

THE FRESH EXPRESSIONS LIFECYCLE SURVEY

An account of fresh expressions
that stopped running in 2019

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Foreword



**'For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven:
a time to be born, and a time to die;
a time to plant, and a time to pluck up what is planted;
a time to kill, and a time to heal;
a time to break down, and a time to build up;
a time to weep, and a time to laugh;
a time to mourn, and a time to dance...'**

Ecclesiastes 3 v 1-4

Despite scripture telling us to expect seasons and change, remarkably we expect church to remain the same. We interpret the end of something as a failure and we move on.

Yet in an ecosystem, we know that nothing is wasted – all the nutrients are broken down to feed new life. And we also notice that in a diverse ecology, some life is short-lived and fruitful, some is slow-growing and unable to produce fruit. But all is valued in the Kingdom of God.

This research is one way of ensuring nothing has been wasted, by harvesting the learning from the leaders who were brave, creative and experimented with new ways of being church in their neighbourhoods. We appreciate their 'getting stuck in' with what the Holy Spirit inspired in them, and also their willingness to take part in the research once their venture had ended.

We're continually learning from the creativity and experimentation in the fresh expressions world, and adding to the accumulated wisdom of the movement. We've spoken for a long time about the best practice of leading as a team, and have in the past 18 months developed a national approach to supporting teams to get started and keep going in their journey together. That approach is called Greenhouse – churchofengland.org/greenhouse.

So, it's encouraging to see the correlation in this research that those fresh expressions led by teams were more resilient, giving us great confidence that Greenhouse will not only help dioceses to cultivate healthy new fresh expressions, but also support existing ventures to be hardier.

I'm often asked how we know a fresh expression is 'really church', and in the movement, we understand this through the lens of four attributes:

1. it needs to be serving people outside the current reach of existing church (missional)
2. listening to those people and entering their culture (contextual)
3. making discipleship a priority (formational)
4. intentionally forming as church-connected with the local and global church (ecclesial).

Often, the impulse to start something new comes from the desire to reach new people, but we can stumble at the hurdle of listening to their culture. We need to be careful about not making assumptions based on how we see the world. Again, it's encouraging in this report to see that those who were willing to let go of what they knew in terms of church were ultimately more likely to reach more people.

In the mixed ecology, diversity is only ever generative. Even if after experimentation with new ways of being church the new churches run their course and then end, we can still be sure that there has been new life. New people have had an experience of the family of God and, for those involved, hopefully a deeper faith and learning about being Jesus-Shaped and Christ-centred has also been experienced.

How wonderful it is that nothing is wasted in the Kingdom of God!

Heather



Heather Cracknell,
Head of Development
for Fresh Expressions
in the Church of England



Summary

Fresh Expression Details

- › The average fresh expression lasts around three years, though the range offered in this sample goes from a few months to well over ten years.
- › Around half of the people attending fresh expressions are 'Existing Christians' (i.e. those who already attend a form of traditional worship and would do so if the fresh expression was not running).

Motivations for Starting

- › Key motivations for starting a fresh expression seem to be to 'engage with new people' and to 'carry out mission within a parish'.
- › Other common motivations include 'building the community' and 'increasing the numbers at church'.
- › Fresh expressions that named 'building the community' or 'engaging with new people' as a major motivator possessed a lower proportion of 'Existing Christians' in their attendees.

Challenges Faced

- › Key challenges for running a fresh expression seem to be 'attaining new members', 'variable attendance at meetings', 'developing spirituality of the group', 'growing leaders', and 'attaining volunteers'.
- › Fresh expressions held in a church were more likely to select 'attaining new members' as a major challenge.
- › Fresh expressions that named 'attaining new members' as a major challenge had less people attending an average meeting and were active for a shorter period of time.

Reasons for Stopping

- › Key reasons for a fresh expression ending seem to be 'leadership moving on' and 'lack of interest in the fresh expression'.
- › Other common reasons for a fresh expression ending include 'a lack of volunteers', 'refocusing efforts elsewhere', and 'the fresh expression coming to a natural end'.
- › Fresh expressions held in a church were more likely to select 'lack of interest in the fresh expression' as a major reason for the fresh expression ending.
- › Fresh expression that listed 'leadership burning out' as a major reason for the fresh expression ending were active for a longer period of time.

Starting a fresh expression

- › Over half of the fresh expressions had a vicar involved in their creation.
- › 40% of fresh expressions were created by a team of people rather than individuals. Those who were started by a team of people were active for a longer period of time than those started by an individual.
- › Having more people in the leadership team leads to the fresh expression being active for a longer period of time and also having larger attendances.
- › 70% of fresh expressions had a 'planning period' of under three months. Fresh expressions with longer planning periods are more likely to be created by a team of people.

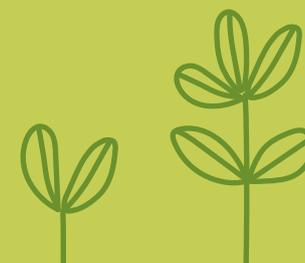
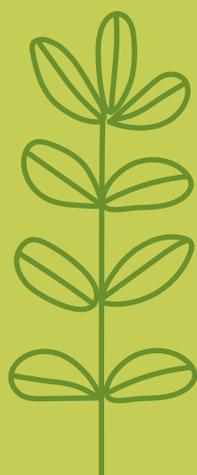
Levels of Support

- › 35% of fresh expressions felt that they had some form of support from the diocese.
- › 65% of fresh expressions felt that they had some form of support from a local parish church.
- › A fresh expression that is supported by both diocese and local parish church is active for a longer period of time, has larger attendances, and possess a lower proportion of 'Existing Christians'.



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Data Collection Process

Background

Statistics for Mission, an annual report provided by the Research and Statistics team in Church House has been collecting data on fresh expressions of Church since 2010. This data provides a snapshot of fresh expressions details, but the lifecycle of fresh expressions has not yet been explored.

The Fresh Expressions Lifecycle Survey was built with the aim of investigating lifecycles of fresh expressions of church, challenges that they face when running, and reasons why they stop running.

In 2019, an initial qualitative Fresh Expression Lifecycle Pilot helped to build the questions and methodology of the survey. This pilot contacted 40 fresh expressions that had stopped running between 2017 and 2018 (with 27 responses) asking about the motivations for starting the fresh expressions, challenges in running the fresh expressions, and ultimately the reason as to why the fresh expression stopped running.

The Fresh Expression Lifecycle Survey was built using responses to this pilot in conjecture with our 'fresh expressions advisory group', which contains experts on fresh expressions within the NCIs and within dioceses.

Fresh expressions that have stopped running between 2018 and 2019

The Statistics for Mission form prepopulates each church's form with their fresh expressions listed from previous years. The person entering the data only then needs to tick whether that particular fresh expression is still running or not. The main reason for this was to reduce the burden for those completing the form so that they do not need to re-enter full details of fresh expressions that they have entered previously. However, this gives the additional advantage of enabling analysis to identify potential closures of fresh expressions soon after they might have closed.

Data within Statistics for Mission 2018 and 2019 highlights 2,400 fresh expressions that were reported in the 2018 data that were not reported in the 2019 data (meaning potentially 2,400 fresh expressions that were no longer

running). The aim was to contact each of these fresh expressions to offer them the opportunity to fill in the Fresh Expressions Lifecycle Survey. All of the churches giving data for these fresh expressions were invited to complete the Fresh Expression Lifecycle Survey. Of the 2,400 fresh expressions, around 200 did not have any contact details, with a further 250 having bounced back "undeliverable" contacts.

Responses were received from just over 1,000 fresh expressions. 350 of these confirmed that they had indeed stopped running, with just under 300 completing the survey itself. Just under 200 fresh expressions were confirmed as still running but did not see themselves as a fresh expression anymore. Almost 550 that responded confirmed that they were still running and offered a reason as to why they were not in the Statistics for Mission 2019 data. There were three main reasons almost equally reported for this:

- There was an issue with the term "fresh". With the suggestion that if a group had been meeting for a few years now they would not consider themselves fresh – something that will need to be clarified in definitions of what fresh expressions are.
- The fresh expression had a new name, which means it would not be captured as the same fresh expression between 2018 and 2019.
- The fresh expression was reported by another church.

Excluding those that could not fill in the survey (those with no contact details, undeliverable contact details, or those groups that are still running) means that we had a response rate of 24% of fresh expressions that were reported in 2018 but seemed to have stopped running in 2019. Of those that explicitly stated that the fresh expression had stopped running, almost 85% completed the survey.

All data and analyses presented in this report come solely from the raw data collected from the Lifecycle Survey with no scaling or estimating process.

Details of the Fresh Expressions

Years Active

Among the fresh expressions that had stopped running, their median average lifespan was around three years. We had responses from groups that had lasted a few months to well over ten years. Figure 1 highlights the variance in lifespans of the fresh expressions who responded. There does not seem to be a common amount of time presented.

A graph highlighting the lifespans of fresh expressions sampled in the Lifecycle Survey

Figure 1 ►



Attendance at fresh expressions

Fresh expressions were asked their average attendance at a meeting throughout their lifespan, in the first few months, the last few months, and what their peak attendance would have been. Table 1 highlights the differences in these variables.

As would be expected, the average attendance throughout a lifespan is very similar to the attendance at the first few months of a fresh expression, with then a decline in the attendance during the final few months of a fresh expression, and then a much larger attendance at peak.

The average attendances at a fresh expression meeting across its lifespan

Table 1 ►

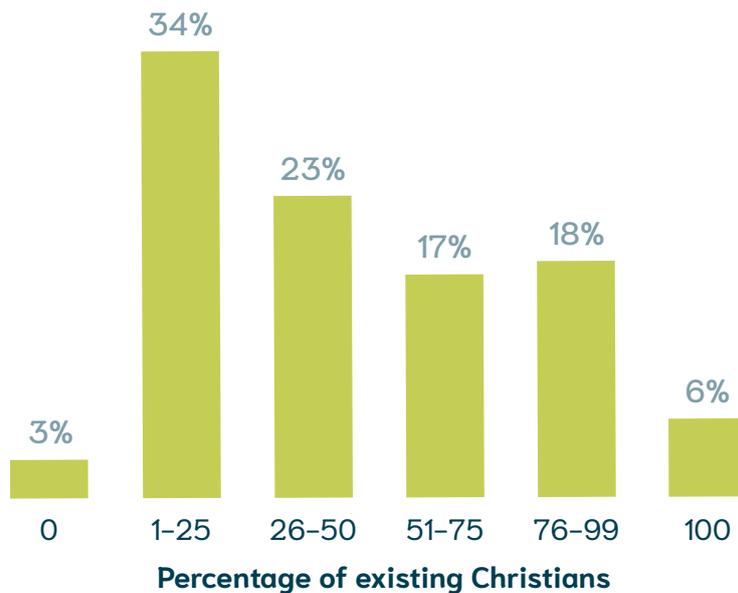
When in the lifespan?	Mean Average	Median Average
Average attendance	18	12
First few months	18	12
Last few months	13	8
Peak attendance	30	20

Existing Christians

A question was also asked regarding the proportion of attendees that are 'Existing Christians' (those who already attend a form of traditional worship and would do so if the fresh expression was not running). Results from this question would suggest around one half of those attending a fresh expression also attended another form of church. The variance in this can be seen in Figure 2. It shows that very few fresh expressions (3%) have no one attending that also attends another form of church, while there are also only a few (6%) groups that have an attendance that is comprised of 100% people that also attend another form of church.

A graph highlighting the proportions of existing Christians of the fresh expressions sampled in the Lifecycle Survey

Figure 2 ▼



Frequency of meeting

Of the fresh expressions sampled in the lifecycle survey, 25% met weekly, 7% met fortnightly, 53% met monthly, and 16% selected "other" for their frequency of meeting. As shown in the Fresh Expressions: State of Play Report¹, the response of "other" usually means a mixture of groups that meet annually, bi-monthly, weekly during term-times, half-termly and termly.

There are no significant differences between the frequencies in which fresh expressions meet and their percentage of Existing Christians, their attendances, or their lifespans.

Location of meeting

Over half (56%) of the fresh expressions sampled usually met in the church. 15% met in the church hall, 9% in a village/town hall or a community centre, 7% in a school, while 13% selected "other".

Interestingly, there are no significant differences between where a fresh expression met and their percentage of Existing Christians, their attendances, or their lifespans. Meaning that meeting in a church as opposed to a different location does not seem to impact number of people attending, whether those who attend already attend church, or the lifespan of that fresh expression.

¹Fresh Expressions: State of Play, written by Dr. Samuel Nunney, Research and Statistics Unit for the Church of England, available upon request

Motivations for Starting

The qualitative pilot and the fresh expression advisory group suggested six common potential motivations for starting a fresh expression from, as shown in Figure 3.

The most common motivator for starting a fresh expression was to engage with new people (93%), with over three quarters of those surveyed stating that this was a major motivation for starting.

A further common motivator was to carry out mission within a parish (87%) of which 60% stated this was a major motivator.

The only significant differences in major motivation selection comes from those fresh expressions that listed building the community and engaging new people as their major motivations. In both of these cases, their selection as a major motivator was associated with a lower proportion of Existing Christians in attendances:

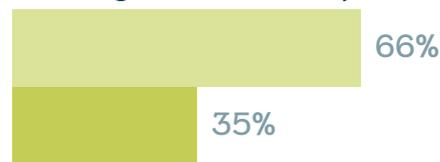
- › Those fresh expressions that suggested that building the community was a major motivator had an average of 38% of their attendees that were Existing Christians, compared to 51% in those who did not list building the community as a major motivator.
- › Those fresh expressions that suggested that engaging with new people was a major motivator had an average of 43% of their attendees that were Existing Christians, compared to 58% in those who did not list engaging new people as a major motivator.

The percentage of responses reporting particular motivations for starting a fresh expression, including whether they were a major motivator

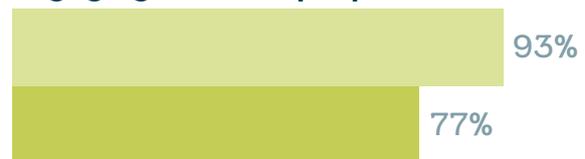
Figure 3 ▼

Motivation Major Motivation

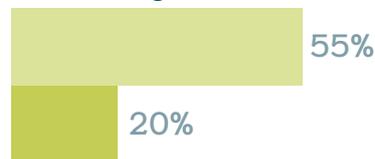
Building the community



Engaging with new people



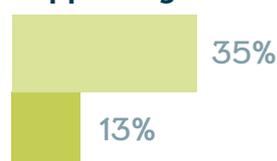
Increasing numbers in church



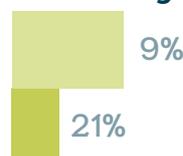
Carrying out mission



Supporting disadvantaged groups



Continuing other group



Challenges Faced

There were nine common potential challenges faced suggested in the lifecycle survey. Seven of these can be seen in Figure 4. Two of the original challenges (obtaining funding for the fresh expression and issues with the venue) are not included in Figure 4 as they had fewer than 10% reporting them as challenges.

There were five particular challenges mentioned by over 50% of the sample:

- > Attaining new members
- > Variable attendance at the group
- > Developing spirituality of the group
- > Growing leaders
- > Attaining volunteers

The only major challenge impacted by where the location was held, was in “attaining new members”. Of those who had selected attaining new members as a major challenge, 64% were held in a church building, while of those who had not selected attaining new members as a major challenge, 49% were held in a church building. Suggesting that attaining new members is more of a challenge for fresh expressions held within a church building.

As would be expected, those who selected “attaining new members” as a major challenge showed differences in attendance and lifespan. Those who selected “attaining new members” as a major challenge had significantly fewer attending an average meeting (13 people vs. 22 people) and were also active for a shorter period of time (3 years vs. 5 years) compared with those who did not select attaining new members as a major challenge.

No other major challenges had such significant relationships with attendances or lifespan.

The percentage of responses reporting particular challenges in running a fresh expression, including whether they were a major challenge

Figure 4 ▼



Reasons for Stopping

There were eleven common potential reasons for a fresh expression ending suggested in the lifecycle survey. Seven of these can be seen in Figure 5. Four of the original reasons for ending (the venue was no longer suitable, the fresh expression developed into a new group, the fresh expression formed traditional worship, and the group was no longer being considered a fresh expression) are not included in Figure 5 as they had fewer than 10% reporting them as challenges.

There were two reasons for ending mentioned by over 50% of the sample:

- > Leadership moving on
- > Lack of interest in the fresh expression

There were also relatively high responses for:

- > Lack of volunteers
- > Refocusing efforts elsewhere
- > The fresh expression had come to a natural end

The percentage of responses reporting the reasons why a fresh expression stopped running, including whether they were a major reason

Figure 5 ▼



Similar to findings shown in the challenges facing fresh expressions, the location of the fresh expression was associated with those who had reported a major reason for ending as a “lack of interest in the fresh expression”. Of those that reported “a lack of interest in the fresh expression” as a major reason for ending, 64% were held within a church, while of those who did not select it as a major reason for ending, only 50% were in a church. This would suggest that a lack of interest in the fresh expression is more of a major reason for ending for fresh expressions held in a church.

The only other significant difference in these reasons came from lifespans of fresh expressions that suggested that “leadership burning out” was a major reason for ending. Those who had suggested that leadership burn-out was a major reason for the fresh expression ending had an average lifespan of 7 years, compared to the average of 3 years of those fresh expressions that did not suggest that leadership burn-out as a major reason for ending. This would suggest that the longer lifespan of a fresh expression is associated with more chance of leadership burn-out.

No other major reasons for a fresh expression ending had such significant relationships with attendances or lifespans.



Starting a fresh expression

Who starts it?

It should be noted that it was possible to select more than one answer to this question.

Regarding who was involved in starting the fresh expression, a vicar was involved in creating over half (53%) of the fresh expressions in the sample. A pioneer was involved in the creation of 12%, a PCC was involved in 8%, a different lay person was involved in 31% of new fresh expressions.

Whether a vicar was involved in the start of a fresh expression had no significant impact on the fresh expression lifespan, attendance, the proportion of Existing Christians, or the location of where the fresh expression was held.

40% of the fresh expressions in the sample were created by a team of people, rather than an individual person. While the fresh expressions being started by a team of people rather than an individual does not have a significant impact on attendance, the proportion of Existing Christians, or the location where the fresh expression was held, it does have an impact on lifespan. The fresh expressions in the sample that were started by a team were active for an average of 5 years, compared to an average of 3 years for those started by an individual.

Who leads it?

Of the fresh expressions in the sample, 45% were lay led, 21% were ordained led, while 34% led in some form by both.

There was a significant difference on its lifespan depending on who led the fresh expression. Those that were ordained led were active for an average of two and a half years, which is significantly less than the average lifespan of four years for those that were lay led and led by both.

Who led the fresh expressions did not have a significant impact on attendances or proportion of Existing Christians.

Planning period

“Planning period” was defined as time spent preparing the setup of the fresh expression before officially starting it.

70% of the sample of fresh expressions had a planning period of under three months. 21% had a planning period for 3–6 months, 7% had a planning period of 6–12 months, while just 2% had a planning period of more than a year.

While having a planning period of longer than three months had larger averages for lifespan (4 years vs. 3 years) and attendance (21 vs. 17), neither of these differences were significant.

Interestingly, the fresh expressions in this sample that were created using a team of people were responsible for 56% of the fresh expressions that had a planning period of more than three months, which is significantly larger than the percentage of fresh expressions created by a team that had a planning period of less than three months (33%). Meaning that fresh expressions with longer planning periods are more likely to be created by a team of people, while fresh expressions with shorter planning periods are more likely to be created by individuals.

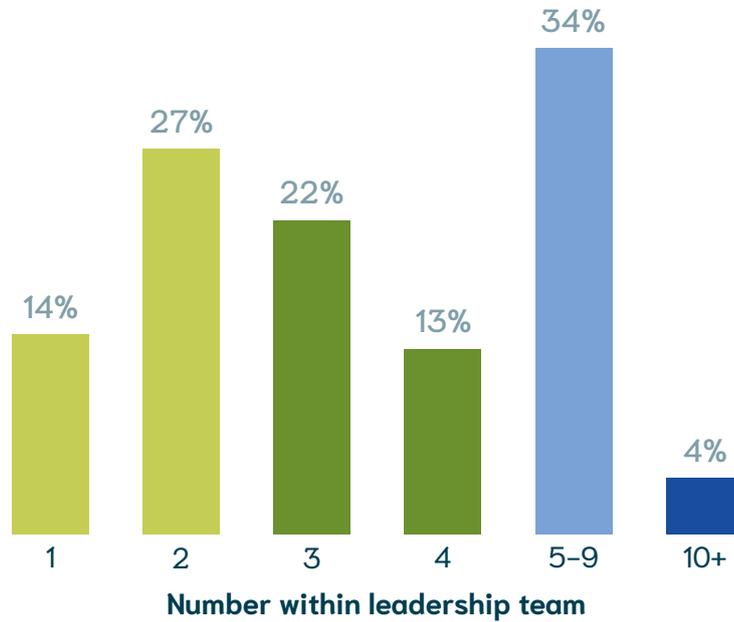


How many people are in a leadership team?

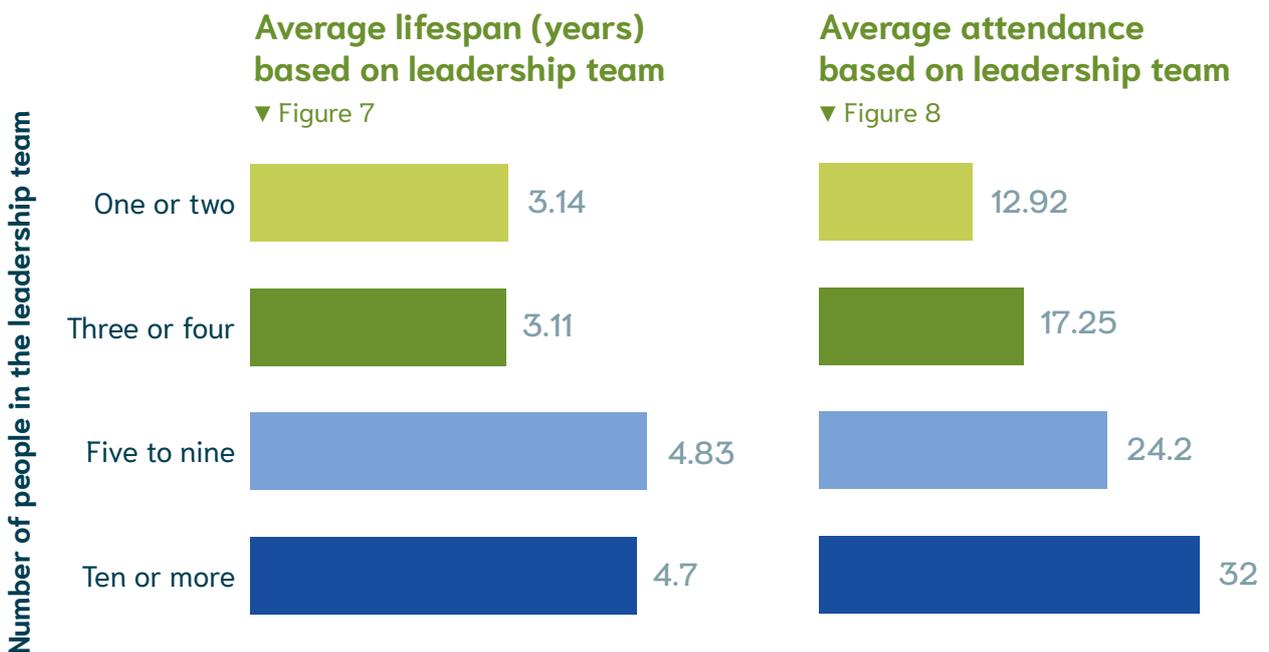
The average number of people in the leadership teams of the fresh expressions in this sample is 3. This sample also provided a range of 1 to 14 people in the leadership team. Figure 6 highlights the variance in numbers within leadership teams of the fresh expressions. As can be seen, 14% of fresh expressions had just 1 member in their leadership team, while 4% had at least 10 members.

A graph highlighting the numbers of people within leadership teams of the fresh expressions sampled in the Lifecycle Survey

Figure 6 ►



Analyses show that numbers within a leadership are associated with the lifespan length and average attendance at a fresh expression. There is a significant positive correlation between numbers in the leadership team and lifespan length, meaning that, generally, the more people in the leadership team, the longer it remains active. A similar correlation was found between number of people in the leadership team and average attendance, meaning the more people in the leadership team, the more people it has attending an average meeting. These associations can be seen in Figures 7 and 8, where the number of people in a leadership team have been grouped together for ease of viewing.



Levels of Support

Support from the diocese

35% of the fresh expressions in this sample stated that there had been some form of support offered by the diocese. Regarding particular aspects of support: 10% of fresh expressions stated that they had received financial support from the diocese, 7% received people/admin support, 20% received support through prayer, and 12% received a public expression of support.

Levels of diocesan support did not have a significant impact on the lifespan or attendances of the fresh expressions in the sample.

Support from parish church

65% of the fresh expressions in this sample stated that there had been some form of support offered by a local parish church. Regarding particular aspects of support: 29% of fresh expressions stated that they had received financial support from a local parish church, 45% received people/admin support, 45% received support through prayer, and 31% received a public expression of support.

Levels of support from the local parish church did have an impact on the lifespan of the fresh expressions in the sample, though not on average attendance at a meeting. The average lifespan of a fresh expression that received support from the local parish church was 4 years, compared to an average 3 years for a fresh expression without any support from the local parish church (though it should be noted that this difference is only verging on statistical significance).

The average lifespan, attendances and % Existing Christians at fresh expressions depending on levels of support

Table 2 ▼

Level of Support	Average Lifespan (years)	Average Attendance	% Existing Christians
No support	3.76	16	49
Just parish church support	4.06	17	50
Just diocesan support	3.00	14	47
Support from both parish church and diocese	5.19	22	40

Table 2 shows the impact of the levels of support from both the diocese and parish churches. It highlights that if a fresh expression is deemed to have support from both the parish church and the diocese, it seems to last longer, have more people attending the group and also has a lower percentage of “Existing Christians” (i.e. are bringing higher proportions of new people to church). This can be seen in Figure 7.

Examples in practice

It can be helpful to see the facts and figures of research demonstrated in real life practice.

These are two different stories of fresh expressions which each came through tough times. For one, it was the expansion of the team that made all the difference, for the other, now a long-running fresh expression, it was consistently encouraging new leaders to step up along the journey.

StoryHouse café, church and charity, Crosby, Liverpool Diocese

Dave and Lizzie Lowrie have dedicated their lives to pioneering and nearly gave up on their once successful café church after the congregation disappeared within just a year of start-up. But all was not lost. Read about how resilient and generous teamworking brought the whole venture from the brink of closure to become a thriving fresh expression, even flourishing through the Covid-19 pandemic.

[Read their story>>](#)

Breakfast@9, Canford Magna Parish Church, Salisbury Diocese

The Revd Chris Tebbutt, Team Rector at Canford parish church in Dorset, initially set up a fresh expression congregation based around sharing a breakfast. It has survived and thrived through setbacks and successes over a remarkable 10 year period. Leadership since the set up has been team-based, and fluid with comings and goings, but the venture still remains intact.

[Read the story>>](#)



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