

John Bowen: Starting a New Service [transcript]

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I do have some experience of starting a new service. I'm a member of the parish of St. John the Evangelist in Hamilton. We began to experiment with what was then called alternative worship in the late eighties. But it wasn't until 2005 that we actually began a new service that has continued to this day. I won't tell you much about it although you're welcome to ask. It is located rather awkwardly between the 8:15 Said Service - BCP. You know what the other half of this equation's going to be, don't you? And the 11 o'clock Choral Service - BAS. So the so-called Discovery Service happens at 9:30 to 10:30. It's a pretty narrow slot.

And since 2005 we started with 20, 25 people. These days we're disappointed if we don't get 50. Last week was 57 and that caused some excitement. But, you know, who's counting? Numbers don't matter. But it is kind of nice and it is kind of reassuring, isn't it?

So I'm supposed to do the theoretical stuff around the question of why would anyone bother to do this? Because, frankly, starting a new service – like anything new in church life – takes a lot of extra effort, it's probably going to provoke opposition, and the outcome is uncertain. Some of these things don't last very long. I was told, for instance, expect that within three years if you've only got one music group, they will burn out, they'll get tired of doing it. I've been waiting for that to happen. It's still the same music group. I don't know how – anyway, it's something miraculous going on there.

I want to suggest that there are three reasons – OK I'm an evangelical and we do three-point sermons. What can I say? At least they don't start with the same letter, right? Those are the worst. So three reasons – two are more theological and one more pragmatic.

And for the first of the more theological ones, I'm going to start with words of Jesus, which is not a bad thing to do, right? And these words in particular: Jesus called the crowd with his disciples and said to them, "If any want to become my followers let them deny themselves, take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it. And those who lose their life for my sake and for the sake of the Gospel will save it. For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life?"

And, incidentally, in here not only is there a positive reason for doing this, there's also a very bad reason for doing it. And you can see it in those bits that I've highlighted.

A very bad motive for trying to start a new service is self-preservation. We need more people. We need more people especially to take envelopes. Whatever else they do, we need their money. Jesus is pretty negative about all such efforts, right? That if you try to save your life – and that's what those things are – how can we preserve our life? He says: that's a one-way street. It's not going to work. You're going to die. That of course applies to many of the things we do in church life.

But then the second half of that sentence, I think, actually gives us a good reason for starting a new service. As for other things in church life, maybe everything in church life, but I'm not going to go down that road right now.

"Those who lose their life for my sake and for the sake of the Gospel." Isn't it interesting that he puts those two things together? It's not just for my sake – and the Gospel. As though they're equally important. It occurs to me if you've got Jesus, you've got good news. And if you've got

really good news, then somehow Jesus is going to be at the heart of that. But you need to lose your life and frankly starting a new service can mean losing your life in many practical ways. It will take your time, your energy, your emotional strength, your gifts, your love, your money, which otherwise might go to something else. You'll be giving it away for this cause: the cause of Jesus and the Gospel. And how can that be bad?

So, I want to suggest this – this is my first reason. A new service is one way to declare the Gospel to people who might not otherwise hear it. And to help people experience the goodness of the Gospel. The goodness of the Gospel in new and refreshing ways. And certainly in our experience it's not only been for new people, but we ourselves I think have been refreshed by the Gospel in this new format.

I came across a good question recently. Someone said, "Who is not going to be reached by the Gospel if we continue doing the things that we're doing?" I find that quite provocative. There are people who will never hear or experience the Gospel if we just keep doing what we're doing. Who are they? Who might they be helped at least to get a taste of what Christian faith is all about.

When we started our service, shortly after that, I heard reported to me that one of our wardens was going around saying, "John Bowen wants to kill the 11 o'clock service." I took him for coffee. We're pretty typical in some ways. I took him for coffee and said, "Have you ever heard me say this?" He said, "No." I said, "Have you ever heard me say anything that might possibly be construed indirectly to mean that?" He said, "No." I said, "Well I really don't want to kill the 11 o'clock service." And this image popped into my mind. I said, "The 11 o'clock service is a door that is open for people. If they're going to come through they can hear the Gospel that way. All we're doing with the 9:30 service is to open another door." So my answer to him was, "Why would you close a door? That would be crazy."

Now Jenny said this earlier, that to start a new service may be a new door through which people will encounter the love of God who might not otherwise do so. But it is only one door. In a society where fewer and fewer people have a church background and therefore going to a church, however cool and friendly you think it is, seems more and more weird, it's going to work with fewer and fewer people. But there are contexts, there are cultures – and yours may be one of these – where it is going to be the most important door for someone who knows nothing about the Gospel and the love of God. So that is the first reason: I think it is worth it for the Gospel.

Here's the second one. I don't know if you know this name, Lamin Sanneh. He's an African who teaches at Yale. And his most famous book is this one, called *Translating the Message*. It's getting old now but it's still very useful. He says Christian faith gains in energy as it is translated into other languages. He compares it with Islam, and this isn't a criticism necessarily, but in Islam, as the Quran is translated into other languages it diminishes in power. That really you should learn Arabic and read the Quran that way. But he observes the history of the Christian missionary movement, he says, as the Gospel is translated it has power. It puts power into the hands of those into whose language it is translated. And he tells this lovely story of an African woman into whose language the Bible had been translated. And she said, "It's as if Jesus Christ walked in our villages". Isn't that lovely? Not that he just walked in Palestine or he walked on the streets of North America somewhere. He walked in our villages. And that's what happens when we try to translate the Gospel into terms of our own culture. That Jesus – it's as if Jesus Christ walked on our streets. He lived in our apartment blocks. He went to the Second Cup on the

corner. That's what we want people to feel. Wow. This Jesus is real. And it happens through translation.

But of course this is not just a nice human idea. This is really the principle of incarnation. That Jesus entered totally into a specific culture in time and place. God, if you like, was translated into a particular human language. Does that mean he lost his identity, his uniqueness? No, of course. The closer he got to the people and their culture, the clearer it was how he was unique and the message that he was bringing.

I don't know if you've read this month's *Anglican Journal*. Read Mark MacDonald's column. It's always worth reading. But this time he talks about Albanian missiologists. There's two words I have never heard together before. Albanian missiologist Archbishop Anastasios Yannoulatos. And yes, I did practice that beforehand. But he says this, the two goals of mission – and this is quoting from Mark's article – the “incarnation of the logos of God into the language and customs of a country,” we could simply say another culture, because in Canada we have myriads of cultures “and” as a result “the growth of an indigenous church which will sanctify and endorse the people's personality.” Isn't that beautiful?

So this is our second reason. I haven't actually spelled it out yet but our second reason for a second service is enculturation. Sorry, I shouldn't say a second service – a new service. The theological principle of enculturation. That the Gospel needs to be incarnated into different cultures, different languages.

Now this is not just a broad Christian principle this is specifically an Anglican principle. I was talking with Dave Robinson this week, told him what I was going to be doing this Saturday and he quoted – there are clergy here, I don't need to remind you of the 39 Articles, do I? I mean that would be redundant. But he immediately went to the Article that I was going to tell you. Do you know which one it's going to be? 24. Who said that? Give her the prize. Excellent. Of speaking in the congregation in such a tongue as the people understandeth. Are you ready? It is a thing plainly repugnant to the word of God and the custom of the primitive church to have public prayer in the church or to minister the sacraments in a tongue not understood of the people. You got it. Isn't that great? And obviously at that point he's talking about the importance of having the mass not in Latin but in English, but it has all sorts of wider implications than that.

I want to read you a story. Some of you know the name Vincent Donovan? He was a pioneer missionary among the Masai in Tanzania in the sixties and seventies, wrote a famous book called *Christianity Rediscovered*. It's quoted in the Mission-shaped Church report from England 2004. It's quoted in Brian McLaren's *Generous Orthodoxy*. So on both sides of the Atlantic. And in 2006 I was able to go to Tanzania to figure out what had happened to his work after he had left.

And I have to give a brief commercial, this appears in my edition of *The Missionary Letters of Vincent Donovan 1957-1973*, published by Wipf and Stock and available at Crux Books, which will be open by the time we're finished. Alright.

So here is a story I heard from this guy – the guy on the right, the white guy – Pat Patton about what he found was going on among the Masai after Vincent Donovan had left. It's a five-minute story ok so relax.

We would start in the evening when the cows were coming in and the elders would gather up green grass. Green grass is a really powerful symbol of forgiveness. And anyone holding green

grass is saying: I'm ok with everyone around here. And if I'm not I have to go to the person I'm not ok with and get things right. So they start with the equivalent of passing the peace but it involves holding grass. And so, as the cows were coming in the evening, people would gather the green grass and then when the cows were milked and everybody was full and at ease there's a traditional song the women and men sing. They go in concentric circles, counter-rotating, singing two different songs that blend fabulously. And then each woman brings a new piece of firewood. All the fires in the households are extinguished and the warriors start a brand new fire by rubbing fire sticks together. They really do. I've seen it. And then people would start discussing in the group from the circle what story – I think this is what New Testament story – most touched them. And there'd be some discussion and then kind of a consensus. And then someone would tell the Gospel story and they would tell what happened in their lives. And it was not always a success story. It would sometimes be, you know, well we should have been able to do this better or it worked part way. In other words, they're taking the Gospel story and trying to live it out.

That would be finished, then, with a communion service, which was done on a cow skin, on which all of their special ceremonies are done, with the *olorika*, the three-legged stool there, and a gourd filled with wine and a half buffalo horn there, sliced longitudinally, and resembled an artistically shaped plate with bread on it. Everyone would be signed with chalk in the form of a cross on their foreheads. For the Masai, chalk is a sacred symbol of new birth, of initiation, of new beginnings. And in the evening, in the firelight, you would see this vivid white on these black faces. And then people would share the gourd and the buffalo horn and there would be interspersed the Masai songs. I don't know if you've heard the chant. They always kind of chant, and there's always a verse and a refrain. Someone will lead and sing a verse and then everybody sings the response. And it's a quick back and forth interaction in the singing, not longer drawn-out verses the way we often have. And then in the end one of the people from the oldest age groups would stand up, take the fresh milk from the cow and gather up all the grass, put it in the gourd and then sprinkle everybody heavily with milk as a sign of blessing. And then the woman would each take a piece of wood from the new fire and take it back to their homes. And then we would stay there that night and leave in the morning.

I just use that as an example of how the Gospel is acculturated into particular cultures.

So here's how I would put it. Starting a new service is a form of enculturation. Translating the Gospel into a new culture rather than expecting people to adopt our culture as a pre-condition of their hearing the Gospel. What is essential to Christian worship and what is merely cultural. We don't want people to be put off by cultural things simply because they're not what they're familiar with. We want them to encounter the love of God in the Gospel in Jesus Christ.

Here's my third reason and it's a pragmatic one – I told you it would be – that a new service can be a way of establishing some priorities, which it would be harder to introduce to an existing congregation. For instance, our 9:30 service is called the Discovery Service. People mock this. Just call it the 9:30 service. You got 8:15, 9:30 and 11. It's weird.

Well a layperson always introduces the service and they will often say, "You may never have been to a church with a Discovery Service." We call it that because church is a place to discover more about God, more about yourself, more about life and more about what it means to be a follower of Jesus in our world. It's said frequently. You would never hear that at a traditional church. It might be a throwaway line in a sermon. But here it is established on a regular basis.

The Discovery Service has given us the freedom to do sermon series. One Advent we did a series on Christmas movies. A woman saw the poster outside the church, came in, hung around. The following Easter she was baptized. This was maybe seven years ago. Can't be that long can it? Maybe six years ago. And is involved in leadership in the church these days.

I think because we were looking for new people we had to work harder at welcoming. The 11 o'clock service is good at welcoming but we had to kind of reinvent our welcoming. I've noticed that often missional initiatives in the church come from the Discovery Service. We've just started Messy Church. The leaders are people who came to this church because of the Discovery Service. And I think behind this is the fact that starting a new service means you can start over. There are no expectations. People come not knowing what to expect. So it gives you the chance to establish a new DNA for a new community. But I want to add: those priorities can then spill over into the existing congregation. They're not in watertight compartments. Some of those Discovery Services are interactive. Well if the same person is preaching at both services it's a bit of an effort to cut out the interactive part so guess what? Now the traditional congregation is getting involved in interactive sermons. And they really like it. And I've noticed with Messy Church the initiative was taken by people from the Discovery Service. Guess what? People from the 11 o'clock service and 8:15 service and even the Wednesday service have got involved in it. Would it have happened if we only had the 8:15 and the 11 o'clock? I suspect probably not. So there is this delightful spillover that's happening. So I would say reason three that it develops discipleship because that's what happening at our Discovery Service.

The other thing I want to do before we're finished is look at some of the objections to starting a new service and some of the specifics of how it might work. But I just want to pause. I've suggested three reasons:

1. for the sake of the Gospel. Number two;
2. for the sake of enculturation or incarnation; and,
3. because it can establish discipleship as a fresh priority.

So let me talk about the main objection that I hear to starting a new service and maybe you do, too. And that is that it is consumerist – you're pandering to people's personal tastes and to fashion and to passing whims and they've just got to suck it up and do the right thing. We know how it should be done. Don't mess about with this new stuff.

The problem is in part that we are already consumers. It's no use saying we cannot be consumers. Whatever your church is, here are some questions to ask: If people pass another church on their way to yours because yours is more evangelical, more Anglo-Catholic, more liberal, more inclusive – if they're passing one or in most cases two or three or four or five other churches to get to your church, you are already letting them make a consumer choice. And we all do it, right? We're not going to tell them: you must go to your local church. I'm slightly proud of the fact that I do go to my parish church and my wife and I can walk there in good weather. But I have to be honest and say when we moved to Hamilton 16 years ago – and we checked this out – if it had been by my standards really bad I might have gone somewhere else. So I can't blame anyone else for this.

And then if you were at the Vital Church Planting Conference I think two years ago, we brought in Bishop Steven Cottrell by the miracle of Skype. He's an Anglo-Catholic Bishop, a leader in the Fresh Expressions movement in England, and he said: look, if you already have more than one Eucharist during the week then you are already offering a consumer choice. He said: ideally there's just one and the whole community comes. But if you have one at 8:15 because some

people prefer the quiet service and not talking to anybody and the old form of service, and not singing, or they prefer the choir, or midweek suits my schedule rather better than a Sunday, we've already moved in the direction of consumerism. So it's not a clear choice between being consumerist or not being consumerist.

I want to suggest that there is a way to look at this. I'm wondering whether we could even use the word principled consumerism. The question I think is – I'm going to put it like this – does starting a new service lead to complacency or to discipleship? Does it confirm how we already think and live. Or does it open us to be challenged with the radical message of Jesus?

So If I'm going to this new service because I prefer guitars and drums or maybe the church always has been guitars and drums and I prefer the organ service with choral music, does it just make me feel comfortable? Does it simply reinforce me in everything that I've thought and done up to now? Or does the fact that it's more my culture mean that I'm open to hear the Gospel, both its blessings and its challenge?

Because this is why the Meeting House has its purge Sundays. Lots of people go to the Meeting House, but many go for entertainment. They like the cultural value. It's in a cinema. You get to drink nice coffee. The preacher has long hair and wears jeans. Wow, this is so cool. But they're aware of that danger. And, a couple of times a year, they say to people: if you're just here because you enjoy the culture, you should go away. Find another church. Meeting House is about discipleship – learning to follow Jesus in our world. And the way you learn that is going to the home church during the week. So, fish or cut bait. Most of us don't have the courage to do that. We don't have the numbers that we could afford to lose the people who are simply there because they like it and it makes them comfortable. But it's not a bad model that people go there because it is for them culturally comfortable and attractive and yet, they're trying to say, but that's not what it's about. It is actually about learning to follow Jesus in our world and I appreciate that.

Incidentally, the people of the culture you are trying to reach may not be your culture. My Churchwarden friend at St. John's said: "I know you go to the Discovery Service because you like the music." You think I – I mean I have to be careful what I say – it wasn't the music. My ideal music is Bach, Vivaldi and Handel, right? Neither, none of our services offers that. But I'm willing to suck it up because I see that God is at work through this expression of the Gospel in a different culture. It's not my culture but I want to be part of what's going on. So bear that in mind.

Let me suggest as we think about a new service there are four particular areas where enculturation can, perhaps must, happen or most likely to happen:

1. music;
2. language;
3. formality; and,
4. media.

There may be others that you'd like to add to this list. As I say, I'm making this up as I go along, which is the watchword of Fresh Expressions.

First of all, music. You heard what Pat Patton said about the music of the Masai. Would it be better to introduce the hymns of John Wesley or, as many Swahili-speaking churches do, 19th Century American revivalist choruses translated into Swahili? I think there is something very precious about having music and words that is of that culture. I had a West Indian student at

Wycliffe a few years ago who told me it was a turning point in the life of the Anglican Church in the West Indies when the people went to the priest, who was at that point still white, and said: "May we use our steel drums in worship?" You're the priest. What are you going to say? I hope you would say yes. The priest said yes. And it was so helpful that people felt, ok, this worship really is ours. So, music is one.

Language is another. I don't need to tell you this. The BAS is not contemporary language. Why do we keep having to have new prayer books? Why does the Bible keep being translated? Because we're trying to communicate to people in the language in which they speak. I love Eugene Peterson's *The Message* but I have people under thirty saying: that's not the way we talk. I'm not going to say we need a new Bible translation or we need a new prayer book but we do need to watch our language especially if we are working with people who are not used to church. I remember one young person who was new to church saying: every time you pause and explain something I feel included. Isn't that lovely? And clearly the opposite would be true if you just plough ahead and use the weird language that we use, what are they going to feel? Excluded. That's not an expression of the Gospel – needs to be in a tongue understood of the people. And you've got to figure out how to do that.

I put formality down there. There's much in our culture that says formal is hypocritical and informal means authentic. I don't buy that. It can be true, but it's not necessarily true. You can be hypocritically informal, right? And the opposite. But it is an issue to think about. I know people, young people, who have chosen to come to our 11 o'clock choral formal service because that's where they encounter God and they are helped to discipleship. They grew up in a happy-clappy church. And I hesitate to say that doesn't work for them anymore 'cause we're back into consumerism; but, they do find that the formality is actually a good thing. So please don't think I'm saying we need to ditch formality and go to informality. But they are different cultures. And if we're trying to open doors, maybe that is a door that we should open.

And the last one is media. We had a fight in our church over whether we could have a PowerPoint projector and a screen. You can imagine. Our new priest David Anderson found he had some discretionary money. One Sunday we showed up and there it was. Never heard any objections after that. But that's not the only medium although as you see it's one that I happen to like. But what about drama? What about interactive sermons? What about bringing up someone to interview them? I was speaking on discipleship and brought up an electrician from the congregation and said: "How did you learn to be an electrician?" And they said: 'Well one day a week I went to electrician school, four days a week I was working with an electrician.' That was great in talking about how discipleship works – that it's really apprenticeship. Interviews.

And I choose those four because it seems to me none of those is an absolute. I would argue that we shouldn't lay down our lives for any of those four – a particular kind of music, a particular kind of language, a particular emphasis on formality or informality and a particular kind of medium and worship. I don't think it's worth it. If you have done or you are thinking of doing the Re-Imagining Church course, you'll see that image in there of water in a glass. And I argue there that the essence of church, where the Gospel is, is like the H₂O, but that H₂O can be found in many different kinds of container. The challenge for any of us is to figure out what is the H₂O? What is absolutely essential? And what is the container which we need to change in order to be faithful to the Gospel and the incarnation? But those are the things I think we need to be thinking about.

So I have a dear friend who's an adherent of the 11 o'clock service who says: "we're not three churches, we're not three services, we're one congregation, we just happen to worship in three different ways." Sounds good, but the problem is that new people are coming into these services. We have tried from time to time doing social events. If we have social events then everybody can get to know everybody. But the more the churches – the services – grow, the harder that becomes. You're running faster and faster to get to know more and more people. So at a certain point, what happens to unity? The body of Christ ultimately cannot be divided. Social events can help. But if your services are growing there's a limit to how useful that can be. Retreats, similarly, but as with any retreat you're only going to get the keeners to come anyway. In our church in the summer we don't have the 9:30 and 11 routine, we just have one service sometimes that is blended, sometimes we'll do the Discovery-style one week and the choral style the next week. And the hope is that people will come all through the summer. And some do. My wife and I do, but there are some who stay away on the Sunday that it's not their style. But opportunities to worship together, which we do at Christmas and Easter, I think are really, really important. That's one way that unity is preserved.

And the other one, and it won't surprise you that I think in some ways this is most fruitful, is working together on mission opportunities. That one of the meanings I think of the Church being one Holy Catholic and Apostolic, the Apostolic piece means we are engaged in outreach and mission. So it's lovely to me that Messy Church is involving people from all the congregations. There's one lady, I think she must be in her eighties, because she told me after the last Messy Church she'd been in this church for seventy years. And wishing to be discreet I said, "Oh does that mean you were baptised here?" She said, "Oh no." In other words she was of an age when she came to the church. I don't know if she goes to the 8:15 or the Wednesday Eucharist because we can't know everybody, right? But she saw the sign saying Messy Church and grumbled what's all this and messy, you know, church shouldn't be messy and why are we bothering to do yet more new things. And someone took the trouble very gently and patiently to explain to her what Messy Church is. She said, "Oh, if that's what it is, I would like to help." And we've only done it twice but she's been there both times. So I think mission is one of the things that brings the Church together.

I just want to say think about it, pray about it, do your missional discernment. You can call it market research if you want. This may be right for you and it may not. And if it's not the right thing then pray for God to open another door by which people can encounter the love of God in Jesus. And I came across this verse in Second Corinthians and so I went OK, Paul doesn't talk about a new service, but he does – this is my paraphrase ok, this is the message according to me: A new service can be a means of extending grace to more and more people so that it may increase thanksgiving to the glory of God. And I don't think that's a bad principle to drive this whole thing.