



Beginning, nurturing and sustaining  
**fresh expressions of church**  
in the Diocese of Oxford



Diocese of Oxford



‘Living Faith for the future’ reminds us that our purpose is ‘to join with God in creating a caring, sustainable and growing Christian presence in every part of the Diocese of Oxford...’

Down the years, ministry in the diocese has been expressed in terms of our often complementary work in parishes and chaplaincies. Today the picture is still more varied with people coming together in a wide variety of networks and groupings, opening

up a whole new series of opportunities for ministry. The calling remains unchanged — to join in God’s mission to his world — but this needs to be ‘freshly expressed’ in each generation.

This booklet is a call to get involved with God in what he is already doing. But it is not just a call: it is also a quarry of good ideas and good practice and my hope is that it will be widely used in the years to come.

+ Colin Dorchester

## What is a fresh expression of church?

A fresh expression is a form of Christian community for our changing culture, established primarily for the benefit of people who are not yet members of any church.

Fresh expressions is a new mindset, not a new model of church to be copied. It is a mindset that starts with people who don’t belong to church. Fresh expressions start not with an invitation, but with an offer: ‘We’re willing to come to you, serve you and stay with you. If you want, we’ll also help you to be church in a way that suits you — in your style, not ours.’

The aim is not to provide a stepping stone into existing church, but to form new churches in their own right.

### Fresh expressions of church have three characteristics:

- a strong mission focus
- a willingness to re-imagine church so that people can encounter Christ in their culture
- a commitment to the ‘mixed economy’ of existing and new forms of church.

### A spectrum of fresh expressions exists:

- *The renewal of an existing congregation.* This might involve radically reshaping the provision of all-age worship, for instance, or rethinking a midweek service.
- *Reinventing an existing ‘fringe’ group, mission project or community service to become ‘church’ in its own right.* A youth group might grow into a youth congregation, or a lunch club for the elderly might add worship after the meal.
- *Creating a new Christian community within a single parish or benefice.* An informal service in a leisure centre or an after-school meeting for a meal and worship would be two examples.
- *A large mission initiative spanning a deanery, cluster, team or multi-parish benefice.* It could be a new network church across a city-centre for the 20-35’s or a home-based church plant on a new housing estate.



Photo: Rich Loft

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## Why do fresh expressions matter?

**F**resh expressions reach out to a changing society. Lots of changes have created a new cultural mood, to which fresh expressions try to respond.

### Among these changes:

- people have been turning away from external rules, duties and obligations. They are more into relationships and experiences;
- networks feature more strongly in their lives than geography or traditional institutions;
- diversity has shot up the agenda. People prefer personalised approaches to one-size-fits-all.

Fresh expressions can engage with people's spiritual longings. In Britain, despite declining church attendance, interest in spirituality is widespread. In 2000, the Soul of Britain survey found that 76% of the population claimed to have had a spiritual experience, such as answered prayer or a strong sense of God's presence. The figure was

almost 60% higher than just over ten years before.

People are interested in spirituality but not organised religion. Fresh expressions have the potential to create a less 'churchy' environment in which people can explore their spiritual yearnings.



*Society has changed and church must change too*

Fresh expressions make strategic sense. It is often easier to plant a different congregation alongside an existing one than to ask churchgoers to change radically how they worship in the hope of attracting newcomers. Instead of inviting people on a church's fringe to come to Sunday worship, which can feel culturally alien, church can grow within a lunch club – for instance – in a style better suited to that particular group.

# How do fresh expressions begin and develop?

A fresh expression of church will come into being through principles of:

- **Listening**
- **Loving service**
- **Being involved in the everyday lives of the people you are called to serve** (incarnational mission)
- **Making disciples.**

*Digging deep foundations  
will avoid problems later  
+ - it is worth taking time  
to do it well*

It will have the potential to become a mature expression of church shaped by the gospel and the enduring marks of the church and for its cultural context.

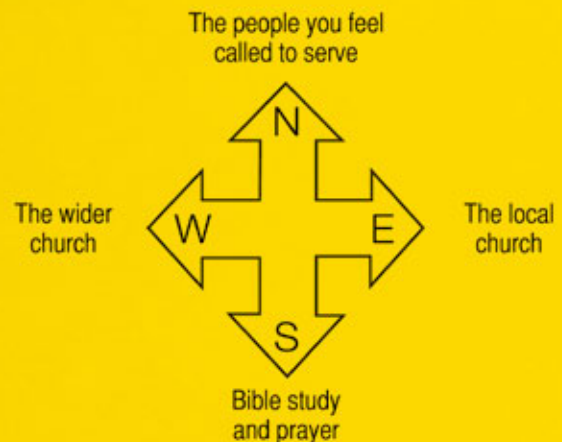
Preparing carefully for a fresh expression of church is vital. Building a community round Jesus that will draw people into the heart of God's love is so valuable that it is worth taking time to do it well. Experience suggests that starting a fresh expression needs careful thought. Sometimes there is more to bear in mind than people realise.

## Listening

We can't emphasise enough the benefits of listening and learning before you start.

Prayer and listening - both to God and to the people you are called to serve - are central to this fresh expressions journey, at every stage. The more time spent in prayer and preparation at the beginning the more likely it is that the venture will be fruitful.

## 360 degrees listening

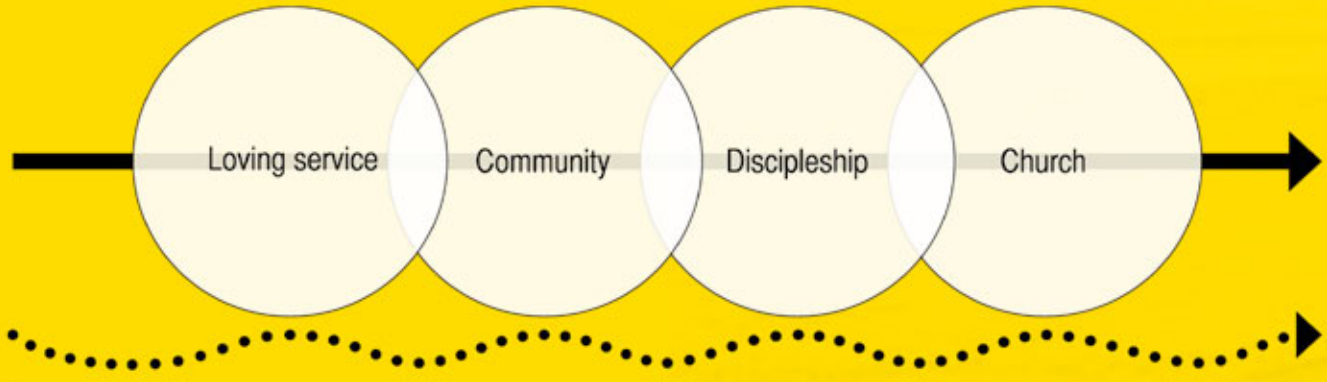


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Photo: Dave Richards

## Underpinned by prayer and listening



### This 'fresh expressions journey' is modelled on Jesus.

He served people, he formed his followers into a community, he made them disciples and his disciples showed us what church can be like (Acts 2.42-47).

#### Loving service

If you launch a worship service, you know who is going to come – Christians! So if the aim is to serve people who do not come to church, you may not get very far. Instead of starting with a worship service, fresh expressions are more likely to begin with loving service:

- a community cafe for the neighbourhood
- kite-flying with a group of friends
- a bus with food and videos for teenagers
- an after-school club
- a zone in which to relax and explore spirituality
- a course on money management
- an environmental group
- a local campaign on behalf of asylum seekers...

The possibilities are endless!

#### Community

Building community within the context of loving service is vital. People may not come back if they do not feel accepted and valued. But if friendships form, the coffee may be dreadful, the talk can be really boring, the building may not be perfect, there may be no wind to fly your kite, but people will still turn up. Your act of service will become an opportunity to meet with others. Creating community may be the biggest service you offer.

#### From Community to Discipleship

There seem to be at least three evangelistic pathways between community and discipleship.

- *Include an explicitly Christian dimension from an early stage.* Take a lunch club, for example. Members might put candles on the tables after the plates have been cleared, play some Christian music, invite someone to read a few verses from the Bible, allow time for silent prayer and ask someone else to read a couple of written prayers – all lasting about 20 minutes. Guests could leave or stay for this. As prayers are answered, this short act of worship



Photo: Contemplative Fire

might lead to a fortnightly Bible study after lunch, or a discipleship course.

- *Include a more general spiritual dimension.* At the end of the evening, members of a divorce recovery group might be invited to share a period of quietness, in which they could pray to God as they understand him (or her) or think positive thoughts.

In time, they might be invited to share their hopes and concerns about the coming week, and then pray for — or have positive thoughts about — the other person. The leader could quietly pray that the Holy Spirit graciously responds.

Feedback on whether this was helpful might create openings for the group to discuss what God is like and how he gets involved in people's lives.

- *Create opportunities to form a separate explorers' group.* As relationships develop, people may become interested in examining the Christian faith. A group might meet at a different time for this purpose.

All three pathways depend on individual Christians being willing to share their faith with others one-to-one.

### **Discipleship**

This is the process through which people explore and are nurtured in the Christian faith, including learning how to worship together. It is an essential part of the fresh expressions journey. Jesus called his followers 'to make disciples of all nations' (Matthew 28: 19).

### **Church**

As people explore the Christian faith and worship together, they are not encouraged to join 'the main church', but are invited to explore what it means to be church themselves, as they meet and relate to each other.



# Nurturing a fresh expression

**F**resh expressions tend not to follow a fixed path. They often emerge in surprising ways, but using the fresh expressions journey, the group might discuss questions like:

- How are we going to build a real sense of community?
- Which of the three 'evangelistic pathways' to discipleship should we aim for (see page 6)?
- What might church eventually look like in this context?
- If a café evolves into a congregation, what sort of relationship would it have with the parent church?
- What nature of ministry does this vision need in the first instance e.g. local lay leadership, an Ordained Pioneer Minister?
- What will you have to do to enjoy 'the goodwill of all the people' (Acts 2.47)? For example, how will the venture satisfy legal requirements, such as employment law, health and safety, child protection and third party insurance? Have you thought about charity status so that you can claim back the tax on donations?

## **Organising support for the venture might include:**

- *Prayer partners.* Who from outside the group will support the venture in prayer? How will you keep in touch so that they know what is going on?
- *Other Partners.* Who could work with you? Could it be a deanery venture? Have you shared your vision with other churches in your locality?
- *Permission givers.* Have you got the backing of your church leadership?

You will want to think about accountability. Being accountable is part of Christian maturity. Even Jesus made himself accountable — to his Father. How will the emerging fresh expression be held to account? How

will the church leadership also be held to account for delivering what it's promised?

## **Nurturing the team — shared leadership**

- Getting together — a shared call
- Exploring the possibilities — a shared vision
- Thinking ahead — shared values
- Organising support — a shared venture
- Nurturing the team — shared leadership

Sometimes these stages will flow logically from one to the next. More often, they will overlap. **GETON** is not a rigid framework. It is a checklist to help spark ideas.

## **Organising support — a shared venture**

The final task will be nurturing the team. The planning group might ask:

- *Who's going to be involved in leading the fresh expression?* How will they be recognised by the church? Might they be commissioned during a service?
- *What training will they need?* In practical things like health and safety, and child protection? If this is to become a fresh expression of church, should some of the team be going on a Fresh Expressions course, such as *Mission Shaped Intro* or *Mission Shaped Ministry*? Would the team benefit from some training in personal evangelism?
- *What outside support will the team require?* Should the core team have a mentor? Or will it be the team leader who has a mentor? Will someone in the core team join a learning network and bring lessons back to the team? Will someone else keep in touch with practical advice?

# Sustaining a fresh expression

**T**hinking ahead about sustainability means discussing:

- intention
- gradualness
- simplicity
- shared leadership
- multiplying leaders
- passing on your values.

*Realism may be a helpful start.* Not every fresh expression needs to achieve self-financing, self-governing and self-reproducing.

- A venture can be short-lived and still be an authentic expression of church — a fresh expression in an after-school club, for example.
- More and more churches recognise that it is not reasonable to expect youth work to be self-financing and are appointing paid youth workers.
- Some ventures may not be fully self-governing. Oversight and administration may be shared with their mother church. The finances of a church plant, for example, may be looked after in the 'main' church's office.

*Having clear intention* might encourage you to ask: 'What would we have to do to include sustainability, and especially multiplication, in our vision?' *Gradualness* is about starting on a realistic scale that will be sustainable early on, and encouraging it to grow step by step.

This applies particularly to finance. It is natural that many ventures should rely on outside funds in the early stages. But if the budget is too large, the project may struggle to

become financially independent.

*Asking the right questions in the planning stage will help:*

- What are the financial resources of the people we are called to serve?
- What sized venture could they realistically sustain?
- How long will the initial funding be available for?
- Is replacement funding from outside likely?
- Are we thinking on too large a scale?

*Your answers might influence your approach to employing staff.* For instance, in this Diocese we have learnt that appointing a full-time paid minister is not the best way to grow and sustain a fresh expression in the longer term as it creates major financial burdens. However, an ordained or lay Pioneer Minister may emerge once your fresh expression begins to develop.

A fresh expression has to be contextual in every respect — in its size and funding as well as in everything else. Taking 'gradualness' seriously could well force you back to the drawing board. You may have to pray for a new vision. *Simplicity may be another key to sustainability.* Keeping a fresh expression simple (or 'lightweight') could help to ensure that it is manageable. If simple equals small (which is not always the case), you might want to think of creating several small cells that cluster together for a different style of worship and teaching.

*Shared leadership is vital.* It entails replacing the mindset, 'This is a project for other people', with one that thinks, 'This is a project with.' Plenty of volunteers will greatly increase the likelihood of the venture proving sustainable.



The load can be shared more widely, reducing burnout. The project won't depend so heavily on one or two key people who might have to pull out if their circumstances change.

*Passing on your values will also be important.* The church has flourished over many years, it has changed and adapted to new circumstances, but throughout it has kept the same core values. Some of the monastic traditions demonstrate this particularly well. Might retaining a core identity prove to be part of the story for fruitful and sustainable fresh expressions?

*We suspect that one reason fresh expressions don't multiply is that they fail to start with the intention that they should.*

### **Sustaining your fresh expression within the structures of the Church of England**

The thought of 'bogging down' your fresh expression with 'inherited church' structures may make you want to change your mind about starting one in the first place! However, if fresh expressions are to become part of the mainstream of the life of the church, they have to find a way to exist both on the edge where people outside the church are, but also within the life of the whole church. Bishop's Mission Orders provide a new legal device that enables a bishop to recognise a mission initiative that will lead to a new Christian community — a fresh expression of church. This sets the 'new church' in Anglican structures and provides the support it will need to thrive, develop and grow.

# Resources

The web is full of information on fresh expressions of church, including blogs and stories of people and projects from all over the UK and the world. Here are a few addresses to get you started:

**Fresh Expressions.** Website of the national Fresh Expressions team including information on Vision Days, training programmes, publications and the excellent DVD's. [www.freshexpressions.org.uk](http://www.freshexpressions.org.uk)

**SHARE – the guide.** Where much of the information in this booklet has come from. A comprehensive series of guides on everything involved in thinking about fresh expressions. [www.sharetheguide.org](http://www.sharetheguide.org)

**The Sheffield Centre.** Home of the Church Army now at the forefront of fresh expressions in the UK and authors of the excellent Encounters on the Edge booklets. [www.churcharmy.org.uk/sheffieldcentre](http://www.churcharmy.org.uk/sheffieldcentre)

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Over the past six years, Oxford Diocese has supported various fresh expressions under the Cutting Edge Ministries initiative, including:

**Maybe.** A group of people working at becoming a community exploring creative, simple, engaged and

playful living in the way of Jesus Christ through a weekly community meal, a rhythm of prayer, looking out for our neighbour, weekend Eucharist, and creative acts. [www.maybe.org.uk](http://www.maybe.org.uk)

**Home.** Spiritual seekers sharing spiritual practices, a Christian community in the city of Oxford, UK. We are discovering something liberating and humanising through trying to follow the path of Christ and our hope is to share this journey with others who are also seeking. [www.home-online.org](http://www.home-online.org)

**Caféplus+** is a breakfast café, open on the first Sunday morning of every month from 9:30am to 12:30pm in Haddenham Village Hall. The main aim is to help to bring the church into the community and at the same time help our community to discover church. [www.haddenhamstmarys.org/mission/cafeplus](http://www.haddenhamstmarys.org/mission/cafeplus)

**i-Church.** An online Christian community exploring what it means to be church on the Internet. [www.i-church.org/home](http://www.i-church.org/home)

**Contemplative Fire** is a movement, a community and an adventure, celebrating life in all its fullness on the Way of Christ. Contemplative Fire is emerging into a number of small communities of Christ at the edge. [www.contemplativefire.org](http://www.contemplativefire.org)

Need some more help and advice? Contact a member of the Diocesan Fresh Expressions Group or one of the Parish Development Advisers (01865 208252).

[www.oxford.anglican.org/mission-and-evangelism/fresh-expressions-of-church](http://www.oxford.anglican.org/mission-and-evangelism/fresh-expressions-of-church)

Be creative... try new things... take risks...



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