

A network of worshipping communities:

a model for a multi-parish team with a vision for a blended economy of church

In summary

We are changing the organisational structure of a multi-parish team to affirm the best of what we have inherited and to facilitate creativity as new things emerge. Our organisational model is a flexible 'network of worshipping communities'. 11 of these meet in the ancient parish churches; their long history means that each is shaped by its village context. The 12th is a loose youth community, across villages. The others, currently, are a weekly toddler church, a weekend Messy Church and a monthly seniors 'tea and prayer'. Each is locally run and engages its context, and is supported from the centre.

The context

The Lordsbridge Team of Churches (Team Ministry) was brought together in 2010. It consists of 11 villages and 11 parishes, each with an ancient parish church, in an area of 45 square miles, served initially by a Team Rector and 2 Team Vicars.

In 2011, village size ranged from 250 to just under 3,000 with a total population of 12,300 (census data). Village residents include those who have lived there for more than a generation, those who moved in as young families in earlier village expansion (1980 – 2000) and are now parents of teenagers or becoming grandparents, those who are seeking to put down roots for their own young families, and those who use the villages as dormitories. Local employers are scattered around the area and include farms and agri-business, cafes, shops and small businesses based on farms, local hospitals and healthcare providers, the local schools, the university (not just academic staff) and high tech businesses. Substantial new edge of village development is already approved for the next few years increasing the housing stock of some villages by 20-25%.

Each parish has an active worshipping community associated with the parish church – 9 of these meeting every Sunday morning and the other 2 alternating their morning service, with a sprinkling of early services too.

All 11 church buildings are listed and each building has its own blessings, and challenges of maintenance and fundraising. All the churchyards are still open and used for burials. The smaller parish church communities, in particular, struggle with governance and rely heavily on their incumbent.

There are 3 church schools, out of a total of 7 primary schools, a secondary school and a 6th form college.

Starting points

We came at this from three directions: firstly, how do we make the work of our new multi-parish benefice more sustainable? Secondly, how do we become more missional? And thirdly, what gifts do we already have in these village church communities?

The first of these questions came from the reality that multi-parish benefices are often treated merely as a series of parishes now bolted together but still trying to do what they have always done in the way they have always done it, with increasing amounts of desperation and burnout amongst the clergy. The 'minster model' (eg Nick Spencer's *Parochial Vision*) was a valuable attempt to break free from this mould and work with a different, more sustainable, structure. However, that model only works where there is a potential 'minister' church. The collection of villages in a multi-parish benefice may not naturally fit this model, as was the case for us.

The second question arose from the statement in the Ely diocesan strategy: 'An equal number of Fresh Expressions and traditional forms of church by 2025'. So we found ourselves asking these supplementary questions: How do we hold together the different realities of traditional and new forms of church in a multi-parish context? Can we make space for the innovative whilst continuing the best of parish ministry? How can we affirm the reach of our parish churches alongside reaching beyond them? So, as well as looking for an organisational structure that would be more sustainable in terms of ministers' workloads, we recognised that organisational structure can support or inhibit creativity. The longevity of the parish structure, and the expectations of what a parish church should be and do, exert a strong gravitational pull which can stifle innovation. We were looking for something that retained the best of what we inherited but enabled new things to emerge more freely.

The last question made us recognise that village churches, at their best, are good at being a community, and are well-embedded in their mission field ie their village. In addition, they are typically relatively small communities.

Networks

Early on, we recognised that a network is a nimble and flexible organisational structure which allows separate small, and to a degree diverse, entities to co-operate without creating a hierarchy. The phrase 'network of friends' captures this use of the term. Our thinking was drawn from various business studies including Arie de Geus' *The Living Company*, the work of Peter Senge and more recently, Satya Nadella's *Hit Refresh: The Quest to rediscover Microsoft's Soul and imagine a better future for everyone*.

Alongside this management science, we explored the example of the early church in Acts as a network of, for the most part, small communities of Christians who gathered in their particular place to learn and worship together, and who shared resources – people, teaching letters, finance – for shared benefit.

From this idea we developed the principle that 'the Team is a network of worshipping communities each rooted in its local context'.

Missional communities

Taking this a step further, we considered the work of Bob Hopkins and Mike Breen in *Clusters: creative mid-sized missional communities*, in which the authors advocate breaking large churches down into locally run missional communities (15-60 people), small enough to become well embedded into their local context, and connected together so that they can be supported from the centre with resources, administration and growing leadership. A missional community has 4 dimensions – UP (a growing relationship with God), IN (social and pastoral links with itself), OUT (a missional focus beyond itself), and ACROSS (membership of a resourcing and support network).

The rural multi-parish benefice has multiple ready-formed worshipping communities of this size, already embedded in their village context. They are also already connected, at a minimum by sharing clergy. There are large urban churches spending time and energy to create a structure that we already have in the villages. However, these rural worshipping communities are often without the supported local leadership, the shared resources and the missional focus of the missional communities described by Hopkins and Breen.

Adding this thinking to our model of a network of worshipping communities gave us three additional things –

- It provides us with a **simple eccesiology** (a theological understanding of what a church is and is for) in the IN, UP, OUT, ACROSS framework that enables to talk about, and work on balancing, these dimensions in each worshipping community.
- We developed the idea of a **light (lite?) centre**, so that support and resource are spun out to the **'mission-edges'** that are occupied by the various worshipping communities and where resources are contextualised and delivered. We are resisting the temptation to draw resource into the centre or to centralise things around the clergy. We use the principle 'central support, local subsidiarity'.
- We can **add more worshipping communities to the network** as they emerge, in addition to the 11 communities that worship in ancient parish church buildings. These new communities or Fresh Expressions of Church can therefore relate to different groups of people, different geographies and different networks than the traditional parishes. The ease with which this can be done enables experimentation without raising the stakes too high.

Finessing the model

Each worshipping community has a **'lead minister'**, who can be lay or ordained, paid or voluntary, and can be shared with another community. Each lead minister is developing a **'local team'** for that worshipping community, though exactly what that looks like depends on the context. Decision making and finances operate at PCC level or at community level (where there is no PCC).

The lead ministers, with one or two others in key roles, make up the **'core team'** which meets together weekly. A **Team Council** (representing key stakeholders and meeting 3 times a year) acts as a council of reference for the core team and oversees projects that provide support to the worshipping communities. This core team and the Team Council constitute the **'centre'**.

We have increased our **missional focus** by welcoming a pioneer curate as part of the core team for the last two years who has provided role modelling and coaching to a number of the worshipping communities (both traditional and new).

What has happened as a result?

Our shared vision is now of a blended network of worshipping communities, where each parish based church is a small but confident community of Jesus' disciples engaged in its particular village mission field, with local ministers doing the basics well. Alongside these we are pioneering and experimenting so that we have at least one new congregation or worshipping community in each parish. Our organisational model supports this vision and is part of a long term project of culture change.

Impacts

We have seen the following impacts:

- Many of the church communities are actively exploring further forms of community engagement with 4 regular, seasonal or pop-up community cafes starting in the last 3-4 years. We are seeing the fruit of this investment in building reputation and networks as we sow the seeds of new congregations.
- We have increased the number of LLMs and ALMs and in most, though not all parishes churches, clergy are working with small local teams of LLMs, SSMs and clergy with PTO. 'Usual Sunday Attendance' in Lordsbridge has risen by 3.6% from 2013 to 2016 against a backdrop of a decrease of 4.2% over the same period in rural churches in the diocese as a whole (Stats for mission 2013 and 2016).
- In the last 5 years the number of worshipping communities has risen from 11 to a network of 15 or 16 (depending on how we count them) as we have become more intentional in growing different forms of church. To date, these include a weekly weekday toddler church, an embryonic missional community meeting weekly in a café, a monthly Sunday morning Messy Church reaching beyond the normal congregation, a monthly Sunday afternoon children's church, and a monthly community for seniors based around tea and prayers. There is room and there are ideas for more.
- Centrally run projects that support the worshipping communities include weddings administration, youth work coordination, regular gatherings to encourage different ways of praying, a school of theology, a bi-monthly newsletter to share stories, a process of checking and sharing to make sure we have ministers in Sunday services, and a growing bank of downloadable service sheets. We have recently been awarded a grant to develop a 'resource hub' to increase our administrative capacity to better support our missional vision.

Challenges

This is not without its challenges:

- Not everyone (including some ministers) understands this paradigm shift and some are keen for their vicar to lead with parish-based programmes rather than grow mission orientated locally-led projects and communities.

- Some existing ministers (lay and ordained) are reluctant to embrace the more team-based ways of working.
- The new worshipping communities are fragile and an earlier one has now 'closed' as people have moved on, though a number of things have been learned from the experience.
- There is still work to be done on lightening the load of legal and practical responsibilities held by the parish church based communities, particularly the smaller ones. Much of this is outside of our control.
- We need to grow more lay leaders and ministry team members equipped to lead mission projects. We have more ideas and opportunities than people to work with them.
- This structural change is part of a broader cultural change. It will take time!

Thinking of adopting this idea?

Here are some important points to bear in mind:

1. Make sure that this model of a network of worshipping communities fits your context
2. Change the way you describe the team/benefice and find ways of symbolically and literally reinforcing the new description; keep stating and restating the model/vision in different ways
3. Create a 'light centre' and work out what it can do first to support your worshipping communities to demonstrate the concept; but don't mandate the use of centrally created resources, offer an opt-in
4. Find a way to increase the focus on mission – this may need to be a dedicated resource since all the existing ministers may well be fully stretched on 'business as usual' activities, at least until a new way of doing things fully emerges
5. Grow local shared leadership and shared ministry in every way you can, regularly ask broad vocational questions, consider yourself a 'training benefice'
6. Think about how to provide administrative support centrally for economies of scale
7. Be in it, collectively, for the long haul – culture change takes a long time.

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