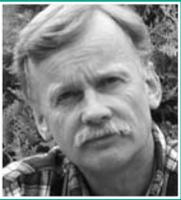


47: Christ Church Bridlington



In the main, English larger churches have kept a distance from the fresh expressions agenda. Running what they already have, and drawing others to it, takes their energy and yields good numbers. So when Sheffield Centre heard of a story that bucked this trend we were intrigued.

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Encounters on the Edge



no. 47:

Christ Church Bridlington

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Introduction

Why tell the story of Christ Church Bridlington, which at well around 500 members is large by English standards. How is that living at the edge? Moreover, overall the larger churches have not engaged much with the planting fresh expressions of Church agenda. They can think what they are doing already is working sufficiently well, doubt the need to change a 'successful' formula and undoubtedly know that managing change in a large church is quite an operation. Then often visions for radical growth become limited to expensive church building projects either extending what they have, or updating their internal provision.

Yet what constraints does that build in to their future life? Some seem to reach a plateau of size in which losses and gains start to cancel one another out, while taking huge energy to stay running fast where they are. Having spent most of my local ministerial life in larger churches, I know how complex and demanding they are and far from being a sinecure.

The more I heard of this local story, it seemed to be one of the multiplication of congregations, rather than of addition to a large one. As well as adding congregations within the existing envelope, this church community has branched out beyond its buildings. While some churches do add further congregations, they are very alike to one another, but here the multiplication is enriched by diversity of size, scope and style. This is reinforced in that Jonathan Couper, the vicar, is perfectly content to call each of them both congregations and also churches. Such ecclesial boldness is rare and in my view healthy. Perhaps most surprising of all, the costs of, and focus on, engagement with the local community is a larger slice of the overall budget and staffing than the continuing of the inner life of the church. Here more is spent for the sake of others than on ourselves. Yet it all happens in a small town in the north east of England and a county with notably low Church attendance.

Welcome to Bridlington

The monastic past



The Priory

It is thought that the Celtic church came south through Bridlington and planted some small communities usually on existing pagan sites. More certain is that from 1133 an Augustinian priory grew up around promising farmland, a water supply and fish from the sea. It became the fourth largest religious house in Europe, including impressive defensive walls and gates to protect it against raids by predatory pirates, and within boasted an imposing chapel as well as a hospital. The old town grew up around this foundation and was

nurtured by it. Henry V gave thanks there for the favourable outcome at Agincourt and Henry VI founded a school. Its most notable leader was St John of Bridlington (1319-1379), the last English saint canonised before the Reformation. The surrounding hagiography attributes to him what today we would call healings, words of knowledge and prophecy. He also exhibited notable concern for the poor, smuggling out bread from priory sources to feed them, and also an unusual humility in choosing to sleep not in his own Prior's quarters but in company with the other brothers. In any event the monastery was dissolved in 1538, but its grandeur meant it took many days to disperse its treasures, considerable lands and building materials.



The Priory

The chapel was retained and turned into a parish church, known as the Priory and a grander front added in the nineteenth century.

Christ Church

The almost square nave, designed by Gilbert Scott, was put up in 1841 as a chapel of ease from the Priory. As such it began as a church plant.¹ The present steeple and chancel were added in 1871 as the church gained its own parochial status. The large vicarage, set in extensive gardens, dates from 1857



The Vicarage



and was even bigger than today with wings, one of which acted as the dormitory for the small boys' school run by a past vicar. The map from late in the 19th century shows all this plus the large 1871 wing to the north of the chancel, then called the Wycliffe Room. All of these spaces and elements will have their part to play in the unfolding thirty year story. A text to Joshua has come to epitomise that long process: 'I will give you every place where you set your foot... No one will be able to stand against you all the days of your life. I will be with you; I will never leave you nor forsake you.'²



Christ Church

The secular story

Like other seaside locations, the tourist trade arrived in the 1840s with the advent of the railways and its large station, now a shadow of its former self, which brought in coal and took out the catch from the lively fishing port. So the town spread south and that development has continued. A new station terminus opened in 1912. The seaside tourism heydays ended with contraction of the railways under Dr. Beeching and the advent of



¹ J. Couper, *The Face of our Parish: A Victorian Church Plant, Anglicans for Renewal*, Volume 64, (1995), p. 4.

² Joshua 1:3,5.



cheap flights overseas. Today the narrow winding streets of the old town to the north with their specialist shops, give way to a mix of grand and unkempt central areas that speak of the post-war low ebb of the town and its continued struggles with unemployment. Tourism is the major employer, then come shops and services, light engineering and printing. Social housing, retirement bungalows, guest houses, multi-occupancy terraces and comfortable suburban villas combine to create a picture of wide social diversity. Christ Church parish is a socially deprived area in the centre of this significantly diverse town. The diversity continues with numerous Poles and Philipinos among the otherwise static 33,000 inhabitants. The fishing fleet today focuses on the local rich shell fish beds, but it fears the

blatant scouring of the sea floor further out by other nationalities' trawlers. Despite being half the size of grander fellow resort town Scarborough, 18 miles to the north, the town seems on the up, with recent development of the seafront, as well as future plans for shopping, attractions and housing in the south central area between the station and the sea. The buses to and from the new park and ride location sport an upbeat message: 'Bridlington is changing – catch the wave.' Such a message is apt for the story of Christ Church that has learnt to respond to the promptings of God, led by a visionary, innovative and intuitive vicar. They try things and when they work, then tease out why.



Meeting Christ Church: a 30 year story with chapters

1981: Frailty and possibility

Jonathan Couper, son of a vicar, was ordained at 23. After curacies in York and Barnsley, he came to Bridlington as vicar, at the tender age of 29, along with his hospitable wife Anne. In 1981 he inherited a church in the evangelical tradition, yet a congregation of only 60 and under threat of closure, the diocese thinking there were too many churches in the town. However, the patron, the vicar of the Priory, thought otherwise and appointed him. Kept afloat financially by a weekly jumble sale, traditional elements with an attendant musical style were in tension with a 1960s family service style complete with a Pathfinder youth group. Yet part of the inheritance included a desire for growth, people being saved and drawing the younger generation.



Jonathan & Anne Couper

1981-1988: Laying charismatic foundations

An evening service was begun with just four people. Charismatic understanding was taught and practiced which drew people from the morning service, who wanted more to their faith and life. At this edge of the country such things were quite new and thus not complicated by established resistance to such life in the Spirit. The service and its teaching became the spiritual root of all subsequent developments. Four attenders became 20, which grew to 40. Speakers came from the wider church and by 1984, 250 attending was not unknown. Jonathan describes those years as 'manic' as there was no local vision for, nor diocesan encouragement of, additional staff.



In 1984 a first floor was put into the Wycliffe Hall to create an office area and provision for youth. At the same time a teacher left her job and took on the first part-time post, as vicar's secretary. In this chapter the idea began of having a prayerful, responsive, evolving future. This included having aims, targets and budgets, which galvanised giving and growth. In 1983 a town-wide evangelistic crusade, led by Duncan Leighton, led to 90 professions of faith and the fruit seemed all to end up in Christ Church. The emphasis on renewal was given further impetus by the ministry of John Wimber. The changes of emphasis here included a shift beyond tongues and prophecy to healing and words of knowledge; also to teaching that such things were normal, missional and signs of the kingdom, and bringing further depth of intimacy in worship. Jonathan and a few key lay leaders attended conferences in 1985 and one suspicious medic received a word and subsequent healing about his own rare, little known, medical condition which was highly convincing. However, bringing these changes back was less easy. Some thought Jonathan had gone over the top, and a surprising number of people began to manifest disturbing traits and even demonic infestation, all of which took wisdom, time to handle well and external consultation. It also led to recognition that **even a gifted vicar could not give the pastoral care, nor counselling, to so many with such diverse needs**, particularly as many were coming to Christ with serious issues from non-churched backgrounds.

1988-1994: From inward parish to outward town-wide community church



Michael and Polly Hart

Often developments have been in response to perceived need. The gestation of the Pastoral Support team came in this period, today led by Dr. Michael Hart and his wife Polly their accredited trainer. The initial response was to create a Sunday-based prayer ministry team, but this did not engage enough with the wider community and its needs. Over the years since, various sources of training have been brought in. There has been sifting of who was called to this work and

changes about where this caring service was offered. As more premises, further away from the church, were built in later decades, and community provision was offered within them, so this team has shifted its operation further from the church building, while still being available for church members. In addition, the differentiation between three valid yet different strands has been carefully delineated and kept: listening, counselling and prayer ministry. Those in the middle category are ACC accredited; they work with a third semi-skilled person or chaperone present, and are themselves in supervision. They receive referrals from GP surgeries, as well as those who come by personal recommendation. The five supervisors meet weekly and the whole larger team gathers termly.

In this period the site underwent its first building development since the 1925 church hall. *The Forecourt*, costing £128,000, extending out from the western end of the church, was opened in 1988, the first of several designs by congregational member and architect, Michael Green. It marked the first step down what would turn out to be a 20 year road of creating venues and spaces that took seriously a desire to engage with the wider community. But **what was characteristic was to do it by coming outside the classic church space used for worship**.³ Thus typically it became the venue for the *Lighthouse Coffee Shop*, started by Anne Couper with the aims of serving quality coffee and cake, open to the public midweek and creating a neutral space in which to build relationships. In monastic community terms, the first expression of the community function of 'refectory' was being added.

Use of the existing church hall also expanded. Work with families, not least younger mothers and their children has a long history, going back at least to 1983 and Brenda Clark. In this period it continued to need space and more volunteers. In 1991, an offshoot of that concern was the first steps to a second-hand clothes shop for toddlers, entertainingly called *The Pink Stiletto*, apparently because one such ladies shoe was found while cleaning out the space needed for the storage involved. A different provision was the start of an over 60s luncheon club, also held in the Hall, which was becoming home to a multitude of functions.

³ I would now term this 'chapel' to distinguish it from many other church spaces, that are not primarily for corporate worship but all of which together make 'church'. See *Encounters on the Edge no. 43 Seven Sacred Spaces* (Sheffield: Church Army, 2009).



West Hill Church

Quite different was the expansion beyond the town centre parish. There is a discreet area to the south west of the town called West Hill. It is over the railway which divides the town east and west, bounded by major roads to the north and west and by open country to the south. The area is 1950s social housing but well designed with its own row of shops and generous social spaces. From being a poor relation to Bridlington and a dumping ground from it, it has become more socially mixed.

However, its vicar left in 1990 and St Mark's church was down to six members, with its other church St Magnus in the outlying village of Bessingby faring little better. Jonathan Couper was made priest-in-charge of this additional parish, and Christ Church staff member and Church Army evangelist, Chris McCarthy, its lay minister. Over time it would grow to seventy members.

During these two early chapters, Andrew Jefferson was converted, showed natural leadership and became warden and subsequently what is, in effect since 1999, the full time 'development manager' within the life of Christ Church. If he and the vicar are seen in animated conversation, it is very likely that further blue sky thinking is erupting once more. If it is right, in secular terms, to describe Jonathan as an innovator, Andy is an entrepreneur.⁴ His gift is not only to spot or sense opportunities that others miss, but to find the human and financial resources that can turn an idea into reality, as well as devise structures to carry the project forward in stability. Then having brought something to birth and robust life, he withdraws to seek what is the next thing to initiate.



From 1992 Andy has worked for the church and was one founder of a key factor to understand, which is *Christ Church Community Services (CCS)*. Since 1993, CCS has operated as a separate registered charity and not-for-profit company. Its objects are both the promotion of the good news of Jesus Christ, but also the provision of community needs for the people of Bridlington.

⁴ For further delineation of the differences, see B. Bolton and J. Thompson, *Entrepreneurs* (Oxford: Butterworth-Heinemann, 2000), chapter 1.

In its own words, at its 10th anniversary, they longed that 'Bridlington will be a place where God is clearly at work.' CCS is legally separate from the PCC, although accountable to it, with leading members on both and co-opted members on the PCC. In addition, it pays management and rental fees to the PCC, so it is quite clear where authority lies. This distinctive identity ensures that the church itself is not swamped by social projects, although it is utterly committed to them. Also the particular charitable aims of CCS make it far easier to attract substantial funding from government: European, national and local. Its projects might be small, such as piloting a parenting course for those with under fives, or they might be large with a five year lead time and costly whole new building, together with managing the political battles that can occur in planning and development. Andy has built relations of mutual trust with the council and serves on a number of charitable bodies.



The Trustees

CCS has created a track record in Bridlington for establishing the church community as one which provides value-added community provision, at value for money, and wins contracts to offer that provision. This in turn releases money to pay staff to deliver those services. Today its annual budget is ¾ million, much of which is staff costs and government funding attracted by its clients. This outstrips the PCC budget of under ½ million. Andy calculates that over the period CCS has existed, its project value is over £4 million made up of capital, revenue and volunteer time costs, all of which can attract EU monies.

I was reminded of the pioneering 12th century agricultural innovations of the Cistercians at Citeaux in France. They worked 'at the edges' of society and edges of innovation in unpromising land, but showing how it could be redeemed. And they worked 'alongside' people, not from above in the later overbearing monastic power typical of the worse face of Christendom. Thus they contributed to the welfare of society around them and created a new working class, freed from the thrall of serfdom. **Liberation of people is within the best monastic tradition, helping them enter being more fully human;** it is a social fruit of the aspect of its community life called 'garden' or work and from an inherent monastic value called hospitality.

All these changes themselves provoked yet another change, which was that a staff team was emerging, which was itself new. At the same time, despite all these developments, or perhaps because of them, a plateau to growth occurred. Factors included being caught up in responding to existing social needs, limited available buildings, lack of staff and premises in which to house existing staff, and an infrastructure to coordinate all that was blossoming.

1994-2002: Buying the vicarage expands the work

The response to the plateau and the springboard for the new chapter turned out to be buying the vicarage from the diocese for £100,000 in March 1995. Raising the money was not without drama as pledges to raise the money were needed in quick time from the congregation and at one stage it seemed they would fall £20,000 short. However, when the message of a problem went out over the designated giving weekend, individuals got up to pledge yet more and others followed their lead. The deal stood. The diocese agreed to the Coupers finding another house of similar value. This moved them off site after 13 years, giving them a place of rest and family life more separate from work pressures. It also freed both vital space within the vicarage now termed *Church House* and also the garden area around it. Teams within the church family put in the IT provision and communications between *Church House*, the church hall and Christ Church so the first could now be used as staff offices. All this offered a connected infrastructure that could support yet further future projects. The Pastoral Support team also gained here a more neutral home then called *The Pastoral Centre*, for the increasing demand for its services as more contacts with the community were being made.



Todz Shop

One example is that in this period the second-hand toddlers clothing scheme, *The Pink Stiletto* moved out of the hall and into a leased shop in town, now renamed *Todz Shop*. This service has moved venues over the years but been on the present site four years, retaining the name and function. Within, the paid manager Lesley Gaines and volunteer staff receive gifts of clothing for under fives, which are cleaned, mended and resold. In prior agreed cases of more extreme

need, and accompanied by a worker, clothing and goods are freely given. There are also a few toys, now with working batteries, and in the back room, buggies, prams cots and walkers are available too.

Another CCS ministry is the *Furniture Store*. This too has moved around leased premises and the current shop is on Springfield Road near the church. Begun in 2000, it gains furniture from its house clearance scheme, but also receives donated goods from the congregation and the town. After repairs as necessary, items are for resale, but more commonly also given in proven cases of need. Those in need include poor families, people moving to the town and women, often with children, fleeing domestic violence.



Mark Beckett

Referrals come both from contacts on the church site or the social services. Here two-way traffic operates. Some access *Furniture Store* through an appeal for help to the church, while others can be directed from it to the Christ Church site and its other arms of assistance and help. When I visited, it was in the

capable hands of Mark Beckett who used to have a supervisory role in a Kwik Fit store and now is assistant manager, with four other part-time staff who drive the vans, as well as run the additional storage building. Mark came to Christ through a work colleague, and tells a winsome tale of a transformed life and family, breaking with past negative patterns. He and his



Youth congregation at play

and his wife Janet also now run the Youth Alpha programme and help with the youth congregation.

Very early in this chapter of the story, the 'Toronto blessing' appeared. A few from Bridlington visited and brought back the understanding they gained. A more explicit 'inviting of the Spirit' and the more visible phenomena associated with

this, revealed yet more pastoral needs. As Jonathan wrote in a 1997 report: '...as the love of God became tangible in worship, wounds surfaced more readily.' This added weight to the direction taken in forming the Pastoral Team. However, it also highlighted that a small proportion of the overall congregation were really dispensationalist in doctrine and opposed to this development. The unrest, attendant local power struggles and odd letter of complaint to the Bishop were a burden of controversy that lasted a couple of years. A press release, in November 1996, reported on the overall health of the church, citing that over 800 a week were participating in the community projects. It set in context that out of a congregation of 365+ including children, only 37 had left, yet wished them well and drew a line under the business. I mention this because it was freely told to me and to illustrate **this is not a varnished tale**.⁵ Change, especially if experimental and edgy, can easily find it is opposed and even good stories do not always run smoothly.

It may not be coincidence that the *House of Prayer* ministry began in 1999, under Michael and Shirley Green, a singularly sunny and vigorous pair of over 80 year-olds. The Thursday morning is spent in a mixture of private individual prayer, a communion service followed by coffee and then longer group intercession in the first floor Dovetail chapel.⁶ As the work of the church and CCS has expanded there is no shortage of topics to intercede for, as well as the needs of people associated with them.



In this chapter there was also an internal church reordering. By contrast to other tales of large churches, this is a minor story and it was not even clear to my long list of interviewees exactly when it happened. However, in 2001 out went the pews and in came chairs, set in curved rows, but flexible in arrangement. I saw them often moved around in my few days there. Fresh decorations in warmer colours, better heating and lighting and power point

⁵ Jonathan Couper wrote publicly and eirenicly about this period of difficulty and how he handled it, in *Anglicans for Renewal*, Volume 64 (1995).

⁶ The name comes from a moving message penned by Revd. Robert Ross in 1901, in his first year as vicar, which called for a House of Prayer and mentions the Wycliffe Room (the west transept of the building) by which it would be 'dovetailed into the Church'.

capability were introduced, with two modest sized screens on the east end nave walls. In my view the latter mercifully do not ruin the sight lines to the open chancel. The work has greatly enhanced a stronger sense of a community gathered to participate in worship, rather than a congregation assembling to be spoon fed. For the same reasons it increased their capacity to run conferences regularly which from 1996 had begun to serve others both regionally and nationally.

A culmination of this chapter was the building of the Pre-School in the garden of the hitherto vicarage. Costing £180,000, the building opened in May 2000 and was an extension of the provision for families begun through the toddlers work. It sprang from the vision of purpose built child care, available to people across Bridlington, to alleviate the needs of a single mum or stressed parent, and to provide a positive environment in which children would learn, play and develop across a holistic spectrum. They would meet Christian values, be better equipped towards schooling and overall increase their chances of a purposeful life. The senior manager is Margaret Walker and the deputy head teacher Angela Gale. In addition there are EYFS (Early Years Foundation Stage) key persons for particular children and support teachers for the 75 on the books at present. 10 years and 4 Ofsted's later, 700 have passed through the school and 45 were leavers the Sunday I was there. The income is by parental fees for 2-3 year-olds (with bursary provision if needed). Above age 3, the Education Authority funds for half day provision. The whole unit exudes professionalism, and wisdom from experience, topped off by genuine warm humanity.



Pre-School



Angela Gale

2002-2009: Re-inheriting the land

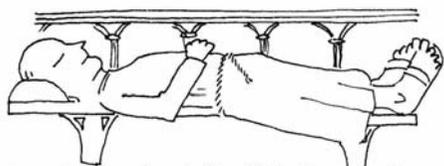
Quite a lot of the community projects could be classified, or even criticised by the churlish, as being provision at the bottom of a cliff after people had fallen over it. Now a vision arose to do preventative work, putting up fences at the top of the cliff, through re-education and re-training. This would open the job market

up to people, especially the young, in an area and town where widespread unemployment, with its attendant losses of esteem, and invitations to a darker side of life beckon. But how might this be done? Once more the available land had been built upon, yet further community needs were becoming clearer without a solution towards them.

Thus far two-thirds of the historic Christ Church site was in use. The final third at the back had long since become glebe land, owned by the diocese, and was now disused and unkempt, having been an attempted market garden forty years earlier. The parish was willing to pay £10,000 to get it back, prepared to guarantee that they would not resell and promising that it would be used in perpetuity for church work. The diocese were reluctant and it emerged a developer was offering £250,000. No contest you would think. The church prepared a paper and prayed. The day before the diocesan committee sat to consider the parish bid, the developer pulled out as it became clear that the site was landlocked. Suddenly £10K was attractive. The audacious proposal statement read: 'The whole site is the inheritance of Christ Church and should be used for work of the Kingdom of God.' This step marked two things. It heralded and enabled the next chapter of further change. Just as important, **the whole land was now reunited** as a whole site after many years, and it was about to be reoccupied.

A pleasant encouragement to press on was for Christ Church to come second in a national competition for churches engaging with the needs of their context, mounted by *Faithworks*. Yet at the same time a deliberate balance against well meaning activism was sought to balance community life. Existing patterns of prayer were strengthened after a visit to Northumbria Community's mother house in 2002. Their morning office, usually led by Jeff Denton, the site manager, has from then on been said in the Dovetail chapel at 0815 to mark the opening of the community's day. My own rejoicing at this then turns to

reflection and my present understanding that it is the midday office which is most counter-cultural to our contemporary temptation to overwork. **Midday prayer punctuates the day, introducing a semicolon of calm, into the sentence of its daylight hours.** Its content, steered



St Benedict preferred the full stop of sleep

by the prayer 'Let the beauty of the Lord be upon us and establish thou the work of our hands',⁷ reminds us that unless people sense in us the aroma of Christ, and unless God is at work within, beyond, and sometimes despite, what we do, it is all well-meaning futility.

From 2002 onwards, vision led to plans for what became *The Key Centre*, a new and the largest building to date on the overall site, which was opened by the Archbishop of York in 2006. 'Key' is a pun on Quay, the street outside and subtle reference to Christ the key to life.



The Key Centre

This development was not achieved without skillful work by Andy Jefferson and others who needed to convince grant making bodies, despite the politically orchestrated protests from other providers in the town of social services and mental health who feared that this development would harm them by competition for available monies. Today, it acts as

home for several functions to which its reception team, headed by Anne Couper, will direct you. Sessions with the pastoral team are held there, some midweek church small groups use it, and it is home to the Sunday youth congregation. *Door Step* runs from 1100-1200 every weekday and gives advice, food parcels and practical support to the homeless, also signposting them on to other sources of help, across the town and other CSS projects.

However, the largest use is training people for entering the world of work. It was managed, until recently, by Shirley Moir who has just retired. Courses are run, usually from Monday to Thursday and lasting from 5 to 15 weeks, on how to prepare for and to find work, skills in catering, in aspects of IT, and working for the leisure and entertainment industry. Most are in partnership with regional providers such as the Humber Learning Consortium, from whom they



Anne Couper

⁷ Psalm 90:17.

won the Provider of the Year award in 2008. Many courses are free to candidates, covered by grants paid to CCS for students who complete outcomes.



Todz Shop Interior

An inherent part of the scheme is the provision of six week placements, for half a day, as part of orientation to the world of work. Through this they get a reference while staying on benefits for the time being. Here a wonderful overlap occurs with many of the other projects. The projects need volunteers to get their work done. *The Learning Centre* people, out on placement, need a constructive task to do and, just as important, inspiring people to work with. It brings the chance to bump into **the gospel dynamic that in serving others life comes to us**. They gain a

dignity through work and learn to embody love through action. Moreover because this is about doing, it is as friendly to men as women, not always the case in church related stories. I happened to meet up with a part-time assistant in one project who confidently showed me round and explained things to me. Only later did I find she used to be a very shy, unconfident, young person out of work and without faith. I would not have guessed. Although this placement scheme has its own validity, it has been through this oblique route that people have become Christians, not least as they breathe the air of Christian community at work.

In the untidy evolution, so typical of this story, it then became clear from running the *Learning Centre* that those on courses needed day-long child care provision, not just the hours offered in *Toddlers* and *Soft Play* or *Pre-School*. Thus yet another building arose on site, the nursery called *Noah's Ark Crèche*, which opened in 2007. Led by Julie Brown and



Noah's Ark Crèche

Anita Grandy, the work has 40 on the register and can take 21 on any one day, segregating babies and toddlers. Because it is all day, there is also lunch provision. The funding and ethos is basically as per the Pre-School arrangement, with the differences that these children are younger and it provides full day care.

Another later development of work with families is extension of the toddlers work in the church hall, called *Play N Do*. It runs on a Thursday, from 0930-1100 and is for accompanied children. Led by Moira Jefferson and some helpers, it has some similarities to *Messy Church* but without explicit emphasis on an all age understanding and families eating together. *Godly Play* could also be a way in which the spiritual side is developed. *Play N Do*, unlike most of the other provision, was also started on a Sunday morning, in 2009. It is one of the congregations meeting on the church site, including Andrew Jefferson providing a male role model amidst what can be a female-dominated environment.

However, the land to be re-inhabited by a contemporary Christian community was not limited to a larger and more diverse presence on one site. It is often the case in small towns, where the parishes are of different traditions; all of them have congregations that are technically eclectic, in that they come from all over the town. 'Eclectic' can be an Anglican swear word that eschews unprincipled individualistic ecclesial consumerism. However, in balance it can be explained that what is happening is just that the geographical catchment area is wider than parish and more like deanery. It is not denial of locality, only redefining its borders. In the case of Christ Church there is both a town-wide membership that works with area, but also it draws regulars from up to 20 miles. There is nothing like it for miles.

As other larger churches have found, part of their continued growth is to begin further expressions of their life in the more closely defined pockets of the overall town, from which their people already come. As such this knows that presence round the corner is important, honours locality and thinks that engagement with it should follow. But such thinking is almost beyond the ken of protectionist parochialism, which seems more interested in defending its borders than providing for the people within them. This growth fits too with a prophetic call, brought in 2002 by London vicar Bruce Collins, that Christ Church was to be a resourcing and releasing church.

The Martongate church plant begun in 2005 within Holy Trinity Sewerby parish, a large area of the north east of the town and its hinterland, has these dynamics.

It meets in one of the two secondary schools that serve the whole town so the natural catchment and web of relationships is deanery not parish. This plant provides diversity of Anglican tradition more locally in a distinct area of the overall town. It is also another smaller sized seedbed in which gifts in public ministry can be nurtured and matured more easily than in the more intimidating large morning congregation at Christ Church. In retrospect, its genesis in the style of change known colloquially as 'do it and apologise afterwards' was not ideal, but at the time the alternative of 'ask for permission and be turned down' was not encouraging. In this case negotiations with the incumbent did not open a way, although the Rural Dean and Bishop both saw the need and offered tacit support. At the time the BMO legislation⁸ was not yet in place that could have legalised it. An actual letter of apology was later sent and the matter seems to have gone quiet.



Applegarth

Bridgeway is similar and different. It began life as the Bridge Café in town in 2004 and later migrated to a theatre and has since settled down, in 2007, in the lounge of a retirement home called Applegarth, within Priory parish. This time there was a favourable consultation process. This intimate neighbourhood church is not limited in attendees to the home's residents. It is led by Neil Mackay, a licensed lay worker, with whom I trained for one year back in 1974, but had not seen since. Communions at these church plants are provided by the clergy team of vicar, curate and two retirees.

Ulrone, begun in 2009, is a different story again. The small parish church set in a village south of Bridlington was down to two attendees and facing closure. Once more Christ Church volunteered to begin the kind of church plant called a graft – adding new life alongside the old without riding roughshod over it. A reader, Margaret Walker, and husband Chaz now lead a slow recovery that at present brings 13 on a Sunday. With all these developments beyond the town centre parish, Jonathan Couper is now technically a vicar in plurality which twitches diocesan legal minds and only lasts for his lifetime. **Our Anglican structures, designed to be pastorally stable in a very slowly evolving social and mission context, do not make rapid or radical growth easy** in a

⁸ BMO is the acronym for Bishop's Mission Order. This Church of England legislation was requested through *Mission-shaped Church* in 2004 and is now part of our Canon Law. By it, after consultation, a Bishop can rule that a venture to plant a fresh expression in another parish is in the diocesan mission's interest, overruling the historic canonical right of an incumbent to refuse such initiatives.

swiftly changing world in which relationship may be more significant than history or even geography.

Back at Christ Church, behind *The Key Centre*, work by the church's *Practical Skills* team and others, on the garden area at the very rear of the site began in earnest in November 2007 and was substantially completed by 2009. This area contains raised beds planted up with bushes, trellises and block paths which beckon people in to walk in and explore the site, rather than stand on the edge and take it in at a glance. The whole area would be sympathetic to use as labyrinth and already there are focal points and tasteful signing. It is public space with a little seating and people are encouraged to use it to chill out. Historically the monastic 'garden' was a

place of serious work. So it pleases me that this garden, which needs work to keep up its quality, is another placement for those returning to work. Thus those not used to work find **it works its magic upon them and sows seeds of enjoying work within them.**



Now weekly, there can be up to 2,000 people on site, compared to 800 eight years earlier. If the totals across the congregation are only 500, then most of the others are not yet Christian. How many

other churches (excluding cathedrals) have three times as many outsiders midweek as they have insiders on Sunday?

Space does not allow for comment on further ministries: the more recent *Healing on the Streets* that prayed with over 300 last year; *Meeting Place*, the present development of using the forecourt as café space, the *Start!* course for baptism enquirers, the ongoing *Alpha* programme, or the much longer tradition of sending and supporting nine worldwide mission partners, nor growing links to churches in Europe in which Jonathan may act as consultant or speaker.



What do these things mean?

Network or net at work?

This story is set in a fishing port town and amongst an evangelistic minded leadership. Perhaps it was inevitable, as my mind enjoys wordplay, to fiddle with the word 'network'. I hope what follows is fair to their identity, but I think it is helpful to see there are at least three sets of crossing threads in what I saw and which is why it works so well.

1. The horizontal lines: the nine congregations in different areas of town

The nine congregations

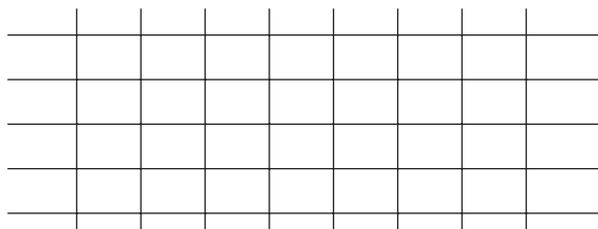
Venue	Name	Start*	uSa ⁹	Day & Time	Character
Christ Church	0900	1990	55	Sunday 0900	Traditional renewal and a root of prayer for the rest of the work
Christ Church	1100	2009	165	Sunday 1100	Family service style
Pre-School	Play N Do	2009	12-40	Sunday 1100	Debts to Messy Church
Key Centre	Youth church	2009	30+	Sunday 1100	Youth activity and congregation
Christ Church	Midweek communion	1981	25	Thursday 1000	Traditional, and one stage in the morning called House of Prayer
St Mark's	Westhill	1990	45	Sunday 1030	Grafted estate church plant
Headlands School	Martongate community church	2005	50	Sunday 1030	Cross boundary plant in a school for the Marton area of town
Applegarth residential home	Bridgeway	2004-7	33	Sunday 1045	Cross boundary in a residential home in the north end of town
Ulrome village	St Andrew's	2009	13	Sunday am	Graft plant into a dying village congregation

- * The year of start can be misleading in that some have slowly evolved, some out of a previous congregation. Dates over a period reflect a change of venue or stage.
- A congregation is understood to mean a group of Christians meeting on a given day which will include worship, giving, use of the Bible, led by a known and recognised person. It will have a mission identity and community engagement and may have small groups.
- Thus each congregation has a 'network pastor'. Their role is to grow the church, keep in touch with its members and develop its strategy of mission. They meet weekly with Jonathan Couper.
- The 1800 evening congregation is omitted because it is substantially made of twicers and leaders of the other congregations, and because I think it has different role (see p.25).
- There are other regular gatherings - such as a Thursday meeting for women, a Tuesday evening spiritual refreshment event, a group supporting those with baby blues, and a forum for women growing in faith - but though these are gatherings with leaders, they are not congregations.

One would think this long list provides for all tastes and stages. Yet a perennial lesson learnt by those who embark on diversity is that serving greater particularity exposes previously hidden gaps. The leadership ask themselves what would meet the needs of older teens and young adults under 35 without children. This segment locally experience shortage of work, money and debt problems, relationship difficulties and can be locked within a media-driven private world of entertainment. How could they meet the quality of community that brings wholeness; how could they learn to meet and follow Christ who is for them? Another factor they are aware of is that despite all the provision, there is more for mothers than fathers, although I was impressed during my visit that there is a lesser disparity between the predominance of women and relative absence of men in this church. It may well be that the many opportunities for difference levels of serving activity opens a door for them, even at the early stages of exploring faith.

⁹ Usual Sunday Attendance

2. The vertical lines: the CCS projects, and...

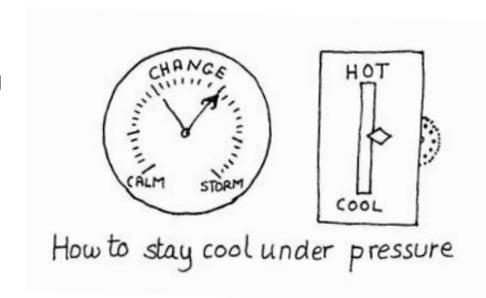


The projects

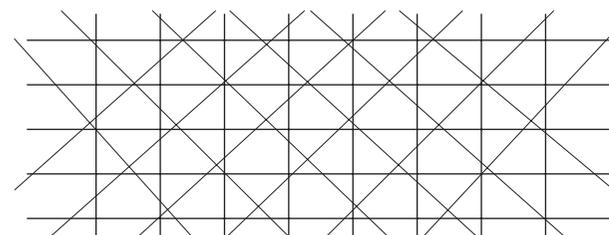
Name of project	Start	Leader	Venue if applicable
Pastoral support team	c.1994	Michael Hart	Key Centre
Manager: Children and families work	1996	Margaret Walker	Pre-School
Toddlers	c.1983	Moira Jefferson	Church Hall
Pre-School	2000	Angela Gale	Pre-School building
Noah's Ark	2007	Julie Brown	Day nursery
Manager: Community Projects and Placements	2006	Beverley Hall	Key Centre
Todz Shop	1999	Leslie Gaines	Prospect Street
Furniture Store	2000	Gren Goodwin	Springfield Road
Door Step	2005	Beverley Hall	Learning Centre
Manager: Learning Centre	2005	Shirley Moir	Learning Centre
Practical skills	2007	Jeff Denton	All over the site

- Most of these fall within the structure of CCS, but not all. The boundary shifts over time and season.
- This table was correct at the time of research. We understand there have been staff changes since then.

I think two other vertical lines that run across the congregations are firstly the prayer support from the Thursday morning House of Prayer, and other regular prayer meetings and intercessory prayer chains, that support not just the worship services, but also the CCS projects, all their staff and their contacts. Secondly the Evening Service acts as a refuelling station serving all the congregations. It embodies a clear living out of the charismatic emphasis on the leading and intervention of God, the centrality of Jesus, all brought by the Spirit, and provides one focal point of unity. Anyone from any congregation or project can come and sense the heartbeat of the whole. Jonathan also notes that **it acts as a barometer of the climate across the network, and sometimes as a thermostat.** It can both reflect the mood and set the tone.



3. The diagonal lines: personal relationships that are foundational to both.



This third set of lines are drawn too neat and long. Taken literally they imply many people attend at least five congregations and serve as many projects! But it is true that many in Christ Church do hold down multiple roles that cross more than one congregation and one social project. Thus they are the living connectors in the overall net. Furthermore, there are 20 small groups which are primarily relational and these do not serve discreet congregations, although that avenue has been explored. Christ Church has a healthy high tolerance of mess and of constructive untidiness. It goes with the flow of spiritual guidance, emerging needs and personal investment in relationships. Thus groups stretch across the congregations and projects. So there are many connectors that make it easier

for the outsider to touch Christ Church at one point and find, without knowing it, that they are connected into other openings and opportunities. There are many ways in and it is more difficult to slip through a hole.

Even then the cultural and spiritual gap between young unemployed people, male and female, and the most family friendly morning service or the spiritual high octane evening service, is still massive. It is a long path to travel. Mixing my metaphors, at least here the upward path has more easy shallow steps to it than I have seen elsewhere. For the same reason **I consider this the most effective Christian ministry among working class and underclass people that I have seen in 40 years**, since the heyday of St. Mark's Gillingham under John Collins.

An important consequence of these three sets of strands only became obvious to me on the Sunday. **The Sunday services do not work as the major shop window of the church**, unlike at most other larger churches. Increasingly it is the case that Sunday services in a post-Christendom society are not the best advertising we do. It is too often apparent that those who do go to church regularly haven't improved much because of it. Stories of newcomers being bemused, ignored or even told off are too frequent. Nevertheless vast effort goes into trying to polish them up in order to impress. Here it is different. The major contacts are in serving people and making normal relationships with them. Going to 'chapel' is about the saints meeting with God and each other. It is the family sitting down together with their feet up, not dressing up to put on a party for the neighbours. The services are real and homely, not highly polished and aimed at the outsider. Of course because it is authentic, those God is calling are impacted, but that is a by-product, not the core. **This is a reversal of much we have assumed in the last 50 years.**

A journey into diversity

Here diversity is celebrated, not merely tolerated. This applies to the range of projects that serve the wider community, the variety of sizes and styles of congregations, the combining of streams charismatic, evangelical, Celtic, social and spiritual, reminiscent of the breadth commended by Renovaré. In addition, the Christian community contains a wonderful mix across social strata that is unusual. It seems partly to arise from the leaders noticing the diversity naturally present within the town and from being presented with its varied needs.

They were encouraged in this instinct in that being a town of 'great diversity' was forcibly alluded to in May 2002 by an American 'prophet', Sharon Stone, while speaking in Driffild, though never having been to Bridlington. I think it is also rooted in the charismatic value, modelled by Jonathan Couper, that puts trust in the Spirit of God inhabiting the people of God.¹⁰ Yet some charismatics still illogically behave like control freaks who hold onto power and deny ministry to others. It takes a personal quality in leadership to be confident in placing trust in people, having an instinct to spot them, being glad to raise them up and choosing to set them free.

Moving in diversity brings challenges about how unity is expressed and how identity is understood. Here the overall pastor has a vital teaching role to communicate continuity of values while endorsing evolution in identity as size and complexity grows. The art of leading also lies in discerning ahead what God's call is, how that may modify identity over time and enabling the members to absorb this.

Writers on the dynamics of different church congregation sizes have long noted this. Christ Church over the 30 years moved on quickly from being a large 'small church'. It has now made the transition in moving from being a large 'middle-sized church' to being a small 'large church'. All agree that in the large church the importance of values is critical. Since 1994 Jonathan has been preaching occasionally on them and the list of them has slowly widened and sharpened over the years from six in 2003 to the current ten.¹¹ With diverse and trusted operations this is the first obvious test of whether something new really fits. Jonathan also insists that anything new needs clear links to the existing, through support, relationships, structural belonging and line managerial clarity. Beyond this there are few rules.

In the large church – and sometimes even earlier – this changes how a PCC works. In the smaller church or slower changing church its members can represent most of the elements within. Thus it can keep pace with and regulate what happens. As the church grows innovation comes from its entrepreneurs, not the council. As its staff grows, execution and even evolution of policy, as well as day-to-day decisions, are made outside the PCC. Increasingly it becomes out of touch with work on the ground and loses political power while wanting control. A parallel in Britain has been the growth of cabinet government

¹⁰ This value is not exclusive to charismatics and was powerfully written about many years earlier by the legendary Anglo-Catholic missionary Roland Allen.

¹¹ These are listed under the 'Who we are' tab on their church website: www.christchurchbridlington.com

and the decline of the influence of the House of Commons. To avoid PCC being just a rubber stamp, its agenda needs to focus on the big picture and trust details to the workers. Work in empowered subgroups can mitigate this and reflect callings and giftings.

The Spirit and the poor

The opening lines of Jesus' manifesto in Luke 4 contain the *cri de coeur*: 'the Spirit is upon me ... to bring good news to the poor'. In this story these are **two emphases that balance each other**. Being around Christ Church for a few days immerses the visitor in a deeper awareness of the Holy Spirit at work, without in the slightest bit eclipsing Jesus. The remarkable stories of how the past unfolded, homely contemporary accounts of changing lives and present expectation that God is still at work, all warm and increase both trust and faith. Faced with significant needs in individuals as well as huge financial challenges, this has been vital. Yet the emphasis on the Spirit has not been domesticated into conveniently improving the life of the saints – though he does. The Holy Spirit pushes us out in mission and we find him in the poor. I suspect there is no need to convince *Encounters on the Edge* readers of either of these truths – only to point out that in this story both are prominent and intrinsically connected.

What are 500 people among 33,000? Actually they are bringing a quiet revolution.

What also struck me was that although the emphasis on the Spirit's power is clear, the work is very free of triumphalism, exaggerated claims, or Christians trying to control society, or attempting to turn the clock back to Christendom. For some time I have noticed the wide range of images Jesus used of his followers. Two, such as **the city on a hill** or **the lamp** on the stand, are highly visible, attractional, and gather people to them. Two others are often invisible and transformative, but work through dispersal: that is, **salt** and **yeast**. You see the

first pair and see the results of the second pair. My take is that in post-Christendom, **the authenticity of the latter will be more convincing than the public claims of the former**. I suspect the dispersed effect of the CCS projects and the nine congregations is more like salt and yeast. What are 500 people amidst a town of 33,000? Actually they are bringing a quiet revolution.

Re-inhabiting the land

I made reference earlier to the Cistercians and to St. John of Bridlington and now suggest it is meaningful to see the whole site as a living new monasticism. Consider its following elements. At 0815 there is daily prayer from new monasticism in the 'chapel'. They are re-expressing the charism of St. John of Bridlington of caring for the poor. *The Learning Centre* echoes the school functions brought by Henry VI and a past vicar. The pastoral support work is in line with historic role of the monastic infirmary. There are now several 'refectories' on site and the 'garden' provides not just recreation but a place of work on placements. Its Church House provides for staff and acts as 'chapter house', with many connecting 'cloisters' where people meet between the various parts of the site. The so-called Dovetail chapel is the classic quiet place and nearest to 'cell'. Thus the 1841 building is no longer the whole of church, it is but the contemporary



1) Worship Space 2) Church Hall 3) Pre-School 4) Vicarage 5) Key Centre 6) Noah's Ark 7) Garden

'chapel' with the site as a whole modelling a healthier and holistic view of what 'church' is.¹²



The Priory gatehouse

But this is not a view locked into creating a Christian ghetto into which to retreat. There are no gatehouses and walls of the Priory. Rather this is an open community that

people easily come in and out of. In the town there are the leased shops; on the streets there is prayer for healing; in the seafront Spa complex there are conferences. This is a Friary that those within live out of, not a monastery into which they escape.



Christ Church

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

Bridlington today, tomorrow the world

This church's leadership are visionary and always asking what next, yet they seem to have had wisdom to listen to others and are realistic about pace. Their history could read as living in the obscurity of the north east coast, many miles down the road from the nearest motorway, but with the internet and conferencing, what might happen now? The leadership sense a wider call, sowing seeds of what God has led them to do. Perhaps this booklet will have its own little part to play in making their work known more widely, which it deserves. I would be sad if people thought I was commending a model to copy, for no two towns or churches are the same. I hope it has pointed up a story to ponder, values and principles to consider and a journey of local discernment to begin.

George Lings
23rd July 2010

Cartoons: Tim Sharp

To find out more and gain your own impression, visit their well laid out web site, with plenty of pictures, designed by their able but modest administrator Steve Frazer.

www.christchurchbridlington.com



Steve Frazer

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