



ChurchArmy
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Encounters on the Edge



no. 25:
**A Short
Intermission**

How can church be
expressed within the arts?

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Many thanks to Billy for permission to use his photograph of the dancer on our front cover.

A Short Intermission

How can church be expressed within the arts?

You must be joking

That I should write something on the arts and church is a fairly good joke. My painting repertoire in school when confronted with, and intimidated by, a vast, exceedingly blank, white piece of paper and a puny pencil, was a slowly improving set of drawings of WW2 Spitfire fighter aircraft. My sculpting was given up with the sand pit. In music I was asked, nicely, to leave the choir so that they could press on less disturbed. I did get a drama prize for a school play performance as a cockerel, though slurs that nothing changes may be denied. I might claim that the evolving scale model of the LMS railway station at Matlock in Derbyshire circa 1938 in my cellar, including all buildings fashioned just from drawings and photos, is a work of perseverance. However, even my friends would hesitate to call it art.



My model railway

The arts are influential

Even though I am an amateur observer of trends, I note that **we have become an age more conscious of images and influenced by art**, taken in this booklet as a broad set of disciplines. The millions spent on advertising, as well as the trend to promote brand image not product information, both indicate belief in the power of the visual and symbolic. Various expressions of art draw the crowds. Apparently someone has worked out that there are 60% more people in cinemas weekly, than in churches. The annual attendance at rock concerts is 50% more than for churches and even monthly visitors to art galleries attract 40% more than churches¹. Whether the audiences experience community or are only collections of consuming individuals is an interesting question.

When the field of the arts focuses on the multimedia worlds of radio, TV, journalism and the cinema, **these forces are serious employers and opinion shapers**. Consider the thesis of the recent Dan Brown novel *The Da Vinci Code* which seemed to me to have more holes in it than a colander. However, when the film version with Tom Hanks is made, many more people will swallow its spurious message of a Christian conspiracy to obscure the supposed secret of a line of descendants from a very human Jesus and Mary Magdalene and the attendant belief in the sacred feminine. If it is on film and about a cover up, there is enough smoke to prove a fire². Or consider how **the very word icon has changed meaning**; what was a sacred image through which to pass, has come down in the world to a set of computer symbols on toolbars and it has become a way of talking about a fashion leader, media celebrity or sporting hero³. These latter icons are portrayed as people we should aspire to or find meaning through.

Most sources I have looked at recently include the architect and the fashion designer in the world of the arts. They too create worlds for us to inhabit and to which we aspire. It is also clear that the world of music is not only

¹ A starting point for further investigation on these statistics include UK Christian Handbook Religious Trends 3 CRA 2001 and <http://www.mori.com>

² See also Pedr Beckley's Grove Evangelism Series booklet No. 60 on the lure of conspiracy thinking.

³ See Rowan Williams *Lost Icons* T&T Clark Edinburgh 1999 p. 1

highly influential culturally and economically but that different kinds of music are creating their own sub-cultural or tribal identities. Thus, the Top 20 pop chart has been abandoned in early 2005 because there is no one style that is meaningfully popular. I have some memory from 20 years ago of a source claiming that the only future for a post-industrial Britain that could neither compete with low labour market costs from the two-thirds world, nor with the economic muscle of the USA, was to become the entertainment capital of the world. An article this year in *Artisan* cited the three most influential media/arts cities as Los Angeles, New York and London⁴. The shift beyond modernity, the rise of pluralism, the charge against spin and the proliferation of TV and computers all create a swing from verbal to visual in communication, education, popular philosophy and economic life. Keats' closing lines of *Ode on a Grecian Urn*, written in May 1819, is apt for today's world:

*"Beauty is Truth, truth beauty' – that is all
Ye know on earth and all ye need to know."*

Some questions within the arts community

I also detect that the power of image, money and cult of celebrity raises issues of the corruption of art by the overbearing influence of the accountant and advertiser. Art and patronage have had uneasy alliances not least when the paymaster "calls the piper's tune". I pick up that the business world likes to be a patron of the arts because it creates a cultured image. Whether that art is understood is quite another matter. It is, thus, ironic and bizarre, yet memorable because humorous, that the *Orange* mobile phone company have made a series of cinema advertisements poking fun at this tendency. The promotion of biggest and best (measured by box office receipts) also marginalises many others who may have a more penetrating question or subtle comment they wish to offer. I suspect theatre audiences are dwarfed in number by cinema audiences and it is the former that put the sharper questions about life. I was struck by the comment of Nigel Goodwin who founded the Arts Centre Group in 1971, *"The artist is a person gifted to provoke questions."*

*"The artist is a person
gifted to provoke
questions."*

So loose or troublesome ends are airbrushed out of the popular versions of works; I am not alone in thinking that the epic film trilogy *Lord of the Rings* is poorer for eclipsing Tolkien's chapter called *The Scouring of the Shire*.

⁴ See *Artisan* ed. Steve Cole Winter 2005 p. 31

To imagine that to undertake such a journey and to engage in such a conflict can leave a hobbit world untouched is “Disney” not reality. Selling and unselfconscious beauty do not sit easily together. Art is intrinsically connected to beauty. Consider the stories of pressures on young artists who hit fame. Charlotte Church could be a case in point.

If there should be a reaction to increased legislation, regulation and centralisation in government to the power of international companies, or what Rowan Williams called market states⁵, and to the attendant influence of globalisation, then I could imagine **the artists will be in the vanguard of the protest**. I like the flood of images that float though a longer version of a similar point from David Thistlewaite: *“Surely it is the artist, the musician, the poet who tells us what life is like. It is the artist who, time and again, has learned to listen to society’s cry, rather than, with the politicians, to stuff its mouth with the pacifying dummy of short terms comforts. It is the artist who takes the pain of life and refuses the anaesthetic. It is the artist who, while others are sealed inside, sticks his head out of the train window and faces wind and smoke to try and see where it is going.”*⁶

Are we all artists?

Some like Andrew Jones⁷ think that the internet, with everyone able to have a website and free to compose a “blog”, has made authors of us all; all can make their comment to the wider world, if they so choose. My question is, “Who will listen?” For I guess nearly all have the ability to make keyboard strokes and so produce words, but fewer people have the craft to compose creatively and the art to sustain compelling reading.

Perhaps a Christian perspective would say all people have the potential for being creative. This would be one reasonable inference from us being fashioned in the image of God, the ceaseless Creator. So we cook, decorate our houses, write emails and even have bright ideas. But are they beautiful? Where is the form, line and balance? Do they foster appreciation or make

⁵ Dr Rowan Williams *The Dumbleby Lecture December 2002*

⁶ David Thistlewaite *The Art of God and the Religions of Art Solway 1998 p.119. I do not pretend to have plumbed the depths of this book. Rather I have paddled in its shallows and respected it contains far deeper waters.*

⁷ An influential exponent of emerging church thinking and practice.
<http://tallskinnykiwi.typepad.com/>

striking connections? Perhaps **the artist is gifted with a further sense of perspective, a heightened awareness of what works and the instinct to push beyond the previous boundary and yet the work is coherent**.

In the visit I made, two very pragmatic distinctions were made between the creative we all share and the artistic gift some are given. Firstly, has there been formal training that confirmed the gift? Secondly, is a living being made by it, even if it is at the classic artist’s pauper rates?

The arts community is a very loose term for the world of the professional in the arts. As such it represents a network to enter, but not a bounded set of people. As with many networks, the connection and flow are more important than address and place. How is the church to tiptoe into this important slice of life? Where would I find a story that marked a fresh beginning, beyond the *come* mode of being a fashionable West End London church which an actor might frequent or which played host to an art exhibition in a transept?

Intermission starts

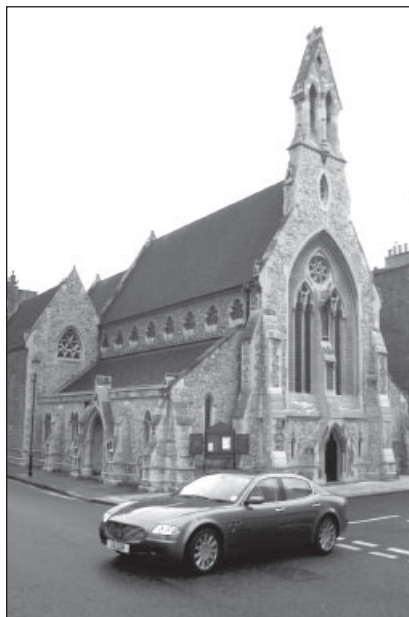


Rob and Janine Gillion

In 1998, the Revd Rob Gillion returned from many years of ministry in Hong Kong. There he and his wife Janine formed and grew *Discovery Bay Community Church* and for ten years he was also an unpaid prison chaplain. The combination was potent. Prison chapel modelled a transforming community finding a focus in a safe place within a dangerous environment. *Discovery Bay* was a church growing from small beginnings in a place where there had been nothing before. Both were **contexts in which people's gifts**

could flourish, where risk was normal with surprises allowed, and in which non-threatening relational evangelism flowed that interpreted the prior quality of Christian community. From 1998-2001, Rob served as advisor in evangelism to the Bishop of Kensington, Rt. Revd. Michael Colclough. Utilising mime, plays, one-man shows, video and a touring bus, they visited a number of church schools. For this work, he was eventually accepted into the Archbishops' College of Evangelists with a focus on arts and media. Building on Hong Kong experience in broadcasting, he regularly joins Terry Wogan at 9.15am on his Radio 2 programme, to give a Pause for Thought.

In this area of London were two parishes with a priest, Michael McGowan, who was unwell. St Simon, Zelotes, in the words of the twin churches' broadsheet *Connections*, "*delights in the traditional liturgy of the Book of Common Prayer; it presents outstanding music from the Anglican choral repertoire, and is known for being warm and welcoming.*" Having met its people during the midweek, I vouch for the last and heard their intelligent passion for the first two. The eclectic congregation of around 100 is of varied ages and boasts a Sunday school. The building within and without is



St. Simon Zelotes

mid-Victorian and enjoys a domestic, rather than grand, ambience not unrelated to its inception as built for the servants of the area. Barely a quarter of a mile away, St Saviour's, tucked behind *Harrods*, was not much more imposing. It was declared redundant in 1996 and the faithful few kept alive a hope that it was not dead but only sleeping. Initial ideas from an architect had been prepared and building work had begun, but illness and slim resources prevented much more. In terms of what happened subsequently, this may have been providential.



St. Saviours

After the death of Mr McGowan, the Bishop, knowing that Rob Gillion's post was coming to an end invited him to become Priest-in-Charge of the two churches, not least because he had helped out there as advisor and by taking services. In addition to maintaining the worship but enlivening the preaching at St Simon's, the Bishop, with a twinkle in his eye, invited Rob to "**do something mischievous**" in the parish. Rob was appointed on September 12th 2001. He recalls as yesterday the sense of cold feet at **the apparently crazy mix of a firmly traditional church and a church "with a blank canvas"**. How were they to be joined in any meaningful way?

The reordering of St Saviour's was completed. The western half of the nave was sold off and has since become a private dwelling, funding most of the development. The eastern half was almost transformed out of all recognition and the flow of the rooms went beyond the previous plans. It became the home of *Intermission* at St Saviour's.

The building is a beehive

I believe the building works as **a highly plausible collection of smaller spaces** on three floors. Entrance is through new doors at ground level in the east wall into a large, tiled open space that was once the sanctuary and the chancel. Immediately on the left is a small but quality bookshop that opens on Saturdays and whenever the church is home to an event or exhibition. Beyond is the stairs leading to the upper floor and then the toilet provision. Ahead, through the chancel screen, is the generous kitchen area. On the



right is a lady chapel that acts as an important reminder of the cherished past and a focus of prayer intention. Further along, and connecting with the kitchen, is a carpeted room set up with lighting and hanging to facilitate the main space in art exhibitions within the whole building.

The quietly imposing staircase comes up to a glassed landing at a new mezzanine level. On this floor, Rob has his own office which doubles as a vestry and Janine works full-time as administrator in her own office at the other end of the corridor. Beyond the glass, the main space used for public

worship is visible. Here the angels that used to be atop the columns are now among the other worshippers. Unlike the initial plan for a preaching and teaching centre with dominant pulpit and pews, **the first floor envelope has been kept very flexible.** Normally, there are at least four separate spaces, each with a circle or semi-circle of chairs and a focal point. However, the top floors can work also as one space. To the north, the focal point is the font; to the west, it's a floor-to-ceiling painting by Emma Tunmore of the angel Gabriel.

Upstairs is a gallery that is its own upper room and in the middle is found the largest circle of chairs which is the normal roosting place of the various congregations throughout the week. On the chancel is the old high altar but it is cleverly cut to half its previous width to reduce dominance. The same cannot be said for a mammoth stone pulpit, beloved of English Heritage but not many others, which at least facilitates *deus ex machina* interventions in plays.

Throughout, the colours are pale, yet warm and neutral; that is not surprising if you want to hang works of art on them. Somehow the overall effect reminded me of a beehive; each shape or place does its own work and yet, more importantly, they are interlinked in a honeycomb and together produce something more than a sum of the parts. **The beehive is a home to a working community,** some spending their lives within, others foraging and bringing back what they gather. I guess this will remain a church of many, small, interconnecting facets. **It is never intended to become a big church and this is part of its charisma.**

Why such a reordering?

Spaces should reflect a vision. Having tried to describe the building physically, compare that with the blurb from the broadsheet *Connections*: “*Refurbished after years of redundancy to combine the traditional and contemporary in architecture and in worship, St Saviour’s provides ‘a holy space’ – an oasis where you can drop in and spend some quiet time in prayer and reflection, as well as seeing exhibitions of art and performances of drama, music and dance, complemented by lectures and workshops by Christians in the arts.*”

This building acts as a place to relax and be refreshed. When I remarked that the building actually smells nice, Janine Gillion smiled with that “I’ve something to do with this” look and told a story of a woman coming out the female toilets in tears, overcome that it was the first time she had seen flowers in such a part of a public venue. This sense of care and safety is echoed by nine year old Rhys Nordstrom: “*I go to St Saviour’s on Sunday because I like looking at the people in the stained glass. And it smells nice. I like the people at church because they are really nice to me and I can ask Rob my questions...like when is it God’s birthday and who gives God presents? And I help Rob to set the table with the bread and wine.*”

Rob adds that this child was not trained to the latter role but simply came out of the congregation and wanted to be involved in this way. Live theatre you might say.

Holy Space

From the visit and conversations, the key words are *holy space*. In an interview for a Church Times article by Theo Hobson, published in January 2004, Rob remarked, “*I thought, let’s see if we can create a church which welcomes the artist – a space for them to come and share their faith through their art.*”

There are various strands here that have since become more teased out as distinct values. **St Saviour’s is not an arts centre.** In more traditional language, it remains a house of prayer and a parish church. *Holy spaces*

are not for rent or hire; it cannot be booked. However, like the monasteries, this *holy space* has a significant role of hospitality. An artist may be invited or asked to exhibit, but a **counter-cultural gift economy** is practised between St Saviour’s and the artist. The church space is given and the artist in turn is asked to give one of the pieces of art to become an on-going part of the life lived in the space and its unfolding history. Deciding who comes is another value. It is a space for Christian artists to share their faith through their art and to be the best they can be from a base line of a quality to which either the Gillions (or people whose judgement the Gillions trust) will testify. This is not a showcase for the well meaning but incompetent.

In addition, the *holy space* is not a passive bare wall or empty room that the artist can simply dictate how it shall be used. **The space has its own economy and history.** Both Janine and Rob, in that order for she has an eye for this and acts, in part, as an events manager, work with the incoming artist to find the creative way the building and the incoming pieces will read each other well. Most who have come have instantly respected this. It is also an outworking of a further value that **the exhibitions which come to the holy space spring from relational contact, not promotional opportunity.** Hospitality is their ministry but that doesn’t mean becoming a door mat with “welcome” printed on it. The space has to be guarded so that it stays holy, not in the sense of pious withdrawal but of being wholesome and holistic. If art is about truth and so about life, then **the very processes by which exhibitions arrive and work, must also exhibit truthful values about relationships between persons in a given space.** The events which are staged come, thus far, from a wide variety of styles of painting, dance, one man shows, sculpture, theatre productions, a fashion show, contemporary music, designer jewellery and performance poetry. There are often more than one a month, but with gaps in summer holiday periods.

The three muses

In addition to the exhibitions, there has been a *resident artist* for seven months of each year, from September to June. Carla Moss, an installation artist, came first followed by Jessica Layton, a lighting designer and



Carla Moss, Jessica Layton, Sarah de Nordwall

sculptor. This year, the performance poet Sarah de Nordwall is in residence, which includes, if necessary, a studio space and a chance to exhibit. All are Christians but from all kinds of denominations and none. It sounds very organised but it isn't. Each *resident artist* emerged from the artistic ether and found St Saviour's. All are asked to reflect at the end of the year, at an *Intermission* event, their view of the experience. I see that this arrangement is a deeper intentional intertwining of church with the arts world and a longer experience of welcome, nurture and partnership. Jessica in the 2004 Church Times article spoke of the way the atmosphere inspires her:

"I think working at a church is a really good stimulus for an artist. So much modern art is trapped in a negative view of life, and this is a way of breaking out of that, because there's lots going on here that's to do with joy and hope."

Space for hope

This theme of hope as a contribution of the artist with Christian faith rose to the surface in a number of conversations over the days of my visit. The Gillions look for the elements of hope and quality in the work of artists selected to exhibit. It is not difficult to see it is a commodity that is in short supply in a suffering world and the extent of that suffering makes hope seem trite or unconvincing. Bishop Richard Harries acknowledges something of this pressure towards the end of his book *Art and the Beauty of God*, *"'All that consoles is fake' wrote Iris Murdoch and something within us responds. Yet the Christian can and must say something different"*⁸. He locates that different response in three considerations that help us live with the pain of pain. God has chosen to make the world with genuine independence and it is hard to see how it could be otherwise. God has come among us in Christ and shares our anguish to the depth of the darkness of the Cross. The Resurrection is a sign and promise of hope that in the end the purpose of love will prevail⁹. Even put in these verbal terms it all sounds rather too confident and a knock-down argument against the problem of evil. Harries, of course, would not be that crass. If such values can be translated into poetry and paint, into drama and dance, the sheer sideways take might give those without hope a pause for thought. My sense is that **the arts have a prophetic role to play in a society searching for meaning and**

⁸ Richard Harries *Art and the Beauty of God – a Christian Understanding* Mowbray 1993 p.145.
I confess I have also dipped my toe into this volume and wish I had time to do it justice.

⁹ *Ibid* p.135

hope. Sarah de Nordwall cherishes the hope she could act as a bard; the poetry I heard was so playful yet sharp, that she may find the jester is the outfit she will sometimes wear. Perhaps the decline of Christendom has reached such a point that the Christian voice is undoubtedly not the trusted councillor to the Kings of this world; nor is it the sought voice of the spiritual guru. **We may be reduced to jesters yet that piping powerlessness is also licence not to be entirely controlled and dare to jest before now greater powers.**

Space for a safe platform

Rob Gillion from his work as an actor and theatre director, knows artists have **a sense of being on the margin**. There are various levels of this. There is the sense of only being as good as your last performance/piece. (Writers of booklets can sympathise with this.) There is sensitivity to criticism and a paper thin security of fulsome praise - the "darling, you were marvellous" syndrome. They can feel that others outside the arts community want them to perform all the time and don't know how to treat them as normal people not celebrities. Then there is the gap between the public persona and the private face.

There are two sides to this. There is the platform for artists to be, to come, to chill out and to feel safe enough to dare to be vulnerable and open. This is one interpretation of the word *Intermission*. It is a space in a busy life, a breathing space, a time between acts, to be refreshed, to chat about the experience of the early acts of the play and to go back better equipped to re-engage. It is a space for stepping back and thinking about what is going on. **Some see Intermission as a well** – deep and quiet.

"I'm walking now to a place of sanctuary

To a world between the worlds

An Intermission

Between Spirit and symbol

A space for meditation

On the Gospel of peace.

There is a well in Walton place

Dug by devoted hands

And filled by praying and imaginative hearts

Who drenched themselves
In love
And cared for nothing else but grace.
Here, time is Nowhere
For a little space.

The door stands open
And the sun is blinding
As I enter in.

To die, perhaps, is nothing more than this.

Eternity
Begins."¹⁰



Emma Turnmore with Gabriel

I agree but think it is only one side of the coin. *Intermission* also sounds like “into mission” and is suggestive of mission between partners. This is true here. Take the story of Emma Turnmore. Trained as a dancer with roles in *Tommy*, *Cats*, *Chicago*, *Fosse*, *Anything Goes* and more recently *The Producers*, she has diversified into a venture called *Urban Angels*. This is a street dance company with shows that go into prisons, schools and church outreach events. Emma takes up the story:

“This led me wonderfully to Rob Gillion. His vision for Intermission is one where the arts are nurtured, blessed and brought into God’s care. Rob, being Rob, supports Urban Angels and on meeting him he asked me the catalytic question, ‘What do you want to do next?’”

This is **the enabling question** which offers people scope to build on from where they are and gives them a place, and a space, in which it could happen. Emma was finding a rekindling of her passion for painting and seeing this expressed through “vibrant colour and envisioned imagery”. But the urge to exhibit was scary and a rather bold statement to make.

¹⁰ Extracts from *Underground to the Well* by Sarah de Nordwall. For full text, visit www.intermission.org.uk

Yet through Rob’s encouragement and the provision of a platform at *Intermission* for two weeks at the end of October and the beginning of November 2004, her exhibition called *Where We Stand* happened. Part of the mission is giving Christian artists a platform from which to communicate. As **in all cross-cultural mission, the indigenous people will be those who stand a good chance of being heard in their own culture.** This group speak “art”.

Space cannot be crowded and remain space

Janine told me a powerful tale in respecting space. Over a short period of time, a lady mysteriously dressed in a hat and chiffon scarf that totally obscured her face came to *Intermission* events. Rather than join a circle she sat at the back and was allowed this apparently deviant behaviour. One week she disappeared and only months later wrote in deep appreciation. Her face was being reconstructed after some trauma hence the garb. *“Thank you that nobody asked me questions”* was her comment.



Rob and Emma



Mel Lloyd

This community in this building know about space for pictures and installations. Nothing is crowded, fussy, or cramped. Even words need white space around them to communicate powerfully. The same is true for dealing with people. **Space between people needs respect and should not be overridden by specious**

demands for community and belonging. I will comment more on this later in the year when trying to tackle the topic of a new monasticism.

The dancer in mid-air



The more visits I make to fresh expressions of church, the more convinced I become that **beginnings are more than chronological starts. Genesis is, presumably, linguistically related to genetics.** Oddly, in so many stories, there is something like DNA being laid down which needs noticing as its messages will and should reappear. The biblical record shows me similar dynamics in the Exodus tale, the birth narratives of Jesus, and the callings of prophets and apostles. Going on any research visit, I begin by knowing that I don't understand what is going on in the community I travel to meet. There is a secret to become disclosed, a mystery to enter and a dynamic to uncover. Sometimes the group themselves only dimly see beneath their activity to their specific identity. As I listen, probe and enquire, something starts to happen to bring focus to us all.

The building was officially opened and Rob inducted as incumbent by Bishop Michael in January 2002. The legalities of tolling the bell and placing in the stall happened downstairs and then the fun started. The assembled company processed upstairs to the upper room where the vision of *Intermission* was to be reflected in the liturgical acts. Subdued lighting gave way to theatrical light revealing a dancer suspended in a cradle within the roof timbers. Launched on a wire she danced at balcony height, seeming to float in mid-air. Was this representation meant to be the Spirit, Jesus or just a good fairy? In darkness, she descended and disappeared. The Bishop was open-mouthed with delight and surprise. Actors read noble biblical passages, the Bishop sprinkled all in sight with holy water and, it being Epiphany, images of the three wise men were brought forward and mounted on a large blank canvas. Their demeanour, not just what they



The Dancer by Billy

carried, posed questions: what do we do with our gifts, with our desire to pray and with the reality of suffering? They are good questions in mission to artists by artists in a spiritual age.

However, it was the dancer that puzzled and entranced me by appearing from nowhere, dancing in the air not on the ground and disappearing from sight. Why was this somehow iconic and what might it signify? A chance remark from Rob a day or two later offered a clue. Talking about artists, he spoke of how itinerant they could be, living, almost without families; it was **inherently a migratory life of coming and going.** Suddenly a connecting metaphor suggested itself. It was not so much that *Intermission* at St Saviour's was a beehive of small places connected to collect sweetness and where many were hard at work; it was something else with dynamics that were more loose, more fluid but equally creative and sustaining.

A nesting place for wild birds

It seems to me that if mission shapes church, then **the shapes of a particular church will be legitimately influenced by the patterns of those to whom we go in mission.** Perhaps the dancer was not just an artist, but *the* typified artist – not a Jesus or Spirit figure at all. She blew in from outside, gave us her gifts and departed the stage. **The artist is the wild bird of our society and our problem in mission to wild things is that so many churches are cages for tame budgies.** Church is so often measured by weekly attendance. Our base statistics work on this premise. Much renewal and evangelism is about increasing frequency of commitment and so attendance. Most denominations think of church as *gathered* and only *dispersed* because it was first gathered. Not being there is almost as bad as taking absence without leave.

No bird watcher or ecologist thinks any worse of a migratory bird that is not at its nesting grounds for the rest of the year. It is doing its thing and that is to be celebrated. How would you know if a church for wild birds was working? Not by weekly attendance, certainly. I'd look for two things. What are the longer rhythms in the patterns of returning? When they come do they breed because their sanctuary is a safe place? Forgive the glib statement, but artists breed art and further artists. **All gifts tend to**

The artist is the wild bird of our society and our problem in mission to wild things is that so many churches are cages for tame budgies.

multiply themselves which is a message as old as Ephesians chapter 4. So the small places around the building are nests not bee cells. What do you find in nests but eggs? Funnily, those little spaces are occupied by art and somebody gave birth to each one of them. This is indeed *holy space* where life and creativity flourish. This space as a platform is both a sanctuary for the wild birds and a breeding ground that their song may be continued.

Was this why, days before, Rob told me with commendable reluctance, of a literal vision (something he had seen in his mind) at the time of conceiving the values and shapes that became the re-ordered St Saviour's?. He saw **an eagle hovering and a map unfolding**. Once more, here is the wild bird motif and some uncertainty of what will appear. Throughout the visit, I was struck by the vulnerability and fragility of the unfolding journey for all involved. There is no guaranteed succession of events to mount. **The artists fly wild and widely, not in every Sunday circles**. For performance artists, Sunday morning could actually be their worst time of the week. Numbers at St Saviour's are not impressive and it is easy to wonder if it is working. Spontaneity and gut feeling are good short-term friends but they can feel tiring long-term companions. Fragility is real for the guardians of the wild birds' nesting ground, as it is for the artists themselves. That identification sounds to me like good missionary enculturation, even if it is not comfortable.



The Arts Warriors

I listen to the wild birds

Did this metaphor also make sense of conversations with two groups of artists during my visit? A number of groups of Christians in the arts use St Saviour's as a mutually convenient place to meet. One such is the alarmingly named *Arts Warriors*, who in reality are modest, human, delightfully open and gracious. They have two concerns.

One concern is the way the world of the arts and media is controlled by the powerful few.

They know that the arts are not value free and have enormous influence. They long for Christians to come into places of influence and to support them there, one to one, without trumpeting their status. The questions posed to Cabinet Minister Ruth Kelly about her involvement with *Opus Dei*

illustrate current sensitivities. As such, they seek, in a benign sense, to permeate the arts world with some Christian yeast.

The other concern is their conviction that the arts are high on God's agenda because of their influence but also because they see the arts as a window that many look through to examine today's issues. However, they regret this is not broadly the view in the church. The *Arts Warriors* offered me some headlines of why church and artists don't mix easily. They sense **the church is uneasy with the arts because the former cannot control the output of the latter** and are nervous of the bohemian reputation of the artist lifestyle. Artists fear the church only wants art for utilitarian purposes, put bluntly, "to get people in". They argue the church at large is ignorant of art, its disciplines and purpose, and that it abuses artists, in the sense of expecting them to give their craft for nothing. Art is viewed as not serious but as a hobby activity, like ladies of leisure doing third rate water colours in their drawing rooms. Artists sense that those of them who have become Christians while in their artistic profession, are forgiven for being there, in the sense that they knew no better and because the church is desperate to have famous people who convert. **Returned prodigals are so much more exciting than stay-at-home older brothers**. This compounded sense of disease was epitomised in the heartfelt comment that erupted from one of them, as they sensed I might be safe, **"I go into church with only 30% of who I am"**. How many others might identify with that sentiment? All had been schooled in the belief that meetings of artists could not be church and that only congregations could be that. Now I noted that they were questioning this dogma, still in transition, nervous of my response to whether anything else could be church. I mentally added them to my growing list. This is one more group, along with youth, those finding spiritual life in small groups, mature working women more spiritual than their vicars, those whose life is centred in work, those turning to new monastic communities and those simply leaving, **all of whom are joining the running current that erodes the sandcastle labelled "only congregation is church"**. Within the metaphor of this issue, I am not surprised that the wild birds sense



traditional church feels like a cage. They were born to fly, not simply to sit and chirp on demand.

Exhibitors comment

Rob and Janine also arranged for me to meet a selection of those who had exhibited at *Intermission*. Intrigued by the “30% of who I am” cry from the first group, I asked them to react to it. Emma echoed the battle to survive and also the opportunities they have. *Intermission* was seen as an unusual haven. More often, **artists find themselves in a cross fire**. The Christians ask how they can combine faith and a career in the arts. Those in the arts world assume that to be Christian must be to be repressed¹¹, thus it must be impossible to be both Christian and truly artistic. To be free in this *holy space* was intensely valued. “*You are not required to do anything. You are not being a fraud*”, said one. “*If you live in London, you are dying for community*”, said another. By contrast, traditional church was experienced as disapproving and scared some of them. Its preponderance of words and books in services was oppressive along with the way it seemed obsessed with the past. Stephen echoed how his church had reduced art to tools for evangelism; he expressed his delight that now he could come as himself and the other 70% no longer had to be held within his private world.

To exhibit within *Intermission* is highly subversive of both cross fire critiques. Emma and Julia noted how outsiders from various walks of life dare to come to the exhibitions and, in particular, the invited private viewings, and are astonished that they love it. They recognize that the quality of art and the standard of exhibition are professional. Better yet, it is done for pleasure, not primarily to sell. At the same time, they noted a strong sense of “being at home” with the host community. The roles of the Gillions who “*give all visitors the time of day*” were generously praised. **The exhibiting artists found they were part of a community**. Together they were making this event take off; it was not minister dependent. Words visitors used such as “amazed”, “relaxed”, “cool” and “quiet”, showed their pleasure and surprise. Genuine conversations unfolded and people ventured beyond the frontal persona problem that curses the arts community. In this sense, the exhibitions are expressions of open-ended, incarnational mission. Seeds are sown with trust, to wait and see what may come.

¹¹ A charge echoed in the quotations from opponents of Christianity collected by Leonard Sweet in his *Out of the Question and Into the Mystery* Waterbrook Press 2004

The artists also find that here they can more consciously connect art and faith. Julia found being asked to talk about her work at a weekly meditation gave her a sense of “bringing things together”. However, although it was pleasurable, it was risky. Julia remarked, “*Being accepted as you are is very important as you stand beside what you are with your art, with the thought “Is it good enough?”*”. **Art is vulnerable because you pour your soul into it.** (So is that why I’m embarrassed to show people the railway in the cellar?)

Antonia spoke of her desire to connect the divine and the mundane, by contrast to the commonly held view of religion as “rules that don’t work for me”, though spirituality is thought to be all right. One way she expresses this is through her *Jesus on the Tube* paintings which are normally individually commissioned, putting a specific family and how they wish to see themselves on tube train seats with a Russian iconic Jesus sitting among them. Here is art posing questions and breaking down walls with joy, love and humour. **Art simultaneously connects and disturbs.**



Antonia Rolls

Many found that friends were surprised to discover they were believers, instantly expected the “hard sell” and even said that was what they were waiting for. However, when they met the artistic work first, this was a far better, genuine interchange and a culturally fitting prompter of open questions.

Once more, I sensed that wild birds had found a safe nesting and breeding ground. **Here was a place to play, to find resonance, to be with fellow kind, to share work and ideas in a non-competing environment.** The language they fell to for this place and its community was tranquil: simple, quiet, calm, able to listen, free. This *holy space* does seem like a nesting place for those who gravitate by homing instinct to its sanctuary, who like the wandering wise men bring their treasures, who here have their own creativity and craft affirmed and so are reinvigorated to fly away to follow their course. I guess that assisting artists to fly could be a good calling, but the supporting church must not take fright at how far they might go.

So what is *Intermission*?

One church broadsheet answer is “a faith community going beyond the walls of its home. It is a community of Christian artists and worshippers, committed to the deeper understanding of God through the arts.” Another version reads, “*Intermission* is a faith community that will serve Christian artists. It is committed to support, pray for, respect and encourage artists within the peace of a sacred space. Within this space, they can express their faith by inspiring and entertaining audiences through the brilliant creativity of God.”

I suspect this understanding is still unfolding, like the map Rob saw at the start. The sense of community beyond the walls is crucial, the place of art is essential and the value of service is underlined. Yet are the artists the beneficiaries or members? Is *Intermission* a service to others, or is it a different kind of church? As the visit unfolded, it became gradually clearer that **Intermission is church, not just an arm of church. Quite properly, the church word is not being used** as there is far too much interference on the line for the true meaning to be heard behind the inherited crackle. But if church has a dynamic cycle of gathering and dispersing, of being called out and sent on, that is happening here. The difference is that the cycles and the journeys are longer. If church is Jesus-centred community and mission, nurtured through worship that expresses both, then across the many little spaces in the building, in the exhibitions and the varying meetings through the week, I think that is what I see happening.

As Rob expressed it in *Connections* for Easter 2005, “*Art exhibitions, musical evenings and theatrical or dance performances are the life blood of this church, providing a holy space, an intermission, for us to express and enjoy these gifts of God*”.

St Saviour’s and *Intermission* are two different groupings

Perhaps there is prose and poetry here. The prose is what I would call **the monastery congregation**. These are the settled ones, the regulars whose focus is 9am Sunday morning. Through the week, they are hosts of the building, welcoming, praying, catering, and facilitating. In that sense,

they too entertain, sacrificing themselves to make their guests from the arts community feel special by the service of hospitality, and ensure the *holy space* is entered as gift, not a rental option.

The pilgrim gatherings of the wild birds range across several manifestations. The midweek meditations, some weekly, some monthly, can draw people for whom Sunday is the wrong day. The presence of the resident artists is iconic for others and part of their own pilgrimage in connecting art, faith and witness. The exhibitions may be like festivals with an inherent seasonality. For a time they are high profile but then they disappear. All are bringing gifts not just needing space. They too entertain, not in the sense of welcoming guests, but through their crafted art, bring pleasure, evoke wonder and provoke questions.

The interlinked expressions, at their best, offer mutual service by different gifts to one another and to whoever else will come. Gift economy simply makes an offer, whereas market economy woos customers and seeks a profit. The more all facets of *Intermission* see each others’ contribution within this very specific way of being church, the more coherent and compelling will be the ebbing and flowing community that traces an interweaving dance through any given year as the wild birds fly in and out.

Further questions remain

Does the term administrator for Janine Gillion fail to do justice to her creative and guardian role in the *holy space*? Is she really events manager or even guardian of the *holy space*? Why choose such a prosaic term thus far?

Could it be that the longer journey here is not the well worn path of getting arts into the church, but a deeper, subversive mission-shaped journey of taking church into the arts? **How can church “on the wing” be fostered, not just church “in the nest”?** If church is grown where people gather, and shaped by how they do this, these questions are not illegitimate, even though the answers will be unusual. Part of this, in due time, could be through evolving **bishop and abbot roles** on the Celtic monastic pattern. The birds will need a bishop who may travel with them and be church on the wing with them. The hosting monastic group will need an abbot, to care for the quality of community that must underlie their important service. Is Rob the first? If so, who will be the second?

Can this be transferred elsewhere? (I should hate for it to be photocopied; that would not be artistic!) I guess if the values can be created elsewhere, it needs a leader who knows the arts world, a catchment where enough artists cluster and a generous community who will be the monastery. How is the abbot to build the regular community who, in turn, feed the wild birds and guard their habitat? Can this group become large enough to be self-sustaining in a wider church that now has to ask hard questions about what buildings remain open? How can the wild birds not become consumers of *Intermission*, but those who can recognise home, build nests to which they return, honour this *holy space* for that role, and reproduce their art and their gifts in others, making it the fruitful nest it should be? If the existing dynamics are nourished and these questions are handled well, then *Intermission* will lead to some very good second acts indeed. Let the play roll on.

George Lings

April 2005

Cartoons: Tim Sharp

Further Resources

Art and the Beauty of God Richard Harries Mowbray 1993

The Art of God and the Religions of Art David Thistlewaite Solway 1998

Lost Icons Rowan Williams T&T Clark 1999

The Arts in your Church Fiona Bond Piquant 2001

Quiet Spaces Rob Gillion BRF (to be published in Spring 2006)

www.intermission.org.uk

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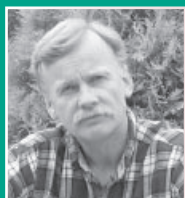
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