

## Church? What does she mean to you?

GEOFF RYAN, JAN/FEB 2003

*“At every one of these concerts in England you will find rows of weary people who are there, not because they really like classical music, but because they think they ought to like it.” (George Bernard Shaw, Man and Superman)*

William Blake, the 17<sup>th</sup> century English artist and romantic poet, was a visionary, a mystic, and possibly a madman. He rebelled against all forms of earthly authority including the Church, but he loved God. In his poem, “The Little Vagabond”, Blake wonders if people would more readily attend church, and enjoy it, if it bore a closer resemblance to the local pub.

*Dear Mother, dear Mother, the Church is cold. .  
But the Ale-house is healthy & pleasant & warm:  
Besides I can tell where I am use'd well.  
Such usage in heaven will never do well.*

*But if at the Church they would give us some Ale,  
And a pleasant fire, our souls to regale:  
We'd sing and we'd pray all the live-long day:  
Nor ever once wish from the Church to stray.*

*Then the Parson might preach & drink & sing,  
And we'd be as happy as birds in the spring:  
And modest dame Lurch, who is always at  
Church:*

*Would not have bandy children nor fasting nor  
birch.*

*And God like a father rejoicing to see,  
His children as pleasant and happy as he  
Would have no more quarrel with the Devil or the  
Barrel*

*But kiss him & give him both drink and apparel.*

**A**t the opening meeting we held for the Salvation Army in Rostov-on-Don, one of our invited guests was the local Russian Baptist pastor. He was a cheerful, older man of great vigour who subsequently proved to be a good friend during our years in that city. He had a hard time with our service though and afterwards took me aside to give me a little “fatherly advice”. The problem for him stemmed from the fact that our meeting had not been churchy enough. It had been “more like a nightclub than a church”. I considered this a positive thing and told him so. “You see, Valentin Dmitrivich”, I said, “people like going to nightclubs and don't much like going to church!” The point was lost on him, however.

Personally, I do not like going to church much either. I never have. I have gone through periods of relative enjoyment, but in the main, church has felt more of a chore than a pleasure - a drag as a kid and a duty as an adult. Admittedly this is a bit of a drawback in my profession, not to mention that I've been a “church planter” for most of my officership. This is a contradiction for sure.

If I try to think objectively about the dominant feelings that have accompanied the word “Church” it is sense of being trapped. Maybe it is the sitting down for long periods of time, I've always had a hard time doing this. Sometimes I just don't feel in the mood to be there. Sometimes I don't want to sing. Often I can't pray. When speaking as a guest at other churches, I can become agonizingly self-conscious, like an urchin in an upscale restaurant not sure of which fork to use. I want to run away most weeks. It is nothing to do with God, really. The issue is more with the hoops I am expected to jump through in order to connect with him.

Without a doubt, “church” is an overused word, especially in evangelical circles. Its definition has expanded to the point where it encompasses everything from a building, to an institution, to a home group. We can have both church architecture and a church without

walls - the local church, the church universal and even aqua church. My kids refer to Sunday activities as going to “Hallelujah”, a hangover from Russia days when this universally understood word snagged their imaginations more than “church”. In Canada, we have renamed most of our “corps” and now call them “community churches”, though many are in actuality commuter churches with no common link to the surrounding community save geographical location. Like the word “love” in popular usage, “church” effectively means most anything we *want* it to and consequently little that we *need* it to. Paradoxically, to be known and recognized as a church is a holy grail we pursue as evangelicals somehow thinking it will increase our appeal and acceptance in the world, while at the same time the term “church” engenders less than positive feelings amongst most of the unchurched populace.

Part of the problem is that as Protestants we have inherited an impoverished understanding of the church. The reactionary fervour of the Reformation had its down side and included in this was the lowering of expectations of what the church could be and should do. The practice of faith was moved from the communal to the individual, from the public sphere to the private closet and, in reducing the sacramental understanding of the church from seven to two, we also reduced the import and validity of what people expect to experience on a Sunday. The church, as the body of Christ on earth, is meant to be the place where our lives (of faith and lack of faith) are lived out together. It is a community in which we play out all the most significant events of our earthly lives and spiritual pilgrimages, a place to get married, be received into the body of Christ, confess our sins, be confirmed in our intention to live as followers of Jesus and prepare to enter eternity among other things.

We have reduced the spell-binding mystery of union with God and each other through the irresistible seduction of the bride of Christ, to a cheery, Sunday morning therapy session where the main question put to newcomers is: “Did you like it?” (as if it were a meal at a restaurant or a newly released movie). But surely the purpose of the Church is not to make people happy, but to make them holy, as Charles Colson points out in his book, “The Body”?

It has been my experience that the average Salvationist has little or no idea that “church” is primarily a relationship in the context of a faith community. We have been enculturated to engage in programs and performance.

Programs are clean, safe, efficient and excellent to hide behind. Relationships are costly and messy and demand an investment that spills beyond the walls of our church on a Sunday morning and that demands that we become vulnerable and admit our needs. Nothing could be further than the typical Sunday morning reality in most Salvation Army corps.

As Phil Needham points out in “Community in Mission”: “The Church is not a grouping of individual Christians; it is a community in which Christians share in one another’s struggles and hopes. In the fellowship of believers, Christians bear one another’s burdens (Galatians 6:2), weep together, rejoice together (Romans 12:15), lift one another up in prayer (Romans 1:9; 2 Corinthians 9:14; Ephesians 1:16; Philippians 1:4; Colossians 4:2; etc), and love one another as Christ loved them (John 13:34). There is a togetherness in this fellowship that goes far deeper than mere camaraderie. The pledge which the Spirit empowers the Church to carry out is the pledge of members of the community of faith to *be with* one another in *every* circumstance.”

Our faith community at 614 Toronto can seem at times like anti-church. It is actually a bit of a mess most Sundays. A spectacularly chaotic sprawl of adults, children and ... things. A shaggy mongrel of a “church”, cobbled together with donated equipment, wounded people and cash infusions from DHQ. It is not recognizable church for most people who have been taught otherwise but it does mostly contain what I *do* like about church, though, and that is *the people*. They come seeking other people, nosing out the possibility of human warmth and the touch of another human being, the promise of a well-fed belly and some bright, emotionally charged singing that allows a brief forgetting of the monotony of daily life. And of course the chance that Jesus might show up. It’s a bit of a gamble, but Jesus usually does show up. Not in response to any summoning or conjuring, not because we have played and sung so hard that the emotional pitch is high and hot enough... but because he *wants* to. Because he promised that “where two or three are gathered”, because he inhabits the praises of his people, because he also lives in our part of town.

And so our people come to church each week. Troops returning from the front of their daily existence, sporting fresh wounds, fatalities as common as mud. Our people, our church - with blackened hearts many of them, battered personalities and bruised consciences... scarred in body and mind and will and spirit. In Psalm

24, David claims that that only those with clean hands and pure hearts, only those who have not lifted their souls to idols or sworn deceitfully, only such righteous people will receive the Lord's blessing. If this is the case, then we haven't a hope at 614. In our church there are few clean hands, few pure hearts, plenty of idolators and deceitfulness abounds. But they come, *we* come, just the same, "bending under heavy loads; loads of injustice, of resentment and hate, of suffering and sin...dragging the world behind them, with everything rusted, twisted, badly adjusted." (Michel Quoist)

We lift our hands in praise, stained and disfigured by sin like leper's stumps. We pray, often with speech slurred by the drunkenness of our compulsions and marred by the curses that our lives seem to be on that particular day. We talk and hug and fellowship together even as the sharks of mistrust and envy, hatred and lust swim between and around us. We listen to God's word, sometimes without comprehension, hardly hearing through our pain and

dysfunction. But sometimes like Peter stepping out of the boat and fixing our eyes straight ahead, trying not to look down at the raging waters because we know it is the difference between getting to Jesus or drowning in our circumstances. And like a kid searching for Waldo, we look around and crane our necks, looking for Jesus, wondering in whom he will show up this week. Such is church as we understand it - definitely more hospital for sinners than museum for saints. A bit like the local pub, actually, not a recognizable program in sight. And this I can handle, most weeks.

Next summer at SARROOTS our theme is "Church? What does she mean to you?" We will be exploring what the church is and attempting to gain an understanding of her that is adequate to the world we live in and the lives we lead. I will be there, a bit wary and slightly mistrustful, likely wandering the perimeter of the main worship venue. But I will come. I have to. Something draws me. I invite you to join me. At church.