

The Prophetic Youth Worker

It is understandable that Christians seek social influence. Responsibility to 'mend the world' and serve the common good is inscribed into the very character of Christianity as a prophetic religion.

Miroslav Volf (2011, p. 78)

It may have been love that held Jesus on the cross, but it was the politics of resistance that got him there.

Richard Passmore

Frameworks and perspectives

Artists have long used a 'perspective frame' to help them in their work. Most famously, Van Gogh used one to help him accurately paint his subjects and give him a precise depth of field in his paintings. The frame consists of a rectangular structure and a series of perpendicular, horizontal and diagonal strings or lines that divide up the frame into a grid. This type of frame enabled Van Gogh to capture the principal features of his subject, thereby enabling him to make a more accurate drawing. The frame helped him transfer what he saw in the field on to the flat surface of his canvas. In a letter to his brother Theo he said the result of using the framework was that 'on the beach or in a meadow or a field you have a view as if through a window'.¹ In the same way, Christian-motivated workers need perspective in order to help them see the world as it is. Workers need a framework to help glean an accurate understanding of what is happening in the world they exist and operate in. Such a framework gives perspective about what is going on in society, what God thinks about it and what prophetic actions and messages need consequently to emerge.

In this chapter, I seek to use the framework of the Nazareth Manifesto and the imperatives identified in Chapters 2 and 3 to consider the philosophy and values of Christian-motivated work and the political nature of these. I also consider the pedagogy of such work and what the political

¹ See <http://vangoghletters.org/vg/letters/let254/letter.html>.

component in a curriculum might be. I examine community organizing possibilities for workers, the young people they work with, and those they represent. This enables a rationale to be developed for ways that workers, churches and Christian organizations engage with policymakers. Finally in this section, I reflect upon the prophetic responsibilities of being a representative of God in the public square, the costs of being a prophetic dissenting voice and how to handle those challenges.

Philosophy and values

I scanned the conference programme looking for something I might find interesting, something that might go beyond the usual 'how to make the worship more dynamic', something that might look further than an overview of youth culture, something more than another reminder of the perils of sex, pornography, drugs and young people's challenging behaviour. Nothing. Yes, there was the now traditional session about some aspect of global poverty and a passing note to justice issues, but nothing explicitly, unashamedly, controversially and radically political.

There is nothing wrong with any of these usual subject matters and I don't mean to criticize any specific youth work conferences – my critique could be applied to most if not all conferences. Youth workers and ministers need to discuss populist matters and fully consider them. Indeed, I have often delivered sessions on them myself; but I want, I need and have to have more. I also believe God wants, has to be and demands more: that prophetic dynamic that stops the soul in its tracks; that spiritual jolt reminding us of our own vulnerability and failings as humanity; and those momentary releases of heaven into earthly realms. What we do has to be prophetic if it is to shape and help mend the world. If it is not, I am left questioning what it is we are doing and why.

Being politically prophetic enables us to act and speak about the nature of God, impregnating our broken world with hope, encouragement and improvements so the *what*, *when* and *how* is more justly apportioned. I do, however, consider there is a difference between prophesying and being prophetic. I believe being prophetic is not exclusively talking in 'thus saith the Lord' proclamations (although they have their place and are also welcome). It is more the redemptive acts, healing words and saving graces that emerge when the distinctive philosophy and values of Christian-motivated work impact political domains and unjust structures. These dynamics challenge inequality, build shalom and develop the common good.

Prophesying about the specific direction an individual, group, organization or nation should take is a weighty responsibility. It needs to be undertaken with great care and accountability and is a specific gift of the Spirit (1 Cor. 14.1). Acting *prophetically* in a counter-cultural way that upholds God's values also requires a careful and considered approach. However, I believe *being prophetic* can be done more systematically as part of a lifestyle choice and considered personal quest, as well as a specific manifestation of God's Spirit.

I have already discussed how Jesus was counter-cultural in his approach to women, the poor, the religious, people from other faith backgrounds and children and young people. We too can be prophetic in our choices and quests. For example, people might choose to buy Fairtrade goods as a prophetic statement about justice and economics. Others might choose to give up particular foods or meals (or even not to eat at all) during Lent to stand with those on the margins of society who have no food. Vicar Keith Hebden did this as part of the End Hunger Fast campaign. He prophetically fasted and also wrote an open letter signed by forty-two Anglican bishops and more than six hundred clerics, calling on the three main party political leaders to work to end food poverty. When he and the Bishop of Oxford tried to present this to the Prime Minister's constituency office (by appointment), the office bizarrely called the police. Fortunately, Keith and the Bishop did subsequently meet the Prime Minister to discuss the issue.

In my youth work, I have opted to be prophetic and counter-cultural by espousing an ultra-positive philosophy and value base towards young people. This has meant valuing them, communicating positive stories about them and what they do, saying 'hello' to them in the street, welcoming their opinions and endeavouring to involve them in everything impacting them. My doctorate research into Christian youth work projects identified a number of clear philosophical drivers and evident values underpinning the work undertaken. These include:

- a firm belief in human dignity where young people are treated with unconditional positive regard;
- going the extra mile to serve and empower them;
- a commitment to, and a declared vested interest in, working at a clearly defined local community level;
- embracing approaches that are salugenic – in other words, doing things that are life-bringing, coherent and help human flourishing;
- developing the ideal of the common good;

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- making a difference, not only to the young people but to the communities and contexts within which they exist;
- creating opportunities for them to be heard;
- maintaining symbiotic and synergistic relationships where workers, young people, the community and other stakeholders really are 'in this together';
- maintaining sustainable work that values good stewardship both in times of possibility and uncertainty; and
- being values-driven and reciprocal in everything undertaken.

These philosophies and values both manifested themselves within the projects studied and became externally evident in political and counter-cultural actions, attitudes and frameworks enabling work to be developed and young people to be served. Consequently, the work I researched was not only effective in terms of meeting young people's needs and helping fulfil their aspirations, but it also conveyed prophetic messages to society about what was perceived to be important. Excitingly for me, these drivers (some of which I discuss further shortly) are entirely consistent with the theological imperatives of shalom. I can think of no better prophetic rationale and stance upon which Christian-motivated work should be based.

Improvising and rehearsing what we do: our pedagogy

If Christian-motivated work is to embrace the passion of politics more effectively, then it will not only have to start doing more politicking, but it will need to start talking and thinking about it more. The survey results already discussed strongly suggest this is what youth workers want to do, providing they have the tools and resources to do so. The challenge is making this politicking happen in a way workers find empowering and releasing rather than alienating and restricting. One way of achieving this is to design a Christian youth work and ministry curriculum specifically and deliberately containing politicking elements, right at the fore. If this is to occur, workers need to understand what pedagogy it is they are using in their work.

Pedagogy is the method and practice of what is taught. It is the art and science of education. It is how we lead and guide someone educationally, the approach we take to convey knowledge and manage learning, and the methods we use to help young people grow and develop. It is the process we create for learners so that they learn effectively.

The original Greek meaning of the word *pedagogue* was 'a leader of children'. It would seem entirely appropriate then to consider how this educational leading might best be done to teach prophetic politicking in youth work and ministry.

One of the great strengths of the Christian-motivated youth work field is that a large number of volunteers deliver the work with young people. These volunteers represent a committed and vast resource of people and experience. Often, these volunteers are busy people with other jobs, family and church responsibilities. This usually means that what they teach or seek to impart to young people and the resources they use to do this need to be readily available and easy to use. 'Off the shelf' Christian youth work ministry resources have become the staple diet for many church-based youth work volunteers. Many of these resources are excellent, but usually they do not encourage the volunteer, or employed worker for that matter, to think about their pedagogy. The process is usually: look at the resource; prepare the youth work session; and then deliver it. If the resource is not pedagogically robust, does not contain political elements and use the theological lenses of shalom, the Nazareth Manifesto and the Beatitudes then we risk selling young people short. We will be offering a slimmed-down version of the good news and a potentially diminished experience of God. In my experience, not all resources are as pedagogically designed and robustly considered as they deserve to be.

Christian youth workers have an added challenge as they try to uphold the values of informal education as well as their faith convictions. Tony Taylor from the In Defence of Youth Work organization has used a very apt phrase to describe an approach embracing the idea that youth work starts with the needs and concerns of young people, while maintaining a commitment to undertake values-based work informally and educationally. He describes this as being 'improvisatory yet rehearsed', where the ability

to be able to think on your feet, react 'spontaneously' to twists and turns in conversations with young people demands that you spend significant time keeping abreast of political and current affairs; that you rehearse in your head how you might respond on an issue if it comes up or indeed how you might introduce an issue in a 'natural' rather than forced way.²

² Quotation from correspondence between Tony Taylor and myself. Also see www.indefenceofyouthwork.com.

The British film maker and playwright Mike Leigh uses this improvised but rehearsed approach in his work. Rather than present actors with a tightly written script, he comes with stories, ideas and possibilities. He then creates a rehearsal space, gathers actors together and begins to improvise the script. Characters develop, plot lines emerge and a narrative begins to take shape. What he does in this rehearsal and improvising space is then put before the camera and turned into an actual film. Perhaps we can learn from this approach. If we *practised and rehearsed* our politicking before we did it for real with young people we might develop better skills and a richer narrative. This would enable the worker to respond to where the young people are at, having previously considered their faith and political tools, processes, methods and responses: improvised, but rehearsed. I think this is what Jesus did. He had an overarching motivation and agenda (building the kingdom of God and implementing the Nazareth Manifesto), and an array of creative pedagogical approaches. He met people where they were at, practised and rehearsed with his disciples before he sent them out into the world.

Some European youth workers appear a bit more enlightened in these approaches than those of us in the UK. They talk about workers being 'social pedagogues'³ – carers and educators of young people working holistically and participatorily, concerned with individuals and wider society, seeking to reduce inequalities in society, showing solidarity with the marginalized and focusing on relationships and challenging social problems. This social pedagogue approach liberates the worker and aptly reflects how Jesus worked. The Christian youth work projects I have studied also seemingly embrace this ideal. While they might not be aware they do, they manage to bring together care and education, resulting in change, and do so via political, social action and justice-orientated approaches. Specifically, I found their work is about nurturing young people, caring for them, building community with them, advocating on their behalf, being socially structured and educational, while transmitting the Christian values they believe in. I think these elements form a challenging basis upon which an *improvised yet rehearsed* curriculum might be shaped, thereby enabling a more just *what, when and how*. However, as one research participant noted, 'There has to be a relationship and a long process which is supported by youth workers and other professionals to enable and equip young people to become more politically engaged.' Taking the time and developing a robust pedagogy will significantly help such engagement.

³ See Cameron and Moss 2011.

This process needs to consider when and how young people will be exposed to ideas that stem from the important theological imperatives I set out in Chapter 2: empowering people, justice, good news for the poor, blessing people, advocating, making a difference and trusting God. For the Christian youth minister, there might have to be specific sessions about these things: exercises, workshops, practical activities, prayers and Bible studies. Consideration will have to be given to the pedagogical methods and processes employed, and there will need to be a commitment to being intentionally political.

For the Christian youth worker, there will be a need to *rehearse* thoughts about these ideas, constantly ensuring that the value base worked from reflects them. I am an advocate of *prophetically rehearsing* what it is I do. That is, praying, reflecting and asking God what it is he is doing and what it is he wants me to do before a session or season of work. Young people will also need to be engaged and equipped to determine what they think about these matters and be encouraged to become active. Workers might additionally opt to invite the young people they work with to think about the most effective pedagogical approaches to take in the work. Simply asking young people what they think about different ways of doing things (that is, establishing their preferred learning style), or what issues interest them (that is, a needs analysis) or what they would like to see in their community (that is, basic profiling) would be a good starting point.

Community organizing as local activism

I have already discussed that if we want to have a Jesus-like approach to what we do, then we need to be an activist and do everything we can to ensure we act politically to liberate people. However, I want to explore this idea a little further here as something significant has happened in the last few decades regarding a political practice begun long ago. There seems to be a renewed interest and focus on *community organizing*: a process where people are brought together to be political activists by exercising their collective power to bring about change pursuant to an agreed common agenda.

It was American Saul Alinsky who helped bring the idea of community organizing to the fore. His work with poor African American neighbourhoods in Chicago in the 1950s elevated the idea of organizing to new levels. Unorthodox and confrontational, Alinsky developed a set of rules and tactics formulated around what local people wanted.

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He addressed one specific issue at a time and was highly agitating towards those who had the power that impinged on what local people said they needed or wanted. His goal was always to realize change.⁴ Alinsky was not a Christian. In fact he had an agnostic Jewish background with a penchant for the dark side of spirituality: many right-wing American Christians believed he was an agent of the devil. However, he was prophetic, very pragmatic and got results. His work has taken on added significance of late since Barak Obama became President of the United States. The President studied and was influenced by Alinsky, undertook some community organizing work when he was younger and has been an advocate of it ever since. The thing youth workers and ministers can learn from Alinsky and community organizing is that activism, realizing power and politicking are not things that should be left to chance – they should be planned for. It needs to be an orchestrated process that calls people out of their private worlds, into the political public sphere. At the beginning of this book, I made reference to the origins of the word ‘idiot’ and how it referred to those who withdrew from Greek political life. For Alinsky, apathy and non-participation was a bad thing. People, therefore, need to be trained, educated and organized to prevent this occurring.⁵

The Citizens movement, mentioned in Chapter 4, is an example of community organizing on a city-wide scale. In the UK, the initiative started in London as an alliance of local groups (churches, mosques, synagogues, trade unions, charities and academic bodies) coming together to politick. The movement is now spreading across cities in the UK and seeks to develop the capacity of its members to build power locally in order to hold politicians and other decision-makers to account. My local Citizens groups has recently won ‘living wages’ (where people are paid an amount based on the cost of living, rather than the minimum wage) for several thousand people, and realized substantial changes to health care and policing provisions.

Whether it is through formal bodies like the Citizens movement, practitioner networks like the ones FYT facilitates, or more informal associations, youth workers can come together to realize power and organize themselves to campaign for the things important to them and the young people they work with. Christian workers cannot divorce what is going on around them from what God wants and what they are called to be and do. They need to build and maintain alliances and

⁴ See Alinsky 1971, pp. 126–30, for a list of his ‘rules’.

⁵ For a further discussion, see Shannahan 2014.

draw upon their prophetic callings to ensure their ongoing spiritual credibility and relevance.

An exciting example of local community organizing comes from a group living on a housing estate near to where I was born in Macclesfield, Cheshire. A youth work colleague, Rob Wardle, helped set up Moss Rose Community Limited. The Trust has the aim of trying 'to be a voice for people about what is important to them and what they want to see happen' on the estate. Membership of the Trust is open to any person who lives in the area and who completes an application for membership: this includes young people in either School Year 7, or who are 12 years of age or older. The Trust is very much focused on improving the lives of those who live on the estate and this means listening to people, running events they want and campaigning about issues they are concerned with.

While I was writing this section, news broke of a community organizing, local activism campaign following an incident in a Nottingham sportswear store. The shop apparently asked a woman who was breast feeding to leave the store, because they considered it inappropriate. In response, a large group of women organized a sit-in protest. They turned up at the shop with their babies and started to breastfeed them as a way of highlighting how the store had behaved. The store apologized for what it had done.

Community organizing opens up many possibilities for both workers and young people. If we believe God is working in our midst, it can be a truly prophetic response to the *missio Dei*. It might even be a very tangible alternative to voting, because it seems to get things done in a way elected politicians often fail to. It might, as one research participant said, 'stir up passion and therefore potential action from youth'.

Engagement with policymakers

Community organizing is just one way of engaging with the powers that be in order to bring about change. It seems to be very effective at addressing certain issues, but it is not always possible to approach policymakers in such an organized and collective way. Indeed, it might not necessarily be the best way to tackle every issue. Different issues, involving different people, looking for different outcomes require different politicking approaches. If we want to impact the *what*, *when* and *how* determined by policymakers, we need to consider carefully which is the best approach to take in each and every circumstance. As

our consciousness about politics increases and develops, it is likely we will want to influence what policymakers do, both at a local and at a national level. If we are to fulfil prophetic promptings and callings, we need to take God's just ideals to policymakers and apply them to social policy narratives. This will take time, energy and courage as we endeavour to engage those with the power and seek change.

It is not always easy to build strategic alliances to campaign about an issue. As we have seen from exploring how Jesus ministered, confrontation and provocation have their place, but the personal touch and 'critical friend' approach also works. I recall sitting in a government minister's office with a group of young people and my good friend Bishop Roger Sainsbury, talking about youth unemployment. We had a constructive conversation and developed an ongoing relationship with the MP, which continues to this day. The young people involved also greatly benefited from the opportunity to talk in a non-threatening and non-confrontational environment.

I also recall a time when I was quite critical of a local youth policy and service – it just didn't resonate with what the young people I was working with were saying and experiencing. I attended lots of meetings. I got involved in the management of the service, the strategic direction it was taking, and also some of the direct delivery of the service. I was quite vocal (OK, very vocal) about what was happening and probably a real pain for the people on the other side of the table. However, we worked together for several years to try and make things better for everybody. Sometime after these events, one of the people with whom I was arguing a lot of the time publicly commended me for being a *critical friend* of the local service and stated how important it was to have partners and stakeholders who would bring challenge and perspective. I really appreciated this and was humbled by the man's deference and sentiment.

What I particularly like about community organizing is that it brings together those who might think they have little power and challenges those who take their power for granted. If we are to engage policymakers effectively, then we have to get to the people that have power. In the context I am talking about, there seems little point being prophetic to the wrong people. My research suggests those doing Christian youth work and work with young people are more likely to be interested in engaging with policymakers than those doing Christian youth ministry. I understand why this is the case: the former types of work are probably more impacted by policy – particularly policy directly relating to youth work and services for young people. However, I think it regrettable

that those doing Christian youth ministry are not more motivated to embrace those wider dynamics of their ministry relating to the common good of society. For example, I met a Christian youth minister recently who worked in an isolated rural area. She worked in a church, discipling the Christian young people, and had little contact with anyone or anything outside of her context. Other service providers had no contact with her and she none with them. She said the world just carried on, and she let it go by. She acknowledged this was not ideal, but said it was how it was. I fully understood where she was coming from and we had a very fruitful conversation, but I left feeling somewhat dissatisfied with where she was at and the lack of impact her work was having on the wider community. As I have indicated before, I think we can and should do better than this – for all our sakes.

Even if we try to do better, success is not guaranteed. The policymakers that many Christian youth ministers tend to engage with and influence are officers of church institutions: these institutions need prophetic challenge too. However, as one research participant said, this is not always easy. They told the following story:

Being ‘political’ is not simply about government or being interested in parliament. ‘Politics’ is everywhere, office politics, church politics etc. A few years ago I initiated a petition to try and save one of the national posts in the Church of England . . . over 1,000 signatures and a load of questions asked in General Synod . . . ultimately it was not successful. However, the ‘powers that be’ were made uncomfortable and made to think about their decision making . . . sometimes that is the best we can do.

Irrespective of whether it is secular or religious policymakers we are seeking to influence, the challenges of prophetic engagement are the same. For example, we may have to play the long game and invest many years of work in a particular domain or relationship. I have spent much of the last 15 years endeavouring to get policymakers to recognize the spiritual side of life as a component of well-being. I have done this not just because of my Christian faith beliefs, but because I consider spirituality a human development imperative. Some policymakers give the brush-off and I have received many standard letters of reply from some, had my questions left unanswered by others and had my emails ignored by yet others. When presented with a challenge, some power-holders say, ‘Prove it’. Parliament did this recently when it examined the value of youth work; workers were effectively told to go away, do

some research and prove their worth to society.⁶ Other policymakers might seek to stall and delay on a particular issue even though they know that the argument made or evidence presented is not on their side. A case could be made that the 14-year delay about the skate park in my village I talked about in Chapter 2 fell into this domain. Others seek to engage you, but on their terms and for their purposes. This happened to me recently when I took part in a process to frame how youth work outcomes were shaped and positioned. I was very critical of the shortcomings encompassed within the proposals. When the final framework publication was launched, I noticed my name appeared in the document. It thanked me, along with several others, for giving my time to help shape the framework. *Prima facie*, this was a nice gesture. The only issue was that they had ignored all my input. It looked as if I'd endorsed what they had written, when I hadn't.

I have also experienced other policymakers who have endeavoured to marginalize those who make representations to them. Because of the faith aspect of my youth work this is a particularly common experience. The macropolitical culture is better than it was, but there is still suspicion of faith-based work. More than once, it has been implied to me that Christian youth work is not proper youth work and, therefore, the opinions of those doing Christian work are not important. Some policymakers seem incapable of accepting that someone with a strong faith can do excellent work with people of all faiths and of none, without needing to ram their faith down everybody else's throats. Yet other policymakers, I am sorry to say, act deplorably. They lie, manipulate, rip you off and do everything to protect their position and diminish yours (for legal reasons I had best not give examples about this or name names). Of even more regret is that some of these policymakers work for church institutions.

Despite all these challenges, I remain convinced that we have to engage with policymakers. The many disappointments that come with this engaging are compensated for by the joys that result when a policy or decision is changed and a difference is made in people's lives.

Prophetic responsibilities

Whether it is relating to policymakers or addressing the many wider issues and narratives Christian-motivated workers encounter, there is

⁶ See House of Commons Education Committee 2011.

a need to be prophetic, persistent and stay courageous. If we want a better world, we have to engage those with power and prophetically speak into matters impacting our work. We need prophetically to pave the way, creating space for workers and young people so they can flourish. As Miroslav Volf reminds us, Christianity is a 'prophetic religion' (2011, p. 78). I wish to underline again that I am not exclusively talking here about the prophetic utterances favoured by those from a charismatic or Pentecostal Christian tradition. I am talking about a way of being that emerges as we get close to, and serve, a living God: a life that is counter-cultural and akin to the one Jesus lived, one that fully represents that ambassadorial role Paul talks about in the second book of Corinthians (5.20); one that is salty, full of light and delivering hope. This approach carries responsibilities.

There is a responsibility to be an effective witness for God. Christian-motivated work needs to model what shalom looks like. It should be good news for those young people who are poor and it has to speak out for those who have no voices. It needs to embody all that God is, and faithfully represent the gospel in all its dealings. Workers cannot stand idly by and passively hope things will miraculously change or get better for the young people they work with. While appreciating there are not enough hours in the day to fight every battle, there is a responsibility to at least fight some. We need prayerfully to choose which battles to fight and how and when to fight these. Prompted by God's Spirit, we need to remember 'our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms' (Eph. 6.12). This sentiment might explain why Jesus chose not to avoid paying the temple tax (Matt. 17.24-27). As the son of God he was exempt from paying tax on his Father's house, but in order not to cause offence he opted to pay it – miraculously with a coin from a fish's mouth. Of late, I have chosen not to join campaigns about modern-day slavery. I have opted not to fight for the rights of the homeless, or lobby about the extortionate rates of interest charged by pay-day loan companies. This is not because I don't think these issues are important. It is because I have chosen to prioritize and campaign about other things: the youth service, education matters, unfair cuts in welfare, young people's rights, and church cuts in youth work advisors, to name but a few.

When we take our prophetic responsibilities seriously we risk getting into trouble. Being a representative of God in the public square means taking on those principalities and powers. A worker in my research

described what this was like for them and the young people they worked with:

It is very difficult to bring up many issues in youth work, as assumptions are easily made about the sort of person you are – even if you are simply discussing the issue. I can imagine sharing your considered opinion on some topics, however considerately one might do so, could potentially jeopardize your employment or liberty. So how young people themselves are meant to have the confidence to do such things without severe repercussions is beyond me.

This is a difficult one. Many workers in my research said they felt constrained by the attitude of their employers and often these were said to be churches. It is unfortunate the very powers that should be backing Christian-motivated workers often become the powers against which they end up fighting. We spend far too much time in FYT supporting youth workers who are damaged (usually avoidably) by their churches. My only advice regarding this is to follow the leading of another research participant who said they would 'invite involvement from a foundation that . . . starts in love of people, love of God and love of the created order'. If we are to speak out, act prophetically and choose when and how to do this, then we need to be motivated by this sense of love. We might be angry and full of righteous rage, but we must not forget that it is the love of God and our neighbour that bookends all we should be and do. Being prophetic is about pointing people towards something that does not currently exist in their world-view, lens or framework. It highlights injustice, ushers in alternative ways of being and doing, reorders the micro and macro stage and creates places and spaces for the marginalized to prosper. Most importantly, it points to God as the pioneer, author, perfecter and finisher of faith (Heb. 12.2) and life. Christian-motivated work should aspire to do the same, taking its prophetic responsibilities extremely seriously.

Criticism and how to handle it

There is no doubt that politics can be a bruising business. When faith and politics are bought together, in the name of righteousness, then the bruising can be painful. Jesus said, 'Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven' (Matt. 5.10). Taking on micro and macropolitical powers and principalities

is rarely done without a price being paid, but, as Ann Morisy argues, 'community ministry cannot claim to be rooted in the gospel if it does not engage with the principalities and powers . . . associated with earthly oppression' (2009, p. 68). The price impacts our personal relationships, our health, our finances and our standing in the community. I am not sure it necessarily amounts to the type of persecution Jesus had in mind when he delivered the Sermon on the Mount, but the cost should not be under-estimated. I don't think we are really persecuted in the UK. We might be mocked a little and at times restricted, but not persecuted in the manner I believe Jesus foresaw. Clearly people in lands further afield are persecuted. In some countries, doing politicking gets you arrested, tortured and sometimes killed. Thankfully, we do not have to endure this in the UK. However, we need to be mindful that at a practice level there will be conflict and we need to develop strategies to handle it.

I have been hurt by some of the criticism I have received. Sticking my head out and voicing my opinion has not always gone down well. Challenging the vestiges of Christendom's approaches to politicking – by rejecting appeasement, politeness, endorsement of the status quo and fighting for rights, seeking radical reform and combatting the abuses of institutional power – risks upsetting not only elected politicians, but also those embroiled in benign churchmanship practices. At times, being a dissenter is lonely. It has often left me feeling vulnerable and sometimes there have been despondent feelings as I have questioned – 'I am the only one?' 'Why does no one else care?' 'Why isn't everybody protesting about this issue?' A personal pity party all too easily ensues – rather like that one described in Chapter 2 involving Elijah and the solitary tree. Workers in my research talked about feeling 'hopeless', 'tired', 'angry', 'stuck' and 'drained'. When we are feeling like this we have to do what I talked about in Chapter 2; first and foremost we have to trust God. Experience suggests there are some other things we can do too.

- We need to remember any criticism directed at us is probably not a personal attack – it is more likely an attack on and conflict with our ideas, not us as individuals. See past the person criticizing you; it's probably not a conflict with flesh and blood, even if it seems like it.
- Try to avoid being oversensitive. The idiom 'water off a duck's back' can teach us much. Meekness is an underrated quality that Jesus highlights (Matt. 5.5). Meekness is not about being weak and

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pathetic, but about developing an inward grace of the soul that is focused on God. When this is fully developed, it puts worldly things in perspective and literally enables us to 'inherit the earth' (Matt. 5.5) without being crushed in the process.

- Find people who support your politicking. They don't have to be people who always agree with you, but they do need to be people who believe in you and believe in what you are called to be.
- I mentioned earlier the role of critical friends. Make sure you have some of these who can challenge your perspective and keep it rooted in godly reality. I find a partner or spouse does this quite effectively.
- We need continually to recognize that the cost of making things better is often a price worth paying. Several people in my research mentioned Emmeline Pankhurst, the suffragette who paid a very heavy price in order to ensure that women got the right to vote. The cost for her was high, but the result changed the place of women in society.
- In a similar vein, we need to keep our ultimate goal at the forefront of our minds and spirits. If being a prophetic dissenting voice, advocate for others or local activist builds shalom, develops the common good and creates a better world, then I can be encouraged to put up with a bit of personal criticism from time to time.
- We can draw further encouragement that Paul talked about his 'light and momentary' troubles being inconsequential compared to the glory of what awaited him (2 Cor. 4.17). He was imprisoned, beaten up (so many times he can't remember and nearly to death), half-drowned (three times), whipped (five times), sleep-deprived, in constant danger of being robbed and often cold, hungry and thirsty (2 Cor. 11.23-27): perhaps a little criticism is not that bad in comparison.

It might sound a bit arrogant, but I think some people are critical simply because they don't know any better. They criticize out of ignorance, fear and their own limitations. For example, I have encountered churches who don't think anything exists outside of the box of their Sunday meetings. I have met people in schools who think the type of education they offer is the only form of learning with real value, and I have met many, many statutory youth workers who consider voluntary sector and faith-based work second class compared to that delivered by local authorities. When faced with this type of criticism we can but hope to be gracious, if not even a little smug and grateful for the greater knowledge, understanding and experience we quietly entertain.

Criticism is just one personal barrier that hinders effective politicking work and needs to be overcome. In the next chapter I explore some contextual and cultural barriers that also exist and consider how we might best address them.

Things to think about

- Think about Van Gogh's perspective frame. What do you see when you look at the world through whatever framework you use to gain perspective? How does this make you feel, and do you need to realign any perspectives you may have?
- What are the key values (be as specific as you can) underpinning your work? Can you see evidence of those values all the way through your work and approach? Think about what you do, how you do it, how you treat people, what results emerge from your work and how others perceive you – are your values ever present?
- To what extent do you agree that Christianity is a 'prophetic religion'? What stories, examples and evidence can you think of where you have been prophetic in your work? Is there an area of work/life that you would like to be more prophetic in? How might you go about achieving this?

What can I do?

- Write out on a series of cards some of the things to do with politics, social policy and/or Christian youth work and ministry you would like to know more about – one thing/issue per card. Don't make these too abstract: try to connect them to the world the young people you work with exist in. Put these cards in a diary and bring one out each month. Each month, commit to exploring the 'thing' or issue as part of your 'rehearsal' time so that you are better equipped to improvise about the matter in hand next time you talk to a young person about that thing or issue.

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- If you work with a regular group of young people, why not do some community organizing-based activities. Identify with the young people what issues are important to them that need changing. Find out who has the power to change them and go about seeking to realize that change. Input into an internet search engine 'Alinsky's rules for radicals' and use the rules he came up with (there are 13) to inform your organizing and actions.
- Some personal criticism is unjust or unwarranted and the negative effects of it can be long-lasting. Spend a moment or two in silence thinking if any criticism of your politicking from the past is holding you back from doing more (or more significant) politicking in the future. If you think it is, write down what the criticism is on a piece of paper or Post-it note. Put the paper or note in an envelope or small paper bag. Then shred it or burn it, praying – as you do it – that God will release you from anything unwarranted that is restricting you.