

Anne-Marie Angus

Panel session 'Building up the church' - a perspective of growing up in the church

Many of you know me to a greater or lesser degree, but some of you don't know my background at all, so I thought I'd tell you a little context to frame what I have to say on the issue of building the church.

I am a child of the Metropolitan Anthony era; that is to say I am one of the generation who grew up in the church which was entirely shaped by his influence & presence. My parents were both British converts; as far as I know there is no Slavic or Greek blood in me, and no-one else I knew was Orthodox. I inherited Orthodoxy, I did not choose it, at least not as a child. Like all inheritances, it comes with memories, with expectations and with a responsibility to maintain it. Those of us who are 'cradle Orthodox' - a term I dislike intensely, but one which is, I suppose, a useful shorthand - have had a different kind of journey from those of you who became Orthodox as adults. The assumption is that we don't need to be taught, that we learn our faith by osmosis. That is true for the rubrics perhaps, but many of us who are born Orthodox have not read the writings that a convert may have done & often feel theologically 'ignorant' in comparison, despite years of Sunday school & camp.

What follows is my view of growing up in the church and how this has influenced my views on how we need to make it welcoming to others. It comes with apologies to my lovely Mum who is here with us today, I hope there aren't too many surprises for her or others that have known me for years!

Being a child in the church was rather bewildering; there seemed to be so many rules, everything was in a foreign language, there was lots of hanging around after the service waiting for the adults to be finished whatever it was they were doing (and as the parents of myself & my friends were clergy or

church wardens or choir members or washers-up there seemed to us to be an endless amount of doing to be done!). It occupied the almost the whole of every Sunday because we went nearly every week. So many of my contemporaries no longer go to church at all. Perhaps not surprising, given that I (and others) felt that children were not really welcome in this adult world full of mystery & stillness.

All our school friends thought we were very odd, and it was very hard to explain why we went to this church miles away and worshipped somewhere where it was all in Russian. I had no idea why we did so. Sunday school didn't really clarify things much and besides it was hard to concentrate on nothing but a digestive biscuit & a small glass of squash at 1.30pm when everyone else was sitting down to a Sunday Roast. There were slightly exciting exotic things: we got to hold candles (and play with the melting wax - that was the bit we told our friends), we got to stay up late & eat delicious food in the middle of the night at Easter and our friends were very envious of the great times we had at camp.

Over the years I have worshipped in Orthodox churches in London and many other cities, towns & villages in the UK; in Paris; in Greece; in a converted shed in South Wales and very memorably in the open air in New Zealand. It was in Paris that my husband James first understood any of the Liturgy without a service book, because at least it was in a language he knew. Over time we have been part of several parishes. We were very involved with the community in Cambridge when it moved from monthly services to regular weekly Liturgies, becoming a parish under Fr John Jillions in the days before the IOCS. When it became difficult to travel with children to Cambridge we started to have Reader's Vespers in our playroom at home and very occasional Liturgies which Fr Alexander kindly did for us. This echoed the Christmas Liturgies that we had had for many years at home in South London with Fr Alexander's family & our family, which came about through my Mum's persistent requests to Metropolitan Anthony. Before this we had travelled to Lewes every 25<sup>th</sup> December (which from London seemed a pretty long way to us kids). When we had Vespers in our

playroom we covered the toys with sheets and put icons on chairs with nightlights in front of them; the children were the choir. It was homely but still Orthodox. The families that came formed the basis of our worshipping community in Redbourn, bult up from that small beginning. The service that we did for the children here at the conference last night was essentially the same as the one we used at home. Last night we had about 30 children singing and reading with us. Fr Edwin joined us to give the children a blessing at the end, but essentially it was a Vespers led by families for families.

Despite being married in the Cathedral at Ennismore Gardens and having our children Baptised in Cambridge and Clapham the one place that holds a really special place in my heart is the chapel tent at camp; here I first learned the beauty & simplicity of the services, here we were a community where the focus was on children, not on adults. For the first time we could 'be' Orthodox without (much) restriction.

Now I am part of the little community in Redbourn, (which is in Hertfordshire for those of you who haven't yet been to visit us). Along the way I have been a child, a young adult & a student in the church & at camp, a churchwarden, a choir member, a camp leader and camp cook, as well as a wife of another convert, a Mum to 3 kids & a doctor. All of these experiences have formed my thoughts on how we build the church - to me the key is about how we make people welcome.

Perhaps now, more than ever, we need to think about how we project our communities to others.

So how can we do that? How can we make people feel part of our communities and parishes? I would like you to think about a time when you went somewhere unfamiliar, where you didn't know many people, perhaps didn't know the 'rules of engagement' - it probably felt uncomfortable didn't it? Some people coming to our churches may feel like that. I certainly did as a child.

At the most basic level it is about things like where are the toilets, do you stand up or sit down, who can light candles, who

can go up for communion? Then of course there are the more complex questions & who to ask them of.

Some of what I know I have learned from my parents (Mum will be glad that I am saying that – all her efforts were not in vain.....). They were both welcomers but had very different styles – more latterly Dad’s way was to sit at the back behind the candle desk at Clapham, a quiet presence with a smile and a kind word, directing people if they asked (although of course many of you will also remember him corralling people to help with the bazaar at the Cathedral). He also greeted people, including all the children, by name. Mum’s way is to encourage helpers onto one of her many rotas, realising that people feel welcomed and part of things if they are given a job to do.

At Redbourn, in common with many congregations, we (usually me but others might do it occasionally as well) try to welcome people informally when they arrive and to invite them to share coffee or lunch with us. In my experience joining together for a meal is the very best way of building a community.

We have an area where the children tend to sit together, colouring icons or reading – we try to make it friendly, and as a result there is of course a certain amount of whispering & misbehaving – the adults have to decide how much of that is acceptable & how much is not. We have in our community a collective responsibility for the children, all the adults look out for what is happening to the children (which helps us as usually James & I are far away in the choir – history repeating itself you see!). We have had visitors who don’t like the presence of the children & the distraction they bring. Others love the fact that children are welcome, often being relieved to find somewhere that they come & worship as a family. At this point I’d like to remind you all of Fr Alexander Schmemman’s phrase about “the holy noise of children” and Metropolitan Anthony’s memorable retort to his parishioners once that “if you are aware of noise from the children you aren’t praying hard enough!”

The children & young families are the future of the church. When you ask adults why they come to church they will give

you a variety of different reasons – the music, the liturgy, the fellowship, the stillness, the sharing of communion, being on journey, seeking something specific, personal distress etc. **If you ask young adults why they come to church, in my experience they universally say “to see my friends”**. We need to engage with them and welcome them, we need to give them reason to keep coming. At Clapham, Northampton and Redbourn (in common I’m sure with many other communities) the children are given space to be a bit noisy, they are asked to carry candles, to sing in the choir, they are allowed to run around afterwards to ‘let off steam’. At Redbourn, we all come to the middle of the church to sing the Creed with words held up so that everyone can join in. The older children take the younger children up to communion. When Fr Stephane gives a sermon, the children come and sit on cushions around him to hear the story and he tries to include us all in what he says.

There are other things we should consider – what does our outwardly facing contact with the world look like? Do we have posters up outside? Do we ‘advertise’ our presence in local papers or at local colleges? Do we have an accessible web presence? How do people find us? Can we offer lifts to those who cannot get there themselves (again this is something we do at Redbourn – it is common for us to collect others along our route, often taking an extra car in order to do so).

There are probably some other great practices that people can share....

In summary:

Think about what our worship looks like to others – try to put yourself in their shoes, particularly the children (to paraphrase Dumbledore in Harry Potter: we cannot expect children to know what it is like to be adults, but we adults should not forget what it is like to be a child). Welcome newcomers, listen to them, but also to the established community members; regularly re-evaluate what works and what could be done differently- don’t be afraid to be flexible in arranging the worship and do what works for your needs – parishes & communities are dynamic

and interesting places to be, but like everything that relates to people they need constant input to maintain.

Anne-Marie Angus May 19