

Evangelism

Switched on?

If you're struggling to live out your faith in your daily life then the Toolbox course could be just what you need. CATHERINE LARNER checks it out

WHEN reading newspapers, attending business conferences, interviewing directors of blue chip companies and heeding 'mission statements', I have often been struck by the language, ethos and goals of the commercial community, and how, increasingly, it was hijacking the language of the Church. Today's consumer is being described as being eager for emotional connection, fulfilling experiences, and gaining identity and meaning through a brand.

This offers huge opportunities for the Church to respond to obvious needs, both in how it encourages discipleship among its own congregations but also in how it engages with the community outside its doors. I had been reading the regular e-mails by organisations like Damaris Trust with its Culture Watch which highlights morals and messages presented in films and books, and I had also bought some of the Connect Bible Studies that looked at how we could relate the themes of television programmes, books and films to the Bible.

I wanted to get more involved and put it all in the bigger picture, so I was thrilled to learn that London Institute of Contemporary Christianity was running a course called Toolbox on: "Engaging in the Contemporary World: Biblical Foundations and Practical Skills".

The programme outline seemed user-friendly, highlighting how to pursue whole-life Christianity through 'interpreting consumerism', 'ethics - making the right decisions', 'reading worldview through art', 'organisation ethos and values', 'globalisation and the global disciple', and 'understanding media'. I signed up right away.

It was only when I started planning my week in London to attend the course that I began to get nervous about what might be expected of me. Running from Monday to Friday at the LICC offices in a converted chapel behind Bond Street, we would be attending sessions from nine until nine each day. And this wouldn't mean sitting passively, nodding knowingly at lengthy lectures; we were to be participating in group presentations and workshops throughout. It looked exhausting - and it was, but it was also the most stimulating learning experience I have had as a Christian. And my fellow participants were unanimous in their endorsement of the course too.

We were quite a disparate group. In a remarkably even split of male to female, our ages spanned from 20-something to 50-something and we had come from all over the British Isles; the furthest reaches included Northern Ireland, Scotland, Cornwall and the Isle of Wight, and one delegate came from Belgium! There were ministers on sabbatical, youth workers, church leaders, people employed by Christian organisations ... and a journalist. Some people had been supported by their church in attending, others were self-funded and making time in their annual vacation.

Each day started with a short worship time, followed by World Watch when one

group would present on something that had caught their attention in the time they had spent outside the course (a feat in itself as you were usually so shell-shocked from all you were taking on board, it was a task in itself finding your way home to your digs that night). They presented on a newspaper article, a song, a poster on the tube, and an experience with a shop assistant and looked at some of the questions it raised, then reflected on the issues from a biblical perspective.

We were encouraged to learn to adopt 'double listening', a term coined by John Stott, the founder of the institute. He says Christians should be "listening to the Word, listening to the world". We listen to God to believe and obey. We listen to the world to understand its predicament.

In our lecture programme, which made up the bulk of our time, we were shown how we could equip ourselves for this task. Each of the members of the LICC research team made presentations, with the executive director Mark Greene conducting the bulk of the teaching.

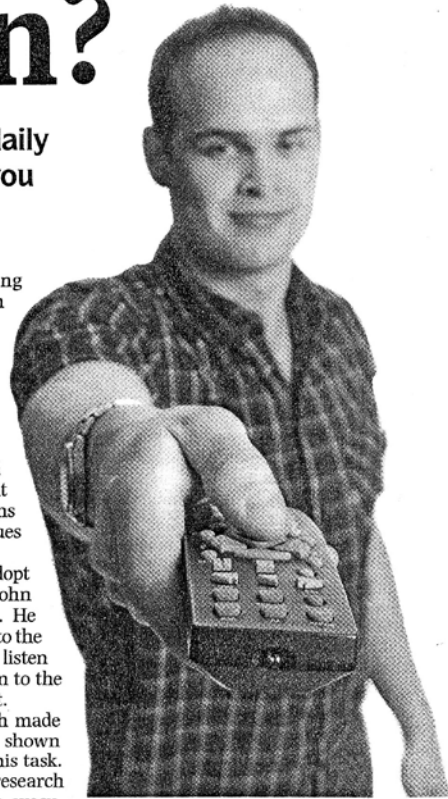
"Are we able to achieve this double listening?" he asked. "Not usually. Most Christians don't know how to live in this culture. They feel alienated. They are not confident about the ideology that they follow."

Mark, who has individually made a huge impact on the Church through the resources he provides on God in the workplace, cited how 47% of people say the preaching in their church is irrelevant to their life, and 50% haven't heard a sermon on work.

As Christians we need to be briefed, trained, supported and resourced, he said. Preaching is perceived as good technically but it generally gives us information about how we can live better individual spiritual lives, how we can relate better in families and as a church community. Yet how much is the Church equipping us for the place where we spend most time - the workplace? This is where we are most likely to meet and befriend people who don't know Jesus, yet we often find we are talking a different language.

"Too often we feel it's our duty to tell people what we believe instead of finding out what they believe," said Helen Parry, a lecturer in ethics. "We give them the answers to questions they aren't asking. We are waiting for our opportunity to speak instead of finding out about their yearnings and aspirations."

We can no longer assume people have an innate knowledge of the Bible, and in our postmodernist society we are also not welcomed if we declare that we know the truth. Today there is no absolute truth and, while we may not be met with antagonism when we declare our faith, people are less likely to ask "is this true?" - they are more likely to ask "does this work for you?" We have entered an age of pluralism. It is acceptable for you to believe what you like so long as you don't impose it on me.



When we try to communicate the Bible outside the Church we have to build bridges, to embrace the culture around us but this shouldn't be intimidating. It can be fun! Almost everyone on the LICC course had some passion, whether it was films, books, art or music, yet often we are bashful about these 'worldly' interests: they are leisure pursuits that are taking us away from our Bible reading.

Toolbox showed all of us that we didn't need to apologise for our interests. Some 85% of people in the UK get their primary information through television. This means that we see our world through a lens, in edited highlights. Music is similarly influential in shaping how we view our world. Scottish political thinker, Andrew Fletcher said: "Give me the making of the songs of a nation and I care not who writes the laws."

Engaging with the culture around us is therefore a part of our call to make disciples and the call to relevance. Everyone has their own cultural context, one is not necessarily more significant than another. Today it is easier to speak to people and know they will have experienced a book, television programme or film and in that they will have explored all the big issues of life - true love, happiness, what it means to be a man or woman.

"We need to be more Christian in the world and more human in the Church," said Brian Draper, lecturer in Contemporary Culture. So we need to acknowledge the impact of the sacred-secular divide on the thinking and approach of the Church, and develop skills in reading contemporary culture through biblical lenses.

For everyone on the Toolbox course this was a thrilling, exciting and liberating challenge.

● For more information and upcoming courses ring LICC on 020 7399 9555

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