



Finding the secret to achieving harmonious co-existence between two distinct groups with different traditions and identities is a real challenge, and no more so than when a new community emerges alongside one which has deeply held religious, cultural, geographical or historical roots.

I know that for some fresh expressions of Church and other pioneering missional communities, the answer to whether they can co-exist in harmony with the local parish church has sometimes been a negative one.

I have witnessed the tensions, conflicts and misunderstandings that can happen on ‘both sides’ (notice how easy it is to slip into the language of ‘sides’, of ‘right’ and ‘wrong’), but I have also seen other ways to answer this question that bless both the old and the new, and I would like to offer four brief reflections here. I wonder if any of these resonate with you?

In my experience, a healthy pioneering missional community, or fresh expression of Church, will work **in, with, for** and **against** the local parish expression of Church. It may exhibit all four of these characteristics, or, it might find greater identity in one of them, but each one is significant, and understanding where ‘we’ fit can really help to answer the question about harmonious existence.

### ***In***

Most good parishes churches, whatever their size, location, demographic or other status, will already share several expressions of community that form that church. Mid-week services, home communions, school assemblies and the breadth of Sunday gatherings all contribute to a diverse expression of what it means to be Church in that context and with the people of that parish. Within this understanding, a fresh expression or pioneering community is able to find a place of belonging with **in** that diversity and breadth. Being **in**, speaks of a codependency and a deep connection, as well as the welcoming of the new.

### ***With***

Sometimes in responding to mission, we are called to form a very different expression of Christian community to that of the parish church and being **in** becomes more of challenge. However, many of our parish churches have long histories of being **with** other communities of mission, both overseas and locally. I once led a community in central Birmingham and part of our calling and our official remit for the diocese was to complement the existing church. For us, this meant working with the other city centre parishes and the cathedral, not being the same, not being an alternative, but in being a community that worked **with** them and alongside them to complement one another.

### ***For***

It could be that the genuine work of pioneering mission becomes **for** the existing church and helps to transform the existing parish church and its culture. I know people who have pioneered in mission only to find that those they pioneer with start coming to church, which is *‘not what is supposed to happen!’* Pioneering mission and the work of fresh expressions always has an element of surprise, disruption and cost to it, and it

might just lead to unexpected outcomes.

### ***Against***

A fresh expression of Church can be a community which stands back to back, ***against*** the existing church and faces a different way. New worshipping communities among people who might ordinarily be excluded, forgotten and under-represented may fall into this category, as might fresh expressions that exist within networks (physical or virtual), for example work places, or when an existing local church is no longer able to fulfil its missional vocation in the way it once did. In these circumstances something new, radical and boundary-crossing might be needed.

Harmony refers to things that are different in nature each thriving on its own, yet embodying a spirit of mutual flourishing and wellbeing. For our fledgling, new, established, ancient and even dying church communities to co-exist in harmony and to bless one another, we need to work to understand how we are being called to work ***in, with, for*** or ***against*** one another, we need to be prepared for unexpected disruptions (for this is God's work and not ours) and we simply need to be prepared to follow where God leads.

In a post-pandemic world (soon, God willing!), with all its upheavals, changes and challenges, both the existing Church and the pioneering Church will need to work together and the much discussed 'mixed ecology' of our Christian communities will doubtless become even more apparent. I doubt whether much about our parish churches or our fresh expressions of Church will ever be the same again, so our coexistence will change too. Perhaps we'll all need to be in the Greenhouse together?

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**Source URL:** <https://www.churchofengland.org/about/fresh-expressions/can-parish-churches-and-fresh-expressions-co-exist-harmony>