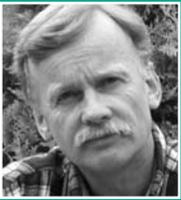


## 49: New Ground



How can at least some students grow through active ministries of giving out, gain a positive experience of community, learn to love local church and significantly reduce their student debt at the same time? Could this be combined with more churches learning practical working together, gaining resources to provide much needed ongoing sustainable work among teenagers and twenties? What if, at the same time, teenagers gained safe space to be themselves as Christians and had ready access to role models of service and community? The combination sounded as if it should be better known so that others could follow up on this win-win scenario. George Lings went to find out.

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# Encounters on the Edge



no. 49:

## New Ground

A working students' household

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Discoveries about fresh expressions of Church from The Sheffield Centre

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## Introduction

This particular story, *New Ground* in Whitstable, is the brain child of the team's youth minister Paul Franklin. While it is not a fresh expression of Church, the story is about an increase in the mission resources available to fresh expressions and the rest of the Church. It has certain virtues: it is designed to develop discipleship among young adults who are themselves a relatively rare feature of wider church life, and it can enable a collection of existing churches to engage with children and teenagers. This in turn may lead to the creation of fresh expressions of Church.



**Paul Franklin**

While I think that some young people grow to enjoy and appreciate traditional expressions of Church, more of them, however, are likely to grow up to find existing adult church rather controlling, stodgy and passive. Anglicans have yet to see what enduring ways of being Christian will engage with these young adults' cultural identity while also taking values from that denominational inheritance. I suspect that although some will be happy to be independent, congregationalist, post-denominational believers, others will learn to value the gifts brought by instincts for catholicity, indigenous liturgy aware of history, dispersed authority, fuzzy membership boundaries, and taking responsibility to serve an area. This could be one short list of what Anglicanism continues to offer.

Over the years, the *Encounters on the Edge* series has deliberately covered a spectrum. At one end are bold unusual moves to reach niche parts of today's culture, such as the arts community or high-flying business people. At the other end are stories of what many other places could do. The first celebrates imagination, addressing an important particularity that few will emulate; the second offers transferability of the dynamics that many could apply contextually elsewhere. I can see this story being translated elsewhere and even a network of similar projects growing up.

## The kernel of the idea

In theory, a win-win scenario can be created for university and gap year students, as well as local churches and their Christian youth work, by creating a household of students to do ten hours' volunteer work in those contexts, in exchange for living rent free in a local house. As such they are not 'employed', which avoids various legal and financial complications. Perhaps more importantly it expresses something of a gift economy. Here it involves gifts of time given and return gifts of rent free housing. This underpins that ministry is essentially about service, not remuneration, and where money is involved, this is to enable living, not pay for skills.

The students gain in many ways: they acquire experience of ministry and at the same time grow in discipleship through service as well as being mentored. They also experience positive links with a local church, as opposed to being largely consumers at a big student church in term time and possibly being spiritually rootless in the vacations. **For many years the drop-out rate from Church, among Christian ex-students, has been of concern.** They have enthusiastically been in student churches and Christian Unions, but these connections do not provide a working model of how to belong in local church life. Through this scheme, at least a few can experience these different worlds being connected. The students here will also incur far less debt, get the chance to learn at first hand about the demands of community, and experience the mixture of studying and employment which is of value in years ahead, as in a changing world most of us need to be lifelong learners.

The local children and young people also gain. In the young adults, they see role models of commitment and community, as the household is a proving ground of both. Such a household also creates the kind of hub that teenagers are drawn by. Through the focused life of the household and their wider experience of being in a youth congregation, teenagers can rightly differentiate themselves from their parents and their faith, but without the frequently chosen alternative of simply spending time on the streets, or in places of entertainment. If the household community works well, it not only provides a sound base for the students who work out of it, but it also shows younger people what committed relationships, in the age group they aspire to, look like in practice. **In a world short on relationships that disclose stability without sterility, and**

**shy of facing the conflicts that come with community, this route offers some welcome pointers.** As its inventor Paul Franklin wrote, 'A household that can handle conflict well is itself a powerful witness in a world that can't.'

The stipendiary youth worker also benefits in a number of ways. Working with volunteers most of the time, it can be quite a relief to have a few team members to whom 'orders' can be given. Moreover, with the more able household members, a youth leader gains colleagues, not just helpers. This reduces the pressure to be good at all aspects of the job. In this case, Paul freely admits that being 'blokey', it is wonderful to have team members good at pastoral work with teenage girls.

Smaller local churches also benefit. The scheme increases the number of workers in children's and teenage work. This may be especially significant as many such churches would be incapable of providing this without an external resource. Their congregations are too small and too elderly. Sometimes they can find ways to do something with children, either through a monthly family service, or a simple Sunday school. But at the age of eleven, or the change to secondary school in year seven, most of these contacts are lost, because there is no further stage of work for teenagers to move on to. Providing continuity of appropriate young people to lead this stage is a significant gift.

### Necessary factors

- A town with a university nearby – say up to six miles away
- A worker responsible for youth at one local church, who values working with others, and where youth work already exists in some form
- A house large enough for at least four people and with downstairs rooms for meetings, as well as space for the household to eat and to chill out
- A collection of churches in the town willing to work together
- Agreement across these churches that it is legitimate to form a youth congregation which is not to be seen as a bridge to 'real church'
- Finding at least three young people willing to put in around ten hours' voluntary youth work
- Leaders who will bring the household support, discipline and encouragement
- A champion who can guide the process of creating this and provide expertise to move through resistance or resolve difficulties

<sup>1</sup> Paul Franklin, *New Ground: a Primer in Planning Student Households* (Whitstable: Lulu, 2010), p.36.

## New Ground in Whitstable

### The locality

Whitstable is a town of around 31,000 on the north Kent coast, five miles north of Canterbury, to which it is the nearest port. The latter has two universities, each of some 15,000 students. Since Roman times Whitstable has been famous for its oysters whose desirability has waxed and waned and may be recovering again. It also boasted one of the earliest passenger steam railways, the charmingly locally named Crab and Winkle line, although that closed in 1953. A notable geographical feature is 'The Street', thought to be a natural strip of



Harbour Street

shingle on a clay bank. It runs north out to sea at right angles to the coast, for a distance of about half a mile. People walk out on it at low tide. Some locals claim it may be of Roman construction and part of the earliest port. The harbour has gone through ups and downs and today serves as small fishing port and yacht marina. The town began one of the earliest sailing clubs in England and I recall the town with affection as the place where I bought excellent racing sails for my own dinghy.

All this conjures somewhere historic and quaint, with some whiff of departed glories. It is in several ways a conservative place. It has comfortably returned a Tory MP to Parliament for many years. By repute, it has the honour of being the town with the highest proportion of individually owned shops in Britain, which makes walking along Harbour Street an agreeable experience. The downside is lack of commercial acumen or local political will that has led to a history of resisting any entry by chain stores. The upside is that it is a still place of evident character, sporting an artistic community complete with gallery and numerous antique, not junk, shops.



Some local housing

The town has grown along the coast over the years and suburbs like Seasalter to the west and Tankerton to the north east all now form one joined up swathe of housing. Yet the housing is varied, with the east end more prosperous and some local authority estates elsewhere. Seaside bungalows exist alongside twin storied houses old and new. It is a mixed community.

### The churches

Since 1984 there has been an Anglican team ministry in the town. It has a standing of some repute in the diocese of Canterbury because it is a story showing a commitment to diversity that has worked through attendant conflicts and competition. There are seven church buildings, with congregations across a wide range of churchmanship, from high to low, conservative to liberal, and also large to small. Today numbers vary considerably, with under 20 regularly at two of the buildings, and one, St Andrew's, which closed as a 'normal' congregation and is now the home of the youth congregation. To the west end of the town, St Alphege Seasalter is a church of three congregations meeting in Seasalter Christian Centre, one of which is a *Messy Church*, together making a usual Sunday attendance of over 250.<sup>2</sup>



Seasalter Christian Centre

Another at the eastern end, All Saints with its robed choir tradition, draws around 130 on a Sunday. The team is served by four stipendiary clergy, one of whom is a curate, and a full-time youth worker. The successor for a further house-for-duty post has been resolved and an appointment made. The leadership of the team rotates and is not held by the incumbent of any one church in perpetuity. Attending a team meeting showed a group committed to one another, with a pattern of prayer, support and joined up thinking that is evidence that official teams can still work where there is trust and relationships are cultivated, facing down the competitiveness that clergy can exhibit. In addition there are long standing and irenic ecumenical relationships between leaders in the town. Two free churches – one large and one smaller – are part of this story. The scheme does require there be a number of churches involved, working well together. But this team ministry is only the historical particularity of the local story, not a prerequisite. The local churches need to have trusting relationships, but not necessarily formal partnerships such as an Anglican team or group, or ecumenically, a Local Ecumenical Partnership.



Whitstable Team Meeting

<sup>2</sup> This figure includes those under 16 and the monthly *Messy Church*.

## The youth congregation

In some cases a congregation might grow, the working students' household being the catalyst and hub to begin such a work. In this case, a youth congregation preceded it. The Whitstable team ministry launched Y in January 2000 with a previous youth minister. Thus it was an early example of the growing perception that something like this should exist as a church for youth across a town, rather than a bridge for them to cross to attending 'real church' – or all age congregation.<sup>3</sup>

By contrast to this, I am always suspicious when I see the word 'service' in the identity of something started for any age group. Often it is code for something with less corporate identity than the fuller term 'congregation'. It also baptises a narrow focus upon those aspects of being church which centre in attendance at Sunday-centred, leader dominated, event based, gathered public worship. It tends to obscure the equally crucial needs for community, being blind to the life of that community other than Sunday. It fails to make mission anything other than attraction to the said 'service', and so limits its appeal. In addition, the 'service' identity usually precludes government by the indigenous group, and this remains the province of the 'service' provider.

Yet here a number of those negative theoretical factors, which I have deduced from observing twenty years of church planting practice, occurred. The early years of worship and teaching were provided by adults, with the teenagers



sitting on the floor – a singularly low position in relation to the standing adults. Paul Franklin himself arrived in 2002 and by 2003 the limitations were being recognised, not least because of the lack of young people, who had voted with their feet. Changes included praying and listening to the young people. In came chairs and, more importantly, ownership. They came to lead the worship, providing the music through four different bands, taking a turn in speaking and managing the sound. The majority of members on

the leadership team are young people. Deliberate mission events beyond Sunday and the church building became a part of Y's

life, though much of the ongoing relational evangelism is by osmosis.

Community was also built through residential weekends, deliberate socials, altering room layouts and, in 2005, by the introduction of cell groups. These peer led groups further the task of Christian discipleship (one true measure of being church) and mutual pastoral care. Paul summarises: 'Don't think about an event or a service, think in terms of community. Share ownership of everything with the young people. Trust them.'

Thus in many ways, Y has become a fully fledged congregation within the overall team. It is fortunate that it does not share its building with another congregation, which gives it a discrete place in the ecclesial landscape. However, it is deeply dependent on the Whitstable team financially, as a youth congregation will struggle to pay full-on costs of a full-time youth worker. Over many decisions of its common life, it is self-governing with the Y leadership team acting as a ministry leadership team (MLT). Through its youth minister it has a voice in staff and PCC. Items of expenditure over £1,000 go to the PCC. Yet sometimes there are gravitational pulls back to inherited church thinking - take the tendency for other churches to see Y's members as a ready pool of leaders for other churches' children's work. This also assumes that because of their age they are necessarily gifted for work with any group younger than themselves, which may not be true at all. Of course it is good for young people to learn to serve others, but this assumption can be erosion of their congregational identity. The scene is also complicated in that many do attend the morning public worship of other churches in the team and town. So their identity is complex and this can make it unclear.

Linked to this, it is not straightforward to describe where a youth minister finds his or her deepest sense of belonging. Here Paul belongs to Y and to *New Ground*. He manages St Andrew's building and is a member of the Whitstable team. Which identity is primary? If he were like the minister of an all age congregation the answer would be Y and yet he is at least ten years older than any other members and thus different from them. Perhaps this conundrum is complicated by his being single and some churches operate socially and for hospitality around couples.

'Don't think about an event or a service, think in terms of community. Share ownership of everything with the young people. Trust them.'

<sup>3</sup> Still the shortest and best defence of the legitimacy of this is Graham Cray, *Youth Congregations and the Emerging Church* Grove Evangelism No. 57 (Cambridge: Grove Books, 2002).

Paul's convictions about trust crystallise out in their wide values: community, worship, passion, hope, life, encounter, change, play. I gather this list is a distillation gained over years, by reflection upon what did not work, and upon

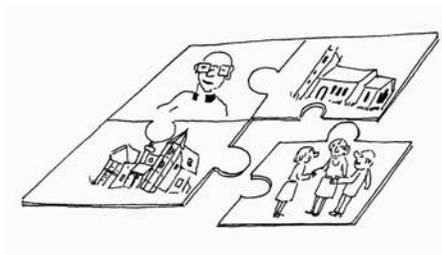


what has been learnt and thus now does work. It creates an environment in which there are implicit attitudes that **renounce 'control' because it can only engender either conformity or rebellion.** Thus the discipleship – at both congregational and cell level – value honesty and freedom, renounce 'shepherding' as practiced by sect-like groups, and seeks to cultivate trust and honesty. These implicit values have surfaced when issues are raised such as whether the student house can contain both genders, should alcohol be allowed on the premises, can team

members give pastoral care to those of the opposite sex and should boy/girl relationships be policed. Perhaps in the cultural 'water' of post-modernity and its primacy of experience, explicit values only crystallise out as particular issues are contested. This does have the advantage that they stand better chance of being owned, as opposed to being imposed. A weakness is that they may only emerge after a difficulty is encountered. However, such values have contributed to the ethos of the student household.

This congregation is not the only piece of youth and children's work in the town. Each church has a relationship to a local primary school. Three of the larger Anglican churches in the team have a midweek group, as do the two independent churches in the scheme, Harbour Street Christian Community Church working with older children and the larger Tankerton Evangelical Church known locally as TEC.

### Starting the scheme



Paul Franklin moved into the ex-St Andrew's vicarage in January 2007. He had long wondered whether a working student house was a possibility to raise the profile of young people as a discrete ministry. Now some key jigsaw pieces were in place: a house suitable to be shared by him and three volunteers and

placed next to the church building that was home to the youth congregation. He lived in the house by himself for a year while the scheme was discussed.

Obstacles to overcome included an attitude from some in existing congregations: 'We don't see the young people enough at our services.' This was not an objection to the scheme *per se* but incomprehension of the legitimacy of both youth congregation and a vision for youth ministry that does not directly lead to a payback of attendance at existing congregations. This is a common issue, as is the resistance to spending serious money on any new untried scheme. So another obstacle was the challenge to raise the monies involved, granted the constraints above. Bringing clarity about when and where youth ministry would, and would not, overlap with congregational life helped. A quite different challenge, that might be met elsewhere, was resisting any diocesan view that selling the St Andrew's house was preferable, as this would release capital for supporting ministry elsewhere or upgrading existing parsonages. Related to this was the case that having a household, rather than individual students dispersed among various families, had to be put to the clergy and team council. Arguing the theoretical win-win case for the churches, their youth work and the students was crucial.



St Andrews Vicarage

After permissions were secured, a steering group was formed, chaired by Paul. It contains the team curate, the two involved free church pastors, and three members of participating churches. Its roles are overall responsibility, financial management, and ensuring committed joint ownership across the participating churches. In Whitstable they found monthly meeting during the initial setting up was necessary, but now that has been pared back to once every few months and intervening communication is done by email. The exception is interview time when all are involved much more, both to try to ensure good candidates and to see that they will fit the respective churches. This pastoral sense is followed through in that all the household members are mentored by someone on the steering group. In the unhappy event of unresolved conflict within the student house, members of this group would become involved.

## New Ground in practice

### Preparation

November to January sees the period of advertising in *Youthwork* magazine and on the internet for gap year seekers, and through chaplains and CU contacts for students. It seems in practice that, along with today's culture of deferred decision making, applications are received right up to the end of the January deadline. A sample of the kind of questions that go into the application is given in Paul's booklet on practical details<sup>4</sup> and wisely includes exploration of what applicants think about sharing a house.

In February applicants come for the interview process. This seems very thorough as befits a residential communal year. Applicants meet the existing house in informal and social ways, which reveals people's social and communication skills. A tour of the involved churches gives applicants a view of the churchmanship range involved and can be part of discerning if there are obvious matches to follow through between applicants and a piece of work. They meet the youth congregation and are set various tasks to complete. There are formal interviews with members of the steering group who, of course, now have a few years' experience to draw upon. Thus over two days a better picture is built up, enabling both sides to come to a decision.

Some successful applicants are able to gain a running start in August by attending a week at Detling which is, in effect, Y's annual youth camp. They go as part of a now long-standing regional event in Kent owing much to the ethos of New Wine. Thus, without the pressure of having to perform, they can be around the youth congregation and pick up more of its ethos.

### Off you go

September is the month for the full start. A new academic year begins with many young people facing a transition. The students move in, begin to settle and are introduced to the local churches, to the existing teams they will work alongside and to the work they will undertake. Paul Franklin describes the first month as critical, for it sets the patterns of work and its attendant pace. The bedding down of the new community is also occurring and it is to be expected that every year will go through some iteration of the forming, storming, norming, performing

<sup>4</sup> Franklin, *New Ground*, pp. 40-41.

process. Steve Coneys, who came to Seasalter in 1994 and became team rector in 2002, concurred that this is to be seen as normal and that it takes skill to guide newcomers through it. This can be alarming to idealistic young people who can imagine that any kind of conflict represents failure or fault and is to be avoided at all costs. Moreover other leaders noted how our surrounding culture is becoming more individualistic with loss of social capital. The shift from listening to 'records' in a living room to listening through earphones to iPods



**Vicky and Steve Coneys**

would be one icon of this. Living in a community house sharpens a counter-cultural reversal of these wide trends. Steve Coney notes over the three years that there has always been some tension in the house. How people are

interacting needs spotting and the right kind of speaking out to learn how community grows through its birth pangs.



In addition, they have found there can be problems when the household takes on a local person to live within it. These individuals will need to create 'distance' from the previous chapter of their lives in

which they were just one of the gang and living with their family. Both they and the group can find the change in role difficult. A good compromise has been to let such young people continue to live at home and be auxiliary members of the household team.

### Work patterns

I interviewed all three household members. The patterns for the two gappers, Sarah and Jay, turned out to be similar, while those for Tim (known locally as T.J) reflected his different commitments, in part arising from his being a full-time university student and also being in his second year in the project. The classic weekly pattern of the house includes a wide variety of elements.

**Monday** morning was shopping day for most of them, the exception being TJ who has lectures morning and afternoon. The early evening for Sarah and Jay was spent helping local leaders at the *Urban Saints* group based at Tankerton Evangelical Church. In the evening, TJ took a Y cell group.

Time for preparation took **Tuesday** morning, except twice a term the team would take a local school assembly. Sarah and Jay used both to be involved in an after school homework club at St Alphege Seasalter, and later in *High Spirits* a youth group most attended by boys at All Saints in the early evening. Jay found the former too academically based and Sarah found 11-15 year old boys not her thing. Both were allowed to withdraw, so there is flexibility in the scheme to find what works. TJ's Tuesday, post-afternoon lectures, contains a variety of monthly St Alphege Seasalter based commitments, including membership of its MLT and the Canterbury CU. Here is evidence that with potential, a young adult, staying for two years, can gain valuable experience of life in the local church.

After TJ's morning lectures, the household staff meeting occurs on **Wednesday** afternoon. It covers holding the diary together, discussing how they are doing, and how work is going. At the time of writing, this meeting is about to move to Thursday for diary reasons. Sarah and Jay used to run a cell on Wednesday evening. However, it closed due to small numbers across a wide age range. Jay hopes to begin another group, perhaps around after-school swimming. Sarah enjoys meeting young people 1-1 and could develop that. TJ also participates in 1-1, or 1-few, pastoral time and is confident in meeting either boys or girls in a neutral venue such as Whitstable Costa or in the student house. As he says, it is often not so much that you select who to see, they choose you and invite others. He does this too on a Thursday afternoon. In the evening, with Amy of Tankerton Evangelical Church, he runs *The Edge*, a new group started September 2010 for young adults. This is an example of a further work begun out of the student house and represents his first experience of planting something from scratch.

**Thursday** begins with the mid-morning service at Harbour Street Christian Community Church, by which the team receive input in its Bible study led by Pastor Alan. Sarah and Jay then have time with their respective mentors from the steering group, which she regarded as a highlight. TJ's mentor is recovering from an operation, but he has more access to both Paul Franklin and Steve Coneys and so is provided for. In the evening, Sarah assists in 'Town' church's (St Alphege, Whitstable) youth work *Allies*, whereas Jay is based with Tankerton

Evangelical Church and TJ with *Sorted*, the open youth club for Seasalter. The latter is unusual for being able to mix estate and suburban teens and also include Christians and non-Christians. After the youth groups finish, Sarah and Jay put in a couple of hours' cleaning at St Andrew's. This is paid for separately and creates income for the scheme.

On **Fridays**, the three go separate ways. It is TJ's day off, while Sarah travels to Archbishop's school in Canterbury for morning detached playground work and a lunchtime CU meeting. Jay is back in the Harbour Street church coffee morning and sometimes helps out at the endowed school adjacent to the 'Town' church. His afternoon includes 'enrichment' work at that school which he loves. Both are involved early evening with *The Hub* for junior school children based at Harbour Street. It can also be the night for Y socials.

They then take **Saturday** off and TJ is on, with a varied life that can include preparing worship for Sunday services or for his *Messy Church* connection.

They are all based at different churches on the **Sunday** and link this with having time, and usually a meal, with their 'pastoral' family of that church. The mentor tends to be more like a work consultant and this family will be around to pick up on personal issues. Depending on their commitments, parts of the afternoon will be spent preparing for Y and the evening taken up by being part of it.



St Alphege Town Church



Whitstable and Seasalter Endowed Church of England Junior School

In theory, the scheme for full time students on the team claims to be ten hours' work and Sunday, but it may exceed this, with the strengths that it is a varied week and contains elements that are helpfully stretching. The view is that there is no fixed shape of the day. Rather it is loose, revolving around the various work commitments of the team, themselves committed across a number of youth and children's ministries in various churches. The upside is that pragmatically this works and serves a range of churches. The downside is that work can dominate over what could be balancing communal and spiritual factors which I explore later. It also leads to it being a distinctly owl-like late house. Evening youth work is often followed by debrief and chat, well into the small hours, with people only surfacing mid-morning. Larks need not apply.



## Lessons

### Three cheers

Commentators from the Whitstable team believe the scheme has not only brought greater resources and energy to the youth work, leading to an increase in numbers, but also greater intentionality. Quality and purpose are deeper than number and buzz, so that is good to hear.

Across the years Paul has seen a whole range of positive lessons learnt by the students. They have a good experience of moving away from the security of the parental home. Through serving they learn to own their own faith and make progress in finding their own identity and gifts. Beyond this they meet a wide cross section of humanity and learn to avoid church-hopping along with the values of stickability and making a difference. Commonly there is also an increased sense of vocation.

### Recruiting

Over the years they have seen the recruiting patterns vary.

Dates	Name	How	From	Age	Stage of life
Sept '08	Laura Siminsen	Local contact	Whitstable	19	Gap year
to July '09	Tom Haig	Advert - internet	Southampton	19	Gap year
	Jess Milns	Advert - internet	Norfolk	18	Gap year
Sept '09	Chris Walters	Previous parish	Portsmouth	19	Gap year
to July '10	Grace Williams	Local contact	Sittingbourne	18	Gap year
	Tim Jones	Linked parish	Frinsbury	19	2 <sup>nd</sup> year student
Sept '10	Sarah Bladen	Advert - magazine	Poole	18	Gap year
to July '11	Jason Bradshaw	Advert - internet	Maidstone	27	Late gap year
	Tim Jones	2 <sup>nd</sup> year in scheme	Frinsbury	20	3 <sup>rd</sup> year student

Table of the volunteers and their years of service

To complete the data, both in 2009/2010 and the following year, a local school leaver who could perfectly well stay in the parental home, and who has been a product of the Y congregation, has been a team member though not resident in the household. Dan Dennis did this first and Nathan (usually 'Nate') Jenks followed this year. This seems to work well.

The table shows a predominance of gap year students. There are several reasons for this, some of which apply to Whitstable and some that are generic. It is six miles from the universities at Canterbury and thus at the extreme range of

ability to draw them. The town itself is not large and thus has a limited pool to fish from and is limited in its attraction to outsiders. Steve Coneys considered the challenges in recruiting to be one of the biggest issues faced in the overall process. **Reasons that make finding students harder include that there is no structured equivalent for them to discover *New Ground*.** This is in contrast to gap year young people with access to *Youthwork* magazine and its website, or to the plethora of gap year schemes. Indeed the latter means it is hard for the *New Ground* advert to be noticed. Some of those who have come were wondering about future youth work and thus looking for opportunities. Moreover, university CUs linked to UCCF (Universities and Colleges Christian Fellowship) would be less likely to favour placing one of their number in a context that deliberately chose to serve a variety of churchmanship. Christian Unions working with an alternative student mission organisation called *Fusion* might well look more kindly upon it, as the household has some similarity to cell thinking and offers mentor supported work. Thus a good proportion of those who have been through the scheme came through relational contacts. These might be personal, or links between parishes, within or across dioceses.

### Finding a two-year person



Tim

The table also shows Tim Jones is in his second year with the scheme, and a stand-out lesson is that **where a good two year appointment can be made, this carries considerable advantages.** Relationships between the students and those they serve deepen more. There is time to learn from inevitable mistakes and then have a substantial second chance, honing skills. It increases stability, continuity and experience in the household as it goes through stages that all communities face. The ideal might be to find first year students who are willing to explore a two year

commitment and to deliberately overlap the years in which they serve. If that could be made to work it would actually ensure there were always two working in this way, one in their first year and one in their second. The attendant disadvantage is reducing the number of students who can pass through the scheme. The risk is the disruption if a prospective two year post does not work out.

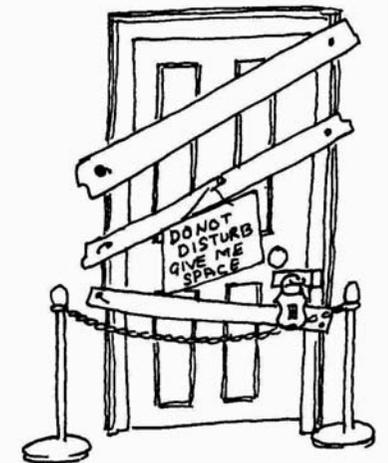
A danger to watch, with either one or two year posts, is that the indigenous Christians can sit back and take the view: 'They're paid to do it; why should we?' Thus it may be better not to extend one local household scheme, which could create further dependency, but to have a number of them across a diocese or district.

### Gender balance

All noticed, albeit on slender evidence, that the team having **more girls than boys creates problems.** One young woman commented that a household with one girl and two boys, plus Paul, avoids a competitive spirit between girls that can arise. In addition she candidly spoke of their attendant tendency to be bitchy, as well as being more emotionally up and down. By contrast she noted the boys showed their emotions less, despite what they might well be feeling within. Reflection on the year in which girl household members did outnumber the boys was taken by others as corroborating this view. Doubtless issues of maturity are cardinal and I can imagine selectors in another place or year going for those candidates who display it, almost irrespective of gender. However this scheme has most flexibility and effectiveness when the team contains both genders.

### Give me space

There is a need for the house to contain **space for the household to be free of work.** The St Andrew's house could have been organised to include another student and attendant separate bedroom, but this would have been at the expense of shared space, not least the chance for introverts to recharge. Downstairs contains a larger and smaller lounge, a kitchen-diner, utility room, guests loo, and Paul Franklin's study bedroom. Upstairs offers three private bedrooms, the 'blue room' which is work space for the team (and a cell group location) and a bathroom/toilet. The downstairs smaller lounge - the red room - acts as the TV room and most obvious communal chill-out space. Even then they find there can be few quiet spaces or times as many drop in casually and unpredictably.



Another kind of space is emotional. Sarah knew it was valuable to her to have regular quality time with her mentor Tanya, and very helpful to have a girl friend to chill out with outside the household in Laura, who happened to be a local household member from previous years. This kind of provision for the only girl in the household seems essential to me.

Paul has also found that, on the one hand, leaders in the participating churches can underestimate the ability of team members. To be fair, these will vary across the team and the years, thus succession of work needs careful matching of person to role. On the other hand, perhaps because such leaders are long standing members of their own communities they, at the same time, overestimate how quickly the new team members will make pastoral relationships.

### The best year

There was wide consensus that the third year of the scheme has been the best to date. The first year had to go through the storming to performing stages for the first time, making forming community a challenge. The second year experienced one member leaving through personal problems and the third has enjoyed the advantages of one member being in his second year. It is a team which brings enthusiasm and an overall leader who now has lessons to draw on, to bring to newer members from the past two years. **Realism, learnt the hard way, is a good gift to young communities.** False expectations are never helpful.

### Fruit



Nate

I saw the household halfway through a year. They had been there long enough to learn the ropes, find what patterns were working well and what needed adjusting. It was clear that Sarah, Jay, TJ and Nate had all grown in confidence. Nate himself described the year as a big step up. Now he knew he had the respect of the kids and was looked to for leadership. For a lad not going on to uni and halfway through a bricklaying course, the leadership roles he fulfilled in the youth congregation and the serving roles he held across both the household and the youth work were quietly impressive. Paul too spoke very highly of Nate as an implementer who doubled

Paul's own capacity, praising his utter reliability and dependability.

Sarah was very positive and clear that in particular she had gained various specific skills: an ability to cope much better with larger groups whereas she has come with a strong preference to work with very small numbers; learning how to handle disciplinary issues; being more confident in dealing with conflict. She was learning proper assertiveness, coping better with living under pressure and how to be an authority figure. I saw a young person reflecting quite acutely on the relatively few months she had been in post, knowing herself better and how she was growing in relationship with God. All this was quite a move forward for a girl youngest in her family. She had also gained clarity vocationally, including a passion for ministry to girls, and so was moving away from pursuing Chemistry at uni and actively applying for youth ministry through the *Centre for Youth Ministry*, while looking for the commensurate appropriate part-time job. Her *New Ground* experience should strengthen her application. She was also clear about some things she sensed she had given. She had restored belief that a girl can handle the year, as her predecessor, of a similar age, had left halfway through. She had shown the value of there being a mixed team and was handling the pastoral work with the girls in classic areas like image and relationships.



Sarah

Jay's learning had made clear to him that he prefers work among primary and junior school age groups, though if he is to pursue youth and children's work he will need to be able to do both. He found the year a good experience of learning how to be a team in contrast to a previous gap year elsewhere. He valued learning through the team meetings and Paul being part of the household as someone around to keep all members up to the mark. He was balancing the virtue of learning patience with recognising that he lived in a busy house and was an introvert.



Jay



Tim and Paul

Tim's learning has been as a foil to Paul. They are very different Myers-Briggs Type Indicator personalities sharing only preference for the big picture. Paul is seen more as the teacher with a prophetic edge and Tim as the worship leader and pastor. Their roles, as being akin to Celtic Bishop and Abbot, in relation to *Y* and the household, made sense to them when I unpacked the ideas. His growth is such that should Paul move on, Tim would be in the frame for consideration as a possible successor. His maturity, this experience and his theological degree would be part of such a case.

Another fruitful development has been the birth of *The Edge*, containing young singles and marrieds, run by TJ and others. It represents something rather healthy in local church life that there is now provision all the way from work with young children through to work among young adults. **So many churches can only mount a minority of those stages with an attendant drop rate in consequence.** *The Edge* is not just the product of the student house, but also response to a wider change as *Y* members have grown older with a number staying in the area. However it is true that TJ wrote the paper proposing the group's creation and it coincided with a review conducted by Bob Jackson that highlighted the shortage at St Alphege Seasalter of those in the 18-30 age bracket. *The Edge* is cell based and every six weeks or so the group put on a worship service. With such a structure an early challenge will be finding additional leaders when the initial group should multiply.

### Theory runs ahead?

The theory of a working students' household is ahead of the practice I saw at only a few points. This is not a fatal objection and only time will tell whether the theory is right and needs to be grown into, or that some parts were idealistic and should be knowingly dropped.

Some of the early accounts describe the student house as modelling household church. While



that would be congruent with youth work that knows both congregation and cell, I doubt this is what is really happening. I also question that it can occur as the membership may well change by 75% each calendar year. Moreover there is not enough time and continuity to form something we would call church. In addition, whatever this is, it can't be joined. There is no more space for another living in member.

Other documents expressed the hope that the household idea drew upon the monastic. I warm to ways of being Christian that inherently combine elements of private and public prayer, eating and meeting, studying, deciding and working. I think it is fair to say that this household at times demonstrates elements of community, hospitality, generosity and labour. Yet only some of diagnostic monastic rhythms are actually present. I was surprised that the household struggles to find rhythms of shared prayer and meals. Rather it was the case that team members buy and cook for themselves. In theory they eat together once a week, but sometimes that is only theory.<sup>5</sup> Examination of the working week, including three different days off across the team, and some activities at supper times, reveals real pressure to find times in the diary when they are all together. Yet my view would be that doing slightly less, and facing down its attendant activism in order to redeem and balance that situation, would be well worth it. Perhaps the middle of the day would contain the least conflicts. Establishing some simple rule of life might help.

So I was helped that the same 2009 source also describes it more modestly and closer to what I observed. **It suggests the household operates as a mission hub.** It is where a small team live, engaging in a variety of work among children and youth across a town. Here it has proved helpful that it so happens the community house is adjacent to the church building, St Andrew's which is the Sunday home of the youth congregation. Thus it importantly acts as a base within which the midweek life of the youth congregation happens. This house is far more than provision of a building in which young people can meet, rather like a church lounge may host a midweek prayer meeting for adults. This is a home which is inhabited. That creates a different ethos. I am reminded of the soap *Friends* and how the flats they rented were significant meeting places (not just inexpensive sets for TV makers) different from going to an event or



St Andrew's Church

<sup>5</sup> Franklin, *New Ground*, pp. 14, suggests this.

even a café. Once again, through exposure to dynamics within the fresh expressions world, we bump into a recovery of the domestic as a core context for being Christian.

### At home

The importance of this house for young people needs emphasising, and it is another example of the 'three places' theory spelt out in *Encounters on the Edge* no. 48. Paul's youth work training laid out for him one framework of progression in youth work. Stage one is 'in contact' which could be simply meeting young people in school or town. Stage two is 'just looking' when relationships involve more extended time and are being built. This might well involve planned meeting up in a neutral venue or attendance at an open event or club. Stage three was called 'committed' and is characterised by attendance at a cell or congregation. It is also held that the venues and functions of these first three stages are to be kept separate from each other. Stage four, 'disciplined', is more invisible again and will typically be 1-1 or maybe 1-few. Stage five is 'in ministry', when young people are themselves taking initiatives with others over the previous four stages. Some readers will see a further endorsing of the earlier published work of Laurence Singlehurst,<sup>6</sup> as well as similarity to the work described in *Encounters on the Edge* no. 48. In such a progression, the community house embodies unstructured opportunities and space around stages two and three. It can also be one venue for stage four.

Paul also helped me to become aware that a house to which they can freely come, that is not the parental home, is a rare gift to teenagers. Domestic culture is not very hospitable to them, for many adults do not know how to welcome them, let alone in groups. **Socially, young people are either excluded from, or exclude themselves from, much adult society.** In today's neurotic and over-sexed society, old fashioned innocent friendships between teacher and pupils are also now taboo, which again cuts out a source of safe adult-teen relationships. Child protection is at times creating teen isolation. So this community house exudes a counter-cultural message of openness and trust. It is diagnostic that a number of senior youth congregation members have a key to its door and the whole complex is affectionately known by the teenagers as St Andrew's-land.

<sup>6</sup> Laurence Singlehurst, *Sowing Reaping Keeping* (Leicester: Crossway Books 1995). The Sheffield Centre regard it as an abiding source of sense about wider evangelism processes.

### Following the crowd

The scheme was in part designed to model that students need not be sucked into large churches, and act like consumers of their goods and services, but rather can build good relationships with less glamorous local congregations. In this scenario there has been mixed success. Though Y serves the whole team, the largest church, St Alphege Seasalter, has a gravitational pull. I do not believe it deliberately seeks to do this, but young people themselves follow the crowd and where the crowd gathers it is attractive. At present most of the young people have a dual ID, both through Y, and the St Alphege Seasalter's all age Sunday service at Seasalter Christian Centre.



Inside Seasalter Christian Centre

### Finance

I highlight here what is true in this story.<sup>7</sup> Other places will have local and regional variables. For example, in some parishes a family may have moved for a year or more to work abroad and are willing for their house to be used in this way.

### COSTS

#### Set up

Furnishing the house £2,000

#### Annual

Rent of a surplus diocesan house, to vicarage standard	£7,000
Living allowance for three students	£2,000
Based on 1 student @ £60 per month, September-July	
Expenses for travel, educational materials for three students - say	£700
A training residential for three	£300
Recruiting process – advertising and travel	£1,200
Repairs allowance on the house	£1,000
Total	£12,200

<sup>7</sup> Taken from interview and confirmed by various pages of Franklin, *New Ground*, pp. 16-19.

## Contributors

Harbour Street Christian Community Church	£3,000
Tankerton Evangelical Church	£3,000
Whitstable Team Ministry (spilt by relative size of each church)	£7,000
The Whitstable team also are responsible for Paul Franklin's salary and expenses	

## Time

This is a kind of cost: mainly the giving of supervisory and pastoral time by the clergy, members of the steering group and the mentors. However, this is not normally computed in assessing other church activities like Bible study groups, Sunday schools or regular committees.

## Comparisons

Full-on costs of a full-time cleric (depending on diocese)	£45,000-£49,000
Full-on costs of full-time youth worker	£25,000+
Cost to a student finding accommodation for three years at uni	£10,500
Cost of a normal student household for four for one year	£14,000

## Financial conclusions

This is a far cheaper way to generate further ministry than employing more full-time staff. It represents good investment by a group of churches in young people, as well as in ministry to further young people, and thus the future. It is also a considerable reduction of debt for able and willing students now faced with tuition, accommodation and living costs.

## Variables to the scheme

### How many churches

The number of churches in the scheme needs to be large enough to provide different outlets for meaningful work and ministry by the students. I doubt it could be less than three but would be glad to be proved wrong. The number needs to be small enough that team members have a specific allocation, working alongside a specific group for a year, not spread across too many churches – such as a whole deanery - and thus only be a rota filler or programme item.

The churches need to have enough **vision and money** to back the project. Here a couple of free churches each put in £3,000 annually. The Whitstable team covers the housing rental cost of £7,000. Clearly the larger the number of students in a house or houses would affect how many churches were needed to meet the costs. Some parishes might even already own a house that used to be occupied by a past curate.

### Housing the youth leader

Where the youth leader lives can vary. He/she need not live in the community house. In this case Paul Franklin does. Living in has the advantage that a leadership structure is immediately visible and there are shorter lines of communication. This may be ideal where the youth minister is single. Where the youth leader is married or has children, different arrangements will be needed, including greater clarity about how the house works, and firm times when the leader is there as well as planned supervision.

### The champion

The person who consistently says 'Why not do this?' need not be a full-time youth minister. What is necessary is a focus upon, and commitment to, work among young people, gifts of leadership and a person who can bring continuity. The latter means that it probably should not be a curate. They take time to land, are effective for a time, then are caught up in moving on and may not be replaced, immediately or ever. A team vicar with 1/3<sup>rd</sup> time dedicated could be suitable.

## The range of work

The work the students do can vary. Connections can be made to existing children's work, being part of a *Messy Church*, working with 11-14s such as *Pathfinders*, or the 14+ youth work. It could also focus on local schools. That has not been true here as most teenagers are in schools outside the town. Work among fellow students would need closer proximity between a university and the local churches than is the case here. On the positive side it could create the bridge needed to find easier successions of students. One danger might be simply creating another consumerist student church. The work can be based in any local church, of any participating denomination, or interdenominational such as with *Urban Saints* – the erstwhile *Crusaders*. This work can be combined with other serving roles such as cleaning a church, PA assistance to staff, administrative work in the church office or gardening. The *New Ground* scheme is computed on ten hours' youth work, but this can be spread across different patterns depending on the local opportunities and needs as well as the aptitude of the students.

## Mixed teams

The team can contain differing mixtures of people. One variable is taking locals and non-locals, although the advice from here is it should not be made entirely from the former. In addition a mix of those on gap years and university students can be explored, which can bring a useful range of ages into play.

## Where do we go from here?

### Back where I started?

It was odd researching and writing this project in that I was often reminded of the first 1999 *Encounters on the Edge* story about *Living Proof*. They too made significant use of post-university gap students, who lived in two community houses. The main difference was that their service was through a base of contact in local schools and built on with further empowering processes. As such they were working even further out and further back than this story and so needed slightly older young adults to cope with those demands. **Both stories show young people can do more than sometimes we ask or think.** They are well worth investing in.

### How common could this become?

The market for this is larger than I first thought. Consider that, according to *Universities UK*, there are 109 recognised universities in the UK and 352 institutions in the UCAS system which deliver accredited higher education courses.<sup>8</sup> While some towns and cities have more than one university, it is also the case that there are many churches in those locations that are not the recognised student watering holes. Moreover not all Christian students want to be part of large churches.

In addition, the scheme is not limited to university students and includes gap year people. Nationally there has been reportage of a large increase in the number of those choosing to take this one year out. Factors influencing it include the squeeze on university places with resultant competition for places from 2009. One consequence is that students search to do something else to make their CV stand out more for the next year.<sup>9</sup> Since then, highly publicised legislation has gone through to allow universities to charge higher tuition fees from 2012. This in turn has already increased university applications for autumn 2011, such that a higher number than usual will not find a place. In future the change in fees is likely to increase the number of students staying at home while attending a local university. It will make some more keen to find ways to work through university. Perhaps it will helpfully discourage those simply going off to uni to postpone deciding what on earth to do, or worse, to have three years doing as little work

<sup>8</sup> [http://wiki.answers.com/Q/What\\_is\\_the\\_total\\_number\\_of\\_universities\\_in\\_UK](http://wiki.answers.com/Q/What_is_the_total_number_of_universities_in_UK).

<sup>9</sup> L. Tobin, *The Guardian*, 1st September 2009, reports 25,000 extra 'gappers' in that year.

as possible, while having a good time. In any case it is bound to heighten the search for the kinds of accommodation that will be less costly. Such pressures are likely to create more candidates for schemes like this.

However this could lead to mixed motives and interviewing will need to be acute in this area. At the same time **if the Christian community can help a number of students do something worthwhile outside their studies, and release them from some measure of debt, then that is honourable and desirable.** I simply do not know whether the idea has been put into practice earlier and elsewhere, but here was the chance to tell the first story that I know of its kind. Of course elements of this have occurred before. Student houses, gap years and internships are nothing new. What may be new is the combination of factors and that they are not so out of reach of a good number of local churches.

### Dream on

I could imagine most dioceses having a handful of such places. A good diocesan secretary would be likely to know where in addition to a university there was a clutch of collaborative churches. These could widen the provision they made for children and youth and assist at least a few students and gappers to experience a purposeful set of years and open up God's vocational paths for them. They are a rare breed in churches and deserve all the encouragement we can give them.

George W. Lings  
February 2011

Cartoons by Tim Sharp

### Further reading

Paul Franklin, *New Ground: a Primer in Planning Student Households* (Whitstable: Lulu, 2010). This goes into greater depth on the practicalities.

Paul Franklin, *Indigenous Worship* (Whitstable: Lulu, 2011).

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