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Religion, Community and Events:

Rev. Ruth Dowson, UK Centre for Events Management, Leeds Metropolitan University

Any discussion on the role of church engagement with their communities would be incomplete without reference to the nature of events held by and in the church. Whilst connections between church and 'events' may not initially be apparent, in addition to the range of projects and services within local communities, many churches' energies are focused on events, from fetes, to community days, to music events, and conferences for clergy and laity. This poster summarises research that assesses the role that events play in the culture of the local church and its local community, with case studies of three Bradford churches, in building relationships within the community and developing a sense of belonging and identity.

Defining an 'event'

Bowdin summarises the key characteristics of an event as being "consciously planned", having "a purpose", time-bound, or "of limited duration", that may be "one-off or frequently occurring" and which results in a "unique" combination of "the blend of management, programme, setting, and people". Thus, any church service could be seen as an 'event' as it meets these criteria.

Alternatively, a 'special event', is expressed as a: "*phenomenon arising from those non-routine occasions which have leisure, cultural, personal or organisational objectives set apart from the normal activity of daily life, whose purpose is to enlighten, celebrate, entertain or challenge the experience of a group of people.*"

This definition can be applied to many of the activities undertaken by churches. However, a further definition of a 'special event' as: "a unique moment in time celebrated with ceremony and ritual to satisfy specific needs", was inspired by the anthropologist, Victor Turner, who wrote that "every human society celebrates with ceremony and ritual its joys, sorrows, and triumphs", and it is this aspect that most closely relates to the topic in question.

Research Conclusions

Each church in the study had a distinct culture, and each community was different; yet in all three churches, research participants were strongly committed to and identified themselves with their own church as a community, as well as within the community of their local geographic area. The focus of the role of ritual in church activity when viewed through the lens of the three participating churches and the literature, is based around relationships; shared values within each church demonstrate an intention to welcome, and to build close relationships within the church and into wider community.

For some churches, "serving" at events has an explicit purpose in building community and showing commitment. Small groups facilitate the care of those within them, bringing meaning to shared understandings and experiences, whether formally organised or not. Ritual can become a dividing barrier between people (and churches), but it can also offer depth of meaning and solace.

Events can and do offer opportunities to build new relationships and strengthen existing ones; they can provide possibilities to involve those within and those outside the church – whether unchurched or dechurched. The role events play to take the church beyond one hour on a Sunday, is to support the building of relationships, and encourage a sense of belonging to a community, as well as reaching out beyond the gates of the church.

References:

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