

Sanctus I

**The opportunities and challenges of an
emerging church**

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Introduction

This dissertation is a study of *Sanctus1*, an ‘emerging church’ based in the city centre of Manchester.¹ Its beginnings lie in a report on city centre ministry commissioned by leaders of the Diocese of Manchester (Church of England) in the late 1990s, out of which emerged a realization that the life of the city centre was developing in a new way, and the existing churches were not likely to appeal to the young adults moving into the area, for work, recreation, and as their permanent home. *Sanctus* is still very much in its infancy, and nothing else has been written about its progress to date, which made it a particularly appealing topic for study. It also facilitated my work on the ground, as the bishop and other Church leaders were keen to have an outside observer report on what had been accomplished.

Process

A longer version of this report will in due course be submitted to the Diocese of Manchester. In relation to this dissertation, however, it became clear at an early stage that in order to keep within the prescribed length it would not be possible to propose a rigorous methodology and also to have sufficient space to report the results of the study. I therefore decided to describe the process, but not to try and justify it. There is a fuller account of this in chapter 2. The basic methodology involved participant observation of *Sanctus* in which a high priority was given to interviews with everyone who had been part of the process, both diocesan leaders and members of *Sanctus*. This prioritizes the perceptions of those involved in the project, allowing the agenda to be determined by their own areas of interest and concern. Since the role of specific Church leaders has been crucial in the development of *Sanctus*, it was inappropriate to mask their identities in any way, and they are all referred to here by name. Members of *Sanctus*, however, are generally not identified in any personal way, except where that is intrinsic to understanding the discussion.

Readers who are familiar with this kind of study will recognize that the underlying model is similar to that proposed by Don S Browning in his book *A Fundamental*

¹ The full name is *Sanctus1*, but it is more commonly referred to in conversation just as *Sanctus*. Both terms are used interchangeably in the following chapters.

Practical Theology,² supplemented by insights from Norman K Denzin's work *Interpretive Ethnography: ethnographic practices for the 21st century*.³ His insistence that 'No text can do everything at once. The perfect ethnography cannot be written'⁴ offered some reassurance that whatever its deficiencies the final outcome would nevertheless be both accurate and worthwhile.

Summary

This work comprises three chapters, beginning with an overview of the challenges facing western culture, including the churches, with particular reference to ministry among those who have been called Generation X.⁵ Chapter 2 then offers a series of snapshots of the life of *Sanctus I*, gathered during a one-week visit to Manchester in May 2003. Some key themes are identified and analyzed through the perceptions of both the Church leaders and *Sanctus* members. These same themes are then picked up for further reflection in chapter 3, where it will be suggested that there are two different understandings of faith and spirituality being held in tension in *Sanctus*, which may be characterized as 'Roman' and 'Celtic' understandings of the church and of Christian theology. The dissertation concludes with reflections inspired by an inscription I discovered in one of the galleries in Manchester, and which seemed particularly appropriate to this imaginative project. Two appendices include other materials referred to in the course of the discussion.

Acknowledgements

The following individuals were especially helpful in the course of this research: the Rt Revd Stephen Lowe, Archdeacon Alan Wolstencroft, Canon Robin Gamble, Revd Simon Gatenby. They gave willingly of their time to talk with me about the project and the wider issues of city centre ministry. Their support staff also supplied photos and other information. Revd George Lings, Director of The Sheffield Centre (Church Army) shared his personal insights, which were particularly helpful, while the *Sanctus* Steering Group allowed me to be a fly on the wall and still managed to be 'normal'.

² Don S Browning, *A Fundamental Practical Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press 1991).

³ Norman K Denzin, *Interpretive Ethnography: Ethnographic practices for the 21st century* (Thousand Oaks: Sage 1997). Cf also Carolyn Ellis & Arthur P Bochner, *Composing Ethnography: alternative forms of qualitative writing* (Walnut Creek: AltaMira Press 1996).

⁴ *Ibid*, 287.

⁵ A term first coined by Douglas Coupland in his novel *Generation X* (New York: St Martins Press 1991), which has subsequently been adopted as a useful shorthand way of referring to young adults who were born approximately between 1960 and 1980. Coupland's novel is still one of the most compelling accounts of the spiritual search of young adults.

I also need to thank members of *Sanctus1* who went to great lengths to facilitate my work where at all possible, but more especially for their acceptance. I was considerably older than all of them, but at no time did I feel I was anything other than accepted as part of their community, so my comments about their relationship-building skills are based on personal experience. In particular, there is Colin who took me on a conducted tour of Sacred Trinity (and other places) and filled in other details of the story for me. Mark and Laura whose home was my home, and who in the midst of a particularly stressful work week were continually at pains to look for ways to help me - whether by identifying a location on the A to Z street map or anticipating whether a coffee or a gin and tonic might be the best aid! Living with them gave me a closer insight into the pressures of daily life that young people face today than could ever be gained by reading statistics or reports. Then there is Ben Edson, without whom I simply would not have been able to do this work. As well as facilitating my involvement with the group, he also read through an earlier draft of chapter 2 to ensure that I had reported the facts accurately – though the interpretation of them is, of course, my own. In the process of observing him at work, I had first hand experience of the way that ‘hanging out with folk’ and ‘building relationships’ does indeed model the Gospel. He truly is a ‘practical theologian’ and I am pleased to count him as a personal friend at the end of this process.

Finally, my husband John, whose support has been, as always, totally reliable - whether engaging in conversation or filling the dishwasher to prevent us disappearing under a heap of dishes while I sat at the computer through much of the summer.

Chapter 1

Setting the Scene

‘Things are no longer merely in the process of change ... Postmodernity doesn’t mean a mere adjustment of modernity. It is a quantum leap into a new world of ideas, values, and ethics. All of Western society has been impacted, and nothing is really the same. Rationalism, faith in the future, and many of the ideas that fueled modern Western life have been discarded or, at least, reinvented.’⁶

Craig Detweiler and Barry Taylor put into words what we all know. Wherever we look, the world is not what it once was. In the global village, no country can isolate itself from the welfare of others, and though previous generations of westerners managed to live in a way that was detached even from their own colonies, today’s young adults are no longer able to remain sealed off from the rest of the world. No-one can ignore the new world order that requires us to develop new forms of international relationships. Even for those who never thought of such things before, ‘9/11’ has become a kind of shorthand for the realization that instability in one part of the world potentially leaves us all vulnerable. Technology and travel transfer information and people across the globe without restrictions, and the West – for so long the dominant force in world affairs - struggles to discover its place in the new reality.

A hundred years ago British sovereigns were the ‘emperors’ of India, but now its workers are finding the tables turned as their jobs are transferred to what was once regarded as a backward country, because its workers are not only cheaper but in many respects more committed and more highly skilled, especially in hi-tech industries such as computer programming, or even in the staffing of call centres. Paradoxically, the impact this has on the Indian economy might yet have a greater part to play in reducing poverty in that country than the much-publicized handouts of ‘aid’ given by prosperous governments. The creation of global markets began in the West, as the lifestyle portrayed in Hollywood movies and glossy advertising was exported, and came to be regarded as highly desirable by upwardly-mobile people in developing countries. Western goods soon followed, and with the lifestyles came values to

⁶ Craig Detweiler & Barry Taylor, *A Matrix of Meanings: finding God in pop culture* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic 2003), 24.

match, all of which tend to undermine ethnic distinctives in a way that, in some places, has had destructive effects.

Young adults like the members of *Sanctus1* take all this seriously, not least because of the impact it has on community life and the responsibilities of one group to another. Without making a simplistic equation between everything Western being bad and everything non-Western good, they are concerned when they see the destruction of other cultures that have worked well for thousands of years, not least because of their awareness that the wisdom of generations is also being discarded along with external forms and traditional practices. Though they like to travel, they are disappointed to find that everywhere is increasingly the same, with the same branded goods on offer in identical multinational outlets – and often even the same food in the same restaurant chains.⁷ The world is being homogenized and ‘McDonaldized’ and they are concerned.

The Church

This dramatic shift in the nature of global culture is also reflected in the Christian church, but in reverse. If the globalization of consumerism has meant the rest of the world becoming more and more like the West, the globalization of Christian belief has had the opposite effect, and it is now more or less taken for granted that Western culture can appropriately be described as ‘post-Christian’. Fifty years ago, the church’s heartland was in Europe, North America, and places like Australia and New Zealand to which people of European origin had migrated. Today, the centre of gravity of Christian belief is in Africa, South America and parts of south-east Asia, while the church in the West has experienced rapid and serious decline.⁸

Dr Peter Brierley, Executive Director of *Christian Research*, has been tracking these trends in the British church scene for the last twenty years or so. In his book *The Tide*

⁷ For many examples of this, see George Ritzer, *McDonaldization: the Reader* (Thousand Oaks: Pine Forge Press 2002). and other people on this trend The figures compiled by Brierley and Christian Research, though relying on the voluntary co-operation of local church leaders, correlate with statistics maintained by the major denominations, so that while they may not be 100% accurate there is no reason to doubt their overall veracity. And in any case, the comparisons which he makes over the twenty year period are between statistics gathered in the same way, so the trends that can be traced are reliable enough.

⁸ For statistics relating to this, see David B Barrett, George T Kurian & Todd M Johnson (eds), *World Christian Encyclopedia: a comparative survey of churches and religions in the modern world* (New York: Oxford University Press 2001), 2nd ed. in 2 volumes – and with annual updates in the first issue for each year of the *International Bulletin of Missionary Research*.

is Running Out, he summarizes and comments on a survey of church attendance in England, carried out in 1998.⁹ He enumerates the following conclusions:

1. More than a million people stopped attending church regularly on Sunday in the nine years from 1989 to 1998.
2. If the rate of decline continues then in a generation's time there would be only a tiny percentage of the population in church: the church could bleed to death.
3. The institutional churches (traditional monolithic denominations) have experienced a higher rate of decline than the non-institutional (independents, and more loosely connected networks).
4. The Church of England and the Roman Catholic Church have each seen Sunday attendance drop between 40% and 50% in the course of the last two decades.
5. Of the non-institutional churches, only Baptists and New Churches experienced growth in the 1990s. Baptist growth was small, while part of the New Church growth was due to previously independent churches joining one of their 'streams'.
6. There are 16,000 churches in England for which a Sunday attendance of fifty or less would be the norm. Only 3,000 churches have average congregations of over 300 people, 2,000 of which are Roman Catholic.
7. Overall, in 1998 the Church of England had the smallest average congregations of any denomination, with sixty on a normal Sunday. The New Churches had the largest with an average of 138, after the Roman Catholics with an average of 326.
8. Church attendance has not declined uniformly across the country: the south-east, especially London, has experienced significantly less decline than elsewhere. Possible reasons for this might include a continuing trend of population movement from other parts of England into the south-east, as well as the emergence of several very large churches in the capital.
9. Evangelical churches of all denominations have declined at one-tenth of the rate of non-evangelicals: in 1998 they accounted for three-eighths, or 37%, of all churchgoers.
10. The Sunday Shopping Act (1994), which had a significant effect on the cultural habits and leisure lifestyles of English people, may account for some of this significant decline in churchgoing.

⁹ Peter Brierley, *The Tide is Running Out* (London: Christian Research 2000), 67. The figures compiled by Brierley and Christian Research, though relying on the voluntary co-operation of local church leaders, correlate with membership and other statistics maintained by the major denominations, so that while they may not be 100% accurate in every case there is no reason to doubt their overall reliability. And in any case, the comparisons which he makes over the twenty year period are between statistics that have all been gathered using the same methodology, so the trends that he traces are useful enough – and, of course, correspond closely with the anecdotal evidence available to any observer of the church scene over recent years.

In presenting this bleak picture, Brierley comments

‘I am a statistician, not a theologian. The numbers in this book show a haemorrhage akin to a burst artery. The country is littered with people who used to go to church but no longer do. We could well bleed to death. The tide is running out. At the present rate of change we are one generation from extinction.’

While acknowledging the depressing nature of these statistics, Brierley remains optimistic that there could yet be a positive way forward, if only church leaders would recognize the importance of strategic thinking and forward planning. He identifies this as a major weakness in church life:

‘We have not planned for, nor managed, strategic change in the societal impact on our church life ... But it is not yet all over bar the shouting. Strategic thinking can be done. Action is possible.’¹⁰

Society and Spirituality

Before returning to this theme of strategic thinking by church leaders, it will be worthwhile reflecting on the nature of this culture which is apparently rejecting the church so decisively. In the 2001 UK national census, 72% of people in England described themselves quite specifically as ‘Christian’. Translated into actual figures, that means that almost three-quarters of the population, or roughly 39 of the 49 million people in England, happily identify themselves as Christians. By any standards, that is a staggering statistic, especially when we compare it with the figures for church attendance, which show almost four million in church every week, with five million attending once a month, and roughly ten million once a year. In a more recent article, Brierley hardly needs to observe that ‘There is an obvious yawning gap between profession and commitment if measured by church attendance.’¹¹

So who are these people who describe themselves as ‘Christian’ but never go to church? David Hay was until recently Reader in Spiritual Education at Nottingham University, and has been engaged in research on the nature of religious or spiritual experience for more than twenty-five years. In his survey of the spirituality of people who don’t go to church, he comments

¹⁰ Brierley, *Tide is Running Out*, 236.

¹¹ In *Quadrant* (London: Christian Research, May 2003).

‘The results of my work have strengthened my belief that spiritual awareness is a necessary part of our human make-up, biologically built into us, whatever our religious beliefs or lack of them. I also happen to be a Christian believer, and over the last few years I have found myself thinking increasingly about the implications of my findings for the mission of the Church.

If spiritual awareness is indeed a human universal, and if God the Holy Spirit communicates with all of Creation, then we ought to be able to learn something about the nature of God by listening to people talking about their spiritual experience. At a time when the mainstream churches in this country are going through a period of severe decline, it must be valuable from the perspective of mission to try to understand how God is speaking to those who seldom or never go to church; that is to say, the great majority of people in Britain.’¹²

On the basis of his research, he concludes that about ‘half the adult population of Britain would claim to have a spirituality that is grounded on their personal experience.’¹³ His work is of particular significance, as he intentionally avoided starting with an agenda that would define the terms ‘religious’ and ‘spiritual’. Instead, he focused on listening to personal stories as a way of creating a space in which people’s experience could define the terms of reference. This is of the essence of good qualitative research, especially in areas related to topics such as personal experience or spirituality. Furthermore, this most recent research (published in 2000) in some respects paralleled a 1987 survey in which Hay had also been involved,¹⁴ and that enabled him to track developments in social consciousness over that period. This comparison revealed a 60% increase in spiritual experience over that time span, with something like 76% of the population now apparently admitting to having had a spiritual or religious experience (a figure which he believes to be an underestimate, because, as he says, some people still have a residual embarrassment about reporting such things).

Something which people label ‘spirituality’ appears to be recognized in some form in almost everybody’s life, though it is not always connected to overtly religious beliefs and practice (if by ‘religious’ we mean formal involvement in the activities of a faith community). By way of explaining this, interviewees referred – among other things - to their awareness of a transcendent providence, an inexplicable patterning of their

¹² David Hay & Kate Hunt, Foreword, in *Understanding the Spirituality of People who don't go to Church. A report on the findings of the Adults' Spirituality Project at the University of Nottingham* (Nottingham: University of Nottingham 2000).

¹³ *Ibid.*, 4.

¹⁴ David Hay & Gordon Heald, ‘Religion is good for you’, in *New Society* (17 April 1987); see also David Hay, *Religious Experience Today: studying the facts* (London: Mowbray 1990).

life. In spite of the fact that they were all selected specifically because they did not go to church, many people spoke of being ‘aware of the presence of God’, often in times of deep distress, adding that this helped them to handle their suffering. Many others, though, had the same ‘awareness of God’ when they were extremely happy. Even people who were uncertain of ‘the presence of God’ might pray when they were afraid or unhappy. Other commonly reported experiences included an awareness of a ‘presence’ in nature, connecting with dead people, and an awareness of the presence of evil.

When people mentioned ‘religion’ it frequently had a negative connotation. The institutional church was a disappointment, insisting people ‘jump through hoops’ and adopt belief systems just to satisfy the clergy. The church was criticized as having no credible metanarrative on offer, and churchgoers were perceived as being unduly arrogant in their claims to possess the ‘truth’. By contrast, many of the people surveyed saw ‘spirituality’ as an unfolding journey, and resented the demand to believe with certainty and the way that ‘religion’ offered no space to doubt, or even to explore for themselves. Those who had some previous contact with church tended to use ‘religious’ language to interpret their experience - though they were frustrated that church activities failed to resonate with their life experience, and by implication therefore lacked meaning for them. Those with no previous connection with the church tended to create their own spirituality, often around sacred space or ritual, though they acknowledged that their lack of a ready-made language or framework could be a challenge. Some found that their family’s belief in the supernatural provided a framework within which to work out their own narrative. They too resented the way church behaves like an exclusive club (in things as various as the dress code, way of speaking, and denying access to rituals unless people signed up to things that were not even explained to them). Overall, there was a longing that the church would be less dogmatic, and more spiritually serious.

People’s stories gave evidence that God is at work in the world (the *missio Dei*), but that was not good news for the church, which appeared to be disconnected from this awareness, more bothered about organizational maintenance than spiritual formation. Of course, institutions in general are distrusted today, and this partly explains suspicion of the church (‘religion’ is seen as institutional, whereas anything ‘spiritual’ is personal or transpersonal). The church seems to be locked into a way of being that

is out of touch with how people make decisions and behave in everyday life. The church's requirement that people believe pre-packaged ideas was a particular issue, especially notions such as God's transcendence (which can just look like a justification for human power and control). By contrast, Hay's research showed a wide acceptance of God's immanence. So is this not the obvious place to engage with people in order to help them journey to find a metanarrative in which to understand their spiritual experiences?

Some within the world of 'religion' (church) will regard starting from human experience as a deficiency, for surely predetermined doctrine should have priority - and in any case, it will be claimed, Hay's approach through self-defined conversations is just a recipe for wooliness and vague feelings, with no specific content. This is not strictly true, however, for in two appendixes to his report he indicates the area of discussion used for Focus Groups and individual conversations, and these are based around fairly traditional concepts, though without being prescriptive. His biological notion that human beings are 'hard wired for God' could also be criticised, since there is no evidence for it, nor could there be at this present time.¹⁵ Though he personally regards this contention as central, the authenticity of people's stories clearly does not depend on its being true. If it is true, it only serves to emphasize his case. His working definition can be roughly encapsulated in the idea of 'religion being an expression of spirituality but not necessarily defining the whole of it', a definition which is increasingly heard in the popular media as well as in academia, for the simple reason that it clearly correlates with the experience of increasing numbers of people in today's world.

This kind of research is also backed up by anecdotal evidence that is increasingly encountered both in church circles and elsewhere. Christians are sometimes surprised at the ease with which ordinary people now talk about their spirituality, though they need not be, as it is a regular topic on TV chat shows and radio phone-ins. Though there is no agreed explanation as to what it all means, all the evidence now suggests that, though there is a considerable disillusionment with the institutional church, there is also great spiritual openness in our culture at large. It is tempting to think that all

¹⁵ For more on this debate, see R. Joseph, A Newberg et al, *NeuroTheology: Brain, Science, Spirituality, Religious Experience* (Berkeley: University of California Press 2003, 2nd ed); and, for a more speculative approach, Laurence O. McKinney, *Neurotheology: Virtual Religion in the 21st Century* (Albany NY: American Institute for Mindfulness 1994).

the church needs to do is get its house in order, and perhaps the statistics of decline could be turned around. After all, if ‘Mind, Body and Spirit’ shops in our high streets and shopping malls can make a living by selling ‘spiritual commodities’, pop groups like *Faithless* can write songs about the spirituality of club culture,¹⁶ and top actors like Jim Carrey and Morgan Freeman are prepared to star in a movie exploring divine providence,¹⁷ why does the church find it so difficult? Many young people are open to exploring spiritual pathways, and Wicca is evidently enjoying enormous popularity among teenagers, especially girls. Spiritual retreats are widely advertised and many businesses send their staff on courses to address their spirituality and holistic lifestyles.

Spirituality is no longer a subject to be swept under the carpet but a hot topic in bars, clubs and the workplace. Yet in the church, all this is sometimes treated with suspicion, and it is not uncommon to hear it suggested either that there is no such thing as ‘spirituality’ or that those who are so self-consciously searching for it have no idea what they are doing.¹⁸ The fact that it is so often referred to as a ‘spiritual search’ indicates that most people know they have not found what they are looking for – but when Christians can be so negative about it all, it is hardly surprising that most of these searchers would never imagine that the church might offer any significant tools to facilitate them in their exploration. In the closing paragraph of *The Tide is Running Out*, Brierley comments:

‘We need to encourage more *personal spirituality*. In congregational studies we have undertaken, there has been a close association between feeling close to God in worship and growth in faith. Mother Theresa once wrote, “Try to put worship into practice in your life. Be alone with Jesus. You will notice a change in your life, in your family, in your parish and in your environment.”’¹⁹

¹⁶ The *Faithless* song ‘God is a DJ’ is a classic example of this: ‘This is my church, this is where I heal my hurt. It’s a natural grace ... enemies becoming friends when bitterness ends ...’

¹⁷ *Bruce Almighty* (2003), directed by Tom Shadyac, distributed by Universal Pictures.

¹⁸ In a recent editorial in *Themelios*, for example, Carl Truman complains about Christians who base their evangelism on the assumption that ‘there is something innate in human beings that strives for transcendence, for something beyond the routine of everyday life’ – preferring a different interpretation that dismisses such ‘spiritual searching’ as ‘the latest attempts of humanity to avoid precisely any form of true spirituality ... pathetic attempts to pretend that we are not going to die and then to face the judgement ...’ (*Themelios* 28/3 (2003), 4). For an example of the kind of understanding he is criticizing, cf Paul Vallely, ‘Evangelism in a post-religious society’, in *Setting the Agenda: the report of the 1999 Church of England Conference on Evangelism* (London: Church House Publishing 1999), 30-43.

¹⁹ Brierley, *Tide is Running Out*, 233.

He goes on to refer to a study which reported that only 35% of churchgoers spend as much as an hour in personal prayer each week, so even this most obvious of spiritual pursuits is not a high priority - something which must contribute to the opinions of those who see the church as 'unspiritual'.

All this is relevant to the challenges facing the church. But it is not only an external problem, because the church seems unable even to keep its own children. Children brought up in church, but who then leave, are in a different position from those who have no experience of it. They are not ill informed, and many of them leave precisely because of what they see, and the realization that if they want effective spiritual nurture, they will have to look elsewhere.

The 'alternative worship' movement

The emergence of so-called 'alternative worship' (often abbreviated to alt-worship) services has been one response to this situation. One website claims that 'alternative worship isn't defined by style of music, use of coloured or dimmed lighting, smoke or projecting visuals or lyrics using a slide projector ... and no two groups are the same.'²⁰ The first alt-worship groups in the UK were started in the 1980s and early 1990s by Christians who were already involved in the dance and club scene, which explains why things like smoke, projected images, and so on are indeed fairly commonplace. Though these early groups were not all successful, their style has been copied by others to such an extent that in a privately-circulated research paper based on visits to alt-worship services throughout the UK, David Denniston comments:

'It struck me as curious that "alternative" worship services should all be so similar to one another! ... it raises the issue of whether the alt worship network is as guilty of creating a new worship orthodoxy as the traditional and charismatic/evangelical patterns which alt worshippers tend to reject. This is not to say that the predominant overall style fails to resonate or engage. On the contrary, I almost invariably found it helpful, meaningful and relevant.'²¹

There is no official listing of such groups, and some are fluid networks of like-minded people that last for only a short time in a particular form, before re-emerging in a new incarnation. Something like twenty or thirty such groups that have been in existence for several years, and have established something of a reputation for themselves as

²⁰ <http://www.alt-worship.org>

²¹ David Denniston, *alt.worship.co.uk: alternative worship in the United Kingdom* (a paper written as part of the study leave programme of the Board of Ministry of the Church of Scotland, 2001).

innovators in this field.²² It is undoubtedly a growing phenomenon, and any place with a reasonable population base is likely to have one or more. The annual Greenbelt Arts Festival has become something of a gathering-point for people interested in alt-worship, and is a major opportunity for ideas to be shared and new experiences to be explored.

People of all ages can be found in the alt-worship scene, though there is a predominance of twenty-and thirty-somethings. Many become involved as a result of their dissatisfaction with the mainstream church, which means they can bring painful baggage with them, and they also want to show the church 'how to do it right'. 'Doing it right' generally means creating worship experiences that, instead of being locked into the culture of the past, will enable people to engage with God from their cultural 'home' or lived experience.

In its heyday, the Nine O'clock Service (NOS) in Sheffield was the flagship of this movement, with many hundreds attending its services, and though it was justly proud of being a 'seamless act of professionalism and creativity', there was a lot more to it than mere electronic gimmickry. The opening invocation of the Planetary Mass which was the centrepiece of its weekly celebration intimates a much deeper purpose:

'Here we seek to mourn the destruction that we have just heard of and to cultivate a compassion that feels in our own flesh the wounds inflicted on others and on the planet and to awaken to the incredible awe and beauty of our existence with God.'²³

This experiment in creative worship received what was probably its highest accolade when Matthew Fox visited in November 1993. His work on 'creation-centered spirituality' was their source of theological inspiration,²⁴ and he returned their compliment by describing the Planetary Mass as '... twice as good as I expected: they

²² Leading examples would be:

The Bigger Picture (<http://www.emmanuelcroydon.org.uk/bivverp.html>)

Grace (<http://freespace.virgin.net/addam.baxter/grace>)

The Mass (<http://www.the-mass.com>)

Unity (<http://www.unity.faithweb.com>)

Vaux (<http://www.vaux.net>)

Worship Alternative (<http://www.lineone.net/abbotsford>)

²³ Roland Howard, *The Rise and Fall of the Nine o'clock Service*, (Mowbray 1996), 94.

²⁴ Cf M Fox, *Original Blessing* (Santa Fe: Bear & Co 1983). He describes his involvement with NOS as a transformational experience in the final chapter of his autobiography: Matthew Fox, *Confessions: the making of a post-denominational priest* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco 1996).

had invented a new language to communicate, which is exactly what I'd been writing about ...The commitment of these people was beautiful'.²⁵

The NOS came to an unexpected and ignominious end in a highly public way, but that was entirely unconnected with its vision for alt-worship and its concern to connect with unchurched young adults, which has secured it a significant place in the history of the alt-worship movement in the UK, and many would still regard it as an important model. Even before the demise of the NOS, these alt-worship services were not widely adopted or commended by the wider church community, and most such groups today tend to attract only small numbers, mostly recruited from drop-outs from mainline churches. In relation to this study of *Sanctus I* the alt-worship movement is important not only as part of the historical background, but also because the Bishop of Hume - the main Episcopal sponsor of *Sanctus* - was himself involved in the NOS, something which no doubt explains the rather different basis on which *Sanctus* was established.

Modernity and post-modernity

To understand the driving force behind the emergence of *Sanctus I*, we need to take a step backwards and re-examine the cultural change that is signified by the shift from modernity to post-modernity. This is not the place to give a detailed account of all the implications of that, except to say that the trends identified at the beginning of this chapter, when combined with philosophical questioning about the nature of reality – and, indeed, about human nature itself – have resulted not just in a pragmatic shift of perspective, but signify the emergence of a completely remodelled worldview among western people.²⁶ The problems of the church can be traced back to the 1960s.²⁷ That decade was especially significant because, in Britain anyway, it was a time of previously unimagined prosperity for those who had experienced the deprivations of a major world war (in some cases, two), typified by the political slogan adopted by prime minister Harold Macmillan, declaring that 'You've never had it so good'. In the 1950s, that slogan could with some justice have been applied to the church. Though he was controversial at the time, Billy Graham's visits, first to England and then subsequently to Scotland, gave the church a public profile it could previously

²⁵ Howard, *Rise and Fall*, 99.

²⁶ For a succinct and accessible account, see David Lyon, *Postmodernity* (Buckingham: Open University Press 1994).

²⁷ Cf Callum G Brown, *The Death of Christian Britain* (London: Routledge 2000).

only have dreamed of. Both his style and message spoke to the concerns of a generation that was just emerging from the restrictions of food rationing and air raids. Not only were the shops beginning to fill up, but people once again could go out freely at night in well illuminated streets, and gather without fear in large numbers in public places. To a nation that had known nothing but hardship, Billy Graham seemed to embody the future. He was an ordinary person, and yet he was also like a film star, surrounded by the kind of glitz and glamour that had been lacking from British culture for so long. On top of that, he apparently had the answers to life's tough questions, based on an authority that could be trusted: the Bible.²⁸ Not everyone warmed to his style, but this was also the period when Christian apologists like C S Lewis had ready access to the airwaves, and in a different way they too offered the possibility of trustworthy answers to ultimate questions of meaning.²⁹

By the end of the twentieth century, however, this kind of approach had lost its sparkle, and though Billy Graham himself returned to the UK in the 1980s and early 1990s, none of those visits evoked the same national excitement as his Haringey mission of 1955. The apologetic style that offers an almost scientific 'proof' for Christian belief, held up by speakers who can argue a case, still connects with some of those whom demographers have labelled the 'Baby Boomers' (people born between about 1945 and 1960). But it holds no attraction for their children, Generation X. The boomers were raised in a world in which reason was still treated with respect, and experts were believed just because they were experts. But subsequent generations have had to face other questions that have highlighted the complexities of life, and of faith. Science no longer seems to know all the answers, and increasing numbers of people believe that, far from making the world a better place, it has actually created many of the ultimate questions we now face. Technology is welcomed as a way to make life easier, yet with the accompanying possibility that it can also more easily facilitate our final destruction. Even freedom – especially sexual – has apparently exposed us to greater risks than we know how to deal with, most notably AIDS. Arguably the world has always been an unsafe place, but whereas in the past it was taken for granted that someone, somewhere, understood it all, that is no longer the

²⁸ For accounts of all this, see John Pollock, *Billy Graham* (London: Hodder & Stoughton 1966), Marshall Frady, *Billy Graham: a parable of American righteousness* (London: Hodder & Stoughton 1979).

²⁹ Cf C S Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (London: Collins 1952, 2nd ed).

case. We are, quite literally, on our own, and with the continuing fragmentation of the family we can no longer be certain of the support even of our nearest and dearest. In the midst of this social upheaval, traditional institutions have become increasingly problematic. Trust in politicians is at an all-time low, indeed the very notion of representative democracy appears to be under threat, as people increasingly want to take matters in their own hands through the influence of single-issue pressure groups. The motives of accountants, banks, and the legal system are all under suspicion. And the church is no different. There is a feeling that traditional institutions have created a mess – so how can these same institutions possibly put things right again? For better or for worse, the perception has grown that, if we are to find God, we will have to take responsibility for it ourselves, rather than trust institutions like the church – hence the positive understanding of ‘spirituality’ (a personal thing) and dismissal of ‘religion’ (an institution).

The people who feel the discontinuities of all this most acutely are those who are now in their twenties and thirties (and, of course, the generations coming up behind them). Those who think about such matters often blame their parents (the boomers), indeed some social commentators claim that those who are now in their fifties might be the richest generation in history. Many of them certainly enjoy a level of prosperity unheard of by their parents and grandparents. But increased wealth allowed people to enjoy more privacy in their individual homes, and be less reliant on connecting with the wider community. For them, church seemed boring and irrelevant when compared with the seemingly endless variety of leisure opportunities available to them, and active participation in worship was understood as, at best, a lifestyle accessory. Paradoxically, as well as being the richest generation, they might yet turn out to have been one of the most miserable. Their children are realizing that, though their parents had material wealth, they frequently lacked love and relationship. Many GenXers virtually ‘raised themselves’ because their parents were out working all the time in order to ensure their financial security. Though many have accepted this same outlook, increasing numbers of younger people are seriously dissatisfied with this way of being, and are eager for a change. But because of the worldview they have adopted, their determination to change is only matched by the ferocity of their distrust of other people, especially those who (like traditional churches) tell them they know all the answers. Gordon Lynch, himself a GenXer, sums all this up as follows:

- ❑ GenXers are disengaged from traditional sources of meaning and suspicious of traditional sources of authority
- ❑ It is a generation whose prospects appear worse than that of their parents' generation, yet who do not necessarily equate well-being with material prosperity
- ❑ GenXers have been traumatised by social and relational instability
- ❑ They lack a sense of meaning, but also have a significant interest in pursuing meaning
- ❑ They define themselves primarily in relation to popular culture³⁰

Tom Beaudoin insists that Christian ministry with Generation X must acknowledge the reality of the personal pain of such young adults.³¹ Craig Detweiler and Barry Taylor agree, adding that 'a case can be made that the art world offers a more open environment for expressing pain and suffering than does the church. This may explain postmodern culture's embrace of the arts and rejection of organized religions.'³² Elsewhere they observe that 'When the system no longer works, artists step into the gap as critics, as questioners, and as theologians ...',³³ while also expressing confidence that 'God will thrive even in a post-literal world. We have plenty of experience talking about the message. What we need is a theology rooted in the medium.'³⁴

This is the matrix of despair and optimism within which a group of church leaders in Manchester began to reflect on the future of ministry in their city centre. They recognized that, for the church to have a long-term viable future, then whatever the difficulties, it must connect with GenXers – not just by packaging its traditional message differently, but by listening to their concerns and asking what the Gospel might now look like in this context.

The Manchester Review

In March 2000, the Rt Rev Stephen Lowe, Bishop of Hume (Diocese of Manchester), commissioned a report on *Mission and Ministry in Manchester City Centre*. The

³⁰ Gordon Lynch, *After Religion: Generation X and the search for meaning* (London: Darton Longman and Todd 2002), 21.

³¹ Tom Beaudoin, *Virtual Faith The Irreverent Spiritual Quest of Generation X* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass 1998), 96-97.

³² Detweiler & Taylor, *Matrix of Meaning*, 283.

³³ *Ibid*, 168.

³⁴ *Ibid*, 218.

working group was chaired by the Ven. Alan Wolsencroft, Archdeacon of Manchester, and Bishop Stephen's hope was that the group would:

- 1 Examine existing and proposed developments in the centre of Manchester, gather information of the population make-up, and the City Council's proposals for community meeting places for the resident population and any other relevant information about the life and needs of the city centre's resident population.
- 2 Examine the City Council's proposals for further development in the city centre, examine the implications of Manchester's regional status for the churches and the needs particularly of younger people and people working in the city centre.
- 3 Examine the life, work and witness of the existing churches in the centre of Manchester, including those of other Christian denominations; review their plans for development and so ensure that any work suggested by the Working Party would then be in partnership with other denominations working in the city.
- 4 Specifically review the work of St Ann's, Manchester and Sacred Trinity, Salford and to consider how the life, work and witness of Manchester Cathedral related to the task of mission and ministry in the centre of Manchester.
- 5 Recognize the contribution the Hume deanery might make to the development of mission and ministry in the city centre of Manchester.³⁵

The catalyst that made all this both possible and desirable was the significant regeneration that has taken place in the city centre of Manchester in recent years – and which still continues. The possibility of substantial rebuilding was first considered in 1988, when the city submitted an unsuccessful bid to host the Olympic Games. But the single most important factor in the regeneration of the city centre was completely unplanned: the almost total destruction of a major sector of the city centre by an IRA bomb on 15 June 1996. The damage was enormous in social and economic terms, with more than 200,000 square feet of retailing and 300,000 square feet of office space destroyed in a blast that was estimated to have done damage amounting to some £700 million. The sheer scale of the destruction ensured that there was no chance of things being patched up, and the city council saw it as a unique opportunity to re-plan and re-build quite literally from the ground up, assisted by a dedicated four-year £435 million funding package.³⁶

³⁵ Letter from Rt Rev Steve Lowe to Archdeacon Alan Wolstencroft dated 27 March 2000, included as Appendix 1 in *The Consultative Paper on Mission and Ministry in Manchester City Centre. A report to the Bishops of Manchester and Hume.*

³⁶ *Ibid*, Appendix 2.

The outcome of all this is that, whereas in 1988 Manchester city centre boasted just four residential schemes with a total of 363 housing units, by 1998 this had expanded to forty, with a total of 2,100 units. At the time the church report was compiled, a further 550 housing units were under construction, with 400 more at the planning stage, plus a significant expansion of student accommodation through the construction of an entirely new Student Village. In the meantime, the successful bid to host the Commonwealth Games in 2002 had acted as an additional spur to all this activity, and the resulting demand for new building of all sorts left developers struggling to keep up. Not surprisingly, this substantial growth in city-centre housing has raised other questions about its long-term sustainability, not least because of a shortage of local food shopping and a lack of community infrastructure such as schools. At the moment, this is not critical as only 1.5% of city centre households have dependent children, compared with 26.7% for the city as a whole, and the average household size is correspondingly small with almost two-thirds of city centre homes being occupied by only one person.³⁷

In seeking to answer the questions posed to them by Bishop Stephen, this was the background against which the Church's working party carried out its work. One of the most significant factors to influence their decisions was the population movement that took place as a result of the physical regeneration of the area, and this had a particular bearing on the emergence of *Sanctus 1*. Based on figures from 1996 and 1998 (the most recent at the time), the number of people working on a daily basis in the city centre was as high as 180,000, with the largest employer being the finance and business sector (41.3%), while sales and related occupations represented a further 16.2%.³⁸ A further significant factor, however, was the way in which the resident population of the city centre had changed during the 1990s: while the population of the city as a whole increased by just 2% between 1991 and 1998, city centre residents increased by a massive 22.7%. A study by English Partnerships estimates that the city centre population, which is already the largest of any city in England, is now growing at a rate of 25% per annum. On this basis, Greater Manchester Research reckons that the population in the city centre will reach 10,000 within ten years, though another

³⁷ *Ibid*, Appendix 2.

³⁸ These figures may well be under-estimates in relation to the current situation, as they were already four years old when the report was written, and therefore reflect a period of great uncertainty for city centre businesses (just after the IRA bomb).

estimate has projected a total as high as 20,000 by 2005.³⁹ The age profile of these people is a critical factor, with those aged 16-29 forming the largest single group (44.9% - compared with 23.5% for this cohort in the city at large). There is a similarly high proportion of adults in their thirties (25.8% in the city centre compared with 15.1% more generally). In total, therefore, 70.7% of the resident population in Manchester city centre is aged between sixteen and forty. In addition to that, there are some 1,700 residents under 25 who are living in communal establishments of various kinds. The picture is made a bit more complicated by the fact that the two cities of Manchester and Salford adjoin one another, and connect seamlessly at the city centre of Manchester. Though the diocesan working party specifically researched the Manchester side of this conurbation, the same phenomenon of population growth is known to be taking place in Salford (for which statistics are gathered separately), and many of these people fit the same age and lifestyle profile as their counterparts in Manchester itself – and regularly use the facilities of Manchester city centre. This has a particular bearing on the place of Sacred Trinity church (mentioned in the next chapter), which is technically in Salford, in an area that is next in line for regeneration but which is also adjacent to the city centre of Manchester.

It soon became clear to the diocesan working party that there were several people groups whose needs ought to guide the future role of relevant ministry in this context. These included the young affluent singles and couples who make up the majority of city centre households. Alongside them, however, it was possible to identify a much smaller, but still significant, group of deprived people who were being displaced by the urban regeneration, and whose future was unclear but certainly insecure. In addition to this, there was an identifiable – and growing - gay population. Then on top of these resident groups, the city council has plans for Manchester to be a 24/7 city, which will necessarily mean people working in the city centre at all hours of the day and night, while the increased leisure facilities will attract visitors, both tourists and conference delegates, as the city's reputation grows. This in turn is likely to bring more street traders, casual workers, and people in need. All of this will only increase the demand for more diversity in ministry to an increasingly mobile public.⁴⁰

³⁹ *Ibid*, Appendix 2.

⁴⁰ *Ibid*, Appendix 2.

As a result of its deliberations, the working party made a number of recommendations to the Bishop of Hume, which are worth listing in full not only because a significant number of them were to have a bearing on the way that *Sanctus 1* developed, but also because they give an indication of the breadth of creative thinking that went on in the process in relation to Christian ministry in the context of a large pluralist city at the start of the 21st century:

- 1 The appointment of a new Rector at St Ann's is crucial to the mission and ministry in the centre.
- 2 Appoint an associate minister at St Ann's with a special brief to develop new styles/patterns of worship that are accessible and relevant to younger people.
- 3 Accept an offer by the Church Army to provide a staff member.
- 4 Develop chaplaincy models in ecumenical partnership.
- 5 Expand the cathedral ministry.
- 6 Establish firmer links between Church House [diocesan headquarters] and Church [parishes/people].
- 7 Affirm ministry to the gay and lesbian community.
- 8 Address practical issues such as housing for staff.
- 9 Study city centre social ministry.
- 10 Review ministry with students.

In relation to the development of *Sanctus 1*, the most significant thing here was the acceptance of the Church Army's offer to fund a newly commissioned Captain to serve a probationary period of three years in this situation. The person appointed was Ben Edson, and his training and personal gifting, together with his sense of 'call' to work in a city centre environment, enabled something to happen quite quickly. The most natural place for him to have been placed would have been St Ann's (the parish church of Manchester city centre), but at the time of his appointment the incumbent there was about to retire, and so he was linked with the Cathedral (also in the city centre) and Canon Robin Gamble (Diocesan Evangelist) became his mentor and line manager, at least in the early stages of the process.

Chapter 2

This is *Sanctus1*

Starting points

When I first proposed this study to Ben Edson, the Church Army captain appointed as city centre missionary in Manchester to facilitate *Sanctus1*, he welcomed this, pointing out that such a study could also be of value to *Sanctus* members themselves, as well as the church leaders whose initiative it had been. I decided the best approach would be to spend a week in Manchester to share in some typical *Sanctus* activities, and to interview as many people as possible. This report is therefore a snapshot of *Sanctus1* taken between Tuesday May 6 and Monday May 12, 2003. In addition to *Sanctus* members, I also met with some key Church leaders: the Rt Rev Stephen Lowe, the Venerable Alan Wolstencroft, Canon Robin Gamble, the Rev Simon Gatenby, Vicar of Christ Church, Brunswick (also Area Dean of Hume and a member of the *Sanctus1* steering group), and the Rev George Lings, researcher for the Church Army (and another member of the steering group).⁴¹ The only type of *Sanctus* event I did not experience was a worship celebration which takes place on a monthly basis. I attended a meeting of the steering group (which only convenes three times a year), plus two *Sanctus* events: their main weekly meeting (Wednesday evening), and the launch of a new Sunday evening venture, ‘Soul Food’. The questionnaires referred to below were distributed only at the Wednesday night event.⁴² One of the core members also hosted a dinner for people to meet me more informally and share their experiences as part of *Sanctus1*. While in Manchester, I stayed with a couple in their twenties, whose small apartment overlooks Piccadilly Gardens, which made it easy for me to meet people as well as giving me a feel for city centre life, and some insight into the pressures faced by young adults in that environment.

Core values

Sanctus’s own publicity describes it as ‘A Christian community based in the city centre of Manchester, engaged in a journey of creative exploration into faith, worship,

⁴¹ Unless otherwise indicated, all the quotations in this chapter are taken from these interviews.

⁴² The questionnaire itself is included in appendix 1.

evangelism, friendship and lifestyle'.⁴³ The importance of community was emphasized through the questionnaires and also in conversations. The intentional creation of community is central to the group's identity, motivated not only by their own personal needs but also by a conviction that a community living out the values of the Gospel will be attractive to the unchurched.

In all, fourteen people completed questionnaires, of whom nine had come from another city, eight in the last two years and eleven in the last four years. Ben Edson and his wife Ruth are also newcomers, though unlike the rest Ben did not have the security of a clearly defined job, and had to invent his position from a standing start. Like the others, Ben started by getting to know the city centre, and the personal contacts made this way have been vital in getting the group off the ground. The questionnaires indicate that seven of the fourteen came through Ben, with two through Robin Gamble, and another four through friends already in *Sanctus*. From the start, *Sanctus* adopted a low profile, and their early publicity was distributed only on a personal basis. They did not want to encourage 'church hoppers' who may have stayed for a month or two and then moved on.⁴⁴ George Lings described this danger:

'... there has been a tendency for the new to attract the disaffected ... who inevitably bring their baggage with them. Sometimes that can be helpful when they find something that really fits them, and they become integral and purposeful members of the community. Other times the disaffection is not just the problem of the church they left, but within their own attitude, and they can be quite significantly disruptive, move on again and repeat the pattern. ... Also the young church can shift from being missional in its intention for those who don't know the faith at all, to become a hospital for the Christian wounded. The latter model is not illegitimate, but it is a change of purpose. It is not very easy to combine the two, unless we hold out to the new people who come the vision of a fresh expression of church and they adopt it, otherwise that vision can become diluted.'

One of the original *Sanctus* members agreed: 'we don't want it to be just disaffected Christians – "Christians Anonymous" ... I think it's important that they have a forum to sound-off about their churches, but we are not a counselling group.'

⁴³ A copy of this postcard is included as part of appendix 2. See also the website: <http://www.sanctus1.co.uk>

⁴⁴ For an interesting account of the issues that create dissatisfaction with the church for increasing numbers of people, see Alan Jamieson, *A Churchless Faith* (London: SPCK 2002). Cf also Michael J Fanstone, *The Sheep that got Away* (London: MARC 1993); William D Hendricks, *Exit Interviews: revealing stories of why people are leaving the church* (Chicago: Moody Press 1993); Philip Richter & Leslie J Francis, *Gone but not Forgotten: Church leaving and Returning* (London: Darton Longman & Todd 1998).

The initial adoption of a low profile turned out to be a wise move,⁴⁵ providing the time and space for serious relationships to develop, and also allowing for clarification of the style that *Sanctus* would adopt. Other Christians were already working in the city centre, and ‘knowing what was good to be part of and what to step back from’ was one of Ben’s first dilemmas. An example was another Anglican running an Alpha course in the Life Café, who would have welcomed his involvement. But some of the people attracted to *Sanctus* had previous negative experiences of Alpha, finding it did not afford them the freedom and flexibility they felt they needed. It was obvious that to be involved with Alpha would give the wrong signal to most of those who were connecting with *Sanctus*. There are also large congregations on the fringe of the city centre, notably the King’s Church (independent) and a Vineyard church, as well as networks connected with the Evangelical Alliance and (in the youth scene) Worldwide Message Tribe. Though Simon Gatenby expressed a hope that *Sanctus* might be able to offer some of these other groups a new model of being community, there is a recognition that *Sanctus* should be different, something on which Archdeacon Alan and Canon Robin Gamble are agreed. As Robin said, ‘I don’t want people to think of *Sanctus* like that – it’s more flexible and fluid ... I don’t have a problem with a lot of stuff they do, it’s just not what we are trying to do.’ Part of this is related to leadership styles: Ben consciously avoids ‘the leader running it from the front’, something he identifies with ‘a Free Evangelical type model’. By way of contrast, his hope is ‘... that *Sanctus* can offer a sacred space in the middle of a week, a time to refocus. Most people work till seven and come down after work. “Services” are about giving time and space to relax and *be*, rather than loads of information - just about being with God and connecting, rather than thinking.’

By way of teasing out the implications of some of this, I asked Ben what he thought was worth believing in today’s culture. His reply is possibly as close as *Sanctus* will come to formulating a statement of faith:

‘For me, through the Christian faith people can find freedom from what a lot of culture tells them, the trappings of materialism and power.

Through belief in Jesus, and the stories within the gospels, people can find freedom.

⁴⁵ *Sanctus*’s story has recently been more widely shared in the Manchester Diocesan Magazine and the Church Army Magazine: see copies in Appendix 2.

Transformation: the Christian faith brings transformation to individuals, but also cultures and societies.

It is important to believe you are loved - not just that you are the person society tells you you should be. We are loved as the children of God – that's it – cultural values don't really matter. There's so much negative stuff about self image – that's something we can really offer to people. Folk don't think of going to church to find it.'

Belonging

Traditional churches are worried about their numbers declining; *Sanctus*'s biggest headache would be for them to grow too quickly. If everyone turned up at once, there could be thirty, which is regarded as too many to fulfil *Sanctus*'s fundamental aim, summed up as 'participation'.⁴⁶ Ben's hope is that 'the conversations and discussions enable people to be refocused in the middle of their week and build relationships' – and to facilitate that, they may divide into two groups, which would both meet within the same venue on Wednesday nights. He reasons that 'smaller groups are not so intimidating and will also facilitate growth,' while cautioning that 'we want to get the timing right so that each group is sustainable.' This aspiration was shared by the people I interviewed, most of whom saw the purpose of their Wednesday meeting as group bonding rather than being a 'service'. Ten of the fourteen who completed questionnaires claimed to attend on 75% or more of all Wednesday evenings, and this was the one event that came highest in people's priorities - closely followed by eating. Food and community naturally belong together, and Simon Gatenby commented that he couldn't remember attending a *Sanctus* event where there was no opportunity for food of some sort – even if only the sharing of bread and wine.⁴⁷ The importance of this focus for Wednesday evenings was underlined in the expansive comments offered on the nature of community. The following views are typical, and widely held:

'It's the community that attracted me'

'Belonging, being accepted (more than friendly)'

'Although it's not all that I want it to be, it's a million miles from where the other churches are at.'

⁴⁶ Since my research was carried out, a *Sanctus* event in mid-August attracted thirty people, of whom only seven were regular members (most of them being on holiday). This suggests that the question of size is likely to become a more urgent concern than it first seemed to be.

⁴⁷ Not necessarily in a sacramental way, though as I shall indicate later this is a much-discussed issue.

Several commented that when they first arrived in Manchester, other churches were unable to address ‘Where I was at in my life’, while one felt ‘They were OK if you were prepared to leave your brains at the door.’

The open-endedness of things is appreciated, the way in which ‘no one forces theology on you’:

‘You can express yourself really well, there’s no right or wrong way, an acceptance of different ideas and you get a lot of different points of view - whereas at church you get just one point of view. Most established church structures don’t allow freedom of debate. I like to see what other people think.’

At the same time, this does not seem to end up in intellectual mediocrity. On the contrary:

‘You can think about your faith.’

‘I talk about things that are never mentioned in church.’

‘It really opens my mind up, it challenges perhaps the way I have thought in the past.’

The opportunity to work together in creating distinctive experiences of worship and reflection also leads to new learning:

‘I like the use of stories, Jesus used stories.’

‘I’ve never found a service⁴⁸ where I could interact before.’

‘In the two hours there will be something for everyone.’

Some are thinking of community in a broader perspective, recognizing that their response to one another’s emotional, financial and spiritual needs will be indicators of the extent to which they are inspired by the Gospel, rather than just being a group of friends. A few expressed an awareness of their financial privilege in a world of mixed economies, and were concerned about the global scene as well as the needs on their doorstep. They expressed a desire to have a lifestyle that would be honouring to God, but were unsure what that would mean. One person commented that ‘not all problems are as simple as providing finance, and indeed sometimes money can be the cop-out.’

Sacred Space

At the start, the core founders of *Sanctus* met in one another’s homes, but this soon became impractical. Pubs seemed to be the obvious place to look next, partly because

⁴⁸ Interestingly, though the Wednesday gatherings are not a ‘service’, this term is used by more than one to describe it – perhaps because no other word is available to them.

Robin Gamble had previous experience with a pub church in Bradford. But as one member of that early group observed, ‘trying to find somewhere to be a sanctified spiritual space that was suitable to pray in as well as give presentations proved to be more difficult than we had anticipated.’ As a result, *Sanctus* ended up in the Cathedral, a provision that is appreciated, but which presents its own different set of problems. In the meantime, the ancient church of Sacred Trinity (dating to 1635), on the edge of Salford but adjacent to Manchester city centre, and in an area earmarked for redevelopment, has offered *Sanctus* another possibility, and some members of the group are already using it as a base. As it was described to me,

‘Sacred Trinity is potentially fantastic. We are not paying for it, [I subsequently discovered that the diocese is] it’s huge, and has amazing merit architecturally. Whether that responds to what *Sanctus* wants to be, I’m not entirely sure: it is still a church building: it is not an open place, you have to go round the back to find the door.’

Some see considerable potential here for Sacred Trinity to be redesigned so as to incorporate studios and office spaces that could be rented out (to *Sanctus* members and others), though a lot of work would need to be done first. In addition, there is still a small residual Sunday congregation, and things like funerals take place from time to time which, even for artists, would hardly constitute an ideal working environment. There is also the danger that by moving into an area that could take ten years to become vibrant, the existing group might be damaged in the meantime. At least one member would like to see *Sanctus* in a completely different kind of space:

‘Personally my ideal would be a café/bar that we could have the whole of, with a mezzanine level upstairs where we could have a meeting space. The entire space would be ours. I would like to see us running a café during the day, having discussions in the space. Other people could come in to use the space as well. It would be an entity – a spiritual/business entity within the city, expanding to a community of people living together or in the same locality.’

Evangelism

There is a strong consensus among *Sanctus* members that, while they have a responsibility to share their faith, the time and circumstances need to be right. In commenting on this, many characterized *Sanctus* as a resource that enables them to talk about their faith at work:

‘*Sanctus* is an outlet for me to be a witness to people at work, I would describe it as a good group of young people, building friendships, talking about things that are interesting’

‘I’ve told my colleagues I go to *Sanctus*. One person asks me, “What will you be discussing tomorrow night?” - then she asks me afterwards how it went.’

‘I think there’s loads of people who would be attracted by an accepting group that were more than friendly, living out their experience of God’

When it comes to more organized evangelistic endeavours, though, there are numerous opinions. This may be partly due to the fact that some *Sanctus* members are also involved in other churches, and look to *Sanctus* only for what they do not find there, which is mostly other people in their twenties and thirties. A minority feel quite guilty about not ‘doing evangelism’ in traditional ways, whereas others have had bad experiences at the hands of overzealous churches and are reluctant to inflict the same treatment on their friends, which they can only see as counterproductive. There is a more broadly shared view that for evangelism to be ‘effective’ (whatever that means), they need to work at their own group relationships so they will be strong enough to sustain others who might join but bring significant problems with them.

This concern for ‘getting it right’ expresses itself in many different ways. For some, it is about breaking through the image problem that the Church generally suffers from:

‘It’s very hard to reach our generation. People think it’s acceptable to read crystals, but being a Christian is odd. They see church as not appealing, maybe they would see something about the group when they couldn’t see it in one person. Belonging to the group might be attractive.’

There is a vision for specific outreach events of some kind – indeed, there is a proposal for a ‘growth group’ to consider the matter - but there are several views on how this might work. Some see it as just an excuse to reinvent conventional church:

‘There’s now a growth group – I think that’s something about evangelism – if they start to do it, it would be along traditional lines.’

But there is generally a desire to uncover innovative ways forward:

‘I’ve talked about *Sanctus* to my housemate. He wants to go, and so does his girlfriend. We are thinking of having a night in a bar or something to invite people to. I’d probably invite them to that. They may get a feel for it and then I would invite them to a Wednesday.’

‘There’s a Chapel Street festival, where Sacred Trinity is, once a year displaying music and art, mostly in venues not in the street. It would be good to put something into that but we would have to have an arts events coordinator, a person to pull things together.’

Others, while just as enthusiastic for new ideas, worry about whether the core of what they see as the ‘real Gospel’ will be lost or sidelined in the process:

‘I think we need to go out to popular venues around the city where non-Christians are, to be there and be seen not to have two heads - we’re normal. Have some kind of presentation, whether or not it’s discussion, not compromise what we are going to say, but be in their surroundings.’

‘Ben knows a DJ – we are going to have that kind of night, but then we need to get across that we are Christians – I don’t know how we’d let them know that, and that we are not just about going to church on a Sunday or reading a Bible every night. Ben’s talked about introducing the evening. I don’t know how it would work.’

Another element in this debate concerns what Christians actually do in order to express their spirituality and/or share their faith:

‘Symbolism and ritual is important to a lot of people, it’s how a lot of people relate to things’

‘Symbols that have something behind them’

‘Stories – Jesus used stories’

‘Meditation/labyrinth/visual art/write/draw/collages/music it’s not just about sitting there – these things are a good hook for people who have a form of spirituality – people are desperate to do these things.’

Yet others have an even broader vision of the Gospel, and are bothered about the social implications of *Sanctus*’s existence:

‘We need to push beyond our comfort boundaries. There’s a key group in *Sanctus* not doing anything about social action. How do we make justice real? ... we can’t all go to Iraq and build a road ... but locally, how do I do that? How do I know who is in need? How do you put yourself alongside them? What’s appropriate? ... there needs to be a balance, an appropriate balance for each person.’

Discussion about the meaning of evangelism has also facilitated further reflection on the core constituency which *Sanctus* can reach. Manchester city centre houses huge numbers of students, some of whom are involved in *Sanctus*. But should it consciously seek to connect with the student world? For the present, the consensus seems to be that student ministry is something quite different – and is already being done effectively by more traditional churches and para-church agencies. Most *Sanctus* members have themselves been students in recent years, and there is a feeling that student lifestyles raise different issues than those with which *Sanctus* is best equipped to deal. One member felt so strongly about this that she vowed

‘... the day we become the university mission team, that is the day I leave *Sanctus*. That is not what I go to church or community group for. It is a false representation of who we are ... we are not a SWOT team, we do not come in and deal with something and run away again ... we are a group of normal people who are engaged in what appears to be an unusual activity – building something from scratch.’

It was not altogether clear why this had apparently become such a big issue, though Bishop Stephen certainly sees some natural connection in this direction and told me, ‘I feel there should be a bridge between the university and *Sanctus*. There is enormous potential there.’ At the same time, he conceded that ‘I don’t want *Sanctus* to become a student movement, but there are a lot of people who study here and stay on in the city,’ and is realistic enough to understand that ‘They are sufficiently themselves to take it how they want ...’

In the midst of these diverse opinions, there are also encouragements. Three people who attended *Sanctus* with no church background have been well accepted, which is maybe not high in numbers, but proportionately is a much greater percentage of the total (10% or more) than most traditional churches could claim. One of them attended the very first *Sanctus* event and, with no prior Christian experience or knowledge, immediately knew it was for him.

Ben succinctly sums up the evangelistic agenda for the future:

‘For the first year and a half we have grown by organic growth, sharing the vision. Now there needs to be a move into being more proactive and asking how do we grow? It would be good to host an event in a bar in Manchester. I don’t know what it will look like ... trying to get the balance right between this type of event and saying “This is *Sanctus*: we are a Christian group” and at the same time not wanting someone to stand up and give a talk is my question. I think people need a good experience of being with Christians first. Hopefully that environment can give them that. I don’t know when it will be ... we will probably err on the side of caution, not an overtly Christian thing, just a space for people to come to. ... Most people think we have a good thing which we should be offering to others, but they don’t want to reinforce old models of what Christians are about, whereas others just want to get on and see what happens. I think both are important: finding the balance is important.’

The Bible

If talk of evangelism revealed more-or-less polite diversity of opinions, the questions I asked people about the Bible evoked stronger feelings than any others, and this was the only subject on which people sent me unsolicited emails to follow-up what they said during my visit to Manchester. This may partly be explained by the fact that my

visit coincided with the launch of ‘Soul Food’, a Sunday evening meeting specifically focusing on the Bible. I will come to that event shortly. But first, some comments from the questionnaires, which showed an almost equal split between those who felt *Sanctus* did not use the Bible enough and those who were genuinely concerned about using the Bible to dictate everything they did. The following typical responses⁴⁹ illustrate the depth of feeling aroused by this issue:

‘I don’t recall a Bible being opened and looked at in fourteen months. Small quotes may have appeared, but for me I felt we were on dangerous ground without a focus.’

‘The Bible is very important.’

‘Central’

‘It is used implicitly, underlining everything we do - sometimes indicated, sometimes not.’

‘*Sanctus* is Jesus-centred. in its approach to spirituality. [The Bible] is best used when it is part of a service than as part of a vocal message. It is worst used when broken up into passages and analyzed word-by-word.’

‘Don’t know yet. On tonight’s performance, it is well used.’

‘Not the focus, though, and I think this is right.’

‘Doesn’t rule what we do and discuss – discuss how it applies to our lives today.’

‘Not a lot of Bible study.’

‘I sometimes left *Sanctus* not even understanding what the message was.’

Further comments made it obvious that some saw the success of ‘Soul Food’ as crucial to the whole *Sanctus* venture:

‘I am delighted that ‘Soul Food’ has started. I felt this should have been present from the absolute beginning. I feel ashamed that it was not and that it has taken so long. The group needs this rooting.’

The same ambivalence about the Bible was expressed in conversations. Most *Sanctus* members felt the Bible should have some formative part to play in their faith (‘if the Bible is the root of everything we think, then it needs to be more part of you’), but equally there was a feeling that, as one put it, ‘If you just repeat Bible Study as we’ve experienced it in our past it won’t be any good.’ Knowing how to use the Bible is obviously an important issue, and several individuals highlighted this:

⁴⁹ The questions were: How important do you think the Bible is for Sanctus? and How is the Bible used in Sanctus?

‘I haven’t read great passages for ages. I don’t think your understanding of the Bible is core to what sort of Christian you are. Maybe I explore Biblical things in the things I do day-to-day in my life, rather than reading them off the page. I do have a certain amount of knowledge to say that’s what I’m doing, but that’s not conscious ...’

‘We constantly make references to the Bible ... you watch a film and it has references to the Bible, depending on the particular take ... You can have a group following in the steps of Jesus without the Bible being important to that. How you deal with the Bible is important, there is no set prescribed way of having to deal with it.’

It was clear from other comments that effective use of the Bible and actual learning came about more often by being involved in planning the monthly services or Wednesday night events:

‘We went to see *The Lion King* at the IMAX [cinema] and we used that. It has a lot of metaphors and stories that we used to show Jesus being alone and questioning his role when God left him alone to suffer. We didn’t discuss it, we let people make the connections themselves, and talked about Easter being every day. We split into groups for discussions and came back together to do some reflection, prayer, and then have bread and wine. People did it on their own: we read about Christ living in you with the eating of the bread and wine, and did a meditation about Jesus being alive in you, and sensing God in the environment around you, and how it affects your life. It quite surprised me – people enjoyed it; I enjoyed doing it. I realize I have new possibilities: if I put the effort in, I could teach others.’

That sort of comment contains a number of clear references not only to actual Bible stories, but also to more specifically theological reflection on their meaning, and gives credence to the claim that, if the Bible itself was not actually read, then its message was certainly taken seriously. Some of the more Biblically educated among the group want to argue that this is how it should be, pointing out that Jesus consistently told stories and left people to make their own connections, rather than reading and expounding sacred texts, and commending that as a more appropriate way to use the Bible in a group that says it wishes to encourage freedom of debate and the acceptance of different ideas.

This is how Ben explained his understanding of these issues, and his vision for ‘Soul Food’:

‘I am still trying to work out the relationship people have with the Bible. To some it can be a source of inspiration, while others find it an impenetrable book. For some, there’s a lot of guilt associated with it, feeling they should be better Christians and read the Bible more. Others have read it and know it inside out, and they want to move on or find new ways into it. I don’t know how key it is

corporately, but it underpins all that we are and do. But on Wednesday night we don't tend to do Bible Study things. 'Soul Food' is intended to complement Wednesday with something else so we can make it to be more accessible. I think the Bible is a useful tool but we are not using it to its full potential at present. I find it difficult to be creative with a piece of text. There is only a certain amount of things you can do with it, so I would tend to shy away from it because it's difficult to do anything apart from traditional Bible Study ... It will be interesting to see how 'Soul Food' will work. We are looking at Ephesians. I am going to start at the beginning - use notes, it'll be discussion based. I'll use a commentary, get someone to suggest questions and see if it's OK, then build onto it.'

That was before the first 'Soul Food' took place. I had already asked some others if they would attend. Their responses varied from a definite 'no interest' to 'Yes, I asked for it', with a fair number along the lines of 'I'm only going for the wine' or 'I'll go to see what it's like' and others who were more cynical altogether:

'This new initiative is 'Soul Food', which is Ben leading a Bible Study. They would have been actively uncomfortable with that before, now it's what people want. "Bible Study on a Sunday night, singing on a Wednesday" - how traditional can you get? I don't know where the choice of passage came from. It's clearly not set up to reach the unchurched at all.'

I joined Ben and another person for the postmortem the day after the first 'Soul Food'. The numbers were a major surprise for them: instead of the 6-8 they had anticipated (who could have worked around a table), thirteen turned up which meant the room was crowded and they had to split into two groups for discussion. They agreed that this had been disruptive, but felt that regular attenders would probably settle down to about 8-10 - though not before they talked again about what constitutes a suitable space for spiritual activities. One encouragement was the way people took seriously the need to read Ephesians 1 beforehand. One person had difficulty finding a Bible because they hadn't read it for such a long time, but on opening it found many things underlined from previous readings. 'Soul Food' has continued to study Ephesians, with mixed outcomes - perhaps not surprising in view of the fact that, when I asked Ben why he had chosen Ephesians, his answer was: 'It's short'. In a recent email to update me on progress, he highlighted one of their problems: 'I used [a leading commentary] but it's not fantastically helpful and can be a tad conservative at points. The format has been the same for all three that I have done. Laura [*Sanctus* member] led one which she incorporated some film into - but again, I think that she found the commentary hard going and not that helpful.'

Prayer

After so much heated debate on the Bible, it was a relief to discover that, among those who completed questionnaires, there was virtually unanimous agreement (only one exception) that prayer is an essential part of everyday life. One or two quibbled about the use of the word ‘every’, though even that seemed to reflect people’s actual practice rather than their estimates of the value of prayer. Some added explanatory notes to indicate that they felt they ought to pray more often. But it rated highly in everyone’s spirituality. I did not ask for a definition of what people understand by ‘prayer’ so I have no idea how they pray in private. But I was not surprised by Ben’s comment on how people act in corporate gatherings: ‘Most people have a traditional way of connecting with God but are wanting to find new ways.’ Since that sums up much of *Sanctus*’s struggle to evolve a relevant way of celebrating faith, there is little to add here to what has already been said under other headings. The nearest *Sanctus* has come to holding a ‘prayer meeting’ would be a Taizé service, which was well received. Praying for one another as part of regular gatherings reflects some of the same tensions between personal and corporate spirituality that have been noted already, with some being more comfortable with it than others. As a compromise, Ben usually sends an email round the day after a meeting to highlight the prayer needs of people over the week.

The Ecumenical Dimension

Though Archdeacon Alan made it abundantly clear, both in his original report on city centre ministries and subsequently in conversation with me, that his preference would have been to approach the challenge of city centre ministry from an ecumenical base, *Sanctus* would never have happened if it had been proposed as an ecumenical venture. However desirable in theory, it became obvious from an early stage that any creative proposals would simply circulate through different layers of bureaucracy in the various denominations, and the outcome would be stalemate:

‘With *Sanctus*, if we went to everyone, it would still be going to everyone. We didn’t ride roughshod, but we just got on with it.’

However, as *Sanctus* developed, an ecumenical dimension inevitably surfaced sooner rather than later. Though a good number of them have an Anglican background, and describe themselves with terms such as ‘Anglican born and bred’ or even ‘Anglican

from the womb’, not all share this same history. Some have a background in mainline denominations (Roman Catholic as well as Free Church), while others have experience in independent churches. Not surprisingly, there have been questions about the Eucharist. One attends RC mass each Sunday, while the group itself has experimented with the sharing of bread and wine in what is technically a non-eucharistic setting. One such occasion was reported to me in some detail, and is worth including here.

One of *Sanctus*’s members has roots in the Goth community, and led a whole evening on Vampires, in the course of which the question was raised: what is the difference between Christians drinking blood and vampires drinking blood? Naturally – given the importance of appearance in Goth culture – visual symbols played an important part in this exploration, raising (among other things) questions of Christian identity. As it was put to me,

‘everyone would recognize a Goth on the street, not everyone would recognize a Christian – what does that say? Goths have beliefs and they are not unwilling to display it: you are not half a Goth, you either are one or you are not.’

Watching clips from the movie *Dracula* and then drinking red wine from a big bowl opened up a major discussion on transubstantiation, which according to those who were there would have taken hours to orchestrate otherwise. One person thought it was ‘the best discussion we’ve had at Sanctus’ and the sharing of wine and bread ‘made it seem real and fresh, recognizing what it was – the vitality of life and death, what they mean, the sacrifice of Jesus in dying’, venturing the theological opinion that ‘If you take away the religious crap, you can see what Jesus is saying.’ Some were less enthusiastic, but would still have agreed with the person who thought that ‘in terms of reaching out, that evening was a thousand times closer to evangelism [than what usually passes for it].’

At the very least, it displayed a degree of lateral thinking and creativity not often associated with church. But was it a ‘real’ Eucharist, and if not, why not? The Church has a simple answer to that: no, because it was not celebrated by a ‘real’ priest. Nor were the other, more frequent if less flamboyant, sharings of bread and wine that take place in *Sanctus*. Not surprisingly for a group like this, such responses – if not actually rejected out of hand – call for more explanation. There is a shared conviction that ‘as a group we need to think about what our core beliefs are and where

we are coming from' but that can run into difficulties if some of the core beliefs are actually prescribed by some higher authority, such as the Church of England. Pragmatically, *Sanctus* has no choice but to stay with the Church, which is after all its financial sponsor, though at least one member was prepared to articulate a more radical vision:

'There's not enough cash within the group, but is that a good reason for working with the Church of England? I don't think there's any problem with that, it's just an anachronism against exploring faith – things like sharing bread and wine. Either we just have bread and wine - we share it, and it's *just* bread and wine – or we have an ontologically changed person coming to do it for us. We are stuck: we can't explore what Eucharist is – even the giving of the blessing at the end, there's rules about that. It's not a huge issue, it's an example ... it's not clear what will happen when *Sanctus* grows and Sacred Trinity flourishes – do we then become an official church?'

When Archdeacon Alan talks about needing to take risks, this may be what he had in mind, though Canon Robin Gamble is less sanguine on this topic than on most others:

'Some key people in the group have mega negatives about the church. When they are not balanced by affection it is dangerous. I think there is a spirit of negativity in the group. I think it's their experience, and clichés which are endemic in their generation: "Where are we in relation to the rest of the church? Are we part of the Church of England? Do we come under anyone's authority?" Do they recognize that the Church of England is investing a lot of money in this? They never seem to turn round and say, "Thank you". We are massively resourcing you: I hope *Sanctus* matures to the point where they appreciate that.'

Of course, there is more to this than just arguments over the sacraments. Both the Bishop and Archdeacon are unshakeable in their conviction that new ways must be found to express church for the 21st century, and that nothing must inhibit experimentation, whatever form that takes. In conversation with Bishop Stephen, I did not raise the question of *Sanctus* and the Church of England in this specific context, though given his own previous involvement with the disaster of the Nine O'clock Service in Sheffield⁵⁰ the broader issue of relationships between the two naturally came up. His response highlights the importance of mutual accountability:

'My challenge to them, as well as ourselves, will be how do they relate to the church in the life of the diocese as they grow and develop? We left it too late in NOS. It drifted too far from the Church, became a separate entity. It needs to

⁵⁰ He was Archdeacon in Sheffield at the time, and also a personal participant in NOS. Cf Roland Howard, *The Rise and Fall of the Nine o'clock Service* (London: Mowbray 1996).

be more plugged-in, related to – hopefully its members will be considered as good Anglicans as anybody else.’

I asked if he had any intuition about how this might happen: ‘They need to ride light to church government, but recognize it’s important to any group that it mustn’t become dictatorial – as many house churches have found.’

Given the wider discussions about the nature of ministry taking place within the Church of England – and the proliferation of recognized ministries, with stipendiary, non-stipendiary, local ministers and so on – it is not impossible to imagine that these issues might be resolved to the satisfaction both of the Church and the more free-thinking members of *Sanctus*. George Lings certainly thinks so, and sees it as inevitable that some sort of lay presidency will be authorized, or a cultural shift that means people are ordained first and trained later – or some combination of the two – if only because of the shortfall between available priests and ministry opportunities.⁵¹

Views from the Church leaders

Some opinions and insights from the Church leaders who were involved with the original vision have already been referred to in passing. But it will be worth bringing them together in a more coordinated way so as to see the bigger picture.

Community

Not surprisingly, they are very supportive of what has been achieved, and the centrality of community seems to inspire them as much as it does the *Sanctus* members. Bishop Stephen repeatedly applauded the flexibility of this model: ‘We all need space to dialogue and journey. We need to belong - move away from “this is the package and we’ll let you in” - which of course is one of the things that attract people to *Sanctus*. Canon Robin Gamble agrees, while identifying the challenge for the institution in allowing the group this space: ‘Every community creates its own lifestyle. They have to do it their way: I’m just hanging back and seeing where it gets them.’

One obvious criticism of *Sanctus* would be that it tends to be a homogeneous unit, and Archdeacon Alan was open in acknowledging that to talk of the ‘city centre

⁵¹ Reflecting the recommendations of *Formation for Ministry in a Learning Church* (‘The Hind Report’ submitted to the General Synod of the Church of England, July 2003).

community' is a nonsense, for there are many different communities. In that respect, he himself has undergone quite a transformation in the last few years:

'I've come to question a lot of assumptions that I held very dear – the whole notion of a parson, our understanding of community is so different now. Communities are where people are, a community of likeminded people. In cities there are gatherings of people who are doing likeminded things, whether skateboarding or shopping or whatever.'

But he argues that no single way of being church can meet all these needs. When he became archdeacon in 1999, moving into the city from a parish in Bolton, he immediately sensed that something was happening, and the Church was not a part of it:

'There was a great entrepreneurial upsurge I had never witnessed. In the city we only had St Ann's, which used the prayer book, and the Cathedral with its own traditional congregation. When you look at the people passing, we ain't touching the surface. ... It was a real eye opener for me to explore what was going on. I thought we had to take some risks to engage with these different sections of people. St Ann's and the Cathedral are simply not touching the vast majority.'

He has no doubt that the risk was worth taking:

'Ben was given a lot of freedom. I have to say I thought he exercised it extremely well, and within a short space of time - because of his own interests and bent towards the arts - he soon gathered round him a small group of people. That ... was the beginning of *Sanctus I*. I was surprised it happened so quickly ... I think he's done a remarkable piece of work, I find it exciting.'

Notwithstanding this obvious affirmation for what *Sanctus* has become, there was one question in particular that I needed to ask the Church leaders: do they think *Sanctus* is a real church? I had anticipated that this might be a difficult one, but Bishop Stephen offered an unequivocal response: 'Absolutely. *Sanctus* is not a temporary station towards participation in parish church.' Archdeacon Alan was just as forthright, commenting 'I would be very critical of any one who said this was not real church.' Robin Gamble, while agreeing with them, highlighted the way in which this was a double-sided issue, observing that 'We [church leaders] have to learn it's their group, but they [*Sanctus*] have to learn it's our group', a sentiment echoed in a different way by Bishop's Stephen's desire: 'I want them to be real members of the Church and feel they are part of it.' There was also evidence that, should the need arise, they will be prepared to stand by this stated mutuality and defend *Sanctus* against possible detractors. Archdeacon Alan felt especially strongly about this and is worth quoting at length:

'As Ben's work goes on, there will be those who will say "he's been working two years and there's only twenty". It won't make any difference me saying, "St Whatsit's has been going on 250 years and there's only fifteen there!" For a good number of Church people it will be difficult for them to see *Sanctus* as

real church, but that's part of our job, to help them see it. ... I think I can quietly and openly affirm what's going on, saying "You yourselves have to be prepared to take risks." Some places have to die, some places breathe new life into dry bones. There's nothing new in what I'm saying, but as archdeacon there's a sense of urgency about what I'm saying now. Time is not on the Established Church's side. ... I don't think we should just keep going what's been going. We're forever starting things, we never stop anything. We've just got to let go of some things, some people, some buildings, say quite hard things – that's part of what I'm into – breaking new ground.'

Bishop Stephen expressed a similar opinion: 'If we don't try new models of ministry or mission we won't discover what it is to be church to the 21st century. ... It is very different to what most of our churches are, I believe' – a viewpoint shared by George Lings, who argued that there is no point intentionally engaging in 'evangelistic work which will lead to fresh expressions of church' without recognizing that 'you will not be able to store the fruits of that harvesting in the old barn.' He is already thinking about how to pre-empt more theologically-informed criticisms of *Sanctus* that may arise in the future:

'If we boil down what is essential [to being church], my understanding is that if there are two centralities it is something like this: the unique particularity of Jesus, and the formation of a community whose common aim is to follow him. That's minimalist. There's nothing about ecclesiology/Trinity – however, I suspect that if people pursue those things, Jesus will disclose the Father and the Spirit will witness to Jesus, and the community will become 'church' even if they don't use the word. And it doesn't matter to me very much whether they do use the word.'

Evangelism

Sanctus members see evangelism as a major part of their purpose, and the Church leaders agree. Canon Robin Gamble has a more intimate relationship with them than any of the others, because of his original involvement as Ben's line manager, and his own role as canon evangelist ('I am 100% focused on evangelism'). He applauds the progress made at the time when he was most involved ('It's done well. The first stages are most difficult: getting from 0 to 12 is harder, getting from 12 to 24 is easier.'). But the way he describes things now clearly reflects the fact that he knows many of the group personally. In some ways, he regards himself as a parent to

Sanctus, and now finds himself in the situation of a parent allowing their growing children to leave home and make their own way in the world:

‘... when you’ve got a favourite group of young people whom you like better than any other group ... man, it’s like having your own children – they are the last folk to take your advice ... I drip feed things in: it’s up to them then. I love them and I want it to work well – it’s not a youth group – so they have to get it right.’

He recognizes that many of them are not his type of people:

‘Some of *Sanctus* are part of a fairly sophisticated artistic type of sub-culture; others aren’t – they’re more into football and lager ... It’s a task for them to share the Gospel with people like us and build an attractive Gospel community.’

Archdeacon Alan echoed a similar sentiment when he commented that he would not want *Sanctus* to become the equivalent of ‘an artists’ fellowship or businessmen’s fellowship.’

Like many parents of teenagers, Canon Robin thinks his own intentions are sometimes misunderstood, especially when it comes to evangelism:

‘I’m very encouraged – only see one tricky thing, it comes back to evangelism. It’s a difficult subject, but all churches have this – there has to come a moment when they launch out, but they need nudging and prodding ... they think I think you should sit down in a wine bar and say, “Would you like to come to the Lord Jesus tonight?” It’s frustrating when my job is to help people share their faith.’

As he looks to the future, he sees a major question still unresolved in relation to what *Sanctus* aims to be as a ‘church’. Whereas Bishop Stephen thinks it *is* a church already, Robin’s definition of church appears to be more particular:

‘If they said, “We are not going to be a group of people, but a church” it would change - because churches do evangelism, worship, care for each other, have children and care for them. Others age and they look after them, they launch into the local community, involved in what others are doing on the other side of the world ...’

Still, *Sanctus* members would share this aspiration:

‘Inviting people you know to enjoyable culturally appropriate events where they can engage with the Christian faith. People are interested in our questions: does God exist? Happiness? Where do we come from? Is there life after death? Does anybody ever listen to our prayers? ...’

They would also agree with a qualification proposed by Archdeacon Alan, that while ‘a lot of people ... are doing some deep thinking about life/meaning/purpose, I don’t

think they are doing that in a philosophical sense.’ And they would surely recognize themselves in Canon Robin’s opinion, that:

‘... their greatness is their passion. Passionate people tend to find it difficult to be open and liberal – they have a sense of direction. A different temperament sits back and says, “We need to think about this.” You need both.’

Though deeply committed to *Sanctus*, those church leaders who have been less involved with its operations on a regular basis seem to view its potential in a more strategic perspective, which connects quite noticeably with the views of *Sanctus* members themselves. There is appreciation both for the emphasis on community, and the open-ended approach to spirituality that is evidenced in *Sanctus*:

‘*Sanctus* seems to be bringing groups together – it sounds like doing their own thing, but there is direction and there is leadership. Ben knows what he’s doing: he wants them to come to faith, rather than give them a faith – which you can’t do. I would want to see emerge out of it all – people who are in business, local authority, environment, stores and shops ... can somehow because of their lifestyle attract like-minded people, see our theology there in all of this. How does what we do and say relate to what we are doing Monday to Friday? In terms of my observation, the scene is set for us: vitality is there, people are genuinely interested, but they don’t see the keys: how can they find out how to make faith sense of their lives?’ (Archdeacon Alan)

Simon Gatenby has a similarly expansive vision:

‘There is great interest in things spiritual. *Manchester City Life*, a weekly paper, has all sorts of spiritualities offered, but there’s nothing Christian. *Sanctus* could offer and deliver good quality stuff.’

Archdeacon Alan – though being less precise in how this might be accomplished – also recognizes that today’s culture offers new opportunities that need to be grasped:

‘It’s one of those moments where we have an opportunity. We’ve had some fallow years in the Church, we’ve been closet Christians for a long time, our confidence was eroded. I hope we can regain confidence in our faith, but tempered with humility about the mistakes we have made.’

There is evidence of both a willingness and an ability within the Diocese to think outside the traditional church box. Archdeacon Alan told me of a venture that began in a small way with a donation of £15,000 from a businessman who wanted to see an obvious Christian presence in the city centre at Christmastime. Promoted as ‘The Campaign for Real Christmas’, it was so successful that he supported it for a second year, and by the third year had developed enough momentum (and confidence) to organize what was billed as ‘the world’s biggest carol service’ in Maine Road stadium

– a vision which turned out to be realistic, as it got into *The Guinness Book of Records*.

Events on that scale are far removed from the present aspirations of *Sanctus* members, but Simon Gatenby for one would like to encourage them to consider working on a bigger scale, not just because numerical growth is important, but also because that kind of service to the wider community could save them from becoming ‘just a gathering for communal navel gazing.’ He identifies ‘a bit of a contradiction’ between being open and vulnerable (which to him implies engagement with the wider community) and ‘putting on this non-threatening participative type of stuff’ (which can be defensive and inward-looking), though he doesn’t see them as mutually exclusive: ‘it’s a two pronged attack – two different strands’. He, like almost everyone else I met, sees relationships as central to any effective evangelism:

‘... once [people] are [in Sanctus] they find key relationships, and hopefully God might be one of those relationships - though that isn’t essential to be part of it. “If you want to journey, we’ll journey with you”. It’s so much more Biblical to be *working with* people rather than *doing for* them: you only have to look at Jesus. We say, “What can we do for others?” ... we’ve created and been part of the whole dependency culture that cripples an area like this ...’

George Lings echoed the same theme:

‘... one credible dimension long term that the world will notice is attractive community. We are largely past the stage of putting on worship that people will like. That will bore them: in our current world we are increasingly suspicious of words. It is lives that we all look at, and the quality of lives lived together on the basis of that developing community is fairly central to most new mission endeavours ... strengthening existing teams which are demonstrating something of that community is quite an obvious way to go.’

There are strong resonances here with what I was hearing from *Sanctus* members themselves, and though they may not be quite ready to embrace the large-scale event, it seems likely that they would receive significant diocesan support should the opportunity arise. Archdeacon Alan, for one, seems ready to put his reputation on the line:

‘I think we have to take some risks to engage with these different sections of people ... I just feel we’ve got to make space and plough in resources. Most people who have the finances don’t see this. We have to find the resources to break into our society that we are not touching, so that they can be allowed to break in to us. Our liturgy doesn’t do it either. I love it, but when I stop and think I realize we are a small group. What are we doing that’s touching the hearts and minds of real people?’

At the same time, he appreciates that *Sanctus* will grow and develop in its own way, and places an enormous amount of trust in Ben's own sense of direction for himself and the group.

Many alt-worship groups have found themselves being used as a carrot to attract people into what then turns out to be more-or-less traditional church structures and lifestyles. The conversations I had with *Sanctus* members suggested to me that there were different opinions about the extent to which Christians should be speaking to the wider culture (usually with a view to correcting it), and what it might mean for people's everyday experience to be taken seriously, posing different questions that might have the potential to expose hitherto unnoticed aspects of the Gospel itself. So it was natural for me to want to explore the expectations of church leaders in that regard. Almost inevitably, the conversation turned to sexuality, not only because that is a major battleground right now, but also because there is a large gay community in Manchester city centre, within which the Bishop and Archdeacon have both supported the appointment of a non-stipendiary worker. I imagined that Church Army, as a major partner in *Sanctus*, may have a strong view on this. George Lings recognized that 'It's a particularly hot issue because of the appointment of the new archbishop and the diversity of reactions connected to those issues' though he was 'not aware of any official Church Army position on that issue.' He did expand on this with what I took to be a personal view rather than an official Church Army position: 'If part of the nature of the Gospel is to have a preference to the outsider and excluded, then the gay community would be one clear example of such a group ...' – though he went on to add, 'The dilemma for some people would be ... granted that this is a group of people who have every right to be loved, is there something operating here that is less than ideal - and how you balance those two is very difficult.' My conversations with all these Church leaders took place before the Jeffrey John affair and the appointment of a gay bishop in the USA, and whether they would now say something different, or more carefully nuanced, is impossible to guess. On one similar issue, though, Bishop Stephen expressed a very open-ended approach: 'Most people live together before marriage – I think you have to be laid back about that ... any idea that *Sanctus* is going to be into lifestyle patterning for anybody would be death.' In answer to my question, 'Are you open to different expressions of faith?' he responded it was 'vital

the Church of England takes risks', though I did not pursue that to find out what it might mean in practice.

The Bible

Because of the imminent launching of 'Soul Food', I found that some of the Church leaders had also reflected on the role of the Bible in *Sanctus*'s development. Simon Gatenby (the only other Church leader apart from Robin Gamble to have had actual involvement in *Sanctus* meetings) expressed surprise that anyone would see a need for this:

'Wednesdays seem to have been reflection of God in experience: that would have been my way of doing Bible Study, rather than just building up Biblical knowledge ... in the services they take scripture and work with it imaginatively.'

His own comments encapsulated the divisions of opinion found among *Sanctus* members themselves. While he indicated his own clear preference for the methods developed among base Christian communities, his perception of the other side of the argument was right on target in relation to what I picked up in conversations with *Sanctus* members, though he put an interesting theological spin on it:

'I suppose it's satisfying a works mentality ... that's a piece of work you can do, drummed into you if you have had an evangelical past ... what goes round comes around ... I'll watch that space with interest. I don't know whose baggage it is: I suspect there are more people with an evangelical upbringing or conversion experience for whom the whole package hasn't worked, but there is still stuff there ... trying to make sense of their faith now, because they don't make sense of the evangelical package and they had it ground into them ...'

George Lings, as a researcher with wider experience overall, recognized these tensions as being endemic in the entire process of reimagining the church that is now taking place, and offered a possible way forward:

'If we understand the New Testament aright, the epistles were written first and the gospels were codified later, the shared corporate memory of Jesus ... I would want to say to young Christians in community, focusing on community and becoming community that follows Jesus leads you pretty naturally to saying, "Well, the Gospel is corporate in him." I presume in the earliest communities a lot of oral storytelling about Jesus that later we find in the breadth of gospels took place – and we being later have direct access to those texts. I think even for a community that might be substantially made up of dechurched people, particularly coming from charismatic or evangelical churches, that probably think too long and hard ... It might be good for them, in

encountering a story medium, for letting the Spirit do its work in the common mind of the group.’

- a comment that naturally evokes Simon Gatenby’s further question, ‘Why Ephesians?’

Archdeacon Alan offered an opinion which brought together *Sanctus* members’ concerns not only about the Bible but also about the Church:

‘The core issue would be the teachings of the Church, the doctrine of the church – not what I want people to graduate to. If they asked me, this is what it is to me: it isn’t a package holiday, but it isn’t a pick-and-mix either. But come to it in your own particular way.’

Future plans and prospects

The one thing that is indisputable is that *Sanctus I* has engendered a high level of energy and enthusiasm, not only among its own members but also among the Church leaders who are its sponsors. Everyone has a vision for the future, and wishes to see it move forward. Some of their aspirations as indicated on the questionnaires could be found in any traditional church with a vision for the Kingdom and for its own community:

‘More ecumenical stuff’

‘Social Action’

‘Becoming a guide to other groups/churches in the future’

‘Worship with other denominations’

‘More inclusive welcome’

‘More creative ways of looking at things in culturally relevant ways’

In conversations, however, it became clear that some of them have thought in considerable depth about who they are becoming, and (*contra* Canon Robin’s comments, recorded earlier) are appreciative of the way in which the Church of England has invested faith as well as money in them:

‘It’s evident that the Church of England think of us as a model and wonder how they will then use it. It puts huge responsibility on to us ... Now the group exists, we need people to guide us and advise us, but we also need to be allowed to make the decisions ourselves in a way that’s appropriate for us ... Our community will define us: how we respond to one another’s needs and respond

to the needs immediately on our doorstep, and ultimately our global conscience.’

The Archdeacon has been as good as his word in both supporting and initiating innovative ventures. Having secured funding for *Sanctus* for another five years after the initial three, he has also identified a big development at Salford Quays which, while not Manchester city centre, is only a short tram ride away, and more importantly is home to the new Lowry Centre which, with its theatres, art galleries, children’s workshops and other attractions, is a magnet for artistic people of the kind who are already connecting with *Sanctus*:

‘Someone working in among this mixed artistic culture might see how some expression of spirituality might draw people together as a church. I’m looking at someone being in for this. Also, we would like someone in the city centre with the unattached young people who skate board.’

One *Sanctus* member shared with me a vision for the future which can only be placed in the same category as Martin Luther King’s famous ‘*I have a dream*’ speech:

‘My absolute ideal – personal and all my different aspirations for *Sanctus* - would be existing as a community, for us to be part of a residential living community within a block of flats. Architectural question: how do you design a block of flats so everyone has personal space and yet you are building community, tied in with the fact that all these people are part of *Sanctus* whether or not they do anything other than live there ... with a café/restaurant ground floor – studio space – gathering space – others where *Sanctus* can gather ... living and working within that – for me - others might cross at different levels ... feeding into the artistic life of the studio spaces participating in *Sanctus1*, eating dinner in the restaurant and doing things with the rest of my community, and through that whole structure of things ... I have ideas about how that would be financed, developed, run so that you could achieve social/spiritual change/urban environment/physical space ... that could be amazing ... [Sacred Trinity] could be transformed into a fantastic urban space that *Sanctus* could be part of ... How do you communicate that?’

The answer to that final question might be easier than it sounds, given the creative thinking that I came across among the key diocesan leaders, though I can see how a twenty-something person might find it intimidating to knock on their door and propose it to them.

Church Army played a vital role in getting *Sanctus* up and running, as part of its commitment to supporting its workers in their first post. There is a recognition here that three years involvement in a venture such as *Sanctus* is too short a time to make a substantial difference, though current policy is to encourage separate fundraising for

particular posts rather than financing things from a central fund. Church Army has deliberately realized a portion of its historic assets in order to fund specific projects, but self-funding by individual workers is probably their way forward on a long-term basis. George Lings gave me an example of how this might work:

‘At the last Church Army conference, a captain from the USA spoke of going to do work among drug addicts in a town called Brampton, the folk music capital of America. He has had to find self-funding because Church Army in USA is minimal. This is being held up to Church Army in England as a route for us to go down, partly because it’s increasingly difficult for charities to be funded by people just giving to it centrally. This no longer seems to catch people’s imagination.’

Whether that will work as well in the UK as it does in the USA remains to be seen, as there is a longer philanthropic tradition there than in this country – though if it is going to be possible to match Christians with significant financial resources with those who have a missionary vision, Manchester is the sort of place where it might well work, given the vibrancy of the local economy and the entrepreneurial attitudes that have led to the substantial regeneration of the city centre over the last decade.

Church Army’s contribution to *Sanctus1* is understood and appreciated by the Church leaders. Since theological education will be mentioned in the next chapter it is worth quoting Archdeacon Alan at this point:

‘I don’t think we’d have had the same creativity if we had a curate. I think Ben’s training has been a significant contribution. There has obviously been a significant change in the Church Army ... they have picked up a change in direction for themselves in society, this reflects in the people who are coming out now. Formerly they tended to be stale or would-be clergy – quasi-clergy – a lot became ordained. I sense now they are turning out people who want to be true evangelists, not restricted to parish work. In the Church of England theological education we are still turning people out to be parish priests - some brilliant people coming through - but we are still churning parish priests out rather than people with flair and imagination.’

Ben himself describes his leadership style as follows:

‘I try to facilitate in discussions, but try to get them in a particular direction – if they are going off at a tangent I say, “It’s very interesting, but ...” Let them say what they want to say and move it back round. Most people are happy with that. There’s a lot of strong characters in the group. Keeping them focused and not going off on their own particular agenda can be quite difficult. I meet new people in the city, usually for a coffee. I work at building relationships.’

One way or another, everyone seems to be agreed that, if *Sanctus* has a future, those relationships will be fundamental.

Chapter 3

Reflections

None of the central issues identified in the previous chapter are unique to *Sanctus*. On the contrary, they are symptomatic of wider cultural changes taking place in Western society, and the questions they are wrestling with are commonplace among Christians trying to work out what a ‘post-modern’ church might look like. Recent writers have used various images to define the paradigm shift involved in this. Some describe it as a move from modernity - with its concern for structures, discipline and predictability - to post-modernity, characterized by a more fluid, holistic and interconnected understanding of things.⁵² Others see it in terms of the struggle of a Western imperial church trying to reinvent itself in a post-colonial context, faced with the paradox of its own decline alongside the growth of Christianity elsewhere.⁵³ Yet others look even further back for some insights, and speak of a struggle between ‘Roman’ and ‘Celtic’ understandings of the nature of the church.⁵⁴ Though none of them used it, this is the terminology that seemed to apply most usefully to what I heard from *Sanctus I*. There has, of course, been a good deal of debate about the nature of Celtic Christianity, and the historical usefulness of such sources of information as we now possess. But these various metaphors are just offering us different ways of defining the same essential questions: the contrasts between modern/post-modern, western/non-western, Roman/Celtic – and, for some, male/female – are being used iconically to highlight a reality that is otherwise difficult to grasp. I would therefore want to argue that it does not really matter whether any or all of them would pass the test of historical scrutiny: they offer useful alternative prisms through which to get fresh angles on contemporary realities.

Certainly, *Sanctus*’s self-understanding closely parallels what we seem to know of Celtic spirituality, in several respects:⁵⁵

- 1 Understanding life as a journey, with more emphasis on the going than the arrival.⁵⁶

⁵² John Drane, *The McDonaldization of the Church* (London: Darton Longman & Todd 2000).

⁵³ David J Bosch, *Transforming Mission* (Maryknoll: Orbis 1991).

⁵⁴ John Finney, *Recovering the Past: Celtic and Roman Mission* (London: Darton Longman & Todd 1996); George G Hunter III, *The Celtic Way of Evangelism* (Nashville: Abingdon 2000).

⁵⁵ John Finney, *Recovering the Past*, 34.

- 2 An emphasis on prayer.⁵⁷
- 3 Concern for people on the edge of things.⁵⁸
- 4 A dislike of uniformity⁵⁹
- 5 Concern to adapt spirituality to the culture, rather than the other way round.
- 6 A recognition of the provisionality of spiritual growth.⁶⁰
- 7 A clear commitment to incarnational mission.⁶¹
- 8 A commitment to using the arts as a way to access reality.⁶²

In his book *The Celtic Way of Evangelism*, George Hunter has a diagram contrasting Roman and Celtic ways of being church, and the correlation between *Sanctus* and the Celtic model is striking.⁶³

Roman Model	Celtic Model
Presentation	Fellowship
Decision	Ministry and Conversations
Fellowship	Belief, Invitation to Commitment

Community

On the dust-jacket of *Life After God*, Douglas Coupland asks, ‘How do we cope with loneliness? How do we deal with anxiety? The collapse of relationships? How do

⁵⁶ Esther de Waal, *The Celtic Way of Prayer* (New York: Doubleday 1997) provides a scholarly and concise overview of Celtic spirituality.

⁵⁷ Esther de Waal, *Celtic Way of Prayer*, 97; cf Ian Bradley, *The Celtic Way* (London: Darton Longman & Todd, 1993), 31.

⁵⁸ Finney, *Recovering the Past*, 6-7, Hunter, *Celtic Way of Evangelism*, 23-24.

⁵⁹ Finney, *Recovering the Past*, 22; Hunter, *Celtic Way of Evangelism*, 16-19, 40-41.

⁶⁰ Bradley, *The Celtic Way*, 118.

⁶¹ ‘the more Roman the monastic communities and churches became, the less they engaged in evangelization ... the heroic Celtic era of mission ended, and Christianity’s apostolic mission was negligible for centuries’ (Hunter, *Celtic Way of Evangelism*, 43).

⁶² ‘Our age has more regard for the artist than for the orator.’ Eddie Gibbs & Ian Coffey *Church Next* (Leicester: IVP 2001), 31.

⁶³ Hunter, *Celtic Way of Evangelism*, 53.

we reach the quiet, safe layer of ourselves?’⁶⁴ *Sanctus* members have heard such pleas, and are intentional in creating community. They want to be what Donald Postereski calls ‘meaning-makers’,⁶⁵ creating a new way of being church that will offer fresh images of what the Christian life can look like. This search for community is partly about personal identity, but it also incorporates a concern for global issues. For many GenX-ers, U2’s ‘God is good, but will he listen?’ sums it up.⁶⁶ They want to believe, but have the same hesitations as Bono: ‘Can you imagine how it feels to believe in Christ and be so uncomfortable with Christianity? The church is an empty, hollow building ... when the Spirit of God leaves a place, the only things that are left are the pillars of rules and regulations to keep its roof on ... we are more and more claustrophobic around organized religion.’⁶⁷

This offers a particular challenge to institutional churches, and it is one that the Manchester Church leaders understand very well. Those who were responsible for enabling *Sanctus* to be established actually heard what was being said about the Church, and insisted from the start that, if Ben Edson was to be successful in discovering a way of being church that matched life in the city centre, he would need freedom to experiment rather than importing a ready-made package from somewhere else – something that Ben found ‘both liberating and scary’. Theologically, they began by assuming that God is at work in their city, and Ben would therefore encounter signs of this activity (the *missio Dei*). Organizationally, they created a situation not unlike the early Celtic church, in which the abbots (community leaders) were empowered to take initiatives without constant reference back to the bishops (who themselves were part of the community). They also understood the growing impact of the city itself on the values and lifestyles of popular culture, and the challenges it presents to young adults.⁶⁸ Many *Sanctus* members adopted city life in order to further their education or career. Urban living offers fresh opportunities, but also distances people from their existing support networks. Competitiveness is the key to survival, and when combined with the individualism of consumerist culture,

⁶⁴ Douglas Coupland, *Life After God* (London: Simon & Schuster 1994).

⁶⁵ Donald Postreski, *Reinventing Evangelism* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity 1989), 31-32, cf Gibbs, *Church Next*, 192.

⁶⁶ Detweiller & Taylor *Matrix of Meanings*, 85.

⁶⁷ Susan Black, *In his Own Words: Bono* (London: Omnibus 1997), 30.

⁶⁸ Mike Riddell, *Threshold of the future* (London: SPCK 1998), 103. For a wider appreciation of the challenge of urbanization to the church see Robert Linthicum, *City of God, City of Satan: A Biblical Theology of the Urban Church*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan 1991), 17-25.

community is the first casualty.⁶⁹ Ben's mode of operation, based on building relationships and journeying with others, appeals to people in this post-modern urban context, for whom 'authority is based on relationships, not on status or position'.⁷⁰ It also follows Jesus' own ministry style, with its combination of vision and vulnerability.⁷¹ Furthermore, because it is effectively 'training on the job' it also encourages leaders to be reflective practitioners, for whom 'theory and application go hand in hand. Theory informs practice, but – equally important – practice develops new theories.'⁷² And, whether or not anyone was consciously aware of this, it follows the ancient Celtic pattern of first gathering people, and then allowing structures to emerge from their shared experience, rather than the Roman model which was to establish an organization first, to which people were then recruited.⁷³

This consciousness is expressed quite clearly in the description of *Sanctus*'s 'services' as occasions for 'celebrating the life of the community' and the way their times of meeting are scheduled to match the lifestyles of young city dwellers. But it is not a vision that developed only within the group: one of the things that the Church leaders expressed most stridently was their shared conviction that *Sanctus* should be flexible and fluid. In spite of that, however, some *Sanctus* members find it difficult to move beyond paying lip service to such ideals. To use traditional terminology, it is as if their heart tells them that the Celtic style is the way to go, but their head pulls them back to the Roman - or for some, it may be the other way around. Though this does not apply to all, probably most *Sanctus* members are conflicted between their own self-understanding as post-modern people, and inherited ideas of what constitutes 'proper' worship. They may be living out the reality identified by Eddie Gibbs: 'although traditional settings are becoming increasingly rare, traditional mindsets still prevail in many churches of all denominations whether liberal or evangelical, mainline or independent. This is because the church is an inherently conservative institution.'⁷⁴ On the other hand, it could be that their reticence to trust their intuitions is borne out of a lack of confidence – not so much in themselves, but in their parent institution. Though all the Church leaders are 100% behind *Sanctus*'s vision of itself

⁶⁹ Ulrich Beck, *Risk Society* (London: Sage 1992), 91-150.

⁷⁰ Gibbs, *Church Next*, 85.

⁷¹ Laurie Beth Jones, *Jesus CEO: Using ancient wisdom for visionary leadership* (New York: Hyperion 1995).

⁷² Gibbs, *Church Next*, 87-88.

⁷³ Finney, *Recovering the Past*, 32.

⁷⁴ Gibbs, *Church Next*, 26.

as an open community with space for exploring the Gospel in new and meaningful ways, I am not sure that this is understood by all its members. To my knowledge, they have never heard either the bishop or archdeacon say to them the things they told me. Perhaps they should.

Though the stated purpose of Wednesday meetings is to build relationships with one another and with God, some find these occasions unsatisfactory because there is no ‘proper Bible Study’. They are united in the desire to create community – and, as far as anyone can tell, are very satisfied with the outcome when they do ‘social’ things. But making the connection between friendship and spirituality is apparently more challenging. While there is a stated unwillingness to jump through hoops for the sake of it – and a strong resistance to structured programmes such as Alpha – there is also an uneasiness about the fact that they are not doing them! One person told me, ‘At first we queried, “What does it mean to praise?” ... We discussed the style but not deep down why we are doing those things.’ Deliberate avoidance of the substantive issues will be counterproductive in the long term, and the lack of a common mind on such matters will tend to weaken community, not strengthen it.

Some of this ambivalence is probably due to previously narrow experiences of Christian spirituality, especially among those with strongly evangelical backgrounds (both Church of England and independent). One thing that may be helpful in addressing this would be the sort of approach adopted by Charles Keating,⁷⁵ and using Myers-Briggs personality types - or some similar lifestyle questionnaire – might offer a safe space in which this question of conflicted identity can be explored. It would certainly enable them to understand why some people go home on Wednesday nights feeling ‘high’ while others complain that it was too superficial. Keating himself puts into words the sense of urgency about spiritual development that *Sanctus* members shared with me:

‘I remember being impressed by the almost infinite possibilities of spiritual growth. Since then I have found that many of us only scratch the surface of those possibilities ... God is the real power in our growth in holiness, calling us and sustaining us, gifting us more and more as we respond to his call ... Many of us do a remarkable job of avoiding sin and of following faithfully a spiritual regimen, but year after year we seem to remain in the same spiritual path, if we

⁷⁵ Charles J Keating, *Who we are is how we pray* (Mystic CT: Twenty Third Publications 1991).

don't slip backwards! We settle for perseverance when we should be climbing the heights. We get stuck somewhere on the face of the mountain.⁷⁶

Mike Riddell proposes that a spirituality to meet these needs will be embodied, conversant with human suffering, attainable within the complexities of life, holistic, creative, communal and contextual.⁷⁷ Interestingly, the first two resources he mentions are prayer and the Bible, the two topics that featured most regularly in my conversations with *Sanctus* people. Every questionnaire gave personal prayer a high priority (99% on a daily basis),⁷⁸ and some of the dissatisfaction that surfaced with regard to corporate prayer may be due to an understanding of prayer restricted to traditional alternatives such as petitioning or contemplative. There is, however, a relational dimension to prayer, and it struck me that this happens even at times when most of them would not think they are 'praying'. *Sanctus* members talk about spirituality just as they might discuss their fitness regime with a personal trainer. At its best, this becomes a sort of corporate spiritual direction, or prayer. The urbanization of culture, which isolates people from informal family or community support, creates a need for this. To be a truly caring community, *Sanctus* will inevitably attract people with no other immediate support and the outcome will be robust discussion of all those things that concern them. The open sharing of differences is one sign of a genuine community. The way differences are resolved will determine whether *Sanctus* becomes a community of transformation, or the equivalent of a dysfunctional family. Again, the Celtic tradition offers some insight here with its more holistic understanding of faith and spirituality, including prayer as 'not a formal exercise but a state of mind.'⁷⁹

The Bible

Problems with the Bible are not restricted to *Sanctus*, nor even to the Church of England. The basic issue is that we only know how to interpret the Bible in accordance with the norms of modernity. The 'historical-critical' approach of conventional Biblical scholarship emphasized rationality, and led to the faith being

⁷⁶ Keating, *Who we are is how we pray*, 1.

⁷⁷ Riddell, *Threshold*, 130-143.

⁷⁸ This correlates with the high priority given to prayer even among non-church goers, 37% of whom claim their prayers have been answered. Cf David Hay and Kate Hunt, *Understanding the Spirituality of People who don't go to Church*, Table 2, page 13.

⁷⁹ Gibbs, *Church Next*, 138.

defined in terms of ‘scientific criteria’.⁸⁰ This is why Ben and Laura found a traditional commentary on Ephesians to be ‘not much use’ for ‘Soul Food’. In a post-modern context it was simply irrelevant – not because of intellectual inadequacies, but its assumptions about what matters no longer coincided with the concerns of GenX-ers.

Some complain about ‘truth decay’⁸¹ but the cultural reality is better expressed in the title of Mitchell Stephens’s book: *The rise of the Image – the fall of the Word*.⁸² This is bad news for a faith that has sometimes described itself as a ‘religion of the book,’ especially those forms of it that elevate preaching and teaching above symbol and sacrament. Craig Detweiler and Barry Taylor highlight the challenge in relation to church styles:

‘while the modern age placed a high premium on theories of faith, the postmodern era searches for authentic practices of faith – showing rather than telling. Experimentation and innovation run throughout contemporary spirituality. The word spirituality no longer refers to an already-held theological standpoint but to a search for meaning via experimentation, questioning, and exploration.’⁸³

Faced with this shift in emphasis, there is a temptation to adopt a purely pragmatic approach, but that is likely to leave people uncertain about what to do with the text, indeed not knowing why they ought to be bothering with it in the first place, and consequently feeling a lack of confidence about it all. Eddie Gibbs argues that past failures here actually contributed to church decline: ‘... churches that made a significant appeal to the baby-boomer generation did so through applying marketing strategies rather than mission insights. This shortsighted strategy has contributed to shallow discipleship, short-term commitments and compartmentalized living,’⁸⁴ resulting in the shift identified by Tom Beaudoin, from boomers regarding ‘religion-

⁸⁰ Even Eddie Gibbs, writing predominantly for an evangelical readership, unhesitatingly states that ‘Evangelicalism ... was itself influenced more than it realized by the modernism it combated ... Christian apologists had to employ the tools of their opponents ... In so doing they became unwittingly subverted by the assumptions they made in debating with their opponents.’ (*Church Next*, 27).

⁸¹ Douglas Groothuis, *Truth Decay* (Downers Grove: Inter Varsity 2000).

⁸² Mitchell Stephens, *The rise of the Image, the fall of the Word* (New York: Oxford University Press 1998).

⁸³ Detweiler and Taylor, *Matrix of Meanings*, 76, 290.

⁸⁴ Gibbs, *Church Next*, 37. The terms ‘baby-boomer’ and ‘boomer generation’ are generally used to refer to the generation born between about 1945 and 1960, ie people now in their 40s and 50s who are parents to Generation X-ers.

as-accessory' to their GenX children taking the next obvious step: 'religion-as-unnecessary.'⁸⁵

Mike Riddell is one of the more radical commentators on today's church, but still insists that the Bible is 'the touchstone of orthodox faith and practice': 'Without the historical anchor of Scripture, we would be in danger of drifting into the theological stratosphere.' At the same time, he warns that

'Scripture is prone to abuse ... often used as a blunt instrument with which to convince people of their sinfulness, or as a talisman of wisdom which protects against unknown dangers. Somewhere along the way, something has gone seriously wrong. Somehow the love, grace and passion of Christ is not being recreated by our reading of the Bible. If we are to recover the heart of mission, Scripture must be rediscovered in a life-giving way.'⁸⁶

What I heard from *Sanctus* members suggests that they would agree with him: everyone thought the Bible was of some importance, but there was no consensus about how to use it. Here again, the Celtic church may offer some insights. No-one who is familiar with their magnificent manuscripts can deny that they placed a high value on the Bible. But instead of quarrying it for proof-texts and propositions they believed that 'if you could make a Christian truth claim clear to the people's imaginations, the people and the Holy Spirit would take it from there.'⁸⁷ Tom Beaudoin expresses this in contemporary idiom: 'When I "do" theology ... it's not a matter of taking dictation from God onto paper but of working with lived faith, Scripture and tradition ... all of which are assembled and reassembled together (more or less creatively) in my imagination. What is possible theologically, then, depends on what is possible imaginatively.'⁸⁸ Some *Sanctus* members might wonder if 'being creative' is just a euphemism for subjectivity, though Detweiler and Taylor challenge that: 'Using our imaginations in the propagation of the Gospel does not mean merely co-opting the creativity expressed in popular culture ... We must discover our own creativity and take it into pop culture. This includes the need to rediscover myth and story.'⁸⁹

Sanctus members have no difficulty using their imagination to form creative community, but seem unable to appreciate that the very same skill can also give them

⁸⁵ Tom Beaudoin, *Virtual Faith* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass 1998), 13.

⁸⁶ Riddell, *Threshold*, 42-43.

⁸⁷ Hunter, *Celtic Way of Evangelism*, 72.

⁸⁸ Beaudoin, *Virtual Faith*, 159-60.

⁸⁹ Dertweiler and Taylor, *Matrix of Meanings*, 151-152.

new insights into the Bible. There are several models that might help them, including the insights of liberation theologians, who first brought the imagination of the poor to the text, while others have brought the experiences of women, different ethnic groups, children, and many others. None of these can be universalized, and it is both the privilege and responsibility of leaders to help those in their care to identify the questions relevant to any particular situation. This kind of critical reflection on praxis is commonplace among practical theologians, but seminaries and colleges all over the world still offer a fragmented curriculum that encourages students to study the Bible without engaging with these hermeneutical issues. When they do, it is often at an elevated level of reader-response criticism that makes few connections with the world of popular culture in which the church operates.⁹⁰ Riddell dismisses this as ‘playing intellectual games ... the royal route to avoidance of confrontation with God’⁹¹ – but church leaders can hardly be blamed when their professors offer them no other model. The different ways people ‘come into’ the Bible was illustrated at the inaugural ‘Soul Food’ event. Someone asked a question about the origin of chapters and verses, which led into a historical conversation about Jerome and James Ussher. Some found this a good deal more engaging than the main subject of discussion, predestination (based on Ephesians 1), which seemed to connect mainly with those who were predisposed to identify ‘real’ Bible study with arcane ideas disconnected from real life (largely influenced by their previous evangelical baggage). I wanted to remind them that even Karl Barth recommended that we hold the Bible in one hand and a newspaper in the other. Coincidentally, not long after my visit to Manchester I saw the movie *Bruce Almighty* and recognized it as a superb commentary on Ephesians 1. Director Tom Shadyac is a Christian, and utilized many Bible ideas to explore divine providence, though he would probably not regard himself as theologically sophisticated. He was, however, contextualizing the Gospel by creating a dialogue between popular culture and the Bible and offering post-moderns more serviceable insights than the commentary which Ben and Laura found so inadequate. ‘Soul Food’

⁹⁰ ‘There is an urgent need to engage in critical contextualization through ongoing dialogue with popular culture, which will bring questions, old and new, to the Scriptures. Such engagement will enable us to read the Bible in a new light as we seek insights in response to the challenges of ministry and mission in postmodern contexts. Christian leaders must be equally skilled in exegeting both Scripture and culture ... They are challenged not just to be able to think clearly but to have the nerve and faith to act decisively in navigating through stormy and uncharted waters.’ (Gibbs, *Church Next*, 37).

⁹¹ Riddell, *Threshold*, 54.

may have made more progress on predestination had they watched that movie first, and then asked ‘what resources does the Bible offer to help us address these questions?’

Ultimately, *Sanctus*’s questions about the Bible are about risk and vulnerability. It can seem safer to stick with accepted understandings than to ‘re-examine even our deepest certainties.’⁹² Detweiler and Taylor – with extensive experience of ministry with GenXers - counsel that ‘It is time to take the consecrated bread out of the tabernacle and place it in the hands of ordinary people, offering them a new portrait of holiness. Popular culture continues to redefine the relationship between the sacred and the secular, the holy and the profane. People of faith should do the same.’⁹³ Bishop Richard Harries said much the same at the Church of England’s General Synod in November 2002 by challenging the Church to understand ‘self-defined spirituality’ not as something hostile to the Gospel but as God-given, if incomplete.⁹⁴ That in turn is not so very different from the insistence of maverick theologian Matthew Fox that an over-emphasis on fall-redemption theology prevents people hearing the Gospel effectively.⁹⁵ His understanding of sin might well need to be redefined to take better account of the deep anxiety felt by many today, but if people are indeed ‘made in God’s image’ that must mean they intuitively reflect something of who God is, and Bible study will therefore be a two-way conversation. In the words of Robert McAfee Brown, ‘We bring our experience *to* the Bible, we draw new insights *from* the Bible, we go back to our own situation *with* the Bible, and see it all in a new way.’⁹⁶

Evangelism

Talk of trusting others brings us back to community. If the Bible is set free to speak into our lives, then arguably the life of the community will itself be evangelizing, and the priority for mission is simply to be with people – expecting that, in the course of being welcoming and affirming, we ourselves will be transformed, as well as those

⁹² Riddell, *Threshold*, 41.

⁹³ Detweiler & Taylor, *Matrix of Meanings*, 291.

⁹⁴ The theme is explored more fully in his book *God outside the Box* (London: SPCK 2002).

⁹⁵ Matthew Fox, *Confessions: the making of a post-denominational priest* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco 1996); the classic exposition of his ideas is *Original Blessing* (Santa Fe: Bear & Co 1983).

⁹⁶ Robert McAfee Brown, *Liberation Theology* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press 1993), 81-82.

who are hitherto unchurched. This question is therefore implicitly linked to the matter of sacred space, about which I heard much from *Sanctus* members. The Celtic church had a fascination with circles, which may well have been relational, for in a circle people are in relationship and the space is common to all, in a way that does not happen in, say, a Gothic building where control is enshrined at the front, and whoever occupies that space holds the power. On the other hand, space is not just about aesthetics: it is also a question of being. The ‘place to be’ for most twenty- and thirty-somethings in the city centre seems to be pubs, clubs, theatres, and other artistic venues. The question of previous generations (‘Would Jesus go there?’) has been resolved,⁹⁷ and the key question now is, ‘How would Jesus be when he went there?’ That was the question most *Sanctus* people asked in relation to evangelism.

The word ‘evangelism’ evokes different images: for Canon Robin Gamble, it is a good thing, inviting people to follow Jesus. Most *Sanctus* members have a darker image, regarding it as irredeemably ‘Roman’, and corrupted even more by memories of the Crusades, slavery, and the Conquistadors. Their experience tells them that traditional approaches are ineffective: an over-emphasis on sin/fall/redemption means little to young people who are predominantly ‘sinned against’ through lack of support from their families and exploitation by their employers. They would warm to David Smith’s understanding of the three core elements of effective mission: worship, imagination and discipleship.⁹⁸ Evangelism must connect with people’s lived experience – which, if David Hay is to be believed, includes ‘spiritual experiences’ for more than three-quarters of the population. Many of them will be searching for a metanarrative that makes sense of their experience, and a significant number see Jesus as a figure to admire: ‘as respect for the organized churches has declined, reverence for Jesus has grown’⁹⁹.

Sanctus members recognize all that, but their comments suggest that for some of them it is yet another point of conflict. They say that relationships are central to evangelism, but then feel uneasy about trusting relationships to do the job. Mike Riddell and David Smith both highlight the story of Cornelius (Acts 10:1-11:18) as a useful Biblical resource, emphasizing how the evangelist (Peter) was evidently more

⁹⁷ Certainly in Manchester, where one major club (Ascension) is operated by Christians.

⁹⁸ David Smith, *Mission after Christendom* (London: Darton Longman & Todd 2003), 113-115.

⁹⁹ Jaroslav Pelikan, *Jesus Through the Centuries* (New Haven: Yale University Press 1985, 2nd ed), 232.

thoroughly changed than the convert. Riddell calls this story ‘a paradigm for our times’.¹⁰⁰ Smith recounts his own parallel experience, and argues that this is always a sign of effective evangelism.¹⁰¹ Peter’s entire worldview was deconstructed, and everything he thought he knew turned out to be contrary to what God was doing in that place. Paul’s visit to Athens is another example.¹⁰² Though they would not have used the terminology of *missio Dei* the Celtic missionaries went out with the same expectation that the world was literally alive with God’s presence, and evangelism therefore consists of journeying with people. For many Christians – including some in *Sanctus* – this is a move well beyond their comfort zone, and one that is easily misunderstood. Even Peter came under pressure in Antioch and denied his experience by refusing to eat with Gentiles (Galatians 2:11-14). The same pressures are potentially there in *Sanctus*.

One issue that could become a flashpoint is the question of boundaries, both of membership and belief. There are many historical and legal reasons why churches like to know who their members are, though the need to believe in order to belong discourages many.¹⁰³ Even Mike Riddell’s slogan of ‘open at the edges, committed at the core’¹⁰⁴ may be too conservative an approach, for though people may be open to journeying with Jesus, they often use the ‘wrong’ language or draw the ‘wrong’ conclusions, especially in a post-Christian culture where there is a tendency to avoid anything sounding like traditional Christian terminology to express spiritual concerns. Something like that is happening in the discussion about the Eucharist within *Sanctus*, and when the insights of totally unchurched people are included it is likely to stretch to breaking point the boundaries of what is deemed creedally acceptable. It is easy to talk of God being ‘outside the box’ or to describe emerging churches as ‘open, flexible and non judgemental’¹⁰⁵ but it is much harder to put into practice. While the Church leaders happily regard *Sanctus* as ‘real church’, they have yet to see how it can be integrated into the structures without strangling it. As a ‘broad church’, the Church of England is in a better position than some others to accommodate such flexibility, and it can also take comfort from the claim that ‘sacramental churches are

¹⁰⁰ Mike Riddell, *Threshold*, 27.

¹⁰¹ Smith, *Mission after Christendom*, Introduction.

¹⁰² Ross Clifford & Philip Johnson, *Jesus and the Gods of the New Age* (Oxford: Lion 2001).

¹⁰³ Riddell, *Threshold*, 147-150.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid*, 150.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid*, 169.

poised for a comeback'¹⁰⁶. But it still struggles – and may yet fracture – over those issues of diversity and inclusivity that it knows about, let alone others that a group like *Sanctus I* could present in the future.

Church leaders

In an earlier chapter, I compared the Church leaders to parents watching their child grow up. The way Bishop Stephen expressed his concern for *Sanctus* sounded very much like parental instinct: ‘There will be arrows thrown they won’t see. I can say “Shove off, leave them alone, this is OK, I value them.”’ More prosaically, in response to a question about how he might support them, he said: ‘I can stand up for them; I can encourage them; I can enable doors to be opened for them; I can protect them.’ And though he was slightly apologetic about not being quite as ‘hands-on’ as Ben would like, this Celtic model of episcopacy has much to commend it: ‘My job is to provide the space for them to grow and flourish. It will take five or ten years to have sufficient roots to flourish, but if it went well it could grow remarkably. That will be my hope.’ It also echoes Mike Riddell’s comment about the tensions between traditional and emerging church:

‘For a period the old and the new will exist side by side, a threat to each other and the cause of tension and power plays. The visionary community needs protective structures, within which it can develop its own self-understanding, free of domination and control from the failing institution. Such tangible structures will also provide a sign of hope to people trapped in old orthodoxies but nervous about stepping out into the unknown.’¹⁰⁷

I would personally qualify that by saying that the need for the future is not for one form of church to replace another, but for there to be multiple expressions of church overarched by a common vision, the Kingdom of God. That may be a challenge for Bishop Stephen in regard to his concerns about student ministry, for a student church will probably look quite different from *Sanctus*, and though this may not be his preference right now, acknowledging the need for even greater diversity could result in a more significant outcome.

Archdeacon Alan Wolstencroft and Canon Robin Gamble also in their different ways demonstrate a parental concern for *Sanctus*. As a local man, the Archdeacon knows the city and recognizes the importance of its artistic community, not least as

¹⁰⁶ Detweiler & Taylor, *Matrix of Meanings*, 301.

¹⁰⁷ Riddell, *Threshold*, 98.

represented by the heritage of L S Lowry whose work was inspired by the everyday lives of city dwellers as they tramped between home and mill. His vision for a pilot project to explore spirituality within the arts community seems tailor-made for *Sanctus* and, whether he realizes it or not, is yet another connection with the world of Celtic spirituality. All the more visionary ideas that Ben mentioned for the future connect with this artistic emphasis, including partnerships with city centre cinemas to explore spiritual themes in movies, and having a presence at the annual Mind, Body and Spirit exhibition. The Celtic missionaries were world travellers, and some of these ideas also have a global dimension which *Sanctus* could easily learn from, and become a part of. In today's globalized culture, making connections with others who are engaged in similar ministries is essential, and financial support for this could be money well spent.

Of all the Church leaders, Canon Robin most obviously embodies some of the same ambivalence as I discovered among *Sanctus* members: recognizing the need for fluidity and flexibility in order to reach post-modern people, but being conflicted about how to accomplish this without losing something of essential value. It is a genuine question – wanting to be ‘Celtic’ and ‘Roman’ at the same time – and he is not alone in struggling with it. As the one who has been more directly involved with *Sanctus* than any of the others, he is concerned for them to reach their full potential as ‘ambassadors for Christ’ - words that are certainly more ‘Roman’ in style than many in *Sanctus* would like, which is a pity because he is more deeply committed to them than most of them realize. Like most evangelists, he is a unique individual, and most interested in ‘what works’. If *Sanctus* ‘works’, it will be interesting to see whether *Sanctus* members manage to resist the tendency of all evangelists, which would be to try and package their formula as ‘the way to do it’ – something that runs counter to their own stated self-understanding.

All three of these key Church leaders are committed to *Sanctus*, and understand that, as children grow up, good parents will be supportive. They also speak to one another, and in relation to *Sanctus*'s ambivalence about what I have called here ‘Roman’ and ‘Celtic’ ways, it could be a useful contribution to the discussion if they were to speak with one voice rather than either keeping silent or sending out mixed messages. They are all totally committed to *Sanctus*'s emphasis on being an open community with space for exploring the Gospel in new and meaningful ways, but to achieve their

potential *Sanctus* members need the reassurance that those who brought the group to birth will actually support them if (as will happen on occasion) they get it wrong. Wise parents know when to remain silent as well as when to speak: this might be an occasion for speaking on some of these matters, to offer encouragement and support, as well as wisdom. And also – like all good parents - to listen and learn.

Post-Script

On the Sunday morning I was in Manchester I joined my host to visit Manchester Art Gallery to view the *CoBrA-Exhibition* of Nick Crowe and Ian Rawlinson.¹⁰⁸ As we walked in we were arrested by the sight of two burning bushes digitally projected onto a screen, and the exhibition catalogue gave the following explanation:

Then Jehovah's angel appeared to him (Moses) in a flame of fire in the midst of a thornbush. As he kept looking, why, here the thornbush was burning with the fire and yet the thornbush was not consumed.

Exodus 3:2, New World Testament Translation of the Holy Scriptures

On entering the gallery our attention is immediately drawn to a large screen with a projected image of two bushes, burning in a landscape. The artists have placed us in the position of Moses as he encountered the burning bush, the manifestation of the one God. The story is also recounted in the holy Qur'an when Allah appeared to Musa in the same way. Instead of a single bush we see two which spontaneously catch fire and then burn, the flames never consuming them. According to the doctrines of both Christianity and Islam there is only one God. *Two Burning Bushes* questions the relationship between singularity and truth within monotheist religion and interrogates the notion of one God in a world with competing monotheisms. Transposed from the Holy Land the bushes burn in an overgrown and deserted ex-industrial site in Trafford Park. It is bordered on one side by the Manchester Ship Canal and on the other by the Trafford Centre. In choosing to site the reappearance of the God of Christian and Islamic belief within the clearly secular setting of Manchester's industrial outer suburbs the artists are working within a romantic tradition in which the remarkable or divine is recast within the impoverished everyday.¹⁰⁹

A Muslim family were as captivated by the sight as we were, while their preschool children ran round and round the images, obviously fascinated by the exhibit. I too felt that like Moses I should be taking off my shoes. It was certainly not 'church', but I did encounter God.

Then I moved on to view the main *CoBrA* displays. It was not so much the paintings that arrested me, as they are not now so shocking as they were when they were first exhibited. Rather it was some words I read on the wall as I left, attributed to William Sandberg, Director of The Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam and organizer of the first

¹⁰⁸ The *CoBrA-Exhibition* concept originated with young European artists in the 1930s and 1940s, who embraced what they called a 'spontanic form of expression' (basically, any experimental form that challenged the norms of the art world). Since 1949 there have been regular exhibitions in key galleries all over the world. For the history and rationale, see the website http://users.cybercity.dk/~dsl71660/cobra_history.htm

¹⁰⁹ Nick Crowe and Ian Rawlinson, *Exhibition Guide*, Manchester Art Gallery 3 May-15 June 2003.

CoBrA-Exhibition in 1949. They seemed to sum up my week in Manchester, and all that I had experienced and witnessed in meeting the people of *Sanctus1*.

after war
i asked myself
what arts reply would be
to all these huge changes
in human relationships
the famous artists hardly responded
i was about to turn away
when I noticed a group of young people
who had something to say
and who said it on a new note violently
in a primitive way perhaps
they were seeking a new language
with much warmth and resolution

Appendix 1
Questionnaires and Responses

You are being invited to complete this questionnaire as part of a research project being carried out at the School of Divinity & Religious Studies in the University of Aberdeen by Olive M Fleming Drane. The final report will be submitted to the University in the form of a dissertation for a Master of Theology degree, and will also be available to the leadership team of Sanctus.

Your participation in this questionnaire is entirely anonymous, so it will not be possible for you to be identified personally. By taking part, you are giving permission for your opinions to be incorporated in the final report, and for your comments to be quoted as appropriate.

14 questionnaires were returned

Section 1: About you

Delete what does not apply

1.1 Male/female

Male	6
Female	8

1.2 Age

Youngest	21
Oldest	37
29 or under	12
30 or over	2

1.3 Are you:

Single, living alone	3
Single, living with friends	2
Single, living with parents	2
Single, living with a partner	1
Married	6
Divorced/separated	0

1.4 Are you: in work

full-time	14
part-time	
both	
unemployed	
a student	
full-time	
part-time	
undergraduate	
postgraduate	
professional training	

1.5 What kind of job do you do (or are studying to do) – or, if you’re out of work right now, what kind of work would you be looking for?

Architect 2
Head RE Secondary School
Trainee clinical embryologist
Civil Servant
Management Accountant
Acting Head of Primary School
Sick Children’s Nurse
Business Analyst
Solicitor
Secondary Teacher
Arts for Health Officer
Arts Worker – Self-employed
Physiotherapist

1.6 How long have you lived in Manchester?

1 year or less 4
1-2 years 4
3-4 years 3
over 30 years 1
1 lives in Bolton
1 did not answer this question

Did you move here from

Another big city **9**
Medium sized town **1**
Rural situation **1**

1 lives in Bolton

Section 2: About you and Sanctus

2.1 How did you first get to know about Sanctus

Ben 7
Robin 2
Friends in Sanctus 4
Northumbria Community 1

2.2 Since then, how often have you come to Sanctus, on average? Please indicate if this is your first visit – if it is, you may need to skip some of the following questions.

Each week 4
Most weeks 6
50% 1
25% 1

First time	2
2.3 What kind of Sanctus events do you like best: list in order of preference	
Sunday Service	2
Wednesday evening	7
Eating/Social	3
2.4 How does participation in Sanctus inform/challenge/help your life at work/study/home?	
Gives focus/direction/behaviour/values/ethical issues/work related issues	2
Challenges and enables me to focus	7
Gives me a community/a place to belong	6
Didn't respond to this question	3
2.5 What is most important to you about Sanctus? – in order of preference	
Friends/belonging/community/fellowship/support	
Creative/challenging/learning/discussion/openness/acceptability	
Keeps me in touch with Christ	
Being involved	
Finding new ways of being	
2.6 Are there other things you would like to see Sanctus engaging in?	
Film	
Music (not choruses)	
Art	
Social Action	
Evangelizing	
Meeting with other denominations	
More welcoming to non Christians	
2.7 Do you consider Sanctus your church, or your community – or would you use some other term?	
Church only	2
Community only	2
Both	10
2.8 How important do you think the Bible is for Sanctus? How is it used?	
Implicitly	1
Not enough	6
But.....	5
New people who did not feel they knew enough to comment	2

2.9 Sanctus is part of the Church of England. How important is the wider church to Sanctus?

Everyone felt the need to be part of the wider church but the majority emphasized the need to interpret ‘the wider church’ as wider than the Church of England or indeed the UK.

Section 3: About your values and spirituality

3.1 What influences and concerns are most important in shaping your personal beliefs/values/spirituality (list in order of preference):

Job
News
Friends
Family
How I feel
Faith
Marriage
Christian teaching
Jesus
Ethical behaviour
Compassion
Gospels
Sanctus!
Justice/world
Bible
Truth
Integrity/honesty
Searching for answers
Engage with consumerism

3.2 Would you say that prayer is, for you

An essential part of my everyday life	12
Something for a crisis	1
Something I would only do with other people	1
Of no real importance at all	

3.3 Are the expressive or creative arts important for your spirituality? If so, can you say which art forms, and explain what contribution they make.

No	1
Yes	13

3.4 Before joining Sanctus, did you have any previous connection with Christians? If so, what form did this take?

No	6
Yes	2
RC	2
C of E	6
Young Adults Group	1
This was interpreted as being ‘since I came to Manchester’	

3.5 Are you currently connected to any other faith community apart from Sanctus? If yes, please name it.

No	1
Yes	13

NB several of the questions asked open-ended questions. Where there was any sort of consensus, or more than one person said the same thing, I have summarized these responses here. All the written responses have been taken account of in the material presented in chapter 2.

Appendix 2

The following pages contain:

- **Examples of *Sanctus1* publicity materials:** the one at the top of the page is their original invitation card, relating to events taking place in winter and spring 2002-2003; the round one advertises events through the second half of 2003.
- **Two articles on *Sanctus*:**
 - ‘Sanctus1: a new expression of Christian Faith’, in *ShareIt! The Magazine of the Church Army* Issue 17 (2003)
 - ‘Sanctus1: where the city meets the church’, in *Crux33/5* (May 2003), the Magazine of Manchester Diocese of the Church of England

In the original thesis, this page was followed by samples of *Sanctus1*'s publicity materials, together with copies of the two articles referenced above. They are not included here for technical reasons.

Booklist

- David B Barrett, George T Kurian & Todd M Johnson (eds), *World Christian Encyclopedia: a comparative survey of churches and religions in the modern world* (New York: Oxford University Press 2001), 2nd ed. in 2 volumes
- Tom Beaudoin, *Virtual Faith: The Irreverent Spiritual Quest of Generation X* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass 2000)
- Ulrich Beck, *Risk Society: Towards a New Modernity* (London: Sage 1992)
- Susan Black, *In his Own Words: Bono* (London: Omnibus 1997)
- David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission* (Maryknoll: Orbis 1991)
- Ian Bradley, *The Celtic Way* (London: Darton Longman & Todd 1993)
- Peter Brierley, *The Tide is Running Out: What the English Church Attendance Survey reveals* (London: Christian Research 2000)
- Callum G Brown, *The Death of Christian Britain* (London: Routledge 2000)
- Craig Detweiler & Barry Taylor, *A Matrix of Meanings: finding God in pop culture* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic 2003)
- Don S. Browning, *A Fundamental Practical Theology: Descriptive and Strategic Proposals* (Minneapolis: Fortress 1991)
- Douglas Coupland, *Generation X: Tales for an Accelerated Culture* (New York: St Martins Press 1991)
- David Denniston, *alt.worship.co.uk Alternative worship in the United Kingdom* (privately circulated report written as part of the study leave programme of the Board of Ministry of the Church of Scotland 2001)
- Norman K. Denzin, *Interpretive Ethnography: Ethnographic Practices for the 21st Century* (Thousand Oaks: Sage 1997)
- John Drane, *The McDonaldization of the Church* (London: Darton Longman & Todd 2000)
- Carolyn Ellis and Arthur P. Bochner (Eds), *Composing Ethnography: Alternative Forms of Qualitative Writing* (Walnut Creek: AltaMira 1996)
- Ross Clifford & Philip Johnson, *Jesus and the Gods of the New Age* (Oxford: Lion 2001)
- Michael J Fanstone, *The Sheep that got Away* (London: MARC 1993)
- John Finney, *Recovering the Past: Celtic and Roman Mission* (London: Darton Longman & Todd 1996)
- Richard W Flory & Donald E Miller (eds), *Gen X Religion* (London: Routledge 2000)
- Matthew Fox, *Confessions: the making of a post-denominational priest* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco 1996)
- Marshall Frady, *Billy Graham: a parable of American righteousness* (London: Hodder & Stoughton 1979)
- Eddie Gibbs & Ian Coffey, *Church Next: Quantum Changes in Christian Ministry* (Leicester: IVP 2001)
- Richard Harries, *God outside the box: Why spiritual people object to Christianity* (London: SPCK 2002)
- David Hay & Gordon Heald, 'Religion is good for you', in *New Society* (17 April 1987)
- David Hay, *Religious Experience Today: Studying the Facts* (London: Mowbray 1990)
- William D Hendricks, *Exit Interviews: revealing stories of why people are leaving the church* (Chicago: Moody Press 1993)

Roland Howard, *The Rise and Fall of the Nine O'Clock Service: A cult within the church?* (London: Mowbray 1996)

George C. Hunter III, *The Celtic Way of Evangelism: How Christianity Can Reach the West...Again* (Nashville: Abingdon Press 2000)

Alan Jamieson, *A Churchless Faith* (London: SPCK 2002)

Graham Johnston, *Preaching to a Postmodern World* (Leicester: IVP 2001)

Laurie Beth Jones, *Jesus CEO: Using ancient wisdom for visionary leadership* (New York: Hyperion 1995)

Douglas Groothuis, *Truth Decay* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity 2000)

Charles J. Keating, *Who we are is How we pray, Matching Personality and Spirituality* (Mystic CT: Twenty-Third Publications 1987)

George Lings, *Encounters on the Edge: a series of quarterly investigations from The Sheffield Centre*, (Sheffield: Church Army): Quarterly Investigations nos 1 (*Living Proof*), 6 (*Across the Pond*), 7 (*New Canterbury Tales*), 8 (*Thame or Wild?*), 9 (*Leading Lights*), 11 (*Never on a Sunday*), 12 (*The Enigma of Alternative Worship*).

C S Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (London: Collins 1952, 2nd ed)

Gordon Lynch, *After Religion: 'Generation X' and the search for meaning* (London: Darton Longman & Todd 2002)

David Lyon, *Postmodernity* (Buckingham: Open University Press 1994)

Robert McAfee Brown, *Liberation Theology* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press 1993)

Jaroslav Pelikan *Jesus Through the Centuries: His Place in the History of Culture* (New Haven: Yale University Press 1999, 2nd edition)

John Pollock, *Billy Graham* (London: Hodder & Stoughton 1966)

Philip Richter & Leslie J Francis, *Gone but not Forgotten: Church leaving and Returning* (London: Darton Longman & Todd 1998)

Michael Riddell, *Threshold of the Future: Reforming the Church in the Post-Christian West* (London: SPCK 1998)

George Ritzer, *The McDonaldization of Society* (Thousand Oaks: Sage 1993)

George Ritzer, *McDonaldization: The Reader* (Thousand Oaks: Sage 2002)

Colin Robson, *Real World Research* (Oxford: Blackwell 2002, 2nd edition)

David Silverman, *Doing Qualitative Research A Practical Handbook* (London: Sage 2000)

David Smith, *Mission After Christendom* (London: Darton Longman & Todd 2003)

Mitchell Stephens, *The Rise of the Image the Fall of the Word* (New York: Oxford University Press 1998)

Carl Trueman, 'Boring Ourselves to Life' in *Themelios* 28/3 (2003), 1-4

Esther de Waal, *The Celtic Way of Prayer* (New York: Doubleday 1997)