

Achieving Sustainable Growth

By the Revd John Walker

I. The need for sustainable growth

At least five times... the Faith has to all appearance gone to the dogs. In each of these five cases it was the dog that died (Chesterton 2007: 249).

For the Christian faith to be threatened by apparent irrelevance in the face of contemporary cultural developments is nothing new, it seems. G.K. Chesterton refers to the challenges represented by Arianism, the Albigensians, Humanist scepticism, Voltaire and Darwin. Each time, he argues, the Church has survived its apparent decay. It has drawn deep on its roots and re-grown, re-shaping itself to meet each challenge, re-invigorated, renewed.

The Church in England faces a new and very real threat to its existence at the beginning of the twenty-first century. If we merely do the same things as we've done in the past, all the evidence suggests that the Church will wither and die. But it does not have to be this way and, indeed, there are signs that some parts of the Church here are already drawing deep and re-shaping themselves to meet the contemporary challenge.

My research has been about helping churches recover from decline. The first phase, reported in the Resourcing Mission Bulletin in January 2011¹, established that less than 8 per cent of current churchgoers in Britain attended church as children. Traditional approaches to evangelism largely depend upon a connection with some childhood experience of Christian belonging. However, child attendance on Sundays in England has been in particularly acute decline, a loss for which even the rising midweek child attendance has not yet compensated. As the pool from which churches normally fish, the de-churched, grows smaller, traditional approaches like Back to Church Sunday will have a diminishing impact. Unless our strategies change the church will become progressively smaller and more elderly, gradually losing the resources to reverse current trends. I argued that long-term decline can be reversed only if churches find more effective ways to attract children or the non-churched, or both.

The second phase involved working with a group of five parish churches and five fresh expressions in the Diocese of Canterbury that quantitative research demonstrated were better than average at attracting children or the non-churched. I used qualitative research methods, mainly participant observation and semi-structured interviews with 103 participants, to investigate the process by which families with children and those with no churchgoing background became committed members of faith communities. My aim was to discover whether there were any patterns common to all ten churches despite differences in structure, tradition and social context and, if there were, to allow those patterns to suggest strategies to encourage long-term growth.

¹ <http://www.churchofengland.org/media/1171835/resourcing%20mission%20bulletin%20-%20january%202011.pdf> (see last paper in this document)

2. Common factors

Although each story was unique and nuanced, a number of common factors emerged from the qualitative data to do with motivations for trying out a church or church group in the first place, and then for deciding to stay.

Significant life change

The parents, teenagers and non-churched people who joined these churches all experienced some kind of significant life change which raised questions about their self-perception of their identity. Such life changes appear to create a dissonance between past and future identities, with the present being in flux and pregnant with possibility. For parents, even something as natural, and desirable, as the birth of a child or their changing needs appears to engender this quality of reflection about the capacity of the past self to cope adequately with future reality and the unsettling reformulation of a self-image that can be projected into the future:

Nick: Becoming a father really changed my perspective on life. There was that real sort of sense of responsibility that I suddenly had...

For teenagers, it was developing an identity of their own:

Oz: It gives me an identity; or it helps me express and explore my identity.

For non-churched adults, it was usually some kind of crisis: bereavement, relocation, divorce and being arrested, for example:

Richard: The reason I started going to PC5 was that my mother died suddenly in 1994 and up 'til then I would say that, on a good day, I believed in something.

These life-change events led to an openness to consider church attendance as a way of resolving their inner questions. But this would rarely have happened if it wasn't for the next factor:

Someone invited them

Usually, someone already known to them (and it was rarely the minister) invited them to some kind of group or service, like a church parent & toddler group, a house group, an Alpha group, a confirmation class, a youth group or a service with good provision for children:

Terry: We had this beer-tasting evening; that's something, obviously, I knew that I would enjoy and went along and Nick had a lot of his friends from church there and I started getting talking to them...

The right resources

Parents were most attracted by services or groups where their children could interact with other children, have fun and learn. Parent & toddler groups, messy church, Sunday schools, after-school clubs and other midweek activities were examples:

Muriel: For a start, they're welcome. Some other churches you've been to, your child makes a noise in the church, they're looked at. But here it doesn't matter. The minister

just gets louder and louder if the children get louder and louder it really doesn't matter and the groups they have for them are fantastic.

Teenagers and non-churched adults usually needed a small group where they would be accepted and where their questions could begin to be asked and taken seriously. Alpha, confirmation classes, house groups, cell groups, bible study groups and youth groups are examples:

Richard: One thing comes to mind: how ordinary the people were. They were just like me, they was ordinary; they didn't have wings or haloes round their heads, they was very ordinary people; very nice people, very friendly, made me feel welcome and I asked a lot of questions.

But why did they stay?

What was it about these churches that helped these newcomers not only to become committed members of their faith communities, but also be transformed from churchgoers into disciples of Christ? Interestingly, the same factors which help adults to do this also help teenagers and children:

1. The children were happy and enjoyed their activities:

Briony (11): It's nice doing all the activities every Sunday with your friends and you have a lot of fun. And you have fun and you're still learning.

2. The quality of the welcome they received overcame their initial nervousness:

Carl: It was very laid-back and very welcoming. I had a lot of fears of what it would be but they were kind of not there when I actually came to it and I actually sat down and walked around and people were talking to me, it was a very nice, great atmosphere.

3. A relaxed and friendly atmosphere, even where the worship was more formal:

Mary: It's very friendly and welcoming and easy to feel that you're a part of; it's not that you've got to work at it. It's very comfortable.

4. The Christian faith was taught well and made relevant to life and its questions:

Chris: You can kind of slot in what the Bible's saying and what you're being taught into your life. I think that's quite important. I don't think that I would go if it had no relevance to my life at all.

5. Existing church members enfolded newcomers into their friendship networks:

Richard: My first impressions of going to a house group was they were nice; nice people. And some of them I've stayed in contact with I am real solid good friends with.

6. Newcomers were invited not only to participate in the life of the church, but to take on responsibilities of many different kinds:

Ben (16): Before it had been, like, 'Oh I'm still giving this a try'; after three or four months they decided to lend me a drum kit? And then, like, apparently I was pretty good, so they drafted me into one of the bands? And that kind of kept me going out of duty, but then I also loved doing it at the same time?- so it was a sense of 'I like doing this; I want to be here'.

7. After initial questions were resolved, new questions of faith were constantly raised and addressed:

Liz: He said to me: 'You have to read it in the context in which it is written'. And so my reading started to expand and, subsequently, I read the Bible in the context in which it is written, and I still do to this day. Question things constantly.

8. Worship was inspiring, though very different in each faith community:

Lily (14): It helps me, like, focus on God. It gets rid of other distractions.

9. Children began to make friends and grow into a faith of their own:

Maggie: With Macey (7), if she's upset or someone gets hurt, she'll quite often say, 'Oh, can we pray about it'... she's learning to build a relationship with Jesus even though she's maybe not aware of that.

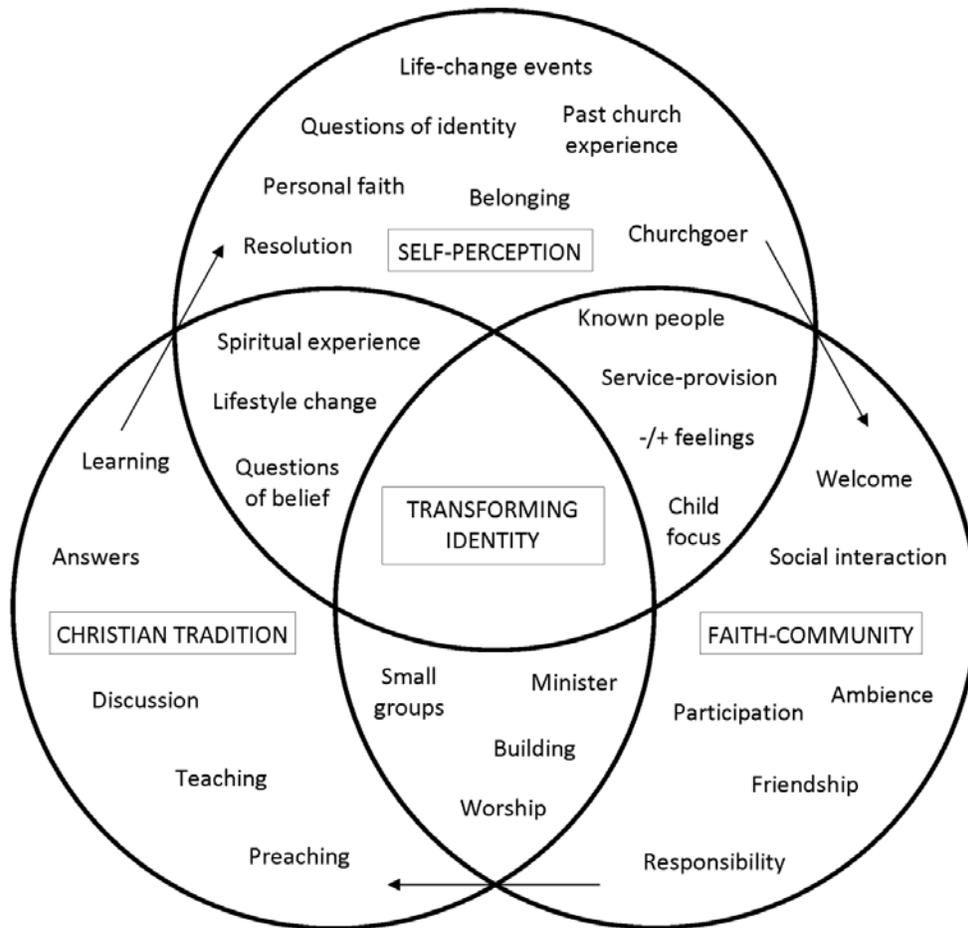
10. New members ended up with a new sense of identity, as a Christian who belongs to a particular faith community:

Kate: It's not just about Sunday morning for two hours; as well, it's very much a whole lifestyle.

3. The Cycle of Transformation

This process can best be expressed in a Venn diagram as a repeating cycle in which a gradual transformation of identity takes place:

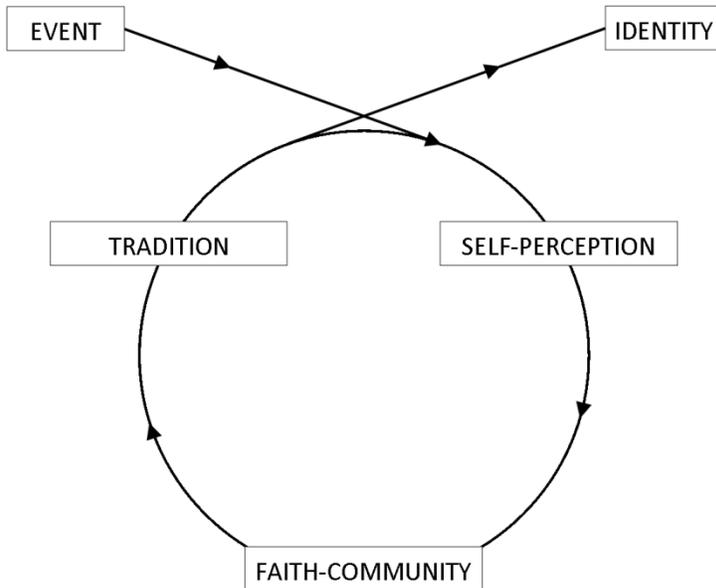
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Transformative factors: dynamic

For example, Richard experienced a challenge to his self-perception through a bereavement life-change event that raised questions of existential contingency. A known person, the curate at PC5, invited him to a house group at his faith community. He meets others, asks his questions and begins to hear teaching from Christian tradition. These answers cause him to begin to adjust his self-perception.

In fact, the arrows denote not a single turn of the circle, but a continual cycle that, with each pass, reinforces a gradual process of transformation in the way in which the participants perceive their identity:

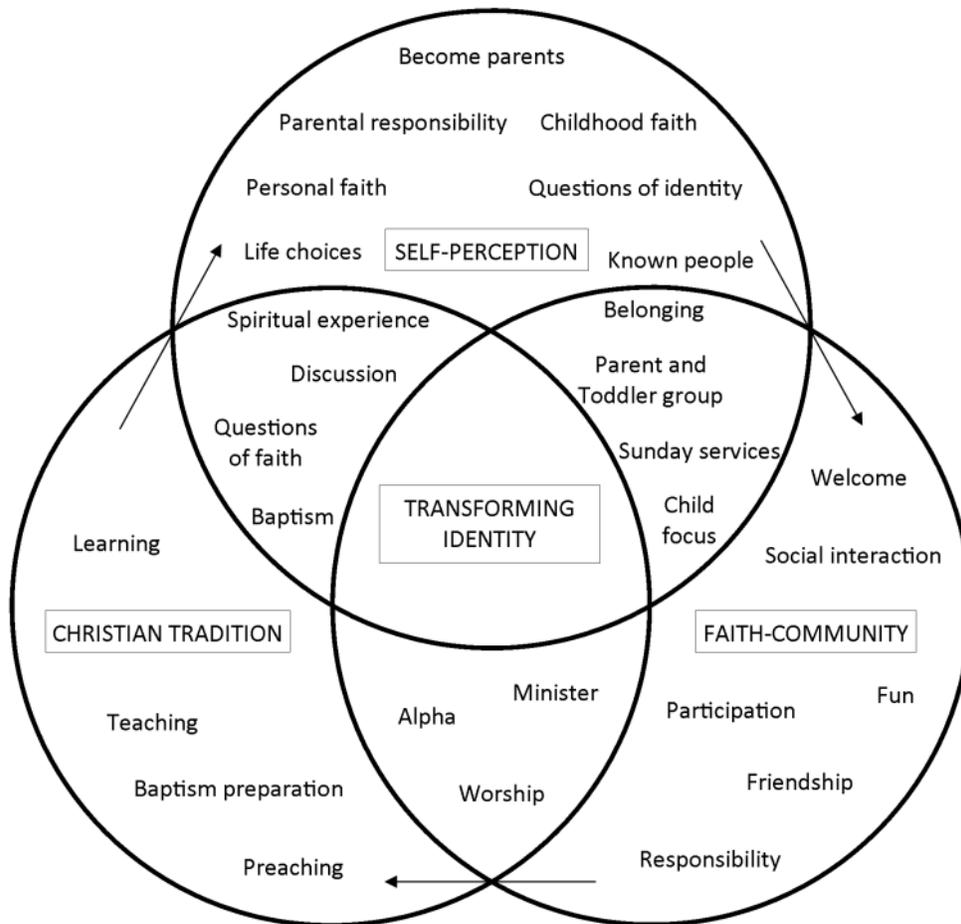


The Transformative Cycle

Not every factor is active during any given pass of the cycle; indeed some represent the gradual strengthening of a prior but related factor: for example, Welcome → Social Interaction → Friendship. It is also clear from participant accounts that the amount of reinforcement necessary to achieve transformation of identity differs according to individual circumstances. Someone with no church background, for example, will need many more turns of the circle than a churchgoer who relocates from another church.

Case study

The model is perhaps best illustrated by a case study of the way in which Nick, Maggie and Macey became members of PC5:



Transformative factors: Nick, Maggie and Macey

Nick and Maggie became parents when their daughter Macey was born in 2003. Maggie had been baptized a Catholic and then raised in a Baptist church and Macey’s birth appears to have triggered a recovery of the importance of her own childhood faith in the form of a recognition of a spiritual dimension to her new parental responsibilities.

So Maggie wanted Macey to be baptized but, right from the start, saw baptism as only the beginning of responsibilities arising from this new fusion of her identity as a mother and her childhood identity as a Christian. She told me, “I’d originally said... if I was going to get her baptized, I was going to go to church and bring her up in the church so I’d already made the decision that I was going to continue going. My husband was like, ‘No, I’ll go until we get her baptized’, he said, ‘and I probably won’t go anymore’”.

Nick agreed to a baptism. Although never having been a churchgoer, Nick saw baptism as a ‘natural’ social custom: desirable in itself but with no consequent obligation to continue attending church. At first sight, then, Nick’s motivation for attending appears to be clear and focused. “At the time”, he says, “I was very vocal and very clear that, yeah, well, we’ll do whatever we need to do to get her baptized but, after that, this is not for me”.

Maggie began a search for a church in which Macey could be baptized and brought up. She heard about the parent and toddler group run by PC5 and attended with a friend. She was impressed by the vicar’s approach to taking a Christmas service at the Parent and Toddler

group, describing him as charismatic, energetic, good with children and having a sense of humour. It reinforced her sense of a spiritual dimension to parenting and, convinced that the vicar was, as she said, “the sort of person that my husband would be able to relate to”, she persuaded Nick to attend a Sunday service with her.

Nick agreed, but his acquiescence was not wholly a matter of pressure from his wife and social custom. At a deeper level, becoming a father had changed his perspective on life and he was questioning whether he had the resources he needed to be a good parent. There was a part of him that saw the baptism as addressing that need.

They started attending services together. Nick recalls a sense of there being a ‘church family’ into which they were being welcomed; people wanted to get to know them. There were other young families they could relate to with children Macey could play with. Maggie describes the services as very welcoming and friendly with a mix of traditional and modern music and good, understandable teaching. Nick remembers liking the vibrant, refreshing, contemporary worship but, he says “what was more appealing to me was the approach of the vicar at the time: the way in which he delivered the sermon and delivered the service”.

They therefore approached the vicar to ask for baptism for Macey. At this point in the process, however, Maggie and Nick stood at very different stages. The services had continued to revive Maggie’s childhood faith. She was beginning to feel settled. Despite the positive experiences, however, Nick was still planning to discontinue attending after the baptism.

The vicar explained that the baptism process involved three home visits and Nick was impressed by his approach to these; he got to know them as a family, identified common interests and listened well. They also had the effect of causing Nick to wonder if the church could offer the kind of resources he felt he lacked as a father. He says, “I guess, having then had this exposure to church, I think I realized maybe what I'd missed out during my childhood... so, for me, it was about, as a father, I can make a choice, along with my wife, to go to a church... somewhere where those children would be supported and would be taught enough so that, when they, you know, were able to make their own decisions, they could make those with a solid basis of knowledge which I didn't have when I became that father”.

Continuing social interaction with other churchgoers was facilitated by services and baptism preparation and Nick’s learning of the basics of the Christian tradition so that when, after the baptism, the vicar invited them to attend an Alpha course in order to gain a better understanding of Christianity, Nick’s questions about his self-perception as a father developed into more fundamental questions about his core identity. He recalls, “I found I was asking a lot of questions and thinking, ‘Well ok, I'm a lot wiser now. I'm a father, I've got responsibilities; perhaps it's time to go and fully understand it before I make any firm decisions’... and I thought, ‘Actually, I need to fully understand this now. So that, if I have a discussion either way, whether I say, “No, I'm an atheist” or “No, I'm going to become a committed Christian” I at least have a firm basis of knowledge to support those decisions”.

They both decided to participate in the Alpha course. For Maggie, it “made sense of things that I'd learned when I was young” and introduced her to a new experience of the Holy Spirit. Nick appreciated a setting – “a nice meal; good company” – in which there was informative, understandable teaching; encouragement to ask questions, and the opportunity to discuss them. Many more questions were raised as they discussed their reading at home, which were then taken to the following session. Not only were questions being answered but, he says, “we came out of Alpha having forged closer relationships with a far-reaching set of people within the church and they'd welcomed us into this family”. Through the teaching and experience he encountered, Nick made a commitment both of personal faith and to continue belonging to PC5.

Meanwhile, the church's provision for children fulfilled everything that both parents were hoping for Macey. Children were welcomed, there was good, in-depth teaching as a basis for future life choices. Macey was having fun, making new relationships and, as she grew older, wanting to be there. She chose to participate in services with other children by leading prayers, reading, demonstrating action songs or helping to lead them. Nick and Maggie say that the relevant way in which faith was taught was helping Macey to build a relationship with Jesus.

Finally, as soon as Nick and Maggie chose to continue to attend, they began to participate more deeply in the life of the church. They wanted to become involved in this dynamic, new, growing environment and give to others what they had found by using their strengths. They joined a cell group and took on responsibilities, some of which they had been asked to do but for many of which they had volunteered. Together, they supported new families coming to church; helped with Alpha courses; introduced new people to the church, facilitated marriage courses and became involved in youth work. Nick advised on communications, then joined the PCC, soon becoming its secretary. This involvement bound them even closer to relationships within the church and enabled them to share the teaching that they had received with others. Their transformation to an identity centred in belonging to a Christian faith community was complete.

4. So what helps the Transformative Cycle to turn?

Those churches and fresh expressions which were most effective at attracting the non-churched or children were those in which this Cycle of Transformation worked best. But what marks those faith communities in which the Transformative Cycle works well?

Culture

First, leaders had developed a strong congregational culture of care for others that members had internalized and from which they operated instinctively, even outside of the congregation. When they encountered colleagues, neighbours, friends or family who had undergone significant life change, they invited them to a church service or group. When newcomers arrived at such services or groups, they were made welcome and were quickly incorporated into existing relationship networks.

Engagement

Second, engagement with the Christian tradition in forming and sustaining the new values, priorities and ethical behaviour fundamental to a distinctive Christian identity. Supportive

relationships alone were not sufficient to mediate the transition of participants to an identity as one who belongs to a Christian faith community. The questions raised by life changes were only able to be resolved in this way as they probed, and were answered by, that community's interpretation of the Christian tradition in its worship and teaching.

Relationships

Third, the centrality of deepening relationships of trust and mutual care in creating a sense of real belonging to a community in which their whole life found meaning. 'Going to church' became 'belonging to a church family'. Many found that small discussion groups helped this process, but informal friendship networks and being members of task-oriented teams were also significant. These groups, networks and teams were marked by inclusivity – not in the sense of, "we'll accept you if you come" but, "we'd really like it if you'd join us".

Responsibility

Fourth, assuming responsibility by taking on a particular practical role within the faith community was vital to completing and sustaining church belonging. Such responsibilities were seen as both an appropriate commitment to their faith community and a dimension of Christian discipleship. The altruistic contribution of time and skills, and its recognition and appreciation by others, seemed to enhance these participants' sense of significance and embed their new-found Christian identity more firmly.

5. So what?

In the light of all this, here are my top five suggestions for local church leaders to help reverse decline:

1. Culture

Work on your congregational culture. If your congregation hasn't internalized a culture of care for the spiritual journey of others, none of your programmes will be much use. Read *The Healthy Churches' Handbook: A Process for Revitalizing Your Church* (Warren 2004) and Chapter 7 of *Congregation: Stories and Structures* (Hopewell 1987).

2. Social context

Conduct an audit of the physical and social demography of the parish, area or social network within which your church exists. Identify the physical and social barriers or gateways, and be honest about where your church is situated in relation to them. Audit both social needs and present provision. Find the gaps and make them a focus for mission.

3. Children

Start a Messy Church. The two Messy churches I studied were 60 per cent more effective at attracting a higher ratio of children to adults than the two parish churches with the fastest growing child attendance in the diocese. Given the bleak outlook predicted by present attendance patterns, the phenomenal spread of Messy Church is a major sign and carrier of hope for the future for the Church in Britain²

² 100,000 members of 977 registered Messy Churches over 5 years (Moore, 2006)

4. The unchurched

Make sure there are small groups in which people going through life-change events can have their questions taken seriously and develop trusting friendships. Alpha, Emmaus, The Y Course, Walk the Jesus Walk or confirmation classes – the evidence suggests that the content is less important than the function of providing the opportunity to address questions, engage with Christian tradition and build relationships. And once the course is over, keep house or cell groups going – they help keep the Cycle of Transformation turning.

5. Responsibility

Invite everyone in your congregation to take on a specific role or responsibility, including newcomers, and make sure that they know that their contribution is appreciated.

6. Conclusion

None of these findings or suggestions are new or particularly revolutionary, and many other congregational studies have identified one or another of them. But they do lie at the heart of a process which needs to be carefully tended and facilitated if we are to see a reversal of current trends of decline. Any strategy for growth needs to make them priorities, whatever else they do.

The Revd John Walker ministers in the diocese of Canterbury

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