

We had just finished one of the Lent group sessions in the parish in Gloucester where I was serving as curate. The material our groups were using was one of the books in the *Pilgrim* course series, which was fairly new off the press at that point, on the Eucharist.

As we drew this particular session to a close, one of the participants – a lovely, gentle and godly man – said: ‘Well, I’ve been going to church for 70 years or more, and I never knew *that* about the Eucharist. I’ve learned something today, which is great!’

That is one of the reasons why having a nurture course as a regular part of our churches’ life is so important, and worth the investment of time and resources. Even when we know that parish life is so busy - planning worship, responding to pastoral care needs, PCC business, safeguarding, building issues, churchyard problems, committee meetings, children and/or youth planning, stewardship drives. And never enough volunteers. In this situation, it’s easy for Christian formation for adults to take a back seat to all the other things.

But if the experience of our beloved brother in Gloucester – and other congregations of my experience – is true, then in our church communities right now are adult members who know that they don’t know what they should know about their faith. Perhaps more than a few adult members.

Some of them might be fine with this. But I suspect most of them are not. In our day, ‘going to church’ is no longer culturally expected, it is completely voluntary. It also has to compete with many other enticing weekend activities. So, most of the people who are making it a priority to get themselves to worship on a regular basis actually have a real hunger to grow in the knowledge and love of God, and to be a good neighbour to all their neighbours, near and far, as Jesus teaches us.

My hunch is that most of the people in our pews *want* to learn about their faith. They want an authentic relationship with God. They have real questions about meaning and purpose, morality and mortality, burning questions about sin, grace, forgiveness and relationships.

If conversations I’m having with people inside - and outside - church are anything to go by, many people have had real experiences of God’s presence in their lives that they want to talk about. They might have been hurt by another church in the past; they want to work through what happened to them and who they are now in relationship with God and Jesus. They might pray a lot, but never talk to anyone about it. Or they might have always wanted to learn how to pray, but no one ever taught them and now they are too embarrassed to ask.

People like this are in our churches, or on the fringes of church. Some of them might even have been raised Anglican, but because of a whole host of reasons to do both with the wider culture and secularization, coupled with a lack of consistent, ongoing Christian formation, no one really taught them the basics of Christian faith in a comprehensive way.

It’s good that there are people in our pews because they have discovered a welcoming community, lasting friendships, nourishing worship, opportunities for service, and companionship.

Yet they still haven't learned many of the things that they thought they'd know after years of church-going. Are there folk among us who can't find passages in the Bible on their own? Or they still don't feel confident turning to God in prayer when they are not in church. They don't really know why we do the things we do in worship – which in churches of our Anglo-Catholic tradition includes music, movement, gesture, sights, scents, words, silence.

These are just some of the reasons why it is important to offer regular introductory and nurturing material in our churches, even with all the other competing demands on time and energy of our congregational leaders.

Having courses like this isn't just for children or 'newbies'; it's for all of us, and it's important for the sake of the health of our churches.

It's also good for lay people to step up and lead sessions – it grows their own confidence as well as growing a loving, praying community. And with the current strain on clergy numbers, having a regular course which lay people easily can lead means this could continue, for example, during a vacancy, or during a parish reorganisation, to maintain momentum in parish life.

There is good evidence, however slight, that more people are showing an interest in getting to know God, who we see revealed supremely and wonderfully in Jesus Christ. They are looking at us, the Church, to help make that happen.

Bible study is important and necessary. Adult formation that engages important issues of the day from the perspective of faith is also important. But without a deep background, without an opportunity to start from Square One, it's difficult for the daily habits of following Jesus to take root very deeply.

That's why we have started the benefice-wide **Pilgrim** course, meeting fortnightly (not a huge commitment), over coffee/tea and a light breakfast – it's always good to eat together!

Look out for details of the course, held on the first and third Saturdays of each month. Think about joining in with our band of pilgrims as we learn and grow together in our faith. And even, perhaps, pray about whether *you* could be among the leaders of sessions.

I'm sure that in our churches there are adult members who know that they don't know what they should know about their faith. Let's change that.

Fr Simon