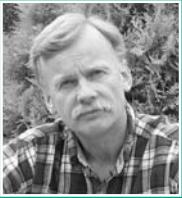


41: Do network churches work?



In 2004, network churches were identified as a hugely important type of fresh expression of church to respond to changing patterns in our society. A decade has now passed since the first network churches began. How have they fared?

Why have they not thrived and multiplied as was hoped? What difficulties have they encountered?

George Lings reflects on the developing stories of the network churches told in two previous Encounters on the Edge issues.

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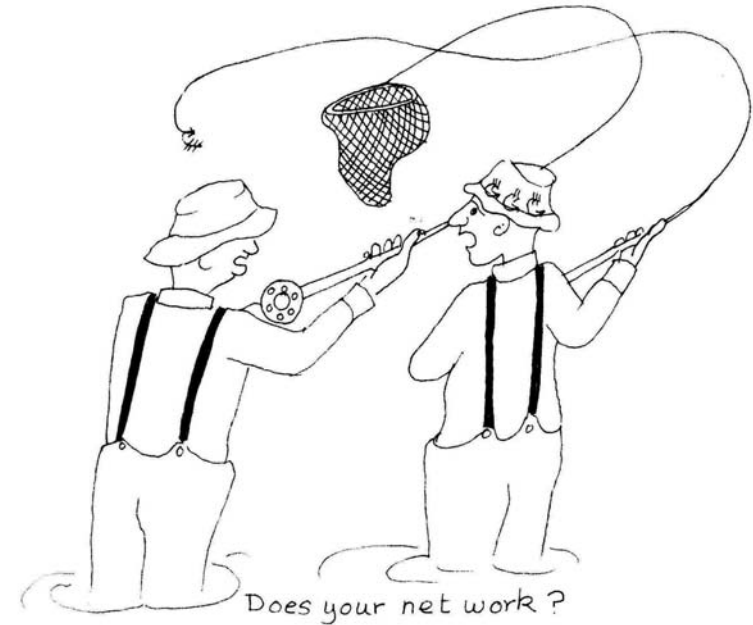
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Encounters on the Edge



no. 41:

Do network churches work?

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

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What has happened since the stories started?

At the start of the new millennium, *New Canterbury Tales*, Encounters on the Edge no. 7, first introduced the phenomenon of network churches by telling a pair of stories: *The Carpenter's Arms, Deal and Harvest New Anglican Church* in Thanet.

The series returned to the theme late in 2003, prior to the advent of the 2004 report *Mission-shaped Church* with its anticipated emphasis on the growing social reality of network. Issue no. 19 covered the early years of two further network churches: *The Net* in Huddersfield and *B1* in Birmingham. The second pair differed from the first in that they included a stronger emphasis on intentional diocesan ownership, not just local initiative. Did this mean the idea was catching on more widely?

Since then, in all but one case the founding leaders have moved on, all the communities have gone through significant ups and downs and two have planted once more, creating yet further examples of the genre. What does the longer story tell us about what it is like to try to work with network? What have these groups learnt about being this kind of church? And how does a decade and more of the lives of these unusual Anglican communities compare to the hopes surrounding their beginnings?

One founder, Dave Male, has reflected on his experience and published a book. Early on in the account, he passes on this message from his leadership team when they learnt a book was being written: '*tell them how hard it is*'.¹ With responsible candour, for it is not prudent to give all the pastoral details, he does just that, giving emphasis to both the joys of their mission story as a church and also in his words '*the darkest days I have ever had to face*'.² The six stories I have reconnected with in the research for this issue confirm this sober, though by no means hopeless, picture.

In 2003, it was possible to imagine that network churches, because they were tapping into a major way in which society was being reshaped, would at least emulate the effectiveness of other long established churches that worked through the parochial, territorial model. It was then thought that

¹ David Male, *Church Unplugged* (Milton Keynes: Authentic, 2008), p.2

² Male, *Church Unplugged*, p.2

these new churches too could grow, from the modest beginnings of the team sent, into at least middle-sized congregations of well over a hundred regular members.

The expectation was that, over time, they would fully pay their parish share and thus, on traditional means of allocating clergy, would fully deserve further investment by their diocese, leading to their founders being replaced in due time by suitable full-time successors. It was hoped they would become a stable and strong part of the 'mixed economy' within Church of England dioceses, which would express its nationwide calling, both through a geographically-based mission (which we have long known as parish) and the complementary feature of network churches. Together these two ways of being church would serve to express **a deeper Anglican instinct than parish, which is to work incarnationally.**³

This word 'incarnational' is useful code for the costly desire to come alongside all kinds of people in the life they actually lead, rather than insisting on perpetuating our own organisational deployment systems (parish) for our own convenience. As such, to be truly incarnational might severely critique insistence on 'parish' in certain social contexts where geography is not the basis for that sector of society. An example would be that I know of no Anglican who criticises chaplaincy for not being parochial. That it is known as 'sector ministry' is recognition of its legitimate difference.

However, as the table on page 5 shows, it has been rare in the 15 years that have followed, that hopes of this sustained strength among network churches have been realised. Only *The Carpenter's Arms, Deal* built to this kind of size and attendant complexity in its initial five years (1994-1999). In this particular case, *The Carpenter's Arms, Deal* also met the combined constraints of filling its rented building, having to abandon its participative café-style feel in order to pack more people in and being unable to find a larger suitable venue in this small town. In those days, it more than paid its way and is reputed then to have had the highest giving per capita in the diocese. All the other examples have remained below the hundred mark and many seem to have found sixty is the more normal ceiling. Reasons for this need pondering and exploring.

³ Evidence for such an assertion is at least twofold. Partly it is rooted in Anglican espousal, since the 19th century, of the incarnational principle as a central tenet. This has the virtue of being a theological base, whereas parish is only an administrative historical story that has gained the status of a value. The other weighty consideration is that the worldwide Anglican Communion does not have parishes in the sense England does. Wherever Anglicanism is a minority denomination, such as in Scotland or Ireland, let alone in the USA or Australia, it is a much looser idea without pretensions to provide spiritually for all in its geographical area. In that sense parish is an English device, not an Anglican one.

Some parameters of the stories drawn upon

	The Carpenter's Arms (TCAD)	The Carpenter's Arms (TCAS)	Harvest New Anglican Church (HNAC)	The Net	2nd Net	B1
Area	Deal	Sandwich	Thanet	Huddersfield	Huddersfield	Birmingham
Start year	Oct 1994	Oct 1998	Sep 1998	Sep 1999	Jan 2008	Dec 2000
Stipendiary full time leader	Rev'd Alan Dodds 199?-1999	See below ⁴	Rev'd Kerry Thorpe 1998-date ⁵	Rev'd Dave Male 1999-2006	Rev'd Nick Haigh 2008-date	Rev'd Geoff Lanham 2000-2009
Successors	Rev'd Mike Schorah 1999-2002 Steve Dallison 2003-2007 Currently none	Dick Venn 2000-2005 Tony Harrop 2005-2008 Currently no one person	n/a	Rev'd Nick Haigh 2006-date	n/a	Likely but not certain
Team size sent	18 adults 13 children	13 adults 7 children	57 people	30 adults and children	15 adults 16 children	29 adults
Maximum/minimum attendance	200 - 15 (including children)	70 - 40 (including children)	98 - 57 (including children)	80 - 30 (including children)	35 - 15 (including children)	40 - 60 (plus children)
Current size	30 adults and children	40 adults and children	85-95 adults ⁶	35 adults and children	30 adults and children	50 adults
Legal status	Extra parochial place	Part of Sandwich Parish	BMO in process	Not pursued BMO	None, too early	Not yet pursued BMO
Advisory group	No	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Management group (first 2 years)
Special features⁷	Initially cafe church	Includes messy church	Cell-based	Seeker and small groups	Cluster thinking	Variety of sources

⁴ With The Carpenter's Arms, Sandwich, Alan Dodds was for a few months the leader across both churches. However, Sandwich's relationships with his successor, Mike Schorah, quickly deteriorated and a founder member Dick Venn became the diocesan recognised 'focal person', working voluntarily half-time until ordination training and subsequent deployment elsewhere. He was then followed by Tony Harrop, working in his spare time, until being moved by his employer to the USA.

⁵ Kerry Thorpe has evolved an intriguing intentional pattern of being less than full time at HNAC, which deserves its own comments later.

⁶ HNAC calculates its membership by those in cell groups - some of these are not Sunday morning attenders.

As the variety of influences across the last row of the table on page 5 illustrates, network churches are different from most other kinds of fresh expression of church. They are not fundamentally interested in a model, but in a market. They serve networks not a way of doing fresh expressions. Network churches have been known to draw upon (in alphabetical order) alternative worship, café, cell, cluster, messy church and seeker approaches; all of these can contribute. Nor are they necessarily for a particular age group or social groups like skateboarders or clubbers. Most I have met contain a variety across the age range from children to seniors. As such they are falsely accused of being homogenous and do contribute to some degree of bridging capital.⁷

Working with network church statistics

I don't imply by this discussion that numerical growth is the most important feature of kingdom or church life. Good mission is better gauged by ability to truly enter the host culture, both celebrating what is good in it, as Gregory the Great advised Augustine, and discerning how the person and values of Christ bring counter-cultural values that later critique and redeem it, as current Anabaptist thinkers and others emphasise.⁸ Through such a process, a growing community of disciples within that culture emerges. **Nor is size the surest indicator of ongoing health**, as amply demonstrated, one might say, by the current problem of obesity in western society. Health must include a dynamic balance that draws from the missional, the communal, the spiritual and being interconnected beyond one's own group. In other words, being Apostolic, One Holy and Catholic.

However, **size does matter** when it comes to having, or not having, the human and financial resources to live out these four-fold tasks. There would be a grievous limitation in having a splendidly inclusive theology of mission as well as an elegantly articulated ecclesiology if there were only two people and a dog to deliver them. Size also matters when dioceses have finite resources and have to make tough decisions about where and when stipendiary leadership is allocated to focus the life and mission of particular groups of Christians. Continued investment of leadership and finance must ask questions of effectiveness.

The most rigorous data comes from Kerry Thorpe, interestingly also the only remaining founder of the examples we are looking at. In their first ten years, 193 adults have been part of the church he founded called *Harvest New Anglican Church*. Of these, 57 were founder members, 38 converts (non-churched), 43 restored (de-churched at some stage), 45 transfers⁹



George was reluctant to enter one church's guesstimates scrawled on the back of a beer mat into his otherwise perfectly accurate data base.

⁷ This charge is raised by Martyn Percy, 'Old Tricks for New Dogs?' in L. Nelstrop & M. Percy (eds) *Evaluating Fresh Expressions* (Norwich: Canterbury Press, 2009), p.32

⁸ Authors include Clapp, Hauerwas and Willimon, Murray, Volf and Yoder.

⁹ The last category does not differentiate between those Christians who moved into the area and those who changed church locally. I am seldom embarrassed by the former category as it is common source of growth in any church with a definite tradition of its own, but am always initially suspicious of the latter.

and 10 current interested fringe. Thus for every 1 person taken from Holy Trinity Margate in 1998, 2.4 others have joined in the decade following. That sounds modest, but if such a pattern were true across the country, there would be very bullish noises being made about the health of the British churches.

Yet if *Harvest New Anglican Church* were asked: 'What is your current average Sunday attendance?' they would enter two protests. Firstly, they would reply that this is a cell-based church so what is deemed essential is the number of people in cells - that is, those who engage relationally with the community and are pursuing discipleship. Not all those in cells find Sunday attendance either possible, or as significant as cell membership. Secondly, looking at current attendance, it literally is only half the story. The 2007 figure of the number in cells is only 84, but this is less than half the 193 who have belonged across the overall story. It is the analysis Kerry provides of this which may be very pertinent for all network based churches.¹⁰

Type		Lapsed	%	Moved away	%	Transfers out	%	Died	Transfers out	%
Founders	57	8	14	14	24	7	12	2	26	46
Converts	38	7	18	13	34	6	15		12	31
Restored	43	13	30	7	16	2	5		21	49
Transfers in	45	1	2	8	17	11	24		25	55
New fringe	10									
Totals	193	29		42		26		2	84	

Readers can scan this material and draw their own conclusions. Several features struck me.

Do the lapsed relapse?

Nearly one third of the restored, who were at some stage de-churched, subsequently dropped out. I don't know whether this may have been because cell is so different from congregation and, in my view, rightly demands more of all members. One could conversely argue that level of commitment would be part of its attraction compared to congregational existence that sometimes asks very little.

Or it could be related to another feature I think I have noticed over more than 10 years of network churches. In the classic parish, the fringe is a broad

¹⁰ 2008 data exists but the categories used were changed so the comparisons can create confusion.

notion; regularity can mean anything from annually clocking in at Christmas, through to monthly attendance, to never missing. It is elastic also in that there is a sense that simply by being in the parish, or attending in the past, one still belongs and can pick up 'going to church' at any time without any questions being asked. You are 'in' until you positively choose to be 'out'. Northern European Lutheranism is even more loosely associational; with its system of state tax, baptism acts like taking out a lifetime subscription to the club, but then never having to attend to renew it.

For network churches, almost the reverse is true. **Network has a far narrower band of fringe.** Being 'in' and being 'out' is a sharper line. They are almost entirely dependent upon the emphasis on relationships. This is connected to not having territory and as a result there is no traffic from occasional offices, which is a classic way Anglicanism creates a fresh but elastic fringe. In my experience it is not that relationships in network church are exclusive and cliquish, so people feel shut out. The reverse is true - such relationships are more prominent, for the members know this is the heart of their life. But maybe during times 'out', it is then harder to find ways back, although I do hear from other founders that people with a gap of as much as three years absence do sometimes get back in touch.

Watch the transfer market

Transfers have long been a bone of contention. Gavin Wakefield wrote a Ph.D. in 1998 on reasons people leave and join churches. He then found that among Anglican parishes, transfer growth accounted for between 30-50% of all gains and 50-55% of all losses.¹¹ However, such figures in absolute terms only represented 1-3% of changes to the total membership.¹² Over ten years, *Harvest New Anglican Church* figures show a transfer in rate of 23% of the total membership and transfer out has been 13%, which are rates within that range. Thus, transfers for this fresh expression are only at similar rates to what occurs in parishes and Kerry notes that in his case few came from Anglican parishes. As Wakefield himself wrote, a decade ago:

*"The key conclusion with respect to the original purpose of the research is that the church plants studied have not grown disproportionately by overall transfer growth..."*¹³

However, what I notice from Kerry Thorpe's figures is that the highest percentage of transfers out to other local churches comes from those who

¹¹ Gavin Wakefield, *Finding a Church: Reasons People Give for Joining and Moving from Churches* (University of Kent at Canterbury: Ph.D., 1998), pp.289-290

¹² Wakefield, *Finding a Church*, p.290

¹³ Wakefield, *Finding a Church*, p.287

previously transferred in the first place. This also confirms my previous experience in parish-based churches. I think it remains true for all fresh expressions that **other Christians joining later is a mixed blessing at best.** Much energy has to be spent, first in welcoming them, then helping them to understand the values of the church they are joining and how this is different from the church they left. After this can come the consumerist-type pressure of keeping such customers satisfied and watching with dismay how often they revert to inherited church values, despite their induction.¹⁴ At worst, such values include an inward preoccupation of setting high store on what they receive from the quality of worship, preaching and provision for the needs of their children. Moreover, when these are set against the value of shaping church to fit those who do not yet come, the former set dominates. This breeds dissatisfaction and engenders the desire to move on once again.

Is mobility higher in network churches?

Looking across the totals, the column 'moved away' yields the highest figure of 'losses'. The single largest reason such a church finds it difficult to grow to unquestionable self-sustaining size is that a significant proportion of its members simply move away. Then I notice who they are. A quarter of the founders are no longer there. What loss of camaraderie and in relationships, as well as of gifts and ministries does this mean the church must bear? Yet when I compare that figure with the snapshot evidence I have heard this year from the other network churches I visited, the *Harvest New Anglican Church* figure is actually low. At *The Net* in Huddersfield, there are no founders left at all and at *The Carpenter's Arms, Deal* over 90% of the founders are no longer there. This raises a further issue of how the founding missional vision is retained, with the attendant danger of a vacuum in which reversion more easily occurs to introverted pastoral mode among those who never knew the defining founding period. **Founding stories need constant re-transmission** to remain fresh as a calling and to act as the potentially actualising images they are.¹⁵

This emphasis on initial call is not to unduly emphasise the apostolic dimension to their start. I take it as read that churches need to be both missional and pastoral and have little time for those who unnecessarily oppose these dimensions. But I think there is a crucial difference related to their long-term presence in the life of a church. Pastoral mode is like a dominant gene. It is reproduced in the next generation with little effort. However, being **missional**

¹⁴ I recall these worries from conversations with Alan Dodds in Deal and Robert Freeman and Nick Haigh in relation to *The Net* in Huddersfield.

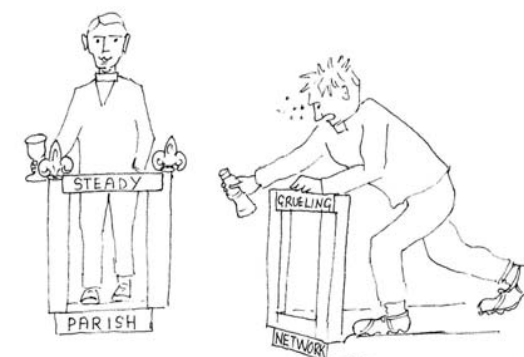
¹⁵ I am intrigued at the way the Old Testament urges the people of God to look back to Abraham and to the Exodus as their founding stories that govern their self-understanding and the purposes of God. In the New Testament, the focus is on the person and work of Christ and that Eucharist aids that process. Newbigin offers longer reflection on call and purpose. This can be explored either in the chapters 5 & 6 of *The Household of God* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 1998) or chapters 7 and 10 of *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* (London: SPCK, 1989).

is like a recessive gene and the perennial danger is that it will be bred out in the next generation. To eclipse mission, all that is needed is to do nothing. That is partly where founding stories come in.

This trend of potential in people that have gone elsewhere is true in other places. Geoff Lanham of *B1* in Birmingham records that in the last three years, though 19 have joined, a further 24 have joined and then left for various reasons. In addition, 16 'established' members have moved on. All of this is within an overall average Sunday attendance of 35 adults and 16 children, which makes these changes all the more significant and tiring. When network churches are intended for young adults, it has become apparent that the turnover is higher than expected. This was true for *B1* with 60% of its people under 35 and also for two other examples begun in 2003 in Stoke and Scarborough, both of which have subsequently struggled. One possible analysis is that this age group no longer has binding ties to parental family nor children of their own with attendant long-term friendship networks and schools they wish the children to stay in. At this stage in life, they may have money to enable exploring elsewhere, or the need for a job that necessitates it, or work for a company that requires them to move.

All these large percentage movements occurring with the lapsed, those who moved away, and local transfers out, are considerable. They contribute to **an ongoing sense of fragility**. Yet this sense by no means belongs to *B1* alone. In the months of this research, the word 'fragility' has consistently come up in virtually all cases. Perhaps *Harvest New Anglican Church* is the exception and currently it seems to me the most resilient. It is showing the ability to weather the storms of higher than average turnover than is usually the case in a geographically-based church.

If it is the case that network churches have to live with higher than average turnover, and that most of this is outside their control, it is easy to see why they feel that often they have to run fast in order to stand still. Developing that image, it is as though they are on a running machine set at a slightly faster pace than they would choose and as a result they get hot, tired, out of breath and overly task-focused. **Living as an anaerobic church is fine for a time but it is almost impossible to sustain.**¹⁶



¹⁶ G.W. Lings, 'Net Gains', *Encounters on the Edge* No. 19 (Sheffield: Church Army, 2003), pp.6-8 highlighted these sort of lessons in the life of the Nottingham network church, Tommy's, which only lasted from 1996-2000.

Converts moving on - export or loss?

Another feature of the 'moved out' column is that one third of the converts from *Harvest New Anglican Church* are now elsewhere. Often there is an emotional cost to such changes, perhaps akin to that felt by parents when their children, who are now young adults, leave home. There is such a mixture of feelings. It can contain joy at a job well done, relief that the illusion of parental competency was not too exposed, pride at what 'the kids' have become and are moving onto, fears for how they will make out by themselves and loss that the life and vitality they bring is now only on a visiting basis. Here the big-hearted church can choose an export mentality; these people young in the faith have a story to tell, energy to contribute, gifts to explore and the wider church can benefit. On the other hand, it is easy to imagine how 'healthy' *Harvest New Anglican Church* would have looked had all these converts stayed to radiate their new found faith into their friendship groups. Loss of converts can reduce the witnessing effectiveness of a church, especially as these are the people most likely to still have friends who are not Christian and may have noticed the changes brought by coming to faith.



Geoff Lanham

Geoff Lanham of *B1* uses the related analogy of seed-sowing. Over the life of *B1*, they have had 155 adults who belonged 'for reasonable periods during the eight years.'¹⁷ Yet their current numbers are only 32% of that total. *Harvest New Anglican Church* has been going slightly longer and their equivalent percentage is 48%. That is a lot of seeds sown that are mainly flourishing, but sometimes languishing, elsewhere. The seed-sowing mentality will cover both this case of young converts now elsewhere and the much earlier stage of relational mission with people who show signs of moving towards faith in Christ, but among whom we do not get to hear the end of the story. Of the 155 people, Geoff estimates some 45 have been through various courses to explore faith. Such a seed-sowing view holds onto hope, but has to live with some frustration and the cost of surrendering that which we cannot keep but would like to.

¹⁷ Geoff Lanham. Private report on B1 to the Diocese of Birmingham, 2009, p.2

Loss of 'hubs'

Loss of members may mean loss of key networkers and their relatively rare gifts. From my years as vicar of St. George's Deal, I remember that two women, Lizzie and Audrey, were highly influential in making many community-based relationships, one through contacts with other mothers and children and the other through nursing. When one woman moved away and the other joined the staff team at the church, both sources of new people dried up. For some years we, as a whole church, struggled to have an evangelistic cutting edge.

In a church that is relational not territorial, loss of such members will mean the loss of their contacts and be all the more significant. Nick Haigh reflects on *The Net* story and how, in his view, the founders Dave and Heather Male were the major source of non-Christians joining.¹⁸ Not only that but they had been building relationships in the Huddersfield area for some years before *The Net* formally started.



I recall how this ties in with the research of John Finney in the early 1990s which gave a researched basis for evangelism as more commonly being a process or journey. He did find variables, according to theological expectations, with sudden coming to faith being nearly twice as common in evangelical churches as compared to other traditions. Yet even in these contexts, gradual awakening was twice as common as the cases of sudden faith. In terms of the time taken, Finney also found great variation. This ranged from under a year to what he described as 'ongoing'. Average figures thus have limited meaning, but the journey taking more than three years was 58% of the total. In addition Finney showed that friends and the minister were the major reasons for people finding faith. They were far more significant than church activities, evangelistic events or the Bible, although church activities had a useful supporting role. The variables within these relational contacts were the high influence of their children upon women finding faith and the wife or partner upon their husbands.

¹⁸ The received story is that existing Christians moving to the area joined The Net through finding it on the internet, and non-Christians through relationships.

Assuming that the sort of analysis is still pertinent, it means that **when key evangelistic people move on, there is a danger.** Those with whom they have been building genuine friendships can become disconnected, and relational links are set back many years. Perhaps leaders gifted in evangelism will need to work in such a way that their non-Christian friends often meet other Christians to widen the circle of those supporting exploration of faith. I do realise that this is easier said than done and it can be the case that evangelists know there are too often local Christians whom we hope our non-Christian friends will not meet!

So this set of figures carefully kept over the years acts to me as an intriguing window through which to peer and try to assess the fluid context in which network churches live. It also serves to show how a crude snapshot measurement of their life may be both unfair and unhelpful.

Strategy and stories

My good friends Bob and Mary Hopkins have also given thought over many years to mission to networks. They have been members of steering groups for network churches and acted as consultants to them. I am grateful to them for the chance to draw on what they have written privately for such groups and make the generic lessons more widely known.¹⁹



Beware parachuting in a pioneer

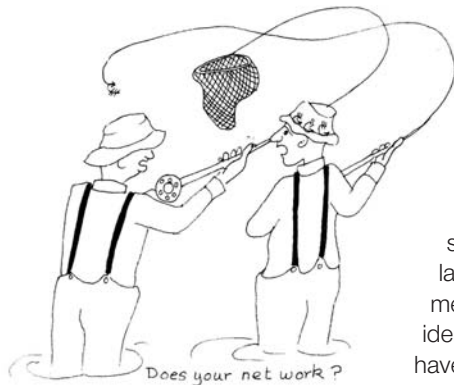
An outsider may be needed when a new network church begins. But it is risky and must be seen as a long-term commitment by those who send that leader. Almost by definition **such a move is like starting from scratch.** There are no previous relationships upon which to build both communally and missionally. There is scant positive track record of church among that network to build upon. Such a leader has both to engage in what are virtually cross-cultural relationships and also fashion a team to do likewise. Other examples in Stoke, Scarborough and Telford show how uphill and long-term this is. In the cases I have been reviewing, the majority of founders already had some years in the vicinity, or were brought to the area and given at least a year prior to the official launch, in order to form the team and begin missional contacts.

Choose your network carefully

There is a danger here that the buzz word 'network' can mask confusion about which 'networks' are being referred to and failure to examine the enduring dynamics of each such grouping. It is therefore vital to think carefully and accurately about the chosen mission context, research how a network works and decide which one is to be concentrated upon. Established mission wisdom commends the goal of growing indigenous

¹⁹ I am conscious that from their long thorough reports, I am only taking highlights. It may be that such reports deserve longer and wider inspection.

church. This applies equally to networks as to territories. Only if networks are sufficiently defined and enduring does this become possible. The Hopkins applaud the term, I think coined by Gordon Crowther in Stoke, who spoke of the need for a 'cradle' within which to bring to birth and then rear a faith community. By this they mean 'an existing well-integrated social context'.²⁰ They go further and see the need for a 'substantial, unified cradle'²¹ and furthermore see the lack of this as a crucial weakness in some well-intentioned network churches. What they have found in some cases is that there has been either ignorance or failure to be clear here.



Peter Neilson who used to head up New Charge Developments (fresh expressions and church plants for the Church of Scotland) posed similar questions in reviewing network churches. He helpfully suggested finding out the numbers in any given posited network, how they form – for example round an individual or events - how wide they extend into other social structures and how deep they are. The latter could be assessed by frequency of meeting, loyalty engendered and values identified.²² It seems that sometimes churches have not done this kind of work and thus not identified **which networks are substantial and sufficiently enduring**. A promising example would

be a secondary school. Conversely, I think that a supposed fraternity of fly fishermen would be doubtful, though I could be proved wrong.

Is this a network or individual relationships?

An attendant difficulty that then becomes a greater problem is that the Christian community that subsequently forms is from a wide variety of networks. As a result 'there is little or no capacity as a mission force to engage substantially with any of their individual networks.' Moreover, the variety means there are few if any ways 'to invest in social engagement processes that would connect across their individual networks.'²³ This precludes many opportunities for corporate 'acts of loving service or social events that could engage with everybody's networks.' My comments are that not only is there no overall positive impact within a network, but also

that the networks concerned do not meet the Christian community within that network, thus demonstrating what incarnational Christianity could look like there. This in turn means a return in practice to 'attractional' church, based on a worship event on the turf of the Christians, which is what network ministry tried to get beyond in the first place.

In addition, severe limits to growth now dominate. The contrast to parochial church may be pertinent. It is the case, overall, that Anglican parishes are able to draw about 2% of those they serve into regular attendance.²⁴ Thus a parish of 10,000 souls may have a Sunday attendance of 200 and be thought to be doing well. Suppose a network church is doing well and has 100 members. Pro rata will they only be able to win another two people? As I have shown, they exist in a mobile society and 'lose' a good number of members. On the growth side of the equation, while relational evangelism has long been advocated, it is sadly the case that many Christians do not have a wide circle of non-Christian friends. Moreover, it is very rare that we see a rapid and wide coming to faith of people in our individual friendship groups. These factors taken together can make network churches heavily dependent of future growth by transfer.

So failure to identify, enter and engage with specific networks, that themselves in turn are substantial and enduring, creates an enormous problem for so-called network churches. They may flourish for an initial period.²⁵ They may look healthy because they have a few effective 'hub' people. But unless they ask the strategy questions, this initial growth may easily plateau and then they simply do not have a wider set of warm contacts with whom to work. I saw an early example of these patterns within Tommy's in Nottingham in the late 1990s. Innovative central meetings and passionate leadership did not dispel or overcome the problems and this young church became unsustainable. The comments from the Hopkins make clear where the lessons need to be learnt, including the willingness of the team to make sacrifices about which networks they choose to let go of, in order to find and meaningfully enter and engage with probably one network so that indigenous church can grow within it. That later might become the base for diversification. However, the base must be built first for otherwise its vulnerability as a mission context will be exposed.

To identify, enter and engage with specific networks, that themselves in turn are substantial and enduring, creates an enormous problem for so-called network churches.

²⁰ B. & M. Hopkins, Private report on a mission accompaniment, section 4.2

²¹ Hopkins, Private report on a mission accompaniment, section 2.6

²² Neilson, email to the Sheffield Centre, 23rd Feb 2006.

²³ Hopkins, Private report on a mission accompaniment, sections 2.10 and 3.2

²⁴ This varies enormously by region and context. Inner urban attendance can be 0.1% and rural as high as 20%.

²⁵ Wakefield observed in the 1990s that church plants only attracted people at a greater rate than established churches for the first two years of their life. Wakefield, *Finding a Church*, p.287 and p.294.

Stories of good practice

Networks round children

With such a catalogue of dangers, it is good to be able to report cases where the lessons were intuitively or consciously applied. In the early years of *The Carpenter's Arms, Deal*, those reflecting on its success note the effectiveness of its work through children, through school contacts and a



resultant Crusaders group.²⁶ Alan and Chris Dodds had experience in this area of ministry; they headed up and offered a quality, value-added, ongoing series of events which engaged with a network of friends and contacts.

Children were a way in for parents. There was also a sustained pattern of all-age social events, through a young church that knew how to party well and many who were very good at opening their homes. This was good engagement with a clear

The Carpenters Arms, Deal in 1994

network, showing in appropriate activities where the network met the church on neutral ground. Sunday worship was but the last arch in a much longer and well-constructed bridge.

Working with a school



The Carpenter's Arms, Sandwich inherited some of the above instincts or values that Alan Dodds summarised as 'fun, food and friendship', because that is where fellow founders learnt them. In Alan's words: 'many TCAD (*The Carpenter's Arms, Deal*) members were party animals' and this was true of many among the members sent to start *The Carpenter's Arms, Sandwich*. In Sandwich, they work with both

The Carpenters Arms, Sandwich in 2004

neighbourhood and network. The small town of about 6,000 is split by the railway line and by social class. *The Carpenter's Arms, Sandwich* serves the area south west of the line, outside the historic centre, and focuses much of its life in the junior school which itself is a network including other villages around the town. Their involvement in the school community includes having members' children there, thus naturally being at the school gates, attending parents' quiz nights, sponsoring the school football team strip, church events advertised in the school newsletter, doing assemblies, running a school leavers' barbecue and family fun day. Currently, one member of the leadership team, Sally, is a governor and another, John, worked as temporary caretaker for a time. Media resources in the building are often shared. This is sustained engagement with a network. The school is therefore where they meet on a Sunday. It used to be in an afternoon, so that Alan Dodds could be at both, but latterly it has curiously reverted to morning meeting, although this clashes with some other social functions like sport.

Messy pigs?

Despite this depth of links, *The Carpenter's Arms, Sandwich* have spawned other work to build yet more contacts with associated networks. Those who tell their tale say I must mention *Percival Pig* who fits neatly here. Alison Harrop began this in 2004 as the church's mum and toddler group, but as the school was obviously being used midweek in term time, they gather in the URC building in the town centre on a Friday morning. The group even has a page on Facebook.

Percival Pig has attracted many other mums and their kids yet they found, despite the warm relationships and successful one-off events like craft workshops and a holiday club, that the jump to going to Sunday *The Carpenter's Arms, Sandwich*, even in the familiar school, was 'a bridge too far.' Then a member, Natasha, read about Messy Church. *The Carpenter's Arms, Sandwich* meeting once a month is done in Messy Church style with a lunch, which the Whole School Meals Service volunteered to mastermind and the school cook was happy to prepare for £5.50 per meal. Somehow, despite being in the same venue, the event doubles the Sunday attendance from 50 to 100. Older people come and love working in craft-based small groups with children. The absence of a churchy feel, overbearing Bible thumping and old-fashioned and now unknown songs, draws some *Percival Pig* punters. Children who like it bring their parents. What I notice is not so much the model they have chosen, but that **it fits sustained engagement with a network.**

²⁶ This national organisation, aware of historical and Muslim sensitivities, is now renamed 'Urban Saints'.

Get involved

Harvest New Anglican Church also invest significantly in social events and forms of social involvement that work for the networks that their cell groups are connected with. The view is that the **job of the leader is to help members find their ministries** and release them into that, whether it is running a book club, belonging to a Badminton club, attending a folk night or involvement in provision of sheltered accommodation.

Moreover, **other cell members are encouraged to come to such meetings so that the outsiders meet the group** – not just the lone Christian. They also encourage the ministries of individual members in the social structures. Thanet has areas of significant deprivation, with higher unemployment figures than much of East Kent. Kerry Thorpe chaired Sure Start in Margate from 2003 and Paul, another member, chaired a housing trust and then the Strategic Partnership for Thanet. It is these investments with networks, invisible on church attendance figures, which are the life blood of network churches and essential to their sustainable missional life.

Be flexible

The two *Net* meetings found their monthly pattern of three times apart and one together did not work. The joint meeting became an excuse for a lie in. In addition, paying over £7000 a year to rent a morning venue was becoming prohibitive. So this spring they have changed venue (again), frequency and time, making a much cheaper venue in the centre of town the place for whole church gatherings twice a month at 4.15. However this development, that could look like retrenchment, is balanced by the start of three clusters, also meeting twice a month. These are deliberately missional. The first is for youth, to build on the positive leads they have from their town-wide youth work. The second is for young adults building upon the network of relationships at the university. The third focuses on families, as an extension of the afternoon *Net*. Once again, **I note the intention to engage with a more specific network.**

The network church leader

So far I have made clear the reasons I see to explain why network churches have not fulfilled the hopes we had of them ten years ago. In a mobile society, they have to run fast to stand still in terms of maintaining numbers. Consumerism among Christians has had its part of play in this difficulty. This pressure has been severely exacerbated because the nature of mission to networks has not been sufficiently clearly understood, with the result that some have reached a plateau and then declined. Yet where real penetration of a network has occurred there are encouraging signs.

In such a context, what role does leadership play and what correlations have there been between kinds and chapters of leadership and church health in the network examples? The first table showed we now have a small range of examples from long-stay founder to churches on their fourth arrangement. This in itself may show that there are both pioneers who need to move on (for their own health and that of the church) and pioneer-sustainers who exhibit a different pattern. I think we are less clear about how we know beforehand which are which, and also **by what criteria we judge when it is time for the pioneer to move on.** I suspect that their own boredom threshold is too subjective a judgment and that in some of the cases that could be a lesson from hindsight. Perhaps there is work here for a re-reading of Roland Allen²⁷ and trying to map his criteria onto the fresh expressions of church phenomena.

A founder reflects

Ten years after Alan Dodds left the then notable success of *The Carpenter's Arms, Deal* I asked him for his assessment of the qualities and characteristics needed. By contrast, Alan has since served in Uffculme, an ideal parish arrangement in a good sized compact village. This has been aided by an evocative and accessible church building, a level of occasional offices that could be followed up, a supportive wider team ministry and some favourable history to trade on. These elements, he told me meant that 'more growth came to us on a plate'. So this is not the voice of a network devotee.

Alan wondered if network churches are more personality-centred and draw people who like that buzz and creativity.



²⁷ R. Allen, *Missionary Methods – St. Pauls or Ours?* (Cambridge: Lutterworth Press, 2006)

In contrast, some parishes can get by on their history and attract those who prefer the wheel not to be reinvented. He recognised that where personality plays a bigger part, both growth and collapse are more marked, with changes between leaders being more unstable. I note that in Deal, under his successor, the implosion from 200 to 15 over three years was catastrophic. More than that, it created aftershocks and long-term disturbance, including distrust of leadership from outside. This led to the turning down of future offers from the diocese and ambivalence between dependency and fierce independency in regard to further leadership.

His advice to a new network church leader embodies what he did so well. **Build contacts and friendships, but do it as a person, not a vicar.** Christian leaders should have a gospel attraction about them. And the non-churched won't come because you wear a dog collar. They may come because they think you are for real and you are a spiritual person. He warns that network church is hard work for various reasons. It is often starting from scratch. There is freedom but no momentum. Furthermore, the quality (or perhaps authenticity) of the corporate life of the network church (its community, mission and worship) needs to remain high because the members won't invite their friends until they are convinced the church is worth joining and have gained the confidence that when they invite friends, neither party will be embarrassed. One bad event is enough to put off the spiritual investigator and undo six months' faithful work.

Alan and his wife, Chris, also sensed that they had to be the major sources of creativity to develop new aspects of the ministry. Busy working people struggled to find the time and, recognising their skills, came to depend upon them. Combined with this, others I talked to also noticed that **as the work advanced, so the pastoral needs markedly increased.** The *Carpenter's Arms, Deal* was in touch with some significantly needy people, including addicts whose chaotic patterns of behaviour made exhausting demands on the leadership. Also, in a network stretching over eight miles, it was those nearest who picked up the brunt of having to respond. In hindsight, it may be that this development of the work was too adventurous and insufficiently resourced. Some think it contributed to the Dodds moving on before the foundations were secure enough to weather that very significant change. All this chimes in with Dave Male's earlier assessment of the pressures on *The Net*.

Play it again, Sam?

I then find two things salutary. Firstly, of those who were network church leaders only one is doing it again and only in his 'spare' time. Dave Male in

Cambridge now works for both the Diocese of Ely and Ridley and Westcott in Cambridge, looking after pioneer ministers. He and his wife, Heather, are in the process of starting a sport-based church. None of the other planters have done it again; they have gone into parochial work. It raises the question of whether this is too hard on the models we have. In fairness, I think given a choice, Dick and Helen Venn would have stayed at *The Carpenter's Arms, Sandwich* but, for reasons I don't have access to, the Bishop moved them out into parochial ministry elsewhere when his year of ordination training was complete. I think this illustrates the wider church still overvalues deployability over indigeneity. Parochial ministry is seen as enduring. Pioneering ministry is seen as seasonal.

The second feature is that there is only one founder left. I wonder if **the pattern Kerry has evolved is extremely significant.** From early on, he ensured that up to 50% of his time was in new areas of work beyond the local church. This ranged from involvement in national bodies such as being a consultant for the Bible Society, a regional Alpha co-ordinator, serving the Grove Evangelism booklets group, chairing the On the Move movement, as well as deep involvement in secular organisations in Thanet. It seemed to me that this had at least two related virtues. One is that the condition I call 'pioneer boredom', which sometimes occurs, did not set in. Thus he was less tempted to make *Harvest New Anglican Church* the experimental laboratory for his latest ideas, a trait that eventually exhausts congregations. Nor was he tempted to 'pastures new' to alleviate the same itch, but destined to repeat the problem.

The other considerable advantage was that **the church was less able to create a culture of dependence upon him.** This of course fitted beautifully with being a cell church and the value that 'episcopate' type leadership exists to see what is needed, encourages the identification and release of gifts, while holding the vision together. It also means that the church as a whole

The wider church still overvalues deployability over indigeneity



Kerry and Eunice Thorpe

has learnt to be missional and not rely upon a charismatic evangelistic minister. This valuable combination of local and catholic involvement has been a new stage, since 2006, with Kerry working half-time as the Canterbury diocesan missionary for fresh expressions of church. There is also the small point in a diocesan view of sustainability that this makes it much easier for *Harvest New Anglican Church* to cover all its ministry costs. I commend the principle to pioneers who need to learn how to harness their ceaseless creativity, to stay long enough for work to mature, but to ensure that dependency does not follow.

Pioneers need to learn how to stay long enough for work to mature

This relates to a wider issue: the conundrum around fresh expressions of church and full-time leadership. At its worst, there is expectation from critics that fresh expressions will be radical enough to engage with the non-churched, become large enough to pay their way, cease being a drain on the diocesan purse, resourced enough to engage in the kingdom work of holistic mission and wise enough to acquire sophisticated ecclesiology

and participation in the structures. Yet it is also said that the vast majority of them will do this through the agency of part-time or voluntary lay leadership. I find that combination utterly implausible. Frankly, most parishes struggle to emulate such a vision with much conviction and most of them have a full-time vicar.²⁸ Yet I accept that the mission need for many more fresh expressions of church will easily overrun our current ability to pay full-time pioneer ministers. Thus I am intrigued at the pattern Kerry has found works for him and Harvest New Anglican Church. I think it shows one element of a way forward.

²⁸ The Diocesan Statistics for 2006/07 show 7616 full time parochial clergy as against 12,732 parishes. This yields an average of 1.67 parishes per clergy person. The distribution is unequal and the existence of multi parish benefices increase the proportion of other cases where it is still one person to one parish.

Fragility and network fresh expressions of church

Thinking, watching and writing over the last few months has made the word 'fragility' a reoccurring theme. As I write, the future of *The Net* is not certain. Will it be merged with another post in the deanery, like the university chaplaincy, as the diocese faces tough decisions over a shortage of clergy and finance? An alternative is for Nick Haigh to have a half-time training and enabling role across the deanery. *B1*'s future is more secure; they will soon be advertising for a successor to Geoff Lanham. This transition is itself a significant challenge.

Down in Kent, *The Carpenter's Arms, Deal* has a continuing outreach to a number of old people's homes as well as staffing the Christian bookshop in the town.²⁹ However, it is losing some of its most mission-minded members either to other churches or fresh callings elsewhere. Its relationship to St. George's, the parish that sent it, is distant and has not been without strain. I fear it is possible in the future that it will opt for independence. In my view, that will consign it to joining a number of disparate small inward-facing free church groupings that litter the townscape but have minimal impact on the whole. *The Carpenter's Arms, Sandwich* has many more signs of missional health, but how much can continue to be carried by a flat-topped lay team remains a long term question, unless there is external support and mentoring.

A tough mission

Some challenges are *missiological*; they are mentioned by the leaders themselves and echoed in my own thoughts. Keeping mission high on the community agenda and also resisting consumerism in church life requires perennial vigilance. **Any church left to itself tends to sit back and please itself.** This is a sharper issue in pure network church because there is no territory, and not much history to fall back on. Relationships are everything and without them, eventually there is nothing.

So leaders might not be out-and-out evangelists (more like Andrew characters than Paul perhaps?), but they do need to be 'hubs' with lots of connections to people, creative resources and skills to network social structures. Geoff Lanham knows how important this is for *B1* and sees his

²⁹ *Carpenter's Arms Deal* also give to support Church Army evangelists, Operation Mobilisation and other mission groups.

departure as a way of making room for a new leader with fresh thinking and creativity. He also recognises the aging of the leader can be an issue in a church reaching younger adults so hopes someone younger will be appointed. In recruiting teams, one new network church for central Sheffield deliberately and wisely looked for team members who were hubs. This church has flourished numerically, reproduced young indigenous leaders and now also started a second congregation.³⁰

Yet this discernment about mission is an art which, if addressed too vigorously, leads towards burnout of leaders and members. Another related issue is that fresh expressions of church find they have to be at work to help those recovering from existing church. But can this and pursuing evangelism to the non-churched be a lethal cocktail? Is the combination difficult, a paradox or just impossible?

In terms of the community gathering, I note that most of the network churches find ceaseless creativity and artistic use of multimedia in a visual age (which is used to quality) hard to sustain. It can also collude with the consumerist problem. The search is still on for authenticity and for patterns of worshipping life that encourage those who come to take responsibility for ongoing spiritual growth. 'New monasticism' and 'cluster' thinking helpfully converge here. Network churches have also struggled with venues. *B1* have used more than seven. *The Net* may have had as many. **I have yet to see a venue that effortlessly combines visibility and accessibility in the townscape, with affordability and suitability** for the venture. The Hopkins note the same in another project they consult for, finding some 'neutral or working against the project'.³¹

³⁰ Christ Church Central, through an unfortunate breakdown of relationship to the diocese, before the days of Bishops' Mission Orders, is technically an independent church, though believing itself to relate to the Anglican Communion. Thus I have not featured it within this issue as there is the danger of more heat than light. It does, however, repay study and is a vigorous and effective church designed for networks.

³¹ Hopkins, Private report on a mission accompaniment, section 8.1

Are you really church?

The second set of features that create fragility is *ecclesiological*. Diocesan support is variable across the country. Because network churches are so different to classic Anglican patterns, it is understandable that a heavy culture of inspection about them exists from the wider church. This creates pressure greater than the normal parish lives with. Inspection is also more frequent because none of these posts are incumbencies, so lengths of license are shorter, accountability to outside groups are more intense, and in some places the climate feels more suspicious than welcoming. Where there is no longer a diocesan 'friend at court', a network church can feel rather isolated. It will almost always be the only example in its deanery and as one sympathetic deanery secretary put it: '*territorial churches inevitably regard network churches as sheep-stealers*'.³²



Net Advisory group

The invention of Bishops' Mission Orders (BMO) was a good attempt to right two wrongs. It gave the Bishop legal authority to override protectionist incumbents when a fresh expression was needed within diocesan view of its overall mission calling. Secondly, it offered legal identity to non-territorial churches, which up till then could gain no recognition beyond the licensing of their minister. Thus *The Net* has a mission-priest but it has no legal standing. However, sadly **the process to obtain a BMO is more cumbersome than is ideal**. Equally disturbing, it is the equivalent of a provisional license to a motorist. It runs out within a few years with no assurance of renewal. Hesitant provisional welcome into the family is not really in the spirit of the 'mixed economy' or the requests of *Mission-shaped Church*. This area still feels like a tilted playing field on which there are real parish churches and these new ecclesial immigrants who have to be watched.

In some cases, the watching reveals causes for concern. Before doing this research **I had not noticed the part that multi-denominational teams or post-denominationalism play in creating risky tensions**. Looking back, I now realise that the majority of those who joined the original *The Carpenter's*

³² Mike Quinton has watched such developments in Sandwich deanery for over 15 years.

Arms, Deal were not Anglican. They had been largely happy fellow travellers in St. George's, so I gave it no thought. It was Gavin Wakefield who drew my attention to the higher transfer rate among free church denominations via closure and dissatisfaction.³³ I wonder if this links to 'the right of private judgment', the tendency for Protestantism to continue to fragment and attendant individualism. Congregationalism is the consequence with no instinct for catholicity. Hindsight suggests that in the days of effective leadership by Alan Dodds and live personal links with St. George's, this tension did not matter. However, that set of instincts has grown stronger over the years and is now dominant. I do not imply at all that these were not good people, but only that they held a different ecclesiology and that these issues do matter in the long term. It creates fissures in the self-understanding of a fresh expression of church and that makes it more fragile.

If Anglicans deem having a sacramental life essential to ecclesial life through dominical warrant, it is then tiresome, and probably damaging, that such communities are denied the fullness of this dimension

Another issue of ecclesial identity is provoked because **the lay-led church is unhelpfully dependent on outside provision of clergy to give them communion.** At worst, this is a return to Mass Priests. At best, it is a ceaseless reminder that such a congregation is in permanent dependency on those outside its life and is thereby somehow second class. If Anglicans deem having a sacramental life essential to ecclesial life through dominical warrant, it is then tiresome, and probably damaging, that such communities are denied the fullness of this dimension. By this, they are made more fragile. Such scenarios have similarities to the nineteenth century overseas problems that bedevilled those works that were 'missions' but denied the status of 'churches'. They had problems of dependence on the professional missionary and on finally becoming designated churches promptly lost most missional desire or impact. Such patterns are not to be repeated.

In practice, members of both network churches in Deal and Sandwich spoke with restrained frustration at how difficult getting suitable 'cover' was and how it made them feel like 'the poor relation'. Understandably, those of a free church persuasion found this doubly irksome. They had no conviction that this priestly requirement was necessary and served only to demonstrate to them the ecclesial imperialism of Anglicanism. *Eucharistic Presidency* is an irenic and scholarly read of the Anglican Bishops' last

published view of the topic and makes a good case that what is at issue is the catholicity of the church.³⁴ However, this now exists in tension with the bottom up creation of churches who seek a fullness (or second century Ignatian catholicity) of their life and rightly sense their local oneness is impaired by this arrangement of a near stranger heading up the family meal. There is also the vexing issue of whether the church is better defined by its overall ministerial arrangements or its localised congregational life. If the number of lay-led fresh expressions grows, the issue will grow sharper.

Last but not least is the pressure on these communities to maintain a quality of communal life that reflects Christ's command to love and which therefore draws others. Rather than prolong this issue, I commend Dave Male's book to the reader and the counterpoint between his extolling of community life in chapter 6 and reminders about expectations in chapter 10.³⁵ The appealing and the appalling are forced to meet with some hard-won wisdom of how to handle both.

³³ Wakefield, *Finding a Church*, p.287, conclusion 3

³⁴ House of Bishops: *Eucharistic Presidency* (London: CHP, 1997)

³⁵ Male, *Church Unplugged*, pp.98-116 & pp.153-166

Is it worth it?

The features of mission and being church I have teased out here make quite a list and I admit it is probably not exhaustive. However, I can see why it is exhausting and most of the network leaders affirm this is a demanding road.

I know I have been critical in pointing up the lessons that have been identified. I do so that they may be learnt. Maybe we thought the mid-nineties examples like Tommy's were our prototypes, from which we assumed we knew all that was necessary. I no longer think that. I am sure that **network is a mission field that has very particular challenges that we are beginning to understand better**. We also now know that to fail to take this on board will not only invite a meagre response, it will lead to

burnout and closure. We also see that good leadership is vital and that leadership succession needs very careful thought as there may not be many people who are suitable. Network churches still have a tricky task navigating a changing and nervous ecclesial context. Their own clarity over (and charity about) ecclesial identity will help them.

Yet it seems that the world of network is not going away. Like mountains which are climbed because they are there, none of the difficulties I have enumerated are reasons for avoiding the task. Perhaps this issue lays out some of the preparation and kit that will be needed.



George Lings

Good Friday, April 2009

Cartoons Tim Sharp

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