

## **Research on Fresh Expressions, John Walker**

John Walker, *Testing Fresh Expressions – identity & transformation* (Ashgate Contemporary Ecclesiology). London: Routledge, 2014.

Summary by Canon Kerry Thorpe. Canterbury Diocesan Mission & Growth Advisor

Well, do they pass or don't they? As a Fresh Expressions Pioneer myself, and one of the people whose work went under John Walker's microscope, I studied this book with more than a passing interest. John has provided a massive service both for Fresh Expressions in general and Canterbury Diocese in particular. This book is the distillation of several years' work, in which John has researched in some detail the actual growth experience in a sample of both Fresh Expressions and Parish Churches in Canterbury.

His answer is both 'yes' and 'no'. No, Fresh Expressions are not single-handedly turning around the declining fortunes of the Christian Church in the UK. But, yes, they are a significant part of a movement that is helping to re-imagine, re-engage and re-invigorate the church's missional life.

'Testing Fresh Expressions' is arranged in four parts.

Part One provides a detailed, sometimes trenchant critique of the ground covered by the 2004 'mission shaped church' report. What do we mean by church? Is it best defined by creedal belief or through the relationships by which we live? Are we genuinely shaping church to meet the needs of an unchurched generation? Or are we simply accommodating church to a rootless, consumerist culture?

Part Two outlines current statistical research, which makes pretty bleak reading. How accurate are the figures? Do churches struggle to grow because of sociological factors over which we have little control, or internal factors that we can easily address and change?

Part Three is John's own unique personally conducted research. 103 people were interviewed, from 10 churches in the Canterbury Diocese, 5 Parish Churches and 5 Fresh Expressions, all showing consistent signs of sustained growth. What were the unique factors? What in common? What can we learn?

Here's the heart of it. Fresh Expressions are not attracting significantly more un-churched people than the best examples of Parish Church. But in both there is a clear set of principles, which if rightly understood can be applied across the board.

The overwhelming majority of those who newly joined, and stayed, in a worshipping, discipling, serving, Christian community, travelled a similar journey that John describes as a Transformative Cycle. Almost always triggered by a life-event (positive or negative), these individuals re-evaluated their own self-understanding, in the context of a growing set of relationships, informed by an inherited, but constantly re-applied, Christian tradition. They were welcomed, nurtured, supported and engaged. It didn't just happen. It had to be worked at.

Messy Church merits, and gets, special mention. Professor Robin Gill, in his Introduction, describes how as a result, he has changed his mind and become an enthusiastic supporter of this rapidly growing, inter-generational, highly inter-active, form of church.

John's point is that all the research, his and others, shows the supreme importance of childhood engagement with faith, for the future health of the church's mission. Child attendance shows alarmingly sharp decline in recent years. Fresh Expressions in general, and Messy Church (with its roots in Godly Play) in particular, are showing a demonstrable ability to address this issue.

In Part Four, John draws his conclusions. Fresh Expressions, rather than showing how to reach unchurched adults in any unique way, are in fact leading the way in laying the foundations for the next generation of growth. Where growth is now happening, and that means both Parish Churches and Fresh Expressions, there are clear and easily transferrable lessons to be learned. This is not the book to turn to for theological point-scoring, but it might just facilitate more intentional mission action

planning in pursuit of numerical and spiritual growth, re-imagined ministry and meaningful community partnership.

## **Nine Lessons for a Mixed Economy Church**

The Rt. Revd. Dr. Steven Croft, Bishop of Sheffield.

From 2004 to 2009, the first Team Leader of the national fresh expressions team.

Since 2009, I Bishop of Sheffield

Lecture at the *Deutscher Evangelischer Kirchentag*, Centre on Congregation and Church, 5 June 2015

<http://freshexpressions.de/fileadmin/fresh->

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*Dire state of Church of England...*

...

### *New lessons*

In the 1990's we began to learn new lessons about forming new ecclesial communities through contextual mission. At first our learning was informal and accidental, the gathering of fragments of stories as different pioneers were inspired to go to parts of the community which knew nothing of Christ not to draw people back to the existing church but to create new churches.

### *Mission shaped Church 2014*

That gathering of stories led to an attempt to understand what was happening and to develop a vocabulary to describe it. We called the new ecclesial communities fresh expressions of church. As a Church we took a decision in 2004 actively to support the formation of new communities through contextual mission and to encourage a mixed economy of church for the new millennium. Cf. the Policy Document *Mission shaped Church* (2014).

Our mission context calls us to be more diverse. We have encouraged the formation of fresh expressions in every diocese; we have identified a recognized focus of training for ordained ministry called ordained pioneer ministry; we have rolled out a training programme for lay pioneers and clergy; we have seen this movement expand internationally and ecumenically, for which thanks to be to God. We have seen the movement challenged theologically and those challenges refuted.

### *Research Study 2014*

Over the last 12 years this movement has grown and multiplied and has been resourced in different ways and different places. There are now thousands of fresh expressions of church across every part of the Church of England. 10 dioceses (out of 42) were surveyed for a major study published in 2014:

*Church Growth Research Project*

[http://www.churchgrowthresearch.org.uk/UserFiles/File/Reports/churchgrowthresearch\\_freshexpressions.pdf](http://www.churchgrowthresearch.org.uk/UserFiles/File/Reports/churchgrowthresearch_freshexpressions.pdf)

In those dioceses:

Fresh expressions account for 15% of churches and 10% of attendance In 7/10 dioceses growth of fresh expressions cancels out decline Adds a further diocese to the Church of England 52% of fresh expressions are lay led Most are small, growing, part of an existing parish.

“Nothing else in the Church of England has this level of missional impact and adding further ecclesial communities”

### **3. What lessons have we learned about mission?**

#### *i. Mission is God's Mission*

This whole movement is undergirded, supported, held by a theological understanding of the mission of God: that God is a God of mission; that mission is the outworking of God's love and God's very nature; that God is deeply and profoundly at work in the whole world; that God is working already outside the Church; that mission is centred on discovering what God is already doing and joining in; that God is concerned most with those who are furthest from God's love and light; that mission follows the pattern of Christ in both his incarnation and his character; that mission is about being sent by Christ in the power of the Spirit; that mission is about proclaiming the kingdom, teaching and baptizing new believers, service to the wider community; seeking to transform unjust structures, care for God's earth and working for reconciliation.

This theological understanding of God's mission has been rebirthed in the Church of England over several generations, inspired by the Anglican Communion, by theologians returning from mission elsewhere in the world, by the worldwide renewal of a theological understanding of mission, by discernment arising from study of the scriptures at the core of the Anglican tradition.

The changes we have experienced have arisen from this theological renewal. They are not simply about pragmatism or what is effective; still less about what is fashionable for its own sake. Much of the theological wrestling we have done are the core theological questions of mission – especially contextualization. Do not attempt to encourage fresh expressions of Church without this serious theological undergirding.

#### *ii. The whole Church and every church needs to be mission-shaped*

Once that work is done it is possible to see instantly that we are not talking about fresh expressions of church which do mission and parish churches which do not. We are talking about every church engaging in God's mission, whatever that means. In developing fresh expressions we are not talking about questions of personal preference or taste, what some have characterized as boutique church – but about what is helpful and effective and essential for those who are coming to faith and growing in faith.

This is the vision statement of the Diocese of Sheffield which undergirds all we do and the reshaping of every parish church, every deanery, every fresh expression and every appointment:

“The Diocese of Sheffield is called to grow a diverse network of Christlike, lively and diverse Christian communities in every place which are effective in making disciples and in seeking to transform our society and God's world”

#### *iii The whole Church needs to invest in evangelism*

To be fit for purpose every Church needs to invest in evangelism: communicating the good news to men, women and children. Local churches which do invest in evangelism will grow, whether they are fresh expressions or not. Local churches which do not invest in evangelism will not grow, whether they are fresh expressions or not.

Evangelism is a complex series of disciplines, often subject to caricature. I was asked to be the Anglican Fraternal Delegate to the Roman Catholic Synod of Bishops on Evangelisation in Rome in

2013. In a paper for the General Synod in 2014, I attempted to describe 7 Disciplines of Evangelisation all of which need intense investment and development across the local Church, by Dioceses and by the Church nationally. The 7 disciplines are:

1. Prayerful discernment and listening (contemplation) 2. Apologetics (defending and commending the faith) 3. Evangelism (initial proclamation) 4. Catechesis (learning and teaching the faith) 5. Ecclesial formation (growing the community of the church) 6. Planting and forming new ecclesial communities (fresh expressions of the church) 7. Incarnational mission (following the pattern of Jesus)

As part of that investment in evangelism, the House of Bishops have developed Pilgrim to encourage catechesis across the Church of England, in all kinds of expressions of church.

*Intentional Evangelism* (GS 1917), see Source: [www.pilgrimcourse.org](http://www.pilgrimcourse.org)

Download

<https://www.churchofengland.org/media/1872415/gs%201917%20%20intentional%20evangelism.pdf>

#### **4. What lessons have we learned about ecclesiology?**

##### *iv. We need to think and talk about the Church*

Developing new forms of church shifts ecclesiology to the centre of the theological agenda. We need to reflect over and over again on what it means to be the church in different ways and different places. Our experience was that our ecclesiological muscles were flabby and underdeveloped. We had left ecclesiology to ecumenists. It needs to become once again the province of missiologists. The forms for Church need to be shaped by the mission of God. Our understanding of the mission of God needs to be shaped by Christ and by our Christology.

The best resources here are short summaries of what is essential about the Church not long, dense studies. What are the essential marks of the Church? What does something have to be or to have before it can be called the Church?

##### *v. We need language to describe different forms of church working together*

It is vital to develop a both-and approach to parish churches and to fresh expressions. We must never set them in competition. Each must use respectful language when speaking about the other. The biggest challenge to the fresh expressions movement in the UK has come from not using language carefully. Where fresh expressions have communicated that they are not a new thing to sit alongside the old but the new thing to supplant the old there has been resistance to change and a turning back to old ways. The language which has worked best for us has been the language of mixed economy of church or mixed ecology of church. Both forms of church are missional, both need each other, both serve different purposes in an increasingly diverse society and mission field.

##### *vi We need to enable and encourage fresh expressions of church*

Within the context of the mixed economy, fresh expressions need positive encouragement and endorsement by senior church leaders and by the wider church if they are to flourish. These are tender, delicate plants. We have moved as a church in twenty years from hostility and suspicion, to tolerance, to permission giving, to active blessing, and in some cases to resourcing and integration of the new with the old. This has not always been an easy journey. It has not been the same journey in every diocese. Some are very much ahead of the others. But the greater the encouragement, the greater the fruit.

## **5. What lessons have we learned about encouragement?**

Finally and briefly what lessons have we learned about how to encourage fresh expressions of church within a mixed economy. How can we be Barnabas in this contemporary Antioch?

### *vii. Encourage fresh expressions as you do fresh expressions*

We have learned to encourage fresh expressions in the same way as we do fresh expressions. We have learned to be light touch, responsive to what God is doing, courageous and risk taking, listening and finding out what works.

It was tempting in the beginning to set out a great denominational structure, a programme of activity, a demanding syllabus, great files of policy. Wherever we developed them, they were like David trying on the armour of Saul. What was needed was blessing, simplicity, eyes open, listening ears, time, prayer, an openness to the Holy Spirit.

This movement is of God and is still in its infancy. We need to be sensitive, flexible, humble and discern what God is doing. We are not rolling out a programme.

### *viii. A principled and careful loosening of the structures*

The best policy we have developed has been about removing obstacles rather than creating templates or strategies. Rowan Williams, the last Archbishop of Canterbury, did a huge amount to encourage fresh expressions. One of his many helpful phrases was a call for this principled and careful loosening of structures to give the new ecclesial communities space and time to grow. We need possibility and creativity more than we need regulation and adversity to risk.

### *ix. Relationships are vital*

Finally and very briefly, relationships are vital and particularly relationships between denominational leaders and pioneers, the loyal radicals of the Church who want to see change but to remain part of the denomination. These relationships are vital in both directions. The pioneers need the denominational leaders to remain connected and also to provide support in brokering new opportunities. The denominational leaders need the loyal radicals so that we continue to be challenged and refreshed by the very edges of the life of the Church.

This is exactly what is happening when Barnabas goes to Antioch. The centre is going to meet the edge. The edge is meeting the centre. In the dialogue between the two there is creativity and life and the recognition of a new form of church.