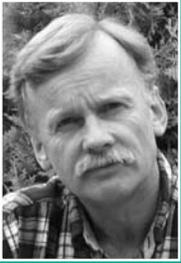


## 56: Sweaty Church



Welcome to Sweaty Church in York. Inspired initially by Messy Church, this fresh expression of Church uses participation through activities, games and sport, rather than craft, as the means of families learning together. Its evocative name is earthy, entertaining, intriguing and honest. It is not hard to see why it is already drawing numbers and starting elsewhere. Here is a type of church that connects easily with a wide variety of males. Just as important, Sweaty Church's 'learning by doing' approach reminds us how rare it is that the wider church caters for kinaesthetic learners, but how legitimate that is. We liked their values and went to see it.

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Tel: 0114 252 7279  
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# Encounters on the Edge



no. 56:

## Sweaty Church

Church for kinaesthetic learners

 **ChurchArmy**  
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Discoveries about fresh expressions of Church from The Sheffield Centre

## Contents

|    |   |    |  |
|----|---|----|--|
| 3  | First impressions of York               | 18 | What happens at Sweaty Church                    |
| 4  | Welcome to Holgate                      | 18 | Set up starts                                    |
|    |   | 19 | The dressing room talk                           |
| 6  | Sweaty Church - a porous phenomenon     | 20 | The warm up                                      |
|    |   | 21 | The hook   |
|    |   | 21 | Carousel   |
|    |   | 22 | Half time  |
| 7  | What flowed in                          | 23 | Wrapping up                                      |
|    |   | 24 | What do others need to do this?                  |
| 7  | Lessons from an annual camp             |    |  |
| 8  | Use different learning styles           |    |  |
| 8  | Something for males                     | 25 | Flowing out                                      |
| 10 | What's in a name?                       |    |  |
| 11 | Links & lessons                         | 25 | Links to St Paul's DNA                           |
| 11 | Full & then?                            | 26 | Connections across the life of the church family |
| 12 | Gifts of the leaders                    | 28 | Four images of different kinds of church         |
| 13 | Is there anybody out there?             | 29 | Publishing and popularity                        |
|    |   | 30 | Questions that remain                            |
| 14 | Understanding what powers Sweaty Church |    |  |
| 14 | Its pillars                             |    |  |
| 15 | Let the reader take note                |    |  |

## First impressions of York

York to the outsider could conjure up the impression of being a bit of middle class south in the north. The tourist attractions include the Minster, or the National Railway Museum depending on your passion, the Jorvik Viking Centre and ancient city walls, or the Shambles (a host of bijou shops), art galleries and its theatre. The arrival in the 1960s of secular based York University with many students from the south followed by a high retention rate fits this image, together with the 35-year draw and reputation of St Michael le Belfry.

However, another truer picture comes from an industrial history which owes much to the expansion of Victorian railways. The boom years nationally were the 1840s and York was no exception. George Stephenson, one railway pioneer, had planned a line from Newcastle to London. Between 1839 and 1849, George Hudson was Mayor of York and on the town council before disreputable business practices led to his disgrace and removal. He was also known as the railway king and, early on, he persuaded Stephenson to build his main line through York, rather than going west of it directly to Leeds.<sup>1</sup> The impact of the railways on York was significant.

Much of the rest of the city was rejuvenated. The railways allowed people and products to be transported to and from York faster than ever before. Entrepreneurs were given access to new markets. Thus York could boast two world famous chocolate makers: Rowntree and Terry. There was printing, a glass works and a sugar works.



York Carriage Works

<sup>1</sup> A temporary wooden building opened in 1839. There was a profound effect on the city. In 1840 the first train ran direct from York to London. By the 1850s, there were 13 trains a day between the two cities, carrying 341,000 passengers a year. The current station was built in 1877, then the largest in the country. By 1888 there were 294 trains arriving daily.

## Welcome to Holgate



St Paul Holgate

All this serves as the background of why St Paul's Holgate was built in 1851. Holgate lies to the west side of York, with the station in its north east corner, and the parish continues westwards towards Acomb. The area contained the carriage works of the North Eastern Railway and latterly the London and North Eastern Railway (1923-1948) that railway buffs associate with the Flying Scotsman and a second locomotive, Mallard, that holds the world's fastest steam engine record. The carriage works in



its heyday employed 3,000 people, living in terraced housing. The church of St Paul was a railway workers church, built adjacent to the railway. Fittingly its pillars are made of cast iron though painted to resemble stone. The parish also contains some grander properties and its mixed identity continues today. York graduates who have stayed to work are now raising families and seek modest properties to buy. So the current parish of between 8-9,000 people contains a mixture of these social elements. In addition, Holgate has no community buildings to speak of and a bare handful of shops. The city centre or the outer suburb - and erstwhile village - of Acomb have these facilities. The area and its church are modest.



John and Niki Lee came to York in 2002, after an associate minister role in a Leicester city centre church. They followed a 30-year-long and valued ministry under Derek Wooldridge, under which the church had been reordered in 1984 with a dais, carpet and moveable pews. They built upon the transition already occurring from workers' church to church for younger families.

A truism would be that John took burials for ex-railway workers and baptised the children of professionals. Yet the area has not undergone rapid change and feels like a stable, slowly evolving community. By the time I visited in October 2012, there were three congregations. The smaller more traditional 08.45 with a dozen to 20, the 10.15 with 100 adults and 60 children, and the 18.00 with 35-50 of whom 20 would be 'twicers'.



John & Niki Lee

Down the side road beside the church - named Watson Street, but not after the famous York Vicar - is St Paul's Church of England Controlled Primary School. The buildings are old, but its community is lively and competition exists to enrol. Their website includes the following sentence: 'The links with St Paul's Church are strong and secure. They underpin the Christian principles that guide the spiritual and moral development of our pupils.' The church concur and see the links as long-standing, open and positive, with John Lee as vice chair of the governors and St Paul's staff members taking assemblies. For lack of space in the school site, events involving parents, school plays, some fundraising activities and some services in the school year, the school come up the road to St Paul's Church.



Here then is a typical Anglican parish context. An area with a known and coherent history, a complex but not tangled web of social relationships, a known track record of trust built through long-term local ministry, and the visible presence and contribution of the church in the townscape. Why then start something innovative like Sweaty Church?

## Sweaty Church - a porous phenomenon

I am not here referring to the way sweat comes out through the skin. What I am thinking of is the nature of porous rocks like chalk or limestone. Water falls on them, soaks through them, water carves out features within them, and eventually issues out of them in springs, streams and even rivers.

Where parish ends and fresh expression begins is not regrettable lack of definition as occurs in blurred boundaries; rather, porosity is an inherent quality that enables flow and rejoices in connection.

Throughout my stay I noticed how Sweaty Church has many sources that feed into it and shape it. It has also discovered its own particular character and this is beginning to affect other aspects of the church around it. In turn, **it is beginning to lead to others things**. It is itself a porous entity and this image acts as one commentary on the sort of relationship that fresh expressions of Church can have with their host parish. Where one ends and the other begins is not regrettable lack of definition as occurs in blurred boundaries; rather, porosity is an inherent quality that enables flow and rejoices in connection.

## What flowed in

### Lessons from an annual camp

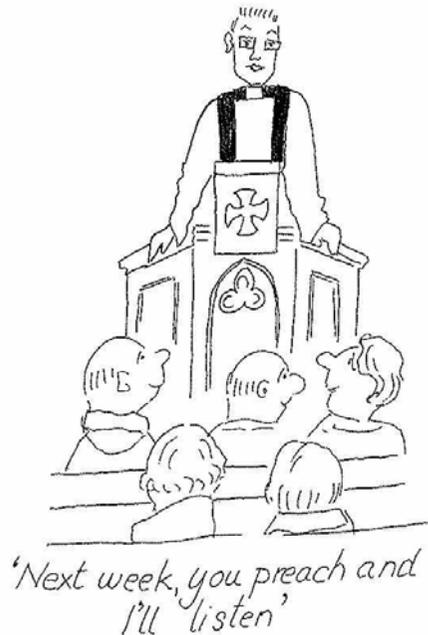
Looking back now, what was then apparently unconnected but has been a significant stream into Sweaty Church, is the CPAS annual camps held at Criccieth in North Wales. Derek Wooldridge took his family of four boys and led them. Some of them inherited the mantle and one son, Jonny, has now been part of leading them for many years. These were highlights of the year, both for leaders and members, but why? The greater intensity of living together for a few days emphasised the value of community. Being away from home had a sense of adventure, enhanced by the games and activities that pushed boundaries of what could be attempted and achieved. Community and adventure led to friendships forged. It was also a spiritual high, with concentrated learning through small groups, as well as talks, professions of faith made, and leaders building enduring relationships with members. I recall with abiding affection my experience of something similar in my own teenage years and the significant part Christian camps played in my path of discovery and discipleship. The downside of 'camp' was the long months between these annual highs where local church was not even a pale shadow of that community spirit, exploration and adventure, nor even explicit intention to grow in faith. The blazing fire of camp spirit dulled down to embers, fanned occasionally by the thought that summer would come again.

How could something of this kind of learning and commitment through activity and fun, enjoyed by the whole family, come home to Holgate? It was noticed that teenagers of Christian families were repeating the patterns I have described about myself. **What was there back at home that could keep the fire burning** in between annual camps? How could they continue to learn by doing? How could they get beyond being consumer Christians, to those involved and growing by doing? Attempts were made to make some evening services more interactive, yet these did not fully solve the problem. What might they be given to do, and to help lead, that might propel them beyond being consumers into disciples and disciple-makers?

## Use different learning styles

Today's teachers are well aware of very different learning styles that exist and that the children they teach will range across them. Thus the teaching methods employed will seek to be similarly wide. So another factor was the positive link with St Paul's CE Primary School. However, it did not just provide a warm link

to develop, it also included a challenge to take on board. One widely used categorisation of the various types of learning styles names the following: visual learners, auditory learners, reading or writing learners, and kinaesthetic learners. The last is sometimes made equivalent to tactile learning. The learning takes place by the student engaging in some physical activity, rather than listening to a lecture and writing notes, doing their own reading, or watching a demonstration. Put most simply, it is learning by doing. It can include conducting experiments, participating in sporting activities, playing games, making art and acting. However across that range, which today's children will be used to, the church as a whole specialises in 'I speak, you listen.' If I am a bit wiser then I also illustrate, use humour, and have some visuals. But usually church-based learning is nowhere on the kinaesthetic scale.



## Something for males

This last point also links to a wider debate about the decline of men in church and the alleged feminisation of church. *Christian Vision for Men*, led by Carl Beech and based in Chesterfield, is one English focus of these concerns.<sup>2</sup> Ben Norton is a pioneer minister who ran something called XY church in Bridlington for a number of years and was featured by the Fresh Expressions team.

Another source is Men's Rites of Passage, a five day away from it all initiation experience, founded by the Franciscan Richard Rohr.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>2</sup> [www.cvm.org.uk/carlbeech](http://www.cvm.org.uk/carlbeech)

<sup>3</sup> [www.MRoP.org.uk](http://www.MRoP.org.uk)

One American writer has been David Murrow and his book *Why Men Hate Going to Church*.<sup>4</sup> None of these sources want any return to male domination of society or church, but rather they seek for a style of church life in which both genders can flourish in their overlaps and differences. Here are a few citations from Murrow to give a flavour and posit the connection to the learning by doing style. 'Few churches model men's values: risk and reward, accomplishment, heroic sacrifice, action and adventure.' 'Men are changed by what they experience, not necessarily by what they are told.' When asked why they don't go to church, a common response is: '**There's nothing for me to do.**'<sup>5</sup> Murrow also notes that much the same is true of young adults of both genders, as both enter the workplace and face adventure and challenge.<sup>6</sup>

The leaders of Sweaty Church write, a bit apologetically, on their website:

If the truth be known we wanted to create something that appealed particularly to 7-11 year old boys. We needed an active and energetic space where we could tell people to stand up and engage their bodies more than we would tell them to sit down and quieten their minds!

This area of positively including the male side in a changed church life is still contentious, like current proposed EU legislation to force big companies to ensure 40% of their directors are women. But it is part of the story here, yet falls within a wider concern about how people learn. New readers of the *Encounters on the Edge* series may wish to connect this thinking to a strand that has been emerging in recent issues, like Nos. 51 and 52, where discipleship, understood as apprenticeship, has been a helpful way forward in those churches. Apprenticeship would have been diagnostic in learning within the railway carriage works of Holgate parish. Sweaty Church sounds a lot more fun, but the learning by doing is very similar. And sweat is not out of kilter with that style of learning.

<sup>4</sup> D. Murrow, *Why Men Hate Going to Church* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2005).

<sup>5</sup> Murrow, *Why Men Hate Going to Church*, pp. 15, 34, 39 respectively.

<sup>6</sup> Murrow, *Why Men Hate Going to Church*, p. 22.

## What's in a name?



Jonny Wooldridge & Ian Mayhew

Another stream, connected to the learning point, is the inheritance from Messy Church. Jonny Wooldridge and Ian Mayhew, the leaders, have had positive and encouraging contact with Lucy Moore of Messy Church. She is 'delighted at the development', having always believed and stated that craft was not the only way in human creativity, and attendant learning through doing could be accomplished. Her language of 'development' suggests linkage. One could imagine **Sweaty Church is one boisterous offspring of Messy Church.**

St Paul's leaders gladly admit the name is tongue in cheek and owe a debt to Messy Church. In May 2011, Lucy Moore endorsed their work on the Messy Church blog and noted it was for boys, especially but not exclusively, and that there were parallels. These include the family learning together and thus also learning more about how to be family. Messy Church has set some precedents, by its combination of kinaesthetic learning, family activity, food and promoting Christian discipleship through all those means. It has also helpfully provoked some ecclesial questioning by combining very unlikely words. 'Messy' and 'Church' have never been a favourite combination of ecclesiological purists, or liturgical fundamentalists. It could however be argued that critics of the Church have seen all too often how the two words do combine strongly: usually the result is flavoured with hypocrisy or an unseemly gap between theory and practice. So another parallel between Messy and



Sweaty Church includes the fun and objections to the name. Calling it 'Perspiring Church' or 'Glowing Church' just wouldn't be the same. 'Sweaty' is earthy, entertaining, intriguing and honest.

## Links & lessons

Other smaller inputs were seeing connections to, and developments from, an after-school club and a Tuesday weekly group started by a previous curate, Ursula Simpson, called 'Round The Table' at which adults chatted in the café area of the church to pre-set questions and activities were provided for their children. These fed elements into what Sweaty Church would become.

## Full & then?

A significant but very different factor was that the 10.15 Family Service was getting full and at the same time its leaders were aware of those who were not coming for significant reasons. As early as 2009, leaders and members had children who were part of the rise of Sunday morning sport. **Facing down this clash of priorities was not sensible.** In addition, the service style still favoured only the audio and visual learners so its appeal was limited, not least to dads and to children as they got older and wanted to make choices about Sunday mornings for themselves. Often, in new leaps forward for a church, **external opportunities occur in the same period that internal constraints are noticed.** I sometimes wonder whether the Spirit of God is more familiar with the necessity for carrot and stick, to move human beings along, than we might imagine. If there is only external possibility it can be tempting to think that should be fed directly into existing patterns. If there is only the internal problem, the ways perceived round it too often are too limited. Have both and something more creative and contextual seems to emerge. Perhaps the earliest example is in the period of Acts 8-11 when persecution in Jerusalem and the first witness to non Jews coincide.

The temptation in response to the overcrowding alone could have been to opt for a less invasive strategy and repeat the Family Service at some other time in the week. I guess this is where the other streams explained above had some

part to play and imagination came in. As the Sweaty Church website says:

We realised that we needed something new. It wasn't just about 'photocopying' the Family Service and relocating it somewhere else in the week, we needed to think imaginatively about the learning and engagement needs of these families. The result was Sweaty Church ... However instead of using craft as a connection and community building point we wanted to use games, sports and activities.

### Gifts of the leaders

I think there is something significant about who the two key leaders are. I won't do to attribute the whole story to God and the inspiration of the Spirit. I think inspiration was involved, but as Augustine of Hippo is reputed to have said: 'Without God we cannot; without us God will not.' As humans in the image of God, from the outset we are intended to have a part to play.



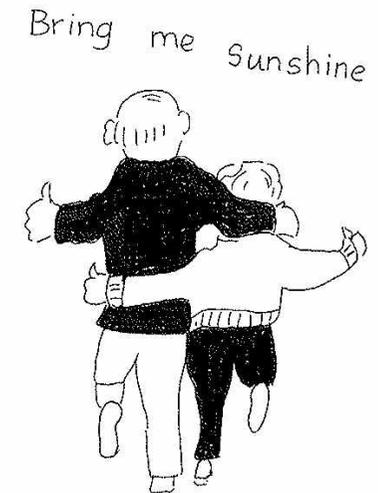
Both leaders are family men, with wider Christian experience; they both are educationally aware and have some passion for learning by doing. They are more complementary than alike. Jonny Wooldridge is sometime described as the head coach and is the anchor man presenter on the day. He has been a geography teacher and classroom control is a skill still possessed and demonstrated. He is the local man and a life-long Anglican, indeed one of the sons of the previous vicar. He is not a staff member and nowadays has a business and property job. He is larger than life; I guess he is truly extravert, optimistic and expansionist, the obvious front and funny

man. The CPAS camps stream comes through his story. As the upfront person he might be likened to the striker in the football team.

Ian Mayhew has a Salvation Army background and has been a church planter and youth worker with them. He took the St Paul's parish weekend in 2009 and out of that success was later invited to join the staff as associate lay minister, three days a week, while still living in Wetherby which is 15 miles away.

His forte is ideas and creativity. Themes culled from other places are then linked to ideas for activities and games to reinforce the chosen topic. He is also a prolific networker and pulls the team together. It takes at least another ten people per month to make it work well and safely. He could be likened to the player manager. I did wonder irreverently – with them being taller and shorter, funny and straight man - whether Morecambe and Wise was another parallel. After all, they do both sing and dance about.

One more factor needs naming. John Lee is a permission-giving vicar. His instinct is if someone comes with a plausible idea and is not asking for implausible money to go with it; 'let's have a go and try it'. But he is entirely content to let those with the idea run with it and try it. No sooner had I arrived to meet this trio, than John absented himself and gave me a couple of hours interviewing Ian and Jonny alone. However, he did steer them beyond Messy Church and coined the Sweaty name as a throwaway line.



### Is there anybody out there?

So began a search for resources. Of course there was little that was really suitable. One helpful source was a book that used to be published by Scripture Union called *Sports Value Course*.<sup>7</sup> It covers some ten topics like winning with humility, the ability to lose, team work, training, working with our weaknesses, learning self control. These and others made a good set of themes to work with in the first year. They have also drawn on material by Bryan Mason of 'Higher Sports'.<sup>8</sup> But none of these resources were designed for events to suit a congregation inside a church building. Yet they did work with valuable themes - teamwork, discipline, using your head, passing to others - so Ian and Jonny found ways of exploring biblical themes that linked to these. In the end they created an outline that works for them, can be done in this particular building, and so borrowed or created games and activities that worked in their context.

<sup>7</sup> T. Perry & S. Pilkington, *Sports Value Course* (Milton Keynes: Scripture Union, 2003).

<sup>8</sup> [www.highersports.org](http://www.highersports.org) [bryan@highersports.lccnet.co.uk](mailto:bryan@highersports.lccnet.co.uk)

## Understanding what powers Sweaty Church

October 2010 saw the first Sweaty Church and the leaders describe it as a hilarious and sweaty journey. It does take from 11.30 in the morning through to break down by 18.00 to achieve and is quite physical. The concentrated session from 16.00-17.30 is high energy. Those who take part get fit and may sweat.

### Its pillars

It might be that there are two cardinal values, or pillars. As with Messy Church it is about **learning as a family**. In particular Ian and Jonny wanted dads to enjoy the opportunity to play and learn alongside their children. Sweaty Church shares with Messy Church the counter cultural value of being all age where possible, as opposed to age segregated. However, unlike some poor Messy Church practice (not its theory), parents are quite strongly encouraged to

participate. They are simply not allowed to drift to the sides of the church and watch from afar or to defend themselves in corrals of ostensibly important chatter. But unlike Messy Church, there is a stage of the afternoon where parents are gathered together for discussion and this might be an option for the Messy Church movement to explore as it ponders furthering discipleship.

The second pillar is **learning through physical activities**. If Messy Church uses craft to embody one way of being creative, and this is rightly seen as one element of being truly human, Sweaty Church is more about learning styles and



the value of sport and activity to express being human. Neither excludes nor contradicts the other. They are different aspects of being human. Perhaps they connect through the tendency and capacity of humans to play, not just to work. Neither craft nor games are as basic as eating and sleeping, but they are clearly important to human flourishing. Indeed the word 'play' stretches elastically over the disciplines of sport, drama, music and parlour games.

So the families that come learn and play together; the teaching is more by coaching than lecture, reinforced by activities that demand the virtue chosen and theme-related parenting discussions.

### Let the reader take note

As such, Sweaty Church is misunderstood if it is seen as just a kids club, or a monthly holiday club, or even a new form of un-uniformed organisation. It is church with an aim to grow families, not least fathers and sons, as committed followers of Christ. It is different also from the camps that were one source in the flow inwards to Sweaty Church. At those camps, varied and interesting activities filled the day, but the trade off was sitting quietly for the evening talks, or God spot. No, here the two are entirely integrated on the principle that people learn a great deal by doing. So how can the doing be designed that the medium carries the message?

The other highlight I want to post about identity is that the first misunderstanding can come from a second one. If there are any who read this booklet and think, we should try this, please do not skip straight to the section about what happens and simply try to copy that. When the Encounter on the Edge series covered an example of Messy Church, I entered a plea that only when the values are understood can you know how the shape really works and what may need to change in another context. By this same process, Lucy Moore can rejoice in the different way Sweaty Church works, because she sees the congruence of the values and thus is entirely relaxed that it has a different shape.

That's partly why I like this image of the values being called pillars. For a start there is a local resonance with St Paul's Church that has its railway era pillars of cast iron. But more than that, pillars evoke a different image to foundations.

**Foundations are essential but they are seldom seen.** That is precisely the

danger; values can become invisible when compared to activities and shapes of meetings. Pillars do not just support the building; they can have a beauty of their own, and sometimes they are in your face and frankly inconvenient because you want to look round them. Yet if your desire to see through them would lead you to remove them, that would be disastrous. There may well be times when practitioners are tempted to take a short cut. Wouldn't it be easier to give a straight talk than devise activities that embody that lesson? Yes it might be, but you are then demolishing a pillar. Wouldn't it be simpler to find material that just suits kids or only suits adults? Oh yes, but bang goes another pillar and the building won't be up much longer. So those awkward **pillars are meant to support and also to prevent all views being taken**. There are some core features you have to work around.

One more thing about values as pillars: they can take time to become clear and to put up. When a new venture like Sweaty Church has been going a little time, and its supporting values are talked about, it can seem that they were crystal clear from the very beginning. Listening to this and to other stories elsewhere, I do not think that is always, or even often true. I think of two groups I belong to. One is Northumbria Community.<sup>9</sup> It took years for its most simple statements to crystallise into a very few words.

Generally speaking, values are like alcoholic drinks. The more they are distilled, the stronger they get, the more they cost and the smaller volume they occupy.

I think also of my own journey with Church Army and our recently becoming an Acknowledged Mission Community of the Church of England. The route from being a Society to becoming Order has taken at least six years since it was first raised and in my view we have only begun to make clear to ourselves what our highest values are. These are deeper things than five year plans, or those vision statements that some churches love to coin and polish in special committees, but the average person in the pew is unable to repeat. **In this longer search for values there is a dance between initial calling with its first guesses of values and the practice of the ensuing next few years.**

Practice tests theory and theory directs practices. Both affect the other. Generally speaking, values are like alcoholic drinks. The more they are distilled, the stronger they get, the more they cost and the smaller volume they occupy. If the list of values is long or complicated, be sure there is more work to do. If the members do not immediately know what they are, there is more work to

do. Learning as families, learning by doing, sounds fairly distilled to me.

So then it was reasonably safe to try to create a monthly running series of family congregational worship: fashioned out of activities, team games, competitions, aerobics, songs, discussions and even yes, a boxing bag suspended from the church roof and a tightrope slung (not very high up) between the pillars. Only because the values were clear could they avoid being absorbed by the initial wackiness of it all. Jeux Sans Frontières met the Church of England and chaos did not result.

<sup>9</sup> See G. Lings *Encounters on the Edge* no. 29 *Matching Monastery and Mission* (Sheffield: Church Army 2009).

## What happens at Sweaty Church?

It occurs on the 3rd Sunday of the month. The doors open shortly before 16.00 and the official end is 17.30. It runs for nine months of every year, omitting December because of the crowded Christmas season, August because people are on holiday and July is Sweaty Church camp away. 3rd Sunday is not sacrosanct and in that it can clash with harvest and with Mother's Day that choice is under review.

There is a shape and a timetable that is so well adhered to that the neighbouring railway would approve. I don't know what Sweaty Church's equivalent of leaves on the line would be. But with so much going on it is rather important that timing controls pace and a sense of direction. To that end Jonny the presenter is 'miked' up and certain parts of the afternoon actually run to a displayed stopwatch. But then sport and timings are closely linked.

### Set up starts



It is after 11.30 on Sunday morning. The 10.15 service has officially closed, but people are still talking companionably over good quality coffee from the servery not too near the exit. The Sweaty Church team begin to move in and literally move the pews. Mercifully they were made moveable in a previous reordering and as the last major work on the nave was several decades ago, no one is too precious about the brown utilitarian carpet or the paint work. The nave space available is nearly square, with

the back partitioned off some ten years ago to make offices, small rooms and in 2007 better kitchen facilities. The splayed dais from 1984 has a distinct

orange carpet and again that chancel space is not too holy to be invaded or put to practical other uses. It becomes the repository for the stacking chairs. As the space is cleared it does not feel that the church is being desecrated. If anything it is like a ship being cleared for action – which as I was there on Trafalgar Day is a metaphor that will please John Lee who numbers Admiral Nelson high among his heroes.



### The dressing room talk

I go off to lunch and wander down again by 15.30. The team of ten for the day are assembled and Ian is running through the 'batting order'. There is a two page sheet for each team member. It covers theme, objectives, shape, the list of activities and who will do what. It is not unlike a highly organised teacher's lesson plan. So the team, even if they are only half awake, know the score. They know the theme, which today is simply 'gratitude'. Each game leader has their activity sheet with

instructions on how it is played, the link to the theme and even a brief risk assessment. **The aim is no unwanted surprises.** I and others are named as guests. I am given a sticker with my name and honoured to wear a 'team' label on my back. The link between the games and how they support the theme is emphasised, including a suitable verse from Scripture to which to tie the learning. At around 15.50 early arrivals are coming in and Ian closes the pre match briefing with prayer. The team members move to the particular activity they are responsible for supervising. I wander around and talk to a few of them. Some are young adults who have grown up in Holgate, been to the summer camps, and have been regular helpers right from the start. One helper is a young mum with a de-churched background, who found Sweaty Church through the



school link and is glad now to be a helper. This is very like the Messy Church view that new or returning adults 'get it' through their helping roles. All are welcome to get involved. It is the pillar of learning by doing, doing its work in practice.

### The warm up



By 16.00 the number of arrivals is increasing and there are several supervised activities for them to try out. An automated ping pong machine fires balls at a predetermined velocity and frequency and its opponent gets the chance to learn how to return them. Thank you, kind and predictable machine, for working to make my early table tennis learning easier. The tightrope, a lorry load fixing strap tensioned between two pillars, lures the brave to try it alone and mums help the younger ones to totter across it. Others use it as a springboard. **Risk and experimentation are all kinds of learning.** The

cross trainer bikes will be a novelty for some, for others just a chance to loosen up some muscles. Younger girls show the rest of us why they are the queens of hula hoop. The dad who tries it needs to learn from them. Others try to see how far they can swing from the punch bag suspended from a room timber. I still don't know how they got the rope up there in the first place. The vicar and curate mingle and try to spot the newcomers who may need a bit more welcoming.

The warm up ends at 16.10 with Jonny inviting everyone to gather at the front with kids on the mats, and adults on the few pews left to make the front stalls of this theatre. The welcome airs the theme, highlights the shape, and gives a few special announcements. It is best CPAS camp style – not far away from music hall humour, not unlike Sesame Street and very engaging



for all that. It even has me shaking my limbs in the led aerobics warm up, as we all follow our head coach. Next comes the BOING song which is quite beyond me to classify, but is clearly enjoyed by all.<sup>10</sup>

### The hook

Actually this is their private title for this section and I hope I am in order using it. It is shorthand for handover to Ian at 16.15. He snappily introduces the theme of gratitude and a prayer demonstrating it, and for us all to learn to be like that. Next comes an experiment. Ten unbriefed volunteer kids come out while the room is kept relatively quiet. They are given a sweet and we notice whether or not they say thank you. An abridged version of the ten lepers all healed by Jesus is then read to the backdrop of some delightful PowerPoint line drawings of the ten at various stages of the story. It is the same point of course – gratitude matters but can be taken for granted. Another angle through doing is then offered. One of the original helpers is moving away. It's a chance to say thank you for all he has done. Rather than just a talk and presentation from the front, everyone has the chance to write one thing on a ping pong ball and throw it into his hat. The section is light in feel, fast moving and varies across hearing, seeing and doing.



### Carousel

The nave has already been set out with some of the games that will be used. A familiar drill now occurs at 16.25. Get yourselves into six teams – one for each game. Groups quickly self select. Here consideration of overall numbers and venue size comes in. Too small a number of participants and the games feel flat. Too many and the venue gets crowded and could even begin to court risk. Too small a venue and there can't be enough



<sup>10</sup>BOING stands for *Bounce On in the Name of God*, written by Dave Godfrey. See [www.numberfun.co.uk/dg/songs](http://www.numberfun.co.uk/dg/songs)

games to bring real variety. On the Sunday I saw, I counted 18 adult males, 21 adult females and 34 under 16s. It was slightly down on average but worked well in the venue size. On the two PowerPoint screens at the east end were countdown clocks set for 3.30 minutes per game. With the group sizes everyone got a turn and some games were team based anyway.



Many were linked to harvest – like finding a needle in a haystack, seeing how many vegetables you can stack up on top of one another, shooting peas at grumpy faces to make them turn over to smiley ones, or rolling tins down a ½ drainpipe shape and through a hoop across the floor. The last sounds simple to the point of being trivial but to me was a reminder that challenge is never far away if you look ahead. Pleasures at achievement can be simple and such simple games played together have entertained families for generations before the invention of television and then the computer game. The latter is

often the antithesis of this – technically sophisticated, expensive to buy, often played solitarily, requiring little physical exertion and yet curiously addictive. I'd be interested to know if any families at Sweaty Church have changed their gaming habits at home.

### Half time

It is 16.55 and everyone gathers once more at the front. In keeping with this section, drinks and even sliced oranges come round while people gather their breath. Three deceptively simple questions are given out: How do you like to be thanked? What gifts do you have that others enjoy seeing you do? Who do you need to thank more? The family take a few minutes to ponder these together. I did not hear it directly but in other months parents have reported to leaders how impressed they are at what the children are teaching them. Here stands the pillar of learning together as a family. The next stage is when the age groups do split up, some ten minutes later. The adults move out to the café area near to the front door, while the children are split by year groups with the

older ones 8-11 in the crypt for an indoor energetic game – like hockey, while provision is made for the younger ones in the nave, and an upstairs lounge area is used for craft with the 6-7 year olds. Originally the Sweaty Church leaders thought the age range would be 7-11 plus parents, but the younger siblings came too and I saw what I thought were some 4-5 year olds, so they had to be catered for as well. A minimum age is a current question. They do not cater for unattached children, but can cope with those who have come as friends of a family.

The adults collected drinks from the servery, and sat as they chose around 6-7 small tables. A mum team member, Catherine, then showed a short video clip from parentchannel.tv. It was a mix of vox pops from parents and children, interspersed with weightier comments from a child psychologist. The topic was sharing out chores in the home and parents were invited on their tables to discuss this value, why it might be fostered, what their expectations and experiences were and whether there was anything they wished to change or start doing. Earlier in the story of Sweaty Church they did try something more clearly spiritual during this section of the afternoon but concluded that they were expecting too much too soon.



### Wrapping up

At 17.25 Ian called time in the café while the various groups began to come back from the far corners of the building. He thanked the adults for coming, drew attention to the Men's Health night which was coming up soon and closed with a prayer on the overall theme. Tea and toast was then available at the servery and unsurprisingly many then stayed some time and chatted, while others left. Breakdown of the various areas followed, including a lot of Hoovering, and we were done before 18.00.

I give the shape to give a flavour of the event, its content and pace, and also because Ian and Jonny find it has not changed much over the two years. I reflect that **clear values can lead quite naturally to definite shapes and then to content that serves both**. Indeed this is one contemporary understanding of how all good liturgy works. There are values that lead to shapes, into which, by engagement also with a clear theme for the day, material written, sung, silent and spoken is fed.

### What do others need to do this?

A clear understanding and adoption of the pillars comes first. Without that, the energy, time and creativity involved will drag you inexorably into getting enough together to survive providing the next month's event and you are already running down the road to your so-called 'Sweaty Church' just being a club. Sweaty can be done more easily than Church, and more easily than combining the two.

Next you need leaders who are sufficiently creative or great at stealing and adapting material. They also need to be good at finding and inspiring volunteers. These recruits too need to get the values, and be willing to pray that they be realised and practised, or else the process of dilution begins again.

You need a building that is large enough, warm enough, flexible enough and people are not too precious about it. I heard of one church doing the games down the fixed aisles and I admired their courage. St Paul's Holgate, which has the strapline 'A place to belong', is like a well used home. The family that live there are more important than the house looking smart.

**It really helps to have a wider church family who know what Sweaty Church is.** That creates prayer backing, finance when it is needed, but also stops the usually unhelpful question: 'When are these people going to start coming to real church?' It is true that some may do and that fits with the porous image running through this booklet. But many won't. It will become, or may have already become their church, or the first building block in a more complex picture by which church is made up of belonging to more than one thing.

## Flowing out

### Links to St Paul's DNA

John Lee sees Sweaty Church embodying something of what he thinks of as the DNA of St Paul's itself. DNA is a frequently used metaphor and mainly used to convey a set of inner values that will be exhibited in outer practice, but need not look identical in every manifestation. Even as I began to write on October 23rd BBC Radio 4 reports were coming in on work with identical twins that have the same genes but who nevertheless exhibit varying characteristics. So **DNA language is not code for production line thinking, or closely controlled franchising about church.**

I was intrigued by the link he made and asked John to tease out the key words of that DNA. Under the ironic acronym ICE which itself remains frozen, is slippery to deal with, moves slowly and sometimes with fearsome power, but is pretty good in gin and tonic, John was persuasive about what the letters could stand for.

**Innovation is the starting point** which he related to Jesus' text about new wine for new wine skins. As such Jesus and his kingdom values create the need for fresh ways to store the life that is found in him. I would go further back to the Incarnation. I see it as an innovative step in God's own mission that had not been undertaken before, even though it may well have been long planned. Not only that, but as the eternal Son took flesh, this was deliberately and even necessarily in a culturally specific way, as a first century male Jew. The historical Christ events have ever since continued to be translated in culturally specific ways, but the number and variety of them has steadily widened. So the faces drawn of Christ look different for different cultures and church emerges in culturally specific ways that nevertheless have some eternal churchness about them. **This can only be done by including innovation as well as seeking faithfulness.** Thus innovation is always risky and without faithfulness it is prey to syncretism. It is always in danger of failing to innovate and we call that irrelevance. Ian, Jonny and John had to innovate and yet, as I have shown, the story reveals the inflow of many streams that led to the innovative feature that appeared.

*Complexity* was the second point and John illustrated it from his own garden. He and Niki decided not only to have some planned neat raised beds for vegetables but to designate a different area as a wild flower garden. Here they noticed that unplanned combinations of flora and fauna occurred; these in turn gave rise to different fruitfulness which could be noticed but not necessarily expected or planned. Wendell Berry, a prophet of early Christian environmentalism, notes that human **agribusiness tends to produce single crop annuals while nature always reverts to a variety of perennials**. The latter is more complex but also more sustainable by the earth. So I am intrigued that through this other image of porosity, this story is showing the complex interconnections that lead to the birth of something new and also how it in turn affects what surrounds it.

*Experimentation* was his third word; his permission giving instinct to say yes and being willing to see what happens. It is the consequence of innovation, but also offers any proud innovators the chance to learn humility by a degree of trial and error. Thus it is also necessary that it is **served by a feedback loop**. This value is already in place with St Paul's and was demonstrated in the Monday staff meeting when the events of the past week were reviewed. Sweaty Church still being relatively new is a living embodiment of all three ICE values and as such sustains a flow that keeps the rest of the Church more attune to those values.

### Connections across the life of the church family

Another specific overflow would be the day when Sweaty Church came to the 10.15 and took it over for the morning. Unsurprisingly they chose Father's day in 2012. They incorporated some of the regular features like the carousel of games, but with each one run by a dad. It included a testimony and some songs from the nearly instant Sweaty Dads Choir. Learning by the family and through activities was followed by a BBQ. It could be an annual event or linked to some topical sporting event like the Olympics.

I could also see flow both ways between Sweaty Church and other events for men: the advertised annual men's weekend away and also the forthcoming men's health night with a thought provoking evening drawing on a medic and Bishop Martin of Selby on emotional and spiritual health issues for men. I gather Sweaty Church, along with other ministries at St Paul's, have combined

to run termly after-school family events. These are not seen as worship, but do create an environment similar to a regular Sweaty Church. Complexity and porosity are operating once more.

Another clear flow outward is the annual Sweaty Camp in early July, now in its second year. Thus far each one has been wetter than the one before - monsoon camp in 2015 beckons. It is a back to basics woodland adventure for all the family. 125 people came to the most recent one. They played and prayed within a beautiful Scouts venue in the North York Moors. The day was spent enjoying good food. Indeed, its importance as an extended family felt almost eucharistic. It also meant getting involved in activities. The range was wide: den building, pottery, woodwork, mad science, nail painting, jewellery making, photography, story sticks, prayer and reflection, and river walking. Wonderfully, internet and mobile access is impossible, making the place adventurously remote, almost wild yet safe. That built friendships, worked with the pillars, and drew people who were not ready for Sweaty Church, yet gave them a flavour of it.



There is here another connection worth pondering. In churches of St Paul's size and complexity there is a tendency to have a 'main congregation', usually the mid-morning one, which has a hegemony of influence, greater resources allocated to it, and preferential language to bolster it. **The word 'main' is obvious evidence of power**, but often this is buttressed by calling it a congregation and everything else are but 'services'. Thus this one mid-morning community is privileged and all the other things are downgraded to events. This often unthinking power play is linked to two pairs of entertaining images of differing church sizes and dynamics that I first met in New Zealand.



## Four images of different kinds of church



The smallest is **Cat church** – in which the pastor thinks he may own the cat, but of course the cat knows the truth and behaves with appropriate independence. Here the pastor is but chaplain to the powerful leading lay family[s].



**Dog church** is different and usually a bit bigger. Dog is very loyal to master but is rather dependent on him for feeding, exercise, and dealing with unmentionables. Dog is not reliable in dealing with outsiders and may either growl at them or lick them to death.



**Garden church** comes next. It grows according to the skill, energy, finance and time of the one gardener. It develops until the limit of what the gardener can sustain is reached. Then maintaining what has been created takes the time available. This last is the classic minister led Anglican parish with one church and because these have been going some time, maintenance is already high on the agenda.<sup>11</sup>



**Farm church** is profoundly different to Garden church. The staff have to be multiplied, as the one gardener can no longer do it all. Unless the farmer is relaxed about others with different, more specialist, and even better skills than his own, there will be control issues. The fields are more diverse contexts than the one garden and tend to grow different crops. Crop rotation will also be practised. This is more complex and no one field, or indeed one worker, is primary.

In my view St Paul's is well on the way out of Garden identity into a Farm one, but Sweaty Church by its name and its profile makes that all the more clear.

**Maybe the time is coming to see St Paul's as a family of churches.** If that is to be done most healthily then all the parts need to affirm the full existence of the others. Here are two practical ways to express that. What prayer partnerships might be built between the congregations? How often in intercessions have you heard the 'main congregation' pray for its older BCP sister one, or vice versa for that matter? How about the Sweaty mob digging over the garden of an elderly member of another congregation, or painting one of her rooms?

<sup>11</sup>The self-limiting nature of the first three models has been noted as an Anglican problem for many years. See D. Wasdell, *Urban Church Project Papers 1 & 2 Let My People Grow* (1974) and *Divide and Conquer* (1975) highlighting the inherent flaws in the parochial system. [www.churcharmy.org.uk/ms/sc](http://www.churcharmy.org.uk/ms/sc)

## Publishing and popularity

Another outflow is aspirations and explorations of Sweaty Church elsewhere. Already there is the beginning of Sweaty Church in other places: St James Wetherby, St Andrew's Chorleywood, and a Methodist church in York. While I was visiting, an observer from the Methodist circuit in Halifax was also watching and learning. As such the idea has multiplied. Being the subject of an Encounters on the Edge booklet can only accelerate the process. It isn't strictly reproduction in the classic church planting understanding. To use an analogy, it is like a baby boom hitting a group of friends, rather than having more children oneself.

With some of these early examples, Jonny or Ian have gone to the church and led the event, sometimes the first three of them. Clearly that pattern is not sustainable. They are also considering making available the resources they use, that is the themes and associated games. This would be a great gift to others, but it also spells **opportunity and danger**. One has already been highlighted in this booklet: trying to do too much directly for others is exhausting and can even damage the work back at base. Some well known fresh expressions of Church **deliberately limit the number of times a year that visitors come**. Others ration the time given to the wider church through conferences and workshops that their leaders are wise to take on.

The other danger is that if you publish you lose control and there is sadly often an attendant loss of quality. The Alpha Course earlier, and more recently Messy Church, have been through that loop. They have taken respectively tougher and more relaxed views of franchise, but in both cases it has not stopped people using the label and misusing the product.

This too is a complex area. On the one hand we should rejoice in non-identical reproduction. How mysterious and wonderful that the three of the Trinity are not identical. How merciful that my two boys are not me. We sense it in the Godhead, we see it among ourselves, but struggle to let it happen through church. Yet context and incarnation should have made it obvious.

Pillars or values remain and these are to govern how the shapes that embody them should come to be chosen. Failing to think that way will lead to the unthinking adoption of shapes and the 'how to' mentality, rather than the tougher process of values and context leading to shapes, or the 'why to' mentality. Publish and these issues are with you.

## Questions that remain

Do Jonny and Ian do too much? Can their gifts be emulated? They have tried wider team planning but the single young adults who are some of the helpers do not contribute freely in such gatherings. They do however thrive at leading sessions during Carousel and small group work. It may be that some parents will emerge to take on more serious roles.

Is it OK not to know how it will all evolve before starting? I find that one easy. The answer is yes and one I put into practice when getting married and when we started a family. It is still work in progress. What is not OK is to give up because the future is not yet crystal clear.

Could it work to make a connection with those classic church parades, made up of the uniformed organisations? What would it look like to combine the best of what the uniformed organisations do in terms of games and activities, with what Sweaty Church offers? For Cubs and Boys' Brigade this might be a very real step forward in bringing its members and an ongoing church experience together, in way that is not only congruent, but also accessible and fun.

How can Sweaty style learning occur in the homes of the families that come? What will be the ways to discover that deepen discipleship and stay sweaty? What might be evolved for young people as they reach secondary school? When will it be the right time and context to think about the sacraments and can they be done in a sweaty way? Clearly for baptism there would be lots of water and it is a ready made theme. So is it church or a feeder to church, or both, and with porous thinking does clarity always matter as much as connection?

I hope a book with the working title Messy Church Theology, to be published by BRF, will be coming out in the autumn of 2013. As its editor I see many parallels in the questions being unpacked in that book about whether and when something like Messy Church can be church and what the process and fruit of discipling looks like.<sup>12</sup>

**George Lings:** October 24th 2012     **Cartoons:** **Tim Sharp**

### Getting in touch

Resources for a full programme are available contact: [www.sweatychurch.co.uk](http://www.sweatychurch.co.uk)

<sup>12</sup>Already some overlap is planned. Sweaty Church will be featured in a future *Get Messy* magazine. See <http://www.brfonline.org.uk/getmessy/>

# The Sheffield Centre ceased at the end of 2012

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The Encounters on the Edge authors thank all those we have journeyed with:

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## Continuing Resources

Hard copy back numbers can be obtained free for as long as stocks last, but with the cost of postage and handling.

PDF versions can still be ordered on line at £2.40 each via this website:

[www.encountersontheedge.org.uk](http://www.encountersontheedge.org.uk)

Church Army's Research Unit, being smaller, thinks its future output will be web-based.