TSC Research Bulletin

TSC Research Bulletin Summer 2008

The Sheffield Centre

Welcome to bulletin No.2

Inside this issue we have most everyone from our extended team-family involved, from Colin Brown in central Sheffield, to Juergen our colleague from Germany, and of course articles from us at the Sheffield Centre.

We attempted to theme this issue loosely around fresh expressions in urban areas. I think it has turned out differently, despite best intentions; this writing business isn't always predictable!

So we start with George, mainly because it sets the scene, that fresh expressions *are not expendable*; that **people are more important** than projects, causes, structures. That's seems a pretty good theme to me.

We hope you enjoy these thoughts and are encouraged to dig deeper.

Laurence
team coordinator

Danger Planting!

My studies have brought me into contact with the writer Paul Minear. He shows how the New Testament is full of images of the church, but never any definitions. That approach heightens the sense of elusive divine mystery in what church is. Yet he is not afraid to choose four master images around which to group his book: The People of God, the New Creation, the Fellowship of Faith and the Body of Christ. The third is the least visual but in ways the title does not immediately reveal; this group of images explores how the life of God, with a Christological focus, is being formed in the church. In reviewing a sweep of this subsection of images he writes "The images draw their basic meaning from the central relationship to the work of the Father, Son and Spirit."

I note that his choice of master images are human, relational and personal. Even the new creation contains humanity as the pinnacle of a loving creative process. This seems to me to be in painful contrast to some of ways the process of creating fresh expressions of church is talked about:
"Let a thousand flowers bloom."
"If 30% of the Fresh Expressions die it doesn't matter."
"We must be like entrepreneurs who welcome the culture of risk"

I notice that those who plant gardens can shrug their shoulders if the slugs or the wet makes the seeds rot in the ground. They wouldn't take that view if they had a cot death on their hands. It looks like some entrepreneurs are more fired by the risky adventure than concerned for the people who they call to embody their idea. Some leaders seem to find followers expendable – collateral damage they might say. So I wonder whether, unintentionally, the very language of 'planting' in relation to churches has created a less than human view of the church and one that is out of keeping with the New Testament images. I know there are also building images like Temple and City – but I then note all of these are social spaces, intended to be inhabited. This is not interest in architecture but in where social and sacred space meet.

Sadly not everything that is born survives or flourishes. That's true of church too. But Fresh Expressions are not floral decorations like daffodils, or expendable like world war one foot soldiers. They are young vulnerable ecclesial communities. They are fragile gatherings of the People of God, expressions of his New Creation, ways of the Trinity's life growing within them, and a partial glimpse of the Body of Christ. As such they need valuing so none die unnecessarily, and nurturing so they have a better chance to live up to the high calling that all images of the church hold out to us. We need to learn to talk of them in human and divine terms, much less than in agricultural or business metaphors.

George Lings
Director, the Sheffield Centre

Inside this issue:

Spirituality & Community	2
Urban Elderly	3
Reflections from Germany	3
Learning to Listen	4
Church Army & Hope '08	4

The Sheffield Centre team are:

George Lings, Mike Collyer, Steve Hollinghurst, Claire Dalpra, Andrew Wooding, Laurence Keith

and associate members:

Peter Hallsworth, Colin Brown, Juergen Baron

A spirituality of fresh expressions?

It would appear that the spirituality of many fresh expressions reflects the rich diversity of the times we find ourselves ministering in. Although the church is called and the Spirit equips it to reflect the uniqueness of God and the gospel, the present cultural emphasis upon personal choice as opposed to a common meta-narrative is reflected in the plethora of spiritualities within the many examples developing in this country.

This is no surprise when we consider the starting point of listening well to both God and context. For each leadership team will be discerning an appropriate missional approach through the lens of their own inherited spirituality, as well as responding to the needs of the people and context.

The challenge however is to hold lightly to what we bring with us, to even let it die. And this is the common thread of fresh expressions spirituality. Many practitioners are being continuously called to step into unknown territory…daily. It has been described as an 'As we go' spirituality. Or even an 'Oh heck!…I have no idea where to go next with this… but I believe God does'. There's a common call, to trust in the God who is always ahead of where we are. To trust that he will lead and reveal the way, step by step and moment by moment. Often leaders say that they feel uneasy when they are trying to make things happen, but spiritually 'at ease' when they have the courage under God to let go…and let God be God, *to* them, and *through* them.

Letting go is never easy, especially within a culture of self-interest and protection. Perhaps it is no surprise that the Spirit is calling and equipping a mission-shaped church to follow in the way of Christ. A spirituality of faith and trust, death and resurrection.

Colin Brown

Colin is a Church Army evangelist and an associate of the Sheffield Centre. He works as part of the Fresh Expressions core team where his focus is spirituality and prayer.

It is not only to invite someone into our house; it is also to invite people into our lives

Genuine Hospitality

More tea, vicar?

What do you immediately think of when you hear the word "hospitality"? Tea and cucumber sandwiches at the vicarage? Hyacinth Bucket madly tidying her house and dusting off her best china to serve something impressively difficult to cook?

I am currently drawing to a close a 6 month research project on the topic of community. I interviewed a number of intentional Christian communities in search of wisdom to offer those fresh expressions of church seeking to grow a deeper sense of community within themselves. Understandably, the subject of hospitality came up a number of times. The genuine welcome of a Christian community to newcomers was mentioned as one discernable measure of its maturity.

Bob and Mary Hopkins were interviewed for their first-hand experience of growing a Christian community from scratch in an Urban Priority Area in St Helens. In this context, they learnt that hospitality that communicated was less about serving a posh dinner on their best china but more about take-away fish and chips or pie and peas on mismatching plates. Or no plates at all, just newspaper! It was less about tidying the house so it was presentable for guests and more about inviting people to drop by and being welcomed into the muddle of everyday life. Not only were visitors spared the feelings if inadequacy and guilt if they could not live up to such a standard, but hospitality was less of a disruption or a drain for hosts if they asked guests to lend a hand with setting the table or peeling the potatoes if needed.

Claire Dalpra

Lauren Winner in her excellent book *Mudhouse Sabbath* draws a comparison between hospitality and entertaining. Too often we are tempted to entertain others by offering displays of perfection, capability and serenity. But if we are serious about living a deeper life of community with others, hospitality is not only to invite someone into our house; it is also to invite people into our lives with all its short-comings. We are not meant to rearrange our lives for our guests but to invite them into our lives as they really are. The 6th century priest, Julianus Pomerius, wrote that this kind hospitality should take precedence over other spiritual disciplines. He wrote about the necessity to "unbend oneself" with others to grow in maturity. The Hopkins reminded us that telling the truth about how our lives really are is something that people in UPA contexts do very well; therefore in this aspect of building authentic community, they may well have a head start on others more affluently situated.

To read more on this and other aspects of what best nurtures genuine Christian community, see **Encounters on the Edge** series as no.37 *Chasing the Dream: Starting Community* and no.38 *The Cost of Community: Issues of Maturity*.

Urban Mission: Reaching the Isolated Elderly

Mike Collyer CA

In the last bulletin I asked the questions;

- Where do older people fit in with mission-shaped ideas of the church?
- Do older people represent a problem or a challenge?
- In the huge demographic shift to an ageing population, how are we going to reach significant numbers of non-churched older people emerging from the boomer generation?

More recently I have been asking, how is the church going to respond to the increasing number of isolated elderly frail people living in high-rise flats in urban areas?

Engaged in such a mission is Mo Smith, founder of the community project Regenerate-RISE (**R**each the **IS**olated **E**lderly), inspired by a strong sense of God's calling and vision based on her own personal experience of isolation and disablement in the past. Her healing by God convinced her that the impossible is possible with God. RISE is the foundation stone of a fresh expression of church for older people called 'Platt Praise' where those 80 years plus are coming to faith for the first time or are having their faith renewed.

> Those 80 years plus are coming to faith for the first time, or are having their faith renewed.

Mo's guiding principles for success are:

- Network as widely as you can
- Be certain that you are providing what is needed
- Know what your vision and objectives are and match this to what is possible and sustainable
- Take risks
- Pray and trust God for inspiration

Following this process led first to the setting up of the community project, securing funding from the local authority to provide a wide range of activities, including regular outings and opportunities for people to explore their faith. Secondly, both within the community project and the church 'Platt Praise' members actively engage in the decision making processes for its function. Thirdly the project including 'Platt Praise' is not dependent on the local church for funding or leadership and is free from local church governance.

How this has been possible will be explored fully in my next *Discovering Faith in Later Life No7* research paper, coming soon.

Reflections from Germany...

'If Mick Jagger were to be converted what kind of church would he be attracted to?'

This question of my collegue Mike Collyer from The Sheffield Centre may sound hypothetical or thought provoking. But if that happened and Mick joined a church in Germany where I am from, I wonder how long he would stay there. We could also ask what happened if Amy Winehouse or someone in the generation between them both was to be converted. It seems that the gap between our culture in the churches and the culture in the society in which we live becomes greater and greater.

The issue is how churches become again relevant to the community in which they are placed in. But if churches started to change in a way that converted rockstars felt comfortable with - what would happen to the already existing, often long term members of churches?

One answer seems to develop a broad diversity of churches. There isn't the one and only right way any more. Churches in England have discovered - and are still about to discover - many new ways of being church. I have visited several different churches in urban contexts in Sheffield and Liverpool - which has been a great privilege to be involved in such different faith communities and teams. Every one of them is still looking for an adequate way of becoming relevant for the community or the network to which they are called. There are quite exciting and creative ways - for families, young professionals, students or for particular groups like asylum seekers, homeless people or vulnerable women. **But all are about high quality relationships**.

The churches in Germany are also moving from similarity to diversity. The process has just started recently. We can learn a lot from the development in England and it is a great pleasure and enrichment to participate in the experiences of the team of The Sheffield Centre.

> Churches in England have discovered, and are still about to discover, many new ways of being church.

Jürgen Baron, Sheffield

Jürgen has been living in Sheffield this year with his family, and has worked on placement with several churches exploring fresh expressions.

Learning to Listen

This might sound obvious, but in recent weeks – in my capacity as co-ordinator of learning networks on Share (www.sharetheguide.org) - I have experienced the value of learning from people by just sitting down and listening to them.

The Fresh Expressions team have organised a series of meetings for key pioneers in different parts of the country. The pioneers gather together in a pub environment, and talk about their work and what they are learning over a meal and a drink.

This has deliberately been designed as a listening exercise. The pioneers are asked questions around their experiences of sustainability, church and leadership. Then they are listened to, without advice or comment given unless it is directly asked for.

The aims of these meetings include connecting and build relationships with key pioneers in each region and learning from the experiences of the key pioneers, in terms of our perspective on the questions being asked, and ways forward found.

So far I have attended two such meetings – in the Manchester and Liverpool areas – with another about to take place in London and more to come later in the year. I could have written a lengthier article containing the actual findings from these meetings, but for me the main lesson learnt was not to underestimate the mutual benefits of providing people with a relaxed atmosphere where they are free to talk openly and be heard - not talked at.

There is so much to learn from people who are actually doing the work… if only I would sit down and listen.

Andrew Wooding

Wider news from Church Army: Heavenly Recipes for Hope

ChurchArmy www.churcharmy.org.uk

Have you ever been inspired by feats of great courage, sporting achievement or adventure? Heard stories of people walking solo to the North Pole to raise money for a charity, overcoming illness and winning Olympic medals, or surviving disasters with heroic credentials? These individuals seem to have special abilities, physical and mental, that enable them to act and behave extraordinarily.

All of us are faced with challenges that test our physical and mental limits. Perhaps not polar bears and plane crashes, but from time to time we have challenges that show us what our limits are. “That’s impossible”, we say, “I could never do that”.

‘Heavenly Recipes For Hope’ is a new booklet written especially for www.hopeinfo.co.uk, the online public face of the Hope 2008 initiative. It enables visitors to the site who have begun to explore hope through the films, Secrets of Hope test and other online material to delve a little deeper.

Exploring the subject of hope further in very practical ways throughout, it links examples of hope with Jesus’ teaching and the challenges of the early church. It will benefit anyone who has their future on their mind. It explores and develops the idea that a healthy psychological hope coupled with a strong and developing spiritual hope is a powerful combination.

Why is hope important? Changes in people’s lives may be of their choosing, or the changes may have chosen them. Through any process of change there are going to be difficult challenges to overcome and it is our mental or psychological strength ideally empowered through God’s spirit that gets us through these times.
Hope and optimism help us interpret the challenges in our lives as either insurmountable obstacles or as problems to be solved or even as opportunities to grow.
Heavenly Recipes for Hope is by life coach Bruce Stanley (www.embody.co.uk) and is available through the hopeinfo.co.uk website or by writing to FREEPOST MORE HOPE. Most of the films on the website are available to download for your personal or church use.

Taken from an article to be published in the next ***Inspire*** Magazine.

David Coleman,
Church Army’s
Communications Manager

> Hope and optimism help us interpret the challenges in our lives as problems to be solved, or even as opportunities to grow.