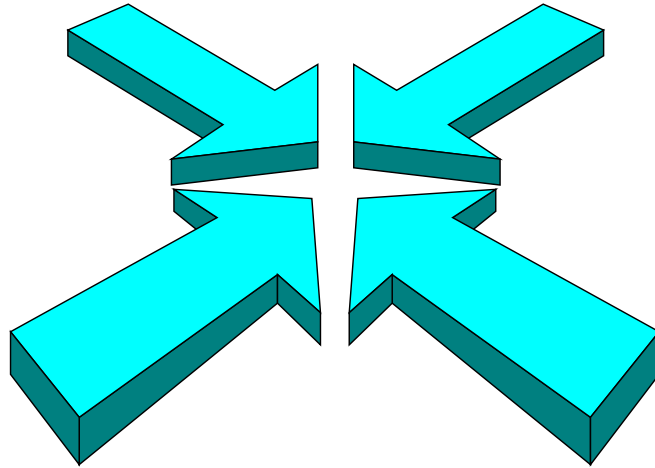


BAGGAGE and TREASURES



A six-session course
for all who seek more unity across the Body of Christ

by

Clifford Owen

© 1998 for BBC Radio Stoke's Lent Course
(Revised with permission 2021)

Where did *Baggage and Treasures* come from?

Back in 1910 a challenging question emerged from the Edinburgh Missionary Conference: ***how can we preach a gospel of love and reconciliation out of churches which are so obviously divided and separated from each other.*** It began the modern search for Christian Unity, usually called 'the Ecumenical Movement'.

The following years came to be labelled 'the era of the enthusiasts'. Many prominent churchmen led *ad hoc* initiatives and this led in 1942 to the formation of the British Council of Churches. For nearly 50 years the BCC built up a great deal of respect for its theological work, conferences, publications and not least, its high quality of personnel. But early schemes for church mergers proved unsuccessful. By 1982 the Anglican-Methodist reunion scheme had collapsed. The proposed Covenant for Unity between five churches (Church of England, Methodist, United Reformed, Moravian, and the Churches of Christ) had also failed. But this 1982 season of pessimism was punctuated by the visit of Pope John Paul II to the United Kingdom in the same year. This encouraged conversations between the third major Christian community in England, the Roman Catholic Church, and the member churches of the British Council of Churches.

In 1983 the Inter-Church process began, when Archbishop Runcie called various church leaders to Lambeth Palace in the wake of the collapse of the Covenant for Unity. This led in turn to the establishment in 1984 of the Inter-Church Meeting, which brought together not only the three largest Christian traditions in England, but also a wide range of other churches including the Orthodox, the Lutheran and some African and Afro-Caribbean Independent, Pentecostal and Holiness churches. The Inter-Church Meeting initiated the Inter-Church process, '*Not Strangers But Pilgrims*', including the 1986 Lent course, '*What on Earth is the Church For?*' in which nearly a million people took part in radio-based house-groups. It was sincerely believed that the Inter-Church Process represented a new and positive way to move the churches forward from the frustration and discouragement of the previously failed attempts at union schemes. So it turned out to be. The process culminated in a major British and Irish Conference at Swanwick, Derbyshire, at which the Swanwick Declaration was adopted by acclaim and personally signed by those present on 4th September 1987. Swanwick 1987 was a pivotal moment, especially as it led directly to the formation in 1990 of *Churches Together in England* and similar bodies in Wales and Scotland. Swanwick may well be seen in historical hindsight, as the result of an ecumenical initiative from 'the top' meshing with the ecumenical enthusiasm from the grassroots. What emerged from Swanwick called for engagement and commitment from the churches at the right level. It honoured the various histories and convictions, which gave churches their identities, including the smaller ones. They signed up, not to a unity scheme, but to a ***pilgrimage to seek unity.***





It was in the climate of this new enthusiasm that BBC Radio Stoke began a local ecumenical initiative based on the original model of Lent 1986. Each Lent the churches of the North Staffordshire area followed a Lent Course based around weekly radio broadcasts. Many groups participated and in Holy Week there was held a plenary meeting and act of worship in one of the Stoke-on-Trent churches. '*Baggage and Treasures*' was one such course and Clifford Owen was invited to write it for 1999.

It is now 2021. '*Baggage and Treasures*' has been revised to try and pick up again that thread of hope and enthusiasm which propelled the churches in the 1990s. There were three key 'drivers' in the 1990s. There was the approaching Millennium Moment of 31st December 1999. **2000 years of 'anno domini'** Many churches focused on why we counted the calendar from the birth of Jesus. Consequently church leaders agreed to 'seize the season' and that the 1990s should be a **Decade of Evangelism**, when 2,000 years since Jesus should be celebrated as a fresh start.

Ecumenically we were in the **first enthusiastic generation** since Swanwick 1987.

So where are we today, 20 years into a new century? Have we gone forward in our churches in this new millennium, stayed treading water; or have we drifted backwards? Maybe over the next six sessions you will discover!

Symbols used in the following sessions

	<p>Group Exercise</p>
	<p>Turn to your bibles</p>
	<p>Prayer</p>
	<p>After thought</p>

SESSION 1: Baggage is necessary. Without it we cannot transport the treasures.

At the Baggage Reclaim

The holiday flight is over. We've walked from our aircraft down into the baggage hall and now we are standing by the carousel. Everyone else's baggage seems to come past before ours turns up; so we are forced to watch most of the bags passing before our eyes. So many look the same. Will the pink ribbon we put around our case handle for ease of identification have stayed on? Here's a case with old labels. Wow! they look well-travelled. Look at that person over there grabbing at luggage. Why does someone need all that amount? What can they possibly be carrying around? Won't my case look a bit cheap when it turns up alongside these posh ones? What's inside. I wonder? Are there expensive presents for loved ones? Are there jewels that the owner has risked putting in? There must be trousers and T-shirts, pyjamas and toothpaste. But are there ball gowns and dinner jackets? Are there drugs in secret compartments? Aha! Here's mine! Off the carousel it comes. Now it's safely in my possession once more. Other people's baggage now fades from my focus. Ah, yes....do I have anything to declare?(original introduction)

...and so to our CHURCH BUILDINGS

There are many church buildings about if we care to look. The majority are probably old, but many

are new. Some have been part of the landscape for centuries. Others could be mistaken for the library or be an obviously converted cinema.

I was recently visiting Inverness. I was looking through the B&B window across the River Ness while wondering about which church to attend on Sunday. There were a number of towers and spires to choose from. I went on the internet to look at the map and tried to match the map to the spires I could see. In the end I went for a walk to see them close up. But finally, I discovered the Cathedral and attended it on Sunday morning. Why? Well mainly because the time of the service fitted well with our 12.30 train departure to Aberdeen and also my relations thought they would prefer its music! Our choice was based on time of service, style of worship, tradition, and 'would we feel comfortable if we attended?' The internet helps of course. But our choice was also based on long 'inside knowledge' of worship in so many different churches and traditions. But what if I was a total stranger; unfamiliar with regular Christian worship?

Q1: What does your church building look like to the outsider who is just passing by?

These days we have become more conscious of the message that they might be giving to the outside world. Why for example do wedding couples nearly always choose the 'nice looking' old church for their photographs!

I was once driving around Kidderminster inner ring road. I passed a number of churches. Some turned my head by their sheer size. Others were tucked down side streets. Why did they have to build a brand-new Methodist church right alongside the ancient parish church? What I thought was the Methodist church turned out to be the Roman Catholics!

On a visit to New York, we approached the city on the AMTRAK train. The skyscrapers of Manhattan were an awe-inspiring sight as we came in on a high viaduct over Brooklyn. There below us and standing out prominently among the residential tenements, I could see what looked like a large mosque. As we drew closer I spotted a Greek flag and recognized a beautiful Greek Orthodox Church!

It does take a while to recognize what kind of church building we may be looking at. Of course, if we are not sure we can always consult the noticeboard.

Q2: But what messages do our church noticeboards communicate?

Nearly always the noticeboard will give the denomination, the ministers' and lay leaders' names and contact details. There may also be a challenge or pause for thought:

'CH...CH What's missing?'

or

*'Love made the world round, love makes the world go round'
(Wayside Pulpit)*

I was once walking past North Finchley Methodist church. I guessed that it belonged to the nineteenth century and the date on the stone confirmed that. Outside there was a very sincere notice which read: *'You will find a warm welcome here'*. Unfortunately, the welcome couldn't be read until one was almost upon it because the roses which obscured it hadn't been pruned! Then there are our service times: Does the outsider understand our coded signals? Holy Eucharist, High Mass, Evening Praise, Preaching Service, Breaking of the Bread. 'Open to God', Tots Praise,

Messy Church, 5th Sunday BCP. Maybe even regular worshippers are confused by the array of titles!

You may know the inside of your church so well that you are largely unaware of the signals and messages it may give to an outsider. You may not even know the insides of other churches of your own denomination. You may even be someone who does not know the inside of any churches. If so you are a very important person for this course. You will know better than the regulars about outside impressions!



Go around the group in turn and after personal introductions (if not done already) give a brief description of the OUTSIDE of your church and then invite others to comment on your description. Try to be honest about the impressions and 'vibes', the myths and the histories of those churches according to the local grapevine? e.g. 'Oh! St Agatha's. Isn't that the happy-clappy lot?' 'St. Barnabas: we've always thought that you were higher than Rome!' 'But doesn't that new group meet in a school somewhere?'



DO OUR CHURCH BUILDINGS MATTER TO GOD?

Choose from the selection of short passages below to help.

Haggai 1. 1-3 The re-building of the Temple *'is it a time for you to live in your well roofed houses, while this house lies in ruins?'*(v4)

Mark 13. 2 Prophecy of the destruction of the Temple.

Matthew 4. 23 Jesus' ministry in the synagogues.

Luke 7. 5-6 The centurion's financial support of the synagogue.

Acts 17. 24 Does God need a building to live in!

Post COVID19: What has worshipping online by Zoom or U tube etc. taught us about buildings?

STOP PRESS:© How do Huntingdon Methodists feel about their new extension opened September 2021?



We thank you Lord for our church buildings: the small ones and large ones. The old ones and new ones, the magnificent ones and the simple ones. Teach us to be aware of what they are saying. Move us to develop them and spend on them if that seems right; to share them as you direct; to dispense with them if they have had their day. Above all let us see them as servants of the Kingdom that is yours through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen



Some churches seem built to the Glory of God, others to the glory of the architect, some to the glory of both. Others are just built! If churches are sermons in stone, could you put that sermon into words?

SESSION 2: WHAT'S INSIDE YOUR CHURCH? What are the treasures within?

'The vehicle and the goods'

I live near the A14, an arterial highway stretching from the east-coast container port of Felixstowe, across East Anglia to join the M1 motorway in the Midlands. A new 12 mile by-pass has recently been built to by-pass Huntingdon and eliminate a bottleneck, which frequently clogged up the traffic flow. As I look over the new road from one of the bridges you can see a clear sample of the traffic passing along the artery. It's mainly heavy goods vehicles, or 'trucks' if you prefer. As you drive the A14 and look at the registration plates on those HGVs, you will see many different European nations. The traffic on the A14 runs all around the clock. Something like 80% of goods move around by road. Some of the lorries have their goods advertised on the side of the vehicle. Some vehicles are travelling empty. We rarely if ever see the real freight inside. But if we were to follow to an industrial estate or a wholesale distribution centre, eventually the juggernaut would stop. The doors would open and the goods off-loaded: every kind of manufactured item, fresh and frozen foods or whatever. The HGVs are the essential lifelines of everyday living. But without the need of the goods the vehicles would be redundant. Without the HGV the goods could not be distributed.



If the church could be compared to a vehicle, what 'goods' are conveyed by your church. Last time you looked at the images that the externals of our churches conveyed. In this session we open the church doors to see if there are any treasures inside.

What is it that your church holds special? Could you call it a 'treasure'?

How you tackle this question depends to a certain extent on who is in your group. And what denominational churches they represent, but it would be useful to explore this question from two angles:

1. **The local angle** e.g. Your church might say that its treasure derives from its history as a town centre prominent church, a focus for many visitors. Another church might feel that its attraction lies in its informal and almost casual style of approach for people on a local estate (in other words it believes it is culturally relevant). Do we believe that our particular church has something special that gives us a 'feel-good- factor'?
2. **The denominational angle:** this assumes that your church shares a lot of things in common with other churches of the same denomination, e.g. if you are a Baptist and have known no other tradition then you should feel at home in any Baptist church because they all do more or less the same things in the same order even though they are 'free' churches! It used to be said that the thing that Anglicans had was 'Common Prayer'. You could go into any Anglican church anywhere in the world and you would find the same service. Nowadays it seems as though Anglicans have '57 varieties'!



Having spent a while trying to discover any initial treasures, you might like to focus down on these frequently used lines of contrast:

- a. 'Free' church services over against 'liturgical' forms of worship. Does 'free church' really mean that the congregation is freer? How central should Holy Communion be?
- b. Some churches pride themselves on having preserved the 'true gospel'. This might be seen in the form and length of preaching. Other churches see their strength in good sound doctrinal preaching, faithful to Bible and Creeds. They might see themselves as standing firm against 'liberalizing' tendencies. But do Christians need to have plenty of scope for liberty of thought and interpretation? How wide should the boundaries of orthodoxy be? What one church calls strength, another might label as weakness. Can you 'pigeon-hole' your church under a popular label?
- c. The Holy Spirit question: Are Charismatics the only ones open to the Spirit? Can we have a church which is always waiting for the wind of the Spirit and can do without structures? What about the skeleton and the flesh in the human body?
- d. Catholic and Protestant. Do they need each other? Is it yesterday's conflict? What importance should a church place on history, tradition, continuity and authority.



Read Ephesians 4. 1-7, John 17. 20-23

WHAT ARE YOUR TREASURES?

It may be that you will find in your groups that there will be too much above to discuss in one session. If so, it doesn't matter. If you find it useful and want to complete the exercise then perhaps you can arrange a second session on another day. The object now is to try to discover the treasure of your own church and denomination. Do the other members of your own church agree?

Post COVID19: What Treasures have been discovered by your church worshipping remotely during Lockdowns?



Lord God, we thank you for calling us into the company of those who trust in Christ and seek to obey His will. May your Spirit guide and strengthen us in mission and service to your world; for we are strangers no longer but pilgrims on the way to your Kingdom (CTE Prayer)

Finchley Churches Together agreed this statement:



What are we trying to do? Put simply, we seek new ways forward together into this 21st century. No one could doubt for a moment our individual and collective need of prayer, but even in prayer, the very centre of our life and work together, traditions and tastes vary considerably.

'We tend to spend much time talking and compromising, usually in 'a bit of everything' while often the truth of things is that we are all most eager to share the great and wonderful gifts we ourselves find in our own church and communities. This is not always just because we believe that we are 'right' or 'better' or even because we 'prefer what we are used to', but because we love and can't stop talking about it. We are eighteen such church communities and we are different, even those of the same denomination in a different place find different reflections within the riches of their own broad traditions....

SESSION 3: HAS OUR FIRE GONE OUT?

Back in 1998, when this course was originally written it was the Decade of Evangelism and there was great enthusiasm 'for something' as people approached the year 2,000. The churches together planned the Decade of Evangelism in the hope that the regular Sunday worshipping attendance could be lifted from the 9% of the population towards 15%. It was a great target and much effort went into it. The churches pushed hard. I can remember visiting every house in my rural Worcestershire parishes with a copy of John's Gospel which included a forward written by the Archbishop of Canterbury! Most people welcomed my visit but very few came to church 'just like that'! When the churches checked their attendances this side of the Millennium it was found that church attendance actually declined during the Decade of Evangelism!

It is now 2021. 'Baggage and Treasures' has been revised to try and find again some of the threads of hope and enthusiasm which propelled the churches in 1998. Have we gone forward in our churches in these first twenty years of the new millennium, stayed treading water...or have we drifted backwards?



A recent survey (2017) by the Diocese of Ely suggested that in Market Towns church attendance is below the current national average e.g. In Huntingdon it is as low as 0.5% for the Church of England. (1 in 200 of the population on a Sunday) However if one adds together ALL churches of whatever denomination the figure runs up to 3%.

Is this a hint that our churches should be working together?

In Cambridgeshire we have a steam tourist attraction: The Nene Valley Railway. For three years I worked as a volunteer in the loco-shed depot at Wansford. It was heavy but interesting work maintaining and restoring vintage steam locomotives. But at the end of the day, the intention was not that these beautiful old 'iron-horses' should sit in museums but that they would come alive when the coal is roaring in the firebox and the steam gauge is showing enough pressure to get the locomotive moving. I remembered from my trainspotting days of forty years ago how lifeless those lines of rusting old engines seemed until the fire was lit within. When it was, life and motion returned to wheels and carriages.

'Has the fire gone out in your church?'



Many of our churches are apparently 'in motion' but the spiritual fire may be burning low; so for initial encouragement read **Ezekiel 37. 1-14**; The vision of the valley of dry bones. The bones are symbolic of the nation of Israel. The bones are proof that there had been life once. The prophet is commanded to call life back to the bones. Those who are tempted to give up take heart!

There are many reasons why our church's fire may have burned low. *One may be discouragement because of competition.* In the competitive atmosphere that can still reign between our churches, do we keep our treasures secret or should we share them? Does the grass in the other church always look greener? Does that 'new church' pose a threat by drawing away some of our best folk?

Competition between churches is often most keenly felt when new Christians move into an area and start shopping around. It is quite common for people to check out the churches before deciding to move into an area. They may be looking for a church where there are good youth groups and children's work if they have a family to bring up. It may be that they want a church with 'good sound

teaching'. Perhaps they are looking for a place to which they can bring their own gifts and ministries. Sometimes a group of Christians will create a new congregation independent of anyone else. They may do it without any reference to or consultation with the existing churches. Neither does denomination seem to matter too much to Christians who are on the rounds of the churches looking for the speciality that they seek.

It is easy to condemn these 'Christian gypsies' who are always on the move. Many ought to be willing to seek God's strength to stay with tough situations a little longer and work together with those who may have been struggling for years against all the odds. On the other hand, dare we ask the question 'what's missing in my church?' Has our fire really gone out? Do we actually have the particular treasure that people who pass through our doors might be looking for? Has another church got our missing treasure?



By now in the group you will have discovered a little about each other and your churches. You will have become aware of some of the treasures you have as well as those you don't.

Here are seven suggestions as to why the fire might be burning low: (Only suggestions!)

1. **Always a financial struggle?** *Why is it that St.X's always have enough money and mount this campaign and that. Why can they afford an extension to put in all the extra congregation and new facilities, whilst we struggle to pay the quota? Why is it that some Christians will give large amounts of money for one kind of church but not for another?*
2. **Prayer.** *Is yours a praying church? Is prayer confined to the leader of Sunday's worship or is it part of the life of most church members? Has the prayer connection been made between prayer, faith and real issues that concern people?*
3. **Bible exposition and study.** *Like prayer, is the Bible a vital source of spiritual life and nourishment. Does the church sit under scripture or over scripture? (e.g. The doctrine of the Church of England is grounded in the Holy Scriptures and in such teachings of the ancient Fathers and Councils of the Church as are agreeable to the said Scriptures. Canon A5. This is the claim. Is it true at the local level?)*
4. **Youth and Children's work.** *Not too many churches attract and hold large numbers of young people. Is this the elusive treasure of our age? Are there any secrets to catching the kids?*
5. **Church growth.** *Is your church growing in number? If the answer is 'Yes' can you explain 'why?' 'If there is a drift of people away: any idea why?*
6. **Nostalgia.** *Were our congregation's good days in the past...when Revd. X was here? How can we get back there?*
7. **Vision** *Does our church have a sense of God's call in a particular sphere of work and ministry? Did we once have a vision years ago but somehow it has been lost?*

The above are JUST SUGGESTIONS. You may need to do some homework just sitting, thinking, praying and then pool your comments another day (or even at church council!)

Post COVID19: Have you discovered new friends from other churches during Zoom sessions?



'Grant us O Lord to have a fresh picture of what your church might look like in our town. Focus our minds on our need of each other, but above all of the heartwarming life that springs only from You, our Lord and Saviour. Amen'

We need each other



*the Evangelicals to get us started on the road.
the Baptists to teach us the real meaning of having a bath
the Charismatics to turn our sails into the wind
the Society of Friends to train our ears to listen
the Catholics to train us for the marathon and
the liberals to keep our grey matter working
(Clifford Owen, July 1998)*

If you disagree with the above, how would you like to re-write it?

For next time: **Travelling light: What would a united church look like?**

Think about this for homework.

If you prefer, do your answer in diagrammatic form, or a sketch or even as a cartoon.

SESSION 4: TRAVELLING LIGHT: WHAT WOULD A UNITED CHURCH LOOK LIKE?



Ephesians 4. 1-16 The Unity of the Body with Christ as Head.

Silence:

TOWARD A UNITED CHURCH:

Most Christians have grown up in churches, which appear complete in themselves, but contain one or two particular treasures at best. Our separated denominations witness to the inability of past Christians to hold treasures together. Because the treasures have become separated, each one has required its own particular packaging to transport it down through the years and in some cases centuries. But the treasures really belong together in a single church, how can we bring them together? Can you identify separated gifts and ministries in the churches represented in your group, which would really be better together working in conjunction?

- In your town/village are there any formal Local Ecumenical Partnerships?
- Are there any shared building arrangements or regular shared worship?
- DO THE CHURCHES IN YOUR TOWN ALREADY PRAY TOGETHER?

Throughout Church history various sects and groups have gone off independently to guard what they see as a particular treasure. They may have wanted to shrug off much of the frustration of hierarchical baggage that they have perceived as stifling God's work. But how quickly do 'new churches' create their own baggage in their quest to 'get back to the early (and supposedly pure) Church'. Can you identify movements which have arisen under this category?

The Charismatic movement began as a renewal movement within the historic denominations, but it also spawned large numbers of cell groups. Many of these have become independent churches and "fellowships". Some of the cells disappeared as some Christians returned to the main streams. But it is interesting to note how some of the larger new churches have had to purchase buildings, open new plant, set up networking systems and so on.

As the years roll by new churches accumulate all kinds of routine baggage that in time grow tired and spiritually much the same and tired as the churches they split off from! We need to try and identify in the wider church not merely the packaging which is now disposable rubbish, but also perhaps whole remnant movements which once were the latest God given means of reaching a particular group with the Gospel, but now may be effectively redundant. Perhaps the same thing could be said of certain church magazines and newspapers!

Can we identify churches, movements, organizations and the like where the breath of God appears to have departed? Should we allow them to die slowly or extinguish them?

At the heart of our faith lies the principle of death unto resurrection. Dare we allow the Cross to remove some of the baggage to enable new life to spring into being? (At the 1997 Swanwick Ecumenical Forum it was remarked that there was just such a need to die in order for new things to be born)



Is there 'historical baggage in your town'? Look at the HISTORY of the Churches in your town/area. Are there any historical episodes or incidents which have separated the churches?

Post COVID19: Has the experience of the larger Zoom meetings during COVID19 restrictions given you a glimpse of what a united church might look like?



'Show us Lord where the baggage of history is weighing us down and preventing our present progress. Show us where we can share baggage with our brothers and sisters and so together be that treasure which is your Church, your Body on earth, with you O Lord as Head. Amen' (Clifford Owen)



Would a united Church be perfect?

Psalm 133. 1,5 'Behold how good and pleasant it is to dwell together in unity.' 'For there the Lord has promised his blessing'

Psalm 122. 3. 'Jerusalem, built as a city that is at unity in itself'



O Lord Jesus Christ, who on the Eve of thy Passion didst pray that all thy disciples might be completely one as Thou art in the Father, and the Father in Thee, grant that we may suffer keenly on account of the infidelity of our disunion. Grant us the loyalty to recognize and the courage to reject all our hidden indifference and mistrust, and our mutual hostility.

Grant that we may find each other in Thee, so that from our souls and from our lips may ceaselessly arise thy prayer for the Unity of Christians, such as Thou dost will and by the means that Thou dost will. Grant that in Thee, who art perfect Charity, we may find the way that leads to Unity, in obedience to thy Love and to Thy Truth. Amen
(Abbe Coutourier)

Session 5: 'The treasure that is me; the treasure that is you'.

GOD'S VALUING OF OURSELVES AS INDIVIDUALS:

A lot of people can somehow sense a 'loving/guiding hand' over their lives years before they discover the reality of the Living God. Throughout my primary education and for the first couple of years at a Midlands Grammar School I had shown little interest in sport. Games lessons were to be endured and consequently I was never in any school teams. Then one day the school needed an under 14's team to run against another school at cross-country. A notice was pinned up in the school tuck shop asking for volunteers. 'Something' urged me to put my name up, but I hadn't the courage. Later that week in PE we were all sent off on a cross country run and the first eight back were to be the required team. There were fifteen in my class! After five minutes the regular athletes and the rugby "toughs" decided that they would go on strike and sat down en bloc to have a smoke in the park! I came in fifth, got in the team and never looked back. What the rugby 'toughs' couldn't have guessed was that their protest would change my life. Within two years I could do a sub five-minute mile, and forty years later I ran the London Marathon. I know looking back that God had a hand in that 'strike' and helped me to discover a hidden treasure that has brought fifty years of pleasure. It was a sign of His Love to an individual.

Have you a personal and precious story to share of God's prevenient love?...some time/place/happening where He was clearly watching over you and gifting you?

In the first four sessions we have concentrated mainly on our churches and denominations; to explore their baggage and treasures; to see how they could bring their treasures together more closely as they work towards a single church. We move in this session to consider ourselves as individuals. What is the treasure that is you? The other person after all only sees the baggage. These bodies of ours grow old and eventually will wear out but during 70 or 80 years something grows and develops in them which is precious treasure.



You hardly need reminding of the value the Scriptures put upon the individual. In your group start to short list some of the many references to the importance of the individual: e.g.

'If anyone is in Christ he is a new creation' (2 Corinthians 5 v 17)

'It does not yet appear what we shall be but we know that when He appears we shall be like Him. (1 John 3.2)

'The very hairs of your head are all numbered' (Matthew 10 v 30)



Note down the things that have meant a lot to you. We call it 'counting our blessings'. Such things as a good friend or partner, a nice start in life through caring parents. An ambition or career fulfilled. What about personal knowledge of God?



Along life's way all of us will have experienced joys and sorrows, success and failure. For most of our journey we will have worked out how to take 'the rough with the smooth'. But most people will have the baggage of the wounds of deeper conflicts still being carried with us. There will be suppressed memories of dark days. Some may be labouring under a sense of having been dealt a bad

hand, of never having had a fair chance or a 'level playing field'.

In the group you might like to discuss and make a list of common wounds which inflict people e.g. Bereavement, divorce, unemployment, assaults (physical, verbal, emotional).

This might be difficult. How much of your life's journey are you still carrying as 'baggage', because of wounds of one kind or another?



St Paul talks about having 'treasure in earthen vessels' (2 Cor. 4:7) He refers to the knowledge of Christ in our frail and imperfect human vessels. Do you yet see yourself as a channel of Christ to others?

Look again at 1 Corinthians chapter 12. The gifts and ministries we have are for the benefit of the whole body. If we are selfish about them, try to use them for our own glory or neglect them altogether then it is the whole body which loses out.

There is an important connection between our individual baggage and treasures and those of our Church.

When you think of how big an influence one or two people can have in a church it is important that all of us, leaders in particular, own their baggage and use their treasure!

The strapline back in 1999 as the Millennium approached was '**making a fresh start**'. If you realize how much you mean to God you will want to make a fresh start with Him. Making a fresh start means enabling God to help you to lay aside any baggage you may be carrying and to let His Spirit release the treasures within.

Post COVID19: as we all met on screen in our 'same sized pictures' I sensed a new equality. We were all important within the body of Christ. Agree?

As you make a fresh start so your church will benefit. In its turn your church will be better equipped to close the gap with other churches and together close the gap with the world outside.



Help me to lay aside the wounds of the past, especially to forgive those who have wounded me, and to ask forgiveness of those who have been wounded by me. And so help me to follow you afresh from this day forward in willing and joyful obedience, for Jesus Christ's sake. Amen'

SESSION 6: MOVING ON AND NOT STOPPING

For Meditation: 1 Corinthians 15. 58.
2 Peter 3. 8

One of the most encouraging pieces of pastoral advice that I have received in recent years was offered by an Anglican bishop at the end of a conference. It was almost a throwaway remark. He simply said at the end of his bible reading:

'finally brethren, I beg of you this one thing: please don't stop'

For both churches and individuals we are on a journey; an unfinished pilgrimage. We are a work in progress.

Many times in our churches or more generally in our Christian pilgrimages we have been tempted to stop in the face of adversity. Many times we have felt that being a Christian today is a bit like fighting a losing battle. Why continue? Why? Because our faith is about death and resurrection. The Cross and the empty tomb say it all. We need to take our eyes off the many, temporary setbacks in order to look to God's goals and intentions for His Church and Kingdom.

Angela Tilby in her *Church Times* column wrote: *Today , it seems years since the Churches really believed in visible unity. ; the very name "Churches Together" suggests that the once precious goal has been quietly abandonedThe vision of unity which was promoted in the mid-20th century depended on an already existing Christian culture that now barely exists. There are many reasons why ecumenism has lost its way, but perhaps the basic reason is that the high-priestly prayer of Jesus no longer speaks to us as it once did. Reinterpreting the Lord's will on mission and unity should, perhaps, be the focus for this week of prayer (Week of Prayer for Christian Unity January 2019)*

In reality our ecumenical hopes have become somewhat dimmed in the twenty-first century. Some have talked of an 'ecumenical winter'. In some circles the very word 'ecumenism' has become an indicator of diluted orthodoxy. Ecumenical efforts can seem like a distraction of energy from the urgency of mission and evangelism. BUT if Jesus is saying anything in John 17. 20-21, he is surely saying that lack of unity in the Body acts a brake on mission.



Look again at John 17. 20f.
Are mission and unity linked or has too much weight been put on this passage?



One person doing this course in Lent 2019 hoped that out of 'Baggage and Treasures' could come one clear practical commitment/suggestion/task for the local churches in a particular village. She further suggested that the 'thing' decided upon would emerge locally at grass roots level and not be thrust down from 'on high' (the Holy Spirit excepted of course!)

So I offer a framework of three words which have frequently encouraged me on my pilgrimage:

VISION - REPENTANCE - OBEDIENCE

VISION for the FUTURE

We need two dimensions for vision, two ranges to our sight: one for the long term goal, and also a second for the next step in the journey. The car headlights light up the next bit of road; the next bit we need to see in order to drive safely. We don't need to see all of the way to our destination. But we need to be clear on our destination! God declares the goal that He intends for his people, and for His creation. There is an agenda for the Church: we know from scripture of the calling of the Church as the body of Christ...instrument of the kingdom etc. He is the Alpha and the Omega. Most Christians should agree on where God intends to take us!

It may be worth pondering this for a while in groups, just to recall and reflect where the aim of creation is: Fruits of the Spirit: love, joy, peace etc.

(Jesus: *have come that men might have life, and have it to the full.* John 10.10)

But what about the next bit of our journey towards the long term goal. Which road will the churches take in our locality? **Local vision is important.** We need to know where we are going now...and also where we are going individually. God moves us individually and corporately. The loving fellowship of the local congregation is powerful. How many churches will still wish to 'go it alone'!

In 'Baggage and Treasures' I have tried to keep both dimensions in view. Unless we are clear on the goal, pursuing closer fellowship with other churches will be difficult. Unless we seek our local future together, some 'go it alone churches' may deprive others of their treasures, and miss being enriched by the others.

Research some years ago showed that growing churches possessed
a. clear vision and
b. strong leadership.

REPENTANCE for the PAST

As we orientate forwards, the PAST may weigh us down. Some people try to drag the church back to some supposed idyllic state of yesterday! Repentance is placing ourselves unreservedly at God's disposal now for His agenda not ours! When I joined the Navy sixty years ago I was conscious of handing my life over to another to serve them.

In letting go of the past we lay aside some of the BAGGAGE we carry. Some of that baggage may well be unreconciled relational difficulties, which get in the way of going forward.
(cf. 'forgive us our sins as we forgive others') Lay baggage and sin 'at the foot of the cross'.

'if the ship is to make its voyage, it has to let the berthing wires slip first'



OBEDIENCE in the PRESENT

This is the 'do' bit. We lay aside the baggage and follow the vision.

Those who sow with tears will reap with songs of joy.
⁶Those who go out weeping, carrying seed to sow,
will return with songs of joy, carrying sheaves with them.

Psalm 126. 5-6.



We must sow *our* mustard seed faith: it need only be one small step.
So where can I, where can you sow the faith seed in your circumstances
today?

Both as individuals and as churches we shall be blessed as we go forward.



'Grant O Lord in my life and in our church a vision for the future and a
glimpse of the hope to which you have called us. Let us hear again your call
to discipleship and pilgrimage. Give us faith to follow where it is lacking.
Amen.'

Acts 28. 30-31 'For two whole years Paul stayed there in his own rented house and welcomed all who came to see him. Boldly and without hindrance he preached the kingdom of God and taught about the Lord Jesus Christ.'

This ending of the Acts of the Apostles by St. Luke has always raised a mysterious question. Why did it end here and like this? Was it a happy ending? Did something happen abruptly? We may never know, but often it is said that the Acts of the Apostles has this open-endedness to enable we, the church, to continue the acts of the apostles!

So the Post COVID19 'Baggage and Treasures' ends with this important question:

WHAT ONE NEW THING CAN YOU DO TOGETHER FROM NOW ON?

That is for you to decide.

'finally brethren, I beg of you this one thing: please don't stop' (Bishop Mike Hill of Bristol)

A note on the Author

Clifford Owen was ordained into the Church of England ministry in 1973 and has spent much of the last forty years in ecumenical work.

He worked in Bordon, Hampshire from 1976 to 1989 setting up and nurturing an ecumenical shared church between the Methodists, United Reformed Church, and Anglicans. The unique goal of this church was to preserve all three traditions whilst having a single congregation.

*In 1989 He moved to parishes in Worcester Diocese and was appointed Diocesan Ecumenical Officer. When the new ecumenical instruments were formed in 1990 Clifford took on the role of County Ecumenical Secretary for Dudley and Worcestershire Ecumenical Council. He served on the Churches Together in England Swanwick Forum and on the CTE Enabling Group for the West Midlands. He also helped work through the text of the Anglican – Methodist International Commission report *Sharing in the Apostolic Communion*.*

*Together with the Ecumenical Officer for Staffordshire, Clifford helped to devise a new ecumenical network to cover the four Black Country Boroughs of Dudley, Walsall, Sandwell and Wolverhampton called *Black Country Churches Engaged**

In 2002 Clifford took up the post of Chaplain in Corfu, where he learned much first-hand of the Greek Orthodox Church. In 2008 he moved to Ostend and Bruges, where he learned much inter-church co-operation in the West Flanders Ecumenical study and workgroup.

In 2007 He completed his Doctoral thesis at Birmingham University on ‘The Ecumenical Significance of the Charismatic Movement with special reference to the Roman Catholic Charismatic Renewal.’

He retired to Cambridgeshire in 2012 but still assists with locum ministry in the Diocese in Europe, and helps on Huntingdon and St. Neots Methodist Circuit. His ecumenical hopes are still intact!

SUGGESTIONS on FORMING LOCAL GROUPS

When *Baggage and Treasures* was originally written in 1998, it was targeted to the Churches Together Groups in the BBC Radio Stoke listening area. This area already had many existing Lent ecumenical groups of some years’ standing. By ecumenical groups was meant a deliberate grouping of people and ages from several denominations.

It is unlikely that such groups will exist in any new area, such as Cambridgeshire, and so some effort will be needed to develop perhaps already existing groups to include invitations to friends from different churches to form new groupings. Obviously the wider the range of denominations the more interesting and lively the groups will be. Leaders can be from any church and don’t need to be specialists in ecumenism. Those who might ordinarily lead their own church study group(s) will be well able to guide a group through ‘When the Churches Come Together’.

It would not matter if a single church attempted the exercise, even in a rural area. The main reason for this latter suggestion is that most rural churches these days will have congregations of mixed origin. Many rural churches, realizing themselves as the only worshipping centre in the area may have made a ‘Declaration of Ecumenical Welcome’. In addition, the operation under Canon B43 has meant that many rural Anglican Communion tables have been open for a long time now and effective ecumenical gatherings will have been established.

So there is an opportunity for some bold imagination to operate in all kinds of local situation to

form new groups. Because Radio Stoke was a central focus for the web of the 1998 groups there was a sense that however many groups participated they were joined together in a common exercise around their local Radio. The present revision assumes that Radio will not be involved and depending on who takes part some appropriate form of joint gathering/event might well be arranged at the end of the course.