

So, what's new?

**Doesn't it seem an epoch ago
that we all started talking postmodernity?**

Who on earth said,

**"The word means nothing -
use it as often as you can"?**

Were they serious? Didn't we take them up on it?

Who started all that business anyway?

Lyotard? (Did you hear that he died?)

Baudrillard? Foucault? Jameson?

Cray? Gay? Drane? Brain?

**And what possessed Douglas Coupland
to coin the phrase**

'Generation X'?

Over-employed and crassly deployed? Or what?

And who thought up the term 'post-evangelical'?

How do you describe yourself?

**So, have we reached the final credits or is it *still* the commercial break?
Did someone press pause? Has anyone seen the remote?**

a time of questioning

Are we starting to get the picture?

Since the spring, we at Grace have been going through a period of reflection on how it should develop. Most of those directly involved feel that Grace is not just a monthly service but their chief or only church - and there is a hunger to see it develop and deepen as a community, perhaps with more frequent services which may include regular Communion. **Or do we need more?** The team wondered what the non-team congregation felt about these issues, and so we handed out questionnaires at the May and June services to get some feedback. The results were skewed by the absence at both services of many of our regular faces, but they at least gave a view of how strangers see us, where they come from and why.

For the team, the service itself is just the visible tip of the iceberg. **Is the passion to shop destined to be all-consuming?** We spend so much time meeting, preparing content, setting up etc. that it is a major part of our lives in a way that it cannot be for those whose only involvement is an hour once a month. The congregation are dispersed over a wide area - we attract relatively few locals. At present the congregation mostly ignore the pub evening and only come together for the service once a month, so it is much harder to achieve a sense of community for them. **Or can we choose another path, less well worn?** The exceptions are those people we know as friends and see elsewhere.

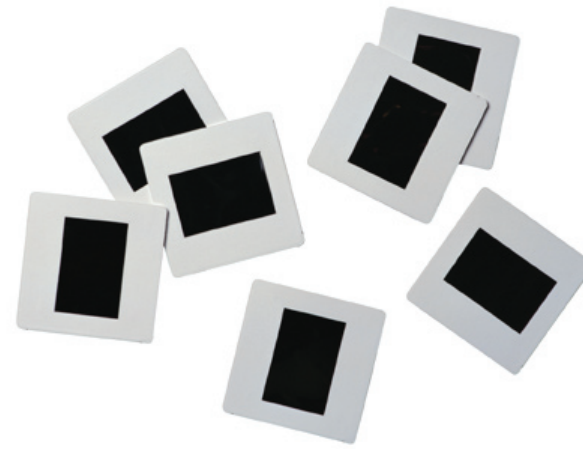
Is there something post-post-late-Capitalist?

It was very clear from the questionnaire responses that people are using us as a leaven to their normal church diet [naughty but nice], rather than the main course. **A Third Way? (What could be better?)** This doesn't mean that Grace isn't important to them or that it isn't having an effect on them and on what they do. **And what about the culture of work?** Grace isn't just acting as entertainment or a change of channels, but as a role model, as a source of ideas and new spiritual perspectives. **Do you get to enjoy yourself these days?** We were very encouraged by how much people valued what we do - in fact they seemed threatened by the implication that we were seeking to change anything. The irony of people begging an alternative worship service not to change was not lost on us!

Do you get to enjoy your friends? Your wife? Your husband? Your children? God?

One thing that should perhaps concern us - we found that we are not pulling in non-Christians or even, really, fringe people. **Do you have the time?** We seem to be providing an 'open door' for Christians to access non-church culture in worship rather than for non-Christians to access God. Is this due to how we publicise Grace? Is the fact that it's inside a church building still too big a barrier? Are people suspicious that it's just a trendy front for evangelism? **Should we?** How do we deal with this situation? We suspect that the people in the street outside would be fascinated, amazed, even moved by what was going on in the church they were passing - but they don't know...so how do we tell them in a way that's going to convey the actuality of what's happening and cut through the stereotypes and fears that cause them to dismiss us out of hand?

Can we counter culture?



grace questionnaire responses 10.5.98

some analysis:

34 questionnaires filled in as follows:

- 1 vicar **And is nothing sacred anymore?**
- 4 grace team
- 5 from lbc
- 3 from gillingham who heard about grace at spring harvest
- 7 a youth group from sunbury-on-thames who heard about grace at brainstormers creative worship day
- 4 from st. mary's, ealing
- 4 others who live in ealing but worship elsewhere
- 1 ruislip **Or is everything? When did *you* get millennium fever?**
- 1 heathrow
- 1 west twyford
- 1 croydon
- 2 sussex

- ages:
- 0-13 1 (baby)
 - 14-18 8
 - 19-25 9
 - 26-35 7
 - 36-45 6
 - 46-55 4
 - 56+ 0



29 out of 34 said grace was a supplement to other church activities note - everyone not on the team was involved in regular church activity elsewhere **Will spirituality cease to be trendy after the year 2000?** 6 want to get more involved.

things people want us to do more of:
wider/more publicity
small groups/social functions
**Will we realise what we've become?
Or will we keep becoming?**

On the questionnaire we asked, 'Is there anything you'd like to ask us?' Here are some of those questions, with our replies.

Who am I? Didn't I ask that once before?

If you were an animal, what kind of animal would you be?

This was the hardest question to answer, because we were bewildered by all the different kinds of animals in the world. We are not bovine or equine, or canine. Dave said a cat, because it has nine lives, is active at night, is independent and goes its own way. Jonny said a marine fish [not it seems a fresh-water one] but couldn't be more specific. Perhaps a sole [sorry]. Or, given the age of some of the team, a stingray. How about a catfish?

Was that really me?! ...Or was that someone else? Will I ever decide?

If you did a morning service would it take a different format?

The visuals would be a problem due to the daylight, but the general format and methods would work. The atmosphere would be different - would meditation work well without low light conditions?

Do you write/invent the stories/ideas etc - if not where do you get them?

Much of the stuff we do write or invent ourselves, but we also quote directly from a wide variety of sources including Mike Riddell, Douglas Coupland, Thomas Merton, Celtic liturgy and poetry both ancient and modern, CS Lewis, and traditional Anglican practice and writing. **Can you show me the way to the pick'n'mix counter please?**

Of course what we do is also informed by all the Christian activities we have been involved in, services we have been to, theology we have read, music, magazines, television, film etc... and our experiences in life. **What's your favourite thing?**

Is alternative worship actually becoming the new mainstream?

Not yet it isn't. We should be so lucky.

Your favourite sweet?

How do you become more inclusive and less led from up front?

We try to avoid putting ourselves up on a stage and reducing the congregation to an audience. The available positions for mics and amps in most venues tend to limit the team to being in one place - we'd mix in more if we didn't have to climb over everybody to get to a mic! We always try to include activities and discussions that the congregation can do without intervention from the team, and can give feedback on, but inevitably there has to be some leadership to give direction and shape, and to provide the stuff that has to be prepared earlier. **Your favourite tradition?** If we had a bigger proportion of the congregation involved as part of the team there would be less of the same faces and voices. This is something we're working on! We are also considering forms of service that could run themselves to a greater degree - at the moment it is necessary to guide people through what is going on. **Your favourite religious cocktail?**

Is there room here for people who want to celebrate life and worship God, but who don't necessarily believe that Jesus is more important than any other 'enlightened mystic'?

Yes, but we believe that Jesus is the Son of God and God the Son, so you won't agree with everything we say or do. **Will you get bored of it?**

Is the girl with long blonde hair single and what is her phone number?

I'm sorry I can't tell you that. **How long will it take?**

Why are there so many things in St. Mary's for me to knock over?

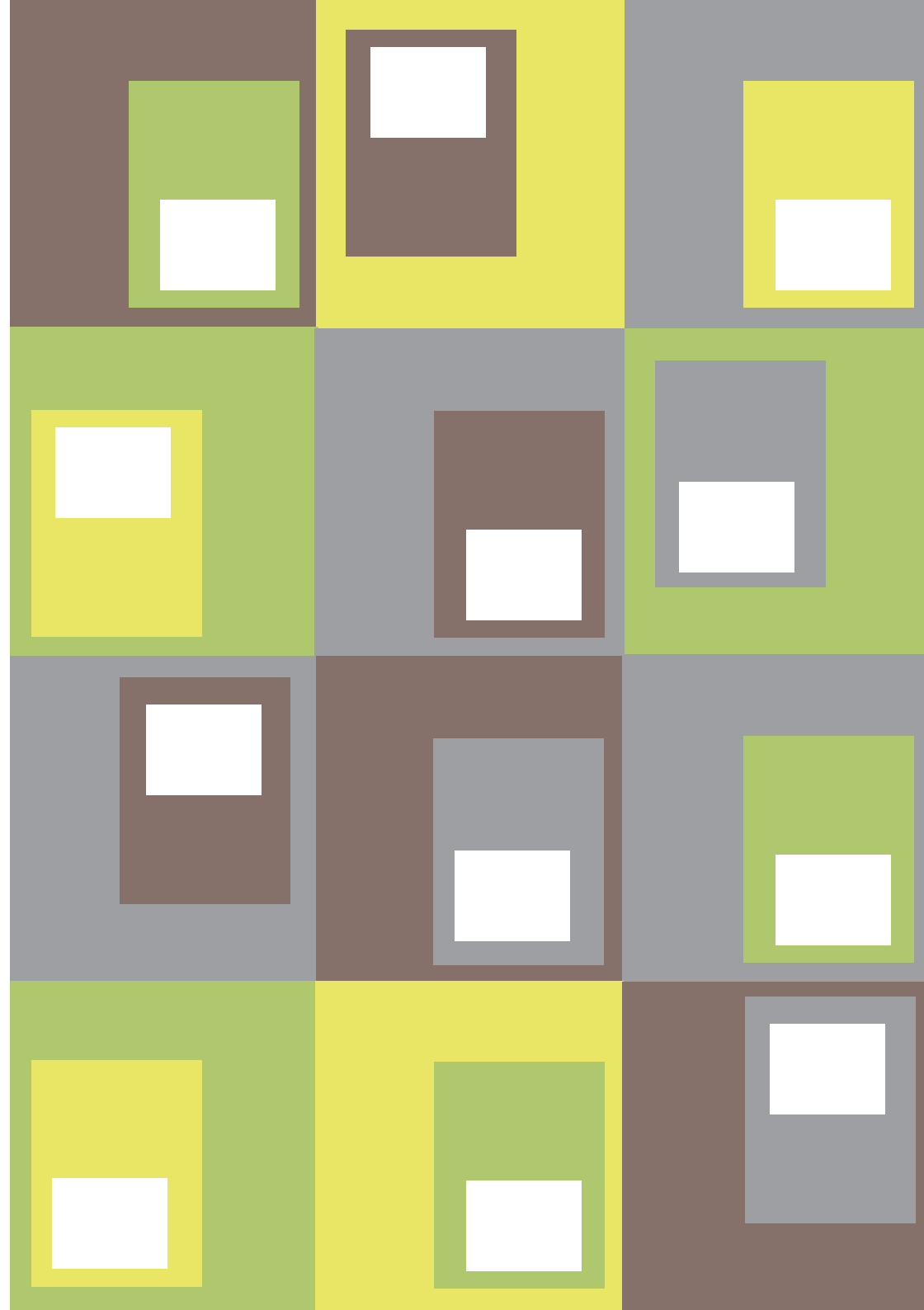
There aren't, you're just clumsy.

When you think of church, does it make you want to laugh or cry?

Is it usual to have these feelings about the other members of the group?

Yes, entirely. Come and see me about it later.

Are we still amusing ourselves to death?



noise is unwanted sound which is why your parents call the music you like noise

but noise isn't just about sound

it's about information Have you seen Jerry Springer yet?

noise is whatever drowns out or interferes with or conceals meaningful information

Is that man for real?

sound engineers, radio engineers speak of two things, **signal and noise.** the **signal is the message**, the meaningful part of the transmission

the **noise** is all the unwanted **stuff** that interferes with your ability to hear

or decipher the signal. **What possesses people to go on that show?**

our lives are full of noise too much information

too many messages that don't add up to any coherent whole Have they no-one else to turn to, to confide in, to help them?

all competing for our attention we can't find the signal or make any sense of our lives

and so we go into the **desert to escape the noise Do you think it'll catch on over here?**

but then we can hear our **internal noise**

some of which is very gross especially during **silent prayer**

and some of which is subtle **but more deeply disturbing Will Vanessa get bigger? Is there room?**

like tinnitus

which is nerve damage to the inner ear resulting in a permanent **whistling or hissing noise inside your head** that you can never escape

for someone like me who suffers from it there is no longer any such thing as silence Did anyone read that stuff by Pete Ward on faith tourism?

if i am in a silent place **what i hear** is the high-pitched whistle inside **my own head**

and that's just the physical noise inside us

but our heads are full of mental noise.

the thoughts that won't stop chattering that stupid song that you can't get out of your head that nagging worry about something you said or didn't say

that hurt and anger that you can't let go of, churning inside you when you're supposed to be concentrating on work that dumb

joke that keeps making you giggle on the bus so that people look at you strangely... **Did he mean us? What was he on about?**

and when you're alone **you can't pretend any more that any of these were necessary Who knows? Does he?**

so you try and put them aside to **pray Are you a faith local or a faith tourist?**

and now you become aware of spiritual noise **An authentic purveyor of culture, or a cultural parasite?**

all those things that compete with god

distraction your attention towards selfish or worldly **concerns**

drowning out your attempts to hear god's voice disturbing the message

or making you lose bits like a mobile phone passing under a bridge

sin is a kind of spiritual tinnitus

the closer we get to god's silence the more we are aware of **the unceasing whine inside ourselves**

of want and need and hurt and self

trouble is what we've lost the volume knob and anyway we're scared of silence because without all the activity and distractions

we'll have to face ourselves and god **and we are frightened of what we might find Will you set down your roots?**

but god longs to heal us

to still the oscillations of our souls **Or will you backpack around the spiritual world for a while yet?**

turn the noise off

and give us **peace**

because only then

will we be able to hear

the music of heaven

Do you care?

step into the noise



And what's the score with community?

confession

white lines
blowing through my mind
and all the while I think of you

you said
hello boys
are you pleased to see me?
we said
lord, when did we see you naked
and not rewind the video

you said
some people bleed internally
for lack of anyone to touch them
and pronounce them clean
we said
some people are just asking for it

you said
it's a lovely day
come outside and smell the flowers
we said
there was a drunk on the train tonight
we could hardly breathe
don't these people ever wash?

you said
hey baby
we could make
beautiful music together
you said
you could at least phone
we said
we're sorry there's no-one here to receive your call at present
please leave your name and telephone number
and we will get back to you as soon as possible

you said
if your hand causes you to sin, cut it off
If your eye causes you to sin, pluck it out
with the remaining hand
because you can't, you won't, and you don't stop

you said
take, eat - this is my body
drink it all of you - this is my blood
we said
this product will only aid weight loss
as part of a calorie-controlled diet

Has anyone found one that works yet?

Can we live beyond theory?

Will someone tell us?

Are you lonely?

Are your friends?

**And what was that about truth?
Do we possess it?**

**Or relate it?
Do we dare talk about it?**

What can I say?

Will the bright lights of a culture stuck on fast-forward shine forever?

(What other clichés can I use? Tesco ergo sum?)

But what will happen if the power cuts?

**Even if the lights are on, will anyone be home?
If they go out, what shall we do?**

**Tell each other stories?
Or just talk about storytelling?**

**Are we afraid of the dark?
(Which advert do you see when you close your eyes?)**

Or are we afraid of the light?

**Don't you hate it when you prepare slides and loops for a service
and the sun just won't set in time?**

What do we do then? Alter the brightness?

you said
the eye cannot say to the hand "I don't need you"
or how are you going to reach out?
you said
the head cannot say to the feet "I don't need you"
or how are you going to dance?

we said
we are the body of christ
but it's not quite nice to talk about bodies
especially in church
if you wanted us to be holy
why did you invent sex?

you said
I gave up my body
to murder and resurrection
to put all this mess right
I can start changing things right now, if you want
we said
yes please

steve collins

Can I be an alt.worshipper and still claim I'm a Christian?

When is a Christian not a Christian?

Where do we draw the line? At ethics?

Is there anything left to draw with?

What *don't* you believe in?

sleeping bag

Jesus is in the sleeping bag
stopping over
he comes round any time he likes
right time, wrong time
he don't mind
foxes have holes
birds have nests
but the Son of Man has the sofa

So can we find common ground?

He's poking round the fridge
needs defrosting
old sins stuck in the icebox
fruit gone bad
leftovers still left over
he throws them out
I guess I should clean up
but I never get much warning
it's embarrassing
but still I'd rather he came

We sit up late talking

Who's your favourite Spice Girl?

And is Lara Croft's chest 4 real?

What is real?

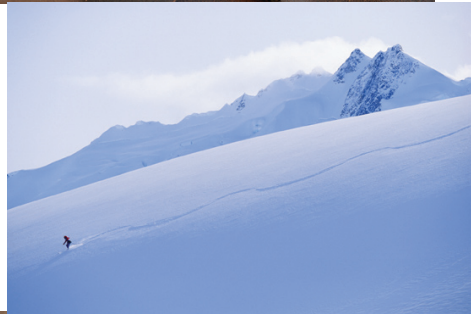
where we've been
and where we're going next
he's already bought the tickets
all I have to do
is take the time off work
new trainers on the floor
goodnight rustle in the corner
the room feels warmer
with him in it

Is God a she or a he?

Or just a figment of our imagination?

If you close your eyes, can you reimagine what worship's all about?

Can you remember why you ever wondered in the first place?



steve collins
with thanks to jolyon for the sleeping bag

Well I never pray but tonight I'm on my knees
I need to hear some sounds that recognise the pain in me
The Verve, 'Bittersweet Symphony'

What will the church be like in 5 years time? In 15? In 50?

'If it's the real thing we're wanting just where do we find it? The Nineties quest for life and some sort of authenticity coupled with a gradual loss of faith in the capacity of big ideas and beliefs to save our souls has led us to make up our own truths, build our own small worlds as best we can'

Miranda Sawyer, 'Ideals for Living', The Face 1/97

'If there's a key to the Nineties I think it's that perpetual insecurity. Never have people thought so hard about their lives and come to such indecision or felt further apart... if there's going to be an epitaph for the Nineties it will be 'by the end we all felt like victims' **Have we missed the boat?**

Damon Albarn, The Face 1/97

**Or are we steering it?
Is the time ever right?**

Picture our society as the wreckage of a plane crash in the high Andes; while some eat the bodies of their less fortunate fellow passengers, others huddle together for warmth and tell stories to keep each others' spirits up. These are strategies for survival while waiting for rescuers to arrive. **Don't we know all this anyway?** We are sending out signals, not sure if there is anyone out there who can help us. Strangely, much of the Church looks the same way. **So what are we doing here?**

Does a faith that talks of brokenness and dying, that offers no easy triumph, but only one won hard through bitter pain, have anything to say to this culture, these times? **So what?** While some parts of the Church have been triumphant, **What?** their certainties seem naive to the rest of society, who see no real sharing of their perplexities and heartbreaks. Maybe it's time to leave the party and head off into the night. Why listen to speeches when there's work to be done?

Resurrection cannot come before Gethsemane; Ezekiel sat with the exiles seven days in silence before daring to speak of the living God. **How?** Celebration is premature. Triumph can wait. It's not over till it's over. Words of victory come too soon, they have nothing to say to this situation. Only when we live that wounded love and share the pain and confusion will they see God. **Where?** Words will not be necessary. The Western Church is called to a new kind of brokenness, of powerlessness. It has to die, in order to be reborn without imperialism, without the trappings of worldly power and self-centredness. **When?** What we are seeing is the Church being stripped of its finery. Instead of mourning the loss of our power and prestige, we should be rejoicing at being set free from a gilded cage. Maybe it's time for the song of God **Who?** to be heard again, the song that was sung on the day of Pentecost, out there in the world.

Why?

And God, you know, is already out there, unannounced, at work in so many places. He is alive, and every moment of wild hope is a seed of the Kingdom, a song from Aslan's country calling us on.

**Did we know we'd still be asking questions after all this time?
What's new?**

Brian Draper, address to 'Reimagining Worship' conference 9/5/98

sometimes
maybe you choose not to know
what we are about to do
because you want us to surprise you
with our imagination and creativity

you made us in your image
with the power to create something new
unlike anything done before

and, just as the angels were astonished and delighted
when you created this universe

seeing something they could begin to experience, but not explain beforehand,
because it was itself the words of its own explanation
which could only be spoken by living them

so you want us to bring you the same delight and astonishment
as our gift back to you

and so we offer ourselves and our works
our worship and our anger
our best moments and our worst moments
our songs and our silences
our tears and our laughter
in surprise and delight at finding ourselves loved

as you hesitate at the door in anticipation
wondering
whatever next?

grace. whatever next?



fresh vital worship

relaxed funky ambient & reflective
visuals* meditations*tunes

8pm@st mary's church, st mary's road, ealing w5
second sunday of every month.

info jonny 0181 567 6926
mike 0181 567 3466

grace.london@btinternet.com
<http://freespace.virgin.net/adam.baxter/grace>