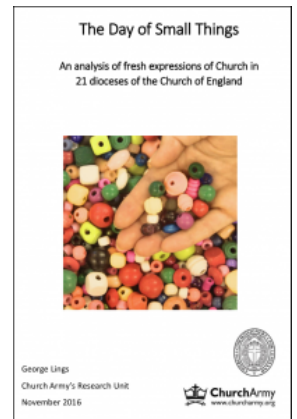


Review: The Day of Small Things – An Analysis of Fresh Expressions of Church...

If there was any sense in which we were once starry-eyed about the Church of England it had something to do with what we now call “fresh expressions of Church.” Gill and I were church planters once, inspired by the *Mission Shaped Church* report and the growing call for a “mixed economy church.” The Church of England was, from an outside perspective, a place where missiology could be lively, and the ecclesial machinery would even appoint a bishop to lead a Fresh Expressions team.

The Day of Small Things is a recent report from the Church Army’s Research Unit. It’s a statistical analysis of fresh expressions (they abbreviate to “fxC”). It considers their number, their size and shape, and the manners and means of their missional and ecclesial effectiveness. It draws on over two decades of data; it is thorough and informative.



It is an encouraging picture in many ways. The crucial role of fresh expressions in the Church of England is revealed.

They may not be definitive metrics, but headline numbers such as 15% of church communities being fxC attended by 6% of the C of E populace show that the effect has been far from negligible (page 10, Executive Summary). It also indicates that much more can be done.

Between January 2012 and May 2016, Church Army's Research Unit examined fxC across south and central England, with the backing of the Church Commissioners. All the fxC examined were established between 1992 and 2014. Here are some interesting facts that have emerged from the findings:

FxC's impact on community and church life:

- Over **50,600** people are attending fxC across the 21 dioceses surveyed.
- There are **four times** as many fxC starting up now compared to a decade ago.



Who are the leaders?

- The so-called lay-leaders make up more than **36%** of the existing fxC leadership.
- The fxC are as likely to be led by women (**49.5%**) as men (**50.5%**).



Who attends fxC?



- The leaders of the fxC reported that their attenders are made up of **40%** Christians, **27%** de-churched and **33%** non-churched.
- They attract double the number of under-16s (**38%**) compared to parish churches (**19%**).
- Most types of fxC get-togethers are relatively small, with 35-55 members.
- fxC have a strong presence on some of the poorer housing estates.

Food for thought:

- Over **80%** of fxC are taking some steps to grow disciples, not just attract attenders.
- They are vulnerable because only **10.8%** of fxC have any legal status within the Church of England.
- Half of the fxC surveyed have remained the same size, **28%** continue to grow, **17%** of them experienced growth but are now shrinking, while **11%** have died all together.



To read the full report, a summary of the main findings and to watch a video on this topic, visit www.churcharmy.org/fxCresearch

There is no need to summarise all the detail of the report here. It's impossible to do it justice in a blog post. Church Army have, themselves, put together some excellent resources, even producing a lovely infographic (see to the side). I do, however, want to record my own observations, highlighting some of the aspects that are close to my heart and our experience:

#1 – This report helps us understand what a fresh expression actually is. On the ground, this has both a positive and a negative component.

From the **negative** side, I note with a growing cynicism the propensity for churches, even if well-intentioned, to borrow

“off-the-shelf” language and so avoid some of the deeper challenges of mission activity. The survey invited responses from dioceses regarding activity that was classified as fresh expression and more than 40% of these activities simply had to be excluded as not only being “not an fxC” but not even readily identifiable as an “outreach project” (Section 12.10, pages 202-204).

Clearly there is confusion about the term “fresh expression”, and the excluded activities are not without value. But I share these sentiments:

We detect a disturbing tendency for increased use of any new label that becomes popular to be in inverse proportion to accurate understanding of its meaning. The same could be said for the use of the word ‘mission’ in parish and diocesan literature. It is almost now there by default, and as has been said: ‘when everything is mission, nothing is’. (Page 204)

This tendency is disturbing. In our experience, we have seen those with a heart for mission be led up the garden path towards projects and positions that were only whitewashed as such. We have seen those who would otherwise be fully on board with a fresh expression baulking at the idea because of a previous negative or insipid encounter with a project that wore the name only as a brand. Experiences such as these are damaging and stultifying.

The report, however, brings a **positive** initiative. In pursuing the complex and difficult work of classification of an entire ecosystem of missional activity we are given clarity. That clarity is not simply technical, narrowly encapsulating branded programs, but reveals, in both breadth and depth, the essence of what fresh expressions

What is an Anglican fresh expression of Church? – Tim Chester

The Church of England's mission & outreach department is the following definition of a fresh expression in various forms and contexts. It is a mission activity that is new in form, content, and context, and is a response to the needs of the community in which it is established. It is a response to the needs of the community in which it is established. It is a response to the needs of the community in which it is established.

1. It is a mission activity that is new in form, content, and context, and is a response to the needs of the community in which it is established. It is a response to the needs of the community in which it is established. It is a response to the needs of the community in which it is established.
2. It is a mission activity that is new in form, content, and context, and is a response to the needs of the community in which it is established. It is a response to the needs of the community in which it is established. It is a response to the needs of the community in which it is established.
3. It is a mission activity that is new in form, content, and context, and is a response to the needs of the community in which it is established. It is a response to the needs of the community in which it is established. It is a response to the needs of the community in which it is established.
4. It is a mission activity that is new in form, content, and context, and is a response to the needs of the community in which it is established. It is a response to the needs of the community in which it is established. It is a response to the needs of the community in which it is established.
5. It is a mission activity that is new in form, content, and context, and is a response to the needs of the community in which it is established. It is a response to the needs of the community in which it is established. It is a response to the needs of the community in which it is established.
6. It is a mission activity that is new in form, content, and context, and is a response to the needs of the community in which it is established. It is a response to the needs of the community in which it is established. It is a response to the needs of the community in which it is established.
7. It is a mission activity that is new in form, content, and context, and is a response to the needs of the community in which it is established. It is a response to the needs of the community in which it is established. It is a response to the needs of the community in which it is established.
8. It is a mission activity that is new in form, content, and context, and is a response to the needs of the community in which it is established. It is a response to the needs of the community in which it is established. It is a response to the needs of the community in which it is established.
9. It is a mission activity that is new in form, content, and context, and is a response to the needs of the community in which it is established. It is a response to the needs of the community in which it is established. It is a response to the needs of the community in which it is established.
10. It is a mission activity that is new in form, content, and context, and is a response to the needs of the community in which it is established. It is a response to the needs of the community in which it is established. It is a response to the needs of the community in which it is established.

Application of the criteria
The criteria for a fresh expression of Church are: 1. It is a mission activity that is new in form, content, and context, and is a response to the needs of the community in which it is established. It is a response to the needs of the community in which it is established. It is a response to the needs of the community in which it is established.

Visible in the world
The criteria for a fresh expression of Church are: 1. It is a mission activity that is new in form, content, and context, and is a response to the needs of the community in which it is established. It is a response to the needs of the community in which it is established. It is a response to the needs of the community in which it is established.

Church House, London, June 2014

are seeking to be. The discussion in section 2.4 and further development in 12.10 is worthwhile reading.

The **ten indicators of a fresh expression** that are used as criteria for inclusion in the survey are of great value. They draw upon classifications in *Mission Shaped Church* and are simple observable ways of ensuring that we are talking about groups that are *missional* ("intends to work with non-churchgoers"), *contextual* ("seeks to fit the context"), *formational* ("aims to form disciples"), and *ecclesial* ("intends to become church"). Church Army have a single-page summary of the ten indicators, but a summary is worth reiterating here:

1. Is this a **new and further group**, which is **Christian and communal**, rather than an existing group...
2. Has the starting group tried to **engage with non-church goers**?... understand a culture and context and adapt to fit it, not make the local/indigenous people change and adapt to fit into an existing church context.
3. Does the community meet **at least once a month**?
4. Does it have a **name** that helps give it an identity?...
5. Is there **intention to be Church**? This could be the intention from the start, or by a discovery on the way...
6. Is it **Anglican** or an Ecumenical project which includes an **Anglican partner**?...
7. Is there some form of **leadership** recognised by those within the community and by those outside of it?
8. Do at least the majority of members... see it as **their major expression** of being church?
9. Are there **aspirations for the four creedal 'marks' of church, or ecclesial relationships**: 'up/holy, in/one, out/apostolic, of/catholic'?...
10. Is there the **intention to become '3-self'** (self-financing, self-governing and self-reproducing)?...

(Page 18)

A personal impact for me from this is a re-evaluation of *Messy Church*. I have only seen Messy Church run as an outreach project at best, often merely as an in-house playgroup. The fact that so many of the included fxC's (close to 33%, Table 11, Page 41) were denoted as Messy Church has made me ponder them anew, especially with regards to criteria 5 to 10.

#2 – The diversity of leadership raises provocative questions. But one of the most crucial questions is absent.

Section 6.13 and Chapter 10 give the data on the forms of fxC leadership, looking at details such as gender, remuneration, time commitment, and training received. Much is as expected. For instance, male, ordained, stipended leaders predominate in traditional church plants; female, lay, volunteer leaders predominate in child-focussed fxC such as Messy Church (Table 53, page 106 and Table 74, page 176).

The report does well to highlight (in Chapter 11) the phenomenon of the so-called “lay-lay” leader who “has no centralised formal training, or official authorisation” (page 181). A leadership cohort has manifest without a clear reference to the institutional centre. I wonder how much this is a “because of” or an “in spite of” phenomenon: has the centre created space, or has it simply become ignorable? There is a gentle provocation for the institution in this:

Writers in the field of fxC have urged that the size of the mission task facing the Church of England will require many lay leaders and this is evidence that it is already occurring. The wider Church may need the difficult combination of humility to learn from them, as well as wisdom to give the kind of support, training and recognition that does not lead to any unintended emasculation of their essential contribution. (Page 189)

I note with interest that the correlation of lay-lay leadership with cluster-based churches (Chart 39, page 184)

and its association with discipleship (page 187) demonstrates the crucial role of missional communities (as they are properly understood) in the development of fxC and the Church more widely.

A striking and concerning part of the data is the relative diminution of Ordained Pioneer Ministers (OPMs) with only 2.7% of fxC leaders (Table 76, page 177) being classified as such. In the seminal period of the early 2000's, OPMS were seen as a key innovation for mission development, a long-needed break away from classical clerical formation that was perceived to produce ecclesial clones emptied of their vocational zeal and disconnected from the place and people to which they were called. Anecdotally, our experience is that missional illiteracy is dismally high amongst the current cohort of ordained persons. The traditional academy can do many good things, but the action-reflection-based contextualised formation of OPM more readily leads to the deeper personal maturation upon which adaptive leadership rests.

The absent question in the data on leadership is this: **there is no recognition of couples in leadership.** This is a dismaying oversight. The number of clergy couples would, I suspect, be a growing phenomenon. Similarly, in our experience, much innovative practice (particularly forms of ministry where the home or household is a key component) is led by lay couples. The Church in general, and the Anglican variant in particular, is all but inept when it comes to adequately recognising and supporting couples who lead together. It would seem to me that fxC would be the best place to explore and experiment with what this might look like. To have no relevant data, therefore, is a significant oversight. This is a topic on which I will be writing more.

#3 – Ongoing structural concerns are indicated. Structurally, fxC remain at the periphery. Moreover, while the contribution of fxC *in themselves* can be measured as independent units, more work needs to be done to see fxC as an integral part of

the system.

The headline statistic in this regard is that 87.7% of fxC have no legal identity (Table 91, page 206). The report does well to reflect on how this increases the insecurity of the “continued existence” of an fxC. A more general point illustrates the key concern:

An analogy, designed to provoke further discussion, is that many fxC are in effect treated like immigrants doing good work, who have not yet been given the right to remain, let alone acquired British citizenship. There is active debate about whether they are to be regarded as churches or not but little to nothing is said about giving them rights and legal identity within the Anglican family, unless they can become indistinguishable from existing churches, a move which would remove their raison d’etre... We recommend that this present imbalance of so many fxC having no legal status, and thus no right to remain or not working representation, be addressed. (Page 206)

It has been an aspect of our experience that much is demanded of fxC – Success! True Anglican identity! Numbers! Money! – in order to perpetually justify institutional existence. It’s a rigged game. Existing forms of church happily, and without comment or query, lean upon legal standing, guaranteed livings, central administrative support, legacy bequests, and even the provision of curates/trainees. It has a propensity to keep them missionally infantile. Yet, without this support, are fxC unfairly expected to run before they can even crawl?

I think of the concerning admission that in some cases “numbers of fxC attenders were deliberately not reported in order to avoid parish share, on grounds that these early attenders do not yet make a financial contribution” (page 49).

Even metrics like “attendance” presuppose a structural shape that may not apply, “not counting a wider fringe” (page 57)

and unfairly diminishing the value of fxC.

Perhaps the report's suggestion that a "control group of existing parishes" (page 215) be included in subsequent reports, would go some way to balancing the picture. Such a control group would at least allow a comparison. What would be even more valuable would be a way to assess *integration*, i.e. to consider fxC as part of a system. Two particular aspects of this that are worthy of further consideration are:

1) The nature and need of so-called "authority dissenters."

The report recognises the importance of the diocese within the ecclesial system (page 62). It also points out that "local visions for growth have always been more common than a diocesan initiative, welcome though the latter is" (page 192, emphasis mine). An "authority dissenter" is a person or office that covers and connects new initiatives into the system.

Does the high level of "localness" indicate that such provision is not needed, or that it has not been forthcoming? I suspect the latter.

I have a growing sense that the *deanery* is the ecclesial unit that can most readily provide a covering. Chart 46 (page 194) demonstrates at least some sense of this: Current fxC that are not "in benefice" or "in parish" are far more likely to be "within deanery." The "cluster church" fxC type intrigues me the most – 41% of these are classified as "within deanery."

Deaneries are peculiar ecclesial creatures. When they work, they work. But they generally have limited authority, overstretched leadership, and few resources – almost the exact opposite of the three-self maturity they might want to foment!

Yet they are uniquely and strategically placed between the local and the large to nurture fxC and to protect them from diminution from both above and below as we learn to "think both culturally and by area" (page 96). An exploration of how Deaneries have fitted (or could fit) into the fxC picture would be helpful.

2) The impact on sending and surrounding churches. The report does well to distinguish between the sending team, and the participation of non-churched, de-churched, and churched cohorts. A more detailed picture would be helpful in a number of ways.

Firstly, it would help inform those who are considering being a “sending church.” The cost of an fxC in terms of financial and human resources can often be readily counted. It would also be good to know how to look for benefits, and not just in terms of the kingdom contribution of the fxC itself (i.e. it’s own sense of hoped-for “success”). A sending church is also changed in its act of sending. From a stimulus to looking “outside of ourselves” through to being able to learn from the fxC as a valued “research and development” opportunity, it would good to be able to describe and measure the sorts of blessings that attend to those who generously produce the fxC.

Secondly, it would help inform those who are wary of new kids on the block, so to speak. A typical fear is that an fxC would “steal sheep” away from existing structures, and the zero-sum calculations are made. What data exists that might address these fears? Do fxC have impacts, negative or positive, on existing surrounding ministries? What mechanisms best work to allow mutual flourishing to occur?

Finally, discipleship is key. And some personal thoughts.

The correlation of fxC mortality with “making no steps” in the direction of discipleship (page 208) is well made. The “ecclesial lesson” (page 214) is a clear imperative: “start with discipleship in mind, not just attendance... it should be intentional and relational.” It seems Mike Breen’s adage has significant veracity: “If you make disciples you will always get the church but if you try to build the church you will rarely get disciples.”

To conclude my thoughts, though, it is worth considering **New**

Monasticism. It's a new movement that the report has only just begun to incorporate. "Their focus is on sustaining intentional community, patterns of prayer, hospitality and engaging with mission" (page 222). But here's the interesting part:

More often the instincts for this [new monasticism] are combined into another type of fxC, rather than existing on its own. (Page 222)

I note with interest that the type of fxC with the largest proportion of leaders that had had *prior experience with fresh expressions* is the New Monastic Community (48% – Table 70, Page 166). This intrigues me. As Gill and I continue to have conversations about pioneering and fresh expressions, the longings and callings that we discover in ourselves and in those we converse with, invariably sound like new monastic characteristics. Watch this space.

Pioneering Mission and Authoritative Dissent

It's always great to get in conversation with stimulating people who understand the dynamics of mission in the church and all that's in play and at stake when pioneering is needed. One of the things that happens is that words and phrases get used that state

a concept or an experience that you've always been aware of but have struggled to describe. With new words comes an



opportunity for reflection.

Recently we had cause to reflect on the concept of “dissenter.” It’s in two parts, “**pathfinding dissenter**” and “**authority dissenter**.”

They’re not terms we’ve coined. You’ll find reference to it books such as Arbuckle’s *Refounding the Church: Dissent for Leadership*, which I haven’t read but plan to. It’s in a whole bunch of pioneering ministry material, which you can google for, but which I also haven’t read. All that I say below are my thoughts, capturing our experience through in these terms.

The concept of “**pathfinding dissenter**” is readily grasped.

Everyone understands that for something new to happen there needs to be a form of leadership that is constructively *discontent* with the status quo and simply refuses to agree that the way things are always done is the best way forward. This form of leadership, when done well, pokes and prods, questioning assumptions and the cultural “givens.” The discontent is entered into and wrestled with, preferably in a gathering community of the like-hearted, and a pathway forward is discovered and followed.

To others, it may not look like a path. Indeed, it is sometimes the task of the dissenting explorers to “toss their caps” over an impossibly high wall so they can find their way.

But this is why *dissent* is a good word to use. It’s a disagreement with the presumed impossible, it blazes a trail, it gets new things done.

Gill and I have had the joy of walking with pathfinding dissenters. For us, the phrase was “damn the torpedoes” and for an all-too-brief season it was the way of new things.

It’s the term “**authority dissenter**” that has intrigued me.

But, of course, it makes sense also. The authority dissenter is the one who interfaces between the pathfinder and

organisational structures. *They have authority, and they recognise, release, cover and connect with the constructive pathfinding dissenters.*

They have institutional authority but a pioneering spirit. They also share the same constructive discontent. They also dissent from the cultural presumptions of the status quo. They also understand viscerally that new paths ahead need to be found and forged. And they champion and support the pathfinders, without getting in their way. They take their hands off, create the space, and protect where needed.

An ineffective nerdy analogy perhaps: It's the wisdom of Gandalf, and then Aragorn, who allow the ringbearer and his friends to forge their own path, while they get on with the jobs that need doing and the wars that need waging, all the while watching, believing, and drawing away the enemy fire.

Without the authority dissenter, the pathfinders will still go ahead – the pioneering spirit cannot easily be quenched – but they will do so disconnected. Their task will be harder and the pathfinders will struggle. But most importantly, the organisation will also be disconnected, without a way to follow along the new ways forward, and with a diminished sense of “blessing and being blessed in return.”

The authority dissenter is a permission giver, but of a particular sort. Many effective leaders will hear proposals and the creative ones will give permission to make it happen. But the authority dissenter doesn't just give permission to what can be known (“Go and do what you have said you will do.”), they give permission to the *unknown* (“Go, and may the Lord show you your path.”)

Authority dissenters can cover the pathfinders in all manner of ways, from providing resources, to dealing with and removing bureaucratic overheads, to bringing people into community with one another. They are the champions that

justify the pioneers to whoever sticks their nose in, so that the pioneers are released from the ever-present weariness of having to justify every step (and mis-step) to eagle-eyed naysayers.

And here is an important dynamic: the authority dissenter does not demand primary loyalty. The relationship with pioneers is not that of patron-client. It is a parental-release dynamic.

The analogy is this: I expect a certain high degree of loyalty from my children. But as they forge their own path, those loyalties will rightly and appropriately shift, most clearly towards the formation of their own family.

In pioneering it is the same: as pathfinders scale their walls and go through fire together there will be a mutual loyalty which should not be tampered with. As a pioneer leader passes through trials and moves in the charism that necessarily follows, their chief loyalty will be towards those they serve and serve alongside.

At this point, without an authority dissenter, the organisation will try and claim it's prize, or like a clinging mother-in-law, try to put it in its place and demand its dues.

But the authority dissenter is there to make more room – the space given to the pioneer at the beginning of the journey is now extended to those who have been found at the end and along the way. Because it is clear: the new thing will expand in God's grace, and the old will either move and embrace it, reject and abandon it, or be cracked and broken by it.

The authority dissenter is there to be the point of embrace, taking upon themselves the points where it rubs and wears, mending the cracks, and helping the blessings flow both ways.

Gill and I have had "authority dissenters," whose authority was episcopal. It was a foundational blessing. In other ways, though, we've had to cover ourselves: arching our backs against church machinery that would squash the fragile new

things that were growing. It's wearisome and wrong to run up and down the path, pushing with the pathfinders at one point, pushing back at the machinery at another.

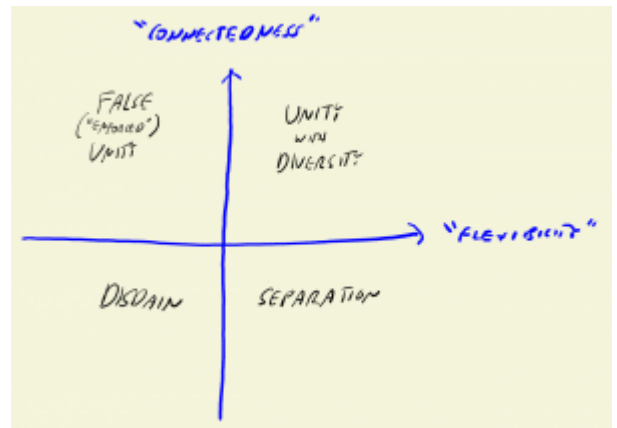
My reflection concludes: The authority dissenter, the cover of the apostolically hearted, is not just important, it is essential. We look for innovative pioneers to push us outwards. But that's not enough. We must also incorporate into ourselves, and give authority to, those who can recognise, release, cover and connect with those who will do what we need to do next.

Unity, Diversity, and Conflict

I've adapted this from a talk I gave a number of years ago in my church-planting days. These were the heady days of the "mixed economy church" and, as a young gung-ho missional fresh-expressioner, I was asked to talk about how the church can draw together both the traditional and the contemporary. At the time, there was a degree of conflict between the "old" and the "new."

I'm thinking about it now because of my current reading about the current issues of conflict. The current issues are epistemological and ethical, rather than missional, but there is still a correlation.

The framework loosely draws on the concepts of *flexibility* and *connectedness*. There are some marriage preparation courses that use these words to look at family of origin issues and modes of how people live together. I'm using them in a modified sense (and perhaps inaccurately) and applying them to ecclesial "family."



The ideal of course is in the upper-right quadrant. Unity is expressed not only institutionally but in true fellowship, and there is a diversity of expression in non-essentials that reveal the gospel in a fulsome and applicable way.

In the bottom-right quadrant we have low connectedness. There is a great deal of flexibility and freedom, and a full range of opinions exists, including much that reveals the gospel.

Often these things are manifest independently and inefficiently. This is chaotic, but it can be creative, as we shall see.

In the bottom-left quadrant we have the worst of both worlds.

There is low flexibility, but also low connectedness. The things that bind are more bureaucratic than anything else. At the same time differences are not well tolerated. This is a toxic situation marked by disdain.

The top-left quadrant has high connectedness, but low flexibility. This is not unity so much as *uniformity* and people are held together by some form of rigidity. This form of unity has a sense of compulsion, or at least obligation, and is therefore a false or "enforced" unity.

Conflict often lies in this top-left quadrant. Why? If there were less connectedness then the parties wouldn't care about each other enough, or interact with each other enough, for the

conflict to foment. If there were more flexibility then differences could be accommodated.

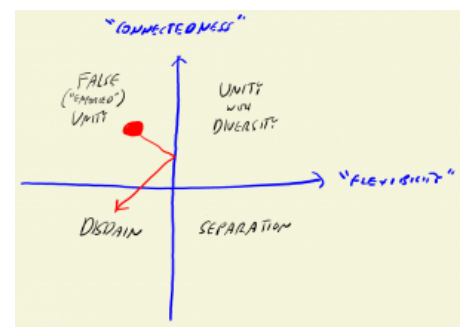
This is a possible way of looking at the current situation, which is manifest on matters of sexual ethics but actually runs deeper to fundamental matters of worldview. Anglicanism is still *connected* – at the very least (and it is much more than this) by an episcopacy, a shared geography, by history, and by formularies and legal standing. It is very clearly a broad church with a great deal of diversity of expression.

But there is a point of inflexibility: an articulated, inherited, and (many would argue) *necessary* restriction on matters of doctrine and practice.

The rub of it is this. Conflict makes us insecure about unity. We therefore try and get to the happy quadrant of “unity and diversity” by emphasising what holds us together.

But at this point unity and inflexibility are interlinked. We end up with paradoxical behaviour – we try and allow flexibility by inflexible means.

In my original context of missional expression this looked like diversity-by-management and showed the problem of “high control, low accountability” which brings new expressions to a painful and grinding halt. The attempt to get from the left-top quadrant *directly* to the right-top quadrant is therefore fraught. It’s a “hard wall” transition, and the likely result is a rebound to a worse situation in which both diversity and unity are diminished.



Rather, the road to “unity in diversity” is achieved more effectively by *loosening* the connectedness, and offering freedom, even a degree of separation. This allows room for the diversity to manifest itself. In the missional context, it gives space for a new expression to “find itself” in God, to work out its vision and communal life, and so be blessed.

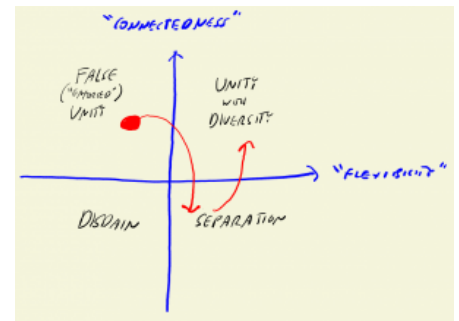
Moreover, as the diversity grows, free of connectedness, there can be a *discovery* of things held in common.

Upon this common ground a unity can be explored and expressed, resulting in a life-giving “unity in diversity.”

Connectedness increases without reducing flexibility, and the result is good.

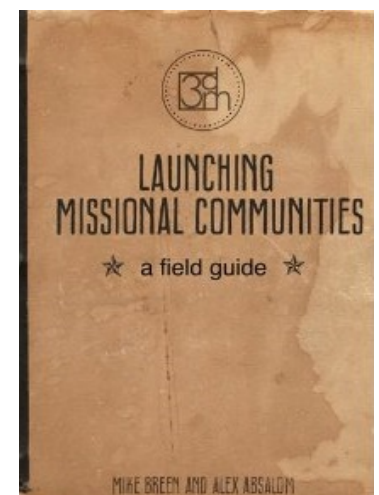
In sum, the “conflict” is resolved by letting go, offering freedom, and then seeking to restore unity from a place of possible separation.

In the current troubles, I wonder if this is the shape of a way forward. Rather than grasping at unity, allow freedom, recognising that that freedom may include at least some element of *separation*. From that place of honesty and freedom, the common ground can then be re-explored, and expressed in a mutually appreciated way.



Review: Launching Missional Communities: A Field Guide

I’ve finally read this book. Those who know me will wonder why. After all for many years I was the leader of a church plant that had the hallmarks of the “Missional Community” brand. But at that time I hadn’t heard of the movement, although it was there amidst that heady mix of the 00’s which sparked up buzzwords like Fresh Expressions, Emergent, Emerging,



Reformation, and had voices that sounded like Graham Cray, Rob Bell, Mark Driscoll, John Piper, Brian McLaren, and a bunch of others who tapped the Gen X energy as it came of age: as we set our sights, gritted our teeth, and pushed on with our vocation, irrespective of whether the baton had been passed on or not.

And we learned some things. My wife and I certainly did. Although we never got to writing them down. We were (are?) too busy recovering.

But someone else did write them down. And they wrapped them up in a phrase called “Missional Communities” and blew away some of the chaff, and distilled the principles. And this handy little practical book is an excellent summation of it all.

The authors (Mike Breen & Alex Absalom) are clearly trying to avoid our natural tendency to fad-ism. This is the danger of “Missional Communities” – that it becomes a program that is a hit in a few places, helpful in others, and fades quickly away everywhere. Normally the only way to avoid this is steer away from the “how” and stick to articulating the principles. But this is a “field guide” – they have to do both without collapsing the organic heart into some form of methodology. They do a good, but imperfect, job at this.

They do a very good job at articulating some of the **principles** of missional communities. This is the stuff that stirs my heart.

- The term “Missional Community” encapsulates “mid-sized communities, led by laity, [which] are ‘lightweight and low maintenance’, and most often gather formally and informally numerous times a month in the groups’ missional context.” (p18, see also p 124). More importantly, it is this form of organic community that is most readily effective at growing the kingdom,

particularly in the Western World. It is *small enough care, large enough to dare*.

- MC's are organic and seek to tap into a "welling up" of a mutual passion. But they remain deliberate, and holistically led. They do this within and through a culture of *discipleship*. This is the muscles of church leadership that is often ignored in favour of the administrative "bones" – leaving heavy carcasses that cannot move. The "huddle" model of discipleship (I hate the term, but like the concept) incorporates both horizontal (peer) and vertical forms of discipleship.

The culture of "low control, high accountability" is *essential*, particularly in church systems which have become dominated by the line-management corporate-space idols of the last century. Even the corporate sector is moving away from this, and the church remains stuck.

The authors quote from a Harvard Business Review article:

'We have found that contrary to what many CEOs assume, leadership is not really about delegating tasks and monitoring results; it is about imbuing the entire workforce with a sense of responsibility for the business.' They [the HBR authors] call this mutualism, whereby staff are measured against qualitative values such as trust, responsibility, and innovation. (p 55)

- MC's both express and encourage a cultural shift from static programs to dynamic mission. Programs, demographics, models, professionalism, and decision-making processes remain important. But such things become self-referential and stultifying. Enlivening happens, rather, in transitioning processes, discernment, on-the-ground context awareness, passion and discipleship (see p26). Such enlivening is naturally holistic and therefore naturally breaks down the secular/sacred divide and other curses of the Western church.
- MC's do not replace the "wider" church but are a natural

structure within it, and a deliberative structure that can be embraced. It embraces a “space” (p 42ff) that has, historically, been absent from the church – that of the size of an “extended family.” The church has operated in the “public space,” and since the advent of small group ministry, the “personal space” – it thus expresses “corporate” and “individual.” But it has ignored the “social space” – what Breen and Absalom call the *oikos* (household – p33) space – the “community” space which naturally connotes a longing for “belonging” in the Western world.

- The *outward* movement of MC’s relies on discernment and discipleship before it relies on strategy and management. Absalom and Breen make reference to “Persons of Peace” (p 38) as the hub of their mission dynamic. This relies on the Holy Spirit to bring about the natural connection points where the gospel will find traction. MC leaders are disciplined as they are encouraged to exercise this discernment. It is naturally “organic” and:

the church grows best through natural organic relationships, rather than through institutional structures. The invigorating part of the Person of Peace strategy is that it stops mission being yet another thing to cram into our busy lives. (p 39)

There are many chunks of wisdom throughout the book. Many of these articulate some of the things that have been unearthed in my own practical experience. e.g. The “out” of mission builds community and grows the church – “There is nothing like shared battle stories (and battle scars!) to enhance a community’s sense of togetherness, so the very action of going out in mission strengthens the group’s life with one another” (p 32). The practicalities articulated in the latter are the same – how to exercise a teaching ministry in such a context, the role of children at the missional front, venues for

meeting, smaller groups within the larger group, the manner of exercising pastoral and practical care: these are questions that we have had to wrestle with over the years and have arrived at similar conclusions.

While many of the points in the book were articulations that expressed something I already knew (even if I hadn't articulated it yet), I was still extended. The chapter on "spaces" (p42) has some good things to explore for teasing through what the role of the "Sunday" church is and how the organic messiness of MC's can still be made coherent and coordinated. Breen and Absalom talk about "minster" models and I particularly appreciate the recognition of the celebratory (worship) and commissioning/apostolic role of the centre.

There are parts of the book that don't resonate with me. I am not convinced by their launch strategy of pilot MC followed by "launch Sunday" and the implied wholesale of converting an entire church to participation in MC's. Perhaps the quote from Machiavelli (p 78) warned me off! For me their launch strategy cuts across the "welling up" "organic" nature that is the life of the whole thing. I think it would be better to start with discipleship – that is, begin by discipling the leaders of "MC" size groups that already exist, or of leaders that have a passion for an outward mission that has some legs, and encourage, train and release them. This "infection" method of cultural change is in my experience much more effective, reduces unnecessary risk of disillusionment, and avoids the fad-ism.

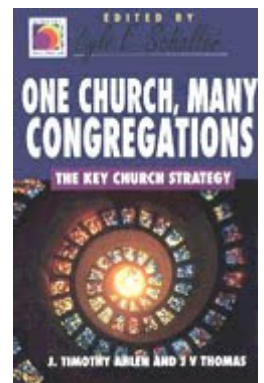
Similarly, the "Growing your MC" section (p109) seems to speak more to the tools of the trade than to the heart of the matter. The variation of the Engel's scale that is employed leans more towards those on the fringe (and the People of Peace) being treated as targets in themselves, rather than objects of genuine love. Like other tools (e.g. Bolt's *Mission-Minded*) there is no natural space for worship

and communal adoration and runs the risk of making the mission of the Missional Community overly-utilitarian in nature.

The whole thing still excites me though. This vision of how the church can be still gets a “Yes and Amen” from my slightly less youthful lungs. And the various forms of ecclesial inertia that frustrate this vision now sadden me more than frustrate me. The long goodbye of the non-missional church is almost upon us. We will grieve and bury our parents, and help to launch our children. And Christ will be known in our season.

Review: One Church, Many Congregations

One Church, Many Congregations is a fascinating little book. Written from an American Baptist context it explores what the authors call the “Key Church Strategy.” While the book is very closely tied to this strategy and occasionally assumes some familiarity with both the Strategy and its associated material and jargon, it does put forward some sound principles for revitalising church through mission.



The fundamental premise is this – that “the most effective – and often the lowest cost – way to reach new generations... with the gospel of Jesus Christ is through new worshiping communities.” (Page 11). Unashamedly, **“The most effective form of evangelism is church starting.”** (Page 135). Here is a holistic view of evangelism that avoids utilitarian and overly-pragmatic views on the most efficient ways of winning

souls. It recognises that not only do people (as in persons) reach people for Jesus but people (as in congregations) are necessary to reach people for Jesus. The idea is this – if you want to grow the church, plant and nurture new congregations and missions.

While it's never explicitly spelled out (something of a frustration) it appears that the Key Church Strategy revolves around breathing life into old churches through enabling that church to plant other churches or satellite ministries. In their chapter on "Foundations" the authors look towards NT history to pattern a model of evangelism-by-church-planting.

The most useful thing they extract from the biblical pattern is the "Indigenous Principle." Having already illustrated the idea earlier when talking about an outreach to a local apartment community in which "a pastor from the community" is "enlisted and trained" (Page 23) it is explained:

"The indigenous missions principle states that congregations are healthier and more productive, and require little or no outside support, when started and developed in the context of the socioeconomic condition and culture of the people who are to be evangelized or congregationalized." (Page 32)

Here we see the holistic nature of the Strategy: we find mentoring and leadership-development at the heart of mission and evangelism. They include the exhortation to "Teach members of the church planting teams to replace themselves by enlisting residents indigenous to the target community and teaching them to be leaders." (Page 35). Without knowing the strategy, this is the sort of thing that has been happening at Connections and which needs to happen further if we are to build significantly onto some of the inroads we are making, as a community, into different socioeconomic groups.

The insights are not restricted to the churches being planted but fundamentally to the church doing the planting. The

authors see the role of the Key church as *sponsorship* or *partnership*:

"...sponsorship is a partnership between the new church the new church congregation and the established church. Each partner supplies some expertise and resources needed to begin and grow a new church... The goal of sponsorship is for the sponsoring church's presence to decrease as the new congregation grows. The sponsor can call itself successful if it works itself out of a job." (Page 37)

This stuff is dear to my heart and of great relevance to myself as I consider my own ministry of context of the Parish of Burnie where we find ourselves multi-congregational and needing to implement changes in governance and other structures that recognise this sort of partnership and allow a network of partnerships to emerge. The structure they put forward (a "Key Church Council") would not readily apply to my context, but the principles are sound: "A necessary part of any church ministry strategy is the establishment of an organizational structure that will do more than simply meet and make decisions. Good organizational structures facilitate ministry, not merely debate it." (Page 53). That's close to home.

For the potential "Key Church" the idea is that revitalisation comes through embracing a willingness to invest internally by focussing externally. The vision is not a myriad of uncontrollable, resource-draining programs hanging of an old structure – but genuine outreaches that aspire to the "three-selves" of maturity (self-supporting, self-governing, self-extending). Even when there is ongoing connection with the centre (in the so-called "Indigenous Satellite Strategy") and the outreach remains a "permanent part of the sponsoring church" (Page 79), the aspiration is still towards this sort of maturity, and to a mutual understanding that "the resources are in the harvest" (Page 81) and that there is blessing in

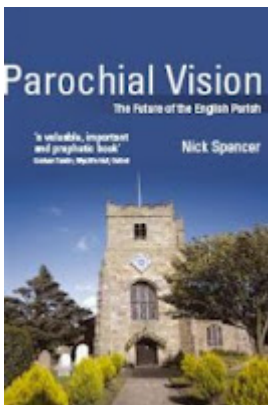
investing in a number of demographically homogenous units that allows the church network as a whole to be a heterogeneous community (see Page 83).

There are numerous practical suggestions. From a list of “temptations to avoid” when enlisting a core group (Page 114) to guidelines in the appendix that run to detail such as financial arrangements (“tithes and offerings should be pooled and a separate checking account opened in the name of the new congregation.” (Page 132))

Like all ministry-management books it is never a direct match for one’s own context that can be directly copied. But there is decades of experience here in a model of doing church and growing the kingdom that beats close to my own heart and the necessary direction for our own church. I’m glad to have had a glimpse and pray to know the same wisdom in the here and now. And it is stirred me to not simply be content with ensuring the church machine continues to tick over, but seeing it accelerate.



Review: Parochial Vision



I had heard of Nick Spencer’s *Parochial Vision* because it has come up as an input into the strategic plan for the Diocese of Tasmania. One of the aspects of the plan is the exploration of a so-called “Hub” model and other ways of reenvisioning Anglican structures for doing ministry in this state. The plan has drawn support from Spencer’s key purpose of reappropriating the historic “minster” model.

"This book is a contribution... It looks at the parish system that has dominated the English landscape for a thousand years and proposes a new approach based on the system out of which parish churches grew." (Pages xii-xiii)

There is a deep exploration to this purpose. Unlike other books I have read recently Spencer gives a thoroughly enjoyable and graspable insight into English church history. This made the book an excellent take-with-me-on-planes-and-trains book for my travels last week.

The first two chapters give an excellent overview of the rise of the parish model – essentially a model for ministry shaped around dividing a region into smaller and smaller heavily demarcated areas in which an individual minister has the so-called cure of souls.

In this overview Spencer has a rhetorical intent and he presents some of the perhaps-less-than-honourable reasons for the genesis of the parish model with its benefices and rights of tithe etc. He makes comparison with methodist and non-conformist post-reformation models and so demonstrate the inherent flaws in the parish model. This leads into the consideration of the industrial and post-industrial eras in the second chapter that leaves us seeing the cracks in the edifice held together only by the fact of the English church's establishment.

"At the turn of the twenty-first, the Church matters less in people's lives than it has done at any time over the past 1,000 years. Most people neither know nor care which parish they are resident in... For 500 years, the parish had been a natural community in rural areas. It may have originally been a secular unit, it may have evolved in the most ad hoc manner, there may have been a multitude of stresses and strains that twisted and tweaked the structures here and there, but the power of authority kept it in place..."

“The deep roots that have kept the parish structure alive for so much longer than might have been predicted a century ago are also the reason why, ultimately, it cannot survive.”
(Pages 56-58)

Spencer suggests the *minster model* as a solution. In pre-modern pre-Parish times, within the celtic foundations of the English Church, these were “communal churches” (Page 69). Not yet a nation of Roman-esque Christendom, England had not been fully converted, and not able or ready to be split into small ecclesiastical and bureaucratic “parish” regions. Rather, minster churches – large churches with relatively larger regional affiliations (*parochiae*) – acted as “missionary churches, whose task was to educate the people in the faith just as much as it was to pastor to them or administer the sacraments.” (Page 73)

“Anglo-Saxon minsters became centres for missionary activity from which small groups ventured out into the nominally Christian but often culturally pagan territory which surrounded them, and preached and ministered from bases established within local settlements, such as stone crosses in villages... at which local devotions would be performed.”
(Page 74)

The parallels with a post-Christian western world are clear (see Page 95) and Spencer suggests a number of related reasons for a “return to minster churches” (Page 83) including social, ecclesiastical and historical aspects.

He speaks of the benefit of “collegiality” (Page 107) in having larger team-ministered regions rather than many single-minister parishes. He promotes a synergistic balance between having *local* ministries supported by the resources of a *larger* unit able to bring training and encouragement and providing other aspects of large-scale spectacle and collaboration. He recognises the outcome of the myriad reports and experiments

over the years and sees minsters as their end. One thing he draws out from, for instance, is a consideration of a cooperative arrangement of small groups, team-lead local public congregations, and a larger “local church government” level (Page 138). He even begins, in the last chapter, to tentatively suggest some practical ways in which minster model regions may be begun.

I am a supporter of our diocese’s strategic plan. My region, in North-West Tasmania is strongly in need of, and ideally placed for, a reimagining of itself as something akin to the minster model. We are not the same as the Church of England, but many of the problems – particularly with regard to nominalism and inefficient parochial insularities – are replicated here. It would work: a cooperative structure that embraces brother collegiality and individuality – common and particular expressions of a general mission – where congregations (some currently existing as parishes) can walk together, doing the good things of old and exciting new things as well.

Sometimes I disagree with the detail of what Spencer suggests as a way forward – nitpicks about the meaning of membership, the focus of financial arrangements etc. – but these are all peripheral to Spencer’s main purpose. The parish structure now hinders the church from being the church. A minster/hub/network model looks better.

Time to make it happen.



Leadership Loneliness

Insightful post at the Resurgence:

Almost every lead pastor I know deals significantly with loneliness. I think the struggle is even more difficult for church planters...

Church planters and pastors must make biblical, life-giving community a real priority. Proverbs 18:1 says, "Whoever isolates himself seeks his own desire; he breaks out against all sound judgment." As pastors, we cannot buy the lie that we don't need the community our people need. Our enemy, the Devil, loves it when church planters/pastors isolate themselves. We become easy prey when we try to stand alone. Our wives and children become easy prey when we try to make them stand alone. Build a strong community for your family.

