

ALL CALLED TO SHARE IN CHRIST'S GREAT AND CHALLENGING BANQUET



In outlining his theme, incoming President Tim Presswood is encouraging our churches to think about activities which are life-bringing reflections of the fullness of Christ.

In 1991, whilst still a student at Northern Baptist College, I was privileged to visit BMS missionaries, David and Rachel Quinney Mee in El Salvador. It was at the tail end of the civil war which saw over 80,000 killed and a million people – approximately one fifth of the population – made homeless.

We spent time with the sisters of the Small Community (Pequeña Comunidad) in San Roque, a suburb of the capital where almost a thousand people had been murdered by their own government. The Pequeña Comunidad had also known tragedy with Silvia Ariolla, one of the sisters, a secretary to the murdered archbishop of San Salvador, Oscar Romero, being tortured and murdered by death squads.

One evening, we huddled in their makeshift chapel to pray. Gathered

around a small log which acted as a communion table, we could hear the rattle of machine-gun fire coming from further up the volcano. As we prayed, the faces of Archbishop Romero and the recently murdered Jesuit priests looked down from the wall where they surround Christ's Cross. Next to them was a small photograph of Silvia and another of Miguel Tomás, a young student from the Baptist Seminary who had also been murdered by the death squads. Cut out of faded sugar paper, alongside the photographs and the Cross, were the words of Jesus in John 10:10.

"I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full."

Now, perhaps more than ever, our churches need to ask whether their activities are life-giving, life-bringing reflections of the fullness of Christ.

I WANT TO SEE CHURCHES, IN OUR POST-PANDEMIC WORLD, ASKING THEMSELVES: WHAT IS LIFE-GIVING IN THEIR COMMUNITIES?

As we seek to move on from the pandemic and lockdown, our churches are finding that significant numbers of folk have not returned. I have a dear friend who has served the same church for over forty years in many different roles, often at the same time. No one else was willing or able to take on the work. My friend loves Jesus. My friend is still a believer, but no longer has the energy to turn out Sunday by Sunday to 'keep the show on the road.'

Is the church to which my friend belongs, but no longer attends, life-giving?

Some years ago, I was challenged by one of the co-ordinators of Urban Expression, the urban church planting network which we went on to join. Our church building had been compulsorily purchased forcing us to find new homes for all of our church activities. Sunday by Sunday, though, we met in our front room to pray, sing and hear the gospel. My colleague Clara Rushbrook and I were tired. We were rapidly approaching burnout, but every Sunday we put together a familiar and comfortable act of worship for the handful of our community who remained.

"You mean," the Co-ordinator challenged, "that every Sunday, you sit downstairs in your front room and pretend to be a 'proper' church?"

On reflection, the answer was yes. We realised that we needed to let go of much that was precious to us, but which was not honouring or relevant to God in our small, inner-city corner of God's reign.

What would be life-giving in our community? What is good news for the people of inner-city east Manchester?

Out of this reflection, we have now developed into Forest Church, Manchester – a loose collective of folk, who gather together to pray, to support one another and to engage with the ecological crisis. East Manchester was the home of the industrial revolution. Perhaps in some small way we can be part of the healing of the relationship between humanity and God's creation.

I do not wish to see every Baptist church immediately stop what it is already doing and transform itself into a Forest Church!

'The thief comes only to steal, kill and destroy. I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full.'

WE ARE DISSENTERS. WE ARE A PROPHETIC PEOPLE, CALLED TO CHALLENGE ALL THAT IS NOT LIFE-GIVING, ALL THAT IS NOT OF GOD

I want to see churches, in our post-pandemic world, asking themselves: what is *life-giving* in our communities?

Hayley has invited us to *Build a Bigger Table*. Luke 14: 16-24 records Jesus telling the Parable of the Great Banquet:

Jesus replied: 'A certain man was preparing a great banquet and invited many guests. At the time of the banquet he sent his servant to tell those who had been invited, "Come, for everything is now ready."

'But they all alike began to make excuses. The first said, "I have just bought a field, and I must go and see it. Please excuse me."

'Another said, "I have just bought five yoke of oxen, and I'm on my way to try them out. Please excuse me."

'Still another said, "I have just got married, so I can't come."

'The servant came back and reported this to his master. Then the owner of the house became angry and ordered his servant, "Go out quickly into

the streets and alleys of the town and bring in the poor, the crippled, the blind and the lame.”

“Sir,” the servant said, “what you ordered has been done, but there is still room.”

‘Then the master told his servant, “Go out to the roads and country lanes and compel them to come in, so that my house will be full. I tell you, not one of those who were invited will get a taste of my banquet.”’

At our bigger table, we are invited to share Christ’s Great Banquet, not with the many who were invited, those we know and like, but rather with those whom Eugene Peterson in *The Message* calls ‘all who look like they need a square meal, all the misfits and homeless and down-and-outs you can lay your hands on.’

The point is that the host is inviting – and later rather troublingly compelling – those who do not fit, who don’t *look like us*, to come and share in his great banquet.

They are not being invited to come and wait at table – or do the washing up in exchange for leftovers. They are not being invited to sit, like dogs under the table, to gather up crumbs. Rather, the outcasts are the very people who are being invited to share in Christ’s Great Banquet.

Luke 14 invites us to look beyond our religious traditions. It begins with Jesus’ challenge to the Sabbath regulations, moves into the Parable of the Wedding Feast in which we are challenged not to seek positions of honour – and moves on to the Parable of the Great Banquet which benefits the outcasts, not the respectable.

Finally, of course, in Luke 14 we are invited to count the cost of following Jesus. Baptists are followers of Jesus. The same Jesus who... made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. As Baptists, whilst respecting his earthly authority, we do not recognise king or pope as head of the Church. We are dissenters. A prophetic people, called to challenge all that is not life-giving, all that is not of God. **We are all called to share in Christ’s Great – and challenging – Banquet.**

**THE OUTCASTS ARE
THE VERY PEOPLE
WHO ARE BEING
INVITED TO SHARE
IN CHRIST’S GREAT
BANQUET**



Tim will be inducted as Baptists Together President at the Baptist Assembly in June.

Tim has spent the last 30 years re-inventing the church in one of the most deprived inner-city communities in the country. Today he is team leader of the Urban Expression Team in Openshaw, East Manchester, and minister of Forest Church, Manchester.

In 2014 Tim was invited to join the staff of the North Western Baptist Association, where he led the team through a transition process. He is now enjoying leading the Church Life Team at NWBA half time, while acting as College Manager for Northern Baptist College and continuing in ministry in Openshaw.

Tim has held a number of community roles in East Manchester, including senior roles in the NHS. For 20 years he was on the board of Manchester Credit Union as either treasurer or chair, building it from 85 members to more than 20,000. He has an interest in alternative economic solutions.