

44: Hidden Treasures



Stories of church for adults with learning disabilities are an important reminder that fresh expressions of Church continue to grow in surprising places, including vulnerable groups within our society. This issue tells two stories of such churches. Both are on an intentional journey toward ecclesial maturity but what particular opportunities and challenges do they face along the way? Claire Dalpra went to find out...

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Encounters on the Edge



no. 44:

Hidden Treasures

Churches for adults with a learning disability

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Hidden Treasures

Surprising connections

I was astonished. When our team first met to discuss this topic, it transpired that almost everyone had a family, friend or work connection to someone with learning disabilities.¹ Within the many and varied types of mission context in which fresh expressions are being planted, I had identified this mission context as important but assumed it would be an isolated and obscure area of research. How wrong I was.

Official statistics are almost impossible to gather because so many people with a learning disability go unregistered.² However, Mencap estimate 1.5 million members of the UK population have learning disabilities. With such a large proportion of society affected, I should not have been at all surprised at so many first-hand connections within our team. However, for all the wide-ranging, random and honest conversations we as a team have shared over the decade we've worked together, these common experiences have been left unexplored until this meeting. That we were unaware of each others' connections and the profound emotional and spiritual issues each of us has wrestled with as a result is sadly indicative of the ways in which those with learning disabilities remain hidden in society on a much larger scale.

I am therefore very glad that this series can report on a number of stories of church for learning disabled adults. The statistics alone should be sufficient reason for this mission context to demand our attention but, related to the aforementioned tendency towards hiddenness, this group, more so than others, needs assistance in championing their right for equal attention in mission conversations. The 2009 General Synod debate on the report *Opening the Doors* is an encouraging development for Anglicans in setting guidelines for ministry to the learning disabled³ and I am glad this series is able to take them seriously in a fresh expressions of Church context.

¹ The term 'learning disability' is what used to be known as 'mental handicap'. It differs from 'mental illness' in that it is the person's natural condition rather than something that is potentially treatable through drugs, therapy or time. A. Lowe *Evangelism and Learning Disability: Learning from the Faith and Light Communities* (Grove Evangelism Series no. 42, 1998) p. 3.

² According to www.learningdisabilities.org.uk/information/learning-disabilities-statistics/ (accessed 26 October 2009) only 20% of adults with learning disabilities are known to learning disability services.

³ *Opening the Doors Ministry with People with Learning Disabilities and People on the Autistic Spectrum* GS 1729

Challenging assumptions about what is 'normal'

For regular readers who may be inclined to disregard this as a specialist issue within this series, disconnected from more mainstream church contexts, I nonetheless challenge you to read on. These stories significantly contribute to counteracting the critique that the fresh expressions movement is merely a 'bourgeois' phenomenon.⁴ The stereotype of bored, middle class Christians searching for God in a darkened room experimenting with sand and tea lights is shown to be unfair and inaccurate by the stories that follow. These are communities for whom re-imagining church for their culture is not an indulgence, a hobby or a passing fad but **a lifeline in a context of very limited options**. Unlike other mission contexts involving vulnerable people, such as the homeless or young children for example, those with learning disabilities are a group whose characteristics are permanent and irreversible.

Moreover, I draw your attention to an important power dynamic. When we fail to familiarise ourselves with the issues that vulnerable groups face, our benign disinterest reinforces their marginalisation. For the learning disability community those of us with learning ability, because we are the majority, set the rules of what is considered 'normal' in terms of social interaction, behaviour and lifestyle. We therefore unconsciously confine those who are genuinely unable to adhere to such rules to feelings of exclusion and insignificance.⁵ Discovering what is 'normal' for the learning disabled community is hugely significant in helping to correct these distorted assumptions. Or put another way, the *'arrogance of the so-called able is what disables the disabled'*⁶ and the more we become aware of this the better.

Different kinds of story

For this booklet, I went to visit four examples of church for adults with learning disabilities and it was immediately obvious that there are a variety of approaches used by churches. Firstly, we are aware that for some people with learning disabilities, integration into existing church is possible; one of my colleagues has a god-son with Down Syndrome who grew up in his local parish church and now acts as server and communion assistant.

⁴M. Percy, 'New Tricks for Old Dogs' in L. Nelstrop & M. Percy (eds), *Evaluating Fresh Expressions: Explorations in Emerging Church*, (Norwich: Canterbury Press, 2008), p. 34.

⁵A. Webster *You Are Mine: Reflections on Who We Are* (London: SPCK, 2009) pp. 56-57.

⁶M. Bredin *True Beauty: Finding Grace in Disabilities* (Grove Spirituality Series no.102 2007) p. 12.



Tuesday Special



Rainbow Worship

Secondly, two of the visits I made were to groups that have developed as midweek congregations within existing churches.⁷ I discovered that two of the larger national organisations supporting Christian communities for the learning disabled, Causeway Prospects and Faith and Light, both recommend this congregational or small group approach for reasons that will be discussed in the next section.⁸

Thirdly, I encountered two churches that have been planted specifically for those with learning disabilities. Though this approach is rare, these are the stories I have chosen to reflect on in this booklet. Because they have followed a more unusual path in actually planting a church, their ecclesiological issues are more acute. It is also the case that both churches I met are working with a greater proportion of profoundly disabled than many Causeway Prospects groups. For both of these reasons, their stories are intriguing. The depth of exploration and sense of isolation I sensed on meeting these churches and their leadership teams make their stories ideal material for a series investigating the lessons pioneers are learning in mission and ministry 'on the edges' of church life. Their journey is one that few have travelled before.

⁷I visited Tuesday Special of Greyfriars Church in Reading and Rainbow Worship of St John and St Birinius, High Wycombe. I am exceedingly grateful for their warm welcome and keen insight into this area of ministry. I am very sorry to not to have enough space to include their stories but I have taken the liberty of including one or two photos from my time with them.

⁸www.prospects.org.uk/index.php/causeway_prospects Causeway Prospects partner with 180 UK churches to support and equip groups predominantly from an evangelical stable. www.faihandlight.org.uk Faith and Light groups have developed as a ministry within The Roman Catholic Church and, as of 1995, had 1,276 affiliated communities worldwide.

Fenland Community Church

I made my first visit in September 2008 to a church in the town of March in Cambridgeshire. The quiet, flat roads of the region of Fenland⁹ led into the almost deserted streets of the town, it being relatively early for a Sunday morning. With little difficulty, I located the scout hall where Fenland Community Church meets three Sundays a month behind the giant Sainsbury supermarket. On arrival in the car park, it was clear that a well-organised and concentrated hour of set-up was underway in time for a 10.30am service start. PA equipment was in the process of being carried in and cars were arriving and departing, delivering residents from nearby homes. I met leader Edward Kerr ready in his position of welcome by the door to greet members individually as they arrived.

Chairs were set out in a semi-circle, two and sometimes three rows deep, angled towards a screen. Later, I learned this layout has the advantage of plenty of room behind chairs for people to move about and wheelchairs can be slotted in and out without difficulty. The hall had yellow game lines on the floor, trophy cases on the walls and the ceiling's strip lighting gave much-needed glow to what would otherwise have been a bit of a dreary room, especially given the bright sunshine outside. But then this venue works well for its location rather than its ambience; being so near to Sainsbury's allows relatives and carers to do a bit of shopping.

I will never forget the few minutes before the service began. In typical researcher mode, I turned to those sitting around me to introduce myself and find out a bit about who they were and why they come. The first lady I spoke to smiled at me and continued to look at me but said nothing as I kept on talking. (I was told later that she doesn't usually speak at all.) Non-plussed and kicking myself that I should have realised all that was needed was a straightforward 'hello', I found myself face to face with a man with Down Syndrome with a lovely smile who wanted to be introduced to me. Then, as the service began, an older



⁹ A district within Cambridgeshire.

gentleman moved into a seat next to me and took hold of my hand, seemingly content to hold it throughout the service. Following a suggestion from one of the team that he let go, the service then began.

It was a fun, interactive, fairly noisy and active time of worship (lots of people wandering round) lasting about an hour. I counted more men than women and, as far as I could tell, more over 40 than under. Carers were thanked for bringing those in their care, a lady with learning disabilities opened with prayer (with a little help from Edward) and very embarrassingly, I was introduced and made to stand up. No hiding at the back behind my clipboard on this research visit!

Simple songs from Causeway Prospects and modern choruses such as 'Beautiful One' and 'My Glorious' were led by worship leader, Rosie, on guitar and Edward with Makaton signing.¹⁰ They told me later they use songs old and new, but do try to find songs that are simple to understand, with as little imagery as possible. They use percussion instruments and flags that all attendees are free to use. During the songs, Edward's wife, Marilyn, gently wrapped members unable to move or see with large sheets of soft material to encourage a feeling of inclusion. The largest chunk of singing resulted in a good number of people dancing in the middle, with others waving ribbons and flags.

A variety of activities took place between songs. Stones were handed round to represent the things we do wrong and we were invited to approach the front and lay them in front of a cross as an act of confession. Visual images were projected up on the screen to reinforce what was being said, including Salvador Dali's Christ of St John of the Cross at one point.



¹⁰ Adapted from British Sign Language, Makaton is a way of visually representing language to accompany speech which increases understanding and makes expressive communication easier for children and adults with learning disabilities. www.makaton.org

I was told pictures, clipart, photos and Makaton symbols are regularly used to try to enhance communication. Where relevant, they also use objects such as photos, wooden crosses that can be handed round, flowers, plants and candles to enhance the tactile and visual elements of what they try to teach. A visiting team from another church presented the Parable of the Good Samaritan in the form of a puppet show and members were invited to consider the ways in which they can bless their family, friends and carers by small acts of kindness. They also encourage people to pray for each other at some point in the service. I was told this is a popular time, and regularly demonstrates that people are able to think of others and pray for them, albeit with very simple prayers.

After refreshments, goodbyes, departure of members to their homes and the hour of pack-up, the team that run the service (plus the puppet team) decamped to the Kerrs' house for hot buffet lunch. (When they found time to prepare and cook this, I know not!) I was told this is the usual end to the



Edward and Marilyn Kerr

morning as, most Sundays, they visit a residential home (in the afternoon) so it makes sense to eat and relax together before setting off for a 3pm start. Over lunch, I was able to grab some time with Edward and other team members to hear more of their story.

Fenland Community Church began in the early 1990s with no idea that they would end up as a church for people with a learning disability.

Edward and Marilyn approached Plumline Ministries and ended up overseeing the

development of a new work in March.¹¹ The team's early outreach work in the town centre brought them into contact with two women with learning disabilities in their thirties, leaving the team questioning the best way of helping these people, and being unsure that the youth group – the only viable group at the time – was the right one. In a strange turn of events, existing membership of the newly planted church began to decline at the same time as the word spread that this church took seriously people with learning disabilities. More people with a learning disability joined and, five years later, the team, now basically three people, let go of the original vision and started asking questions – such as: *'How are we meeting these people's spiritual needs?'* – with greater intentionality.

¹¹ www.plumline.org.uk

Over a decade later, the team find themselves with 20-25 people with learning disabilities on a Sunday morning, including the carers and family members. In addition to their Sunday gathering, remarkably the team visit eight houses in the area once a month. Their members are almost all non-readers, a good number are non-speakers, many are profoundly disabled and a few cannot see. Therefore, many of the excellent Causeway Prospects resources have not been suitable for the severity and diversity of disabilities they are dealing with. Plumline Ministries, though also supportive with visiting speakers, visiting groups who story-tell with puppets and other help, have no previous experience of this kind of ministry. Fenland Community have had to explore, adapt and create resources as they went along. They require more long-term committed members who will view this church as their church, not as a project.



In Edward, Marilyn and the small team, I encountered a remarkable degree of commitment, passion and humility; over the years, they have had to discover what works through trial and error. Their ethos is to try and find the person behind the disability and attempt to communicate with that person. Their church logo is a picture of a bruised reed, communicating something of the difficulty that many of their members have experienced in engaging with society outside the learning disability community. Sadly, they report that, on occasion, they have even met a reaction from a few Christians of 'Why bother?' when exploring what discipleship means for those with profound disabilities.

Not that it has been easy; the time and care they have taken to 'bother' over the years has led to a deep questioning in themselves regarding the nature of personal faith and our inherited church traditions. For example, if it's okay that their members can't say the sinner's prayer, what does this mean for 'normal' conversion experiences? If it is okay for them to keep to a very low level of pressure for church members to be involved and engaged with faith issues, why not in other churches? If their church's worship style is legitimate, why can 'normal' worship in mainstream churches be so formal and non-involved? As they compare Fenland Community Church to other churches, they live with the unresolved question: **if all people, disabled or not, are acceptable in God's eyes, why do such different expectations apply to their community that don't apply to 'normal churches'?**¹²

¹² An article by Edward Kerr explores this further www.sharetheguide.org/blog/archive/2009/05/26/a-pattern-for-church-life-by-edward-kerr/?searchterm=fenland (accessed 26 October 2009).

Focus Service: Sheffield Church

A year after my visit to March, I visited a church much closer to home in south Sheffield. Focus began in 2000 as an informal ecumenical project through collaboration by a number of churches in south Sheffield, initiated by Revd David Middleton and his work with Compassionate Response.¹³ David, a Special Needs Baptist minister, has worked with the learning disabled for 25 years and since 1996 has been involved in running occasional worship services and running regular weekly evening fellowship groups, focusing in on the very particular thinking and reasoning needs of this group of people. Keith Blinston is a Church Army officer I knew from his time of Church Army training at Wilson Carlile Centre, where our office is based. Keith had experience working with

people with a learning disability before joining Church Army, and the call of God for him to be involved with this people group has been very strong for a number of years.

I joined them at St Paul's Norton Lees, where they are currently renting space for their regular fortnightly worship at 7pm on Sunday evening (the team use alternate Sundays to plan). In complete contrast to the simplicity of the scout hut, St Paul's is a newly refurbished church with that lovely mix of old and new; through the large glass doors, I saw both stained glass window and carpeted, well-lit nave with plenty of room and flexible seating, once again arranged in a careful semi-circle.

The worship began with welcome from David and the choosing of volunteers to bring in the cross and light the candles. This process took longer than anticipated as someone who volunteered, but didn't get picked, grew very obviously upset.



The proceedings were temporarily halted as the team responded and a second round of candle-lighting was embarked upon after the first song. Makaton sign language was used throughout the service and key phrases such as 'We're God's family' were repeated often. During the songs, musical instruments were offered round and I decided to enter whole-heartedly into the proceedings by accepting a strange-looking wooden percussion instrument. Scraping inexpertly away to guitar-led 'When the Music Fades' by Matt Redman, I found myself quite teary as I looked around at my present company. I defy anyone to not feel humbled when singing 'I'm sorry Lord for the thing I've made it; when it's all about you Jesus' in the presence of people so straightforward and genuine. For me it was additionally moving, having been involved in the machinations of worship leading in a large church for a good number of years.



Interactive drama is a large part of what they do on a Sunday. The teaching for this service was based on the story of Jesus healing the man with a skin disease. This surprised me a little as my background reading warned me that naïve and misguided assumptions regarding healing and learning disabilities can cause harm and confusion in the long-run.¹⁴ However, the emphasis was directed at sore eyes and sprained ankles and I soon realised in this group where learning disabled are normal and embraced as who they are, the only person wrestling with the theology of healing and learning disabilities was me. David took the role of narrator and members of the congregation volunteered to act out parts with simple costume, props and lines of dialogue repeated after the narrator. The take-home message was simple: if we don't ask Jesus to heal, he can't answer.



¹³ www.compassionateresponse.org

¹⁴ J. Swinton *Building a Church for Strangers* A Contact Pastoral Monograph No.9 (Edinburgh: Contact Pastoral Trust, 1999) p. 26.

So prayer needs were identified, drawn pictorially on a flip chart and then prayed for (with a little assistance) by those who identified them. To conclude, a light supper was served in the church room (plus cake in honour of someone's birthday) before carers and taxis arrived to fetch people home.



David and Keith take what they do very seriously, demonstrated by their willingness to stand and talk to me for over an hour after everyone else had gone home. They told me the story of how Focus began. On moving to Sheffield in 1999, David began to explore the possibilities of spiritual nurture for adults with learning disabilities but concluded that it was unreasonable to expect an ordinary church to change the fundamentals of how they do church in order to accommodate the needs of the few people in their congregations with learning disabilities. David contacted Jonathan Dunning of Meadowhead Christian Fellowship for his partnership support and started a permanent and regular worship service for learning disabled in Sheffield.



The intention was to be an independent worshipping body of people, but in an official relationship with, and receiving support from, an ecumenical partnership board which had advisory powers and offered pastoral support. The ecumenical partnership board consisted of Compassionate Response, Meadowhead Christian Fellowship, and St Peter's Greenhill Anglican Church. David's work as Learning Disabilities Chaplain for Sheffield Health and Social Care Trust for the last seven years has further connected them into Sheffield's disability culture and put them in touch with yet more adults with learning disabilities.

In May of 2004, when church members began to describe Focus as 'their church', David and Keith embarked on the next step towards becoming church more fully. They turned what was a regular church service into an official legal ecclesiastical entity. They drew up an official legal church constitution and governing document, duly signed by the existing partners at a public ceremony. From that date in 2004, they were an official church with a participating church membership, church meetings, positions of Office and prescribed sacramental ministry. Though being an independent congregationalist church has served them well, this past year, they have applied for a Bishop's Mission Order (BMO), apparently the first such request in the Diocese of Sheffield.

David and Keith shared with me their concern that the wider church is terribly ill-equipped to respond to the needs of the learning disabled community. On a practical level, ministers are needed who understand cognitive human development theory and its action-based learning implications. So many churches that are allegedly 'learning disabled friendly' still have monologue sermons. In their opinion, moderate and profound levels of learning disability require more skill than is wise for an amateur to handle without help. Even their own team find the challenge of communicating one simple message through action difficult to get right every time. They are also keen to note that the wider church explores the theological implications of engagement with this mission context to avoid ministry that is fuelled by mere sympathy vote or token gesture.

Searching for clues: fresh expressions parameters

This series has always sought to take care with the phrase 'fresh expression of Church'. We believe if it is used too easily to describe things that are not fresh expressions of Church, expectations will not be realistic and the terminology will become meaningless. We have come across many who are already put off by the phrase. So over the last year, our team have begun the challenging task of identifying criteria by which we feel we can recognise fresh expressions of Church. These have been in the back of my mind during my visits and I explore them now with these churches in mind.

Context shapes Church

The first parameter we deem vital is the instinct for inculturation not assimilation. By this we mean: are we asking people to join our existing church culture or are we asking to join them in discovering what Church is in their context? The danger of an assimilation instinct is that leaders might set up fresh expressions they think they ought to run and then go looking for people who might want to join them. *Mission-shaped Church* was careful to discourage the creation of new churches that unquestioningly copied existing ones. It encouraged leaders to lay aside their own preferences for what Church should be, to give priority to the different culture they are working in. The phrase and imagery of 'dying to live' was coined to communicate the kind of spiritual and emotional journey involved in moving out from what is familiar to something that feels so much more vulnerable.

I was therefore interested to hear the Kerrs describing themselves as cross-cultural missionaries to a lost tribe. The extent to which they have had to strip away all that is normally done in church and re-design it in a 'language' that communicates is hugely impressive, as is the ongoing review process and necessary adjustment. Word-based worship with abstract-ridden themes requiring lengthy concentration - broken up by a confusing pattern of standing, sitting, kneeling - is all very bemusing and impenetrable to those with learning disabilities.¹⁵ While this group may not be the sort to grumble about sermon content or new choruses, leaders of these churches can never rest on their

¹⁵D. Potter *Am I Beautiful or What?! Outreach and Ministry to People with Learning Disabilities* (Dorchester: Scripture Union, 1998) p. 8.

laurels; a threshold of boredom needs to be surmounted. Plus the challenge of keeping it all fresh and relevant is, to an extent, not helped by the lack of clear feedback.

I note the similarities across all the visits I made. All use the same venue each time they meet, arranged in the same way by semi-circle. All are of a similar numerical size; being too large would make it difficult to know everyone's names and it would lessen the space available for people to move around with ease. All worship services are no longer than an hour, though I note starts and ends are more fuzzy than most churches I've visited. All use screens, visual images and Makaton signing. Teaching is simple, participative and jargon-free as much as possible. Application is always relevant to everyday life. Daily living, for those with a disability, necessitates being in close community with other people. Picking up clothes, helping with zips, sharing food, smiling at carers, thanking carers may all seem very small gestures to us, but it is what they can do within their capabilities. Lastly, all are conducted in a spirit of tremendous enjoyment and fun that is truly refreshing to experience.

However, I also note a number of differences. Focus invest heavily in interactive

drama, whereas Fenland Community Church place emphasis on creativity, freedom and a multi-sensory approach (even using smells!) in worship and teaching.¹⁶ On my additional visits, I saw the inclusion of a craft time as a substantial part of what is done, a pattern of doing food before the worship rather than after and a song repertoire that included well-known hymns; 'Amazing Grace' was sung with surprising gusto.¹⁷ Two of the examples serve a hot drink and biscuits, but the other two feature food more centrally by serving a light meal as a significant part of what they do. **To me these different emphases suggest, even within the particular culture of disability, that no one church is slavishly copying another.** The instinct to grow what seems appropriate to the local context rather than pre-determining a framework ahead of time seems alive and well.



¹⁶The Fenland Community Church website contains many more examples of the ways they encourage communication and interaction. See www.fcc.uk.net.

¹⁷I was told that many of the older members who grew up in institutions would have sung hymns in chapel.

Is the aim to become Church?

The next parameter asks whether a fresh expression intends to become Church. One key question in determining the answer to this is whether there is an expectation that it will grow as a church in its own right or whether it is intended as a feeder or a bridge to another church. (We would make an exception for projects that only discovered after starting that their missionary endeavours were resulting in the planting of church.) It is important to ask whether members of a fresh expression see this as 'their church'. Also, do the majority of members see this as their major expression of Church or do they regularly attend other churches or congregations? For Fenland

Community Church and Focus, this is immediately obvious. All are clear they are 'Church' for people who would not otherwise be in church or would attend but significantly struggle to engage with what was going on.

One critique of *Mission-shaped Church* is that it contains a hidden 'theology of apartheid' in its strategy to plant churches into specific cultures.¹⁸ I am also aware that the trend for 'normalisation' in learning disability culture seeks as much integration as possible into the wider community.¹⁹ Aware of both these factors, I was therefore very interested to hear why the examples I visited saw the planting of church in its own right as preferential over a bridge type ministry

where disabled and able could worship side by side. I discovered that the leaders of Focus believe that having a dedicated church for those with learning disabilities helps members feel more normal than they would if they joined a 'normal' church. It is better to have church that takes the learning disabled seriously with the freedom to address the particular issues in their culture. Choice is a big issue for them in that very often they have precious little.²⁰ Focus try to give it back by offering as much choice as they responsibly can at every meeting.

Both leadership teams were realistic about what fusion of able and disabled people requires of existing churches. Would mainstream churches know where to start? Would they cope with constant distraction in worship? What if

It is better to have church that takes the learning disabled seriously with the freedom to address the particular issues in their culture.

people screech? Would people be free to wander around? Would carers feel relaxed with their residents in that environment? Would they be prepared to commit to the important dimension of going into homes and building trusted relationships with managers and carers? **Is there really a basis for mutuality or will it always be an act of charity or merely accommodating those with disabilities?**²¹ I am reminded of the worrying pattern we have seen in churches working to integrate middle class and working class cultures or teenagers with adults. The more educated group always unconsciously dominates. The more intellectual and verbal the church tradition, the harder this will be to escape.

Frequency and name

A third parameter concerns frequency. How often does the church meet? Our team would need some convincing that a group meeting less than monthly is a fresh expression of Church. However, we realise that asking for weekly can be too demanding for young churches with limited resources. I was surprised by the regularity and consistency that each church I visited had achieved over the years, though I also note each is different.

Fenland Community Church meets weekly with a breather on the first (and fifth) Sunday of the month. Focus meets fortnightly with planning meetings on the alternate Sunday night. My other visits showed term time and monthly patterns. A greater frequency of meeting seems to be hugely beneficial; much can be forgotten between gathered times and to have a routine that is predictable and reliable is comforting to members. I applaud these churches for finding patterns that are sustainable in the long-term, allowing for much-needed consistency.

Having a name is another parameter. It is an important sign of identity. A name tells you so much. Whether something is called a club, a project, a service, a congregation or a church, all communicate something to those within and without. So I was glad to see both stories deliberately using church in their name and I would encourage any other group pursuing ecclesial *interdependence* to consider reflecting this intent through what they call themselves.

¹⁸ J. Hull, *Mission-shaped Church – A Theological Response* (London: SCM Press, 2006) p. 14.

¹⁹ J. Mitchell-Innes, *God's Special People: Ministry with the Handicapped* (Grove Pastoral Series no.62, 1995) p. 24.

²⁰ Less than a third of people with a learning disability have some choice of who they live with and less than half have some choice over where they live. www.mencap.org.uk, accessed 1 December 2009.

²¹ Swinton, *Building a Church for Strangers* p. 35.

Four dimensions

Regular subscribers to this series will know that we think assessment of any fresh expression of Church should take into consideration the characteristic four marks (one, holy, catholic and apostolic) that ecclesialogists agree to be diagnostic of Church.²² The 'one' mark (or the 'in' journey) measures the strength of the community life of the church. **One trap that fresh expressions can fall into is encouraging attendance but not belonging.** There is just as much a risk of this happening in these churches as any other; people could attend for something to do, a way of getting out of the house, because they attended once and do not how to say no, or because it is friendly. This issue is made more challenging by being difficult to measure. However, perhaps they have a small advantage over some other fresh expressions in their clear

awareness of this issue and investing as much as possible in growing authentic community. The emphasis on regular gathering, the careful welcome, knowing everyone's names, eating together, even the chair arrangement, all contribute to involvement, interaction and belonging. Passive attendance is resisted as much as possible.

This trap of mere attendance rather than belonging needs to be asked of those who help as well as those who come.

Volunteers who are seconded from the 'proper' congregation to help out send a powerful signal that this is not a valid

expression of Church in itself. Take care if volunteers are 'borrowed' on a rota system; this speaks of duty or hobby, not membership of a church. I was pleased to find little evidence of that kind of attitude. Those who lead and assist these churches don't seek out additional spiritual nourishment elsewhere as much as I expected, for reasons I explore later. Where they do occasionally attend services elsewhere, I was reminded of the general trend we think we see of an increasing number of Christians finding meaningful connection across more than one church community in the same way that someone planting a small inner-city church in their front room might also find encouragement from occasionally attending a monthly all-singing, all-dancing worship event at a large church across town, for example.

The apostolic dimension of Church (or 'out' journey) invites a fresh expression of Church to journey on and out in mission. I note that any fresh expression of Church once formed and serious about growing in maturity should continue to

grow its mission dimension. So this heading is not about how you start to connect with those with learning disabilities but rather, once church has formed, does it grow in maturity by continuing to be outward looking? In what way **is the fresh expression of Church responding to the ecclesiological challenge of developing its own outreach ministry or ministries?** A question we normally ask is: do members as well as leaders understand this calling for the fresh expression of Church to reach out beyond itself? Have members been encouraged to seek opportunities to offer loving service to others outside the group?

This is an intriguing question for the churches I visited. Where does a church for adults with learning disabilities begin with mission beyond itself? An individual solution is perhaps most appropriate along the lines of encouraging members to serve, invite and involve their families, friends and fellow residents in the life of the church. But what would mission look like on a corporate level? A fund-raising prayer walk and an annual carol service might be a step in the right direction, but I fear that the biggest hurdle to the growth of this dimension is those without learning disabilities refusing to accept, for whatever reason, a gesture of loving service or the initiating of friendship from those within the learning disability community. A patronising response, made for all the right reasons - maybe one made out of embarrassment, or even fear - still emphasises the domination of intelligence. There is also the issue of CRB checking and the safety of vulnerable adults. While no one would dispute that those with a disability need protecting, the act of protecting often has the effect of isolating them. The community of people with a learning disability rightly asks us to welcome them into our world. It is much harder for them to welcome us into their world.

This connects to catholicity (or the 'of' journey). Any fresh expression of Church needs to know they do not exist on their own and are called to relate to Christians beyond their own group. For Fenland Community Church and Focus this is possibly their greatest challenge. Though they have their own denominational affiliations, the challenge to find connection on a more local level continues. As such, it is easy to see why Causeway Prospects advocate their approach of groups existing within a wider church structure, although it is important to ask how meaningful is the relationship between the group and the 'main' congregation or indeed other midweek congregations? Are the relationships mutual? In light of the many possible tensions arising in a worship setting, perhaps the old adage of **looking for catholicity in their dimensions of mission or community would be more manageable starting points for churches.**

One trap that fresh expressions can fall into is encouraging attendance but not belonging.

²²A. Dulles, *Models of the Church* (New York: Image Books, 1978) pp. 129-144.

On my visits, most were doubtful when I asked about possible fusion with or inclusion of children with learning disabilities. Children with learning disabilities would find it difficult to meet so many new people, and adults would need to be closely monitored to ensure appropriate behaviour. One church would love to try but have no idea how it will work.

The remaining mark is 'holy' (or the 'upward' dimension). If a fresh expression of Church is indeed a new church, then it must encourage members to embark on a longer journey of faith discovery. A fresh expression of Church, because it is a church rather than a bridge, is required to take seriously the discipleship of its members. For this type of fresh expression, issues like encouraging personal

prayer, recognising they are non-readers and providing small group life, all need careful thought and resourcing. When it comes to communion, is it possible to over-estimate the challenge of inviting members to participate? For example, the leaders recognise that many 'normal' people would struggle to answer you if you asked them to tell you the theological significance of the sacrament of communion.²³ Both churches have nurtured a sacramental aspect to their church



life and Focus have written their own communion liturgy with the help of an expert. Fenland Community Church made me smile when they told me communion is rather chaotic and, in trying to let them take their own bread, much explanation is needed that a small piece is order of the day. Parishes offering Christmas midnight mass have met similar problems with the wine.

Secondly, as the leaders of Focus told me, with such profound disability, all the normal measurements around professions of faith - repentance and confessions of faith within baptism, and being 'born again' - are gone. On the one hand they may want and need to say sorry for things done wrong²⁴, but on the other is the perpetual awareness of the danger of putting words into people's mouths. It is rare that behaviour is noted as being different. **The Kerrs use an analogy of metres and centimetres for measuring what progress in**

²³ Also discussed in J. Swinton, *Building a Church for Strangers* p. 34.

²⁴ Potter, *Am I Beautiful or What?! Outreach and Ministry to People with Learning Disabilities*, p. 23.

discipleship feels like in mainstream churches, but here it feels like millimetres. That is why working with their members over a long period of time in such depth is crucial; you get to know individuals well enough to see the small changes.

Three self

I was struck by the way in which these churches have found a way to be self-financing, despite the fact this kind of church will never yield collections, tithes or direct debits from its members to sustain full-time paid leadership. Funding is a massive issue for the learning disability community (the implications of Care in the Community were always going to be expensive)²⁵ and sadly, there are no funded posts for leaders of church communities of this kind.

For Fenland Community Church and Focus, the solution has, so far, been tent-making leadership and a committed team of unpaid volunteers. **Usually denial or unavailability of resource prevents a church from making it past a good start to good sustaining, but here we seem to find an exception to the rule.** Denial of resource may well have been the gift that has led to sustainability. If seed-corn money had been available at the outset to fund full-time leadership, would these churches still be functioning when that funding ceased?

These churches are spared the pressures that many of the more typical groups, services and congregations for those with learning disabilities face. They don't need to worry about being sidelined in favour of the 'main congregation' or feel vulnerable to members of the staff team moving on and incoming staff not understanding what they do. They don't need to worry about how to accommodate growth in a church building with other congregations also needing space. By being self-governing they have the space to explore their identity and who they are as a church as they wish to, with all the pressure of finance and decision-making that go with it.

The issue of self-reproducing is a curious mix. On one level, due to the strength of team work, in most cases there are back-ups in place for worship events to cover any absences. Yet, overall, there are key people who if they should leave, the church would struggle to keep going. The raising up of indigenous leadership presents these churches with a significant challenge, although it is important to note that **Focus have two members with disabilities on their leadership team who take an active part in the leading of the church by**

²⁵ J. Mitchell-Innes, *God's Special People: Ministry with the Handicapped*, p. 25.

helping to plan the services. Yet three of the four churches are run by 'able' people heavily involved in the learning disability community, those who 'live' within the community long-term. So perhaps they are closer to indigenous leadership than one might at first assume, if the qualification is widened beyond the learning disabled to those who live and work in the learning disability community. The same dynamic would be present in fresh expressions working with children or the elderly frail.

In terms of reproducing further communities, all seem at or near capacity; like many deliberately small-sized expressions of Church, issues of reproduction are more acute. Rather than a group dividing (too much change), reproduction is more likely to look like Christians with links into disability culture being encouraged to begin something in their own area. I am thrilled to hear of these leaders' input at festivals like Spring Harvest and Grapevine²⁶ to enable this, and of course Focus are part of the wider training network, Compassionate Response, that supports and equips others to start their own ministry.

So, like many other types of fresh expression, it would seem these churches excel in some parameters but struggle in others. Their engagement with context is impressive, as is their intention to be Church, the development of their community life and ability to sustain regular gatherings long-term. Challenges of mission, catholicity and discipleship loom large, for this type of church faces unique issues in developing these dimensions. As no fresh expression can produce instantaneous results in all areas at once, as we look down the list of criteria, **we would be confident to call something a fresh expression of Church when three quarters of the parameters apply.** In my estimation, this is the case for Fenland Community Church and Focus.²⁷

For projects that, as yet, have not reached such a stage where three quarters of parameters apply, it is important to say we would not wish to dismiss them. Perhaps they are still at an early stage of their development where their intention to grow as church is the key and the term embryonic or potential fresh expression of Church may both honour this intention as well as reflect the reality of the stage they find themselves at. Or perhaps some projects will only ever express some parameters and not others

²⁶ www.grapevinecelebration.org.uk

²⁷ Please note that The Sheffield Centre's interest here is not passing or failing various projects but finding language to discern what is happening when there is a significant re-imagining of Church or finding criteria to decide whether something *is* Church.

because their identity lies in being a fresh expression of community development, a fresh expression of evangelism or a fresh expression of worship.²⁸ For some projects, it will be important for them to *not* try to become church and so let us use language that accurately reflects that.

²⁸ These different categories are discussed in more detail in G. Lings, *Café Church 1: Café, Croissants and Christ?* Encounters on the Edge no.33 (Sheffield: Church Army, 2007) p. 27.

Checking the map: noting some wider connections

Having applied The Sheffield Centre's criteria against these stories and established that the language of fresh expressions of Church is appropriate to use in this context, I now turn to the ways in which they intersect with other fresh expressions types. Looking across the diversity of types that exist, where are these stories similar to others and where are they different?

Two groups within one

While I approach comparisons between learning disabled and children with great caution (I was told to be wary of Sunday School teachers who think they automatically qualify as teachers of learning disabled adults as the skills needed are hugely different), I do see one very similar dynamic in both contexts. It would seem that fresh expressions of Church for children are not the only fresh expressions type to have a secondary group within it raising a parallel discipleship challenge. Just as church aimed at children's spiritual needs struggles to know how to cater for parents and carers, so too will this kind of church have to consider carefully the involvement of family, friends and carers.



Carers' attitudes affect so much. In a similar way to children's church, so much depends on the carers' openness to Christianity. When I asked about whether the history of church attendance for those with learning disabilities affects who joins, one leader commented that the church background of the carer appears to be more significant in practice. Staffing schedules are tight to keep costs low, so these churches are hugely appreciative of staff who see it as worthwhile to bring those in their care. Just as many children's fresh expressions have conceded that it is impossible to do all that is needed for discipleship

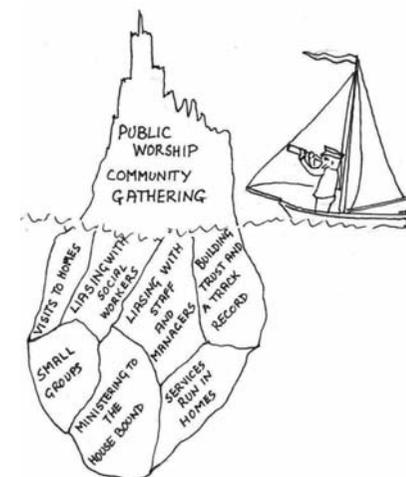
for both children and adults, so too may this kind of church need to consider what loving service to carers looks like in a way that builds on many of the positive comments from carers but doesn't make attending a church meeting feel like a busman's holiday.

A reminder to think beyond worship event

The key part that carers play makes building connections into residential homes all the more important. With shift patterns, some carers cannot or will not bring people and many residents are unable to leave their homes even if carers were free to bring them. Furthermore, very few people go into homes; the disability community is, more often than not, a closed one. Therefore, ongoing work in the homes is crucial to build trusted relationships with staff and residents and be a means of social integration where there is otherwise precious little.

Like many other fresh expressions, the Kerrs believe relying too much on the Sunday event is unwise. They talked about the significance of their Sunday service as more of an outward sign to others outside the church rather than having special significance for members. **I was left with a mental image of an iceberg;** Sunday is the most visible part of their life to an outsider like me, but actually it is only a fraction of the important relationship-building that goes on

less obviously to the outsider. My choice to visit the Sunday event of each church betrays my mistaken assumption that their worship event is the only thing worth seeing. In hindsight, I regret not arranging to accompany the team as they attempt to be church in the residential homes. Interestingly, when I asked one set of leaders how they would use a gift of financial resource if it was available to them, they replied they would use it to free up someone to maintain and **develop links with the homes rather than pay someone to run Sunday worship.** As many who lead these churches do so in part-time or spare-time hours, such a resource would be invaluable.



Demanding yet undemanding

In some fresh expressions circles, cultivating a culture of risk is a good thing. For these stories, it is not. To the statement that 'it doesn't matter if 30% of fresh expressions die' in the pursuit of creativity, I say please make sure these churches aren't in that 30%. This is a type of church that requires consistency and longevity to be appropriate and effective. Careful consideration needs to be given to resources, pace and frequency and the more profound the disabilities,

the greater the need for professional expertise within the team. Perhaps a helpful analogy for this kind of work is that it is like a wheelchair marathon rather than an able-bodied sprint.

However, there are a number of factors which make this type of fresh expression an easier journey to set about planting than many others. In the main, it is a mission context with remarkable stability. Although closure of homes and changes in staffing cause instability, these churches are spared the disappointment of losing members to job promotions or loss, house moves to other parts of the country or the upheaval of demanding stages of family life.²⁹ Unlike ministry among the elderly, another vulnerable group of people in society, their life expectancy is longer.³⁰ And unlike work with children and teenagers who, over time, move on to further life stages, this group will be with you, as they are, for life.

Mirroring this stable mission context, in these stories we see the capability to run for over a decade with minimal resources and without full-time stipendiary leadership. Sadly, we have seen other fresh expressions with dedicated, paid, full-time leaders flounder in less than half the time these churches have been running. This kind of stability creates a dilemma within me. Why should these churches be overlooked in the allocation of financial resource, especially when they minister to a people group who will never have money to support a leader? It seems so unfair. Yet, I am delighted that all the examples have found ways to develop appropriate, lighter-weight models of church that do not depend on the system, with its tendency towards temporary attitudes to funding and short-term clergy deployment patterns. As one of the leaders I visited commented, would the necessary degree of commitment and motivation be present if leaders were paid?

The challenge for this sustainable, lighter-weight model is: **how do they remain connected and are they given room to grow?** Regardless of whether leadership is lay or ordained, stipendiary or tent-maker, what is the church's relationship to the wider institution? Some way must be found through the following conundrum. An independent approach may mean when endings occur, no one replaces the leader. However, a dependent approach may mean with a change of incumbent, someone may one day shut it down.

²⁹It is important to note that currently 29,000 adults with a learning disability live with parents over 70 or older. When parents die or become too old to care for them, they'll lose parents, home and support network, all in one day. For only 1 in 4 have local authorities planned alternative housing. See www.mencap.org.uk.

³⁰Mencap statistics claim mortality rate is higher for those with learning disabilities.

Fenland Community Church and Focus show that healthy independency is achievable (though not without challenges) and in our Anglican context, we must recognise a multiple congregation model needn't be the only option available.

The gifts of vulnerable mission

Our team often refer to the contrast between being a guest and a host to describe the dynamics of power and culture when planting in a cross-cultural situation. Remembering that missionaries are guests of those they are among reminds us of the risk and vulnerability involved where a missionary sacrifices their cultural preferences concerning church in order to leave space for an indigenous church to grow. I was therefore curious to know how this dynamic played out in these stories, aware of how many fresh expressions with a far less dependent clientèle end up working in host mode and adopting a client/provider model which is unhelpful in the longer term in the way it prohibits a sense of genuine community.

I discovered a complex dynamic in which people started as hosts but over time became guests. Vanier describes this as moving from 'doing for them' to a 'be with them' that often develops as a permanent vocation to live within the particular culture, in this case the culture of disability.³¹ This resonates with insights from our team that connect the cross-cultural missionary as guest to something akin to willing slavery. This is powerful imagery with the New Testament call to a servanthood that voluntarily submits itself to the person or people they are serving. **Those leading these churches talked about members' weaknesses unearthing parallel weaknesses in them** and please note they were not implying a lower form of existence in saying this. One church described their weakness as the constant challenge of making sure needs are being met. As discussed already, this degree of long-term commitment is a demanding and vulnerable one; this is no ministry for anyone wanting to impress through quick fixes and easy success stories.

Yet, for all the warning that this is a demanding and serious ministry not to be undertaken lightly, these stories testify that, in spite of such restrictions, those involved in this ministry find it is highly rewarding. Is this what sustains leaders in their long-term commitment? Is this why, with no escape, they do not feel trapped? All those I spoke to testified to the incredible mutually rewarding nature of this work. There is something infectious about the sincerity of the learning

³¹ J. Vanier, *Community and Growth* (London: DLT, 1979) p. 11.

disabled. Their simplicity and spontaneity of life style is refreshing next to the complexity of many. Furthermore, connecting to the insights of Vanier and Nouwen, there is something about an encounter with a learning disabled person that can more easily lead to an encounter with God.³²

Gift to us all

Returning to our team's research meeting I described at the beginning of this booklet, in hindsight, we agreed that our discussions on this topic resulted in one of the most poignant and enriching research meetings we have ever had. For us, the issues raised by the topic were an important reminder that whatever our mission context or task, people need to be treated as people regardless of their circumstances. Furthermore, we were grateful for the invitation to reflect on what it is to be human. Disabilities of this kind rightly challenge assumptions that personhood should be something that is defined through the achievement of individuals. It is no wonder that some find people with a learning disability difficult to be around for they are an important reminder that there is so much we can't control about our humanness. Though we like to believe we are in control of our lives and through natural ability can work to establish security, significance and autonomy, we are all at the mercy of illness, old age or chance accident.



What people with a learning disability reflect back to us is that personhood is about the intrinsic value each of us has and that **we only know ourselves in relation to others**. To take people with a learning disability seriously, this understanding of personhood as relational must not be based on cognitive ability. Indeed, some argue that the dependence and limited ability of those with a learning disability offers a far more accurate template for human inter-relationships. This in turn reflects the relational nature of the Trinity.³³ As relational beings

made in the likeness of God we are all dependent on one another; it is just that for those with a learning disability, this dependence is more clearly observable.

³² Vanier, *Community and Growth*, p. 95 and p. 188.

³³ J. Swinton & E. McIntosh, *Persons in Relation: The Care of Persons with Learning Disabilities 2000* findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_qa3664/is_200007/ai_n8911602/pg_2/?tag=content;col1, accessed on 1 December 2009.

For me, encountering the enthusiasm, contentment, generosity and lack of pretence in people with learning disabilities has been hugely refreshing. For these churches and congregations, such precious characteristics have woven together to form a special charism. So much that society claims is important - such as productivity, intellectual prowess and social position - is shown up for the inferior goals that they are when you encounter church for the learning disabled.³⁴ Conversely, their living out of a friendship that crosses the divide between those with learning disabilities and those without, acknowledging and embracing interdependency, is extremely precious. **From this perspective, the previous assessment of these churches' upward journey or 'holy' dimension should include this startlingly mature dynamic**. Perhaps their upward dimension is their strongest. These stories tell of Christians living a delightfully counter-cultural stance.

Essential though distinctive

If my first encounter with church for learning disabled adults challenged my assumptions that this was an isolated and obscure mission context, all that I have encountered on my visits has confirmed for me their place as an equal player at the 'fresh expressions' table. Both stories illustrate well the kind of missionary instincts that the *Mission-shaped Church* report encouraged in connecting with such a subculture containing those who find traditional forms of church 'peripheral, obscure, confusing or irrelevant.'³⁵ These leadership teams have shown remarkable creativity, sacrifice and perseverance in reimagining church for those within disability culture. What they continually grapple with through necessity is a valuable reminder to us all; effective communication, the fostering of genuine friendship, counter-cultural witness and continually wrestling with what it means to be a disciple of Christ are core issues that all fresh expressions of Church should be engaged in. As such, these are churches to be treasured.

However, though they are equal players, they are not identical players. In a number of ways, these stories don't fit neatly into the wider fresh expressions patterns we think we have been seeing over the last ten to fifteen years. Unlike churches working in other vulnerable contexts, these are stories of stability rather than more typical volatility. They have found ways of funding their work for over a decade despite a membership who are unable to give financially.

³⁴ Swinton, *Building a Church for Strangers* p. 20.

³⁵ *Mission-shaped Church*, A report to the General Synod of the Church of England (London: Church House Publishing, 2004), pp. 39-40.

For social reasons, the stage of public worship service has been developed much earlier than in most other situations where there are significant cultural barriers to negotiate. Lastly, in considering them in light of parameters to assess whether something is a fresh expression of Church, they have considerable and unique challenges to face in their growth towards ecclesial maturity.

I opened with a reminder of the importance to question all that we assume to be 'normal'. I end by applying this to a fresh expressions context. The wider Church has a proactive role to play. We mustn't be guilty of disabling these churches in our assumptions of what we think a fresh, or indeed, an inherited model of Church should be. We must recognise that different types of church operate in different ways and resist the temptation to force all expressions to conform to one methodological process of coming into being. We must allow church for the learning disabled space to explore what steps in their journey towards maturity will need to be taken *and* in what order. In reaching out to others in mission, in gathering enough resources to sustain what they've started and in searching for ways of expressing a catholicity built on mutual appreciation, we, the so-called 'able', have an important part to play in understanding and offering recognition and connection.

Claire Dalpra
December 2009

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