



## Reading: the Signs

How do you connect with teenagers who have never been to church? Where do you start? Where will it lead? Reading these signs is far from easy. George Lings investigates an Anglican church in Reading who are finding a way forward.

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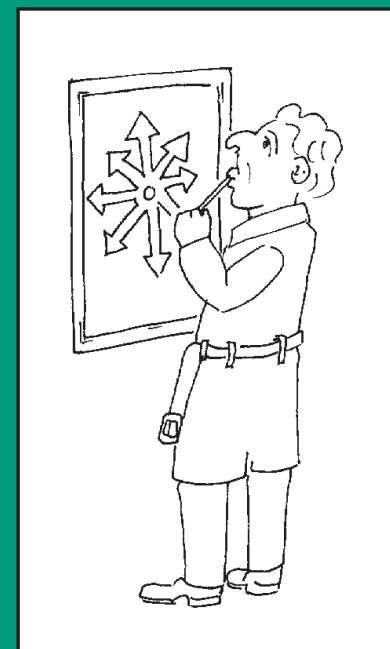


ChurchArmy

# Encounters on the Edge

A Series of Quarterly Investigations from The Sheffield Centre

## No.21



## Reading: the Signs



ChurchArmy

The Sheffield Centre

50 Cavendish Street, Sheffield S3 7RZ

Tel: 0114 272 7451 Fax: 0114 279 5863

Email: [g.lings@sheffieldcentre.org.uk](mailto:g.lings@sheffieldcentre.org.uk)

[www.encountersontheedge.org.uk](http://www.encountersontheedge.org.uk)

Encounters on the Edge

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## Reading: The Signs

### The search for indigenous Christianity gets harder

In a pre-Christian mission context the task is clear, if experimental. It involves a sympathetic understanding of the local culture. It requires the separation of forms from principles by incoming Christians, to minimise cultural imports. The aim is to create expressions of being authentic Christian community, including paths of ongoing mission and worship. All these must resonate with, and yet speak as a critical friend to, the local culture. The threats are, on one side, falling into syncretism and, on the other, disconnection.

**That task is present in the UK, but with a further significant complication. Usually we work with a post-Christian context. This brings additional difficulties.** Confusion exists about aspects of true faith that have been both misunderstood and also rejected. There are often unhelpful cultural memories about what must be included. The process of unlearning and translation - reading the signs - is far more difficult.

### What Would You Do?

Suppose you led two town centre parishes. Neither church is very strong and one is very weak. St Laurence is attended by 12 mainly elderly people, all of whom travel in, for traditional high church Eucharistic worship. St Mary the Virgin is the civic church and attracts 30-40 attendees. You look after both and dash from



one to another on a Sunday morning to repeat the sermon and preside at similar services. The second congregation looks viable, but is the first heading inexorably toward closure? At the other end of the high street, within a quarter of a mile is *Greyfriars*, a flourishing eclectic church, in the classic evangelical tradition, with a team of leaders and workers and many hundreds of members.



At the same time, the town centre is changing fast. A large, brand new shopping complex called *The Oracle* is springing up. A quarter of a million shoppers a week will go through its doors. Pedestrian precincts

are being created inside a ring road. Within its orbit are many other shops, the upgraded town museum, fine Abbey ruins, not to mention the famous jail that once housed Oscar Wilde. Themed pubs and clubs are clustering near the door of the weakening church, whose life and foundation goes back to the 12<sup>th</sup> Century Abbey. Young adults and teenagers with time and money to spend are arriving in numbers in the town. This hub of 180,000 people is becoming a regional centre. Reading is moving from its market town history to seeing itself as the capital of the Thames Valley, drawing on a 10 mile hinterland of another 180,000 people. Because road and rail connections are good it is becoming a venue of choice for the headquarters of commercial companies like the *Prudential*, and along the M4 corridor it is home to telecommunications and I.T. companies, in which like attracts like. It seems as though words of the burial service are becoming true for the Church "*in the midst of life, we are in death*".

None of these churches really act like a parish; the population comes in from outside by choice. The three parishes exist for 32,000 people but only 378 attend. Just over 1% Anglican attendance is half the national average. What



of St Laurence and what signals does it send? **All churches and their buildings speak**, whether the message is of vibrant life, struggling existence or closure. Its often locked exterior, small numbers and tired interior communicated failure and decline. Simply to continue that pattern would be to institutionalise that trend and endorse a maintenance mindset. The status quo was not a viable option. Yet the sheer shutting of a prime site would send the wrong signal, not least at a key location in the townscape. The parish also possessed considerable monies

from its ecclesiastical charities that rented out shops. In addition it possessed a utilitarian 1960's church hall in a saleable location. This beguiling financial security could have been used to prop up the existing situation and it is to the credit of various individuals that this path was not allowed to unfold. *Greyfriars* was thriving in its eclectic life, but the difficult issue was how its strength could be allied to surrounding parishes without that collaboration turning into a take over and submerging of other traditions.

## What They Did

It was a pleasure to listen to Canon Brian Shenton, the town centre Rector, describing the process he had gone through since coming to the two parishes in 1989. He admitted that taking two churches forward was too demanding, not least when the weaker one had evolved a culture of passive resistance to change. It knew it was sitting on a pot of money that could keep it going in tick-over mode.

Brian sat one day for contemplative prayer in St Mary's. He had noticed the change of culture in the town. Ruminating on St Laurence Church, he found himself thinking, *"Let it run down, have a review, even if I lose my job - I must go out into the darkness and put my hand into the hand of God. This will be safer than a known way"*. **Willingness to let go was a genuine lever for change in this story. Humility and realism made it possible.**

## The Town Centre Review 1997-1999

Lay and ordained leaders of the three parishes met, with a Rural Dean from elsewhere, to assess current resources, examine opportunities and find a way forward. Together they were candid over a number of issues. Adventurous proposals emerged from the Review at the start of 1999:

- The Rector would resign the St Laurence living and focus on building the Civic/Guild Church role of St Mary.
- A partnership with *Greyfriars* would be formed; St Laurence would be joined to it and become a hybrid, serving both its inherited faithful congregation and the young adults of neighbouring pub and club land.
- A new stipendiary Priest with some skills for the two-fold work would be recruited, as there was some leeway over clergy numbers in the town. The Diocese would pick up the bill of the housing and stipend. The St Laurence's charities guaranteed an income towards the new work.
- Sensitive to fears of takeover and the traditions involved, the new venture would not be called a church plant, but rather an opportunity for mission to young adults in the town centre.

## Good Foundations Take Time

### Hunt the leader

The Deanery Pastoral Committee and the Diocesan authorities adopted the review's conclusions fairly easily because two factors came together. The centrally-driven proposal to work with a large group of youthful incomers in the new town centre made the idea attractive, not divisive. Doing it in a way that solved an issue of providing parish cover, including rescuing an historic building was the other lever. They coincided well.

Brian Shenton and his avuncular and strategically-minded Archdeacon, Norman Russell, went in search of a mission-minded priest who could minister to a diversity of groups, but who would work well with young adults. Graham Cray, then principal at Ridley, commented that he knew of only ten clergy able to do the task. Tess Ward was coming to the Episcopal Area as a curate and was asked for a name by Bishop Dominic. When the various

seekers conferred, the name of Chris Russell came up from both sources as top of what was a short list.

Chris is the son of an Archdeacon, so knows some Anglican ropes, though he claims to have inherited no organisational genes. After reading undergraduate theology at Durham, he had worked in the early nineties as the research assistant to Labour MP Paul Boateng, being consistent with his passion for politics and concern for the less privileged. Three years at Ridley Hall, including an M.Phil, examining charismatic corporate worship, were followed by a curacy in Deptford. He married Belinda in 1998, who had come from a strong new church base called *Revelation* in Chichester. They met during the year she studied for her masters and worked part-time at HTB. Chris was forming instincts that would undergird the as yet unknown Reading post. These included conducting ministry based on friendship not on professional detachment and accepting that spiritual interest might arise from unlikely sources (such as “Graham” who started coming because of the content of an episode from *The Simpsons*). **Chris wanted younger newcomers to church to be allowed to shape what church should become, rather than being told to fit in with it as it was.** Such signs are usually seen in retrospect, not ahead of time.

At the time of the Reading search, he and Belinda had left the curacy and were living in their own house in St Albans. At the invitation of Mike Pilavachi they spent a year, off the Anglican payroll, with *Soul Survivor* sharing their vision. Chris’ paper offering to lead something pioneering for youth had lain apparently dormant somewhere in the corridors of Southwark Diocese, although Bishop Colin Buchanan had tried to find a suitable opportunity. **Their sense of call was to non-churched young people, to build church with them, for them and by them.** *Soul Survivor* looked a possible base from which to

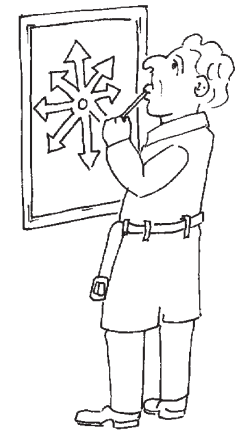


Belinda and Chris

find others who could share a particular call, and the leaders were open to that giving away of human resources.

### Yes or no?

Belinda and Chris were invited to visit Reading in December 1999, meet key people and consider their response. On the way home he was as sure the answer should be “no” as she was that it was “yes”. Partly the job was different to his preferences. He knew they both looked for locality-based community, working from scratch with a known local church building. This was town centre, network-based, without a community, in a church building dislocated from its emerging context and with its congregational life conducted in a foreign tradition. Furthermore, there was pressure that outsiders thought he was just the man for the job. The gap was scary. Belinda is intuitive and, in that way infuriatingly beyond the male of the species, just knew. **Reading the signs is not straightforward.** Between January and May 2000, correspondence seeking clarity went back and forth. Big questions needed resolution. What was the vision? Who was the new thing really for? What would it mean for it to be Anglican? What would happen to the building?



### Redefining who it is for

The question of vision and the specific group to work with was key. The Review imagined contact with young adults, coming into Reading for the clubs and pubs, and connecting through well resourced evening events perhaps drawing inspiration from seeker services or *alternative worship*.

Chris, supported by Pete Ward, profoundly questioned the viability of the whole approach. In their view those coming to pubs and clubs have come for a good time aided, if not defined, by drink, drugs and the opposite sex; looking for a good church to attend was not high on their agenda. They were aware a few people such as *Youth For Christ* in Norwich and *Church Army* in Bournemouth had tried to enter the Club scene, putting in a worker.



This they likened to a chaplaincy model. By nature and context such work was reactive, slow and uncertain. Its danger was an insufficiently relational base which made it idealistic. Responses thus far did not encourage more hope than that, let alone furnish evidence of the creation of mission-minded Christian communities equipped to reach further into that scene. Moreover they knew that *seeker* connects better with an older generation. Both *seeker* and *alternative worship* demand levels of technical expertise and human resources that were outside their range. A different view may be taken by the proponents of club ministry, drawing on the language of spirituality in some parts of its scene and being content to work the vulnerable chaplain type model and see what emerges. The jury is still out as to what can be achieved. Though Bournemouth has ceased, *Church Army* have begun another such venture in Cardiff, with some monitoring from *The Sheffield Centre's* Steve Hollinghurst.

The Russells were clear that if Reading wanted N.O.S. at its best (*alternative worship* for young adults) to come to town, this was not a job for them. However, if the brief was working with non-churched teenagers well before they entered the club scene, that was different. Teenagers could be reached mainly through relationship-based schools work, which also provided a genuine



Belinda and the girls

chance for them to increase a whole range of their skills. The Russells offered a vision of Church as being accessible to non-churched young people, seeing them come to faith, be disciplined and gain a sense of belonging and serving. It would grow as these young people brought their friends into that community. The community would initiate and develop forms of worship that sought to be accessible and authentic to young people. In this they did not seek to throw down a threatening gauntlet but, by mutual honesty, to offer what they could bring and ask if a “*church and youth culture project*” at St. Laurence was wanted. The change was accepted and in July the job was both offered and accepted.

### The link with Greyfriars did not materialise

Several reasons contributed. Disentangling the two parishes proved more difficult than expected, in that Charity Law specifically required the incumbent of St Mary's and St Laurence, as vicar, to be an ex officio of the St Laurence Charity. It would be difficult to connect into pub and club land, or into schools serving more deprived communities from a *Greyfriars* base. A feature of Reading is a sharp divide on these social lines, with schools at the very top and very bottom of the infamous performance tables. Dominic, then Bishop of Reading, was very clear that this was not the goal and was to be actively resisted. The already strong classic Evangelical tradition would perhaps expand, but crucially would not diversify Christian witness in this diverse town. Was growth of the existing strength the greatest need across the town?

I also observe on a broader canvas that **strong churches have greater difficulty in diversifying their operation, for they have *prima facie* evidence that what they offer works.** This can apply to the continuation and incremental development of their preferred styles of worship, teaching or evangelism. Whereas paradoxically, **the weaker church or the pioneer missionary is freer to work contextually, to try out various new options, to abandon what does not deliver, and so to discover what works in practice for a cultural group not previously successfully contacted by the church.** It looks like the willingness to give St Laurence away became the basis for a healthier way for it to continue to belong. The upside down nature of the Kingdom testifies to that kind of dynamic.

## Slow Progress

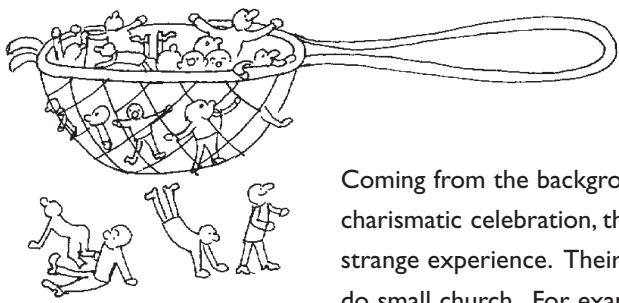
I have long believed that good foundations are worth it in buildings, even though it means enduring mess for some time, without much to show for it.

### Team drain

The slow pace continued after February 2001, but for other reasons. The initial team of ten dwindled to five over the first few months. Two at Reading University came to the end of their courses and moved on elsewhere. A couple commuting from Watford suffered protracted decisions over relocation and eventually decided against. The last individual stayed in Watford because of a job offer and so pulled out. Yet the same period saw Nathan and Kelly Lambert move to Reading, look for a church, wander into the tiny evening meeting of the remaining team rattling around in the chancel of St Laurence and decide this is where they should be. Nathan (above with Chris) is now a warden. Sifting and shrinking seems typical, not



only of Gideon's army, but of the early stages of many ventures in faith to create fresh expressions of church.



Coming from the background of *Soul Survivor* charismatic celebration, this loss and tiny size was a strange experience. Their tradition did not help them do small church. For example, sustained singing for 40 minutes among five people lacks conviction. **The reality forced exploration of how to worship with slim resources and modest**

**numbers.** Yet it was not so difficult to do life together trying to be conscious of seeking the presence of God, using varied liturgical shapes and different people taking responsibility for parts. Always the vision, prayer for it and openings to pursue it played a part. Looking back now, I am glad of this stuttering start, for it prevented a package being imposed at the beginning and it created more openness about ways to do worship when the teenagers also began to come. **I am tempted to say the commitment and the charism of this community were clear, before the invention of the spirituality to sustain it. Perhaps that is a good order for mission-minded communities. It will be especially true where there are mixed post-denominational teams.** Here they knew they were church, and that being church is about who we are before God. But that was nearly all they knew.

### Starting from nothing is slow

The other reason for a slow start is that it was pioneer mission. Non-churched teenagers from tougher schools is a substantially unploughed field in which to sow. It takes time to make those kinds of contacts. Chris was tempted to write to various local school heads and offer assemblies and lessons, but the danger is that this gives only a platform, not sustained relationships. Rather, the core community decided to pray and see what was presented to them as leads. It happened when a member of *Greyfriars* had been working in *Meadway Secondary School* for a trust called REACH and offered the St Laurence team the chance to take over. They were to work informally with a small number of 'problem' young people. *Meadway* was at that time a failing school, and has subsequently closed.

### Stage two - too quick

How to build on from those growing contacts was the next question. How do you make further contacts? How do you begin to disciple those who show interest? **There were precious few others round the country to ask who had practical experience.** It was good that Roger Ellis from *Revelation* in Chichester was on the steering group. He kept in contact and had walked some similar paths. Other informed support was minimal.



Ben Morison, one of the famous five that stayed, had the idea of starting a pool club, and it was widely advertised in the area at his expense. It fell entirely flat. It was not the activity or the venue that were at fault, but the lack of

relational contact to make it work. Just as trust is an issue in good church planting, so it is a cardinal issue in relating to today's teenagers.<sup>1</sup> **Event-based youth work, with provision of activities as the drawing power, in mission, is passing away.**

To build sustained relationships meant developing school contacts. PHSE type links led to lunchtime clubs with the same people, playing cards, music, playstation and hanging out in the same space. That could be followed by individual mentoring and the starting of small groups. Once that connection of trust was in place, there were friendships that could move onto the second stage which did see a pool club and film club begin in January 2002 which now both draw 25 each. Both by choice meet in secular venues to model entering culture, not rescuing people out of it. The film club meets weekly at the shopping centre multiplex. The management did a deal of club membership with a substantially reduced entry fee. Discussion and drinks follow in a separate small function room. The teenagers learn how to read film, discuss issues they raise, increase their social, analytical and debating skills and become yet more a cohesive group. They also discover facilitating young adults who will handle the opinions and issues honestly. This stage continues to work well, although the numbers fluctuate because young people are taught by cultural upbringing to do only what they choose.

### Spot the log in your own eye

Before a third stage could happen, an internal change had to occur. Finding pre-packaged worship didn't deliver well for their small group of Christians and being suspicious of a possibly indulgent sub-culture that could grow round the big event, had led them by their own admission, into the danger of overreaction. By their self-assessment, it became arrogant repudiation of

<sup>1</sup> Compare Dawson McAllister *Saving the Millennial Generation* Chapter 1 : Thomas Nelson 1999

such styles of worship. Yet what came home was that **the point of worship is encounter with God that is transformative.** That doesn't mean being fixed on a particular celebration style, adopting some kind of post-charismatic stance, nor trying all kinds of creativity for their own sake. Genuinely seeking God, whatever the means, is the deal, in a way which expresses and nurtures the mission calling.

### What are we trying to do?

This connects with another source I noted a few years before. I am no expert on sociology and generational differences so from confessed ignorance I pass on the comments I take to be at the heart of a book on work with today's teenagers by Dawson McAllister. I think he rightly spots a shift from valuing propositional truth to seeking experience. He connects that with Eugene Petersen's work on spiritual formation as the heart of ministry. Such spiritual direction is promoting the finding God in every aspect of life, no matter how mundane. It has three assumptions:

- 1 God is always working – an active grace is shaping our lives
- 2 Responding to God is not guesswork – the church has gained wisdom for guidance
- 3 Each person is unique – it takes discernment to tell

This he claims is different to past traditional youth ministry models.

Type	Traditional Model	Spiritual Formation Model
Aim	Knowledge	Intimacy with God
Method	Communicate content	Facilitate experience
Style	Entertain and teach	Equip people to notice, name and nurture God's hand at work around their whole life
Resource	Youth minister as hub	Team of mentors

This connects strongly to peer-led cells. I would add the factor of mutually given accountability to the newer list. Moreover, good cell leadership will look for mentors to emerge and become mentors of further leaders.

### Stage Three

The coming of Christmas opened the way. December 2001 saw the *Meadway* Christmas celebration in St Laurence Church. The school steel band did all the music, the Food and Technology Department did the catering, the Art Department put up displays and a dance group brought their gift. The church was the school's space, not its host. 70, out of the 110 students, came but **for most it was their first time ever in a church**. The performers needed to practice so they came into the building more often beforehand. The pattern was invoked again at Easter 2002, once again asking the young people what they wanted to do. Out of it grew a team of 15 young people who planned a labyrinth of self-exploration, the nature of love and exploration of Good Friday's events. Echoing McAllister, it was conceived as encounter with God, not with the content of belief. The members acted as guides through the labyrinth and they ran a cafe within the church.

Easter Sunday contained an invite for the parents of those involved to come to tea in the church and watch the dance group at work. To their amazement and horror 40 came and Chris, in some trepidation, presided over 45 minutes containing some singing, the content of which most of them didn't know, taking stones to a tomb, writing of prayer requests and a five minute talk to try and tie some ends together. Yet the team were ecstatic and phoned late at night to burble about it; people had stayed, participated and appeared to want more. So an unplanned further event happened the next week; a team member and two young people did something on one of the Resurrection appearances. Food and nets featured, so I guess it was about when Peter had gone fishing.

By now the pattern of stages from initial contact at school to meeting with the Christian community, including its worship, were in place. Various patterns were tried for the third stage. For a time, youth cells met at 5pm on Sunday, with freedom to stay on for the adult's own choice of worship at 7pm, which often these days seemed numinous and significant. After taking four young people to *Soul Survivor* Somerset in summer 2002 they stopped this unhelpful youth/adult split. However with a wider group to reach, worship for the team didn't seem to reach the previous heights and depth. The team decided cell group was now their place of encounter and growth with God and that Sunday evening would be for the young people. Further change occurred when St Laurence building was closed in March 2003 for re-ordering. The young people, meeting in a hall, missed the messages conveyed by its antiquity and quality.

### Current shape in a St Laurence week

Day	Time	What?
Sunday	1700	Communal tea at wherever is church
	1745	Themed worship led by at least 3 people and after some go out on the town
Monday	Daytime	REACH contact in Prospect School - led by 2 full timers Anne and Lindsey
	1500	After School Club
	Evening	A Cell Group - largely adults
Tuesday	Daytime	Chris Russell casework in schools
	Daytime	REACH contact in Prospect School - led by 2 full timers Anne and Lindsey
	1600	Film Club - Warner Village
	Evening	A Youth Cell
Wednesday	Daytime	REACH contact in Prospect School - led by 2 full timers Anne and Lindsey
	1730	Pool Club at Rileys
	Evening	Table Tennis team play league game
Thursday	0700	Prayer Meeting [with evening alternative]
	Daytime	REACH contact in Prospect School - led by 2 full timers Anne and Lindsey
	Evening	1 Youth and 2 Adult cells
	2230	Prayer Meeting [or morning]
Friday	Daytime	REACH contact in Prospect School - led by 2 full timers Anne and Lindsey Russells day off
	Midday	Prayer meeting
	Evening	Football team
Saturday		Family and whatever
Other		Strategy group 8 times a year. Chris sees other team members 1 to 1. Planning every other month, team days every 2 months, weekends away every 6 months

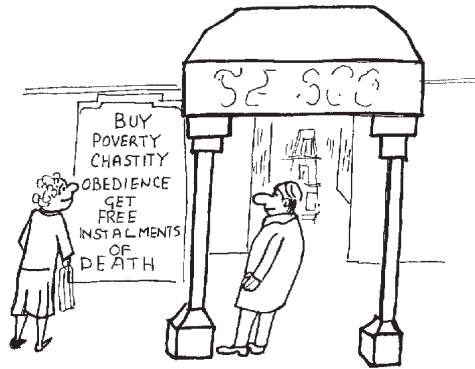


## Who's there?

The team is now 18 young adults and they meet with 23 core teenagers and a wider set of contacts in schools and with friends of members. There have been just a few transfers. Generally transfer of teenagers or young adults has been strongly resisted. It is impossible to prevent enquiry, but this is met with two levels of questioning. One is whether an incomer owns the vision of church for non-churched youth. This is non-negotiable, but verbal assent is too easy and needs testing. The dangers of easy assent, seen by the leaders I met with, include choosing a social group to belong to, or selecting a best fit of the churches in the area. Those choices are decried as indulgent, consumerist and nominal. So those who assent to the vision are asked whether they will give time, prayer and money to the vision. I was reminded of the nearby Abbey and monastic vows; for time, prayer and money, read obedience, chastity and poverty. Words about following Christ and responding to His calling were made practical on this spot for hundreds of years. It is happening again.

Poverty is not the immediate word that comes to mind in this story. Stipend and housing is picked up by the Diocese, re-ordering costs were substantially met by sale of the Hall and Trust income. Why do they need money? The team are clear that money goes to fulfil the mission. Thus from their slim numerical base and its internal finance, they appointed a full-time qualified youth worker Quentin (known as Q) (below) Gunderson in September 2003.

He exists to co-ordinate youth work, pioneer new dimensions showing a professional face to the work of St Laurence when needed and train others.



## Reading These Signs?

### Not a church plant?

This political statement may still officially be in force. I can understand why. In reviewing the national scene over 10 years since *Breaking New Ground*, some unhelpful stereotypes and stories of planting have been created.

*Mission-shaped Church* admits this:

*“Words tend to acquire a history and among some people ‘planting’ has acquired a mixed reputation. When the process is cloning, or it is aggressive, or involves transplanting large groups without attention to the mission context or other existing churches, then it will deservedly gather a bad name.”<sup>2</sup>*

Chris Russell wanted to avoid these criticisms and also what he calls “*Christian tourism*.” The aim was not a kind of **new celebration centre which all too easily colludes with consumerist instincts within Church members**. The focus was the non-churched and growing a community with them.

**So what is the new St Laurence?** It is led by a person recruited from outside the Diocese, by agreement this was with a team, as it happens of ten talented and committed workers, which has grown through ups and downs to 18. They see themselves as a dispersed Christian community. They intentionally exist to serve and reach a people group. Their confessed value is to do church with converted young people for non-churched young people. Their policy is to work with those outside the church in such a way that they become church in continued mission to their own cultural group. If I saw that as church planting, I think most readers would conclude I was not exaggerating.

For the 16th century’s untidy evolution of the Church of England, a phrase was used to assess past traditions that were deemed worth retaining, despite their detractors. It ran “*the abuse does not take away the use*”. *Mission-shaped Church* came to the same opinion about church planting. I hope that clarity of internal thought and warmth of external welcome will combine as *Mission-shaped Church* is read. By more rigorous description of the planting process, and careful contextual application of that understanding, it may be possible to

<sup>2</sup> *Mission-shaped Church* : CHP 2004 p31

redeem a good phrase by modelling better practice. Then perhaps Anglican fears of planting can subside.

### Is it Anglican?

Chris welcomes that the time has come to embrace a diversity that goes beyond labels and traditions for their own sake. He applauds the Tom Wright sentiment that looks beyond evangelicalism and enabling people to get into the Bible, beyond being charismatic and rather seeking the Spirit, beyond catholicism but loving the Church and beyond liberalism and entering the love of God. He longs for the re-imagination of the church so that its language and practice is no longer alien to non-churched young people. He grew up with the insights of earlier leaders, like Pete Ward, who described the distance as far back as 1992 in cultural terms<sup>3</sup>. The discomfort included the formality of rows, impenetrable books, services led from the front, culturally inaccessible music from a Christian sub-culture, whether Wesley, Stanford, Appleford or Redman, that only made young people laugh. They experienced it as passive authoritarian and sexist. Beyond that, to become a Christian would be to experience a crisis of peer group identity. So what would it be to be Anglican for them?

When pushed on the minimal liturgical requirements, it was agreed that a consecration prayer authorised within *Common Worship* be used at communions. In this spirit of taking the essence of a tradition, to be true to his own roots, as both charismatic and evangelical Chris wanted to take certain dynamics; it involved **trusting the Spirit** in the lives of young people, **expecting the laity to exercise ministry** (in this case teenagers) and looking for **worship to grow up out of the communal life** of the Spirit directed community. Its worship and life would attend to the voice of God and its participants expect to be sent out once more into the world having met Him. Unsaid, but evident throughout the visit, were the healthy open relationships existing between St Laurence leaders and Diocesan figures. It is further evidence that one pragmatic working definition of **what is Anglican is simply whatever a Bishop approves of and will licence**. In this case Bishop Dominic licensed the whole team to lead, preach and administer at communion.

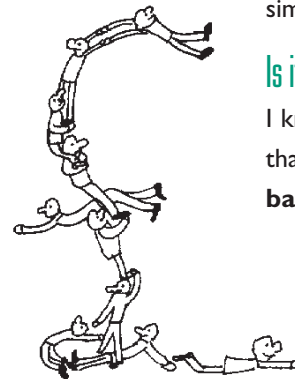
<sup>3</sup> For example: Youth Culture and the Gospel 1992, especially chapter 2, and Worship and Youth Culture 1993 for beginnings of a response.

### A wider aside

To my mind, this is also a working out of the shift in how we construe church. If, stereotypically, Catholicism works through worldwide hierarchy and Protestantism through agreed Confessions of Faith, Anglicanism has historically taken the pragmatic road of being defined by territory and law. The legal has included the boundaries of each territory, authorising of worship in those places, licensing of clergy to them and vows of canonical obedience within a larger area, called a diocese. With the advent of a network world, there is conscious reshaping of our mission task.<sup>4</sup> In this emerging world, Anglicans are not called to defend the idea of place and territory at all costs. The Incarnation is dear to Anglican theology. However, **it is more of an invitation to enter culture than locality, just as the incarnate one, Jesus Christ, came for the people of Israel rather than the location of Bethlehem**. But if mission is shaped by how people live and church is legitimately reshaped by mission, then ministry should follow the lead given by mission and church, or else it will become disconnected from what it should serve. Thus the re-configuration of ministry, including episcopacy, along the lines of networks, not solely defined by territory, beckons as a credible way forward. Signs of similar Anglican developments are being seen through the unhappy impairing and fracturing of Communion - either over issues of women's ordination or human sexuality. I doubt that either are the best reasons for such change, but oversight on the basis of relational networks has been the practice of the erstwhile house churches for decades and may be coming our way. Then to be Anglican may turn out to be in good standing and relationship with a Bishop, who is also in similar relationship with the Archbishop of Canterbury.

### Is it accountable?

I know of no sustained fresh expression of church<sup>5</sup> that has not had to build and then draw **on a bank balance of trust in relationships**.



<sup>4</sup> *Mission-shaped Church* makes this one cardinal premise.

<sup>5</sup> This is the preferred term used by *Mission-shaped Church*.

It is clearly mutually held between Brian Shenton and Chris Russell (*right*) and was being forged in the period of preparation prior to his arrival in January 2001 and starting a month later. Brian is technically Rector and Chris technically Curate though called Associate Vicar. Prior to the appointment some friends advised Chris not to go unless he were made incumbent, for fear he would have a rug pulled from under his feet when boundaries of convention were challenged in the emerging life of the new church. That call was resisted and has not happened. Brian has, from day one, created a relationship of equals in which Chris is *de facto* the Vicar of St Laurence. It is a delight to see how well they get on as team and friends. Brian presided at the first service and then handed over keys, responsibility and running of St Laurence church. The letting go was immediate and heartfelt, but not without misgivings honestly confessed as fears of oneself. How would sharing ministry be? How would he handle gaining a very talented younger colleague and a convinced charismatic evangelical to boot? Could he learn to re-evaluate his own ministry now exposed to directly biblical thinking? Was he too old to change? To the credit of them both, the transition has been healthy, constructive and fun. I learn that the presence of fears and the presence of trust are not mutually exclusive. It may be the admission of the former builds the growth of the latter. The changes have brought a sense of an untidy unfolding guidance by God. Letting go and trusting Him enables better trust of one another.



### Building funds of trust

Other such funds included those held by Brian with the existing St Laurence congregation. He was able to broker the change, helping them see it as an addition not an eclipse of their ongoing life. He had also built trust with the Clerk and Treasurer of the St Laurence Charities and this would prove important later. As Rural Dean, there was a trust account with the local clergy and it was natural for him to introduce Chris to that circle and together they could reduce the sense of threat existing ministers seem

prone to feel. Partly to reassure others, and partly to be wise, a steering group including local and appropriate national people, has formed and meets monthly including receiving a written report. **Trust does not fear to be held accountable, but this needs balancing by deliberately not creating a culture of close supervisory inspection.**

Chris also had trust accounts. One was with the team members that came with him. During the time at *Soul Survivor* and not least in 2000 when the job was being negotiated but had not begun, up to ten people indicated they were willing to relocate to Reading and find there fresh jobs and homes. It was quite an investment to make on the basis of quite short relationship. Some chose to take tent-making jobs in order to fulfil the vision of making time to invest in relationships with young people and help disciple them to become disciple makers themselves. There was no security of salary or even that the venture would work.

The other trust account was with the Diocese. The Diocese through its officers adopted the local review plan, went on a national search for a candidate hitherto unknown, then handled his re-negotiations of many contours of the initial plan. They helped St Laurence find an imaginative architect, Rob Robinson, and gave the church considerable freedom over how to work with him. They have provided housing, which near the centre of Reading is not cheap. Moreover, after a false start that did not work well, a second house has been found. It is ideal for a family and provides a mid-week home for the open style of community life that the Russells like and the youth church appreciates. The Russells live, in delight and awe, with a sense of favour and privilege. It creates a further sense of being entrusted but has some heavy sense of responsibility too. No one can say they didn't have the resources. If this cannot be made to work, what can?

### History won't lie down

**To have, as the home of a new community, an Anglican building that quietly insists that it has outlasted you and will see you out too, teaches historical humility.** A shrine that offers its hospitality and shapes what you may care to devise there, has significance. These stones will

do their own work of creating Anglican identity, even though the current generation are changing the interior to aid the proclamation of the gospel afresh for this generation. Those who enter it meet history. St Laurence himself is known for an apocryphal tale. Under Roman persecution, he was charged with handing over church treasures. He summoned the poor, cared for by the congregation, and reputedly said “*These are the treasures of the church*”. It is arguable, at least, that the non-churched youth of deprived urban areas are among today’s poor.

History has a queer knack of repeating itself. St Laurence church is part of the overall complex of the lands of the ruined Reading Abbey. This was a place of royal favour, significant in pilgrimage until dissolved by Henry VIII. Walking round the Abbey, embedded in its own town parkland, it seemed we entered a world hidden from the casual shopper in adjacent streets, yet

which echoed still with spiritual resonance and showed signs of renaissance. What fresh work may flourish within the renewed St Laurence to offer hospitality to contemporary pilgrims and so catch the new enquirer unawares?



### Making holy space?

Money to reorder, totalling £472,000, came from the parish charities, assisted by leadership exercised by Rector, Acting Vicar and Archdeacon. The submission to the D.A.C. explored “*how best this ancient building may become hospitable to the new vision*”. The vision and the heritage constraint meant the unashamed statement of putting the new within the old, but always ensuring the changes were reversible.

- The nave (*right*) has been cleared and will remain open, redolent of **church as medieval market place**. Its wooden sprung floor assists varieties of artistic discipline. Its sheer space suggests possibilities and its grandeur offers transcendence. Yet it is the lives of those who offer that space that will determine whether it speaks of holiness.
- The aisle (*below*) contains a two level structure, largely in glass, but with some steel. The lower level includes a kitchen that can service a minimalist style café, with toilet facilities including for the disabled. Any St Laurence member can freely join the club that uses it and bring four guests at any time. Thus ownership and outward intentionality are encouraged. The aim of the renewed building is to create a market place to which others can come with no understanding of God and become part of its community.
- Accessed by circular wooden staircases, the glass balustrade mezzanine floor offers chill out space with sofas and **the option to watch what occurs** in the nave beneath, prior to decisions to participate. This open inspection is taken further by smaller glass walled spaces as meeting rooms. **Nothing is secret here except the mystery of why it changes people.**





I was pleased that my visit occurred while work was in progress. This seemed to me symbolic of the life of this young church. Enough had been done to indicate what would be, yet the fuller glory was still to be revealed. I think after the building work is done, that perspective will need guarding, despite the gains the re-ordering will bring.

## Reading the Signs for the Wider Church

Some factors will be hard to reproduce elsewhere. Spare quality buildings will exist in a few places, but seldom linked to lucrative trusts. Not all work among teens or young adults will inherit a temple; they may find lower cost tabernacles. Making the most of ancient references can aid youth work, sidestepping the problem of keeping up with contemporary worship styles and multiple musical sub-cultures. After you have built relationships, it will be an additional strength, though not an essential one. As yet there are not very many ordained pioneers. There are more youth workers and I see some signs that a number in post are seeking ordination as they find on the ground that they are starting churches.

My present guess is that to build community, not just provide congregation, is both theologically and culturally a good way forward in being Church. To foster relationships with individuals and to serve others, rather than tell people what they should do or believe, is a good handle on mission and evangelism. It goes beyond a mechanistic offering of youth *Alpha* or any other course. Chris tells me that among deprived teenagers, the only courses they attend follow being caught by the Police. To follow Jesus, always asking what He would do, and turning to the Gospels to frame those aspirations, looks a plausible path of spiritual formation, for discipleship and teaching. It will however conflict with the cultural values of self-determination and pluralism.

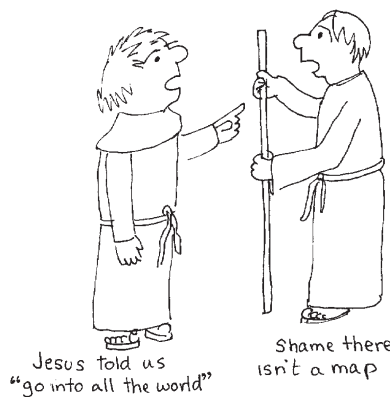
But how to worship may be the most problematic. Anything borrowed externally has cultural and historical associations bound into it. The visit to *Soul Survivor* in summer 2003 showed young people can be socialised into responses in celebration worship, which they initially found so weird that

they took camera pictures. Interestingly those patterns of external response did not survive the move back to Reading. Anything local will, in one sense, be genuine. Yet it will be rare that it escapes a post-Christian spin. Moreover it may be banal and not capable of sustaining repetition. Also ceaseless local creativity may be exhausting. If there is any veracity in my thinking that worship is the toughest nut to crack, it may be that the other factors of community, mission and discipleship show the way forward. Perhaps the worship needs to be shaped in such a way that sustains those other emerging elements of being church. **Once more the charism shapes the spirituality, not the other way round.** I now consider it is not an accident, that only in pioneer mission do we gain the freedom to think like this. To me this is a sign that only by being in mission can we find the shape of the church. I suspect this is contextually and theologically true.

It was no surprise to me that the team lived with some sense of fumbling. There has been a sense of making it up as they went. God's preference to work with the foolish is both comforting and disturbing to self-designated fools. The story is about trial and error. The ability to realise mistakes and

revise responses has been key.

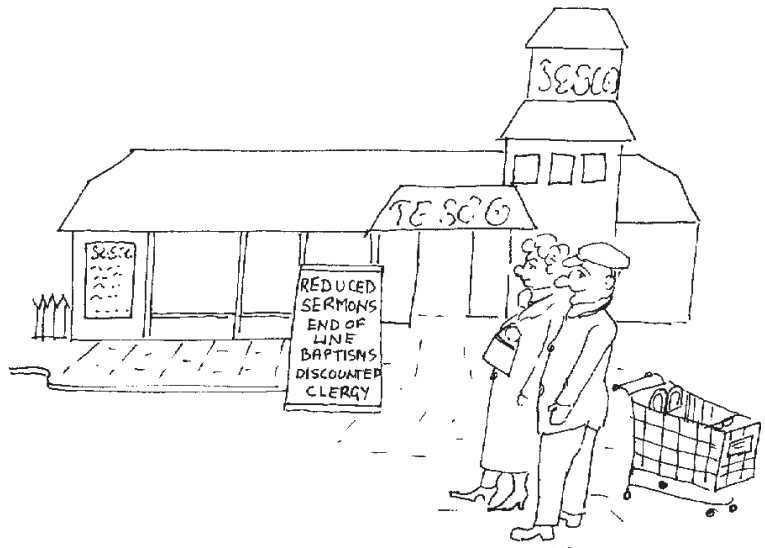
**Working with signs is like that; they are not always clear.** It is a story of slow discernment. The initial report was only partially right. Some signs were discerned, others awaited disclosure. **Working cross-culturally and operating intuitively is walking by faith and not by sight.** Often I describe the apostolic journey as "*out and who*



*knows where*". The signs that accompany many an apostle are clearer about the sending or the calling. Their fulfilment is often less obvious. Contrast for St Paul the blinding clarity of the Damascus road and the tortuous path that led to Rome. I consider this story another sign that apostolic pioneering is back with us again.



In this story, I see **it helps to be allowed to create minimalist Church**. The context warranted this, the authorities allowed it and the relationships of accountable trust kept that safe. The community is Jesus focused and about creating Jesus' followers. Leadership here trusts God, the wider church, and the Spirit working in prior ways within those to whom we are



sent. This is a call to believe in releasing, empowering and giving responsibility. It is not about being up front all the time, but does include guarding the vision of church for non-churched youth by youth. From this spring stories of surprising individual transformation into lives that authenticate the good news they tell.

I see such patterns of spiritual encounters lived at the edge of what is known across diverse work done, among the poor, on deprived estates, among the new city-centre dwellers and ministry to form church for the workplace. All these are mission to dominantly non-churched people and **there is a genuine search, following fragmentary signs, to discover indigenous church that connects and challenges**. The incarnational descent into a new culture will connect. Only then can the second journey to counter-cultural challenge begin, based on the Lordship of Christ.

**George Lings, February 2004**

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*Left to right: Steve Hollinghurst, Claire Dalpra, Michael Collyer, George Lings, Peter Hallsworth, Ruth Walker, Andrew Wooding*



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