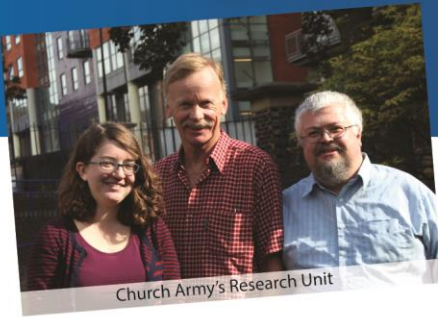


snapshots

stories from the edge

by Church Army's Research Unit



by George Lings –
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Foundations and calling

Mark Broomhead, the founder of The Order of the Black Sheep (TOBS), was born in 1971. Looking back across his life it is not difficult to see the beginnings of the apparently disparate strands that have become connected and significant in what has emerged since 2006.



His parents shifted from nominal faith to a charismatic/evangelical persuasion when he was four, so a Christian home is one element. From the age of five to 21 he lived in Nailsea, North Somerset, and was part of the local

Issue 4: Welcoming the black sheep

Anglican church led for many years by John Simons. (Oddly enough, I know John because we both were called out of work for the Bank of England into life in the Church of England.) Having made a profession of faith at the age of eight, Mark was later part of the youth group, yet also at home in the adult church as a member of Deanery Synod. This is one instance of what seems like his effortless ability to combine unlikely elements as though they were entirely natural.

This trait continued, in that from the years eight to 12 he discovered and appreciated the music of the heavy metal band Judas Priest. I admit complete ignorance of this band and genre. That academically dubious yet ubiquitous source of information, Wikipedia, tells me that after inauspicious years since their founding in 1969, Judas Priest made their mark around 1980 and the years immediately following. An album of that time, *British Steel*, is said to be their long-term best seller. This induction to that overall culture, with attendant dress and patterns of socialising, followed in Mark's teenage years. It provoked the question, sharper in those days, of whether - let alone how - heavy metal and Christian faith could be combined. He felt faced with a split: do I lose my faith or destroy my vinyl? On the other hand, why leave either; rather, hold them together even if others find it odd. In this he was helped in that both family and the local church were loving, accepting and supportive, if not always understanding. So, a pattern began to emerge. One might say that this black sheep was unselfconsciously wandering around the rest of the flock, or maybe he just knew being a black sheep is equally normal. Mark and a few friends wanted to express their Christian faith within this cultural

genre and formed a “thrash metal”¹ band called Detritus. They had some success, winning a Battle of the Bands, producing a demo record, playing at the Greenbelt festival and in clubs, and one song made it to sixth in the rock charts. Their first album, produced by Kingsway, was taken up by mainstream label Music For Nations, who then had international giants such as Metallica, Slayer and Megadeth on their books. This illustrates the two worlds which they spanned and inhabited. The band broke up in 1992.



He met Sarah, who became his wife in 1993, through friends. After completing a degree related to agriculture and food, he worked as a secondary school food technology teacher and eventually started a family. By then they had moved to North East Derbyshire and a second heavy metal band, Fire Fly, had formed with his brother-in-law Simon. Sarah was also a playing member for some time. Articles about it can still be found on the web.

“Fire Fly have built up a reputation among Christian hard music devotees as being the UK scene’s premier pioneers of impossible-to-pigeonhole hard rock music. While many bands have chased their creative tails churning out increasingly tired nu metal and hardcore sounds, Fire Fly - Simon Bibby (vocals, guitar), Mark Broomhead (bass), Scott James

¹ I learnt that this was an extreme subgenre of heavy metal music characterised by its fast tempo and overall aggression, perhaps at its peak of popularity in the late 1980s.

(keyboards) and Ben Griffiths (drums) - have developed a sound which is genuinely original.”²

Despite these and other positive comments they were not signed up. So they recorded in their own rented studio in Chesterfield and sold through iTunes. Yet, then and now, Mark reflects that they were too Christian for the main metal scene and too metal for the Christian one. Thus there was a strange gap between doing European-wide gigs and even gigs in the USA, and life in a relatively staid local church. Maybe being a black sheep in the flock wasn’t so easy.

To throw ropes across the gap, they began Embryo, which by 2005 was a quarterly and then monthly worship event. It toured locally and devotees followed. They drew upon the experience of leading worship at festivals such as Living Water, Greenbelt and Meltdown. The next twist of the story was to go to the local vicar, Matt Barnes who was faced with a declining evening service about to close. The concept proposed was of a charismatic/evangelical heavy metal service, complete with visuals and a sermon. As Mark put it to me this year, it was “New Wine on acid”. This would become Sanctum, as we shall see.

Mark is a modest introvert who plays down his story. For the 2008 journal *Anglican Witness* he succinctly summed up those years: “I have been involved in the ‘heavy metal’ music scene since my teens and have played in several bands so it has been very much part of who I am for many years.” I had no idea of the high profile those brief words contained. It also goes further.

That interest developed in giving back to the culture he values. He and others have for some years been helping to lead the welfare provision at the annual Bloodstock festival.³ They offer a Christian presence in the festival, in a tent next to the medics, not unlike the style and work of Street Pastors in town centres.

² http://www.crossrhythms.co.uk/articles/music/Fire_Fly_The_UK_hard_rock_band/15760/p1

³ The current advert on the net for the 2015 version reads: “Bloodstock Open Air is the UK’s biggest independent metal festival. Held at the picturesque location of Walton on Trent in Derbyshire, it has won the hearts and minds of fans of heavy rock and metal by consistently showcasing the strongest metal line-up on UK soil.”

Mark informs me that it's one of the main annual heavy metal music festivals, and the more specialist end of the market with Viking metal, satanic metal and pirate metal. I noted the band names playing there have an interesting range of aura, from deep black to bright white.

Behind all this, another strand lurked in the background. From as early as the age of 18, Mark wondered from time to time about ordination. By 2006 he was in the selection process for ordination and, with the encouragement of the Bishop of Derby, Alastair Redfern, was eventually designated one of the first cohort of Ordained Pioneer Ministers.

The journey continues

Sanctum, the prototype

Prior to ordination, the first part of Mark's mixed mode training and curacy was spent at Clay Cross and Danesmoor, working as a full time lay member of staff. The area is two parts of one ex-mining town, six miles south of Chesterfield and five miles west of the M1. It has seen more prosperous days, initially mining coal and iron in the nineteenth century, and latterly focusing on ironworking and brick making. The major employment it provided in these industries finally closed down in 2000.

Here, Mark was part of planting Sanctum. It was what I would generically call a fresh expression of Church, starting in the summer of 2006, but its sharper identity was as a rock music orientated congregation, made up of about 25 people. It went through various evolutions including an attempt to form a graft within the overall parish, with the Danesmoor St Barnabas centre, which did not work as well as hoped. Perhaps the combination did not work for either party. However, attendance grew to a zenith of 55 people in 2009. Mark adds that many of these were imported, not local, as there was nothing like its approach and worship in the wider area. After he and others left in 2010 to move to Chesterfield, the numbers began to dwindle, as it ceased to prioritise being attractational and tried to be missional to the immediate area. When our Church Army team took a record of it in 2012 for our database there were only 16 people and Mark thinks the remnant may now be back into the parent church.

In retrospect, Mark thinks it was the wrong context for such an alternative approach; the setting was too traditional, with few people from alternative cultures. Nevertheless it taught lessons about errors to avoid, such as: attracting

"blenders" (that is, existing Christians who also worship elsewhere); providing what became worship entertainment rather than a focus of discipleship and community development; and not paying enough attention to context before starting out. It also taught that most journeys in mission have plenty of ups and downs. The learning included the need for a focus on God and one another in community without becoming selfish. However, it is not to be dismissed as a prototype that never even flew. Young people met with God, some are still going forward with Christ and have become resource people for other churches. As such, it was good while it lasted. During that period the wider theological landscape also changed, becoming more accepting of diversity, thus helping to open the doors for the next step.

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When his vicar, Matt Barnes, moved on in 2008 to Brampton in Chesterfield, the next appointment to Clay Cross was unsuccessful and so, brief. Mark had to take a lead in two interregna and felt he should now move on to give space to the next successor. Although this move would be the final year during his long curacy, through mixed mode training based at St John's Nottingham, the Bishop of Derby, Alastair Redfern, was very supportive of the proposal that Mark, Sarah and family move to Chesterfield in order to set up a new community to be called The Order of the Black Sheep, or TOBS, and for him to gain wider ministerial experience. An example of the open partnership that already existed was a CD which Fire Fly recorded for the bishop's appeal in 2009, in which he paid for the production, called *Gloria*. Entertainingly, it effectively made the diocese a record company, which was novel. It was an album of Christmas carols (with a "metal" feel) which raised a great deal of money for the appeal.⁴ The diocese generously

⁴ Those wanting to listen to a sample or buy the song can go to:
<https://itunes.apple.com/gb/album/firefly/id347467188>
or
<http://www.amazon.com/Firefly-Gloria/dp/B0037ZLLWG>

provided a house in the Brampton area where they still live and it is an effective base; it is far enough from where the church gathers to have family space and near enough to be used for some meetings.

The move to Chesterfield

Context

Let me set some context for those who don't know the area. Chesterfield is the second largest town in Derbyshire with some 103,000 inhabitants (2011 census). It has a long historic past and the Chester part of its name infers Roman origins. It has undergone massive change in the last 30 years, losing 15,000 jobs from 1981-2002, among people employed in the coal industry. Secondary manufacturing industries used to have a wide span: mining equipment, a sawmill, Glass-making, automotive and aerospace components through GKN, a global engineering group, Robinson's who specialise in paper-based packaging, and the sweet-makers Trebor who merged with Bassett's of Sheffield and were later taken over by Cadbury. Overall, manufacturing has fallen by one-third since 1991, although there are still small scale firms on the newer out-of-town industrial estates.

If those changes present economic downturn and challenges, the growth has been in the tertiary sector and an administrative section of the Royal Mail - Post Office, which is now the largest employer. The town boasts the largest open-air market in Britain, open three days a week. Opposite is the Pavements Shopping Centre area opened in 1981 by the Prince and Princess of Wales. It is complemented now by the newer Vicar Lane area; this open-air shopping centre hosts a large number of smaller shops and national chain stores. There are also restaurants and cafés of several nationalities. Cultural life is stimulated by a multi-purpose cinema, a theatre, a museum, a symphony orchestra, street art and sculptures. A little out of town is one of the newer Tesco Extra superstores.

Choice

The aim in the written proposal, accepted by the bishop and diocese, was to find and rent a building that would fit culturally for "alternatives" and be a safe space for those who had been hurt by the church, castigated for their heavy metal dress code, even branded demonic without trial, and told to change or leave. To be accessible it would need to be near the

developing town centre. The term "alternative" is suggestive but loose. As Mark put it:

"The 'alternative' subculture is a difficult one to describe but it has grown from the 1950s and 1960s teddy boys, through mods, rockers, hippies and people who generally feel themselves to be on the edge of society and don't fit in with the 'in' crowd. These days there are all kinds of different expressions of it, whether it's heavy metal, goths, bikers or skaters – all sorts of things."

The building chosen for the base is just off the Vicar Lane area; it acts as one of the social hubs of this town, which is re-inventing itself and contains a much wider mixture of people than could be found in Clay Cross. So it made sense to move there in order to be in contact with the particular social groups that might be called "alternative" and were absent in Clay Cross, but were clearly around in the centre of Chesterfield.



The move meant staying within a diocese that knew him and liked what he was trying to do, and beyond that, in an area Mark has long known. It is slightly odd therefore that Chesterfield represents more of a Nazareth than a Galilee and that has sometimes been troublesome for pioneers. Yet at other times it brings deep cultural understanding and acceptance, which is what has happened here, assisted by Mark already having significant relationships with people within Chesterfield.

What's in two names?

In an interview for *Anglican Witness* in 2008, Mark talked about TOBS in these terms:

"I chose the name, or the name chose me, because a black sheep was for many years seen as the worthless sheep of the flock, the one that couldn't produce any wool that was worth anything. In Medieval times it was even seen by some as a sign of the satanic. I really pray that The Order of the Black Sheep will be a home for the marginalised, for members of the alternative community who feel a little bit like the black sheep in society – and the church. Our motto will be along the lines of 'better a black sheep than a goat'."

The name has some cache and has fared well. Several stages of the story have been told through the Fresh Expressions website between 2011 and 2013. The name was chosen with the intention to both disturb and comfort. Presumably self-sufficient, "comfortable" white sheep will experience the former and possibly "disturbed" fellow black sheep rejoice in the latter. The website anticipates it could be a paranoid name: "We don't want to create a community of people moping about licking their wounds, more a community of people proud to wear their scars as a sign of God's grace and healing."

Its profile has led to many requests for visits and placements. So much so that the community has tended to restrict them to ones within the diocese and to cut off what could be called "fresh expressions of Church tourism". A working alternative to enduring many smaller visits has been to hold a few open days and so regulate external interest. I was grateful to be an exception, but quite properly my request to visit was taken to the leadership. I was then always made welcome and found the community open and very tolerant of my palpable ignorance and attendant ceaseless questions.

If the community is The Order of the Black Sheep then the venue, hence the term church, is known as The Gates. Behind this choice is a general feature that gates are mentioned over 100 times in the Bible. But these include: "...I will build my church and the gates of hell will not overcome it" (Matthew 16.18) and "Lift up your

heads, O you gates; lift them up, you ancient doors, that the King of glory may come in" (Psalm 24.9). This brings a more specific meaning. The order want to build church, in what has been traditionally seen as the devil's territory, in order to allow the King of glory to come into that community and to do what he wants to do.



Initially, I was not sure of the relationship between the order and The Gates and it turns out not to be much more complex than talking about "the congregation of St Mary's", or whatever saint name a parish may have. Wider church people tend to use The Gates. I think some of my confusion was expecting the order might have a tighter membership with an attendant novitiate and that therefore there might be commitment distinctions, visible or invisible, between The Gates attenders, and members of the order. It doesn't seem to be like that and with a hint of a pun, "the gate" to being in the order is wide open and largely unguarded. The question of how people join the order is being worked on, which will be needed if TOBS is to become "acknowledged".

Snapshots, and *Encounters on the Edge* before it, has often used chapters of time to explain what the young church was, through how it has developed. I don't think that works here, for this journey has been less ordered, and more exploratory after the launch, because it is treading in unmapped territory. Maybe the story is like genuine explorers of an earlier generation who had no map, only a starting point, curiosity and a compass.

The launch, October 2011

The Gates used to be a tattoo parlour, hair and beauty salon. That fitted pretty well as a history, but the building needed work and re-fitting out. Extensive renovation work on the premises during the summer of 2011 continued, literally until just a few minutes before Archbishop Rowan Williams' arrival. He toured the building, which has been re-ordered to include a chapel, café bar, media suite, 1950s style dining room and a gothic style room, and met many of the people involved in its development.



In typical fashion, Archbishop Rowan sat among people and spoke, apparently off the cuff, in the disarmingly direct way I recall from seeing him in conversation with other "black sheep"; in that instance, struggling young people in deprived urban areas of South Wales, who were part of Living Proof.⁵

"In the sheer mysteriousness of this world you never quite know what's

⁵ Their story was told in the first-ever *Encounters on the Edge* in 1999: <http://www.encountersontheedge.org.uk/encounters-on-the-edge/encounters-no-01-download.html>

going to happen, what's going on, you never quite know what God's got in store, there's no real way of telling (the difference) between insiders and outsiders. Like all sheep are black in the dark, we struggle with the real darkness of experience sometimes. We're all in the same boat."

The phrase "all sheep are black in the dark" is typical of his creativity, his honesty about human frailty and the inclusivity he relishes. It is also apparent to me that a leader of a national Church coming to where those in "alternative" cultures are content to gather, further undoes any stigma of being a black sheep.

Gates and spaces

In my short period of visits I have quickly felt at home in The Gates. This is despite the following features of the way in. Its footprint in the street is at best discreet and there is no adjacent parking. The ground floor is an unattended lobby, to which access is by buzzing to be let in. The staircase winds by 90-degree turns through 360 degrees, so you have no idea what will be disclosed when you get upstairs. This is not a venue designed to attract the bypasser or lure the casual visitor. But one has to admit that some historic churches have decaying or apparently closed exteriors.



However, as soon as you are on the landing the place is clearly inhabited and attractive. Off the landing to the right is an evocative chapel space that can work equally well for a small group of four, or for forty people. The front usually has a low table, often with a cross and candles, and it is populated with quality bean bags. Audiovisual technology is built in and the street front end has a large drop-down screen. The rear of the room is set with chairs and tables,

which could function also as a place to eat, to hold a meeting, or be the overflow from the front of the chapel. Beyond it is the small office area and some storage.

To the left is what they call the café bar which, like all the contemporary monastic communities that I know, is the hub of the complex.



From the perspective of the seven sacred spaces⁶, "refectory rules", one might say. The décor is imaginative and fun-loving, the coffee machine is seriously good and the kitchen was designed to make meals. People gravitate to it and can spill out of it into two further comfortable rooms, each with its own character.

The overall layout speaks of intelligent design and the belief that more different sized, and diversely themed spaces serve a community better than a focus on one shared space, so typical of bland multi-purpose church halls. A characteristic feature is the widespread use of the colour black, which readers might expect would feel dingy or depressing. It quickly feels normal, which is presumably the point, and for this culture black and dark are inherently attractive.

As far as I know, all this re-ordering was without any knowledge of my writing about the seven sacred spaces. I take it as more unconscious evidence that what the monks found they needed is actually a reflection of what makes

⁶ This is a way of interpreting the architecture created by historic and contemporary monastic communities, by which they pray in private, worship together, decide, meet, work, eat and study. A PDF of *Encounters on the Edge* no. 43 is still available on our website: <http://www.encountersontheedge.org.uk/encounters-on-the-edge/encounters-no-43-download.html>. In response to demand we plan to produce a revised second edition during 2015.

human beings flourish, and is also unpacking what it is to be in the image of God. There is a fruitful triangulation between Trinity, humanity and ecclesiology.⁷

Who comes?

The Gates was made known through a variety of channels. Friends brought friends, some from days in Clay Cross and with longer connections to Mark and Sarah. There was a little passing trade and Mark, in clerical collar and sporting dreadlocks, handed out leaflets in the immediate vicinity of the shopping precinct. He has also made links with Chesterfield College, social services and local charities and all those they assist.

My impression, and his assessment, of who comes is that it is a wide mixture. There are some college students, people who would probably call themselves

part of the alternative culture, whether that be people who relate to being goth or those who sees themselves as skaters. The overall community includes the homeless, some of whom would be involved with the Church Army's Church on the Bus in the Chesterfield



area, those with learning difficulties, people whose lives revolve around the arts, and professionals in social care and education. It is made of people of all ages and the Sunday lunchtime that I saw was nearly half children in families. People come on their own terms. Though they know that the order and The Gates are Christian, some come not wanting to get involved in the religious side of things as they probably call it. But they welcome the building of relationships among fellow black sheep. Those I met and talked with were more from a de-churched than non-churched background.

⁷ One evocative source linking Trinity and humanity, and by implication ecclesiology, is Tom Smail's book *Like Father, Like Son* (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2005).

The café and trying other social links

The hope was that the café bar would be popular enough to allow The Gates to be open five or six days a week, staffed by one funded full-timer plus helpers. The equipment was there, a staff member could be found, but the funding had to be external and after two years ran into the problem so often met by seed-corn funded projects: it was unable to cover all costs itself and the start-up funding would not be renewed.

The staff member had to be made redundant and the building now only opens on planned days and times. Examples would be the Tuesday food bank which a TOBS member, Ben, works at three days a week, the Wednesday short service and open lunch, and the Friday morning group for those with learning difficulties. Other links have been through events or courses, such as jewellery-making, being a gallery for an exhibition from the college, and Mark becoming the college chaplain. Indeed, many of these local connections have a chaplaincy feel to them. The Christian focal person is there on the terms of the parent body. They are playing away, in order to make connection, and their value is some independence in that they come from outside. This connects to the re-occurring feeling of vulnerability.

Vulnerability

One of the main focuses to begin with was the setting up of the café and the hope it would be the main focus for their presence and role. Yet commercially it didn't work out like that. Financially it became worrying. The other challenge was that TOBS people weren't able to help very much because of being at work, or having other legitimate demands on their time, like family. That created dashed hopes, disappointment awareness that things were not going so well, and the stark challenge to keep going under pressures. It was difficult, not knowing how they were going to pay certain bills.

Mark makes his own comment on this process:

"I don't feel isolated usually, but when we get to the point where we're worrying about how we're going to pay the next bill, I do start feeling a bit isolated and that can be quite a big burden to carry. And I find that quite difficult. I feel secure and vulnerable at the same time."

As a leader of a young community, made of diverse elements some of which have high levels of need, Mark sensed both hope and risk. The energy came from sensing the community was coming together, becoming more stable, more real and tangible. Yet at the same time was awareness of things they were doing that were quite high risk: the practicality of being able to pay bills, keep premises going, and justify decisions made. This felt vulnerable and even frightening. The need was for these two realities to come together and inform one another better.

I found the vulnerability illustrated, with its attendant hope and risk, during the period of my visits across the whole of winter 2014/15. The adjoining property caught fire in December and The Gates suffered extensive smoke damage, closing the venue during the Christmas season, along with its programme and related opportunities. I was impressed with how well they were able to relocate using other church premises in the town, using a room in St Mary's re-set more like a pub, maintain their ethos in a very different location, and press on with the additional work needed to deal with insurance companies and getting restorative work done.

Sampling Sundays

The lunchtime gathering

I visited in March 2015 and joined people gathering in the café area at 12:00. People bought a variety of coffees and teas, and some brought food to be shared later. Those I chatted with were candid about their prior issues with the Church. The lack of freedom to be themselves, and of permission to ask questions came up, as well histories of over-commitment and subsequent burnout.

Around 12:45 we were informally invited to move through to the chapel, its table laid out for communion, the children in the front half on the bean bags and adults scattered round the rim and in the rear half with chairs and tables. Mark led with dignified informality, dressed in dog collar and short sleeved shirt. Throughout a debt to liturgical awareness and instincts undergirded a commitment to social justice and engagement. The worship unashamedly regularly draws on a diversity of textual sources: Anglican, Celtic, popular culture, Orthodox or they write their own.



Following some community announcements, an adult read a version of Jesus' cleansing of the temple, which was followed seamlessly by a DVD clip highlighting how the Church today often apes secular values of entertainment, militarism, individualism and prolific consumption. The question raised was how we continue to follow Jesus, deny ourselves and struggle against such forces. The second reading, by a child, was from Micah 6 about justice, kindness and humility, followed by a Q&A with the children about Lent, leading towards how chocolate is made from seeds. This was developed to cover the problems and dangers workers face and how they seldom, if ever, get to eat the finished product. Fairtrade chocolate and its values were both upheld and distributed. A clear challenge was given that, as Christians, faith should permeate the whole of our lives, including our shopping and eating habits.

Do not let it be said that in fresh expressions of Church issues of discipleship are never faced, or that engagement with important current issues is ignored.

It was followed up by another clip from Norman Wirzba of Duke Divinity School, who has written on food and faith. This section highlighted a number of dangers: consuming junk food, destruction of agricultural habitat leading to migration to the cities, and slave conditions of workers. In conjunction with the earlier views of Wendell Berry,⁸ Wirzba upholds the nobility of farming, and castigates urban economics and its views of growth that make ethical farming more difficult, if not impossible. By contrast, God

⁸ W. Berry (essays), *What Are People For?* (New York: North Point Press, 1990) particularly pp. 123-144.

cares about the land and Christians should influence society to help it change to give farmers a better deal.⁹

Do not let it be said that in fresh expressions of Church issues of discipleship are never faced, or that engagement with important current issues is ignored. Nevertheless, I wish this sort of holistic approach were more common. The morning contained accessible and far-reaching education. This treatment was compelling and practical, so not unhelpfully guilt-inducing. It led in this case to prepared prayer on the theme, the needs of people involved and the advent of the kingdom.

In turn, we moved into the Eucharistic Great Thanksgiving, using the more responsive version H, including sung acclamations. Mark, as presiding, received first, then invited people to draw near. The children came forward, scooped up the broken elements and various cups and, without ostentation or silliness, distributed them to the rest of the congregation around the chapel. It was both a delightful surprise and surprisingly normal. The distribution over, chatting broke out as some stayed and some went back to the café to bring out the lunch. I applauded the way the people and the day moved with such naturalness between chapel and refectory and back to chapel, with the unity and diversity of the movements of a symphony.

I got into engaging conversation with my immediate neighbour, Sorele, who is a member of TOBS and its Mission Order council as the pastoral representative. She was glad to be proud of her church, one in which anyone can feel comfortable - and I was certainly made to feel that. At the same time she valued that it has an outward focus, as the Sunday morning had just demonstrated. Its inner life she praised for its honesty and sense of family.

All this is some way from the image of a "heavy metal" church, and I notice that sometimes the wider Church, perhaps through its press and communications officers, want to fixate on these "jazzy" labels. I have seen this elsewhere with young churches that do work for skateboarders or for surfers, but are not narrowly defined by that target group. Fears of fresh expressions of Church being for narrow niches continue to be denied in practice and should not be talked up for marketing value.

⁹ An internet search on Norman Wirzba's Food and Faith opens this area up.

Values

Smaller, shorter and deeper

A week earlier in the evening I was in the chapel area with a small group that were holding an open discussion on a theme, each one nestling on a bean bag. They seemed relaxed that I should rather obviously observe and scribble like mad on a pad to try and capture something of the flavour. My impression was they ranged from early 20s to mid-40s, and were all among the more committed and long-standing members; the couples tended not to sit next to one another, perhaps to avoid pairing or to embody they had their own point of view. This was only their third meeting and its infant tradition was that the group selected themes for the months ahead, then each time one person would introduce the theme and chair, but all would prepare to bring something to the metaphorical table.

They were aware of seeing exile in the loneliness of being a particular person, yet not wishing to romanticise this. TOBS was for all kinds of people who sensed they were different.

This evening the theme was exile, which is salutary for those identifying with being black sheep. Some brought evocative quotes they had found, read them and commented further. I enjoyed a number of them; one was: "It is way out people who know the way out." Others had chosen a YouTube clip that highlighted what they had noticed. Another had written her own poem, and one a theological reflection. The discussion was respectful, intelligent, open yet trusting. Serious comment and laughter mingled; they were aware of seeing exile in the loneliness of being a particular person, yet not wishing to romanticise this. They admitted their own cultural particularity as white, middle class, mainly married and straight, but returned to the value that TOBS was for all kinds of people who sensed they were different. Once again I had the privilege to watch and notice that TOBS is by nature rich in creativity, participative and egalitarian. I could imagine that this is where people flourish and it could be the sort of group that will continue to grapple with the rule: apply, test, and where needed, prune it.

The rule

The rule, written before the launch, has a width which speaks to me of a healthy desire for a holistic approach, but its length testifies ironically to a short lifespan. It is too long to memorise easily and the slow process of crystallising shorter, mentally portable, values will take time and is already under active consideration. I recall in the fifteen year life of Church Army's Research Unit, despite having a fairly settled staff, we took at least ten years before we could come up with what was self-evident to us, thus compelling, concise and crisp.

To Seek God

Through the Scriptures, in prayer, in one another, in the unexpected places

To Worship God Creatively

As we gather, through our work and art, in every area of our lives

To Love One Another

By sharing the good news in word and deed, by seeking justice, by sharing our resources and offering hospitality, by listening to one another

To Grow

As a child of God in the image of Christ, to become a servant, to discern my vocation and encourage others in theirs

To Develop My Gifts and Learn New Skills

To enrich my life and the life and mission of the community

To Live Respectfully

Of God, of others, even when we do not agree with them, of creation

To Rest

Take time to reflect on the day before God, take time from work to enjoy the good things God has given us, make a time of retreat/pilgrimage each year

I think I saw other values through my visits and dare to name them in case it is helpful.

Balance 'Out' and 'Of'

I don't know if they see it as a conscious value, but TOBS embodies what I have long held, that the examples most far-reaching in apostolic terms ('out') will need to be balanced by being the most committed to catholic belonging ('of').

In the Roman Catholic lengthy tradition of orders this combination is clearly seen in the attitude of founders, like Saint Francis and Ignatius Loyola. By this combination, their charisma was not blunted and their loyalty was honoured. I wish the same combination was an instinct in all our pioneers, born of love for Christ and so love for his Church. I also wish those with authority had enough trust in the pioneer's catholic loyalty to let them roam freely in apostolic mission. At the local level, the value of this balance is held in tension with the value of being keen for members of TOBS to explore, and in Mark's phrase, "take their place at the table of the wider Church family" as part of their discipleship.



Real church

Early on, Mark grasped that seeing this as a fresh expression of Church meant he would maintain it would be a church rather than a gateway to "real" Church. So it has proved, and it is one diagnostic feature of all genuine fresh expressions of Church. They know what they are already, without denying that there will be further to grow, in depth and probably in size.

Real mission

Mark commented on the challenge of taking the gospel to people in "alternative" groups. The contours of that steep climb are that this sharing of Jesus is with those who have a well-founded mistrust of the Church and Christian culture. Faithfulness means refusing to "dress up" the gospel for those cultures. This comes out in the worship and teaching which is intentionally Jesus-centred. That mission, which has included running their own wider version of the Alpha course, can only work if the place used helps build community; a centre where it is safe and one can talk through things, where the Church can be touched, where people are accessible, where space allows worship and meeting God, and where it fuels service to the wider community.

The examples most far-reaching in apostolic terms will need to be balanced by being the most committed to catholic belonging.

Enabling others

As Mark put it: "It's about enabling other people to get involved and it's something that isn't highly dependent on me." This is a lesson needed in reaction to celebrity culture and may be a reflection on what did not last at Sanctum. I suggest it is also key for all pioneers, who by calling and profile may be tempted to do it all themselves. Enabling others is a value that should trickle down. Thus I was pleased to hear that Sorele, the pastoral representative, does not pick up the task of meeting all needs. Rather, she is a conduit that links needs and offers via social media. Her task is to help the community be the community, but in turn not creating dependency. An example would be that people are asked if they want meals prepared for them after a birth, rather than it be assumed.

Signs of maturity

Working out changed patterns, February 2013

In early 2013, it was felt that to go fortnightly from monthly might be a good idea. This would mean that instead of having communion and eating together monthly on a Sunday, it would be every other week. The point was that this was something that people asked for. It wasn't driven by the leader but it arose from the community itself, showing it reflecting on its life and taking responsibility for initiating change. It also takes maturity to do this well, as worship service changes are classic community fight areas.

Mark commented on the challenge of taking the gospel to people in "alternative" groups. The contours of that steep climb are that this sharing of Jesus is with those who have a well-founded mistrust of the Church and Christian culture.

It was also the case that quite a few children had started to come, which was not expected or planned, but the product of the age of people who had started coming. In discussion about how to respond, some asked whether

TOBS should have a children's group or something similar, but it was felt quite strongly by the people within the community that it should stay together; that they should make sure that the services worked in a way that works for everybody. It does make higher demands on creativity but is working well. As a result they are getting about 40 people coming on a Sunday, with 10-15 of them under the age of 16. So they made that change too, and it seems to have been a success, leading to an upturn in numbers.

The community can also be self-critical about their own preferences, which is mature. In this case, aware that the way that the services are on a Sunday perhaps doesn't attract, or is not suitable for, the way that everybody works. The events are quite presentational, especially the reliance on video clips, including ones they have made themselves. Its virtue is not unlike worship in cathedrals, in that people can soak in what is offered and see if it fits for them. While that can be good for those who want to sit back and think, and then talk about what they saw afterwards, it provoked the thought of doing something more interactive, based on the people who were attending. This awareness underlies the recent development of the Sunday evening open discussions on a theme.



Mark even wondered about going weekly. He put that to the newly established leadership team and while it was aired well, it was recognised that there was a quality about it being fortnightly, and it helped people with difficult or family circumstances, or complex lives, who would not be able to attend each week. Curiously, being fortnightly allows people to interact better, and they now see that going weekly would have taken something away. The openness and realism involved looks like a sign of maturity.

Living with widening diversity and uncertainty

Mark and the leadership are aware that they have quite a split of different people coming to The Gates. There are people with experience of going to church, but mostly earlier in their lives. For various reasons, they have fallen out with church, or felt that it's not a place that they're comfortable with any more. But they are still searching spiritually for a home and have found it within TOBS, which is good. Other people, who have been met through the work at The Gates, through its café, or who have come in for myriad reasons, have no prior experience of church whatsoever. They would probably say that they have no Christian faith as such, but yet they feel part of what is being done and are coming to explore, and again that is promising. That is quite a cocktail: a real mix of people from different backgrounds and experiences.

As the life of The Order of the Black Sheep matures and becomes more complex, Mark has to live with not having a clear idea and plan about where it's going.

This diverse community is starting to take more responsibility and the leadership is formally coming together to determine where they should go next. It means that Mark senses he can take his hands off the reins a bit and TOBS can genuinely be more community, rather than a one-man band. As they gather together and learn more about each other, they find time and energy to start doing things outside to help the wider community. One of the things that has been set up is the food bank, working alongside other churches. Another is providing the venue for the learning difficulties group. Yet, where these leads go is still unknown. As the life of TOBS matures and becomes more complex, Mark has to live with not having a clear idea and plan about where it's going any more, sensing that TOBS now has a life of its own and there is a need to see what happens. That's not easy for a leader and a little time ago he reflected:

“Part of the challenge of that is I do quite like knowing where things are going, so for me to sit back and watch where things go, which may not be the way that I'd have imagined or maybe guessed, is challenging for me personally, but it's exciting.”

Trying an idea

Chesterfield is on the edge of the Peak District, with many people who visit it over the weekends doing mountain biking, walking, different kinds of rock climbing and canoeing. A few of those connected to TOBS are involved in this. So they started thinking about how they could interact with them. Mark's brother-in-law talked to him about geocaching which is when people hide little caches of small (and even big) things in the countryside, and the grid references are published on the internet using a mobile or GPS system, then other people go and find them.

So TOBS came up with Geochurche (which can be found online at geochurche.com). This is the rationale: "Growing out of a love for God, community, the outdoors, and geocaching." It works in a similar way, by publishing grid references on the internet. They gather people together at a specific time and place using the grid reference.

As befits values in alternative cultures, hierarchy appears as little as possible. Issues for decisions are put on Facebook and aired at open gatherings.

The difference is that people have an opportunity before then to go and find these other caches and make that part of their spiritual journeying experience. The objects will be placed in such a way that maybe not everybody will be able to find them all and maybe not everyone will want to do the whole of the journey. An important part of the gathering will be people reflecting and sharing the journey they've had, sharing their adventures. Alongside that, they can share the journey they've had through the week, "where they are" and what part of the wilderness in their own human journey, they're on. It's almost the complete polar opposite of what is done on a Sunday usually. The originators think that it is oddly similar to a traditional church where different kinds of worship service are offered and only a few to come to all the services, like the family service and the sung Eucharist. Other people will only find they can interact with certain parts of it.

We shall have to see if Geochurche takes off. I can imagine it might be a seasonal beast and only flourish in the better weather. But a mature church will have the courage to try things and

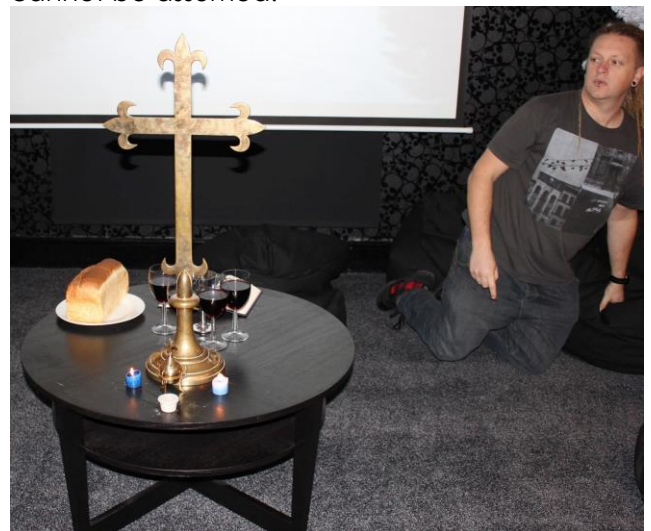
find ways to decide together whether they are working.

Making decisions

As befits values in alternative cultures, hierarchy appears as little as possible. Issues for decisions are put on Facebook and aired at open gatherings. Yet by June 2013, Mark could log that more people were taking more of a leadership role. As mentioned, a leadership team exists: with two wardens, a secretary, treasurer, pastoral rep, food bank rep and under18 rep, who are advocates for their areas of responsibility. They call it the Bishop's Mission Order council rather than a PCC. Mark is both pleased and amused to note all ways TOBS is turning very Anglican.

Wider connections

It was quite clear to me over the months of our contact and conversations that the work of The Gates and the identity of TOBS are firmly rooted in the diocese, from which a Bishop's Mission Order was freely forthcoming and which has been renewed. I have heard it said that such a renewal moves its status from provisional to permanent, but I wish I could independently confirm this. Mark's relationships with the deanery are open and positive. I simply do not know how widely in the membership that connection is valued, but I hope it is. Among those with a de-churched background that cannot be assumed.



In view of the networks that The Gates engages with, it is very sensible that he is licensed, not to one parish, but to the mission and ministry area of Chesterfield. The five clergy with this license meet informally for mutual support bi-monthly.

His attitude to the importance of wider belonging has always been clear and positive:

"I really believe in the Anglican Church, and I really believe in what's going on through pioneer ministry and fresh expressions. In some ways it would be easier to try and break away and just get on with it, but I think it's really important to do things properly so there is accountability and people know we're serious about what we're doing; that it's not a fad or an add-on, it's a genuine expression of church."¹⁰

Mark knows that believing in catholicity, and in practice being an Ordained Pioneer Minister with the order having a Bishop's Mission Order, has real value. It...

"...allows us to be established as part of the Church of England rather than just floating out there all on our own, which is really nice to have that support and structure around us and for us to be able to give back into that community as well."

Money

Accountability works the other way too. His stipend comes from the diocese. As such, it is still a local church able to continue by a measure of subsidy from the wider Church, though a decision has been made for TOBS to contribute around £2,500 to the common fund. The diocese has been highly supportive, through its mission fund, which has been generous towards their work. Yet Mark still has to spend time applying to different grant-giving bodies to help them, because TOBS community is small and so the giving is not huge. The grants present a dilemma. They do not want to turn this work into a commercial business. Grant-chasing takes a lot of the time already. To spend more time trying to make it pay through that source would be in danger of losing out on the spiritual emphasis.

¹⁰ Quoted at the time of the launch in October 2011 with Archbishop Rowan Williams.

Fanciful links with two Chesterfield icons

The "crooked spire" of St Mary's and All Saints in the middle of town is world-famous and websites give varying accounts of what caused it. There is no reputable connection between a spire finished around 1360 and a nursery rhyme first recorded in 1840, but it made me think of how the song ends: "They all lived together in a little crooked house". Both this spire and that house are different from the usual, but that is what makes them special, not worse or even better. I am entertained to note that an ecclesial order of black sheep should be founded in a town whose church has a crooked spire. It somehow resonates.



When I was a vicar in Deal, the Channel Tunnel was being cut. Having finished the job, the machine that did it was put up for sale, as having one careful owner and limited mileage.

I recently learned that the cutting machine was made in Chesterfield at Markham & Co. That machine did the most amazing underground job, linking up two countries and two peoples historically at odds with one another. How curious that the Chesterfield Order of the Black Sheep works almost out of sight, connecting two groups historically disconnected and mutually suspicious of one another – the established Church and those in, should I call it, an underground alternative culture.

Once more, it's not a serious comment but a curious one. Yet perhaps I thought it because of the poster below, which is hung from one of the walls of the landing in The Gates. It entertained me so much that I took a quick photo.



Future challenges

The life of a young church is vibrant, but its future is less certain. There is no long tradition that has a momentum to carry them forward in times of uncertainty. Here are some questions:

The lease on The Gates runs out in 2016. What should happen then? Can and should they renew it, or should they find another larger home? That will partly depend on money, partly on where they think they should be in the townscape, and who they are in active partnership with.

I am increasingly doubtful that most kinds of fresh expressions of Church can infinitely expand without changing their character.

Within its own developing life, what will happen as TOBS makes more pastoral contacts and those people trust them more with the issues they face? How many of the deeply needy can its membership sustain? I recall one monastic group noting that it takes four people to carry one stretcher. That is no hard and fast rule, but it is a sobering comment.

A related question is whether the community at The Gates now is the natural size for an expression of The Order of the Black Sheep? Does it have a natural "flock" size beyond which relationships will change, not for the better? I am increasingly doubtful that most kinds of fresh

expressions of Church can infinitely expand without changing their character. Alternatives are to accept a plateau, a view which is hardly missional, or to think in terms of reproducing and the birth of something further. The largest challenge of the latter route is multiplying the leadership needed.

Related to that observation is whether a community of some 40 people support the costs of a full-time leader and whether they should? But that financial question exists in a wider Church, none of whose dioceses at present bear the costs of its own bishops, a General Synod who rejected that route when it was proposed in the aftermath of *Mission-shaped Church* in 2004, and all of whose cathedrals are subsidised, as well as churches serving smaller and poorer parishes.

I salute the beginnings that have been made by Mark Broomhead, the mission council and The Order of the Black Sheep. If I lived in Chesterfield, it would be a pleasure to belong to it. This is no longer some infant, highly dependent, church. It has been through ups and downs which have been part of the maturing. But like a number of young adults today, it can't afford its own place and is still making its way in the world. I pray they and the diocese are far sighted in how that can happen.

George Lings
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