Church Army's research unit

TSC Research Bulletin; Summer 2012

Fresh expressions of Church in Liverpool

The Church of England needs harder facts about fresh expressions of Church (fxC). Stories rightly inspire, but cannot give an accurate bigger picture to inform decision making. The Sheffield Centre was set up by Church Army as a gift to the wider Church to discern patterns and trends in its ongoing mission. We have set out to begin to plug this gap. We are working diocese by diocese asking what fresh expressions there are, where they serve, why they began, who and how many they reach. Liverpool Diocese were very co-operative and this is our first report.

By the end of March 2012, data from 132 of 134 known examples had been gathered and analysed. In all cases there was a phone call with the nominated leader of the fxC or in some cases the incumbent who knew the story well.

The results contain many signs of hope, as well as intriguing patterns and doubtless further questions for qualitative study by others. There are also the questions of how the leadership in the diocese want information shared and what further work needs to be done from this data set. The results were shared with members of the Liverpool Church Growth team in May.

What was included and excluded

Following personal contact with all cases, it was sobering that as many as 58 examples were agreed with respondents should not be included. The basis was our pre-existing ten criteria used to assess all cases. We think this indicates the lack of clarity that exists nationally around what counts as a fresh expression, not any local intention to deceive or to over-claim.

Those **excluded,** we divided further into five categories. (Subsequently for Canterbury we have had to invent a further classification [NY] for examples being planned, but *not yet* started.)

Arch (A - 11 cases)
Either steps toward, or onwards from a fxC, but not an fxC in itself.
Died (D - 7 cases)
Died, or put down. A few lived under 2 years and so were not recorded.
Infrequent (I - 5 cases)
Meeting less than monthly so unlikely to build a sense of community.
Double (2 - 1 case)
Double entry in the data given because of a name change over time.
Not fxC (N - 34 cases)
This category contained a variety of other things (see below).

The 'N' group was made up of a wide mixture of categories: re-badged existing services, outreach projects to bring newcomers back to that local church, one off or regular social events, examples of chaplaincy, clubs for children without ecclesial intent and work-place based discipleship with no ecclesial intent. All of these have value, but are not fresh expressions of Church.

To the surprise of some, we **included** church plants, which *Mission-shaped Church* listed as one type of fresh expression of Church. We concur with this reasoning and have taken 1992-2012 as our period of research. 1992 is the year that saw the setting in motion of the report *Breaking New Ground* that brought church planting to the attention of the wider Church of England in 1994.

We also included a handful of examples that died in the year of examination or in the last few years as their data contributes to the overall picture from 1992-2012. But attendance at the older died examples are not included in attendance figures given.

Thus 78, the 59% majority, qualify and all but four are ongoing. Compared to 202 parishes, the number cited

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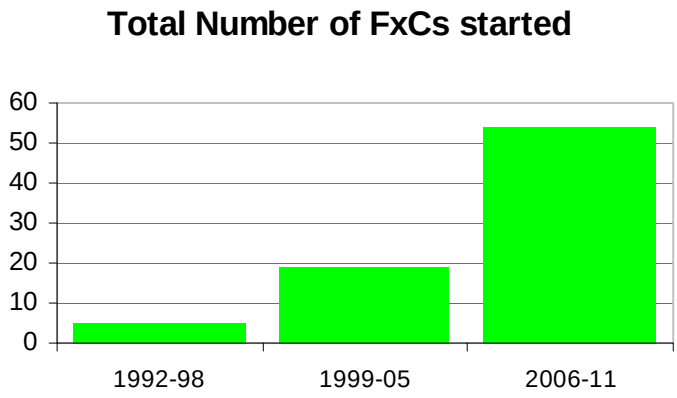
in the national Church Statistics 2010/11 for Liverpool, this is a sizeable aspect of diocesan life. The proportion of fresh expressions of Church compared to parishes is 38.6%. If compared to the number of churches, which might be a closer comparison, that proportion is 30.4%. Either way, about a third of the ecclesial bodies in the diocesan family are current or recent fxCs.

This may come as a surprise and counters the sense that fresh expressions of Church are but peripheral to the life of the Church of England. We do not assert that this proportion is true nationally but in this case it is.

Some Headlines

A growing trend

54 were begun between 2006 and 2011, whereas only 19 between 1999 and 2005, showing a clear increase in the rate at which this trend has been happening.



A wide variety of kinds

- We listed 19 different kinds of fxC to select from and all were represented
- Only 13% are strictly in the *Messy Church* stable, compared to a higher national impression
- All those that have a major focus on children, when added together, are 36% of cases
- There is an overlap between these and with those which are deliberately All-Age of 63%
- Those designed only for adults are 21%
- Those designed for people somewhat shut in through infirmity/old age make up 8%

What and whom do they serve?

Leaders of the fxCs selected from 11 possible combinations of geographical and social area, from urban to rural. The spread was wide. A quarter nominated UPA, one fifth the suburbs, and just under 20% rural or expanded village locations. Virtually half were in social settings that the Church has historically deemed more demanding. It is clear that these fresh expressions were not mainly focused on suburban middle England. These proportions will vary between dioceses. Here there seems to have been little building of massive new housing estates and resultant engagement with them.

We can compare data of the last few years, broadly in seven year periods, with that from the mid nineties (1992-98) and from prior to the wider impact of *Mission-shaped Church* (1999-2005). It seems in Liverpool that more cases, compared with years ago, are happening in the City Centre and in Rural contexts. The percentage of suburban cases is slowly diminishing, while those in Urban and Urban Priority Areas continue as numerous as before.

Network or Neighbourhood?

86% begun from parishes and their meeting place remained within the sending parish. This could look as though parish structures and boundaries are all that is needed. However the fresh expressions of Church drew people from what was a more complex picture.

We asked what proportion of attendees came from a neighbourhood that was roughly coterminous with the parish, and what proportion came out of wider relational networks. 33% of the cases *intended* that either a majority, or all, their people would come from networks. Yet we found a slightly higher number, 35%, was the *result*.

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In addition there were surprises found between intent and result, working both ways. Here is some hard evidence that network and neighbourhood both matter in the church's mission.

Christians, De- and Non-churched

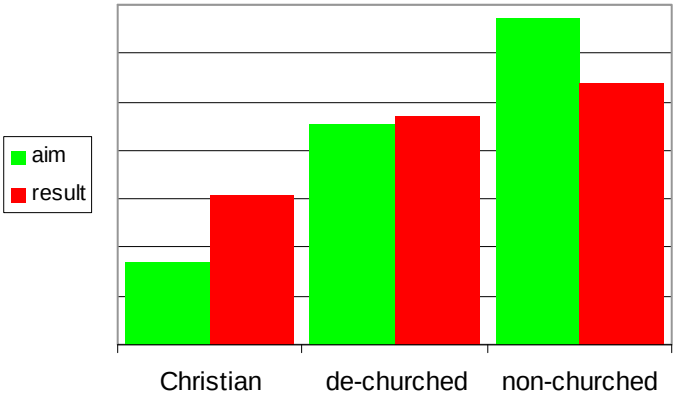
We asked each fxC what was the main group they intended to reach: Christians, De-churched or Non-Churched (the three categories employed in *Mission-shaped Church*). Then we asked them to compare this intention with what happened.

The scoring we offered on a scale of 0-3 is crude. 0 meant not true, 1 a minority reality, 2 the majority and 3 totally true. Such simplicity was chosen because we decided we were limited by what respondents could be expected to know. There were stories of welcome surprises and significant disappointment, with some aspirations that were never met.

The table below scores the totals for intention and also for result across the 3 groups. This showed an overall picture of fresh expressions drawing significantly more Christians than they aimed for, slightly more de-churched than they tried for and a fifth less non churched than they hoped for.

However overall the Christians present is but a quarter of the attendance. It needs to be born in mind that this includes the team members sent to begin the work. From the statistics known of those sent out, the team make up the predominance of Christians present. Then the de-churched are a good third of the overall number and the non-churched make up two in five. The data, in this diocese, contradicts the impression given by some that fresh expressions of Church overwhelmingly attract the de-churched and existing Christians.

Missional effect by background



There is also some early indication that different kinds of fxC connect with different parts of this spectrum. But the sample sizes are very small and data from further dioceses would be needed for comparison.

Attendance figures

Who attends
Their total membership, from 78 cases analysed, is 2,885, being 1,679 adults and 1,206 children, from 481 adults and 91 children sent out. This is more than a four fold return that bears noticing. However in computing the overall impact of these numbers it must be born in mind that 54% of cases meet weekly, 12% fortnightly and 35% monthly.

An affect on the whole
Liverpool's average weekly attendance in 2010 was listed as 27,800. Thus this fresh expressions of Church attendance figure equates to just over 10% of the whole diocese. The number of children and the high proportion of cases intended to be all age communities indicates that the movement has succeeded in attracting families.

Patterns
Two things stand out from the attendance log; this is a sizeable collection of smaller churches, with the average being just under 35. Granted some large exceptions, the normal number is yet smaller. It is also noticeable from longitudinal attendance, which in many cases goes back some years, that most examples quickly grow to a size and then plateau at that point. This data cannot tell what factors operate here but it would be very prudent for the diocese to find out. Factors could include: limited capacity of lay spare time leaders, no suitable public buildings to grow into, lack of a relational fringe in a small congregation, reaching the natural unit size of either particular social groupings, or the choice a particular kind of fresh expression of Church, and the lack of vision or leadership resources to aid reproducing elsewhere.

Leadership

Leadership of fresh expressions of Church in Liverpool is split half and half between Lay and Ordained, with the former including Church Army Evangelists and Readers. What is historically new, compared to other national figures collected from the 1980s and early 1990s, is the rise of the local lay person (36%) without any other ecclesial badge or training. It would be a good further question to know how many of these had been through something like the *Mission Shaped Ministry* course and what plans there may be to support

their ongoing training and leadership. Because in some stories the leadership has changed over time there are more than 78 who have led. 45 leaders are male, 52 are female. 42 are employed full time (though not with all their time devoted to the fresh expression), 22 part time and 26 in their spare time.

The Sacraments

Our team do not think this is the best and certainly not the only measure of being church. But being dominical, the sacraments rightly demands inclusion, at some stage in the maturing of fresh expressions of Church.

46% of the 78 cases have had communion services. 20.5% have held baptisms. It appears that the different kinds of fresh expression either set a different value on this, or it may be that they mature ecclesially at different rates, depending on the people and age group they work with. All Alt worship, Network churches, and nearly all traditional church plants had communion services. A third of Clusters and Network churches baptize, with less among other kinds. Patterns are not clearly established.

Some of the internal dynamics

Motives

Seven options were offered and compared with similar data from 1984-1997. It is less common now for initiatives to be a response to finding an *area* of a parish without easy access to a church, and more likely to be *cultural* factors such as a distinct people group, or the desire to provide increased diversity of ways of being church. The sheer desire to grow was also present.

Ecumenical partnerships

It is clear that none were undertaken as LEPs, and all but 4 were solely Church of England initiatives. The 'Anglican only' proportion is even higher than that noticed 20 years ago. While beyond the scope of this data, perhaps each denomination is taking its own initiatives, although aware of one another and not in competition. It may be in some areas only the Anglicans are left.

Team sizes taken

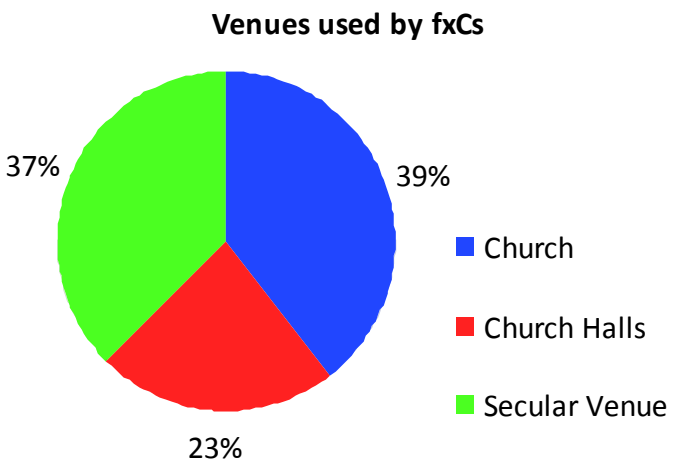
Most teams were small, with 3-13 members being true in 70% of cases. Only 5% had more than 20 team members. The stereotype of the large planting team sent out from a larger church to begin a transplant does not apply in this diocese.

Participating traditions

The traditions of Anglicanism are not evenly split in any diocese. Nor are the traditions always in neat distinction, but are often combined. In these cases those owning an evangelical tradition were 44% of the total, Charismatic Evangelical 19%, with 19% selecting Central, often combined with either Evangelical or Charismatic. Catholic examples, combined with other traditions make up 8%. Thus all are represented to some degree.

Locations used

39% of cases used an existing church, 23% a church hall and 37% a secular venue including houses. A few used a mixture of venues, mainly secular. Thus 60% of fxC are not in the parish church, but at some distance, culturally or geographically, from it.



Days of meeting

The examples were spread across the week, with only 29% meeting on a Sunday. 66% might be classified as midweek, with 5% on Saturday. This looks like evidence of a desire to fit with local and cultural realties and recognizing the social factors against meeting on Sunday, like sport, work and divided or extended families.

Attempts at discipleship

Leaders were asked if they mentored people 1-1, provided courses, ran groups, or drew people into working teams. Only 20% of cases did none of these and some were very recent starts. 1-1 work and small groups were the most common choices. Here are some indicators that fresh expressions of Church are not merely interested in attendance and are trying to form disciples.

Discipleship is an area of growing concern in all churches and deeper questions of what happens and what works will continue to matter.

Dynamics of mission support

In 9 out of 10 cases support came from the sending parish, which fits with the 86% of cases whose meeting place was still within its boundaries. However, in 10% of cases the leaders had relocated, moving house to some distance away, and it was more like starting from scratch. Unlike some other dioceses there were no cases of 'transplants' and only one that could be termed a 'graft'.

Pioneer-progression features

Leaders were asked to what extent they were responding to a context of admitted church weakness or absence (pioneering), or alternatively building on existing effective presence and strength (progression). Various combinations between the two could be selected, from 0-3 for each option (as with the de- non-churched question), but the single largest group of 40% felt they were completely in a pioneer context, and a further 24% that it was the majority factor. Some sense of risk and adventure is to be celebrated here.

Some conclusions about the method

The data took us nearly 3 months to collect and 2 days to analyse. The time taken in gathering data, which would average 40 minutes per interview, encourages us to assert that the data has an acceptable level of integrity. The limitation has to be partly the accuracy of perception of those interviewed and only closer qualitative work could test this. Also the number of cases examined is a high percentage of the whole, suggesting the teasing out of patterns may be reliable indicators.

Liverpool diocese may have more examples, as a percentage of its total number of churches, than many other dioceses. But equally, it may just be more in touch with what it does have. Yet 20 out of the overall 134 cases were either known only to the Sheffield Centre, or found during the process of research, and did not figure in the material sent from the diocese's 2008 material. Thus some significant growth through planting fresh expressions of Church may be happening underneath the radar.

Church Army's Sheffield Centre is repeating this exercise with other dioceses, applying the same criteria of inclusion, process in collection and analysis. Only then will similarities and differences between dioceses appear.

Now that fresh expressions plants are being discovered and analysed, we will be able for the first time to give a more fully informed indication of their nature of their contribution to overall diocesan growth and decline and the part they play within the mixed economy.

George Lings, 26th June 2012

Produced by The Sheffield Centre
The Sheffield Centre is a research team whose role is to discover, develop and communicate our findings in evangelism and mission to Church Army and the wider Church.

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