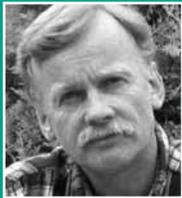


51: DNA Networks



How do you start a new church from scratch, but in such a way that does not largely attract bored existing Christians? Is it possible to combine being a church community that obviously enjoys life and yet is about discipleship, not attendance? Can it be deeply attractive and yet also successfully repel consumer Christians? What happens if a church lives by its values, not programs or even outcomes? Can a church continue to give away resources and survive? If such a creature existed, could it be Anglican? We found one that spoke into all these questions, so it was natural to go and visit.

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Encounters on the Edge



no. 51:

DNA Networks

Open community centred on Jesus

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Discoveries about fresh expressions of Church from The Sheffield Centre

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Welcome to Colchester

Colchester in Essex may be the oldest recorded town in Britain.¹ The name that begins to appear in this form in the 10th century could be translated 'the castle on the river Colne'. Or it might be the castle of old King Cole. It is rich in history. As Celtic Camulodunum, it was taken after the defeat of Caractacus by the Romans, led by the Emperor Claudius, soon after AD 43, who had a temple built in his name.² As the then capital, it was attacked and sacked by Boudicca in AD 61 and, even today, a layer of ash is found wherever deep enough archaeological digs occur. It has the remains of a fourth century Roman church and Holy Trinity has a Saxon Tower.



The Normans used the remains of the rebuilt Roman walled town to build over the temple ruins, putting up the largest Norman keep in Europe. The medieval period saw the construction of many church buildings as well as a Benedictine Abbey and Augustinian monastery erected. Today no less than five redundant ones are within the old centre. Flemish weavers and cloth makers came and founded a Dutch quarter. In the civil war, it changed hands and after the 1648 siege, the Royalist leaders were executed. The Victorians are to be thanked for the massive town hall and a water tower known locally as Jumbo. It has long been a military garrison and the University of Essex lies to the south east of the town. It is now one of the fastest growing towns in England with a population in excess of 174,000 and has a live application to be a world heritage site.

David Beales, who, along with his wife Janie, leads DNA Networks,³ moved there as a young child where his father was the headmaster of a local school. He senses at least three strands that reoccur within Colchester's history. He feels it can be a place of **hidden innovation**. Illustrations of this are that, though it has the ruins of what is possibly the earliest known Christian church in Britain (St Albans may disagree), nothing much is made of the site. Similarly, little is made of

¹ Apparently, it appears in the AD 79 writings of Pliny the Elder.

² Claudius then becomes the only biblical character to have visited Colchester.

³ The acronym can stand for Dynamic Anglian Networks.

a tablet high up on the outside of a house to commemorate the home of William Gilbert, the 16th century founder of electrical science and the study of magnetism. Few know that Spurgeon grew up nearby and was converted in Colchester. I wondered whether the story of this network church which I came to tell had its own hidden and innovative quality.

Secondly, there has been a tradition of **hospitality to refugees**. Proximity to the North Sea plays its part. The creation of a Dutch quarter was one such chapter. Today the University of Essex has a high proportion of international students, attracts job seekers from the wider world, and it is a town where immigrants from many parts of the world are sent to resettle. It is estimated that over 15,000 inhabitants are non-white. Certainly DNA Networks has carried on that tradition and even made it a major slice of its life.

Sacrifice may be another reoccurring theme. St Cedd was sent by King Oswi of Northumbria to the lesser King Sigeberht of the East Saxons to re-convert him and his people and thus build on earlier Augustinian work. He was called away from an existing mission to Mercia, reputedly travelling from Aidan's headquarters in Lindisfarne by coracle. He founded small monastic communities, one being Bradwell, using them as a base from which he followed the mobile Celtic pattern of beginning a further number of churches. Eventually he was made bishop and Bede thinks him decisive in the conversion of the area. He later moved to Lastingham in Yorkshire where he and his company died of plague. Much later the Lollard clergyman, John Ball, who lived for a time in Colchester, was one leader in the Peasants' Revolt of 1381 and subsequently executed. Still later on, Colchester is thought to have had more Protestant martyrs per head of population in the reign of Mary Tudor than elsewhere. While less ultimate than these cases, I reflect that church planting seldom lacks the theme of sacrifice.

Calling the Beales

David and Janie met in Durham and married in 1976. For the next 20 years, which included ordination training at St John's Nottingham and the raising of their three children, they moved back and forth from



Janie and David Beales

Australia which was her home. Roles included local church leadership and later diocesan roles in youth work and itinerant evangelism. Through those years they found they worked well together; both were relational evangelists but liked seeing things through longer term. In Melbourne in 1998 they began to sense not only a call to England but more specifically to East Anglia. Several components contributed to this. In a dream, David 'saw' a cross stretching from Peterborough to Colchester and from Norwich to Barnet. In the same period his stepfather died and he felt responsibility for his widowed mother back in Colchester. They worked out their notice in 1999 and in 2000 returned to Colchester, living at his mother's farm outside the town and beginning to work out how to plant a church from scratch. Isaiah 37:30-31 came to their attention earlier on and became foundational, shaping their planning and expectations in these first three years:

And this shall be the sign for you: this year eat what grows of itself, and in the second year what springs of the same; then in the third year sow and reap, and plant vineyards, and eat their fruit. Once more a remnant of the house of Judah will take root below and bear fruit above.

The length of this process was reflected in several ways. During 1999, they remained where they were but took on board current church planting training both in Australia and in the USA with Jon Shuler of NAMS.⁴ Much of 2000 was spent - almost hidden in rural Essex - putting down roots in prayer, reading, discussing and learning from others. They also recognised a call to plant among non-Christians, as apparent newcomers to an area; through this low profile they could resist being cluttered and distracted by consumerist Christians looking for the next new thing.

Further specific guidance came through another dream during 1999. David 'saw' a house, in Wellesley Road where he had grown up, and himself buying it for £115,000. When they came to England, he went round and found to his surprise that it was not for sale but that one down the road was. On enquiry, it looked very suitable; the only problem was lack of money and, without a job, no prospect of a mortgage. His mother sold the farmhouse and the shared inheritance took care of the



House in Wellesley Road

⁴ The North American Mission Society seeks to work with (conservative) Anglicans worldwide. Like CMS and Church Army, it too is exploring the journey to being a mission order.

deposit. Protracted negotiations with the estate agent eventually established that no. 52 could be bought for £115,000. It seems a classic case that the leading of God curiously combines the clear and the confusing, a magnetic draw to explore and mystery in the outworking. However, they have been there ever since and the house works well as a personal home and a community hub. I also notice across stories that I have heard in my research years that **clarity of call is by no means matched by simplicity of follow through.** Sometimes I think that the clarity is not only about direction but also a gift of assurance and building up of character that better enables those called to see through subsequent difficulties, complications and disappointments. The Old Testament prophets might agree.

On arrival in England they wanted contact with, and the blessing of, the bishop. Through a mutual contact, Richard More, who later became a trustee, they were introduced to the then Bishop of Chelmsford, John Perry. He welcomed them and gave David permission to officiate and a public preacher's licence. During 2001 there was even an exploratory process, that eventually proved abortive, to become incumbent of the amalgamation of two of the town centre churches. What were they to start?

There were two other strands in the guidance. One was the well-known span of the missional journey from Jerusalem to the ends of the earth (Acts 1:8). The Beales' own wanderings had already done that geographically. But was this also now to have a cultural or ethnic dimension? The other was learning from their reading of the Schaeffers' *L'Abri* story to pray for and work with those God sends to you and even keep others away. Over the years since they have seen that pattern repeated; those they deliberately invited to be part of things didn't last, and those who were sent by God to them did. All this creates an image of Church thinking that is relational and organic, far more than institutional and planned. It was better designed to serve untidy and loose networks of people, not legally laid down parishes. As such, the church has never advertised but only communicated by word of mouth. It is not 'attractual' to the programme, but invitational within relationships – come and see.

What of the early years?

Among the earliest contacts were internationals sent to be there for various purposes. The first was Manik Corea, a Singaporean. He had been an international student in London in the past and had been sent to England as part of NAMS to get wider experience. His first connection had not worked out, but knowing the Beales, Jon Shuler wondered if Colchester was the way forward. Manik and David discovered that the University of Essex has a high proportion of international students, around half taking further degrees. David had earlier met Enoch Kunarajah, a Sri Lankan, who had come to do a PhD. They met through the Colchester cricket club and he brought the two together. The two began to pray for the way forward at the university as the official CU focused on the white students. They had complementary gifts; Enoch was the relational evangelist and Manik the pioneer and apologist. Both were natural teachers.

Two grew to five at what earlier we would have called a Bible study group with a mission heart. But it was wider than that. They came to see their work as three Rs: *Rice, Relationships* and *Rescue*. That is fairly clear code for hospitality and food, building trust through time together so that Christ can be seen in us, and sharing the gospel of Christ. Five grew to 15 and was named the All Nations group. Challenges included the high annual turnover as students returned home and how to adequately prepare them for Christian lives and leadership, often back in countries with young or secret churches. Encouragements were finding the mainland Chinese especially open, many interested in truth and meaning, the way converts were ready evangelists of their peers and how further churches were seeded on their return.

Entertainingly, both met their partners through DNA Networks, who came as international students in 2001 and became trusted co-workers and co-leaders. Manik and Maple (from Taiwan) returned to Southeast Asia in 2005 and are now cross-cultural Anglican missionaries in Thailand. Enoch and Pinceau (from Hong Kong) remain and head up the international work and are involved in a process, called New Neighbours, helping refugees settle in this country.



Manik and Maple



Enoch, Pinceau and Tabitha

Other strands I only heard of second-hand were early sixth form college based youth work and the influence of David and Janie's son Shane bringing many friends, and concern for Christians to engage with the workplace through the Baptist minister, Terry Tennens. Both these strands have continued in differing forms over the years.

When DNA Networks started Sunday afternoon gatherings in June 2001, members from all three groups would go along. In the early years the internationals were a significant proportion of the whole. This pattern fits with good practice as taught by The Sheffield Centre and *Mission-shaped Church*.⁵ **Do not start with the provision of central worship, rather focus on building community and engaging in mission.** Only when people are being discipled can you work out what way of worshipping may connect, resource and nurture their callings. One measure of overall growth was the increase from an initial 21 towards 60 two years later. Yet that does not represent all the live contacts and many more were mainly part of the dispersed groups but not coming on Sunday. This prompts a question.

⁵ Graham Cray (ed), *Mission-shaped Church* (London: Church House Publishing, 2004).

What is DNA Networks?

I arrived ignorant, curious and a bit puzzled. Was it a congregation with small groups, or was it a family of congregations, or what? It is certainly not just a Sunday congregation. Currently it is made up of six bodies that clearly qualify in DNA Networks thinking as so-called **mini-churches**, nearly all of which have their own leadership team. These are bigger in size than small groups and may meet in larger homes or public secular venues, but even the largest is at present only some 30 strong. They are likely to eat, pray, study and worship, and aim to remain missional.

In addition, there are **mission units**. A mission unit is 'when two or more people gather with the intention to do mission among a particular group of people'. The intention is that some will become Christian disciples. It happens that currently there are five of these. There is no organised pattern by which this work occurs. The point is intention and relationships, not frequency or programmes. The aim is to enter the normal life of the network of those to whom they are sent. Some mission units directly feed into the mini-churches, such as the link between the families mission unit and their Messy mini-church or in the overall work among international students. But others are not so directly linked to one mini-church, such as those who support ex-offenders or help immigrant groups. In addition, there are prayer groups, some of which directly support the churches or missions. Others are interest-based, or at a stage in discipleship like Alpha. At any one time fresh groupings may spring up around a discerned mission opportunity and this is broadly welcomed.

Beyond that official structure there are also small prayer and accountability groups, but these do not appear to be organised centrally. Across all this mixture, there is an overall leadership team and a flexible pattern of Sunday meetings. Most Sundays, people from all these different levels can gather, though not all do. Once a month they deliberately disperse on 'multiplication Sunday'. Yet some mini-churches may meet



Leadership team

more often – the notable example being the newish Swahili speaking one. Even then I have only described the skeleton of DNA Networks, not put flesh and blood upon it. The image I was left with is that DNA Networks is not like a planned garden with tidy rows, distinct herbaceous borders and areas of mown, manicured lawn. It is more like a deliberately created wildflower bank. This has been weeded beforehand and care is taken over what is allowed to dominate, but then it just grows and spreads. It is naturally self-seeding. It may appear chaotic but would be better described as 'chaordic', confessing an ecology that has its order within what can look random. **Its wildness is inherent and to tame it would rob it of identity and also its beauty.** 'Beauty of life causes strangers to join our ranks. We do not talk about great things; we live them.'⁶



What are the values?

Their early instincts emerged in published form in a 2003 chapter in Mark Mills-Powell's book, *Setting the Church of England Free*. Here they describe DNA Networks as a church planting movement, seeking 'to work within the historic denominations and value co-operative unity among the churches.'⁷ The very term 'planting movement' fits well with the wildflower bank analogy – it seeds itself and some seeds are blown far on the wind. Near the core are three ideas that act as theological foundations.

The dynamic of the Holy Spirit

This is explained as looking for guidance and leading of the Spirit. The key verse associated with this is 'set apart Barnabas and Paul for the work to which I have called them'⁸. This seems to me to have two ways of outworking in the DNA Networks story. Firstly, it has obvious resonance with the call to the Beales and those who have similarly been called to work alongside them. Very often the call has been to more than one person, sometimes to a married couple, but also to two individuals who form a creative mission partnership.

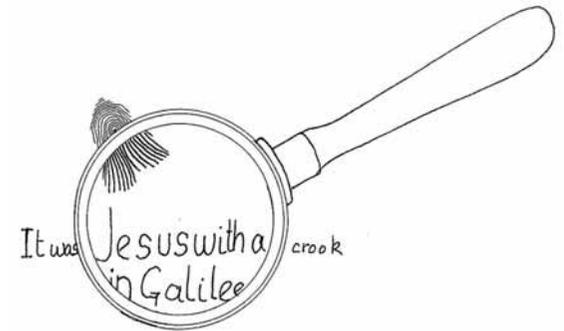
⁶ A phrase used by Alison Morgan speaking at the 2011 Diocesan Missioners conference, quoted from Minucius Felix, Rome, AD 160-240.

⁷ Mark Mills-Powell (ed), *Setting the Church of England Free* (Hants: John Hunt, 2003), chapter 9 by Janie and David Beales, p. 111.

⁸ Acts 13:2.

Secondly, DNA Networks has acted as an Antioch and been the place *from* which people, who have grown through being in mission in Colchester, have gone to other countries and planted further churches. One estimate is that there may be now over 50 of these simple organic churches. This is evidence of its flower bank seeds flying far, putting down roots with DNA-type life growing up again elsewhere.

They also speak often of the **fingerprints of Jesus**. It is connected to the analogy of DNA, but it is more an analogous way of talking about becoming like Jesus. Fingerprints, with their forensic association, are also a way of talking about evidence that Jesus has been somewhere – 'we picked up his fingerprints'. The term has become a strapline on many DNA Networks in-house publications and the name of the occasional newsletter. The fingerprints cash out in two other seminal or core theological ideas.



Incarnation

This means not merely identifying with others, desirable as that is, but something more visible, tangible and distinctly Christological. Their understanding is that incarnation means a call to embody something of the life and ministry of Jesus (not including his divine identity or atoning work). The paradigm verse quoted is: 'As the Father sent me so I send you.'⁹ I associated with this the attractive whole life feel that this church exhibits. This is delightfully expressed in a short piece sketching what a community centred on Jesus might look like by Enoch Kunarajah, a colleague from the start now heading up the international students' work and part-time stipendiary since 2008.¹⁰ Another way to put it is that this church has fun; they enjoy life. The website is full of pictures of laughter, food, fun, sport and play. Yet this is not self-centred hedonism; the broken and needy in society are a real and contributing part of the community. Thus they also lament, endure, give and forgive, as **the community exists across work, rest and play**. I have seldom seen something so holistic yet with a light touch.

⁹ John 21:21.

¹⁰ I commend this article being read in full. It can be found at <http://dna-networks.blogspot.com/p/dna-vision.html>

Multiplication

In reading David's chapter, I was delighted to see explicit rejection of cloning and a likening of the planting process to giving birth to a child.

An expectant couple will not know what the new person will look like, but they know something of the DNA that has created the new person. They know what they and their parents ... look like.¹¹

I utterly concur. This should be how we approach church planting. In this story, the diversity of mini-churches and even wider set of mission units are testimony to that belief. It shows in a trust that does not control all outcomes but invests in values. It is clearer about what the past generations looked like and takes that as only some indicator of what to expect in the unfolding but unknown future. They find a paradigm text in the parable of the sower where the fruitfulness has to unfold. Yet this seems to me to be a story of identical reproduction. Perhaps the Genesis 12 promises to Abraham are clearer. For his descendants were related in their DNA but diverse first as 12 tribes, and later by the birth of the international Church. That is a case in which **inheritance and context combine to produce what by definition comes non-identically.**

However, the multiplication value, so well understood as like giving birth, in itself does not tell a church leader at what size church should multiply. Extending the picture, **is one called to breed a colony of mice or a troupe of elephants?**

The gestation periods, not to mention differences of habits, food needs and

behaviour, are rather different.

From the early days of their development, the Beales were familiar with cell church thinking, the growing of mid-sized or missional communities, and those like Neil Cole advocating organic or simple church. It may be too that their previous experience in youth work also helped them gravitate more towards the mice, rather than the elephants.

Multiplication also involved many



¹¹Mark Mills-Powell (ed), *Setting the Church of England Free* (Hants: John Hunt, 2003), chapter 9 by Janie and David Beales, p. 116.

new starts from tiny beginnings – just as with a foetus. Key to the growth involved is finding and deploying (not necessarily involving money) a pioneer who is characterised by the ability to make relationships and point people to Christ.

In one phrase

The one phrase that is virtually a mission statement seems to me to be '**Open community centred on Jesus**'. Then I could not fail to notice the consistent testimony of the 23 people I interviewed over the three days of my visit that meeting such ready acceptance and non-judgmental attitudes (a measure of the quality of open community) was their major way in. Yet that does not mean DNA Networks is so inclusive as to have no teeth, boundaries, definition or demands. The balance is rooted in the other half of the phrase 'centred on Jesus'. The interviewees were also clear that there was a very obvious and consistent call for transformation of life, through being found by Christ and being indwelt by the Spirit. Open at the edges, committed at the core nearly says it – but there is also another pair of phrases needed: intention to draw people to the core and plenty of grace for second chances (and more) for all who mess up on the way. 'Passionate and forgiving community centred on Jesus' might summarise all that.

Smell a few wildflowers

If DNA Networks could be likened to a wildflower bank, what kinds of mini-churches and mission units make up the individual plants? Let me introduce you to a few.

Out for Good - O4G

Peter Hope enjoyed an eventful earlier life in the fire service and left-wing trade union concerns. Surprising episodes in that life led to him, as an agnostic, making promises to God and eventually becoming a Christian some years ago. Later, connections grew with Fellowship Afloat, the probation service and Frontier Youth Trust. He began to focus a calling as helping disadvantaged and rejected younger people, who feel outsiders, make links with Christianity and churches. One obvious application was for younger people coming out of prison, and a ministry was begun called Out for Good. The term covers both the desire to end re-offending and the aspiration of a more purposeful life. Living then near Colchester, he bumped into David Beales and DNA Networks in 2006. He was intrigued in his words by its openness and acceptance which speaks to the sense of rejection. It also had a practical bent, a just-do-it attitude, was not burdened by having a church building and was helped by being all about people. In the same period, ex-offenders started coming to DNA Networks.

O4G recognises a triangulated relationship between the provision of accommodation, having mentors and finding purposeful activity. The novelty of the first two wears off and without work, training or supervised leisure activity, the question of what to do with money and time are pressing. Purposeful

activity can include gaining skills in relation to a wide range of things: water sports, gardening or work experience. Without any or indeed all of the three, the chance of re-offending is very high as is the cost to the state. To take this further, Peter and his wife Mary moved to Colchester and, over the next few years, a small string of different housing arrangements took place. Sometimes O4G residents lived in a rented house with a lead tenant who acted as a mentor.



Peter and Mary

Often this was Patrick Ramazani, a Congolese pastor who came as an asylum seeker and was in the long process of gaining a right to stay and to bring his family to join him. Patrick would live rent-free, helping him with an address and a role. Sometimes the house didn't have a lead tenant but this was found not to work so well, making the mentor a visitor, not a resident. However, being the lead tenant had real demands that could become excessive.



Patrick

In 2010, a lottery fund grant enabled O4G to employ two people to head up the project and Peter withdrew to make space for them. Neither of the two new leaders were members of DNA Networks. However, under the new leadership and its links to a different charity it looks as though the values have begun to change. Lead tenancy is no longer used, those who come are now known as 'service users', the language of 'faith' rather than Christ or Christianity is in the reports and the emphasis on finding work has diminished. Ethos and structural connections with DNA Networks are waning, although the work is still socially valuable.

GO4

Knowing how crucial finding work is, Peter with others founded GO4. At one level, this is an anagram of O4G but is shorthand for encouraging ex-offenders to find a skill and job and 'go for it'. GO4 Enterprises is technically a community interest company (CIC), a social enterprise device invented by Labour in 2005,



Carey and Dave

which is halfway between a charity and trade, with limits to its profits and those to be used for the public good.¹² The work was also supported by other skilled DNA Networks members on its steering group, such as Dave and Carey Watson, with concerns for and some experience with NEETs – those not in education, employment or training.

¹² I found the Wikipedia article on 'community interest company' instructive to a novice like myself.

A particular challenge is that **there seems to be a belief in society that people cannot change** and to be an ex-offender is to be branded for life. In employment, this makes it very difficult to get business insurance and even to find work. The most obvious ways forward are through self-employment, hence trades like gardening, window cleaning, decorating and white goods repairing. Work does bring a change of confidence and self-belief, enabling people to get beyond the self-fulfilling rejection syndrome. I met a few of its members through a café in which they work and through the Sunday gathering. One had recently taken the training session for the football team in the absence of the normal manager. It seemed to have gone well. GO4 is still a toddler in its whole development but the signs of life are evident, though the future is still to be unpacked.

No bacon, thanks

Some flowers spring up quickly, bloom and fade. The advent of a number of ex-offenders and homeless people starting to come on Sundays looked as though it might be another mini-church. Yet finding any consistent meeting from a collection of people who didn't really know each other, some of whom are passing through, and whose lives can be chaotic is tough. The gathering consisted of eating bacon sandwiches, telling their stories and hearing something from Scripture as well as praying. But using the term bacon in the title was tricky as it turned out to be prison slang for paedophiles!

Football and cricket are different



Naomi and Mark

DNA Networks have created a winter season **Football Church** through a training programme and a match day practice of breakfast beforehand, a time of study linking Scripture and sport, as well as prayer. The ethos is not 'win at all costs', but enjoy the game and model fair play. They are not top of the league, but other teams respect them. Players take turn to lead church and training sessions but, as the team includes those exploring faith, there is no rota. The team manager is Mark Snelling, in the transport police, who didn't have a Christian background, coming to Christ over a four year period.

It doesn't work like that with their mission based around cricket. Though both sports have a social element, cricket is a much longer game often played in the evenings. People turn up for the game and there isn't a real equivalent of gathering the team beforehand, nor a regular staying behind afterwards. Conversations do happen on the field among the bowling side and off the field among the batsman who are either not yet in or are already out. They can also be different social groups with football as the working man's game. The Africans tend to join in the football, while the Indian subcontinent is mad about cricket. So there won't be DNA Networks cricket church, but it can be a mission unit, and with David Beales as a lifetime cricket fan and player, many significant contacts, friendships and journeys to faith have begun around that sport. It all goes to show that **not every network can become a church**.

More to see

Space has run out to tell of various other mini-churches and mission units: **Sacred Space** exploring contemplative worship based at St Martin's church, which ran from 2006 until 2009; **Barn Church** for a wide range of teenagers from across gender, ethnic background and educational path. Don't dare call that homogeneous. There is more: **Friday Church** was for mothers and toddlers and morphed in 2010 into **Messy Church**, meeting on a Sunday; **Swahili Church**, with Patrick Ramazani, which grew out of the international work as more asylum seekers from the Congo, Kenya and Tanzania arrived and English was an issue, with Swahili as a common tongue, and African spirituality a different style; and **Simple Church** which fosters the view of seeing



Swahili Church

the workplace as vocational. Sydni Brooke is pioneering **Girls church**, while Alpha converts Jon and Sandra Butcher now run that very much on the lines of the non-judgmental acceptance - yet not compromising truth - that they found in the process of their own joining. And it falls outside our scope to do justice to further churches begun by DNA Networks members in Germany and the Far East.



Sandra and Jon

Lessons over time

Where to focus?

One risk, knowingly taken, was to base a hope for sustainable growth in the work among international students. It was natural to follow the fruitful leads there as well as to utilise the skills and natural connections brought by leaders like Manik Corea and Enoch Kunarajah. Yet however effective their ministries were and however much these groups flourished for a time, it was inevitable that the vast majority of those won for Christ went back to their country of origin. Some then did plant seeds and further churches back home and this has been part of the legacy DNA Networks can take credit for. But it did not

build a home base. **An analogy would be trying to establish a flower garden by only planting annuals.** It can be done but has to be redone every year. A mixed approach, using shrubs and perennials, together with the attractive splashes of colour that annuals give, would be a better strategy and help create a more favourable microclimate for further growth. Something similar can be said about placing too much reliance on youth work if the social pattern is that they go elsewhere to university. **The useful lesson is not overinvesting in transient networks to the detriment of more enduring ones.**

A related dynamic, also seen later on, is that work based around leaders who are only there for a period has real limitations. The classic Anglican case is the ups and downs of youth work directly related to the comings and goings of curates. Here the gift of gap year students and those sent for a few years in the evolving partnership that DNA Networks has with United World Mission (UWM) is a

case in point. UWM have been sending mission partners to DNA Networks since 2007 through the link of their National Director Gary Seithel with the Beales.¹³ The Americans who come on mission gain from exposure to our situation in which post-Christendom has advanced more rapidly and our fresh expressions of Church response is more developed. This models cross-cultural mission for them and is a pointer to lessons to be learnt back in the USA. Despite these gains, the mission units and mini-churches which have

¹³ This began through the ecumenical *Building Bridges of Hope* process in which Gary was the accompanier to DNA Networks. His being based down the road in Brentwood made that convenient.

apparently blossomed through this partnership, have also subsided quite quickly after the key player moved on and finding and training successors has not happened. Currently it is hoped that Nick and Sydni Brooke from Missouri will stay on longer term than two years and they could model a pattern that has time to find and disciple successors for whatever they initiate. We are still learning the lessons identified by Roland Allen a hundred years ago.¹⁴



Nick and Sydni

Tabernacle not temple

A lesson well applied is the refusal to own property and settle into one venue. The choice of a tabernacle-based corporate life is no mere theory and the venue used for central worship events has changed every few years. It is true that some changes were forced upon the church and out of their control, but that was true for the children of Israel following the pillar of cloud too. Each venue has brought its own advantages and disadvantages as well as losses among those who liked the previous venue and stopped coming, while gaining others drawn by the new one.



From 2001, Live at Five met in the Arena Leisure Centre. A building owned by The Royal Association of the Deaf was their venue from 2002-2004. Next they met in Philip Morant school from 2004-2006.¹⁵ It offered several rooms in which to meet, making work among children and youth easier, and it seemed to foster creativity in corporate worship. However, it was two miles out of town and the danger grew up, through the location and the quality of the Sunday event, of becoming a suburban 'community church' with its focus on Sundays.

¹⁴ See Roland Allen, *Missionary Methods: St Paul's or Ours?* (Cambridge: The Lutterworth Press, 2006) and Roland Allen, *The Spontaneous Expansion of the Church* (Cambridge: The Lutterworth Press, 2006).

¹⁵ Named after the 18th century incumbent of St Mary-at-the-Walls church.



Claire found hanging basket church a lot of work

From 2006, they have gathered at St Mary-at-the-Walls, now the Colchester Arts Centre. The building, now suitably black-walled for arts and drama purposes, is evocative and almost goth-like in feel. It is almost one space, and

while this creates a sense of unity, it is less easy for acoustic separation of different work among children and adults. It can also be a problem for those with children in that it may not have been properly cleaned up from secular use the night before. The venue can polarise love-hate feelings among the community and it is not certain whether it will remain the venue for future years.

The week I was there it was unavailable and we met in Holy Trinity, the church with the Saxon tower, yet declared redundant in 1956, taken into council ownership and only recently come into the hands of a youth café trust. It has more accessible spaces within than St Mary's and is predominantly light. My feel of both buildings is that the arts centre would be cosier in winter and favours evening use with its low ambient light. Trinity is a summer building, full of light. In winter, its white interior might turn into a chilly atmosphere. It is

certainly resonant, making noise and hearing more tricky. Carpet or putting matting in the café area would help tone that down and warm a distinctly spartan medieval nave.



Holy Trinity exterior and interior

Worship events not services

I hesitate to call what happens on a Sunday 'congregation' because that suggests this is the real unit of which the other manifestations are but subgroups. It would be more accurate to liken the role of Sundays to a tribal gathering of several interrelated families but each with their own different parcels of land, a tribe who are connected and yet whose families have differing stories and skills. In such a picture, all levels matter and that is the point. Hence the central gathering is officially known as a worship event, not a 'service' that connotes many unhelpful Christendom associations such as the gravitational pull of services and Sunday-centred church life. Not least these include the assumption that 'they' the professionals will provide what is needed; all we need to do is attend and consume the fare provided. In such a construct, church becomes not unlike a corner shop or a Tesco store, depending on its

size and range. **I now really wonder about the wisdom of speaking of Sunday as 'the shop window of the church'**; consumerism has already gone too far among Christians.

I appreciated the four pairs of words that inform the worship events:

- A. Create and play – for we are a team
- B. Thanks and lament – we come to God the Father as we are
- C. Seek and reflect – we open our lives to the word
- D. Send and engage – we engage with the workplace

I value also the statement: 'What we do together reflects who we are becoming.'

B is rooted in the realism of the psalms and their emotional range. Sometimes a 'wailing wall' and an opposite 'hope wall' have been set up for people to write prayers which one or other wall evokes. D includes stories and prayer for people in their workplace, or their lack of it. It was a pleasure to be part of the Sunday gathering and to see these four pairs of values in practice. **It is rare to have a space made for lament**, as when a talented teenager dying in a mountaineering accident was remembered. Similarly, there were silences to *reflect* on 'the sad things that happen to us' and another for 'where we have messed up in our lives'.

By contrast, there was joy and *thanksgiving* at the news of Patrick's family being given permission to come to this country and join him. There was hope as Mandy came to ask for prayer for her next spell in rehab. Thanksgiving was then led structurally by David into Eucharist, together with explanation of that word. A simple narrative institution and epiclesis¹⁶ was followed by distribution of the bread and wine through



standing reception at two corners of the church building. The talk by Janie and her interviews of others followed through interwoven themes of loving through living out the Ten Commandments, either by going the second mile or daring to witness at work, or following God through times of tragedy and valuing the listening that others offer.

¹⁶In lay terms, this is telling the story of the Last Supper and a prayer for the Holy Spirit to be sent on all who receive communion.



The venue itself encouraged using the café area before the official start and it enabled groups for children to meet. The café layout fostered meeting, greeting and community building. Thus at the close, 80 minutes in, it was clear that no one wanted to go home; groups went and got more coffee, and gathered to chat and catch up.



When to multiply

David and Janie also found some guidance on a size to multiply the overall worship event. The prime lesson, taken from the early pages of *Encounters on the Edge* no. 41, was that **network churches seldom exceed 80 members**. This is because they are based on sustained interactive relationships characteristic of relatively small groupings. This gives them one natural multiplication size, but also may

point out a glass ceiling which will constrict and even negate any further growth. In my visit, I then noticed two things. The first is harder evidence of the 80 member instinct. The current usual venue, the Arts Centre which I saw unoccupied, and also Holy Trinity used on the week I visited, naturally accommodates that sort of size. The 75+ who came filled the space pleasantly, on a true café church layout, leaving room for moving around and interacting.

The second thing I noticed may be fanciful but it was striking. As I walked around the foundation stones of the AD 340 church, I suddenly realised that it too was of that size. It was at least curious that the first known Christian building erected not long after the 313 Edict of Milan giving toleration to Christians, and one of the more recent church communities to spring up in Colchester, should be so similar in group size. Thus their intention is to



4th century church ruins

multiply through mission units that, in turn, grow into mini-churches as people share faith through their natural mission pathways. The challenge of this model will be how the 'episcopal' figures, not least David and Janie, multiply ministry at the oversight level. I suspect that the difficulty in multiplying leadership is what contributes powerfully to the growth of larger unit churches and consequent reliance on professionals who are given, and also take, all the key providing roles. Here the aspiration is that in a few years' time there may be three communities, each of 80, perhaps one each around commonalities associated with internationals, sport and leisure and those with a variety of social needs. The latter will need a strong core to provide stability. The documents I saw knew this would mean making starts in mission that were among those of a homogeneous group but which would over time 'undoubtedly become heterogeneous'.

Across this multi-level church there are some guidelines. They were cashed out in an application document for a diocesan grant in 2011. With anything from two to four people, a mission unit is formed that builds relationships in a specific network, seeks to introduce its people to Christ and begins discipling them. As people are won, begin to pray and be exposed to Scripture, mini-churches form and need a leadership team of three to five. The mini-churches they lead may well grow to around 25 in size, meeting a few times in the month as appropriate, serving networks of around 150 people and can grow upwards towards 80 people. These figures are far from set in stone, but they illustrate both intentionality and the multiplication processes. In practice it is messier than that, partly because of the people involved and partly because in a mobile society there is coming and going. DNA Networks see connections also to the Roman history of Colchester that found effective armies needed legions made up of smaller units. Cohorts of around 480 men came in turn from six groups of 80 each led by a centurion. These 'centuries' were then composed of ten 'tents' of eight men each. DNA Networks have found a precedent about multi-level belonging and taken it to themselves.

What leaders need to be and do

To make such progress realistic, it was suggested that each working leadership team of a mini-church will need to think of putting in 20 hours a week, together with a couple of hours of prayer and a meeting at least monthly to plan in the

Network churches seldom exceed 80 members.

the light of goals. Across the team, the job description includes **strategy co-ordination** in discerning, and overseeing towards the longer goal of reproducing. **Continuous research** was advocated, not least among those continuing to join the growing town of Colchester. Leaders need to enable and teach, meeting for **focused prayer** which fosters vision. **Gospel sowing** is inherent and finding environments where the message of Jesus can be transmitted faithfully. One interviewee commented to me that **DNA Networks is more a sowing church than a reaping one**. It almost indiscriminately loves and invests in people and yet freely lets those transformed move on, blessing them when they are called elsewhere.

Disciple making is core, because it is the multiplication process and done more through the mini-churches than the overall gathering. Hence the next role is **multiplying groups**. If this was growth for its own sake, that would be the distortion long-criticised by Steven Croft; it is the consequence of discipleship and one means of pursuing it further.¹⁷ Disciples are intended to make disciples who make disciples. Such groups are neither self-sufficient nor independent. They value **clustering**, gathering groups to worship to foster unity and wider identity. I note that **gathering for worship** is the last in the list, being both a consequence of the others and a resource to them.

Don't be coy about Church

In various documents given to me by the leaders, I noticed that, across the ten years, some things in DNA Networks which used to be called mission units are now termed mini-churches. In some cases, it is because the stage they were at changed, and as disciples were made, they did become churches. Yet there is congruity between this shift and a period of time in which the question 'What is Church?' has become more complex. It used to be restricted to mean congregation, or even larger units like dioceses and denominations. However, since the advent of cell church and base ecclesial communities, it is applied also to smaller units. For me, a more significant shift is through an analogy. I consider we are being shifted from thinking that the question 'What is Church?' is analogous to the question 'What is adult?' Thus the answers tend to require very high levels of competency, maturity and self-determination.¹⁸ I began to question this back in 2000 with *Encounters on the Edge* no. 5. **I am now clear it would be far better to liken 'What is Church?' to a different but related question 'What is human?'** We would then be more able to see that Church

¹⁷ Steven Croft, *Transforming Communities* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 2002), pp. 59-60.

¹⁸ Lesslie Newbigin never found this claim for diocese as the unit of Church very convincing. See his *Household of God* (Carlisle: Paternoster 1998), p. 139.

is about far deeper attributes than competencies; it would give us humility to recognise both churches that were going senile and those that were still infant as valued. It would give us flexibility to treat as ecclesial those things that have intention in that direction, but still have far further to go in reaching maturity.

I consider this change also connects to the change of language from the vocabulary of 'a church', to the different, wider and looser language of 'church'. Davison and Milbank dislike this drift that they also notice, thinking it may dilute and trivialise what is meant by Church.¹⁹ I share a concern that not everything that is Christian is Church – for example, a solitary hermit or one Christian standing at a bus stop. However, if we take seriously Jesus' statement about being present among two or three meeting in his name, in an ecclesiological sense, is it impossible to use the language of church about a small group meeting intentionally for Jesus-type purposes? DNA Networks show a living laboratory where such changes are being worked out. **Call something 'church' and it is likely to fulfil that high calling; name it just a mission and it may never escape that label.**

Call something 'church' and it is likely to fulfil that high calling; name it just a mission and it may never escape that label.

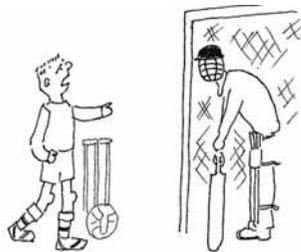
Provide a variety of networks

The sending out of planters has been a steady part of the story and contributes to their being truly a church planting movement. The discipleship pattern of learning through serving has led to a good growth of local leaders.

It is clear from this issue that there has been a gradual increase of small groups connected to various networks: international students, parents and their children, the homeless, NEETs and ex-offenders, those in sports especially football and cricket, work with refugees and asylum seekers, creating church with Swahili speakers, support for Christians whose ministry is mainly in the workplace, and youth work.

This diverse pattern is in sharp contrast to other approaches I have seen where one group tried to provide one gathering place and do 'network' church for people whose primary identity is not with place. However, as explained in *Encounters on the Edge* no. 41, the latter approach usually omits to distinguish

¹⁹ Andrew Davison and Alison Milbank *For the Parish: A Critique of Fresh Expressions* (London: SCM Press, 2010).



Fred and Peter found it difficult to score

which networks are present and so fails to truly enter it. **Spotting the difference between cricket and football dynamics**, DNA Networks do not try to combine them. It therefore deserves noticing and celebrating as embodying a better way to approach the variety of networks that exist across our so-called 'network society'.

However, the parable of the sower reminds us that some pieces of work can spring up but wither because they have no root. That could be true of the example of café church in Costa that seemed to mainly draw Christians, and DNA Networks have withdrawn from it, trusting the local Baptists may be able to turn it round.

Discouragements

Sadly, in 2008 there was a split in the community, involving many in the leadership. It is a mark of how fully the wounds are now healed that the remaining community who recall that time can talk, but only if needed, of those who left in terms that are generous, praising their good qualities and wishing them well in their ongoing life. However, at the time issues arose over different interpretations behind people's pastoral needs. The group that left had been strongly influenced by teaching from Ellel Ministries with its focus on healing from negative contacts from past generations and the belief that Christians can 'have demons'. The effect was to reduce people's confidence in their salvation and reopen both fear and a sense of guilt. This emphasis grew in influence while the Beales were on sabbatical.

The leadership studied the issue and concluded that this language was only used in the gospels for those not Christian who were 'possessed', and used against John the Baptist and Jesus by their enemies. Thus such language diminished the effectiveness of the Cross and the sanctification brought by the Spirit. On teaching this publicly, the other group resigned almost *en masse* and between 25-30 left. Church income similarly took a sharp nose dive. I include the matter to avoid naivety about young churches. It illustrates that fresh expressions of Church are not immune from issues that occur over divergence of doctrine and its pastoral consequences. Failure to grasp these or to overreact can be equally problematic.

A blossoming future?

Is it Anglican?

That may depend. 'What is Anglican?' was a simple question to answer 50 years ago. Parish, church building, male clergy, using the BCP and a bishop visiting occasionally were all universal givens. Now nearly all of those are but variables. In the fresh expressions of Church world we joke in seriousness that now Anglican is anything a bishop approves of and has an accountable relationship with. The Bishop's Mission Order (BMO) is even a device to legalise that. Let's spell out that dynamic here as one illustrative case. You might say the old Anglicanism was like an English country garden complete with croquet lawn and rose beds. So what do you do with a wildflower bank? Is it just a posh name for what is really a weed bed that should be rejected or can it be valued in a wider view?



DNA Networks has trustees. From the start, one has been the bishop's choice, with the intent 'that DNA Networks remain consistent with the mission of the Church of England in Essex and East Anglia'. DNA is seen as part of the fresh expressions network across Chelmsford diocese and was registered on the Fresh Expressions database in February 2006. Its staff include the leader who is a licensed public preacher and has 28 years of ministry experience across the Anglican communion. There is also a team member, John Claydon, who is a retired Anglican priest. There is active exploration of licensing the range of preachers they use. Staff members participate in both diocesan and national church planting gatherings. The suffragan bishop has visited to commission the leaders in a forthcoming phase of mission and to confirm members.

Their practice and intentions also bear upon this. They set high value on the incarnational instinct, engaging in practice with a wide diversity of social contexts. When at his 2005 re-licensing, David asked a subsequent bishop,

John Gladwin, about worship at DNA Networks, the reply was to urge them to 'adopt experimental forms of liturgy' and that the Canons of the Church of England give more freedom than commonly understood.²⁰ Currently DNA Networks on a Sunday have a form of communion twice a month, as well as other 'worship events'.

While it is true its genesis was one precursor to the pioneering fresh expressions of Church movement in the Church of England, nevertheless the Beales have never belonged to anything else than Anglicanism, nor had a desire to start any other denomination. Throughout they have been guided by the theological tenets of the Chicago-Lambeth quadrilateral²¹ and wish to be held accountable in an Anglican framework.²² On the strength of this they have been encouraged for two years now to apply for grants through the Diocese of Chelmsford mission opportunities fund and in 2011 were successful with nearly £34,000 to be given over three years, to enable staff developments in this growing church. Conditions include it applying for a BMO, David's more frequent attendance at chapter and continuing membership of the Archdeacon's pioneers' group. In all these senses, DNA Networks, through its accountability and relational links, is part of the Anglican family, although it is a case, as with several fresh expressions of Church, that stretches the current envelope wider than it has been used to historically.

Potential weaknesses

Every church has further to go and I wonder, with this diversity of wildflower bank life, how much training and support there is for mission unit leaders. I saw evidence of material aimed in that direction, but did not get time to see how that was delivered. Equally for the seeding overseas and elsewhere, meeting Manik showed me his concern that in his time at DNA Networks he had wondered whether he offered adequate training for sending. It also seemed to my over-tidy mind that the small group accountability was mixed. It may be that this too has to be self-regulating, but then it will be uneven. Behind all this, if DNA Networks is more a sodality than modality, then the characteristic dangers

²⁰ I understand this to refer to B5 paragraphs 2 and 3 which allows for creativity when presented with circumstances for which existing prayer books do not provide, as long as what is devised does not represent a departure from Anglican doctrine 'in any essential matter'. www.churchofengland.org/media/35579/sacraments.pdf

²¹ These are the four components that Anglicans adopted as non-negotiable in ecumenical conversations in 1886. http://anglicanonline.org/basics/Chicago_Lambeth.html

²² It is worth adding that for some internationals in the church, while its Anglican identity is not contested, it is problematic that some are from the global south and have suspicions of the leadership and future direction of the Church of England.

of the sodality are elitism and activism.²³ I do not say I saw these, but temptations don't work that way. We need examples of 'working churches' that work, but do not overwork. I was glad this one knows how to play and laugh as well.

Real strengths

I admired the entering of so many networks, and each network on its terms. This was real mission-shaped practice which is to be saluted and celebrated. I respected the faithfulness to stay with being a church planting movement which means giving away resources. This is a sowing church that is happy that others elsewhere will reap. It is also commendably a sowing church in the sense that it invests much of its time and most of its people in making relationships with non-Christians. Those who sow bountifully...

Church designed to repel consumer Christians

I loved that it was not afraid to be a church that repels consumer Christians. I confess that was not their term but mine; however, when I coined it, there were broad smiles not frowns. **This is a working church, not a leisure hobby.** It is made up of both sorted people and those whose lives are still very messy. It has plenty of ordinary working people and those who have never worked – except when they were 'inside'. It is not for the conformist or the comfortable. It is held and practised that discipleship happens through work and service. That is how people best learn and grow. I have now witnessed the discovery of the self-feeding sheep for which I have long hoped.

This seems normal to the non-churched joining DNA Networks; that's all they have ever known and they are the best evangelists for it. It seems different but attractive to the de-churched who previously were 'attending non-believers' and have only 'got' Jesus by coming to DNA Networks. It is perhaps intentionally difficult for established Christians joining who are used to deep teaching, inspiring worship and excellent provision for their children. They come to be fed and quickly get frustrated. A number of leaders commented that they leave quite soon, having been initially attracted by the quality of community that values every person and helps them belong.

²³ Ralph D. Winter, The Two Structures of God's Redemptive Mission: <http://www.movements.net/wp-content/uploads/2009/04/two-structures-gods-redemptive-mission-winter.pdf>

It was these features that made me think DNA Networks is more like a sodality than a modality. Classic church sodalities include the monastic movements and the missionary societies. There is something here like the intensity and vocation associated with the life of the friars. They are serious about the call of God,

passionate about inner transformation by meeting Christ, determined to follow through spiritual practices and drawn to engagement with the world. I believe **we shall need more healthy sodalities alongside healthy modalities** – like effective parish churches - to reach the British Isles for Christ. It was good to be there.



George Lings
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Cartoons by
Tim Sharp

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