

# Max Doubt

**confident faith comes through doubts and questions.**

Max Doubt is a two-sided rhyme ☺– firstly, ‘maxxed out’ means great enthusiasm and secondly, ‘Max Doubt’ is a name that suggests someone who has many doubts and questions. We get to the first through the second.

Sadly, we may not linger long enough in the question. It can hurt. Equally sadly, someone we ask for help with our questions may misunderstand us, and frankly we might not be too clear ourselves.

Max Doubt is a Wonder Workshop that just might address broadly some of these burning issues. For more details, see [maxdoubt.wordpress.com](http://maxdoubt.wordpress.com)

#### TOPICS

Questions are most welcome

Evil and Suffering

Truth and Proof

Church and Hypocrisy

The Cost of forgiveness

# 1. QUESTIONS ARE MOST WELCOME

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## GOAL

To show how spiritual growth requires good and necessary doubts, questions, and the pain of change, and that these questions need to be cared about not defeated.

## INTRODUCTION

It is popular to portray the church as dogmatic and religion as static. However, in most people's experience, their faith is constantly flexing, growing, changing as each decade does its work on us. Churches hear the people's questions and embark upon honest answers. Yet there are some churches or church schools where questions from the floor are not on the agenda, and where incomprehensible nonsense is not discussed. So how can we discuss the big questions?

## STEP ONE

Here are two Graffiti pictures. Someone is putting their view or their pain out on public display. One is a question and one is a statement. But what is behind it, what is the back story? In this part of the exercise we note that doubts and questions may be the same thing, so don't just answer a question or reject a doubt. When pain or anger is expressed you might be hearing someone with strong motivations that you can draw upon and not just push back.



SO let's reframe these two statements:.

- What is a statement that might be made by the person who wrote such a question? What is a question that might be asked by the person who made the statements? If they are angry, state what may be their pain? If they seem to be in pain, state what might be their anger? What if we with and hear more, interact and find the back story, how will that change our words of response or wisdom?
- *Allow ten minutes for this conversation to open out.*
- What are we saying about doubts and questions that seem to be against the Christian faith as we understand it?

## STEP TWO PICK YOUR FAVOURITES

Choose your two favourites sayings from this list of sources then discuss them in your group.  
Why do you like this one? What is our definition of doubt?

There is nothing more dreadful than the habit of doubt. Doubt separates people. It is a poison that disintegrates friendships and breaks up pleasant relations. It is a thorn that irritates and hurts; it is a sword that kills.  
**Buddha** c. 563 BCE to 483 BCE a sage on whose teachings Buddhism was founded.

He who doubts is like a wave of the sea, blown and tossed by the wind.  
**James 1.6** New Testament , early church leader

Be merciful to those who doubt; snatch them from the fire and save them  
**Jude 22-23** New Testament , early church leader

Doubt is a pain too lonely to know that faith is his twin brother.  
**Khalil Gibran** 1883 –1931 was a Lebanese-born writer, most famous for his inspirational fiction *The Prophet*.

The trouble with the world is that the stupid are cocksure and the intelligent are full of doubt.  
**Bertrand Russell** , 1872 –1970 a British philosopher, mathematician, and social critic.

Wonder rather than doubt is the root of all knowledge.  
**Abraham Joshua Heschel** 1907 –1972) a Polish-born American rabbi and theologian

Faith keeps many doubts in her pay. If I could not doubt, I should not believe.  
**Henry David Thoreau** 1817 –1862) an American author, philosopher, social critic, naturalist.

Doubt is not a pleasant condition, but certainty is absurd.  
**Voltaire** 1694 –1778) a French political philosopher of freedom of religion, freedom of expression.

My faith is one that admits some doubt.  
**Barack Obama**, 1961-, current President of the USA, first African American to hold the office.

If you would be a real seeker after truth, it is necessary that at least once in your life you doubt, as far as possible, all things.  
**Rene Descartes** 1596 –1650) a French philosopher and mathematician, Much Western philosophy is a response to his writings

Doubt, indulged and cherished, is in danger of becoming denial; but if honest, and bent on thorough investigation, it may soon lead to full establishment of the truth.  
**Ambrose Bierce** 1842 –1914) an American satirist, critic, short story writer, editor and journalist.

Faith and doubt both are needed - not as antagonists, but working side by side to take us around the unknown curve.  
**Lillian Smith** , 1897–1966) social critic of the United States, on matters of race and gender equality,

Doubt is not the opposite of faith; it is one element of faith.  
**Paul Tillich** (1886 –1965) a German-American philosopher and theologian.

There lives more faith in honest doubt, believe me, than in half the creeds.  
**Alfred Lord Tennyson** 1809 –1892) Poet Laureate of Great Britain and Ireland

## STEP THREE THERE ARE ONLY FOUR QUESTIONS

Everyone needs Christian belief to be tough enough to carry them through real life. So, we are entitled to test it and us to see how genuine and how tough is the Gospel. Therefore hard questions are welcome in the light of harsh reality.

Rather than being defensive, testing questions are opportunities to see the Gospel in a great light. The next four sessions will help you to find your way to this. Real answers de-institutionalise faith. They move right away from the lofty abstract language of words like 'omni-present', 'omniscient' and 'predestination', which are too hard to ever think about sensibly. Get real, get down. That's why Jesus came down to earth.

**Four questions summarise almost all the major objections against Christian faith.** If you can learn the structure of these questions, you may be surprised to discover that you have capacity for most questions.

Can I say I hesitate to say this – I don't want to provide a reason for you to act like 'I heard it all before. Here come slick answer number four!'. The person asking the question or stating their anger deserves every care and mercy. Either they are talking about their life *or* don't bother to engage with the question! If they *are* talking about their life-treasure with you, then as 1 Peter 3.15 says 'do it with all gentleness and respect'.

Every person is unique so these four broad categories are a structure only, call it a scaffold against which you may strive to build love and respect.

### PROBLEMS OF EVIL AND SUFFERING

where suffering is thought to show that God is less powerful or less good than we say. Rather, it shows the love, the presence, the patience and the plans of God for humanity.

### PROBLEMS OF TRUTH AND PROOF

where any uncertainty is thought to show that we cannot be singleminded about Jesus Christ being the only way to the Father. Rather, it shows that our faith can be secured on very many grounds and on much evidence.

### PROBLEMS WITH CHURCH

where the behaviour of some Christians past or present, near or far, calls into question whether Jesus Christ can make a difference in our lives. Rather, it shows that the problem of sin is serious for everyone personally, and every organisation, so that the only hope for us is to pursue the way of forgiveness.

### THE COST OF FORGIVENESS

Why can't God just let people go free? Why isn't it easy? So what is the price that Jesus has paid? Why does there have to be a cross? Why does receiving God's forgiveness mean we count the cost, that is, note the losses and risks from going forward? On the other hand, all decisions have particular consequences, all choices close off other choices, and forgiving a debt usually means that someone else pays for it.

Despite what everyone feels at first , no ONE of these four is THE ONE big question, the deal breaker, the king-hit for everyone. IF you are ready for it, there is an exercise in each of these to follow.

Note every carefully that the same question can come out in different ways. When people are making their comment, they may be philosophical, historical or personal, even intimate. Always remember before working with them towards an answer **first ask and listen** for the part of the question which really matters, at heart level, the question behind the question, the back story that makes this important for them. If you don't, you will always ring hollow. If they get angry at your answers, you didn't listen long enough.

There is a second reason for the importance of these four questions. If people have not asked these questions before entry to the faith, they will fall away when they soon encounter the problems within the faith. eg. Differences of christian interpretations are "problems with truth". The failings of christians whom they look up to are "problems with Christians". Some fervent prayers left unanswered are "problems with evil".

Many of us have failed to face these things ourselves, and have opted for church discussions which are easier, and consequently weaker in faith. This is why some churches have no room for questions – they are protecting themselves against the lingering doubt that there is no answer. As you head into these dialogue, as much as you are ready to engage with them, your healing may be ahead. They highlight how brilliant Christianity is, not its short comings. They are quite practical not just philosophical. For some, unresolved hurts emerge as they engage with these questions – Look on these as God-given opportunities to surrender the hurt or anger to him for deeper healing. This is open discovery of more of God.

## CONCLUSION

To summarise, the following exercises expect we will **not** seek out a 'quick and complete answer'. It asks us to enter into the question, earn trust, find the real issue, get behind the words to the things that prompt the question. The frameworks offered here provide a range of approaches to try with someone over a period of time in dialogue. These frameworks are pastorally sensitive and biblical. It's always about the Love of Jesus. So even if people can't hear from our mouths clearly, let them feel it through our friendship.

# 2. PROBLEMS OF EVIL AND SUFFERING

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## GOAL

To share good news about evil and suffering.

## INTRODUCTION

This is one of the greatest issues in life. It strongly shapes people's beliefs. Time of suffering are pivotal to how we approach life, for ourselves and for our descendants. How we react to the bad stuff is the really REALLY big shaper of our life – will this make me better or bitter- but some still need to say 'why is this happening to me?'

There's another side to it. To witness someone else's suffering, as we do nightly on television, is to become either numb or outraged, either mobilised or impotent, philosophical or compassionate. Which will it be?

This question (like all the others in this series) may be asked in many forms - from the philosophical to the very intimate, for instance:

- "If God is there, and he is perfectly good and all-powerful," they might ask, "why is the evil in the world so vicious?"
- "How can an all good, all powerful God allow evil to exist? How can he just stand by?"
- "Why is this happening to me?"
- "Why doesn't God stop the wars and the floods?"
- "How can a good God send people to Hell?"
- "Why couldn't we help?"

*Leader gives an example of a time when they experienced this struggle.*

## KEY QUESTION

We are going to look at one of the hardest questions in all of life. We are going to enter into harsh reality with nothing but Jesus. Scenario: a parent has lost their child to cancer 10 years ago. They hear you speak of your love of God and then they ask:



**"HOW COME GOD MADE MY BABY SUFFER SO MUCH?"**

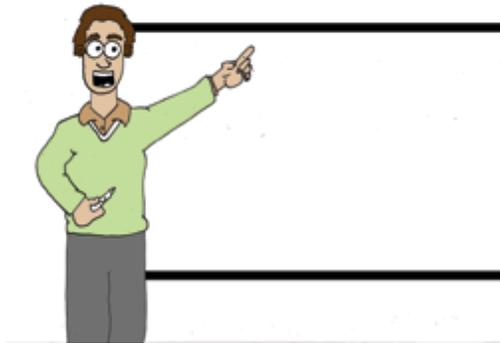
What would you do and say to enter into this question and help that person to understand God in that situation.

It is most important to think what's important about BOTH how you approach the person AS WELL AS addressing the question. You may offend if you neglect either side of those two. Please, no one-minute answers in this exercise! "Speak the truth in love". (Ephesians 4:15)

Form groups of three or four, one to take notes. Allow fifteen minutes in small groups to discuss it, then five minutes for the group to list things that they would seek to say over some period of time, not necessarily all at once. In a separate column, things they feel are important to do or remember. One of the best responses is probably: "I don't know what to say." Maybe start there.

Write the group's responses into the Frame, including comments on both content and approach.

### SUFFERING REFRAME



- 1 I am with you...
- 2 God is *with* you...
- 3 Jesus acts *for* you. ..
- 4 Join in Jesus' flow..

### TOGETHER: DISCUSSION POINTS

- a. Acknowledge their pain. "I do not know the answer yet. We will see why one day. But just now it just hurts".
- b. What is God up to all this time? "God has pledged himself to bring good out of evil, some now, and fully in the end. God has a hurting heart and has pledged to end the suffering.
- c. "Focus on pain, not on blame" is a good proverb.
- d. People need to know that we have been there. It is very important. So tell a story of God's grace in your own suffering, but careful not to overpower the present experience of this other person.
- e. Why does God wait? God places high value on human freedom, because true love only comes from true freedom. God has given a high responsibility to humans to care for each other.
- f. Isn't God 'omnipotent'? God is more interested in coming close in the actuality of life than in getting a reputation for high-sounding words.
- g. People usually talk about 'freewill' as a way to describe the love that God waits to see. Philosophically that gets difficult to process. It is probably better to talk about the 'responsibility we humans have towards each other and the 'response-ability' we need.
- g. There are stages to grief and therefore stages in people's ability to hear our answers without misconstruing them. When people ask "sensible questions", but cannot grasp the answers, it is because their feelings of hurt are unsatisfied, not because their minds are unsatisfied. How will I know when to move on further? "Eyes with tears can not see perspective." If they get angry (watching?), you moved too soon.

### CONCLUSION

This question seems to challenge God in many ways. Once explored, however, it highlights the plan of God to eradicate all evil in all forms, *and yet* to love a people of his own. Evil is still with us, not overpowered yet, so that shows how drastically important it is that God's form of love is necessary to achieve the final solution.

## HOW TO USE THE REFRAME ABOVE

Generally speaking it is best to move carefully from 1 through to 4. It can be summarised thus:

1. I don't have answers, just hope. I am with you in this mess. This too will pass.
2. God is struggling along with you. He understands. Is he bringing some good out of this evil even now?
3. God shows Ultimate Love in a world gone awry. Jesus heals and forgives.
4. God will make all things new One Day So take up his way of love and forgiveness.

*Some other points along the way:*

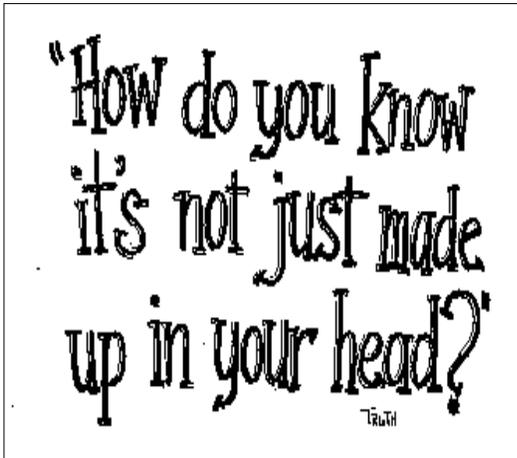
- a. Any greater intervention by God is The Judgement. He waits in order to give us space to come to him. It is worth it?
- b. If evil is bad, join God in opposing all hurt and evil. Repent and love more. See the cartoon "I was about to ask God why he didn't do more about suffering but then he asked me the same question"
- c. Card-playing analogy: We cannot help what 'hand' we are dealt, but we can decide how to deal with it. We become bitter or better.
- d. Trust God that he judges with holy love and it **will** all be worth it in the end.
- e. This is a complex and difficult question, but it is not necessary nor desirable for one person to have the answers for everybody.
- f. We don't have to blame sin or Satan for everything – they are not that big. There are five different and independent sources of evil today – sin from within people, being sinned against, the Satan and his associates, the sorrow and sickness of a fallen world, and lastly the systemic or structural evil arising from the world's political or business or cultural systems. Get your diagnosis right or you can't treat the disease!
- g. This question can upset people if it triggers deeply hurting memories. If so, ask them to stay, but they may be less embarrassed if they go to sit up the back with a friend. Ensure that they are receiving adequate help before you leave.

# 3. PROBLEMS WITH TRUTH AND PROOF

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## GOAL

To share the good news for scepticism; to show how well founded is Jesus' claim to be the Way, the Truth and the Life.



## INTRODUCTION

There are good reasons for this to be a tough question.

At best, it is not enough for people to take your word for anything. They must **discover** the truth of Christ for themselves. We help one another along we don't sort each other out!

They may also be coming from a viewpoint that **predisposes** them to ignore the gospel, e.g. 'the only facts that matter are made of matter'; "what is true for you is your truth only, mine is a different truth". A lot of our time is spent uncovering assumptions that feel like

conclusions but aren't.

Alternatively, they may just need **reliable information** due to the very many funny ideas that circulate about both the original story and its transmission through the centuries. Contrary to popular belief, the evidence is huge.

There are many kinds of evidence for Christianity and the weight of it is simply enormous if you approach it with the possibility that it may even be true. You may have to start reading. Some [MYWResources](#) can direct you.

## KEY QUESTION

Someone asks:

"HOW DO YOU KNOW ITS NOT JUST SOMETHING IN YOUR HEAD? "

*Groups of three or four, one to take notes to submit group's answer.*



Together

Write down group answers under the four different kinds of evidence. The EVIDENCE REFRAME.

## DISCUSSION

(a) Some people are persuaded more by one sort of truth-basis than another, depending on personality, culture or education. Therefore, if the group before you is fairly homogeneous, there will sometimes be occasions when one or two of the categories on the

board may seem a little bare after the feedback time. If so, prompt further reflection by asking a different question from "Other Questions".

(b) For people who do not accept that the Bible is the Word of God, it is usually counterproductive to keep on pushing it. That is a mature faith stance, not a pre-condition of faith. There are some Christians who seem to love to reduce all arguments to this. We have far more on our side, so try a different approach!

(c) Many people cannot accept the idea that anything is "the truth". Except mathematics! It sounds arrogant to be so absolute, they feel. But we can know the mountain is there and how to walk into it, without claiming to know all about the mountain.

(d) Faith is not just a "leap in the dark". It is trusting in Jesus on the basis of good wisdom, some thinking, wide observation and personal experience. When we 'leap', like launching on a voyage, we launch in the full light of what God has done. To change the analogy, it is like learning a second language. First a little, then some more, gradually a conversation, and so on.

#### NOTES ABOUT THIS EXERCISE

(a) Many resources are available to convey this information.

(b) Sometimes we can say, "a person with an experience is not at the mercy of a person with an argument".

#### OTHER QUESTIONS TO TRY

"The early church gradually changed the story of Jesus into a miracle story."

"You are a christian because you were born here. If you had been born in India you'd be a Hindu. It's all the same really."

"I could never believe like you do. I just don't see how I could make such a blind leap of faith."

"I just want to be sure. I've never studied it like you have."

"Even if 500 lawyers and doctors signed a paper saying that Jesus had risen from the dead, I still would not believe it. Miracles don't happen."

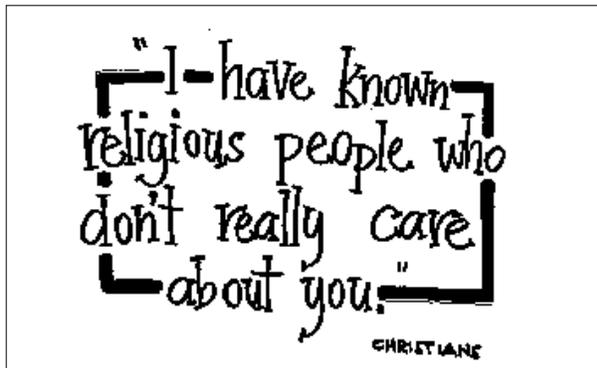
"The Bible is full of contradictions. You can't believe in it."

# 4. CHURCH AND HYPOCRISY

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## GOAL

To share the good news for hypocrites; to show the deep need in humanity for the Holy Spirit to save and sanctify.



## INTRODUCTION

Institutional sexual abuse by church workers is in the news, and it has been too long in coming out. The history of the church is scorched with many fires of abuse, bigotry, stupidity, murder, corruption and cowardice. The worst hypocrisy is when church pretends it did not happen.

The questions are telling the church that we have been caught in our own agenda: "Why are the churches so opposed to gays?" "Remember when

the Christians were bombing each other in Northern Ireland?" "What about all the different denominations?" It is not time to defend, it is time to apologize.

Christians like to say that "those persons" were not acting on the gospel. On the other hand, it is perfectly fair to ask if this gospel can actually work in practice.

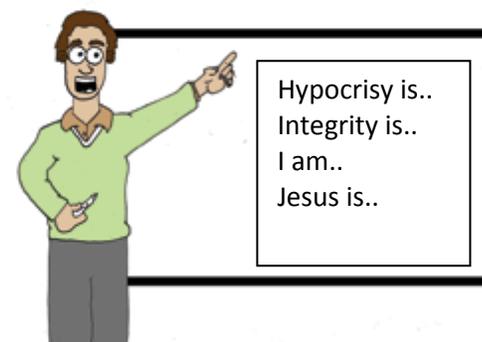
## KEY QUESTION

Someone has heard you speak of your love of God and says:

**"I HAD ENOUGH RELIGION RAMMED DOWN MY THROAT. IT'S NOT FOR ME."**

*Groups of three or four, one to take notes on the points made in the group.*

## TOGETHER DISCUSSION



Summarise responses into the HYPOCRISY REFRAME, noting both content and approach:

ANOTHER REFRAME: You are right, I am sorry, Church gets reformed, We all need help.

Some of the following may come up in the discussions.

(a) Many people have given up on church but not on Jesus. Others can't see Jesus because they put someone else in the way. The focus is Jesus. We are not inviting people to church

but to him. In fact, they might not survive our church unless they see this clearly.

(b) God is committed to putting fallible people up front in his plan, in order that we grow as a community of grace. This often results in our mistakes becoming glaringly obvious. This is hard to accept sometimes, and many Christians need help to accept it humbly and get going.

(c) Look at some of the weird and awful things that some of the biblical characters were! God still used them, and was able to change them.

(d) The need for forgiveness and a life-changing force within us.

(e) Is there anyone here who has NEVER been hypocritical, that is, never failed to live up to *their own* best standards? Are there any social entities or institutions in society (schools, unions, banks, sport teams, etc) that have NEVER failed the persons they are there to serve? Hypocrisy is normal.

(f) Do you personally prefer a faulty person who admits it, or an idealistic person who overlooks their failings? Why

## CONCLUSION

All people are hypocrites. We all fall down against our own standards. It is not a statement about the church as about every organisation and every individual. It is the most basic bias of humankind, that we know what to do but we do not do it. Christians admit it every Sunday in their prayers of confession. The church needs to admit it more often, and be credible about their actions to follow it up. The gospel says that this is the most basic need, and addresses it directly.

## NOTES ABOUT THIS EXERCISE

- Many Christian people are looking for a place to have their own hurt heard and valued. They may use this session as their opportunity, and they may be angry. Be sensitive to this by the way you hear and appreciate both the sinner and the sinned-against who are in the session with you. You must model for them a way of speaking with non-Christians.
- Everyone has their horror stories. After you have heard a few such stories, do not allow the group to go on heaping vilification and discouragement on each other. Move to acknowledge that we all have these horror stories and that we will now focus on how to work with them, rather than be defeated by them.
- The column on the right of the board gives opportunities to record good questions that may be asked by the Christian, or other good insights about how to approach the matter. e.g. Don't try to defend the church. Acknowledge the truth of their comment as much as possible while not trying to judge the case in the past.

## OTHER QUESTIONS TO TRY LATER

"Christians are boring."

"Those missionaries/priests did not look after me. I was abused in that place."

"Why are the churches so opposed to gays?"

"Remember when the Christians were bombing each other in Northern Ireland?"

"What about all the different denominations?"

"Religion causes all the wars"

# 5. THE COST OF FORGIVENESS

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## GOAL

To understand the emotion and value factors in giving and receiving forgiveness.

## INTRODUCTION

It is costly both to give and receive forgiveness. This surfaces in questions like: Why can't God just let people go free? Why does there have to be a cross? Why does receiving forgiveness have a cost?

People need to count the cost, grieve the losses from going forward with Jesus. Sometimes the loss of egotism is felt as humiliation. Sometimes a sexual relationship or habit is threatened – faith feels at that moment like being sentenced to impossible loneliness. The loss is real, and it is not helpful to dismiss them. On the other hand, forgiveness always costs somebody something. So what is the price that the Jesus has paid?

*Leader gives an example of a time when they experienced this struggle.*



## KEY QUESTION 1

Think of a time when you gave or received forgiveness. Why was it needed and what was it like to do? What was 'the cost' of being forgiven freely?

*Leader gives an example.*



## FORGIVENESS REFRAME

- **Shame** – unwilling to be the first to admit fault. Revenge is strong but perpetuates violence. Honour breeds shame - hard to name and claim forgiveness.
- **Name** – 'we' have a problem. Name it = a Relief. Pain makes us better or bitter – we choose.
- **Let Go** – let go the pain, the resentment, the regret, the things that might have been, the ego of feeling you are better than the other person.
- **Let God** – believe that a better future is possible, commit to the hope of coming through this to a better relationship, ask for and accept God's declaration of forgiveness, become the Jesus-like person he is making through this situation.

## KEY QUESTION 2 – *add more to the Forgiveness Reframe*

Someone at work tells you about being betrayed by their business partner and then says: "DON'T GET MAD, GET EVEN. THAT'S WHAT I WANT." What will you respond?

*Form groups of three or four, one to take notes. Allow ten minutes in small groups to discuss it, then five minutes for the group to list things that they would seek to say over some period of time, not necessarily all at once. In a separate column, things they feel are important to do or remember.*

**TOGETHER DISCUSSION** – *keep writing notes on the board so people can watch the progress*

- Who bore the cost of the transgression? Is there always a cost?
- Why is it important to the meaning of forgiveness that it is not strictly fair?

*Draw the comparisons, if it is still needed, between these ordinary human encounters and God's forgiveness.*

## **CONCLUSION**

To some people, revenge shows honour, and forgiveness is shameful. In the Christian view, relationships in families and communities can only be healed by the offer of forgiveness. Without it, it is impossible to restore the broken trust, and the cycle of violence continues.

Without a relationship with God, and the model of Jesus, it is hard to stay in the place of freedom and grace.