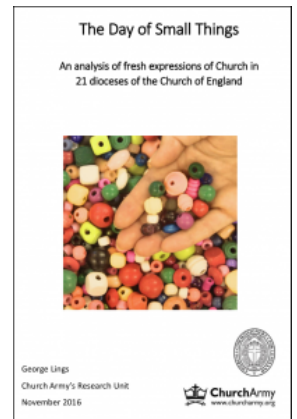


Review: The Day of Small Things – An Analysis of Fresh Expressions of Church...

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 & evangelism department has published a fresh expressions survey report. The report is available in full on the website of the mission & evangelism department.

1. Mission & evangelism is the Church's primary purpose. It is the Church's responsibility to share the Good News of Jesus Christ with all people. This is done through the preaching of the Word, the sacraments, and other means of grace.

2. A fresh expression of Church is a new, self-sustaining, self-replicating community of faith that is not a traditional parish or mission.

3. Fresh expressions are created in response to the needs of the community and the mission of the Church.

4. Fresh expressions are created in response to the needs of the community and the mission of the Church.

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15. Fresh expressions are created in response to the needs of the community and the mission of the Church.

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.