

Learning from the work of David Wasdell and resistance to it

A startling and alarming set of Church of England figures were put together in 1974 by Revd David Wasdell, based at St Matthais Poplar. He was the brains of the *Church Urban Project* whose work was sponsored by a number of Bishops in the London and Essex area, as well as the then Archbishop's Council on Evangelism.

He produced 2 short volumes. *Let My People Grow* was published in October 1974 and a second volume called *Divide and Conquer* in June 1975, by which time the ground had shifted under his feet, because he dared to assert that the structure of parish system was fatally flawed. Perhaps he was unwise in the way he phrased his conclusions, but he was correct to say that they were 'unacceptable in a missionary church'.¹ However, he went on ...

'We have become involved in the public re-enactment of heresy. We believe and proclaim a gospel of grace available to all but we operate a structure which takes the form of a club with limited membership.'²

What lay behind such an audacious comment, quite apart from its shrill tenor?

The centre of his work was the effect of the size of a parish on the mission of the church and attendant growth. There had been concern about the frailty of, and low penetration by urban Anglican churches and a resultant focus on clergy redeployment to address this. Wasdell addressed both issues. He wanted to know whether the Church of England had 'self-imposed limits on growth.'³

He researched and plotted three factors.

Parish Size

The first was **the incidence of parishes of particular sizes** of population served.

I have grouped these to underline that 70% of these were for communities of 4000 or less. That becomes significant in a moment.

Congregation size

Next with the help of Mr Neuss of the Central Statistics Unit he plotted **the size of average congregation in parishes of each given size**.⁴ As one would expect, the larger the parish served, the congregation size grows. But Wasdell noticed that it made little difference to congregation attendance whether a parish was of 4,000 souls or up to 15,000.

In this he also drew on work done, 10 years before, by Revd A.B. Miskin who is quoted in the Leslie Paul report of 1964 – *The Deployment and Payment of the Clergy*. Miskin's research showed that festival communicants, Sunday attendance and confirmations all dropped as population density rose.⁵ Leslie Paul, a layman, was not afraid to express the ensuing problem.

'... the distribution of the clergy is in inverse proportion to pastoral need... the greater the density of population ... the poorer the pastoral results of the Church, the feebler its total impact.'⁶

¹ D. Wasdell, *Let my People Grow* (London: UCP, 1974) p. 7. Hence *LMPG*

² Wasdell, *LMPG* p.7.

³ Wasdell, *LMPG* p.4

⁴ This was calculated from ER, ASA and mean festival communicants.

⁵ L. Paul, *The Deployment and Payment of the Clergy* (London: CIO, 1964) pp 54, 57 and 80.

⁶ Paul report, *Deployment of the Clergy*, p. 137.

Looking at the figures Wasdell wrote ‘In parishes of over 2000, the single-clergy model church levels off at an average congregation of 175, regardless of parish population.’⁷ I think 4000 would have been yet more accurate, but I take his point.

175 appeared to be an absolute barrier for any one parish led by a sole clergyperson, which today in 2015 is idealistic though not unknown. With multi parish benefices and decline of vocations, the ratio of churches to full time clergy is now 2.1, up from 1.4 in 1990.⁸

Wasdell also drew on Miskin’s work, as did Leslie Paul, to show that any further increase in attendance was directly attributable to deploying additional full time staff, with the first one able to draw another 90 and the second only another 80. This was found to be true irrespective of parish size, and each successive staff member added less than the one before.⁹

One vital conclusion from this, that has usually been ignored, is that seeking to increase clergy numbers and increasing the flexibility of their deployment, while good in itself, cannot be an adequate response to this structural issue. Miskin himself expressed the problem if the audacious aim was to see 10% of the population in church. In 1964, he calculated it would need 27,000 clergy. Since then the population has increased, and in 2011 there were about 11,000 clergy. That includes those not stipended but not either Dignitaries or the retireds. Miskin also mused that a parish of 15,000 would need 14 full timers.¹⁰ This is clearly a porcine aviation zone.

If any think that putting a major emphasis on issues like increasing vocations, making clergy more deployable, providing more accessible training, finding more OLMs, then A.B. Miskin, Leslie Paul and David Wasdell all say you have not understood the problem. The problem is not just shortage of leaders, but the size of parishes. As Wasdell wrote in 1974; ‘No amount of pastoral juggling and redeployment of the clergy can create the needed breakthrough.’¹¹

Penetration

If all this were not worrying enough, Wasdell goes further and reveals the depth of the missionary problem and the ecclesial structural constraint. He worked out the **diminishing percentage of church attenders** for each given parish size. As the parish size increases it is blindingly obvious that the church becomes utterly ineffective in reaching its parish. That’s what he meant by comments that a supposed national church has acted ‘to abdicate from parochial responsibility and settle in practice for congregationalism.’¹²

Let’s illustrate that, taking Wasdell’s suggested maximum size for an effective parish unit. A parish of 2000 may reach 10% of its people - a proportion that is visible and a group which has a continuing credible impact on its community. By contrast 2% in 10,000 is virtually invisible.

When you put together the data about sizes of parishes, the attendances they drew and the percentage of parishioners who come, then it is clear that the parish system in urban areas of 1974 was a mission disaster area. It was a structural constraint accounting for decline in urban church life. Not only in far too many cases were the hard pressed clergy buried under the weight of occasional offices. The boundaries of many parishes contain 95% of unreached people religiously protected from the gospel, by the very boundary that was intended for their benefit.

⁷ Wasdell, *LMPG* p.6.

⁸ B Jackson, *Centre for Church Growth paper* No. 2 (Nottingham, CCG, 2015) p. 1

⁹ Paul report, *Deployment of the Clergy* p. 139.

¹⁰ Paul report, *Deployment of the Clergy* p. 151.

¹¹ Wasdell, *LMPG* p. 8

¹² Wasdell, *LMPG* p.7.

You might reflect also that if a larger parish reached 10% of the people it would have neither a building nor a staff capable of receiving them.

What have we done since?

1974 is a long time ago – so why learn from it? Probably, because we still haven't. Here once more are the figures of the various parish sizes in 1974. How does that compare with figures of parish sizes from the 2011 census?

Since Wasdell, we have eliminated many of the tiny rural parishes, because of declining clergy numbers. But in effect we have reduced the number of the more effective parish units.

At the same time, we have increased the number of units that the research told us were extremely ineffective. That is a strange response, fuelled doubtless by shortage of clergy and lack of money. Are those good enough reasons?

There are several things either we did not perceive or were unwilling to countenance.

- We have not perceived the need to *penetrate* a parish area. We have rationalised our decline making ourselves content with fig leaf representative presence.
- We have kidded ourselves that church was basically attractive and maybe just needed to brighten up its Sunday worship a bit.
- We have refused the route of needing more parishes of modest size, and permissions to reach 'the pockets of 3-5000 people who are unchurched for all practical purposes' in the larger parishes. Such pockets were the exact phrase from the lips of a London diocese Archdeacon, Eddie Shirras, made to me on my 1992 sabbatical.
- We have been unable to imagine that a church community for each micro community of 2000 people might be a valuable yardstick.
- We have also assumed that the responses to decline should be centrally initiated, and focus upon increasing numbers of clergy of whatever kind, preferably cheaper ones.

What has been the result? How does the **chart of penetration** of the parish look these days? Here's a reminder of the 1974 shape. Here are those figures in the right hand margin and now look at the chart of the figures of 2011. Two things appear to me.

- 1 We are now about 40-50% worse off by decline across all the sizes involved. That's worrying for resources are now less than they were.

Of course other factors are involved in the decline, I cite some: the ageing of the Christian community, the few Christians in the younger generations, the tidal outflow of nominalism, decline in the belief in a personal God, the internal squabbles of and abuses within the church and the inability of the wider church to share its faith in Christ with joy and confidence.

- 2 Secondly at this structural level we have learnt nothing. Wasdell's data is not outdated, it has simply been updated, and we start now from a less promising base than before. It says to me that failing to address this problem is perpetuating it.

What is true nationally is broadly reflected with exceptions across the dioceses

I show you the picture for all 43 dioceses. Lowest and highest scores are

Diocese	Average size of parishes	% of Population attending
Birmingham	10,093	1.12%
Hereford	941	3.13%

You can see that London diocese is the clearest exception to the thin blue polynomial trend line. But examine its own comparative figures and the same general principle applies.

If we are to do better in the next 40 years – which will be someone else’s task not mine – then I want to explore a topic of almost equally importance. That is to try and identify the features that led Wasdell’s work to fail, for that is what happened.

Resistance

The report went to the General Synod gathering in November 1974. *Let My People Grow* was "noted" in the way of all the best Anglican reports. Actually his findings and conclusions were so uncomfortable for the establishment that I understand that Wasdell’s contract with the church authorities was terminated. This resistance was feared in his introduction to the first report. ‘New facts and ideas are often threatening and become buried by defensive reaction – something which may well happen as we grapple with this kind of material.’¹³

His second piece *Divide and Conquer* came out in June 1975. The introduction obliquely indicates a change of climate. ‘The paper is not commissioned, authorised or approved. It has no status and no authority other than given to it by virtue of its content. ... The work paper is not a report to be “received” or “noted”’¹⁴

The first report highlighted a problem; the second proposed solutions., as I read it again, today the tone sounds more shrill, the frustration is more apparent, perhaps the sadness more acute. Resistance factors cited early on are the Church’s ostrich like response, denigration of statistics, cutting back on research, innovation being discouraged, only changing to fix the past and failing to imagine for the future, with the Church likened to an ‘organisational fossil’, incapable of accepting that congregations have an optimum size – like cabbages do not infinitely expand when grown in larger fields.¹⁵

What did Wasdell advocate?

‘It has become crystal clear that the strategy of growth by addition of new members to existing groups or congregations is self-defeating. As numbers increase, so the quality of life which sustains the group is destroyed. Opportunities for personal learning, participation and maturation, pastoral care, taking of responsibility and use of gifts, all begin to disappear. While the church retains this strategy of growth by addition she stands firmly in the way of the purpose of God for the wholeness of man. Now there would appear to be only one alternative to growth by addition, and that is growth by multiplication. ... then the most important problem to be solved is the question of what that unit looks like and what kind of leadership is required in the church to enable multiplication to take off and be sustained’¹⁶

He adds that trying to grow small or primary groups, say of up to 12 people into larger secondary groups, of up to 200 is folly, just as is trying to make congregational groups of up to 200, into crowds of far larger size. It is folly because it misunderstands that they have different functions that do not translate across size.

What he advocated never happened. Wasdell kept writing up till 1978 both in the *Tomorrow’s Church* magazine and he got a piece into the 1977 *International Review of Mission* journal.¹⁷ Both sources included description the factors by which change is resisted. So did *Divide and Conquer*.

¹³ Wasdell *LMPG* p. 3

¹⁴ D. Wasdell, *Divide and Conquer* (London: UCP, 1975) p. 3 Hence 2DAC !

¹⁵ Wasdell 2DAC p. 3-5

¹⁶ Wasdell, *Divide and Conquer* (London: UCP, 1975) p. 16.

¹⁷ D. Wasdell, *The Evolution of the Missionary Congregation*, *The International Review of Mission* October 1977.

Talking of the parish congregation unit in the last thing he wrote for ACE in 1978:

‘The forces sustaining the size, lifestyle, organisational form and mission of each of these working units are complex, deeply interwoven and highly resistant to change. Moreover if breakthrough does happen and a particular congregation starts to grow the dynamically conservative pressures in the rest of the church act in concert with those in the surrounding community to return the ‘rogue’ congregation to pattern. Traditionally ministry involves running the church in its received pattern and passing it on to the next generation as little altered as possible. Changes are only made in so far as institutional survival is threatened and then the strategy of ‘least possible change’ to cope with the threat is followed.

The church is superbly organised for survival and brilliantly effective at perpetuating its institutional form. Tragically the form so preserved now stands firmly in the way of the effective mission and ministry of the church in modern England.’¹⁸

Thus he changed career, left ordained ministry, and founded a charity called URCHIN – all about how institutions defend themselves against change. Presently he still does the same, but focusses on how it relates to climate change issues.

What do we learn?

I have given you one thorough worked example of research done, with conclusions drawn but which were ignored. In it I’ve shown that Wasdell himself drew on material 10 years before but had which not been followed through. Probably we could do something similar with other initiatives that gained less air time. Take John Tanburn’s 1970 book on very early small groups in St Barnabas Cray, called *Open House*. Take the Mission Priority Area idea canvassed in the early 1990’s by Richard Giles, Felicity Lawson and myself.

Others have written on the fate of the **John Tiller report** of 1983. He highlighted six weaknesses of the parish system: its emphasis on maintenance, meaningless boundaries, isolationist style of ministry, staffing shortages, few links with other mission agencies and inability to cope with fragmented communities containing diversity. The report recommended that every Christian community should provide its own essential ministry in a team of ordained and lay, with oversight by the diocesan bishop and a team of diocesan clergy available for specialist ministries and mission.¹⁹ Little official support was given to taking the report’s proposals forward. There was a strong concern to retain a stipendiary priest in most parishes.

We all know the phrase ‘thinking outside the box’

Jimmy Hamilton-Brown whom I knew as Vicar of Bramcote in Nottingham remained passionate about helping local churches change for the better and wrote widely in the magazine *Parish and People*. In 2004 he listed factors that inhibit, domesticate and vitiate change. Fear, loyalty to the past, lack of trust in the proponent of change, not allowing time for ideas to sink in, lack of vision and loss of position or influence.

Jimmy himself was doubtful about trusting what Wasdell proposed, saying he couldn’t make it work in his own East end parish and also that Wasdell underestimated the resistance to the idea of small groups as a microcosm of the larger church. I wonder if the latter is fair, in that Wasdell listed many of the very same questions that I now hear posed in relation to fresh expressions of

¹⁸ D. Wasdell *Tomorrow’s Church*: ACE No. 34 (September 1978) p. 12.

¹⁹ J. Tiller, *A Strategy for the Church’s Ministry*, (London CIO, 1983)

Church about their identity, maturity and accountability.²⁰ He also wrote that these proper questions could be used as an excuse for doing nothing until they were all solved, which he believed stemmed from a set of deeper issues: he called them ‘the fundamental insecurity of leadership within the church ... neurotic dependence upon known structures’ being ‘gripped by fear of the future .. anxiety of taking on new ways ... inertia’ and ‘disillusioned fatalism’²¹ I think he had some idea even by 1975 of what he was up against.

Let’s go back to the famous box outside of which one is not supposed to think. What is the C of E box and what is it made of. Why is it so resistant to deep change and so often settles for massaging the existing stressed and aching system? Once more I gladly admit a debt to others and borrow a box, as imagined in 2012 by Philip James. I then want to develop the picture to talk about its dynamics; why it is so resistant both to change of its shape and to thoughts that occur within it but seek to travel beyond it. This is no mere set of lines, it is more like a prison camp.

The four sides of the C of E box

You see four sides for I suggest the elements are fourfold. At any one time, the oldest factor is usually the church building and even calling it a church is a power play. The label says ‘our church’ and that means the view of the congregation, but also often the sentiment of the wider geographical population. ‘Our’ is an ownership word, that signifies power.

It’s a good question whether public worship or the minster comes next so I show them together. I’ve provocatively put ‘our worship’ for I guess the plain fact is that the present people are there because it suits them. It’s to their taste whether traditional or charismatic. Hence changes to either times, or styles, let alone music are deeply difficult changes to manage. Equally there is the dimension noted by David Voas that most congregations say they want new people, but they want them to be the same as them.

‘Our priest’ because the finances of the Church have changed; local Christians provide the bulk of the money to provide clergy. The piper now calls the tune. It is ‘our’ also because church people want that person/parson to be local. He or she should look after us; be our chaplain. Between us we keep the system going. In most churches mission is an afterthought. Actually it is an assumption – that anyone with taste and decency would be happy to join us and we just hope they will.

The result in larger parishes, with the single minster, is the 175 ceiling and in smaller communities or poorer ones it will be much less. In some rural dioceses there are scores of churches of under 10 people.

The fortified box

Change might come either from priest or people and more rarely both at the same time. Why is change unlikely to succeed? Most minsters are still being **trained** in the priest-pastor or teacher-pastor model, and with a bit of management thrown in. Surveys suggest this is how they either do, or wish to spend, their time. The people want this provision; it is their **expectation**. People choosing their church, by quality provision of goods and services, for them and their family is becoming normal and decisive about where they choose to belong.

Liturgical conservatism is not limited to lovers of the BCP. Familiarity is part of the very way in which liturgy works. By that very gift we may pass through the words to the presence of God.

²⁰ Wasdell, *2DAC* p. 18

²¹ Wasdell, *2DAC* p. 18

Continuity and resonance are two of its virtues. Even young churches know that doing the same thing twice has begun a tradition. It also claims the high ground; that worship is the chief end of human beings and will be the diet of heaven. What could be more important? So it must be honoured and protected. Both minister and building exist to serve it.

Many of our **buildings** are fabulous, all of them are expensive. You know all the forces within and outside the Church that seek to preserve what is best about them, regulate what may be done to them, much less dispose of them.

Then there is the **parish boundary**, held by many as an inherent Anglican value, whereas it might only be a pastoral administrative arrangement. In practice it still is a major dictator to the provision of occasional offices, preserves distinctives in traditions, and shapes the most obvious but limited flows in mission.

The box looks pretty strong but there is more. There are internal bonds designed to stop it being bent or broken open.

Minister/Worship

Often the clergy-people relationship is collusive. They may unduly defer to him – ‘Father knows best’; rely upon him – ‘I couldn’t possibly do that Vicar’. He or she may have their ego stroked to be so needed, in a world where clergy are marginalised or figures of fun. It may also suit the clergy to maintain strict quality control. You can see why pioneers don’t fit.

Worship/ Building

We have no more expensive way to exist than in our current buildings. Yet it is defended as the proper way to do things. This venue and its purpose in public worship is decent, safe, relatively undemanding, even uplifting. Forget it is a luxury in the two thirds world and unknown in the early centuries. Even young churches seem to be drawn to owning property, being able to call the shots.

Building/ Mission

Because we invest so much in our buildings, we are bound to want to draw others to them. If we love them and say they work for us, it would be hard to think anything else.

Mission/Parish Clergy

If so much energy and powerful forces are going into maintaining the box then it is no surprise it exerts a massive gravitational pull. Any forms of change suggesting crossing boundaries of the box must be worrying and probably dodgy. Hence any network based thinking is worrying and cross boundary mission must be sheep stealing and the game keepers cry poaching.

Oh dear. Really lay leadership, as opposed to clericalised lay is suspect, as is any focus challenging the primacy of worship. Meeting not in a Church building is unduly exposed and strange, and transgressing a boundary is likely to be malign.

There are psychological reasons we don’t want change, there are structural reasons to stay with the safety of what we know. There are social forces to keep going as we are. There are now studies that show, in other areas of life, that information and warnings about the dangers of a present system do not work. Examples would be whether or not people decide to give up smoking or over-eating. Tina Rosenberg wrote ‘People rationalise to justify an intolerable behaviour’.²²

²² Tina Rosenberg, *Join the Club* (London: Icon Books, 2011) p. 22.

What is already emerging beyond the box?

I suggest to you that the 4 elements necessary which cannot thrive inside the box are not strategies they are instincts. They are not easily controlled or managed, we may not even be able to initiate them. And I think they are all connected to the work of the Holy Spirit and the Jesus who said 'I will build my Church.'²³

1 Since 2005 we have recognized the existence of **pioneer** ministers. We already know that there are questions about how best they are trained. Some of them doubt you can train pioneers, it is a given. Beth Keith has researched how they are deployed and often the answer is not very well. In 2014 Church Army published its research which showed 40% of the fxC being **lay-lay** led and that these uncertificated people, mainly women, were doing just as well as the other leaders who were mainly ordained men. Will these developments be welcomed denigrated or domesticated? Long ago Leslie Paul noted the tendency for Church to be equated with clergy and for lay leaders to be clericalised.²⁴ Vocation, which lies behind the lay and pioneer factor, is the calling of God; all that training does is shape it, ordination recognizes it, and a diocese may be able to deploy it.

Waddell argued the case that we need many more smaller congregational units. Bob Jackson has argued for over 10 years that all big churches need small sub units. Cells in England are too small to be missional, but there is hope for clusters or mission-shaped communities. The many lay-lay led fresh expressions of Church are of similar size. Do we get it?

2 The direction of travel of the pioneer, the fresh expressions of Church goes beyond the box. You come to us, is now **we come to you**. Such an instinct is more faithful to the particularity of the Incarnation, to the mission imperative of Jesus in Acts 1.8, testified to by the disturbances of the Spirit and modelled to the whole church by its sodal members. But this come to you is not all go. The consequence is to **gather**, where those to whom we are sent gather. Just as the eternity of God the son was gathered within the human frame of the jewish Jesus, or as Paul went to where the women of Philippi gathered by the river.²⁵ Our instinct is for missional contextual particularity, there further churches will begin, flourish and grow.

4 At IDLC 3 I argued that beyond the box's side of worship, which is common to all faiths, the heart of the matter is community around Jesus. It is this encounter which changes everything including who you worship and how. The Spirit has a perpetual focus on Jesus and the inner transformation he brings is to make us more like Jesus, in interdependence with one another

All this is hard for us. An illustration is the beautifully presented *From Evidence to Action* booklet which is so dominantly about growing existing churches. When do we learn that growing bigger brighter boxes is not the best future, though it is part of it? Did you notice that of the 8 symbols, on its page 4, singling out church growth factors, none explicitly deal with creating further churches. There is but one paragraph on page 6 in the 16 pages on fresh expressions of Church, though two of the 5 cases studies are illustrative of it.

Please understand that my aim is not to blow up the box but that it needs to become porous. I do not say there is no value within the box but I do say that it is not enough, for it does not allow diverse multiplication. I ask you to decide is that true?

²³ Matthew 16.18

²⁴ L. Paul *The deployment .. of the Clergy* pp. 149-150.

²⁵ Acts 16.13.

I have tried to show the powerful gravitational pull the box exerts. We need to be more realistic about how difficult it is to pass beyond it. As I have listened to the IDLC conversations over nearly 3 years, so often solutions proposed have been about better leadership, usually clerical. Of course that matters, but it won't break open the box. Do you want to allow the box to have the last word?

The box is also regular. Its sheer shape suggests institution or managerialism. Did you notice this?

'The desire for neatness, as much as the desire for control, is characteristic of ... those contemplating office. They are often backed up bureaucracies which are allergic to messiness. But human life and creativity are inherently messy and rebel against the uniformity that accompanies systemic constraints and universal solutions.'²⁶

Our future cannot be simply about better future human planning, much less angry condemnation of the past. The future will not be simple continuation of the past. I think Wasdell was only half right to spot the need to multiply. That word is still managerial and mathematical.²⁷ We need an organic word. I suggest it is reproduce. The church needs to dare to have church children who are related to us but not the same as us. Such young churches have already begun, many more are needed. Will we dare go with a messy, non identical future?²⁸

- How does this evidence base feed into diocesan strategies?
- How will it affect the thinking of the national Task Force considering the Church of England's future?

²⁶ House of Bishops, *Who is my neighbour?* (London: C of E, 2015) para 55.

²⁷ Examples of such thinking include the 1990s DAWN strategy, critiqued by Lings and Murray in Grove Evangelism No 61, *Church Planting Past Present and Future*, p. 3. More recently a Free Church minister Phil Barber has been circulating a paper called *The Power of Compound Interest*. The analogy breaks down for churches are not banks nor do they grow like interest, though his desire for all denominations to begin more churches is laudable.

²⁸ In our 2015 Church Army research, we see one such beginning in Carlisle diocese. There, starting youth cells across a deanery, gathering also in deanery and diocesan wider celebrations, the diocese are growing a parallel new church from the bottom up, knowing these young people will not go to traditional church.