



Models of Engagement

Introduction



In this research bulletin we are reflecting on a research team meeting from September 2010 where Jeff Kirby, a Church Army Evangelist working among asylum seekers and homeless people in Sheffield, explored with us two related models he and his wife Vanessa have developed to explain what they do in their ministries.

One they have called *the Pitsmoor Cycle*, which relates to the faith journey of an individual. The other is a model of three stages of relationship development: 'contact', 'engaging' and 'friendship'. We spent some time looking at these models and did some further exploring together, some of which we have written up in the following pages.

Our first article is written by Jeff and Vanessa and introduces the Pitsmoor Cycle. Hopefully this sets the scene for the rest of the bulletin.

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The Pitsmoor Cycle



The underlying foundations for the model lay in the well established theories of the Experiential Learning Cycle, the Learning Cycle and the Pastoral Cycle. However, we have orientated these concepts towards the realm of belief and religious practice / rituals. We have also mapped onto the cycle the helpful categories often used to identify involvement in the Christian Church: Belong or Bless / Believe / Behave and 'Bother' (our addition).

The four stages (continued overleaf)

1) Experience of God

We begin with an Experience of God; here the individual experiences the divine. Experiences could include miracles, events that defy everyday explanations, coincidences, an experience of creation that is awe-inspiring. Alternatively the experience may be negative leading the individual to question why God is punishing them.



The Pitsmoor Cycle Continued...

2) Understanding of God

The Experience demands some form of understanding - making sense of the experience. Understanding will involve past experience, other people around them, media, established culture and established religious traditions. For some, belief and understanding may remain here without engaging with the other stages of the cycle.

3) Rituals / Behaviour

If the individual does adopt a specific belief then it is likely that it will lead them to behave differently. In the realm we are discussing this equates to rituals and daily practice, such as Church attendance / ceremonies, daily Bible reading and prayer, caring for and serving others. Often reinforcement for an individual's understanding is sought by meeting and communicating with other believers.

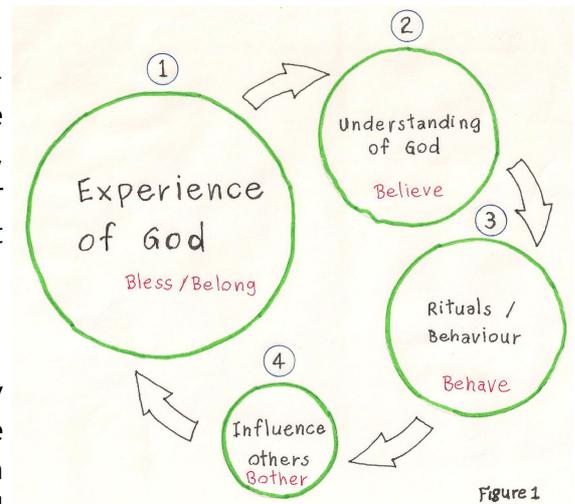


Figure 1

4) Influence Others

The final stage of the cycle is Influencing Others. Here the individual is confident enough of their understanding / belief to attempt to influence others. This could be by verbal / written communication or by actions attempting to create an experience similar to the one that led them to faith. This leads us naturally back into experience.

Theological reflection on the model (continued overleaf)

We have concluded in our ministries that much of our understanding of God is actually located within experience and not easily separated out. In this sense it is a practical knowledge of God, not a theoretical knowledge of God - knowledge which can only be experienced in relationship. What we do, inspired by the actions of Jesus in the Gospels, is a material proclamation of what we would like to see more of, what some of us believe is to come.

This notion, that significant knowledge is located in experience, relates directly to established theories surrounding knowledge transfer, namely 'Embodied Knowledge' and 'Encultured Knowledge', the focus being on non-explicit and socialised forms of knowledge.

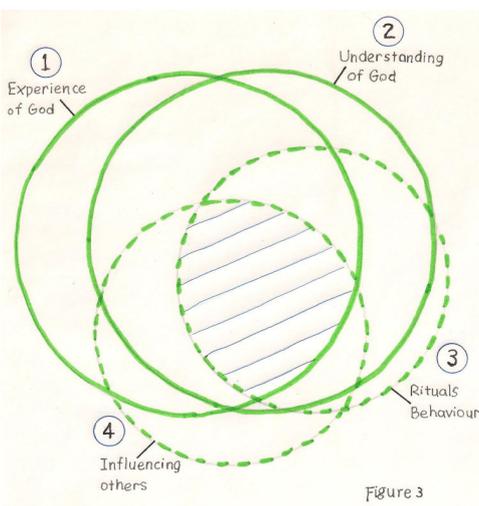


Figure 3

Clearly, embodied knowledge challenges the Pitsmoor cycle to adapt to include it by overlapping all the spheres. We have outlined a model here to show how this might look.

The shaded area in the middle of Figure 3 represents activities that cover every aspect of the cycle. One example from our work would be the international monthly homeless meals. Asylum seekers needing a meal are fed, volunteers chat and work out what is important and why it is important, everyone is celebrating and eating together, the public nature of the venue attracts attention from strangers walking by, local people are welcomed in.

The Pitsmoor Cycle Continued...

It may be helpful for us to relate this to Jesus in the gospels. We clearly see that Jesus' ministry was about influencing others. He did this by giving the disciples and those he encountered an experience of God, an experience of the kingdom, and an understanding of that experience. Not everyone accepted the explanations that he offered. Nonetheless a significant number did and in time they sought to influence others. In his last days on earth Jesus instituted rituals that would remind people of the experience and understanding he brought and the depth of his love made visible on the cross. It appears to us to have been about a journey of discovery which developed into a journey of faith.



We thank Jeff and Vanessa Kirby for letting us reprint their work here

Three stages, three places



We are interested in theory and value learning from practitioners. They sense patterns within their own work and air them. We compare these to other contexts to test for wider verification. Thus theory evolves.

Church Army Evangelist, Jeff Kirby, reported something to us recently. Working among asylum seekers and homeless people in Sheffield, he noticed that relationships go through distinct gear changes. These relate to the number of different 'places' in which people choose to interact. He calls the stages 'contact', 'engaging' and 'friendship'. Here is a similar progression in another context. Stage one, boy meets girl in a youth club. Stage two occurs when, after a time short or long, he invites her out to a coffee or a drink. Notably this meeting occurs in a second different space, like a café or pub. The relationship has moved to 'engaging'. It takes both risk and trust to make the shift. Stage three occurs, after some further weeks or months, when she invites him home to meet her parents. This happens in yet another and different third place. Again it takes risk and trust but, once it has happened, something further has changed. In this case it is more than 'friendship', but it is at least that.

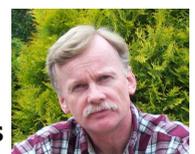
I have now seen this pattern at work in a piece of superb youth work in Bradford. Safe initial contact with no pressure occurs in the first place - a secondary school. From there in due time, and with discernment, invitation is given to the second space - a weeknight youth club. Again, as relation-

ships grow, there is progression to the third place where more Christian content happens. At each stage there is more commitment within relationships. That is fostered by meeting people in a variety of contexts. The change of 'place' inevitably reveals more what each person is like.

This analysis also means I have yet more reasons to doubt whether attending a worship service is adequate, in terms of helping newcomers to belong to a church community. In my own story, in which I am no longer a vicar, last month I attended a PCC away day. There I met and talked with more people in one morning than has occurred through being a new-ish attender at a well known Sheffield congregation for the best part of a year. This has occurred in a large local church that prides itself in being friendly and has a welcoming team. I simply note that this doesn't turn newcomers into friends. Similar things happen at work. A workstation is but one place, meeting around the coffee machine is a second, and an invitation to a home is a distinct third. If we want to build genuine community, having and moving across different places matters.

Different spaces have different functions, and meeting in more than one place is absolutely vital. This idea complements my research into the seven sacred spaces, written up in Encounters 43.

George Lings



Happening upon the three spaces?



Curious about fresh expressions of church that are led by volunteers, I have dedicated some time this autumn to delving a little deeper into how they work. I am particularly interested in those heroic individuals who manage to lead churches at the same time as working full-time in other employment. How are the churches they lead sustained when leaders have limited time in which they can be available for all those tasks usually associated with a church leader?

One of the issues I have discussed with them seems to overlap with the issues raised so far in this research bulletin. It is the issue of worship and what patterns and ways of worshipping are manageable given the time constraints of a 'spare-time' leader. Aware that lay led church planting of the 1980s and 1990s struggled to sustain a congregational model of church on a weekly rhythm, I was therefore interested to find out what patterns worked for them.

Though my research is still ongoing, interim analysis of six churches offers some data to comment on. One church did meet weekly throughout the year, but the remaining five churches met for congregational worship less often. One met weekly in term time but gave themselves a breather in school holidays. The remaining four met monthly. Straightforward findings, you may think.

But not necessarily so. Beneath my question and subsequent answers, I was surprised by the com-

plexity of other ways in which these churches do their worship and discipleship. In many of the churches that met monthly for congregational worship, elements of worship and discipleship (and community) did occur weekly (and in some cases twice weekly), but in smaller, more informal sub-gatherings. Furthermore, two churches who aren't currently doing this, expressed a longing to introduce something in the future.

But aren't these simply home groups, you may well ask? Yes and no. The discipleship element was a clear similarity, but I was surprised by the larger numbers often involved in these sub-gatherings and by the way they seemed to be very much at the core of the life of the church rather than something added 'on the side' for those who are really keen.

In all but one interview, those I talked to recognised one congregational worship gathering struggles to adequately respond to the diversity of not-yet Christians, new Christians and existing Christians. When a leader's lack of availability means congregation worship cannot be sustained on a weekly basis yet they are aware of the diversity issue, I wonder if this is a blessing in disguise; have those that meet monthly for congregational worship yet have weekly sub-gatherings at the heart of what they do stumbled across the different places /spaces approach without realising it?

Claire Dalpra



A healthy shape for churches



George believes we have much to learn from monastic communities. His travels in 2009 have included visits to Taize and Citeaux and extended stays at both Northumbria Community and the Anglican Franciscans at Hilfield in Dorset.

These visits along with his study of monasteries throughout history confirmed his thoughts that healthy monastic communities contain seven sacred spaces: cell, chapel, chapter, cloister, garden, refectory and scriptorium.

To read more see our website here: [Encounters on the Edge no.43: seven sacred spaces](#)

Discos, church plants and youth camps



When my Church Army colleague Jeff Kirby (we go on retreat together twice a year) came and spoke to The Sheffield Centre, I was taken with his and his wife Vanessa's idea of three places where relationships form and grow: 'contact', 'engaging' and 'friendship'.

I couldn't help reminiscing about my schooldays. You'd think that spending six hours a day, five days a week in school would be enough to form friendships (the 'contact' stage), but it was always those occasions where I saw my classmates in their 'normal' clothes and not school uniform that led to the real friendships forming.

First, there were the end-of-term discos (the 'engaging' stage). Not a uniform in site, dinner-ladies dispensing cheap cola and penny sweets, and 'trendy'-looking teachers dancing awkwardly alongside pupils to the latest hits from Sham 69 and Brotherhood of Man.

Then there would be invitations to people's houses (the 'friendship' stage). Yes, I had lots of 'colleagues' at school, but the real friendships developed outside school hours. This in turn led to better time with friends in class, but it wouldn't have happened without the extra-curricular socialising.

Same with a church plant I attended in Worthing. It was only after I'd joined in with church walks and picnics, 'talent' nights, games nights and parties at people's houses that I felt a deeper sense of belonging on the Sunday mornings.

The sign of a good church, to me, is that people are seen as more important than keeping the machine going - a church that places a high value on community and depth of relationships. It was

telling at this church that after a service it took longer to get to the back door to go home than the service itself actually lasted. People wanted to hang around and chat with each other and you couldn't get rid of them. Again, this wouldn't have happened if the only point of contact had been the Sunday morning.

Finally, I helped run an annual Pathfinder venture in Devon for the whole of the 1990s. Every summer, upwards of 100 11-14-year-olds would descend on Devon from various modes of transport, and we would subsequently spend the next 9-10 days together.

The venture's worship meetings and Bible studies were planned meticulously, but without fail the first one or two would always feel a little flat. It was only after the whole of the venture went for an endless day-long walk (relationships developing through shared adversity) that barriers would break down.

The final leveller would be the first evening disco. As with the school discos, leaders and teenagers alike would make fools of themselves on the dance floor and wear their most embarrassing clothes. From then on, the ventures would take off and feel like one big family eating together, having fun together, praising God together.

Can we make our churches like this? Yes, provided we move from 'contact' to the 'engaging' and 'friendship' stages. It's not hard work, and it's actually quite fun!



Andrew Wooding



Action – reflection – conversion



Jeff and Vanessa’s observations are developed from their own version of an action reflection cycle. I think it helpfully widens it from some models that are only focused on social action by making us aware that ‘religious action’ through ritual, prayer and worship is part of the processes of reinforcing the developing understanding. Equally they stress that the circles overlap; we are not dealing with a cycle operating in a fixed order. One of the consequences of this is that experience can occur at different places on the cycle. Religious ritual or seeking to influence others and society may thus be places of encounter with God also.

This cycle, with experience of God as part of it, reflects the Christian worldview which Jeff and Vanessa operate within. Many of those who work with them, however, are activists with no religious worldview. These people are both colleagues and companions in their work but also those amongst whom Christian community is being planted. How might these people enter into this action reflection cycle? They will do so within their own worldview, and therefore possibly *not* recognise God in the process, or at least not with the concept of God Jeff and Vanessa share. In any shared form of social action then there are two, perhaps more, parallel interpretations of the cycle reflecting different worldviews. A process of conversion within such an understanding is a change of worldview; a movement from a non-Christian cycle to a Christian one.

Worldviews are powerful and operate at a level we are not conscious of. They tend to reinforce themselves, so we interpret information from

both the experience, reflection and action stages of the cycle in ways that confirm our existing worldviews. One person’s answer to prayer, for instance, is another person’s luck or fate. Ritual plays a part in this for the non-religious also. Certain traditions, images and actions become part of the identity of any group and help strengthen it. Changing worldviews is not easy, but any concept of evangelism means this is what needs to happen.

How might this occur? The reality is that at each point in the cycle the potential is there to have an experience, encounter or understanding that challenges the existing worldview. This can be resolved by adapting the worldview or finding a reading of events that makes the challenge go away. However, at such times it is also possible to link the parallel circles in the cycle so that one can change from worldview to another. This is the strength of Christians and non-Christians sharing in such a process; it opens up the Christian interpretation for a shared experience or action to be explored and potentially adopted by others. This is also why social action projects in which groups of Christians undertake social action to benefit non-Christians rarely lead to conversions, rather it is the ones in which the Christians and non-Christians share in the social action that lead to people coming to Christian faith and the forming of new Christian communities.



Steve Hollinghurst

Different stages in the mission process are also explored by Steve Hollinghurst in *Mission-Shaped Evangelism* Canterbury Press 2010 pp.242-243



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