




AN UNEXPECTED CONVERSION

Our churches have seen a flourishing of social action over the last decade, but not the revival of baptisms or new members many of us have also been praying for. How are we to make sense of this – and what happens next?
By Trevor Neill


Several years ago, I found myself in conversation with a number of church members, reflecting on our experiences of working together to run a project that supported young people struggling in mainstream education. This was a ministry that had required huge sacrifice on the part of church – we gave away hours

of our time, invested significant sums of money and devoted much of our building's space to this alternative provision, but the rewards made it all worthwhile. We lost count of the number of local young people who came to us with problems that led them to the verge of permanent exclusion from school, and left with qualifications, entry to apprenticeships and a renewed trust in adults who had modelled love and patience to them.

However, in the midst of these successes that we celebrated, there was one alternative perspective: "But we haven't seen anyone saved." It was just one voice, but I suspect they spoke for many of us, giving expression to nagging doubts felt by many. We had undoubtedly witnessed redemption, but not the kind we longed for most. There had been no 'naming of the name'.



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My guess is that many similar conversations have taken place in other churches in the past ten years, a decade that has seen a flourishing of social action (night shelters, foodbanks, a vast array of community service undertaken during lockdowns) but not the revival of baptisms or new members many of us have also been praying for. How are we to make sense of this?

Reflecting recently on this question, I've been thinking afresh on a story from the

Gospels - Jesus' encounter with the Syrian-Phoenician woman recorded in Mark 7 and Matthew 15. Jesus is in unfamiliar territory with people traditionally seen as enemies of Israel, the region of Tyre condemned by prophets like Isaiah and Ezekiel. When this woman asks for healing for her daughter, Jesus replies in a way that strikes most of us as shockingly rude and dismissive. His mission, he insists, is only to the 'lost sheep of Israel.' But the woman persists, famously turning his slight on Gentile dogs into a plea for crumbs from the table. In a stunning combination of humility and audacity, the woman stands out as the only figure in Mark's Gospel to address Jesus as Lord and the only person who gets the better of the teacher who outwits everyone he meets. Furthermore, she also appears to be a woman who changes Jesus' mind, opening his eyes to the importance of mission to the Gentiles.

I wonder how many similar encounters have taken place in our churches in the decade just gone. Could it be that we have seen change taking place, but not in the way we anticipated, that we hoped to see God converting other people but found instead that he was converting us? We've been awakened to the reality of suffering and hardship experienced by those on our doorsteps, alerted to injustice which is both personal and structural and healed from the blindness of complacency and privilege. Having thought it was our role to 'fix' people we have discovered ways in which we need to change as well, summoned to a greater empathy with victims of deprivation and austerity. At the same time, God in his grace has been using us

in his mission - every occasion when someone is free from debt, school exclusion or other crises, reflects a 'plundering of the house of the strong man Jesus came to tie up' (Mark 3:27).

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HOW MIGHT GOD BE CALLING US TO CHANGE NEXT?
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Of course, this process of conversion is not complete. How might God be calling us to change next? One possibility might be that a season of acting and doing on behalf of the marginalised might give way to a period of being with them in solidarity. It now seems that the 'new normal' beginning after two years of the pandemic will not be a promised land of economic growth or reimagined high streets, but rather a time when prices rise, belts are tightened, and when people of generosity and imagination need to speak up about how resources are shared and what 'the good life' looks like.

What words of hope might we speak to go alongside our acts of compassion? Might this be a moment when the church finds its voice, proclaiming a story that is more expansive and informed by our recent experience? Can we imagine how powerfully God might use local congregations which become true colonies of heaven, offering a glimpse of how everything will be when the coming kingdom arrives: a welcome that reflects God's healing of divisions, a sharing that reflects his generosity, words that announce new possibilities and point forward to the time when 'the old order of things has passed away'?

CONVERSATION

“Helped lots of people - but haven't seen anyone saved”
 How do you respond to this?

How has your involvement in social action impacted your understanding of what it means to be a follower of Christ?

STARTERS



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