

This month, ordained Pioneer and Mission PhD researcher Ian Mobsby explores the importance of fresh expressions being contextual and how the 'Listening First Missional Journey' helps with that.

The great gift of fresh expressions is that they break down the separation between doing 'mission' and being 'church'. Wonderfully, 'mission' and 'church' are brought together through the vision of 'building new church communities out of contextual mission'.

I believe it's important to focus as much as possible on those much further away from time-honoured church, going out beyond the fringe. It will mean being deeply relational with them in a particular place or social network: this is what we mean by 'contextual'. The hope is that a new Christian community grows out of a process of listening to them, drawing on time-honoured mission practices, prayer practices and theology, whilst creatively responding to form 'church'. (My hope especially is that worship that makes sense in that context emerges.)

This is often not easy to do in practice! This is why the fresh expressions 'listening first missional journey' expressed in the diagram below is so

to follow when doing contextual mission.



## **Listening to the local, responding contextually**

We live in a diverse culture where every local area has a different story - its history, its aspirations, its hurts, its joys. Sometimes it can seem that listening to God and listening to the local is very complex, particularly in multi-ethnic places and those with different socio-economic groups, but it's nonetheless crucial if the fresh expression is going to be authentic. This does mean getting out of our church bubbles to do that listening, particularly because in many places there are negative stereotypes of the Christian faith and Church. Listening to God and the locality is such an important first step.

## **Loving Service**

Once we've listened, our next actions must not come from a place of believing we know best: the vision must focus on what God is seeking to bring to birth here - how best to respond to the needs and aspirations of local people and also the Spirit who is bringing about the Kingdom of God there. So whatever this activity is, (and by the way I strongly suggest it is not a form of worship service and ideally, if possible, not in a church building but focused on real local people), then something can begin.

It's important to think about the form of activity or event and its language so it makes sense to the people you've listened to. For example, 'spiritual' not 'religious' conversation groups, a community café, a commercial café, meditation groups for stressed out workers or friends of a local garden group - the possibilities are endless.

## **Forming Community**

At this stage the 'loving service' activities have drawn local people to start building new community connections and self-identify with being part of whatever the group is becoming. For example, people begin taking part in some shared activity, or helping to make something happen. It could be forming a committee or working group of those who want to contribute to making the event happen.

## **Developing Discipleship**

This stage needs to be at the pace of the people who are joining in with what is being formed. Often there is a process of breaking down negative stereotypes to Christianity to then trust Christians, to establish relationships of integrity so that people can start to ask spiritual questions. I believe that in time, God seeks to encourage people to explore important questions of life, and some will decide for themselves to become Christians.

I see our role as 'contextual curators', using the wealth of resources like courses, prayer practices, bible text discussions, issue-based discussions etc, to draw on when engaging local people who are wanting to explore the Christian faith.

## **Developing contextual worship**

For this final step, we continue to keep the local people front and centre as we explore together, with the community that has formed, how to express sacraments, explore the bible, and take part in forms of worship, so that the aspirations, hopes and language of the local culture shape what we do. These patterns could look like a shared rule of life, shaped by the bible and the Christian tradition, around the values the community identifies as helpful. Examples might be an inter-generational gathering at the school connecting with the school year and their curriculum, small groups worshipping over a meal, or reflection and contemplative prayer in the forest or local park.

Attending to the local community and drawing on contextual tools at every stage is critical to building an authentic form of local fresh expression of church.

Ian Mobsby is a Writer, Assistant Dean for FX in the Diocese of Southwark, Ordained Pioneer and Mission PhD researcher.

Resource link:

Ancient Faith Future Mission Series and other books

**Source URL:** *<https://www.churchofengland.org/about/fresh-expressions/what-do-we-mean-when-we-say-fresh-expressions-are-contextual>*