

This article, by Canon George Lings, comes with gratitude and apologies to C.S. Lewis author of *The Screwtape Letters* – a compendium of advice from a senior to a junior devil.

## **Screwtape suppresses statistics**

The Church of England has a long history which mercifully includes the ability not to be disturbed by data, but to keep calm and carry on. We have ensured that although it has the tiresome habit of commissioning and publishing reports which read well and would further the enemy's cause, we have managed to get people to ignore them in practice.

This is quite an art and takes practice; there are some useful strategies to learn, and some tricky traps to avoid. We should begin with the obvious temptations now that the Church Army has produced the ridiculously named report '*The Day of Small Things*' on the distasteful topic of fresh expressions of Church. These young churches threaten to help the Church of England in its mission and, just as bad, try to supply simpler ways of being church that attract people normally under our influence.

### **1 Don't read in the first place**

At 233 pages it is far too long and that will help. The problem here is that the research has been published and people can easily get hold of a copy. We know that Russell, a tiresome Church Army activist, has sent it to the two Archbishops, but we can provide distractions so that they'll be too busy to read it. What's worse, is that the internet - over which our control is patchy – has meant people can get it for free, and no one will know they are reading it. It is going to be hard to hide it away. So other strategies may be needed to prevent it undermining our efforts.

### **2 Get church people to say 'we just don't need it'**

Suggest to them that the Church is doing OK and that the disturbance caused by this new stuff could erode confidence. Bury bad news; like one recent survey of parishes showing that 50% of the attenders were over 65. Remind them that experience is what counts. Reassure them that as Cathedrals now sing Graham Kendrick songs, they can know they are up to date. Don't let them think about the low morale of the clergy, the number who are about to retire, and the increasing number of churches they have to look after. Present the multi-parish benefice as an opportunity.

### **3 Discredit the research in their minds**

Get them to make friends with an academic who will know how to pooh pooh things. Here are some useful words to create doubts: 'anecdotal', 'unrepresentative' and 'biased'. You can always fall back on that 'damned lies and statistics' chestnut. Make sure that people don't see the map of where this has been done. Otherwise they'd see that half of the country has been covered. Worse, the researchers got records of 99% of all the known cases of these young churches. It looks worryingly comprehensive.

The other thing to keep dark that there was a list of 10 indicators about what should be counted in. Most people don't know that the research had to exclude 60% of the cases presented. It all looks rather rigorous, rather than the charming view; '5 Christians meet at a bus stop, so it must be a fresh expression.' Confusion about what counts has helped us for years. But the problem of this supposed clarity does lead to another helpful approach.

#### **4 Use the argument 'It's all too complicated'**

Draw on the fact that 60% of the cases were excluded. Argue there is a lack of definition about fresh expressions of Church. But if that doesn't work, argue that the definitions are too tight. That would be rather excluding, and therefore very un-Anglican, which must be wrong.

Keep people away from the dangerous view that the definition or a fresh expression of Church is actually as simple as H<sup>2</sup>O – where all that is needed is two elements. Annoyingly, this approach also enables these research people to point out that water doesn't have just one form, but it exists in many forms including the steam in steam engines; use lure that to get clergy excited by this distraction. Fortunately when the researchers translate this simple view into theology, then words like missional and ecclesial come in – so no one knows what they are talking about.

#### **5 Persuade them that the fxC make no real difference.**

This is a tricky one. You need to start with some bluster and talk about how marginal they are. Despise a Messy Church in the deanery as 'kids stuff' or call the Alt worship one 'exotic'. The trouble will come if a few facts come out.

- There are 1100 known ones with 50,000 people at them.
- It seems for every maverick who started one, there are now over 2 ½ more people.
- Just as bad, the stats say that there that they get twice as many under 16s as parish churches.

Our control has slipped badly in this area of dis-mission, for 40 years ago only 2-3 of these things started per year, now it is over 300.

Discouragement always helps. Plant the thought, 'it still hasn't stopped decline has it?' But then head your person away from any smart Alec who replies – 'so without the fresh expressions of Church the decline would be worse, wouldn't it?'

There may be a better defence, if your human gets bombarded with these stats. Feed his vanity and fear, tell him to look superior and sophisticated and say 'we are not interested in numbers.' Lure him into praising slippery values like depth and dedication; or Anglican practices like liturgy and lectionary. Remind him that's what counts.

If the facts get out the bag, so you will have to change tack. Because these things are mainly small, and also young, they are vulnerable. Attack what they are and play on people's fears.

#### **6 Sow the seed that young churches are risky**

Here some data is on our side. 11% of these things have died. How irresponsible – ha ha! Feed the shock it would be if the C of E had closed 11% of its churches. So they must be a problem.

You can also play on a worry that over a third of these fresh expressions of Church or 'fxC' are led by unqualified people. The researchers call them the lay-lay. Make jokes about chickens or Chinese minsters if you can get away with it.

If you go down those routes, beware of people who praise a culture of risk and who note that compared to small businesses these fxC are pretty solid. Other people may come in all dewy eyed about 'the liberation of the laity' and how this is the cheapest form of ministry in years. Of course we know better and have worked hard so that many laity, we have trained well, believe

they are there to turn up, pay up and shut up - except during responses, hymns, and Synods. But lead? – heavens! if you will excuse my swearing.

You could also point out to them the danger that these things, lurking as they do at the fringe, are bound to leave the Church of England, taking valuable young people with them. But leave the slur there, don't let people find out that only 4/1100 actually did leave.

## **7 The fxC will never grow up and become proper churches**

These presenters are cunning. They play on the fxC being young and therefore there should be some scope to note their intentions, not just their performance. They say that's what you'd do with children and teenagers. Remind your victim how tiresome and troublesome teenagers are.

They then claim 80% of the fxC have started down the road of discipleship. They say all of them engage with the Bible one way or another, 80% also have started down the road towards paying their way, making day of day decisions and to seeing various sorts of spiritual fruitfulness. If you can't suppress these details at least you can point out how few have communion. For some people that proves they can't be real churches.

The trap to avoid here is a clever clogs asking how well existing churches would fare if they were put through the same hoops, or asked how mature they were or how they had grown.

## **8 Tempt them with a few myths**

Myths are so much more powerful and enduring than facts. One good one is that the fxC are full of choosey, Christians chasing the next thing. That sows the seed that this is just more internal transfer growth and the spread of consumerism more deeply into the Church. Blind your person against the opinion of the interviewed leaders that 60% were either people returning to church after some time away or coming for the first time.

Another good one is that this is a game only played by part of the Church of England. Present it as a sort of divide and rule strategy, sowing discord and preventing concerted action. If the data escapes and people see that there were more central than charismatic examples, either point up the evangelical figure as a takeover strategy, or start muttering about Holy Trinity Brompton and a plan to enforce the London model elsewhere.

## **9 Sow the slur that that they aren't Anglican**

Keep your temptee ignorant of the fact that no one actually has a definitive answer any more about what makes something Anglican, or that it has been a source of argument since the Reformation.

Point out that about 24% the fxC crossing parish boundaries which sounds very wicked and even an invasion. Keep dark that 76% of them don't do this and all those that did got permission. Certainly quote the confirmation figures, which are even lower than for communion and don't let advocates of change point out that with lots of the non-churched and adult baptisms in these fxC makes this rather likely.

Do go on nagging your charge about the proportion that lack clergy leadership. Appeal to their view that standards matter and suggest that heresy may lurk in the wings. Keep them away from the wondrous fact that the church has been declining and is still fighting over doctrine, having had clergy leadership up till now.

Keep out of people's sight that all the fxC examples came from a diocesan list in the first place. Cover over that they all passed the list of indicators, including being seen as part of the diocesan family. Of course it also doesn't help that their existence and performance has been passed back to the diocese – no one need know. Worse there might even now be someone doing something about it. This leads to the last vital tip.

## **10 Keep this data away from policy makers**

What would be rather dangerous would be if trusting relationships grew up between two groups of people in the light of the evidence. If a room contained permission givers and policy makers – you know - Bishops, Diocesan secretaries and Mission specialists, as well as the pioneers, lay-lay and willing clergy, who knows what might happen.

Already scary visions of more fxC are being set in various dioceses. The situation threatens to get out of control, and even become evangelistic and enthusiastic. That wouldn't be Anglican at all, let alone be in our interests.

Yours infernally  
Screwtape