



Re-imagining the Church in a rapidly changing culture



Linda Rayner

Linda is working as Fresh Expressions Coordinator for the United Reformed Church, which became a partner in Fresh Expressions in 2009. Her remit is to find out how local URC churches are establishing new ways of being church and encouraging them to explore fresh expressions. To find out more about this movement visit www.freshexpressions.org.uk

Origins

In 2003, Archbishop Rowan Williams began to talk of a need for a 'mixed economy' of church to meet the new challenges of a rapidly changing culture. This was amplified the following year in the 2004 report *Mission-shaped Church*, which was commended by the General Synod.¹ The report sought to reflect what was already happening, with a number of denominations and mission agencies working and beginning a process of investing and encouraging the pioneering of new forms of church expression. These were not simply a fad or an attempt to be cool but looked to address a rapidly changing culture in Britain and a change in attitude to attending church and to a spiritual life.

Mission-shaped Church argued that 'the time has come to ensure that any Fresh Expression of church that emerge within the Church, or are granted a home within it, are undergirded with an adequate ecclesiology.'² This was exciting and encouraging for many practitioners at the time who were working hard to disciple people and develop new and imaginative expressions of Church but found them hard to be accepted as 'church.' Instead the report recognised their importance, placed value on their role in a 'mixed economy' of church and furthermore recognised the need for the 'identification, selection and training of pioneer church planters, for both lay and ordained ministers.'³ Here the Fresh Expressions movement was born as a partnership between the Church of England and the Methodist Church and initially led by Bishop Steven Croft with Revd Peter Pillinger as

the Methodist Missioner. Since then new partners have joined with Fresh Expressions – the Salvation Army, the United Reformed Church, the Church of Scotland and the Baptist Union of Great Britain – all of whom identify growth and encouragements in these new experiments in church.

What are fresh expressions of church?

Providing a precise definition of fresh expressions of church is a challenge because no two fresh expressions of church are identical. The Fresh Expressions movement uses a definition that sets the agenda and opens conversations with others, and it's a good (if imperfect) starting point: 'Fresh Expressions are new forms of church that emerge within contemporary culture and engage primarily with those who don't "go to church".'⁴ These are *new forms of church*, which are right for their own situation, but probably would not work somewhere else; they are not off-the-shelf solutions for other churches to copy. In fact, fresh expressions of church are constantly developing and changing – morphing to suit their individual specific requirements at any given time. That said, some of the extraordinary stories of existing fresh expressions of church can inspire similar ideas.

Fresh expressions of church *emerge within contemporary culture*. By this, we mean that they often develop around something that is already going on.⁵ Usually they emerge when a small group of Christians decide to try to share their faith in a way that is meaningful for other people,

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1. *Mission-shaped Church: Church planting and fresh expressions of church in a changing context* (London: Church House Publishing, 2004), p. 147.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 147.

3. *Ibid.*

4. See <https://freshexpressions.org.uk/about/what-is-a-fresh-expression/>

5. E.g. new types of church have emerged from coffee mornings, from special interest groups, like walking groups, knitting groups and cookery clubs, or in foodbanks, colleges, schools, gyms, workplaces – in fact, anywhere that people meet.

6. 'Spiritual but not religious', <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/magazine-20888141>

7. G Lings, *The Day of Small Things: An analysis of fresh expressions of Church in 21 dioceses of the Church of England*. See also C Dalpra & J Vivian, *Who's There?: A survey of attenders at Anglican fresh expressions of Church examining their church*. Both reports are available at https://churcharmy.org/Groups/244966/Church_Army/web/What_we_do/Research_Unit/Current_research/Fresh_expressions_of.aspx

and this can only happen if those Christians have been sufficiently immersed in the local culture to understand what is needed, and how to communicate at the level of that culture, using language that is right in that place.

Fresh expressions of church are intentional about reaching and sharing faith 'primarily with those who do not go to church'. In the UK in many families there are at least three generations of people who have grown up without learning about Jesus, have no idea about how to behave in a traditional church, and have no understanding of the language that is used in a church setting (can we explain a hymn, an anthem, Eucharist, Collect, Psalm, prayer?) Most churchgoers can recount stories of the baptismal party who had no idea about how to behave in church, but those same churchgoers struggle to explain why traditional church is as it is.

For people with no church background, church can seem alienating and excluding, even when the members are doing their best to be welcoming. Sadly, if someone from outside of church wants to explore faith and spirituality, they can find it difficult to connect with a traditional church.

One thing that the Fresh Expressions movement makes very clear is the need for *both* traditional *and* new forms of church. No one is suggesting that we abandon centuries of church (unless it is not working). In Fresh Expressions, this is called having a 'mixed economy of churches', and it is quite possible for different types of church to collaborate in one place, ensuring support for the new form of church, and encouraging the traditional to be more accepting of new ways.

Why do we need fresh expressions of church?

For some people, the traditional church (sometimes called the 'inherited' church) meets their needs, this is especially true for people who have belonged to church for many years. However, there have been dramatic changes in society over the past few decades, and lifestyles have changed, leaving little space for and, perhaps, more to the point, little interest in church. As noted, we also have generations of people who have no understanding of Jesus, have never seen a Bible, and rarely set foot inside a church building.

Take, for instance, technology. It is only in the past 20 years that the internet has become a way of life for many people. It is said that each smartphone today carries more computing power than the Apollo spacecrafts of the late 1960s. There is a generation of young adults in the workplace, for whom their smartphone is essential in every area of life. Many people have access to multiple channels of communication – mobile phone, landline, text, Skype, FaceTime and numerous different apps. A society dominated by consumerism means that people have a vast array

of choice – an online supermarket offers 72 brands and 36 categories of bread, people eat 'food-on-the-go', rather than around the table. Lifestyles are generally faster and stress has replaced back pain as the number-one reason for people being off work sick. All this change has taken place in the past 30 years, and in this fast-moving world, the Church needs to be able to adapt if it is to keep up.

fresh expressions are signs of reform and renewal within the Church

At the same time as the rise in consumerism, there has been a rise in interest in 'spirituality', as evidenced by the numbers of 'Mind Body Spirit Fairs' and similar events that can be found in many towns at weekends. According to Professor Michael King from University College London, about a fifth of people in the UK claimed to be 'spiritual, but not religious' in 2013.⁶

Making connections

Churches connect with local people in different ways:

The *invitational* approach is perhaps the most familiar. This is where churchgoers invite their friends, family and neighbours to come to church. There is a belief that the friends, family and neighbours will accept what is on offer and fit-in with the way that it is done. The flow is from outside-in: from the local community into the congregation.

The *engaged* approach goes a step further: the church members might go out into the community, perhaps helping with a community event – maybe a street party, or a charity coffee morning – and then they offer an invitation to people to come to church. In this case, the church may be making a considerable effort to engage with the community, yet the people who show an interest in faith are still expected to come to church and accept what is on offer.

The third approach is quite different, this is when a new church begins to *emerge* from prayers, community engagement and understanding, and is where fresh expressions of church begin. These new forms of church occur when Christians ('pioneers') intentionally set out to immerse themselves in local culture, becoming part of the society, building up a meaningful understanding of the needs and way of life and developing genuine friendships and relationships. We can call this the 'listening' phase. As the pioneers become more deeply involved, serving and helping as part of the neighbourhood, a community of faith can begin to develop, and new disciples can be brought to Jesus. James echoed Jesus' command to love our neighbours as ourselves when he wrote in his

epistle, 'What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but do not have works?' (James 2.14, NRSV). It can take months or (more likely) years before a fledgling group might be described as a new expression of church.

Fresh expressions of church are meeting people in their own locations, and making meaningful connections with local communities. They can be for people who are just beginning to explore faith, they often start among people who have no faith, they can be at different times – not necessarily on Sundays – for different ages, different interests,

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in locations other than church buildings, such as people's lounges, community halls, outdoors, and they are relevant to different cultures.

What makes it church?

If we consider the very early Church, as described by Luke, we see a gathering of disciples that is quite different to many churches today, yet could be a model for us to adopt:

'They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. Awe came upon everyone, because many wonders and signs were being done by the apostles. All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need. Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having the goodwill of all the people. And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved' (Acts 2.42–47, NRSV).

'Having the goodwill of all the people': those original disciples behaved in such a way that they shared their faith with people outside too – and brought new disciples to Jesus. That is the way that the twenty-first century pioneers are working.

Fresh expressions of church take a number of different forms, there are various key features that unite them and provide further clarity around what a fresh expression of church is (and isn't):

Missional: they share the love of Jesus by behaving as Jesus did – loving and serving in the neighbourhood, outside of the church environment.

Contextual: they are always adapted for and adapting to their situation.

Formational: their priority is to form disciples, by journeying with people and helping them to understand and become more like Jesus.

Ecclesial: they are intentional about establishing some form of church.

The Fresh Expressions movement encourages all churches to move towards behaving according to these values.

Diversity and growth

Over 3,000 fresh expressions are now active around the world. From the initial vision of Archbishop Rowan Williams and the *Mission-shaped Church* report, a growing movement of practitioners and pioneers have formed fresh expressions of church in the UK, across Europe and in North America. Church Army Researcher, George Lings, calculated that in 2016, a survey of 21 dioceses showed 1,109 fresh expressions of church with approximately 50,000 people attending.⁷

There are at least 20 different recognisable types of fresh expression – common ones include Messy Church, café church, child-focused church, new monastic communities and church plants. Most are relatively small, of around 35–55 in size and are as likely to be led by women as by men. They attract double the number of under-16s (38 per cent) compared to parishes (19 per cent).

There are four times as many fresh expressions churches starting up compared to a decade ago. Around 2,100 fresh expressions emerged between 1992 and 2014. Not all have remained open (around 11 per cent closed), but for every person who set out to be part of beginning a fresh expression of church, there are now over 2.5 extra people involved.

Lings' report also highlights the fact that the movement is not solely focussed on numerical growth. More than 80 per cent of the fresh expressions surveyed were taking steps to grow disciples, rather than just attract attenders.

Conclusion

At the end of Matthew's Gospel we find the Great Commission where Jesus commands his followers to, 'Go and make disciples of all nations' (Matthew 28.19). Fresh expressions of church are a contemporary response to this command. Believing that God is already at work in the world, fresh expressions reimagine how the body of Christ can live and work in diverse and changing contexts, making meaningful connections with people and culture outside the churches. If we, in the churches, are to reach out to people who are hungry for 'spirituality', we will need to reach them through practices that are relevant to their way of life. Fresh expressions of church are not the only answer to questions of how to grow the Church, but they are a sign of reform as well as renewal.