



Joining the club - or changing the rules?

Why bother to validate new ways of being Church?

As we go into the New Millennium and at the end of the Decade of Evangelism we need to catch up with the past. New ventures proliferated in the 1990's, so much so that people can already refer to "traditional church plants". The range is almost bewildering, but together they raise a clamour insisting that old ways of being Church cannot have the last word.

George Lings considers why we should take a serious look at the new ways of being Church which are emerging.

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Encounters on the Edge

A Series of Quarterly Investigations from

The Sheffield Centre

No. 5



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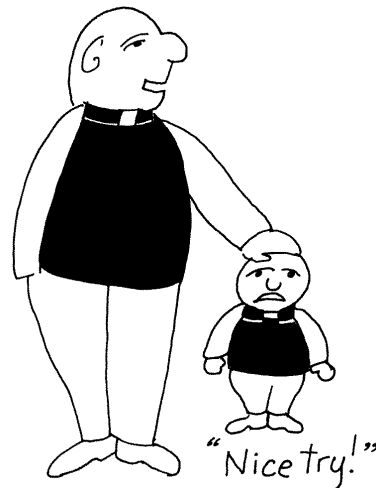
Why bother to validate new ways of being church?

As we go into the New Millennium and at the end of the Decade of Evangelism we need to catch up with the past. New ventures proliferated in the 1990's, so much so that people can already refer to "traditional church plants". The range is almost bewildering, but together they raise a clamour insisting that old ways of being Church cannot have the last word.

Yet we need to learn from the past. The prevention of mistakes is also valid. The tragedy that enveloped the seminal alternative worship event 'The Nine O'Clock Service' in Sheffield still stands as a 'warning triangle' to emerging churches. New ways there must be, but not at any price. Equally, the existing church needs to improve its record in dealing with its ecclesiastical immigrants. **Two classic stances will no longer do.**

In the past the official church marginalised and so ostracised Church Plants. They were regarded at worst, as threatening historic church order. At best, they were always in danger of being patronised, as only provisional ways of being Church or leading to 'proper' Church.

All too often new forms of Church received discouragement from the historic Church. As a consequence they become structurally alienated from it, leading them into more extreme positions or pushing them towards a premature death.



The other ploy was to 'domesticate'. New forms of Church were, in a wondrous remark of Revd Paul Perkin, "suffocated by being taken to the ample bosom of the establishment". They were enticed into a process of receiving acceptance by having their distinctives toned down. Thus they became indistinguishable from the very Church for which they set out to provide alternative models.

Either dynamic was a disastrous process of change for a Church working in a changing world.

Is this an Encounters on the Edge issue?

I think so, because the previous stories related in the *Encounters on the Edge* series have raised these kinds of questions. Real encounters also occur at the edges of our assumptions. **Tomorrow's cross boundary issues may be mental not geographical.** But the task is not an inherent conundrum wrapped in a mystery. There are theological and human analogies to offer a principled rationale which can help us to accept emerging churches. There is an abundance of criteria by which we can warmly welcome them as being valid.

1. Possible Theological approaches

a. From Creation and Fall

It is an inevitable consequence of the theological principle of the Fall that all human institutions, and even well intentioned proposals to reform them, have cast over them an incompleteness and provisionality that denies to all of them a perfection of expression. Thus any institutional part of the church that expresses doubt over such new forms of church - such as more radical church plants or youth congregations - should be wise to remember its own provisional previous definitions and existence. Could it be that those living in glass churches should not throw 'stony theology'? Any serious history of the twists and turns of Ecclesiology will bear this out. For amplification of this perception, readers could consult chapter 4 of *Recovering the Ground* (Kingdom Trust Publications, Ed. Nigel Scotland), *Deconstructing the Church's Ministry*, unsurprisingly by Richard Holloway, Bishop of Edinburgh.

b. From Christology

Orthodox historical Christology came to accept that the Incarnation is the birth of God the Son and it rejected Adoptionism - the view that Jesus only became the Son of God at the time of His consciousness of it, which is usually connected to the actual event of His baptism.

Yet in the historical period leading to the Ascension, his identity and divinity was only gradually disclosed to others. This process is a crucial example showing that inner identity, and the outward recognition of it, do not have to be contemporaneous from the outset. Christians have always accepted the Body of Christ as one foundational model of the Church. If Church is being formed in new ways for new cultures and groupings, why should not a similar discontinuity between identity and recognition be permitted? If the Church, the body of Christ, is being formed for a fresh group of people, and Jesus was content for gradual disclosure to take place for himself, why should a similar discontinuity not be allowed? Incomplete recognition should not become a bar to gradual disclosure. Perhaps we should pray and expect that more of today's Church leaders follow the steps of Peter at Caesarea Philippi and suddenly have revealed to them that it is Christ and his Church being formed among such communities.

c. From the Kingdom and Eschatology

The Kingdom dynamic interweaves an untidy eschatology, well exemplified by the writings of George Eldon Ladd and summarised in the tension inherent in the phrase "*already - not yet*". The tension between these two, neither end of which must ever be relinquished, is expressed on the one hand in Jesus' comment in Mark Ch.1:15, "*The kingdom of God is at hand*" and yet Jesus' insistence in the Lord's prayer that we are to pray "*...your Kingdom come*".

The Church should be a disclosed sign of the Kingdom with the challenge being how closely we demonstrate this call. Is it then surprising, especially in a changing world, that there should be inherited forms of the Church

which are easily recognised and can be likened to '*already*' manifestations of the Kingdom and that there should also be emerging parts of Church which have a more '*not yet*' character? My choice of language deliberately echoes terms from *Building Missionary Congregations* about inherited and emerging modes of Church.

This Kingdom theological framework can embrace, and live with, the untidiness of both dynamics being present in the church. We hold together the '*already-not yet*' tension in areas of Eschatology, believing Christ has come, Christ comes among us now and Christ will come again. We teach it about Salvation, knowing that we are saved, are being saved and will be saved.

We know the same tension painfully in connection with the process of Sanctification - our holiness as individuals. It begins in accepting we have been made new in Christ, but that spiritual life and death continue to work within us and we long for the final Day when the process is completed. It seems consistent to hold a similar long term view over our theology of Church.

If within the doctrines, Creation and Fall, Christology, the Kingdom and Salvation there is room for what is emerging, then, is it not likely that it is an institutional resistance, rather than good theology, that has barred forms of emerging Church through history and denied them legitimisation until they conform to all past external marks?

2. Analogies from Life

Church is, among other things, fundamentally to do with relationships, with the Divine community of the Trinity and with relationships in human community. Moreover, one way of seeing the Church is that it is the emergence of God's plan for a new humanity, in Christ. This cardinal connection is played upon in the title of one of Robert Warren's recent books "*Being Human, being Church*". Any analogies with what it is to be truly human are likely to have some validity in recognising what is Church.

a. *Being Human, being Adult, being Mature*

Our problem about defining Church without unhelpfully excluding emerging Church, is mirrored by struggles to get beyond having an instinctive idea of what it is to be human, but finding it difficult to come up with a definitive explanation of the term. Not only that, but we recognise that to be human is a far more embracing term than to be adult, or to be mature.

Just as it would be foolishness to say that only mature adults are really human, so could we not coin a similar language for recognising forms of Church that may still need to grow to adulthood and maturity, but which are nonetheless essentially - and therefore authentically - Church? It is not impossible or meaningless to talk about mature children, mature teenagers or mature people in their twenties. Why can we not exercise similar generosity to young communities of faith? Equally, in humility can we not admit that as so called adults, we are not fully mature? Many established congregations are more than capable of exhibiting immaturity.

There is an intriguing overlap here with the growing perspective that it is both a pastoral and theological mistake to deny the status of Christian to Church children. This then has a host of implications about worship and communion, about the style of teaching, the scope of pastoral care, and about children exercising gifts and ministries, not just receiving them. **I have seen in local churches that those who treat professing Christian children, as actually Christian, find that those children often rise to expectations and even exceed them. If we did the same with emerging forms of church we might receive equally pleasant surprises.**

b. *Mess in the New Testament Nursery*

Those who remember changes in Church life of the 1960's will have encountered the work of the translator J.B. Phillips. His volume title for the



Epistles was Letters to Young Churches. The content of the letters show the glaring human flaws, the painful wrangles, the imperfectly held doctrines, the inconsistent lives, as well as a pulsating Resurrection life beating in the heart of these raw, vulnerable, tottering toddler communities. Paul, Peter, James and John never think of them as other than Churches, even though by Revelation 3 the writing is on the wall - or more exactly on the page - that they are not all going to survive.

Like most arguments, the ones about humanity also cut the other way. Radicals of whichever theological tradition can be tempted to write off historic forms of Church as dead, and they would do well to realise that such blanket dismissal is as inaccurate as it is unkind. Immature, disappointing, vexing they may be, yet incomplete Churches they still are.

c. *A Statue of limitations*



Some statues of human beings are compelling in their beauty or striking in the image of power they engender. But you can only learn a certain amount of what it is to be human by looking at one, however fine the craftsmanship. It will tell you certain things about proportion and anatomy, or the image it was intended to convey, but much less about relationships, or being alive and changing.

Some traditional understandings of Church, based around doctrine or orders of ministry tend to measure what is unchanging. The formulations have been designed, in a particular history, in order to defend or exclude rival views. But part of the essence of Church is being alive and thus responsive and moving. Definitions of it are thus likely to be difficult, though that may be unsatisfactory to those who like things neat and tidy.

d. Top Gear?

On the motorway, on my way to a research investigation of an emerging Church for the non-churched in Cardiff, I overtook a car which, to my practised eye, clearly was not a production model but what is termed a kit car. These are betrayed by a certain crudeness and lack of overall design balance, which from the point of view of the owner is an unfortunate disclosure of its antecedents. However, it would be entirely ridiculous to say therefore that it wasn't a car at all, simply because it didn't meet the levels of sophistication to which we have become accustomed. Similarly some young, even adolescent Church communities may lack some marks of a Church, as required by the purists. But perhaps it is the purists who make themselves ridiculous by failing to recognise what these communities are, despite their limitations. Indeed David Treharne one of the leaders of this emerging Church remarked "It could be the other way round - could not emerging Church be the brand new proper car and existing forms of Church simply be classic car models?"

All these approaches challenge a mistaken insistence that unless all marks deemed to be desirable of the church are on parade, then it is not the Church which is present. All the analogies above, and the content of a messy New Testament people of God, refute such a fundamentalist and exclusive way of thinking.

3. Where could we go from here?

Analogies are fertile sources of lively debate, but I suggest, in the light of all the suggestions above, we need a humbler, more open, way of recognising Church. With a living organism, it is inappropriate to adopt the methodological rigour of the MOT test - which works by denying a pass if any one component is failed. The arid nature of some systematic



theology, which seems to owe more to modernism, than Christian life or charity, is unlikely to be a good method to evaluate adventures which, by definition, do not fit with all the old marks. It would make as much sense to judge a bicycle by the exacting standards of what makes a luxury car. Yet on some narrow inaccessible tracks and mountain trails, a bicycle might be just the transport that suits best. **Some modern mission tracks are mountainous rather than motorways.**

It could help to use a looser list of criteria that can gladly affirm something as Church when, for the sake of argument, 7 out of any 10 chosen marks of the Church are present in an emerging Christian community. Moreover this needs to become an attitude that is looking to welcome "emerging church" rather than to repudiate "not yet church". We need the modern Barnabas, who can recognise the converted Saul and bring him to the Jerusalem disciples, despite their suspicions.

Which criteria should be included? A sifting process that excluded nothing would be a waste of time and a betrayal of truth. We should not for instance omit establishing proper lines of accountability, nor fail to express the Church's nature of Interdependency and even more seriously fall short of historic Orthodoxy. A visionary committed to radical forms of thinking and mission, like Lesslie Newbigin, held to certain anchors. As William Schenk writing in the Bible Society's special edition of the magazine Transmission put it, "For Newbigin, any action must be continually tested against the norm of the Gospel, the centre of which was the cross". **Another way to put this cardinal criterion would be to insist new communities of faith are Christian, before we ask whether they conform to ecclesiological subtleties. Are they close to the life and teaching of Jesus? That is the acid test.**

But we are not without starting points, indeed we may have too many. To ask a young church to apply them all might lead to paralysis by analysis.

4. Credible criteria

In devising any such criteria to recognise emerging Church, we should look back at historic formulations of Church, for example the enduring credal marks - one holy catholic and apostolic. Many pots of ink have been

consumed on the topic, each revealing not only a passion for those four words, but inevitably a twist showing the period of history for and against which they were written.

In keeping with that process, my conviction is that these very terms need some reworking for a Missionary rather than Christendom context. How might they apply to new forms of Church in a new mission millennium?

a. Lessons of Church History: One Holy Catholic and Apostolic

The Church is ONE

Today's world is drawn more by the dynamics of spirituality than the tentacles of institutions. It might be both good tactics, and better theology, if our model for oneness, is not the stained history of a fractured world wide Church, but is the Trinity. Here is the living example of enduring loving community that shows us that oneness is experienced as unity in diversity. Here are separate and unequal roles, giving and receiving, mutual recognition and outgoing, ongoing loving of those outside its own community. In the Trinity there is no conflict between the passions for unity and for mission.



“Logistics department here... There are problems with the proposed Incarnation idea”



When Graham Cray remarked at a Church Planters conference that “effective mission should be allowed to create problems of unity”, I wonder whether he saw a precedent in the Incarnation. For the sake of Mission, never had the Godhead been so separated or diverse.

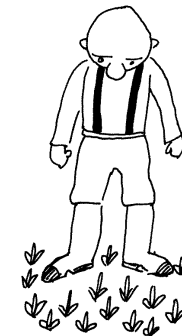
The church, at whatever level we experience it - cell or congregation, diocese or denomination - which is based on the Trinity, will say no to factors like uniformity, mere politically correct equality, inward preoccupation and a monochrome culture. She will dare to portray a creative mosaic and take risks for the sake of others. At the same time as diversity, a passion for loving unity in the community will be her trademark, as all the practical sections of the epistles insist it should

be. The affirming attitudes typified by the Trinity are not optional. **New forms of Church should welcome other Christians and Churches. The bottom line is that no Christian group can legitimately think “we exist by ourselves, or for ourselves”. This applies equally to emerging and inherited forms of Church.**

The Church is HOLY

Today's media driven world contributes to a loss of innocence. Life in the spotlight shows all flaws. Heroes are put on pedestals and then shot down. Ideals are risky for they become targets. Yet the Christian community on earth takes its lead from the Trinitarian community in heaven. The mission community is dedicated to continuing the purposes of its founder. The saved community takes its ethical character from the one who saved it. “Be Holy, as I am holy says the Lord”.

Our problem is that our calling and our performance are so separated. The Church can be a synonym for hypocrisy, a bear garden of destructive behaviour, a refuge for fine sounding heresies and a shameful disfigurement of its name- the body of Christ. I guess such a gap is partly what leads some Christians to exodus from the Church. Others resort to patterns and requirements in discipline tighter than the New Testament requires.



“they look the same to me”

In the fourth century, rigorist and compassionate views clashed. The Donatists argued for a pure Church and did not want to re-admit those who had caved in under persecution. Augustine and the Church Catholic argued that the Church was to be thought of as both a barracks of soldiers under discipline, but also a hospital for the sick and sinful. One of their guiding texts was the Parable of the Wheat and the Weeds (Matt 13 24-30) with its directive that both be allowed to grow together until harvest time. **It is the argument that the Church, though called to be holy, has to live uncomfortably, and even to its disadvantage, with being both visible and imperfect.**

Such a view opens up an untidy, even messy, church life, but one which I suspect will be ever more necessary as we seek to grow new forms of Church among

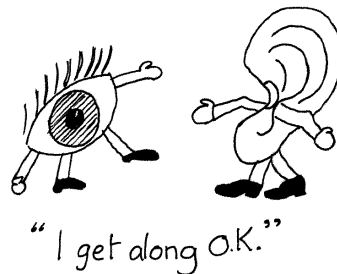
the non-churched, or plant among those from deeply post modernist backgrounds. People will come with a laden raft of social and ethical baggage which is simply not going to be untangled with a few bits of scripture whether lovingly or sternly delivered, even when accompanied by obviously pertinent touches of the Holy Spirit upon a body or life. I remember John Wimber advising a conference as to the length of the process. A person gloriously converted, patently Spirit - baptized, powerfully de-demonized, etc. may still take two years to be re-socialized into the Christian community.

The call to holiness is non-negotiable, but the process and the length of it is as long as the three fold tenses of Salvation. On earth we are still in the process of being saved. All our most honest experiences in spirituality confirm that our growth into the likeness of Christ is slow and partial. It will be the same in ethics and discipleship. The inner demands of the Sermon on the Mount make sinners of us all. We had better get a good grip on that and resist forms of modern day Donatism, or any approach that offers short cuts to Holiness.

The Church is CATHOLIC

The contemporary world is more aware than ever before of the interconnectedness of all things. From ecology to chaos theory, from economics to history, we know every pebble in a pond has ripple effects. This is life in the global village. How can the reality of this interconnectedness translate into a living ecclesiology? The universality of the Church - its catholicity - is the consequence of there only being one Body of Christ. Christ being divided is utterly foreign to the New Testament. This image of the Body has very significant implications for our view of ministry and membership. I Corinthians 12 is rightly a happy hunting ground for a diversity of gifts in ministry, but it also teaches us much about how members of the Church - this diverse collection of parts - are to view each other.

Independence confuses a stage of identity with a higher goal. Interdependence is the only way to live. "The eye cannot say to the ear I have no need of you". Independence is never found in the Trinity nor the image of the Body of Christ.



Within individual churches, and between churches, we are to live in an interdependent fashion. That is why Anglicanism has always said a robust "No" to congregationalism. Planted Churches above all, should know their dependence on those who sent them and that their long-term aim is partly to send out other churches from them. Church plants should naturally think in terms of family relationships - having mothers who bore them and daughters they will rear to release. Needing and giving, the grace to receive and grace to give; these are Christian values of the Interdependent Church. It's good to know our individual identity, but only if we hold equally strongly to our incompleteness, which is compensated for by our being connected. Church is Connectionalist, not Congregationalist. For Anglicans that means being Episcopal, for others being Presbyterian.

Church for Anglicans cannot be the old Free Church equation: local and visible, plus universal and invisible. As Anglicans read the New Testament they see there are translocal leaders like Paul, Timothy and Titus. There is wider oversight exercised by overseers. Church is a word used of house, of area, of city, and region. There are as many layers of Church as there are layers of society. All are interdependent, but all exist. I have been Anglican long enough to know that Bishops and Dioceses are mixed blessings - as are clergy and authors of booklets! But as a theory of Church, I am sure interdependence is right. It is good to be under authority. It is good to belong to something bigger. It is good that we have a history. This is one reason we believe that crafted, tested, liturgy has an important place in worship. In worship, we not only join the worship of the universal Church, in heaven and on earth, but we share prayers and passions of those who have been in the faith longer. We are fed by their faith and are not totally dependent on our own creativity.

We only know our rightful identity, by knowing where and to whom we belong outside ourselves.



The Church is APOSTOLIC

Mission statements abound. They are painted onto the White Vans that terrorise other traffic, shout from the billboards of street corners and subways, and decorate the headed notepaper of companies.

It is ironic that mission statements are more popular in secular society than mission is in Church. It is possible that we are an amnesic apostolic Church? How can a vibrant apostolic identity be re-invigorated?

I suggest John 20:21 is foundational to this process. Jesus the Risen Lord, displaying crucified marks on his body, says *“As the Father sent me, so I send you.”* If we connect that dynamic to another text, from Hebrews 3:1, where Jesus is called an apostle, this powerfully nuances the Johannine meaning. Then we can say the Church must model the apostolic nature of Christ, if it is to be genuinely Christian. In the Creeds we say we believe in One Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church. What does that mean? - Historically the debate has been whether it is more important to hold that the Church was started by the apostles or by their doctrine? While both of these contain important truth of our antecedents, I suggest it is more fundamental than either.

My own understanding of this was propelled forward by a simple discovery about the words Mission and Apostolic. Leslie Davison in a book *Sender and Sent* p19 writes:

“The root idea of mission is sending. Our word comes from the Latin Missio which translates a Greek word apostello - which means I send.”

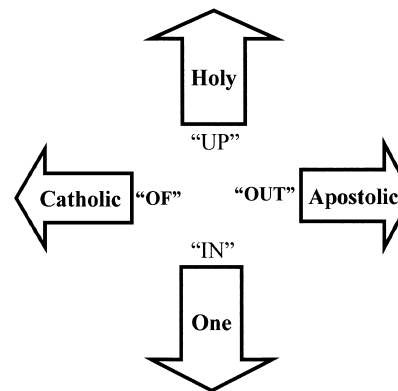
Both a missionary and an apostle are people who are sent. **Why is the Church described as apostolic? Because it was sent by Jesus - “so I send you”, but also yet more fundamentally, because Jesus was apostolic first. “As the Father sent me”.** PT Forsyth the early twentieth century Scottish theologian helped put me on this path. I learnt he was fond of saying:

“In Christ, God was his own apostle”.

There is growing conviction about seeing mission and church in terms of the sending community the Trinity. In this view the Father is the sender, Jesus is the sent one, and the Holy Spirit the sender on - of the Church.

I seriously suggest that Church Plants – for they have senders, that is the church that spawned them, because their intrinsic identity that they are a sent group and by existing to reach groups of people they are sent to - are recovering for us a genuinely apostolic nature. It is as though, through church planting, we are rediscovering what we were all meant to be in the first place. Amnesia dissolves and an apostolic/missionary Trinitarian identity re-emerges.

To become mature, new churches will have to grow into these four dimensions of their identity, but we can affirm these basic categories which are part of an understanding of the identity of new churches. It is good to understand them and to see how they affect everything.



- To be **One** calls us to unity and diversity in relationships within an emerging Church.
- To be **Holy** beckons us into an evolving framework for people growing up into Christ, in a visible and yet fallen Church.
- To be **Catholic** insists upon our interdependence within and beyond an emerging church.
- To be **Apostolic** is knowing we are called to be sent. We join the Mission of God.

These are key marks of our identity as Church. These prior realities shape our worship, our care, our history and our engagement with the world. They tell us who we are, how we relate and show ways in which new forms of Church can be truly part of what has always been - the one holy Catholic and Apostolic Church.

b. A comment from the Reformation: Article 19 of the 39 Articles

“The visible church of Christ is a congregation of faithful men, in which the pure Word of God is preached and the Sacraments be duly administered ...”

Compared to the section above, such definitions betray their sixteenth century origin and the preoccupation with differentiating what was then an emerging Anglican Church from its inherited Roman history. The accented marks of this new Church are visible, communal, ethical, doctrinal and sacramental. Yet the definitions here are functional not ontological, because as statements from a particular history they mark differences from a past, less than pointers to a future. The most glaring gap is that there is nothing about evangelism or mission. What a classic case of the very struggle to be free, blinding the strugglers to a wider, but key, dimension of their existence. By contrast to Anabaptists, the mainline Reformers did shake off medieval Catholicism but could not step outside Christendom. How hard it is to see the whole picture. That signals a danger to those in both inherited and emerging Church.

c. Pointers from the Nineteenth Century Mission field

To assess the validity and health of emerging forms of Church, a further valuable set of criteria would be those developed in the nineteenth century mission field by Henry Venn of CMS. They became known as the **3 Self Principles** or **3 Self Movements**. These three principles are to be self governing, self financing and self reproducing. It could be argued that these are more marks of adult congregational maturity, rather than essential Church identity. But they are helpful signposts to an infant church of its longer term objectives. They give historical justification to escape from the parental control mechanisms that still throttle some young Churches. I need to add that it would be unfair to Venn to see these marks of maturity used to undermine the journey to a mature interdependence within the wider Church. This is a call to maturity, not to isolationism or independency.

d. Modern official criteria offered by "Breaking New Ground"

These marks carry the imprimatur of a 1994 House of Bishops report and I confess had their origin in my own sabbatical thinking of 1992, but they are beginning to show their age in one important way. The assumption that Church Planting will be congregational, owes too much to our assumptions about what Church must be like. Cell Church, House Church and Base Communities are three expressions that force us to press behind this. Christianity is a corporate

existence and a communal faith, reflecting the unified loving diversity of the Trinity. So the test will be rightly be to look for a community of faith, but should not be to insist that it must be expressed as congregation.

My own guess is that when our mission is the evangelisation of, and planting among, the non-churched, or those de-churched by choice, it is unlikely that resultant church will form into congregation. The non-churched in the urban western world often carry a folklore of church horror stories; negative experiences fuelled by the odd newspaper revelation. Stereotypes about congregations and church goers will need to be overcome. Small groups, in homes or events in secular venues will offer fresh starts, less tarnished by the stains left in their memories.

Here are practical questions about:

- **orthodoxy (a),**
- **incarnational mission (b and c),**
- **eirinic catholicity (d and e),**
- **and authorised interdependence (f and g).**

Where the honest answers are 'Yes', welcome not suspicion should follow. Note too that 'Breaking New Ground' itself asks that these criteria are not used in an exclusive, 100% pass mark, sense. It notes that a number of parish churches might also find themselves embarrassed by these questions.

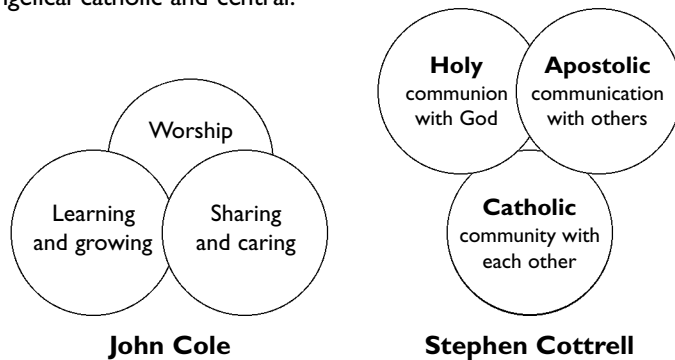
In response to the question "Is a cross boundary plant still Anglican?", p32 of 'Breaking New Ground' offers the following criteria which may be helpful:

- a) *Is there commitment to the doctrine and practice of the Church of England as expressed in the declaration of assent?*
- b) *Do members of the planted church come from within the neighbourhood or network which the plant is designed to serve?*
- c) *Is there evidence of a desire to reach to the unchurched in the defined neighbourhood or network?*
- d) *Do the leaders of the planted congregation display an affirming attitude to other traditions around them?*

- e) Do they use authorised form of worship, being those allowed by bishop's authority under section B of the Canons of the Church of England?
- f) Do the leaders of the congregation have Episcopal ordination licence or authorisation to exercise ministries in the local Church and do those ministries include a life and teaching consonant with those normally expressed within the Church of England?
- g) Does the congregation acknowledge Episcopal leadership and accept financial and other diocesan obligation and generally participate in the life of the diocese?

e. Other contemporary key criteria of church.

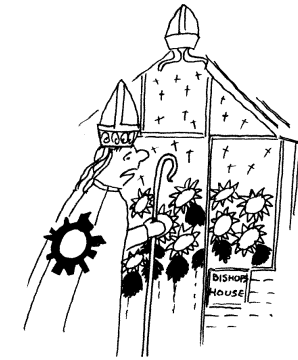
Simpler and broader categories of Church derive from the contemporary writings of **Robert Warren, Stephen Cottrell and John Cole**. As it happens these three could represent three differing traditions in Anglicanism: evangelical catholic and central.



The Warren diagram is well known and is also shown in Encounters Issue 2 p10.

These functions are themselves outward expression of relationships. Firstly upward with God in Christ, then inward with each other in the body of Christ and also outward to the world because of Christ. It is also noteworthy that none of these headlines specify either ordained ministry or the sacraments as being of such primary importance as to displace the categories chosen. I believe the correct implication is that both ordination and sacraments, often regarded as sine qua none of Church, are utterly dependent for their very place on the prior and more basic existence of a Christian community revealed by its inner relationships and dynamics. Such simpler contours of church are refreshing and

liberating. Too often I suspect our obsession with orders and sacraments is a reflection of churches led by clergy whose identity is centred in practising both sacraments. In such cases could it really be about retaining power and inculcating dependency and not much about missionary theology?



f. More recent work from the Church Growth Stable

“Are these GM churches?”

Some will know the writing of the German researcher Christian Schwarz and his British Church Growth Association book *Natural Church Development*. One comment he makes is that often it is adjectives rather than nouns which mark what is Church. For example; it is insufficient to say that a mark of the Church is the presence of relationships. Sadly we all know of stories of congregations that are bitterly and deeply divided and which disfigure, dishonour and do not even deserve the name of church. Here the noun is not in itself sufficiently diagnostic, but put in the words *loving relationships* and a quality which reflects the presence of God is suggested and moreover a dynamic is introduced alongside the definition.

The fabled 8 marks are...

- Empowering Leadership
- Gift-Orientated lay ministry
- Passionate Spirituality
- Functional Structures
- Inspiring Worship
- Holistic small groups
- Need-orientated Evangelism
- Loving relationships



The PCC Secretary voted for... passionate structures and functional worship

Once again, while leadership, spirituality, evangelism and worship are cited, ordination and sacraments are not. Indeed any ecumenically aware assessment would know that it is not the particular forms in which we operate that are crucial for life and growth to follow. The good Lord does not seem limited to working through Episcopal ordination or tightly regulated forms of sacramental grace.

These criteria cannot be used on their own, in that the titles could equally apply to a Buddhist renewal movement, or Islamic Mission. Both might be very effective within their aims, but it would scarcely make them Christian. What Schwarz is after is the thought, alarming to some, that for church to be Church, it must be alive. A dead church is ultimately an oxymoron. We talk of a dead body, but the phrase a dead human being owes more to bereavement denial than logical thought. The children of the Father, the body of Christ, the temple of the Spirit must either be alive, or be a hoax.

It is very simple. To qualify to be a Church of God, there must be Christian, corporate, spiritual life. This work gives us parameters to measure its health. All churches could benefit from going to Doctor Schwarz for a check up.

g. Learning from my children - have you met Mrs Nerg?

My 14 year old son Julian (*right*) tells me he is taught in biology that there are 7 marks of something being biologically alive. The application to that well known organism – the church – is fascinating. I leave readers to make their own entertaining comparisons to Schwarz’s factors or the Warren, Cottrell, Cole clusters of criteria.



MRS NERG stands for:

- M** Movement **R** Respiration **S** Sensitivity
- N** Nutrition **E** Excretion **R** Reproduction **G** Growth

I particularly notice that churches are **Sensitive** (S) to internal issues and external criticism. They can be riveted by **Excreting** (E) what they dislike, and obsessed with what they take in through **Respiration** (R) and **Nutrition** (N). No wonder the church may appear to others as either overweight or anorexic. Where I ask are irrepressible signs of **Movement, Reproduction** and **Growth**? These are equally normal in biology. I long that it was so in God the Creator’s favourite animal – the Church.

h. The Gamaliel Principle

1991 saw the advent of four unauthorised cross-boundary church plants, all of which I visited and wrote up in my 1992 Sabbatical report on Church Planting. I still think there is fascinating mileage in the reported view of John Yates, the then Bishop of Gloucester, that the number of precedents strengthens the argument to allow what is currently illegitimate. This could be described as the process by which Outlaws are made into In-Laws if there are enough of them!

Historically there is some truth in it. The size and durability of the major denominations born at the Reformation has wrung grudging recognition from the Roman Catholic church. The apostate are now “*separated brethren*”. Similarly the Church of England has moved from its historic attitudes to “*Dissenters*”, speaking now of “*Free Churches*” and giving them warm ecumenical embraces - though always denying them consummation. In the 1790’s, John Wesley, though he believed he lived and died an Anglican, was hardly their blue eyed boy. Yet he was feted by Church of England at the 250th anniversary celebrations held by the Methodists. Seen most charitably, this is the Gamaliel principle, whereby those currently in ecclesiastical power decide not to repress a new movement, but to and wait to see if it is of God. The number of cases, their health, vitality and durability will all be indicators of true divine initiative. But we can do better than outlaw the new manifestations until there are so many that we are compelled make them in-laws.

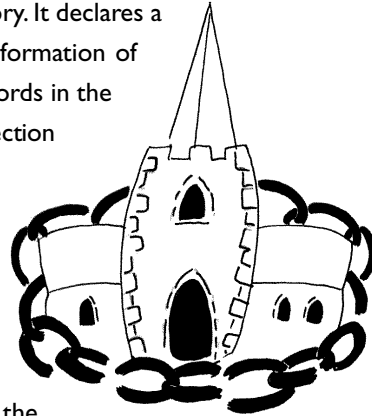
i. A non negotiable criterion of being church.

My plea is that Mission must be included as an essential mark of the Church. From the heavyweight writings of David Bosch in ***Transforming Mission***, to the perception shift brought by a ***Decade of Evangelism***, we are coming closer to a view that says the **Church does not do mission as an activity, rather it is mission.**

The reality may be even more radical. The best perspective may be that Mission should shape what the Church is, rather than the Church prescribe what mission may look like. I have come to believe that this is the story which lies behind Acts of the Apostles chapters 8-12. It was changes on the boundary of mission that led to the cross cultural church planting from Antioch of chapter 13 onwards

and this in turn led to the changes of the council of Jerusalem. I note too the shift was inspired by experiential encounters with the Missionary Spirit of God rather than by deliberations of church councils, or Bible studies on the nature of mission. I dare think such processes were not just historical accidents but parables of theological principles.

I see the same dynamic operating in the coming of Jesus. He appeared proclaiming the proximity of the Kingdom and forming a community of faith in the disciples. What emerged as the Church was, I think, not just the happenstance of that period of history. It declares a priority of the mission of God before the formation of Church. Thus to applaud George Carey's words in the late 1980's that ecclesiology is but a sub-section of the doctrine of mission, is not only to assert a priority between them, but assert an inherent order too. If it became normal for us to think that Church should be always reforming and re-evolving in the light of the ongoing Mission, we would have struck a significant blow to split the shackles that surround our ideas of church.



Perhaps Ecclesiology is always going to have to choose between being responsive to its mission task or accommodating to the dominant surrounding culture. My own view is that under Constantinian pressure it made a mistake and opted for fitting in with the latter. The lessons learnt on the boundary of mission are inherently more healthy, if more risky. If God the Trinity is understood as Community in Mission and Mission by Community, then we should expect those two strands (Mission and Community) to be foremost in what the Church is most meant to be where new forms of Church are being formed.

j. Head in the sand?

It is the comment of a paranoid ostrich to maintain there are no clusters of criteria that could be used to assess whether some new Christian community in mission is a Church. The problem is more that the marks we have relied upon

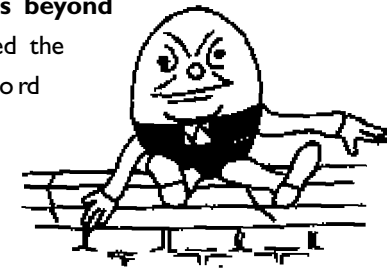
in the past are too tied to the static, financial and legal instincts of a national Church designed in Christendom. Worse, they were intended to enable it to continue in the future as it has been in the past. The tide of such assumptions has run out a long way and it is inconceivable that it will ever come in again. Hence the lively debate about what is church, which may become more radical yet. **It has long been known that the pure Church doesn't exist.**

It is a view from raw human experience: most starkly put, I recognise that pure Church does not exist because I belong to it. I am a fallen, redeemed, partially transformed being and the Church is made up of people like me. It is a view with a history: the corruption of the medieval church pushed the reactive 16th century Reformers into the dead end of the idea of the Invisible Church - a doctrine with no cash value. It is a view with a contemporary wistfulness: perhaps the most endearing English Archbishop of our century, Michael Ramsay, commented:

"I believe passionately in the One Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church and very much regret that it does not exist."

Proper Church or common church?

In musing one day with Martin Cavender of Springboard on the elusive nature of Church and our common longing to re-imagine Church and as to what she may become in the future, my mind began to freewheel. **Perhaps one way out of our obsession with Church, an escape from an overdeveloped doctrine of Church is to deliberately prune it drastically. Perhaps we have elevated Church above Salvation and Mission, giving it a whole status beyond divine intention.** We have treated the word as a Proper Noun - that the word Church should be capitalised. But maybe it is only common noun - it is one description of Christians communally or Christians in action, but not much more.



"Words mean exactly what I want them to mean."

The word “church” in Greek originally did not mean Clergy. It did not contain any thought of a sacred place of Christian worship. It did not even mean a collection of Christians. It simply meant a gathering. Thus the earliest Christians did not even use the word church and the preferred term, The Way, endures through to Acts chapter 24, although it does not then appear in the epistles.

Kevin Giles underlines this.

‘Ekklesia was the word used of the citizens of the state in assembly. It was an abstract noun that spoke of those actually gathered. When the people went home, the ekklesia ceased to exist.’

What on Earth is the Church? SPCK 1995 p24

Note the phrase abstract noun. Realism about our word roots and humility about our identity could be healthily subversive when we take ourselves too seriously. It is who we are in Christ, and how we are to co-operate with the Trinity in their mission that is crucial. Niceties about what is and what is not Church, is labouring under a burden of history that would be good to cut off our backs. Obsession with Church is not recommended.

“The apostles never regarded the Church as a thing-in-itself. Their faith was in God who had raised Jesus from the dead. That is always the nature of true belief in the Church. It is laying hold on the power of the resurrection.”

Michael Ramsay: **The Future of the Christian Church** 1970 p38

Where new kinds of Church emerge, for sound mission reasons, and they are on the journey to fulfilling the kind of criteria I have explored, why cannot warm acceptance and encouragement by the wider Church follow? It would be Christian charity, it would be repentance for our history. It might even fit better with the radical Jesus who launched a church intended to be responsive.

As long ago as 1967 the WCC report **The Church for Others** picked this up.

“The churches’ attitude towards experiments should not be one of silent toleration, especially towards experiments which are seeking to create new forms of Christian presence in terms of particular situations. A missionary church should welcome such attempts and encourage their multiplication.”

What practical action would demonstrate that a new group was valid?



- The mission risks taken were applauded in official letters and wider diocesan communication
- Such documents affirmed that cross-culture mission could lead to culturally attuned liturgies and governmental structures
- The leaders were affirmed, authorised and financially assisted.
- Succession of leadership beyond the pioneers was promised, should the work continue to flourish
- An appropriate Legal existence was found, with Mission driving the Lawyers, not vice versa
- Accountable relationships built to people in the Diocese or Deanery
- Provision of representation on Deanery structures
- Appropriately transitioned Quota arrangements

In other words an emerging church was treated like a church by the existing church.

I know cases where these bold practical steps have been taken. My plea is for this to be normal, not exceptional. We desperately need our new ventures to succeed - helped by being treated fairly and well.

What could you do now?

- Other readers have used *Encounters on the Edge* in their house groups or their staff teams. Some regularly order multiple copies for that purpose.
- You might want further individual copies to send to others; these can be ordered from our address on the back cover.
- You might know a strategic contact to whom we could send one complimentary copy of a past issue - please email, ring or write.
- This might be the first issue you've read. You may want to obtain the previous issues listed on the back cover. Issue numbers 1-4 are £2.50 each and from issue 5, copies are £3 each.
- If we can help you in any of the above ways or if you have any other queries or questions, please get in touch, as we are here to help serve your mission needs.

The Sheffield Centre - developing Church Planting & Evangelism

Our origins

In the early part of the 1990s, **Church Army** reviewed its strategy, the outcome of which was the seminal '**People to People**' strategy document, first published in 1993. The decision to establish the **Sheffield Centre** was spelt out in this document.



Its aim was to be:

- To inspire and mobilise the Church in its task of evangelism.

The Sheffield Centre now has the following main functions:

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

The Sheffield Centre can now offer the wider Church:

- Practical hands on experience in Evangelism for young people through its *Xchange* and *First Contact* initiatives -
National Youth Projects Co-ordinator: Captain David Booker
- Specialist research, consultancy and publishing on **Church Planting** issues, the fruits of which are partly made available through *Encounters on the Edge*.
The Director of the Sheffield Centre: Revd George Lings
Research Assistant Claire Woods.

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Together we are a team supporting the mission of the Church of England.