

Space for the journey

Thomas Baldwin learns about a charity which is using outdoor spaces to help bring a faith perspective to times of change

"THERE'S something about the outdoors that offers itself to people at a lot of different levels. We become a bit softer and more open to ourselves."

Andrew Hook is a facilitator for the Coracle Trust, a small Edinburgh-based charity which exists to bring a faith perspective to moments of transition in life – everything from the big changes around birth and death to starting secondary school and entering puberty or adulthood or middle age, getting married and significant anniversaries.

"There are a heck of a lot of transitions in life," he says, "And we experience a lot of turbulence that we're not very good at processing. So we are exploring what are the good ways to work with, rather than fight against, those transitions – and to recognise that often God's hand is in them."

The Trust, which has been going about fifteen years, works ecumenically with small groups and individuals to offer, according to its website, 'a place for studies, discussions, spiritual direction, informal teaching, training and social events... to provide a context, to create an environment in which people might deepen their understanding and experience of how God is present and at work in their lives and in the world, and how he might be calling them to live out their faithful response in the ordinary business of everyday life.'

To that end, Coracle has a large archive of resources and reflections on its website, offers spiritual and physical hospitality to two groups meeting monthly in Edinburgh

and resources another in East Lothian. But it has also recently extended into exploring the role of outdoor spaces, using both the natural and man-made features (such as paths, trees, walls and gates) and twinning them with rituals which help people process the transitions they are going through.

Andrew compares it to the outdoor gym equipment that is becoming more commonplace in parks around the country, only instead of aiming at improving people's physical health this is about mental and spiritual wellbeing.

He says: "It seemed natural to try and develop into creating something physical, something in the public domain, with the belief that objects and the outdoors can help people move through and process difficult times... and sometimes help to connect with themselves more deeply and also hopefully connect with God."

"Spaces such as church, hospice and community grounds can become even more generous hospitable spaces, offering reflective points that facilitate specific and general life and faith transitions. These for example add to the church's acknowledged resource in facilitating birth, death, marriage, extending into decision making, experiencing loss and limitation, taking new steps in relationships, in short helping to 'say our hellos and goodbyes'."

The Trust has been extending its thinking and experiences around transitions into outdoor spaces, looking at two in particular: St Mark's Episcopal Church in Portobello and Harmeny School in Balerno.

Harmeny, a school which works with children and young people with complex needs, wants to develop its grounds beyond outdoor education and increase awareness of nature's role in wellbeing to include a spiritual, therapeutic element for pupils, teachers and then ultimately for the local community. Looking at the varied physical features in the grounds (such as old archways, small bridges and meandering paths) the plan is to fashion and create installations that connect with and facilitate well the typical journeys that are experienced by pupils and staff.

The grounds at St Mark's are used as a public thoroughfare, and house interesting features common to many church grounds – such as gates, steps, graves and arches of branches – that are all suggestive of thresholds to be approached and crossed. The grounds are already used to provide interactive prayerful spaces for the congregation and community, hoping to mirror the practices and worship within the church building itself.

Creatively curating the space, mirroring the liturgical seasons, offering physical contexts for engaging in Biblical stories are all in the mix of this conversation. Their aim is to provide accessible sacred space, advertise the church's message, to offer 'a church outside a church which is always open and available and isn't intimidating'. It wishes to incorporate pilgrimage and procession, to communicate their love and faith for God.

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Photo credit: Andrew Hook

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public domain, to be generous and not too prescriptive about what people should be experiencing but leaving enough space for people to engage with their own journey,” says Andrew.

Coracle is looking to collaborate with churches who have similar thoughts about using the specific shape and features of their grounds for the wellbeing of their congregations and local communities. ■

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