

Side-by-side in the Minefields

In the light of yesterday's post it seemed appropriate to repost this video:

Gill discovered this song on our 15th anniversary. We were 19 and 21 the year we got engaged...

We're hoping to see Andrew performing in the UK later this year.

Priscilla & Aquila Today? – Supporting Side-by-side Leadership

In the early 50's AD, the apostle Paul travelled from Athens to the city of Corinth and commenced his ministry there. As he arrived, Acts 18 records one of those divine appointment moments.



...Paul left Athens and went to Corinth. There he met a Jew named Aquila, a native of Pontus, who had recently come from Italy with his wife Priscilla, because Claudius had ordered all Jews to leave Rome. Paul went to see them, and because he

*was a tentmaker as they were, he stayed and worked with them.
Act 18:1-3 NRSV*

We're not told how Paul came to know of them, but he *seeks out* a "Jew named Aquila" and his wife Priscilla. He shares in their tentmaking business venture, he joins their household, and they work together in gospel ministry. These companions of Paul are invariably referred to as *a couple*. They are "Priscilla and Aquila" or "Prisca and Aquila."

Priscilla and Aquila accompany Paul when he leaves Corinth (Acts 18:18). They part ways in Ephesus (Acts 18:19) as Paul travels on to return to Jerusalem. In Ephesus their *leadership* role is clear. When it happens that Apollos arrives in Ephesus, Priscilla and Aquila offer him both hospitality and *guidance*:

*He began to speak boldly in the synagogue. When Priscilla and Aquila heard him, they invited him to their home and explained to him the way of God more adequately. Acts 18:26
NRSV*

Paul sends them greetings when he writes his letter to the Romans. He refers to them as ones who "work with me in Christ Jesus" (Romans 16:3) to the point of risking their lives. Tradition has it that they were martyred together upon returning to Rome.

What an intriguing couple! They are lovers, co-workers, co-ministers. We do not know if they had their own children, but they certainly opened their home and hearth and "parented" (as it were) some of the leaders of the church.

Priscilla and Aquila are indeed a *side-by-side* team, in it together, and always spoken of together. We know of many couples who would seem to be of a similar kind. Gill and I are a couple in ministry. And, while we don't want to

inappropriately lay claim to Priscilla and Aquila, they are before us as an example and something of an inspiration.

So what can we learn from them? How can we think about this sort of side-by-side ministry in our own times? It's something we want to explore more.

To explore it, we need to define it, or at least to describe it:

1. We are talking about couples, **married couples**. There are other duos in Scripture who minister together – e.g. Peter and John (Acts 3-4), Paul and Barnabas (Acts 13), Paul and Silas (Acts 16). These partnerships exhibit synergies and complementarities, but for Priscilla and Aquila there is a sense in which the charism extends to the marriage identity also. What I mean is this: when we consider Paul's apostolic ministry we can conceive of it not just in terms of *function* but of *person*; he *embodies* the gospel in a 2 Corinthians 4 sort of way. With Priscilla and Aquila that *embodiment* extends to who they are as a married couple and is expressed in their relationship and their home. Their *family* is apostolic in this sense; it certainly was for Apollos.
2. We are talking about **something other than "I'm right behind you" partnerships**. By this we mean the form of partnership where either husband or wife (or both) releases the other into their individual ministry. This is much more than the unfortunate stereotype of housewife looking after the children so that a Reverend Gentleman can be about the "the Lord's work." We know husbands and wives who self-sacrificially provide the financial, familial, and moral support necessary for the other to be released into ministry. This is genuine partnership and of great value. The demarcation might be blurry, but the side-by-side partnership of Priscilla and Aquila in home, work, and ministry seems to be

distinct from this by more than just a matter of degrees. They are released into *their* shared ministry.

3. What we are talking about is perhaps indicated by the increasing phenomenon of couples who are both ordained but **this is not just about ordination**. We know some ordained couples who minister effectively apart, as individuals, in entirely separate contexts. We know lay couples who operate side-by-side, and similarly couples where there is a difference in ordination or institutional training or recognition. We know side-by-side couples who are remunerated differently, and often inequitably. Institution finds it hard to recognise or respond to them, rather, the side-by-side togetherness often derives from a deeply shared journey in the real world.

The subjective indicator is this: when we think of a couple who minister among and with God's people, do we first think of "X" and "Y" or do we first think of "X and Y" together? As an exercise, Gill and I went through our experience, naming those who we thought of in this way. Invariably they have blessed us. Priscilla and Aquila, side-by-side, exemplify the people that we were thinking about.

Church History is usually a useful discipline to consider methods and manners of ministry; there is nothing new under the sun and we can learn from those who have gone before. But in this case, it is more difficult. The predominant influencers in early and medieval church history are mostly unmarried, and usually men. Perhaps Martin and Katharina Luther are an exception and mark a turning point, although they are rarely spoken of in the same breath. Early Protestantism through the 17th and 18th Centuries record male leaders who are married, but there is no sense of them being together in ministry. Both Wesley and Whitefield had unhappy marriages, unsurprising given their treatment of their wives.

It's not until the 19th Century that there is a clear emerging sense of partnership. William & Catherine Booth are often described as founder and "mother" of the Salvation Army, and similarly Hudson & Maria Taylor with respect to the China Inland Mission. In the 20th Century, the number is beyond counting (although Loren & Darlene Cunningham, founders of Youth With A Mission are a personal favourite of mine). The 20th Century might correlate with the advent of Pentecostalism, but I suspect other cultural shifts as well.

Question for feedback: *Can you think of side-by-side couples in Christian history?*
Let us know in comments or contact me.

So, on the face of it, we have a fundamental form of vocation that has biblical precedent and contemporary reality, but with little historical understanding or reflection. So how do we offer support to couples who are in ministry in this way? What issues do they face?

Some of the issues are **internal**:

Nearly everyone wrestles with vocational questions: Who am I? What is this God-given gospel-shaped passion, longing, yearning, that calls me forward? How refined and redeemed is it? What selfishness and sin does it feed when I do not approach it in submission and surrender? How must I lay it down? How must I cling to it in fervent faith?

The same questions come to the side-by-side couple. They must wrestle with them as individuals, but also together: Who are we? What is this God-given gospel-shaped passion, longing, yearning that calls us forward, together – which neither of us can follow on our own? How refined and redeemed is it? How do we express it healthily or unhealthily? How do we lay it down? How do we cling to it?

It's often a journey of discovery. In our ministry life Gill and I have had to learn to be close: drawing boundaries,

negotiating the wedge issues, laying down self and individual ambitions not just for the sake of the other, but for the sake of “us together.” We have also had to learn to be open: letting others in so that we’re not a “closed shop” but are properly connected with the wider body, and freeing each other so that we can grow as whole individuals. It involves a lot of emotional and relational risk! But that’s the stuff of life.

We have had mentors and helpers on this journey. However, there are few general resources to draw upon.

Some of the issues are **external** to the couple:

Institutional systems simply don’t cope well with couples. It’s true with secular systems (e.g. tax and immigration) and so it is in ecclesial institutions. Generally speaking in mainstream institutions: Individuals, not couples, are selected for ordination (the least effective selection processes give little consideration to the marriage relationship, most give some). Individuals, not couples, are authorised for ministry. Individuals, not couples, are remunerated (and usually only one of them).

There are exceptions, often torturous. We know of a ministry couple who were able to argue for remuneration for the wife’s contribution to the work of the church, but only after the husband was formally released to attend to an external ministry part-time. We know of a large parish in which the ministry team structure slowly evolved to recognise what was actually the case: the vicar *and his wife* were placed in the same location in the team diagram, an internal document.

There are misconceptions. One of the most deflating comments that side-by-side couples hear is, “Ah, two for the price of one!” It’s usually well-meant but not helpful. The “price” of a minister to an organisation isn’t just about money – it’s about giving that minister understanding, support, and an appropriate voice – a *place* in the family. “Two for the price

of one” usually means one or ‘tother, and therefore both together, are not going to have that place. Underneath it is, “thanks for tagging along.”

Of course, some institutional wariness is warranted. There are unique issues relating to family welfare, safeguarding, and professional supervision. Of course, there are also couples who are vocationally broken, co-dependent and operating out of injury reflect a negative synergy; there are couples who internalise all decision-making and exclude those who should have a voice; there are couples who are inconsistent, double-minded, and you’re not sure where you stand with them; there are couples who haven’t done the vocational and emotional work. But all of that can be said of individuals also.

So how do we help institutions respond to side-by-side couples, and how might we support and help such couples with these internal and external issues? This is something we want to explore.

To that end, if you are a couple in ministry, **we would love to hear your story**. What follows are some questions that might help you tell it. If you are able to, please contact me, we would love to hear from you. We would also love to hear from you if you have experience of a side-by-side couple in ministry, maybe as a co-worker, a church volunteer, but especially as a *child* of such a couple.

TELL US YOUR STORY

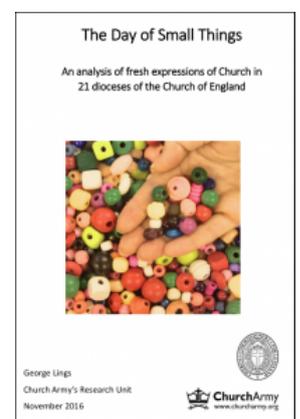
1. *Please give us an outline of your story. What is your history, individually and as a couple? Where are you located now?*
2. *How much do you see yourselves side-by-side in ministry like Priscilla and Aquila? Do you agree with how we’ve described it here?*
3. *How do you describe your vocation/call/purpose, individually and together?*

4. *What have you learned about being together as a couple/family in ministry, but also maintaining your individual identity and vocation? How did you learn those things?*
 5. *What have you encountered that has frustrated you as a couple in ministry? What support have you found?*
 6. *Please let us know how confidential you would like your story to remain: i.e. don't divulge anything, share anonymously, happy to have it shared in full etc.*
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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-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 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.