

## Other Stories

St Katherine's on Canvey is but one story. Many grafts include the bringing of an incoming team in order to assist the kick-start from decline to growth. In most cases I know of, the grafted team comprises of a recognised leader together with members of the church where the leader previously served. A graft involves the challenges of two different groups learning how to grow together; perhaps it's like the skills for making an arranged marriage work. That process is made more hazardous if the team come from a different church to the incoming leader. Comparisons with the complications of a menage a trois suggest themselves!

A well-balanced example of the latter is St Leonard's Norfolk Park in Sheffield where I am now honorary curate. Other dimensions of its story as Church on a high rise estate are written up further in Grove Evangelism Booklet no 44 pp 12-14. This late 60's social housing estate, physically dominated by tower blocks, now decaying and condemned, was served by a building and congregation that both went into decline. When the buckets catching the incoming water outnumbered the departing congregation, crisis loomed, but creative answers appeared, the kind I

long to see repeated elsewhere. A three way partnership between the diocese, St Thomas Crookes, then led by Robert Warren, and the local church



people was forged. A new leader, Bill Craft, was recruited and appointed and a small team from St Thomas's committed themselves to be part of the new phase of St Leonard's. The connection to St Thomas' was strong although it is in another deanery and on the other side of this city clearly divided between richer west and poorer east. Bill Craft was a member of the St Thomas Staff team, financial subsidy was given and people were invited to consider a call to become part of St Leonard's. There was never an intention to model, or to be a take-over. The language chosen was "fostering". The intention from the start was the resurgence of an indigenous congregation from which external support would then be withdrawn. I am intrigued that some of those who came from St Toms did not return there, but over time decided to buy property on or near the estate.

When I joined the congregation in 1997, several factors struck me. I could not immediately tell who was originally from St Toms and who from St Leonard's. Styles and friendship circles



interweaved. There was absolute clarity that the purpose of the church was to be a church on Norfolk Park, for Norfolk Park. Those who lived near, like me, or further away were welcome, but the church did not exist to meet our needs. If we chose to join the cause we were very welcome, but no dilution of the locally delivered purpose was going to come in by stealth. This was never going to become a church for local working class people, run by middle class people coming from outside.

The vision or ministry convictions were and are clear. The focus on worship as encounter with God is the way into healing, restoration and receiving the love of God. Those who receive then have something worth sharing and seek out the open, the interested and the curious. They are drawn into a welcoming place where they in turn are exposed to encounters with God.

Mending broken and deprived lives is messy and about as peaceful as a roller coaster. There is a tangible sense of integrity and honesty about life with God in the ups and downs and lives are being changed.

What was also refreshing and illuminating was an extremely sensible choice of building. I was aware that declining churches normally carried burdens of large, inappropriate, expensive buildings that dwarfed them, with which they have a love-hate relationship. Only in large transplants, with members and money to rescue and restore those buildings is there an effective way to keep them. I also knew that around 70% of church plants met by choice in secular venues to minimise the “stained-glass barrier” to dechurched and non churched people. In addition, they are wary of being entangled in the time and money costs of buying or building their own building; too often this seems the prelude to losing their adventurous pioneer instincts. I was, therefore, hesitant about small churches having their own building.

In this case the 1968 building needed to be demolished before it fell on someone. The diocese expressed its commitment to the area by talking of a



new one. However, to spend a million on a church, amidst a decaying estate would be an obscene ostentatious display of church wealth and insensitivity. Yet to build nothing would be to invite invisibility and not show tangible commitment to the estate. The answer has been admirable; six portakabins bolted side by side, put on decent foundations, topped with a pitched roof and kitted out has cost £100,000. It provides a multipurpose room easily

seating 100, together with a kitchen, three small rooms, toilets and office. The running costs are a couple of thousand a year, largely covered by community rents. Moreover it is re-saleable if and when the much heralded SRB regeneration of the estate occurs and its heart moves elsewhere on the hill. Throughout its history it has been a sign of church involvement with the estate. It has been a culturally suitable home for the congregation; it fits with its environment and the lack of vandalism is surely noteworthy.

Looking back, Bill Craft thinks this graft has taken because the vision was understood and followed. The informality of the surroundings meant relationships could form more easily; they were freer of pretence and mistakes were known to be OK. The presence of God in worship, practical teaching and prayer ministry made a life changing difference. However, in such a cross cultural graft, important lessons include learning that everything takes twice as long as you think. Local people have long term low self esteem, they fear leading, but value family. Many are cruelly addicted in ways beyond drugs or drink yet some are emerging with gifts and leadership. The church has become financially self supporting. It is remarkable that St Leonard's has survived the 2/3rds depopulation of the estate prior to regeneration during which time most members' homes have been either demolished or totally refurbished. Naturally this has adversely affected membership and giving, but less than could be expected.

A number of similar dynamics and challenges can be found in Bob Hopkins' account of their cross cultural experience in Holy Trinity St Helens - Grove Evangelism booklet No 8 pp 12-17.

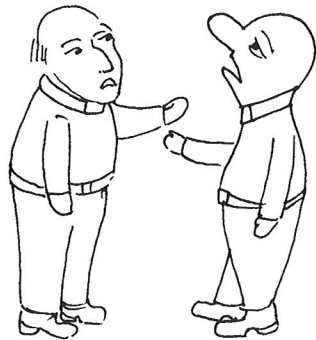
## Wider Questions

From a national perspective, small churches and plants may have a good track record of growth, percentage wise. However, without being obsessed by numbers or the drive to support full time stipendiary leaders, I see the need for growth to the point that more churches become able to cover all their own ministry costs. They should become net contributors to further mission, not disguised receivers of subsidy from the existing church. I wonder how much longer we can limp on without facing these facts. It

would be a searching exercise if the financial truth across all churches in a diocese was made transparent. I accept that some churches working exclusively either with youth or the poor may never reach self financing status and I believe in principled, open, agreed subsidy in these cases.

In the past, the churches that do not reach self sufficiency and self determination we have sometimes referred to by the extraordinary term "mission churches". We have sullied the honourable and apostolic calling of all churches to be mission churches with the slur of being governmentally adolescent or financially deficient. Conversely, it is the true mission church that can offer the resources to rescue the weak.

In Birmingham Diocese, some parishes are being put "under review" because there is an awareness that their future is in doubt; within the diocese paper on that scheme there is recognition that the sending of mission based resources to them is one way forward. I don't know that the language of Grafts is used, but it sounds similar. In Wakefield Diocese, they are experimenting with what are termed "Turnaround Teams", in which a priest, supported by a lay team will give half their time to serve in a selected parish for two years. It is too early to tell how effective this may be and some anonymity may help good things grow in secret. Watch this space in 2004. I am glad that dioceses as well as individual strong parishes are exploring how strength can be given, or lent, to aid weakness and turn decline into growth. There can be no doubt that it is needed.



"My Church is under review"

"thats nothing we're in special measures!"

### What makes a graft take and flourish?

These stories, and subsequent conversations with Bob Hopkins, suggest the following are important:

- finding agreed vision and values between incoming shoot and receiving stock, especially if the team and the new leader are from different sources
- readiness to change a mind set from decline to growth, and realism about its cost, in the receiving church
- readiness to change, including humility and openness in the grafted members
- sending churches truly willing to give away resources of people and money, seeking the reinvigoration of indigenous churches over which they do not have control
- leadership gifts of reconciliation and creative compromise that can work through the dangers of "them and us", of rejection and imperialism
- discerning, facing and crossing barriers that are part of the captivity or decline
- achieving a mission impact through the incoming group and the transformation of the receiving group to evangelise its own culture
- early on seeing lives changed, bringing hope
- finding, having or making a building that is an effective appropriate home and base

When these factors under God come together then a graft is far more than the crude nailing together of two pieces of wood to give more strength. Overcoming the risk of rejection by the stock and death of the shoot, there is the organic synergy of both leading to a fresh creation, demonstrating its own increased health, yield and beauty, and in due time its own ability to send out and reproduce after its kind.

Hard graft? Perhaps, but if healthy graft - great possibilities!

**George W Lings**  
**April 2001**

## Where could you go from here?

### Strategically...

- If you are thinking of introducing a **graft** to a church, use this issue together with No.9 to think through the proposed church style and the leadership resource implications.
- If you are a church where **grafting** has occurred, these stories will help your leadership team compare experiences. What might you want to communicate to your sending church, or your diocese as a result?
- If you have **connections within diocesan groups**, please think who else needs exposure to these kinds of questions and suggestions. How can these issues help us all get closer to good practice?

### Practically...

- For whatever reason if you want **further copies**, those can be ordered from Claire Dalpra by note, phone or email - see *next page*.
- Is the **first issue you've read?** You may want to collect the previous issues listed on the back cover. All individual copies are £3.

## About us...

In the early part of the 1990's **Church Army** reviewed its strategy, the outcome of which was the seminal 'People to People' strategy document first published in 1993. The decision to establish the **Sheffield Centre** was spelt out in this document, with the aim

- **To inspire and mobilise the Church in its task of evangelism.**

## The Sheffield Centre has the following functions:

- **Research into church planting and evangelism**
- **Extensive study and library facilities through the Training College**
- **Specialist training in church planting and evangelism for those in full time Christian ministry**

## The Sheffield Centre - developing Church Planting & Evangelism



## The Sheffield Centre can offer the wider Church

- **Specialist research, consultancy and publishing on Church Planting, the fruits of which are made available through *Encounters on the Edge***

*The Director: Revd George Lings.*

*Research Assistant and PA: Claire Dalpra*

- **Practical hands on experience in Evangelism for young people through its *Xchange*, *First Contact* and *Word on the Web* initiatives**

*National Youth Projects Co-ordinator: Captain David Booker*

*Evangelist with the Sheffield Centre: Alison Booker*

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**We are a team supporting the evolving mission of the Church of England.**