

## Using Tailored Mission Strategies in a longer term situation

My experience with using a tailored mission approach in the village of Herstmonceux began in 1990 with a telephone call from the Church Secretary one evening. About a year previously a pastoral ministry I had exercised in the town fifteen miles away had come to an end. I knew Herstmonceux Free Church (Congregational) from having conducted special services for them from time to time. It was a very small congregation and mostly elderly. They were certainly nice enough but both the premises and style of worship suggested that little had move on since 1950. From the phone call I discovered that a new and lively charismatic church in a town five miles away had offered to take the church over or otherwise they intended to plant a new church in the village. It was a cry for help, and they were looking for leadership.

A few days later my wife and I met with the handful of members and agreed to answer the call on the understanding that the existing members were open to change. There was no particular way in which I wanted them to change at that time. But I needed to know that change would not be resisted. They agreed.

I then approached the charismatic church in the nearby town and asked the leader if he would give us two years to see if the work could be revived. He gave us six months! In the event he became a good friend and gave us the space we needed.

Over the previous few years I had been working with churches as a mission consultant using the Rural Sunrise tailored mission approach. Now I found myself in a pastorate where it was badly needed. The question was whether I could put into practice in a sustainable way what I taught to others. My commitment to the church at Herstmonceux was “part time” but that was undefined. I promised two Sundays a month and at least one day in the week. They promised me £30 per week which was their average Sunday collection.

### Maximising involvement:

The first principle is to involve as many of the church members or core congregation in the process. I had inherited a core group in single figures so ensuring all were involved was not a problem. The Congregational pattern of regular Church Meetings (the governing body of the church) provided an opportunity of working through the process in a more measured way. The more we developed our strategies together the greater the commitment and the more likely they will be sustainable.

### The Context:

With the assistance of the members the next stage was to do some mapping. Herstmonceux is a service village. There was no smart village green. Small industrial and commercial units nestled among the very ordinary housing. It was officially identified as an area of deprivation. The main heart of the village (Gardiner Street) had a population of about 1,000. Two other discrete settlements close by were also part of the civil parish. These added another 1,000 to the population. Four more small hamlets put another 2,000 people within a five minute car drive from the church.

All these settlements looked to Herstmonceux for various services as it provided the local primary school, medical surgery, two general stores (one a post office) and several other small businesses and restaurants.

The church had a presence in two of these communities. Geographically the main part of the village divided into four different housing areas sitting side by side; we also presence in three of these.

As with all villages there were numerous social networks which we also mapped. The church had some but not much presence throughout these. The only young couple in the church ran the largest farm in the village. Their farmhouse was the next premises down

the lane from the church. Our church treasurer was one of the village hairdressers. One elderly lady was one of the village characters connected with (but now retired) the trug making business (a trug is a traditional boat shaped wooden garden or fruit basket).

As for the church premises, they were a quarter of a mile from the heart of the village on a lane that led down to Herstmonceux Castle, which until recently had been the home of the Royal Greenwich Observatory and a major source of employment in the community. The Parish Church sat at the far end of that one mile long road and the Free Church at the top. There was also a small Friends Meeting House in the heart of the village.

### Church Appraisal:

John and Helen, the farming couple were by far the youngest members of the congregation and had two very young children. They made up the Sunday School which operated during the second half of the morning service. Tom and Ruby, our oldest couple were great. They still walked hand in hand and were respected in the village. Clarrie and Bessie, a couple that had retired from the London City Mission had previously done good work in the church but were now too old. He was the church elder but resigned when I arrived; she played the electronic organ for the services. Doreen was a retired architect. Molly, also retired, was my retired trug maker and was somewhat eccentric. George and Heather Washer were approaching retirement. He was the church secretary and she the church treasurer and local hairdresser.

Beside these nine there was another retired couple, Josie and Desmond Luck who, like many others, were worshipping in the nearby town but we saw them occasionally. Doreen and Josie were converts from an evangelistic mission conducted in the village in 1964 and in which I was involved as a team helper. Molly and Desmond also went back to those days and well before. The others had come along at different times.

The church premises had seen various alterations throughout its history since 1811. Originally cuboid in shape it had been extended at one end and a gallery built at the other end. It could now seat about 60 people. It had uncomfortable cheap pine pews. The gallery and stairs to it were rotten. The entrance was foreboding and musty with some old worn felt covering the inner door. A small hall was built at right angles and was cluttered with old furniture and various rugs covered the uneven floorboards. At the far end was an unhygienic scullery in a small lean-to. Off this apology for a kitchen was a suite of two toilets added in the 1980s. The main roof was sound and the building was Grade 2 listed.

In addition the church owned a two bedroom house and a four bedroom house in the village. These were let for £30 and £45 per week respectively!

Sunday worship at 11.00 was led by an assortment of some 20 lay preachers who varied enormously in ability and style. One week the service might be led informally by a younger charismatic evangelical man, and the following week a saintly retired minister in his nineties in full clerical attire would conduct the service in the style and language in which he had trained seventy years before!

Underlying this was a form of evangelicalism associated with around 1950. Services began with people choosing favourite old-fashioned choruses. Otherwise only traditional hymns were sung. If it was a good hymn George would sing heartily with his hand raised high above his head in a somewhat defiant manner. When the children and their mother left for their session Jessie insisted on playing "I am H-A-P-P-Y" on the organ, because that was what you did back in 1950!

The image of the church in the community was that it was elderly, exclusive and irrelevant.

One problem was that my wife and I were living fifteen miles from the village.

Of major importance was the discovery that the church had an exciting history. The church records revealed times of revival, and even a time when a second church was planted in one of the nearby villages (since destroyed by fire). These wonderful stories provided a vision for what the church could recover once again, rather than having an image of missional church in another context.

### **Tailoring Mission Strategies:**

It would take a book to explain how this church grew from these beginnings into a church with a strong commitment to mission, a more youthful Sunday congregation which at its height was in the thirties (drawn from the local area), with a strong children's and youth church, running the village youth club, running a mission community project and staffing it six half-days a week, with two couples in overseas missionary service, and running a fresh expression of church long before the term was coined. At one time 100 local people were attending at least one Bible based meeting a month.

As soon as possible my wife and I moved into the village. She became a local school crossing attendant (lollipop lady) and also helped out at a local baby clinic.

The process enabled us to identify strengths and weaknesses. The 20 assorted preachers were whittled down to three who shared the responsibility with me, all using contemporary English, the NIV Bible, and working to establish consistency and continuity.

We tackled exclusiveness and rapidly became the village church where people could come when they wanted without feeling they were being asked to make a commitment. The core body of committed Christians grew and we explored what it meant to be a Christian church 24/7 fully integrated into the life of the wider community.

We used the neighbouring farm and farmhouse to develop a sense of hospitality. Regular faith lunches were held especially in the summer when we could spill over onto the small church lawn.

The Castle was turned into an International Study Centre. This and a nearby College of Phytotherapy brought some Christian youth into the church.

The church developed a strong sense of being a team. Together we undertook fantastic Holiday Bible Clubs. We became integrated into the life of the village school.

When the village youth club leadership broke down for the umpteenth time, the church youth workers took it on and we even moved it onto our premises as a gift to the community.

Slowly the worship pattern changed and became a mixture of old and new. The electronic organ was replaced with a keyboard and guitar with an occasional flute, violin and cello.

The image of church as a servant of God for the benefit of the community developed and resulted in taking over a closed shop and converting it into the Village Information Centre, which offered support services to local charities and community organisations. This project even helped to win the village a prize!

The monthly "fresh expression" held in a smart new village hall was a combination of café church style and TV chat show style.

Something needs to be said about ecumenical relations. In the early days of our involvement our friends in the Parish Church confessed to feeling threatened. But we eventually developed a good partnership and made an effort to support their special events and avoid any conflict. By holding some of our meetings in the Friends Meeting House we helped to keep that cause going. A wider ecumenical body was based upon the nearby town and we became active within this and managed to help turn it into a town and villages ecumenical group.

The two houses were re-let on commercial rents. Serious beetle damage to the floor of the main worship area enabled us to strip out the inside of the building. Comfortable chairs replaced the old pews. The pulpit disappeared. The gallery came back into use. The floor was smartly carpeted. The local conservation advisor to the Local Authority praised the finished project. Later we tackled the remainder of the building, extending the hall to provide a proper catering kitchen, full disabled access, a useful suite of toilets, and a welcoming entrance. All achieved by funds from our own funds.

Not all our dreams were fulfilled. I had hoped that we would have a home group in each of the seven settlements but that never materialised, though we did draw folk from all but one of them.

### **Change Management:**

Following the Tailored Mission approach is a cyclical process. We moved from what we could be a step at a time. With each change we needed to reflect and review where the journey would take us next.

Much of the change was a very positive experience. For example, the change in the people conducting services brought in a young family who would otherwise have gone out of the village to worship. This brought the average age down immediately and grew our children's work. Hearing what we were doing another family, from the church that had intended planting in the village, decided to be part of what we were doing and purchased a house in the village. That doubled our numbers of children and provided me with six younger people keen to serve God through the life of the village church. So it went on.

In other words one change brought others, each one strengthening the church and enabling its mission.

There were two aspects of change difficulties that need to be mentioned. When the interior of the church was re-ordered we lost Doreen, our architect. She later returned.

Of greater significance was what happened with Clarrie and Jessie. Clarrie trained and served God within a different cultural context but failed to see how that having once been a great asset to the church they had become a hindrance because of their intransigence. I once invited Clarrie to close a Sunday service in prayer (knowing he was capable). He shouted a defiant "No"! On another occasion we broke into discussion groups and moved chairs to form circles. Some of the congregation lovingly moved towards Clarrie but he refused to adjust his chair. He ended up as part of a circle but remained facing outwards while everyone else faced inwards.

After several years of patience I eventually had to recommend - for their sakes - that they found a church that worshipped and ministered in the style and language with which they would be more comfortable. Once they agreed I did what I could to facilitate this and to ensure that we retained as strong a friendship as possible.

This was one of a few sad episodes. I am sure that they too were saddened by this development but clearly appreciated that we did our best to keep them "in the loop" with regular visits and shared information. They settled elsewhere and the life of the church moved forward.

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