

The Sunday worship (right) evolved with sufficient difference of style to the parent church, to helpfully confer identity, of being both smaller - so more informal and intimate - and slightly more open to the Charismatic. A full length all age service, followed by children's work in groups was justifiably abandoned after the children complained that it meant they faced double church duty. Building on the Sunday school foundation and the input from quarter-time youth worker Keith



Pentelow, provision is now made for each age group of children in the standard CYPECS age bands with all ages coming back to worship together. A large number of the adult congregation are involved in this worship which increases both participation but also planning. With only a morning service, the spiritual care of teachers has been a difficult issue, resolved in theory by use of small groups midweek. The church has on its books some 40 adults but 65 children, which brings personnel strains.

But...

It sounds good so far, but comments about lack of support from the sending church, coping with its own strains beyond the scope of this investigation, indicated some important needs not being met. Having lay leaders with a participatory style, all of whom were in employment, seems good for heading off complaints, but led to members not wanting to admit pastoral needs for fear of over burdening the leaders. The fortnightly midweek groups, in theory

offered the necessary pastoral support and input in spirituality, but they were not that easy to join and it was the same small group of hard working leaders who were the facilitators.

The leaders were engagingly honest that after three years down the track, there was a concerning sense of plateau. Being in a rented building, the church having no corporate home and being led by spare timers made for a lack of leadership focus. **The leaders were tired out by the required level of work. They felt inadequate to take the church any further forward, vision and energy were absent and exercising leadership was more difficult by being well known fellow members.** Even Jesus struggled with ministry at Nazareth.

Is a lay led plant bound to lead to plateau?

Do plants that have been going longer than Pathway confirm or deny the pattern? Among the longest lived are those in Chester le Street, near Durham. It is one of the most recounted stories of church planting and was a flagship of the movement in the early 1980's.

Chester le Street is a town of c30,000; it is one of the largest parishes in England. Following the growth of population through housing estates and the incorporation of previously separate ex-mining villages into the town, in 1971 Patrick Blair began a policy of taking the church to where the people were, rather than expecting them to come to the single historic Parish church. Area Family Services were begun and this pattern was followed and developed by Ian Bunting from 1978 onwards. At its zenith -1982 to 1984, the parish or "big" church as it was called, had 6 plants or satellite services. Overall



St Mary and St Cuthbert

attendance including a joint evening service had shot up to c850 and lay ministry was in full swing by evangelical theological conviction, not just because an ordained staff of three could not meet such a demand.



But between 1985 and 1994 there was a change. An unpublished report by John Poulton had questioned how Anglican this pattern of ministry was and a plan, whereby the incumbent would become Rector for the whole parish and a Vicar appointed to look after the big church, was rejected. A traditionally Catholic Diocese not afraid to speak of the need to “normalise” this rare church curtailed the development of local and voluntary lay ministry. Stephen Prior (left) who

was instituted in 1994 felt “I had inherited a sinking soufflé”. The staff lacked a united vision, numbers were down by a quarter, people had lost heart, some had gone to local Free Churches, some nowhere and there were arrears on the quota. **The flagship had been torpedoed.**

Hesitations about control of hitherto unknown patterns of lay ministry, the problems of helping a Diocese move with this pace of change, the difficulty of finding a successor to take forward such a radical parish were all real in the late 80’s. However, it would be unfair to attribute the decline to negative diocesan led intervention only. Research showed figures had begun to peak by 1984. Since 1994, the Incumbent has been a mission minded man, a dedicated supporter of lay ministry, but as of 2001, only 3 Congregations serve the Parish. Three Area Services closed between 1996 and 1998.

What else was going on?

I share Stephen Prior’s observation that the late 90’s is a different era to the mid to late 70’s. The Area Family Services were started by those with young families for young families, on newish estates. **That was a highly appropriate, fairly simple, form of church for people, many of whom**

had grown up with a Sunday school background and as de-churched young adults were open to something less formal and more child friendly than the contrast to their earlier experience - BCP matins or Series 2 Communion. In addition, employment was high, stable and with a regular eight hour day. There was time for the leaders to put energy into creating worship that suited those they aimed to reach. By the mid 1990’s, however, those plants were still led by the same people, now in their 50’s and themselves “empty nesters”. Many of their children had aspired to higher things and left the area. At this stage, the leaders had demanding jobs that left little time to prepare, let alone to think radically or strategically about the change in worship in twenty years.

The emergence of non-churched people is an utterly different mission challenge. They represent a different proposition, in that worship is no longer the place to begin with them. **Even among the less challenging de-churched, those from Generation X are not that impressed that the event is informal and friendly; that would be simply assumed in their culture. In addition, they would look for quality skills in presentation, including the visual and sharpness in understanding and approach.** Area Family Services run by local people do not have that kind of resource to reach Generation Xers. They cannot mount frequent, imaginative, multi-media, Seeker sensitive, topical events. The needs had changed but the workers were the same, except that they themselves were increasingly tired, carrying the burdens of the past greatness and commendably unwilling to put down the baton handed to them.

However, I take seriously the slogan that has been put in place to encapsulate the way forward. It speaks I think to the needs of many emerging churches whoever they are led by. “Big enough to celebrate, small enough to care”. It leads me to the second reflection.

“Sorry love, Strawberries are off”

I believe the planting analogy of *the strawberry plant* was popularised in Chester le Street. It was brilliant in that it helped people envisage a creation of a natural offshoot from the mother church, which would earth in neighbouring ground, grow strongly supported by the link to the parent plant and as it

established then that umbilical link would naturally wither. **What few, if any, saw in 1980 was that the need, by the end of the 1990's, was for raspberries and runner beans.** This leaves expansionist strawberries feeling decidedly passé.



I think we have confused reproduction and replication. I am sure the Church is intended by God to have the capacity, like all his other creatures, to multiply. This is partly how all of them spread and survive. However the church is unique among God's creatures in that it is called to give birth to different forms when needed. Sci Fi fans might instinctively think of morphing, citing the character Odo of "Deep Space Nine". He is himself liquid but, as a shapeshifter, can change form according to need. I hope not to be thought irreligious, nor Docetic, when I compare that ability to Philipians 2 and the volitional change, in the Incarnation, of God the eternal Son to the form of a dying crucified servant. Did not that very Jesus say - "as the Father sent me, I send you"? **I suggest morphing the Church will be more and more on the agenda.** That may be a difficult task for part-time lay leaders.

It now seems to me that we have over invested in the congregational model of church. Many of these are too small to celebrate with conviction or to have the resources to present apologetics and pre-evangelism to more discerning fringes. They may also be too large to be intimate and caring for individuals. I think it no accident that the last few years have seen a rise in small church movements like Cell and Base Communities but also interest in Minster Churches, which are large resource centres. I read that this trend to both larger and smaller churches is echoed in the USA.

Chester le Street spawned a number of modest sized congregations. Perhaps it was unrealistic to hope that with slender resources they could ever emulate the life of the mother that gave them birth. They had no sacred space, no history going back to the bones of St Cuthbert, fostering the osmosis style of fringe. **Neither the numbers sent or acquired, nor their leadership provision, would ever enable them to create a similar kind of church**

complexity or breadth of provision that they once knew. 30 people starting to meet in a school or pub with part-time lay leaders may be an adventure in mission, but it carries some dangers of asking the congregational sized model of church to work without the attendant history, resources and leadership to sustain it. Add to that MARC Europe's statistical observation that churches of 30 or less find it very difficult to grow numerically, and once a plant hits such a plateau, it will be difficult to escape.

This further confirms to me that there is a twin task in church planting. People skimming this issue might conclude that church planting does not work. I read that the *planting* did work for many years - a Christian presence was established in the areas - and that the form of church chosen was right at the start, but it was *church* that failed to morph as the mission changed. The form became increasingly inappropriate and unsustainable. **Reproduction - the planting process - was not the problem, replication - the form of church - was the unseen constraint.**



All Saints

It works here

Some may wonder why many churches set off down the perilous path of voluntary lay leaders. Over a year ago, I visited Bracknell to research the story of Eternity (Encounters No.4). I also spent time with the lay leaders of All Saints, another plant in the same St Michael, Warfield parish. This entirely lay led congregation, born in 1994 with a team of 40 adults and 14 children had, by

1997, grown to 115 adults and 111 children. Six years is not a long time to test the long-term viability of voluntary lay ministry, but ongoing health is a **valuable parameter. The ability to reproduce is such a test, and this same plant has now also planted out.** It has given away some of its most precious resource, lay leadership, to begin St Peter's. A quarter of the congregation, 23 adults and 26 children were sent out in March 1999 and already they have seen growth to 40 adults and 40 children. Back at All Saints, the gap created has already, mysteriously, filled up and this church is once more full and considering its options. The evangelistic gene, inherited from the grandparent church has clearly emerged in each succeeding generation. St Peter's is yet more firmly in the Seeker strand of Sunday presentation than All Saints and this is a resource hungry model that will test the capabilities of a lay team.



How, why and who?

I discussed with Gary Shirley, a Church Army officer who is part, not leader, of the St Peter's team, what reasons might account for this encouraging pattern of sustaining growth. My present understanding is there is a happy confluence of theological and sociological waters. The former rises in the ministry convictions of the Incumbent Brian Meardon. It flows out through the way he exercises an oversight through encouragement, giving the freedom to make choices including mistakes, the ability to pick up ensuing problems and all the while instilling confidence, vision and an outward looking thrust. Nor is this a loose "do what you like and blow all structures" view. The leader of All Saints has been by design one of the Parish Church Wardens, so close partnership and teamwork across the churches in the Parish is inbuilt. Because St Michael's - the grandparent church - is itself now two congregations both lay led, **Brian has withdrawn from a presbyteral role there and exercises an episcopal role across all the Warfield churches.** This is very like the

incumbent's role highlighted on p17 of Encounters No.8.

This group of churches also share a conviction that gifts in ministry are to be tested locally before they are put up for ratification by the wider church. This is one with the trend to subsidiarity; local people are good judges of what works among them. So the frequent presence of people provisionally exercising public ministries is normal and healthy, held within the framework that wider training and recognition should eventually follow. As such the **locus of authority is shifting from diocesan to local church.**

The sociological stream is that the area is stiff with managers. These are people who are entirely used to salami slicing their time; they are highly organised, task orientated, know how to delegate and to deliver. The All Saints leadership team of about 1/2 dozen is fortunate in that it includes a retired priest Brian Weaver. Beyond that, a pastoral assistant, Mary Summers, works half time voluntarily. The size of this church means that a key task of the team is oversight and the enabling of the ministry of the rest of the church. The quality of oversight brought by Brian Meardon, the secular skills in leadership, the provision of some specialised people and the commitment to freeing all the saints to be All Saints makes this look sustainable.



Gary Shirley, third on the left

St Peter's is younger and smaller. The key values and oversight are the same but the congregation is younger and interestingly the leadership have reduced meetings by conducting much of their work through email. For example, the Seeker services are planned that way. Email draws responses from leaders and members in a way that notices definitely don't and even posted notes fail to generate. Gary Shirley being full-time stipendiary, but not the leader, can act in the anchor or continuity role but is keen to retain his evangelism and evangelism training speciality across the churches and not be drawn deeply into administration and reactive pastoral care. The team of ten have clearly demarcated specialist roles and at this young formative stage are those who front the various ministries.

Later as the church grows they will want to make the shift into enabling others as a larger slice of their time. Time will tell but this looks promising.



Time is of the essence

As I look at a handful of other lay led plants that seem to thrive, I see leaders with similar skills, also people who can give the time it takes, either by being paid locally or being able to renegotiate the number of working days in their week. Those who love children's stories may recall chapter 12 "Leading Lights", in Arthur Ransome's "Swallow's and Amazons". Two lanterns - rigged one above the other allowed the Swallows to return to Wild Cat Island in their sailing dinghy late at night. Only when the two lights were directly in line, above and below one another, was the boat on course through the narrow harbour entrance. One light alone would be meaningless for that purpose and at night highly dangerous, inviting the vessel onto the rocks. **My conviction is that effective new church leadership takes two leading lights - ability and availability, or gifts and time. One alone will not be sufficient in the longer term, if we are talking about sustaining new churches as we have known them.**

Congregation seems to require managerial skills. What different abilities might be needed in other models of Church?

Sacramental Impasse

A further complication is ordination and its present indissoluble link to sacraments. New forms of church emerging are likely to challenge historical understandings of sacramental provision. As indigenous, enculturated, grassroots-generated churches seem to be the future, so centrally controlled authorisation will look increasingly bureaucratic, no longer theologically pure. Sacraments to serve the church should, I think, be allowed to follow this trend of forming church from below, in response to mission. **Not only is this culturally cute, but furthermore better mission centred theology. In such a context, I can no longer be content to define Church by the presence of authorised sacramental ministry.**

Already Baptism is lay administered in emergencies; admission that pastoral need, not ecclesiastical control, is the primary issue. In many Dioceses, Church Army Officers are allowed to baptise, though forbidden in others. Such inconsistency has further breached the sandcastle walls surrounding the issue. Agapes have been in the public domain since the 70's. Life in Cell churches, Base Communities, Alternative Worship events and the lay-led plant will continue to raise the question of eucharistic provision. Having been shipped in monthly to the Carpenter's Arms in Deal to provide authorised Communion before its leader was ordained, I felt the incongruity of going to see those who I had known as friends and fellow members of St George's, and yet who were now on a fresh journey and I was a reminder from the past. I was a necessary imposition, a well-intentioned Mass Priest. Using "Patterns for Worship" we found something that worked but it was no surprise, and no insult, that after Alan Dodds' ordination I was not invited back in that role. Celebrating Communion springs from the communal life of the Christian community. **Outside provision cannot convey inside integrity.** This is a continued stress, and potential sickness for, the lay led plant. I do not know whether the OLM route may significantly heal it or how the wider Church could accept episcopally authorised lay presidency. The latter pleases some, but a less arduous route to the former might better preserve unity.