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Encounters on the Edge



no. 28:

Rural Cell Church

A new wayside flower

Contents

Rural Cell Church	3	Why has cell flourished here?	18
What kinds of fresh expression of church can flourish in the countryside?.....	3	Contextual	18
Where?	3	Ideological	19
Real not idyllic	5	Good leadership	20
The making of a country parson	5	Intentional search for maturity.....	22
Why did it start?	8		
		Rural church and the future	24
Who for?	10	The burden of buildings	24
The significance of the cell quarter	11	Cell and rural	25
What kind of people are in cells?	12		
Why this growth?.....	13	Further reading	26
Sacramental cell life	14		
Sow what?	15		
4all.....	15		
Is 4all enough?	16		

Rural Cell Church

A new wayside flower

What kinds of fresh expression of church can flourish in the countryside?

Encounters on the Edge no.27 examined the evolving rural context for all fresh expressions of church and told one story. Some would think all cases must work with the rural penchant for church buildings and be led by clergy to be proper. So multiple congregations, midweek church, or even alternative worship sound plausible¹. But can cell church grow in the countryside? Could it arise out of the local mission context, not just existing church shapes? Could it be a new wayside flower bringing a welcome colour, vigour and diversity? It seems it can and more surprisingly, it is well suited to do so.

Where?

The Tas Valley Team Ministry is a multi-parish benefice (MPB) of six parishes, either side of the Tas, a stream flowing south to north. Starting two and a half miles south of Norwich, the area stretches a further seven miles south. To say it sits between Norwich and Long Stratton is physical geography; that it exists between Tesco and the Co-op is a question of rural economic access. The shape of its boundaries are not unlike a right facing bust of a horse's head. Norfolk is the most



Newton Flotman

densely churchded area of Europe north of the Alps, but the buildings of this MPB are varied and local, not grand wool churches. The parishes have been brought together in a gradual process since the 1970s, before which nearly all had their own parson. In the opinion of Sally Gaze, the team rector, the

¹ An example of Alternative Worship at St John Bridgetown Totnes is briefly given in the February 2005 edition of Exeter Diocesan News on page 8. As a market town, it may qualify as a kind of rural.

existence of MPBs is the greatest structural difference between urban and rural church life. She comments that they do not relate to any distinctive of rural life and are a least worst coping mechanism to enable inherited structures to continue as long as possible. Mission-shaped church should fit with cultural distinctives and this perception would guide her thinking for the future.

The London to Norwich railway line is its western border and, most importantly, it is split north to south by the busy A140, carrying fast traffic. It is known, not unaffectionately, as the great divide. Four parishes lie to its west and two to its east. Sensibly the two clergy, Sally and Phil are placed one on either side. Sally Gaze, as full-time, concentrates on the four and on the cell movement. Phil Wood, her half-time colleague, looks after the two villages to the east. Attendance, across the churches, varies between 1.5% to 6% of the population.



The great divide



Sally Gaze and Phil Wood

Village	Pop ²	NSA	<18	Clergy reside & i/c	Other	School
Swainsthorpe	374	6	0	SG (Sally Gaze)	4all Monthly	Yes
Newton Flotman	1197	24	7	SG		
Tasburgh	1076	35	9	SG	Celebration 3rd Sun	Yes
Tharston	599	8	1	SG		
Saxlingham	676	24-45	1	PW (Phil Wood)		Yes
Shotesham	539	16	0	PW		
Cells	Network	24	15	SG	4 adult 1 teen	

² 2001 Census Data Table KS01v

Real not idyllic

In Osborne's terms, the MPB contains a mixture; some villages are strongly farming related and, in others, the many urban exports, the commuters and retireds, predominate. In terms of Russell's concentric rings, I would call it accessible countryside, not urban shadow.³ In some villages, like Saxlingham, historic houses catch the eye; in others, such as Tasburgh, styles from the 1970s are most evident. In-fill housing can be found in most of them and there is a rumour of 600 new dwellings south of Tharston. Incomers are still arriving. My illusions of rural Norfolk were disturbed by two factors. Some villages like Newton Flotman (where Sally lives) are significantly working class with cheaper housing. 7% of the households are single-parent families and double that in surrounding villages.⁴ Secondly, none of them has a townie's "Cotwolds" image, containing an obvious centre replete with green, pub and pond. Their roots are working communities that have grown up "higgledy-piggledy" through time and circumstance. The MPB is a complex mosaic not picture poster simplicity. The Free Churches have almost gone; only one remains in Saxlingham.



Saxlingham Village



New Estate, Tharston

The making of a country parson

Sally and Chris Gaze, with their son Matthew, arrived in Newton Flotman in 2002. They had grown up in Norfolk and she had completed two rural curacies, near Worcester and in Crickhowell. Almost invariably, I find the creativity and passion of pioneers have long strands into their own history, punctuated by key moments.

³ See *Encounters on the Edge* No. 27 for these two different ways to classify villages.

⁴ 2001 Census Op. Cit. Table KS20



The Gaze family

I note her faith commitment as a child to Jesus as King, and as Saviour, as a teenager. She told me of the conversion of her non-believing parents and the subsequent transformation of their family life. Her boyfriend and now husband also came to faith. The reality of, and necessity to pray for, conversion, change and discipleship has given an evangelistic component to her ministry and are significant in this story. This was strengthened by the example of her second incumbent, Jo Vickery. As she put it in an email *“he was simply not afraid to ask or to talk about God to everyone. He is my inspiration today.”* This is in stark contrast to the talk of pastoral mission that I have found in

official rural Anglican reports and in otherwise thorough books on rural ministry. **Frankly, any view of mission that can totally escape talking about evangelism is a distortion of agreed Anglican understanding.**⁵

Another key point was the discovery, in her 3rd year of Theology at Cambridge, of Arbuckle’s *Earthing the Gospel*, setting out a process by which gospel and culture interact with one another; as such, it might be better called “Interculturation”. It is the long process of translation between the two, leading to assimilation and eventual transformation of a host culture, finding what is appropriate and avoiding what isn’t.

During ordination training at Queens Birmingham, she started an M Phil on “Inculturation and St Paul”, which she then completed in her first curacy. It gave depth to several convictions; sharing faith is partnership with a present God waiting to be found and seeds of the word are sown in the whole of creation.⁶ Also, in the inculturation process, there is what Catholic theologians call entering the paschal mystery, a sense of following the patterns of, and even becoming one with, the dying and rising Christ. This perception was one of her important contributions to the *Mission-shaped Church* report, crystallising the language of “dying to live”. **It established in**

⁵ See the Five Marks of Mission of ACC 1988 which explicitly include evangelism, making it the first mark. Or consult *The Cutting Edge of Mission* (the mid Decade of Evangelism report from Kanuga) and not least its chapter 34 by Raymond Fung.

⁶ A thought from Justin Martyr explored in Sally Gaze’s M. Phil Thesis p.16-17

her a willingness to die to inherited or imposed patterns of church when communicating Jesus to the culture around her.

The rural curacies added further ingredients to the mix. They taught her various systems to set up, resource and maintain the complex pattern of services that a multi-parish benefice spawns and how to juggle the disparate demands on a leader. This gave a framework within which creating yet more expressions of church could more easily occur. It was also a time to underscore and connect various key thoughts. One was Newbigin’s observation that the Christian community is the only hermeneutic of the gospel.⁷ The community learning to demonstrate the life of Jesus became a quest. The second was a focus on the value of cell thinking. In her teaching days, before her call to ordination, Sally had been a member of a youth Bible study group. It was peer-led and the members had flourished.

It modelled the best values of church. However, out of inculturation instincts, she rejected a centralised transition to cell principles. *“I realised ‘big bang’ would be a damp squib”* was the comment.⁸ The third strand was the centrality of discipleship, or following Jesus. She had seen that *Alpha* led people to faith, but without a small group to follow up, very little discipleship occurred. **It may be that one curse of Christendom is that it is too easily satisfied by attendance;** diocesan systems, through their record keeping, can encourage this. The deeper need is fashioning a Christian lifestyle, not merely exercising a consumer choice for what people find as attractive Christian public services.



It may be that the curse of Christendom is that it is too easily satisfied by attendance.

⁷ Lesslie Newbigin *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* p.227

⁸ “Big bang” is the name given to one way of bringing cell to an existing church. The values are taught for a period of time to the whole church, and then at a given point all the existing small groups are deemed cells and sometimes even congregation members allocated to them.

Why did it start?

Coming in 2002, Sally Gaze intended to follow the classic advice to first incumbents: for the first year, just watch. Yet by autumn 2003 some cells were in place. *"God prepared me and pushed me"*, she remarked. The reasons exist at several levels behind a background pattern of prayer for the way forward.

Necessity was one indicator. Here is yet another story of some *Alpha* graduates finding that the jump to congregation was too wide to leap, even in a rural context. To move from friends to strangers, from discussion to just



listening, from questions to acquiescence, from secular building to strange church and from meal to being debarred from communion is not a great inducement. In discussion with the adults and teenagers discovering faith, other factors emerged. It seemed church attendance required an interest in old buildings, coping with 17th century English, cutting into family time on Sunday morning, having young children with zipped up lips and acquiring a husband who didn't mind being left at home. That amount of baggage lacked credibility. The Christian dynamics of creating a community following Jesus (supporting each other, offering God worship, following the Spirit's prompts in mission) were all fine. People asking questions about *"what next?"* was one reason for the introduction of something different, as congregation did not look like a plausible delivery system.

Following local patterns was another. Sally noted that "networks", not just neighbourhoods, were alive and well in the benefice. These had evolved

through interest groups or school association and they crossed villages. *Alpha* groups were further examples. Inculturation is relaxed at baptising the social patterns which do not inherently conflict with Christianity. Why not let the cells follow these natural patterns? It would then be more obvious that **the groups created for networks were complementary to the village congregations which served neighbourhoods**. This could lower the sense of competition or threat felt by the older expression of church. It was also a mission-shaped process. If networks were now how some people across the villages lived, then creating expressions of church that worked with this reality made sense. It was better than insisting they should go to their supposedly "local" village church, where they would feel like strangers, not locals.

Conviction was a third; what should follow must grow disciples. Cells are shaped to tackle this head on and, in an ageing and declining rural church, this is significant. This way of being church attacks the mentality of mere attendance which is usually also clergy dependant. By contrast, it opens a route that is more self-sustaining. As such, it is more like the values of the earliest church. Because it is interactive, it is also more open to handling the continued wide range of questions that new Christians from non-churched backgrounds have, because they have no well formed inherited Christian foundations. Another reason, significant for the rural context, is that the cell route delivers smaller churches from trying to compete with any large urban counterparts in terms of sophistication of public ministry. The rural church is not going to grow regionally noteworthy ministries in preaching, musical excellence or provision for varied ages of children's groups. What it does is offer something simple and sustainable, where all who go count; they know and are known. Cells by their small group dynamics are another form of small unit church and enjoy the same benefits. As such, cell fits quite well here with rural church. Born out of demand that created necessity, responding to network patterns and out of the conviction that cell aids discipleship, some groups began.

Who for?

There are, at present, five groups. Over time, they have become continuing groups for those engaged in faith exploration, as well as discipleship groups for existing Christians. They mainly serve networks of people as they grow through friendships. Moreover, when new people need or ask for a cell, they are placed in one where they have things in common. Though each has a regular meeting place they are not based geographically by village. They have a fluid life as from time to time people move to another cell, as their circumstances change.

When I visited in June 2005, the cell groups were listed as an item in the A-Z of regular events in the monthly news sheet. The wording captures quite a lot of the message being given out to non-cell people.

*"Cells are vital units of the body – and cells in church life are small groups, which contain the DNA of what it means to be church. We meet to grow in faith, to pray and support each other, to learn from the bible and to join in actively sharing our faith and serving the wider community."*⁹

Then follows a list of which meets when, in which village and phone numbers to call in order to join. For those with eyes to see, the claim of cell to be church is being made here. Their openness to others to join is alleged, but I did not hear of any who had come by that route. I was surprised by where it was placed on the page. To put it among events (which are listed separate to services) still sends a message that it is not church as much as Sunday building-based expressions are. It could look like cells are an important extra, but not yet core curriculum in public.

This modesty may be tactical, not wishing to make a bolder claim in print and not wanting those satisfied by congregational life to feel coerced into cells and dilute its difference. The four cells I visited exhibited much of the kind of small group life I would expect and hope for. Their pattern is three

⁹ Readers will look in vain for an extended description of their cell meetings. Let them consult either no.3 or no.19 in this series or read a book devoted entirely to cell. However I don't know of a book that deals with cell in a rural context and up till now there has been doubt that it could be made to work.

weeks of pursuing discipleship and one week of a social, to have fun and to connect with non-members. Another useful pattern (which I had not seen before) was that often a husband and wife went to different groups. This enabled cheaper domestic babysitting arrangements and I wondered whether sometimes it meant partners participating in their own right.



a cell meeting

The significance of the cell quarter

However good the cells are, it remains true that 26 adults attend them, compared to around 100+ who go to Sunday congregations, not including those cell members who are doing both. What does one quarter of the adults being in cells indicate? On the prototype understanding of cell, which grows entirely organically, this is very good going for only 18 months progress, not least when the church context could be described as a broadly conservative. In addition, while not all members of the cells are new Christians, a good number are. **It is here that the vast majority of the new Christians in the benefice are growing in faith.** In an ageing church, that is significant as the years roll by.

From watching cell changes elsewhere, I would wait to see how well they succeed in multiplying indigenous leadership, that is, from within the cells. I don't mean they must be *old villagers*.¹⁰ At present, only one of the listed leaders was in the benefice four years ago. It is sense to use able *incomers* who are integrating well, but it is risky to rely on a continued supply from outside, as the cells expand. The other issue is that **incomers may be the most significant new mission for rural church** and if they stay, they will be the life blood of future village life. The cardinal cell issue is whether they can help brand new Christians grow into sufficiently mature disciples for them to become leaders.

Incomers may be the most significant new mission for rural church.

¹⁰ See *Encounters On The Edge* No 27. *Village and Fresh Expressions* p6 for three types of village dwellers.

It is also common sense to recognise that leadership changes in cells are not easy transition points. When they multiply (to use the correct language), there is an inevitable sense of loss which feels like division. In addition, despite the same shape used of the 4 Ws, new leaders do bring a different feel. They may not know the members and they may come in with different adult educational skills. Following the vicar, who may have run the first prototype, can also add to the challenge. Of course, it could be a relief but often it is felt as operating with a less skilled leader. The only people I met who had dropped out of one of the cells did so following such a change. This challenge to grow indigenous cell leaders may limit the multiplication of cells, more than a lack of people wanting to learn how to be church in this way. Sally is already regularly mentoring one children's cell candidate and is about to start a cell leader training course to which each leader has been asked to bring a prospective assistant.

What kind of people are in cells?

As far as I could tell from the range of people that were lined up to meet me and who generously opened their lives and thoughts to my ceaseless questions, **the adult cell members are nearly all new villagers.**¹¹ I met one farmer's wife and another young wife who was an old villager, but otherwise they had come to the area from outside - some to commute, some to retire. I don't conceive of second home owners making it into the regular life of cells; they are more likely to be occasional Sunday folk. I don't mean this group were all recent

newcomers; some had been there many years. The ongoing drift to villages, by definition is made up of new villagers. In the more accessible part of the countryside, they will, by their numbers, competence and assertiveness, become dominant in the younger generations of the community.

If cell can work for new villagers, it should not be dismissed because the take up is less among farmers and old villagers. The two I met from the



a cell group poses

¹¹ One of three groups in rural England, the others being *old villagers* and *farmers*, identified by Anthony Russell.

latter two groups were both de-churched. Indeed, in the countryside that could be expected where the bonds of church and community still are wide and plausible. What is significant is that they were prepared to step outside their grouping, which does have some likeness to tribal identity, in order to join cell. Was it significant that in both cases either difficulty or major tragedy had had a part to play in re-igniting their spiritual quest?

Why this growth?

Staying with who goes, it would not be fair to suggest that this cell movement is growth by transfer. That charge is fair when existing Christians do a church swap, but stay living where they were. These new villagers have moved home, made a new life and then found a way of being church, to which they were becoming committed. Most of those I met had found a living faith on the way and **cell was a sustainable nurture system that would draw them onwards without exhausting the clergy resources.**

One other dynamic was obvious. Women predominated, with the exception of one group. I reflected that the benefice is led by a very personable yet unthreatening younger woman who is already a much loved role model. In addition, she is the evangelistic focus. This is partly by gifting and background. It is also that she is at the stage of life of having school-age children, which is one archetypal way in which new networks are formed. Furthermore, she goes into the schools as Rector, thus having considerable opportunities to sow seeds of interest and forge new relationships. If she forgives me for putting it this way, sow a "Sally" and you will reap younger women Christians. There is, therefore, a need in the benefice for finding and releasing some male counterparts who can connect with the probably tougher male networks, where access is difficult because of long working hours. These may be in the world of work. I noted that some business



Annette



Jackie



Tanya

people in the area did deliberately meet to foster one another's businesses. What connections there are to networks of sport or leisure I don't know.

I wonder whether one commonality among those who moved to the area while already Christian, was that they had seen other ways of being church in their usually urban backgrounds; the jump to cell was, therefore, less radical. Among those who only found faith after their move, I noted that there was another commonality. I picked up some resistance to, or distance from, attendance at Sunday church, yet nearly all of this group were de-churched people, rather than non-churched. One person spoke movingly, but without rancour, of **the daunting formality of church and its language**. She missed any open two-way interchange of views, felt the difficulty of walking in on her own and should she become tearful in church, felt very foolish. Once more, it is not surprising that running an *Alpha* course¹² should be fitting to explore the questions they had. It is then also to be expected that some groups include members who do not attend Sunday expressions of church. This is understood, allowed and affirmed. If cell is church, then it is church.

Sacramental cell life

In keeping with that conviction, Sally ensures that all groups experience the sacrament of communion three times a year. I have not yet met a group that has handled the further question of baptism. My present understanding is that if cell is church and congregation is church, then the logic suggests we need to invent ways for an unbaptised new Christian to be initiated into both levels of community. We have been this kind of way before; in the early church, Bishops administered baptism, which then rightly included the bestowal of the Spirit with the laying on of hands. Necessity in the 4th century, through higher demand, led to the localisation of baptism, delegated to priest and congregation, rather than reserved to Bishop and diocese. It led to the probably unwelcome splitting off of what then became Confirmation by a Bishop. Can a missionary liturgist please come up with a celebratory baptismal rite that works for ways of being inculturated church which are not congregational and are not also dependent upon a licensed building?

¹² This happens to be the process evangelism course run in the Tas Valley. I see few reasons why the same would not be true with other choices, though this choice fits best for those in the Charismatic tradition.

Sow what?

One criticism of cell is that they signally fail to live up to their outreach calling. This is not true here. The groups not only follow the pattern of monthly socials to draw in others, underpinned by regular prayer for those they are in contact with. Groups also take responsibility for running the steady *Alpha* program. Once again, I had not seen the pattern that having done the hosting etc, **they would have their cell meeting in the same venue while the small groups dissected Nicky Gumbel**. Two young mums went yet further. They started a toddlers' music group, meeting in the Tasburgh church premises. It is not an especially religious meeting but gives parents/carers a chance to get out more and have fun with their toddlers. It acts also as a sowing ground that may lead to further faith enquiry and one of the young mums' cells supports it as their outreach. Furthermore, this cell group has begun an all-age monthly Sunday afternoon service, based in Swainsthorpe, which otherwise has half a dozen people over 75, who gather in the morning for 1662. The cell got to hear of another Norfolk village, Southrepps, doing something not dissimilar and went to see.¹³ They were encouraged to hear the lessons learnt. Keys were loving atmosphere, informality, interaction and food.

4all

February 2004 saw the birth of their version. The skeleton is a liturgical shape from Common Worship. Flesh comes from a range of sources. Music, old and new, is either on CD or a keyboard. People of all ages (notably children) take readings prayers or act out a bible passage. The word is often by way of a story of what God has done in local people's lives. The closing prayer is thanksgiving for food, as it is laid out already in the Lady Chapel and an integral part of the event. On a normal month, 20 adults and the same number of children will be there, many of whom have been part of preparing the event. It is becoming a fresh expression in its own right. The cell group provides constant support in prayer and planning.

A few from the surrounding villages who were not regular churchgoers have been drawn into its orbit. I witnessed one such event. It was a baptism and the small church was filled by over 60. The Common Worship liturgical text was radically cut back from its verbose, interminable length, led with warmth and verve by Sally Gaze. The reading about the rescue of the slaves in Egypt

¹³ See *Mission-shaped Church* pp.119-120



4all set up



4all end



4all tea

was from a story version of the bible. Children came to watch as Legoland people crossed through a plastic trough that had been watery yet was now divided and made dry by a bisected lemonade bottle. Songs were accompanied by flag waving children. Prayers were led by a young mum. The baptism was confidently done at the nave font. A touching prelude was that the children brought the water, through which the Lego people had passed, in containers and thus filled the font. The *4all* team tried very hard and it had a coherent liturgical shape to me as a professional insider. Yet, frankly the guests seemed most taken with the short video clip from *Prince of Egypt*. Parents, who had long given up on controlling their kids in this strange church building, didn't have to worry about it for four minutes; this part was, by its medium, in a cultural language the children were used to. **I was left thinking that the gap to the non-churched is a considerable chasm and I doubt whether even inventive hard working services alone will cross it.** Interestingly the baptismal party "legged it" immediately and didn't even stay for the food. Perhaps they had already made their own party arrangements, even though it had been explained and they had been encouraged to stay.

Is 4all enough?

Sally surprised me by questioning my assumption that *4all* was really a fresh expression of church. On my probing, she gave the penetrating, but possibly alarming rationale that **alone it might not be enough to grow disciples.** She, of course, is alert enough to realise that this quite high assessment of what is church might mean that a large number of groups, though meeting in ecclesial premises on the first day of the week, are also not churches. Her critique of attendance as being adequate to find living faith, let alone grow in depth and commitment as a disciple, has long been one suspicion I

have had of monthly family services. As curate and vicar, I watched several times how a fringe was built up while the children were of primary school age and then as they dropped away in early teenage, so did their parents. **No wonder there is a proper search for ways of being church that go beyond friendly nominality.** We may also need to think sharper than functional views of church as living out community, mission, worship and connection to the wider church. Discipleship has a dynamism of growing in Christ, and for Christ, which is a good test of those four functions.

Why has cell flourished here?

There are several kinds of reasons.

Contextual

Sally relates why they were able to start cells to a favourable aspect of being an MPB. The local church members have **already experienced multiple churches** in the benefice. The illusion of there being only one way of doing things is already exposed; diversity has been seen and it is appreciated that different ways of being church help different people. As such, churchmanship differences are not strongly held. Adding to an existing diversity is easier than moving from only one way to two. There is already enforced trust in others because of the knowledge that one local church cannot appeal to all, and movement is eased in the MPB, because **parish boundaries are permeable already**.

The notion of gathering small numbers is seen as normal and good.



Secondly, the notion of gathering **small numbers is seen as normal and good**, as happens in cell. Rural people are used to small church and lack of size is not seen as a bar to virtue or excellence. Thirdly, **networks are now normal**, certainly in the commuter, retired and new villagers. They are part of the exporting of the culture of the urban masses into the countryside. To follow networks in order to form groups seems normal, rather than disloyal to the village. One example of a different network (not urban refugees) is that of the otherwise somewhat isolated farmers, who gather at markets. Forming a network of cells follows a pattern of relationships that is socially accepted. Fourthly, at the lowest level, there is a **pragmatic arrangement** that the cells fit with the day of the week that people can manage. In lives that Sunday does not always suit, building lasting commitment

around achievable patterns is not simply bowing to consumerism. What works may last.

Does this all add up to a cultural change in rural settings called **suburbanisation**? The similarities are aspects like networks, consumer choice, mobility and electronic communication via mobile phone and email. The differences include more space between places, thinly spread resources and so constraints to access to resources. Some therefore think that there is *“a greater opportunity for fresh expressions of church than many of us had imagined”*.¹⁴ Perhaps we could think that **rural people are not deeply different, just differently spread**, which, in turn, affects their self-understanding. Moreover, the issue for the church is *“to learn to participate in God’s mission in rural culture as it is today, not as our nostalgic imagination would paint it”*.¹⁵ My caveat would be that there are a number of different rural groups and I think this story supports the contention, to some extent, that new villagers find it easier to enter the world of fresh expressions than old villagers or the farming community do, with their greater attachment to place, parson and church building.

A fifth dynamic has been suggested by Richard King who was a vicar in the Ham Street MPB in Canterbury Diocese.¹⁶ He attributed part of the success of cell to **facing the difficulty of being anonymous** in village life. He noticed that those who regularly attended the classic festivals never came at other times and, frankly, many other individuals never ever came. To set foot inside a church on a Sunday, even as the most tentative, casual and disinterested enquirer, would be to be instantly visible to the other congregation members and ruin a well-cultivated non-religious reputation of a lifetime. But to go to someone else’s home was far less visible and noteworthy. Cell made spiritual exploration possible, in a place where there are few secrets.

Ideological

One principle was growing cell out of **mixed economy** thinking. This is more than a tolerance of diversity, though it needs that; it is seeking intentional synergy by valuing both the old and the new as well as helping them value

¹⁴ Barry Osborne *Country Way* 2004 Issue 37 p.18

¹⁵ Sally Gaze in email correspondence with George Lings on 3rd December 2004

¹⁶ The Sheffield Centre holds a copy of his report *The Cell Church Model in a Rural Multi Parish Benefice* pp.12-13

each other. In all cases, it also means assessing what works for which groups of people. In this case, the old was already well represented, by the prominence and antiquity of the church buildings and by the length of years the present congregations had been there. The average rural MPB does not need more traditional expressions, but rather the birth of other expressions that will connect for rural dwellers for whom the traditional does not compel.

I realised this was another example of “parallel” cell church planting.

A corollary of this was rejection of “big bang” thinking or, in other words, deciding that the goal was not to transition the whole benefice to cells. Technically, this acceptance is called “metachurch” thinking.¹⁷ Sally was clear and relaxed that cells do not appeal to the traditional congregation member. Indeed, their small group may be the congregation. I realised this was another example of “parallel” cell church planting, comparable to the *Soft Cell* story in *Encounters on the Edge* no.20. What was new was seeing that it could work equally well in a rural context.

Mixed economy could be seen as the framework for mutually-affirming, loving catholicity between expressions of church. Such an attitude promotes synergy. In this story, it is clear that some who found faith through *Alpha* and then felt able to attend a cell, now find that the Sunday expression of church as congregation is also helpful. In the other direction, some staunch PCC members have found fresh vitality in faith by their chosen exposure to cell life. I long that the mixed economy thinking (by which each expression gladly recognizes other expressions as equally valid church) operates here. Sadly, often a barely hidden imperialism emerges and traditionalists think the cell members now attending congregation have seen the light and vice versa.

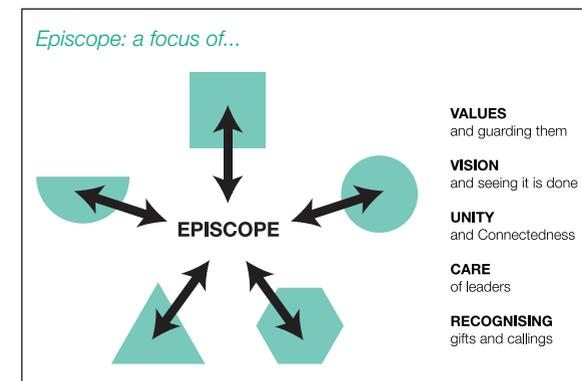
Good leadership

It is always a pleasure to observe quality leadership in action. In growing fresh expressions, I have come to think certain qualities are highly significant; perhaps many of them are those of the cross-cultural missionary. I found these kinds of gifts here.

¹⁷ See Carl George *The Coming Church Revolution* Rivell 2000 where this partial change is regarded as a virtue, not a vice.

I think it begins in attentive **listening**. This is focussed not just on the local people but takes in and discerns their culture time and characteristics. It is a listening that connects strands locally with wider emerging trends and senses, often with others, what it all may mean. That can create possibilities that the local people alone may never have perceived. This is part of the gift of coming from the Church catholic and being essentially missionary. **Something from outside is brought**, but in the spirit of a gift, not an imposition. This means a lowly daring to be creative and to **take initiative**, especially in ways of doing mission beyond the normal round of pastoral care and liturgical responsibility. That was true of Sally perceiving that *Alpha* could work here; more than that, that cells were a way forward from the fruit *Alpha* began to grow. In the relationships between Sally and her leaders, I saw genuine, practical **empowering** and delegation, not a controlling attitude (which always seems to disclose a lack of trust). Best missionary leadership has learnt from Venn, Allen and Donovan that **two trusts**, one in the Spirit and another in the new converts, is essential, though at times heart stopping. This kind of leadership therefore recognises that **growth by adding will not be enough**; it is the multiplication of further churches, in this case some cells, which is the creative, contextual way forward. This involves some **willingness to die** to the previous ways of being church, or at least to their absolute monopoly. It may well include dying to some of the personal preferences of the incoming leader.

I think two essential attitudes co-exist behind many of these values in leadership. One is the **affirmation of diversity across unity**. It can be theologically rooted in the life of the Trinity, the celebration of creativity in creation and the affirmation of culturally specific mission exhibited by the Incarnation. It will build from the patterns of unity and diversity within the early church and so reject tendencies to monolithic uniformity. A consequence, but also the second value, is to see that diversity means the incumbent has to **exercise episcopate** across a range of expressions of church. Such



episcopate is more about a vision of what needs to be done, than a volley of activities done by a “one man band”. That means growing a team who are trusted. Sally would be the first to pay tribute to her colleague Phil and to the lay leaders of the churches - the readers, churchwardens and cell leaders - who are highly committed and gifted. Commitment to team means working with people with gifts you may not have yourself. Sally seeks to support and has regular meetings with these various teams of leaders (wardens and cell leaders) across the benefice but to stay out of local minutiae that could unprofitably consume her energies.

Perhaps there is some inherent loneliness in exercising episcopate, for Sally talked about another trait identified by Gerald Arbuckle as “*little need for affirmation*”.¹⁸ While she felt herself blessed in being among people who are often very affirming, she noted that you must not wait for or depend on, affirmation. If you do, you will never initiate, much less implement, the vision. Confidence must come out of hearing God’s “well done”, not the cheers of the populace.

Intentional search for maturity

This is another trait of the good leader and a point of principle, yet I want to make a category in its own right. It flows from features like diversity, trust and episcopate and is held up in common by Venn, Allen and Donovan. It is a crucial longer term vision for what is created.

Maturity leading to recognised identity is also a deliberate **bulwark against the vagaries of the future**. It is already clear from urban and rural stories elsewhere of pain and difficulty, that **the creation of cells under one incumbent is not proof against the cold winds of change that blow when a founder leaves** and a successor follows who does not so fully share their vision. I suspect this is a feature of all fresh expressions and not limited to cells. However, cells are a peculiar case in that being lay-led by design, non-boundary in character and informal rather than legal in entity, they are especially vulnerable. They are also like people or animals that have a high metabolic rate. If their input level drops, their health suffers quite quickly. Listening to those accounts, there is mutual pain. The cell

¹⁸ G. A. Arbuckle *Out of Chaos – Refounding Religious Congregations* London Geoffrey Chapman 1988 p.38 NB The whole list of Arbuckle’s qualities of intrapreneurs is interesting. 1.Ability to listen/creative imagination/action orientated 2.Passionate commitment to refounding 3.Acceptance of hard work 4.Little need for affirmation 5.Commitment to small beginnings 6.Team builders

leaders can find the incoming dictatorial, controlling and destructive of what they have been led to create under the founder. The incoming priest can see the leaders of the fresh expression as wanting to hold onto their babies and find themselves being cast in the mould of the wicked stepfather. They can’t help being the stepfather, but are not therefore necessarily wicked. Yet expressions of church that are balanced and healthy should have some reasonable rights to continue to exist beyond leadership changes. Perhaps this is one application of Christ’s teaching in John chapter 15 v.16 that his people are chosen to bear fruit that will last.

How does maturity come? It is by the intentional giving of responsibility. **What we treat as adult will tend to become so**. What we fear as adolescent will tend to fulfil our prophecies. Thus, here responsibility for meetings and pastoral care of their people, is given to cell leaders. They in turn are supported by good quality notes to aid their preparation and by regular meetings with them. Whole cells have taken responsibility for aspects of ministry e.g. the creation of the *4all* service. The path of maturity was set out long ago by Venn’s “3 self” thinking. Already the cells are becoming **self-propagating**, in the senses that they grow members’ gifts and ministries. They are growing new Christians and grow yet further cells. Sally and I both note they may already exceed the congregations in this measure of maturity. They are **self-governing** at least in the sense that they are not dependent on any one PCC as they have an existence across the benefice. So the leaders meet directly with the incumbent who has episcopate for them, including finding their way forward together, which is not unlike the best functions of a PCC. It ought also to lead to the creation of an elected lay post across the cells, an equivalent in seniority to a warden, who could as of right attend benefice leadership meetings. In convoluted parish life, this might only mean an existing warden learning how to wear two hats.

Unusually, they have also set out down the road of becoming **self-financing**. Often there is no practice of stewardship in cells, no mechanism made available for giving, no teaching about it and apparently no costs to cover in the first place. It looks like the proverbial free lunch and, these days, no one charges for coffee in a private home. **Yet the hidden costs are the supervision time and travel from the leader of leaders**, creation of training materials, hospitality in homes and use of a building for celebrations across

What we treat as adult will tend to become so.

cells. However, cell leaders usually have their own giving already tied up in congregational life and their own private choice of other charities. Giving to and through cell is a non-starter; cells often have no funds and no spelt out focus to see the need of them. It is arguable that this hinders new Christians growing in the grace of giving and blocks their corporate path to maturity as ecclesial entities. As such, in parallel cell planting, the congregational partner could be forgiven for seeing its cell counterpart as parasitic. Sally wisely has seen that in the life cycle understanding of growing churches, it is as though the cells are at a teenage stage, needing to be given responsibility and also to mature by taking responsibility, which includes handling money well.

In mixed economy thinking, this is not just about the maturity of individual cells; it is also about the path to maturity across the cells through interdependence. Out of this came the exploration of how the cells could be seen as an expression of church, alongside congregation, that the diocese would recognise. This, too, is a natural consequence of mixed economy ecclesiology. In practice here, two changes have occurred. Firstly, the cells have taken responsibility to raise a contribution of some £2000 to the benefice share. This could be helpfully related to their receiving ministry from the clergy. The second element is that the cells, through negotiations with the Diocesan Secretary Richard Bowett, have their own nominated Diocesan Board of Finance bank account (as of May 2005) which gives them some sort of recognised corporate identity and accountability, as well as the practical advantage of claiming tax on gift aid. **Both the diocese and the benefice are to be congratulated on creating a helpful national precedent.**

Rural Church and the future

The burden of buildings

One of the obvious challenges is the number of church buildings proportional to the overall population, most of which have some architectural merit. Some like Bob Jackson foresee a future in which the local church is crushed by the weight of financial responsibility of their upkeep.¹⁹ An example in this benefice is Swainsthorpe. Six people (mostly of pensionable age) no longer have the energy and finance to keep a historic building going, much as their devotion to worship there would wish to do. The way forward which is beginning to

be explored is to **sell the building to the village, making it a charitable trust.** Under such an arrangement, the congregation would be one group who rent it for use, presumably on a Sunday morning. The re-ordering required in this case would leave the chancel untouched, which would be large enough for this size of congregation. The nave would need flexible seating to enable a range of functions including the much larger 4all congregation. Ideally, the side aisle and rear of the nave would need clearing to create provision of kitchen and toilet facilities. *Country Way* comments:

*“Objections may arise from those who have a narrow view of what constitutes holiness but they fail to realise that the medieval church was indeed used for a wide range of activities...there is nothing in human life in which God is not already involved.”*²⁰

I see several additional missional advantages. It moves the status of church from its benevolent Christendom stance of gracious provider, on its own terms, to that of a post-Christendom minority partner. **Our influence will then have to be by quality not power.** It increases the possibility of overlaps between the Christian and village community and could decrease the barriers in crossing between the two. It creates a sense that the building is alive through consistent use and is home, not just rented out, to a variety of ways of expressing village life. In smaller villages that can be without any secular parish community building, this is a significant resource. I hope people in Swainsthorpe will see the mutually beneficial positives and that accordingly it becomes an example of good practice.

Cell and rural

Developing cells has many advantages. **It delivers a small local church from the impossible burden of trying to be all things to all people,** for with its limited resources, it cannot please all of the people all of the time. Cell alongside congregation offers a wider, principled but limited choice. It



Swainsthorpe Church



Swainsthorpe Porch

¹⁹ Bob Jackson *Hope for the Church* CHP 2002 p.4

²⁰ *Country Way* 2004 Issue 37 p.18 citing part of *Faith in the Countryside* 1990

is not choice without commitment, as few could accuse cell of being half-hearted or a passenger mentality.

It also offers a natural progression for people who become Christians from connections in networks and by active participation within forms of process evangelism.²¹ Instead of them having to come and be squeezed into a foreign mould of passive congregational attendance, they are encouraged to grow in the very way they learnt, as they found faith. **It fits also with rural church, in that its inner dynamics include lay-led, small church.** The recovery of lay ministry and leadership has been significantly related to growth of rural church health overall and in cases of its increase in numbers.

It may be that rural cells will be a key player, growing now what will become a kind of underground church of the future. Later they may, or may not, adopt the known public face of the church, through use of its buildings. To do all this will take an enabling mission-shaped leader. This person will be secure in offering episcopate and committed to diversity and to trusting others to grow a cell church alongside congregational life. They will grow a cell church intended to become a full adult part of a benefice's life. This present wayside flower has flourished and nurtured disciples. It may become more like a staple crop in a mixed rural economy.

George Lings
October 2005

Cartoons: Tim Sharp

Further reading

Having seen parts of it in draft, I want to commend the book Sally Gaze is presently writing for CHP. The working title is *Mission-shaped Rural Church* and it will be able to tell far more of this story and offer deeper reflections. I expect she will further open up questions of whether we must start with what we already have in terms of parish and church building and why, in the past, rural church planting has been seen as more difficult. I salute her willingness to let me offer this taster first.

²¹ I comment on the helix like synergy between process evangelism and small groups in the twin issue *Encounters On The Edge* No. 27 *The Village and Rural Expressions* p 26

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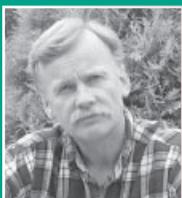
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Supporting the continuing mission of the Church of England

28: Rural Cell Church

- A new wayside flower



For fresh expressions of church, is it better to start something *alongside* the traditional rather than reform it radically? Cells seem to be a natural home for people coming to faith through process evangelism courses. However, how well does cell suit the countryside? Could it be significant for the rural church of the future? I went to see...

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