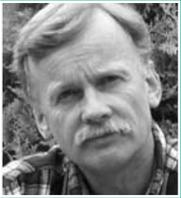


## 45: The X Factor Within



It looks as though café culture is here to stay. Perhaps this is why examples of Christians developing café churches continue to emerge. This issue tells the story of a café church in a rural context. It is an intriguing example of a fresh expression working with café, all-age worship and faith exploration concurrently.

George Lings went to find out more...

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# Encounters on the Edge



no. 45:

## The X factor within

Rural café church

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Discoveries about fresh expressions of Church from The Sheffield Centre

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## Another café please...

It's nearly three years since *Encounters on the Edge* ran two consecutive issues on a few newly designated café churches. We found it was an easy term for others to use, with resonance to the café culture that has broken out like a rash in the UK and Ireland, to the surprise of those who thought we wouldn't be found drinking coffee outdoors in our weather. Actually, the majority of cafés are in the chains like Starbucks, Costa Coffee and Café Nero found in so many towns, and apart from fair weather days, it is inside that solitaires drink in peace, and socialites chatter like magpies.

Since then, a May 2008 edition of the Church Times carried an article on how Costa Coffee had given churches permission to use their shops for regular meetings. The entertainingly named Revd Cid Latty, a Baptist Minister in Welwyn Garden City, began the movement two years earlier in 2006 and there are a number of churches in what is like a franchise. It includes centrally organised training on how to run such a regular event, by which the local church pays Costa through a loyalty card and guaranteed sales depending on the venue size.

I ran a query on the online self-registering database, run by Fresh Expressions, which was kept live until early 2009 and has since been kindly given to The Sheffield Centre. It showed around 30 examples claiming to be some form of café church. How many there are now nobody knows, but clearly the concept is still popular and has not gone away.

In choosing what to write about in the *Encounters on the Edge* series, we include a mixture. Some are what could be called exotic cases that spark imagination and demonstrate unusual engagement with niches of our diverse culture. By contrast we also tell stories of more widely reproducible cases whose virtue is that an ordinary church has gone on a journey within the scope of what others could explore. We would want to add that in all cases, we never favour mere copying, and this tale helps show why. Rather we encourage learning and reapplying for each localised context. We believe God's way for the birth of further churches is by non-identical reproduction.<sup>1</sup> So when I heard of a small rural congregation in Norfolk running a café church called Xpressions Café and embodying several of the stages I had suggested in Encounters 33, it was intriguing.

<sup>1</sup> Martyn Atkins, *Resourcing Renewal* (Peterborough: Inspire, 2007), pp. 222-223 & p. 241 is the first to use this term which helpfully clarifies that 'reproduction' should not be twisted to mean copying or cloning.

## The background to Xpressions Café

### Where

The Chet Valley benefice is halfway between Norwich and Beccles. Its largest village, Loddon, used to be the local market town halfway along the fifteen mile journey between them and it still has a staithe, meeting the river, which connects to the southern Broads. The benefice is split north/south by the A146. Sisland lies to the west and all the other villages to the east. Google Earth shows the population centre is the two connecting villages of Loddon and Chedgrave, with the Chet running under a road bridge between them. The others might be termed hamlets, placed in an eastern two-mile arc around Loddon/Chedgrave.



Village Name	Population	Church Attendance	Governance	Special Features
Loddon	2578*	55	JCC	Anglican Methodist LEP
Chedgrave	985*	23	PCC	Venue for the Café
Sisland	48	10	PCC	8.00am BCP
Langley	c.250	n/a - School only	DCC	Independent School Chapel
Hardley	c.240	8	PCC	8.00am Common Worship
Hales	479*	-	-	Redundant Church
Heckingham	143*	-	-	Redundant Church

A couple of these villages also have a variety of monthly services.

\* 2001 Census figures. Langley with Hardley is 489. Wikipedia provided the Heckingham data.

Immediately it is clear these are relatively small churches in terms of human resource, which makes the story more notable. The sizes also provide a measure by which to assess numbers drawn to various elements of Xpressions Café. In both rural and UPA contexts, growth measured by percentages is far more meaningful than raw numerical figures which can look slight. It is also evidence that percentage attendance varies widely across the villages; witness

20% at Sisland, to 2% at Loddon. In addition, I learnt that some churches are eclectic across and even beyond the benefice, while others are strongly local. There is also a recently constituted overall benefice council to which the PCCs have devolved powers on issues affecting the whole benefice.

Staffing includes Nigel Evans as stipendiary incumbent, Richard Seel as NSM associate vicar, Janet Wyer as training curate, Alison Ball as part-time voluntary children and families worker, two Readers, of whom one is an OLM ordinand, a part-time paid youth worker, as well as another ordinand and a reader-in-training who will redeploy elsewhere. Compared to some other rural contexts this represents rather more leadership than most other rural benefices will enjoy.



### When, why and who

Nigel and Penny Evans and their family came to the Chet Valley, and to Nigel's surprise to a rural first living, in January 2005. At that stage there were only three church families with young children and with Nigel's own background including a spell as a primary school teacher, addressing this issue was an early priority. Having their own children in the local schools made making relationships at the school gate, and with the staff, a natural way forward. Although none were church schools, there was a warm welcome for assemblies and school events. A consequence was a rise in baptism requests but, as is found nationally, this but raises the question: 'And then what ...?' So often the gap between a one-off church visit to mark the birth of a child and commitment to regular meeting with a group of strangers engaging in unfamiliar rituals is unbridgeable.

Nigel and Penny talked with local people and a monthly Sunday afternoon event called Xpressions began in their village, Loddon, in the Methodist chapel, St John's. Designed for family participation, it included crafts, games and tea time cakes, quickly drawing 40 people. Like many new things, over time initial interest can wane and by 2007 fresh exploration was needed. A one-off families' breakfast was begun on Mothering Sunday. It built upon Alison Ball's contacts

with existing Xpressions families. Held at Chedgrave All Saints' church centre at the same time as morning worship in the adjacent church, the cooked breakfast ended with a participative short service and mingling with the existing church congregation. Its popularity led to an equivalent gathering on Father's Day and then at Harvest. However, once again the question remained of how to build on from these promising leads.

Richard and Shirleyanne Seel joined the benefice in February 2007. Richard came as associate vicar, having been an OLM elsewhere in the diocese of Norwich. He is technically a Non-Stipendiary Minister (NSM)<sup>2</sup> on a house for duty basis. His background includes 29 years working for the BBC as a film editor and then manager. He also still works in business consultancy. By May,

the idea of a café church operating every Sunday somewhere in the benefice was explored and welcomed in principle by the council. Some strands of that agreement were the positive nature of the Xpressions Sunday afternoon events, the reading of the two *Encounters on the Edge* booklets on café church and Richard's prior convictions about the need for more liquid forms of church, as well as more use of visual and electronic media to communicate effectively in a post-modern age.<sup>3</sup>

The more specific proposal was to build upon the previous profile and popularity of the

afternoon Xpressions event in Loddon, but to take it further and base it in Chedgrave. From the start, three concurrent events, operating on the 1st Sunday of each month, were envisaged.<sup>4</sup>



Cafetiere or cafe to here

<sup>2</sup> He dislikes the term NSM and I agree that such designations betray the fading hegemony of stipendiary clericalism by calling people by what they are not. He prefers the term Locally Focused Ordained Minister which is both positive, accurate and without hostages to fortune about future deployability that are bound up in the other current term of Ordained Local Minister.

<sup>3</sup> Richard Seel's website [www.emerging-church.org](http://www.emerging-church.org) has a section called video church with links to lists of suitable resources as well as how to make videos and legally download those of others.

<sup>4</sup> This sat well with observations in *Encounters on the Edge* no. 33 that to connect well with outsiders, a bridge between them and us would need to be composed of a number of stages or arches. The stage starting with them would assist building community, the next explore faith and only the third evolve a suitable form of worship. See *Encounters on the Edge* no. 33: *Café Church 1* (Sheffield: Church Army, 2007), pp. 24-28.

The overall term Xpressions Café<sup>5</sup> would include a straightforward café, a child-friendly zone but not to be seen as a dumping ground, and a venue for an exploratory yet guided approach for adults. Taking X as the link and the cue, the café in the community centre downstairs was to be called Xpresso, the 'families' zone was assigned the centre's upstairs room and dubbed Xpressions (which initially I found confusing) and the space for adults christened Xplore.

### Three corners

As such the three are like a triangle; each side or corner is both itself as well as connected to the other two. Only together do they make the whole. The All Saints premises at Chedgrave were well suited to such an arrangement. In 1993 the grade one medieval church, with its 19th century north aisle, was added to by a tasteful two storey church centre/community building. Its size means no one space unduly dominates another and its proportions and roof lines make it congruent with the older structure. Thus there are three discreet yet interconnected spaces, with a genuine physical ease of access between them. Perhaps the only exception to that is lack of disabled access to the first floor, which would require a costly lift. Watching the events take place live, **the interconnecting lobby acts like a roundabout** that copes well with human traffic flowing in all directions and, in the terms of *Encounters on the Edge* no. 43, it works as a cloister that connects areas well and provides for unplanned meeting.

Looking back now, I see that this three-cornered approach also fitted with skills in the team. A number of people loved offering hospitality; indeed Janet the curate had for some years run a pub, Alison and others were gifted at children's work, while Richard was in his element using and creating video and visuals. Guess who ended up involved with which team? As such it is not only that mission shapes church, but **the missional discernment includes spotting how God has already gifted the particular people who are being sent onwards in that mission**. I think I see a similar dynamic in the quiet, early preparation of St Paul, which includes his bicultural background in the Greek and

<sup>5</sup> They deliberately utilised the currency of the term 'Expressions' and its familiarity from the Loddon chapter of the story.



Jewish world, his training in the more open school of Hillel and his Roman citizenship. It is always true that the mission has missionaries, who are part of being church, and they are a significant component of the contextual creativity of the Spirit.

### Core values



Café has its own unwritten rules about leaving the customers to their own space. This group have developed values building upon this. Reflecting on two years of experience, Richard Seel wrote three pithy papers summarising much of this.<sup>6</sup> In the first, which deals with whom they were trying to reach, he made explicit the existing ground rules of the whole café. Xpresso in particular is deliberately seen as a neutral zone, being aware that the research of Nick Spencer<sup>7</sup> showed how fearful and suspicious non-Christians are of being got at by overt Christians. So in Xpresso it was fine

that hospitality was offered, enjoyed and left at that. It is, after all, a café, not the foyer of a cinema where it would be odd not to go through to the film. In café culture you are served by others and left to your own devices about when you come, how long you stay and when you go. **Hospitality that creates pressures or demands denies its own vocation.** However, they did not ban 'God talk' as another church café had done.

Richard Seel sums it up:

The watchword of Xpresso is extravagant hospitality (Luke 6:38). It is here that people experience warmth, welcome, acceptance and service; it is here that they begin to encounter God's love in action. One woman who travels some miles to come to Xpressions Café said, 'coming here is like having a hug...'

Gifts exercised at Xpresso do serve others and that is legitimate persuasiveness in itself. Love cannot help but warm, but it will not force.

<sup>6</sup> The papers are now available in html and pdf form at: [http://www.emerging-church.org/xpressions\\_cafe.htm](http://www.emerging-church.org/xpressions_cafe.htm).

<sup>7</sup> Nick Spencer, *Beyond Belief?* (London: LICC, 2003).

The second corner, Xpressions, as a 'family' zone, does need a structure and outline content, as any educational engagement with the young and their parents require. However, it is equally the case that the children and their parents are free to come and go across the morning and to respond as they wish to the various participative activities offered to them. Thirdly, in Xplore there is at least as much structure and perhaps, in the two months I saw, more prescriptive content than either of the other two places, with some suggestion in my mind of Seeker church instincts. The more it would lean in that direction, the more I think it would live in tension with the spirit of café which is the overall identity and the style people have become used to at the other corners of this three-sided experience.

However to balance this, it was true that at the same time that Xplore demonstrated clear alignment with the values of Alternative Worship. Evidence included the provision of stations, as well as space and time to respond to them through the media of paint, drawing, touch, taste and smell. I commented some years ago that the colours of café-style evangelism and worship sit more naturally with those of Alternative Worship, rather than Seeker, as combined strands in fresh expressions of church.<sup>8</sup> Both share a relaxedness about trusting both those who come to what we offer them and the Holy Spirit to make the spiritual connections for them when the time is right.<sup>9</sup>

So this story seems to me to represent a healthy growth pattern for beginning fresh expressions of church. It arose out of a longer process of relational community engagement, not least by Nigel the Vicar and Alison, the children and families worker. It listened to the local community about content, time and place; it offers a progression, at their pace, for those who wish to follow the journey; there are premises that are congruent with the purpose and not too alien to the surrounding community; and it is appropriate to the gift mix in the team called to do it.

The idea became benefice owned, itself a change in a recently created benefice that is learning to overcome a prior narrowly parochial mentality. So the members of the teams involved come from across the benefice, with a notably high proportion from the tiny Sisland. It may be significant that doing something together for those outside them all has been a far easier route to unity across

<sup>8</sup> George Lings, *Encounters on the Edge* no. 33: *Café Church 1* (Sheffield: Church Army, 2007), pp. 16-17.

<sup>9</sup> This instinct may be historically rooted in all theologies that believe the image of God is not obliterated in humans by the Fall. A notable example of trusting the Word, and the Spirit, given to the indigenous people is the writings of the Edwardian missionary Roland Allen, whose works are always worth studying by those called to fresh expressions.

their diversity, than that of surmounting internal challenges set by periodic attempts at joint worship across the benefice.

Speaking of team, another core value from the beginning was that this was to be lay-led work, with a staff team member acting as chaplain and facilitator. I myself would refer to this staff role as *episcopo*: checking vision and values, providing connection to other elements of church, supporting leaders and recognising gifts in others. Each corner of the overall triangle has its own team, with minimal overlap, in order partly to protect people from being overloaded, partly to build real ownership between the team and its work and also to be an active process of matching gifts to the varied parts of the whole. Thus already a few individuals have transferred by mutual discernment from their original team

to another one better suited to them. After an initial successful general appeal, now prospective team members are invited to join, usually by the leader, but it has also happened through members.

**General appeals for volunteers can be problematic;** they can lead to unsuitable applicants, prey upon the readily guilty and often over-committed, and fail to engage with the deep sense in many Anglican laity that they have nothing of real benefit to contribute, having been in past collusion with 'father knows best' clergy. '**Turn up, pay up, shut up**' has been the summit of their horizons leading to profound lack of self-confidence. That sorry tale is being turned round here in no uncertain terms.



The autumn of 2007 saw the beginning of the publicity launch. An enigmatic advert was placed in the September issue of the local paper, simply saying 'X is coming'. October only added: 'X is free'. November offered explanation of the three X elements in the paper and the 20+ in teams were commissioned by Archdeacon David Hayden. December was the birth. 70 people came through the doors. That was pretty full.

## Behind the scenes

The part hidden from the punters is the considerable work beforehand. The process begins with the preparation by the teams in relation to the month's theme. The broadest themes are loosely based upon the lectionary, set some months before, so what I saw in December 4<sup>th</sup> 2009 took John the Baptist, and January 3<sup>rd</sup> 2010 unpacked the Incarnation. Each team then has its distinctive way of working. In the case of Xplore, Richard Seel sends out the theme by email and asks the six or so team members to reply with ideas of angles and activities that would serve the theme. People then contact each other to invite partnership, meeting as often as necessary for the ideas adopted. They also keep Richard in the loop. Then the team meet every other month for a more strategic assessment such as feedback from the past month on how things went. What began as the director working with his cast, has now matured into mutual evaluation and encouragement. Regular feedback is an important part of skilling people in ministry and building teamwork. It reinforces values, offers appraisal and stimulates reflective learning. Further forward planning is rarely needed as the values have settled and the themes are in place. The meeting includes prayer, though often time for this is squeezed. 'How are you doing?' questions are part of the friendships within the group, rather than part of team time.

The Xpressions 'families' zone team, that has grown from five to twelve, meets monthly, some time ahead of the next event. Their aims are similar but the frequency is different and more work is done within the meeting rather than before it. Moreover, the emphasis is on face to face meeting rather than prior work done electronically. They too pray, learn and evaluate from feedback from the previous café, bring ideas to the given theme but also work up activities for the families, offering some differentiation because of the age range of children. They also say they laugh a lot, which sounds good. The team meetings themselves are part of discovering and growing in ministry by taking responsibility for prayer and evaluation, supporting one another and stirring creativity. Alison's role as leader is to put up a chart at a quarterly meeting that members sign up to with ideas. Monthly, these offerings are co-ordinated and team members' confidence is built through their doing and their co-leading. It also involves a progressive letting go on her part, so that the team may grow through being involved.



The Xpresso café team, led up till now by David Wyer and his curate wife Janet,<sup>10</sup> is made up of those who serve in the kitchen and those who serve the tables, all kitted out with aprons. It needs to meet least as the preparation is practical, like the pair who set out the tables, or David who buys in stocks of coffee, tea and chocolate, and there is commissioning of the baking of the excellent home made cakes.

The head waiter, if I may so term him, is Edwin Smith who effortlessly models hospitality. He exudes an impressive mix

of warmth, yet unpressurising reticence. Like Jeeves, he will suddenly but silently appear at one's elbow with just the right enquiry. He also buys the milk and papers on the day. His story is an interesting example of a previous history of regular attendance at the carol service and Harvest, but this involvement goes way beyond that and is warmly accepted. Many another man before him has found deeper faith (believing) through a prior stage of active serving



(behaving) which led to a greater sense of belonging. Janet has set the tone for the team's hospitality values. From being a pub landlady she comments: You never know who comes through the door, but they all have the same need: warmth, love and acceptance.' So those who come are free to move, to learn and to experience. The team serve each time; there is not a wider rota and this builds confidence in the role and encourages responsibility. At the same time, there are enough of them that they decide between them on the day when and if they wish to sample the delights of Xpressions or Xplore.

Richard Seel takes overall responsibility for the interweaving and co-ordination of the entire suite of activities. Readers may have noticed that the vicar Nigel Evans does not appear in the cast list. On a Sunday he is often taking services elsewhere in the benefice, but he pops into the café whenever possible. In an engaging fashion he also confesses that it is very healthy for him to be unable to control this event and the incessant creative changes it spawns. At the same time, he is blessed in the humility that gladly recognises that others can do these things better than he does, delights in seeing people liberated in ministry, while being wistful at no longer having such direct contact with young people and children. As a people person, his episcopate is the care of the core leaders involved. This overseeing stance takes skill and courage.

'You never know who comes through the door, but they all have the same need: warmth, love and acceptance.'

<sup>10</sup> As curate, she is about to move on to her next post, St Peter's Church in Norwich.

## Meeting Xpressions Café



The day starts with as many team members as are free to gather as part of the 0900 communion service at Chedgrave. This is wise, deliberate, prayerful balancing of receiving and giving. After the peace, we all move up into the open chancel, standing for the great thanksgiving and reception. **I note with pleasure that the incumbent receives from others and last.** For decades it has struck me as culturally odd, and even offensive, that in a church seeking to be more egalitarian and less clericalist, as well as more missional, diaconal and hospitable, that its president at the common

feast should serve himself first. After this pleasant short service, people hasten away to final setting up in the various venues, checking the kettle is boiling and making last minute adjustments if a team member is absent through illness.

### Xpresso

The café opens at 0930. The church centre is set out with six tables decked with a cloth, menu and newspapers, each with between four to eight chairs. In one corner is a play area bordered by two pews. The space is not large, but perhaps in a village it doesn't need to be. I saw the event in the depths of sharper winter than usual and in January wondered if I would complete my snowy car journey from Sheffield. I can imagine that in summer with longer, lighter days, the café fills earlier than the slow start I saw. However, during a morning, Mary, Anne, Val and Lilian may



take up to 90 orders, though some people do have more than one cup. The theme each month, acting as a thread of unity across the triangular diversity, is made explicit by the table cards in the café. Executed in three differing colours for each of the three elements, they also offer some approximation to a menu, but act more like a timetable, so that if people wanted to plan their morning with visits to events within each or any of the three concurrent streams, they can do so. It sets them free to choose, which is essential to café.



It is not accidental in the A4 landscape sheet, with two folds to make the card stand on a table, that café is placed centrally. This suggests visually that it is core; architecturally this is reinforced in that the café area is the major way in, and nearest on the path from the village. Drinks and Sunday papers are free as an act of giving and hospitality. As the leaflet says: 'There is no charge for anything in Xpressions Café; it is our pleasure to share with you.' There has been a journey here for the team.

**Church communities can be reared to endure appalling coffee and to applaud meanness of spirit as prudence in the face of uphill economics.** 'Getting'

the concept of gift as foundational in the Christian way is not automatic. The self-service cakes, which are both free and yummy, are cunningly laid out at the interchange/cloister area. This introduces movement within the venue and at least gets people through one open door and nearer to the thresholds to the other spaces. During the morning there are periods of quiet and of animated conversation as the numbers fluctuate and people meet and greet. I am told that the range of background of people who come is very wide, including the non-churched.<sup>11</sup>



<sup>11</sup> See Richard Seel's first paper on ways forward for further sub-classifications on his website.

## Xplore

It is 1015. Since 1000 Xplore, in the church building, has been officially open. But now a bell gently tinkles and to the initiated it means a session is about to begin. In retrospect I think the wisdom of Benedict would be to have two bells.<sup>12</sup> In this tradition, the first is the five minute bell which acts as advance



notice that work needs to be put down and a walk to the chapel begun, as well as time to still oneself, having arrived. The second bell marks the start of worship. In café culture, people are hopefully somewhat chilled out, and springing up to rush to something else jars. Although they are welcome to bring their coffee through, they might well be talking at some depth, and to break off to move elsewhere would be socially rude.

Xplore happens in the medieval church and, depending on content, including the side aisle and chancel. It is described as 'informal worship

and exploration' and is composed of two to three separate half hour sessions within the two hours available. The 15 minute breaks between each session offer clear chances for people to come and go, choices of which session, if any, to participate in, and time for the multimedia to be set up for each occasion. The range of media in use include drama and story, songs, readings and poetry, with all the above both live and on video, and space for responses through discussion, activities and prayer stations. I appreciated that the leading from the front was done by two people, often with one of each gender. None wore clerical dress, with the sessions led by the laity, with the laity, for the laity. The to and fro between the presenters, with short comments, not long inputs, was



reminiscent of some TV news programmes. It gave pace without rush and variety without undue complexity. It created the ambience of hosts, not the augustness of an expert. The style is to start a process, not to dictate a result. In sessions I saw, the minority of the time raised leads and offered input; the majority of the time was in response, either individually, in groups or plenary. As such I think its deeper instincts are to lean more to Alternative Worship values than Seeker presentations.

Connections between the content of the biblical tradition and contemporary issues were lightly but often made. This is not a church subculture separate from the world of work or politics. The aisles and chancel offer spaces for stations and people moved freely to them, assisted by mood CD music, such as plainsong, that covered the noise of movement or activity at a station. Also music makes a thinly occupied church feel inhabited. Xplore numbers when I was there were small, with a majority of those there being existing Christians who find this at least as helpful as traditional church, as well as those who come to support those leading that week. If any part was stilted, it was getting response from the whole congregation to questions put. Partly the relatively small numbers rattle in the building, partly pews seem to make people passive, partly amplified questioners and non-amplified respondents makes the communication process uncertain and partly it is not easy to ask questions of adults that are not embarrassingly easy or fiendishly complex. It may work better to pose a proper level question from the front and invite a pew or pair of pews to discuss it. A counter example of effective engagement was the showing on the screen of six quite different representations of God as conceived by different artists, from adults and children. With copies of the pictures posted up at different locations round the church, the adults and children were invited to visit them all and stick a star on any that they agreed with. Such choice and participation, together with feedback on the results, created a buzz of interested involvement and being taken seriously.

When there was a song, it was usually presentational, not demanding that explorers must tacitly agree by joining in. They also used the best Power Point text practice that I have witnessed. The number of words per slide was minimal,



<sup>12</sup> See *Encounters on the Edge* no. 43: *Seven Sacred Spaces* (Sheffield: Church Army, 2009), p. 12.



enabling the background picture to have its voice and not be reduced to wallpaper. The font was small enough not to shout at you and once more to allow the picture to speak. The pictures led and the words supported them. The only exception was the familiar Christmas reading from John 1. It was well read, but at the same time the screen was stuffed full with the words, and the reader standing in the sight line of a good proportion of the congregation. This seemed to me to be a confusion of radio and television, or maybe theatre and lecture. Can you imagine going to Stratford and having the text of Hamlet on a screen at the back of the stage at the same time? To screen or

not to screen, you might say. I think there are better choices. One is to select readers who know what they are doing and leave them free to exercise that gift. Another variable would be the kind of good flow of words on the screen this team are capable of, perhaps with suitable background orchestral music, and to allow people to read it from the screen for themselves. A third would be to print out the text, maybe with a question at the bottom - 'What does this make you think?' - and give people space to read and to respond within. The reader may feel this one critical comment is harsh. The team have asked for feedback and I offer this wider appraisal of current PowerPoint use within a spirit of gratitude to them, and some degree of wonder at their creativity in invention, and courage in serving, that is highly commendable.

### Xpressions

This too begins at 1000 and runs until 1200. The leaflet calls it: 'family-orientated worship. It offers a fun, family-friendly way to explore stories about Jesus and the Bible and to respond to them.' It happens upstairs in the centre. Though access to it requires more



effort than going through the church door, kids seem to like going to their own place and none can slip out unobserved so it is secure. Adults with children will also easily slip upstairs and both mums and dads were present. This group I am told contains the single largest kind of attender. From two months' exposure, I note that some staple ingredients are food, craft and story, all based around tables. Food is not just provided, it is made. I have now eaten a honey and locust sandwich, as well as part of an edible crib - and lived. The craft becomes the basis of the teaching point; it is not mere distraction or entertainment. As is often true, the helpers found that the preparation and engagement was a key part of their ongoing learning. Also the participative all-age nature of the event made it a safe context to ask about what they didn't yet understand.



It was notable to me that the younger families flowed freely between Xpresso and Xpressions. Parents might take their children upstairs and stay or might have some 'sticky bun time'<sup>13</sup> with their partner in the café. However, it was rare that they inhabited the other corner of the triangle. That might be a reason why sometimes the final half hour session of Xpressions is combined with Xplore but held in the church building, to which 45 adults and 18 children came. I am not sure what I make of this. The family may be an overworked analogy for church and used as a justification to bring all ages together. In some contexts this grates with teens, young adults and singles, while it delights others. It may be that the joint meeting in the church building reduces the stained glass barrier for future visits. But why is the progression always to the 'chapel' space?<sup>14</sup> It may be a shame that the buildings do not allow them to ring the changes and visit different spaces. In addition, does this fusing of two strands bring some compulsion which isn't in the spirit of the overall café?

<sup>13</sup> A phrase my wife and I picked up, to mean intentional relaxed time between parents, culled from a long forgotten author on better marriages.

<sup>14</sup> See *Encounters on the Edge* no. 43: *Seven Sacred Spaces* (Sheffield: Church Army, 2009) for the characteristic seven spaces, needed for enduring Christian community, that make up more fully orbbed church.

## Xperience starts

January also saw the first outing for a fourth strand called Xperience, put on the card as interweaving with Xplore and held in the church.<sup>15</sup> The north aisle had been tastefully curtained off, leaving an entrance and exit. The drapes and



background chant on a DVD clip provided something more akin to private prayer space. The Alternative Worship influence once more was evident, the freedom to respond clearly signalled and the creativity involved commendable. I was sorry for them that really to make this work best, the majority of north aisle pews needed removing for freedom to use the remainder to construct 'cells' in this suitably evocative space. But then the drawn out process of persuading the traditionalists and obtaining a faculty in a Grade 1 listed building raises its head. If it

could be done, the north aisle would then be really different from Xplore, which operates in the nave, and give people permission to stay there. At present the stations are laid out across the pew tops and the visitor unconsciously propelled down the aisle – not unlike the experience of seeing the original Bayeux tapestry, where the script in your ear and the press of the crowd behind edges you on faster than you want.

## Over

All too soon the two and a half hours were past, surely a good sign of an involving, interesting and satisfying way to be in church. The close down was shared, efficient and accomplished and we were away before 1230. Clearly overall this is good. What is offered is not very sophisticated and all the better for that. It is homely and in scale with a rural community. **Quality comes through the authenticity that comes with the vulnerability of very human**

**offerings.** Interest is held by the variety of inputs and space to engage; it is far more participative than the standard church service so it is more memorable. You would have to say broadly this works, but what of the vision that it could happen elsewhere in the benefice?

## The Loddon experience

Café at Chedgrave is on the first Sunday morning of the month. From September 2009 until November they tried repeating the process on the third Sunday in the Methodist Chapel, St John's, in Loddon, hoping greater frequency would build community and discipleship. It was in the largest village, the chapel had three connecting spaces, and in a fairly central location. They recruited further team members for Loddon, including a whole Xpresso team, to not overload people and gave it a go. It always struggled. The complex is made of old chapel, lecture hall and new chapel. It was never compelling which of the three corners of Xpressions Café best occupied which space. So no sense of home and fit developed. Worse, the corridors and stairs between them felt oppressive not liberating, like obstacles not openings, hindering free flow of people down them. These were not cloisters but bottlenecks. Whereas the Chedgrave congregation willingly shifted their service time earlier to accommodate the Café; this more conservative congregation, who see church as meeting God and not socialising, felt 'we lost our communion'. Both Café and Alternative Worship flourish because they generate a conducive atmosphere. That feel arises partly from the space and partly from the team. Here was the second difficulty. Replicating a programme does not reproduce a team. Some of the new people in teams did not, and could not, inherit the DNA that characterised the Chedgrave teams who had been formed through a founding process. It has been decided not to continue. However, the idea is not dead.

Both Café and Alternative Worship flourish because they generate a conducive atmosphere.

The team were aware of the dangers of replicating a scheme or franchising a product and are at pains to tell visitors not to copy what they do. However, this trial period of using the premises in Loddon further confirmed for them the problems that arise from a seemingly simple venue change. This is an important reminder to others tempted to see a fresh expression as a product they can sell on, rather than a community. It is not free

<sup>15</sup> This turns the 'three corners' into a square and if it takes root will update the earlier section of this report.

standing and instantly transplantable, it has roots in a context. Extending that horticultural analogy, there may well be a seed idea or people who act as seeds that grow from the host plant, but seeds need sowing and tending before any reaping can be expected. What grows will be related and different. This process is clearer in the human world; the next generation takes its DNA identity from both parents and yet is unique as well. So I have come to think it is with churches, and now prefer the terms *creating, birthing or reproducing*, to that of planting. It is more accurate and more suitable for human communities.

## Evaluating the story

Where does the Chedgrave café fit in the taxonomy of café churches? How similar to and different from other ones is it?<sup>16</sup>

In terms of the **venue**, it seems to be at the low risk end for the Christians. This is not about finding the capital to run a full scale café in the market place. Lest this should seem unduly timid and unadventurous, I enter two qualifications. One is that it took the agreement of the Chedgrave congregation to move their 1030 service in order to make the space available at the time that suited the village community. This is not an easy task in a rural context, although Caféplus+ in Haddenham took an even bolder direction and closed their morning service once a month.<sup>17</sup> It is also utilising a widely-used church building in a village. Often in a rural context the church stands as a community building already and may be very suitable, reducing the danger of alienation felt by some. **Being natural may be more important than being risky.**

The **frequency** is monthly. This has the virtue of being sustainable by a smaller group of people and may be a sharp enough learning curve for them, quite aside from time available. Bear in mind that it takes one quarter of the benefice attenders to staff the three teams. Issues on the converse side include whether a monthly meeting builds loyalty, let alone whether it fosters discipleship. Add to this that the experience across different types of fresh expression is that the better they are done, the less willing people are to settle for traditional church as the way on from there. This sharpens the question of whether Xpressions Café as a whole is church. Throwaway lines in conversations with the team, and lines written into some of the prayers used suggest they all think so. I was intrigued that this is congruent with their already having held baptisms. If people come to faith through this community, that is very natural. In the spirit of Roland Allen I would allow the people who come to meet the story of the last supper and be content to wait for that day and handle it then. As it happens, the team have decided that as next Easter day falls on an Xpressions Sunday, it will include communion.

<sup>16</sup> The avid series reader can make comparisons with dynamics of the matrix in *Café Church 2*.

See George Lings, *Encounters on the Edge* no. 34: *Café Church 2* (Sheffield: Church Army, 2007) p. 24.

<sup>17</sup> See *Encounters on the Edge* no. 34: *Café Church 2* (Sheffield: Church Army, 2007) pp. 4-16.

## Stages, styles and arches

What is different here from most other café examples is that the stages of a bridge made of several arches, explained in *Encounters on the Edge* no. 33 p. 24, are all under one roof at one time. The people who come are free to walk up and down that bridge, as it were, during an overall Sunday morning experience. That is a brilliant idea and is working if you reckon that August is a quiet month yet still 50 come, while 86 has been a high water mark, beaten only when a group of external visitors came.

There are even hidden arches or stages before this. If the first arch is about fostering relationships and building community, then this happens structurally through the Mums & Toddlers group, Noah's Ark, run by Alison and others on a Wednesday in the flexible open nave of St John's Methodist Chapel. Shirleyanne Seel, one of the group's natural evangelists, runs a Monday Mardle<sup>18</sup> in the Chedgrave church centre. Both have seen people then come to the Xpresso café and onto other zones.

On the Sunday, Xpresso Café is the first arch that The Sheffield Centre calls developing community. In a rural context perhaps the church fete used to do this, and café is but a fresh expression of those kinds of instincts that enable people to mix and enjoy themselves. I was interested and relieved to hear that

earlier on, at the planning stage, the team had wondered about providing a low key 'God slot' in the café every half hour but decided against it. They understood this violated the safe space of café and its protected neutrality. I also suggest that such a decision rightly respects that each stage does different work and that trying to mix them is a profound mistake. Moving on from Xpresso involves a gap to jump or a change of mode to ease. For example, in café you are served, it is not self-service.

You are almost a customer. But move to either of the other 'corners' of the triangle and you must shift to participant, responses and engagement. These are not forced or manipulated, but it is a change.<sup>19</sup>

Each stage does different work and trying to mix them is a profound mistake.

<sup>18</sup> This is a Norfolk term for a group having a chat.

<sup>19</sup> This is a disadvantage of the arches analogy that suggests the transitions are smooth. Change the picture to stepping stones and we easily recognise the more complex reality made of progress by stages and jumps.

In theory Xplore, as the name suggests, is the next stage. The Sheffield Centre expectation of the second arch, built after community is trusted sufficiently, is that it is one by which faith can be explored; as such it is evangelistic. We would have expected some form of process evangelism. We hold no brief for any of them. In this case it would be finding or devising whatever style best fits with the café start to which people have become used in the first stage. However, what people meet is a mix of styles that has resonances mainly with Alternative Worship and at times with Seeker that might be closer to fresh expressions of evangelism in that Xplore is issue based, open-ended and presentational. Seeker is like watching a Nicky Gumbel video, but without prior food or subsequent discussion. So both styles use worship to explore issues of faith, but are not really fresh expressions of relational evangelism. Coupled to this large jump is the use of a church building. An additional barrier this January was that the visually pleasant church felt freezing, despite the hiss of the wall mounted heaters that warm your head, but leave your hands and feet icy, as your breath billows out before you in song or prayer. At one point I heard the cry from the warmer café area: 'Keep the church door shut or we'll all freeze.'

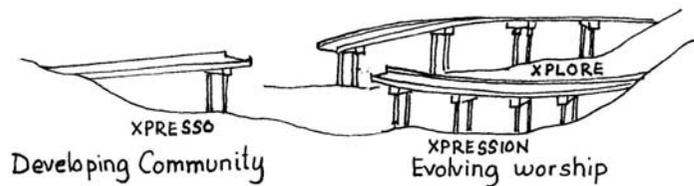
Also it is a bigger cultural leap to come out of café into church than to go upstairs, particularly if your children are already up there. Experience suggests people will venture next to Xpressions before Xplore. We often need props. Tables protect our space, and cups of coffee at least give us something to do with our hands. They legitimise being in a café space. Having children who are in a 'families' zone, being with them and joining in with craft does the same. However, daring to open an ancient door, crossing into a room that probably has its own rules, but without anything to carry or do or someone to find, is more exposed. The sadness in writing this is that I really liked what they did. The strands inspired by Alternative Worship were creative and thoughtful, giving lots of room for personal quieter response. I think this may well work for the more open de-churched, but I'm not sure it is the best location or approach for the non-churched. It means walking in too far too quick. Xperience comes under the same scrutiny.

Our existing theory of arches then suggests that those finding faith will want to worship and a process of evolving that begins. Xpressions is described as family-orientated worship. Perhaps because the space is small, and certainly because the earlier community links are through children, on first impressions it looks more child-centred than family neutral. That lack of space is one

pragmatic reason why sometimes there are joint Xpressions/Xplore sessions in the larger and more evocative church building. The one I attended worked well, but it is hard truly to be for family. Teens and young adults without children would struggle. In fairness, some think that a regular genuine all-age event is probably only less difficult a task than a child's funeral.

### Mind the gap

I am therefore left wondering whether this excellent idea to have all three stages under one roof works quite as well as I expected, or that it is what I first thought it was. Is this one bridge made through the successive arches of café, chill and worship? Or could it be that though the café builds one kind of arch from the



social/communal side and the two expressions of worship both build out differing arches from the traditional church side, there is still a missing link in the middle where faith could be explored in open discussion,

without being in the ambience of worship. This might need a totally different venue like the village pub. Interestingly, Richard Seel in conversation recognised it is a leap to make from Café to Xplore and is actively wondering how that gap can be reduced. I think he is right to consider this. It seems to me that there is less of a gap to Xpressions because of the child factor, but then being there asks less of an adult, with Godly Play as a valuable exception. I am not here wheeling in Alpha as the magic solution, but I note in their story that it has been tried; nine people came and half had some link with Xpressions. I am not sure the church or the centre is the ideal venue for this stage, but I am clear that **the existing arches should not be hijacked and turned into something else. They do valuable work in themselves.**

Thinking this through, I was forcibly reminded of the much earlier book *Sowing Reaping Keeping* by Laurence Singlehurst which thinks also in stages. He charts an evangelistic progression, while I am thinking of one that combines missiology

and ecclesiology. We both think that trying to combine the content of the stages is fatal. We both hold that each stage must be clear from the previous one, yet the relationships must carry across them and the next stage must stay in the style (though not content) of the previous one. Hence in Chedgrave all these arches need to respect café culture.

Singlehurst's key diagram so helpfully adds what I could call the more/less factor. The 'more' factor is that more Christians are needed to be present in and to staff the early stages than the later ones. The 'less' factor is that, at each stage, less people 'progress' to the next one. This is not unlike the experience of Jesus through the gospels, epitomised in his question to the disciples in John 6:67: 'You do not want to leave too, do you?' Singlehurst teaches us to minimise the gaps that we ask others to jump, but he knows that at the point of change between stages there is always some gap to jump.

### Sowing reaping keeping - the key diagram



It is that realisation that points up some flaws in the arches analogy. The reality is messier, less tidy and smooth. It may be more akin to seeking out a set of stepping stones across a mountain stream. Sometimes it is the case that they are simply hard to find, sometimes that the river has provided some convenient boulders for you, but in places you may have to find some of your own stones to plug the gaps. Even then they can be slippery and a guaranteed crossing is not assured. **Jumping is part of the process.**



### Four stages in growing a fresh expression of Church



The other flaw is that though the arches image helps describe the journey made by an individual, it is not good at insisting that each stage continues even though the individual may have crossed it. There is a similar problem in Singlehurst's triangle and in the booklet *Starting a Fresh Expression* and the derivatives from it on the Share website. The core diagram sees the journey as overlapping ellipses.<sup>20</sup> To be sure, the stages do overlap, but the deeper point is that they don't end. As such, a timeline would show that eventually they are all operating concurrently, which is what I so like about café in Chedgrave.

### A timeline in growing a fresh expression of Church



### The need for 1-1 ministry across the stages

One of my lasting memories of long-term effective youth work was the emphasis on 1-1 contact, befriending people, letting them ask their questions and gently leading them towards Christ. If the houseparty atmosphere provided community, its talks developed faith, and the Sunday offered worship, it was the 1-1 where the crucial personal work was done. In parish life I have seen this same dynamic, often in people naturally embedded in the community: the parent at a school gate, the practice or parish nurse, the mobile hairdresser, school assistant or car repairer. Some people were taught the 1-1 skill, others were naturals. I long for Chedgrave to unearth more of those gifts and to let those people wander through the overall Sunday morning and see who God leads them to.

### Surprised Christians set free

A commonality across the team members I interviewed individually was that they all had de-churched backgrounds and stories of discovering living faith later in life. This is partly what gives them zest now for a way of working that may enable others to make this discovery too. It also explains why the age group of the team is mostly from the late forties to the seventies. But that is not problematic; café culture serves a very wide age group, the oldest of the boomer generation are now 65 and still active, and it shows the church has grey power that can still be liberated to attract and serve a younger generation.

One of the most warming aspects of this overall story is the profound changes that have occurred for people on the teams. Not least with Xplore, the preparation has helped them think about their own faith, made it possible to express their own doubts, which in turn becomes the launching pad for deeper learning, as well as engagement points with others on a faith journey. This active process develops people, not least as they characteristically work in pairs. As such the group is splendidly not dependent on the staff figures like Richard and Janet. They have learnt that they can lead and that it is okay to be still learning. Dependency does I think rear its head at the point of reliance on Richard re the technical side of DVD and video. It would be good if an assistant could be trained up to free him more to have time with people across the whole morning.

<sup>20</sup><http://www.sharetheguide.org/develop>

Delightfully, the team members find they are trusted more than they imagined possible or even sensible. They are expected to do something significant. They find they are more creative and courageous than they ever conceived. I was moved at the stories, for example, of Val and Jill who in their separate ways were being transformed. One humbly said she 'had learnt more than she had given', found the process of this ministering 'incredibly exciting' and admitted how special it was to 'get a feel from the Holy Spirit' about what to do. The other also bubbled: 'It's opened my eyes to what can happen'; she is excited that people are finding out about Jesus. She was encouraged at how we 'love and support each other'. She still exuded surprise that she was now actually 'doing ministry'. How many other churches have 25% of its members actively engaged in something directly missional? The difference it has made to that group is palpable. If the potential of God's people was widely released, how different mission and church would be. In an Obama era, it is not trite to note that this is a local story where 'yes we can' has become real. Is this the X factor of the story, more than the clutch of events beginning with X; a process that unearths hidden talent and makes stars of ordinary Christians?

George Lings  
March 2010  
Cartoons: Tim Sharp

### Further resources

Richard Seel is an enterprising soul who bagged the name **[www.emerging-church.org](http://www.emerging-church.org)** for his website, where further resources and reflections can be found.

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