

Rhythms of Life

- *shaping shared lives within Jesus-centred values*

DYNAMIC AND ORGANIC

Communities with cadence

Church cannot be authentic without being dynamic, filled with the energy of change, development and growth. It must be real and substantial while at the same time elusive, always calling us on to more.

Church must find ways of expressing community beyond community, a place 'where life rhythms meet kingdom values'.¹ This is church dancing together to the music of Jesus-centred life-giving *shalom* values.

▪ **Wheels within wheels** ²

God has created the cosmos to be alive with syncopated rhythms. Our lives are lived out within these rhythms and cycles that are fixed; constantly moving like spheres within spheres, each at a different pace yet all completely beyond our control. They set the pace and embrace us in all that we do. Some rhythms are clear, others mysterious, but each are always present. Wheels within wheels, turning with ever forward movement.

It is as physical bodies that we touch the world
Bodies, deep and alive with rhythm
With sleep that rests and replenishes
Rising and breathing
The air that gives us life
Relationships that make us human
Activity, often marked by struggle
And once again to sleep

Rhythms of the day begin at dawn
Waking light and then the sun beckoning another day
Morning –rising with the promise of living
Noon, that time to pause midday
Afternoons, that move at varied pace, towards ...
Evenings, twilight and dusk
Nightfall and the encircling embrace of darkness

Every year the seasons turn with colour and contrast
A yearning for light, greenery, warmth and joy in midwinter
A propensity to celebrate the spring with symbols of rebirth
An impulse to make merry in the sunlight and open air of summer
A tendency for thoughts to turn towards death and the uncanny at the onset of winter³

¹ This is a phrase that was used by Naomi Milner in a conversation about church and community on Thurs 19th June 2008, which stimulated ideas that were developed to provide much of the shape of this section

² The image is both the chariot in Ezekiel's vision (Ezk 1:16-21) and an 'orrery', a mechanical version of the planets in the solar system; these rhythms move at completely different paces but all flow into and within one another – they are both fixed and yet dynamic

³ From Ronald Hutton '*The Stations of the Sun: A History of the Ritual Year in Britain*' Oxford 2001



We move to the rhythm of days and years – the gift of life
Miracle of birth, wide-eyed with wonder
Childhood, filled with questing, questions and dreams
Maturity, days of opportunity tempered by responsibility
Old age, wisdom and reflections to share
At death, deep peace in joyful anticipation of resurrection

Throughout, our lively feet touch the earth
Strong provider of all we need; yet she too has rhythms
Wind, water, fire and soil
Weather, gentle or challenging, constantly in flux
Tides, like time, flow with unceasing energy and presence
Rocks seem eternal
Yet constantly shaped by elemental hands
The whole earth, ferocious and fertile, dances too

Tiny eco-sphere whirling in awesome space
Swirling around our sun-star in the company of others
Caught up in the rhythms of the universe itself
Galaxies without number
Star systems beyond counting
Dark matter and bright supernova
Each moving with cosmic momentum
Each of these rhythms embraces us
Beyond our control, we can only move with them

▪ **Creative Counterpoint** ⁴

However, they create a world filled with pace, patterns and possibilities
Often unpredictable; appearing as if from nowhere
Sometimes with a leap of joy, occasionally with the tread of fear
A creative counterpoint to the fixed rhythms
The environment within which we are called to be communities of faith

Relationships are like a dance
Close and permanent shaping our lives
With partners, parents, parenting and treasured friendship
Chance and happenstance, surprising and enriching us
With wayfarer, stranger and unexpected guest
Colleagues, neighbours, acquaintances and those in need
Rhythms of caring, sharing, burden bearing and memorable moments

Celebration sees the pace quicken and the mood lighten
Festivals interlinking the changing seasons
Birthdays, engagements and weddings, Easter, Christmas
Or just because it's Tuesday!
Food, music, dance, drama and even fireworks
Each with a rhythm of its own, uniquely expressing the joy of being

⁴ 'Counterpoint' is a musical term, it is a secondary melody that is set as an accompanying contrast to the main melody in a way that is both harmonising and tantalising in equal measure, it flows both with and against, under and above the main tune



Thoughts flit like a swallow in flight
Ideas skip like a child at play
Finally they come to rest and we slowly make connections
These lead us to understanding
With slow rhythms we take those threads
Weaving a tapestry of wisdom upon which we dance

Moods swing
Emotions have their own distinctive motion
Rhythms of joy, laughter, grief, despair
Days of depression interlaced with periods of elation
Crippling and profound bereavement
Overwhelmed by events, underwhelmed by life
Feeling alone, feeling loved and connected

From around the globe we hear voices
Languages full of strange cadence and beautiful music
From across the earth, customs clothed in the rhythms of cultures
Come to us, sharing new ideas and fresh insights
Rich with vision, resonant with meaning
So much for us to learn and from which to be deepened

Life is unpredictable, full of shock and stumbling blocks
Obstacles thrown up to challenge or trip us
Crises that give birth fear and panic
Learn to move among them with subtle rhythm
Ducking and diving, dipping and swerving
Seeking *kairos* moments
Opportunities for things life-changing and life-giving to happen!

These are the rhythms within which the church is called to live, and to discover what it really means to be the people of God following Jesus.

All of this provides both the environment and the atmosphere within which we explore and express what it means to be a Jesus-shaped community of faith. All this confirms what we have already discussed, that the popular understandings of both the words 'church' and 'community' are largely incapable of communicating the dimensions of what is possible in being the people of God today.

In truth it must be acknowledged that historically many Christian communities have endeavoured to shape their liturgies to many of the life-rhythms mentioned, as of course indeed have other faith traditions. Our arguments are that there is need for greater emphasis and spontaneity in this and that it must be liberated and not restricted by supporting structures.

Formations and freedoms

▪ Discovering disciplines

Rhythms provide music and movement with stability; they provide balance to something that is dynamic and active. Down through the centuries Christian communities have learned the value of 'sacred disciplines' as a means to nurture spiritual development,



bringing exactly that same balance and stability to the flow of spiritual journey and community. In recent years many Christian groups have been rediscovering the value of these disciplines.

The word 'discipline' is popularly seen in negative and restrictive terms, but it simply means 'to learn'. Discipline is the process of giving shape to our lives in a way that enables us to discover and learn, a 'liturgy for life'; hence the preface 'Learning to live ...' used with the disciplines described below. Here 'discipline' is not a restrictive or imposed term, but something that gives structure to life that is supple and organic – like the bones of a skeleton enabling the muscles of the body to move and run and jump, not a shell to restrict it.

Furthermore, 'spiritual disciplines' are usually seen as personal and individual exercises; we wish to explore them as points of focus to help shape the life of local churches as a community as a whole in the light of the rhythms.

Here are sixteen examples of spiritual disciplines:

Worship	Celebration	Service	Pilgrimage
Confession	Guidance	Fellowship	Prayer
Study	Solitude	Meditation	Secrecy
Fasting	Submission	Simplicity	Chastity

- How might these disciplines help develop the spiritual life of a community in the light of the rhythms?
- What do you think of the significance of disciplines like these in today's world?

Here are brief reflections on each of the sixteen disciplines: ⁵

- **Worship** - (from Old English *weorthscipe* – 'worth-ship').
 - Learning to live in ways that honour the 'worth' of God in Christ. It may well involve, words, music, song and dance (cf Rev 5:11-13), but it is primarily a lifestyle word, requiring 'spirit and truth' (Jn 4:23) and involving 'heart, soul and mind' (Mk 12:30). It flows from a relationship of love. Filled with amazement and *Shekinah* - the radiant glory of God.
- **Confession** - (from Latin *confiteri*– 'to speak completely')
 - Learning to live in transparency and openness. Able to reveal failure and wrongdoing in relationships of trust where weaknesses are known and forgiven. Able to make bold and clear statements of truth and belief. Confession brings

⁵ These disciplines have been taken and freely adapted from two contemporary books on the subject, R Foster '*Celebration of Discipline - the path to spiritual growth*' Hodder 1998 and D Willard '*The Spirit of the Disciplines – understanding how God changes lives*' Hodder 1996

In preparing these reflections it was felt that having a brief comment on the etymology or origin of the English word would be a helpful aid to reflection on the terms used.



healing (Ja 5:16) – physical, emotional, relational. It helps avoid sin (Prov 28:13). It nurtures courage, vulnerability and trust.

- **Study** - (from Latin *studere* – ‘to be zealous’)
 - Learning to live attentively - applying the mind to listen, question, think enquire and learn. Reading life, which will occasionally include books! Being changed in the process. Focus and diligence - ‘Study to show yourself approved of God’ (2 Tim 2:15); a thirst for applied knowledge that leads to understanding and wisdom.
- **Fasting** - (from Old English *fasten*– ‘to keep from food’)
 - Learning to live with restraint. Abstaining, usually from food, but perhaps other pleasures or seeming necessities. Discovering ourselves with an absence of focus on gratification. Finding dependence upon God (Mt 4:4; Lk 12:33). Displaying spiritual seriousness. Feasting on God (Ps 131:1-2). An active expression of justice and compassion (Isa 58:6-7).
- **Celebration** - (from Latin *celebrare* – ‘renowned’)
 - Learning to live festively; merrymaking in remembrance, with communal eating, drinking, singing and dancing. An antidote to despair, a wellspring of gratitude. The sensual and earthy, spiritual and ethereal intertwined. It is a continual attitude; delirious embodied joy (Ecc 5:18-20). Always invite those who would usually be excluded (Lk 12:12-14)
- **Guidance** - (from Old French *guider* – ‘to know, to be wise, to show’),
 - Learning to live with direction. Responding to Jesus’ call to, “Follow me” (Mk 1:17). Being open to be led and learning how to determine direction and so lead others. Attune to hear from God, and from others and along with others. ‘It has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and us’ (Acts 15:28). Carrying responsibility for choices made.
- **Solitude** - (from Latin *solitudo* – ‘absence of company’)
 - Learning to live with aloneness. Isolation in the ‘desert’, the ‘closet’ or ‘the crowd’ (Mk 1:12; Mt 6:6; Jn 6:66). Silence and noiselessness. ‘People who love one another can be silent together’⁶ Giving each other space. ‘Be still and know that I am God’ (Ps 46:10). Discovering quiet inner confidence in the midst of turmoil.
- **Submission** - (from Latin *submissum* – ‘to send beneath’),
 - Learning to live in humble vulnerability. Yielding and deferring to others. ‘Being open to being persuaded’ (Heb 13:7), Open to God’s wisdom in others. ‘Be subject one to another, and be clothed in humility’ (1Pt 5:5). Our mission is to be subject to God and to others, while at the same time living with authentic freedom and authority.
- **Service** - (from Latin *servitium*– ‘being a slave’)
 - Learning to live for others. Being available to help, to benefit, and to wait upon other persons. ‘Service is the high road to freedom from the bondage to other people’⁷

⁶ E Arnold ‘**Why we choose silence over dialogue**’ The Plough 11 Bruderhoff Community July / Aug 1985

⁷ D Willard ‘**The Spirit of the Disciplines – understanding how God changes lives**’ Hodder 1996 p189



Jesus is the servant par excellence (Phil 2:6-8 cf Isa 53:2-6) and gives us an example to follow (Jn 13:14). Here is dignity; there is nothing servile about service.

- **Fellowship** - (from Old Norse *felagi* – ‘a partner in goods’)
 - Learning to live in *koinonia* – ‘sharingness’. Having ‘all things in common’ (Acts 2:44). Gifts, abilities and actions shared, creating a life-giving critical mass where the impact is greater than the sum of the parts. Individual gifts are shared for the up-building of everyone (1Cor 12:7-11). Corporate reciprocity between one another and God.
- **Meditation** - (from Latin *mederi* – ‘to heal’ or Indo-European ‘to measure’)
 - Learning to live with spiritual thoughtfulness. ‘Discursive thinking and reasoning about ultimate matters as well as contemplation and mysticism ... it is the search for wisdom and the relishing of wisdom when it is found’.⁸ The path of stillness; the sound of silent music, the way to union, harmony and ultimate values (cf Ps 1:2; 63:6).
- **Simplicity** - (from Latin *simplus* ‘consisting of one element’)
 - Learning to live with both focus and carefulness. Without covetousness, abstaining from excess. Free from indifferent things. But it is also about giving, not just living sparingly; for to be frugal is to be fruitful (see Latin *frugis* – ‘fruit’). Give to everyone who begs from you’ (Lk 6:30). ‘Do justice, love mercy, walk humbly before your God’ (Mic 6:8)
- **Pilgrimage** - (from Latin *peregrinus* – ‘foreigner, stranger, traveller’)
 - Learning to live with forward momentum. Having the mindset of a wayfarer; visiting actual places of physical and spiritual significance and drawing from them. Also living each day with the attitude of someone on a journey. ‘They were strangers and foreigners on the earth ... they desire a better country’ (Heb 11:13,16).
- **Prayer** - (from Latin *precare* – ‘prayer, entreaty, negotiation’)
 - Learning to live communing and communicating with God. At the frontier of spiritual life.⁹ A relationship rooted in a sense of ‘being’, through to spontaneous spiritual ‘breathing’, along with the wrestling and struggles of ‘battling’ over issues. Both in solitude and in the midst of busy daily demands. ‘Lord, teach us to pray’ (Lk 11:1).
- **Secrecy** - (from Latin *secernere* ‘to separate apart’)
 - Learning to live openly from the hidden depths of our being. Nurturing our secret heart in relationship with the God who dwells in deep darkness (2Chr 6:1, Ps 97:2). Concealing, covering and secluding, so that, ‘the good person out of the good treasure of their heart brings out good’ (Lk 6:45).
- **Chastity** - (from Latin *castus* – ‘pure’)
 - Learning to live wholesomely. Chastity is about purity rather than abstinence. Our sexuality is total, not just genital. ‘To the pure, all things are pure’ (Titus 1:15). Behaviour that is appropriate; ‘(treat) older men as fathers, younger men as

⁸ William Johnston *‘Silent Music’* Collins / Fontana 1974 p 9

⁹ R Foster *‘Celebration of Discipline’* Hodder 1980 p 30



brothers, older women as mothers, younger women as sisters in all purity” (2Tm 5:1-2).¹⁰

▪ Exploring freedoms

We have seen that rhythms provide music and movement with stability; that they provide balance to something that is dynamic and active. However, we must not forget that rhythms are also about freedom; within their stability there is also the opportunity of spontaneity. From the strength of the disciplines also comes the flexibility to embrace each moment and opportunity as it appears:

‘Where the Spirit of the Lord is there is freedom’
(2Cor 3:17)

We tend to interpret this in individual terms. What might this mean in when speaking of the faith community as a whole? This is where we engage with the ‘creative counterpoint’ of living (see above).

SHAPE-SHIFTING STRUCTURES

Questions, principles, examples

• Shape and understanding

For a Christian community of faith to be dynamic, and filled with the energy of change, development and growth, it must be able to have a shape, form and structure that is able to express and not suppress this. This may well be important in terms of the physical space in which the meet, but it is even more important in terms of how they think and imagine themselves. It is an essential part of the *metanoia* – the choice to think differently that Jesus calls us to.

• Searching questions:

- “What does this all mean and what might local church look like in practice?”
- “How do I relate this to my traditional local church?”
- “How can we keep the rhythms dynamic and organic?”
- “How can this be developed and sustained from discovery through to maturity, and well beyond that?”

• Discovering principles:

- Structures should exist to serve, not preserve, truth
- What is the truth we want to serve (gospel)?
- Traveler’s tent that journeys with them (tabernacle)
- Caterpillar, chrysalis, butterfly
- ‘What do the images of ‘yeast in flour’, ‘new wineskins’ and ‘un-patched cloth say?’
- How do we hold together both tradition and innovation?

¹⁰ While we recognise that the context of these words is to do with how we speak to others, however it is a perfect illustration of all appropriate intimate and interpersonal behaviour from a Christian. Also the use of the word ‘purity’ is valid with reference to all these relationships, not just with young women



- **Ideas and examples:**

- An 'open circle' where people can move in and out towards and away from the centre, like the ebb and flow of the tides
- A 'closed circle' where children and new believers are at the centre (bringing fresh exuberant life) and the more mature around the edges (giving support and protection); like a bubbling spring of water from within a rock

Exercise:

How do we deal with fundamentals like:

- Truth: "*How do we decide what is authentic and correct?*"
- Tradition: "*How do we make decisions, where does power lie?*"
- Authority: "*How important is the past, how should it form the future?*"
- Structure: "*How vital is physical shape to expression and growth?*"

... as a Christian community of faith in the pluralistic and fast-changing world of today?

Questions

1. What is the value of rhythms in the life of the Christian community of faith?
2. How would you provide a positive life-giving understanding to the subject of disciplines when they appear to be the opposite of freedom?
3. Reflect on the phrase that local church 'structure should serve truth rather than try to preserve truth.' What conclusions do you come to?

Reading and Resources

R Banks *'Paul's Idea of Community'* Hendrickson 1994
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