

Fresh expressions of Church – the state of the art in England

An art indeed

This article is limited to the research, experience and contacts of the author. It deals mainly with his view of the picture within the Church of England and conversations with colleagues in this discipline. It only touches on what is happening in other denominations in England.

I am glad the word ‘art’ is in the title. Seeing a young church come to birth, shaped by both the context around it and the heart of the Christian gospel and church, is an art, not a science. Each one is a creative act, not a machine that rolls off a church production line. In addition, the uncertain process by which this wave, of creativity at the edge of the church, flows towards the power centres of the Church, is more art than science. It will contain planned events, private conversations and serendipity. New ideas and practices seldom move down a smooth path; they are rightly critiqued and take time to assess, to find wide acceptance and seen as normal. This is especially true if they are seen to reform understandings of previous normality. However, some enduring questions have been asked over the past decade.

How far has the fresh expressions of Church agenda got?

Statistics have provided a more secure foundation

One measure of clear progress is that the narrative about fresh expressions of Church [fxC] has moved beyond reliance on a set of individual stories¹ to widely researched statistics, covering all known fxC in half the dioceses of England. In 2016, the substantial report *The Day of Small Things* on fxC came out, and three other shorter accompanying volumes looking at who attended them, how these young churches sustained and what dioceses had done with the results reported back to them.²

Various headlines stand out.

- 40 years ago, fxC might be 1/40th of the churches in a diocese. Now it is 1 in 6.
- There are 1100 known fxC, and the Church of England may have 2000 overall.
- Four times as many now start each year, as compared with the 20 per year in 2004, the year of the seminal *Mission-shaped Church* report.
- It is clear they are making a missional impact
- They are also showing some signs of maturing as young churches.

At the time of writing the Methodist church in Great Britain is nearing the end of collecting data from a stratified sample using the same indicators of what is an fxC. They have good grounds to think there are another 1000 in this denomination.³

Other measures of progress

Several further factors can be named. Firstly, the three most recent Archbishops have given support, and even leadership to, the broad phenomenon of fxC. Most notably, Archbishop Rowan formed the

¹ Two sources primarily have operated The Fresh Expressions website carried the headlines of many fxC stories, across the denominations. Church Army published 56 mainly Anglican longer accounts in the *Encounters on the Edge* series between 1999-2012. Both are still available via the web.

² Each report is available as a free PDF or a purchased hard copy from www.churcharmy.org/research

³ This work is likely to be presented to the Methodist Church in early 2018.

Fresh Expressions team, now in its 12th year. Across his years as Archbishop he also spoke and wrote adding credibility and depth to the self-understanding of this loose grass-roots movement.

Secondly, nearly one quarter of the English dioceses have sensed a call to set a vision including goals for the number of further churches that they think can begin by a certain year. These goals range from the most ambitious, that look to 50% of the dioceses churches being fxC by 2030, to more modest ones such as starting 100 further churches within 10 years. 15 years ago, such statements would have indicated diocesan delusion, or episcopal megalomania. But setting a goal and achieving it are very different matters, A contributory reason to this confidence may be that several senior staff across the dioceses have prior experience of leading an fxC or church plant when they were vicars or curates.

Thirdly, some dioceses have been making applications for large grants of money [sometimes more than £1 million pounds] from the central Church, which include funding the appointment of paid leaders, and sometimes acquisition of secular premises, to start further churches over the next five years. In a few cases the Church Army Research Unit has been involved to act as part of the evaluation process. Fourthly, a growing number of dioceses have made an internal appointment of a person to act across the diocese in respect of its fxC and their leaders, ordained and lay. Their titles vary such as enabler, or coordinator, or advisor. Such appointments can be significant to give a loose local movement impetus and co-ordination.

Taken together, this range of factors makes it hard to think that this period of innovation can be reversed. Too many fxC exist, too much has been gained and invested, too influential people are behind it, to imagine this change can be totally undone. The fxC are on the map. I think this view of how far it has got applies to both the Church of England and to Methodism. Other denominations are less far down the road, sometimes because their structures do not allow for rapid decision making, or they have few pioneers, or they are wedded to prior church planting language and to models which are less creative, as these only replicate what already exists.

[To what extent is there an agenda, and if so what is it?](#)

The word ‘agenda’ deserves a comment. In that fxC is not a coordinated movement and certainly not a political party within the Church, to talk of an agenda is misleading. At the grass-roots, the agenda has only been to start something that will take forward the mission entrusted to the local church and to widen the diversity of ways of being Church. The nearest one can get to a wider agenda would be the writings of its advocates. But we know from research that most of the local practitioners have not taken training to begin these young churches so we don’t know what they have read.

Those who are the writers might be said to hold together two views. Firstly, what is needed is a ‘mixed economy’ of traditional and fresh expression of church, ideally all done well and all with a sense of mission. Secondly, that creating fresh expressions of Church is both theologically normal and missionally necessary. Perhaps more has been written in the past on the missional and contextual elements, as past decline in attendance and a sense of mission need mainly drove the onset of these young churches. More recently the emphasis among authors has fallen on ecclesial elements, notably on making disciples and how young churches mature. To this I have added the specific ecclesial case that churches have a divine calling to reproduce a further church at some stage in their life.⁴ However, other potentially competing agendas exist in the wider church.

⁴ G. Lings, *Reproducing Churches* (BRF, 2017)

Other potentially competing agendas exist

Disproportionate investment in the existing church

It is understandable that as the fxC are only 1/6th of the diocesan churches that to address the health and wellbeing of the majority of the churches is good sense. Under the national *Renewal and Reform* agenda there is a centrally driven desire to put resources of money, personnel and training to improve the life and mission of the parish churches that we already have.

There is also the drive to increase the number of those being ordained. Partly this is because such a high proportion of existing clergy will retire in the next ten years. Partly it is because some evidence suggests that a shortage of clergy hinders church growth.⁵ Within this two fold view, the language of a 'mixed economy' disappears and talk of fxC is quietly dropped. The danger of this pair of emphases - on existing churches and having more clergy to service inherited ways of being church - is that it communicates a flawed message; 'if only we do well what we have already been doing, this will be enough.' There are two principal reasons for thinking that this message is flawed.

Firstly, Church Army research shows that this view ignores other important evidence. We found that there are three times the proportion of attenders without a Church background [we term them the non-churched] at the fxC, as compared with parishes churches and that the attenders at fxC are much younger, with twice as many attenders under the age of 16.⁶ These groups are both growing proportions of the population and two big gaps in the mission effectiveness of existing churches. The evidence shows that the fresh expressions of Church are better able to address both needs.⁷ To rely mainly on the past ways to be Church will be a mistake.

Secondly, research done in the 1970s on Church of England parishes and their attenders by David Wasdell showed that the parish, led by a single clergy person, was a self-limiting mechanism, putting a glass ceiling on numerical church growth, irrespective of the number of people living within that parish. This meant that in urban areas the proportion of actual attenders was virtually invisible to the surrounding population and attempts at church growth would be frustrated. This evidence was spurned at the time, and was forgotten by nearly all, until I raised it again at an inter-diocesan conference, and in written form in an issue of *Rural Theology* in 2016,⁸ for which I recalculated the figures for the most recent year of the census (2011) and showed the same problems still existed, but with church attendance now only half of what it was in the 1970s. His answer, and mine, is that the way forward is the birth of many lay-led smaller congregations within any given parish. Ironically that is often exactly what is seen in the start of fresh expressions of Church, although the leaders have been completely unaware of Wasdell's work, or my revival of it.

⁵ This area is disputed. D. Goodhew and B. Kautzer argue that any structure, such as team ministries or the multi-parish benefice, that requires a clergy person to care for many congregations across several places contributes to decline. See Church Growth Research Programme, *Strand 3c Amalgamations and Team Ministries* [October 2013]. The riposte to this finding, which was unpalatable to the established Church, came in further research called *Stronger as One* conducted by Dr Fiona Tweedie in 2014, which found against the view that having more churches to care for led to numerical decline.

⁶ See C. Dalpra and J. Vivian, *Who's There* (Sheffield, Church Army, 2016) p.8. and G. Lings *The Day of Small Things* (Sheffield: Church Army, 2016) sections 4.7. p. 45 and 6.11 pp. 102-104.

⁷ S. Hollinghurst, *Mission-shaped evangelism* (Canterbury Press, 2010) pp. 10-15

⁸ G. Lings in M. Brown (ed.) *Multiplying Churches and resistance to it* (Rural Theology, 2016). Copies of this journal are notoriously difficult to obtain and a Word document of the article can be obtained from ask@churcharmy.org.

Resource churches are the answer

There is another source of competition for resources and media profile, in the move to begin so-called Resource churches. These have been prompted by the apparent success of large transplants in London diocese. These begin by taking at least one experienced full time ordained leader and usually a paid worship leader too, together with 20-50 worshippers to another location, either reviving a congregation in the last stages of decline, or reopening a closed building. Up till now they have been either charismatic or evangelical in tradition, or both. The aim now is to start these around the country in cities, or other large centres of population, and to grow them as centres of excellence which in time will lead to further church plants.

So far it is clear that these have seen significant numerical growth and some of the older ones have begun further young churches, all of which is commendable. It is not yet clear what proportion of new attenders are existing local Christians transferring church attendance, how many are de-churched returning and what proportion are among the non-churched. Church Army research on data from 2011-2015 examined data from 132 church plants. Not all of these plants were large transplants, but they did include all plants known in London diocese. We found, in the leader's opinion, the following distribution of the three backgrounds among the attenders.⁹

Type of background	Christians	De-churched	Non-churched
Average across 14 different types of fxC	38.7%	27.8%	33.5%
Church Plants	51.7%	28.5%	19.5%
Messy Churches	32.5%	22.3%	45.2%

The church plants are the only type of fxC in which the majority of attenders are existing Christians. They score the lowest for attracting the non-churched with the exception of 'older people's church', which are expressions of Church for a segment of the population in which there are less non-churched people. At present our data shows the mission effectiveness of the church plant is less impressive than might be thought.

The other unanswered question, about which there is only anecdote at present, is this. Do these large high-energy churches only sustain their attenders during their late teens and twenties? We hear of stories that when young people marry and children are born, they leave and join smaller family-based churches. Others say when difficult questions of faith arise that these churches are less good at handling this stage. But we all lack wide, careful, evidence to weigh such questions. However, there is little doubt that considerable energy, publicity and money is being spent in this direction by many dioceses, to create at least one. A continuing, open, mutually respectful conversation is needed between fxC and church planting thinkers.

How embedded are fxC in the Church of England?

If the first section on how far the agenda has got is a national view, this one about embedding, might be best seen as a diocesan view. The Church of England is a complex phenomenon and the outsider may think that the national is the determinative picture. But in practice and theory the diocese is the Anglican base unit of church. This is where practical policy is shaped, most money is spent, discipline is exercised and staffing allocation decided. Moreover, in the past dioceses were extremely reluctant to learn from one another and thus can have different cultures, for historical reasons.

⁹ Figures from G. Lings, *The Day of Small Things* (Sheffield, Church Army, 2016) p. 88.

Embedding is a shorthand term to refer to the process by which something moves from the margins to the mainstream of an organization such a denomination, in this case the diocese.

The candid answer to how embedded the fxC are in the dioceses, is that the picture is patchy. In a very few, the fxC are not only seen as entirely normal, but also a key part of the future with published aspirations that they will become as numerous as the parishes. At the other end of the spectrum are dioceses who think they don't have a single fxC, who believe that good parishes are the sole necessity, or who write off fxC as peripheral and that church plants are the way forward. What is shared across the dioceses is that past denial of decline has ceased, talk of church growth and of evangelism is in the air, the theology of *Missio Dei* is accepted and unquestioned subsidy of failing local churches cannot be continued. What this means is that the mission need is being widely acknowledged, but the accompanying re-imagination of church is often being missed, or being refused.

It is also thought that the appointment of the diocesan bishop and her/his key team and advisors is crucial. Where a diocesan leader favourable to fxC is appointed, the culture can change but it may take years for this to filter down to the diocesan committees which are often staffed by traditionalists, though it more rapidly reaches adventurous parishes. The national Fresh Expressions team are trying to counter this uneven picture by starting what they call 'hubs', both for bishops¹⁰ and for archdeacons.¹¹ These are voluntary gatherings of the like-minded or even curious, in which good practice is shared and ideas travel. Ideas also travel, because in the Church of England there is clerical free movement of labour, and so those with positive experience of fxC can enter dioceses without that emphasis, subverting its history.

What are we still learning?

Firstly, that there is still more to learn. This evolving discipline is not fully formed. International co-operation will show us what was just English and what is deeply common across cultures. Secondly, we admit that change takes longer than we thought. It is now 13 years since *Mission-shaped Church* and still some people have not heard of it, nor the term 'fresh expression of Church'. Thirdly, we have started to realise that it is easier to talk about discipleship than to measure it; it is equally elusive in parishes as in fxC, and not everything that counts can be counted.

Over leadership in fxC, we have learnt how to recognize pioneers, but still struggle with how best to train, and then how to best deploy them, and have little idea what a lifetime pioneer vocation looks like. We are beginning to learn that lay-lay leaders of fxC¹² do as well as authorised lay and clergy leaders.¹³ We still have to demonstrate that we know how to support them without turning them into puppet clergy.

There is also future learning that still eludes us. What truly flourishes and lasts in social areas of deprivation? This includes how are indigenous leaders raised among the underclass, without them wanting to leave. I also think we still need to learn that sustaining young churches is every bit as important as starting them.

¹⁰ Reputedly there are 30 Bishops in their hub.

¹¹ The archdeacon is a clergy person who is senior middle manager in the diocesan structure. Ideally the bishop holds the vision and the archdeacons transmit it, holding annual inspection visits to all parishes.

¹² This term was coined by Church Army's Research Unit for lay people leading fxC without formal training or diocesan licensing, though with local parish permission and blessing.

¹³ See *The Day of Small Things* Chapter 11.

Conclusion

The fxC are here to stay. How significant they are, history will determine. These are some of the current questions around them and my impression of the answers. There would be more to say as this story really goes back 40 years to the first church plants and to other changes in English church life that made the start of fresh expressions of Church easier.¹⁴ It is also equally clear that there are challenges from competing emphases, that have more access to resources. But the resistance today is less from inertia or self-satisfaction in the church. The fxC baby is now a teenager with a clearer identity, self-confidence and still more to learn.

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¹⁴ One account of those features can be found in D. Goodhew (ed.) *Church Growth in Britain 1980 to the present*. Ch. 10 G. Lings *A history of Fresh Expressions and Church Planting in the Church of England* (Ashgate, 2012) p. 161ff.