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So Far, But No Further

Introduction

In 1946 an article was written in The Irish Monthly called *So Far, But No Further, In Theatre* by Gabriel Fallon, in which the author criticised the stance of some of his contemporaries in believing that modern theatre should not be allowed to change and develop past 'naturalistic fourth-wall drama'.

He goes on to say: 'But [these good people] are inclined to forget, I think, that there were theatres before the theatre of naturalism, and there will be theatres after it has gone. It is most unlikely that this particular form of drama was at its birth predestined to immutability.'

In the pages that follow, the team have written about situations where the Church has been able to go *so far, but no further*, either due to the difficulty of the mission work, a lack of resources, or a lack of organisational investment. In all cases it seems to be a time of transition, between what was and what has not yet become. So a timely reminder, lest we forget, that *it is most unlikely that our current form of church was at its birth predestined to immutability*.

Whether the fresh expressions we are involved with and investing in will become the churches of tomorrow or not, we cannot say. What is sure is that we are in a time of transition, and that what we have now will change. Somehow.

Laurence Keith

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The Sheffield Centre is a research team whose role is to discover, develop and communicate our findings in evangelism and mission to Church Army and the wider Church.

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Discipleship and Messy Church

My wife Alison started a Messy Church on a council estate in Sheffield a couple of years ago after a number of encouraging baptism and funeral contacts with parents in the area. The Messy Church was lively, well attended, the children seemed to love it, the food was good, and parents started bringing other parents and their kids. Most were from non-churched backgrounds. All well and good.

About a year in, a handful of parents went to Alison and said they were interested in either getting baptised or confirmed. Great news! Alison asked me to help with the baptism/confirmation class and between us we agreed that the *Start!* course was probably the most appropriate. Snappy. Down-to-earth. Interactive. Simple.

The first session went well enough, but at the second only two people turned up, and come the third week people either phoned to say they were ill or they were uncontactable. The course had fizzled out well before the end of its six weeks. What had we done wrong?

In conversations afterwards, it seemed that all this talk about big life and death issues wasn't what they were after. To paraphrase one mum: 'I love my kids and I like to go out on a Friday night. But thinking about all this God stuff is just too much. All I want to know is what words to say so that I can get confirmed.'

I'm not judging. I totally understand. They didn't join our Messy Church to find meaning or answers to the big issues of life. They joined because it was an attractive community. They were happy to belong to it and bring others along, and they were asking for some sort of ritual to commemorate this. They were offered the usual suspects of baptism and confirmation, but maybe they needed something that was less about a lifelong commitment to the Christian life and more along the lines of 'I'm now a member of this Messy Church'.

It's great that Messy Church worldwide is touching so many non-churched people, but if this is a typical example, and baptism classes or enquirers' courses aren't the best answer to the discipleship issue, then what is? As George Lings points out in *Encounters 46*: '...today's evangelism is harder than that of yesterday. Alpha is becoming like Arnhem – a bridge too far.'

However, George comments in the same issue that 'serving is a discipleship trait', so maybe discipleship can happen in the context of encouraging people to become involved as helpers. I certainly saw this at our Messy Church in Sheffield with some of the people who helped in the kitchen or set out tables. In at least two cases, the spiritual growth was significant. I would love to hear how other Messy Churches are dealing with discipleship.

You can get in touch with Andrew on the Share website at www.sharetheguide.org

Andrew Wooding

A Pivotal Point

In the spring of 1996 I was completing a masters thesis arguing that New Age and Contemporary Paganism should be seen as emerging faiths at home in a post-modern culture, and that Christians needed to take them seriously as places of mission, but also as offering insights for the future shape of a missionary post-modern church. At the time the first idea was academically contentious, but is now I think accepted. The second was radical, on the whole Christians, with the notable exceptions of John Drane and David Burnett, wrote of the New Spiritualities as evil dangers for Christians to avoid. Much of the role of researching evangelism and post-Christian culture requires a looking forwards, trying to spot trends and think how evangelism might engage in what is emerging.

As I discovered over the next few years, and especially since joining The Sheffield Centre in 2003, I was not the only one thinking this way. Over the past few years a number of us have not only been advocating this changed thinking but equipping Christians to go to places like Mind Body Spirit fairs and engage in sensitive cross-cultural mission, enabling Christianity to be present in the contemporary spiritual market place. Last year we hosted the first national conference for those involved in this ministry here in Sheffield. The 95 people who came were all practitioners in this area from across Britain, and more could have come. 13 years earlier such an event would have been unthinkable; much has happened.

But much of the strength of The Sheffield Centre's research has been about looking backward, learning the lessons from what has happened, and this has born much fruit. This analysis had taught me that the future of mission in the New Spirituality culture, like all cross-cultural mission, was likely to need such fresh expressions of church; indeed I encouraged people to expect to find themselves working as church planters. But in truth there are almost no new Christian communities from this work, and this has to raise some searching questions.

First the good news. For a while when people asked me 'So are people coming to faith?' I had to be honest and say 'well, no', but I knew that powerful things were happening and people were making connections with the Christian faith; if you knew the stories you would realise how amazing they were. I also knew that this was not about a target market; we were getting to understand and make friends with people in a community we had come to respect, even if we didn't always share the same understanding of faith. Others out amongst those of no church background have been finding the same thing, and are having to field the same questions. The reality now is that people *are* coming to Christian faith, often in ways quite unlike what have been the norms of evangelism, with dreams and visions playing the key role.

And this has brought the issue of fresh expressions back, not as part of the theory but as urgent necessity. The reality is as we might have expected: those discovering Christ on their spiritual path from their journeys in the New Spiritualities would be damaged by even the best of our churches, because they are unable to handle their stories and the expression of Christian faith they are bringing to birth. And here is the problem: most of those doing good outreach are not like St Paul, lecturing every day in Ephesus for three years before there was a breakthrough, they are people offering a commitment to a few events a year that are starting to bear fruit. Moving to the next much needed stage is a whole gear change. My hope in creating the national network that met for the first time last year and continues to support each other is that together we can do what in reality most cannot do in their own locality. So we are at a pivotal point, we can see where we need to go, but need to change to get there. Mission does this; it changes the missionaries before it really changes the world.

Steve Hollinghurst

An Internal Transition

Something has shifted within me this past year. I've undergone an internal transition. A change of mind.

This last year, for my MA, I had to pioneer a mission project from scratch. It had to be fun but cost as little as possible in terms of time and money. So I began a cookery club for juniors from our local primary school. Every fortnight we gathered in church to cook as well as reflect on Christian festivals and traditions. For the final session at Easter, the children cooked and served a three course sit-down meal for their families.

I realise this kind of project is hardly groundbreaking. Many Christians engage in this kind of work to bless the local community and get to know families beyond the fringes of church. Nor did my project achieve one of the course aims to plant a church. But then six months is far too unrealistic a timescale to see something ecclesial established with people who aren't already Christians. The most one could do was build a preparatory step towards church.

What I do think is important is the transition that occurred within me in doing it. I have never thought I could be a pioneering practitioner myself. The start of the process felt truly terrifying. A number of my fellow students said the same and yet our collective endeavours resulted in pioneering work among people who go to Mind, Body and Spirit fairs, arty types exploring spirituality through open-mic events in a local wine bar, those who enjoy an outdoor pursuit called geo-cashing and regular shoppers in a church-run charity shop. Visit www.cliffcollege.ac.uk/page/blogs for the blogs these and other projects kept along the way.

Having to face the challenge head-on, we are now wiser about the difficulties of this kind of work. Working with limited resources, sustaining what is started, growing community in a diffuse network and existing Christians not understanding what you are trying to do are all constraints not to be underestimated. Switching hats from researcher to practitioner, I also add to this list the reminder that good mission moves at a much slower pace than theories sometimes imply.

However, we are also wiser about the opportunities. Pioneering a project was easier than we thought. Because of what we've been through, we have confidence to believe that, with the right support and permissions, we don't have to wait for someone else to initiate something but can dare to begin something ourselves.

I see a number of parallels with fresh expressions of church that have developed out of Christians starting or joining local community groups. See Phil Potter's *The Challenge of Change* for the way in which engaging in much-loved hobbies and skills in spare time has led to the planting of new congregations within St Mark's Haydock. Also, Wel/Dun, one of the four Threshold congregations in rural Lincoln written up in *Encounters No. 42* is another church exploring this as their mission focus, and discovering it to be a very natural and enjoyable way to engage in mission.

As I write this article from my desk beside the window in our new temporary office, across the road new windows are being fitted in the first floor of the house opposite. It's a good analogy. Because of the experience I have been through, I now see things through different eyes. Last year, I needed convincing that relying on spare-time lay volunteers to begin the kind of mission that will lead to fresh expressions of church was a good idea. Now I would need convincing that it isn't.

Claire Dalpra

Transitory Communities

A couple of months ago we gathered together a small group of practitioners developing churches in new housing areas. One challenge raised at our gathering was the nature of these neighbourhoods and the extent to which these communities are not simply new but continuously changing.

Whilst these neighbourhoods are sometimes referred to as new communities, people often live in such areas for short periods of time, some figures from Cambridgeshire suggesting three years as an average length of stay. So, new housing areas often function as transitory communities rather than new neighbourhood communities. In this context practitioners work in a setting of ongoing change as the church mirrors the community, living in ongoing transition. Clearly this environment creates a variety of pastoral and missional challenges, providing some interesting examples with practitioners working alongside other service providers to develop transition support in schools and within the community.

This type of transitory environment, whilst offering opportunities, is clearly challenging. Any practitioners working in this context need to feel comfortable with a high level of change and uncertainty, so it is ideally suited to individuals with abilities to adapt, innovate and encourage community formation and transition. Such abilities are often present in pioneers; however these opportunities for ministry and the skills of pioneers are not being matched up, with new housing posts unfilled and ordained pioneer ministers being placed in traditional roles.

Perhaps this is due to these ministries being seen as similar to parish based ministry; like establishing a parish church in a new 'parish', and so requiring a parish priest. Even where some contexts call for a more traditional style of churchmanship, the process of establishing church here requires a very different set of skills to continuing and developing an established parish church.

Perhaps the similarity between parish and this context is also encouraged by an image of new housing areas as a geographical community. However some practitioners have found that high proportions of the new community previously lived close by. They continued to see their community as their established networks of work, friends and hobbies outside their new geographical location. In such cases a neighbourhood approach alone may not be appropriate.

A further similarity between a new housing context and parish based ministry is perhaps in the assumption that a new church is established for existing Christians moving into the new 'parish'. This assumption ignores both the missional needs of the neighbourhood and can lead to further assumptions about the character of the leader needed, skewing the type of ministry away from mission and towards pastoral care. The context is clearly challenging so could be viewed as requiring leaders with substantial experience in parish ministry. However in understanding the nature of the context it seems unlikely that those with the skills and temperament to thrive in such transitory contexts will fit this requirement of extensive pastoral experience. Perhaps it is time to recognise the adaptive skills in pioneers rather than discount them for what may appear to be gaps in their experience.

Further details from the research day have been written up and can be accessed at: www.sharetheguide.org/perspectives/topics.

Beth Keith

Lawrence of Arabia – A Tale of Two Halves

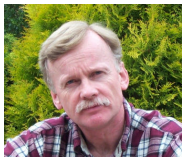
In January I watched a pair of BBC2 documentaries on Lawrence of Arabia, by Professor Rory Stewart. Lawrence aimed to build a new independent Arab nation, but these two films show how Lawrence felt his dream ended in catastrophe and shame.

My reading of it is that Lawrence was a romantic, a linguist, as well as a trained solder and archaeologist, who thus unusually for his time deeply respected Arab culture. He was able to unite and inspire a guerrilla movement from below, that brought down the Ottoman Turks in Palestine. For his pains he was promoted to Colonel and on 1st October 1918 stood at the threshold of glorious possibility at the Arab council in recently captured Damascus.

But already long before, in 1916, behind his back, Anglo-French diplomats in the Sykes-Picot agreement had agreed to carve up the captured lands in areas of British and French control. Lawrence was already exhausted from desert warfare and then by inter-tribal Arab strife. He then saw a culture that he admired, ignored and despised; he had to watch external political imposition come in and flout the promises made to his Arab leader friends. Although notionally consulted as a popular hero, in effect he was politically ignored and eventually he joined the RAF as an aircraftsman and in 1935 died ingloriously through a motor cycle accident. It was a life of two contrasting halves, underlined by the documentary. The very apt skills that enabled him to pioneer an astonishing change from below in the first half were not those needed to successfully stalk the corridors of political power in the second. What brought us progress to where we are may not be what we most need to journey further.

To me it was like a scary parable – but not an allegory – of the fresh expressions of Church adventure. Today we have come further in terms of liberating missional resources, seeing new local communities form, disclosing pioneer gifts more widely and daring to re-imagine church than I dreamed was possible when I started this job in 1997. I am astonished and grateful. However I still see signs that pioneers are sometimes deliberated blocked in vocation, still barely understood, as yet inappropriately trained and too often domesticated in their deployment. Our clericalism still focuses more on the career development of newer ministers than sustaining and developing the life of the equally new Christian communities. Our finances massively bolster the decaying edifice of the existing ageing church with very modest investment in what is only emerging. We still think organisationally and so spread the butter of money and leaders fairly but thinly, and fail to think in an organic way that knows growth comes unevenly from growth.

Yet I thank God for the few who are in places of influence to seek to change the centre and the system, while the pioneers venture on at the edge. I long that the edge and the centre do not become disconnected, but I am convinced that there is still a very long way to go in seeking a genuinely mission-shaped church. Prayer and vigilance will be needed.



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