

PAST LIFE – PRESENT MISSION:

**the relevance of Celtic Christianity
to urban mission**

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Introduction

This booklet considers how the past can inform the present by describing how principles and practices of Celtic Christianity were applied in the Birmingham parish of St Edmunds Tyseley during the ten-year period when I was its vicar (1989-1999).

Why we started

There were three main reasons why we came to apply aspects of Celtic Christianity to this disadvantaged urban parish. The first was my lifelong involvement in working class communities. Second, was the approach to ministry at St Edmunds, that of an extended Christian family committed to being a church for their community. This concern was expressed through an experimental Neighbourhood Project that we called StEdicare – Tyseley. StEdicare created an environment where, by the mid 1990s, we were motivated to search for a fresh and relevant set of Christian mission principles that applied both to our own lifestyle and were relevant to the local community. Third, in my own spiritual journey I had begun to explore Celtic Christianity.

Roots

In 'Wholeness through Christ' prayer counselling a focus on my Christian radicalism emerged, which linked it to a deep sense of loss of land in my family history. Our sense was that this related to Celtic and Highland forbears and to the Highland land clearances. The reasons for this sense of loss had been forgotten over time but the radical attitude it implanted remained across the generations. This link between a personal Celtic heritage and my current Christian practice led me to undertake two personal pilgrimages. Firstly, to the island of Lismore where I discovered the opportunity for reflection and dialogue with God afforded by Celtic Christian sites. Secondly, a six week 'pilgrimage of discovery' which started at Iona, finished at Holy Island and involved travelling and camping in a small diesel van. This personal journey of discovering Celtic Christian sites became linked to my parish ministry and Christian radicalism in Urban Priority Areas through the 'Woven Cord' programme that is outlined in this book. Coupled with this were a series of visions, regular Bible teaching, social action in Tyseley, and academic study of Celtic Christianity. It has been an immense privilege to minister among those who the Celtic Christians would have seen as the "hewers of wood and drawers of water" and who I view as the 'salt of the earth'.

What we did

Fourteen Principles of Celtic Christianity were identified through Michael Mitton's *Restoring the Woven Cord: Strands of Celtic Christianity for the Church Today*. These were checked for authenticity through a critique of Celtic Christian literature and historical examination of the Christian life style of three 4th-6th century Celtic Saints and of the evolving 6th century structures of monasticism and wandering pilgrimage (peregrinatio).

These principles were then studied by various groups within St Edmunds and their responses analysed. The 'Woven Cord' programme aimed to act as a prerequisite for mission within Tyseley by encouraging the growth of participants' spirituality. The results showed that 80% of the people in these groups responded positively to the principles and practice of Celtic Christianity and transferred to their life style much of its approach to spirituality. This booklet looks at how and why that happened.

It is my hope that this can provide a blueprint for using Celtic Christianity within urban mission in a way that enables the past to bring the present to life.

Chapter 1: The principles and practices of Celtic Christianity

In his book *Restoring the Woven Cord*¹ Michael Mitton identifies fourteen Biblical Themes that became the background frame of reference at St Edmund's Tysley for our own 'Woven Cord' programme. Mitton's choice of themes and their content seemed to me to be a populist set of material about Celtic Christianity and were, as a result, appropriate to urban priority area residents and their non-book culture.

Whilst not exhaustive, the principles and examples of practice within Mitton's themes provide an overview of key aspects of how Christianity was practised in Celtic areas during the 4th-7th centuries AD. The result is a collection that synthesises this wide-ranging material into a set of principles and practice about Celtic Christianity as found in Celtic lands.

1. The Authenticity, Simplicity and Holiness of Celtic Christian Living

These characteristics were widely found in the lives of individual Christians and within the Monastic system. Celtic Christians practised humility and a gentle approach to people, encouraging them toward commitment to Christ, baptism and confirmation. Established Christians were nurtured and established in their faith and led into discipleship. Much of what we know is based on monastic living where monks and those not under vows accepted a disciplined cycle of daily prayer, creative activity and work.

Nora Chadwick summed up this Principle as reflected in the Sancti:

“We see in their gentle way of life, their austere monastic settlements and their island retreats, the personalities of their saints, and the tradition of their poetry, which expresses the Christian ideal with a sanctity and a sweetness which have never been surpassed and perhaps only equalled by the ascetics of the eastern desert.”²

Even Wilfred who spoke for the European Church of Rome at the Synod of Whitby in AD 664, referred to Celtic Christians as people “who in their rude simplicity loved God with pious intent.”

2. The Centrality of the Bible in the life of the Celtic Church

Celtic Christians were deeply dependent on the Bible, accepting it directly and with much spiritual intuition. Their beliefs and way of living were moulded by Scripture. This is profoundly illustrated in Patrick's 'Confession' and his *lorica* prayers.

Patrick saw himself as an Ambassador for Christ within a hostile and changing world (Ephesians 6.20). He witnessed the power of the resurrection to change and transform peoples' lives. Patrick's personal faith reflected his commitment to the Bible. Similarly, Aidan taught all his faith sharing teams to memorise scripture as they travelled.

Within the monastic system there was a deep immersion in the study of Scripture and its scribal writings. The Book of Kells, the Lindisfarne Gospels and the High Standing Crosses illustrate the Celts love of the Scriptures. This helped the growth of spirituality and an orthodox living out of the faith.

3. The Importance of Children within the Celtic Christian Family

This was particularly illustrated in the Lindisfarne monastic and mission approach under Aidan. He took children in his monastery for training and teaching in the faith including four Anglo-Saxon boys, Cedd, Cynebil, Caelin and Chad, who became influential as adults. This is the first recorded example of a school for boys.

The Lindisfarne mission base included a wide range of life experience that included: teaching and preparing children and adults for life as monks; memorising Scripture; a daily rhythm of prayer and worship; English and Latin was taught; helping on evangelistic missions; learning and living the life of faith; and an underlying expectation that children would encounter God in experiential ways.

Numbers of Celtic Saints first emerged as young people responding to a call from God. Columba was an example. As a teenager he asked God for three virtues: Chastity (i.e. Celibacy); Wisdom; Opportunity for Peregrinatio. Cuthbert was the subject of a prophetic forecast about his future whilst

still a boy. Later as Prior of Melrose he used to take a young boy on pastoral and evangelistic visits to neighbouring villages.

4. The Embracing Nature of Christian Community within Monastic life

Iona, under the direction and control of Columba was an outstanding example. At one time over a thousand monks lived in its community. The monastic rules and cycle of worship involved everyone and great skills emerged in scribal writing of religious texts, liturgy and worship.

There was much involvement in missionary evangelism stemming from its strong community base. These characteristics were reflected in most Celtic monasteries. Bede suggested that "The Ionian community was characterised by their purity of life, love of God and loyalty to the monastic rules."³

5. The Sense of Unity within Creation

The Celtic Church had a creation affirming spirituality. Christians looked for and expected to see signs of God's presence within creation and their daily lives. Celtic Churches were aware of the damage done to creation by sin. Their standing crosses were signs of God's redeeming work in the heart of His wonderful but damaged creation. This prevented a dualism between nature and humanity emerging.

6. Creativity and Spiritual Gift within the Christian Community

The lives of such as Ninian, Patrick and Columba demonstrated the presence and acceptance of spiritual gift among Christian people. At the centre of this openness to God's gift to His people, lay a Spirit of outstanding creativeness. Caedman, for example, was an uneducated lay monk who was given the gift of Christian songs. The gift of song writing for him was not merely a technical gift, but one that was of a spiritual nature that blessed and inspired others.

The music and poetry of the Celtic Church was transmitted orally, and was influenced by the sounds of the natural world of creation. There was a beauty of language, a freshness of imagery and a depth of piety within the creativeness that surrounded spiritual gifts among Celtic Christians. This was particularly illustrated in Patrick's 'Loricas'; Columba's poems and Carmichael's documentary of ancient Hebridean songs and poems from oral sources that were lost in historical time.⁴

7. The Ever Present Fact of Death and the Presence of the Dead

Many illnesses in Celtic times frequently led to death. The Plague could afflict whole communities, as could tribal warfare. The knowledge of redemption through Christ and belief in the resurrection were key teachings, together with the reality of Heaven and Hell. To many this represented the only hope they had. The sanctity of special places was significant and behind lay the belief in immortality. Death was seen as a connecting point between the world of Heaven and Earth.

Drythelm was a devout man who had a detailed, near death, visionary experience whilst in the grip of the Plague. He was returned "from the grasp of death." Drythelm shared his experience with many others, of how he was led by an angel to see something both of Heaven and Hell. Drythelm became a monk at Melrose and his ministry led to many conversions. He is an example of a missionary monk committed to evangelism.

The place of burial was significant to the Celtic Christians. They saw it as a place where the prayers of the saints in Heaven had particular effect.

Weathered wood

On my personal Celtic Pilgrimage of Discovery I was, at one point, on a beach in South Uist, one of the Western Isles, way out in the Atlantic Ocean. It was low tide. There was a great sense of the Presence of God. A sense of a massive God whose Presence provided the wonderful world that I was perceiving and responding to. At the water's edge I saw a little wooden object, a piece of weathered wood that looked like a dolphin. As I picked it up and considered it – there, at low tide, left by the mighty Atlantic - I felt it was a symbol of a mighty God who has limitless power and resources. A God who works in our lives to get rid of the rubbish and the unnecessary baggage, rather like this piece of weathered wood where all the soft wood had rotted away leaving only the hardwood and a unique shape. So, the God whose presence could be felt in our lives sends us, or allows us, to go through deep waters that we might become like this piece of weathered hardwood. Some time later a member of St Edmund's Tysley had a major operation, which we knew was serious. Her husband suggested a particular time for me to visit in hospital. I felt at such a loss to know how to respond and, in the end, took this little symbol of God's presence, His love and His way of working in our lives and gave it to this lady, explaining how and where I got it. From that point on it remained with her until the Lord took her to be with him. On at least one occasion whilst she was in hospital she told her doctors what this object symbolised for her. Her funeral occurred part way through the 'Woven Cord' programme and was a moment at which members of St Edmund's realised that, as with Celtic Christians, they were open to the reality and nearness of death and the presence of the spiritual world in a way that was not apparent in the surrounding community.

8. The Importance of Evangelistic Mission with the Good News of Christ

This was one of the central concerns of the monastic church in the Celtic lands, and its outpouring of trained monks to go on wandering pilgrimage. Patrick practised a wide-ranging peripatetic ministry involving much journeying to remote areas in Ireland. Patrick believed he was living in end times. To reach the Irish people "who lived on the edge of the world" was for him an urgent task. He witnessed to the power of the resurrection to change and transform people's lives. He defended his ministry in his 'Confession':

"I, though ignorant, may in these last days attempt to approach this work, so pious and wonderful that I may imitate some of those the Lord long ago predicted should preach this gospel for a testimony to all nations (Matthew 24v14), before the end of the world."⁵

9. The Reality of Christian Healing and Miracles

The majority of Celtic Saints were deeply involved in this type of ministry. An example was John of Beverley who overflowed with the Presence of the Holy Spirit and whose ministry was noted for its miracles. Ninian prayed for healing of people together with the laying on of hands. Martin Wallace referred to Ninian as "someone who not only believed, but practised the power of prayer to protect, heal, pardon and release."⁶

We should nevertheless note that many Celtic Saints prayed for other New Testament gifts that are not fashionable today e.g. the gift of celibacy or poverty.

10. The Acceptance of the Ministry of Women

Some women were very influential within the Celtic Church. A primary example was that of Hilda, Abbess of Whitby. Both priests and bishops were under her authority. Brigid who founded a famous monastery in Ireland at Kildare and became its Abbess, was another example of influential ministry by a woman. Kildare was a centre where Christ was exalted, and the light of the gospel was taken out into the pagan community.

It is important to note with this Theme, that the women who became leaders in the Celtic world generally or within a Christian community were usually from aristocratic families. A woman at that social level could be elected as Chief of a Tribe, or be the leader of a warband, or an Abbess.

Certain monasteries such as Iona were for males only and were based on celibacy. Other monasteries were double monasteries where monks and nuns lived within the one community. Within such monasteries there was a general acceptance of women. In that respect, Celtic Christian attitudes towards women seemed softer than that of the European Church of Rome. One of the longer term consequences of the Synod of Whitby was that Celtic openness to a wider role for women within

Christian living; was stifled by the establishment of the Roman Church approach after 664 AD and its Synod of Whitby.

11. The Place and Importance of Prayer in the life of Celtic Christians

Patrick was an influential example that illustrates the daily relationship between prayer and evangelism. His prayer life deepened his love for God. His faith was strengthened and his spirit stirred. Prayer was often linked to ascetic practices, particularly with monks who became hermits in remote areas. For them a disciplined prayer life also involved celibacy and fasting. Patrick wrote,

"I prayed frequently during the day. The love of God and the fear of Him increased more and more and faith became stronger and the Spirit was stirred, the Spirit was then fervent within me."

Columba had the reputation he would not spend one hour without including study, prayer or writing.

12. The Place of Prophecy and Awareness of God's Will

Furse had a travelling ministry in Ireland, then a wandering pilgrimage to the east coast of Britain from 633 AD. He experienced extraordinary visions where he saw the fires of falsehood, covetousness, discord and cruelty. This gift strengthened the effectiveness of his ministry.

Patrick is another example as reflected through his eight major visions. His first vision, which was his call back to Ireland, is illustrative:

"And I saw, indeed in the bosom of the night, a man coming as it were from Ireland. Victorious by name, with innumerable letters, he gave me one ... And while I was reading aloud I heard a voice 'we entreat thee, holy youth, that thou come and henceforth walk among us.'"

To the Celtic Christian, the material and immaterial, the visible and invisible, the physical and spiritual, were dimensions that inter-penetrated each other.

Spiritual Visions

From the beginning of January 1996, for a period of at least eight to ten weeks I received a series of visionary experiences, some of which reached a climax before a PCC Away Day. For the previous 40 years since I became an adult, I had had a few visionary experiences, six to eight at the most, so they were very occasional. I would describe them as being able to enter into the spiritual dimension that surrounded a current situation. In the past and again now, they involved descriptive awareness about the people in the vision, and their actions. The majority related developmentally to where I was 'at', including a limited prophetic discernment about my future.

Three days before the PCC Away Day I awoke late into the night and the matter of the Away Day came strongly to mind. I was aware of God's Presence and being in the spiritual dimension. I then had visionary pictures of five people who would be attending the Away Day. Each picture was clear and the sense or meaning of the vision was definite. In addition the sense was somehow impressed upon me that the Lord wanted to look at our pattern of relationships as His people at St. Edmund's.

At the afternoon session of the Away Day, I shared generally about the visionary experience. After discussion, everyone agreed that if 'they' were one of the five, they would be willing for the vision to be openly shared. This then took place, and it was a deeply moving experience. It was experiential in terms of the awareness of God's Presence walking amongst His people. This led immediately into a service of Holy Communion. It was clear that one central action of the Lord in this matter was to put His hand on our relationships, our need to change in specific ways and to be able to receive spiritual gifts from Him. Inevitably, any spiritual challenge about relationships and what we are deep within, can make us feel vulnerable but what the Lord was offering through the pain was precious and was linked to our potential.

13. The Reality of the Powers of Evil and the Acceptance of Spiritual Battle

There was a strong awareness amongst Celtic Christians of this reality, and the significance of the need for spiritual protection. Examples include, Illtyd and Cuthbert. To Illtyd the Christian was involved

in conflict with demons and the powers of darkness. Creation was good and benevolent; but equally it was a world marred by evil spirits. Cuthbert was another example with his deliverance ministry engaged in spiritual battle with demons on the Farne Islands. The Celtic Church took seriously the darkness found within their world. They developed prayerful ways of protecting themselves from its influence, but also delivering people and land from the power of evil. The Celtic Church had this ability to hold together an acceptance of the forces of the dark as well as the light. Ascetic practices often formed the backcloth for those involved in such conflict.

14. The Living Reality of the Holy Spirit

The 'Confession' of Patrick is filled with the involvement of the Holy Spirit. To Patrick, it was God who had initiated the process of his conversion and sanctification. The Holy Spirit also communicated with him through visions and dreams. Brendan, part of Columba's group and one of the so called twelve Apostles of Ireland, was filled with the restless spirit of adventure and wandering pilgrimage. His "Voyage of Brendan" with fourteen monks reflected the openness to God's Spirit reflected within their wandering pilgrimage. The story of their voyage integrates love for creation; a desire to bless others who they met on their journey with the faith; and a longing to reach the place of their own spiritual resurrection i.e. their place of spiritual rightness with God. This was the ultimate personal experience in their wandering pilgrimage. The reality of the Spiritual Presence of the Holy Spirit was central to that experience.

Chapter 2: The Celtic Saints: what can we know and how?

“Interest in and admiration for Celtic Christianity is booming. Books pour off the press telling the stories of 5th and 6th century British and Irish saints ... offering a Celtic model of mission and church organisation ... The appeal seems to extend across the theological and denominational spectrum, and well beyond the company of Christian believers, New Agers, post-modernists, liberals, feminists, environmentalists, evangelicals and charismatics identify with Celtic Christianity and call for a recovery of its key principles today.”⁷ The publishing fraternity has responded with “everything from weighty tomes on Celtic consciousness to some poor attempts at re-telling ancient Celtic myths and legends”.⁸ But these often create as much fog as light. How sure could we be sure then that Mitton’s fourteen themes accurately describe Celtic Christianity?

Issues

The romanticism and trendy nature of some contemporary literature on Celtic Christianity can obscure what the Celtic Christians actually believed⁹ while interpretations of the historical data can often be subjective reflections of established Church traditions. Patrick Thomas refers to a TV commentator’s comment during George Carey’s enthronement as Archbishop of Canterbury that “the new Archbishop was the successor of St Augustine who brought Christianity to Britain in 597 AD”. Thomas comments, “it was the kind of statement calculated to make Welsh, Irish and Scottish hackles rise, as there were Christians in Britain long before St Augustine’s mission”.¹⁰

Similarly, Basil Hume suggests that the deeper issue which lay behind the discussions about the date of Easter at the Synod of Whitby was this: “was the Christian Church in this Island going to be separate from the universal Church and develop along its own lines, or was it going to be part of the universal Church accepting the authority of the successor of Saint Peter?”¹¹ The Synod of Whitby was actually the point at which the Celtic Church of the north and west was forced to bend the ecclesiastical knee to the Roman ‘Catholic’ (meaning universal) Church of the south. Hume’s historical perspective, therefore, is associated with a traditional belief system that claims dogmatic authority for the Roman Church and its claim of universal jurisdiction, which it certainly did not have in the 7th century AD. Instead, as F. E. Warren clearly asserted:

“[The Celtic Church was] orthodox (catholic), independent of Rome. Part of a vast communion existing in Britain and Ireland from which it expressed its mission to the Teutonic tribes of the continent. Its claims to Catholicity ignored or impugned by the European Church of Rome.”¹²

Many writers insist that the heart of any in-depth understanding of Celtic Christianity and its spirituality is not merely intellectual or academic but is experiential. Esther De Waal suggests that:

“The Celtic way of seeing the world ... cannot be understood only in cerebral terms. It speaks to the heart, is closer to poetry and like poetry, it must remain ultimately illusive.

You can come in,
You can come in a long way –
But you won’t be inside.”¹³

However, this approach too can lead to total subjectivity. Mackey, for example, reveals that his assessment of the various papers for his book on Celtic Christianity was based on “whatever seems to reverberate within some depths of my own Celtic consciousness as that too has been formed by my learning and use from my earliest childhood of the Irish language that repository of a total and ancient culture”.¹⁴

Elizabeth Culling berates Mackey for this specific inconsistency in historical objectivity saying:

“If this kind of criterion is used to sift the evidence of history subjectivity takes over ... A writer like Mackey is free to build up a picture of Celtic Christianity as characterised by a theology which excludes original sin and a natural world which is ‘altogether good and salvific’ for ‘the Celtic mentality’”.¹⁵

Ninian

The problem of source material is illustrated in considering the life and work of Ninian at Whithorn, as there is no documentary or source evidence until about 300 years after his death. Charles Thomas suggests the following approach to achieve a level of historical critique about the Celtic Saints:

- *Establish the primary sources:* The visible and tangible ones e.g. St Patrick's written "Confession" and "Letter to Coroticus" or the inscribed Latinus Stone of Whithorn and the stones found at Kirkmadrine, which are equivalent to contemporary and authoritative documents.
- *Secondary sources usually based on oral traditions:* Such as Bede's comments about Ninian and Whithorn 300 years later or the 8th century "Miracula" poem which refers to the Whithorn period.
- *Tertiary sources:* These include peripheral allusions to Whithorn in the Irish context, the Medieval life by Aelred, the lengthy ecclesiology of Whithorn, and the whole body of commentary most of which has occurred during the last forty years.¹⁶

An informed and culturally sensitive understanding of Celtic history must therefore be a prerequisite to entering into an experiential awareness of these ancient ways of thinking and acting. A point illustrated by the example of Ian Bradley who acknowledges that his early book *The Celtic Way*¹⁷ reflected the romantic approach that he now rejects. Nevertheless he suggests:

"If Celtic Christianity, however reconstructed and re-shaped, can help us not just to dream but put our dream into reality by changing ourselves and our world and moving forward in imitation of Christ and toward the kingdom of God, then ... it is its ultimate justification."¹⁸

This is a summary of the hopes and vision that lay behind our approach at St Edmunds based on the belief that "the distinctive voice of the early indigenous Christian Communities of the British Isles speaks to us through all the layers of distortion and fabrication with which it has been overlaid".¹⁹ Ninian is a good example of this occurring, as is the following material on Patrick, Columba, monasticism and peregrinatio.

Patrick

According to the best estimates Patrick lived from 390 to 461 AD. Much literature about Patrick agrees that at age 16 he was captured by Irish (Scotti) raiders who returned with him to Ireland where he was enslaved, and used as a herdsman. Separated from his family, Patrick responded to the Christian faith becoming deeply committed to prolonged and intense prayer. Six years later he escaped from Ireland by ship to the Continent, but was eventually able to return to Britannia and his home. Whilst in his home environment, he had a dream that called him back to Ireland to preach Christ there and engage in mission.

The Annals of Ulster record Patrick's arrival in Ireland as 432 AD. O'Laoghaire records the fact that less than 100 years after Patrick the structure of the Church in Ireland had become Celtic monastic, not Roman Diocesan. The subsequent wide scale emergence in Ireland of Celtic Monasticism linked to the rural, tribal system was based on Abbots who governed them. Bishops were often part of the monastery but rarely in control. This became the established model throughout Celtic Christian areas rather than the European Roman Diocesan model.

In his exploration of Patrick's evangelistic method John Riordain analyses and evaluates Patrick's handling of Christian belief as an evangelistic offer within the worldview of those who were living within Druid belief. Following Riordain's argument, I suggest that we need to change the view that Patrick was a Romano-Briton who failed to convert Ireland to the Roman Diocesan approach, even though he subsequently became the Patron Saint of Ireland. Rather, he should be regarded as an outstanding Celtic Evangelist.

Riordain begins by pointing out that in Irish Druid culture "the Celtic understanding of reality, the gods and goddesses inhabited the hills, the mounds, the megalithic tombs, the lakes, the rivers and woods. The entire world was enveloped in a sort of nature faith. People were always in contact with the other world, the world of the supernatural. It was invisible but around one at all times and could certainly manifest itself at any moment."²⁰

Riordain then discusses an episode outlined in the "Tripartite Life of Patrick", which throws light on Patrick's "missionary approach to a people surrounded by so many gods and goddesses".²¹ Patrick meets two daughters of Laoghaire at the well of Clibach near Rathcrochan the Royal seat of Connacht. As they wash their hair in the well, Patrick and his clerics walked by in white robes. Not having seen them before, the Princesses think they are of the "Tuatha De Danann" (i.e. mythological Celtic gods and goddesses). Patrick starts to share his religion with them. When the eldest girl Eithane finds place to speak, she has a lot of questions for missionary Patrick:

“Who is God?
and Where is God?
Of whom is God?
And where is his dwelling?
Has he sons and daughters?
Gold and silver
This God of yours?
Is he ever living?
Is he Beautiful?
Was his son fostered by many?
Are his daughters dear and beautiful to the men of the world?
Is he in heaven
Or on earth
In the sea, in the rivers,
In the mountains
In the valleys?
Speak to us
Tidings of Him?
How will He be seen?
How is He loved?
How is He found?
Is it in youth
Or old age
He is found?”

Riordain suggests that in this series of questions Eithane is naturally thinking in terms of Druid religion, the Tuath De Danann faith. He notes that Patrick’s response does not contradict her. Indeed he endorses, while reforming and transcending her own assumptions. Patrick’s response is to present to Eithane and her companions a revised worldview:

“Our God is the God of all things,
The God of Heaven and Earth
The God of the sea and the streams
The God of the sun, moon and stars,
The God of the great high mountains and the deep glens.
The God above heaven, in heaven and under heaven,
And he has a household, heaven and earth,
and the sea and all that they contain.”

This is in contrast to the Druid impersonal concept of Nuirt. He unfolds the mystery of the God of all things, revealed in the person of Christ²²:

“The ancient religion far from being obliterated has in fact blossomed into its fullness. Having gone through the impersonal stages of ‘Nuirt’ and the semi-personal deification of nature, it reveals its full development in the incarnation. Nothing has been lost along the way and God is still as near as ever.”²³

Riordain suggests that “...if one is to understand Celtic religion and its spirituality ... it is necessary to appreciate that continuity of thought”. Patrick’s basic approach to evangelism was not to argue or ‘put down’ the Druidic beliefs of the people, but to show them Christianity as a better way that brought fulfilment to their patterns of belief and world view.

Columba

Columba was born in Donegal, Ireland, of royal stock. As a young boy he was fostered by a priest who prepared him for the priesthood. Later, under St Finnian he studied at the Monastery of Molville (Leinster). After ordination he spent 15 years preaching and teaching in Ireland and founded a number of monasteries including ones at Derry and Durrow. He was skilled as a scribe at illumination of Biblical texts and it was alleged that he made a copy of the Psalms from the edition belonging to Finnian. Subsequently Finnian claimed the copy Columba had made as his own. This led to a massive and bloody battle at Cooldrevne (Cul Dreimne) in 561 AD.²⁴

Subsequently and on the advice of St Molaisse his Anmchara (spiritual director) Columba left Ireland on a wandering pilgrimage (peregrinatio). Molaisse condemned Columba to a permanent exile to undertake the conversion of as many Picts as were killed at the battle of Cul Dreimne, for which he held Columba responsible. This created for Columba a personal peregrinatio that was to involve both mission and evangelism.

Columba, aged 42 years, set out from the coast of Derry with twelve companions during 563. He was obliged, following his arrival in Iona, to journey to what is now Inverness to obtain permission from King Brude to establish a monastery at Iona.²⁵ This was accomplished and Brude became impressed with the Christian faith through Columba's influence and miracles.

The site where Columba chose to build the Iona monastery was a former Druid site. It was to become one of the great mission centres of the Celtic lands and an important seat of learning. During the early years of Columba's ministry he developed a major emphasis on teaching and preparing monks for mission to the Irish Scotti. These were ethnically his own people, many of whom were responsive to Christianity. His Ionian approach was equally committed to evangelism amongst the pagan Picts and others in these islands and Europe. The late 6th century monastic approach Columba developed became widely adopted. Its rule of life required that the monks lived only for God, praying constantly, with regular study of the scriptures (the Psalms were held in deep veneration), owning no luxuries, eating only when hungry, sleeping only when tired. Novices studied in preparation for taking their monastic vows. The Venerable Bede in his "Ecclesiastical History of the English People" (completed in 731 AD) wrote that "the Iona community was characterised by their purity of life, love of God and loyalty to the monastic rules".²⁶

When he died in 597 AD he left behind a well-organised network of monasteries (part of his family's Paruchia), all subordinate to Iona. This provided a stable structure for the survival of his monastic system, and subsequent Abbots came from his wider family. As a result Iona retained a long-term, central place within the Churches in Celtic lands, particularly in the Scottish Highlands and islands and later through Lindisfarne to Northumbria and wider to include European countries.

Monasticism

Monasteries often started in a small way with a group of monks, as did Iona. Others started as a lonely hermit's prayer cell, which grew as other monks joined, until it became a monastery. Bradley describes the evolving monastic system within the Celtic areas as a "network of largely autonomous monasteries taking over many of the functions of schools run by Druid Filid or Bards", and that this "fitted the scattered rural nature of the country much better than a highly centralised system of parishes and Dioceses which were designed for urban society."²⁷

The Abbot was head in an authoritative as well as a spiritual sense. There was a mixed pattern in that some were celibate leaders (as in Columba's Iona 'Paruchia') but others included married people. Daily life revolved around the basic activities of prayer, study and work. There was usually a banked or walled enclosure within which would be built (depending on the size of the monastery) a church that was likely to have been constructed of wood; an Oratory; cells for the monks; storage buildings; a granary for food; cells for scribes; a teaching cell for adults and children.²⁸ This was the context within which Christian faith in the Celtic era was mainly located.

Whilst Bishops continued to exercise their normal liturgical role, they were overshadowed as administrators and usually as spiritual leaders by powerful Abbots whose monasteries were linked to their own family (usually aristocratic) group known as a Paruchia. The word refers to the family's sphere of influence. Some Paruchia were scattered over wide areas and yet formed an integrated unit of daughter monasteries.

The overriding importance of the Paruchia monastic system was that it related to the central institution of tribal society namely: Kinship and local small Kingships known as Tuahs, with an overlord as High King; and the Clan. Ian Bradley refers to Celtic society as "non-hierarchical and decentralised, being made up of a series of loosely organised and largely autonomous communities bound together by family ties much along the lines of the clan system in the Scottish Highlands."²⁹

J. N. Hillgarth suggests that because of the fusion of the monastic system with tribal kinship and the kingship structure, particularly in Ireland, Christianity was able to triumph over Paganism.³⁰ The 4th-7th centuries; the era of the Sancti, the Celtic Saints, was the critical period when Christianity became

accepted, yet reflected its pagan background among the people. Pagan holy sites and even pagan gods had their association and attributes transferred to the incoming religion of Christianity.

The Celtic Saints during these centuries became the Christian equivalent of the pagan Celtic war-lord heroes. Hillgarth gives Columba as a classic example through his involvement in aristocratic feuds in Ireland, leading to the battle of Cul Dreimne. He is celebrated in praise psalms in old Irish, which catch key aspects of his life – the danger of sea voyages which he undertook with Irish monks when they “swept over the sea in boats...”. Adomnan, Columba’s biographer writing a century after his death, called Columba, ‘The Island Soldier’.

Nora Chadwick suggests that with the death of Columba in AD 597 and the widespread development and influence of the monastic system in Ireland and the British Isles during the 6th-7th century the era of the Sancti ended. The monastic system provided the main centres of Church life, deeply integrated into the tribal social structures of the Celtic rural world.

Peregrinatio

Peregrinatio originated in the 4th century, with a rapid development in the 5th to become a central principle widely practised within the Celtic Church by the 6th century. In order to identify the unique characteristics of this form of wandering pilgrimage, it is important to identify that it is not pilgrimage per se. The Biblical background to Peregrinatio was stated within the source material entitled, the *Old Irish Life of Columba*.³¹ It was regarded as a spiritual and practical challenge for Christians and its key characteristics were its wandering nature, pilgrimage with a personal and spiritual aim, and for many either mission or evangelism or both.³²

Chapter 3: Christian life and mission in the light of Celtic Christianity

St Edmunds Tyseley

Tyseley is a large geographical area in East Birmingham, 2½ miles from the city centre, known as ‘the forgotten triangle’. It is an older working-class area of mixed residential and industrial land use with high proportions of minority ethnic people together with a rapidly increasing young family population with a high birth rate. Social needs in Tyseley included high levels of unemployment, large numbers of elder people and lone parents, a lack of youth facilities, congested roads and heavy industrial traffic, a polluted atmosphere, high levels of illness, and few open or play spaces. On my arrival at St Edmunds in 1989, a social worker told me:

“The thing you will soon discover about Tyseley people is that they have no hope. If they are middle-aged and unemployed they will never be employed again. What they have got in life now, won’t really be added to before they eventually die.”

The Church buildings and site were in need of refurbishment although the facilities were used by the community and the Church members viewed themselves as being an extended Christian family committed to being a church for their community. Change occurred in our situation as major building works were financed and completed and through an experimental Neighbourhood Project, StEdicare – Tyseley. The building works and StEdicare created an environment where, by the mid 1990s, we were motivated to search for a fresh and relevant set of Christian mission principles that applied both to our own lifestyle and were relevant to the local community. The use of Celtic materials in worship and study were a key part of developing this fresh approach.

Using the Biblical themes

Mitton’s biblical themes were used by three housegroups and several individuals (45 starters, 40 completers) as a set of notes with the following format:

1. Consider an historical story about one or more of the Celtic Saints which illustrates each Biblical theme.
2. Interpret the story and its theme and apply it to the Church of today.
3. Read a relevant Bible Passage for each theme.
4. Discuss questions arising from the text.
5. Conclude with prayer.

When each group had finished studying the material I visited them and discussed their response. Behind my approach lay the question: “Is it possible for an ancient form of indigenous Christianity to act as an important guide line for Christians living and mission in a deprived UPA 1500 years later?”

Responses

Category 1 responses: This included the majority of participants (a total of 32 out of 40), most of whom were long-term residents of Tyseley. As a group, Category 1 people were untroubled and perhaps unaware that there could be a problem in accepting, that an ancient, indigenous, Christian approach could be relevant to their own spiritual growth and awareness. In general they set aside what one might call the structural and historic differences between rural, agrarian people and themselves as urban dwellers immersed in the culture of Tyseley and St. Edmund’s Church. They were prepared to consider what the biblical theme itself offered. As a part of that, they accepted themes and aspects of themes that affirmed existing Christian life-style, and any challenge toward new ways for them, to live out that theme.

Category 1 people coped with the ‘Woven Cord’ programme notes through the strength of the story approach, and the sense of concreteness it brought to their discussions. The success and centrality of the story approach with its visual and descriptive imagery should not be lost sight of. Neither should the use of biographical content and illustrative testimony by group members, which became a positive part of their own involvement with the notes. The notes were totally focussed on examples of Celtic Christian principles and practices. So this was what participants accepted and applied to their lives. Equally themes which were not accepted reflect positive decisions as these emerged from the exploratory process they had practised.

People in this first category were warmed by stories of Celtic Christians and connected with them at a feeling level.

Category 2 responses: These people were a minority (8) of participants in the 'Woven Cord' programme. Category 2 people found the issue of responding to cultural knowledge and life style from an ancient Christian people somewhat difficult. They perceived the Celtic way to be 'romantic' and rural and, therefore, irrelevant. Their reasoning was academic and the question arose as to whether the use of 'non-academic' faculties such as intuition, story and art was viewed as a threat.

This also raised the question, are well-educated Christians who occupy a high social class but choose to live in or near a UPA and worship within it, less motivated to consider alternative Christian life-styles than the ones they currently live out? Whilst this is merely a possibility it could be relevant to the way mission was planned and structured in UPA parishes. After a lifetime's involvement in working class areas, I am of the view that well-educated, professional people are needed to worship and live in UPAs. They have lots of gifts to offer, but the essential question is how effectively they relate to Christian living and life-style of local people who are long-term residents. In this instance the two categories seemed to be within two different worlds.

I asked myself the question, why were the Category 2 people so unaccepting of the Celtic themes? Various possibilities seemed relevant: What was their commitment to living in a UPA, was it for 'Romantic' reasons? Was their response related to the kind of worldview they implicitly accepted, which (perhaps) made receptivity to the past difficult? What theological position had they adopted with respect to tradition? Had they thought through the question of ancient text (the Bible) or story (the Celtic) in relation to contemporary life? Did they assume the Biblical text transcends the historical and cultural in a way which other texts do not?

Themes that resonated

The following are themes that particularly resonated with the Category 1 participants. They are themes that were transposed directly into their approach to Christian living, and are not presented in any particular order:

- The importance of authenticity, simplicity of life-style and holiness within daily Christian living.
- The centrality of the Bible and the commitment to living out its teaching in a direct manner.
- The acceptance of the presence of illness, death and dying and the significance of faith in relation to that awareness. 'Life' beyond the grave.
- The sense of unity with the world of creation.
- The reality of spiritual powers, including those of evil, and the fact of spiritual battle.
- The place, work and gifts of the Holy Spirit...Discernment, prophecy and healing.
- Acceptance of the ministry of women, and the place of children within the Christian setting.
- The importance of prayer in the daily life and worship of Christians.

Other themes that strongly emerged included:

- The possibility of experiencing peace, quietness of spirit and hope in the living out of faith.
- The sense of freedom in Christian living and worship.
- The awareness of Christian belonging and sharing faith with others.

Themes that did not resonate

In the main these were as follows:

- *Celibacy* seemed to be regarded as irrelevant to their lives. In terms of gender, their view and assumption was the acceptance of heterosexual family life as being the norm.
- *Asceticism* was regarded as strange and irrelevant. They were aware of the challenge toward discipleship but now saw that in terms of direct Christian living within their daily lives. Asceticism was not applicable to their view of growing in holiness.
- *Poverty* was a matter most knew something about. For them it had not involved choice. As a factor that was chosen as part of a Celt's life of faith, it did not appeal to participants in the 'Woven Cord' programme.
- *Christian Monastic Community* was ignored as significant to their lives. In general the response of participants was biased towards direct examples of Christian living as

demonstrated in the 'story' approach. This particular theme illustrated their unreadiness to approach issues from the basis of Institutional life.

- *Peregrinatio* was discussed with interest and felt to be Biblical. We have already established that with most themes that resonated, they were then applied directly to people's lives, especially any scriptural teaching. The fact this theme did not resonate related to the lack of feasibility for them to practice peregrinatio i.e. it was a Celtic Christian practice that did not transpose into their social structure. The fact it did not resonate, thereby showed the critical ability of Category 1 participants to show that not everything about Celtic Christianity was suitable for them.

The common denominator in these negative responses was that even where they were individual practices, they had a particular link with the institutional structure of the Celtic Church. As a result, there was not the same acceptance by the Category 1 participants.

Key factors

The key factors which made these themes of significant meaning were:

- *People's identity and self-image:* Many UPA Christian people do not have a strong identity or confident self-image in relation to the wider society. They are not confident about many roles. Roles that for example, most middle-class people are automatically prepared for by family and life experience. In the Christian context of St. Edmund Tyseley that included such common roles as: becoming a Sunday School Teacher; taking a Bible reading in a Church Service; or joining a visiting team. All of the themes that resonated had this linking strength. Acceptance of the themes aided that person's identity and self-image as a Christian believer.
- *Direct applicability to everyday Christian life as a UPA person:* The social context for the target group of Tyseley residents was one of 'deprivation' and marginalisation from affluent Britain. Within the Church context of St. Edmund's there had been an absence of 'hope'. The movement into using Celtic Christian principles and practices as a set of guide lines for spiritual growth within the Church reinforced in the mid 1990's, a movement away from this no hope perception for the individual and the Church. As the 'Woven Cord' programme progressed there was an increasing awareness of the presence of God, a God who was at the centre of the new openness to directly apply the practice of Celtic spiritual material into daily living. The story of the way Celtic Christians saw and lived out their faith became relevant and accessible to participants. The manner in which this happened, suggested that Category 1 participant's perception of renewed Christian living did not depend on institutional or social class definitions of the correct type of image or behaviour. One of the more significant changes in absorbing Celtic Christian practice, was the move away from coming to Church "to get your batteries charged" – to viewing Christian living as a daily affair involving prayer, worship and service to others. The themes that resonated had this "direct applicability" element to the participant's everyday Christian life as a UPA person.
- *Need for a sense of belonging and to find their Christian roots:* Within UPAs' there is usually found a locality-based, neighbourhood sense of community. Social networks are often locally based also. This, together with family and friendship networks, link strongly into a person's identity and self-image. Tyseley has been very much a white community with a great emphasis on extended families. That structure is now in rapid change into a multi-ethnic community, surrounded by the influence of contemporary social values and rapid social change. This means there are areas of new vulnerability within the local neighbourhood, within family, Church life and for the individual. The whole structure of belonging and the sense of roots has been dislocated through rapid social change. It is hardly surprising that for Christian UPA believers, anything that helps their sense of belonging and discovery of significant roots is welcomed. This programme and its Celtic Christian backcloth together with the themes that resonated, strengthened the participants sense of belonging to each other and to God through Christ. Their sense of dignity and worth as a child of God gained new roots through their identity with Celtic Christians. A significant factor in this was that their faith was no longer to be so determined by their UPA human context or definitions about them stemming from social class attitudes and behaviour.

In the earlier Chapters I noted two developmental stages in the evolution of Celtic Christianity. First, the age of the Sancti, where there was a major focus on the Saints of the 4th-6th centuries AD. These were the men who were the Christian equivalent of the Celtic war-lord heroes of which Ninian, Patrick and Columba were distinguished examples. Second, this was followed by the movement into

structures that were to characterise the Celtic Church, in particular monasticism and Peregrinatio from the early 6th Century onwards. The Themes that resonated with UPA people were particularly illustrated by stories from the first time period of the Celtic Sancti. The Themes that were rejected or ignored, were generally related to the period when the focus was upon the characteristic structures found within Celtic Christianity and its practice. In terms of the wider study of Celtic Christianity, both divisions include major themes. For future programmes the different contemporary contexts within which such themes may be placed, will help to determine whether they are regarded as major or minor Themes.

Implications for developing future programmes

Some excellent material has surfaced in the last few years, that greatly improves the position. This comes, for example, from the Rev. Martin Wallace who initially published a series of low cost, samizdat publications based on Celtic style talks given at St. Peter's Chapel, Bradwell-on-Sea, Essex.³³ This was the Church St. Cedd built in 654 AD. Wallace's basic value in writing such books was to "combine the lives of the Saints together with radical lessons for today." These were followed in 1998 by Wallace's "The Celtic Resource Book". This excellent book uses the same type of worship resource material we used at St. Edmund's, which included material from David Adam, the Carmina Gadelica, Wild Goose Publications (Iona), the Northumbrian Community and the like. Content is divided into sections that include: Liturgies; Prayers; Lessons from the Saints; Practical Meditation; Artistic Activities; and Going on Pilgrimage Today together with exploratory ideas on different ways of using the Resource book. Any future programmes about Celtic Christianity among UPA people would be helped by making use of Wallace's ability to relate Celtic Spirituality into the context of modern urban living, particularly that of 'deprived' communities.

Learning patterns

The following were important to the way the Study developed:

- Celtic Christian prayers, poems and meditations used within Church worship from 1994.
- A series of sermons during 1996 that transposed Celtic approaches into life, living, and Christian faith within a UPA context.
- The use of everyday objects as visual aids or as a sacramental symbol. For example: offering the congregation, after a sermon about Columba's life and ministry, a small pebble from the beach on Iona where he landed. It was offered on condition that if accepted, the pebble would be used as a symbol for that person of a commitment to share the Good News about Jesus with others. Another image used was that of the 'Open Gate,' signifying movement in our Christian pilgrimage individually and as a Church.
- A series of visions that occurred at the time of a PCC Away Day in 1996 and their challenge about responding to the Spirit's work in rebuilding Church relationships.

The Open Gate

"As long as we are alive, we are on the move. To become static is to stagnate ... life is meant to be an adventure ... In Celtic folk-tales a curse that could happen to a person was to enter a field and not be able to get out of it. To be stuck in that place forever ... The Open Gate is the call to explore new areas of yourself and the world around you." (*The Open Gate*, David Adam, Triangle 1994). David Adam suggests that the open gate is the choice that God is always placing before us and that we "should look upon the open gate as a way to extend ourselves and our vision ... it may take a great deal of discipline to get off the old familiar track and to break with old habits, but, in return, it offers the excitement of new ground and new vistas ..."

"Every now and again our eyes are opened and we see beyond the narrowness of our day to day vision ..." into new spiritual dimensions of awareness and experience. I was privileged to have two such experiences whilst on Celtic pilgrimage. The first, whilst staying for a few days in a remote cottage on the Island of Lismore where I had an overwhelming experience of the awesomeness of God's presence together with an anointing that led to a great rejoicing in Jesus. The second was during my 'Celtic Pilgrimage of Discovery' when I experienced a new relationship with God and his physical creation.

For us, living in the inner city, some new gates may open at a point of crisis in our lives. When we are suddenly and unexpectedly bereaved, or made redundant, or "where we are having what the world

calls a breakdown". Such events make us more aware of change because they have dislocated us. Pain, brokenness and loneliness may be involved in walking through that new gate.

At St. Edmund's at that time we seemed to be moving into a spiritual field where there were new gates before us. Inevitably there was also a variety of responses. To some, the Lord was acting as a heavenly potter bringing change and re-moulding which involved brokenness, inner healing and a move through the gate marked spiritual renewal. To others, it included dislocating experiences that re-directed that person's pilgrimage. To others again, it was a gate of deepening awareness of the plans that the Lord had for that person.

Spirituality: a target for growth in UPA Churches

Celtic Spirituality is filled with a great sense of spiritual presence, of Christ being present in all things, of an awareness of His immanence, of a spirituality rooted in a poor world where oppression, illness and danger were linked to fear and a poverty of spirit. In Christ the reality could be faced and the natural world was affirmed. There was a command to redeem the whole world. Joy and celebration in the Holy Spirit abounded, together with means through prayer for protection. This was the substance of the Celtic Spirituality provided through the 'Woven Cord' programme and the backcloth to the 'Woven Cord' programme supported that overall spiritual content.

The evaluation of key themes that resonated or did not resonate showed that Category 1 participants had absorbed the Celtic sense of spirituality. Such spirituality involves both body and soul, but is of a nature that links to all the realities, problems and joys of the real world of people, including that of Tyseley as an UPA.

Spirituality exercises

At St Edmund's we encouraged people to reflect on spirituality with several 'spiritual exercises'. Here is one that you might like to try:

- STAGE 1: Get a blank sheet of paper and write at the top of it this statement on Spirituality – "Spirituality means ... the real, the effective understanding of Christian truth and experience from within our own human awareness (or consciousness). It's ... understanding ... it's experience of God's Holy Spirit Presence ... It's an inner awareness of The Lord; and the realness (reality of) Christian faith from within the person that is YOU. It is often surrounded by or part of prayer and it's a vital part of our personal commitment to Christ. It includes our understanding of ourselves in relation to the religious and moral values we believe and/or practice!"
- STAGE 2: Write down what you've made of it. Add anything else you think it means and especially note if you think it's left out anything that's part of it ...
- STAGE 3: Over the next three weeks add anything else that happens to you that is within you ... your thoughts, feelings, responses to being a follower of Jesus that day ... any awareness you had of the actual presence of God. Especially, how you became aware of His presence. Put it down on your spirituality sheet. If you are a housegroup member why not have a 'chin wag' about it together, and weld it together with prayer.
- STAGE 4: Return your sheet so that all the replies can be looked at to see if something comes out that all can share in.
- As part of all that, try praying to the Lord, say at the start of the day, in a way that starts to invite Him to make you aware of His lovely presence. Or, you never know, it might be a slightly different awareness!! In my case, who knows, God (in spite of His lovely presence) may need to give a bit of a 'kick on the ankle' over something or other!

Mission in UPAs: the Celtic Christian background

Patrick and Columba's ministry was characterised by mission to established Christians and missionary evangelism to others, leading to conversion and Christian commitment. Their approach became a model for the wider work of Celtic Saints and countless monks who, within the practice of peregrinatio, integrated mission and evangelism. Hillgarth established that evangelisation in Ireland was carried on after Patrick's death by 'holy men' who lived a life alternating between living as hermits or wandering preachers, teaching and evangelising.³⁴ Patrick's approach also involved a willingness to engage in open debate and opposition to Druidism. Thus, the Celtic Saints practised both mission and evangelism.

Nora Chadwick discusses this within the 4th-6th century context. She refers to the fact that Celtic monks, as part of their commitment to Peregrinatio, engaged either in missionary work or mission. Columba illustrates the difference between the two concepts. When Columba visited King Brude of the Picts, or when his monks subsequently worked among them, this was regarded as missionary work. It involved, in Chadwick's view, a primary evangelistic introduction to them of the Christian faith. Whereas when Columba and fellow monks ministered to the Scotti, i.e. the Irish invaders who were colonising what is now Argyll in Scotland, they were engaging in mission.³⁵ In Chadwick's view the Scotti were already within the embrace of Christianity. Peregrinatio was the ascetic discipline behind such mission and missionary evangelism. In practice any distinction between Celtic mission and evangelistic mission as meaning missionary work is really quite tenuous.

In the context of this study, I have used an applied definition of mission and evangelism. The definition is closely based on Nora Chadwick's explanation about Celtic mission and missionary evangelism during the 4th-7th centuries AD. The setting of this applied definition was strictly within Tyseley as a 'deprived' neighbourhood, defined nationally as an 'Urban Priority Area':

- **Mission:** Contemporary Christian work amongst established believers to encourage them in the growth of spirituality as expressed in daily Christian living within their UPA. This I regarded as a pre-requisite for the second aim to occur.
- **Evangelism:** To prepare and send out Christians into their neighbourhood and among those they 'rub shoulders with day by day', sharing the good news about the Gospel of Jesus.

A contemporary definition of mission by Andrew Kirk is, "Christian believers being sent out into the world to witness in word and deed to Jesus Christ."³⁶ In many ways Nora Chadwick's discussion of Celtic mission and missionary evangelistic activity in contrast, seemed more relevant to Tyseley and its people. The definition and approach to 'mission' in this study linked input to established Christians with the hope it would eventually lead to evangelistic/missionary outreach into the local area.

Mission and pre-Evangelism

While the 'Woven Cord' programme did not, within its time scale, prove to be a major pre-requisite for evangelism in Tyseley two new actions that involved direct outreach into the local neighbourhood were achieved.

The first involved undertaking a community survey to find out how local people saw the neighbourhood's main 'needs'. Members of the congregation took out a questionnaire to be completed at three key places within the streets of Tyseley: outside the Primary School; outside Tyseley Post Office; and outside St. Edmund's Church. Members of the congregation who shared in this task in small groups, came back thrilled at the interest and response. The survey meant Church people were actively consulting Tyseley residents and publicising the work and future hopes about Stedicare and its wide ranging Christian outreach into the parish. This was a clear example of a move into pre-evangelism.

The second related to 'The Tyseley Prayer Vigil'. This linked regular group prayer with direct outreach into the locality. During the 'Woven Cord' programme the Vigil group started praying specifically for each street in Tyseley, and any known situation that needed prayer and for its residents. This pattern continued and subsequently led to 'Prayer Walks' in a few streets.

The Tysley Prayer Vigil

At our Prayer Vigil in St Edmund's, on the day the UN deadline for the first Gulf war was reached, our burden was that war should be avoided. As we moved toward the end of the Vigil, the Lord spoke to us strongly in two ways. First, He brought to our notice, through the reading of Daniel 10: 1 - 18 and Ephesians 6: 10 - 18, that the Gulf War is part of a great cosmic struggle going on between the forces of evil in conflict with the forces of light. Second, one of our ladies shared with us something that had happened to her the previous night. She was unable to sleep and as she spoke with the Lord, He gave her a message which was to 'Prepare the Way'. All of us in the Vigil then sought the Lord to ask Him to share with us what He was now saying to us as a Church, how to prepare the way. Various ones then shared the following: That the Lord was saying to us, here in Tysley, that we needed to move into a time of preparing for the Way of the Lord. That the Gulf crisis, and our legitimate concern about it, shouldn't stop us from committing ourselves as a Church to earnestly seek the Lord's face that His Spirit might start to prepare us for His work here, in the days ahead. That God was also preparing the

way nationally, and internationally, for His work and will to be done, even from within the war. Preparation was what we had been told to focus upon. A new commitment to prayer seemed to be at the heart of it. The Lord had spoken to us whilst we had been in a trough. He had all sorts of plans for Tysley and local people, and we were a part of that. He wanted us to share in that, even though we were a small congregation. The example of Gideon was relevant (Judges 6 - 8). God doesn't always need masses of people to be His local commando troop but He does require those who are prepared, when it comes down to 'brass tacks', to put Him first.

Mission and Evangelism in UPAs

The Church of England, due to its commitment to a parish system, has always had direct involvement in disadvantaged urban areas. At times, some of its approaches have been particularly successful, as with the Anglo-Catholic 'Slum Ministry' early last century. Other Christian denominations at times have successfully maintained active ministry in UPAs' such as the Salvation Army, built upon the challenge of General Booth's 1899 book *In Darkest England and the Way Out*. The 1985 *Faith in the City* report compares with Booth's book but updated to urban realities in the mid 1980's. Following that report I surveyed UPA clergy in Birmingham and published a book illustrating the multi-faceted ways that front-line clergy in Birmingham were using creative ideas and initiatives to effectively minister in UPA parishes.³⁷ Yet, it also brought to light that there was much despair and absence of hope in many UPA parishes. This piece of action research provides one example of a programme that addresses absence of hope in UPA parishes.

Whilst the Fieldwork Programme at St. Edmund's was not epoch making, it did result in building up in the faith a small group of the Lord's people who live in a UPA, with its marginalisation from affluent society around. Christian believers from the lower social classes were thereby helped to reflect and be strengthened in the living out of their faith using the Celtic Christian model of spirituality. Their perception and awareness of the possibilities of Christian living as something distinctive, in which they were no longer pushed into the mould of the world around them, was strengthened. It is my view, that for such programmes within this type of urban context, "small is beautiful".

The Tyseley study as a starter programme needs to be further assessed, built upon and remoulded into the type of mission programme that would resonate with other UPA Christians. I feel confident that there is a place in deprived urban areas for such small, intimate, mission programmes built around blueprints of spirituality, of which the Celtic is an excellent example. There may be others worth identifying and considering. Whatever is chosen would need to be grounded upon prayer, in association with a group of committed believers ready to commit eighteen months or so of their lives to such a programme and to such a UPA area.

A significant but unheralded happening at the end of the 'Woven Cord' programme that related to the transfer of Celtic Christian principles to the practice of Christian living at St. Edmund's was the ending of a concentration, within the fellowship's worshipping life, on 'thing's Celtic! The Celtic resource material and the ways in which individuals had been strengthened through an in-depth sharing of the Celtic Biblical themes had been effectively applied into the context of the participants' own urban world. The individuals who had gained through the mission programme and the Church's own growth in spirituality had been transposed into being a spirituality for believers living in Tyseley. It was now part of their shared experience, and in a holistic manner they owned 'it'. We no longer referred to these matters as 'Celtic'.

Conclusion

Wynton Marsalis, an American musician made a moving statement that I will use as an ending to this study, with the hope it may encourage others ministering in UPAs:

"I say to the kids in the schools, make sure you play a solo, all of you, and whatever you play, do it like it's the last thing you're ever going to play. Even if its sad, play it. But just don't play too long! That's my belief and the music is a reflection of that. Being in the process, that's what counts. You might not be there at the end of what's being worked out. Look at the cats who built those big cathedrals, put down the first stones. They weren't going to see the thing finished, but they were putting those stones down with a certain vibration."³⁸

Perhaps this study could become a tune for some sad and lonely UPA Church to re-discover 'hope' in Christ, and become established like a Celtic island 'Inis', an island base of Christian warmth, belonging and service to others, created within the hope of a new beginning. A place where believers

could be sent out to re-establish a people for the forgotten God from among the dusty, noisy, stressful streets.

¹ M. Mitton, *Restoring the Woven Cord: Stands of Biblical Christianity for the Church Today*, Darton Longmann & Todd, 1995. Mitton's selection of 14 Biblical themes was based upon ones that have endured within the historic Christian Church, and which seemed particularly relevant to Christian believers living in today's world.

² N. Chadwick, *The Age of the Saints*, Oxford 1991. This book is totally taken up with a study of the Celtic Saints (The Sancti) 4-7th centuries AD.

³ Bede, *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, Penguin (Revised Edition), 1990, p. 149.

⁴ A. Carmichael, *Hymns and Incantations: with illustrative notes of words, rites and customs*, Edinburgh: Scottish Academic Press/Oliver and Boyd, six volumes published during 1900-1954 and orally collected by Carmichael in the Scottish Islands and Highlands during the 19th Century. See also C. J. Moore ed., *Carmina Gadelica* (Floris books, 1992), a special selection of Carmichael's work.

⁵ These quotations from Patrick came from an excellent translation and discussion of Patrick's 'Confession' by D. D. O'Donoghue (*Aristocracy of Soul: Patrick of Ireland*), London, 1997, pp. 10, 34 & 16).

⁶ M. Wallace, *The Celtic Resource Book*, The National Society with Church House Publishing, 1988, pp. 84-86.

⁷ I. Bradley, *Celtic Christianity: Making Myths and Chasing Dreams*, Edinburgh University Press, 1999, p. vii.

⁸ J. P. MacKey ed., *An Introduction to Celtic Christianity*, Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1989, p. 1.

⁹ M. Symmons Roberts, 'Romancing the Runes' in *Leading Light: Gospel and Culture*, Vol. 2/2, 1995.

¹⁰ P. Thomas, *A Candle in the Darkness: Celtic Spirituality from Wales*, Gomer Press, 1993, p. 11.

¹¹ B. Hume, *Footprints of the Northern Saints*, Darton Longman & Todd, 1996, p. 41.

¹² F. E. Warren, *The Liturgy and Ritual of the Celtic Church*, The Boydell Press, 1987, p. 29.

¹³ E. De Waal, *A World Made Whole: Rediscovering the Celtic Tradition*, Fount, 1991, Introduction.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 10 following.

¹⁵ E. Culling, *What is Celtic Christianity?* Grove Booklet No.45, 1994, p. 4.

¹⁶ C. Thomas, *Whithorn's Christian Beginnings: First Whithorn Lecture*, Friends of the Whithorn Trust, 1992, p. 2.

¹⁷ I. Bradley, *The Celtic Way*, Darton, Longman & Todd, 1993.

¹⁸ Bradley, 1999, pp. ix-x.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. ix.

²⁰ J. Riordain, *The Music of What Happens: Celtic Spirituality - A View from the Inside*, Columba Press, 1996, p. 44.

²¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 44-47.

²² Nuirt or Neart refers to a Celtic Druid belief in a kind of 'impersonal' force or energy that lies behind everything there is - behind objects of nature, the thought and action of humans, the behaviour of animals, behind every movement of the birds of the air and the fish of the sea. This impersonal force or energy was perceived as filling the whole world and was beyond understanding. It indicates force, power, strength, energy, dynamism. Whilst Neart had a religious power and numinosity it was coldly indifferent and devoid of morality. It provoked awe but not prayer in a personal sense. "It is this factor" suggested Riordain "which underlines the Celtic Christian sense of the all-present God, perhaps the central and all-prevailing concept in Celtic Christianity, God utterly near and immanent and at the same time utterly beyond and transcendent".

²³ Sean □ Duinn, Kells Lecture (Ireland), 1994.

²⁴ See N. Chadwick, *The Age of the Saints*, Oxford, 1991, pp. 102-103. There is also a clear discussion of these dramatic events in B. Lacey, *Colum Cille and the Columban Tradition*, Four Courts Press, 1997.

²⁵ Bradley, 1993, pp. 19-20.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 13.

²⁸ D. Delap et al, *Celtic Saints*, Pitkin. 1995. Page 6 provides a birds eye picture of the monastic system.

²⁹ Bradley, 1993, p. 5.

³⁰ J. N. Hillgarth, *The Conversion of Western Europe*, University of Pennsylvania, 1986.

³¹ Chadwick, p. 83 following.

³² The *Old Irish Life of Columba* described Peregrinatio pilgrimage as involving the possibility of three stages:

<u>Grade</u>	<u>Description of Peregrinatio</u>
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- 1 When a man leaves his country in body only, but with spirit uncleansed.
 - 2 When a man leaves his fatherland in zeal of heart though not in body. Being detained under authority in his own land though dedicated in spirit to God.
 - 3 When a man leaves his country altogether in body and soul as the Apostles and people of perfect pilgrimage.

The inner spiritual dynamic was central to Peregrinatio's aim of being a 'Perfect Pilgrimage'. It also catered for the person who couldn't physically leave his country for legitimate reasons, but could leave in an inner, spiritual sense though 'zeal of heart'; where, as a whole person he was 'dedicated in spirit to God'. The ultimate grade 3 was to leave your country holistically i.e. in body and soul whilst 'seeking perfect pilgrimage'. The key aspect was 'seeking the place of one's resurrection'. This brought together missionary commitment with the expectation that at an unknown place you would reach your own spiritual place of rightness with God.

³³ M. Wallace, *Celtic Heroes of Faith*, Aquila Celtic Crafts, 1996 and *Practical Celtic Spirituality*, Aquila, 1997 (906, Coastguard Cottages, Mill End, Bradwell-on-Sea, Essex, CM0 7HN). Also *The Celtic Resource Book*.

³⁴ Hillgarth, 1986. See Chapter 3 on Irish Christianity.

³⁵ de Waal, Introduction.

³⁶ Andrew Kirk is Director of the Centre of Missiology and World Christianity, Department of Theology, The University of Birmingham with Selly Oak Colleges and has given this definition in his book, *What is Mission? Theological Explorations*.

³⁷ P. and J. Evens, *Despair and Hope in the City: Community Work? What relevance to a Church of England parish struggling to survive in an Urban Priority Area?*, Oxford: Alistair Shornach, 1990.

³⁸ Found in a music magazine article about Marsalis.