

## A few “sayings” from ministry on estates

### *Prayer - Bible - Friendship*

#### 1. “Jesus didn’t sit in his hut”

Not my line! When we moved onto the estate a man who ran the local café noticed me wandering around and said “I don’t know much about your faith or what you’re planning to do but I do know Jesus didn’t sit in his hut and just wait for people to come to him”. The “hut” can be literal (the building) and/or metaphorical.

Once our worshipping community had grown other vicars would ask “what do you do on Sundays to get those local guys to come?” and the only response was “we stopped asking people to come to church”! It doesn’t matter so much how informal or novel services are when the local folk keep saying “I’d catch fire in there”.

Local folk often said “I’m not religious but...” - to me meaning that while they didn’t want to come to church – or feel able to – they weren’t totally against faith/ Bible/ being prayed for. Take Jesus to them - where *they* feel comfortable. Key question: what are we asking folk to do (foreign to them) *before* they meet Jesus/ hear about the cross, hope?

The pull is always back into the building, set times, groups, services, structured stuff. So this saying is not only for the early days. And even the new believers can disappear into the hut. The bigger the church the more important to clear time in the pastor(s)’ diary to be outside the hut and join what Jesus is still doing there.

#### 2. “Reaching the unreached”

Middle-class England largely doesn’t believe in God but unwittingly breathes Christian air. Outer estate life is more pagan and the UK’s largest unreached people group. Unless seen as cross-cultural mission, it’s approached the wrong way: It’s not bringing “church” on to an estate, it’s new life *before* form - loose wineskins for new wine.

The devil doesn’t want you there: so really pray! Have Christians outside “the team” and church giving cover via WhatsApp updates and urgent requests. How much is the team really praying? Don’t worry about evangelising the estate but focus on the next person Jesus shows you: really pray until they come to faith. Reach the unreached.

There are wonderful and redeemable qualities about estate life: loyalty, inter-dependence, love, generosity and honesty. But sex is out of control, mindless entertainment can be destructive and there’s weird spiritual stuff (pray against witches – they will be “praying” against you) – often linked to death of loved ones.

Teach about real life. Poke the devil in the eye. From the front don’t shy away from sex, marriage, male, female heaven, judgment, forgiveness. Speak plainly and be engaging. Informal discussions are effective with the Bible open. The Bible *first-hand* is important – don’t *rely* on courses/ video content/ online material - especially early on.

Unreached folk often come to faith with lots of “stuff”. 2:1/ 3:1 ministry is important: it must feel safe and in Jesus’ timing. The devil prowls around, so don’t be afraid to exercise church discipline on divisive behaviour and gossip. When doing so: be clear, keep notes and keep issues between those it relates to – don’t gossip between leaders.

#### 3. “The plan to find out the plan”

Church planting strategies often focus on hiring staff, 1<sup>st</sup> year plans, launch dates, strap lines. Plans are good, but Jesus “does only what he sees the Father doing”. Keep communicating with *team*, “the plan to find out the plan”. Best to land first, take 6 months, outside the hut, with folk, listening, watching. Live locally in an estate-type house.

With regards to “team”: remember it’s cross-cultural mission not a satellite of a city centre church. Don’t be a lone ranger *but don’t go mob-handed*. Keeping outsider-Christians happy can drown and distract from the vision: a church *of* the estate not *onto* an estate. “Planting” is often unhelpful language, especially locally.

Be wary of having a vision for the community. Jesus already has a vision and it’s about people not neighbourhoods (Luke 4). We make disciples and Jesus builds his church. This *will* change things: locals *should* notice a difference: disciples *are* a blessing - and serve. But careful of “resolving”/ specialising in particular issues (addiction, poverty).

“Timely words” and prophetic pictures are often mission-critical. Remember prophecy builds up: it unburdens, clarifies, endorses and encourages more than it gives us things to do. Be wary of “words from the Lord” that tell you what “*we should be doing*”. Warnings aren’t unheard of. But prophecy points us back to Jesus not ourselves.

#### 4. “Be part of, don’t put on”

It’s tempting to make our mark. Christians from *outside* apply that pressure. “It’s what we did at our last church”. *Putting on* provides somewhere *we* feel comfortable - we know our place, the rules - but do the locals? Wait to be asked - serve. Don’t take over. Cheer on others. Speak well of what’s happening. Join in. Be a positive presence.

Neutral spaces are safe – cafes, schools. It takes time for people to feel at ease in church buildings. It takes time to get into homes. Be wary of local politics unless Jesus clearly leads you in - especially where money is involved. Serve *people* - keep partnerships informal where possible. Lanyards make people feel like service users.

“Be slow to lay on hands”: especially in giving all key decision-making & serving roles to the incoming Christian “team”. It’s hard to change that dynamic later on. It’s OK to leave gaps a while. If groups/ activities are polished, local volunteers will worry about ruining them. Be ready to give locals responsibility, but without formality for a while.

Ask mature Christians (especially if not moving to the estate) to mingle for a bit rather than having a role. If they push for a role they might not be people that serve the “*of the estate*” vision. Do they mingle well? Be careful too of estate folk with church backgrounds who can become dominant - not by spiritual authority but by knowing the lingo.

#### 5. “Free to fail” or “messy but safe”

Jesus wants his church to feel safe but allows us *and others* to arrive as we are. The messy/ safe balance is crucial and perpetual. If you’re always worried about stuff getting ruined (apart from people) change it, get rid of it, get over it – i.e. material/ structural/ external. People fear “getting it wrong” in church, but Jesus gives freedom.

Be light-hearted. And fun. Banter is OK but avoid sarcasm, dry humour, teasing and being “cool”. Be the safe person. Naïve to local whispers. Be mindful of people’s fragile self-worth. Save your serious voice for when something is very serious. Don’t be intense. Discipleship can be tough but don’t stress about “running a church”.

Use questions as much as giving advice. It’s tempting to enjoy feeling needed, being “wise” and in the know. A lack of thinking is a kind of poverty. Jesus wants people to think. If you give too much advice which people *don’t* follow it creates barriers or feelings of failure. If folk always comply, are they trusting *Jesus*? Don’t be bossy.

Don’t make a big deal out of “doing the stuff”. Avoid this by getting people to do it early – praying, serving, sharing etc. Don’t make a big deal out of “evangelism” – it will happen naturally. Be mindful of how you pray with someone or in groups: if it’s long, complicated or religious it will shut others down who will think “how do I follow that?”

If an idea/ activity gains traction be slow to “turn it into a thing” - a “ministry”. If it has happened naturally it will thrive naturally. Turning it into a *thing* – especially a church thing – changes people’s relationship to it. It soon becomes a chore. It can outlive its season. Once it becomes a *thing* the experts are needed. Jesus didn’t use experts.

## 6. “Free to come and go”

Discipleship takes time. Often people look like they're going backwards at 6 months or in second year. It's not backwards it's stuff is bubbling up. *Belonging* is complicated: often folk's greatest desire and biggest fear. Folk wobble, push away, run away, go off the rails. Keep in touch, be consistent, keep it light, give time, pray.

Watch the “in or out” dynamic. And be mindful of their two fears: being trapped and being left out. Keep soft edges. Make small movements too. Change is hard. Keep stuff as unofficial as possible where appropriate for safety. Regularly host occasions to mix church/ fringe/ returners/ all age – food helps – so does the *outdoors*.

Discipline *is* important. But be aware of rules. Jesus' commands are not burdensome. Address commitment issues wisely, gently, personally, biblically. Relationships begin as friendship but drift towards something more church-orientated. Re-establish the *friendship* base when you feel this – go and do something you used to enjoy together.

## 7. “Keep up the fun”

An interest in football, kayaking, pool, boxing or food is often essential. Again, don't let church life always be serious. Discos, bingo, pantos. Family life is top of the agenda in estate life - get the kids involved. Get youth off the estate and give them new experiences. And when they do something well, text their parents and big up their child.

Poverty creates “small worlds”, so have adventures. A few a year is fine. People remember *moments*: they talk about them for months after and look forward to them months before! Go away a few days – as mates - *do* something. For bigger trips it's holiday parks over camping. Don't get bogged down in being the organiser - enjoy it!

Birthdays are a big deal - make every effort to attend the parties and bashes - if you're invited of course!

## 8. “Don't fake it”

Don't worry if you feel you're not connecting straight away. Time is important. Estate folk have a heightened sense of pretence: don't be someone you're not. Being honest about your own “stuff” will help level things out. We call church, “prayer – bible – *friendship*”. Don't try too hard or ask folk too many questions - social workers do that.

It's easier for middle-class people to manoeuvre, change circles, avoid, move on. On estates there is less change and transience, so issues have to be dealt with. Not always well. But have the difficult conversations. Don't be afraid to ask people what they really think, their opinions, where they're really at. Especially second-year believers.

Trust the Bible yourself: people learn a lot by watching you and they know what's real.

## 9. “A big God faith”

Bring global issues into the local context. Folk on estates often understand and engage with suffering better than middle-class churches. Get in Open Doors, IJM or Compassion. Get them first-hand engaged in praying and supporting global mission and hearing about tough faith, injustice and Jesus' powerful deliverance.

Don't wait too long before getting folk on mission. Keep Jesus' movement moving. There's a strong spirit of sticking with what folk know and low aspiration. Local testimonies are powerful and good for sustainability, but don't hold on to people who might *have* to move on. It's no loss for the church if people see their friends spread their wings.

## 10. "It's not my church"

It's tempting to seek "just press pause" moments when you feel like everything's going well. That's a lie. We are never in control and on top of things. Get used to that. There should be enough battles to keep you praying and enough new life to keep you going. But Jesus is in control. He is your rest – your pause - it's his church.

Don't make church some *thing* you can't hear bad comments about or people don't want to offend you over. The emperor's new clothes. Remind folk church is simply the people. If you keep smoothing over, the foundations will be weak. Don't be afraid to ask how people are finding things. Ask for help and advice. It's not your church anyway.

It's hard to know where people are really at. Especially as a leader. Looks can be deceiving. Someone might agree with you but that doesn't mean they really believe what you're saying. And they might disagree with you but it doesn't mean they're not listening and watching. Be secure enough in Jesus to handle all that.

Don't worry if it all goes disastrously wrong: things pass as quickly as they blow up. It feels awful to drop a clanger, but folk are quick to forgive. Say sorry. And it's OK to look stupid - it makes you normal. *You have to be secure in Jesus* - not church. You are free to fail too. Remember that. You're there to love the people he's given you.

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