

# Stories of Fresh Expressions of church

Bob Hopkins, plus guests (*June 2004*)

*This selection of stories of fresh expressions of church were shared at the Mission Shaped Church conference in June 2004. By popular request the notes used for this presentation have been made available.*

BH Link To set the scene in preparation for our Archbishops keynote at 11.00, we are starting the input today with 5 stories of church planting and fresh expressions of church. I am so thrilled that the M-S.C. report has firmly tied back together church planting and FXC that were in danger of being seen as unrelated or even rival options. The report has confirmed that if we do our mission right, in an incarnational way, then in our many diverse social and cultural contexts, fresh expressions of church must inevitably emerge. So we have the helpful link that church planting is the activity (the verb) and fresh expressions the outcome (the noun).

In choosing our stories, the conference planning group have purposely not identified particular models of fresh expression. Following the whole thrust of M-S.C. to stop starting with a particular package or outcome ... but to let the context shape the outcome, we have chosen stories based on different mission contexts.

## Interview Story : Geoff Lanham – "B1"

BH Link The M-S.C. Report has majored on the predominance of social networks shaping our changed society. This is classically the case in our city centres and this is the mission context for our next story .... B1 – Birmingham Central.

BH Intro Geoff Lanham leads B1 and to trace its roots, we go back to St John's Harborne where Geoff was Associate Vicar. For 2 years he led a multimedia life theme evening, getting himself into the local papers. It was called "Online@ the Junction". This was the training ground for engaging with the network culture of the under 35's. It also was identified by the diocesan Missioner David Lee, as the potential for the first launch of a new Diocesan vision for "Complementary Church". This complementary church concept that fits exactly Archbishop Rowan's "Mixed Economy" Vision. David suggested to Geoff "how about starting a church for 20's and 30's more informed by post-modernity" .... Geoff took the bait and once David had approval by the Birmingham Diocese, the plan to release Geoff to pioneer the first complementary church went ahead. Geoff tell us how you gathered the team?

GL A team of 27 came together, all were from St John's except 2 who just heard about it and were looking for a challenge. Half those from St John's were hand-picked and half responded to an invitation to seek God's calling .... all went through a discernment process. Most were between 20 and 40 and half were from Online@ the J. After 6 months two of the team went back for good reasons and over the 3 ½ years 3 of our members have been sent out as full-time missionaries.

BH As you and the team prayed, to discern your mission focus, you settled on plum centre of Birmingham & nightlife land – B1 postal district.

GL Yes! We were led to the heart of the city – but the idea was never to be a "clubbing church" .... the focus was more café: bar: pub culture. We saw the huge numbers for whom the City Centre was a magnet for social life. So we started to meet in venues where they would be comfortable. The broad target was 20-40's but we recognised that there were lots of sub-cultures. So we began with the networks of the team through their interests – sports, leisure, work ..... etc.

BH So when you started meeting which venues did you choose, what was your thinking? And how did you grow in year 1?

GL We begun with meeting in a function room of a pub called "Edwards". This was on a Sunday morning or afternoon with kids. Then monthly, we met on Sunday evenings in the "Walkabout Inn" when we used multi media. Again in a function room upstairs with live bands downstairs! These were at all sorts of times and intervals .... Whilst the venues were in the heart of our mission field –

we really saw that it was personal invites that brought new people, we did very little publicity. Rather we did items to make invitations easier. Interviews with local celebrities, live or videoed, lots of Voxpops, guests invited to be interviewed who weren't Christians. And we also did an Alternative worship service monthly on a Wednesday night in a bar. In the first year we grew significantly from the team of 27 to some 40 adults.

- BH In year 2 the pilgrimage of venues started as you lost one after another!?
- GL We soon saw how fragile venues were in this culture. Edwards was unreliable and grotty – often stepping over vomit on arrival .... Or cramming into a home 'cos it was double booked! Next the Crescent Theatre gave an excellent bar area, but not enough room for children and then they took a Performance booking. The Zinc bar and grill was incredibly trendy and remarkably cheap until they realised we weren't giving the profit in drinks bought! We now also use a place called "The Orange Studio". It is a roof top terrace bar / restaurant. Sunday stuff happens in a Hotel called City Inn.
- BH Stage two also involved a journey of listening and learning and being more shaped by the mission context?
- GL Yes! We set ourselves to do some cross-cultural mission work. We realised that some of the sub-cultures were different but more nuanced. The main shift we made was away from being "event dominated". These had been high quality and guests came, enjoyed them and sometimes came back. But it was very difficult to build ongoing relationship. So we cut the frequency to bi-monthly and spent more time engaging with the networks in smaller settings. We downgraded the overt Christian content and events seen to have no hidden agenda brought in lots of visitors. Like the "Help, I'm a TV producer get me out of here". We've moved from programmes to friendship.
- BH Tell us about some recent lessons from operating on this centred set model with a growing fuzzy edge and very permeable boundaries?
- GL This has worked well in enlarging our pool of contacts and a growing fringe. But we have seen that the core weakens. There are more folk working through doubts and as we cater for their spiritual needs, the core's original mission focus can become more diffuse. Some of the fuzzy edge may not be as keen on the original vision, and are harder to challenge to reach out to the non-churched.
- BH So discipleship has been your recent challenge? But alongside real encouragements?
- GL Yes! Just this last week we've had three not yet Christians coming to worship services and obviously seeking. Developing discipleship is hard. We have developed our own course called Illumine, which looks at different spiritual traditions through the ages. It's proved great for the de-churched but we are still looking for something straddling the streams.

We are really encouraged that we feel the way we worship now has become a more authentic expression of our culture. We use a choice of zones and give folk something to do so that it's not just passive and not just words. There is a great appreciation generally of doing church differently.

### **Interview Story : Si Jones - "Ignite"**

- BH Link Our next story focuses on the mission field of the emerging generation. Some describe it as the lost generation certainly it has the highest proportion of non-churched (those with no church connection whatsoever). And also their mobility and pattern of relationships makes it a network culture.

- BH Intro The project is in Harrow (pictured here)

But Si Jones the leader has planting in his blood. Everywhere he's been, he's planted in schools and community centres from Hidenborough to \_\_\_\_\_ to Emmanuel, Northwood. Every time its painful and he's said that at 4 months in, he feels like giving up every week.

At Emmanuel, Si was Associate Vicar and Director of Youth. The work with non-church youth led to a youth congregation called "AWESOME". But Si spoke of an Apostolic yearning, pushing him out to something new – pushing the boundaries for a network church for the missing generation. He wrote a paper and then drafted a business plan for the then Archdeacon, Pete Broadbent ... who shortly was bishop and said go for it! That was some 3 years ago ..... Si tell us how you gathered a team, and who went with you.

Si J The leaders of Emmanuel agreed to my sharing with the church a missionary call to establish a new church and I then approached some 25 folk who were all between the ages of 14 and 25.

BH North Harrow was your mission context. How was that chosen and how did you relate to other churches?

Si J We chose North Harrow because very few churches had significant youth works and there were no Anglican churches of our Spirituality. I visited all the ministers assuring them we had no intention of taking their young people and suggesting we pray for one another's work. This seemed to reassure them & the Bishop also spoke to a ministers meeting explaining that it was to be a non-parish, network initiative.

BH As you built team, prayed and explored the mission context, what was the mission vision that emerged?

Si J The call we felt was to plant a new Anglican church with an emphasis on the missing generation....? We got the name "IGNITE" & two straplines spelt out our aims

1) Training the next generation now so training has been central

2) A church with no walls ... we would have no building and our aim is that folk outside can get in easy; and folk inside can get out easy!

From our past experience and researching other projects, we knew that you have to involve the emerging generation, not chase cultural relevance. Youth Culture changes so fast .... Its by involving that generation that you gain cultural relevance.

BH When you are not a parish, there are no natural contacts. With your mission, you are engaging a network .. how did you develop contacts?

Si J Probably the most significant contacts came through the local council. Approaching them led to us working in 3 of their centres and it wasn't long before one of the Centre Managers got converted. She was baptised 3 Sundays ago! We also have done lots in schools – with lunch clubs; and sports are a great link with youth and young adults .... Football evenings and basketball. We have also used our website.

BH I gather dance has also been at the heart of both making and developing lots of contacts. Cindy, you have had lots to do with that.

Cindy Our dance work took the name "Elevate". This dance project involved, creating, performing, rave, street dance ... a night club. There are now 250 young people involved with the dance project and we have started an "Elevate Academy" – This involves 20 each week doing dance & DJ to perform.

BH It looks like you are very ethnically diverse?

Cindy Yes, well Harrow is very ethnically mixed so the church reflects that diversity of culture with many Asian and afro Caribbean youngsters. We do nothing specifically geared to ethnic groups ... its just who we contact and we are doing stuff that multi-ethnic youth are into ... "they swim in it each week!"

BH From those contacts what sort of church has been emerging?

Si J Well the key building block has been cells. We started with 2, grew to 8 in the first year and now we are .....? Youngsters are very ready to invite friends to the cells. But we also have a Sunday service – type event. This has fewer numbers. The not-yet Christians are wary of it .... Its church “!” to them, and that’s scary!

BH Si ... you’ve said its been roller coaster .... but finish with two reflections; one looking back and one recent development ...

Si J Well looking back I would emphasise the importance of our connections with the local councils. They have both provided the source of networking with many groups, and also because we work in a holistic way with those the council identifies as needy, they have enabled us to access pockets of money for funding much of what we do. So often money limits mission.

Secondly, our most recent initiative is having to think about planting back into the next generation back. We have just started “FLAME”. 2 cells just focussing on younger teens. Our weakness was that we generated loads of contacts with young people, but our process of discipling was very weak. We are learning how to develop contacts and how to develop their faith! We are using the youngsters own ideas and a sort of pre-Alpha called “Quest”.

### **Story : Damian Feeney – ASDA Church**

The story I’m going to tell you started to take shape around our kitchen table in a brand new house on the outskirts of Preston in May 1999. I had been appointed by Bishop Alan Chesters as a Mission Priest to Longsands, a new housing area next to the oldest stretch of motorway in the country – the Preston By-pass.

The initial challenge: to find a place in this community in which to hold the legally necessary Licensing Service. The options were limited – no church building, you see. There was a school that was too small, a pub that was already too crowded and a Community Hall which hadn’t been built yet. Oh, yes – and there was a supermarket – ASDA, the biggest building in the area, turning over hundreds of people per hour. Where would Jesus be? Probably where the people were.

My wife Fiona, who is a fully paid up member of the good ideas club, suggested I go and speak to the Manager. This, combined with a contact via the Archdeacon to Mr Allan Leighton, then Chief Executive of ASDA UK, ensured that the local store couldn’t do enough to help us. A licensing service was duly planned, invites issued, and press releases released. A wave of press interest – both positive and negative – ensured that we were off to a good start. In particular, the prospect of television coverage prompted a camera conscious Deputy Manager to ask whether we could have this sort of thing every week. Thank you, Holy Spirit!! We were in.

The licensing was a great success – over 300 people turned up. Following on from that, we held eucharistic services every Sunday morning, followed by breakfast in the ASDA cafeteria, and a remarkable collection of people were attracted. Some came and went, others came and stayed. Many were profoundly uncomfortable, others showed tremendous respect, some quite the reverse.

There was always a breaking open of the word – the whole service was conducted over the greeter’s microphone so that people all over the store and in the back rooms could hear. The seed was scattered over a wide area. We had Harvest Services, and a Christmass Carol Service broadcast live through ASDA FM to a potential audience of 250,000 people. The other side of this presence was chaplaincy work, among staff and customers – on Wednesday afternoons, but ultimately whenever I went to do my shopping!

After eighteen months, it became clear that such a worship base would not be a sustainable strategy, and the seedlings were transplanted into a new congregation meeting on a Saturday night in the new Community Hall. Not on a Sunday morning – Sunday for many in that community is a chance to lie in after the demands of a commuter week, a chance to play or watch football, a chance to visit relatives or spend time with children who live on the other side of a divided family. The seeker after faith may not be inclined to give such time and priorities up initially.

Other factors in the formation of this congregation have been the outreach through the local pub – Midnight Masses at Christmas, Carol Singing with a decent choir – and constant visiting and provision for worship at the very supportive local community school.

Why Eucharistic? I have long believed the Eucharist to be profoundly Evangelistic, affecting people on a variety of sensory and spiritual levels. The essence is ritual without formality or pomposity, and a relaxed sense of Eucharistic hospitality. Those who knew their hunger came forward and were fed from the cornucopia of the living Christ in their midst. In this sacrament, Jesus is incredibly robust. He who withstood the nails of the cross cannot be diminished by the carelessness of the Sunday Shopper.

The new Saturday Night service was timed in the space between Grandstand finishing and the pub across the road warming up. Since January 2000 approximately 150 people have been through the doors, with a relatively stable 30 being the average congregation. In an area of high mobility, it's a decent start. Over half that congregation are children, who are very much a priority. Quite apart from anything else, they are the happiest and most positive congregation it has ever been my privilege to serve.

The full story of Longsands has been wonderfully told by my friend and colleague George Lings in his pamphlet 'Encounters on the Edge no.16' which is a good place for further information – although if you have any questions please do feel free to ask during the course of the day.

### **Interview Story : Sally Gaze – “4 All”**

BH Intro Our next story comes from Sally Gaze, a member of the M-S.C. working group. It's from a rural context in the Norwich Diocese. Its particularly important and encouraging, because it illustrates that the principles can apply in villages, or anywhere .... We don't have to be in a large or strong church. And it need not take forever! Sally has only been Vicar at the Tas Valley team for 18 months. It's a benefice of six very different parishes. These range from as small as 300 people, (half living in a tiny village and half spread out in farms), to some 1000 in a dormitory village. Sally, tell us a little more of the social variety.

SG The whole environment is rural in character, but ranges from deep rural with farming families and long-term locals, to brand new housing estates and other parishes of largely the professional upper-middle class who love to live in the picturesque village.

The old ways of being church still work pretty well for the likes of the retired and lawyers commuting to Norwich. They have memories of Sunday School and like the affiliation with the village church.

BH What first caught our attention Sally, was learning that in the village in which the usual church attendance is just 6 people, you now have an average of 40 coming to a Sunday afternoon gathering called “4 all”! But you have since made it clear that that isn't actually what you see as the fresh expression of church! It's really a seeker event that's more of a stepping stone. So where do you see a truly fresh expression emerging and how did it start in just 18 months?

SG I hadn't planned to do too much too quickly when I arrived - but it seemed God had other ideas. One lady who was attending church really wanted to be confirmed - but had loads of questions about what she believed - she wasn't really sure she believed in Jesus. I thought if I was going to do confirmation preparation, I might as well see who else wanted to come. We had 26 people come on an Alpha course and several became Christians. (Amanda's story if I get permission)

BH So how did that lead to cells?

SG At Alpha, people had begun to share their lives on a deep level - they'd begun to pray for each other, to help each other with their deepest questions and to think practically about how Christian communities could share their faith serve the local area and make a real difference. It was impossible to think that God wanted this to stop - and yet I knew that some of the new Christians would struggle to come to Sunday church - and if they did they would find themselves on the

flower rota and PCC a long while before their deepest questions were answered. And since they lived in different villages with different parish churches even their mutual support would be lost

In fact I realised that the 6 small congregations worshipping each Sunday were too small and weak to sustain things like Alpha, youth work or pastoral care on their own. It would also be difficult to develop deeper teaching on a Sunday morning - at the time, there was only one ordained minister and two readers covering 6 services each week. I often had to ask others to help out and services had to be kept under the hour so we could cover 2 or 3 churches on a Sunday morning. On their own, the Sunday congregations couldn't really do any kind of mission or deeper teaching - but as a benefice we could. Cells which were formed upon peoples networks across the whole benefice seemed the way forward.

BH So cells are the really fresh expression that are becoming fully church.

SG Yes! Cells in our benefice function in the way Mission Shaped Church says fresh expressions should - they complement the inherited forms of church so that together we are able to do more of what a church should do and to be relevant to the whole of the local community. They are beginning to reach the parts of our community which relate less well to traditional forms of church - particularly the under 40s - and they enable people to invite their friends even if they don't live in the village. Here's a shot of some of the members of our 2 Youth cells. The young people are particularly good at bringing mates along - In one year we grew from 9 youth to 14 in 2 cells.

BH I gather another Alpha has fuelled the pump and then led to the seeker event called "4 All" that we mentioned at the start.

SG There were 9 young mums of us who knew each other mainly through our children - but one was a young widow from the first funeral I did. She was left with 4 children after her husband was killed in a farm accident. It was such an awful thing to happen and the group really struggled with the problem of suffering - then on the Holy Spirit Day, God gave Tanya an amazing experience of his love. It made such a difference - Everyone could see her face was changed. After that 4 others offered their lives to Christ. In January as Alpha ended, they formed a new cell with one of the Alpha helpers .

BH Did you say that this new cell was the launching pad for the new seeker service – "4 all".

SG Yes. Some of them had come on the course more for the sake of their children and wanting their children to have a positive experience of church so that they could make up their minds when they were older.. While, the Alpha was running we went to see a "4 all" service in South Reps in the Trench Team. We came back thinking ... "We could do this! It's fairly low maintenance". Its like a children's birthday tea party after some very informal Christian stuff. We prayed and started monthly on Sunday afternoon back in February and got 45 to our first (1/2 being children). Its in the church in Swainsthorpe which usually only has 6 attending BCP monthly in the morning.

BH What things come together that make "4 all" work so well.

SG It's backed by the prayer and commitment of the cell. And this means that the workload is spread and there's a real network of people who do inviting.. Firstly, invites go into every house in Swainsthorpe and also to friendship networks of team members elsewhere. Then secondly, people come with people they know and bring them from across the benefice.

BH So what's the format and what's your hope for the future?

SG "4 all" is monthly on Sunday afternoon at 4.30pm. This seems ideal as folk can still go out for the day and visit family..... and go home for the evening afterwards. The service includes a bible story, some children's songs and the barest minimum liturgy and then there's the party food time. It's good for fellowship but very light on worship and there is no real discipleship or outreach. This is not the "real business". My hope is that people will be drawn to the cells and become more fully disciples, not treating it as another form of entertainment. Discipleship is the real aim. In the long term, I would like to see the cells recognised by the diocese as a 7th expression of church in the

benefice equivalent alongside the 6 parish churches and working in a way that is complementary to them.

BH But it's still pretty fragile?

SG Having said that, every month still feels like it could all fall apart - the cells and the 4all service depend on a few key people and when difficult times or illness hits, you really feel the blow. We are all learning to depend on God because we have no choice! But then we remind ourselves that it is God who has led us this far - and things have happened that I could never have dreamed of or planned - so I guess there will be surprises in the future too.

### **Interview Story : Ian & Erika Biscoe – Hayford Park**

BH Link With our database of church plants, post Breaking New Ground in the mid 90's, The Oxford Diocese was near the top in numbers and in getting a planters forum going. So now with MSC it's interesting that they have been one of the leaders in setting up "Cutting Edge Ministries". This has found matched funding to add to the Church Commissioners grant for mission and so 5 new FXC projects are emerging. Contemplative Fire is one and Philip is in the Marketplace. Watch this space!

BH Intro More than one recent C.P. project in the Oxford Diocese have taken on a new housing mission challenge. With the Prescott plan envisaging 40K new houses per year to offset a ½ million shortage ..... this is a major ongoing mission opportunity. Two really good recent CP's into new housing are the LEP's in Elvham Heath (Fleet) and Camborne (Cambridge). There are Greenfield sites, Brownfield sites ... and re: developed Airbases. The US airbase at Upper Hayford has become "Hayford Park". Its housing comprises the 320 ex air-force homes .... But the 1000 + new houses are stalled pending agreement. Ian & Erika Biscoe were appointed as pioneer planters in Sept '02 to develop church in this new community. But with the development stalled its not been what they expected and they have had to improvise, going with the mission opportunities that are there. Describe that for us!

I.B. Well, 800 people have taken up residence in the old base houses – all of which are rented – pending the development decision. Rents are cheap and the community is transient and the feel is a bit like a Local Authority estate. Folk aren't particularly well off and there's lots of uncertainty and insecurity.

BH As you've gone with the presenting opportunities, three congregations have begun to emerge. One for kidz, one of youth and one of adults. I gather the adults kicked off first all through a rather forthright neighbour!

IB Yes! Jane lives next door to the base house we moved into. She began asking us when were we going to start church! That wasn't really our idea, so in the first months of arriving, we started a meeting in our home. Jane and another guy quickly became Christians. A number of other folk came to these Sundays in our home, but we noticed they only ever came once. This led us to explore the social patterns on the estate. People didn't invite one another into their homes – they talk on the doorstep. So we saw that church in the home wasn't so appropriate in this culture.

BH Now the airbase had a Chapel with as much as 8 meeting rooms, so this became the gathering point. How did that start?

IB Well, Jane our new neighbour, as a new Christian was great for inviting friends to Alpha. Also with a Carol service in the Chapel and other Christmas events to give out invites, we had 20 turn up to our first Alpha. Most stayed with it through to the end at Easter. So I developed some discipleship stuff and we continued meeting in the chapel on Thursday evenings. Some of the early one-off visitors to our home started to come back!

BH So a sort of midweek post-Alpha church is emerging. Who are the team and where might it be going?

- EB The core team that's come together, is Ian and I plus three others. But currently the ownership of this emerging congregation isn't that strong ... We are not quite sure how it will develop. We are considering developing things in the room we are re-doing in the chapel to be a café. We might also do a Sunday lunch. We aren't following a blue-print but trying to discern what's appropriate as things grow.
- BH You told me the Kidz congregation is the most firmed up. How has that come about?
- EB It all started because we have 4 children of our own and so we began doing Christian teaching for them 'cos there was nothing else around. Our kids already attracted lots of other kids to drop into our house. Also with loads of families on Hayford park, folk started asking what we were going to do. Ian was also doing assemblies at 2 church junior schools in the neighbouring villages. Children invited children and we put fliers out.
- BH So this started in the Chapel building on Sunday afternoons at 3.30pm and you have used something loosely based on the Kidz club format – lots of fun and interaction.
- IB That's how it started but its grown very fast in 18months. We now have 130 on the books with a regular 40-60 attending, split into 4 age groups from pre-school to year 9. We have a very committed team of 12 helpers. This has enabled us to develop the programme so that it is small group based. Its also become a 'network church'. Because the catchment is effectively that of the two church schools, which gather from 7 local villages as well as the base!
- BH The youth work is the least developed and again was precipitated by a parent with teenagers approaching you.
- EB Yes, those first teens drew in other teens and we did a survey with them. This showed that they wanted a discussion format to explore social and ethical questions. Jane, our first convert from next door is a helper. She is artistic and the youth did up their own room on the Chapel site. Its grown to 25 youth but unfortunately we realised too late that some of them wanted to move on and explore Christian stuff. We are currently wondering about developing a youth congregation with peer led activities. Right now, we are researching our options, with a group of committed youth.
- BH How has your role changed over the 2 years and what happens in the way of Sunday Service.
- IB We have no regular Sunday service. At festivals, quarterly we have a celebration gathering the three congregations, adult, youth and Kidz. We had 120 at Easter. And my role has already changed from making contacts to empowering the emerging leaders.