

An email dialogue between Kester Brewin and Ryan Bolger, Assistant Professor of Church in Contemporary Culture, Fuller Theological Seminary.

RB

Greetings...I was wondering if I could talk to you to hear more of the Vaux story.

When and where were you born and raised? What are your faith journeys? Were you raised in the church, or did you come to faith later? Did it become more real at some point? What led you to start Vaux? What was it about church that it was no longer satisfying for you? Was there a particular event that marked this transition for you?

KB

Vaux surfaced in November 1998, the joint birthing of a service reflecting on memory after some years of labour. Four of us were there at the beginning: myself and my wife Beki (current festival manager of Greenbelt arts festival) and another couple, Nic and Sooz. Nic is one of the leading graphic artists in London and his aesthetics have driven the look and feel of Vaux since forever. We had a logo before we had a venue.

Personally, I have been brought up in a Christian home. My father is an Anglican minister who has journeyed with the evangelical/charismatic wing of the Church since the late 1970s. Hence I was born 1972 in a vicarage in Sheffield, and lived the church life inside out. I could point at a Billy Graham rally in 1984 as a 'conversion', but that was really more of a moment of strengthening a faith that has always been there. I have attended church ever since, but have been encouraged to stay broad, to not box faith up.

Finding myself in London in the late 90s, I found myself worshipping at a big church, full of perhaps 600+ young adults each Sunday night. It was here that Beki and I hooked up with Nic and Sooz. Actually, Sooz was the only one of us not from a vicar-kid background - at first we were surprised at the coincidence, but we now see that the alt.worship scene is jam full of us - people who have been brought up 'on the inside', not wanting to throw it all away, but ready to change things and equipped with the know-how to attempt it.

We were frustrated. We sat each week surrounded by some of the brightest talents in film, TV, theatre, art, social work and politics... But made to watch in virtual silence because we didn't play guitar and didn't 'preach'. These were the only 2 gifts that were acceptable as worship. It just seemed such a waste.

In the autumn of 97 we put together a weekend event called 'Dreamspace' at which we simply invited some of these talented people to do small workshops in non-church venues around London talking about their dreams and faith. It was just an attempt to give people permission. The weekend ended with a session by Tom Sine, who took us through a visualisation/dreaming exercise, and the four of us were taken aback at how similar our dreams were.

Initially, and typically for our generation, we defaulted to the professionals for help: we went to Jonny Baker, a good friend of all of ours, and asked him to come and start another 'Grace' in our area. He righteously kicked us up the backside and told us to do it ourselves... What a wise guy.

As you may have picked up from writings on Greyspace, we are big on 'gift'. I go into much more detail in the book, but we have been very inspired by Lewis Hyde's book *The Gift*, which is essentially about art, but for us was all about worship. We just thought it was outrageous that we had all these gifts that were being used in the corporate world, in the market economy, and were being snubbed for poorly done soft-rock and 2-bit oratory in church. We saw that if worship was about gift, then what we brought to worship had to be integral to us, something meaningful from who we were. Vaux was initially then designed as a place where people could come and offer their gifts, whatever they were: dance, liturgy, video, monologue, installation, meditation, graphics, sounds... We simply tried to curate this stuff into some sort of coherent whole, to help people to see that worship was not about coming to get, but coming to give... And to get anything in return was a bonus, an moment of grace.

We've been doing some thinking recently about creation myths. I'm not sure if you're aware of 'Watchmen', the seminal graphic novel by Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons, but there is a section in there about the 'birth' of Dr Manhattan, which I have been mulling over. (My copy is in storage at the moment in the middle of a move, so forgive me if my memory is slightly out)

A character called Jon Osterman is working on the secret 'Manhattan project', and is caught inside the nuclear testing facility during an experiment. Unable to get out, his body is obliterated; nothing remains. But his soul appears to survive, and over the course of time he learns to gradually put his body back together, a process he likens to reassembling a watch, 'just a case of putting all the pieces back together in the right order.' His partial body appears to family and friends - a skeleton is seen briefly, a nervous system... Until gradually he reappears complete. Complete yet totally reconfigured into a form more powerful, more adaptable. Through his annihilation and resurrection, he has learned the inner secrets of his own existence.

For those of us who started Vaux, the body of Christ - the Church - was not so much experienced as obliterated in one mega-tonne fission, but gradually dis-integrating over a period of time. Sitting in pews, standing up sitting down, the same format each week... It just wasn't working for us. As artists, writers, creatives, the single, fixed configuration of soft-rock worship and 3-point linear preaching was a body we felt uncomfortable in, a body that was dying around us.

Vaux's mission, put simply, is perhaps as daring as that of the destroyed Jon Osterman - to reconfigure the body into something better. To make the body of Christ more powerful, more adaptable, more flexible... And this is of course what Christ himself did in his passion/resurrection/ascension. We very much see (and my book tries to argue) that this process of obliteration and reconfiguration is something that the Church must come to terms with.

Of course, we are nowhere near that. Our services - and those of other groups in the alt.worship scene, are like the early appearances of Dr Manhattan: skeletal, nervous, temporal. But we believe that together progress can be made. Vaux has always seen that alt.worship needs to go beyond the simple things of tea-lights and ambient music; that it needs to analyse carefully what it is doing and ensure that it is thinking theologically. We believe that what we are doing is not just some 'postmodernisation' of church services; we are undertaking a spiritual re-birthing of body of Christ. People talk of revival, but fail to see that what needs reviving must be by definition dying - and we are serious about not wanting that to happen, not standing by to let it all just wilt. But we are also pragmatic. We cannot undertake a revolution - this is not God's style. We worship a God of evolving change. It will take time and generations and mistakes and strange beasts... But we will keep at it. Not because we think we are somehow the 'salvation' of the church - far from it! - but because now we have tasted something of this reconfigured body, this 'Complex Christ' as I call it in the book, we simply cannot go back to pews and song-sandwiches.

Apologies if I've gone 'off-piste' a little; I hope there's some useful thoughts in there - and look forward to continuing to dialogue.

RB

I would like to ask you a bit about your community life...

Is 'church' equate to a meeting, at a place, or is it a way of life? How so?

Is there any sort of commitment to each other, in Vaux?

Is there any sort of stress on living in the kingdom of God, living like

Jesus, in terms of the faith being a way of life as opposed to a set of

meetings? Do you see yourself as missional, or outwardly focused towards the culture?

KB

I guess our ecclesiology has been evolving since before we even started Vaux. We work things out through 'praxis' - it is not just that our theology is static, is a stone tablet that informs what we do, but that what we do informs our theology through a process of exploration too. This has been particularly true of our views on church, ie, we didn't start with some grand idea about how to set up a new style of church, all planned out and documented on paper first. Quite the opposite. But in a sense, even that mode of beginning has come to mean a lot to us in our idea of what church is: it is simply a meeting point for those who are journeying.

When Christ said 'wherever 2 or 3 gather...' we believe that he meant that church was happening at those moments. It's not a place to visit, but a dynamic that occurs when people who are journeying come together. As we've explored more deeply, I guess we've come to see that the genesis of the early church holds a pattern for church now, something I go into more detail than possible here in the last chapter of my book.

I mentioned before about re-configuring the body of Christ, and the metaphor of Jon Osterman becoming Dr Manhattan in 'Watchmen'. I think that something similar is going on in Christ's passion. I've always been puzzled by exactly why Judas betrayed Jesus when he did: we're told it was when Jesus gave him a piece of bread (and probably used the words about his body and blood, as other gospels tell it). What was it about this that was made him act?

Looking at the texts, I'm becoming more convinced that Judas was perhaps the only disciple who understood the significance of what Jesus was saying. He'd gone to the Pharisees to tell them he could 'deliver' Jesus to them, but they specifically told him not to do it during the 'holiday' as it would cause a riot. What does Judas do? He 'betrays' him right when they didn't want him to. Again, what caused him to act like this?

I think it was because he saw, as no one else did, when Jesus broke the bread and poured the wine, that Jesus intended to die and be 'reconfigured'. Judas, as many of the other disciples did, wanted and expected Jesus to start a political revolution, and perhaps when he saw that Jesus wasn't going to take that line he panicked and thought he could precipitate it by betraying him, so forcing his hand when he is faced with the Jewish leaders.

Perhaps Judas was the only one to see that if Jesus died and rose again, thus reconfigured he would render the Temple system, and the social control and standing it gave people like Judas, useless. The curtain torn, God would be out of the box, the virus would have escaped, the nuclear chain reaction begun... And he had to try to stop this.

We are thus like Judas each time we try to box God up. We are like Judas each time we try to tie God into our own agenda.

How does this impinge on our ecclesiology, our thinking on community? If the church is the body of Christ, then a reconfigured Christ requires a reconfigured church. To our shame, we have too often gone back to trying to box God up, to place all his power in the hands of those we ordain, to restrict access and formalise relationship. What we are trying to do at Vaux (and in no way are we some huge success story) is to allow the virus free-reign.

We see the act of the eucharist as a powerful symbol of what we believe about Christ and the body of Christ: what was singular, physical, fixed in one place, is split up, transformed and taken out into the cities we live in.

Church for us then is perhaps simply a 'network of the infected'. Each time two nodes in this network communicate, church is happening, the body is evolving, Christ is being formed.

So is there any commitment to each other? Of course. Otherwise the network would collapse. Is there a stress on living like Christ? Of course - it's only when Christ-like activity occurs between nodes that synapses are strengthened and the body emerges. But do we see ourselves as 'missional or outwardly focused towards the culture'? No, not in the classic sense. We are culture. Culture is simply the output of a society creating... We don't see it as something to be changed or sanctified. Rather, we seek to create and infect it from the inside. 'Quit train-spotting, and be the train' as one of our number put it. In other

words, don't be a try-hard alt.worship service, always desperate to play the right tunes, have the right graphics, reference the right stuff.

This goes back to the concept of 'gift'. Our worship is simply an attempt to offer the gifts we've been given. The same gifts that we are hopefully using in our workplaces. Someone once asked why Vaux didn't run a soup-kitchen. It's a non-question for us. We have senior civil servants, teachers, social workers, urban planners all part of our 'network of the infected' who are involved in the nitty-gritty issues of urban life every day. To open a soup kitchen may sound worthy, but it does little for our view of the 'worth' our work has.

Iain Sinclair, the London 'psychogeographer', writes in 'Lights Out for the Territory' that "The City is revealed as a naked brain, uncapped so that all its pulsing cells are offered for exploitation. The churches are needles, driven into the clay to bend the flow of current." The church at its best is not an attempt to replicate the brain, to form some other utopia, some other city, but rather is an attempt to become a grand idea that infects the thoughts and actions of that brain. Invisible. Yeast-like. Viral. The community of the church can only be plotted in synaptic snap-shots. It is ever evolving, ever adapting, ever changing.

RB

Thanks again for your very thoughtful response to these questions. Church as a meeting point for those journeying -- this is a reconfiguring as you say -- a necessary one. The church has typically separated the spirituality of our individual journeys from our corporate journey and vice-versa -- in fact they usually have nothing to do with each other. Vaux weaves those together. You also talk about church as the network of the infected -- a lot to think about here. You are really arguing against any sort of event orientation of church and instead seeing the church as more of a way of life -- e.g. in mission -- not a soup kitchen but a continual life of serving in all the realms that you live in...to always be the train, to offer the gift...fairly profound ideas...

I never thought that about Judas before -- but I think you are right -- he wanted the revolution so bad he tried to force God's hand. Boy, that really brings Judas much closer to home, doesn't it. Now we can all relate to him...

Thanks for your tip on Bauman - I too am a big fan of his -- there are a few of us here at Fuller who really resonate with his arguments...I used his work extensively in my dissertation...

I'm thinking about your 'network of the infected'? does that extend to other faiths? when you interact with those of other traditions, you simply 'offer the gift', spread the virus, and if it infects them so be it? You do not need to sell the whole package, a whole system of thought, but whatever attaches to them, attaches? you have no control how it spreads and that is okay? would you say the same is with our material, consuming culture? At times our virus might subvert our consumer notions, at other times it might strengthen them. we just be the train, let it work?

On another note, how does this affect leadership? a networked approach? Do all have equal access to the network? is any one person/group the hub? Can any one person participate at any level? is it the same in the main gathering and in non-gathering situations? is it in any way different than other alt worship communities? i see full participation, in regard to power relations, in alt worship as one of its primary contributions, would you agree?

KB

I hadn't thought about the viral thing as applied to other faiths, actually. Will have to give that some thought. We do want to encourage infection, but you're right - it's not up to us to go trying to force that on people.

On leadership, we had an extensive email debate among various alt.worship people a month or so ago, which raised some pretty strong feelings. Some people are massively anti-leadership, which I think is more a reaction to poor experiences of it - the baby goes out with the bath water.

I guess you've probably bought something from Amazon z-shops, or ebay at some point... My (developing) view on leadership is that the systems on these sites that allow feedback ratings to emerge have something important to tell us. We can choose to buy from who we like, but we are more likely to buy from those who have an established track record of trust and good service...

In the same way, while Vaux has no specified leadership, it does have an unspoken trust/merit system where more weight is bound to be given to the ideas of those in the group who have shown consistent commitment and have a track record of good output. We've come to see this as essential to stop what is effectively an open community of artists being diverted off course by any old person who turns up and has a view.

Another good example of this sort of thing emerging is (or was) on slashdot.org. Here, anyone is free to post, but you can choose to view the site at various levels - just seeing posts from people who have shown they consistently write interesting stuff, or seeing all the crap and junk that any old one posts.

Two points are pertinent: firstly, dirt is not excluded, but managed. That's a whole different topic area, but Vaux has done a lot of thinking about dirt... Secondly, the ratings are done by a randomly selected group of 'jurors' who have a certain number of 'points' to give away. It is not a centralised dictatorship, deciding what is in and what is out... It is one way of heading towards an emergent truth, I think.

I believe in leadership - people need direction. But we need to find models of it that have nothing to do with power.

One of the most helpful things we've ever done at Vx was on a weekend away, where we did "Belbin's Team Roles" analysis in conjunction with Myers-Briggs. Belbin helped us to identify what roles people naturally take in a group situation - some are really good at sparking off ideas, others are good at bringing them to completion, while others network, 'serve' and resource etc.

What is key is that to have a successful team you need all these gifts to be functioning. We are very lucky to have 2 people involved in Vaux who are 'Monitor/Evaluators'. These are people who typically say very little in the heat of a discussion, say about an idea for a service, but at the end of the evening will be able to draw the whole thing together and rationalise what might have been a hectic brainstorm. We always make a point of referring to them, and it's amazing how well they distil stuff.

RB

Why is creativity so important to Vaux, and why is it so closely tied to material reality? Is it woven into the very fabric of your spirituality? Is all of this tied in to some sort of response to God? Do you think Vaux is a contextual form of church appropriate for a community of artists, or do you think you have discovered something that the larger church has lost, something that can speak to many churches across the spectrum?

KB

We create because we are created. The act of creation is fundamental to being fully human.

We create to keep the gift moving. If the gift stops, or is turned for profit, it dies.

In short, the act of giving created gifts is central to our worship: we bring something of who we are, something that has taken our time, not just our money, something that uses the gifts we have been given, and offer that in worship. Not songs we don't really like. Not money into the collection plate. Not restricted to oratory and guitar playing. Any gift: dance, writing, film, graphics, installations, meditations...

And in short, yes, we do feel that the wider church has lost something. Its gift practice is too often distorted. By restricting the type of gifts that are really appreciated (mostly to preaching and a narrow musicianship) and by only giving space to those gifts, churches are denying people the opportunity to worship in a way that truly comes from them.

Henri Nouwen wrote about 20 years ago that "I am afraid that in a few decades time the church will be accused of having failed at its most basic task, offering people creative ways to communicate with the source of life." Though we don't always realise it, as created people everyone has a basic desire to be creative in some way, and if the church will not accept their gifts, they will take them elsewhere... Mostly

into the market-place to exchange for cash in their work. And most people know that this can be ultimately unsatisfying.

All churches, wherever they are and whatever tradition, need to become places in their communities where people can exchange gifts - not just spiritual gifts, but any gifts: toddler groups, places to hang art, cafes for passers by, peaceful refuges from noisy streets, financial advice, practice rooms for young bands.. And in the exchange of gifts, relationships are always catalysed, always strengthened. Then and only then can the talk turn to the one who gave everything for us.

Peace

Kester