

## 54: A Spare Part?



A significant proportion of fresh expressions of Church are led by volunteers in their 'spare time'. Leaders have to balance the demands of full-time work alongside growing their church. This booklet tells the stories of two spare-time led churches that have been going for over fifteen years. What advice would these spare-time leaders offer other churches in the same situation? What are the wider implications for the fresh expressions movement? Claire Dalpra went to find out...

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Registered Office: Church Army, Wilson Carlile Centre, 50 Cavendish Street, Sheffield, S3 7RZ, UK

Tel: 0114 252 7279

Email: [ask@sheffieldcentre.org.uk](mailto:ask@sheffieldcentre.org.uk)

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# Encounters on the Edge



no. 54:

## A Spare Part?

Sustainability and spare-time led fresh expressions of Church

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

Discoveries about fresh expressions of Church from The Sheffield Centre

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## The terminology is problematic

Questions of sustainability are now surfacing more readily than they used to and rightly so.<sup>1</sup> This booklet is about the sustaining of fresh expressions of Church led by volunteers in their spare time. In 2001, this series concluded that part-time led fresh expressions of Church had 'sprinting power but not middle distance stamina'.<sup>2</sup> More recently, we've criticised the unrealistic expectations heaped upon part-time leaders to grow churches from scratch that maintain their effectiveness in mission and grow to ecclesiological maturity.<sup>3</sup> This concern was further voiced in Encounters on the Edge no. 50 when noting the significantly higher death rate of fresh expressions without full-time leaders in our case studies so far in the series. If considerable pressure exists for these part-time leaders to sustain their churches in the long term, **I find it surprising that alarm bells aren't sounding more loudly and more often on behalf of our spare-time leaders.**

The number of fresh expressions without a dedicated full-time stipendiary leader continues to increase, alongside the prevalence of self-supporting clergy and doubts about three year seed-corn funding as the best way to birth a venture.<sup>4</sup> Using lay volunteers to develop fresh expressions has now been recognised as indispensable within wider strategic thinking<sup>5</sup> against a backdrop of wider financial constraints and already thinly-spread clergy serving inherited churches. Obviously, some lay volunteers will have independent means, be supported by a spouse or have entered retirement and therefore they are more flexible in the time they can dedicate to starting and bringing up a fresh expression. But what about lay volunteers who have to hold down a **full-time job as well as birth a church?**

There is an inherent problem in calling someone a spare-time leader of a church. When people hear 'spare time' they immediately think of leisure time. Thus to say you lead a church in your spare time sounds like a hobby. It sounds optional so when family or work commitments crowd in, church falls down the priority list

<sup>1</sup> Stuart Murray notes the changes in asking questions about growth in the 1980s, asking questions of multiplication in the 1990s and asking questions of sustainability in the 2000s, S. Murray, *Church After Christendom* (London: Paternoster 2004), pp. 164-165.

<sup>2</sup> G. Lings, *Leading Lights: Who Can Lead New Churches?* Encounters on the Edge no. 9 (Sheffield: Church Army, 2001).

<sup>3</sup> G. Lings, *Do Network Churches Work?* Encounters on the Edge no. 41 (Sheffield: Church Army, 2009) p. 24.

<sup>4</sup> Data collected from the Diocese of Liverpool in 2012 shows 26 of 90 leaders (across 78 fresh expressions of Church) lead in their spare time.

<sup>5</sup> [www.cofe.anglican.org/about/gensynod/agendas/feb2010/gspapers/g1761.pdf](http://www.cofe.anglican.org/about/gensynod/agendas/feb2010/gspapers/g1761.pdf), accessed 13 Oct 2010, p. 16.

quickly. It has an air of being a lightweight option, thus playing into the hands of fresh expressions sceptics that claim the movement is unhealthily permeated with a 'what feels right for now' mentality.

Yet we have no settled inherited way to describe the lay volunteers in this situation. The term 'bi-vocational' is good at expressing a parallel vocational calling that requires a balance of commitments but 'bi-' implies a 50/50 part-time split. This may be the pattern for some but blanket usage of the term is in danger of obscuring the situation of many volunteers who are not at liberty to allocate the time in their week to job and church in equal parts.<sup>6</sup> I fear our limited existing terminology masks **this important issue of time-poor leaders that is in grave danger of being overlooked**. This series of booklets has always sought to encounter pioneering work 'at the edges' so, in the absence of any better alternative, I will keep to the term 'spare time' to discover how leaders in this most time-poor scenario lead their churches.

Whether it's a cause or a symptom of the challenges that spare-time led churches face, there aren't many resources in our mainline denominations that address the twin challenges of spare-time led fresh expressions and sustainability together. Literature that does exist claims that simpler models of church are the answer.<sup>7</sup> In autumn 2010, I interviewed six leaders of spare-time led fresh expressions of churches that had been going for at least five years to discover more about how, against all the odds, they've made it work.<sup>8</sup> Is simplicity the answer and, if so, in what ways? I lead with two brief stories before offering some commonalities I observed across them.

<sup>6</sup> Wider than a lay issue alone, many clergy birth fresh expressions of Church alongside their inherited church and find the time they can commit to the new venture is limited, although at least they have some freedom to allocate their time.

<sup>7</sup> S. Murray, *Church After Christendom* (Milton Keynes: Paternoster Press, 2004), p.227.

<sup>8</sup> To limit variables, I excluded examples of spare-time led fresh expressions that had been begun or led at one time by full-time or part-time leaders.

## St Peter's, Warfield

The parish of Warfield near Bracknell in Berkshire is a mixture of rural and suburban. St Michael's church is in an attractive but remote location at some distance from where most of the people in the parish live. Almost all owner-occupied housing in Warfield is much desired, being within commuting distance of Bracknell, Maidenhead and Reading and the IT industries that abound along this part of the M4 corridor. Church planting has long been the instinct of this parish to connect with the new areas of housing that have sprung up within it over the last 20 years. Eternity, their youth church featured in Encounters on the Edge no. 4, has developed into Encounter, an accessible church youth gathering on Sunday evenings aimed at encouraging teenagers and young people from all walks of life to encounter the good news. With as many as five different interdependent churches now 'birthed' and with some now well into adolescence, it is not surprising they refer to themselves as the Warfield Family of Churches.



In 1998 Chris Hill was asked to lead the planting of St Peter's Church at the same time as working full-time for Microsoft. The planting team was made up of 25 adults and 25 children from the sending church, so a dedicated full-time paid leader wasn't deemed necessary at this stage. The team were all committed to making it work so Chris's job in the early years was to ensure work was divided out and that everyone continued to move in the right direction. St Peter's met weekly on a Sunday morning in a local school to offer a more informal style of church for families moving into one of the housing estates. In *Mission-shaped Church* categories, it would fit most comfortably within the 'traditional church plant' category, and the Warfield story confirms this kind of congregational planting still works very well in a context like this.



Chris described to me the first 13 years of St Peter's and what he felt made it work. The team were very clear that these Sunday morning gatherings were the core of what they did. Furthermore, they were aware that this was how newcomers most easily found their way into join them. Even in the very quiet holiday periods, they met in the same place, at the same time, although for the first Sunday in January or sometimes in August, they gathered for refreshments and chat rather than the usual

worship service to give the team a rest from service leading. I reflect that **finding and maintaining the way the majority of your newcomers find you makes a good deal of sense.** In the quest to keep church life simple, identifying your main 'front door' and then keeping it open is vital. If you want new people to find you, don't thwart the necessary relational work by choosing places to meet that are obscure and times that are variable.

Over the years, they were an attractive port of call for existing Christians moving into the area, but they were quite careful to explain the values and ethos of the church and were quick to point out the ways they differed from an inherited church setup. They didn't mind existing Christians coming and going, but their priority was connecting with those new to the faith. The extent to which they had to wrestle with the question of letting those who have not yet made a public profession of faith take on roles and responsibilities within the church is indicative of the connections they made. The team agreed that non-Christians could volunteer as helpers while leadership responsibility of an area of ministry rested with Christians.

### The team that plays together...

Chris says he was fortunate in being able to start with a good team. His incumbent, Brian Meardon, invited him to select a team from the sending

church and recommended Chris pick team members that he and his wife could socialise with. Rather than adhere to some conventional wisdom that you need a balance of gifts and skills in a team, Chris was told to choose a core team of people he didn't have to walk on egg shells around - team members who could be your friends. While there is no way to avoid 'egg shell people' scenarios entirely when birthing churches – this story wasn't without its moments of friction - choosing a team in this way established a culture of prioritising relationships from the start. St Peter's name was accompanied by the strapline '**Make friends, Make disciples**', and as it was a value that was already being lived out, it lent them important credibility. As many of the team had younger children, unsurprisingly they attracted a good number of younger families. Those children grew up with the church over the 13 years, leaving them with a healthy bulge of early teens. This pattern mirrored the broader demographics of the local area as initially many couples moved onto the estate with young children and stayed put as their children grew into their teenage years.

Aside from Sunday morning, they were very careful only to develop what they could sustain. Resourcing the adult service with children's work in parallel (except out of term time when they had family services) was manageable with their large leadership team of eight. But even then, it was normal for DVD discipleship resources followed by discussion in small groups to be used in place of a sermon. **In doing anything beyond the Sunday morning gathering, they had to be quite shrewd about what was sustainable.** For example, at one stage the youth work on a Sunday for older teenagers wasn't working. They lacked the volunteers with the skills to lead it, so the leadership team suggested it stop and invited the older teenagers to join the adult service. Sad though it was, Chris and his team knew they had to be realistic over things like this, to the point of being ruthless, for 'leaders who are stressed are no



St Peters New Wine

good to anyone.<sup>1</sup> Chris told me they didn't always get it right but discovered that it was okay to admit some aspects of church life had to be stopped for the time being.

They were also imaginative about partnering with the other Warfield churches when they needed to accomplish things they couldn't do on their own. Over the years they've borrowed musicians for a season, and one Christmas St Peter's arranged with Eternity to hold their Christmas parties in the same venue, with St Peter's serving Eternity one night and Eternity serving St Peter's the following night. An annual church week away at New Wine in the summer was another way to access resourcing - the teaching, worship, releasing of gifts and skills for mission and ministry always motivated members, and the church saw their numbers swell every autumn. Going deeper in discipleship was an ongoing challenge, but some of the material they borrowed from the Mosaic church in the US<sup>9</sup> and adapted for St Peter's offered them a framework to explore what it was to be a church made up of broken people, like broken mosaic pieces. Home groups (term time only) were expected to be places of discipleship and I was interested to hear that a small group met consistently to pray at 6.30am every weekday morning for the church and for revival in the area. This extraordinary dedication was all a good reminder that **simplicity doesn't have to mean shallow commitment.**

### Connected yet distinct



St Peters Family Service

Chris remains passionate about the value of volunteers planting churches in their spare time as a strategy that works well for the early years of a church's life.<sup>10</sup> The diversity expressed across the Warfield Family of Churches has multiplied the opportunities for people to join a congregation that suits them and that they can serve. Chris used the analogy of having more than one wardrobe door into Narnia. None of this diversity would have been possible if finance was needed up

<sup>9</sup> www.mosaic.org

<sup>10</sup> We observed similar patterns in a spare time lay led church in Australia in Encounters on the Edge no. 32, *Simpler Church* (Sheffield: Church Army, 2007) but without realising this was a positive virtue.

front to pay leaders from the start. Plus he suspects it may stifle the energy that he has seen grow in lay volunteers in being given responsibility to form a planting team themselves. In their context, it works. But the incumbent of the parish does need to keep a pastoral lookout for those people, making sure the leaders have the emotional and spiritual support they need. Chris and his team were very grateful to have little controlling influence from their sending church, All Saints, itself one of the plants from the historic parish church St Michael's. They were given complete autonomy and Chris advises others in a similar situation to make sure nothing is thrust on you from a sending church (even if it is well-meaning) that will distract you from your focus. Chris described it as an issue of trust and character. Although it's good for leaders to sit down with one another and with their incumbent occasionally to think things through, St Peter's were trusted by the overall leaders of the Warfield Family of Churches to be a team of people who prayerfully thought about what they were doing and expected to get on and do it. Chris described it as very motivational to be trusted and to be given the authority to go with the responsibility. His view was that if you are given responsibility but no authority, then trouble is bound to ensue; this arrangement produces 'robots' rather than people who can lead churches.

### Where now?

For St Peter's, having no paid leader was a strategic practicality in the early years. Around 2005, they reached 100 adults and Chris began to feel the strain. He approached Brian Meardon about St Peter's having a full-time leader. Together they discussed options and agreed that Chris should train as an ordained minister on a part-time course. When Chris finished his training, Brian was on the verge on leaving so no process was begun to make Chris a full-time stipendiary leader as was hoped. As of 2010, the church was 140 adults and 120 kids. Although their giving could fund a leader, Chris was still working full-time with Microsoft. At that



St Peters Congregation

point, a stipend would have been gratefully accepted although probably halved and shared between Chris and his youth workers also volunteering in their spare time.

At the time I met Chris in 2010, he told me there were early indications that there might be another planting opportunity on the horizon. So it was no surprise to hear that in December 2011, St Peter's commissioned Chris and a team to leave them and plant another church in a nearby secondary school. Chris has now stopped working for Microsoft, secured the stipend he was hoping for and has taken on a wider strategic role across the parish, supporting the leadership teams of planted churches. Quite sensibly, St Peter's have relaunched themselves. They acknowledged that with almost all of the original St Peter's planting team having gone with Chris, they are now a different community. Allan Wilson<sup>11</sup> has been chosen to lead St Peter's, which he does in a spare-time capacity, and new leaders with gifts and skills have emerged to make up the team leadership. And so St Peter's begins a new chapter in their story.

<sup>11</sup> Allan doesn't use a capital letter for his name because of a 'deal' Allan made with God when he became a Christian

## Grace, Ealing

*Grace* in Ealing began in 1993 when a group of friends admitted how church on a Sunday seemed detached from the reality of life in the rest of their week which made it difficult to invite friends. So in starting *Grace*, this group sought to develop worship out of the 'stuff of everyday life'. The decision to be spare-time led was, in part, simply the situation they found themselves in as everyone had existing jobs. However, being spare-time led was also ideologically driven. Having a flat leadership structure sat well with *Grace* as they sought to quietly challenge the appropriateness of inherited patterns of hierarchical leadership, foreign to post-modern culture that is deeply suspicious of the control and manipulation that can accompany these roles.

### No strings attached

Over the years, they have been very grateful for the way they've avoided having a stipendiary leader, although they are quick to point out this was no great wisdom on their part at the time; they've only realised it in hindsight. In other fresh expressions of Church, they have witnessed the 'strings' that come attached with money and they are grateful for the freedom they've had to develop in their own way and at their own pace without the often unrealistic expectations of growth

in numbers attending, the pressure of raising finance to justify having a dedicated leader and the sorrow and disorder caused by a stipendiary leader being withdrawn only a few years into the life of the new church. They also recognise that without a leader, all involved have to 'behave like grown-ups', and in nurturing a community life that is healthy and mature, they readily draw on the gifts and skills that are present in all members in a way that churches with a full-time leader sometimes can overlook.



Group at *Grace*

All those in the alternative worship movement know the dangers of young churches over-investing in public worship events that take away energy from other necessary aspects of church life such as mission. Yet, for 19 years now, *Grace* have consistently kept to a pattern of mounting experiential worship services that require a planning team every time, a constant flow of new ideas and members' commitment to set up and take down the installations and café for every event. All this seems very far from simple.

Frequency is a simplifying factor; the pattern is monthly not weekly. But there's something more than that. For *Grace*, **the key to their sustainability has been identifying and building on what motivates members to belong.** Paradoxically, it is the complex and demanding task they set themselves every month that has meant greater involvement of members and therefore greater sustainability in the long term. 'Raising the bar' of what can be achieved energises them and increases ownership rather than scaring it off or burning it out. Three quarters of an hour's tidying up at the end of a Saturday evening is now down to a fine art after 19 years.

## Entering in

The *Grace* gathering I attended was intriguing for its paradoxes. St Mary's is a very large, imposing church building on St Mary's Road running south from Ealing Broadway tube station, yet only when I got close to the front door was I



St Mary's Gate

absolutely sure something was happening inside. Inside, the space was very large but with the help of bean bags and ambient lighting, the atmosphere conveyed emotional warmth despite the actual temperature being on the cool side. The service was led expertly but in a way that felt very relaxed. One of the most intriguing things was the multiple presenters that almost seamlessly took turns in leading.

The theme of the evening was 'Give us this day', one of three gatherings exploring the significance of The Lord's Prayer. *Grace* members observe that preparing themes for worship is the best way they do theological reflection as a community, and this was a good example of wrestling with the question posed to them by an overseas visitor of how they, as a community, use this well-known prayer. During the time of worship, we were invited to engage with probing questions of what 'Give us this day' conveys in translation and what it may mean to us in our everyday lives to trust God and let go of our desire for control. There was time to reflect individually and to chat in small groups. The service culminated in the Eucharist celebrated by an ordained member of the community who works full time as a chaplain at a nearby college. The thirty of us then relocated to the adjacent lounge where refreshments kept to the bread theme and we chatted over wine, bread, olives and houmous.



*Grace* Communion



## Behind the scenes

They hit upon one key element to sustainability a number of years ago by ensuring the responsibility for monthly worship did not fall to the same group of people. One member is chosen as 'curator'<sup>12</sup> for the upcoming service who, along with a small team they've recruited, carries the responsibility for planning and organising. Thus any one member may only be involved in this way twice a year. The overall leadership of the church falls on the shoulders of a 'buck-stopping' facilitation group that invites members to serve on it for no more than three years. This group keeps an eye on the community dynamics as well as the long-term vision. Both the facilitation group and the involvement of curators to lead services means *Grace* are no longer dependent on the founding leaders, although when long-standing members do move on their absence as community members is felt deeply.

<sup>12</sup> For further explanation of the term 'curator', see J. Baker, *Curating Worship* (New York: Seabury Books, 2010).

Two other temptations are faithfully resisted. Firstly, *Grace* refuse to provide for people wanting to join who are looking for the weekly patterns and complex provision of an inherited church i.e. small groups, a dedicated children's programme, twice daily public worship and local community outreach through groups. For *Grace*, the three planning meetings leading up to the monthly

*Grace* service, functional though they sound, have been the key places for balancing the big event with a space to nurture the relationships necessary to community life. The one exception to the monthly worship pattern has been *Gracelet*, an additional time of worship which they began as a way to introduce another public gathering point in the month but one that requires very little preparation. *Gracelet* has been recently reviewed because interest and momentum was waning. Interestingly, they suspected



*Grace at Dinner*

the apparent lack of enthusiasm was related to its simplicity, reinforcing their assertion that team work and imaginative design are what energises them as a community. However, the review shows that *Grace* members are keen that *Gracelet* continues and the plan is to base it around a simple liturgy and prayer focus.

Secondly, they resist the temptation to hold *Grace*'s public events in a venue that would charge them rent. Though it seems like a good idea to use art galleries or cafés as venues to connect with people more widely, they wish to keep costs low and thereby avoid the pressure of fundraising that may well threaten their longer-term sustainability. If for some reason in the future they lost St Mary's as a free venue, they would meet in each other's homes and work out the way forward from there.

## Maybe it's because I'm a Londoner...

The members of *Grace* are clear about their community values. These include close friendships, humour and honesty, all of which make them wary about the implications of becoming big. They operate a culture of trust (rather than rotas); when members say they will do something, they are expected to honour their commitment without additional prompting. Furthermore, they keep mission firmly on the agenda by volunteering at events such as the London Mind, Body and Spirit fair and making sure the social boundaries of individuals are kept low; that way natural connections with people eventually lead to conversations about faith that may take a while but 'aren't naff'. All this sits well with a church who instinctively think of their whole life and work as mission - not a bolt-on to church life. Hypothetically, if *Grace* were offered a stipend, their current preference would be to invest it in an in-house professional artist who would work alongside them, in the way that a cathedral might have employed a stained-glass maker.

Members admit *Grace* may well work because members come from largely professional backgrounds, bringing a confidence and competency to the group that could be absent if attempts to reproduce *Grace* were made in other contexts. Furthermore, there is something about being based in London that helps; the city and all its creativity means *Grace* members seldom run out of ideas. Other characteristics of living in the city include people's reliance on the internet to find out about interesting-looking cultural and social events to attend, and the courage to visit something new and unfamiliar to meet people socially. Their 19 year history, strong web presence and high profile involvement in festivals such as Greenbelt mean that a handful of visitors to their worship every month are entirely normal to them. They describe themselves as a 'tourist church' and manage expectations in a careful way that never oversells.



*Grace at Greenbelt*





Shine Jesus Shine  
on one kazoo had  
its limitations

points for newcomers; if the intimacy of a smaller group or the unfamiliarity of a large worship event is too much for a visitor, it is more possible that there is something else of a different size and style they can engage with.

The number of times resourcing sung worship came up was intriguing. Although many agreed spare-time led churches should avoid trying to mimic the style and scope of their better-resourced sending churches, quality of artistry does matter. Although it is said by some that for simpler or smaller unit church, it doesn't matter if all you've got is a flute player and a drummer, these churches felt it actually did matter. It can sound naff so easily, which isn't inspiring for anyone involved. Working in partnership with other churches to 'borrow' good musicians for a season (not unlike an inherited church 'borrowing' an organist) was the way St Peter's tackled this problem. Another church invested in decent backing tracks that were perfectly adequate for their residential housing context. *Grace's* story, with their wide variety of media and art forms, reminds us how

anachronistic communal singing has become. Rousing hymns or upbeat choruses are not the only way.

### Investment in community life

With an ongoing interest in how the 'in' dimension of community works in fresh expressions of Church,<sup>16</sup> I was intrigued that these churches invested so much time and energy in socialising. Eating together, throwing parties and having fun all seemed very normal as well as easy places to invite new people to. Furthermore, I noticed something about *where* the eating happens. While shared meals in public places can be lovely, there is something different about the hospitality within a home that hasn't been organised by a committee or laid out buffet-style to process a long queue as efficiently as possible.

<sup>16</sup> C. Dalpra, *Chasing the Dream*, Encounters on the Edge no. 37 (Sheffield: Church Army, 2008), C. Dalpra, *The Cost of Community*, Encounters on the Edge no. 38 (Sheffield: Church Army, 2008).

I am reminded of the comment that hospitality is not just about inviting people in your home, it's inviting them into your life and giving space to them in your heart.<sup>17</sup> This is also a good reminder to those of us in polite middle class society that *do* use only the house but too often invest in a reciprocal dinner party arrangement that can be deliberately limiting and not really take others into our lives and hearts.

All the founding leaders have seen changes in leadership patterns, with some no longer leading, but they all remain warmly attached to their communities. This to me adds a layer of authenticity to that claim that forming genuine friendships between leaders, and across the fresh expression of Church, is a key element of sustainability. Enjoying each other's company was clearly important. **Those in leadership have got to enjoy it for there is no incentive otherwise.** Furthermore, combining church business with a social activity was simply seen as a sensible use of precious time; I heard about planning meetings in the pub over a beer at one church, and the gathering of small group leaders for catch-up taking place in the context of a dinner party at another. When evening meetings combined spiritual exploration with a meal, I noted two churches kept to a strict separation of the three roles of host, cook and leader to share out the roles.

All this made me wonder whether being spare-time led meant community was easier to build. Some churches said they were evidence of this. One leader commented that being spare time creates a culture within which it is easier to ask every member to have a go at something as no one can use the excuse of 'the minister's paid to do it'. Yet other leaders were less keen to agree. I suspect this mixed set of experiences is a very good reminder that there are no instantaneous or organisational solutions to creating genuine community.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>17</sup> J. Vanier *Community and Growth* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1989), p. 265.

<sup>18</sup> C. Dalpra, *Chasing the Dream* Encounters on the Edge no. 37 (Sheffield: Church Army, 2008), p. 5.



## Receptive mission contexts

I noticed that, while there is always more that could be done, mission seemed a natural part in the life of these churches. For example, *Grace* commented that if members don't invite people to come, then nobody's going to. This is reassuring given the stories of fresh expressions that lose their pioneer leader without being replaced, only to find they had relied too much on the time and evangelistic skills of their leader to make initial contact with newcomers.<sup>19</sup>

Without the kind of fringe created by occasional office traffic and Christmas and



Candles at *Grace*

Easter visitors, the new membership that these churches create is to be highly applauded. However, during the course of the interviews, and in the way my questions about mission were answered, it struck me that there was something about the contexts these churches were engaging with that 'brought people to the door'. Either they were working among isolated communities where there was a deep desire for connection with others outside them, such as

adults with learning disabilities, older people and asylum seekers. Or they were working in areas that had people moving into them who were actively looking for new friendships locally, as the two stories told in this booklet illustrate. When these dynamics are present in a context, we call these 'receptive' mission contexts. **Ease of mission context casts a certain degree of doubt over the blanket assumption that mission happens more naturally without a full-time leader because all members take responsibility for mission.** There is a further piece of work to be done in this area in tracking down examples of spare-time led churches in 'tough' mission contexts such as deprived inner city communities, diffuse networks of people who aren't actively looking to connect with others or housing estates where church attendance has not been common practice in families for three or more generations.

<sup>19</sup> G. Lings, *Do Network Churches Work?* Encounters on the Edge No. 41 (Sheffield: Church Army, 2009), p. 13

## Close connections with sending churches

'Catholicity' or 'of' are shorthand terms for a complex dynamic that the *Mission-shaped Church* report highlighted as vital for a healthy fresh expression of Church.<sup>20</sup> No church exists for itself or by itself; instead, churches are called to relate together. Catholicity is what connects local church to the wider church. One aspect of a fresh expression's 'of' dimension is the relationship they have with their sending church and this is the issue I asked them questions about.

I discovered that formal legal, financial, governmental or sacramental independence was neither a current reality nor a long-term pursuit for any of those I interviewed. **They preferred to maintain close connections with sending churches** to avoid the extra work needed to achieve formal independence. In addition, they all felt that the informal relationship with their sending churches worked very well. None felt they wanted or needed their own PCC. Their sending churches supported them by either managing their finances, supplying them with a free or low cost venue in which to hold gatherings or, in three cases, providing them with an agreed sum of money to cover modest expenses.

Many recognised their own church's vulnerability to changing incumbents, but there were no horror stories of over-controlling incoming clergy who threatened to close them down. Where there had been friction, this was recognised as a difficulty that helped them grow as individuals (and as a church) in relating to the wider church, negotiating issues with skill which strikes me as a very mature attitude to maintain. **Achieving relationships of trust to co-exist peacefully without the formal mechanisms to enforce them was seen as a strength.** One leader also commented that formal self-governance could make self-reproduction difficult, as staying flexible allows them to 'birth' further churches without the headache of legalities and paperwork.

The three-self principle of self-financing, self-governing and self-reproducing, drawing on insights from Henry Venn, teaches that churches must not be dependent on their sending church if they are to be sustained and grow to maturity.<sup>21</sup> To what extent these churches were dependent was ambiguous. Although no formal governmental structures existed for their communities, informal arrangements existed. Plenty of latitude was given to leaders to make

<sup>20</sup> G. Cray, *Mission-shaped Church* (London: Church House Publishing, 2004) p. 99.

<sup>21</sup> Henry Venn was CMS General Secretary in the mid 19th century. W. R. Shenk, *Henry Venn: Missionary Statesman* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1983).

their own decisions for the life of their churches. Yet the need for some to rely on small amounts of funding from their sending churches or the preference of others to run their finances through their sending churches' accounts made it difficult to tell whether or not they could be self-supporting if they had to be. It reminded me of an adult child living at home; they have their own job and social life, but he or she remains part of the parental household sharing cooking and laundry facilities. **It is hard to tell at first glance whether this interdependent living is by choice or necessity.** When I asked if these churches could be self-supporting if their sending churches withdrew support, leaders guessed their churches would continue, but half acknowledged significant adaptation would need to occur.

## Simplicity vs. complexity

### Simple only in part

The term 'simple' might be an appropriate adjective for some aspects of these churches' lives. They have the freedom to choose when and how they gather for public worship, finding patterns that sustain but do not drain. They are at liberty to design their own 'diet' rather than adhere to canon law to maintain the weekly schedule of public worship that, like a gravitational force, can become the focus of a church to the detriment of other aspects of community life as highlighted in an earlier booklet of this series.<sup>22</sup> Resourcing worship can become too high a priority. Rather than respond to the breadth of people's expectations about what church should provide, they have the freedom to remain focused in what they prioritise.



*The Revd Dyson was no sucker.*

They have opted for team leadership where roles are allocated and no one shoulders the burden of too much responsibility. **The strength and stability of these churches is**

**largely due to the way leadership is undertaken as teamwork.** Perhaps unsurprisingly, gathering a good team around you when leading a church in your spare time was the strongest piece of advice offered. Furthermore, there is wisdom in making sure team members come from more than just one family. All leaders were confident that their churches would continue quite happily beyond their departure because of the strength in their teams.

Simplicity occurs in other ways. They have found themselves in receptive contexts where mission happens with a degree of ease. They have all arranged their finances to be low maintenance, often by running expenses through their sending churches and choosing to avoid the demands that accompany legal interdependence contribute to a simple life. With no one holding the 'purse strings', they are free from the suffocating scrutiny that many fresh expressions with stipendiary leaders crumple under with the weight of expectations, trying

<sup>22</sup> G. Lings, *Seven Sacred Spaces Encounters on the Edge* no. 43 (Sheffield: Church Army, 2009), p. 23.

to justify that they are value for money. These churches can take the time they need, feeling no pressure to 'look busy' or play the numbers game.

Yet to stop there and label these churches as 'simple' is misleading. As Stuart Murray has commented, attaining simplicity can be a surprisingly complex process.<sup>23</sup> For example, while there is a simplicity in holding congregational worship fortnightly or monthly, there is complexity in maintaining overall cohesion across the smaller gatherings that happen in between. For leaders, keeping an eye on all that is happening is harder to do when people are doing different things with different people within a month. Furthermore, in the team leadership modelled by these churches, I struggle to call the energy and time in growing relationships of trust and genuine friendship simple; such investment is the work of a lifetime.

### Wider recognition is not simple

Indeed, the harder you look, the more evident the complexity is. It can make church life simple to be 'under the radar', to relieve external pressures such as obstructive scrutiny and cumbersome legal and financial procedures. However, **how these churches then achieve wider recognition is not simple** while remaining governmentally lightweight, for it leaves their identity as Anglican and as church in question. Further to their comments about finding a sponsor in the diocesan structures, *Grace* members commented that it is 'easy to be naïve' about political negotiation in the wider church, and fresh expressions should not be surprised or disappointed when what they are doing becomes a threat to other churches.

As outlined in the introduction, the fact that the terminology is not simple is another complicating factor. Not only is there a lack of settled terminology to describe how much time a leader can give a church, there is also the need for a term that communicates a church has been birthed by leaders in their spare time so expectations of these churches are appropriate. While the issue of language may appear at first a minor one, language has a tendency to be self-fulfilling; if there are constraints concerning appropriate terminology for these churches in a wider church setting, is this indicative of further constraints in church culture generally? For example, a national research study of self-supporting ministers in 2011 shows that while selection and training are positive experiences, when it comes to ongoing support, self-supporting clergy feel ignored, overlooked and under-used by their dioceses.<sup>24</sup>

<sup>23</sup> S. Murray, *Church After Christendom* (London: Paternoster 2004) p. 226.

<sup>24</sup> <http://1pf.co.uk/report.html> I note with interest that 24% of self-supporting ministers work full time in alternative employment, serving their church in their 'spare time'.

The language of sodal and modal is now becoming better known. Sodal church is specific, highly intentional and flexible. Modal church is generalist, settled and territorial. One danger is that the two are seen as black and white opposites and people fail to realise that they can be seen as spectrum with examples between the polar ends.<sup>25</sup> These spare-time led churches are a case in point and their recognition will be hindered by modal church that thinks parochially. For those



St Peters making the mosaic cross

readers familiar with sodal characteristics, there are one or two dimensions that look very sodal-like. The degree to which these churches have had to resist responding to the breadth of ministry that parish churches offer is like sodality. In admitting that they can't do everything, these churches **have had to work harder at identifying their priorities and their values**; a commonality across these churches was an unusual clarity over what they valued, who they were for and a commitment to remain focused on that. Again, this sounds like sodal specialism rather than how a classic parish church works.

It has been said that such self-awareness in fresh expressions is rare, so I applaud them. As such, it feels as though they operate with something like a charism. By this, I mean a calling that weaves together gifts, skills and passion and is careful to make sure newcomers know they are coming to a church with a specific focus and that they will be expected to pitch in and help along with everyone else. Again, this degree of team commitment feels more like sodality that asks members for a high level of commitment rather than a modal approach that generally asks little of its members except attendance.



Mosaic cross

<sup>25</sup> Winter saw certain examples as between the two. 'Such a structure stands, in a certain sense, midway between a modality and a sodality, since it has the constituency of the modality (involving full families) and yet, in its earlier years, may have the vitality and selectivity of a sodality.' R. Winter. *The Twin Structures of God's Redemptive Mission* Perspectives on the World Christian Movement 4th Edition (Pasadena, CA: Winter Carey Library, 2009) p. 250.



Grace weekend away

On reflection, despite their intermittent sodal characteristics, these churches are modal. One reason sodalities exist is to renew modalities, so to find values of high intentionality and high commitment in fresh missional modal churches needs to be warmly welcomed. However, I do fear that if sodalities are in grave danger of being unrecognised by the wider church, then these churches that are modal with sodal characteristics fall somewhere between the two models and will

have even less of a chance of being understood as ecclesial. **Indeed the very things they do to keep their life simple will hinder outsiders recognising them as being church;** for example, monthly congregational worship will no doubt contribute to the outsider's misperceptions of what is being done if traditional understandings of church providing weekly worship still dominate.

From the churches I encountered, I learnt that communication about what you are doing will probably be an ongoing task. There will always be people who assume that, because you have no full-time leader, what you are doing is a social gathering or an outreach project. Incumbents at the sending church or area deans have an important role in interpreting what these fresh expressions are to their congregations and deaneries and managing the fears that tend to arise when people are confronted with a diversity beyond their expectations. For example, when the leaders of a fresh expression of Church ask their sending church for greater freedom to make their own decisions regarding what they do, the clergyperson leading the sending church will need to reassure members of the sending church that the fresh expression doesn't think of itself as being better than the sending church, or some sort of loony cult for that matter! Rather, this is to be welcomed as one more step towards the fresh expression growing in maturity and taking responsibility for itself. Another example is a sending church that thinks beginning a new congregation is divisive because it undermines the traditional Sunday morning parish worship; if so, an incumbent could play an important role in explaining that

different complementary congregations are needed to connect with people who will never be comfortable with traditional worship.

### Understanding ecclesial maturity isn't simple

If progress towards maturity is defined by institutional or managerial ways of thinking that look to sacramental practice, and formal legal or governmental independence as priority, the lack of these churches' aspirations in these directions suggest this will never be a likely reality. In the life cycle thinking that has been applied to birthing churches, they will never reach adulthood.<sup>26</sup> Yet for those who agree with Carter and McGoldrick that the life cycle model has been unhelpfully skewed towards assumptions of western, male, individual independence rather than a more helpful and nuanced interdependence where relationships with others are key, the criteria to define 'adult' church changes.<sup>27</sup>

From this alternative perspective, these churches show encouraging development. Many exhibit self-awareness and sophistication in relationship building that is not reliant on formal organisational mechanisms of accountability or a paid professional to generate and monitor them. Furthermore, in proving an ability to empathise, trust, communicate and collaborate and respect others who are different and negotiate interdependence with their sending churches without exploitation, these churches appear to show a great deal of maturity.

Assessing the ecclesiological strengths and weaknesses of these churches becomes a more complicated task when questions of identity rather than function are asked. As Dulles comments, 'Christians...are not agreed about what the church really is.'<sup>28</sup> Working with the interpersonal model of understanding church that we in *The Sheffield Centre* have come to favour,<sup>29</sup> does the lack of formal legal, governmental, financial and sacramental independence signify an unhealthy permanent stage of adolescence? Or, as I mentioned earlier, is it like adult children choosing to live with their parents for convenience that suits them both against a backdrop of economic difficulty and financial constraints?

<sup>26</sup> [www.acpi.org.uk](http://www.acpi.org.uk), accessed on 8 Nov 2010. See p. 2 of 'Planning Frameworks' under 'Articles'.

<sup>27</sup> B. Carter and M. McGoldrick, *The Expanded Family Life Cycle, Individual Family and Social Perspectives* (Boston, MA: Allyn and Bacon, 1998). Chapter 2.

<sup>28</sup> A. Dulles, *Models of the Church* (Dublin: Gill & Macmillan, 1987), p. 15.

<sup>29</sup> To explore this further, see G. Lings, *Evaluating Fresh Expressions of Church*, *Anvil Journal* Volume 27 No. 1 p. 32 or [sheffieldcentreresearch.wordpress.com](http://sheffieldcentreresearch.wordpress.com)



What these leaders perceive are the ingredients that sustain these churches speak of instincts that intuitively acknowledge the reality of interdependency with others that all human life contains. Behind this is the theological principle that humans are made in God's image and that the nature of church partially flows from this. Then the interconnectedness of persons modelled by the Trinity is a significant aspect of the nature of church.<sup>30</sup> These churches model this through maintaining close connection to their sending churches and networking with others for

resources. By contrast, the image of a solitary individual adult determined to survive without reliance on anyone else, that can be invoked by western institutional or managerial thinking, in fact marks a shift from being functional to becoming dysfunctional. So these young but evolving churches provoke important and complex questions of how church should be understood and which images and language are more helpful to assess ecclesiological development.

## Could this be our future?

Some things are becoming clearer to me. The six examples I studied show it is possible for spare-time led churches to be sustained in the long term. They've had much in their favour: enduring passion, receptive mission contexts, supportive incumbents, good instincts for community building, and sufficiently tenacious leaders with enough confidence and knowledge of the system to stand their ground and negotiate their own existence. Where this has been down to skill and not happy circumstance, all that they've achieved is quietly impressive.

It is important to say that many of the spare-time leaders I spoke to mentioned times of difficulty when the routine feels monotonous and the drudgery sets in. Even when sustainability is possible, life is not always a bed of roses. Expect it to be hard and lonely work at times. The advice given across these churches was to **find your encouragers**, the people who can inject positivity into the most depressing of seasons. Invest in relationships with those who you find remind you of why you are doing what you are doing in the hard times.

I note that identifying these examples initially was quite a challenge. Finding spare-time led fresh expressions that had been going at least five years was extremely difficult. Many fly under the radar and, as yet, there is no centrally organised way to keep track of them;<sup>31</sup> it is impossible to know how many examples are out there, how many have kept going and how many have stopped. As such, I feel **we still don't know enough about how to sustain spare-time led fresh expressions of Church in an Anglican context and need to do more work in this area**. And there is an irony here. In the last few years, at the same time as the welcoming of more and more lay volunteers to lead fresh expressions, a lengthy process of selection for Ordained Pioneer Ministry and Venture FX training has evolved.<sup>32</sup> Yet there appears to be no consideration given to the longer term consequences of what kinds of church will grow depending on this leadership resource, and at what pace. I fear that without attending to the time issue, spare-time led churches will be expected to yield the same results as those fresh expressions with full-time leaders, and when found lacking will be unfairly criticised. This will be especially difficult for churches who feel they have had this situation thrust upon them, rather than considering the options and electing to be spare-time led.

<sup>30</sup> J. D. Zizioulas, *Being as Communion* (Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1985).

<sup>31</sup> *The Sheffield Centre* continues to collect quantitative research data on fresh expressions from representative dioceses so we may have a better idea in the near future.

<sup>32</sup> A. Shier-Jones, *Pioneer Ministry and Fresh Expressions* (London: SPCK, 2009) p. 66.

To not attend to expectations strikes me as unfair and unwise. If a diocese can't offer these churches a paid leader, the least they can do is increase support and understanding of their situation. This could include support to those examples that choose not to have a full-time leader. All the resources that the Bible Reading Fellowship offers nationally and regionally to Messy Church leaders, knowing how many of them are time poor, is a good example of this.<sup>33</sup> We need to be realistic over the considerably slower pace at which these churches will grow, and be aware that the characteristics they exhibit will look less and less like inherited church models as they find ways to sustain themselves and that contribution to the diocesan purse will be minimal. To fail to adhere to consequences of this time issue for leaders is sadly indicative of the attention of focus on starting rather than sustaining.

**If we think we can maintain church the way it has always been by papering over the cracks with spare-time leaders, we are deluding ourselves.** Burnout beckons. If we are hoping for a return to some idyllic past where every church had a full-time professional we will be waiting a long time. If we wait, we will miss out on the important lessons these churches have to teach us about keeping church sustainable without substantial central resourcing, which may be a reality more and more churches face in the years to come if present patterns continue. If we accept this as our future, we have a greater chance of developing healthier models; these would match resources and expectations better and accept that both interdependence and simplicity are virtues.

Claire Dalpra  
April 2012  
Cartoons: Tim Sharp

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<http://www.flickr.com/groups/gracelondon/> <http://www.smallfire.org/gracepage1.html>

<sup>33</sup> None of my six case studies were Messy Churches because at the time of my interviews, none had been going longer than five years.

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