

# Hearing the Call

## Discerning Our Unique Vocation to Build the Common Good

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### Introduction

Let's recall where we've got to. So we've seen the brokenness and we know this is a dark time. I know, it's overwhelming. But it's real. This is where we are.

But it doesn't mean there is no hope. The worst thing is cheap hope. But we have real hope. Because God is at work, and this Pentecost, He has called us here.

We spent time this morning reading the signs of the times in two important ways: first we looked at our components and examined the features of the change of era using the tradition of Catholic social teaching, and second by listening with the Holy Spirit in your small groups sharing what you are seeing at the local level.

And now in this session we're going to consider our response. A response that is true to our faith and tradition. And then at about five past two, we'll go into small groups again for another round of *Conversations in the Spirit* to share what touched you from the first round, and explore together what God might be calling you to - where you live, in your pastoral area?

### Hearing the call

So what does it take to become a common good community? It needn't be that difficult. It could start with a conversation.

God works in so many ways. He calls each of us into his great creative participation according to our unique gifts and abilities. He does it in His own time and can't be hurried.

This is not a day to recruit you into existing projects or volunteering roles. As important as they are, Pentecost is calling us to be open up to a much wider sense of possibility. Sometimes we have restricted our horizons to our man-made idea of what is needed. Sometimes we have pressed ahead with programmes such that we have inadvertently engineered out the potential inspiration of the Holy Spirit.

## Listening to the Holy Spirit

God's Spirit needs space to breathe through us. You may or may not hear something today. It may be that in a few weeks time, you might sense a little nudging. But if you are open, you may well notice something quite different from what you expected.

Don't feel the outcome needs to be in the form of a campaign or a project - it could be - but you may also feel called to be a good neighbour in a particular way in the place where you live.

You may have a grand plan. Or a more modest idea. Often the smallest things can end up being the most generative. You never know what might come of one small step.

I'm going to share some ideas and as we go, I'd invite you to notice what resonates, take note of what moves you - whether it's a sense of agitation or joy or other emotion - acknowledge that God might be calling on your gifts in ways you hadn't expected. You may feel you can identify a simple concrete next step.

## POSTURE

First I want to look at a few things about posture. I have a problem with my posture today as I have a bad back. And I know it's after lunch but think about your posture. Are you sitting comfortably? Are you conscious of your posture?

### 1. Not on your own

First, we are not meant to be doing this on our own. Remember that in Luke 10:1-12 we read that our Lord "sent them two by two." First of all it takes courage to step out in faith, and we're not meant to be doing it alone. We tend to assume we must do it alone because church leadership has been influenced by individualism and the culture of clericalism has tended to isolate the ordained and promote passivity in the laity. This has inhibited the range of charisms that the Holy Spirit generates.

### 2. Shared leadership

But since *Evangelii Gaudium*<sup>i</sup>, we are called to a distributed leadership, to co-responsibility<sup>ii</sup>, which recognises that the gifts of the Holy Spirit are many and varied. We are all missionary disciples now and the Church needs everyone to play their part. Everyone has a calling, not just clergy and religious.

God often calls unexpected people. Remember Jesus built the church on Peter who was not well educated, not an obvious leader. New leaders need support. It is important to accompany those emerging to take responsibility in our communities.

### 3. Be attentive to the charisms

Notice the charisms that are emerging beyond the ordained ministries. Ensure someone gifted at discerning the movements of the Spirit is available. We each have a unique vocation<sup>iii</sup> in God's mission. But it can be easily missed if you don't know what to look for. Before I was called to this work, I was a graphic designer, I wasn't doing anything like this. This is how God works. There will be lots of ways that people sense a call but do not know how to articulate it. Sensitive accompaniment is vital to spot what is going on. We are to encourage each other every day (Heb 3:13).

#### **4. Not the saviour**

I know people feel overwhelmed, sometimes exhausted. The effort to serve becomes a posture. But we know we can't meet all the need - it's too great. And it's likely to get worse. The powers are very great. So it can be stressful.

So I want to say this to you very directly. Because I know a lot of clergy, a lot of volunteers, a lot of Christian activists and charity workers, and I know the reality and the risks.

Remember you're not the Saviour. Please remember that.

Too many Christian activists fall into a transactional dynamic, becoming the deliverer or rescuer - and so the poor person is the recipient. This "service-client" dynamic creates a tension of 'us' and 'them'.<sup>iv</sup>

For the recipient, the assumption of being on the receiving end can over time become disempowering. For the activist, it can be a recipe for burnout. And for both, the chance of a reciprocal relationship is lost. But most importantly, thinking of oneself as the rescuer is a form of idolatry. It is only Christ who can rescue.

But there is a different way, where we are not assuming responsibility to fix the brokenness of the world and yet we play an important part. This is the relational way of justice. In walking together with our neighbours we adopt a different posture. A more reciprocal dynamic emerges.

We can give a hand up. But we can also receive. It is very important to be able to receive as well as give. Because we give the other dignity when we receive. Then we can join together in a shared life. This is a posture of solidarity and the objective is relationship.

Pope Francis is quite uncompromising. He says we should stop outsourcing to the state and to professional charity workers. He's not saying the state shouldn't exist, nor saying charity shouldn't exist. What he's saying is Christians have done so much outsourcing that we have lost our ability to be relational. We need to become communities of common good.

#### **5. A sense of family**

But the truth is that many churches have fallen out of relationship with the poor communities they want to help. There are issues of class. Christians are often more comfortable - and many have told me privately - helping refugees or fundraising for charity at arm's length than they are in helping their next-door neighbours. Often there is fear around interacting with poor families in our neighbourhood. There are issues of confidence.

It's not just Catholic churches that have fallen out of relationship with the poor communities that surround them, many other churches have too. Many have become more middle class, and lost a sense of solidarity.

It has to be said that there are some churches which are actually engaging quite well. Some of the non-denominational and Pentecostal churches for example, make it easy for people to get involved, to step over that threshold, so that it's not intimidating. They are providing a sense of family where people can be themselves and not feel they have to work too hard to be acceptable. They feel forgiven and loved.

Think of the lady I mentioned earlier, in debt for two years, a single parent and no one in her church knew her story. A common good community would be different, wouldn't it?

There is a mysterious reason why Francis wants the Church to engage with the poor - it's not just for their benefit. The poor are the treasure of the church: the church needs to be evangelised by the poor to rediscover the reality of God. But affluent churches often fail to understand.

I can't help thinking that in this season, God could be humbling the church so that in its poverty it realises its need for others, especially the poor.

## 6. Becoming a relational people

God loves people, so that means mission needs to be grounded, not abstract, located, we are to be living a common life among our neighbours.

But becoming a common good community not only requires some shifts in posture, it also requires a shift from the individualistic to the relational.

We might start by asking each other, what will it take for us to become a relational people?<sup>v</sup>

## PRACTICES

We can begin with practices that help to shape us become relational in all that we do.

Are we facing inward, to our own community, or outward to the neighbourhood?

In fact, we need to do both at the same time. For simplicity, we could call these practices internal practices and outward-facing practices. Like two sides of a coin.

### 1) INTERNAL PRACTICES

So let's look at some internal practices. Here are some suggestions. You'll have your own ideas.

1. Cultivate a **culture of expectation** that God is at work among you. Expect to wait. The waiting is important. The gift of patience.
2. **Allow experiments** and expect new forms to emerge. A good leader, lay or ordained, will be open to the promptings of the Holy Spirit in people's lives, and will be open to encouraging. It's important not to stifle the creativity of the Holy Spirit by expecting fully formed and successful projects - these experiments may look messy, so relax and learn from mistakes. Be aware that there may be a need for some unlearning - and to acknowledge that the 'stand and deliver' and 'command and control' posture may not deliver the culture change we want to see.
3. In terms of **liturgy**, can we think about creative ways to cultivate a more **communal spirituality**, ways to make it easy for people who aren't used to church to join in - invite them into be part of the discernment and designing as it develops
4. Help people learn how to pray in **communal practices of prayer**. Create lots of different opportunities for people to experience *Lectio*, contemplative prayer, accompaniment, pilgrimage<sup>vi</sup>, organise prayerful activities together, in person and online.
5. How about **adoration as a communal experience**. Maybe invite a local musician to play something contemplative, creating a refuge from the noise of everyday life. There are times for solitary prayer but sitting in the presence together can be a powerful experience. Consider that Celtic spirituality was forged during the fall of the Roman empire - the Celtic saints were known for contemplation and action in the local.

6. **Small discipleship groups** are important - regular groups that journey together for the long term, dwell in Scripture together, listen to God together, build trust and spiritual intimacy. It's worth noting that churches with cell groups like these did much better in the pandemic. This is a model more like the early church. Discipleship is meant to be a shared experience. Alpha<sup>vii</sup> is a great place to start but there are other cell group models. Again, relationship is the objective here, these are not issue based groups. Some Christians I know meet daily online to say the office together.
7. Then, of course, there's the practice of the **conversation in the spirit**.<sup>viii</sup> This can be transformational for relationships. Many congregations are adopting this, not only to learn about each other, but also using it in team decision making, as a way of doing things in relationship with the Holy Spirit.

So those are just some ideas for internal practices. Doing this kind of thing can help us become more communal, more open to each other and to God, to become a Common Good Community.

In a moment we'll look at some possible outward-facing practices.

## Questions

But first we can begin by checking our posture, and asking each other questions like:

- How can we **join with God in the neighbourhood?**
- Are we attentive to where **God is already at work** in the place where we live?
- What actions can we take to start **interacting with our neighbours?**
- Are we attuned to spotting **signs of the Kingdom?**
- Ask each other how can everything we do can become an **occasion for communion?**

## 2) OUTWARD-FACING PRACTICES

Here are some key outward-facing practices:

- Exercise the **spiritual gift of curiosity**.
- Have a **one-to-one conversation**<sup>ix</sup> at least once a week - but not for any motive other than for the honour of hearing a person's story. Not for a campaign, not for a project. Doing so outwith the transactional is a countercultural act. It has the potential to draw a person out of hopelessness.
- **Walk the neighbourhood**, step out two by two. Get to know the place, noticing its features. Learn its stories. See its suffering. Discover its needs. Get to know the people, stop and interact, don't rush.
- **Draw a map of the area**, noting its unique geography - its remoteness or its proximity - note down all the local institutions you know and those you don't. Pray for the place and ask God to show you where you are called.
- **Connect with other human beings**, make eye contact at the checkout, say hello in the street, stop to chat, don't be in a hurry. Turn off our devices and resist screen addiction. Realise how important this is in an inhuman culture that is undermining human interaction.

QUICK CHAT: What stood out for you? A word, a sentence, an image?

## SHIFTING THE CHRISTIAN IMAGINATION

So we've looked at some of what it might take to become a common good community. It will look different for each group of people, and different in each place. It will take time.

We talked about a sense of opening up to a much wider sense of possibility in terms of what it means to be God's people in this time of instability and unravelling. We got a clear sense of the importance of place, and of local relationships because this is what will sustain us when things get harder.

The central practice is to learn to listen to God, and we recognised the significance of being attentive to the different charisms. We looked at why we're sent out together, not our own, why we are not to be the saviour, why we should avoid the transactional dynamic and learn to receive as well as give; in the context of widespread loneliness and social alienation, we see the importance of creating a sense of family; and what it means to welcome the poor as the treasure of the church.

We also explored some possible *internal practices* - for example, to foster a culture of expectation that God is at work, to encourage experiments and communal practices of prayer, discipleship groups, liturgy and conversations in the spirit.

And in terms of *outward-facing practices* - we suggested joining God in the neighbourhood, we emphasised the importance of the spiritual gift of curiosity, looking for signs of the kingdom, the countercultural significance of listening to someone's story, getting to know the neighbourhood by walking and connecting with people.

### Ideas and examples

No need to catch it all - just let it wash over you and see if anything resonates. Remember we want to be open to a wide range of possibilities, so don't feel restricted by this in any way:

- 1) A good place to start is to identify local need. A group of Christians I know<sup>x</sup> in Birmingham first started out in a dilapidated building. They decided to **ask the neighbours what they want**. Top of the list was a playground. So they organised. Neighbours actually dug the foundations together. That was 25 years ago. That church was almost empty then. It's now the hub of that community with 2,500 people going through that building every week, worshiping, participating, eating, celebrating, learning, people finding their place and taking responsibility.
- 2) Thinking about the woman in debt, can we ask what would it take to develop **a culture where people are known** and support each other? Where people are valued despite their brokenness?

- 3) And we could ask are we the kind of church that knows enough about our neighbours, for example, to club together to ensure a poor person gets a **dignified burial**?
- 4) Are we the kind of parish that would be comfortable to **welcome an ex-offender** and his family? How prepared are we to do that?
- 5) Are we the kind of people who practice hospitality? Can we make our Sunday dinner an occasion for communion by sharing our table? This is what Pope Francis is asking for explicitly - that we should **share our table**. What is stopping us from doing this?
- 6) I know a priest in Italy who provides a sense of family for twenty homeless men once a week - but it's not a soup kitchen. They sit around a table together. They cook, eat, chat and wash up together. So over time, this helps them re-enter society, by being allowed to live like human beings
- 7) I know a woman in Vancouver who intentionally gardens in front of her house in order to start conversations with her neighbours, intentionally doesn't buy all the tools she needs so she has to borrow. She holds the keys for six neighbours. Hosts weekly soup nights where neighbours turn up and people who didn't know each other have become friends.<sup>xi</sup>
- 8) A pastor I know in Croydon invited some neighbours who were not interested in church to a shared meal.<sup>xii</sup> He said to them, would you join me - I'm not cooking, I'm not washing up. Would you join me to make a meal? It's **sort of church but not really**. So they came, they cooked together. They had a conversation. He introduced them to prayer very simply. And they said could we do this again next week? They came, they brought family and friends. Over six months, it grew to over 100 people. They had to move into the church hall. People came to faith. There are different ways of doing things.
- 9) We are called to become communities of place. You've probably heard of the national movement **Places of Welcome**<sup>xiii</sup> - there are more than 600 across the country now. All you need is a room and a few friendly, prayerful people to hold it, then invite people to come, to talk, play music, be together, play board games. Make it intergenerational, a place where old and young can be together, where people can be seen and welcomed.
- 10) And think about **young people**, remember that loneliness is statistically higher among 18-24 year olds than among the old.<sup>xiv</sup> They are the most vulnerable to the toxicity of the digital world and they need help in building relationships. Young people are hungry for the physical experience of communion. Offer them a space and support them to curate a regular evening where they can do good things together.
- 11) Look for how everything you do can become an **occasion for communion**.
- 12) Perhaps some of you are located in very beautiful natural surroundings and yet there is a great deal of hidden rural poverty. Neighbours can tend the land together through gardening, litter picking, conserving. The **natural environment** can offer ways of bringing local people into a healing relationship with each other and the land in fruitful ways.
- 13) There is great potential to **partner with local institutions** like businesses, charities, associations, colleges, to encourage them in their civic vocations. Like Jesus, we are to live an incarnational theology that tangibly weaves itself into all aspects of our daily experience.
- 14) Between us we have many connections. We can **bring civic institutions together**. We can act together for the benefit of the community. We can support deliberation, we can stand in the

breach with, we can suffer with. We can lend a hand to poor and low income people.

- 15) We have **buildings**. The church doesn't just belong to the small group inside. Jesus didn't start a private club. **Sharing our space** offers potential to build bridges between estranged groups. In sharing our buildings, we are helping to **build a local economy of gift**. We can start by asking our neighbours for help when we need it: humility is a good place to initiate a culture of reciprocity.
- 16) I know a **church hosting a boxing club** and this has led to a growing sense of trust between estranged parts of the community.<sup>xv</sup>
- 17) It's time the Church shifted its posture **from host to neighbour**. We are long past Christendom<sup>xvi</sup> and the Church is increasingly marginalised and needs friends. If a church is struggling, vulnerability can be a blessing, because it's when you're vulnerable that you ask for help and that is how relationships form.
- 18) Finally, let me tell you this story. I know of a church in Chicago in a poor neighbourhood with no jobs and people suffering from poor nutrition. A congregation saw this need<sup>xvii</sup> and prayed, asking God what they could do to. In time they partnered on a gardening project and grew more food than they could use. They started a cafe. They sold produce, established a co op. Then the 'Wholefoods' chain came to town and opened a branch in the neighbourhood. Jobs were created. There was an abundant supply of healthy food. Other businesses followed: more jobs. The neighbourhood thrived. Pastor Jonathan says people say "We want to do this at our church." He replies 'I always ask them if they have talked to the folks in their community first. It needs to come from those affected.' People often ask why his church made "food justice" a priority. He resists this kind of framing and says we didn't start like that. You need to **start by listening and getting to know your neighbours**. The key is to become a common good community, not a "justice-oriented" church. He says that 'when you begin with issues then "issues" are your focus. But when you begin with community as your foundation, then people are your focus.'<sup>1</sup> When you focus on people, the relationship overflow leads to justice. He adds, 'what happened didn't happen because of us, but it couldn't have happened without us.'

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## Conclusion

We'll shortly be going into our conversation in the spirit groups again.

Being a common good community invites us to learn to live in the way of the early apostles. That requires some unlearning of what we've known before.<sup>xviii</sup>

This is a gentle thing that necessarily cannot be rushed. It is like Sabbath. It is slow and mostly off grid. It needs to be built up incrementally and it starts by listening to God and noticing what He is doing among his people in the local.

In doing this we create spaces for humanity to flourish, offering some resistance to the dehumanising technocratic and financial powers. This is not false hope, it is our Christian hope.



So how do these practices and postures connect with the bigger questions of justice?

Often people regard this work as less important than politics in terms of the difference it can make. But given the signs of the times, this work is fundamental. Never let anyone make you feel that building local relationships is in some way trivial or a 'nice to have'.

To protect society, local relationships are going to become more and more important. There are many more things that need to happen which are matters of statecraft and I could talk about them if I had another hour. But this day is about how we can hear God's call to play our part in the places where we live.

This patient work builds common good, a relational power, genuine agency among the people of a place. Solidarity then develops in concrete ways. As a people we can then represent our interests in negotiation with government and business without being subordinated, to create places where communities can flourish.

This is how the church can help to heal the world. It may not happen because of us, but if we follow this path, then it won't have happened without us.

This Pentecost God is calling us to join in his mission, each of us in a different way. Small concrete ways. Being a common good community is really about building the Kingdom.

#### BREAKOUT GROUPS - CONVERSATIONS IN THE SPIRIT:

What is God calling me to do in concrete terms? What are my gifts and skills and how can I build common good where I live?

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*Together for the Common Good is dedicated to spiritual and civic renewal. Drawing on Catholic social thought, T4CG helps people across the churches make sense of this time of seismic change and discern their unique vocation for the common good.*

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## NOTES

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- <sup>i</sup> [https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost\\_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco\\_esortazione-ap\\_20131124\\_evangelii-gaudium.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20131124_evangelii-gaudium.html)
- <sup>ii</sup> <https://togetherforthecommongood.co.uk/from-jenny-sinclair/co-responsibility-in-mission>
- <sup>iii</sup> <https://www.pathsoflove.com/johnpaul-vocation.html#sdfootnote6anc>
- <sup>iv</sup> <https://togetherforthecommongood.co.uk/from-jenny-sinclair/how-should-the-church-respond-to-poverty-at-this-time>
- <sup>v</sup> <https://togetherforthecommongood.co.uk/from-jenny-sinclair/the-relational-church>
- <sup>vi</sup> <https://www.pilgrimways.org.uk/>
- <sup>vii</sup> <https://alpha.org.uk/catholic-context>
- <sup>viii</sup> [https://www.synod.va/content/dam/synod/common/phases/en/EN\\_Step\\_6\\_Spiritual-Conversation.pdf](https://www.synod.va/content/dam/synod/common/phases/en/EN_Step_6_Spiritual-Conversation.pdf)
- <sup>ix</sup> <https://togetherforthecommongood.co.uk/resources/one-to-one-conversations>
- <sup>x</sup> <https://togetherforthecommongood.co.uk/stories/pavilion-shaping-a-community-of-hope>
- <sup>xi</sup> <https://togetherforthecommongood.co.uk/stories/a-good-neighbour>
- <sup>xii</sup> <https://togetherforthecommongood.co.uk/stories/where-the-kingdom-is>
- <sup>xiii</sup> <https://togetherforthecommongood.co.uk/stories/pavilion>
- <sup>xiv</sup> <https://www.ukonward.com/reports/age-of-alienation-loneliness-young-people/>
- <sup>xv</sup> <https://togetherforthecommongood.co.uk/stories/wrestling-in-church>
- <sup>xvi</sup> <https://www.amazon.co.uk/Christendom-Apostolic-Mission-Pastoral-Strategies/dp/099887289X>
- <sup>xvii</sup> <https://togetherforthecommongood.co.uk/stories/there-are-no-god-forsaken-places>
- <sup>xviii</sup> <https://togetherforthecommongood.co.uk/leading-thinkers/the-story-in-which-we-find-ourselves>