

## The Contact Story

### Paul's story

I always found Sunday morning worship difficult. Whether I was preaching in the Circuit or as a member of my local congregation I struggled with what we were trying to do. It was summed up by one person who told me, "we are coming together as one family to worship God", but what does this mean for us today?

It was a Saturday afternoon and the whole family were together in one room. Four generations: great grandparents, grandparents, parents and children. How was everyone feeling? The great grandparents were dozing off, waking themselves up with the occasional snore! The grandparents were basking in the satisfaction of seeing all the family together in one room. The parents were desperately trying to keep the children amused and quiet, and were frustrated by what they were being expected to do. The children were bored and suggested a variety of things they would rather be doing, most of which did not take place in this room! It was good that the family were all together - but no one said how they really felt!

When leading worship on a Sunday morning, where children who went out to Sunday School, I was always faced with a dilemma:

- ◆ Should the first part of the Service be aimed at the children using appropriate songs and prayers and following the theme they would be using in Sunday School? But what would this achieve? It provides the children with a glimpse of worship that they would not be able to experience if they attended the whole service and offers the rest of the congregation two services in one.
- ◆ Should it reflect the nature of Sunday worship in that particular church and follow the same theme the rest of the congregation would consider once the children had left? But what would this achieve? The children have to sit through worship that they find difficult to relate to and on a theme that bears no relationship to what they are thinking about in Sunday School.

When attending worship on a Sunday morning I was faced with the variety of ways in which other people faced this dilemma:

- ◆ some aimed the first part of the Service at the children
- ◆ some linked what they said to what the children would be thinking about in Sunday School
- ◆ some used this part of the Service as an introduction to what they would say later
- ◆ some said it was nice to see the children
- ◆ some didn't seem to notice that the children were there
- ◆ some didn't know what to do ... so they did nothing

How was everyone feeling as they met together for the Sunday morning service?

- ◆ some people got annoyed because they didn't like singing 'modern' songs
- ◆ some people thought this was the best bit of the Service
- ◆ some people enjoyed seeing the children in church
- ◆ some people tried to keep the children quiet
- ◆ the children wanted to go to Sunday School

Is all this turmoil what worship is about? Where was God in all this? How were we enabling people to worship? What were we saying to the children about church? These and many other questions filled my mind - what was the way forward?

## **Jonathan's story**

I have for many years had a vision of simple worship of a God who cares with a strong practical link to how people can live their ordinary lives. Worship is often characterised as respectful, majestic, submitting a great and awesome God. I wanted to worship in an environment where God was the centre, not the actions, the rituals or the observance. Not that any of those things is necessarily wrong – I just wanted to know more of God and, for me, the essence of worship was a very real sense that God is present.

For me, worship is about knowing and proclaiming that “God you're the best and I want to follow you more”. If Sunday morning “worship” gets in the way of that, I start to wonder why I'm there. So for many years, I have felt led to get my hands dirty in leading worship.

For as long as I can remember, I have been part of providing music for worship. But always that has been in the background, in the corner – and that's how I wanted it to be. Being involved in something new meant that I had to conquer my fear of leading, of looking a fool, of having to rely totally on God.

Prayer was the most important part of getting Cont@ct off the ground. Each of us had an unease about how the current worship “menu” was serving our community and ourselves, but each had a slightly different way of expressing it. Prayer was crucial to God leading us to something that was not gimmicky, would be lasting and would serve him in drawing people to consider what being a follower of God was all about. It was not easy, but we were strengthened in the knowledge that we believed that this was what God was calling us to do for Him.

I feel utterly thankful and awestruck about what God can do in your life if you let your defences down just for a minute. God doesn't muscle in and dictate lives – he waits patiently until invited, then does his great and marvelous works through the inadequate, the scared, the self-conscious and the weak.

## **The Vision**

Two services on a Sunday morning? Would this would allow us to have two different styles of worship? Should they run alongside each other or one after the other?

### ***Services running alongside each other***

This would enable families to come together and attend different acts of worship but would create a lot of work in setting up and clearing away the hall each week. There was also a feeling that the worship centre should be used for worship and that worship taking place in the hall might be seen as ‘second class’. It was also difficult to see how Sunday School would fit into this pattern.

### ***Services running one after the other***

This would enable both services to take place in the worship centre but could possibly create two congregations that hardly met together because they were in the building at different times. It would also allow Sunday School to continue to take place alongside the second service.

### **The solution**

After a lot of prayer, talk and reflection it was decided that the best option for our particular situation was two services running one after the other. The following Sunday morning programme was proposed.

	<b>Worship Centre</b>	<b>Church Parlour</b>	<b>Church Hall</b>
8.30am		Holy Communion <i>(first Sunday of month)</i>	
9.00am			
9.30am	First Service	Breakfast <i>(first Sunday of month)</i>	
10.00am			
10.30am		Drinks	
11.00am	Second Service		Sunday School
11.30am			

This pattern enabled the two services to take place in the worship centre and for Sunday School to run alongside the second service. Drinks were served between to two services and it was hoped that this would be a time when the two congregations would meet together each week. It was also agreed that on four Sunday's during the year: Easter, Pentecost, Harvest and Christmas, we would come together to worship as one congregation

Just before Christmas 1999 the Church Council agreed that this would be the pattern for Sunday mornings for an experimental period of one year. We would start in May 2000, giving us five months to make all the necessary preparations. From this moment on it began to sink in what we had taken on and how we were moving into the unknown - we realised how much we needed to put our trust in God.

### **Preparations**

To begin our preparations we met together once a month, and at our first meeting in January 2000 the following issues and concerns were discussed:

- ◆ what would it look like?
- ◆ what effect would it have on the other service?
- ◆ who would provide the music?
- ◆ what about Communion?
- ◆ how will we get other people involved?
- ◆ what about Sunday School?
- ◆ how will the service be publicised?
- ◆ how would prayer for this venture be co-ordinated?

We had so many questions and so few answers but we knew that God was there to guide us and we just needed to spend time with him. We were also aware that we needed to get to know each other, not only socially but spiritually. If we were going to lead worship together we also needed to be able to worship together.

We worked our way through the issues and concerns we had, and as we resolved one we found it raised others. What do we call this time of worship was quite a problem because we needed an easy way to distinguish it from the 10.45am Service. After a lot of suggestions we agreed on 'Contact' as we felt this said a lot about worship being a time of contact with other people and with God. We also wanted the word itself to express what we were about so a logo was developed.

*CONTACT*

One of our biggest concerns was how to get other people involved. There were five of us who shared the vision but we needed to involve others. We invited people to pledge themselves to the project and produced a pledge sheet that could be completed and returned. This invited people to pledge themselves to the following:

- ◇ to be a member of Cont@ct for the first four months
- ◇ to be involved in leading Cont@ct
- ◇ to be a door steward for Cont@ct
- ◇ to be on the drink rota
- ◇ to pray for Cont@ct
- ◇ to help distribute leaflets for Cont@ct
- ◇ to display a window poster for Cont@ct

The people of the church were really supportive and many came forward to help in whatever way they felt appropriate. A good number offered to be a sort of 'rent-a-congregation' for the first four months so that new people didn't come into an empty church, and many others offered to pray for the work. We produced a prayer list and encouraged people to pray for different aspects of the project each day.

Our other concern was where the new people would come from. We knew that the most successful way of bringing people into the church is through personal invitation and most of our emphasis was placed on inviting people we knew. Some of these people had no previous contact with the church but most were on the edge of the church community, eg. they attended other groups, attended worship at Christmas, their children had been baptised at the church, etc. We invited as many people as we could and left the rest to God.

About a month before we started we spent a day away together with our families. We prayed and worshipped together, we ate together, took a walk together and we shared communion together. We spent a little time on some of the issues that we still had not resolved, but most of the time we spent doing things together. This was an uplifting day that confirmed to us that God had his hand in what we were doing.

We didn't resolve all our issues and concerns before we started and some were never resolved because they never became a problem. We realised that this was going to be an ongoing project and that we would always need to be assessing what we were doing and making changes as necessary. If we put what we are doing in God's hands we need to be willing and able to change as he commands – standing still is not an option.

## **First Sunday**

As we walked out of the vestry and into the worship centre on Sunday 14<sup>th</sup> May 2000 there were over 60 people in the congregation. Many had come to support the new venture, but there were others who were new to the church. A lot of people had been inspired to personally invite people to come and some of these had come.

The theme and content of that first Cont@ct was not very memorable, indeed no one can really remember what we did. But, what was important was that we had done it and with God's help we had been able to turn the vision into reality.

### **Four years on**

There are now over eighty people who regularly attend Cont@ct, although it is very rare that they all come on the same Sunday. For many regular attendance is not every week but when they are available, for example, every other week, one in three, etc. This is part of what it means to belong in the 21<sup>st</sup> century and the church needs to accept this.

Each year the leaders have spent a day together, reflecting on Cont@ct and how it has evolved to meet the changing needs of the congregation. We have learnt more about working together and have complete trust in each other. We are also constantly amazed at how the Spirit inspires us to find new and creative ways of enabling people to worship God together.

There is still more to do and more questions to be answered. The day that we sit back and say that's it, we've got it sorted, is the day that Cont@ct will end. Until then we keep working and praying to encourage and enable people to worship God.

Amen.