



Things that were tried and died

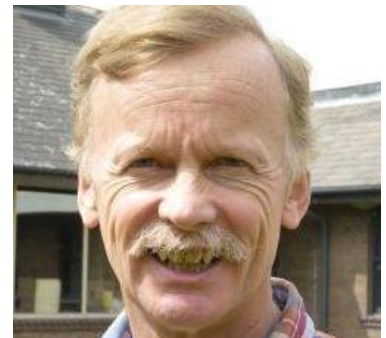
Why do so some young adult mission initiatives die?

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George Lings was Director of Church Army's Research Unit for 20 years until his retirement in 2017. Here he presents the findings of interviews with the leaders of various young adult mission initiatives that have not worked out.

He also reflects on these findings in the light of his wider research experience and offers advice and suggestions about the practical implications.



Churches which were begun to focus on reaching young adults, especially the non-churched ones, are relatively new. Some years on, the Church has found that some have thrived and lasted and some haven't.

For this case study, we looked at 8 young adult fresh expressions of Church (fxC) that were tried and died and asked what lessons can be learned.

This short summary of our findings presents:

- **3 different types** of cause of death
- The **practical implications** for leaders of young adult mission initiatives and leaders in the wider Church
- **Further background** information about the eight initiatives we looked at

Cause of death

From the stories we heard, we have identified three different types of 'cause of death'.

Leadership factors

Stresses on leaders played a large part. 3 people cited burnout. 2 suffered serious marriage difficulties. The lack or loss of team members was cited in half the stories.

After the founder left, all those following were spare time and voluntary. This wasn't enough. A precipitate handover or an externally imposed solution is bad news too.

In two cases, there was the lack of evangelistic gifts or instincts among the leaders.

Having unresolved differing underlying aims is fatal. It results in muddled communication, eroded trust and conflicting priorities.

Mission context challenges

High transience in the context applied to $\frac{3}{4}$ of the cases. It might mean attenders were rehoused by the council, were imprisoned, moved away for jobs, got married and moved, or changed life stage - getting a job or having children. One leader said:

"We failed to be an organic church and change as our members got older."

Jesus' parable of the sower includes 3 out of 4 failures: seeds snatched away, young plants withering for lack of depth, and being choked by competing factors.

Those serving in deprived areas related to this parable. Leaders had to react to inherently chaotic lifestyles, transient populations, exhausting and critical pastoral situations, even dangerous areas needing two people to be present, all of which eroded family life.



Lack of sustainable results in these contexts was discouraging. Candles in the gloom were the minority of lives lastingly changed.

3 examples realised too late that they tried to reach too many different groups. Those that tried to bridge from teens to post-uni graduates and young professionals found it didn't work. One problem was that the teens were disempowered. Another leader said:

“Teens and students have time; the young professionals don't.”

Their discipleship patterns and needs are different.

Wider Church factors

Here we identified a range of factors, including:

- **the mother church recalling the fxC**
- **the loss of key diocesan allies** who had been part of the founding story
- **the appointment of a new incumbent** threatened by the existence of the fXC
- **incomprehension or opposition by other clergy** in the deanery
- **the inability of the sending church to replace a full-time leader** of the fxC

Practical implications

Cardinal factors

From the various death causes we have identified, the following questions and principles stand out of utmost importance:

- **Who exactly is the fresh expression of Church for?** Divergent expectations are deadly.
- **How will the leadership and wider Church know if it is working?** Unrealistic expectations disable.
- **Slim leadership resources invite burnout.**

Advice for leaders

If you want to do something - a young adults mission initiative or fresh expression of Church - you should:

- **Choose the team**

carefully - those with the time, and members with a balance of ministry gifts, including a proven relational evangelist.



- **Have courage:** create a climate open to questions, give young adults their head in leading, foster innovative practice, and face down fears and criticism of others.
- **Discern** whether to go for a mission-shaped community, linked cell groups or a congregation.
- Usually **start by creating community**, then explore faith sharing, from which worship will evolve.
- Consider whether a **venue** is likely to suit the non-churched.
- **Guard your time** - so you can think and discern, and have space to meet unplanned crises.
- Focus on a theology by which **young adults make a difference in God's kingdom and world.**
- **Take the long view** from the start. Raise and mentor emerging young adult leaders.

Things to avoid:

- Unthinkingly **mixing youth work with young adult work** - their maturity, life stages and patterns are very different.
- **Underestimating how transient the 18-30s stage of life is.** People will change and pass through.
- **Starting something when the local vicar, or bishop behind it, is about to move on.**

What the wider Church needs to learn

Whether a young adults mission initiative survives or thrives isn't down its leaders and members alone; the actions (or inactions) of the wider Church also play a part. The key things for leaders in the wider Church to remember from these stories (things that were tried and died) are as follows:

- **Young adult fresh expressions of Church exist to create diverse, connected ways to be church, not swell existing congregations.**
- **Only if the attenders have reasonably paid jobs can financial subsidy be avoided.**
- **Work with young adults is rewarding but inherently stressful** because of transience. This is doubly so in areas of social deprivation. Leaders need tailored diocesan backed support.
- **Work out a viable succession plan** before a founder moves on.
- A diocese, starting a young adult fresh expression of Church in a **deprived context**, should **expect: modest returns, need for long-term support and probably permanent subsidy** (like in some Urban Priority Areas and rural parishes).

Further background

For those who are interested, here is some further background material on the 8 initiatives we looked at that were 'tried but died'.

Where? What? Who? When?

Where: All 8 examples were urban, but they vary from city centre to outer social housing estate. All but one have higher education institutions in the town or city. We are not aware of any rural examples.

Denomination: 7 were Anglican and 1 was part of an independent church.

Date started: They all began between 2003 and 2010. The shortest life span was 4 years and the longest 8. The average was 5.9 years.

Target groups: 18-30s in theory. In practice, any mix of youth, students, young professionals, young parents, NEETs (Not in Education, Employment or Training) and graduates. 18-30s were 60% of attenders. Range: 33%-97%.



Number of people involved (leader's estimate): Only the range matters. 2 were small groups, most were small congregation size and one was over 100.

Staffing: 3 examples had more than one leader over time. 6 were ordained, 4 were authorised lay and 3 were lay-lay. Most of the ordained were stipendiary, but only 2 authorised lay leaders were paid. The lay-lay were all voluntary. The only obvious link between leader status and fxC death is that where full-time founders were followed by voluntary lay, the work became unsustainable.

Teams: All had at least one assistant - mainly voluntary and spare time. A few were locally paid.

Funding: Running costs were low, or met by the sending church. Staffing costs were never met.

Premises: 5 met in secular venues (pubs, local halls, schools). 2 used a church hall and 1 met in church.

Variety and type

In 2013 the Fresh Expressions team published *Authentic Faith*, a booklet by Beth Keith on young adult churches. She examined 12 examples and found at least 5 distinct types happening. There is no one way to do this.

What works for Christian young adults seems different to what engages those who have rejected church or which attracts those without a Christian background.

In 2016, knowing that variety, we looked for similarly varied examples that had been tried and died. The ones we found fell into various categories (some examples were more than one category).

| | |
|---------------------------------------|---|
| Deprived social contexts | 5 |
| Young adult work from a larger church | 4 |
| Existing youth work extended | 2 |

We tried to find a ‘mission-shaped community’ (also known as cluster) that had died, but at present ones we knew of were too fluid and short-lived to easily learn lessons from. Other types of examples only had a minority of young adults. We set those aside.

Context, venue and mission reach

It’s a tiny sample but it points a finger at who comes from where to what.

Leaders of the fresh expressions of Church (fxC) gave us their view of the percentage of non-churched, de-churched and Christian attenders. Notice what they told us about who comes and what venue they come to.

| Type of fxC that died | Average non-churched % | Average de-churched % |
|--------------------------------------|------------------------|-----------------------|
| Young adult fxC from larger churches | 10% | 45% |
| Young adult fxC in deprived contexts | 61% | 15% |

Reaching non-churched young adults, especially in deprived contexts, is a very difficult challenge. Their lives are often chaotic, they have no Christian heritage or values to draw on and they are living through life stage changes that may well include moving.

The wider Church needs to praise these pioneers and realise their work is slow to progress, rollercoaster-like and uncertain in guaranteed outcomes.

| Type of fxC that died | Secular venue | Church hall | Church |
|--------------------------------------|---------------|-------------|--------|
| Young adult fxC from larger churches | 1 | 2 | 1 |
| Young adult fxC in deprived contexts | 4 | 1 | 0 |

The table shows that in deprived contexts and among the non-churched, secular venues are chosen. The one church hall used in a deprived context was already running as a community hub café.

What helped things go well?

Although all 8 examples eventually died, they enjoyed a measure of fruitfulness and effectiveness for a season. Key lessons that emerge from their ‘successes’ are as follows:

- **They all met weekly.** Amid chaotic lives in deprived contexts - or full, last-minute-deciding, many-dimensional lives of 18-30s - weekly works best. One leader said: “We’ll be there whatever and whoever comes.”
- **All of them offered food and drink.** Hospitality and community are foundational and normal in young adult work.
- **All encouraged participation, questions and feedback** in the gatherings and in any small groups. Experts spouting at the front are not the way forward.
- **All tried to develop disciples.** 6 out of 8 had small groups and 5 worked one-to-one. Two were simply groups.
- Some found **communion** was wanted, others had to deliberately avoid it.
- Some took **biblical** and contemporary themes, others worked through biblical books.

“We stumbled onto something good, that ‘the big story’ of Christianity works for young adults.”

Impact on the young adults engaged

All the fxC faced working with transient populations. Many people passed through over the years, making leader's estimates and averages more difficult.

In the examples from the larger churches, the transience could mean that twice as many people had made progress in their faith journey as the average number of attenders. But in the tougher contexts, leaders thought anything between a quarter and a half of the average numbers had made such progress, despite many more coming through for a time.



Over coming to faith, a couple of leaders said none had, one said a few had, 3 said some had and 2 said high proportions of the average numbers. These returns did not make any obvious match with the different social contexts.

We think the variety partly reflects confidence and intentionality among the leaders, to provide distinct opportunities to embrace faith and aiming to work one-to-one with people.

Another leader regretted a lack of clear evangelistic gifts in their team. 6 out of the 8 reported having baptisms, a sign of faith and a degree of commitment.