

# Cafechurch – We're All In It Together

## *The Vision*

At Cafechurch we are all in it together: seeking authenticity in our lives, engaging with questions of faith and meaning, and exploring how to be followers of Jesus in our culture.

This is our vision statement. It is not set in stone – it is a starting point for discussion. In fact the whole idea of a vision statement feels like a funny sort of thing to have when we're discussing something as organic as a church. But we need to explain a few things about why we do what we do and are what we are.

In thinking about what sort of a place Cafechurch is, we came up with four key values. There are a lot of other ones we could have come up with – a lot of other ways of expressing what we are on about. But we think that these four give us a pretty good place to start.

1. Reclaiming secular space: How chatting over coffee in a bar is in fact a radically incarnational statement.
2. Open-ness, inclusivity, and acceptance: How can we wrestle honestly with questions of faith? Is doubt OK? Inevitable? Perhaps even a bit desirable sometimes?
3. Authenticity: We want to be real – real with each other, real in our dealings with the world, real with God. How can we free ourselves of masks and encourage one another?
4. We're all in this together: Some people like to call it "Every Member Ministry", but we're going to experiment with Church as Wikipedia.

There are gaps here; things which we could, and perhaps should, have included here. Perhaps the document is too inward focussed. What about the "world outside"? Is this just another way of forming an even more exclusive little holy huddle?

The hope is that other things will be resolvable in terms of the above minimal set of values. If that isn't true, then perhaps we need to expand the set.

Finally this document is to be treated as a beta. That is, not taken absolutely to heart, subject to revision and change and tinkering. Cafechurch is a fairly new thing (though not completely fresh, because there really is nothing new under the sun) If things don't work out, then that's OK – even that is a useful discovery.

## Reclaiming Secular Space

First some technical language: when Jesus was wandering around ancient Judea, he was really human. He sweated, he ate and drank, was happy and sad and angry and cried. And yes, he went to the toilet. He was, as the creed says, fully human. We call this the Incarnation, and understanding this is fundamental to understanding why we meet in cafes and bars.

To be incarnate is to be human at a particular place and time, with all the particularities of a culture. Jesus taught in parables: not the Socratic elenchus, not long doctrinal explanations, not multi-hour Scriptural exposition. All those things have their place, but if we are to really imitate Christ, we must do it in the true heart of things, not by imitating the forms.

Further, we believe that God's spirit can be present in and through culture. While no culture is perfect, we don't think that it is outside of God's area of influence and interest.

In our readings of the Gospels, we see Jesus reaching out to those outside the promise of Israel. He spoke extremely harshly to the Pharisees, and overruled their attempts to delineate a clear understanding of exactly who was in and who was out. Likewise, we strive to be a place where people are welcomed. We try not to speak churchy language, not only because it is naff, but also, more importantly, because it is a way of excluding outsiders, and a way of controlling insiders.

When I first came to Cafechurch, Steve told me that there was only one rule: no-one was allowed to say "God told me this for you."

So: why do we meet in bars? Because that is native to our culture. If Jesus was one of us, he too would meet in cafes and bars and talk about God. We live in a post-modern world of cultures, so Jesus could just as easily have been found on the football field, on the fishing tinny, or in the model car hobby club. But we can only represent him where we find ourselves, while inviting others to do the same where they are.

Having said all that, it may well be that the best way which we can operate within our culture is by a "thick" exploration, an appropriation of the deep resources of spirituality, practice, and discipline of our culture, rather than a "thin" emptying out of our faith. Embracing the pre-modern might be a way of transcending the modern.

## Open-ness

Dealing with doubt seems to us to be one of the big problems of the Modern church. Here, it says. These doctrines are what you need to believe. Just swallow these points, and you've got it. If you can't believe them, then, I'm sorry to say, you are not in fact a Christian after all. Whether the doctrine in question is penal substitutionary atonement or the bodily assumption of the Virgin Mary, the problem is the same.

Here at Cafechurch we think that doctrines are not to be mistaken for God. While the fruit of the reflection of thousands of years of Christianity is not to be thrown away, respectfully we decline to participate in the idolatry of doctrine. God (alone) is truth, and all our statements about God are inevitably going to be at best partial, incomplete, and subject to further revision.

Freeman Dyson talks about a theology of humility, saying that, as in science where resolving one mystery leaves two new mysteries in its place; in religion we bathe in mystery. (I paraphrase, but you get the point)

Not that this means that we abandon the attempt to understand. We embrace the struggle to love God with all our hearts and minds and understanding. As C.S. Lewis says somewhere, God is no fonder of intellectual slackers than of any other kind.

So we don't exclude people because of what they say they believe. If they are happy to be part of a community which is trying to model itself on Jesus, then what right do we have to turn them away? Again, we remember that the people who really made Jesus angry were the Scribes and Pharisees. He seemed pretty keen on sinners and questioners, and so should we be.

## **Authenticity**

Jesus was fully human. He was fully alive, and did not wear a mask. He wants all of us – all of our lives. Sell all you have and give it to the poor he says, and we take that as a command to live our whole lives as one thing, sold out to God, while wrestling with just how literally we are prepared to take it. And that doesn't mean insisting on using pious language, or applying alien criteria to our lives which have nothing to do with loving God and our neighbour.

The first step towards loving God with our whole being, being honest with God, is being honest with ourselves. This doesn't mean spilling your guts at every meeting to whatever stranger happens to saunter in off the street, but it does mean seeking open, honest, authentic relationships with one another, starting with trying to be honest with ourselves. If we don't know what really motivates us, what really irritates or moves us, then how can we possibly be honest with other people?

It is only through authenticity that we can hope to be like Jesus, and that should be the end of all our aims. You made us for yourself Lord, said Augustine, and our hearts are restless until they find their rest in you.

## **We're All In It Together**

God, Christians believe, is a trinity – three in one and one in three. Whatever else this profoundly mysterious idea may mean, it suggests that at the heart of God lies community. We see this played out in the life of Jesus, when pretty well the first thing he does when he begins his public ministry is to gather a group of friends around him. The disciples followed his example, and we follow theirs. In meeting together we enact a little bit of God's dance of community, love given and received, in our own lower level.

Practically, this means that we place a very high premium on community. Not for us waiting until the service is over to be able to catch up with our friends and see what's going on in their lives. Each meeting begins with eating together, an informal communion in which God is as much present to us as he is in our comparatively formal, "official", communion.

We believe that everyone has something to offer. It may be that, given where we are in our lives, only barely able to keep it together at all, the thing we have to offer is mainly the opportunity for others to serve us. Or it may be that we are brim full of energy, and desperate to get up and talk about stuff at every opportunity. Wherever along that continuum we find ourselves, we still have something to offer. No-one is to be excluded from contributing; everyone has the responsibility to do what they can to support one another in our walk with God, following The Way.

The flip side of this is that we do not value people for what they can contribute. Relationship comes first; results come a long way down the list. After all, it is through what the world counts as foolishness that God acts.

We are the richest, best resourced, best educated generation of Christians that there has ever been. This is a wonderful gift, but also a responsibility. If we don't treat our faith at least as seriously as we treat a hobby, even as seriously as we treat our jobs, then what do we mean when we say we are disciples?

We welcome open discussion: nothing is more Cafechurchy than someone providing an alternate version of something, another perspective which might not otherwise have been sufficiently aired. Just so long as the challenger is prepared to become the challenged, because everything is open to discussion.

Someone new to Cafechurch once asked how we determine who can and who cannot speak. We said "anyone can speak." The community itself, under the protection of the Holy Spirit, is a self-protecting thing. When we speak, it is out of a place of community and of friendship.