

Dear Friends

This year, on Easter Sunday no less, I am celebrating 17 years since I was baptised. I am from a non-faith family and came to know Jesus when I was 16 years old. I remember clear as day God telling me to be baptised, and, the ensuing emotional turmoil that act of standing up in front of people and declaring my faith brought. Thankfully I was supported by the most amazing youth pastor and a fabulous Moderator (what Baptist Churches have when there's no minister in place) and my fears were quickly dispelled. My baptism still remains one of the most precious and significant days of my life.

As I look back over the years, I am thankful for all of the people who have helped to shape me as a Christian. From that first youth worker, Sam, to my friends and extended family within in each congregation I have called home, to the team I work with today. I have been blessed by people who have intentionally invested in my faith development and given me opportunities to grow and be challenged. I have also had the wonderful privilege of working alongside a wide range of Christians with whom I have been able to discuss faith and what it means to live out the Christian life. The people that have also prayed for my life and my circumstances have blessed me more than they will ever know.

Before I became a Christian, when I was a smaller child, I attended the Girl Guiding stream in my local Methodist Church, I was a Rainbow through to a Ranger and loved my time in those groups. The church in which we met were wonderfully faithful to us, inviting us into all of their social activities and making us a part of the church family. We got to be involved in their pantomimes and a wonderful lady set up a choir for those of us who were interested. I wrote to them last year to thank them for their commitment to us as uniformed organisations within the church and for the prayers I am sure they prayed over us and our families. As I look back, I can see that God was at work in my life through them before I even understood who God was.

This significant lent season has got me reflecting on my Christian life and exploring my journey through faith. What I have come to realise is it that I can remember very few sermons, Bible studies and church events, although I am sure they have played pivotal roles in growing me day by day. Instead some of the most stand out memories for me have been the relationships I have encountered along the way. The sense of being loved, accepted and welcomed, the opportunities that people have believed me capable of and the support I have been given to grow. I am only here today, by the grace of God and because of those people that loved, prayed, challenged and supported me through. I am convinced today more than ever that church family is more important than we might ever know.

In Simply Christian (the book we've been studying in our circuit book club) Tom Wright puts it like this,

"The church also exists... to encourage one another, to build one another up in faith, to pray with and for one another, to learn from one another and teach one another, to set one another examples to follow, challenges to take up, and urgent talks to perform. This is all part of what is known loosely as fellowship."

I am thankful that my Christian life has been full of people who encourage and build me up. People who pray with and for me. People from whom I can learn and be challenged.

I hope that in my life as a Christian I have offered the same for others. As I look forward to the next 17 years my commitment is to ensure that I do. My heart longs for this true sense of fellowship that Wright talks of, and I am passionate about seeing this become a reality. Because for me mission and outreach are only effective long term if there is a place for those people reached to call home.

I have come to realise, over these 17 years, that being involved in a faith community and coming to worship together, is as much about what we give as the things we get. And that If we are to be sustainable and fruitful in our future seasons, we must take seriously our commitment to fellowship and to one another. If we hope to grow our church families, we need more than good activities, attractive worship and sound theological teaching. We need an actual church family, where people feel loved and a part of what is going on. We need to be a place where we encourage and build one

another up, where we learn together and teach one another. Where prayer is a constant part of our rhythm and where we are challenged and stretched and galvanised. Where we can serve together, worship together, have fun together and mourn together.

Church life is not always easy, we will not always agree, we all will have different priorities, but our commitment to the body of Christ must be our first priority. Our commitment to one another, to those we see eye to eye with *and* to those we don't, to those who are like us *and* to those who are not, to those we find easy to love *and* to those we find it more of a challenge, is the foundation for building the church, the body of Christ.

So what might it look like if we were more intentional in developing the type of fellowship Wright encourages across the whole church body? What might it look like if we talked to someone different at church this week? If we sat in a new place next to new people? If we had coffee after the service with someone outside of our usual group? If we offered to pray with and for others? Or got together to talk about the sermon? Or spent some time with someone who challenges our faith or our world view? Or intentionally invested in someone younger or less experienced or new to faith?

What could church be if we approached it with a wider mindset?

I am thankful for that first Methodist Church I encountered. For how there was space for these fairly rowdy, unchristian, young ladies. For how we were welcomed and loved and accepted. For how they supported me when I first became a Christian, and then encouraged me to find a Church with a thriving youth work, that would support me as a teenager, when they knew they did not have the resources to do so. They were committed to fellowship, to the Kingdom of God, and they gave me a foundation on which a lot of my life and ministry has been built. In a fairly brief amount of time as a Christian, but mostly before I had even come to faith.

My hope is that all churches today would offer similar to those outside of their walls, and maybe more fundamentally to be committed to growing in fellowship with those already within the family. To be home for those of us that attend. Who knows, if that was really the case, we might be more willing to invite our friends, and others might be more willing to come.

With every blessing

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