



Stepping Stones

Suppose a middle class church was called to work on a run down council estate, frighteningly called "Little Beirut". How much could they know about how to tackle the task? How much could they know at the start about how it would work out? Was that why they called the Church Plant "Stepping Stones"? Is this

some parable to the wider church today as it faces a cross cultural mission in its own backyard? George Lings went to find out.

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Stepping Stones

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TV seems to have a current passion for gardening programmes. These range from makeover stories and tips for home hobbyists, to delving into the history of gardening, including the bringing of species from overseas to the UK. The *Encounters on the Edge* series could be seen as telling makeover stories for some parishes, or offering some hard won advice on good practice in the establishing of some plants, but most of all it might be viewed as an expanding catalogue of exotic plants not seen before in the landscape of British Christianity.

By contrast, this story is not especially exotic. Tales from several other dioceses could parallel it. It is not characterised by stunning ground-breaking discoveries, nor is the story one of unbroken success or striking breakthrough. Yet these “stepping stones” are not ones laid out by design to look pretty by a man-made pond. This story is more like picking one’s way across a real stream, hopping from stone to stone over a torrent, by what you think may be a route, but one without signposts. I have known the story in outline for some time, partly because this is one of the regular visits made on church planting courses at *Wilson Carlile College of Evangelism*. I have seen the gap it tries to cross, heard its ups and downs, walked the streets where it seeks a lasting presence, observed some of its service to the community and watched the slow developments.

What has struck me over the years is that **the name *Stepping Stones* has been an inspired choice.** It conveys an intentional journey, from one bank of a stream to the other side. Living out the name has meant making a crossing from the known and the safe, over the uncertain, towards the hoped for but



unknown. At times the passage across has been distinctly precarious; the young church has wobbled, poised on a slippery rock. **Its life is more a story of the risky crossing than the safe arrival; it has been lived out one stone at a time. It seems a credible parable of the evolving mission of the Western European Church to contemporary culture. The call is clearer than the end.** The path contains risk and uncertainty. Falling off, getting wet, even being swept away are all real possibilities. Yet each step taken is one nearer to the goal.

A Trip to the Anstons

This large village is ten miles east of the centre of Sheffield, the last parish on the eastern border of the diocese. To the north of the Anstons are ex-pit villages of the South Yorkshire Coal Field. By contrast, Anston has been a village of small farms, a few of which are still working and, in the past, a stone quarry. South and North Anston are geographically strongly divided today by the west-east A57 trunk road running between the M1 and the A1, but just as much by the railway, running on an embankment parallel to the road. There are only two over



bridges through the embankment, one out of the way at the western edge of the village and the B6059 - the main way from North to South Anston. Deeper in the past, the barrier was the Anston Brook, buttressed by the marshy land on its north



bank, across which some say were stepping stones. Housing grew up on and above the river terraces either side, above “The Stones” crags alongside the brook. For some reason South Anston became dominant and St James Church, to serve both sides of the stream, goes back to 1170, built towards the top of the South Anston hill.

In addition, a cultural gap opened up in the 20th century. The eastern end of North Anston is dominantly post war council housing stock whilst South Anston is primarily more expensive private housing. In recognition of these divides, a church hall was erected in the 1950's, located north of the railway on the interconnecting Ryton Road. It was the first response from St James to reconnect with this cut off part of its parish. The extent of state housing grew in the 1970's and was to some degree used by the Council to house problem families. This later small estate has never really gained an official



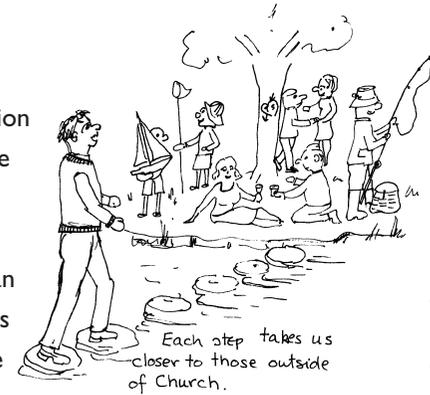
name and parish literature of the time calls it the Rackford Road/ Woodsetts Road area. Unofficially, at the nadir of its vandalised existence, it was known locally as "Little Beirut" - a mark of the degree of decay, violence, lawlessness and lack of hope.

The Rough Route Towards Stepping Stones

Patrick Coghlan became vicar of St James in 1992. He inherited a historic church building, comfortably full on a Sunday morning, and some people wondering if the way forward was two morning services. He brought experience of previous ministry in the diocese and missionary service in Brazil with SAMS. In the following year internal discussions about the need for church planting in North Anston were under way through an outreach committee, involving a group of intercessors who fed back their impressions. Exploration encompassed visits from and to other Church Plants in the diocese and a prayerful beating of the bounds by the St James congregation. Very early on it became clear that the most recent council housing was the most socially needy and from which virtually nobody came to church.

What's in a Name?

1994-1995 were two years of preparation and considerable uncertainty. The name itself was far from straightforward. There seem to be two attributed sources for the idea. The then Diocesan Missioner Dennis Lennon, with previous planting experience in Edinburgh, spoke in February 1994 at a midweek



meeting, about Christians being "stepping stones" for others on their way to Christian commitment. The image was remembered. A village resident Jean McBernie is also credited with a memory from local history that Anston Brook had stepping stones across its marsh. This name was first aired in September 1994. However, it is clear from the wealth of primary documents provided to *The Sheffield Centre* that the name provoked long running controversy. As late as weeks before the launch in December 1995 team members disavowed the name. It was disliked for not being biblical and because it conveyed being on the way to something and so lacking a sense of finality. The launch publicity then compromised and spoke of "A New Church for North Anston", with an inside paragraph linking ideas of stepping stones and the church made of living stones.

Behind this argument, which looks all too typical of church obsession with internal details, runs an important question of the identity of the planted community. Biblical students will be well aware of the significance of names. Name, purpose, style and identity are intertwined. Even in our own day, brand names like Hoover have become verbs. Names have a funny habit of becoming symbolic or prophetic. **Those of us who study planting also know the power of the early patterns in the life of a young church.** Assumptions in the early days tend to shape what will follow in the years ahead, for good and ill. Difficulty in sorting these things out has been part of many a story.

Fancy Combinations?

Beneath this name question are also some quite basic differences in approach between the Anglican and Free Church backgrounds both within St James, and within the resultant planting team. I have observed similar tensions in other planting stories, particularly where they have arisen out of Anglican churches with supposedly post-denominational congregations, or in cases of Anglican/Baptist partnerships where I have acted as occasional consultant. At the risk of gross over-simplifying and stirring the wrath of readers across the whole ecumenical spectrum, I generalise here and characterise the differences of emphases, by taking an area of theology, with the classic Free Church attitude put first and the classic Anglican view second.

- **Holiness** - separated from the world OR set apart for service?
- **Local Church** - gathering of the rescued faithful, OR meeting open to all in an area?
- **Worship** - personal creativity and expressed conviction OR liturgically shaped shared texts?
- **Mission** - Atonement centred; go for proclamation to rescue people from a wicked world, OR Incarnation centred; focus on being sent into the world, in service?
- **Government** - congregational church meeting OR - elected/selected representatives?
- **Truth or Unity** – if in conflict between the two, choose the former to maintain purity OR choose the latter and work at the former?
- **Scripture** - sole authority OR supreme authority?
- **Certainty** - objective revealed truth, OR provisional understanding open to revision and correction?
- **Knowledge** - explicit biblical warrant, but with the right of private judgement on interpretation OR theological thinking from scripture, tested by the wider church, past and present?
- **What's OK** - if in doubt exclude, OR if in doubt include?

I do realise that within the mixed traditions of both kinds of Christians, people will not all choose the whole column of the particular option I have presented, but I offer the list as the kind of caricature that highlights the differences that can occur. Occasionally putting things starkly reveals the deep assumptions made on either side, which then makes it difficult for people to find unity on a particular issue. I hope my list produces more light than heat. Nor do I say, as an Anglican, that the first list is erroneous and the second is inspired. My point is more basic; whatever the respective merits of both positions, it is not easy to combine them.

Note the Start Point

The list deliberately starts with the contrasting views of holiness.

This underlying factor seems to be differing assumptions about the result of the Fall. Is the world essentially to be viewed as bad, or is it good but gone wrong? There is a connection here also to the competing views of the Hebraic view of the interconnectedness of all things, as against the Platonic Greek split of spirit and body, or division of the ideal, from the practical. From these competing views, flow different emphases about the church and the nature of its mission. Readers wanting to connect this area with a wider rethinking about the changes around Church could try a plea for bringing back the Hebraic from James Thwaites in *The Beyond the Congregation* (Paternoster Press 1999).

The Anston story is not different here from others. But to see its documents reveal some of these tensions is very valuable and I want to make those lessons available to the rest of the planting world. I also applaud the honesty and vulnerability being modelled through this disclosure by trusting us with such a full set of literature surrounding their ongoing story. **Wearing rose tinted spectacles about starting new churches will help no one.** In a post-denominational church scene these kinds of tensions may become all the more common.

The Difficulty of Getting it Together

I do not argue that there can be no combination of Anglican with anything else, if only for the simple reason that Anglicanism itself might be described

as a historical accident in search of a clearer identity. At best, the inherent provisionality of its own modest position as Reformed Catholic, and also stating, through its own Declaration of Assent, that Anglicans are only part of the Church Catholic should make it open to others. Mixing traditions can be enriching. Planting with partners can model the kind of unity the church should stand for. However, it will take skill to recognise the different assumptions that are at work.

The task is even harder than stated so far. The first half of the list above are areas of different emphasis over theological *content*, but the second half is about differences in theological *method* to resolve content differences.

When people try to find ways forward, but without realising that the ways they prefer to do that are also different, then tension and miscommunication have a field day. English usage is curious. When someone says “*With respect Vicar...*”, this is code for “*You are obviously an idiot and I am about to tear your view to bits*”. When a Christian begins “*Let me tell you the truth in love...*”, you can be sure life is about to become fairly difficult. So how can we handle these areas of potential conflict better? The dictum...

*“In essentials – unity,
In non-essentials – liberty
And in all things – charity”*

...is easier to say than to do. My guess is that the leaders of prospective plants need to establish early what the vision is, the values that express it **and also the methods by which vision and values are formed.** They need to be explicit on theological method, not just content, for the former is the more difficult to resolve, if there are inherited differences.

Back to Anston

Preparation and Selection 1994-5

Spring 1994 saw the *Outreach Committee* decide to start the process for the plant. There was some indecision about how to select the team - by open letter to all or selected letter to a few. Behind this are two different patterns of vocation. One is operating through belief in the sole sense of individual call. The other is that used for all Anglican authorised ministry – the mixture of

personal call and the view of the wider Church. The second party may either weigh the call or it may initiate it. In retrospect, Patrick Coghlan saw the route of using the sole call method as a mistake not to be repeated, partially evidenced by some people going to *Stepping Stones* and subsequently leaving quite quickly. Be that as it may, the June 1994 meeting saw 19, from several different denominational and cultural backgrounds, attend who sensed there might be a call to the newer estate in North Anston.



Good Practice

All members of the St James congregation were encouraged to pray through a calling to “grow and stay” or “grow and move” with the planted Church, the latter committing themselves for at least three years and to give up existing St James activities. Team

meetings and team building would begin in July 1994. Sustained prayer for the plant was commended. Much of this is in line with evolving best practice to help both the sending and sent church adjust to the new reality. In particular, this way provides an opportunity for the sending church to focus on its own evolving mission and to discover more of its own changing identity, once another church, with some similar characteristics to it, has been born. This is not unlike the way a husband and wife have to learn to make adjustments in their own relationship when the first child is born. **Helping the sending church discern its own future vocation also heads off a later regret or accusation that “the plant took all the best people.”** An open, agreed process of vocation and seeking the future mission tasks of the sending and the sent church is always healthy.

Getting it Together Slowly

Newly ordained Deacon Steve Millwood became Co-ordinator of the Church Plant Core Group in July 1994. He had some relevant experience, having taught in a tough area of Sheffield and seen Base Communities at work in Paraguay. Perhaps from such sources came sympathy for ideas for social justice and engagement on the estates, such as a Credit Union. Wisely

he also read up the planting literature of the time and attended an extended church planting course run by Bob and Mary Hopkins of *Anglican Church Planting Initiatives*. In material presented to the PCC, he used such material to argue well for both accountability to St James as the sending church and flexibility of operation for the plant as the sent church. Other preparations beyond the regular team praying and meeting, included a 1994 carol service in the Hall, minor refurbishments of it, fundraising towards the project, celebrating Steve being priested, contacts with local schools and prayer walking on the estate. Also a midweek Mums and Toddlers group during holiday times started, as did a local Youth Club long before the public launch of the plant in December 1995. This unusually long gestation period suggests some internal uncertainties and this is born out by material supplied.



Oops!

In one area hindsight is unkind. Re-reading the history, the core group came together in Spring 1994, some months before the ordained member of the leadership came, which may be a mistake to learn from. Factors that help make a good team might be fivefold:

- clarity about, and calling to, the mission task
- harmony with the appointed leader
- building a sense of unity and teamwork with others in the team
- ensuring the gift mix across the group is right for the task being attempted, including the presence of evangelistic gifts
- agreed accountability, flexibility and communication with the sending church – the mission partners

Recruiting a team around a known leader, including a known process of how a call will be discerned is one way to improve the quality of team assembled.

Adding the leader later is at best a difficult transition for all parties. The team notes of the core group, circulars from intercessors, and entries from a diary made by a core group member all show a mixture of

responses, containing some pain of adjustment all round. There is a fascinating record of positives: progress towards the goal, valuable humour and vulnerable self-disclosure. Alongside it, can be seen tensions over the future content, the name, the size of decision making group, the different agendas expressed by the intercessors and those of the activists, the timing of when to start worship, let alone whether public meetings should be monthly or weekly.

Selecting the leader first is not foolproof, as Paul, Barnabas and John Mark discovered. In my own experience, in *The Carpenter's Arms* story of Deal in Kent, despite a gifted leader coming first, we too made mistakes. Some of those who volunteered and were accepted, in the end were not able to work with others and eventually left. Others, though gifted, were a strain to work with and eventually came out of leadership, but stayed valuable members. It seems **if you are going to cross stepping stones, a leadership team who can keep their balance together is essential**, if you are to help others who may be even less sure-footed. Recruiting the leader first makes that balance easier to find and provides part of the wider weighing and discerning over a sense of call felt by individuals.

Stepping Stones 1996-97 - The Early Years

More Uphill than Across the Valley

Weekly services were held in the Church Hall. The early months were uphill from day one. The heating system was found to be broken and condemned in January. Significantly disruptive children from the estate came, without their parents, partially attracted by the breakfast, sometimes on offer beforehand.



Many of the weekly meetings of the team, now of 17, were difficult and the apparent unity of the start was shown to be shallow and short lived. By April only 8 of the 17 remained, but 4 further members of St James had come and stayed. The pain, cost,

disappointment and discouragement all round can easily be appreciated. Already tired by hard work and conflict, the remaining group felt stretched and under resourced for the enormity of the task. At least the *Stepping Stones* name had now stuck, even if only half the band who set out, had made the crossing from the first stone to the next.

Dear Diary . . .

Yet somehow after that baptism of fire, despite mistakes, problems and disagreements, a greater sense of unity and togetherness emerged amidst the hard graft of running all age worship and coping with all too human relationships. One member's diary gives the week by week flavour -

April 21 *"The children were awful and ran riot."*

June 23 *"The service went very well except that some of the collection was stolen."*

July 7 *"Lovely time together with a feeling of mutual love and caring. Sometimes we feel we are on a roller coaster."*



The only other church planting material I know that tells it like it was, warts and all, is Diana Archer's beautifully written story *Who'd Plant a Church?* (Christina Press 1998). She was the vicar's wife involved in a pioneer plant done from scratch on a new housing estate. Leaders of teams could do worse than track it down and make it required reading for over idealistic team members.

February 1997 saw two memorable services; one a brilliant, if risky, dramatised portrayal of the clash between Goliath and David and their two armies. By the close of the service, further action threatened from the two "armies" was then skilfully deflected by adults acting as peace negotiators! Yet the very next week palpable anger and violence permeated the service with aggressive and disruptive children being asked to leave and others leaving in protest. **The stress level was massive.** Steve Millwood wrote about this estate,

"The area shows signs of being almost out of control, particularly with violent and difficult children, many of whom come to Stepping Stones. Why they come, God only knows, but perhaps its because they do receive some attention and some love."

For two years the roller coaster patterns continued and *Stepping Stones* average attendance was some 27 adults and 16 children. The first faltering steps on the route had been taken. They had left St James. They had moved onto North Anston. They were wobbling uncertainly, hoping to survive. As a member put it,

"Three years ago we set out on a journey which we knew would take us through difficult and searching times. We were not disappointed.... We've been reduced to tears both of joy and of despair, our patience has been tested to the limits but we've also had some really good times."

The minutes of the *Stepping Stones* team show the dominance of public worship in the agenda of the new church, trying to cope with the latest difficulty experienced or to improve what was on offer. The direct outward dimension in mission was small by comparison with all this. Perhaps in a young church, when it feels like survival, Maslov is right that this is all human beings can think about. They were getting by, without being able to find discipline patterns to cope with the children, glad to receive some musical help from the parish church, but desperately wishing more people would come down and become part of *Stepping Stones*. Other attempts to form partnerships with either the Methodists or Catholics, and so increase resources, also came to nothing. However during this period the idea of moving out of the hall and into the estate using the community centre was aired. At that point the local Council refused use saying it was only for the people living in the sheltered housing surrounding it. But was the next stepping stone beginning to appear?

Steve, Janet and his family were getting to be known, loved and trusted on the estate, although it was heading downhill in social and physical decay. However, his time as a curate was coming to an end and leadership succession was becoming the next demanding issue to face for the little team.

Jan 1998- July 1999 - The Lowest Point

Steve Millwood moved on to be vicar of Kimberworth Park in Rotherham in January 1998 and the pressure of leading services had to be borne by the small team. For a few months things went well, but **pressures told on inexperienced leaders holding down full time jobs**. A time consuming dominant needy family, internal disagreements, falling membership, children stopping coming, meetings to solve problems squeezing out prayer in favour of planning, severe health and family problems among team members all led to the reduction of services from October 1998 to twice a month in the Church Hall, which became much too big for the dwindling congregation.

There grew a sense of being a stuck church; unable to move things forward for lack of leadership. Or was it a sick church, conducting no effective outreach, just hanging on with minimal congregation of numbers down to 15 and minimal service provision? Either way it felt to some like an abandoned church. They had been sent out, but then had become out of mind. They realised that with two churches, the vicar at St James could not be expected to provide. Was it the beginning of the end?

The Next Stepping Stone Appears

Yet developments also occurred. An early Saturday evening youth drop-in at the Church Hall began to grow. It extended the work from an Adults Friday afternoon version, linked to the Credit Union and provision of second hand clothing.

In addition, the Community Centre, on the most needy estate, surprisingly became available and one of the services per month was transferred to the new venue from October. This seemed to work better as a venue and from the end of Feb 1999 all services were held there, as well as the core group's meetings for Bible study and



prayer. In this dark tunnel period, it turned out that the next stepping stone was indeed found and begun to be crossed, even drawing the odd newcomer from the area.

Hanging In

The small group tenaciously hung on and deserve commendation for that act of dogged perseverance, continuing to pray and keep things ticking over. In this period Bob and Mary Hopkins of *Anglican Church Planting Initiatives* visited, from Sheffield, bringing welcome advice and encouragement. At times, simply standing on the stepping stone, not even wondering where the heck to jump to next, is all we can do. But that is better than giving up, turning back or falling in.

Taking the Next Step, Not Pulling Back

The leadership at St James also takes credit. It would have been quite possible to argue that a worthy experiment had been tried and was now failing to thrive. At this point some could have thought it was the time to call "enough" and to haul the remnant team back. However St James leadership had not given up on *Stepping Stones* and its mission to that part of the parish. I am glad that was what happened. The alternative to pull out was never contemplated.

Think Long-Term - Provide Leaders Long-Term

I do know however, from comparison to stories elsewhere, **that three years in the life of a curate and a small team of 12, however persevering, is not likely to see a breakthrough on a tough English council estate**, especially when the team is made up of those from outside the estate and then most of the energy goes into Sunday services and coping with unruly children's ministry in a church hall.

This kind of urban mission is never going to be a quick fix. Making it into a church plant doesn't change that equation much. There are some advantages of planting over just doing evangelism, but they are of sharpening focus, not of magic answers. Planting can locate the resources to a particular context or place, in a longer-term way than other shorter-term

projects tend to. It does make such estates the primary goal of the team, instead of having to split their energies between it and continuing proper involvement with the parish church. However this investment of people and time, for such a period as three years is likely only to begin to break up the ground and begin some sowing of fragile seeds, in a community that will certainly be largely ignorant of vibrant Christianity and very probably will be hostile to charitable do-gooders from outside.

Unless an incoming planting community, with continuity of leadership, is there for the long haul, it may be almost better not to start. Short-term work will only raise temporary expectations, but disappoint long-term transformation. Pulling out at the down time, which will follow short-term investment, carries damaging implications. It means another failure of the Church's mission to the urban poor, and another unwelcome experiment on the local community. **This in turn further hardens the ground for any subsequent seed sowers.**



In this case, hanging on and thinking longer term led to conversations between parish and the Church Army, and to the appointment of Paul and Sheelagh Easby (left). They were both completing shorter than normal two-year courses at *Wilson Carlile College of Evangelism*

in Sheffield, having worked for *Youth For Christ* for 10 years. They met the leaders as early as January 1999 and the Vicar and PCC invited them to come. It was as though the *Church Army* cavalry had turned up! They arrived in July to what they described as “*a magnificent warmth and great friendliness*” from both *St James* and *Stepping Stones* folk, and were quick to applaud the core group who offered that welcome and for the loyalty, devotion and commitment enabling this small group to hang on, in the dark, low times.

Estate Regeneration: 1999 Onwards



The area surrounding the community centre, known now as the *Woodland Drive Estate* had reached its lowest ebb and was up for major refurbishment. One obvious indicator in 1999 was that 40% of properties were boarded up. I recall visiting a year or two into the five-year program and even then the estate felt like a backwater with only one shop, no post box, and no bus route. Plenty of alleyways and rat runs made crime of various levels easier and I was glad, as a stranger, to be walking round in a group with Paul or Sheelagh. By then they were known and



respected figures. The church's mission audit told the tale of low incomes, high unemployment, high levels of disability and lack of respect both ways between old and young. Issues encompassed personal safety, drugs, crime, no recreation areas, concern for ongoing care after refurbishment, lack of provision for children and young people and attendant lack of community spirit.

Going back in 2003, the streets seemed wider than I remembered and I learnt that whole rows of houses had been demolished to make a greater feeling of space, to give the remaining houses larger fenced gardens of “defendable space” rather than the previous arrangement of land owned by no one, which in turn was respected and cared for by no one. Many of the known troublemakers had been moved on - though spare a prayer for the places that

inherited them. Houses had been refaced, roofs insulated, windows UVPC double-glazed, and buildings externally decorated. It is now physically quite pleasant, though still lacking in social amenities. The atmosphere has lightened and as the story will show the Christians take some credit for it. As we go to press, a small playground for under 5's has just been completed and the 'muck patch' local field is currently being improved.

Clearly in a longer process from the arrival of the Easbys, perhaps culminating in the taking of a mission audit in 2001, the *Stepping Stones* church community grasped and owned the need through a *Mission Action Plan*, to look far wider than attracting people to a Sunday service. Once more some *Stepping Stones* were appearing before them, taking them into the unfolding journey into the unknown.

Mission Regeneration: 1999 Onward

Paul and Sheelagh began by continuing the twice a month services, building relationships with, and the confidence of, the remainder of the core team, by adopting *cell* principles for the content of the midweek meeting, to encourage an instinct to reach out once more. The two of them regularly walked the estate, praying as they went, chatting and visiting contacts.

Within three months they established some development priorities. The first was for a **Thursday after school club** in the community centre which began in November 1999. Clearly it was an estate with many young families and this was one wider point of contact. They set a limit of how many they could take, being 20, and quickly got a dozen, growing to a full complement within the year. Based on the *Kids Klub* model, the work included a weekly home visit – later reduced in frequency because of other growing commitments - but opening up contacts with the whole family.

The second was a hoped for midweek day time meeting for older people, perhaps on a *Songs of Praise* model – but it was only a seed sown and took far longer to become reality, through slow growing contacts among the elderly on the estate.

The third goal was **restoring weekly worship** and this was achieved at Advent 1999. Already numbers had begun to pick up once more to around

25 and occasionally 30.

Any congregational community existing on less than weekly patterns knows it is under threat.

Small house based groups can stand longer time intervals in the cases where personal

commitment, trusting disclosure and common goals exist. However congregational life seem to need weekly patterns. This may be especially true in communities with an erratic social life. To miss one meeting where



the frequency is less than weekly makes an enormous gap with no contact and it becomes far too easy to lapse from attendance and even not be missed. This has been a particular criticism of monthly family services for some decades.

Continuity of weekly patterns is also significant where the leaders want to develop congregational life. With weekly meeting, new patterns are learnt quicker,



continuity and progression of teaching becomes easier, relationships can deepen faster and corporate memory is more responsive and alive. Within months, by the advent of the year 2000, the number attending with differing degrees of regularity, across a four-week cycle, was up to 50.

The Importance of Evangelists

These three plans, two of them clearly outward facing, quietly testify to the priority that is natural to evangelists. In addition, they started going more often into the local school. Furthermore a *Church Army* mission team came in Spring 2000 and generated more contacts, individually and through low-key events. In passing, I sometimes wonder whether **we should drop the general term “mission” for a short term burst and dare to be more specific about the stage in evangelism that is really in view**, in any one period. This team came and principally sowed seeds, by making new

initial contacts; it did not come to reap, where others had already sown and where a harvest was already prepared. Paul and Sheelagh were also steadily sowing seeds through personal links, by connections to community groups and offering training and encouragement to existing members through methods like the *How to be a Contagious Christian Course*.

My own understanding is that all who have specific gifts, in the Church of God, will not only exercise them, but seek to see these dimensions of ministry reproduced in others. To the evangelist it is natural to share faith - in a variety of ways - and equally natural to work to see others acquire the same confidence and concern to share discoveries about Jesus. Similarly teachers tend to breed further teachers, while worship leaders grow other musicians around them. It is both a natural outworking of a particular passion, but also the outcropping of a deeper theological instinct for the healthy church to reproduce - whether that be manifest in further members, gifts, ministries or even further fresh expressions of church. **It is a Christian dynamic to give away what is most valuable to us. So evangelists will breed further evangelists.**

Evangelists also instinctively think outside church buildings. A more traditional example would be Easter including more public events - such as a walk through the estate carrying a cross, followed by the seasonal food of hot cross buns and Easter eggs. This instinct to be out beyond the confines of services and church venues is I think what led to the variety of next stepping stones that appeared before them.

Stepping Stones to the Community

As early on as May 2000, Paul and Sheelagh noted in their bimonthly report to the PCC:

“Very few parents, other than being grateful that we are looking after their children, are willing to go any further even though we visit them at home most weeks. And ... there is some hostility towards some church members who live (and love!) on the estate and to us as a church, because of the changes Christ is bringing through Stepping Stones.”



The depth of resistance to Christianity in general and church in particular mean that pursuing strategies in care and mission which still add up to “come to us” invitations will go unheeded, or at least be declined. Such parents may even be glad their children are

taking an active part in some “church” event - but will not themselves attend, even to watch. The depth of this cultural and spiritual resistance has to be lived to be believed, but is I think, not unusual on such estates, not least in low church attendance areas like South Yorkshire.

Evangelists should be less fazed by this than some others in the wider church and can much more readily continue in the mode of “go” to those in the culture to whom they are sent. **In similar fashion missionary figures, throughout history, have accepted that taking the risk to enter the culture of others and see what will then happen is the way forward.** Once more stepping stones - but not certainty of crossing them successfully, or all that lies upon the other bank - is what comes into view.

By Summer 2000, ideas for groups to foster parenting skills, a further midweek *Kids Klub* for Secondary school kids called *Girl Thing* (which grew to 14 in number), a Summer Holiday Club called *Chatterbox*, and again, exploring something for older people were on the



agenda. The first three all came into being, drawing small numbers, but proved sustainable over the years ahead; **the beauty of stepping stones is making little by little progress, without falling in!**

Stepping Stones to Church . . . or of Church?

All of these are non-Sunday events; all apparently are not church but all contain aspects of being church, yet in disguise. Being part of a community of people slowly being transformed by their relationship with Christ, and enjoying being together is significant. **Jesus' earthly pattern with his disciples and with the unlikely - even unacceptable - friends he made, seems to owe as much to time spent hanging out and eating together, and serving others, as in overtly religious activities like attending Synagogue.** In the latter seems one of the most enduring sources of conflict, rather than blessing, in the Gospel stories. Once more I discover, that **go to the edges of what may be necessary for progress in tough mission contexts and it makes you question what doing church is really about.** We may find aspects of being and doing church in the most unlikely places, some of which may not have much at all to do with congregational attendance in special buildings on a Sunday.



Stones To Make a Cross

I realise that writing up this slow progression across the stepping stones could sound like measured and relaxed progress. Paul and Sheelagh are at pains to stress that the levels of prayer backing they sought were high, the need for more helpers was acute, the space in the

Community Centre seemed inadequate, the invention of an eighth day in the week would not have gone amiss and the ups and downs of an estate undergoing regeneration which at times could appear to go in to reverse. These needs were echoed at an away day in 2001, in which they continued also to value and praise the contribution of the core team, the need for continued perseverance, the sense of spiritual battle that enveloped them all and gratitude for answers to prayer. The progress and cost was symbolised in a series of stones laid down to form the shape of a cross. These stepping stones are not a pleasant Sunday nature ramble - it will involve the way of the cross.

Part of the cost of ministry is staying and investing in local people. The Easby's quickly realised - in the 2nd year - that extension of their three year contract was important if the work was to become established and become sustainable. It is to the credit of all involved, including the diocese who bankroll the salaries, that this offer to extend the contract for two further years was agreed and enabled by *Stepping Stones*, St James and Sheffield diocese. Only longer term investment by persevering dedicated groups will see the continuity and development of local ministry that can reasonably expect to see some ground broken up, some relationships lovingly tilled and some seeds of the good news in Jesus sown into human lives - with the consequence of some responding to him and joining a local expression of the Jesus community.

Another Stepping Stone - to Maturity

The self same away day recognised the need to move away from using the term 'core group', acknowledged the many responsibilities now being shared by a slightly larger group of people, and looked at *Stepping Stones* having its own District Church Council. Some might read this as invitation to administrative atrophy and blunting mission focus. **I see in it the healthy desire of all young churches to grow out of dependence on their sending church and rightly to take responsibility to order their own affairs.** In the realm of human development, we move out of the early years of our dependence on our parents into the next stage of independence, which if resisted may be forcibly asserted by teenagers. Only by successful passage of independence can we enter the further and higher human stage of interdependence. An intriguing sideways read on this is the self-management guru book by Stephen Covey *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*, especially pp 48-52, where the three stages are presented as growth into relational maturity.

I continue to be impressed that St James Church swiftly saw the value of this development, encouraged *Stepping Stones* to have an acting council from October 2001, as soon as was practical, while the legal changes went through in the ensuing year of 2002, with the first official DCC meeting in June. Not least I applaud the self-denying ordinance by which St James went "down" to

having a DCC themselves, with a joint PCC only having very occasional meetings. They also continue to administer the finance for both churches, provide significant prayer and encouragement to the newer church, and supply considerable musical input to the Sunday service. There are **many sending churches that need to follow the practical and courageous decision to give away to a small congregation, only in its fifth year, working in an uphill mission context, that right of self-government.**

This pattern is beloved of missionary theoreticians but often resisted in practice. Another stepping stone was being crossed - perhaps a vicar with missionary training and experience helped.

The challenge for the new leadership team will be to ensure that the young church keeps facing its ongoing mission task and that of building Christian community. It would be sad if the greater ability to order their affairs marked any descent into the plethora of administration that marks out many PCCs.

Incremental Steps Continue

Four weeks of prayer visiting, following training of the membership, touched the estate in September 2001. A letter “warns” the locals that church members are coming and they will ask whether the house hold members want anything prayed for. As the letter said – “we won’t stay longer than it takes you to say ‘thank you’ or ‘get lost’”. It was intriguing that only 3% were rude, though 17% said “no thanks”. A quarter of people did have a topic they wanted prayer for and a further third initially said no, but good conversations happened on the doorstep. A longer write up of a similar approach can be found in *Beyond the Fringe* edited by Nick Pollard - as told by the then vicar Paul Harris - who now works for *Evangelical Alliance*.

The days of nearly cold calling are not yet over, as the continued growth experienced by the Mormons and Jehovah’s Witnesses may indicate. Continued visiting on a smaller scale continues.

The last year has seen the Community Centre renovated. Inevitably disruptive at the time, it has brought several particularly helpful changes. The downstairs space for worship has enlarged, by removal of a partition wall.

This has helped alleviate an increased overcrowding problem on Sundays. The kitchen is now well equipped and the upstairs is now more suitable for children’s work on a Sunday. Sunday worship is informal, participative, and at times noisy; the spread of ages is wide.

Helpers continue to be found slowly, but there is an astonishing yet encouraging story of a couple coming from the USA. Julia had left North Anston for college vowing never to return. She and her American husband Tim lived in mountainous snow-capped Oregon. Sensing a call to England, they surfed the web, came up with *Stepping Stones*, sold up and came over. A delightful touch was their natural concern for their children’s education, as one has special needs. Imagine their pleasure to discover that his teacher was also American. My guess is that such stories are the encouragement brought by signs of the Kingdom, which we are given to help us stay faithful - even if sometimes much of the surrounding context remains tough.

The vision of something for the elderly has become the Tuesday afternoon cell meeting for the elderly - called *Kobblestones* - drawing over 15 women. Most of them come on a Sunday, but for others this is their only experience of being church - encountering the scriptures, prayer and care.



In all these variety of ways, *Stepping Stones* is now recognised as the Church in the community of Woodlands Drive. For some it has become their community in which they participate on a Sunday. For others it is the midweek events, some annual, some weekly, containing a mix of fun, social events, worship, prayer or fellowship, that are the stepping stones towards being a dispersed people of God throughout this estate.

Where is the Future?

Some stepping stones are still unclear.

Paul and Sheelagh Easby are only contracted to stay until summer 2004. What are God's stepping stones for them - here or elsewhere? If they move on, what stepping stones will the two DCCs have to cross about future leadership? What part might another outside resource



have to play and could Ordained Local Ministry developments be part of the way on from here? What will the embryonic and dispersed expressions of church on the estate like *Girl Thing*, *Kids Klub*, and *Kobblestones* become - what are they stepping stones to? What future factors, that none of us know, will emerge as the next steps on the journey?

I see a story of plenty of modest steps. It is a yarn of uncertainty and exploration, at times of conflict, perplexity and discouragement, at other moments of surprise, joy and vindication of perseverance. It is as though the stepping stones have kept appearing out of the mist, just enough ahead of the feet of the journeying group. I tell the tale because I suspect **that in finding fresh expressions of church among post-Christian people, this may be more typical than we would care to admit.**

George W Lings

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Cartoons by Tim Sharp

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