

BEING 'CHURCH'

By SUE KING

IN JUNE 1986 THE PARISH CHURCH which I had attended for a year offered a parish-based retreat to members of the congregation. I had been a nominal Christian for some fifteen years but was now feeling the need to make sense of the little faith I had, so I was very eager to take up one of the twelve available places. I had no idea what to expect.

At a preliminary meeting, we learned that the retreat would run from Monday to Friday, meeting in the vicarage garden each morning, and that each one of us would have a half-hour one-to-one session with one of the two leaders in the afternoon, with all of us meeting in the church each evening for Compline. We were for the most part mothers of young children and this was taken into consideration—the session would finish in good time for us to collect children from playgroups or helpful friends! We were encouraged to do only the essential things that week and to avoid any activities which were not strictly necessary, in order to give ourselves as much space and time for reflection as possible.

We were probably rather shy and awkward when we met for the first morning, since many of the relationships were fairly superficial at that point. Each day we were given a talk on different aspects of a theme, then we split into small groups to discuss it, with permission to wander a bit and make connections, and then we were led in prayer, a different way each time.

This week was a wonderful experience, both personally and as a group. On the personal level, I still vividly remember realizing, during the talk on the Wednesday morning, that all those words about God's love actually applied to me—I was loved! Somehow the message had always had undertones of 'once you are a better person', but now came the discovery that the love was unconditional, and now. When the time came for my first one-to-one session I did not know what to expect, or rather, what was expected of me, but it turned out to be a very affirming and liberating experience because the director met me where I was. This concentrated experience of spiritual direction every day for a week gave each of us an unprecedented opportunity to reflect with someone else on our own history, our attitudes, circumstances, hopes and fears, and to see where God might be in all of this.

For the group the discussions were formative, not just in what was said but in the attitude we learned—to listen to and to value each person and

their experience, and not to be afraid to explore and to question. After a couple of days, we declined the usual invitation to go into small groups for discussion, because we now felt safe enough to expose our thoughts and questions to the whole group, secure in the knowledge that we would not be judged or ridiculed.

I think this attitude has been the basis of what has happened since. Existing prayer and discussion groups within the parish took on a new depth as members of the retreat were more able to speak openly about what they believed and to acknowledge their doubts and weaknesses. So many of us had been trudging along in a guilty silence, each convinced that she was the only person in the world to have *this* particular problem or *that* particular failing; to voice it often helped others who were not able to. In such parish groups the retreat members acted as 'the leaven in the lump'. Over a period of two years there were three parish-based retreats; people who went out to work during the day were also able to share this, because one of the three was designed to fit around their working day, with meetings arranged for the early morning and evening. This one was also a powerful experience for those who took part; the chance to relate their faith to their daily work opened up a new way of looking at it for some, and fulfilled an existing need for others.

We continued to grow together, deepening our prayer lives, paying attention to our journey and taking a more active part in life both outside and within the parish; I think we were all now aware that each person has a ministry and were now confident enough to offer it in the wider communities in which we moved each day. Within the church, we created special services, for Advent and other occasions, and became involved in helping to lead parish weekends and workshops, confirmation training for teenagers, starting a Julian Group; these and other activities flourished, even, in the course of time, through an interregnum.

Our new vicar's style was very different; he described it as didactic. Individuals no longer felt their varying spiritual paths encouraged or affirmed. After eighteen months of tension and conflict during which we tried to find a way forward, very difficult decisions had to be made and, one by one, most of those who had shared the retreats left the parish church. It was a very painful time for everyone involved.

Wounded, but still empowered by our experience together, we continued to meet as a prayer group. After a while patterns began to emerge—a leader as such was not what we wanted, we explored prayer together with a different group member leading on each occasion, and we supported and cared for each other. Through that shared pain, we came to realize that to consider 'the Church' to be only the institution as

it is established was an error, and that the Church is actually the body of Christ in the world, made up of the millions of people who follow Christ's way. We were not outside it.

Sustained by our time spent praying with and for each other, two years ago various members of the three parish-based retreats began to meet monthly for discussion. There are many good television and radio programmes exploring spirituality and we began to record these and use them as a basis for an evening of discussion. Examples of these have been Joseph Campbell's series called *Myth, Women of wisdom*, which explored the spiritual experience and beliefs of women of different faiths, the recent BBC 2 short series *Soul*, and Radio 4's *Seeds of faith* which is extremely varied and frequently challenging. We are not a homogeneous group and many differing opinions are held, but the original way of sharing our thoughts, listening to and valuing each other has enabled very fruitful discussions to take place, and we continue to learn from each other. We have talked about, for example, how science is now 'proving' mystics' truths that it had previously scorned; about members' different attitudes towards the image of God as Mother, either anathema or deep recognition; and our varying attitudes towards the Church as an institution, with its paternalism, some of us being so deeply unhappy with it that they have to stay outside and others who will always remain within it.

We make decisions jointly, rather than having a hierarchy, so when the majority of people wanted both the prayer and the discussion group to meet more frequently, we moved from monthly to twice-monthly meetings. We have tried to remain open rather than exclusive groups and I think we have succeeded in this; over a period of three years others have joined us and are still doing so, people who attend various Anglican and Roman Catholic churches, and some who have no church. Our meetings happen in members' homes; at first this was because these were the only places available to use, but now it is out of choice, because we have come to believe that small groups like these are a very valid way of being 'church', and that if we were to embark upon hiring a hall we would be on the way to becoming an 'organization' and would soon become occupied with running *it* rather than with paying attention to our original aims, a problem which besets the established church. Also the small group size enables everyone to speak and to be listened to, while it can sometimes be too difficult to do this in a larger gathering. We have never had more than twenty people at any meeting.

We see ourselves as a community, genuinely interested in and caring for each other, and as a development of this, we decided that we wanted

to worship together regularly as well. Hence, this is our latest adventure. First of all, we got together to share what our various needs and hopes might be in relation to this, and we invited to this meeting others who we thought might be interested. What emerged was that people wanted a gathering specifically for worship and for sharing with each other our experience as we each continue on our journey. We wanted to be able to bring in our concerns, the things that life throws at us from time to time, and to know that the others would listen and care at a real level. Being able to be ourselves and not to have to pretend, and for each member's way to be respected were important needs, and joy and laughter were also mentioned. Those who go out to work, the majority, would value being able to share some of the problems they meet there, and being able to talk about them in relation to their faith. We decided to meet weekly for an experimental period through the spring and summer and then to review it; we deliberately avoided Sundays so that those who have church commitments are not compromised.

Our worship has been varied; it has included silent meditation, readings both biblical and from other sources, singing and chanting, joint reflection on a painting of the annunciation, taped music from the Russian Orthodox Church and Taizé, circle dancing and various forms of intercession, including using a cut up map of the earth and putting it together again as we made each prayer. As with the prayer group, the leadership rotates and each week two different people have devised the worship. And again, to a core of people who shared the parish-based retreat experience have been added others from a wide area and now— at last!—we are no longer exclusively female.

There have been stumbling blocks along the way, but overcoming them has, I think, led to new understandings and helped to bond us into a community. We have needed to articulate some of the attitudes which the 'retreatants' have come to take for granted, for example that fact that it is all right to say how a particular way of prayer does or does not help you, without that being critical of the leader, or that it is all right to voice uncomfortable feelings, or to say that you would prefer to remain silent with your own thoughts for a while.

Having paid attention purely to our own needs over the past two months, we are now beginning to look outwards at those within our larger community, and are hoping to help provide needed equipment for a local school for emotionally disturbed children.

The result of all these activities has been growth, both as a group and as individuals. Latent gifts within people have been developed and affirmed, and most of us are now involved in ministries we would never

have foreseen or imagined to be within our capabilities. Two of us attend a local church where the vicar is very supportive and encouraged us when we said we would like to hold monthly evening services using liturgy from the Iona Community¹ and some material of our own; this has been happening for two years now and has reached out to people who do not usually attend church services. Other parishes have invited us to lead such services for them occasionally, and we were delighted to hear that one of these has now decided to hold a similar monthly service themselves. We have also initiated a visiting scheme in our parish by which, instead of trying to persuade nominal Christians to start attending church regularly, we try to take the church to them by regular visits and listening; many members of the congregation are involved in this.

Over the years since the parish-based retreats, many of us have experienced crises in our lives; there has been a bereavement, two redundancies, ill health and operations. When I was the one in need, the group supported me with prayer, companionship and practical help—it was a church I could rely on. The person who suffered the bereavement has also felt almost physically upheld by the prayer offered.

All of our group are at work in the community in various ways, some working in social services, in hospitals and with emotionally damaged children, some are active politically, some have ministries within the church, some give spiritual direction. Wherever we work, we all see 'ministry' in its widest sense and apply it to the everyday, and enabling other people to become what they have it in them to become is of central importance.

It has been remarked by a senior diocesan source that some of the most creative people currently working in the diocese at large were exported from that original parish; they are also those who took part in the retreats. Reflecting on this, I see a pattern of gathering and scattering: we were gathered in the retreats and then scattered amongst the parish activities; we gathered in our prayer group² and were then scattered from that parish; we and others now gather together for our groups where we get nourishment, and then scatter to offer it in the different circles we move and minister in. Gather and scatter, gather and scatter; it seems a very natural pattern, like a heartbeat.

NOTES

¹ Wild Goose Worship Group: *A wee worship book* (Glasgow, 1989); Wild Goose Publications: *The Iona Community worship book* (Glasgow, 1988).

² Morgan, Henry (ed): *Approaches to prayer* (London: SPCK, 1991).