

37: Chasing The Dream

Starting community



Many of us long to be part of a church that goes beyond mere shallow acquaintance to caring for one another as lives are shared together. Is this kind of community as elusive as sometimes it can seem? What can we learn from intentional Christian communities that have turned the dream into reality? What would they say were the classic mistakes to avoid? How does community aid them in their mission task? What will help us plant fresh expressions of church whose community life is authentic? Claire Dalpra went to find out.

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no. 37: Chasing The Dream

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Encounters on the Edge

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Chasing The Dream

Starting Community

Community. The word makes my heart rise and fall simultaneously. My experience of Christian community, thus far, has been frustrating. I have been a member of too many groups who have named this as their intention but in practice have either been disappointingly shallow or disorientatingly short lived. **Depth and sustainability seem an elusive combination.** I'm now sceptical of anyone who talks aspirationally about community without careful consideration of what it means in practice.



And yet, much as I'd like to, I can't let go of the ideal altogether. I still find myself drawn to reading books and articles on community (of which there seem to be an increasing number) and I can't entirely ignore those rare moments over the years when it feels as though one or two groups I have been part of have come quite close to a level of honesty, acceptance and caring for each other that I and others would call community¹. Rather than naively assuming it will just magically happen, I can't help hoping that if only we took the time to learn from those Christians who have built lasting, transforming community, those rare moments might grow into something more permanent.

Professionally-speaking, ten years' research into church planting and fresh expressions of church has confirmed our suspicions that nurturing community is a dimension that is growing in significance. In some mission contexts, community is the best element of church you have to work with in the beginning stages of a church planting process². In other contexts, the kind of people you

¹ Both Vanier and Peck define community as a group who above all commit themselves to caring for one another. Under these terms, clubs, issue-based groups or schools are not inherently communities, for their *raison-d'etre* is primarily focused elsewhere in enjoyment, winning a cause or academic achievement.

² In the planting of some new churches (especially among the non-churched) increasingly our starting points of public worship have proven to be too incomprehensible and our standard evangelistic methods have been seen as too manipulative. Discernment in Mission: *Navigational Aids for Mission-shaped Processes* Encounters on the Edge Church Army 2006 p.10

are working with requires a deeper investment in what it means to be community: teenagers, students, young adults because they would expect no less³, or those who feel marginalised, ill, exhausted, lonely and depressed because the kind of ongoing support they need cannot be delivered by one person.

But our Christendom inheritance hampers us in thinking beyond Sunday worship as the focus of community for a Christian congregation. How do we grow community without regular weekly public worship as a starting point? How do we nurture community when, as it is with network-focused churches, a building isn't owned and it doesn't relate to a geographical area? How do we best grow a quality of community that *Christians* will want to join, let alone non-Christians?

Against this backdrop, I was asked to assist Revd Dr Michael Moynagh to undertake some research into this very question, the fruit of which would contribute to the Share website⁴. We journeyed the length and breadth of the country to interview ten practitioners and consultants with wisdom in this area. (I insert brief descriptions of our time with them between chapters.) **This booklet, along with the next in the series, reports back on their key points of agreement as to what helps Christian community grow.** This booklet looks at some of the issues concerned with starting a community, both starting a community from scratch and transitioning existing groups into something more intentional. The next booklet (*Encounters on the Edge no.38*) will focus on the issues that help a community grow in maturity.

I imagine these booklets will be most relevant to leaders and members of fresh expressions who see community as a key component of their mission task. As a number of our practitioners pointed out, **our enthusiasm for planting fresh expressions of church must be matched by wisdom.** What can we learn from the best examples of transforming Christian community - such as Lee Abbey and Northumbria Community, as well as writers such as Jean Vanier and Scott Peck - that might help us grow better community in the context of church, so new missional churches can be established and grown to maturity? Even if community is lower down on the list of priorities, at the very

³ *Reaching the Friends Generation* by Simon Kirby Church of England Newspaper, Feb 1, 2002

⁴ A gift from the partnership between Fresh Expressions and Church Army to the wider church, containing advice on starting and sustaining new missional churches called fresh expressions. www.sharetheguide.org

⁵ Walter Wink *Naming the Powers: The Language of Power in the New Testament* Fortress Press 1984 Wink talks of a group spirit as an emergent reality arising from human relationships in which the influence of the whole is greater than the sum of the parts. He warns that it can lean towards good or ill and needs to be given due attention so that the inside (what is unseen but felt) is like the outside (what is said or claimed).

least we should be starting and sustaining fresh expressions of church that function well as community. Walter Wink has written extensively on what he calls the spirit of a group that arises in any group that needs due care and attention so it grows healthily rather than unhealthily.⁵

We have always been clear that *Encounters on the Edge* should not promote quick fixes or simple step-wise programmes to "success" lest it give the deluded impression that there are easy answers. These two booklets are no exception. Scott Peck writes that community, like electricity, does have certain laws and the purpose of this research was to search out some of those. But there is something subtle and mysterious about community. I am mindful of this as I write. I do not wish to give the impression I hope to deliver some sort of instruction kit to "flat-pack" community. Community cannot be manufactured. If we force it, we will ruin it.

⁶ Scott Peck *The Different Drum* Arrow 1990 p.60

Great expectations

All our interviews touched upon the importance of handling well our own expectations and those of others regarding community. In many ways, the entirety of these two booklets attempt to address expectations, but there are a number of important things to say at the outset.

Debunking the utopian dream

At the risk of plunging readers into doom and gloom before starting, our interviewees were united in their agreement that people's expectations about community should never be unrealistically raised. *"The greater their idealisation of the community at the start, the more they put the people at its head on pedestals, the greater the disenchantment"*⁷ says Jean Vanier, founder of the L'Arche community in France, a household community for the mentally handicapped and their helpers. In *Community and Growth*, Vanier writes that there will inevitably be a stage of disenchantment for those entering community life. This cannot and must not be avoided, but its pain for the individual and the community can be reduced by encouraging realistic expectations, watching out for the person as they encounter it and having the courage to talk in the open about it.



The ancient initiation process into the community regarding expectations was brutal but effective.

Fresh expressions of church aren't spared any of these difficulties; indeed, unrealistic expectations might be greater. They might be a "last chance saloon" for disillusioned Christians who place upon them high expectations to fulfil their needs in the ways that previous models of church couldn't or wouldn't. *The Northumbria Community*⁸ gently but directly invite such people into a process of self-reflection to avoid self-pity and discover how they may need to respond. What is God calling them to do about how they feel?

⁷ Jean Vanier *Community and Growth* DLT 1989 p.79

⁸ For a brief description of Northumbria Community, see page 4 of this booklet. For a fuller description, see *Northumbria Community: Monastery and Mission* Encounters on the Edge no.29 Church Army 2006.

⁹ For a brief description of The Net, see page 7 of this booklet

Dave Male talked of the temptation he fell into of thinking The Net⁹ could begin as a fresh expression that would be a "super community" to a number of ex-church-goers they were in relationship with and others that subsequently joined them. In hindsight, they regretted this raising of expectations because the fall-out when conflict occurred unexpectedly was so deeply hurtful. He described it as the greatest mistake he had made. I thank him for his honesty and suspect he is not unique in this. Vanier warns that no community should "fall into the trap of thinking it can be the saviour of all."¹⁰ We should not be too hasty to set up expectations in our conversations that are hard to meet in practice, leaving us more guarded and also more confused than we were before.



Not in place of God

Neither should a community itself act as if it can take the place of God. Jean Vanier warns that it is a sin of a community to "turn its eyes" to itself as a source of life¹¹ instead of looking to the One who called it into life and is the source of life. He draws our attention to the way Ezekiel writes about the Jewish community, in chapter 16, as a woman whom God cared for and made beautiful. When she became powerful, she also became proud and in turning her eyes away from her rescuer, lost her way. In the same way, wise communities are those who are humble about acknowledging their source of life and power as God.

The social psychologist we met with, Sara Savage¹², underlined for us that no human community is meant to fill the gap of your individual relationship with God. We must watch that we aren't asking a community to be and do what we should be being and doing with God. We shouldn't ask humans to function as God because they can't. In this way, we are wise not to lean on community too hard.

Once again, fresh expressions of church might be more prone to this with, on the one hand, new Christians and, on the other, jaded de-churched Christians whose spiritual lives are on hold while they wait for the right church to appear. At every opportunity, communities must look to regularly dedicate and facilitate space and time, with the expectation of individuals spending time with God by themselves.

¹⁰ Jean Vanier *Community and Growth* DLT 1989 p.268

¹¹ Jean Vanier *Community and Growth* DLT 1989 p.159

¹² For a brief description of Sara Savage, see page 11 of this booklet

Motivations that lie beneath

Dietrich Bonhoeffer in *Life Together* writes about "wish dreams".¹³ Each of us unconsciously brings with us very definite ideas of what we think Christian community should be, but we must let God shatter these dreams as soon as possible; only the communities who have faced the disillusionment of inability to realise their own ideals, can ever hope to understand how God intends Christian community to work and therefore survive in the long term. Sara Savage also warned us in her interview to be careful about the kinds of community we hope to nurture. Traditional churches have their existing congregations to ask about this, but fresh expressions set up for those who have yet to join run the risk of unhelpfully predetermining what they may want. Furthermore, the people we are seeking to serve mustn't be the means to our selfish end of building the kind of Christian utopia. **Do we consciously or unconsciously want to push our own agenda?**

If we try too hard to force any kind of community with those who have not chosen it, all we will do is oppress or invade people. We need to be less contrived at the outset. The dying to live instincts to lay aside one's own preferences in growing church in a cross-cultural context¹⁴ encompass our preferences for community as well as worship. I would not wish to push any particular kind of community in this booklet. Size, frequency of being together, proximity, intensity are but a few variables.

There might be a further motivational issue worth mentioning at this point. Vanier writes:

*"The more a community deepens, the weaker and the more sensitive its members become. You might think the exact opposite – that as their trust in each other grows, they in fact grow stronger...Love makes us weak and vulnerable because it breaks down the barriers and protective armour we have built around ourselves. Love means letting others reach us and becoming sensitive enough to reach them."*¹⁵

We don't enter Christian community to feel good about ourselves. If we are hoping for a life of increased security and confidence, or a kind of safety in numbers mentality coping with the outside world, we are in danger of missing the point. Community requires enormous personal sacrifice in ways that can leave you feeling frighteningly disarmed.

¹³ Dietrich Bonhoeffer *Life Together* SCM Press Ltd 1954 p.15

¹⁴ Mission-shaped Church Archbishops' Council 2004 p.91

¹⁵ Jean Vanier *Community and Growth* DLT 1989 p.48

Interview 1

Roy Searle, Wooller, Northumberland

It was on a visit to Lindisfarne off the coast of Northumbria that I first suspected I was falling in love with the person who became my husband. Therefore, that part of the world will always have a special place in my heart.

I was delighted that this research project gave me a reason to make the train journey up to Berwick-upon-Tweed in what turned out to be glorious sunshine despite being early November. The rugged Northumberland countryside on my left was just as beautiful as the views of the calming sea on my right, culminating in crossing the mouth of the river Tweed on arrival in Berwick. Mike Moynagh and I were then driven by taxi along quiet country lanes to Roy Searle's house in Wooller, a small town 17 miles from Berwick.

Roy is one of the leaders of the Northumbria Community, a dispersed community with over 3,000 members worldwide, drawing deeply on the wisdom and practices of historical monasticism as a way to sustain them in their spirituality and mission. Their Mother House, Nether Springs, situated a few miles inland from the sea, acts as the heart and home of the community, staffed by ten or so household members offering hospitality for visiting community members and others. I have long been aware of this praiseworthy example of "new monasticism" through George Lings' close involvement with the community.¹⁶ They never intended to become a community but did so as the most effective way to live as missionaries in today's mission context. Therefore, over the last 15 years, they have had to learn as they've gone along.

As one might have expected from those well-practised at hospitality, the welcome Mike and I received that day by Roy and his wife was delightful. We nattered over cafetiere coffee on red sofas in their light, airy sitting room, complete with vaulted ceiling, looking out on glorious views of the fields beyond. We then adjourned to a local coffee shop on the high street where we continued to talk over the best broccoli and sweetcorn soup I have ever tasted. Despite Roy's gentle insistence on underlining all the deeply challenging aspects of living in community, both the soup and Roy's reflections on their life together warmed me to my very cold toes.



¹⁶ See George Lings *Northumbria Community: Matching Monastery and Mission* Encounters on the Edge no.29 Church Army 2006

Valuing your values

I was not surprised at all to hear values talked about as a crucial ingredient fairly early on by everyone we met. Values are those things that a family, group or church together hold as important about how they are together regardless of what they are tasked with doing together. Values refer to what people value in one another. Values are difficult to establish, to articulate and to handle because they operate at the level of process rather than content and, broadly-speaking, our culture generally and our church culture more specifically doesn't equip the average person to develop skills in awareness at this level. But as George Lings remarked in interview, "*effortless demonstration of a community's bespoke values is one of the things that reveals its maturity*".¹⁷

Take your time

Northumbria Community are a good example of a community who have thought carefully about values and seen the fruits of doing so. They maintain that the process of choosing your values must begin by acknowledging what is already happening in the founding community or planting team. Values must come out of experience or they will ring hollow. They can't be a wish list but must be borne out of what God is already doing among you. This means that any community starting out has to live with a sense of provisionality in its early years. Exactly how long you should wait before establishing your values will vary but *Northumbria Community* took eight years. If that seems too long, note their advice that **the shorter the time you take to establish your values, the harder the task of living by them will be.** This colludes helpfully with the reminder from the previous section not to seek to impose a pre-determined community ideal onto the kinds of people you are seeking to serve; waiting until relationships can be formed and values determined together is of crucial importance. George Lings reminded us that a team made up of people who do not know each other will need an even longer gestation period, as will teams that are large in number.

Values must come out of experience or they will ring hollow

For Northumbria Community, values are foundational in the sense that that is where you begin, but also foundational in they are what you build on. As Encounters on the Edge no.29 explained, it is out of values that Northumbria Community established their sense of call or charism. Values help them in their discernment of what living this charism on a day-to-day basis should look like. As Vanier also writes from his experience at L'Arche, demands on a community's

¹⁷ For a brief description of George Lings' interview, see *Encounters on the Edge* no.38 p.30

time and energy will always be great, and so often "*essentials are obscured in a thousand and one activities.*"¹⁸ "*All serious decisions must be seen in the light of a community's values. They will help you sort out what is important from what is secondary.*"¹⁹ For Northumbria Community, values also help discern what the important issues are for the whole community to take on and what issues are for individuals to take responsibility for.

Because they realise the necessity of seeking God through what has grown up as availability and vulnerability, these values have helped them enormously in how they handle conflict resolution. In times of conflict, all members are invited to examine their hearts and confess their sin before God in solitude.²⁰ In addition, their careful balancing of being together and alone, as well as community and mission, helps them avoid the burnout that so many Christians can fall foul of. Lastly, values have got them closer to the kind of liturgy that sustains them in their charism and many will be familiar with their office book *Celtic Daily Prayer*. It is perhaps not too surprising that Roy told us that once the values are established, they are so foundational that if you were to change the values, you would be forced to bring that community to an end and begin another.



A Northumbria Community poustinia or cell

One of the best gifts values offer a community is the way in which they can assist a church in surviving beyond its founding planter, a hurdle that many good church planting starts have not been able to surmount. Choosing the right sort of leadership to take over after the founder moves on is absolutely crucial for its continuation. A number of our interviewees maintained that selection criteria must include understanding the specific church's values *above all else*. Consequently, this requires those selecting and those being vetted for selection to have some awareness of how a community operates in the dimension of values. Some shared their concern that we as a wider church do not invest more in the training of values, and twice it was suggested that values training be part of ministry formation.

¹⁸ Jean Vanier *Community and Growth* DLT 1989 p.177

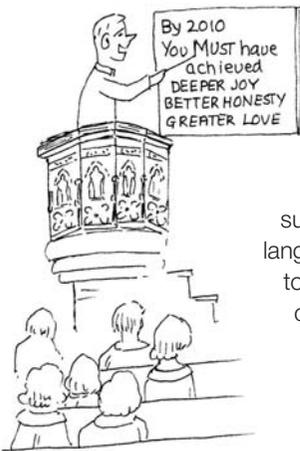
¹⁹ Jean Vanier *Community and Growth* DLT 1989 p.50

²⁰ The Poustinias or cells (wooden huts to house one hermit) in the grounds of their Mother House are illustrative of their practical commitment to living out this value day by day.

In Dave Male's successor, *The Net* sought a leader who could take on the community's existing values rather than impose his or her own. A leader was found in Nick Haigh, an ordinand who had been on placement with them and who had therefore already "lived" with *The Net*. The monastic pattern of electing new leadership from within your community might be an important correction to the wider church in the way it selects and appoints leaders. If values are important as we suspect they are, a leader from within the existing community who has lived the values is well placed to lead. The alternative is to select a leader who is willing to join as a learner.

Vision or valves

But aren't these the kind of issues dealt with by vision? I note that all of our interviewees were tentative when talking about vision. One comment was that, at its worst, vision can become a power issue motivated more out of our need to control. Vision can so easily play into the hands of defensive leaders. One interviewee even raised the question of whether the recent prominence of vision- or purpose-driven thinking in church life may be more about our western values than the gospel. If today's culture is geared to vision, not process, it is perhaps not surprising that for some churches, value questions get overlooked. Myers in *Organic Community*²¹ is similarly suspicious of vision; he believes a master plan approach using language of "ought" and "must" is flawed. For community-building, it is too rigid. We are again in danger of pre-determining or imposing community in a way that becomes counter-productive. Missional church must be adaptive in order to be able respond to what arises out of the mission context. Values give us both cohesion and flexibility to respond well in unpredictable situations.



Solely task-orientated groups and teams can get by with vision alone, but community needs values. Community is about how a group is with each other, not what they do together, so attention must be given to processes within a group. There is something not quite right about expecting programmes or strategy to "deliver" community; something more personal is needed. **I note that both Northumbria Community and The Net understand their vision to be merely living out their values well.** Not all communities will be of the kind that use the language of charism, but any community would do well to reflect on what values they feel they are called to live as they reflect on their gifting and sense of call in mission. As Dave Male commented: "the biggest problem facing fresh expressions of church is not knowing who they are and who they are for".

²¹ Joseph R. Myers *Organic Community* Baker Books 2007 p.30

Interview 2

Dave Male, Cambridge and Huddersfield

On a grey, drizzly day in late November, I walked out of Cambridge train station to the largest collection of bicycles I have ever seen. I hopped on a bus and met Mike Moynagh in the Starbucks on Market Street, a very apt rendezvous point as we share a deep love of coffee, but a slightly risky one as, not knowing Cambridge at all, it is entirely possible these days that there should be more than one Starbucks in the immediate vicinity. Our interview with Dave Male was at Westcott House on Jesus Lane, one of the two Church of England theological colleges that Dave now teaches at. On arrival, Dave ushered us up to his office tucked away up two flights of stairs, looking out onto a delightfully quintessential college quadrangle of green grass with college spires beyond.

Dave brought to our interview his first-hand experience as a planter of a fresh expression of church called The Net in 1999, a network church in the town centre of Huddersfield for those who work and socialise there and only sleep in the dormitory housing estates on the outskirts.²² They were keen to emphasis community as an important part of their mission outreach. In addition, as a new church with no parish or local geographical area to work intentionally within, they were forced to think deeper about what being a community for a network meant and sought help from outside resources. His forthcoming book focuses on this aspect of church above all others.

In 2007, Dave took up the role of part-time lecturer and trainer of Church of England pioneer ordinands training at Cambridge theological colleges, at the same time as taking on the part-time role of supporting and equipping the planting of fresh expressions of church in the Ely diocese. His insights concerning community in new missional churches from this strategic perspective were just as valuable as his first-hand experience.



²² See *Net Gains* Encounters on the Edge no. 19 Church Army 2003 for a more detailed account of their story.

Welcome diversity

In the beginning

L'Arche began when Jean Vanier invited two handicapped men to live with him. The Lee Abbey Community was founded by an evangelical priest, a catholic priest and an evangelical layman, the latter two having experience of mission abroad. *Northumbria Community's* journey began through the friendship of a Baptist, an Anglican and a Roman-catholic. These three founding stories, though different in many other ways, are similar in that they were started with founders who, in their triumvirate, brought difference to each other, be it need, tradition, experience or gifting. There in the communities' inception lay the DNA to acknowledge and appreciate difference that has set a helpful precedent ever since. I note that St. Paul preferred never to travel alone and cited the work of others in the founding of New Testament churches.

Respecting diversity is to respect each other. In respecting each other, we help individuals see how much they have to give and what particular gifts they have. Vanier writes that *"Community is only community when all its members realise how deeply they need the gifts of others."*²³ Peck opens his book *The Different Drum* with a mythical story of a dwindling group of tired and despondent monks who are told by a local rabbi that the Messiah is among them, masquerading as one of the brothers, but they do not know which. Very quickly, this brings life to their small community as they treat each other with the utmost respect and renewed affection as they wonder which one of them the Messiah might be.

Peck later offers us a helpful analogy of looking at each other through *"soft eyes"* as shorthand for regarding people through *"lenses of respect"*. When we begin to do this, something special happens. *"...as the masks drop and we see the suffering and courage and brokenness and deeper dignity beneath, we truly start to respect each other as human beings."* To look at each other through our masks of composure, is to do so with *"hard eyes"* through barriers of distrust, fear, resentment and prejudice which will never build a safe environment for either party to be more open.²⁴

The challenge of community is not simply to identify or tolerate diversity but invite it, celebrate it and transcend it. We should never ignore or obliterate what makes us different from one another. Steve and Jenny Hellyer²⁵ described the

special celebration evenings that Lee Abbey held, inviting someone of a different nationality within their community to share something of their homeland and its traditions. It is the kind of attitude that would concur with Peck when he writes: *"actively seek out those who are different from you because they will have the most to teach you"*. Sara Savage in her book *The Human Face of the Church* writes about the inevitable process of conformity, especially in churches, because acceptance is so often what people hope to find when they come to church. The book offers reasons as well as suggestions to help spot unhelpful conformity.

Once again, fresh expressions may be more prone to attracting de-churched Christians who have failed to conform and consequently not found acceptance in traditional churches. In the fresh expressions we interviewed, we perceived instincts for resisting the temptation to only gather similar kinds of people together. The Net leadership team was intentionally selected to be as diverse a group as possible. Others said new and varied people joining were a catalyst for growth, and yet another said they eagerly welcomed different people for what new thing God was bringing to the community through them.

Actively seek out those who are different from you because they will have the most to teach you

Boundaries are tricky

Choosing to share your lives with people who are different from you is what makes community something more than just a group of friends, but as Vanier writes: *"there is such fear of difference, such fear of losing one's identity. If an individual, a group or nation gets too close to others and starts letting down barriers, they can become frightened of losing own identity and values, their sense of belonging. So, they close up again upon themselves."*²⁶ Like a child when it feels it is not wanted or loved, we close up to protect ourselves. The way Vanier writes suggests it is a fundamental instinct which runs much deeper than preferences for musical genre or what Belbin type we may be.

Peck is clear that community is and must be inclusive. Groups that exclude others because they are of a different class, different ethnicity or are divorced are cliques working against community. However, he acknowledges that having warned against exclusivity, inclusiveness is not absolute.²⁷ All well-established

²³ Jean Vanier *Community and Growth* DLT 1989 p.264

²⁴ Scott Peck *A Different Drum* Arrow 1990 p.69

²⁵ For a brief description of Steve and Jenny Hellyer, see p.15

²⁶ Jean Vanier *Community and Growth* DLT 1989 p.6

²⁷ Scott Peck *The Different Drum* Arrow 1990 p.61

communities have had to struggle over the degree to which they are going to be inclusive. Even shorter-term communities have to address this issue too. For all communities, their inherent values suggest boundaries; a church electing a staunch atheist or Muslim as a core member would not make sense. However, Peck's comments would suggest that a healthy Christian community should take care that it doesn't exclude or dismiss any members wrestling with profound doubt regarding faith.

Concerning the internal life of a community, Savage and Boyd²⁸ as well as Herbert²⁹ warn against cliques, triangles and pairings within a community that can so unhelpfully divide and work to undermine the group. Lastly, Peck also warns that, as well as excluding others, the great danger to community is that we, as individuals, exclude ourselves by deciding quietly to give up bothering to engage.³⁰

There seems to be a paradox lying at the heart of some intentional communities. Those missional communities who have been formed to better welcome the stranger or care for the needy exist because as a community they are more able to do together what they would struggle to do alone. But to establish and maintain a stability and sustainability for such a community, actually raises the bar of who can become a permanent member. **It is a tough decision to raise the bar on the membership of our fresh expressions of church when church attendance generally is so low.** We are so desperate for growth. For some fresh expressions of church, the pressure will be on to provide numerical evidence that a particular venture is working.

But maybe in our forming of new churches, we should have the confidence to make higher demands from those who join if it means longer term maturity for our communities and our individuals within them. The Net encourages a six month period of settling in to see if newcomers grow passionate about their values. While St Lawrence Reading are clear they are not a youth-only church, they do ask that any adults who join their community are ready to creatively support the church's calling to non-churched teenagers. They use the metaphor of all putting their shoulder to a wheel of mission. For example, a teenage psychologist who joined them offers coaching to any adults in the church working directly with teenagers. In this way, gifts are multiplied.³¹

Fresh expressions of church that start with a specific mission focus may have to wrestle with whether to welcome those who are already Christians or people who aren't part of the grouping they are trying to connect with. Peck offers some helpful

²⁸ Sara Savage and Eolene Boyd-Macmillan *The Human Face of the Church* Canterbury Press 2007 p.142

²⁹ Clare Herbert *Bearing It: The Development of a Priestly Spirituality in Soho Spirituality in the City* Andrew Walker (ed) SPCK 2005 p.58

³⁰ Jean Vanier *Community and Growth* DLT 1989 p.62

³¹ For a brief description of St Lawrence Reading, see p.21 of *Encounters on the Edge* no.38

advice to this genuinely difficult dilemma: ask "Is it justifiable to keep this person out?" rather than "How can we take this person in?"³² Those communities who have given careful attention to the values that undergird their community will be better supplied with criteria to answer such a question. One of the many gifts that new monasticism is bringing us is a way of holding different degrees of belonging and commitment in a framework that still values the individual (for who they are, not just what they do) while honouring the community.

Certain fresh expressions of church are sometimes criticised for their deliberate and blatant homogeneity as they reach out to non-Christians in particular walks and seasons of life (even though many traditional churches also seem to do so in practice), but I note that there are many different kinds of homogeneity. With any missional community, however homogeneous in age, class, gender or ethnic background, there will still be a huge diversity in faith, the handling of emotions, styles of learning, natural talkers or listeners, ways of dealing with conflict, those who work to live and those who live to work, etc. Who does the washing up as soon as lunch is over and who waits for it all to pile up to do it all at once? Whether homogeneous or heterogeneous, sometimes it is these more subtle differences that can be the most difficult for a group to surmount.



Paul's cumulative approach to the washing up wasn't working.

I don't think such focused fresh expressions should be exempt from the challenges of finding those people different from them who have much to teach them about their particular mission task. It is an extremely important question to ask for all who seek to grow into maturity. Because their road to community is just as difficult for all the other differences they reflect (maybe additionally difficult because of their unexpectedness), I sometimes wonder if we should concentrate our energies more on supporting even the most seemingly homogeneous of communities to be effective in their life together than debating the legitimacy of age specific groups as theologically-speaking "proper" church. **If Christians can learn to live closely with one another in certain types of difference, surely they will be better equipped to live with others in contexts of greater difference.**

³² Scott Peck *The Different Drum* Arrow 1990 p.61

A call to the poor

Vanier warns that the more a community seeks to continue the work of Jesus, the more they will find themselves working among the weak and the oppressed, those in darkness and despair, because those are the kinds of people who Jesus came to help.³³ He names the weak, insignificant and seemingly useless as the very people to whom Christ comes knocking. Bonhoeffer too warns that if, as communities, we choose to ignore the poor, we must be very careful that we aren't excluding Christ also.³⁴

I think this is a helpful reminder to us that in our planting of attractive, relevant church, if we follow Jesus, we must take care. I note that, after the resurrection, Jesus chose to appear first to the seemingly insignificant Mary Magdalene, not to his disciples. In the churches that we are leading, how much do we seek to help the apparently inconsequential, or do we mostly focus our efforts on the able, the brightest stars for leadership potential? Even in the trendiest of social groupings, there will be people who don't quite fit. How we treat them is very important. Isn't this where our Christian communities offer something more than other communities? Won't this be what outsiders will be looking for as a sign of authenticity that we mean it when we say all people should be respected? Even in our leadership training of others, what are we selecting and training potential leaders to do? Run efficient churches with excellent teaching programmes? Shouldn't any leader be raised up to do the work of Jesus and engage with those who aren't used to being valued or accepted?

³³ Jean Vanier *Community and Growth* DLT 1989 p.215

³⁴ Dietrich Bonhoeffer *Life Together* SCM Press 1954 p.24

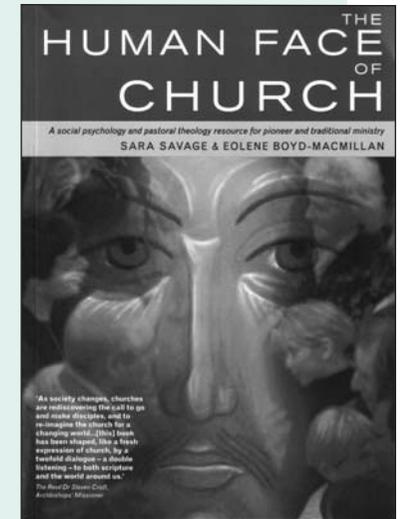
Interview 3

Sara Savage, Cambridge

Leaving Dave Male in the car park at Ridley, we ventured forth on foot to track down Sara Savage in Grange road. Sara is a Senior Research Associate with the Psychology and Religion Research Group at the University of Cambridge and lecturer at the Cambridge Theological Federation. She co-authored *The Human Face of the Church* (2007), a book written to help all churches function better as communities.

Sara's research assistant found us in the drive outside her department, deliberating whether we were at the correct destination! He showed us up to her office, a small sparsely-furnished white room indicative of recent departmental relocation. Sara, with great vitality and charm, arrived shortly after, direct from a teaching a three-hour lecture. In the annoying way that some very able people can, she turned her attentions to our questions needing no break.

Kindly but forcibly, Sara took us in hand right from the beginning, challenging some of our key assumptions. One obvious headline from our discussion was her warning about predetermining community for those who are not yet involved; people will resist anything that forces them into a shape of community someone else has dictated. Wrist aching from taking copious notes as she talked, we were thoroughly energised by our time together and would happily have spent another hour or so drawing on her wealth of research in what she believes is a poorly under-resourced area in church life. Our taxi ride back to the station took longer than expected due to rush hour traffic, but Mike and I hardly noticed it as we chatted away non-stop about what we'd heard and the implications it had for our research.



Expect more not less conflict

There is no way round conflict. Without it, according to Peck, you never grow community. If it is avoided at all costs, a group remains in a state of **pseudo-community**, "trying to fake it" wearing the masks of composure he talks about.³⁵ People's differences are ignored or minimised. The temptation is to make everyone normal, not out of a motivation of love and care for one another but out of fear and insecurity. Misguided attempts to change others and fear of loss of structure inevitably leads to a phase in the group's life that can feel noisy, uncreative, unconstructive, desperate and often boring. This is the stage of **chaos** or conflict.

Savage and Boyd-Macmillan devote a chapter to conflict in *The Human Face of the Church*. They too state it is inevitable. (It is from them I have borrowed the title for this section.) They warn us to expect more not less conflict. Niceness, they say, is one contributing factor that conspires to make conflict in any church a difficult experience. If we confuse being nice with being good and imagine that by being good we can live without difference or conflict then we are pursuing an impossible goal.³⁶ It can also lead us into unhelpful co-dependent relationships.

They write that "sometimes difficult people have no other outlet but their faith community. It is the one context in which they have some power and status..." so their church involvement becomes particularly significant for them as an outlet to express the kinds of frustrations that might have unconsciously built up for them in other arenas of life.³⁷ I suspect we should also watch for Christians who have in addition been frustrated by previous church experience where they didn't feel able, for whatever reason, to express themselves. Involvement with a fresh expression might be doubly loaded!

Secondly, church is largely a volunteer organisation and "without pay, one's tolerance for conflict lowers significantly" because payment gives you motivation for putting up with the pain of conflict; people are less likely to commit to working issues of conflict through.³⁸ This issue should be borne in mind by any permission-givers of fresh expressions of church with unpaid leaders. Similarly, leaders themselves should take care when repeatedly asking volunteer co-leaders for time, energy and financial or professional sacrifices. Savage and Boyd-Macmillan cite a piece of research work that suggests the better the mutual accountability in goal-setting, the more it significantly helps volunteers understand their work as part of their discipleship and spiritual development.³⁹

³⁵ Scott Peck *The Different Drum* Arrow 1990 p.86

³⁶ Sara Savage and Eolene Boyd-Macmillan *The Human Face of the Church* Canterbury Press 2007 p.57

³⁷ Sara Savage and Eolene Boyd-Macmillan *The Human Face of the Church* Canterbury Press 2007 p.131

³⁸ Sara Savage and Eolene Boyd-Macmillan *The Human Face of the Church* Canterbury Press 2007 p.62

³⁹ Sara Savage and Eolene Boyd-Macmillan *The Human Face of the Church* Canterbury Press 2007 p.63

What good can come of this?

Why is conflict so necessary for growing deeper community? Conflict is not as unproductive as one might think; it actually helps us grow. Without it, our reflective processes would never deepen. Without it, we would never learn to interact with those we disagree with⁴⁰. As St Benedict wrote, "those with whom we struggle to be gracious and loving often spur us to grow spiritually the most."⁴¹ I was helped by the following quote from *The Human Face of the Church* which contrasts so well the deep horror that many of us feel regarding conflict with how Jesus dealt with it:

*"Jesus appeared unworried by the conflict he ignited in those around him. Many of us fear that if a relationship is strained, it snaps. It's over. Jesus seems to have had a deep confidence in the flexible power of forgiveness to re-weave broken relationships. He dared to confront, face anger and forgive. Far from avoiding conflict, he welcomed it as an opportunity to create a better relationship."*⁴²

Times of conflict can eventually lead to deeper growth for a community as well as for individuals. The research team I work in is evidence of this. The difficulties some of us have encountered with each other over the years but loyally worked through together have built increasingly stronger friendships. Often in conflict, people are testing one another to see how robust their spoken commitment to each other actually is in practice. A group will often test its leader or leaders through times like this for their commitment and how much they can be trusted to handle what happens responsibly. Peck notes that one common way a group reacts to being in the chaos or conflict stage is to blame the leader. Often there are attempts to criticise or even replace the leader. What the next leaders virtually always propose is an escape into organisation which doesn't address the conflict but avoids the real issues for a later date.⁴³



⁴⁰ Sara Savage and Eolene Boyd-Macmillan *The Human Face of the Church* Canterbury Press 2007 p.56

⁴¹ Sara Savage and Eolene Boyd-Macmillan *The Human Face of the Church* Canterbury Press p.158

citing discussion by Abbot Christopher Jamison in *Finding Sanctuary* Weidenfield and Nicolson 2006

⁴² Sara Savage and Eolene Boyd-Macmillan *The Human Face of the Church* Canterbury Press p.59

⁴³ Scott Peck *The Different Drum* Arrow 1990 p.93

Wise up

Conflict was mentioned in all of our interviews, confirming what I'd read by our social psychologists. Both household communities and church communities alike will experience it at some point. Dave Male warned us that the higher the expectations of people to be honest and open, the more potential for conflict; people will feel invited to be candid when otherwise they might have tactfully let the moment pass. Though it might feel onerous and awkward at the time, putting in place boundaries or rules for handling conflict before it happens will help communicate expectations as well as providing a process to follow when it "gets messy". Dave also recommended appointing an outside visitor or guardian who is familiar with the community and can be someone to whom an irresolvable conflict can be referred, a process that Vanier also advocates. Dave warned us that even with these very sensible structures in place to see that the community doesn't fall apart, handling the conflict will still feel painful.

All interviewees talked of conflict as an ongoing issue; it is not a one-off which however expertly handled will never reoccur. **We must ingrain in ourselves that this will be an ongoing task.** Absence of conflict is not the measure of maturity, it is handling it well, or as Peck calls it: "a group that can fight gracefully" is the true indicator of a well-functioning community. Exercising forgiveness with one another is the sign of maturity.

As we must treat conflict as if it is entirely normal, we urgently need more wisdom in handling it well. A church can grow people's skills through courses on counselling or group processes so they can get better at finding ways through conflict that don't crush people. At the very least, I commend as a starting point the Savage/Boyd-Macmillan chapter that explores different types of conflict (problem to solve, disagreement, contest, fight or flight, intractable) and the questionnaires in the appendix that allow individuals to identify the different styles of handling conflict.



⁴⁴ Scott Peck *The Different Drum* Arrow 1990 p.70

⁴⁵ Sara Savage and Eolene Boyd-Macmillan *The Human Face of the Church* Canterbury Press 2007 p.266

Always a risky business

Vanier warns us to cautiously avoid including people who are inherently disruptive to the health of the group if, as at *L'Arche*, the community exists to serve those who are vulnerable. He writes that people welcomed must try to accept the community as it is rather than change it or take from it without being prepared to give. The community must ask itself if they can give the person what they need to be at ease and to grow. This turning away might feel painful at the time but will avoid hurt and disappointment for both community and individual longer term. Marginal people "*with all their wounds and needs*" can require great time and patience to build and maintain relationships of trust that they feel safe to open up in. Therefore careful thought must be given to whether a community can offer this so as not to set up unrealistic expectations and leave the person with even more debris of hurt and confusion when expectations can't be fulfilled.⁴⁶

When gathering people to start a community from scratch, Peck says beware those with permanent axes to grind. However, he admits this is a difficult piece of advice to follow as it is hard to spot permanent axes before you get to know people. You can't know in advance "*whether people will be able to work through their axes in time or whether they are permanently stuck.*"⁴⁷ Even with the best induction process into a community, you can't be sure that people will "get" the values that lie behind who they are and who they're for. When members join who are wrestling with quite deep issues, you can't know whether the issues will dominate long-term or not, all of which contributes to potential risk.

There are no ways of growing community that don't involve the risk of a breaking down of relationships. You cannot avoid it. As Jenny Hellyer in an interview expressed it, "*sometimes the whole thing explodes*".⁴⁸ John Perry reportedly described Lee Abbey as "*a fragile stronghold*". Fresh expressions of church too are often very fragile. They have less financial resource than established churches. Sometimes leadership has to work part-time or full-time to support themselves. Furthermore, fledgling churches can encounter confused and patronising attitudes from the wider church that are in authority over them. We rejoice when new Christians come to faith

There are no ways of growing community that don't involve the risk of a breaking down of relationships

⁴⁶ Jean Vanier *Community and Growth* DLT 1989 p.275

⁴⁷ Scott Peck *The Different Drum* Arrow 1990 p.105

⁴⁸ For a brief description of our interview with Jenny and Steve Hellyer, see p. (if not on same page already)

⁴⁹ For a brief description of our interview with Chris Russell, see p.21 of *Encounters on the Edge* no.38

but often their discipleship can be a long, messy rollercoaster ride of a process. Chris Russell and his team maintain it takes five years for a non-churched teenager to understand what it means in practice to live as a Christian.⁴⁹

Lastly, fresh expressions of church have no weight of momentum of history or historic building that keeps a traditional church going when numbers significantly dip. All this needs conscious recognition. **If even the most well-established Christian communities carry risks, how much more will our new missional communities have to live with risk?** Finding permission givers who can cope with these kinds of uncertainty will be crucial to their survival and the future well-being of all those involved if things go badly wrong.

Interview 4

Jenny and Steve Hellyer, Oxford and Lee Abbey

I've nurtured a fondness for Oxford ever since discovering an obscure yet highly amusing series of detective novels set there during the Second World War. An hour's driving round the city, lost despite my maps beside me (I should invest in a sat nav!), did nothing to diminish my affection for the city, and on finally reaching my destination I spent a very comfortable night in the Hellyer's vicarage. They have been friends with George Lings' family for many years so it was great to be able to finally meet them.

Mike Moynagh arrived on the dot of 9am next morning (he lives very close) and we settled down in their sunny sitting room to quiz Steve and Jenny about their passion for community. They met each other while living and working at Lee Abbey when Mike Edson was warden 20 years ago. (Steve was a chaplain and Jenny led the worship.) While it was not always easy, the richness of living in close community has left something of an imprint on their lives and ministry. In the ten years they have been at St Matthew's, they have slowly, gently been encouraging a deeper sense of closeness among its members. I was hugely impressed by the way they stressed that the confronting of attitudes or behaviour within a community must always be done in a way that doesn't crush people.

The juxtaposition of Jenny and Steve's two experiences encapsulate very well my particular research angle; what lessons can we learn from life in long-standing household Christian communities that might help us better nurture community as we grow new or transition existing churches for the purposes of mission?



What happens next

Let go of control

Having raised these issues of conflict and fragility, I now end this booklet. It may seem odd but perhaps to break off here is somehow illustrative of the stage to come after conflict. Peck describes this next stage as emptiness, the letting go of the need to control, of our prejudices and our need to fix or solve. As such, it is the hardest part of building community and often people are in no hurry to engage with it. Even now, you may be thinking this Encounters issue alone will suffice – no need to read the next one as well if building deeper community requires such personal sacrifice!

But Peck writes that emptiness is the only way out of conflict that will result in community. This is the part that we need to pay attention to. It is like the kind of death necessary for re-birth. For churches, it will be the handling of this stage that will determine the difference between shallowness and depth, immaturity and maturity and the evaporating or the blossoming of community.

For those of you who do want to finish here, I conclude that good starts are a precious gift to a community; it will make all that follows so much easier. By investing our energies into allowing the conditions to be right, we stand a better chance of seeing that elusive sense of community descend. Attend to expectations. Take time grappling with the importance of values. Welcome diversity with all its challenges for what you can learn from other people, and let us be ready for conflict as a necessary and healthy step towards building healthy community.

Invite don't force

We should never force anyone into community. Any existing group or church wanting to transition to a deeper sense of community must do so by invitation at an individual level. As we discovered with transitioning congregational churches to a cell church model, starting a "prototype" parallel cell group alongside the existing congregation may be a more helpful model than "big bang". Those who "get it" are then free to try it out with others of a like mind, without those who don't "get it" feeling coerced and obstructing progress by their resistance. Our research suggests that inviting people into a process of growing a deeper sense of community will best happen in a similar way.

Encounters on the Edge no.38 begins where this booklet ends. It describes this process of emptiness, as well as other important issues, as it examines the cost involved in growing a community to maturity.

Claire Dalpra
Easter 2008



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