

made of stories

A PCN BRITAIN SERIES OF SHORT FILMS

Telling Stories

In an age of fast-moving visual communication across all types of platforms, the trustees of PCN Britain have commissioned this series of short films which raise challenging questions to those who hold a progressive view of what it means to be Christian today. Rather than producing a series of more didactic, 'teaching' presentations about the content of Christian faith, our starting point is the very different personal stories of people, some of whom faced difficult situations, some of whom hold deeply passionate views about aspects of life and the world as we find it. We are grateful to the people who were willing to tell their story.

Thanks to the generosity of the Westhill Trust and other donors, we commissioned a media company, Boca, to work with us. Boca searched out the people in the films and we are grateful for their expertise in research, filming and editing but above all for their empathy and understanding of our aims in producing these short films.

The viewers will know no more about the story tellers than what is in the film but our hope is that the subject of their story – being HIV positive, being a climate activist, working to revive a church for the community and so forth, will arouse in you, the viewer, questions and reflections about these particular issues and faith. The short films are freely available on many platforms and we hope will be shown in a variety of settings, including the privacy of your living room.

The notes in this short study guide are offered to help stimulate discussion and also to list organisations and resources which are available for those who wish to be more informed about any of the issues raised. These resources will be continuously updated.

We hope you enjoy watching the films and sharing them.

Adrian Alker, Chair, PCN Britain

A Theology of Story

It is said that physically, we are all made of stars. The atoms of carbon that form our bodies come from outer space, the same particles form plants and animals. In other words, we are not only made of stars, we consume them too.

But that is to speak only of the physical: the stuff we can see, touch and smell. We are made of much more than that, we're made of memories, of friendships, of loves lost and found, of ideas and hopes, and of dreams of what could be. Which is to say that we're made of stories.

We're made of the stories that were told by our grandparents, of the stories dreamed by our parents, of the stories overheard in the playground by our childhood selves, and the multi-layered stories pondered in our adult minds. And no matter how much we might try to systematise these stories, to put them into databases and analyse them, to write enormous tomes about them or to examine them under some kind of microscope, our stories are always too complex and too wily to be fully pinned down. Stories are a collection of experiences, each one seen through a lens which has itself been altered by the multitude of the other experiences we have been through. And every time we hear a story, we hear it in the light of the sum of all of our experiences.

In other words, we are not only made of stories, we consume them too.

The Bible of course is full of stories, and the church is full of different ways of understanding each of them. A progressive approach to Christianity must take this into account, it needs to recognise the validity of individual stories.

In this project we've tried to give space for story: We wanted to hear people's voices, and then to give space for you to consider those stories in the light of your own. That way, perhaps we can get past an obsession with who made the stars, and pay attention to who made the stories.

Simon Cross, PCN trustee

Watching the Films with Others

The films are short in length, about 5 – 7 minutes, and you may find it helpful to watch the film a second time after a period of discussion- it's surprising what you miss first time around! Alternatively, members of a group may wish to watch the film at home in private before a communal viewing in the group, either on Zoom or in a physical meeting, where possible.

The films speak to heart and head and the group might want to consider these prompts:

- What were the immediate emotions you felt after the film ended?
- What feelings did you have about the person in the story?
- Were there aspects of the story and /or the issues raised that made you angry? sad? encouraged?
- What surprised you?
- What challenged you?
- What kind of questions does the film raise about our society, about us as individuals, about the role of religion, about the Christian faith?
- What actions might you want to take after seeing the film?
- Would you commend the film to others? who and why?

Gemma's Story

Gemma speaks endearingly about her religious journey and we have glimpses of the perhaps surprising context of her family and working life. Whilst being a gentle presentation, there are nevertheless profound questions in the film about how different faiths can meet the spiritual needs of those who seek to live by truth and love.

Talking Points

exclusive/inclusive



I was told that I wasn't being healed because I was reading the Koran. I heard a voice inside myself saying I am actually innately good.



Can we share how different experiences in life can make us 'freefall'?

How can religion help or hinder our recovery?

truth & love



We construct rhetorics and ideas and we live by them and not by truth and not by love - that hurts people. I realised that there is God but God is bigger and broader than we could ever imagine.



What is your experience of dialogue with people of different faiths?

Is the idea of living 'by truth and love' helpful in that regard?

In sharing experiences of God what can be learnt?

encountering peace



Of Gemma walking in to the church:
there has to be some residual peace in these places.



Can places of worship in all faith traditions be 'spiritual' and sources of peace and wellbeing?

What do you think affects this?

Resources

There are many organisations globally and locally concerned with interfaith issues, spirituality and dialogue. Here are some:

www.interfaith.org.uk works to promote understanding, cooperation and good relations between organisations and persons of different faiths in the UK

www.charterforcompassion.org, originated with the call by Karen Armstrong in her TED talk to encourage organisations and individuals to sign up to the Charter whose central conviction is that the principle of compassion lies at the heart of all religious, ethical and spiritual traditions, calling us always to treat all others as we wish to be treated ourselves.

www.ccj.org.uk The Council of Christians and Jews (CCJ) is the leading nationwide forum for Christian-Jewish engagement

www.ochs.org.uk The Oxford Centre for Hindu Studies (OCHS) is an academy for the study of Hindu cultures, societies, philosophies, religions, and languages, in all periods and in all parts of the world.

The various faith organisations have mechanisms for inter-faith dialogue and relationships e.g. The Church of England's Presence and Engagement initiative and reports (search www.churchofengland.org)

Reading

Books by the late John Hick (eg God and the Universe of Faiths) still available

Karen Armstrong's many titles cover an understanding of God in different faiths

'Together and Different' by Torry and Thorley, published by Canterbury Press, 2008. Worth trying to get a copy.

'Faith, Hope and Love' by Ray Gaston, published by SCM, 2017 and also by Gaston 'A Heart Broken Open' published by Wild Goose, 2010

'Celebrating Difference, Staying Faithful' by Andrew Wingate, published by DLT, 2005

'Trading Faith' by David Hart, published by O books in 2006

'Why did Jesus, Moses, the Buddha and Mohammed Cross the Road?' by Brian McLaren, published by Hodder and Stoughton, 2012

Books by Keith Ward, including one of his latest, 'Religion in the Modern World: Celebrating Pluralism and Diversity', published by Cambridge University Press, 2019

Nathaniel's Story

Nathaniel's story is also his mother's story. It is a story about their relationship with each other, about Nat's feelings about himself, about Chris's feelings and a little about her church. The film invites us to reflect upon our own assumptions, prejudices and experiences about the issues raised.

Talking Points

being gay



Nat: back then I was ashamed of who I was becoming

Chris: Call it a mother's intuition, I think I've known for a long time

Chris: I knew he didn't choose it

Nat: It's taken some time for mum to say it herself and come out with pride



How do the joys and heartaches in this story resonate with you and connect to the experiences of people you know?

being HIV positive



Chris: I was upset that you'd gone all those years without telling me.

Nat: It was the stigma, not the virus that led me to breaking point.

Nat: That was all it took, just like that, I fulfilled the destiny I was so ashamed I would.

Nat: With the right care HIV is even treatable, preventable and even untransmissible.



How have you come to understand issues such as those of shame and stigma, and the way that they have changed?

being a Christian



Nat: Not quite the good Christian boy any more.

Chris: I didn't tell anyone at church, I regret that now.

Nat: Although I'm no longer a Christian, I still think 'What would Jesus do?'

Chris: There's a wide spectrum within Christianity of those...who call it an abomination and those who would accept him.



If you showed this film to a church community you know, what do you think would be the reactions and why?

Resources

National Aids Trust promotes awareness of HIV, the facts and a great deal of other information www.nat.org.uk

Terrence Higgins Trust provides help and support around HIV and sexual health throughout the UK www.tht.org.uk

Stonewall gives help, advice and support to individuals and LGBT communities www.stonewall.org.uk

One Body, One Faith, previously the Gay Christian Movement, then LGCM, is one of the main Christian ecumenical organisations which holds the conviction that human sexuality, sexual orientation and gender identity are gifts of God gladly to be accepted, enjoyed and honoured as a way of both expressing and growing in love, in accordance with the life and teaching of Jesus Christ. www.onebodyonefaith.org.uk

Open Table is a network of ecumenical Christian worship communities which offer a warm welcome to people who are: Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer /Questioning, Intersex, Asexual (LGBTQIA)

Most Christian denominations have produced reports and held discussions about sexuality and gender issues and such reports can be found on the websites of those denominations:

The Methodist Church has produced a report 'God in Love Unites Us' (2019) on marriage and relationships, including sexuality and same sex relationships.

The Church of England will publish its latest thinking 'Living in Faith and Love' sometime in 2020.

Reading

'Who cares About HIV?' Stephen Penrose and others, published by SPCK, 2019

'The Oxford Handbook of Theology, Sexuality and Gender', Adrian Thatcher, published by OUP, 2017

'Just Love: A journey of self-acceptance', Jayne Ozanne, published by DLT, 2018

'Sexuality in the New Testament', William Loader, published by SPCK, 2010

'119: My Life as a Bisexual Christian' Jaime Sommers, Published by DLT, 2016

Holly's Story

Holly tells of her commitment, as a Christian climate activist, to 'change the society that we live in so that its easier for everyone to be able to live a lower carbon footprint'. She joins with others from Extinction Rebellion and speaks of non-violent direct action.

Talking Points

revisiting history



Jesus was a huge activist... he carried out direct action himself. This is very much like the early church, it feels very raw, it's finding its form and we are relying on each other, to support each other and stand up for justice.



Drawing on your understanding of the life and teachings of Jesus and from what we know of the early church, what sort of place do you think climate activism should have in the church of today?

the challenge



All of the creation... the animals, the species, the eco-systems are all made by God, are precious to God.



Where does this affirmation of a creator God in the context of climate chaos and the threatening destruction of so much of our natural world, lead you in theological thinking?

Extinction Rebellion uses non-violent civil disobedience as a central strategy to bring about the necessary political, economic and legal change needed. What are your feelings about this?

If you had been one of the shoppers targeted by Holly with her leaflets, what would your response have been, and why?

connecting



When I am taking part in non-violent direct action, for me it's the time when my faith comes alive and I feel closest to God.



Can you connect with those feelings in your experience?

Resources

Many organisations and websites give information on the science of climate change and the actions being taken:

www.ipcc.ch The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) is the United Nations body for assessing the science related to climate change. The site points to its many reports.

www.un.org The United Nations site has much on climate change

www.theclimatecoalition.org is the UK's largest group of people dedicated to action against climate change

www.churchofengland.org/environment Shrinking the Footprint is the C of E's environment campaign

www.christianclimateaction.org represented by Holly on the film

www.rebellion.earth for Extinction Rebellion

www.hfft.org.uk Hope for the Future specialises in training citizens to work with MPs on climate change

www.sgr.org.uk Scientists for Global Responsibility

Reading

'Time to Act' A Resource Book by the Christians in Extinction Rebellion, published by SPCK, 2020

'This Changes Everything' by Naomi Klein, published by Penguin 2015

'The Uninhabitable Earth' by David Wallace- Wells, by Penguin, 2019

The Covid 19 pandemic has resulted in a great deal of reflection about the environment and doubtless books and articles will soon appear.

Greg's Story

Greg has strong opinions about life on an inner-city estate and how the church, local politicians and government need to better understand working class culture. The story of how churches have changed over Greg's lifetime and how 'the Spirit' can be rediscovered will prompt many responses. Greg might evoke admiration or disagreement but certainly food for thought!

Talking Points

leaders



Wythenshawe is like many inner-city areas across the UK, there is no recognised leadership... the pub landlords, the owner of a boxing gym are seen as leadership quality.



Why might Greg make these kinds of comments? What is authentic leadership?



Decisions will be made about working-class estates from Westminster, from Parliament... they have no understanding of the affairs, the dreams, the aspirations of local people.



What are your experiences of the ways in which some communities have been marginalised?

community



Of a newly opened gym: it was the spirit, the banter, the noise, the crowd, the people.



Does this touch upon feelings of isolation in some communities and why is this?



We are relevant to the community we serve.



Is this true of many churches and if so, how do they achieve this? (If not, how could they?)

purpose



I want to see a church that's dirty and bruised, because it is on the streets (quoting Pope Francis).



Is this our experience of church or is it more like (in Greg's words) 'a museum of sinners'?



The church has become middle class.



What does this mean, what does it look like and has it always been so?



We invited the spirit back in and he came luckily.



What might this mean?

Resources

www.cuf.org.uk The Church Urban Fund was established by the Church of England as a practical response to unmet need and has been active in local communities for over 30 years. CUF supports a whole range of urban neighbourhood projects.

www.estatechurches.org The National Estate Churches Network began in 1998 in response to the famous Faith in the City report from the CofE. Its stated vision is : 'Working with residents and practitioners to promote and support estate ministry. Partnering with policy makers and organisations so that communities on estates can flourish, bringing God's love and hope to those in need.'

www.church-poverty.org.uk Church Action on Poverty is a national ecumenical Christian social justice charity, committed to tackling poverty in the UK. CAP works in partnership with churches, and with people in poverty themselves, to tackle the root causes of poverty.

www.capuk.org Christians Against poverty offers people through local churches debt counselling and money-advice courses.

www.utusheffield.org.uk the Urban Theology Union in Sheffield has a wealth of resources built up by its founder John Vincent, including many of John's books.

Reading

The C of E's 'Faith in the City' and 'Living Faith in the City' are still worth accessing
Books by Dave Tomlinson cover many of the features of Greg's story

Patrick and Davy's Story

In a city still scarred by political and religious divide, Belfast-born Patrick and Davy, Catholic and Protestant, have found great friendship through their love of the Belfast Giants ice hockey team. Their weekly podcast, 'A View From the Bridge' encourages their listeners in the hope that 'In the land of the Giants everyone is equal'. A glimpse into their story prompts us to the wider consideration of how religious identity has 'at all times and in all places' been a force for good and for evil.

Talking Points

across the divide



Davy: I'm proud of where I come from.

Patrick: There will be an aspect where you have to decide.

Despite their friendship, both struggle to think of other friends who are from a religious background different from their own.



What are your reflections on the binding characteristics of religion, setting and culture - the good, the bad and the ugly?

unity



Sport has the ability to unify people more than anything else.



Whatever your love (or not) of different sports, how true do you find this?

How do other things such as arts and culture, compare?

middle ground



Doesn't matter who you are, where you come from, what your nationality is, your orientation, the strapline still is 'In the Land of the Giants everyone is equal'.



Does this say something about progressive religion?

Is equality something we can achieve? How far have we come?



You're always going to have people who... still want to identify with the extremes, the silent majority don't want that, and that is where Belfast has progressed.



What leads to such progress in your experience? Is movement generally away from extremes in our society?

When the two go back to their different communities they choose whether to 'pick up the bag' of their different identities. What baggage do we carry that might cause separation or the illusion of separation between us?

Resources

www.corrymeelacommunity.org For over 55 years, Corrymeela has been a place of gathering, work, faith and discussion; bringing people of different backgrounds, different political and religious beliefs and different identities together. Working with schools, communities, families, Corrymeela's mission is to 'transform division through human encounter'.

'From exclusive to inclusive' BBC religious broadcaster Ernie Rea's article in Sea of Faith's magazine, Sofia, Sept 2019 edition. Search www.sofn.org.uk

Reading

'Fifty Years On: The Troubles and the Struggle for Change in Northern Ireland by Malachi O'Doherty, published by Atlantic Books, 2019

'Reporting the Troubles: Journalists tell their stories of the Northern Ireland Conflict', ed by Deric Henderson and Ivan Little, published by Blackstaff Press, 2018

'The Good Friday Agreement', by Siobhan Fenton, published by Biteback Publishing, 2018

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