

## *Thame or Wild?*

A historic Oxfordshire town conjures tame images: middle England, middle church, and middle class. But any history that tells of trebled membership, principled diversification and the creation of further congregations has lessons to teach us. What did they get right? What are they still learning? What is in it for others? **George Lings went to find out.**

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## Encounters on the Edge

A Series of Quarterly Investigations from

**The Sheffield Centre**

### No. 8



## *Thame or Wild?*

Encounters on the Edge

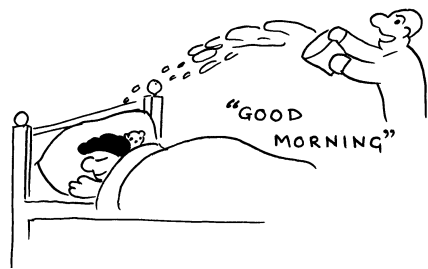
Encounters on the Edge

# Thame or Wild?

When Chris Neal became Vicar of St Mary Thame, the Electoral Roll was a comfortable 186 and the church financially solvent. In 14 years the congregation has steadily grown at some 10% per year and now in the year 2000 stands at 470. By English Anglican standards that is wild growth. What was one congregation is now four. It is hard to resist the thought that they must have done something right.

But why take readers of *Encounters on the Edge* to an Oxfordshire market town with ancient roots - such an epitome of middle England, and why learn from, what observers could label, a success story from middle sized resources? This cannot be the story of a heroic trek, by tiny band of explorers, pushing the boundaries of known paths across a mission desert.

I believe the edge is always relative to where we stand. For a beginner skier to venture beyond the nursery slopes may feel as great an adventure, as for a Slovenian ski instructor to set the new world record for skiing down Mount Everest. I also suspect that church progress is more often evolutionary than revolutionary. The 1999 issues of *Encounters on the Edge* deliberately expose the Church to thought provoking alternative starting points, necessary to minister to those light years away from church attendance or orthodox



Christian conviction. We can be fired up by radical re-imagining of church. It is the wake up call of a cold bucket of water. Later issues such as no 6, "Across the Pond", show a local church journeying from

out of its safe haven in ways that other parishes could emulate if they chose. This story has a similar hope. It describes and analyses what is within reach, though currently on the edge of the experience of most parishes.

## Historic but not static

Thame (*below*) was established as the administrative centre for the endowed lands of the Bishop of Dorchester in AD 635 as part of the Diocese of Lincoln. It holds a charter for the Tuesday weekly market along its wide streets, dating back to 1215. Today house prices prevent the return of recent graduates as first time buyers, but it attracts those moving out from more expensive towns nearer to London. The Council estate is now partly owner-occupier and there are two small industrial estates. At the north end of the High Street, almost guarding the river crossing, stands St Mary's. Parts of the present church building date from 1240. Since then the church has undergone many additions; changes which each generation deemed improvements.

## The re-ordering: 1986-1991

Chris Neal arrived in 1986, recruited by the Peache Trustees in general and Canon Bryan Green in particular, who lived in Thame. "Just come and have a look" was the softly softly road that began a calling. He inherited a church where some members were sensing it was time to move forward in mission and liturgy. The presenting need was the church interior. To the newcomer it was cold and threatening. Dark heavy pews were not so much occupied as defended and heads were baked by overhead gas appliances while feet froze on solid floors.

Though money had become available for redevelopment, prayer was the foundation for rebuilding church life. From the outset Chris invited anyone to join him at 8 pm on a Wednesday evening in church. In the first week 20



came. Fuelled by bible teaching and a couple of courses on the ministries of pastoral care and spirituality, despite frozen feet in winter, a spiritual greenhouse was erected. People caught the vision and a process called *Plans that Care* evolved. From this in 1991 came a revived nave; complete with slate floor; under floor heating, Allan organ, sensitive uplighting, lime washed walls, sound system, kitchen and moveable ash wood chairs arranged in arcs. This became the context surrounding the relocated Jacobean communion table. As the Diocesan newspaper put it “the architect has provided a beautiful, light, versatile space in which to worship and pray.”



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With such investment and achievement it would have been natural to build up the main congregation re-entering its home yet, even before then, other processes and events were beginning to pull in other directions. Under the 1988 vision statement “*Learning to be God’s people for God’s world*”, types and styles of worship had widened and the mission and ministry calling of the whole people of God had been identified, all of which the building was re-ordered to serve. Beyond that envelope, a youth worker had been appointed, House Groups grown and work at Barley Hill begun. To understand the last factor takes a map of Thame. The town is elliptical in shape, with St Mary’s at the NW end of the egg, though it is the only Anglican parish. On the North East side is the Lea Park Estate, built on Barley Hill in the 60’s and 70’s. The road pattern makes it separate to the historic part of the town.

Geographically and culturally it was cut off from St Mary’s. The occasional visitor could be seen lurking nervously in the churchyard and thinking better of entering. In 1990 a monthly Family Service began in the Barley Hill Junior School led by Revd Tina Stirling. All these transitions provoked bolder response

### The watershed: 1992-95

*The way forward* - an Autumn 1992 strategy document to all church members from Chris Neal - responded to the three fold growth of the town population, and overcrowding at Church. This document is the birthright of nearly all that has followed.

- It affirmed ministry without clergy/lay divisions, urging the discovery and deployment of gifts, which was crucial in creating more congregations.
- The need was put for effective pastoral care and disciple making, instead of the paucity and poverty of existing small group participation, but before Cell concepts or language were available.
- The spectrum of worship was charted, refuting any style as an end in itself and affirming the traditional, the charismatic, the creative and reflective, with question marks about what truly includes youth and children.
- It also raised the Seeker agenda, showing deep familiarity with that philosophy without using that jargon, and whether much worship falls between the stool of being accessible to the outsider and nourishing to the insider.
- It proposed that monthly Barley Hill services should go weekly. This concurs with the work of John Clarke in *Evangelism That Really Works* who shows beyond doubt that monthly events have an inbuilt glass ceiling, making further growth difficult. Barley Hill would be a “satellite congregation” with a Leadership Team, musicians, children’s workers, and group leaders.
- Searching questions were asked about the scope and style of evangelism and mission, recognising that organisation in these areas can be a cover for a fairly lukewarm reaction to them by many church members and that the church can be ill-equipped to receive new converts or disciple them.
- It saw Thame provided nothing for youth. This emerged as a fresh pre Christian mission field, with church based youth work doing little to address these issues.
- All these dimensions of the way forward would need the logistical support of good use of buildings, provision of further ones, together with communication to the wider church family and finance to enable steps forward.

I dwell on its content because of its prophetic significance. Its questions are all apt, its instincts honed, but its proposals modest and the long-term practical future unknown. Why was it so ahead of its time ?

### Any previous convictions ?

I wondered humanly speaking how the paper came to be written. Chris Neal (right) happily admits to being a cradle Anglican, with a call to ordination by the age of 15. Having then trained at an evangelical college, it was instinctive to him to want the church to be in mission mode but also to **affirm inherited mode**. Thus rather than force them together he could live with both side by side, each doing its work with different groups. This route was especially necessary as St Mary's is the only parish and to fail to provide for a spectrum of needs would be to unchurch existing members. Anglicanism is not always good at seeking new members but it is loath to lose existing ones.



A related instinct is a desire for **partnership** with the Diocese. Some incumbents of growing churches see the Diocese as the enemy. I guess there are faults on both sides but such conflict can hinder growth. Chris has ensured that the Diocese has never been surprised by what starts in Thame, by sending a steady stream of information at key points to Bishop Anthony of Dorchester. **Enduring multiplication of**

**churches cannot be a wildcat activity.** Not least because staffing succession and increase of staff needs the willing consent of a Diocese.

An Anglican often has an **unerring instinct for the untidy**. Paul Bayes Vicar of Totton leads another parish with a variety of congregations including one cell church. To him and his paper *All Saints everywhere* I am indebted for an apt quote from Archbishop Michael Ramsay.



*"The Anglican church's credentials are its incompleteness, with tension and travail in its soul. It is clumsy and untidy, it baffles neatness and logic."*

The Gospel and the Catholic Church : Longmans 1956 p 220



**"Your starter for ten: What is Anglicanism?"**

Chris smilingly confesses a fondness for the untidy and the unfinished. For him it is the obvious expression of the Christian life and mission being a pilgrimage. The church on the move never has the luxury to unpack all its cases and arrange all its belongings. Abraham and Moses were called into camping, out of plush real estate. I have seldom seen a tent with knick knacks; portability militates against putting down roots and acquiring junk. Jesus remarked the Son of Man had nowhere to lay his head and the Spirit is a well documented disturber of ecclesiastical peace. Let the church be historic but never static.

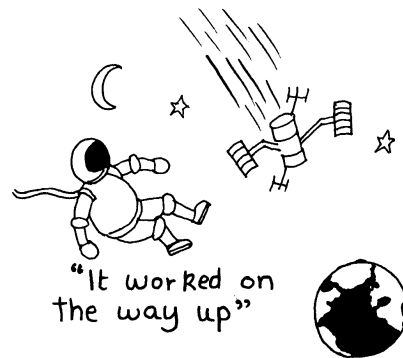
As with many students before, Chris had to write essays. In 1968 one title was **"What is the Church?"** This revealed to him he had never thought about it. Like being English, it was simply assumed one knew, without it ever being asked. Jeremy Paxton in his book *The English - A Portrait of a People* draws out the depth of confusion and lack of substance, now the question "What is English?" is being asked in multicultural, post-empire, post-devolution Britain. The Church of England has brilliantly encultured itself as part of the English scene. I suspect part of our present confusion is related to national heart searching. Curiously it is only since moving into Church Planting research, training and consulting that I have had to get my head around the topic as Encounters on the Edge no.5 *Joining the Club or Changing the Rules* indicates. It is not so surprising that where Evangelicals and Charismatics have no passion for what the Church is, that plants from that tradition fail to mature. A missionary function is a good start, but not an adequate end. Colin Buchanan's *Is the Church of England Biblical?* might be a worthwhile investment for planters.

For the essay Chris read Bishop John Robinson's *The Body*. From then on, beginning further services or starting congregations, could not be separated from **forming churches** - visible bodies of Christ. Thus in conversation he

remarked “Every local congregation is, I believe, the body of Christ called to engage with the local community in which it is set”. So theological conviction, as well as emerging best practice in planting, set the tone for what these congregations in the Thame Valley Team are, and how they are set up. Each has leaders, shared leadership, pastoral and discipleship structures, and is moving to having governing bodies. He wrote to me in 1999. “we now see the three congregations meeting at St Mary’s as free standing units with their own integrity and ministry teams.” I applaud this and wish that the entire church planting fraternity: sending churches, sent churches and supporting dioceses, would listen. Failure to think in this way has crippled some of the previous generation of plants. I believe the reasons are not honourable and have more to do with fear of independence, and loss of control or power. Controlling parents are likely to have rebellious or capitulating teenagers, and though both have responsibility for their stances, I suspect the parent carries the greater weight.

Soon Bryan Green became an Honorary Curate. To him is due an aphorism that became a guiding principle over allowing diversity of worship expression. “Chris, **don’t ask them to mix their drinks**”. It ties in with the observation of an American pastor who deliberately multiplied different congregations. “I am amazed at the power of the worship style to define the character of the congregation attending”. Any who doubt this might consider the formidable resilience of the BCP 8.00 a.m. communion following, which has withstood closure and merger for decades.

Apparently I had a small part in the story. In 1992 Chris attended a day I gave to Oxford Diocesan would-be church planters, having freshly returned from sabbatical in New Zealand. A presentation (still available - see end notes) urged the giving of autonomy to plants, because they are churches and because evidence showed failure to do this led to immaturity and even closure. Reflecting on the language used to describe plants, I quipped that sending out churches called “satellite” was



strange for the only certainty was that **what goes up must come down**. The language of satellite in Thame was binned and has not reappeared. Barley Hill, with a prepared team of 12 as part of 30 sent out, launched at May Bank holiday 93 under the leadership of Revd John Simmons and grew over 3 years to some 50-60 adults.



“Asleep for 100 years?  
I don't believe it”

Chris believes **there is hope**. For him the **Church of England is a stirring giant**, by God’s grace waking up to the call of evangelism and mission, even though we confess it may only be out of necessity. His travels in the wider church make him more hopeful of change in the system than in the prior quarter of a century. Hope is a commodity not to be pedalled glibly, or worse in denial of reality. I took on board

another remark; “The saddest feature that I have seen at the present day has been the discouragement of some Christian workers who carry the real burden of transition and are not able to see the better side.” Several Church Plant practitioners and consultants have known the recurring disappointment of seeing lessons ignored, vision squelched and young churches stifled. The present picture seems a curate’s egg, I hope he is right that improvement beckons.

Prior convictions shape present practice. Good planting is listening to God, spotting the need or opening, deciding which models are most appropriate, gathering and training the resources, sending them out in the best way and empowering them to mature. But all of this is coloured by what we believe about Church. I am so glad so much had been laid down in him, before any structures in Thame appeared. Values will tell and Chris believes that if the church is right then evangelism will naturally follow.

### The Flowering: 1995 - 2000

Feb 1995 saw them publish *Towards 2000*. Like its predecessor in ‘92, it sketched a mission context, rejoiced in steps forward and posed the next strategic challenges. It embodied a call for the church to move from seeing evangelism as an extra, to seeing evangelism as integral. In particular it

suggested two new congregations within St Mary’s on a Sunday morning. One was envisaged as more Seeker friendly, “an outreach to those not used to church” based upon the encouragement from a less frequent evening event *Sunday Live*, the second “would maintain a more traditional Anglican feeling”. Both would be fully congregations, not simply services.

The paper also called for succession of leadership at Barley Hill now the pioneer had moved on. Some plants can seek too much self-sufficiency, become inward facing and congregationalist in ecclesiology, cutting themselves off from belonging to the Church Catholic. The paper argued that the leader should be from outside as a healthy balance and a reminder of belonging to the wider church. But all ministry in all the plants should be structured to ensure stable and mature congregations and disciples. Providing eucharistic cover was not the essence, but “leadership with time to teach, preach, pastor, lead and space to seek God’s guidance for the future”. This led to discussions with the Diocese about St Mary’s becoming a Team Ministry.

The third strand of the 1995 paper put the case for joint renovation and extension of historic barns adjacent to St Mary’s which were ideal for joint community and church use. **The Thame Barns Centre** is not a plant, but it is a significant partnership with the local community, with multi-purpose use and keeps



the wider dimension of mission engagement to the whole town, in the forefront of church life. Jointly owned by town and church, the church offices are rented there and it provides meeting rooms mid week and Sunday.

By 1998, the two St Mary’s morning plants, *Daybreak* and *Open House* had become established with a third congregation *Evening Celebration*. Team Ministry status proved more complicated but was resolved by a plan incorporating outlying villages. A further development to abet and release this mushrooming

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### Thame Sunday

Note the diversity and scope.

Time & Name	Type	A.S.A.	Style	Generation
0800 Service	Communion adults	15-20	Book of Common Prayer & short sermon	Builder / Boomer
0915 Daybreak	Multiple Congregation	125 adults 20+ kids	Anglican / Celtic & Seeker touches. Full Service sheet	Builder & some Boomer
1100 Open House	Multiple Congregation	130 adults 50+ kids	Informal/ Eclectic / Seeker Service sheet	Young Families
1030 Barley Hill	Church Plant	50-60 adults 15+ kids	Informal / OHP	Boomer and few builder
1600 Quiet Service	Service	15-20 adults	Taize/ Celtic - reflective/ meditative	All ages
1830 Evening Celebration	Part Multiple Congregation	80-110 adults 20 youth	Charismatic, OHP and printed songs.	All ages

I was only able to visit some congregations was encouraged by all of them and impressed by some.

### Daybreak

This is a well-led superb example of good practice in living with multiple congregations. This one knows its identity, enjoys being itself, has evolved its own language and jokes, cares for its own but welcomes others, and has its own leader who is in tune with the people. It could have been assumed to be the staid member of the evolving family of congregations, so that isn’t bad going.

Its worship was the shop window for this identity. Arriving in good time, I was thrice welcomed over the next ten minutes by those who knew how to be

inclusive without being intrusive. The stature of the outside of St Mary's has the lofty grandeur of a young abbey, but intimate surprise within, arising from the integrity of a well re-ordered parish church. The building is open, light, uplifting, restful, intriguing, flexible, and valued.

The worship and building resonated in deep harmony. Both carried historic authority with a light personalised touch. An unannounced choral introit from a transept "When Morning Gilds the Skies" set the tone. If good liturgy is like a



culinary art then the team vicar designate, Ian Adams (left), has a chef's training and creative gifts but a family cook's knowledge of what the kids like. The style draws at least from Anglican ASB, Anglican Common Worship, Celtic liturgical and music sources and is garnished with Seeker instincts, to communicate with the visitor and explorer. The specially devised service booklet was clear, uncluttered and lifted by occasional clipart. Early on "In Focus" proved to be when the theme of the

day was vividly introduced so that all ages could sample the theme. Later "Daybreak Community news" was as interesting in content, as this better dynamic equivalence of "the notices" suggested. The hymns and prayers played fair with the incongruous mixture of human experience - joy and pain woven fine. The glory of God and the frailty of human life danced together; the protest "why?" and the dog-like trust that endures, weaved through prepared word and informal comment. How many clergy and congregations would be open with each other about the potentially serious illness of his wife? The quality of participation in readings, intercessions, and dramatic dialogue was consistently high and movingly honest. These people knew when and how to start and stop. Nothing was laboured and everything was allowed to make its own point. I'd love to know how they were trained. Beneath the apparently effortless excellence it was obvious to me that this man loves his people, they him and together they enjoy being with God.

I sat in my pew thinking that thousands of Anglican parishes up and down the country could take a lesson from such unpretentious quality. If this was normal, then many places would turn from plateau or decline into growth.. But this congregation is not just a worship option. It is fully congregational church. For example 75 out of 125 adults are in Daybreak small groups. But clear identity is not straying into independence. Already a language has been coined for the wider church that share the building - referred to informally as *The St Mary's Community*. There is healthy awareness of being part of a larger expression of Church. As it happens they would all come together for a joint harvest service the following week.

### Barley Hill

Imagine *Daybreak* as a yacht, sailing with a favourable the wind, then *Barley Hill* is like a dinghy, tacking in shifting strong winds with an inexperienced crew.

In fairness the climate is more adverse. The junior school hall building is adequate but not uplifting. Behind the Baptist style central lectern, was a huge



picture painted by pupil, in visual conflict with the service leader and preacher. It appeared to be of a singularly hairy cricketer - it was high on entertainment or distraction, but low on inspiration. The caretaker operates a fierce 12.15pm shut down policy, engendering nervous clock watching.

The context is tough. The church is in interregnum, following an unplanned short stay by the previous post holder. As a casual, though probably acute visitor, I picked up uncertainty rather than familiarity with a house style, a group working hard to stand still and a lay leadership doubting the commitment of the rest of the membership. In such a context, exhortation can come over as projection of guilt.

The layout was only functional. With two side aisles and blocks of chairs, there were no spare ones to assist the newcomer or latecomer. The building has no passing trade, nor bold external advertisement, so I guess no casual newcomer has been seen in years. There is no welcoming system, but in a group of 50, it was sad that no one spoke to me (except Chris the Rector who popped in unannounced) or initiated conversation afterwards. The group seemed wrapped in its internal agendas and I can guess why. The language of the informal service was not seeker targeted and too full of evangelical cliché. We “just” did many things, “shared a word” and rejoiced in “the blood”. I was relieved the local vegetarian agnostic stayed at home that morning.

I remember a stage in bringing up our family when one of the children clearly needed to move up to the next level of schooling; there was frustration, conflict and confused motivation. It was not an easy year, but then life took off again. Being a Church Plant is no more a guarantee of being a healthy church, than being a child is a guarantee of being a healthy human being. Children have vigour, natural curiosity and zest, but they too can become ill, and if they do, their conditions can degenerate alarmingly rapidly and their resilience can be limited.

I salute Barley Hill that they have kept going. I was glad to see lay ministry exercised. I am sure it is better for a church to be on Barley Hill than to run home to mother at St Mary’s. I sense there is considerable potential, but it will probably need wise leadership that can assess the width of traditions, current conflicts in values and then have the strength to bring a vision that unifies and prioritises. I rejoice that a leader will be welcomed in November and wish them all well as they tackle the issues together.

### Evening Celebration

A crowd of all ages piled into St Mary’s for this gathering that has a number of functions. For 20-30 members it is their congregation. For the youth group it is an option some choose to attend, followed by a chill out time over coffee. Principally they meet mid-week in cells, which in time will become peer led. For most others it is spiritual resourcing and relaxed celebrating. These are the lay teams working in other congregations and in the villages. As such it works as a Minster to their rural parishes.

The style was more overtly Charismatic, both in choice and style of song. The Wimber-like pattern of worship block, message and response was simple and coherent. There was some space for the spontaneous and contributions from the floor, but I sensed there is more to learn about enabling those gifts. The flexible seating could be rearranged to be more strongly communal in feel, more time could be given before embarking on the next front-led item and more ease about periods of silence communicated, as gestation for stirrings of the Spirit among his people. The event is also an opportunity for the values and vision to be refreshed. Chris Neal spoke on the rhythms and marks of Christian community. I have changed my mind, since leaving parish ministry, about how much more necessary it is to promote values before people. In a parish with diverse multiple expression of its life, common core values are a glue that hold the intricate, even delicate, organism together. It was values, or previous convictions, translated into action, that took Thame this far.

### Far out

Acute readers of the congregations table will note the relative absence of Gen Xers. That’s true in the town too because of job shortages and house prices. But how do they make contact with those who are there from this gap?

It is dreadfully bald, rather dull, and fearfully modernist, to define *Holy Unsuitable* as “a non threatening Church sponsored pre-evangelistic live music-

comedy-and-video outreach event for Gen Xers within the church to use in their personal witness to unchurched friends”. But that’s how Si and Jim (left), its founders writers and Christian equivalent of TV comedians *Vic and Bob* put it - but it was for the PCC. If the video I saw, ruthlessly





ragging OTT Christians and Cliff Richard into the bargain, is anything to go by then it is a riot, and totally non cheesy. Held till now at Racquets - the squash club - drawing 60-90, only a few times a year, it shows Christians are normal - they drink and have fun. They are able to relax, laugh at themselves and the ridiculous things religion does. It takes vast amounts of preparation time, some PCC dosh and loads of borrowed equipment. It sounds quite anarchic but is totally loyal to the mission vision. Its importance is the recognition of how far out we must go to make genuine friendships with Gen Xers. They will be looking suspiciously for the hidden price tag or the adman's line. It's not there in *Holy Unsuitable* because real friendship is the agenda. That becomes, in time, the bridge across which traffic in serious issues, can cross.

### Unity beyond diversity ?

The cautious see diversity as a precursor to division. What is to stop Thame going wild in the wrong sense and exploding into worship factions, personality cults or class distinctions? I do not believe that organisation or legislation are key, they prevent but do not motivate. The quality of relationships across a **united staff leadership** will be key. It is not law but grace that enables me to be loved and to love. Tensions, difficult decisions, sacrifices and compromises will arise. How the staff members are with each other, how they love each other as fellow disciples, how they balance the competing claims of love and truth will sort how these pressures are resolved. Their vulnerability about their own weakness and valuing of each other's strengths will assist them. Already a pattern of **matrix leadership** is evident. A congregation leader also has responsibility for a slice of the life across the congregations. One develops prayer and spirituality, another the development of pastoral care, another training. By this, their own specialism is nurtured and a commonality of values transmitted. Thus one vision is kept, the



discernment of which is the task of them all, but most keenly sought by the overall leader.

An apt and biblical analogy of the church's unity is the body. But I reflect that effective unity of my own body is not at its zenith when my foot and my head are in same place. I am not a yoga expert. I need my feet on the ground and my head 6 foot above them, to see where to go. Unity is not conferred by proximity or similarity. I'm glad my face looks better than my feet. (My friends can tell me different.) Unity is in the common purpose of my feet and my head, delivered through the brain and nervous system. Then I can stand, run or climb. So the unity of the leadership must be matched by quality of **communication** to the rest of the body. The 1992, '95 '97 and '98 documents are exemplary. It may be time for another one.

What is **the role of the Team Rector**, not least because he now has considerable Diocesan roles? For the town of Thame he is in effect its Bishop with his Presbyters around him, like the early Bishop of a small Turkish town. He has oversight (episcopate) of them. They oversee their ministry teams and on out to the congregations. He is the focus of unity, the guardian of the vision and the spearhead of mission. Steven Croft, Warden of Cranmer Hall in *Ministry in Three Dimensions* highlights the episcopate roles as vision, unity and transformation, enabling the ministry of others, watching over others and yourself. This is not to say that those with this responsibility totally forego diaconal attitudes or presbyteral ministry. These are the foundation on which the third level rests. I hope the wider Church will be relaxed about the episcopal functions exercised by large church leaders and rejoice that this development is effective delegation by the technically consecrated, of their valuable envisioning role.

The Anglican cocktail tittle has a strong dash of worship. It is assumed that local unity is to be expressed in common acts of worship. The Church Growth literature on sizes colludes with this. Celebrations are interpreted as festive, ebullient worship. Only this year I saw for the first time that unity need not be expressed through worship. Church is also **community** and one of its archetypal expressions is eating together and having fun. It was a

conference for Asian Christians that opened that insight. In a diversity that included those from Hindu, Sikh, Muslim and Buddhist backgrounds, the meal was their instinctive celebration. Eating is deep stuff of community. From a passover perspective, why have we allowed worship to hijack the word celebration and dislocate it from a meal and artificially sacralise it?

My mind constantly thinks in the three fold dimensions of worship, community and **mission**. This church is some way down the road of expressing unity through common commitment to mission. I hear other stories of churches across towns learning to value each other by common cause in mission. We have seen it makes sense. Why should this not be true for a family of congregations? Their prayer can be in common, some events may be shared, those who respond may choose what leads them on best. Their purpose is united, not only with each other, but also with the Christ who prayed for a unity so that the world might believe. Mission and unity are old friends. **Unity is not sole prerogative of worship.**

### Recent learning

You might think this church has nothing more to learn. The instant riposte of their leaders is robust denial. From 1998 they have been trying to grapple with a call to Cell Church values. Cell is simple to understand (if you get it) but not simple to implement in an existing church. Here it is rightly seen as retaining the elegant edifice of the previous 12 years and rebuilding the entire work from its foundations. With a building that calls for consummate skill, considerable patience and immaculate planning, so that the pile does not come down around your ears - it's not much different with people.

I use this analogy because Thame has opted for **Meta-Church** not pure Cell Church. The former places equal value on the Church as congregation as it does on cell. Bill Beckham is a leading advocate of Meta-Church, in his book *The Second Reformation*. The overall thesis is that just as a bird needs two wings to fly, so the Church has equal need to express its life through large and small groupings. Sadly the small wing atrophied after Constantine, was not rediscovered at the Reformation, and is only recently recovering. I cannot outline the invaluable essence of Cell here. Readers can consult Encounters

on the Edge no 3 - *Has Church Reached its Cell Buy Date?* and the resources listed at the back of that volume.

The point is that Cell, of all new ways of being church, most freely combines with many other forms. Thus it always needs to be kept in mind as part of the overall re-imagining of church occurring in this country.

My understanding is that Beckham is also the champion of the evolutionary change to Cell values and practice, known as **prototyping**. It arises from a conviction that Cell is caught more than taught. Discipleship is following in practice, not practising following. So the leaders who have caught the values find those who share them. They live Cell together and continue reaching out to the rest of the church, finding and apprenticing members, releasing and supporting a widening ripple of groups. Thame has applauded that method, but with hindsight, rushed ahead of it. Starting in 1998, by 2000 all its small groups are now retitled **HomeBases, Cell being seen as too clinical, or custodial**, a term. I like the term but fear that re-badging the groups has not given them a heart transplant. Even as I visited the staff in October 2000 this whole area was being re-assessed and vision recast among them. The hope is to identify the groups who have understood the radical call of Cell - to discipleship and fresh disciple making. They will, in effect, be fast tracked and the principle of prototyping applied through them. They contain the leaven for the lump of Thame. This process will be time and resource hungry and Chris Neal accepts that the Church may appear to plateau for a time before this DNA is fixed, and courses through the blood of the Thame Valley churches. When it does, the vision is that clusters of cells, organically grown from a



common stock will form yet further congregations. This is their best hope of breaking the 500 membership barrier which foils most English churches. 500+ also takes a certain kind of leader, but this “bishop” is, I think, equipped and called for the task of foundational leadership.

## Why do new services work?

One story may not convince a reader, but what if it were a proven track record? Charles Arn is author of *How To Start a New Service* and president of Church Growth Inc. Monrovia California. Five years of research suggests that in 80% of cases, when churches began a differently styled worship service, their overall attendance increased by at least 10%. If this pattern is broadly transferable to the UK then, if this one strategy alone were adopted by half of the churches in this country, national numerical decline would be reversed.

In the January 1999 issue of *Ministry* Arn highlighted seven reasons for starting a service. A summary appeared in Peter Brierley’s September 1999 issue of *Quadrant*. I have re-titled the headings in the light of the content and added commentary.

### 1 To remotivate the church to reach those outside its walls.

Just as with church planting, starting a new service can evoke a strong sense of mission and group spirit, focussing on whom the new service is for. Here too is a chance for members to invite friends to an event in which they have confidence. It provides the opportunity to remove the cultural churchy wrapping, cloaking the good news of Christ, forcing the question, “what is the form and what is the essence of church?” These convictions fired the Seeker movement, and led to that form of multiple congregation strategy. Depending on who they are trying to attract, seeker events and believers services may be more or less differentiated. The Thame churches deliberately offer a variety of events and services across that spectrum.

### 2 Providing choice for existing Christians

Pragmatically providing for different liturgical options, for children and for a range of music styles will attract more people, because the church that says

“take it or leave it” will exclude many. This issue is controversial. Debate is in full swing over whether this is but marrying the spirit of the age - the value of choice - in an intentionally insatiable, market driven economy. Or is it moving with the recovery of diversity, a positive fruit of popular post-modern culture, allied to the Pauline mission tactic (1 Cor 9) of conscious adaptation to diverse cultures for principled mission ends?

### 3 One service cannot attract different kinds of people

Arn takes for granted that worship is still the main shop window of the church. He knows that whether newcomers stay, depends on their impression of the quality of the Sunday experience. In the US, outside the inner cities and among the urban poor, this probably holds good and is the mental address of much of the UK church. He quotes James White

*“The truth is no worship is culturally neutral no single service can be all things to all people. Consequently it is important to ask the question, ‘who finds our present service attractive?’”*

Opening the Front Door: Worship and Church Growth: Convention Press 1992.

Arn goes further: “Most church services appeal to one, and generally one, of the following six groups”.

	Christian	Seeker
Busters/ Gen X born 1964 - 82		
Boomers born 1946-64		
Builders born pre 1946		

Some will see generational apartheid writ large. They may comment with justification that attitude and age are not co-terminous. A Sunday in Thame attending as many services as possible confirms to me that different

generations do worship together, but also that different groups predominate, suggesting some merit in Arn's statement.

I believe he helpfully goes on to identify a common tactical error. In order to broaden the generational or spirituality choices in an existing service, some churches deliberately extend the range of what is put into the one service. The outcome does not provide something that everybody can like, but the very reverse; every service contains something everybody does not like. In the name of unity, a uniformity, or form of highest common factor, is imposed which lacks conviction, integrity and identity. With regret, I pillory such provision as undercooked stew: stringy meat and manky vegetables swimming in thin gravy.



I realise too that those bearing Cell Church or Base Community convictions and those engaged in mission through community development are taking a lead to refute Arn's worship based assumption. They are making a radical reappraisal of what church is, and they see that the non churched, post Christian, surrounding community has no use for Sunday church as it is.

#### 4 To break out of the cycle of institutionalisation

He observes the older a church gets in decades after its founding, the less likely it is to share the passions of the founder. But the "man, movement, monument" trend can be bucked by planned or fortuitous interventions. While change of staff, external consultancy, and denominational intervention can bring this, so can relocation, church planting and beginning new services.

#### 5 To allow for change while keeping the familiar

In contemplating change there may be three options. To redesign the one event, to increase variety within that event and to offer clear choices about future diverse events. Arn points up that the danger of the first two routes is the alienation of as many as are attracted. He posits a principle of innovation;

"Change through addition will be more successful than change through substitution". Clearly in 1980 the Church of England opted for the third route in publishing the ASB. It is curious that this style of change and its explicit diversity, which was publicly modelled nationally, is not always embraced without fear locally.

#### 6 To bring back the lapsed

It has become clear from half way through the nineties that attendance patterns are changing. In that context, more congregation members are not present on any given Sunday than before. Arn found that increasing the range of services, reduced those absent from worship by about a third. He also notes that people who have dropped out, often unintentionally, after six months find it too embarrassing to consider returning. However the provision of a fresh service, or a church plant, is a classic opportunity for the lapsed to return, either under cover of everybody being new, or as a deliberate choice of giving it a second chance. Church Planting research in the UK suggests the return of the lapsed is one important source of new members.

#### 7 To help the denomination survive

Arn affirms the view that starting new congregations is a denomination's most important activity for assuring its future. He asserts that starting new services is the second best strategy because they achieve many of the same goals and find the same benefits. The Brierley summary, working from his research showing the decline in the birth of UK congregational plants since 1995, reverses that order. My own guess is that church planting has diversified into a number of streams, some of which are not all called plants; including youth congregations, alternative worship events and multiple congregations. When all those are added in, I wonder whether decline has occurred. I agree with those concerned that too many plants were not as healthy as they should have been, that as they matured too often their growth was stunted by structural strictures and too many were too similar to the churches that sent them out. But nevertheless both new churches and new services have helped keep the Church of England aiming at being a Church for England.

## Not finally

The Thame story illustrates very well that merely creating more congregations is not a final solution. It does allow a diversity that draws and holds more people. It has created a greater mission resource that can tackle further challenges. It is providing a framework in which many more of the laity can exercise ministry - the gifts of God for the people of God. But multiple congregations is a strategy that brings numerical growth yet only redefines some bigger questions of what is Church, to which Cell makes an enormous contribution. Planting congregations also provokes the issues of distribution of staffing and our dependence on stipendiary ordained leaders. If Thame goes further, locally ordained and authorised lay leadership will become an increasing part of the picture.

But a church leadership relaxed about the untidy, can afford to see the church on earth as a building site. Without being dismissive of 14 years work,



they see that period as clearing the ground and now they are beginning again, from the bottom up, in order that the Kingdom may advance yet more.

As it happened the weekend I was there, the tower carried scaffolding, indicating work in progress. I note too that their reordering has made splendid use of the nave. However if the whole building were used for a Labyrinth - a kind of pilgrimage maze in Chartres Cathedral - then the transepts and sizeable chancel could provide stations for pause and prayer on future journeys. This is itself an illustration that the Thame Valley Team already know there is further to go.

## Further reading

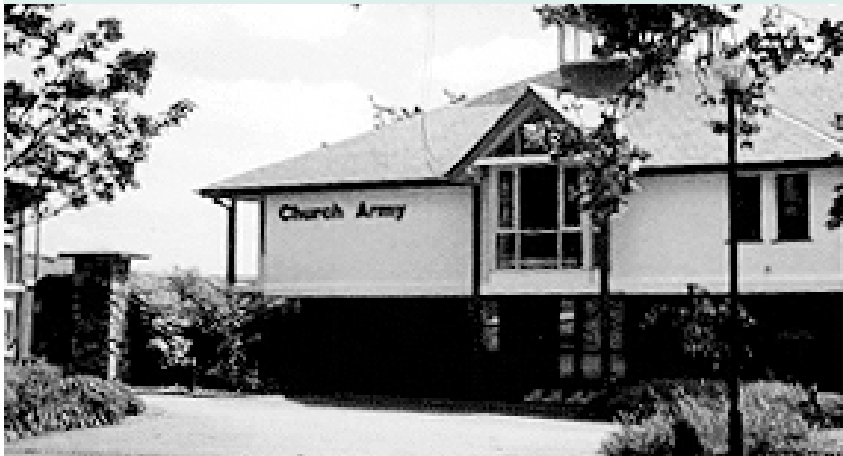
- Administry** *Get up and Grow*  
Resource Paper 91.3
- Charles Arn** *Why Add a New Service?*  
Article in Ministry Jan 99
- Paul Bayes** *All Saints everywhere- Cell Planting in Totton*  
(Private Paper)
- Peter Brierley** *Quadrant Sept 1999 - Church Services Where and When?*
- John Clarke** *Evangelism That Really Works*  
pp 58-64
- Josh Hunt** *Ministry by Multiplication*  
Article in Leadership 91
- George Lings** *Degrees of Autonomy:*  
updated version of Oxford 1992 paper; £1
- David Wasdell** *Divide and Conquer;*  
Urban Church Project Workpaper no 2 1974

## 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 Dalpra 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. Individual 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.

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- 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.

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- 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: Claire Dalpra.*
- Practical hands on experience in Evangelism for young people through its *Xchange* and *First Contact* initiatives -  
*National Youth Projects Co-ordinators: David and Alison Booker*  
*Project Administrator: Ruth Mills*

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