

# The Nature of Church

*A study course in four sessions to help consideration of the ancient concepts of church, and how they help us understand how church might be in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century.*

by Revd Beverley Hollins  
Deanery Development Facilitator  
Newport Deanery in the Diocese of Oxford

This course is based largely on the work of Dr. Steven Croft (now the Bishop of Sheffield) in his book *Transforming Communities: Re-imagining the Church for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*. It also takes a number of other sources into consideration. It is written in the first instance for the PCC of the Newport Pagnell Parish, but will hopefully be of use to other PCC's, Deanery Synods or church groups.

## Introduction for Leaders

Sunday after Sunday, we are used to repeating the refrain: 'I believe in one holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church'. It is very easy to assume that this phrase is purely historic, or of interest only to theologians. In actual fact, this phrase is the key both to understanding the nature of church across time and space and to considering how we express the nature of church at this time and in this place.

As we consider how we should be and do church today, this course invites us not to assume that our current model is wrong because the church is declining, or that it is right because tradition and culture have moulded it over time. Instead, we will consider four images used to describe the followers of God in scripture. These images were offered first by Steven Croft and can be found in section three of *Transforming Communities*. The images – the bride of Christ, the body of Christ, the Light of the World, and Pilgrim People – help us to look at the way we as church relate to God, to each other, to the world and to our future. As we look at the images, we will bear in mind the description of the nature of the church which we use whenever we say the Nicene Creed. I have decided to take the images in the same order as Steven Croft does, placing consideration of our relationship with God first, and so the four aspects of the church's nature from the creed will not appear in creedal order.

Archbishop Rowan Williams refers to these four words as the four 'marks of the church'<sup>1</sup>. He writes helpfully that:

All four marks of the church are about Jesus Christ. The church is one because Jesus Christ is one; the church is holy because Jesus Christ is holy; the church is catholic because Jesus Christ is the saviour of all; the church is apostolic because, as the Father has sent Jesus, so Jesus sends us. In other words, if we are to understand the nature of the church at all, we are to understand who Jesus Christ is and what he does.

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<sup>1</sup> Friday 28 October 2005 Archbishop's Address to the 3rd Global South to South Encounter Ain al Sukhna, Egypt to be found at <http://www.archbishopofcanterbury.org/1464> (retrieved by the author 21<sup>st</sup> December 2009)

And to see the nature of the church in these terms is, I believe, to be liberated from any idea that the oneness, the holiness, the catholicity, the apostolicity of the church are either characteristics that we possess in our own right, or even goals that we can plan for. Before we can even begin to think about what belongs to us or about what goals we should have, we must think about Jesus Christ.

I hope then, that in leading these studies you will share this priority. Look first at Jesus Christ. Our nature as church flows from our relationship to our saviour. In part it is about how we model ourselves on him; in part it is about how we behave as a people who are before all else Jesus' lovers.

In an age in which talk of love is often mistaken for talk of sexual encounters (even the phrase 'making love' is misleading and unhelpful) we often fight shy of talking publicly about this loving relationship. We don't want people to get the wrong idea about us, about the way we think of God or of each other. We most certainly do not want to be mistaken for a deviant sexual cult. And so we fail to speak of love. And in not talking about our first love we lose the language and the feel for our calling.

We who are called to be part of the church are called to be lovers. We are lovers of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. We are lovers of each other – our brothers and sisters in Christ - and we join with God in loving all those whom he has made, becoming lovers of all creation. This love should be pure. It is a crying shame that we are inhibited from shouting it from the rooftops because we fear that the world will point and misunderstand, hearing sexual innuendo when we speak of love. But the deepest nature of God is love and if we shy away from proclaiming this then we will never truly be able to reflect his nature in the church.

In the course, then, we look at the four images through which we discover how God reaches out in love to us and calls us to respond in love and share his love with others. The sessions follow a pattern which allows the members to engage with the subject matter personally, as a small groups (subdividing into buzz groups if the study group is a large one) and all together. In each session time is spent at the end of the session thinking about how the sacraments we all celebrate together reflect the theme, and finally how our learning might be put into action locally. Action points will need to be noted and remembered so that following the course they can be considered by the church and brought to life. Full introductions to the theme of each session are given in the background section. This material is provided for the leader to study and use in preparing

input and perhaps in accompanying preaching. It is not written in a way that is intended for the leader to read out. In deciding what material to share in the 'input' section of the course, the leader will need to make their own judgements about how much to say and how to convey the message depending on the membership of the group, the time available, and other local priorities.

#### *Transforming Communities*

Steven Croft<sup>2</sup> suggests that the place where we are most effective as church is not in the Sunday gathering – though that gathering remains relevant – but in smaller groups in which we can interact at a deeper level. These groups go beyond the house group model popularised from the 1960's onwards which grew out of the early Ecumenical Lent house groups and the Methodist and congregational Class system. Croft's small groups, which he refers to as 'transformational communities' develop and grow from a basis of learning to worship and pray together in an atmosphere of sharing. Members of a transforming community get to know each other well and support one another. They bring their joys and problems, their concerns and fears to the group. If one member is made redundant, or has a family member who is unwell, or is confused about a decision, they can and should bring it to their group. If another member is celebrating their child's baptism and wants help with the buffet and to have their friends at the party, they can and should bring it to the group.

So far this may not look very different from a house group, though perhaps not all house groups have the depth of shared love and relationship that I am describing. But the important factor is this: since the group is an expression of church, it needs to be all that church is. So it is not just a fellowship but a whole church community.

That means that as well as being 'one' as a fellowship, the group must be holy; that is, learning more of God together and being peacemakers in the world. And it must be catholic – bringing wholeness and healing into the world and sharing a message of our future with God. This means that the group needs to actively engage in some way with the community. Finally it must be apostolic, which means that the group is not ashamed or afraid to speak of God to others and to actively engage in mission. This may well be combined with whatever project engages with the community.

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<sup>2</sup> Croft, Steven, *Transforming communities: Re-imagining the Church for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*. London: DLT, 2002.

A transforming community may look like some of our existing communities: a church choir, a band of ringers, a Mothers' Union, a pastoral outreach group may each be a transforming community already, or may be able and willing to adapt to become one.

For example, let's imagine the church choir at St. Cecilia's as it considers whether it is a transforming community – or just a singing group. The choir already has a role in mission and outreach to the community through music by singing for church services. Members might well ask though whether they should sometimes do something more than just singing on Sundays and at weddings – perhaps their music might take them into places where people need to feel God's love (carol singing in local nursing homes) or it might be a way of regularly acting in new ways for mission (singing at street services) or mercy projects (a programme of concerts for charity). The church choir would also need to look at how the gathered time is spent. Clearly a choir will spend most of that time singing; but it will only become a transforming community, an expression of what we are as church, if it also finds a way to spend time on personal relationships and in prayer and worship. This might mean having coffee time after choir practice and sharing in open and loving conversations, and then having a time of prayer before everyone goes home.

In every church there will be members who are part of a community which is, or could be, a powerful transforming community. Those people can be encouraged to recognise that for them that small group (and it is necessarily small if that depth of relationship is to be maintained) is where their main church commitment lies. Their community might join with other transforming communities if the church is a large one, or it might be the entire membership of a church in a small community. Attending Sunday worship remains important, but Sunday worship should be a reflection of the work of the transforming communities coming together to share in God's love. It is a place to celebrate what the church is doing in those communities, to share news, to commend and to welcome. The Sunday church is the place of sharing in the sacraments which give context to the life of the church as it is lived out from day to day. The daily living part, though, is supported by the small transforming community and the friends who are to be found there, not by the Sunday church.

Some church members – and of course any new person who approaches the church through the main congregation – will not be a part of a transforming community. Here lies the second challenge. The first is in ensuring that existing groups of friends really are acting as transforming communities – living out all aspects of the nature of the church through the lives of those communities.

The second is for those who are not rooted in a small community. The church is responsible for helping them find a community to join or for creating new small groups which can grow together to become transforming communities, giving each member the chance to live out with others the calling of being a lover of Christ, part of the body, lighting the world and joining others in the pilgrimage to bring all people to the eternal wedding banquet of the lamb.

Newly formed small groups might grow out of teaching groups e.g. an Alpha, Start!, Christianity Explored or Emmaus course. Or they might be started from scratch. A group doing a Christian discipleship course is not in itself a transforming community, and we shouldn't try to assume that it can be – the members of a course need to concentrate on learning more about Jesus and making a decision to commit their lives to saying 'yes' to his call and thus living as his disciples, his lovers. Once that decision is made, a person then needs to be a part of the church, part of the community that will support, encourage and challenge him or her in living that Christian life. This may be a community which continues from the membership of a course, or it may be a new community – or perhaps the person is able to join an already existing small group.

However the group is formed, the task is the same: to reflect the full nature of the church as one, holy, catholic and apostolic within the life of the group. The group will spend time getting to know each other. They will study the scriptures and pray together. They will choose a project of some sort to begin or to join in with in order to engage with the community and share the love of Christ with the world. This might be starting or supporting a toddler group or a community food cupboard, or offering a gardening service to elderly people in the community – it will involve identifying local need and matching it to skills and interests within the group. Group members will be expected to be as committed to the group project as to any other aspect of the life of the group, which is one reason why it must be generated from within the group after plenty of prayer and discussion.

Members of the group will be expected to be honest with each other and turn to each other in times of need and of celebration and to support each other in those times. If a group grows too large – more than about 12 members – it will subdivide so that it never gets too big for the members to be able to properly support each other. Finally, the group will consider itself to be a part of the wider church with which it is one, and so being a part of the gathering on Sundays and holy days with other Christians for worship and sharing in the sacraments will be an important aspect of the life of the small community.

### Course outcomes

As you work through the course, be ready to consider new ways of doing things. This may mean exploring the possibility of starting a transforming community in your church, and/or encouraging existing groups to renew their life to more fully reflect the whole nature of Christ and his Church. Or it may be clear to your study group that God is calling you to work in other ways to renew the life of the church. The goal is not to come out having applied a formula, but to have looked and prayed together about what God wants to do with you and your church at this time.

A guide to the structure of the course follows this section.

### COURSE SESSIONS

*Session One – the Bride of Christ: a Holy People*

*Session Two – the Body of Christ: the church is One*

*Session Three – Light of the World: Apostolic Witness*

*Session Four – Pilgrim people: the Catholic church looks ahead*

*All Bible references printed in this course material are taken from the New International Version of the Bible.*

### BIBLIOGRAPHY

*Mission-shaped church; church planting and fresh expressions of church in a changing context.* London: Church house Publishing, 2004.

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## The Study Session:

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### Prayer

Each session should begin with prayer in a style that the group finds comfortable. If have started with refreshments and want to signal a change of mood you might find it helpful to light a candle, which would then be blown out at the end of the closing prayer. Make sure that everyone is comfortable in their seats before praying.

If the group is used to extempore prayer you may wish to start in this way; if there has been time for sharing and/or you are aware of particular concerns affecting people in the group then you may wish to pray about these now.

Alternately, a set prayer is provided which can be led by the session leader or an invited member of the group. If you have a data projector or OHP you could project the words so that all members of the group can say the prayer together.

Father God,  
as we gather together to study your word,  
to listen to you as you speak to our hearts  
and through each other,  
help us to learn more of you  
and of your church  
that we may be emboldened  
to become the church you desire us to be  
at this time and in this place.  
Amen.



### Scripture

Every session includes one or more reading from the Bible. It is always helpful to take the time to read the passages aloud. The session leader will need to decide who should read, and whether group members need Bibles or perhaps if using a data projector the words of the readings are on a screen.

If not explaining the readings during the input section, allow time for questions of clarification to ensure that all participants understand the

readings. However, general discussion of themes raised by the readings should be saved until the group discussion.

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### Input outline

There is no script!

The background material provided for each session, with the material in the introduction may provide enough material for you to work with. The suggestions for further reading following the introduction will also help. You may well want to draw learning points from the scripture readings. Key points that inform the discussions are suggested in this box in each session guide; how you communicate them is up to you!

Ultimately, you know your group and how best to work with them. You know whether they will listen to a 10 minute talk, or whether you need to include some role play or dialogue with a second leader to hold their attention. If your group is full of reflective thinkers you may even want to give them a copy of your script! If your group includes a number of active learners you may wish to illustrate your input with images or objects to help hold their attention.

Timing: 10-15 minutes

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### Personal reflection and activity

Depending on the size and make-up of the group, you may wish to invite people to work alone or in pairs; or to begin alone and then share their thoughts together in pairs.

This is an opportunity to consider how the scripture readings and leader's input makes each personal feel, or to consider what they think, about the implications of what they have learned for their personal relationship with God.

Give each person a copy of the personal activity sheet for this session, and ask them to spend about ten minutes thinking about or writing down their responses. If working alone, allow time at the end to talk briefly with a partner about the activity.

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### Group discussion

If the study group is large you may decide to subdivide into smaller groups for this time of discussion. If subdividing, ensure before going into groups that everyone understands the task, and that groups will appoint a member to make a note of any action points raised and to feed back to the whole study group any reflections which the group wants to share. You will need to allow about 15 minutes, plus time for feedback if sub-dividing.

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### Sacramental perspective

This specific input session is optional, and whether you include it will depend on timing and your goal for the group. It is offered in the same spirit that Steven Croft offers sacramental reflection in *Transforming Communities*, so that we can place our learning into the context of baptism and eucharist, the sacraments which mark the key points in our shared life.

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### Plenary discussion

Conversation at this point allows you to ensure that all participants have understood the input and that they are applying what they are learning to the life of the local church. Some participants may come up with new ideas, some of which may be radically different from the way church is managed in your area now. It is important to be open to all ideas while not allowing the group to assume that because the idea has been voiced that means it will happen. If the study group is a PCC or other decision making body, they may need to be reminded that during the study course they are not in session – ideas that they want to take forward will need to go onto the agenda of a business meeting on another occasion. Make a note of ideas that might go forward so that they can be raised in the second part of the plenary, Action Points.

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## Action points

At this stage in the session the questions is asked:

*Has your discussion today prompted anything you might like to do personally or together?*

Take a few minutes for each person to reflect and note any personal actions they might want to take as a result of today's study. If there is time, offer an opportunity for anyone who wishes to share their person action points. Be clear about who people can speak to privately if they would like to ask for help in taking personal actions forward.

Then take some time together to consider whether anything discussed together today suggests action points for the church community. If there is time, encourage the group to begin by talking for a couple of minutes with their immediate neighbours, and then invite ideas to be shared in plenary. If you are short of time you can go straight into a conversation with the full group, but you may need to work harder to get people to make suggestions without the conversation in pairs.

Appoint someone to make a note of the group action points, perhaps on a flipchart sheet or a PowerPoint slide, and tell the group that you will be considering these action points again, along with action points from the other sessions, at the end of week 4. At that stage the group will be able to decide together how to take their action points forward.

In session 4 you will also need the notes of the action points from sessions 1-3. If possible display them (using flipchart sheets or PowerPoint slides) and remind the group of them. It is possible that some of the early action points will have been forgotten or superseded, while others may be of particular interest. Decide together which action points the group would like to see taken forward. Have a clear strategy. If the group is a PCC or other decision making body they may feel able to convene briefly to enact a simple point, or they may wish to ensure that the action points appear on the next agenda of the formal meeting. If this study is not being undertaken by a decision making body then you will need to identify which body needs to be approached with action points and which people within the study group are going to do it.

Also, appoint a person whose job is to remind those acting to get on with it! We may have great emotions and intentions at this stage in the course, but a day or two of normal routine can reduce the impetus and lead to delay or loss

of enthusiasm. A second person to encourage and remind is often all that is needed to ensure that actions really do take place.

Ensure that as you finish the course, all who have taken part know what is going to happen next, when it is likely to happen, and who is taking responsibility for it. If appropriate, appoint someone to ensure that this information is also fed back to the wider church community.



## Closing prayer

As at the beginning of the session, it is good to pray in the way which is most comfortable for the group. This may be extempore or open prayer which gathers thoughts raised during the meeting. Or it may be simply using the suggested prayer for the session. Again, the suggested prayer may be read by the session leader or another reader, or may be projected so that all may say it together.

If a candle was lit at the beginning of the session, blow it out after the shared prayer.

Group members from traditional backgrounds may also like to end with words of dismissal, such as

Let us bless the Lord  
**Thanks be to God**

or

Go in peace to love and serve the Lord  
**In the name of Christ. Amen.**

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## *Session One The Bride of Christ: a holy people*

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### Leader's Notes

The two scripture readings are the main sources for the image of the Church as Bride which illustrates this study. In Jeremiah's prophecy, God remembers how he had a loving and devoted relationship with Israel, which is likened to the relationship between a bride and her husband. This is an image which is not only about love, but also about commitment – the lifelong promise to remain together and to support one another which is unique to a marriage relationship over any other; and to a degree it is about ownership. In the culture in which Jeremiah was writing, the bride was the property of the groom, and he therefore carried not only certain authority over her but also responsibility for her care and protection. This relationship did not remove a bride's ability to act and think for herself – her choice to love and serve her husband was her own and she could choose not to do so. And this is precisely what we see in Jeremiah's prophecy. Israel was the bride, the beloved of God. Indeed, some writers compare the passionate love poem we find in *Song of Solomon* to this relationship between God and Israel. Whether this was the poet's intention or not, the quality of devotion is the same. God loves Israel, and as bride Israel loved God just as much. But her attention has wandered. She has busied herself with other things, been distracted by the interests of other friends. She no longer shows that level of devotion and commitment that is expected from a wife. The marriage is damaged.

It would be easy to give up hope. The relationship between humankind and God is changed and that special closeness is lost for ever. We humans don't stay focussed, we don't stick with God when times are tough and other options are easier. However good our relationship with God might be, the joy of having a relationship with the quality of married love and commitment has been lost to us. But then, almost as the scriptural story comes to an end we are presented with a stunning image of the future. Revelation climaxes with the image of a great celebration at which 'the Holy City, the new Jerusalem' is recognised as the bride. Now the wedding is happening and 'the Spirit and the bride say, "Come!"' (Revelation 22:17). The new Jerusalem is not merely those people who are part of Israel, but a much bigger group of people who have entered into relationship with the Lamb – that is, the Christ – and who together have a relationship which once again can be likened to the devotion and commitment of a marriage.

In this first session of the course we look at the church as the Bride of Christ. This is an ancient image, and one which is easily tangled with sexual imagery. Perhaps this is why we hear so little preaching on the subject. Then again, for men in the church there is some challenge in associating oneself with the image of a bride! As with all the images which we will look at in the course, they are meant to help with discussion, to help us take to heart aspects of our calling to love, but if the image becomes an obstacle to relating to God then it may need to be quietly set aside.

The bride is the lover of the groom. She is in the closest relationship there can be between two people. In this image the groom is the Lamb of God (Revelation 21: 9), whom we identify as Jesus Christ. Some course members, perhaps especially men, will find it difficult to identify with an image of the Church which in human terms has such a strong sexual aspect. You will need to persevere in looking at the marriage relationship as one of commitment, of growing understanding and knowledge between two people, of obedience, service and care, all motivated by love. This devoted relationship is the image we will be using to understand the nature of the church as holy.

We proclaim Jesus as holy in every Eucharist as we say or sing the Sanctus during the Eucharistic prayer, and we often enjoy singing of his holiness. We refer to certain outstanding historic Christians as holy in calling them 'saint', a word rooted in the Latin *sancte*, which means holy. It is significant that the groom is described as the Lamb, the one who was sacrificed for us. We associate holiness with sacrifice, with the Cross. The Lamb, the one real sacrifice for us all to end all other sacrifices, is truly holy. Archbishop Rowan writes<sup>3</sup> that in John 17:19 Jesus says:

'For their sake, I am making myself holy, so that they may be made holy in truth'. And that gives us, I would say, a very important clue as to what Christian holiness is about; here is Jesus, the night before his crucifixion, saying 'I am making myself Holy'. He is going forward to his crucifixion, where by the shedding of his blood, he makes peace between Heaven and earth.

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<sup>3</sup> Rowan Williams. *ibid.*

As bride and groom come together in a shared life, that act of peace made by Jesus unites heaven and earth in a relationship which becomes holy.

The question that follows for us is: how then does our being a holy lover of Jesus affect the way that we live out our life as a church community now? We can see the picture of how it will be in the future in the book of Revelation – the new heaven, the new earth, the wedding banquet of the Lamb and his bride to which we invite all people to come and never be thirsty. But how do we live this out in England in 2010?

We already have a settled way of being church. There is great value in much of this. The eucharistic gathering of the family looks forward to the wedding feast and backwards to the moment when the world first saw what holiness really is – when Jesus went to the cross and allowed his body to be broken, his blood to be shed, in order to restore a peaceful and loving relationship between God and his people for all time. He didn't have to die to achieve that goal. He could have preached and healed and called and that would have attracted enough people to change the world. But in dying for us he came alongside the suffering in a more real way than he ever could in living. Some Christians speak of the message of incarnation and the message of the passion and resurrection of Christ as though they are somehow separated. But they are facets of the same stunning story – that Emmanuel, God with us, brought heaven and earth back together; and that he didn't stop at that – as if that was not enough – he went to the darkest, most difficult and humiliating place to which a man could go and stayed there to the bitter end. Our loving husband Jesus has shown us how to be holy in a world of suffering and pain.

As he did this he instituted the Eucharist, saying 'whenever you gather and share bread and wine, remember me'. And so it is right and proper that we place the celebration of the Eucharist at the centre of our life as a church. But his action was far more than a ritual involving bread and wine. He gathered people around him and went with them into the hard places of the world he loved; ultimately he went to be God's presence with us in death and then showed us what God's eternal life looks like. This too informs our calling to be church. It is not enough to gather on a Sunday for a ritual service. We need to be the holy lovers of Christ, making peace between heaven and earth as he does.

So in this study we need to consider how we relate to the world around us as holy lovers. How do we relate to each other in such a way that we

continue to encourage each other in holiness and learn together how to bring that holiness into the world?

<sup>9</sup>But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light. <sup>10</sup>Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy. *1 Peter 2:9-10*

As a bride is chosen and called by her groom, in a relationship of mutual love, so each of us – and we all together – are chosen and called by God to be his people. We can choose to respond to this call positively and if we do so we live in relationship with God, and it is a relationship we need to nurture just as a marriage must be nurtured.

We must give the best of ourselves to God. The best of our time and the best of our thought. That can't be restricted to a slot or two on a Sunday. It is a full-time calling and may well involve joining with other Christians on other days of the week for worship, fellowship, service and mission. As well as praying and studying on your own or with family members on a daily basis.

And as a marriage relationship can't be done on our behalf by somebody else, neither can a relationship with God. The clergy are not there to do our holiness, our loving or our relating for us. It is easy to become mentally and spiritually dependent on the clergy to do church for us, but they are merely fellow servants – and servants who are as fallible and needy as all the rest of the church. They will not be standing in for us when we die and come face to face with our Saviour. If at that stage we find that we don't have a great relationship with God because we've done nothing about nurturing it, the clergy won't be there to help. They will not be any use to us when we are asked whether we acted as holy lovers to the rest of the church and the world. However much we each may have supported our clergy in their endeavours, we cannot use their work as an excuse to take no interest in living out our calling ourselves. When we meet Jesus he will want to know what you did, not what your vicar did.

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## The Study Session:

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### Prayer

Begin with informal prayer or use this prayer together:

Father God,  
as we gather together to study your word,  
to listen to you as you speak to our hearts  
and through each other,  
help us to learn more of you  
and of your church  
that we may be emboldened  
to become the church you desire us to be  
at this time and in this place.  
Amen.



### Scripture

*Jeremiah 2: 1-7*

<sup>1</sup> The word of the LORD came to me: <sup>2</sup> "Go and proclaim in the hearing of Jerusalem:

" I remember the devotion of your youth,  
how as a bride you loved me  
and followed me through the desert,  
through a land not sown.

<sup>3</sup> Israel was holy to the LORD,  
the firstfruits of his harvest;  
all who devoured her were held guilty,  
and disaster overtook them,' "  
declares the LORD.

<sup>4</sup> Hear the word of the LORD, O house of Jacob,  
all you clans of the house of Israel.

<sup>5</sup> This is what the LORD says:  
"What fault did your fathers find in me,  
that they strayed so far from me?  
They followed worthless idols  
and became worthless themselves.

<sup>6</sup> They did not ask, 'Where is the LORD,  
who brought us up out of Egypt  
and led us through the barren wilderness,  
through a land of deserts and rifts,  
a land of drought and darkness,  
a land where no one travels and no one lives?'

<sup>7</sup> I brought you into a fertile land  
to eat its fruit and rich produce.  
But you came and defiled my land  
and made my inheritance detestable.

*Revelation 21: 1-4*

<sup>1</sup>Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea. <sup>2</sup>I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. <sup>3</sup>And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Now the dwelling of God is with men, and he will live with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. <sup>4</sup>He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away."



### Input outline

In preparation for this you may find chapter 7 of Transforming Communities useful. You also have the background material above and your own experience and study to draw from. Read the scripture passages together and consider how the image of the bride represents the church in relationship to God.

Key points to highlight:

- the image of the bride is about relationship and commitment.
- marriage is an ongoing relationship, not a one-off event, and it must be worked at.
- in cultivating our relationship with God we need to learn more about him and show him ourselves.
- we can do this through sharing in Bible study
- through prayer of many different kinds

- through worshipping God together in small groups and on Sundays.
- As marriage is the foundation of family and community relationships, so the church as bride takes the love out: We may not keep it to ourselves!
- Look at this extract from the beginning of the Common Worship Marriage service:

*The minister says to the congregation*

Will you, the families and friends of N and N,  
support and uphold them in their marriage  
now and in the years to come?

**All**                      **We will.**

As married couples need support from friends, family – and sometimes from experts on marriage – so Christians need help and support in relating to God. So gathering together, learning from the more experienced, sharing our lives and supporting each other is vital. This can be done in church, but generally also needs smaller sub-groups of people who become loving friends within the church.

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### Personal reflection and activity



This activity uses the marriage vow made by bride to groom in Common Worship as a way to spark consideration of the depth of relationship Jesus wants to have with each of us and with us together as church. Unmarried people within the group should be encouraged to see the activity in this light, and not to assume that there is any implication that marriage is being promoted in preference to singleness as a way of life for Christians (indeed, St. Paul encouraged us to think of singleness as the better way).

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### Group discussion



How does the worshipping life of your church allow people to deepen their relationship with Jesus and live as holy people? On Sundays? On other days?

Since we are human, we can always do better. How might this church community improve the way it lives the calling to be the bride of Christ?

How does your church ensure that members have close support within the church community to help each other live the calling?

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### Sacramental perspective



Taking part in the sacraments is in itself an act of commitment. Baptism, and the promises involved, binds us to Christ as closely as the marriage vows bind husband and wife. We belong to him and he to us in a profound relationship rooted in the love between Godself as Trinity.

The sacrament of the eucharist invites us to reflect on the closeness of this love. We enter into the sacrifice Jesus made for love of us; we share with him and with each other in a family meal and remember the depth of his love and his desire that we love him too. And we look forward: when we pray 'give us this day our daily bread' in the Lord's prayer we are saying words which can also be translated 'give us today the bread of tomorrow'. That is to say, today we want to connect ourselves to that holy meal which 'tomorrow' – whenever tomorrow comes – we will share in the presence of the Risen Lord in heaven. Thus the eucharist looks not only back but also forward (we will think about that more in session four) and invites us to remember that our love commitment is lifelong – and in Jesus' terms that love goes beyond death.



### Plenary discussion

What is your response to the sacramental perspective?

Is everybody happy that they understand this evening's learning?

Are there any further thoughts that you want to share?



### Action points

Has your discussion today prompted anything you might like to do personally or together?



### Closing prayer

**Lord, make us holy  
as you are holy.  
Help us to grow in love with you  
and to share your love with everyone we encounter  
day by day.  
Amen.**

## Session One personal activity sheet

### The Bride of Christ: a holy people

Spend some time thinking about your relationship to God. Revelation 21 suggests that we will take our place as a Church in a relationship of love with Jesus as close as a marriage: we become the bride of Christ, with all the commitment and hard work that such a relationship requires.

Printed below are the words of the marriage vow made by bride to groom in a wedding using the Common Worship order. Look at these words slowly. Does the way you relate to God enable you to keep this vow? Are there things you would have to change in order to better live in this sort of committed relationship?

I, \_\_\_\_\_,  
take you, the Lamb of God,  
to be my husband,  
to have and to hold  
from this day forward;  
for better, for worse,  
for richer, for poorer,  
in sickness and in health,  
to love and to cherish,  
till death us do part;  
according to God's holy law.  
In the presence of God I make this vow.

As God's holy people, our marriage commitment takes us beyond death and into eternal life. We are the bride together, not individually. Think about how you can support your brothers and sisters in Christ as they too try to live out this holy commitment.

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## *Session Two* The Body of Christ: the Church is One

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### Leader's Notes

The Scripture passages chosen for this session are familiar, especially from their regular appearances during the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity. In this session the image of the body of Christ illustrates the unity of the church. But do not limit the vision of unity to the hopes expressed at ecumenical meetings for shared mission or worship or even structures. While Christian unity between Christians of different traditions is an extremely important area of work, the unity for which Christ prayed went much deeper, to the heart of the relationship between every follower of Jesus and his brothers and sisters wherever they may be in time or space.

In the Creed we profess a belief in one holy, catholic and apostolic church. It is easy to take the word 'one' in this sentence to mean that there is no alternative church, that only one church exists. And in one sense that is correct. But the oneness in which we believe tells us more than that. Not just that there is ultimately only one corporate body of believers standing around Jesus our Saviour, but that the nature of that corporate body is to be one people united in worshipping and witnessing to our risen Lord. And it goes deeper.

Archbishop Rowan, in his address on this theme<sup>4</sup>, spoke of the unique nature of Jesus in his close relationship to the Father.

At the beginning of John's Gospel, we read 'No-one has seen God at any time, but the only God who is next to the Father's heart has made him known'. In the best manuscripts of John's Gospel, that is what is said; 'the only God', not 'the only Son' *monogenis theos*; the unique God who stands next to the Father, in the bosom of the Father. So from the very first chapter of John's Gospel, we have before us the image of the only one who is in eternal intimacy with God the Father; the only one who is next to the Father's heart. Making God the Father Known. So the oneness of the church is about how the church is the community of those who are led to the one place at the

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<sup>4</sup> Rowan Williams. *ibid.*

Father's heart where he can be known, where he can be seen. St John's Gospel is indeed about the unity of believers but I think we misunderstand it if we treat that just on a lateral level; unity between believers. It is about the unity of the community as it exists standing in that one place where the only God, the *monogenis theos* of chapter one of John's Gospel, stands. And so I believe that one of the external signs of the unity of the church in a sense more basic than the universal Episcopal order, more basic than the creed, more basic than the instruments of unity of the Anglican Communion, even, more basic than Holy Scripture, is that Christians are called and enabled by the Holy Spirit to say 'Our Father' because they stand in the one Christ and are brought next to the Father's heart, by Christ. 'When you pray say "Our Father"', and when we pray our Lord's prayer, we affirm we stand with the one Christ, the one eternal son, the one word in the Father's bosom.

This kind of unity goes beyond any understanding of fellowship that the world comprehends. The implications of it are immense for the church as an organisation. We can not behave like any other human organisation because the depth of our relationship goes far beyond the depth of relationship that would be considered reasonable in any other setting.

Jesus' prayer for those of us who came after him was that we would have amongst ourselves the unity that he shares with his Father. This is a unity created out of the love of God the Father for God the Son, our co-creators. Our unity is not, then, about structures – whether or not we all serve the same bishops or agree to the same set of instructions about what robes to wear or what kind of wine to use at a communion service. It is not about agreements, documents or canons. All those things will pass, as traditions and canons have come and gone before. Ultimately, our unity as Christ's prayed for people is about love. As the Father and the Son are one in their loving and binding relationship with one another, so Jesus wants us to be one with each other.

As we consider the nature of the church at this time and in this place, we need to ask ourselves whether the church where we are enables us to live as a people in this kind of unity. It is not enough to share together in worship on a Sunday and all agree that we liked what happened. The unity we share needs to go much deeper than agreeing that in this church we all like to do things in a particular way. Our church family needs to be ordered in such a way that we can develop relationships with the people who are part of our immediate

church community that reflect the commitment of love between the Father and the Son.

It simply is not possible on this side of heaven for humans to relate in that way to every member of a Sunday community. We would exhaust ourselves trying to give the time needed to know so many people that well. Only God can love every person with that kind of depth. However, it is possible to live out deep unity with a small group of people. It takes time and commitment to get to know a group of people that well, but within a small group, whether it is a home group or the Mothers' Union or some other church group, relationships can be developed to a high degree.

And while we can not actually relate to every other Christian in depth, we need always to bear in mind the specialness of relationship that we have with every other person who is called to pray 'Our Father' with us. The nature of our oneness as church gives us a connection with Christians across the globe, no matter what tradition they belong to, and across time. This is one reason why Christians are – or should be – quick to respond to emergencies in other parts of the world. Our connectedness to our brothers and sisters in Christ will make us share in their pain when times are hard, and it is part of our imperative to take action to support them.

As so many preachers at ecumenical services have said, 'unity does not mean uniformity'. St. Paul gives us the image of the body which is used to illustrate this session. It is an image which has inspired ideas of human co-operation way beyond the Christian context. A group of people working together are a 'corporation'. This is not a corruption of the word co-operation, but a word meaning body, from the Latin 'corpus'. A body is a unity. There is only one BBC, however many people work there, however many programmes, podcasts, books and websites they produce. There is only one Church, the Body of Christ. A body is made up of 'members' – the collective phrase for body parts. Though we are familiar with the word member in its proper usage, for body parts, on a daily basis we use it more often to refer to people as a part of a corporate grouping of some sort, whether they are 'members' of a football team, a political party or indeed a church. The members are the different limbs of the corporation, and as such are likely to have different functions.

St. Paul writes at length in his epistles of the different gifts and talents to be found amongst the members of the body. Universally, as we consider the one body of Christ across time and space, we might see different members of the

body in terms of particular church institutions – the Orthodox, Catholic, Lutheran or Baptist expressions of church, for example. Locally we apply the image to seeing ourselves as having our own particular role within a church community. Some of us are evangelists, some prophets, some preachers, some healers. Equally, you might say that some of us are church secretaries; some are organists, some bellringers, some toddler group helpers. While it is important to value such roles, we need to balance this with remembering that the roles are functions of the body as a whole. Whether we are considering the Anglican communion as a 'member' of the Body of Christ, or Mrs. Jones from no. 7, each is both a gifted member and part of the one body, unified with it, one with the church, with Jesus and with our Father. And so each member must take its place within the body as a whole, and make an effort to relate in full love to the body. At the level of the Anglican Communion that may be about ecumenical relationships between Anglicans or with other ecclesial communities. At the local level that will also be about how each of us is valued and enabled to express full membership of the body within a small group and within the Sunday worship.

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## The Study Session:

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### Prayer

Begin with informal prayer or use this prayer together:

Father God,  
as we gather together to study your word,  
to listen to you as you speak to our hearts  
and through each other,  
help us to learn more of you  
and of your church  
that we may be emboldened  
to become the church you desire us to be  
at this time and in this place.  
Amen.



### Scripture

John 17: 20-23

<sup>20</sup>"My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, <sup>21</sup>that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me. <sup>22</sup>I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one: <sup>23</sup>I in them and you in me. May they be brought to complete unity to let the world know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.

1 Corinthians 12: 14-30

<sup>14</sup>Now the body is not made up of one part but of many. <sup>15</sup>If the foot should say, "Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body," it would not for that reason cease to be part of the body. <sup>16</sup>And if the ear should say, "Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body," it would not for that reason cease to be part of the body. <sup>17</sup>If the whole body were an eye, where would the sense of hearing be? If the whole body were an ear, where would the sense of smell be? <sup>18</sup>But in fact God has arranged the parts in the body, every one of

them, just as he wanted them to be. <sup>19</sup>If they were all one part, where would the body be? <sup>20</sup>As it is, there are many parts, but one body.

<sup>21</sup>The eye cannot say to the hand, "I don't need you!" And the head cannot say to the feet, "I don't need you!" <sup>22</sup>On the contrary, those parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, <sup>23</sup>and the parts that we think are less honourable we treat with special honour. And the parts that are unpresentable are treated with special modesty, <sup>24</sup>while our presentable parts need no special treatment. But God has combined the members of the body and has given greater honour to the parts that lacked it, <sup>25</sup>so that there should be no division in the body, but that its parts should have equal concern for each other. <sup>26</sup>If one part suffers, every part suffers with it; if one part is honoured, every part rejoices with it.

<sup>27</sup>Now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it. <sup>28</sup>And in the church God has appointed first of all apostles, second prophets, third teachers, then workers of miracles, also those having gifts of healing, those able to help others, those with gifts of administration, and those speaking in different kinds of tongues. <sup>29</sup>Are all apostles? Are all prophets? Are all teachers? Do all work miracles? <sup>30</sup>Do all have gifts of healing? Do all speak in tongues? Do all interpret? <sup>31</sup>But eagerly desire the greater gifts.



### Input outline

In preparation for this you may find chapter 8 of Transforming Communities useful. You also have the background material above and your own experience and study to draw from. Read the scripture passages together and consider how the image of the body represents the church in relationship to herself.

Key points to highlight:

- the body of Christ is one across time and space, uniting us with Christ and with the Father.
- the members of the body have different and valuable roles but they can never stand alone – these members only function properly and have value as part of the united body
- since our oneness flows from the love shared between the Father and the Son, we understand it as an expression of love not only between Christ and his people, but also between the people themselves.
- we therefore need to prioritise working on our relationships within the local church and within small groups take the time to develop full deep relationships of support and fellowship

- and we hold alongside that a priority to remember our unity with other Christians, wherever they are, and of whatever tradition. When those Christians need our support, whether it be to join in organising a carnival float or to send out aid to a church affected by famine, we respond in love out of our sense of unity with them in the Body of Christ.



### Personal reflection and activity

The activity sheet shows an outline of a human body. Invite participants to consider the roles they think are important within a local church, and the gifts which they would like to see within the community, and to label the body with the roles and gifts. Which of the gifts do they feel they have? Which, if any, roles have they held or do they hold now? Do the gifts and the roles match?

After a few minutes, invite the participants to talk about their reflections with a partner.



### Group discussion

The body of Christ is made up of people who are called by Christ to be there. The members bring their own gifts and talents, but unlike a secular organisation they are not recruited to fill particular roles. How can a local church welcome each member and value them as essential parts of the one body?

What can we do as a local church to ensure that we enable each member to feel fully part of the body, expressing oneness with the rest of the body?

What can we do as a local church to ensure that each member is able to use their gifts and value the gifts of others?



### Sacramental perspective

As a church our oneness is best expressed in the baptism we all share and which is recognised almost universally. The pouring of water unites us with Jesus, baptised by St. John. Jesus later broke bread, telling the disciples 'this is my body, broken for you'. The theological implications of considering ourselves as Christ's body and yet holding in our hands bread which Jesus asked us also to see as his body are profound.

Archbishop Rowan in his address to the leaders of the Global South spoke of unity between Christians in relationship to the sacraments.

So our unity is, at its deepest, the unity which the spirit gives in enabling us to call God 'Father'; it is the unity given in baptism, in which the spirit is given to us so that we may pray like this; so that we may pray the prayer of Jesus. It is the unity expressed in Holy Communion, not as the result of what we share as human beings, but because in Holy Communion we are drawn into praying the prayer of Jesus, standing where he stands, by the Holy Spirit, alive with his life.

During the communion service the president breaks the consecrated bread and says:

We break this bread  
to share in the body of Christ.

We reply:  
Though we are many, we are one body,  
because we all share in one bread.

Our unity as the Body of Christ flows from Christ's loving gift to us of his own life. He entered into our mortality and endured suffering and death, and then showed us the way to eternal life in which we are united in him, a body beyond death.



### Plenary discussion

What is your response to the sacramental perspective?

Is everybody happy that they understand this evening's learning?

Are there any further thoughts that you want to share?



### Action points

Has your discussion today prompted anything you might like to do personally or together?



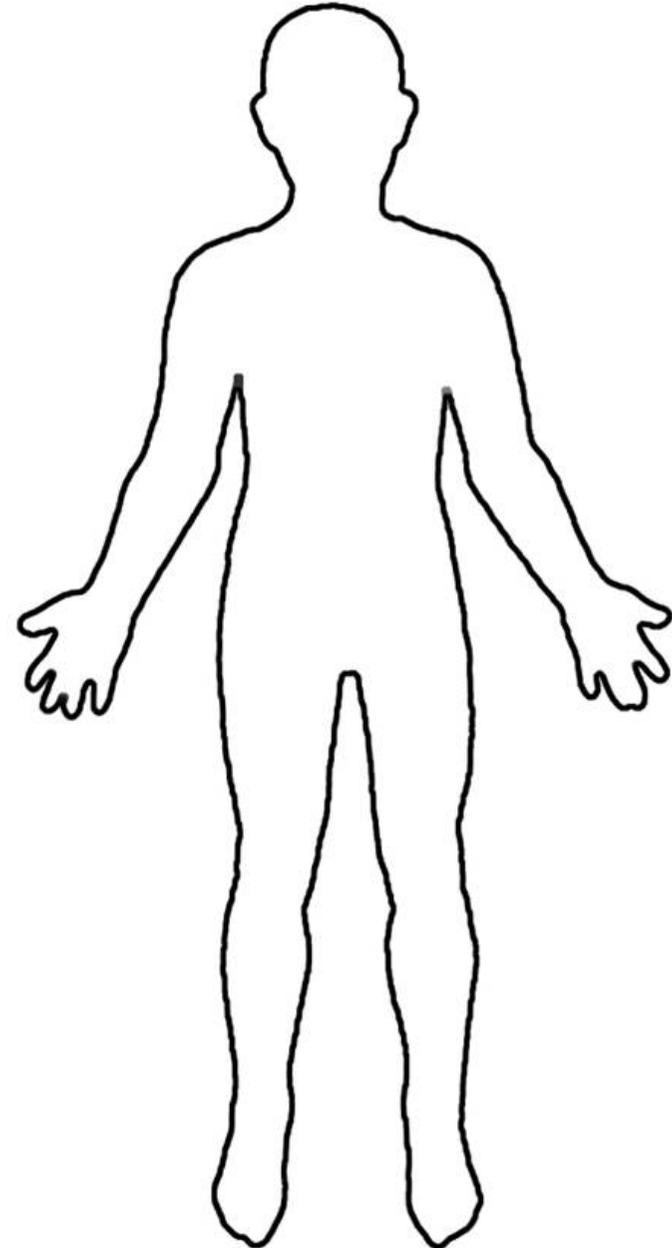
### Closing prayer

**Lord, your Son prayed that we might be one as you and he are one.  
Make us one with each other and with your wider church.  
Help us to grow in love with you and to share your love with everyone we encounter day by day.  
Amen.**

## Session Two personal activity sheet

### The Body of Christ: the Church is One

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## ***Session Three: Light of the World: apostolic witness***

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### **Leader's Notes**

In the previous two sessions we have looked at how the nature of the church, at its most simple, is to love. Firstly it responds in love to God, becoming a holy, worshipping church relating intimately to God as the Bride of Christ. Secondly the Church as the group of people who love God love one another. This relationship is equally intimate, as one body made up of members bringing different gifts and taking on different roles. And so the church is one, a unity of people whose shared commitment is to love God and to love one another.

In this session we consider the nature of the church in relationship with the whole of God's world. God made all things and loves all that he has made. When Jesus summarised the commandments he asked us to love God, to love ourselves (and as an instruction to a community that includes the love of the Body of Christ) and to love our neighbour. This love for neighbour must be as strong as the love for self. Thus we are commanded to look to the people who share our world and to love them as actively and caringly as we love each other within the church.

Jesus became human to show us how to love in the fullest possible way. His love was not reserved for the Jews, though his own people were his first priority. Rather, he demonstrated love for all people, and then he sent out his disciples to share the message of love too. When he prayed for his followers on the night before he died, Jesus said: 'As you sent me into the world, I have sent them into the world.' *John 17:18*.

We are a people who are not only called to God, but sent by him. In sending us, God does not send us away from his presence, for he promises to be with us always. In Psalm 72 the psalmist writes:

<sup>23</sup> Yet I am always with you;  
you hold me by my right hand.

<sup>24</sup> You guide me with your counsel,  
and afterward you will take me into glory.

As disciples of Christ we share an imperative to tell the whole world about God's love, loving the world ourselves as best we can according to the example Christ set for us. He sends us into the world as his agents of love. In this we become witnesses to all that Christ is. In other words we are apostles, and we express the apostolic nature of the church. An apostle, quite simply, is a witness – one who sees Christ and tells others about him. Sometimes this

definition is limited by certain theologians to those who witness the risen Christ, which allows them to name St. Mary Magdalene as the first apostle. Others prefer to include all who witnessed Christ throughout his incarnate life – which would make the shepherds the first apostles. Wherever you see the starting point of this apostolic calling, there is no doubt that the calling remains. Jesus sends us as witnesses of his love and the Father's love for all of the world.

Then the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain where Jesus had told them to go. When they saw him, they worshiped him; but some doubted. Then Jesus came to them and said, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age." *Matthew 28: 16-20*

Some churches use the name 'Mass' for the eucharistic celebration. This name comes from the last act of the service, the dismissal. Both words come from the Latin *missa* which means sending. By giving the service a name which prioritises our sending we are given an important priority. In attending Sunday worship we engage in an activity which strengthens and resources our relationship with God and with the wider church. But this is not a completion of the task. We can't draw a sigh of relief at the end of the service and think that our Christian duty is done for the week. Rather, in going to church we equip ourselves for the main thing, which is the sending out. The task begins when we leave the church, not when we arrive.

Small groups – transforming communities – within the church are very important in resourcing us for this sending. Ideally it is the small group which is the sending heart of the church rather than the Sunday community. In a small group each member can share stories, experiences, concerns about the people they are sent to and the things they are trying to achieve. The group members can support each other in the task and share the burden. Ideally, the group works together, sharing in apostolic activity together. Jesus always sent his apostles out in pairs, and he encouraged them to be together as a larger group to support each other and to pray for each other. In the security of the small group, members can enable and resource each other in a way that cannot be done in Sunday worship.

The image used in this session is 'Light'. Usually we think of the image of light as being connected to Christ, the Light of the World. Simeon proclaimed Jesus as a light long before Jesus was able to speak for himself:

"Sovereign Lord, as you have promised,  
you now dismiss your servant in peace.  
For my eyes have seen your salvation,  
which you have prepared in the sight of all people,

a light for revelation to the Gentiles  
and for glory to your people Israel." *Luke 2: 29-32*

In the book of Revelation Jesus is also referred to as the light of the world, an image that many churchgoers find difficult to separate from the painting by William Holman Hunt. As the nature of the church is to be like Christ, imitating his love and living out his commands, so we find that we must also take up the lamp and become lights for the world. This is what it means to be an apostolic church. In the first of the scripture passages set for this session, Jesus tells us that we (the Body of Christ) are the light of the world. So now the task is not only Christ's, it is ours. We are the light of the world. We should be as visible to the world as a city built on a hill, Jesus tells us. And now the challenge sets in. This sending to shine as lights in the world asks us to make ourselves very visible – and thus also very vulnerable.

It is tempting as Christians to live out our faith in such a way that we reserve our talk of Christ and our living according to his commands for those who share our point of view. We can live full lives as holy people, very much part of the unity of the church, and looking for the Catholic, universal future of a people who are to come into Christ's presence at the end of days. But if we do not also live out the calling to be apostolic – to shine out the news of Christ's love to the world, then we are missing a vital aspect of the life and nature of the church. The fourfold nature of the church is like a four legged table. Lose any one of them and the table is no longer stable. Give undue emphasis to one aspect of the church over another and the table becomes wobbly.

So often when churches neglect one part of the nature of the church, it is this apostolic calling. We hope that the Bishops or other clergy will do it for us. We feel shy or embarrassed. We don't want to risk losing friends or becoming unpopular within the community in which we live by saying things which makes others feel uncomfortable. And so we keep quiet about our faith. We reason that this is just for us, it's about what we do on a Sunday, and we have no reason to impose it on anyone else. And so we hide the light. Jesus pointed out that no-one who is trying to light up a room would put a light under a bowl. Of course they wouldn't. That would not only mean a dark room, but it would put the light out. A light placed under a bowl will be starved of oxygen and will quickly fade. But we do this all the time. We are the light of the world, people who because of Christ's love for us are filled with his light – we are called to shine this light out so that others will come to the light. But we allow our

embarrassment or our introversion or sometimes our laziness to become an excuse.

We live in a liberal and tolerant society, in which multi-culturalism is celebrated and we are encouraged to allow that all people have the right to their own beliefs. What is not tolerated, indeed, is imposing our beliefs on other people. You're ok, I'm ok, we say; and you don't have to be ok my way – don't expect me to be ok your way. Faith is private and sharing it is almost taboo. We see regular items in the news about employees in major companies who lose their jobs because they wear a cross or have offered to pray for people. The temptation – which the legal process risks making an obligation – is to avoid ever showing faith in any way. And so we place the light firmly under the bowl and add some extra weight on top to ensure we don't risk the light dazzling anyone or getting in their eyes.

And so we need to learn that the call to be sent, to be apostolic lights in the world, is something that is so essential that we will find ways to shine despite the prevailing culture in which we live. It is not just that we are lights but that we want, with all of our hearts, to shine. The room is dark and we want to light it up – that is why we do not hide the light or allow it to go out. As a church, we need to cultivate our desire to shine, to make it the deepest desire of our hearts – that as we respond in love to God we share his love not only with fellow lovers but also with those who God would have love him – that is, everyone else!

As we consider this challenge, Steven Croft reminds us that there is more than one aspect to our calling to share God's love in the world.<sup>5</sup> Croft calls this 'The Two Ways':

Firstly, we are called to love by looking for social justice and peace for all of the world, a calling which would include care for the environment within stewardship for the whole of creation (the first task given to humankind). This task, which might seem overwhelming when expressed in this way, works out in small groups and local churches both through the hands on work we can do ourselves in the community – collecting for a Food Bank, perhaps, or running a toddler group or a soup kitchen, or establishing a community shop. Our concern for the wider world is important too, and is usually worked out as we find ways to support agencies which are able to work on our behalf, perhaps by fundraising, publicising campaigns or even encouraging individual church members to consider vocations to working for social justice or even in politics.

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<sup>5</sup> Croft, Steven, *Transforming communities: Re-imagining the Church for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*. London: DLT, 2002, p 138.

Secondly, we are called to proclaim the word of God. It is our task to name the God who motivates our lives and shows us how to love. If we are active in the first area, this will go a long way towards helping us in our proclamation. The principal attributed to St. Francis of Assisi applies: "Preach the gospel at all times; when necessary, use words."

Sometimes we do need to use words though. This is perhaps the hardest part of the calling for some Christians. We are not all called to be evangelists, and we are not all articulate. Within the body of Christ we are therefore called to help each other shine – the light is a shared light, not one that individuals are expected to keep kindled by themselves. So faced with difficult questions, one church member might refer to another for help. Knowing each other within a small group helps in knowing which of your friends in the church community you can call on to help in this way.

In shying away from this part of the calling, some Christians are confusing the apostolic calling, which is an essential aspect of the nature of the church and therefore something to which we are all called, together and individually, with the evangelical gift. We must support and call evangelists within the membership. Every church needs evangelists – people equipped to proclaim the gospel. But they are not to be left to do the whole of the apostolic witnessing of the church by themselves. We all shine, and because we all shine together the light is so much brighter. Each of us is sent by Christ to witness to him, to shine in the world, using the gifts which he has given us. If our witness is a witness of love through an ability to bake delicious cakes and supply one every week to a homeless shelter, then that is wonderful. One day, the good baker might be asked what motivates him/her to make those cakes. And the baker may well call in the preacher to help with the long answer, but it is important that every one of us is equipped to give an immediate answer. It is not a difficult answer, but it is one which needs courage to speak out because our culture does not approve of religious talk in public. But the simple answer is this – I love you, and God loves you. And I want to show you God's love in the best way I can – in this case, by making cakes.

Can our churches and small groups support each other and learn together in such a way that every church member has the four table legs equally balanced – including the apostolic leg? Can every small group ensure that it has a project which shines the light in the world in one or both of the Two Ways? Of course, we can. Archbishop Rowan's words<sup>6</sup> are encouraging:

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<sup>6</sup> Rowan Williams. *ibid.*

And it is as we perform this apostolic task that of course we are drawn back again and again and again to where we started. The one Christ, the one source of divine life and power. Because you see the apostles in the New Testament are not heroes; they are saints and martyrs but they are not heroes. They struggle, they fail, they repent, they return. Peter himself betrays his lord and is called afresh. Paul speaks of how he's not even worthy to be called an apostle because he persecuted the church of God. And Paul in 2 Corinthians with great irony spells out just what it is to be an apostle; a series of stressful heart-breaking, body-breaking experiences and humiliation, failure and struggle, yet sustained always by the one Lord.

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## The Study Session:

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### Prayer

Begin with informal prayer or use this prayer together:

Father God,  
as we gather together to study your word,  
to listen to you as you speak to our hearts  
and through each other,  
help us to learn more of you  
and of your church  
that we may be emboldened  
to become the church you desire us to be  
at this time and in this place.  
Amen.



### Scripture

*Matthew 5: 14-16*

<sup>14</sup>"You are the light of the world. A city on a hill cannot be hidden. <sup>15</sup>Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house. <sup>16</sup>In the same way, let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven.

*John 9: 1-7*

<sup>1</sup>As he went along, he saw a man blind from birth. <sup>2</sup>His disciples asked him, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?"

<sup>3</sup>"Neither this man nor his parents sinned," said Jesus, "but this happened so that the work of God might be displayed in his life. <sup>4</sup>As long as it is day, we must do the work of him who sent me. Night is coming, when no one can work. <sup>5</sup>While I am in the world, I am the light of the world."

<sup>6</sup>Having said this, he spat on the ground, made some mud with the saliva, and put it on the man's eyes. <sup>7</sup>"Go," he told him, "wash in the Pool of Siloam" (this word means Sent). So the man went and washed, and came home seeing.

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### Input outline

In preparation for this you may find chapter 9 of Transforming Communities useful. You also have the background material above and your own experience and study to draw from. Read the scripture passages together and consider how the image of the light of the world represents the church in relationship to God's world.

In thinking about how the Two Ways might be worked out in small groups or the wider church community, you may find it helpful to use the Five Marks of Mission set out by the 1988 Lambeth Conference as a resource.

#### The Five marks of Mission

- to proclaim the good news of the Kingdom
- to teach, baptise and nurture new believers
- to respond to human need by loving service
- to seek to transform unjust structures of society
- to strive to safeguard the integrity of creation and sustain and renew the earth



### Personal reflection and activity

Invite people to use the activity sheet for session three to think about what things they allow to become bowls which they put over their lights, writing the names of the issues on the bowls. Perhaps it is to do with personality, or cultural or community factors, education or their understanding of evangelism. The bowls might be shared problems rather than personal ones.

Once each person has had a few minutes to think about their sheets, encourage them to find a partner to share their findings with. Then invite feedback to the plenary, noting the issues on a flipchart or PowerPoint slide.

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## Group discussion

Look at the issues that have been listed. How can your church and the small groups in them work together to remove these 'bowls'?

What resources will you need?

Look at the five marks of mission. How well is your church showing each of these marks? What would be your priority for further development at this time?

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## Sacramental perspective

Many churches take up the option offered by *Common Worship* to present newly baptised church members with a candle. As we do so, we say the words:

You have received the light of Christ;  
walk in this light all the days of your life.

**Shine as a light in the world  
to the glory of God the Father.**

All who are baptised are received into Christ's love and are made part of his loving family. With baptism comes a calling to share Christ's love with all of the world – or at least all the parts of the world to which he send us. We are called to shine.

We are resourced for this in the Eucharist, in sharing bread and wine which represent the loving sacrifice made by our Lord for all people across all time. We are reminded in this sharing of the best news the world has ever been told, and we have a calling to tell that news in action and in words. At the end of the Mass we are told to go in words that may vary according to the season or the preference of the minister – often something like 'go in peace to love and serve the Lord'. To which we joyfully affirm 'Thanks be to God' or 'In the name of Christ'. If this ending is meaningful then we take seriously the implication that loving and serving the Lord after we have left the church building means actively loving and serving God's world.

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## Plenary discussion

What is your response to the sacramental perspective?

Is everybody happy that they understand this evening's learning?

Are there any further thoughts that you want to share?

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## Action points

Has your discussion today prompted anything you might like to do personally or together?

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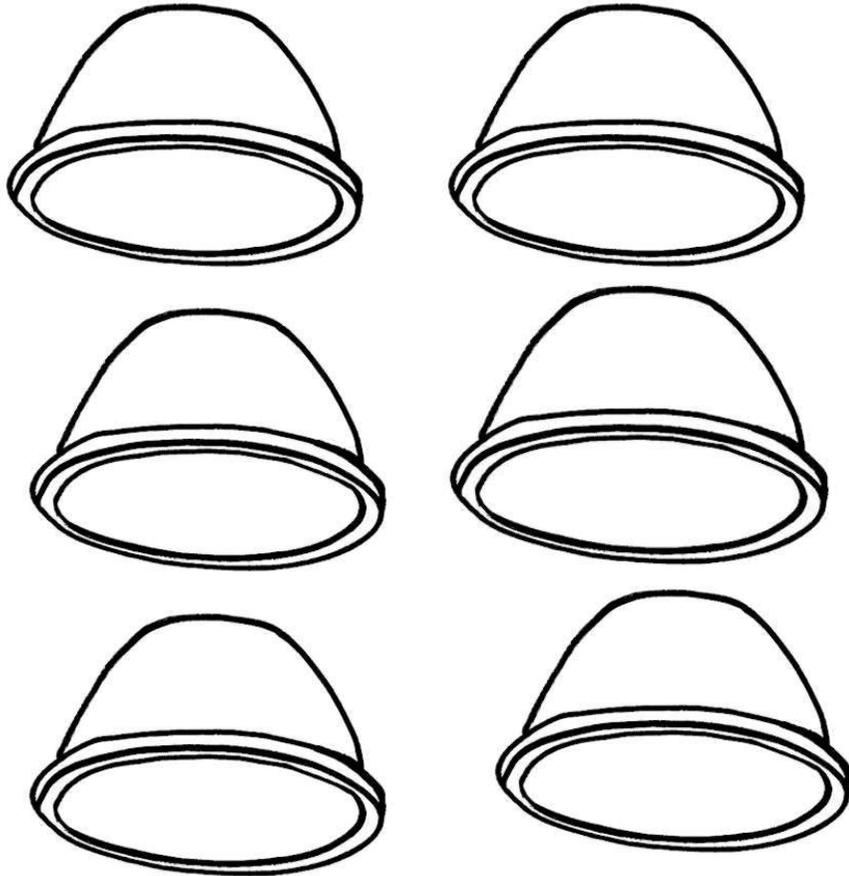


## Closing prayer

**Lord Jesus, you are the Light of the world  
and you called on us to shine our lights too.  
Help us to shine out our love for you  
that all the world may see your love through us.  
Help us to grow in love with you  
and to share your love with everyone we encounter  
day by day.  
Amen.**

*Session Three personal activity sheet.*

The Light of the World: apostolic witness



Session Four: Pilgrim People: the catholic church looks ahead

**Leader's Notes**

In the three preceding sessions we have considered the church in relationship to God, a holy church symbolised as the bride; the church in relationship to herself, a church in unity symbolised as the body; and the church in relationship to God's world, an apostolic church symbolised as the light of the world. In this final session we consider the church in relation to time, a catholic church which will be symbolised as a pilgrim people.

The four marks of the church, the marks which indicate the nature of the church are like the four legs of a table; each must be even if the table is not to be wobbly. However, some of the language and concepts surrounding this session's mark have become mired in unhelpful meaning or historical associations which can lead us to neglect it. But we need to learn to be a catholic church as much as any other kind of church if we are to be a church with a future. So let us begin with some definitions.

As a student I had a friend from a New Church background who worshipped in the lively Anglican church in the town. He explained one day that he had a problem with the phrase at the end of the Creed that we have been working with, but overcame it by saying 'one holy apostolic church'. Let us be clear. Using the word catholic when reciting the Creed no more makes every one a Roman Catholic than referring to St. John as 'the Baptist' means he has membership of the Baptist Union. The word Catholic applies to the Roman Catholic Church which uses the word in its name, and it applies to every ecclesial community which does not use the word as a name.

The word catholic is often defined as meaning 'universal'. This definition is helpful, but not quite adequate. The universal nature of the church across time and space is a powerful image, but perhaps a confusing one. A better definition of catholic is 'whole'. The church is a community of followers of God who are made complete in Him. God's business in loving us is in healing and fulfilling all that we can be in relationship to him and others. Each of us as individuals and the church as a body is made whole by Christ as he loves us and leads us into a fully loving relationship with the Father.

If we can understand this we can debunk a great myth – one which was behind the misunderstanding my student friend had. To be a catholic church does not mean that it is a church which is the same wherever it is found. By defining the word merely as universal we have created the possibility of there being one way of doing things. We say ‘this is what the church is like’ and so we expect all churches to say the same prayers, use the same robes, follow the same rituals, and we hold this up as the ideal way of being church. Look more closely at the Roman Catholic Church, the one which we most often think is modelling this kind of universal nature across the globe, and we will soon see that such a model cannot work. For while there are strong threads which bind the church together and make it recognisable, each church building has its own decorations, its own colour scheme; each congregation has its own favourite hymns or songs to sing; each liturgy is in the language of the nation where it is found; each church is recognisably Roman Catholic but also distinct and individual. So not, in fact, universal. It is worth quoting at length from Archbishop Rowan’s address<sup>7</sup>:

In other words, a catholic church is not a church that seeks a uniform global culture. The unity of the church is not cultural; it is in Christ – one Lord, one faith, one baptism – and any number of languages and costumes. It’s been said recently by one theologian that the catholicity of the church is really a kind of great protest against globalisation; the really catholic is the opposite of the globalised, because the catholic is about wholeness, about the wholeness of the person, the wholeness of local culture and language, therefore it’s not simply opening the same fast-food shop in every village on the globe, and it’s not like the global economy, in which people are drawn into somebody’s story and somebody’s interests which in fact makes others poor and excluded. The catholic is the opposite of the globalised because the catholic is about everyone’s welfare, everyone’s growth and justice. And particularly in our globalised world this witness to what I would call the truly catholic is perhaps more important than ever. The affirmation, the rights and liberties of local persons, but ‘rights and liberties’ is a weak and perhaps misleading phrase; the language of rights has not stood us in good stead in the church. Let’s say rather the Christ-touched dignity of every person and every culture. That is what the catholic church honours in its fullness and that is why the catholic church protests about a globalised system that

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<sup>7</sup> Rowan Williams, *ibid.*

works in the interests of a minority, whether in the church or in the world.

The catholic church is all those lovers of God made whole in Him. This is a vision as well as a reality; anyone will be able to affirm that the church at this time and in this place is not yet whole – and so perhaps not yet catholic. Is that why we have erred towards the more easily achieved universalist understanding of the word? We may well believe that in the perfection of a time yet to come the church will achieve a wholeness of self, a fullness of being which can truly be described as catholic, but perhaps we can not claim to be there yet.

So why do we say that this is what we believe the nature of the church is? For the same reason that we claim the church is one, holy and apostolic. Critics of the church can easily show that we are not what we claim to be because we are all human, all sinful and all very capable of failure. We do not manage at all times to be holy, to live in unity, to proclaim the word of God. And we are not yet whole, either individually or as a body. But we strive to become such a church. Indeed that is the purpose of our existence as a church – to become one, holy, catholic and apostolic – indeed, to be like Christ. As we grow together and work together towards these goals we make progress together, believing that one day we will be that perfect church. In the meantime, we call ourselves one, holy, catholic and apostolic as the sign of all that we are striving to be. At the beginning of a GCSE course a student might only be capable of getting an E grade if entered that day. But the teacher sees the potential in the student and what the student is likely to achieve if she does the exam at the correct time after two years of study, and so the student may well be referred to as an A\* student even though she would not get an A\* today. In this sense we too are A\* students – we are one holy catholic and apostolic church because this is our destination.

The image of God’s people as a pilgrim people is deeply rooted in the story of the faith. The story of the Exodus, told again on a frequent basis in the course of the Christian year as well as the Jewish one, reminds us that we are a people on the move, dependent on God for direction, sustenance and protection. We are a travelling people and we are not yet at the end of our journey. The church we see today is not the final outcome of Christ’s work on earth. We are part of something bigger, of a movement towards achieving the final fulfilment of Christ’s mission. As the Hebrews in the desert relied on the pillar of cloud and fire to lead them, so we too are dependent on God’s leadership.

Today that leadership comes through the involvement in our lives of the Holy Spirit.

The modern church sometimes behaves as though it knows where it is going and how it is going to get there without needing any help from God. We may have two thousand years of experience to inform us, so that when faced with a hill to climb we can assess it and consider the experience of our forefathers before choosing the appropriate equipment for hill climbing and finding the right page on the map book. But that does not mean we know which hill God wants us to climb today! Or whether this particular hill has new problems surrounding it which our forefathers did not have to deal with. We will not make progress, then, without the guidance and leadership of the Holy Spirit. As churches we should pray for the presence of the Holy Spirit whenever we gather for worship and whenever we are sent out from worship to do God's work in the world. In our small group meetings we can pray specifically, sharing our need with the Holy Spirit and listening to each other as we seek to understand together just what the Holy Spirit's guidance really is.

The people of Israel did not know from day to day where the pillar of fire and cloud would lead them, but they knew the eventual destination – the Promised Land, Canaan. We too travel each day not knowing what the route is by which we are to travel, but able as God's children to be sure of the destination. In session one we looked at a passage from Revelation 21 in which St. John the Divine wrote of seeing a new heaven and a new earth, in which the church came down to the side of Christ arrayed like a bride ready to be fully committed and connected to her Lord. This is our destiny.

In scripture we are often reminded to prepare ourselves for this coming time, when Jesus will return and all things will be made new and whole in Him. In Jesus' parables those who are waiting for the day of return are expected to be vigilant and ready, but they are also expected to get on with their work, whether it is trading, running a palace household or ensuring that there is oil in the lamps in case Jesus comes at night-time. They are aware of the future but also of the present. Steven Croft calls this living in the 'now and not yet'.<sup>8</sup>

The Church therefore lives in the time of 'now and not yet'. The kingdom has been established but not yet fulfilled. For individual Christians, the journey ends with death and resurrection to eternal life. For the Church as a whole,

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<sup>8</sup> Steven Croft. *ibid.*

however, the task of 'keeping watch' continues until the Lord returns. The fulfilment of the kingdom embraces not only the community of the Church but the whole of creation.

Living in the now and not yet for us at this time and in this place means that we are not static but people on the move, people travelling towards Jesus even as Jesus comes towards us. We do not wait passively, keeping the gifts he has given us buried in the ground to return to him intact when he arrives. Rather we travel together hopefully, using the gifts and growing them and ourselves so that we are closer to becoming the people who Jesus intends us to be at the end of days. We are a pilgrim people.

Being pilgrims has a number of implications. It suggests that at any time we are a people who are passing through on our way to a holy destination. We may be in a place, we may spend some length of time there, but we do not belong to it. However much we enjoy the places we pass through on the journey – and we may enjoy them very much indeed – our heart's desire is always to be in another place.

Pilgrims rarely travel alone. Jesus always sent his disciples out in pairs and the early church followed this pattern, sending out apostles in pairs (we see Peter and John travelling together to visit new groups of followers of the Way) or in bigger groups (Paul and Barnabus took various different young leaders with them on their missionary journeys). Travelling alone is not Christ's way. The Christian pilgrimage means travelling with a group of companions, fellow followers of the Way who learn to love God and live in his ways together. As we journey we will sometimes be called to move at a different pace from one set of companions. If this happens, perhaps because we are moving home, or taking up studying, or we find that our pattern of life has changed because of a new job, the birth of a child, retirement or illness, we should seek new companions to travel with. Ideally there will be a small group of close companions, if possible in a transforming community. Whatever the case, we should not travel alone. If a church has reason to believe that one of the pilgrims in membership is travelling alone, then the community must take responsibility for finding companions in the journey: housebound church members should have visitors, for example.

The Synoptic gospels show us a picture of Christ on a pilgrimage which brought him to the holy city of Jerusalem. He travelled at all times with companions – his first action after baptism was to call people to travel with him ‘Follow me’. As they travelled they supported one another and shared their lives. They entertained each other and strengthened each other. They challenged each other and together they changed – both as individuals and as a group. Like that first group of disciples we too are called by Jesus to follow him. Jesus for the disciples took the place of the pillar of fire and cloud. For us the Holy Spirit supplies the guidance that we need to travel safely, and the courage that we need to face the adversity and suffering that inevitably comes from travelling in the footsteps of Jesus.

When we look at the apostles in the gospels and Acts we see how they change. Peter especially made himself vulnerable when he shared his story with the early church, which leaves us with a good picture of an ordinary man full of doubts and fears who nevertheless followed Jesus even when it meant changing – sometimes changing his attitudes to others (allowing Gentiles to join the Way) and sometimes his self understanding (most notably as he wept after denying Jesus). We too are called to change as we grow closer to being made whole.

A common accusation made against Christians is that we do not like change. Churchgoers like to keep things as they are, to treasure the old things, to do things the way we always have, because it works after all. Looking at the Christian church immediately shows that this is not true. Nevertheless there are those amongst us who find change painful or difficult, something they will only do if there is really no alternative. Often we fear change because we fear loss. Change from pews to chairs and you have lost beautiful pews and all the history that came with them. Change from traditional styles of service to modern and you have a sense of loss of connection with people who have gone before, or a loss of the poetry of those particular words which are familiar and friendly because you have known them and spoken them weekly all your life. And then there is the fear of throwing out the baby with the bathwater- change too much and we might lose the loving relationship that is at the heart of it all.

This last fear suggests a lack of trust in the Holy Spirit, who will protect the church, God’s love, and keep her safe throughout times of change. Holding on to one kind of liturgy or furniture suggests that we

somehow believe that we have arrived at the final answer, that using these words rather than any others indicates that we have reached the place where Jesus wants us to be. But until he comes this can never be the case. We are on a journey and that means that the landscape around us will change.

When we make a journey we leave places behind, but this does not imply that the places we have left are lost to us. Their value remains. The lessons we learned in those places remain to make us better travellers, better able to appreciate the new vistas opening up before us. So we do not lose in changing, rather we add the new things to our existing experience. We grow and we come closer to being made whole. This is true for us in our individual journeys as Christians travelling with companions towards our place at the table at the wedding banquet in heaven. It is also true for us corporately as we travel together, full of hope, towards the place where we will be united with our first love and made complete in him.

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## The Study Session:

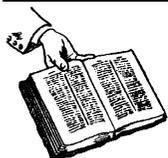
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### Prayer

Begin with informal prayer or use this prayer together:

Father God,  
as we gather together to study your word,  
to listen to you as you speak to our hearts  
and through each other,  
help us to learn more of you  
and of your church  
that we may be emboldened  
to become the church you desire us to be  
at this time and in this place.  
Amen.



### Scripture

Acts 1: 1-11

<sup>1</sup>In my former book, Theophilus, I wrote about all that Jesus began to do and to teach <sup>2</sup>until the day he was taken up to heaven, after giving instructions through the Holy Spirit to the apostles he had chosen. <sup>3</sup>After his suffering, he showed himself to these men and gave many convincing proofs that he was alive. He appeared to them over a period of forty days and spoke about the kingdom of God. <sup>4</sup>On one occasion, while he was eating with them, he gave them this command: "Do not leave Jerusalem, but wait for the gift my Father promised, which you have heard me speak about. <sup>5</sup>For John baptized with water, but in a few days you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit."

<sup>6</sup>So when they met together, they asked him, "Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?"

<sup>7</sup>He said to them: "It is not for you to know the times or dates the Father has set by his own authority. <sup>8</sup>But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."

<sup>9</sup>After he said this, he was taken up before their very eyes, and a cloud hid him from their sight.

<sup>10</sup>They were looking intently up into the sky as he was going, when suddenly two men dressed in white stood beside them. <sup>11</sup>"Men of Galilee," they said, "why do you stand here looking into the sky? This same Jesus, who has been taken from you into heaven, will come back in the same way you have seen him go into heaven."

1 Corinthians 13: 8-13

<sup>8</sup>Love never fails. But where there are prophecies, they will cease; where there are tongues, they will be stilled; where there is knowledge, it will pass away. <sup>9</sup>For we know in part and we prophesy in part, <sup>10</sup>but when perfection comes, the imperfect disappears. <sup>11</sup>When I was a child, I talked like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I put childish ways behind me. <sup>12</sup>Now we see but a poor reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known.

<sup>13</sup>And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love.



### Input outline

In preparation for this you may find chapter 10 of Transforming Communities useful. You also have the background material above and your own experience and study to draw from. Read the scripture passages together and consider how the image of the pilgrim represents the church in relationship to time.

Key points to highlight:

- Christianity is not a static faith but a journey
- the destination is the fulfilment of all that we are when we are united with Christ at the second coming.
- pilgrims never travel alone. We seek and find companionship in the local church, perhaps especially amongst small groups of friends within the local church community, and those companions travel together, supporting one another and sharing the load.
- as pilgrims we are changed by the journey. Change is to be welcomed, not feared.
- To be catholic is not merely universal, a globalised church. Rather, it is a church made whole in itself, complete in Christ.

- we are not yet truly one, holy, catholic or apostolic but we will be when Jesus returns.
- in the meantime a we travel we strive to become more truly one, holy, catholic and apostolic as far as we can.



### Personal reflection and activity

Encourage each participant to consider prayerfully the questions on the activity sheet. They can do this alone or in pairs. Those working alone might wish to find a partner after a few minutes to share their thoughts with.



### Group discussion

The Catholic nature of the church is about the wholeness of the whole body of Christ. Do the structures of your local church enable you to pray and support one another in the journey towards wholeness?

Does your local church reflect the culture of the community around it in its ways of meeting and celebrating?

How can your church change –still valuing the past which brought it to the present place in the journey – in order to be a catholic pilgrim church which local people will want to be part of?



### Sacramental perspective

Baptism is often seen as being the beginning of a pilgrim journey, which is why some churches use a scallop shell – the symbol of the pilgrim – as a tool in baptism. The scallop shell was worn as a kind of safe-conduct pass. Pilgrims travelling through areas in dispute with their own nation were considered to be exempt from persecution or opposition because they were on a holy errand, protected by God. They showed their status by wearing scallop shells as badges, usually on their hats. There is no safe-conduct badge for Christians today, and so we rely on the Holy Spirit, who comes to us in baptism, for protection as we travel.

Holy communion reminds us of the exodus, the pilgrimage that defined the nation of Israel. Just as Moses led the Israelites to the Promised Land, so Jesus leads us. And as God provided manna for sustenance on the journey through the desert, so we are offered the Bread of Life.

As we receive the bread and the wine we also look forward to the day when we will share in the bread of the kingdom; communion is a foretaste of our gathering as one around the banquet table in heaven. Though perhaps on that occasion there will be less ritual and more plentiful food!



### Plenary discussion

What is your response to the sacramental perspective?

Is everybody happy that they understand this evening's learning?

Are there any further thoughts that you want to share?



### Action points

Has your discussion today prompted anything you might like to do personally or together?

Today you will also need the notes of the action points from sessions 1-3. If possible display them (using flipchart sheets or PowerPoint slides) and remind the group of them. It is possible that some of the early action points will have been forgotten or superseded, while others may be of particular interest. Decide together which action points the group would like to see taken forward. Have a clear strategy. If the group is a PCC or other decision making body they may feel able to convene briefly to enact a simple point, or they may wish to ensure that the action points appear on the next agenda of the formal meeting. If this study is not being undertaken by a decision making body then you will need to identify which body needs to be approached with action points and which people within the study group are going to do it.

Also, appoint a person whose job is to remind those acting to get on with it! We may have great emotions and intentions at this stage in the course, but a day or two of normal routine can reduce the impetus and lead to delay or loss

of enthusiasm. A second person to encourage and remind is often all that is needed to ensure that actions really do take place.

Ensure that as you finish the course, all who have taken part know what is going to happen next, when it is likely to happen, and who is taking responsibility for it. If appropriate, appoint someone to ensure that this information is also fed back to the wider church community.



### Closing prayer

**Lord, you call us into a church which is whole  
bringing healing and love to all in the world  
and looking forward to meeting with you in the New  
Jerusalem.**

**Help us to respond to that call positively.**

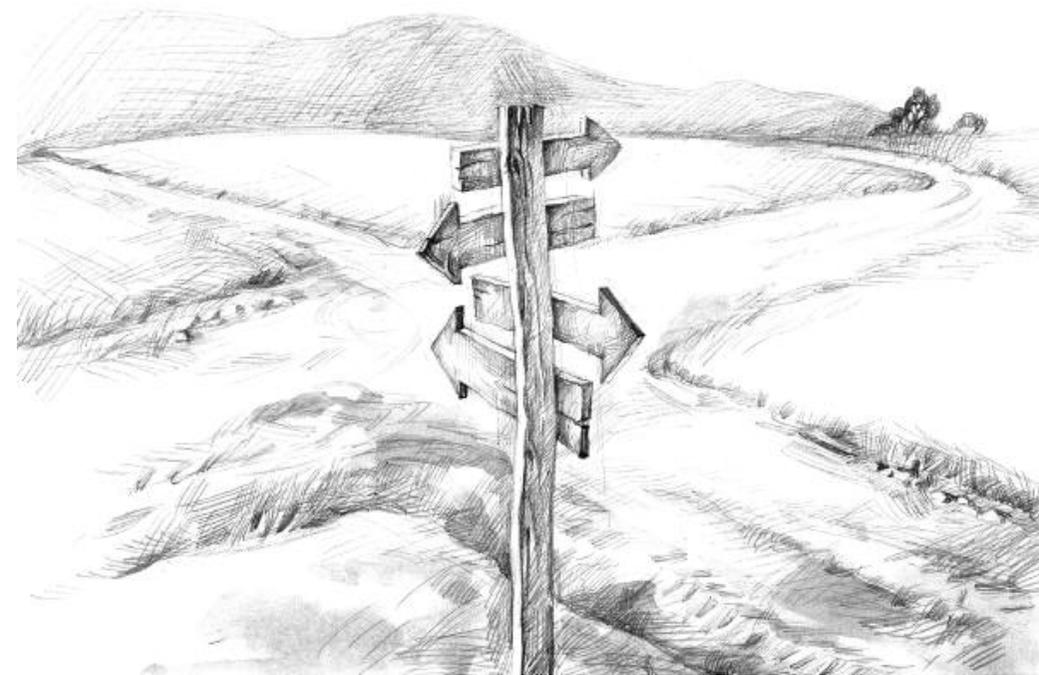
**Help us to grow in love with you  
and to share your love with everyone we encounter  
day by day.**

**Amen.**

## *Session Four personal activity sheet.*

### Pilgrim People: the catholic church looks ahead

Spent a few minutes reflecting on your pilgrimage with Christ so far.



Who are your fellow pilgrims? Remember other past companions.  
How can you welcome and support new pilgrims who join you?

How has the journey changed you? Have you been able to welcome  
change or have you resisted it?

How can you support fellow pilgrims as the journey changes them?