

Diocesan Synod, Saturday 21st March 2015

Stimulating Growth: Mixed Economy Church and Fresh Expressions

This document will provide your group with some contextual information around Mixed Economy Church and Fresh Expressions, and will outline briefly some ideas and comments linked to this theme that have been put forward during initial consultation. This document should be considered a **stimulus for discussion**, and your group may draw on it as much or as little as you wish. You may wish to explore and develop aspects of the ideas presented, or you may come up with different ideas: all of this is helpful as we seek to discern how our resources can be used most effectively to stimulate Church growth.

Impetus

Starting a Fresh Expression of Church (FxC) is the most numerically significant feature of current Church of England life, and this is reflected in the Diocese of Exeter. Recent (2013) research undertaken by Dr. George Lings of the Church Army identified 69 projects that met the exacting 10 point criteria of FxC, and a further 108 projects that contained elements of a FxC. One interpretation of this research is that Exeter Diocese now has 69 young churches in its family that need praising for what has been achieved and nurturing to address existing frailties and vulnerabilities. There is room for this number to grow to reach others on the fringes, or currently beyond, the Church.

Context

Lings' report gave many points for encouragement:

- 88% of FxC teams are made up of 3-12 people, indicating that a small team can be successful.
- There is a high growth ratio of 5.3 (or, in other words, 4.3 people are reached by each person sent out as a FxC team member). This is higher than the national average of 3.6. Although much of this growth is through child attendance due to the high incidence of Messy Churches, even adult growth taken alone matches the national average of 3.6%.
- The FxC are, on average at least as big, if not larger than, the average Exeter Diocese church congregation.
- There is a clear story of many more FxC starting in the last four years.
- There is a high proportion of those attending whose background is non-churched.
- FxC teams have a high proportion of lay people, the majority of them women.
- There are high levels of intention in relation to steps towards self-financing and self-governing .

However, signs of vulnerability were also identified:

- The FxC appear to be slightly marginal to the life of the Diocese. It is estimated that only around half of those attending are included within AAAWA statistics. If they were all included they would at least partially offset recent declines. This also indicates that the true level of decline within more traditional forms of church is being partially obscured.
- Exeter's FxC are attended by more Christians than the national average. The de-churched figure is unusually low. However, researchers noted that there appears to be a greater reluctance in rural Devon to classify oneself as 'de-churched' than is usually the case.

Growing in prayer
Making new disciples
Serving the people of Devon with joy



- There is a high level of misunderstanding as to what is or is not a FxC, with a record exclusion rate from Lings' study of 71% (i.e. self-categorisation of FxC not meeting the exacting national criteria).
- A higher than usual proportion of FxC have plateaued in terms of attendance numbers.
- There appears to be an absence of FxC in inner urban areas of the diocese, particularly Plymouth, and in some rural deaneries, notably Holsworthy, Hartland and Torrington.
- 32% have still not taken steps to promote Discipleship although this may be due to many of the FxC still being very young; 37 of the 69 have started since 2011.
- The figure for sacramental practice is also low. 29% of the 69 cases have had communion services, compared with 38% nationally. 27.5% have held baptisms (34% nationally), 18.8% held confirmations (26% nationally).

There is an appetite for starting FxC within the Diocese of Exeter. However, it is probably true that most existing FxC have yet to establish ecclesial maturity where discipleship, room for spiritual growth and sacramental worship are fixed. What then happens to individuals when they find the FxC they have joined no longer satisfies their desire to know more, to be more, and to become more mature in their faith? Without this, it becomes difficult for them to move beyond receiving ministry and to begin to explore and perform their own God-given ministry. An FxC should not be considered a stepping stone to traditional church but a fully developed worshipping body in its own right, and, in any case, it would be wrong to assume that a traditional church is more adept at allowing this sort of growth.

Possible initiatives

- 1) To offer training and support to enable FxC leaders to take their FxC beyond the 'new' stage. This might involve:
 - a) Recruitment of somebody to continue to advise on the creation and building up of FxC;
 - b) Recruitment of a team of – mainly SSM – pioneer priests to work particularly within FxC, developing their discipleship and sacramental aspects, and mentoring leadership teams;
 - c) Development of local training for FxC leaders, both face-to-face and online;
 - d) Development of and participation in local and national networks for the sharing of good practice;
 - e) Facilitation of attendance for FxC leaders at national conferences/study events.
- 2) To provide particular support for Messy Church, with the aim of getting away from the idea that this is targeted at 4 to 11 year-olds and reverting to the project's original aim of being open and relevant to all ages, allowing people to fellowship with those of a different age and stage.
- 3) To develop particular support for house groups as FxCs.

Comments

- FxCs require appropriate leadership, training and guidance.
- Readers are key to FxCs, and are currently under-used in some areas of the Diocese.
- This is an area where Mission Communities need help.
- It is important that FxCs have the chance of developing into church in their own form, as the transition to a more traditional church format is too strange and difficult for many members to adjust to. Different forms of worship suit different people.