



## The Fresh Expressions Initiative

### Background

Fresh Expressions was initiated in 2005 by the Archbishops of Canterbury and York with the Methodist Council, but now also involves the United Reformed Church and a number of other partners (see [freshexpressions.org.uk/about/partners](http://freshexpressions.org.uk/about/partners)). The aim is to encourage new forms of church and hundreds of new congregations have been formed alongside more traditional churches. For the first four years, Fresh Expressions was led by the then Revd Dr Steven Croft, now Bishop of Sheffield. The present Archbishops' Missioner and Team Leader of Fresh Expressions is Rt Revd Graham Cray, former Bishop of Maidstone.

The initiative was established as part of the follow-up to the best-selling report, *Mission-shaped Church*, which has recently been reprinted and translated into a number of languages. The team has worked at grass roots level with dioceses, districts synods and groups of churches and has played a leading role in the formation of national policy in a number of denominations.

The Fresh Expressions Board meets eight times a year at Lambeth Palace and governs the organisation and is responsible for raising funds. Its current chair is David Saunderson. The Team Leader reports to the Board and to the Archbishops.

Alongside the team leader there is a senior Methodist member of the team and three 'hub leaders': Training, Communication and Resources and *Share* (an online guide to good practice, online community and learning networks). In addition there are currently about 16 additional full and part-time members of the core team which meets once a month.

Nearly 50 freelance Associate Missioners work for Fresh Expressions, mainly delivering training and presenting at *vision days*. There are a number of 'round tables', often made up of those working in other organisations and acting as advisers to Fresh Expressions (for example: discipleship, young people, sacramental and contemplative, theological educators etc).

FEASTs (Fresh Expressions Area Strategy Teams) are also being established across the country. These are ecumenical and are made up of permission-givers, leaders of fresh expressions, mission experts and educators and those passionate about developing new forms of church.

1700 people have taken part in 44 Fresh Expressions *mission shaped ministry* courses since *msm* was launched in 2007. Interest keeps on growing with the course currently running ecumenically in over 30 centres across the UK and a further 16 courses are being prepared - with the possibility of *msm* training in Canada, Australia and the Netherlands. Designed for those wanting to plant or sustain fresh expressions of church, *msm* is also proving useful and appropriate for those in existing churches looking to reshape for mission.

Other resources, both online and physical continue to be produced, most recently *Sanctus: fresh expressions of church in the sacramental tradition* (a DVD featuring stories of fresh expressions in the sacramental tradition alongside a keynote address by the Archbishop of Canterbury from 2008's national day of pilgrimage to Coventry Cathedral) and *mission shaped congregations* (an interactive DVD-ROM to help in planning a mission-shaped Sunday worship service).

### Reflections on progress so far:

Some fresh expressions are very different from church as we are used to it in the UK – there is a surfer church on Polzeath beach, a eucharist for Goths in central Cambridge, a youth congregation based in a skate park and cell church among the Merseyside Police! Others are more familiar but in unfamiliar settings – church in a café, church in the function room of a pub, church in a school, church in a gym or a sports club. They can be found in rural areas as well as in towns and cities and have been planted to reach

all age groups, pensioners as well as those focused on children or young families. There is no intention to divide people up, but the aim is to plant church into the communities to which people actually belong. Then those churches can reach out beyond their usual networks as well. Many churches are neighbourhood based. Fresh expressions of church are also planted into networks.

A fresh expression is a church plant or a new congregation. It is not a new way to reach people and add them to an existing congregation. It is not an old outreach with a new name ('rebranded' or 'freshened up'). Nor is it a half-way house, a bridge project, which people belong to for a while, on their way into Christian faith, before crossing over to 'proper' church. This is proper church!

Fresh expressions are a response to 'our changing culture'. This movement assumes that the church is shaped by both the gospel and the culture it is trying to reach. It is not meant to be conformed to culture, but it is meant to be appropriate for reaching and transforming a culture.

This initiative is primarily for the non-churched – for those who have never been or for those who have stopped going and are not willing to go back to what they experienced before. We are trying to win those who are not reached by church as we know it. At least a third of the adults in the UK and the majority of children and young people have never been regularly involved in any church in their lifetime – so this is a big mission field and a growing one.

Because there is no standard model of fresh expression of church. They should not be cloned! Rather there is a process, which is normally followed, when they are established. It begins with listening – to God and to the community or network you are trying to reach. It is more about discernment than strategic planning: Looking for the Holy Spirit's opportunities and obeying his call. Out of the listening – which may take some time – comes service: a way of serving the people you are trying to reach. Christians who want to share good news need first to be good news, to show genuine concern for others. This is the start of 'incarnational mission'. Which means following the example of Christ and seeking to evangelise within the community you are now serving. In that context we can begin to make disciples. The very last thing that is decided is the nature of the worship service. Fresh expressions are not about planting a congregation which worships the way the planters prefer and then hoping that other people like it! Listening comes first, decisions about worship styles last.

These are fledgling churches and congregations. They have not had the time to become mature. But they have the potential to grow into a mature expression of church. Traditionally the marks of the church have been listed as one, holy, catholic and apostolic. But maturity will not mean they become like the churches which planted them. They must remain relevant to their cultural context.

This language assumes that all local churches are 'expressions of church'. No one local church can fully express Christ and his gospel. Each needs to be related to others, which have different gifts or contexts. In particular the fresh expressions of church are not meant to replace existing forms of church and they are certainly not in competition with them. We use the expression 'the mixed economy church' as a way of saying that the one economy of God's church needs both our inherited approaches and fresh ones.

## **Priorities for the next phase**

The Fresh Expressions team's priorities for this second phase can be summarised as: More, Better and Owned.

### **More**

The response of the churches since 2004 has been extraordinary and very encouraging, but much more is needed. Although the (1996) research published in *Mission-shaped Church* is not directly comparable with the recent (2006) Tearfund survey, the substantial decline in those described as 'open dechurched' is alarming. The largest section of adults in England (34%) is now those with no significant connection to any church in their lifetime. When those under 16 are added this amounts to a large and growing proportion of the population. Alongside the work of church schools, Back to Church Sunday and other mission opportunities, the planting of fresh expressions of church needs to become the norm for most parishes.

This is not a 'quick fix'. The churches face the challenge of the planting of fresh expressions as a long haul and not a brief fad.

### **Better (sustainability)**

Most fresh expressions of church are young. The emphasis of the first phase was properly on the skills involved in starting, more than developing them. This phase will also research and emphasize growth to maturity, discipleship, financial sustainability, the development of indigenous leadership and the commitment to plant fresh expressions from existing fresh expressions.

The Archbishop of Canterbury is to be the keynote speaker at a national event in Lincoln in March which will focus on the long-term development of fresh expressions of church. Dr Williams will be joined by Dr Martyn Atkins, General Secretary of the Methodist Church in Britain.

### **Owned**

These fledgling congregations need to be embedded in diocesan and district structures, have their fair share of limited resources and be networked together.

In addition to encouraging this ownership the Fresh Expressions Team will encourage the developments of FEASTs in each region of the country.

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For further information, including access to a free monthly e-newsletter and podcast, see:

**freshexpressions.org.uk**      main website

**sharetheguide.org**              online guide and community plus learning networks for allinvolved in fresh expressions of church

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