

Encounters on the Edge

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ChurchArmy

Encounters on the Edge

A Series of Quarterly Investigations from

The Sheffield Centre

No. 4



Eternity - the beginning

Eternity's mission statement - to build a Community in which Christians and non-Christians can experience God's love.

George Lings investigates how they are getting on.

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Eternity - the beginning

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The way in to Eternity

It was Friday night. An ex swinging-sixties teenager, retaining shreds of residual Peter Pan illusions, tottered into a prosaic secondary school hall and into **Eternity**. Lights flashed, smoke poured across the floor, drapes divided up the space, music throbbed, people drifted in and out of corners of darkness and pools of light. It wasn't a near death experience, just middle aged me visiting a youth church plant holding **Eclipse** - its monthly dance event in Bracknell.

Bracknell (*right*) is a fast growing New Town, south east of Reading, part of the M4 corridor. **Eternity** is one expression of the mission instinct at the core of the St Michael's, Warfield parish. Warfield was a quiet Berkshire village that is now virtually indistinct on the map from north Bracknell. Like the new



housing that continues to expand, St Michael's continues to multiply, by planting further churches. **Eternity**, a self-confessed youth church, was launched in 1995.

I wandered around the hall, bought an age-inclusive Coke at the bar, admired the energy of the dancers, peered at the video clips, marvelled at those who obviously could converse by lip reading, and noted the larger outer ring of watchers, unsure of whether to join in. Grateful to have the uncertainties of teenage no longer and distinctly acoustically challenged after half an hour, I withdrew to an adjoining outer room. The decibels lowered, the dim light became constant. My coming had been advertised and a slow stream of the



team of **Eternity** let me ask my incessant questions, gave me snippets of the story, exuded the integrity of the event and demonstrated its base in relationships.

Late that night, **Eclipse** was wound up, with a low-key plug for follow-on events. Its engagement with the culture seemed natural; its Christian identity was plain but not heavy. The "breakdown" of the gig followed, revealing a well drilled team who actually seem to like each other and handle well the humble, regular, physical hard work of mounting this sort of mission. Next morning, refreshed by the hospitality of leaders Mark and Woan Meardon (*right*), fortified by croissants and coffee, I fired off more questions in their direction. When I left, I sensed I had been entrusted with a story that should become better known.



Eternity is a model for others

- 1 This enterprise is **powered by values relating to others**. Spirituality, community and mission are expressed in mobile, outgoing, relational terms.
- 2 It is clear that this church plant is **flexible**. In its short history, its patterns have evolved and the leadership have responded to the changes in the culture which they seek to reach out to.
- 3 This ministry is **repeatable**. It has a quality that makes it worth re-applying elsewhere, but it is simple enough to be within the reach of groups of Christians working in towns of say 30,000 or more.

Looking at Eternity's Values

Eternity's one sentence mission statement reads “**to build a Community in which Christians and non-Christians can experience God's love.**” This is intentionally holistic. It is not just alternative worship, or a youth club. It is gaining all the breadth of being Church for young people. Their values are written up on the first page of the Visitor's Pack.

a) Our values toward God

We aim to be worshippers in spirit and Truth.

Yet a time is coming, and now has come, when the true worshippers will worship the Father in spirit and Truth, for they are the kind of worshippers the Father seeks. John 4:23

b) Our values toward each other

We aim to love each other, and express this love by laying down our lives for each other.

A new commandment I give you: love one another as I have loved you, so you must love one another. John 13:34

My command is this: love each other as I have loved you. Greater man has no man than this, that he lays down his life for his friends. John 15:12-13

c) Our values toward those who are not yet Christians

We aim to let God give us a passion for those who don't yet know Jesus, that we may express to them what God has done through Jesus.

Those who sow in tears will reap with songs of joy. He who goes out weeping carrying seeds to sow, will reap with songs of joy carrying sheaves with him.

Pss 126:5-6

Some of those priorities and texts are predictable, but also necessary. Any church would be suspect that thought it was not called to worship God, to form community, or to be sent out in mission. The overlap with the defining categories of church from Robert Warren's *Building Missionary Congregations* is

substantial. Some nuances of these three factors are not so obvious and repay more inspection, revealing something of the spirituality beneath all three values.

I noticed the recurring word “**toward**” - toward God, toward each other, and toward those not yet Christians. Subtly but explicitly, there is a feeling of **movement**. Journey has become one of Christianity's newer jargon words. At its worst it can be an apologia for the absence of any certainty, or a cover that excuses the lack of progress. At best it is a metaphor that welcomes discovery, expects change via movement and embraces travelling companions. I am reminded of the key phrase within a charge from Archbishop George Carey to the Canterbury clergy in the early 90's when he spoke of the Church being not only of “*the Way*”, but also “*on the way*”. But the length of our Christendom history, the prevalence of beautiful inherited buildings, the once for all nature of the faith delivered to the saints, the archaic dress and modes of address among clergy, as well as the lure from some who are asking us to be timeless, in a climate of unprecedented change, all make permanence and immutability seem helpful and correct. Is this our nature or just our history?

A first glance at the Trinity shatters any static view of the church. The Creator lovingly brings into being what was not, the Son accepts a change to earthly existence that still is unique in world history, and the Spirit constantly spurs the Church beyond its present boundaries. Of course such simplicity is rather modalistic. It is more accurate to see all three persons bound up in each stage of the relationship towards the whole of creation. But in each activity, movement and change are intrinsic. We have the remarkable tag that we are called God's new creation, the Body of Christ, and the temple of the Holy Spirit. So the church-on-the-move is not so much discovering how to find forms of church for a changing world, it is already back in touch with a key part of its God given nature.

Eternity in Bracknell sits easy with movement, even though ironically the word **Eternity** suggests something unchanging. That movement is not primarily about self-discovery or an intellectual journey. It is **relational**. The movement is towards persons. It is not just postmodernism that leads their mission statement to speak of “*experiencing God's love.*” The Hebraic worldview, that

roots knowledge in relationships, feeds this conviction. Then the evangelist's call to relationship with Christ contributes to it. But their one sentence mission statement speaks of a community where this encounter with God takes place. This is not a call to a private spirituality, but Christian reality known in community.

The Epistles of John forever forbid the separation of loving God and loving others. The experience of the love of God will be mediated through a loving Christian **community**. The characteristic of both loves is costliness. **Eternity's** values mention "*laying down our lives for each other*". A Biblical text supports that language, but it is nevertheless a bold statement. Yet the serving attitude in the gig breakdown was a significant symbol of this value. Take a look at how any church puts away its chairs and it may tell you more than watching the music group leading worship. It is in the cell group life at **Eternity** that the needs to be met are revealed. Social, economic and practical needs emerge and require response. By tactile, tangible response, members of **Eternity** learn to recant the axioms of a 'Me-first' generation and make the shift to costly committed love of others. 'Me-first' dies by laying down my life.

Costly relationships include willingness for accountability. Mark welcomes this

*"The most important thing is that keeping within our mother church is imperative. Being accountable is so necessary. We would not have gone ahead with planting **Eternity** if we did not have 100% blessing from St Michael's. The prayer support, teaching and care from them is invaluable."*

This plant has proceeded knowing its need of a sending parish, valued oversight by its leaders, sought and obtained deanery involvement and Mark having a diocesan licence. There is not a sniff of a passport to anarchic youth activity. Rather there is the strong instinct to belong, to contribute, to give and to receive.

Having met the vicar Brian Meardon (*top right*) and seeing how he recruits and trusts his lay leaders, I am confident that this is a parish where giving independence is seen as a positive route to interdependence – which marks a higher degree of maturity.



Passion is the one chosen word that intrigued me in evangelism, their third value. The related word compassion and the phrase 'the Passion of Christ' point up some of its costly meaning. Psalm 126 has not been the most common public anchor for evangelistic values. Sowing in tears arose out of Mark Meardon's experience at a **Soul Survivor** event. He came to understand that his own weeping was an echo of the passion of God for the youth generation.

The power of that calling helped shape **Eternity's** values and it still fuels the members, enabling them to do the sheer hard work of the job in hand. Here is evangelism rooted in a spirituality.

The values also strike notes of **humility** and **partnership** - "*we aim to be worshippers and to love each other*". That calling is sure, but working it out will take dependence on God; it will also mean learning from mistakes. It will entail recognising what we humans cannot do. "*We aim to let God give us a passion for those who don't know Jesus*". How much better it is to be caught up in that divine passion, than to engage in reluctant evangelism born out of guilt at a sermon, or to practice pedestrian attempts that accompany mere duty, or to make wild lunges at the world as the fearful emerge briefly from a Christian ghetto. A healthy missionary spirituality must continually depend on God. He is the one who seeks Trinity - motivated worshippers, inspires life-surrendering lovers and sends out tear-stained sowers. The members of such a community begun in Him and sustained by Him, are likely to bring those in contact with them to encounter Him.

The Genesis of Eternity

The values did not fall out of heaven. They have an earthly history. Mark Meardon came to Bracknell when his father Brian became vicar of Warfield in 1982. He grew up in the town and went to the local school.

"Looking back it's strange to think about where I am and what I'm doing now. A shy vicar's kid with uncontrollable hair, God used me at school to see many of my

friends become Christians and as I left home to go to University, my heart continued to long for the young people there. After graduation I went to Africa, still with a passion, but now also with a vision, for Bracknell. I eagerly returned to see about setting up a youth congregation.”

In the meantime some members of St Michael's, Warfield had met over many years and had been praying for God's initiative among the youth. A quarterly youth service began, to serve existing youth groups in the wider area. Some 90 came, together with 50-60 adults. Young people came but, partly because it was only monthly, there was nothing to belong to - just an event to attend. **Church cannot be only an event, it must be also community or family.** Moreover they were not being empowered, for adults took all the overseer roles. They were a market who had a limited responsibility for what was provided for them. They were, by mistake, condemned to become consumers not stakeholders. So the event was short on growth and direction and it suffered the lack of a leader who could address these issues which were only seen in retrospect.

As Liz West, Director of Youth Ministries for YWAM wrote in 1998:

“When we run youth work by providing programmes for young people which are adult-inspired, driven and organised, we encourage them to become passive consumers. Are we then surprised when we cannot compete with the range of high quality activities that are on offer for young people, or with the pressures of school work?” Anvil Vol 15 No 4 p 276

When Mark returned in Autumn 94, a paper had been written to the church Youth Co-ordinators, highlighting the need and constraints. He was willing to take a year out and the position of leadership was ready and open for him to step into. The adults relinquished responsibility.

He and three musical friends took over the service and called it **Eternity**. They planned youth services. These were crafted and choreographed, contained drama and lighting effects. But when they had done all that they were supposed to do to be cool, life and health didn't flow. Worse followed. By Christmas numbers were down to 30.

“We decided the old format of the youth service had to be scrapped. The Alternative Carol Service of December 1994 was the rather embarrassing last

straw of the Sunday services with worship songs like “It came upon a midnight clear” played (badly on acoustic guitars, sitting on stools) to the tune of “All along the Watchtower” by Bob Dylan. Everybody makes mistakes.”

1995 dawned.

*“On January 13th, with a budget of £20 and a mission to build a community in which people can experience God's love, we held our first Friday evening service. There was some worship, a bit of a talk and an appeal. 40-50 came and there were 7-8 professions. These kids were the first fruits. What were we to do with them? We arranged an impromptu follow up for 15 people at the vicarage. The response encouraged us to continue. It's funny because at this time we didn't have a sound engineer. It just happened that one of these first people who came to Christ through **Eternity** was into sound recording.”*

There followed a fortnightly Friday 'Celebration' which grew in number to 150. The follow up group became a regular Wednesday small group (with worship, open Bibles and prayer in smaller groups). When numbers reached thirty they moved out of the vicarage and into a Parish Room. It was a practical necessity but rather too large and formal a venue. This forced **Eternity** to move another way. They split down into 'Cell Groups'. Cell principles insist small groups are not just for nurture. As microcosms of church they are missionary too. So they acted as both 'Just looking' groups for those of a non-churched background and discipleship groups for the new Christians.

1996 saw the birth of a third Cell group, with the provision of more leaders. Leaders were older young people. They were enabled to take that role through a mix of written leader's packs, ongoing regular leadership training and meeting to ensure their spiritual well-being. Real questions from enquiring non-Christians and new young Christians gave members and leaders a significant challenge “*Can I hack it?*” and “*Am I out of my depth?*” were frequent comments.

Mark Meardon playing at a Celebration



Looking at Eternity's Flexibility

The evolving history of **Eternity** shows an admirable flexibility. What struck me between the eyes was that the purposes and values remained intact, but virtually everything else changed: venues, forms of event, days of the week, combinations of purpose, even most of the personnel.

It reminds me of the events of moonshot Apollo 13. When the side of the command module blew out with near fatal consequences, the purpose of bringing the endangered astronauts home became paramount. The staff at Houston and crew aboard did things they had never done before. Unnecessary systems were shut down. The crew put up with personal privations. The lunar craft became home for far longer than it was ever designed for. Long moments of risk and uncertainty were the diet of all involved. Heath Robinson solutions to replenish the carbon dioxide filters were devised from scratch. A brand new re-entry procedure using the maximum 12 watts available on board was thought out and tested on the Houston simulator. **Everything but the purpose was negotiable. Just about everything else had to be.** In pioneering new forms of church, for cultures alienated from traditional church, we may be on a mission that requires similar tenacity of purpose and flexibility of form.



1996-97 in Bracknell was a harvest period. The team could have thought they had arrived. The schools work took off. An able set of young people was emerging. Now 40 teenagers were in cells. But the growth contained the seeds of necessary change and movement. The small traditional church building of St Michael's, Warfield could no longer house all who came on a Friday night. There were a large number of Christians who needed teaching and prayer ministry, but also a fair number non-Christians who needed evangelising. The radical step to break **Eternity** up into two different but connecting streams, with leadership and venues for both was a way forward. The focus of **Eternity** activity remained Fridays, but these were used in diverse ways.

The first stream was for the Cell groups who came together, once a month, as a whole body of **Eternity**. They continued at St Michael's for what became called the '**In Church**' meeting. The purpose was teaching, worship and ministry to existing Christians.

Making this a monthly event helped counter the old down-side: the pressure of tiredness, setting up and breaking down the weekly event. Additionally, the pressure of popularity had not been helpful. **Eternity** became an 'in thing' in the Bracknell area, with people coming in by bus from miles around. The danger was that the **Eternity** community sense, and its very identity, declined and it could have become just an event. Deliberately the reformed '**In-Church**' was kept simple with minimal frills.

Two more pressures were still with them. One was that many of the able young leadership group went away to University in the summer of '97. Replacing resources is a story many growing churches know. The second was that working in youth culture means trying to build community and commitment with youngsters whose instincts are to pick and choose. To sustain a church which is constructed around weekly cell and monthly congregation and celebration could be hard.

Stream two was outreach, but it contained several strands. It was still based on schools work, friendship evangelism and local publicity drops. Once a month, on a Friday night, outreach focused at Wick Hill school. In a simpler starker building than the church, a bit more multi-media kit seemed necessary.

"As the old Friday meeting grew, God provided amazingly for the running of it. I needed a car to get around and we needed a new PA system and we thought it would be good to have a video projector. Within a week of praying for it, someone contacted me saying "I don't suppose you want a second hand video projector for £200?" We found ourselves trusting God to bring growth, especially as the first meeting had less than at our old building. We now see 300 young people every meeting, many of whom are not Christians."

This openness for kids to wander in is built upon the use of a school venue which is their familiar territory. Not only that, Mark and others on the team are often in the nine schools of the area, taking assemblies, occasional RE

lessons, lunchtime events and gigs. They now hold school missions twice a term, working with existing CU groups. Follow up is done by the CU's who in turn bring people to Wick Hill events and to **Evoke**. Sadly since Easter '99, they have had to move this event to **Coopers Hill** (below) a community centre, because understandably the level of nuisance and damage caused by many teenagers coming to events, already having been drinking, became too much for the school to tolerate.

Evoke was a drop-in Cafe started in 1997, headed up by part-time team member, Sarah Gough. Starting once a month, it grew to two Fridays a month. They had been praying for a venue and a recently built community centre was offered to **Eternity**. Low key, chill out, relationship-based is the style.



In 1998, there was still life, growth, diversity and response. The number of *Cell Groups* grew to eight. A team of leaders grew with some giving their year out to take on aspects of the work. Mark Meardon was overall leader, John Bush headed up In-Church and Pastoral work, Sarah Gough took on **Evo ke**, Anne Marie Beyer worked in schools, Mark Anderson led *Cell Groups* and Lucy Ward (right) handled the administration.

Yet this young church needed to remain flexible in approach. **Evoke** numbers began to drop. They sensed the youth culture was moving away from *Cafe* towards *Dance*. The principle behind **Evoke** was kept - a place where **Eternity** can build and form relationships with non-believers. But, despite the creativity that had gone into it and the relatively short

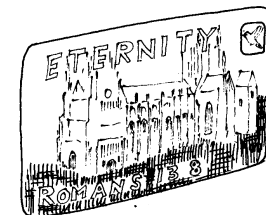


life it had known, **Evoke** was allowed to die and **Eclipse** was born with dance, live DJs, Playstation and a non-alcoholic bar. It seems to be working, second month around, I was one of 100 there.

Such commitment to staying ahead of the game, to remaining fresh, to have a constant creativity in approach made them short-sighted about the demands. By their own admission, Autumn '98 was tough, with a number of leaders experiencing burn out. The team structure was kept, but membership widened, bringing more resources to teams and lowering individual loads. These were further flexible responses.

Eternity believes there is still a long way to go and they will need to stay flexible for the future. As a church plant intended for its deanery and recognised by that body, it seeks a town-wide ministry to young people. The amazing reality, through the schools work, is that 100% of 11-16 year olds do make some contact with **Eternity** and the further dream that partly pulls **Eternity** into its future, is that 15-20% of them will be in active contact with a church.

Young churches may find flexibility easier than long established ones. Here traditions are less binding, and ministries less entrenched. But it would be a fainthearted mistake for the rest of us to avoid such adaptability, by saying our churches are too old to learn real flexibility of form within steadfast purpose.



Eternity has learnt flexibility and found church must operate at three levels:

- They exist in **Cells**, seen as the enduring base of **Eternity**. They have shown these can multiply, with sixty young people at present in eight groups. Here discipleship is rooted and practised.
- They meet in **Congregation**. The In-Church meeting draws fifty to sixty on Friday night for teaching and worship, including Communion once a term, presided over by the Vicar.
- They provide **Celebration** of God, done in such a way that it feeds the young Church and is a shop window for the fringe.

So How is Eternity Repeatable?

The hesitation of some is whether this kind of work is too hungry in terms of technical wizardry, presentational excellence and crucially finance to pay youth ministers. Is this beyond us?

300 towns

I noted that **Eternity** serves a town which is a deanery. Its scope is rightly wider than one parish and secondary age schools are organised on a town not parish basis. In two other towns I know well, which are not prosperous, there are youth-based ventures born from a cluster of churches agreeing to fund a youth worker and to pool their existing youth contacts so as to achieve the critical mass necessary. I find this suggestive and suspect, in any town of 30,000, that there is not only a need, but also the resources to begin to respond. Some think you can't mix reaching non-churched youth with the discipling of existing teenage Christians, so a fresh start with the new group is needed. That becomes an additional reason for fresh youth congregations. Other places have appointed full-time youth leaders and schools workers. SU is a notable example of a para-church body taking this initiative. The acid test will be what these movements will be allowed to grow up into. The insistence that the fruits are fed back into existing church is fatally flawed.

As I sat poring over a road map, comparing town sizes, I concluded that in Britain, there are 300 or more towns, including areas of cities, that should be considering this. What would the birth, in the next five years, of 300 youth churches say to our critics and to ourselves?

Such a move provokes a call for youth workers who can become youth ministers. Church Army has made working with young people one of its **Five Focus Areas** and it forms part of the standard training given to all of its evangelists.

Degrees from the *Centre of Youth Ministry* are being offered through training at Oxford, Cambridge, Nottingham and Bristol. The *Centre* is a partnership between some theological colleges, *Oxford Youth Works*, *Frontier Youth Trust* and *Youth for Christ*.



Anne Marie Beyers is one **Eternity** leader on the course at nearby Oxford. Anne-Marie is pictured left with Eternity's leadership team. From the top, clockwise they are Jack Bell, Anne Marie Beyers, Trevor Meardon, Louis Littlejohn, Mark Meardon and Michelle Bentley. I gather that at present less than twenty people are on the courses at Oxford and

Cambridge, but it is a start. In due course they will need placing, so the money to employ them needs to be found. I have heard the suggestion that Dioceses set aside money saved from Sheffield cutbacks. The 1999 Anglican Conference on Evangelism voted that one million pounds from central resources should be directed to evangelistic work with youth.

The daunting question is my mind is "*Fine, but supposing evangelism among youth work - what they would go to?*" This raises a massive question.

What is the need for Youth Churches?

The problem to face

The best concise summary that I have seen was written by Revd. Paul Simmonds - the Mission Adviser in Coventry Diocese.

"Not only are we struggling to keep and care for young people from Church families, we are making only negligible impact on the vast majority of the young people who are unchurched."

I take his analysis very seriously and believe it should be more widely considered. The headline message is "*Life threatening crisis!*" The numbers of young people in Church has dropped to such a damagingly low level that English Anglicanism faces serious decline in the long term future. The pressing question is - why is this happening? Listening to a range of other people, the most clear message insists "*Your church is primarily set up to minister to the over forties at the expense of young people.*"

In what ways is that true?

- The changes forged in the 1970s, such as liturgical revision and musical innovation, have solidified. They appeal to those who made the changes and it is as though they have drawn up the drawbridge of further change and consolidated their position in what you could call 'Kendrick Castle'.
- We have become more rigorous about numbers but have counted only total congregations - so we have remained blind to the fact that youth numbers have been dropping.
- Because of rising expectations of ordained leadership, we have looked for ordinands who have previous secular experience, so average the age of ordination in England is now 38. The 40's feel is imaged from the front.
- While one third of the population are under 25, the Church of England has only one ordained person in this age group. This is grievously at variance with, even scandalous compared to, the number of leaders in their twenties who become doctors, lawyers, teachers, accountants, and brokers.
- The parish principle affirms being where people are and re-directing financial and human resources, with some equality. The "Sheffield" formula is the teeth of that conviction. Such redistribution is but fiddling with marginal differences compared to a far vaster inequality. If one third of the population is under 25 - why do we not spend one third of our budgets on youth and children's ministry, especially by providing full-time trained personnel who can spearhead effective ministry to them? Such equality is not even glimpsed at present.
- It is not that youth find no attraction to Christianity in an organised form. But those drawn are largely through the new (house) churches and new missionary societies YWAM, OM, Horizons. The exceptions would be some student churches and also Youth Congregations of which some say there are 30+ Anglican examples in England.
- Most youth still in churches, are residual conformers - children of Christian parents. Only 1% to 2% of such groups are from a non-churched background, even in large churches.



- The huge drop in Sunday school attendance means that the number available to 'return to us' has dropped drastically. The strategy of adult return is now flawed. Though we baptise 25% of all babies born, only 3% return for Confirmation with a high drop-out afterwards.
- The percentage attendance at church or youth groups is pitiful. The national average adult Church attendance figure is 2%. Coventry Diocese shows youth attendance to be one tenth of this percentage, 0.02%. In Wakefield, the figure is still less at one twentieth of the national average, 0.08%.

The stark reality is that we are not holding, winning or discipling young people.

What response has been made?

'Youth A Part' (GS 1203) was published for the General Synod Board of Education in 1996. My purpose here is not to review it, but simply to highlight what seem to me its lustrous pearls and its Achilles heel.

Section 1.1 We recommend the Church examines its budgets and other resources and re-allocates them to reflect the distribution in population.

Section 3 We have a vision of a Church where young people are leaders and innovators.

Recommendations follow for them to be offered training in leadership and their roles in planning and delivering youth work, taking part in wider church decision making (section 4) and help to develop new ways to worship (section 6); these are all to be supported and resourced.

Section 11 This section calls for the valuing of youth workers and improvement to their training and support.

Section 12.1 Modules of Training in youth work should be part of ministerial training.

But my overall reading of the report is that, in essence, it still thinks of opening the way for young people to be added to **existing** forms of church - through positive discrimination for their voice. Is it co-incidence that the stable out of

which it came, is the Board of Education, not the Board of Mission?

The Achilles heel juts out in one concluding sentence from Chapter One. p22.

“If young people are taken seriously, respected and truly valued, the gap between Church culture and youth culture will decrease and close quite naturally.”

On the copy I borrowed from a youth worker friend, he had written “*Is that really true?*”. I add my own guess that this approach is not radical enough. It is not that young people are not interested in spirituality. Many testify to more evangelistic openness among young people than for some time.

Graham Cray agrees but sees a problem.

“The tragedy is that as evangelism becomes easier, there are increasing difficulties in churching those who respond.”

Or as Pete Ward put it to national Anglican evangelical leaders in 1995:

“It’s not that young people don’t want to become Christians, it’s that the Church can’t handle them when they do.”

‘Youth A Part’ itself carries the data which admits our current inability to bridge the gap between church and youth - even for Church based groups. It cites Leslie Francis and David Lankshear - ***Changing trends in Anglican Confirmation, 1993.***

In the period 1987-93

<i>14-17 year olds church attendance dropped</i>	<i>34.9 %</i>
<i>18-21 year olds church attendance dropped</i>	<i>34.1%</i>

Equally membership of church based youth work declined

<i>14-17 year olds membership dropped</i>	<i>35.4%</i>
<i>18-21 year olds membership dropped</i>	<i>40.2%</i>

This is a loss of between one third and two fifths in six years. **That is not a leak; it is a haemorrhage.**

Two deeper reasons for the unbridged gap

David Bosch, among others, argues that we are in **mission to Post-Christian people**. We may have to learn how to form Church among them, rather than inviting them to join something which they have already decided to reject. There is still a

search in pursuit of spiritual questions. But the word on the street is that the Church does not have the answers.

I return time and again to the haunting words of Harold Turner, a retired senior New Zealand Missiologist:

“There is no precedent for a mission to a culture that thought it had been converted when it hadn’t and which then publicly discarded the Christian faith.”

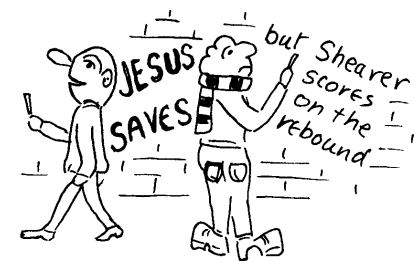
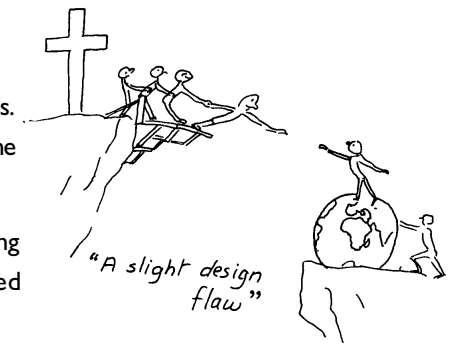
Curiously this reaction of being post-Christian has now gone so far that we are starting to find something beyond post-Christian. **Children of post-Christian parents may be Pre-Christian.** They will not have been to church activities of any kind. The 1944 Act about worship is widely ignored in schools and much RE is lamentable. In the words of Graham Cray:

“We are increasingly dealing with pre-Christians with whom there is practically no common ground in shared religious belief, despite the assumptions of many Church people. The assumption is that when we talk about Jesus, people will understand what we are talking about, even if they don’t agree. But the assumption is wrong.”

I was intrigued by the shift mentioned by Bob Mayo, course director of the Ridley Youth Workers Course. In the 1960’s youth workers might extol Jesus to their Christian young people and in passing compare him to the ability of a quality goalkeeper. In the 1990’s, they are more likely to reverse the order and talk about goalkeepers, only then going on to make a comparison to Jesus. The change of starting point speaks volumes about what can be assumed.

What can we do?

Eternity is an example of finding there can be several ways forward with different starting points. **Worship** is one. Their history shows it is possible to make a start with a new event, planned by youth, led by youth for youth. Yet the story reveals deeper foundations in prayer, a process of calling and



experimentation, and recognition of mistakes in the evolving of what actually worked for the local young people.

Alternative Worship events around the country have flourished, and drawn publicity, even a short Television series *God in the House*. Alternative Worship and Youth Congregation are by no means synonymous. Graham Cray draws out valuable recognition marks.

Youth Congregations:

- are targeted to teenagers and may include some young adults.
- want to be orthodox Church - offering worship, discipleship and mission.
- seek to expand the practical boundaries of Church for those already distanced from it.
- know the cultural and missiological gap to young people has opened.

By contrast Alternative Worship events:

- contain teenagers, but also pick up a wide mix of post-1960's people.
- focus more narrowly on worship and are maybe more theologically questioning.
- are more likely to try to hold onto people in danger of drifting away from church.
- serve a 'hinge generation' spanning Modernity and Post-Modernity.

I suggest there are two further options that need recognition. One theological question about youth churches is whether they will become heterogeneous in terms of age. Sociology will actually dictate part of the answer. In Bracknell, the dominant pattern is that young people go away for higher education and house prices prevent their return. In Watford, they stay, so Soul Survivor members are marrying, having children and require children's work at their church!

A matrix focuses the options

	Alternative Worship	Youth Congregation
Stay in area	N.O.S. Sheffield	Soul Survivor Watford
Move away	Sanctuary Huddersfield	Eternity Bracknell

To stay in mission, **Eternity** must continually re-cycle. To work with 11-16 year olds mean their church turnover will average 20% a year. **Soul Survivor** will gently age and have to face the task of when it re-creates new work among a rising teenage generation.

Evangelism is another way in, demonstrated in **Eternity's** short life. To reach beyond what the Worship events could do, they had to travel further out from church into the community. The most obvious gathering of young people is in schools.

As people used to parochial, area-based thinking, we have probably underplayed an important mission reality. **In a world where most adults do not live, work and play in the same community, schools represent up to a third of our parishioners using one venue for work and play and near which they may also live.** This is the group with whom we could have most continuity of contact. It is most local churches equivalent of Paul's Agora in Athens. It is the most concentrated focused mission field that most churches have.

In and out of class time, through taking assemblies, RE lessons, after school clubs, homework clubs and even Christian Clubs, relationships are built and seeds are sown. Schools work also provides a focus to lead the existing Christian young people in mission and, for **Eternity**, sharpens the outward thrust of their *Youth Cells*.

In many places, I suspect schools work will need to take place, perhaps for a short number of years, before it is appropriate to think of any kind of worship event. It sounds elementary. We must re-learn that we need to sow before attempting to reap. Breaking up the ground or ploughing and then sowing is hard work. In schools youth work it is possible that no one has been effectively sowing for years, maybe even generations. Thus patience, stickability and a longer time scale are very important if the team is not to be discouraged.

An example of good process in sowing before attempting to reap is the story of Johnny Sertin, son of an Anglican Vicar. To reach young people, he first worked as a lifeguard and behind the bar in a sports complex and simply met teenagers. He discovered that they would be interested in attending raves. With them, he set some up and called them "Night Bin" because at one point during the rave, they would get out a Council refuse bin, perch a Christian of

their own age on it and invite the audience to ask them the hardest possible contemporary questions that they could think of. From those who were interested through that encounter, he set up discipleship groups and then only after that, youth/alternative worship.

Yet another way in among communities most distanced from all forms of institutional church is necessary. Here worship would be an implausible start and any naked manifestations of evangelism would be too forward. The stories of **Living Proof** and **Unit 8** - told in **Encounters on the Edge Nos 1 & 2** - explore how starting in and with **Community** engagement can grow, through the silent evangelism of loving service, into natural forms of proclamation evangelism and into corporate Christian worship, all expressed in vocabulary and style within the culture.

Can we justify the age specific assumption?

- 1 Some argue pragmatically that until we abandon age specific congregations for older adults, we should give the young people the same privilege as we bestow on ourselves. We seemed to have little problem twenty years ago, going for younger adults through the invention of the Family Service.
- 2 Some believe that there is a principled missiological reason. The gap is not just generational, it is cultural. They are not like us, and will not grow up to be like us.

Culture or generation?

For as long as I can remember, Church and Youth, where they have met at all, have sat at opposite ends of the same bench, looking warily out of the corner of their eyes at the other apparition. As a cartoon has it, a punk was complaining that some church people didn't like his form of dress and they thought it odd in church. That he could cope with, but then in came the liturgically-garbed vicar and all logic vanished!

We have thought it generational, but this may be inaccurate and unhelpful.

My own thinking has changed and several sources of insight over a few months have contributed to the new direction.

"Young people are growing up in a different world to that experienced by previous generations. The life experience of young people in modern industrialised societies has changed quite significantly over the last two decades." Furlong and Cartmel :Young People and Social change 1997

If it is true that today's youth are a different culture, as people like Graham Cray argue, then the work of planting among them has even more significance because they will grow up to be adults with a different culture and will not grow into the culture that the church has learned to reach.

"The primary frontier which needs to be crossed in mission to young people is not so much a generation gap as a profound change in culture." **'Youth A Part'** para 2.11



Phil Wason is International Relations Officer for SU. He likens culture to a pervasive way of life, a set of norms a set of basic assumptions and pre-suppositions which underlie the thinking of a society and by which its people live their lives. Culture is a kind of silent language.

A fascinating example of a culture we have recognised recently is work among the deaf. Gill Behenna, who among other things works as a signer at conferences, taught me that deafness began to be recognised as a culture, rather than a disability, through a technological change. When video became much more prevalent, teaching of signing was often done through video. Then experts in linguistic analysis recognised it was its own language, not just an approximation of another language. With the recognition of it as a language group, it then became far more possible to recognise it as a culture with its own distinctives including a greater use of the tactile and a greater attention between two communicators. This is an accepted example of recognising a culture and therefore concluding it is right to encourage its own distinct form of Church. This may lead to questioning some assumptions we have made about the very nature of worship, in this case singing.

Vincent Donovan Preface to the second Edition of *Christianity Rediscovered*, p vii:

"I realised, when I came back to America, that on the home front I had left behind

me one of the most exotic tribes of all - the young people of America. They have their own form of dress... food, music, ritual, language, values - these are the things that make up a tribe, or a subculture as they have been called. It is to that tribe, as they are, that the Gospel must be brought ... You must have the courage to go with them to a place that neither you nor they have been before."

The word *subculture* I suspect reflects the adult mindset that young people will grow out of 'this phase' and also that when they do they will become like us - the existing adult population. Adolescence has some end points, though elongated by the drift to higher education and drift away from younger age marriages. I recognise, as an ex-teenager of the 1960's, that I have some different values and attitudes to those raised in the 1940's or 1950's. Equally, my team at work contain those in their early twenties. There are times when I publicly have to ask them, in ignorance, what certain phrases mean, and occasionally privately, I raise an inner eyebrow as our attitudes to possessions, choices, rights and simply what is normal are different. I grew up to be unlike my parents and in the same way, I perceive that my younger adult friends are distinct from me.

Graham Cray argued in this same vein in an address in 1998.

*"It follows that Youth Congregations **are not a bridging strategy**. They are not a temporary holding camp where young people can be acclimatised to existing church. It is not a bridge to the real thing. These groupings take responsibility for worship, pastoral care, mission and evangelism. To their members, they are the only real things they know. It is an experience of the Church of Jesus Christ."*

And speaking to Church Planters in May 1999, he memorably went further:

"Effective mission must be allowed to create problems of unity."

I have no doubt that we should dare to allow difference before asking for belonging. Some large city churches may bridge these gaps, but they will be the exception. For sound mission and cultural reasons, we must give independence to youth congregations, encouraging them to move into interdependence with other congregations for adults. All congregations need to accept that they are partial expressions of Church. Together, they make up the mosaic of God's mission to a diversifying world.

If you would like to know more about **Eternity** write to

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Trevor Meardon (centre) checks out a community artwork project.



The Sheffield Centre

- developing Church Planting & Evangelism



Our purpose

The **Sheffield Centre** came into being through the vision of the **Church Army**. It was conceived as part of a way forward for Church Army, re-establishing its identity around a strong evangelistic centre.

The new thrust was encapsulated in Church Army's corporate strategy document '**People to People**' published in September 1993. The role of the Sheffield Centre (then known as the Institute of Evangelism and Church Planting) was spelt out in this document.

The aim was:

'to inspire and mobilise the Church in its task of evangelism'.

It was to have the following main functions:

- Research into evangelism and church planting.
- Extensive library facilities for study.
- Specialist training in evangelism and church planting for those in full time recognised Christian ministry.

The Sheffield Centre can now offer to the wider Church:

- **Practical hands on experience in Evangelism for young people through Xchange and First Contact -**
National Co-ordinator: Captain David Booker
- **A Certificate level university-validated modular course, bringing a balanced theory of Evangelism to today's context, through Learning to Share -**
National Co-ordinator: Revd Mark Smith
- **Specialist research, consultancy and publishing on Church Planting, the fruits of which are partly seen through Encounters on the Edge -**
Director of the Sheffield Centre: Revd George Lings.

Please contact any of us if you think we could be of assistance.

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Together we are a team which is ready to support the mission of the Church of England in the New Millennium.