

38: The Cost of Community

Issues of maturity



What might help the communities in fresh expressions of church grow beyond good starts to longer lasting effectiveness? What can we learn from intentional Christian communities that will help fresh expressions of church grow mature community? What were their catalysts for deeper growth? What would they say were indicators of a mature community? What level of personal cost does being part of such a community require of us? Claire Dalpra went to find out.

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no. 38:

The Cost of Community

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Encounters on the Edge

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The cost of community

Issues of maturity

Encounters on the Edge no.37 examines some of the important start-up issues in nurturing community as we establish fresh expressions of church. It is not assumed that all churches must engage in the same depth of community or the same *kind* of community. For some, a certain kind of community life will be intrinsic to their mission task, while for other churches, simply awareness of these kinds of issues will help them as they grow and mature as a community at a very basic level.



While the nature of community is such that there will never be a blueprint to follow, the previous booklet examined what helps it begin well, based on interviews with ten practitioners and consultants with wisdom and experience in this area.¹ Good starts are made by maintaining realistic expectations of community, focusing on values rather than vision, welcoming diversity despite its challenges and seeing conflict as entirely normal. If any of these take you by surprise, I invite you to read it before continuing with this booklet. Good foundations will be the key to the survival of any new community serious about going deeper with one another.

This booklet begins at the point that the previous booklet left off. How does a healthy community find its way out of conflict, whether it be painful disagreement, overwhelming disillusionment or a sense of feeling insurmountably stuck, and move on? What else must a community seeking to grow in maturity bear in mind? What will help grow the kind of Christian community that is both stable and significant in their care of one another and those whom they are called to serve?

¹ Short descriptions of our interviewees are inserted between the chapters of this and the preceding booklet. See *Encounters on the Edge no.37* for descriptions of the first four interviews.

Contemplating monsters

The way out of conflict is to face up to brokenness. Jean Vanier deems this so important, it is L'Arche's way of discerning whether applicants to work as assistants stay or leave. They only stay if they "discover they are as needy in their souls for God as those disabled".²

All our interviews stressed the need for every member to give attention to their own hearts. The hardest thing about community is that it shows up our frailties, our struggles, our limitations, our fears and, as some describe, our "shadow sides".³ When living so closely together, the mask of composure is bound to slip. The days when we feel cross, depressed, sad or apathetic are not easy to hide in community. Those we struggle or disagree with bring out unexpected reactions within us of irritation, judgement and impatience that we need to be honest about and confess.

We must be prepared for monsters to be revealed

Scott Peck, author of *A Different Drum*, writes that our society's ideal of "rugged individualism" encourages us to hide our weaknesses and failures and be utterly ashamed of our limitations, but if we do this, genuine community becomes impossible.⁴ Conversely, it is in realising when can never be whole in and of ourselves that we find the seeds of true community. As one practitioner put it, we have to start from a place of acknowledging we're all ratbags

otherwise we will never model communities of grace. Walter Wink writes that self-righteousness ends all dialogue; unless we realise in humility that we are no better than anyone else, we can't love those we find difficult. We will find conflict resolution impossible.

Roy Searle, one of the leaders of the *Northumbria Community*,⁵ commented that "You can't build community without looking inward in order to express the outward. Otherwise community is not sustainable." Before we can be available to others, we need to be available to ourselves and to God. This is a helpful reminder that though community may be emphasised, the individual growth and discipleship of every member is just as important. Social Psychologist Sara Savage⁶ reminded us that **the growth or maturity of a community is entirely dependent on the growth of key individuals within it.** Behaviour is only then

² Jean Vanier *Community and Growth* DLT 1989 p.99

³ Walter Wink *Engaging the Powers* Fortress Press 1992 p.293

⁴ Scott Peck *The Different Drum* Arrow 1990 p.53

⁵ The previous booklet contains a brief description of Northumbria Community. For a fuller description, see *Encounters on the Edge* no.29.

⁶ Co-author of *The Human Face of the Church* and one of our interviewees. See p.12 of *Encounters on the Edge* no.37 for a brief description of our time with her.

"normed" and filters through to the rest of the community. Bonhoeffer wrote: "let him who cannot be alone beware of community."⁷ He writes that those who find it difficult to be alone often find difficulty in accepting God's personal call on their life. Persistent refusal to do this can only do harm to yourself and the community.

Bob and Mary Hopkins commented that in many UPA or other disadvantaged contexts, openness and brokenness come quite naturally to people; as such, communities that grow in these contexts will have a head start! For those of us to whom it doesn't come naturally, we must learn to better monitor any inner violence we may secretly harbour. As one interviewee remarked, we all have emotional needs and Christians can be especially good at denying them. If we don't, the parts of ourselves we keep desperately hidden will express themselves under stress or conflict with explosive and disastrous results.



Walter Wink is quite clear that whole communities, not just individuals, need to acknowledge their shadow sides in healthy acceptance.⁸ We must be prepared for monsters to be revealed. I was impressed at how readily Roy Searle could identify many of Northumbria Community's monsters and reflect back to us how the community were handling them. "What are my/our monsters?" is a question well worth asking by any individual or community looking to grow in maturity.

The way through

Peck stresses this admittance of brokenness as a crucial ingredient for community. It is the only way out of conflict, he maintains, and a stage which he calls **emptiness**.⁹ By this he means people must empty themselves of barriers to communication – expectations, preconceived ideas, prejudices, ideology, the need to control. It is the hard part and the vital part. Unsurprisingly, it is the stage that groups aren't generally eager to pick up on. Such sacrifice hurts and therefore needs a safe place to be handled in. It is a small kind of death but one that is necessary for re-birth. Should we be surprised that community requires of us such a kenotic pattern? The subtle challenge to any community is to see

⁷ Dietrich Bonhoeffer *Life Together* SCM Press Ltd 1954

p.57 The reverse is also true: Let him who is not in community beware of being alone.

⁸ Walter Wink *Engaging the Powers* Fortress Press 1992 p.293

⁹ Scott Peck *The Different Drum* Arrow 1990 p.56

such processes take place at an individual level when appropriate and at a group level when appropriate; both are necessary.

Jean Vanier, founder of the *L'Arche* communities, reminds us that **in community we should seek to serve others, not save others.**¹⁰ Peck writes that we must empty ourselves of the need to fix or convert someone. A safe place emerges when no one is attempting to heal or convert you, to fix you, to change you. It is only when we are safe, that we find we can heal and convert ourselves because we are set free to be who we really are.¹¹ (The word “convert” is used here in a much broader sense than faith conversion.) Peck maintains that attempts to convert will be naïve and ineffectual as well as self-centred and self-serving.

Peck praises the community model of Alcoholics Anonymous for their wisdom and effectiveness. Those who join the community do so at the very point of realising their brokenness. Such honesty about their brokenness and need of others then facilitates a very healthy community of people knowing how much they need each other. By continuing to use the language of recovering alcoholic beyond the programme and admitting the danger of relapse is always there, acknowledged brokenness becomes a constant companion and the need for community is accepted as a lifelong need. We know of a number of examples where 12-step material is used effectively for transformation discipleship and spiritual exploration.¹²



Authentic hospitality is another reason to know your own heart. Vanier wrote that to welcome someone is not only to open one's house, **it is to give space to someone in one's own heart.** Laura Winner, in her excellent book *Mudhouse Sabbath*, writes that inviting people into her life is much more difficult than simply inviting them into her house.¹³ Authentic hospitality to her means inviting people into her life with all its

¹⁰ Jean Vanier *Community and Growth* DLT 1989 p.282

¹¹ Scott Peck *The Different Drum* Arrow 1990 p.67

¹² *Encounters on the Edge* no.17 tells the story of a church in Missouri, USA, working with recovering addicts using the 12-step programme. St John's Bowling Green in Bradford have used 12 steps for discipleship in their cell groups - see Howard Astin *12 ½ steps to Spiritual Health* Monarch 2002. A colleague of ours has been part of a 12-step based spirituality course called *The Journey*, written by Adrian Scott and Mark Pickin, at the Listen Centre, Sheffield.

¹³ Laura Winner *Mudhouse Sabbath: An Invitation to a Life of Spiritual Discipline* Paraclete Press 2007 p.46 In the 6th century, Julianus Pomerius insisted that hospitality took precedence over other spiritual disciplines.

short-comings; no wonder people prefer to put on a show of perfection, capability and serenity, because being the only one to tell the truth of how our life really is can feel so absurd!¹⁴

However, if the heart is not peaceful, it cannot welcome.¹⁵ Vanier comments that some who appear to be welcoming are on deeper examination only seeking to calm their own anguish by having power over others or wanting others to be dependent on them.¹⁶ The genuine welcome of a community to newcomers as a measure of maturity was mentioned a number of times in interviews. George Lings mentioned hearing Eddie Gibbs say that regardless of the quality of the Sunday event, people only stay in a church if they've made six new friends in one year. My interviewing partner Mike Moynagh shared with me a good example of the gift of authentic hospitality from his friend John Wood. If you are hosting a men's breakfast in your own home, take a couple of hours on the phone to personally invite 50 men. Because you want them to come to your home, you must issue the invitation yourself rather than delegating ten phone calls each to five people.

A spirituality that sustains...

Given this serious need to address issues of the inner heart, I was not surprised to learn that the communities we talked to have needed to ask harder questions about the kind of spirituality that can sustain them in this daily soul searching. Vanier devotes a whole chapter to nourishment for those living in communities under one roof. He recognised the need in himself *"not to have just a deep spirituality early in the morning and then business for the rest of the day..."*¹⁷ but something that sustains him throughout the day in all its mundane tasks.

If community is constantly challenging, we need to find constant nourishment. We have to *"discover the wisdom of the present moment and find God in the small things"* by the attitudes we have over daily jobs.¹⁸ We need to find liturgy and worship that speaks directly to these practical needs. Northumbria Community's daily midday office was written out of an experience of one of the founding members as he worked as a window cleaner. It has been deliberately kept short to be prayed in the time it takes to boil a kettle. We have long been aware that Anglican liturgies evolved within a Christendom (and therefore an essentially pastoral) context and consequently are ineffective to nurture the calling and charism of those called to pioneering mission and evangelism. Any missional community should have the

¹⁴ Laura Winner *Mudhouse Sabbath: An Invitation to a Life of Spiritual Discipline* Paraclete Press 2007 p.51

¹⁵ Jean Vanier *Community and Growth* DLT 1989 p.265-272

¹⁶ Jean Vanier *Community and Growth* DLT 1989 p.270

¹⁷ Jean Vanier *Community and Growth* DLT 1989 p.301

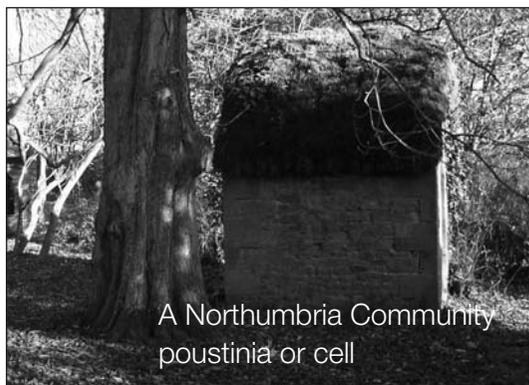
¹⁸ Jean Vanier *Community and Growth* DLT 1989 p.169

confidence to find, design and use the kinds of liturgy and worship that sustains them in living out their values and purpose day to day.

Because of this daily need for spiritual sustenance, Vanier writes that you need to make sure a community contains a certain type of person.¹⁹ As well as activists who love adventure, love projects “*and do dramatic things*”, you need people who work well with routine and predictability “*whose roots are in the spirituality of everyday life*”. I think this is particularly helpful for us in our choice of leaders and planting teams for communities we start and want to see last. **We need people who are gifted at running the marathon as well as the sprint.** Communities will take time to grow, especially communities called to help those in great need. Those who thrive on seeing immediate results need to prepare themselves for the long-haul.

Vanier emphasises the need for those communities intent on longer-term sustainability to address the issues of rest and relaxation very seriously. He talks of it as a discipline.²⁰ A day of Sabbath is absolutely vital. The more people live constantly with others in community life, the more they need this day of solitude. As individuals we can get away with compromising a day's total rest but the demands of community mean that you can't. So many conflicts are fuelled by tiredness. **Note that the more intense and difficult a period in the life of the community, the more we need times of relaxation.**²¹ He also warns readers against seeing being alone as relaxation and being together as only service. To do so is to miss out on being open to the incredible richness that community life provides and serving will become more difficult to do over time.²²

A spirit of contemplation for all?



Northumbria Community have found early Christian monasticism particularly helpful in their spiritual life as a community. The desert traditions, with their emphasis of finding God and finding yourself in silence and solitude, lay out for them a framework for addressing the issues of your heart. “Go to your cell – your cell will teach you everything” is a

¹⁹ Jean Vanier *Community and Growth* DLT 1989 p.303

²⁰ Jean Vanier *Community and Growth* DLT 1989 p.177

²¹ Jean Vanier *Community and Growth* DLT 1989 p.180

²² Jean Vanier *Community and Growth* DLT 1989 p.171

much-used phrase. They see such contemplative spirituality as a much-needed foundation for effective mission and community in our present day; finding God and finding yourself will better prepare you to find others. The idea of “Wandering for the love of Christ wherever the father leads” from the Celtic tradition is also a helpful reminder to the kind of instincts of availability that they believe will help them be more effective in mission.

This contemplative theme was developed in our interview with Sara Savage. She went as far as saying the contemplative must be recovered if communities are to be sustained, though she was quite open as to how that contemplation is facilitated. She observes that people need to “*be still and know that I am God*”²³ and the average worship service isn't great at allowing the space and silence needed to do this. Candle-lighting is so trendy now that a number of us in our team roll our eyes over it, but as Lauren Winner writes, “*Candles seem to create peace. You don't find candles lit in frenetic houses; you find them lit in houses where people are trying to pay attention.*”²⁴



Contemplation is necessary for the individual, for the quieting or emptying of the ego self to give more room for God to work in your heart through unconscious listening. “*With their lives slowed down for silence and solitude, their 'scripts' that operated as the basis of their identities were brought into the light...*”²⁵ It will be beneficial to the community as a whole; a group of self-aware, self-reflective individuals will better be able to answer or examine itself as a collective to ask and ascertain how well the community is growing. Peck writes that often one sign of a true community is the way in which a quietness emerges from or descends on the group.²⁶

Savage and Boyd-Macmillan draw attention to Benedictine Abbot Christopher Jamieson's comment that many of us choose a busy life while pretending it is forced on us.²⁷ They go on to say:

²³ Psalm 46.10

²⁴ Lauren Winner *Mudhouse Sabbath: An Invitation to a Life of Spiritual Discipline* Paraclete Press 2007 p.112

²⁵ Sara Savage and Eolene Boyd-Macmillan *The Human Face of the Church* Canterbury Press 2007 p.170

²⁶ Scott Peck *The Different Drum* Arrow 1990 p.74

²⁷ Christopher Jamieson *Finding Sanctuary* Weidenfeld and Nicolson 2006 p.14

"We choose to be busy because it facilitates our consumerist lifestyle that requires us to work harder and harder and to fulfil our consumer ambitions. It distracts us from the deeper realities of life. When given space for stillness and silence, we prefer to rationalise our discomfort rather than face the sources of our restlessness."²⁸

Communities who build in contemplation as a regular practice can begin to address these sources of restlessness. It is a gift we can offer non-Christians as they search for ways to de-stress and become less anxious in what has been described as "the general mayhem of modern life."²⁹

Interview 5

Chris Russell, Reading

Having to suspend a very interesting conversation with Mike Moynagh about New Frontiers church planting, our combined intellectual prowess was put to the test as we navigated our way from the M4 to the Oracle shopping centre car park and then, on foot, from the car park through the pedestrian streets of Reading to find St Lawrence church. More due to its prominent location next to the town hall (near Blagrove Street) than our sense of direction, we arrived at our destination. We tried the black iron handle of the royal blue church door nearest us and crossed the threshold.

St Lawrence is a stunning architectural accomplishment combining the heritage of the 12th century building's walls and stained glass windows with modern (almost space-age-like) office space, kitchen, loos and flooring appropriate for their work. I'd seen photos and knew something of their story³⁰, but there's nothing like seeing it first-hand. Chris Russell then descended a flight of stairs and, with coffee, sat us on sofas of very differing heights and squishiness in the nave. I, from near ground level, listened to him talk through issues of building community at St Lawrence for the last eight years. Working with non-churched teenagers has been a rollercoaster ride for them, fraught with many discipleship challenges the team have had to puzzle out as they've gone on.

I suspect their story is particularly valuable for its indication of the feel of things to come. If in society healthy communities are becoming less and less common, with attendant lack of role models, whole generations will be less skilled at handling different kinds of relationships maturely. Therefore, future church communities will need to invest time and energy over a longer period into nurturing skills and patience for living out community. I applaud them for resisting the temptation to settle into the easy job of catering for trendy young families who are already Christians.



²⁸ Sara Savage and Eolene Boyd-Macmillan *The Human Face of the Church* Canterbury Press 2007 p.136

²⁹ Tobias Jones 'The C-Word' article *Third Way* Winter 2008 p.12

³⁰ Reading: *the Signs* Encounters on the Edge no.21 Church Army 2004

Community leading

Vanier says leadership is a gift we are all called to learn as we grow in maturity³¹, but he also writes that when no one carries the responsibility in a group, the weakest usually suffer. When things go badly in a community with no leader, the group will often direct its aggression towards the weaker members of the group; someone therefore needs to take responsibility for helping the group channel negative emotions appropriately.³² Wink says though some groups may have no formal leader, every group will have informal displays of power going on. Indeed, even some groups with formal leadership find that the real power lies elsewhere, often working against them! It can take time to uncover where power really lies in a group.³³

Vanier devotes a whole section of *Community and Growth* to weighing up different styles of leadership. Generally speaking, in our wider mission context, we are now living in a society that requires a different model of hierarchical leadership than that of army or industry.³⁴ Savage and Boyd-Macmillan concur and comment that no model of leadership and decision-making is wrong in itself; what matters is that our leadership models are culturally appropriate to the contexts we are working in. They understand our context to be one where *"the communal experience is considered central to faith communities, (so) self-awareness at the individual and team level is crucial for healthy teams."*³⁵ Interestingly, they quote research that has shown that in groups that are led autocratically "... greater aggression, dependence on the leader and self-centred orientation" is observed.³⁶ While each fresh expression of church must gauge the style of leadership against the purpose, style and size of group, this research suggests that a heavy-handed leader is not helpful in cultivating missional communities where members are outward looking and take responsibility for their own spiritual discipleship.

³¹ Jean Vanier *Community and Growth* DLT 1989 p.205

³² Jean Vanier *Community and Growth* DLT 1989 p.231

³³ Walter Wink *Unmasking the Powers* Fortress Press, 1986 p.75

³⁴ Jean Vanier *Community and Growth* DLT 1989 p.229

³⁵ Sara Savage and Eolene Boyd-Macmillan *The Human Face of the Church* Canterbury Press 2007 p.102

³⁶ Sara Savage and Eolene Boyd-Macmillan *The Human Face of the Church* Canterbury Press 2007 p.91

A shared leadership

So what kind of leaders do we need to facilitate spiritual growth that will sustain communities in their mission? Vanier is very clear that in communities such as *L'Arche*, no leader should be required to carry sole responsibility of being leader, prophet, priest and confessor because of the potential power such a leader would have to manipulate people.³⁷ Vanier agrees with Dietrich Bonhoeffer that "bishop" and "abbot" roles are particularly helpful as a model because the bishop can watch out for the whole community while the abbot can focus on the needs of individuals.³⁸ We are reminded by these great men that **community is not an end in itself, it is the growth of each individual within it that is the purpose.** As Northumbria Community have found, the shared leadership roles of bishop and abbot will keep this important and necessary truth focused for a community.

Teach them to communicate to those they have consulted that they have listened and responded

Every other example we met shared an instinct to devolve responsibility with colleagues in some way also. In one example, a leadership team was formed in which the ordained stipendiary leader had equal status with other elected members when making decisions. The evidence seems to suggest that wherever possible, fresh expressions who are serious about growing intentional community should be led by more than one person. In terms of decision-making processes, almost everyone we met had a consultative approach. Many of our examples agreed that the best way of making decisions is that people's opinions are asked for, but it is understood that the leadership weighs them all and, at the end of the day, makes the final decision. At the very least, communities are wise to make sure the structures designed are clear to all.

John Wood (in his interview with Mike Moynagh) offered us some helpful advice in training those you delegate responsibility to. Two skills are necessary. Firstly, teach them to consult those they serve, and secondly, teach them to communicate to those they have consulted that they have listened and responded. For example, an email along these lines might read: *"These are the responses to my last email. There seem to be a couple of themes. Where should we go from here? Anyone want to join me in the pub to discuss it?"* However good the telling, John says, it is best to check people have really understood; this is an important process emphasised by a number of our interviewees.

³⁷ Jean Vanier *Community and Growth* DLT 1989 p.243

³⁸ Jean Vanier *Community and Growth* DLT 1989 p.20

The use of circle imagery to represent shared leadership and consultative decision-making came up more than once in the background reading. Vanier writes that, at its best, leadership should be like a circle rather than a pyramid of authority³⁹ and Herbert practices a circle of safe space not unlike group processes used in social work.⁴⁰ The circle is symbolic of the kind of decision-making that Peck describes as a flow of leadership, something like consensus, but when all members share a common mind.⁴¹ He is very suspicious of any organisation set up as a leadership or decision-making structure because so often such a move is part of a conflict avoidance strategy.⁴² Vanier too warns that **it is easier to obey a law than to love people** and that organisation "must be lived in love and compassion".⁴³



John Wood commented in his interview with Mike that "relationships are central. Organisation must serve relationships. If at any time the organisation threatens relationships, then let the organisation collapse and regroup later."

As Clare Herbert comments in the chapter she contributes to the book Spirituality in the City,⁴⁴ no wonder lone leaders of church communities feel so stretched. By delegating, she, in her ministry, seeks to avoid a management style of priesthood because leaders strive to achieve so much that they are bound to fail. As Savage and Boyd-Macmillan in The Human Face of the Church comment,

*"It does not matter that a team leader is not good at everything. What does matter is that leaders know their strengths and make an effort to balance out their weaknesses either through training or through delegation. The good news is that team-members are often forgiving. As long as the explicit team leader is good at something, admits mistakes and compensates for weaknesses through delegation or training, people will forgive shortcomings."*⁴⁵

³⁹ Jean Vanier *Community and Growth* DLT 1989 p.228

⁴⁰ Clare Herbert *Bearing It: The Development of a Priestly Spirituality in Soho Spirituality in the City* Andrew Walker (ed) SPCK 2005 p.64

⁴¹ Scott Peck *The Different Drum* Arrow 1990 p.74

⁴² Scott Peck *The Different Drum* Arrow 1990 p.93

⁴³ Jean Vanier *Community and Growth* DLT 1989 p.108

⁴⁴ Clare Herbert *Bearing It: The Development of a Priestly Spirituality in Soho Spirituality in the City* Andrew Walker (ed) SPCK 2005 p.58

⁴⁵ Sara Savage and Eolene Boyd-Macmillan *The Human Face of the Church* Canterbury Press 2007 p.109

A serving leadership

A good leader needs to be able to let go of control, to model the emptiness that Peck maintains is so vital to community. George Lings reminded us that because community is a gift, not a product, control over it will always be detrimental. Peck maintains that the job of a leader is to simply at "all times protect the spirit of group as a safe space and help its members to do the same".⁴⁶ **Vanier talks about the need for leaders to build a community where people can trust one another.** Sara Savage gave us an example of imposing and modelling robust boundaries that helps do this. If a member of your community is complaining about being the only one who is doing the washing up, the leader's job is to reframe this issue in a constructive way for the whole group. "How can we solve the problem of the washing up being done by only one person when it is meant to be the responsibility of the whole group?" they might ask. By bringing the issue to the group, you protect the group from negativity, the individual from feeling disrespected and the group understands that it is their responsibility to respond to this in a constructive way. Leaders of communities would do well to grow their skills in being to be able to rephrase potentially difficult issues into askable and answerable questions for the rest of the group. Careful skill is needed to ensure individuals feel served and not managed.

Because community is a gift, not a product, control over it will always be detrimental

Vanier writes that it is important for people in authority to reveal themselves as they are and to share their difficulties and weaknesses.⁴⁷ This was confirmed by a number of our interviewees who agreed that not to say sorry when mistakes have been made is more damaging to the community in their experience. Like good parents, you need courage to admit mistakes because doing so builds trust and communicates the refusal to control.

Vanier writes that being available is important for a leader because otherwise how would they know issues of community?⁴⁸ As one of our fresh expression leaders commented, leaders need to be able to "take the temperature" of their group. They need to be aware of the big life issues. They need to be able to assess the balance of fun and seriousness and offer comment back to the group for their self-reflection, if need be. This requires a kind of availability of the heart as well as time.

⁴⁶ Scott Peck *A Different Drum* Arrow 1990 p.118

⁴⁷ Jean Vanier *Community and Growth* DLT 1989 p.227

⁴⁸ Jean Vanier *Community and Growth* DLT 1989 p.227

⁴⁹ Jean Vanier *Community and Growth* DLT 1989 p.210

Perhaps linked to this is a willingness to receive from the community as well as serve it. In a sense, being a leader in a community will always set you apart to some degree.⁴⁹ There is always a balance needed in modelling openness and honesty, but maintaining appropriateness at the same time. But from their UPA experience, Bob and Mary Hopkins talked of the need to develop friendships, not just professional relationships with those you are serving. Leaders who always have to look for personal sustenance outside their community they serve (as theological colleges advised clergy in the past) should take care; if this is the case for them, maybe the community does not sustain the members either! A number of examples show that a realistic expectation is for a leader to hope that at least two or three people will be able to appreciate them for just being them and find support and encouragement with them at least.

Just as Vanier is clear that working with marginalised people will always require professional help from psychologists, psychiatrists and others,⁵⁰ our interviews agreed that **good leadership will know when to draw on outside help.** *Northumbria Community* had outside help in designing organisational structures as they experienced significant growth they had not foreseen. *The Net*⁵¹ realised early on they needed help in relationship-building and found support through an organisation called Intimate Life Ministries.⁵² Among many other things, this gave them a wider emotional language that helped them communicate better, particularly for the men. Sara Savage suggested other areas churches might need help on could include personality testing, therapeutic processes, handling difference and handling conflict.

⁵⁰ Jean Vanier *Community and Growth* DLT 1989 p.279

⁵¹ For a brief description of our interview with Dave Male, see p.8 of *Encounters on the Edge* no.37

⁵² www.greatcommandment.net

Interview 6

Phil Potter, Haydock

Mike Moynagh wasn't able to make this interview, so I ventured forth on my own by train to a part of the world I have never been to before. Richard the community worker kindly met me at the station and drove me the 20-minute drive to the church through the town of Haydock. The original church building has been tastefully extended to include a glass-fronted café called The King's Table in what was the entrance foyer and offices upstairs. Already people were setting up, not only for the café but also for their community project TANGO and the New Creations fresh expressions congregation who meet on a Tuesday afternoon.

I met Maureen, Phil's PA, who gave me a flavour of what it was like to work at St Mark's, a church of over 600 people. She described the leadership team and Phil in particular as the sort who work in a highly consultative way and have therefore, over time, been able to facilitate change well. Over the last 15 years, the church has transitioned to a cell approach and more recently, also clusters. I then had time with Phil who, fresh from writing a new book called *The Challenge of Change*, talked through many of the issues he raises in print, including the need to encourage mixed economy thinking. His strong encouragement of members to use their gifts and passions in being missionaries to the communities they are already involved in outside church was inspiring. Phil has a diocesan role supporting and equipping pioneer leaders in their planting of fresh expressions of church. I missed Mike dreadfully as listening well, writing comprehensible notes and planning your next hopefully intelligent question all at once is quite a feat!



As we are gathered...

Vanier writes that *"If we love, we have to meet"*.⁵³ He observes that many of us avoid properly meeting with each other by focusing on administration, law, rules, objective truth or doing things for people. We must be careful not to. **Expect meetings to be a tortuous experience and a waste of time and they probably will be.** We mustn't underestimate how much meetings can be improved by preparing well inwardly. We shouldn't expect too much nourishment from business meetings (deanery synods!), but they can still be enjoyed as we listen to each other and organise well for the community. We need to grow our skills in participating in a way that makes a real effort to listen and understand one another. Even if people make violent outbursts, we should respect them and not make them feel guilty. Vanier writes that such people may be genuinely suffering or they may be on the verge of healing or commitment.



Peck writes that in community people need to treat each other with extraordinary respect. It takes a lot of work for a group of strangers to achieve the safety of true community where people can experiment with taking off their "masks of composure" and acknowledge their brokenness. *"As soon as most people in the group know they will be listened to and accepted for themselves, years and years of pent-up frustration and hurt and guilt and grief come pouring out. Vulnerability in community snowballs."*⁵⁴

The best communities will cultivate an environment where members know they are allowed to speak. Herbert reminds us that like families, churches where members are silenced *"tend to create the ground where abuse can take place."*⁵⁵ At the same time, members

need to know they are allowed not to speak. They are welcomed but not invaded. They are allowed to be themselves. People so easily feel rejected, especially in marginalised contexts. A warning sign for any dysfunctional gathering is thinking, *"I ought to go to support Claire or because Claire would be disappointed if*

⁵³ Jean Vanier *Community and Growth* DLT 1989 p.284

⁵⁴ Scott Peck *A Different Drum* Arrow 1990 p.67

⁵⁵ Clare Herbert Bearing It: *The Development of a Priestly Spirituality in Soho Spirituality in the City* Andrew Walker (ed) SPCK 2005 p.63

⁵⁶ Many thanks to John Wood for this advise.

*I didn't."*⁵⁶ In well-functioning communities, people will want to meet.

Meetings intended for sharing must be made safe confidential trusting places, as letting down some of our barriers can be difficult and even dangerous.⁵⁷ To prevent too much sharing (like a group confessional) or too little (can't get beyond externals), Vanier recommends a starting place of inviting people to share where they are in the community, what is happening in their life and how they are reacting to people and events. This reminds me of one fresh expression of church I visited⁵⁸ that uses two questions as their focus for sharing and discipleship among the core team: 1) How are you experiencing the community? 2) How are you experiencing God in your life?

John Wood offered us helpful suggestions about PCC meetings. He advises asking the group questions such as: a) What's going on in your life/what's the issue for you personally this month?; b) What's the issue for church this month?; c) In both cases, how can the church best provide support? - and inviting them to share with one another in small groups. If themes emerge, leaders need to be seen to be responding, even if the issues were never on their agenda. In this way, you let the group's agenda comes first. The agenda can be handled by sending it out ahead with a suggested proposal beneath. If the group do wish to discuss these items, they can do so after sharing. John warned us: "people have an infinite capacity to talk about themselves, so build this into your meetings."

A call to littleness...

Vanier writes that **it is wise to hold modest expectations of community.** We are all called *"to do, not extraordinary things, but very ordinary things, with an extraordinary love that flows from the heart of God"*.⁵⁹ This is an important reminder for some of us who might have fallen into the trap of waiting for the next big Christian event/speaker/worship leader/miracle worker to visit our church and inspire us. He writes that it is not easy in our world to embrace humility; society teaches us to seek promotion, to succeed, to win and to be independent, but as Christians, *"the gospels call us to love and live the beatitudes; to die to ourselves."*

Vanier writes that it is when we do not attend to what happens between the big projects and heroic acts that we are in danger of ignoring the kind of essentials of Micah 6:8: *"A community which has a sense of work done well, quietly and lovingly, humbly and without fuss, can become a community where the presence of God is profoundly lived."*⁶⁰ It is the affectionate acts day to day - the

⁵⁷ Jean Vanier *Community and Growth* DLT 1989

⁵⁸ Mini Mass *Small Beginnings* Encounters on the Edge no.31 Church Army p.14

⁵⁹ Jean Vanier *Community and Growth* DLT 1989 p.298

⁶⁰ Jean Vanier *Community and Growth* DLT 1989 p.299

looks, the smiles, the friendships – that matter more in community than the intermittent interventions of God, even though they will no doubt be special too. It is being patient with the person who drives you up the wall. I heard this echoed by a number of practitioners, including Jenny Hellyer, who warned against underestimating the effectiveness of small acts of kindness, be it writing a kind note or simply taking time (it might feel like wasting time) to listen and notice the things going on in others' lives. It is allowing space for things to pop up in conversation that one might otherwise miss.

A call to exuberance



Vanier reminds us that celebration has, in the past, been linked to family and religious tradition; with the breakdown of family life and the diminishing influence of church life, no wonder we are lacking in this area. So often celebrating has been reduced to consuming vast amounts of alcohol and sitting to watch entertainment provided for us. But at times we need a little sign of heaven beyond the daily grind and such celebrations need careful thought and planning.⁶¹

Many of our interviewees talked about the need to celebrate the triumphs and failures of their communities. It is a chance for existing members to remember the values, the charisma and the calling. For newcomers, they can encounter the meaning behind the community for the first time. Vanier writes that to do so is

uplifting.⁶² **It is important to look to the past and remember how God has looked after you.** It is a reminder that he will do so in the future with all its questions, difficulties and tensions. Dave Male said The Net took every opportunity to remember key moments in the church's past life – the church's birthday, start of the new academic year, start of the new calendar year, advent, AGM.



⁶¹ Jean Vanier *Community and Growth* DLT 1989 p.152

⁶² Jean Vanier *Community and Growth* DLT 1989 p.318

The Net also took every opportunity they could to eat together. Meals are a fantastic way to facilitate good meeting between people. Vanier recommends communities sit down together at a table if at all possible. Self-service buffets don't facilitate sharing in the way that having to pass the potatoes does. For celebratory meals, ask people to find rousing, funny stories that encourage sharing and openness so people don't come as consumers.

...and a call to mourn together

In a complementary way to celebrating, our communities can be enriched by careful thought over handling grief well, at a personal level and at a community level. On a personal level, we can be great in the first two weeks, but how well do we support each other when months later you are still crying your eyes out and processing extreme emotions of anger or guilt? As Winner writes, we lack church customs and vocabulary for what happens to the living after the dead are dead.⁶³

How well do we mourn the end of church, community or group? **Because ends in Christian groups are so often understood as failures, it is no wonder they are often met with embarrassed silences.**⁶⁴ Just as we hold memorial services to celebrate a life lived well, so we can celebrate groups that have done jobs well. In the time of the Hellyers, Lee Abbey had developed a goodbye ceremony for individuals leaving the community. Over morning coffee, all members of the community stood in a circle and the person leaving said goodbye to every one in turn as they made their way round the circle.

⁶³ Lauren Winner *Mudhouse Sabbath: An Invitation to a Life of Spiritual Discipline* Paraclete Press 2007 p.28

⁶⁴ Sara Savage and Eolene Boyd-Macmillan *The Human Face of the Church* Canterbury Press 2007 p.107

Interview 7 & 8

Bob and Mary Hopkins and George Lings, Sheffield

One Wednesday afternoon in late January found us interviewing Bob and Mary Hopkins and George Lings on the red sofa in my Sheffield Centre office. Fortified by doughnuts in true Sheffield Centre style, we began with Bob and Mary,



who have worked as national church planting consultants and trainers in Anglican circles for the last 20 years as Anglican Church Planting Initiatives and more recently CMS and Fresh Expressions. I was very interested in their comment that, in their experience, genuine community is not rare but it is also not common. As well as their insights from a broad perspective, we were also keen to hear about their first-hand experience of moving from leafy green Chorleywood in the late 1980s to plant a church from scratch in inner urban St Helens.

Interviewing my own boss and mentor of eight years was a very strange experience of role-reversal for me! George Lings has been director of The Sheffield Centre, Church Army's research unit, for ten years. Like Bob and Mary, we were keen to draw on his familiarity with a considerable number of different fresh expressions of church - encountered through his research and consultancy - to glean insights into good community building. His more recent PhD study into church planting and ecclesiology has further convinced him of the importance to think beyond mere functionality in church planting and to ask more rigorous questions of what it means to "be" and to "belong". He underlined for us the risk the fresh expressions movement runs in underestimating the significance of community. If expressions of church will increasingly be smaller, more diverse and more domestic, we ignore these issues of community at our peril.



Humility to keep learning

The more research I do in this area, I begin to understand why my experiences of intentional community have so often felt shallow or short-lived. As Scott Peck writes, there are no shortcuts; community only happens through effort and sacrifice. Such cost applies to maturing a community, not just starting a community. Who wants to wrestle with their inner monsters? Who wants to own up to the monsters that together as communities we keep hidden? Are leaders prepared for the sacrifices they are called to make in trusting others to lead with them, serving those they are called to lead and being open to receive from them? Do we have the time and energy for the intentionality and care that good meetings and rites of passage require? Are we willing to attend to littleness and let go of our hopes for greatness? I suspect issues of sustainability are inherently more complex than start-up; I wonder if this is why this second booklet was more difficult to write than the first.

Mature community can't exist without mature individuals. Because so many of us have so little experience of living in communities, and because community life requires such awareness of self and maturity at handling one's own shortcomings, we were warned that it is wise to always expect immaturity from all those involved. For this reason, I'm now more sympathetic to those who at the outset hold up their hands and admit they are not ready for a deeper level of community. **I would rather people count the cost beforehand than naively assume it's easy and leave a trail of devastation for them and for others.** As Chris Russell commented in his interview: "Utopian ideas are usually signs that people have never properly experienced community."

But note the words of Vanier that describe the growing importance of community: *"In the past, Christians who wanted to follow Jesus opened hospitals and schools. Now that there are so many of these, Christians must commit themselves to the new communities of welcome, to live with people who have no family and to show them that they are loved and can grow to greater freedom and that they in turn, can love and give life to others."*⁶⁵ The communities we interviewed see the way they live together as the most valuable witness they can make in our individualist and anxiety-ridden society. They offer a counter-cultural lifestyle of hope and purpose to the lonely through living more intentionally in community. But not just a refuge - they see this as the best springboard for the mission ventures of their individuals as well as their collective.

⁶⁵ Jean Vanier *Community and Growth* DLT 1989 p.283

If we are serious about building new communities of faith for those not already in church, and not just reworking worship or evangelism for existing congregations, we must recognise there is no Christendom congregational precedent to follow; we have to look for other sources of wisdom. Otherwise, at worst, we will drift into running domesticated multiple congregations that are attractational in their provision, fostering client/provider relationships. As Vanier writes, we are not just called to do things for people in need but receive them as a source of life and communion, a kind of mutual learning.⁶⁶ Nurturing community where people are invited to "own" their membership of a group will better build a framework for this.

We have tended to keep apart the dynamics of monastic communities and church communities because they've never needed to be together; they have had different and distinct callings within a wider framework. Where Christendom thinking and practice assumed everyone was part of the community of church (but there is considerable doubt over whether that was really true), our current post-Christendom mission context is a radically different one; not for the first time in this series, we suggest that new missional churches will be required that have more in common with monasticism than we first thought. The evidence is growing for the case that new monasticism is not just one of many different kinds of fresh expressions of church but something of greater significance that has much to offer all fresh expressions.

It will continue to be a mixed picture. Taking my own advice, I can't impose a blanket recommendation for fresh expressions of church to invest in deeper community along the lines of the content of these booklets. **No one can be forced, only invited to consider the call to live a life of deeper community with those around them**, both in the effort and sacrifice but also in the richness of life it offers in giving new hope and new meaning to people who have little and would otherwise, in this day and age, be sat in front of the TV. This is the mission of any community, writes Vanier.⁶⁷ As I wrote at the end of *Encounters on the Edge* no.37, the implication is that any existing diocese, deanery, church or group might have to consider growing a deeper sense of community in a similar way to those who plant parallel cell churches. That way, those who "get it" are free to explore more fully what it means, but no one is coerced. So many of us are tired from chaotic models of change that have been implemented without proper reflection before and after. It is no wonder that we react negatively to blanket impositions and quietly resist them.

⁶⁶ Jean Vanier *Community and Growth* DLT 1989 p.76

⁶⁷ Jean Vanier *Community and Growth* DLT 1989 p.86

If, in reading this, you are more mindful of past mistakes or present deficiencies, take heart. Vanier writes about the person in distress having a mysterious power. *"Those who are poor in spirit seem to break down barriers of powerfulness, wealth, ability and pride because they reveal to those who are there to help, their own poverty and vulnerability."*⁶⁸ He goes on to say that, like a person, a community can be poor and in pain. Such a community needs our love and respect just as much and will also have things to teach us about the shortcomings of each and every community.



If I at any time questioned the point of pulling together lessons learnt in intentional communities for the purposes of growing more effective fresh expressions of church, the findings from interviews prove it is a helpful exercise. We have very few inbuilt processes in the church to reflect on past or current practice and learn from what people are finding. Vanier warns that **young communities with enthusiasm and emotionalism must take care as many of them will die.** Those *"who are young should beware of believing we have the answer."* Communities that have been living well together for a long time but not making too much noise about it have much to teach us.⁶⁹ As we seek to establish fresh expressions of church, a little humility in learning from those who have gone before us will stand us in good stead for the humility needed to sustain the heart of these communities. Many are already doing so. I hope that these booklets have contributed in a little way to this.

Claire Dalpra
Easter 2008

Cartoons: Tim Sharp

The Foot Washing by Kathy Priddis on p.18 included with kind permission of the artist.

⁶⁸ Jean Vanier *Community and Growth* DLT 1989 p.96

⁶⁹ Jean Vanier *Community and Growth* DLT 1989 p.254

Further Resources

Dietrich Bonhoeffer *Life Together* SCM Press Ltd 1954

Chris Edmondson and Emma Ineson (ed) *Creating Community* DLT 2006

Tobias Jones *Utopian Dreams* Faber and Faber 2007

Dave Male *Church Unplugged: Remodelling Church Without Losing Your Soul* Authentic 2008

Joseph R Myers *Organic Community* Baker Books 2007

Sara Savage and Eolene Boyd-Macmillan *The Human Face of the Church* Canterbury Press 2007

Scott Peck *The Different Drum* Arrow 1990

Jean Vanier *Community and Growth* DLT 1989

Andrew Walker (ed) *Spirituality in the City* SPCK 2005

Fraser Watts (ed) *Jesus and Psychology* DLT 2007

Walter Wink *Naming the Powers: The Language of Power in the New Testament* Philadelphia Fortress Press 1984

Walter Wink *Unmasking the Powers: The Invisible Forces That Determine Human Existence* Philadelphia Fortress Press 1986

Walter Wink *Engaging the Powers: Discernment and Resistance in a World of Domination* Minneapolis Fortress Press 1992

Lauren Winner *Mudhouse Sabbath: An Invitation to a Life of Spiritual Discipline* Paraclete Press 2007

John D Zizioulas *Being as Communion* DLT 1985

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