

Encounters on the Edge



no. 33:
Café Church 1
Caffeine, croissants
and Christ?

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A café in Seville

The arrival of café

I realise we have global warming and it is bad. But that alone can't explain why the English have gone beyond drinking their coffee indoors in private. Now all our towns have spots with chairs, little tables on the pavements and people wrapped in their coats pretending they live in Paris, Rome or Madrid. I know that powerful companies like *Starbucks*, *Costa* and others have turned the word coffee into a choice-haters nightmare, but that sheer variety expresses the current value that choice makes me who I am. I hear the Internet is often freely available in such places. In the public spaces that mark the change of our new café culture, the Internet helps serious business, can create important relationships and, beyond that, enables connecting and relaxing to happen.

If that is an emerging dimension of western world social reality, then to think of **creating café church is only a fresh outworking of a long-held missionary instinct**. We are to find what can be taken in the host culture without fatal compromise and transform it into ongoing Christian practice. So in our day if café is an emerging and sufficiently lasting culture, then the Christian instinct has always been, go and join it for the sake of those in it and win those within it for Christ.

Back in 2003, writing what became *Mission-shaped Church*, café church was one plausible label to include among a dozen different fresh expressions of church. I should stress at the outset that we never thought café was a way of being church that was utterly distinct from all others. Some examples of café church have been combined with beliefs about 'alternative worship'; others have been used with elements of small unit church such as cell. Some incorporate aspects of seeker-style thinking while, for others, café church is another vehicle for contemporary Charismatic worship. Some examples work with network church instincts for a mission base springing out of relationships, while for others café church springs out of responsibility for an area. The choices about these sources have been usually derived from the theological convictions of the founders, the mission context as they perceive it and (I would guess) the founder's location across the Fowler stages of faith.¹

What was diagnostic about café church was **a deliberate change of ambience** and style when people met corporately, away from traditional congregational practice. Here's one list of changes; the more of these factors that were present, the more it was plausible to call it café church. Starts and endings were blurred, not sharp. Gatherings were around small tables rather than in pews. Quality coffee and tea, and often nibbles, were routinely available on entry, as well as throughout the event rather than an option for the dedicated at the end. People characteristically sat and talked or wandered round the venue, rather than sat and listened or stood and sung, all the while occupying and perhaps defending their pew space. Café was relational more than attendance based. Interaction rather than spectating was encouraged. Note I have not included in this list the provision of corporate worship, for that would be about content not about style. The venues could be ecclesial or secular; the latter included community centres, youth clubs, and pub rooms, or even a shop bought or rented for the purpose. In 2003, examples were not yet common. In this issue and the next are some stories that have grown up since.

¹ James Fowler's six stages of faith helpfully explored in Alan Jamieson *A Churchless Faith* SPCK 2002 under the headings of the innocent, the literalist, the loyalist, the critic, the seer and the saint.

Soul Café: St Paul Chester Green Derby



Their attractive invitation cards give a fair first impression. Central is a mug of coffee large enough to impress *Starbucks*, with key words spaced above, some in bold: **coffee** snacks **music** chat **art** faith. Beneath are three phrases that epitomise the values: **a place to meet/a time to think/a space to be.**

The start up story

Sue James can be thought of as one of the founders. For those familiar with Fowler's stages of faith, she has her own unfolding story of a journey that gradually bade farewell to the third loyalist stage, at the time expressed in being a music team leader for many years in a Charismatic Evangelical church. Her development took a route through deeply enjoyable formal theological study and the unearthing of many questions to an even bigger God. That was followed by a surprising call to ordained ministry.

Sue's dissertation covered the usual suspects² writing on those who are giving up on congregation, as we have known it, and inventing ways of public worship that are less like a train journey on known tracks and more like options for exploration and space for extended response. Equally, she had a yearning for making the practice and instincts of 'alternative worship' more accessible to the non-intellectual. The choice of the word "soul" rings various bells for me. It echoes the search



² Richter and Francis, Graham Tomlin, Mike Riddell, Alan Jamieson etc

for the spiritual. It speaks of the importance of the inner journey. There are also hints of hunger and thirst and the suspicion that existing church is rather dry and barren. At the same time, soul is a term that is inclusive of both de-churched and some non-churched.

St Paul's parish is modest railway housing now occupied by younger couples, forming part of inner Derby, with the 19th century stone church building physically prominent, adjacent to an enormous green. The congregation which had shrunk to an unsustainable level (only just double figures) was the recipient of a 'graft'³ from nearby St Alkmunds by which Michael Mitton and a dozen others joined. Their first service together took place on Remembrance Sunday, November 2003, a date which has some hints about belief in new life, despite what can smell of death. Michael himself has a diocesan enabling and training role under the policy known as *Renewing Ministry* by which parishes form larger units with a more missional identity; he is technically the minister responsible, not a full-time vicar.

Bishop Jonathan had forwarded a suggestion to Michael that Sue came to the parish as curate. As life began to emerge in the parish, Michael became aware of Sue's gifting, training and yearning for a fresh expression with the instincts outlined above. He encouraged her to devote substantial parts of her time to what might emerge. This would also model both mixed economy and the practice of fostering fountains of life in what could feel like desert places. Something practiced locally, would under gird what he was seeking to communicate more widely. In 2004 she began as NSM part-time.

The next turn of the wheel was a meeting of minds between Sue and Phil Baggaley. He is a song writer and producer who, for a time, was half of *Phil and John*. He was part of the graft from St Alkmunds. Sue and Phil both had musical and creative instincts, found they had a common concern to be leaver sensitive for the de-churched and felt there was little to lose in a once a month experiment. Four more people joined their team, with awareness that this was not only provision for others, but

³ A biological term used by church planters to refer to a small team of people from another church joining a struggling church to bring increased numbers, resources and mission creativity from outside.

for themselves as they were all on the edge of leaving. From July to December 2004, they talked with Michael Mitton, worked out costs and wrote a paper for the PCC. It outlined a **historical continuity to past coffee bar work** and put a case for engaging with the café culture using St Paul's suitable location. Frequency and likely attenders were made clear, with the commendable realism that though it could attract the 'Generation X' age-group, it would be most likely to draw the open de-churched. It would be harder to reach much further out, desirable as that was.



The costs were mainly set-up costs: £1000 for staging lighting and backdrop, £500 for catering equipment, £200 for publicity and the same for décor. To their delight, the PCC gave approval and they were authorised to launch a trial run in November, the first live event in December and thereafter monthly (except July and August).

What's the *Soul Café* experience like?

The shape of the evening from 8-10pm was laid down to the PCC and corresponded well with my experience of it in May 2006. People begin to arrive from 7pm, some chatting and some gravitating to the quiet corners provided. 8pm sees the catering open, with quality coffee and home



made cake, not weak instant coffee and half dead biscuits. The rear end of the church has already been transformed with the provision of tables and chairs across its entire width. There is a central area containing a temporary stage, band instruments and visual backdrop; this area was not unlike the focus point of a folk club meeting. Lighting levels are low,

but this only means turning off the nave lights, with two follow-spots for performers. This did not involve a major relighting scheme.

At 8.30pm, the leader, seated and spotlighted, welcomes people in the style of chat show, not congregational worship. She introduces the theme which the next 25-30 minutes explore in a variety of media and allusive angles. This time it includes specially written songs performed by Phil and the local band *The Harbour Lights* and a very able young female singer, some poetry, a storyteller and a video clip from a current film. **The feeling of the evening is like a folk club**, enhanced by applause, though rightly some very thought provoking items are greeted with proper silence. There follows a break in which people mill around, chat, stock up on coffee and sample what is on offer in various areas: the quiet space in the north transept, the installations in the side aisle window ledges and the resources at the west end. The final 20 minutes start around 9.20pm, again with a varied media input, including the occasional spiritual quote



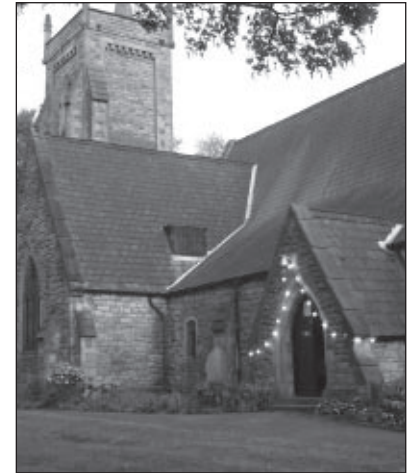
on the screen, to backing visuals or tracks. A Celtic blessing rounds off proceedings, wishing people well for a safe journey home along with a reminder of the date of the next *Soul Café*.

The attractions and limitations of the venue

Both are strong. There is a pleasant domestic feel to St Paul's, partly architecturally engendered by

its low windows in the side aisles and the exposed rafters. It has an attractive simplicity, even including the damp patches with buckets to catch falling drips. At all events the settings are modest and the place of the presenters is restrained. For example, at the follow on gathering *Soul Space*, the domestic simplicity is emphasised by the use of a communion table only 18" high (a vested IKEA coffee table). **There is no room here for accusations of expensive high-tech presentation, much less glib salesmanship** or an appeal to the historically gorgeously transcendent. All this has the additional virtue for others that most of the style and

content is fairly reproducible. With experience, they find they can do the necessary set up each month in two to three hours, which is not an impossible burden. Probably the element most difficult to emulate would be the live folk music that comes from the creativity and skill of Phil Baggaley and those round him. Other café events will grow their own home grown talent across a range of media. Whether café churches would like to share resources with each other or prefer to grow their own talent will depend on the attitudes to shared resources, as it does within the 'alternative worship' world. **There is a trade off to work out between objective quality and indigenous authenticity.** Beneath all this, individual churches are wise to work with what they've got.



St Paul's

One physical down side of the venue are the fixed pews of the nave. The popularity of *Soul Café* means that, for presentational parts of the evenings, two thirds of the listeners are improving their contortionist skills by facing backwards while sitting in a pew. Mobility is also highly restricted which may hamper the sense of community. **To flourish despite these constraints suggests they are offering deeply appealing elements that keep previous outsiders coming.** This is a triumph over the discomfort and inflexibility. Another possible downside, though difficult to measure because there is no access to those who choose not to come, is whether the venue being a church creates social and cultural barriers. The PCC paper expressed the hope that the ambience might compensate, but of course that only applies to those who have already decided to take the risk of turning up. In this



case, it seems where convinced punters bring their friends this stained glass barrier is not impossibly high.

How has it fared?

Initially, it was thought that *Soul Café* might be fortnightly but the reality has been monthly. This has been fortuitous in that it gave more space for other events in the month, a feature which began some nine months later. The take up, in numerical terms, has been startling, but possibly deceptive. December 2004 welcomed 40 people. 80 came in January 2005, with 40 more a month later. By summer, they had reached the plateau of 180-200, imposed by the building. The old 80% usable seating rule still applies.

However, those who come are an instructive mixture. The age range is very wide, from teenager to young retirees, presumably a reflection of the breadth of café culture. In terms of what the founders hoped for, a significant proportion are the de-churched. Attenders could be divided into two categories. Firstly, there are some with a church background now exploring the discovery of living faith for the first time. Secondly, there are Christians from the wider Derby area who are church casualties; they have either left already or are teetering on the brink. These two groups have very different stories and needs. It is significant that some non-churched also come and this is their first connection. Across this range, what is impressive is that **those who have discovered *Soul Café* have no hesitation in commending it to their friends and do bring them.** They feel comfortable to be there and they sense they relate to what is being offered from the varied presenters.

There is yet another quite different group who come. A significant proportion are Christians visiting from outside Derby to gain inspiration and see an example of café church in practice. Their website, and praise from some in the wider church, has made it **almost too well-known for its own good.** This can create



a distortion that militates against building relationships among the more regular, local people.

Success and weakness

This is one of the ironies for leaders of fresh expressions of church. **Those within often have an enduring sense of the vulnerability over what it happening;** casual observers seem to notice only the creativity and apparent popularity which appears as strength. The vulnerability can consist in a number of elements, not all of which will be true in each person or venture. There is the persistent need for creativity, the sense shared by many artists that you are only as good as your last event or performance and the feeling of making things up as you go along. The questions of sustainability don't go away and perhaps nor do the fears of taking on something too big and inviting burn out. There is also the disturbance, and confusing identity, of being a bi-cultural person who doesn't entirely belong in any one place. This, in one sense, is an endemic missionary feature and includes having to speak in different languages to those inside and outside the church. Within *Soul Café* leaders have to switch between the opinions and questions of the non-churched off the streets, the sensitivities of the church leaver, the certainties of the charismatic tourist and the questioning of church traditionalists. That's tiring. All these features of vulnerability combine to form what we, in *The Sheffield Centre*, call **impostor syndrome.** This is a condition we admit we all see in ourselves. Others think we are experts but we are conscious of how little we know.

Such vulnerability is increased by the sense of visitors' inflated expectations and their praise. This is where a team that can be honest about these pressures, but resist their debilitating tendency, is crucial because of the refreshing support it brings. Sue James has consistently been candid about such pressures and has recently decided to relinquish her leadership role as from this summer. Vulnerability is modelled and commended by the apostle Paul, not least in 2 Corinthians. When it is seen as normal and even necessary, this helps to remove its sting, if not its pressure. I hope that as fresh expressions of church become more common and more varied that something of this extra pressure through inspection and high expectations of others decreases as there are a greater range of examples to learn from.

The wisdom to build wider links

One of the features I most value in this story is the recognition that *Soul Café* can only achieve certain things. **It legitimately needed to be supplanted by the invention of further related events to achieve its wider aims.** I explore the necessity for this at the end of this booklet and in its successor. In this case, the group responsible for *Soul Café* have created an event that is a plausible feeder to it. They call it *Open Mic Night*. It occurs two to three times a season, on a Monday following *Soul Café* and those who come can contribute a poem, story, song or mime, done for their own sake and without having to be explicitly Christian. It is becoming known in its own right on the folk circuit around Derby. **Its style is therefore related to the feel of *Soul Café*, but equally important, the latter is a natural follow on from it.** *Open Mic Night* is a seed sowing venture as well as valid in its own way and a useful testing ground for ideas and material that could be aired again in a *Soul Café* event. It is wisely and deliberately providing something that starts further back than *Soul Café* and assumes less spiritual interest in the potential attendee. Such possibilities were within the minds of those who wrote the original paper for the PCC.

If *Open Mic Night* starts further back, another monthly event called *Soul Space* that attracts 40-50, moves people further on. I can see that creating *Soul Space* has at least two valuable functions. The overall cycle includes an event where Christian content, not least public worship, is more prominent, yet which is practised in a way that those who enjoy *Soul Café* would find natural. It also provides for an event that goes beyond what could be **the danger, within café culture, of providing monthly consumption of a pleasant event.** It is another step towards discipleship and belonging to Christian community.

Soul Space is also held monthly in an evening; its liturgical shape has four elements: informal gathering, an opening quarter hour of themed communal liturgy of the word, 25 minutes for people to move around stations and a concluding quarter hour of Eucharistic prayer and reception. The layout has some similarities to *Soul Café*, with the big change of all facing east, the natural orientation of the church. People sit within the nave and a linen screen hangs across the entire entrance to the chancel for the back projection of images. The chancel ceiling is lit, creating a tantalising

awareness of what is quite literally beyond the veil, adding a sense of mystery and transcendence. Lighting is only provided in the side aisles and standard lamps assist the service leaders.

The Eucharistic character is clear by the presence throughout of ciborium and chalice on the table, together with 3 candles and a flask of oil. The liturgy of the word has space for reflection, creativity in cross-fertilisation of words and images and a dignity of quiet conviction. Signing is provided at one side at the front, recognition that Derby has the second largest gathered deaf community outside London. The stations section gives access to a variety of responses that can be made in different forms of prayer. People gather back for a form of the great thanksgiving, containing all prescribed elements a purist could wish for, but some of it using sources I did not recognize. The

notes of inclusive welcome and acceptance to address hunger, thirst and healing are warmly made and reinforced later visually on the backdrop screen. Sadly to me, instructions about reception are then given, which spoils the flow. I would rather they occurred when people gather back or left unannounced, letting those familiar with the ritual model to others what occurs. Standing reception in a semi-circle is allowed to take time and the service concludes with a post-communion prayer and a song. The offer to be prayed for afterwards is also included.

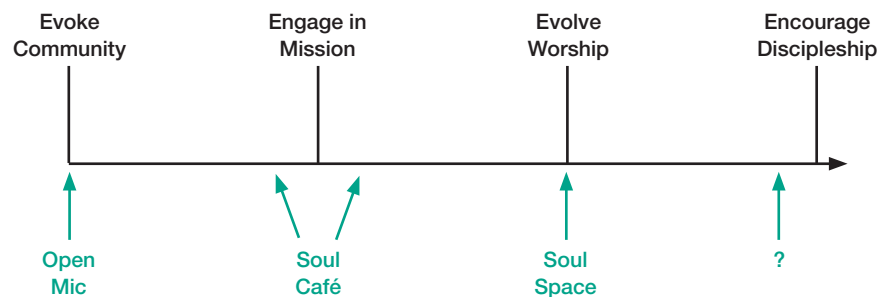


Together this family of events are more plausible as church; apart, each only models some aspects of being church.

Soul Space feels consonant with being Anglican, yet clearly draws on Celtic elements, Ignatian spiritual disciplines and ‘alternative worship’ values. Sue comments that all these are “*trying to provide breadth to allow depth of encounter.*” **Not for nothing is ‘space’ in the title.** The event owes some debt to the thinking emanating from recent students at St John Nottingham called *Liquid Worship*.⁴

The genius of *Soul Café* is that there is not only a deliberate follow-on, but there are regular events which lead to it, all within the same genre. This is partly indicated by the name associations and more importantly by the style. Put all three events together and I see a family of meetings that begins to look like ‘Soul Church’.

What is essential to notice in today’s mission is that **together this family of events are more plausible as church; apart, each only models some aspects of being church.** I want to suggest that this is becoming a characteristic feature of our current mission scene and should not be seen as a deficiency within it. I think we are right to ask that all fresh expressions of church, including café church, should intend to move beyond securing attendance to encouraging discipleship. But **don’t let us imagine that it is easy or even always possible for all aspects of being church to occur well in one event.**



The existing church should be also modest in posing this question, for its own track record at getting beyond attendance mentality or the habits

⁴ See Grove Booklet W181 *Liquid Worship* Tim Lomax and Michael Moynagh

of spiritual consumption is not impressive. It has been weak on building quality community and lamentable over mission.

Going further in faith

So how can evening attenders of the *Soul* family of events in Derby become committed followers of Jesus? Even *Soul Space* is in danger of being still largely an attendance mode event. There is little chance for the providers to engage with the reactions and questions of those who come. How can disciples be made? I recognize that discipleship might be too technical a term to use with this group and also that this issue is personally intimidating to post-modern newcomers who are used to the right to run their own lives thank you very much. However, **genuine cultural baggage does not remove the legitimacy of the question of becoming disciples of Jesus.**

I suspect one answer is that the overall ‘Soul Church’ would need to create small groups, who meet outside the set times of *Open Mic Night*, *Soul Café* and *Soul Space*, in order to go further. How might these be shaped? Would there be mileage in learning from the Celtic lesson of its missionaries memorising and using the Gospels and Psalms? These passages contain stories of Jesus and of people being real with God. Thus, they provide the personal and narrative parts of scripture, that people not used to Bible and Bible study could still engage with. I imagine this occurring through a mixture of discussion, personal reactions, creative writing and meditation. This exposure aims to trust both the Word and the Spirit to do the transforming work essential within the lifelong process of discipleship. At the time of going to press, I hear that small groups are beginning to form based around reading a book.

There is one more possible family member at St Paul’s called *Soul Breakfast*. As the name implies, it is different from all the others by being a Sunday morning event at 10 am. It is like them in that it involves café style by providing continental breakfast and newspapers at tables along with ambient music. At 10.20am, there is a mix of presentation of video clip and discussion, informal prayer and some singing, seated at the tables. Further coffee is served at 11am. Compared to the other morning services that attract around 40, this one draws 70 and twice as many children. Clearly it is having a welcome effect. Yet despite the name and

style linkages, I am not yet convinced it is organically connected to the other three *Soul* events. I guess that for many outsiders the intended progression from three evening events to a morning one will be a leap too far. **The ambience involved in the change from evening to morning is large** and the introduction of children creates similar large stylistic changes. My present understanding is that the differences in time of day and the two types of people who come mean that *Soul Breakfast* has learnt from the other three, but is actually provision for a different group of people. Michael, the Vicar, notes that *Soul Breakfast* helps them to foster ongoing pastoral relationships.

What is *Soul Café*?

I've already made clear that it is only part of a wider family of related meetings. In one sense, it is the overarching title for a range of different regular gatherings. As to its specific identity and purpose, some don't think about the question; they simply find it refreshing and praise it as an event they could bring friends to. Some call it 'church for those who don't go to church'. Yet it isn't an English 'seeker service' in that the sideways style it models is far more like the instincts of 'alternative worship', though they try to avoiding an intellectualism that can often accompany that genre. ***Soul Café* aims to be cryptic but authentic**, sideways not direct, offered lightly not thrust boldly, giving space to explore privately or in conversation, or not at all. It is about voluntary participation not performance shouted from the front.

In connection with this collection of instincts, I notice that a café is different from a hotel. The latter has waiters, a published menu and fixed arrangements about how many days you will stay. Formality is part of the identity. Café is more varied. It does not have pretensions to grandeur or formality. It offers space in the public domain for personal privacy. It is entirely acceptable to have coffee and read newspapers alone, even for a long time. Café fits with a 'my-space' culture. Café can also provide intimacy for a small group around a table. Because of this respect for the space of the person and the context in which real meeting can occur, together with its relaxed style and lesser costs, it will be visited more often than a hotel. Those thinking through what it means truly to explore café church will be wise to note these features and work with them, because that is what the punters will be assuming. As such, I suspect cafe style

evangelism and worship will sit better with looser 'alternative worship' type instincts than the more directive seeker or charismatic approaches. **The latter may be adding coffee but not café.** Some of the *Soul Café* leaders note that it is odd that in both the evangelical and the charismatic traditions, there is a strong belief in a God who intervenes and yet both traditions have persistent activist features that seem to want to do God's work for him.

So what is *Soul Café*? It is not intended to be public worship, though it does offer space for thought and to reflect with God if you believe in him. It does seek to build some sense of community and makes a beginning in what could be called 'pre-evangelism'. I think Michael Mitton was right to think of it as a missional activity by a church, grown out of a listening process, seeking to build some sense of community from which further steps can be taken towards discipleship. *Soul Café* is also the group who dream and love each succeeding event into existence. They meet socially as well as twice a term to plan ahead. As such it is one element of being church. So that is where I have located it in my evolving taxonomy of the very varied species that presently we call café church⁵.



More than one?

What is happening in Derby also made me aware of another constraint in our thinking around fresh expressions that needs to be identified and may need to be repudiated. I have made the case that the *Soul Café* and *Soul Space* gatherings owe much to 'alternative worship' instincts. Consequently, there are now in Derby, which is not a large city, two 'alternative worship' style events. The other is a far longer standing service called *The Mass*, presently located at the Bridge Chapel which comes under the Cathedral. There are also 6 café churches in Derby,

⁵ See Encounter on the Edge no.34 for the full taxonomy.

including one based at St Alkmunds not far away. This cafe has retained and continues to keep prominent its charismatic/*New Wine* music style. It has a strong emphasis on the obvious signs of the Holy Spirit and is more focused on teens and younger adults.

I realise that we can be trapped into thinking that the fresh expressions movement, if that is what it is now becoming, is about adding one example of the new alongside a multitude of existing expressions

in any give area. I believe **we should resist any view that fresh expressions of church are like exotic plants** or beasts which only appeal to marginal tastes and should be severely kept in check

lest they become as common as traditional forms. A family analogy would be allowing a teenager to paint their bedroom in lurid colours, but utterly banning their influence on any other room. There are two issues here. Firstly, **to treat fresh expressions as an exotic addition is to marginalise them.** Secondly, this is to misunderstand what they are about. They are intended to be response to and engagement with what has become the majority non-churched culture of this country in all its varied forms. As such, to add only one is regrettable and culpable tokenism. The other issue is **the legitimacy of creating**

church for society as it is. It was no problem to us in the past that the Church of England offered the same diet on a national basis because it was deemed to fit a broadly monochrome united nation. If café has become part of today's culture of how people gather socially, then we should expect and work for a proliferation of them.



Café Church @ The Well: St Bartholomew Sheffield



Kinder Kalsi is one of Church Army's newer evangelists. I've had the fun of being a little part of his training. He is a man of considerable warmth and humour, an enthusiast and entrepreneur to his fingertips, with a background in running his own local business. He is married to Gina who is an ordinand.

A good try...

In looking for his first job, he built a relationship with one of the local churches, St Bart's Langsett, Lower Walkley in north west Sheffield. He began part-time work with them in 2005, and was licensed full-time from September 2006. In that time he has established a number of good community links. St Bart's building is a completely new build in the last 20 years, including a community area adjacent to and visible from the worship area. Recently, this area of the complex has been renamed *The Well*. This multi purpose building reflects a long (and sometimes chequered) history of the premises also functioning as a community centre, which is highly suitable as the area is one that has known considerable deprivation. He has long hoped to do café church there and was full of ideas. However, he was going to a church community that averaged 30 people on a Sunday, most of who were over 60.



St Bartholomew Sheffield



The idea

In January 2007 we sat down together for me to hear the story of what happened. At Easter 2006, Kinder was part of a Church Army mission team to the parish that put on a Sunday morning café service, replacing the normal fare. He saw it as trialling what he could offer later.

The event was publicised as an informal café style service and 54 came, of whom 30 were the regulars. What was the reaction? In his own words, *“The congregation said even though they didn’t want it to be their regular service, they knew people that would come to something like that and not normal Sunday mornings, which is why we ran with it”*. He also hoped some would buy into it, providing needed assistance with the practicalities and familiar faces.

The practice

May 2006 was for real. The time changed to 5.00pm, partly to avoid a clash with the congregation and for the better reason that listening to the neighbourhood suggested that by then Sunday lunch was well past and kids bedtime hadn’t started yet. Conversations at the door suggested afternoon midweek or a weekend evening but the church leadership thought it must be Sunday. At least that time could be a slack point in the day. The location moved out of the worship area into *The Well*. Kinder and Gina invited people on the periphery of church life from occasional office contacts and asked them to bring their friends. Publicity called it *Sundays at 5pm* explained as *‘explore faith and life issues - coffee-cake-chat’*. There was a photo of the church (which doesn’t look much like one) giving the address with the words *The Well* beneath it. The word church was well hidden within the flyer.

Kinder was clear about elements that shouldn’t happen because they were too churchy – no hymn singing or communion. But he kept in a disguised prayer of confession, dramatised reading from the bible, a 2 minute thought and space for prayers. All this sounds very traditional so I should add the other elements he included: testimony, use of video clips, discussion at tables and prayer stations like the act of dropping a pebble into water. The frequency

changed to weekly from a one-off and they made the decision to adapt and lengthen a nurture course used in their sponsoring church to which they had contributed. Culturally, the two churches have some similarity so that was plausible. *The Well* was set out with tables and chairs. One each was a menu of the content of the afternoon, containing starter, main course and dessert. This is code for ice breaker exercise, discussion topic and space for private reflection. The topic was *Who is God?*



The tail off

17 came, of whom 4 were team and 7 were from St Bart’s who sat on their own familiar table. They recognized they made some mistakes such as leading it all from the front instead of having group leaders at the tables and they over invested in the multi-media approach which the discussion didn’t really need. By June, the numbers were down to 12 of whom 4 were children and the big issue was how to follow up those who had stopped coming. The voluntary nature of café culture rather militates against this. In mid June no one came as the event clashed with England playing in the World Cup. By July, the attenders were a handful. Furthermore, the rota system they chose to staff the four people necessary to front the event, provide the catering and welcome people came under pressure of summer holidays. By the time I met with Kinder, those who came were a small group of 9-12 year olds who like a cake and enjoy lighting a candle to pray. Some of them have started hanging around on Sunday morning too.

The aftermath

Kinder and Gina have to deal with lots of questions. Was it the time chosen? Would it have worked better after school? Was the venue still too churchy or was it the very open glass building that means there is no anonymity? Another option would have been to use the Healthy Living Centre in the parish that is a natural centre to the community. None of this frustration is helped in that

some Church Army publicity jumped on the bandwagon far too quickly and turned this fragile experiment into an apparent success story.

I am no longer convinced that coffee and cake makes something into an example of café.

Having seen other examples, I have further questions in my mind. **I am no longer convinced that coffee and cake makes something into an example of café.** Running an enquirers course for people who may not be ready for it, in a culture that is naturally fairly chaotic, will not be made viable by coffee and cake. Café is more about a whole style and a relaxed fostering of relationships. With the thankless benefit of hindsight, it all feels like this went

too fast and too soon. They tried to do café church and probably should have only tried to do creating café community, before even moving onto café evangelism, let alone worship. For me it is a case that underlines the length of today's missionary journey and **the illusion that one form of fresh expression of church can cover the spread of what may be needed.** I also think rotas for helpers sound a death knell for café. They speak of administrative arrangement, not organic commitment to values and to ongoing relationships. It is tough when you want to press ahead but the rest of the church is not ready. In such a case starting very small, only with those who are really with you could be far better.

Kinder and Gina were brutally honest with me and I thank them for what we all learn from their realism and refusal to fake it. Thinking café takes more thought than I imagined. **Using café language does not necessarily convey its benefits.** Not everything that starts succeeds. Café is not magic.

Understanding the café evidence

Why attempt café church?

Kinder's story doesn't put me off working with café. I think it resonates with some decent Christian themes, that I hear being echoed round the world. Flying back from New Zealand in the summer of 2006, I read *Thinking Outside the Square*⁶ which is a collection of essays by those engaged in a wider range of mission to Kiwi culture. (That term is their dynamic equivalence to our term thinking outside the box.) **I noticed how many stories included themes of food, community and hospitality.**⁷ It is affording guests the same special attention that is offered in a home.

The deepest foundations here are the Trinity and the sense of community between the members coupled with hospitality extended to others beyond them. Hence to me it is now normal to think of the Trinity as 'community-in-mission'. In *Thinking Outside the Square*, Anthony Nobbs pungently remarks "*relationships are not disposable or instrumental, they are essential for making me who I am.*"⁸ From this kind of conviction flows the priority of relationships, serving others and hospitality.

I wonder if café church does help change something. **I do not believe that coffee makes it easier to follow Jesus, but café has a part to play in putting eating together firmly back into the pattern of discipleship.** For me, it is another part of the evidence that existing congregational life is weak on growing community and discipleship; we have lost the domestic dimension of life, in which loving and living, talking and eating are bound together. Café, where it is not merely selfish private indulgence, is an informal restatement of reconnecting such things. It is one way of putting the best 'home' back onto the townscape. Church could well learn from that.



⁶ *Thinking Outside the Square* St Columba Press & Journeyings 2003 Ed. Ree Boddé & Hugh Kempster

⁷ May Croft's *Brunch@ ½ Twelve* (p.71), Archbishop David Moxon's chapter that has much on hospitality (p.225), Caroline Leys writes that life in community has much to do with hospitality (p.192), Rosemary Neave on the practice of hospitality (pp.250-1), Anthony Nobbs' chapter on community and the importance of belonging (p.273)

⁸ Op. cit. Nobbs chapter p.283

Café church is deceptively diverse

I am already convinced that there is no one thing called café church. The sheer variety within the Derby story shows me that. Not only that, but **no one form of café church will offer a complete journey to faith for an outsider.** In the second issue on café, I will tell the story of even more different café ventures and suggest a taxonomy that can put them all within one coherent grid. I end this issue with a distinction that offers one way to analyze these examples of café church, but which also illuminates a way through some confusion that still surrounds the whole fresh expressions phenomena.

Arches and bridges

If you look at these two pictures and ask what they are, the answer is not always clear; they could be either arches or bridges. Both these engineering structures exist to span gaps between places that people want crossed. They might carry walkers or water; they might be for cars or trains. Sometimes bridges are a single arch; sometimes they are made of many arches. I have come to think that, in evangelistic processes and the planting of churches, those who start them, or those who describe them, are confused about the difference between arches and bridges. I think Kinder's story is a case where they tried to build a bridge, but found it wasn't even an effective arch. Let me explain.



Often Christians find something that seems to work. By 'work', we mean that some people are willing to try something and there is some level of response. The event or course is significant in either moving them toward

faith and ongoing commitment to Christ, or helping existing Christians into fuller discipleship. *Alpha* is arguably the best known case in recent years. But others claim similar virtues for cell church or seeker services and each of these has serious backing from their founding organisation. Fresh expressions of church have hopes in the same direction, though much less resource and publicity. The Fresh Expressions team, led by Steve Croft, and funded by the Lambeth Partners, is a very welcome change to this. However, this resource is not directed to any one model.

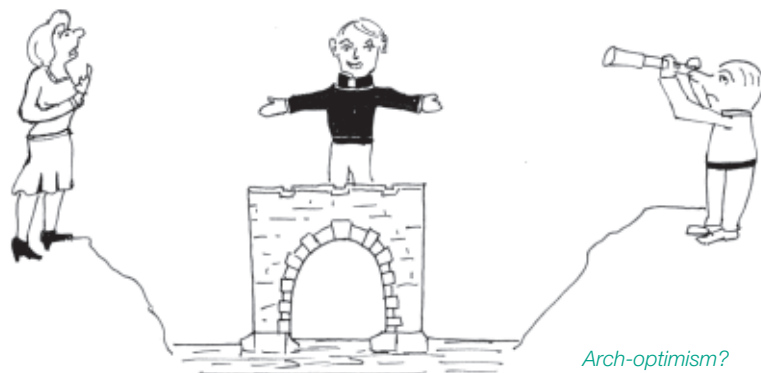
But **often we don't ask two key wider questions about what happens either side of the good thing discovered or promoted.** Does this process start far enough back to connect with people beyond our existing fringe membership and personal contacts? Also, does it take people far enough on, so that they have a good chance of staying life long disciples of Jesus Christ? Our discovery may be that we have found a valuable arch in the overall journey to Christ. **Our blindness is to fail to ask whether this is more than an arch and whether it actually is a bridge.** Because something seems to help some people, we start to think and talk as though it is a complete process in itself. In effect we start to invest in the arch, but fail to see the need to build the bridge. It is as though we say "*what a wonderful arch this is. We should paint it in attractive colours; what about putting some battlements on the stonework and a preservation order on it to ensure its future.*" People write books about what a wonderful piece of stone or brick work it is, with stories of those who crossed it and how that helped them.

Fresh expressions of what?

I begin to see the same confusion with fresh expressions. Please note that term. It has become commonplace to use those two words "fresh expressions" and leave it at that. Tiresome people like me want to ask "*fresh expressions of what?*" Frankly, I guess that many are not yet churches and some may not even be designed to be. However that does not invalidate what they are.

Some of what we see are *fresh expressions of community involvement.* They create genuine bonds of friendship with the local community; they build up trust and good will, offering good loving service to, and partnership with, those in networks and neighbourhoods. That is all to the

good, but they are like an early arch within a longer construction process – it is not yet a bridge. Buying and running a café, in its early years, will be at this stage.



Some things are *fresh expressions of evangelism*, quite different from the proclamation crusade, revivalist meeting or being handed a tract. Beyond the adoption of someone else's process evangelism courses, people have tailored their own. **The ambience of café fits well here with light food to aid the need to belong and the freedom to question around tables.** I applaud these signs of mission. But will they go back far enough to the actual questions of the majority of the population? Can they go on far enough into the breadth and depth of discipleship? Aren't these also actually arches, not bridges?

Some people are working with *fresh expressions of public worship*. Examples include the passion for 'alternative worship', seeker, and some cases café church. Some café events are even described in that way.⁹ I can see this may revive and engage Christians and those open to come back to church, but **it is almost certain that this arch won't go back far enough to connect with those much further out.** They are usually weak on fostering ongoing discipleship. This is not a bridge for most people. Bear in mind that the most recent Tearfund research shows that only 1% of the population are open non-churched and 5% are open de-churched. The former figure is completely new information and latter is far less than we recorded in *Mission-shaped Church*.

⁹ See David Currie Sabbatical Report p.11-12 about a café story from Wellington New Zealand. Available from our office ask@sheffieldcentre.org.uk

With trying to spot arches and bridges, it's not so much what they look like, we must ask what job they do in relation to a context. You only know that something is a bridge when you can see it reaches both sides that it was needed for and that it carries the traffic it was designed for. Watching a national church that can be anxious and which sometimes entertains messianic hopes for new discoveries, I think **we hanker too often for one stunning span that will do all we need.** Yet my guess is that today we need bridges made up of several smaller arches that enable people to cross at their pace.

A fruitful analysis?

So how do you know whether any fresh expression is an arch or bridge? Or indeed is it really a fresh expression of church at all – or only one dimension of being church? What tests could be applied? Jesus told us to look for fruit and that good fruit was a sign of a good tree. Equally, he urged us not to expect figs from thistles. Forgive me if this is simplistic but try this.

- If something creates relationships and the beginning of spiritual interest out of watching changed lives, it may well be a fresh expression of community engagement. But as yet, it is without the later arches.
- If it creates an environment in which people will come and talk, some of whom make professions of faith but it stops there, then it looks to me like the arch of fresh expressions of evangelism and needs the earlier and later arches that make a bridge.
- If what happens is existing Christians exploring spirituality, finding some level of greater authenticity when they gather together, it may well be a fresh expression of public worship, but it is still an arch.
- If something is connecting with those currently outside the church and the result is producing disciples, or put another way, people continue to seek God, want to love fellow disciples in and beyond their own expression of church, and want to engage in serving others in ongoing holistic mission to the culture they came from, or are sent to – that looks to me like church.

This last description is the kind of bridge we are most looking to design and create. That list is quite a tall order, so let me say that in the business

of creating fresh expressions, intentions are crucial. **I'd very much prefer people taking time to build a bridge that they know is not yet complete, than be satisfied with an arch they don't realize fails to connect.** All café churches I have seen are still in this building process. Let those who do café church and all fresh expressions rejoice in what is accomplished but take the long and wide view.



George Lings

April 2007

Cartoons: Tim Sharp

The Well photographs: Media Image Ltd 020 8378 1196

Additional Sources

Mission-shaped or Mission-flavoured: Two Café Stories Ken Morgan
www.encountersontheedge.org.uk

Examples of café included in *Mission-shaped and Rural: Growing Churches in the Countryside* Sally Gaze CHP 2006

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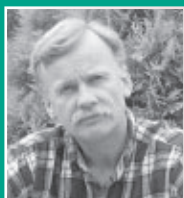
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Supporting the continuing mission
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33: Café Church 1

- Cafe, croissants and Christ?



As café has established itself as an accepted part of British public life, there is a case that this culture should be embraced by church members, carrying within them the gospel of Jesus. This is being done in very varied ways and will take two issues to explore properly. One response has seen churches alter the layout and ambience of their buildings and offer a kind of gathering that reflects the dynamics of cafe. Some have worked and others have struggled. Behind café church and other kinds of fresh expressions, is an important question. Is it a bridge to Christian faith – or is it just one arch, which will need other different arches to complete the bridge?

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