

Encounters on the Edge



no. 34:
Café Church 2
Double Jesus with
cream and sugar?

Contents

E 34 Café Church 2	3	Pendeford Oasis: St Paul Tettenhall	17
Double Jesus with cream and sugar?	3	What actually happens?.....	18
Caféplus+: St Mary Haddenham	4	But is it church?	19
How did it start?	4	'Allo 'allo?	19
Surprise	5	Understanding the evidence: a taxonomy of café church	21
What actually happens?.....	7	Learn from the birds of the air	21
A generally good venue	7	Connecting with the double identity of Christ	22
A great way in	7	How does the taxonomy work?	23
Spaces in the main space	8	Weekly or weakly?.....	25
Quiet space	9	Judea, Samaria or Ends of the Earth?.....	26
Enter <i>Food4thought</i>	10	In closing	28
How do they think they are doing?	12		
What is it?	13		
When is something church?	14		
Choices beckon.....	15		

E 34 Café Church 2

Double Jesus with cream and sugar?

Today the best examples of mission are journeying into surrounding cultures, not persuading people to come into church culture. How does this work in café culture? We found three stories taking honourable risks to venture out beyond church venues. We learnt that café church is a very varied phenomena; no one way to do it is right but no one way can do all that may be needed. We offer a way to place all examples in a taxonomy. This will help people understand what they see. Equally importantly, they can decide what they are called to do and have a good guess of what it can and cannot achieve.



"Here's to café church!"

The commonality across the stories in this second edition on café church is that none of them meet in church buildings, not even their hall. Thus it looks as though they are starting further out, or further back, in the journey to serve others and connect with them. In the language of Frost and Hirsch, **this is incarnational church within café culture rather than attractional church using café themes.**

Caféplus+: St Mary Haddenham



Haddenham is some 14 miles east of Oxford and a couple of miles beyond Thame with which it shares a Parkway station. By train, London is an hour away. The location and connections have accelerated its metamorphosis into a dormitory village. Its centre attractively retains a village feel. The cottage whitewash walls under thatch or stone under old red tiles, together with the requisite pub, look out over the prestigious green, its pond replete with white farmyard ducks. Beyond the war memorial on the green, stands St Mary's church. The idyll appears undisturbed, but the 5,500 inhabitants are increasingly the new villagers. Some signs of this include the new housing since the mid 1970s, the social housing built east of the village, the two primary schools, many of the seven pub/restaurants and a recently-opened gym. Like everywhere else, house price increases are sharp and already the 20-30s are a gap in the age profile.

How did it start?

Plants have roots. As usual there is a history. For some years, a successful holiday club had run but with a perennial question. While we can attract children to events, what is there for the dads? This led to a *Promises* group which began to meet monthly at the neutral youth and community centre, offering free breakfast, newspapers and children's activities. Building these bridges (or more accurately arches¹) seemed to work. But what could follow on from that?

¹ See *Café Church 1 Encounters on the Edge* no.33 p.24. Café church along with some other types of fresh expression of church are likened to one arch of a much longer bridge needing other arches before and after it to enable a fuller process of making disciples of Christ in today's mission context.

The founders, Tim and Kirsten Shaw, lay members of St Mary's, began to imagine a way forward. They noticed the church congregation getting older. In getting to know Tim, I discovered one of his hobbies is rock climbing and that his work is developing computer systems for Oxford University. That seems to be a combination which is strong on initiative in finding out solutions; in his own words, he is *"always working near the edge"*. In keeping with that, he openly confesses to a discomfort with whatever is mainstream, be it *Common Worship* or *New Wine*; it almost equates to a spiritual gift of dissatisfaction. Expressed without constraint, it could be flakey; channelled, it is very valuable. Ignored, it would become dangerous, at the very least, to him.

An idea was taken to the PCC in September 2004. The inevitable working party met and put forward proposals in January 2005 which received 100% approval. The church congregation voted 90% in favour and, more importantly, wanted to be involved. It started in June 2005, ran through the first year with an understandable break on Jan 1st 2006. I visited in June 2006.

Surprise

The story thus far could read like a conservative group accommodating its radical fringe and humouring them. *"By all means start something up, as long as it leaves us undisturbed."* That was not the deal here at all.

Imagine the conversation

"The proposal is a monthly café event in the village hall."

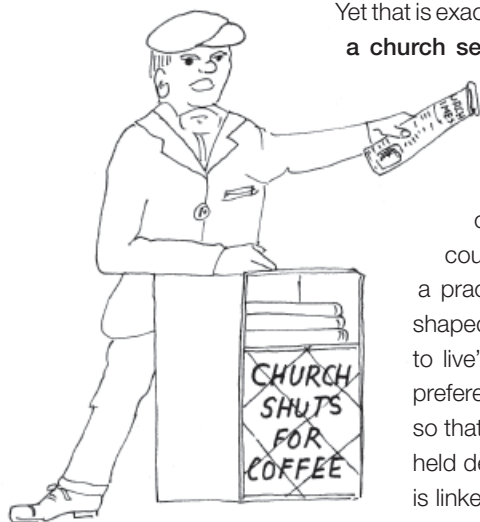
"Fine."

"We're thinking a good time is the first Sunday of the month from 9.30am to 12.30pm."

"Oh, so you won't be in church then?"

"No I won't, but then neither will you, because it means shutting down the 10.30 morning service, so we can serve the community together."

"Ah, well, that will be different. That takes some thinking about."



Yet that is exactly what they have done. **How revealing: close a church service in order to be of service as church, and discover what will emerge.**

It is true that the 8.30am communion still happens and that there is an informal service in the evening, but nevertheless I warmly commend the people of St Mary's for their courage, outward focus and good sense. Here is a practical example of what we meant in Mission-shaped Church when we extolled the instinct "dying to live"². It is about putting down our convenience, preferences and sometimes even cherished values, so that others can find life beyond the forms we have held dear. One phrase kept coming up, which I think is linked to this selflessness; it was a desire to "bless the community". I think I know what is meant, though

I wish there was a snappy contemporary dynamic equivalence to "bless"³. Bless contains a mixture. It includes wanting to serve, a desire to bring good to others and to contribute to the well-being of the wider community. It is linked to prayer, and in biblical theology, "to bless" is actually to confer that which is spoken. It is not mere words.

How interesting that serving others brings more unity than a worship service.

A year after the launch, it was fascinating to talk with Hugh and Trisha who are longstanding church members. They also play prominent professional roles in the community. In *Cafeplus+*, they exemplify the spirit of service and work within the catering team. In their view, this venture of blessing and serving is one out of two things in a thirty year

period that has united the church. **How interesting that serving others brings more unity than a worship service.** They spoke of a renewal of vision, made real by involvement, lived out with the strength of a corporate venture and yet with a vulnerability that needs to depend on God. The results in the people of God are increased motivation, building up of faith, learning self-giving and becoming more generous hearted.

² *Mission-shaped Church* CHP 2004 p.91

³ Answers on an email to ask@sheffieldcentre.org.uk

It did take some giving even to start. £1000 bought crockery, a serious coffee machine and table cloths etc. Consumables run at £160 a month. This includes the £100 rent, food and drink, papers and children's materials. Posters advertised *Cafeplus+* in various venues around the village including library and health centre; increasingly, people hear about it by word of mouth. The village newsletter to all homes was less promising, as it was so full of adverts it was easily binned.

What actually happens?

At 8.40am, the team for the day assembles at the church hall and begins loading the gear necessary for the kitchen, children's work and PA for the main hall. From 9am-9.30am, sees them at the hall and setting up. It takes an overall team of 20 plus the catering team, the children's team and a smaller one for the sound. It is quite an operation that practice has made cheerfully efficient. At 9.30am, the doors open and people begin to arrive. That's a well organised busy start. I doubt it can be then, but I was not clear how and when the team pray for *Cafeplus+* in any sustained way, though those running the quiet space make that part of their task.



A generally good venue

I need to describe the facilities as it is another example of how a building will govern what is offered, for good or ill. Built in 1983, the village hall is relatively modern and has unusually good facilities.

A great way in

The foyer opens to a café area of small tables with a servery and





Only the freedom to be left alone, gives real freedom to choose to talk.

Spaces in the main space

Beyond the café area is the big hall, made emotionally warmer by being laid out with some 20 tables seating 4-5, each with a table cloth and flowers. A *Traidcraft* stall is wisely placed near the entrance, staffed by Debbie and Wendy. The stall takes £80-100 monthly, so clearly it is an appreciated source of fairly traded goods. The room has other optional focal points. One is a stall for those interested in wine making and it is introduced later in the morning as a feature. Another one is rightly left unstated; Marilyn simply sits at her spinning wheel and finds that of those who pass by, some watch and some

kitchen along its left-hand wall. To the right are folding doors which disclose a large lounge of easy chairs. That room could be rather like a scene from a sheltered housing complex, but the chairs are put to the sides to create a children's space. So families that come are immediately met by the offer of food and a safe place where children (3-11) can let off steam. Ronald Macdonald could not have done much better. The café area is laid out with 5 tables and can seat about 20 at a time. The kitchen serves not only very good coffee (cappuccino, latte or espresso) but breakfast runs all morning with a choice of cereals, juice, croissants, bacon rolls and fruit. It feels like quality. As it is free, this is hospitality and grace. Some sit and talk. Others read their newspaper. That's café culture in practice and *Cafepius+* people are absolutely right to go with it. **Only the freedom to be left alone, gives real freedom to choose to talk.**

enquire about spinning. Others sit and begin to talk quite deeply. It is a wonderfully natural example of the value of the oblique. **Both Christians and those without that faith shrink from forced or direct sharing of faith.** Marilyn is an introvert. "I'm not a social person" she says and yet she has discovered a way that really is her, which others choose to enter and which is clearly valued. On the back of it, a spinning group has started up. At the far end of the hall, temporary staging has been erected with a screen that suggests powerpoint is lurking to be revealed. Off to the left of the hall, down a dubious narrow passage is a further small room that houses the teenagers. They probably enjoy being away from it all but only the initiated would dare to get there.

Quiet space

Beyond the end of the hall is a small door that leads to a designated quiet space. The room is long and thin which militates against a sense of space. However, there is TV on at low volume and tables with leaflets, all with intended soft inspirational content. There is a prayer corner, where people can either post up their requests or engage with a person who will listen and, if wanted, pray with you. I was very surprised that when I visited, there were no candles burning which is, I think, a



Traidcraft stall



contemporary and well-understood non-verbal way of indicating prayer and space. **For those who can't articulate what they want to pray, candles provide their own vocabulary.** I suggest it would be another option in this area. At present, more women than men come and the majority are already Christian, but bring real issues of belief and pastoral needs.



Enter *Food4thought*

All of the features mentioned above run throughout the morning, although there is a focal point at 10.30am in the biggest hall. Around 10.20am someone announces through the PA that this section of the morning is starting. They can come if they want and bring their drinks with them. Most do, some don't and that's fine. *Food4thought* is 30 minutes of magazine-style presentation. It is not trying to be trendy worship nor intended

primarily for the existing 10.30am congregation, some of whom flood into the complex around that time and do see it as the God slot in the village hall for that week. Others come and bring their friends to what is a less threatening venue, into an environment less public than the church on the green. Its long approach to the south door makes anonymous enquiry virtually impossible

and what are you supposed to do when you get inside? In conversation with an older member of the congregation, I met a poignant reverse reflection of the same reality.

“When I came to *Caféplus+* for the first time I was terrified. I didn't know how it was going to work.” Precisely. Perhaps linked to this and because of the influx of church people, *Caféplus+* leaders have had to resist making this section churchy and have excluded



requests for choruses or that people be encouraged to ask for prayer. These issues sharpen the questions of “what is *Caféplus+*?” and “is it church?” to which I will return.

I suppose this section of the morning could be called *Seeker Lite* in that each month Helen Barnes and her team explore a contemporary issue including a Christian slant on it. Line drawings, drama, clowning, mime, video, DVD and even Morris dancing (though I can't remember how) have been used to communicate content. Nobody is made to “participate”. I suppose it's almost the cabaret part of a café event. The 120+ people, safe behind their tables, watch or not; those who do, listen, smile, laugh or clap.

The theme I watched was “who do we listen to?”. Video clip vox pops came up on the screen to a backing track. There followed an amusing home-written, well-acted monologue on taking advice on how to catch a mouse in the house, with a genuinely funny and surprising end. Someone else read part of the story of Elijah on Mount Carmel to a backing track of sounds that turned into quieter space, supported by a violin solo. Helen Barnes gave a short talk picking up these accents: God isn't in the obvious or noisy. What place is there for the intuitive? Like a wise parent, God does want to be involved but usually isn't pushy. A poem rounded off the half hour. People are invited to come and discuss with the team or to use the quiet space. I don't know how often they do. Interestingly, that day all the presenters were women.

In the past in church, we wouldn't have noticed if they had all been men. Nowadays, a gender balance is nearly always desirable. Following *Food4thought*, a good light touch took the magazine style onto the special for that month – the wine making stall and a demonstration. I liked the way the “serious slot” was not obviously different from the rest of the morning. **God in the midst of the wholeness of life was a valuable subliminal message.**



They have the idea that a quarterly alternative to the presentation would be setting out a labyrinth in the hall, with stations at various points and left for use throughout the morning. I could guess that starting to get it used might be awkward. In another city, I found the organisers also provided walkmans with music tracks and short suggestions for the stations built into the labyrinth. I can imagine that something to listen to privately might not only aid concentration but might help shut out the presence of others in the hall.



How do they think they are doing?

When I was there the team were working well and the event ran without any major hitches. It is, after all, a live show and over 200 came through during the morning. Throughout the morning I heard different assessments of what was core. I suppose it was natural that each team thought that their element was key. For some it was

the café style, not least the very practical hospitality offered. Others saw a progression from the café venue, through the content of *Food4thought*, to use of the quiet room. It is clear that all think serving others has been a lasting gain for the church members in many ways. They have pulled together, found again how energising vision is, discovered ministries by having to do things and made new friends beyond the church. Perhaps they have turned a corner in the recent history of church and village. Charismatic renewal in previous decades ended robes and brought in interior reordering and new worship styles. It became more eclectic, even termed a mini St Aldates in the countryside, and separated church and village more. *Cafeplus+* marks significant re-engagement with the village but not by return to the worst kind of innocuous chaplaincy to a village entirely on its terms. I think it is a good example of the more difficult role of doing two things; ***Cafeplus+* is both undeniably engaged with the community but is also non-aggressively counter-cultural.** The very term 'free breakfast' might encapsulate that. The message is real hospitality, but not on the middle class assumption that you will invite me back. Then we can both tick the list of having exchanged visits,

enabling us to smile politely at each other in the future and each criticise the other behind their backs.

Those who have come are the new villagers. The old villagers are declining; they are self-sufficient socially in their family groups and if they want proper church they'd go to the proper building at festivals. It is noticed that this is a good link for baptism families, some of whom after the great day become regulars at *Cafeplus+*. It seems easier than going to a family service. Kids can move around in a safe environment. Parents are free to take a short break from being with them. People feel at home, meet those new to them and are free to talk.

I always want to know who looks after the pioneers, as the polar opposite dangers of burn-out or boredom can raise their heads. In this case, it seems that for Tim and Kirsten, in part they have to be self-sustaining. He makes use of pod-cast ministry from other places to listen to in the car. She has a small group of women, fellow *Cafeplus+* leaders, who meet weekly over coffee to talk and pray. I was not aware that leaders of other parts of the work mutually support one another. Perhaps this is all part of the next question.



What is it?

Conversations revealed that this is far less clear. Some were sure *Cafeplus+* is church already. In this view, it was a company of Christians meeting and serving others; they were living out the great commandment. Looking for more was in danger of courting dubious values like seeking numbers in church and success. Moreover, on other Sundays they could put into practice other elements of being church, like public worship and they could go to groups midweek. Others were adamant it was not 'church in the hall', it was just serving the community, though valuable and essential in itself. Similar to that were those uneasy that it would be thought of as church for



two reasons. One was that to call it that would mean newcomers would not progress onto the family service in the church on the green. For them it also raised issues about unity. If this is the 10.30am slot on the first Sunday, what is the relationship between *Cafeplus+* and the rest of the Sundays? Is *Cafeplus+* the 10.30am congregation in serving mode, or is it some other animal?

I am genuinely glad that we are wrestling more deeply with what is church. Only a mixture of seriously thought out generic parameters will be able to engage creatively with the diversity of contexts that already make the local answers look outwardly different. I warmed to the list one person there gave me. What is church? It involves food. It is sharing community more deeply than society. The community has a sense of mission and it is a place that releases people. It celebrates the whole of life, the joys and sadness. Worship is engagement with that whole and includes serving others. **All this aids discipleship which doesn't grow out of meetings but of meeting.** It's a good list, but I'd want to add two things. Unless Christ is explicit as central, it could be any world religion. Unless it relates well to the rest of his body, it is missing the wider unity dimension he intended, today called 'catholicity'.

When is something church?

In assessing whether any fresh expression also genuinely deserves the term church, I have become aware of another complication. In times past, public worship, congregational meeting, teaching for adults and children and midweek specialist provision were all on a weekly basis. That was church. To be rigorous, this self-same pattern was usually devoid of mission in practice, though church members believed it was open to all to come and join them. It was probably short on catholicity, for parish was all, and you just hoped the diocese wouldn't get in the way too much. So even then, with no less than two inherent elements weak or absent, was it church? **To be fair, we are all compromised and living with less**

*"When the church ceases to be one, or ceases to be missionary, it contradicts its own nature."*⁴

than what is fully church. Take the 1953 words of Lesslie Newbigin, "*When the church ceases to be one, or ceases to be missionary, it contradicts its own nature.*"⁴

Now with fresh expressions, the dynamics are even more variable. Some are focussed on building community and pre-evangelism, in which public worship quite rightly has not yet evolved at all. **My present understanding is that it is not the presence of all desirable features that makes something church, rather it is the calling from the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ and his presence.** Newbigin later in the same chapter argues that the ecclesia word simply means gathering and this, by itself, tells you little. Describing church, he writes, "*it derives its character not from its membership but from its Head, not from those who join it but from Him who calls it into being*"⁵. This fits well with Archbishop Rowan Williams' view that church is event; it is what happens when Jesus turns up and begins transforming people. It is a very valuable reminder both to seek God-centred rigour in our understanding, but also to be generous about what we call as being 'in'. I also understand that where Christ is present and his people seek his ways, then over time there will be growth towards the values of living out being Catholic, Apostolic, Holy and One, which we call marks of the church.⁶

Choices beckon

Now having met a number of different café events and thus been forced to think more deeply about them, I see that *Cafeplus+* faces distinct choices. Does it recognize itself, in the terms coined in Encounters on the Edge 33, as an arch; that is, it is one structure or step within a longer process that will require other and different arches to build a bridge that carries people into lifelong discipleship with Christ. In such a scenario, it is very convincing to think



⁴ Newbigin Lesslie *The Household of God* Paternoster 1998 p.23

⁵ Newbigin Lesslie *The Household of God* Paternoster 1998 p.25

⁶ The argument that potential for maturity is more important than external existing marks is developed in my essay within International Journal for the Study of the Christian Church Vol.6 No.1 2006 p.104

that the earlier *Promises* group was the prior arch to *Caféplus+*. If so, what is the next arch?

The alternative is to think of it not as an arch, but as a boat which will sail on. How will it travel on its own way to becoming church with those it has already gathered? What emerges will not look like church on the green. It would have to have the ambience that earned the sobriquet café church. It might



be a small group-based church, meeting around food in homes. My only guess towards an answer is to watch what happens with those who are moving to finding faith. Can they make the cultural shift to traditional church or not? **If we applaud *Mission-shaped Church* as a concept, then let the mission shape what church emerges.**

Pendeford Oasis: St Paul Tettenhall

This example starts yet further out; it is a café operating six days a week in the centre of the community. It pays two full-time staff for the Monday to Friday work and is run by church volunteers on Saturday.

Pendeford is in the northwest quadrant of Wolverhampton. It is now a mixed estate of 10,000 people, half social housing and half private with some areas of deprivation. Begun in the 1970s, the origins of St Paul's church were an informal ecumenical arrangement meeting in a community centre, led by a curate from the parish of Tettenhall. With the prospect of a large estate being built in the 1980s it became evident that a church building would be needed for worship and also for other community activities. The money came from the Diocese of Lichfield and Wolverhampton City Council, as the latter were building a school for the growing number of estate children. Both St. Paul's school and church centre opened in 1982. They are two adjacent and connected buildings, though the school is not a church school.

Mark Kinder arrived in 1998 as team vicar. A number of factors came together that prompted the next stage. The so-called square at the centre of the estate was a bleak, open space, adjacent to the school and church buildings. Often people hung around there dropping off or collecting children. It was a potential gathering place in a community still lacking facilities. Mark saw this as **a chance to combine community development, mission and spirituality**. From 2000, in partnership with local people, £1.5 million of match funding from local and national sources saw the transformation of the square. Now it contains a playground, library, health centre and near the middle, adjacent to the church is the café called Oasis. It all comes with a centre piece amid lights set in the paving stones and the ubiquitous CCTV.



The regenerated square opened in 2005. Clearly the project has created social capital. In their words, "As a lot of the funding for the Oasis came from the community, there is a sense that the Oasis is built in the community,

with money from the community and is for the community.” With some 500 people passing through, weekly takings in an average week are £800. The website wording gives a snapshot of the rugby ball shaped building:

“The Oasis is part of an exciting new development of Pendeford Square. Together with the new chapel for the church and a shared foyer, it forms part of a stunning new extension to the church/school building. The Oasis itself consists mainly of a community café, with attached rooms for one-to-one private discussion, if required. Within the café area is a play area for toddlers and younger children.”⁷

What actually happens?

Seating 40-45 people, it is the meeting place at the heart of Pendeford. It is open daily from 8:45am to 5pm. Decent, fairly traded coffee or tea is 95p, with homemade cake as extra. They offer a healthy lunch option as well as chips and chicken nuggets which is estate fare. Even to do that opens new challenges. Haddenham *Cafeplus+* food was all free, with work done by volunteers. That models Christian hospitality. *Pendeford Oasis* is the café business of that estate. The internal costs alone were £20K. It is jointly funded by the church and the *Pendeford Oasis Partnership* (POP). It comes under food hygiene, health and safety and employment law. Mark as Vicar is chair of POP and freely admits to going through a sharp learning curve on the business, inspection and legal fronts. Help comes in that, in addition to the full-time staff of cook plus one, there is a part-time manager. Three part-timers also work there, though they are less needed during half terms and holiday seasons. This is what it means to take café to the community.

Various groups meet in the café. A new mothers' group meets on Tuesday afternoons with children under 2 years old to gather to socialise, relax and gain group support. A group meets on Wednesday afternoons to help people make better life decisions, around issues like families, health, money, and local community. On Thursdays, there is a lunch and social club for older people providing a two-course meal and drink for just £3.25. Lunch and bingo takes place on Fridays. It sounds to me like these are events that suit the estate and cater for a variety of age groups.

⁷ www.stpauls-church.org.uk/oasis.html

But is it church?

So where is the church bit, apart from just round the corner? To my pleasant surprise, they have found that though St Paul's chapel is a stone's throw away, and the *Pendeford Oasis* has created good will towards the church, nevertheless Oasis can be seen as a fresh expression; Mark and I agreed that by itself it was a fresh expression of community. Like the *Soul Café* story in Derby, they too have spawned other gatherings that go further than creating café community can. In the genre of café, they have begun *The Blend*. It is a monthly chill and chat gathering, on a Wednesday evening, building on relationships started on the estate and warmed through the café contacts. It is styled for those who might say “I do faith but not church”. As could be expected the content is made accessible to its de-churched and non-churched constituency e.g. by using the Nooma DVD materials. For those who have not met these, they are 10 to 14 minute DVD clips from the American Rob Bell tackling a life issue. The nearest English equivalent has just begun to emerge from *FreeSpirit* led by Martin Garner CA.⁸ Some early Blends have looked at issues like identity and forgiveness and used a mix of resources in addition to Nooma e.g. poetry from the ReJesus website, well-known cover songs in an unplugged style with questions and discussion. The venue for *The Blend* is the café and not the nearby church. **What a reminder that physical proximity does not translate into cultural accessibility.**

'Allo 'allo?

Another example of emerging full-blown café, even further out than Pendeford, is almost ready to open in Civray. Michael Hepper is the Anglican chaplain in the mid-west of France. With Gisele, his French wife, they are pioneering a café restaurant in the town square. To be exact, it will be a *Salon de The* and will also include meals at lunchtimes. They have no church and their congregations use various buildings belonging to other denominations. At present, though they have seen remarkable growth with a multiplication of congregations, these mainly cater for those



“Listen very carefully, I will plant this only once”

⁸ FreeSpirit. info@freespirit.org 6 Gilpin Street Sheffield S6 3BL Cost £2.50 each



who are churched, or wish to be and at some stage have moved out to France to live. This community is getting younger, because of relocation to set up internet-based businesses in the cheaper housing market and warmer climate of France. Chaplaincy is no longer simply the care of the retired abroad.



La Bergerie

I visited what was the shell of the café last year and saw the early stages of its transformation. Themed on English northern sheep farming, it is called *La Bergerie*, meaning 'the sheepfold' which will make it novel locally. In secular France, display of religious symbols is rigorously controlled and **only the curious will discover the intentional connection to The Good Shepherd.** The café

restaurant is on two floors with the chaplaincy office and meeting room over the top on the second floor. Thus, as the stages of its life evolve, people can remain within the building they have become familiar with - a wise move. An encouragement is that Alison East, with experience of café church ministry in Stockport, has come to join them and is living in the flat above the office. Intercontinental Church Society (ICS) is actively supporting this by paying her rent. An as yet unanswered prayer is for a drinks license that would make the place more attractive to those who would enjoy a beer rather than a cup of tea. The dream is that this will be yet another kind of church. Michael and Gisele have just sold their house to help finance the project and are down-sizing, a powerful indicator of their commitment. Such are the courageous and risky adventures some Christians are embarking on to better connect with those who won't come to us as we are. I wish them all well.

Understanding the evidence: a taxonomy of café church

Having visited a number of places where café church has been the label and having spoken to others on the phone, it is very clear to me that café church is far from being one thing.

To their amusement or frustration, my friends find that my mind gravitates to analogies. As I thought about café church it happened again. To think there is one thing called café church is as true and false as thinking birds are one thing. We all know birds are different from fish or mammals but there is significant variety within the bird world. Their differences may be more important than their similarities.

Learn from the birds of the air

Birds are not one thing just painted in different colours. A swan is not a white eagle. Nor are they most helpfully distinguished by size. The kestrel and eagle, though very different in size are more alike than the kestrel and the similar-sized pigeon. The key distinguishing differences are mostly about their different habits and their habitats. Some are carnivores like the raptors, others share eating fish but look utterly different like the gannet and the kingfisher. Some birds are seed eaters like finches, while others browse on scraps like feral pigeons. Some inhabit wetlands, others live in the mountains and some are almost domestic. **There is a literally vital relationship between their environment and their identity.** Only because the two fit together is the species sustainable in the longer term. We know that climate change has threatened some animal and bird species. They have to adapt or migrate to survive; if they do that then they may continue to breed and thrive.



I believe the same is true about churches. They are living, corporate organisms, but they are not utterly freestanding. It was a delusion in the prearranged and stable world of Christendom that we knew exactly what church was and how it thrived. But **what was invisible to us was that Christendom was only a**



context; it was not the only world that could be. That is why we are finding it hard to change now. We don't have a recent history of how or why to do that. Yet the reality is that **churches exist only in particular cultural, chronological and missiological climates.**

Connecting with the double identity of Christ

There is a deep missiological and Christological connection that legitimates this change which can inspire and direct us. Jesus was both the Son of God and a first century male Jew. Ever since we started following his command to continue his mission, we have been connected to the two parts of his identity. On the one hand, there is the task of holding onto the eternal good news of and in Jesus and what it is to be a community committed to following him. This flows from our response to his divinity. But on the other hand, this has to be mixed with application of what these verities mean in a different specific context. This flows from his choice of daring to enter a specific humanity. I commend to the reader the writings of Andrew Walls who shows us how the gospel has had to keep on being translated. Though it is the case that there is an eternal word, it is also true that it can only be heard in specific languages.⁹ I dare to critique his much respected view and suggest that what is true about gospel is also equally true about church. Jesus was not just the Word; he came in flesh and deliberately surrounded himself with a community.¹⁰

We live in a time of greater freedom which welcomes creativity about gospel and church than at any time I recall.

In my view, **we live in a time of greater freedom which welcomes creativity about gospel and church than at any time I recall.** It is both privilege and profound challenge. My guess is that much of this has been forced upon us because our mission climate has changed. I dare to believe that the creative disturbance of the missionary Spirit of God and the twin nature of Christ, God the Son and Son of Mary, has also had much to do with it. We now stand in a time when we see the need to create fresh expressions of church, which are attentive to their context and so are mission-shaped. Thus

⁹ Andrew Walls *The Missionary Movement in Christian History* Orbis T&T Clark 1996 particularly chapters 2 and 3

¹⁰ One of the most poignant passages on the primacy of community comes from Newbigin's ecclesiology: *Household of God* Paternoster 1998 pp. 24-25

they will have a better chance to survive and thrive in the context to which they are sent. I don't wish to imply that survival is the agenda item. Continuing in the life and mission of Christ, for the sake of others is the real point, but if they don't survive, that further possibility is never going to happen.

Within that theological framework, I return to the varieties of café church, because any who read this along with Encounters on the Edge no.33 (also on café church) will be foolish simply to copy any one story. It would be far wiser to understand the variety and see how they are offering different things and connecting with different groups. As such, they are more properly like different species within a broad type. Then a reader can make accurate connections to their own context and discern what the Spirit of God may be calling them to do, knowing the opportunities and costs.

How does the taxonomy work?

On the next page, the **columns** mark out different locations on a spectrum from least to most like the kind of café that a casual passing person would recognize and enter. These are discrete categories, though it is possible, in the ongoing story of people following the café route that the venue might change over time. It is generally true that the columns to the right represent greater degrees of risk. That could be measured by the capital outlay required and questions of ongoing financial viability. It could also be about seeking contact with hitherto unknown passing trade and meeting people who have not come with any declared spiritual agenda. Money spent will vary, not so much with the venue as with the extent to which it needs modification and equipment to operate as a café. Thus the third column showing the rental option is probably the cheapest, but it is least certain about how it would develop further, within its own genre.

The **rows** explore the function of café churches in relation to some classic features of being church. I've included the first row to give a full picture of things that use café language, but I wouldn't actually call this row a fresh expression at all, in that it has no missional intention and never ventures outside its own walls. Otherwise, the borders between the rows are fuzzier. Hence there are no lines of demarcation. What is clear is that there is usually an intention for any development of the venture to move down the rows, because that represents movement towards becoming church.¹¹ Thus the row labels are progressive

¹¹ The acute reader will see in the row labels both a progression but also a similarity to the process advocated in the booklet I wrote with Steve Croft and Claire Dalpra *Starting a Fresh Expression* The Archbishops' Council 2006.

rather than separate categories. It is not the case that we begin by offering community and when that bait is taken, that community is withdrawn and people are fed only worship. It is therefore a legitimate question to ask whether some things, though in the café genre, are not yet really church. That is not to dismiss what they do, it is to acknowledge the length of journey before them if café church is their intention.

I have numbered the columns and put letters by the rows to give identifiers in the resultant matrix. The space in the boxes gives me the option to place each venture closer to borders between rows and I have located them following visits and conversations.

A Café Church Taxonomy (only placing stories from Encounters on the Edge 33 and 34)

		Columns: Venue			
Rows: Purpose	[1.1] Church worship area using café style	[1.2] Church hall laid out café style	[2] Rent exclusive use of a local secular venue	[3] Occupy space within an existing café	[4] Buy, create and run a café
[A] Not missional: interactive, experimental worship			n/a	n/a	n/a
[B] Offering and growing community	Derby: <i>Open Mic Night</i>		Haddenham: <i>Caféplus+</i>	Sheffield: 925 Cluster from St Thomas Philadelphia ⁽¹⁾	Civray Pendeford: <i>Oasis</i>
[C] Some sense of community and opening up evangelism	Derby: <i>Soul café</i>	Sheffield: <i>Café Church @ The Well</i>			Pendeford: <i>The Blend</i>
[D] Community, discipleship and evolving worship	Derby: <i>Soul Space</i>				

⁽¹⁾ 925 was a mid-sized group within St Thomas made up of young adults who saw their places of work as their primary mission context. In addition to small groups that met in homes, they gathered for larger events at times and in venues (such as *Pizza Express*) that were familiar and therefore less threatening to the non-Christian workmates they were building relationships with.

It would be tempting to plot *Alpha* on such a matrix. If run as intended, which must include offering food and providing groups, I think it could be seen as café-style evangelism. I suggest where it is placed in the columns will be dependent on the venue used by any one course and may work according to the relational links that enable newcomers to risk a venue that might not be their first choice.

This matrix does not even attempt to measure the number of attenders, believing that this is not the most diagnostic feature. Usually the size is determined by the venue space. Where the financial and personnel outlay is modest, smaller groups are sustainable in the longer term. However, for those groups who have bought a café, the volume of through traffic will affect their long-term sustainability.

The chart does not show frequency, though it seems to me that, at present, there is an observable direct correlation. The work involved for columns 1.1, 1.2 and 2 mean the meeting is monthly. The simplicity of column 3, but practised amid busy lives make it weekly and to make column 4 work, the aim and usually the practice is daily, with a closing day.

Weekly or weakly?

I suggest **frequency and self-identity are linked**. I notice that monthly meetings are prone to be called events. That confirms their episodic character and has the real danger of reinforcing an attendance mentality. Weekly is a well-known rhythm, seen in the patterns of weekend, church, football matches and TV series. Weekly is frequent enough to evoke belonging and commitment, but it seems that participation and engagement, rather than sheer weekly presence, fosters these virtues. The critique of church, by those who leave, is not fundamentally about frequency but the sense of disconnection and irrelevance.

This embedded weekly rhythm creates a problem for monthly café church. How can it be built upon, in a way that retains the DNA of café identity, but does not require the logistics and investment of creating a public café space? One disappointing answer would be traditional church, done sitting round tables. Perhaps a better way forward would be offering groups in homes, which include eating and sharing of lives, on some of the other weeks of

the month. It could even be that this would enable some interchange of life and ideas between the two. It would also help break the suspicion that café church is only a sweetener before putting people on the hard stuff of traditional congregation. Another connection to be made, which might give freedom, is that though church has inherent Up In Out and Of journeys¹², that does not mean that every journey must be expressed weekly. Take two examples: Anglican Ecclesiology believes that the base unit of church is a diocese, a view going back to Ignatius.¹³ Yet one of the long-term definitive tasks of the Bishop is the ordination of those put forward through a corporate vocational process, which itself is part of the reproduction of leaders and the life of church. However, that is by no means weekly. Or again, many forms of mission are reactive to circumstances and can be episodic. Once again, this erodes a hard sense that all functions of church must be weekly.

In the same way, there are elements of living out family life that have different lengths in their rhythms; higher frequency is not an infallible judge of significance. Some important longer rhythms include holidays, birthdays and rites of passage. So it can be in church life; **patterns looser than weekly congregating have occurred before in the spiritual life of the people of God**. Even when the Israelites had settled the land and the Jerusalem Temple was built, all those who lived out of walking distance from it would only have attended public worship at occasional festivals. Weekly synagogue was a much later exilic invention. Here is a tension: on the one hand, patterns less than weekly can be more difficult to sustain, but on the other hand to grow some fresh expressions of church, it seems we need the agility to see church expressed across a variety of meetings, including different time rhythms.

Judea, Samaria or Ends of the Earth?

My guess is that these columns also map fairly well onto the diagnostic tools offered in *Encounters on the Edge* No. 30 which use the categories of the subheading.¹⁴ From what I see and hear, the choice of venue, coupled with the style of the whole event, will position the individual

¹² A shorthand version of holy, one, apostolic, catholic see *Encounters on the Edge* No 5 p.10 or *Mission-shaped Church* Ch 5 p.96

¹³ It could be expressed as the company of those called by Christ, whose response includes baptism and who gather round the Bishop and are in communion with him. Thus the Christological, relational and sacramental are all operative.

¹⁴ George Lings *Encounters on the Edge* No. 30 *Discernment in Mission*. Consult it for terms coined or popularized there and used without further comment here.

example of café church, on this cultural map of the varied mission tasks before us in the West.

Despite the energy, creativity, sensitivity and aspirations of those in variants of columns 1.1 and 1.2, the vast majority of their contacts are with existing Christians and open de-churched people. The venue simply precludes other contacts most of the time. Moreover, **in many cases the intention of a café church event does not start far back enough in terms of being content to hang out with people**, but has a shape and thrust that offers presentation. These are worthwhile ventures, but the danger is that they remain essentially 'Judean journeys'. I see nothing in the surrounding culture to indicate that this constraint will change and that they can easily connect with those further out.

I sensed from the Haddenham example in column 2, that the venue choice and the style have opened up the beginnings of more de-churched and some non-churched coming, simply to find food and chill space in congenial surroundings. As such it is café, that is, **you come and go when you want, not to fit in with the planned programme of the café owner**. For those who run it and those who come, this will be a slow and uncertain journey, but it is more like the 'Samaria Safari' or perhaps an 'Ends of the Earth expedition'. Thus what church might look like, at the end of the road is less clear. That may be a mercy because we are re-learning the truth that inculturated church should evolve, not be imposed.

You come and go when you want, not to fit in with the planned programme of the café owner.

The last two columns contain similarity and difference. They share the possibility of drawing those from way outside and are most like 'Ends of the Earth expeditions'. The Sheffield 925 example was entirely reliant on relational links but its venue and style made it accessible even to non-churched. The daily cafés in column 4 do not start by being relational, though customer loyalty in pubs does become a form of community. They, in theory, are open to all and because their Christian footprint is discreet this will include "all sorts and conditions of men"¹⁵. The big challenge they share is in what ways to

¹⁵ Book of Common Prayer: Prayers upon several occasions when the Litany is not appointed to be said : p. 814

build on these openings such that indigenous Christian community forms, almost certainly alongside the continued daily life of the café.

In closing

Readers may think I have a lurking preference for the riskier ventures, so let me be clear. **None are doing the wrong thing, but none of these can achieve everything.** The complicated contours of our mission context mean that we will need all the variety of types of café church. What will take longer to notice and discern is whether the majority are in fact only walking the Judean journey. If so, the question rightly arises whether that is the best choice if we know that the proportion of the open de-churched is a shrinking group. I know of one case in the west country where a promising home-based café church that grew out of an *Alpha* group was eventually stopped by the pioneer leader because it became an event in which the style and demands of the Charismatic Christians made it no longer suitable for spiritual seekers or young Christians with a non-churched background. It seems that the early church problems of the Judaisers are still with us. Paul's response is robust rebuttal of this down drag back into previous exclusive cultural expressions of church; made worse by the passion for this external form, they turn out to be the dead hand of law with the essential priority of grace abandoned. Café church gives us another chance to explore facing outwards to see where being sent by Christ will take us.

<http://www.cafepius.org.uk>

<http://www.stpauls-church.org.uk/oasis>

George Lings

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Cartoons: Tim Sharp

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34: Café Church 2

Double Jesus with cream and sugar?



Today the best examples of mission are journeying into surrounding cultures, not persuading people to come into church culture. How does this work in café culture? We found three stories taking honourable risks to venture out beyond church venues. We learnt that café church is a very varied phenomena; no one way to do it is right but no one way can do all that may be needed. We offer a way to place all examples in a taxonomy. This will help people understand what they see. Equally importantly, they can decide what they are called to do and have a good guess of what it can and cannot achieve.

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