



Encountering Exile

The decline of the Church in the West means many Christian leaders are forced to taste a bittersweet draught of hopes fulfilled and deferred, liberally laced with failure and even shame. Our world seems so different to the joyful simplicity of the

new Church of the New Testament. Where else in the Scriptures could we look to cope and hope? **George Lings investigates.**

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ChurchArmy

The Sheffield Centre, 50 Cavendish Street, Sheffield S3 7RZ.

Tel: 0114 272 7451 Fax: 0114 279 5863

Email: g.lings@sheffieldcentre.org.uk



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Encounters on the Edge

A Series of Quarterly Investigations from

The Sheffield Centre

No. 13



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How high should our expectations be? I read the prayer letter of missionary friends in Japan and see that the rate of conversions and church growth are modest compared to news in England. On the other hand our growth seems pathetic compared to stories from South Korea. As an individual I have further to grow in faith, but I do not think my expectation of progress in England is just a matter of faith. Receptivity in a culture is a significant factor in determining the rate of progress. In the West we need to know both how to relate to diverging expectations held out to us from the world church and how to connect our own mission context to the Scriptures.

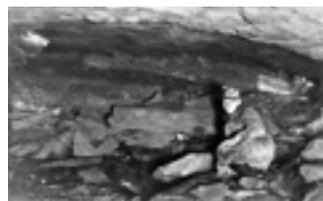
The latter factor brings a niggling question: “Which parts of the Scriptures are most appropriate for understanding ourselves within our secular western European context today?” I am not convinced that the Acts of Apostles is the most relevant period.

“I don’t think it is Christian to want to get to the New Testament too soon and too directly.” Dietrich Bonhoeffer *Letters and Papers From Prison* p.53

I do believe the sending of Jesus and the era of the Holy Spirit since Pentecost are foundational enduring realities for any view of Christian mission. However we must appreciate that the 21st century is neither a time, nor a culture, where Christianity is brand new, with all the attraction and power of newness. We are not in a climate of clear spiritual hunger that positively relates that hunger to Christianity. Like it or not, being “post-Christendom” gives us a history to draw on, a burden of structures to carry and parts of a story to live down. So where in scripture could we look?

Dark but Productive?

Using a mining analogy, I fancy there is coal in the broad seam of literature which deals with



the pre-exilic and post-exilic period of the Old Testament. **My hypothesis is that the Exile brings me insight and perspective. From its depth, I bring out attitudes and perspectives that help me stay with hopes I entertain and to cope with fears I cannot banish.** Without suggesting that there is any explicit or inherent repetition of the Jewish history around the 6th Century BC, **the number of echoes is uncanny.**

Funny you should say that

Consider the Decline of Influence.

Just as the northern and southern kingdoms declined in political influence from the heyday of David and Solomon, so the Church in the West has seen marked decline of its influence in society and the proportion of the population who are active attenders. *The English 1851 Census* revealed that less than half of the population attended church. In its day this was an enormous shock. 150 years later the proportion of the population who were active Anglicans had declined to 1 million or 2%. In the Old Testament history of descent towards Exile, there are the bright periods of significant prophetic ministries and the benign rule of better kings, but, in the wider sweep of history, these represent a stay of execution rather than reversal of history. In our own day, we may be glad of the influence of **thriving churches and Renewal movements, but these have not reversed overall declining numbers.**

In the opening pages of *Threshold of the Future* Michael Riddell writes:

“The Christian Church is dying in the West. This painful fact is the cause of a great deal of avoidance by the Christian community. To use terminology drawn from pastoral care, the terminally sick patient is somewhere between denial and bargaining.”

Michael Riddell *Threshold of the Future*
(SPCK 1998) p.1



What are the signs Riddell sees of this terminal illness? The decay of the Church is most easily recognised in the most secularised parts of the Westernised world: Western Europe, Canada and Australasia. Large numbers of people are leaving. There is major competition from shopping and sport. Both partners in a relationship are at work, cutting the volunteer church labour force. People have been alienated from church in times of need or failure. Full time leaders are more difficult to recruit, large numbers are resigning and those that stay have less status. Some respond by adopting the model of the pastor/administrator; others choose the counsellor role. Ethical failure among Christians has reached epidemic proportions and Christians are in general moral confusion. “Plausibility structures” supporting Christianity have collapsed in the public arena and are only maintained in a private world; pluralism repudiates the centrality of Christian motifs and has little interest in the questions addressed by Christianity. Society believes that the church has little involvement in the issues others think are vital. Christians are regarded often as hypocrites or a privileged elite who insulate themselves from reality with an insincere piety. Despite a rise in the interest of spirituality, little connection is made with the resources of the Church. Church is seen as a relic of modernism, shallow and repressive. Christians are often materialistic and emotionally stunted. They seem to be unwilling to experiment and learn from experience while spiritual disciplines are often more talked about than practised.



That is some list. Whether you agree with Riddell’s arrows fired into the body of Christendom, it is not a matter of argument that the great days of ecclesio-political influence and power are gone. We are no longer in power. **We no longer control society by influence, money, and decision making.**

2 Note Decay is a Long Story

In the kingdom of Israel, the **seeds of spiritual corruption** were sown at

the height of its power under Solomon. We too have such a history in the Medieval Church. This apparent strength was followed by the break-up of this power into divided kingdoms. In 1453, Christendom split into a Catholic West and an Orthodox East and in the 1520s into European Catholicism and European Protestantism. Furthermore just as the ancient northern and southern kingdoms fought against each other, we have a history of conflict, culminating in the *Thirty Years War* in 17th century Europe. Arguably this disgrace, equivalent to **religious civil war**, sowed the seeds of Rationalism that gave birth to Secularism.

3 Establishment Values Dominate

Furthermore we need to note the change in Old Testament Jewish society from **Tabernacle to Temple**. This occurs at the height of political power under David and Solomon. The connection to church history may be seen in the profound changes brought about under Constantine, when some of the wildness of the church was tamed. As the Old Testament people headed towards the experience of Exile, Jerusalem and the Temple became viewed as an inalienable blessing turned into a religious talisman. Jeremiah’s criticism was “*you keep saying the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord*” (Jer 7:4).



We too have a heavy emotional dependence on, and heavy financial burden of, religious buildings and public worship, exaggerating the sense of the importance of place in guaranteeing the church’s future stake in an emerging society. What might Jeremiah say to us?

With these equivalences, I then encountered the writings of Walter Bruggemann, in particular *The Prophetic Imagination*. In his view the prophetic identity of Israel, brought in under Moses, is as follows

“*This community gathered around the memories (Exodus) knows it is defined by, and at the disposal of, a God who as yet is unco-opted and uncontained by the empire (Egypt).*”

Walter Bruggeman *The Prophetic Imagination* (Fortress Press 1978) p27

He then argues that Solomon brought the Canaanisation, or indeed paganization, of Mosaic religion and the death of the prophetic as the driving force in Israel. He cites the introduction of the harem and reliance on political marriages. Tax districts replaced tribal loyalty by state control. Central bureaucracy enthroned reason and minimised compassion. The standing army made redundant dependence on God's spirit. The fascination with Wisdom literature made reality too rational.

Our accommodation through Christendom, to the pursuit of power, to the spirit of the Western Middle Ages and later to Rationalism is a painful story when compared to this. For example, Clark Pinnock in *The Most Moved Mover (Patnoster/Baker 2001)* sees a disastrous subversion of Christianity by the ideals of Greek Philosophy.

4 Beware Superficial Change

The people, before and in the Exile, are called stubborn and rebellious by Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Hosea and Zechariah. The only report ever done on the Church of England by its worldwide Anglican partners, was called *To a Rebellious House?* (CIO Publishing 1981). It is still a timely and prophetic read. Sadly, large parts of the Church find it interesting to listen to talk of *Building Missionary Congregations*, hearing *Springboard* speakers etc, but apart from changing some labels, very little else seems to happen. At end of Decade of Evangelism, cynics observe that **the language of everything has changed to mission yet nearly everything has remained much the same.**

5 Are There Important Differences?

I see one point of significant divergence. The Exilic period contains a firm call for the people of God to see themselves as an intended **light to the nations** Is 49:6 etc., but the call was seldom grasped beyond the inward looking response for proselytes. However the Christendom Church in the West has, in part, a different history. From the Jesuit response of the 16th century and from the 1790s in Protestant denominations, it has engaged in the worldwide missionary movement on a scale never seen before. Through this and despite some elements of it, a more vigorous worldwide church has been planted in the two-thirds world for which there is no equivalent in the

Old Testament Exilic story. Andrew Walls in *The Christian Movement in Christian History* (T&T Clark 1996) argues that **the history of the reincarnation of Christianity in new cultures has been a saving feature several times**, over the last 2000 years.

Some may object to such a wholesale comparison when there is no obvious equivalent to **the fall of Jerusalem** in 587 BC. I suggest that this is to misunderstand the nature of what has happened to us. The enemy of the Church in the West is not persecution and the issue is not political power. The issue is spiritual credibility and relevance in the equally real battle for the affections and minds of human beings. Faced with both the onset of secularisation and the surprising riposte of the re-emergence of spirituality, usually New Age or Pagan, **the battle to be the leading spiritual force in the Western nations is being lost. In that sense, the judgement is falling already.** Jerusalem, understood as the church in the West, is neither “the joy of the whole earth”, nor the centre of society and not even the place where it is expected that God will be found. Rather, it is seen predominantly as an institution, a relic of a

bygone age and a minority sport for those who like that sort of thing. Even among Christians, I detect an increasing tendency; their yearning for God is in tension with a sense that this hunger can no longer be fed by attending congregational forms of denominational life. They are dropping out into forms of alternative worship or private religion. The growing cry among some of my thoughtful friends is “we *can't go on like this*”. My sense is that like the Davidic Dynasty, today's Church is at the end of an era.



One of those days

Strands in the Prophets have echoes for today

The Exile produced a diversity of responses, from the deep pessimism of a Jeremiah to the lyrical hope of the latter chapters of Isaiah. We too will hear voices from both ends of the spectrum. Consider strands from a number of prophetic books.

DANIEL : Repentance For, and As, the People of God

Bishop Jack of Sheffield came to his diocese in 1998 with three stated priorities – rejoicing in God, compassion for the needy and repentance for church. It reminds me of *Daniel 9.15f*

“Now, O Lord our God, who brought your people out of Egypt with a mighty hand and who made for yourself a name that endures to this day, we have sinned, we have done wrong. O Lord, in keeping with all your righteous acts, turn away your anger and your wrath from Jerusalem, your city, your holy hill. Our sins and the iniquities of our fathers have made Jerusalem and your people an object of scorn to all those around us.

Give ear, O God, and hear; open your eyes and see the desolation of the city that bears your Name. We do not make requests of you because we are righteous, but because of your great mercy.”

There is a sense in which we, the Western Church, are living under the judgement of God. It is easier to think he may be judging an increasingly frenetic and decadent society, but I cannot believe God has nothing to say to a church that has known great influence yet been in decline throughout the 20th century. Amos chapter 2 is famous for its condemnation of the barbarity of the surrounding nations. Then, without a break in style, Amos issues an even more severe castigation of Israel - God's people.

Repentance for our own position – not blaming other bits of the church - may be far healthier than repudiation of society.

Corporate repentance could become part of our spirituality and a proper response to the many voices of criticism, inside and outside the church. Some people speak out of sorrow - some out of anger. I cannot simply dismiss them as pessimists who are to be repudiated for both the content

and style of what they say. Such dismissal is far too typical of exactly what was wrong with pre-exilic attitudes. I don't want to collude with those who say “tell us *only* the good news” - such denial is eloquent psychological testimony to an underlying malaise. Failure to compose and sing contemporary songs of lament is a similar sign.

Take an example. In October 1998, I went to a Church House conference. The Director of Communications Bill Beaver told us there are real signs of hope in the face of negative media coverage. He cited rising numbers of ordinands and rising levels of giving. These were described in his American twang as “two key performance indicators”. While I rejoiced in both gains - I could not fail to observe three things:

- 1** Both are classic indicators of enabling the existing model of church to be sustained, which may not be the model we most need. **Resources directed to preserve the existing order is the standard response of institutions in decline.**
- 2** Looking more closely, I note in the 1999 official statistics that there were 357 retirements from full time stipendiary ministry and 476 people ordained. However 47% were Non-Stipendiary Ministers (N.S.M.) or Ordained Local Ministers (O.L.M.). Therefore we are not replacing like with like, stretching full time leaders more and more. Furthermore in the early 1960's we were ordaining 600 people a year, all of which gives us a perspective of how we kid ourselves.
- 3** The very same conference heard a paper from Robin Gill clearly showing from rigorous survey work that belief in a personal God, in Christ and in life after death are declining and the gap between Christians and non-believers is widening.

I find the voices of those who wish the Church well the easiest to hear, but they probably are not the only ones I should attend to, if I want the truth. The truth, as I can best discern it, leads me often into repentance for the Church. I have no choice but to love her still - because Christ loves her - and I am a product and a part of her. This is not a comfortable place to be.

JEREMIAH : Living in Times of Judgement

If we are in a period of judgement we shall find ourselves caught up in the consequences. Take Jeremiah 12. Verses 1-4 contain the prophet's complaint about God's lack of apparent justice: the way that the wicked and powerful flourish, how the vulnerable are exploited and also that the perpetrators have lost any sense of accountability to God for their conduct. This is not very different from some strands today. God's response is not comforting.

"If you have raced with men on foot and they have worn you out, how can you compete with horses?" (Jer 12:5)

It is as though God rejoins "yes it is tough - and it could get worse". I wonder whether if we have found it difficult to race with modernism and often found ourselves lagging behind, how then shall we fare with a swifter changing and slippery customer like post-modernism? Don't hear me say we shouldn't try, I simply say it may be less easy. I am amused and alarmed at the aphorism, derived, I think, from Helmut Thielicke - You should start with where people are, but this is more difficult when they keep changing their address!

Post-modernism is a topic in itself. I simply note two markers.

- a) Too many presentations I have heard on evangelism to post-moderns, have been modernist in the extreme in style. Being modernist about post-modernism will not help enough.
- b) There is enough talk about post-modernism and evangelism, but precious little about forming post-modern church. We must do both if the fruits of the evangelism are not to rot in the fields.

Jeremiah continues with vss 10 and 13.

"Many shepherds will ruin my vineyard and trample down my field; they will turn my pleasant field into a desolate wasteland." (Jer 12:10)

"They will sow wheat but reap thorns; they will wear themselves out but gain nothing. So bear the shame of your harvest because of the LORD's fierce anger." (Jer 12:13)



The church apparently destroying itself and being bound up in a hard working futility are not new problems. Living in a time of the judgement of God on society and on the church will never be a picnic.

A variable within the broad theme of Exile is that different individual churches and indeed whole denominations may find more resonance with the impending doom of the immediate pre-exilic period. However some will identify with the period of exile itself and others find themselves genuinely caught up with the hopes of return. For all of us, enduring themes include living with the faithfulness and severity of God, the need to be honest about our past and the permission to acknowledge our present difficulties. The judgement will place us in a vulnerable position. Psalm 137 laments "how shall we sing the Lord's song in a foreign land?" **Yet that very difficulty of being worshippers surrounded by a hostile and alien culture could be precisely the point.** God's people have a call to be a light to the nations, not be comfortable by themselves.

A later writer, from the apocryphal period, got the point.

"We give thanks to you O lord before the nations, for you have scattered us among them There we make your greatness known and exalt you in the presence of all the living." (Tobit 13)

HAGGAI 2 1-9 : Don't Give in to Fears

Here is a message to leaders who recall the former glories and to whom the present achievements can look insignificant by comparison.

"How does it look to you now - does it not seem as nothing?" (Hagg 2.3)

The prophecy calls us to be strong in verses 4 and 5, but this is not the same as a call to power. The call is not to cave in, but to hold to the task given. Previous power is neither offered nor required. Those returning from exile were never called to rebuild the Davidic political kingdom.

The call is not to fear - a powerful temptation in a changing and uncertain society. Fortnightly, I use a prayer that begins

"O Holy Spirit, whose presence is liberty, grant me that freedom of the Spirit, which will not fear to tread in unknown ways nor be held back by fear of others or misgivings of ourselves." Bishop George Appleton

The Haggai passage contains hope for the future. God will shake the existing order and fill his own chosen place with glory. There is even the audacious verse 9:

“The glory of this present house will be greater than the glory of the former house” (Hagg 2:9)

I do not yet see how this can happen in the 21st century, but the promise is there. If it does not appear in history - it will be delivered in eternity.

Hope must be a permanent mark of Christian spirituality and it will be based in the presence and promise of God, not our ability, strength or wisdom.



On a grassy bank, east of Sheffield station, stood a ruined two story stone house. The area used to be back to back housing, demolished post-war with only this building left. I wondered why it had been kept and

discovered it was called the Toffee House, where a local firm made and sold toffee. It is a landmark of local history. Since I came in 1997, it remained forlorn and decrepit. In 1999, SRB funding was targeted at our area. The Toffee House became ringed with galvanised fencing. Scaffolding reached up to roof level. The old roof was torn off. Breeze blocks festooned the top boarding. They were all promises of progress, yet for more than a year that was all that happened. The process had apparently got stuck. It reminded me of renewal around the Church of England. I am glad the glory of the Toffee House was finally revealed in 2001.

There is hope. It is Christian to think so. The hope is in the God of mercy and judgement, the one who does not break the bruised reed (Is 42), who

blesses the poor in spirit, (Matt 5) and is ever working to make all things new (Rev 21). **The hope is not in the human wisdom of better apologetics, slicker advertising, or sophisticated audio-visual equipment.** Nor is it in the power of persuasion, particular courses, or any preferred human strategy. *“Be strong. Do not fear. Hope in God”* says Haggai. I can’t think that doesn’t speak to us.

HABAKKUK : Living Among a Secular Culture that Values Power

Habbakuk explores what it is like to be living when the wicked succeed. Messages from God speak of judgement for the unprincipled powerful whether they exercise military or economic might.

The call is to a journey: from fear to faith. *“The righteous will live by his faith”* (Hab 2:4). It is a move from anger to hope *“the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of God as the waters cover the sea”* (Hab 2:14). In it we are moved from knowing we are under judgement, to asking for mercy

“LORD, I have heard of your fame; I stand in awe of your deeds, O LORD. Renew them in our day, in our time make them known; in wrath remember mercy.” (Hab 3:2)

Evans and Fearon quote with approval Dr Rene Padilla working in Argentina. Padilla yearns for a just society but knows the situation is getting worse instead of better. His realistic hope is in small pockets of people that are living out the Gospel, where churches take responsibility for their surrounding communities, seeing many small changes at grass roots level.



ZECHARIAH : Don't Despise the Day of Small Things

“Who despises the day of small things? Men will rejoice when they see the plumb-line in the hand of Zerubbabel.” (Zech 4:10)

I presume the plumb line refers to the intention to see something built straight and true. In church planting, people are exploring how, with a new start, they have the chance to build church again. This time they aim to be more straight and true, redesigning church freer from the

past inheritance that ossified, compromised and corrupted what she should be. Today we are building more modestly and fashioning fresh communities rather than erecting new buildings.

I trace four indicators of “small things” in growth.

1 The Wave of the Congregational Form of Church Planting has Peaked

Over the last 20 years we have seen the multiplying of churches. My database shows c400 started since 1977. In the early 90’s, we know 40 per year started. That is impressive when even the optimistic Victorians never achieved one a week. These days I guess only 20 begin annually.

2 Small Numbers of Radical Mission Starts

Cell Plants are not transitions to cell, but plants for non-churched people done from scratch with small teams. There are but half a dozen of these. (see Encounters 3)

Network Church Plants are set up with permission across parish boundaries to reach networks rather than neighbourhoods. We need one of these in every urban deanery, but I only know ten cases. (see Encounters 7)

Community Based Plants work for, and in, a local community development project and church begins to be formed in response to what God does through the local people. There may be a dozen of these. (see Encounters 1,2, 6)

Seed Teams to UPA areas in which people move home and job to relocate to engage in cross cultural evangelism. Again the number of examples is minuscule. *The Eden Project* in Manchester is the best known.

3 Numbers of New Churches Driven by a Felt Need

These have been born in response, either to the well-publicised distance of youth from church, or by the acceptance that no one worship mode meets the range of needs.

Other people’s sources lead me to think there are 100+ **Youth Congregations**, responding to a cultural gap - not just a generational one. I’d love to know where they are. (see Encounters 4)

I have heard of several dozen **Alternative Worship** events. These are different from youth congregations in that their age group is wider. They are keeping existing people from falling out of church, more than attracting new people. (see Encounters 12)

We hear of a renaissance of **Multiple Congregations**. This has happened before in the 1970’s but there seems to be a fresh impetus in this direction. Their health and longevity are yet to be tested. (see Encounters 8)

4 Revitalised Existing Churches

Once more there are several strands to this phenomena.

Cell Church Transitions: Preliminary research suggests that by 2000, about 50 Anglican churches were actively pursuing this path.

Willow Creek – or seeker churches. Their association has 400 churches across all the Protestant denominations in the UK.

Minster Churches: I suspect there are key churches in larger cities which resource those other churches around them in terms of vision, money, personnel. They act as Ephesus did in the New Testament period - centres that send out others. They work in a more mobile or Celtic fashion, and less in a parochial or Roman way.

Missionary Congregations: who knows how many congregations have been helped to make the change to such an outward, work-centred focus?

The width of responses listed above is both desirable and commendable. It is what Mission to a diverse society needs, yet I think we have to face what the anecdotal numbers tell us. The number of radical starts is very small.

Their significance is not in the volume of instances, but in the precedents set and mental boundaries pushed back which helps change the climate.

The number of what now look like “traditional plants” is some 400 cases over 20 years. Would the number of revitalised churches be some six to eight hundred? Even all of these categories together are still small compared to the Church of England’s 16000 churches and 13000 parishes – between 5-10% of the total. Let’s be honest - but not despise the day of small things.

Perhaps E.F. Schumacher's book still has a message for us – *Small is Beautiful*. The expectations from mission partners in Islamic countries would be instructive; from missionary friends working in Oman, I learn they know how to rejoice over little encouragements. It could be good to take that instinct into our prayer lives.



Isaiah 45 : Expect Partnerships - Even With Those Not of the Faith

Isaiah 45 remarkably refers to Cyrus the Persian as “my servant”. Moreover, in the story of Nehemiah we should not ignore his dependence on King Artaxerxes to give him authorisation, building materials and an armed escort.

If we engage in the regeneration of communities because our gospel is for the whole person, it will take significantly more money and human resources than we have. **We shall have to move out of Christendom mode, where we called the shots and controlled the projects.** In post-Christendom mode we have to dare to explore partnerships with others.

But why explore risky partnerships?

“Build houses and settle down; plant gardens and eat what they produce.”
(Jer 29:5)

We are to occupy and settle in the communities in which we are placed. The focus is more than our own survival.

“Also, seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which I have carried you into exile. Pray to the LORD for it, because if it prospers, you too will prosper.” (Jer 29:7)

Seeking peace and prosperity of a community will lead us to a concern for its regeneration where that is decayed or dysfunctional.

This kind of involvement raises the old chestnut about Evangelism & Social Action. I note a historical progression. Back in 1975 John Stott spelt out, in characteristically irenic fashion, ways of seeing this relationship. In his book *Christian Mission in the Modern World* (Falcon 1975), he took it as read that there was no liberty for any Christian to so exalt the claim of one of these parts of mission, that the other was excluded or substituted.

Stott explored but rejected social action as a means of evangelism, and as a manifestation of evangelism. Attracted by the warmth of this approach he still believed it made such involvement a means to an end and service a subdivision of evangelism. **He believed the proper statement was that the two are partners.** Whether the analogy of the blades of a pair of Scissors was his idea I don't know. The point of the analogy is that only when both blades are at work is there effectiveness on the cutting edge of mission.

Ann Morisy revisits this kind of ground in her book *Beyond the Good Samaritan* (Mowbray 1997). By her time some of the climate had changed. Partnerships between Christians and non-Christians working in deprived areas are more common. The need is acknowledged and tools for audit are readily available and community engagement by local churches in urban areas is a given. She argues for models of community ministry that unites practical social responsibility and active Christian mission. She believes and writes beautifully about a special dynamic released when this is done among the poor, engendering surprising encounters with Jesus, for the supposed giver as well as the receiver. She is not afraid to say Christians have something distinctively spiritual worth sharing, - *“the good news of God becoming incarnate in the world in Jesus”* (p62). This is not negated by working in partnership with secular bodies, giving case studies to illustrate her thesis.

David Evans of Tear Fund and Mike Fearon wrote *From Strangers to Neighbours* (Hodder and Staughton 1998) with a similar challenge. They show how Christian approaches in community development, which are well tried overseas, can be applied to our urban areas. The authors illustrate this with a broad wealth of examples in sufficient detail to inspire others. **They argue for Christian community**

development that goes beyond the dualistic scissors analogy, preferring to talk of a seamless garment of mission.

They want to go beyond First Aid for the community, even beyond political campaigning and hiring professional workers, into community development from the bottom up. They argue that experienced based learning



changes Christian's attitudes far more than any texts or books can. They accept the South American dictum, "the poor evangelise the church."

I raise this issue because we are weaker in our mission to urban areas and the rural poor areas. Only such intrinsic partnerships of evangelism and social involvement will be effective and only partnerships with others of good will can harness the resources. These dynamics underlie effective mission to the non-churched - as opposed to the de-churched – with the former becoming the major sector of society.

Here is the call for wisdom about what Jesus, on different occasions, said:

"For whoever is not against us is for us." (Mk 9:40)

"He who is not with me is against me, and he who does not gather with me scatters." (Mt 12:30)

The former is comment on a surprising person doing Christ-like work. The latter is in the context of Jesus' work being attributed to Beelzebub, that is, reacting to those who insist on calling white black. It will take discernment to decide which text applies. Spirituality will be the backdrop to any discernment and grace for humility to work in partnership with others.



Isaiah 43 : The Contribution of Hope

The early verses insist that when we pass through the water and the fire God will be with us. Hope does not preclude suffering opposition and living through the consequences of being under judgement. Nevertheless, we are affirmed of our value to God, in which lies our hope.

Later in verses 16-19 we discern a God who is at work despite powerful forces of chaos, and who has acted in history to save. The text invites us not to dwell on the pressures of the past but to perceive the new way that God discloses - in the desert. Why there? The desert acts as shorthand for the Exodus, for simplicity, dependence and the search for spirituality. It is the place to need God and where he meets us. Then we shall "be his witnesses" vs 10 and "proclaim his praise" vs 21.

Does this fit?

I find the prophetic context provides a way of living with a mixture of a sense of judgement and of hope. It gives an appropriate biblical precedent for living through an equivalent death and resurrection of the church as we know her. **To be the people of God in Exile was very much an Encounter on the Edge.** An encounter with a foreign culture, an encounter with a new experience and an encounter with God, one of whose trademarks has been the paradox of strength in weakness. There is going to be a lot to learn. If this parallel has any validity then one key spiritual message is that it is repentance, not reorganisation that precedes restoration. It is trust and faith, not tactics and fads, that usher in what God can do.

John Wesley wrote

*"Why are we not more holy? Chiefly because we are enthusiasts - looking for the ends without the means. We want lively churches thriving evangelistic programmes, glorious worship and social sensitivity, but we are often not prepared for the personal renewal which must undergird those things."**

** For those eagle-eyed readers who noticed only the author given for the John Wesley quote we, at the Sheffield Centre, have been unable to trace the source. Answers on a postcard to George.*

I don't say any of those inner attitudes come easily or quickly. They are contours of a 6th century BC spirituality. **These dynamics resonate with me far more than a glib optimism about Mission or a wistfulness for Revival. These passages sketch out living through a kind of death and resurrection.** The Exile marked the death of Israel as an independent political force, but offered the possibility of a future spiritual identity. Perhaps we are in a similar situation and need to teach this to our people.

Dangers of the Ghetto Mentality

After the return to Jerusalem the sixth century people of God had their problems too. I highlight a few as warning signs to us. The religious ghetto to can lead to **pietism** in its derogatory sense: a show of spirituality without engagement in life, a private life with God without touching mission or suffering.

Siege mentality has been a past refuge. We may smile when we spot the isolation and withdrawal of the Exclusive Brethren, but it can come closer to home than we think.

Eschatological drop out has been a hideaway. People put all their eggs into a future event, like the advent of the Messiah, as did the Essenes. Some similarly invest in the Return of Christ at a dated time.

The challenge of 6th century BC was to be the restored people of God in order to reach the world to fulfil the Abrahamic covenant. It was delivered but not realised. Some signs of hope were seen, in the rebuilding of Jerusalem's walls, its houses and its temple, but the hope fizzled and **the concerns of the Inter-testamental periods were usually too inward.** The temple and its worship became a focus. A passion grew for clarity about who was acceptable and who was not, with an attendant legalism. Holiness became defined as being "separated" from the world. This in turn led to mission being corrupted to the view that others must become like us. It seems our view of holiness may often shape our view of evangelism. So all mission then became centripetal – dragging the outside to the centre.

We may wish to avoid all that, but haven't found it easy to escape those temptations. I ministered in local churches through the mid 1970s to late 1990's. Part of those years included a period in which building projects and church extensions were the rage, as a consequence of Church Growth philosophy. I am now astonished at the way evangelicals could use the books of Ezra and Nehemiah to draw out many spiritual principles undergirding re-building projects, while steadfastly ignoring the fundamental rule of overall context. No speakers and writers, as far as I know, gave any attention to the basic mission challenge of a small remnant returning from Exile, nor gave any attention to the spiritual dangers of the inward attitude too often associated with the post-exilic community.

The period around 6th century BC was not a golden era. It could not compare either with the Exodus or with the Rule of David. Nor was it insignificant. **The period was stunning for the voice of the prophets.** While part of what they said pointed to Christ, their lives and their messages were mostly for their generation. The Prophetic - by which I mean hearing God and daring to express it - is still with us through the legacy left by the risen Christ as expressed in *Ephesians* 4. The church is to be built on the apostles and prophets. Re-imagining church - both existing ones and new ones - should be prophetic.

The Prophets: fools for God

The Old Testament prophets were entirely used to gestures and postures that were ridiculous. Their stance appeared out of synch with current events and their actions could be absurd. So it is today. Making a new start with church - either new forms of church planting or renewed forms of existing church could be deemed **a sign of foolishness.** Why take the risk of a new venture? Why leave a well ordered church? Why work among those more distanced from Christianity? Beginning new churches is to **explore weakness:** abandoning the safety of routine, security of numbers and going for the vulnerable option of a new start. Re-imagining church is **a sign of madness.** Surely nobody would be interested in new churches, as everyone knows institutions are all dropping in popularity. Today we believe without



belonging. Church Planting and new mission are **signs of bad taste**. Embarking on a whole venture dedicated to evangelism for its very life is not very kosher in our pluralist and ultra tolerant world. **Yet foolishness or the upside down seems to be God's way.**

Those who have hopes of a contemporary "return from Exile" should note that the Davidic days never returned. The wheel of history had turned. I suspect the call to turn back

the clock is always misconceived. The way forward for us will be new. It will be uncertain. Murray and Wilkinson-Hayes give us valuable pointers in Grove Evangelism 49 *Hope from the Margins*. **It may not be clear how to live as exilic people, because the ways are still being discovered.** We shall have to learn how better to mix incarnational commitment and counter cultural identity. As with the Exile, the future will arise from the ruins of the past and the arrival of outside resources.

A story may help make the point.

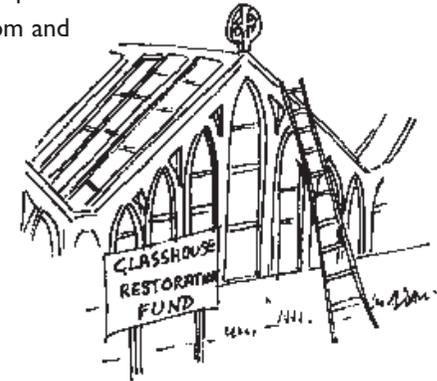
Once upon a time . . .

There was an uncultivated island. Some visionary people came to it. They thought how good it would be to make a garden there, to grow vegetables for food and supply flowers that would brighten and cheer their lives.

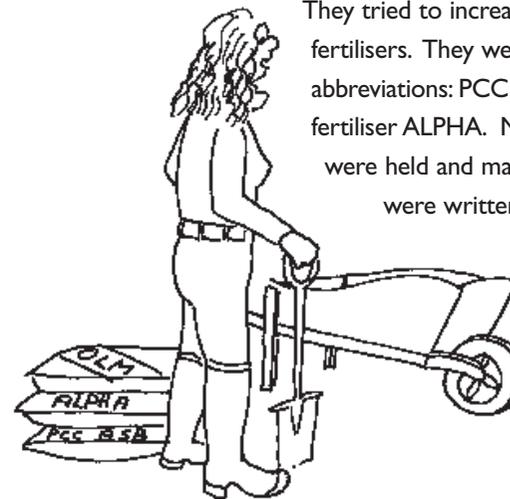
They cut back the wild growth and planted crops and flowers. They discovered that when they protected them with shelter and warmth, these made better yields. Over many decades they built greenhouses, which eventually covered the whole site. They called this the National Greenhouse or Glassdom. This splendid venture took many workers to maintain. Each had their own separate part to tend, marked out on a master map. Gardeners were grouped together under oversight gardeners. The national greenhouse seemed to provide what was needed for all the people of the island.

But slowly changes for the worse started to appear. Some islanders didn't want what the greenhouse grew, found other food elsewhere and stopped coming to it. Further people actually disliked it and its monopoly, its power and fixed way of doing things. They started throwing stones and broke a number of the windows. The rate of damage increased when some big storms caused extensive problems and the money to make repairs was very hard to find. So the gardeners had to spend more time mending windows in the Glassdom and the levels of production of vegetables, fruit and flowers began to fall, as the interior temperature dropped.

Because of the difficulties it ceased to be a respected thing to be a gardener. Those left had to cover larger areas of ground within the greenhouse. The oversight gardeners called this Gardening Re-organisation, not to discourage the gardeners. Nevertheless, production lowered again even though they were working harder than before. The reality was that they couldn't keep up with the increasing task of repairing the greenhouse and also growing plants used to the greenhouse.



They tried to increase the yield through special fertilisers. They were often known by their abbreviations: PCC ASB OLM and the wonder fertiliser ALPHA. More gardeners' question times were held and many reports on better gardening were written for gardeners to read in the time they didn't have.



When others wanted to tell them that the very structure was becoming unsafe and ought to be

abandoned, the gardeners couldn't take it in. They needed the greenhouse. It gave shelter to the sensitive, and often beautiful, plants they were still tending. The proposal was horticulturally uncaring. Moreover, surely the fact that some people did come in for "occasional flowers" - as it was called - showed that the greenhouse system was still valuable and basically working.

The debate within the decaying greenhouse continues. There is a group who say it should not be abandoned, it just needs managing better and provision of more gardening training. There are voices who tell the others to look for a time when a benefactor will come from outside, provide a brand new Glassdom made of aluminium and a return to past techniques will be all that is needed. Some are just downhearted. Old gardening methods just don't



grow things like they used to. The people outside don't seem to want the greenhouse produce as they did in the past, it all seems hard work and a bit pointless. Trade in occasional flowers is the summit of their expectations. A number simply go on in the old way and seem able to ignore that the climate inside the holed greenhouse has changed. They don't look around and see the Glassdom simply isn't there any more as an overarching structure.

Within the decaying greenhouse, there are signs of new growth and new plants. Some are struggling to grow, because they are varieties bred for the working greenhouse and they aren't equipped for the harsher climate they were now in. In other places, existing plants and shrubs had received grafts from new stock and varieties. These are in transition towards coping with

the cooler climate, but significant growth is taking time. Food production is slow, despite the new fertilisers. It is hard to discern a pattern in the new plantings. There is an absence of straight lines, so typical of the greenhouse in its heyday. Plants seemed to be coming up at their own pace and sometimes in unlikely places.

In neglected parts where the glass frames had fallen in long ago, often at the edges of the site, new gardeners had taken over. It had taken a long time to break up the ground, and prepare the soil, but young shoots could be seen. It was rather too early to tell what they would grow into. Some traditional gardeners were dismissive. They muttered "*Keep those species segregated, they might carry diseases to our plants. They might grow rampantly, spreading into our plots. We might even have to grow them*".

The gardeners on the edges accept that the task is uphill and not always understood by others. However, they are committed to breeding strains of plant that can grow elsewhere on the island, outside the irreparable greenhouse. More than that, they actually believe that the real point of having a greenhouse in the first place can still be followed - the point is providing food and flowers for the islanders.

Life springing from the irreparable ruins - that's an Exile message.
I find it helpful to remember that Easter Day was a surprise.

George W Lings
February 2002

Where could you go from here? Strategically...

- I found others writing on the theme of Exile and they are willing to be contacted.
 - *Exile as a Theological Model for Churches in Urban Priority Areas* Revd Peter D. Atkinson 2000 (Write to: St Peter's house, 18 Bronte Close, Aylesbury, HP19 8LF)
 - *Reflections on the Theme of Exile* Revd Mark Brown 1999 (Email: markbro1@netscapeonline.co.uk)
- Consider using these themes from the period of Exile in a bible study or sermon series. Application could explore the parallels to today and how this might affect our mission, our spirituality and our self understanding as churches.
- If you have **connections within diocesan groups**, please think who else needs exposure to these kinds of questions and suggestions. How can these issues help us all get closer to good practice?

Practically...

- For whatever reason if you want **further copies**, those can be ordered from Claire Dalpra by note, phone or email - see next page.
- Is the **first issue you've read**? You may want to collect the previous issues listed on the back cover. All individual copies are £3.

About us...

In the early part of the 1990's **Church Army** reviewed its strategy, the outcome of which was the seminal 'People to People' strategy document first published in 1993. The decision to establish the **Sheffield Centre** was spelt out in this document, with the aim

- **To inspire and mobilise the Church in its task of evangelism.**

The Sheffield Centre has the following functions:

- **Research into church planting and evangelism**
- **Extensive study and library facilities through the Training College**
- **Specialist training in church planting and evangelism for those in full time Christian ministry**

The Sheffield Centre - developing Church Planting & Evangelism



The Sheffield Centre can offer the wider Church

- **Specialist research, consultancy and publishing on Church Planting, the fruits of which are made available through Encounters on the Edge**
The Director: Revd George Lings.
Research Assistant and PA: Claire Dalpra
- **Practical hands on experience in Evangelism for young people through First Contact and Word on the Web initiatives**
National Youth Projects Co-ordinator: Captain David Booker
Evangelist with the Sheffield Centre: Alison Booker
Administrator: Ruth Mills

Please contact us at the **Sheffield Centre** if we can be of assistance:

Phone: 0114 272 7451 **Fax:** 0114 279 5863

Email: g.lings@sheffieldcentre.org.uk
c.dalpra@sheffieldcentre.org.uk
d.booker@sheffieldcentre.org.uk
a.booker@sheffieldcentre.org.uk
r.mills@sheffieldcentre.org.uk

Address: The Sheffield Centre, 50 Cavendish Street, Sheffield S3 7RZ

We are a team supporting the evolving mission of the Church of England.