

Challenging Leadership: A Methodist Perspective on Fresh Expressions Today.

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As many of us have already introduced, we are in the state of transition. Be that a transition from one school to another; a new job; or the prevailing winds of postchristendom as it impacts upon our schools, students, colleges and pedagogy - the world is changing. One missional and evangelistic response to this from British Christianity has been to rediscover the power of *missio dei* theology - an approach which recognises and celebrates that God is at work in our towns and cities through the movement of the Holy Spirit, nudging people and captivating people into the Kingdom. Influenced by the rationale of Vincent Donovan, the UK is now treated as a mission field (from both within and without the church), and church growth movement is beginning to take seriously an incarnational approach to its praxis and language. This paper: Introduces Fresh Expressions, recognising that it is a pretty new missionary organisation on the metaphorical block.

Seeks to note its success and significance in the UK and wider afield
Substantively Offers a critique of leadership within Fresh Expressions, not to undermine the methodology, but to offer warnings and insights for others who are inspired by the helpful evangelistic and missional rationale and its impact for church in a cultural transition of its own.

Fresh Expressions remains a highly influential organization within the Methodist Church. The 2011 statistics suggested that there were in the region of 3000 Fresh Expressions meeting at least fortnightly, reaching 30000 unchurched people, and mainly being served by volunteer leaders. An alternative reading is that 51% of Methodist circuits were engaging with Fresh Expressions in some way. Recent work at the Church Army suggests that the Church of England picture is comparatively similar (although their geographic and membership pool is far higher, and thus the figures less significant.)

It is fair to say that Fresh Expressions are changing the landscape of mission and worship in all sorts of ways. There are thousands of individual and community stories of high impact. One participant in a Messy Church said "i love messy church. it is the only hot meal my child eats all week." another member of a community openly and enthusiastically shares how he has kicked booze and drugs because he has found freedom and hope in Christ. one leader describes how he has found more theology sat in the gutter wiht homeless people trying to make sense of the mess all around them, than he ever did in theological college. fresh expressions have given the BMC to remember afresh her calling to be a discipleship movement shaped for mission, and to look outside of herself and her walls in order to see Christ at work. through the work of those involved in these fresh expression plants of church, polity is changing (eg sacraments), liturgies are being recreated (eg baptism), and congregations and communities are discovering a renewed passion and vigour to share faith in innovative, creative and occasionally completely wacky, ways.

I am a practitioner, a proponent and teacher within this movement.

However, I am also a provocateur and offer critique to my friends, colleagues and employees. Fresh Expressions are starting to change the map of Protestant Christianity - but from a Methodist perspective, I remain unconvinced that they are actually doing anything new – and perhaps they are a reminder to the Methodist Church to remember who we are, rather than to sell a new product or programme. The world does not need another programme. The world needs Jesus. The danger with FX is that many leaders and communities serve a community faithfully, incarnationally, servant heartedly and expensively - but forget to share the very Gospel which has called them into the risky missional lands to which they find themselves.

There is a dissonance between the missional method (spend time in a community, listen long and listen hard, serve people, listen, build team, get involved with the Holy Spirit) and the drive to be more relevant or contextually engaged in worship. However, a few chairs arranged in a circle and a breaking from the popular 'five hymn sandwich with children's address (just in case)' does not a fresh expression make. It is a good thing to do, and shows an intentionality to welcome the stranger, but it is still an inward 'come to church' perspective, rather than an outward missional model instigated by fresh expressions. The stats only give part of the picture, as people say they are doing fx when they aren't and vice versa, and there is an ever increasing need for good qualitative research into the narratives behind these numbers.

A fresh expression of church is a community intentionally formed to reach unchurched people with the good news of Jesus Christ, and with the potential to be a mature expression of Church. As with the ongoing missional challenges from the emerging and emergent church in the global north, it is very easy to get sidetracked down some very interesting and yet spectacularly unrewarding linguistic cul-de-sacs even with this definition. There are still a huge number of questions to be discovered and wrestled with by the Methodist Church and by Fresh Expressions – after all, it is fair to say that most fresh expressions just carry on and try and ignore any of the heavyweight infighting that ensues. When does it become a mature expression? How does the governance of the church enable that to happen? What about membership? And money? What about all those people who are not unchurched? What about other missional church planting behemoths who seem to have far more numerical and pneumatological success?

But all this sidelines the fact that there is something happening in the church in the UK, and it is having a seismic impact on the life, mission and witness of the whole people of God.

[Hear the stories of people's transformed lives – Discipleship DVD clip]

<http://m.youtube.com/watch?v=2M-sQq5lmvo>

In 2004, a best seller was published. The world looked on, as interest and intrigue grew around the imaginings of Dan Brown in the DaVinci Code.

This was not the only story to grab the best seller charts.

The Church of England had its own bestseller. As the decade of Evangelism ended with talk of great decline in the church, a commission was set up in order to investigate what was actually happening on the ground. Mission Shaped Church. It was the report of a working party - a collaboration of sorts, between the Church of England and the Methodist Church, and attempted to outline the reasons why there was a growing disconnection between the worship offered in church on a weekly basis, and the way of life experienced on the high street every day. The report took a broad approach to exploring issues of postmodernity, postchristendom and even what was then the more popularist version of emerging church. It challenged the Church of England to face this challenge head on and begin to reimagine itself, offering what it coined 'a fresh expression' of church for the twenty-first Century – a mixed economy, where base ecclesial communities could live in missional and ecclesial harmony with café church, a local church plant, and a jazz worship.

'One of the central features of this report is the recognition that the changing nature of our missionary context requires a new inculturation of the gospel within our society. The theology and practice of inculturation or contextualization is well established in the world Church, but has received little attention for mission in the West....Church has to be planted, not cloned.'

The chair of the commission behind the report was a Bishop, Rowan Williams. His promotion to Archbishop of Canterbury, and the strategic riches of the Lambeth Partners, combined to the creation of 'Archbishops Missioner for Fresh Expressions.' The Methodist Church joined in this venture as equal partners, and thus the organization and the missional methodology was born.

Over the last decade, there have been a significant number of changes and challenges within both Fresh Expressions and the ecumenical partnership between the Church of England and the Methodist Church. In Methodist terms, this has included the development of a £7million, 15 year experiment into pioneering (VentureFX), the appointment of a seconded member of staff to Fresh Expressions for advocacy, and a further Methodist appointment to the role of training producer (sic). It has seen law and polity create permissions for Fresh Expressions to apply for authorization of missioners and leaders of fx to apply for permission to preside at communion for reasons of missional deprivation. Similar polity and liturgical work is being undertaken in terms of baptism and membership. The prioritization of mission as a criteria for grant funding at local level, and unpredictably, a statistically substantial increase in the number of people candidating (and being accepted for) diaconal ministry.

This is before the stories of the Fresh Expressions of church themselves are collected and retold.

In the course of my research, I spent 3 weeks in 3 locations. All names have been changed to protect the identity of the communities and their leaders.

The parameters of my research were to investigate leaders and leadership within Fresh Expressions to explore what, if anything, was different in Methodist fresh expressions – and how this related to and challenged the inherited Methodist church. Alongside the ethnographic study carried out, I also conducted semi-structured interviews with senior Methodists, members of the communities, and the leaders themselves. The study was limited to presbyteral ministry – although there is a substantial and significant piece of work required in terms of the diaconal order.

Perhaps as we might all identify, 'It is important for us to recognize the brute fact that not all existing ordained ministers are necessarily leaders.'

Introducing the communities

My research is based on 3 communities, but there are other examples in the appendix which also provide a Methodist 'flavour' to the development of Fresh Expressions.

'Connections', an Arts cafe in the centre of a busy metropolitan city in the north west of England. Analysis is offered primarily on the nature of oversight in an ecumenical environment. I explore the symbiotic celebrations and tensions that arise when two fresh expression communities share the same physical space. The study of Connections provokes questions about the nature and purpose of Christian community within a business and consumer setting; the challenges of transition for community, and the role of women as members of a leadership team but never named as leaders in their own right.

'Watch This Space' (WTS). This is a cell church based fresh expression in an urban priority area of the north east of England. The demographic of the location provides crucial insights into the challenges of fx of church when they develop in a context with low literacy and high social needs. EG Fajita's. It raises key questions about how mistakes can still be made when engaging in contextual ministry. WTS is also interesting because it is led by an ordained woman, who reflects a great deal about the challenges of being both a fx leader and a circuit minister. This framed further analysis on the tensions within circuits and districts between leaders and between churches. Given the deliberate cell structure, WTS also offers an example of what ongoing discipleship looks like for people who have no previous experience of church. One of the crucial observations within this community was the level of

gatekeeping done by the leader 'people are invited to join a cell group...if people have a comment but are not in our target demographic we just ignore them.'

'**Safe-Haven**', a community for young professionals in a large cosmopolitan city in the south east of England. Safe-Haven is something of a deviant case, as it is led by a lay employee, albeit ordained pastor in Vineyard, rather than an ordained presbyter in the Methodist Church. The leader here raises the most significant questions about the pastoral care of leaders within communities and the risk factors involved in employing people who are themselves vulnerable. Safe-Haven offers an example of a value-driven community of people striving to make an impact in the social and political environment in which its members live and work. It also offers insight into a community of people who are encouraged to recognise 'brokenness' as a feature of their lives and the local community. The community therefore integrates more concerted theological ideas into their sense of collective identity.

Each community consisted of a wide network and sphere of influence but a smaller contained ecclesial community – often between 20-40 people in size. [In UK terms this is the size of a number of our Methodist chapels.]

My thesis is provocatively and ambiguously entitled 'challenging leadership' because it presents evidence for the multifaceted challenges that mission-shaped leadership brings to the Methodist Church, and offers conclusions for transformed practice.

In the study, I offer twelve proposals for transformed practices in light of the collected evidence and analysis. By offering a critical reflection, I am aware that I offer a potentially negative portrayal of, and engagement with, the communities and Fresh Expressions. This is not my intent – although I recognise the outcome. Interesting research often comes in the midst of tension and crisis, and thus many of the issues and questions raised are perpetuated by the reformative and defensive reaction of leaders trying to follow their kingdom vocation but being thwarted by poor psychology or by the perceived (or real) politics and structure of the Methodist Church – and more so the unwieldy monolith of the Church of England.

Leadership in Methodism in the UK.

Methodism is inherently pragmatic, meaning that there is very little intentional theology regarding the practice of ministry. Ironically, this is a criticism levelled at both the thesis and at Fresh Expressions.

'It has to be said with ordination, as with much in Methodism, we do not have a considered theology which we then put into practice, rather we

find theological reasons for what we are already doing because what we are doing works well.¹

There is a tension, therefore, in an order of ministry designed for the good order of an already existing ecclesial community (often of generations of people within the same family group and networks); and a group of people who are exercising a missional ministry which has the intent and imperative to create and nurture what may in the end look very different to the current order.

Within an fx context, church order cannot be the primary motivation for leadership, nor can it be the source of key character indicators and functions, not least because many fx leaders are dissenters, provocateurs, prophets, poets, entrepreneurs and creatives - the very people who, like Wesley, challenged the status quo.

The contemporary Methodist (and indeed Anglican) Churches are not the first to ask these questions of the tensions between mission, maintenance, management and governance. Mr Wesley himself wrote, 'soul-damning Clergymen lay me under more difficulties than soul-saving laymen!'²

[Ordination of Coke and Asbury...we've done it before!]

There is a subversive streak within Methodism, noted already in the term 'inherent pragmatism', which enables sufficient flexibility within Church structures to allow a response to the missiological and contextual needs of a locality and of the Connexion. The desire for 'missionary effectiveness' over and against rules and regulations, is the genius, and the curse, of Methodism. It is the increasing flexibility of constitutional discipline, the desire to enable people to make decisions based on a precept of 'holy risk' and the expectation that Conference rightly functions as a place of conferring - which perhaps enables FX to have such an influence within Methodism. There is a sense in which the 'divine discontentedness'³ of many Methodists (exhibited again throughout the interviews with community members) and the willingness of some leaders to take such holy risks, finds a home in a denomination which at its very beginning put mission ahead of order.

¹ Methodist Church, *Statement on Ordination*, 110:8

² Wesley, John, 'A Letter to Rev. Thomas Adams' in Wesley, John, *The Works of John Wesley* (Grand Rapids: MI, 3rd ed., Vol. 13, 2007), 209

³ Atkins, Martyn, 'A Discipleship Movement Shaped for Mission' Podcast – September 2011
www.methodist.org.uk/static/dsign

I recommend that the cost of leadership be taken seriously; in terms of the financial burden of mission and evangelism to the institutional church; the psychological wellbeing of leaders; and the ongoing cost of leadership to the families of pioneers.

FX are expensive. The cost of leadership in fx is multifaceted. There is the cost to the Methodist Church to be in partnership with the Initiative. The current budget is set at £140k per year.

There is the relational cost of being a weaker partner in the partnership. British Methodism to feel as though they are a mere footnote to Church of England power, politics and practice. The lack of Methodist examples in literature and debate exemplifies this. Davison and Milbank's demonstrates that this is more than mere perception,

'it is already to yield a great deal of ground to think of the Church of England as simply one denomination among many in this country. Historically, this is not how we have seen ourselves, nor does it reflect our legal position.'⁴

There is the psychological cost to leaders who feel torn between two masters. Leaders talked about feeling guilty about doing the 'fun stuff' of ministry at the expense of 'proper leadership.

Furthermore, there is the loss of capable leaders to the stationing system who are now put into single stationed appointments of small communities, further burdening their circuit colleagues with multiple congregations and pastoral oversight.

FX are also costly to family stability, as leaders reach breaking point in their own wellbeing. The thesis remains embargoed due to the evidence for this.

Finally, fx communities are financially costly, especially using success criteria of expenditure over numerical Membership growth to the Methodist Church. FX groups tend to be communities of 20-30 people – nowhere near the 200-300 that attend HTB plants across London and the Home Counties.

I argue that it is impossible for ordained leaders to engage in fx work and inherited church at the same time.

The provocative postmodern philosopher Pete Rollins argues that pioneering and missional work in the context of twenty-first century Britain needs to be done outside of the institutions,

⁴ Davison, Milbank, *For the Parish*, 3

‘more radical expressions...need to resist being drawn into the ‘inherited church’ so as to magnify rather than minimise the reality that many of these collectives do not merely have an important message for those outside the institutional church but also a message for the church itself.’⁵

Rollins’ contestation is that in order to change the status quo, leaders need to act outside of the institution rather than being bank-rolled by it. The experience of many leaders within FX, however, is that change is happening through the missional endeavours of missional leaders in the ‘mixed economy’ of the Church. These leaders need to be outside of a circuit system in order to be subversive within, and provocative to, the institution. The Methodist Church, if it takes seriously its history and heritage, will always be a place of protest, of social transformation and of mission. The risk of a mixed model of leadership, whereby presbyters are appointed to both mission and maintenance leadership in a mixed economy, is that both communities and leaders become confused about what they are called to do and be. This in turn fosters a lack of confidence in the local congregation about both the value of the denomination and the cultivation and sharing of a community and individual narrative. Ultimately, the risked consequence of this is a lack of confidence, or disappointment, in God.

The collected evidence indicates that fx projects are being used by leaders as an escape from these inherited models of church, and that they are often last resorts’ for leaders who would otherwise leave the denomination.

Fx and pioneer mission is an alternative to inherited church leadership. It is an escape for leaders. It is an escape from a ‘palliative care’ model of church oversight,⁶ and it is an escape into an adventure of unplanned and unexplored missionary opportunities. It is an escape from a Christendom model of church life into an emerging post-Christendom evolution of missional discipleship. However, by expressing frustration, presbyters in missional appointments can be, rightly or wrongly, seen to be acting recklessly or childishly, especially in their reaction against authority and management structures. They are often spoken about as needing to ‘grow up.’ Consequently, there are those within the institution who feel betrayed and let down by leaders like Jake, Andrew and Emma. The language, exemplified by Emma as she talked about ‘leading people the way Jesus would lead’ is heard as a judgement about the passion and style of those who do not share the same worldview or experience. For others they fear being maligned or let down by leaders who fail to care for those who are already within the Methodist fold

⁵ Rollins, ‘Biting the Hand that Feeds’ in Nelstrop and Percy, *Evaluating*, 77

⁶ Cox, ‘Emerging Expressions’, 130

The use of Central Halls as a location for mission indicates that there is the need to rediscover a missiology of central halls applicable for the twenty-first century.

Central Halls were the precursors to the contemporary debate about third spaces. This theory, first purported by Oldenburg,⁷ suggests that the first space is that of one's home and family, the second place is one's workplace, where one spends most of their time. The third place is the place of leisure, the place where community is formed and where friendships are developed. On this basis, Central Halls were attempting to develop third places at the turn of the last century. FX are using the third place theory to help people think contextually about where the Holy Spirit may already be at work in people's lives.

Central Halls, therefore, have the renewed potential to enable focussed and specifically contextual ministry and missional appointments for teams of Presbyters, Deacons and lay people. This need not be about buildings per se. The rediscovery of a theology and ecclesial practice of Central Halls enables flexibility within Methodist structures, as Central Halls have their own standing orders and legal status. There is also the intentionality that the context is the primary focus of mission and ministry, not necessarily the original inherited congregants. For the leaders in this research, the local context of the community is of greater significance than the resources and provision of a church building. Leaders of fx of church see the context of their work in geographic and demographic terms rather than congregational terms. For some fx, the church building will still be a primary location for mission. However, there are a growing number of communities that are locally engaged and thus using facilities outside of the church premises, thereby employing the missiological practice exemplified through Central Halls, but this time outside of a Church building. I am arguing, therefore, that alongside the hospitality and evangelistic intent of Central Halls, such theological foundations may also enable effective mission in other environments within a locality.

Leaders of fx need to develop teams of people around them, in order to share the workload and to mitigate against the risk of abuse by leaders.

Despite all the leaders researched having leadership teams in place, these teams acted more as a support group rather than as a missional team unit. For the future health of communities and their leaders, therefore, it will be increasingly important to develop teams of people who not only tell the story of the community, but who are able to shape it beyond the legacy of any one individual. Additional training and funding will be required for this at a local and national level, in order to support the continuing development of leadership teams and to build on the networks of support that are at present serendipitously achieved.

⁷ Oldenburg, Ray, *The Great Good Place* (New York, NY: Paragon, 1989)

Furthermore, a succession plan needs to be instigated from the communities at an early stage of development, and that this may not fit with the current systems of stationing and recruitment within the Methodist Church.

There is a lack of qualitative success criteria when it comes to fx (arguably just as there is with the wider church!) One means of measuring success is through succession planning. As one superintendent suggested, succession planning is crucial, otherwise “the Conference might have sent us a prat.”

Communities need to be able to discern the people who can ‘inherit’ the communities, following the departure of a leader. In the Methodist context, ordained leadership is always a time-limited affair. A challenge for leaders is to discern the vocation of lay people, to equip them and to work with them during transition and take-over. Scharen notes that ‘[the community] has ebbed and flowed with the quality and commitment of the ministers assigned to it.’⁸ One Anglican Bishop noted that ‘the success of leadership is measured in the ability to notice those who have a vocation to leadership and service.’

Leadership needs to be seen as a long-term investment by the church, and that one success criterion for fx is the ongoing personal development of leaders well into this century. In order to achieve this, leaders should be expected to have the support of coaching, therapy, spiritual direction and mentoring in order to sustain their leadership.

in order to sustain and develop leaders primarily as Christian disciples in their own right, leaders need the support and empowerment of specialists outside of their network, peer group and theological persuasion.

When Jake talked about Safe-Haven as being a place where people are able to ‘learn the moves’ of Christianity, he was not just talking about the routine choreography of worship.⁹ He was talking about the means and methods of daily discipleship, prayer, scripture, journaling, and worship which were all supported by the books available for the community to borrow in the library. This is similar language to that used by Wright in discussing the significance of virtues in contemporary life.¹⁰ When it comes to the character of the leader, therefore, there is also the need for the leader to be the ‘chief learner’

⁸ Scharen, Christian Batalden, ‘Judicious Narratives or Ethnography and Ecclesiology’, *Scottish Journal of Theology*, 58(2), 2005, 141

⁹ Astley talks about the ‘grammar of faith’ in Astley, *Ordinary*, 25f

¹⁰ Wright, *Virtue Reborn*,

within the community, the person who is able to lead but with the humility to be learning alongside the community rather than at the front as some sort of spiritual superior.

Ryan Bell furthers this need of support structures, as he notes, in another denominational context, the importance of peer networks and teams,

'What we don't need is a denomination-wide strategy to make everyone...missional. But we do need to cultivate an environment among a network of pastors in an area that can help form and nurture the practices of discerning God's future with...congregations.'¹¹

The Methodist Church should take seriously the encouraging statistics of the influence of FX over the course of the past five years, and be confident in taking more risks, and develop a learning environment which appropriately reflects upon failure.

Atkins' rally call to Methodist people is that,

'Risk taking obedience is required today...risk taking inevitably heightens the possibility of failure, but it also increases the chance of achievement.'¹²

Methodist circuits are taking these risks, albeit within the bounds of successful models. As Atkins' notes, however, with the chances of achievement also comes the risk of failure. Adair notes, 'organisations that fear

failure...establish all sorts of controls to ensure that [they] do not happen.'¹³

This thesis demonstrates that there is a willingness in the senior leadership of the Methodist Church to enable creativity and innovation in contextual mission, but that there is caution and constraint throughout the Connexional structures, Conference, circuits and through grant making processes. If these risks are to continue to have an impact upon the renewal of the whole church, they require continued long-term investment in terms of leadership development and guaranteed continued financial support.

Leaders need to be given the support to be able to take risks and to be able to learn from failures.

The mission-shaped agenda provides the ecclesial space for these risks to be calculated, taken, and theologically reflected upon.

¹¹ Bell, Ryan, 'From the Margins: Engaging Missional Life in the Seventh-day Adventist Church', Fuller Theological Seminary, Fall 2008, http://documents.fuller.edu/news/pubs/tnn/2008_Fall/3_from_the_margins.asp (24th October 2008)

¹² Atkins, *Renewal*, 251

¹³ Adair, John, *Leadership for Innovation: How to Organise Team Creativity and Harvest Ideas* (London: Kogan Page, 2007), 130

‘The church can risk being creative in its faithfulness because we trust that in God’s providence even our failures will be gathered up and made to contribute to the final act of the drama.’¹⁴

Theologically, the wider Church needs to take seriously the narrative theological approach that is inherently taken by these communities.

Although the suggestion of theological illiteracy is placed at the door of FX, not least of all in the continuing mission-shaped conversation, it is important to note that this is not a new critique. Marsh notes that

‘As a ‘doing’ movement, Methodism is prone to leave the theology by which it operates too easily unexamined because it leaves it contained within the actions or words which lie behind [it.]’¹⁵

This assumption comes because the traditional language of theology is not employed within the communities.

In the case of Methodism, and in the case of the examples researched here, the ‘doing’ of theology: the daily living, values driven, small Christian unit discipleship promoted and protected by the leaders, can be easily missed. In the interviews with leaders, it was clear that there was a great deal of reflection happening, both theological and sociologically. However, this was not always communicated to the wider community, nor to the Circuit. The suggestion that Methodism is a pragmatic movement helps to tease out the subtly here. Not only is it a pragmatic movement, but it is a movement which subconsciously, or privately, reflects upon practice using the tools of reason, scripture, tradition and experience, and puts into action a transformed practice. Fx communities, on the evidence of this research, are employing the same method, but without describing it. Thus actions can appear to be unconsidered or theologically weak, when in fact they have been considered in depth by the leader, often through the filter of how the community may respond.

As one member of Connections notes,

‘The results of the ... charismatic people, may be beautiful but they may be bad theologians, and you need also the reflective people who can see what’s happening with the sparking of ideas and be able to interpret that to say OK what’s the theology behind this.’

¹⁴ Bader-Sayer, Scott, ‘Improvisation’, 21

¹⁵ Marsh, *Unmasking*, 98

Narrative or ordinary theology empowers a community to own and tell its story and its God story in an authentic way. Chung notes that the inherent patriarchal ism of reflective practice:

'raises the question not only of the way in which one dominant (colonial) culture can silence another (indigenous) expression; but also how issues of power and difference within a culture can be adequately considered and addressed.'¹⁶

Chung's sense that 'theology is a language of hope, dreams and poetry...firmly based on concrete, historical reality but points to the mystery and vision'¹⁷ speaks in a language spoken by fx practitioners and commentators.

Furthermore, I also challenge those in fresh expressions to be explicit with the gospel. The risk with developing community projects is that they are exceptional pieces of work, but that Jesus is never proclaimed. Community projects and social action are good things in themselves - but a fresh expression explicitly needs to not only incarnate, but also articulate, the gospel in ways that connect with the community. The danger with a lack of theological dexterity and reflective practice is that the gospel is neglected for fear of offence or failure - the end result being an empty promise and an unfulfilled mission.

Leaders should become more confident and aware of their Methodist heritage, and the wider Church should expect to see and be challenged by the Methodist ecclesiology being practiced and developed by these communities.

The relegation of denominational DNA to something that is secondary to the debate could be seen as a manoeuvre made from a position of organisational power. Denominational DNA after all does not matter if the presumed model is that which is already known, cherished and held in esteem. FX has an Anglican default setting which transfers into all parts of the organisation, often without critique or comment.¹⁸ It may well be that once again, one of Methodism's inheritances is the ability to question assumed authority structures and thus giving the opportunity for other denominations and parachurch partners and associates to begin to share their codes of DNA into the theological reflection too. Although not meant to be complimentary, it is no bad thing surely that, 'our [Anglican] doctrine of the Church has leapt, not

¹⁶ Graham et al., *Methods*, 220

¹⁷ Chung, Hyun Kyung, *Struggle to the Sun Again* (London: Orbis, 1990), 101

¹⁸ It is interesting that the most significant critical commentaries are representing an Anglican view of theology and ecclesiology which ignores any other partner or voice in the conversation, see Davison and Milbank, *For the Parish* and critical voices in Nelstrom and Percy (eds.) *Evaluating*. Perhaps one method of critical engagement is by refining the role of partnership and joint theological learning.

drifted, in the direction of Free Church Protestantism.¹⁹ The DNA metaphor is useful as it also provokes the potential for shared genes and identity markers, and for offspring to evolve who resemble their parents but who have a unique identity all of their own.

In light of a further 3 years of Fresh Expressions work in localities, I would further add to these conclusions to:

Suggest that Methodism takes its DNA and Wesleyan missional method more seriously. Methodism has a great deal to offer to Fresh Expressions, and is often treated as a second-class voice in proceedings. As Fresh Expressions becomes a majority Free Church organisation (as it now includes Church of Scotland, Salvation Army, Oasis Trust, Baptist Union and United Reform Church), Methodist theology and practice has a great deal to bring to the table.

Fresh Expressions is being driven by publications rather than mission. The links between publishing contracts to 'success' models needs to be challenged, especially as they are often under-representative of the actual picture of fresh expressions communities.

Methodism has always been a pragmatic movement, but there is a disconnection between practice and theological reflection which is currently being filled by a focus on ecclesiology and polity, and neglecting some of the potentially more significant theological work being done within the communities and by groups of leaders in their learning days together.

Leadership is not limited to those within the communities. There is an increasing gap between those in superintendent leadership and those exercising fresh expressions leadership. This brings with it a great deal of conflict and imminent potential for schism. Furthermore, in conditions of conflict, creativity is stifled, and thus the communities themselves suffer. Those in power have a tendency to find Fresh Expressions a threat – in part due to its profile and priority for the Church, and thus try to undermine leadership and practice.

Fresh Expressions may not be the only prescription for the cultural condition of a postmodern culture. It is not the silver bullet, and should not behave like it is – nor be treated as though it is.

If Fresh Expressions are defined by their values, then these values need to be inhabited by leaders of all areas of the institution. The desire of values at the heart of community should speak to the whole Church

¹⁹ Davison and Milbank, *For the Parish*, 41

about its values and how these transform practice. There is a great deal to learn from Pope Francis in this regard.

In order to be mission-shaped in the twenty-first century, the Church needs leaders who are both challenging and reciprocally challenged about their identity, behaviour, and purpose. What is asked of one community needs to be asked of the other. Furthermore, the Methodist Church cannot just use Fresh Expressions to Botox over the cracks of a declining institution. It can, however, inhabit a values driven, missionally incarnation, Jesus centred, pneumatologically fuelled and inspired, community transforming vocation to build church fit for purpose in a discipleship movement shaped for mission.

Joanne Cox
13.8.13

Appendix

Examples of Fresh Expressions (taken from www.freshexpressions.org.uk)

RevCoffee

Thursday, 18 July, 2013

Methodist VentureFX Pioneer Minister Simon Oliver, whose ministry comes under the banner of 'RevCoffee', explains how new things are happening in Cottenham through community, creativity, Christianity and cappuccinos.

I am employed by the Cambridge Methodist Circuit to work alongside the Cottenham Community Centre (CCC) and Coffee Shop.

The Centre and Coffee Shop came into existence when, after many years of faithful worship and service, Cottenham Methodist Church closed down in November 2007. The day after its final service a public meeting was held to explore the possibilities of how the building might be used as a community resource.

The CCC was formed, much hard work and fund raising was carried out, and in February 2011 the beautiful Coffee Shop was opened. It is no longer a church, but I am privileged to be a part of the Community Centre team. I was appointed as part of the VentureFX scheme to work alongside the CCC with young adults and families

in Cottenham, a vibrant village of about 7,000 people just outside Cambridge.



At the heart of my role lies a conviction that being a welcome, accepting, incarnational Christian presence in the community is key to contemporary ministry. So I spend a great deal of time simply hanging out in the coffee shop, sometimes working behind the counter, sometimes tapping away on my laptop, and often just meeting friends old and new.

Out of these relationships, and my connections with other community groups and churches in the village, I try to find fresh ways of exploring issues of life, meaning and faith. People are interested in looking at such issues but often feel alienated, disconnected or simply uninterested in traditional Church, or are just too busy with the chaos and demands of life to find the time and space in their schedules.

We now have quite a few initiatives and projects going on in and around the Community Centre and Coffee Shop; my wife and toddler are very involved in many of these groups. My approach is to be as collaborative as possible, so everything has been set up as a result of prayerfully listening to what people might be interested in, and in partnership with others (sometimes Christians, sometimes those who don't usually have anything to do with traditional church). These initiatives include:

- Arts Night: A small group of young-ish poets, musicians, storytellers, comedians, singers, photographers and artists get together on the

second Sunday of the month. It is a mostly musical group and we have also had some great poetry from Larkin, Yeats and our own members, short stories and photography. Each month has a theme (eg war and peace, parenthood, love, death, resurrection) and we share original and borrowed material and attempt collaborate in creating new works, as well as putting on quality performances. And we always have some really interesting conversations exploring issues of life and faith from a variety of perspectives.

- Film Club: A fun, new group where people of all beliefs and none come together to watch a movie, eat popcorn and then explore the existential and spiritual issues that come out of it.
- Dad's Play: We have a large (70-plus on the books) group of dads and male carers/guardians of under-5s who meet informally in the back hall of the Cottenham Community Centre Coffee Shop. The kids get the chance to play together while the men get a chance to eat bacon sandwiches and drink good coffee. We also have regular curry nights - although the children aren't invited to this!



- Marriage and Parenting Courses. We have run a number of these courses in the Coffee Shop.

- Daily Prayer: This takes place from 8:30 – 8:45 am,

Sunday to Friday at the Coffee Shop. It is often just a couple of adults and my two-year-old, but others often pop in, have a natter and occasionally join us or ask for prayer.

- Football Plus+: A group young and not-so-young men play football on the first and third Sundays of the month, and a small group of us are exploring the possibility of using of the fourth Sunday to talk football, life and faith over a couple of beers (or lemonades).
- the Roost: this is new all-age event which we have been experimenting with over the last few months on Sunday afternoons and which officially 'launches' in September. It is a relaxed group which includes arts, craft, conversation, messy play, videos, the Sunday papers, music, poetry, coffee, flapjack and more to give people the opportunity to have fun together, create community and to explore different issues from a Christian perspective.

All of our activities aim to be open and accessible to all, and to give people the opportunity to develop meaningful community and consider the possibility of faith. All beliefs and viewpoints are valued, and seen as equal conversation partners as we try to make sense of life together. Everything is done in very low key and simple ways and – as I have already said – relationships take precedence over activities.

My ultimate hope is that through one or more of our initiatives people are given the opportunity to have a meaningful encounter with Jesus Christ and to explore what that might mean for them.

I take the Methodist and Fresh Expressions commitment to ecumenism very seriously, and have found it very encouraging to work alongside the Baptist Church, The Salvation Army, All Saints Parish Church and Christians Together in Cottenham as we seek to develop our ministries in collaboration.

It is not always easy, but it is a wonderful role and a rewarding project, and I feel very grateful to God and to the Methodist Church for allowing me to be a part of it!

New Song Network - Mar13

Date

2013-03-11

Jackie Bellfield is minister of Bold St Methodist Mission, Latchford Methodist Church and Rixton Methodist Church, Warrington. She also leads New Song Network, which is becoming a fresh expression of church.

It all started four years ago with New Song Café at Bold St Methodist Mission; the New Song Network is a growing Christian community which has developed from that.

New Song Café was, and still is, a gathering of people that meet at 7pm on the fourth Sunday of the month at Bold St Church. Our initial intention four years ago was to start off in the church venue but eventually move New Song Café gatherings into a local Costa coffee shop to worship there.

I thought maybe 20 people would come to the first New Song Cafe. In fact, 65 people turned up so we quickly had to move from the church coffee shop into the upstairs hall at Bold St. We're still there. We haven't quite made it into Costa because 130 people are now meeting at New Song Café for worship, prayer and praise. Initially, our thoughts were that 7pm on a Sunday night was not the best time to arrange anything like this and we were 'warned' that no-one would come to church at that time on a Sunday night – but we discovered that it was a very good time for a lot of people. It's true to say that it has outgrown our expectations and become an amazing time of gathering together.



In fact the whole idea of New Song has grown more than we could possibly have imagined as New Song Network has developed. The initial impetus was to have a sense of being together and of fellowship and of doing something new that may attract those no longer being reached by our churches. Inherited church continued to be very important to us but we also felt that God wanted to do something different, something that sat alongside inherited or traditional

church – not to replace it but to sit alongside it. At that stage we thought that would simply involve going into Costa as a new way of presenting worship but a much bigger picture emerged.

Among those who came to New Song Café were those who had drifted away from church for a variety of reasons; New Song has become a stepping stone or a safe environment for them to dip their toe back in the water of church. It also became



clear that people wanted something to build on what they were discovering at New Song Café. That's why we then started Discipleship evening, a separate teaching session, also monthly.

Then, just over fifteen months ago, we started New Song Breakfast - involving a lot of bacon butties - at 9 o'clock on a Sunday morning at Latchford Methodist Church. Attracting some of the same people different people also started coming to that and suddenly this Network of Café, Discipleship and Breakfast started to develop.

And then under the umbrella of our calling, the four strands of priorities within the Methodist Church - worship, learning and caring, service, evangelism - we felt that we wanted to look at other areas too so under 'services we began to explore how we could reach out to our

community. We launched the Community Action Team and people started saying, 'Yes we want to be part of that too'.

What had started out in New Song Café as a place to worship in a different sort of way was developing into an ecclesial community as New Song Network. We realised that a fresh expression of church was beginning to form before our very eyes and God was doing something far greater than we possibly ever dared dream or imagine.

Some people go to Breakfast and Café, some just go to Breakfast and help with our Community Action Team; others get involved in the various aspects of the Network. It is so exciting to see this community being born and this church being developed.

We are now encouraging people to step up and take responsibility for elements of the Network as part of the leadership. I already work with the most amazing team; they are kind, considerate, generous and they love being involved. People are passionate about what we're doing with New Song and they are passionate about worship, learning and caring, service and evangelism so we are urging more of them to take risks in the power of faith. There's also a lot of fun involved because - in addition to the worship and the service - we have walking groups, quizzes, curry nights and lots of other things. There are many different ways to share the Good News of Jesus!

The relationship between New Song Network and the established churches is really strong and very, very important. New Song Café wouldn't exist without Bold St Church; the congregation supports the Café and the Café supports the church. After the morning service, people from the church go and set the hall up ready for



Café and that means such a lot. It's a great relationship and they turn up en masse to support the Café in the evening too.

The same is true of New Song Breakfast; that has gone ahead because Latchford Methodist Church welcomed and embraced it. As part of what has happened there, families have now come into the church at Latchford so we see the growth there of inherited church and a new way of being church.

This is not about the inherited and the new being poles apart, this is how the two can work in tandem and, for me, as minister of both there is something beautiful and harmonious about that – how two can grow and learn together.

One of the most moving and far-reaching ways of serving our community takes place on Christmas Eve, Christmas Day and Mothering

Sunday when we go to the local crematorium and cemetery to give out hot drinks to people leaving floral tributes in memory of loved ones. On Christmas Eve and Christmas Day 2012, 35 volunteers gave out more than 700 hot drinks in what was an amazing and beautiful time. I'd previously heard of a small church that did this act of kindness to those visiting their local graveyard and we decided to pick up on that idea because I thought we, as Christians, shouldn't just be in our churches on those special and vulnerable days of the year, we should be out there with those who grieve. I asked the local council for permission, they agreed, and we're now in our fourth year of offering hot drinks and a listening ear.

We draw alongside people and hear their stories - whether it's their first year of being there or their 40th year of being there - hearing about who it is they've come to visit, showing that the church is not immune from their grief but stands with them. It's a way of saying, 'we're here' but actually more importantly, 'God is here, is alongside'.

So many things have come out of these times. It has made quite an impact on the volunteers who come and it has also started so many relationships and conversations. There have even been occasions when a bereaved family has rung a funeral director and said, 'There's a lady with purple hair, a minister, who gives out hot drinks at the cemetery; could she possibly do my loved one's funeral?' That only happened because they had seen us handing out those drinks where they were, that then became a link to church they hadn't had before.

In this, and many other ways, we have seen God in action as we join in with him in sharing alongside people in our inherited church settings and through New Song Network.

So what next? We are developing our weekly Advent and Lent study evenings (which have met in a local coffee shop) into house groups to further develop discipleship and learning together. Then there is a desire for Pub Church, a weekend away and other ideas as to how we develop this amazing community. It is so exciting – and we are thankful to our God.



Knit and Natter - update Jul12

Date

2012-07-23

Chris Crowder explains how Knit and Natter in Ellesmere Port, Cheshire, has become much more than a group for people who enjoy knitting.

We are now coming to the end of our fourth year and it seems hard to imagine that at the beginning we were nervous of introducing a spiritual element into our meetings. We talked of asking people if they'd like to come into Church after the group had finished for a short devotional time, we didn't know how to introduce topics of spirituality and so on but - from the first meeting - it was obvious the members would welcome prayers said within group for the people they loved and the spirituality has grown naturally and is now inherent in every meeting.

Knit and Natter is Church - God's people all gathered together in one place doing God's work: caring for others by producing warm clothes for the needy, whether they be the homeless person on the streets of Liverpool or an abandoned child in Swaziland or a patient in the leprosy hospital in Nepal, and caring for each other as we get to know one another better through conversation.

Our meetings are relaxed and friendly – there is no formality. Our liturgy follows a similar pattern every week: knitting (some!) conversation (lots), tea and cake, perhaps some more knitting and lots more conversation, and then prayers for those we know are in need (a list is passed around during group) and finally the Lord's Prayer.

Members (there is now an average of 35 attending every week) come from all denominations and backgrounds; most of our group are over 60, but occasionally young mums call in with their children and feel at home in the warm family atmosphere that is generated. Members feel wanted, useful and loved and those that are depressed, or lonely, or bereaved can share their problems in a loving, caring environment.

This year we have sent off many kilograms of jumpers hats and mitts across the world, we have made piles of baby clothes for local hospitals and knee blankets and shawls for hospices. A member of our group accompanied Anna Briggs of Liverpool to Norway with the shawls she had collected from all over England to give to those affected by the Utoya massacre in July 2011.

We have also knitted hats, mitts and jumpers for all 29 children in the Sandra Lee Centre in Swaziland and we hope many people will consider sponsorship of a child there.

In January, for the third year in succession, we had a very successful Knit and Natter service at which the speaker was the Rev Ian Hu from Somewhere Else (the 'bread church' in Liverpool). The retiring collection was given to Ian towards his work and also, during the service, a scarf was completed by the congregation

which was given by Ian to one of his members - along with a hat and gloves.



In May, we had a stall at a Diamond Jubilee Street Party and decided to

use this opportunity not just to promote Knit and Natter, but also to raise monies for postage by selling vintage knitted items, such as covered coat hangers, hot water bottle covers, tea cosies etc as well as toys and bric-a-brac. We also had a pile of Jubilee Edition New Testaments marked 'free of charge' to anyone who wanted one. An hour before the end of the Street Party everything was gone and we had raised nearly £200 towards postage!

Some time ago, one of our founder members mentioned that she had never been baptised: she is now 82. On 26th June we put that right: through Knit and Natter Sibby made her wish known. She found a way into the Church and in the presence of her family, church and Knit and Natter members - in a glorious celebration within the group - she was welcomed into the family of the Church by Deacon Judith Ireland.

We have now finished for the summer break (during which time the members will all be knitting furiously). We are sure the table containing their work will be groaning under the weight of work on the first day back in September. Our last day coincided with the arrival of an Olympic torch which had been carried through Chester by a young lady who used to attend our Sunday School – what a glorious way to finish a magnificent year!



Feltwell Chapel

Thursday, 18 July, 2013

When Matt Finch became co-minister of ten Norfolk Methodist chapels in 2002, he inherited a fortnightly Bible study among the largely elderly congregation of Feltwell Chapel. It was well attended by six members of the church and several others from neighbouring villages.

Matt describes the 15 members of Feltwell as having *a passion to do things differently.*

The Bible studies provided helpful fellowship, but while undertaking a CPAS course on evangelism, 'Lost for Words', Matt became aware of a deep dissatisfaction among the chapel members. The course helped highlight the despondency people felt about the state of their church.

They asked, 'What can we do with this?'

he says.

'We can't do a mission course and not change.' There were lots of mumblings about church not being right.

What needs to change? 'We can't do a mission course and not change'

Matt took a big sheet of paper to a Bible study and brainstormed with the chapel members how they would like church to look in the future. He typed up the results, brought them along to the next meeting and presented the chapel members with a clear picture of their 'desire to be connected'.

They were there every Sunday but never connected,

he says.

They wanted to know who sat in church with one another.

At that time a building project was under discussion. Now it was scaled down - bar essential changes such as disabled access - in favour of instituting a new way of being together on Sunday mornings.



Such was the enthusiasm that the new model of church began the very next Sunday with each member offering to take responsibility for certain elements. They each agreed to play their part in arranging coffee

before the service, to sit around tables and to have an interactive sermon and shared prayer time. To meet all needs, traditional services happen on occasion, still around the café tables.

'They were saying they had always had baptisms and communion but not community. Now they are sharing each others' lives.'

Because I wasn't there every week it was hard, but a real understanding developed,

Matt says.

They were saying they had always had baptisms and communion but not community. Now they are sharing each others' lives. Some of the members pray together regularly, and they are in pastoral circles in which they each take responsibility for one another.

This recognition of a congregation's responsibility to care for one another without reliance on the minister is especially important in a rural setting where clergy are spread over several locations. A key lay worker has also undertaken a commitment to Feltwell to assist when the ministers are unavailable.

Matt describes the chapel as still

a long way from being truly missional,

but since its changes in 2005 several non-churchgoers have become interested. A baptism family was so 'blown away' by how the chapel had changed that the parents now want to marry at Feltwell and even, if possible, have a café style wedding.

Matt puts down Feltwell's growing success in building community to a new freedom on the part of chapel members to question and disagree with the preacher, and to a new involvement with one another.

They weren't happy with what happened on Sundays, but they still wanted to worship on Sunday mornings,

he says.

Feltwell's worship is culturally specific, but the underlying principle is of something that connected with them and helped them to love one another.



God seeks to transform society: The Terminus Café

Date
2008-01-01



A Methodist church on an estate in Sheffield in 2000 went on to the streets with a questionnaire asking their neighbours what mattered to them and what the church could do to help.

The majority of people didn't recognise that the church could play a role and were surprised at the question,

recalls Joy Adams, a Methodist minister on the Low Edges estate.

The church discovered that the most pressing local needs were litter

picking, a drop-in centre for the elderly and youth activities. It also realised that any response would need to come from all the local churches and so formed an ecumenical prayer group.

At the same time, local shopkeepers were keen to lease their premises to the churches for community ventures. Recognising an opportunity, the churches set up The Terminus Café.

From the start we worked in partnership with the different agencies on the estate,

says Joy.

We said right at the start that we are four churches working together to open a safe place and we are motivated by God's love.

When you are open with people, they're open with you, we've found.

'I feel safe when the café is open'

The café is self-financing, includes a charity shop, and opens three days a week to around 60 visitors a day. Its Christian remit is made clear by a monthly service, 'Worship at the Terminus' at 4.30 on a Thursday afternoon. Bible study groups happen in series of four or five at varying times and venues to suit the differing needs of local residents.

When the idea of the service was first mooted, it was greeted with 'shock', Joy says. Low Edges is notorious for anti-social behaviour and drugs.

Café staff open and close the day with prayer which is visible through the window. In 2004, as a result of witnessing this, visitors began to ask for prayer. A prayer board is now situated in a discreet part of the café and one-to-one prayer is available under strict guidelines.

Volunteers now staff the café from across the church and community, and The Terminus Initiative has been created to cover the café, an asylum seekers befriending service and a Credit Union.

Other café initiatives include a Tuesday night youth café where young people can hang out and play computer games.



When assessors for the Duke of York Community Awards visited The Terminus, they asked its neighbours for their opinion. The Sikh shopkeeper, next door but one, replied,

These are the best neighbours I've ever had and I feel safe when the café is open.

Now the elderly of Low Edges have a place to go, the young people have an event just for them, and while litter is still evident, anti-social

behaviour has reduced in the area.

Where it does happen, the local police approach the Terminus for help.



Goth Eucharist, Cambridge

Thursday, 18 July, 2013

The Goth Eucharist featured originally on *expressions: the dvd - 2: changing church in every place*. The Eucharist's Chaplain, Fraser Watts, outlines what's happening today.

St Edward's Church in Cambridge has been offering a Goth Eucharist service in its community since January 2006.



The assistant chaplain at the time, Marcus Ramshaw, had discovered that his friends were fascinated by the supernatural and wanted to create a service for people where they wouldn't be judged by their clothes or attitudes. It was to be a place where 'taboo' subjects such as depression, self harming and grief could be talked about in the same way as the psalmist would approach

them.

Marcus wanted to find a mainstream Christian way to help with the things faced by the Goth community. He knew it would be controversial so wanted to do it in a completely orthodox way. A Eucharist service was offered to a small group of Goths who went to a Goth nightclub once a fortnight. Marcus and I sought new ways of making the life of Church meaningful to people from alternative, and particularly Goth, communities.



The service was candlelit with a specially written liturgy, using a variety of modern rock as well as classical music. The structure of the service revolved around the baptismal candle and reflected a serious engagement with the darker sides of life before moving towards a position of hope and joy found in the empathy of the Lord Jesus Christ.

The past five years saw fluctuating attendances as the number of Goths in the area decreased and fewer people attended the Eucharist. The Goth nightclub also started to operate at a different time but we still recognised the need for a fresh expression of church in the area.

As numbers dropped to an average of 7-8 people, the Eucharist was relaunched in September as part of On the Edge, a new, broader programme of services. We call it 'On the Edge' because it is for people who are on the edge of church and often on the edge of society too, people whose lives are often difficult and edgy. We want

to identify with people on the edge, and using their rather edgy music is one of the key things that make the service feel like their space.



'On the Edge', still brings together contemporary secular music with Christian worship. Goths remain a very important part of the service, but others who don't think of themselves as Goths are also very welcome.

The first 'On the Edge', drew on the life story of the late Amy Winehouse. Associate chaplain Malcolm Guite talked about the tension in her life between creativity and self-destruction. Other issues covered

since September have included despair, dependency, depression and death. Like the Goth Eucharist, 'On the Edge' aims to connect with people who have a strong sense of the darkness of life, and may feel alienated from normal church services as a result.

We are less exclusively Goth than we were. The key thing seems to be intertwining hard-hitting 'secular' music with Christian liturgy and preaching on difficult real world issues. We will also be broadening the musical and cultural range, still including 'Goth' but also going beyond Goth to other musical cultures and artists.



The Wesley Playhouse

Thursday, 18 July, 2013



Who would have thought that a visit to a children's indoor fun centre could inspire church steward Caroline Holt to oversee a dramatic shift in the fortunes of a small West Yorkshire Methodist church?

Caroline made the trip to a commercially-run activity zone with her god-daughter, and wondered why such a venture had never been provided in church buildings? Surely it would bring in countless children – not to mention their waiting parents?

As a member of Howden Clough Methodist Church, Birstall, Caroline was faced with the challenge of a dwindling congregation and a community that appeared to have no need for the traditional church building on their doorstep.

"Seeing all those children in these awful places to play made me really stop and think," says Caroline. "I thought, 'why don't we do something like this at Howden Clough?'"



Her dream has become an amazingly successful reality – thanks to the efforts of a dedicated volunteer team, key sponsors, and a church willing to take what was seen as an enormous risk. "As far as I'm aware, nothing like this has ever been done anywhere else in Britain," says Caroline. "We now have 3,000 sq ft of play area, a café that operates alongside it and a supportive local community who have taken it to their hearts and now use The Wesley

Playhouse as the venues for birthday parties and celebrations. We've even had several Christenings there as a result of people feeling so much part of what has very much become their own fresh expression of church."

Since its launch in 2007, the project has seen over 24,000 people come through its doors. It's a long, long way from the days when the pre-Playhouse Howden Clough Church had just 10 members attending regularly.



Caroline explains, "There was no doubt about it, we were facing closure. We had tried various attempts to get local people into church but nothing seemed to work so in 2000 we decided to leaflet the community and find out what we could do to serve them.

"When I put the idea of the Playhouse to our members they were mainly supportive, though some people obviously did have concerns because it's quite a difficult thing to imagine in a Chapel building that has been around since 1871!

But, God bless them, they backed the idea and it all snowballed from there."



Finance was the first major hurdle. The church needed to find £120,000 to get the scheme off the ground, and they had £3,000 in the bank. But the money came rolling in - thanks to the Methodist Circuit, District and Connexion providing £78,000 in loans; individual supporters; and £50,000 from the Biffaward landfill

community's fund.

Twenty people from different churches across the area came forward to offer their staffing help for the project, and Howden Clough began its transformation into multi-coloured Playhouse and The Ark Café. Work started in February 2007, with the Playhouse opening in October of the same year.

Services take place in a room re-designed as a chapel downstairs every Sunday morning, and a Playhouse Praise is now a regular event on the first Sunday of the month. The young visitors, their families, and older members of the original congregation share the facilities on offer, and Caroline is now working to bring them even closer together.

"It's fantastic to see how many people have struck up friendships and are happy to be part of this community," says Caroline. "People have asked to have their babies christened here and been amazed to discover that we can do this in The Wesley Playhouse. I explain that we may have climbing frames and all sorts of things all over the place but we are a church, and we're here because we love God and we love them."

And the ongoing challenge? Caroline is clear: "At the Playhouse itself, it's to lead people to faith and disciple them; to help them find out why we've done what we've done with this project and encourage them in their own walk with God.

"Personally, I'd love to see The Wesley Playhouse 'brand' go nationwide and be part of making that happen. Maybe other churches in similar situations to us are wondering how they could get something started along the same lines. I want to be the person to help them do that, and with God's help and blessing, I will be."