

## Pioneer Ministry Training and Fresh Expressions

In the last few months I have moved to Cambridge to begin a new and very exciting role as Tutor in Pioneer Minister Training at Westcott House and Ridley Hall Theological Colleges and Fresh Expressions Advisor for Ely Diocese. This has been a big move for me after planting one of the first 'fresh expressions' called The Net, in Huddersfield, over the last 7 years.

I am passionate about fresh expressions of church as a missionary movement of God to reconnect us with many parts of non churched Britain. But it also has an important role in enabling the 'traditional church' to ask serious questions of itself, as it changes in reaction to many pressures, both negative and positive.

Before taking up my new role I have had some space for reflection as I visited America and Australia during the summer to look at what is happening with fresh expressions in those countries. Stepping outside your own backyard provides some helpful distance in being able to view your own situation more clearly.

I am amazed and excited by what God is doing here and how the Church of England really seems to have taken this movement into its structures. Sometimes I have to pinch myself as I reflect how far we have come since I tentatively put forward to my Diocese my vision for the Net 9 years ago. I desperately do not want this to be a blip in a declining church. I already hear the critics lining up to write this all off as a passing fad or the next good idea. I speak to clergy who are just waiting for all this to pass off into the distance. If this, though, is God's agenda for us we must be honest with ourselves about what really is happening on the ground and be prepared to continue to develop our thinking around the issues created. Here are my most pressing issues that I am presently grappling with .....

### 1. The nature of fresh expressions of church.

To update Bishop Stephen Neil famous quote, 'If everything is fresh expressions, nothing is fresh expressions.' Let me give a couple of recent examples to highlight this. In a Diocese, in the recent questions related to the National Mission Statistics sixty six churches said they had some kind of fresh expressions but the vast majority of these said they were aimed at frequent attendees. Recently at a Diocesan Clergy Conference I was asked to lead fresh expressions night prayer! I'm still not sure what this is. It felt like two different phrases joined together with no real synergy. Are fresh expressions purely whatever we choose to give such a title to? Where does effective evangelism in the parish stop and fresh expression begin? Are church plants of large churches really fresh expressions? Does it have to be young or trendy? What does a fresh expression look like for senior citizens for example and how might that be different from a traditional service?

I welcome Fresh Expressions' recent definition that, **a fresh expression is a form of church for our changing culture established primarily for the benefit of people who are not yet members of any church.** (See the website for the full details [www.freshexpressions.org.uk](http://www.freshexpressions.org.uk))

I think we need to keep talking about this issue so that we are honest in what we are doing and not doing. The danger we face is that fresh expressions of church can mean anything it also means it can mean nothing and so is easily dismissed by those who oppose it.

2. We need to ensure fresh expressions are really reaching the non churched?

How successful are fresh expressions at connecting, converting and discipling the non churched, that is those who have no history of church attendance, maybe for several generations? This is the group that in many areas is the majority of the population. We may need to do some honest evidence based research that goes beyond the anecdotal.

Many parish churches are good with the fringe and dechurched but not with those way outside their normal orbit. I was talking to the vicar of a large, growing, lively parish church the other day who admitted that hardly anyone was coming to faith. Their growth was from transfer growth from other local churches and people moving into the area. I really wonder from my experience of visiting parish churches whether many of our initiatives, including the work of the larger churches in our cities are really touching this non churched group.

I am convinced fresh expressions of church should be reaching non churched people. But we need some hard evidence for fresh expressions so we can work out our future strategies and even revise our expectations in a difficult missionary church. We were given 3 years initially when we started the Net to prove ourselves. Is that a sensible amount of time to reach cultures that have marginalised the church? Is seven years to create a new church for unchurched people realistic in anyway? Will we need to become like overseas missionaries who give their best years to connect with an unreached culture for Christ? We just don't know but we need to as we are in a new missionary scenario.

3. Let's not lose the evangelism in our mission.

Words, words! I am discovering the words mission and missional are slippery customers too. I can have a conversation with someone about mission and find we are using the same language but talking about completely different things. When I was in America much of the conversation was about missional church. But then I realised nobody was mentioning the E word. I soon discovered it was not wise to. You were quickly written off as old fashioned and out of step with the culture.

There has certainly been a right reaction to bad evangelism but lets not lose our confidence in good evangelism and the role of the evangelist. I feel we need urgent discussions on the role of evangelism and evangelists today in the face of a changing culture. I know mission and evangelism are closely linked but they are not synonymous. Let's not lose sight of the role of the E word within our mission. I quote the guru of contemporary mission thinking David Bosch, 'evangelism is the core, heart or centre of mission, it consists in the proclamation of salvation in Christ to non believers.'

4. We have to develop a ministry of steadiness

This may sound like strange language coming from a pioneer. But I fear we the church could become like the education system where teachers wrestle with ever increasing new ideas, fads, schemes and changes from the government. If we really believe this missionary movement of fresh expressions is from God, we need to commit ourselves to it, with time and steadiness plus our best theological minds, resources and above all with prayer. We need to understand fresh expressions of church are not a short term resolution to dwindling numbers but a missiological and ecclesiological imperative for a post Christian nation.

Fresh expressions of church will need investment in all sorts of ways while ensuring whatever starts remains accountable. We must be prepared to take risks and fail. Dioceses will need to be prepared for things not to always work out and to develop and learn from this. We will need to develop a supportive culture of risk taking. It will need creativity in training, for both clergy and laity and in the use of the churches' limited financial resources. All this will certainly challenge the established triumvirate of church building, stipend and house? The real question is, as Loren Mead of the Albin Institute said 25 years ago, 'who will hold us steady on the future?'

5. Let's work on the church in fresh expressions.

It's interesting to me that we usually refer it as fresh expressions but miss off the phrase 'of church.' I worry that in our contemporary scene we often want to play down church whereas I think scripture calls us to play it up. This is not ultimately an evangelistic project or a series of meetings or events but the creation of Christian communities that reflect the relational nature of God. As Rowan Williams says, 'church is what happens when Jesus is around.....here is God doing something , here is God in Christ drawing people together in a certain shape of community of common life.'

This process is not a one off but calls us to structure communities where people are enabled to meet with the living Jesus and, in meeting Him, will want others to share that same experience. Let's make sure we are keeping the church in fresh expressions but also developing our thinking and practice of what we mean by that.

I look forward to being part of the church that wants to develop these discussions with verve and vigour. We owe it to ourselves to give it all we can, we owe it to our nation to be the church God is calling us to be and we owe it to our Lord who gave everything for us to glorify Him as His body here on earth.

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