



Lessons learnt from the emerging Church

Recently, I was asked for advice about how to go about starting a congregation in a café. The question started me thinking about the lessons that I had learnt from my church's experience over the last three years in starting non-traditional congregations based on new models of church. My first response was that there was no way I could provide advice on this issue – our experiences are our own and are moulded by the personalities involved with our congregation, the profile of

our local community, our resources and our time. What has worked for us will not translate to a “how-to” guide for others – church can not be franchised as if it were a take away store.

At Northern Community, we have a policy that there are no maps for the future, only signposts indicating the direction in which we should travel. Although I cannot hope to create a map for the development of new church models, maybe our experience can reveal some signposts and warning signs.

Australia's 1996 Census data shows that 13.2 million Australians (73.8% of the population) indicated a religious belief of some kind. Around 69.5% of Australians identify with a Christian belief system¹. A 1994 Saulwick Age poll found that 75% of those surveyed believed in God². The National Church Life Survey indicates that 20% of Australians attend church at least once per month³. So what has happened to the other 50% of Australians who identify with a Christian belief system but do not attend church regularly? One response might be that church should be better, slicker, more entertaining. A recent Washington Post article quoted one US pastor as saying “Worship is a form of entertainment...If people are not entertained, they don't feel like they're participating.”⁴

However, I suspect that the current or “traditional” protestant model of church – singing, preaching, singing, praying more singing – will appeal to maybe 25% of Australians. Of those, 20% are already attending church at least once per month. I suspect that a large proportion of Australians, even those that believe in God and identify with a Christian belief system simply do not feel comfortable walking into a church and regularly attending a traditional church service, no matter how slick or entertaining it might be. I also believe that our churches are catering very well for the 25% of Australians who might feel comfortable attending a traditional church service. The challenge is to look at new ways of creating worshipping communities which others in our community *will* feel comfortable being a part of.

Northern Community has an interesting history. In 1999, four churches took the courageous decision to join together to create our new church, agreeing to sell their historical buildings and pool their resources to try something new. In the years since, our church has formed a vision to be the hands and feet of Jesus in the northern suburbs of Melbourne. As a church, we recognise that our society is very different from what it once was. Post-modernism, pluralism and other cultural changes have all affected the life and practice of the Church. New models and new ways of connecting with our community are needed. There is some grief in this for those of us who cherish the ways we used to do things. Despite the pain, God calls us to begin the journey to “sing the Lord's song in a strange land”.

In the parable of the wineskins (Matt 9:17), Jesus suggests we have a responsibility to present the gospel in new ways to new generations and new people. This does not mean we will do this uncritically or indiscriminately. Rather, it requires a great deal of planning and experimentation. We do not want to tamper with the wine, and our message has not changed. Yet, if we do not transfer the wine to new wineskins much of the wine may be lost. Jesus never placed a boundary around his message or stayed within the Temple walls. Jesus went and walked the streets of Galilee and Judea to be with people in their joy and pain. His followers worshipped in different ways, by sharing a meal with him, praying with him, listening to him, tending to his needs or even arguing with him!

We have created a Church that operates with a model that we have called multi-congregational. We have explored different days of the week, different styles and places for “doing church”. Each of our congregations, regardless of time, style, place or size is considered to be “church”. Our particular (and perhaps unusual) challenge is creating new

¹ Maddox, Dr Marion, “Does a Preamble Need a God”, Commonwealth of Australia Research Paper 9, 1999-2000

² *The Age*, 17 October 1994

³ National Church Life Survey, 1996

⁴ Broadway, Bill “Churches Turn up Volume with Big Sound Systems”, *Washington Post*, 5 January 2003

church models alongside a traditional Sunday congregation. Our members worship in different ways, at different times and have very different ideas of what it means to be a worshipping community.

Our own experience shows that there are very different ways of engaging in church through alternative models. Our more traditional Sunday service worships in a style which would be familiar to many involved in churches. We planted a congregation which met initially in a home and later in a café, catering to those who want to worship in a post-modern, generation X manner. Since then we have planted a further congregation in a café and one in a private home for predominantly generation X young adults, each different in focus and style. A further congregation caters to our youth, aiming to present worship in a manner which is accessible and relevant to teens. Our sixth congregation is a contemplative congregation, focusing on prayer, ritual and reflection. Each is different, each is attended by different congregational members and each carries its own challenges.

In our experiences with planting congregations exploring new models, we have learnt many lessons. These lessons may be useful or instructive signposts for others, particularly for those interested in planting congregations with different models in the context of existing churches. However, these are lessons that we have learnt within our own context. Others will meet different challenges and have different wisdom to share. Some will disagree with our philosophy and vision. We at Northern Community believe that we are called to this path to ensure the long-term survival of the church and to connect with those people that will never engage in a traditional worship service but yet wish to join with our cause in following Jesus.

Remember this is Church not a small group

One of the most common initial reactions to some of our congregations has been “I like it, but it’s not ‘church’”. So what is “church”? Some of the new church models look very similar to a small group or a youth group or some other gathering which we would not normally consider to be “church”. So how do we distinguish whether a congregation based on a new model is really church?

The difficulty is, many of us have never considered what it is that defines church. Is it the singing? Is it the prayer? Is it communion or the offering? Is it the regularity or frequency of the meeting? Perhaps it is a combination of factors, and it is likely to be different for different denominations. In our denomination (Churches of Christ), the communion meal is a cornerstone of our worship and therefore, any new congregation must incorporate communion weekly. You cannot expect a congregation to be seen as church if it does not incorporate those elements which you, or your denomination or your community consider to be an essential part of church.

A congregation also needs to be recognised and accepted as church. If you have other congregations (as we do) the whole of the church needs to recognise and accept each congregation as a valid expression of worship. There is no expectation that congregation members will also attend another service as often is the case with a small group. There is no expectation that congregation members will in time “graduate” to some other worship congregation, as often is the case with so-called outreach or seeker services.

Perhaps most importantly, a congregation might be recognised as church, incorporate the elements of church, and yet not actually *be* church. It is possible for any congregation to go through the motions and cease to be a place of genuine worship and connection. Even the best new church model can be in danger of becoming a club, a social event or an obligation.

A square peg in a round hole

One of the most challenging and controversial elements of experimenting with new congregations is how these will fit within an existing church. Many pioneers in developing new models have done so through planting new churches. This allows a genuine freedom to create the culture of the church from the outset. On the other hand, creating new models within the framework of a traditional church structure can be very difficult. It may require revision and alteration of the promotion of giving, representation on church leadership, allocation of ministry resources and budgeting. The failure to adapt these elements of church “infrastructure” to the needs of emerging alternative congregations can lead to the new congregation being poorly valued and supported.

However, when an existing church plants new congregations with new models, those new models have the advantage of the resources, support and identity of the church. In addition, the exercise can have a very positive impact on the existing church, defining a vision and mission, accessing new members and leadership resources, creating a diverse community of different members. Moreover, it enables a church to connect with new people while simultaneously valuing existing models of worship.

The challenge for an existing church is for the planting of new congregations to transform the church's structure and identity. Even when the church is overwhelmingly committed to the mission, this is not a slow process. A minister at an inner city church which was introducing a new urban mission unit commented that it was like turning the QE2. A church which has developed its structure and processes over decades can't be transformed overnight. These structure and processes are often built around the importance of the Sunday morning worship service, and must be rethought to ensure that all congregations are valued equally.

Even the words that we use can create difficulties. Referring to the "main" congregation or the "real" church can undermine new congregations. A member talking about the "majority" of the church may in fact simply be referring to one congregation, which happens to be attended by a numerical majority of members. At Northern Community, church gatherings such as Annual General Meetings were often historically held at Sunday lunchtime in the church hall, a foreign environment for congregations which met on weeknight evenings and rarely entered the church building.

How can church decisions be made in such a way that voting can be registered in 6 different congregations meeting at 6 different times? Is it possible to avoid the tendency to refer to the building as "the church", when an increasing proportion of the membership does not worship on-site? Will special church events such as baptisms or the induction of a new minister receive the same support if they do not take place at the Sunday worship service? How do you create community when your members worship separately?

The multi-congregational approach, particularly when it incorporates new models is a long term process. It requires the commitment, co-operation and support of all members of a church. However, I believe that it has the potential to revitalise and rejuvenate existing churches and create relevant and diverse faith communities which reach people who would otherwise not be touched by the gospel.

Spiritual Practices

Inevitably, any church model involves compromise. A congregation designed around discussion and participation might lack opportunities for prayer and spiritual reflection. A reflective congregation might struggle to engage in mission and action. Some Christian practices may not be essential for a congregation to be considered church, but they are essential for a congregation member to be considered a growing and well-rounded Christian.

Planting new church models creates a new challenge, or more likely reveals a challenge that has often been ignored. Churches focus on the development of corporate or community spirituality, however churches have a vital role to play in individual spirituality. How can a community monitor the spiritual health and growth of its individual members?

At Northern Community, one of our café congregations was primarily discussion based. The members and leaders discerned the need for reflective and contemplative spirituality, but attempts to incorporate this into the congregational worship met with mixed results. The congregation members brainstormed about those practices or activities that its members felt were essential for individual spiritual development. The congregation then vowed to regularly revisit these seven spiritual disciplines and hold each other accountable to engage regularly in these disciplines. The program had a great impact on the congregation as a whole and its individual members. A year later, the spiritual disciplines were adopted by our church across all of our congregations.

It is not sufficient to create a worship event which is well received. A church will care about the lives and the spirituality of its members long after the worship event is finished. This also involves an acceptance that a worship event cannot be all things to all people. Trying to meet every spiritual need in a weekly worship meeting prevents a congregation from developing a distinctive style of worship appropriate to its environment and members.

New models are an excellent way to connect with new people. However, this is not an end in itself. The primary role of worship must be to equip and inspire members to participate in the cause of Jesus, both individually and corporately. The spiritual disciplines are another way for our congregations to be kept accountable to our commitment to follow Jesus.

Make sure there is need and you are not just following a fad

As with any new initiative in a church, there is a real danger that new models of church may become a fad. I suspect that new models of church may be seen by some churches as a quick fix, or an option to “try out” to see if it improves the fortunes of an otherwise drifting community.

I have seen various examples of this in churches around Melbourne. The so-called “café-church”, where pews in a worship centre are replaced by tables and chairs, moving a church service into a church hall rather than a chapel or taking part in debates, panels or discussions in place of a service can all be examples of experimenting with the fad of alternative church models. These exercises *can* revitalise churches and worship services which have become stagnant, but are not necessarily a genuine attempt to offer new models of church. A person who is not comfortable entering a church building will probably not be enthusiastic merely because the pews have been removed from the chapel.

Likewise, creating a congregation in a café may be destined to fail if it does not address a real need in your community. New models should be designed to address particular needs of your community, and to reach people that would not encounter the Christian message through a traditional church service. A congregation in a café or pub may attract young adults who are more comfortable discussing issues of belief and faith over coffee and alcohol than in a church building. However, if you wish to engage with seniors or young families, holding church in such an environment might be counter-productive.

Any new model of church should be based on a careful assessment of your community, the type of people which you would like to make contact with and the type of worship that you are equipped to engage in. This type of congregation is a long-term strategy and can disrupt other existing congregations, governance structures and harmony within a church. It is not to be taken lightly. However, for those churches that are called to offer new models, the rewards are undeniable.

Engaging in each others lives

Often, the traditional model of church has a far greater influence on the operation of a church than just the way in which worship is presented. In developing new models at Northern Community, it quickly became clear that our pastoral care structures were ill-equipped to deal with our new congregations.

A large degree of the success of a new congregation, particularly when the congregation is numerically small, is dependent on the feeling of community and engagement. This might be met in a variety of ways, but needs to be addressed in a manner which is suitable for the age, experience and situation of the congregation members. Pastoral visitation by elders may be uncomfortable or inappropriate for a young adult congregation. Pastoral care for such a congregation might be better experienced through relaxed community events, or a mentoring program.

At Northern Community, we have placed a high value on engaging in each others lives. This involves open hospitality, honest discussion and an intentional development of social intimacy. We have discouraged “congregation-hopping” and encouraged the formation of strong, coherent communities of faith.

Ensure that the leaders facilitate and don't preach

It may be stating the obvious to say that new models of church often require new worship skills. In our context, leadership and facilitation of discussions is a particular skill which we have needed to develop. Ministers are not necessarily equipped with the right skills to lead worship in these environments, as their training may have focussed

on the skills needed for a traditional worship context. A minister with great skills in preaching might find it particularly difficult to lead an open discussion in a group.

For a discussion-based worship environment to be effective, a leader must be comfortable with allowing tangents in a conversation. The irresistible urge to stick to the plan at all costs must be resisted when the congregation feels passionate about a tangential issue. Likewise, a leader must be comfortable with silence, with leaving questions unanswered, and allowing unresolved differences of opinion. A discussion can be soured if a leader feels a need to resolve all differences and have all members reach agreement on the “right” answer. Difference and dissonance, when handled well, are the elements which enable a discussion to inspire, challenge and teach.

For leaders unaccustomed to this sort of worship, it may take some time to learn the skills of facilitating a discussion, ensuring that all members are respectful of each other without being overly intrusive or controlling. Some small group resources provide excellent guidance, but it is inevitable that a congregation may spend some time before a new worship style really works well.

Face the inevitable opposition

I dream of a day when a new congregation could be planted in a new style and be received by both potential congregation members and other members of the church with great celebration and no negative feedback. However, it is unrealistic and perhaps undesirable to expect that this will occur, even in the best of circumstances.

A new congregation member was very resistant to the idea that one of our congregations, which she attended and enjoyed, could ever be considered “church”. It went against everything that she had been brought up believing. In time, she came to believe that the congregation was more effective at creating a church environment than the services she had attended in her youth. Sometimes negative feedback is a sign of the pain of a paradigm shift. Sometimes opposition is a genuinely held belief that we are heading in the wrong direction. Sometimes that opposition is insightful criticism that needs to be accepted.

Complaints, negative feedback, opposition and resistance are not signs of health. However, it would be difficult to conceive of a healthy church that would not experience some issues on the implementation of a new congregation exploring a new model.

Adapting to the environment

New models in different settings carry with them their own limitations. Just as it would be difficult to run a night club in a chapel, it can be difficult to run a church service in a different environment.

Two of our congregations take place in a local café/restaurant. We can’t expect to control our environment as well as if we met in a church building. We can’t control the noise of the restaurant, we can’t control the background music, and we have to work around orders being taken and food being delivered. However, we chose the environment because we wanted to meet over a meal in a café. We need to remember that we are adapting our church to a café, and should not expect the café to adapt to the church.

Focus on health and not size

One of the ways in which churches judge their success is by numbers and attenders. However, the “church growth” mentality is not the best way to ensure the success of new congregations. Our first new congregation had been running for around 12 months when it began to regularly exceed the seating capacity of our environment. If we wanted the congregation to continue to grow numerically, we would need to move it to a different venue, and change our style of worship to adapt to the larger numbers. We were tempted by the possibilities of numerical growth – so long as the congregation continued to grow, it would be easy to demonstrate that the model was effective and “successful”.

However, taking this path would have changed the style of worship, the sense of community, the amount of engagement and ownership, in short all of the things that were attractive about the congregation. We chose the path

of managing numerical growth by planting other congregations. This also gives us the opportunity to create new doorways for people to access our Church. Numerically, our new congregations have contributed to the growth of attenders and members at our church, but we may never have an alternative congregation attended by a hundred or even fifty people.

The ultimate goal should be church and congregational health rather than church growth. If your congregations are healthy and meet a need in your community, then numerical growth may well follow. However, just as growth is not an indication of health, the fact that a congregation is relatively small and stable in numbers is not an indication that it is a failure.

Never underestimate the power of food to create community

A sense of community and connection is vital to a healthy congregation. Fortunately, Jesus provides us with a great example of how to create community and share the lives of other people. Jesus did this over the meal table, eating with the tax collectors and sinners. This is one of the strongest examples we have of what it means to share in community.

Unfortunately our traditional model of church has mostly lost sight of this tradition. All five of our new congregations at Northern Community share a meal together as a part of their worship, at a restaurant, in a home or wherever they might meet. Our traditional blended congregation has implemented a hospitality program that ensures that it also prioritises sharing a meal together as a part of worship.

Starting congregations with a new model of church is an outstanding opportunity to introduce a communal meal as an element of worship. It is an easy and effective way to create community and a positive and enjoyable aspect of the worship act itself.

There are no boundaries

Worship can be many things. The possibilities for new worship models are limited only by your fixed requirements for a group to be considered church and the needs in your community. We at Northern Community have great dreams for what we might accomplish in the future.

In truth, the first congregations exploring an alternative model are unlikely to be very radical. A traditional church with members predominantly over the age of 75 would probably find it difficult to create a successful rave congregation. The most natural first step is to connect with people who are similar to us, but who would not feel comfortable attending a traditional congregation. A home church, a café congregation or a contemplative congregation may be more achievable as they draw on environments or worship styles which are somewhat familiar to us.

However, even in these less radically new models, there is plenty of room for creativity and innovation. This is an opportunity to use drawing or writing, poetry and recitation as part of your worship experience. You can draw on the learning of other religious traditions, as well as elements of the new age movement or other sources. Congregations do not need to be tied to one venue, and worship can be experienced by attending excursions to a lecture, a play, a movie, a symphony. Worship does not need to be weekly, nor does it need to take place on Sunday or at a certain time of the day or for a certain time period. One of our congregations has intentionally developed a program to appeal to those in our community that wish to make a regular commitment to a church community, but are not willing to attend on a weekly basis.

It is difficult to break free of the traditional church paradigm when designing and developing a new worship experience. I have caught myself many times imposing ingrained expectations on our new congregations without considering whether those expectations are appropriate to the setting.

Reflections on a model

I am excited to be involved in a church which is taking the challenge of new models of church seriously. I firmly believe that this is vital to the future of the church as a whole and our church in particular. One of our new congregations experienced a lot of growth from an unexpected source – the young alumni of our churches. The congregation became filled with young adults that had a strong background of church attendance, had been involved in leadership at their churches and had been strongly committed to the cause of Jesus. For one reason or another these talented and gifted people were no longer attending church regularly and certainly were not contributing to the leadership of their churches. Some had been absent from churches for several years.

Some might look at these young adults and see people who were relatively *pro-church* anyway, who had been involved with church most of their lives, who were open to the cause, who were looking for a way to connect. They would be right. However, I can't help but ask the question that if these pro-church people, who were open to the cause, had been involved with church most of their lives and looking for a way to connect were not comfortable attending a traditional church congregation, how can we expect that people who have never been involved in a church community would feel comfortable there?