

Church Planting in Rural Lincolnshire

(This article, written by Barry Osborne, originally appeared in Country Way magazine in 2004. Threshold has continued to make progress and we hope to bring you an updated report soon. On change is that "clusters" no longer exist and the church is now more focused on local congregations.)

I must admit that when I first heard that a "new church" (once called house churches) was engaging in church planting in villages I was somewhat sceptical. I had made a study of rural church planting some years before and was conscious of just how little was being done and how difficult it was. I had also worked briefly with another new church that was considering using a house group in a village as a base for starting a local church, but that was aborted. Frankly, one of the problems was that the enthusiastic style of charismatic worship just did not seem to fit well with rural conservatism. But my prejudices were about to be challenged.

My first contact was a seminar at the 2004 Christian Resources Exhibition. Here I not only met Pete Atkins, one of the leaders of this new church, but I was surprised to find that Bob and Mary Hopkins from the Anglican Church Planting Initiative were hosting this event. I had worked with them on previous occasions and knew of their excellent reputation. What I had apparently stumbled upon was a programme of strategic church planting in arguably England's most rural county that had a strong commitment to work ecumenically.

Threshold, as the church is called, started in 1995, and its leaders are clearly committed to working harmoniously with local Methodist and Anglican churches, and have gained a considerable degree of respect and cooperation. They have also engaged with others through Churches Together. It is essentially a "cell church" structure and currently has some eight cells plus youth cells grouped into six clusters and serving several villages. The cell groups are the main building block of the church. All parts of *Threshold* meet together on alternate Sundays.

Like many new churches *Threshold* operates with strong team leadership but I was impressed that its leaders are open to allow local initiatives to develop in ways that are appropriate to their setting without imposing a model or local strategy. They are also keen on networking with others and during the three days that I spent with them during July they also introduced me to three other rural church planting initiatives not part of *Threshold*, and an ecumenical Church Planting School. They are also part of an association of churches called Ground Level.

One particularly exciting aspect of their work is their programme among the youth, which includes a very professional and well-equipped hi-tech resource. In addition to a regular Sunday morning programme, their youth activities include two events each month - one a concert type event attracting very large numbers and the other a successful culturally relevant programme with more overtly Christian content.

Threshold leaders were pleasantly modest about their achievements, but I feel that there is much to learn from this programme. What I suspect I found is a model that gives some hope for the future, at a time when there remains considerable uncertainty with more traditional forms of church in rural Britain. It may well be that the increasing sub-urbanisation of the culture in many rural communities now offers a greater opportunity for new expressions of church than many of us had imagined.