

The Enigma of Alternative Worship

Should we see it as creative or subversive? Does it serve paradoxical or unreconcilable needs? Why does it live uncomfortably with the label stuck on by others? What is Alternative Worship? We went to find out.

George Lings investigates.

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Encounters on the Edge

A Series of Quarterly Investigations from

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No. 12



The Enigma of Alternative Worship

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Enjoy the Doughnut!

A joke is going round the Alternative Worship scene. Why are so many Alternative Worship groups like doughnuts? When you see their creative offerings at Greenbelt or look at their web sites, they seem huge, inviting, tasty and satisfying - all that goes to make up the large outer circumference of the doughnut. When you meet them locally they are small, struggling groups, tired by the constant high level of creativity they chose for themselves and aware of weakness and vulnerability. This is where the small inner circumference of the doughnut meets a hollow centre. As one who has visited a few events in the Alternative Worship scene over the years and especially in the Autumn of 2001, I retell the joke because like all good humour it gets close to the truth.



The Writing on the Wall? - sorry, Web.

Another curiosity, similar to the doughnut paradox, is my growing awareness that more information is available about this relatively new form of church than other kinds of new church examined in this series.

Paul Robert's Grove Worship Booklet 155 *Alternative Worship in the Church of England* seems to me the best overview. You can branch out into books by Pete Ward, John Drane and Graham Cray, or take a trip with Riddell & Kirkpatrick in *The Prodigal project* including its CD, exposing you to some of the stories and images, so typical of Alternative Worship. Go on the Internet



and look at sites such as www.trinity-bris.ac.uk/altw_faq/; this site contains self descriptions of the various groups around the country which themselves, by their style and content, are eloquent witness to their values. Fascinating articles on related topics became part of my required reading and discovery.

When put together, these varied kinds of resource reminded me of the *Reader's Digest* type cliché "when all is said and done, more is said than done". It was another version of meeting the doughnut. I came up with 26 Alternative Worship congregations mostly Anglican in origin (1 URC and 2 Baptist) but all with a post-denominational feel and begun in the late eighties and nineties. Of these, at least 2 no longer exist in their well-known form, though remnant groups continue. Typical numbers in attendance are now in the 20-40 bracket. One writer from *Phuture Resources* expected that 90% of Alternative Worship groups might only last five years, before the creativity either departed them or left them exhausted; he recommended closure and patience for what might ensue in a fresh guise. One founder of *Visions* in York commented that they had recently celebrated their tenth birthday and this was quite an unusual achievement. Alternative Worship is a small, fragile animal.

The Nine O' Clock Shadow?

Vulnerability among Alternative Worship groups was first painfully and publicly demonstrated in 1995.

The demise of the *Nine O' Clock Service* (NOS) was one of the most lurid church episodes of the 1990's. **In the Alternative Worship scene it was the equivalent of the sinking of the Titanic.**

It was the success story that all the others looked up to; its creativity was admired and the commitment of its members set a standard. People travelled hundreds of miles to observe, explore, learn and emulate. This group was making claims, with some reason, that it was a living example of the church of the future. Andy Thornton in a self-confessed tongue-in-cheek address to an Alternative Worship gathering in London in May 1998 said:

"The (wider) church adopted the new groups because they saw the big model working. Yes, the group that started with twelve was now five hundred, six hundred. It was jumping, it was lively, although somewhat secretive as to how it achieved all its ends. It was nevertheless the great answer to the great new word "post-modern"."

Paul Roberts analyses NOS's history, weaknesses and strengths on pages 10-12 of his Grove Booklet. I want to add that it was like *RMS Titanic* in that both were, in a sense, prototypes. After the disaster, *Titanic's* twin sister ships *Olympic* and *Britannic* had full height watertight bulkheads, better lifeboat provision and double skinned inner hulls fitted. Within two years, passenger liners were restricted from sailing too far north and an ice patrol was instituted.

However, it is the nature of prototypes that they work well enough to be allowed to go to the next stage. Only by flying, sailing or driving them can we see what needs working on. **I fail to see why we demand in church**



life that when we are inventing fresh forms of church for new contexts that we should get it all right first time. We want to trust in God, but we are frail and fallible translators of his guidance. I do not dismiss the cost when prototypes crash rather than just creak. Of course I regret the ongoing cost to the personal casualties of abuse but even my non-Christian friends in Sheffield recognise that it is a story of something good that went wrong. To them it is entirely obvious that the church needs to strike out in new directions to resonate with the younger generation.

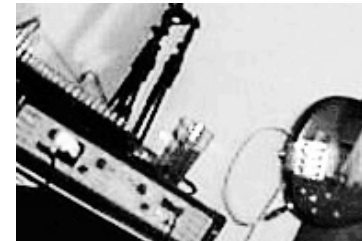
Many I have talked to acknowledge their debt to NOS for entering popular nightclub culture, combining the best of a radical, evangelical, charismatic spirituality with artistic, multi-media creativity and high energy club participation. It included living a costly

practical discipleship in a communal lifestyle that set many members free to work in the club culture. At NOS's height, it saw 250 members supporting 50 workers. This may be the reason why some Alternative Worship groups

(children of NOS) have not been able to emulate its effect in attracting and winning those not yet Christians. Due to limitation of size and the fear that too demanding discipleship is abusive, they have not been able to set free the missionaries in the indigenous culture. By contrast in *Visions of York*, only one person Sue Wallace, is paid part time.

It is to the credit of the wider church and the Alternative Worship movement that learning lessons and moving on has been the order of the day. Greater networking with other groups, open sharing of worship resources and far less authoritarian styles of leadership have followed. There is no more hubristic optimism; there is the weight of a grateful debt characteristic of real bereavement. Thornton in the talk already quoted goes on:

"Until the day the bubble burst ... and the great hope was gone. The proof that it all worked vanished. And the others that were left after this collapse began a period of readjustment."



Those who go through such an event know it is impossible to imagine that death cannot touch them and those they look up to. The illusion of invulnerability is smashed.

Misunderstandings

1 Alternative Worship is mainly for youth

This is largely wrong. Whereas a few may have had this element in their start (like *Revive* in Leeds), the settled conviction of all I interviewed is that this is a movement more focussed on the young adult. Furthermore, some youth workers are dismissive of Alternative Worship as too arty for their teenagers. As we shall see later, Alternative Worship also draws some considerably older than Generation X. Any teenagers who were not scandalised by their 1960's experience, could feel culturally connected to much Alternative Worship, despite the number of contemporary popular musical or visual sources drawn upon.

2 Alternative Worship is mainly an evangelistic attempt at being culturally cool

This view makes it sound like a trendier, artier version of "Seeker services". Nothing could be further from the truth. Superficially, they might have in common an exploration of media beyond the predominant traditional use of the verbal but press deeper and they are virtually polar opposites. If "Seeker", a little parodied, is taking the worshipful and the mysterious out of evangelistic presentation to outsiders, then Alternative Worship is putting worship, rich in ritual, fully at the centre of the experience of Church and God for insiders. If "Seeker" makes engagement with secular culture a high priority and subjugates church culture to fit it, then Alternative Worship rejoices in the best of church culture, such as enduring symbols and sacraments, as a way to live through the vicious vicissitudes of contemporary life. If "Seeker" puts evangelism to the top of the Sunday morning agenda and tells the Christians to get fed mid week, then Alternative Worship is searching very hard to make worship utterly central to its communal life, whatever

evening day the worship event is held on. Moreover, Alternative Worship admits no division of worship from holistic Christian discipleship; the divisive language of secular and sacred is anathema to them. If "Seeker" tries to convince and to persuade, Alternative Worship is classically laid back and non directive. If you get it fine, if not, fine.

3 Alternative Worship is intended to resocialise converts back to normal church

This is untrue at any level you care to examine and can only be construed as the myopic view of those in mainstream church subculture who still think existing church is essentially healthy and worth joining. I would no more carry sheaves of corn into a burning barn than adopt this notion (Bosch, David J. *Transforming Mission* Orbis 1994 p.5). Normal may be the most offensive word in the sentence. The idea that Alternative Worship is not part of real church is deeply, and I think rightly, resisted by those within the scene. At the same time they do not see themselves as being like the local churches which some of them have consciously left, and do not want to go back to what was boring and worse, inauthentic.

Many readers may still be saying "*but what is it like to be at an Alternative Worship event?*"

Come to Visions as a Case Study

This community uses the ancient church of St Cuthbert, whose list of Rectors goes back to 1239. In the 1960's when the St Cuthbert congregation under Revd David Watson moved to St Michael le Belfry, a two story internal edifice giving kitchens and offices was erected, leaving the front third of the building as open space. Pilot Alternative Worship services began in the time of Graham Cray in 1989 and became regular in 1991 during a lengthy interregnum, when the pilot members took the initiative. The language of church rather than service was used from the beginning, perhaps due to the previous incumbent who understood church plants. *Visions* is an autonomous church plant from St Michael's - a healthy model in my view.

To visit, I took Helen my wife who enjoys Ignatian spirituality. I suspected she had a hankering for more visual and reflective elements in public worship. I took Julian our youngest son as the token millennial voice, and Claire my research assistant. I wanted all their reactions. We arrived half an hour early and the building had already been prepared for the monthly service. The smell of incense hangs about it, ceiling to floor banners hang down between the stained glass windows. The east end Saxon wall (unusually without fenestration save for an incongruous late medieval window serving a side aisle) has been turned into an enormous screen. The consequential asymmetric feel creates intrigue rather than confusion. In low lighting, a visual montage of many images includes an angel (looking not unlike J.S. Bach with wings), a roman aqueduct with its arches glowing in morning light, a pair of ballet dancers, the heads of flowers and shrubs and a contemporary picture of a woman praying. The verbal message overlaying a darker area of the screen reads; *“Welcome to Visions. The service will officially begin soon. Please use this time now as part of your worship, to relax, to put the worries of today behind you and to tune into God’s voice.”* - not a bad comment to put on the parish news sheet.



The floor is strewn with beanbags. On the south wall is a large Rublev’s icon of Christ. Ambient music plays from a catholicity of tastes. Four TV screens carry the same set of images, but the effect is bombardment of sense rather the utilitarian goal of all can see at least one. It may be my imagination but the TV screens seem grouped in one triangular set of three with the same colour mix. The fourth is off to the side, set to different colours, though giving the same images. Somehow Trinity and Unity are evoked. No less than eight slide projectors are used. Five are in one of the offices, shining through the plate glass wall, carrying the permanent visual images to the east wall. Another two are in the chancel accompanied by a video projector looping a presentation onto the north wall. This combines the unusual

elements of an ornate Victorian metal cross and candles, contemporary camouflage net, pictures of public buildings in a townscape and projected sets of words carrying feelings and reactions. The seating area has greater width than depth. The strong visual images surround the worshipper and with stimuli to the senses of smell and sound, create the feeling of sitting amongst the images rather than facing them and of being drawn slowly down, and agreeably, into a multi-sensory arena.

Writing this many days later I still carry the visual imprint in my head - more than one can say about many church services. One is so far forward within this variety of stimuli that it is impossible by design to take it all in at once, contributing to the palpable sense of transcendence. Here is more than can be taken in, by contrast to Western monofocal church, fixated either with pulpit or altar. The vision is greater than human perception can survey at a glance - a subliminal message of the event I would think.

The theme announced is “Wrestling with God”. The virtually standard Alternative Worship welcome, from a person sitting to the side on a cushion at the chancel steps, invites us to chill out or take part as we want. Songs (including one I gather from the contemporary dance scene) and responsive readings pick up the theme of struggle and uncertainty. The readings, I later discover, have been taken for half a decade from the Anglican lectionary, to which the community reverted after many years of freestanding creativity. Sheer creativity can be too exhausting and the treasure house of past resources, either dusted off or lovingly adapted, is a feature of many groups. After the Genesis passage of Jacob wrestling with the angel/God, earth is passed round in a glass bowl for people to feel and see how it clings to their fingers and dirties their palms, symbolic of what sticks to and soils our lives. At the same time the words of the Kyries are shown and sung from CD, interspersed with slides carrying words of factors we may be enslaved by or addicted to. The confessional issues covered range from the personal, ecological, matters of social justice and needing repentance by the church. A bowl of water and hand towel make their way around while an absolution is projected, not pronounced. For that reason, it stays in sight longer for

descending reception into the spirit. "God forgives you, forgive others, forgive yourself. Through Christ God has washed you clean, approach your God in peace." The languid pace, the variety of senses evoked, the sensitivity of approach were in concert. We stay long enough in the penitential rite for spiritual resonance to develop.

Three brief video interviews follow with members of the community on their experience of struggle with God. This style is less obtrusive than testimony, in keeping with the ethos of the event but in terms of content, the people chosen talked more about the past than the present. The low level of vulnerability was less than I had expected, granted the theme and the closeness of their community. While the passive acceptance of the interviewer in this mode fits with the chill out mood, this could be a point where blandness becomes the resultant danger.

The New Testament reading on the unjust judge is followed by a responsive reading focussing on the first day of the week, celebrating creation and resurrection. At this point I suddenly realise it is a creed and the shape we are following is ASB type evening prayer in heavy disguise. I have no quarrel with this usage as various shapes have been devised for varying purposes. The real art is knowing which shape to choose for which purpose and how to make them work well. Thus the brief sermon follows, though the community make clear that illness of others means the preacher has been thrust into the breach. I afterwards wondered whether it was necessary granted the richness of other stimulus.

Next come the prayers of the people. A5 sized pieces of paper are distributed. Worshippers are invited to write the headlines of their own intercession onto them and then to weave the



"A Visions Catholic Mass at Greenbelt 2000"

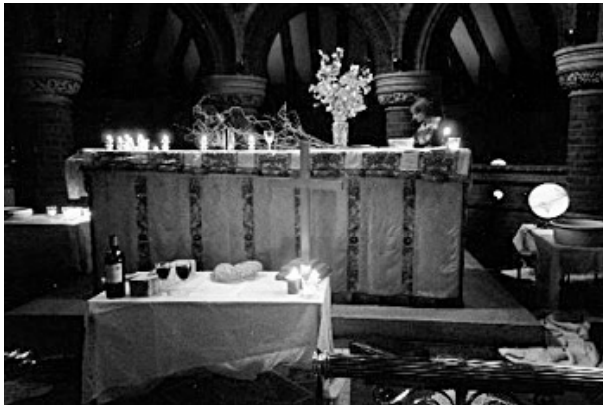
paper into the folds of the camouflage netting, itself a symbol of warfare and conflict, a particular kind of struggle. The TV screens play clips from the film *Gladiator*, cleverly and effectively interspersed and contrasted with water washing over small rocks on a beach. Struggle and tranquillity visually jostle as symbols of the conflicting and crowded canvas of human lives. It is somehow very easy to get in touch with the events and people I struggle with. Single words go down on my paper. God and I know their significance and how they represent spiritual encounter and willingness to relinquish them.

A third song from the same indigenous stable is sung at the end. To me, their strength is that they arise from the community and so express its life. They contain a mix of praise and lament, so they mirror the content of the Psalms and reflect the ambiguities of life. They can be either read by the unfamiliar or sung by the affectionados. The weakness is that the lines tend to be long, creating a haste in diction somewhat in conflict with the chilled atmosphere. In addition, unknown songs for the visitor can distance him or her from the congregation. The blessing is proclaimed to one another, but might have been equally effective if projected and left unsaid.

Tea and coffee follow and then an invitation to the Black Swan (the local for the locals) where people come and chat to us. Seeing as we make up a third of those present it is not surprising that we were noticed, but the conversation did not feel contrived and our reactions were genuinely sought.

In the car on the way home, my millennial age son, Julian, commented on how much he valued being given space to have his own reactions to what was portrayed, which he found preferable to the Wimber shaped charismatic worship offered in the Sheffield church he sometimes goes to. "Chilled out" was the favourable summary. A sense of space was heightened by backing music and the absence of front figurehead. The choice of contemporary dance tunes and lyrics was recognised and approval given that they were not specifically Christianised or interpreted. Julian liked the use of touch brought by the soil and water and the interplay of historical styles between Greek or Latin texts set to contemporary music. He identified aspects for further

improvement: for people not to take control of the event or to coerce responses at any point. For him their chosen black dress code and long hair was rather too close to Gothic to be cool. Such is the sub-cultural diversity around us! He wondered which leader would break an ankle hopping over bean bags to get to the microphone and was surprised that the video interviews lacked depth and tingling candid honesty which is appreciated.



"Epicentre worship, May 1999"

Not all Alternative Worship would be this visual or sophisticated. *Epicentre* in Battersea are pursuing a community based on many members gifts, with different prayer cells within the community

taking turns to prepare the monthly service. This brings a powerful and legitimate sense of ownership across the membership, but also reveals who has obvious gifts in this field and who does not - as yet! *Revive* in Leeds is quite different. Coming partly from a youth group history and Goth background, the venue is a heaving pub basement into which fifty cram. The music is loud, the band visually totally dominant, the transcendence is as low as the ceiling but the intimacy and sense of community is very high.



Common to all is space given to reflect and content which freely acknowledges the downs and ups of life. There is no sanitised sweet smelling life in Zion being hawked. The names of various groups bear out this yearning for reality: *Abundant, Grace, Revive, Not as we know it, Sacred Space, Sanctuary, Soul Survivor, the Deepend, Unbelievable, Unity, Visions.*

Sanctuary - going beneath the forms

I visited *Sanctuary* in December 1997 - my first foray into Alternative Worship since *NOS* in 1992. It no longer exists in that form as its founders have moved on to other ministries, but it was one of the best-crafted, memorable and satisfying events I ever attended. It was a delight to detect liturgical instincts and principles informing the event. Forget prayer books handed out at the door or the neck straining equivalent on OHP, I mean instincts not simply texts. Let me describe not the content of what occurred (though the treatment of the Advent theme was imaginative and full) but rather what lay beneath it.

There was a strong sense of **shape** to the evening, with stages, transitions and completion giving a sense of flow. A rounded theology of Advent (the journey from evangelistic encounter with Christ to eschatological fulfilment in Christ) clearly governed the content. **Economy** in the use of language was evident and the style was narrative rather than exhorting or hectoring. **Movement**, within parts of the building and between parts of the building, was progressive, natural and cumulative. It encapsulated **response and encounter**, never descending to prosaic announcements like "it's time to stretch your legs" or "let's take a break" but was expressive of journey within the Advent Theme. Parts of the event requested **responsive behaviour** (inherent in the theme itself) and moving people out of spectator mode into being participants. **Symbols**, audible and visual were frequent if not rampant. Parts of the **Bible** were read and left to do their own work. **Sacramental echoes** pervaded stages. The baptismal was enacted in the deliberate move from narthex to nave, complete with removal of a garment and reception of a gift, passing by the font on the way. The Eucharistic was echoed in the wedding meal set out on wooden tables in the nave with bread and wine being part of the fare provided. The Eucharistic is

becoming more central to all these groups, reflected in the book *Mass Culture* edited by Pete Ward. Belief in the effect of such instincts then leaves the service designers and leaders freer to let God do what he chooses with such instruments, rather than being anxious to “make it happen” for those who come.



"Resonance, Bristol - a service in June 2001"

Local Drama?

An analogy I found refreshing was that of the good local dramatic society. The attraction is seeing local people make it happen and their investment is its authenticity. The leaflet produced by Revd Tim Sledge explaining the work of *Sanctuary*, refers to the concept of stakeholder liturgy. It seeks active participants in creative response and not passive observers - a very typical Alternative Worship instinct. The impression given of *NOS* at its height, or some Greenbelt productions, is that they are high energy, high technology, big numbers and perhaps thus in danger of being unwieldy, coercive, impossible to do locally and disconnected from a sense of community. *Sanctuary*, by such standards was not high tech. Screens, paintings, some of their own music, use of lights and instruments, video clips, CO2 guns were used, but not so they dominated. At the size and style of the event, it was like being at the local drama society production where you know the person in the lead role, can see a few of the joins and wish them to do well because that is the attraction of the amateur performance. Linguistically, an amateur is one who does something for the love of it. I wish all worship in that sense was amateurish. In an alienating over-professionalised world what a blessed relief that would be.

Who goes there?

Alternative Worship is not inhabited by one kind of people, both in terms of who leads and who attends. Some could think it is the young adults' singles arts set, or an ageing group of disenchanting Christians. The reality is mixed, almost tribal. *Sanctuary* first alerted me to the variety. It had a number of functions. Various analogies poured into my head.

Sanctuary was partly a “**church truancy service**”. It was for those, whom the leaders expected to be in the 15-35 age bracket, who were giving up on church. *Sanctuary* hoped to catch some of them, keep them in the fold and even return them back having found that meeting with God can and does happen in ancient buildings, using crafted and participatory worship. A wider age range than expected was the response. 15-35s turned out there to be 14-80 year olds.

Other Alternative Worship congregations had wide age ranges. Ian Mobsby of *Epicentre* in Battersea suggested a focus on two particular groups. One is young adults in their 20-30's who had got burnt in previous churches - either over committed and drained, or disenchanting with simplistic claims. They then could not get past their doubts and questions. They felt trapped in a cage of church that seemed to require certitude of them. To question was to invite being marginalised so they left. The second group are 40+ to 50 but entering a mid life stage. The kids have grown up, previous careers have peaked, and further training may have thrown up a whole new set of questions. Somehow the plausibility of their faith that had been coherent and sustained them, no longer held.



"Epicentre worship, Sept 2000"

In my own circle of friends and family, I can readily identify faces even as I write this. They have faced inexplicable tragedy, unexpected bereavements or marriage collapse, hit new reductionist questioning or wondered more deeply than ever before. “Is the world out of control?” “Is what I believed in my teens and twenties actually true?” “How does it connect with the issues I have had thrust upon me?” The sense of confusion and alienation is their deepest experience of the absence of God. Often existing evangelical and charismatic church life neither protects nor nourishes them through such changes. Those who know the ideas of Fowler’s stages of faith will recognise this came as the loss of what he would see as adolescent certainties.

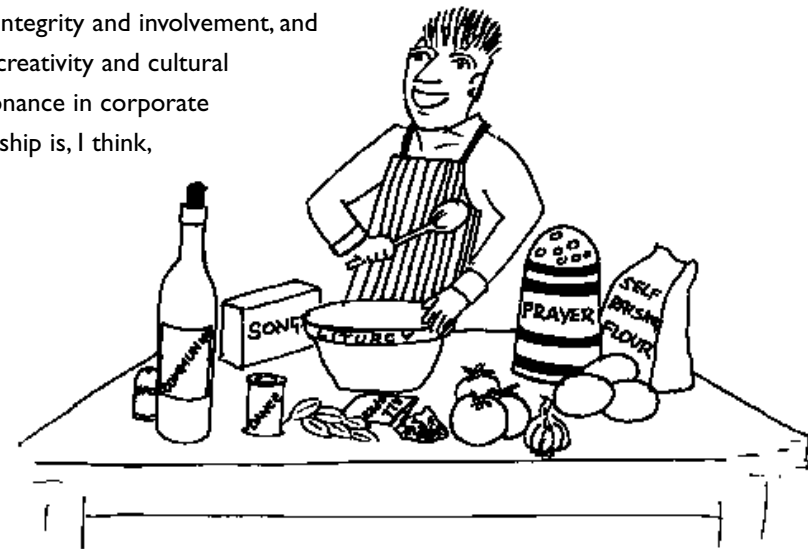
However, truancy is the wrong picture; it suggests people bunking off from the establishments they ought to stay in. It implies catching them, unscrambling their motives and sending them back to do time in school to become proper adult citizens. For such groups maybe our churches are no longer the safe places for meeting God that we thought they were. They won’t return; they will stop going at all. I am told that in the UK and US (rather a disparate grouping) 53,000 are leaving a week. The discovery that there could be new safe places for the Christian wounded and disillusioned is not to be sniffed at. I do not know whether I am right in what I guess, but for about the last two years **I sense that the credibility of existing church has hit an all time low in the lives of the worshipping public.** A respected friend told me of a regional survey (I believe in the UK) that showed half of the worshippers only hanging on by their fingernails through a sense of duty. The sense of “we can’t go on meeting like this” is getting stronger. *Epicentre* leaders claim they have enabled about 90 people to remain Christian. However, the number of converts has been small. A significant role for **Alternative Worship is not so much a culturally cool fishing net, but a “safety net” to catch those falling out of church.**

This “safety net” role is also played by some small groups I have heard of, where people have stopped attending public worship. However they are very committed to meeting in small community to eat, discuss, pray and explore going on with God, choosing to be accountable to one another. As a vicar in Deal I was part of a group that had all these strengths and in some

ways it was more real as church than what I tried to enable for congregations on a Sunday.

The danger for this clientele, recognised by leaders in the movement, is that Alternative Worship could just be a haven for the disaffected. People might resist resolution of real issues. Enabling growth in discipleship in a totally non-directive style is difficult, working at this with the damaged and wounded takes sensitivity, skill and time.

Sanctuary was the “**liturgical Naked Chef**”. Clergy and lay leaders came visiting, confessing that they too are insufferably bored with the worship they themselves are conducting. Centrally cooked Anglican Liturgy is their worship fare. Its traditional balance, urbane cadences, increased verbosity and cultured singing are possible to criticise for being bland and repetitive. Was this part of what William Temple meant when he said, “*The Church of England is dying of good taste*”? The search for integrity and involvement, and for creativity and cultural resonance in corporate worship is, I think,



not a passing whim, but a rising tide. *Sanctuary*, typical of much Alternative Worship, showed what can be done and offers chances for people to go and do their own cooking at home, having had a taste. One Alternative Worship group is called *CSD - Cooking Something Different* and another *Taste and See*. Here it was safe to participate in experiment, to sample and sniff, without

the cost and pain of having to take the local congregation along the arduous change route with you. Tim Sledge commented “*This is one of the great strengths of Sanctuary and the team are now planning a workshop day “Build your Own Sanctuary”, to help facilitate more creative liturgies locally.*” Perhaps this is a role a number of Alternative Worship groups could offer the wider church.

Sanctuary was a partly a “**port for foreigners**”. For some it was an entry, through spirituality, to the Christian faith and church. Here was a safe place to test out whether the Christian faith, tasted through its worship, is compelling and authentic. In this story as people express enduring interest, they were referred to one of the variety of churches in the town. In most cases they would be invited to stay in the Alternative Worship churches they had found. I suspect that this makes sense of insisting that church is community and that the sense of belonging is the start of the journey to faith. To disrupt that process in this way makes little sense.

Moreover, those outsiders exploring Christianity who find Alternative Worship helpful, would be very unlikely to be able to make the transition to a local parish church. The limitations are its visually boring verbal dominance, its tendency to be disconnected from issues of everyday life, its formal hierarchical style of being led from the front and the poverty of its sense of community between its attenders. Furthermore, the last thing Alternative Worship members would want would be converts from popular culture to leave their own cultural group. They are, potentially, the best entry points to it and still have relationships within it. They are the best chance to form indigenous church within popular culture – a task that has barely been begun.

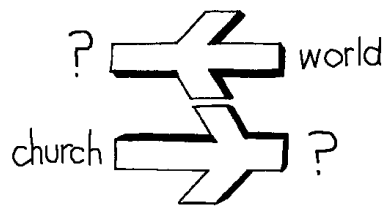
What a Mixture

Alternative Worship is inhabited by those bored and tired with old church as well as the enthusiastic, adventurous for this kind of church and the mission it can have to post-modern popular culture. You will find the dropping out Christian and the occasional seeker rubbing shoulders. The difficulty of leading and managing Alternative Worship is that it can contain these two groups facing in two different directions and with different needs. With those falling out of existing church, the task will include remedial pastoral

care, but also finding forms of spirituality distinct from historic church that begin to connect and sustain.

Whereas in

marked contrast, with those peering in from the world, the task through worshipful spirituality is apologetics, evangelism and nurture. The irony is

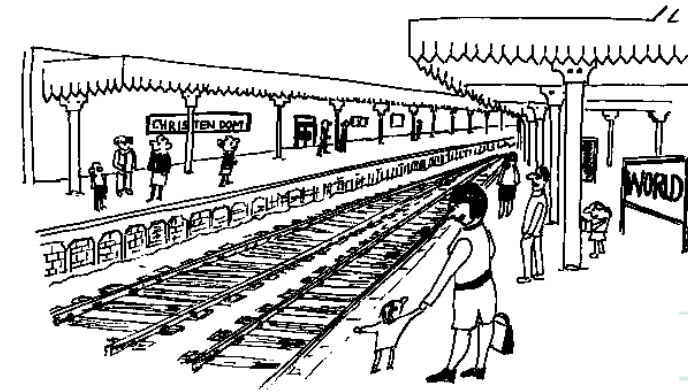


helping them to discover faith through a church made up of some people unconvinced that it works. Are Alternative Worship events therefore inherently unstable? Do they represent two streams of traffic going in opposite

disconnected directions? My interest in railways led to my imagining a curious station called Alternative Worship. It is a junction with several platforms and trains coming in on all of them, but without a footbridge, level crossing or tunnel to connect any of them. I saw in my mind’s eye people daring to open a carriage door on the wrong side to leap into the other train before it pulled out - a possible but precarious scenario.

How does it fit with other movements?

Simon Hall of Revive sketched a way of looking at the tribes around Alternative Worship in a web site article. He starts with the “Radical Reformers” and “Post-Evangelical Rebels” who were inspired by NOS at its best. I see them as the fiery end of a wider group fed up with existing church. They are part of the Alternative Worship scene but dissidents do not necessarily make good long-term leaders and such groups can become intellectual and introspective. His second group “Establishment Plagiarisers” took the NOS style, bought the techno kit and entertained youth groups with it but “raves in naves” for youth is not what Alternative Worship is



about. What he means by a third group “Charismatic Colonists” is easiest to grasp by citing examples such as *Soul Survivor* - the local church, not the event in Somerset. *Tribal Generation* churches would come in this group, as would the *Revelation House* churches from Chichester and the *Cultural Shift* movement. This third group I have tended to call “Counter Cultural” and see them as different to Alternative Worship, though I accept some Alternative Worship groups have a mix of Simon Hall’s first and third categories. Let me characterise the differences.

The **ALTERNATIVE WORSHIP** stance (though not a formal movement) affirms the church’s cultural value of the use of ancient buildings hallowed by prayer. It knows about “thin places”. It values antiquity and ambiguity, the use of historic texts and letting mystery do its strange work. However there is also a strong desire to engage with the quest, technology, art and values of contemporary society. The instinct in relating to cultures could be “**take it or leave it**”, for its style is non-directive. The call to work with two cultures, the church and the world, powers part of the creativity within the movement. The world critiques the ecclesial over its control, power structures and prejudices over gender, creation and holistic issues. The ecclesial offers ancient resources to interpret the secular and to offer a Christ centred take on spirituality. However, the very term “alternative” is one that has been bestowed by the Church at large, rather than owned by those in the movement. To be dubbed alternative is an equivocal compliment.

What I call the **COUNTER CULTURAL** is in one sense, more genuinely alternative. These are churches, Anglican, Free and Restorationist, that are chosen alternatives to traditional forms of church and which are also deliberately alternative to the values of modern society - repudiating large elements of both. This instinct allies itself more with early church or Anabaptist roots, and thinks Constantine a disaster. It can be either Pietist and value withdrawal, or more Kingdom driven and intentionally subversive of both Church and World. Its instincts could be dubbed “**leave it and change it**”. There is some accommodation to popular culture in terms of

dress, publicity, informality and music styles. However, the clear shape of much of its worship and its directive style owes more to a particular Christian sub culture - the unwritten liturgies of John Wimber, than either historic worship or spirituality. It believes it is accessible to outsiders, but I wonder if the passion of its members and its use of small group life are really its effective evangelistic mediums.

Enduring Questions

What place has Mission in Alternative Worship?

Readers will have gathered that mission is not a naturally high priority and this could be a major criticism of the movement. It is understandable that if Alternative Worship as a safety net contains those falling out of church then they will be hesitant and unmotivated for any forms of evangelism. However, my conversations with leaders show that Alternative Worship also contains those with an enduring sense of call to reach popular culture. In addition, they have a passion to close the divide between the church experience and the rest of life. They seek to be responsive to post modern culture, being in touch with preferences for ambiguity and antiquity. They also engage with post-modern instincts in the preferences for a multi-media approach which may be diffuse not focussed, is created locally rather than remotely, works contextually rather than institutionally, makes use of the symbolic and the subversive rather than didactic, and is open ended in its style. This represents one of the most thoughtful attempts to relate worship and culture. Thus they have a profoundly mission based instinct operating behind their worship, though at the same time a number of groups are distinctly uncomfortable with any aggressive or blatant evangelism as too modernist, directive and narrow.

By contrast, I observe with some disappointment a number of more traditional church plants. They may have begun courageously and imaginatively in terms of their community involvement or their evangelistic thrust. However when it comes to worship, they revert to fairly

embarrassing forms of family service or they uncritically adopt the Wimber liturgical shape, lampooned as - worship done standing, word heard sitting, and prayer ministry received wobbling.

The artists connect to the culture in very different ways to the apologists and ways will change as the culture itself shifts. One illustration is that ten years ago *Visions* tried making evangelistic contacts in the club scene of York. They found themselves in unsuccessful competition with many who wanted to be DJs, but they were invited to provide the backdrop visuals and did so for several years. This eventually stopped because the clubs they were in contact with either ceased to be alternative or closed. Those that survived underwent a shift and became larger commercial ventures, more consumerist in terms of drink and drugs, which no longer wanted the artistic backdrops they could provide. Through their strategy they made individual contacts but found it was too big a hop for contacts to go from there to entering a church, albeit in Alternative Worship style. The group are still looking for some intermediate steps in between. A recent photographic exhibition in a church hall drawing some 400 people has been one useful attempt.

Epicentre in Battersea sense their local scene has shifted from lively clubbing and parties towards a café culture. Parts of Battersea have become a South Chelsea - albeit with greater pockets of poverty and a wider ethnic mix. So here Alternative Worship is no longer any emulation of high energy clubbing and more like the ambience of the chill out room. Its group would be drawn from professional Generation Xers who work in the media, IT provision, IT graphics and design, and various artistic disciplines. Meeting contacts will be through café type venues, meals and varying artistic events as an expression of inner urban mission. For example there is a monthly *REEL* Films evening - done for its own sake as an enjoyable window into that media of creativity and insights into what it is to be human. However, this is not conceived as a programmatic step towards signing up for an *Alpha* course. Old issues of the relationship of art and mission surface.

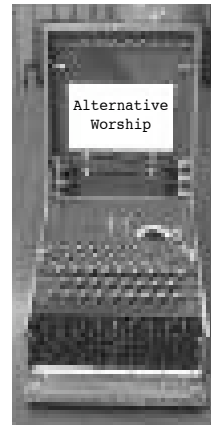
Why is Alternative Worship limited to a few countries ?

Alternative worship seems confined to Britain, Australia, New Zealand and

more recently America (in that order of starting up) although there are now a few interested in Germany. Why? It cannot be understood just as a church reaction to post-modernity, for that reality is equally present in mainland Europe. Is it more a reaction to an English evangelical way of doing church with its modernist search to be relevant? Only churches in these countries have had the resources and wit to try to change in these ways. I know, for example, the church planting movement is far more advanced in England than on the continent. As Paul Roberts says:

“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.”

Throughout, I found a critique of the worst kinds of charismatic worship. This is seen to be too orchestrated from the front to be authentic, its language about God is too soppy to be more than sentimentality, its intensity



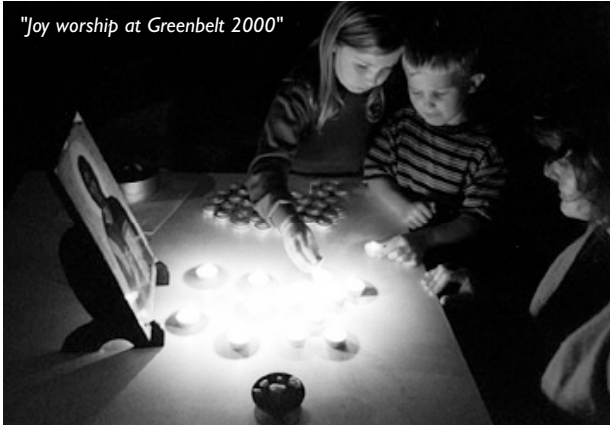
too extended to be humanly honest and its optimism too blinkered to be useful in the face of a struggling world. One commentator dubbed Alt Worship as post Evangelical, post Charismatic and post Kendrick. What an enigmatic animal it is.

I am intrigued it has become called Alternative Worship, rather than Alternative Community or Mission. I wonder if this is because Christendom churches have become so focussed on worship as the defining mark of the church that this is the label which has stuck.

Why Are Alternative Worship Groups So Small ?

I think this is partly because small groups cannot set great resources free to encourage growth, partly because of the safety net syndrome and partly because the scene has changed from emulating throbbing clubbing to smaller chill out or café type contexts. Small size is part of the very intimacy of the event. To grow beyond a unit size of 50 would do violence to its nature. I noted that in all the groups I visited, the sense of community was very strong.

"Joy worship at Greenbelt 2000"



Like the characters and age group of the TV soap *Friends*, these are people who hang out together a lot. It was evident that the integrity of the worship is because it springs out of,

and then feeds, the ongoing life of the community. I came to wonder whether they are better understood as new network based communities, out of which springs the worship of this creative and deliberately encultured quality.

To me this is one with what I believe is happening more widely. I think we are in a major shift from defining church by its worship and asking others to join us doing that activity. Clearly that tack has diminishing credibility. We have been in a stage that imagined we could do evangelism, which needed to be distinct from worship, and that the inherent truth and quality of our claims about Christ would be persuasive. Postmodern deconstruction of all claims has cut the feet from under us. We are being driven back inexorably into the question of community to define what church is. I say "question", because it is highly questionable whether most congregations have anything like the attraction of meaningful community. I cannot commend too highly the reading of Grove Liturgical Study no. 32 by Alan Kreider called *Worship and Evangelism in Pre-Christendom*. I believe he shows beyond doubt that the factor which made Christianity credible was the quality of its loving community, centred on the person and values of Jesus. To such a vulnerable yet potent address I believe we are being driven once more.

Where is Alternative Worship Going?

I hope it will intuitively connect with what I have just said about community and build on that. At present, its ability to reproduce after its kind seems stunted. The web sites don't show any new ones having started since 1997, but Sue Wallace knows of a few.

I recognise that it will take garnering of considerable local resource and involve risk to multiply such groups from such a small unit size. Yet more people are leaving the existing churches and I long they should not drift out of sight. The current groups are distributed equally north and south. They occur in centres of population and usually in places where there is tertiary education. So they are well placed to be "safety nets".

My prayer for them is to have confidence in the value of what they do. Their obviously chosen task of encultured worship and less trumpeted element of building community are both vital. It would help if they were seen by any sending churches or parent bodies, as a particular kind of church plant and thus encouraged to rejoice in their special identity and be in healthy interdependence with other ways of being church. I think they will need to search for ways of mission that are natural to them. Then once more they could grow into increasing maturity and continue to be a valuable part of the emerging varied missionary movement needed in the Church of the west.



Web sites

<http://www.trinity-bris.ac.uk/altw-faq/>

<http://www.labyrinth.org.uk>

<http://www.yjb97.dial.pipex.com/events/cag00/papers>

<http://www.epicentre.org.uk>

<http://www.visions-york.org>

<http://www.revive.org.uk>

See also the Baker/Collins booklet *Fresh Vital Worship*
From Grace in Ealing

Where could you go from here?

Strategically...

- If you are thinking of **starting alternative worship**, use this issue together with No.9 to think through the proposed church style and the leadership resource implications.
- If you are a church where **alternative worship takes place**, these stories will help your leadership team compare experiences. What might you want to communicate to your sending church, or your diocese as a result?
- If you have **connections within diocesan groups**, please think who else needs exposure to these kinds of questions and suggestions. How can these issues help us all get closer to good practice?

Practically...

- For whatever reason if you want **further copies**, those can be ordered from Claire Dalpra by note, phone or email - see *next page*.
- Is the **first issue you've read?** You may want to collect the previous issues listed on the back cover. All individual copies are £3.

About us...

In the early part of the 1990's **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, with the aim

- **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 through the Training College**
- **Specialist training in church planting and evangelism for those in full time Christian ministry**

The Sheffield Centre - developing Church Planting & Evangelism



The Sheffield Centre can offer the wider Church

- **Specialist research, consultancy and publishing on Church Planting, the fruits of which are 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, First Contact and Word on the Web initiatives**
National Youth Projects Co-ordinator: Captain David Booker
Evangelist with the Sheffield Centre: Alison Booker
Administrator: Ruth Mills

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