



ChurchArmy

# Encounters on the Edge

A Series of Quarterly Investigations from

The Sheffield Centre

## No. 3



### *Cell Church Planting*

The questions "What is Church?" and "What should emerging forms of Church be like in the early years of the New Millennium?" are in a state of ferment. Many strands contribute to this position. They spring from a changing kaleidoscopic world and an increasing spectrum of mission driven responses.

**George Lings investigates an example of one possible way forward.**

Also available in the Encounters on the Edge series

*No.1 LIVING PROOF - A new way of being church?*

*No.2 UNIT 8 - Out of sight, out of nothing*

# *Has Church reached its Cell Buy Date?*



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# Cell Church Planting



What is Cell Church?

## Has the Church reached its Cell Buy date?

The questions “What is Church?” and “What should emerging forms of Church be like in the early years of the New Millennium?” are in a state of ferment. Many strands contribute to this position. They spring from a changing kaleidoscopic world and an increasing spectrum of mission driven responses.

Robert Warren’s *Building Missionary Congregations* (1995) gives one influential overview. In pages 35-39 he urges that there will be no one agreed way forward. Rather he already detects at least six diverse emerging strands:

- **Alternative Services for youth culture, or formed from Base Communities thinking**
- **Church planting - on the well known congregational model**
- **Multiple congregations using one building - to allow more diversity of approach**
- **Home groups - if and when they become more outward focused**
- **Groups meeting at work, including individuals from various churches**
- **The renewal of existing parish churches for mission**

### Tugs and Liners

Quite clearly he believes that the last route must be the long-term goal. Using the analogy of tugs and a liner, he likens the first five radical alternatives to tugs and the existing parish system to a liner. He argues that the powerful, manoeuvrable, nippy tug can help pull the bulky ponderous liner out of harbour, but only the liner itself, by virtue of its sheer size, can transport a large number of people across the ocean to their destination. Thus both are necessary - **but moving the liner is the goal.**



C-ELL: Church not S-ELL: Church

I am considerably in Robert Warren's debt for helping me to re-imagine church. I use his models in consultation with others frequently, but I do wonder whether the assumption in the analogy is correct. Criticising his writing is akin to taking a spade to a soufflé, but put as a serious question not just a pun - **'Has the liner run out of steam?'** The explicit message is that the liner carries most of the people and all that is needed is for the physically insignificant little tugs to get it going. While I'm sure Robert Warren can think beyond those terms, this viewpoint does represent a position of many English Anglicans; if only we can renew what we already have, all will be well. The assumption of the analogy can be challenged on several grounds:



**1 If the traditional parish church truly were to become truly missionary, is it conceivable that it would remain as it is?**

Some years ago a leading child's toy was the 'transformer'. An innocuous looking lorry could be manipulated so as to change into a Challenger tank. Is it not likely that the liner itself would have to become a 'transformer'? It may not be a question of just getting a liner, like the Queen Mary, out of dock - we may need to conceive and build new kinds of vessels.

**2 Even with changes to parish churches, the most serious mission-minded people are asking 'Whom will older styles of church work for?'**

This renewal of the existing church and its evangelism still appears to be effective among those who have been de-churched in their own lifetime. But there is also evidence that existing church is increasingly inappropriate for mission work among the non-churched. The recent work of Francis and Richter in *Gone but not forgotten: Church Leaving and Returning* suggests, by implication, that 40% of the UK adult population have never been churched at any stage of their lives. They are like the large number of people who would use the Channel Tunnel and not take a boat at all. For them, it's 'forget the Liner' - they wouldn't contemplate it as an option or use it.

**3 About 25,000 people attend Anglican congregational church plants which have begun since 1977.**

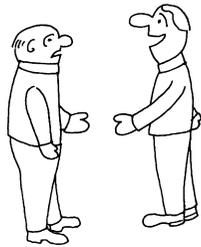
The electoral roll figure in 30 of our 43 English dioceses is smaller than this. Are there more people in church plants across the country than in one total diocese? Surprisingly, yes! There is also some evidence from research both by Alan Bing and by Gavin Wakefield that church plants do find and win new converts among the non-churched, particularly in the early years of their life. Is a model, which carries 25,000 people to be seen as a tug any longer? It begins to look like one of those rather popular little ferries which do a very brisk trade on their own terms.

**4 Cell church thinking is a further emerging stream that rejects the analogy on other grounds.**

- **Firstly, the liner sailed under the flag of Constantine, and plied the Christendom routes - we now need to sail to other destinations.**
- **Secondly, it is now beached and holed, the engines are rusted, and the crew noticeably incompetent - who would want to sail with her?**
- **Thirdly, it has the dubious reputation of a fated liner such as the Titanic, whose owners made hubristic claims and ignored the warnings given. The contemporary western Church has struggled to change course to mission in practice and its future survival in the face of icy, secular circumstances is dubious.**
- **Fourthly, it is no coincidence that liners carry passengers. That is exactly what is wrong with them. The Church made up of passengers has already ceased to be the Church.**

## What IS Cell Church?

**Its advocates present Cell Church as the biggest change to church life for decades or perhaps centuries.** Protestant advocates such as the American writer Bill Beckham use language of a second Reformation, or of completing the first Reformation. Perhaps a fairer historical equivalent is to say we have not seen such a vigorous, evangelistic, small group movement since the Wesleys and the Class meeting.



The Cell Church is a creative way to interlock membership.

**Cell thinking claims that cell, rather than congregation, is quintessentially church. Cell Christians will engage together for mission, community and worship. Their spirituality is deeply dedicated to effective discipleship by application of scripture and mutual accountability, but also committed to the discovery and use of gifts and ministries by all.**

Prayer and action are directed to reproduction of both leaders and cells. They are firmly wedded to relational forms of mission and all their meetings are open to others. It is heady drink.

### Where is Cell - by today's date?

At the middle of 1999, Anglican interest in Cell Church principles and practice is being followed by a small network of leaders. At a private consultation in June 1996, they discovered relationally-based groups emerging at the margins - both of institutional church life and also of society. These were springing up in a wide range of British contexts. These shoots have connections with either or both of two streams: Base Communities from South America and Cell Church from Africa and the Far East. Literature on the latter comes mainly from the USA. The group concluded:

*"We long to see them recognised, affirmed and creatively related to the institutional church; not ignored, marginalised or taken over."*

Some congregation members have registered their interest, through *Youth With a Mission (YWAM)*. This relatively new mission organisation has strongly identified itself with Cell Church, not least because it encapsulates very clearly their own stated twin priorities of discipleship and mission as central to Christian formation and identity. So many Anglicans have enquired about Cell Church that YWAM decided to run some separate conferences solely for Anglicans, the first of which took place in June 1998, drawing 150 attendees, of whom I was one. CPAS, through John Gooding, decided to track this development in a database. It showed that some 200 churches are considering a move to becoming Cell based, though only 50-60 have actually begun to do so. June 1999 saw two events - north and south - drawing nearly 300 people between them. Bishop James Jones of Liverpool, in an off the cuff video introduction to the northern event, commented on Cells practising welcome, worship, word and witness - *"When you've got these four pillars, you've got a church."*



*Its well past its cell by date*

But so far, most people are seeing Cell Church as a way of renewing existing churches for discipleship and mission. Those who commit themselves and their congregations to this process, talk of the change as 'Transitioning'. Howard Astin's book *Body and Cell* is the first to be available, telling an unvarnished tale of a transition to Cell Church in inner, urban Bradford. It is vital to understand that this 'transition' is far more radical than re-introducing beefed-up house groups. Rather, it is shifting the centre of focus, resources, identity and attention from congregational life to the cell. Cell is church. These are attempts to give the 'liner' a total overhaul. Perhaps it is akin to changing its power source from coal-fired to diesel oil, and changing its function and internal layout from passenger liner to troop ship.

The cost and time for the refitting of this vessel is considerable. It used to be normative among Cell Church thinkers to say that to achieve a thoroughgoing change to this new way of being Church, takes seven years. The enduring

attachment English people have to congregation has meant that this time band has recently been lengthened to ten years. Moreover all the examples of this transition being made with success, come from urban contexts. Rural church operates significantly differently. I know of only one fragile rural example of a formal attempt to plant cell church. John Cole in Lincoln Diocese has a more positive tale to tell of a less doctrinaire approach. He notes the re-discovery in his diocese of the value of small faith community - a new centre of gravity for Church - that provides intimacy, mutual discipling and a greater outward focus than before. Leslie Francis and David Lankshear's article in *Anvil Vol. 15 No4* chronicles hard evidence that leaders moving to rural areas must ameliorate any strong colours of churchmanship. Incomers need to recognise that what is needed, expected and tolerated from one Church serving a whole neighbourhood community is significantly different to what flourishes in the urban culture of networks and choice, or the city culture that adds a further cultural value of mobility.

In the face of such difficulty and pain of change, I have heard stories of half a dozen leaders who have decided not to transition whole churches, but rather to begin Cell Church alongside an existing urban church. Pure Cell Church advocates like Ralph Neighbour might say, 'I told you so'. As such, the more they opt for separate leadership, distinct mission target groups, discrete pastoral structures and governmental processes, these Cell-based churches are more akin to Cell Church plants and I expect they will repay further study.

However, the number of Cell Church Plants being done from scratch in a specific neighbourhood is minuscule. This is completely pioneering work, both in the sense of planting a church for an area or culture without an accessible church, and in the sense that, within western Anglicanism, there are no models to follow. The first of this kind that I know of was begun in the winter of 1996 by a Church Army Captain and his wife, Martin and Sharon Garner, in an estate in Lisburn, Northern Ireland.



Well Peter the cell Church has a long tradition

I hold no brief to say that the *MV Anglicana* should not be converted to better mission purposes. If people can make her into a troop ship - then God bless them. My perception is that we need a second whole strand in our approach, which is planting new kinds of churches. Both initiatives are valid but neither can do the work of the other. We need to accept the significant proportions of the population who will not get in touch with us as we are; not even if we brighten up the ship's paintwork, convert to modern propulsion, train up the crew and advertise better. Changing the analogy, if we have a mission to the nation, we have a responsibility to go and cross the widening gap to those who will not come to us in our present guises. Cell church, from scratch, is a way of being church that looks and feels so different to the forms of congregational life that we know too well. It has enough distance from all that makes us hang our heads about Church, to enable the Gospel of Jesus to waft as a fresh bouquet on the air. This is therefore potentially a development of national significance in finding new ways of being Church. It is especially suitable for those more alienated from her.

### What special factors operate in Northern Ireland?

**The Church of Ireland** is Anglican, but that does not make it the same as the Church of England. It serves both the Province and the Republic, but in neither case is it the established Church, nor even the majority Church. In the South, less than 3% of the population would be nominally Anglican and in Northern Ireland, the numerically dominant group is the Presbyterian Church. On visiting Belfast and surrounding areas in November 1997, and again in February 1999, I was forcibly reminded of parallels to New Zealand - geographically, architecturally, socially and ecclesiologically. Like the Anglican province of New Zealand, Northern Ireland Anglicanism has affection for England, but has its own identity as a minority denomination in a pluralist religious society. Working across the whole island of Ireland, it has much smaller dioceses (100 clergy is large) with an attendant different sense of belonging, more financial independence and self-sufficiency for parishes to meet their own staffing requirements. The local churches talk about having links with families who declare some Anglican affiliation, rather than working through a blanket parochial responsibility. Parish is not quintessentially Anglican.

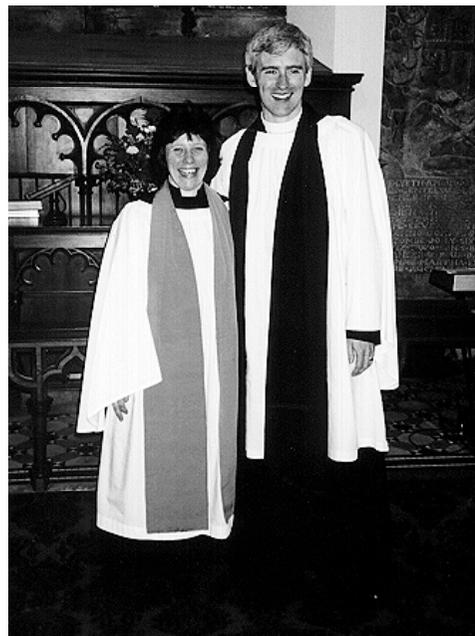
The differences to New Zealand are that there is a pride in the Celtic inheritance - seen as a longer active missionary Christian history than possessed by England and her history from an Augustinian mission. It is significantly less secular, with a sizeable 'institutional fringe' - only still present in 'white highland' Christendom pockets of England. Figures from MARC Europe's 1984 surveys of membership show a stark difference.

	England	Ireland
<b>Membership</b>	<b>18</b>	<b>80</b>

Attendance figures for both are lower but the differential is still enormous.

Thus work among the lapsed and the de-churched is still legitimately the major mission field in terms of numbers in Northern Ireland. The non-churched, that is those who have not attended at all in their own generation, are only now emerging, but very strongly so among the young. With modern communications and advertising, the globalisation of a secular materialist culture is rampant. Here, there is a chasm opening. If lessons from more secularised countries are to be learnt, this is a mission field that must not be eclipsed by work done among the lapsed and de-churched. There is also the unique connection between history, politics and church, such that it is still not unusual to see a Protestant minister marching in an Orange Order parade.

Martin and Sharon Garner work in the town of **Lisburn**, eight miles west of Belfast. It is HQ for the British Army and its 65,000 population is predominantly Protestant. There are three parishes, and this Cell plant is part of the work of one parish, known as Lisburn Cathedral, whose Rector at the start of the project was Canon John McCammon. The work is warmly endorsed by his successor Revd Sam Wright.



*Revd. Sam Wright with his wife Paula*



*Sharon & Martin Garner with their children*

*“Martin and Sharon are leading a pioneering work. As Anglicans we have a responsibility to relate the Gospel to the ordinary folks of the parish. As the traditional model doesn't work in this area, we need a community based approach to evangelism and church.”*

Lisburn Cathedral has a roll of some 400 families, mainly middle to upper middle class, but also has responsibility for the Hillhall estate which has a very different character. This socially and geographically discrete area has, over the years, been a source of concern and guilt. Samuel Poyntz, the former Bishop of Connor, on a parish visit in the late 1980's is credited with remarking that Hillhall would not come to Lisburn, so Lisburn Cathedral would need to go to Hillhall. A subsequent curate tried Sunday school on the estate but it never broke through to indigenous leadership and forms of all age church and so faltered. The Select Vestry (PCC) became increasingly aware that a more local, incarnational church planting model was needed.

**The Hillhall Estate**, built in 1972, is a mile from the town centre. 3000 lived there at the last census but numbers are falling, houses stand empty and some shops have closed. There are signs of deprivation. A local survey cited low-income households, high unemployment, poor and declining shopping facilities, yet 40% of the inhabitants do not have a car. There is high demand for social services to respond to



*Hillhall Estate*



long term illness and disability, lone parent families and a sizeable teenage population with plentiful half brothers and sisters. Hillhall has a poor image, and a very distinct one, in that it is a strongly Loyalist estate and a centre for the local para-military. My first impression of the houses, many with a flagstaff sporting the Union Jack and with sectarian graffiti-plastered walls, was astonishment. Those of an unflinching, positive disposition would summarise it as 'challenging'.

It is this mix, with its own freedoms and constraints, that partly led the Garners to believe that Cell Church offered sufficient discontinuity from existing church to be attractive to those who no longer go, or more importantly never went to existing church. Intuitively, they sensed what new people won for Christ on Hillhall have found, and this investigation is making more explicit, **Cell is a way forward in these contexts.**



Howard

Howard is an apprentice leader in the second all-age Cell. He has been a Christian for 15 months.

*"I think that cell church to me is the best discovery ever, 'cos I've never been a churchgoer and I'd no interest in God because of the way the Church portrayed Him. They weren't answering my questions. When this cell church came along, I could actually ask what I might have thought were stupid questions, on a personal one to one basis, which I couldn't have asked in mainstream church. To me I can sum it up by saying - it is taking church to the people who never go into a mainstream church - so the cell church is talking to people and it works."*

Martin and Sharon have become more convinced that the call to discover true community, amidst a somewhat paranoid provincial community, is a Gospel dynamic. The opportunity to experience the values, in Christian community, of mentoring and accountability, rather than bow to the pressures of sectarian

coercion, could be attractive. Here was genuine community and effective family. **The power of the risen Christ to offer a possibility for change and a dynamic to challenge existing ways could be the energy that gave a new start and a way out of prejudice and what manifests as religious tribalism.**

## What's the story so far?

Philip McKinstry, a member of Lisburn Cathedral, saw a bungalow for sale on the estate and thought that it was a foothold with a future. 35 Meeting House Lane was later offered to the Church and the Vestry (PCC) bought it, put in an upper storey and sought to recruit a couple to live there who had a missionary emphasis. Captain Martin Garner was appointed and he was given a free hand about how Church on the Hillhall Estate should develop, rather than a detailed Job Description, because he has built a track record already in Church Planting and because Church Army are known for exploring fresh edges of mission.



35 Meeting House Lane

The planting of Cell Church in Hillhall is still young, born at the start of 1997. Martin and Sharon summarised their first 12 months.

*"We called the first year 'A Year of Sowing' which meant a year to build relationships, get a feel for the local area and start key initiatives. A year on, we meet as a small church gathering on Sunday mornings, the children's work is taking off and the local high schoolers are in the process of 'Cottage Renewal' to make a teenage den."*

The space available in, and the readership of, a church magazine tends to generate headlines that don't look very different from the sort of start made to form congregational church life, but this belies the reality, or rather it tends to mask the dynamics that make up Cell Church.



This must be the new Cell Church!

## Three Strands to the One Work

### The one work: Inter-generational Cell

Martin and Sharon, despite their previous planting experience, know they have undergone a sharp learning curve. A learning pattern of experiment, evaluation, reflection and adaptation has characterised the development of the work. Three years down the track, they are clearer on the nature of a series of core values for growth on Hillhall.

- **Broken family life is reversed by an experience of 'Christian family cells'. Children and youth participate fully in Church life. The criterion for success is an experience of 'New Testament' community.**
- **Trainees are developed at every level; the style of leadership and models of training must be achievable to Hillhall people, so that the work becomes increasingly indigenous.**
- **Every person discovers their own spiritual gifts and learns to use them for the common good and to find effective service.**
- **Jesus is at the centre of everything.**
- **Prayer moves the life of the church.**
- **Clear Bible teaching and powerful worship experience.**

*An all age cell meeting*



As it happens, these Cells meet on a Sunday morning at 1100 am. If social patterns in the area dictated otherwise, another day or time would be chosen. When there was only one cell, it met in the Garner's largish sitting room. As numbers grew, leaders were trained and now there are two cells. Dennis and Anne lead the second with their apprentice leaders Howard and Judith, using the latter's home on the heart of the estate. Still in her home, Sharon Garner leads the other, with an apprentice Jenny. Martin is a member of this group and so free to visit both groups.

Sunday at 1100am? It sounds like Mattins for adults around the fireside, with the children doing Sunday School in the kitchen. The two assumptions, that Sunday must mean 'Worship' as well as segregation by age, are both significantly wrong.

### I The Sunday Cell is not mainly worship.

Because this is Cell, the meeting includes a fourfold shape, each with a significant purpose, expressed in an important period of time.

#### a) Welcome - you to me.

Various icebreakers and questions enable each person to have a voice and an opinion, to get to know each other and newcomers better. No one is a spectator, all are included. True community as a remedial experience, is formed and reinforced, bringing healing and belonging. This is not a meeting. It is a being met. It naturally comes at the start of the cell church being together. Traditional Church is the only place where you get coffee after the event. Even in sport and theatre the refreshments come at half time.

#### b) Worship - us to God.

I have noticed through many years of local church life that the integrity and depth of worship is often a by-product of the quality of community life brought by the potential worshippers. Worship towards the end of a church houseparty often has this enhanced feel. I reflect also that this is partly why in liturgical worship, confession comes early in the process. Without integrity and harmony in relationships, what we ostensibly bring to God together will be spiritually flawed. As community is warmed, its worship can begin to fly.

The values concerning Jesus at the centre, prayer and the use of gifts all come into play. Any gifts that express those values are welcome. Prayers, songs, spiritual experiences, charismatic manifestations are woven into the worship. All may contribute; all are encouraged to bring something and all to be open on the day.

**c) Word - God to us.**

This is neither a sermon, nor an expositional Bible study. Rather, built around a chosen theme, the aim is understanding and personal application. There is room for people to explain what they need to apply and to ask for others to pray that it will be so. Next week will be the test of what happened!

**d) Witness - God through us.**

Over the weeks and months, cell members are encouraged to remain focused on their outward mission. Aided by prayer and mutual accountability, they will make genuine friendships on the estate, seeking also to see them won for Christ as they meet other Christians who are both normal - and attractively changed. From the start, each group has known that it exists to multiply. The two Hillhall cells plan to multiply to four within 9-12 months.

So each Cell gathering is many dimensions of Church - not just worship. It is significantly community, strongly focused towards mission and clearly energised by its spirituality. We could dare to ask whether existing church meetings on a Sunday are worthy of their name, when they prove to be so obsessed by their worship, so impoverished in expression of community and so distanced from mission. All of these reflect badly on their underlying spirituality.

**2 It is not that the Children are seen but not heard.**

They occupy a level playing field with adults. They are now an active part of Church.

Ever since welcome reports like *All God's Children* and *Children in the Way*, together with such pioneering ministries as those of Alan Price, Ishmael and others, there is recognition that children deserve not only teaching and evangelism, but also pastoral care and a share in ministry. They are human and spiritual now, rather than potential adults or empty vessels to be filled.

So a number of existing churches have tried to move beyond the so-called Family Service to All-age Worship.

For me, a further plank of understanding came as Martin described the response to the resistance which he has encountered. Someone asked, 'How do you deal with the differing needs of different age groups?' His answer was that essentially, within Cell Church values, there are none. All our lives need changing, all of us bring our emotions to corporate Christian gatherings, all experience boredom or being gripped by the meeting. It's just that children show externally whether they are bored or engaged. All ages have a need to belong, to grow in faith and in love. All need to be captivated by having Jesus at the centre and learning how to live life with Him.

The inter-generational cells have the children in worship time throughout. They take a share of choosing what is sung or read. They bring prayers and will pray spontaneously for others. They exercise gifts and lead sections of the morning. The smaller, less formal context of Cell makes this much easier to work with than in congregation-sized gatherings.

Now that there are two cells, there needs to be a relationship across the cells and a monthly celebration is being planned. They will celebrate what is happening in each cell, worship in response to who Jesus is and participate in teaching and wider vision. This pattern can bring together many future cells that own a belonging to Church which is wider than themselves.

## Three strands beyond the Inter-generational Cell

### I Children

'Kool Club' used to run on Fridays in the estate primary school as an after school club. It was a valuable way in to making contacts in the community and relationships with school age children. It has now evolved into an early Monday evening activity at 'the Cottage' (see next page) It is focused on fun for some forty kids and run by leaders who are approachable. The shape and focus of this contact will continue to unfold.

It should not so much be seen as a traditional children's activity programme but as an expression of Cell belief and practice. Crucial differences are that

it is the aim for each child to be visited in their home on a weekly basis by a team member, themselves part of a Sunday Cell. This is relationship-based not programme-based work. This approach feeds the belief that children are



people too, and have need of pastoral care and discipleship, as well as to receive through teaching. The other assumption is that the programme content is designed to help children experience God within the daily realities which they face, not just to give them religious information or knowledge. The latter approach (in common with much RE in schools) has too often led just to an 'inoculation' against Christianity, by experiencing the form but not the power of the Good News in Jesus. The consequence of living with a Protestant Christendom fringe is that many, even those under the age of 11, still know the right language about salvation. They appear to agree with it and may talk about 'decisions', but it does not revolutionise their lives, choices or values.

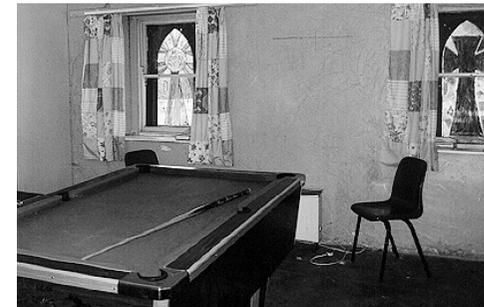
**All those involved in any forms of Christian teaching need to be crystal clear that giving Christian information does not necessarily lead to Christian transformation. Failure to close the gap between the two has been the bane of sermons for centuries and the weakness of house groups for decades.** In Cell Church planting there is an opportunity to begin again from scratch.



There is the chance to model that all true Christian learning (as opposed to teaching) is rooted in application, in accountable relationships and in a deepening spirituality. Few with a sense of history would believe that this is radically new. After all, the Orthodox have long believed that a theologian is someone who learns to pray and worship better. But the pervasive culture of Christendom congregational life is curiously both deeply resistant to such a life-changing assumption and yet at the same time hungry for more spiritual reality than institutional church life can proffer. So starting anew with a deliberate discontinuity from the past, gives increased freedom to escape its shackles. As usual we must look behind an activity, to its purpose and philosophy, if we are to see its potential and significance.

## 2 Teenagers

**The Cottage** is the second strand of work on the estate. There are significant numbers of teenagers on an estate which is without a community centre or obvious outlets for their energies and frustrations. The consequences are easily imaginable and frequently true. These teenagers have in the past been overfed with Christian information, but have made no church links. Since 1997 some have made commitments to Christ, but they plunge down and soar up, as echoes of the roller-coaster emotions from broken families. They will need time to fit within an inter-generational cell. The Cottage is a house at the end of the Garner's garden, owned by Lisburn Cathedral. Its renovation started in 1997 as a drop-in centre for the whole community. But typically of Cell



*The Cottage*

Church values and also the repudiation of the Nanny State mentality, the teenagers with others, carried out the renovation and not just as a labour force for other people's ideas. They were invited to be part of the answer to local community needs. This is creating such dynamics as a pride in what they do, responsibility for what they have, freedom to invite their peers and seeing that changes can occur on their own patch. Here are reverberations of Base Community dynamics and perceptions from community development work.

This is sound, secular, community-based work. Martin Garner has made it clear from the start that he seeks relationships with the community and works with those who want to work for the transformation of the community, so he became treasurer of the Community Association. But he also holds that communities are not changed unless people are changed. The distinct Christian dynamic in the community is experiencing the transformation of human lives and relationships, through encounter with Christ and co-operation with a Holy Spirit who takes up residence within them. As such, Cell Church is working to demonstrate an attractive alternative community, which will in turn influence the surrounding community.

**Only if the Kingdom working in practice is seen to be different and desirable to the World, will the latter consider joining it.**

As I have studied a wide variety of Church Plants, I grow more and more convinced that to adopt a model of relationship to a community, which could be characterised as a



*Hillhall teenagers on their own cell weekend away*

Chaplaincy to existing structures, is utterly disastrous and reflects loss of confidence. Forms of compromise, questions of ownership, lack of freedom of action and self-determination mean that such an attempt at Church is never allowed to be the Church in the sense commended by the New Testament as 'being in the world, but not of the world.' Far too often the reverse has been true - that the Church has been of the world and yet ironically not in the world. As Robert Warren put in a paper 'Towards an Anglican Theology of Change':

*"Before Constantine, it (the church) was a subversive counter-culture operation. Since then it has had an authenticating role. The time has come for the church to become counter-culture, prophetic, developing a theology of resistance/insistence"*

I am not arguing there should never be any Chaplaincy work. In some cases it may be all that can be achieved within a secular organisation. But when we are beginning new churches - by congregation or cell - for unreached communities, it is a flawed and foolish way to proceed. It prevents an alternative society growing alongside the secular one. Incarnation must never be reduced to immanent identification, or else transcendent intervention is lost. Christ brought both. Christ will both enter and affront every culture. His body on earth does well to take note.

### 3 Adults

The **Adult work** reflects the same values and aims. There is the mix of visits into the community and to homes, together with time in a small group on a Sunday. Accountable discipleship is the style; Christian service and witness is seen as normal, not additional. The explicit value put upon every member ministry and the search for indigenous leadership means that adults are part of a continuous equipping track. Some Sunday evenings or special weekends are set aside for this. Material is drawn from a number of approaches such as *Alpha*, *Emmaeus*, *Becoming a Contagious Christian* and the *Network* course on gifts. One to one mentoring is encouraged across the cells, with pairs of people who find time to meet for mutual accountability, prayer and growth in ministry. The focus for adults is not on Sunday as an event, but on relationships within and beyond the Cell.



*Food, fun and fellowship - the cell groups met regularly*

Common to all levels of the work is an emphasis on relationships with the community, work among all members of the community, and being radical about the kind of Christian community which is being formed. This cluster of priorities chimes in with choices made by projects which I have visited other than cell planting. They look like common contours being identified in the landscape of this emerging mission frontier.

Cell Church, like Church Planting, is also committed to growth by multiplication. So much so, that this overrides the importance of times and venues. The latter two are to serve the former; all structures are held to be dispensable to serve the continuing healthy growth of the number of cells of healthy mission-minded disciples.

### *Martin Garner's own role*

Martin is the last person who would want this paragraph written, but I do so in the conviction that **the character and gifts of a leader are an integral part of a work which bears fruit.** Why else do we spend time and money on selection, training and ministerial formation, writing job descriptions and resourcing staff development?

The gifts and convictions which he brings are significant. He is a palpably humane and warm person. This is reflected in his leadership, thinking and evangelism. His enthusiasm is infectious and energising rather than alarming or intimidating. Gordon Macdonald in 'Restoring your Spiritual Passion' speaks of four kinds of people in our lives.

- **Very Resourceful People who fire our vision**
- **Very Important People who share our vision**
- **Very Nice People who enjoy our vision**
- **Very Draining People who act as described!**

Martin is one of the relatively rare first kind. I hope he can be a mentor to a number of others who will catch the fire. I am not surprised that he is pioneering this form of church, nor that he has been taken to a place where it needed this kind of brand new approach to give it any chance of success. It is entirely natural for him to build Church around relationships and community.

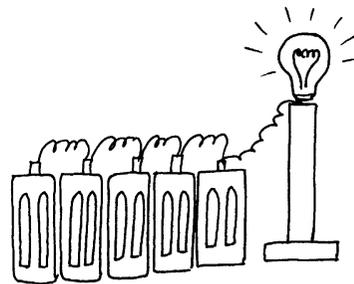


*Monthly guest service*

But it is not the case that he and Sharon simply go it alone. There is a core group of eight who themselves are committed to living the values of Cell Church and commitment to the local community. There is a sense in which Cell Church Planting is caught, as much as it is taught. Because this work can grow only out of existing cell relationships, it is necessarily a slow start - at most one cell can only spawn yet one more cell - and so Martin is committed to a five year view.

- 1997      A year of sowing**
- 1998      A year of first fruits**
- 1999      A year of restructuring - 2 Inter-generational Cells**
- 2000-01   Two years of multiplication**

At the present rate after five years there could be 8 cells. It is no accident that his language is more at home with the untidy growth of the Kingdom, rather than the language beloved by advocates of order. His instinct and teaching is to echo Jesus' approach in John's Gospel "What is the Father doing? - then that is what I must do." He will look and teach others to look for where God is already active - among the 60% of people who claim to have some kind of spiritual experience - and pray to offer them some interpretation of what God has already been doing. This does not preclude his prayer and expectation that people will be evangelised in such a manner that they pass through profound conversion (whether gradual or sudden) into ongoing discipleship, characterised by the radically new life that only the Spirit of God can bring. With gratitude, Martin and Sharon note that this process has begun in new Christians.



The more active cells the brighter the light

## Wider perspectives on Cell and Church Planting

**A**vexing corollary of Newism is that there is a rampant Ageism about ideas and resources. Some already present Church Planting as a *passé* phase of the late 80's and early 90's. Pursuing Cell Church is now the new Holy Grail for the Millennium. The relationship between the Planting and Cell movements is quite complex. Certainly they are not opposites or exclusive alternatives.

### 1 They share a number of instincts in mission and church doctrine

- Evangelism is a normal segment of being church.
- Relationships in community are deeply characteristic of church and mission.
- Multiplication is a normal means of church growth.
- Mission is based on 'go' not 'come'.
- Diversity is welcomed in reaching a diverse mission field.
- Continued growth of leaders is a key to sustaining growth.

### 2 They can be operated together

- Cell principles will help Church plants particularly those working in social groupings where middle-sized congregations - and their administrative organisational style - will be culturally foreign.
- Cell Church will help a number of Plants break through the 50 attendance barrier, by breaking down the unit size and raising the proportion of the church membership engaged in evangelism.
- Cell will assist the multiplication of leaders and the pattern of ongoing training. Finding and forming them is key to the whole process but also a potential Achilles heel.
- Cell will help simplify the inner life of young church plants. They can get bogged down by administration and clogged up with pastoral care, both of which can soak up the energies of the pioneers and lure plants towards predominantly maintenance mode.

### 3 They can operate apart

- Most Cell Church work in the UK at present is seeking to transition existing churches through the commendable task of re-focusing on discipleship and evangelism.
- There are sectors of society for whom congregation as a church model has currency :
  - Middle class populations which still retain affection for Christendom at its best.
  - Rural areas where the instinctive interweaving of church and community is still deep.
  - Churches which have warm contacts with significant numbers of fringe members drawn by existing church based activities.
  - Areas of new housing, consisting of people of the same culture as the existing church membership.
  - Parts of the country where a congregational church plant in a secular venue would struggle because the folk religion insists that this is not 'proper church'. For example, there is anecdotal evidence of this instinct being far stronger in urban areas of Lancashire than in Yorkshire.

For all of these cases, it will still be a viable and perhaps wiser missionary tactic to church plant according to the congregational model and use cell principles to enliven their small group life. Some call this Meta-church.

### Cell Church and Evangelism:

A most important and interesting observation has been made by Revd Howard Astin, author of the only substantial Church of England book on the subject. His comment is that the move to Cell Church helps shape and direct growth but does not create it.

My reflection is to note that Cell Church originally came to us from parts of the two-thirds world. In the churches of those countries, the powerful impression from books and individuals, is that growth and evangelism are the

most natural things in the world. Cell Church has been thought up or evolved to cope with the attendant growth. Thus it is true to say that it was not designed to stimulate growth but to channel it.

In ancient Egypt, a formidable civilisation was built upon the annual flooding by the Nile. An elaborate but effective irrigation system was devised, along with a social and economic infrastructure. The system put the brimming water to better use. It did not initiate the flood, nor could it have power to do so. In the West, it feels like we are carrying water uphill in buckets, not knee-deep in swirling spiritual enthusiasm. It may well be then that Cell will not in itself be the catalyst that helps the British church discover the prior need of a missionary identity. In the Lisburn example, the kernel of the evangelistic profile comes from the leadership and Cell is a highly suitable way to channel this energy.

It would also be a mistake for Cell to make mission only consist of evangelism. Precisely because it is so well suited to work on the margins, with those distanced from church, the community engagement and social transformation dynamics of mission must not be eclipsed.

In our own history the nearest phenomena we seem to have is the Class System of eighteenth century Methodism. By all accounts, its essence was relational with an outworking in discipleship and evangelism. A Methodist told me of a reputed remark of Wesley's to the effect that when class system ceased to be evangelistic, it would begin to die. That's rather what has appeared to have happened. Let Cell Church be warned, the danger from our history is that its welcome emphasis could be subverted into a new form of Church inner renewal. **An encounter on the edge is never a comfortable address.** Worse still, renewal could be further corrupted into preferences for a slightly different kind of small group to those we have had in the past. That would be a tragedy for what Church should be and would rob it of two essential dynamics; evangelism and discipleship.

Our need is still to find ways of enabling the church to be instinctively missionary. Fresh starts with discontinuity from past ways, leading to laying down new instincts will be one part of the answer. Thus Cell Church Planting will continue to be a picture worth watching.

## Cell Church Resources

AUTHOR	TITLE	PUBLISHER	DATE
<b>Pamphlets/Booklets/Books by Anglicans</b>			
Bob Hopkins	Mini-Guide to Cell church <i>This is a masterfully concise overview</i>	Adminstry or the Author	1999
David Rhodes	Cell Church or Traditional	Grove Evangelism 36	1996
Paul Simmonds et al	A Future for House Groups	Grove Pastoral 66	1996
Howard Astin	Body and Cell	CPAS	1997
David Prior	The Church in the home	Marshalls	1983
Ian Freestone CA	A New way of being church <i>NB The author decided to move outside Australian Anglicanism to see his work through</i>	Tooley Printing	1995
<b>Non-Anglican sources</b>			
Bill Beckham	The Second Reformation	Touch Publications	1995
Carl George	The coming Church Revolution	Revell	1994
Carl George	Prepare your Church for the Future	Revell	1991
Ralph Neighbour	Where do we go from here?	Touch Publications	1990

These 'how to' and inspirational works spell out how Cell Church is structured, resourced and developed, but discerning readers will see they assume a post-denominational or New Church ecclesiology. Coming from the USA and Far East they also assume a different culture about management and change.

### Investigative material in Masters level Theses/Dissertations

The Sheffield Centre is building a small collection of English theses on the subject. In keeping with an Anglican desire to adapt, not just adopt, they explore to what extent Cell principles can live with Anglican understanding and practice; in particular its ecclesiology, governmental structures and sacramental life.

Visitors are welcome to browse in the Church Army College Library.

### Want more information and background?

I have also written another paper, beyond the scope of this report, looking at these specifically Anglican issues, the challenges from Cell to Church of England ecclesiology and the particular constraints that could apply to future Cell church development. Readers can write or email me for a copy. (£1 per copy inc. p&p)



**George W. Lings, Director  
The Sheffield Centre  
July 1999**

*Cartoons Tim Sharp, Deal*

**For further information on the  
work at Hillhall, please contact:**

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Tel: 01846 629930**

### If you would like to pray for the Hillhall Church plant:

- It would be wonderful if this young Christian community could shine as a beacon of reconciling love amidst the tensions of the current political insecurity.
- Martin and Sharon need wisdom in identifying emerging future leaders and the gifts of space and time to see these latent ministries developed.
- For plans to visit the whole Hillhall estate and for the occasional pre-evangelistic social events at the Meeting House to which many people are invited.
- That the vision, of cells which encapsulate church and which multiply, will remain clear and compelling in the instincts of all the members.
- For the wider Church to know how to benefit from Cell thinking. For courage to welcome new starts. For good sense and timing in transitions.

# *The Sheffield Centre*

*- developing Church Planting & Evangelism*



## **Our purpose**

**T**he **Sheffield Centre** came into being through the vision of the **Church Army**. It was conceived as part of a way forward for Church Army, re-establishing its identity around a strong evangelistic centre.

The new thrust was encapsulated in Church Army's corporate strategy document '**People to People**' published in September 1993. The role of the Sheffield Centre (then known as the Institute of Evangelism and Church Planting) was spelt out in this document.

## **The aim was:**

**'to inspire and mobilise the Church in its task of evangelism'.**

It was to have the following main functions:

- Research into evangelism and church planting.
- Extensive library facilities for study.
- Specialist training in evangelism and church planting for those in full time recognised Christian ministry.

## **The Sheffield Centre can now offer to the wider Church:**

- **Practical hands on experience in Evangelism for young people through Xchange and First Contact - National Co-ordinator: Captain David Booker**
- **A Certificate level university-validated modular course, bringing a balanced theory of Evangelism to today's context, through Learning to Share - National Co-ordinator: Revd Mark Smith**
- **Specialist research, consultancy and publishing on Church Planting, the fruits of which are partly seen through Encounters on the Edge - Director of the Sheffield Centre: Revd George Lings.**

Please contact any of us if you think we could be of assistance.

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*Together we are a team which is ready to support the mission of the Church of England in the New Millennium.*