

Various questions have been raised about the value and purpose of ‘fresh expressions’ and the emphasis on ‘pioneering’ in the Cumbria Churches Ministry Strategy. This paper gives some reasons why this emphasis is important, plus some examples.

Pioneering Ministry

What might pioneer ministry look like in a mission community context?

If ‘pioneering ministry’ is working well then you cannot pin-down what it will look like – it will be the outcome of Christians prayerfully reflecting on the needs and opportunities of people who are not currently part of church, and looking to see what God might already be doing (or where there are existing points of contact) and then exploring how that might be developed. Pioneering ministry will be different in different places and communities.

‘Pioneering ministry’ in Carlisle Diocese takes much of its impetus from the Fresh Expressions movement. Here is some background material from www.freshexpressions.org.uk.

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.

- *It will come into being through principles of listening, service, incarnational mission and making disciples.*
- *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.*

A fresh expression is a church plant or a new congregation. It is not a new way to reach people and then add them to an existing congregation. It is not an old outreach with a new name (‘rebranded’ or ‘freshened up’). Nor is it a half-way house, a bridge project, which people belong to for a while, on their way into Christian faith, before crossing over to ‘proper’ church. This is ‘proper church’.

Fresh expressions:

- serve those outside church;
- listen to people and enter their culture;
- make discipleship a priority;
- form church.

It is a way of describing the planting of new congregations or churches which are different in ethos and style from the church which planted them, because they are designed to reach a different group of people than those already attending the original church. There is no single model to copy but a wide variety of approaches for a wide variety of contexts and constituencies. The emphasis is on planting something which is appropriate to its context, rather than cloning something which works elsewhere.

Some fresh expressions are very different from church as we have been used to it in the UK – there is a surfer church on Polzeath beach, a youth congregation based in a skate park and a church for skiers. Others are more familiar but in unfamiliar settings – such as church in a café, pub, church or school. They can be found in rural areas as well as in towns and cities and have been planted to reach all age groups – pensioners as well as those focused on children or young families.

The Church Commissioners have recently completed a careful and wide-ranging assessment of how fresh expressions are developing, and of their fruitfulness ('Anecdote to Evidence', 2014). The research looked at eleven dioceses, covering a full range of rural/urban/sub-urban. Some headlines:

1. **Most of the fresh expressions started in the last six years.**
2. **Across the eleven dioceses there were a total of 518 fresh expressions, an increase of worshipping/serving/witnessing congregations within those dioceses of 15%.**
3. **The fresh expressions had led to an average increase in attendance of about 10% across the diocese, in seven of the eleven dioceses reversing the decline of the last six years.**
4. **Of those attending fresh expressions 40% had no previous involvement with church, a third were people who at one time had an involvement with church (but no longer attended) and the remainder were people who were attending elsewhere. In other words three quarters of attendance were people not currently involved with church.**
5. **Of these fresh expressions 7% were child-focussed, 19% were adult only and 74% were for all ages.**
6. **Across all fresh expressions in the survey 52% are exclusively lay led. The extent of lay leadership is a significant factor in both enabling fresh expressions to happen (ideas, motivation, prayer, time, enthusiasm) and also in ensuring that new congregations are rooted in the communities/cultures they seek to serve (not 'steered' by professional clergy).**
7. **Although some fresh expressions have tended to originate from more evangelical churches, in various dioceses (for example, Norwich) the majority were birthed from a 'Central' and 'Anglo-Catholic' stable.**

There is lots of encouragement here. Among the most interesting is 3 above. In the next section of this paper there will be a sincere affirmation of existing/traditional/conventional styles and patterns of church, and the need to develop and strengthen these. But considerable energy has been put into developing and strengthening existing/traditional/conventional church, over many years. And even with that support and encouragement most dioceses have seen decline. The only approach that has consistently reversed decline is that of fresh expressions. ¹

One of the comments received about the Carlisle Diocese Ministry Strategy is: "Please help existing parish patterns become more pioneering rather than create a parallel pattern". Some comments:

- a) For several decades, in most dioceses, this is what has been happening. They have been seeking to strengthen existing patterns and ways of working. This has led to some growth here and there, but little significant growth in most places.
- b) The pioneering emphasis in our Ministry and Outreach strategies is part of an overall holistic approach. In the Outreach Strategy these are labelled as 'MeReach', 'InReach', 'OutReach', 'BigReach'. Fresh Expressions are featured in the Ministry and Outreach strategies, but they are part of a renewed emphasis on all sorts of mission and evangelism.

1. **NB.** It is obviously good that decline has reversed across a diocese, but it may not be much encouragement to individual churches. Many churches want more people to 'come and join them' – come and boost numbers attending and involved. Fresh Expressions do not directly boost numbers attending any particular church or congregation. They are about new churches being planted, *in addition* to existing. So while attendance may increase across a diocese, it will not necessarily increase in any given church. [In fact there can be spin-off benefits for conventional churches if those who attend get involved in some way in the fresh expression – for example with a Messy Church. The vitality and potential arising from fresh expressions can boost people's adventurousness and ambition for their own congregation's activity and programme.]

- c) The concern expressed in the comment about encouraging pioneering in existing congregations is valid. The various strategies are intended to embed 'pioneering' into existing parish patterns (assuming parishes permit). But the diversity of people across Cumbria, and their 'distance' from church and the gospel, means that a more ambitious and creative plan is needed, going beyond what could be summed up as 'boosting and offering more of what we currently do'.

Some issues and confusions

1. Old and new

One concern/complaint that is voiced about our diocesan emphasis on pioneering is that it seems to suggest that traditional/conventional styles of church are no longer significant – we are letting those fade away while putting our energy and resources into something 'new' (and untried and untested, and which may not work in a traditional place like Cumbria).²

An emphasis on pioneering and fresh expressions in no way means that existing patterns and styles of church are undervalued. Indeed the 'pioneering' emphasis recognises that existing styles and patterns of church are a vital part of community life and should be encouraged and developed in every way.

But... the emphasis on pioneering and fresh expressions recognises that – if we want to connect as many people as possible across Cumbria with the gospel and with an experience of Christian community – then this is not going to happen simply by relying on our existing styles and patterns of church.

Most ordinary churches across Cumbria are 'middle of the road'. They are welcoming and hospitable. But they also have a particular style and 'feel'. They tend to suite those people who go along regularly but are not very keen to adjust how things are done, or what is sung, or who does what. While being generally welcoming they are not easy places for those with little prior understanding of church to feel at home. Or if people do attend they find the 'culture' of the place to be one to which they struggle to relate – singing traditional hymns or contemporary songs, listening to a long talk, standing and sitting, ecclesiastical words and liturgy, making polite conversation over a cup of tea, being in a chilly building for an hour while your children fidget...

Archbishop Rowan Williams used the phrase 'mixed economy' to describe what is needed across the church – a diversity of forms and rhythms of worshipping life and Christian experience. A person with lots of savings who invests it all in one company, or a town where there is just one main employer, or a supermarket that sells only one breakfast cereal, would all be aware how vulnerable they are. Yet many churches basically 'offer' one style of approach. This can work in small (rural) communities where people's level of relationship is high. But it is unlikely to be the most effective approach in an age of diverse cultures, preferences and lifestyles, and in which few people have even a rudimentary grasp of the Christian story, let alone the Christian gospel.

2. The concern about 'untried and untested' is no longer valid, given the considerable research and interest that has been applied to fresh expressions since 2004. And given that many rural dioceses are confidently (and successfully) adopting fresh expressions there is no reason to assume that 'it won't work' in Cumbria. Messy Church (which is becoming 'normal' across Cumbria) and the fruitfulness of Deanery Network Youth Church, makes clear that a pioneering and fresh expressions approach can, is and will be helpful in Cumbria.

A 'mixed economy' approach completely affirms traditional/conventional forms and styles of church, because these are powerful for many people and help both make and grow disciples. But traditional/conventional forms of church (on the whole) are struggling to make significant impact in terms of mission and outreach. A 'mixed economy' approach means that 'the church' adapts the style and 'feel' of what it offers in order to connect with different people in different ways.

Many traditional/conventional churches are already aware of this 'mixed economy' principle (even though they have not applied that name to it). For example, once a month they may have a 'Family Service' instead of Sung Eucharist, or a Taizé-style evening service every so often, or Songs of Praise in the pub at Harvest or Christmas. Those churches already recognise that, in order to connect with different people, cultures and personalities, and in order to offer something that 'works' for people who are not regular at church, then there needs to be inventiveness and variety. The emphasis within the diocesan strategies on 'pioneering and fresh expressions' takes these approaches and builds on them so that we can reach as many people as possible.

2. What is Anglican?

One of the hallmarks of the Church of England is our parish system. Everyone, whether they attend church or have a faith, is embraced by the network of parishes. We are 'there' for all people. This can be particularly true at times of crisis or celebration (birth, death, marriage) – although we have a diminishing role even in these significant life-events. Our churches are intended to be there for everyone and what they offer in their worship is intended to be '*Common Worship*' – worship that all people can access and through which they are able to encounter the living God.

We live in times that are culturally and socially very diverse. England has never been culturally homogenous but it is now extraordinarily multi-cultural. At one time there was the Light Programme, the Home Service and the Third Programme. Now there are a seemingly endless variety of music, talk, cultural and entertainment programmes, across radio, television and digital. Within Cumbria there is little cultural-*ethnic* diversity, but there is considerable cultural diversity between different age-groups, geography and ways of living. In order for the Church of England to connect with this range of people it needs to discover new ways of being and doing church – ways that relate to people and their lifestyles. This is a reflection of our foundational principle – that we are 'there' for everyone and want everyone to encounter the living God. Like missionaries trying to reach different tribes with the gospel we adapt ourselves to their culture so that they can discover and experience God in a way that makes sense in their life and community (rather than expecting the different 'tribes' to adapt themselves to our way of thinking and doing things).

3. 30%

The Ministry Strategy identifies that we should move towards 30% of resources being given to 'pioneering', in order to strengthen what we do in mission.

- a) As is often said, the Church is the only society that exists for its non-members. The Church in Cumbria exists in order that Christian people might be built up and supported in their Christian lives. But the church in Cumbria also exists in order that many other people might have the opportunity to discover more of God and God's purpose for their lives. We exist for our non-members because God's love and concern is equal for all people – Christian and not Christian.
- b) The shift to 30% of resources being given to 'pioneering' is not about shifting resources into a trendy new idea. It is about wanting to honour:

- the gospel imperative to “Go into all the world and make disciples”;
- the theological pattern of Jesus’ incarnation – he left heaven and came among us, in our ordinary lives;
- and the Anglican imperative of seeking to serve, engage with and witness to all;
- the sobering reality that our existing support for parish ministry has not (on the whole) led to significant numbers of new people coming to faith (although many have come to faith and been developed in their discipleship, praise God).

4. Maverick pioneers

‘Pioneering’ is perhaps not a useful label for what is being suggested. It suggests there will be maverick Christians going off solo into uncharted territory, having exciting or difficult times, and then saying to everyone ‘back at base’ come over here where I am. An emphasis on ‘fresh expressions’ is more helpful, because it puts any ‘pioneering’ within a shared, mutual and embodied enterprise – it is something that ‘the church’ does together and supports (even though only a few may do the actual pioneering). A ‘fresh expressions’ mindset is also helpful because it makes clear that pioneering is usually tentative – maverick pioneers tend to go off and ‘do their thing’ whereas ‘fresh expressions pioneering’ tends to be prayerful and exploratory.

An example. Once upon a time a church might notice a crowd of youth hanging around at the bus shelter in the evening. They would decide to do something about this. They would negotiate with church hall users for a regular evening slot in the programme to start a youth club. They would get grants to buy table tennis tables, video games and to stock a tuck shop. When the ‘youth club’ was ready to launch they would send out invitations through schools, and hand out invitations at the bus shelter. Some youth might come along.

The pioneering/fresh expressions approach would be different. Now the church notices the issue and finds way to talk with the young people. It finds out what they are thinking and needing. It prays and talks with the other church in the town. It might result in setting up a youth club, but it probably results in hiring a nearby cafe two evenings a week, and opening the door to whoever comes in, and being around to chat, and offering to pray, and maybe talk about a bit of the Bible or things on the young people’s minds, and maybe finding a venue for a Sunday evening session, and maybe offer to take some of them to Soul Survivor or Greenbelt, and see what happens. This is not a very different approach, but it is more intentional about building relationship with the young people (rather than giving them something to do to keep them off the streets) and is also intentional about finding ways to help them begin to encounter God and develop some sort of welcoming Christian community in which they might explore what it means to be a disciple of Jesus.

This briefing paper was produced by +Robert, Bishop of Penrith, in order to give some answers to questions raised in feedback to the Cumbria churches Ministry Strategy.

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Examples

Examples are helpful because they paint a picture of what fresh expressions and pioneering might be like in practice. But examples are also not helpful because in different situations what happens and what is planned will be different

Here are a small selection of pioneering examples. Use the link to see more of each story.

Messy Church (www.messychurch.org.uk) is a great example of a fresh expression that is accessible and 'doable' in many contexts. The short video on their web site ('What is Messy Church?') is very helpful. Go to <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8IR-VTHYer4>.



Life Church, in Newton Aycliffe, Co Durham

A church that has grown to 100 in eighteen months, based around community involvement and service, and poverty issues. www.freshexpressions.org.uk/stories/lifechurch

Thirst, Romsey Town, Cambridge

Meeting Saturday teatime, in a school, with games, sports, conversation and DVD, plus a Eucharist

www.freshexpressions.org.uk/stories/thirsttoo/mar14

Cook@Chapel in Hanslope, a small village about seven miles north of Milton Keynes

Church and holistic spirituality for young teenagers, based around cooking!

www.freshexpressions.org.uk/stories/cookatchapel/feb14

Car Boot Fair Church, Hastings

Serving and connecting with thousands at Sunday morning car boot sales

www.freshexpressions.org.uk/stories/bootfairchurch

United Network, Clitheroe, Lancashire

A new church community, started by an Anglican Ordained Pioneer

Minister

www.freshexpressions.org.uk/stories/unitednetwork



Hot Chocolate, Dundee

Christian community among young people that began by giving hot chocolate to those hanging around outside church on a cold day...

www.freshexpressions.org.uk/stories/hotchocolate/jul13

The Ark @ Crawcrook, Gateshead

A church, café and soft play centre where place where the community can meet, have fun, be supported and welcomed.

www.freshexpressions.org.uk/stories/arkcrawcrook

