

LUSS

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The Autumn Study Day 2008 – A Report and Assessment

Luss Parish Church might have remained a sleepy little church in a small tourist village on the shores of Loch Lomond. Or more likely, in time the congregation might have dwindled, the building might have become uneconomic to maintain, and the church might have eventually closed its doors – unless leaking rainwater brought the roof down first. This is a familiar scenario. Instead, this beautiful little church has dramatically increased the numbers of visitors and pilgrims. People are coming to participate in the worship and in the church community, and they are doing so physically in the usual ways, and they are visiting ‘virtually’ through the presence on the Internet that the church has established. Quite often the one leads to the other.

Church services are streamed onto the World Wide Web via cameras placed in the church. Up to ten thousand people from around the world can log onto worship on any Sunday. Regularly the morning service is relayed in this way to Royal Navy vessels. The website receives up to 800 hits a day. The church has always been a charming place for a wedding, but lately the trickle of young couples wanting to be married here has become a steady stream. One hundred and forty couples a year come to be married in Luss itself, from seventy different countries. And after the wedding, a professional quality DVD of the occasion can be offered, thanks again to the cameras and vision mixer installed in the church.

The technology there is just one result of fund-raising activities initiated and pursued by the minister, Dr Dane Sherrard, in ways that he himself is happy to describe as both ‘brass-necked’ and unexpectedly blessed by God. As he said, there are plenty of people who are ‘desperate to do good and exciting things’. Another project is the development of the church glebe – twenty-five acres of land that were virtually unusable until the Royal Engineers were persuaded to volunteer to build a bridge over the stream that separated it from the church and the village. Now the glebe is being developed into a ‘Pilgrimage Walkway’ that is both built by, and attractive to, regular work-parties of young people.

This inspiring project reminded me of George Macleod's work parties from Glasgow who restored the ruins of Iona Abbey, and built community in the process.

There are many other stories to tell, but to hear them I would recommend you visit the website, www.lussonline.net, to get more of the flavour of what is happening in Luss. Here I just want to make a few comments based on the delightful and thought-provoking CSS Study Day that was hosted there last October.

Humanly speaking, I reckon that here was a ministry built on four things: One is the 'man for the moment', Dr Sherrard: an ebullient, entrepreneurial, story-telling minister with a flair for fund raising. Secondly, he has working with him a technician who is creative and highly skilled – the potential of such a partnership cannot be underestimated. Thirdly, there are the local resources of land, people, and buildings and the tourist attraction that is the village of Luss itself. Fourthly, there was a niche to be discovered, based on the resources and context, but dependent on the vision and development skills of the teams led by the minister. Dr Sherrard insists that they have been merely 'fairly good at stumbling into things'. I think he is a being a bit modest.

Equally important is the underlying approach and attitude to mission, and particularly the communication styles of mission. Here I think this church gives a model of communication for 21st Century Scotland, one that extends beyond the particularities of the four things I have just outlined. This is communication that uses any and every means available to ensure that there is something for a visitor, pilgrim or worshipper to hear, to see, or to experience. Worship, whether the liturgy is traditional or contemporary, is best when developed as a multi-sensory experience. This approach has a chequered history in reformed settings. Secondly, the worship is offered with an invitation rather than a command, with hospitality extended rather than obligations to conform. Mission also is multi-layered, with a great range of opportunities to give and to participate, and this draws in the range of gifts and abilities to get jobs done and to build teams.

Such open styles of worship and mission acknowledge that the sender-receiver (or 'transmission') model of communication is largely both ineffective and inappropriate in our society at this time. Accommodation is the theological

tightrope to be walked here. How easy and how dangerous it is for any religious expression to so conform itself to the surrounding culture that the gospel becomes distorted, powerless and ultimately and literally grace-less. The other danger is carrying on with the forms and strategies of past ages – culturally conditioned though *they* were – and then wondering why no-one is hearing or responding. This risks ignoring the full import of the principle of accommodation (as Calvin explained it) by which God reveals himself in language and forms that we can understand.

I think what is happening at Luss walks this tightrope very skilfully indeed. No doubt, if I may be permitted to push the metaphor a bit, the walker is blown by side-winds. Sometimes these correct and rescue an over-balancing and sometimes they are unsettling enough to remind the walker that it is God alone who sustains the whole enterprise. The missionary aim of Luss Parish Church is ‘to help visitors become pilgrims’. In graceful, creative ways, they seem to be doing just that. I recommend a visit – real or virtual. It will provide a great deal of food for thought.

References

Schultze, Quentin J, *Communicating for Life: Christian Stewardship in Community and Media* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Books, 2000).

1 Geoffrey Stevenson was invited to Luss to help facilitate group reflections and reactions.