

Encounters on the Edge



“Across the Pond”

Why should a stagnant pond be the hidden key to effective church planting? How can churches, used to a mentality of “Come”, discover how to go beyond control and security? How can they set out on the vulnerable journey to “Go”.
George Lings investigates a church drawn down that path.

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ChurchArmy

The Sheffield Centre, 50 Cavendish Street, Sheffield S3 7RZ.

Tel: 0114 272 7451 Fax: 0114 279 5863

Email: g.lings@sheffieldcentre.org.uk



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A Series of Quarterly Investigations from

The Sheffield Centre

No. 6



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Blackheath conjures images of green open spaces with elegant town houses; a heath south of the river Thames east of the docks, with an Anglican church standing in splendid isolation; the bijou shops of Blackheath Village focus the bustle and energy of a lively upmarket suburb of south east London.

A snapshot of St Michael's, Blackheath Park

The 1995 parish profile tells the tale.

“St Michael (right) and All Angels serves a parish of around 3500 people in an area which spreads out east from Blackheath Village. Most of the housing is privately owned. The congregation (Electoral Roll 192, Adult normal Sunday attendance 120) is largely made up of professional people, some of whom come from surrounding parishes. About one third of the housing in the parish consists of two local authority estates dating from the late 1950's. The majority of residents are white collar workers rather than manual workers. St Michael's is not at present well represented on these estates.”



Note the last comment. “Not well represented” is Anglican code, for “we're not doing well but we're not sure how badly”. That would come clear later. The profile goes on to spell out a “church in the evangelical tradition ... influenced in quiet ways of charismatic renewal, committed to Lay Ministry”. The accepted priorities of its present Vicar Henry Whyte, who came in 1994, are prayer, conversion growth and mobilising people for ministry. Characteristically for the area, the church building began life in 1829 as a private chapel to the Cator Estate. The profile continues “It is tall elegant and light, and centrally situated in our parish.” Centrally situated is true on the map, but for whom? - It sits in amidst the upmarket housing that gave the building birth. **How was the church to cross the divide to the part of the parish separated more by culture than geography?** Henry Whyte saw that challenge.

The story of 1996-1999

Hunt the worker - Summer 1996

St Michael's very creditably opted to raise money themselves to appoint an evangelist, though they were offered a curate at Diocesan expense. **Raising over £100,000 was costly engagement with Henry Whyte's vision for evangelism and recognition of the mission call to the local authority estates.**

Conrad Parsons was appointed in 1996 for four years, to a two fold job - coordinating and developing children and young teen's work, and secondly pioneering in areas of the parish yielding little impact and few members. The latter rightly included the possibility of church planting as groups of believers and enquirers emerged on the estates. He is by temperament a pioneer, Church Army trained, with 8 years experience in Australia including a job at the national office, both practising and equipping others for evangelism. He is the author of a booklet - sadly not readily available in this country - *Understanding Evangelists*. It presents a good case for the evangelist fulfilling both reaping and training roles. There are keenly worded chapters on the difference between pastors and evangelists and a candid expose of the spiritual and moral temptations to the evangelist, with the need for support in these areas. He is a thinker as well as a pioneer, recently obtaining a Masters in Evangelism Studies. He and his wife Wendy are pictured on the right.



Overall plans - end 1996

By winter 1996 the full time staff and the PCC evangelism team had put together a report giving a view of the next four years for St Michael's. The headlines in its own words were

- 1997 Renewing** for the existing congregation and fringe members in spirituality and personal evangelism at work and home
- 1998 Reaching** areas of the parish at present under represented, and developing ministry to people at each stage of life. Plus plant a new Sunday congregation.
- 1999 Reaping** conducting a Parish Mission period and planning for the Millennium

2000 Rejoicing celebrating the Millennium and the past three years.
Plan for future

There is much to applaud in this process. The dynamic of beginning with Renewing chimes in well with best practice, across all traditions, that growth in spirituality is the springboard for growth in mission. There is some helpful recognition that sowing must precede reaping. The outward focus is one that many parishes could be pleased with. Here are evangelists at work planning to send the congregation out. I also found a welcome width in the range of events suggested behind this four-year process. Different age groups are catered for, and training accompanies exhortation. Nor is everything church centred - faith at work and parenting courses are included. The style is wider than proclamation evangelism, and includes visiting and caring, before the stage of witnessing and winning people to faith in Christ.

But it seemed to me, **the process and events are all within an assumption of "Come" evangelism.** Conversion to Christ and attendance at the present St Michael's are strongly linked. Come to church to find Christ is the paradigm. Coming to St Michael's events, devised by St Michael's people, is seen as the main way into faith. **This is culturally attuned to the existing membership and their social circle, but would it work for those from the Council estates?** The journey of discovery and diversity began.

Bring in the Consultant - Spring 1997

Revd Benny Hazlehurst works for Southwark Diocese, and in particular within North and South Greenwich Deaneries as the Estates Outreach Worker. The aims and objectives of his job are "to work with local churches, to resource and encourage them in their outreach to UPA estates."

I On the Estates,

- building and establishing networks of contacts
- enabling the local church to support people on UPAs,
- strengthening the image of the local church as a welcoming and caring community
- finding ways to communicate the Gospel which show relevance and power to local people

2 In the Churches

- assisting them to find appropriate strategies
- encouraging greater involvement in UPA estates
- equipping them to welcome all who respond and then helping them grow as Christians

He visited the parish in 1996 and again in Spring 97. Conrad and Benny planned the latter visit from the start of 1997, and advertised it to likely church members as a key discovery and training period for any wanting to be involved in Estates ministry. Benny and the PCC agreed the level of his involvement. The PCC chose to work with him over 5 weeks and about 40 people came to the three special Bridge Building evenings. They tackled the present level of involvement with the estates, why they mattered, the present strengths and weaknesses of the relationship with the Church. They examined the similarities and differences between Estate and Church people, listening and learning skills and earning the right to be heard. They began to think through practical steps of long term ministry to the Estates and recommendations of possible start points.

End of term report - May 1997

The Survey and Training culminated in a May report by Benny Hazlehurst. Its headlines were:

There are two **Local Authority Estates**; Pond Road in the north east of the parish, and Brooklands Park Estate in the South East corner of the parish and furthest from the Church building. Between them they account for 35% of households in the parish, but **only 5% of attendees from within the parish came from them - a seven-fold discontinuity.**

Both estates do not have the major social problems associated with some deprived UPA areas. They are liked by those who live there, sought after by tenants and private buyers, and generally well maintained. They are mixed in age and occupancy, dominant groups being the elderly and those with young families. Positive contact with St Michael's is mainly through the parish magazine, but this is offset by two obstacles.

- a) St Michael's building is on the wealthy Cator Estate and the local authority housing people have always felt "looked down on" by this social grouping.
- b) **There is suspicion of the Church generally and what involvement might mean.**

The report then offered a number of practical routes that could be explored, including suggestions from the floor. Specific recommendations covered the forming of a small Core Team, identification of a limited number of avenues to pursue, building a prayer base and drawing up of plans for the year ahead.

In the conclusions which gave grounds for encouragement to St Michael's, was a significant caution. **"Building up Ministry on the Estates is a long term process"**. The unfolding story will illustrate that piece of wisdom. I think **all western churches exploring more radical forms of evangelism and mission, for urban areas that have been marginalised, forgotten or neglected, will need to take on board that reality.** This is the consequence of the kind of "obstacles" identified. They will occur in individual ways in many urban parishes. Crossing the gap and building genuine trust are not short-term accomplishments.

Beneath the text

Reading the variety of suggestions made by the congregation, I was struck by two important changes in emphasis. **The largely "Come" agenda of the four-year plan was giving way to an emerging "Go" mentality,** in which events on the estate were more numerous than events back at the church. Moreover projects with the estate people, not just for the estate people were starting to surface. "Going" would mean taking on their agenda, not just persuading them to "come" and accept the church's existing agenda.

Equally significant, **the Christians were starting further back in the process.** The two estates, Brooklands and Pond Road, were being differentiated. Each was seen in its own right - rather than being lumped together - perhaps as an overall projection of the sense of failure or guilt a parish church can feel. The need to listen more, to meet people on their terms, and not to know beforehand what the outcome would finally be, began to emerge. As such the group had set off on the journey, leaving behind an evangelism operating in Christendom mode, exploring becoming cross cultural missionaries of the post Christian era. The change of perspective is undoubtedly still working through, but its shoots are visible in this document.

Them and Us?

The sense of obstacles between St Michael's and Brooklands Park and the assumption that we need to know how we shall speak before we can do so,

was illustrated back in November 1994 during an introductory visit for Conrad. A chance remark struck him, as he and the Vicar, Henry Whyte, were walking one of the Estates. Local people passed them on the paths and pavements. Henry was deep in conversation with Conrad who, whether he knew the bypassers or not, would give each an Aussie "Hi" or "G'day". Then Henry remarked "We just don't know how to reach these people". His concern was genuine but was it preventing him from doing the most obvious thing - talking to those very people who were literally walking past him? Choosing a very different colleague was an inspired way through.

It may be I make too much of the Australian angle, but as I watched a Channel 4 program, on the school days of Prince Charles, I saw another connection. The contrast between what the Prince endured at Gordonstoun and what he enjoyed at Timber Top was sharp. Those who knew him from the Australian school simply stated how they did not suffer from the British weight of history, class and tradition. These factors made it less than natural for school fellows in Britain to relate personally to those in royalty, with the unselfconscious ease the Aussies could give. Perhaps it is **a finger print of God at work, to send a classless, naturally egalitarian, Australian around the world to be a bridge person across the class and historical divides that are a barrier in the British mission landscape.** Others on the ground have come to the same conclusion. An Australian was someone secular Brits could relate to through the soap Neighbours. This openness enabled Conrad to become a key bridge maker. By accent and attitude he was not one of "them" whether church or estate. Excuse the corny line but this neighbour became a good friend.



Instincts for "come" and "control" die hard - Summer 1997

The summer saw a one-off simpler, brighter, parish newsletter. Despite the format, I consider **the message was still that Church is found at the church building.** The unspoken text read "We want you to come and we have

tried to make it nice and suitable for everybody". The map on the back was trying to be helpful. Classically the caption was "We are here". The actual truth was, we meet here, so please come here. **The western church has operated for so long in this mode that it has almost lost the ability to question its own propaganda.** It advertising is In-drag, not Out-Reach, much less, to coin some horrid but hopefully evocative words, Out-serve or Go-Reach. I suggest we realise that **the market who will come to the institutional church, even when the publicity is smartened up, is surely declining.**

The Estates team of six for Brooklands and Pond Road were formed. Reading the terms of reference now, knowing what actually happened, there is healthy overlap in many areas of proposed work. The early parts of the document envisaged church controlled projects, however church members working with community owned ventures is what actually occurred. **Control had still to give way to Partnership.** What took off was getting alongside the community's own projects and stated needs. Not only that, but **the event that most opened up the way wasn't in this paper at all.** Three cheers for the God of surprises.

Spot the "Gatekeepers": Autumn 1997

Benny's approach had solved a missing link in Conrad's knowledge. He wrote in February 98 "Another memory is of Benny's knowledge of estates and where the entry points and key "gatekeepers" might be found. This filled a large gap in my knowledge and removed my hesitancy about evangelism on estates."

This is probably a key stage in how the shift occurred - from following the church's agenda, to finding the community's pulse.

Benny Hazlehurst had visited the Chair of the Residents association and other up and coming figures in the corporate life of the community. This process of his survey of Brooklands Park and how they saw their estate and its needs, opened the door for Conrad to do the same. Tracy, Cheryl and Trevor became key contacts. Cheryl became Chair, Tracy the Secretary and Trevor the Treasurer of Brooklands Park Residents Association. Tracy was also to run the emerging Toddlers group. Members of the St Michael's Estate team were welcomed onto the committees. As Conrad later wrote "This has enabled us to work in **partnership** with the residents and work to their agenda, on needs they see". (My bold italics)

This concept of the Gatekeeper is similar to Mike Breen's idea, finding "The Person of Peace"- a reference to Luke 10. 5f I believe Mike popularised this notion first while working at All Saints Brixton Hill - another Local authority and UPA area. Endemic in this concept are two elements.



- a) Finding the people who have, by their position and attitude, the ways in to the rest of the surrounding community. They are literally at the gate of a community and can bar or open it.
- b) **Trusting that God will have been ahead of us in mission,** in preparing such people for our arrival, who by their warmth and influence will become partners with us.

The October 1997 newsletter of the Brooklands Park Residents Association may not have been on the national news, but as a mission pointer, it makes good reading. "Our thanks to Conrad Parsons, from St Michael's who has given us many hours of help and support over the last few months. Also a big thank you to team members, David and Marion, Sue and Judy. With the help of Conrad and his group, we can start with

- After school care - Fridays : Conrad and Tracy
- Mothers and Toddlers : Tracy, Sarah and Beverley
- Carol Service : Conrad

These are a few of the projects for this year. Wait chout for posters & letters that will give dates and times. It's nice to know you are on the other end of the phone when we need you Conrad - thank you"

The partnership begins to move - Winter 1997-1998

Links were also made with the **Pensioner's Club**, through committee member Betty Gear, a member of St Michael's. Conrad now visits them once a fortnight and is invited on their outings. Resistance because he "might be religious or want to talk about it" had to be gently defused, as did handling the fear expressed that they wouldn't want to be known as "people who didn't believe in God".



A BBQ and Dance was the first joint project with the Residents Association, followed by a Video evening for Teenagers - showing Independence Day on a big screen.

A Carols evening in December drew many elements together. Beginning around the physical focus of the estate - the Pond - the residents ended by serving coffee and mince pies in their "Estate Hall". Candles flickered and carols wafted through the night, as all ages came and several people told memories of Christmas and gave a one liner of what it meant to them. "I haven't been to anything like that for 40 years," said one resident.

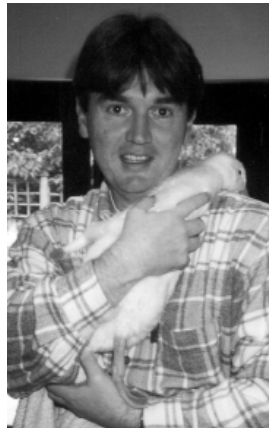


The Toddlers group started in January 98, with toys from several church families and stored on shelving for them provided from nearby Church Army Headquarters.

Conrad earned the freedom to tell his own story to people within these partnerships.

Duck evangelism!

Most people will assume that by this I mean evasive action taken by Christians to avoid evangelising, or others lying low to escape being evangelised. Conrad's story is different to both. Another key breakthrough was that he began to keep ducks - not you may say, the most obvious tactical move. But it is an example of finding a way in to our lives. **It provides a non religious way in to relationships. It matters not whether we are into cross-stitch, real ale, model railways, sailing or music** - to list the hobbies of the Sheffield Centre team I work with. **A hobby helps makes a Christian human.** Conrad - the duck keeper - actually enjoys his hobby. He gives away duck eggs with some regularity and now others have a starting point with him. "How are the ducks?" It is both a joke and a genuine concern, especially after foxes carried off the first ducks. He jokes that his next book is going to be on Duck Evangelism.



Back at the PCC

The report of St Michael's Evangelism team in January 1998 marks another positive transition. The need for relational and community sensitive models, beginning in listening and learning, and using wider gifts than evangelism are all affirmed, as is the recognition of many differing self contained estates within the parish. This last awareness is a dynamic often released in church planting. Plant well once, and it serves to reveal how many other planting opportunities and needs there may be.

Yet the deepest surprise of this story, the surrender of control to be able to enter partnership, is still to permeate this evangelistic team's instincts. The splendidly practical section of approaches has a five-fold order: prayer, getting to know the area, making contact, serving, spiritual development. It sounded good, but I looked harder at the content. Some of the evangelistic and church centred content of "contact" came too early in the process. This team had not yet earned the right to speak, which could only be won by the section that followed - "serving". **It's so hard for mission minded Christians to deny ourselves the instinct to want to speak before we have listened and loved long enough.**

A team for each estate, each finding its own strategy, was proposed. Without using the language, the details of the proposals looks to me like a half way house to planting Cell churches for each estate. Being in such a team was designated the major area of service for the person concerned. Teams were to contain all the range of gifts that make up Church - with the notable exception of worship. Cell thinkers will see tacit admission that Sunday congregation was still the hub around which all else revolved. The teams would aim to win at least a small group from each estate and help them grow in faith.

But it was precisely the half way house to planting that gave me severe tactical worries. The mind set behind such evangelism is still a view that thinks "come to church as we have made it", rather than "we will go to find, and be, church with you". The two clauses can sit as a simple contrast in one sentence, but they are worlds apart.



“Come to church” fails to separate out those estates where the cultural gap between the estate and the church is negligible, from those areas where it is too wide to be crossed with any certainty.

Of course in Blackheath there are many people whose cultural expectation of coming to Christ will include a rediscovery of Church, by which they mean attending Anglican congregational worship in a traditional building. But for others there is no such cultural experience to draw on and a suspicion, or even hostility, at doing so. For the latter, having found God at work on their estate, in the relationships with Christians who have been in partnership with them in community projects, **Church is being with those people, not moving off the estate to go to an unknown building.** I’m reminded of a quote from Bishop Jack of Sheffield:

“It is about as difficult for the average man or woman in the street to enter a church as it is for the average member of the Mother’s Union to enter a betting shop.”

I see a process by which the congregation of St Michael’s building is slowly coming to realise that St Michael’s Parish requires a greater diversity of ways of being Church. **The dynamics of church planting, which are more radical about church, than historic evangelism alone usually conceives of, were opening that up further to them.**

D-day was Pond Day - March 14 1998

Most historians agree that D-day changed World War Two. A beachhead was established in mainland Europe. Winning changed from if to when. I dare include the militaristic analogy, with the proviso that the Brooklands Park Estate people are viewed as the French, not the enemy!

Brooklands Park Estate’s architectural centrepiece was a natural pond ringed by established willows. Over the years it had been tamed by concrete borders, made safe by iron railings but kept interesting by its adoption by various wild fowl. However years of neglect brought stagnation and piles of debris and rubbish. Eye catcher turned to eye sore. For years the community had campaigned and cajoled



for drastic action to make it flow again and recover its intended glories. But insurance for a party of pond clearers could not be found and for a decade that aborted plans. Making the clearance an official church project meant St Michael’s insurance could cover it and the way was suddenly open.

It took months to wade through the tangle of bureaucracy. Plans for clearing had to be matched by Council assurances for an effective maintenance program, post clearing. The logistics of reducing water levels by opening sluice gates, prior removal of dead and dangerous trees, provision of skips for debris, sorting out clothing and food for the workers, recruitment of the army of clearers and cleaners, and how to best use them, all had to be worked out. The final green light of permissions only came two weeks before the event. Perhaps it did feel like D-day to the key workers!

March 14th dawned and the sun shone. 80 people were put to work in waders and wellies provided by gifts of the wealthy. Muck was shifted by the barrow load. It was a sight to see church people with very responsible secular jobs using their hands more than their heads, and being wet and dirty. **Such fun.** Children were directed throughout the day to nature projects and enjoyed games provided. Pensioners ran the cafe and the bar. Others alerted sleepy community members what was happening. Local TV and press covered this unique community and church partnership. A video was made for showing at a joint party planned for a fortnight later and showed to popular acclaim.

Church & Estate communities meet



There's nothing like



...across the pond.



...getting your hands dirty.

So what?

A Pond was cleared, but **a bridgehead into the community was finally made.** Let the participants' words tell the story. "Before it was them and us. Now it's just us." And "it was like the removal of a cork" The church newsletter wrote "Years of mistrust and suspicion - the them and us - between Brooklands estate and this church was literally binned, along with the mud and debris that dogged up the pond"

Conrad summed up "**The result is we're now in it together.** There's a sense of people connecting and we can build on that. It's really given people hope. The pond had been in the front of their minds for so long and now they can see it changing. It's happening now and they've been empowered to do it."

Building from the Bridgehead

The spirit saying "we did it" has overflowed into confidence to raise money to provide disabled access to the community centre. A fun day - round the pond of course - was organised by the residents and raised a £1000, an unheard of sum - almost the equivalent of a year's profit on the hall.

The teenagers group set up their own organising committee to stage monthly events. A helpline was set up for the elderly and the lonely. Brooklands Park people are doing things for others in their community. Some computers were acquired to be able to offer retraining for those returning to work. **The Pond gave hope.**

The local school, which had been rather closed to St Michael's, has now become open to visits. Around the estate there are now more conversations that include openness to Christ. Some of the gatekeepers have been to church services and freely admit to praying again. In life's crises that come, people now want to talk. **A task that had more to do with the respecting of creation, turns out to have as much to do with the process of redemption.**

Quietly waiting

Spring 98 to Spring 99 looked like a fallow year. Not much new happened. The projects born of the Pond clearing simply kept going and became more self-sustaining. A video night for teens had been a good idea, but the response didn't justify the high effort levels needed, so that withered. But it was the only casualty. The Brooklands Pond Group began to see its way forward to improve the Pond, Weir and plants, via grant aid and environmental agencies. A second

Carols Night drew 100 people. Conrad and Wendy went back to Australia for a two-month break from February - April 1999. **But fallow years are not wasted time; they can be the secret garnering of ingredients and energies that later sprout and flower.**

Springtime

In April Conrad returned with the seeds of a way forward. Informed by current Cell church thinking and the historic insights of the Three Self Church (from 19th Century CMS General Secretary Henry Venn), he envisioned a Pond Church made up of small groups on the estate, each one like a fresh pond flowing to create further ones. He sketched the idea on one side of A4 and sowed the concept to two of the gatekeepers Cheryl and Trevor. On 3rd May the Residents committee unanimously passed a vote. "We invite Conrad Parsons to start Church Services on the Estate". Only weeks later the St Michael's PCC had a Saturday planning day. The night before Conrad received a note.

"Good luck for tomorrow. You know whatever plan you come up with for your Sunday Service here at Brooklands you have our full support. I think the outline showed me is just the fresh approach that is needed. I just hope you are here to see your "pond" turn into a great "lake". Cheryl.

Conrad presented his A4 sketch and a second sheet spelt out the implications. He would need to be freed from some St Michael's responsibilities to invest the time needed in the new church. The new church was not for St Michael's dissidents or spectators. A selected group would need to be released from existing St Michael's responsibilities. **The residents rather than the culture at St Michael's would shape the new church.**

In my view, all the key bits of this missionary jigsaw had now been identified and were clearly laid out on the table. The attendant sacrifices, of time and human resource that need to be freely embraced by a sending church were also presented. The documents represent a founding charter for the Pond Church.

A new team for a new stage

The invitation to start Church meant that the Estates Team originally formed for Brooklands had done their job. It was time for congratulations but also changes. A new missionary team was needed to form the core of a cross

cultural church plant and to be trained as such. In July the Estates team looked at this proposal and possible futures; they agreed to only meet in future as necessary. Others from St Michael's have continued the serving pattern of offering their skills to the estate and Residents association, but without



becoming part of the planting team. Conrad and Wendy invited Keith and Kathryn, Patrick and Julia and family to join them. The first team were volunteers. The second were picked for

their range of gifts in ministry and their relational skills. On invitation all would modestly protest "Who me?", but meeting them casually in December 99, the quality is evident. Between them priorities in teaching, evangelism, worship and care are represented. From September they met together in the Estate Hall to talk, think, pray and learn. By October Keith voiced the growing thought, it's time we started something.

We have lift off

The front page of the October issue of the church paper celebrated developments on the Estate. The Residents Action Group for bringing people together, the Pond Group for improving the ornamental lake and the emerging third group - the Pond Church. Conrad continued:

"Someone said to me on the phone today that what we are missing these days is community spirit. These three groups each seek to reignite that spirit. Local people in partnership with their neighbours can generate great benefits for local communities...

our resources are limited but together we can do exciting things"

The Pond Church opened in November, meeting at 5 p.m. Numbers have quickly built to around 25, including the team. But attendance on these estates can be volatile. Like many new churches find, a number of children have come and provision is being made, by importing a carpet to deaden the noise, simple worship and teaching to include them, and their own activities. It is very early

days, but the breakout from the Pond beachhead has begun and an infant indigenous church is forming.

I witnessed the third carol night, gave lit chinese lanterns to entranced children, sang my way round the estate and gathered in the Hall. I reflected that this number of people would not have made it up the road to St Michael's. The style was like the music hall. Carols were gutsy. Readings were clapped, prizes of sweets went to right answers. Local lad Lee did a karioke Cliff Richard Lord's Prayer - twice I was hauled up the front and asked why I'd come from Sheffield to see this. I explained the need for new churches for people who thought old church was naff. People were glad I'd come and proud of what they has been building together. It couldn't have happen up the road in tastefully re-ordered St Michael's.



St Michael's is working through the transitions. Will Keith, a talented musician and preacher be released from mother church duties? **It is curiously easier to release people to go and work for God in Nepal, than next door.** Will the Pond Church be recognised as such by those St Michael's members used to thinking of their building, ordained ministers and full

sacramental provision? Will space and time be given to let Pond Church find its way through these issues when they need to? What will happen when Conrad and Wendy move on? Who will replace them and with what brief? Its taken four years to get this far, now is not the time to rein things back, even though unanswered questions abound. How might St Paul have felt after two lightning visits to Lystra and Iconium, after which time he appointed elders and moved on in the apostolic travels (Acts 14)?

Conrad believes Cell could be the engine for the way forward. The advantages are its strongly relational style that builds on the past four years. Its teaching emphasis is on application, minimising cultural differences in education. It is committed to multiplication - both to benefit this estate, and to spawn in due time, on other estates. It is different to the St Michael's congregational emphasis, giving both churches complementary identities.

What are the enduring pointers of the start?

The story shows "Come" thinking turning to "Go" practice.

As we go further away from Christendom and further into Postmodernity and the Post Christian era, my deepening conviction is that **the invitation "COME to Church" is on the way out, whereas the command to Christians GO**

- in order to be the Church for others - is on the way in.



The Welcoming
reaching out
Church?

It is sadly a deep instinct of the Church only to re-evangelize its fringe. David Bosch in a lecture shortly before his death, in 1992, now in a small book entitled "Believing in the Future" speaks of:

"The notion that when we discover the church is losing influence with members we had better resign ourselves to an evangelistic campaign in an attempt to redress

the balance, reclaim lost ground and re-recruit people into a cultic community that is aligned chiefly on their individual salvation and their pastoral care."

All these bullets are fired at any Come mentality. **Theological reflection buttresses intuition for a Go attitude.** A few proofs text cannot make a case, but I found this juxtaposition suggestive. I note that the most famous occurrences of Jesus saying "come" occur within his deeper "go" Strategy. The invitations to come are thus a process towards continuing in his mission of going.

- Mk 1.14 "Jesus WENT into Galilee"
- Mk 1.17 "Come follow me" - an evangelistic call
- Matt 11.28 "Come to me all who are weary" - a pastoral concern
- Matt 28.20 "GO and make disciples of all nations"

There is a restless powerful sense of movement in the New Testament. It is implicit in the Eternal Son becoming Incarnate, alluded to in the new Exodus (Luke 9.51) leading to Holy Week's events, palpable in the energy of the giving of the Spirit, lived out in the Acts story of the journey from Jerusalem to Rome and demonstrated in the change from Judaistic



sect to International cross cultural mission. This culmination should leave the church uneasy with being settled. **Go, move, change should be as normal to the Church as come, stay and stick have become. Today we speak freely of pilgrimage and journey in spirituality, but have not connected it to Church identity.** Brooklands Park is a story calling for attention by others, as St Michael's parish make this transition led by the Spirit of movement in mission.

Cross-cultural mission is complex and takes longer than we prefer.

Benny Hazlehurst pointed up the reality of the long haul in his report and urged the attitude "start with small things". Even as the Brooklands Park story stands today, Conrad is nearly through his contract. The infant Pond Church is planted on that estate. The way has been opened, but many people still need to be won for Christ and grow as his disciples. Truly indigenous church, with indigenous leaders, is still a fair way off.

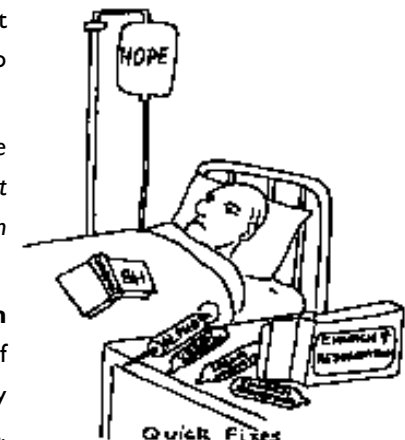
We need the grace to be glad of the rapid growth in pre-Christian parts of the world. But unadapted adoption of their models is thankless and fruitless. Our context is significantly different. Michael Riddell in *Threshold of the Future* writes:

"Never before has Church faced a post-Christian culture; one which has known and dismissed Christianity as an option. The Western Church is not facing incomprehension or opposition so much as massive indifference."

The frequent promises of Revival, offered over the last thirty years, have also created as much disillusion as hope, not least among those who now call themselves post evangelical or post charismatic Paul Roberts in Grove Worship Booklet 155 notes.

"Many Christians involved in alternative worship are weary of a spirituality that seems to be driven by a cultural obsession with the latest, newest, best."

Quick fixes in contemporary western mission are an illusion. Even the joys of the Brooklands story are not matched by how it has been on other Blackheath estates.



It is not always easy to differentiate between principle and model. What worked on Brooklands cannot simply be downloaded to another estate in the same parish. We need to see our parishes much more as patchworks rather than single mission entities. Thus parish policies that present a uniform mission plan are liable to be flawed. Moreover **Missions with outside speakers are designed as reaping events, not sowing strategies.** Any one British parish is liable to contain a mix of fields, of which only a few are ready for harvest, however sophisticated a combine harvester one hires in for the week.

The need to engage with the local community

The church planting fraternity are learning the hard way that the wider the gap (whether caused by history or culture) between church and a community it seeks to reach, the more impossible and implausible it will be to start new forms of church by putting on worship, even if made more used friendly. It will be equally insensitive and injudicious to start the process with spoken evangelism, the bridge of underlying trust is simply not built. This story underscores **how important it is to start with partnerships in community building. In Christendom mode we can still call people back to worship, in Pre Christian contexts we may start with Mission. But Post Christian societies are different from both previous contexts.** For those who accept building Community as a good post-Christian starting place, their question might be very simple. How?

Anne Morisy has done us all a favour by answering many dimensions of those questions in her book *Beyond the Good Samaritan*. The distinctive skills and approaches are well set out and 6 stages of a process devised by the Gulbenkian Foundation are given on page 84, of which I give the headlines.

- Study the situation
- Establish rapport and relationships
- Gather information, analyse needs and identify issues, reflect on responses
- Design a project moving from informal response to a structured one
- Work on the initiative, modifying procedures from experience
- Review and evaluate in the light of aims

But beneath this is another essential emerging dynamic.

The shift from Control to Partnership and service

Conrad highlighted and adopted Benny Hazlehurst's example. *"His approach to people was very good. It was honest, appropriate and out in the open... additionally, watching how residents of the estates welcomed the approach gave me confidence to continue the ministry."*

The backdrop to this change of style is the demise of Christendom. **The language of control is no longer fitting.** The clergyman providing the answers has been replaced by the politician and the scientist, the doctor and psychiatrist, and the money that spelt power is no longer present. My observation from a little involvement with larger churches, either as a staff member or as temporary consultant, is that **the stronger and more self sufficient they are, the harder it is for them to build genuine models of partnership** with the local community, because in the end of the day they do not yet need to. Such churches remain financially viable, and warrant a full time minister because of their membership size, often with an eclectic dimension. They can still imagine continuing as they are. **The shadow side of their numerical strength is an inability to be vulnerable and the avoidance of being truly local, both of which are intimately associated with the missionary principle of the Incarnation.**

Expect the evangelist to be changed by the process

Conrad was candid about it:

*"I came with the agenda of "I want to convert these people". It was a matter of us doing something to **them**. I had to learn to surrender to their agenda and work with the people on the estate."*

Merely including those on the estate in church plans could still be patronising and implying that the church had nothing to learn. He found he had to start further back; relating, commenting when asked and seeing what emerged. But to go with the flow instinct alone would sell people short. It needs matching with expectation, born of trust in the God of mission and spotting where He is ahead of us; preparing people, speaking to them through the events of life and even more supernaturally if it pleases Him. **Then evangelism becomes the task of interpreting what God is already doing,** as Philip found in conversation

with the Ethiopian Eunuch in his chariot. Re-reading Acts chapters 8 to 12 is a crucial study for seeing how God changes several evangelists, as well as conducting his own mission, with or despite their involvement. Michael Riddell in *Threshold of the Future* works this through with particular reference to Peter and Cornelius, in Acts 10 and 11.

Think new Church - not just new converts

A great deal in this story energises me. It has twists that work out and difficulties that remain which have a stamp of reality. It has taken a local church beyond the edge of what it knew. That is something to be glad of. I sense a door has been opened in this Blackheath parish and knowing how it happened can help others. But as a church planter I sensed a missing dimension which became more and more pressing as the story moved towards its future. There was barely a whiff of a church planting instinct in the otherwise excellent Hazlehurst report. The parish leadership by its own admission is strongly evangelistic.

I believe the wider church needs to love and value its evangelists far more than it has in the past. The recent report *Good News People* should further this process. But if I reflect on my experience of evangelists, and add comments I've heard from some watchers of the Church world wide, this story illustrates my hunch that **evangelists too often think of adding to the church - not of multiplying churches**. Sometimes it is even worse. As the good can be the enemy of the best, so evangelists can be more reluctant than pastors to understand or endorse church planting processes. Evangelists might ponder this story and these two contentions.

The Church is called to evangelise a pluralist and multicultural society. **If we conduct our mission by planting new kinds of church, we are more likely to reach the diversity of people and cultures we encounter than by adding to existing congregations.**

There is also wide anecdotal evidence that well-founded new churches are more effective evangelistically. They have a natural outward focus and simpler structures. Their new members still have friends who are not yet Christians. They also know that if they do not grow, they will die.

GWR



Compliments of the *Cornish Times*

The Great Western Railway built a Bridge at Saltash - over the River Tamar into Cornwall to stimulate and tap the holiday trade. I. K. Brunel beautifully designed a bridge made of two spans each with forces balanced within it. Each complete section, of many tons, was in turn taken out on

pontoons onto the river, they were anchored and then the sections laboriously jacked up hydraulically into position over many months - moving a matter of a few feet a day. Now suppose Brunel ordered that they stopped the whole process after installing the first span, a party was held and then they all went home. It would be sheer madness.

Half a bridge is nothing to celebrate.

The Great Western Reality, in mission, is a widening gap between the world and the church. Evangelism seeks to close the gap building spans from the world towards the church through the attraction and truth of Jesus. But putting all our eggs into the basket of evangelism is about as logical as building a magnificently engineered and beautifully detailed bridge that only spans half a river. The best definitions of evangelism know this. They include not only a significant and meaningful response to Christ, but also incorporation into His body or into the Christian community. Unless the church can change, move and go towards the world, the gap is not going to be closed. **Unless we change the church, we are wasting our time doing better evangelism.** Planting new kinds of churches is one cardinal way to attack the gap from both ends.

George Lings, Director, The Sheffield Centre

Cartoons by Tim Sharp: Deal

April 2000

What could you do now?

- 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 Claire Woods at our address.
- You might know a strategic contact to whom we should send a complimentary copy - 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. 1999 copies are £2.50 each. 2000 copies are £3 each.
- In any case 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.

Our aim is:

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

The Sheffield Centre has the following functions:

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

The Sheffield Centre can 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: Revd George Lings

Research Assistant and PA: Miss Claire Woods.

Please contact us at the Sheffield Centre if we can be of assistance:

Phone: 0114 272 7451 **Fax:** 0114 279 5863

Email: g.lings@sheffieldcentre.org.uk
c.woods@sheffieldcentre.org.uk
d.booker@sheffieldcentre.org.uk

Address: The Sheffield Centre, 50 Cavendish Street, Sheffield S3 7RZ

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