

## **Estate Evangelism – Ministry.**

In the estate churches network executive meetings we can be quite agenda driven but often we break out into conversation. One conversation was about what NECN member would want from us, and consequently what were estate ministries seeking to achieve. Two possibilities were identified. One was the minister, lay or ordained, who wanted to give the what people traditionally expected from their role or office, and to do it well. Another was those who saw the cultural situation as demanding something different which might be a sign of something bigger to the church. A difference which involved modelling 'new ways of being church'. The following 'think piece' is a bit rough and ready and intended to provoke conversation, refinement or debate. Do not hesitate to submit your thoughts.

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A *parish* priest in the Church *of England* is by definition almost obliged to see the institution as a bastion of 'English culture'. Of course, the notion of parish suggests that in reality there is a commitment to 'locality'; and perhaps even of sub-culture. (Yet even many parishes may be a mixture of sub-cultures.) A parish priest, at least, is stretched between the myth of English culture as a singular entity on the one hand and the myth of a local reality of one or more sub-cultures on the other. What those of us who minister on housing estates experience is the suburban 'professional and managerial culture' on the one hand as the powerful representation of English culture, and the 'working class' and 'ethnic' cultures on the other.

When an Anglican vicar is instituted, the Bishop will say "receive this cure of souls, which is both yours and mine:..." If the priest is stretched in the direction of English culture she may think she has been trained to operate anywhere in the Church of England. The emphasis will be upon the Bishop giving a cure of souls of a particular parish that they can have back again if they want.

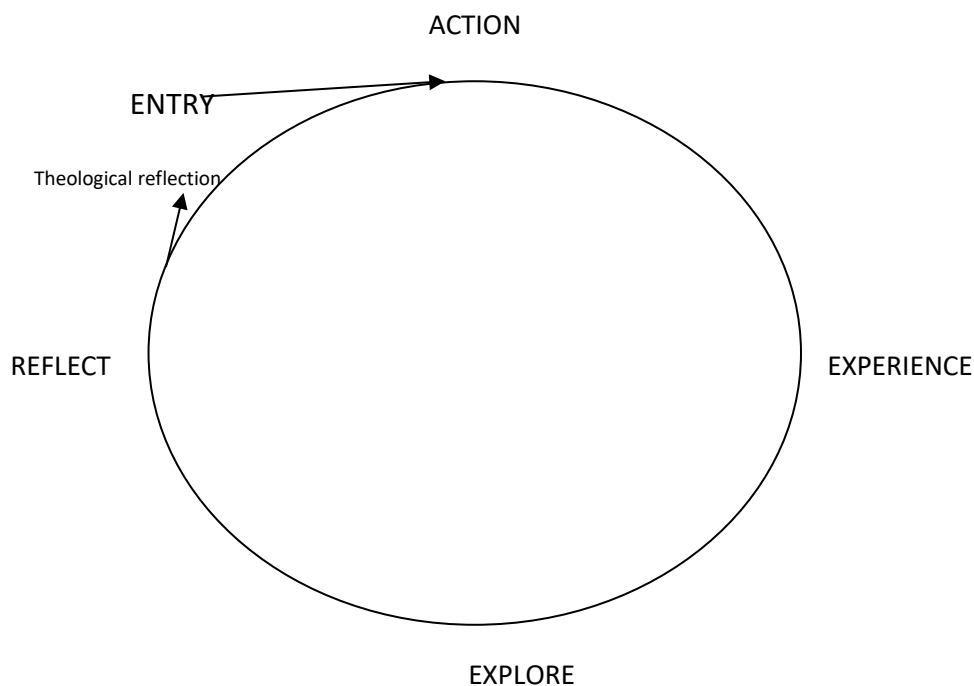
The Renewal and Reform programme of the Church of England is seeking to promote evangelism on Council built housing estates. It cannot avoid the differences that exist or it if the priest is stretched in favour of a contextual theology she might be different. Here the Bishop shares her cure of souls which is to remain shared. The vicar has responsibility to the cure in 'context' and the Bishop's responsibility to the cure of 'contexts in togetherness' and becomes the focus of unity. Here the bishop has to work hard in making sure that contextual freedoms do not offend the freedoms of others by their particular practises. Maintaining freedoms takes more than just inventing rules. It demands being a guardian of the faith. This finds clergy, and maybe in our own historical situation estate clergy especially, viewing their concerns differently and not only clergy but ordained and lay ministers together. In fact licensed and unlicensed ministries within a parish 'team' are variously stretched between trying to reflect a national and/or contextual culture, will fail to help us break out of the current trap of replicating suburban models which currently represents the suburban English national church at the expense of subcultural and contextually defined descriptions of mission and evangelism.

If I were pressed to begin to be more precise on what the difference was I would look at the pastoral cycle, or the learning cycle from which it was derived, to see how it is acted upon on Estates. I offer two pictures of the cycle below.

The first picture is of how we do 'evangelising ministry' and assumes ministry and evangelism is done by 'outsiders'. By this I am referring to cultural outsiders and this includes outsiders who have become residents.

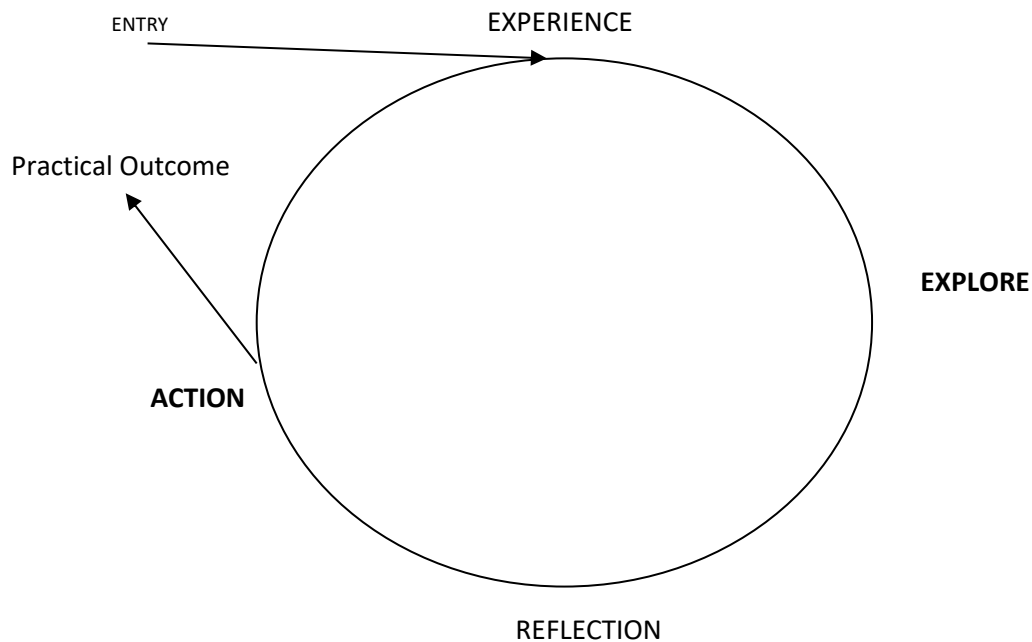
The point of entry is easiest where you can familiarise yourself with what is going on. In the diagrammatic representation below it is at the point of joining the action. After all, the outsider has no other way of gaining or joining the necessary common experience. (This suits trainers in particular. You can finish the first cycle by asking students to write up the theological reflection which can be marked.)

### Picture 1. Outsiders theology project.



If you are an 'insider' and you are trying to excite indigenous evangelistic ministry this approach makes little sense. In working class subculture, and among many others, the reason to learn is so that you can do something. The sensible place at which to join the cycle is at sharing experience. (See picture 2 below.) You then end the first cycle with action. (Trainers find this difficult because they are left wondering how you tick the box called essay, or its equivalent. Because of their own unfamiliarity with the subculture they are at a disadvantage in evaluating the action as evidence for learning.)

**Picture 2. Indigenous theology project.**



The evangelistic plus for indigenous evangelistic ministry is that we have people talking about a God they have seen through the eyes of their own culture. This is harder and takes longer to achieve but a far more communicable evangelism results within a common culture.

Why does this so rarely happen. I would venture to suggest that 'English culture', a national culture, pulls so heavily in the direction of replicating suburban models. Also, the church is not well endowed with people and resources to work with 'inculturation' methods of mission. This not just a matter of money but also one of attitude. Suburban sees itself as normal and those living on housing estates as representing deviancy. (There are so many more studies of poverty as a problem than there are of wealth as a problem even though, in many ways, the latter is the cause of the former.)

Furthermore, there have been bold attempts to free ministry with experimental initiatives. However, it is not good enough to give people freedom to try new ways without setting up the support structures to facilitate them. This demands being open to new ways of evangelisation and also at the same time new ways of being church. The two issues are inseparable. Otherwise it would be like inviting new people into a congregation, and every time they came up with a new idea telling them things cannot change. It might be that this is too difficult. If so we are in danger of

further losing the engagement of those from working class culture and ethnic cultures in the multitude of housing estates the Church of England claims to serve.

The renewal and reform programme has to face up to the fact it has unwittingly stepped into the class divide of our social climate. No doubt, being the Church of England, it will conduct itself with uttermost politeness.

Revd. Canon Joe Hasler.

P.S. I have written this from the Church of England perspective that I know from experience. This is not to exclude ecumenical partners from the conversation. I am sure they will have different but equivalent experiences from within their own settings.

### **Essential bibliography**

Laurie Green, *Let's do theology* (Mowbray, 1990) (Later edition available.)

Joe Hasler, *Mind, Body and Estates* (NECN, 2000) (downloadable from [joehasler.co.uk](http://joehasler.co.uk))

Joe Hasler, *Crying out for a Polycentric Church* (Church in Society, 2006) (also from [joehasler.co.uk](http://joehasler.co.uk))

Steven B Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology* (Orbis, 1994)

Steven B Bevans and Roger P Schroeder, *Constants in Context* (Orbis, 2004)

### **Important resources**

[www.nationalestatechurches.org](http://www.nationalestatechurches.org)

[www.theologyforall.org](http://www.theologyforall.org)

[www.joehasler.co.uk](http://www.joehasler.co.uk)