

Listening to the Pioneer Ministers in New Housing Areas

A report from a gathering at CTE on 24.02.09 by Jim Currin



'There's no such thing as a free lunch'. We all know that, so when the invitation went out for pioneer ministers living and working in new housing areas, to come to a 'free lunch' at Churches Together in England, we had to explain the catch. It was that we would provide food if they would come and share their experience and tell their story.

It was on 24th Feb 2009 that five church leaders explained what it was like, with the ups and downs, of trying to start a new church from scratch. They were all very different accounts of house building and churches at different stages and with different styles. Interestingly most of the people we heard from had a church plant and building. We know of other pioneers who work with cells and do not plan to build.

The audience were members of the Churches Coordinating Group for New Housing Areas. This is an experienced network of people from across England, representing the major denominations, that helps to highlight and profile the issue on the wider churches mission agenda.



The group were also joined by a number of other network and resource people, like the Archdeacon of Bournemouth and the Baptist Regional Minister for East Midlands. Others were keen to listen too, like Bob Purser who is employed by Churches Together in Northamptonshire to advise re church and new housing. The key people though were the pioneers themselves and what they had to say. Two of the presentations were made by Power Point, and these can be see on our dedicated website 'Church in New Housing Areas': <http://www.cinha.net/>

Elvetham Heath. David Price is the minister of an ecumenical church at Elvetham Heath near Fleet in Hampshire. This is an Anglican, Baptist, Methodist and URC partnership. 24 people in December 2000 gathered to think and pray about a new church plant on land which had been designated on a 'use it or lose it' basis. David quoted George Lings suggestion that they consider themselves to be 'in the departure lounge without the comfort of arrival'. Two key questions were considered:

- a) would this be a Fresh Expression or more conventional church and
- b) Would it be more described as 'network' or neighbourhood'?



David stressed the importance of a shared vision to guide the emerging congregation through all the options and stages of development, and the value of starting early eg buying one of the first houses. After that it was an emphasis on the basics eg Bible, evangelism, practical service, pastoral care. What has emerged naturally is a village square and church in the heart of the new community. Though daunted by the burden of repayment, the congregation has grown and is excited about the future, feeling 'on the right track'. More information is on: <http://www.churchontheheath.org.uk/>.

Dickens Heath Village. Tim Aho, from USA has been with the Fellowship of Churches of Christ in England for 15years and planted the church at Dickens Heath Village near Solihull with four couples. 'We were blessed by the other churches' he said and particularly encouraged by the Heart of England Baptist Association. The vision was for people not a church building, which felt right at the time, but in retrospect more could have been achieved with their own space. A congregation has developed which meets in a school and networks based around the home. On their website you will see this under 'Home Zones'. Early involvement and network with developers, planners, Council, agencies was all important and the

church was seen as a group building community. The annual Picnic on the Green, Christmas Fete, Community Survey and good links with the school have all been significant factors in the growth as you can see on their website: <http://www.dhvc.moonfruit.com/#>



The Hamptons. We had hoped to hear from Judith Shultz, a Salvation Army officer working in the Thames Gateway but she could not be with us on the day. Another speaker was Dianne Tidball, a Baptist Regional Minister who spoke of the opportunities and possibilities at the earliest stages of development. The Hamptons near Peterborough does have some Christian presence and engagement already, but Dianne's question was whether some form of Café Church, Pub Church, Saturday Church or A.N.Other form of church could be formed in the shopping mall. How would it work if they secured a shop front for example? Dianne is networking with other church leaders and is currently at the stage of asking questions.

Grange Park, Northampton. Charlie Nobbs had been a nearby Anglican Curate when the building began on fields near the M1 back in 2000. Now 1580 homes are occupied and he is the minister of the church which began with gazebos in the playground. Building a good partnership with a new school was key, as was moving on to the estate in early days with his own family. The surprising main way in which the church was able to build community was with young mums and the opportunity to serve refreshments at the Weighing Clinic. In addition to Neighbourhood Watch, Litter Picking, Firework displays and other community events, it is the young mum's network that has been really significant. 'Not many babies born on Grange Park in the last 4.5 years have not spent Thursday mornings in the Vicarage' he says. This initial contact has led on to 'Talking Point', Kids Zone' and 'Stepping Stones'. A very helpful resource has been the 'Journeys' dvd from NZ with faith journey stories at fortnightly wine and pudding evenings. <http://www.grangeparkchurch.com/>



Locking Castle, Weston Super Mare. Mark Elvin is a URC Minister and says community development at Locking Castle was inspired by a local vet. She led the way with a new practice on the estate. The vision for a church was inspired by a previous local minister and a new congregation began to meet in a portacabin. Now they have a church building and an ecumenical congregation, though questions have surfaced about the design, as most people drive past to work and do not see anything going on as activities are in the hall out of sight. A large notice board and posters help say it is a church, and outreach initiatives and Alpha groups help people see what goes on. <http://www.lockingcastlechurch.org>.

Reflections As you can imagine, from all of these stories lots of questions emerged, not only about the histories and practicalities, but also about the 'new ecumenical missiology / ecclesiology' which church planting in new housing areas brings. 'Flexibility' is the key, especially if building plans are being discussed. Common vision, and 'like-mindedness', lead to good working relationships, and creativity. The pioneer ministers were asked about support networks and local colleagues, peer coaching, support from denominational officers and networks like 'Incarnate' and 'New Wine' were most significant.

A '**theology of building**' in new housing areas was discussed, which needs to be the following: multi-purpose, a community home, place where activity can be sustained and developed, with community needs thought about from the beginning, with creative and mission design. Change of use over time is obvious when toddlers become teenagers, but this principle always needs to be in mind as surprising opportunities can emerge if networks and good partnerships have been established early on. 'Dance where you can dance together' was a good picture.

One perennial question is always '**To build or not to build?**' Our pioneers happen to have buildings, and it was interesting to hear Tim Aho say they look back and think of the advantages if they had been 'bolder with the developer' and able to raise finance to match expectation to have one.

One observation was that in several cases illustrated the significant '**seed team**' had all moved on for good reasons and the current congregation were 'new', even in the early years of development.

The Coordinating Group will post more stories, resource material, and sample documents, along with the two **Power Point presentations**, on www.cinha.net, and say **thank you** to all who came to lunch.

