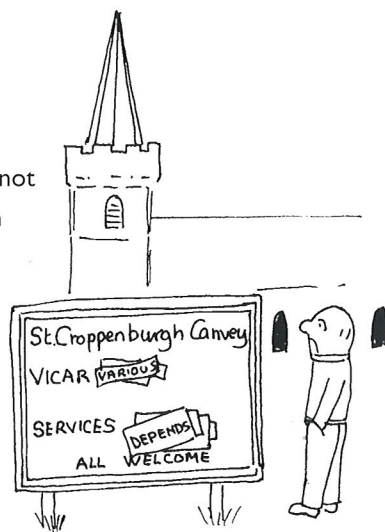


The team ministry on the Island has had a chequered past. Several post holders have not stayed long; one left with stress, one died in post and one did a moonlight flit. Early on, Paul was asked “when are you leaving?”; past reputation of both church and island history has left some islanders expecting newcomers to only stay temporarily. More recently, two attempted church plants from charismatic free churches off the island have failed to thrive, adding to the outsider’s unsubstantiated perception of a dark island beset by spiritual warfare. There is a danger of self fulfilling prophecy operating here.



Paul, Christine and their children would like to stay. He is pursuing ordination training, to be made deacon in 2002. In addition to following a personal sense of vocation, this will establish him yet more as the leader of St Katherine’s who is

around for the long haul. For a graft to be successful, it will take time both to win trust and to turn decline around. Furthermore, it will take time to ensure that the new dynamics of life are well established and will not revert at the departure of the grafted members.

St Katherine’s has known ups and downs since 1975. The congregation had a close association with the school through meeting on the same premises, but the numbers, at times a hundred, were misleading. There was a very open baptism policy and a school admissions policy of clergy recommendation for who attended the school. As a popular school, people came to church for the necessary three months to qualify, but then dropped out. Consequently,

the congregation could be a different set of people every three months. In addition, a hundred would attend a very popular parade service held once a month. It was easy to think from that week that all was well. However, from the early 1990’s numbers at non-parade services declined. Some families found the Anglo-Catholic worship hard going and with so many young families, 50% of the congregation were children. Paul comments:

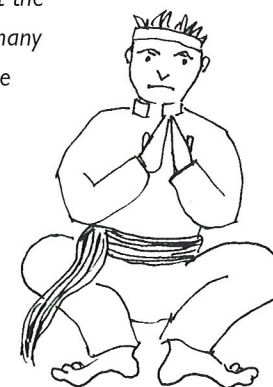
*“Anglo-catholic worship isn’t necessarily anti-children but it did not work in this context; it just didn’t connect. It is quite easy to gather a crowd on Canvey Island but in the end, it meant that the core group was eroded”*

By 1996, a normal Sunday might be 2-7 people and regulars wondered if it was worth having a congregational service. Paul’s predecessor had the pain of seeing this decline as people left to go to other churches both off and on the Island. He concluded it was time for him to move on too.

### The call

*“I was in my previous parish of St Paul’s, Hainault, near Chigwell in Essex. The phone rang and it was Bishop Laurie Green. He said would I consider looking at a job on Canvey Island? This was around the same time as I felt the Lord saying no to a church planting job in Cambridge. We went over to Canvey for the day to meet a few people. When we met the vicar, David Ella, he said “come and kick as many doors down as possible for Jesus, pray and see what happens”. I thought to myself, this sounds promising, lets go.”*

I realise that such language and process would not convince everybody, but I can see its attraction to an evangelist who is considering taking on a declining church and whose family represents the grafting in of potential new life. Not that it was all straightforward.



*crouching evangelist  
hidden grafter*

## The challenges

It emerged that traditional Island opinion did not think an Evangelist should run a church. People were surprised when Paul did not stop and hand over to a priest. People were having to cope with making sense of a church that met in a school and didn't have its own priest. It didn't fit their assumptions. Other lessons were about to come too.

## Plan B

Not unreasonably, Paul thought that with the number of young families, a cool, impressive family service with good children's talks was the way forward. He tried it but was worryingly aware of a sense of performance, entertainment and that the worship was lifeless. Being cool would not build a church; presentational skills alone would only generate shallow events. There was a need to start further back in a number of ways, ones for which he thought he had not been trained, or by choice had not attended to during his training. As a young evangelist interested only in leading people to Christ, he admits he had a deficient, solely functional, view of church. Activism needed changing through deeper roots of spiritual disciplines, in particular prayer and fasting, now in a monthly pattern. Only then could witness and worship be the overflow of spirituality. Over time, St Katherine's have found when they sought numbers they waned but when they sought God, numbers came too. The good idea and the God idea are not coterminous.

Paul began to suspect that God wanted to make the following clear: the reinvigorating of St Katherine's and the evangelisation of fresh people would occur despite the lack of church resources. This would be important to demonstrate that anything that happened was God's doing. Paul was just starting to feel that such an approach was really hard when, at a meeting in London, a disinterested outsider passed him a "message" that he should re-read the story of Gideon. It fitted so aptly. In both cases, there was a depressed group of God's people with numbers depleted and an absurd



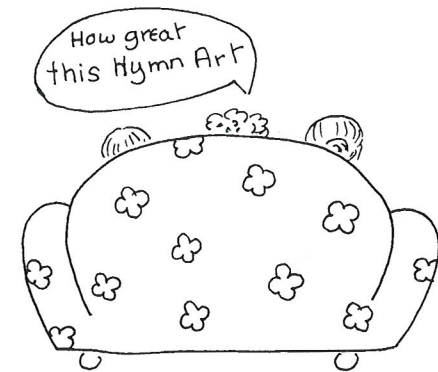
choice of leader. It was salvation against the odds. With the most unlikely and incapable of leaders, only God would be glorified. To Paul, it was confirmation of what he had begun to sense. His family might be the graft, but only God gave the growth.

## Start with the core

In grafting, the turning around of attitudes among the receiving congregation is important. The history of decline can make them nervous, defensive and inward. Keeping going can be the summit of ambition; they can look back to a previous supposed golden age and live in nostalgia. Love and vision are twin gifts that are the human engine for possible change.

Like Gideon, Paul spent more time with the few core members despite some criticism from others about favouritism and time given. They began meeting as a cell group, but two of the seven left the cell because in their words "it was too much about God now" - shades of Gideon again. However, the cell had a significant effect on the worship. In Paul's words:

*"The thing that had failed to strike me in my naivety was that these people had to fall in love with Jesus again. They were drained and demoralised; they had tried everything new. So, in the small group I tried to help people fall in love with Jesus again and it worked very well. This flowed into worship. With no musicians, I had thought that I would just do entertaining things at family services and the people would come. However, all these people who had had their faith rekindled wanted to do was to sing. I thought all we needed to do was sing Matt Redman songs but not so. We're going through a re-discovery of classics "How great thou art" etc."*



The Cell grew, then multiplied and over 2-3 years most members are now part of the seven or eight cell groups around the Island. That growth forced the training of further leaders, itself a

key breaking down of a Clergy dependency culture that had ruled on the island. Cell on Canvey has been demystified and stands for Caring, Equipping, Learning and Laughing. People are equipped to give, pray, use their bibles, minister to the needy and to lead the varying parts of cell meetings. Paul sees that the cell relational network has brought an emphasis on discipleship and reduced the drop-out rate from church. Members bring their friends to cell meetings before inviting them on a Sunday; when they come to public worship there will be a small crowd they already know.

### Converts are key

An Alpha course in the first autumn was another breakthrough. Through a memorable, powerful Holy Spirit weekend, Richard was converted - a welder and crane driver for a local steel fabricating firm. In his words *"I went to sort them out, I thought it was a cult"*. If God could sort Richard out, what else could he do?

Watching Alpha also taught Paul about Church. A process like Alpha that is open yet structured fits well; something that is purposeful and caring suits too. His understanding is now that caring is the basis of building committed membership. Allowing enquiring people to belong enables them to believe. A process like Alpha, which includes a possible crisis also, facilitates those who have faith but who have never taken a conscious decision. Paul was the first leader they had known to preach deliberate turning and decisions for Christ. Those who have never known decision can lack assurance; by public profession they cross a line and decide to go on further with Christ.

I interviewed two core members from that time who are still central in St Katherine's and they appreciated the emphasis on the Holy Spirit which was perceived as new. The receiving and exercise of gifts and the incorporation of the demonstrative in worship were seen as gains. Jesus too became seen as a life changer, rather than a figure of history. *"He's been brought alive"*, one said.

Writers such as Welby and Gamble, both of whom have taken on the role of being the new life grafted into a declining church, stress the key role of seeing either renewed members, fresh converts or both. Not only does this



provide some of the resources to develop the work, but more importantly, it creates a sense of movement under God; there is a sense of hope reborn amidst the still struggling little church. Humanly we cannot make this happen. Conversion and bestowal of the Spirit are in the hand of God. However, we can work at the task of evangelism and hold out the process of seeking God in renewal.

### God save the?

Another crisis event was the monthly parade service that always included the singing of the National Anthem to conclude worship. Paul wanted to explore wider alternatives like a hymn or song of blessing. Over this apparently small point, the deeper issue of the uniformed organisations as a powerful influence over the congregation was beginning to emerge. There were issues of conflicting ownership and the real factor of not losing the opportunity of having hundred people gather in church. The Uniformed Organisations made it clear that they were not willing to change their minds and if the National Anthem was stopped or moved, they would leave.

Paul spent time in prayer. He didn't want to be a dictatorial leader nor be detached from them so got alongside the groups to befriend them. He suggested starting with the National Anthem. He suggested that they have a special service set aside for themselves with him to give the spiritual input. Their counter suggestion was their request of a fireman to come in to talk about his work in place of what they termed the "bible bits". It ended with an ultimatum *"do what we say or we leave"*. Paul could not agree to their requirements, although he stressed they would continue to be welcome. A storm broke. There was a mixed response from the rest of the parish. The PCC demanded to know what had happened, believing that the most important thing was to have the crowds. The four or five members of the core group drew together behind Paul. St Katherine's stuck to their guns and that Sunday service was turned into a family service/kids church, now drawing about as many as before. It is made up of people choosing to be there, expressing a living faith or those on a spiritual search, not those paying an educational entrance fee or painting a varnish of religion over a social function.

There are bound to be points at which the new, small group of grafted in people have difficult issues to face in the receiving culture. Total acquiesce or arrogant riding roughshod over inherited patterns are equally problematic. Openness to change among people in both the stock and the grafted shoot will help find a way, the humble search for discernment and that delicate art known as timing will be required. Such a process can scarcely be taught, only commended. However, in one form or another, it is likely to arise.

### Have evangelism in the DNA of the grafted shoot

Steady growth has been a feature of this story, with Paul using the analogy of building a wall one stone at a time. Anyone who has attempted dry stone walling will have some idea of the physical labour, the modest pace and the skill involved. At the same time the high level of expectation may startle some readers. At the time of my visit Paul made the throw away remark that it was strange that they had now not seen a convert for twelve weeks and were they doing something wrong? If most churches saw just 1 new convert every quarter, I would guess Peter Brierley would have a large smile on his face in 2009. In grafting, the bringing of evangelistic gifts and the ability to release mission potential in the previous congregation by re- envisioning and retraining is a key factor. In some grafts the leader will be the evangelist, but where there is a team those gifts may reside in others. Unless the whole resultant new church group gains the ability to make a mission impact the history of decline will not be reversed, merely halted.

### Life attracts life

Worship that enabled connection with the rest of life has been a high priority from the start. The three year plan written by Paul in October 96 sets out that stall and that it will be not just child friendly but child centred. It is unusual for a



public document to include a line “we will of course welcome breast feeding in worship”. The contextualised service I saw in spring 2001 was notable for its energy. The Church Army officer was on the coffee rota afterwards modelling obedience and service. There was a high level of participation by its children, young people, and adults. They used CD tracks to effectively compensate for lack of musicians and keep the preparation for worship simple. The age range of attendees was notable; only 10% of the congregation were over 45. This does rightly reflect the age profile of the island, but will be part of helping newcomers sense they are joining without crossing cultural barriers. The monthly pattern includes Eucharist twice a month with Communion by Extension, a constraint on Church Army Planters and their congregations alike. Interestingly with what was a fairly child centred event, children are discouraged from coming without a parent, partly influenced by the pressures of the Children’s Act. Where a parent is in work some Sundays, another responsible adult is nominated and the parent then comes when free from work. One child, Lucy, who through schools contact was determined to come, succeeded in bringing her parents and now all come by choice.

Part of the longer story is the way in which a revitalised St Katherine’s has won not only new Christians but also drawn Christians who were worshipping off the island and now sense they are called to be living and witnessing on the Island. I stayed with a delightful family, Daniel and Linda Terradez. They and parts of their extended family are now key members in St Katherine’s and together run a business on the island. Suggestive of yeast of the Kingdom, the conversion of a motor car dealer now trading as CMC (Christian Motorcar Company) has led to working in a small but subversive way. They work with the old fashioned Christian notion of business as service and discourage people from buying cars that they can neither afford to run or insure but still they make a profit.

### How far have they come?

Normal Sunday attendance is now sixty to seventy with a fringe of thirty. From the tiny core left in 1996, this is a story of real recovery. It illustrates

at least two factors highlighted in Robert Warren and Bob Jackson's latest work, publicised by Springboard in the booklet: *There Are Answers*. Small churches seem to be growing more vigorously than large ones and planted churches in their early years show the most rapid growth of all. I need to add that fundamentally St Katherine's did not grow because it was small, but because it was a graft that worked. The right leader and his family, with the right gifts and a willingness to learn and change was joined to, and became part of, an existing group who also were open to change. Together they could meet and surmount particular barriers to growth that emerged. It may be that having become that small the choice between change and death was stark. Alex Welby in his *Replanting* booklet makes much of this choice and in the second quarter traces factors to assist that process. Beneath and beyond all this, enshrined in the call and worked out in the story is the action of God himself. In His creative and saving work is the changing of lives, the calling of resources and the fashioning of a church life that continues to draw others.

### How far is there to go?

I note that overall attendance across the three Anglican churches on Canvey is at most 320 - a tiny dent in a population of 50,000. Nationally Anglican attendance may be 2% of the population; here it is only 0.6%. There is much further to go towards the forming of a witnessing, serving, Christian

population that has noticeable critical mass amidst the society of this Island's life. Once again I remind myself not to despise the day of small things (Zech 4.10) and that



some of Jesus' Kingdom parables and miracles work with small beginnings - the mustard seed, the one talent, the five loaves and two small fishes.

### Surprises

When asked what surprised him in reflecting on the story, Paul was candid in his reply; he reflected that working on Canvey may have changed him more than the other way round. Planters who come to be part of a graft cannot expect to remain the same. The very process of becoming part of something else requires openness, elasticity, flexibility and humility, in addition to calling, convictions, passion and stickability. Being turned down once by ABM was also a jolt that forced him to think more deeply about the nature of ministry and leadership. It is the mixture of the Christian life and work being hard and joyful that is authentic. This is how mature Church is formed. It is not accidental that grafting is also a term suggesting working at something that may not come right quickly. Paul recognises that on Canvey he has now met in practice what is held by the dictum that we overestimate what can be achieved in one year, but curiously underestimate what may occur in five years. God is extremely skilled at working with our poor motives. Some people who have come to St Katherine's for the wrong reasons - like escaping from another church or to criticise it, have nonetheless been blessed, converted, gifted and led further people on in faith. Perhaps we can relearn that the return of the Prodigal is more typical than we suppose and his return was not primarily one of considered wisdom, much less high-minded creditable searching. Need, desperation, cynicism, serendipity can all be transformed by the Father who longs, waits and runs out to meet us. Paul has learnt that people will do what he does, not what he says. It is scary that people do actually follow us and the church does begin to look like the leader. While there are dangers in this, part of the nature of discipleship is being transformed by being with, and following, a transforming person. As an Alpha advisor he now takes a local team with him, rather than go away himself; a corporate modelling both of witness and giving back to the wider church occurs through these contacts. He among his people is caught up on the learning journey to witness, to give, to pray - to be Christ's person.