

The Rugby Club Church

Author: Paul Tester was involved for a year in ministry on a typical UK housing estate. Here he shares some ideas as to how an 'emerging church' approach might work in a church planting context. The local rugby club was the key to his thinking.

Church attendance is rapidly declining across the UK and the national Church is faced with the possibility that it may be close to extinction (Moynagh, 2001, 7-10). It must consider the possibility that God has abandoned it (Murray, 2004, 231), and if it believes that this is not so, it must look to see how, and where, God's Spirit is leading and renewing His Church (Fresh Expressions, 2006, Prospectus: Phase 2, 4). The "emerging church" appears to offer the potential of such Spirit led renewal. This essay will consider how such a church might be planted on the Gloucester estate of Matson.

Matson is typical of many estates across the UK. It is one of the more deprived areas of the country (National Statistics, 2006). There are three existing churches on the estate which are working well together. The churches have congregations that are predominantly middle class and towards the older end of the age spectrum, some of whom travel in to the churches from surrounding areas. Local centres of activity include a youth club, a pub, a family and neighbourhood centre, a shopping arcade, a library and notably Matson Rugby Football Club (RFC). I have been playing rugby at the club for the last three months and have observed how the club is truly a centre for the people of the community. It involves not only the senior players but also young players and women from the local netball club. It also has a skittle alley, bar and multi-purpose room which are used by various community groups. On a Saturday afternoon particularly, the club is full of people from the local area who have played sport, their relatives, those who have spectated and those who have helped in the kitchen / worked behind the bar. Although Christian influence at the club is currently minimal, as such a community focus, it provides an opportunity for the establishment of a community and mission based church to minister to the unchurched people of the estate.

I am advocating a radically different type of church for the proposed plant in Matson. Such a plant must include the key ingredients of a church but express them in a way that is relevant to the church plant culture. Drawing on the experience of cross-cultural church planting from around the world, the form and activities must be shaped by people from the receiving culture (Hesselgrave, 1980, 349; Finney, 2004, 103). This is a risky, yet necessary process. Although networks appear to be the way in which society now relates, networks have not replaced neighbourhoods (Church of England, 2004, 5). "Local communities are still important to people" (Moynagh, 2001, 150). Becoming involved in the rugby club provides the opportunity for a church planting team to reach a sub-culture which is primarily community based. Building relationships, and being part of estate life, will be key (as illustrated by the church plant on the Prospect Estate (Guildford Diocese, 1996)). Mason (2003, 80) notes that the church should not compete with existing facilities and resources but work to improve what is available. If the church plant were to provide a qualified, high quality coach to the rugby club, it is likely that the club would agree for the use of its premises for church plant gatherings. The coach, and 2-3 players (all mature Christians), would live on the estate with their families and form the core of the church plant. The plant would be a "cell" church, meeting in the club, at a time likely to be suitable to potential new members. A convenient meeting time is likely to be a weekday evening after training. This will not clash with young people's sport on Sunday mornings and will be at a time when most club members will be at the club. As such, a number of the barriers to church attendance described by Finney (2004, 127-131), such as the unpopularity of Sunday morning services and the poor perception of organised religion in today's culture, would be removed.

One of the key ingredients of the church plant will be mission. The Spirit must lead the process and role-modelling through an incarnational approach will also be key (Mason, 2003, 159). Sport provides a relevant opportunity for strong relationships to build quickly (Mason, 2003, 46) and the impact of such a ministry can be immense. Jason Robinson, former England rugby international, is a living example of the potential. Those likely to be drawn to a rugby church plant will be from two groups that are typically missing in church, men and young people (Mason, 2003, 53). This approach of designing church for the unchurched incorporates the idea of "prior mission" (Savage et al, 2006, 121) and parallels the approach of the New Testament church which operated on a "we'll come to you" basis (Moynagh, 2001, 139).

Watson (1978, 7-8) looks to New Testament church principles to shape modern day church. When considering how worship should manifest itself in church he considers there to be two key aspects to worship, "bowing down" and service (1978, 180). From my experience, it is unlikely that sung worship will be a natural "bowing down" response for those involved with a rugby club and so worship in the cell church would be of a more "alternative" form. Flanagan (2004) provides an example of a useful resource with ideas for more relevant prayer and praise. Church members would also be encouraged, through "cell" discipleship, to live life in a way that glorifies God, as their worship through service. Mason (2003, 29) quotes Colossians 3:17, "Whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him" to confirm this approach. He relates it particularly to the attitude to be displayed on the sports field. Teaching would be relevant and generally through oral and visual means to maximise its effectiveness. Any resources would be chosen to maximize their relevance (e.g. Bibles designed for a rugby literate audience (Bible Society, 2003)).

Community should naturally flow from the relationships built through the common bond of the rugby club and the shared experience of church. To facilitate this further, shared leadership would be developed, initially under the authority of the planting partnership. However, the intention would be for this to pass to those from the plant culture as soon as was reasonably practicable. Hesselgrave (1980, 349) argues that local spiritual leadership must be developed before organisation of the church can be finalised. Through the use of the "cell" model, all can be mobilised for discipleship, ministry, leadership and expansion" (Church of England, 2004, 52). Ellis and Mitchell (1992, 162), referring to New Testament example, also note that academic achievement is not a pre-requisite for leadership, which is worth considering as the majority of the local people will not have a strong academic background.

Unity with the wider church must be maintained, but at the same time the planting partnership must understand from the outset that the plant must be given space to determine how to express that. Tensions will no doubt arise regarding contentious issues such as the sacraments. However in line with the "emerging church" philosophy (Steven Croft for Fresh Expressions, 2006, "What not to say"), the new plant must be given the space to develop its own understanding as to how church should be from Scripture. Unity can nevertheless be maintained through emphasis on the common ground of the key church ingredients and specifically the churches' shared spiritual unity (Watson, 1978, 342).

There are undoubtedly issues to be resolved with "emerging church". A case in point is the fragmentation of the church into many different sub-cultures. The whole church must continue to wrestle with this issue as to how "one-ness" is expressed and with other issues raised by "emerging church". The church should practice double listening (Church of England, 2004, 104) - the listening to God speaking through both the culture and tradition, and the gospel and church. Steven Croft (for Fresh Expressions, 2006, "What not to say") reminds us that "there are no blueprints to follow". However, with a strong focus on listening to God (Church of England, 2004, 104) and participating in mission where God is already working through his Spirit (Fresh Expressions, 2006, Prospectus: Phase 2) there is the potential for renewal in the UK church. A sport based

church can be successful, if God wills it to be so. These could be exciting times where we "recapture the subversive pre-Christendom dynamism that turned the world upside down from the margins" (Murray, 2004, 155).

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