

A Journey to a New Kind of Life

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Outlines of the journey

Very few people have yet realised the extent of the challenge we face due to climate change. Much as we might like it to happen, no one is going to arrive with a magic wand to send this one away. There will be no easy technological fix. Instead the issue goes right to the heart of our modern Western lifestyles, our consumer society, our work, our travel, our leisure and even our ways of thinking about the world. Climate change may actually be a symptom of a more pervasive and spiritual disease. It may be the product of a society that has seriously lost its way. It is time to take a hard look at the whole way we are living.

Two thousand years ago a prophet from Nazareth in Galilee drew people around him with a vision for a new kind of life. He made it clear that this new life would be hard to find but would meet their deepest needs. I believe a similar process could happen today as if Jesus was again renewing the earth with a vision for a new kind of life.

This course is designed as a journey so that we can examine all sorts of attitudes and behaviours, some related to climate change specifically, others which question wider aspects of the overall system that we live in today. Some might describe it as a discipleship course. Others might see it like Alcoholics Anonymous or as a Methodist Class, because it continually returns to our own personal stories and struggles as we encourage one another to find the narrow road.

It may be that every age has its test. Two hundred years ago this country was agonising over the slave trade. It divided people. It divided the church. And it was surely a test of the gospel. Perhaps climate change will be the test for this age. And if we respond well toward it then all sorts of other things that are now out of kilter in our lives may come right.

This booklet gives materials for six group sessions designed for 4-12 people.

And before we begin I recommend we commit ourselves to two attitudes, both of which were found in Jesus' own community.

Attitude One

One of the greatest dangers in conversation about the environmental challenge is that people will start to judge one another. It is all too easy for just a look to put another person down or for a careless word to make someone feel hopeless. I suggest the group commits itself to the fact that when it comes to climate change we are truly all 'sinners', caught up in a society that is deeply enmeshed in carbon dependency. The key passage here is the story of the two people who went up to the Temple to pray, one was proud of all that he had done and how different he was. The other just knew that he had got it wrong. It was the second one whose attitude was acceptable to God. We need that attitude on this journey. It is liberating.

Attitude Two

We need to recognise that we don't know the answers. Our society is undergoing a radical shift and no one at this stage has a blueprint for the future that is credible. The purpose of this journey is to 'seek' the vision rather like Jesus told people to 'seek' first the Kingdom of God, yet being aware that none of us has all the answers. This means listening hard to each other, working at learning and allowing God to work in us.

How to run the session

All the normal ideas apply to these groups. Those who facilitate should not dominate, should look to include all the participants and listen hard themselves.

Each session can be managed in a number of ways but the core elements are:

- ❖ Story – allow a substantial part – say a third of your session to people simply telling stories
- ❖ Engagement with a new area of life – the exercises headed Awareness, Feelings, Motivations, Vision etc can be handled as you choose. They are essentially prompts to conversation.

- ❖ Wisdom – different groups may want to engage with this material in different ways. Various options and exercises are provided as examples. Feel free to make up your own. Choose whatever suits your people.
- ❖ Take a step – it is very important not to miss out this stage. It is the heart of the process. This course is not about nice ideas, but about actually changing our lives.

So with that... come and join with us on a journey to a new kind of life.

Step One

Our relationship with the resources of the earth

Story

Invite members of the group to briefly introduce themselves to each other, saying something about their journey so far and what attracted them to be part of this group.

Intro to this session

I was born in the 1950s. My generation has been called the 'baby boomers', resulting as we did from the post-war expansion in the population. My generation in this country is also relatively special in not having had to live through a major war. Yet the peace that we have lived through may not truly have been so peaceful as we think.

It is said that the people alive since 1950 have used up half the world's non-renewable resources. My generation has raped the earth. This has come about because industrial and technological advance reached a stage in the mid-twentieth century such that our impact on the earth became truly substantial. When we just had horse-drawn ploughs we could only scratch the surface. Our machinery now moves mountains, drains seas and cuts down forests at a prodigious rate.

In this step we are going to look primarily at oil, because oil, together with other fossil fuels like coal, is the primary energy source for industrialisation and its waste product, carbon dioxide, may have disastrous consequences for our future. This sort of exercise could be repeated with a long list of non-renewable resources which we are using up without thinking.

For more on these other non-renewable resources see Richard Heinberg 'Peak everything' or visit

<http://globalpublicmedia.com>

For more on the story of oil from its origins in the earth 200 million years ago to the massive exploitation of it across the world today see Sonia Shah *Crude- the story of oil*¹

Awareness

Write down on a large sheet of paper all the ways in which we as individuals are using oil and its products. Take ideas from all round the group.

Feelings

How do you feel about this oil use? Do we feel anything – or do we just treat it as *there* to use.

In 2001 human beings burned over 25 billion barrels of oil². This figure continues to increase.

Motivations

What aspects of this oil-dependent lifestyle do we particularly enjoy and would be hesitant to give up? Encourage people to be honest. Would you say we were addicted to oil?

Wisdom

Some warnings

There is a brief story in Genesis about human beings becoming too powerful. It tells of how they build a great tower reaching to the sky with the comment

'this is only the beginning of what they will do; and nothing that they propose to do will now be impossible for them' (Genesis 11 v 1-9)

In its original form this story understands language as part of the God-given frustrations of human cooperation, and tells of God confusing their speech deliberately.

¹ *Crude – the story of oil* Sonia Shah 2004

² See Shah page 38

In another way this story might also be told of today's society, which also has a view that we can do anything, and the reason for this is that we have tragically lost touch with our proper roots in the earth.

One of Jesus starkest warnings was about people who loved mammon. He said:

No one can serve two masters; you will either love the one and hate the other or be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and mammon.

This word mammon seems to relate to material things pursued for their own sake and, as we shall see later in the journey, applies to all sorts of areas of our lives today. It might also be said to refer to material things used without consideration for their roots in the natural world.

A vision:

Ancient peoples across the world recognised their dependence on nature. In the Judeo-Christian scriptures this was expressed in a dream of harmony. The people hoped that if only they could order their lives in harmony with creation, they would be experience God's favour. See for example

- Psalm 19
- Matthew 6 v 25- 33

To this way of thinking the idea that human actions would do damage to the atmosphere, induce climate change, and wreak terrible destruction, would be perceived as the ultimate offence to God.

For more on this vision see 'Introducing Shalom' available to download at

www.dreamofshalom.wordpress.com

Optional exercises

1. Some say that climate change is just a symptom of a much greater spiritual disease that has its roots in how we relate to the earth and its creatures. Consider these three ways of perceiving the earth. Which comes closest to how you think we should see it? Which is the

one that we live from now? Read out the options. Give people a moment to think before they start speaking.

- The earth and its creatures are just there – for us to use how we choose
- The earth and its creatures are a gift – and we should respect that
- We are an integral part of the earth and its creatures – we depend on each other

2. People may like to do something meditative.

Read these words and keep silence for a minute.

Beneath the stars

The old man Abraham stepped out from his tent in the evening of the day. All around him was evidence of God's blessing on his life. From the tents around him came the sound of laughter and music as the herdsman whiled away their evening. The dark shadows of his cattle stood in a quietness interrupted only by the occasional sound of a calf seeking refuge in its mother.

At times like this Abraham loved his life, moving as they did from one part of the country to another, always exploring, using all their knowledge and wisdom to discern where would be the best pasture, where would be the next water. A great tribe now depended on his decisions and he was grateful for the sense of God's hand on their lives. Only one thing nagged in his heart. The need for an heir. It had been many years now and how they had longed for a child. He looked up to the stars. It seemed as if there were more and more at each moment of his looking. It was then he felt the reassurance. 'Your descendants shall be as many as the stars in the sky.'

It is a beautiful tale from the very origins of biblical faith, from the days of the pastoralists who wandered the lands of Canaan. We have their names, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob. We read stories of meetings with kings and deceptions about wives. Such people measured wealth in terms of increase in their cattle, their gold, and their offspring and they were acutely aware of their

dependence on the earth and its creatures. For them faith was wrapped up in creation. The increase of their herds was the blessing of God and their skill in husbandry was the wisdom of God.

Or

Use Psalm 19 v 1-10 as a meditation by reading the words slowly then keeping silence for a minute, then reading the words slowly again. After another minute in silence invite people to imagine a scene from nature themselves and enter into it in their minds. End the time with someone reading verse 14 of Psalm 19. Afterwards let people describe what it did to them.

Take a step

Invite each member of the group to think about changing one aspect of their lives as it relates to oil and its products and to report back next week on how that has gone.

For example: in Bristol we currently have an initiative called Chooseday which is encouraging people to leave their car at home on Tuesdays and choose other ways to work or travel. Some may want to try that. See www.chooseday.org

Step Two Our relationship with the natural world

Story

Invite people to tell their story about the step that they took last week to reduce their oil consumption. How did it go? What did they learn?

As an intro to this session ask each to tell of an animal that has meant something to them.

Intro

Half of the world's people now live in cities. As industrialisation progresses so more people move into cities. In the UK nine out of ten people live in towns or cities. The great difficulty with an urban environment is that many of us lose any real feel for our dependence on the natural world. If we are to stop abusing the earth one of the key inner transformations required may be a renewed sense of interconnectedness with the natural world.

Contact with nature, and particularly with wilderness, has been a source of spiritual renewal and life change for many people over the centuries.

Joanna Macy describes our current need in terms of a Great Turning which will involve a new sense of interconnectedness with the earth and a new compassion for its creatures.³

Bill McKibben believes that humans are now so powerful there are no longer any really wild places left in the world⁴.

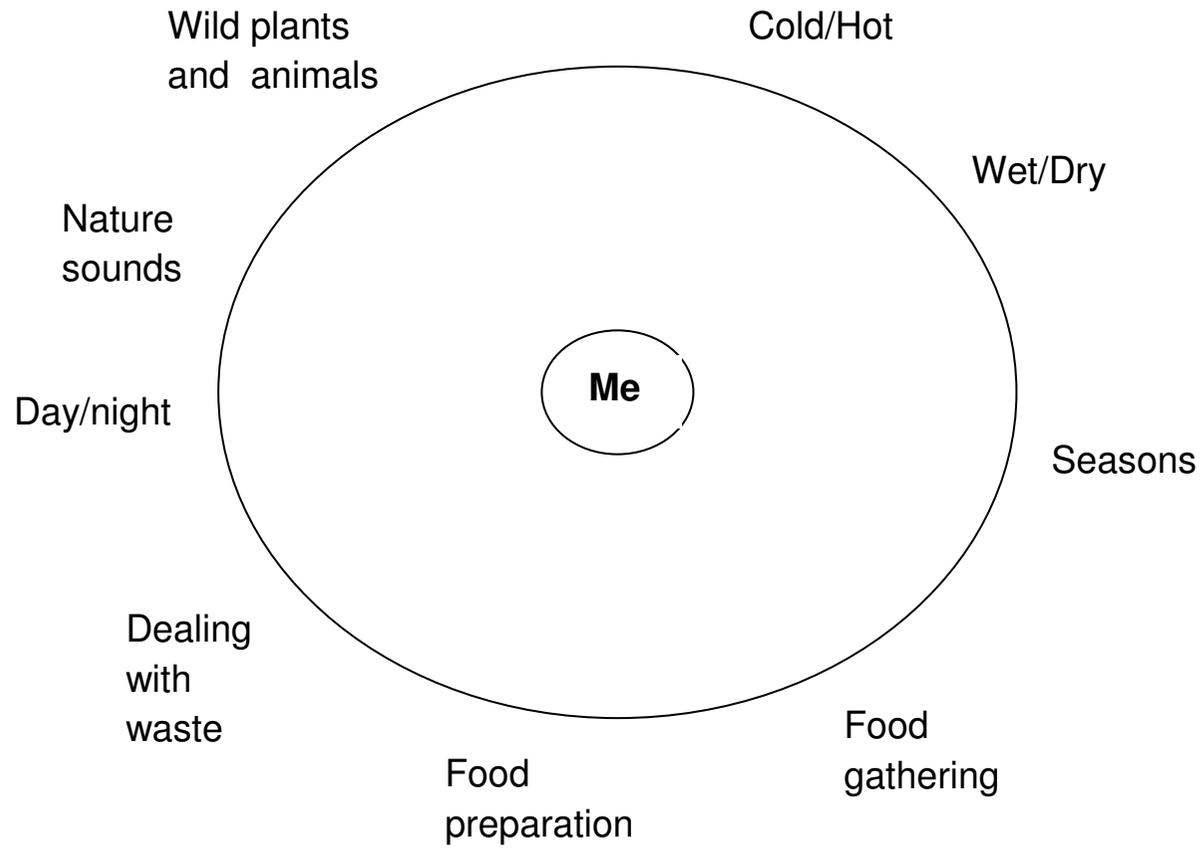
³ Joanna Macy and Molly Young Brown *Coming back to life – practices to reconnect our lives, our world*

⁴ Bill McKibben *The End of Nature – Humanity, Climate Change and the Natural world* 1990 and 2003 Bloomsbury Press

Awareness

Consider your day to day life. Around the edge of this circle are different ways that we might experience the environment. Draw a line from the 'me' in the centre to the outside at each point to indicate how much *you* feel in touch with the physical world at that point.

For example re *cold/hot* – think about how much your own environment is temperature controlled and how much you actually feel the weather change. If you don't experience this much draw a very short line toward these words. If you are a great outdoors person, you may draw a much longer line here almost touching the outer circle.



Feelings

When you are in touch with nature what does it do to you? Imagine a moment in your life when nature became vividly present – what were your feelings?

Motivations

Take some time in quiet to reflect on your body. Feel yourself breathing in the silence. Recognise that you are a creature of the earth.

Or

What inner drives do you recognise as part of being a creature of the earth? Brainstorm these as a group. Write them on a piece of flip chart paper. How do you treat these?

Vision

Imagine a society of people living sensitively with the natural world. What would it look like?

Wisdom

Three pieces of wisdom for you

ONE Contact with nature has been discovered to bring a strange calmness and healing to the human soul.

He makes me to lie down in green pastures, he leads me beside still waters, he restores my soul (Psalm 23)

TWO The natural world provides rich images for us to understand both our inner lives (Psalm 142) and the life of human society (Isaiah 5)

THREE People in life change moments have deliberately gone to the wild place. There they have encountered the divine and new life strategies have been revealed.

See Moses (Exodus 3)

Elijah (1Kings 19)

John the Baptist (Matthew 3)

Jesus (Mathew 4)

More and more people in our own day are discovering the life giving power of contact with wilderness. In one study of 2000 people in the US – 38% of people undergoing a wilderness experience reported that they had made a serious and enduring life transition as a result⁵.

For more on this see ‘Introducing Shalom’ downloadable from

www.dreamofshalom.wordpress.com

Optional Exercises:

Invite people to deliberately take a walk on the wild side. It might be just a day or a whole holiday, but encourage them to spend a serious amount of time in the natural world, and to do so conscious of God. Invite them to stop at various points and keep silence to hear God.

Or

Consider this:

⁵ *Ecopsychology* ed. Theodore Roszak page 129 published by Sierra Club books 1995

Dangerous people and wild places

The story of Jesus turning over the tables in the temple causes an intake of breath among the tame. 'Oh dear' gentle Jesus meek and mild has just broken his cover. Something real, something slightly dangerous has just emerged. There was a wildness to Jesus that made him strangely attractive. Perhaps he learnt it in the wilderness.

Wildness is an underrated virtue. Religions commonly cultivate tame people. A tame person is careful not to offend, fits in with cultural norms and is 'nice' and gentle. Yet creative challenge necessitates a degree of wildness.

Wild people are an endangered species in the church. For years they have been subtly excluded, made to feel uncomfortable, gently driven out. Most creative people are just a tad wild. They need to be and we need to value them for it. Driving them out has left the church bereft of the creative impulse it desperately needs in order to find the future.

The person in touch with their wildness will dare to speak the truth without concern for the consequence. They are an exciting and dangerous person to be with. It is through the wild person that others sense hope. They are mould breakers. They challenge oppressive institutions. They confront people and issues that others shy away from. And they have a tendency to suffer for it.

Take a step

As you have explored your relationship with nature what one thing would you like to change about your life, try it this week.

Also if you are up for it, take a further step on last week's area, cutting your fossil fuel dependence and tell others what you plan to do.

Step Three Our relationship with money

Story

So how did your new resolve about nature go? Tell the story.

And has anyone taken further steps in their cutting down on fossil fuels? Let's hear about it.

Intro

Scientists are saying that countries such as the UK will need to cut their carbon emissions by 80% in order to avoid catastrophic levels of climate change. The depth of this change takes us beyond technological fixes and means we are going to have to question the whole system that we have developed in the West. For example, we have come to see ourselves as consumers. Many of us now indulge in 'retail therapy' having 'bought into' the promise that we will feel better about ourselves if only we buy this or that product. Likewise politicians still conceive real progress in terms of increasing the Gross Domestic Product. This may prevent them taking the radical steps necessary to avoid climate change. A society dominated by the market also ignores other vital aspects of our humanity.

One way to explore all this for ourselves is to look at our own personal relationship with money.

At the beginning of this session put a plate in a prominent place in the centre of the room.

Then invite everyone in turn to place a banknote of the highest value they have in the plate.

If anyone has none then someone else puts one in for them. Then begin.

Awareness

How aware are you of money? Think of a particular spending moment where there was a significant amount of money involved and some uncertainty in your mind. Imagine yourself back into that moment. What happens inside you as you make the decision to spend? Are you happy about that?

One of the big regular shopping experiences for most of us is getting in our groceries. How do you do this? What goes through your mind as you go round the supermarket? (if you use the supermarket) Are you aware of alternatives to the supermarket?

Feelings

Would you say that money was something that you;

- ❖ Enjoyed
- ❖ Feared
- ❖ Longed for
- ❖ Were indifferent about

Motivations

What drives you in your relationship with money? Try to be honest with yourself about your own motivations. Are you aware of shopping to comfort yourself? Don't rush to easy justifications.

Vision

We work with a capitalist system. One of the essential features of capitalism is that decisions are made about money on the basis of financial increase, as in the public company whose primary responsibility is to its shareholders. This tends to cut the world of money off from discussions about what it is being used for. So we have no way to insist that it be used for good purposes or resist it being employed to rape the earth and exploit humans and other creatures. Some of the most important social advances of the last few centuries have been in remaking these connections, so as to abolish the slave trade, prevent the abuse of children in factories, encourage fair trade and the like. Our present challenge is to remake the connections between the use of our money and the exploitation of the earth.

One approach to this is provided by Jonathan Porritt in his book '*Capitalism as if the world matters*⁶. Some would argue that even this is not radical enough saying we need to question the whole system.

Wisdom

The people who wrote the scriptures knew about the corrupting power of money and were continually suspicious toward it. The poor could be terribly exploited (Job 24) while the rich amused themselves (Micah 3 v 1-3 and v 11).

Jesus taught his disciples to sit lightly to material things, even to make themselves deliberately vulnerable so as to appreciate their dependence on God and on other people.

He encouraged people to focus on the real purpose of life – 'Seek first the kingdom of God' - that great peace which was coming on the world, with the promise that if they did this their needs would be met. 'and all these things will be yours as well'. (Matthew 6 v 33).

⁶ Jonathan Porritt *Capitalism. - as if the world matters* 2006 Earthscan

For more on this see 'The Challenge' on www.dreamofshalom.wordpress.com

A historical note: As commercial life expanded in Europe so the church was very hesitant to embrace the idea of lending money at interest, or usury as it was known. Part of this was to protect the poor against what we would now call 'loansharks', but it may have also been important in trying to retain the true social connection for money and prevent it becoming a 'thing in itself'⁷.

Optional exercise:

Ask one or two people to tell of a time in their life when they were seriously hard up. How did it feel? Where there any positive outcomes of this time?

Take a step

Is there an action that you could take to align your use of money better with the deep purposes of your life? Take it this week.

As one specific idea - have you thought of sourcing local and/or organic foods instead of tripping off to the supermarket? Perhaps explore what is possible this week?

⁷ RH Tawney *Religion and the rise of capitalism* 1922

Step Four Our relationship with work

Story

So how did you get on with the money thing? Share some stories around this, though be aware that some people may want to keep this private. Also recap on the other areas that we have been working on particularly how we are doing with our energy use. Any new ideas and insights into this?

Intro

In the last fifty years we have adopted a culture where everyone of working age is expected to take on paid work. It is part of a political culture that measures progress by the increase in Gross Domestic Product. The more people in work the more wealthy we appear to be. But are we? Many aspects of life that were once done voluntarily, such as child care, have now become waged. We all pack in the hours, earning our wages, to spend it all on our leisure and in consumption of material goods. Those who measure happiness say that the last twenty years have been a step backward. Questioning this version of progress may also be at the heart of dealing with the environmental challenge that faces us. Time to have a think about our relationship with work.

Those not in paid employment provide an important perspective and should not feel left out. Let them tell their story about their life and what they appreciate about it as the conversation proceeds.

Awareness

Do you work harder than you would like to?

Do you know why you do this?

Feelings

How do you feel on a Sunday night?

Motivations

Why do you work? Is it...

- ❖ To make ends meet
- ❖ To go out and meet people
- ❖ Because you believe in what you do

Vision

If you worked less, what other things would you try to incorporate into your life?

Is that feasible?

Is there another type of work you would really like to do?

Wisdom

Some people think that Christians have been partly responsible for our very strong commitment to work. Calvin was an influential reformer who taught that Christians prove their ultimate salvation through diligence, thrift and hard work. He was against all sloth and laziness and against eating, drinking and festivals.

But actually there is another branch of wisdom that would encourage us to play.

The writer of Ecclesiastes say many outrageous things, but he clearly believed that life should be enjoyed. He said:

‘What do people gain from all the toil and strain with which they toil under the sun? For all their days are full of pain and their work is a vexation... There is nothing better than that people should eat and drink and find pleasure in all their toil.’

Ecclesiastes tells a story about a man who made a fortune then lost it all in one bad venture. The writer tells of all the ‘vexation and grief’ that he expended on his work only to land up with nothing to even leave his heirs. (Ecclesiastes 5 v 13-17)

It may well be this story that Jesus had in mind when he told about the rich man whose land brought forth plentifully and who stored it all away in barns only to die prematurely. ‘Fool’, said Jesus. And he goes on to encourage people not to be anxious, ‘Consider the lilies of the field...Read it for yourselves in Luke 12 v 13-30.

Are we actually far too focussed on work today?

For more on this see ‘A new attitude to work’ on www.dreamofshalom.wordpress.com

Or for a modern day Ecclesiastes try Tom Hodgkinson ‘*How to be free*’ – only prepare to be outraged at times.

Optional exercises:

For those of a more analytical turn:

Read Ecclesiastes 5 v13-17 and Luke 12 v 13-30 and write down each story in phrases in a list on a piece of flip chart paper. Note the similarities and differences. Can you think of any other sayings or habits of Jesus that fit with the attitudes of Ecclesiastes?

Are we just too focussed on work in our lives today?

Or

Sit together in silence for one minute, then read these words from Matthew 11 v 28,29, then pause for another silence and repeat.

Come to me all who labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me; for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.

Take a step

Is there one thing that you could do to better align your work with your wider life and its purposes?

Step Five Our relationship with travel

Story

It will be becoming clear now that all the areas of life we are discussing interact with one another and that the environmental challenge must lead us to rethink it all. In our storytime this week, begin to explore those overlaps as you are discovering them. What would a new kind of life look like?

Intro

Human beings have always enjoyed travel. It has been a key source of knowledge about other people and cultures and has the potential to open our eyes and encourage mutual understanding. The free and easy transportation that we currently experience through aeroplanes and cars is a new thing. It has emerged and become mainstream only in the last fifty years. Such mass transit has the capacity to overwhelm and undermine cultures as well as contribute to catastrophic climate change. Around 30% of UK emissions are due to transport of some kind with about half of this resulting from passenger transport. It is unlikely that there will be any easy technological fix to replace the use of oil products in transport.

Yet we have grown used to going where we want when we want, exploiting the availability of cheap oil. And our societies have adjusted so that we now find it difficult to do without it. Many cities have been redesigned to suit the private car, and other transport possibilities take second place. There is evidence that obesity is linked to car usage⁸.

For more on the impact of the car on society - see Lyn Holman's book *Car Sick*

⁸ Lyn Holman *Car Sick- solutions for our car-addicted culture* published by Green Books 2006

Awareness

Invite people to take a piece of paper and write two column headings. One labelled 'Needs' and the other labelled 'Wants'.

Ask them to think of the journeys that they currently undertake and write each of them under one or other heading. Now write down next to each what mode of transport they use. Could they conceive of using any other more climate-friendly option for the same purpose? What would need to change for them to do this?

Feelings

How do you react to the idea that travel will become much more precious and scarce in the future?

Motivations

Think specifically about holidays. Why do you go on holiday? What are the deep level motivations that lie behind your choice of holidays?

Vision

Is it possible to conceive of a lifestyle with much less travel in it? Can you foresee any positive impacts of this?

Wisdom

Many cultures have developed codes of hospitality toward the stranger. The offence of Sodom (Genesis 19) was partly the breaking of such a code. Similarly, when Jesus commanded the disciples to cast themselves on the communities to which they went (Luke 9

v 3,4), he was partly depending on the obligations to give hospitality to the stranger that existed at that time. The sort of mass transit that we currently indulge in frequently overwhelms and offends other cultures, overriding most codes of hospitality and focussing instead on a crude and universal materialism.

Freedom is perceived to be a good thing in our culture. Some would see our mobility as a necessary freedom or even a right, despite the fact that it has only been around in this form for the last fifty years. Freedom from oppression and exploitation are certainly promoted by faith. See for example Jesus summary of his mission in Luke 4 where he says 'The Spirit of the Lord is upon me because he has anointed me to bring release to the captives...' But the faith did not commend other sorts of freedom. Paul, for example, says to the Christians 'Do not use your freedom for indulging the flesh'. (Galatians 5 v 13)

At what point should we limit our travel for the sake of the earth and its creatures?

Optional exercise:

Invite people to share holiday experiences where they have sensed that a cultural visit had been overtaken by materialism

For more on this see *The No-Nonsense guide to Tourism* by Pamela Nowicka⁹

Take a step

Invite the group to set themselves one target for the next week and one target for the next year regarding travel.

⁹ *The No-Nonsense guide to Tourism* by Pamela Nowicka 2007 New Internationalist

Step Six Our relationship with neighbours

Story

Hear people's reflections on their ideas and promises last week. Did anyone try anything different by way of travel in the last week? How did it go? Are they likely to do that again?

Intro

In the UK today many of us do not even know our neighbours. A strange and fundamental shift has taken place and mass mobility is a primary cause. With free and easy transport we have learnt to locate ourselves anywhere we choose. Families spread out right across the UK, or even the world, and we expect to be able to visit each other regularly. Many of us sample the life of our cities at will, grazing across great distances and choosing our work patterns, friends and leisure activities without regard for those who may reside near us. When family members are well, then all is well. When they grow old or infirm or get into trouble then suddenly living at a distance does not look so wise. Social services step in for what otherwise would be the family's responsibility. Of course there is a big variation from area to area, but some people are saying that loneliness is now the great secret British disease.

Awareness

Give out a map of the UK and ask people to mark on it where those people most precious to them live. Have a map of the world handy for those who need that.

Invite people to name as many people in their street as they can.

Feelings

Invite people to tell of a time when one of their loved ones needed them, but was some distance away. How did it resolve?

Motivations

Why do people choose to live so far from each other? Is it deliberate or just unthinking?
What motivates people to live where they do?

Vision

Environmental concerns are going to cause us to re-evaluate our relationships. It may be that neighbourhoods will be re-invigorated in the process. Take some time to imagine what that might look like.

Wisdom

The command to love your neighbour as you love yourself is universally acknowledged. But perhaps it is too often spiritualised. Perhaps we should first think of it as the person who lives next door, and only then go on to consider the others in our culture or our community that we fail to relate to. Jesus' Good Samaritan story talked about a hated foreigner who showed the way to caring for others across deep cultural and religious divides. (Luke 10 v29ff) Yet some would say that we no longer even care for our extended families.

At the same time it is clear that human beings have profound relational needs that are often not being met in our society. In the story about the making of Eve, it is said in Genesis 'It is not good for the human to be alone' and surely that is still true. Why do so many of our older

people feel left to die? Why do so many children long for someone to care? Why do so many adults, with all our leisure and money still feel bereft of simple companionship?

Jesus taught that there was a hard side to an authentic life. True discipleship would feel like a 'narrow road' whose 'way was hard'. There were things that we did not want to do that we must do. He said 'Whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever gives up his life for my sake and for the good news, will save it.' He said of his own life, 'Unless a grain of wheat fall into the ground and die it remains alone but if it dies it bears much fruit'. These words grate on our modern, self-indulgent ears, so we tend to spiritualise them out of existence.

Yet he also taught that he had come to lighten our burdens and to bring us into the fullness of life. Maybe these two ideas are not so paradoxical as they seem? Maybe we enter a new 'fullness of life' when we are willing to pass through the churning transformation that is 'hard'?

Are there aspects of our conversation over the last few weeks where you have felt the challenge of thoughts like these? Can you see how change might actually bring a more abundant life even if it seemed hard at the time?

Take a step

We are now drawing this set of sessions to a close. Use this time to consider the journey that people have made together in this course. Let them reflect on what has happened between you and the changes that are taking root. Consider how you would like to build from here.

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We are particularly keen to hear your comments on this pilot edition. Please send these to enquiries@agoraspace.org or to Project Agora, 50 Guest Avenue, Emersons Green, Bristol BS16 7GA. Tel 0117 9574652

