impoverished people

Even when praying for people living in poverty, it can be really easy to forget that God is longing to bring the people we are serving into an ongoing relationship with Himself. It is essential that when praying for those on the margins we are able to cry out that people will come into a relationship with Jesus and go on to grow as a disciple of Him.

Prayer for Individuals

Many individuals who have come from an impoverished background will often face huge challenges in their lives. It is therefore essential that people throughout Gateway are able to pray for the needs people have. If this is to effectively take place it will need the quick relaying of information from people in Gateway, who have contact with people in need, to other prayer intercessors within the church. Having a list of people in the church who would be willing to receive a confidential text message and respond quickly in prayer could be a very positive thing. (Please note that the effective relaying of information can only really happen if people in Gateway actually have ongoing relationships with people on the margins.)

Here are some practical suggestions regarding prayer:

- More intentional prayer in the life of Gateway through Community Groups / Power House.
- Individuals in Gateway praying for other individuals, who are living in a life of poverty.
- Combining specific prayer for people to grow as disciples, along with praying for people’s general practical needs.



Teaching/training those in Gateway

If more people within Gateway are going to be able to engage more effectively in this area then the church itself must provide spaces where people can learn more about the subject of discipleship with those on the margins. As well as integrating this teaching/training into activities that already exist it may be appropriate to have separate seminars/teaching sessions specifically on this topic. A genuine fear people have with this is that you end up putting those who are already in the church and on the margins under a spotlight which stigmatises them. However, because there is such a risk that this issue can be forgotten about very easily there is a justification in allocating specific time to this topic. A key part of this implementation will be the use of language. For example, a meeting was held recently regarding the topic of disability/special needs. The title of the event was "Through the Roof" and the way in which the event was announced at church on Sunday did not seem to stigmatise anyone but provided a healthy platform from which to talk about this issue. Language will be very important and I do believe that if we balance being intentional with a Godly wisdom this should not be too much of a problem.

One on one mentoring

With the many challenges that people face, one on one mentoring could be a very positive step forward in helping an individual develop relationships with people and God in Gateway. It is very easy for someone who has come from a very different cultural background to struggle to integrate into church life. Therefore, breaking things down into a one on one context allows the person mentoring to specifically address those cultural differences. For example, if the person in question struggles to read, then the mentor may be able to read through certain biblical passages at the person's own pace. They would be able to give appropriate explanations and relate them to the individual's life in a way that would be very difficult to do in a bigger group. Secondly, if people are not used to a life of routine, regular gatherings and appointments, a committed mentor would be able to be flexible around these challenges. For example, it may be that the mentor volunteers at a specific project, either run by Gateway, or a cross-denominational initiative, and that mentor is able to arrange to meet this person whilst they take part in their volunteering role. Regardless of how the mentoring looks, the mentor in question will hopefully be able to maintain contact with an individual even if they didn't attend some of Gateway's regular gatherings/meetings.

An example of how mentoring can look: Chris is currently involved in mentoring Ben, who he met at St George's Crypt (a homeless shelter) whilst volunteering there and has taken him to church on several occasions. Ben still regularly attends the Crypt and knows it as a safe place to be. Chris combines his volunteering role at the Crypt with mentoring Ben. The mentoring session varies week to week and can have a number of different scenarios.

Scenario 1: Chris turns up at the Crypt having booked a time to meet Ben and he is not there. Because Chris has a general volunteering role, this is not too much of a problem and he just gets on with engaging with the other clients who have attended the Crypt that day.

Scenario 2: Ben is there this time but says he's not feeling great and doesn't want to talk about God today. Chris manages to engage Ben in two 5 minute conversations. The first is sat down at a table



over a cup of tea. The second is stood in the queue waiting for a hot meal. Although Chris and Ben don't manage to pray or read the Bible, Chris is able to listen to the challenges that Ben is going through and let him know that God is there for him in these challenges.

Scenario 3: Chris and Ben sit down for 30 minutes and read through Psalm 139. They have a really good discussion about how God knows us in every detail and when Ben struggles to understand a part of the passage, Chris is able to give an explanation. Towards the end of the discussion, they both talk about going to church on Sunday and why it is that Ben hasn't been for six weeks. Ben says that he wants to get more on track with God and start coming to church more regularly.

When engaging in a mentoring role, it is important to strike a balance between being intentional enough to offer the person appropriate support, yet not simply making them into projects. Achieving this can be tricky, but one can often find that the person in question will let you know if they feel you are making them into a project.

Integration into Community Groups

With Community Groups already situated in areas where there are pockets of high deprivation, such as in the east, west and south of the city, there may be potential to see individuals integrate in this way. It would be essential to make sure that the individual had a good relationship with a member of Gateway, who is well-established within the particular Community Group. As we have said previously, integration may prove to be more successful should the person in question be engaging in some form of one on one engagement. It could be the case that due to some of the cultural differences discussed earlier they find it hard to develop relationships with other Christians and with God. Therefore, having space to talk things through on an individual level could be very helpful in providing support to the individual. One challenge regarding this idea is that not every Community Group will feel able to manage an individual who may have a high level of vulnerability. For example, someone who lives in Hyde Park might be more suited to a group that meets in East Leeds. When this situation arises, it's advisable to speak to the individual in question and try to make appropriate arrangements regarding transport. Finally, if you find you are engaging with someone with a high level of vulnerability, it is best to talk through what are appropriate boundaries with a church leader / elder.

Community Groups with a specific emphasis

One option which Gateway has is to look at setting up Community Groups which have a specific focus on engaging with those on the margins. This has already started in Woodhouse, where we now have a community group which is specifically designed to reach people in Woodhouse who are from the margins of society. The combination of having individuals who are part of the Hope in Woodhouse Team, running this community group is exciting. One of the key aspects to the group flourishing will be the group's ability to maintain contact with individuals even if their attendance at community group is fairly sporadic. Because the Hope in Woodhouse team already seeks to make contact with the local community, regardless of whether people are part of a Gateway-run group/gathering, maintaining contact with individuals should be an achievable aim. Obviously, the more you stay in touch with an individual the more likely they are to attend the group and thus grow



in their relationship with other Christians and with God. The community group model which is being implemented in Woodhouse could potentially be implemented in other parts of the city.

Sunday gathering

Ultimately, it is the longing of all of us to see people who are from the margins of society coming together to worship God and hear His word, side by side with lawyers, accountants, doctors, teachers etc. The reason we have deliberately brought this subject up last, is because we believe that we are only going to see more people participating in our gathering on a Sunday if we raise the temperature on the other areas mentioned above. It is essential that we model a culture which always aims to meet some of the poorest people in our city where they are. It is from this position that we should seek to integrate them into the church. One of the failings that many churches have is that we seem to embody a culture which subconsciously says "you come to us". When we find ourselves in a situation where the person we have had contact with doesn't want to attend church on a Sunday, churches don't seem to have structures in place which can continue to engage with these individuals. If we, as Gateway, can develop a more holistic approach to integration, it will give people the opportunity to gradually grow in their faith in Jesus and being part of our Sunday gathering will become more and more common.

If we start to see more people interested in participating in Sunday worship, then giving them adequate support will be important. All support should be done in coordination with the Welcome Team. Here are a few ideas:

- Being aware of financial constraints, for example, spending £3.80 on a Day Rider may be very difficult for people getting to the church building, thus:
- Offering lifts where people live more than three miles away or have significant disabilities can be helpful.
- Being aware that people may not have credit on their mobile phone (or may not even have a mobile), therefore arranging meeting times early in the week so you're not caught out by not being able to get hold of them on a Saturday night. If there is no way of contacting someone by phone, then it may be appropriate to go round to the person's house and arrange a time, if capacity allows.
- Meeting people outside church and introducing them to people so they don't have to walk in on their own.
- Expecting people to get up in the middle of the service and go out for a cigarette.
- Running an Alpha or a Beta course whilst the sermon is taking place.
- Putting in safeguarding procedures should someone have a criminal record.

Engagement with Christians in the city

To practically outwork this vision of discipleship, Gateway is going to be far stronger if it constantly seeks to engage with other Christians in and around Leeds. There are two main reasons for this:

1. There are fantastic opportunities to engage with some of the poorest people in Leeds through working with cross-denominational initiatives that are already well established in the city. Establishing more of a two way flow with initiatives that already exist could prove to



be a very powerful expression of unity across the city. Many initiatives are more than willing for Christians to engage in on-going discipleship and press in to the prospect of inviting people to be part of their church.

2. Engaging with other Christians on the theme of discipleship will be a key in helping us to learn from what others are doing. It is important to state that there will be other Christians who are wrestling with similar issues, who may come to different conclusions regarding how best to disciple those on the margins. When differences of opinion do emerge, then it is not for Gateway to compromise its profound belief in having a vision for an “all sorts” church which means people being completely integrated into the Gateway family. However, it is essential that we as a church respect others and maintain a high level of integrity when engaging with Christians who have different opinions on this issue.

Conclusion

Gateway has a long way to go if it wants to become an “all sorts” church and truly live out the commandment to make disciples from many different cultures and backgrounds. Significant progress will be made, and potentially is being made, through the recognition that we face very significant challenges which are not always easy to see. These challenges come in the form of there being huge cultural differences between the make-up of the majority in our own congregation and those who come from the social and economic margins. Differences with regards to educational background, language, embracing an unknown geographical venue and attending regular meetings/gatherings all play their part. To add to this, we must recognise that people who live on the margins may lead lives which can often become chaotic. This chaos can often prevent people who want to know more about the Christian faith developing in their relationship with God and other Christians.

To meet these challenges Gateway must continue to see resources channelled out to the front line to meet people where they are. Simultaneously, the church must be able to be creative and proactive in discipling people who want to find out more about Christianity. Engaging in specific prayer, encouraging one-on-one mentoring, developing community groups and helping to facilitate access to our Sunday gathering will all be important aspects of this. This must be encompassed by adopting a general realisation that we must maintain contact, even if individuals’ attendance at Gateway meetings/gatherings is fairly sporadic. To add to this, we need to seek to be adaptable to the ever-changing needs that come before us as we move forward. The combination of these factors will be crucial in seeing an “all sorts” church realised and seeing some of the most marginalised people growing as disciples of Jesus Christ.