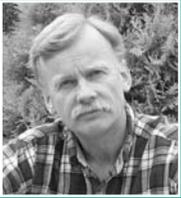


39: Hope Among The Hopeless

Connecting with the urban poor



One of the challenges before the church is the call to urban areas which exhibit the reality of a post-Christendom society and are in the grip of poverty. Can we find ways to create the kind of Christian community that engages well in areas where previously hope had dried up and the Christian presence has all but vanished?

The 'Encounters on the Edge' series covers a wide range of topics including the following:

Kinds of Fresh Expression:

- Alternative Worship Communities
- Café Church
- Cell Church
- Community Development Churches
- Multiple Congregations
- Midweek Churches
- Network Focused Churches
- New Monastic
- Traditional Church Plants
- Youth Congregation

Other areas:

- Anglo-Catholic Fresh Expressions
- The Arts engaging with the Church
- Children and Fresh Expressions
- Discerning Directions in Mission
- Ecology and Church
- Exile - a paradigm for today?
- How do we know it's Church?
- Mission-shaped Church an evaluation
- Rural Fresh Expressions
- Workplace and Church

Our most recent issues include:

35 Changing Sunday

"Come and go": beyond attractional church

36 Leading Fresh Expressions

Lessons from hindsight

37 Chasing The Dream

Starting community

38 The Cost of Community

Issues of maturity

For a full listing of titles in the 'Encounters on the Edge' series and to order back copies visit our website:

www.encountersontheedge.org.uk

The Sheffield Centre, Wilson Carlile Campus, Cavendish Street, Sheffield S3 7RZ

Tel: 0114 272 7451 Fax: 0114 279 5863

Email: l.keith@sheffieldcentre.org.uk www.encountersontheedge.org.uk

no. 39:

Hope Among The Hopeless

Connecting with the urban poor



 **ChurchArmy**
www.churcharmy.org.uk

Discoveries about fresh expressions of church from The Sheffield Centre

Encounters on the Edge

Contents

The context and the calling

Sheffield by the sea?.....3
 Much smaller than Sheffield..... 4
 Berkeley..... 5
 Not a Christian heartland.....5
 Cometh the hour,
 cometh the man.....6
 Steps to a vision.....6
 Two steps forward,
 one step back.....8

The story unfolds..... 9

Seconds out, round one.....9
 Round two: *Adopt a Block*.....9
Adopt a Block in practice.....11
 Ken and Pam’s story.....11
 Troy takes me on *Adopt a Block*....12
 Round three: patience and trust....13
 Alpha in Berkeley.....15
 Round four: life worth living.....17

Why is it so effective?.....21

The next round: discipline and
 sustainable life.....21

One of the challenges before the church is the call to urban areas which exhibit the reality of a post-Christendom society and are in the grip of poverty. Can we find ways to create the kind of Christian community that engages well in areas where previously hope had dried up and the Christian presence has all but vanished?

The context and the calling

Sheffield by the sea?

Imagine the eastern industrial side of Sheffield, city of steel, not in the middle of England, but located on an east coast promontory and you have begun to sense what the town of Port Kembla in Australia might be like. Travel over 40 miles south of Sydney, down Highway 1, and you enter the Wollongong region. Port Kembla is technically a suburb of Wollongong, itself home to over a quarter of a million people. However, it feels more like its own place. It is four miles by road south of the main housing area, separated to the north by the industrial complex. It is one of the largest complexes in the continent and full of railway lines serving blast furnaces, through which a river runs providing the needed water for the industrial process. It is also bounded on the east by the Pacific, the Great Dividing Range to the west and with the large inland Lake Illawarra to the south. That makes it sound like those English east coast towns unkindly described by detractors as miles down the road to nowhere.



Its significance is being the closest specialist industrial port to the Sydney metropolis where nearly 30% of all Australians live. Iron ore, coal and grain make up the traffic that pours through, including exports of coal and grain. It is poised to become the chief port for imported cars, principally from Japan and Korea. Historically speaking, until the 1980s its industrial heart was in steel. Its owners were Broken Hill Proprietary Company Limited (BHP). This firm is now a multinational, having merged with a UK company in 2001 to form BHP Billiton. They renamed themselves in 2003 as BlueScope Steel and are now the largest firm in Australia, producing 70% of steel consumed within the continent. Its production is centralised in Port Kembla.¹

¹ Newcastle, north of Sydney, is the other major concentration.

Like the steel industry in the UK, over the last few decades employment levels have dropped through technological changes, leading to increased output per worker. Whereas there were 32,000 employees in 1982, by 1996 this had shrunk to 12,000. Even as I write, there is a dispute over the prospect of a further 1000 jobs being outsourced by BlueScope. However, though workers in 1983 produced 178 tonnes per person, in 1996 that figure had risen to 636 tonnes² and current management hopes are to raise it over the 700 mark. Pressure on the company comes from the competition of cheaper imported steel, not least from China.

Much smaller than Sheffield

The 2001 census for Port Kembla counted the population as some 4500. Of these, only 160 are historic indigenous people and some 20% are of Greek background. Indicators of poverty include: less than 20% have a certificate or diploma, 15% are unemployed, only 25% have access to a computer and 17% are

in single parent families. However, indicators of past better days are that 67% own their own house and 73% of all dwellings are detached. The latter is a classic antipodean settlement pattern with housing that is both detached and very modest. The remainder is local authority or social housing. The Aussie term is “housing commission” and it makes up a significant part of the area. In addition, Port Kembla has a higher percentage of older people than surrounding Wollongong. This indicates a relatively stable population with a slower turnover. The township has only one main “drag”, a small range of shops

with an obvious presence of seedy establishments such as the so-called adult shops and topless bars. An additional factor has been industrial pollution, with nitrogen oxide, acid rain and high lead levels being notable. The overall history and downturn in employment have contributed to personal illness, environmental health problems and socio-economic ones. As the city council noted:

“This decline has seen the Port Kembla Township deteriorate creating a number of social problems in the area. Renewal programs involving partnerships across government departments and agencies are currently underway to help revitalise the area and bring both economic and social renewal to the area.”³

² *The Iron and Seep Workforce of the Twenty First Century* Geneva: International Labour Office 1997

³ *Port Kembla Demographic Profile 2002-2004*, Social Planning Department, Wollongong City Council



Berkeley

Focusing down yet more sharply, Berkeley (pronounced Burklee) is a housing area on the western side of Port Kembla, overlooking Lake Illawarra. This dominantly white area has a higher number of housing commission properties. Some of the shopping area premises are boarded up. The one community centre is simple but functional. The area has a reputation as a troubled community, yet the coastal location means some people are here with higher aspirations and standards, maintaining their properties in good order. Oddly, the suburb also hosts the Nan Tiem Buddhist temple, the largest in Australia.



Not a Christian heartland

In England, it is well-known that industrial areas have the lowest church attendance figures, not least among Anglicans. Sometimes areas with Catholic populations or those with a strong Methodist heritage have done better. It is said that the average Anglican congregation in east Sheffield is around 30 people. But the parish system, though spread thin, is still in place. England's Sheffield, geographically dissected by ridges and valleys is, in one sense, a collection of urban villages and each still has an Anglican presence, with a church and clergy person. Sheffield knows a stark contrast between struggling churches in the working class east and several strongly flourishing ones within its middle class south western quadrant.

So it is here, yet more so, in this part of the large ebullient Diocese of Sydney, itself split into five episcopal areas. Berkeley is part of the parish of Port Kembla. Nearby Dapto parish is in a more prosperous township, only three miles west of Berkeley and on the western shores of Lake Illawarra. Its Anglican rector is Stephen Semenchuk and the family of Dapto congregations meet in four separate locations within the town. By contrast, in Berkeley a previous work conducted from a painfully simple community building, clad in asbestos sheeting, closed in 1989 and the area remained untouched



until a Church Army evangelist came in January 2007. The current leaders think there are locals who are up to three generations non-churched.

Cometh the hour, cometh the man⁴



Wayne Pickford, who came from Dapto parish, has a colourful background. For part of his life he was a professional wrestler under the sobriquet "Pickford the Punisher". That's the kind of sport that goes down well in Port Kembla or Berkeley, populated by "battlers" – an Aussie term for working class, hard living people, among whom family conflict is as normal as illustrated by an episode from Coronation Street. Later, being a prison officer for 23 years continued an education in the tougher sides of life and also showed Wayne the enormous gap between a Sunday congregation life and

a Monday to Friday faith. In Church Army from 2000, as part of Dapto parish he was involved in ministry to men on the edge of the church but found that "battlers" couldn't connect with church life. His wife Mary was the parish's children and family worker. The Diocese of Sydney, which clearly and confidently embraces goals for growth under the slogan of "10% of the population of Sydney in Bible believing churches by 2010", itself freely admits that its penetration among the "battlers" and those outside the middle class north shore of Sydney metropolis is less effective.



Wayne misunderstood integrating church and work

Steps to a vision

In the next stage of Wayne's calling and sensing a vision, **two strands came together** to reveal ways forward beyond his frustration. One was continued contact with Tim Scheuer, now national director of Church Army Australia. It is intriguing that Tim had considered a post in Port Kembla in 2001 so it was known territory. In addition, as told by Claire Dalpra in *Encounters on the Edge* No. 17⁵, Tim had previous experience of starting the effective creation of Christian community work among the working poor in Branson, Missouri. This included the emergence of indigenous leadership whom he trained and to whom he handed

over the work in order to move to Australia. Tim brought with him to Australia the lessons of life transformation and sustainable community among those from addicted backgrounds drawing on an original Christian version of the Alcoholics Anonymous programme.

The other strand was my own visit in 2004 to the Australian Church Army Conference to which I was invited to talk about what our research in England had been teaching us, emerging in the lessons and principles of speaking and which drip fed through the *Encounters on the Edge* stories since 1999. I highlighted how and why classic evangelism was now limited in its effectiveness. This chimed in with Wayne's experience. I opened up that, particularly among those working with the non-churched, we were now seeing elements of **a new shape of good practice**. This could be summarised as follows.

The first stage was to grow a sense of community, both among the people to whom one was sent and also within the team sent. Both aspects tend to prompt spiritual questions, by the quality of relationships and engagement with local people's issues. Then next, in due time having won the right to speak and because of the interest shown, this would be followed by more obviously evangelistic contact. That could be either individual conversation or, if it was culturally suitable locally, group exploration of Christian faith. Only then, as encounters with Jesus began to come into focus and people started to choose to follow him and his ways, would the third stage emerge and it would be appropriate to evolve acts of public worship. But these ways of gathering must be ones that suited the culture of the local people, not imposed by a well-meaning outside team.⁶



⁴ Wikipedia asserts there is no agreed source of this phrase.
⁵ C. Dalpra *Encounters on the Edge* No. 17 *Addicted to Planting Church Army* 2003

⁶ This process became formally written up in the booklet, C. Dalpra, G. Lings and S. Croft *Starting a Fresh Expression* CHP 2006

At the time, this shape could still seem strange and a long way from previous practice of direct evangelism or past church planting practice in which one assumption was that public worship marked the start of the work. However as a good pragmatist Aussie, Wayne could see that what had been tried before wasn't working, so the mad pommie's views could be given a chance. What was there to lose?

Two steps forward, one step back

A new shape had some potential because Berkeley had a history of past failed church planting done by various denominations on the old model. As explained, Anglican work had ceased eighteen years earlier. Was this going to be hard ground or would there be seeds lying dormant? A proposal was put together through 2006, aided by the rector who served on the Diocesan Board of Mission. The idea was that the diocese would put in one third of the costs, Church Army another third and Wayne would raise personal support for the remainder. The parish's gift would be to let Wayne and Mary stay in their existing church house and to take with them some members of Dapto as the core team.

Although the area bishop, Reg Piper⁷, was excited by the prospect, the diocese thought the proposal too risky to invest in and declined part funding so Church Army, the rector and Wayne had to raise the monies elsewhere. Wayne went through the process of seeking to raise a team from among the Dapto congregations and found half a dozen willing hands, including those with some doubts raised by a previous unhelpful transplanting venture. Wayne understood from the teaching of Bob and Mary Hopkins (on a later visit in 2006) that getting the right team was crucial. It should be allowed to take time and, **for this kind of cross-cultural work, a smaller but committed team was more helpful.** He was able to utilise and take the newly-formed team into Church Army Australia's basic training package "Base Jumping". This programme was devised by national training co-ordinator Ken Morgan for those exploring first steps towards a mission-based global gap year through Church Army.

⁷ Now retired

The story unfolds

So on February 18th 2007 they began. So often, church planting ventures kick off with an all-singing, all-dancing public worship service. But this can be unhelpful in at least two ways. It sets a standard that is hard to keep up week by week and it implicitly reinforces that the summit of ambition is church attendance, being passive watchers as the people at the front do their thing. Wayne had some pressure from local clergy that this was the way to start. However, he hung onto the elements of the founding vision and stuck with what would strike a note of community building. What could he bring?

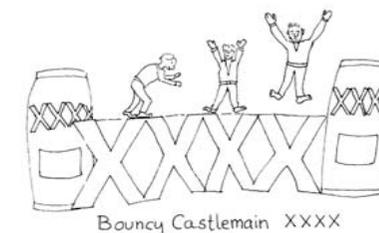
Seconds out, round one

"Pickford the Punisher" re-emerged in a purple costume as part of a free public outdoor series of wrestling bouts - and an Aussie barbie of course. I never got to ask him whether the colour of his costume was from the past or a subtle nod to ecclesial hopes, or if winning all his bouts was only down to sheer skill. Naturally **people turned out for a fun event** amid a sometimes drab area where trouble can be more normal. In addition there was a band and a bouncy castle. People's curiosity was raised but, fun and memorable though it was, solid work cannot be built out of razzmatazz. Curiosity can wane.



Round two: Adopt a Block

Some say that Churchill made a romantic decision in World War II that defending India was more important than protecting Australia. If the latter was invaded by the Japanese, it could be re-conquered later. This was taken as a marker that Australia's future was not fundamentally with "the old country". Whatever other levers operate with this (such as distance), Australia now has a stronger Pacific affinity than an English one; perhaps this comes out in their determination to beat us at all sports and their resultant breast beating over our higher medal position in the 2008 Olympics. In addition, its sheer vast size and history of being five separate Crown colonies until 1901, means Australia is federal. Thus, for many reasons including similar length of written history, **there are natural affinities with the USA** who were central to the defeat of the Japanese.



In addition Aussie pragmatism works easily with American “how to” approaches. I have therefore found that the Australian church is more open than in England to US church thinking, writing and models. It was only in 2008 that I began to hear this questioned more widely and to witness the Australian church being more confident to draw from English *Mission-shaped Church*⁸ thinking as well as US material and, even better, to find its own way by writing home-grown material to address its own diverse and changing culture.

However, the practical application beneath the English idea to begin the planting process with enhancing community, was drawn from the US. *Adopt a Block* is a programme with accompanying training materials, that operates out of the Dream Center in Los Angeles. The AOG founding pastor, Tommy Barnett, from a megachurch in Phoenix Arizona, branched out to Los Angeles in 1994 to begin the Dream Center in the poorer areas of the city. It

became part of Los Angeles International Church. The vision talks about getting out in the community, meeting people in their homes and neighbourhoods, finding their needs and helping them to meet them. This can mean taking them food, helping them with their yards and gardens by bringing in tools they don't have, clearing up graffiti in the area and helping them clean up the community.

Essential is helping the local people rediscover a sense of pride.



Critics would applaud the loving service, approve of the belief in empowerment rather than strengthening dependency, but might query that it could be designated ministry at the bottom of the cliff, rather than fence building at the top. Perhaps two responses would be to say if there are already plenty of people at the bottom of the cliff, ministry among them is necessary and not all kinds of helpers are in positions of power and influence to agitate for the fence building. It can also be true that good work at the bottom of the cliff can be the springboard for questions about what structures cause these needs in the first place, leading to council and government interventions to address the causes and unnecessary inequalities.

⁸ *Mission-shaped Church* Archbishops' Council CHP 2004

Adopt a Block in practice

The team of six, not including Wayne and Mary, were initially daunted by the thought of what seemed like cold-calling in an area known to be tricky. Some described themselves to me as initially terrified. I was told that in some parts of Berkeley the police and the ambulance crews are nervous to go in, though often have to and there literally can be blood on the stairways of the three storey flats near the centre of the community. They developed a pattern of calling weekly during daylight hours and, having found out the needs, with free loaves of bread, donated from a local quality baker. They would be seen across the estate with a green "bag for life" bulging with bread on every visit. The ex-church hall became their storehouse and the base for what Aussies call “the op shop” (we'd talk about “a charity shop”). Some of the locals are not short of varying kinds of stimulants but these patterns eat into their money and simple nutritious foodstuffs become lower priorities and can be in short supply.

However, this work is far more than mobile charity. **These team members have become street pastors.** Each take on 30-50 houses or flats in a compact definable area and these are the people they visit weekly, simply walking door to door. As such I was reminded of the dynamic within the Kidz Club movement whereby helpers visit the children and their families with similar regularity. Then addresses become names and faces with ongoing stories; trust leads to appropriate vulnerability, familiarity opens opportunity, needs turn to prayer and conversations about deeper issues surface. Inevitably, there are cases of cold reception, sometimes intended deception, but mostly there are stories of openness, people beginning by passing the time of day but then willing to talk and even request prayer - and this in an area of third generation non-churched.

Ken and Pam's story

For many years the Harpers were part of Dapto parish. Ken still works two days a week for the steel industry and Pam is a nurse, so they both know the issues connected to the area. Ken should; he was born here. At worst, Ken jokes that all they learnt about relating to outsiders from years of church attendance, was how to give out hymn books. What an indictment of church life that would be and in some cases I suspect it is true. To be fair and truthful, in his case he was part of the Evangelism Explosion visitation programme for 20 years, imported, as in England, from the States. Yet they found that it proved too dependent on a past rector generating fringe contacts through the occasional



offices. For people less connected to church and faith, the whole programme and its tightly structured teaching starts too far on in spiritual exploration.

To join the team, move the focus of their service to Berkeley, learn the insights of *Adopt a Block* and become street pastors has been life-giving to them. It is as though they have been trusted as never before and certainly given scope like never before. This is real ministerial responsibility and they lap it up. Ken looks after two blocks and Pam shares the care of one of them with him. They love it so much they are considering whether to cut down their working hours and take less paid work. "Now we belong here, not Dapto. These are our people and this is our church. We needed to be used and we needed to step out of our own comfort zones", they told me. A very obvious example of how the block sees them in a positive pastoral and spiritual way is that when a person within the block died, the relatives asked Ken to take the funeral which he did and it was natural that he spent the entire day at the wake.

Troy takes me on *Adopt a Block*

Troy is a team member who has been visiting his patch since February 2007. In July 2008 he took me with him to the three floor blocks of flats that he serves. Their reputation is to be among the toughest in the neighbourhood and Aussies like to offer the poms the deep-end experience. The residents are poor; most are long-term unemployed. Gambling is an enormous problem with them spending up to three times the national average on poker machines and it is normal for the male 18-24 year olds to lose \$750 a year. Some of the children are so disruptive and criminalised that they have had to be excluded from school and any central meetings the young church have. Lives are often chaotic, with a lack of rhythm. Drink and smokes are perennial as is the blaring TV. Rubbish lies on the stairs and in the open areas between the blocks.



Some residents describe their patch as a ghetto. However, when Troy started visiting, it was the residents who

were afraid of him. They now joke with him about flushing their drugs down the toilet at the knock on the door. It all began in mutual fear and local suspicion.

Though it was winter, the temperature in the flats was in the low 60s. On each floor the fly screen door was closed but the main door open. I noticed that some people were still hesitant to open that outer door and respected the way Troy never tried to

open it, always waiting until trust had been built and they were ready to stand in the doorway or to invite us in. I was touched that **in their poverty many would offer us a share in their cigarettes or beer** and it was fine to say yes to the latter and in today's world OK not to be a smoker. I confess I was relieved not to be offered drugs; a little dilemma between sense and hospitality would have arisen. They were grateful for the rolls and white fruit loaf that we brought. It was good that our common humanity was affirmed by this mutual sense of giving and receiving and I think it was right that we did not spurn their hospitality. Troy told me that on occasions, in some households there was the need for basic furniture and second-hand items have been brought and put to good use. Sometimes these are given. Sometimes they are bought cheaply through the op shop. A number of households I met were aboriginal family groups, notable for their immediate warmth and an inherent sense of the brotherhood of all humanity, though substance dependency is rife.

Clearly already there is openness to more serious conversation. While doing the rounds, people in some households asked for prayer for personal or family needs. It seemed to me entirely correct that Troy's instinct was to respond with prayer out loud at the time. **This is an immediate culture that values straightforward simplicity.** To say we would take away the request and put it on some church prayer list for next Sunday would be to emphasise distance and that the sacred happened somewhere else. And how would they know whether the church had actually prayed? This immediacy was expression of both good inculturation and a belief in the sacrament of the present moment. Equally, because the overall work has now developed it was straightforward and un-embarrassing to say "*hope to see you on Sunday afternoon*" which is when the church community gathers. But this is to run ahead in the story. Granted chaotic lives, there will long be a gap between expressed intention and regular attending.

Round three: patience and trust

One of the delights of this story is that it is such a copy book example of the shape and process I thought I spotted in the early years of researching for *Encounters on the Edge* and brought out to Australia in 2004: build community, let evangelism develop, evolve worship. Wayne was most entertaining about this. On meeting him again after a two-year gap, he began by saying, "*You know that stuff you talked about in the Church Army conference in 2004?*" I wondered why there was a quizzical look on his face as he said this. I was waiting for some difficult question, subtle modification, bare-faced distortion, or outright repudiation. "*Well, it actually works,*" he continued. I confess I was somewhat relieved. But it then got better.

"*We kept on doing the community stuff until they said they wanted to find out about the Christian faith.*" My instinctual beliefs, I hope schooled to some extent by the wisdom of Allen and Donovan, had a great surge of encouragement. Here was

We kept on doing the community stuff until they said they wanted to find out about the Christian faith

someone who trustingly (which is a bit scary when you have "sold them the package") actually thought it would work and found that it did. I want to add that the magic is not of course that this has a "made in Sheffield" label on it, but that all we are doing is trying to note how God the Spirit is at work in our culture. We simply go round the place sniffing for the aroma of Christ. We look for the fingerprints of God and the evidences of the Spirit blowing, as past reputation suggests will occur. It seems to us that what happens is when people more deliberately live out together the transformational communal life of Christ within them and between them, a spiritual magnetism begins to hum.

As people let the love of Christ which has entered them slowly make them more Christlike, overflowing to others, then this finds resonance in those they meet. We are all made for this transforming encounter with God; to be taken on this journey is to go further in rediscovering what it is to be truly human. Of course committed loving community is powerful and attractive. It mirrors the life of the Trinity and, by creation ordinance, is inbuilt into humans, all of whom we believe are in the image of God. This is underlined in that the image text of Genesis 1 is intimately connected to the introduction into the story of gender. **Community necessarily involves the embracing of difference**, just as *perichoresis* and diversity of persons are inherent in the Trinity. I don't say that the good people of Berkeley knew all that theory, but then it is true that magnetism worked long before any scientist discovered how it worked.



What the excellent Berkeley team did know was that you don't only do community engagement and the practical loving of people until they start coming. It isn't the case that you go fishing and stop when you have caught enough. *Adopt a Block* is not an in-drag programme in disguise or a process of "rice Christian" inducement. It is long-term engagement with a community for its own sake and the practical loving of people for their sake. An example would be the work in the local pub. Under the previous

landlord, its reputation was one of a men-only group in which fights included knives as drugs and other black market goods changed hands.

However, when the new publican, who has a small chain of pubs outside the area, Dan O'Hara took over, he wanted a change to something that built community rather than being parasitic upon it. He introduced food and worked for a family atmosphere. The refurbished building, RDL Cellars Drive-In, does not conform to

the English village green image and when I went in at lunchtime the predominant group were what I took to be "battlers" engrossed in the televised horse racing in a dimly lit bar. But monthly the street pastors, now aided by new church community members, put on a free BBQ of egg, bacon and rolls for whoever is there.

The day we visited about 20 people came through and enough trust had been built that my taking photographs was not an issue. I met Dan the publican and sensed the shared desire for rebuilt community that he has in common with the team. The function room has been significantly upgraded. They have an arrangement with Dan to use this room when their normal hall is booked out and early next year the young church will use it for a beer and prawns night with the bishop, Al Stuart, as guest speaker. The locals are interested as they have never seen a bishop before and have some questions for him, including why he wears a dress.



It seems that the emphasis on community works, in terms of drawing people to the energy and person of Jesus who inspires all this. Love is both self-giving and inherently attractive; it both genuinely responds to needs and tends to prompt questions. So in this case, when the local people started to ask what lay behind such self-giving, the team provided ways that they could explore their curiosity. At this point it has to be admitted that some Christians thought the next stage was public worship but Wayne resisted that jump, helped by Ken Morgan who acts in a coaching relationship to the team.

Alpha in Berkeley

In this case, *Alpha* seemed to work for them. I suggest here that there is connection to two particular strengths. One is that *Alpha* is based on food, community and hospitality. As such it would be a good choice because it follows on naturally in the steps of the first stage of visiting with bread that shares those dynamics. This is in keeping with the older wisdom in Laurence Singlehurst's still valuable book, *Sowing Reaping Keeping* and its observation that core dynamics in the earlier sowing stages should be retained and continued in any later stages. I made a related point in the analogy of mission being more like constructing well-connecting

arches rather than hoping to find a one arch bridge that takes a person, theologically-speaking, in one jump from the world to the church.⁹

With this culture and set of people, the other connection operating is that *Alpha* is strongly experiential. This is not only found in the rich experience of food and small groups but also that its content is more about what it would be like to be a Christian rather than intellectual reasons why the listener should become one. Then this is topped off, if those are the words I should use, by the Holy Spirit weekend or day, in which the leaders are taught to pray and expect that something will actually happen. Worldwide, I observe that one of the big Christian stories of the twentieth century has been the growth of Pentecostalism among the world's poorer peoples.

Newbigin, in the still extraordinarily valuable small book, *The Household of God*, coined perhaps the first distinctive Pentecostal ecclesiology from outside the movement. He laid it alongside the existing Catholic and Protestant views and argued there that **the New Testament writers are notably free of the reformed and modernist fear of experience.**¹⁰ If nothing happens why would you think it was real? If it makes no difference, why would you stick with it when times are tough? If there is no power for change, am I not left in the grip of my addictions with only self-help and peer pressure to persuade me? I am aware that over-claiming change and power, tendencies to methods that look like controlling God and leanings to prosperity gospel make this Pentecostal connection hazardous but the alternative of merely intellectual faith or attending the institutional church are hardly mouthwatering, let alone life-changing.

So *Alpha* is what they chose having decided that the inherited *Evangelism Explosion* material was too heavy, too intellectual and insufficiently experiential. They regularly include ice breakers which have two virtues. They assist the local people in seeing that team members are people who share in everyday ups and downs of common humanity. They also serve, in a community that lives with some level of dysfunctionality, the ceaseless task of relationship-building and even repair. The local people seem to find it helpful, though as with some other working class communities, variable attendance is par for the course and being allowed to go through it more than once is utterly essential. It meets on a Wednesday evening with an overall group of about 20 people.

In the same spirit, Wayne then led the team to continue to wait; they didn't leap from *Alpha* to starting worship services. I find this entirely in keeping with the vision of Roland Allen. The tough question to the impatient missionary and the distrustful professional is this: do you actually trust, not just the Spirit of God working among the people, and the Word of God given to the people for them to digest, **but do**

you trust the people themselves to co-operate with Spirit and Word? I sense that this is easier for those with a Catholic view of humanity than for some Protestants. For the latter, the fall is regarded as so ruinous and destructive that they doubt there is sufficient good left in any of us. Not only that, but the Protestant view of holiness can be distorted to focus more on separation from the world than calling to be transformed to be more like God. Both instincts frame how evangelism and mission is controlled and colour how evangelism is to be done. If in doubt, tell them rather than let them discover. Push them through the process because they won't get it for themselves. I think the essence of Allen's message is still waiting to be practiced as normal. Hence my delight to see it being done here and being fully honoured. "We waited until they said they wanted to start meeting for worship." Naturally volunteers are worth many pressed men and from the start there is deeper ownership of the process.

We waited until they said they wanted to start meeting for worship

Round four: *Life Worth Living*

The people in the *Alpha* groups were taught that they were the church of Berkeley. It is then less surprising that they started to want to meet. So what day did they choose? Where did they meet? There was not much choice over the second in that there was only one community centre and it was central and known. Saturday night at 17:00 was the chosen time. One of the locals explained that Sunday was family and house cleaning day.

I gather the afternoon I visited was fairly normal. The large, wide room with a stage at the far end was laid out with 12 tables and 8 chairs round each. That's an expectation that there could be 100 people. In the event, I counted 30 kids and 40 adults. They were of all ages and with a good spread of men, not dominantly women. On each table were crayons, pencils, paper and sweets. As the event unfolded it was not just children who drew. In one adult group of men, a practical class in mechanical engineering with diagrams to boot got



⁹ G. Lings, *Encounters on the Edge* No. 33, *Café Church pt 1, Coffee, Croissants and Christ Church Army* 2007 pp. 24-27

¹⁰ L. Newbigin, *The Household of God* Originally 1953, now reissued by Paternoster 1998 p. 119

recorded. It might be worth collecting up the papers week by week as evidence of what happens at the tables. The all-male amplified band of two guitarists and a drummer were setting up at the front as well as those sorting out a data projector and microphones. Between then and 17:25 people wandered in and out, including those who called to say they couldn't come this week.

The informal gathering was drawn together with a couple of songs which ushered in my first surprise. The diet was mainly *Hillsongs* with pleasantly presented words through powerpoint. What had happened to “evolving worship”? Where was inculturation? The explanation was simple. Everybody here has TV and many channels. The God Channel is on all the time and so this was the music they already knew. The participation was in keeping with that source. When the band played, the people sat at their tables and sang along, just as you would in your living room.



However, because this was live, at the end of the set they were clapped as you might be in a working men's club or the pantomime. It was then odd that the team members were largely clustered at the back half of the room where the tables stopped. They conformed to church culture and stood doing the requisite body movements. I wondered which group would socialise the other. One of the songs was introduced as the time for an “offertory” and I confess the word grated. But the style was fine. A man walked round with a plastic bucket, some people tossed in coins and notes

and to each he said “Ta, mate”. It was human and homely. Wayne got up, set the tone by welcoming people and explained they could come in and out for a smoke whenever they liked. He interviewed Tim Scheuer and this chat show section was also clapped. I found myself musing that Cranmer would have appreciated the need for the worship to be in keeping with the culture of the people.

Part of this section included the reading of a letter of encouragement from the area bishop. It was fascinating to instantly realise that the bishop had tried to personalise this text for the Berkeley context so the vocabulary was less ecclesial and complex than usual. However, it still flew some 15 ft over everybody's heads, leaving Tim and Wayne struggling to translate as they read it and the people thinking it was nice the bishop bothered to write but without a clue as to what he was really saying. By contrast, the 15 minutes kids spot was led by Dave (a team member) and drew on the best traditions of participation in beach mission slapstick comedy, taking home the point that we needed Jesus in order to clean up our lives.

I hope at other times there would be equally memorable material that was confident in Christ and positive about change already in place, as I sense the local people already live with a sense of mess and perhaps shame.

Ken led the prayers and I appreciated the mixture of using a few evocative, beautiful pictures on the screen that took us both wider than and beyond our context, with the gathering of live prayer requests as well as news of answers to previous prayers that rooted us back in the locality. The combination encapsulated both a beckoning vision and a community learning the reality of corporate prayer. It is nevertheless hard to escape all “Christianese”. Why do we still “bow our heads”? Surely the screen and its images invoked looking up to God? **This business of truly evolving inculturated worship is a tough one** in which it is harder for us to put down what we have inherited than we think.

Emily then introduced what they call “table talk”. A question is introduced, in this case, “*Why do you think Aussies don't go to church?*” After a few minutes of buzz in groups, Emily gathered up some responses. I could see the value of finding subjects that chimed in either with topical or local issues, or those that in effect introduced the theme of the day. It would be one way of getting feedback on the evolving mind of the young community. A 10 minute half-time smoke break was announced, during which the children brought round scones and cake. Once more the historic **boundaries between church service, café culture and community event were happily blurred.**

At this point, the children went to their own activities. After the one reading from Philipians, Wayne's talk was prefaced by his prayer not to bore people and to keep it short and sweet. 25 minutes later we had been carried along by humour, testimony and passion. He told stories of how even a local atheist, challenging Wayne if he could know he was right, had to admit this church is different. The assembled people were urged to think of themselves as not only the church of Berkeley but, by their love for one another, a foretaste of heaven and a colony of it on earth. The emphasis fell on the continued need for practical action, taking out the transforming difference Christ was making through deeds and out of desire for Berkeley to be a different place. He trod the narrow path between offering hope and yet encouraging realism. The appeal, to declare oneself to be part of the church, putting Christ first and being part of taking the Gospel out to the community, had for me the unlooked





for result that nearly the whole church went forward to be prayed for en masse, leaving me sitting solitary at my table. I hurriedly made a virtue from necessity by taking a photograph.

A couple of songs, clapped as normal, then led to the homely ending. *"Thanks for coming, please join us for dinner."* The children came back in and the whole company surged to the left where the kitchen servery opened for a hot meal accompanied by chips and salad. Some returned to the tables while others ate standing up and chatting.

Why is it so effective?

I found it astonishing that in an area this challenging, in 15 months they had drawn such a response. As is nearly always the case wherever I visit, it is a week of poor attendance and there have been times 100 have come. This response is doubly noteworthy in that the stage of evolving public worship had been kept back until it was asked for. Is that perhaps one reason for its impact? The Saturday gathering is thereby more deeply owned and certainly the local people are actively involved in the setting up and breakdown. They participate both round the tables and with comment from the floor. I look ahead to the day when they are among those also leading at the front. Could other features be a leader who can identify culturally and thus is a role model within reach? Is it linked to having a small committed prayerful team who are genuinely building community relationships? Is it that so little had happened in the last 18 years that this was a welcome contrast? Were there seeds sown earlier that had lain dormant and which now have burst into life? I confess I don't know.

The next round: discipleship and sustainable life

I do know that they are wise not to be content with good numbers attending the public meeting. I think of the drift of Jesus' words that people saying "Lord, Lord" is not going to impress him much; rather he would value those who do the will of the Father. Essential in the whole process is the existence of small discipleship groups whose emphasis is transformation of life. This would be a natural legacy from Tim Scheuer's work among recovering addicts. These same sex groups meet in threes with an emphasis on group accountability and mesh with the *Adopt a Block* structure. It is following natural lines that those we visit are those we do discipleship with, growing the sense that the blocks are the pastoral structure within the church. Building on this they are working towards a monthly party held on each block, not least to counter the comment of those who feel they live in a ghetto. Already there is some sense that the community is changing and growing stronger. Even those selling the drugs locally say they want the area to get better for their kids. The discipleship focus also puts emphasis on being willing to use people in ministries without waiting first for formal theological knowledge, let alone for acceptable public moral rectitude. As soon as possible, members take part in serving at the pub BBQ or in the Saturday gathering.





It would be possible to be rosy-eyed and realism knows that many members face multiple problems in life. They need one to one mentoring and as the church grows the number available to do that is small. Some members have very short fuses in a community that knows all about long-standing arguments

between neighbours on the street. Patterns are often of glorious growth then marred by loud collapse leading to painful restitution. It will take considerable time, not so much to spot the indigenous leaders, but for them to become more stable as befits more responsibility. Yet there is no lack of willingness to give them rope even if it means there will be learning the hard way. It is the pattern of the disciple Peter and the messiness of the Church of Corinth. God has trodden this way before.

Those risks mean the individuals I talked to were very clear that **here is a Christian community that is big on acceptance.** One said *"I don't have to walk on eggshells. You don't have to change who you are."* Yet she knows she is being changed; forgiveness for her is now a reality, fear of death has receded and prayer has become a normal part of life. She is gaining confidence to invite others and to stand against criticism and dismissal. *"I love this church,"* she simply said. It's a good place to end. I wish them well on the ongoing journey, where hope is coming to a community in which it was in short supply.

George W Lings
September 2008

Cartoons: Tim Sharp

How can The Sheffield Centre help you?

This booklet has been brought to you by Church Army. It was written and produced by The Sheffield Centre, Church Army's Research Unit. Directed by Revd George Lings, The Sheffield Centre exists to discover, develop and disseminate their findings to Church Army and to the wider Church in the following areas:

- Fresh expressions of church and church planting: George Lings
- Evangelism to post-Christian culture: Steve Hollinghurst
- Evangelism and older people: Michael Collyer

What else does The Sheffield Centre offer?

- Further sources of study on the issues raised by these booklets: Claire Dalpra
- Training courses on planting fresh expressions of church
- Sabbatical study facilities on areas related to our research
- A database of Church of England fresh expressions of church
- Online guide to fresh expressions of church: Andrew Wooding

How would you get hold of more copies?

To order further copies of this booklet or others in the series, visit our website:

www.encountersontheedge.org.uk

or contact Laurence Keith on l.keith@sheffieldcentre.org.uk
or 0114 272 7451. Individual copies are £4.

www.encountersontheedge.org.uk

Supporting the continuing mission
of the Church of England