

Transformation in the Kingdom of God: Introducing the Fruitfulness Framework for Fresh Expressions of Church

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The Kingdom of God and Transformation

He said therefore, "What is the kingdom of God like? And to what should I compare it? It is like a mustard seed that someone took and sowed in the garden; it grew and became a tree, and the birds of the air made nests in its branches." And again he said, "To what should I compare the kingdom of God? It is like yeast that a woman took and mixed in with three measures of flour until all of it was leavened." (Luke 13:18-21, NRSV)

The Kingdom of God grows, there is great potential in even the smallest seed or organism. The Kingdom is varied, abundant and to be found in all the nooks and crannies of life. Church that seeks to be the community of the Kingdom expects change: change in individuals' lives, change in their collective life, and change in the world around them as they follow the God whose creation groans for the Kingdom to come in all its fullness.

We often call the transformation we see in the lives of individuals "discipleship": the learning journey of following the Way of Jesus Christ, our Master. Research conducted into 'Faith Journeys'¹ describe them as

"the stories of how people become aware of God's presence, are attracted to it, respond to it and are ultimately transformed by it. These transformed individuals are followers of Jesus Christ, sharing the love of God to bring about the Kingdom of God on earth, thereby transforming the world."

The research finds that whilst every individual's journey is unique due to their personal context, there are some common stages of the faith journey that can be seen: a phase of faith being catalysed; initial engagement; a phase of ongoing engagement; a phase of belief, commitment, and belonging, leading ultimately to Transformation. (Sudden dramatic conversion is rare.)

¹ Faith Journeys: Summary of Research November 2018⁹, 9Dot, accessed at <https://www.bristol.anglican.org/content/pages/documents/1594134314.pdf>

The Language of Transformation

The language we have had in the Church to talk about the signs of this transformation in individuals tends to focus around church activities: reading the Bible, attending church gatherings, giving money to the church, praying, and so on. These are all wonderful things to start happening, but we have often been left with only being able to count "attendance at specific worship events" and "giving to the church", which feels unsatisfactory. People who are comfortable talking about these activities tend to be in the 'belief, commitment and belonging' stage of their faith journeys, leaving us with little language to celebrate the changes happening in the earlier phases of the journey.

There are lots of examples of people trying to identify other ways to talk about discipleship, but they have still relied on language like 'Holy living' and 'Study of Scripture' which often still feels alien to those not yet nearing the 'belief, commitment and belonging' stage.²

Fresh Expressions of Church (FXCs), along with Church Plants and Chaplains are intentionally connecting with people much earlier in their faith journeys, many of whom wouldn't feel authentic using this language of discipleship. This has sometimes led to assumptions that discipleship isn't happening among the individuals in those communities, whereas in fact, the issue is more about not having the language to describe those earlier experiences of becoming aware of God's presence, being attracted to it, responding to it and beginning to be transformed by it.

Finding New Language

Working with Eido Research,³ FXC leaders' conversations were held with pioneers in the Church of England and other denominations, as well as those whose role it is to advocate for and support pioneer ministry.

The result of these conversations was the **Fruitfulness Framework tool**, which explores:

- the individual's relationship with God
- their view of themselves
- their relationship with others in their faith community
- their engagement with the vision of their faith community
- their engagement with their wider community.

Within each of these dimensions, the framework asks about participant beliefs, behaviours, and experiences⁴ in order to recognise the changes brought about by God described in the earlier stages of faith journeys.

² <https://www.wearemakingdisciples.com/about.aspx>

³ <https://www.eidoresearch.com>

⁴ The survey questions can be found at <https://survey.alchemer.com/s3/6406312/Fruitfulness-Framework-Eido-Research-example>

Celebrating Transformation in churches

We know that Church is at the heart of the Christian faith; that as individuals following the Way of Jesus Christ, we need to connect to others doing the same, along with others in our wider communities, in order to live the fullness of life that God intends for us. From the earliest times Christians met together to pray, eat together, learn, worship, and share their lives.

The Faith Journeys research points out that the catalyst for a person's exploration of faith, and initial and on-going engagement, often (but not always) comes about when they are part of a church or other Christian community (for example, a workplace chaplaincy). Church leaders, and especially pioneers and FXC leaders, are often the people who notice the transformation happening in these early stages of faith, but without the language to describe it, have not been able to celebrate or evidence that it is happening.

This is significant because Church leaders currently feel a pressure to demonstrate that what they are doing in their ministry is making a difference in the lives of those who have gathered into their Christian community, and thereby demonstrate the impact they are having.

Good Stewardship

Fundamentally, measuring is about good stewardship: being able to accurately describe reality and using that information, combined with wisdom and experience, to discern the path ahead. Many of the stories Jesus uses in his teaching centre on discerning what to do about crops planted or vines, seeds or trees growing. Whilst there's abundance in the Kingdom, there is clearly also supposed to be wisdom and planning.

What we measure – or put another way, what we intentionally notice or pay attention to – defines the nature of our work as we will inevitably focus on these areas at the potential expense of other areas. As Shannon Hopkins, Social Entrepreneur, quipped “if we don't measure what matters then what we measure becomes the only thing that matters”.

In other words, the act of measuring always drives behaviours: if we are asked to account for our activity by supplying stats of attendance, we will spend our energy on activities that encourage attendance. If we are unable to count online attendance on our statistics, we will not prioritise our online engagement. For example, since the pandemic lockdowns have lifted, a particular parish church has had a worshipping community of 80, with 60 in the building and 20 engaging digitally – these figures are steady, with each week different people online or on-site. If the metric continues to be ‘attendance in the building’ the focus for the leadership will be to get people to stop engaging online and come on-site. However, if the metrics were changed to focus on the growth of those individual's faith, regardless of how they are engaging with the Christian community, then the leadership will be encouraged to prioritise rather differently.

What should churches measure?

Eido note later in this report that “Leaders of faith-based organisations often struggle to define success” and indeed the language of success is contentious when trying to describe the Kingdom of God. In a broad church like the Church of England, different church traditions, theological emphasis and ecclesiology all change the parameters of defining what “good looks like” and therefore what we should measure. This lack of consensus has often led us to believe that measuring well is impossible, or inevitably tradition-specific. We have been left with the only common denominators: attendance and giving.

However, in a mixed ecology church, the question of attendance already takes on real complexity due to the vastly different ways that churches, chaplaincy communities and new congregations gather – outdoors altogether; separately in the neighbourhood and then corporately online (‘phygital’); in small groups; in informal networks in public social spaces; online tuning into recorded content or online in interactive spaces – our previous ways of measuring attendance as a proxy for participation will be even less relevant to the actual engagement of regulars and those new to church.

It is clear that attendance at church is not an adequate proxy for the transformation in people's lives that are signs of God's action in their faith journeys, and this is especially so in a mixed ecology.

Fruitfulness

Church leaders want to notice and celebrate the changes in people's lives that God is bringing about, and the new language in the Fruitfulness Framework can be used for people in the early stages of their faith journeys as well as those who are in the ‘belief, commitment and belonging’ stage. The experiences of individuals can be thought of as the fruit on a plant, and the overall health and thriving of the plant can be seen by how much fruit it bears. Conceiving of “success” in this way fits well with the Biblical narratives of harvests and stewardship, and also accounts for the huge variety of ‘plants’ that make up a mixed ecology.

A bramble bush and a sunflower will bear their fruit in completely different ways, and so comparison is pointless. But each can be understood on its own terms: if a sunflower does not grow tall it is not thriving, whereas a bramble bush that doesn't shoot up quickly may well be, as its lifespan is expected to be different and its growth slower. Each plant requires something different from its environment and may well not be in competition for nutrients, light or water due to the different ways they grow. Indeed, many plants can mutually-enrich the ecosystem, providing for the other plants a safe haven for pollinating insects, or by producing certain chemical compounds when they breakdown in order to feed the other organisms. This is a mixed ecology, and the metaphor can greatly enrich our understanding of health and thriving: there is not one size that fits all, there is not success or failure.

Measuring Fruitfulness

The Fruitfulness Framework Tool developed with Eido Research is intended to help FXCs measure their impact by allowing their members to articulate the transformation that is happening in their lives, and by collating these individuals' (anonymised) experiences, they can build a picture of their collective growth and change.

As Eido notes in this report, the tool “enables them to [objectively] define and measure their success on an ongoing basis. This in turn will drive an improved impact strategy, increase motivation and funding based upon areas of strength, and improve areas of weakness for these FXCs.”

Context for the Pilot Study

This pilot research was done mid-pandemic, and it proved difficult for many FXC leaders to get enough of their people engaged to fill out the questionnaire. Only the keenest and most resilient did so (19 out of the 48 who signed up).

There was a high proportion of previously-in-church respondents (60%, with 10% not answering this question). This still means that 29% were unchurched /dechurched, but this is a low figure compared to the Church Army research⁵. However, the research notes “that respondents to this survey are also, on average, more keen and involved than non-respondents (both observed anecdotally in conversation with leaders, and statistically in the decrease in enthusiasm amongst the later respondents) which means that 3 in 10 is likely to be an underestimate as new and peripheral members of the church are less likely to have responded.”

It seems likely that the FXCs whose leaders were able to get enough participation were generally more resilient at the mid-pandemic point (and those FXCs with a high proportion of unchurched and dechurched people in them are more fragile.) This could explain the low proportion of those not in church previously. But it's a small sample size in a pandemic situation – more research will need to be done in the future.

A decision was made at the design stage to keep the complexity of the tool despite this likely being a barrier to those with English as a second language. This needs to be reviewed as the research is taken forward, and it might be that a modified, simpler tool will be designed so that it is more inclusive.

No other data was collected around educational background, income levels, social mobility indicators etc.

More about Eido

If you would like to read more about Eido Research and register your interest in the Fruitfulness Framework tool, [follow this link to visit the website](#), or scan the code on the right.



⁵ <https://churcharmy.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/the-day-of-small-things.pdf>

Faith journeys noticed from further back

The Fruitfulness Framework Tool was designed to be, and appears to be in practice, attuned to the earlier stages of faith journeys, and so this research can help us notice the foundational shifts in how people are finding faith in FXCs.

Before this, it has been easy to overlook the transformation that is happening in peoples' lives in FXC when the measures focus solely on spiritual disciplines (reading the Bible, giving, committing to rotas etc) as these changes happen further along the discipleship journey.

Leaders of FXCs have known this anecdotally and the research confirms this: “[participants] actual contributions to their churches often lagged somewhat behind their commitment.” However, participants who had previously attended church did score 5-15 per cent higher on measures of spiritual disciplines such as prayer and reading the Bible. (Fascinatingly though, not-previously-in-church attenders scored higher on giving money. Further research with a larger sample size will offer more certainty on this finding.)

Good News

The Fruitfulness Framework highlights such good news for the Church of England (and all churches beyond the confines of a denomination). It tells us that FXC positively transform people's:

- Relationship to God, and help people feel spiritually alive.
- Experience of peace and sense of worthiness
- Sense of belonging and being invested in/disciplined
- Sense of having something to give
- Courage to try new things and get out of their comfort zones
- Connectedness to their local community
- Desire to share the difference God is making in their lives

“Respondents from smaller churches reported more personal change. This was only a slight difference, but it suggests that larger churches may not always be at an advantage in helping members grow spiritually.” (p4)

Strategic Priorities

A mixed ecology is a wonderful aspiration for churches to have – it allows people who are younger and more diverse to become missional disciples and find an accessible pathway into faith for the first time. This research shows signs of bearing this out:

Younger?

- 80% were under 65
- 9% were under 25 (there were no messy churches involved in the research this time)
- Largest group was 35-44

“Younger congregation members were slightly more likely to experience change than older members. The group most likely to report personal change was respondents between the ages of 25 and 34.” (p3)

More Diverse?

Respondents were 88% white.

The decision was taken at the design stage to keep the complexity of the tool despite this likely being a barrier to those with English as a second language. This needs to be reviewed for taking the research forward, and it might be that a modified simpler tool is needed to be more inclusive.

No other data was collected around educational background, income levels, social mobility indicators etc, which could have shown that FXCs do reach people that the majority of parish churches often struggle to engage with. More research is needed in this area too.

Missional Disciples

As has already been noted, 60-70% were already in church prior to joining the FXC (and of course may remain so, attending both their parish church and the FXC.) We can note some interesting changes in their discipleship journeys through the research:

On joining the FXC only 39% wanted to tell people about the difference God is making in their lives. This rises to 79% now. If we assume that most of the 40% who changed in this regard were church-attenders before, that means FXCs help people grow as everyday witnesses.

On joining the FXC, only 42% felt they had something of value to contribute to the church, and this rises to 82% having participated in the FXC. Again if we assume that most of the 40% who changed in this regard were church-attenders before, that means FXCs help people grow as valued co-ministers in the Christian community.

Another exciting shift is in the numbers who want to try new things and take risks: rising from 39% to 79%. This could demonstrate a consistent pattern – that previously-churched people are finding spaces to step out in faith within FXCs.

“Areas where those who were ‘part of a church’ before scored above new attendees included prayer, wanting to be challenged, some experiences with God and the impact of the church on their social lives. They were also more likely to feel safe to express doubts and more likely to understand how to integrate faith into their lives.” (p48)

Regarding attendance at church “either physically or online” the changes are interesting: roughly speaking FXCs turn monthly attenders into weekly, and those that had attended a few times a year into those who attend monthly. (This is a very broad-brush sketch but might be of interest.)

Faith for the first time

“In summary, those who were not part of a church beforehand saw the most change.” (p48)

Areas where new church attendees scored above historic members:

- meeting regularly with other FXC members (including both discipling and being disciplined) – wanting to invest in other people’s growth and empowerment rose from 61% to 90% overall.
- knowing the vision of the FXC
- being full of love and forgiveness toward others (never or rarely feeling forgiveness towards others dropped from 36% to only 12%;
- giving money
- involvement in the local community (including helping with voluntary activities in the local community, telling friends and neighbours about the work of the FXC, and meeting up with members from the local community).

The tool offers lots of learning for FXC networks not least as a useful tool for defining and evaluating the fruitfulness of FXCs. The intention is to make the tool available for wider use and capture a bigger picture of the health and fruitfulness of fresh expressions of church across the country, so we are able to grow a vibrant mixed ecology where people encounter and grow in their faith for the first time, and where those who are already finding and following Christ in everyday life can grow as missional disciples.



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