

35: Changing Sunday

"Come and go": beyond attractational church



Surely three services on a Sunday morning provides enough challenge and diversity; why change it to ten half hour sessions? This is a good example of spotting changes in background culture and shaping church around the needs of those who find its patterns don't fit. Deeper than that, what happens when existing churches are serious about discipleship, creating community and enabling lay ministry to the point that clergy cannot provide all that is needed? Come and Go is far more than a search for relevance and is turning this church inside out. We wanted to find out how it worked.

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Encounters on the Edge



no. 35:
Changing Sunday

**"Come and go":
beyond attractational
church**

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Changing Sunday

Two meanings of "fresh expression of church"

This series deliberately tries to tell stories across the ever widening spectrum of ways that church is being re-imagined in the early years of this century. Some are called fresh in that they look pretty novel; cases would include those slowly growing among the subcultures of our day such as clubbing, extreme sport communities, or groups like Goths. What is both common, and indeed normative, across them is that they involve planting something that did not exist before and, as yet, they tend to be relatively small in terms of the numbers involved.

At the other end of the spectrum are existing churches making significant changes to their existing internal life. I am thinking of examples like churches truly transitioning to cells¹, those creating clusters² as their normal gathering pattern and those reconstructing their Sunday worship into far more flexible and much more engaged patterns³. By contrast to the first group, these are existing churches with larger numbers of people. But because of the significant internal changes, they too deserve the epithet fresh. When writing *Mission-shaped Church* **we were always clear that fresh was not**

the same as new. It was about life not novelty.

As my informal colleague Paul Bayes teaches, the terms fresh orange juice or a fresh cup of tea are meaningful statements. But do note that they are different drinks that refresh.



“a fresh cup of tea is not novel.”

This tale is about the guidance towards, the discovery of, and the young life in, a fresh expression in this second sense. It is about an existing parish, St John Hillingdon, undergoing what looks like structural change. Their Sunday morning is now a series of half hour slots from 08:00 until lunch time with people free to come and go to whichever ones they want, hence the name "Come and Go". However, that is merely the clothes on a change of values deeper within. It is the latter that makes it fresh.

¹ I have included the word "truly" to point up that some churches really are only re-badging their existing small groups and cell's value-led change does not occur. *Encounters on the Edge* Nos. 3 or 20 respectively give stories of thorough processes: planting cell from scratch and creating cell in parallel with existing congregation.

² Bob Hopkins and Mike Breen have just published their long awaited book on this. *Clusters: Creative Mid-sized Missional Communities* 3dm Publishing 2007

³ Grove Booklet W181 *Liquid Worship* Tim Lomax and Mike Moynagh spells out one way of pursuing this.

Why the change?

A flavour of Hillingdon

The town of Hillingdon, south east of the M25/M40 junction, lies within the larger borough of the same name. The latter is the westernmost part of Greater London. To describe it as the home to Brunel University and London Heathrow Airport could make it sound academic and international. However the parish of St John Hillingdon is upper working class; the residents are more likely to work



at Heathrow than jet set from it. The population is ethnically mixed with 14% South Asian and 13% Afro Caribbean. The town has its own ancient history which involves periods of disassociations from, and combinations with, neighbouring Uxbridge. It thinks of itself more as Hillingdon than part of London.

The church stands on the south side of the main Uxbridge road, next to a thriving pub *The Red Lion* and opposite a row of shops. Being beside a busy dual carriage way, it doesn't pick up casual passing trade

as you have to turn down a side road to park. Yet the flint building with bath stone dressings and its solid 17th century tower, replete with cupola, is a notable feature in the townscape and people do drop in midweek sometimes to search out local or family history. It's quite an imposing medieval structure with nave and two aisles from the 14th century. Like many older churches, it has undergone significant architectural changes, with the current chancel and transepts added in the mid 19th century after advice from the still young, and then untitled, Gilbert Scott. The argument was that the 600-seater church was becoming too small for the growing urban population.

When I visited in March 2007, there were signs of more recent work. The entrance has inner glass doors and the area immediately inside is more open. Two smaller rooms in the northwest and southwest corners have been turned into a prayer room and a rudimentary kitchen respectively. The building has more of a domestic than mini-cathedral feel. This is the result of low vaulted arches and the simple single chine wooden vaulted ceiling. Again, partly because of the arches, it feels more like a network of connected spaces than

one large auditorium. Three aisles, two transepts, a chancel, northeast lady chapel, two corner rooms mentioned above and under the tower make ten spaces. This helps when different-sized congregations need to occupy a helpful size of building and when people break out into smaller groups. As such, the building is far more friend than foe, for those in society who will brave the ecclesiastical exterior. There are future plans to turn the whole south aisle into a café style area, complete with sofas, to upgrade the kitchen area and make the north transept into a dedicated storage area.



I first met the vicar, Robert Harrison, through his writing. I can't remember how I chanced on *Oriel's Diary* but immediately I knew I'd met a storyteller. Presented

as the diary of an archangel, it gives a take on the life of Jesus, based on Luke's shape. Humour, perception and passion mark a narrative of tested trust in God's strange ways. It carries you with pace but also prompts pause for reflection. It was little surprise that his own life story includes roles of youth worker, theological thinker, journalist, a love for the dramatic and over 25 years of writing. Story would be a major instinct for a man wanting to help others focus on Jesus and wishing to inspire and perhaps even disturb.



He came to Hillingdon as his first incumbency in 1997 and built a track record with the parish in which the range of services gradually widened, as did the number of people sharing forms of ministry. A recent Church Army evangelist put forward by St Johns described him to me as a permission-giver and, behind this, a person who willingly accepts that failure is an inherent part of creativity, growth and change. Leading by example and trusting others to play their part means they will make mistakes too and that is allowed. Others I met in

the parish echoed these assessments. My own guess is that **this security not to have to be in control, and being secure enough to stand some failure, is important in growing fresh expressions.**

No need?

The three morning congregations were already diverse and viable. 08:00 Book of Common Prayer communion was followed at 09:45 by parish communion and then at 11:30, an all-age celebration. People were choosing what suited them, either in terms of different style or if their circumstances changed on a particular Sunday. Even with a curate there was plenty to do.

I asked Rob why they set out towards the changes they made. Part of it was spotting an unrecognized need. It showed in two ways. He began to realise that baptism families enjoyed the family event in church and a good number kept coming for a few months. They found the congregation friendly and the atmosphere warm. However, it was still a slowly revolving door and they would exit, not to return. The second strand was a particular conversation he had with a mum accompanied by her toddler. Having wondered about coming for some weeks, she finally arrived for a service, but because the service had already started, she felt she had to go away again. The church community thought they were open, flexible, welcoming and suitable. She simply felt, by being late, that she didn't fit. I sometimes wonder whether such encounters are among today's equivalents of the Cornelius story in Acts 10. Is God behind this apparently innocent arrival of unconscious messengers? Responding to such discoveries is deeply connected to being mission-shaped. The church, which has an intrinsic sent identity, could be on its outward journey and be re-fashioned in response. Or it might be that God sends us people in his mission and church is again re-shaped in response. **Unless**

"Unless there is response, I am not sure the process is mission-shaped".

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Connecting

They began to realise that this was a sign of a change in society that was already well under way. Some think the activity that most typifies our current British culture is shopping. There are television adverts which present their bank as open when you want. Our supermarkets trade much longer hours than before. Within the wide framework of an opening time and a closing time, shoppers are then free to come and go at any time in between. If they like the overall experience, they stay longer, have a coffee and browse some more. Other features of this greater flexibility are fuel stations being open 24 hours a

day and more people working flexitime. TV schedules enable people to choose what they want to watch and to exclude the majority of material they will not



⁴ Mike Moynagh *Changing World, Changing Church* Monarch 2001 chapter 2 pp.32-34

by the curate, Elizabeth Moore-Bick, that having three different existing services was a significant platform to build on. Diversity was already in place and monopoly of service style had been broken. It would be even tougher to grow this sort of pattern from one dominant service. This whole section on process should not be taken as a blue print; it is rather a particular story illustrating principles of knowing your people, giving to them both a lead and the necessary information and trusting that together the right outcome will emerge. In consequence, I noticed a mature people who could freely admit that a few in the congregations have not coped with the changes and left. But they were very few.

"Value led change is worth the time it takes".

How did they handle the change?

⁵ See Encounters on the Edge No.31 *Small Beginnings: Church for Under 5s*

⁶ St John's MAP is on their website www.stjohnshillingdon.org.uk

What happens?

The timetable below is adapted from the official leaflet and from my notes on 18th March 2007.

Time	Kid's Activity?	Title	Flavour and functions	Nos 18/3	Age range and notes
08:00		Morning Prayer: BCP	Traditional Worship	9	55-75 and 1 in 40s
08:30		Traditional Communion: BCP	Traditional Worship	14	As above. 5 come and none go
09:00		Breakfast and Conversation	Interchange & Community	12	40-70. A real mixing of 08:30 and 09:30 people
09:30	Yes	Songs Of Praise	Relaxed and Varied Worship	40-65	All ages, but few 20-30s. Coming and going does occur
10:00	Yes	Understanding Our Faith	Talk and Discussion	85+	As above. Kids move around the church. Some ethnic diversity
10:30	Yes	Family, Communion and Baptism	Relaxed and Varied Worship	100+	As above. None leave, but a few come for next session
11:00	Yes	Refreshing and Activities	Interchange & Community	60+ leave	Gradual exodus after a drink. A few arrive for the 11:30
11:30	Yes	Praise and Worship	Informal Worship	35	Younger families, including Afro Caribbean and singles
12:00	Yes	Exploring Faith Together	Informal Worship	20	Those who leave are musicians on duty since 09:30
12:30		Food and Friendship	Community	20	Younger families and singles
		End / Clear Up		10	People stay up to 13:30 and then clearing up occurs

NB

1. Eucharist in different forms occurs in each of the three cycles at 08:30, 10:30 and 12:00.
2. It is not possible to deduce overall attendance figures from column five.
3. The table does not show the complexity of when children are in for parts of the morning.

The bald table cannot adequately convey either the atmosphere of each section, the flow of the morning as a whole nor the sense of connection across the various half hours.

08:00 The "Traditional" sections

We gathered in the Lady Chapel which felt appropriate in size and privacy. As the newcomer I was noticed, but not pounced upon. The lay-led office text was essentially Cranmerian⁷, but the welcome and thematic introduction were contemporary. Simplicity was, in my view, aided by the absence of acclamations to readings and provision of silence for reflection. There was no sermon, for that would belong to the next half hour. Participation beyond listening was modelled in readings taken by congregation members, well-prepared intercessions and the invitation to come and light a candle as a form of prayer, with congregation members free to add the reason why. This was warmly and widely responded to. A collection was taken and indeed some form of offering is included at every service. Rob Harrison teaches a view of the worship of God which is focused in a four-fingered signpost. The four directions to work with are signed as the past, the future, the corporate and the cost. I could often see how all these elements were present through the morning.



In the spirit of *Come and Go*, the Vicar came for the next section. The half hour of BCP communion service that followed assumed the previous section had done the work of word, confession and prayer. Thus, where to fit in a sermon was not obvious; after the *Sanctus* and before the *Prayer of Humble Access* was the location. Being Mothering Sunday, the theme of family had been chosen, working out of the narrative in which Jacob cheats his brother Esau and the New Testament pericope in which Jesus names all who do the will of God as his brothers sisters and mother. The conniving, immoral Old Testament story was elaborated on, in the conviction that story does its own work and it connects with our own fallible stories. It was led throughout by the incumbent unvested but dog-collared to assist the conviction all are ministers. In pleasing token of this belief, throughout the day, those presiding received last at the table, which surely fits with most cultures' expectations of hospitality. Why it is different at the church table has long been a mystery, and even offence, to me as its first president was par example a servant leader.

⁷ Terms like Holy Ghost had been changed to Holy Spirit.

09:00 Breakfast and Conversation

Those familiar with the building and wanting to stay made their way from the NE corner to the SW lobby, through an unlabelled door. The transition did work just, but the distance does make it less likely some will stay and that newcomers would get it. On arrival, the welcome by Jackie and her team is palpable and the breakfast simple but sufficient; conversation flows naturally. A brief litany introduces the meal when people are gathered, so sharp false boundaries between worship and community are happily blurred. Jackie sees that she praises at 08:30, serves at 09:00, but it is all worship. That felt very wholesome. The room is intimate but is already working at capacity so it is not surprising that not very many from the 09:30 come. I don't know whether a renewed, café style south



aisle would alleviate this problem. How it can be done without the complexity of an audio clash with the 09:30 musicians coming and setting up would need attention but may not be a problem. I also wonder how breakfast in progress would feel to the other arrivals for that half hour. Perhaps they would be enticed in because at present the breakfast is out of sight.

09:30 Songs of Praise

Each cycle of the remaining morning is prefaced by a gathering song. The intention is that this is more than blowing a whistle that the train is about to leave the station. Certainly it is better than the conventional officious announcement, duly ignored by chattering Christians. The hope is that it is something like a theme song for that event and a tone setter. The 09:30 song is *Praise to the Lord, the Almighty the King of Creation*. This introduces the music curriculum which is from congregational traditional (but no anthems or canticles) to late 1970s, led by organ, choir of eight and a small music group. The morning I saw was very ably led by Carol Williams who would not be out of place as a TV presenter. The style is warm and confident, without being loud or hectoring. Her thought for the day was homely but incisive, as were her led prayers. Discovery of such gifts is part of the enduring value of this kind of value-led development. The number of people present make the nave feel pleasantly full. The time is filled with lots of singing, but then it is songs of praise.

The peace, exchanged by a congregation clearly happy to be tactile, acts as the buffer zone to the next section

10:00 Understanding Our Faith

The peace and next gathering song, *Teach Me to Dance to the Beat of Your Heart*, coincides with half a dozen people leaving and many more coming in. It is easier to come and go in certain elements of the morning. The theory says it can be any time, but certain aspects of the created atmosphere assist this more naturally. This more playful gathering song does duty for a stress on application rather than ethereal praise, but it also shifts gear into what is more like family service. There is more evident humour and this is a church that does laughter. This half hour is word, following worship and Rob speaks. He expands his 08:30 version, with greater emphasis on going beyond pretence and admitting our imperfections. He and Kath having five alert children is bound to be an aid to this.

I confess that though it was quality, I expected less talk up front and more interaction and response in groups, which I know the leaders value. However, when that did occur the brief buzz of conversation sounded like **they are used to breaking the silence that can be a hidden church rule**. The section did raise the timetabling issue in that this one overran some 25%, to 10:38. (Details people like me can be tiresome.) I gathered afterwards there is an official timetable and a hidden emergency timetable with strategies to catch up what has been lost, by cutting elements in the next section, not simply speaking faster. If all else fails "the meal breaks" will act as buffer zones that can recover the timetable. I did wonder, if time is an issue, why have long readings spoken aloud that have already been printed out on the notice sheet? Why not sometimes ask people to read it to themselves which would take half the time? They might even take in more because that way is visual. The Northumbria Community song, which marked the close of this section, touched with honesty the emotional areas in life that contains struggle. Such candour, publicly owned, fits well with discipleship and is vastly preferable to diets elsewhere of loud, musically aggressive, unflagging optimism..

10:30 Family Communion

The next gathering song sets a tone which is softer. Appleford's *Lord Jesus Christ, You Have Come To Us* was the introduction to confession, a declaration of faith and then the Eucharistic prayer. I thought some presenters were still learning how to lead within the new "Come and Go" shape and this section felt at times ponderous compared to the "light touch but without triviality" that had marked the morning thus far. Here it also takes skill to know how to play fast

and loose with Anglican liturgy and to negotiate what some feel is an interminable or too great a Great Thanksgiving prayer. Moreover, to communicate to over 100 people needs to take time; if not, people feel processed attendees not welcomed family. I am glad to say that this sense of space was given. It needed half an hour and took it.



I was glad too that the longer post-communion prayer was the chosen corporate response. Arguably, Frost's "Father of all we give you thanks and praise..." is linguistically the crown jewel of the original Series 3 Communion, with memorable compression and breadth of imagery. If Eucharistic worship can be helpfully compared to theatre, too often in church it feels that denouement is followed by anticlimax. This prayer helps prolong the sense of occasion that meeting with Christ, in word and

sacrament, evokes. The prayer also takes time to enable us to focus outward, connecting spirituality and mission. Such an emphasis is sustained both by their next chosen prayer "Christ has no body but our bodies..." and the rubric following which reads "Our worship continues with refreshments and activities." It was a pity that the service leader did not understand that and reverted to what could be called the "We've now done God, so you get coffee as a reward" view. To me, one of the pleasing dynamics of the whole morning is that the unhelpful divisions between a narrow view of public worship and living out community are dissolved. The whole morning is community-in-worship, who are being both resourced for mission and being mission to outsiders who come. These three sections from 09:30-11:00, while ostensibly separate, also work as three chapters of one overall Eucharistic event. Though the punters have shown they are free to come and go, a numerical climax is reached in this half hour and the half hour of refreshments afterwards.

11:00 Refreshments

This nearly works well in that people do happily mill in the aisles, the area under the tower and around the coffee station, the last of which is set out from 10:15. I say nearly because pews are never going to be brilliant for this, especially for the newcomer who doesn't quite know the rules and that church people can do culturally odd things like walk over them to get where they need to. The

development of the south aisle sounds very promising. I thought it was commendable that a number of people spotted that I was new (I was already strange by having a clipboard) but they affably inquired who I was and what I had made of it all. They offered (and better) delivered coffee and somehow knew how to also leave me my own space. Whether they are trained or naturally skillful, like Goldilocks I felt it was "just right." In retrospect, I wonder if this section needs a better title. Refreshments sounds like an intermission between things you have really come for; possibly worse, it might suggest that the previous event will have left you in need of relief and sustenance. After communion, that is singularly unfortunate. I confess I have no solution to offer, but readers may like to send us suggestions which St John Hillingdon can ponder at their leisure.

11:30 Praise and Worship

The table shows that the 11:00 slot works both as a community gathering but also as a break and during it an exodus occurs. More than 60 went home while only a few arrived. The gathering song, *O When the Saints Go Marching In*, is at the informal end of the spectrum. I was least



convinced by this choice as it seems to me too stereotypically bright. The rest of the well-introduced and linked music curriculum was historically wide and more sensitive than the ebullient gathering song suggested. This section as a whole is deliberately more visual and participative than the earlier *Songs of Praise*, with people happy to talk. Smaller numbers may well assist this. I can connect this dynamic with cluster thinking which suggests that around 70 people, the dynamics or perhaps its expectation inexorably changes from participation towards passivity, and from amateur to professional. It was good that, within this period, a younger person with story telling potential was allowed scope for this budding craft. Greater experience will grow his confidence that the good story doesn't then need explanation, nor is it always aided by insertion of a preacher's rhetorical questions.

I was interested to learn from Rob and Kath that this section and the next has been the slowest in finding coherence. It lacks something of the critical mass of the 09:30-11:00; those there rattle about a bit in the nave, but there isn't a better-sized area yet. Would they take over the café style south aisle in future? It also faces the challenge, felt nationally, that running good all-age worship is

demanding. The analogy they used was that if scripted liturgical events are like crossing a bridge, this is more like wading through water. The later is both more dangerous and unpredictable. It takes determination and maybe courage. It is easy to be knocked off course but a crossing will also give a greater sense of achievement. The requisite flexibility was modelled in that the printed service order was used more like a menu than a predetermined meal.



12:00 Exploring our Faith

A shared peace ended the previous section and people were gathered back through the song *We are Walking in the Light of God*, which is light but with a strong and hopeful communal feel⁸. Once more the Isaac story was told, followed by discussion. One slightly large group of adults gathered and one of younger people. In the former, I could smell some healthy whiffs of reality and it was not difficult to see the deeper dynamic of discipleship through honest engagement being followed through. The wording of the offering, common to each section, underlines this emphasis of wholehearted response.



Lord of creation we thank you for our world
 All *We thank you for your love*
Heavenly Father we offer you our gifts
 All *We offer you our lives.*

The section concludes with the most domestic and Jewish kind of Eucharist that I have witnessed in a building designed for a congregation. Not only did we gather around the table throughout, but children had parts to play. In the framework of Eucharistic Prayer G, it was as though the family was celebrating

⁸ They have since changed this to the Taize chant *Bless the Lord my soul* as more suitably meditative

or toasting the success of Jesus its eldest brother. On distribution of the bread, the whole gathering raised this element in salute and gratitude before consuming. The same was true with the wine, thus requiring individual mini cups. Yet this was not individualism destroying a common cup; it was corporate rejoicing with Christ who is our Passover. A short period followed in which the meal of bread and wine continued with conversation; during it people helped themselves and others to what was laid on the table. The event was brought together with the acclamation "*This is our story... Christ has died, Christ is risen, Christ will come again*" and a prayer of thanksgiving. What could have been simply messy had integrity and authenticity.

12:30 Food and Friendship

Most then stayed for a plentiful but simple buffet-style lunch with people gathering in seated groups and standing in twos and threes. It felt like the family chilling out. It felt to me like a mix of two factors. Those who had enabled long stretches of the overall morning, were now putting their feet up and getting their reward. And for others it was a natural extension of the gathering of the community from 11:30.



Looking deeper

This story will be profoundly misunderstood if it is only seen as providing more flexible worship options in a consumer culture of choice. It is true that the new patterns might well lower the threshold to attendance for the fringe and de-churched. Rob's view is that it probably has done so and it has brought new people and enabled some fringe contacts to stick. But he thinks that the step is still difficult and high for some. For them, church is still apparently held behind narrow but open doors in a medieval building; that is not inviting nor plausible for many. So there is further to go. This is mainly a Judean journey being done very well, but merely to do more of that will not turn it into a Samaritan safari, much less an ends of the earth expedition⁹.

Is relevance the goal?

The section on connecting with society could sound like the relevance argument, which is becoming more contentious. The relevance argument is despised by those nervous of syncretism, who value rocks of tradition standing firm in a wild sea of change and suspect much of pursuing relevance is actually a lust for passing fads. At the other extreme it is embraced, sometimes uncritically, by those who actually enjoy change and novelty. They think it is fine because, to them, it is only changing external labels on the eternal product, or bait put out to catch fish. The danger with the former view is disconnection and ossification; the peril of the latter view is that we can be more affected by the culture than we think. A broad example might be how wedded to modernism our apologetics sometimes became. A narrower manifestation of it would be defending "a God of the gaps" view of life's questions or the newism that dogs contemporary congregational worship and inhibits the building of enduring quality.

"The incarnational instinct will grow towards the counter-cultural one."

My guess is that the danger of syncretism is inherent in all cross-cultural mission. However, that there are dangerous quicksands does not invalidate making a land journey on the coast; it calls for discretion and local knowledge. Yet, let's admit too that our discernment of what may be needed is flawed and partial. It is part of a humility in double listening and a good reason to do it corporately. At the least, there can be

some local *consensus fidelium* at work. What worries me about relevance is that it sounds like chasing culture. So I'd prefer to talk about inculturation than

⁹ See Encounters on the Edge No.30 *Discernment in Mission* pp.17-20 for further explanation of these terms

relevance. As I understand it, the former is not only serious engagement with culture, but also the insertion into that culture of seeds of gospel and church. As those seeds grow in that soil, something comes up that is not entirely explicable by the soil. It is deeply related to what is planted into it. Coming out of the botanical analogy and moving to the example of Jesus, I think this is connected to us trying to follow his broad pattern. He was born into a culture, grew up within it and from there conducted an attempted renewal of that culture, a searing critique of parts of it and a redemption that went beyond it. In theological terms, this means **the incarnational instinct will grow towards the counter-cultural one**, or one might say a parallel dynamic is that the Kingdom of God invades another one to subvert and transform it. Hence **relevance itself is never the goal; that is confusing means with ends**.

Beyond relevance, connection and flexibility

So what is *Come and Go* about? Rob described it in several ways that are all connected. Partly, it is about the Christians learning to minister, gaining confidence in the discovery and application of their gifts for the service of others. The new pattern would require many more people to be involved than before. Here it is very different from the Orthodox or Catholic examples cited. How brave and wise to evolve a way of being church that is impossible for a minister to provide.

Come and Go needs a core team to meet weekly, discerning the themes for the weeks ahead, evoking the sparks of creativity that would explore the theme and ways to enable people to have time on the day to begin to apply it. In their very meeting, the core group themselves make that application; in effect they live out being church, before being before others in public and assisting them. That itself is a discipleship-type process. It is not learning theory in a study and airing the fruits of your research. It is more living a life, following a Master, putting into practice his ways and then repeating those dynamics with others. So a disciple is someone who is being discipled and is treading the steps to beginning to disciple others. That is the second intertwining theme. Church is about growing disciples not satisfying attenders¹⁰. Whenever this is true something counter-cultural to consumerism is at work. Rob is so clear that discipleship is crucial that the plan for his forthcoming sabbatical is to study rabbi-disciple patterns, both past and present.

"How often do clergy only allow change that they can continue to directly control?"

¹⁰ I have already contrasted those two words in Encounters on the Edge No.27 *The Village and Fresh Expressions* p.19

The liberation of ministry and practicing discipleship goes beyond the core team, for there are groups ministering by welcoming, cooking, story-writing, making music, watching to give care, praying in public or for individuals. They found that they would have needed to commission more than 30 leaders in various roles, including service leaders and preachers, which would have overwhelmed the diocesan system for authorisation. Our wider systems are not designed to cope well with any rapid forms of growth. So their training was provided within St John's on a disciple, or apprentice, model of watching and doing. At this point, Rob's relationship with the area bishop and his own length of service in the diocese acted as a trust account upon which he could draw. He remained accountable to the wider church and became the authorising minister. I have seen this welcome pattern of more local episcopate elsewhere when ministry multiplies. That oversight needs to continue to support and, if

necessary, direct. The teams gather about 3 times a year for further skills-based training and mutual support. Conversations with them revealed that they do feel empowered, have learnt that they can do things and grow by taking responsibility.

Thirdly, the growth in confidence, through doing, is also connected to confidence in the Jesus story and that stories have their own power. Rob brings an emphasis that Jesus' own message was not firstly to be understood as disclosing his own

Christological identity, hence the strand of the Messianic secret, forbidding others pass on their discovery of his secret identity. Nor was he very bothered that people must be persuaded to believe; this is endorsed by the volume of his parables that were not only unexplained, but deliberately chosen as such. Rob boils down the Jesus message to two themes: "You are loved by God beyond decency and sense" and "Be ready – be on the right side now". The two themes are worked out by ready practical loving of those we rub up against. This story of being loved despite the messiness of our normal lives is a repeating tune across the symphony of the St John's story.

The fourth strand is a reworking of the role of clergy. If they are following the Jesus pattern, they too will be trainers of disciples as well as storytellers to the wide community. This can be subverted by Christendom expectations, such as pastoral care on demand from all who ask for it. Here it means something



different and closer to the original. Like Jesus, it means disproportionate investment in giving time to small groups of people. They will then be those who carry forward the ministry, as was the case with the 12 in Luke 9, and in the early church. However, it would not be right so to stress the enabling role that it becomes a back seat one. One discovery I am not sure was anticipated, was that as the local church members have become the ministers, then the clergy are freed to pioneer outside the confines of the building. All these features demonstrate flexibility of thought, way beyond simply more flexible worship times.

First steps beyond attractional church

The Toyota Prius looks like a conventional car of MPV from bonnet to boot. Only when you get in and want to start it, do you begin to realise you have actually sat in the driving seat of a different concept. You press the start button and nothing happens. There is no starter motor grind, no engine turning over and firing and no burble out of the exhaust. Just a set of lights come on. You select a gear and depress the accelerator and, to your surprise, the thing moves. It is probably only a step towards the future but the vehicle is both electric and petrol powered. The latter only cuts in when needed and even then I couldn't hear when it started. In many respects it seems to behave like the cars I knew, but it is significantly greener and quieter. It is different. Is *Come and Go* something like this – both a change and a halfway house?

If you don't look too closely, you might say it is just church services done more flexibly. But look harder and deeper. It challenges the Sunday-centred view of church. Sunday itself isn't church; it is only a gathering which helps resource the ongoing life of church. The reality of church is community being met by Jesus and thus it is primarily event and a consequence of something that lies beyond itself. As their own website¹¹ puts it,

"The most important thing about St John's is not the beautiful ancient building, nor the wonderful local Christian people, nor the tried and tested traditions of the Church of England; what makes St John's special is God, who loves us human beings and longs for us to share that love."

As people are being transformed by that encounter, they are empowered to continue in his ongoing mission to the wider community. They also meet with Christ and the Spirit on that outward journey and this in turn feeds back into the times of gathering. The contrast of church as attendance is very different. The

¹¹ <http://www.stjohnshillingdon.org.uk/aboutUs/index.php>

bizarre analogy is of a person who became so addicted to buying petrol that they spent their life driving round the forecourt, buying motor accessories from the shop, cleaning and polishing the vehicle, organising rallies of other cars to do the same and training courses on buying petrol. It is clearly crazy.

Yes, this set of changes is also about accessibility and flexibility over service times but that is only to open the door. What lies inside is far more significant. This is about liberating ministry, not providing consumption. This is about discipleship not attendance. This learning of confidence in the Jesus story will overflow the building. It is also about clergy as enablers not entertainers, which is very challenging to some of them as it was not the focus of their training. These are values and they are what will lead to change.

Of course not all at St John's get it. Read the gospels as a novel and we see that was also true of the disciples, and their Rabbi was the one best at discipling. I become more and more persuaded that in some ways the gospels give us more insight into what it is like to follow Jesus than the epistles do. By that, I only mean that in the gospels we almost eavesdrop on the messy hands-on process. It is not artificial like the *Big Brother* house but it does look

uncannily honest. The flaws are blatant, as is the time the disciples take to get it. By contrast, the epistles which are, after all, a different genre being letters can sound like counsels of doctrinal and ethical perfection. The directions they set are exemplary and normative. It is not for me to quarrel with them. But I am in some ways more helped by the evident fallibility of Peter, the struggles of Thomas and the insistent accepting yet transforming attitude of Jesus.



“Jesus, look at my lovely patches”

I offered my view earlier that *Come and Go* by itself is largely a Judean journey. It is a very good example of real flexibility about "come to us". The title itself bears witness to that. As such, the threshold has been lowered which is good. Yet I was struck by Rob Harrison's candour that it was still an old wineskin but with high quality patches. Perhaps the Toyota Prius is similar; it is only a significant step in the right direction. So a question follows.

Where next?

I was intrigued by the growing perception that now the laity have been trained to minister, clergy can go out and pioneer. This seemed to me to be related to the view of Paul in Romans 15 who has fully proclaimed the Gospel of Christ and now wants and needs to move on. It is also like the instinct of the good cross-cultural missionary and a less well-known quote from Vincent Donovan. “*The final missionary step as regards the people of any nation or culture, and the most important lesson we will ever teach them - is to leave them.*”¹² I doubt in this case the people will be totally abandoned, but they are being trusted to get on with running *Come and Go*. In this case Eucharistic provision will be an issue and finding an OLM/NSM with the right feel for these events and congregational credibility could be good.

It is planned that some Sundays, two teams will go out into the community. They are not putting all their mission "eggs" in the worship "basket". One existing focus is on Violet Avenue, an area some way from the church, both geographically and culturally. For some time, a drop-in has been running together with a charity shop. This midweek ministry of a small number of people getting together to serve others in a simple and practical way, has needed little long-term planning or financial investment. A community has begun to gather there with whom relationships have been built by gentle, patient and generous love. The need is to explore what might slowly grow among them in terms of relational evangelism.¹³ Later on, the kind of worship which fits culturally for those only newly discovering faith will be need to be explored.¹⁴

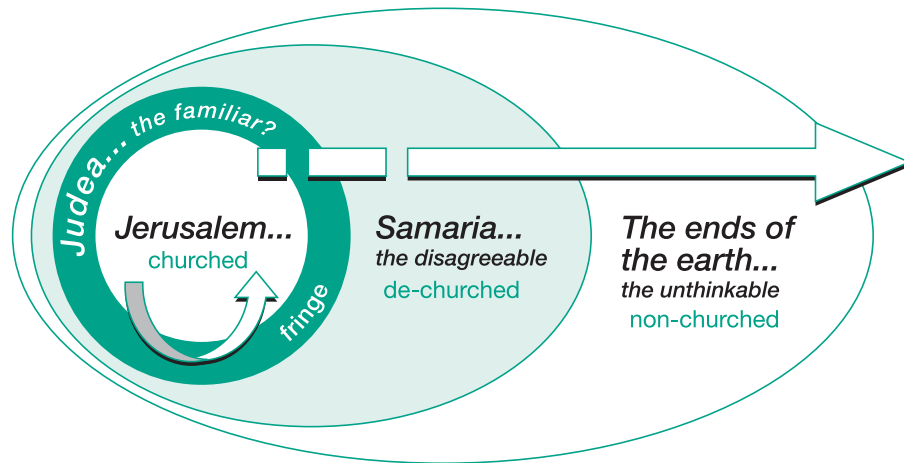
¹² Vincent Donovan *Christianity Rediscovered* SCM 1982 p.163

¹³ Since my visit, Elizabeth tells me a beginning has been made with a mixture of light hearted activities, discussion, reflection, bible input, coffee, drawing small numbers at present but noticed by others.

¹⁴ See the shape of the booklet *Starting a Fresh Expression* The Archbishops' Council 2006

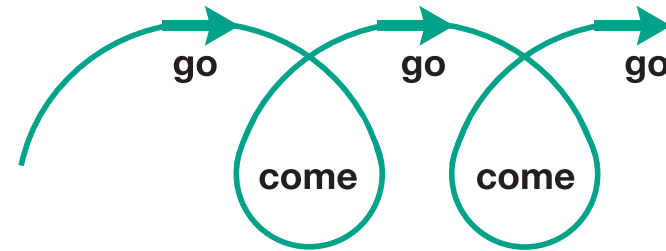
Come then go?

It looks to me that the term "come and go" is acquiring a whole new meaning. Initially, it could have been merely assistance in attracting consumerist people, making it possible for them to come and go when they liked. However, its values of training ministry and growing confident disciples using clergy enablers, means that the "go" dynamics are taking on a whole new meaning. Those changed by it are being liberated to go beyond its confines. Such is the characteristic work of the Holy Spirit.



If the Acts paradigm of Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria and the ends of the earth is anything to go by, then they will find two further things are true. Firstly, their mission cannot be contained in the loop that goes out from Jerusalem and returns to it. Therefore, those who meet Christ beyond the St John's building will not best be served by being dragged back to it. Further colonies of heaven will be planted beyond it. The practice of mission shifts the previous centre of church. Mission is naturally eccentric rather than concentric.

Secondly, this process will contain the, as yet undisclosed, surprises that mean the "go" journey continues to venture outwards. As new generations are born and fresh cultures emerge the end of the earth also moves. The pattern very often works in loops.



New gatherings form in a season of "come" and in due time they are followed by a complementary season of "go" and a yet further dispersing. So this is how the phases of the endless expedition toward the ends of the earth seem to work. In this understanding, it is "go" that prevents "come" from being consumerist. And it is "come" that saves "go" from being activist.

George Lings
September 2007

Cartoons: Tim Sharp

www.stjohnshillingdon.org.uk

¹⁵ See Encounters on the Edge no. 30 *Discernment in Mission* pt 3 for further explanation of these dynamics worked out in the book of Acts.

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