



New Housing, New Partnerships?

Does ecumenical church planting mean death by bureaucracy? Is it being overtaken by post-denominationalism anyway? How are mission-minded church plants being grown on the new housing developments? Do multiple denominational churches show us a way forward?

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ChurchArmy

The Sheffield Centre

50 Cavendish Street, Sheffield S3 7RZ

Tel: 0114 272 7451 Fax: 0114 279 5863

Email: g.lings@sheffieldcentre.org.uk

www.encountersontheedge.org.uk



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Encounters on the Edge

A Series of Quarterly Investigations from **The Sheffield Centre**

No.23



New Housing, New Partnerships?

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Better together?

Over the last 30 years, there has been lively debate in British politics between the so-called Euro-sceptics and pro-Europeans; a referendum in the UK over the new EU constitution and the related issue of the euro is at least likely. For 20 years, I have been observing and commentating on the evolving church planting scene in this country. One of the enduring questions through that period has been whether this church mission task is best done ecumenically, or by each denomination acting alone. For good or ill, I have acquired a reputation of being what could be termed a LEP-sceptic.

A case in point would be the Grove booklet that I wrote last year along with Stuart Murray (Evangelism 61) in which we reviewed church planting in the 1990s after the failure of the heralded DAWN saturation planting strategy. In this booklet we noted that *'planting ecumenically (rather than cooperatively) has drawbacks'*. One response came from David Price, minister of a young, flourishing church with four denominational partners who noted that *'this is perplexing given that there are several recent and significant plants such as Elvetham Heath and Cambourne which are both mission-oriented and ecumenical in approach'*.

In the eyes of some, *Mission-shaped Church*, perhaps because I had the privilege of writing its first draft, has also been seen to have a similar stance on the issue. So Keith Elliott, ecumenical officer for part of Exeter Diocese and Minister of a multi-denominational church called Roundswell (on the outskirts of Barnstaple) wrote as part of a letter commenting on their strengths and weaknesses, *'I felt that Mission-shaped Church was at best ambiguous about multi-denominational church plants...'*

The choice of *Encounters on the Edge* issues has often been via recommendation of good practice by somebody else. Here then was not only feedback to weigh, but also an offer to visit and see the positive side of such stories and re-examine this question.

New communities: an important opportunity

Another draw was that all the cases cited were church plants in large areas of new housing. *The Barker Review* from the Deputy Prime Minister's office has made a commitment to a significant building programme (200,000-250,000 new houses per year for the foreseeable future), including creation of new areas of housing. These areas are likely to be anywhere between Lincolnshire and Oxfordshire and in the Thames Gateway. They are needed as response to a variety of factors: demand over supply, demolition of past sub-standard housing, the drift to the south and the rise in number of smaller households. *Mission-shaped Church* gave figures for some of these dynamics on pages 1 and 3.

It is also well known that **at points of change or disturbance in their lives, people are more open to new possibilities.** In moving to a new area, they are likely to be looking for new friendships for themselves and

their children.

They are more open to new ideas and reassessing values.

Newcomers to established housing areas have long been fruitful points of contact for existing

churches. Yet the 20th century creation of the new towns and the responses of the churches too often yield stories of church entering the



process too late, battling with developers more interested in profit than the creation of sustainable community, struggling to grow churches amidst people who turn out to be highly mobile, living disconnected privatised lives, who move on and out with disturbing frequency.

Local Ecumenical Partnerships formed in this tough context could also suffer from insufficient coherence about the meaning of mission, from ponderous ecclesiastical procedures, across the partnerships formed.



How could this new clutch of cases do better, working as they do with a more favourable national climate? The contribution of spirituality to life is more readily received and even written into aspects of school life. The government acknowledges that local churches are skilled partners in the creation of sustainable community. The fostering of quality community by sympathetic architectural design now repays developers in attracting higher housing prices for creating communities that are safe and fulfilling to live in. Accordingly, developers statutorily make educational and community provision; they seem more ready sometimes even to make spiritual provision by land set aside for church buildings. All these commitments will be entered in *Section 106* agreements to build whole new developments, and occur according to the number of houses provided. **These new so-called villages and towns are arguably the most physically obvious new mission field in England**, in terms of the number of people coming. Spiritually they may be among the most open, for at least the first few years of their existence. There could be a strong case for putting some of our best pioneers into this kind of development.

But are we now post-ecumenical?

Compared to the energy for ecumenism 20 years ago, today a sense of weariness may be detected, despite current initiatives over the covenant between the Church of England and Methodism. The pioneers of the post-war movement are retiring. Those who have grown up in denominational posts have become used to that identity. Voluntary self-annihilation takes

singular courage and conviction. Organic union appears further away than 25 years ago, following abortive earlier schemes. How are we to assess this?

On the one hand, I am glad that nearly a century of ecumenism, since the Edinburgh missionary conference of 1910, has seen extraordinary positive change, compared to the previous four centuries of ecclesiastical strife. The churches have moved out of physical or legal **conflict**. They have gone beyond naked **competition** over territory abroad, numbers or right doctrine. Most groups have entered into **conversations** that have brought degrees of **consensus**, or at least grace to differ and continue talking. In many cases denominations have **co-operated** in local partnerships and there have been a few official **corporate unions** - such as the Church of South India 1947 or the United Reformed Church in 1972. In the sense of closing the chasm that existed, it could be argued that the majority of the work has been done. It is now normal for most Christians to think that, in other denominations, there are other Christian people of different views but equal integrity, passion or conviction. **Ecumenism brings some welcome humility and provisionality to all our protestations and positions.** Those who take all these gains for granted need a sense of history to realise where we have come from. Like Isaac Newton, credited with singular scientific discoveries, we should note with gratitude and humility that we too 'stand on the shoulders of giants'.

Yet single corporate identity, united governance and, in those senses, full communion, seem beyond us. Energy for institutional answers to create a federalist pan-denominational church are unattractive, even irrelevant, to people influenced by post-modernity. Some world-weary secular journalists dismiss further covenant-making as church leaders showing panic or desperation over shrinking denominations. It is now a minority of Christians who will make impassioned pleas that this assessment is negative and cynical. As diversity grows in general acceptance, **denominational identity held in mutually-friendly relationships, seems more like pleasing particularity than obnoxious partisanship.**

In addition, many observers sense that younger generations, from *boomers* downwards, are moving from thinking ecumenically to thinking post-denominationally. This is more than boredom with institutional games played by those in church government. Surrounded by secularism, materialism,

¹ This quote has been attributed to Sir Isaac Newton since it appeared in a letter he wrote to fellow English scientist Robert Hooke dated 5 February in either 1675 or 1676.

competing spiritual movements and other world religions, to them just being authentic Christians seems quite sufficient. Add to this increased mobility and real choice about where to affiliate, and for many the search for what to join becomes a hunt for a church exhibiting spiritual reality, family provision and authentic community. Life, not labels, attracts.

It is a material question of whether younger Christians care much about the demise of the institutional church at all. I recall a recent conversation with Claire Dalpra, my *generation X* team colleague. In comparing our emotions and reactions at the decline of the western church, my sense was of regret, sadness and even embarrassment. It was as though I was a spectator when the boy finally appeared who shouted, 'The emperor has no clothes on.' None of these feelings resonated with her. Bear in mind she had even grown up in a vicarage and been involved in several local churches over the years. The instinctive retort was, 'But I never saw the emperor with his clothes on.'

The weaknesses of such indifference to church as institution centres around a lack of a working sense of catholicity; this would include the loss of accountability beyond a local expression of church, much greater risk of reinventing the wheel, the lack of those bringing the wisdom of history or a good word of caution, and the mutual detriment of disconnection between emerging and inherited church. Positively, there may be expression of the search for generic Christian values beyond forms of denominational thought, an upholding of values of mission above church order and a yearning for co-operation with a disturbance of the Spirit beyond bounds of convention.

How then are these new churches in new communities handling this mission opportunity amidst a shifting climate about denominations and Christian identity?

Elvetham Heath

Where?

Travel 30 miles south west out of central London and Elvetham Heath (EH) is a strongly-bounded rectangle of ground between the M3 to the north and the Waterloo to Basingstoke railway line to the south, with a golf course to the east and a busy road to the west. It was always its own place, being some 300 acres of managed forest, planted on a wet area of heath, belonging to the Calthorpe Family Estate.

Why and when?

Hart District council, under government edict, had to provide more housing but not add to existing villages. Putting large new housing into what are then defensible boundaries, against further creeping housing growth, helps to reduce NIMBY tendencies in existing home-owners and to gain the necessary planning consents. From the early 1990s this desire was known and the consent given in 1997, with the land and consent sold to the developer *Beazer Group* in 1998. Designs were agreed in 1999 and the first houses on EH completed and occupied in May 2000. The population is planned to be 5,500 by 2008 and is already over halfway there in 2004.

During the same period, from 1993, *Churches Together in Fleet* began praying and planning for their early participation in the development on EH. The Anglicans, Baptists, Methodists and URC (listed a-z) signed a declaration of intent in 1994 and drafting of a constitution began in June of that year. From these groups slowly grew the elements of the team that was sent out to be *Church on the Heath*.

Two cardinal lessons are detected by those who reflected with me on the story. There is no guarantee that they can be emulated by all others aspiring to follow, but they set a standard.

- Determination to **be part of the community building process as early on as possible** is vital. Early involvement means planning for the leader to be one of the earliest arrivals as new residents. Trying to join



late is a massive disadvantage. David Price (left) was appointed in summer 2000 and began work in late October. Thus leaders coming at the inception enter the melee, mess, adventure and creation of community. They are among the pioneers, seen as one of us, part of helping the emerging

community come into being. It is therefore essential to appoint those who like people, are good at networking, remember names, have the drive to make things happen, and are relaxed at making partnerships with those without faith, for community purposes, rather than have instincts to invent and run church parallels to secular initiatives. Yet they need to be those who can reflect on and evaluate what is going on. At times, they may need to challenge either the developer or a local interest group, or even an incoming church planting team. None of these are easy tasks.

- It is hard to over-estimate the significance of a **long-term prayerful ministry** by a group with **consensus in being mission-minded** and its contribution to a successful church plant. If the horticultural analogy, inherent in church planting, has coherence, then this ministry is like clearing virgin ground, improving the soil quality as necessary, then ploughing and tilling. Where this has happened, a rapid response to the sowing done by the pioneers is far more likely. It is even harder to achieve that sort of prayer and missional consensus across a number of churches. Each can so easily be bound up in their own agenda, differing priorities and even theologies of mission. It may take years of patient co-operation between congregations to lead to trust in the face of risk and the willingness to sacrifice for the greater and common good. It is perhaps no accident then that the 25 that came from the local churches to EH (6 Anglican, 3 Methodist, 7 Baptist, 9 URC) called themselves a 'seeding group'. Prior to any language popularised by *Mission-shaped Church*, they simply deduced that plants needed seeds. They sensed a call, tested that with the leader of their local church, and ensured that all members were mission-minded and not disaffected with their existing congregation. Coming from different churches, they wisely took time to grow their own identity and sense of community, by meeting in homes, before embarking on provision of public worship. **They knew they were called to be willing to die to their own preferences about how to do church**, not least because of being older than the average person moving onto the estate. Their task was to help create what should emerge in context, not to clone what they came from. They also knew the time would come when they would cease their pioneering identity and either fade into the indigenous church or return to their sending churches. By autumn 2001, that step had been taken. None have returned, although three retain close ties with their sending churches.

Character and feel

Elvetham Heath is, in my view, a good example of **the best kind of new housing development**. The *Section 106* agreement includes provision of land for a community centre, nursery, pub, school and supermarket. Some buildings were funded by the developer; other buildings, like the pub, supermarket and church, came from the provider. Various promotional phrases have been deliberately coined, including 'building a community', 'creating a sense of place' and 'village'. Town planning and architecture combine to give the western half of the new community a very coherent sense of place. The sweeping curves of roads, deliberately broken-up sight lines, mixture of housing types, together with the presence of the



supermarket, community centre, pub, nursery, school and church (still to be built) around the large village green, all create a sense of instant village.

Instant village is both the

pleasure of first impression and the suspicion of living in an English version of the *Truman Show* film set. It is very easy to see why a national survey by civil servants of where the best quality of life is to be found (reported in *The Daily Telegraph*, May 6th 2004) cited EH in the top bracket. The article commenting on quality of life in prosperous Hampshire villages went on: '*their wealthy neighbours in the commuter belt model village Elvetham Heath have something else to smile about.*' The number, range and friendliness of people eating out at the *DeHavilland Arms* pub generated an

immediate positive impression of a cohering society, not surprisingly gathering round food. It is not just churches that are learning that community and eating are inseparable. This is becoming far more than a dormitory village; people live here, not just sleep here. It remains to be seen whether the eastern end of the village, as yet under construction, further away from all these facilities, will have the same kind of identity with the whole, lacking proximity to its best provision and views.



Intentionally, the housing is at least somewhat mixed: 75% owner occupier (starting at £190,000, and rising to £800,000), with 15% housing association and 10% private lettings. I had to be shown which was which

and there seemed to be little sense of poorer areas, though within three years it is noticeable that higher turnover and social disruption occur more among the occupiers of the private lettings. There is, however, deliberate playing to people having 'aspirations'. This may be a veneer of spiritualising



sheer materialism. As an ex-Reigate curate, I was familiar with parts of Surrey as the gin and Jag belt and mischievously wondered if EH would own up to being '**BMW and Bacardi**'. There was a palpable

atmosphere of upwardly mobile people in pursuit of being fun, loving and flashy. Apparently there is affluence and ostensible self-sufficiency. However, a money-rich, time-poor set of people have issues. The 2003 *Churches Together* review of EH reported: 'divorce, work and personal stress, redundancy, domestic violence and debt are among the issues which have become evident.'

The church values

Two values have marched hand in hand. The church was to model a *missionary* venture working with Christians of all traditions and none, in the spirit of Matthew chapter 28. It was to express unity as commanded in John chapter 17, but this was seen as part of the mission (so that the world may believe: John chapter 17 verse 21) rather than an end in itself. The constitution is less a proposal of future ecumenical marriage and more a framework for mission by diverse Christians. It is certainly seen by the leadership team as expression of these values; it is taken as **permission for mission rather than prescription for doing church**. As such, it is seeks to be minimalist, allowing the emerging church to influence the way it shapes its common life, mission and worship. It is inclusive, for example, of the different modes of baptism and Eucharistic hospitality.

Especially in the early days there was a light touch to core ideas. The sense of unfolding and movement also emanates from the three bullet point mission statement: sharing the good news, serving the local community and growing as Christians. It is the 'ing' of each that suggests journey and development. They even coined a value called 'prayerfully making it up as we go along'. I wish such nonchalant breeziness about discovery was more characteristic of all churches.

Church on the Heath's history

From September 2000, the seeding group met in the home of team members the Cowderys (*right*). David and Becky Price joined them in the autumn. It is a happy story that adding a leader



to an existing team worked well. Generally, church planting orthodoxy recommends doing it the other way round.

The first service was Advent Sunday 2000 - not so much out of eschatological conviction - but because that was when the community centre was almost ready to be handed over to the council for bookings. One of the delights of the story is resolution of the difficulty that the handover was convoluted, and obtaining the key was problematic. But it 'happened' that there was a Christian working in the firm of developers and he was able to unlock the problems and the church became the sole key holder for the first few months. This also gave them a kind of second launch at Christmas, a pattern I have seen used with profit elsewhere and a good tip on an estate that continues to grow.



2001 brought many firsts: baptisms (both of infants and of adults), congregational meetings and elections of council members, informal relational evangelism contacts with the community through events like barbecues or quiz nights, or less familiar patterns of doing litter picking (see above) or offering a free car wash service. The autumn saw the birth of the youth group, half-term holiday club and an Alpha group. By November, the first congregation of 100 was recorded and an architect was appointed to design the future church building.

2002 began with the wonderful surprise that the church site, under *Section 106*, was to be right in the centre of the village, opposite the supermarket entrance. Hard work on the design led to no fewer than 8 schemes being rejected before no. 9 won acceptance, by both church and developers. The church wanted maximum value and flexibility inside, and the developer wanted the church outside to make the village green look right. The 2001 patterns of inroads into the growing community continued and for the first time the community centre was full on a Sunday high day. The formalities of establishing the LEP as a single congregation partnership were completed and the house groups had to multiply and reshuffle for the first time.

2003 included the first church wedding, first community funeral, the first indigenous people starting training for formal lay ministries and serious fundraising towards the new building. Nearly 200 people crowded in for one baptism. Half of the adult membership was now in small groups.

How has the church fared?

Clearly this is a story of quite rapid and sustained growth. Yet they would say the starting point was vigorous, with 24 in the seed team and early adopters giving a first year average attendance of 63, including children. By 2004, this figure is nearly 110, as an average, and the building used is already at 80% seating capacity. By opening dividing doors to the area normally reserved for children's work, that capacity can be increased for festivals, but

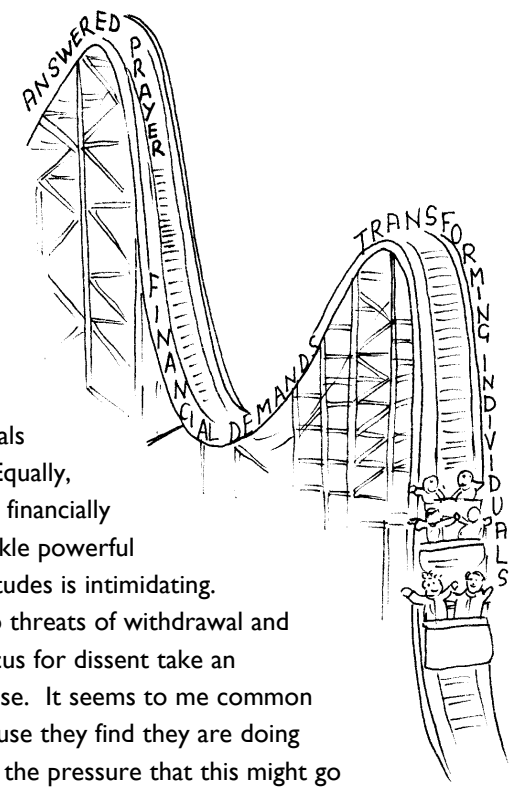


it then requires all-age worship style and skills. A large occasional fringe of a further 150 has also come into being. 76% of all attenders come from EH, but there are immediately adjacent housing areas from which the 24% come. This figure is skewed in that perversely the vast majority of the original team still live off Elvetham Heath. I am surprised at how well this unusual dynamic seems to work, and it may be that the prompt disbanding of the team, and their releasing attitudes as other gifts appeared, prevented it becoming a problem.

Its strengths include a diverse team and congregation which nevertheless have a sense of unity in which any prior denominational allegiance is hard to detect. **There is clear commitment to patterns of mission through building community with, and offering service to, the wider community.** The mission statement and the reality are connected. The church is seen as a key and valued player in creating community and can do this fairly seamlessly. An example would be the EH newsletter, in which church and community items and communication sit side by side, rather than in separate publications. The worship is reasonably accessible, being gently informal and family friendly. This and the mission styles adopted have meant that a large fringe has been created; David Price thinks it is those and the open de-churched who have joined and come to faith.



It would be wrong and misleading to present all this as effortless gain. One image used was of the **roller coaster**. The words 'thrill' and 'terror' easily come to mind and the sense of not being in control - surrendered by going on the ride. It is clear that this young church have known those moments of satisfying and awe-inspiring partnership with a God who takes initiatives, answers prayers, engenders coincidences, transforms individuals and obviously inhabits aspects of worship. Equally, the building project is both managerially and financially demanding on the leadership. Having to tackle powerful people where there are confrontational attitudes is intimidating. Misunderstandings within church can lead to threats of withdrawal and internal disputes. People who become a focus for dissent take an inordinate proportion of time when they arise. It seems to me common among church planter leaders that just because they find they are doing what they would most like to do, somehow the pressure that this might go wrong or fail is all the more pressing when that fear occurs. The roller coaster is not a bad image for the mixed feelings that occur. In this story there is also the sobering thought: 'If the church can't do it here - where can it flourish?'



What further issues lie ahead?

Like many young churches, once survival seems guaranteed, there is the challenge to **maintain momentum**. In one sense it is impossible. It is not likely that the early percentage of numerical growth can be sustained, nor the sense of the early pioneer adventure. The brief section on the church's history demonstrates the latter. One of the challenges of the next three years will be not just to get the new building right and use it well, but to have the energy and wit to use this as the departure lounge for the future, as opposed to the sofa of final arrival. **Initial momentum changes partly through the gradual increase of complexity of church life, which means some energy is legitimately diverted from outward mission ministry.** It is also probably true that the early adopters, or those

already near to faith, have already got in contact and begun that journey. While a growing village will for some years still have newcomers in that category, there is the harder and longer challenge of winning the hearts and minds of the majority population who, year on year, will be more solidly non-churched. To this is added the increased competition church will face as a social attraction, as Elvetham Heath's wider community develops the range of activities and groups offered.

One way momentum can be fostered is around the cluster of issues that surround the intentional **creation of diversity**. The church on EH are already aware of this in terms of requests for more diverse music and worship styles. I very much hope this won't simply lead to a mix and match instinct within one service, which is almost guaranteed to frustrate all and please few. I shall be intrigued to watch whether one resource for an expression of real diversity will emerge. I vividly recall an energising afternoon spent talking to Ros (*right*), a woman whose tradition would be naturally renewed by attending high Mass, the practice of contemplative prayer and spiritual direction at a convent. It was delightful to hear her describe her fearful early journey at encountering EH worship, including such assaults as OHP songs, children waving flags and the apparent absence of liturgical worship and reverence. Yet by grace,



within weeks she began to 'hear' the structures and insights of the denominations and how people had gone to trouble to craft these acts of worship that were not simply a potpourri thrown together. Knowing Christians to be a diminishing minority, she concluded that learning from one another across difference would be necessary if each group were not to die alone clinging to its own speciality. I admired the

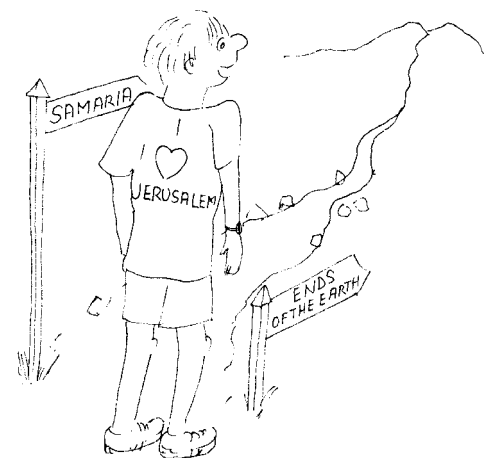
generosity of spirit enabling her to make that journey, yet found myself asking what her pastoral skills, spiritual direction experience, and acute

liturgical instincts in contemplative prayer, could bring.

Perhaps midweek in a quiet room in the community centre, or a chapel-like space in the new church building, will be a context to offer these gifts and fashion quite a different experience of *Church on the Heath* to the wider community. In the face of the busyness of this high-flying community, the gifts of stillness and quiet waiting will be significantly and helpfully counter-cultural. That it might be enabled by a physically disabled wheelchair user is itself iconic of having to be still and finding a liberty that transcends mere bodily movement, as well as illustrating the importance of 'learning across difference'.

Other diversity issues will very likely include responding to post-Alpha groups' natural desire to do church in interactive group and responsive style, and not capitulating to congregational forms of attendance and learning. Another desirable possibility is that if deeper entry to other social groupings and gatherings, like the pub, school, or day nursery, were to develop, my more recent planting thinking encourages me to believe this should lead to the growth of being church on and in these contexts, not lifting people out of them and relocating them into the existing church. *Church on the Heath* is already full on Sunday morning and has its own sub-cultural manifestation. I have come to think that the Acts mission in Philippi, Athens and Ephesus shows us that **Apostles seek where people gather (agoras and the like) and form ecclesia there**. Another likelihood is the creation of a further church for the eastern half of the estate.

In relation to all these possibilities, I continue to ponder that the New Testament Acts story is not so much the easy one of ever-widening ripples from one big stone dropped in a pond. Rather, the Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, ends of the earth message of Acts chapter 1 verse 8 is the more demanding picture of a **journey from familiarity, through the disagreeable, into the unknown**. This involves both reproduction of church and diversity of its expression.



Both are very much matters of momentum, but also of receiving vision. The call of Paul and vision of Peter in Acts chapter 9 and 10 are not tales of clever men thinking out what God would like; they are **stories of surprised and shocked men, shaken and sent by divine initiatives.**

It is also the nature of mission to overflow boundaries. It was geographically true at the start of this story. Part of the land was in Winchester Diocese and had to be ceded to Guildford in 1999. The challenges of legal transfer are minor matters when compared to those of the overflow of imagination. In a diverse mission context the bigger challenges are to real diversity of expressions of church and growing them where we are sent and people gather. Yet by our sense of unity we will seek to express connection between these expressions in healthy interdependence, not by organised assimilation.

Cambourne

Where?

Drive eight miles west of Cambridge and the three brand new villages of Great, Lower and Upper Cambourne greet you. Actually only two do, as



the third is just beginning to be built. Each has its village green; each is technically separated from the others by a band of sacrosanct green space. However, Great Cambourne, in the middle of the three, has the shopping, hotel, leisure and community facilities, and the new business park to be, in effect, the centre of

a new market town of at least 10,000 people, spread into three discrete areas. In the collusion with urban escape, the yearning for human-scale community and sympathy for the history of Cambridgeshire, the language of villages has been espoused and the mirage painted into the incomers' mental landscape.

Why and when?

If anything, the sell is stronger in Cambourne than Elvetham Heath. Those wanting to buy in Cambourne had, until recently, to go to the Concept Centre and they met pictures (of people like them, or who they wanted to



be like) accompanied by statements like **'discover a new way of life'**, or 'a greater sense of belonging'. Confusingly, 'a community that's been centuries in the making' was in rather too close proximity to another strap line promising 'a new community created for the 21st century'. But will illusion in time breed disillusion? They could buy for as little as £120K a one bed house, whereas three to four bed houses range from £220-400K. Mixed housing across private ownership, housing association and shared equity is planned. But the latter are only now starting to be expanded and this will mean leadership in the local community is already settled before the less affluent arrive.

The motivation of need for new housing and time scales towards building is virtually identical. Involvement by church leaders at the regional level was also commendably early and welcomed. Developers move at social levels that mean talking to a Bishop is preferred to tea with local incumbents. In this case, it was meeting regional heads of the partner denominations. Discussions with planners started in 1990. A *Section 106* agreement in 1994 gave land for a church, along with other community provision. House building started in autumn 1999. Lower Cambourne is complete; Great Cambourne centre is still under construction with various community facilities behind both time and the agreed thresholds for completion. A plan called *Cambourne Enhanced* is coming in; this is an official expansion of an additional 1500 houses that has been submitted by the consortium of developers.

The church story

The churches here have not had the local resource equivalent to the Hampshire story. The development is eight miles from any sizeable population and so from any potentially sending church. In January 2000, the first minister was appointed; Carrie Pemberton lived offsite in a village five miles away and was only paid part-time. She was able to make inroads into the community and hold services sporadically in the local school, where relationships have not been easy. The first public worship service was held in October 2000. The logo, name of the church and several of the groups e.g. pub lunch forum and craft group, date from her time.



Peter and Emma Wood (*left, with their children*) were appointed in 2001 and moved in May, with their first child Ruari, into rented accommodation. Their first Sunday service was held in a house used as the doctor's surgery to which 11 adults and 4 kids came. Slowly the group grew, but the venue could only house 30 adults and 15 kids. By Easter 2002 two moves had occurred. The Woods, with their new daughter Cara, got into the church house - premises which are very suitable and useful, near the

entrance to Great Cambourne. The church also acquired a five-bay portakabin and managed to plant it near the designated site for the eventual church. They put on a pitched roof, at the insistence of the developer, called it the Ark, and had it painted out by the local mums and rewired by a visitor from the Bahamas coming to see his son in Cambourne. It was all overseen,



including planning permission, design and architecture, by relative newcomer but now acting church warden, Ian Jarvis (*see left*), whose background as a design engineer helped in understanding the developers. **Such a story of divine coincidences helps build a community.** It can

take 75 at a squash, is much loved, and equally important, it is used throughout the week by as many as 26 separate local activities in the community and church.

Two indications of how well integrated the church is into Cambourne are firstly that Peter found it easy to get me lengthy interviews with key members of the wider community. Chris runs the community youth club, and used to chair the residents association. Roger is 'Mr Fix-It' in the community and is hoping he might retire from his Cambridge job and become the clerk of the parish council. Both had church backgrounds in the deep past; the first now calls himself a card-carrying atheist and the second is closed de-churched. Yet, secondly, both freely admit and admire that **if anything good happens in the community, it probably happens at the Ark** and they recognise the quality of community grown there. Both are good men, and that sense of neither being far from the kingdom was apparent.



The venue size means that CTC - meaning *Churches Together in Cambourne* - has more recently grown into two morning services. From Easter 2003, what began as two parallel services, in my view thankfully evolved so that the 0930 is quieter, less child-centred, obviously liturgically-shaped and uses traditional hymns. The 1100 is more visual, data projector-driven, freer in shape with interactive teaching, and sings 'worship songs'. The two get the chance to meet at coffee and croissants between the sittings. The first draws between 12-35 and the second 25-80. The considerable variance of both numbers suggests the power of choice, mobile consumer population, and competition from leisure and wider family commitments. For a time they also tried a 1945 quiet evening event but after a year have suspended it because it only generated 'twicing', created competition with overlapping youth ministry and grew no further. Yet the suspicion is that its time is yet to come. For those tired by work, and emailed-out by too many contacts, the space to be, to think via pictures and to contemplate, seems promising.

And now . . .

CTC are about to enjoy the ministry of assistant Anglican minister, Pauline Scott, who is giving her time to work NSM and will head up children's and youth work out of her professional background as a teacher. This is another manifestation of **the instinct in some younger churches that the shape of ministry is created by whom God sends**. I have seen the same belief at work in the L'Abri Fellowship and adopted into the Northumbria Community's values. In a few months, the community centre should be complete and open to them. Like Elvetham Heath, there is an opportunity and danger in the move, in that the future bigger venues, for several hundred, might create a professional church that mustn't be spoilt

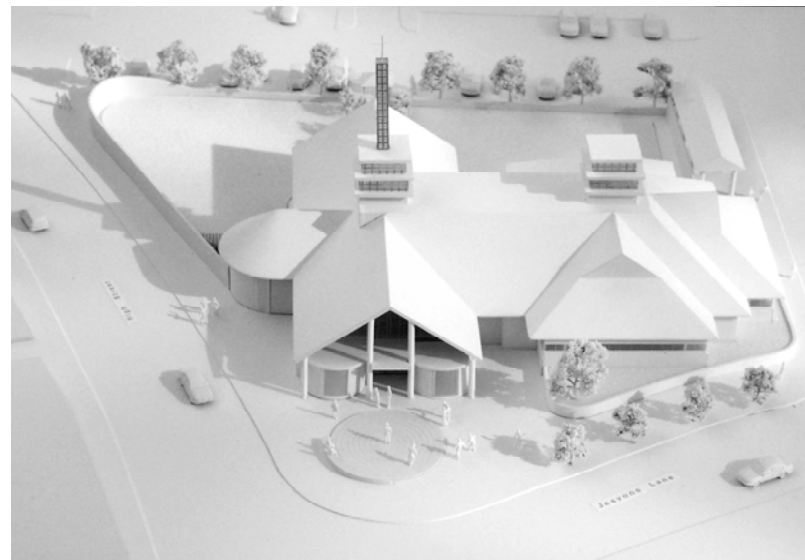


and take away from the rough and ready, 'we did it', 'we made this happen' feeling, amidst the community meeting in their current simpler venues. Before that, a day away has wisely been planned to express what are their shared values and how do they express who they are as CTC. In the longer term, a £3 million building project stands before them, partly impelled by the fact that as Cambourne High Street is completed, **the empty church site will become the missing tooth in the village's smile**.

What is similar?

- Both leaders are couples with **overseas cross-cultural experience** - one in economic development, one as CMS mission partners. Thus both are used to working instinctively with the grain of a context and also in seeing things evolve. It helps to be energised by people, able to see the big picture, reflective yet open to unforeseen changes of plan and ideas.
- They hold in common that they describe the churches they serve as **multiple denomination churches (MDC)**, not as ecumenical. For both, this is more honest about pragmatic partial unity for the sake of mission. It is also more real about difference and links to my preamble about post-denominationalism. The names chosen reflect something of this, in different ways. *Church on the Heath* maintains there is but one body of Christ - albeit at present fractured if you look closer - and *Churches Together in Cambourne* makes that reality explicit. Both maintain that the word ecumenical means nothing on the street to the outsider, and honesty about partnership across difference in a MDC speaks loudly and is respectful of particularity.
- Both churches have placed enormous resource and **trust in the creation of community and providing services** to the wider community. As such they are classic examples of best emerging practice, and evidence that this approach can connect with all groups in society as far out as the non-churches, though that seed-sowing ministry will not be a quick one.
- They recognise that thus far the mission has been **attracting fringe and de-churched** - sowing among non-churches will be tougher and longer. Both could now do with a specific post of a person gifted in evangelism and this kind of opportunity could be a rich connection to CMS or Church Army's desire to deploy people in pioneering teams.

- Both places have been given **prime sites for future church building** and the church communities face expensive times. They share long-term vision for the buildings that includes week-long use, community building, café church ideas and space for the visual and contemplative.



- Both couples **welcome shared and lay ministry**, and are grateful for the gift of key lay people, acknowledging they have made a huge difference in skills, encouragement and shared vision.
- Both churches see the **need to become more counter-cultural** communities, especially over the issues brought by consumerism and materialism, inside as well as outside the church.



Differences

- Cambourne is bigger and more like a town. It is also clearly three areas, and they may need different future churches. Its houses have no front gardens, so casual conversation over the fence doesn't happen.
- Cambourne from the outset has had less team, less resources and so less contacts and numerical growth. It is the one factor that turns Peter Wood green. This is further accentuated by the later arrival of the Woods, the first minister having lived offsite.
- Elvetham Heath has the enviable history of long-term local prayerful planning.
- Cambourne has seen more venue moves. Perhaps this has helped it earlier into an enforced exploration of diversity of church life.

What traps for LEP/MDC are admitted?

Go A&A!

I talked with two other ministers in similar contexts: Jonathan Ford in Bury St Edmunds, and Keith Elliott of Roundswell, north Devon. Interestingly, there was total agreement that to be only 'A&A' (accepted and authorised), not 'R&R' (recognised and regarded), was a great advantage. This new vocabulary to me means the A&A minister of an LEP or MDC is **not obliged to water down time by commitments to the local Methodist circuit**. All regard that system - as does Bob Jackson - as a chief reason for lack of mission or strategic renewal by local Methodist churches or church plants. They simply lack the consistent presence of a full-time leader to see through the much-needed, mission-centred change.

Ecumenical bureaucracy

Equally all agreed that this is worst when dealing with the centralism built into Methodism. I hope my friends in that denomination will only groan in recognition of a problem and not grind their teeth at us all. Equally they were firm that **ecumenical red tape could be cut by helpful regional**

figures and that such people were brilliantly placed to start negotiations with developers. They all chose to resist the pressure to attend more meetings that a plethora of denominational associations tends to engender. They felt they all had good legal instruments with which to work. The mission-centred light touch, asked for by recommendation 9 of *Mission-shaped Church*, was being modelled and these cases could be useful precedents.

Rota worship by denomination is death

To have a Methodist service one week, Baptist the next, with the Anglican rite in the third, etc, each led by someone else, is the worst of all possible worlds. I recall such a story in Canterbury Diocese fifteen years ago which limped along for five years until Bishop Gavin Reid grabbed the situation by the scruff of its neck and put in a person to bring continuity and develop inner integrity. The Elvetham Heath constitution p.4 says: 'It is intended to worship as an integrated congregation'. This is not to say cannot be made of various external sources. In Cambourne, Peter Wood who is Church of Scotland, makes plentiful use of Iona materials which are appreciated.



Advantages of being MDC

- Local **unity across difference** not only operates in the spirit of John 17 but it shows on the street. One whole objection to the credibility of Christian claims and charity is dealt a fierce blow. In that sense, practical unity talks; 'So you're actually working together' was the surprised response heard on Elvetham Heath.
- In today's wider church climate which more freely admits the present crisis of decline and so welcomes responsible pioneers more readily, this story shows more '**permission for mission**' is being given, with less tight controls about previous ecumenical nuances to be preserved. David and Peter both sense **trust is being given**, accountability is only reasonably required and support is generous.
- At places they suspect they have **more freedom for innovation** than some single denomination church plants. Variety of worship sources would be one case, exercise of experimental lay ministries would be another. It seems the local MDC minister is more readily accepted as the locus of authority in allowing such things - or maybe it is just not known what they do.

Postscript

I leave the reader to judge whether the upsides and downsides of ecumenical church planting, as cited by *Mission-shaped Church* (p.129), are essentially at variance with these stories, or whether it might still be true that these are examples of good practice and do not mean that all ecumenical churches flourish in the same way.

My starting thinking saw the advantages to be:

- A significant proportion of LEP plants have been begun in new towns. This is a sensible response to a shared mission initiative where often there are not the complications of existing churches and there is the advantage of working with 'green field' sites.
- An LEP/MDC gives a good impression, especially in a new area, of churches working instinctively together, sending a message both to the surrounding community and the existing churches.

- LEPs have the further advantage that resources, which may be slim, are gathered together for one initiative, not dispersed across a variety of outlets.
- All these advantages apply equally to areas of new housing now being created.

The disadvantages have been found to centre on the following:

- There can be a higher administrative burden because of various bodies to relate to and consult with.
- Other ecumenical partners or bodies can be concerned with the task of unity to the practical exclusion of mission.
- The young church planting team can have foisted upon it more sophisticated church questions than the simplicity of its youthful existence really warrants.
- The young church can find its focus taken up with church questions, whereas mission must be its lifeblood if it is to survive, let alone thrive. This can make it more difficult for an envisaged church to be significantly different from previous churches, even though some of the groups they may be trying to reach warrant a more radical starting point or style.

I am glad to say I very much enjoyed my visits and conversations and was delighted to see how the constraints I had heard of in other places were not operating here. I particularly like the development of the MDC idea and reaffirm that, especially in areas of new housing, this is one of the best ways to work.

George W Lings
October 2004

Further resources on ecumenical planting:

Reading:

- *Ecumenical Church Planting* paper by Revd Jonathan Ford available from The Sheffield Centre office
- *Multi Denominational Church Planting* paper by Revd Capt Keith Elliot available from The Sheffield Centre office

Training:

- *Ground Level Network Training School* for further details contact Kath Atkins: email kathatkins@myrealbox.com

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Left to right: Steve Hollinghurst, Claire Dalpra, Michael Collyer, George Lings, Peter Hallsworth, Ruth Walker, Andrew Wooding



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