

Participation in Church



Participation in Church Network

We're inviting Christians who are using or interested in using participative methods in church or community to form a network to share ideas and information. This collection of short articles sets the scene and if it makes sense to you there are a number of things you can do:

Register for a one day consultation which aims to bring together the network – this will be an opportunity to meet other practitioners and to work together to identify priorities for the network.

Date: **Saturday 7 February 2009**
Time: **10.30 for 11.00am start, 4.00pm finish**
Venue: **Wilson Carlile College of Evangelism, Sheffield**

The Consultation will use the World café method and will include lunch. There will be a small fee.

There is a 'Participation in Church' group on Facebook, and this may be one way in which the network can discuss issues. We will be looking for other ways of networking and would welcome suggestions.

To register your interest in the network, contact one of the names below and we will send you more details about how to register for the Consultation and keep you in touch with developments.

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Why Should There Be Participation in Church?

For me the whole nature of God is participative, it appears that God has always wanted us to participate with the divine in the working out of life and its place with the eternal. There are key reasons why participation and therefore participative processes are important for a church that is finding its way within Post Christendom.

I often find myself talk of belonging, of coming home, but what do I mean? I think that I mean that I am looking for the reality that my mental, emotional and spiritual life adds (or at times detracts) from the wholeness that is Church. It is not that I, or we, are so important that others cannot function without my (our) input. It is just that our individual input somehow makes the present whole a little more divine-like. We become part of a God collective - I bring my bit of the image of God to the table. Without a deep process of participation we only enable the valuing of those that function well within current models of engagement, the articulate, the confident, the good speakers, the sound theologians. Participative processes when led well enable all to come to the table and bring their thoughts, emotions spirituality and wisdom, their wholeness.

We have seen some move toward what might traditionally be called a better understanding of 'the priesthood of all people' (1 Pet 2:9). We hear, and I all too often spout, the rhetoric of ownership of churches by their congregations. How do we move away from the talk to a walk? Where ownership of processes and thoughts are not 'corrected' but are explored through a dance of inquisitiveness to see what it is that we might learn from the rhythm that we find.

Our theology of faith and our understanding of church and community becomes a dance where we join and part, where we touch for a moment and leave that touch to develop the thoughts, ideas and spirituality of others.

Finally my simplistic analysis of how we do church and this 'faith thing' is that I/we really do not know what to do. Our impact is often minimal and at worse detrimental to the developing of a kingdom of shalom. I and maybe (we) need a collective wisdom to make sense of how we could really live. I need my ideas, assumptions and behaviours challenged. I need my narrow and dysfunctional view of life and faith challenged and informed by debate, discussion and application. I believe participative processes begin to enable groups and individuals take tentative steps toward valuing, owning and becoming wise.

What is required is the sense of each person having a genuine contribution to make...it appears chaotic, time consuming and open to abuse.

The goal however is not efficiency but inclusion.

(Riddell, 2000, pp. 26-27)

Participative Approaches

The participative approaches listed here summarise the scope of this style of work. Participation is where all collectively determine their own agenda and work on it according to their enthusiasm rather than through some external pressure. This is an ideal but contrasts with consultation or facilitation, where the agenda is pre-determined.

Conference Methods

Open Space Technology

The group charts topics on a wall and then allocates times and venues for workshops. The approach does not allow for preparation of workshops but over a 2 – 3 day event allows for developing changes in the agenda.

Open Space Technology: A Users Guide by Harrison Owen.

World Café

Participants sit around small tables, if possible with the ambience of a café. Each table has large sheets of paper for recording ideas as they develop. From time to time participants move around leaving one behind to initiate the next stage of the conversation.

The World Cafe: Shaping Our Futures Through Conversations That Matter by Juanita Brown, David Isaacs, and The World Cafe Community

Future Search

A series of conversations and group work that bring a 'whole system' approach to an organisation. This will occur by involving a range of stakeholders and participants. Participants are invited to explore the past, present, and future, identify and confirm their mutual values, and commit to action plans rooted in reality.

Future Search by Marvin Weisbord and Sandra Janoff

Community Development / Research Methods

Community development depends upon the best information it is possible to obtain; similarly researchers often need to find out about the views of people in the community.

Community (or Citizens) Organising

This is the grandparent of contemporary participative approach, probably traceable back to Saul Alinski. This method depends upon mobilising large numbers of people who over time learn how to effect change. It has always had a church centred orientation.

Building a People of Power: Equipping Churches to Transform Their Communities by Robert C. Linthicum

Participatory Appraisal

Well known method used to engage a wide range of people from all ages and walks of life. It is known for its range of interesting tools that help people record and develop their views. It depends upon a clear understanding of participation to be used effectively.

Consultancy Methods

Non-directive Consultancy

This method was developed for church and community work. The practitioner is helped to think through their problems ideally with no direction from the consultant. This is normally used 1 to 1, and might be invaluable with other participative methods.

Consultancy, Ministry and Mission by George Lovell

The following books provide a more theoretical overview of the topic:

Presence: Exploring Profound Change in People, Organizations and Society by Peter M. Senge, Joseph Jaworski, C. Otto Scharmer, and Betty Sue Flowers

Leadership and the New Science: Discovering Order in a Chaotic World by Margaret J. Wheatley

The Power of Spirit: How Organisations Transform by Harrison Owen

Chris Sissons

Works for the Methodist Church but writes here in his own capacity.

The Challenge of Participative Approaches for the Church

Using participative approaches can be a challenge for some churches that have been used to only working in particular ways and who have been rooted in hierarchical leadership processes for hundreds of years. I have identified and explore some of these below to offer constructive suggestions as to how these challenges might be addressed:

Power

I will start with perhaps the biggest issue, that of power: Who should have it? Who currently has it? How is it used? Many aspects of the world we live in have moved to more participative and user-shaped ways of working. Whether it be a drive for more democracy, voting on TV shows, developing a community service, deciding how and where we shop or using online games and leisure activities, contemporary society expects to be able to decide for itself what it does and how it does it. Theologically, I would argue that participation is also key to the future success of the church.

For this to happen, power has to be more widely invested in those who have the passion and motivation to make a difference in our world. Using group participative approaches moves this power into the very hands of those people most affected by the decisions that affect them. In short, they are empowered to take responsibility for their own destinies. I consider this to be a most positive and enlightening approach.

Participative Leadership

For the church leader who is used to making most, if not all, church decisions, group participative approaches can be a major change in approach. I would wish to clearly say that

strong, clear, dynamic and effective leadership is not threatened or diminished by such processes but is enhanced and embraced. The essence of leadership in these contexts will be less autocratic, more likely to be rooted in the leader's own deep sense of personal identity and security and more likely to focus upon consultative, collaborative and consensus approaches. I consider such notions theologically robust, contextually appropriate and less prone to error and leadership burn-out.

Time Investment

There is no doubt that some times it is quicker, cheaper and easier to 'do it yourself'! However, such a view is tainted when the long-term benefits of involving others are considered. Participative approaches can build the esteem, assist discipleship, capture the abilities and enhance the collective contributions of an individual. In so doing, the extra time investment required to enable these processes to be used can, in effect, be time saving in the long run.

Conflict

There is no doubt these approaches can be dynamic, innovative and bring about organisational and community change and transformation in significant measure. For some, this can be unnerving and potentially cause conflict with existing protocols, structures and methodologies. This cannot be ignored, but I consider that if there is a better way of doing things that leads to better outcomes for those who will most benefit from decisions made, then it must be embraced.

Belief In 'The Expert'

Our work to date has revealed that some people only like to put their trust in experts -either actual or perceived! They don't want to hear the opinions, views and perspectives of those considered less learned, preferring those who are skilled, educated or experienced in a particular field.

Experience, however, would indicate that such skill, education and experiences is often held most by those working in the field at close quarters to the issues that the participative processes seek to address. I would argue that in both practical and theological terms, expertise is often found in the hands of those who are sometimes overlooked, marginalised or dismissed. Participative approaches encapsulate all the possibility, hope and faith that the body of Christ manifests.

Quality

Involving others in consultation and decision making inevitably means that people will have diverse and potentially highly individualistic views. Their contributions may not be made in the expected manner nor be nuanced to the level of sophistication desired. Experience would suggest that 'poor' contributions (if that's what they are) are not confined to people who are not used to being involved in such processes.

Many supposedly high powered meetings are dominated by those with poor social skills, irrational opinions, little self awareness and no understanding of group dynamics! It is often the case that involving a wide range of people and perspectives develops a connectedness between theology, practice, process and outcomes irrespective of the depth, or otherwise, of the contributions offered.

Innovation

Using group participative approaches can produce unexpected results. These might be innovative and open up new ways of working, addressing a challenge or seizing an opportunity. This might mean that everyone travels a different journey to that they have previously travelled.

Resistance To Change

There are inevitably those that do not wish to explore the new nor consider the possibilities of change. Such individuals might be motivated by fear and insecurity or they might be very conscientious and feel that change causes uncertainty and threatens effectiveness. Whatever happens, using these approaches will engender change. Therefore the task is to manage this change, including resistance, not avoid it.

Maintenance

The approaches being discussed here are inclusive methodologies that potentially could involve a very diverse set of participants. They will all come with their worldviews, cultures, perspectives and hobby horses! Maintaining respect, tolerance, harmony and a constructive attitude can be a challenge especially if someone comes who is not of your theological, cultural or educational tradition. I would appeal to the notion that the body of Christ can function effectively in such circumstances and that the principles of shalom and the Kingdom need to be employed to help promote tolerance and understanding.

Answering Questions

If these approaches are to be successful and transformative then they will raise key questions that will demand an answer and response. Churches can be afraid of addressing these questions and fearful of the consequences of answering them. Courage, faith and a trust in the work of the Spirit is needed when using participative processes. I believe that they are stimulating, empowering and revelatory; they enhance all that the church is and seeks to be.

Nigel Pimlott
Frontier Youth Trust

Into the Unknown! Using Open Space Methods in the Church – Reflection on Practice

I am Church Army's Lifelong Learning Co-ordinator, and my role includes responsibility for contributing to the ongoing development of teams whose role is the creation and sustaining of innovative "fresh expressions" of Christian community. These teams include Church Army evangelists.

In November 2004, teams from the initial four projects met for 48 hours, to reflect on their experiences of the first year, with opportunity for collaborative theological reflection, and identify learning both for the teams, and for Church Army as a whole. This has continued annually, including others as the range and number of innovative projects has increased.

A suggestion from some participants in 2006 was that we might use an Open Space model for the conference; this happened for the first time in November 2007. The Open Space model resonated with the risk taking inherent in fresh expressions, and the recognition that while there is a growing body of understanding and experience about fresh expressions, much of it is as yet unwritten and there is a sense of learning opportunities needing to draw together the creation of knowledge as well as transmit it.

What we did ...

The planning group had evolved over several years, and comprised the Lifelong Learning team, (two educators and one administrator) a Church Army manager, and a researcher. We agreed to send a questionnaire to potential participants, asking them about issues currently facing them, and key questions they would like to discuss with others. From the responses to the questionnaires, the planning group identified a focal theme for the conference, which was then shared with teams as they were encouraged to book for the conference.

The planning continued. We were aware that we were expecting a range of participants, from those who had experience of life in some challenging places to those who had formal ministry training. It was a challenge to provide an environment where all could contribute on an equal footing. One element to help this happen was the provision of creative materials, and prompts, related to the focus of the conference, so that those who would prefer to create with their hands rather than words would have opportunity.

We needed to give careful consideration to practical stuff. The administrator's role in handling all the IT equipment – setting it up and keeping it going – was invaluable.

We were aware of the need in previous conferences for the teams to spend some time identifying what they would do with the outcome of the conference on return, so we included time for this in the programme. We also wanted to include worship, as an integral part of the programme.

The conference had around 30 participants, some in teams and a few coming as individuals. The majority gained considerably from the experience, with feedback indicating particularly the value of the mutual encouragement, the freedom to explore relevant issues, being treated “as an adult” and having a “team of experts” to respond to questions. A few found the experience uncomfortable, and craved some “input” from the front. Interestingly, one of these people created a conversation to draw together those who were uncomfortable, thus using the process to meet their needs, and spawned a fascinating further conversation about the nature of expertise.

Would we do it again?

The response is a resounding “yes”, but we'd like to make a few modifications ... and we're not sure if this takes us out of the realm of “pure open space” ... But we're hopeful that it will work, and meet our needs. There's a sense in which we, the conference organisers, are on a learning journey alongside those who are innovating in fresh expressions.

We will be asking some of the potential participants to work with us on the focus question (hardly rocket science in terms of participation!)

And we'll be exploring with them ideas for developing the Open Space format for our use.

We're thinking about providing an opening session, with several brief and varied styles of input to stimulate the conference. This replaces the Open Space format of papers that are sent out to read before the event, in the interests of enabling those from a wide background to participate.

We're also thinking about how we might enable input to be offered by both participants and facilitators, within the style and approach of the conference. (For example, we might offer a list of "led sessions" where participants can choose to take one of these, and enter it into a conversation slot.)

We're wondering about how to "do worship". Thoughts so far are that we offer a wider variety of worship, including some that is pre-planned by the organisers, and participants. We'd also like to provide a way of enabling worship to be created within the life of the conference.

We found people were struggling with being the person who wants to engage with the topic, yet is also the facilitator of the group and the note taker. We'd like to explore how these tasks could be shared – possibly with people offering their services to take on a particular role for a conversation. We also felt that making some more detailed guidelines on facilitating a group may be helpful for some who are new to this role.

I've also got a question about how the original remit for the conference, which included theological reflection, can encourage theological reflection yet hold this in tension with a real desire to give away the power to the participants.

So ... we're moving forwards, and we're learning ... and we're looking forward to learning more in conversation with others

Jenny Richardson
Church Army