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Encounters on the Edge



no. 32:
**Simpler
Church:**
Where time is at a
premium



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Simpler Church: Where time is at a premium

The gift of re-imagination

Since 1999, *Encounters on the Edge* has been telling stories of people who have at least one thing in common. They somehow sensed they were called to be part of creating something that had not been done quite like that before. It took imagination, creativity and courage, as well as love for the surrounding people they were connected with.

Some of these stories explored a fresh way of building community among a culture or group who were way outside the reach of conventional church. By surprise, they found they eventually had grown a Christian community (church) almost by mistake. Other stories were drawn into engaging in fresh aspects of evangelism to those beyond the fringe. They found that the harvest of lives changed by encounter with Jesus could not be stored in the barns of traditional church and they too had to invent a way of being church that fitted the culture they had been sent to.

A third strand wanted to re-imagine fresh ways to explore communal worship. Their hope was to be authentic and attractive to people without Christian faith or who used to go to church. They also suspected there were lots of Christians for whom existing congregational church was running out of credibility.

The feature of Christians disillusioned with church has been tracked by a number of writers. Alan Jamieson, Michael Fanstone and Phillip Richter and Leslie Francis would be four.¹ I know some people have dismissed this evidence as being only fall out from denominations or traditions seen as too certain, too high energy and thus too demanding in the long term. More recently, however, there have been other claims about the size and growth of this trend. The English example is the report by Alexander Campbell at the *Mission 21* Conference, in 2006.

¹ Alan Jamieson *A Churchless Faith* SPCK 2002, Michael Fanstone *The Sheep That Got Away* Monarch 1993, Richter and Francis *Gone But Not Forgotten* DLT 1998

From a localised anecdotal base and extrapolated by mathematical modelling, Alex claims there may be 40,000-100,000 Christians in this country who are, not so much churchless, as congregationless². They continue to meet in small groups. He himself is part of such a grouping in Bath and his website is a connecting point. Martin Robinson comments on the trend towards finding “simple church”.³ He draws on examples worldwide and pays especial attention to an example in the Westernised world of continuing multiplication of churches in the home. One chapter features the work of Tony and Felicity Dale⁴ and the point made is that the key is not so much to start a church, but to mentor new lay converts, so they plant into their networks and communities.

The crucial point about simplicity is that it assists reproducibility.

I don’t know whether Alex Campbell’s figures are near the mark. I do know that in private conversations I have with leaders of local churches, a number of them wouldn’t attend if they didn’t have to lead them. I do know I meet more people who are giving up on congregational church life for a varied set of reasons, most of which are connected to the way that these **existing ways of being church deliver less than the life in Christ they promise.**

The need for re-imagination

Here is one set of such disappointments. Congregation extracts duty rather than liberating gifts and breeds guilt at failure instead of fostering playful creativity. Church spawns the kind of meetings that actually prevent meeting. It is satisfied with passive attendance and afraid to promote responsible discipleship. Sterile public worship neither gives space for encounter with God, nor teaches people how to enter a sustainable living spirituality. Congregations accumulate busy programs with levels of activity that foster disconnection from the world, rather than a community life which resources participation in work, friends and family. Such **church treads in the shallows of superficial conformity rather than risks the deep end of vulnerable authenticity.** Paradoxically, it asks both too much and too little.

² www.simplechurch.co.uk This website also cites the work of George Barna who claims an increase from 1% to 9% of American church attendance is now in homes (Archive June 2006). Alexander Campbell’s Mission 21 research report can be purchased for £5 at www.togetherinmission.org/shop.

³ Martin Robinson *Planting Mission-shaped Churches Today* Monarch 2006 chapter 9. Helpfully, he rebuts the tendency of some in this grouping to write off anything that is not home-based and airs issues of sacred space and public visibility.

⁴ Their own story is told in Tony and Felicity Dale *Simply Church* Karis Publishing USA 2002

I don’t say all forms of congregational life have this deadening effect, or that all who left suffered from all of them, but Encounters readers may know stories that resonate with parts of this sorry tale. No wonder that among some there is wistful yearning for the re-imagination of church. What is hopeful is that **we live in a period of history where there is more creativity and exercise of the imagination about church and mission than there has been for a very long time.** What is also striking is that most of what is being grown by trial and error is not highly technical nor resource-hungry. The stories are more like the adventures of old fashioned explorers, who went out not knowing quite what they would find nor what the journey would disclose.

A story of re-imagination

From the arrival of the first fleet of ships in 1788, the original settlers in Australia had been confined to the north to south coastal strip around Sydney on the east coast, because no way could be found across the Blue Mountains to the west. As the colony grew in size, through immigration, so the pressure on land grew as well as an attendant shortage of food. No less than six attempts were made to climb this 1000 metre high barrier and each was forced back by the combination of thick scrubland or “bush” and a lengthening set of disappointing stories of yet another promising valley that ended up at the foot of precipitous cliffs. The Governor pleaded with England not to send any more colonists as the mountains were impassable. There were no further obvious valleys to walk up. They were in danger of starving.



Katoomba: The Three Sisters

But the need grew sharper and crisis of the colony deepened. 1813 was a dry year; the livestock that fed the colony were threatened and yet more land was needed to feed all the people who were arriving in Sydney. That year, three people of English origin (including a farmer and a military surveyor) gained permission to try again. Blaxland, the leader, described the start of the journey:

"On Tuesday, May 11, 1813, Mr. Gregory Blaxland, Mr. William Wentworth, and Lieutenant Lawson, attended by four servants (other sources say convicts), with five dogs, and four horses laden with provisions, ammunition, and other necessaries to last six weeks, left Mr. Blaxland's farm at the South Creek, for the purpose of endeavouring to effect a passage over the Blue Mountains. They crossed the Nepean River, at the ford, at four o'clock p.m., and having proceeded, according to their calculation, two miles in a south-west direction, through forest land and good pasture, encamped at five o'clock at the foot of the first ridge. The distance travelled on this and on the subsequent days was computed by time, the rate being estimated at about two miles per hour."

Their origins may be important. Their previous experience in Britain and awareness of the Alps in Europe would have told them that if you want to cross mountains, the best thing to do is to look for a pass, where the land is lower and less steep. Glaciation and river erosion combine to create these features which cut into the mountains and enable crossing of high ground otherwise too prone to snow and ice. The colonists faced high ground, so to look for a pass was what one should do. Only consistent failure of this method made re-imagination possible. What if there was another way to get over a mountain? Other accounts say they also took James Turner, a kangaroo hunter, and yet others tell of conversations with Aborigines. It may be that from these sources, the different idea arose. They were not going to struggle along more valley bottoms; they were going to try to walk the ridges. For three solid weeks, they cut their way along ridges, often having to retrace their steps, but always seeking to head northwest. They literally blazed a trail, marking the trees so that they could find their way back. Occasionally they had to go down to a valley to find water and grass for the



Blue Mountains Bush

horses, but then they would climb back up to the ridge and on they would go, in hope and uncertainty. Did these ridges go on for ever? Did they too end up in sheer cliffs? Would they run out of provisions? Would their tattered clothing hold out? By May 31st, though they did not know it, they were near the end of their journey. Blaxland wrote:

"The party encamped by the side of a fine stream of water, at a short distance from a high hill, in the shape of a sugar-loaf. In the afternoon they ascended its summit, from whence they descried all around, forest or grass land, sufficient in extent in their opinion, to support the stock of the colony for the next thirty years."

This was the extreme point of their westward journey. They had travelled about 58 miles northwest on foot; that is, fifty miles through the mountain, the greater part of which they had walked over three times, and eight miles through the forest land beyond it. They were back in Blaxland's farm on June 8th having retraced the blazed trail and were later rewarded with gifts of land. The colony was saved. The opening up of a way across the mountains led to the establishment of a new town on the west side called Bathurst. It paved the way for inland settlement and enabled the carrying out of exploration which went on for more than half a century. Today's road, the Great Western Highway, and the railway that interweave up the ridge, closely follow the route they took. With the completion of the railway across the mountains and upgrade of the road the population on the mountains and west of them quickly grew.

It is a tale of necessity, bravery and re-imagination. What I find most fascinating of all is what was learnt later. The Blue Mountains are rather a misnomer. Blue is plausible; it refers to the bluish green of the abundant and varied gum trees. But they are not mountains at all. It is ancient high tableland which water and wind, without glaciation, have eroded. The area is like a hand with all the fingers splayed out. The tops of this upland are flat, but the gaps between its fingers have steep sides. The only way to cross it is to follow along the line of a finger - along the ridges.

I wonder whether, in the re-imagination of church, this story could act as a parable. In western countries we face the pressure of what feels like the failure of existing ways to be church. Attempts to revitalise it from within look very limited. Inevitably, they contain assumptions about how church is to be done yet these are becoming more questioned and they do not provide enough ways forward in our mission context. Is it possible that some of our assumptions are wrong? Yes, it does feel like there is a mountain to climb, but might there be another way to do it? What are explorers at the edge learning? What encounters are they having?

Explorers Christian Church at Wentworth Falls

In June 2004, I visited Australia at the invitation of its Church Army.⁵ One among many pleasant surprises was meeting Guy Davidson CA who told me about a church plant, of which he is a co-founder called *Explorers Christian Church* or ECC. It met in Wentworth Falls, one of the small towns built along the Great Western Highway named after the youngest explorer. The name of the young church was thus a gift. It grew out of the local history, suited Aussie “can-do” mentality, fitted the current sense of spiritual enquiry and had some modesty about knowing answers.

The more Guy talked, the more it sounded like an example of a simpler way to do church. He kindly gave me copies of founding papers and its subsequent history, but there was no time in the planned schedule to visit or meet the leaders. Two years later I was back and could experience it first hand, watch some of its life and spend time with the leadership team. As with so many places I see, I am grateful once again for the willingness of Christians taking risks to open up their story, warts and all, and expose something still young and vulnerable to inspection.

1998: beginning the journey

Two families were friends and both had some experience of the wider mission and church. Guy Davidson trained as a Church Army Officer. Married to Christine, he taught English full-time in a Sydney school, travelling in daily as a commuter. Andrew Knight had used his medical training with CMS in Tanzania. With his wife Katrina, the family moved back in Australia, with him working as a GP and training others a few days a week in Sydney. **As such they were typical of a broad strand of people living in the Mountains.** These founding families began meeting together in their homes weekly from



Guy and Andrew

⁵ Led most ably by Tim Scheuer, who prior to this role worked in the USA. He featured as the planter of church for recovering alcoholics in *Encounters on the Edge* No 17.

July 1998. Together they sensed the need for a different sort of church. They longed for one that was truly missional and so would seek to fit the context. Such a church would stand a better chance of reaching the kinds of people that traditional evangelical Anglicanism was out of touch with.

By December, this group had expanded with two other Christian families who shared the growing vision and had not found a local church into which they had felt welcomed. They went to the vicar of Holy Trinity Wentworth Falls, Neil Emerson, to seek permission to take it further. This was willingly given, so that something culturally autonomous could grow, but based on common doctrinal understanding and, equally important, based on trust in their relationship.

The context helps design the church

The upper Blue Mountains lie 2 hours west of Sydney, by car or train. It is a popular tourist destination. Land values are less expensive than in Sydney which has the most expensive property prices in Australia. As a result many young families choose to live in the Blue Mountains, both for environmental reasons and to get a start in owning their own homes. The ribbon of villages and towns strung out along the ridge serves as a dormitory area for workers who commute daily to the city for work. Involvement in social activities tends to be restricted amongst the commuting population due to the fact that in excess of 20 hours a week is lost to this travelling. Potential involvement in church activities is thus limited. A consequence of the mountain location is that all these families tend to be time-poor and also some are economically stretched as they endeavour to meet housing costs. **How could church life be made simpler so that it would have a chance of working?** How could it be kept simple, as both Guy and Andrew would only have spare-time to give towards its leadership?

The ridge is physically divided by the main carriageway and the railway. These features have come to enshrine economic division. On the south side are Victorian mansions and million dollar homes, inhabited by middle class people, enjoying splendid views out over the Jamison valley. On the north side, modern, modest housing is for rent. This is why some areas of the upper mountains have a higher



Kihilla

The Blue Mountains communities epitomize a pioneering spirit in the Australian psyche: human life clinging tenaciously to an unforgiving landscape.⁶

than average proportion of people on welfare. Rents are also taken by working class families and a disproportionately high number of single parent households.

Over time, other groups have been drawn to the area. There are significant numbers of Pagans and also New Agers attracted by alternate lifestyles in art, music, environment, native spiritualities or Eastern mysticism. Typical of the broader population of Australia, there is not a great deal of interest in traditional Christianity and institutional religion is seen as either irrelevant or regarded with scepticism.

Part of the calling to what became ECC arose out of the recognition that the Anglican parishes were not effectively reaching, or seeking to become relevant to, large sections of its parishes. In Wentworth Falls, the church building was on the southern side of the ridge, the opposite side of the major highway to the lower property values. Its style of Anglicanism, that typified its services, did not fit with the many Australians who had never had an experience of church and for whom church, as it is, appeared irrelevant and out of touch. Its geographical address and cultural connection spoke only of another time and place. The area also embraces the independent retired and the elderly who tend to be grounded in more traditional church expressions. Therefore existing

mainstream congregations seem dominated by older people. By contrast, school leavers and those in their early 20s tend to leave the area for tertiary education, employment or greater social diversions. How could the proposed church plant break with these unhelpful church stereotypes and time-encrusted preferences? **How could it be a community known to explore, rather than just a place where the leader expounds?** How could it be a community of different ages, but focussed towards children, singles and younger parents?



I liked the way the idea of church was designed to fit the context. Inherent in the word 'mission' is the sense of being sent. There is little point in being sent if you do not connect when you get there. **You cannot connect if you don't notice, listen and respond.** I sensed I had met a process that created genuinely mission-shaped church. For them, it was the beginning of an exploration that led to the name. The name reflected the values. The choice of a school sports hall as the venue was guided by the principle to make the group accessible to the members of the community who had no personal or historic link to denominational church. They were learning to be mission-shaped in theory and practice.



Blue Mountains Grammar School Sports Centre

⁶ Jeremy Halcrow *Spiritual Explorers* A private paper on Explorers Christian Church

Values for the Journey

Explorers Christian Church, though simple, has been thorough. Their founding documents contain a set of written values and part of what is impressive is how much these continue to shape what is done, how it is done and, equally important, what is not done. Inevitably some of them have come into greater prominence and others have elided together. It was easy to see how the values I had read about were alive and well in the life of the church.

Do it like this

In writing I noticed how the values were an outworking of broad elements of double listening⁷, though that language was not coined till later. They were formed by listening to how Blue Mountains people are, what their lives consist in and the desire to connect with them. So the aims were:

- to provide an open, warm and accepting environment where people are unconditionally accepted
- to be user-friendly and culturally accessible, serving people not inherited traditions about church
- to be authentic to the Australian way of life reflected in the experience of those who come

So the language in public meetings is clear and singularly free of jargon. Money is only occasionally mentioned in church meetings and is never collected publicly although as people develop as disciples the topic comes up naturally, leading to private contribution. There is a dearth of notices and admin, with important messages sent by email.

But not like this

Equally they were aware of the need to overcome negative stereotypical perceptions of church and Christians, as portrayed in the popular media. In particular, they picked perceptions about the church only being interested in people for their money and decided it was essential that the leaders did not receive an income from the church. The decision to have no full-time paid staff was thus a mix of Guy and Andrew being in full-time work already, a

⁷ A way of discerning the way forward, advocated in *Mission-shaped Church*, p.104 seeking to attend to the voice of God through both context and the living tradition.

conscious choice to start a simpler church for time-poor people, awareness that having paid staff would give the wrong impression to outsiders, and collude with any members who were used to professionals doing the essentials.

Listening for how the past informs the present

The second ear of double listening attends to the heart of the living tradition and *Explorers Christian Church* say they seek in all things to be biblically based. They have a conservative evangelical theology, as expressed in the Prayer Book, without adopting its formal, and often complex, language. I find “biblical” is often more a cheer word than particular content; few Christians make a virtue of being not biblical, so it is how that term is cashed out that explains what they mean by it. Their aim was to be a mission-minded orthodox community, built around relationships not roles. So mission and community are two strands of the DNA of this church. They sought to express simpler church by an accent on the organic and minimal structures. One natural and pleasant aspect of this emphasis is that the leaflet about the church and congregation contains pictures, phone, email and even birthdays of all the members. This spoke volumes about **a high value placed on community, openness, and willingness for some risk.**

Community

This has some distinct characteristics. It was set up to be family and therefore child-friendly, reflecting the high value put on children and family in contemporary Australia. This value is reflected in the choice of meeting place, provision for them within the shape of the event and the guess that if they look after kids well, adults may come too. **Fail to provide for children and the adults will stay away.** Thus the membership profile in 2006 was some 50 adults and over 60 children. Of the adults I observed half a dozen “empty nesters” alongside an above average number of single parent mums and second marriages. This testifies to the inclusive attitude of acceptance, provision for children and giving singles (of various kinds) a real place within extended family.

The church runs on lay ministry, the only exception being the visits from time to time of Revd Neil Emerson to preach and act as celebrant. He also attends but does not chair leadership team meetings. Some models



of lay ministry seem like a lot of hard work. *Explorers Christian Church* are not idle, but they have chosen a style that is non-demanding in terms of involvement and activity. People are not held answerable for their involvement or non-involvement. They are treated as responsible adults. **The whole community tries to remain an**

“ought-free zone”. This means at least two

useful things are kept in balance. If ministry is to happen, local initiative is vital and also that if there isn't anyone gifted or available for an aspect of ministry, then it doesn't happen. The leadership resist demands for providing an aspect of ministry, such as “more teaching”, that cannot be resourced from within the body as a whole.

Decision-making in the community is guided by a style of non-authoritarian leadership and certainly on my visit it was not obvious who were the leadership team. They acknowledge that this style only operates as far as possible, but the aim is to be inclusive, **seeking consensus** of the whole group. Ironically, this sometimes is less than simple and decision-making at times has been protracted. As a result there has been a growth over time from the original pattern of two founders working with congregational consultation, to the existence of a wider leadership team, who both decide and consult. Initially the wider group was appointed by the founders and now is partly elected. I see very similar patterns across the range of other young churches.

Mission

Their focus on outreach and evangelism operates through naturally occurring relationships through everyday activities at work, home or in the mountains rather than a program of events. In practice they have found this is easier for those parents, usually the women who are still at home with children, than for the men who are travelling to work. The creation of a midweek mothers' group has been particularly fruitful in attracting new members. They were aware of the distortion of growing a church made up only of “people like us” but as the younger age group was under represented, this came to be seen as valid.

Three or four times a year, the Sunday meeting is cancelled in favour of an activity such as a picnic, barbeque, games/activity morning. This is an opportunity to invite friends to something which is relational, informal and fun, so that the hurdle of meeting with strangers in a strange place doing strange things is removed. A number of people from non-churched backgrounds do come to these events, but don't come to Sunday. This is accepted as a step in the process of building relationships and friendships. In time it may progress to exploration of faith, having questions asked and discovery of encounter with Jesus. It is a good question to ask what that further step would look like, because the meeting itself is probably too big a jump.

There is here a tension between their culture that, on the one hand, resists motivation by guilt and people then only acting out of obligation, leading to resentment. On the other hand, there is a recognition that **mission and evangelism too easily tracks off the radar for many Christians**, especially those who have come back to church after burn-out elsewhere or having been in congregations that they now think were abusive. This creates a risk of overbalancing towards maintenance mode.

I continue to value the Augustinian tradition that sees church as equally a hospital for sinners and a barracks of soldiers. We should not see ourselves as merely robust combatants, needing no more than the occasional patching up in order to return to active service on front line. Neither should we see ourselves as only patients with all the dangers of institutionalisation and dependency culture. I suspect each of us is always both figures, somewhat inconveniently and untidily joined at the hip. **To be sinner and soldier connects maintenance and mission**, pastoral care and evangelism. It tells us that though we struggle to keep the balance, that is infinitely better than losing half our identity.



The meeting

I visit on a Sunday morning in June 2006. The Australian winter has begun and it is cold outside. ECC meet on the balcony of the sports centre. The building is cold and seems another manifestation of the Antipodean aversion to central heating. Perhaps I'm a soft Pommie, but it's the first time I've seen men keeping their hats on in church. The welcome however is warm and confident, yet natural not pushy. It reflects one of their beliefs that what they hold are "meetings" not "services". Calling the events services was felt to be unhelpful in several ways. It was churchy jargon, separated meeting others from meeting God and was misleading about the wider meaning of serving God.

If you believe church is about meeting, this affects choices of the shape of the meeting space. It is deliberately set up so that people have the strong sense of engagement with others. ECC has found that three sides of an oblong configuration with public ministry led from the "open" side works well. By contrast they thought the traditional model of the minister up front with people looking at him or the backs of others heads seemed both anti-relational and unhelpfully priest/preacher centred.

Casual not careless

In keeping with simpler church, the music group is only three people – two acoustics and a bass guitar. The children join in by playing percussive instruments. I notice that the short songs are only sung once through, even one acknowledged as new. I wonder how easy that is for newcomers. I am not sure whether the simple PA was necessary and in other places with congregations of under a hundred I have sensed it reintroduces an unwelcome sense of the division caused by some people being the professionals. The style is casual, without becoming careless. All participants are introduced by Christian name. I suspect real skill is needed to do this well, without becoming chatty or banal. **Reality TV is crass enough without having reality church as well.** It is always a challenge to pursue the relational and



the personally engaging without worship becoming a talk show. I have been in gatherings where the explanation of what we would do took longer than what we did and thereby robbed it of much of its power.

The meeting is structured into two sections, the first with the children in and the second with the children away at their own programme after twenty minutes. There is no liturgy in the old sense of set texts from a book, but there is liturgical shape in a known pattern of elements that are fairly commonly found in churches catering for families. There has been a conscious choice that there should be little or no extemporary prayer. They thought such prayer would feel unnatural to a newcomer. It might also create the fear of having to do it oneself and that would be a barrier to coming. Numbers of Christians can identify with that fear too.

The aim is plain speaking with minimal use of churchy jargon and expression. I noted how vigilant one has to be; I was amused that the introduction to the prayers invited us to "quieten our hearts", which is one thing we are actually unable to do. But then we were not given time and silence to focus our minds, or to seek to still down, before the intercessions began. Their content was commendably wide, mixing the local and universal, the personal and big issues and the verbal style fitted with the ethos. Twenty minutes of sermon followed, on the issue of how you handle being right, taken from John 9. It contained an attractive mix of explanation of the original story with personal story, laced with appropriate humour, including admission of the elusive nature of true humility.



Surprise

At that point, the most remarkable part of the morning unfolded. ECC decided from the start that there was to be **the crucial role of discussion**, debriefing and a search for application immediately following the teaching in the meeting. They freely allow the expression of divergent, and even unorthodox, opinions yet they have found so far that this has never been confrontational or adversarial in practice. I was astonished at what I observed. Chaired by the leader of the meeting, not the speaker, many people put up their hands to

make a comment, but the content did not turn into two-way talkback with the speaker. Others took up the development of what became a conversation of several threads, punctuated with a lot of laughter and a quality of comments that **modelled openness, honesty and some vulnerability**.

Commendably, people attended to one another; a spirit of listening led to others making contributions, rather than making position statements or offering their summary of what others has said. The whole process spoke of, and taught the value of, a search for integrity not a neat formula. Perhaps knowing they were called *Explorers Christian Church*, I should not have been so surprised. Yet I have seldom seen anything like this outside intentional communities that have had several years of growing together. Here was a simple way of focussing issues in discipleship and being candid about partial progress down that road. Of the 55 minutes of adult time, the discussion occupied 20.

And then...

After a prayer, picking up some threads of the group's conversation, the meeting slid naturally and nicely into the next stage. People stay for up to 1½ hours each Sunday morning after the meeting, building community and welcoming newcomers, over quality coffee and cake. Once more out of listening (in this case to the café culture) it was felt that quality filter coffee and home made cakes were essential. It spoke volumes about **a commitment to**

caring for people and the positive role of hospitality. It did not require the excess of a banquet, but what was served (note the word) needed to be sufficient quality and quantity for everyone to feel it was fine to have what they would like. **Catering of doubtful quality or volume has been endured for too long.**

What helps them in ECC is that the kitchen servery is directly in line with the way out, so you need an escape plan worthy of Chicken Run to get out without trying something. How



Real coffee

much more sensible this was than arrangements in many churches that require a detour and forced march in order to find refreshment.

Some people just catch up with one another, but the experience of most is that this is an important time to build community and serve one another. Encouragement, consolation, loving concern and prayer occur during this time. In simpler church, this is the way to provide the pastoral care that, in other places, happens in a small group during the week. From the way I was treated I see that the congregation is aware of visitors and newcomers.

People consciously and sensitively engaged with and welcomed me. What happens in this dispersed way is as important as what happens during the gathered meeting. **Sunday does what Sunday is** – the meeting point of the community. It is a way of keeping things simpler.

I am not surprised to learn that many make an independent and unsolicited observation, soon after joining, that **ECC is the first church to which they feel they could invite non-Christian friends, without apology** or fear of embarrassment. That has to be a goal for all expressions of church. It will be the result of listening to the culture and offering quality of community and gathering that will be inherent in the mission.

Who does come?

They began meeting in public on 14th February 1999, with 11 adults and 9 children and in the seven years this *membership* has grown to over one hundred people, counting adults and children. *Attendance*, like everywhere else, is lower at 60-70 people, again half adults and half children.

They are glad that there is **no transfer growth** from local churches as this has been deliberately discouraged. However, this is different from Christians moving to the area and making this the church of their choice. They also acknowledge that they have been **more effective among the de-churched than the non-churched**. This relates to at least two factors. One is the prominence of the meeting in the life of ECC and despite its evident relational qualities, it starts far further on that most non-churched would relate to. The other is lack of time especially among men, which has meant that the time



to build relationships, beyond the worlds of work and natural connections with families at similar stages, does not exist. So by default they have been drawn to the de-churched, but there are a number of interested seekers. Many they find are people who have been out of churches, of a whole range of denominations, for a period of years. A significant number have been hurt, burnt, abused or disillusioned by their earlier church experience. Responding well to this takes both a length of time and considerable attention.

The church is more drawn from networks than neighbourhood. People come from up to 30 kilometres along the ridge with over half the membership coming from beyond Wentworth Falls. This may be a clue to the future developments as their very growth is bound to change the dynamics of how they operate.

Simpler is not always so simple

From the start, though the word is mine, they created patterns that valued *simpler* church. There was a deliberate policy of not doing too much as a church. They wanted to avoid tying up people's time in church busyness, programmes and activities that reduced their contact and relationships with those outside the church.

Is this an example of what you might call "seeker-lite" church? With the elements that an outsider would find strange removed, does Sunday become thematic presentation for the seeker? I concluded that this is utterly different in several ways. **Seeker is anything but simple.** I think it is so resource hungry that there are few UK examples.⁸ Seeker moves the content of real Sunday to midweek, whereas this pattern teaches that the essentials all happen on Sunday. **Seeker does high quality presentation. ECC are aiming for authentic participation.**

How nice to be simple

I can see the attraction to contemporary people in a society that almost values haste and has spawned the time-poor phrase. Ecological awareness has helped fuel the suspicion that "**less might be more**". I can see how it appeals to those impatient with institutions and their structures and want to search for the heart of Christianity stripped of encrusted accretions. That search is as old as the draw of the desert.⁹ I agree there is beauty in simplicity – whether the face of a child, a striking piece of art, a melody that sticks in the mind or the grace of an attractive building. Yet I know that the more you examine any of these examples, you discover that **simplicity is in fact complex.**

⁸ Administry How to Guide Vol. 2 No. 8 *Evaluating Seeker Services* by Anne Hibbert and Chris Stoddard p. 16 concluded the same.

⁹ A similar call is found in Gordon MacDonald *Restoring Your Spiritual Passion* Highland 1986, not least chapter 2 or more recently John Ortberg *The Life You've Always Wanted* Zondervan 1997 chapter 5

Traps for the unwary

I know this urge is not new and it is not simple. Can this group escape the complications that were found along the way by the restorationist house churches of the 1970s or indeed by the denominational church plants of the 1980s? Some of these, as they grew, became less personal, a number acquired their own buildings and thereby perhaps lost a distinctive in that process, most notably the ability to keep moving and changing location as the ongoing mission changed.¹⁰ More and more I am suspicious of this trend and I do wonder if the process is like the Old Testament story of the ending of the tabernacle and the desire to build a temple. From the New Testament perspective it seems clear that **Jesus signalled the end of temple** as a building and invited us into the re-imagination of temple as located among his people. I hope ECC will never own a building.

Other parallels could include becoming over-directive, but I think they are well-defended against that temptation. Another is the belief in local church self-sufficiency and their documents make it clear, despite an early period of difficulty with some in the sending church, that they see the value of being connected to the wider church. Some gains are the ability to give to and receive from others, to be in accountable relationships, to have mechanisms for succession of leaders, to avoid the charge of being a cult, and the sheer practicalities like group insurance and child protection policies. A further similarity is the growth of full-time staff with attendant requests for finance to support this pattern and then expectations from the givers that these people will provide ministry to them.



Leadership team meeting

Take me to your leader

ECC has had several debates over the last five years about how leadership should develop. They recognize that already the time needed to lead has been too much for the founders. Andrew Knight wisely wished to avoid burn out and has stepped down after 5 years to enter an emeritus role and Guy Davidson is increasingly more like a mentor to the leadership team. As such this

¹⁰ See Stuart Murray *Church Planting Laying Foundations* pp.203-213 for discussion of advantages and disadvantages

may be a very healthy way that the founders hand over to successors while ensuring that the DNA of the church is passed on.

All are clear they wish to avoid acquiring an external pastor/teacher/vicar type, not least because that person will not have lived their story. Employing them will force a focus onto money and also many of the gifts needed are already present in the congregation. The issue for the existing leadership is time and availability and so they have seen the value of someone to co-ordinate various roles and at various times have employed people part-time to this end. Sometimes it has been in administration, other times to ensure that pastoral care was offered to all, but that person not becoming the frontline pastor. In 2006, they were exploring a full-time appointment in pastoral care, because of increased numbers and needs. Recruitment was not easy because the person needed is a worker, not the leader and so less might apply for the post.

Heavy Burdens?

I also note that much of their mission in practice means evangelism or social dimensions only through personal links. Here is a dilemma for a number of fresh expressions of church in that their short history, relatively small size, simple structures and youthful converts are not well placed to be involved in the breadth of the 5 marks of mission.¹¹ **Yet involvement in the holistic mission of God beckons.** As a rule of thumb I would only expect these wider concerns to be tackled in the second five years of the life of a young church, only being attempted earlier if the guidance to do so is clear and the resources adequate. **In the first five years** the priorities are the deepening of relationships in community, following the leads of those showing spiritual interest, finding how worship will evolve with them and starting down the path of being a disciple in practice, individually and in small accountable groups. That list of functions takes a fair amount of time and even *Explorers Christian Church* began to find, as newcomers increased, that it was too much and for a time they employed one of their senior members for a day a week to graft in those joining.

¹¹ The 5 marks are: to proclaim the Good News of the Kingdom, to teach, baptise and nurture new believers, to respond to human needs by loving service, to seek to transform unjust structures of society, to strive to safeguard the integrity of creation and sustain and renew the earth.

One way of remaining simpler has been to be not well-known. Then there are very few pressures to speak, host enquiries and receive interested visitors. I hope the publication of this issue will not wreck that quiet stance. Another intriguing feature is that ECC is far simpler than the Sydney Diocese guidelines for planting which ask for higher numbers in the start up process and with aims to become 3-self churches quite rapidly. Their defense will be that their genesis was well before the exodus of these guidelines.

Will their future get more diverse?

A common feature of young churches is the tendency for what began as a narrow focus to get wider. Church Army in its history since 1882 knows this very well. In this case, the obvious and pressing question is what provision to make for their children, especially those now on the threshold of teenage. This is prompting significant discussion about what will need to be provided in terms of time, personnel, skills, meeting places and money.

Another far reaching question is the consequence of their effectiveness. **Should they think of getting larger or should they aim to work through multiplying?** For me this is related to the DNA of ECC. The questions could be put like this.

What size is big enough...

- for some anonymity provided to newcomers, who can watch and make their own mind without being badgered
- to give a reasonable chance that the visitor can find someone to identify with
- to provide enough people to carry the tasks of leadership, public ministry roles, care of children and provision of hospitality
- to carry the weight of some needy people
- to be a breeding ground for future leadership gifts

Yet what size is small enough...

- to foster the priceless style of the interactive discussion
- to have the sense of being in the extended family
- to feel – in their words – like a family dinner that has some guests too. The event is relaxed but there aren't too many in-jokes

- to be a safe and responsible place for intimacy
- to be a place where people can try out gifts because it's not too threatening

Some intuitive sense will, I hope, tell them when the 'small enough' dimension is being lost. To me that would be a case for exploring multiplying. Already people travel to be part of *Explorers Christian Church* from along the ridge. Could there be a future for more congregations in the different towns, but with a shared DNA, perhaps sharing an admin person or a full-time youth worker or training resources? One sizeable challenge would be the multiplying of leadership. Both Andrew and Guy are modest men, yet I note they have had formal leadership training that is not easily reproduced in the next generation of leaders.

Is this work cutting edge?

I end with this question because it seems that some watching the emerging scene, both in England and in Australia, expect, demand or even fear, that fresh expressions of church must be novel or unusual to be worthwhile. This seems odd to me. If I am given a glass of fresh orange juice, I do not have to pretend that I have never had orange juice before.¹² But it helps if it is still within the sell by date and that I like orange juice. The same could be said about a fresh cup of tea. We know what we mean by this language and it is a good reminder that **novelty is of little value in church life**. By contrast, I set high store by every newly created church being shaped by mission. What makes an expression of church fresh is its healthy engagement with its mission context, not the search for being outlandish.

ECC is not very different from anything seen before, yet there are instructive lessons. The determination to make Sunday do what church does and keep



Sydney Docks

¹² My thanks to my good friend Paul Bayes for being the source of this illustration.

the week free is helpful. The discussion quality was brilliant and the coffee time just as good. The search for simplicity is very welcome; **being simple is more about remaining uncluttered**, not learning how to be flash.

I rejoice that this work is modest; ECC admits it is a work in progress. They know they don't please all of their own people all of the time. There are calls for more effective pastoral care, for more space and quiet in the adult part of the meeting. They live with the tension of wanting to keep facing outward yet keeping that stance voluntary and free. Since my visit, typically honest email contact has shown that the tension between both legitimate roles of mission and pastoral care has grown and even adversely affected weekly numbers. Moreover as they grow in size, changes are happening to them like it or not. **The search to keep simplicity is both complex and sobering.**

But I remember they only called themselves *Explorers* at Wentworth Falls. Their namesakes were most clear about needing to find a way; they had strong hopes it could be done, but they did not know whether the path they set out on that afternoon in May 1813 would work. In the re-imagining of church we may not be in such a different place. I choose to applaud those who try and I am glad when the simplicity of it makes it more possible for others to think they too could go walk ridges of their own and see what happens.

George Lings
December 2006

Cartoons: Tim Sharp

My thanks to Guy Davidson, Andrew Knight and Jeremy Halcrow for papers on ECC



Katoomba - The Three Sisters

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32: Simpler Church

- Where time is at a premium



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