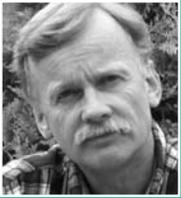


## 53: Crossnet



Some assume all fresh expressions of church can or should become large churches, even those that are network-focused. However over the years, *Crossnet* in Bristol have discovered remaining small can be a significant gift. Their story offers valuable insight into how apprentice-style models of discipleship done among the few are more effective than traditional methods of discipleship among the many. It is a good reminder that the wider church needs a mix of specific, highly intentional, flexible churches, more reminiscent of monastic groups, as well as parochial, generalist, settled churches.

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# Encounters on the Edge



no. 53:

## Crossnet

Do not despise the day of small things

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Discoveries about fresh expressions of Church from The Sheffield Centre

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## The stage is set

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People could think Nick and Lucy Crawley had done it all in the charismatic evangelical Anglican world. He had soaked up the best that Holy Trinity Brompton could give. A curacy followed at another large London church. They had enjoyed leading a significantly successful large church in Zimbabwe, where all they touched turned to gold. Then they crossed the twin cultural gaps of returning to England in 1999 as well as that of fostering new life in Netherthorpe - an inner city parish in northern Sheffield. They were well thought of in the wider circles of New Wine and nearer at hand by the leadership at St Thomas Crookes. Both of them had teaching ministries in which a passion for bringing the Bible to life was matched by charismatic conviction that the Spirit was given to transform people into the likeness of Christ and to surprise and propel the church in mission.

In late 2003, from such a background came the calling to relocate once more. It was to move to Bristol, with two other like-minded, gifted couples who shared something of their spiritual and cultural background. The three families would begin another of those then relatively new network churches, in mission to those outside the current church. It would draw upon relational links in a free flowing society in which who you relate to is more important than your address. A proposal was written for and presented to Bristol diocesan authorities. At the time it felt a big decision to step out of parish-based life, akin to Peter being invited out of his boat to walk on water, but on the very day of contemplating such enormity, a warm invitation to come arrived from the diocese. The arrangement was for seven years of funding for Nick and an equity share in the house they have been in ever since. The other couples had generous friends who brought in significant funding to cover their stipends. In 2004, all the lights seemed to be turning green.

## Clear call, so keep watch

In researching for the Encounters series, I have listened several times to how the clarity of the call was then matched by the high level of difficulties that followed. I have since reflected that such a pattern has marked both many an Old Testament prophet and some New Testament apostles. Jesus' early invitation to follow him characteristically named a daily cross to be taken up (Luke 9.23). He also later spelt out a dying to live pattern that he would exemplify but which his servants would need to follow (John 12.26). I imagine in choosing the name *Crossnet* the founders imagined an emphasis on Christ and the atonement. While this focus on Christ has been followed as essential, the unfolding story has exhibited a process which discloses how **suffering, discipleship and mission are intrinsically connected**. That gives the invented word *Crossnet* a different tone and even meaning. Crosses have been carried, initial visions have died and been buried, pain of difficult decisions has been borne, all with living on the edge of past patterns, leaving the dead to bury their dead and puzzling about ways forward. Was it only co-incidence that the invitation to come to Bristol landed on the mat on Holy Saturday?



In 2012 what exists is very much smaller in size from what was imagined would happen, although over the years 130 people have been members in a significant way. Who *Crossnet* is for has been different from what was expected. Leadership issues and transitions in patterns have been extremely painful. Perplexity and hope have walked hand in hand – or rather, should I say, that they waved at each other across the street as they passed in opposite directions. Exhilaration and despair have marked the swoops and plunges of this rollercoaster ride. They have heard that Bristol has long been called 'the graveyard of ambition'<sup>1</sup>, but if ambition, that two-edged quality, was present it has been squashed; they

<sup>1</sup> This self-deprecating comment is also used within nearby Bath and over the water in Swansea and Galway.

alone of the original team are left, none of the earliest attendees are around, and Nick is now a self-supporting minister for *Crossnet* and half-time stipendiary in a rejuvenated dockland parish, three miles away.

Yet through the heat of this crucible (which I note is another word related to the cross) something smaller but solid is being forged. Another painful analogy would be that through severe pruning, there is evidence of fruit - perhaps not plentiful - but with telltale signs that it will last (John 15.16). This fruit is carrying further seeds that in turn will bring fruit elsewhere. In language I applaud, such a progression is a non-identical reproductive process typical of the church as it is intended to be. It also operates with a deliberate close parallel to what occurs in good human parenting. This dynamic is one upon which I will comment more later.

Because so much has changed since the Crawleys ventured out, I want to depart somewhat from the narrative style that Encounters on the Edge often uses in teasing out the lessons within the chronology of the local story. I want rather to move more quickly across that canvas and focus on what has been learnt through the ups and downs, more than chart what occurred. The historical ins, outs and twists may not be what most matters. What is being formed now and why seems to me more significant.



Nick

## A sketch of the story

### First faltering steps

The initial months after their move in summer 2004 saw the three families and some personal contacts gathering at the home of the Crawleys on Sunday afternoons. Yet it became evident early on that there were a diverse and disconnected set of networks that the group were attached to. One family was not in Bristol or even the diocese, but in Bath where the other two couples decided to settle. Moreover, in Bristol the Crawley's four boys were in a number of different schools. Observers of the fresh expressions of Church movement have learnt in the last decade that such a diverse mission field cannot be made to work, because there is no sustained pattern of relationships with a particular network and therefore no plausible flow of suitable events and meetings in which those relationships can grow. As can be imagined, the dissolving of the initial partnership was painful, tangled and emotionally costly. The lessons are clear and some were named in a report Nick wrote for the diocese in 2010: if shared leadership is to work, the structure must be clear, vision must be united, and if in doubt written down, with leaders living within or near enough to the area where a network may focus and having had some prior years to build relationships in that network. Wider experience of small churches shows adult leaders need to be emotionally robust and such small all-age groups do not cope well with children who have special educational needs. All these limits

were present, but only revealed with hindsight. Within two years the initial partners had gone their separate ways. Death of an original vision is a hard passage.

However, some steps forward emerged. Contrary to the first declared plan, Lucy sensed they were being guided to work with students, so in November they found their first café venue, founding the tradition of meeting on a Tuesday evening. Classically there would be



Interior of local café

at least coffee and cake, a game to build a sense of community and participation, some Bible teaching, sung worship and prayer for people present. Most of these elements have proved enduring. At the very time of the difficulty and confusion that marked the end of a plausible ministry to families and attendant all-age church, out of the blue, unrecruited and largely unconnected, twelve Bristol University students started coming. They were all academically able, from a similar upper middle class stable and keen to learn and grow. So in retrospect one element of *Crossnet* began to be laid down. Nick and Lucy have invested a lot of time at their home, sometimes 1-1 and sometimes with very small groups, in discipleship. This story is one, not of wide and perhaps shallow appeal, but of contact with the few that has gone deep.

The depth is exhibited in a number of ways. These students were not only encouraged to bring friends and others from their student households, but on a regular basis to fast and pray for them. **Cost and commitment were normal from the start** exhibited in spiritual disciplines being learnt and practised. Next I note that there were a few clear, although gradual, conversions including students well known in the university by their leadership roles in sport teams renouncing previous lifestyles, much to the astonishment of their colleagues. Some then went on after university to work in Christian organisations and as a normal part of their ongoing life in Christ to form similar discipling relationships with further people. I interviewed a few of these either face to face or via Skype. Common to these conversations was that their time in *Crossnet* was foundational and formative. We could call it acquiring lifetime holy habits, inheriting *Crossnet* DNA, or disciples becoming like their teachers. All would be true and represent complementary facets of the transmission of life. Sometimes this group of young leaders then observed several factors, as they moved and settled elsewhere: a lack of deeply hospitable community, no ongoing time with an expert in unpacking Scripture and an absence of transformative accountable relationships. But the pattern of disciplines laid down in *Crossnet*, and tools of the spiritual life, took them through those transitions and they continue to be rounded, confident, influential young adults with useful contributions to make in the wider church. It is also unusual to be able to record that the majority of them are male.



If young adults are the group that are most missing from forms of church life, then the male of the species is the more rare. There is something here worth identifying and learning from. I somehow suspect in the economy of God that it is not entirely coincidental that the Crawleys are parents to four boys: Seth, Harry, Roscoe and Jem. Certainly it enabled and eased the possibility, over the years, of a few male students living in the Crawley household as interns and members of an extended family.

Perhaps this embodies, at the core of this church, an ambience in which males can feel at home. However, it would be quite wrong to suppose that the fewer female members of the community are wallflowers or only act as the catering team. Lucy Crawley for example, who was influenced by secular feminism in her younger years, shares fully in the public worship and teaching ministries at *Crossnet*, has recently completed her PhD and teaches in theological circles. She has been equally influential as Nick in the discipling process and she is the person who coined the likeness of this process to good parenting over time, as mentioned earlier. Also other female young adults have fronted some of the missional developments in the story.

It may be fair to the story to think that phase one ran from September 2004 to summer 2007. In 2006 the Crawleys took a sabbatical - for him to study other network church examples; for Lucy to meet with her PhD supervisor in New Zealand and to write more; for both of them to recover a little from the strains of the early years and process its pain. This included the transitions as the



Lucy

initial leadership shook out and the focus shifted from families to students and young adults. An example of the latter would be Sarah Haynes who teaches sign language to those working with the deaf community and is now the longest serving member showing there have always been minor exceptions to this youthful and male predominance. However, by 2007 the first tranche of students came to the end of their time in Bristol and moved on elsewhere.



Sarah

### A second chapter: two steps forward, one step...?

This period can be charted as running from 2007 to 2010, a stage also marked by several changes, the precise details of which may not be of enduring significance. It included another abortive attempt to team up with an existing Christian group, with leaders pursuing the dream of network church in Bristol. Despite best intentions and hard work, these explorations foundered. In retrospect, divergence of vision, mismatch of gifts, too widely dispersed networks and attendant places to gather, are features for all to avoid. The period was also marred by family

bereavements and some long-standing ill health for Crawley family members. The Tuesday venue changed using the 'Boston Tea Party' local chain of cafés, while remaining in the western side of the city. These years also saw attempted partnerships with Trinity Theological College students who wanted to combine placements with fresh expressions of Church experience. The most effective of these arrangements was with Trinity 3<sup>rd</sup> year ordinand, Josh Maynard, who wanted to





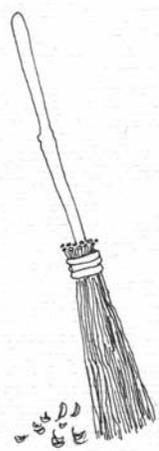
### Work through Besom

gain experience of network and café church, leading the café work for a few months in 2009-10. Other attempts led to some Sunday night meetings, in venues both secular and ecclesial, which drew some couples. However, the students could seldom be committed for more than one year and, as had happened before, *Crossnet* never had the resources to provide for children's work and the couples considered they needed that for their families. Thus these initiatives faded. In retrospect, I think this disconnect with children's work was not about any prejudice against children's work, or simply lack of resources, but may have been an early sign that their work had something of a monastic touch, focusing more on adults, and those mainly single, by which to foster deeper commitment.

One of the earliest converts, Jules Springer, came back in this period, serving as an intern and as part of an extended family household, sometimes referred to as the band of brothers, at the Crawleys. This increased their capacity to offer 1-1 discipleship and was part of his further growth, manifesting how what was invested in him was now being multiplied. Another fruitful story, early on in that chapter, was that *Crossnet* acted as the springboard to launch a Besom project in Bristol, initially led by Bea Ward, a *Crossnet* member. The term 'Besom' comes from a traditionally constructed yard broom, which I recall from

my childhood, in which twigs are bound around a handle. The strapline of the charity thus sometimes is 'sweeping away suffering'. The charity now works nationally with many local churches in an area and functions by matching declared needs of local people with the promised gifts of time, money, goods and skills of those who wish to contribute. Once again *Crossnet* seems to have acted as a seedbed or a starting point. There is a dynamic that runs through the story, of starting up and handing on, often with some specialism to it.

This period was also marked by the largest number attending the Tuesday café meetings of up to 30 people. Yet they began to notice that, just as small groups seem to change for the worse once numbers go above twelve, so **truly participative café style gathering is affected**



Not making a sweeping statement

**adversely when there are more than around 24 attending.** Then the extraverts start to become louder and the introverts close up more, patterns of participation become more predictable and the creative untidiness of a café gathering, and energy, both at and between tables, diminishes. Yet this larger size of membership did lead to *Crossnet* being nearer to becoming self-financing in regard to covering the costs of a stipendiary minister. Nick Crawley has calculated that at this period they were meeting nearly half such costs, although over the whole seven years were only able to put in roughly one third that the diocese invested.<sup>2</sup> Perhaps the numerical buoyancy of this stage contributed to the diocese accepting the review of *Crossnet* conducted by Chris Neal of CMS and agreeing to extend funding of the work for another three years from summer 2008.

Pulling back from this particular story, sustainability and financial questions are still being tested by the shapes and sizes of church that are being born today. Suppose a way of being Christian community that is mutually accountable, inherently participative and apprenticeship in style is desirable, and may even specially attract some young adults. How are such groups, which may be no more than 20 in size, to be led and paid for? Is it merely reluctant necessity that has led the Crawleys to accept that *Crossnet* would never become self-financing - seen through the western Christendom lens of bearing the total on-costs of a full-time stipendiary minister? Such costs in most dioceses are little shy of £50,000 per year. That would mean 50 individuals giving on average £1,000 a year, or maybe £800+ if they were covenanting taxpayers. When there are couples involved, then the number of unit givers significantly shrinks. Small unit churches will never be of this size and to imagine smaller groups plutocratic enough to give substantially more than £1,000 per person is equally unlikely. It might be that if there was a wider collective of three or four such groups across a city, a full-timer could exercise episcopate across them. The downsides of that structure might be similar to the strains upon the incumbent of the multi-parish benefice or the Methodist circuit minister, being stretched across all and in danger of belonging to none, as well as being hindered in seeing through strategic growth in any one group, nor able to offer in-depth discipling to any but the leaders of each group. Would such a distant relationship between groups and a full-time leader evoke the commitment to give at the financial levels necessary?<sup>3</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Across the period, the diocese invested some £155K. *Crossnet* contributed in return £50K. In addition, the diocese received some £15K on the buying out of the equity share on the house. A net figure of £85K over seven years is modest compared to the full on-costs of an incumbent.

<sup>3</sup> The alternative is to settle for less than full-time leadership, either part-time or spare-time. Issues raised by those arrangements will be explored in depth in the next Encounters on the Edge no. 54, by my colleague Claire Dalpra, so I leave them hanging here.

Perhaps aware of these questions, Nick Crawley eventually decided that a plausible way forward was to become a self-supporting minister in regard to *Crossnet* and to take a half-time parish. He put this in an analysis, to the diocese, of the *Crossnet* story up to 2010. But that arrangement is not without pressures as two half-time posts so easily conspire to make far more than one full-time life. His report also drew upon my analysis and conclusions from study of other network-based churches, appearing in *Encounters on the Edge* no. 41, about what a demanding road to travel network church was: living with attendant higher turnover and a tighter smaller fringe; the necessity to identify

and penetrate a large enough specific network; the dubious blessing of existing consumerist Christians joining; and that truly network-based churches seldom exceed 60 members.<sup>4</sup>

While at the same time diocesan expectation could be that such churches will become sufficiently large to be net-contributors to the

diocesan purse, sophisticated enough to participate in ecclesial structures, as well as engaging in effective wide-ranging mission. It creates pressure on the demand and supply side of church life. It was not the way forward for them.

2010 was more like a quiet year, or perhaps the closing of this second chapter. A number of members moved away. The Tuesday gathering moved out of its last secular café venue and back into no. 27, the Crawley's home. In the year that followed, their own teenagers brought their friends and a few students, for the continued pattern of a meal followed by worship, teaching and prayer, all in a participative style. Lucy was then able to concentrate on finishing her PhD on Spirit Christology. But both Nick and Lucy were tired of the attrition in high turnover, with the energy required to keep saying 'hello' to newcomers knowing it would be followed relatively quickly by the losses of saying 'goodbye'. This is, as of today, still the venue used and the gathered group is but a dozen.

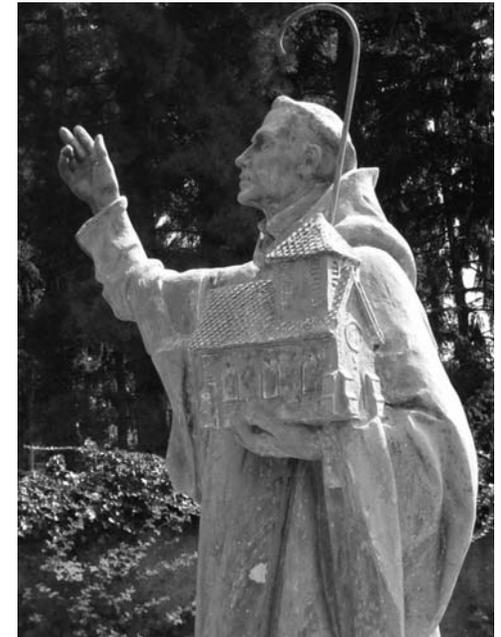
<sup>4</sup> The current notable example that bucks this trend is Exeter Network Church, of several hundred people, led by the Sopers. It is probably significant that it has a 'missional communities' structure (also known as mid-sized communities or clusters), which means it is made up of several smaller communities each with its own calling to a specific identified network.

### The present third chapter – emerging clarity

There is little need to unpack the 50% role Nick has played at Holy Trinity Hotwells since September 2010 as the work of the two churches is not deeply combined. The membership does not much overlap, except for a small Sunday evening gathering, focusing on both word and Spirit and open to both groups, and the purposes of both are honourable and different. I only remark that such an arrangement might be one model that suits the mixed economy and combines continuing to bring life to a relatively small parish with leading a fresh expression. This suits anyone with a passion for the emerging yet who still loves the traditional church, as does Nick, but not someone only wedded to one half of that equation.

In June 2011 Nick and Lucy went away for 24 hours to celebrate a wedding anniversary and stopped en route at Tintern Abbey and spent an enjoyable day as tourists exploring the evocatively substantial remnants of Cistercian life which began there in 1131, being the second Cistercian 'monastic plant' into the these islands emanating from the mother house in

Citeaux. The Cistercian monks at Tintern followed a reformed Benedictine life. Their *Carta Caritatis* (Charter of Love) laid out the values of the rule: obedience, poverty, chastity, silence, prayer and work. With this demanding but holistic way of life, the Cistercians were one of the most successful orders in the 12th and 13th centuries. They brought back active work into living out a monastic rule, both for themselves and a focus on local agricultural workers on their estates, spreading technological advance in agriculture, metallurgy and hydraulic engineering throughout medieval Europe. Over time the group in Tintern also established a few other houses elsewhere.



Statue at Citeaux

## The curious identity of *Crossnet*

### Stay small

What the Crawleys especially noticed, from the site information supplied, was that a fresh Cistercian work would begin with an abbot and twelve lay brothers. A patron in society supplied them with land and capital towards a building.



Here was an example of highly intentional practice, training and sending out their best, a small number of quality people, who in turn would have a wider influence elsewhere. Was this a pattern to attend to? Was this in effect the beginning of a more specific calling that they had not understood until now? Was it just a joke that Lucy had from time to time teased Nick that he was a monk at heart, who loved to retreat to his study to engage with Scripture and to pray?

Was this Cistercian clue also a

different level of explanation of the last seven years? With evident humility, Nick and Lucy acknowledge bringing limited understanding of network planting, past mistakes in strategy, naïvety in attempted partnerships and assumptions about fruitfulness leading to a free standing congregational-sized work. The Tintern discovery was a different shaft of light offering to explain why all their attempts to grow big had been frustrated. The very point was remaining small, in order to be highly intentional among a committed group in growing the habits of a rule of life, including having a focus on being Christian out in the world of work. This life included the dynamic of those thus schooled moving away and beginning another such pattern elsewhere. I have never yet seen elsewhere reflection on the connections between congregational-sized life and Jesus' picture of the vine in John 15. The description of a single vine whose life is in Christ and of which Christians are the branches, evokes the picture of one ancient yet grand vine that might grow up some supporting structure on the side of a

Mediterranean house. Church understood as one congregation, often with its building for gathered worship founded many centuries earlier, fits effortlessly with this. That positive view of longevity expressed in singularity is fortified by most teaching on the oneness of the church.

Yet most vines these days do not exist in this way. They are in vineyards and that is a very different image and reality. This form of life occurs through the intentional dispersal and spread of many small vines, each one cultivated from a shared stock, in order to produce a particular quality of wine or a supply of grapes. The notion of oneness through shared origins is retained, the proof of fruitfulness is still present and may be even higher, but the unit size is quite different. Does Jesus' image in John 15, and wider Church history, necessarily preclude this? I think not. I suggest the burden of the passage is 'abiding' in Christ, shown by being fruitful, not the organisational structure of the vine.

### Focus on particular kinds of learning

An enduring vexing question throughout its seven years has been why *Crossnet* has remained small. As a visitor I asked myself why, with such able leaders, both gifted and used in public teaching in the wider church at events like New Wine, a popular teaching ministry had not grown up? Why with those who had a passion for the kind of worship that helps people encounter God in a transformative way, not merely entertains them, had a significant congregation not been the result? Another image, related to the monastic, but with its own logic occurred to me. I do not present it as adequate by itself, but it also does celebrate the small and intertwines with discipleship. It is to take a higher educational parallel. This may be apt as many of the *Crossnet* members have been university students, or of that potential.

One source of university education is the lecture; it is a presentation made by an expert in their field, disclosing prior learning to aspirants and, in theory, thus inspiring them, embedding in their consciousness both information and a similar love of the subject. It assumes that giving information, by a motivated and able teacher, leads to positive change in students. There are obvious links to the sermon in congregational church and the role of preaching. The results, in both contexts, seem to me to be extraordinarily variable. A few are deeply inspired and changed; some love the system, while others merely endure it, and some even skip it. However, in church life there is little structured equivalent to required

reading that supports the lecture method much less producing an essay demonstrating learning acquired and critical engagement with the topic. I am then not surprised that '**lecture church**' may breed preachers, but it is long-doubted that by itself it produces disciples.

In recent years, not least at conferences or through local church courses, 'lecture church' has been supplemented by '**seminar church**'. At worst these are simply middle-sized groups of passive participants who hear more lectures, perhaps further enlivened visually or through story. At best, this style combines giving new insights with more dialogue, or group work, and/or question and answer with the seminar leader. Alpha and many other process evangelism courses that use open-ended small groups, are positive examples of this dynamic. Once again weaknesses can include almost total lack of prior preparation by the 'students' and little engagement with the inner methodology of the discipline, only with the content of the topic. As a result information can trump transformation. Within the Alpha process, the Holy Spirit weekend is an example of trying to resist this trend. *Crossnet* on Tuesdays at cafés and in the home has been like a positive interactive example of 'seminar church'.

Yet the hidden pattern in the relationships at the heart of *Crossnet* is most akin to '**tutorial church**'. In Oxbridge university colleges the tutorial system requires prior engagement by the student, followed by the presentation of that learning, which is then dissected and evaluated by the tutor on a 1-1 basis. There is nowhere to hide. It is the most labour intensive and searching of the three methods and deemed by Oxbridge to be endemic to their approach, producing higher quality results. It is not possible to do that with very large numbers. Yet it is these sorts of 1-1 relationships that Nick and Lucy have with the members. It is a trajectory of high investment in the small because of its power to transform and to send out. **Here monastery, discipleship and mission meet.**



## Sources of their discipleship

Over coffee in the nearby Costa, Nick Crawley told me his longer history and I realised I was hearing a story of repeating patterns, woven from congruent but differently shaded strands. As a Southampton undergraduate the prime influence upon him was the Navigators. This lay movement invested heavily in small group discipleship with particular emphases: personal prayer, committing a wide variety of Scripture to memory, actively seeking guidance under the Lordship of Christ, demonstrated by obedience to what was disclosed, through serving, loving, humility and sharing faith. If the methodology could be distilled into one New Testament verse, a strong candidate would be 2 Timothy 2.2: 'The things you have heard me say in the presence of many witnesses entrust to reliable men who will also be qualified to teach others.' The characteristic dynamic is handing on the apostolic content, in such a way that others can repeat the process as future leaders. Discipling is for missional leadership. Perhaps for once the emphasis on men should not be softened to people. 1-1 work with other males so that they learn, live and leak Scripture has been an enduring mark of Nick's life. Later chapters in his life, first at Holy Trinity Brompton while working for Barclays in London, and later at Wycliffe as an ordinand, added both systematic theology and charismatic experience, but only served to widen the curriculum offered within this methodology.

A little later Nick encountered the writings of Dallas Willard, who to many is but a lesser known mentor to the better known Richard Foster. Nick holds that history will judge Willard's *The Divine Conspiracy* a great book. It refutes that initial professions of faith in Christ, followed by consequent entry to heaven on death, as at all adequate to describe the Christian life. Rather the practical and demanding rigour of the Sermon on the Mount needs to be held together with an understanding of what Christ has done for us as explained in Romans 3. Thus the condemnation of separating faith and works in the book of James is just what one would expect, in that the kingdom has already come, though only in part, and we are called to participate in it now. This process includes the search for justice, ministry to the poor, and God changing us through the circumstances of life, in which our effort and the work of the Spirit both count. **Pursuing such engaged discipleship is, in most places, not the Great Commission but the great omission.** Yet on the other hand talk of spiritual disciplines needs to avoid legalistic polluting by Pharisaism, and is not to be thought of as negative, punitive and unduly complex. Rather it is straightforward not arcane, and even fun in the sense of being life-giving and joyful. In practice acquiring holy habits

will involve both building distinct life patterns, as well as abstaining from the good for the sake of the better, in order to control desire. Many a serious athlete would readily understand those sentiments. It will involve immersion in prayer, study, serving and chastity (the latter understood as faithfulness, not necessarily singleness). There will be seasons of denial such as Lent and of celebration at festivals, learning to have much and to have little and so in all things to be content. By these means the Christian engages in the life of the kingdom, both in terms of growth within, as well as serving others, giving and sharing faith.



Nick

How does this cash out in 1-1 discipleship? Nick and those he meets with have adopted the following process that they call Pods.<sup>5</sup> They agree on selecting a shorter book from the Bible. In the month that follows, both will read it, clarify why it was written, seek to isolate the heart of its message, decide on its key verses and what the application of all these questions is. Those lessons are then attempted.

Throughout the month Nick prays for them daily and

follows how their lives are going. At the end of the month comes the 'tutorial' when what is being discovered and applied is disclosed. It is a process to teach others to learn through immersion in the text and openness to the Spirit to direct what is being highlighted for their lives. These hour-long 'tutorials' may be face to face or, with *Crossnet* associates living away, done by Skype call. In a 21<sup>st</sup> century western culture often marked by absent fathering, these relationships are significant. My Skype calls to two of the associates confirmed how valuable they found these links. This and a Facebook site express their ongoing dispersed life within *Crossnet*.

## The rise of the apprentice?

One legacy of my previous research visit to River Community Church in Telford has been the avenues opened up to me by following the translation of the Greek word *mathetes* as apprentice, rather than the traditional term disciple. In the Christian world too often discipleship is limited to taking a course, despite fine works down the years from the likes of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, David Watson and more recently, from Bishops Graham Cray and Steven Croft.<sup>6</sup> All agree that the deeper realities beyond course-based discipleship are vital for today's church. However, I increasingly find that the word and its inherited associations are problematic.

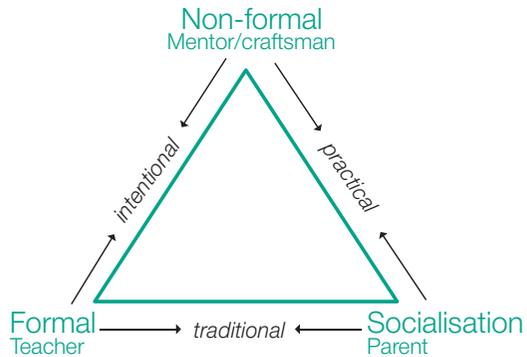
Several virtues in this change of vocabulary have crystallised for me and the *Crossnet* visit fortifies them. Exploring the educational range of learning styles within lecture, seminar and tutorial, with the sharper learning occurring in tutorial, is part of this. Another virtue of using 'apprentice' is that it is an accessible contemporary word that has energy; it immediately evokes images of work, acquiring skills, learning by doing from a master craftsman, and moves away from formal education, merely gaining information, and teacher to student language that some contemporary Bible translations use for disciple. I wonder too whether the term apprentice is socially more widely inclusive than the narrower learning image, favoured by the political drive to have more people in higher education. In society there is also a renewed search to promote apprenticeships as valued ways to gain skills and find enduring and satisfying employment in making things. For some, of course, the term could merely prompt memories of the TV show pitting competitors against one another to become apprentices to Lord Sugar.

At least the word is known and used. However by contrast, if disciple conjures anything for non-Christians it might be a stained glass representation of one of the twelve apostles and a fusty if charming irrelevance. An alternative contemporary use of disciple can mean a devotee fairly blindly following a guru. I think some freedom to find a better word is indicated by the realisation that **'disciple' does not occur in the New Testament outside the gospels and Acts**. I suggest this reveals more of its Jewish cultural particularity, rather than indicating any loss of nerve in becoming like Jesus among early Greek and Roman Christians. It is this issue of becoming Christ-like that is central. Nobody disputes that *mathetes* is related to learning and that it is one of the core words within the gospel texts. Nick Crawley even wonders whether the choice of the

<sup>5</sup> Currently Nick sustains a dozen such relationships and they continue to grow in number.

<sup>6</sup> D. Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship* (London: SCM Press, 2001), D. Watson, *Discipleship* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1983), G. Cray, *Disciples & Citizens* (Nottingham: InterVarsity, 2007), S. Croft, *Jesus People: What the Church Should Do Next* (London: Church House Publishing, 2009).

name of the first gospel, Matthew, is an intended word play on *mathetes*. However, what kind of learning is the question at stake.



**What are the sources of learning?**

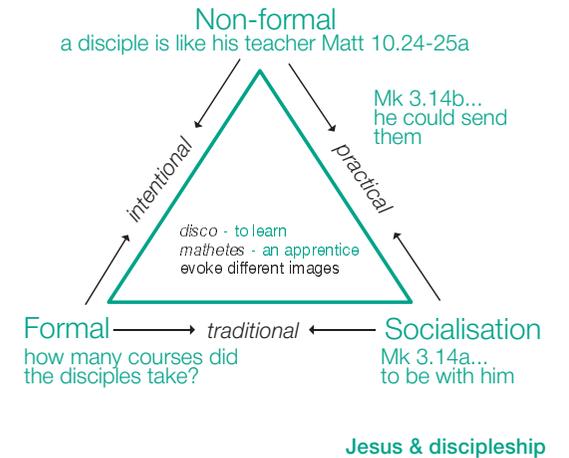
when the Battle of Hastings occurred or the value of the mathematical symbol pi. *Non-formal* learning occurs in demonstration and instruction by a craftsman on using a chisel or repairing a motor vehicle. The three are not unrelated to one another and the accompanying diagram shows which pairs are most traditional, most intentional and inherently practical. In some cases all three are going on. For example, newcomers will be socialised into the workplace and taking day release courses, while acquiring shop floor skills. Thus 'discipleship' could in theory be placed at any point around or within the triangle.

What do we see with the twelve? I find Mark 3.14 a suggestive place to start. In Jesus choosing them and designating them apostles, the listed purposes significantly begin with these words: 'that they might be with him'. That I suggest resonates most with the language of socialisation. They gradually get Jesus, his attitudes, values, relationships as well as mission and identity, by hanging round him. Later when they fall out with each other, argue and compete, the correction is mainly remedial socialisation. It is definitely not the case that when they start out they are packed off on a formal training course at some discipleship school. Yet Mark is quite clear that Jesus' purpose is also 'that he might send them', which connects the word apostles and apostello, meaning to send. That sending is first embodied in Mark 6.7f. What they are sent to do is follow the pattern of what they have seen him do: preach,

I am being helped to reconsider this through the lens of teasing apart three different kinds of learning and then comparing them to the content of the gospels, when they portray the relationships between Jesus and the twelve. There are at least three different colours in the rainbow of learning. Let me use a label, a classic example and provider of each. *Socialisation* learning is occurring when children are taught by parental example and precept how to hold eating implements and what to say at table. *Formal* learning is occurring in being told by a teacher

exorcise and heal. Bear in mind that by this stage both their Christology and their soteriology would not pass level one in theological college. The overall picture at this stage looks to me most like a pattern of non-formal learning, gaining tools of the trade by watching the master craftsman and then being told to have a go yourself. It is about acquiring skills through experience. Yet there is more than that, and Matthew may offer the clue. In his expanded account of this sending in chapter 10 he goes beyond the Markan expectation that not all will receive them well, and has Jesus preparing them to expect suffering through active, even virulent, opposition. Jesus finishes that section with why they should not fear this reaction: 'It is enough for the apprentice that he be as his teacher' (Matthew 10.25). 1<sup>st</sup> century rabbis accepted disciples so that they would become rabbis. Master craftsmen take apprentices with the same intended trajectory. It is not just acquisition of skills, but also becoming 'as the teacher', like the master. Once more we are in the territory of socialisation as well as non-formal learning.

Scary as the prospect rightly is, apprentice is a word suggesting that with Christians what is in view is becoming like the master craftsman; discipleship must not be content with following behind him. Stephen Cherry captures the difference: 'being Christlike ... involves following, but that following is not so much trotting along some distance behind Jesus, as about emulating his way of travelling.'<sup>7</sup> The strand of what is called *theosis* focuses a higher aim. Glimpses of this aspiration and intention includes texts like: 'be perfect as your Father in heaven is perfect' (Matthew 5.48); '... mature, attaining to the full measure of the fullness of Christ' (Ephesians 4.13); 'your life is hidden with Christ in God' (Colossians 3.3); 'through (his promises) you might become partakers in the divine nature' (2 Peter 1.4); and 'we shall be like him for we shall see him as he is' (1 John 3.2). Among the early Church fathers, consider St. Irenaeus of Lyons: God 'became what we are in order to make us what he is himself', or St. Clement of Alexandria: 'he who obeys the Lord and follows the prophecy given through him . . . becomes a god while still moving about in the flesh.' Take St.



<sup>7</sup> S. Cherry, *Barefoot Disciple* (London: Continuum, 2011) p. 10. His italics.

Athanasius: 'God became man so that men might become gods,'<sup>8</sup> or St. Cyril of Alexandria: we 'are called "temples of God" and indeed "gods", and so we are.' While St. Basil the Great stated that 'becoming a god' is the highest goal of all, and St. Gregory of Nazianzus implores us to 'become gods for (God's) sake, since (God) became man for our sake.'

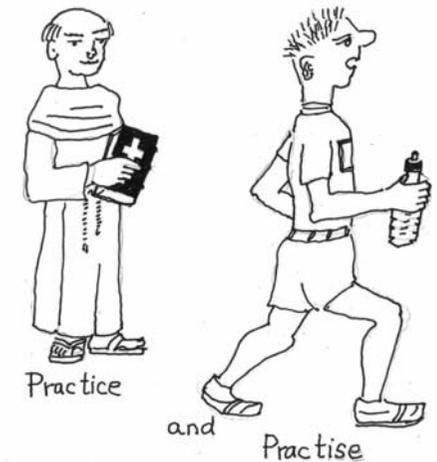
None here are saying we shall be as God ontologically or salvifically. We should rather think of the restoration of the marred image of God, fullness of unity with God, and of similarity of holy character. To revert from this jaw dropping comparison to the prosaic description of learning styles, here once again we meet a preponderance of socialisation and non-formal learning. The place of formal learning is least significant. Not for nothing do theologians of world-renown like Aquinas and Barth compare their total works to insignificant bundles. Yet does this balance reflect in how most western Christians see discipleship? I fear not. Part of the gift the Crawleys are modelling down in Bristol is **recovery of the roles of socialisation and non-formal learning as inherent in Christian community** and that it is more diagnostic in making disciples than formal learning, especially if the latter is separated out from the other two and then mistakenly thought to be cardinal.

### Apprentice monks?

My mind then connects back to the Cistercian clue that has brought Nick and Lucy clarity about their calling. In my view, and it is not yet their language, I think the story hints that they are called to found an urban friary. I find that significant for several reasons. Nationally I have thought for the best part of a decade that new monasticism is one strand of the wide phenomena of fresh expressions of Church. I also think it promises to be one of the most significant ones, in that it is designed to bring transformative life, depth of character and communal counter-cultural example. In the last year alone I have heard of more examples that are being influenced by it. I also recognise that the journey the UK and Ireland Church Army is making to become an Acknowledged Mission Community has been part of my thinking and inner life since 2006. Thus I might be biased. I use friary in that the members deliberately travel out of it, rather than remain monastic within it.

The further connection I make is this. Monks and friars do experience all the three kinds of learning. However, across the rhythm of the day, and examining the breadth of their kinds of activity, linked to the functions of the seven sacred

spaces, the vast majority of time and place leans more towards acquiring holy habits by socialisation and non-formal learning. Only the Scriptorium has a very clear bias towards the formal and even there the copying element is non-formal learning. Monks and friars are formed by participation in the patterns of their community, in which prayer, study and work feature strongly, but which also throw them together in refectory, cloister, garden and chapel. **Habits are acquired by practice.** These become instincts that fortify them when the mind wanders, the body protests and the will rebels. Once more serious athletes would readily sympathise – an image used a few times by letter writers in the New Testament.



Watching *Crossnet*, it was not difficult to spot the seven sacred spaces at work, not that they had consciously modelled this.<sup>9</sup> With home-based church and the years spent using a café, refectory is close to its social centre and the very shape of no. 27 aids this with a warm, large kitchen/dining room just off the entrance hall. It is also true that scriptorium is strong. Both Nick and Lucy spend considerable hours in their studies and preparing teaching ministry, but always with the view to transmit that knowledge. An emphasis on cell, that is, on personal prayer and Scripture, is consistent and one of the community promises. The members are all working people and hard work is valued, the virtue praised and practised in garden.

Though small in number, the community realise the need for communal decision-making. Their chapter is expressed in a Community Leadership Team. One long-standing member made the point to me that the element of shared worship or chapel is the consequence of being the missional community in discipleship, not an end in itself, an emphasis I applaud.



<sup>8</sup> Athanasius, *Contra Gentes* 269:54. Note the subtle use of God and gods to mark differentiation.

<sup>9</sup> G. Lings, *Seven Sacred Spaces* Encounters on the Edge no. 43 (Sheffield: Church Army, 2009).



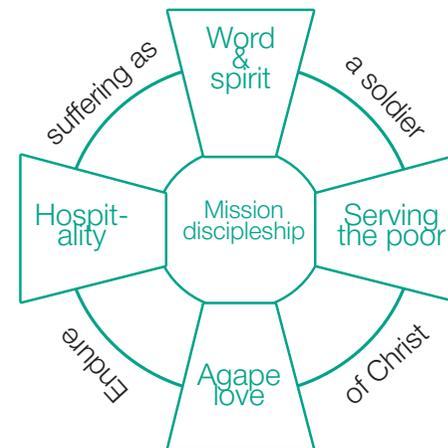
As for cloister, I found it in them being a surprising collection of people, not a self-selecting obvious one, and yet their shared lives often connect.

At present their journey down this path is to make year long vows. These are only from October through until the following June, which permits fresh faces to explore joining over the

summer, includes a summer rest period and allows for the rhythms and lifestyle of younger people to whom a year seems a lifetime. That is a sharp contrast to the permanent fluidity and deferred decision making they seem to live in, a lifestyle enabled and accelerated by the use of social media. The *Crossnet* community members promise the following. Please note these are corporate vows, not those of an individual. Those living away from the community may also make the vows and are deemed associates. They will also have 1-1 time with one of the Crawleys, so it is not a term merely of affectionate memory or loose attachment.

Together, and with God's help, we will:

1. Seek to obey the leading and guidance of the Holy Spirit
2. Set aside time each day for prayer, worship and reading of Scripture
3. Seek to be a blessing to those around us, demonstrating love for one another and working for justice and truthfulness in our relationships
4. Seek to share our faith with those around us in word and deed and to pray for those who do not yet know Jesus
5. Seek to understand how God is making us more like Jesus in every circumstance of life



The *Crossnet* Logo

I am glad of this fifth promise, in that it promotes *theosis*.<sup>10</sup> It also makes space for a recurring feature of the story and the Crawley's lessons in life: the connection between life in the Spirit and suffering. I see its rare value. The logo expresses something of their understanding.

## The Spirit and suffering

At the beginning of this booklet I noted the strand of suffering could be connected to *Crossnet* as the chosen name of this church. The story itself contains delightful accounts of lives transformed, extraordinary timely provision, considerable steps on in discipleship and times of great fun. However, as well as this were hopes deferred, acute disappointments and difficult conflicts. The times of discouragement, seasons of depression and moments of despair can easily be imagined. Nick and Lucy knew from their time in Zimbabwe that **going in mission for God is no guarantee of indemnity from suffering**. A friend and fellow church planter was murdered on a park bench as he prayed, his body shoved in a shallow grave and wife approached with a bogus ransom demand. Lucy explores what the New Testament says about mission martyrdom and suffering in some pages of her PhD.<sup>11</sup> She affirms that the coming of the Spirit is for power and transformation, but rejects tendencies to promote success, complete healing and prosperity, rooting this caveat in the affliction, endurance, suffering and death of Christ. She then shows the width of biblical textual evidence that persecution and suffering is expected, not endless unbroken triumph. One quote may summarise her view:

<sup>10</sup> Lucy is currently writing on apprenticeship and becoming like Christ, drawing on *theosis* thinking, her PhD and the *Crossnet* story, to be published by Cascade but as yet without an agreed title.

<sup>11</sup> L. Peppiatt, *Spirit Christology* (New Zealand: Otago, 2010) pp. 171-177.

The importance of this for mission is that being ambassadors for Christ in the power of the Spirit will not always look like the latter - power glory triumph healing etc., but will often look like the former - weakness, vulnerability, powerlessness, futility and failure. This, however, is no less a work of the Spirit.<sup>12</sup>

She is both compassionate, but also trenchant that often middle class western Christians are spoilt and risk averse. In the *Crossnet* apprenticeship leaders' model, vulnerability and weakness is admitted. The young people are prepared for the possibilities of hardship: there are temptations from an over-sexed and deeply addictive society; they may hit their own marriage difficulties; a parent may die untowardly or both divorce; a child may be born handicapped or die. Let no one say that all fresh expressions are shallow and church-lite. But let more of them know that among their number are those facing these sorts of challenges head on.<sup>13</sup>

### Parenting and discipleship



The Crawleys

A few years ago Nick received a prophetic word that he would act as a father to young men. It made sense of his background story, the propensity of *Crossnet* to become a home to them and the patterns of apprenticeship he has with them. The Cistercian strand provokes my additional comment that the words abbot and Abba are strongly related. Indeed in the Desert Fathers the latter is used. I think it no accident that Lucy Crawley has also written in this area and I believe perceptively and wisely

interprets how good discipling can be seen through the lens of what makes for wise parenting, especially in teenage years, while aiming to raise grown-up young adults. I do not wish to steal her thunder and so only list the headlines. The full text can be obtained from her or The Sheffield Centre.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>12</sup> L. Peppiatt, *Spirit Christology*, p. 172.

<sup>13</sup> Further readings on the centrality of suffering are found in Northumbria Community's Celtic Daily Prayer, in the Aidan readings throughout April.

<sup>14</sup> [sheffieldcentreresearch.wordpress.com](http://sheffieldcentreresearch.wordpress.com)

Good parents:

- Prepare their children to leave home
- Strike a balance between control and freedom
- Prepare children to take responsibility, to make good decisions of their own, and to form healthy relationships
- Give children the freedom to fail
- Adapt to the different phases of a child growing up
- Delight in their children's differences (from themselves and from their siblings)
- Impart values by teaching them and modelling them
- Act as guides and friends throughout a child's life
- Depend on their grown-up children when they need to in exercising humility and modelling teachability

Discipling in some Christian circles has been an appalling code word for control and even abuse. There is no tinge of that here. Alongside intentional discipleship has been considerable fun, not unlike the teasing and safe irreverence that occurs in healthy families with teenagers and young adults. I like the instincts that balance giving shared values and respecting individuality. I like the trust, mutuality, realism, space and flexible patterns. It fairly describes what I saw in practice. The traditional gap between vicar and congregation has disappeared here. I cannot fail to close the circle by noting that parenting is dominated by socialisation and non-formal learning.

### It is a sodality

I regret ending the issue without being able to spell out more fully the growing importance I attach to what is called sodality and modality thinking. It has been around in mission circles since 1973 and the foundational document is still available on the web.<sup>15</sup>

This opaque technical term refers to specialist groups recruited out of the mainstream or modal; they exhibit high commitment, are offered high support and are selected vocationally. Civic examples would be the police or fire service, or military ones like the SAS or paras. In the Church it has been the orders and the mission societies. God has consistently raised them up in times of Church weakness or corruption, to exercise his mission and renew his Church. Some argue without them it might well have perished or foundered.<sup>16</sup>

What is still not widely accepted in Protestant circles is that sodalities are ecclesial, whereas Catholics have always known this. They are church but in a different way to settled, territorial church that tends to make minimal demands on its members.<sup>17</sup> *Crossnet* is an example of just this. Some, not all, fresh expressions will be. **It would be so helpful if modal church would recognise the sodal are church but different**, and accept that they will tend to be small, highly intentional, and dispersed through multiplication. They will be more like Jesus' images of yeast and salt - almost invisible yet highly influential. Without them we could look flat and be tasteless.

### Modality and Sodality - characteristics

	modality	sodality
Secular parallels	town - diverse	fire service - particular
Military parallels	infantry - gain and hold ground	paratroops - elite: gain objectives

Church feature	in modality	in sodality
Place	settled	mobile, flexible
Typical Structure	parish, diocese	order, mission society
Task	sustain what is	grow what isn't yet
Scope of purpose	general	specific
Demand on members	minimal	high
Mutual support	adequate	high
Who joins?	self-inclusive	vocational so exclusive
Weakness	looks inwards easily satisfied	tempted to superiority excessive work ethic
What does it feel like?	safe, stable	risky, exciting

<sup>15</sup> Typing in R. Winter, *The Twin Structures of God's Redemptive Mission* should find it, as will entering Winter: *Sodality and Modality*.

<sup>16</sup> A. Walls, *The Missionary Movement in Christian History* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1996) chapter 2.

<sup>17</sup> For my far more detailed explanation, including how the sodal and modal interact to mutual benefit, go to The Sheffield Centre blog: [sheffieldcentreresearch.wordpress.com](http://sheffieldcentreresearch.wordpress.com)

## Which images to choose?

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So *Crossnet* community evokes many images for me. It is like a small field with a number of small vines, each dressed, pruned and fruiting. It could be called a tutorial based church in which learning is highly intentional, practical and accountable. It is deliberately small like the English Cistercian beginnings at Tintern, and, like the first twelve around Jesus, does not major on formal learning. Yet both reproduced apprentice trained leaders who in turn influenced others. Such is the role of ecclesial sodality. It is in many ways like a small urban friary and finds, in co-operation with the word and the Spirit, more transformative energy is released in the socialisation of shared daily life and the intentional patterns of acquiring skills from parent figures, as well as putting them into practice.

The small first snowdrops in January are pleasing if you stop to notice them. The combination of delicacy and robustness is extraordinary as they push their way up in a harsh unpromising winter environment. Yet these fragile creations are signs of the coming of springtime. Is *Crossnet* such a snowdrop? May a springtime for the Church not be too long coming.

George Lings: 4<sup>th</sup> February 2012

Cartoons: Tim Sharp



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