

SINCE THE DAWN OF TIME PEOPLE HAVE GATHERED where the sacred and mysterious are felt, to declare who they are, and where they came from, using rituals, dances, poems, songs, and drama. It happened when seasons changed, when crops were sown and gathered, at times of birth or death, making marriages, alliances, peace and war. Here mankind's first ideas of worship, and of their creator took shape as part of human identity and belonging.

Religion was born from the desire to express a connection between human beings and what they consider spiritual and sacred. Today, individuality is valued, and expressed in choices made about every aspect of life: what to eat, what to wear, how to be entertained, where and how to travel, what kind of career or life-style to adopt. Religious belief, once inherited from family, community, or place of origin, is today a matter of personal choice.

The traditional practice of joining in regular public prayer and worship with family and local community is no longer common, except for special occasions, like weddings and funerals. A majority still claim to pray or meditate regularly or occasionally, but without relying much on conventional Christian teaching.

Emphasis on free choice leads many to take a 'let's see if I can find a satisfying religious experience' approach, and to pick and choose aspects of belief and spiritual practice agreeable to them. This leads them to find fellowship with kindred spirits, but can also lead to no sense of belonging at all. Work, social habits and consumer

patterns should bind people together in ways that afford a sense of identity, yet loss of identity and loneliness are common today. The more we are urged to express individuality the less contented with ourselves and restless we can become.

OLD TESTAMENT BIBLICAL TEXTS relate how relations between humankind and God developed over 1,500 years. In ancient times, a collective relationship between a tribe and to God was voiced by its warriors and shamen. Later, classes of priests and prophets appeared to fulfil the role of go-between with God. From about six centuries before Christ, the idea developed that each person is accountable for themselves in a direct personal relationship to God, whoever they may be.

THE MESSAGE OF JESUS AND THE APOSTLES aimed to touch individuals, and awaken faith in God at a deeper level than ever before. Those who responded to him were a diverse bunch of people with one thing in common: because of him, they became part of a new community, not based on family ties, social status, ethnic or cultural identity, but on freely acknowledged love for God. They trusted his teaching and followed a way of life distinguishing them from others by its qualities of confidence, kindness and trust.

The earliest reports of disciples of Jesus as Christianity first spread, say that they met often to listen to his apostles teach, to pray and share food with joy and thanksgiving in their homes. The diversity of ways in which Christians have worshipped together across two millennia have the same origin – a simple human desire to learn more about

God, to enjoy sharing prayer, food and companionship.

The Christian community seeks to be a place where people support and encourage one another in all the joys and sorrows of everyday life, and in personal relationship with God. This can happen safely because its members commit themselves to trust each other, and be really honest with each other about knowing God, and keeping faith. The story of Jesus teaches how new life and hope can be found in the face of failure, defeat and suffering. It recognises how our best resolves can be undermined by hidden fears, but encourages the conviction that God's perfect love casts out fear.

THE CHURCH EXISTS NOT JUST IN VISIBLE ORGANISATIONS AND BUILDINGS but in every place where gathering to worship is part of a way of life, accepting God's love for them as they have discovered it through the way of Jesus. An essential expression of God's love, revealed in Jesus is the experience of the liberating power of God's forgiveness and healing at work in the life of an individual. This is reflected in a spirit of thanksgiving and joyful appreciation of life and its challenges.

None of this may be true in the experience of some who encounter the church. Communities of faith can fall short in being what they are meant to be. Followers of Jesus recognise their imperfections, and the hurts sustained from bad things in life. Christian disciples wanting to know and love God better aren't a club of perfect souls. They are more like people recovering

their health, learning to relax and not try to do everything on their own in competition with others, trying to grow stronger, more capable of living life as intended, honest about doubts, anxiety, frustration, failure and discontent, knowing that truthful recognition is the first step towards change.

In fact, it's difficult to grasp fully the point of regular prayer and worship together, unless this arises naturally from being part of a lively active community, whose members want to learn about God, grow in relation to him, and see their lives changing in response to God's graciousness and goodness.

The Christian understanding of the meaning of being human rests on the belief that people exist most fully and completely as free responsible individuals, when they are relating freely to others, united by love for God and neighbour, willingly admitting their need for God, giving God priority in their lives and letting all other choices flow from a desire to do God's loving will and purpose.

THE LIFE OF PRAYER AND WORSHIP IN CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY takes many forms : public services, or groups where people spontaneously pray aloud for their needs, or deep silence uniting two or three, even a great multitude in simple adoration or meditation on scripture. In this diversity, there's something for everyone. The aim is to create an environment of love and acceptance where people are empowered to grow in love and in relation to God and each other. Nothing nourishes spiritual growth as effectively as prayer and worship

in common. Our needs may change as our spiritual journey progresses, but in a living Christian community of faith, there will always be somewhere for each person to find themselves at home. As Jesus said, "*Seek and you shall find*".

Where are you truly at home in a community of faith?

Any questions or comments
arising from this leaflet?
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Christianity for 21st century people

3. What is the point of worship & praying together with others?

60% of people interviewed about religious beliefs admit to praying occasionally, some even say they pray often. About 3% of the population are regular church attenders. Many attend worship less frequently than they used to. Public prayer and worship is far less attractive to twenty first century people than it was to our Victorian ancestors. The reasons are varied: disinterest, boredom, availability of more inspiring alternatives to worship, such as concerts, art events, classes in reiki, yoga, or Tai Chi. Most who profess to be believers today are stating, in their own way : "I don't need to go to church to pray or worship God."

Have people today out-grown the need for the traditional practice of public worship?

Is there nothing useful to be gained from the regular practice of common prayer together?

**A CARDIFF URBAN MISSION
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