

## Culture Questions

When we first became parents I spent a lot of Sundays behind a glass window in church in Bristol with the service piped through on a speaker. When I became a vicar that's what I offered the parents in the crèche in Holgate as well. There were positive things to be said for the arrangement but there was definitely an unspoken message that said -

*While you have a noisy baby you and your offspring are a problem and you don't fit in with normal patterns. We love you but just stay in there for a bit.*

The church in Bristol and then the church I led in York was not really asking...

Why is this service so well suited to a 80 year old or a 35 years old and not to a 3 month old?

Or

Why is it so important to hear what the vicar is saying at the front of this building – especially when he said the same thing last week and will say the same thing next week?

Or

If Jesus was here in the flesh would he be straining to hear the liturgy or would he be rocking the baby?

And I think, if I was leading a church again, I'd want to ask this question. Do a crying baby's parents feel that they are disrupting a church gathering or is there a way of reacting to that baby that means that they can help to define what it means to gather as a community of Jesus' disciples

Maybe those are simply a subset of a whole lot of questions that various groups ask of us because their behaviour doesn't fit...

- Small children, who love to run round and round the church endlessly, ask questions of us.
- People with learning difficulties with demanding understandings of boundaries ask questions.
- Neuro-diverse young people, who find loud noise tough, ask questions of us.

The answers aren't easy, but the questions do need to be heard if we are going to lead our communities into a culture that works as mission to our neighbours and a sign of love in our cities and towns and villages.

So where do you find the questions that will open up your perspective on your life together?

It's not easy to stand back and look at a community that you know well. I found that when I had a new curate, who was the age of my daughters, I got a lot of really interesting questions which boiled down to 'Why do you do that like that?' You might want to look for a friend to come and spend a bit of time with your community to ask the questions you have stopped asking.

Meanwhile you can still have a go. You could ask...

- Who is not there when you gather?
- Who is inside and who is outside?
- You could listen and find who speaks most and who speaks least.
- Who gets the biggest slice of time and of money?
- Who are people trying to keep happy?
- If the children's group leader is off one week do the children have to sit through the adult service or does the vicar give the grown ups some colouring and go and lead the children?
- Who is best served by the layout of the building – small running around people or old sitting down people?
- At coffee time does everybody sit at tables with limited seats or do they stand around in open loose groups?
- Who sets the times and the timings?
- What sort of noise level is ok?

**John Lee - June 2022**