

## 42: Across a Threshold



We are now confident that fresh expressions of Church can be started, but more subtle questions remain about how they develop over time and are sustained well. When an initial fresh expression reproduces, how is it affected and what are the dynamics of creating a family of fresh expressions? How does ecclesial DNA engage with a variety of contexts? We found a rural example living through these transitions and report the evolving story.

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# Encounters on the Edge



no. 42:

## Across a Threshold

A family of rural Church plants

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Discoveries about fresh expressions of Church from The Sheffield Centre

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## The inspector calls

Occasionally I am asked by a fresh expression to conduct a review of its life and to assess something of its strengths and weaknesses. I am given the privilege of inside knowledge by private meetings with leaders. I gain access to founding documents or notable position papers and I visit, rather in the manner of the "mystery worshipper"<sup>1</sup>, to see how rhetoric and reality correspond. Thus, I have a better viewpoint from which to see if there are particular opportunities before it or, conversely, threats to its values or its existence. At the same time, it is an opportunity to try and unpick its DNA and reflect back, as a relative outsider, something of its corporate character and particular nature.

The *Threshold* group of churches, around and within Lincoln, began with one small group in 1995. In about fifteen years, this intended rural movement has grown to three distinct congregations and one other different way to operate, with an occasional overall gathering. Back in 2008, they invited me to conduct a review, which took place in November, with a write-up and feedback in December 2008.

To start with, some thanks are in order. I thank Pete and Kath Atkins, all the other leaders and the congregations. I have seen their stated values at work. The quality of welcome has shown *generosity*. The *hospitality* has been seriously creative and equally calorific. The diversity across the movement has been obvious and unaffected. *Openness* of response has been commendable, which suggests healthy confidence. As is often true in visits I make, I would be glad to be a member of such a group of communities if I lived nearer. Yet as with any living, changing social organism, there are questions beneath the surface. They range across understanding the past, interpreting the present and seeking to discern the future.

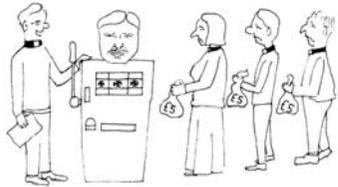


Pete and Kath

It is not a cliché to say it was a privilege to be asked. Any church that dares to bare its soul to an outsider, and even its warts, deserves praise. So often

<sup>1</sup> Visit <http://www.ship-of-fools.com/mystery/> to find out more about "mystery worshippers".

in the decade of researching for an *Encounters on the Edge* issue, people find that in me they are wired up to an incessant question machine masquerading as a person.



The Church consult-o-matic

I am grateful that nothing was too much trouble and no question was impossible to put. Without this kind of disclosure and reflection, *The Sheffield Centre* could neither have started nor maintained the series since 1999. In that way, I want to thank all our story holders. It is always fascinating to me to watch for the outcrops of the stated values of these young churches and how the practice and the theory intersect, though usually not neatly. I have found that practice both tests and refines theory.<sup>2</sup> Certainly much of the theory that *The Sheffield*

*Centre* now stands for in relation to planting fresh expressions of Church, has been significantly built upon, piece by piece, in the twist and turns of the discoveries made on such visits.<sup>3</sup>

Occasionally the process has been different; this review was conducted in its own right. It only occurred to me afterwards that the lessons unearthed would bear some translation into an *Encounters on the Edge* story. A notable example would be the work over two years with Northumbria Community that became the basis for *Encounters on the Edge* no.29 on new monasticism which, interestingly, is the first issue to have been reprinted.

### The brief and an impression

I was helpfully given a number of questions to explore. Here are most of them. Some I did not cover for lack of time or because some areas of work were in transition.

- 1 How do we best pursue the vision from here?
- 2 How do we sustain *Threshold* through the years ahead in terms of:
  - i. Sustaining, growing and maturing what is already established?
  - ii. Sustaining ongoing effective planting activity?
  - iii. Continuing to influence the wider Church towards planting?
- 3 How can we maintain a mission focus and also work for mature discipleship?
- 4 Can we accelerate the planting process?

<sup>2</sup> I note the words of that homespun philosopher Yogi Berra; "In theory, there is no difference between theory and practice. But in practice, there is."

<sup>3</sup> The *Encounters on the Edge* house style regarding capitalisation of the word "church" has changed with this and future issues. My PhD study has caused me to question previous convention and adopt the practice of using a capital "C" for church when the Church universal, ideal or theological is meant.

Immediately, it was clear that this church was intentional and that mission was a high profile part of its DNA. Moreover, there was an assumption that health and growth was more connected to the multiplication of more churches rather than growing one large one.

### Plant or reproduce?

Sometimes I find a visit leaves one impression or lesson that is more enduring than memories of the pleasant plethora of people or surrounding multitude of details. Here it was that the growth of this church by planting had created a diversity of expressions. I have to confess that at the same time as working with *Threshold*, I was revising, for the fourth time, my PhD thesis on the calling and capacity of the Church to reproduce and was clear in my mind why this meant non-identical reproduction. As part of that study process, I had also encountered ecclesialogists such as Minear and Dulles and mission thinkers like Roxburgh, who all concurred in stressing that **images have the ability to evoke that which they signify** so they need to be chosen with care for the power they possess.

Here then in Lincoln I felt that in meeting the variety of *Threshold* churches, I had bumped into several ecclesial corporate personalities with related but differing histories and characteristics. In addition, I was becoming convinced that the older language of planting needed at least setting alongside, and maybe even taking a minor role beside, the lesser known language of reproducing. Yet to help all this stick in the minds of the people, I needed images. So in the reporting back, I deliberately used analogies from and comparisons with processes of human and family development. This was in the belief that though *Threshold* understood itself to be both planted and a planting movement, it should not be understood primarily as planted vegetables but more like human beings who reproduce.

I am convinced that the older language of "planting" needs at least setting alongside the lesser known language of "reproducing"

### A set of images

I find it easy to think that as most churches have names and some have patron saints, they do have an identity which is unique to them at the same time as belonging to some sort of wider family. To me, this is **akin to my identity coming from receiving both a particular Christian name and also inheriting a surname**. To understand me better, both features need coming to terms with. To take only "George" would be excessively

individualistic, but solely to mull on "Lings" would be unduly corporate. So I suggest it might be with churches.

*Threshold* was clearly no longer simplistically one thing. I suggested it is best understood not as one individual but more like a family group, sharing a surname and a history but with each part of the family having a unique Christian name and a special contribution to the wider family. As families grow over the years, the ensuing complexity and diversity requires adjustments in attitudes and changes to patterns of gathering and dispersal.

The extended family analogy has several virtues. As we are the children of God in a family covenant relationship with him, it is a way of thinking that has Biblical roots.<sup>4</sup> Because extended family is an image, it tends to stay in the mind. As an image, it will tend to open conversations rather than close down options. Because we have all grown up in families, it is familiar to us and provides many of us with insights we can take from experience. However, it is also true that some extended families are dysfunctional. This image may then be painful or troublesome to people with that history, but still it can show errors to avoid and values to aim for. *Threshold* being like an extended family seems to me to embrace much of what I think I have seen and it is a useful way to frame their current questions and future directions.

In keeping with this, already there is a realisation that the present is more complex than the past and that the future is unlikely to revert to initial simplicity. For example, only a few people know everybody across the churches any more, but this may not matter. Instead, this means the inherited DNA of *Threshold's* values is vital for all to know, yet how values are applied is not always immediately obvious.

<sup>4</sup> An Old Testament parallel is the dual identity in the people of God. Overall, they were the children of Israel and yet also they belonged to a particular tribe which lived in an area within the Promised Land. That tension was not always easy, or well-handled, but it was recognition of diversity of size and complexity of identity. An example might be tiny Benjamin, or the key role in history such as played by Judah. In the New Testament the term "Church" is used both of the gathering at a house, across a town or region, or of the whole body of Christ. In ecclesiology, the term "catholic" has a similar complexity; the 2nd century Ignatian use pursues the wholeness of the local, while the 5th century Augustinian usage emphasises the universal. The loss of either sense impoverishes the other.

## Overall factors

### Context and calling

*Threshold* began in the commuter villages north of Lincoln, such as Nettleham, and has grown both northwards into other villages further out and southwards into one area of the city characterised by deprivation.

*Threshold* is healthy in that its calling is reflected in its unfolding history. The calling is written down as follows: "to see the kingdom of God extended through a church planting process in and for Lincolnshire – especially initially in rural areas". As *Threshold* grows in diversity, **the founding story will need repetition** in official documents and public teaching just as the Psalms and Prophets recall the Exodus story or the Passover celebration wording is written to enable the group gathered to imagine they themselves are coming out of Egypt. They live in the spirit of the founding story. This connects to the sobering assessment that one of the New Testament churches had lost its first love. Those who don't know where they came from (and why) are more vulnerable to that danger. This knowing covers both the big picture of what God has done for us in Jesus but also the specific call here and now. That balance reminds us that God choosing us is a cause for gratitude and wonder and that the choosing is also the calling – to join with the ongoing communal mission of God.

His choosing is also our calling - to join with the ongoing communal mission of God

My observation is that enough documents exist that a mission history of *Threshold* could now be usefully written. This account is of intentional present diversity; it is not primarily that story. Such an account should naturally embody and reflect the values but set down what an increasing proportion of the current membership have not lived through. If done well, such a document becomes a resource to enable newcomers to understand what they consider joining. Any church that wins new members needs to induct them into the values. In stormy periods, it will act as an anchor. In days of remarkable blessing, it can test fruitfulness and a day may come within another fifteen years when few or none of the founders are still in active leadership. A church's oral tradition may need more than that.

Another part of the context is given by what I call their surname: *Threshold*. Surnames often reflect roles: Baker, Smith or Mason. Names in Scripture commonly express character and calling. The other disciples probably thought that it was a good joke to call their up-and-down colleague "Peter the rock"; their choice may have been to name him Sandy.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>5</sup> A good joke I heard years ago from Bishop Michael Marshall, at an Eclectics conference in the 1980s.

Therefore, it is no surprise to me that *Threshold* in its short history of fifteen years often had the sense of crossing over the threshold of what it was, into what it was becoming. Yet that history shows that each change was without that new location or "address" being the final destination. None of the many arrivals at new venues have been, or can be, the Promised Land. This is a people who seem to stay on the threshold, which can be tiresomely provisional but actually is a virtue. *Threshold* is also a word that reminds us that Christians seek to cross over into the mysterious, awe-inspiring presence of God. Yet it reminds us that we only tread the edges of his ways; his full presence is more than we could cope with and this world is but the ante-room for the royal presence in heaven.

The term *threshold* has a missional meaning for it is a **transitional zone**, an invitation outward beyond a comfortable home. I hope *Threshold* as a whole will find it impossible to settle down into one place. The day they are renamed *The Lounge* will be a sad one. It is unlikely because the term *threshold* also fits the pioneering restlessness of many of the leaders and their cross-cultural mission histories. *Thresholds* also mark edges and God has a long history of sending people to edges to find what they should be and who they should be with. Even Jesus, immediately after his baptism and the expression of the pleasure of the Father, was driven by the Spirit into the desert. Moreover, there is an equally long history of God renewing his people from the edges. Examples include the desert fathers, the monastic movements, the Reformation, the story of Wesley and the world mission movement from the 1790s.<sup>6</sup> Therefore, I said to a gathering who heard part of the report:

*You must know what your name means, for then you can live it better. As an extended family you will never finally "cross the threshold" into a completed mature adulthood and completely arrive... Another part of maturity is the capacity to give birth to what is not yet, by which the family grows and over time becomes an extended family.*

## Kingdom and Church

*Threshold* sees its identity in seeking the kingdom. This is a deep root for their name and is prominent in their values and practice. Two sentences from Jesus sum up a key point about the kingdom: "Time's up. The kingdom of God is here" (Mark 1:15 The Message) and in Luke 11:2 Jesus teaches us to pray "Your kingdom come". The kingdom is now.

<sup>6</sup> For an academic source of such planned disturbance by the Spirit, consult Andrew Walls, *The Missionary Movement in Christian History* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1996) pp. 16-25.

It is here. And it is *not yet* because we pray for its future coming. All Christians live on the threshold between the two and, in this life, we always will. Our identity is and will be now and not yet.

My understanding is that this means our life together will always be on the move, always transitional, always provisional, almost nomadic. *Threshold* could never build a temple and remain faithful to who they are. They are committed to living in tents and will have to put up tabernacles that mark only the temporary location of God. When he moves so should they.



The 'now' and 'not yet' of living in tents

That is tiring and nomads need to know their portable story and they also need oases. The family on the move and becoming more diverse need to know how, where, and when to come together. **Growing and sustaining need to remain fast friends.** The challenge is to do justice to such a life containing both polarities. I sense the movement component is strong in these founders, demonstrated by the emerging edges of the work. This will probably always have an apostolic effect on the wider membership, drawing it forward and outward. But the component of *being*, as opposed to doing, was, I thought, less consciously developed. I have pondered if there are two reasons for this.

Firstly, sometimes kingdom language can be used to avoid a focus on the Church. There are a number of reasons this can be attractive. Some missional thinkers have had such a poor past experience of church that they invest in kingdom and mission talk, ignoring the "c" word. Some more recently-formed Christian groups are significantly made up of local church refugees or battered Christians who run whimpering from the word "church" and the bad memories it provokes. Again, some evangelists talk as though Jesus is great, Church is appalling and they rejoice that they don't have to connect the two.

However, to imagine that to talk only of the gospel or kingdom delivers us from being Church is delusion. The New Testament, most of all when it is talking about the Spirit, presents the groups of followers of Jesus as a *foretaste*<sup>7</sup> of the kingdom, who know a down-payment of life in the Spirit and are living letters of the gospel. We are those who, by undeserved favour,

<sup>7</sup> I argue in the PhD that this Biblical word "foretaste" is the characteristic contribution by Lesslie Newbigin to the kingdom/Church debate. He argues it is the basis by which lesser terms like "sign" and "instrument" derive meaning.

have crossed over from death to life. We are now the family of God. The life of Jesus is being reproduced within us and the fruit of the Spirit is growing and even showing. Some of the not yet, is already now. Theologically, that is what Church is.

We are free not to use the "c" word where, for mission reasons, it is inappropriate. *Ecclesia* was, after all, only originally borrowed from secular Greek usage as one way to explore an inculturated understanding of this new group of people. But we are not free to drop the idea. **Jesus left behind him not a book, not an ideal but a group of people to embody his life in them; that was his mission strategy.** *Threshold* is helpfully focused on kingdom to beckon it into its future, which is part of the not yet but that should not be used to eclipse the value of the now – Church as a foretaste, and thus a sign, of the now of the kingdom. Without losing the kingdom focus and that call to doing, *Threshold* could benefit from consciously welcoming the positives of Church and more consideration of its own being.

Secondly, another reason why the being is less developed may be having a short history and a young existence. If the whole of *Threshold* is only fourteen years old, it may be useful to sometimes think of it at this stage like a teenager. This analogy has occurred to some on the leadership. Younger children, like puppies, are full of life; their energy levels can't be copied by adults. They live in the present with life as a kaleidoscope of discovery, learning and wonder in a properly-sheltered world.

As they grow, they become more reflective. Questions arise that are no longer so easy to answer and this is disturbing before it is liberating. Why am I me? How am I different from my parents or siblings? Who am I? A young church often begins with a life that is simple because human resources are frequently slim and it meets in a house. The mission focus can also be dominant as it has a new young life to share, people are excited by the new thing and, frankly, it needs to win others in order to survive. But complexity of life begins to arise as church in a home setting becomes church in one congregation and even more as further clusters or congregations begin. Yet growth in numbers or gatherings does not answer identity questions. Neither is a teenager or an adult simply a big child. When a church is young it can be largely kingdom-focused, but even at this young stage, the exploring of a variety of identities as churches is legitimately occurring.

## Identities within the *Threshold* family

To grapple with the identity questions, I need to shift the analogy away from the single teenager. Nor is it as simple as saying that *Threshold* is a mature church with teenage congregations. *Threshold* is now a complex reality, diverse in expression and dispersed over a widening area. These dynamics are likely to continue. "*Where are you going?*" is a less difficult question because the call and values tell them the answer is outwards. They may not know exactly where or when but those are questions of discernment and timing. How the multiplying process changes the being and the identity of each group seems to be less clear.

**The image of the extended family offers a way forward**, and within that, to realise that each corporate expression of being *Threshold* has dual identity. The overlap and difference between a surname and a first name does this work.

***Threshold* is the group surname; the location is the personal name.** The surname carries the DNA of *Threshold* values; the location gives the personal story and the individual identity within the *Threshold* family. Thus the three congregations I visited rightly had

values in common and even some common shapes to their public meetings. However, their feel was different. The layouts were varied, the size at which they naturally worked differed and the content of the monthly patterns were not the same. The proportions and ages of children present also varied, the provision and timing of food were different and the kind of participation was culturally different. And that is all good but it is more complex. This church is already living out the tension of unity and diversity. **They have passed beyond the infantile stage of unconscious conformity and avoided the controlling instinct of uniformity.** Copying Mum and Dad is neither no longer sufficient nor even required. Nor is *Threshold* like a spider plant that sends out a runner and clones itself in nearby ground. This reproduction is rightly two-sourced by both DNA and context, just as Jesus of Nazareth was God the Son and son of Mary. So the expressions of *Threshold* are rightly non-identical.



Here is some of the variety that I saw which also reflects the history. I found as my visits went on I started to look for the individuality within the *Threshold* family more than the values which are shared. I noticed that the surname and values were so strong that I was reminded of my childhood school days. In that more formal era, I was called "Lings 1", whereas my younger brother was "Lings 2".<sup>8</sup> Christian names were far too personal. Now this is all reversed and cold-calling phone operators call me George without my permission. So I wondered if there were some unasked personal identity questions around. Would they enrich self-understanding and explain some internal dynamics? For each congregation has a different identity and role in the extended family.

### Nettleham

The more I listened to the Nettleham story, both the night before visiting and on the Sunday, I realised it was the longest story. It was the place that had sent out most people, or given away most. It has been the test bed where most changes have been begun and tried: house group, cells, congregation, sender of the plant to Wragby, then the creation of one in the adjacent villages of Welton and Dunholme and then Monks Road in Lincoln. It went through a stage of clusters (later abandoned) and now appears to be itself. This congregation is in its ninth venue. But what is it, in the extended family? Is it a tired mother whose youthful children tear round the house?

Not really because the children are elsewhere. **It seemed more accurate to think of the empty-nester scenario.** This is partly a comment on the age group present, for there are proportionally less children (perhaps because of house prices and because the founders' families have grown up), but it is also a comment on its corporate history and identity within *Threshold*. It fits with the analogy to observe that the current venue also represents down-sizing since 2006 when the change to four congregations in localities occurred.

Empty-nesters have opportunities and challenges. They can be proud of the part they have played in raising the kids but can feel redundant as life has moved on beyond them. They need to make space to process the sort of bereavement created when children leave home. They need to be flexible because those children you thought had left may come back, either out of pleasure or need. They now have freedom to follow their own careers, hobbies and interests and build new friendships. That could be life-giving,

but such parents need to watch that they don't become inward-looking. A valuable stability might even occur rather than the roller coaster ride of the teenage years.

Here the leaders know and live the values; they know too they have freedom to interpret them in context. Yet the search for agreed vision and specific identity for Nettleham *Threshold* is real. A complication is not having had a public presence in the village itself between 2001 and 2006. They are only two years back as a congregation in and for Nettleham and in a focused local missional way. However, I heard of welcome signs of communal involvement and there may be reaping from seeds sown in the deeper past that may go back to the ministry of Dr. Ian Lechler in the village from 1948.



Ed & Maggie Sewell, leaders of Nettleham Congregation

Returning to Nettleham as the empty-nester, I've suggested that while it is healthy to recognise that though sending out people to start a congregation is good, it does create bereavement, as when a son or daughter leave home. Those who leave to marry gain a spouse, and I wonder whether, in this analogy, the new local context and those who join from it are the spouse. If so, to that spouse the empty-nesters are just the in-laws. That relationship can be OK (despite plenty of jokes to the contrary), but the relationship needs intentional work to be of any value.

That's another twist to being an empty-nester. There are people in the other villages who don't really know empty-nester Nettleham, its story and ongoing life.

This connects with another feature. The overall *Threshold* as an extended family lives with those who have joined from outside the family. It is not the case that everybody knows everybody well. Perhaps it is not surprising that not all want to come to the overall family gatherings if they didn't live through the nuclear family history.

<sup>8</sup> My father, being a second son in a previous generation, was dubbed "Lings minor".

Wel/Dun

I was initially confused by this label that is part of *Threshold* parlance and thought the name was a comment on "Well done, good and faithful servant". Maybe it is truer than I realised. Within *Threshold* as a whole, this may be the part that has evolved most often over time. Some founders lived there from the early years in the mid 1990s, starting cells in 2002 that became their own cluster, which felt like a normal development of its existing life.



Now it is a congregation serving the two adjacent villages, Welton and Dunholme, and still undergirded by five small groups. Within the extended family analogy, **this story is most like a nuclear family** within it. The language of family is quite often used to describe its life. Provision for children is a high priority and they do not always go out to their own activities. This congregation could consider one week sending out the adults to their

activities and then inviting them back to tell the children what they had learnt.

It may be that the length of this story is itself a **comment on the length of time it takes to grow a congregation in the village context**. Throughout the visits, I have sensed a tension between the desire for clearer, faster, more

obvious kingdom growth and the actual history of slower seed-sowing and relationship-building as they have gone through stages towards growing a congregational-sized presence. As long as both sides of the tension are valued, it will be a useful one.

Wel/Dun now has quite a sophisticated pattern of gatherings on Sundays. Some are about community building and pre-evangelism through socials, others are for corporate worship in varying



styles, and others meet with another local church for special occasions. There has been a variety of community engagement, with notable examples linked to festivals. Virtually all have included food which has led easily to Alpha.

They know the pressures of family-style congregation life. It is neither so intimate as the small group nor can it exhibit the depth of teaching or excellence of presentation that the more occasional celebration can aspire to. It seems that the larger the church size, the larger the temptation for Christians to get comfortable, to be content to meet their existing friends and to exhibit consumerist tendencies in regard to church.

The larger the church size, the larger the temptation for Christians to get comfortable

Wel/Dun is also making the demanding transition of when leadership is passed on by the founders. This is occurring partly for the very excellent reason that some pioneering founders are being called to pioneer again but elsewhere. Thus what should be a normal search for indigenous leaders is accelerated. To everyone's delight, Alan and Ann have now found two people to complete their team, thus releasing Simon and Ann for their new venture.



Simon and Ann Baker



Alan and Ann Evans

## Monks Road



This is the most different gathering. Perhaps in the extended family **this looks most like the teenager**. The location would rank as a well-kept secret; it is unadvertised and in the first floor of the YMCA above their fitness centre. It is not aimed at passing trade. Food happens first and for a good social reason that this will be breakfast for some of its members. The gathering is most like café with people milling round tables and rarely standing to participate. A fag break is a normal part of its life, though increasingly people are

encouraged to smoke before the service to minimise interruptions.

The membership is dominantly male and under thirty. Anything can happen and it usually does. This immediate culture and its apparent randomness is more akin to the feel of music hall or pantomime. The talk has to be fairly free of notes as it is a live show. Anyone operating at the front can expect cheers or a joke that their expense. Whole group games and table-based group work are lively and essential parts of the meeting. The songs that work best are ones known because they are performed by well-known artists as this group will normally have bought into secular celebrity culture. This is an echo of commendable early musical instincts of the Salvation Army.

And absolutely none of this is wrong; it is a living example of taking *Threshold* values and incarnating them (or putting flesh on them) in a very different context that is cross-cultural although in Lincoln. That context would not be characterised by stability but rather chaos and hurt. The discipleship issues faced are huge and obvious. The counter-cultural values of stability and consistency are provided by the incoming team. This is modelled by grandparent type figures, the varied but cohesive leadership team, and thirdly by the intriguing social mix in this area. This ranges across young professionals to those from underclass deprived backgrounds, those with mental health issues and those of some ability but who have fallen on hard times.

The ongoing life of the Monks Road *Threshold* is very clearly now and not yet. There is already joyful progress now and distinctly not yet behaviour

patterns. Here, belonging and believing are laps ahead of behaving when it comes to money, sex and power. The potential and baggage are considerable. It's all rather messy and also glorious because the lid is taken off and it's real. Mercifully, "nice" Christians from outside have been discouraged from joining and turning it into a "nice" church that Monks Road people would never join. I salute the leaders for this example of real connection which takes *Threshold* values, dares to live with the mess and works onwards.

An example of this commendable flexibility is that its dynamics owe more to cluster thinking than the traditional congregation. The name of the game is participation, with application done among a large family grouping. This, in my view, will mean that should it grow in numbers; early thought needs to be given to its natural unit size. When would larger numbers inhibit this dynamic of immediacy? Getting bigger without multiplication could be a mistake.

Yet the challenge would be how to find enough leaders for more than one gathering, not least as most of the leaders have full lives and are in employment. Here, the road to anything like indigenous leadership is patently a long and uneven one.

I wonder whether the intentional development of the young professionals needs a bit more thought. It is excellent that they are there to love and serve. It is good for them to relate with those who are very different from them. But in the overall extended family of *Threshold* there may need to be additional times and spaces for them on their own, either as single young adults or, if it works, with young marrieds as yet without children. *Threshold* has shown it is capable of mixing not just different groups in one place but that its overall life moves across territory and across the different sizes of being Church: cell, congregation and celebration. I suspect here is a need that as yet is not met for this group to grow as disciples with issues that



Carl and Sarah Belcher,  
leaders of Monks Road



arise in this stage of life while still being connected in to a whole mixed congregation.

### Hemingby

The account of the dispersed picture of *Threshold* should include the following intriguing pattern. This story is closely linked to the journey of Paul and Di Stephenson. Founder members of *Threshold*, they have been one of the 300 members of the small village, Hemingby, since 2002 where their strategy was to get involved in the local community. Space does not allow a fuller telling of the longer tale but I want to comment on the patterns that I thought I saw.

The most obvious points at which something like Church is seen are, on the one hand, at festival events like the nativity trail and, on the other hand, in home-based gatherings. **Nearly always there is food and a festive spirit.** Intriguingly, some villagers have decided that Paul and Di, taking initiative in these ways, is some equivalent to having Church in the village. I was reminded of the work of Robert Jewett, a New Testament scholar, who argues that the early Church, though house-based, was not mainly villa-

based which would be a congregational-sized gathering.<sup>9</sup> Rather it was tenement Church; the working poor met in their only room – with each church made up of twelve to fifteen people at most. It was relational, communal and meal-based.

So maybe Paul and Di are already doing Church although it doesn't entirely look like it when seen through the congregational lens. Perhaps something is Church already when there is a small group sent by Jesus, finding its life in Jesus and intending to follow Jesus. **Whether something is Church then is more about intention than performance, more about inner dynamics than outer delivery.** I want to connect this to the intentional value of *Threshold* to reproduce *small churches*, not to grow one large

one. I believe this is wonderful for engendering contextual diversity. It is also far better for engaging directly with the plethora of village communities. It reminds us that growing congregations is not the goal; they are but one expression for particular-sized contexts.



Paul and Di Stephenson

### Connecting the family differences

My mind turned to another analogy. I began to think that *Threshold* has something like a Tesco. At the same time, at least two of its congregations are similar to *Spar* shops and Hemingby could be thought of as a *corner shop*. All are expressions of serving communities but in different ways because of different sizes.

The *Threshold* celebrations are *Tesco* church. They can create ambivalence. Like Tesco you get fantastic stuff and everything there is well-produced and advertised. Yet, how local is it? Do you really know the check-out person or the other shoppers?

The congregations are *Spar* churches which carry less range; they are simpler than *Tesco* and maybe there are fewer bargains. But they have the essentials and they are in the larger villages.

The *corner shop* church is different again. It's all about relationships and being there. Watch Ronnie Barker in *Open All Hours* for a humorous take on this. *Ratatouille* and rat poison might be on the same shelf, but it's probably safe. Moreover, you can live from its essentials. It is a way to be a shop.

*Threshold* is expressing how to be church in several different ways and can rejoice in each. **The key is what is appropriate to the content** and not to believe any one of them is the real thing and the others are just less good.

<sup>9</sup> Robert Jewett, *Tenement Church and Communal Meals in the Early Church* (Chicago: Journal of the Chicago Society of Biblical Research, 1993) pp.24-43

## Some issues across the extended family

### Sung worship and fresh expressions

Observation and conversation lead to questions which point up strengths and suggest areas for development. In company with a number of churches singing contemporary songs, the focus is either on the praise and adoration of God or the call to participate in his mission. There is little written to nurture the community life of the local Church or promote the belonging to the wider body of Christ. In theological terms, the call to the Church to be holy and apostolic is evident, but support for its call to be one and to be catholic is lamentable.

The songs that are written and become popular are driven by album sales; they rarely come out of local creativity and a local church story. So sometimes they don't fit. Most are written for big bands and front-led performance with electronic amplification that makes the necessity for congregations to sing up superfluous. Little is written which suits the small church. Yet ironically, the verbal style is excessively individualistic although personal and there is little that builds the sense of communal and corporate. The language and tone in many songs seems to appeal more to women than to men. Nor is this I think simply my unfamiliarity with some of the new curriculum; in each congregation I visited, significant numbers of members barely sang.

Here is a challenge for many fresh expressions including *Threshold*, a church which I think splendidly and rightly believes its calling is to remain an extended family of mostly small (but growing) churches, all of which relate to small village communities. It has the additional complication that its celebrations will by their size and the demand for competence model the life of big churches. Thus, the biggest platforms don't show how to be small Church, just as cathedrals are unhelpful models for village parishes. As one of *Threshold's* values is creativity, perhaps this area becomes a long-term prayer point and the gifts of those who see this weakness may be a significant resource in moving these issues forward.

### Leadership changes

Growing as an extended family is creating all sorts of changes from the simplicity of up to ten years ago. Pete Atkins, the nearest thing to an overall leader, is himself a youthful grandfather not just to his daughter Sarah and

Carl's twins, but to *Threshold*. He and Kath have a grandparent-type role. They used to be like parents with kids at home in the original *Threshold* in Nettleham. Now more time is spent travelling to visit the other congregations or "marrieds" that now have their own kids. They also host the overall festive family occasional get-togethers.

Pete's job description reflects this. His title is team leader, not simply leader. My understanding is that this does not just reflect the wisdom to be in a team of six in the overall leadership but that *Threshold* is itself more than one entity. The *Threshold* family is also a team. I have read the eleven main roles he is tasked with. Mainly it is not a doing job; **it is a job of seeing that what is necessary is being done.** The key word used is oversight. If they had chosen a Latin derived word for this, it would have been supervision. If they had chosen the Greek root, they would have written episcopate. To those who find this word puzzling or uncongenially redolent of medieval prince bishops, I remind them that we know what a tele-scope, a micro-scope, and a peri-scope are; they are all seeing words. So is epi-scope. It is a particular kind of leading that has to let go of much direct doing and moves into seeing which then leads to encouraging, mentoring and monitoring and initiating what is not yet.



I think the only classic wording of the role of episcopate that is not there explicitly in his job description is "*leader in mission*". It might well be added as fitting the DNA of *Threshold*, Pete's own calling and the historic understanding of episcopate. Depending on gifting, that might mean spotting and sending others on mission, which is well-covered. However, in the Celtic tradition, it could mean going and doing it oneself before handing that over to others.

I am pleased that a wider role beyond *Threshold* is explicitly included. Founders tend to be pioneers. Pioneers can have a low boredom threshold. A few years ago I saw a pattern of mixing local and wider involvement that helped find outlets for this intended restlessness. I wrote it up in *Encounters on the Edge* no.41. I add here that therefore such leaders not being around all the time was a gift that propels indigenous ministry

forward. Perhaps Jesus had this partly in mind when he said, “*It is good for you that I go away*”. Moreover, this fits with the *Threshold* value of generosity and existing to bless other Christians and churches. This is an important way to express the sense of a wider belonging beyond *Threshold*.

Within the leadership questions, that of **the training and support of the next generation** of congregation leaders, who are successors to Pete, Kath and other founders, is crucial to the future. Alan and Anne Evans, Eddie and Maggie Sewell and perhaps others are being offered the *Mission Shaped Ministry* one-year course. The pleasant irony is that the origins of the course started life here. However, it may not be ideal because the material is more akin to how to start fresh expressions of Church rather than their situation of inheriting something someone else started.

I wonder if further training should be something more like an ongoing mentoring relationship from within *Threshold*. In addition, should it be complemented by something from outside and how? It is already apparent that, as the next generation of leaders, they are facing some of the sort of challenges faced by full-time clergy. These features include meeting significant pastoral problems that are more than small group leaders can easily handle, learning different patterns of life that mean devising structured availability to others, the need for days off, for holidays away from ministry that otherwise is all-embracing and handling expectations of congregational members. Moreover, almost all of them have limited time and **their fear is that part-time leaders can only produce part-time results**. There are also the issues for them and the congregations of neither being the founding fathers and mothers nor being the incoming missionaries with an external set of credentials. Also, those founders are still in the vicinity and have oversight of the wider *Threshold* church.

This stage had to come but it is not yet certain what pressures it will bring. Nor is it yet known across new younger churches to what extent congregations or smaller groupings (made up of what you might call self-feeding sheep) can be raised. **It is a live question how church life can foster communities where people take responsibility for their own discipleship** in accountable relationship with others and not perpetuate the patterns of dependence on leaders that quickly set a ceiling on low levels of individual maturity and inward-focused patterns of corporate church life. This all bears upon the third question I was set. How can we maintain a mission focus and also work for mature discipleship?

## Can we accelerate the planting process?

This was one question set for me. In one sense, the planting process can be accelerated, but this comes through multiplying the number of congregations that are reproducing. Nettleham has taken ten years with twists, turns, encouragements and setbacks to become four congregations. In the next ten years, what could come from the three congregations and two further explorations in other villages? The stories of Waddington, Witham St Hugh, and who knows where else, are still to be told. Even if they only gave birth to an average of two each, the overall number of *Threshold* expressions would be over a dozen. That alone would be a significant and welcome growth for the kingdom, but it would also continue to extend the family and now be across three generations of planted churches.

In another sense, I doubt the planting process can be accelerated. The reasons are because in a post-Christendom context, seed-sowing takes time and relationship-building is generally slow. To change the image, the bridge to cross from unawareness to commitment is made of many arches that take time to build.<sup>10</sup> Not only this, but those very clearly gifted in evangelism are a minority of any church and the number of contacts they have is not unlimited. The stories around Lincoln thus far show the length of the process that has been needed.

Moreover, the starting years of *Threshold* were marked by the unusual gift of several people with significant life stories. This included experience of ministry, cross-cultural training and experience, managerial gifts and the kind of community roles that make people known and even trusted. That starting dynamic is a precious gift but it cannot be assumed as a permanent pattern. What indigenous leaders arise and how they are trained and sustained is a significant and not yet proven variable.



<sup>10</sup> *Encounters on the Edge* no.33, *Café Church 1 Caffeine, Croissants and Christ*, (Sheffield: Church Army, 2007) pp. 24-26 teases this thinking out further

## A new angle on tent making

In passing, I was struck by the roles played across the whole *Threshold* history by doctors. Since Paul White's books in the *Jungle Doctor* series, we have been used to the pivotal role of the overseas medical missionary. Up till now, I have also imagined that St Paul made tents because he needed to eat. I now wonder if I have misunderstood all this. **Could it be that Paul made tents because it put him in the market place?** He met people in a neutral space but also produced something of value to them.

In today's cross-cultural mission at home, could the tent makers of tomorrow be doctors and nurses, solicitors offering legal aid, hairdressers, coffee-shop staff even plumbers and electricians – anyone who meets people in a neutral environment and offers something of value to them, including a listening ear in an environment of trust? If they were also church planters and leaders, it would mean the forms of church grown would have to be simple and with the work shared across the people of God because they would not have the time or calling to be full-time pastors. Is this a possible vision for the new pioneer ministers?

## Across a threshold

This issue has now reached normal *Encounters on the Edge* length. It still has not covered their much-valued youth or children's work with a significant leadership resource attached to both. The former has a new set of leaders still finding their feet and needing to explore links into schools. I have only mentioned the villages in which work is being done. I have almost ignored the strong and life-giving links from *Threshold* to its own wider network *Ground Level* and their work with other churches both in particular villages across the Humber to The Wash area and nationally.<sup>11</sup>

*Threshold* has very clearly crossed the threshold of beginning. It has thrived and it has crossed another boundary and diversified. It has known significant successes and is working through one case of a closure in the village of Wragby earlier in 2008. Lessons learnt in retrospect from that story helpfully point up the painful process, deeply akin to bereavement, when a church plant ends. It is not finally clear whether that has died for ever or is only in the apparent deadness of depths of winter, waiting for a new springtime. For those involved, it is very much like a death or, worse still, a divorce in the family. In what I read privately, the retrospective analysis takes that seriously, including assessment of what can be learnt. This contains a note I find crops up often elsewhere: **agreed expectations through clearly shared values and adequate leadership arrangements are two crucial factors.**<sup>12</sup>



Overall, across *Threshold* the signs are good but as ever the extended family church faces challenges, this time through the complexity of this stage of their life. But that complexity is not wrong; it is not a departure from the simple gospel or simple church. **It is the direct consequence of giving birth to that which came from it but is rightly related to and different to it. This is the nature of non-identical reproduction.** To meet

<sup>11</sup> [www.groundlevel.org.uk](http://www.groundlevel.org.uk)

<sup>12</sup> See the book by Dave Male, *Church Unplugged* (Milton Keynes: Authentic, 2008) chapters 2,3,6 and 10.

this, they are learning to welcome diversity, have changed leadership patterns and paid to free up some leadership time for the episcopal functions, both in Pete Atkins and the connectivity of having an operations manager.

This church will do well to continue to attend both to its DNA and to context. In the vocabulary of the Mission-shaped Church report, there is a related bipartite process called double listening. This is about seeking to discern the call of God through two sources. One is what he has said in the past; in that sense *Threshold* already has a living tradition built on Scripture and its mission experience which it should draw upon. The second source of God's guidance is through the variety of local contexts. **These two sources mean that while the DNA can remain faithful, it will show in a diversity of expressions of being *Threshold*.** This can seem strange and even worrying to a young movement that does not want to lose focus or compromise values. However, this is normal in the ongoing missional process of the non-identical reproduction of Church.

Understanding and living with this two-source understanding will be essential to finding ways forward in the foreseeable future. It also means that the way forward can remain creative and flexible, as well contextual and incarnational, which connects with being hospitable and generous. All these qualities are manifestations of the *Threshold* ethos. Then the process of non-identical reproduction of its life will continue in complex although coherent diversity.

There are bound to be surprises and even setbacks but I am confident that their passion for the kingdom and values like flexibility and creativity will help. It is also a value to couple these features with a prayerful spirit and relational life. I am very hopeful that what has been from the start can, under God, continue to take them forward, multiplying an extended family of small churches with the emphases on corner shop and Spar, depending on context and always aiming at discipleship. Many of the rest of us could take note.

George Lings  
May 2009  
Cartoons: Tim Sharp

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