

Kingdom People, Big Questions: Offering

Introduction

I have a friend: he has been a faithful Christian most of his life. He has faithfully served in many different ways over the years, sought to follow Jesus as best he could, the way he has been taught; he has done many things, but has serious doubts about the actual difference he has made in this world; he has taken part in many church activities, but struggles to see how most of them serve to build the Kingdom of God.

I have another friend: brought up in a Christian family, who encountered things which did not fit the teaching and the worldview he had been brought up with; he started to ask questions which the members of his Christian community were unable to answer and which, it became clear, he was not supposed to ask; he started to see inconsistencies between the message being preached about fullness of life and joy and purpose and the actual experience of the people around him, mostly just struggling in all the usual ways; he could not reconcile all these conflicts and hold onto belief in what appeared to be empty words; he no longer calls himself a Christian, but neither can he bring himself to fully embrace the empty secularism of our society.

And there are many others: friends, acquaintances, and passing contacts; I have listened to them, talked with them, sought to help them in various ways. Over and over again, I have spoken with individuals (church members, church leaders, those who have left the church, and those who have never belonged to one) and been told that our current systems and structures are not meeting their needs.

What they have in common is that they feel isolated; they are looking for someone who will listen to them and not tell them they are wrong for feeling the way they do, someone who will not tell them the answer is to pray more, read the Bible more and trust God more. They appreciate the time I can give them, but I don't have either the capacity or the wisdom to offer them what they need.

Our response is to build a community which accepts them just the way they are, and encourages them to grow in the ways they care about; a community where people are encouraged to grow through sharing, connecting and learning from one another, by exploring the things they care about and are motivated by, and by helping them find ways to engage with society as a whole and serve the people around them.

We want to attract the participation of people who:

- are seeking to **grow as people**;
- are seeking to help **build a better world** for everyone; and
- are seeking to **connect beliefs and actions**, so the way they live can increasingly be an authentic expression of their most important beliefs and values.

Some Initial Thoughts

We aim to create a community where people can thrive. We believe that people thrive when they belong to a loving community; when they love other people; when what they do connects to what they believe; when what they believe connects with reality; and when they can explore the questions which are important to them, and so deepen their understanding of reality.

This community must *offer a positive vision which people may want to embrace*, and support and encouragement for those who do – not a criticism of existing groups and structures. It is easy to find people who are not happy with what we have; the challenge is to help people find and embrace something better.

There needs to be *some form of membership*: people must be able to identify with the vision, to say they support it. We would like to know who they are, and some of the people who feel frustrated by the *status quo* are leaders in existing churches: we would like to help them identify people who feel the same way within their congregations, so they know they have support for changes they would like to make.

The *membership must be inclusive*, not exclusive. Presumably, some people will not immediately embrace the vision being presented, but if we can seek to articulate and live the things Jesus wants for His people, this can be done in the hope that the good things being offered can become a part of and benefit the mainstream church – which means that, whatever it is, it must not be, and must not be seen as, another church, or the start of another denomination.

The best model for (at least some aspects of) the kind of thing I am currently imagining is the Bristol Equality Charter. There is a charter, a statement of values and aspirations, which was produced by the initial members, and which the members sign up to – not to say they fully comply with everything it contains, but to say they share those values and are seeking to implement them in their own setting. The main difference, as I see it, is that we need to create a stronger community and greater personal engagement.

My original thinking was to aim for two distinct but linked groups: we would have one for people who know they are looking to Jesus for their answers, and one for people who are just looking for answers, with one set of core aims and expectations, while allowing people to sign up to just one, or to both groups. We do not need two groups, but we do need a safe space where we can explore beliefs and practices, and Christians need to learn how to communicate the things they believe and understand with people who have not already ‘bought’ the whole package.

And sometimes Christians are troubled by basic questions which they feel they should have answered years ago. Some questions involve ordinary apologetics, and some require clarifying things like worldviews. But many of these issues are best handled, initially at least, outside the Christian framework: the answer must make sense to people who have not yet ‘signed up’ for Jesus and His mission.

Another advantage: you only know you understand an idea when you have successfully explained it to someone else. If Christians only ever attempt to communicate their understanding to fellow believers, they never fully explore it.

Aims and Values

The aims and values must be shared by everybody. Here is a first draft.

We seek to help people flourish, to grow as people in every way they can – not only spiritually, but mentally, emotionally, physically, relationally, and so on. Nothing is unimportant if it is important to someone.

We seek to provide a space where everybody feels safe and welcomed, whoever and whatever they are. Jesus welcomes everybody into His Kingdom, and we seek to follow His example, loving people whoever and wherever they are.

We seek to provide a space where everybody is treated with dignity and respect, where people can feel accepted for who they are, which means they must have the opportunity to talk about themselves, to share their story as well as their questions.

We seek to provide a space where people can ask questions and explore, not only ideas but also practical challenges; aiming to root spirituality in the details of everyday life. The reason we seek an answer is so that we can live it.

We seek to find the best answers we can, but recognise that an answer which satisfies one person may not satisfy another, and also that in practice we must often be satisfied with ‘good enough’ answers for the time being. Finding a good enough answer does not mean that you stop seeking, but it may mean that your search takes on a different significance and urgency.

We seek to articulate a set of values which we can embrace. We seek to understand values, not only to understand and affirm them, but so that we can attempt to live by them. By seeking to understand them better ourselves by articulating them more clearly, and by identifying with them personally, we are able to influence the society around us. In particular, we want the churches and charities we support to share and identify with the values which are important to us.

We recognise that every question is a personal one, even if it is shared by many people. The questions which trouble us are rooted in human life: questions may often be presented in absolute and abstract terms, but I only ask the question because I have a need to find the answer – even if that need is only simple curiosity – and the nature of my need shapes both the question and the answers I am interested in finding.

We recognise that everybody is different, even though we share many things in common; we can learn from one another, but cannot demand that what works for me will also work for you. We seek to find, not ‘the’ answer to difficult questions, but a range of answers, each of which will work for a different group of people, so that while you will probably not find every answer helpful, you may at least find something helpful.

We recognise that we are not called to do everything, but we are called to do what we can do best. Other people and groups offer a great deal which is good and helpful, and we are not called to reinvent the wheel; but we aim to create a space which is not currently being provided for many people.

People

We will invite people to sign up, either as a member or as a friend. Only a member of the group can contribute, and every contribution will have the author identified. One aim is to build a community, and people have to be able to trust that the other members are who they claim to be.

We will also need to identify friends of the group – people and organisations who want to be kept informed about the group, but who do not want to be (or who are not allowed to be) identified as members. Members and friends will both be sent any newsletters, but (for example) invitations to a group Zoom meeting would only go to members.

Members will be expected to share brief biographical details. We will need to know the usual ‘equality’ details about the members; it will be up to each individual how much of this will be made available to the other members, although they will be encouraged to be as open as possible about who they are, without sharing their contact details. Two basic pieces of personal data which all members will probably be expected to make public would be their name and their nearest town or city.

Membership will be, for the most part, public. In normal circumstances, people will be expected to make their real name accessible to the rest of the community; for obvious reasons, a unique username will also have to be chosen. But I can think of two possible occasional exceptions to this general expectation.

Firstly, anyone wishing to join who has a genuine reason for not wanting to be identified as a member of the group – one example would be a secret believer in a country where believers are persecuted. They would be allowed to join with a fictitious ‘real’ name, which would be associated with all public interactions with the group, and to withhold their location.

Secondly, any member who wants to post something which reveals something they have a good reason not to make public – one example would be a question about how to respond to news about a family member which they have not been given permission to share. In this situation, the member can be given a new, limited user name to use just for that specific topic. The contribution would be clearly identified as being from a ‘stub’ user rather than from a regular ‘public name’ user.

We need to identify the usual equalities details about members for several reasons.

Firstly, we want to reach all parts of the community, and we cannot know who is missing and make sensible decisions about attempting to reach the under-represented people without solid data. This is simply good management.

Secondly, and more importantly, we recognise that we are all biased by our culture and experiences. I am an old, white male, but I cannot pretend to speak for all old, white men; equally (and more importantly), I cannot claim to understand the perspectives of the young and of other lives I have not lived. When we link each contribution to the author, we make explicit the point that *this content* has been written by *this person*, and open up the possibility that a different person will be able to offer a different perspective on the subject in hand.

Forms of Engagement

We need to provide a website which is essentially a combination of articles, blogs and discussion forum. While only members can contribute and view the details of the other members, the rest of the website should be fully accessible to the public – nothing is hidden.

We want to encourage personal statements, because truth is too often hard and cold unless it is expressed in the context of human experience. We want to encourage personal statements, with feedback and discussion of the material following. We want to know *what* you understand and value, and we want to know *why* you understand and value these things. The freedom to express your personal views is balanced by the invitation to subject those views to public scrutiny.

We want all the contributions to help us to ***articulate or discover a shared understanding of the matters being discussed***: this should be helpful, both to the people participating and to those who read the discussion afterwards. This may involve, at times, some (in computer jargon) ‘refactoring’ of the context – not replacing the original conversation, but providing a more accessible version of the content, which is a better foundation for constructive conversations in the future.

Acceptable responses ***deal with the views being presented, not the person presenting them***: it should never be “You are a bad or ignorant person for holding this view,” but rather, “What is your evidence for holding this view?” or “How do you reconcile *that* view with *this* fact?”

In all the contributions, we want to ***clearly distinguish between facts and opinions***. (As a working definition, *facts* would be statements about personal experience or about objective reality which can be checked by other people, and *opinions* would be personal judgements based on your assessment of probabilities.) In either case, it is reasonable to ask *why* – why you consider this to be a fact, or why you have arrived at this opinion – and to have the reasons you provide held up to examination.

A possible criticism of any contribution could be: this is interesting, but it is not relevant – or it is not *as* relevant – to me, or to this group of people. The criticism is helpful if it includes three obvious details.

- ***What*** part, exactly, is less relevant?
- ***Why*** is it less relevant?
- ***How*** can it be changed to make it relevant?

We want to ***talk mainly about facts and opinions, rather than beliefs***: facts and opinions can be discussed reasonably easily, especially when you are prepared to distinguish between them, while many people are taught to fervently hold some beliefs and attack others, and find it hard to refrain from putting other people straight.

When we do consider them, ***the two key questions about any belief are: what is the evidence for it, and what difference does it make?*** How does holding (or rejecting) this belief enable us to love people and build God’s Kingdom? We want to focus on questions which makes difference, not just satisfy our intellectual curiosity.

Growth

We want this to be ***a place which encourages our desire to grow as people.*** Growth involves change, and we generally resist change unless we can't avoid it, even when we know we need it. So, a safe environment which provides encouragement and support to help us – and help us to help others – to grow can make a significant difference.

We can strengthen the desire to grow by ***sharing a compelling vision of a realistic and better future,*** a future which we can believe in and work towards. A significant part of this involves recognising that we don't all believe in or want the same things, so we often find ourselves in conflict with others. Whether we want to or not, we all have to decide how to handle this conflict.

We want this to be ***a place where we can accept our differences and address our conflicts:*** the alternatives are to pretend that we all agree on everything which matters, or decide to ignore the problems in the hope that they will go away, and neither strategy gets us very far. Whether we recognise it or not, we have a deep need to meet and learn from people we disagree with.

One vital service we can offer is to provide many different examples, to ***help people believe that loving and constructive disagreement is possible,*** and then learn some of the ways to do it – that is, both ways to seek agreement, and also ways to live in a healthy relationship with someone you disagree with. Many people avoid facing up to conflicts because they have never learned how to do this.

The starting point is to ***accept people for who they are.*** We may want to change them, but the only person I can change is me. I can decide to embrace growth, or to resist it.. But I can only embrace my own growth; I can offer others the opportunity to grow; I can, perhaps, encourage them – but such encouragement is a tricky thing. It is easy to confuse encouraging people with pressurising them.

We can – and we must – learn to ***love people who are different from us*** because, in the end, those are the only people we have. The alternative is to seek a comfortable life by only associating with people who believe the same things as we do, but this is rarely a sustainable strategy: when we agree on all the big things, the small things where we tend to stick out like a sore thumb and occupy our attention. The more we need other people to agree with us, the more obvious it becomes that they don't.

We can accept people who are different from us because we recognise the deeper underlying reality: that ***we are all connected with each other:*** we are all members of the human race, all children of God, all living on this amazing planet, all seeking a shared future which will be good for all.

Because we are all connected, ***a key part of my personal growth lies in seeking to help other people grow.*** Growth, like all change, is difficult, so I need the support and encouragement of others, and offering mutual support is a good way to find what I need; also, it seems clear that I'm not going to grow – not in the important ways – by focussing only on me and my needs. And I'm not going to learn all I can from others, if they are not also learning things and growing in ways that are not directly open to me. Learning and growing is a shared activity.

Practicalities

There needs to be a small steering group, both to get things going and to form the initial core of the community. At this stage, I don't see the need for formal roles, but clarity in this area will no doubt become important if and when the community grows.

In the early stages, I think it needs to operate as a benign dictatorship, drawing on the skills and resources of a number of people, but being shaped by a single vision. This will become less important as the community grows and develops habits and norms and establishes, as all groups do, a personality of its own.

This project needs to generate income. This is partly because I can't afford to start another activity which takes time but generates no income, partly because people tend to value things more if they pay for them, and partly to protect the future growth – if this does grow, it will require more resources, and it is very hard to introduce money into a successful activity which has always been free; many successful hobby projects have failed in the end because they became too successful, the creator could not afford to continue to pay for the resources the larger group needed, and not enough people respond to the requests for voluntary contributions.

My current thought is to ask the members for a monthly donation, with £1 a month as the minimum, £5 a month as the request, and invite people to give more if they can afford it. If anyone cannot afford £1 a month, operate a 'bursary' and give a free membership to anyone who asks, trusting people not to abuse this.

We need to provide a website which is essentially a combination of articles, blogs and discussion forum, and also some way for people to pay electronically, although none of that needs to be available on day one for the initial steering group. My hope is to get a large enough group of people who are committed to this vision to finance the investment which will be needed to develop the website and associate facilities.

The website needs to be fully accessible to the public – nothing is hidden – but only members, people who are committed to the vision and values, are allowed to participate. We cannot provide a safe space if anonymous people can freely insult, criticise and undermine the people who are seeking to explore difficult questions.

In keeping with the core vision, I see the finances being operated on an open book basis: one of the key needs to be addressed is how we integrate our spirituality and our handling of money, and we need to model financial integrity, as we need to model our values in every area of life.

Copyright © 2021 Paul Hazelden
Last updated: 10:35 on 18 March 2021, revision: 56
Location: /home/paul/C/KPBQ/docs/KP_Offering.odt