

The Education Office and Vision and Strategy Theological Group worked with a diverse group of around 30 students (aged between 12-17), drawn from 6 schools across the National Younger Leadership Groups. The engagement sessions ran throughout the Summer Term, resulting in a range of excellent written pieces from the students in each school. These themes were then shaped in into these four initial vignettes.

## I - All that is done should be done in love.

Love can sometimes seem such an empty word.

A gesture, an emoji. A follow, a like, a swipe up or down, left or right.

Yet **each of us growing up today needs to know love more we need to know than anything.**

We long to experience it, to know we are safe, accepted, valued, forgiven, free, and without it, even as children, we know pain, loneliness, anxiety, fear, trauma and regret.

A God who we can't see so easily these days, whose story we don't all know so much anymore - is harder to believe in – that is if you want us to believe in Him, which you seem to.

But a Church that could show us His love – that really would be something. It would have to be **the kind of love that doesn't come with conditions**, pre-dispositions, prejudices and baggage about who we are.

The kind of love that says you are welcome first. The kind of love that says **you can belong here**. The kind of love that says you **matter**.

The kind of love that says whatever you're thinking of, whatever you're dreaming of, **you're accepted for who you are, not for who we'd prefer you to be.**

That's the kind of church we could get involved in.

This kind of church would literally **embody the love of God for all.**

To become the feet that walk the longest journey, to become the hands that give gifts serve the most needy, to become the ears that listen first before the mouth that speaks.

It would have one central mission - **to literally put love into practice**, and use the simplest decision-making mechanism to determine every course of action:

**Does this decision show the love of God? Yes? Then do it. And keep doing it.**

Does it not? No? Then stop it. Just stop it.

And ideally genuinely apologise for that too, rather than try to look good – no-one really trusts people like that anymore.

Where the church has colluded with practices which have abused people and planet, there should be honesty, confession and restoration. The church should take a lead. The church should be a safe space and an anchor for all - both inside and outside of the church – and **all that is done should be done in love.**

We want those who feel outside the church **to be intrigued by the love that motivates its actions.** Its words are less important now. Because no-one really trusts words anymore, just actions.

But without love, the greatest of spiritual forces – **the love about which everything turns and towards which everything is drawn** – all that may remain soon is a well-intentioned, but ultimately hopeless organisation.

**A club that has forgotten its founder:** a man who seemed only to be known for loving those whom no-one else would or could, but probably should.

All that is done should be done in love.

## II – Jesus never set up a building.

We're often told at school that there are key people in history that we should learn from – whose impact is timeless, stretching out across history, geography, design, English, art, music, science, economics – in fact the whole curriculum.

When we learn about these people, we're taken back into their lives, their contexts, their story – usually in great detail – to see what key aspects we can learn from.

**By knowing their story, their story can become part of ours.**

When we think about the Jesus story, there's plenty to read.

**Stories told, speeches made, dinners eaten, journeys taken, lives raised, eyes opened, deaths died, tombs emptied.**

It's mainly an adult story and **we would love to know what Jesus was like when he was a child or a teenager.** Not just the one-off famous story, but what he was *actually* like – what he made of the world, and how we could relate more to him if we knew that. **It's an adult Jesus we're asked to believe in usually.**

But strangely when you think of what we have become, in the Jesus story there seems to be no organisation started, no structures set up, and buildings built.

It is interesting that **Jesus never set up a building and then asked people inside to talk to them.**

Instead, he talked in other people's houses and on hills or even on a lake to allow his voice to carry better.

Although we know that the church is God's people, it can be very hard to imagine those people talking about God outside of its buildings. In this way, **it is easy to only think about God when you're inside a church and then forget him when the setting changes and you are getting on with the rest of your week.**

We've got some great buildings, and some even some good churches who use those buildings for a few hours each week. But ultimately, **if faith is only about what happens in a building then it doesn't really make sense to us.**

Many people believe that the church is just a group of people that **follow strict rules and judge those who "break the rules".**

It surely doesn't have to be like that.

**The more the church is outside of its buildings, the more it will make sense to people** (not least because nearly all people are not in those buildings, and won't be coming in any time soon).

Someone once said that "the Church is the only organisation that exists for the benefit of its non-members". Unfortunately, we're not sure that the world would agree with that at present.

If we are actually going to learn from the Jesus story, perhaps we should look at what he seemed to spend his time doing, and what he seemed to be up to.

Maybe that would make us less worried about our buildings, or institutions and **more focused on the showing the love of God to others – which is mainly what he seemed to do.**

**It's really a story we want to be a part of, but only if it connects with actual life** – in all its fullness – which is rarely fixed in a building.

### III – The Glue of Life.

Even the most positive people have to admit **most things are broken at the moment** – the planet, economics, families, communities, cultures, races, religions. Fractured at least, but in many cases broken.

So many of our friends come from broken homes, and so many feel like they themselves are broken. **So many of us already feel we are not enough even** at our age.

With every like or follow missed, **we're daily told we're not clever enough, pretty enough, funny enough, fast enough, talented enough.**

No wonder so many of us feel like we need help from someone through our mental health issues.

Things that are broken need fixing. They need joining back together, and becoming re-attached to grow back together. Jesus is **the one who mends the gap between us all – he is the glue of life.**

We heard that Gandhi said – **'we like your Christ, but not your Christianity'** – not surprising given how many times in history religions seem to have been used to break rather than fix, to harm rather than heal.

This gluing back together is not just about changing people's minds to believe one thing rather than another – it's about finding creative ways for us to live well together, and **for the church to become known as the number one organisation for reconciliation in society.**

To do that, it needs to be **a church that listens first.** Hopes and prays second, and then acts third.

It needs to be a community where we can co-exist gracefully in our difference.

It needs to make room for respectful disagreement, leading the way to conversations that can flourish into discussions instead of binary arguments.

A community that shows that we can genuinely learn from each other – **not one that just keeps saying we're right, you're wrong, and our task is to change your mind.**

For our brokenness to genuinely heal there has to be a coming together – rich and poor, young and old – every race and gender and sexuality and **every expression of what it means to be fully human** – because we're heard we're all created in God's image after all.

And the glue, the adhesive, the joining, the magnetism, the cement can't be us, it has to be Jesus.

**He seems like he would think we're good enough.** That we were worth fixing, fighting for, dying for even.

**If our Christianity could become more like our Christ,** then more people would surely get involved.

## IV – It takes the whole church to raise a child.

A church that does not expect young people to come anymore, probably doesn't plan for that possibility anymore. Even **when a family does walk in, they quickly decide whether they might fit in here.**

Whether they would belong.

We all do the same in a new place, a party, a classroom, a sports team, bar, café, club or restaurant.

**Often they don't stay because they don't perceive they could belong.**

It's actually quite a tall order for a small church to provide high quality activities for every single age group – Hardly anything in society manages to make that kind of product well. **It would be like about 30 different Netflix shows all playing at once.**

So it seems that the best thing is to make certain places and spaces that are just for young people – youth work, activities, clubs – all good stuff, and yes we do love being together. **It helps us feel like we could belong** (a bit like adults probably do too).

But don't misunderstand us.

**We want to learn with and be with and live with people of all ages.**

That's what families are meant to be – from the oldest to the youngest (frail at both ends of the journey) and everything in between.

We want to be part of a church where we're not the only young people – it's hard. Probably adults would feel just as awkward in a room full of teenagers if they were the only ones.

But we also know that **it takes a whole church to raise a child** – a family of all ages – all of generations – of mothers, aunties, uncles, grandparents, fathers, cousins, sons, daughters, brothers, sisters – **all living well together.**

That's why although we need our friends, our peers, **family is so important to us.** It grounds us, shapes us, holds us protects us and offers much more long-term stability than most people around us can.

So make church **a community we feel we can belong**, but don't feel you need to make some perfect kind of product that appeals to every single age – why do you think there are 500 channels on our TV these days? **We'll probably never all agree what to watch.**

Make it a community where **we eat together, create together, learn together, grow together, laugh together, pray together, sing together, dance together, grieve together.**

But we do it as a family of all ages, not just a youth club of a few.

It takes the whole church to raise a child.