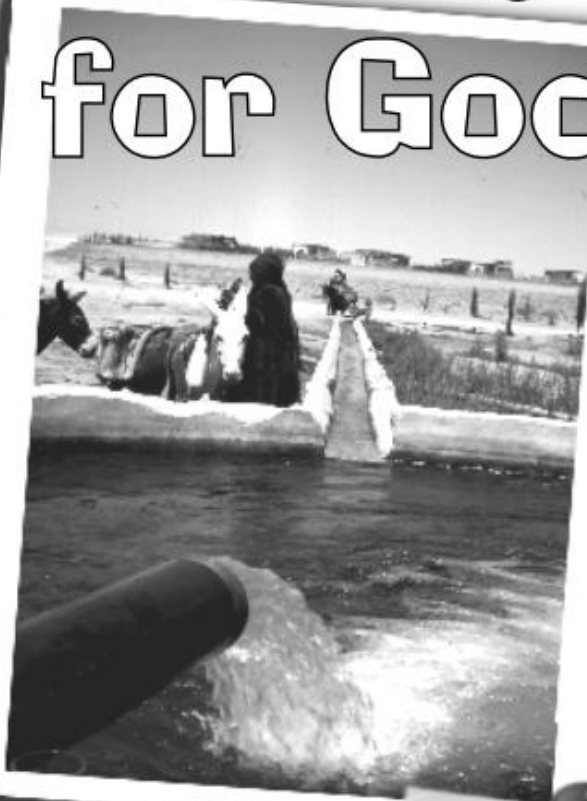


Thirsty for God



WATER IN THE DESERT
Abdelliyeh, Jordan, 1965

See page three

John Cole
Autumn 2012

Thirsty for God

Where do you – and others – find spiritual wells?

John Cole finds evidence that challenges our conventional thinking about ministry, mission and congregational life.

***To make the most of this booklet, use it as a basis for a study day in the parish or the deanery.
See inside the back cover.***

‘De-churched’ or ‘un-churched’ – but still searching

"Being Christian is not the result of an ethical choice or a lofty idea, but the encounter with an event, a person, which gives life a new horizon and a decisive direction." (Pope Benedict XVI)

Across the population of England, in the roundest of round figures, one can work on the basis that

- 10% attend church (all denominations)
- 10% maintain some association with a local church (the ‘fringe’)
- 40% used to attend church but do so no longer (the ‘de-churched’)
- 40% have never attended church (the ‘un-churched’)

80% (40% + 40%) - four out of five people – will rarely set foot in church (for a whole variety of reasons) except perhaps as tourists. Many of them, however, apparently still recognise a need for spiritual nourishment or refreshment in their lives.

Plenty of researchers testify to the seriousness of people's spiritual quest and to the reality of their spiritual experience. It is not just emotion or self-indulgence.¹ It is just that most people cannot imagine finding this nourishment in church on a Sunday morning. **Are they at fault? Are we at fault? Or are we expecting Sunday worship to do what it was never intended to do in a no longer Christian culture?**

When young families in a North Yorkshire commuter village met the researcher as part of a study of Fresh Expressions in Rural Methodism,² many spoke of being 'terrified' at the prospect of going through the main entrance of a church in order to attend a service. For the 'de-churched' it brought back memories that left them feeling 'unworthy'; for the 'un-churched' their fear was that they would be expected to know what to do, when they didn't!

Over the two decades since these 'rule of thumb' figures were first suggested, the number of 'un-churched' has surely increased, while those who are 'de-churched' are growing older and fewer.

It used to be assumed that those who have stopped going to church were never fully committed in the first place, and had merely attended out of social convention or habit. This may have been true a generation or more ago. Today, however, stories are all too frequently told of more complex processes being at work³. For example:

A church organist had been loyally serving his local church for ten year or more – yet secretly he had been finding the experience increasingly arid. If the Sunday worship was meant to be a spiritual well for him, he was going away thirsty! A discerning priest finally discovered the truth, encouraging him to stand down as organist and take his spiritual quest elsewhere. Churchwardens have been heard to express similar emptiness and frustration.

Scores of lay people (and even some clergy) responded to a letter to the Times by Jimmy Hamilton-Brown, secretary of Parish & People, reporting their frustration at

not being allowed to live out their Christian discipleship responsibly as part of their local church.⁴

A former lay Reader had pioneered a very popular lunch group in her home. Without any explicit intent on her part, it had become a significant spiritual well for several participants. However, because this group was not sponsored by the benefice, it was felt to be a threat to good order within the Church. The group's founder was effectively 'de-churched' and has continued a somewhat lonely uphill spiritual journey through contact with Iona and the Celtic tradition.

A younger generation must also be included among the 'de-churched', and they are much closer to home. In many cases, they are our own children and grandchildren. Their journey of faith has taken them far from institutional churchgoing, but not all of them have completely rejected their Christian upbringing.

Water of Life

The imagery of the water of life, springs of water to slake a deeper thirst, occurs throughout the Bible. From the Exodus⁵ right through to Revelation⁶, it is God who satisfies people's thirst. The psalmists⁷ sing repeatedly of their soul's thirst for the living God, and of God's constant love and promise of 'streams of living water' in response⁸.

One learns to value wells when one lives on the edge of a desert. When Jesus got into conversation with a Samaritan woman at Jacob's well, it was clear how precious the well was – even sacred – because the lives of so many generations had depended on it⁹.

Back in 1965, a long way east of Amman in the middle of the Transjordanian desert, a retired CMS missionary, Winifred Coate, had employed a local water diviner and had sunk her life savings into drilling a well. As if miraculously, water was now gushing into irrigation channels; the desert was blooming; tomatoes and green peppers were growing strongly; and a new community was taking shape.

The psalmists mostly complain that in the past they used to get to drink this 'living water' within the Jerusalem temple; and it is there that they hope to return to give thanks to God. The Samaritan woman challenges Jesus about the importance of the recently rebuilt temple at Jerusalem, but gets a surprising answer. Jesus steers her away from arguments about the temple, and instead links true worship to a recognition of the power of the Holy Spirit at work in people wherever they may be.

Finding spiritual wells today

If today one asks people where they look for spiritual wells (some prefer to speak of 'wells of the Spirit') and where they find them, the answers are wide-ranging – *but these spiritual wells rarely include public worship in church on a Sunday.*

Clearly there is still spiritual nourishment to be had from formal public worship in church. When worship takes place with integrity, and with a shared commitment to offer nothing but the best, it has a meaning for our regular churchgoers sufficient to ensure that attendance is no mere duty.

However, it does seem that, even when the Sunday worship is inspiring and rewarding, our livelier disciples discover richer spiritual encounters and their most abundant sources of the 'water of life' elsewhere.

It is surely significant that our most committed Christian disciples *and* those who are most resistant to organised religion appear to agree about this. Those of us who are parish clergy and congregational leaders (churchwardens etc) may find this shocking. But perhaps we should look more closely inside ourselves:

- Have we too readily identified our love for our local church with the Psalmists' love of the Jerusalem temple?

- Have we failed to heed Jesus' discussion with the Samaritan woman, or his sorrowful predictions that the temple would soon be destroyed?
- Have we allowed ourselves to become preoccupied maintaining congregational life and Sunday worship, often with diminishing resources, as if they were ends in themselves?

Naming people's spiritual wells

Over the years I have asked many different individuals and groups in our churches to name their spiritual wells. The range of experiences they have mentioned is amazing:

- Obvious examples are
 - Groups linked to religious communities such as Taizé or Iona
 - Individuals adopting the disciplines of semi-monastic groups such as the Northumbria Community or the Open Gate (on Lindisfarne), or as Benedictine or Franciscan Tertiaries.
 - Groups following shared disciplines such as Cursillo and Focolare
 - Groups developing distinctive patterns of shared prayer such as Julian groups or Maranatha
 - Taking part in evangelistic courses such as Alpha and Emmaus
- Less obvious are
 - Volunteering with the hospital chaplaincy or at the local hospice
 - Helping with a local Christian Counselling service
 - Being part of a small group of near neighbours who have discovered that alongside meeting for prayer and study there are all sorts of practical ways they can get on with showing God's love to their local community
- Positively unlikely (at least at first sight!)
 - Singing with the local Choral Society or small choir

Gareth Malone's work with the Military Wives Choir – as seen on TV – demonstrates the spiritual enrichment that comes through disciplined choral singing. It is at least arguable that this can only be through the active but possibly unrecognised presence of the Holy Spirit. It seems improbable that there is some other less benign source.

The significance of all this activity is generally underrated by church leaders. Much of it is in small groups, and not directly sponsored by the institutional Churches. Some of it is not overtly 'religious'. So it gets overlooked; it all seems to happen 'below the radar'¹⁰.

However, this kind of experience is not unusual. It appears to be widespread amongst church people. A straw poll at a diocesan synod (repeated subsequently at the Methodist District Synod) yielded some remarkable results.

Try the same straw poll at a meeting of your Deanery Synod or local Churches Together group when a good number are present – and compare your results with those obtained previously (see endnote)¹¹:

1. Hands up those of you who are routinely engaged in some kind of activity that benefits others.
2. Hands up if this activity is organised by your local church.
3. Hands up if you engage in this activity with others.
4. Hands up if these other people include Christians from other traditions.

If – as seems highly likely – these activities are both rewarding and significantly spiritually refreshing for their participants (more than their churchgoing), could they also be the source of spiritual refreshment for others who have not yet found their way to becoming Christ's disciples?

A fifth question might be worth asking:

5. Hands up if your group includes those of other faiths and/or those of no explicit faith.

Common features of people's spiritual wells

The experiences that people recognise as their spiritual wells appear to have a number of recurring features:

1. People are engaged together in groups where there are deep relationships of trust, involving a mutual giving and receiving.
2. People are engaged together in a common purpose that extends beyond their own self-interest.
3. People will from time to time glimpse something so deeply satisfying and transforming that it makes the whole enterprise more than just 'worthwhile', more even than 'exciting'. They are not 'playing games'.
4. The mutual commitment and accountability of the participants gives the activity an element of autonomy. 'Ownership' belongs to the participants, not to a sponsoring institution.
5. All the activities incorporate an element of diversity; the total experience benefits from the diverse backgrounds of the participants. These activities are not the product of an individual leader's ego-trip, nor are they based on the expectations of a leader appointed from elsewhere.

The fact that these characteristics keep cropping up is no accident. When Christians commit to one another to act in community, they do it in the spirit of the One whose covenant purpose shapes and focuses everything they do. God's covenant initiative is to *choose* with whom his covenant is made, to make gracious *promises* and to give *gifts*, all with an ultimate *purpose* in view. God seeks a free response of loyalty and self-discipline.

When the search fails

When people's search for the water of life – that essential ingredient for 'our soul's health' – fails, the consequences can be severe. Under pressure, individuals, groups and even whole nations and societies can be affected. Meaning and fulfilment in life are found in other ways, all of which are in some way destructive of the self or of others.

It seems there are two broad strands of human response: extremism and addiction. When people are facing hard times, one way they can find their identity is through hatred of others, be it on the basis of religion, race or any other excuse for treating someone else as 'different'. Another way of escape from a harsh reality is by opting for an unsustainable and self-destructive world where an initial pleasure triggers an insatiable hunger – for alcohol, drugs, over-eating and even just amassing more material possessions.

This negative spirituality is a wilderness where churches and church people throughout the generations have faced endless testing – temptation. Too easily we still collude with the 'spirit of the age'. Alternatively we retreat into a ghetto. We can expect no 'cheap grace' when we accept our calling to follow the way of incarnation, the way of the cross.¹²

The basic building blocks of Christ's Church

Asked by aspiring theologians what his vision for the Church was, Archbishop Rowan Williams replied: *"A vision of people meeting in small groups in living rooms, with open Bibles, helping one another to be grown-up Christian people, supporting, nourishing each other (in spite of what the Church wants it to be)."*

Perhaps it is time to recognise that the groups where people most readily taste the water of life form in fact the basic building blocks of Christ's Church. They are the environment in which Christ's disciples *"find out what God is*

doing and join in"¹³ and in so doing find themselves spiritually sustained and enriched. These groups are smaller than your average congregation and work to a different internal dynamic. They are evidence of the alternative vision of Christ's Church as expressed by Robert Warren (formerly the Church of England's National Adviser for Evangelism): Not 'priest + building + stipend' but 'faith + community + action'.¹⁴

Over recent years, research and the experience of pioneers in many traditions have been pointing Christ's Church consistently in this direction. **But if we take these basic units of the Church seriously, how does this change and refresh the institution of the Church that we have inherited?**

The next few pages perhaps provide some clues – or at least we can perhaps identify where more thought and prayer are needed.

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| <p>1. <i>'Building Bridges of Hope' (1993 – 2004) – an early warning of the task ahead</i></p> |
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Through the latter part of the 1990s the Churches Commission on Mission (part of Churches Together in Britain and Ireland) sponsored a research project under the title 'Building Bridges of Hope'. The research involved accompanying around 40 congregations from a wide range of Christian denominations over a period of three years. It provided an early warning that we need more than just congregations if we are to engage effectively in God's mission purposes.

Four key observations from Building Bridges of Hope:¹⁵

- Almost all the congregations had difficulty articulating their aims. Initially they could only imagine a traditional congregation promoting itself in a 'Christendom' context. Over time the unreality of this became clear, and their aims were expressed more in terms of how the love of God could be

incarnated in the whole of creation and how their congregational life could contribute to this.

- The more 'incarnational' activities were gradually recognised as offering the greatest spiritual riches to both the participants and those who benefited in the wider community. They were, however, uncomfortably out of the control of the congregation or its leaders. One congregation even reported that working with partners outside its own circle was 'too difficult'. This included work with Churches of other traditions.
- Few congregations made any connection between their engagement with their surroundings and the nurture provided for their members. Overwhelmingly, and perhaps surprisingly, house groups set up within the congregation for prayer and Bible study were experienced as failing to connect with people's daily lives and were often dominated by the individual group leader.
- It seems that, for most of the congregations surveyed, their aims, activities and patterns of nurture were almost totally disconnected from each other. This may explain why nobody seemed able to explain or justify the repeated assertion by almost all the congregations that "worship is central".

2. In search of a 'Mission Shaped Church' (2004)

When the Church of England realised that 'more of the same' was not an adequate missionary response to the changes in English society in recent decades, it commissioned the 2004 report 'Mission Shaped Church'.¹⁶

Unlike many church reports that seem only to gather dust, 'Mission Shaped Church' has had a huge impact. Much has happened as a result. The Church of England has recognised the importance of 'pioneer ministry', of 'Fresh Expressions of Church'¹⁷ and has given a constitutional basis for Mission Initiatives through 'Bishop's Mission Orders'.¹⁸ All this is now regarded as

sitting alongside traditional parish life in a 'mixed economy'. New attendance figures for the Church of England show that 3% now attend 'Fresh Expressions' and the number is growing fast.¹⁹

More than thirty years ago, research by David Wasdell had shown that Christian communities grew not by endless addition but by multiplication. There was a limit to the effective size of the 'priest + building + stipend' model of congregational life.

An early response to this insight was 'church planting'. Large and lively urban churches – often of a more evangelical and charismatic style – sought to replicate themselves elsewhere. It was a direct challenge to the Church of England's parochial system! Fortunately it quickly became clear that cloning an existing style of congregational life was not what God intended. **Instead, is God asking us to 'sow seeds' that God could grow into more contextually appropriate expressions of Christian community?**

The 'Mission Shaped Church' report failed to distinguish clearly between 'planting' and 'seeding'; and the tensions created, probably unintentionally, by the early church planters have left lingering suspicions in the minds of many parish clergy and their congregations:

Mission initiatives in a 'planting' mode look too much like free-church congregations and are therefore a threat. Mission initiatives in a 'seeding' mode are often perceived to be so far on the edge of institutional church life that they are not to be regarded as 'church' at all.

'Fresh Expressions', however, are not to be ignored; they are part of an important trend through which God is at work.

3. *Small is beautiful*

Back in the midst of the Decade of Evangelism, in the 1990s, a small consultation convened by Robert Warren probably did not gain the wider attention that it deserved. Robert brought together about a dozen people who had been exploring in a variety of contexts how Christ's people were effectively finding out what God was doing and joining in.

The overwhelming conclusion of that little gathering was that God was asking us to pay more attention to smaller communities of Christ's disciples as agents of God's mission.

- Evidence was presented from parishes adopting the 'cell-church' pattern developed by Ralph Neighbour – and subsequently widely promoted by Laurence Singlehurst (previously at Youth with a Mission).²⁰
- Representatives of a small group called 'New Way of Being Church' shared how they were adopting the principles of community life developed by the 'Base Ecclesial Communities' of South America.²¹
- Stories were told of how very tiny congregations in remote villages, many miles distant from where their incumbent was living, were re-discovering their vocation no longer as fifth-rate congregations but rather as first-rate 'cells' – ministering communities deeply embedded in their village life.
- A Roman Catholic lay person, just completing a thesis on the place of small Christian communities in her tradition, gave us an early insight into the 'monastic' character of these communities by describing an initiative based on a 'house of prayer' that was also very much a place of hospitality.

4. *The dynamics of small Christian communities*

A unique feature of the 'cell-church' model as developed by Ralph Neighbour is the discipline that if the cells grow beyond a certain size, they are required to divide. However, this approach conflicts almost totally with the dynamics of small Christian communities as experienced elsewhere. Three key dynamics can be observed:

1. Small Christian communities gather round a purpose beyond themselves. Therefore they disband if
 - a. Circumstances change
 - b. Their purpose is fulfilled
 - c. They can no longer contribute effectively to that purpose

Unlike congregations, their self-perpetuation is not seen as a virtue. They do not exist only for their own benefit.

2. Their leadership is contained within the group. Optimally, the functions associated with leadership are dispersed amongst the group's participants, often on a rotating basis²²

Unlike congregations, they are not dependent on a leader imported from elsewhere in order to direct their activities.

3. It is not a purpose of the group to grow bigger.
 - a. The size of the group is likely to be dictated by the nature of its external purpose.
 - b. If members of the group are 'surplus to requirements' for the existing task, the way forward will be for the whole group to discern alternative or additional external purposes. Only then might it make sense for the group to divide.

Unlike congregations, they are not tied to disciplines imposed from elsewhere. They are free to develop their own dialogue with the culture in which they are set.

All this, of course, means that these small Christian communities are intrinsically vulnerable. It is a recipe for disaster when they go unrecognised and unloved.

5. *'Inherited' versus 'Emerging'?*

Two other pieces of terminology were given to us by Robert Warren to describe the ingredients in the Church of England's new mixed economy: He labelled the parish system as *'the inherited Church'* and these new mission initiatives as *'the emerging Church'*. It is a convenient distinction, but it leaves a key question unresolved: **What is the relationship between the two?**

For 'inherited' and 'emerging' simply to co-exist in mutual ignorance of each other is hardly an attractive proposition. When deaneries have attempted to sponsor mission initiatives and Fresh Expressions, they often find parishes are wary of how these initiatives will affect them. Similarly, many of those who are beginning to find something of God in Christ through these initiatives are often deeply suspicious of traditional patterns of worship and congregational life.

But the idea that the emerging will eventually 'replace' the inherited could be even worse. **What can be done in the 'mixed economy' to bind the 'mixture' into a 'compound'?**

6. *Stones that the builders rejected*

Meanwhile committed lay people, finding their own ways of sharing in God's mission purposes outside the orbit of the local congregation, remain frustrated - as evidenced by the response to Jimmy Hamilton-Brown's Times

letter mentioned earlier. The important ways in which they are serving God's kingdom in their daily lives are often not just ignored or overlooked; they are actively disparaged as 'not proper ministry'.

An experienced teacher has a professional pastoral role in the secondary school where he is deputy head teacher. But only the things he does as a member of the parish's Local Ministry Scheme are apparently to be regarded as his 'ministry'. His professional life, through which he is both challenged and inspired, is written off as 'just his discipleship'.

A Christian Counselling Centre has established a great reputation for its compassionate work across a city. It has won a small amount of recognition as a 'Christian ministry' through the local Churches Together Group, but when individual denominations debate their strategies for ministry and mission, it is invariably overlooked.

Surely, if spiritual wells – genuine 'wells of the Holy Spirit' – are to be more accessible to those who need them, what lay people are routinely doing in the service of God's mission day by day should be the foundation for all our thinking and planning for ministry and mission within the Churches. It should not be treated as a minor add-on or an afterthought!

7. The frustration of the pioneers

The frustration of lay people who are already getting on with the job is shared by many of the new Pioneer Ministers involved with Fresh Expressions. The role of these pioneers is to discover what possibilities God is opening up for revealing God's love amongst people long alienated from traditional forms of congregational life. A recent enquiry of Pioneer Ministers undertaken by Beth Keith of the Sheffield Centre provides two important insights:²³

- Pioneer Ministers are discovering how radically they must set aside their preconceptions about what they would like to achieve for God if

they are to contribute effectively to what God is already doing out there in God's world.

- Pioneer Ministers who are deployed as members of parish teams experience considerable frustration because the expectations placed on them by the parish congregation prevent them from following through on this radical agenda.

8. *Lessons from the past*

Ignoring where people are finding their spiritual wells has had serious implications for established churches throughout history. The Church of England provides enough examples of what can happen when the parish congregation and its incumbent fail to see what is going on:

- Early Methodism ended up being organised first as a 'connexion' and then as an autonomous denomination, when it should have been possible for it to stay as a force for renewal within the Church of England.
- Christians coming from the West Indies to England in the 1960s expected to find a loving welcome in English parish churches, and assumed they would be free to continue their lifestyle of worshipping in the parish church on a Sunday morning and holding their own enthusiastic praise/preaching events in the evening – a pattern not unlike that of early Methodists! The new wine, however, was too much for the old wineskins, and the result is a whole cluster of new Afro-Caribbean denominations.
- In many places the effect of 'charismatic renewal' over recent decades has been similar – bursting old wineskins in both the Church of England and Methodism. New networks and 'streams' of house churches and community churches are the result.

Oh – and have you noticed how the water of life has turned into wine?

Re-imagining Congregations

“The disciples were a rag bag of people, with no job description, no person spec, no interviews. But empowered by forgiveness and being called again and again, and by the Holy Spirit’s gifts of love, joy, peace, discipline, self-control and above all communication (as on the day of Pentecost as described in Acts,) they were able to change the world.” (Nicholas Holtam, Bishop of Salisbury)

Like other communities experiencing renewal before them, what will prevent Fresh Expressions, and even possibly some Local Ecumenical Partnerships, also severing their relationship with their ‘parents’? The elaborate control mechanisms of Bishop’s Mission Orders could easily prove to be at least as oppressive and inhibiting as the much-maligned regulations for Local Ecumenical Partnerships.

Perhaps it is time to re-imagine the congregation. Perhaps we have been expecting it to do too much. Could it be that your average congregation was never meant to be this kind of spiritual well?

It might be a great relief if we discovered that congregations are best understood not as gatherings of individuals – who are to be encouraged to be as like-minded as possible! – but as places where members of a whole range of smaller Christian communities are able to come together to celebrate what God is already doing in their diverse settings.

It is these smaller communities – the places where people find their spiritual wells and find they can offer refreshment to others – that are the true ‘base ecclesial communities’. Some will be recognised Fresh Expressions; some will be quite informal and ‘hidden’.

Congregations should be places where the members of these smaller communities can tell their stories, both of their struggles and of what God is doing with them and through them. They should be places where diversity is

cherished and affirmed and embraced in a unity of love. This is what addresses the vulnerability of the small community that was identified earlier.

Congregations do, of course, have other functions – not least as places of ‘respite care’, solace and sanctuary for individuals under stress because of the challenges of their daily lives. It gets out of proportion, however, when the main function of the Sunday worship is to offer the congregation a chance to ‘escape’ from the world around them.

It follows that the purpose of the small community is not to act as a recruiting station for membership of the large congregation down the road. It has long been recognised that many of those whose lives are changed through joining Alpha or Emmaus groups find it hard to step directly out of that experience into the life of a traditional congregation. Congregational leaders often express concern when these new disciples prefer to continue to meet as a small group – but maybe this is as it should be; maybe the congregation needs to change its own perspective.

The small Christian community is ‘church’ in its own right (as is any more formal monastic community). It is just that it can never be complete in itself but must always look for recognition and acceptance as part of something bigger – not least through sharing in Eucharistic celebration with others in a wider and more diverse fellowship. The relationship between parish and diocese is just the same: local autonomy balanced by a commitment to belong.

A congregation might be helped to re-imagine itself if its public eucharistic worship could be reshaped so that it clearly became a celebration of people’s experience of what God is doing in the diverse settings of their daily ministry and discipleship. Those who have found spiritual wells – and perhaps a new faith – in these small communities might well be attracted to get involved in such a celebration, but they will not see why they should engage out of duty

in a rhythm of Sunday worship that seems to be conducted merely for its own sake. This perhaps points towards a less frequent pattern of Eucharistic celebration, given the increased fluidity of people's lives today. Those who are able and willing to meet regularly on a Sunday morning could perhaps use their time more constructively – e.g. to develop their discipleship or to focus more on the therapeutic role identified above. They would be, as it were, 'Sunday morning cells'.

Whether this means that we should envisage our base ecclesial communities meeting as 'the Lord's family round the Lord's table on the Lord's day' is more debatable. Either way it seems we need now to have a serious reappraisal of some of our venerable and traditional disciplines for public worship, even though they are currently enshrined in canon law.

Conclusions and Implications

The message of this booklet to the wider institutional Church is twofold:

- 1. It must acknowledge where these smaller communities already exist before it assumes that the only thing to do is to contrive new ones.**
- 2. It must re-order its life to give priority to nourishing and cherishing these smaller communities so that they do not lose touch with the leading of the Holy Spirit.**

It is a message based on six key propositions:

1. The primary ministry of Christ's Church is conducted by lay people in locations other than around the congregation.

Lay people engage in this ministry either individually or (often more effectively) in small communities of disciples where they are unselfconsciously earthed in their context.

However, they will find it hard to develop a sufficiently distinctive culture of responsible and Christ-like love – practising self discipline in matters such as discretion and confidentiality, and committing themselves to receiving and giving mutual account – if their vocation to ministry in daily life is not seen as crucial to how God's people engage in God's mission.

2. Small communities are frequently a key source of spiritual nourishment for their participants – and are named as their 'spiritual wells' – just as they can also prove to be sources of spiritual encounter and enrichment for those around them.

Small Christian communities, as described in this booklet, need a relationship in which they are cherished by the wider community of Christ's Church. The link between formal Mission Initiatives and their Bishop (through Bishop's Mission Orders) is good but it is not enough.

Small Christian communities that go unrecognised and unloved²⁴ can easily run into difficulties. Groups can become over-intense and emotionally overheated; over-enthusiastic individuals can hi-jack the group to serve their own agenda; groups can become over-politicised and partisan. However, the solution is not regulation or control ("Find out what Matilda is doing and tell her to stop."), but cherishing.

These basic units of Christ's Church are cherished (and benefit greatly) when they enjoy the companionship of a trusted friend who can both challenge and affirm them, with an authority that comes primarily from his or her ability to ask probing questions. This accompanying friend is there in love to speak "*the*

Word of the Lord ... that cuts all the way through, to where soul and spirit meet, to where joints and marrow come together.”²⁵

It could be argued that these small Christian communities sometimes feel the need to try to develop into larger places of celebration (ignoring the ‘inherited’ church) because of the lack of welcome, understanding and appreciation that is available to them in the public places of worship.

3. Most congregations in our parish churches are too big to function as primary mission communities.

The size of most congregations requires them to maintain the formality, the disciplines and the structures that the institution of the Church has inherited from the Christendom era – or that have developed as one consequence of the ‘professionalising’ of the clergy that began when theological colleges were first set up in the middle of the nineteenth century.

Parish congregations and their leaders need to rediscover a richer identity as ‘communities of communities’ where the different things that God is doing with these diverse small communities can be cherished and celebrated. Public Eucharistic thanksgiving arises naturally from this.

Two challenging implications

- Local Ministry Schemes are counter-productive if they draw lay people away from this primary ministry and occupy them with activities that lead others to think of them as mini-clergy.
- Many parish congregations, whilst they are too large to be effective missionary communities, are also too small to encompass the diversity that would make them into places of celebration. Does this mean there should be fewer, bigger parishes? Does this at least partly explain the resurgent life of many of our cathedrals?²⁶

4. This change of perspective releases our parish churches to serve once again as ‘available space’ – holy places.

Parish churches can once again belong to the wider community, as sanctuary for the whole population, places of *public* worship, – rather than being elaborated into multi-purpose campaign headquarters for what church members then mistakenly assume is *the Church’s* mission (rather than God’s).

Two approaches to mission are associated with the persistent notion of the church as ‘campaign HQ’ – and they link back to very ancient alliances between the Church and secular powers-that-be. In this way of thinking, the function of the church building is not dissimilar to that of a mediaeval castle, both built at a time when Christendom and feudalism held sway.

The aim of those in the ecclesiastical ‘castle’ over the centuries has been either ‘*to bring Christ to the people*’ (by dominating society – this is the ‘establishment’ model) or ‘*to bring people to Christ*’ (as if by press-ganging people into the Church militant! – this is the model of ‘dissent’).

The change of perspective suggested here could represent a considerable release, as a castle is surely just about the least appropriate base from which to serve God’s mission in today’s fluid society. The occupants of a castle appear embattled and imprisoned within the walls as the busy world swirls round them.

5. Parish clergy could similarly be released from a whole range of undeliverable expectations.

No longer need clergy feel guilty at not being successful area managers for a sales force based at campaign HQ, let alone being chief salespeople.²⁷

Once lay people have been affirmed in their ministry outside the boundaries of organised church life, the clergy can also be released from duty as ‘mercenaries in dog collars’ – people who are being paid to do what lay

people could be encouraged to do without feeling they first have to complete a programme of training. Some training may be necessary, especially to meet the requirements of ‘safeguarding’, but regular and supportive contact with a ‘soul friend’ could be far more useful.²⁸

Perhaps we could then also discover that the people who should be ordained are those *of whom others are already saying that they bring them closer to God* – whether or not they have any gifts relating to the many functional roles that have been thrust upon parochial clergy over the last century or so.

6. The biggest obstacles to this change of perspective are the financial and fiscal structures of the church institution.

Old style congregations remain stuck in something close to collusive dependency on their stipendiary clergy, not least because congregations are needed to finance the old model of priest + building + stipend. It can reach the point where clergy are expected to grow the congregation in order to pay the clergy in order to grow the congregation etc ad infinitum – and it can seem that there is no way to break out of this closed loop.

Crossing the Red Sea

The big risk in all this would be that it would entail

- ordaining radically fewer stipendiary parochial clergy
- ordaining only those who are recognised already as people with whom others feel closer to God
- identifying and calling in a more targeted way those gifted by God to maintain an overview (bishops) and to handle necessary practical tasks (deacons)
- using released resources to invest in smaller mission initiatives – with much greater affirmation of lay people who are just getting on with the job
- encouraging a move towards fewer and larger congregational gatherings for eucharistic worship – through which the life of the smaller mission communities is celebrated
- encouraging the wider community to invest in and use their sacred spaces

Given the size of the existing stipendiary ordained work force, which nonetheless continues to overwork to meet inappropriate expectations, the problem is how to effect a transition from the old pattern to the new.

“Let my people go!”

The Exodus story resonates strongly with the situation faced by institutional Churches today. The Israelites were enslaved in Egypt making bricks without straw. All the efforts of parish congregations are not yielding sufficient results in terms of extra bodies on pews even to sustain current levels of stipendiary staff, never mind grow.²⁹ If your local church is bucking the trend, thank God – but also ask yourself why. The reasons may be as much sociological as spiritual!

As one stands on the edge of the Red Sea, the route ahead may seem impassable – and experience suggests that even after the first obstacle is passed, the pathway will be long and hard going. But God’s repeated message throughout the Bible is, “*Don’t be afraid!*” The promised land of God’s kingly rule is what awaits us, and God’s ‘new thing’ is happening already.³⁰ The water of life is there to be found welling up in the wilderness. God is already with us on the journey.

A Manifesto for taking lay ministry seriously

*Alongside this booklet, Parish & People is launching ‘**A Manifesto for taking lay ministry seriously**’. The aim is to promote renewed debate about the nature of Christian ministry and about where and how it can be exercised effectively in the service of God’s Kingdom.*

With the Manifesto comes a leaflet containing resources for opening up the debate – including key questions and case studies for clergy and lay people to explore together in their local context.

At Parish & People we hope very much that you will join in this debate and share your responses with us, as well as with your deanery and diocese.

Contact: Parish & People, c/o April Cottage, West Street, Winterborne Stickland, Blandford DT11 0NT secretary@parishandpeople.org.uk

Please also report to the Church of England’s Ministry Division, which has recently committed itself to an exercise in ‘Re-imagining Ministry’.

Contact: the Ven Julian Hubbard, Director of the Ministry Division, Church House, Great Smith Street, London SW1P 3AZ

Thirsty for God

Questions for local churches

1. **Where can you see God at work in your locality?**
 - Inside the church?
 - Outside the church?
2. **What spiritual wells are available to people in your locality?**
 - Do they have different styles from each other?
 - Do they work together well?
 - Are there styles to fit all cultures/types/ages etc?
 - What areas/groups of people are missing out? Why?
3. **What groups do you have in the church?**
 - If they are not spiritual wells, what function do they perform?
4. **Where are church members involved in groups outside the church?**
 - Where is God in these groups?
5. **Is the Sunday congregation over-emphasised as being the real church?**
 - Can small cells also be 'church'?
 - Or do we see them just as half-way entrances to the congregation?
6. **What other groups does the wider community need?**
7. **What new mission initiatives – 'fresh expressions of church' – are needed?**
 - Do they have to be sponsored by the parish church?
8. **Finally, a catch question:**
 - Does your Vicar delegate?
(NB You cannot delegate what does not belong to you!)

NOTES

¹ See, for example, 'Understanding the Spirituality of People who don't go to Church' by David Hay & Kate Hunt and 'Something There – The Biology of the Human Spirit' by David Hay.

² 'Methodist Fresh Expressions: Listening to Leaders of Specific Rural Initiatives in England' by Paul Rolph, Jenny Rolph and John Cole – in 'Rural Theology' Volume 9.2 (2011)

³ See also 'Gone but not Forgotten' by Leslie Francis and Philip Richter (DLT 1998)

⁴ The implications are explored in 'Communal Ministry – Towards the Ministry of All' (Autumn 2011 – available via www.parishandpeople.org.uk)

⁵ Exodus 17.3

⁶ Revelation 21.6 and 22.17

⁷ Examples include Psalms 42.2, 63.1 and 143.6

⁸ Isaiah 43.19-21

⁹ St John's Gospel, Chapter 4

¹⁰ The author first came across the phrase 'below the radar' being used in this context some years ago when in

conversation with John Smith, then Mission Director for the Evangelical Alliance.

¹¹ The results from the straw poll at the Diocesan and District Synods were identical:

To point 1:

Almost everyone raised their hand.

To point 2:

Very few hands were raised.

To point 3: *About half those present raised a hand.*

To point 4: *Almost exactly the same number of hands remained raised.*

Significantly, these results include responses from both lay and ordained.

¹² Dietrich Bonhoeffer's writings – at a time when the German Churches were colluding with National Socialism – remain essential reading for today.

¹³ Paraphrasing an idea first expressed by John V Taylor in 'Go-between God' (1974)

¹⁴ Robert Warren first explored the distinction in 'Building Missionary Congregations' and 'Being Human, Being Church' in the mid 1990s.

¹⁵ For archive material from the Building Bridges of Hope project, email bbh@parishandpeople.org.uk

¹⁶ ‘Mission Shaped Church’ - now available on line at www.chpublishing.co.uk/uploads/documents/0715140132.pdf

¹⁷ See www.freshexpressions.org.uk

¹⁸ Details in the Dioceses, Mission and Pastoral Measure 2007 – available on line at www.churchofengland.org/media/55211/dpmm2007.pdf

¹⁹ See the report ‘Fresh Expressions in the Mission of the Church’ and the associated General Synod debate (July 2012)

²⁰ For current thinking, see: www.celluk.org.uk.

²¹ See www.newway.org.uk

²² For a fuller discussion of this approach to leadership, see the opening section of ‘Seeds of the Word’ by Peter Price (DLT 1996)

²³ The results were presented in April 2012 at a conference organised by the Church of England’s Division of Mission and Public Affairs on the theme of ‘Missionary Communities – a new Monasticism’. See <http://starttheweek.typepad.com/stw>

[/2012/04/new-monasticism-day-recordings-and-handouts.html](http://2012/04/new-monasticism-day-recordings-and-handouts.html)

²⁴ A small group of lay people, who began meeting as an ecumenical Lent house group, have persisted quietly over the years in prayer and Bible study and have discovered many ways in which they can serve God’s loving purposes in their local community. When the County Ecumenical Officer got to hear of them, the plea from the Anglican members was “Please don’t tell our Vicar!” Thankfully they have managed to survive the pitfalls of their isolation.

²⁵ Hebrews 4.12
(Good News Bible)

²⁶ A rather less favourable interpretation would suggest that cathedrals, like our Charismatic mega-churches, appeal to certain social groupings within a consumer society, giving them an emotional ‘charge’ that enables them to feel good about themselves, whilst carrying on with their lives much as before. See ‘Church without Price?’ by John Cole (www.parishandpeople.org.uk)

²⁷ A recent conference on ‘*Re-imagining Ministry*’, sponsored by Ridley Hall and Westcott House in Cambridge, appears to have reached

some similar conclusions. (Church Times report - 27 April 2012). See also Bishop Alan Wilson's web-based review of *'If you meet George Herbert on the road, kill him – radically re-thinking priestly ministry'* by Justin Lewis-Anthony:

<http://books.google.co.uk/books?id=I572nHfcHv8C&sitesec=reviews>

²⁸ Issue 53 of 'Encounters on the Edge' (available from the Sheffield Centre – www.encountersontheedge.org.uk) describes Crossnet, a formal Mission Initiative in Bristol Diocese, which surprised itself by discovering that it wasn't there to grow a congregation. Instead God was calling it to be a small Christian community focusing on the needs of university students and young adults. A key ingredient was the opportunity for one to one relationships with those who came into the community as part of their journey into committed Christian discipleship. The dynamics were those of *'affiliation'* in the true meaning of the word. (cf the faith development theories of John Westerhof III in 'Will our Children Have Faith?') Westerhof would wonder what challenges these young adults will be facing in the

'wilderness' once they have left the community.

²⁹ A large and apparently successful church in Northern Ireland, surveyed in the 'Building Bridges of Hope' research a decade ago, reported that all their best efforts at evangelism (including employing a full-time evangelist) had done no more than "slow the rate of decline".

³⁰ Cf note 8. In Isaiah, chapter 43.16ff, the Prophet of the Exile reminds his hearers of the Red Sea crossing ("a road through the sea"), but then promises them "a road through the desert", where rivers will flow "to give water to my chosen people."