



ChurchArmy
www.churcharmy.org.uk

Encounters on the Edge



no. 26:

A Rocha

Christians, Conservation
and the Community

Contents

A Rocha	3	Wider connections	19
The genesis of <i>A Rocha</i>	3	How are pioneers called?	19
<i>A Rocha</i> grows in Southall	4	Churches with a specific charism	19
The Process and the Pioneer.....	4	So could an <i>A Rocha</i> be an expression of church?.....	20
A long way in	4	Churches for single issue politics?	21
Making sense of previous experience	5	Acting together for a difference ...	22
A sharpening of a call	5	Church and powerlessness	22
Returning to Southall	6	Serious about play	24
Just a Minet!	7	Small beginnings	24
Take two looks.....	8	Resources	25
Can you do this and remain a vicar?	9		
Better seen than described	10		
What are the key values in <i>A Rocha</i> ?.....	12		
1. Christian.....	12		
2. Conservation	12		
3. Community	13		
4. Cross-cultural	15		
5. Co-operation	16		
The team grows and the work grows in two directions.....	16		
A dilemma about the future?	18		

A Rocha

Christians, conservation and community

The genesis of *A Rocha*

As of April 2005, the *A Rocha* International family are a group of conservation projects and attendant Christian communities, in 15 countries round the world. The founders of the *A Rocha* movement are Peter and Miranda Harris. After a first curacy on the Wirral they moved to Portugal in September 1983. This was in response to a calling to begin the creation of a field study centre on the south coast of the Algarve, in order to inform and influence the environmental decisions being made about the region.

The centre eventually founded stands in the area called Quinta da Rocha between two rivers, on an estuary which was a significant wetland habitat. From this came the name for the work. *A Rocha*, in Portuguese means the Rock. Foundational values were needed for the study centre, as they are for life. That foundation is Christ and the name can be a talking point for all these levels of meaning.



A Rocha, Portugal

The particular interest of *Encounters on the Edge* is wherever there is overlap between two circles: mission among post-Christian society and the creation of Christian community. I met Peter and Miranda Harris at a family wedding of my nephew only a few years ago. We chatted in the graveyard, as you do, about their work. Their description of **the combination of Christians in conservation and community** sounded worthwhile in itself, but I also saw it as a particularly needed way to express mission and grow church today. Furthermore both had **an attractive counter cultural stance, which I suspect is the likely future address of the church**, and to affect its mission and community life. Throughout the process of visiting and writing I have been asking myself whether such a community can be a particular fresh expression of church.

A Rocha grows in Southall

The Process and the Pioneer

I continue to be fascinated by the untidy and unlikely process by which people are called into pioneering roles. At a time during which there is a well intentioned concerted effort to enable the Church of England to take the essence of the 2004 report *Mission-shaped Church* into its bloodstream, when some dioceses are writing strategy documents, others are working at active discussion on the finding, selecting and training of pioneers. How pioneers actually sense a call seems random by comparison.

A long way in

Dave and Anne Bookless were students at Trinity, Bristol. As subscribers to *Third Way*, they had noticed an article about *A Rocha* in Portugal. With an interest in the environment, the idealised thought of being with Christians and watching wildlife sounded nice. However, it was the end of a holiday in the Scilly Isles that made its mark. Asking how they should dispose of the week's rubbish, they were told they could throw it over a particular cliff. Looking down over this open waste tip, it was as though God posed the question: "How do you think I feel about what you are doing to the world?" Back at home the same essential problem existed, but was sanitised, so it took this moment in a holiday to raise the issue. For the first time, the question

Does ecology matter to God?

arose: **does ecology matter to God?** They joined *Friends of the Earth* and asked whether other Christians were involved. The answer was very few. *Christian Ecology Link* was a campaigning organisation. Its focus now is upon issues of climate change. However, its broad church flavour was not their tradition and *A Rocha* seemed the only other Christian players in the field.



Dave and Anne Bookless

Making sense of previous experience

With studies in Indian and African history, as well as theology and four years teaching in a multi-racial school, the offer to Dave in 1991 of a curacy at St John Southall made sense. Southall is a densely crowded multicultural area a few miles from Heathrow. 85% of the community has SE Asian roots, with Sikhs, Muslims, Hindus and Christians co-existing. Recent asylum seekers have further widened the ethnic spectrum. It is a vigorous retail centre, now famous to tourists for silk, jewellery and eastern cuisine. However, the population density puts pressure on the environment, with congestion, solid traffic, lack of green space, fly tipping and a lack of pride in the area. Halfway through the curacy he took on further roles at St George Southall, which grew to becoming Priest in Charge from 1993-2000.



Southall Station



A sharpening of a call

In 1993 the 10th anniversary for *A Rocha* was held at All Soul's, Langham Place. Dave recalled the sense of being inspired and overwhelmed, both by the teaching from John Stott and the story of community, mission and caring for creation from the Harris's. They met volunteers from Portugal and felt the sense of family and community between them. "How can we get involved?" was their question. Peter Harris replied, "Use your holidays to volunteer." The little problem was Anne's ME condition. At that stage it had her in a wheelchair.

Nevertheless they went to Cruzinha in May and October 1994 and were hooked. Partly it was the exhilaration of ringing birds on the very first evening. This expresses an *A Rocha* value which could be put as "get people involved as early as possible." Using flick nets they were catching swifts and swallows. To hold one of these acrobats of the bird kingdom in your hand is unforgettable. Partly they were captivated by the sense of belonging, being part of the community. Meals were extended affairs. No guests are

allowed to help on their first day; they are treated as guests. Nevertheless meals epitomised the sense of fun, the perennial buzz of conversation and the sense of being together in a shared task. Community is one of the DNA words within *A Rocha*. Partly it was the care of Anne in her weakness by the community, and not least Miranda Harris that spoke. Prayer and a literal foot washing illustrated the characteristic combination of care across the whole range of life, that refuses to split the spiritual and the physical. This spirit recognised the different care for Dave who needed space, to be freed from his duty of care, in order to walk and have time by and for himself. Perhaps it is true that **as people learn to care better for a fragile eco-system, they will care better for fellow creatures called people.**

All this created a sense of “coming home”, never having completely fitted before. It was a community in which to act and think creatively, a place to explore questions. One live question was: if this was to be carried forward, how could a wife in a wheelchair be a contributing part of it? Curiously, it was in London, at a meeting connected with the Toronto blessing between the two visits to Portugal that Anne prayed a prayer of renunciation accepting her condition, and that day it disappeared, for which they have been enduringly thankful.

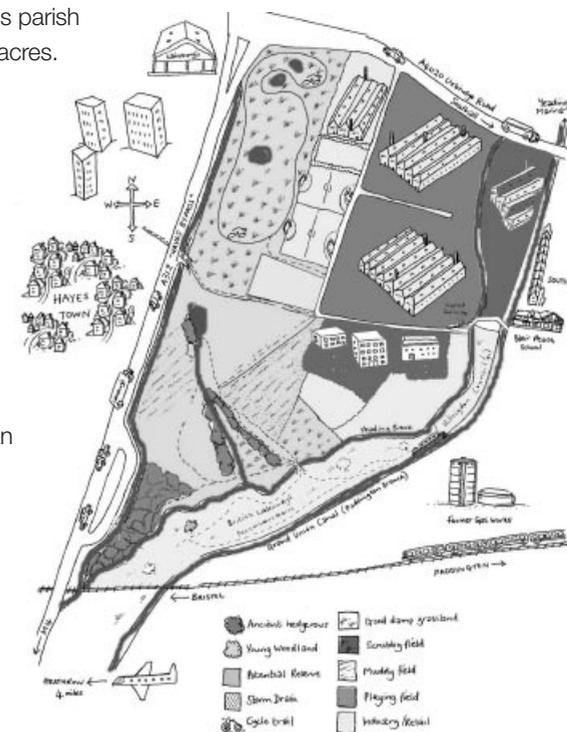
Returning to Southall

The Bookless family returned changed and called, but still more was to unfold. Their visits were the beckon of the call, but not the timing to implement it. **Prophecy tends to speak in the present tense. Urgency can feel like immediacy, but it may not be so.** Back in the local church they increased their investment in creating community and Dave started the long process of acquiring bird ringing skills. In 1995 he was invited to be an *A Rocha* Trustee, which in turn led to speaking invitations wider afield. From 1997, what had been one *A Rocha* multiplied into Lebanon, France and Kenya. Yet 90% of the financial support base was in the UK; did this mean there should be one here? For Dave and Anne, they also had to make sense of the calling to urban multicultural life. The dream of an English replica of Cruzinha – perhaps in rural Devon or Northumberland - had to die.

I see here the crucial difference between creating and cloning, in the process of a movement that is multiplying. Though cloning occurs naturally and successfully in parts of the plant kingdom, it does not in the more sophisticated animal kingdom which reproduces through pro-creation, not pro-cloning. Moreover, mission and church always have a context which gives them a specific encultured shape, not a borrowed clone shape. This is part of what *Mission-shaped Church* advocates. **There is always the need to separate out the essence of mission and church, from the expression of it for a time and place.** In multiplying a movement that has a vision, the same will be true. **One of the difficulties is that when there is only one example you cannot so easily tell what is generic and what is specific.** Copying Cruzinha was attractive, but in this case having a romantic rural setting of international scientific significance for its values was found not to be essential.

Just a Minet!

In 1998, Dave began to notice what was under his nose. Overlapping with his parish was a wilderness of about 90 acres. It lay between strongly marked boundaries like major roads, a substantial brook and industrial estates. The Minet Site, so named after the family that owned it, had been sold to the council some years before. Classified as greenbelt, for decades it remained totally undeveloped as a potential oasis among a densely populated urban area. Even on his first walk through he noticed the variety of bird life, decided to walk it regularly and completed a list of what he found. He invited fellow trustees to come one winter's day, with a sense of trepidation because it did not fit the Portuguese model.



Take two looks

In addition, the site is not initially prepossessing. Some of it is virgin Middlesex meadow land, and so ecologically valuable and locally rare. At that time other parts of it were being trashed by local people and used by motorbike scramblers and fly tippers. At its centre was a thrice weekly massive car boot sale site. All of these generated significant dirt and rubbish. When I first saw the renewed site it looked like slightly tatty grassland and I wondered why so much fuss had been made. My second visit a day later was a guided tour that revealed 30 bird species in an hour, out of 105 species now recorded. I began to notice it **is a subtle mosaic of different habitats** which



thus is home to various small animals and an impressive range of insects and plants. Deliberate biannual mowing provides nesting and cover for various species. As I watched, along the storm drain flew a kingfisher. But **A Rocha is about the care of all creation; birds are its brilliantly painted early warning system.** It was a good case of taking time to see what was under my nose.



Grasshopper
Warbler



Minet - storm drain

The trustees came, saw and were conquered. As the site yielded its secrets they embraced the vision, even though it was so unlike previous *A Rocha* projects. A period of the excitement of possibilities ensued, with more key contacts being made. A formal study needed to be made, and it so happened the hour produced the man. Colin Conroy had an appropriate degree, a background in charismatic Catholic community, had visited *A Rocha* in Portugal and was offering a year, while raising his own support. In 1999 he did a part time job parking airport cars and completed the base-line survey that would be needed to present the case that the council should invest to make Minet a country park.

Can you do this and remain a vicar?



Dave's sabbatical in 2000 further fuelled the desire to follow these leads. One fascinating oblique connection was with a Pentecostal church back in India where he had grown up. They had found their missionary work had confusingly (for them) led into work with a local community whose major social need was the restoration of mangroves. They invited Dave to spend two days with them, because in their words, "we need a theology for what God has led us into." I was reminded of the 1908 comment of Martin Kahler: "Mission is the mother of theology... **Theology began as an accompanying manifestation of the Christian mission**"¹. I suspect a few of us in the fresh expressions of church and church planting area are finding something similar.

2000 saw the setting up of a charity *A Rocha UK*, appointing trustees, finding supporters and helping them see the work was worthwhile in itself but was also a form of pre-evangelism that would put the church on the radar of the other faith communities in Southall. The more the project grew, the harder it was to be also a full time vicar. Perhaps it was time to stop being the latter, but how could a full time project leader be funded? Meetings with both the Area Bishop, Graham Dow, and then with Diocesan Richard Chartres, were very positive about the work proposed. But in a diocesan climate of some cutbacks they could not provide a salary out of parish share. Bishop Richard made Dave a licensed preacher under seal, giving him a roving licence and found a trust that put in four thousand per annum for five years. Another crucial link was built with CMS who were creating mission partners within the UK. Southall is clearly a cross-cultural mission context in Britain. They put in ten thousand a year and Dave and Anne are technically CMS partners seconded to *A Rocha*.

Dave left St George's at the end of 2000 and after a period of belonging to a church in Ealing they re-joined St John's Southall with Dave as NSM. A house was needed for the *A Rocha UK* new leader and a couple in the *A Rocha* network heard of the need. They were retiring to the country, but wanted to keep a foot in the London property market. They bought 13 Avenue Road

¹ *Transforming Mission* : David Bosch : Orbis 1991 page 16

Southall and A Rocha rented it. Quickly the site acquired a shed at the bottom of the garden which became the UK office. The shed was the nerve centre from which the Minet project was managed.



The shed at number 13

Better seen than described

The story of the transformation of the Minet site is perhaps best told with the great benefit of seeing the gradual transformation through their video *A New Creation*, made between 2000 and 2003 as the progress and setbacks unfolded.² The contrast is shown here through some stills. It can be seen that rubbish has gone, the boot sale closed down, the waterways cleared and enlarged. The £1.25 million to do the whole work came from three major sources: SRB regeneration funds, Section 106 planning agreements with supermarkets and an unusual angle on landfill tax monies.

The central area was landscaped, creating grassy slopes that children love for rolling down and break up the site into areas of discovery. It will please some that subsoil and rubble from the Wembley stadium were used. The site includes a well used cycle track and a playground.

Minet is not intended to be an area only for naturalists but for the community. Only as they use it and understand it can they come to appreciate it and themselves become part of sustaining this piece of the *terra*³ they share with creation. To that end the community were involved throughout the process. Not only were they consulted, they were actively involved, sharing in the litter removal and tree planting parties. The site includes a lodge, from which courses are run. Up till now, for protection against vandalism, it looks like a heavily armoured closed up scout hut. The plan for 2005 is for a staff member, the present community liaison officer, Sarah Leedham, to work from there. This will give it a lived-in feel and a human face.

² See the Resources section on page 26 for details.

³ See the Portugal article on the *Encounters on the Edge* website for the meaning of terra in Portuguese.



The southern end, with its historic meadowland, contains two corridors of hedge and trees that are important habitat, giving food and safety. It has a wilder feel and the historic brook runs along its borders. As a whole, the area recovered from the changes in 2003, and a mass of wild flowers emerged. Among them, species not previously noted were detected, including Bee Orchids, and the range of birds noted has also increased.

Throughout, A Rocha played its characteristic role of gathering information, monitoring the site and feeding this into the process. They campaigned in the sense of raising awareness, bringing people including the MP into partnerships, taking school parties onto the site and helping to plan the local involvement. They are partners with the local authority, and the charity are paid for the responsibility to open and close the park, do a regular survey of what is living there, look after the lodge and help manage the conservation areas.



Tree corridor; Bee Orchids; Gathering information

⁴ James Jones op cit page 27 – attributed to Cambridge scientist John Polkinghorne

What are the key values in *A Rocha*?

Parts of its literature mention the five Cs. The order in which they come represents a degree of priority.

1. Christian

In 1983 the Harris's went out as BCMS/Crosslinks missionaries. However, its faith basis documents reflect a history of division from CMS, so *A Rocha* adopted the broader EA declaration of faith, more in keeping with its interdenominational yet Bible-based roots. Only trustees and staff members are required to sign up to this document. Even volunteers do not. But these are details. What is more significant is the whole work proceeds from Christian convictions, that creation and salvation encompass the whole created order. **"Matter matters to God."**⁴ I agree with Peter Harris when he writes: **"Conservation is by its very nature religious... people treat the world according to what they believe about it."**⁵

2. Conservation

One of the phrases often used by *A Rocha* people is "creation care". This links to seeing conservation less as campaigning and more as practical involvement, an outworking of Genesis 2.15 with its mandate to tend

and to care for creation. Stewardship alone can focus on responsibility to the God who gives this role. Care speaks more of an earth-directed role, balancing the steward's identity and helping the earth to be a place where the diversity created can thrive. It is enabling fruitfulness.

Christianity will, however, repudiate naturalism. It agrees with the quip of a mythical gardener who met a person attributing a beautiful landscape to God alone. "Ah, but you should have seen it when he had it to himself."

Humans are both part of creation and have a unique role within it, of care and ordering.



⁵ *Under the Bright Wings*: Peter Harris : Regent College 1993 page 106

3. Community

In the video, Anne Bookless enthuses about this. **"I think the community feel of *A Rocha* is the heart of what we are about ...** we staff and volunteers come together, enjoy food, experience great rapport between us – it gives us all a sense of belonging." Yet as the *A Rocha* international family grows, the patterns of community are not the same at every centre. In Portugal originally there was clearly one strong nuclear family at the heart of things. Both there and in the UK, the children of the lead family play important roles and naturally see themselves as part of the team. **Children can be helpful catalysts of community** by their openness, directness and curiosity. They can draw out adults and state what is obvious but is being avoided by adults. The leading family also need their own defensible space in which to withdraw. But this pattern of one family is not fixed. Portugal now has two couples and Kenya is led by a single person. The value of community seems to be significantly culturally conditioned and it is influenced by leading personalities. **As such there is no agreed definition, or shape, of community within *A Rocha*.** Rather, there is an aspiration for deeper relationships, including with the rest of creation.

*"I think the community feel of *A Rocha* is the heart of what we are about"*



A meal with the children

In Southall I noted another dynamic, brought by two factors. The first is that while Dave and Anne Bookless are the pioneers and longest serving members, they live in number 13 Avenue Road. However, as the work grew during and after the development of the Minet site, *A Rocha* UK, by another story of faith and generous provision took possession of two semis, 18 and 19 Avenue Road, that had previously been turned into a nursing home. This provided the necessary office base for an expanding team, residential accommodation for some full time staff and rooms for the increased number of visitors. It is hard to lead some kind of intentional community, if you live in



nos. 18 and 19 Avenue Road

a separate building and if your advocacy work takes you round the country. Dave has now moved from being effectively the Minet Project Director to being *A Rocha* UK Director.



Kathy and Rob Thomas

People to head up the community in this new building needed to be found. Kathy and Rob Thomas gave up their jobs in the Midlands, found friends who would support them and volunteered. The *A Rocha* UK magazine No 11 of Autumn 2003 tells their story, which I find endearing and courageous. They are resident and have a small flat upstairs at the front of No 18. They chose not to go with the title House Parents – though with some volunteers it does look like that. They preferred not to be known as Wardens as it sounded to them, and their family too much like being caretakers. So the chosen title is Centre Managers. I see the reasoning but find the title rather too functional for the essential warmth they generate and the stability that they bring with their complementary gifts.

This leads me to the second factor in the specific dynamic in Southall. Seeing the Thomas and Bookless couples at work, and talking with them all separately, I was reminded of the alleged **Celtic pattern whereby an asymmetric pattern of leadership evolved**. The pioneer was called the **Bishop** and set free to wander, dream and continue to found new things. That is what Dave and Anne are like. However, the home base was maintained in good community fettle and spiritual life by an **Abbot** figure, of equal status. Since 1997 when I started my researching, I have seen a number of good pioneering works elsewhere run into trouble because the Bishop figures, who are always the starters, have not had the wit, or advice, to find the Abbot figure they need. Or I have seen the Bishop fail to empower the Abbot with equal clout over the running of the home base. This long term distortion brings exhaustion. **Pioneers can have little idea how tiring or alarming they are**. However they must not be domesticated otherwise their energy goes bad. But for the sake of the sustenance of the community in mission, they need balancing. I am glad Kathy and Rob have come and I pray that this dynamic, whereby they are in effect the Abbots of the community house, will flourish. I could easily imagine that in other *A Rocha* venues there will be variables around this theme. Perhaps in some places the developmental, scientific or

advocacy roles would be more akin to the Celtic Bishop, whereas the nurture of the working community, the fostering of its spiritual life and the well being of its members needs the Celtic Abbot.

Community is a loose word, which can be wonderful or infuriating depending on who you are. It is used in a yet further way within *A Rocha*. Dave Bookless explained it as a set of **concentric circles**. Those nearest the centre are those who live nearest to one another and see each other the most. So the core are the resident workers, then there are those who work for *A Rocha* full time but live within commuting distance. Then come the regular but local volunteers who see themselves as part of the team. Further out by distance are the national supporters drawn from 150 churches, local support groups and 1,500 households round the UK. Then come the international *A Rocha* family. These rings are not fixed and at larger gatherings of members, or international conferences, temporary proximity and deeply shared values make for immediacy and cogency of community across the circles. Let the founder Peter Harris have the last word in this section:

“Community challenges our instinct to categorize and dismiss that which we find difficult in someone else.... As Europe takes leave of God it travels further down the road to social fragmentation and isolation. As our churches take root in this culture, they will have to fight all the harder for the importance of community.”⁶

4. Cross-cultural

This has a variety of meanings. It can be that the teams are themselves from a variety of cultural backgrounds. It can mean team members leave their own culture to work abroad. It can mean one team giving members to another country. In Southall it also means ethnic whites working in a cross-cultural urban environment. What is common to all is the desire to break down walls of hostility between people groups. In theological terms it is seeking the reversal of the divisive dynamics of Babel and working for early signs of the multicultural reality of heaven. *A Rocha* are learning that it also means recognising that **even science has cultural lenses** by which it sees and that western inheritance is itself a construct, not a given. So the Indian *A Rocha* has far less difficulty in practising faith-based science, as the Hindu cultural background naturally sees the two worlds of science and faith as one. This

⁶ Harris: op cit page 163

awareness ties in well with the desire for sustainable projects to be led by indigenous people.

5. Co-operation

This fifth value is a reworking of what used to be called campaigning. It was changed because **campaigns can be project driven and short term. They**

Human beings are not stand-alones from creation.

lack longer incarnational instincts. Co-operation is a more ecologically aware word. **Human beings are not stand-alones from creation,** nor are they intended to be from one another. If the earlier values are Christian, conservation and community, then partnerships made of relationships are the way forward. This will bring fuzziness at the edges, by welcoming those who wish to be co-workers. In Southall

there are volunteers from the Hindu and Muslim communities. It brings some revealing moments. One Bosnian Muslim asylum seeker who volunteered did not pick up that the staff were Christians. When this emerged, her first comment was, "But most of my relatives were killed by Christians." Co-operation has its challenges. To express something of the common share in conservation across the faith communities, *A Rocha* in Southall produce a good looking 6-page magazine twice a year called SHARE – Southall and Hayes Action to Renew the Environment.

Other understated *A Rocha* values

- If in doubt do good food: even if it's simple, it builds community.
- Expect guests, even the unexpected ones; some may be angels.
- Community and conservation will evangelise people far more winsomely than words can.
- Let the actions we take prompt the questions.
- Let the information we gather do its own work.
- Everybody matters and everybody can do something.
- If all else fails, laugh.

The team grows and the work grows in two directions

Sarah Leedham, the office manager, joined in May 2001, and that summer Colin Conroy returned with a Masters Degree in Restoration Ecology. At this stage Anne was as deeply involved as family would permit. The fledgling

charity also serviced supporters of *A Rocha* from around Britain. In 2002 two education officers, Rachel (later replaced by Claire) and Jonathan were appointed on the strength of funding from education trusts who have an environmental concern.



Education officers, Claire and Jonathan

They go into primary schools finding those children more open to ecological issues than their worldly wise secondary siblings. **The hope is to plant seeds of wonder, concern and interest that will flower later in life.** Certainly it builds good relationships with the local schools who bring parties onto the Minet site.



Wildlife Club

In 2003, Rob & Kathy Thomas arrived. In addition to being joint Centre Managers, Rob Thomas acts as the essential IT Manager and Kathy Thomas experiments with finding worship resources, including some liturgical material that will nurture the communal life and charism of the community. She is also Arts Co-ordinator and has piloted courses on ecology and arts among the women of the Asian community. This has several values in a society where women can still be devalued and their professional skills not used. All this is an expansion of the work in Southall.

Now there are also a three day a week General Manager, a full-time Fund Raiser, and a UK Development Manager. Part of this proliferation is that the specific project at Minet is now only the flagship of a wider UK operation. As yet there are no further equivalent projects but this may only be a matter of time, money and staff. I also have seen very clearly that **serious conservation work ironically means serious paperwork.** Research



findings, communication with partner bodies, applications for funding, proper accounting when the charity turnover grows, providing teaching and training resources for interested parties, all means considerable office work and paper.

A dilemma about the future?

I can see the case for all these needs and a necessary professionalism. Part of me is nervous whether it is possible to go for such expansion without losing your soul. Put it another way, having examined its values, would it matter if *A Rocha* moved from organism to organisation? I warmed immensely to the passages in the Peter Harris book about their early days of searching for the centre and wondering whether their work would make any difference. He questioned the western Christian value put on obvious usefulness to God. **I question our wider western obsessions with busyness, usefulness and success. I myself wonder if our society is pushing the value of efficiency to the point of employee exhaustion.** We are devising systems for work that have no meaningful spare capacity to cope with pressure times. We therefore confuse effectiveness with efficiency. I suppose my hope would be that the central organisation of *A Rocha* will be effective, but that the very human communities that sustain the projects will continue that delightful messiness and untidiness of live things.

Wider connections

How are pioneers called?

I reflect that it comes by something given to us, not designed by us. There is a necessary element of surprise. Having arisen, visions are then best disseminated by being caught more than being taught. It is being there and seeing it that does something for others who are also being called. As such, the vision, however commendable, cannot be imposed by the holders, however well meaning. If we wish more pioneers in the wider church to be caught up in the vision of *Mission-shaped Church*, there may be far more mileage in exposing them to stories of where examples are already happening than encouraging reading of the report. In theological training, perhaps energising placements are more significant than anything else.

Churches with a specific charism



"Hail fellow creatures"

Throughout my visit and my period of gestation before writing, I began to see in the life and work of *A Rocha* a number of **parallels to the essence of monasticism.**

John V Taylor reminded me that the roots of most communities [and what he terms cells of dissent] are in the monastic. He calls for the creation of these as response to the greed of a collusive society. He notes that the first monastic movement was "the life-style of the protest against an inflationary consumer society of the latter Roman Empire".⁷

So then is it fanciful to think of the *A Rocha* 5 Cs as being like a rule? Do I stretch the point to see a Benedictine inheritance in the *A Rocha* dynamics of community, prayer and work? I note that house duties of cleaning and cooking are done by all on a rotational basis. The instinct for hospitality looks like the same strand. It includes thinking that living-in guests are normal. Knowing there



⁷ *Enough is Enough*: John V Taylor SCM 1973: page 80

can be concentric levels of commitment has further resonances with the monastic. Indeed some in *A Rocha* are thinking about what would be their equivalent of creating Franciscan Tertiaries.

In the longer term then I note that the very success of some monastic groups and the growth of their power was very dangerous to them. The charism was in danger of being lost and, as with the Cistercians in the 12th century, required drastic renewal back into simplicity that meant starting again. I believe John V Taylor is right that **Christians should not fear the dismissal of simplicity by the sophisticated in our culture**. This jibe pokes fun at us.

*"The traditional response to all this is to accept the role of clown with gladness."*⁸

I wonder **why we have seen monastic communities as parallel, but not identical, to church**. Is it partly history, in that they evolved that way as protest against corruption in the church? In addition they are not open to all to join, but involve some further calling. Their specific charism also acts as a particular vocation that may not be shared by all Christians. Now the language of expressions of church opens up to us the realisation that no expression is complete and all of them are partial. The need to contextualise church further undergirds the legitimacy of creating particular examples. Both factors blur the earlier firmly drawn lines between church and monastic.

So could an *A Rocha* be an expression of church?

Throughout the second part of *Enough is Enough*, Taylor calls for joyful resistance, for non-conformity but without moralising, and he rejoices in the immense potential of small purposeful communities as a new form of missionary presence.⁹ I think today he would easily see these small cells of dissent as fresh expressions of church. Even then, in 1973, he saw that they had:

*"their own experimental worship, their own forms of evangelism and their own responsibility to one another and to the surrounding community"*¹⁰

Some *A Rocha* communities, like Portugal, France and Lebanon, have all these elements and I do not hesitate to think of them as fresh expressions of church.¹¹ Others, like Southall, have these dynamics in part or in embryo. The

⁸ Taylor: op cit page 80 ⁹ Taylor: op cit page 112 ¹⁰ Taylor: op cit page 108

¹¹ See the Portugal Article, on our website, for additional reasons why this has occurred.

values lead to patterns whereby working for *A Rocha* brings the experience of shared meals and the intermingling of working, socialising and being overtly but naturally spiritual. It is clear that the front half of 18/19 Avenue Road is a work environment. The back of the house feels like where those in the family business take their shoes off and put their feet up. **This house is home to considerably more than work**. There are also weekly morning staff prayers, which are becoming more than just intercession. There is no doubt that *A Rocha* has a mission. It is practised by a community. That the community doing the mission want to worship seems reasonable. In that sense **becoming church will lurk in the wings**. Some members there are beginning to think in this way, but not all do. The resistance is mainly among the younger members. Other factors that inhibit the language of *A Rocha* as church are wanting to create good relationships with other local churches and partnerships with them.

A rubicon may be crossed when the low key pre-evangelism that conservation practices, creates spiritual enquiry from people who would not think of joining existing churches. Dave and Anne have found that through *A Rocha* they have built more relationships with those who do not claim Christian faith, than ten years in parish ministry. If they come to faith, what do they join?

Churches for single issue politics?

I could imagine that we may see the growth of churches around cases of single issue politics. Conservation could be a good example. I don't think all single issues should be treated in this way because of the danger of further fracturing society. People do despair of making a difference in a complex and well defended world. Taking one issue and then focussing it more locally can create the hope of "doing something in our area." I have argued elsewhere that the first church was a by-product of the mission of Jesus.¹² **If caring for creation is part of the mission of Jesus, then the creation of fresh expressions of church along that route is not so surprising**. For those troubled at the thought of yet more highly focussed churches that may be unhelpfully homogeneous, I reply that conservation groups contain young and old, children and adults, male and female and, in Southall, all manner of races too. Moreover, to succeed they have to make partnerships beyond themselves with others of good will. In addition, the sheer diversity of issues

¹² See the *Encounters on the Edge* website and talks given at leaders on the Arrow program

that will arise through conservation work all make it unlikely that a dangerously narrow identity will form.

Acting together for a difference

Confronted with a daunting task, often a helpful response to what is felt as individual weakness is for the like minded to band together, though those who do may need to take care to distinguish carefully between the advantage of what empowers them to dissent effectively and the dangers of building a power base than can corrupt, at the very time it seeks positive influence. For those in existing church communities who wish to band together, plenty of practical ecological suggestions are found in James Jones book cited earlier.¹³



Church and powerlessness

However liberating the issue, if we try to misuse power to bring change about, or try to throw our moral or political weight about, I fear this will alienate and be seen as oppressive and reactionary. **We live in a time that is suspicious of church power.** One of the challenges in being counter-cultural is to apply that identity to the use of power. **We must learn to operate from our weakness.** A study of 2 Corinthians as a model of working from powerlessness could help. The founder of the *A Rocha* movement, watching the destruction of the Portuguese wetlands by a cynical tourist industry that inflicts further ecological shockwaves, reflects:

“What I have often found the hardest is the sense of powerlessness, of being without recourse to reason or justice, but this has been precisely the experience of everyone who has gone down the road Jesus took establishing a different kingdom not based on force.”¹⁴

I note and commend the sense of **vulnerability** in both the Southall and Portugal stories. For me it connects with the emphasis I have been trying

¹³Jones : op cit pages 94-101

¹⁴Harris: op cit page 63

to articulate about being shy of the use of power. It links to the spiritual dynamic by which weakness turns out to be truer strength. It comes in the powerlessness felt in the Portuguese story, of being content to supply information from which others would make decisions. It outcrops in an accepting community that does not demand faith before entry into it. It connects to values like community and co-operation, by which the weakness of the one becomes the interdependent strength of the many. Such values were impressed on Dave and Anne Bookless through her illness. This is all linked to daring to take on adventures that do not have guaranteed outcomes. **Hope is more vulnerable and more elastic than knowledge.** Faith is more attractive than power.

One of the difficulties faced by a successful growing movement is that its very success may seduce it away from the dynamics of weakness. As such **I am glad of the return of the church to the margins of society**, that we are not able to command attention through vast advertising campaigns and that the dominant place our buildings previously occupied in the townscape is diminishing. Bishop John V Taylor in his chapter on being a joyful resistance movement, pens a section on travelling light. This resonates with the vulnerability recommended by Jesus of going as lambs among wolves. **I can imagine lambs banding together, but I get nervous when they put on lion skins.** John Taylor quotes with approval the American Bishop Dwyer of Reno:

“The cathedral symbol which has dominated our thinking and imagination for so long and has dictated the forms and concepts or our buildings from actual cathedrals to country parish churches, is dead and had better be buried ... The cathedral typified wealth and power and esteem, if not downright human pride ... It was the fortress of faith, the stronghold of religion, the rhetorical assertion of the temporal triumph of Christendom.”¹⁵

Encounters readers will know I spend time looking for pungent material and do not believe in keeping it to myself. I am glad at every element in the changes around us that force us into genuine dependence on God, that reconnect us to the simplicity of Jesus, that relinquish human power so that the new life, the Spirit of Jesus that has been put within us, can emerge. I have come to see that Encounters with God are to be more expected at the edge. **Vulnerability is intrinsic to our future.**

¹⁵Enough is Enough: John V Talor SCM 1973 page 75

Serious about play

I make one further connection; the word play is not terribly interested in busyness, usefulness or success, for their own sake. **I think we are mistaken to think play is just for children.** I am intrigued that some of the most penetrating accounts of human life are in Shakespeare's *plays*. In sport we *play* games, and I think one of our problems is that we have come to despise the amateur – who plays for the love of it. The other limitation in sport is that, for so many, they only play vicariously, on the terrace, glued to the pub big screen, or sprawled on the sofa by themselves. Our videos and DVD machines have a *play* button, but the tragedy is that we can't, because it only means watch. Hobbies are forms of *play* but often those who have them feel they have to apologise for their eccentricities and call them "sad" activities. I hope *A Rocha* will retain its own playfulness: that is a sign of a healthy community. I notice the Minet project contains a playground and cycle track.

Conservation is a serious business, but it is an invitation to delight and wonder.

It has space to play games; the mounds and slopes make children laugh as they explore them. **Conservation is a serious business, but it is an invitation to delight and wonder**¹⁶ and then laughter is not far away.

Small beginnings

"Behold I am making all things new' is still the word of the sovereign Christ. But his renewals and revolutions begin quietly, like faith itself. They start growing from one tiny seed, the staggering thought: Things don't have to be like this."¹⁷

With these words John Taylor ended his book in 1973. The *A Rocha* movement has these dynamics and this conviction too. This apparently tiny challenge to the world around us may be another significant beginning which we do well to notice.

George Lings

May 2005

Cartoons: Tim Sharp

¹⁶ See Michael Mayne's book *Sunrise of Wonder*

¹⁷ Taylor: *op cit* page 114 – the closing paragraph of the book

Resources

A New Creation: 25 minute video of the transformation of the Minet site in Southall. Order from *A Rocha* 18/19 Avenue Road, Southall Middx UB1 3BL Tel 0208 574 5935

Some books listed alphabetically by author

The Care of Creation: Ed R.J. Berry : IVP 2000 is a range of essays largely by evangelical theologians and noted ecologists, including the celebrated 1966 essay by Prof Lynn White Jnr indicting Christianity as a major factor in the present crisis.

For the beauty of the earth: Steven Bouma-Prediger : Baker Academic 2001 is the recommended read from David Bookless. Full of data of current ecological issues and nuanced theological argument, it re-examines biblical material and historical sources, including rebuttal of the Lynn White case.

A Short History of Nearly Everything: Bill Bryson: Black Swan 2003 This fools guide for the agnostic person without a scientific background wonderfully sketches the delicacy, fragility and balance of the ecosphere in which we live. It celebrates creative discoveries yet puts those arrogant arrivals *homo sapiens* in their recent place.

Earth Spirituality: Edward P Echlin: Arthur James 1999. Written by an ex Jesuit, the book reflects a desire to communicate with a light touch, out of missionary engagement, but from long roots of scholarly study.

Under the Bright Wings: Peter Harris: Regent College 1993: The story of the first *A Rocha* sets out in narrative format the founding values of what has become an international family of communities and projects. Later editions contain a snapshot of other projects round the world.

Jesus and the Earth: James Jones: SPCK 2003 A popular read offering a re-evaluation of Jesus' teachings about the earth, some interpretations being more compelling than others. It includes discussion questions and practical guidelines for a parish to follow.

Enough is Enough: John V Taylor: SCM 1973 A fascinating re-read for any who want to see the issues from when ecology began to make more regular headlines thirty years ago. Like much retrospectively acknowledged prophetic material, it grows in stature with age. It is strong on creating communities of cheerful dissent.

Websites

A Rocha International www.arocha.org

includes sites for centres in 14 countries as well as *A Rocha* UK. Resources for churches include a conservation glossary and bible teaching from Peter Harris and David Bookless. The UK page also gives links to three other Christian ecological charities. That low number illustrates the infancy of this pioneer movement in the UK. The international site gives more connections.

www.encountersontheedge.org.uk

Homepage: special report on *A Rocha* Portugal.

How can the Sheffield Centre help you?

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

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

What else does the Sheffield Centre offer?

- Further sources of study on the issues raised by these booklets.
- Training courses on planting fresh expressions of church.
- Sabbatical study facilities on areas related to our research.
- A database of Church of England fresh expressions of church: Peter Hallsworth.

How would you get hold of more copies?

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

www.encountersontheedge.org.uk

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

www.encountersontheedge.org.uk

Supporting the continuing mission
of the Church of England

26: A Rocha

- Christians, Conservation and the Community



There are serious claims that climate change is the most pressing single issue faced by the planet. As environmental concern grows, Christians are belatedly adding to the ecological voice. The charity A Rocha has been active in this process for over 20 years. They look like communities with a charism. Is this another emerging expression of church? I went to find out ...

Also available in the 'Encounters on the Edge' series:

- 1 Living Proof**
Church with youth, arising out of community development
- 2 Unit 8**
Growing church on a forgotten council estate
- 3 Has Church Reached its Cell-Buy Date?**
Growing a cell church from scratch
- 4 Eternity**
The validity of youth congregation
- 5 Joining the Club or Changing the Rules?**
How do you know when something is church?
- 6 Across the Pond**
Surprising lessons in cross-cultural planting at home
- 7 New Canterbury Tales**
The first network-focused churches
- 8 Theme or Wild**
Creating diverse multiple congregations
- 9 Leading Lights**
Lay leadership in fresh expressions of church
- 10 Hard Graft?**
Joining an outside group to a existing church
- 11 Never on a Sunday**
Midweek church for children
- 12 The Enigma of Alternative Worship**
Strengths and weaknesses of this movement
- 13 Encountering Exile**
Is this the best way to think about our future?
- 14 The Eden Puzzle**
Bringing in large teams for community development
- 15 Dynasty or Diversity**
The HTB family of churches
- 16 Mass Planting**
Anglo-catholic church planting
- 17 Addicted To Planting**
Church modelled on the 12 steps of AA
- 18 Stepping Stones**
Slow steps in a tough setting are OK
- 19 Net Gains**
The 2nd generation of network-focused churches
- 20 Soft Cell**
Slowly starting cell alongside congregation
- 21 Reading: the Signs**
Youth church for non-churched teenagers
- 22 Mission-shaped Church: The Inside and Outside View**
Bob Hopkins and George Lings debate the report
- 23 New Housing, New Partnership?**
Ecumenical church planting on new housing developments
- 24 Oasis: Work in Progress**
Church in the workplace
- 25 A Short Intermission**
How can church be expressed within the arts?

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

Tel: 0114 272 7451 Fax: 0114 279 5863

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