

“Fresh expressions of church are multiplying at an extraordinary rate. Being Church, Doing Life is full of stories and lessons from this increasingly influential movement. This is a ‘must read’ for anyone serious about living out the Jesus Mission in everyday life.”

– Dave Ferguson, Lead Pastor, Community Christian Church, Chicago

“This book makes you think that anyone can do it, which of course is the whole point – you can!”

– Jonny Baker, Director of Mission Education, Church Mission Society

“Provokes us to search outside of the church walls, seizing opportunities for Christian witness. It will challenge your thinking and push you toward mission.”

– Ed Stetzer, President, LifeWay Research, US

“Wonderfully combines a depth of insight with a simplicity of practice which makes it a ‘must read’ for anyone wanting to start a witnessing community.”

– Dave Male, Director, Centre for Pioneer Learning, Ridley Hall, Cambridge

“Mike Moynagh is uniquely gifted as a visionary with a huge heart and intellect. The combination of his knowledge and enthusiasm will encourage and inspire you.”

– Revd Canon Phil Potter, Team Leader, Fresh Expressions UK and Archbishops’ Missioner

“Shows how small witnessing communities, lovingly serving their neighbours, can offer a tantalizing ‘taste of church’ and intentionally plant signposts to Jesus. Read Being Church, Doing Life for renewed vision!”

– Grace Sears, past president of The Order of the Daughters of the King®

“Mike Moynagh’s lifetime work has been to assess the way the world is evolving and also how the church is evolving as a witnessing community. He shows how they can join up in practice in this book, which is peppered with stories. His characteristic skill is to pull together many strands, to distil wisdom from them and add that Moynagh dash of interpretative flavour. In a post-Christendom age, he shows how it is possible to put the church back in the public sphere through holistic service and Christ-centred witness. He longs to earth theory in practice and this book does just what the title says.”

**– Canon Dr George Lings, Director, Church Army’s
Research Unit**

“This both sets a real challenge, and provides ample inspiration and encouragement to the church. A tremendously encouraging read.”

**– Lesley Hamilton-Messer, Team Leader, Church Without
Walls, Church of Scotland**

“Provides inspirational stories, practical insights and sound thinking to equip and encourage Christians to live out winsome and whole lives in the twenty-first century. Excellent stuff!”

**– Martyn Atkins, Chair of Fresh Expressions and General
Secretary of the Methodist Church of Britain**

“Grounded in practical experience, this is a ‘must read’ for all who are passionate about seeing the church alive in the everyday.”

**– Francis Brienen, Deputy General Secretary – Mission
(designate) for the United Reformed Church**

“Explains simply how every Christian can be involved in effective mission. Let’s read it together, apply it together, and see new dimensions of the life of Jesus transforming our networks and neighbourhoods with the yeast of the Kingdom!”

**– Bob and Mary Hopkins, Anglican Church Planting
Initiatives**

“Offers both the whys and hows of developing ‘witnessing communities’, with many encouraging stories of people like you and me seeing gospel transformation as they step out on God’s great adventure.”

– Gareth Robinson, church planter and worship leader

“Mike Moynagh’s insightful book extends our understanding of fresh expressions of church and puts the possibility of involvement within the reach of many Christians in their everyday lives.”

– Rt Revd Graham Cray, Archbishops’ Missioner and Leader of the Fresh Expressions Team 2009–2014

“Full of ideas to stir your imagination. Mike’s wide knowledge of creative ideas for mission and evangelism helps the ordinary Christian to see their situation through new eyes.”

– Revd Dr Martin Robinson, Together in Mission

“A thought-provoking, compelling argument as to how the church can expand its reach in an increasingly post-Christian society. Doing life in witnessing communities is what takes Jesus out of the sacred buildings. If the church desires to be a relevant force, we must learn to live as disciples who make disciples. This book is a true gift to the church.”

– Rob Peabody, author, missional pioneer, and Director of Awaken Movement

Michael Moynagh has written the following for religious publishers:

Making Unemployment Work (Lion, 1986)

Home To Home: Understanding the Family (DLT, 1990)

Changing World, Changing Church (Monarch, 2001)

Liquid Worship (with Tim Lomax – Grove, 2004)

emergingchurch.intro (Monarch, 2004)

Church for Every Context (SCM, 2012)

In addition, Michael Moynagh is author or lead author of:

The State of the Countryside, 2020 (Report to the Countryside Agency, 2003)

Learning from the Future: Scenarios for Post-16 Learning (Learning & Skills Development Agency, 2003)

The Opportunity of a Lifetime: The Future of Retirement (Chartered Institute of Personnel & Development, 2004)

Working in the 21st Century (Economic and Social Research Council, 2005)

Going Global: Issues Facing the 21st Century (A&C Black/Guardian Books, 2008)

Changing Lives, Changing Business: Seven Life Stages in the 21st Century (A&C Black, 2009)

BEING CHURCH, DOING LIFE

Creating gospel communities
where life happens

MICHAEL MOYNAGH

**MONARCH
BOOKS**

Oxford, UK & Grand Rapids, Michigan, USA

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To Liz

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The heroes of this book are the thousands of people who form communities that actively witness to Jesus in everyday life. I have been inspired and educated by their stories, many of which appear in the pages that follow. Some of these stories have been told me in conversation, but most are documented, and in these cases I have provided a reference. The stories are, of course, snapshots in time and will have moved on since they were captured.

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Wycliffe Hall, Oxford, September 2013

FOREWORD

Something remarkable is happening in the Christianity of our times – the church is learning to innovate in new ways to express the love of God and people, and this is resulting in the creation of new forms of community. For instance, we are seeing gospel communities pop up in the context of the everyday life of people – in cafes, gyms, cafes, tattoo parlours, Laundromats, online gaming, and even in church buildings!

Freshly published research on the state of the church in the UK has now demonstrated for us how important this movement is becoming.¹ In it, the researchers have done a detailed study of nearly a quarter of the dioceses of the Church of England, Britain's largest denomination. What they have discovered is that “fresh expressions of church” now account for 15 per cent of the churches in these dioceses and represent approximately 10 per cent of the average weekly attendance. And what is especially remarkable is that most of these communities have only emerged over the past decade and are emerging now at an accelerating rate. This is very good news for a tired and outworn Christendom.

According to the leaders of these fresh expressions of ecclesia, only a quarter of those involved in the communities can be called regular churchgoing folk (“the churchied”). A little over a third had stopped going to church (“the de-churched”), while an astonishing two fifths have little or no church background (“the un-churched”). Taken at face value, in terms of outreach and evangelism these new expressions of church must surely be

¹ Church Growth Research Project, “Report on Strand 3b: An analysis of fresh expressions of Church and church plants begun in the period 1992–2012”, October 2013, p. 6, available from Church Army Research Unit

considered our best chance for a renewed impact of the Gospel in the West.

This new wave of Christian mission is not unique to Britain. There are plenty of examples in North America, Australia and New Zealand, and growing interest in continental Europe. Three features, however, make the UK experience of particular significance and interest.

First, mainline denominations – initially the Church of England along with the Methodist Church – have taken the lead in encouraging these new Christian communities. Permission giving and some proactive leadership from the top have encouraged innovation at the grass roots, mainly by lay people – not insignificant given the clericalism associated with the mainline church. In the United States, by contrast, these new forms of church have tended to emerge outside the denominations. This is starting to change, however, as some North American denominations begin to welcome innovative approaches to church planting.

Secondly, extending the initial impulse by the two denominations, this new wave of mission in the UK has an increasingly trans-denominational flavour. More and more denominations are collaborating at a national level to encourage fresh expressions of church. Britain's Fresh Expressions team has members from not only the Church of England and the Methodists, but also – for example – the United Reformed Church, the Church of Scotland, and the Salvation Army. Some would say this collaboration is the most significant expression of practical ecumenism currently within the UK.

Thirdly, some of the observers of these fresh expressions have helpfully described the missional dynamics involved. After a process of listening to the context, the core team often begins by loving and serving the people it feels called to reach. A community gathers around this loving and serving, and within it

people are signposted to Jesus. Individuals who want are offered opportunities to explore what it would mean to follow Christ, and church takes shape among those who come to faith. In some cases, this journey is repeated by the new Christians.

This turns the conventional approach to church planting on its head. Public worship comes near the end of the journey rather than the beginning. Indeed, the entire process is more organic, experimental, incarnational, local, and often smaller in scale than the more formulaic approaches of traditional church planting.

Despite these exciting developments, many in the UK would be quick to say that the garden remains far from rosy. Overall, the church continues to shrink at a faster rate than the numbers being added through these new Christian communities. Furthermore, how far will the historic, and more institutional, structures be able to contain this burst of Christian energy? Will the new wine of innovation burst the traditional wineskins of the denominations? Will the prevailing structures adapt fast and radically enough to embrace what is happening on the ground? Or will the pioneers of these new communities draw together for mutual support in networks that become increasingly detached from the mainline churches?

Whatever the answers, there is little doubt that we are witnessing a highly significant movement of God, not just in the UK but in North America and elsewhere. Is the Holy Spirit once more laying the foundations for a dramatic rebirth of the church in shapes that we have never seen before? I personally find myself feeling somewhat optimistic.

If you want to know more about this move of the Spirit, and in particular how you and your Christian sisters and brothers might get involved, then this really practical and well articulated book is for you. Its message is as simple as it is strong: find one or two other Christians in a segment of your life – a network of friends, a passion that you pursue, your workplace or neighbourhood. Ask

God to show you some simple ways to serve the people around you and in due course to share the gospel with them. Then see what God does.

Laced with over 120 real-life examples, Michael Moynagh adeptly sets out a new approach to mission in the local church, based directly on witnessing communities in everyday life. He joyfully describes easy ways for ordinary Christians to start these communities and turn them into hubs for making disciples. He shows how local church leaders, especially those called to a “pastoral” ministry, can encourage their congregations to get behind these communities and so join in with what God is doing in our time.

I am grateful that this very practical book has deep Biblical roots. Its theoretical and theological background lies in his rather weighty and complex previous book, *Church for Every Context*. I encourage leaders to study that book as well. Both help to change the missional conversation by shifting attention from how Christians can witness as individuals to how they can witness as small Christian communities. It is radical stuff. But it is not theory. It is based on what a growing number of Christians are doing right now.

So if you want to tear down the disconnect between church and life, if you want to find exciting and do-able ways to add kingdom value to your passion and if you want to witness to Jesus with other Christians rather than on your own, I warmly commend *Being Church, Doing Life*.

Alan Hirsch

Founder of Forge Mission Training Network and author of *Untamed, The Faith of Leap, The Forgotten Ways, The Permanent Revolution*, and many other award-winning books on missional Christianity.

INTRODUCTION – WANTING TO MAKE A DIFFERENCE

“Ministers are desperate to work out how to encourage their members to make an impact for God in the world,” a colleague told me. “Most have little idea how to get started.”

Maybe you are one of those leaders, or one of those members your minister feels desperate about! You love God. You have met Jesus in worship and through the ministries of other Christians. You have encountered the Holy Spirit and seen how God can change people’s lives.

You are inspired by Scripture, and in particular by the kingdom’s potential to transform life. You carry this hope with you as you seek to follow Jesus at home, at work, and in your networks.

But there is so much more to the biblical vision that you pray for. If only the blessings you have experienced could ripple out to others! You can’t wait for the church to make more of a public difference – to enrich people and bring the gospel to them.

You realize that the church is surrounded by an ocean of social change. Yet you long for it to find new ways of connecting with the twenty-first century and to speak a language that reaches contemporary people.

Or perhaps your life stretches ahead. You are full of hope about making an impact. But you are also anxious – like the 22-year-old who had graduated with a good degree, landed a stellar job, and then imagined the treadmill ahead.

“Life isn’t only about making money, is it?” she asked. She wanted to make a difference, but feared the tramlines of a conventional life.

Or are you worried about student debt, getting a job, having any sort of career, and climbing onto the housing ladder? The internet gives you a big platform to address the world, but will you do enough for anyone to listen?

Or maybe you can empathize with some of the readers described by the editor of a large Christian magazine. “If I could peep behind your readers’ masks,” I asked him, “what would be their top feeling about the Christian faith?”

Without hesitation he replied, “Disappointment.”

Among their chief disappointments: a sadness that their lives are not making a bigger difference. They go through the same Christian routines. They go to church regularly. They try to live out their Christian faith. But, if they died tomorrow, there would not be much to fill an obituary. They would leave no mark on the trajectory of life. Rather than shaping the world, they suspect they have been shaped *by* it. They started life hoping to make a difference, but have seen the dream fade. Is it too late to dream once more?

Perhaps you have heard reports of a new movement that is engaging people beyond the church in the many settings of today’s world – that is finding new ways of being church while doing life. Might this be what you have longed and prayed for? Could you become part of it?

Making a difference gives meaning to life, which is vital for human well-being. A 2013 study of nearly 600 Americans found that meaningful activity meets some of our core psychological needs.¹ Three are especially important:

- Competence – mastering an activity.
- Relatedness – being connected to others.

¹ Aaron M. Eakman, “Relationships Between Meaningful Activity, Basic Psychological Needs, and Meaning in Life: Test of the Meaningful Activity and Life Meaning Model”, *OTJR: Occupation, Participation and Health*, 33 (2), 2013, pp. 100–109.

- Autonomy – being in control of your life.

Making a difference to other people enables you to meet these needs. You show that you are competent, you enter into a relationship with others, and by acting out of choice you demonstrate that you are in control.

To suspect that you are not making a difference is to wonder “Am I effective?” “Do others value me?” “Am I powerless?” It is to stare into the abyss of “I don’t matter.”

A distinctive witness?

For a Christian, not making an impact can feel especially uncomfortable. You know you are called to live distinctively and bring good news to others.

You might describe this as being salt and light in the world, or being a loving presence, or witnessing to Jesus, or living out the kingdom of God, or seeing what the Spirit is doing and joining in.

Yet, when you review your life, you feel dissatisfied with the amount of difference you make. Perhaps feeling powerless is what holds you back. Problems in the news seem way beyond your ability to help. The achievements of celebrities leave you murmuring, “I could never do that.” You feel like an insignificant brushstroke on a huge landscape. Your energy ebbs away.

Feeling powerless has many roots. One is our increasingly organized world. The number of organizations has leapt dramatically, whether it be registered companies in California (up fivefold between 1960 and 2001) or international non-governmental organizations, which grew from 176 worldwide in 1909 to over 44,000 almost a century later.²

² Gili S. Dori, John W. Meyer & Hoky Hwang, “Introduction” in Gili S. Dori, John W. Meyer & Hoky Hwang (eds), *Globalization and Organization*, Oxford: OUP, 2006, pp. 2–7; Sara McLaughlin Mitchell, “Cooperation in World Politics: The Constraining and Constitutive Effects of International Organizations”, paper prepared for presentation at the 2006 International Studies Association meeting in San Diego, California, p. 1.

Organizations are reaching into the informal parts of everyday life, even into childcare through pre-school nurseries. The voluntary sector is less informal. Nearly all the decisions that shape daily life are taken by organizations – by marketing companies, corporations, the media, governments, regulatory authorities, schools, hospitals, and many others. Though social media are empowering individuals in new ways, organizations still grip our lives.

Organizations themselves feel more organized – more regulations, more targets, and more accountability. British sociologists Paul Heelas and Linda Woodhead refer to the iron cage of “the targeted life”. Individuals have become imprisoned by targets at work.³

At the same time, more organizations mean more choice and more opportunities – more activities, for example, for your family to choose from. Life becomes increasingly frenetic as you try to squeeze everything in. Whether it is ferrying children from one venue to another, killing yourself to meet a deadline at work, or burning out for your church, organizations drench you in a hailstorm of demands. You don’t have the time or the stamina to make a big difference to your world.

Gathered for worship, scattered for life?

The way most Christians witness in ordinary life compounds this struggle to make an impact. Think about what happens now: as Christians, we come together for Sunday worship. Then we re-enter the world as individuals. Through the week at work, among families and friends, and in our leisure pursuits, we witness to Jesus mainly on our own.

Of course, we are sustained by the worship and prayers of the congregation, and by the fellowship of believing friends and

³ Paul Heelas & Linda Woodhead, *The Spiritual Revolution: Why Religion is Giving Way to Spirituality*, Oxford: Blackwell, 2005, p. 128.

relatives. We may also engage in the outreach programmes of our local church.

Despite this, the perceived experience of most churchgoers is that, having assembled for worship, we disperse as individuals – as Christians witnessing on our own – for the rest of the week.

Especially if we are in a part of the world where the church is strongly in retreat, we may look round our workplaces or apartment blocks and ask, “Is anyone else here a Christian?” Believers gather for support, but scatter to witness.

This gathering and scattering is so deeply ingrained that we seldom question it. Yet, alongside it, a different approach to making a difference is starting to emerge.

Usually in small groups, Christians are gathering in pubs, cafés, workplaces, friendship networks, and neighbourhoods to serve the people around them and to share the gospel.

Lunch by the gym

One group set up a monthly women’s luncheon club in a centre for gym and other activities. The women have a good lunch and hear a talk on the theme of “fit lives”. One woman described how she led a fit life while raising a child with a disability. The speakers are all Christians, so they include how Christ has helped them.

The lunch is held in an upstairs venue with large glass windows. Other people can see what is going on. The women are given a bunch of flowers. As they leave the centre, people arriving ask where the flowers came from. The response is an invitation to the next lunch!

Forty to fifty not-yet Christians attend regularly. The centre’s manager tells his colleagues in other centres, “It’s great for business!”

Catching on

Lubo and Dasa Badiar are lay members of the Lutheran Church in Slovakia. Decades of Communist rule had a destructive influence on families and contributed to a serious decline in church attendance, which is confined largely to Sundays.

Living in the second city of Košice, Lubo and Dasa caught a mission vision from the cell-church movement. But, as they listened to God and their context, they adapted it. They started a midweek "Family Fellowship" to rebuild family life around Jesus and the Bible.

It worked! Their community among family and friends outside church flourished. So they passed the concept on to other couples, who caught the model and took it to their family groups. It has proved remarkably successful. Over the next few years the idea has multiplied into a movement of literally scores of Family Fellowships across the nation.

Turning small groups inside out

In North America and the UK, a growing number of churches have launched mid-sized communities, sometimes known as missional communities.

Unlike typical small groups in church, each community exists to serve a specific neighbourhood or demographic outside the congregation's reach, such as children with disabilities, young adults at work, and people with an interest in justice or environmental issues.

In effect, the groups form small weekday congregations: they typically meet several times a month for mission and worship, while joining with their parent church on one or two Sundays in four.

St George's, Deal, England has found that these communities have released forty new lay leaders, a huge number for a UK

church.⁴ The first community, *Stepping Stones*, focused on the families of pupils at the local school. They held parties in the school, beach outings, a weekend camp and an introduction-to-Christianity course for families. The community has been so fruitful that they have started a second one.

By 2010, in just three years, 3DM – which encourages missional communities – had been involved in starting 725 new churches on both sides of the Atlantic. Most of these were mid-sized communities.⁵

These and other what I call “witnessing communities” enable followers of Christ to witness not on their own, but shoulder to shoulder. Faced by an organized world, Christians stand together for Jesus.

Three words encapsulate the nature of these groups:

- *Community.* Whatever the group’s size, Christians make Jesus public in day-to-day life by sharing their lives in community. These communities normally have a core of believers, who draw others in by loving and serving them and sharing the gospel.
- *Visibility.* The groups meet not mainly for Bible study and prayer, but to serve people in the context and make Jesus known to them. Prayer and study occur in the slipstream of witness and energize it. Church is no longer something “over there”. For people in the setting, church is right here, on their turf, intensely visible.
- *Activity.* These groups do more than support their members in personal witness. The community witnesses as a group. Members do things together to show others around them the love of Jesus.

4 www.freshexpressions.org.uk/stories/stgeorges (accessed 11 September 2013).

5 Mike Breen & Alex Absalom, *Launching Missional Communities A Field Guide*, 3DM, Kindle version, 2010.

Individuals are coming to faith and finding their lives changed. Luke, for example, started dealing in cannabis when he was fourteen, and by nineteen had a really bad cocaine habit:

I had a heart attack at the age of twenty, induced by an overdose, and then shortly after that I started taking heroin... I got to the stage where I feel that God actually brought me to such a level that I had no other option but to cry out to him and ask for his forgiveness. Being with... the rest of the people in the project: they actually helped me through my withdrawals as I'd started to come off methadone. They prayed me through it and I do know for a fact that it was nowhere near as bad as what it should have been. That was the power of God in my life: to help me through that struggle.⁶

Being Church, Doing Life is about how ordinary Christians and local churches can start and develop these witnessing communities. The next three chapters tackle the question “Why?”, and include a galaxy of stories to whet your appetite. You will see that these communities are not an occasional phenomenon. They seem to be the vanguard of a new movement.

Chapters 4 to 7 offer some tools – not rules – for developing these communities. The two chapters that follow describe how local churches, denominations, and networks can encourage witnessing communities, while Chapter 10 unlocks the key to success.

All round the world Christians are bursting out of the local church, not to replace it but to start alongside it, in everyday settings, communities that touch the heart, lift life above the normal, and put Jesus on display. Whether you are a church leader or a churchgoer, you too can be involved.

⁶ www.freshexpressions.org.uk/stories/grafted/luke (accessed 16 December 2013).

PART ONE

Why
communities
in life?

Chapter 1

COMMUNITIES IN LIFE

In Ajax, a Toronto suburb, Ryan Sim is working with others on “Redeem the Commute”, a mobile app and website for nearby commuters.

Busy young professionals often see the commute as wasted time. To help them redeem this time and make positive changes, Ryan plans to deliver good-quality content to their smartphones, starting with marriage and parenting courses. A Christian Basics course will introduce the Redeemer himself, followed by daily discipleship content for those walking with Jesus.

The aim is not to start a virtual church, but to bring young professionals together in a dispersed form of cell church. Participants who start a course on their own will be encouraged to join a discussion group, meeting weekly in places such as trains, buses, workplaces, and homes.

Churchgoers in the area will seed these new groups, which will be organic and self-organizing, centred on the gospel, and supported with coaching, oversight and regular visits from staff.¹

This may be light years from your experience of outreach and church. But it is the tip of an iceberg, one example among thousands of how Christians are increasingly sowing the gospel in innovative ways.

¹ www.freshexpressions.org.uk/stories/redeemerchurch (accessed 30 April 2013).

A new trend

To ignore what these Christians are doing would be to overlook signs of a new mega trend. It would be to bat away the Spirit's call for individuals and the local church to reach out through witnessing communities in daily life. It would play down how ordinary Christians can take the lead.

Across the world

Hold your breath! A remarkable transformation is sweeping across the church. In North America, Europe, Australia, New Zealand, and elsewhere, new expressions of Christian community are beginning to emerge.

In extraordinary research, Dr George Lings of the Church Army Research Unit has examined in detail ten Church of England dioceses. "Fresh expressions of church" – new types of Christian community – comprise as many as 15 per cent of the dioceses' churches and 10 per cent of their average weekly attendance. According to their leaders, roughly 25 per cent of those who come are Christians, 35 per cent are once-churched (people who had stopped going), and an amazing 40 per cent are never-churched. The numbers involved add the equivalent of one further average-sized diocese.²

Even more astonishing has been the pace of growth. The great majority of these churches have come to birth within just the last ten years.

Lings' research merely scratches the surface. The Methodists and other UK denominations have also seen an upsurge of these new communities. In addition there are Christians who are starting witnessing communities without using the fresh expressions label, such as North Americans who identify with

² Church Growth Research Project, "Report on Strand 3b: An analysis of fresh expressions of Church and church plants begun in the period 1992–2012", October 2013, p. 6, available from Church Army Research Unit.

Forge International, 3DM or Church Multiplication Associates, founded by Neil Cole.

Cole, for instance, believes that church should happen where life happens. The movement of which he is part was launched in 2002. It planted ten churches in its first year and over 100 in the fourth, and has multiplied to thousands of churches “where life happens” today.³

On top of these are people who are starting communities without identifying with a denomination or network, such as the young couple who said to me, “We seem to be doing what you describe. We live in a poor neighbourhood, we’ve got to know some of the local teenagers, they now meet in our sitting room, and a kind of church is beginning to happen.”

These new types of community are not confined to the “global North”. They are beginning to emerge in Barbados, Chile, South Africa, and elsewhere. Through them, individuals are finding faith.

One man was brought by his girlfriend’s grandma to help out on one of the craft tables in an all-age example of these communities. He had no church background and was quite nonplussed by Christianity when he first came. He was not interested in church but was willing to get involved in this new expression of Christian community.

He came along again and wanted to help. The leaders then started the Journeys course and he decided to attend. “He was a bit into space life and belief in other things out there... not sure what, but couldn’t grasp Christianity. He is now wanting baptism.”⁴

³ Ed Stetzer & Warren Bird, *Viral Churches: Helping Church Planters Become Movement Makers*, San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2010, p. 119.

⁴ www.messychurch.org.uk/messy-blog/discipleship-input (accessed 6 Sept. 2013).

We are at the frontier, it seems, of a new wave of Christian outreach and impact.

From church plants to intentional communities

This new work of the Spirit builds on a long tradition of church planting. In the global North, one planting model was for a local church to reach out for the kingdom by sending a sizable team to an area with little church presence.

The team made contact with people who were in limbo between churches or who used to attend church and were open to going again. (Reaching lapsed churchgoers was not always the intention, but was often the result.) When enough relationships had been built, a new congregation was launched based on these contacts.

Many of these plants were replicas of successful churches or upgrades of existing church for Christians who were dissatisfied with the offerings elsewhere. Yet, as populations in the global North have pulled away from the Christian faith, clones of existing church have had – with some exceptions – a diminishing impact on people outside.

Partly in response to the limitations of traditional church plants, recent years have seen the mushrooming of intentional Christian communities. These communities look rather different from conventional church. They are church, but not as we have known it. They serve people whom traditional churches and church plants do not reach.

Some are connected to an existing church. They work with homeless people, serve the residents of an apartment block, enable the “late middle-aged” to get to know each other, teach English as a second language, or equip young people for work. In the process, openings are created for individuals to explore Jesus.

St Paul's, Shadwell, in the East End of London, is a church plant from Holy Trinity, Brompton. Members of the congregation have now formed several new communities to serve demographic groups or geographical areas unreached by the new church.

One group has run a money management course for the local Bangladeshi population; another has facilitated a parenting support group, while a third has organized events on contemporary issues for young adults in a pub.

The church's leaders pray that some of these communities will grow and spawn further communities, which will multiply again. They seek to "plant pregnant churches".

Other communities are coming to birth beyond the orbit of the local church.

A young Brazilian man described his passion for surfing. The tussle between beach and church was a no-brainer. The beach won! But one day, as the evening was drawing in, one of his friends invited him to a group on the edge of the beach. It was a surfers' church, complete with surfboard as altar. He now attends regularly.

There are over 300 such churches in Brazil, and an international network. In 2013 one of the Brazilian churches launched an offshoot in Hawaii.

Accidental communities

Alongside these intentional communities is a further development – communities that have sprung up almost accidentally, without a great deal of forethought. These involve Christians who never planned to lead a gospel community in ordinary life but ended up doing precisely that.

Hot Chocolate, for instance, started in 2001, when a small group of volunteers went out to meet some of the young people in the heart of Dundee, Scotland. That was their only agenda. The volunteers took hot chocolate with them and the young people started calling the encounters “Hot Chocolate”. The name stuck.

Within a few months, some significant relationships had developed. The volunteers began asking, “If you had a bit of space in the church building, what would you do with it?” The young people replied that they wanted rehearsal space and somewhere they could crash out and be themselves.

So it was that some thrash metal bands came to rehearse in the sanctuary of the church, and a space that the young people could call “home” was created within the building. Everyday life invaded the church.

Hot Chocolate has grown organically and sees itself as a community. It now has six paid staff (two full-time) and over a year works with about 300 young people, many from difficult backgrounds.

A number have found faith, often as they join the team and experience Christianity more explicitly. One young person started coming when he was thirteen or fourteen, found Jesus, and became a key volunteer.

Team members tend to describe their “church” as gathering round the dinner table three times a week. Worship, which includes a devotion, has evolved in response to the young people and the Spirit’s promptings.

“In a way,” says team member Charis Robertson, “everything that has happened so far in the way of church community is completely accidental.”⁵

⁵ www.freshexpressions.org.uk/stories/hotchocolate (accessed 6 September 2013).

These intentional and “accidental” communities are what I call “witnessing communities”. As I said in the Introduction, three words sum them up:

- *Community*. Christians prayerfully band together in small and sometimes larger groups.
- *Visibility*. These communities are present in everyday life, helping to make the kingdom tangible to ordinary people.
- *Activity*. They go beyond prayer support for their members. As groups, they launch initiatives to serve and share the gospel with others nearby.

Community

Witnessing communities have their roots in Scripture. God does not expect individuals to make a difference for him on their own. He wants them to work in teams. In Genesis 1 and 2, the creation mandate is given to the man and the woman together.

Adam and Eve were placed in a beautiful garden. They were to extend its boundaries till paradise stretched over the whole planet (Genesis 1:26). They were to do this as a team. “It is not good for the man to be alone,” God said. “I will make a helper suitable for him” (Genesis 2:18).

When things went wrong, God did not adopt an individualistic approach to salvation. He called Abraham and Sarah’s household and turned it into a nation. Through this community, God would bring salvation to the world.

The first thing Jesus did in his public ministry was to assemble a community of disciples. When he taught them how to “do mission”, he sent them out not as individuals but in pairs. Karl Barth, the great Swiss theologian, said that Jesus would not be who he is if he lacked his community and if this community

lacked a missionary character.⁶

Paul followed Jesus' example by travelling with a team on his missionary journeys. As the teams grew in size, members joined or left frequently in pairs – Silas and Timothy in Acts 18:5, Timothy and Erastus in Acts 19:22, and presumably Paul and Luke in Acts 20:6.⁷ Central to Paul's approach were mini-communities.

God's process fits his purpose

God does mission through communities. This is hardly surprising, because God himself is community. He is three persons, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, who are also one. God is the divine "communion-in-mission".⁸ Channelling salvation through communities is an expression of his fundamental character.

Through Christ, God is bringing into being a new community, in which "all things" will be reconciled (Colossians 1:20). Church is a glorious outpost of this new community, "an embassy of heaven".⁹

When we become Christians we are given an identity in Jesus – we are in Christ. Being in Christ is not being in him alone, but being with all others who are in Christ. We belong to God's family. The loyalties of this new community supersede even the loyalties of biology (Matthew 10:34–37).

"Church is not another ball for me to juggle, but that which defines who I am and gives Christlike shape to my life."¹⁰ Church

⁶ Quoted by John Flett, *The Witness of God: The Trinity, Missio Dei, Karl Barth, and the Nature of Christian Community*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010, p. 218.

⁷ Bob Hopkins, *Church Planting 1. Models for Mission in the Church of England*, Bramcote: Grove Books, 1988, p. 12.

⁸ Stephen B. Bevans & Roger P. Schroeder, *Constants in Context: A Theology of Mission for Today*, Maryknoll: Orbis, 2004, p. 294.

⁹ Tim Chester & Steve Timmis, *Total Church. A Radical Reshaping Around Gospel and Community*, Nottingham: IVP, 2007, p. 48.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 43.

is my destiny. Heaven will be church perfected.

God therefore uses missionary means, Jesus-led communities, to achieve his missionary end – a Jesus-filled community for ever. His choice of communities to bring about salvation reflects both his character and his goal.

As old as the church

Communities are God's strategy for individuals to make a difference. Believers are to link arms in small communities. These communities are to serve other people and lovingly share the gospel.

Christians have been doing this since Jesus. When the Celtic missionaries moved south from Scotland, for example, they formed highly mobile teams, which could pack up and move on like the nomadic people they sought to reach.

The Benedictine communities, which were schools for God's service, preached the gospel to unreached parts of Europe in the eleventh and twelfth centuries. In the high Middle Ages semi-monastic communities of lay women, known as the "Beguines", were the first known women's movement in the church. These communities were located just outside the walls of many northern European towns and served the local population.

In seventeenth-century England Nicholas Ferrar, a businessman, formed a semi-monastic community in a remote country house north-west of Cambridge. Little Gidding served many who sought physical healing and spiritual renewal, and rehabilitated the local church. A hundred years later, small groups were at the heart of the Wesleyan revival.

Christian Life Communities for lay people, founded by Ignatius of Loyola in the sixteenth century, still attract growing numbers of people worldwide who live out the exercises of St Ignatius in small communities of eight to ten members.

These local communities cluster into geographical areas and then regionally.

In the United States they serve others by providing mentoring in goals, offering retreats for homeless people, campaigning for immigration reform, building houses in the global South and countless other ways. They do mission in community.¹¹

Lesslie Newbigin, one of the last century's leading mission thinkers, described the congregation as "the hermeneutic of the gospel". What he meant was that the congregation is to interpret the gospel to the world. How can the church faithfully and credibly represent the gospel in society, he asked? "I am suggesting that the only answer... is a congregation of men and women who believe the gospel and live by it." Jesus did not write a book but formed a community.

Evangelistic campaigns and other efforts to bring the gospel to public life are all secondary to this, Newbigin argued. They are effective only "as they are rooted in and lead back to a believing community".¹²

Visibility

Yet how can the congregation represent the gospel to people if it is not present in their daily lives? How can outsiders understand what communal life with Jesus might mean if they cannot see what's involved?

How easily can evangelistic and other outreach events "lead back to the believing community" if the latter is some distance away? Church is often invisible to people through the week.

¹¹ www.clc-usa.org/ (accessed 6 September 2013).

¹² Lesslie Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralistic Society*, London: SPCK, 1989, p. 227.

Witnessing to others in daily life and inviting them to church at the weekend frequently requires too big a jump. The style of Sunday worship, the language, and the assumptions ask too much. Visitors have a look. Sometimes they stay. But more often they think, “It’s not for me”, and don’t return.

They would be more likely to remain if the gathering comprised people whom they met through the week, if it were located in the midst of ordinary life, if it addressed issues they were facing every day, if the style, language, and culture resonated with their day-to-day experiences, and if it met at a time that worked in relation to their busy existence.

This doesn’t mean that there is no cost to following Jesus. Rather, the bulk of the population – in many places – does not get the chance to weigh that cost. For most people, church as a living community is invisible. Based mainly in residential areas, it is absent from swathes of life where people spend much of their time. It is not on the radar.

Jesus and his community in daily life

Yet when Jesus called his community of disciples, he not only went with them to the synagogue, he took them into everyday life. They were with him at the wedding at Cana. John 2:2 is explicit that Jesus was at this important event in ordinary life – with his community.

Being in life was so important that often Jesus instructed his disciples in public, with other people milling around – see Luke 12, for instance.

Likewise, when he taught them how to do mission in Luke 9, Jesus sent his disciples in pairs not to the synagogues, but to the villages. They were sent as micro communities into the midst of life.

Similarly, after Jesus returned to heaven, Christian communities multiplied at the heart of life – in people’s homes

where family, networks and occupations all intersected. In excavations of ancient Pompeii, over half the houses either incorporate shops or workshops or have horticultural plots attached.¹³

New Testament scholar Reta Finger describes the impact these home-based communities must have had on others nearby. City dwellings were packed together, with no glass windows to block the noise.

*Many neighbours would have overheard activity around a communal meal in a small room or an open courtyard that was characterized by great joy (singing? laughter?). In the midst of the urban chaos and misery that characterized every ancient Mediterranean city, such a gathering must have sounded inviting indeed.*¹⁴

Stitched into the fabric of life

Imagine that a trade union met in a community hall on Saturdays to change the workplace on Mondays. Would it be effective? Trade unions organize in the workplace because that is where they plan to have an impact.

Similarly, Christians must organize wherever people lead their lives if they want to love and serve them effectively. This will go beyond residential areas to being present in other slices of society as well.

Kahaila café began when Paul Unsworth gathered a group of Christians who shared his vision. Through prayer and hard work, they rented premises on London's Brick Lane and started a community "cafe with a conscience".

¹³ Eckhard J. Schnabel, *Paul the Missionary: Realities, Strategies and Methods*, Downers Grove: IVP, 2008, p. 298.

¹⁴ Reta Finger, *Of Widows and Meals: Communal Meals in the Book of Acts*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007, p. 242.

They run a variety of events from a Canadian Supper Night to an Origami workshop and host art exhibitions. Kahaila is now looking to set up a bakery to provide paid employment for women leaving prison or the sex trade. The idea came from one of Kahaila's young leaders working in the café.

On Wednesday evenings they host worship, biblical teaching, and discussion groups. Anyone is welcome. Christians at the core see themselves as church, "but not church as you might understand it".¹⁵ They are a community – in life.

Activity

Molly Marshall, President of Central Baptist Theological Seminary, Shawnee, Kansas, has asked whether calls for "Christian community" reflect a desire to escape the organized life we experience so often. Churchgoers want family-like communities in which they can be known in depth, be trusted by others, and trust in return. Yet idealizing this type of community may soften the church's call to work collectively to transform life. Comfortable intimacy can replace the hard grind of developing communities that minister to people in need.¹⁶

A growing number of Christians are gathering with small groups of friends – either within the institutional church or outside it – to hang out together, share their lives, and have fun.

A Chicago couple, for example, emailed twenty of their friends, inviting them to form a small group. Ten showed up. They agreed to meet regularly to encourage each other in their growth towards Jesus. Their top goal was not, as

¹⁵ <http://kahaila.com/church/>

¹⁶ Molly Marshall, "Going Public: A Bold Church in a Changing Culture", *Christian Ethics Today*, 6 (5), 1996, available on www.christianethicstoday.com/Issue/006

a group, to serve other people, but to support one another through prayer, study, and fellowship. They hoped this would strengthen their Christian lives outside the group.

But was this ambitious enough?

Of course, individuals should feel supported by fellow group members. Yet if that is all a group does, it will replicate the model of mission currently practised by the local church. Once more, members will return to the world to witness as individuals.

The power of organization

Today's world is highly organized. When Paul wrote that our struggle is "against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world..." (Ephesians 6:12), he was not referring to a struggle with disconnected individuals. He was talking about organized power.

In the face of these powers, witnessing just as an individual does not make sense. If the powers they wrestle against are organized, Christians should organize in response. They should not only form communities. These communities should not only be visible in ordinary life. These communities should be hubs of activity that telescope the kingdom into everyday life.

Although for much of the week Christians will inevitably love others and sometimes share the gospel as individuals, wherever possible they should band together to witness as a group.

Jesus' disciples acted as a group to make a difference. They shared in Jesus' ministry of exorcism and healing (Matthew 10:1). They served as gatekeepers, though without always understanding their brief (John 6:9; Mark 10:13–14). They assisted Jesus in feeding the five thousand and the four thousand (Matthew 14:13–21; Matthew 15:29–39).

Often it is only when you act as a group that you can make an impact. The influential British writer, journalist, and religious

activist Margaret Hebblethwaite describes how Christians seeking to serve other people frequently talk of the need to organize.

Though “organization can almost smack of bureaucracy”, alone we are vulnerable and powerless.

Strength lies in numbers. A people is organized when they have worked out how to convert a disorganized crowd into a coherent, coordinated body that can achieve goals. There must be order, not chaos; there must be communication, not ignorance; there must be accepted leaders, not manipulation by a few pushy entrepreneurs; and so on. Any community needs some organization...¹⁷

Groups make a difference

There is a huge difference between a collection of individuals competing on a football pitch and a team. Christians are more likely to make a difference to the world if they act in teams than if they act alone:

- *Groups pool resources.* You may have a wonderful idea, but to implement it you may need a colleague able to make things happen and someone else who knows the right people. Groups allow gifts to be shared. “Two are better than one... If either of them falls down, one can help the other up. But pity anyone who falls and has no one to help them up!” (Ecclesiastes 4:9–10).
- *They strengthen Christian motivation.* People often have more drive in group settings than on their own – think of the efforts individuals make for teammates, comrades in combat, or family members. Groups can provide encouragement and support.

¹⁷ Margaret Hebblethwaite, *Base Communities: An Introduction*, London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1993, p. 96.

- *They reinforce Christian identity.* One reason people join groups is to establish or maintain their sense of who they are. It is easier to see yourself as a rebel, for example, if you join a countercultural group such as a gang or an artistic clique. Likewise, it is easier to remember that you are a Christian, and to behave as such, if you belong to a group of fellow believers during the week.

A Christians at Work group in the Wessex Water Company, UK ran a “Parenting Children” course on site during the week. The course was designed for those who did not belong to church as well as those who did. The last session included material with a Christian slant. The course attracted around fifteen people, of whom half were not churchgoers.¹⁸

Organizing this on your own would not have been easy. It required a small team. That is why groups must do more than support personal witness. Acting as a group to serve people nearby allows forms of witness that are impractical for individuals.

Making a difference by being different

At their best, witnessing communities that are visible in life and active in serving others have four characteristics. These communities are:

- *Missional* – they work mainly with people who do not attend church.
- *Contextual* – they find culturally appropriate ways of reaching people.
- *Formational* – they aim to form disciples.
- *Ecclesial* – they provide a taste of church for people involved.

¹⁸ www.transformworkuk.org (accessed 1 May 2013).

Frequently, they become church for those who attend.¹⁹

A small group of Christians formed the core of a midweek luncheon club at the back of an English rural church. One week they invited diners to stay after lunch for fifteen minutes of Christian music, silent and read prayers, and a reading from Scripture.

Individuals gathered round the holy table, which was brought down into the building and on which were placed a couple of lighted candles. For those involved, most of whom did not attend Sunday worship, this had the beginnings of "church".

Witnessing communities are not the same as conventional small groups in church, valuable though these are. Although the latter may pray for mission, their focus is on prayer, fellowship, or Bible study. In witnessing communities, on the other hand prayer, fellowship, and study serve the group's main purpose, which is to organize for mission, rather than being ends in themselves.

Witnessing communities also differ from many Christian groups at work. These groups may pray for the witness of their members, but don't organize to serve the workplace. By contrast, members of witnessing communities actively collaborate to love their colleagues in practical ways.

Witnessing communities do not exist in every part of an individual's life. Christians would die of exhaustion if they did! One segment of the week is enough. So start one of these communities among people who share a passion that you have, or where you spend the bulk of your time, or where the community is most likely to be effective.

Witnessing communities need not be an alternative to your local church. Some Christians make them their sole church, but for others they exist in parallel to church at the weekend.

¹⁹ www.freshexpressions.org.uk/guide/about/whatis (accessed 14 August 2013).

The New Testament never says you can have only one church experience in one setting during the week. So why shouldn't you be involved in two "churches"? They would both be part of the same body of Christ. Indeed, this possibility has been officially recognized by the Church of England. In a 2007 report, approved by the Church, the Church's Liturgical Commission acknowledged that sometimes people worship in two churches. In such cases, individuals should consistently belong to both churches rather than have a consumerist pick-and-choose attitude.²⁰

You can be involved in a witnessing community:

- *spare-time*, on top of your other activities;
- *part-time*, maybe employed for some of the week and supporting a mission community for the rest of the time, like Paul with his tent-making. One lawyer works four days a week so that he has one day to start a Christian community in an area of poverty;
- *full-time*, possibly being paid by a denomination, a local church or a group of churches, or perhaps raising the funds yourself from friends and contacts who support your calling.

Anyone can do it – well, almost!

Churches, church plants and some intentional communities have frequently been led by people who seem to have a specialist calling. In the UK for example, founders of intentional communities are often called "pioneers".

Yet, as with the term "minister", "pioneers" can sound like a breed apart. The person has a particular calling – to be the spiritual equivalent of an entrepreneur.

²⁰ Church of England Liturgical Commission, *Transforming Worship: Living the New Creation*, London: General Synod, GS 1651, 2007, pp. 25–26.

If that is your view, think again! Unplanned, almost spontaneous initiatives such as “Hot Chocolate” show that starting something new need not be an elite calling. Like the volunteers who went into the heart of Dundee, Christians who would never have thought of themselves as pioneers find they are the catalysts for something unexpected.

The experience of entrepreneurs may be suggestive. For years researchers have tried to distinguish the personal characteristics of an entrepreneur, but without much success. Entrepreneurs are so varied that it is almost impossible to find common traits, beyond perhaps the belief that they can do it.

Some researchers believe that entrepreneurial ability may be widespread, but remains hidden because circumstances do not draw it out. A nurse would have been entrepreneurial if he or she had had the opportunity.²¹ In a similar way, many more Christians than we realize may be able to start witnessing communities if they are given the chance.

Coffee and chaos

In Souderton, Pennsylvania, for example, Jenifer Eriksen Morales invited her new neighbour for coffee. As two young mothers, they shared the joys and struggles of raising children.

Soon they met other mothers in the neighbourhood and had similar conversations. An impromptu Friday-morning coffee group developed. A few months later, the coffee group turned into a book club. Then something else happened. The women, most of whom didn't attend church, started having conversations about prayer.

The Souderton Mennonite Church, where Eriksen Morales worships, was in the neighbourhood but was not present in

²¹ David Rae, *Entrepreneurship: From Opportunity to Action*, Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2007, pp. 28–29.

the lives of Jenifer’s neighbours. However, it embraced the coffee group as part of its ministry and provided childcare for some of the meetings, without expecting the mothers to visit a Sunday service in return.²²

Build on what you’ve got

Maybe you are thinking, “I could never do that. For a start, I don’t have the time!”

What helps to make witnessing communities feasible is that you don’t have to follow someone else’s blueprint. You just have to do prayerfully what comes naturally to you and build it into your everyday life. The secret is to develop what you’ve got – in particular:

- *Who are you?* Are you a teacher, for instance? Then think about what you could do among the parents, children or staff of your school.
- *What do you know?* You know about your school, of course. But perhaps you also have a passion for art history. Might there be children, staff or parents who would like to meet up, be introduced to some of the giants of painting and sculpture, discuss some of these artists’ works, and go to the occasional exhibition?
- *Who do you know?* Can you think of a fellow Christian, preferably connected to the school, who would meet with you to pray about this? Is there anyone else who could help – someone who enjoys hospitality, perhaps, and could host the group in their home? Is there another person who would be great at inviting people?

²² <http://freshexpressionsus.org/stories/coffee-and-chaos/> (accessed 30 April 2013).