

but I have no doubt that what I learned through the 26 lessons skilled me in a process that I now use almost automatically on a daily basis. Similarly, preaching for biblical literacy that models how to read the Bible for all its worth, whether in pulpit, house group, explorers group or youth group, will transmit a life skill that will serve listeners well for this life and the next.

Ministry in a Small Community

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I often give lectures, and one of my themes is that of *flows*. My aim is to encourage people to look at their 'place' 24/7 and 365 days of the year, because when we do this we see things that easily pass us by. For example, when I worked for a diocese, I had an office, and naturally enough it was known as Ann's office, but by thinking 24/7, the Moslem woman who cleaned my office each morning at 5.00am also came into the frame. When we look at a 'space' 24/7 we often start to notice those who easily get forgotten and undervalued. Looking at a 'space' 24/7 is part of the *raison d'être* of street pastors. By resisting the temptation of looking at town centres 'nine to five', another flow has been recognised: 2.00 am, especially at weekends, when the clubs start to empty.

People quickly warm to the idea of flows and can identify distinguishing features about their space. Maybe their church is near a busy bus stop. Maybe the nearby hospital creates a distinctive flow. Maybe the place is a bit like Liverpool and other coastal towns where previous flows have dried up and efforts are made to stimulate new flows with initiatives such as 'City of Culture' or significant public art work. My experience of promoting the idea of 'flows' shows that most people happily list the flows into their 'space', but there is one group that can get singularly frustrated with the exercise: those who live in rural areas. Rural areas have flows for sure, but their flows are slow and sometimes scarcely discernible.

I now anticipate responses such as “Flows aren’t relevant to my situation” by carrying with me copies of notes I made from a little book by Anthony G Pappas, called *Entering The World Of The Small Church: A Guide For Leaders* ³ The notes from this book have proved to be one of the most well received offerings I ever make as I travel round. It is these notes that I draw on in this article. So, if there is anything in this article that you find useful, with one or two exceptions, then praise is due to Anthony Pappas.⁴

The world of a small community must be understood in its own terms

Pappas makes much of this fundamental insight from anthropology: there is no key to understanding another culture, except on its own terms. Therefore it is important that the reality and coherence of the worldview of those who live in small communities - especially those who have been born and raised in such communities - is understood in its own terms.

Furthermore, Pappas suggests that one of the hardest transitions for ambitious, well trained people who would be leaders of village churches is to grant validity and integrity to the world view of those who have grown up there. This is because those who have received formal training in ministry will have been formed in the rational, future orientated, programmatic and often quantitative approach of ‘mainstream’ life. People born and bred in a small community are likely to operate with different values, perceptions and understandings, and such a worldview is likely to jar with those brought up on apparently rational, individualised and goal setting behaviour - i.e. the worldview and approaches favoured by the wider, mostly urban, church.

Pappas suggests that, in many rural communities:

- Insights about change and development are more likely to derive from biology than business;
- People nurtured in a small community know and judge more by experience than by abstract analysis;
- The ‘Garden of Eden’ is a more inspiring metaphor than that the ‘New Jerusalem’ or the ‘coming Kingdom of God’;

³ Alban Institute (1998).

⁴ As I no longer have my copy of Pappas’ book *Entering the World of the Small Church*, I am unable to make references to page numbers

- The effective leader leads from within - hence the significance of Reader ministry or locally 'formed' non-stipendiary ministers.

The work of Robert Redfield

Pappas, writing in the 1980s, drew on the work of Robert Redfield in relation to 'folk society', i.e. a group of people scarcely interrupted by flows of other people. Redfield⁵ suggests that 'folk society' is composed of people who:

- Are small in number;
- Have long-term association and know each other well;
- Have a strong sense of belonging;
- Are isolated from other groups in neighbouring areas and can function as 'a little world off by itself';
- Identify strongly with the territory they occupy;
- Ascribe wisdom, prestige, and authority in proportion to age;
- Go through a similar sequence of life events in each generation;
- Give primacy to oral over written communications.

Furthermore:

- The individual's position in the 'folk society' carries a distinctive pattern of rights and obligations;
- Relationships are ends in themselves, not means to achieving an external objective;
- Qualities that contribute to stability are valued over those which bring about change;
- Moral worth is attached to traditional ways of doing things.

Reflecting on these insights from Redfield and Pappas, it is possible to contextualise them both in relation to village communities and to an extent, to housing estates:

- Seeing and experiencing life as a totality (incomers who continue to commute are at odds with this);
- Unable to run away from inter-personal difficulties (nowhere to run, so the options are stark - either continue

⁵ Robert Redfield "The Folk Society" *American Journal of Sociology* 52.4 (Jan 1947

with snubbing, or address the issue head on. Note that, in a small community, this rarely means confronting, but waiting for the moment when a difficulty can be sorted *cf* “Lark Rise to Candleford”);

- Unitary sense of time - life is daily not weekly (no strong sense of weekend). Time is not viewed as linear (the training given to church leaders often inculcates a linear view of time), but cyclical (therefore a sense of progress is alien). There is nothing new under the sun - we simply add on variations to abiding themes.
- Responds to external threats more easily than internal threats;
- Habitual - old habits are hard to break and creating new habits is very difficult;
- Understand the world as composed of relationships through time, to the extent that even objects are personalised (e.g. “that sign was painted by my grandfather”, therefore the church building can be a ‘hall of memories’);
- The goal of behaviour tends to be maintenance, not transformation, preservation; not change, so that the anticipation of change can be crushing rather than liberating.

Problem solving in a church in a small community

Our dominant view of the church is that it is an organisation that needs to be managed and task orientated, because the church exists to get a job done, even when that job is fellowship. The assumption with which we are most familiar is that a local church is amenable to planned behaviour to achieve certain outputs. According to this approach, a problem arises when outcomes are at odds with those anticipated in the agreed action plan. Pappas suggests that most church leaders have become so at home with this mainstream analytical approach to planning and problem solving that some questionable assumptions go unnoticed. For example:

- Intention and behaviour are assumed to have a straightforward and predictable relationship. However, the link between thought and action is not as clear cut as is often thought. It’s not obvious how the two are linked;

- It is assumed that life can be ‘stopped’ in order that the situation can be ‘frozen’ and considered at one’s convenience;
- That all the relevant variables acting on a situation are known and knowable;
- The longstanding assumption is that we think and *then* we act, therefore we envision something new and then expend energy in achieving it. However, very often understanding follows behaviour;
- Our efforts at ‘thinking through’ a situation and then drawing up a plan to bring about a desired change in a situation is not so much a chart of the future as it is a description of our present limitations.

In contrast, Pappas suggests that recognising a problem in the church in a small community is likely to be a subjective process, and often may involve *ignoring* the problem. He suggests this can be a viable approach, because often something will just turn-up. This (naive?) trust may be a consequence of faithfulness through the generations i.e. a faith born of experience that God will provide. Such confidence in God’s provision is as much part of the story of the church in a village as it is in a housing estate. Rather than adopt an ‘organisational’ approach, in the church in a small community the following may happen:

Dissonance is felt and generalised to an area (not as a logically defined and analysed problem), e.g. we have a problem with youngsters not coming to church ...

followed by ...

The problem is ‘cooked’ and gradually a general feeling of ‘how things ought to be’ begins to emerge. For example, sermons often have to be ‘cooked’ before an explicit theme and approach emerges

followed by ...

Then ‘aha’ occurs. A way to get things done that ‘fits like old shoes’ begins to emerge...

followed by ...

The ‘aha’ cannot be contained; it is a gift to others so it has to be told to others ...

followed by ...

Conviction - the truth of the solution is located in the 'aha', not subsequent experience associated with testing the proposed solution.

Pappas suggests that Lamentations is the book in the Bible that may bear closest resemblance to a village church. This is because solutions tend to look like the past because what is most desired is continuity. In a small community, the desire is for tomorrow to look like yesterday, and when it doesn't, the tendency is towards 'lament'. Pappas notes there is a grief and a sadness about many villages and village churches because this is a natural response of those used to a 'folk' society, but sense that their world is being overtaken by mores and practices which threaten its very existence. In such circumstances, lament is natural, in that it registers that there is a problem. However, it does not provide a solution, and for this reason it is important to help people remember that life has always been a struggle, and that the capacity to cope with the struggle remains.

Pappas is alert to the danger of people getting stuck in lament. He notes how memory can play tricks on us, so that the recollections of days gone are characterised by successes and charming delight rather than the struggles that might underpin them. For this reason Pappas recommends that those in a small community are coaxed to embrace a little rejoicing to counter this inclination towards lament.

The leadership of a 'small community' church

It was noted earlier that Pappas queries the assumed virtue of planning and the 'forward look' with its assumption that behaviour can be manipulated and is predictable. As an alternative, Pappas suggests that the *backwards* look also provides a way of getting in touch with reality and analysing what is going on and working out what to do for the best. In a small community, the challenge is to lead forward by utilising the 'backward look', thus harnessing the past as a tool for the future. Therefore, Pappas advises leaders of churches in small communities to adopt an approach that gives a high value to the past and see the past as an ally. This will involve becoming a history buff so you can say... "Do you remember

when....” Rather than dismiss the ‘Good Old Days’, the approach is rather “How can we keep the good alive today?”

Pappas makes the following linkages: History - Inspiration - Energy - Mission

He notes that Carl Dudley suggests that pastoral leadership in the small church is more akin to lover than manager. And what does a lover do? A lover is patient and attentive, taking seriously the challenge of ‘wooing’, and when resistance is experienced, then there is willingness to ‘back-off’ rather than force one’s wishes upon others. Strong leadership might even be resisted (who appointed you to be Lord and master over us? - Moses faced this!), to the extent that getting too intense about one’s own agenda may well inhibit the likelihood of the desired outcome. In a small community there may be wisdom in playing it cool.

Whilst it is important to avoid taking on the role of external critic, it is equally important not to slip into the small community world so totally as to lose sight of alternatives. The challenge is to live with one foot in each world. The natural dynamics of a small community is towards inertia, resulting in a diminution of the range of behaviour. In a folk society, it is easier to forget behaviour than to learn new behaviour. Therefore the repertoire of behaviour available to a small church decreases over time unless new behaviours are introduced.

A key observation that Pappas makes is that, in small communities, it is likely that there will be an implicit agenda within the explicit one, and the implicit agenda is that of *relationships*. Relationships are paramount in small communities because people have to be able to live with each other the next day. For example, just in relation to meetings, this is likely to have an impact. A response to an item on the agenda is unlikely to be a response to just content because in the back of people’s mind will always be the thought that a disagreement with someone will be carried into many contexts and percolate into so many conversations. Explicit opposition to one’s neighbour’s viewpoint therefore is virtually impossible to contemplate.

In contrast, Pappas recommends that the leader of a church in a small community should not fear ‘spear waving’, especially as the waving of the spear is likely to be in the direction of the leader!

Pappas suggests that the absence of spear waving or opposition can indicate lack of investment in the issue. Focused opposition can be cathartic and allows proper leadership to come forth. Spear waving indicates that all sides have had their positions heard.

In more positive vein, Pappas offers some insights into how change can be encouraged. He suggests that in a small, face-to-face community:

- People see things (i.e. envision how it could be) by *experiencing* them (rather than seeing things with the mind's eye). Therefore, work with one or two who can see with their mind's eye and when the vision has become tangible enough for others to 'see', it will be incorporated into the body - or rejected. This means that by doing (not by discussing), people decide on the helpfulness and faithfulness of changes.
- Don't be discouraged by the slow pace - be encouraged that, once in place, a new behaviour may last for a long time.
- Gather some open-hearted people together and encourage regular prayer and sharing together - and see what God will do.

The possibility of community action in the church in a small community

It is the relationships between people that is the most appropriate basis for social action in the church in a small community. People who belong to small communities understand the world as ultimately composed of persons and their relationship. This has to be harnessed in motivating social action.

The church in a small community is not so much motivated by the extent of human need as by its *proximity*. The challenge is to help the church in a small community sense proximity and to enable some kind of structure to come into being to enable people to respond. For example:

- The Mary D Fund - here the district (practice) nurse is aware of hardship affecting some elderly people. Donations from church members and friends are paid into the vicar's discretionary fund and deployed via Mary, and replenished on the strength of Mary's good standing and personal knowledge. This would count as a scam in other contexts.

- Discussion in a prayer group about the significance of open cast mining (the land can never be farmed in the same way again after it has been drift-mined) resulted in the prayer group members (regardless of their occupation) turning up at the public meeting and asking searching questions.
- A sick parishioner finds the wall by his hospital bed covered with cards from all sorts of people from the village. “It does the heart good to know so many people are thinking of me and praying for me.”
- In a Derbyshire village church there is a small scale model of a well, complete with roof and bucket, labelled ‘Ronnie’s Well’. Through this model well, the church and village has raised thousands of pounds for wells in Sudan. Ronnie is a young man who grew-up in the church and village and did a long stint with VSO after he’d been to university.

It is worth noting that VSO is there with or without Ronnie, but it’s unlikely the church and community would have responded to this issue without Ronnie. Issues that have an impact or claim on a village are likely to be those which seem to be about ‘caring for our own’. Ronnie, by his concern and commitment to villagers living half way round the globe, made those people part of the relational network of his home village.

Some suggestions that follow from these instances:

1. Find ways to ‘put a face’ on a need to which you feel God is calling the small community church to respond.
2. Establish relationships. Go and visit to generate comments such as “When we met Patrick (who’d been homeless for eight years), he said...”
3. Start at home - e.g. provide a ‘light’ structure through which people can lend a hand.
4. Expand horizons, for example, through a commitment to Traidcraft.
5. Be alert to ‘accidents’ - ‘Life’s interruptions are filled with God’s intentions’. When taken as ‘acts of God’, courses of action that would otherwise be resented can be redeemed. Accidents and untoward events can be a catalyst for commitment and faithfulness because people in a small community are likely to be more at home with fate than intentionality.