



## Soft Cell

Devotees of cell promote it as the big change needed for today's church. Others have decided that the price is too high, the pain is too great, or cell doesn't fit where they are. Is there any middle way to do cell alongside congregation without fatally weakening what cell offers at its best? We heard of a story and went to see for ourselves.

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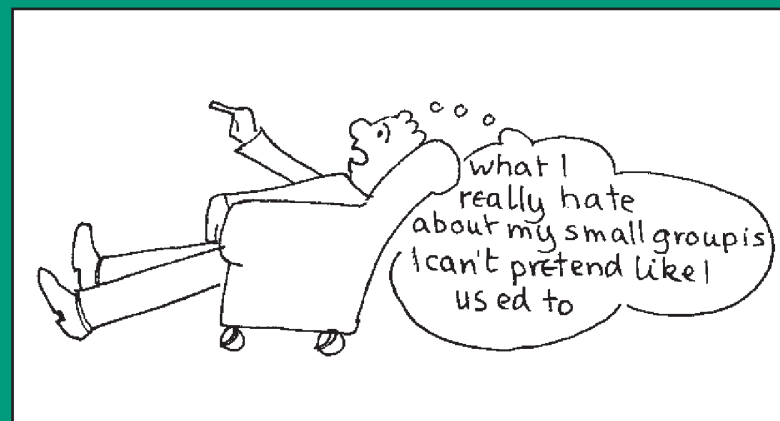


ChurchArmy

# Encounters on the Edge

A Series of Quarterly Investigations from **The Sheffield Centre**

## No.20



## Soft Cell



ChurchArmy

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Encounters on the Edge

Encounters on the Edge

## Soft Cell

Back in 1999, cell church was still very new to Britain; only one book from a Church of England author, Howard Astin, had been published.<sup>1</sup> Most stories circulating informally were of transitioning existing churches. *Encounters on the Edge* No. 3 tried to widen exploration of the field. It offered a snapshot of English Anglicans' interest in cell, highlighted some early feedback emerging on this fresh expression of church and told a different kind of story. We chose the planting of cell church from scratch, on a Northern Ireland Protestant Para-Military estate distanced geographically and culturally from its parish church. From tiny beginnings, through relational evangelism, there grew a committed core of twenty adults and children meeting in two inter-generational cells. These, in turn, were building a wide network of further personal links into the community. It looked hopeful.

Longer reflection on that story and its unfolding shows a less rosy picture. Following a change of incumbent, pressure grew from conservative elements in the parish church who could not accept that this was a valid alternative expression of church, and a review was called in winter 2000. A case was put by the cell leader, in consultation with *The Sheffield Centre*, chronicling why a fresh expression of church for the estate had been decided by the sending church and what had been achieved in four years. It advocated allowing separate indigenous church to continue to emerge on the estate, acknowledging this would not be a familiar route to the local or wider church in Northern Ireland. At the end of the day, the leader's contract was not renewed. The cells went independent and my view is that ground was lost. Here is not the place to dig into all the dynamics and apportion blame. However, clearly cell values at least challenge, and can conflict with, existing

<sup>1</sup> Howard Astin *Body and Cell* CPAS 1997, though two Grove Booklets came out in 1996: Rhodes in No 36 of the *Evangelism* series and Simmonds No 66 in the *Pastoral Series*.

church. Questions of what is sustainable are relevant and I thought it was time to take another story and examine what has been learnt about cell church in the intervening years.

When a few of us began to hear of cell thinking and stories, **it was clear that there wasn't one pattern.** Alongside the few accounts of cell church planting from scratch, were several existing churches that were transitioning. Meta church was another option but so was something different to all these. We called it "cell by parallel planting". This involved giving existing churches real choice and creating diversity. Cell would be introduced, but congregational-centred, programme-based, church would also continue. Purists doubted if such a "soft" approach would work. I waited a few years and then went to see in Totton.



"you will join  
a cell"

### Totton - a town on the edge

I didn't knowingly choose it for this reason, but Totton crouches at the eastern edge of Hampshire's New Forest. The latter's image conjures green wellies, dogs, barbour jackets, retired colonels and stockbrokers, redolent of a moneyed, southern middle-class. That is not the Totton I saw. Part of the New Forest District, Totton is mainly a working-class town with some areas of real deprivation. As the Forest becomes more and more wealthy, the children of traditional "forest people" have moved or been sent to Totton because it's the only place they can afford to live.

It also perches uneasily at the western edge of Southampton, across the river Test. What used to claim to be the largest village in England is now an eclipsed small town (or is it a suburb?) with all the big or glamorous shops in the 'big city', to which the more upwardly mobile gravitate. What is Totton? Is it its own place, or a kind of bypassed nothing in between? The Town Council took part in a national survey of community involvement in voluntary organisations of all kinds. Totton came next to bottom across the whole of the UK.

## A call to the edge

Paul and Kate Bayes had been happily settled in High Wycombe for eight years, running a thriving church and he eventually becoming Team Rector. While they were taking a weekend break to celebrate Paul's 40th birthday, Kate received a prophetic sense of them being "called to the edge" and in faith they moved to Totton in late 1994. Looking back, perhaps the edge was not such an unfamiliar address. Paul had studied for a drama degree in the 1970's and artistic creativity often comes from the edge, not the centre. He stayed in the City of Birmingham to take theological training at Queens. A curacy in Newcastle was followed by five years' University Chaplaincy in West London. Chaplaincy often has an edge quality too. Sometimes it is a matter of hanging on in secular contexts that have no guaranteed place for church, sometimes operating where traditional church has no access. It is often responding to need, crisis and request. What, in retrospect, was most significant was Paul's encounter with the Christian student community living a vibrant small group life.<sup>2</sup> In coming to Totton, his personal



experience of a number of Anglican traditions stood him in good stead as he inherited a Liberal Catholic team of churches. Despite the town population rising 40% in twenty years, previous faithful ministry only yielded a legacy of goodwill and the small congregations were reaching half the national average attendance.

<sup>2</sup> See Paul Bayes: *To Know and Be Known – Ministry in the Service of Friendship in the Church* Sabbatical Report 2003 p 52



Paul retained and encouraged the received tradition in three out of the four churches. At the fourth, St Winfrid, Paul gradually introduced more explicit mission-minded and Charismatic values, while retaining the centrality of



Welcome to my  
Diocesan planting  
Seminar

Eucharistic worship. It may be less than co-incidence that Winfrid is the English name for Boniface, the Wessex Anglo Saxon apostle to the Germans. After training in a Christian community near Totton, he founded eight dioceses in Germany between 718 and 741 and recruited a stream of English leaders to serve in their churches and monasteries. The missionary story of striking out in new directions, struggling with lukewarm, negligent Christians, suffering "treachery of false brethren", handling "fighting without and fears within", comes out of Boniface's recorded letters. Those who have lived through this recent chapter of St Winfrid's family may smile ruefully.

## What works for the modest church?

The search for models that could work at St Winfrid's family led Paul to conclude that **many initiatives, though appearing radical and innovative, were actually built upon the foundation of conventionally successful churches.** These would possess many features like a well-established teaching ministry, a wide provision of programmes, a history of capable leadership and assistant staff, lay leaders, financial resource and some existing small groups. St Winfrid's family was middle Anglican, primarily central

in churchmanship, financially poor, small and diverse in interests. What could build on faithful and prayerful foundations, but in a situation that was not already a thriving church?

It was a New Wine seminar led by Bob and Mary Hopkins in 1996 that sowed the seeds of cell thinking. Paul followed up his curiosity and hope through other conferences, such as those mounted by YWAM. His reading, praying, talking to others and sowing ideas to see what would happen led to several principal contours that mark this story.

Some hard-line cell advocates talk as though traditional church should be lovingly put down like a terminally ill dog and change to cell be enforced as a matter of spiritual public health. Yet this story will show **it is possible to be passionate about the values and yet do “soft sell” about cell.** Why and how could this be?

## 1 Prototype models grace

### Prototype and Big Bang

There are two ways in which cell can be introduced to an existing church. **‘Prototype’** is a term which describes one method well. Like with a test aircraft, one first kind is experimentally created. The first group themselves will be exposed to cell, not so much by prior teaching as through joint experience and reflection. As in mechanical prototypes, elements that work well are noted, shortcomings will be exposed and modifications made. ‘Prototype’ is ‘try it and see’. From this start, other improved production models come. To change the image, **in organic cell the DNA is laid down in ‘prototype’ and the members carry it into future groups** where the process repeats. Over a significant period of time, many of the membership of the existing church and new Christians become part of cell.

**‘Big bang’** is the alternative. Here the dynamic is considerable preparation beforehand, in terms of teaching the values to the congregation, and recruiting leaders who have been convinced for prospective groups. At a discerned date, the scheme is launched and everyone who does not actually rebel becomes part of a cell group; the whole church is deemed to have

become cell. **Advantages are clarity of direction** and claims for quicker transition. Teacher/practitioners like Phil Potter, Howard Astin and Clive Collier all vigorously repudiate ‘prototype’ in favour of ‘big bang’ and have put it into practice in their large, existing churches.

### Why “prototype” was chosen for parallel cell planting



Paul (left) was aware of the ‘big bang’ advocates and their critique that ‘prototype’ takes forever and can divide churches. However, part of his rationale for ‘prototype’ was affirming Anglican values like respecting diversity. He believed it was better to create a new church alongside the existing church – running parallel to it. For him, to **live with a mixed**

**economy of cell and congregation was not a problem, but an opportunity**, that fitted within a Team Ministry already diverse in churchmanship. Parallel cell sits easily with **the Anglican instinct for genteel untidiness in church life.**

It was also a pragmatic decision, driven by the realistic need to work with what was given. Unlike big churches that transition by ‘big bang’, there were far fewer resources. Only a handful of people had experience of leading small groups and only one house group still ran, so such groups were outside most people’s experience. Nor did St Winfrid’s family have any track record in proactive evangelism, so that leap would be a big one too.

I respect the argument from diversity and see the need to be realistic about resources, yet it was the third strand that I found most deeply convincing

about the wisdom of 'prototype'. The first cell value is "Jesus at the centre". It includes the statement: "Only Jesus changes people". Here is the connection to the priority of grace and the legitimacy of what I'm calling 'soft cell'. It seems to be observable fact that **cell is caught rather than taught**. Whether people 'get it' or not seems to be intuitive, not primarily conceptual. It is not the clever, or even the fiery, with whom it all makes sense. It is more a matter of inspiration than education. Thus at its heart, **cell contains an irony. It may be highly desirable, but you cannot make it happen**. It is in one of those Gospel secrets, like Election. Even that is for further mission and service, not pride or self-satisfaction.<sup>3</sup> The 'prototype' method is the more appropriate way to create parallel cell church.

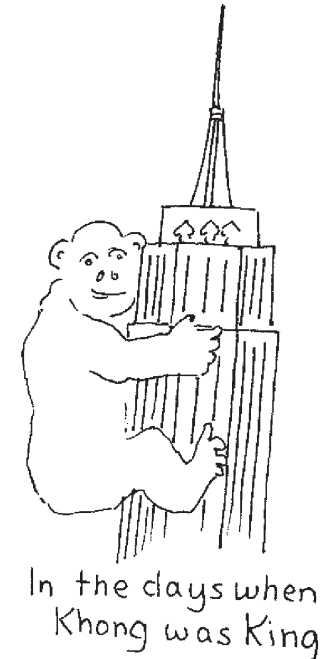
In testing this thinking against scripture, I am forcibly reminded of Jesus' ministry to the Jews. There can be no doubt of His sense of calling, the superlative quality of His teaching, the outrageous acceptance He gave to outsiders and the compassion and healing brought to sufferers. All these appear unequivocal. Yet the healings were signs only seen by some, the welcome of outsiders suggested heretical tendencies to traditionalists, He brought biting criticism of powerful insiders, His teaching in parable was often allusive and elusive, and His very identity was shrouded in the Messianic Secret. It was passionate but not forced. **'Follow me' was always a choice; it could not be compulsion**. This was grace and truth walking this earth.<sup>4</sup> What, then, is the creation of the twelve disciples, if not forming 'prototype'? And now I see more clearly why. Even Jesus couldn't do 'big bang' for the Jews. **I suspect the very weakness of 'soft cell' is precisely its inner strength**. We do not change anybody and can transition nothing. Cell is not magic. Like all best spirituality it is giving us space to be further transformed by God the life-giver. The desire to be fixers of others' problems drives many of us. A passion for cell, but blindness to the helpless grace required could be a blind spot indeed. Sadly, I know of attempts at cell elsewhere that have been abortive and nearly emptied churches. In cell, a "no" needs to be given at attempts to control, manipulate or threaten, for even our Lord refused it.

<sup>3</sup> Compare Lesslie Newbigin: *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* SPCK 1991 Chapter 7 *The Logic of Election*

<sup>4</sup> John 1.17

## 2 Humble learners are not ashamed to go "by the book"

Readers should distinguish here between mere slavish obedience to an imported model, with unimaginative rigid adherence to the structures described, as well as being oblivious to issues of cultural translation. Rather, aware of those legalistic dangers and legitimate cultural diversity, Paul Bayes' attitude was to walk in humility and, if in doubt, to **follow the values** that the original proponents of cell church had taught and refined through experience. His approach was to consciously resist our western tendency to try and improve foreign imported products in the name of enlightened cultural translation and actually to try what they did. It was taken even to the extent that if, at points, the western books on cell, even the American advocates such as Neighbour, differed from Far East practice (particularly that of Lawrence Khong of Faith Community Baptist Church in Singapore) then it was the FCBC practice which was adopted. As Paul Bayes wrote in 1999:



*"My approach has been to adopt the values first, and then to run the nuts and bolts model as accurately as possible until and unless it proves not to be working."*<sup>5</sup>

So, for example, FCBC practices an order of *welcome, worship, witness and word*. Often in the UK this order is changed with *word* moved to either section 3 or even 2. Not so here; following the admission of more **evangelistically-minded Asian people, who themselves found witness could be squeezed out by being last**, Totton kept the order advised.

Not all cell proponents have gone this way. Some have taken the 4Ws - the structure of the cell meetings - and not only changed the order but added a fifth element of *wonders*; this is prayer ministry on a Charismatic/Wimber model. Others have been far more cavalier and simply taken parts of the

<sup>5</sup> See the St Winfrid's family Web Site

<http://homepage.mac.com/paulbayes/stwinfrid/index.htm> – or the sabbatical report op cit p 152

dynamics they liked to beef up their fading house groups. Yet others have attempted to publicly teach the whole package to their churches, sometimes in the mistaken illusion of obtaining a quick fix over issues like discipleship or engendering spontaneous mission. Then they have settled back for what the congregation or the house group leaders would accept. Most leaders of cell churches in the UK consider that the last two approaches are simply playing games and that such abuse of cell will not deliver at all. Then it will not so much be that **cell was tried and found wanting, but found to be hard and not really tried.**

For some reason, the 4Ws meeting **structure has become better known in this country than the values that lie beneath it.** Perhaps patterns are easier to remember than values; perhaps we are easily beguiled into thinking that changes of form will deliver the changes to church life that we yearn for. It may be that we are more resistant to real change of attitude than we would care to admit. Like the rich young ruler, we aspire to follow Christ, but when a radical overhaul of our priorities is touched, we retreat, play for time, or smile graciously but shake our heads. Looking back to *Encounters on the Edge* No. 3, I see that I did include some values, but that even these had been adapted from the original, with some modified and some omitted.

### 3 Cell church is value-centred

At St Winfrid's family, the values are printed on a small card and anyone wanting to join a cell is asked to consider them. If individuals then decide to join, they are given a card of their own. As 'card-carrying members' they are then held accountable for these values:

- **Jesus at the centre** – meeting with Jesus at the core.  
Only Jesus changes people.
- **Everyone in ministry.** Everyone feeling that they have a ministry and role key to revival.
- **Every member growing.** Everyone taking responsibility for their personal holiness and their growth in their walk with Christ.
- **Multiplication.** The spreading of the gospel and making disciples is at the heart of cells.

- **Sacrificial love.** Jesus demonstrated love by sacrifice. His is the challenge to all.
- **Loving community.** The building of relationships both within and outside the cell produces community.
- **Honesty** is the lifeblood of the community and the doorway to Christian growth.

#### How big is the value shift?

My understanding, both from conversations at Totton and with cell leaders in other places, is that **these values, more than the four Ws, represent the cultural and spiritual shift for western Christians.** Sometimes the change appears only to be from inherited unapplied theory, to a firmer practice of being Christian. Thus one might imagine the values would be warmly embraced, but it is not so.

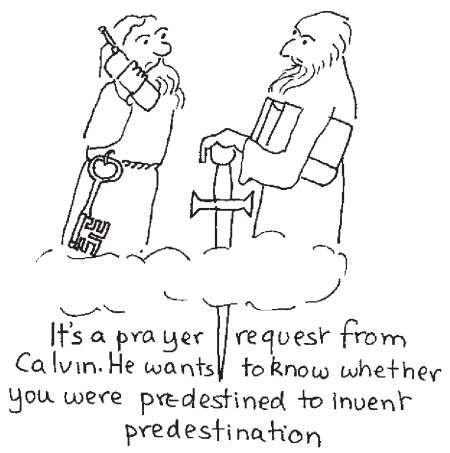
#### Who grows and why?

*Every Member Growing* sounds like apple pie – hard to hate, difficult to dismiss and easy to swallow. However, **the failure of the church to make disciples who take responsibility for their own growth is widespread,** and client-provider collusion in congregations over pastoral care and teaching is legendary. Too often pulpit-led teaching ministries are lauded by members, but the dreadful danger is that the lessons given remain unapplied and a **culture of consumerism about 'sound teaching' is unintentionally fostered.** Cell brings a short sharp shock to that western brand of comfortable discipleship. It does not so much ask what you know about the Bible, but how well you know Jesus and what change is emerging in your life in a growing missionary partnership with Him, for which you take responsibility.

#### Real meeting?

The value of *Loving Community* puts searching questions. Nobody dissents that Jesus and the Apostles hold out love as the key mark of the Church,<sup>6</sup> but practice lags behind theory. To our shame, often churches are loving

<sup>6</sup> See David Watson *I Believe in the Church* Hodder and Stoughton 1978  
The final chapter develops precisely this point



community in name only. **Shallowness, hypocrisy and a judgmental spirit have been a major turn-off for many who now reject church.**<sup>7</sup> Some have not joined the Christian community they tried out, because of their visit to a pew, not so much occupied as defended, or no one helped them go beyond the door in their fear of not knowing what to do inside. Others have stood alone, while coffee-swilling Christians thronged

round them, or they met lack of acceptance over their current thinking or moral choices. Cell may stand a better chance to offer quality community, because relationships inside and outside the cell are the agenda, while congregation is more driven by event and programme. There are even some indicators that Generation X new Christians and seekers relate better to small groups, in which they participate, than to large celebrations where they are spectators. They may not even go to the latter. One of my adult children represents a case in point. **The relational value and character of cell meetings is well suited to fostering community.**

### Why is community key?

I have argued elsewhere<sup>8</sup> that, to connect with the emerging culture in mission, **the creation of attractive community has far more mileage than even relational evangelism and certainly than invitations to join worship.** A wide number of disparate sources have come to similar conclusions. John Drane talks of the entry points of *'community and mystery'*.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Compare Richter and Francis *Gone But Not Forgotten* DLT 1998  
<sup>8</sup> Try our website: [www.encountersontheedge.org.uk](http://www.encountersontheedge.org.uk)  
 Conference Reports *A Church for the 21st Century* Part 2  
<sup>9</sup> John Drane *The Mcdonaldisation of the Church* DLT 2000 p.158ff

Natural Church Development stresses the value of *'loving relationships'*<sup>10</sup>, developed by Robert Warren as *'a loving community'*<sup>11</sup>. Eddie Gibbs calls for a shift from congregation to community<sup>12</sup>. Riddell calls for the humanisation of the Church and an *"open community"*.<sup>13</sup> Tomlin writes that only *'a community of people that lives by God's ways ...will make people think'*.<sup>14</sup> Laurence Singlehurst claims: *'If we want to see revival we must build community.'*<sup>15</sup> The accessible and practical writing of Steven Croft<sup>16</sup> charts the importance of small communities historically, gives practical guidelines of their natural life cycles and relates it all to local church ministry. However, that said, **community is an instinct, not one particular shape**, and it can take a variety of forms and sizes, of which cells are an obvious example. Cell thinking has already played a very useful part of re-evaluating what congregating means and exposing that **church has over-invested in congregation to deliver dynamics of community and discipleship.**

### The last shall be first?

Through the visit to Totton an intriguing suspicion arose. It began with the cell leaders who kindly gave up an evening to meet me, to give their take on the evolving story and respond to the inevitable barrage of questions put. At one point, I posed the open question, "What are the values of cell and which have you found has been the most important?" I expected, because of their background of doing cell by the book, that 'Jesus at the centre' would be reiterated in some way. I was intrigued that **the honest answer was 'honesty'** – the last named value. Yet careful reading of the values might have told me that. **The honesty value is described as the doorway to community.**

<sup>10</sup> Christian Schwarz *Natural Church Development* BCGA 1996 p.36  
<sup>11</sup> Robert Warren and Janet Hodgson *Growing Healthy Churches* Springboard p.7  
<sup>12</sup> Eddie Gibbs and Ian Coffey *Church Next* IVP 2000 Ch. 9 p.211  
<sup>13</sup> Mike Riddell *Threshold of the Future* SPCK 1997 Ch. 8 and pp. 150f  
<sup>14</sup> Graham Tomlin *The Provocative Church* SPCK 2002 p.14  
<sup>15</sup> Laurence Singlehurst YWAM devotional letter February 2000  
<sup>16</sup> Steven Croft *Transforming Communities* DLT 2002



It is extreme to describe a door as the most important thing about a house, but without an entry point a fine house remains only a pleasant external view. **Without honesty, it is impossible to enter cell life.** Without it, who can tell whether Jesus is at the centre? Accountability and sacrifice are easily avoided and true community actually fails to materialise. The value of honesty

continued to surface in conversations with members of groups. The groups succeeded in being **safe**

**enough for people to risk greater honesty.**

Yet this value is resisted in many churches as

unnecessarily demanding, emotionally embarrassing, even shamefully voyeuristic. It is seen as a field day for the exhibitionist, pandering to the self-centred and abuse of the vulnerable. Such 'sharing' emphasises the trivial, turns groups into *Big Brother* episodes, marginalises Bible study and rocks the boat of sensible safe fellowship. **By nature, it is risky, yet the life of the twelve with Christ is a 'warts and all' story.** The Epistles model both honesty about correctives needed and respond to honesty about problems encountered. **The heavenly community to which we head will have no secrets;** we shall know even as we are known. True, the goal is not honesty; it is becoming Christ-like. At times, love may have to stand with a finger on her



lips. Questions about what is appropriate are valid. **But only when we stop pretending can change occur.** Christ came to call those who knew they were sick, not those who thought they had no need of a physician<sup>17</sup>. Even after being saved, without His disclosure I cannot see how far I still have to travel, and without honesty I cannot walk that road with others. I see why honesty is the doorway and have immensely appreciated those groups where it has been safe enough to walk through, in the search for ongoing transformation to know Christ and the yearning to be known by others.

### What operates in good communities?

In this search for transforming community, I was struck by the connections with a classic source: Scott Peck's book, *The Different Drum*. The book contains fascinating surprises and challenged many of my assumptions. **I thought creating community would take a long time, be difficult to achieve, but would be nice when it arrived. None of these seem true.** Qualities that characterise true community appear in Chapter 3. I hope I summarise fairly.

- **Inclusivity** – of different types of people, but also the range of emotions.
- **Commitment** – to hang in when it gets rough. Veni Vidi Velcro - I came, I saw, I stuck at it<sup>18</sup> - learning to climb over and appreciate differences.
- **Consensus** – a more organic and vulnerable process than democracy.
- **Realism** – born of humility. Know your limitations and you will sense and respect others.
- **Contemplative** – examining and knowing ourselves - both as individuals and the community. Community is a spirit that can be lost, so ill health needs recognition.
- **A safe place** – true openness and vulnerability can only occur when no one is trying to heal, fix, convert, or change you - then community will be truly healing and converting.
- **Personal disarmament** – seeing others with respect, out of our brokenness, leads to love and trust.
- **A group that fights gracefully** – resolving conflicts together. It's not a case of resolving conflicts to live in community but vice versa.

<sup>17</sup> Mark 2:17 and parallels in Matthew and Luke

<sup>18</sup> Attributed to Bishop of Birmingham John Sentamu



- **Everyone a leader** – decentralised authority. Prior community building leads to flow of leadership, not vice versa.
- **A spirit** – the elusive awareness among those seeking community, of a delight in being/sensing that peace has come, often manifested in quietness and wisdom.

The crossovers to cell values about group life are wide. Honesty is required in any of those qualities listed. Furthermore, it connects with the very process by which authentic community forms. The list demonstrates how far we have to travel, and with what humble steps, to seeing honest, loving community in many churches. Cell has chosen to go that kind of route.

**Honesty is the ticket that starts the journey.** No wonder it is resisted by those in church who plan to stay where and as they are.

Explore cell values about discipleship, community and honesty and it is quickly clear why such a change of conviction and culture is involved. No wonder a quick fix mentality is sheer illusion. No surprise that some have looked down the path, seen the attractive vista at the end, but concluded it was too rocky and dangerous to lead the people down it. **It is impossible to bolt on cell to church.** Forgive a dangerous analogy. **It is a like a virus - either it will get you, or you will resist it.** A middle position is difficult to sustain. This is not a programme; it is a way of life. Hence, Totton called them Life Groups.

### Value values

I know of no lasting change to cell practice in existing churches that has not centred on values. Phil Potter in Haydock is to my mind the clearest Anglican writer on that necessity.<sup>19</sup> His continued advocacy now focuses on running retreats for church leaders who face the pressures of doing cell, offering diocesan-wide conferences to sow the values among prospective punters and working in personal consultation with leaders handling transitions. It is work with the leader of the church that sees through the values. Give the task to a curate and the experiment will flourish only as long as they stay. **It is like pushing water uphill. Unless there is conviction that higher land needs irrigating, don't bother.** Adopt a policy of gracious inertia and churches will gladly collude and revert to type.

<sup>19</sup> Phil Potter *The Challenge of Cell Church* BRF 2001

## 4 One more thing

There is one further value essential to true cell thought and practice. It is the statement, **“Nothing competes with cells”**. Paul Bayes drew out the double meaning. It is practical, in that **cell is the top priority for all members**. Given a tough week time-wise, choices about what to attend, including Sunday attendance, special events, training programmes, PCC meeting, even evangelistic projects, all go to the wall. In a money-rich, time-poor culture, how we choose to spend our time shouts out our priorities. Nothing else takes precedence over cell. That is the value taught.

Secondly, cell believes **it is church, not an add-on to church**. This needs some unpacking. The more sophisticated position is to say that church is a multi-level reality. From two or three gathered together [Matt 18.20] to the number no one can count [Rev 7.9], this is church because Christ is in the midst. It looks like saying **whatever group Jesus is in the centre of, is church**. Equally if He is not in the centre, whatever the size...?

### But if cell is church . . .

Both sides of the coin of this value conflict with congregationalism. Here, by conviction, is divergence from patterns of Sunday attendance, building-focused thinking and public worship and teaching priorities. It is, however, possible to overstate the difference and think only cell is really church. The analogy coined by Bill Beckham<sup>20</sup> of **church as a two-winged bird** has found some favour. The book argues that in the New Testament, the small group and the big celebration group were early Church practice. These are like two wings which enable a bird to fly. The two wings are of equal significance. The terms “large-wing” and “small-wing” refer to their values, not their dimensions, on a bird called church. Otherwise, it could only fly round in circles, which is as entertaining as it is inaccurate. Beckham also believes that the “small church” wing atrophied at the time of Constantine, briefly reappeared at certain points in church history and only now is recognised as widely as it should be. Others argue, such as Bob Hopkins, that in the Christendom model, “small-wing” church survived through being a Christian in the family home and the provision of church schools.

<sup>20</sup> W A Beckham *The Second Reformation* Touch Publications 1995

Whatever the best historical interpretation, there is no doubt that the recovery of the small group as part of being church has been with us in various forms for well over thirty years. The two-winged church can also helpfully express the theological perception that the Church of God should reflect aspects of the nature of God. To experience Him more authentically, we need to become aware of His Transcendence which is more naturally mediated through being with a big group in a large inspiring venue. Equally, we are called to get in touch with his Immanence which is made more accessible through the intimacy of small group life.

The precedence given to cell when there are time conflicts represents the acid test of whether something is truly cell church. In Totton, the analogy is that cell is the building block, from which other things like celebrations can be fashioned. Others argue that a halfway house is better than no progress at all.<sup>21</sup> Their case is that it can be principled to be church with small groups, not just of small groups, and that the genius of cell is not so much that it breeds better disciples, but it is the ideal context in which to grow leaders. Either way, **cell has legitimately forced its way into the discussion of “what is church?”**

## The story unfolds

### Prototype clear for take-off

Finding the first group was more happy discovery than brilliant scheming. Three other couples came to St Winfrid’s family from outside, with positive experiences of small groups. One had even been on the same New Wine conference as Paul. After some months looking at material and working out how to start, they began meeting weekly. Paul writes,

*“I can honestly say that the prototype has been my first sustained experience of interactive church since ordination [1979] ... I cannot now conceive of my own Christian life without a cell dimension. Thus these first months marked my personal conversion to cell church as a lifestyle choice.”*<sup>22</sup>

<sup>21</sup> See Carl George *The Coming Church Revolution* 1994 or Steve Croft *Transforming Communities* DLT 2002

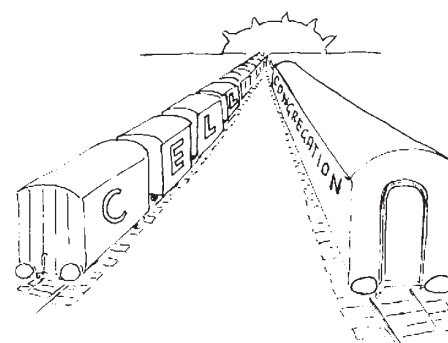
<sup>22</sup> This thinking has developed into a finely written 2003 Sabbatical report on the topic of Friendship in Churches. Copies from the Author, but *The Sheffield Centre* possess one for study. See footnote 2.

They followed closely the pursuit of the values and the FCBC structures for meetings. One expression of Jesus being at the centre was openness to the Spirit of Christ in the leading of worship, making contacts in witness, in honesty and vulnerability through encounter with the word leading to prayer for one another. As such, Charismatics will be the most comfortable with this style, **but it does not demand Pentecostal theologies of initiation or priorities of gifts**. After 9 months together they knew that the DNA of cell had bitten and it was time to start looking outwards.

One of the values is building relationships outside the cell and the group took the view that they must take this on and begin to grow the group with outsiders. **It would be cheating simply to expand via taking in church members**. This was despite the pressure of those who were now beating on the door and pleading to be let in, as a result of both hearing public teaching on the topic and private conversations with prototype members. Here is a good example that **cell is helpfully demanding that the whole DNA is implanted, not just the bits that we like or are convenient**.

### What of St Winfrid’s family members who don’t get it?

Paul was clear with the PCC that he was investigating cell thinking. He was going to begin an experimental group asking what it would be like to make



Jesus the centre of everything and to discover whether it was fun.

**I like the serious lightness of the approach**. No one would be persuaded to join; pastoral care would not be withdrawn from those who did not want to be in cells; the church’s programme, such as a drop-in centre for Totton detached youth would continue, as

would the pattern of public worship. **It was a proactive Gamaliel approach**. What God was in would flourish and others would need to take notice. It really was the early stage of creating something to run in parallel.

However, it would be false modesty to keep quiet about cells and enthusiasm for them is allowed and invitations to others to join were eventually given.

### Three from one

Thus when one group became three, each group leader had experience of fostering friendships outside the group, intentional and sustained group prayer for those friends, bringing in outsiders to suitable socials and seeing them gradually join the life of the cell. Furthermore, Paul decided he must continue to belong to a group, while simultaneously act as supervisor to the three groups. **His view is that the Incumbent must do cell, not protest busyness or supervisory exemption.** Typically, when this year he was presented with the choice of whether to apply for the post of National Advisor for Mission and Evangelism to succeed Robert Freeman, it was his cell group leader to whom the question was put. Christ commended those leaders who knew how to be under authority themselves.<sup>23</sup> Not only that but Paul and I share the view that **vicars are human beings, before they are leaders, and they need friends.**

## Lessons en route

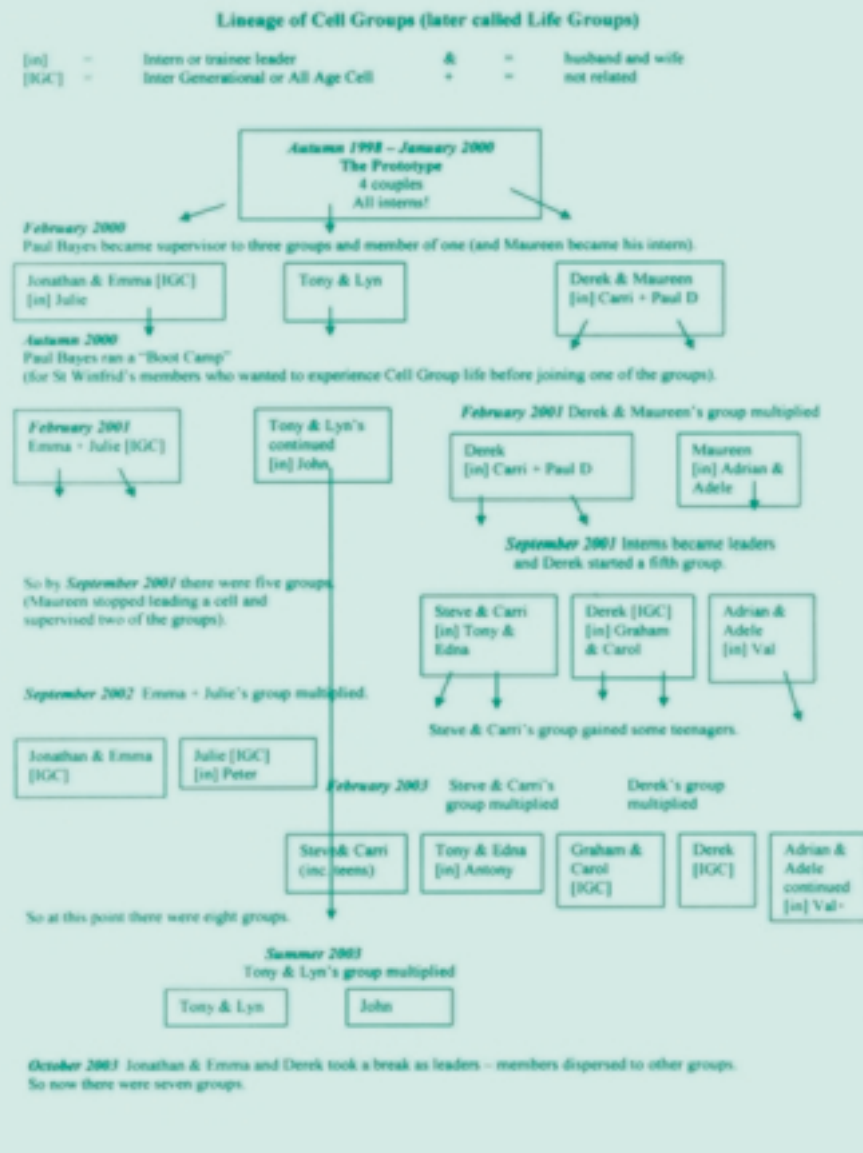
### Evolving the language when the DNA is secure

At one stage, Paul thought that parallel cell might mean having two identities and the phrase *All Saints Everywhere* was coined for the cell church. However, that name is now deemed just a bright idea and has been dropped. In that sense the cells are less obviously parallel but different. They are more like parallel and interweaving with congregation. When asked whether St Winfrid was a church with or of cells the response was, “*St Winfrid’s family is a church with a cell church*”.

The term ‘cell’ sounded more like prison than freedom, so they became ‘Life Groups’. The system or parallel church is known as *Life Group Life*. That is what people are invited to join, but are accepted if they don’t. Equally, the couple of Life Groups that have children in them are not called inter-generational but all-age.

<sup>23</sup> Luke 7.8

## Totton Life Groups Family Tree



## Prototype can work

The extent of the transition is impressive. There was a stage at their height in early 2003 when over 90 of the 140 on the electoral roll were in Life Groups. This has only been diminished by those moving away. Interestingly, nearly 90% of people in cells were not in St Winfrid's family in 1994 when the Bayes arrived. I note from my Deal experience that outsiders, either to church or to the town, can be more open to big changes in church life. Also, **those without a church background probably naturally think that church is relational.** Those who have come through *Alpha*, intentionally linked to Life Groups, or through personal contact, certainly would have that impression. Consequently, the values and claims of cell are fairly natural to them.

## What are leaders made of?

Following FCBC, interns are chosen and apprentices trained within groups as part of the intention to multiply. **Unlike house group leaders, they are not selected for Bible knowledge or teaching ability.** They do not have to have led groups before. Indeed, competence is almost a hindrance to be a good facilitator and creates unhelpfully able leadership. **What is looked for is delightfully simple: people who know God and like people.** A borrowed acronym is FATS0 – faithful, available, teachable, Spirit-filled and obedient. Those qualities need to be read in the context of cell values, not subservience to church authority figures. I was struck by the quality of those leaders I met. They had brightness of eye, humanity of touch, keenness of spirit, humility in self-estimation and yet they were not among those the world would count wise, powerful or of noble birth<sup>24</sup>.

## Sustained ministry by all is practiced

I noted with approval that the four Vs are not just shared but that **a member will take responsibility for one of them for up to half a term.** This has many clear advantages. Their ownership of the task is far more than filling a rota slot. There is a chance to sample responsibility, not just activity. Progression of theme and development of ideas and practices can be explored. There is time for feedback and adjustment if required, **so deeper learning from experience occurs** and the leader does not have to be in headless chicken mode about divvying up tasks each week. I wish I had known this earlier in my life.

## Scales before jazz

Having done cell faithfully by the book, a number of unforeseen phenomena are now starting to appear. A few of the leaders are retiring from leadership but are still passionate about being members. Some want to focus their service, not on cell leading, but on wider involvement with the community such as joining the Petanque Club or sitting and praying with the dying. Paul and I guess that the **DNA of cell is established, but that creative evolution is now at work and will lead to fresh expressions of cell life** that have not been foreseen. Another model to understand this is jazz. The different discipline of listening to the rest of the group and sensing where the music of an evening is going, has begun to grow up, now that the prior discipline of cell scales has been mastered. Leaders are now happy to go more with flow, because solid instincts are in place. Such maturity knows that the different siren calls of **legalism and antinomianism cannot hold grace and law together in community.** Yet grace, which underlies covenant creation, uses law to set boundaries within which to walk in freedom. Groups that know what they are doing will do cell jazz better.



## All-age cell is costly and only for some

Daphne Kirk is the UK apostle of inter-generational cell and a heroine of the all-age cells in Totton, both for her inspiration and consultation. She would disagree with my heading. Here only some groups have gone this way, fitting the diversity model, but I picked up some **useful rule of thumb tips** about what helps them function better. The number of children per group is roughly the same as would be normal for adults in their own families. More than four children in a group of adults would be unusual. Fitting with this, they are **best thought of as extended family**, not inter-generational groups. The pattern is to put a limited number of children in a group that contains quasi uncles and aunts and grandparent figures too. The group may well work better if nuclear family parents and children are separated, and should not include those who prefer not to be there. That constraint can operate from either generation. As such, they are **not child-centred, but child-friendly.** A known contract exists such that discipline of a child or adult in group time can come from outside the nuclear family. Ground rules are then clear. Without this, great tensions arise over differing family styles

<sup>24</sup> 1 Cor 126



of discipline. Children cope very well with welcome, fairly well with interactive worship, but not adult chorus singing. Witness

they find natural and easy and the difficulty is that **they would invite friends far faster than cells can create interns**, or win other adults, to cope with the multiplication necessary to keep up with that. Word is usually handled in separate groups ('the kids' slot') and this separate time includes mutual prayer ministry that might otherwise raise inappropriate topics. Hearing the stories and attending a meeting, I was reminded of the fabled girl with a curl in the middle of her forehead: "When she was good, she was very very good, but when she was bad, she was horrid." Leading such groups is, I suspect, a particular calling, but when it is present, the benefits are tangible. Pearls fall from young lips, age is respected and something wonderful happens.

### Cell evangelism can be natural

It was obvious that a massive corner had been turned here through cell. In the 1999 issue I commented, using the Nile river as an example, that cell no more creates an evangelistic heart than an irrigation system creates a flood. However, **cell does seem good at teaching the value of looking outward**; its structure of meeting regularly reinforces that and, in the nicest sense, inspects what is happening. There is a truism in life, not least over sticky issues, that **people don't do what you expect, but what you inspect**. This set of Life Groups has learnt how to share life with outsiders. A simpler way of being church, by not engaging in the programmes provided by others at congregational church, has helped them be free to make and mature friendships that lead to Christ.

### Multiplication is painful but valuable

If there is **one cell value above all others that inspires horror, fear and plain antagonism in house groups, it is multiplication**. In fairness to them, relationships are valuable and they live in the context of churches that at best only practice addition to their congregations and for whom multiplication of anything is a foreign thought. The saddest sign recently erected on a church notice board was of the house group system where some had written over

their group, "full up". What with I irreverently wondered?

The very first group met this challenge of multiplication and as such was genuine prototype. For leaders, ongoing support, encouragement and envisioning in VHS meetings (vision, huddle, support) keeps them in touch with each other, but for members it can be more costly. Yet a church whose congregation is only a little over a hundred can still keep up friendships and there are clear signs that some do. The benefits are that so many more leaders have discovered ministries and members have grown in a way that could not happen in a traditional house group context.



## Last Orders

### Locally how will Life Group Life fare after Paul and Kate move on in 2004?

Of course there is nervousness. The hope is that the DNA is now so widely disseminated that the plant cannot simply be uprooted. I pray the Diocese has the wit to send a person who will respect, nurture and actually join *Life Group Life*, as well as take the congregational expression of St Winfrid's family forward.

### Nationally, is cell the way forward?

I am convinced that this story shows smaller, **more modest-sized churches can go this route** and find it works in terms of creating mission-minded communities of Christ-centred disciples. I am confident that **humble honesty about partial progress in seeking God is attractive to clapped-out Christians and spiritual seekers**. I see that 'prototype' is a perfectly acceptable way and resist the thought that 'big bang' must be better. Maybe it is more necessary in large churches, but the attempt at enforced spirituality worries me. I came across this from John Newton:<sup>25</sup>

*"I cannot see it my duty, nay I believe it would be my sin, to attempt to beat my notions into other people's heads... When our dear Lord questioned Peter after his fall and recovery, he said not 'Art thou wise, learned and eloquent?' Nay, he said not 'Art thou clear, sound and orthodox?' But this only 'Lovest thou me?'"*

<sup>25</sup> Correspondence with Rev Whitfield: 1757

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**Recently, the existing church and emerging church have been better at listening to one another.** By this means, both evolutionary change in the emerging and renewal of the life of the historic, church is maintained. The warning is that, by this process, **what is new can become domesticated.** Its labels are effortlessly adopted, but often the values beneath have been gagged, if not slain. For example, existing house groups are re-badged as cells but nothing really changes in their curriculum. They include welcome in the structure of the evening, but actually nobody discloses any greater depth of their lives and nobody new comes. There may be talk of cell as being church, but the dependency on the vicar for anything that really matters like teaching, presiding or giving vision remains unchallenged. Indeed, cell threatens some big church leaders.

Yet the variety of contexts in which cell has already been shown to work is intriguing. That people have been able to vary the extent to which they adopt its structures widens the attraction. As far as I can see, **of all the fresh expressions of church that have been detected, this one has the highest rate of adoption by the other expressions.** Its sheer flexibility to do so tells us cell is a significant contribution in finding the way forward. It will not do everything and does not touch everybody, but it is a profound, thought-through way to reconnect with the essence of outgoing Christian discipleship.

**George Lings December 2003**  
**Cartoons Tim Sharp**

**Further resources:**

- *Cell and Anglicanism*, George's own view of some major ecclesiological questions, including Sacramental provision, is on [www.encountersontheedge.org.uk](http://www.encountersontheedge.org.uk) for downloading.
- *To Know and Be Known Ministry in the Service of Friendship in the Church* Paul Bayes Sabbatical Report February-April 2003 email: [paulbayes@mac.com](mailto:paulbayes@mac.com)

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*Left to right: Steve Hollinghurst, Claire Dalpra, Michael Collyer, George Lings, Peter Hallsworth, Ruth Walker, Andrew Wooding*



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