

Encounters on the Edge



**no. 36:
Leading Fresh
Expressions**

**Lessons
from hindsight**

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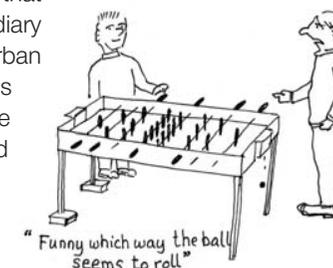
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Leading Fresh Expressions

Lessons from hindsight

It is nearly four years since the report *Mission-shaped Church* came out. In my view, enough has happened both along the corridors of power and at the edges of continuing missional creativity, to suggest that starting a fresh expression of church is now recognised as one legitimate Anglican option. It isn't the answer to everything; it should never be done because it has become trendy, but it has become thinkable to begin one. The need for them in a changing world has intelligent advocacy. Parameters of good practice are becoming more agreed by those of us who analyse them and training, based upon this, is becoming more widely available, both through courses and the web¹. **Starting a fresh expression of church is now OK.** Fresh expressions have not convinced everybody, but it looks as though they are here to stay for the foreseeable future.

However, we are a long way from the wider church having a settled mind that creating fresh expressions is this kind of normal, and indeed normative, state of affairs. Already there are **some cases for concern**. Some are not being given the resources that would enable them to make this progress. Others are burdened with a handicap that being self-financing must be judged by the Christendom interpretation that means covering all the costs of a full-time stipendiary leader. A good number of rural and inner urban parishes cannot do that and some simpler models of church don't need it. In other cases, when the pioneer moves on, there is internal uncertainty and no assumption by the wider church that an equivalent leadership resource should be given again. Not every church that began should continue, but I long for a level playing field between parishes and fresh expressions when it comes to allocation of leadership resources.



I was then intrigued to hear independently of two cases where the pioneer leader had moved on from leading a youth congregation and they were willing to share their reflections on their experience, allowing the searchlight of hindsight to play its unkind beam over what had happened. I hope this issue will be all the more valuable for that and be a contribution to emerging good practice and parameters that assist sustainability.

¹ Share is an online guide and learning network sponsored by Church Army and the Archbishops' Fresh Expressions team. It was launched on October 4th 2007 at a gathering of practitioners. It is hoped that it will become a major portal for all those wanting to contribute to good practice. www.sharetheguide.org

Si Jones and the Ignite story:

The background

Si Jones grew up in Bristol and became a Christian in 1983 at the age of 19 by “following his girlfriend to church”. At Christ Church Clifton, the then curate James Jones took him under his wing and propelled him into ministry opportunities. This experience has become a life time value; he believes we



Si Jones

learn and grow by chances to do something, with others to watch our backs and give us feedback. From the beginning, youth work was the outlet and remained centre stage until 2007. Two years as a *Care Force* worker, then three at Trinity Bristol were followed by ordination and marriage to Karen in 1989. Two curacies took up the next seven years, the first in Hildenborough, Kent and the second in Stubbington, near Portsmouth in Hampshire. In both, he gained church planting experience and was part of the pioneering involved in starting new

work, including a monthly area youth worship event with Geoff Lanham², and pioneering the prototype of what eventually became *Youth Alpha*. So youth work, a mission focus and growing new communities were becoming recurring themes and a resource of experience.

In 1996, Si became Associate Vicar and Director of Youth Work of Emmanuel Northwood on a five year contract. One of the flagships of evangelicalism, its proud history of youth work had shrunk to a handful of teenagers of Christian parents, now living in the shadow of nostalgia for the days of full evening services with rapt teenagers contently listening to exegetical sermons. As is the case for many churches, the tension between young people in the church and the non-churched on the streets was palpable. Things had come to such a pass that the 50 remaining evening attendees had to run the gauntlet of passing through a similar number of estate kids who gathered outside the building to intimidate them. The doorkeepers hastily admitted church adults and equally rapidly slammed the doors shut again. Knowing that

² See Encounters on the Edge No. 19 *Net Gains* for Geoff's continued story.

such a chasm existed and that a fortress mentality could only antagonise, Si persuaded the PCC not to spend money on CCTV and pay out monthly vandalism bills of £1000, but to employ a detached youth worker.

After many months of building relationships, interest was sparked. Teenagers were invited to an ongoing *Youth Alpha* which, at its peak, attracted 30-40. From there, those interested could move on to small groups and to *Sunday Club* which met in a hall next to the church building. Si recruited a team of youth workers from outside the estate culture, partly to give them ministry experience and to enable many relationship links with the teenagers. By this time, *Soul Survivor Watford* was well on into its existence as an alternative Anglican congregation and the then Principal of Ridley Hall, Graham Cray, was talking about youth congregation as a valid way to be church, clearly expressing that this should not be seen as a bridge to adult Sunday church.³ It was also understood, as it was when I was a curate, that trying to mix churched middle-class teenagers with non-churched working class ones was very high risk and probably best avoided.



Awesome beginnings

From 1998 to 2001, what began as a monthly evangelistic event grew both in numbers and in frequency of meeting. *Awesome* became a congregation of Emmanuel in November 1999 with a core of 50 young people. In a year, that number had grown to over 100, meeting both in cells and a Sunday evening celebration in the church lounge adjacent to the re-ordered nave. Fitting with Si's own story, from the beginning it was characterised by a desire “to train the next generation now not later” and provided opportunities for service for teams and individual young people, in many aspects of the church's public ministry. The term “young people” was deliberately wide and cited as 14-35.⁴ With hindsight, this may represent some rationalisation of an initial aim for teenagers, the incorporation of twenties to be some of the team to work with them and the desire of some adults to join in, as it was much more engaging than the diet at the rest of the church. The ministry philosophy was a mixture of Cell thinking and shapes to celebrations influenced by Wimber, that is,

³ This was published in Grove Evangelism 57 *Youth Congregations and the Emerging Church* Graham Cray 2002 and is quoted widely in Encounters No 4 on Eternity another early example of youth congregation that is still flourishing.

⁴ Si Jones and others *Awesome Business Plan* November 2000 pp.4-6

worship, teaching and prayer ministry. In this case, a fun session was inserted between the worship and the teaching which was interactive and not too long.

2001 marked the end of Si's contract. *Awesome* was hitting a glass ceiling in size with its venue and limits in cultural suitability. Various options were considered: take *Awesome* lock, stock and barrel elsewhere, extend Si's contract and stay or, thirdly, invite some to leave and begin a fresh work elsewhere in the deanery. The first would be unkind to Emmanuel, the second option had a limited shelf life, so the third way became the most promising. The Archdeacon, and later Bishop of Willesden, Pete Broadbent gave warm encouragement and close support at this stage.

Ignition and take off

So how did Si evaluate the various stages of *Ignite*? Si reflected on the birth story noting that what became *Ignite* is relatively unusual by being a network church plant. As such, it did not have the strengths of secure parochial identity and a known base of people to serve and work from. Nor in this case did it have the luxury of a large transplant in which there is strength of numbers from day one and a new parish area to work. It did, however, have the positive value of growing church out of a mission context. They intended to develop *Ignite* as "a missionary community to which young people can belong."⁵ Network churches can be freer to be strongly missional and, if they are really to reach into a desired network, it is vital that they are like this because there is no parish passing trade or occasional offices traffic to fall back on. He sees both strengths and weaknesses in how the story started. I quote direct from his written paper, a section called "I wouldn't start from here".

Blessings:

Freedom to take an idea and begin to make it happen. The Bishop's encouragement to "go for it". The PCC of Emmanuel Northwood donating 30 people to begin *Ignite*.

Mistakes:

Our last Sunday service at Emmanuel Northwood was 9th Sept 2001 at the 9.30am service. *Ignite* started 9th Sept 2001 in the evening! There was no gap, no breather, no reflection time, no creativity. We took a pattern that had worked in the settled context of Emmanuel's youth congregation and replanted somewhere else! It has modelled a "rush culture" in *Ignite*, rather than a more reflective approach.

⁵ Si Jones *Reflections Around Leaving 2007*

Immediately I want to salute the candour of the self-made criticisms. In further conversation, he saw that though they wanted to do mission-shaped church, actually it was a case of church-shaped mission. Why did that happen to such an experienced youth worker? Why could it occur to someone who knew so much about relationship-based work? Perhaps it was the temptation to say "what we have works for us so it will work for those we want to reach." All of us in the fresh expressions field need to note that temptation and seek to avoid it. In addition, the sheer rush was caused partly by the end of the contract, partly by the



buzz of what was already happening and it pushed them into a transplant.⁶ **It is quicker to copy what you know than to research what you need. That doesn't make it right.** Another factor was the preferences of the team but that is examined later. Suffice to say here that I know of other network church cases in which this latter dynamic was too dominant. The most effective antidote is belief in the "dying to live" principle that forswears our preferences for the sake of seeing truly inculturated gospel and church emerge.

I also note his comment about a rush culture. This seems to me to be congruent with being in a wider church that is anxious about how it is doing. "Better do something now, rather than wait and see" is a temptation. Here is solid evidence that it is just that. In this case, the rush was also propelled by working with a creative and motivated group. Such ideas often have a "do it now" tag attached to them, but the wise leader somehow takes the flow of ideas and can raise the question of whether they may be "not yet" ideas. Not everything that is thinkable is doable. The wise leader also considers resources. Will people be too stretched? Are the ideas sustainable? This pressure to prove themselves too soon may be common to many fresh expressions of church.

⁶ In my view the term replant is technically reserved for the case where a church building has closed and is subsequently reopened by another group. See *Encounters on the Edge No.10 Hard Graft* p.3 for more details.

What is Ignite?

The shortest answer could be a youth-focused congregation, but it is more complex than that phrase suggests. It may be more accurate to think of *Ignite* as an umbrella term for a variety of activities and forms of service in various networks around the Harrow deanery, within the structure of a charitable trust. This more complex reality has been led by an ordained minister, working with a salaried team of at least four, some full-time, some part-time and a significant number of volunteers.

Ignite has invested heavily in sowing seeds in a variety of ways, many of which are recognised and valued by the secular authorities and this has created a funding stream. The youth workers go into schools, including a road show about drugs. For some years it has run *Elevate*, an educational dance ministry with mainly black local young people that gives them confidence and builds character, as they learn to perform together in public. It operates both in schools and with the excluded. Mentoring has been offered in connection with relationships and sexual health and through the drugs issue as well as biking. *Ignite* also undertakes wider mission by funding individuals and sending short-term teams overseas.

Ignite gathers in cells, with different ones for youth and for adults. It meets weekly on a Wednesday night in an event called *Expression*, which can include social time, group discussion, teaching, prayer and games which the young people call their church though, as yet, it is seldom ever Eucharistic. There is also a Sunday evening congregation of mainly young single adults, though there are a few older and married members. The intention was that the Sunday would also attract young people (as it did when *Awesome* met) but this has been seldom achieved. Si Jones commented on his disappointment with the Sunday event:

"I remember feeling deflated on the first Sunday we hired a community centre for Sunday night worship. As I looked at the 20 people gathered there, I said to myself, 'why aren't there more people here?' A more appropriate question would have been 'why should they come?'"

As he thought further about the wider planning process and compared it with the processes others like *Anglican Church Planting Initiatives* recommended, hindsight kicked in again. He wrote that church planting is **not**:

- Building and Sunday-centred
- Transfer of a bit of worshipping church to a new context
- Thinking that a worship service in a new area would bring new folk

They avoided the building-centred trap by not owning one but the starting rush and the assumption that what worked before would work again, caused problems. As Si put it,

In our enthusiasm we bypassed some important stages in the development of Ignite. We started with a big-gathering expectation, that 'many people' would come and join us on a Sunday night to worship.

This is a lesson that is still important to underline among those who want to start fresh expressions of church. We have inherited a view of church which is focussed on Sunday and public worship in our own building.⁷ So-called success stories in the Christian press and publishing can collude with this and focus on numbers. Si admits the presence of that pressure. When we plant, we plant our assumptions and they need challenging.⁸ So he summarised:

Blessings:

Opportunity to spend time at the Anglican network churches conferences over the past few years. To learn from others.

Mistakes:

Starting with a "big" Sunday night gathering, rather than allowing it to develop organically. Not taking more time for planning and preparation.

Flaws around the mission focus

The mission focus is always important in church planting for the purpose is to love, serve and win those not yet following Christ, but I have noticed over the years that it is especially crucial for network-based fresh expressions, that have no other way to grow, other than through relationships. Yet surprisingly, often that focus is not kept sharp. Limitations and tensions arose in several ways in the evolution of this story.

The networks were diverse and distant. Young adults were travelling to *Ignite* from a variety of locations, leisure networks and work places up to eight miles away in London. To bring a friend that distance to a relatively small and still, as yet, unknown event is too large a step for many to offer or to accept. But not only that, the so-called "hard to reach" teenagers were less mobile and

⁷ Si Jones *Reflections Around Leaving* 2007 "our inherited view of church is building and Sunday-centred. We think that just by opening a new worship service unchurched folk will somehow automatically be drawn in."

⁸ *Encounters on the Edge* has been one vehicle to challenge this because we met stories that showed other routes were possible, legitimate and necessary. This pattern was first spotted in *No 2 Unit 8 Out of Sight Out of Mind* 1999 p.10

came from estates that worked like neighbourhoods. It seems to me that it became harder to ride the two horses, that is, network-based young adults and neighbourhood teenagers, who came from different social classes; there wasn't one focus. Si recognised those tensions and what they had meant:

"Even for me as the key leader, I recognized a departure from the original calling that we outlined in the first business plan. We spread to grow adult church in order to cater for the people who came with us who weren't passionate about youth work. This may explain the gradual growth of Ignite rather than the explosive growth that may have been expected!"

Not only that, but it looks as though the **recruiting processes were flawed**. It seemed a good idea at the time to invite those who wanted to leave *Awesome* and begin what would become *Ignite*. (I am tempted to remark that this is a very old problem and even Moses might recognize it about his church planting venture!) This created specific limitations. The balance of gifts and skills was more toward creativity in relation to worship and less toward networking and evangelism. I have only rarely found an Anglican church planting team with too many evangelists in it. Si soberly reflected:

I have only rarely found an Anglican church planting with too many evangelists in it.

"If possible, it would've been more fruitful to hand-pick those who had a desire for mission with young people some people came with mission in mind, many came with a maintenance mentality."

With hindsight, this created both **lack of clarity about who Ignite was for** and even what it was. Purpose and identity are not the same but they are powerfully related. Confusion of mission focus, which is a key element of vision, infects the whole self-identity of a young church. Here it affected the balance between mission and maintenance and also whether the emphasis fell on youth cells or adult and teen congregation. I even wonder whether *Ignite* was one church with diverse callings or a number of related churches united through a common staff. The worship event pushed the emphasis toward provision for the insiders. They would readily put on events that seemed to help others back in Northwood to keep going as Christians. Si suggested insufficient people, in both cells and celebrations, gave the majority of their time to building relationships outside those circles. In other places I have seen, those challenged about this pattern eventually decide to leave and go back to the sending church, or stop attending anywhere. These are consumerist Christian problems that skew a work towards church-shaped mission. He summarised:

"I suspect that right from the outset there was a confusion of vision. Externally there was a message of beginning a church with a mission focus to young people. Internally there was an expectation of a church that suits me! The genetic pattern was not outlined clearly enough, and even in the leadership there were mixed motives for involvement."

Blessings:

Opportunity to have a go at forming church out of the mission context. We have seen the fruit of this approach especially in the youth congregation *Expression*. To be able to develop a church that was reaching out to the largest unreached people group in the world... young people.

Mistakes:

Asking "who wants to be involved?" rather than being more proactive in hand-picking an initial team of participants. Allowing ourselves to be stretched in too many directions at once.

Changes and a lack of stability

From 2001 to 2007 *Ignite* was based in 4 different locations, or rather, areas. Their core venues were a youth centre in Pinner, a church in Wealdstone, a university campus in the Wembley area and, lastly, a voluntary association building in Harrow. Talking to Si, some of those changes were almost forced on them by the attitudes of local churches threatened by their presence. It is sad but true that some church leaders would rather lose their young people than have them go to a new thing. Lord, have mercy upon us. This reminds me that network does not sit easily with the territorial instinct because the latter is so connected to power. It is still idealistic to think that Anglican clergy today see territory primarily as responsibility for an area; they still think of ownership and possession. "My people and my parish" can mean humble reception of trust given but, in an ecumenical climate and a fast emerging post-Christendom era, it is at best quaint delusion and at worst arrogant protectionism.

The painful lessons from hindsight are that the move of venue created difficulties as well as opportunities. Each time both teens and adults, members and fringe, were lost; some were cheesed off by a move, others were not easily able to make the journey or sometimes even find the university venue. The dislocation was compounded in that the different venues also favoured different parts of the diverse networks; they introduced changes of emphasis and further diffused focus. Si wrote:

People want to belong somewhere that lends some security in a world that already feels unstable. Many people have longed to settle down somewhere and there has certainly been more stability in the past few years since we've been in the centre of Harrow.

Key questions in finding a lasting venue are: “**how do people gather in this network or neighbourhood?**” Where are their watering holes? Where and how do they chill out or celebrate?” If that is clear, seek to work with what you find. If that is not clear, finding a good venue is going to be more of a struggle. Having found one, for it to gain a sense of continuity and become home will bring genuine value. Not for nothing do the Benedictines value stability as a key part of their rule. However, stability is not immutability. Sometimes there is no choice and a landlord can move you on. Sometimes growth means a good venue becomes a constraint. In the latter case, I advise any group to consider if the calling could be to multiply at the venue that works, not to assume the answer must be to try and get bigger somewhere else. Si concluded in this section of his paper:

Blessings:

Freedom to respond to new opportunities.

Mistakes:

Too many moves which were forced upon us rather than being strategic ones. Losing people as we moved, again! No emphasis on place and an over-emphasis on network.

A stretched leader

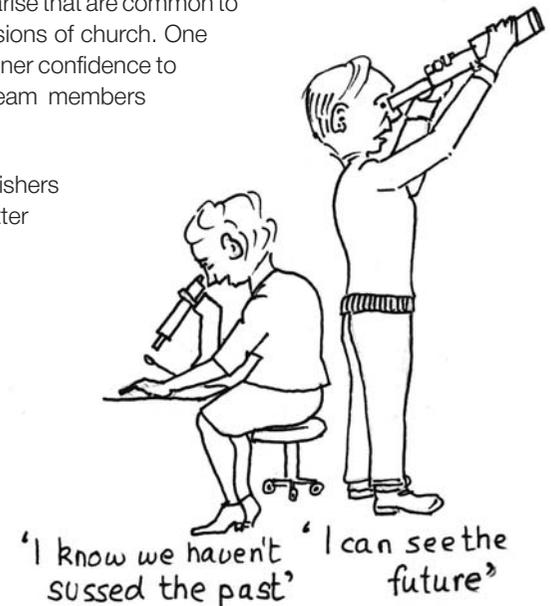
Related to this need for proper stability is the leader's use of time and the results of their bias of gifts in ministry. Si's paper is honest about the considerable tensions created between the “total focus” needed in church planting and the other commitments he was drawn into with *Soul in the City* London, *Oasis* and as a Director of the more local *Romance Academy* following the success of the TV series “*No Sex Please We're Teenagers*”. Again, this was valuable work, but such that sucked up a leader's energy and thinking time. He had candid words for all pioneer ministers.

Visionary leaders are often energised by the new thing. I love the phase of having a new idea and beginning to see it become a reality. The danger with a person like me is that new ideas/opportunities can also be a swamp that you get stuck in unless there is a committed completer finisher type of person working in leadership as well.

At least a couple of important issues arise that are common to both inherited and emerging expressions of church. One is the self-knowledge, wisdom and inner confidence to deliberately find and appoint key team members who have different gifts to us.⁹

Though visionaries and completer-finishers can really annoy each other, it is better to live in tension than cut the cord between them which leads either to visionaries driving others to exhaustion and disillusionment or polished inertia fashioned by perfectionists.

The other issue is that time pressure, even distortion, happened to Si even though he wisely had mentors who asked penetrating questions. I wonder with hindsight if a few further markers are helpful. Do questions about new commitment directions and levels get asked before the commitments are made? Can the mentor really say *I wouldn't advise you to do that*? And what happens then? Beyond this, I admit that I have always found it difficult to resist the increasing workload that grows out of the very advances made in ministry. Here are some examples. Work to enable the ministry of others and their ongoing supervision becomes a growing task. **Simplicity in church life tends to grow towards complexity** with attendant management of change that is time-consuming. When people are converted from profoundly non-churched backgrounds, they come with baggage. The process of pastoral discipleship with them is long,



⁹ For years consultants like Bob Hopkins have advocated use of team tools like Meredith Belbin to ensure a necessary range of gifts and skills are present in leadership teams. <http://www.belbin.com/>

bumpy and demanding. Do something well and others ask you to talk about it which tempts you away from what you are called to do. **It is not difficult to be dragged into more.** I gather Bishop Stephen Cottrell's recent book *Do Nothing for a Change* is attracting considerable interest.¹⁰ I wonder how much residual guilt I will need to carve out the time to read it!

Becoming 3-self and sustainable

Gifts from various sources deserve being acknowledged. The diocese freely put in the leader's salary from the outset and, with a little negotiation, proceeds from the sale of a redundant vicarage elsewhere bought a house. However, the house was some way out, in Eastcote, which did not add coherence in the diffuse picture. The request for the future is a house for the successor to be much nearer to where the work now is focused. This is geographical (but wider than parochial) across the area of Harrow and the "hard to reach" teenagers there. The commitment of time and money from the lay volunteers and from the paid staff has been immense and deserves celebration. Without these sources and their sacrifice there would be no story to tell and thus no lessons to learn.

The classic 3-self principles are intertwined. Lack of disposable money hinders processes of self-determination or self-government. Lack of the reproduction of indigenous membership and leadership adversely affects the other two. The inventors of the 3-self theory saw that imperialist colonial models insisted on provision of professional external leadership and controlled external financial subsidy. Those interrelated dynamics created permanent dependency within indigenous churches that were unable to break out of the cycle.

1 Self-reproducing

Ignite can point with gratitude to various kinds of fruitfulness and this is a measure of reproduction. It is clear that they have sowed much "gospel seed". Their school-related work such as *Elevate*, *Romance Academy* and the drug programmes have given hope and, in some cases, literally preserved lives. Beyond this valuable service, they have also trained many young leaders:

"Perhaps the greatest level of achievement has been in raising the level of expectation about leadership. Ignite has fostered a have-a-go mentality. People have been free to explore areas of gifting and been provided with an opportunity to try those gifts out."

¹⁰ Stephen Cottrell *Do Nothing for a Change* CHP 2007

This is at one with a wider change in youth work, away from entertainment of young people, to taking them more seriously and knowing they will grow by doing. I sense it also resonates with the lessons from Roland Allen and his challenge to church leaders to put their trust in three related factors: the indigenous people, the Holy Spirit at work in them and the scriptures given to them. It could look as though the first one is what external leaders find hardest to swallow. Perhaps that turns out to be distrust that the Spirit is present in the people and his ability adequately to illuminate the word without us. It is to be celebrated that here those trusts were given.

I think it is significant that *Ignite* has, in effect, exported many young leaders and members. The headlines are that some 150 people have been a central part of the *Ignite* family. Of that number very few left *Ignite* disgruntled or unhappy with the direction. At least 15 have gone on to full-time ministry elsewhere and over 20 have been part of the leadership. However, that very throughput has made it hard to sustain what remained and it is now more fragile than in the past.

2 Self-financing

Si wrote that fundraising has been "a constant source of strain", partly because starting with professional staff members from a middle-class church created an expectation that this should continue. In practice most staff had to evolve a tent-making ministry. As their work became valued, Harrow council started to put in funding but this in turn had complications. Strings attached included how explicit the Christian element could be and a level of reporting to the detriment of time spent with young people and chasing money streams rather than vocational opportunity. At its worst, fundraising became a subject that consumed every team meeting and discussions about future direction." *Can we afford to do this?* was asked rather than *is this what God wants us to do at present?* Clearly this pattern positively reflects trust won from Harrow but negatively reflects high degrees of external control and internal anxiety.

3 Self-governing

Ignite became a charity, partly in order to attract and manage the funding stream and partly because the church legislation then could find no instrument suitable for such a mobile work. Extra Parochial Place was considered but was only least unsuitable. (Today, *Ignite* would be in the queue for Bishops Mission Order.) As a result there is both a leadership team and trustees. Si reported that the two did not lead to conflict and he praised the way the...

Trustees have been responsible for the financial management of Ignite. They have overseen the work in the most servant-hearted way and have been a consistent sounding board about the development of Ignite's outreach.

However, being a separate charity is a complication. There is considerable additional work to set up and administer, of which those who consider independent charity status should be aware.

Personal aspects

Si commenting on these six years began “*Ignite* has been the best and the toughest thing I have ever done!” I note that this comes from a hugely capable and experienced ordained leader. With appropriate discretion, he continued:

There has been a huge cost involved for all people not least to my family, where our children were part of a church with only two other children. This cost must not be underestimated as people offer themselves for this form of ministry in the future.

In conversation, he spoke of the kind of strain within marriage that many church leaders will know. Si described writing the report as cathartic. That suggests that starting and sustaining a fresh expression of church is no picnic. While there is helpful talk that taking risks on fresh expressions of church will include freedom to fail, the danger is to think that the costs to leaders and



Si Jones

members are missional collateral damage. But people are involved, wounds are real and it takes time to recover. That is why balance matters, where hearing the soft whispers of wisdom is essential and improving good practice will count. I thank him for writing and know that there was more I had to omit. As I write, a thorough report from the trustees and leadership, highlighting current strengths and weaknesses, sits with the Diocese of London and awaits a process of external review before any succession is known.

Derek Spencer and the Eden story:

The background

Growing up in inner-city Nottingham, Derek joined the church choir at the age of 9 but only out of boredom. Faith only became real and fresh in 1983 at 16, when a new vicar turned the local church around. Leaving school that year, he became a shift worker for the GPO, but inside wanted to be part of what was growing at church. A few years later, he met and married Ruth Baker who was at Nottingham Uni studying music and she introduced him to the famous Limpsfield house parties, during which others sensed his youth work vocation. During the 1990s, he left the GPO and they lived on her salary while he worked part-time first in a Christian coffee bar and later as a parish assistant. With the other half of his life, he discovered an interest in learning and, after starting from scratch with a catch-up year, became a theology student at St John's Nottingham. From 1998-2001, he was the youth worker at Angmering on the Sussex south coast with a spread of work across a church teens group, schools work and detached youth.



Ruth and Derek Spencer

In 2001, the Bishop of Horsham, Lindsay Urwin, who had been a diocesan youth officer invited him to play golf. Four hours with a persuasive Episcopal evangelist wanting you to take on a job is hard to resist, despite being settled and in an enjoyable season of response from the detached work. The job was to become Deanery Youth Missioner in Storrington, based on the CE Steyning Grammar School (a comprehensive that has retained an old name). The deanery is at the northern foot of the South Downs; it is shaped like a long ellipse from Pulborough across to Upper Beeding. Steyning is situated next to Beeding on the eastern side of the deanery, which is split by the north-south A24. It roughly fitted the school catchment area, which is wider than the deanery boundary. Here are three strong contrasts to the previous story: one catchment area rather than diffuse networks, one consistent and safe place for meeting the young people rather than having to devise programmes and move around far-flung venues and school providing a neutral ecclesial focus rather



than venues that create perceived threat to local parishes. I came to think that where there is a bishop with the vision and leadership to convince the local clergy, a head teacher with ready sympathy to significant Christian work in an area school and a gifted youth worker/church planter, you are sitting on a gold mine.

Beginnings

Gold mine it might turn out to be, but mines require a lot of digging. They start as virgin hillside. Derek was starting from scratch again. It was true here; he visited every church and found most in the deanery had no youth attending them. He was not afraid to tell the deanery. Many factors towards a good start were well thought out and resourced. The salary and pension came from the diocese, the house rental came from the deanery and the one selected was in just the right place, near the school. Money put in is one good test of ownership. A car came as a gift and Francis Midner, the lay chair of synod, became a singular consistent source of strength, connection and support, battling when necessary for money. Thus operational and financial freedom of action was secure but not unaccountable which is commendable.

I have already commented on the positives of the choice of this school as the base. Another crucial piece of priceless advice came from the Bishop, genuinely open to youth congregation as an ecclesial concept: *find and follow the hotspots, don't try to spread yourself*. He encouraged Derek to push the boundaries of the possible and accept this would drag others along later.

Moreover, he backed initial help with continued access and Derek has met with him biannually. What a good gift to pioneers. How that kind of contact can be continued, as the national number of radical fresh expressions of church grows, is a key question in future priorities.

Less helpful were certain other features. One was the stated expectation that in three years the work would be self-sufficient; it was expected that Derek would have done

himself out of a job by then. Optimism can come at a price of undue pressure. Another was a steering group of local dignitaries none of whom had experience

or knowledge of this sort of work. Provision of spiritual oversight was good in theory, but the sheer divergence of spiritualities involved vitiated that. The wider church needs to take care that in order to tick boxes about accountability we check that the pioneers think that what is provided actually works. **I suspect there is a national shortage of appropriate mentors for the numbers of pioneers who are setting out.**

It was good that Derek reported back, as of right, to the Synod. He could continually make the case that the youth congregation should be taken seriously, not have the plug pulled after three years and it should not be seen as just a project. Rather it was made of real people and deserved as good pastoral treatment as any other congregation. This level of contact helped create a sense of ownership. The deanery could think "this is our youth congregation, though its members are unlikely ever to come to our individual churches." That is good "dying to live" thinking at work.

Early Years

Derek arrived in summer 2001 and much of year one was spent in two ways: assessing the absence of youth from the churches and getting into the life of the school, during its day and beyond. The school also had a youth wing for evening use that attracted the local working-class kids. Derek was easily at home with them. Because of the large catchment area, there were also some boarding pupils and a Friday gathering with them started. He also found an area "gatekeeper", who turned out to be an ex-deputy head, now town councillor, George Cockman.

Derek and Ruth believed in **starting small, being real**, working for enduring commitment through relationships and giving people responsibility as soon as possible. These are all values from their Limpsfield heritage.¹¹ Through 2002-2003, they evolved varying patterns for two small groups, starting one each side of the A24, mixing spiritual and social activity. Gradually it became clear as the numbers grew from 6 to 35, as members brought their friends, that more than small group was needed. Some may think that a youth group of 35 is no great shakes compared to the days they recall. In this context, that number was double the congregation size of half the churches in the deanery. I suspect most frontier work today, led by slim resources, must learn to be well content to begin with the small, among those who are open, led by those who are committed and understand the values. In this case, it was only Derek and Ruth; they had no other volunteers. It is a pattern and pace not unlike that found in the early years of new monasticism. **Good missional growth is more vocational discernment than market driven response.**

¹¹ This work was begun in 1962 by Revd Kenneth Haberson and celebrates 45 years of steady youth work and resultant adult leaders in many aspects of the wider church

"find and follow
the hotspots,
don't try to
spread yourself"

Going more public

2003 saw the launch of what came to be called *Eden* but the process was crucial and instructive. The groups were asked if they wanted a public event once a month, to which others could be drawn. Their ownership was important. It would only work if they believed in it and were part of creating what they could invite friends to in confidence. Therefore, in the first year, all the presenters were in-house. Only then were other agencies and perspectives invited in to bring breadth. A group of seven adults was carefully selected to head up the various dimensions of the event and to pray and plan together, while the small groups remained more peer-led and leader mentored. The aim of this team was to delegate, supervise, allow



mistakes and reflect. Quite deliberately, this team included two 17-18 years olds though that meant fresh faces had to be found when they moved away.

The venue was the drama hall of Steyning Grammar school, so it was culturally neutral and already well-known. It had a foyer where drinks, food and sweets were always served, initially free and later for a nominal charge to prevent waste. Once when the theme was "blessed are those who hunger and thirst...", it served only water. Relationships built with the school meant the normal charge of £300 a time was waived and the caretaker was very obliging. It provided not a lecture hall, but a cockpit-like theatre, complete with lighting and a large screen, which assisted participation and engagement. They tried to live with the tension of providing quality without encouraging performance. 130 turned up for the opening July event which was encouraging. All these were advantages within the overall process which I think was more important. It seems to be congruent with my conviction that best planting, especially among the non-churched, is done by attention to the dynamics of missional community before contextual public

To think that the worship event of a fresh expression is the essence of what goes on is to mistake its face for its character and identity.

worship begins to evolve.¹² To think that the worship event of a fresh expression is the essence of what goes on is to mistake its face for its character and identity.

¹² This order is affirmed by the booklet *Starting a Fresh Expression* Archbishops Council CHP 2006 by Croft Dalpra and Lings

Advances and complications

A pattern had evolved. *Eden* occurred on 1st Sunday evenings, matched by a CYFA group meeting at the school, all other Sunday nights. Both sought to serve the young people of the entire deanery, though the *Eden* events sometimes drew up to 350 from across the diocese. However, those large numbers entirely coincided with the visit of famous names in Christian music. That tells me that the indigenous church of disciples were those who faithfully came to the small groups. Two apparently benign complications then arose. One of the churches in the deanery which had a contemporary Sunday morning service underwent a change of leadership in 2005. Through no fault of his own, the new incumbent suddenly found he inherited much of a deanery-wide youth group. Ashington village church continued to grow and attracted adults and their children from across the deanery. It could look as though *Eden*, a neutral youth deanery network for all, had unintentionally become a feeder to one parish's morning service. Such developments create tension with other clergy. Ruth Spencer and their children had worshipped there since Derek had taken up his post in 2001. By then Derek had to be elsewhere on a Sunday morning, which they regret.

Ordination

Like a number of youth workers and Church Army officers who plant fresh expressions of church, Derek found being the de facto minister of a community prompts the ordination issue. This development often focuses on providing the sacraments. It is true that top-down features like current regulation, out of Catholic ministerial conviction, only allows those episcopally ordained presbyters to do this.¹³ However, I myself think the equally deep logic that prompts thoughts of ordination is the relationship between local people and their leader. This role as leader, in corporate decision making, in conduct of public events and private personal care, makes



¹³ While this applies throughout Anglicanism to Eucharist, in some dioceses authorized lay leaders may baptise.

such a person the natural president at the Christian family meal. It then rightly feels odd to import a priest from the wider church. At that point, two marks of the church are in conflict; catholicity which values connection to the wider Church, tussles with oneness, here meaning the integrity of the local community.¹⁴ The two marks find resolution as the leader of the indigenous community is ordained. Thus recognition by the wider church matches local discernment about calling and presidency is exercised by the natural leader. This development also adds a strand to the case for the wider church to fully recognize the ecclesial identity of the fresh expression.

Derek explored this path from 2001 and another upside of the story is the thorough investigation, but also the acceptance, of his previous training and ministerial experience. An ABM in August 2003 was followed by ordination as deacon in December. He was ordained, not as curate to somewhere, but as Deanery Youth Missioner, helpfully expressing both wider church recognition and known local identity. I feel ambivalent about the resultant in-service training. Part was distance learning to catch up a few modules through St John Nottingham. The other part was to do various six month placements in various benefices of the deanery. In practice, this meant two additional pressures; he only worshipped with his family about once a year and much of the time he was learning to take the kind of services that only helped traditional churchgoers. It literally gave him a headache some Sundays, because it was so far from church as he was seeing it develop. I see value in gaining liturgical skills, but doubt it takes that long to learn them.

The pattern develops



Derek was ordained priest by Bishop Lindsay at *Eden* in January 2005 in a joyous Eucharistic event that splendidly and sensitively combined elements contemporary and ancient. Monthly themed events continued with attendance averaging 85, including 30% of adults repudiating the notion that it was only teenagers who needed fare different from traditional parish worship. Eucharist was celebrated three or four times a year. Ideas of how to widen and deepen this overall way of being

¹⁴ For those who like stimulating investigation consider reading Volf on Ratzinger and Zizioulas and how different ideas of oneness and the local depend on different understandings of the Trinity. See Volf *After our Likeness* Eerdmans 1998 especially pp 200-204

church was to introduce zones. Stations at *Eden* were already like short term zones that did not prescribe response. Other zones were Prayerzone which would be at the Spencer's home on a Monday with Talkzone to start on the 3rd Sunday evening. Current issues and topics would be taken; initial input would be followed by discussion and feedback. To service all this, the leadership team met three times a month to reflect on the past month, to pray and plan towards the next.

Crash and recovery

Derek came out of the work in April 2006 with stress and stepped down from leadership in December as it became clear that going back was not an option. It is to the credit of Ruth, the leaders and the members, that so much continued. Over time, it is true that *Eden* numbers halved, partly because the leader stopping suddenly makes a big hole, but also the week-in-week out contact with the school ceased and thus the supply of new members waned. Ruth continued to share the fronting of *Eden* and (with an older teenager) led the CYFA small groups, while running a family, holding down a job, leading worship at Ashington and supporting an unwell husband. The word heroic comes to mind. It is to the credit of the diocese that it stood by Derek, paid him through illness, found him a less pressured job at two village churches in the same deanery and stayed with commitment to the venture by finding and funding a successor. The Bishop stayed with the need of a focal person in the deanery and in the school. A house was bought, rather than only rented. Derek's successor is Paul Meier who had various links with him in past chapters of their lives. Paul has some church planting experience and knew *Eden* by bringing his own youth group. There is therefore a meaningful succession. He was appointed in September 2007 and has been recently licensed to the job as a full-time diocesan post, with the deanery picking up the £15,000 annual running expenses. What could have been tragedy has been contained to difficulty and recovery.

What were the lessons of hindsight?

Balancing slim resources and wide tasks is difficult. Full of passion and the only full-timer, Derek acquired responsibility for too many levels of the work. It was natural he should look after the team and be the focal person in the school and *Eden* events. But this led to the very time consuming creation of fresh multi-media inputs needed monthly, co-ordination of the various teams on the day, as well as design, production and distribution of publicity and handling relationships with the wider church. When he stopped, the team who were all in work felt the pace within three months, fearing signs of their own burnout. A collusive feature towards this tendency is that the turnover in membership, to

go away to Uni, could be as high as 30% per year. All this occurred while being parents to a young family and the somewhat draining Sunday placements in other churches. How was this missed?



'do you admit that on the night of July 6th 2003 you did knowingly begin a youth congregation'

Being in the deanery had downsides when some clergy simply did not understand, despite the high profile and frequent reporting. Some tended to judge whether *Eden* was church by the criteria of inherited church. Worse, others imagined that parochial and territorial ownership still applied to young people. Yet their normal experience was constructed by travel out of their parish, to an area church school and networks of friendships that grew from that. Battling to prove legitimacy is wearing. With hindsight, **Derek wishes he had stated that the aim was to create church**, though not as others knew it, right from the start. As such, only to be called Deanery Missioner witnesses to this incomplete ecclesial thinking. Being on trial also makes one feel the fragility of what was begun. Did

the numbers justify the time and expenditure put in by local people? *Eden* could easily look good, but *Talkzone* might only get 30.

At the other end of pressures coming at the identity of an emerging young church, lurked questions of what it is to be Anglican, to be church and to keep a focus on mission. This was new ground to young people more influenced by interdenominational celebration gatherings and consumerist tendencies in youth worship culture. Done again, he would include teaching on being church from day one with the Christian teenagers who were, after all, the core membership. The same applies to the adult leaders coming from a wider area. The need is to avoid the competitive scenario of belonging to local church X, but serving in fresh expression Y. That tension is real, but to know it is OK to belong to both helps hold it.

Derek found, I suspect like many, that prayer took a back seat to planning and activity. It was hard to find those who would pray at, or for, the *Eden* events or the CYFA groups. *Prayerzone* itself remained tiny. He noted the culture of rush among the able young people, typified by those going for 10 A grades at GSCE, with additional tuition and extra-mural

sport. The smaller CYFA groups and stations at *Eden* events helped counter this by offering stillness and openness.

Beyond this is Derek's comment that **he had not been trained in church planting**, neither by his theological education, nor the in-service training. Therefore there was so much more to learn from scratch, with the danger of not knowing the lessons of history. To think you are only engaged in mission but not starting church means that, when one arrives out of the mission, it can be an alarming surprise. There is so much more to think about for it to grow in health, maturity and sustainability. Growing a church from scratch requires thinking that goes back to the roots of what church is. Yet robust radical ecclesiology is still being written and is usually not found in either historic ecclesiology or much contemporary missiology. How much church planting training the new clutch of pioneer ministers receive is a first order question for their curriculum.

Any time of sustained pressure tends to open whatever cracks exist in us, arising from our personalities and backgrounds. These can collude with external forces and with the specific pressure to perform that comes in pioneering something new. Together they begin to drive us harder than is sustainable so burnout beckons. How good in this case he could stop, find support, take advice and attend to the cracks. He has now come back, ready to move on with a fresh role and deeper wisdom. Many of us know seasons of apparent failures that have been painful but apt tutors.¹⁵



Growing a church from scratch requires thinking that goes back to the roots of what church is.

¹⁵ Read Derek Spencer direct on www.emergingchurch.info and edenzone

Was it worth it?

I noted both Si and Derek thought that this was the best thing they have ever been involved with. Neither shirked telling me the costs. Both knew their mistakes, yet wouldn't have not done it for the world. We will need more youth congregations for the foreseeable future. These two stories show that there is great potential for doing this on a deanery basis. The sharp lesson is that it is easier if there is a coherent catchment area created by a co-operative secondary school. An open school is a promising route to creating fresh expressions that merits being reproduced elsewhere. **A full-time, mission-centred, deanery youth worker particularly when based on a clear mission focus is a good way forward.**

"Leaders should not over focus on the public worship event"

But these two stories illustrate some dangers. Firstly, leaders should not over focus on the public worship event, because the danger is that it takes resources but by itself doesn't build lasting discipleship and sustainable church. It is wise to not judge the strength of the work by its public face alone. One weakness in *Ignite* was their move too quickly towards an event. One strength of the *Eden* story was the foundation

from longer established CYFA groups. With them and out of them bigger events could be mounted. Secondly, make sure the people you take with you share the missional vision and are not more interested in pursuing their own dream church. "Dying to live" attitudes remain a golden thread.

Yet this issue is not just about youth congregations. Another thread weaving through is network church. I think it shows that **the more coherent a network it is, the easier it is to grow something sustainable.** Some networks are so diffuse, temporary or transitory as to be unsustainable ecclesially. Necessary coherence might be detectable through the nature of the network's gathering points. Pupils in secondary schools can be there for 7 years, whereas something like a friendship group meeting in a café might only naturally gather for a year or so. The features around a network's gathering will also tell us something about the degree of investment in them. The strength of school networks is that the implicit curriculum includes fostering co-operation, a desire for learning and growth of self-reflection. Planting into that ethos gives a head start.

Regarding leadership, these stories illustrate pressures on pioneer leaders. It would be sad if pioneers feel they only have the emotional and physical energy to plant once because of those pressures, before moving on to more conventional ministry. There also seems to be a dilemma for those in oversight of such leaders. How do they

ask tough enough questions about pace, without adding more pressure to someone already having to cope with a lot? Yet cars that do high mileage need to be serviced more often. I long that those who are running fast can be secure enough in those who have oversight over them, to admit vulnerability, knowing it won't be used against them.

In telling these stories I have tried to embed what I see as the many virtues and values as well as the valuable lessons of hindsight. We are still learning.

George Lings

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Cartoons: Tim Sharp

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36: Leading Fresh Expressions

Lessons from hindsight



What happens when the pioneer moves on? What did hindsight reveal about strengths and mistakes? We are grateful to two leaders who were candid about their own stories. It so happens both are examples of youth congregation, but what they saw contains valuable insights for all fresh expressions, especially those planting into networks, and the honesty about pressures that exist for all pioneer leaders of fresh expressions of church.

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