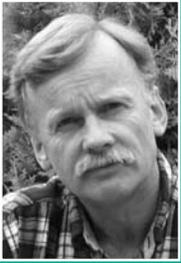


55: Thirst



Though much good mission work occurs in schools, fully-fledged school based church is less common than we thought. This booklet tells the story of *Thirst*, a fresh expression of Church that serves the parents and staff of the local Church of England primary. How did they begin? What are its values? Begun by a non-stipendary pioneer, this story also raises the challenging questions of how we resource these new churches beyond a good start, George Lings went to find out...

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Encounters on the Edge



no. 55:

Thirst

Go to a place neither of you have been before

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Discoveries about fresh expressions of Church from The Sheffield Centre

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Come to Cambridge

Think of a fresh expression of Church in Cambridge. Imagine an intellectual group with elite students, set among bevvies of bicycles, glimpses of gowns and mortar boards, world heritage site buildings, manicured grounds running down to the Cam, replete with idling punts, energetic eights and those light blue oars. Then dismiss all that.

Come to Romsey Town, in southeast Cambridge, the wrong side of the railway station and heading out towards the airport. Enter narrow roads, with heart stopping chicanes created by traffic calming schemes, and rows of small terraced housing, where a three-up, three-down can still cost £300,000 but many people rent. Walk down its Mill Road, with cafés, betting shops and local stores. It is a part of town which would have significant deprivation Z scores, except that the PhD student lives next door to the single parent mother. Here the holistic work of the Christian charity Romsey Mill began in 1980, through the vision of five churches in east Cambridge, to meet the needs of young people on their streets. The project was originally led by Peter Phenna, then vicar of St Martin's Church, and has spawned many interrelated projects. The needs are still there.¹



St Philip's is a one-and-a-half-form entry multicultural school in Romsey Town. This CE Aided primary school is nearly 50% larger than the national average of c.250, with over 40% of pupils from minority ethnic families. 27% of pupils claim free school meals and there are three times the national average of children with Child Protection plans. There are families with issues of domestic violence, substance dependency and members in prison.² Because it is inclusive of the variety in its catchment area, the school has had to



¹ See <http://www.romseymill.org> for more information about this charity.

² The data was taken from a letter written in support of a funding application by *Thirst* by the St Philip's Head Teacher, Mrs Siobhan Rouse, May 2011.

work hard in recent years to raise attainment and is now in line with national averages. It, creditably, has an enviable local reputation as a caring school and community which supports whole families. One parent and *Thirst* member called it 'the hidden jewel of Romsey Town' and that plaudit has deservedly made its way into the school prospectus.

So why and how did a fresh expression of Church become part of this school, serving this area? **Truly school-based church seems to us to be rare, but this is one of them.**

Laying pioneer foundations



Sue Butler

Sue Butler could be thought of as a third generation pioneer. She has never seen inconveniences, like lack of money or people, as a reason to hold back from following where God has led. From a Romany background, her grandfather became a Christian and it was a long 18 years later that his wife and many of their seven children came to Christ. One of them, John Barr, grew up and was called into local church leadership. After links with the Shaftesbury Mission at Victoria Dock, he became the pastor of an Elim church in Canning Town which later grew to several hundred by the mid 1990s. There followed a widening of his sympathies and connections, shown by close links with both Restorationist leaders like John Noble and with the Anglican Mayflower Centre. His daughter, then Sue Barr, also embraced surprises. She made a profession at the tender age of 5, with a further significant encounter with the life of the Spirit when she

was 14. Other family members too pushed beyond their inherited stereotypes, with Sue's mother becoming a teacher and Sue herself at 18 starting to attend a local Anglican church. With the ending of a close relationship there, she partly moved back to the Elim church, but also had some time out from church altogether and went through struggles with God.

Though born in Surrey, from an early age Sue's emotional roots were put down in the East End of London and cemented in 1982 by meeting and marrying Paul Butler, who hailed from Dagenham. Out of a shared passion for God, they sensed a call which took them in 1986 to a two year course at a Bible college in Texas, Christ for the Nations. However, at that time, they found living in the

States so disagreeable and disillusioning that they came back after one year and ended up staying away from church. The next three years saw many changes: the birth of Sam their first child, going through difficulties in wider family, watching tensions in local church life, and joining a church planting team involved in rescuing a struggling church in West Ham. Sue's instincts to pray, listen and act, knowing better what to do, as well as learning to mentor others, became more established in this period.

To their surprise, and that of Christ for the Nations, they went back in 1992 and were allowed, and even funded, to finish what they started. They stayed on in the USA with Sue becoming a librarian and Paul responding to encouragement to do Masters level study, both working at the Southern Methodist University, Perkins School of Theology. It was from here that he was encouraged to take that further at an Oxbridge location.

So by wonderful circuitous wandering, now with a second child Alex, in 1996 they went to Cambridge, being nearer to the East End and family than Oxford. He completed an MPhil and she did an English degree at Anglia Ruskin. In hindsight, values and patterns were being laid down. These include the following: Life in Christ is not restricted to being found in one denomination. Life itself contains significant ups and downs. **Even clear encounters with God are not proof against times of doubt and difficulty.** Church is not something one always wants to be part of, indeed it is easy to see it as a problem for many people. Yet something about the Anglican experience was slowly drawing both of them, not least the ability to be free to keep moving geographically and intellectually. That value may be linked to Sue's Romany background and two generations of pioneering forebears.

It is easy to imagine that pioneering is not just starting from scratch, but is also about **rapid beginnings. That is not what this story shows.** If anything, apparently dramatic entries onto the stage for folk in Scripture like Abraham, Moses and David, all reveal much longer periods of preparation, some elements of which only make any sense in hindsight when the fingerprints of God start to be disclosed.

Underground water starts to collect



An aquifer is defined as an underground layer of water-bearing rock that is permeable or unconsolidated. Water collects there which can later be extracted. This story is about the gestation, birth and life of a church eventually called *Thirst*, a name that clearly has to do with liquids and life. So I have likened its story here to the slow gathering of water underground, that was unnoticed but later would become visible and refreshing.

Finding a school for the children, while not yet returned from the USA, was a challenge. So Sue's parents were sent to do a reconnaissance. They met the then head, Jill Pauling, and as this school has a clear evangelical ethos they found themselves talking about people in the Christian world who had helped or inspired them. The head mentioned a certain John Barr and asked if Sue's parents knew him. 'That's me,' said her dad and then the rest of the interview seemed not to matter. So the depth of link between the Butlers and the school started to be forged out of relationships and unlikely connections, now deepened by the natural tie of having the children there. The Butlers tried over the next few years to escape Cambridge and return to the East End but by 2000 were concluding they were meant to stay. The relationship with the head also deepened, and as she lived some way out in Suffolk, a few nights a week she stayed at the Butlers' home. **Hospitality is a key value in this story but takes many forms.** It was Jill who made the connections yet deeper and wider by one day suggesting that Sue should consider becoming a teaching assistant at St Philip's. The parent was now also a staff member. The latter role then grew into Sue doing the teachers' graduate training programme and teaching at yet another school part time.

The gang of three

Other enduring patterns were also being laid down. Sue and two other parents with similar aged children, Rachel Drury and Ruth Chamberlain, discovered one another in the years following 1996. They were among the gaggle of mums who collect outside the school and continue to chat up and down its alley which leads off the estate into the school grounds. This feature of the lane is striking and contributes to the character of the school and its location. In one way it is hidden away, does not advertise itself and is a secret to be discovered. In another, it is very much its own territory and place which forms its own distinct culture and haven of values, amidst a secular and troubled locality.



Rachel, Ruth and Sue

Sue, Rachel and Ruth would pray in this liminal lane for the welfare of the school and its community, as well as for themselves, their own children, the thriving of their fathers and any current issues. They also frequented one another's houses for coffee and prayer, or at the local Sainsbury's café and later on in the story at Costa in town. In 2001, a monthly Friday prayer breakfast drawing a wider group became established around the commonality of connection to St Philip's school. Friday would become an important day. Being real and being prayerful was what was being modelled, not enforced. Unknown to them, these were the first pools of what would nourish the birth of the later church in the school. The group was socially, nationally and academically wide from the start, reflecting those who were in the area, including a few from other world faiths. A number of those who came did belong to other churches, but some were disenchanted with any triumphalism, sometimes linked to being charismatic, and had been burnt out in churches with an evangelical work ethic that asked too much too soon.



Lane

What can be good marks of Anglicanism began to commend themselves: something of **the freedom to decide how much to belong, the permission and even encouragement to think, as well as space to be**, alongside others

who may not be the same. So they found ways to model a living, but not simplistic, faith that was earthed and realistic, but also attractive and attracting. Other parents without a faith, brought by friends and drawn by the hospitality and honesty, were in effect socialised into these values and started to become Christians, including ones held to be rather troublesome parents and complainers. Transformation of the needy is a powerful sign to others and a great encouragement to those who pray for them.

Slow and steady

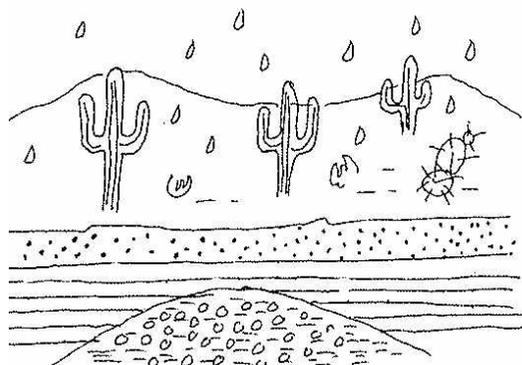
There was no quick or immediate leap onwards from this 'group of friends who pray' that could be up to 20 at a full gathering, to forming church in the school. Members came and went as their time in Cambridge started and ended. Ruth spent more time in teaching and from 2003-2009 Sue also was seeing through her teacher training and then working as a supply teacher. Paul meanwhile had been exploring a call to ordination and went to Ridley to train for 2005-2007. As a group they wondered where it was all going, as some of their children began to move on to secondary school.

I mention all this because in the mixed economy, the **older churches appear timeless, having been there as long as anyone can remember. They don't think about beginnings because there is no one left who was there then.**

The new churches can appear to pop up as rapidly and friskily as meerkats out of a hole in the desert. Now you don't see them and now you do. I suggest that starting an event can be quick, but forming a presence takes time. A bottle of fizzy water may have the lid lifted open with an entertaining popping sound. However, the formation of an underground reservoir, that can be a lasting source, will be the work of years.

Today I think there is some pressure on churches who want to be more effective. They accept the need and validity of offering a greater diversity of ways to

engage with their neighbours, yet with a commonality across them of offering life changing encounter with Christ. So they are tempted to begin something



too soon; worse to copy something else and in effect buy a 'fresh expressions product' off the shelf. Sue Butler has been asked frequently, 'How can we replicate what you have done?'

The idea of copying is the giveaway and a bit of a red rag to her. When feeling strong enough she is likely to reply, 'Build relationships for ten years, pray for a decade and see what God tells you to do.' Not exactly what enquirers want to hear, but an important counter to the immediacy of our culture, as reinforced daily by technological advances that always seek to reduce waiting times, the prevalence of advertising designed to make us discontent and desiring, and a rise in expectations that the future must be better than the past. The name of this fresh expression of Church, *Thirst*, taps into desire unfulfilled, but if that was all, those tasting it would leave still thirsty. Having supplies of thirst quenching liquid is far more than buying good coffee and providing good company (though it is that); it is the laying down of the aquifers of life in God and of trustworthy, enduring relationships. Without them, the danger is froth, which does not quench thirst.

Call to action

So things might have rested but for two factors, one positive and one potentially negative. In 2006, Paul and Sue renewed friendship with a Ghanaian Pastor, Paul Dapaah, they had met in the USA all those years ago. He was now very senior in his denomination and invited them to Ghana. When called on to speak impromptu, they were prayed for by others and the strong 'word' to them was 'continue what you are doing'. They returned with resolve. The other experience was the comment from a Christian leader's wife asking of the non-Christian parents who had come to faith: 'Why don't these people come to church?' Within Sue, the distinctly irate response leapt up, 'Why would they want to? Why would you want to sit on hard wooden seats? Why choose to suffer from moralising intellectual lectures? Why be forced to give? Why be confused and perhaps shamed by not knowing when to sit and stand?' **She found herself vexed at the arrogance of the imposed assumption that existing church was entirely suitable;** a view that was devoid of understanding that the church is a peculiar sub-culture, practiced in an alien building that most people today don't know what to do in, at an inconvenient time and day. Even if they have to go for some reason, they fear being embarrassed by this ignorance, and by the image of a stiff starchy social group that can't cope with children misbehaving or running round. Even some experienced Christian parents struggle with the latter.

Sue found herself asking why nobody knew this. No sooner was all this in her head, than she sensed God's retort, 'Where would they go?'

So the story turns from preparation to vocation. Like with Moses' years in the desert, the burning bush suddenly appears and the call comes. Some sense of self-deprecation, as with Moses, was also present: 'All we know is what we do on Fridays, we are friends who pray, we are real and we offer hospitality.'

Is it a church?

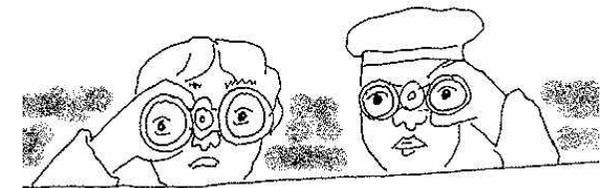
It was fascinating to hear Sue, Rachel and Ruth, who are the nearest to being joint founders, talk about the history, which came alive as they told it, rather like what can happen looking at old family photos. They are very clear that despite stories of transformation it all evolved slowly; there was no rocket science, **they just did what was natural to do in good relationships**. David Male is part of the Ridley staff in Cambridge and has been responsible for Sue's OPM training from 2008-2011.³ He commented that the group's DNA might be coded: pray, love, relate, create. It is pretty fair to the order of the story, and 'create', in the sense of bringing something to birth, comes last, being a consequence of all the other elements. *Thirst* was what was born. As the three talked together about the earlier years and also the life of *Thirst* since 2007, against the backdrop of connections with local churches and in relation to the diocese, it was striking that they knew what they were doing was spiritually far more than a coffee morning. However, they never used the word 'church' about *Thirst* or what they were doing, but they would use the church word freely about every other ecclesial group.

Yet, when I naughtily asked them what those who came to *Thirst* thought it was, immediately and unreservedly they told me that those who come think it is church. Those who come call it our church, and they couldn't wait for Sue to be 'done' (she was to be priested at the end of June summer 2012) because then they would have their own proper 'vicar'. So, **oddly, the youngest Christians and those still on the journey to faith are ebullient about it being church, but the group of leaders are bashful or reticent about it**. From time to time they pick up hesitation or incredulity from the wider church about what they are doing as being church; this seems to make them doubt or hesitate whether they really should use the term. Or, it might be that the long gestation, when it was but a group, not yet obviously a church, has hindered

³ He edited the book *Pioneers for Life* (Abingdon: Bible Reading Fellowship, 2011), having previously led a network church in Huddersfield, see Encounters on the Edge no. 19.

them in recognising that a change has taken place. To extend the analogy of gestation, the foetus has become a child. In other words, the group has become a church. The unnamed 'bump' is now a recognisable named person. In one way it is the same person, but now with a different status, and that young being needs to be encouraged to make its way in the world and evolve relationships with others, through stages of dependence, independence and interdependence.⁴

I could not help noticing too that in another conversation when I asked whether what they were doing was a bridge - between school and church and a link to the wider church - the instinctive answer was to say, 'No, it's a ditch.' The image is evocative. It is low down, not high up. Muddy, not clean. Waded through, not driven over. Wet and cold, not dry and warm. You are in it, not over it. It also marks a dividing point - in this case between the church and those beyond it. In relation to the needs and patterns of the parents there is mess; in relation to the wider church there is uncertainty, a sense of being hidden and lacking recognition and perhaps value. So can their lowly, muddy, messy, hidden work really be church?



Stuck in the mud or
strategically placed

I think there is a back story here that exacerbates this problem. I noticed early on in the story of fresh expressions, since *Mission-shaped Church*, that the 'of Church' was easily lost and I was sure this was a mistake. I realise too that contemporary Anglicanism is still processing some basic but relatively new questions: 'What is church?' and 'When is something church?' For centuries we never had to ask because it was assumed everybody knew, like much Anglican theology which is implicit not systematised. As yet there are few agreed and widely disseminated answers. Some are really rather unhelpful because they are framed around ministerial categories that either may not apply or which distort the answer. Others are based on having the use of dedicated sacred buildings that are part of the problem, and ministries that mainly flourished in Christendom. None of these are the very stuff of fresh

⁴ This progression is the background structure to Stephen Covey's guru status book, *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People* (London: Simon and Schuster, 1992), pp. 49-52.

expressions of Church, so there is a search for something deeper and yet faithful. There is a debate about whether the answers are derived from practices, or as I and some others think, whether it comes from relationships that embody values and which only then lead to practices.⁵

A balloon debate?



Lucy

I was encouraged in my thinking about this on my visit by my conversation with Lucy Fyfe, a Scottish Sikh regular at *Thirst*. She teased out her dislike of religion and her love of spirituality, through the image of a balloon and the hot air inside it. She likened the balloon's outer skin to practices and the air within to values and living encounter with God. It is easy to see the balloon's skin and to say, 'Look, there is a balloon.' However, it floats and moves because of what the skin contains, not the skin itself. It can seem as though there is nothing to see inside the balloon, but pop it and hear the bang, watch it collapse into an untidy inconsequential heap and clearly something vital was lost. What I treasure about this analogy is that, on the one hand, the image does not dispense with the skin, for it does give shape to what is within and protects the inner air that would otherwise dissipate. Yet on the other hand it is clear that

the envelope does not fully define, much less animate, the hot air balloon. Indeed such a name, 'hot air balloon', does better justice to the inherent pairing between the two. So, returning to considering church; **relationships without known practices tend to anarchy, but practices lacking living relationships tend to dead legalism.** The churchiness of the Church of England is in more danger of the latter.

All this is a backdrop to the fact that those involved in seeing new things come to birth are sometimes reluctant to confidently name them as church.

⁵ Davison and Milbank's *For The Parish* (Norwich: SCM, 2010) argues for the centrality of practices. Michael Moynagh and I share a view that it is relationships with God in Christ, one another, those outside the church, and those in differing parts of the church, which are foundational. These lead to practices but are not explained by them. See Michael Moynagh, *Church for Every Context* (London: SCM, 2012), pp. 104-119.

In addition, it is entirely possible in some contexts they are sure that what has begun is church, but are also sure that this word should not be used, because in the context it would alienate those coming. We need to be adept at spotting what is church and adroit in using other vocabulary when appropriate.

Pulling back from that aside and returning to the story, in 2007 the long period of a vital, but in some ways hidden, work ended. What I much earlier likened to an underground aquifer now began to bubble to the surface and since has become a visible running stream that genuinely relieves the thirst of those who come. The call and hope was to take the ethos of the Friday meetings, with the contacts they had, and to meet weekly in the School's community lounge.

Amanda is exploring how to take *Thirst* values further, though now living near Brecon.

'We struggled to find a church in which we felt we belonged. It was draining in some churches, being judged and preached at. I used to feel "I stand still for long enough I become invisible". *Thirst* is people who allow me to grow emotionally and spiritually. I am supported on my journey through much prayer and laughing.'

Streams come to the surface

The school welcomes the plan



Sue Butler and Siobhan Rouse

The head teacher, Mrs Siobhan Rouse, came to the school in 2004, continuing its explicit evangelical Christian ethos. She took the proposal to the governors' meeting and in July replied very positively. She understood aright that it was 'for parents at the school' which was welcomed by the governors as helping to 'fulfil our mission to serve the community of Romsey Town'. The community lounge would therefore be

offered rent free; so far very good. The letter went on that it would 'promote closer links with the parish church', and was dubbed a 'new expression', 'an informal Christian meeting'. Actually it turned out to be for those very people who did not want to have to handle closer links with the parish church, and it was church, not a meeting. The gravitational pull from elements of folk religion, from Christendom mission that offers goods and services in church, and from more recent intentional mission through a 'come to us' mindset makes all this understandable, but mistaken. I was therefore intrigued in conversation this summer that when I asked Mrs Rouse the open question what she thought *Thirst* now was, she immediately and warmly exclaimed, 'Oh, it's a church.'

In September 2007, Sue Butler shared her plans with her friends and laid out the story that had led to taking things further. **As with all wise church planting, the ethos and practice of the church was shaped by what had proved to work in the prior mission.** That's what 'mission-shaped church' was meant to mean when we coined the term in the 2004 report of that name. They stayed with meeting on a Friday morning at 9.30, and because of the

hospitality that has been endemic from day one, she called it a form of Café church for the school parents. The significance of offering refreshments was highlighted in her presentation: 'People talk over food, it helps with safety, security and appeasement of embarrassment.' So the pattern would always include some variant on coffee and cake, and monthly would be a fuller breakfast. In her words, it was for people who 'would never darken the doors of a formal church gathering but would quite happily socialise and talk after dropping their children at school'. The role of prayer among the core group of six, which had been foundational to the story, was emphasised. But this would be built upon, through the aim to offer prayer for those coming as part of the morning, after the open group section had finished. This would both show love to others, but would also be a chance for God's intervention in people's lives. All of this is creating church, often described through the theological jargon of being incarnational.⁶

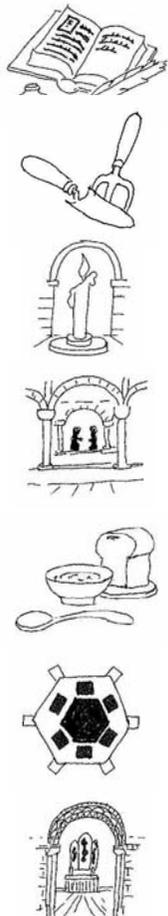
From the start there was a hope that Friday would be but a beginning, which might multiply into further equally intimate groups on other days, perhaps with different flavours. Sue has never imagined that *Thirst* would become one large church of 200, but rather hoped it might become 20 groups of 10, some around particular needs like substance dependency. The style of meeting militates against a larger size and the current premises do not allow it. She is actually anxious that getting bigger would lead to loss of intimacy and depth. Move *Thirst* into the school assembly hall and its relational character would be destroyed and 'just another' public worship event would ensue.

In some ways this reproductive element remains to be realised. This has been partly because of lack of time as Sue has been through OPM training from 2008-2011 and Paul has been a curate in a village outside Cambridge. However, in unforeseen ways multiplication has occurred, in that some key members, who might have led other days, have moved elsewhere in the country, taking the genius of *Thirst* with them and beginning to explore what might grow in their context. Furthermore, a Tuesday Bible study led by Ruth has been an enduring further step, much appreciated by others I spoke to. Depending on skills and the availability of leaders, like Nicky Smith, Amanda Rose and Rachel Drury, community arts groups and informal cookery classes have sprung up in which people are encouraged in gifts they already have, or discover talents they never knew they had. In addition, an Alpha group has run from time to time with

⁶It is doubtful that we can really emulate the incarnation of God the Son, crossing from divinity to humanity, eternity to time, perfection to fallenness, spirit to flesh, and being all-in-all to cultural particularity. In addition, the incarnation is never commanded of us in Scripture; it ended at the Ascension and is literally impossible in that human beings are enfleshed already. What I suspect is meant is better described as inculturation.

encouraging response. Sue initially resisted Alpha as too white, middle class and talking head. However the evident success of Nooma, which has similar limitations, knocked down that objection. They do Alpha Express in which the talks are halved to 20 minutes. If anything, the similarity to televised celebrity culture that watching a slick DVD creates makes it easier to watch, learn, and then say what you like.

Many spaces are needed to make church



Once more it seems to me that church is a much richer reality than one function and one time. Using seven sacred spaces⁷ thinking, the lane to the school is like cloister, the Friday morning begins in refectory and then provides chapel, the leadership which is always open to member suggestions is chapter. The arts and cookery gatherings on other days explore aspects of garden and the Tuesday Bible study offers scriptorium. Cell is up to individuals but there are some one-to-one prayer partnerships that could be linked to this. Only when all this is added together does the fuller multi-level or multi-faceted picture emerge. Once more, to reduce church to the chapel function is to fail to understand what is going on, and to invite unhelpful comparisons between it and Sunday morning in a parish church.

Wisely the leaders also foresaw that constantly giving out could mean they seldom received. Although they also belonged to other churches in which to receive, they sometimes gathered on a Wednesday night, with husbands, holding a private shared meal with a communion service. In addition Sue Butler meets weekly one-to-one with Nicky Smith as prayer partners, pursuing a deeper spiritual journey and drawing on writings of others. Nicky is an art teacher in the school and long time supporter of the work. All core leaders have spiritual directors, and some have been on retreats together.

In addition, the architecture of the part of the school which includes the community lounge works as several spaces. The lounge itself is immediately off to the side of the school entrance; the glazed doors make it both visible, accessible yet distinct, with a threshold to cross.

Thirst members know this is a barrier to surmount for newcomers and

⁷ See George Lings, *Seven Sacred Spaces* Encounters on the Edge no. 43 (Sheffield: Church Army, 2009) for fuller exploration of these locations and their likely meaning seen in Benedictine, Franciscan, Celtic and new monasticism.

that conscious invitations are needed. Yet the lounge has zones that enable smaller sub groups to form naturally: the distinct bar area gathers some, there are two areas that are almost alcoves which facilitate natural one-to-one or one-to-few meeting, as well as the main space. It is a great location and easily lends itself to seven sacred spaces dynamics. It has none of the sterility of a rectangular box set out clearly with one dominant function. That is **a danger for both church auditoria and open plan offices, both of which can reduce the diversity and untidiness of life, callings and gifts**, characteristic of human flourishing.



Nicky Smith and Sue Butler

Sue has found some evocative quotes from an Australian café church and a couple in particular I found striking. At café church you will find: 'caffeine, truth in deep places, shadows in which to hide'. That resonates with my instincts for varied places, and safe spaces, in all the locations in which we live and work.

Another said, 'You will not find solutions to life's mysterious problems; instead you will find ways to help support you through the suffering.' Nor has this sentiment been an idle one. The Butler family have had major episodes with health and family problems, which have not been hidden. It helpfully nuances that in any ministry of healing which does see changes occur, the healers themselves are wounded people, and the questions of why bad things happen to good people are real ones. Then talk is





of deliverance in and through suffering, not from it. As *Celtic Daily Prayer* has it, 'May He guide you through the wilderness and protect you through the storm.' Sue reminded me, from Vanstone's *The Stature of Waiting*, of the danger of looking only for a reason and purpose behind suffering and failing to accept the bad parts.⁸

What I found fascinating too was that Sue had made the connection to the quite famous

quote, made to, not by, Vincent Donovan, but noted in the preface to the second edition of *Christianity Rediscovered*: 'You must have the courage to go with them to a place that neither you nor they have been before.'⁹ This was exactly true here. The group were stepping out of the comfort zone of private meetings by invitation in one of their own houses; they were going onto the school's property, needing permission and goodwill. **They were trying something for which there were few if any national precedents.** In addition they were trusting that the parents would take a fresh risk and cross the threshold into an occupied community lounge and mix with a new group, and explore new ideas and commitments. Truly it was a place neither of them had been before.

A mission statement was coined in 2007: 'To permeate the local community with the life of God, through refreshment, relationships, renewal and regeneration.' At that stage, the name *Thirst* was but one of nine possible choices. The first public meeting was November 9th and they expected to meet in the small room off the community lounge. As it fell out, from day one they had to do plan B, when 30 turned up. Over the ensuing weeks it settled to an average of 15 mothers with five children at the crèche stage, though numbers can range from 21 to only two. However, like all churches, there is a larger number of people, up to 60, who feel they belong, and any of 40 of which might attend on any given Friday in a year. **Publicity was minimal and that seems to me entirely appropriate for such a strongly relational church.** It would in my view be a mistake for *Thirst* to move to being an

⁸ W.H. Vanstone, *The Stature of Waiting* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 2004).

⁹ Vincent Donovan, *Christianity Rediscovered* (London: SCM, 1982) p. vii.

informational and attractational church. Another mark of the relational nature of this church is that Sue, Rachel and Ruth between them may put in 50 hours a week in pastoral work with the members.

What happens?

A pattern of weekly meeting has established. Each month includes breakfast on the first Friday, which is the meeting that week. Coffee, tea and juice is accompanied by selections from pain au chocolat, croissants, sausages and cheese. Some weeks will include 'hot spot' which means testimonies. Stories of people's pasts and what God is doing in their lives now builds history into community and nurtures expectation. Other weeks are more overtly devotional, giving people more space and time to reflect using the multi-sensory stations approach brought in through alternative worship, and it fits with the artistic strand running through *Thirst*. Further weeks, from time to time, have made use of the Nooma DVD materials presented by Rob Bell. All it needs is a telly, DVD player and the box set, a relatively low tech and low preparation way to offer teaching. I was intrigued that the **members relish seeing these more than once**, and cries of 'Oh good, its Rob Bell again' and 'That's one of my favourite ones' break out. I suppose in today's culture of celebrity, and in particular since Princess Diana, those that dare to make themselves vulnerable are valued. Thus this approach fits very well. Seeing someone talking on the telly also conveys a contemporary source of authority.



Nooma discussion group

In the end is this so very different from older patterns in which people travelled to hear famous preachers and chose their local church upon that basis? It got dressed up in the name of a search for good teaching, but I always thought it was hard to deny that the attraction of the teacher came into it. In addition, I hear that some people on the road to commitment and faith want, and are now in more places allowed, to go

through the Alpha course several times. So here choosing the Nooma episode and repeating it is welcomed, and points being made sink in deeper and further aspects are detected. Sometimes a Nooma headline is taken into the Tuesday Bible study and further connections to Scripture are made and applications discussed. In a wider Church that has a liturgical and lectionary approach, this repetition should occasion no criticism or surprises.

Listening and responding

Also key in the meetings is the instinct of the leaders to listen to the members, a road that values being vulnerable and being voluntary and repudiates the power and control that still characterised attitudes elsewhere in the Church. That listening might occur during the previous weeks and months of a chance meeting in the school lane, in planned pastoral contacts, during the Tuesday morning Bible study, or it might be live on Friday. In that sense the interactive nature of this church, with its mixed ability membership, is better educational practice than many traditional ones exhibit, which too often remain in talk and chalk mode, even if today it's lecture and PowerPoint. There is a tension between not surrendering to being led by the members, while truly waiting for permission from them to tackle topics and to hear what they are asking for. It is not unlike ensuring the family have a healthy diet and yet also get treats and favourites.

I was reminded of the work of Roland Allen who insisted on trusting the Word given to the people, the Spirit given to them who would enlighten the Word and trusting the people themselves. He also taught that the presence of the grace to lead was the indicator that responsibility and office should be given. That kind of waiting in trust has governed how soon the sacraments were introduced. In this case the question came up: 'So what is it you do when you have bread and wine?' So something structured followed around the Common Worship shape: a cross and candles on the table in the midst of the circle, a reading and application, the steps explained as they went through, a non-alcoholic drink option included and reception determined by individual conscience. Sometimes it has been more like a meal. The communion needed to be *Thirst*-like: **to respect the context and draw on the tradition. That is the dynamic of evolving inculturated worship.** Enabling this is now easier that Sue has been priested. The instinct to listen and trust also led to the start

of the Tuesday Bible study and soon will make it fine to talk about managing money and getting out of debt, which in turn introduces giving. The path to self-financing, self-governing, self-reproducing church life may have many twists and turns; to make it an enforced route march at the start would be a mistake.

The listening is linked to the learning. The leaders are learning and at times it feels like making it up as they go along and then understanding the process by looking back. They have also learnt precisely because they have had to present in an open forum that encourages questioning, works by example and values application in practice. They think **modelling is essential to discipleship** and the

Nooma DVD I saw the week I was there underlined that value. Rob Bell not only underscored that the nature of discipleship was learning to do what the Rabbi did, but also that the Rabbi selected his followers because he believed in them; that he thought they could do what he did. This message of God's belief in us speaks volumes to those who suffer poor self-image or have been treated badly by partners. The leaders of *Thirst* know they are called to model both family life and spiritual practices, as well as honesty about their own ups and downs in following that call. I showed them the triangle of formal, non-formal and socialisation learning, from *Crossnet* Encounters on the Edge no. 53.¹⁰ We quickly agreed that the main learning in the *Thirst* community was socialisation and non-formal. But the Nooma material and linked Tuesday Bible study, as well as Alpha, added formal elements that buttressed **the main non-formal learning which was the most transformative.** Here people see a different and better way to live, begin to enter that experience themselves and only then begin to acquire theory about why it works and that it is true.



¹⁰ George Lings, *Crossnet: Do Not Despise The Day Of Small Things*, Encounters on the Edge no. 53 (Sheffield: Church Army, 2012), pp. 20-22.

Really the pattern has not changed much over the years from 2007-2012. More or less activity has happened between Friday meetings depending on the availability of the leaders. Thus Sue was less involved, only leading Friday mornings, while training at Ridley, 2008-2011. But it is testimony to shared leadership used to praying and planning, and wanting to grow indigenous leadership, that the church continued. On any one week the community lounge is set up by 9.15am, people begin to arrive either side of 9.30. Coffee and various kinds of pastries are available and people do catch up in groups, or one-to-one. Around 9.45 the content of the morning is introduced, presented and discussed until about 10.30. There is normally no singing. The formal part is wound up with either open prayer or a closing one, always including one for the welfare and life of the school. Then comes any news of the community, and a chance to advertise future events. How nice to have 'notices' at the end and not use the word. Private prayer one-to-one is advertised and will happen in one of the alcoves or adjoining small room. Some have to go and others stay on and chat. At the beginning, and at the end, of each term is a communion service.

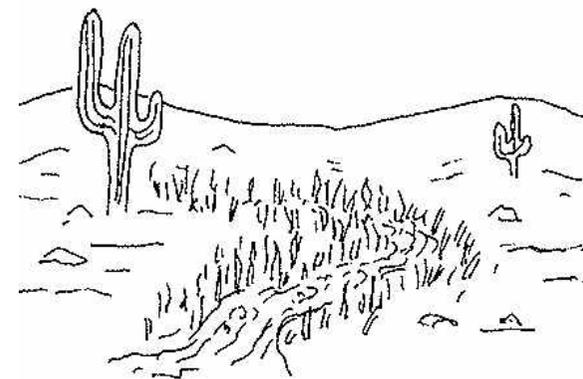
Holiday time is different in that the school is closed. Many people are away, so in good weather gatherings may be at nearby Vinery Road Park, or at Sainsbury's café in Romsey town or even in the launderette. Mid-week life continues and much is made of texting. This is a living community, not a Friday gathering, that models trust and care and looking after one another, but which resists a culture of dependency. The last Friday of winter term is a Christmas service, but Easter does not work for them, being further out of term time and many people being away. I did not notice the risen Jesus thus being any less present amongst his people.

Natallie is from Romsey:

*'I have never been to church before ever. This is my church where I meet the people who I call my family. These people have shown me that no matter what, I am loved and somebody. Without *Thirst* my family and I would not be in a relationship with God.'*

Thirst is a definite type of stream

In the understanding of The Sheffield Centre, not every church community that meets in a school warrants the label 'school-based church'. Those which just rent the space on a Sunday, and which intentionally draw people from either a wider or different catchment area, are not within our meaning of school-based. Other fresh expressions of Church, such as *Sorted* in Bradford, reported in Encounters on the Edge no. 48, have recognised a school as their enduring mission field, but don't meet there or limit themselves to members from there. That too is not school-based church.



However, those which are for those in the wider school community, which can include the pupils, parents, teachers and other staff, and meet in the school, deserve the label school-based church. Yet these are different again from chaplaincy in a number of ways. Chaplains work from within and in some sense are beholden to the school as employer or hirer. Their value is that they stand semi-detached to the structures and serve as a valuable listening ear and potentially wise voice, not tainted by being part of the management. The chapel meetings they take can well be mandatory in attendance and tend to be only for pupils and staff, with occasional invites to parents. Only sometimes, and on a voluntary basis, are there further activities beyond attendance that begin to look like discipleship. Thus at best, these are entirely legitimate early steps to present the Christian faith and offer chances to explore spirituality in an educational context. At worst chapel services have been a significant turn-off in the lives of pupils and inoculation against catching the real Jesus virus.

I did some reading around church and schools, and three Grove booklets from 2002 to 2010 chart something of the growth of interest in this sector of ministry, and how it can be value added to the life of the school. Much of it was in terms

of clergy visiting from outside in traditional roles like assemblies and RE, as well as the rise of schools workers who engage in soft edged mission, respecting that the school is for education and not a mission field, **but these never seem to go on and form church.** There is also chaplaincy done more from inside, with its character as above. There was not a word about school-based church, let alone one focused on parents. It is a very recent phenomenon and was not listed in *Mission-shaped Church* because we didn't know of it.

School-based church is strategically different to chaplaincy, in that the leadership, although working with the school, is never owned by it. This is open partnership, not benevolent or Erastian control. It is different from schools workers who do apologetics and gentle evangelism but don't form church. This is growing a community of disciples of Christ within the wider school community. As such **it behaves like Church, which as early as 1 Peter has the curious character of belonging and not belonging.** Jesus in John 17 cast the disciples as being in the world, but not of it, and as the 2nd century Epistle to Diognetus put it, 'Every foreign country is their fatherland and every fatherland is a foreign country.'¹¹ It is possible for the Christian to be

simultaneously committed to the world and different from it. Such is school-based church. St Philip's senior staff all saw these boundaries and overlaps and agreed that *Thirst* was not chaplaincy but nonetheless valuable for that.

Some examples of school-based church deliberately gather at the end of the school day. It is one natural time when pupils and parents are both around and even a staff member might be able to summon energy to attend.

There is obvious resonance and reason to meet across the wide range of people that make up the overall school community. *Thirst* is different again from that, in that it is almost exclusively for parents, not least mothers, perhaps for



several reasons. Win the parents for Christ, work with them so their lives begin to transform and there are more positive changes in the lives of overall families. Build a base of converted parents and then there may be a resource to do more with the children. Start with children or focus on them, and the parents may hide behind them, or be frustrated that they cannot be real about the issues they face, in front of their children. In addition this takes seriously the relationship of respected difference. The school is charged with providing an overall and spiritual education for the children, through assemblies, RE, clergy visits, etc. However, **the school has no legal obligation, nor resources, to meet the needs of parents.**

I wondered whether *Thirst's* focus on mothers precipitated the danger of it being seen as but a yummy mummy group and not deserving the compliment of church, that customarily models some degree of inclusivity. However, the presence of a few under-five children and the occasional man, the vast social range that are regulars, including black and white, as well as the intriguing attendance by a Sikh (and there have been Muslims), made me realise how widely inclusive it was, not least of people who otherwise would not ever be seen in church. Add to that Sue Butler's list of their values: **relational, missional, healing, disciple making and eucharistic**, and the case builds for saying it is truly church. I was glad to see a younger man at the meeting. Phil Wall is from the URC and studying for a PhD using extended exposure to three case studies under the probable title of 'The relationship between Missiology and Pedagogy in fresh expressions of Church.' He was entirely clear it was church, citing a variety of factors: the presence of both sacraments; a community that notably loves, supports, serves and eats together; there is teaching and modelling of Christian lifestyle; it is inclusive of people at various stages of the spiritual journey; and questioning is encouraged.

Moreover, the aspirations for the future are of yet wider scope. **Initial homogeneity, left to the Spirit, tends to turn to heterogeneity for that is the eschatological future.** There is the possibility of an additional after school service which would include the pupils. Now that Paul Butler has a half time post in Waterbeach, a village only six miles from Cambridge, he wants to explore what could be done among the dads and has a great track record of running very popular monthly pub-based comedy and storytelling work that drew scores of men.

¹¹ Quoted in Eric Jay, *The Church: Its Changing Image Through Twenty Centuries* (London: SPCK, 1977), p. 41.

What does the school make of it all?



Cheryl Lowe

I talked with various members of the senior and office staff who commended the work of *Thirst* among the parents. It was described as a place for parents to go when life is difficult and bumpy or they are struggling. Cheryl Lowe, the schools business manager and previous chair of governors, described it as a backup – a resource to which they could refer parents who need time and reassurance. The assistant head, Ann Chappell, used a memorable image of the difference working with parents makes. A child coming into school on any given day and its state of mind could be likened to a closed can of Coke. Stress that morning in the home shakes up the can, rows between the parents shake the can once more, domestic violence is more vigorous shaking, and lack

of an adequate breakfast is more disturbance to the can. No wonder then that a slight altercation or correction at school and the lid pops open and a minor explosion ensues. ***Thirst's* work with parents, in a way that helps build healthy families, makes a tangible difference to overall school life** and to children attaining their potential, because they are not being derailed by internal turmoil.

All senior staff recognised that, though akin to the value of chaplaincy, *Thirst* being church in its own right is not chaplaincy, and in one way being further detached from school makes it yet less risky for parents to go to. Nothing would come back to the school authorities and many of them have some cultural fear of authority figures. They also value its overt spiritual element that makes God more real, but does not compromise the school's educational identity. They believe its ministry of prayer has changed the atmosphere, making a difference to staff and pupils alike. A funding application, which led to a gift of £10,000 per annum for up to three years, made explicit the school's perception of its provision. It is a safe non-judgmental meeting place to discuss the challenges of family life, offering practical support like help with childcare, lifts to appointments, directing people to specialist services such as debt counselling, pastoral support for children and families dealing with issues of bereavement, divorce, separation or prison, improving cookery skills and

developing healthier lifestyles. The school authorities hear parents who have been helped saying about their situation, 'I can deal with it now.' This range of benefits is like good parochial ministry exercised by an effective church community. In this case, the school community and its discrete area is 'the parish'. Indeed that is how Sue sees it and for whose welfare she and others pray. This funding and another grant from a Christian charity of £3,000 for three years help make *Thirst* more sustainable. However currently, because of her non-stipendiary status, and current national employment legislation, it is not clear how she can receive any of it. The problem there is the law, not the diocese.

Nwabisha, from South Africa, has an admitted uncertainty about speaking to white people:

'I was warmly welcomed by a queue of people waiting patiently to shake my hand and more importantly they all made me feel very important and wanted.'

Will the stream run dry?

Sue Butler is an OPM, but also a self-supporting minister, thus the financial investment by the Church was only her training. She has neither stipend nor housing provided.¹² She is attached to St Philip's in Romsey as Curate and works there for a notional 10% of her time: Sundays and sometimes another day too. That arrangement needed to honour her existing full time voluntary commitment to *Thirst* and required some negotiation away from the frequent, but usually unhelpful, division of labour for OPMs which is 50-50 between inherited church and the fresh expression they create or support. As a starting point 50-50 may work for some, but as the fresh expression grows, 50% will be insufficient to widen its reach in mission by making further contacts, deepen its existing life, care for the truly needy in that community, disciple its members

and grow its indigenous leaders.

These are all key features related to a leader moving on well in due time and leaving behind a young church that is healthy and sustainable. Sue fears this is not really in view, and articulates that in motherly terms: **'What will happen to our babies if we leave?'**

As Ruth is considering ordination, and Rachel has moved out to a village some six miles away, these are real questions in a climate of uncertainty.

It will be instructive to see how much responsibility the wider Church is willing to take on for *Thirst*, especially as it was self-seeded and not planted out from a particular parish. Failure to do this would be hardly encouraging to a person selected for mixed mode training and continuing to lead such an existing fresh expression of Church. The statistics of *Thirst* are fed into St Philip's parish church attendance figures as it occurs within the parish, so they are not hidden. *Thirst* values the support of St Philip's through its goodwill, open relationships, prayer, financial gifts and over possible future Bishop's Mission Order status. There have been limits to its involvement as the church has recently undergone a major re-ordering. It is understandable that this has focused the mind and raised the hopes that new people will be attracted to the renewed St Philip's, including its roadfront café on Mill Road.



'Your bricks are so good
we'll let you make them without straw'

Some voices in the diocese speak positively of 'putting someone in' should they all leave, but unless it is a woman, or at least a parent with children of that age, preferably at that school, it is hard to see how this would be genuinely so-called incarnational ministry. Such an import would start a very long way back without the history of relationships in a church that is relational and neither programme-based nor event- or service-centred. Bishop Stephen Conway, in a diocesan paper called 'Imagining the Future', has spoken of partnerships with schools to 'develop our schools as centres of mission and potentially of fresh expressions of Church'. I am glad of the trajectory and grasping this possibility, but I long that this story is known for showing how long that takes, if we are to go way beyond clergy parachuting into school events or even the deeper route of chaplaincy. Forming church, honouring church and resourcing church in school are still steps we do not know much about. To mature this young church the leadership needs to be set free, to see this as their parish and the community needs recognising. Maybe if *Thirst* acquired a BMO, it may helpfully raise these issues and find good resolution to them. The BMO is usually reserved for work that is not parish-based. Here it is more about giving agreed ecclesial identity to something different from, and not a bridge back to, its surrounding parish.



Can the Church of England change again?

As I consider the issues of sustainability around fresh expressions of Church, I suspect we face the uphill road of challenging a deep yet publicly denied instinct within the Church of England that will mean a shift of thinking and practice. It is being precipitated rapidly and urgently by the deployment of pioneer ministers, but also more widely by the increased stream of curates ordained in later life who come with significant prior life experience and/or the ability to start further things. Current practice also stands in sharp contrast to the secular practice in quality international companies, who give significant responsibility to their young

¹²The latter has now changed as her fellow clergy husband Paul has taken up a parish in Waterbeach.

graduates, including spending power.

That shift is the change away from an exclusive focus on curacies being for assistant ministers and their training, with the consequence that anything they begin is regarded as an intriguing by-product of that period but not of cardinal importance. It is also thus asking for a shift from thinking primarily in Christendom ministerial categories to that of a missional ecclesiology. In the latter, **the church begun is just as important, and perhaps more so, than who began it.** Of course not all that starts can, does, or should continue, but this should not be the justification for what amounts to a cavalier and irresponsible attitude to what begins life under the leadership of a curate or pioneer during those first 3-4 years.

I think I have evidence from 20-30 years of watching young church plants and fresh expressions to know that too often they are abandoned by the wider Church when still vulnerable, sadly revealing the clergy-club mentality to which Anglicanism can be prone. We, the Church of England, assiduously provide job succession for the ordained leaders and let what they begin take its chance unprotected and unprovided for. These things fail to mature, not because they were inherently unhealthy or transient, but because there was no long-term view to see them come to maturity, and even a deliberate policy that curates are really only placed to learn, not to take serious initiatives.

When it comes to the deployment of pioneers and capable curates, the existing view and practice simply will not do any longer. It will frustrate the pioneers no end, and wreak some havoc among those young Christians and spiritual seekers for whom something has been started. Well conceived fresh expressions of Church deserve better. All these changes would mean going to a place we have not been before. Yet the journey embodies an arguably better holistic ecclesiology that takes young churches as seriously as its ordained ministers.

George Lings
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Cartoons: Tim Sharp

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