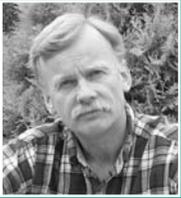


## 40: People Try To Put Us Down

### Fresh expressions with older people



Given the age profile of many of our churches, why do we need to keep older people as a priority in our mission endeavours? Is the significant diversity of those aged between 50 and 105 fully appreciated? Are fresh expressions of church wanted by older people? How do you know whether a ministry is also church and what does fresh really mean? George Lings went to find out...

The 'Encounters on the Edge' series covers a wide range of topics including the following:

#### Kinds of Fresh Expression:

- Alternative Worship Communities
- Café Church
- Cell Church
- Community Development Churches
- Multiple Congregations
- Midweek Churches
- Network Focused Churches
- New Monastic
- Traditional Church Plants
- Youth Congregation

#### Other areas:

- Anglo-Catholic Fresh Expressions
- The Arts engaging with the Church
- Children and Fresh Expressions
- Discerning Directions in Mission
- Ecology and Church
- Exile - a paradigm for today?
- How do we know it's Church?
- Mission-shaped Church an evaluation
- Rural Fresh Expressions
- Workplace and Church

#### Our most recent issues include:

**36 Leading Fresh Expressions**  
Lessons from hindsight

**37 Chasing The Dream**  
Starting community

**38 The Cost of Community**  
Issues of maturity

**39 Hope Among The Hopeless**  
Connecting with the urban poor

For a full listing of titles in the 'Encounters on the Edge' series and to order back copies visit our website:

[www.encountersontheedge.org.uk](http://www.encountersontheedge.org.uk)

The Sheffield Centre, Wilson Carlile Campus, Cavendish Street, Sheffield S3 7RZ

Tel: 0114 272 7451 Fax: 0114 279 5863

Email: [l.keith@sheffieldcentre.org.uk](mailto:l.keith@sheffieldcentre.org.uk) [www.encountersontheedge.org.uk](http://www.encountersontheedge.org.uk)

no. 40:

# People Try To Put Us Down

Fresh expressions with older people



 **ChurchArmy**  
[www.churcharmy.org.uk](http://www.churcharmy.org.uk)

Discoveries about fresh expressions of church from The Sheffield Centre

Encounters on the Edge

# Contents

## Fresh expressions with older people

When I'm 64..... 3  
 Way back when..... 4

## Why bother with fresh expressions for older people?

The statistics..... 6  
 The diversity..... 6  
 The resource..... 7

## St Giles Northampton: Ministry with the elderly

The context..... 9  
 I came, I saw, I pondered..... 11  
 Hymns of Praise..... 13

## Is this overall ministry church?

How could we know?..... 17  
 Limiting factors to being healthy church..... 19  
 Is it fresh?..... 21

## Resources

Another story..... 25  
 Further reading..... 25  
 Ongoing resources..... 26

# Fresh expressions with older people

In 2007, I saw the entertaining, thought-provoking and, in places, shocking documentary about a group called The Zimmers. Among other antics, this music group aged 80+ years performed a fresh version of The Who's *My Generation*. With two million hits on YouTube their version got into the charts.<sup>1</sup> Apart from showing their perennial youthful side, The Zimmers gave new bite to the old protest song that complained that "people like to put us down". Perhaps they might have said it was no longer "cos we like to get around" but maybe "cos we are still around?" What a comment on the ageism that seems endemic in a society allured by the new and young. And was there fun or pathos when they sang the line "I hope I die before I get old?" Original drummer, Keith Moon, had his wish in 1978. John Entwistle lived until 2002. Pete Townshend and Roger Daltrey live on to record further music.

## When I'm 64

I'm more a Beatles man myself and, according to Age Concern's definition, I have been an "older person" for four years and didn't realise it. But when I call out for a reminder of a name, enquire how a rare function in email works or ask a question which examining the internet would tell me quickly, my younger team members are sure I am one of the oldies. That I ask, tells me that I am. I write this booklet approaching the threshold of becoming 60. What a mix of feelings it is. I am more uncertain than ever before how old I am; the inside and the outside seem further apart and the joke about "your back goes out more than you do"<sup>2</sup> isn't so funny any longer. I sense feeling redundant as a parent yet liberated to embark on living as an empty nester and very oddly receiving ageism instead of giving it. The Beatles line "will you still need me, will you still feed me, when I'm 64" is coming closer to home. It has to be partly a confession of ageism to admit that while there have been 39 previous *Encounters on the Edge* stories, only now does one get written about a whole third of the UK population, the over 50s.<sup>3</sup>



<sup>1</sup> <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zqfFrCUEbY>  
<sup>2</sup> For a source of other such one liners consult M Collyer C Dalpra A Johnson J Woodward *A Mission-shaped Church for Older People?* Church Army and The Leveson Centre 2008 p.10  
<sup>3</sup> HMSO statistics from 2003. There are 20.5 million people aged 50 and over in the UK. Please note Age Concern's definition of older people as those over the age of 55. We anticipate definitions will continue to vary as increasingly those in their 60s have equally good health to previous generations when in their 40s. This factor is part of the continued trend away from measuring stages of life by chronological longevity and more towards biological health.

## Way back when

33 years ago as a freshly minted curate I was ready to take the parish by storm. My vicar, perhaps sensing my need of humility, gave me the newly-formed senior citizens group to run. So *Good Companions* became my Wednesday ministry for three years. It was a mix of a smaller lunch club with a following larger afternoon meeting, in and around the community of Harold Wood in Essex. The noble hard working team of cooks, drivers, and other helpers were the newly retired, and a few mums at home, from St Peter's Church. The 70 or so who came were from up to three miles around in any direction, but the vast majority were not church attenders. They came through advertisements in the local press, notices in retirement homes, commendation by existing members and personal invitations from helpers.

They were a mix of 3rd and 4th agers<sup>4</sup>. A few drove down and even collected friends; some walked, some took a bus, while others came in a social services minibus. Many lived in their own home, owned or rented, some in sheltered housing and a few in communal residential care. The programme included lunch for those with a need for this provision, then as others arrived later there was wider conversation, games and chat on tables, a speaker on a topic of general interest and a thought for the day from the Bible, usually from me. We branched out into an adventurous annual outing. The pinnacle had to be the memorable trip to Le Touquet. Some had never left Blighty before and extending horizons is a commendable aspect to work with older people. The trickiest bit was that on arrival we found all the public conveniences were closed. That extended other things, including patience and ingenuity.

In those days we hoped that exposure to warmth of welcome, crossing the barrier to church premises by using its pleasant hall, and listening to a talk would motivate them to try our informal family service on a Sunday. That was our prayer but it seldom happened and these émigrés from the East End remained semi-detached to our life in St Peter's. Looking back I am less puzzled than I was then. All of them were born before 1910. They had been shaped by the Great Depression and the World Wars. Some might have related to the settled duty of traditional church but we were too lively and unfamiliar for that taste. Nearly all were working class. Bill was a retired

<sup>4</sup> One scheme describes people based on biological not chronological ageing. 1st agers are in full time education, 2nd agers are those in working life, 3rd agers are the independent active retired and 4th agers have become dependent and receive some level of care. It offers a helpful taxonomy that is more functional than chronological age does.

trade union shop steward. For him social involvement and community building was fine, but the Church of England was for "the toffs". That wasn't going to be his home. Some came from the surrounding council estate Harold Hill. Though Harold Wood people considered themselves working class stock, they owned their homes and their kids went to university. They were different and there was a cultural gap. By and large, we didn't or couldn't cross the gaps in my time. It may be different now.

I tell the tale for several reasons. It is an example of the church's involvement for many years with older people, though that kind of work has set some patterns. We have rightly perceived that mission should be holistic. Within it, evangelism and social care are good partners, not enemies. We have rightly asked what needs there are in the community and then responded. However it has then been natural to extend the church's practice of putting on events and styling itself as the provider, with the recipients as clients. That has created some ongoing limitations and exacerbated dependency dangers. We have also tended not to think through how the links between such programmes and lifelong discipleship happens. **Nor until recently have we asked ourselves how such events could themselves grow into churches, rather than be fishing grounds for existing churches.** Today because some fresh expressions start in rather similar ways to the tale above, some observers say with asperity – "but we've been doing this for decades already; this isn't fresh expressions." I think much of that depends on what something is intended to grow into.

We have rightly asked what needs there are in the community and then responded

## Why bother with fresh expressions for older people?

### The statistics

Those who seriously ask that question may well think that there are enough older people in church already and one of our image difficulties is grey predominance. But how is that assessed? Here are some facts that made me think again. In 1951 there were 13.8 million over 50s. Now it's 20 million, which is a 45% increase<sup>6</sup>. I doubt we have 45% more older people in church than was the case in the 1950s. It is more true to say we have a smaller percentage of the older population than we had then. It is more likely that we are falling behind in ministry to older people and in that way we **collude with the undervaluing and overlooking of this part of society**.

### The diversity

In addition, what do we mean by older people? Officially this is a wide age spread from 50, say up to 105. This very diverse group includes frail Edwardians, the builder generation, and now the boomers are retiring. The latter culturally widen what we think of as older people<sup>6</sup>. Male older people now include Mick Jagger, Ringo Starr, Clint Eastwood and Harrison Ford; the women include Joan Bakewell, Honor Blackman, Jane Fonda and Twiggy. Which groups of older people do we have in church? My observation is that **we see more from the pre-war builder generation than the post-war boomers**. This is partly what led Chris Harrington to write his recent Grove Evangelism Booklet *Reaching the Saga Generation*. He argues, following Callum Brown, that the builders are there in church out of the last holding onto duty as a religious value and from the last significant revival of faith. Moreover the boomers, who grew up in the 1960s, mark the start of considerable disconnection from church life<sup>7</sup>. I'd love to write a story of full on fresh expressions of church for boomers, but as yet there doesn't seem to be one to tell. Harrington's booklet points up some features they might need<sup>8</sup> and some small group routes that are beginning to be explored; these include film or book groups, keep fit or community engagement, walks including retreats, spiritual wellbeing or live music in a café<sup>9</sup>. I shall watch

<sup>6</sup> See *A Mission-shaped Church for Older people* p.70 for a list of differences between those born in the 1920s and post-war.

<sup>7</sup> C. Harrington *Reaching the Saga Generation* Grove Evangelism 83 Grove Books 2008 pp.3-8

<sup>8</sup> Harrington *Saga Generation* pp.15-18

<sup>9</sup> Harrington *Saga Generation* pp.20-22

with interest. These sound as though they could be embryonic fresh expressions.

Other cohorts are the 4th agers who are more dependent and find it increasingly difficult to come to church, especially when confined to residential care. This group is its own mission field. So with three different cultures among older people, let alone very different life stages, different kinds of church for older people could beckon. The situation is complex and we should not assume what answers will look like. Peggy Boynes tells the story of a vicar who provided 1662 services at a retirement home assuming "the old people like it". It was only a visitor who discovered, by listening, that they put up with them to "keep him happy".<sup>10</sup>

Meeting this diversity of culture, the spread of age and the variety of degrees of independence, we can neither imagine a one size fits all solution, nor should we intentionally create fresh expressions for older people to shut them away from all younger contact. From all three parishes I worked in, I echo Boynes' observation that **older people are delighted to be part of all age Christian communities**<sup>11</sup>, and I have seen heart warming examples of the mutual benefit in reciprocal relationships between people two generations apart. Furthermore, rock festivals now see people across three generations enjoying them. Young people still listen to the Beatles and Dylan and increasingly older people "get" I.T. and new media. We shall need to listen to people and their culture and fashion ways of being church that hold together two things in tension. The community life, with its mission and worship, will engage with how a culture is, reflecting its upsides and critiquing its downsides. But also, these self-same groups will maintain living interconnection with other parts of the church that are different from them.



### The resource

We need to be more positive about older people because this proportion in society is growing and is predicted to increase. Just targeting the young is no substitute. We need to be more focused because older people contain a culturally diverse set who need different approaches, and we need to pay attention to them because the 3rd agers are a notable resource. Those

<sup>10</sup> P. Boynes *Evangelism for Older People* Grove Evangelism 46 Grove Books, 1999 p.8

<sup>11</sup> Boynes *Evangelism for Older People* p.9

retiring now are fitter than ever before and living longer<sup>12</sup>, so they can look forward to at least twenty years of active life before illness or incapacity takes them into physical or mental dependency. The boomers are likely to bring into those decades the characteristics that emerged in the 1960s: their lifelong drive and activism, their independent and challenging thinking, their sense of adventure and fun, and now considerable wealth accumulated. Having lived money rich and often time poor, they may find they have some time on their hands<sup>13</sup>; that is if they aren't on the next holiday, organising a charity, and caring for very elderly parents while keeping up relationships with children and grandchildren in other parts of the world<sup>14</sup>. If they are allowed to shape what is created for their own generation, as well as be a major resource for work among 4th agers, then two valuable ways forward could take place.

<sup>12</sup> Current life expectancy for those at 65 is 84.7 for women and 81.9 for men, with the expectancy that it will be three to four years more by 2025. Mike Collyer *CA Older People in the UK* July 2008, collated and derived from Age Concern's statistics p.1

<sup>13</sup> 50% of 65-74 year olds and 38% of those aged 75+ have taken part in some form of volunteering in the last 12 months. Mike Collyer *Older People in the UK* p.2

<sup>14</sup> Some say they are the first generation to have to look after three other generations. See Harrington *Saga Generation* p.10 and research by the Rowntree Foundation.

## St Giles Northampton: Ministry with the elderly

### The context

The midlands town of Northampton is historically famous for making boots and shoes, unknown as the third medieval university squashed by rivals Oxford and Cambridge, and now a centre for retail, warehousing, Barclaycard, and Carlsberg. Since the 1950s it has quadrupled in size and approaches 200,000 people. Its population claims less Christian allegiance than the national average (57% compared to 72%) mainly through a higher figure combining no religion and not stated (36% versus 23%)<sup>15</sup>.



St. Giles is a town centre church, built 800 years ago just outside the eastern city walls and now in a newly designated conservation area. Its parish is less than 2000 people, of whom around a dozen attend the church. Yet across its congregations it is in weekly contact with 400+ adults and 200+ children and youth. In this context parish boundaries mean little and its character is eclectic and even post-denominational, within a mainstream evangelical identity that is learning how to be more radical in ecclesiology through exploring fresh expressions.

As St Giles is patron saint of lepers and outcasts it is intriguing that the church by his name has branched out into ministries neglected or underdeveloped by other churches. Not only has it identified these needs under the leadership of



David Bird

<sup>15</sup> National Statistics Website accessed May 2007 by Geoff Waters in his Placement Profile report 2007 p.4

Revd David Bird who came in 1997, but it has deliberately diversified its work to positively engage with these areas. Along with some other large churches it has a specialist staff member in children and young families, a part-time worker with under 5s and another in youth work and (less commonly) young adults. The stipendiary curate's work also focuses mainly on young adults. What is most rare is the inclusion of a paid full-time worker with oversight of work among older people. This may be the most visionary part of the account that follows, but it is also the platform from which further growth both in mission practice and ecclesial self understanding can occur.



Geoff Waters was appointed as the first holder of this remarkable post in June 2002. It is fascinating to learn that he came to faith through older people; it is as though a debt is being repaid. Previously a science teacher, he studied theology as an independent student from 1996-99 at Trinity Bristol. This was followed by three years working for a church in Bristol mainly in the church-based Social Services day centre. Since starting at St Giles he has explored ordination and been recommended, involving a part time MA through Queens, Birmingham. I met him in April and May of 2008, and after ordination in July 2008 he was designated a self-supporting minister by the Diocese of Peterborough as he is paid directly by St Giles. The Northampton Municipal Church Charity provided the seed corn finance for this through a five year tapering grant to initially fund the post.

### The range of work

It is not so much the particular activities that makes the story significant as their range. I list them by frequency. Weekly on Thursday there is a service in the lady chapel at 11:00 attended by 15, followed by a lunch club for 30 at 12:15. At The William and Patricia Venton Day Centre, the Age Concern centre next door, there is also a weekly service. At St Thomas House, which is sheltered housing, and at St Christopher's (a development of flats connected with a care home in another parish) there is a weekly Bible study. The Senior Fellowship, of up to 35, meet on two Wednesdays in a month drawing churched and outsiders. Hymns of Praise is monthly on the 4th Sunday, with a service and a tea currently drawing around 70. Annual features have included a week-long residential holiday with 16 people, day

trips out for the same number and a day time Alpha. The holiday was particularly valuable in deepening relationships and seeing the person emerge from behind the dependent client/provider relationship<sup>16</sup>. Behind all this is individual visiting, especially for those housebound or in hospital. **The sheer variety and potential for interconnection makes the work more like an overall ministry**, rather than just the classic church provision of an event that may fail to provide a genuine pathway to lifelong discipleship, as I found years ago in *Good Companions*.

An example of possibilities has been the Alpha group which met on the same day and the same hall premises as the weekly lunch. Granted it was in a small side room, but true to Alpha and the recruiting base of the lunch club, there was coffee and cake, then the presentation and discussion, which led into the lunch. It is a good example of the need for connecting arches as advocated in Encounters on the Edge no.33 *Café, Croissants and Christ*.<sup>17</sup> Yet even then their experience has been that a further step can still be a big one and the invitation has needed to be "Would you like to come with me to Alpha?" rather than simply "Would anyone like to come?" Trying Alpha at Venton has been less easy because of the full programme running there, and because of demand for its services in a small building, older people can only come once a week, not daily.

### I came, I saw, I pondered

Parts of the work I saw included the Thursday service in St Giles. The setting of the church on its green is lovely, but the way in was far from obvious. Firstly I got lost (which is rare for me) in Northampton's labyrinthine one way system. Thus I was late and missed entry into the now locked building. This apparently unfriendly lockout is because the area is a well worn footpath to town and frequently spoilt by vandalism; there is no permanent verger to police a building which, by its nooks and crannies, is ideal for hiding in and causing mischief. It was therefore fortunate that Serena Yong, a younger Malaysian Chinese Christian



<sup>16</sup> See also Boynes *Evangelism for Older People* pp.12-14 Church Army 2007

who is giving one day out of her working week to be part of the team for ministry with older people had been posted to wait for me to let me in. She led me to the right door, had a key, and ushered me up the nave, round various corners to the secluded and partitioned Lady Chapel.



The informal but dignified service survived my interruption and I learnt more about it. The chosen pattern is three weeks of Common Worship communion and one week of BCP matins. **Here was evidence that older people are not ideologically addicted to Cranmer.** I was allowed to straw poll survey the members afterwards and I was interested to find that a third were churched, a third had been de-churched and a third non-churched. **It was tiny anecdotal evidence confirming that by no means all**

**older people were raised in church or Sunday school.** Indeed Peter Brierley's UK Christian Handbook of Religious Trends 2001 No.2 shows that, across a century of steady decline, by 1940 only one third of the nation's children were attending Sunday school. It was a delight to hear one lady's clear story of coming to faith.



We then went over the road to the renovated church halls to observe the lunch club. I see little need in this issue to describe its finer details. This is not a new idea nationally. This one has been running since 1991 and grown from fortnightly to weekly and from 17 to 30 people. That ceiling is set by how many they can cook for at one sitting, even though £20,000 was spent on equipment that meets the standards required and by the level of labour that has the voluntary

catering team hard at it from 10:00 until 14:30. The meal was round smaller tables and ended with a testimony by way of epilogue. Those present came

by bus, taxi or walked in. I'd describe those at both events as older 3rd agers. They were in their 70s at least but still independently living. I did however notice a distinct lack of men. Those who used to come had died, but not because of the excellent food. Once men become absent, team members told me *"It takes a special sort of man to join the women."* **This raises a question of what kind of social gatherings may attract men,** by activity and usefulness rather than the passivity of sitting and chatting. Providing for 4th agers is more demanding because finding trained and available minibus drivers to bring and return them is an issue. It was faithful, helpful and necessary community work but not remarkable in itself. The story is more in the whole not the parts.

### Hymns of Praise

A month later, I was back down the motorway, triumphing over the one way system, and arriving in good time for Hymns of Praise, the flagship of the fleet which began in October 2002. This part of the picture caters also for 4th agers and involves quite an operation. Around 70 come and the one third needing transport are phoned in the week by the team to check they are well and confirm the time of collection. Three hired minibuses and trained volunteer drivers go out up to an hour ahead of the 15:00 kick off to make a collection from





round the town. Some do two laps. It is no accident that the organiser Peter Angus was a transport manager for Ford. He sees this as a ministry in itself, providing a personal service and offering gifts of love and time. Most who come live alone and some say: "You're the only person I've spoken to all week."<sup>18</sup> When they are delivered to St Giles' north door they find a well lit, brown carpeted, reordered nave with curved rows of upholstered chairs in its central aisle, and tables for six at the back and in the wide north aisle, in which the coffee bar nestles and there are evident signs of catering in progress. The chancel and sanctuary are up a ramp, through a screen and nearly out of sight.



We start 20 minutes late because there has been a pick up and traffic problem with one of the minibuses, but no one seems fussed. Geoff introduces, but Michael Mabbutt leads and Peter preaches. The shape is a hymn sandwich. Those chosen seem well known, ranging from the traditional All Creatures of our God and King through to the 1970s Seek Ye First. People stand or sit as they feel able. All expected elements like confession, sermon and intercessions are present. The words are on a data projector operated at the back. Yellow on blue is easy to read and there are



pleasant visual backdrops to the scrolling notices beforehand, the text of the reading for the hard of hearing, illustrations for the talk and a nice picture during the prayers. The talk on the issue of worry was pleasing in honesty and humour and encouraged trust. It was thoughtful and applied. Carole led the prayers well, connecting with people's issues yet extending people's horizons too. The event was reasonably jargon light. I was however entertained that we were invited to "still our hearts" and wondered how many would understand the phrase, whether it can actually be done and which literalists would connect it to cardiac arrest. There was a sense of participation, but I also wondered if that could grow by inviting people to submit hymn choices and putting on interviews and stories of those present. That would fit easily with the TV Songs of Praise diet known by those who came. I was pleased to hear that these elements have been included in previous Hymns of Praise services.

High quality tea and cakes followed round the tables. Normally the service is at 15:00, tea happens at 15:45 and it's time for home at 16:30. It was good that some of the helpers sit at the tables - not trapped in providing food - with the so-called guests. The upside of that curious term is that the event is free of charge. David Bird the vicar came and joined us for the tea, wisely taking care to ensure that Geoff's leadership and oversight is kept clear, though he occasionally is the invited speaker. For the same reason up till now there has not been Eucharistic worship, but that could change when Geoff is priested.



In the bigger picture, the weekly services at the Venton Day Centre are the "feeder" for Hymns of Praise, which has a small group and monthly celebration model. It is through these rotating services that these mainly de-churched older people have had the opportunity to come back to any church, many after decades of non-attendance.

There is an overlap of attendance between Hymns of Praise and the Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday gatherings at Venton. Numbers do fluctuate (the peak of 120-150 occurs at the Christmas Carol service), but

<sup>18</sup> Half of all people over 75 live alone and consider television as their main form of company. Collyer Older people in the UK p.2.



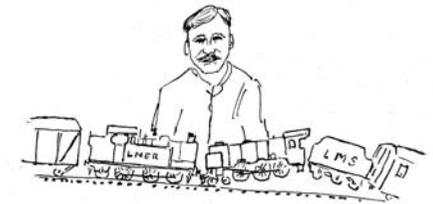
new folk are booked in on the transport when vacancies occur; obviously there have been a number of deaths over the years. I wonder whether it will need a major rethink when the boomers are no longer the team members but of the age and stage of becoming guests. Others who come are a mix of existing St Giles members, those from the weekly Thursday meetings and those who don't come to anything else. **It is not assumed that this is a bridge to "real church"** - in other

words, Sunday morning - as the all age style and pace might not be appropriate and the transport issues would be too great. Hymns of Praise has also fed the Alpha group. Behind it are the small groups mentioned and individual home visiting, not least by Michael and Doreen Mabbutt, the latter being the leader of the Senior Fellowship. So this event is only the focus of a loving community, not an attendance event which pretends to provide all necessary elements of being church. This leads to the next question.

## Is this overall ministry church?

### How could we know?

Here I air both generic parameters and offer specific guesses of replies in this case. The first obvious question, but therefore which is often neglected, is **whether it is Christian**. There are honourable, voluntary, worthwhile programmes and societies, such as for model railways or a rambling group that don't make that claim. In the past, badminton clubs in church halls masqueraded as Christian by their location, but proved not to be. This ministry does make the claim, either in motivation for loving service where faith sharing is in deed, or in gatherings, large and small, where Christian faith is communicated in word. Its leadership make that allegiance and their goal is Christian.



George started a church for model train enthusiasts but it went off the rails

Next I would look for the dynamics across the whole ministry. I'd argue that church necessarily contains the strands of being **one, holy, catholic and apostolic**. In simplistic summary, I understand the first to be reflected in a journey towards community that is both diverse and united. The second is about seeking to become more like Christ, the third knowing we belong to something larger than the local group, and the fourth about facing backwards to our origins, while facing forwards and outwards in mission. It seems to me the story described so far has aspirations for all of these, even though that explicit language may be absent. In one way that is good. If it is naturally there without realising it, that is a healthy sign.

In addition, this work has **a leader, recognised both within the community and beyond it**.<sup>19</sup> I don't think being stipendiary and full time is diagnostic, but when those factors are present it accelerates the rate at which, with others, the leader can attend to the context, shape the vision, co-ordinate the team, front public events and make periodic yet strategic interventions in individual lives. The event of Geoff having been ordained in July will also raise up a perception in the Christendom minds of some that, *"because we've now got our own vicar, we must be a church."* **It is all part of being taken**

<sup>19</sup> This criterion was posited originally as a marker of what made something a church plant, by the House of Bishops report Breaking New Ground CHP 1994 p.5 para 2.1.

**seriously** in the allocation of leader resources.

Another key question is what is the fruit of a ministry? This of course takes time to assess and is a good reminder that we need to look for time scales appropriate to agricultural or human analogies, not industrial or electronic ones. I consider it arguable from Matthew 28 that the acid test of fruitfulness is making disciples. This is more than stirring interest, acquiring attendees or making converts. If people are becoming more Christ-centred and Christlike, then we can rejoice. This is a perennial challenge for prayer and planning. I was glad to hear the language of "make a commitment" used and long that it will include obvious transformation of life. Like all the best things in life, it is something we can't make happen, as only "God gives the growth", but we can keep it as the goal. Fruitfulness is also shown in the reproducing of gifts in others. I see signs of this in the team who share leading and preaching, and in those who offer hours of loving service through driving, cooking, visiting and listening.

Some look for **word and sacraments** as diagnostic signs of church. In that Jesus commanded the latter and embodies the former, it is hard to argue with. At the same time I find they have a more healthy and balanced place when they grow out of the life of the Christian community rather than being forced upon them "because they must happen, to be proper church." To have both sacraments together with preaching, but in a contentious and inward looking community, would not be that compelling. Geoff's children, now aged 2 and 5 often attend, and **I wondered how else children might enliven the life of this congregation.** What if a link was made to a local school and they became in some way regular visitors? The Christmas Carol services at Venton involve 4 or 5 local primary schools. Again for the same reason it seems to me good that a self-denying ordinance is in place, awaiting the time when eucharist is celebrated by the de facto minister of this ironically young church.

Another factor is whether **those who go think it is church.** Clergy have been known to despise the convictions of "the uneducated laity". Roland Allen saw that in the method of the highly effective church planter we call the Apostle Paul that learning to trust them, the Holy Spirit and the word given to them was an indivisible whole. I from an anecdotal base have been consistently intrigued that in mission contexts that have rightly avoided the term "church" as loaded and unhelpful, the new young Christians have no difficulty in spotting that this is what it is, though the word has never been used. So I was intrigued that in a number of the ministries among older people that I saw, there were attenders and guests who said, "This is my

church." Sometimes that was in the church building, which would predispose them to that view, but also when there were events outside it. If that is what the people say, it is part of the evidence towards it being church.

In the longer term, to grow as church there are real challenges posed by **3-self thinking**<sup>20</sup>. In terms of money, at present the wider St Giles subsidises this ministry. It would be healthy if the older people are giving towards it and the overall work of St Giles, even though I doubt pensioners can cover all those costs. This in turn raises another very important question. What are the 3rd agers at all these events? Are they the helpers in a client/provider meeting for 4th age people or are they part together of a real church for older people? For Peter Pan-like reasons those growing up as boomers may not like that thought, but I raise it as an ecclesial issue, not a cultural one. At present I think in this case it is not at all clear. **Do they really belong or are they just on the rota for that month?**

There are similar questions over the second of the 3-self features, the self-governing factor. Are there any able 4th agers in the process of making decisions? Spirits and minds can be sharp though bodies are worn or frail. Listening over the years to Harold Macmillan at 80 and Alistair Cooke when well over 90, I see no reason why this could not be<sup>21</sup>. Yes, extreme old age, lack of strength and infirmity will make indigenous leadership problematic, but what role might there be for a voice at the table, if not in the sink or at the wheel of the bus? **For church to be church, it must always embrace becoming indigenous.** The discovery and release of gifts in that culture is both part of its fulfilling the self-governing parameter and the self-reproducing one. I wonder what ministries of prayer, or care through the phone or even internet, of evangelism to their peers through personal story<sup>22</sup>, or mentoring of the young are still latent in some older people in churches. Perhaps the limit is our imagination.

### Limiting factors to being healthy church

I've already highlighted the conundrum around the status of the helpers. In several other cases of planting and growing fresh expressions, I have seen that **the rota mentality** is a significant glass ceiling. It prevents a work growing beyond its present scope. It prevents the helpers knowing whether they belong or just assist; it creates

The rota mentality is a significant glass ceiling

<sup>21</sup> Peggy Boynes, like me, enjoyed the crafted beauty of 'Letter from America'. Boynes *Evangelism for Older People* p.3

<sup>22</sup> See Boynes *Evangelism for Older People* pp.5-6 on God's use of older people in the Bible and p.10 on training them in faith sharing.

uncertainty as to whether they are principally members of the sending church or of the fresh expression. **It stops them growing a passion for the ministry and relegates it to the level of a hobby.** It can keep the new work dependent on them but semi-detached from them. I don't pretend to know which of these dangers are present here, but I have seen them elsewhere and know that if present they inhibit the healthy growth of the young fresh expression.



Connected to this I was surprised to learn **the team dynamics.** The support team for Hymns of Praise have only an annual meeting. They are a good team of 15 who monthly do the genuine labour of transport, making music, taking the service, catering and befriending. Yet it began to feel to me across the wider work as though there were essentially disconnected but accidentally overlapping teams offering help to the various functions being performed across the range

of ministries to older people. I can well imagine that there may be a genuine struggle with the availability of the busy active retired and their reticence to put all their eggs in the basket of the oldies<sup>23</sup>, but I at least would look among them, and more widely across St Giles for those who would become the inner leadership core of the ministry to older people. Something similar would happen in work with children or with teenagers; why not here? It would be a matter of calling and could be made easier by a sense of covenant to give a specific number of years. The gains would be a praying core, the opening of shared vision, and a community of mutually committed people at the heart of the work.

For similar reasons I am also unconvinced about the **terminology** of referring to those who come as guests. It could be a generous and hospitable place to start, and I presume that lies behind its use. However it seriously limits what the people who come can grow into. What do they have to do to become members? If there is a difference, how is that marked? Where do ownership and responsibility come in? I doubt Geoff Waters wants the worst kind of client-provider scenario that makes older

<sup>23</sup> Noted by Harrington Reaching the Saga Generation p.10, even leading him to advise they wouldn't like the term Saga Church as it emphasises their age.

people yet more dependent because of the language we use about them and so sets attitudes towards them. Perhaps it is fine for those who come for the first time, brought by a friend from Hymns of Praise, to be called a guest. But if this is church, why are the older people called guests and the 3rd agers helpers? That sounds like a functional and even occasional meeting, not church.

I also detected that the **wider St Giles is also in transition** about what this ministry is. By contrast to phrases used about the youth that describe them as a congregation, the language used of events for the elderly is the lesser term: services. Congregation contains powerful signals of corporate identity and shared community. Services are just events that individuals turn up to if they choose, or not. Youth has had to campaign for their recognition<sup>24</sup>. It sounds as though the elderly will need someone to shout for them too. This is not about breakaway and independency but recognition of particularity within a greater catholicity. In the same vein, the church hall had excellent leaflets about many age and stage related aspects of the overall work. Was there one about work with older people? You guess.

I don't take the view that Hymns of Praise is to be thought of as church and the rest of the show is merely its activities. Rather I think it better to consider whether the whole ministry is church and to see Hymns of Praise as its largest gathering, perhaps even a celebration or festival. If that became the understanding then this would help shape and focus its content. There would naturally be news from, and prayer about, the links to everything else, in addition to connection to the rest of the family of congregations/churches that make up St Giles. As such, the weakness normally associated with a church gathering that is **only monthly** may not matter so much in this case.

So is the overall ministry church? Yes, there are powerful reasons to think so. Is this yet entirely clear and free of large rocks to flounder on? No, not yet. I say all this not to pile criticism upon the good folk of St Giles, but to point up issues that many young planted fresh expressions may have to think through. This may be especially the case among those working with the vulnerable; that is: children, the handicapped, those recovering from addictions, the underclass, as well as 4th agers.

### Is it fresh?

The misunderstanding of this term is rife, from pew fillers to diocesan officials. I was asked to speak to a nameless diocesan conference of readers

<sup>24</sup> One champion has been Graham Cray and his Grove Booklet on Youth Congregation in 1999 that argued for cultural reasons they were their own thing, not a bridge to "real church".

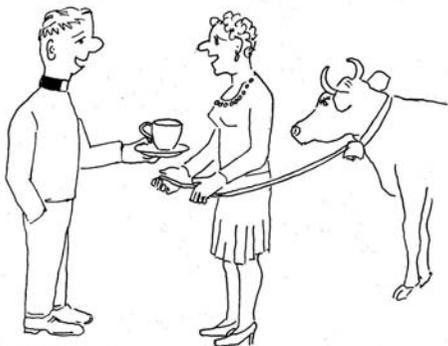
on the topic of fresh expressions. Part of the request was to lay on a fresh expression of worship. I endeavoured to keep frustration out of my voice and replied that the request was intrinsically impossible as all such things that are real are essentially derived from a mission context and in this case there wasn't one. The pause at the other end of the line was followed by relief. Only weeks later at a diocesan synod I saw a similar scenario. Fresh expressions was on the agenda so the introductory worship was billed as fresh. In this case it was not very good guitar playing and fairly good puppetry. You could almost hear the thought bubbles rising among the members, labelled: "gimmick", "trivial", or "but we sing songs like that in our church." **Fresh is in great danger of becoming shorthand for trendy**

which is probably as dangerous in an Anglican context as the dubious value relevance, with all its dangers of syncretism and transience.

Thus, being fresh is only lastly about worship, it is first about us being fresh in our life in Christ, and fresh and refreshing in our mission to others.

**It is hard to convince people that "fresh" means neither new nor novel.** Paul Bayes some years ago spoke to Rochester diocesan conference and made them think what was meant by the familiar terms "a fresh cup of tea" or "fresh orange juice". Fresh is about being healthy and staying within sell by date, being refreshing in its results and also being itself – mixing hot tea and cold orange juice together was not recommended. Herbal tea was however commended, as we should not assume there is only one

real tea. In addition there was the point made that inevitably the times came when a fresh tea bag was needed. It was Bayes brilliance at its best.



"The visiting preacher didn't expect the milk to be quite that fresh"

So is this a fresh expression? I hope I have shown this question is virtually nothing to do with whether the worship is trendy, let alone bizarre and never seen before in world Christianity. **Moreover freshness is, I think, a consequence of something else.** It actually comes from a mission-shaped process. That in turn is not a label to slap on a piece of existing work to gain credibility. **Being mission-shaped is seriously asking who we are trying to be church for and what their culture**

**is.** Then out of the journey of inculturation, it means devising, ideally with those people, what ways will communicate and promote the transforming encounter with Jesus that is characteristic of being Christian for that area or group, i.e. the process and result is mission-shaped. Being mission-shaped will have an affect on how both the incoming and resultant community functions, how it discerns its mission and puts that perception into action. Only then can it begin to evolve what forms of worship that will embody and promote encounter with Jesus for those people.

Thus, being fresh is only lastly about worship, it is first about us being fresh in our life in Christ, and fresh and refreshing in our mission to others. It is most deeply about attitude and process which will then govern form. Thus oddly to some, being mission-shaped can include starting traditional ways of being church for those who would be helped by that. To them it will be fresh – like a fresh cup of tea. And everyone knows what that is already. Equally in other contexts it could be an exotic way to be church, but only, once more, if that fitted the context. (Perhaps a freshly-made "Vesper" with three measures of Gordon's, one of vodka, half a measure of Kina Lillet, shaken over ice with a thin slice of lemon peel, Mr Bond?)



"I like my Church shaken not stirred"

All this connects with the need to avoid the client/provider trap. Being mission-shaped will lead to becoming indigenous. The best fresh expressions for older people will embrace that. They will be for them, not just to them. Peggy Boynes tells of a conference entitled Evangelism for Older People. Two groups turned up, one was young and wanted to know how to reach those older, the other group were older people themselves who had read the advert another way and were excited someone had taken their potential seriously and wanted to equip them for their own mission to their peers<sup>25</sup>. This story at present seems to have some dangers of getting stuck in 3rd agers doing aspects of church for 4th agers. Working out ways for 4th agers to find and practice their own contributions would be healthier and fresher. They too can listen and talk to others, they can dream and pray and give, they can invite and do simple acts of service.

<sup>25</sup> Boynes *Evangelism for Older People* p.3

To fail to explore this would reduce the freshness and bring back the staleness that could be a curse of older people's lives, as the evening of life draws on, frustration and feelings of uselessness arise and society cruelly colludes by increasingly treating them, and even talking to them, as though they were children once more.

But overall in this case Geoff Waters has asked the "Who is it for?" question and learnt from what those in the day centre asked for, as well as what others were doing in older people's work, in particular a Baptist church in the region. That does suggest the proper search for freshness. The Fresh Expressions website, in its definition of when something deserves that tag, fits with this approach: "A fresh expression is a form of church established primarily for the benefit of people in our changing culture who are not yet members of any church." Thus whether there are non-churched who come and find it helpful is a better measure of freshness than the types of worship chosen and whether anyone has had lunch clubs before. Across this work that is what I found; the presence of the older de-churched and non-churched leads me to say there is a case that this is fresh. Long may it remain so.

George W Lings  
December 2008

Cartoons: Tim Sharp

## Resources

### Another story

Bob Hopkins, on the ACPI website<sup>26</sup>, has written a short account of what he calls Molly's Church in Ravenshead, a large village between Mansfield and Nottingham. When I visited I saw it had many features in common with this story: the need to focus on older people, finding what they needed, in particular a long story of vital and necessary community involvement leading to the trust built up that made the growth of the Sunday afternoon possible. It too has a minibus collection routine and a monthly event which includes spiritual input called Sunday Afternoon Tea. That is its name, not Molly's Church, and the leaders Molly and Graham Bell of Groundlevel didn't realise it could be a fresh expression till Bob told them. As yet they themselves see it has some church characteristics but would not call it a church. The differences are that only the Northampton story has the dedicated paid full time leader, while Molly does it voluntarily, both as her own person and as the pastor's wife. In addition at St Giles the fuller range of activities exist that are both the outworking of it becoming church and a source of further attraction to its gatherings.



### Further reading

Peggy Boynes, *Evangelism for older people*, Grove Evangelism 46 (Cambridge: Grove Books, 1999)  
Chris Harrington, *Reaching the Saga Generation* Grove Evangelism 83 (Cambridge: Grove Books, 2008)  
Mike Collyer & Claire Dalpra, Alison Johnson & James Woodward, *A mission-shaped Church for Older People* (Sheffield: Church Army and The Leveson Centre, 2008). This work also contains a wider bibliography for those who want to pursue specialism within the area.

<sup>26</sup> www.acpi.org.uk

## Ongoing Resources

Since March 2004, Mike Collyer has been writing a series called Discovering Faith in Later Life. There are now seven stories and comment, not dissimilar in concept to Encounters on the Edge, but these can be downloaded either as a PDF or in Word format from the Sheffield Centre.



Since May 2003 he has also put together a more frequent background Information Bulletin about the world of older people, the issues they face and national trends that affect them. This series has now built up to 25 issues and can be similarly acquired electronically.

For:

- Discovering Faith in Later Life Series
- Focus on Older People Information Bulletin

email: [ask@sheffieldcentre.org.uk](mailto:ask@sheffieldcentre.org.uk)

# How can The Sheffield Centre help you?

This booklet has been brought to you by Church Army. It was written and produced by The Sheffield Centre, Church Army's Research Unit. Directed by Revd George Lings, The Sheffield Centre exists to discover, develop and disseminate their findings to Church Army and to the wider Church in the following areas:

- Fresh expressions of church and church planting: George Lings
- Evangelism to post-Christian culture: Steve Hollinghurst
- Evangelism and older people: Michael Collyer

What else does The Sheffield Centre offer?

- Further sources of study on the issues raised by these booklets: Claire Dalpra
- Training courses on planting fresh expressions of church
- Sabbatical study facilities on areas related to our research
- A database of Church of England fresh expressions of church
- Online guide to fresh expressions of church: Andrew Wooding
- Peer-based learning networks for practitioners: Beth Keith

How would you get hold of more copies?

To order further copies of this booklet or others in the series, visit our website:

[www.encountersontheedge.org.uk](http://www.encountersontheedge.org.uk)

or contact Laurence Keith on [l.keith@sheffieldcentre.org.uk](mailto:l.keith@sheffieldcentre.org.uk)  
or 0114 272 7451. Individual copies are £4.

[www.encountersontheedge.org.uk](http://www.encountersontheedge.org.uk)

Supporting the continuing mission  
of the Church of England