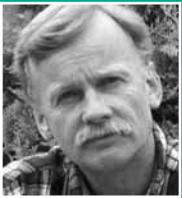


50: A Golden Opportunity



As we celebrate our 50th issue, here is an opportunity to look back and see what we can learn across the stories we've reported on so far. What do their longer stories tell us? Are there discernible patterns across them?

George Lings reflects on how the stories and the series have changed our understanding of good practice in bringing to birth and nurturing fresh expressions of Church.

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- Café Church
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- Community Development Churches
- Multiple Congregations
- Midweek Churches
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Encounters on the Edge



no. 50:

A Golden Opportunity

Revisiting the story so far

 **ChurchArmy**
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Discoveries about fresh expressions of Church from The Sheffield Centre

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Once upon a time

There was once a grandfather in a large family. One day he counted up and was surprised to find that he now had 49 grandchildren. He remembered so well the birth of the first few. It was a whole new stage in his life – not to mention theirs. What bright hopes there were: pulsating new life in all its glory and mess; the extraordinary sight of a tiny vulnerable being yet already undeniably human; the definite promise of a future, but whose twists and turns were quite unknown; the certainty that in some way the future belonged to such as these, when he was long gone and only occasionally remembered.

As their number increased it was harder to remember all the birthdays, what ages they now were, what stage in school they had reached and sometimes, to his shame, even some names began to escape him. Then surprisingly they would crop up in his life again; the familiarity would come flooding back, together with eager enquiry as to their welfare and development.

Some now had grown to adulthood and were making their own way in the world. They were treading down paths he understood in theory but had never walked himself. It was hard enough to try and keep up the tally of the 49, but some of them now also had their own children. Most of these he had never seen in the flesh and only read of in the Christmas letters telling of their exploits, discoveries, successes and setbacks.

Tragically a few had died. The young are both vigorous and vulnerable. A seemingly fit child can suddenly contract an illness which if not spotted leads rapidly downhill. When there had been sudden accidents it was bad enough, but where neglect seemed to be involved his sorrow was deeper and more compounded. Two of three had chosen to break off links with the family and gone off on their own; he wondered how they were doing, but there was no news.

Many were still young, learning intuitively how the balance changes from the earliest stages of being dependent on their parents, towards the later independence of making their own decisions, living within their allowance, making their own friends and finding out their calling in life, including the still later interdependence as adult friends of their own parents.

Coming clean

In that introduction of course I am indulging in an author's liberty and writing obliquely about myself and this series. In reality there are both similarities and differences. I know my role has been more modest and less deeply connected over this long time. I am not the founder, nor the genesis, of their stories. To seriously call myself their grandfather would be untrue to the facts and unfair to those who did bring these communities to birth. I am perhaps only like an adopted uncle who has a link from outside the natural family; yet he does care, does pray for them, does manage to keep up with some and may have a little influence.

Why stories?

I know that with some cases, the mere telling of their story gave them legitimacy with the wider church that they had not had hitherto. This was both welcome and galling to them. In other cases, recounting the tale moved their community out of obscurity into recognition. It showed them they mattered. Having arrived at the 50th issue now is the chance to look back and see what we learn across them all.

Telling the stories chimed in with postmodernity's preference for narrative and thus less exercise of power. Like testimonies and experience, you can disagree with their conclusions but they are hard to entirely dismiss. Stories of new churches begun show what has been done; they evoke what is thinkable and so themselves begin a train of events to change what is thought possible and even desirable. Perhaps history will conclude that it was stories like these and their very diversity, from the mid-1990s and early in the next millennium, that led to the writing of *Mission-shaped Church*. Certainly it was a major consideration which propelled Bob and Mary Hopkins and myself over the Pennines in 2001 to see the then chair of the Board of Mission, Bishop James of Liverpool, in order to request a second report on church planting. That's how that train of events started.

Throughout the series I have tried not to be like the worse kind of sensationalist journalist whose penchant is painting using lurid colours and whose interest is more in the news coverage achieved than the people who are involved. With each story holder I have insisted nothing is published that they have not

seen and agreed. Yet I have always believed that to try and be candid about the vulnerability of these young churches is more realistic and so is useful. **I think that being honest about their struggles, questions and failures is more helpful to others starting out**, than the razzmatazz evoked when other sources seem to deal, out of choice, in words like exciting, thrilling and success. However, I also think it was right to celebrate what has been done in seeing transformed lives, communities of Christian faith born and surrounding areas positively influenced.

As a Christian and as a researcher, I have been profoundly influenced by my contact with these young churches. Every time I go out on a research visit, I assume that I do not deeply understand what it is I am about to see. I go to be educated and to discover. I try to stay until, in the conversations with the people involved, they are telling me that I have come to the inside and am now contributing to their own understanding of what it is they are living out. I have to be there until I get it. In every case that I remember, I returned buoyed up by their faith, moved by the 'coincidences' within the unfolding of their journey and fortified by the bits of evidence that the life of Christ is being manifest among them. Over the years I have been taught and intrigued by the ways of being Church that I have met; I have been prodded and provoked to change the way I think about Church. Oddly, I now think this vital and frustrating body, of which I am part, is both less than I thought it was, and also a great deal more. I unpack that teasing aphorism later in this issue.

Thanks for the journey

However, those latter paragraphs could make me sound like a scientist having fun watching some fascinating developments in a test tube, or a bio-engineer playing around with some stem cells. I have to say I feel much closer emotionally to these stories than that. They have been the steady stream in the complex eddies of my working life for nearly 15 years; they are living examples of what I deeply care about, and because I am a Christian, actually we are part of the same extended family. I am related to them and care about their health and fate, as well as the lessons about mission, church and fresh expressions that they embody. I can identify with Paul writing to the Galatians (not relations), but in language as if he was: 'Dear children for whom I am again in pains of childbirth until Christ is formed in you'.¹ He tells the Corinthians something similar: 'I face daily the pressure of my concern for all the churches.

¹ Galatians 4.19.

Who is weak and I do not feel weak?² Conversely, in the same letter where it is clear that Paul does see his relationship to them as a parent to children,³ he also speaks of being proud of them.⁴ Those of us who are parents know how



proud we are of our children. In conversation we often keep quiet about it, but it sneaks out quite loudly in those Christmas round-robin letters. I confess I do have a sense of pride in these young churches that are the reason for writing *Encounters on the Edge*.

They have faced challenges in mission and church life that I am not sure I would have known how to surmount. They possess among their people evangelistic gifts I do not have. They have often displayed creativity and courage to be starters. In this they have made intuitive pioneering decisions about the ways forward that people like me have retrospectively turned into theories which others coming later may profit from. I do not really know how they knew what they guessed they should do. I conclude this is where we enter the area of inspiration and discernment. Any mission process worth its salt, and which draws upon the gospel texts, holds to certain things. We are in partnership with the Holy Spirit who continues to take what belongs to Jesus and make it known to us. The Spirit is ahead of us⁵ convicting the world of what most needs to be changed.⁶ Thus **the Spirit is a brooding gestation partner in the incarnation of a fresh community of faith.** Without this guidance, enabling and empowering, Christian mission would be impossible. These fellow members of the family are the ones who have gone to the edge and live there. I have only visited. But I am glad to have these pages to say in public that I salute them, I thank them and I have learned more than I could have imagined from them.

² 2 Corinthians 11.28-29a.

³ 2 Corinthians 6.13, 12.14.

⁴ 2 Corinthians 1.14.

⁵ John 16.15.

⁶ John 16.8-11.

I also particularly thank those who have become our subscribing readers. Those of you who have been with us through the whole series are especial stars and your support has been life-giving. When the *Encounters on the Edge* series started out in 1999, there was a goodly list of risks. I had only a handful of stories up my sleeve that might last for the first year. I didn't know whether I could write and I still entertain surprise and doubt at where we now are. I did not know whether Church Army would judge it worth investing in, before it could cover its costs. So I also thank two successive bosses, Philip Johanson and now Mark Russell, both of whom have been unfailingly supportive and kept this resource going as a gift to the wider Church. Even more to the point, I neither knew whether sufficient people would be interested to subscribe and, even more crucially, whether further fresh expressions of Church would come to birth that were worth visiting and commenting on.

A cloud of unknowing

Was what was happening a brief rush of missional adrenaline prompting some interesting short-lived experiments? Would others then simply jump on the bandwagon and copy what they had done? That would not be worth creating a series for. Grove Booklets for example had never created a special series on church planting, but simply kept it as an occasional topic within the wider evangelism series.⁷ To employ another picture, was planting rather like a luxury food item within the healthy life of the normal church that wanted some more mission in its balanced diet?

By contrast to those images, I hoped, but did not know, that we were experiencing a much longer and deeper phenomenon: **a springtime in the Church within England.**⁸

If that were true, we should expect a steady series of shoots without knowing what they would grow into. Some might have been deliberately planted, others self-seeded, which might excite, delight or concern.



"This isn't just Church, this is locally sourced organic church"

⁷ www.grovebooks.co.uk

⁸ I have deliberately not put the British Isles, for the development and patterns of planting are more advanced in England than in the other home nations. They have their own story and different rates of decline as well as different proportions of the de-churched to the non-churched, as borne out by Tearfund's research into church attendance.

We would undoubtedly see a wide variety of species, large and small, sharing some common processes but looking very different from one another. That might be worth creating a series for. But hope about what might happen is very different both from certainty and from the absence of power to make that so.

I have often reflected that the series title does more work than I knew when Archdeacon Ray Muller suggested it to me in 1998. 'Encounters' suggests meeting, event, a dynamism, and even surprise. I quite like that as one unfamiliar set of words to associate with Church. 'On the edge' infers the hitherto unknown, being at the margins, the quality of liminality, and the likely place of discoveries. It has often been true in the last 15 years that Stuart Murray as an Anabaptist and myself as an Anglican see things similarly. In 2000, he, with Anne Wilkinson-Hayes, wrote a Grove booklet of stories with the title *Hope from the Margins*.⁹ **It is precisely at the edge that scary but valuable experience is gained**, fresh learning is acquired and reappraisal of what is normal occurs. But the edge is by definition edgy. Throughout the series I have not known whether it would succeed, nor known much in advance what we would tackle next. I too have lived at the uncertain edge and it seems entirely appropriate that this should be so. Why should I have security in a writing role that was denied to the pioneers I was writing about? So the series really has evolved along with the phenomenon that it reports on. It then follows that if the creation of further fresh expressions were to stop, I have always said to myself that we should stop too – doubtless after a valedictory issue lamenting this fact.

What stories has the series covered?

Consider the birds of the air

Sometimes I liken the diversity of fresh expressions to the bird world. This helps because a number of Christians are twitchers. Even the uninitiated can readily see birds are so delightful because there is **so much variety** in such a small creature. Some of the variety is clearly linked closely to function, while some seems sheer exuberance; it reminds me of a lavish and prolific creator.

Theologically, this parallel introduces themes of unity and diversity. Not only that, but birds illustrate the dynamic relationship between species and a variety of environments, thus raising church identity issues around the twin calls of authenticity and inculturation. *Encounters on the Edge* has obliquely explored these issues. In the world of Church we have seen an expanding list of the kinds of fresh expressions. Starting with the list in *Mission-shaped Church*, we have tried slowly over the years to take stories from most of them.¹⁰ It is clear from the figures that the coverage is uneven, but note we are tracking a moving target and always playing catch-up.

A table of the number of stories – not whole issues – on the various kinds¹¹

alternative worship	café church	community development plants	cell church	child-focused church	messy church	multiple congregations
4	5	7	3	2	1	2
monastic groups	network-based church	older people's church	special interest group*	traditional church plant	under 5s and helpers church	youth church
2	5	1	6	10	2	7

*Special interest group is a term we have coined for a distinct and enduring cultural or occupational group. It presently covers issues on the arts community, on business people, those with an ecological emphasis, and two with people having learning disabilities. It could in future include ones for hip hop, goth or surfing cultures.

⁹Stuart Murray & Anne Wilkinson-Hayes, *Hope from the Margins*, Grove Evangelism Series 49 (Cambridge: Grove Books, 2000).

¹⁰Graham Cray (ed) *Mission-shaped Church* (London: Church House Publishing, 2004) p. 44.

¹¹ See www.encountersontheedge.org.uk for further information.

We realise that we have not written one on base ecclesial communities because we know of no extant British example. Similarly, we have struggled to locate an example of school-based church – that is, not one that borrows the building, but one which engages with, and is drawn out of, the life of a school. We have not yet tackled the type variously called clusters/mid-sized communities/mission-shaped communities because this has generated its own literature and often the fluidity of their life has yet to demonstrate an enduring identity. We are open to meeting types of church as yet undetected.

Is it a bird? Is it a plane? No, it's Superchurch!

The comparison with birds is worth drawing out more. They vary enormously by size. In one afternoon at the 1999 Church Army conference at Swanwick, by its lake I saw the obligatory swan with four eggs, but I also spotted two firecrests on the nearby yew tree. These two species are nearly at polar ends of the size spectrum, yet people would readily agree **it is foolish to classify birds only by size**. Moreover, a swan is similar in size to an eagle but they are more different than similar in habitat and thus habits. Equally, it would be deluded to

insist that a firecrest is merely a challenged swan, or worse that because the latter is regally and legally protected, the firecrest is not a bird at all. Yet some ecclesiologists who think inherently about things like universality and about normative congregational practices seem to take an unmitigated disparaging view of domestic or small unit church, for example.

Variety in the bird world

covers quite a range of features and at best they are taken together to be diagnostic about which bird one is looking at. Watchers refer to this as the Jizz. This term is used to describe the overall impression or appearance of a bird.



It is gathered from such features as shape, posture, flying style and other habitual movements. Size and colouration, combined with voice, habitat and location also count. Colour varies sometimes obviously, and other times with subtlety like telling the brown eagle from the different hues in the red kite. Beaks and feet are notably varied and diagnostic. Some birds are fishers, others seed eaters, yet others are insect catchers and raptors are carnivores. Thus beaks and feet differ for different catching and feeding purposes. This is vital to their ecology and sustainability. Yet even then the kingfisher and osprey are very different birds, though both go fishing. Song is diagnostic to the more expert watcher, but even the beginner knows the difference between the harsh croak of crow, the soft cooing of a dove and the trilling skylark. Wings can be different shapes in hawks, such as the pointed merlin and the square ended buzzard. Flight style is related to feeding, socialising and staying safe. Despite all this, some are very similar visually. Pipits and warblers take experts to separate and often one just sees an LBJ – a little brown job. I'd be fascinated but unsurprised to think that something similar happens in identifying different kinds of fresh expressions. Many borrow from more than one classic model. But after a time you just know which kind you are encountering.

The different identities are conferred partly by inheritance and over time by an evolving relationship to the habitat. We know that due to climate change birds need to adapt; either they move to find an environment ideally suited to them, or they modify their behaviour. An entertaining and infuriating past example is blue tits that learnt how to peck off the lid and to sip the milk out of the bottles on a household step. But the decline of the milkman ended that pattern.

Where did the stories happen?

Talk of different habitats suggests there is a value in listing the different contexts which our stories came from. Below are two tables. Using the conventions I invented and adopted 20 years ago to analyse where church plants were occurring, I have split the locations into two. The first set represents where the church has been historically stronger and the mission task is a little easier. The second set is those locations where the church has found the going tougher – not least while we have lived through diminishing resources and attendance.

city centre	local and private estate	private housing estate	suburbs	town
5	7	3	7	19
local authority estate	new town	rural	urban priority area	urban
10	3	7	2	7

The stories over the last 13 years were not selected to provide an even spread and this year is the first time I have looked at the data set as a series. What is clearly the case is that **they occur in a range of social habitats**. A random sample size (which is in effect what this is, for it was not taken for this purpose) of only 70 cases needs to be taken with a pinch of salt, but here the percentage of 'tougher' cases is 41%. I was amused and intrigued that this figure is not just congruent with those I derived from looking at some 320 church plants dating across a long period from 1978-1997; curiously, it is identical with that average. **It is simply not true that fresh expressions are a middle class, middle England phenomenon.**¹² They seem to continue the best tradition of church planting and are being created for all kinds of social context. This is to their credit and is consistent with an Anglican call to reach a nation in its diversity.

Why does this diversity matter?



One church, one faith, one Lord

Theology of **creation** endorses variety and diversity across deeper unity. We see it in the different kinds of creatures. We see it in the image of God in **gendered humanity**. We see it in the **Trinity**. So why not accept it is normal in church too? The variety of Anglican traditions should have made this readily obvious to us. Catholic, Liberal, Evangelical and Charismatic parishes do share certain features, but on Sunday their leadership, worship and preaching styles, and midweek the features of their organised life, show considerable difference. The variety of fresh

expressions helpfully has pointed up diversity once more. Spotting variety in churches should not however be like some twitchers who travel miles to spot a rarity; it is often a poor bird blown off course and which will probably therefore die, having been entered in some nerd's notebook. This point about variety is not an academic or a collectors' one.

It helps us realise that reality is more complicated than it looks to start with. It is not so easy to say exactly what a bird is; for example, they look very different. They don't even all have the ability to fly. May it be the same with church? I commend the approach taken by Michael Moynagh in his forthcoming book that **relationships are more diagnostic of church than external practices.**¹³ He argues that the former shape the latter, although acknowledging that the latter nurture the former. The relationships are with God, with one another, those a church is sent to and to the wider church. It's a reworking of the classic four marks, but insisting they are best understood relationally. I can see how it's like that with birds; their relationship to one another, to what they feed on, and to the habitat around them, has led to their characteristic patterns and behaviours. In turn, this affects their ability to sustain the species and breed true.

And here comes the next useful parallel. If we are going, in effect, to breed churches, we need to know what makes them tick. What is their ecology? In more detail, what are their dynamics, how do they thrive, what do they feed on, what dangers do they face and how do they breed successfully? Put simply, **there is a crucial link between habitat and habits**. Everything exists in relation to its environment. This gives another reason to persuade all pioneers and evangelists not to import the model of church they like (still less those which have become popular) but to follow the genuine mission-shaped process of double listening and to grow what genuinely fits the context, because it grows out of it. Church is neither meant to be disincarnate, nor an alien import that has its own independent life. Equally, it does not reproduce by a copying or cloning process, but by non-identical reproduction out of a bipartite process.¹⁴

Everything exists in relation to its environment.

¹³ Michael Moynagh, *As yet untitled* (SCM Core Text series, due out mid 2012).

¹⁴ We see this bipartite pattern throughout Scripture. Humanity made of dust and breath, grace and faith in Abraham having offspring, Christ being God and man, Jesus teaching on seeds and soils, Church and Spirit in partnership.

¹²Please note the stories come from all over the country and a few from overseas.

What else have we learnt?

A few leading questions

Across the 49 issues there are 57 examples to consider about patterns of leadership and how these connect to questions of sustainability.

Where are the female leaders?

Only eight (14%) were led by women, of whom three were single. In another four a woman and a man shared the leadership, although not married to one another. A further four were led by a ministerially trained couple. Together that makes 28% of the cases. In a further 21 examples the wife was a member of the wider leadership team. Seven women are ordained (12%), nine lay, of which three are Church Army evangelists. However, this compares with the backdrop gained from the CPAS website which tells us that 25% of clergy in the Church of England are now female.¹⁵ So this small randomly gathered data set confirms anecdotal evidence elsewhere that **women are under-represented** as leaders or pioneers of fresh expressions.

Lay or ordained; paid or not – does it matter?

I separated the lay and ordained categories and also whether the leader was paid full-time, part-time, or was self-supporting. I know this does not equate neatly with the time leaders had available, but it is one measure towards that. While it is true that some paid full-time also had other congregations to look after, yet by virtue of their office and status they had some real authority to choose how to divide their time.

ordained	full-time	part-time	self-supporting
	25	1	4
lay	full-time	part-time	self-supporting
	16	2	9

I do not suggest that the breakdown is typical of fresh expressions of Church, in its evident bias (72%) to full-timers. This is attributable I think to the *Encounters on the Edge* method. We selected those stories which to us most clearly justified being called fresh expressions of Church, rather than outreach projects from existing churches.

¹⁵ <http://www.cpas.org.uk/download/662/WILdeployment.pdf> This figure is for full-time stipendiary clergy. For non-stipendiary and part-time, the figure is 50%.

We would not even consider using the regrettably plentiful examples of blatantly re-badging existing children's work and calling them fresh expressions. Thus those young communities which we visited were likely to have more leadership resources than many others. Please note that no stories were led by a recognised pioneer – lay or ordained. This is only because it is still a newish phenomenon that we need to catch up with.

My reflection on the small number of part-timers is that in most cases they would have been full-time if it could have been afforded. They made sacrifices to ensure something started rather than waiting for more resources before beginning.

That leaves just under 25% being led by self-supporting ministers. What are we to make of this? I think all agree that there are simply not enough full-timers for each expression of church – inherited or emerging - to have one. So what does the Church do? Some herald this as a case of guidance born from necessity, allied to the desirable pursuit of ways of being church more simply, such as cell or cluster. Part of me has real time for loyal radicals¹⁶ who champion more domestic forms of church. I love the way these increase participation, develop ministries, act relationally and foster community. I was glad to see a recent article by Nigel Scotland in The Church of England Newspaper raising pertinent questions about reconnecting eucharist and its original home setting.¹⁷

Yet other supporters of this view (that most fresh expressions will be spare-time led), who tend to be those higher up in the institution, are in danger of assuming that paid ordained people is the desirable norm only for traditional church. Forgive me if this sounds cynical but I know they have to read diocesan balance sheets, and live in times of financial austerity. They know how much income comes from the larger congregations. This keeps many dioceses afloat. There is a strong collusive link between this and parishes, who today ask what they are getting for their money, to ensure that these churches get the brightest and best of the full-time clerical leadership. It is also true that many young churches do not yet fully pay their way and are in effect in receipt of diocesan subsidy. So to reduce costs – the largest of which are usually staffing – why not go down the self-supporting route? Why not encourage pioneers or evangelists to be bi-vocational and so create churches that are less dependent on them? This could have the additional virtue of attacking the clerical virus that plagues churches. Yet to me it is still an open question whether this is good way forward, as I show from the table overleaf.

¹⁶ A term coined by Bob Hopkins, and used of him, to mean someone who both loves the Church and yet works for its re-imagination and transformation.

¹⁷ The Church of England Newspaper, January 27th 2011.

1. Type of leader	ord f/t	ord p/t	ord s/s	lay f/t	lay p/t	lay s/s
2. Number of leaders	25	1	4	16	2	9
3. CA evangelists				12		
4. Plant died	0	1	2	5	0	3
5. Plant left C of E	0	0	0	2	0	1
6. % (rows 4 & 5)	0	100	50	43	0	44

For some time I have been unconvinced by the bland optimism that fresh expressions will do fine without well trained leaders with both authority and significant time available. Now I have some evidence to disturb me yet more. It is startling that although all of the communities led by a full-time ordained person continued,¹⁸ this is in stark contrast to the devastating rate of death among other fresh expressions with leaders with less time and training. I accept that this is a relatively small sample, but the examples were chosen for their track record of apparent inner health and their commendable engagement in their mission task. Not being chosen to illustrate leadership variables, they do constitute a reasonably random selection. If anything, these stories were supposed to be good practice, and yet **44% of those not led by full-time clergy have died or left**. The eagle-eyed will note the lay part-time anomaly in this pattern. I have looked at these two cases and both leaders are long stay in these roles, exceedingly competent and well supported by others. One has since been ordained. I thought some pathology was in order to see what we learn from this high mortality rate.

Why did some fresh expressions die – and of what?

It is tendentious to make any general case from the one example of the part-time ordained person. The story is that the fresh expression ceased after he moved away, for he was singularly gifted in his creativity, but one would need further cases before drawing any general conclusions. But the high percentage of other communities that failed to survive, or which left the Church of England, bears some further analysis.

While I am not so arrogant as to think that communities which leave the Church of England have died, I know **independency can be a route to isolationism** and cultural irrelevance. In the three cases involved, two of which were initially

¹⁸ This refers to their life when led by the founding, full-time ordained person. In one case the next leader was a disaster and left soon. Part-time and then spare-time lay leadership followed, for a largely post-denominational congregation which eventually left the Church of England.

well led by CA evangelists, the founding team from the start was largely non-Anglican. Indeed, it is arguable that part of the planting motive among these people was to increase distance from the felt constraints brought by the parish church. In all cases the founding leader eventually left, was not replaced, and the balance shifted to post-denominational convictions. Eventually distant relations with the sending church – and a new incumbent at that church - atrophied further and the residual group opted for life outside Anglican structures. As far as I know, the majority of them are now not effective in mission and have drifted into a backwater.

Next I examined the five examples that ceased to be, all of which were led by Church Army evangelists. In four out of five cases the community ended after the evangelist had left; the remaining example was imposed as a good idea, never really took root and died in infancy while he remained in post. Some of the evangelists, in my view, left too early before sufficient indigenous leadership became established. They were better starters than trainers. Three cases I would call **only fresh expressions of worship, thus they struggled to be more than events**, and to move people on beyond attendance into discipleship, let alone mission to others. A fourth case was excellent at engaging with the community, was making some missional headway, but barely evolving any pattern of worship.

For years I have been trying to teach that creating fresh expressions (and church planting before that) **is equally a missional and an ecclesial task**. It simply does not work to emphasise either one at the expense of the other. Thus these examples were of interest and potential, but in our view never got beyond an embryonic stage to fully become fresh expressions of Church. Two evangelists were working with unsympathetic incumbents and another two communities were in interregnum, so that too had some part to play. In four cases context played a part, where the work started in classically tough areas like local authority estates and the deep rural context. It looks to me that **we are still learning the lessons of staying for the long haul** and still struggling with creating indigenous leadership in those contexts, which Bob Hopkins identified as 'the biggest challenge in church planting' more than 20 years ago.¹⁹ In the past, the Church of England sometimes played the game: 'If it's an impossible task, throw a Church Army evangelist at it'. I fear we may still be in some danger of asking too much.

What of the seven others that died out? Overall, social context does not seem significant. Stories were distributed equally across the 'tougher' and the 'easier' areas. What is more diagnostic is that in over half the cases the leader(s)

¹⁹ Bob Hopkins, *Church Planting: 2. Some Experiences and Challenges* Grove Evangelism Series No. 8 (Nottingham: Grove Books, 1989), p. 15.

experienced burnout, and in all cases the church stopped after the leader left and was not replaced. That has occurred in clergy-led cases too, but here the diocese stepped in and guaranteed the succession, keeping the community alive. **Lay self-supporting work does not seem to attract the same commitment from the wider Church.** At worst this looks like the Church acting like a clerical club; at best it is recognition of its past investment in training clergy and desiring to redeploy them. Burnout probably relates to another strand. In two cases I would say the missional emphasis was not balanced up by equal emphases on the communal and spiritual. In four cases, echoing some of the Church Army stories, the founding leaders either could not find, or did not leave behind them, sufficient indigenous lay leadership. These are both staffing and missional weaknesses because they set in motion dynamics that prevent sustainability in that context.

Over the years we have also seen that the **incumbent plays a key role**, shown here across the twelve churches that died. In four cases there was a change of incumbent, bringing a different emphasis, and in a fifth case the incumbent was not sympathetic to start with. In another four cases there was no incumbent, either through interregnum or the work was not connected to a parish. In only two cases did the vicars remain and were positive towards the fresh expression. So there is some correlation between this role and what happens to fresh expressions. Outside this study we have seen incoming vicars close those churches planted in the time of their predecessors.

Life beyond the founder?

It has long been held that this is one of the largest challenges a young church faces. Yet best missionary practice, from Venn and Allen, suggests that this should be the aim from the very start. This sample shows that six died as, or shortly after, the founder left without a replacement. 22 cases are still led by the founder. In 25 cases a successor was found and life continued. Of these, five died under the second leader, eight still continue under that successor, and twelve went on into the life of a third generation of leader. Of those, two cases then went independent and one came to an end. The analysis across this whole section tells me that **succession can be done** and the issues are not so much in finding a person, but what time they have available and the extent to which the leadership role is shared with indigenous people who also have time and skills. It may be worth also noting in passing that only one example that reproduced a further fresh expression itself subsequently stopped – and that one left the Church of England. It looks as though reproduction is connected to health, but which way round that relationship works is less clear.

How have the stories and series changed our understanding?

When is it fitting to call something a fresh expression of Church?

There is value in the definition on the Fresh Expressions website. Yet I want to press deeper in than that and establish some parameters to tell us whether and when that definition is deserved. This task was sharply raised for The Sheffield Centre when, at our request, we inherited the self-registering Fresh Expressions database that accepted new entries until early 2009. It was a great help to have this boost to our own partial data collection. For some years our team had been principally working qualitatively through stories, but we became convinced that some wider quantitative data was also needed. Stories are great for showing what is possible and for providing precedent of changing principles and patterns. But they do not provide the harder evidence of wider trends which speak to people who have to allocate resources like archdeacons, area deans and diocesan secretaries. So we have set out down the road towards serious statistical evidence in relation to fresh expressions of Church. However, examining the Fresh Expressions database entries confirmed our worst suspicions that **the term was being used so loosely as to endanger any serious meaning to it.** We had to prune out scores of cases of what we considered bogus entries. The 'Annual Tree Lighting Service' is my favourite example. We needed clarity and consistency, so that what was accepted and what excluded was on an equitable and coherent basis. Since 2009 we have polished our initial set of parameters. This is a slightly expanded take on version six, so readers will deduce this task is not as easy as it looks. Doubtless it is not perfect, but it may do.

- 1 Was **something Christian brought to 'birth'** that was new and **further, rather** than an existing group modified? This excludes 'fresh expression' used to mean re-imagination leading to internal change at an existing church. While valuable, it is not what The Sheffield Centre's database is for.

- 2 The starting group tried to **engage with non-churchgoers**. There was intention for the fresh expression of Church (fxC) to be shaped by going through the mission process. The aim was inculturation of the sent Christians to context, not assimilation of indigenous people to prior church context, as happens with mission projects from existing churches.
- 3 Does the resultant community meet **at least once a month**? We think asking for 'weekly' meeting is too demanding. In cases of monthly meetings, further questions around intentional processes to aid commitment and discipleship do follow.
- 4 Is there **a name** that gives an identity? Where despite a search, no name has yet emerged, this is allowed and would be recorded as 'no name yet'.
- 5 Is there **intention to be Church**? This could be from the start, or by a surprising discovery on the way. This admits the embryonic fxd (fresh expression of developing community) and cases of fxe (fresh expression of evangelism) and even missional fxw (fresh expression of worship). It was not designed as a bridge back to 'real church'.
- 6 Is it intended to be Anglican, or there is **an Anglican partner** in an LEP (Local Ecumenical Partnership). By Anglican, we mean the bishop thinks it is part of the family, not whether it uses only centrally agreed texts, or has legal territory. (We know there are genuine fresh expressions of Church in many denominations. Our work deals only with Anglican examples.²⁰)
- 7 There is some form of **leadership** recognised within, and also without.
- 8 At least the majority of members (who are part of the public gathering) see it as **their major expression of being church**.
- 9 There is aspiration for **the four classic 'marks'** or ecclesial relationships: 'up, in, out, of'. We will not 'fail' an example for lack of catholicity, but commend it being added. We do question its validity if there was an absence of 'out'. We see use of the two dominical sacraments as a consequence of the life of a missional community which follows Jesus, not the sole or even best measure of making something church.

²⁰ This is due to realistic time and staffing constraints.

- 10 There is intent to become **three-self** (self-financing, self-governing and self-reproducing). Details and stages of these developments are too difficult to gather and log in a quantitative database. Only overall intention is registered.

Application of the criteria

Examples failing to qualify on the first six questions would be excluded. However, criteria 7 to 10 are not identity questions; they are 'health' and 'maturing' issues over missional and ecclesial factors. So limits here indicate weaknesses, not exclusion. Discipleship is not forgotten and is the outworking across all the items, but in particular 9 and 10.

Variables will include generosity of spirit over cases that currently don't fulfil all the first six criteria - but might in a year's time. We have a process for recording these 'embryonic' examples. All the criteria deserve and need contextualisation. Thus, for example, criterion 5 does not require public use of the word 'Church', where it was prejudicial in context, but it does need an understanding that theologically this is what is forming.

Representatives in a few dioceses are exploring whether they could use our ten parameters. It would be helpful to all parties if there was one agreed set of criteria, to rescue the term 'fresh expression of Church' from the miasma that presently accompanies it. There are plenty of outreach projects and good examples of children's work that should be honoured and recognised as such, but not designated fresh expressions of Church. Charity and clarity need not be opposed, as most things benefit from being called what they truly are.

Mission lessons

Think of stages

The first two stories in the series identified the need for mission to the non-churched to be done in stages. We called the first 'building community', the second 'engaging in mission', and the third 'evolving worship'. These progressions have been taken into wider teaching.²¹ It was developed and reapplied through the analogy of the differences between arches and bridges in no. 33. It explored not just the existence of the different stages, but also the need to connect them. Plus it enabled us to more accurately describe pieces of

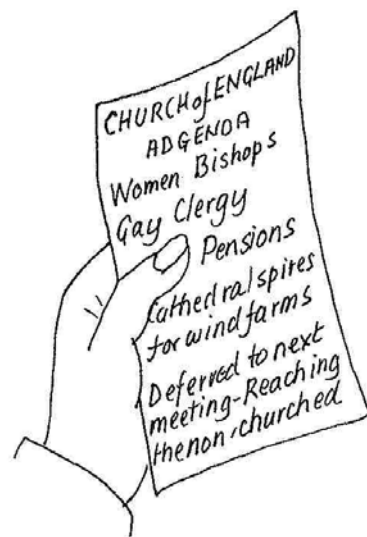
²¹ An example would be the overlapping ellipses in the booklet *Starting a Fresh Expression* and a further evolution of it on the Share website: www.sharetheguide.org/develop

Charity and clarity need not be opposed, as most things benefit from being called what they truly are.

mission that were not themselves church but could be stages towards that. More recently we have seen the stages embodied in a rural café context in no. 45 and an urban youth story in no. 48, as well as the need to keep the stages separate and not try to elide them.

Be realistic about timescales

We have learnt, perhaps the hard way, that it takes a long time to build community with, and make disciples of, non-churched people. **Three-year contracts for leaders here are almost useless** and even five-year ones are often insufficient to establish communities that can survive the departure of the founder, as well as remain effective among their peers. It raises a sharp question: how does the Church create a wise mixed portfolio of investment in its mission? Those routes that have quicker results will tend to find them among the fringe and the open de-churched. But to only do that has several downsides. It denies the Anglican call to seek to engage with all kinds of people. It represents a policy of only fishing in a shrinking pond. It therefore merely postpones the time when other work will, of necessity, be the major way forward. So some investment now is called for, while admitting that overall increased numbers and giving will not be the result in the short-term foreseeable future. However, lessons will be learnt and experience acquired that is bound to be valuable in the future.



Is today an exile or an exodus context?

There is no consensus on the answer, so I can only offer my own view that the exile has more resonance than exodus.²² I conclude this for two reasons. I do not see parallels with the big picture contours of the exodus story. We have not made a whole new start and left a country in which we were slaves, there has been no obvious powerful external deliverance, we have no Moses figure,

nor has a new initial covenant been made. (I also hope we will not wander for 40 years, and most of us die in the desert through unbelief.) But the story is generally too young and optimistic for where we are. Secondly, the **exile motif and its spiritual dynamics does offer us a way to reflect on our diminished influence** on, declining numbers among, and damaged relationship to, society.

It is true that there are differences from the literal exile picture too. We have not been conquered by foreigners, although secular forces are dominant in the public sphere. Our leadership has not been killed or deported, nor our major worship buildings destroyed. We are just ignored. We are not living physically in a foreign land but are now marginal in what we thought was our land. We are no longer the leading spiritual force in society. As such we are seldom a light to the nations, with many parts of the church barely missional but operating in survival. Like the overall exile context, the western church has a story of failure to acknowledge and a loss of power to admit. I am not for creating guilt, apportioning blame or provoking despair. But **I am interested in both realism and repentance, in renewal and restoration.** That starts by accepting that a major strand of exilic thinking is coming to terms with being under judgement.²³ I think we are guilty, of being irrelevant to most people and of a cultural captivity by which we are morally little different let alone better than others. There are many stories of people leaving after forms of church abuse; our communities too seldom are beacons of light and hope; our wider counsels are notable usually for disagreement and conflict.



It would be unfair to exilic thought, and unhelpful to us, to then think there is no hope. The ministry of Isaiah proclaims it and the life of a Daniel embodies it. **The exile was also a place of fresh imagination** about being God's people, how one could worship without a temple, a calling to return to him with the Spirit within, and a renewed heart leading to fresh steps of faith and pioneering ways. The expectation grew of a time when God would again act and liberate. The community was encouraged to take heart and engage with the city in which they found themselves. It seems to me that the *Encounters on the Edge* stories, by being at the edge, embody this sort of journey and exploration. Our exilic context explains how they can be both signs of hope and inherently vulnerable at the same time.

²³I have yet to come across a British book that deals with this. Both Gordon Mursell, *Praying in Exile* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 2005) and Patrick Whitworth *Prepare for Exile* (London: SPCK, 2008) write very helpfully about exile but omit any reference to this essential and difficult topic.

²²This was first teased out in the mischievously numbered *Encounters on the Edge* no. 13.

I find resonance too in the worldview of 1 Peter in which bright hope, the call to holiness, and us being strangers in the world all live side by side.

What is Church?

The series has centred on telling stories of church-in-mission, creating church for particular contexts, leading to some expressions which we have not seen before. This living perennial bonding between church and mission is aptly summarised by Newbigin. 'An unchurchly mission is as much a monstrosity as an unmissionary Church'.²⁴ Yet it will not do to say the church is missional as a knock-down answer to its identity. I agree with Davison and Milbank that mission as its identity and purpose creates an infinite regress.²⁵ Positively I want to add that our understanding of the Church must be derived from our view of Christ and how he is central. To call it Christian is to confess this. Theologically, the presence of the risen Jesus, by the Spirit, is utterly diagnostic to Church, although not always easy to spot. I would look for people being won by Christ, knowing they are in Christ, being transformed through that encounter, and slowly growing to be more and more like him.

I am fortified then in thinking that holding a high view of sacraments is fine as long as one's view of the Church is higher. To think otherwise would be like elevating food above conversation and commitment in marriage. This in turn is theologically akin to the relationship between a covenant and its sign. The former is both relational and foundational. The second helps make it visible, but is not the heart of the matter. In addition, **think as highly of the Church as you like, as long as your view of Christ is higher.** This flows from belief that Church is a derived doctrine; the Church only exists because he brought it to birth. Its call is to be branches in his vine and the body to his head. These roles are honourable and essential, but yet dependent and subservient.

Church is also derived from the revealed glimpses of the Trinity. I suggest that **the credal four marks can be discerned as occurring within Trinitarian life.** The *holiness* of God is axiomatic yet affects all the relationships God has, including calling forth our becoming more like him. Their *oneness* is legendary, though not a uniformity, into which diverse oneness we are beckoned. *Missio Dei* thinking has recovered a dynamic for *apostolicity* and rescued it from the

²⁴ Leslie Newbigin, *The Household of God* (originally London: SCM, 1953, now Carlisle: Paternoster, 1998), p. 201.

²⁵ Andrew Davison and Alison Milbank, *For the Parish: A Critique of Fresh Expressions* (Norwich: SCM, 2010), p. 52. However, I do not think the viewpoint they criticise is one held by all in the fresh expressions movement.

dominance of a backward glance in search of orthodoxy or succession of ministry. Their *catholicity* can be construed through both the universality of God and the perichoretic affect of each person upon the other. I think we are becoming clearer that **however the mystery of the church is best understood, at its heart it is relational and based on how God is.**

Less than I thought

The stories have not set out to debunk past emphases. Yet steadily they have added examples that move us away from being satisfied with defining the Church by its leadership status or patterns, by its using and owning certain kinds of property, and even by long known congregational practices. In my case, it is the stories that have given me permission to think differently. I am aware this is an argument from anecdote and from experience. There is no space here to expand a case that something similar was happening across the New Testament. Jesus rewrote what it was to know the Father; the pioneers of the apostolic mission rewrote who can belong to the people of God. Such changes tend to involve both 'less' and 'more'. **The less is about a search for the essential, beyond the beneficial.** We see this dynamic at work in Jesus' summary of the law. We see it in Paul's treatment of the circumcision question. *Encounters on the Edge* no. 5 began some of that reflection and some of its thought cascaded over into *Mission-shaped Church*.

More than I thought

The way to identify church by its practices goes back through Luther's text at Augsburg, Orthodox instincts to define it through eucharistic worship, to the 2nd century comment of Ignatius about the presence of the bishop. So it is ancient. But **these views have worrying tendencies** to focus on Sunday and to ignore the week, to centre around clergy roles and make the laity passive, they elevate worship and marginalise both mission and community, they are more controlling than liberating, and worst they confuse consequences with causes.



more and less

For me two important rediscoveries have connected me to the 'more' of church. Firstly, from monasticism, old and new, I have seen rhythms and patterns put into a 'rule' that interweave Church as monastery and mission. They celebrate Christians living in the disciplines of being alone and being together.²⁶ From this same rich and long tradition, I slowly realised that **what I had been taught was quintessentially church, was actually only chapel.** Since coining what I called the Seven Sacred Spaces²⁷ that all enduring Christian communities find they need, I have had the chance to talk about this with others. They express the life and liberation they find through it. They see the spaces in their own homes, where they are present and absent in their so-called 'church' buildings that may only be good at being chapel and weak on the other roles.

Secondly, I have been energised by **a change of controlling metaphor** about Church. Since 1984 I have known and used the language of church planting. The surprising mental permission this gave for beginning new churches was simply not provided by the older paradigm of church growth. Aiming for more people in churches is a very different goal and mindset from starting further churches. It involves a complete change of direction. Planting also suggested an organic process, dependent on the Creator, as well as the soil. That was better and different from the managerial, modernist, even Pelagian, construct that church growth could lead towards. These are gains I received from others and I have long been a beneficiary.

Yet I became aware planting did not easily explain what I was seeing. In 2009, I was working with *Threshold*, a group of churches around Lincoln. Across this extended family of churches what I saw was both family likeness and individual identity. I saw an adolescent group finding its identity, a family unit, and an empty nester congregation. Each congregation had a personality. From 2002 I chipped away at a PhD on the calling and capacity of the church to reproduce. **It became more and more clear to me that inherently further churches are born by non-identical reproduction, because it is a two-sourced process.** I am told that most plants actually do this, but it is not clear to the average observer how radically different two daffodils are, or two runner bean plants. However, look back to your parents or to any children you have and it is both blatant and essential.

²⁶ *Encounters on the Edge* no. 29 expands all this.

²⁷ *Encounters on the Edge* no. 43 deals with how this is rooted in Benedictine, Franciscan and Celtic monasticism.

Thus I have shifted in my thinking and language. Churches are not best thought of as institutions though we will need them, or machines to be tinkered with and improved. They are not vegetables to be grown, but churches are most like interpersonal beings to be loved. So churches are born, not planted. Sadly some die, they don't merely close.

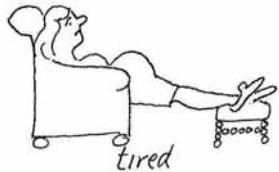
Furthermore, church is a term not akin to being adult, but being human. It is meaningful to talk of embryonic church, young church, even geriatric church and to hold that all of them deserve honouring. Dioceses are not best thought of as having some interesting experimental developments; rather they have ecclesial children of that diocese. I doubt we all think like this yet, but if we did we would have to admit that becoming truly adult church is the lifetime task that we all know it to be as human beings.

They are not vegetables to be grown, but churches are most like interpersonal beings to be loved.

Aiming for more people in churches is a very different goal and mindset from starting further churches.

How will the story unfold?

Starting is easier
than sustaining



I don't know. The interpersonal view of Church connects with the observation that **starting is easier and quicker than sustaining**. At each stage: pregnancy, birth, raising toddlers, living with teenagers, becoming mature adults, it takes longer and is perhaps more difficult. It is similar to the process in which the pioneer has an idea. Quite quickly they may find fellow enthusiasts. It takes more time to listen to a context and build relationships. It takes longer to see solid conversions of life and yet longer to grow disciples. Evolving flexible yet stable structures goes on for ever. Each stage has its joys and pressures, but the later ones take longer. That's normal. I explored something related to this in an article in The Church of England Newspaper earlier this year. I drew a contrast.

There are inherited churches adept at reaching sympathetic groups of people. They have decades, even centuries, of stable, slowly evolving, broad tradition. They conduct their lives through established patterns of community life and governance. These are actually designed to promote consensual change and to avoid rapid change. This is now as much a hindrance as an asset. They produce, pay for and protect full-time leaders who have been trained to run this system for its perpetuation and stately progress. **Such churches have long forgotten what it was like to be born**; among their members are few who will remember their church as young. These communities live continuing what they know, although concerned at cuts in resources, human and fiscal, which threaten sustainable patterns.

Fresh expressions of Church are brought to birth in order to grow communities of Christian disciples among the majority of the population who don't find the inherited way authentic or helpful. They have as yet little or no tradition, just as a young child has experience and implicit values, but a very

limited sense of history or articulated values. They are also discovering what patterns of Christian community life and governance work in their context. This is not unlike teenagers growing beyond childhood dependence, and now rightly exploring independence, so that later they freely enter interdependence. This state characterises God the Trinity, two-gendered humanity in God's image, and life within the catholicity of his Church. Perhaps like small inherited churches they do not know whether continuing life is even certain. Survival rather than sophistication is the issue. Growth among young humans is as much upwards as inwards. To chart a way through, as often as not, they are led by people doing this for the first time, and working at it spare-time or part-time. Such young churches have never been old or fully mature. So much is new and there is so much to learn. **They can't simply copy the inherited church**. They were born in order to be Church, among those beyond existing Church, and in cultures disconnected from that Church. It is good that they are related and different.

Only half time?

How will it all end? A few years ago I was moved by watching the film *Amazing Grace*. The enormity of the slavery issue, the length of time to bring change and the personal cost to William Wilberforce - they all resonated more than I could explain. I began to make comparison to the story I have been a small part of.

For 27 years I have longed and laboured that creating churches should become seen as normal. I have watched as the weight of evidence grew of their birth, bringing diversity, vigour and greater missional effectiveness. *Mission-shaped Church* in 2004 brought a tipping point. **Fresh expressions of Church can now no longer be ignored.** Their part in the mixed economy, valuing both inherited and emerging church, looks secure.

However, as the film reminded me, 1807 marked only the end of the trade in slaves, not abolition of the practice. That would be drawn out until 1833, only weeks before Wilberforce's death. I suspect our western Church is still largely captive to Christendom values. So our focus is too pastoral, our identity is insufficiently counter-cultural. There is too much of the clerical club and we are too content with attendance, not discipleship. The further needed change is massive. Will we dare to invest more in inventing churches we don't yet have, less into rescuing the ones that don't want to change, as well as what we put into improving the ones with potential?²⁸ **I fear we are still wedded to taking beauty treatments when we need to have babies.**

The change I hope for has only gone halfway. Fresh expressions of Church are allowed, but not yet normal, let alone normative.

George W. Lings
April 2011

Cartoons by Tim Sharp

²⁸ There are signs that some dioceses are thinking this way: Toronto and Sydney overseas, London and Chester at home. Will such tough love catch on and will those sorts of schemes have a place for the fresh expression?

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- Fresh expressions of Church and church planting: George Lings
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