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Drawing the Line

by Janet Wootton

The Gospels present the life and ministry of Jesus as a series of encounters with people at the boundaries of faith and society: Gentiles, the ritually unclean, sinners and women. His ministry is also presented as a crossing of boundaries, of demolishing law and tradition for the building up of the kingdom. When the local church engages in mission it too finds itself crossing boundaries – lines which have often been firmly drawn in the collective mind of the church's membership and the wider community it serves. The courage and vision needed to venture into unfamiliar territory can be an upheaval for a congregation, yet it can also bring about a wider vision of God and the world. But which boundaries do you cross, and which boundaries do you leave in place? Janet Wootton describes how these questions were wrestled with as part of the out-working of a missionary strategy in inner-city London.

▶ I have been minister of Union Chapel for ten years now. At the first church meeting I attended, I asked where the boundaries were. At my previous churches I had frequently crossed boundaries, invisible to me, but shocking to some members of the congregation: that sermon was too radical; we don't like learning new hymns; we shouldn't let groups like *that* use our nice new hall; that woman from the council estate doesn't really fit in...

The Union Chapel church meeting simply stared back. There weren't any traditions I could upset, or hidden boundaries. The church members knew they had a vast, under-used building. They had started to look outwards to the needs of the community, and were ready to see what God would do – or at least see what their new minister would do.

The question since then has never been "where do we start?" but "where do we stop or where do we draw the line?" This question is theological, and has arisen in three specific areas. In each area, it arises from the clash between our perception of the gospel as Christians, and the wider community's idea of what Christians are going to be like.

Arts for Everyone?

We decided that the obvious use of our two largest spaces – the worship space and the old Sunday School hall – was for the arts. The worship space is a very beautiful octagonal building, with raked pews surrounding a central marble pulpit on three sides, and excellent acoustics. We enjoy worship in it each Sunday. The Sunday School is a lovely high, light room with a stately gallery. Both lend themselves to performance of different kinds. Our arts policy is to be available to groups which would otherwise be under-represented in the commercial arts. Therefore we are open to children, to groups with disabilities, to the various ethnic communities which make up the rich mix of Islington. This is not simply a case of the church trying to be "trendy". It is based on our assessment of how *this* building can serve *this* community.

But here is the clash. The art and performance of these groups is often iconoclastic. It cries out against the establishment which exploits and excludes people. And it sees the Church as part of the establishment: "Isn't it hilarious, doing all this in a *church*?" they say. And yet we, because of our allegiance to the gospel, are really ahead of them in our outrage against the intransigence of the Establishment. The wider community expects us to draw the line against their iconoclasm, but our line is drawn by a greater iconoclast!

In a Strange Land

The light, airy Sunday School hall, on an altogether smaller scale, lends itself to work with children. We had already provided a meeting place for various refugee communities, and found that there was a need for childcare. With the aid of the BBC Children in Need appeal, and in consultation with the local council and the communities, we set up a small childcare facility.

Now we found lines being drawn against us! Some faith groups were unwilling to allow their children to enter Christian premises. They were also shocked by some of our attitudes. For example, we wanted to meet the needs of the mothers of the children by offering English classes and some other training. Some communities saw this as undermining the place of women, by offering them too much freedom. As Christians, we were in danger of crossing the boundaries of other faith communities, boundaries which we thought unjust.

Where Many Lines Cross

We have a third space which draws many lines together. In the evenings, when there is a performance, there is a licensed bar – now there's a line that many non-conformist churches would draw! During the day, twice a week, it functions as a drop-in centre for homeless people, serving tea, coffee and food. Our stated aim for the drop-in is that we will never ban anyone.

Where do you draw the line? The persistently violent and disruptive are given extra care by the volunteers and short shrift by the other users. The kids (not homeless) who come in to wreck the joint are told that they are welcome, provided they are accompanied by their parents!

Some activities are beginning to draw their own lines. For example, some people want to set up activities for specific groups: a cooking class, photography, life skills, and so on. For these, they want their own space, free of the disruption caused by others whom they see as wasters. There is a lot of discussion about who has the right to draw lines, and where the lines can be drawn.

Whose Lines?

Behind all this is a conscious effort to take seriously the teachings of Jesus in the context of the whole of Scripture. We see Jesus drawing lines against the hypocrites, who used their religious rules to exclude people. His strongest invective is reserved for these "blind guides" and "unmarked graves". On the other hand, he crossed lines drawn by the society of his day. He touched lepers and spoke openly to women and Samaritans on equal terms. His touch was always healing, except when he found people exploiting the poor in the very precincts of the Temple. Then his hands drove against the den of thieves, preventing God's house from being a house of prayer for all nations. All this he saw as being the fulfilment of the Law. He was drawing the line not against God's Law, but against those who abused it.

In all that we do to provide a welcoming space to the local community, in all the lines that we cross and all the lines we find being drawn, we ask the simple question: is this in line with the teachings of Jesus? The answer is often surprising to us – and astonishing to the communities we seek to serve in his name. ■