



Net Gains

Churches for networks of people (not neighbourhoods) are on the increase. What can we learn from the early examples, now that such churches are being intentionally begun by dioceses? George Lings went to find out.

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After *Encounters on the Edge* no.7, 'New Canterbury Tales', why write again about churches for networks? Aren't two issues in four years, to deal with only a dozen cases, excessive and biased? In short, it is important because of the following discoveries:

- we encounter a changed mission context in which network is growing in importance
- there is the opportunity to intentionally increase the number of churches for networks
- there are painful lessons, learnt at the edge, that all network churches need to adopt

1 The Network Context is Growing in Importance

Alan Roxburgh in *The Missionary Congregation Leadership and Liminality*¹ argues the western Church is experiencing a disorientating liminality² but twice over.

It is being shunted to the edge of the kind of world still operating through place. Place may still be the major social construct in urban villages, in areas of poverty, and remoter rural communities. It still has some currency through shrines, memorable locations, national monuments and spots of natural beauty. However, more often, church is being misplaced (pun intended) by the rival claims of shopping entertainment culture, displaced by the priority and pressures of work, the conversion of Sunday to sport and leisure and its place hidden in a resultant new architectural townscape. But more than this, and more disorientating, the second source of liminality **is that in a world of network, there is no centre nor even an edge;**

¹ Alan Roxburgh *The Missionary Congregation Leadership and Liminality* Trinity Press Int. 1997

² "Liminality is a term that describes the transition process accompanying a change or social position" Alan Roxburgh *The Missionary Congregation Leadership and Liminality* Trinity Press Int. 1997 p.23

there are only flows of information, connectors and hubs who are people not places. **Where does building-focussed church fit in the network world that connects the majority of people? Broadly, it doesn't.**

Recently, Albert-Laszlo Barabasi published *Linked - The New Science of Networks*³, which was warmly reviewed in the July 2002 Washington Monthly as 'an important guidebook'. I don't have the scientific background to judge whether it represents hard science or a new scientific mythology. It claims to collate a mathematical set of theories to study the interconnectedness of the world by which, for example, on average people are only six links away from anybody else. A small number of key people, by their high social networking ability, act as hubs linking and influencing people. One example given is the apostle Paul. These hubs become more desirable people to know; so they grow in influence and the network spreads. Such links are for good and for ill, downsides being the spread of AIDS and computer viruses. Information flows operate similarly, with the average web site only 19 clicks away from any other site. Internet search engines like *Google* which gain popularity become yet more used and increase in significance. In this networked reality, accessibility takes over from address, location is less crucial than links, hub is the core not home. Place-based church is passé in the network world. **Static location is no guarantor of connection. Relationship, not real estate, is key.**

For two years a group has been working on the sequel to the Church of England's mid 1990's report on church planting. This radical update, called *Mission Shaped Church*, takes very seriously the new world of network. It argues and judges that network is no longer an addition to the geographical world of parochial life, but is already the dominant social reality to which expressions of church need to be adjusted. Resist this and the image of Canute invited to repel



³ Albert- Laszlo Barabasi *Linked - The New Science of Networks* Perseus Publishing: 2002

an incoming tide comes to mind. Moreover the report argues theologically and strategically that Church must always be shaped by mission.

Incarnation is necessarily contextual; it is a responsive principle.

From this, the widening diversity of churches, created to respond to the social reality of the West in the 21st century, are to be seen as typical of the process all churches should seek. The fresh expressions are not dubious or even interesting experiments, but they are examples grown in the living laboratory of the missionary Holy Spirit. He seeks always to form Jesus centred communities of faith that express the Kingdom of God and engage with a specific mission context. The report virtually says that the **fresh expressions of church are recovering a missionary ecclesiology for the whole church and as such have some claim to be more authentic than inherited forms.**

The report should be published in order to be debated at the February 2004 General Synod. The Review of the Pastoral Measure report comes up at the same time. It agrees with the need to provide lightweight legal scaffolding that can welcome and support mission shaped churches that do not fit with a parish-based legal system because social reality has changed. Network could be a key word in 2004.

2 A Second Stage is Emerging - Diocesan-Led Planting

The first stage of planting churches for networks started ten years ago with individual pioneers sensing the need to connect with groups of people further outside church than their fringe. They talked of connecting with cultural groups - like Radio 2 listeners, or young adults. They were grass roots initiatives that sought the permission of diocesan staff as members were drawn from a number of parishes. They stumbled almost by accident into what people like me then later started to dub 'network-based church' or 'churches for networks'. *The Net* in Huddersfield, whose story is told below, is an example of the first generation of planting for networks.

The second stage of churches planted for networks is the shift from incidental to intentional network-based planting. As this network of churches itself became known, it has drawn in others. It has grown in

influence. Instead of remaining the sole preserve of individual initiatives, there is the beginning of churches started by diocesan strategy. The publication of *Mission Shaped Church* is likely to increase that trend. The existence of new missionary monastic orders will also contribute to the pattern, through offering the resource of mission teams. Second generation network-based churches are more likely to be in cities or large towns because the bigger the mission hole, the greater desire to think creatively and commit resources to filling it. We have deliberately picked two stories of network-based churches in large conurbations to tell.

It may be that *BI* in Birmingham, also told below, was halfway to being the first of the second batch. As a diocesan initiative, the Missioner was centrally involved at the conceptual stage. Since then two fully diocesan sponsored starts have been made. In Lichfield Diocese, the desire for a network-based church for young adults in Stoke on Trent led to a process that recruited Gordon Crowther to start as leader in Autumn 2003. In York, the Scarborough Deanery have recently advertised and appointed Michelle McBride. **Two centrally planned network-based churches do not make a missionary summer, but they look to me like a gear shift.** I am delighted that this second stage is arriving. For the reasons given I think it will be at least as costly and painstaking to build lasting success as the first group have found. It is therefore all the more important that the lessons learnt along the way by the first group of network-based churches are very clearly understood.

The Sheffield Centre and Anglican Church Planting Initiatives have since provided two residential conferences, one every two years, for the pioneers involved and their lay leaders. Unsurprisingly, that grouping has itself become a network. Together we discovered many things. One was that **there is no one way of being 'a church for a network'**. **It is not so much a way of doing things, it is more who it is done for.** Ironically that is very like parishes. Parish ministry is not defined principally by theological tradition like catholic or evangelical; it is not determined by its setting, as a parish could be rural or urban. Rather parish is the intention of existing for all people in a defined geographical area. It is church for place. Network operates in the same

diverse way. Its commonality is that it is designed for people who connect through relationships, not place. We are relearning a truth. **Being with people means more coming alongside how they are, not so much where they are. Their attitude is more crucial than their address.** Yet from observation, this relational base has not led to obvious eclectic gathering of similar people. In one network-based church, I observed male and female, met those who doubt alongside those who believe, saw the young, middle aged and old, spotted black and white and talked with rich and poor.

3 Lessons to Heed From Those That Haven't Flourished?

Tommy's in Nottingham began in 1996, led by the Diocesan Missioner, following two years of discussion with the Diocese of Southwell. With a team of 18, from across the city and from 3 denominations, they prepared together from September 1996 and launched in April 1997 committed to being a *Seeker*-style church. In 2000 I was invited by the Diocese onto a review body to investigate why this admirable venture was stalling and to recommend ways forward including the option of closure. There is a fuller text that could be released to suitable enquirers. **I think of *Tommy's* as a useful prototype.** I am passionate that we learn the lessons and not sweep mistakes under the carpet.



a) Match the mission resources to the mission task

Don't start with too small a team.

Their circle of immediate contacts will be exhausted quickly. Some suggest that when doing *Seeker*-style church, a team of less than 50 will burn out from the resource and time hungry preparation⁴. In cities or large towns, aim for a specific network or the mission will be unfocussed. *The Net* in Huddersfield have used sport and work contacts. BI in Birmingham was set up to target the young adults who crowd into the Broad Street area with its pubs, bars and cafés.

⁴ Anne Hibbert and Chris Stoddard Adminstry How-To Guide *Evaluating Seeker Services* Vol.2 No.8 Oct 2000

b) Understand the long-term nature of English mission beyond the fringe

There are discernible stages in the longer evangelisation process:

- 1 The *creation of contacts* – variously called ‘Sowing One’, or ‘Presence Evangelism’. John Clarke in *Evangelism That Really Works* shows that this works in different ways for parish or neighbourhood-based churches to how it works in eclectic or network-based churches. Some studies argue that the majority of member and time resource needs directing to ‘Sowing One’ ministries, not least because the number of contacts willing to move on beyond there diminishes.
- 2 The increased but *appropriate verbal communication* of the Good News of Christ – sometimes called ‘Sowing Two’ or ‘Proclamation Evangelism’. Process-based evangelism courses such as *Alpha*, *Emmaeus*, *Credo*, *Start* etc work with this, at different speeds.
- 3 The crisis period in which a person comes to faith – terms used include ‘Reaping’ or ‘Persuasion Evangelism’. Not all people experience crisis and many look back to a process during which they changed.

An overall view encompassing these three does not assume any rigid time frame for any of these stages. John Finney's research *Finding Faith Today* suggests an average of 4 years.

It became clear that the work of *Tommy's* focussed on stages 2 and 3. The members had very limited contacts because of the small membership and no localised openings by which to engage in stage 1.

It is all too typical of the church to collude with the illusion that our mission task is still speaking to the fringe. Here the apparent success of *Alpha* is dangerously beguiling. **We are being called beyond the fringe.** The emerging tasks include ploughing up ground in cultures that may never have known meaningful sustained Christian contact. Only then may we begin to sow questions in people's minds through the benefits brought by our presence and the quality of our loving actions.

⁵ See Laurence Singlehurst *Sowing Reaping Keeping* Crossway Books 1995

c) Beware *Seeker*-style limitations

The background culture of the USA makes it easier for the *Seeker* approach to flourish. It is a more religious society, with a far greater proportion [say 40%] of fringe and de-churched people. Churches that mount *Seeker* services tend to be larger in membership, with many paid staff who can pay the time price tag. In addition there is cultural openness to try things, a willingness to travel, and a willingness to say 'I liked that, therefore I will come back'. Conversely, *Tommy's* members found people in this country saying they liked what they saw, but generally felt under no compulsion to come back. Eddie Gibbs would have us notice that 70% of Willow Creek's gains have been lapsed Catholics and concurs that it suits the Boomer generation but not Generation X. (Willow Creek have recently established a ministry called *Axis* for their Generation X).

d) Balance input and output

Those working very hard at the intensive *Seeker* model may struggle to give time to nurture and disciple new people. In *Tommy's*, mission was being pursued to the detriment of community building and finding nourishment through worship. The result was eventually exhaustion. In addition, in this story, the gathering of team across denominations made congregational church identity more uncertain, rendered specific accountability more difficult and found sustained wider support more elusive. The group themselves speak of abandonment and it did not help that they lost a Bishop who was supportive of their start-up. A massive commitment to **Apostolic** mission was not sustained by equal investment in **Worship** (a journey into the holiness of God), nor by building **Community** (a journey into the oneness of God); neither was it moderated by clear connection to the wider church in **Catholicity**. Church in every age is called to find expression of being One Holy Catholic and Apostolic. **It can never be healthy to pursue less than these four enduring marks of being the Church of Christ.**

⁶ Eddie Gibbs *Church Next* Chapters 2 & 8 I.V.P. 2001

The Net in Huddersfield

Calling counts

At the age of nine, Dave Male (right, with his wife) encountered Christ at a beach mission, became a Christian and was telling his story before the end of the week.



Dave Male with his wife

It has set a pattern for his life. At Southampton University, he chaired the Evangelism Committee, not being thought serious enough for the main committee! After work with UCCF and a UPA curacy in Leicester, he joined



the staff of Kirkheaton - the large evangelical and charismatic eclectic church in Huddersfield. With a team, he evolved a monthly pub service in the local Liberal Club but there were two frustrations. **He sensed a massive cultural gap between people who came to the Pub**

event and the Sunday worship, despite its apparent draw for many Christians. Moreover what was the heart of ministry to him was seen as only an additional fringe activity by other Christians more interested in worship and teaching.

Permission was slow

Coming towards the end of this second curacy, Dave met with the Bishop of Pontefract, John Finney, who offered him the next normal step - incumbency of a small church. On his refusal, Bishop John not only asked what he did want to do, but worked with him to help turn into reality the desire to work with those not churched. It took two years before the Bishop's Council (with advocacy from the Archdeacon, Diocesan Missioner and Suffragan Bishop) gave permission to proceed. In this self-styled 'Missionary Diocese of Wakefield', papers prepared had to argue the validity of different models

to the past, in what sense it was Anglican, that it did not mean transfer growth and that there was a mission need. Survey work in Huddersfield revealed 55% of the population were non-churched. [This compares with 40% national average]. Because this proposed church was not territorial and drew from more than one source, it was deemed not to be a church plant, which reveals how static, defensive and mechanistic is many people's understanding of those issues. I hope *Mission Shaped Church* will succeed in blowing away the cobwebs. A code of pastoral practice was drawn up with the Archdeacon covering its non-territorial basis and its alternative not competitive existence, as well as how baptisms, weddings and funerals would be handled. Distributed to local clergy, it clarified practicalities and eased nervousness.

The class of '99

January 1999 dawned with Dave as Vicar, Heather his wife and their three children as members of a nameless church, without a venue, legal status and any other members. By Easter, a team of 30 had formed, usually by the choice of enquirers, rather than Dave pre-selecting and inviting. In practice, only twenty adults came from Kirkheaton and ten from elsewhere. **This is not untypical of large churches; they do tend to think of addition mechanisms and cannot so easily emotionally identify with multiplication.** It seems to question their sufficiency and may well make demands on their people and financial resources. The group that self-selected met on Tuesdays to hammer out their aims and values, to come up with strategies and a name. So *The Net* was born and its mission statement coined.



“By knowing and loving God and each other we seek to enable non-churched people to develop a real and relevant relationship with Jesus”.

Value led

The statement offers clues to the presence of several strands of thought. ‘*knowing and loving God*’ hints at the desire for cultural identification, with the search for living spirituality based in relationship, not just intellectual orthodoxy. This would be reflected in the styles and space in worship offered, which does not borrow much from *Vineyard* or *New Wine* beliefs about the draw of worship. ‘*knowing and loving each other*’ affirms the need to build community, not just do mission. **Only as people see the quality of our belonging, does it become credible to investigate what we believe.**

‘The church is based on relationships; it is a church of hope, a church of people.’ NET MEMBER

They held equal commitment to the Great Commandment to love and the Great Commission to go. The teaching ministry of *Intimate Life Ministries* was especially important in giving practical frameworks for the Great Commandment and the summer term was spent studying and learning to apply these. The word ‘seek’ gives a welcome twist to some Seeker-service instincts. Jesus described himself the seeker of the lost⁷. So Christians have permission to see themselves in that role. But some Seeker-service instincts for quality of presentation, using contemporary themes and multimedia formats, have been a trademark of the public meetings of *The Net*.

Like best Seeker-service practice, the key is not glossy presentation but prior relationships. This reflected a value taught by *Willow Creek* mentor Gilbert Bilezikain:

‘The Mission of God does not happen unless we become the community as God intended it.’

However, unlike the Seeker approach, discipleship happens on a Sunday and invitational themed events for guests occur on weekdays; both are considered ‘church’ by Dave, which is why there would be no Sunday service on the same week as a guest event. *The Net* see themselves working with

⁷ Luke 19 v.10

the post-modern seeker who wants to participate, not to observe, and yet to remain anonymous. Sunday is not the first port of call, for they seek contact with the non-churched, not primarily the de-churched. Dave asks himself with commendable frequency, "Could I bring my neighbour to this?" Ralph has no church background, is a successful salesman, a serious football head-case and mops up alcohol at the weekend. Ralph is a great bloke and neighbour who thinks religion is simply not his thing. So *real* and *relevant* must govern issues chosen and opinions expressed; it must connect with the world of work, of leisure and of the untidy world of network friendships.

Off we go

The Net launched midweek 30th September 1999 at the McAlpine Stadium with 300 attenders from well-wishers to the curious, with an open bar to follow. Dave and Heather both attend the stadium gym and he is chaplain to Huddersfield Town. The first public service was held in the George Hotel on October 3rd. Sunday venues have changed, both as numbers increased and availability varied. The Lesser Hall of the University was a good centrally-based home for a time, Highfields School took on the role from September 2001 to July 2003, but has been outgrown and the most recent venue is Almondbury High School. At present, at only 3/5's full, there is room to expand. The changes speak of a church on the move, seeking cultural connection more than settled location.

From early on, **work with children and youth has been an intentional key element.** Those ministries have grown in size and scope and this is what has forced venue relocation twice. There are now 16 teenagers and they bring their friends. Salaries are the most obvious way churches can state their priorities. Helen Watts became part-time children's worker in October and when she moved on Chris Baskerville (*right*) was appointed full-time from September 2000 and a midweek club launched.



Has it worked?

The numbers game?

There are many ways to assess that. Numbers are but one element. They started with 28 adults and 14 under 18's. The May 2003 figures prepared for the Bishops Council were 55 adults and 45 under 18's, but note that this does not include people who come regularly to Seeker-style events and youth activities. **Percentage gains in smaller churches can look impressive and a longer view will be needed.** Yet it is quite clear to me that a significant proportion of the membership has learnt that networking with those who do not yet share their faith is utterly essential. The major growth has been through conversion. Making and sustaining genuine friends, who may or may not become Christians, is central to the call to be network-based church. It is not a game - it is actually a life and death issue for a young small church. It will either grow or die. Since *The Net* started, 14 of their members have moved away from the area for work purposes. When this happens you have to grow just to stand still. And it is about people, not numbers, which is why small groups are a crucial part of the community's life.

The Net at worship

I have seen various Sunday meetings at *The Net*. They tend toward the informality and pace of a TV chat show, with always more than one presenter. Script and disciplined ad lib are at work. Notices have been mercifully banished to a visual loop that runs before the service. **Each service is different, but they run with liturgical instincts for shape, theme and economy of language.** Any set texts serve those aims. Prayers and readings are prepared lay ministries. Chair layouts change a bit depending on what the theme needs. The talks are crisp, well thought out, laced with humour and plenty of contemporary connection e.g. a series on what Jesus might say in conversation with characters like David Beckham or Homer Simpson or, more recently, discussing contemporary films *The Pianist* and *About Schmidt*. Powerpoint drives all the words and images and uses



commendable restraint to ignore fancy fonts and jazzy backgrounds that few can easily read. My only beef with nearly all powerpoint use for worship in many churches is the foolish use of centre justified wording. The resultant ragged lines and single words overrunning to drop down a line is artistically excruciating and educationally disabling. People in our culture read better with left justification and carriage returns that work with intelligent phrasing. The people who come clearly like each other, but are by no means all the same; they expect to engage with God, be given options and space to express them. Around the event they talk freely, welcome strangers and provide good drinks afterwards.

Faith stories

People have come back to faith, others have found a Christian faith they never had.

Angela's story is among many that show how long the evangelistic process can be, even if there is a dramatic crisis



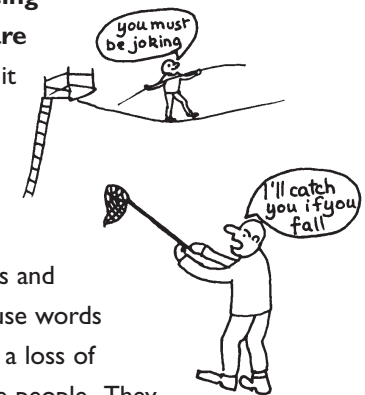
Angela is a college lecturer in nursing and neighbours Debbie and Jeff invited her to the Carol Service at the George Hotel. "It was funny, they used

media clips, it made me laugh." She attended a few of the University Hall meetings and found them non-threatening. "I didn't feel judged, or pressurised or that the person at the front was controlling". She signed up for a Just Looking course. "It was eight weeks looking at faith in depth and I met others like me." She was impressed that church people she didn't know invited her and her husband to lunch. Robin Gamble came to preach and invited those who felt they believed in Jesus to stand. She felt herself hovering on the chair, but unable to stand. The next week, she asked if she could say something at the end of the service. She said, "I want to be one of you. This is the path I have chosen." It was a relief and the climax of a dawning. Her declaration prompted three others to become Christians after the service. The bubble with which Angela tells her story is accompanied by admission of a long road. "With hindsight I had been looking for a long time." She recalls nine years earlier she and Heather Male met by chance as two very pregnant mums who caught one another's eyes, laughed and commiserated together, before walking separate ways. Now she knows that Heather prayed for her that day.

to mark its culmination. Her children have come to faith, and although her husband has not yet, he feels very much part of the church and continues to seek. It is no accident that the Males had lived five years in Huddersfield before *The Net* was started. Heather's work in Occupational Therapy, their presence at the school gate and in the gym all slowly build networks. **It may be harder for the second generation of network-based church to emulate this quiet penetration of networks.**

It has not worked for everybody

I am sad to say that three couples, all of whom were involved in levels of leadership, decided to leave, after about 18 months of the church starting. It is equally sad that only half of them continue to attend a congregation. Part of the story was disciplinary issues that I will not elaborate upon; part was unforeseen confusion of agendas, but it took a messy, time-consuming, year to emerge with clarity. Talk about new ways of being church and one person may think of this as clearing the decks for mission-centred church. Others may hear it as relief from no longer doing tired old ways of being church. Pioneers and those giving church a last chance are not easy bed-fellows. This may be an important lesson for all fresh expressions of church. **Acting as a fishing net thrown to catch outsiders and being a safety net poised to catch falling insiders are different tasks.** They are both valid agendas, but it is very hard to combine them at any time and impossible to do both well when resources are slim. The pressures for the leadership team at the time were considerable. Lose 20% of your adults, a yet higher percentage of your key workers and the whole structure wobbles. Dave and Heather use words like "horrific" and "severely stretched". They faced a loss of people, contacts, gifts and their investment in those people. They feared a local split and a diocesan disaster. **It is deeply scary to face that your greatest dream has now become vulnerable reality and then what you deeply believe in, and are giving your life for, looks like it might fail.** Where do you go from there?



Growing in depth

There are a number of strands that suggest healthy development. From the outset an advisory group was set up under Bishop David James and it provided a sounding board, a listening ear and external comment, including the run-up to the process of whether the Diocese would renew its commitment to *The Net* after an initial three year experiment. Such a process is not without pressure on a new church. Nor has it gone away as the next permission was given, but is only for another five years. The document suggesting criteria by which the Diocese assessed *The Net* can be obtained through *The Sheffield Centre*. Through all the stages Dave drew also on Christian friends and a mentor, both of whom were outside the line manager roles, so it was easier to deal with potentially threatening issues. Once again new network-based churches and their leaders could take note.

The path to becoming self-governing, self-financing and self-propagating is well under way. In government, the church has a staff team and a leadership team. They act in partnership much as Vicar and PCC at best would do. The rising annual targets for the parish share have all been met, all running costs are covered and a salary for the children's worker found. In that full annual ministry costs for a cleric run to at least £28,000 some diocesan subsidy still operates. However that is true of virtually all churches of this size. The giving level per capita is very healthy with *The Net* near the top of the usually unpublished diocesan league.

Extension or propagation has taken several forms. Gifts within the congregation have multiplied. Gifts are regularly given to ministry beyond *The Net* and people too; a team of 11 went to Taiwan for 10 days to serve their link church. Chris, the children's worker, with helpers has led a holiday club for a neighbouring UPA parish and another voluntary full-time staff member Diane (right) takes part in Diocesan missions. The website, first published in March 2000 and sometimes receiving 4000 hits a month, deliberately offers multimedia resources to the wider church. **This church is contributing beyond itself and sees itself in working connection with the wider church.** Maybe truly network-based



churches instinctively relate beyond themselves and **catholicity is inherently in their DNA, because connection is everything.**

These indicators tell me good work is in progress and that with anything young there is bound to be still more to grow into.

B1 in Birmingham

Mind the gap

In April 2000, David Lee the Missioner and Suffragan Bishop John Austin put out a budgeted proposal to the Birmingham Diocesan staff meeting. They had identified that the most serious gap in the church profile was among



young adults in their 20's and 30's. I agree that the Brierley figures confirm the size of the hole. Moreover the implications for the immediate generation of young church leadership are sobering and the gap between the world of street wise young adults and that of the church requires a radical cross cultural-mission.

While 'alternative worship' occasions across the city drew some takers it tended to be those with some residual faith or active spiritual enquirers.

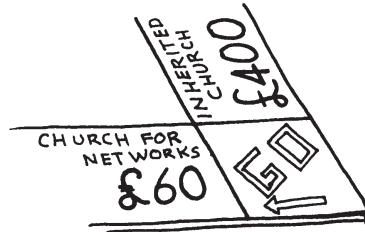
What was proposed was a complementary-based church for the non-churched and needing a new full-time post of City Centre Deanery Missioner to form and lead a Church of England congregation "amidst people we rarely win for Christ", and who naturally congregated in the Broad Street and Brindley Place area of the city centre in its many themed pubs, cafés and hotels.



David Lee had sounded out Geoff Lanham about creating a post-modern Church. Geoff was then senior curate at St John Harborne and due to move on. Geoff had evangelistic gifts, some experience of relevant pub-based work from a monthly event at *The Junction* in Harborne. A core group was willing to go with him with the blessing of John Hughes the Vicar. David had acted as broker with the city centre Deanery Chapter who then commended the idea and have been flexible and supportive in practice. All this formed part of the proposal, commendable in its thoroughness. *The Sheffield Centre* retains a copy.

Pass go and collect ...

It is said that at the Episcopal staff meeting, when the item came up, the Diocesan Mark Santer began with the unexpected announcement as a matter of exercising his Episcopal oversight: *'it will happen'*. **Do not let it be said that there are no willing permission givers!** Stipend money for the first three years fortunately could come from the St Martin's Trust who owned Broad Street land and who already funded a dozen clergy posts. Housing involved the Diocese identifying and buying a property with vicarage capabilities thus able to cope easily with small meetings and an administrative centre, there being no church office. St John Harborne did provide the lion's share of the team of 29 adults and 17 children. Perhaps because of some past history of planting they were commendably relaxed at sending out a group that would be autonomous, took pride in the sending and put in the money for a part-time PA and maintain active prayer support.



The community

Geoff and Mary Lanham (*right*) grew the team together. *B1* became the name, with the vision statement *'a community of young adults finding and strengthening faith within contemporary cultures'*. It is a softer sentence than used by *The Net* and to me



reflects the stronger affinity with the Alternative Worship strand that runs through its public gatherings. The word community is stressing one dynamic equivalence of congregation, but which is more people-centred. It also avoids the overworked term family, which tends to marginalise singles of all ages and couples without children. One clear starting value was time to build relationships with others and as part of this small groups - B groups - were quickly established and continue weekly.

Paul is a music teacher and drummer in the band. "I agree that church is about community, about givers not takers. When you meet people twice a week, its being real, genuine. You feel you belong; people are genuinely interested or can give you a kick up the backside. The B groups are where the community really is, being accountable to each other. Everyone has a role, everyone has gifts, so I'm needed and everyone supports, even when you make mistakes."

Openings

December was *B1*'s birthday on an earlier Sunday pattern of meeting twice a month in the Australasian theme pub, the *Walkabout Inn*. This Broad Street pub would see 4-5000 people through its doors on a



weekend so was one clear centre of meeting for young adults. The plan was for one of those meetings to be *'a contemporary exploration of life themes with non-church goers in mind ... using live music and multimedia'*. The other would "explore the best of alternative worship." The remainder of the Sundays were to be for worship, teaching and Communion but in a style that sought to minimise the gap from the other weeks.

Provision was made from the start for contacts through events, or contacts via friendships to explore further. *Spirited Exchange* was devised and offered at the Lanham's home. It was issue based apologetics and life questions exploring areas starting further back than *Alpha* tends to do, like the question

of spirituality and other religions, which is a live question in multicultural Birmingham. It would be introduced by a short, home-grown multimedia start leading to open session which coped well with doubt and struggle and was easy with diversity in ways of encountering God. 'Inclusive but not fluffy' was Geoff's own phrase.



Sally teaches dentistry. Her story:

"I went to a Church of England school, but religion was just one other subject, like maths. I always believed in God, but churches were scary and cold and I didn't think much of the vicars. Some friends of mine at university and at work were Christians and when I was invited, I went to Spirited Exchange and liked the questions and discussion. Geoff was very different to my Vicar at school who had seemed formal and disinterested; somehow he was disconnected, like he had his nose in the air. It was as though the fog lifted and looking back I could see how God had been involved in my past too often for it to be co-incidences. I now think of God as a loving Father and actually found myself up in my loft room shouting out, "God, I love you." BI is really accepting; it's made of normal people and yet there is a sense of holiness when we meet'

Illumine is another example of a time to explore. Meetings once every 2-3 weeks, once more in Mary and Geoff's home, it is experiential exploration of spirituality and the sense of God. It seems to cater equally for seekers, New Agers, Post-Evangelicals or other dried-up Christians. Geoff describes it as more specific than Essence. Both groups can struggle for dynamics because the number of those attending at any one time from a still small church can be 3, rather than the ideal of 7-8.

Ports of discovery

The *TalkBI* evening I witnessed was held in The Orange Studio - a building near the Cathedral - built by Orange and rented out where young adults work, conference, chill and chat.



The second floor bar is lounge culture décor; minimalist furniture, café chairs and tables, plenty of bare steel, Mediterranean colours, pockets of light and dark and no one dominant focus point - except the

bar at the entrance. The theme was '*Romance - Does it Ruin Relationships?*'. An informal start saw people buying one another drinks and finding tables or standing in corners. Then two presenters led us through the evening, split by a half time drink, using all manner of inputs - video clips from film, a live song from a Manchester girl band, vox pops video interviews, amusing and thought provoking clips of wise words on the subject, a quiz on how film stars ended their relationships, a panel including a GP and a professional counsellor, facing shrewd and tough questions from Geoff. They also often have questions from the floor, or a Kilroy style roving microphone. **Deliberately there is no "sermon" or a predetermined outcome.** People conversed freely. Some made no claim to faith but were comfortable to explore an issue and respected the *BI* people. Others had been disillusioned with church over issues like legalism, guilt-inducing preaching or sexism yet they spoke in warm tones of the vulnerability and honesty of the *BI* community and how they didn't want something trendy for its own sake but which connected culturally and enabled them to be themselves. **The word "safe" was used often during the weekend about this church.**



Synergy

Time to build relationships, time to recharge with God and opportunity for transformative meeting with Him, has fuelled the third week of the month ever since January 2001. There is nothing - I repeat - nothing on that Sunday, but *Synergy* runs on either a Wednesday or Thursday evening, starting in the Walkabout Inn but in other venues as needed since. It is the worship service described by one person as a chocolate box, to taste things about God and yourself. Behind the box lie beliefs in creativity through visual arts, music and the discipline of following a big theme like grace, injustice, or harvest. So themes could be inward or outward facing. The atmosphere is described as lounge or post club. People come to be still; the ambient wallpaper music whispers 'chill' and 'relax'. **Accessibility sets the atmosphere.** The event then deliberately works with the variety of ways and media in which people prefer to learn. Participation is believed in as crucial and to enable it a number of stations are usually provided at which people can see, hear, taste, try, act, handle - or be still. Usually the 20-minute screened presentation prior to extended periods of response will draw upon varying media, but any



spoken comment or direction is from the floor, befitting 'alternative worship' habits. Some men in the church have found it too female, though they admit it has grown on them despite their resistance to cultivate the more personal side and daring to look inside.

Classically they will concede: *'you learn more about yourself and God'*.

Curiously the male bar staff in all the venues have had less inhibitions. For example, Gary, the owner of the present venue - *The Quattro Bar* - puts himself on the rota for *Synergy* nights and goes round the stations. He speaks of his busy life and finding a sense of peace. He has taken a holding cross and displays it openly on the bar. *"I don't know what it is about you lot, but there is something ..."*

Bridges too far?

In practice after 9 months, even with a team, a venue that worked well and bar staff who were more than intrigued by what was happening, the pace in running *TalkBI*, the presentation or cabaret style event was too hot to sustain. Identifying workable themes, then researching, sourcing, videoing vox pops, preparing visually as well as verbally, transporting, setting up, rehearsing, became too much and *TalkBI* became bimonthly. Better to do less but well, than burn out or put on events that do not carry conviction. The similar and related sheer pressure of creativity required for *Synergy* led to the formation of two teams of 3-4 people, each operating bi-monthly.

Like *The Net, BI* too has experienced a mini-exodus in a short interval between May to September 2003. In this case external factors led to several key people moving away for work or the next stage of life. **Those most gifted with the appropriate skills are the most difficult to replace.** But when even less than half a dozen leave over differing values this leads to painful, soul-searching, self-questioning reactions, sometimes more in the leaders than the perceptions of other members. Put together, a loss of 20-25 % of the members was a body blow. However, curiously the original proposal only expected 45 adults by 2003 and that was the new figure after those losses, not counting the 24 children.

Pace yourself

Pace in young churches is a real issue. Leaders who have felt cooped up in institutional church have the chance to live for their dream and tend to overwork. The recruiting and sending process can build visionary idealism that will face the attrition of church planting practicalities. **In the background lurks the felt suspicion that grow or die are the only options.** In engineering terms **there is little inbuilt redundancy - or in other words virtually no spare capacity to draw on.** So what goes wrong always feels bigger than in the long established church. Moreover, in **churches for networks of truly non-churched people, the progress in mission is going to be slow**, because of the long journey to faith that will often be involved. *BI* calculate they have sown seeds with over 250 non-churched people. Proportionally, that is impressive.

I was very struck that part of the leadership of *BI* are two returned missionaries, Kevin and Sheila Vaughan (right). From several terms in rural Uganda they understood implicitly and could talk explicitly that the work in the *BI* postal district was deeply cross-cultural. The most obvious conclusions were that it was going to be puzzling and intuitive trying to work out what works for people different to the sent team. They knew the work would necessarily be slow and patience was the supreme virtue to cultivate. That is hard when there are large churches around the country apparently succeeding, though closer inspection should ask hard questions about high local transfer growth rates and how many newcomers are the lapsed returning or the saints removing. They knew too from experience that in growing indigenous church in a new culture, the course to sail between the whirlpool of syncretism and the rocks of legalistic discipline is not easy to navigate. Part of the way is to trust the Spirit to convict those whose lives do not yet match their profession of faith; part is to live with partial discipleship and open membership. Only those who know they belong are learning to believe and behaviour will be moulded on Christ probably last of all.



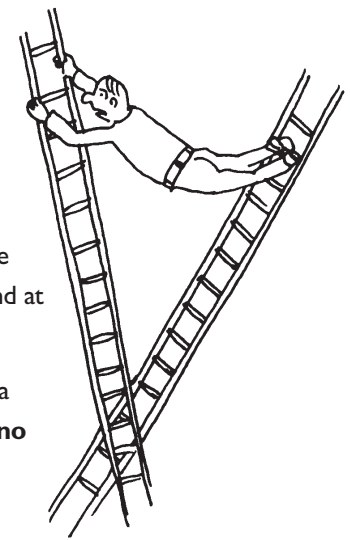
How potent then is a "picture" received of a walk in a plantation and the person seeing young oak saplings growing slowly, ringed by quick growing conifers that were giving some protection and the sense of God saying: 'what is it to you if some other trees are large?'

The pressure on and vulnerability of network-based churches

Space forbids much development of each issue. I offer a bullet point and a brief commentary:

- **A heavy culture of inspection** by the wider church exists. Lengths of contract tend to be shorter, accountability to outside groups is more intense, the climate can feel suspicious not welcoming. This needs to be changed.

- **There is no history to draw upon.** Very few others have gone this path before. Standard packages like *Cell*, *Seeker* or *Vineyard* celebrations don't quite fit. It is both exciting and scary to have a big blank piece of paper.
- There is **no territory to fall back on.** Contacts are everything and without them, there is nothing.
- **Constant camping is wearing.** Finding and using new venues - *BI* have been in seven in 2.5 years.
- The leader has **double learning curves to climb.** They face learning the responsibility lessons of first incumbency, like learning to be permission giving parents to a church family, and at the same time how to pioneer fresh expression of church.
- Ceaseless creativity and artistic use of multimedia beckon in a visual age which is used to quality. **Last week's success is no guarantee** of next month's event.
- Mission must be kept high on the community agenda and consumerism must be resisted in church life. Any church left alone will sit back and please itself.
- Is working to help those recovering from church, and pursuing evangelism to the non-churched **a lethal cocktail?** Is it just difficult, a paradox or just impossible? Would two separate environments help?
- Small **numerical losses hurt deeply** and this shaking down is painfully costly.
- If others pull out of the team or a ministry, because the buck stops here, jobs keep coming back to the leader.
- **Leaders need to be hubs** – people with lots of connections to people, creative resources and network social structures. In recruiting teams one new network-based church for central Sheffield deliberately and wisely looked for team members who were hubs



- The second generation of network-based planting (diocesan led) will have some different dynamics. The leaders will probably come from outside the diocese and it will take longer for them to establish proven relationships of trust with the diocese. **It will take more time to form teams that really know each other and demonstrate evident community.** And as important as anything else, it will take longer to form networks of relationships with people outside the church, to build bridges of genuine friendships with them, across which faith, convictions and values about Jesus can travel.

It's quite a list and I have probably not made it exhaustive. But I can see why it is exhausting.

In my view both these churches have done well, following God's lead and keeping up their team-work, despite real pressure. Both churches have talented, creative, resourceful leaders, people of stature and integrity. If they find the going demanding, we should take note and not burden them with unrealistic expectations. No community building is easy and the most realistic book about this I have met in the last year is the modern classic by Jean Vanier *Community and Growth* (D.L.T. 1979).

Starting and sustaining creative network-based churches is not for the faint-hearted. **However, if network is the direction society is moving in, we have no choice but to incarnate communities of Christ within this emerging culture.** Therefore despite realism about the hardships, will dioceses have the courage to reproduce this model elsewhere? Will they let mission needs dictate to church shapes? Will they vote the money for salaries? Will they recruit pioneers from inside or outside the diocese and encourage large churches to give away the right people to become teams? In all these ways it will take the inherited church to pump-prime the emerging church.

Want to investigate further?

www.netchurch.org.uk

www.blchurch.net

www.greatcommandment.net (Intimate Life Ministries)

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