

2. Encouragement

AIM: To challenge everyone to take a lead in being active encouragers.

Preparation and Introduction: (see appendix A for ideas to read out as example)

Think of a time when you were encouraged by someone, or where you witnessed some encouragement being given. What differences did it make?

You could write it down using fictitious names. Put these bits of paper into a hat. During the evening, at any given moment, the leader (or anyone) takes a story of encouragement out of the hat and reads it to the group. Start now with a couple of stories!

Prayer:

When the good times roll
And my cup overflows
Lord
Keep me thankful.

When all is fine
And I have nothing but time
Lord
Keep me thankful

When I don't see too well
But I don't really care
Lord
Keep me thankful

When the harvest is here
And everything is clear
Lord
Keep me thankful

When it all makes sense
And I'm full of confidence
Lord
Keep me thankful

When there's nothing but cheer
And I know you are near
Lord
Keep me thankful

Thank you Lord.
For everything.
Let it be.

(Julian Hamilton, *JUST THINKING*, Kevin Meyhew)

HYMN: All praise to our redeeming Lord

In a well-functioning family, members encourage one another – each person will build the others up. In the church, as a Christian family, members should do likewise. In Acts and the Epistles, much store is placed on help and encouragement, where the word encouragement occurs about a dozen times. Givers of help and encouragement are listed alongside apostles, prophets and teachers. It's a vital gift that everyone should be able to exercise. Yet in many churches it is grossly underused. The youth leader, who turns out every week to look after her charges, finds it hard going but rarely receives any encouragement for her efforts. The caretakers, who keep the buildings clean, warm and ready for use but rarely get a mention. Folk who are going through a rough patch, but they and their problems are ignored because we don't know what to say. It's not that Christians should always be expecting encouragement or should become dependent on it, (that is dangerous) but the giving and receiving of encouragement should be a normal part of Christian community. (Heb 10.25) The friendly word, the occasional phone call, a smile, are these things and more, are tokens of appreciation and don't cost much.

BIBLICAL REFLECTION

Read I Thessalonians ch. 5 vs. 11 – 23.

The early church was a quite different organisation from that of today. It didn't have 2,000 years of tradition behind it. It was breaking new ground daily and it was running into considerable opposition in many places. Acts 17 tells not only that Paul and Silas had suffered there, but that they had to escape and Thessalonica became a base for the persecution of Christians in the region. So Church life in Thessalonica was difficult, it must have been hard to keep going. It was only made easier if its members were not working in isolation, but together - encouraging each other through the difficult times. Although the organisation of the early church was different from that of today, the people who made up the church were much the same. They were passionate, loving, patient, quarrelsome, lazy, outspoken, frightened, irritating and weak. They needed to help and encourage each other to overcome personal differences, to strengthen their resolve, to share the burdens of leadership and to keep the faith. Being an early Christian could be a difficult and frightening experience and the church needed encouragers.

ACTIVITY

Look up some "encouragement" references in the New Testament to see how they encouraged one another. You may need to read a few verses around each one to get a context. Make a note of what each encourages us to do.

Romans 1; 11-12.....

Hebrews 10.24-25.....

Titus 2; 6-7.....

Titus 1; 9.....

2 Corinthians 7; 4 -7.....

1 Thessalonians 3; 6-7.....

CHARACTER STUDY

Read Acts ch. 13 vs. 1 – 3.

Encourager File. No. 52648.

NOTE THIS MAN!!!

Joseph, a Levite (non-ordained religious worker) from Cyprus.

- The Apostles gave him the nickname of Barnabas, literally Son of Encouragement.
- It was fitting that Paul and Barnabas should be commissioned together since it was Barnabas who, some time previously, had brought the newly converted Paul to meet the apostles in Jerusalem. Paul was the last person most of the believers wanted to see, for he had been the scourge of the early church (Acts ch. 9 vs. 26 – 29).
- Through Barnabas's mediation and encouragement, the leaders accepted Paul and he became the predominant figure of the early church.
- Later Barnabas encouraged Mark to come with Paul and him when they set off for Antioch (Acts ch. 13 v. 3) Mark gave up along the way, in Pamphylia. The next time Paul and Barnabas were to set off for further missionary work, Paul would not consider taking Mark along (Acts ch. 15 v.36 – 39).
- Barnabas was so keen to encourage Mark that he and Paul went separate ways after a bitter argument. Barnabas stood by Mark, and Mark's work prospered.
- Eventually Mark and Paul were reconciled. Indeed Paul became dependent on him – "Bring Mark with you when you come, for I need him," he writes to Timothy (II Timothy ch. 4 v. 11). All because of Barnabas, the "Son of Encouragement".

BEWARE THIS MAN, HE CHANGES THE WORLD THROUGH ENCOURAGEMENT

ACTIVITY

In groups of two or three, imagine and write down some of the things Barnabas would have had to lay aside and the sacrifices he made, or might have made, in order to carry out his ministry of encouragement.

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List the benefits that have come to the Church through Barnabas and his influence on others

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WHAT CAN YOU DO?

Use the dialogues that appear in Appendix B. In groups of two, read them together (act them to each other!) and then spend 2 minutes discussing what particular words, or actions, might encourage the mentioned people in their situations?

AND / OR

In larger groups discuss the following questions:

What words and actions did these biblical people use to make them practical helpers and encouragers? Rahab (Joshua ch. 2); Ruth (Ruth 1); Jonathan (I Samuel ch. 20); Lydia (Acts ch. 16 v. 14).

Have all the groups feed back their discussion and write the main points on a F/C

Hymn

Thou God of truth and love HP 374

Final thoughts:

As we have gained so much from the encouragement of others, are there those who need our encouragement? Are there members of the congregation who beaver away week by week? How could they be encouraged?

If we all followed the commands to encourage one another contained in the New Testament, then each fellowship, indeed the whole Connexion would be much stronger. An individual page of a telephone directory is very easy torn, but tearing the whole book is virtually an impossibility.

Let us not forget that even though we may receive little encouragement ourselves, we have access to the Holy Spirit, the Paraclete, the ultimate encourager and comforter, with us day or night.

Prayer

Look at me with mercy, O God,
As I meditate to know and love you more and more.
I call on you for guidance.

Where I have not fulfilled your Commandments,
I humbly kneel down in prayer for forgiveness.
Keep encouraging me, O God,
In all I do to please you.

In your mercy, O God,
Where all is peace, I'll be led
Not to regret but to rejoice

As in your company I get all my comfort.

Fred R Musimenta, Uganda
(Prayers Encircling the World, SPCK)

APPENDIX

A.

The new motorway between Dublin and Dundalk has cut the journey time to and from Northern Ireland by a considerable amount, although it is still a long journey! Where the motorway crosses the River Boyne there is a series of booths, where drivers pay a toll for the use of the road. Some of the booths are automatic if you have the right money, but if you need change, some have a cashier. That must be a very monotonous job as thousands of cars stream through every day, but the cashier in one of them always gives a brilliant smile as she takes your money and wishes you a good day. It is a genuine smile of encouragement and friendship and it makes you feel good as you continue on your journey. Here is a small thing, in a secular context, that costs nothing, but makes a difference.

Nathaniel Hawthorne was one of the greatest American novelists of the nineteenth century, but this might never have happened if he hadn't had a very encouraging wife, Sophia. Nathaniel worked in a customhouse, but came home one day in a very sorry state to tell Sophia that he had lost his job. Far from being downhearted Sophia told him he now had time to do what he always wanted – write a book. When Nathaniel enquired how they were going to exist without any money while he was being an author, Sophia handed him a large amount of money. Then she told him that she had always believed that one day he would write a great book and that she had saved a little bit of money every week towards the day when he would start writing. With that encouragement he wrote his first and greatest novel "The Scarlet Letter".

The father of one of my colleagues was not a particularly demonstrative man, but he was a great encourager. Whatever activity his family was engaged in he could always find a book that could help in that endeavour. He bought books on gardening, books on French, books on clocks, books on cars, books on chemistry. You name it – there was a book for the occasion. Sometimes the books were spot on; sometimes they were wide of the mark, but the family was always grateful for his encouraging, practical thought.

A lady in a Methodist church whose health is not very good and who isn't able to walk for long distances and visit people as once she did, has developed the most amazing telephone ministry. If she hears of anyone in the congregation who is sick or in trouble of any kind she is on the phone to encourage them and to promise that she will pray for them. She is greatly loved and her love helps to hold the fellowship tightly together

B.

Try using one or more of the following dialogues to provoke some discussion ...

1. (based on James ch. 2 vs. 15 – 16)

Jane: Sarah

I'm sorry to speak to you about this.
I don't really like doing so,
but I don't know who to turn to.
I'm having an awful time at the moment.
I don't know how I can go on.

Sarah: Oh

I'm sorry to hear that.
What's wrong?

Jane:

Jimmy, my husband
He's just up and left me.
The children are playing up.
There's no money coming in to the house.
I'm at my wit's end.

Sarah: That's terrible.

Jimmy's garbage
No money? – I don't know how you manage.
As for the children – they're old enough to know better.
They should realise your position and try to do something to help.

Jane: It's not their fault.
It's been a horrid time for them too.

Sarah: Even so
They should be more thoughtful.

Still, I'm sure you'll get through.
Don't worry – I'll pray for you.

Jane: Uh, thanks

2.

Young person (YP): Seriously, are you saying that I should just ignore the way he makes me feel?

Youth leader: (YL): Well, yes. I mean if he doesn't call you any more? Doesn't want to see you, doesn't want to talk it over, well, what can you do?

YP: Hmmmm, suppose so. It's just that it hurts so much. I mean ... I gave him stuff in my life that no-one has ever had before. Like ... well, kinda You know what I mean ...

YL: I think I do, but you gotta remember I told you what would happen if you kept fooling around with him the way you were. You can't blame anyone but yourself.

YP: You just make it all sound so black and white. I came here for some help. Y 'know, some kinda God comfort? Where's this grace you're always talking about now?

YL: God has grace – plenty of it for everyone. Even you. And no matter what you've done, he'll understand and accept you no matter what.

YP: Listen, I'm feeling pretty low right now, I'm feeling sad, lonely, rejected, like no-one will ever want me again ... and well, sorry but your not making me feel any better, and if this of yours is so full of grace, then he can come and find me ... bye.

3.

Jeff: Pete mate. I'm scared.

Pete: What?

Jeff: This whole pressure thing – this exam is huge, if I don't get it, I don't get the job. So, I'm y'know ... scared.

Pete: Come on boy, pull yourself together. Don't be a wuss.

Jeff: Me? Wuss? Give over mate ... this is a serious day for us. You're gonna fly through it, but me, I'm gonna collapse or something ...

Pete: Nah, don't be silly, you're gonna be fine. You know your stuff. Don't be stupid about this, OK?

Jeff: Stupid about it?!?!?! How can I be stupid about it when so much hangs on the next 3 hours of my life. This is it, this is the moment ...

Pete: This is it???? No, this is stupid. Pull yourself together and come on ...

* wuss - feeble person