

RESISTING THE SECULARISING DRIFT OF SOCIAL ACTION

BY JON KUHRT

At Streatham Baptist Church, we host a community meal on Wednesday evenings called The Vine. A wide variety of guests come along – some are sleeping rough and struggling with addictions but almost all face challenges associated with isolation and poverty.

The purpose of The Vine is to offer three things to our guests: food, connection and community. So to do this we play games, have a fun quiz and all eat a great meal together.

We chose the name because vines provide food and refreshment but also embody unpredictable growth and a sense of connectedness. And it is also a metaphor Jesus uses about himself in John 15-

'I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener... Remain in me, as I also remain in you. No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine.'

THE EXPLICIT ROLE OF FAITH

When we started we thought carefully about the role that the Christian faith plays in what we offer. We did not want to just provide the resource of food. We wanted to create a place of relationship and connection: to both each other and to God. We consciously wanted the meal to 'remain in Jesus' and avoid the secularising drift that affects so many church-based projects.

Back in 1997, the community theologian Ann Morisy (also a Streatham resident) wrote spirituality in social action in her influential book *Beyond the Good Samaritan*: "Community ministry takes seriously the fact that people have spiritual needs, and if churches do not help people address these needs then few other agencies will. Churches have often been duped by our deeply secular culture into providing welfare for those in need without being clear about how this helps the Church fulfil its primary task."

LITURGY

Ann coined the term 'apt liturgy' to describe spiritual words and practices which can be used alongside social action. These words need to be appropriate to the context and be shared in the right spiritual temperature – neither 'too hot nor too cold'.

At The Vine, we have used a liturgy which we have printed out on sheets (which due to our demographic, we also make available in Polish). Before we eat, we stop, ask for quiet in the room and invite everyone to join in to pray a blessing if they are happy to do so. And at the close of the evening, before guests leave, we invite people to say these words too:

*May the peace of the Lord Christ go with you,
wherever He may send you.
May He guide you through the wilderness,
and protect you through the storm.
May He bring you back here rejoicing
once again into our doors. Amen*

There is nothing ground-breaking in these words and they only take a brief moment to say, but they play a significant role in each evening by giving us a time to pause, reflect and be grateful together. They create a sense of 'depth' and mutuality as everyone speaks as equals before God. Somehow, the prayers change the room.

As well as diverse guests, we also have a mixed group of volunteers who are not all churchgoers. But in the four years since we started, we have not had one single concern raised about our prayers. In fact, it's been the opposite, many people have said this is what they expect in a church.

DEEPER NEEDS

It is great to share food together but we know that material needs are only part of the challenges many of our guests face.

My thinking has been very influenced by the missionary theologian Lesslie Newbigin. As a young man in the 1920s, he went to South Wales to help run activities and holidays for unemployed men. Although it was a Christian-based initiative, it had a strict liberal ethos which meant volunteers were not allowed to talk about anything religious. Newbigin reflected:

"I became less and less convinced that we were dealing with the real issues...these men needed some kind of faith that would fortify them for today and tomorrow against apathy and despair. Draughts and ping-pong could not provide this...they needed the Christian faith."

Ever since reading these words, the phrase 'draughts and ping-pong could not provide this' has challenged me. Faith, belief, purpose and meaning are deeply connected to what people most need – today more than ever. Why would a church initiative ignore them?

I believe that social action projects should not accept the common 'secularising drift' that occurs within so much church-based social action. We should retain a missional distinctiveness that enables Christian hope to be integrated alongside practical action.

After over 30 years of working with people affected by homelessness, it is this belief that has taken me to work for the Christian charity Hope into Action, who provide housing for people who are homeless in partnership with local churches.

Rather than allowing faith to be 'skimmed' out of social action, we believe in a 'full fat' approach. We housed almost 500 people last year and 60 per cent wanted to be prayed for and 14 took the decision to be baptised.

Realities like this, both in my local church in Streatham and through national organisations like Hope into Action, show that those involved in social action should rightly have confidence in the relevance of faith to the challenges our communities are struggling with. Alongside the increase in sales in Bibles and more young people coming to church, it is further evidence of a spiritual search that so many are on.

But the practical integrating of overt expressions of faith alongside social action requires confidence, clarity and creativity because there are many, both outside and within the church, who will voice negativity and nervousness.

THESE ARE MY TAKE AWAYS TO KEEP SOCIAL ACTION MISSIONAL:

- 1. BUILD CONFIDENCE:** Faith is more than a 'starter-motor' for social action but can remain its engine. Our confidence needs to be both theological as we appreciate its priority to God and also sociological as we appreciate its relevance to the issues our communities and individuals face.
- 2. BE CLEAR:** If we are vague, defensive and incoherent then it will increase people's suspicions. We need to be clear and intentional about how faith is expressed and shared within a social action project is run. We should listen and encourage non-church-going volunteers or staff to be open about how they feel. In my experience, I find that they are far more open-minded than we imagine.
- 3. BE CREATIVE:** No one wants clunky, awkward or cringy 'God slots' which are simply crow-barred into a project to tick a spiritual box. It requires creativity to develop approaches which bring spiritual depth in an inclusive and meaningful way.



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