TSC Research Bulletin

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The Sheffield Centre

Why have we brought in a new research bulletin?

Our privilege is to observe the creativity of the Spirit of God, through and despite his church. Then we try to pass on what we are learning. One of our team's foundation texts is 2 Kings 7:9. This verse reminds us that good news is not to be kept to ourselves. But...

- Sometimes the lessons are too specific for a journal, let alone a book.
- Sometimes what we've found updates research material already published.
- Sometimes we've sensed our research needs to be spread more widely

This free, email based, publication aims to be a quick read. We hope it will cast some thin shafts of light. It will reveal more of what we get into.

If you have any comments on the content or would like further discussion on material raised in these pages, please get in touch. Our contact details are on the back page.

Welcome to the Sheffield Centre's first Research Bulletin.

George Lings

Director: The Sheffield Centre

Can Post-Christian Britain be religious and secular?

In countries with a Christian tradition, many people own a Christian affiliation as an expression of their cultural heritage. This is illustrated by how many people are happy to **identify** themselves as Christian in census questionnaires.

Fewer people hold religious **beliefs**. Even fewer people adopt religious practices, chiefly regular church attendance. All these have been falling in Britain. The European Values survey shows the percentage claiming to be Christian fell from 84.4% in 1981 to 75.8% in 1999. Mori recorded 83% as Christian 1992, falling to 66% in 2007. In 1947 45% of the population believed in a personal God but in 2000 this fell to only 26%. **Attendance** has fallen from about 50% of the population in the mid nineteenth century to about 9% attending monthly in 2005.

Yet new beliefs are emerging, especially amongst younger adults. So of 18-24s in 2005, 46% believed in restless spirits, 44% believed it possible to contact the dead, 37% in Karma, and 15% in magic. But secularization exponents have argued this just represents entertainment, with little evidence of a commitment like that shown by churchgoing in Christianity.

However, some countries like China and Japan have been secular for a long time. In these societies, 'client based religion' works inversely to the Christendom pattern. Personal religious practice is the cultural norm, religious belief less common and religious identity very rare. Western New Spiritualities seem to work the same way. Identification with the new spiritualities is very small, non-traditional beliefs more common, and even more participate in personal religious practice. The New Spiritualities growing in Britain since the 1960s can't be measured in the same way Christianity has been and cannot be dismissed, but as client-based religions they will not reverse secularization, rather they may be perfectly suited to function and grow within it. The question then is 'what kind of Christianity might also flourish in a spiritual and secular Britain?

For a thorough investigation of this subject, see my forthcoming book **Mission-Shaped Evangelism**, 2008 Canterbury Press.

Steve Hollinghurst

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Mike Collyer
Steve Hollinghurst
Claire Dalpra
Andrew Wooding
Laurence Keith

Learning about learning networks

I'm 'Network Co-ordinator for the Online Guide to Fresh Expressions'. It means that I am responsible for two things: the website Share (www.sharetheguide.org – which contains a guide to fresh expressions), and learning networks (www.sharetheguide.org/networks/).

I started in January 2007 and after nine months of preparation, Share is now a reality. It was launched at the beginning of October, new pages are being added every week and people are registering with the site and leaving comments.

With Share up and running, we can now focus more on encouraging new learning networks to form – fresh expressions practitioners meeting up with each other to share lessons learnt and knowledge with each other, then writing down their findings to share with the wider church.

What have we learnt so far?

Three people in a learning network is probably too small to sustain ongoing learning, but twelve is probably too big for all to participate. They happen best face-to-face with online contact in between times. Regularity and commitment is more important then frequency, which could be 2-6 times a year. We are researching how best to take the findings from these groups and write them up in such a way that they can be useful to others.

Andrew Wooding

A *mission shaped ministry* (MSM) half-unit has been written on the subject, explaining why learning networks are a good thing, proposing some alternative models of learning networks, then giving people an experience of the learning network process. But this is far from the final word. We are still learning about learning networks.

One thing I know is that I am excited by the energy I see in a room when a group of people get together to share their experiences and try to help each other out.

If you have insights on good learning networks, if you are in one and want to tell us, please get in touch: andrew.wooding@freshexpressions.org.uk

More older people than under 16s

Where do older people fit in with a mission-shaped church?

Mike Collyer

In Britain today there are more older people than there are under 16s. The number of older people is set to significantly increase relative to the number of younger people over the next decades, with the mean age of the population likely to rise from 39.3 years to 43.6 years by 2031. The population aged 80 and over will grow from 2.5 million in 2002 to reach 4.9 million by 2031 peaking to nearly 7 million by the early 2050s. (see www.statistics.gov.uk). Yet those over 55 are already one group among older people!

Some ask whether older people are surplus or significant in this huge demographic shift? I am convinced that we need to reach rapidly increasing numbers of **non-churched older people** emerging from the boomer generation. Professor Peter Colman, University of Southampton during a recent lecture said '*The time when older people could be taken for granted in a religious and spiritual context has passed*'.

So as a researcher I must look for examples of fresh expressions among older people. I resist the false assumption that the *Mission-shaped Church* report is just for the young or trendy: teenagers, students, young adults for whom inherited church is often irrelevant. Older people were not mentioned specifically in the report, which has not helped. So it was easier to assume that what *Mission-shaped church* advocates is not relevant to them. Perhaps older people got overlooked because there are still so few examples of good practice available. I hope to change that through my **free emailed research papers** [see below] It feels like the theory of mission to older people is ahead of the practice. We must not let older people become invisible in the mindset of mission strategy. There are so many of them and that will grow.

Mike's role in the team is to explore evangelism, spiritual needs and fresh expression of church among older people. He is a commissioned Church Army Evangelist who has worked mainly with older people for most of his 31 years of ministry. Formerly a residential care home manager for Church Army and focus group convenor for CA personnel engaged with evangelism and older people. He is has written up six research papers **'Discovering Faith in Later Life'** and sends out a regular Information Bulletins **'Focus on Older People'** News, details of books, resources, and conferences.

Email ask@sheffieldcentre.org.uk to subscribe

Under 5s: *really* a fresh expression?

Claire Dalpra and her daughter, Natalie

Question: When is a midweek children's group a fresh expression of church and when is it just a midweek children's group?

This is one we often get asked. I used to think the answer was simple. Now am I not so sure. I used to think that I knew when something was church or it wasn't. What I had forgotten was that the best church planting advice is to build slowly and resist the temptation to place upon a fledgling church expectations of ecclesiastical maturity of a well-established church. This means that something might be church but just in its earliest stages.

So how do you know whether a midweek children's group is a fresh expression of church in the making? How would you know if an emphasis on growing community is simply as a midweek support for tired mums or because it is a necessary building block of the church planting process? My present understanding is that the difference is found in the intentions and assumptions that lie beneath.

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In terms of longer term mission strategy, a fledging fresh expression of church would not see themselves as only a bridge to help newcomers connect with the existing Sunday morning congregation. We suspect there are **two indicators** to test whether "the bridge" expectation has been fully dismantled and the ground cleared for a new church to grow in its place. Firstly, do those that lead the group or assist in leading see this community as their primary place of belonging or are they just lending a hand to what they perceive to be an outreach ministry whilst belonging to a "proper" church someone else? Secondly, have members been encouraged to seek opportunities to offer loving service to others outside the group. They needn't necessarily be all fully signed up Christians seeking to evangelise their friends and neighbours but if a sense of ownership and responsibility can be fostered among members to look outwards as well as inwards, that will build well for the future in term of growth, mission and avoiding an unhelpful client provider plateau.

To take this further you could read my research in Encounters on the Edge no.31 ***Small Beginnings***, and no.33 ***Café Church*** *part 1* where similar issues are present. For an in depth read, see an article by George Lings in the IJSCC Vol.6 No.1 2006 entitled "*Unravelling the DNA of Church*".

Editorial: "Half time, but don't change ends"

William Wilberforce

I was moved by watching the film *Amazing Grace*. The enormity of the slavery issue, the length of time to bring change and the personal cost to Wilberforce; they all resonated more than I could explain.

I began to make comparison to the story I'm a small part of. For 20 years I have longed and laboured that planting churches should become seen as normal. I have watched as the weight of evidence grew of their birth, bringing diversity, vigour and greater missional effectiveness. *Mission-shaped church* in 2004 brought a tipping point. Fresh Expressions of church can no longer be ignored. Their part in the mixed economy, of inherited and emerging church, looks secure.

However as the film reminded me, 1807 marked only the end of the trade in slaves, not abolition of the practice. That would be drawn out until 1833.

I suspect our church is still captive to Christendom values. So our focus is too pastoral, our identity is insufficiently counter cultural. The further needed change is massive. Will we dare to invest more in inventing churches we don't yet have, than what we put into improving the ones we do have. I fear we are still wedded to taking beauty treatments when we need to have babies. The change I hope for has only gone half way. Fresh Expressions are allowed, but not yet normal.

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George Lings

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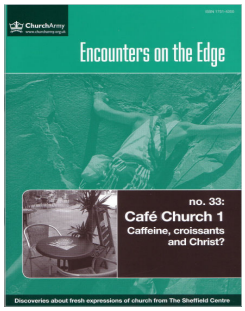

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Wider news from Church Army: A year of Hope for 2008

When was the last time you were asked to share your hopes by someone who really cared?

In November 3,000 residents of Hope Streets across the UK in locations from Aberdeen to Winchester received a letter asking them to express their hopes for the coming year by text, email or post. Hope Street residents were encouraged to be creative and send in words, poetry, art work or even short movies describing their hopes and dreams.

This is all part of a new website based project www.hopeinfo.co.uk created by Church Army and the Christian Enquiry Agency as a focus for a year long conversation with the public about what it means to live hopefully.

David Coleman, Communications Manager for Church Army,