



## *Hard Graft?*

Have you ever been faced with having to revitalise a church? Is this replanting? How many elements of the old will continue? How do you mix the old venue and the new vision? How do you mix the inherited people and the incomers? Can it work or is it hard graft?

**George Lings** investigates.

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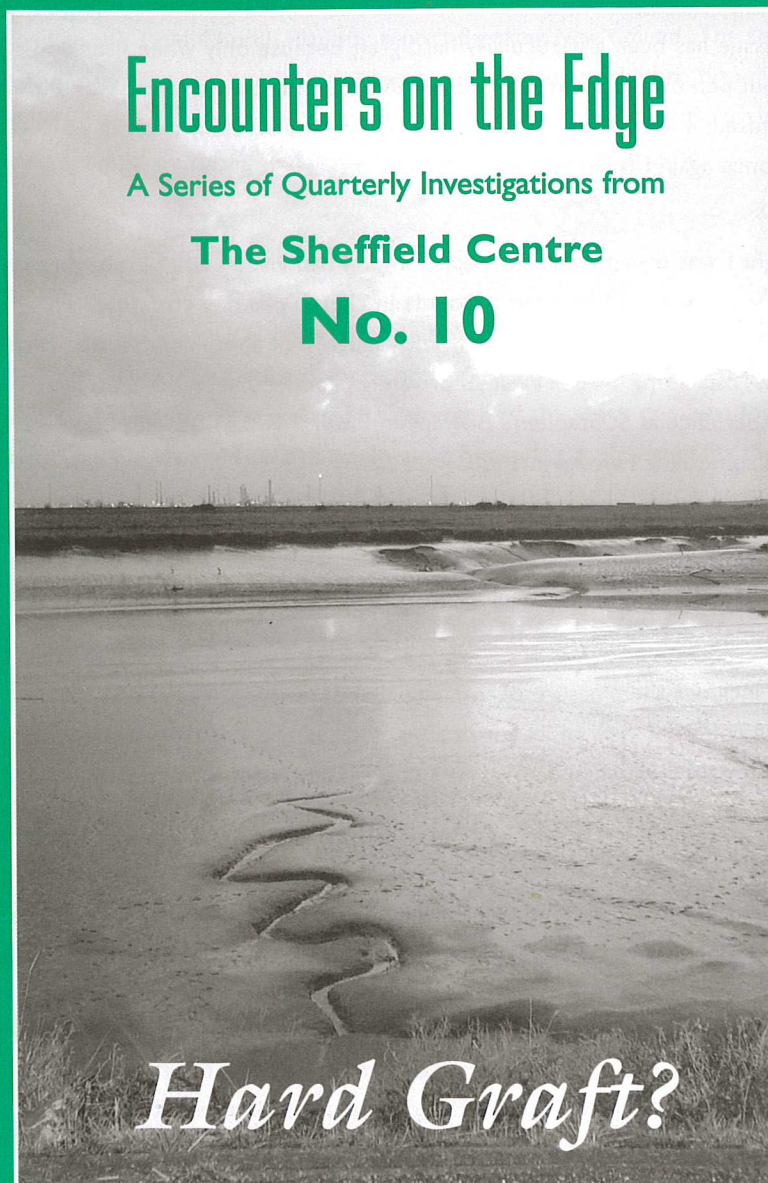
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## *Encounters on the Edge*

A Series of Quarterly Investigations from

**The Sheffield Centre**

**No. 10**



## *Hard Graft?*

## Hard Graft?

Oh dear!

This issue has been a particularly hard graft because only when I sat down to put pen to paper did I begin to realise that my own thinking was confused. I felt an unease and strain, making me scratchy and out of sorts; once again I failed to spot that inner dis-ease is a prelude to further learning.

I thought I was trying to tackle “replanting”. I had visited what I thought was such a story and read of other accounts in church planting literature. This list included the only booklet, to my knowledge, that specifically tackles what it terms “replanting” - Alex Welby’s privately produced reflections on his own experience at St Stephen’s Bowling in Bradford 1988-83. His booklet quoted something I wrote in 1988.

*“The jargon of church planting is still settling down. Planting is a loose term, covering the range from the beginning of a congregation in virgin territory, to the relocation of part of a congregation to another church which is under threat of closure. We need to be more precise.”*

My job includes the pleasure of teaching church planting. Faced with giving others a coherent view of its convictions, choices and kinds, the terminology used is at best creative and at worst a mess. There is no one agreed classification that can cope with what has been done, let alone be a coherent framework for the emerging variety of new forms of church, which *Encounters on the Edge* has been shamelessly celebrating.

The need for precision has not gone away. Church planting language has become more diffuse, possibly because it has become tribal within different denominations. Culturally, as we move into post-modern discourse and into thinking of the Church as organic not organisational, the attraction of logical definition wanes. However where this creates confusion I want to resist that cultural pressure, in the interests of clarity.

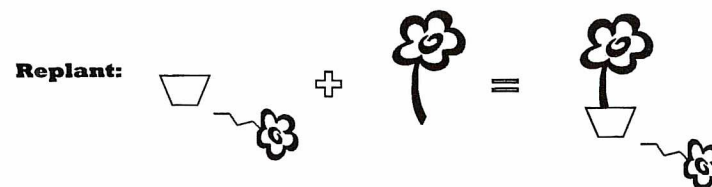
“Replanting” is a widely utilised term, both for the reopening of a church building that has been closed, but also for reversing a process of decline which, if not changed, would lead to closure. This double but different use might not matter so much if the metaphors of “grafts” and “transplants” were not also current parlance among Anglicans, made public domain through the 1994 Church Planting report *Breaking New Ground*. The terms reflect two different horticultural techniques and are applied to two different types of mission partnership that can occur between a declining parish and a group sent in, by agreement, to help reverse decline into growth.



In the garden, grafting is done to bring to the host stock some additional desired quality that the fresh shoot possesses. As they grow together the vigour of the shoot and the residual strength of the stock combine for increased health, yield or beauty. In church planting, grafts, as befits the analogy, are characterised by the incoming group being smaller numerically, but spiritually more vigorous than the receiving congregation.



Transplanting a shrub may involve physically splitting it when it is overlarge, but the essence is its relocation in a fresh site. In common church planting understanding, the transplanted group, always of congregational size, will be larger and more dominant than the receiving group in the parish to which it is sent. Sometimes there is no receiving group at all, just a disused church building - which would then be replanting. The best known examples of this replanting model - sending out large planting teams to disused buildings - are some of the church plants from Holy Trinity Brompton in London.



### Why bother with terms?

Anglicans, of all the English denominations, are most likely to have to use grafts and transplants. This is partly due to the need of arresting the decline of a number of congregations. Also there is nowhere a group can be sent outside a parish to plant, that is not into another parish. As a denomination, we have had to think of the relational implications of any church planting strategy beyond an existing parish. Moreover, not all planting ventures work in the same way. They have different dynamics of opportunity and threat. They require different sized teams and different accents in training. An obvious example is that it is one thing to re-open a closed church and another to make an effective partnership with one that is still alive. Tighter language could help us prepare better. This is why the language issue matters.

All language has a social context. In one sense, words mean what a society holds them to mean; we learn much of it by inference governed by previous usage. I inherited from my grandmother a 1933 edition of the so-called *Shorter Oxford Dictionary - On Historical Principles*. It is two volumes; one alone could be used by rowers for weight training.

*"Replant. 1575 - to plant (a tree, plant) again, to plant (ground etc.) again, to furnish with new plants (or inhabitants) 1652."*

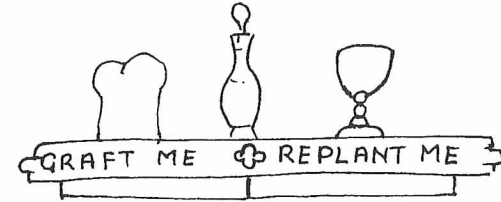
If my green fingered wife, Helen, says she is going to replant the flower border of the back garden, I know the old and tired plants come out, a fresh scheme is in mind, the bed is dug over, and new plants will go in. I understand replanting as indicating a fresh start. This is not planned grafting, nor is it that kind of transplanting where there is a bed already possessing a number of shrubs, flowers etc.



"Graft or replant?"

In church planting, if we are to use analogies then they are most helpful when they flow with the most commonly accepted usage of the term. If we do not, we enter the realm of *Alice in Wonderland* and words only mean what bizarre people choose to make them mean.

Replanting and grafting are valid but to pretend they are deeply similar is a mistake.



I do have a guess at what has happened to create this confusion. Planting was becoming popular in the early 90's. It therefore sounded better to describe the attempted rejuvenation of declining congregations as replanting. Welby, in his booklet, offers some criteria for when a church needs what I would call renewal or rejuvenation, but he terms replanting.

*"If a church has less than 100 members and more than thirty, and had been declining for more than five years, it is a replanting opportunity."*

Welby: Replanting p 14

I believe through the whole booklet he puts a well-researched case for many churches needing help and the dynamics that apply, but I can no longer accept the choice of the replanting word he uses. Look at the congregation sizes he quotes and bear in mind it was written in 1993. I am now told that in Sheffield Diocese, the average Anglican congregation is only 30.

Brierley in 2000 concurs.

*"27% of all English Anglican churches have an attendance figure of less than 25 and 52% are less than 50."*

Brierley: The Tide is Running Out: p 47

I am convinced that there is a great need to help some struggling churches. Where a fresh influx of mission resource is brought in from outside this means grafts and transplants. Replants are also helpful and valid but I now think this term is only properly applicable to the re-opening of a church building that has been closed; it is the bringing of new life where there has

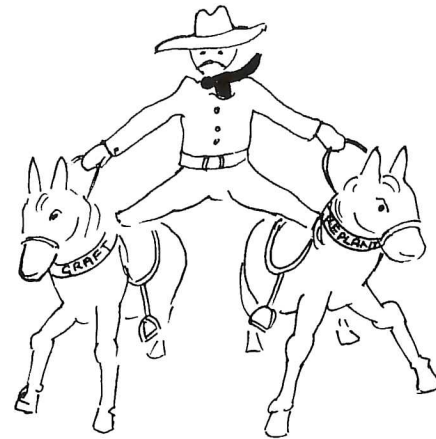
been death. Where there is still a residual congregation, however small and feeble, this is different. The decaying building may be redeveloped, replenished with new people, old ways may be replaced by new, previous people renewed, but what grows is not a replant.

This issue is about grafts, not about replants; I shall not attempt the feat of trying to ride these two horses.

### Wind against tide - bumpy ride

One of the features of the present church scene is the untidy and confusing mixture of growth and decline across the country. I accept the broad picture painted by Peter Brierley in the aptly named report *The Tide is Running Out*. I agree that though there have been many good stories, both of existing churches flourishing and new kinds of churches being created, these even taken together have not stemmed the overall decline. Anglican Sunday attendance figures comparing 1979 with 1989 show a 24% decline, and 1989 to 1998 show a further 23%. (Brierley : *The Tide is Running Out* p 34). To lose one quarter of attendees in ten years could be regarded as unfortunate, to lose another quarter in the next ten makes me wonder what Oscar Wilde would have said!

Sailors know the above catch phrase. If the wind is blowing up an estuary but the tide is flowing out, the sea is even more disturbed and choppy, pitching boats and throwing crew about. Today's Church experiences both the decline of an ebbing tide of membership and, thank God, the renewing wind of his Spirit bringing fresh life in existing churches and bringing to birth new ones. The stark contrast of simultaneous growth and decline offers temptations to all. Criticism, envy or jealousy might erupt from struggling



churches. They might dismiss the "successful" as purely gimmick driven, personality dominated, sheep stealers. Equally, the thriving may scornfully or pityingly write off the weaker or struggling, in terms that would grace Norman Tebbit on a bad day, as unspiritual, dead or unsound.

It is a disturbing time. However, it doesn't take a great brain to wonder whether life in the growing churches could be grafted into some that are in decline yet open to partnership and change. Hear Robin Gamble:

*"The Church is declining. Its decline is most severe in the very places where it is most needed. Today is a time for us to re-discover the faith, the dynamics and the strategies for growth. God's vision is not necessarily for huge 'mega' churches, but it is a vision for growing churches. Growing numbers, growing quality of life, growing impact. In theory it is possible for even the smallest, most traditional church or chapel, in the most difficult of areas to shift from maintenance to a mission mode."*

Gamble: *The Irrelevant Church* p 184

One of those strategies for growth is the sending of a leader, ideally with a team, to a church in decline - deliberately choosing to graft in new life. Is it all hard graft? What happens?

### Hard Graft on Canvey Island?

Mentioned as far back as the Norman times, this low lying island on the north side of the Thames Estuary has Southend on Sea as the largest big town, to the north east. It was subject to frequent flooding until it was walled in 1622 by the Dutch engineer Joos Croppenburgh. Dutch influences



are still strong with a couple of ancient buildings and contemporary buildings sporting Dutch gabling. Its most memorable association is a tragedy; in 1953 a freak storm coinciding with spring tides caused dreadful loss of life and property. There are few buildings from that period now standing, as part of the problem was inadequate foundations to cope with the sand and mud base that makes the island's floor. Buildings of better design have been built since - an intriguing echo with the church story in the same place.

In 1977, a guide to England could have written, "the island is almost one vast spread of bungalows and caravan sites". That sounds like Butlins writ large, but Canvey has diversified and grown up considerably since then. There are a number of estates; some are council, some are private and some are mixed. Most of the housing is double storey but often with a seaside feel. There are some extremely attractive detached houses, a town centre with a fair range of shops and an emerging out-of-town-superstore area, all of which is investment that will make Canvey more confident, self sufficient and attractive to newcomers. Just off the island, South Benfleet railway station is only 25 minutes from Fenchurch St Station; many commute to London but enjoy relatively low housing prices for the southeast.

Paul Hamilton is a Church Army officer who came to Canvey in August 1996 - an area of nearly 50,000 people, served by 9 churches. He comments:



*"It's very proud of its Island status despite being separated only from the mainland by a small tidal inlet. It is a close community but the people are thrilled if you want to live there. It does have a bad reputation but it is unfounded. There are lots of young families as house prices are very reasonable."*

The low prices are partly because Canvey still retains a run down, poor relation image in the eyes of surrounding Essex. People think of oil terminals, though most of them are on the next spit Thames Haven, or of the flooding, though the higher post 1953 walls have never even looked like being breached.

A housing boom in the 1980's took most of the available building land. Prices meant many younger families came and stayed, leading to the need for extra schooling provision. Their sense of pride is occasionally defensive but it usually carries the confidence of openness to newcomers. The sense of identity was so strong that when land ran out for burials, the island community insisted on further land being made available and ashes were retained for subsequent interment. The new burial site is to be by the new supermarkets - an intriguing sideways sign of shopping as a new faith! There is low unemployment and diverse jobs in commuting, retail, the oil industry, services, management and the professions.

### Canvey Church

Church life has endeavoured to keep up with quite rapid change. Canvey used to be a one church parish but the tin Victorian mission church of St Katherine became impractical because it was so small. In 1960, a new Scandinavian looking building called St Nicholas' was erected and became the parish church. St Katherine's school was opened in 1975 and licensed as a worship centre. Monthly services were begun, followed by weekly ones some years later. After another church was built called St Anne's, the Island ended up with three Anglican churches. Three worship centres for a parish of 50,000 people is not excessive. However, because of the Anglo-Catholic tradition, the local school congregation suffered some sense of identity crisis, sensing that their building was not fully a real church.