



Unlock workshop handout

The one thing I keep finding myself saying to people when I am talking about Unlock's work is 'it's not rocket science'. I reckon there is pretty much someone in every church that could grasp the issues, and the basic principles of how to tackle them. That is why Unlock works in a way that does not generate yet another layer of dependency, where people from outside come in and 'fix' things. We work in a way that enables local leadership, offers support for a time while things develop, and then moves on to raise awareness of the issues, and some possible approaches somewhere else.

3 types of culture have been identified in the UK today. I wouldn't argue that there are only these three, there will certainly be others, not least the distinctive cultures of some ethnic minorities, but for now we will focus on these three. They are known as: -

- 'Modern' culture,
- 'Post Modern' culture, and,
- 'Tradition Tabloid' culture.

Unlock has worked for almost 40 years developing ways of using the bible within **Traditional Tabloid Culture**. One of the recognised features of Traditional Tabloid Culture is that people within it don't relate very readily to books and text. These are households where you probably won't see many books, if any, perhaps just a TV guide, or a catalogue. It's not that people can't read; it is just that it isn't part of their way of life, not an activity that they are used to or particularly comfortable with.

So what do you do? This is a 'non-book' culture and the thing you want them to engage with is – a book! Not only that, it is a big fat book, with no pictures, and loads of text, often in language that is strange to most of us!

The trick is not to start with The Book at all, but rather to begin with the real life everyday experiences of the people you are working with.

You could start with: -

- their stories
- their own experiences
- a shared group experience
- Making or drawing something together
- Something within the life of their community
- Something everyday for them
- Whatever they were all talking about as they came in
- An object from everyday life; a carrier bag, bus ticket, mobile phone, cup of tea, etc.
- A culturally appropriate film or TV clip

- A picture
- An emotion – e.g. think of the last time you were angry, ashamed, excited, etc.

The key is to focus on the participants. What is needed is very much learner centred learning, that is not too precious about content, but is about helping people explore their own experience, relate it to scripture, and discover their own potential. In Theological reflection, or in traditional bible study, you begin with a text. All you need to do when working in ‘non-book’ cultures is begin with a different kind of ‘text’, one that is not in print.

This may be scary for those of you who are used to knowing what you will say and what you want people to learn. I honestly think that to work in this kind of culture you have to respect the participants enough to give up the agenda to them, and let them discover what they want to learn, and enable that process with them. One of the things that will affect how scary this approach is for you is how you look at faith. If you understand faith as a nicely wrapped package, with a fixed content, safely fastened up, which you were given some time ago, and all you have to do is keep it safe – you will find this approach to enabling theological thinking pretty scary. If you see faith as a journey of discovery, to which each of us is committed (faithful), and within which each of us is uncovering different aspects of God, and viewing him/her from different places, this sort of approach is much less threatening. I don’t believe that I am qualified to tell you that either of these ways of seeing faith is correct, or incorrect. But I do know that Unlock approaches are much less scary for those who see faith as dynamic, growing and changing, than they are for those who see it as fixed and unchanging. Unlock’s approach leaves a good deal of what people will actually learn in the hands of the Holy Spirit! Prayer is an essential part of the process!

The use of questions is important. It is really the most effective way in which you can challenge groups to think more carefully or explore an alternative perspective. And it’s a very creative tool, not to be underrated. If you look at how Jesus taught, you will see that he used stories from everyday life, and questions, more than any other approach. It is best if you use questions that rely on *insight and experience* rather than *knowledge*, so probably not, ‘who can tell me what Jesus said to the Syrpheonietian woman in Tyre!’ but more like, ‘can you think of a time when you felt rejected by someone who was important to you?’

For example, just say, there is an issue with teenagers being disruptive on an estate, a meeting is called, people come with predetermined ideas about the nature of the problem and what the solution is. Unlock’s approach would be to get people into small groups and ask them to talk with each other about what each of them wanted most when they were a teenager? Who was the adult they liked best when they were teenagers and why? What aspects of their own teenage behaviour most upset their parents? Discussions structured in this way are much more likely to lead to creative outcomes than confrontational debates about who has the best idea for solving the ‘problem’. The principle is simple, you are asking people to apply their own 1st hand experience to help them develop insights into the situation and begin to formulate their own solutions. This is empowering. These principles can be applied to any topic, including the Bible.

The Unlock approach isn’t one precious method; it’s a series of principles which have evolved over 30 years of practical experience. It has manifested itself differently in different places. Workers in Sheffield focussed on the use of contemporary film and have produced resources based on Billy Elliot and The Full Monty. There are all kinds of clips from films, or television

programmes, which can be used to open up theological discussions of contemporary issues. In Hull they specialised in the use of creative visual arts and hands on activities. One of the keys in Hull seems to have been their way of thinking in very concrete terms, which fits well with traditional tabloid culture. In Hull they have – made bricks with no straw – literally, they have conducted an ‘exodus’ from the safety of the church, into the ‘new territory’ of the estate, on go-carts that they had all worked together to build, and they have ‘entered the promised land’ by placing a big thick curtain across the sanctuary and then pulling it down to reveal a feast of fish and chips, ready to share on the other side. Afterwards people have reflected in small groups on their shared experiences, and made connections between them and the stories in the bible and with their own life experiences, so they have identified and explored their own times of ‘slavery’, ‘exile’ and their own ‘promised land’ experiences.

If you want to know more about Unlock and its work you can:-

- Visit the Unlock website www.unlock-urban.org.uk
- Contact the Unlock National Office: Unlock, Handsworth Parish Centre, Handsworth Road, Sheffield, S13 9BZ, Tel: 0114 2939 606, office@unlock-urban.org.uk
- Complete the feedback form provided and return it to the National Office.

Dawn Lonsdale (Chief Officer) November 2007

Nothing new under the sun.....

One worry that is often flagged up when considering non-book ways of communicating theology is that it will detract from the Word of God, ie not using the Bible – the written word - is dangerous. However, there is nothing new under the sun when it comes to visual and dramatic ways of communicating theology. In medieval times (pre Protestantism), when congregations were largely illiterate and the mass was conducted in Latin anyway, churches were full of paintings and murals illustrating stories and themes from the Bible. Mystery plays were also performed in the market places citing traditional interpretations of Scripture in an effort to bring theology to everyday people. The popular “Second Shepherd’s Play” is one example, available from the Unlock office on request.

Nowadays illiteracy is not so much the issue. Rather the shift is towards the spoken and seen word as a matter of choice. Occasionally this is due to lower basic skills levels and problems such as dyslexia; more often not. Whatever, the challenge these days remains the same: to communicate Scripture in ways that are relevant, accessible and meaningful to everyday men and women.

One example of how theology can be communicated in a very real and down-to-earth way is in the life of a 17 year old friend who recently came with me on an outreach trip to Morocco. She is bright, articulate, big-hearted, wise and theologically sound and profound. She is also severely dyslexic which means she finds not only written words difficult to assimilate but spoken instruction too. The best way she learns theology is by living out what she grasps from DVDs, songs, dramas, conversations and through the example of her foster parents and Christian friends around her.

Fiona Smith, Unlock Hull Field Worker, 7/6/07