

EDITORIAL – THE BORING CHURCH

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Last night I was visiting a couple new to our church. In conversation they mentioned that their son gave up attending church at the age of ten. "Church", he told his parents, "bores me stiff". Sadly, that young lad was - and still is - typical of many. In the words of TV entertainer Noel Edmonds, "The church is the dullest experience that we have in this country". Not surprisingly young (and not so young) people are leaving the church in droves. The question, therefore, arises, 'How do we ensure that as churches we hold on to our young people - let alone attract them?' For if we lose our young people, then there is no future for us.

Last summer I visited two churches other than my own. The first was a small country chapel, where the congregation was happily singing out of Ira Sankey's 19th century collection of 'Sacred Songs'. When afterwards I made a mild comment on their choice of hymnbook, I was told in no uncertain terms that this was what they liked. Not surprisingly there were no young people - indeed, nobody there was under 60. The second was a town-centre church, where the congregation was happily singing out of a hymnbook published in 1991, but the beautifully crafted service failed to include any of the songs associated with charismatic renewal. Not surprisingly, I could count the children and young people on one hand - the congregation was for the most part made up of the over-sixties. What future do such churches have?

If churches would have a future, then they must have the needs of the younger generation in mind. Indeed, we must have the needs of children in mind, for whereas in the past teenagers used to leave the church, now it is children. We need to structure our church life and our church services in such a way that the eight, nine and ten-year olds find it attractive - otherwise they will become bored and cynical and give up on church.

How do we ensure that church doesn't bore young people? Perhaps, first of all, by middle-aged and older ministers recognising their limitations. Maybe I am fortunate, but in all the eleven years I have been minister of my present church, I have only had to take one of our monthly family services. Instead, I have delegated family services to a group of young teachers. Nor have I ever taken responsibility for any of our monthly youth 'events' - they too I

have delegated to younger people. Although I like to think I relate well to the younger section of the church, the fact is that I cannot fit into a pair of 32" waist-sized jeans, and I am therefore past it as far as they are concerned. Instead, my job is to ensure that younger people in the church are encouraged to take responsibility for reaching children and young people.

Second, it means that I don't allow my tastes to dominate in the way in the hymns and songs which we sing in our services. There are times when I squirm at the style of the music group or the triteness of the words on the screen, but if it enables young people and young families to worship God the better, then so be it.

But it's not just a matter of devising relevant services. Church generally needs to be a fun place. So as a church we are always keen on celebrations - with plenty of cakes! The other Sunday evening we celebrated my 60th birthday and in so doing trebled the normal attendance, for after a 35 minute family-friendly service, in which I used a video of Eeyore's birthday party to introduce the thought that the Kingdom of God can be likened to a party to which all of us are invited, we went straight into three games (Chinese laundry and musical mats) followed by chicken and rice. What gave me the great pleasure was to see a normally cynical and somewhat rebellious nine-year old thoroughly enjoying himself. "Church", he said, "is a good place to be".

FORGIVENESS & FAITH: PSYCHOLOGY & THEOLOGY IN DIALOGUE

Liz Gulliford

Introduction

The forgiveness of sins is central to Christianity. When we say that "we believe in the forgiveness of sins", do we have in mind the forgiveness of our own sins, through Christ's atoning death? Or do we envisage an ethic, that we believe in the forgiveness of sins, and are ourselves committed, with Christ, to forgiving those who fall short and cause us to suffer injury and hurt?