

Vibrant Expressions

- *Discovering imaginative living*

SETTING THE SCENE

Question

“How can creativity bring significant changes to personal and community life?” – many individuals and communities react to challenges through fear, ignorance and self-interest, they act predictably rather than creatively

Aims of the session

- To discover how creativity starts with the individual and then outworks into the community
- To demonstrate creativity requires values based, rather than rules based, living
- To show community as a potential for radical change
- To explore communities as open, dynamic, outward-looking and attractive
- To discuss how to gain and maintain personal and community dynamism
- To address community culture as stable yet without stagnation or indignation

Knowledge and Understanding

- Of what it really means to be human, spontaneous and creative
- Of the centrality of values in living creatively (personal and communal)
- Of living without legalism
- Of how individual / personal creativity serves communal expression
- Of structure that serves both creativity and community without stifling it

Skills and Abilities

- To think and live more creatively
- To bring creativity into life choices and ethics
- To inspire communities to live differently, using examples from real-life stories
- To develop techniques to help people become more creative and effective
- To develop cultures of creativity

EXPRESSING CREATIVITY

Outside the box

‘Creativity’ is one of those enticing ideas that draws almost everyone towards it, it promises so much yet for many it seems to be truly realised by so few. We have seen that it is part of the core of our being; yet how often it becomes frustrated and forced. In reality there are infinite numbers of creative possibilities lying in wait to be discovered and expressed within the cut and thrust of everyday life.



We have seen creativity as the ability to make connections between things that most people wouldn't consider in that way, to look at circumstances within life from an unexpected perspective, to develop the skills and dexterity to bring it into reality.

Creative and imaginative living takes us out of the world of restrictive and legalistic decision-making into a way of thinking and acting that is energised and shaped by values. Here the subtle textures and contours of ideas such as peace, love, justice, truth, wisdom, joy – and so very many more – create the possibility for untold permutations within life-giving choices; provided there is the imagination to see them and the courage to make them a reality.

Where creativity is explored it is usually on an individual level; even singing in a choir or joining a cookery class can be more about personal development than a particularly group activity, togetherness and friendship being a bonus rather than a focus. Developing our own creative thinking and skills is of course an essential first step but, from a Christian perspective, it must reach out and have an influence and impact in the wider community. Christians must join other creative people of good will and 'think outside the box' when building community and engaging with the many challenges that it faces.

The real thing ...?

When individuals and communities are faced with challenges their initial instinct is to react protectively marked by self-interest. This is understandable but regrettable.

The challenge of teenage promiscuity has led some to respond with the

- **'Silver Ring Thing' – ring-fencing chastity**

This well-meaning idea was begun in 1996 by Denny and Amy Pattyn as a response to escalating teen pregnancies and sexually transmitted diseases in Yuma, Arizona USA. It encourages young people to make a vow of sexual abstinence until marriage symbolized by the wearing of an inscribed¹ ring on the third finger of the left hand. This is presented as God's plan for their lives and to avoid the physical, emotional and spiritual effects of premarital sex, which are not addressed by the distribution of condoms and practicing 'safe-sex'. To its credit it offers a message of forgiveness and the opportunity to embrace a 'second virginity'. Nevertheless, however attractive the idea to many it is a legalism approach seeking immediate short-term results; it does not address the larger question of being a wholly integrated sexual person, stressing 'don't' rather than 'being'. Its legalism has been shown to sometimes create longer lasting sexual problems in later relationships. While it is superficially creative it does not demonstrate deep mature spiritual creativity. It presents a challenge to find a more authentically creative way to help and support young people.

¹ The ring is inscribed with 1Th 4:3-4, 'God wants you to be holy, so you should keep clear of all sexual sin. Then each of you will control your body and live in holiness and honor'



The challenge of the fear of local crime has led some to respond with the

- **‘Neighbourhood Watch’ – defending community**

This is an organized group of citizens devoted to crime and vandalism prevention within a neighbourhood. The principle is very simple: If I care for my neighbour, and look after his or her needs, he will be safer, and vice versa. They are not vigilante organizations. When suspecting criminal activities, members are encouraged not to intervene but to contact authorities. It builds on an old European concept of ‘town watch’ and is sometimes called ‘crime watch’. In its modern format it dates from the late 1960’s following the stabbing and rape of nineteen-year old Kitty Genovese in Queens, New York in 1964 when some 38 people were said to have watched her attack and death and did nothing to help her. While initially seeming an attractive and even sensible idea it actually feeds a ‘fortress mentality’ and breeds on suspicion and fear. It becomes ‘us and them’; it stresses ‘insiders versus outsiders’ and develops a ‘closed community’ mindset. It also seeks to deal with problems and difficulties by pushing them away rather than asking why is there a problem? Authentic creativity seeks to build a safe yet open and outward looking community, as we shall explore below.

The challenge of Christian living has led some to respond with

- **‘What Would Jesus Do?’ – focusing morality**

The WWJD slogan was first popular in the USA in the 1890’s and has been so again since the 1990’s. Charles M Sheldon coined the phrase in his novel ‘In His Steps’ first published in 1896. The main character in the book is a minister, Rev Henry Maxwell, who encounters a homeless man who challenges him to imitate Jesus in the way he lives his life. The homeless man has difficulty understanding why so many Christians ignore the poor. This leads Maxwell to use the phrase, “What would Jesus do?” in facing everyday life situations. Today WWJD is found on rings, wristbands, badges and much else besides. However, it is also widely parodied, mocked and bought into disrepute. The idea itself has a great pedigree, as Sheldon was actively involved in the Christian Socialist movement and the book did much to spread its ideas. At one level you cannot fault its aim to challenge Christians to make choices that would harmonise with what we believe Jesus would choose to do. That is in fact what Jesus asks us to do. However, the phrase is popularly used and interpreted in a bland and shallow way. It assumes we know what Jesus would do in a given situation and we rarely do (quite apart from the constraints of culture and character). It seems to lead few people to the creative Jesus, spontaneous, unpredictable yet always appropriate that we have discussed; someone energised by values and deep spirituality. What this might mean in practice is what we now wish to explore.

VIBRANT CHALLENGES

‘Any Town’ exercise

Imagine a medium sized town, as average and typical as possible, with all the usual community dynamics, nothing extreme but everything as you would expect. There



are individuals and families in a range of residential areas. There are the schools, the churches and a range of different businesses and an arts centre. There are the local government offices responsible for housing and other social needs; there is the health centre and recreation centre. Each of these points of focus has an influence and a response when a challenge confronts the community; each is full of creative possibilities if they so choose.

In our exercise we will confront the people in 'Any Town' with some typical current social challenges based on real-life experiences. Each small group will be presented with a particular social issue. Using the map provided, suggest ways in which each place of influence (school, church, local government office etc) within the town could act creatively to deal with the challenge to demonstrate that the community is both strong and inclusive. Record your ideas on the sheet next to the image of the particular influential group.

Challenging issues

Any town is likely to face a range of possible challenges with all the social pressures at work today. The challenges could come in the form of ...

- Asylum seekers
- Gun / Knife gangs
- Prostitutes
- Rough sleepers
- Anti-social neighbours
- Disruptive hoodies
- Paedophiles
- Roma travellers (Gypsies)

How would you work with the different 'influence groups' in a town you lived in to bring a creative and inclusive community solution to these challenges, one that is marked by a Christian understanding of values? This is the exercise!

Challenging responses

Here are some stories of some positive creative responses made by communities to some of the challenges mentioned above:

▪ Rough sleepers

A Christian community located in central London's wealthy South Kensington area started to open the doors of its building to local rough sleepers. They shared food with them, allowed them to sleep under a roof and use the washrooms and laundry facilities. Around 40 people would regularly come to this church each evening, spending time with the volunteers who were all part of the church congregation. Uncomfortable, and unaccustomed to seeing so many people from this usually excluded part of society in their exclusive neighbourhood, local residents began to lodge complaints both with the church and the local council. They insisted that the project be shut down as the rough sleepers who were now more regularly frequenting their streets had disturbed the atmosphere and peace there.



▪ Asylum Seekers

The Kingsway Estate in Glasgow became home for hundreds of families escaping persecution and torture in places such as Iraq, Afghanistan, Algeria, Uganda and Congo. Over time, the asylum seekers were warmly embraced by the resident community. "We had been really going downhill - a lot of antisocial families were being put here. But after a year of the asylum seekers coming, the atmosphere became completely different," local sixty-seven-year-old Jean Donnachie says. "These people couldn't do enough for you, and I thought this was wonderful - it was like going back to when I was a child and you could leave the key in the door and if you needed help someone would come round." Most of these asylum seekers had their request for asylum in the UK turned down by the Home Office.

When the Home Office began coming to the estate at 5am, in dawn raids to remove them to detention centres prior to deportation back to their country. Donnachie and the rest of the residents looked on in horror. "It was like watching the Gestapo - men with armour, going in to flats with battering rams. I've never seen people living in fear like it. I saw a man jump from two storeys up when they came for him and his family. I stood there and I cried, and I said to myself, 'I am not going to stand by and watch this happen again.'"

Donnachie got together with her friend Noreen and organised the residents into daily dawn patrols, looking out for immigration vans. When they arrived, a phone system would swing in to action, warning asylum seekers to escape. The whole estate pitched in, gathering in large crowds in the early-morning dark to jeer the immigration officials as they entered the tower blocks. On more than one occasion, the vans left the estate empty - the people they had come to arrest had got out in time and were hidden by the crowd. The estate kept this up for two years until the forced removals stopped.²

▪ Prostitutes

In Amsterdam a group of Christians moved into a red-light district and became involved with a network of prostitutes and pimps. They were unable to release women from prostitution without offering alternative sources of income. Many were mothers, and the Christians began babysitting while they were soliciting. The developed into legal work to release the women from the contractual obligations with their pimps; job-finding; and fighting the landlords and politicians who owned the buildings used for prostitution and who profited from it. The Christians had to develop a political and legal strategy to deal with this reality.³

▪ Gun / Knife gangs

² This story is from the Guardian newspaper

³ See R Bakke '*The Urban Christian*' IVP 1987 p154



On 29th July 2002 Damian Cope was shot and killed. He was 22 years old. Since his death, his mother Lucy has set up the powerful nationwide organisation 'Mothers Against Guns'.

It calls for people to set up campaign groups in their communities, to see an end to Britain's rising gun culture and lobby the government to introduce stiffer penalties for people convicted of gun-related crimes. It works to highlight the effects of gun crime on victims, perpetrators and their families.

'Mothers Against Guns' have three key demands:

- Ten-year sentences without parole for people found in possession of a firearm
- Life sentences without parole for those who murder with guns
- A ban on the sale of replica weapons

A short film 'Toys That Kill' has been produced to publicise the campaign. It will be shown in cinemas across the UK.

Alexander Rose (based in Lambeth, south west London) says:

"I go round to schools and youth clubs talking to young people about the issues around gang culture. To make them think about what else is out there. To make them realise that they don't have to join a gang or carry weapons. I want to raise awareness to educate young people to STOP carrying weapons. Friends and family members have died due to this issue. I decided I just had to do something. I turned to what I knew at the time, which was graphic design, and came up with a T-shirt design and a campaign called STOP (Solve This Ongoing Problem). I'm using positive fashion to fight the negative gangster image. I want to inspire others. I'm not special. Everyone can use what they have to do something. I'm telling you: positivity pays off. Talent + Belief = Success."⁴

"I never knew just how deeply the issue, which I have become accustomed to seeing in London, has effected the wider communities outside London. The main thing I wanted to let you know is there are MORE young people like myself who are using their own talents to address the issue. For example I recently met a young barber who gives half price cuts to anyone that wants 'stop the shootings' written on the side of their heads.

I wouldn't class myself as doing anything extraordinary, all I'm doing is applying what I'm learning in graphic design' towards what I see in gun and knife crime, I'm not doing this for fame, recognition or the money. I'm not bothered if no one remembers who designed the T-shirt, but all I care about is the message being remembered. I'm using the money raised from the T-shirts which I sell for £5 on Ebay to help other young people start up their ideas to benefit their communities or to spread more awareness in different forms. I'm someone who'd rather be remembered for what I do rather than what I own."

⁴ There is a video diary of him at <http://www.vimeo.com/stopcampaign> explaining how the campaign came into existence. This is part of a recent interview he had with the Professional Boxing Association. The interview is taken from the Educational Sports Forum website (where Alexander is also photographed with Gordon Brown)

Are you aware of how young people are responding to issues of gun and knife crime in your area? How can we make space in our communities to allow the voice of young people to speak out? In what ways do you think we can allow them space and give them support to creatively find solutions to problems which they face?

Reading and Resources

- R Alter '***The Art of Biblical Narrative***' Basic Books 1983
E de Bono '***Serious Creativity***' HarperCollins 1995
C Booker '***The Seven Basic Plots: Why We Tell Stories***' Continuum 2004
J Cameron '***The Artist's Way***' Pan Books 1995
J Cameron '***The Vein of Gold***' Pan Books 1997
M Csikszentmihalyi '***Creativity***' Harper Perennial 1997
JE Davies (Ed) '***Stories of Change: narrative and social movements***' State University of New York 2002
NM Jackson (Ed) '***Right to Dance***' Banff Centre Press 2004
A Koestler '***The Act of Creation***' Picador 1975
C Seerveld '***Rainbows for the Fallen World***' Stride Publications 1988

