

6. Bowthorpe - a divine accident?

In 1970 Bowthorpe, on the the western outskirts of Norwich, was a mere collection of fields arranged around some farm and church ruins. By the late 1970's, however, it had become three linked urban 'villages' which met together at those ruins. These now encompass shopping, health, church, youth, craft and and police centres. These became the hub for the well designed mix of council and private housing which made up the three villages.

Planners had realised that Britain's housing estates had failed to create wellbeing.. So they they planned a more holistic housing development where home, school and work, council and private homes interweave.. Ingredients that make for good community were in place before, rather than after, problems became endemic.

For Norfolk, this was something new, and the churches of Norfolk realised that here, at least, church and chapel should not compete. But how would the churches work together on such a joint enterprise? Their representatives met but once a year, and they had no precedent to go by.

Fortunately or otherwise, according to one's point of view, the Church of England's Bishop of Norwich, Maurice Wood, had Celtic blood in him. This meant he could, on occasion, sit lightly to churchy procedures and follow his intuition, a trait which did not endear him to the organisation-minded, but which did endear him to the person in the street. Since his was the largest donating church, he invited the representatives of the six sponsoring streams to interview and appoint me as the first minister, and to allow the local Christians on the ground three years in which to determine the shape the church should take. Only then would formal structures be agreed.

In January 1978 in the Village Hall of the first village, Clover Hill, the Anglican, Free and Roman Catholic Church leaders commissioned me, with the Christian Brethren, House Church, Pentecostals, Quakers and Salvation Army extending the right hand of fellowship to establish one family of Christians who would carry out Christ's will for the neighbourhood. 'I suppose there has never been a service in this country which has been so well represented in the licensing of a minister as this one' enthused the Bishop.

We, the first Christians of Bowthorpe, took this mandate seriously. We believed it was of God. Some of those who had given the mandate, however, had not thought through the implications. They assumed that the old parallel-track denominationalism would take precedence over the organic growth of 'one family of Christians'. Indeed, such a freedom to be organic would not have been permitted there before or afterwards. 'Bowthorpe', David Edwards, Dean of Norwich and the Church of England's most perceptive historian is reported to have said, 'is a divine accident'. -

So 'The Christian Church in Bowthorpe' became a laboratory. Some discoveries in this laboratory were noticed, and I have long been urged to make them better known, since they may provide models that may help others. Other discoveries remained unnoticed even by church members who were the workers in the laboratory. These

did not get incorporated into our official working model, yet these, too, are worth a mention, for others might do something with them.

There were weaknesses, of course. Others, or at least their wives, had turned the post down. They did not like the mud or the inadequately sized house. God must have had a sense of humour in allowing me to come. For I was not smooth or skilled in managing either my own emotional needs or people. I was given a vision as big as a large wood, but I did not know how to manage trees. I did not properly take into account that most people require simple boundaries if they are to feel safe and grow, and they can't cope with too much uncertainty. Despite these weaknesses, God had mercy on us. He worked on us until we could offer something even more important than these deficiencies, the willingness to learn to do his will in all things.

There was weakness in the starter process. I was sent to plant a Christian community that required complex lines of communication with the wider churches with neither a team nor a budget.. . Yet, because we had nothing but God, these very frailties increased Bowthorpe's potential as a laboratory.

These are some of the discoveries we made.

1. A church needs people called to give all to that place. Any person called to found God's work in a new area must lay down their life for its people. 'A shepherd lays his life down for the sheep' said Jesus (John: 10). I recognised that my love must be unconditional; I had to be a sign of faithfulness to a rootless population.

Jesus said 'You cannot serve two masters', but many of my ordained colleagues were being pulled in contrary directions. This was the result of imaging their ministry as a career, or of their spouse pursuing a career unrelated to their own calling, or of sending their children, for the sake of their future careers, to schools unconnected with their area. Although I had the advantage of being celibate, I knew only too well how many things, even within a person, can pull them in contrary directions. I knew only too well how an entire ministry can be dictated by fear of other people or of failure, by ambition or ego needs, by dependency or by causes which, however good, had become divorced from God.

So God had to deal with me, discipline me and have me. Two years after we began, defeat stared me in the face. Would the natural churchgoing people with cars each travel to the church of their taste in the city, rather than put up with the hassle of adapting their ways to local Christians of different tastes? Would there remain a mere handful of old and deprived people who lacked the will or means to travel, and would these constitute the church in Bowthorpe? At that time certain people wanted me to resign. I was near breaking point and asked someone in higher authority whether I should resign. I was told instead to go on leave for a month. During that month I had only one question: Had God called me to Bowthorpe? I found the peace that comes from knowing that I could let go of everything, including my dreams, and the gift of God's call remained at the core of my being. I did not have to strive. On my knees I pledged to God: 'Even if no one else responds to your call to build your Body in Bowthorpe, I will remain faithful, and I

will lay down my life unconditionally in love for the people here'. I had been brought to the point where I loved God above all things, and willed to share that constantly replenished love with the people.

Among our sponsoring denominations Baptists and United Reformed churches cherished this concept of the shepherds being in covenant with their flocks. The Church of England, which used to, was bent on marginalising 'the parson's freehold' so it could move clergy around like pawns on a managerial chess board; no longer would they be permitted to pledge long term commitment to their people. Mercifully, the Church of England granted me 'the freehold', the Methodists waived their policy of circulating ministers, and I was free to be a spiritual father to the people of Bowthorpe.

In future, if the Church of England is to nurture churches as communities, these must be led by people who cannot be arbitrarily dismissed, either because they are not on a central church pay roll, or because a Diocese recognises them as in a category similar to traditional religious communities, which are freed from Diocesan control in order to pursue their prophetic calling.

Fortunately, God does not only call ministers to lay down their lives for a place. Barbara, who was born in our part of Norfolk, longed to be a nun as a teenager, but was persuaded to work in a Birmingham solicitor's office for twenty years. Then came the call to return to her roots and to fulfil that earlier vocation in some fresh sense. She bought a new house on the edge of Bowthorpe, and through the church found the confidence to become a Franciscan tertiary, sell her house, and become warden of a small retreat cottage next to the new Worship Centre. As a contemplative deeply committed to the place she became a sign of God's faithfulness to a rootless generation. Others 'just moved' to Bowthorpe, but, once there, also became signs by making themselves fully present to the neighbourhood for the sake of Christ.

2. A church's foundation decisions must be in the will of God.

After three years we formalised the way we went about making decisions thus:

Decisions will be made in submission to the written Word of God,
interpreted by the Holy Spirit, in the belief that Jesus Christ will speak to us
and guide us if we seek Him'.

Some of these foundation decisions were that we would have an open door policy to all the residents, welcome as members all who made a commitment to Christ, meet in groups, build one another up in love, develop every member ministry, relate to the three villages, encourage the use of spiritual gifts. Hospitality had to be fought for with unceasing vigilance, against those who said 'Let the dead bury their dead' and those who said 'we are stressed and tired and we don't want church to make any demands on us so our groups must be for our consolation.'

The account of St. Andrew's Chorley Wood by ... is interesting. The author believes this church was free to grow without being strangled by an ecclesiastical straitjacket in part because in its early days as a daughter church, before it had the paraphernalia of a PCC, it was birthed in prayer.

3. The church must be a community.

The model of church that burned in me and other founding members was that of the early Jerusalem Christians: 'The company of those who believed were together. Attending the temple and breaking bread in their homes day by day, they shared food with generous hearts, praising God and having favour with all the people.' Acts 2:44-47. Community had evaporated in our society, though the longing for it was all the stronger. If either the congregation or the neighbourhood were to be just a collection of people, they would be nothing more than a collision of egos. I had read somewhere that 'community is a place where the connections felt in the heart make themselves known in bonds between people.' I felt certain that what the Church needed, more than new institutions or programmes, was to create Christian community.

The term "Community Church" was being used to describe Christian fellowships whose members radically shared their lives together: their time and money, their worship and leisure, their personal development and life decisions. This seemed so much better than the pew-sitting 'put-on-your-best-face-for Sunday' type of church. We tried to let this way of fellowship grow between us, though, since there was no 'heavy (i.e. dictatorial) shepherding', and some members were conditioned to the pew sitting ethos, the growth in community was somewhat hit and miss.

Despite the fact that we emulated their quality of sharing, the typical Community Church seemed to me only half of the biblical model. Members joined a typical Community Church on the basis of attraction to like-minded Christians; they neglected to relate in an equally Christian way to fellow Christians where they lived. That kind of church often failed to renew the neighbourhood where it worshipped, because it was not of the people of that neighbourhood. Some, though certainly not all of these churches, siphoned talents from other churches that should have been used to support Christ's faithful few in blighted areas; or they colluded with Christians who left their local churches to join them because they were in flight from their own flaws. Such criticism may not be valid in areas where there is no sense of neighbourhood, but Bowthorpe had many of the ingredients that go to make up a neighbourhood.

I felt that a true community church serves the neighbourhood in which it is set. Our church was meant to be to the neighbourhood, what the heart is to the body. Nevertheless it is a humanly impossible leap from our individualistic churches and society to the Christian community life that is needed to turn a neighbourhood Godwards. I had to accept that this is possible only if a range of factors are in place, and only if a deep work of God takes place.(x) How to take the temperature of a neighbourhood

What were the building blocks of community in Bowthorpe? The first was to share ourselves as we really were with our fellow Bowthorpe Christians whoever they were. 'That is a recipe for disaster' warned leaders of some new churches. They had developed 'successful' churches by offering a distinctive brand, running with those who accepted this, and dispensing with those who could not accept it. But I felt that while it was true that these 'successful' churches were proliferating, they formed but a larger slice of a diminishing cake. For most of the population Christianity lacked credibility precisely because the different church streams were

locked into their own conflicting traditions. They did not move as one family. Even within one church, such as the Church of England, evangelical, catholic and liberal wings put 'party' above organic relationship. Thoughtful people were leaving that church because it lacked this organic mark of true church. We believed that, although it was a huge mountain to climb, what we were attempting was something all the churches would have to attempt if they were to be credible in the third millennium.

At first we each brought our different masks and sets of jargon, which made our gatherings uncomfortable. Mark Phippen, a young man who was to become a wise counsellor, pointed out that the chips we knocked off each other were chips from our unreal, falsely religious, unloving selves; what emerged was our more compassionate, true humanity. As we accepted one another, warts and all, we grew in unity in diversity, which is true community.

The second building block of community was for church programmes to be inspired by members, rather than members being steamrolled into a church blueprint. Potential church members who move into an area often face limited and unpalatable choices. They have to squeeze themselves into an institution that does not exist for them, and which presses them to do church jobs because there is no one else to do them, even if this drains their personal and family life of vitality. Maybe the church is dominated by projects run by committees, or it is a preaching house. What these potential members need is the flexibility of a family, and an affirming of their own patterns and creative energies, so that in some cases projects may grow out of these. There were times when we failed in this aim, but then we tried to restore it.

The third building block of community was a core of church members called to be available through the week within a common framework of prayer and service. A community, like a person, has to have an identity. This requires it to have consistent features. Mere friendship between church members whose schedules, job changes or house removals are decided on a private basis does not provide this. God called some people to set aside such considerations as these and to become available to service the church and the neighbourhood on a regular, long term and often week-day basis. A number of people bought a house in obedience to God, even against their own inclination, in order to become available in this way. Some lived very simply rather than take a full-time salary, others took retirement. A few committed themselves to daily public prayer together. One became a Voluntary Church Assistant at our local Church Middle School. Others took responsibility for parents, toddlers and creche facilities or for pastoral care of the neighbourhood and the church.

In the history of Christianity we find that God not only calls people to special tasks, he occasionally calls a person to a place. The Russian Staretz is a shining example of this. When a place has such a person it anchors it in God, and builds community at an unconscious level. We were blessed that God called one or two people in this way.

The fourth building block of community was a commonly accepted life style. Community is only possible if some values and ways of relating are commonly accepted. These need to go beyond ways of handling failings, to ways of building up

individuals, the church and society. In a church with true community there will be people of widely different viewpoints, assumptions, temperaments, and sometimes clashing wills. Disagreements are not signs of failure, they are tests of character. The way in which the leaders and members handle disagreements will decide whether community grows, or whether the church becomes sectarian or ingrown.

We had four rules for dealing with disagreements:

Do not criticise an individual in front of others.

Forgive others, even if you disagree with them.

Deal with a fault in someone by talking it through face to face, always

seeking the spiritual progress of the other person. Then they, not feeling judged, can behave freely, because they know that even if they make a mistake they will not be belittled.

If this fails and others are being harmed, bring it to the Church leaders in confidence.

We also emulated the Bishop of Norwich who told how, as a parish priest, he read extracts from the Rule of the Taizé Community in France to his Church Council: 'Express in a few words what you feel conforms most closely to God's plan, without imagining that you can impose it.'

4. Church buildings can become become a spiritual home.

A person needs a home: so does a neighbourhood. Jesus reminded people that the Jewish place of worship was to be like a home that was open to all people (Mark 11:17). A spiritual home is a place where you can relax amid familiar objects, blow your top, find corners for privacy, space to be still. It should mirror Jesus' teaching about our heavenly home - "a place with many rooms" (John 14:2)

Few church buildings in Britain have the feel and function of a spiritual home; secularising drives have marginalised church buildings.

In early days we opened a shop unit each day in the first village of Clover Hill and named it 'The Open Door'. The secret of its success was that someone lived over the shop. The church was seen to be a home in the midst of the people. We realised this when a screaming young woman sought sanctuary one night before Christmas. As we locked the door behind her she told us her boy friend was chasing her with a knife and would kill her. But before their quarrel began he had also told her 'If ever you're in real trouble you can always go to the Open Door.'

As time went on we were led to establish a Worship and Work area around the church- and farm- ruins at the centre of the three villages. This was serviced by a spectrum of people. Robin Manley Williams opted for a three day week in the Civil Service in order to voluntarily oversee the building of a new Worship Centre. Certain church members established Bowthorpe Community Trust, which renovated the two farm cottages next to the Worship Centre for the use of members committed to this vision. Barbara Fox, a Franciscan Tertiary lived in one, and the Tomlinson family in the other. The Trust purchased and renovated old harness rooms nearby and made them into wood workshops for people with learning difficulties, and a craft shop where local folk could sell their crafts and find a listening ear. Peter Tomlinson became the manager.

Later, leaders of sponsoring denominations became trustees or patrons (including Anglican and Roman Catholic Bishops and Methodist Chair of District), but we began with little professional or business expertise, and even had builders begin to renovate the cottages before their ownership had passed from the city council to the Community Trust! Who in authority would support such a shaky experiment at this stage? Fortunately Michael Handley, who was then Archdeacon of Norwich, concluded that 'this project is so hair brained it might just be of the Holy Spirit'. He became chair of trustees. Michael Handley was right. Over the years human, management or financial problems have arisen which threatened to close the whole thing down. Yet in extremity several people allow themselves to fall to the bottom of the pit until the Holy Spirit alone bears them up, and brings resolution.

Barbara had a vision.

We persuaded the Diocese to build Church House, where I lived, opposite the cottages. My sister Sally used the top floor, and various others shared the guest room at different times. Raffaele Zuppari, a former Verona Brother and separated from his wife, spent two years with us, and his children made themselves at home at week-ends. For a time six people meet fortnightly to explore whether they were called to adopt a common Rule of Life. Since some of these were Roman Catholics I sought the advice of Alan Clark, Roman Catholic Bishop of East Anglia. He was in favour of a Rule of Life shared by Christians of different church traditions, so long as it required each to be loyal to their own church. As it turned out, however, God moved most of the six on. Bowthorpe for them proved to be a helpful but a half-way house.

In order to make the Worship Centre a spiritual home to the neighbourhood we made sure the design was welcoming, the chairs were comfortable, and that there were facilities for refreshments, creche, nappy changing, the disabled, the hard of hearing and children. We tried to make it a safe place, where old and young would feel emotionally secure. Children had an outside play area and an inside display area. Parents and toddlers, parenting classes, housing association meetings, family parties, special council meetings as well as normal church groups used the building.

We felt the secret was for a core community to use the church building as its focal point, until the atmosphere of the whole place became warm, worshipful, welcoming and authentic. As in a family home, all sorts of adaptations will be made to the buildings and furnishings that express this spirit. The church office was part of the Worship Centre. Because it was used in these ways, it was open every day, though sadly not all day.

Our activities revolved around the daily Morning and Evening Prayer. These were mainly meditative in style, but there was also a weekly early morning revival prayer meeting and an informal evening prayer meeting. Different styles of prayer should be expressed in the one building, so that people of different temperaments could relax. This was not easy to create. Our principle was simplicity in the main worship area, and adornment in small areas. Visual aids that offended some people would be brought in only for a specific act of worship.

Our intention was that the joys, sorrows, anger, questioning, fun, love of life, and creativity of young and old in the neighbourhood should find expression through the building. We hosted wedding receptions for couples too poor to finance their own, we held public barbecues and I was delighted that my farewell 'do' took the form of a Karaoke in the Worship Centre, organised by young people. During my time in Bowthorpe, we had only made a beginning. Yet we felt affirmed when a member returned from a visit to the pilgrimage church at Medugorge, which was then in Yugoslavia. 'It was like walking into a warm womb' he told us, 'and I feel like that about our church, too.' On the first Sunday of each month a shared lunch followed the morning service.

5. A clear vision is vital

The fourth lesson we learned in our little laboratory is that an effective work requires a vision that is clear to all and owned by the congregation. That is not a new discovery, of course, but so many churches have forgotten it.

How do you find a corporate vision? We asked, as we sought to wait on God with pure hearts, what was the biggest mountain that came into our view? The vision needs to be in the heart as well as the head, otherwise it is likely to come from the controlling ego. As you subsequently climb the mountain you sometimes see only bare rock before you, but the memory of the vision spurs you on and up.

As we waited on God we knew that we were to build one family of Christians for one neighbourhood, and that this family was called to create an environment of love at its heart where the hurting people moving in would find healing. As the process of deepening, enlarging and updating the vision continued, more of the members were included. Eventually the entire church, through its groups and leaders meetings, was involved in drawing up a detailed vision statement with the title 'Christ for the Community: The Community for Christ'. We wanted every person in the community of Bowthorpe to realise, through us, that Christ was 'for them' and was not just interested in a churchy few; equally we wanted our church community to be so dedicated to Christ that eventually the whole Bowthorpe community would be for Christ, too.

Detail is useless if the nub cannot be grasped by any passing jogger. That point was made by the prophet Habakkuk long ago (Habakkuk 2:2), and was being made by effective businesses who promoted the 'headline vision statement'. As we searched for the right headliner we thought of our early call to love the people of the neighbourhood and our later call to locate our physical presence where the three villages met. The phrase 'A Heart for Bowthorpe' emerged. We produced a logo depicting the three villages with a heart in their middle. Inside the heart two hands were clasped in friendship around a Cross. This logo was reproduced on a banner which hangs in the Worship Centre, and graces the cover of the neighbourhood magazine which goes to every home each month.

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6. Listening can provide the church's agenda

In my work with the Bible Society, which preceded my ministry at Bowthorpe, I related to over a thousand churches across different counties. Many good church people were groaning; they were expected to squeeze their unique lives in to the frozen frameworks of threatened clergy or decaying custom, neither of which would have survived if they had not been artificially protected from the cut and thrust of the market place. The personalities, creativities, needs and ideas of these Christians were not listened to. I identified with them, for often I, too, had suffered a similar fate. The church which I served as minister, I told myself, would not treat people like that. But how well did I know myself?

I had to face the facts that my father had not listened to me as a child, that I felt threatened by any person who reminded me of my father, and easily blocked off what they said. I also became too busy, which robbed me of the time needed to process what people communicated. So I was a patchy listener. Something had to be done. We had to build listening into the fabric of the lives of our church and of our neighbourhood.

We did this in a number of unobtrusive ways. I committed myself to routinely listen in quiet to the whispers of the Holy Spirit and to write these down in order to catch hold of them. We aimed not to compile church agendas before we had prayed, and we included times of silent listening in our meetings and worship. On fifth Sundays we shared in Quaker meetings, when nothing was spoken unless it was thought to be a prompting of God. Periodically we held a day vigil. People wrote on an acetate anything they felt God was saying to the church. My sister Sally once or twice fashioned these into a picture which hung in our prayer room as a reminder of God's current word to his people. Occasionally a member would offer a prophetic word which the leadership weighed and conveyed to the church. We made a conscious effort to fit our decisions and structures into the flow of God's will, not vice versa; we were willing to be provisional, or to be proved wrong.

A whole swathe of people still remained un-listened to. There was the population outside the church, and inside the church there were the inarticulate and the dissatisfied. It took me years to accept that it was as important to listen to people's frustrations as to their 'spiritual' words. We learned to occasionally break Church Meetings into small discernment groups each of which reported back, and we invited each regular group in the church to start their term's session with prayer and seeking God's targets for their coming year.

A midweek lunch time prayer group developed whose members listened to God on behalf of the church and of the neighbourhood. Sometimes they would sense pain in a particular part of Bowthorpe, and would pray at that place. They 'picked up' the pain of one street where crime and violence was taking over, and prayer-walked it. Days later a street resident was arrested; it was revealed he had been the local drugs ring leader with a mafia-like influence. Life improved for that street.

The idea of the whole church discovering God's marching orders by listening to the neighbourhood's pains and aspirations was new to evangelical members, who wondered how God could speak to people who did not worship him. Yet some of us were becoming aware that most residents perceive the church as a privatised concern for a minority who want religion. They do not feel the church is in solidarity with their good, even though non-religious, aspirations. Businesses and political

parties conducted listening exercises in order to respond more effectively to the people they were trying to reach; the first indigenous church in Britain and Ireland was so effective because it heard the cries of the people; was there any good reason why we shouldn't listen?

Raymond Fung, Evangelism Secretary of the World Council of Churches, was urging churches to draw up an agenda with people of good will in the neighbourhood. He called this an Isaiah Agenda, because passages such as Isaiah 65. 20-23 provide examples of agendas of justice and peace which require partnership with the population. (x) Raymond Fung, How a Local Congregation Evangelises and Grows, World Council of Churches.

Our leaders explored how we might harness the following modern equivalent of Isaiah's agenda to the population of Bowthorpe:

- * Every child cherished from conception
- * Every old person living and dying in dignity
- * Every person having a place of their own and fruitful work
- * Joy and safety in the streets
- * Trust between age- and ethnic- groups
- * Harmony with the environment and God.

We were a long way from the whole church owning this approach, but we took a hesitant step or two towards becoming a church that listens to the people. These commitments were included in the Vision Statement that the church eventually adopted: 'We cherish that which is of God in each person. We value everyone because God wants to be Father to them. We listen attentively.'

7. Networking the neighbourhood involves osmosis

If we believed that the church in a neighbourhood is like a heart in a body, how could the church (the heart) bring renewal to the body (the neighbourhood)? We realised it could not do this if it was detached from the arteries of the body, which were the formal and informal neighbourhood networks. I knew large churches which had many local organisations but they never seemed to get under the skin of the neighbourhood. How could we avoid getting on a treadmill of neighbourhood activities which in the end left both us and the neighbourhood exhausted?!

A visiting preacher gave us a single word which in hindsight seemed to be a word from God: Osmosis. Osmosis is a biological process which echoes the process of human friendship. As local Christians draw in human life from the friends they make in the natural course of events (neighbours, shopping, schools, groups, pubs, sports, etc) so their friends in turn imbibe their life, which is permeated by Christ. Christ in the believer filters out impurities that would otherwise be imbibed from their friendships: the filters make human rejection of the people concerned unnecessary.

The heart represents the faith, prayer, and love, work, of the Christian community. If the heart is to transform the neighbourhood, the Church needs an appropriate agenda for the neighbourhood. The outward arrows represent church ministries that reach people on the fringe of church life. The Engel Scale (see Work Book -page) suggests that the population is made up of people with various levels of awareness of God. The majority of conversions come from people who do not

only believe in a supernatural being, but who also have some relationship with the church. Therefore a strategy to enlarge the church fringe makes sense.

We realised that ideally, if the church was to use the neighbourhood networks effectively, it needed not only a right attitude, and a neighbourhood agenda that spoke to residents' aspirations, but also a practical programme for as many networks as possible. At one stage we tried to offer every voluntary organisation a regular visit, to affirm the good things in their work. Sometimes, agencies compete, or specialise so that the individual feels no one is concerned for her or him as a whole person. The church can play the role of coordinator between agencies, and seek to affirm that which is of God in each.

The first residents group at Clover Hill had started a newsletter that went to every home. As numbers grew this would become a big job that required time, skills, and teamwork. The time came when nobody could be found to take it on, and they pleaded with me to do so. So it came about that church people have ever since run the monthly magazine that goes to every home free of charge every month. 'Bowthorpe News' is paid for by advertisers and embraces the three villages. Without the philosophy behind it - free and unbiased coverage of every activity that builds up the common good - it could many times have been hi-jacked by this or that pressure group and become an agent of division. In voluntary work of this scale casualties are legion through overwork or misunderstandings. I believe it is no accident that one of the praying core church community has been editor to this day.

It often takes a generation to build up community in a new housing area. So it was good news when a local doctor told me 'After only five years we have a community which normally would take twenty five years to develop'.

Our problem, however, was that though the neighbourhood was developing well, and the core of the church was strong, the general congregation was weak, in need of nurture and clearer communication. With the arrival of Bill and Linda Bradbeer (Bill as Associate Minister and Linda as Administration Coordinator) we began to build up the middle ground. Learned the lesson that to be spiritual father in such a wide orbit cannot mean you are personally involved in everything.

8. Hospitality means creating spaces for others

I was clear from the start that the spirit of hospitality was meant to pervade the entire Christian community and to be expressed in every aspect of our work. Hospitality had been a primary characteristic of the early churches in the New Testament and in our own land, but most 20th century churches were not thought of as natural spiritual homes to which the surrounding population gravitated. But how do you build hospitality into a church? We had to learn the age old truth that if you try to run before you can walk you fall flat on your face.

Those present at my commissioning as Bowthorpe's first minister were invited to a bun fight in my house. Some teenagers from a tough nearby estate were outside, so I invited them, too. It was the first time they had been invited to eat in some one else's home. Since we had decided to precede Sunday worship in the Village Hall with breakfast, I invited the teenagers to that, too. They brought more friends, and scoffed food and drink before locals had theirs. Locals informed me that they would

not allow their children to come to our services to hear these teenagers' filthy language. We had to ban misbehaving teenagers from the morning services and offer them an alternative on Sunday nights. In time Sunday night numbers swelled so much that, since we lacked the helpers to sustain good order, we had to cease meeting. I was distraught at this missed opportunity of mission, but one of our first leaders, Peter Groom, had greater wisdom. 'God sent you here to start a congregation, not a youth work' he reminded me. 'Once a congregation is firmly established it can sustain a youth work too; but if you start the other way round you won't have a congregation.'

The churches who first so effectively evangelised Britain offered hospitality within a framework of prayer, work, and house rules; they were not taken over by those who abused hospitality. We had to establish a framework like that. Once the rhythm of prayer and work was established in the Worship and Work area it became possible.

We increasingly realised that hospitality means providing an open space for people to find themselves and God. So many churches press newcomers into their mould. The alternative model is to provide newcomers a space in which they find their true calling in God and then, in due course, in the Body of Christ. This approach must apply to worship as much as anything; so much worship is inhospitable. It is controlled by factors such as judgementalism towards those whose style is different, prejudice about what is appropriate in English (or ...) culture, self-selecting majority taste. We provided areas for refreshments, quiet, play, and offered styles that suited people of different temperaments in our Sunday worship. Nevertheless, some people could not cope with the bustle or lack of anonymity of Sunday worship; some of these felt at home at weekday services when they could just sit and be themselves.

We achieved this quality of hospitality patchily, and constant vigilance was needed if it was not to be eroded. The Church Vision Statement of 1996 stated:

'We try to communicate clearly what we feel, to be real, and to share something of ourselves. We keep a space in our hearts for each person we meet. When our situation permits, we welcome others into our homes. As time and energy permit, we are available to others. We renounce the spirit of control that makes others feel excluded.'

9. The separated strands of Christianity are to be woven together again. During the second millennium three great strands of Christianity became separated, as Leslie Newbiggin once pointed out. There was the catholic strand of community around the Real Presence of Christ in the Eucharist; the Protestant strand of personal conversion around the Bible; and the Orthodox (and in a sense the Pentecostal) strand of worship around an experience of the Holy Spirit. It was laid upon me that God wanted to weave these three strands together again, and that we were to let him weave them together in us as he willed.

This began to happen. . The church decided that the Lord's people should gather round the Lord's table on the Lord's day as an expression of our being one community; that Bible study, personal conversion and witness to Christ were

necessary for all who became members; and that as a church we would invite and use the gifts and graces of the Holy Spirit.

Each Sunday all ages gathered in a large circle round the edge of the building for Communion, for even those who did not take the bread and wine received a blessing. Protestants were becoming sacramental. Peter Groom, one of our preachers, put it like this: 'Some believe that Christ is on the table, all of us believe that He is at the table.' Isn't that sufficient basis for all to receive the Lord in this way? Moreover, when Protestants discovered that God could heal physical bodies at Holy Communion, it became no big deal to believe God's Spirit could transform matter, including bread and wine.

Since we had espoused the Pentecostal gifts we invited Pentecostals to look upon us as the Pentecostal Church for the area. We had to bring in one rule to safeguard equality of regard for members who did not speak in tongues. The Orthodox were not formally linked to the church, since they barely had a presence in the city when we began. However a custom, which Orthodox introduced to France's ecumenical Taize Community, of kissing the Cross became a regular option at our Friday night Prayer round the Cross; and I introduced ikons to my personal prayer cell which was open for all to use.

These were weavings of the Spirit. There were also weavings of the Body, to do with the procedures of our formal sponsoring denominations. These sometimes seemed interminable, but there was fruit. The church is part of the Norwich Methodist circuit which made me a Recognised and Regarded Methodist Minister. The last circuit superintendent under whom I served, Alan Cox, turned down the chance to be a professional footballer in order to become a minister of the Gospel. Under his leadership the Bible Society completed a mission audit of the circuit which pinpointed what each church needed to focus if it was to grow. The church was also part of the United Reformed Church, which recognised me as a URC minister and of The Norfolk Association of Baptist Churches, which recognised me as a Minister to Baptists. I cherished the heartfelt prayer meetings of the Baptist Ministers fraternals. Roman Catholics had shared use of the Worship Centre and their mass for Sunday which was held on Saturday night was quite a draw. An Anglican played the piano and there were times when we did things like carol singing or charity collecting together. Both the Roman Catholic and the Anglican bishops and the Methodist Chairman of District were co-patrons of Bowthorpe Community Trust., The Religious Society of Friends also had shared use of the Worship Centre and hosted Quaker meetings on every fifth Sunday evening of the month. I was regarded as an adherent.

There were sacramental weavings. Baptism, that great sacrament of the Christian church was a glorious source and symbol of the renewing Presence of God in the first millennium. Now it was too often a ritual tug of war between churches which had a déjà vu feel about it. I believed it could again become a uniting source of inspiration for the world's parched and pining souls. We agreed with all the churches that in Bowthorpe we would 'respect one another's baptism'. A large baptistery was placed in the middle of the new Worship Centre. Baptisms by immersion of new, unbaptised Christians were thrilling occasions which drew in fresh people, uplifted the congregation, and accorded with the teaching, if not the practice, of all sponsoring denominations. Other local churches, both Anglican and

new, used our baptistery. I urged the Church of England to provide at least one baptistery in every archdeaconry. Something of the spirit of the early church, when new Christians were baptised after months of preparation, was being recovered.

In common with increasing numbers of local churches across the denominations we baptised infants 'on the understanding that they are brought up as Christians within the family of the Church' (X) Baptism of Children in The Alternative Service Book of the Church of England 1980. Parents who wished this were offered a 'Down Your Street' course of preparation. Many other parents who were not ready to make a Christian commitment nevertheless wanted God's best for their babies. We produced a people-friendly Service of Blessing and Dedication of Infants which gave parents virtually everything they wanted. They could have music and godparents, christening gowns and a naming ceremony, a celebration and a certificate. (x) A revised version of the Bowthorpe service is contained in Celtic Blessings for Daily Life Ray Simpson (Hodder & Stoughton 1998). This was successful in waves, enough to convince me that here was an opportunity for the church at large. Its effectiveness was weakened by the lack of a nation-wide alternative to infant baptism. I urged the churches' Joint Liturgical Group, whose ecumenical service for funerals was being widely taken up, to provide a service for infant blessing which would meet an even greater need. Alas, they failed to grasp the opportunity, as did the Church of England when it revised its Service Book at the turn of the millennium. It is an opportunity waiting to be taken up by the churches. The leaders of Norfolk churches had opposing views on baptism, and failed to give us any united guidance. We were the only Christian community in Norfolk which had to grasp this nettle, though across the world many were grappling with this issue. The world churches, after meeting for decades, produced a historic report, Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry. We hammered out a baptism policy based upon its recommendations:

We would all fully recognise the baptism of each person who has accepted Jesus as Lord and who has either been baptised and confirmed, or baptised as a believer.

On the one hand there would be no indiscriminate infant baptism, and on the other hand those who had been baptised as infants would not be rebaptised. Christians were encouraged to renew their baptism, and this could include sprinkling or immersion in water.

Sadly, the Church of England refused to heed the Report's call to end indiscriminate infant baptism, and British Baptists refused to heed its call not to rebaptise. The cold war continued and we became whipping boys. It was crucifixion. The pain was softened a little when a Churches Evaluation Report on Bowthorpe stated in 1993: 'The initiation practices at Bowthorpe have, in our judgment an integrity, as an interim solution... which deserve understanding and acceptance. We recommend ... the (national) Churches to provide services that enable candidates to re-appropriate their baptism and that this process includes evidence from Bowthorpe....'

In his auto-biographical book *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (1966) Thomas Merton wrote: 'If I can unite in myself the thought and devotion of Eastern and Western Christendom, the Greek and the Latin Fathers, the Russian with the Spanish Mystics, I can prepare in myself the reunion of divided Christians ... If we want to bring together

what is divided we cannot do so by imposing one division upon another or absorbing one tradition into another. We must contain all the divided worlds in ourselves and transcend them in Christ'. In some deep and mysterious way, God was speaking also to me along these lines.

God gave me a love for the distinctive, God-given charism of each of the church streams, and I felt I was to make these part of my own life. These charisms had become bolted on to the rigid and rusting scaffolding of the denomination concerned, but now God was calling us to prize the charism free so that it could run its course freely. The charism was to be like yeast in the dough of the whole Christian church. This approach has been popularised in the series of books entitled *The Inner Game of ..* . (Published by Pan, these include *The Inner Game of Tennis* and *The Inner Game of Music*). The best path is not to focus on mastering the externals, but to abandon oneself to the inner meaning and flow of the 'game', whether it is golf, music or a serious business.

Methodism's special gifts to the whole church seemed to me to be John Wesley's Scriptural holiness, passion for mission, and the opportunity to make decisions democratically. Liberty of conscience of individual or groups of believers was a Baptist charism. The ability to gather around the Word of God freed from institutional baggage and to respond flexibly was a URC charism. The charism of the Roman Catholic Church is obedience, obedience to Jesus in the ministers and sacraments of His Body, who safeguard its unity and focus community. Cherishing that which is of God in each person, and listening to that which is of God in oneself were Quaker charisms. Being the church that provides hospitality for all these traditions and for all the people of this land was a Church of England charism. These charisms, of course, were hidden by much other stuff, but I felt they were the charisms as God might see them. They were to be embraced and lived until they were organic. If the church in humble Bowthorpe can bear witness, however haltingly, to these charisms, there is hope that other churches will too.

10. Churches are meant to be Healing Centres

I met a local carer every month at a service in a Sheltered Housing Centre. She and her husband had various ailments but were active and perky. It was only months later, when I dropped in to their home for a cup of tea, that I learned something that shook me. She travelled 140 miles once a month to see a healer. 'Oh', I stammered, 'you don't need to go that far you know, actually your local church offers healing.' It had never entered her head that healing was something a local church would offer. Once she knew, she availed herself of it. This pattern repeats itself throughout the country. On the day I write a visitor to a hotelier, learning that she did not feel well, offered her an hour's healing prayer which she gratefully accepted. The hotelier goes to her local church: the visitor describes himself as a shaman and is not a Christian. 'Since Princess Diana's death there has been a massive change', he tells me, 'and shamans like myself are in great demand by all sorts of people, from the business to the leisure world.'

A large Health Centre was built that faced the Worship Centre across the public car park at Bowthorpe. How were we to relate to it? We came to see our role as that of partners: we offered healing from the inside out, the Health Centre offered healing from the outside in.

Soon after I first arrived at Clover Hill the local doctors came to lunch. In one sense our resources were nothing compared to their infrastructure, but we told them about the two meagre resources we had. The first was a church member who could offer some counselling; the second was a group who met weekly to intercede for the sick. The doctors helped us to develop both resources. They offered a room in their surgery, free of charge, where we offered counselling; and they asked us to keep a record of answers to our prayers for the sick, and to let them know the results. This we did, and it built up our faith. They also suggested we keep a Book of Remembrance in which could be recorded the names of loved ones who had died. On the anniversary of a bereavement, people often went to the doctor, feeling depressed. We, they suggested, could visit the bereaved at this time, if we kept a record. The Remembrance Book became an established part of the pastoral care offered by the church.

John Wimber impacted British churches in the 1980's. His message was this: Churches should expect God to do what he says he'll do, and they should provide for ways of responding. We should expect God to heal at normal church services, and should provide a team of people to pray for those who ask for healing. Several people in the church came back from meetings inspired by John Wimber convinced that we must introduce this as part of our main Sunday worship, and not just as a 'below the counter' service. The church leaders agreed, we drew up guidelines and commissioned a healing ministry team. After I left Bowthorpe this was restyled a Prayer and Listening team. As with all healing work, some people were healed physically and others were not, but always God did something that would not otherwise have been received.

For some people the mornings were too noisy, so we instituted every third Sunday evening as a time of prolonged, quiet healing ministry growing out of worship and a short exhortation. The members of the healing team stationed themselves in pairs in the four corners of the building, and people went to them for ministry while the rest prayed or listened to background music. Sometimes it was exciting, like the time a young unemployed man who asked for prayer for his piles to go. He had a job interview to which he would be unable to go since he could not sit. We prayed without much faith, but his piles went immediately! Sometimes it was like cars regularly coming to refuel. I have no problem with schizophrenics, for instance, coming for a regular refilling and reclaiming.

Our danger was that the healing ministry was reserved for church insiders. How could we take it to the marketplace so that people like that lady carer would no longer need to go to spiritist or manipulative healers who did not link them up with God, the Source of healing? The Norfolk M.E. Association invited us to have a stall, along with many alternative therapy practitioners, at their annual Fayre. As a result we invited them to a Healing Service for M.E. sufferers. We were also invited to have an entry in a Directory of Alternative Therapies which circulated in libraries and health centres throughout Norfolk. Yes, there was a risk of being tarnished by association, but this was a risk Jesus often took, and so did we.

Where there are sympathetic medical practices some churches share a building and work hand in glove with them. We were not able to do that in my time, though our

members worked at the Health Centre in both salaried and voluntary capacities, and occasionally we collaborated in serving a patient.

The World Health Organisation defines health as 'a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity'.

Our deepest reality is as a spiritual being with a mind and a body. To live apart from God ultimately affects our mental and physical wellbeing, and this has a chain effect upon our environment. So for churches to be healing centres in the deepest sense, they have to foster holistic Christians. This underlay all our life together.

Holistic - the church as a compartment of life had no future ...

11. Churches must affirm God's goodness in human beings

I was brought up to believe that the two most important three letter words in the English language were 'God' and 'sin'. God was filled with goodness, humans were filled with sin, and the point of life was to take hold of a life line thrown to us by Jesus Christ, and just hang on. I, like so many others, was blind to a whole world. Our blindness was buttressed by key lines from such traditional sources as the Church of England Book of Common Prayer, which required us to confess that we were 'miserable sinners'. One day Vera, a member of the Religious Society of Friends, who were one of our six sponsoring denominations, informed me in no uncertain terms that she was NOT prepared to be called a miserable sinner. My reply so amused her that she spread it around Norfolk's Quaker Meetings - 'You may not be miserable but you are a sinner all right'!

Vera, and the Quakers, had an important point. Whereas Quakers bid us to relate to 'that which is of God in each person', we, in some of our preaching, were sending people back from Sunday services to face a hard week of work feeling more miserably sinful than when they came. More than one person told me that they simply could not cope with any more sermons which began, continued and ended by hammering home how sinful we all were. 'We struggle throughout the week with our human condition, trying to serve God; we need to celebrate when we gather on Sunday and to be affirmed; instead we go back feeling guilty, condemned and uncherished'. I began to see that the work of Christ was to free us from the things which stopped us being fully human. In our corporate life style we needed to enjoy one another as human beings, on Sundays we needed to celebrate the glory of God reflected in our own play and creativity and mutual love. Hopefully, a beginning was made.

12. Churches should be the most people friendly agencies around

We had no doubt that God led us to have a Worship Centre as our main focus. Nevertheless, something was lost when we ceased to meet in the village hall or school. Also, as numbers grew the leaders spent more time managing from the centre than being out there with the people. In theory that should not have mattered, for we used 'the flower pot model' of leadership. The flowers at the top of the pot were the church members inter-acting with the world through their daily life and work. The soil at the narrow bottom of the pot were the invisible leaders building up these church members. The weakness was that members often follow what their

leaders model. Office-bound Christians are not a good sight. We were in danger of becoming too churchy.

Yet our vision was that the church should be relevant to social needs, and be seen as a resource by the poor and the professional residents, and by agencies such as schools and Social Services. We should be a church for the desperate and needy, but also for the business and political community, reaching out to the locality and the world.

We appointed a Voluntary Church Assistant at our Voluntary Aided Church Middle School, and were involved in other local schools. We instituted a series of classes in parenting skills. Church members started or sustained a playgroup in a village hall, and others organised monthly services in each of the five Sheltered Housing Centres and in a Nursing Home. Some of our members turned a village hall into a classy Saturday Night Dive for young people which they named Twisters. The same people purchased a large derelict barn from the City Council with the aim of turning it into a Leisure and Community Centre; as I write they need more help if they are to realise their aims.

The greatest need was for a church full of keen Christians to let God be God in their everyday non-church situations. The pastor of Norwich Vineyard Church, Geoff Lawton put his finger on this: 'If we became more normal we'd see so much more happen'.

A people-friendly church works with the natural leaders of the area. After arriving at Bowthorpe I gradually gained the friendship of local councillors, doctors, teachers, police and social workers, but these tended to be non-residents. It was vital also to win the trust of residents who were emerging as natural leaders. Graham, the Clover Hill Newsagent was one of these. Shortly after I arrived he stood in the village centre, and I went to talk with him, but his ferocious hound became vicious, so I made a delicate retreat. Graham shouted: 'I thought you were a Christian. Where's your faith?' Making a quick mental adjustment and a heartfelt prayer, I sauntered lowly back rebuking the spirit of fear. To show Graham that I had taken his point seriously, I visibly made the sign of the Cross. A bridge had been crossed.

13. Good churches cherish animals and earth

This episode not only taught me something about working with natural leaders, it taught me something about the Holy Spirit and animals; a later episode taught me even more. We were praying for someone who was hurting. He and I sat each side of a sofa with Lucy the dog between us. As we asked the power of the Spirit to come upon him he went limp under the power of the Spirit. Thus was not unusual. We had not anticipated however, that our prayer would have the same effect on Lucy. She went limp, so much so that she fell on to the floor and lay there out to the world. In future years I was to read about many saints whose prayerful lives created a deep harmony with animals. God was teaching us that in ordinary every day churches there is meant to be this harmony. Of course, we must avoid sentimentality. 'Will you please christen my cat?', a lady asked me after I had conducted a service at the reopening of the local RSPCA animal home. 'Your cat has not sinned, so it does not need to be christened', I explained, 'but I will bless it'.

Cherishing the earth. A new resident knocked on my door. 'I stopped going to churches because they do not honour the earth' Judith explained. 'I tried New Age and American Indian communities who do honour the earth, but I left them because they do not honour Christ. I am looking for a church that honours both Christ and the earth.'

I gulped. Would this be one more example of a person thinking God's thoughts, even unwittingly, who bypassed the church because it was blind to these thoughts? We were committed to hospitality. Surely that meant making room for the insights as well as for the person of the Judith's of this world? 'Come and help us be a church like that' I suggested. I explained that the church had done a Green Audit (x), had closed its account with a bank which exploited the Third World, and that we had lived for a day as if in a Third World village, fetching water from our nearest river. The church cared for its gardens; no one, however, had taken on to look after the interior of the old church ruin, so Judith began to place plants in this flint walled setting.

Although we were a church without a churchyard, we created a garden of remembrance where ashes are scattered.

Shortly afterwards we held our first annual Blessing of the Earth service. We grieved for the violence done to God's earth, and we offered praise for the elements of earth air, and water. 'How like a mother is the soil the Lord has made; it contains us and feeds us, it warms us and upholds us' we prayed. 'Lord bless our land and your children who live by it.' Afterwards a new member, Gary, who had gained sensitivity through suffering, said: 'Something has changed. Now the earth of Bowthorpe can breathe freely again after all these years'.

At the second such service, in a dell by the as yet un built on fields of Bowthorpe, we were joined by some gypsy children. They helped to fasten a banner in the ground, proclaiming 'Bowthorpe, the Community for Christ.' It was a symbolic offering back of the land to God, in partnership with those whose families had lived there long before the houses were built.

14. Roots matter

David Parker, The Vineyard Churches' prophetic leader from North America, was giving a talk at a Day of Renewal in Bowthorpe. He used a phrase of London Underground announcers, 'Mind the gap', as his theme for talks around the country. He would urge his hearers to mind the gap between the church and the people, between the Bible and their behaviour and so on. As he spoke at Bowthorpe he suddenly looked at a glass seat we had placed in an alcove of this modern Worship Centre, beneath which the foundations of an ancient Saxon church could be seen. 'I have never said this before in my talks', David said, 'but I feel very strongly the Lord has drawn to my attention the following point: mind the gap between your ancient roots and the present.'

We had links with a small, weak church in a vandalised housing estate. It decided to trace and then publicly portray the story of the area and its church. A sense of identity brings confidence which can revive a church. This church turned a corner.

We decided to research and produce an illustrated booklet on Bowthorpe's ancient and modern history to help people 'mind the gap'. (x) Ray Simpson Bowthorpe, A Community's Beginnings (Open Door Publications 1982) Available at £1.50 plus p & P from The Hobby Horse, Bowthorpe Hall Road, Bowthorpe, Norwich NR1 9AA.

15. Housing estates need saints

I was making pilgrimage at the wooden prayer cell of Switzerland's national saint, the farmer and layman Nicholas Von der Flue when one of those rare and unmistakable commands from God came to me. I must turn a ruined blacksmith's forge on the site scheduled to become a vicarage into a rustic prayer cell. It must be dedicated to a nearby Norfolk saint, who was also a layman and a farm worker, as well as a healer, namely St. Walstan.

After casually mentioning this during the Norwich Churches Good Friday Procession, Jeremy Dearling, whom I barely knew, offered to make a sculpture of St. Walstan to stand in front of the prayer cell, which would also tell the inspiring story of Walstan to passers by. If I had known the hassles it would lead to I might have said 'no', but as it was, it seemed like a gift from heaven. This was a private venture, but Christians who had been conditioned to confuse representations of good people with idols thought it would do harm. In fact, it provided an antidote to the ghost obsessions school children exhibited when they came to this area, which was near a disused graveyard. We helped these children to focus on a warm and friendly Walstan rather than on the faceless figures they feared. The Bishop of Lynn, David Bentley, dedicated the cell to Christ during The Week of Prayer for Christian Unity, 'for the transformation of the collective unconscious life of the neighbourhood.'

Then Rabbi Lionel Blue visited Walstan. He was making a series of TV programmes on holy places of East Anglia. At the cell of Norwich's Mother Julian someone told him about St. Walstan and the cell. His weary film crew wanted to go home, but he insisted he must come. 'Jews aren't supposed to believe in saints' he told me before he sat, lost in thought, before Walstan. Suddenly he spoke, as if making an announcement to the world: 'Walstan is the answer to the yuppie. Every housing estate needs a saint'. The film crew went home, but Lionel's words live to this day.

Eldred Willey, a journalist for The Tablet, wrote an article about God's healing presence coming into the broken lives of people in the workshops next to St. Walstan. This was happening, he thought, because St. Walstan had been invited back into the area. Another resident pictured the farm-worker Walstan as being allowed by God to 'dig the soil of the hearts of the people of Bowthorpe', creating a God-consciousness in the neighbourhood. When two teenagers, who were widely known as lovable rogues, were killed riding a stolen motorbike, a whole generation of local young people were affected. It was to the Prayer Cell that many of them came, to grieve, to sit, to think, to pray, to place a flower or a note. With succeeding generations care was needed to prevent the cell being used as a hideout for crime. To maintain its accessibility to all and sundry was a calculated risk, but one worth the taking. Children, shoppers, trolley-men from the local supermarket, dog-walkers and others not directly connected with the church felt at ease enough to be still within its rough walls.

16. Worship should bring heaven to earth

I had prepared for my new ministry at Bowthorpe by listening to a cassette course for pastors by Jack Hayford, Pastor of The Pentecostal Church on the Way, at Los Angeles. When his ministry began there the church was quite small and rather dingy. Believing that the Lord is 'enthroned on the praises of his people' (Psalm 22:3) Jack and his pastoral team met in their church on Saturday nights to pray for the Sunday services. On one such night he felt they were being told to station themselves at the four corners of the sanctuary, and to extend their hands as though lifting up a canopy of praise. A sense of God's presence enveloped them. On repeating this another Saturday the building filled with a smoke-like golden aura; it seemed to them like the 'Shekinah glory' that long before had filled Israel's temple. Next day, though nothing was outwardly different from previous weeks, the congregation doubled. As the pastors reflected on this, they concluded that there were four angelic beings stationed at the same locations as the four pastors. 'The angelic beings had not taken their stations at our address', one of them commented, 'rather, our commitment to worship had aligned us with God's address.' (x) Hayford, Jack The Church On the Way (Zondervan 19)

The fact that a Pentecostal Church had learned to align its worship with the eternal worship of heaven brought a flicker of hope that this might be possible in a place such as Bowthorpe, which could relate to the down to earth culture of a church-on-the-way more easily than to that of churches with ethereal liturgies. I delighted in Eastern Orthodox liturgies, chanted under Byzantium domes that symbolised heaven embracing earth, which drew worshippers into heaven, but I also knew that their culture would not 'take' amongst mainstream Bowthorpe Christians at that time. Moreover, evangelical churches and our sponsoring denominations generally had lost the sense of heaven in their worship.

By offering praise on Saturday nights the Church on the Way pastors had harmonised with worship that was already in progress: the visible and the invisible realms had come together. This then became normal in their Sunday worship. Was this a key which could open the gates of heaven to us? Some Saturdays one of our worship team or myself walked the Worship Centre with uplifted hands forming a canopy of praise; later our Associate Minister did the same. Did this lead to a breakthrough?

In one sense it did not. That routine sense of linking in with the eternal worship offered by heaven eluded us in our Sunday worship, and still awaits fulfilment. But the way has been prepared. This was brought home to us on two occasions. When a faith sharing team from St. Andrew's Church, Chorley Wood, visited us, their leader, David Pytches, commented that the building had been released and was free for praise. One of our older members, Joyce, told me she heard monks singing during our worship time. Afterwards I discovered that the site of our modern Worship Centre had once been a monastery Chantry.

17. The woof and warp of a church is prayer.

St Paul urges us to 'pray in all ways' (Ephesians). We soon realised that a majority of a congregation either shrinks from or tires of any one programme of prayer that the leadership promotes. Yet prayer is basic, and is natural to human beings, though

it easily gets pushed out. Different temperaments, circumstances and seasons required different approaches. Yet these different approaches needed to be holistic and to become the weft and warp of our life together.

The twice daily meditative prayer in the Worship Centre at 9.15am and 7.0 pm was a mainstay. On Wednesdays we replaced the meditative prayer with an old style church prayer meeting. Another small group decided to meet at 7.0 am on Fridays to pray for revival. A Wednesday morning prayer group sought to discern what needs in the church and the neighbourhood God wanted to address, and they would then sometimes prayer walk in the street they had been directed to. A telephone prayer chain was formed that was activated when there was an emergency prayer need. Each church member undertook to pray for one other church member regularly. The 8 - 11 year olds ended their club meeting with prayer triplets. From time to time there were prayer vigils throughout a day, on a rota basis, which ended with a larger gathering. Vigillers wrote down on acetates things they felt God was saying and these were gathered together, and then expressed in a picture, which became a visual reminder of what God was saying to us during that season.

The place of contemplative prayer

18. Churches either overcome or succumb.

Churches, like cities and individuals, either go forward or they go backward. We cannot stay as we are, because we are living organisms. If churches sit on their laurels, they slide insensibly but inexorably down hill into zones of comfort, prejudice, hostility, over busyness, or pessimism. The bad frequently overcomes the good in our world, but Jesus called us to overcome evil with good ()

The worlds of business and politics know that regular reevaluation, remotivation and remarketing are essential to long-term survival. The worlds of sport and personal development know that the right diet, exercise and recuperation periods are necessary. Charismatic evangelicals stress the importance of spiritual warfare - identifying and praying against unseen forces that oppose God. This is one key element, but to overcome evil with good we need to link this with positive thinking, responsible living and creative lifestyle.

After some years waves of teenage vandalism threatened to turn the 'dream village' of Bowthorpe into a nightmare. Yuppies, including church members, moved out. Many who stayed had too low an image of themselves and Bowthorpe to halt a downward spiral. In such a situation, how should a church carry out Jesus' injunction to overcome evil with good? We sought a God-given strategy, and to affirm and work with good people who wanted to turn the situation round. Head teachers, police, youth workers, voluntary organisations, health and church workers met together. The approach was three-pronged. We planned how to raise residents' self image, and we brought about a change of tack in the local press. Certain good people made personal contact with the vandal-prone young people and with adults who influenced them. One local resident asked for my prayers before regularly walking and talking with the most disaffected in the early hours of the morning. Thirdly, we got the whole church praying.

Another wave which threatened to de-moralise residents and church members was violence to property. On several occasions one of our members witnessed children running away after smashing church windows. She did not stand aside. She followed them, confronted them, and went to their parents. Usually, this simple act of linking the act with the parents brought remorse, sometimes tears. Agreement was reached how they would make restitution. By taking responsibility in this way, and negotiating restitution without ill feeling, negative behaviour patterns were changed.

Sometimes, division can occur within a church which then succumbs to negative or defeatist dynamics. Our first fledgling members were highly motivated, and each tended to think this was their chance to fashion a church according to their ideal. Since everyone had a different ideal that was plenty of scope for upsetting one another. So we decided that we would not let the sun go down upon any anger, and we would give a love gift to someone who had been hurt by us. I was touched when our Music Director took a bunch of flowers to a packer in a local shop who had been upset by him.

A different and major test came to us years later. A young man came to faith through his baby's baptism, became an avid Bible student, asked to be filled with the Holy Spirit developed leadership skills and spiritual gifts some of which the rest of us lacked. In due course I took the risk of inviting him to lead an occasional evening service which was followed by personal ministry to individuals. The ministry period became longer and longer (and why not?) but the same women (it was almost always women) seemed to come for the same 'fix', and lie in the same spot, each time. Something new and powerful was happening, but was it building up all the people? A member of our healing team said to me: 'They are certainly tapping into power, but I feel Jesus is being shut out'.

I felt we needed more time to test this ministry. Then we learned (the young man was not transparent with us) that he had started meetings at his home. Women at these meetings were seen returning to their homes late at night, and husbands began to blame the church for the bad effect of these meetings on their wives. One or two of the women came to see me. They had been told their problems were caused by demons; if the problems remained after the demons had been cast out it was their lack of faith. They were crushed by guilt or fear that they were possessed by other demons. These women were being damaged, and, despite appearances, were going farther away from God.

We had to act. Our leaders met with the young man and asked him to cease his house meetings. He refused, so we told him we would have to make clear that his group was not authorised by the church. Before we could do so, however, he had delivered individual notes to the church members claiming that we were opposing a ministry of the Holy Spirit, and that he had no confidence in us. He then started a rival church.

How should churches overcome evil with good when this sort of thing happens? My reactions were a mixture of faith, fear, prayer and 'an eye for an eye'. I laid this before my spiritual director, who surprised me. 'Do not fall into the trap', he warned, 'of polarising into two groups based upon one being right and the other wrong. Go deeper than that. At the Cross all of us are miserable sods needing mercy.' So that

was how, privately and publicly, I tried to respond to this opposition: Not by using the weapons of force, blame or self-justification, but by being clear about the facts and seeking to bring all concerned to the Cross - that place where we become at one.

It was not easy. A war had been declared. Some months after this the BBC TV programme *Songs of Praise* featured our church. Many in Bowthorpe had their TV sets on, and evening worshippers gathered to watch it. Shortly before it was due to begin over half of Bowthorpe was blacked out; a power cut lasted for the duration of the programme. Our young rival church leader was reported as saying 'That's good, we were praying against it'.

Despite this, my spiritual director proved to be right. Our young breakaway had to learn hard lessons. The time came when we could embrace as fellow recipients of Christ's mercy.

19. Leaders can find God-given authority

I was not born into a family of leaders, nor was I bred in a public school that prides itself on leadership training. I missed compulsory conscription into the Armed Forces by three months, and the squashed child inside me did not know how to make effective relationships across the board in an adult world. My Church of England theological college provided me with no training in management, interfacing with the statutory agencies or in how to handle inner primal material. Yet God had called me to be the founding minister in a significant housing development. I knew I could not abdicate my responsibility.

I recalled the words of an Iranian MP who was a guest when I was a curate in London: 'You are responsible for the spiritual welfare of all the people in this place.' Was I? I recalled the words of a former English rugby player: 'You can grow in manhood by emulating Abraham, who talked through with God every decision he needed to take, and took it.' I made it my job to get training in missing skills at my own expense.

My natural style is to be inclusive, to be a monarch-maker rather than a monarch; to get a big vision, and facilitate others so that a thousand flowers bloom which are given coherence by the shared vision. This style does not appeal to those who define targets and exclude those who come outside them; nor does it appeal to those who want a directive leadership - any other style is considered weak.

I wanted to include house church Christians as well as those from traditional churches, and in order to get them on board I promised that there would be no Anglican take-over. From the first few Christians who joined us, we elected a group who conferred and made decisions. Unfortunately this group comprised incompatible people - echoes of fundamentalist Ian Paisley, Mother Teresa, half believing Don Cupitt, and charismatic David Watson.

There seem to be as many models of leadership as there are churches. Many church denominations began over disagreement about the form or style of their parent church government. At Bowthorpe a surface *modus vivendi* was agreed. I would minister to members of each of the churches within their own terms. Since I

was a Church of England incumbent I could not be sacked by the congregation as could a Baptist minister, but I made clear that I would not stay if it was the settled conviction of the congregation that I should move on. Members of the Church of England might honour me as a priest within the apostolic succession to whom they could make sacramental confession of sins, but, since Jesus told us all to aim for the lowest places, it seemed edifying to be treated by Free Church members as in no way special. The surface modus vivendi was not the problem.

The apostle Paul wrote to his ordained protege Timothy: 'Let no one despise your youth... Convince, rebuke, exhort... fulfil your ministry' (1 Timothy 4:1; 2 Timothy 4:2,5). I was determined not to impose what people perceived to be an anachronistic Church of England model on everyone; if I had, many Bowthorpe Christians would have joined a separate house church. I adopted the leadership style which draws out everyone's insights and proceeds by trial and error. This frustrated both insecure members who were used to mono-track churches, and strong personalities who could not get their way. The embryo congregation lacked coherence and direction., and I had to take a month's leave on account of stress. During this month I came to terms with the fact that God had actually called me as founding minister, and that I needed to accept his gift of inner authority, which was quite different to being authoritarian. On my return a beady eighty year old looked me in the eye: 'Leadership is not a few people scrabbling about in the mud' he told me.

We developed a leadership team of about six, which in time included both a full-time Anglican and a full-time Baptist minister, and a team of those who coordinated ministries such as children, youth, the elderly, administration, pastoral care, social matters, money, buildings, healing.

But there is much more to leadership than the framework in which it is exercised. The best leaders create a culture where people realise it is OK for leaders to make mistakes, and to learn from them without having to be attacked by those they lead. To do this they need to welcome one hundred per cent feed-back, which is a contemporary form of living in the light. I did not fully understand this principle, and I cringed if I received criticism in a public meeting rather than in private. I now realise that people should be able to tell a leader what he is doing wrong.

I felt God wanted me to be a spiritual father, in organic relationship to the local people. But the church machine, reflecting certain business practice says 'keep moving them'.

Leaders must be concept oriented to be successful; managers must be detail oriented. Almost every significant enterprise has been founded by a leader. Nevertheless, every enterprise that lives past its founder is taken over by a manager. Bowthorpe needed a manager.

20. The Church is a on a journey

History is littered with churches which began as a movement and ended as a monument. A regular visitor to Bowthorpe told me that most churches he returned to after a period away had not changed, they seemed stuck in a time warp. He felt that

we were a living organism; and noticed there were little adaptations, creative responses to fresh insights, people, circumstances, or seasons.

The Church is Christ's Body. Christ walked with God every day of his life. So must the church. In order for churches to be God's people on a journey rather than in a museum they need to listen to God, to the people, and to their dreams.

I had a dream. It was so powerful that it came back day after day. The whole of Bowthorpe turned out for a funeral. It was the funeral of a person named 'Mr. Bowthorpe'. The crowds went in procession down the last street in Bowthorpe and into the area of the crematorium. And I, Ray Simpson, led the procession.

Eighteen years before God had told me to lay down my life for Bowthorpe. Now he was telling me I had to die to Bowthorpe, else it would become an idol. God was moving me on.

I knew two things. First, Bowthorpe was a half way house towards the church that is meant to emerge in Britain. Second, God was moving me on. Bowthorpe needed ordained leaders with fresh energies and practical skills. I needed to share some things with the wider church.

For several years God had given me a burden to share with the wider church. Church leaders who felt they were trapped in the old way of being church increasingly came to talk about new ways of being church. I knew that the new way was not to be new fangled, it was a way that was already there in embryo but which had lain neglected and forgotten.

Bowthorpe was a half way house. On Easter Day 1996, as I prepared to pack and move to Lindisfarne, a wild goose flying overhead gave a great cry. The wild goose is a Celtic symbol of God's spirit. God was saying 'I am going ahead of you to Lindisfarne'.