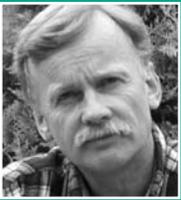


52: New Church, New Town



This issue tells the story of the birth and growth of a young church in one of our tougher UK mission contexts, the New Towns. Building genuine community from scratch in an artificially created neighbourhood is not easy. Dig deeper and beneath there are the further challenges of creating church that is sustainable: How do you encourage true indigenous leadership? How do you introduce discipleship as normal from the start?

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Encounters on the Edge



no. 52:

New Town, New Church

Deep excavations

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Discoveries about fresh expressions of Church from The Sheffield Centre

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Introduction to Telford

The name Telford New Town is misleading. It disguises that this is a fragmented area made up partly from massive expansion of older settlements - these were mainly agricultural and mining villages - but also around Wellington, a town in itself. Other areas are green or brown field sites where an old name has been borrowed to help developers sell a traditional village feel. Most areas are separated by some green space adding to the patchwork feel. Its evolution, in which orderly planning and untidy reality have jockeyed for dominance, is illustrated by the history. In 1963 the new area was called Dawley New Town and intended as 'overspill' of 50,000 people from the West Midlands conurbation and to become a town of 70,000. Yet in 1968 government legislation was passed, after an enquiry, doubling it in size and renaming it after the Scottish civil engineer Thomas Telford.¹ It grew from 78,000 in 1970, to 104,000 by 1980 and 162,000 in 2009.

The M54 runs through it west-east, making it both a commuter town and regional hub for industries and employment. Traditionally a coal mining and iron working area, it has moved to the new technologies and IT, attracting companies from the USA, Europe and Japan. After ups and down through the 1980s and the early 1990s recession, unemployment has fallen from around 20% to 3%, rising only recently to 5%. The town centre is a mix of massive shopping mall, office blocks and retail park, all of which feels functional and consumerist, not significantly communal and cultural. The local paper in 2004 described it as 'only ever a shopping place with no real heart', and a 2007 regeneration plan seeks to address this.²

As the overall town continued to grow, the Diocese of Lichfield wanted to plant churches for this new population. It is 94% white, younger than average with a mix of private and shared ownership housing at affordable prices,³ attracting a population with a high proportion of younger families. As of 2011, three separate ventures have started. This booklet tells the second story. A Radio 4 programme in 2009 followed the early work of the first pioneer.⁴ It claimed Telford has the lowest per capita church attendance in Britain, thus tagged it with the epithet 'the most godless town in Britain'.⁵

¹ He designed and built canals, roads and bridges nationally, but was Surveyor of Public Works in Shropshire.

² <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Telford> accessed 13th October 2011.

³ In 2011, 2-5 bedroom houses were selling in the range of £160-260,000.

⁴ Mark Berry was sent by CMS and the diocese. His work and approach, strongly influenced by New Monasticism, falls outside the scope of this issue.

⁵ 28th January 2009. The broadcast by Jolyon Jenkins is no longer available.

The Kellys move to Lawley



Ironstone logo

In Lawley, the south western quadrant of the overall town and former open-cast mining area, house building began more than ten years ago. A consortium, known as Ironstone, are the developers. The stated aim is to provide 3,300 homes by 2023, providing 20% of Telford's overall housing growth plan. Whether the credit crunch will allow this pace of development is now doubtful. An illustration of the difficulties is that to provide for the needs of the increased population,

'Lawley Square' was planned; it is a project involving both a Morrison's supermarket, other shops and industrial units, together with a pub, community centre, medical and dentist surgery and a second primary school. Some of the commercial aspects are still going ahead, but most of the others have not even gone to the planning permission stage and completion over time is not guaranteed. As one resident commented: 'It feels like living in a half-finished area.' Thus all major shopping still has to be done in the town centre. Yet even half a major development means quite a number of new people, who live some distance both from the heart of the old Lawley village with St John's church and, on the other side of a broad valley and ridge, from historic Dawley. To the south is another discrete area called Lightmoor for which a further 800 homes are planned.

In March 2008, on the initiative of Alan Smith, then Bishop of Shrewsbury, a church planter was appointed to serve these two new areas. The curate at Meole Brace in

Shrewsbury, Rev Steve Kelly, was made team vicar within the Central Telford Parish and community minister to Lawley. The diocese provided a suitable house in Lawley to which he moved in May with his wife Maggie and their teenage children.



I found Steve to be a gentle, insightful Ulsterman, who brings the good gifts I associate with a pioneer-sustainer.⁶ He is creative and resourceful, but also patient, analytical, reflective and aware of background processes. He takes the long view and enjoys finding systems that genuinely serve what is needed. His background in IT, serving motor manufacturing firms as well as having periods of working for himself, is congruent with all this.

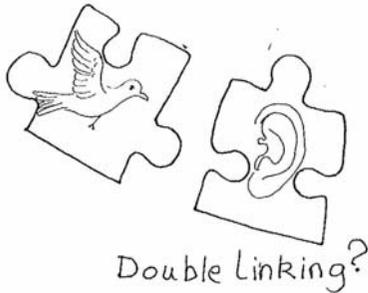
Maggie his wife has a nursing background, initially as a district nurse and latterly in the more diagnostic role of practice nurse. She is practical, sees details and quickly assesses what needs to be done. As an extravert she enjoys the buzz of people and events and enjoys the process of change. She is a licensed Reader. Both have wide experience of church life across the ecumenical spectrum and appreciate both the quick turn-round capability of the New Churches and the longer rhythms of Anglicanism. They bring the valuable experience of being in previous good starts as well as seeing past things go wrong. Having an informed instinct for what not to do is one good way to avoid many planting pitfalls.



Steve and Maggie

⁶ See my Chapter 2 in Dave Male (ed.) *Pioneers for Life* (Oxford: Bible Reading Fellowship, 2011) on the differences between the pioneer-starter and pioneer-sustainer.

Birth and beginnings: 2008-2010



The brief included becoming involved with local people, community groups, developers and planners, all of whom have some interest in bringing a sense of community. At the same time it meant listening and looking for signs of the Holy Spirit at work. Out of the two interlocking processes the aim was to create a fresh expression of Church – perhaps one for each of the two areas. As they lived in Lawley, and as it was larger and older, it made sense to focus there. I think this was wise as **one temptation for those planting**

fresh expressions of Church is to spread themselves too thinly across too many tasks or different groups. A proper question was: 'How do you create church from scratch in an environment that has little community spirit, few community facilities to use, and in an area with long-term poor church attendance with consequent low morale?'

They used the first year to identify opportunities to bring people from the wider community together and to make friends. Steve and Maggie have been part of establishing a community garden. They have organised a teddy bears' picnic, a fun day, nature walks and a local photographic competition. In all these, people work together for the common good and, in the widest sense, enrich the area. **Christians can forget that the church has long experience of making social events happen well**, including empowering many people through trusting them with roles to play. We may be better at it than many in a surrounding area, especially if it is a new housing one. Modelling, creating and assisting community are gifts we offer. Some events were deliberately seasonal, like watching the Six Nations rugby games, an Easter egg hunt, a harvest meal with proceeds going to an overseas charity



and the notable Christmas Eve 'Carols on the Green', which drew 100 to food and singing. Fun, food and parties are a deliberate part of church life. When Jesus spent time with people, eating, laughing and listening, they glimpsed promising avenues, entered life-giving challenges and found a new Lord.

All this was exemplary outworking of fresh expression of Church theory stressing the missional start is found in listening, serving and befriending. Through this, trust is generated, friends are made and pathways for sharing faith laid down. It should not be assumed that the planting team put on all the events. It makes great sense to join in with what the community is already doing, both if the team's resources are slight and to avoid the kind of provider-client relationship that Church can fall into and was typical in Christendom. It fits too with the understanding that **'missionaries' come as guests not hosts**, learning how the host culture works, and establish friendships and contacts through quality of relationships and the value added to the host community, not by relying on their own power as 'hosts' and control of events. Much of the existing 'come to church' instinct is still infected by the latter, even if we think our motives are higher than that.



They had to start this far back for at least two reasons. One is that the Christian presence was weak. The Central Telford parish, led by Rector Marilyn Peters, comprises of one town centre congregation and five outlying ones, served by a team of four, but only 3.2 days full-time equivalent. The 2001 census population was then 45,800 and can be assumed to have increased. Yet the joint aSa⁷ of the six churches in 2008 was 174 and it has continued to fall slowly in the two succeeding years to 162. This makes a percentage attendance of 0.37% - roughly 1/6th of the national average. To be fair, half of the districts concerned have significant UPA scores and poor quality housing from the 1960s and '70s. The second reason was that the Kellys did not want to quickly create a church worship event which by its profile and style drew existing, and possibly disgruntled, Christians. The intention, as with all best fresh expressions of Church, was to reach those outside church and without Christian commitment.

⁷This stands for average Sunday attendance. This can be higher than uSa (usual Sunday attendance) because it includes seasonal variants like Easter and Christmas.



Lawley Primary School

The events created, and joined in with, revealed the relative lack of community feeling and the shortage of community facilities in Lawley. The old village school had become the community centre but was hardly inviting inside. The other major building was the new Lawley Primary School of 300 children. But the issues around child protection mean that entry to the building was only via keypad which was limiting, although interchange at the school gates was vigorous and governors were drawn from the locality.

The problems of loneliness and isolation, and uncertainty of how to get beyond this in a brand new settlement, were felt by many, though often hidden behind the façade of new properties and some show of prosperity.

In the same period, as early as July 2008, the first Friday evening prayer meetings were held, usually at the Kellys' home, attended by a small number of mature Christians with an interest in this mission, seeking guidance and direction for the work and to plan community engagement and opportunities for outreach. Some were congregation members in Meole Brace in Shrewsbury who nevertheless lived in Telford. Others were from the wider ecumenical scene in Telford of whom some were already looking for a new challenge, and a few Christians who had moved to Lawley.

Next steps

They began to test the water and to experiment with what the gathering as visible church might look like. Being dubbed 'the community vicar' by school, developers and leaders of other community events also gave Steve a useful profile and led to the inevitable question: 'So where's your church then?' He would reply that it would grow as the community grows. At Christmas they held a one-off community worship event in Lawley Primary School. The venue was obvious, partly as the only one suitable, but also because both the church and the school have an interest in creating 'community cohesion'. This contributed to creating a good bond between Steve and the head teacher, and Steve began regular visits to the school. At the Christmas event they handed out credit card sized slips of paper, coloured like a traffic light in red, yellow and green. People simply ticked a colour in response to the question: If we did this again would you come?

The response was encouraging and so, in February 2009, a first Sunday of the month café-style church, serving all ages, was launched, running from 3.30 to 5.00 pm. This has continued and is an enduring feature. The emphasis on community is deliberately fostered by provision of quality coffee and generous hospitality, both at the start and close of the gathering. It is also demonstrated by the clusters of chairs and tables with an informal feel, through welcoming children's participation, and a relaxed and participative learning style around life themes. Quite soon 50 adults and children became the normal attendance. That size pleasantly occupies the space, but there is room for more without crowding. I imagine the sustainable ceiling would be around 80.



Another route was to host an Alpha Course at Costa Coffee in Telford town centre. The course was adapted and lightened using the Costa provision, not meals. Video and YouTube clips gave presentational introductions, but the style of discussion and conversation was typically Alpha. It ran during normal opening hours, with other customers and staff intrigued by the visuals and the sight of people praying. They have also tried a small group around a course on life issues, meeting in their home, for contacts willing to come and talk, with bits of the Bible opened up in relation to those topics.⁸ Thus from the start, the public life of the young church was not limited to social involvement and Sunday attendance; attempts were made at the task of helping people explore faith and walk down the path of committed discipleship.

One further strand was that Steve deliberately built relationships with the other church leaders. His Ulster background includes first-hand knowledge of reconciliation groups working across that divide and a conviction of the importance of Jesus' teaching in John 17 that links patent unity with missional effectiveness. His willingness to meet with them, preach from time to time and take services has helped to counter the fragmentation of the churches in the area, overcome hesitations about the validity or effectiveness of new starts, and reassure them that he had been sent to find new Christians, not poach existing ones.

⁸ The Life Matters course was developed by staff at Blurton Parish Church. <http://lifematters.blurtonparish.co.uk/>

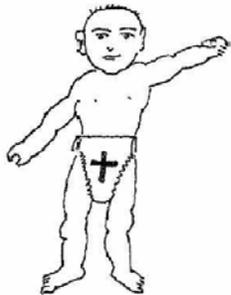
Starting to articulate values

Across this range of early steps I see here embryonic cultivation of the four classic ecclesial relationships – with God, with one another, with outsiders and with the wider church.⁹ From the beginning they were keen also to see that this set of relationships led to a healthy growth dynamic in which three words – 'rooted', 'flourishing' and 'fruitful' – have played their part as ongoing values. These three foundation words were drawn out of passages like the farming parables of Jesus, the vine in John 15 and the organic images of planting in 1 Corinthians. The 'roots' were in God, Christ and the locality; 'flourishing' covered both outward growth and deeper relationships and transformation; while 'fruitful' meant visible signs of that transformation at individual and wider community level. Growth was always linked to fruitfulness. At other times this triad has been linked to three ecclesial purposes: 'Delighting in God', 'Nurturing community', and 'Acting in love'. While these terms have been often used, they are more known by the leadership and somehow have never become the vocabulary of the congregation. Steve Kelly wonders whether just calling them 'Up', 'In' and 'Out' might do the trick.¹⁰ **Balance with simplicity is essential for finding, communicating and living out any enduring values.**

When does church begin?

There is a connection to the not straightforward analogous question: When does a human life begin? At conception? At the stage of a responsive organism in the womb? At viability in the case of a premature birth? At full term? Or as the Jewish contribution to a joke has it: when the children leave home and the dog dies? We have known for years there are plenty of old small local churches that are no longer sustainable, in terms of finance or human resources.

However, just as competence has never been an adequate or satisfactory Christian ethical measure of being human, so also we are confident and right still to call them churches. At the other end of life, I for one think there is value in the term 'embryonic church'. We now know that there are young churches that as yet only aspire to maturity. Does that disbar them from the honourable name of church?¹¹ In the story told in this issue, I have already shown how the Kellys and a few friends were beginning to live out the fourfold ecclesial journeys or relationships. If it behaves like a church and smells like a church, perhaps it is...



⁹In historic theology these would be the four creedal marks of the Church.

¹⁰As from St Thomas Crookes: www.stthomaschurch.org.uk/lifeshapes

¹¹Those who want to dig deeper into the history and evolution of four models of understanding church and a case for why we should gravitate to the interpersonal model, see George Lings, *Evaluating Fresh Expressions of Church*, Anvil Journal Volume 27 No. 1 p. 32 (Cambridge, 2011).

In this story the 'apostolic' relationship with the wider community was very evident to all. The 'catholic' one with the wider church was visible for the few with eyes to see. The nurturing of local 'oneness' within the Christians was served partly by working together, but also in the private gathering to pray, give thanks and discern ways forward, which are elements of pursuing being 'holy'. Some of that was in private, almost secret. But the persecuted church teaches us that having secret meetings does not thereby make those who gather not church. I suspect the conclusion of the matter is that in the missional journey to create church, **the group setting out really are church far earlier than we have**

previously acknowledged. Thus when in June 2010, there was a public launch of River Community Church with the encouraging and delightfully supportive Bishop Mark Rylands, this was not the birth of the church. One might, tongue in cheek, term it the church's baptism, and then liturgy based on the baptism of Jesus would be apt. Actually, the image chosen of 'launch' is quite helpful. In shipbuilding parlance this is not laying the keel or riveting a hull. Decks and superstructure are there and it is a floating ship that is launched, although very probably in need of further fitting out and still awaiting setting sail. **Call it 'church' early on and small beginnings are more likely to rise to fulfil the best of that name.**



Bishop Mark Rylands & Steve

Early learning

Just as a young child is full of life, so life is full of surprises and not everything that is tried works. Learning to walk and talk are substantial and experimental tasks with plenty of mistakes and falling down. With laughter, encouragement and patience most children get there. Do we give time and space for the infant church equivalent?

In spring 2010 Steve reported to the Archdeacon that a number of paths in discipleship were being tried. Some individuals were working with a scheme to read the Bible with a short commentary in a year. Others were in a fortnightly DNA group, with its own planning team, to deepen friendships, pray and study.

A team had also been set up to trial creative and experimental ways to explore teaching, growing community, worship and prayer on a different Sunday to the 1st Sunday café meeting.

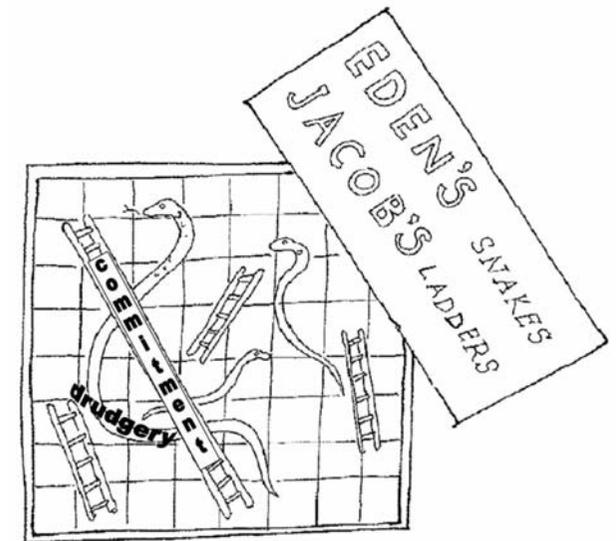
All sounded promising ways of promoting discipleship, but all of them have faced challenges. The reasons varied. Material that seems straightforward to experienced Christians can daunt the newly converted non-churched member. Also growing secure patterns of spirituality is neither quick nor easy, not least in young families and a time-poor society. Only as people work together on a task does it become clear whether they have the gifts needed, as well as the time, commitment and persistence to keep delivering. In a longer view, the Kellys also comment that sustained Sunday teaching series, even when deliberately taking areas of Scripture that mix doctrinal learning and practical discipleship, still are felt by some members to be too complicated and demanding. The challenges to help people move beyond attendance into intentional following of Christ are significant.

An end to traditional small groups?

Reflecting on their longer experience of small groups, as well as the struggles to enable them to work in Lawley, Maggie wonders whether home groups are coming to the end of their useful life, not least in fresh expressions for areas of new housing. There may be several factors involved. The traditional small group met to study the Bible and then to pray, usually about problems of various kinds. The former dives in too deep for younger Christians or seekers, and is often too narrowly didactic for those used to more interactive learning. The prayer style hardly demonstrates the transformation that Christ is supposed to bring and can spread discouragement. In addition, over time very few small groups have any missional aspiration, let alone accomplishment, which has long been a cell church critique of their priorities and health. Moreover, in a time-poor society who wants to go out for an evening after a busy working day and fighting the battle of feeding then putting younger children to bed? At best it might be one parent who goes out and how does that build marriages? Thus the conundrum of how to help people become committed disciples, but not promote over-committed drudgery, raises its head. Perhaps snakes & ladders happens in local Church life. Even if small groups work for some, it cannot be the main plank of discipleship in a church because of the low percentage of any congregation who go to them. I hear reports ranging from 10% up to 60%.

Yet there is something that being small does which big cannot do. An alternative might be discrete smaller gatherings. Some churches are encouraging same sex groups of four, at mutually convenient times but longer intervals, for structured mutual accountability. Other options are changing the shape and location. Instead of a living room, which has one talking space, and 90 minutes of Bible study ending with prayer topics, the Kellys have found meeting round a table to eat, or in a pub for a

drink, gives a different dynamic. Those not used to small group interaction have a better sense of security because of being given something in their hands and something to do. As well as that, the shape and venue supports a number of concurrent conversations. The time might be half spent on the socialising over the meal or drink, 5-10 minutes input perhaps from a DVD with which it is easier to disagree in public, and 20 minutes of guided conversation. *The Well* for women on Thursday mornings exhibits this understanding. I suspect the test of all ways is not so much whether the patterns keep going, but of gradually changing lives and deepening mutual relationships. **As ever transformation trumps information.**



Growing: finding the 'river'

What's in a name?

Over time, the name, character and calling of this young church became clearer. 'Rooted', 'flourishing' and 'fruitful' were words related to plants, so a tree appeared in their early artwork. Positively the words suggested life and development, characteristic of God's incoming kingdom, yet there was something a little static about them; they were universal but not inherently contextual, and they were not explicit about the source of their life. A combination of the monthly prayer meetings, reading Mark Stibbe's book *Breakout*,¹² hearing talks by others and a re-reading of Ezekiel 47.1-12, took the church leaders further. Ezekiel saw water flowing out eastward from the



temple into the desert. Outside the temple it gradually became a river, at each stage of being measured flowing both wider than is normal, but also deeper which was surprising granted the sole small source. On the way back from being asked to observe this progression eastwards, Ezekiel then saw trees becoming fruitful, on both banks, providing food from their fruit and medicine for healing in the leaves. Not only that, but the river does what the Jordan never has – it turns most of the Dead Sea into fresh water.

This river is an apparently simple illustration, but actually it is a complex image, in which the natural and the supernatural combine. The river was easy to see, but its progression was strange. Some of its outcomes were familiar. Trees by rivers were known to flourish as in Psalm 1.3. But to bear fruit every month would be a GM scientist's dream and to change the Dead Sea into a living one is a mind-boggling concept. I myself take this as a reminder that however much we may find out about the normal processes of helping young churches come to birth, **we must beware of becoming 'Pelagian' in this missional and ecclesial task.**¹³ Only as God calls, leads and guides, are the right people sent and correct contextual choices made. Only as encounter with Christ occurs do outsiders find forgiveness, a changed status as adopted members

¹² Mark Stibbe & Andrew Williams, *Breakout* (Milton Keynes: Authentic Publishing, 2008).

¹³ In the early fifth century, the British theologian Pelagius contested Augustine's doctrine of original sin and claimed Christians could live holy lives through free-will and self-discipline.

of God's family and start a new trajectory, living in and for Jesus, enrolled as apprentices¹⁴ under him. In addition, only as the Spirit convinces outsiders, empowers and gifts the members, and continues to both comfort and disturb the church on its journey, will that life radiate to those outside. I was grateful that Steve is very aware that reliance on fresh expressions wisdom and learning is no substitute for this awareness of doing what comes naturally and supernaturally.

The river image also goes far beyond the single fruitful tree. It is inherently moving, not static, thus the aim of the church in Lawley cannot be just to grow big and strong – say like a mighty English oak. The river is a mandate for continuing to flow out, much less to draw in. Although trees do feature, this is no widely distributed forest or a spread out orchard. The trees only root, flourish and fruit because of proximity to the river. Once more, living dependence on, and closeness to, the life that is in God is inherent. And when the trees do fruit, it is with inexplicable frequency. A good question to ask occasionally is whether there is anything so good and pleasing in our lives that it is not readily explicable. Flourishing trees in the desert connect with the biblical strand that talks about how Christians should exhibit grace when things are tough and adverse; then what strength, beauty and resilience are apparent? Returning to the image itself, the origin in the temple could suggest the priority of public worship in the life of a church, but the stronger overall sense of the picture is of a flow out of church.¹⁵ So I suggest the language of temple is more about a quality of engagement with God, manifested in both individual lives and the whole Christian community.

Water in dry places

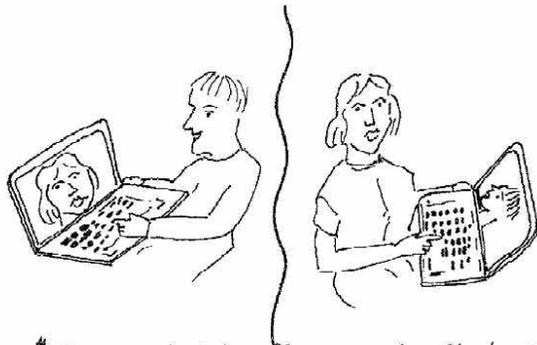
The leadership are also grateful for an image of water in a dry place. Perhaps calling Telford an urban desert would be unhelpfully rude. However, forming community in New Towns has some arid challenges. It is easier to build areas of housing than to create community. Steve taught me that the developers can exclude what is known not to work in terms of poor road and housing layouts, and include potential, like community facilities and green



¹⁴ The older word is disciples, but the sense of the original (*mathetes*) is less about that Latin root *disco* (to learn) and more akin to the apprentice model. I also note the word disciple does not occur outside the Gospels and Acts.

¹⁵ Cf John 7.37-39.

space. However, to quote him, this 'creates a canvas, not a life'. A few sideways signs of this emerged during my visit. I had noted on River Community Church publicity that the Kellys' email and mobile phone were always given, but never the address. I wondered how people knew where to meet them. Steve's experience is that many people in Lawley will either email



"Are we safe to log off and meet in Starbucks?"

or text, sometimes from Facebook, to make a first contact with him. It is less direct than booking to meet, more provisional and not yet committed, and with options left open. Some call it 'intimacy without commitment'. I was reminded of two dogs unfamiliar with one another, wagging tails as they approach, then circling and sniffing, before deciding the other is kosher and it is OK to play. From Mark Russell¹⁶ I hear

similar stories of early evangelistic contacts that begin on Twitter, while the conversations' partners suss out and sample before agreeing to meet in a third place, in the flesh.

Oblique evangelism looks like a way forward. Making relationships in New Towns may be more tentative than elsewhere. There are fewer other options if it doesn't work: only one school gate, perhaps one local store, one residents association. There are no extended families. Few houses have front lawns that enable passing or casual contact. So people face outwards gingerly. Our missional processes therefore need to have even more smaller stepping stones to traverse to our side than we might need elsewhere. Another sign of this fragility in New Towns was the sad story of some relational breakdowns in the local Lawley community, where apparently promising co-operation had become entangled and eventually fallen apart, with no prospect of repair. So in some ways it is a dry place and one where people tread warily, although beneath they may seek community and belonging.

Thus the leaders sensed they had found a specific name which enshrined their calling and its dynamics. It encouraged them to keep moving and reminded

¹⁶CEO and Community Leader of Church Army.

them it was good to be set in a dry place, for they were to be part of watering it and 'seeing the desert bloom'. However, with due modesty Steve and Maggie concede that though the name has stuck, it could have been 'Riviera Church' and a good number of members would have been none the wiser. The river motif inspires the leaders but is still to capture the imagination of all the members. It may be that the latter are like Ezekiel and watching something taking them out of their depth, but not yet on the later reverse journey to notice the surprising trees and transformation of the Dead Sea. The river image still has untapped potential and will bear repeating until more people get it.

Images have potential to foster imagination – why else would advertisers so regularly use them? Yet sometimes as leaders we can fall prey to the assumptions of an instant society and think that good presentation and advertisement will change people's thinking quickly and bring results. The short half-life of a football team manager is painful testimony to that fallacy. I share with the Kellys the observation that Jesus' choice of the agrarian model of growth assumes a longevity of processes that is foreign to industrial and digital minds. It includes the seasonal, the unpredictable and demands patience. The growth from embryo to adult is a similar long and winding road. This church has a good name and still needs to grow into it.

How wide is the river?

I was glad to see across the life of River Community Church that there is unselfconscious progress in fulfilling the classic three steps towards interdependent maturity, coined in the mid 1800s by Henry Venn, with a fourth¹⁷ one, self-theologising, added in the 20th century by some thinkers in CMS. This last addition is particularly important. It is a sign of procedural evidence that the way the other three are being measured is not unhelpfully dependent on imported assumptions about what they mean and how they are to be measured. The process of finding this specific 'river' identity, linking biblical texts and local context, is indicative of the **self-theologising** feature; the decision to make their fourth Sundays one of Sabbath rest would be another, as would exploring and questioning the way small groups function today.



¹⁷For further details see www.acpi.org.uk and an article by Bob Hopkins called: The 3-Self Principle - Which End of the Telescope? It urges all three are applied contextually, not used to enforce heavy burdens like paying for a full-time minister and having sophisticated governmental structures.

Funding of Steve's post through stipend and housing has come from the Diocese of Lichfield, initially for three years, but this has been extended as the value of the work has been clear. However, day to day running costs are down to the local church. Initially the Central Telford parish treasurer handled the finances for the infant Lawley church, but in the last year they have found a member able to take that on, marking a step towards proper independence.

In the first year the church ran almost like a faith mission, funded by surprising and delightful one-off gifts as they acquired catering and communication equipment for the café event. The young church was keen to avoid the customary church image of asking for money. Costs for that half year were some £3,000. In 2009 they rose to £5,000, the following year to the best part of £10,000 and planned for 2011 to be £16,500. Operating costs have always been covered and a small surplus acquired. Those are good steps toward being self-financing. From the start giving away to others has been a sound feature, at 10% of planned income. The percentage explicitly related to outreach has gradually reduced as the life of the church has widened. This reflects the way in which as churches mature, their lives do become more complex. The most notable addition here is the finding and deploying of a part-time children's worker at £6,000 per year. Conscious and public steps towards **self-financing** have been apparent from April 2010 when giving from the congregation was invited, though the work was still only the monthly café gathering. In February 2011 came the first mention of contributing a parish share, which will be in the region of £4,000.

The diocesan backdrop to this story of local progress is that the on-costs of a full-time stipendiary minister are deemed to be £49,000. I gather in this case there is no immediate pressure to meet that target in the short term. There are many differing patterns across the Church of England, with variables about how many years a stipend is centrally funded, followed by different lengths of the years with tapering funding. The jury is still out on whether full subsidy early on assists or hinders progression to sustainability.¹⁸ Clearly, perpetual central subsidy is not the way forward. However, a key variable in this equation is whether some or all fresh expressions of Church can be adequately sustained by self-supporting or spare-time leaders.¹⁹ As others have noted about 3-4-self thinking, it is not enough to measure independence; one must also foster indigeneity, as well as head off any illusions of having arrived. **All 3-4-self thinking requires contextualisation.** There are some cultures and contexts in which a full-time

¹⁸ In the Diocese of Oxford, the fully-funded Cutting Edge projects have not done as well as hoped, while some others not supported in this way have made better progress to sustainability. Whether the funding pattern or the mission context is more significant is a good question.

¹⁹ The Sheffield Centre researcher Claire Dalpra has recently investigated this area and it may become a future Encounters on the Edge issue to spread her discoveries further.

stipendiary appointment is not appropriate. There is also a direct relationship with the natural unit size of the Christian community of differing kinds of fresh expression. The dynamics inherent in cell church, mid-sized communities and medium-sized congregations are very different from one another.

Looking back, it is not clear to me whether Anglicans arrived at our system, which historically had one person/parson per parish, because we could summon the clergy numbers to operate that way, because patterns of rural villages demanded it, or because administrative and financial convenience tied to tithing imposed it. Either way, today the number of clergy (even with the transfusion of women's ordination, the invention of self-supporting ministers and the heroic labours of the retireds) has now shrunk to the point where the clerical butter is now spread so thinly that the system is distressed and failing. Clergy stress and related time off increases, vacancies grow more frequent and longer, and giving comes under pressure with the severing of the linkage of having one's own minister. The relatively few larger churches which prop up a number of dioceses, are now showing giving-fatigue and frustration. **We are in for a major rethink of what stipendiary ministers are for**, and it may be that the missionary planters have a part to play in embodying a way forward that is financially sustainable through simpler forms of church life, led by indigenous people. This thought links closely to the next of the classic 3-self categories.



From the beginning, River Community Church has had a considerable degree of **self-governance** in that the founders have been free to lead and innovate, though accountable to the parish through the team rector, and with the diocese through the Bishop of Shrewsbury. Those having the cure of souls have always had considerable freedom of action. The further challenges to workable indigenous self-government are now being faced with the forming of a core team. The acid tests will be around how fully they can sustain local leadership, should the Kellys be led to develop work on the Lightmoor estate. They would then shift from direct leadership at Lawley, to an oversight role there, while being hands-on in the next plant. This fits with the comment some years ago from the Diocese of Derby: 'If the people of God are to be more priestly then Clergy must become more Episcopal.'²⁰ Oversight, not overwork, is

²⁰ Advisory Board of Mission, *Shaping Ministry for a Missionary Church*, Ministry Paper No. 18 October 1998 GS Misc 534, p. 8.

the way forward for stipendiaries. In my view we will make a mistake to see SSMs (Self-Supporting Ministers) as the key way forward. The danger is that this only continues a tradition of clergy control and we need a more radical shift to indigenous leadership that in turn may spawn ordinations.

As for being **self-reproducing**, it is not yet time for the work in Lightmoor and a second congregation to take off, although initial links are being slowly forged.

But in wider terms of reproductive thinking, there are people finding faith and others discovering the release of gifts in mission and ministry. There are two representative examples in local people. Cathy Parker, with a background in secular youth work, became a part-time children's worker in September 2010 to oversee the children's work and raise a team of volunteers for that. She is also tasked with establishing pioneer outreach midweek in the school and running a children's midweek group out of the young persons' Alpha group which acted as their baptismal preparation course.



Cathy

Steve, most of which is done by email, keeps the online church diary, updates the website, organises the rota of responsibilities for varying Sunday roles, does the admin for Alpha courses, helps Steve keep a filing system and analyses where he is spending his time. Both ministries are about widening who has significant tasks and heading off dependency on a full-time minister, freeing that person for their most essential work. To be fully effective, the task of all three is

Lyn Corbett, an early retired financial director, whose childhood faith was reawakened and enlivened through Alpha, acts as administrator. In a mere three hours a week she acts as a hub for communication, taking that task away from



Lyn

to strategise, initiate and encourage the whole church to take responsibility.

Ministries are much wider than these two. In autumn 2010, a core team of six was invited to share leadership more widely. Half are Lawley people, half from wider Telford, and spread equally across the genders and across experienced and newer Christians. They meet monthly, and as befits a young church have worked at the priority of their relationships, not agendas. However, they are tasked with a wider view of the worship, teaching, communal, missional and recreational life of River Community Church. Leading worship and preaching is now shared more widely within the church. More of the congregation are encouraged to take part on Sundays and to be workers in the social and community events.

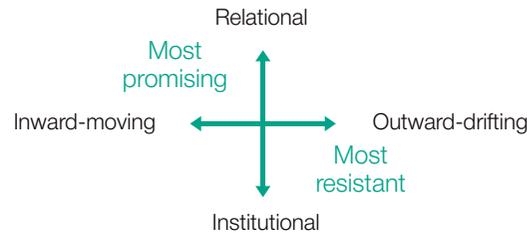
How many in the river?

River Community Church has links with a good number of local families, but what is the harder data behind this? Average attendance at Sunday services in 2010 was 32 adults and 17 children. This number has been a ceiling in practice for some time. Yet Steve knows of 93 people by name with whom there are meaningful church links. Of these, he describes 50 as 'firmly with us'. They get the vision, care about the work and support it. I noted that most of these were couples. However, in common with many other kinds of church, attendance is irregular as many other events compete for family time. And some have demanding life patterns.

Over time, the 'fringe' has become bigger. Some are weary de-churched, chary of commitment. This creates a dilemma for a small founding team with a call to reach the non-churched. Will time spent with the fringe enable them to be healed from past wounds, overcome suspicion and move beyond watching into commitment, thus becoming part of the indigenous community that reaches out with confidence to yet more people? Or is this work so long-term and labour intensive that they must not be chased, but rather left to make up their own minds? It is painful to leaders to conclude they must move ahead with the willing and recognise that their pastoral care of others could easily be described as lacking. I wonder how parables like the four kinds of soil and the shepherd searching for the lost sheep apply here? What also do we infer from the patterns of Jesus' concentric circles of differing discipling patterns with: John, the three, the twelve, the supportive women, the seventy and the crowd?

In local church life I also distinguished, though imperfectly in practice, both between the inward-moving fringe and the outward-drifting one, and the institutional fringe and the relational one. By institutional I mean festival and event attendees who were nearly always resistant to deeper belonging; the relational was a far more fruitful route, people attracted and held by what they saw in other Christians.

Kinds of fringe



How deep is the river?

Throughout my visit I felt delight at the signs of life, good values and wise handling of balances to be struck. Yet I also had a sense of concern at the fragility in the still young church. This was evidenced in several ways.

The particular Sunday afternoon gathering had only 18 adults and seven children present. Few people seemed confident to welcome me who showed up as an unannounced visitor. I had to make the running in most conversations



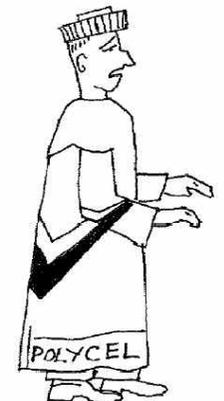
that did occur. People had not turned up to fulfil one or two roles and backup was clearly thin. I wondered how it would fare without Steve and Maggie capably, but not ostentatiously, taking very varied leads. Yet at the same time the event, as a whole, had gentle depth, displayed creativity, evoked participation and was marked by integrity. Young Christians played some memorable parts in the worship and teaching. I could see how it nourished both individual spirits and community.

The struggles to find enduring ways to promote discipleship continue. Further short courses like The Road to Maturity based on a book by Mary Pytches, focused one-off days, training events in the diocese and books to read are all commended, but finding willing takers and establishing progress still seems uphill. Perhaps we should not expect that discipleship comes easy.

Other indicators were two individual stories of tragedy. The sudden and untimely death of one group leader was a huge blow at such an early stage. Being the first death in the young community also naturally prompted questioning. In another case, a separation led to both partners going elsewhere, the ending of a wider ministry of prayer and worship through the contemplative, as well as significantly reducing the number of those who preach and lead. Such events are not unique to fresh expressions, but in smaller and younger churches they are larger blows. The latter kind also rock the stability and even credibility where community life is still forming and as yet has little tradition, precedent and history to help take it through.

In some ways 2011 has been a year of struggle, in which ministry has been more widely shared, and it has not always worked. When someone has had to step back from an area of responsibility, there aren't many others to take up the slack in a small church. The Sunday youth group had to stop when one of the helpers stopped attending. Other areas of church life have 'creaked' at times. Some people fear over-committing themselves, especially if it involves leadership, when their lives already feel busy and stretched. Even following Steve and Maggie's lead in having others for meals is not widely taken up.

Clearly there is more to handing over leading even apparently simple tasks than meets the eye. Sustaining all that has been begun can feel too much, even for the existing leaders. I know of a couple leading in another church who themselves run three weekly nurture groups because there is no one else in the existing church who knows how to do it. Walking round the estate I saw a developer's sign: 'If you see a pothole, tell us and we will fill it.' That can't be the slogan for the leadership of a young church. The Kellys think that **the 'Polyfilla leader' is not a way forward**. He or she cannot be the glue that holds everything together and fills in every crack and gap. There is a time when it is better to decide not to do something, or rather that it need not be done.



"I'm sorry I haven't a glue"

Sunday and the river

From February 2009, as described, the first Sunday afternoon of the month is all-age café church. Originally this was intended as a way in: a short informal introduction to gathering as church, with a simple theme to appeal to children



and adults. As time has gone on, this event has developed a stronger teaching and worship element. Yet the atmosphere remains very informal and relaxed, with any teaching done in chunks broken up by other ways to engage. Although it is still aimed for those new to church, occasionally one or two of those who come only on the first Sunday comment to Steve that its character has changed and it can be 'too much'. Whether to leave it as very deliberately simpler and a first port of call

or to let it develop and become more like the other Sundays of the month is a dilemma.

Starting in June 2010, an additional two Sunday afternoon services a month were added at Lawley Primary School, with a stronger emphasis on teaching and sung worship, together with separate activities for the children during the major part of the service. The adjacent classrooms made this easy and secure. The original hope was that a theme would initially be opened up on the first Sunday café event and then taken further in the successive two weeks. However, it has proved difficult to find sufficient themes that are broad and deep enough. Moreover, people's patterns of attendance are not that regular so the point of such progression was lost. Now each week is its own thing. Setting up three times a month is a significant consideration as most church planters know, but the built-in IT facilities in the hall make that less arduous than otherwise. The second and third Sundays open with a twenty minute set of songs and an activity relevant to the theme including participation for the children. After this, the congregation splits and the children leave for their own teaching time, whilst the adults stay in for a sermon, intercessions and time of response. This can often include small group discussions on the theme, or talking to one another for prayer. Steve has a good gift to do this in a sensitive

way that I imagine makes new people feel comfortable. No one is compelled to participate.

Apart from a notice sheet, songs, readings and any liturgical texts are projected onto the large screen. In addition to PowerPoint text, images and video are employed to link in with the theme. Many of the songs are from the New Wine stable, some chosen with the children in mind, and led by a small group of guitar and keyboard. Prayer styles are varied, including extempore, headings from intercessions, contemplative prayer and moving round prayer stations. Prayer for healing is sometimes offered, which may involve the children in praying, or being prayed for. The nature of the services gives a simple structure within which there is space for the spontaneous, or at times a prophetic word.



Cathy Parker, the children's worker, sees the need to develop two age-related groups for the children as a 5-11 age range is demanding, but securing regular volunteers to enable that will be taxing on resources. Another possibility is to begin a group for 11-18s. This is wise in that the junior school age children will grow up and need provision. This will need to be done with other churches in the area. Some monies for this could come from a legacy and might be spent on a part-time youth worker. All this represents an outcrop of a deeper issue. In a time-poor culture, is it inevitable that more complete but complex ministry can only come through money that enables professional provision? Is that in turn a denial of indigenous church?

In October 2010, the first baptisms took place by immersion for both adults and children. Some of the stories winsomely reveal faith across three generations of a family. This event is spoken of as a highlight of the past year. The second raft of baptisms came in October 2011. There is deliberate linkage with Alpha which has been run for children, and also for adults, as preparation towards baptism in a manner reminiscent of the catechumenate. A regular pattern of



communion is still to be established, but may become monthly.

The fourth Sunday is described in their literature as 'for Sabbath rest and time with the family'. In a 21st century time-poor culture this is a distinct and positive gift, where church can become just one more thing to do. The Kellys have in the past been part of active - I may mean very busy - churches with the attendant problems of a gradual attrition of the spirit and even acute burnout. Then church life, instead of being life-giving, sucks life out of people, leading either to withdrawal to the sidelines, or staying on the treadmill but short-changing marriages and denying time to children. This commuter community, full of younger families pulled in many legitimate directions, finds permission to do nothing one Sunday a month as a counter-cultural restorative gift. It is both unusual and obvious that it also gives the church leaders a whole weekend off, which enables Steve and Maggie to go away together or to visit members of their now further flung family. In a similar vein, there are no services in August, although there are social events that have drawn in outsiders. Perhaps more churches should try it.

Alpha – a stream to feed the river

Alpha, which was first run in Costa, continues to play a role. The times of year and venues have varied, but it is now seen as one of the main ways in to River Community Church. So during 2011 May, June and July, it ran at Horsehay Methodist Church. It was planned and staffed by River Community Church, with help from some other Telford churches. Twenty delegates started the course, and from the feedback and the testimonies at the ending Celebration Service, it was thought highly effective in teaching fundamentals of the Christian faith to seekers, and moving some on to a personal commitment to Christ.

Deep sustainability questions

How does community transformation really happen?

I wish there was space to expand that topic more, as New Towns present particular difficulties in building community. However, I can only commend what the Kellys showed me from the work of Livability Community Mission.²¹ They helpfully distinguish between working for *community provision*, which provides caring services that others use, *community action* that collaborates with local people to plan and deliver provision and *community development* which enables local people to take responsibility. Each has its own strengths and weaknesses. Steve commends consultation with Livability Community Mission to gain a more focused and realistic view of how to engage with the wider community. The forging of deep partnership is vital to community transformation. They also explore how a charismatic approach yet strong social commitment to an area can be combined.

Charismatic but not wacky

I was intrigued by the readily admitted tension the Kellys face on this question. Their public statements reject fads and fashions or running after 'Holy Spirit experiences'. On the one hand, they have seen elsewhere how the exotic or unusual can attract just the kind of transfer growth one does not want, growing a selfish culture of 'bless me'. Also among the non-churched, phenomena like tongues or prophetic words couched in the language of Zion can be bizarre to the outsider and a source of embarrassment to an evangelist bringing friends. On the other hand, singularly apt 'words' have long been shafts of illumination and deep conviction to hearers and the Kellys are very aware that profound reliance on God and some signs of his intervention are crucial. The very toughness of the post-Christendom mission field suggests the need for closely attending to the initiatives of the Spirit in mission. Openness to the spiritual and paranormal promotes readiness to the supernatural, although not clarity about its interpretation. In the milieu of post-modernity, rational apologetic is surrendering pride of place to experiences of the transcendent, encounters with beauty, and the finding of meaning through both. The Kellys rightly long for lives overflowing with living water and have held two separate days to promote this.

²¹ Livability Community Mission, 50 Scruton Street, London, EC2A 4XQ 0207 452 2001. www.livability.org.uk

Developing local leadership



Handing down the baton

How does one grow a core leadership team, for the time will come when the founder moves on? Part of it is a change of image. For the early years Steve and Maggie have been the hub of a wheel. They have been central. All connections, decisions and policies run through them. The generous diocesan provision of a leader and house enables that image but ironically may hinder going beyond it. After a time that very strength begins to disempower the local church. Shifting too quickly to

indigenous leadership risks its collapse, as they found with the first experiment in shared leadership. That then sets the transition back. I sense they still need the emergence of an image to encapsulate the future relationship. A hub is almost self-explanatory. What should replace it? As yet it is not clear. In practice part of the shift may be around who sets the agenda. Steve is currently endeavouring to sit back and let the core team make the running round the varied passions of its members. Thus **the wisdom of the founder in forming a balanced group may be more significant than the founder trying to promote a balanced agenda.** Another strand may be the founder learning not to try too hard, having the restraint to let the indigenous group make its own mistakes and thereby acquire wisdom.

How do attendance and discipleship relate?

If through belief in accessibility and an open door we foster easy-come, easy-go churches, are we right to be disappointed in what we get? I note the advice of Bishop Graham Cray that it is unwise to add discipleship later. It comes across as almost a break of implicit contract and people pull back saying this isn't what they signed up to. Add to this mix that Anglicanism in the past has almost prided itself in not asking too much of its members. As Jeremy Paxman wrote in vexation: 'What kind of an organisation is it (Church of England) that makes itself as available as a post office and requires virtually nothing of its

adherents?'²² Yet for the de-churched who may have a history of churches asking too much, and the non-churched who may come from an ego-centric and materialist worldview, is diving deep into discipleship immediately too off-putting?

I was given time with a thoughtful man exploring faith at River Community Church going beyond his childhood pattern of compelled attendance. He appreciated its informality and the freedom to ask questions. He found Alpha assumed too much too soon, and some of the worship was too demonstrative. For him the word disciple was worrying; it translated as total commitment and leaving everything. There are gospel texts that read this way. 'Obey everything I have commanded you' doesn't leave much out. When I offered a translation of the Greek word *mathetes* as apprentice he gave a sign of relief and it opened a door to a process that was gradual. I was reminded of the 13th century equivalents in the beginnings of the Franciscan Third Order.

It is clear to me that attendance is never enough, but handling the swiftness of introduction - and the steepness of its learning curve - into active apprenticeship is an art. This is a sharper issue in fresh expressions because of a higher incidence of newcomers, and inherited churches can survive longer the momentum of previous attendance. **Apprenticeship easily opens a way beyond any purely didactic**

approach. Cast it within relationships and we see discipleship must be two-way. Courses feel too one-way. Table talk feels better and was one notable way Jesus did it. Another, because it is skills-based, is that apprenticeship is learned by being engaged in mission before 'perfect training' is complete. The sending of the 70 is a classic example. Furthermore, going out of one's comfort zones is helpfully diagnostic. Through necessity it teaches oodles about the need for grace, dependence and the paradox of strength through weakness. I am also aware that popularity is not a mark of effective disciple-making, and Jesus found in John 6 that it led to significant numerical decline. That dynamic



²² Jeremy Paxman, *The English: a Portrait of a People* (London: Penguin, 1998) p. 95.

could be abused to justify doing it all wrong, but we are not free to ignore it. Fewer people becoming more like Jesus by following him better may be what happens.

Knowing your place

This Encounters issue has tried to celebrate the birth and growth of a young church in one of our tougher western mission contexts, the New Towns. It has charted some of the deeper difficulties in becoming sustainable as the work becomes more complex. One is encouraging true indigenous leadership. The other is making progress in discipleship. Both look long tasks. A diocese would be wise to work with such a timescale and the attendant commitment of resources.

I was therefore impressed with the attitudes I found in the Kellys. There was a mixture of clarity that these issues are what to work on, together with a refreshing relaxedness not to be anxious. The latter came more as a gift than an acquired wisdom. One day, Steve sensed God saying: 'It's not your fault. You can't disciple those who don't want to be.' I thought of the pathos in the story of Jesus and the rich young ruler. We are told Jesus loved him and we observe that Jesus was able to walk away. Even the Master found that not all called to follow him did so. Knowing we have been faithful is more important than being successful.

George Lings: October 2011

Cartoons: Tim Sharp

For further impressions and information go to River Community Church's website: www.bytheriver.org.uk

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