

Edgy Saints Leaders' Notes

Thank you for leading this small group series! The material has been designed to deliver over 5 sessions – these might be mid-week group over, for example, Lent or it might form the focus of a weekend away for a church group. It could be delivered in person or on line. These notes are to assist you prepare to lead a group.

What You Will Need....

The Notes these are in booklet form and large print. You might want to print them for people or to email them for them to either print themselves or read on a device during the sessions.

Music Each session ends with a hymn. The words have been printed. If you email me via andy.braunston@urc.org.uk I can provide you with recordings of the tunes needed for each hymn with the correct number of verses in. These could be played on a phone or laptop or any device with a good speaker. People like to sing and it's a good way to end each session.

Your Wits About You!

The task of the leader is to facilitate the learning so know who you can ask to read a Biblical passage, the information box or the reflection box. It's good to have other voices but remember not everyone is comfortable reading in a small group.

Be prepared to gently encourage the quiet and quieten the more bubbly ones. "Thank you, has anyone else got a perspective on this, how about you Mabel?" is a good way to move a discussion on. Be aware if people are being too talkative and who isn't speaking enough.

Glance through the notes on each set of questions, below, in case folk get stuck! Your role isn't to answer (these are questions for discussion not to pass a quiz!) but to get conversation going.

Refreshments

Someone, not necessarily you (!) to sort out refreshments and the setting and clearing up. I suggest people grab a coffee and biscuit as they come in and then get started. That might be easier than breaking and gathering everyone back again!

The Discussion Questions

In black I reproduce the discussion questions. Then in red some ideas to get them going if they get stuck!

Session 1 Martyrs

Magnús Erlendsson

Norse history is something that is often bewildering to those of us who aren't used to it – the names seem odd and it's all a bit confusing despite England being ruled by Danes for some time before the

Norman Conquest. Magnus seems a bit like a warlord – albeit a rather reluctant one. How might we reconcile the use of violence with our faith in the One who told us to turn the other cheek?

[If they ask about Danes ruling England remind them of King Cnut and the others before the Norman Conquest]

This question is designed to think about non-violence and pacifism and whether it's ever a Christian response to resort to violence. These questions are always more difficult in a time of war – if we were pacifist would that mean not resisting the Russian invasion of Ukraine for instance?

Magnus clearly struggled to live out his faith and occupy a position of leadership and do what was expected of him. What are the pitfalls and opportunities of secular leadership for committed religious folk?

Tim Farron famously found that his position as leader of the Liberal Democrats became untenable when his views on homosexuality were seen to be rather less than liberal. Alastair Campbell famously stopped Tony Blair answering questions on faith as “we don't do God.” How easy it is now for a political leader to be a person of faith. Mr Sunak is a committed Hindu, we've no idea about Mr Starmer's faith.

Is it possible, by building a church in his honour and interring his bones at the church, that Ronald, his nephew was misusing Magnus' memory and heroic sanctity? If so how?

Well I think he was trying to capitalise on his sainted uncle's memory. Pilgrims come to the Cathedral, his palace is next door, pilgrims venerate saintly uncle, and now nephew has built this lovely church. Miracles attracted the faithful, and their money....Given the turbulent times having a saint as an uncle probably helped consolidate his hold on power.

St Wilgefortis

Why might women in earlier stages of European history – and often now in the developing world – see the convent as a meaningful life choice?

In a convent women could live without reference to male power. They were freed from marriage and childbirth – where many women died – and could be educated. If one rose to be an abbess one was a powerful land owner and had political power too. It was the only outlet for women to have a form of ministry; food was assured, health care was provided and it was safer.

There's lots of debate about gender these days as roles traditionally ascribed to one or other gender change and there is often more fluidity than there once appeared to be. What do you think of Liz' assertion that in Christ something radical happens to gender and her sense of what follows from that?

There's a broad discussion in society about folk who change their gender – the recent Scottish Act on this was blocked by Westminster. It's more common for folk to define themselves as “fluid” or “gender queer” than it once was and it's easier than ever before to legally change one's gender. However, are any of our identities greater than our primary identity given at baptism of being “in Christ”?

There is much tragedy in Wilgefortis' story – not allowed to follow her own dreams, having to conform to patriarchal norms and being killed by her father. As such we see in her life echoes of what happens to many women now. Why do you think our world seems to tolerate male violence to women? What might your church do about this?

This might depend on the church. Raise money for the local Women's Aid, put posters from Women's Aid up on the back of toilet stall doors (often the only place a woman can be alone if in a coercive relationship) make links with local refuges and see how you can help.

St Guinefort

You or your people might notice this is a similar story to the dog Gelert in North Wales. Though he wasn't canonised.

Why might the Church hierarchy opposed canonising a dog?

Lots of ideas but we normally think of saints as people who live lives of holiness not animals. Maybe the Church sees animals as lesser than humans.

What, if any, is the distinction between humans and animals? Are we (humans) simply another animal?

This might get some interesting answers. We might say that only humans have souls – but who knows if animals do? If we see the ultimate end of time as being the re-creation of a new heaven and a new earth we assume that all creation will be made whole then that will include animals.

Is it right that we exploit animals to sustain our way of life?

In recent years more and more people have become vegetarian or adopted a plant based diet so as to avoid slaughter house products for moral reasons. Even those of us who eat meat might need to think about the ethics of the farming industry, its effects on global warming (all those cows who emit methane) and the waste of growing food to feed animals instead of simply feeding humanity. We may have images of happy animals on fields in lovely places (like Orkney) but not all farming is so idyllic.

Session 2 Radicals

St Oscar Romero

Recently a government minister, annoyed that the Archbishop of Canterbury had criticised the plan to deport asylum seekers to Rwanda accused the Archbishop of preaching from his pulpit...(he meant to say "preaching politics" but didn't! Is it ok for ministers to address contemporary political issues in sermons, services, and reflections? Is it ok for the Church to speak out on such matters?

Generally the URC thinks it's fine to speak out on political issues but steers clear of party politics. Of course we all might approve of the minister preaching our politics but disagree with her preaching the other lot's!

What do you think of Pope John Paul II's attitude to Romero's annoyance with priests and bishops who collaborated with a murderous government? Why might he have been keen to keep the Church in El Salvador united?

Perhaps the Pope thought Church unity and order was more important, perhaps he was afraid of provoking the regime to worse excesses. At the time the Chinese Government were imprisoning Catholic bishops and he may have been afraid the death squads would come for the El Salvador ones – in that sense he was right.

House Church leader Gerald Coates is reported to have said that nothing changes our theology as much as our experience! He meant it about a Pentecostal expression of Church but his saying could also apply to Romero's conversion to protecting the poor and speaking out against a murderous regime. In what ways has your experience changed your views on religion and God?

They might muse about having a woman minister, or an lgbt minister, for the first time, or seeing something in their own experience leading them to change their views – the divorce of a loved one for example.

Dorothy Day, Servant of God

What do you make of that reading from James?

It's uncompromisingly uncomfortable. Let them struggle with it!

Is Dorothy Day a saint who appeals to you or who repels you?

Get them to explore their response. For some the bohemian who had an abortion is an unlikely saint, for others that's attractive. Her uncompromising attitude makes many uncomfortable.

What do you think the Biblical message about the rich and the poor is?

We're back to James...let them explore, ask gentle questions about whether what they think is in the Bible or is an attempt to make the Biblical texts a bit more palatable!

Dom Hélder Câmara

Câmara saw the violence of the revolutionary as a response to the violence of the state – and saw that keeping people poor and downtrodden is a form of violence. He felt the Church should condemn all forms of violence but understand why violence was used. What do you think? Are riots, for example, a response to other forms of violence?

It's always difficult to work out the motives of rioters; I remember being very puzzled about why there were riots in Manchester a few years ago. Can they be a response to the structural violence in society – police powers to stop and search for example, or the violence of poverty and joblessness?

What do you make of this radical idea that church leaders shouldn't live and dress simply and identify with the poor? We see it in the ministry of Pope Francis – for example still staying in the Vatican guest house rather than moving into the papal apartment. We see it, a bit, in the URC with our Moderators simply being ministers deployed to a particular role not a whole new order of ministry. What's good and bad about this ministerial simplicity?

The good stuff is about church leaders being the same as the rest of us, not behaving like bishops, realising that they are accountable like everyone else in the church. The bad...well I'm not sure!

What difference does our, and your, ministry make to those around us?

Take some time to let them gently explore; we're often not good at knowing! Who uses your building, who comes to church, what difference does it make in their lives?

St Aiden

Like the radicals we looked at in the last session Aiden saw riches as a hindrance to ministry. Can we be the Church without riches and resources?

Some might say we are already! However, the wealth of the URC is not insignificant. I think it's a mix of careful stewardship but to use our resources well.

Aiden was something of a maverick but was embedded in his monastic community. Maybe the spiritual sustenance of his fellow monastics helped give him the energy and pattern of life to undertake his ministry. How does the church community you are part of help or hinder your own ministries?

An open ended question which I hope will get some interesting answers...

Aiden was probably not on the top of the king's favourite people! Powerful folk don't often like it when they are told the truth. How easy do you find it to tell the truth to those who have power?

Again a fairly clear question – perhaps they may need prompting about who's powerful – the boss, the minister, a difficult relative?

St Colmcille

John seems to like the naughty Colmcille rather than the saintly Columba (even though they are the same person! Why might our shadow sides be rather more interesting?

This could get very deep! Sometimes we're more in tune with our darker side more than our saintly side, sometimes our naughtiness is more interesting than our sanctity, sometimes our darker side is more in tune with the values in our world than our more saintly side!

Colmcille's journey to Iona/missionary was made necessary as he had fallen out with powerful folk due to his own silliness. Have you ended up having rather important choices thrust upon you rather than being freely chosen? How did it work out?

This could get deep too, so be gentle and don't pressurise anyone to speak. If you've got an example it might be good to start.

John makes this point about there being two Colmcilles/Columbas but I wonder if that's true of all the saints – an official version to inspire the faithful and an actual version which might be rather different. A public/private persona which may or may not be integrated. What do you think? Is this something about sainthood or something about how we are as humans?

I think it's really about sainthood as the Church seeks to control the narrative – easier for saints in history than in more recent memory. Graham Greene explored this in the Power and the Glory where the drunk priest, the last priest in a state in Mexico, was executed but the Church made him into a heroic figure overlooking his frailties – an alcoholic with a child born of an illicit relationship. It might also be a general human thing in that we all have a side that we don't show to others.

St Cuthbert

Where do you think the URC's comfort zones are? How might we move beyond them like St Cuthbert did?

Most of our churches are in suburbia or rural settings, very few in inner city. We're very good with other middle of the road Christians but less comfortable with rather more defined or conservative approaches.

It's interesting, for modern Christians, to see that St Cuthbert set up a bird sanctuary! What does our faith tell us about ecology and responsibility to other living creatures on earth?

This should be an easy one to dig into. Lots about stewardship/care of creation, working with creation in the Bible and in our approach.

Cuthbert seemed to like his solitude – maybe he was something of an introvert – where do you find energy? Do you need time alone or with a small group of people or do you get energy from being with more people?

The thing is here is that introvert/extrovert is not about liking, or disliking people but about where one gets energy from. An introvert needs space to recharge, an extrovert needs people. Congregations will have a mix and it's interesting for folk to see each other in different ways to understand them.

Session 4 Legendary Exploits

St Brigid of Kildare

In previous generations of Christians there was a lot of store set by talismans or symbols of the holy – like St Brigid's Cross – which allowed folk to have a sense of the holy in everyday life. The Reformers took a rather dim view of these things seeing them as superstitious charms yet even now people want to find ways to experience the holy in everyday life. What helps you do this? (A touching cross in your pocket, a Bible, a prayer app on your phone?)

This might be harder for some but many contemporary Christians might have objects that help them pray or remember core Gospel themes – a holding cross is one example, having a candle to light with prayer is another, a pocket or handbag sized Bible, in these more technological ages maybe people have apps on their phones. If folk don't have these things gently share, and ask, what helps them pray.

The use of the Lectionary is now widespread which means on any given Sunday most of the world's Christians listen to the same readings (and maybe similar sermons!) Why then do we not give away all we have to the poor when that reading comes up?! Brigid was certainly generous – albeit with her father's property – but was she on to a Gospel value? What stops us all with following this particular command of Jesus?

No help here I'm afraid! Maybe we hear but just refuse, maybe we say it wasn't a command to everyone, maybe we just ignore it as inconvenient! And, to be fair, Brigid was giving her father's stuff away not her own!

Brigid was aware of the pagan values and practices around her and incorporated some into her monastery – like the holy fire. What values and practices in our world now might we use for missionary purposes?

The huge amount of affection the NHS is held in – often seen as the nearest thing the UK has to a religion (!) might the values we applaud there be link to wider Gospel values?

The valorisation of family might be another link – but again there's much more awareness of how difficult family can be.

There's a sense of horror when politicians are seen to be corrupt, lying or in it for personal gain so again some values there might be teased out and links could be made.

St Elizabeth the Wonderworker

Liz contrasts the power of St George with his lance and army with the power of Elizabeth the wonderworking nun who's power came from within. Is Elizabeth's power more attractive? Why/why not?

Again it will be interesting to see what folk say but I find both a bit problematic. Even our saintly wonder worker felt she had more right to the cave than the dragon in the story, a dragon who still ended up dead albeit with killed with saintly spittle. I suspect I should focus more on the fact that Elizabeth didn't need an army to persuade people to convert!

Notwithstanding a certain sympathy for the dragon in the story – who had found a nice cave to live in – dragons are used in stories often as symbols of problems, things to be defeated. What dragons does the Church now have? How might they be defeated?

This rather depends if people can see the metaphor and not get hung up on dragons being fantasy creatures - like Bunyan's Hobgoblins and foul fiends. The dragon of secularism (which does give us many benefits), the dragon of capitalism (ditto at a cost), the dragon of indifference, the dragon of relativism ("this is true because I say it is true") They might be defeated by first recognising they exist.

Liz references the Gospel story of the feisty pagan woman who challenged Jesus. What do you make of that story?

Some think this story is Jesus learning to leave his racism behind, others that he was testing the woman's faith, others that there's humour here which doesn't come across well. My own take, for what it's worth, is that Jesus, whilst human, wasn't racist and didn't need to unlearn it!

St Hildegard of Bingen

Why might Hildegard have put herself down in her writings yet, at the same time, expound on a range of academic subjects?

Was she saying what needed to be said in order to be heard? I watched a debate in the Presbyterian Church of Ireland – which is uncomfortable with women in ministry – where every woman minister who spoke first thanked the Moderator for calling them to speak, then apologised for speaking and then made their point! Or maybe Hildegard had internalised sexism which made her apologise for her perceived weaknesses. Do folk do that nowadays?

Hildegard didn't seem to have to argue for her place in the Church – she seems to have just taken it (though I imagine there were struggles along the way). Does that approach have problems, pitfalls or pleasures?

Should folk ask for permission or just take what is rightfully theirs? Might our answer change depending on who the “folk” taking things are? Might we give a different answer to LGBT people demanding their place in church and ministry than we might, for example, to women or those who are ethnically minoritized?

What might you want to reform in the contemporary Church? And why?

This should be easy enough for them!

Session 5 Visions of a Different World

St Catherine of Sienna

Do you think Catherine knew what she was doing – ie she realised that starving herself gave her visions, ceased her menstrual cycle and allowed her visions to be taken seriously and give her power? Why/why not?

We can't possibly know but I think it's likely she saw some cause and effect and when people start believing your message you have to keep it going! I wonder if she saw the damage it did to herself - it might have done some damage to women in the Church too – if starving oneself is the only way to have authority.

Can you think of examples now where we might behave in strange or disruptive ways in order to gain power and authority in an unfair world?

Children in school who struggle to read might act up to distract the teacher from the real issue due to the child's shame. Sometimes those in abusive situations might disassociate to cope – they meditate or go off somewhere in their head – but repeatedly acting like this may mean that they lose control over disassociation and it happens at odd times. Oppression of any form leads to interesting ways of behaving – sometimes caustic humour, or backstabbing those who make a go of things in a hostile world.

What effect do you think Catherine's family life as a child had on her as an adult? What might these mean for how we nurture children in our midst?

I'm referring here to the vast number of pregnancies her mother had and the death of her sister; it must have put her off the idea of marriage and motherhood seeing them both as exhausting and dangerous. I wonder how we might nurture children differently, how we might teach boys to be supportive spouses and fathers, and how we might encourage children to think about gender roles and expectations.

Deacon James

How might you have felt in James' place with a Christian king killed in battle, a pagan resurgence, and powerful figures withdraw leaving him to find his own way in ministry?

Betrayed, abandoned, angry, doubting.

How might converts have perceived James? They'd not be converting with the hope of preferment at court after all.

Might converts have been more interested in Christianity due to his witness seeing it as something about life not advantage?

To me James speaks of the Gospel at work in weakness – away from the trappings of power and force – how might this type of ministry be relevant now?

The edgy out of town sink estate? The city centre church with a core but different crowd each week? The drop in for the cold and lonely?

St Hild of Whitby

What effect do you think the fact that Hild was born into a royal family had on her subsequent ministry? Is this an example of one's privilege being used to good effect?

One imagines an educated woman, confident, used to having servants, able to speak to princes, kings and bishops.

The ideal of the earliest Church in Acts 2 where all goods were shared in common has lived on in the life of monastic communities where nuns and monks take vows of poverty, chastity and obedience. The theory is these vows free them for ministry. What do you make of this form of Christian discipleship?

I wonder if it's alien to us or attractive in some way?

The URC not only ordains women but insists that women are equal to men and no churches may opt out of women's ministry – in stark contrast to, for example, the Church of England. How have you been influenced by the ministry of women in the Church?