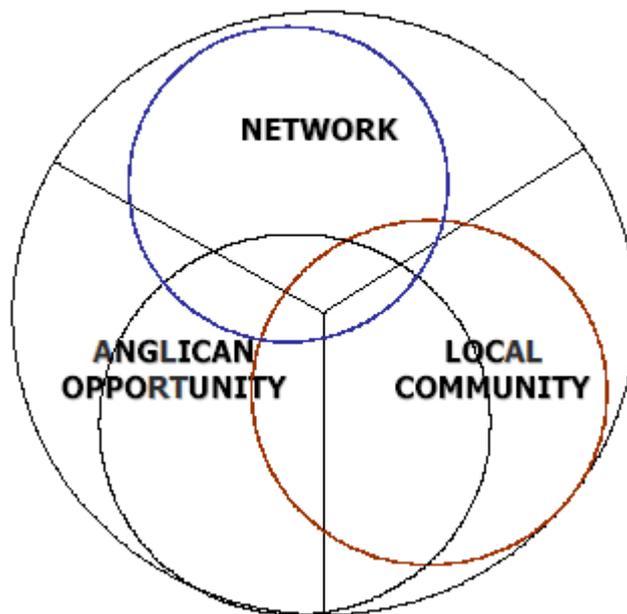


Fresh Expressions – Church Reimagined?



Study Paper

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OUTLINE

Introduction	3
1. FRESH EXPRESSIONS – WHAT ARE THEY ABOUT?	4
1.1 The Post-Christian Landscape	4
1.2 What Do We Mean By “Fresh Expressions”?	5
1.2.1 A Personal Anecdote	5
1.2.2 Two Meanings of “Fresh Expressions of Church”	6
1.2.3 Mission Not Maintenance	6
1.2.4 Mission Shaped Church	7
2. CELL CHURCH – SOME OBSERVATIONS AND REFLECTIONS	8
2.1 Cell Church “In A Nutshell”	8
2.2 The Cell Church Picture in 2008	9
2.2.1 Cell Church Works – In Some Places	10
2.2.2 Issues With The Cell Model	10
2.2.2.a East Is Not West	10
2.2.2.b Leadership Development	11
2.2.2.c “The 4 th W”	11
3. MSCs – MISSION SHAPED COMMUNITIES	12
3.1 Terminology	12
3.2 Vision for Mission	12
3.3 Structure	14
3.4. Formation	14
3.5 Operation	15
3.6 An Example	15
3.7 Clusters as Transitional Church	17
3.8 An Obvious Conclusion	19
4. OTHER FRESH EXPRESSIONS	20
4.1 Young Adult Focused Churches	20
4.2 Alternative Churches: “Laptops and Candles”	20
4.2.1 What to Make of Alternative Churches	21

5. SOME KEY ISSUES RAISED	23
5.1 Fresh Understandings of Resources	24
5.1.1 Buildings	24
5.1.2 Finance	24
5.1.3 Bishop's Mission Orders	25
5.2 Fresh Understandings of Leadership	25
5.2.1 Recovering New Testament Leadership	25
5.2.2 Beyond Leadership By Management	27
5.2.3 Beyond the Pastoral/Teaching Model	27
5.3 Fresh Understandings of Authority	27
5.4 Fresh Understandings of Sacraments	28
5.4.1 Fresh Understandings of Baptism	29
5.4.2 Fresh Understandings of Communion	29
5.5 Fresh Understandings of Our Context	30
5.6 Fresh Understandings of Mission	30
6. CONCLUSIONS	32
Reading List	35

FRESH EXPRESSIONS – CHURCH REIMAGINED?

Introduction

This Paper is the result of six weeks of study leave from the Diocese of Birmingham in 2008. In a sense it follows on from a sabbatical in 2000 which was focussed on the growing cell church movement at that time. Then cell church was perhaps the dominant fresh expression of church. But since then other so-called fresh expressions of church have multiplied and diversified. As a mission-minded person, it therefore seemed logical to take the further opportunity to examine the subject a bit more widely.

The methods of study were threefold:-

- Study by reading: Time taken to review some of the relevant literature appearing on the subject. This included some guided study at the Sheffield Centre (a unit researching church planting and fresh expressions) with the help of its Director, the Revd George Lings.
- Study by observation: Time permitting, visits were made to a number of parishes and other churches around the country, including some recent fresh expressions.
- Study by conversation: Opportunities were taken in these churches to talk with key people, and it was possible to meet and/or talk with a few relevant diocesan or national officers in the field.

The outcome of this process is here organised into five chapters.

- Chapter 1 examines what we mean by the term “Fresh Expressions”; it seemed a good place to start, after all.
- Chapter 2 looks back (briefly) at a previous paper about cell churches and reviews where this movement appears to be now.
- Chapter 3 moves on a more recent development from cell church – Mid-Sized Missional Communities (Clusters); this formed the main focus of the project.
- Chapter 4 briefly addresses (albeit superficially) two other forms of fresh expressions of church.
- Finally, Chapter 5 focuses on some key issues that are raised, the implication being that fresh expressions in themselves are likely to be little more than the latest bandwagon – unless, that is they are preceded by a grasp of necessary fresh understandings to under gird them.

The Conclusion briefly summarises the whole and makes a few suggestions for possible future action in a diocese.

1. Fresh Expressions – What Are They About?

“When there are megashifts in a culture, there tends to be a reconceptualisation of the church. The more profound the cultural shift, the more thorough is the shift in the church’s notion of itself.”¹

There can be little doubt that the last fifty years or so have seen something of a megashift in our culture. This movement from the modern to a post-modern culture, propelled by ever accelerating technological progress and globalisation, has been nothing short of relentless. We have indeed been living through a cultural megashift, which is continuing and has yet to settle.

1.1 The Post-Christian Landscape

It is now generally accepted that we are in the era of post-Christendom. In this cultural context the Church in the West has been, and still is, struggling to re-understand its place and purpose (as are other institutions and organisations). By “Christendom” we mean that period of history from the establishment of the church under the Emperor Constantine in the fourth century, which reached its high water mark in the middle ages, continued through the Enlightenment and its religious off-shoot, the Reformation, in the sixteenth century, and gradually declined into marginality by the mid twentieth century – though some residual aspects of it remain to be seen here and there.

It is against this background that the emergence of so-called “fresh expressions of Church” has to be understood. It is possible, as some are inclined to do, to dismiss these fresh expressions – cell church, youth church, café church, alternative worship, and the like – as transitory bi-products of the spirit of the age; the results of spiritual boredom and restlessness. This may be a mistake. My take is that they are early attempts at what Frost and Hirsch describe as the “reconceptualisation of the Church” amidst a fast-changing cultural landscape. As such they are to be viewed as experiments, some of which will lead nowhere, while some (possibly only a minority – who knows?) will strike new rock on which to build for the future.

Some years ago Robert Warren began to speak of the contemporary Church as operating in two modes – inherited and emerging². This remains the case. What is becoming clearer as the end of the first decade of the twenty-first century comes into view is that, by and large, Church in inherited mode continues to (a) gradually decline³, yet (b) still be perceived by most people as the norm – ie. “proper church”. That said, it is also becoming clearer that emerging forms of church are increasingly appearing on the landscape and are here to stay. They will not go away. Many – particularly those in the generations formed predominantly or entirely by post-modernity – know instinctively that church in the inherited mode isn’t working - for them, at least. But rather than walk away, they choose to reconceptualise and reinvent church for the future.

¹ M Frost & A Hirsch: [The Shape of Things to Come](#). Hendrickson 2003. p 15

² Robert Warren: [Building Missionary Congregations](#). Church House Publishing 1995

³ See Peter Brierly: [The Tide Is Running Out](#). Christian Research 2000

Moreover, those whose natural inclinations tend towards the inherited mode of church may need to take note. Michael Frost and Alan Hirsch have written provocatively along these lines.

“Experimental groups seeking to engage the Christian faith in a post-modern context will often lack the resources, profile or success record of the Boomer congregations. By definition, they are new, untried, relatively disorganised and fearful of self-promotion. They reject the corporate model of their Boomer forbears, and thus do not appear, according to existing paradigms, to be significant. Don’t be fooled. Somewhere in the genesis and genius of these diverse groups is hidden the future of Western Christianity. To dismiss them is to throw away the seeds of our survival.”⁴

By “Boomers” Frost and Hirsch are referring to the generations born between 1945 and 1965, and currently in the ascendancy in society and church. But there are some born during those two decades (myself included) who share the cares and concerns of the “Post Boomer” generations; so it’s not quite so generationally rigid. But as a rough and ready rule of thumb, their observations hold. Moreover, it needs to be borne in mind that the “Pre-Boomer” generations (those born before 1945) are likely – on the whole – to be even more committed to the inherited (or traditional) model of church.

This paper aims to look in broad terms at some of these “fresh expressions” or “experimental groups” – which are attempts to engage with the reality of our post-modern context - and tease out some implications for the Church – particularly the Church of England (CofE).

But first...

1.2 What Do We Mean By “Fresh Expressions”?

It appears to mean different things to different people. It will therefore be helpful to identify what Fresh Expressions (FE from now on, by the way) is NOT about; well, in my view - others will disagree. Let me explain this by a fairly recent personal experience.

1.2.1 A Personal Anecdote

About three years or so ago, I attended a “fringe” workshop on FE at a Christian conference. Looking forward to a bit of a catch-up session on something I was aware of but out of touch with, I sat in the meeting waiting to learn something – genuinely. What followed was a lesson in what I now know to be “Not-FE”.

The facilitator of the meeting invited stories of “FEs” from the group (which seemed to be more or less exclusively clergy and their wives or husbands). What followed was a series of anecdotes about such things as “having a service after the weekly mums & tots group”, “giving out Christian literature at a local car boot sale”, “running an after-school club”, “organising a men’s night at the pub”, and a whole host of other legitimate and praise-worthy activities that might reasonably be expected in and from any fairly lively local church. The point the group seemed to be missing was that these were indeed very good outreach activities from established local churches, which are known to have been going on for decades. Usually, such initiatives are launched as points of contact and bridge-building projects to draw people into the ambit of an existing church.

⁴ M Frost & A Hirsch: The Shape of Things to Come. Hendrickson 2003. p. xi

“How were these FEs of Church, as distinct from outreach programmes?” I found myself asking.

During this research, one Archdeacon remarked to me that “FE is not about pram services” (and the like). FE is not about evangelistic initiatives (whether old or new) from existing churches, whatever the missional value of such projects. Returning to the question, then, what do we mean by FE?

1.2.2 Two Meanings of “Fresh Expressions of Church”

In one of his *Encounters On The Edge* booklets, George Lings gives something of a snapshot of the evolving understand of this, as yet fluid, term FE.

“Some are called fresh in that they look pretty novel; cases would include those slowly growing among the subcultures of our day... What is common, and indeed normative, across them is that they involve planting something that did not exist before..... At the other end of the spectrum are existing churches making significant changes to their existing internal life. I am thinking of examples like churches truly transitioning into cells, those creating clusters as their normal gathering pattern and those reconstructing their Sunday worship into far more flexible and much more engaged patterns.”⁵

What is useful about this definition is that it is definite enough to exclude the car boot sale approach (which trivialises the whole concept) while being sufficiently expansive to include genuinely radical restructuring by existing established churches. Essentially, FE is about church re-imagined – about being truly missional rather than essentially pastoral.

1.2.3 Mission Not Maintenance

Share –The Guide (part of the *Fresh Expressions Website*)⁶ further defines the concept along the lines of missional priority.

“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.

Other terms that cover fresh expressions of church are: emerging church, new forms of church, new ways of being church and church plants.

A phrase like 'fresh expressions of church' can be vague and unclear. Sometimes the label is used to cover almost anything. That is why we offer a definition with a mission focus - 'fresh expressions' have bite.

So if you are doing something that is mainly for churchgoers, it could be extremely worthwhile but would not be a fresh expression as we understand it.

Or if you are running a parents and tots group but have no plans for it to become church in its own right (perhaps forming a cell church among the parents and carers), again that could be really valuable, but it would not be a fresh expression according to our definition.”

⁵ George Lings: *Encounters On The Edge* No.35 – “Changing Sunday”. Sheffield Centre, Sept 2007.

⁶ www.sharetheguide.org

This involves a different mindset when it comes to thinking about the nature and purpose of what we have come to call “church”. It is a move beyond what has been termed “attractional church”. Essentially, attractional church is about laying on structures and programmes (usually focussed on Sunday with supporting midweek groups and activities) to which we aim to attract people (normally from among the churched and dechurched). Attractional models of church work (or not) to varying degrees, but cannot be said to be breaking new ground. A few grow, some remain static (numerically) and others (possibly the majority) decline slowly. Whatever, all of them require people to “come to us”. Essentially, missional fresh expressions are about “going to them” – in some sense.

“The aim is not to provide a stepping stone into existing church, but to form new churches in their own right. The flow is from the congregation to people outside – not inward, but outward.”⁷

1.2.4 Mission Shaped Church

A seminal moment in the short history of FE was the Church of England Report *Mission Shaped Church*⁸ (MSC) in 2004. This Report, as it acknowledges, was building on the work of a previous Report *Breaking New Ground*⁹ (BNG). The group that produced BNG had been set up as a response to the growing phenomenon of church planting in the 1980s and 1990s. When something new happens, the Church of England’s instinctive reaction seems to be to set up a committee or working party to look into the matter. This approach can result in one of three possible outcomes: (a) the new phenomenon is strangled at birth; (b) it is allowed to survive but contained within a controlled framework; or (c) it is given permission to grow and develop with appropriate safeguards.

It looks like church planting as a practice got the “B Card” from the CofE in response to BNG. As MSC reports:

“‘Breaking New Ground’ saw church planting as a ‘supplementary strategy that enhances the essential thrust of the parish principle’. Perhaps the most significant recommendation of this current report is that this is no longer adequate.”

However, as MSC goes on, a move towards the “C Card” has now been recommended and adopted:

“It is clear that the parochial system remains an essential and central part of the national Church’s strategy to deliver incarnational mission. But the existing parochial system alone is no longer able fully to deliver its underlying mission purpose. We need to recognise that a variety of integrated missionary approaches is required. A mixed economy of parish churches and network churches will be necessary.”¹⁰

“Mixed economy” is, I understand, a term originally used in relation to the CofE’s home mission by the Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams. This picks up the note sounded by Robert Warren’s thinking (about inherited and emerging modes of church) a decade earlier, and means that a common theme is emerging. It is also worth noting that the parochial system is regarded by the Report’s authors as “an essential and

⁷ www.sharetheguide.org/section1

⁸ *Mission Shaped Church*. Church House Publishing 2004

⁹ *Breaking New Ground*. Church House Publishing 1994

¹⁰ *Mission Shaped Church*. p. xi

central part of the national Church's strategy..." The corollary of that is that it is no longer the "essential and central part...!". Little words with big meaning, and unimaginable a decade ago.

2. Cell Church – Some Observations & Reflections

Back in 2000 when I looked at the emergence of cell church, it was a relatively new phenomenon. I do not propose to rehearse again the rationale and principles underlining the model; that is contained in a previous paper.¹¹ What follows is, therefore brief and to-the-point. But by way of introduction, here is...

2.1 Cell Church "In A Nutshell"

The Cell Church model originated in the far east, and offered the prospect of church being something made up of small groups, rather than with small groups. There's a lot more to it than that, but it represents the essence of the model. Here is the diagrammatic illustration from the 2000 paper.

The Congregation With Home Groups 'Appendage Model'

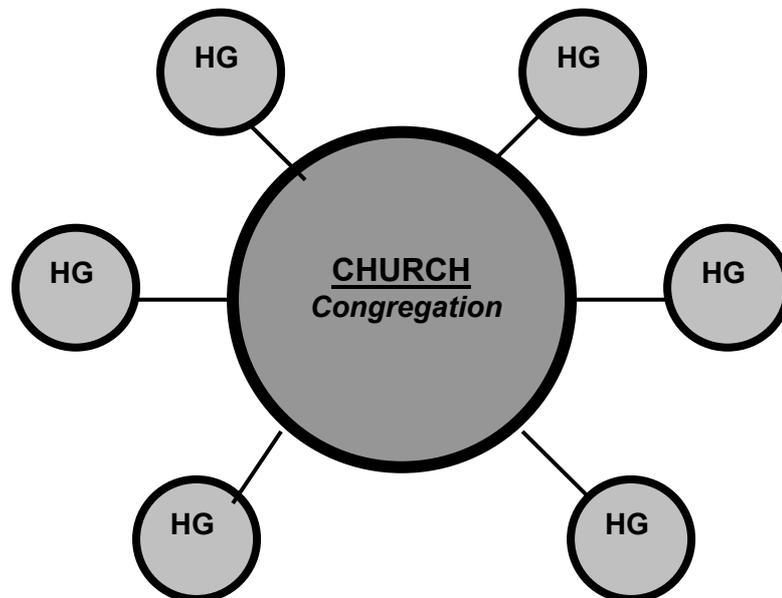


Diagram 1

This is how many churches operated then and, indeed, continue to operate. From conversations with a number of church leaders and members, it would appear that

¹¹ Stephen Corbett: Cell – A New Way of Being Church?. Sabbatical Paper 2000.

some (though not all) churches that adopted the cell church model reverted back to this “appendage” approach. In other words, they ended up with home groups renamed as cell groups without undergoing the necessary culture shift (illustrated in the next diagramme).

The Congregation Made Up Of Cell Groups “Cell Church Model”

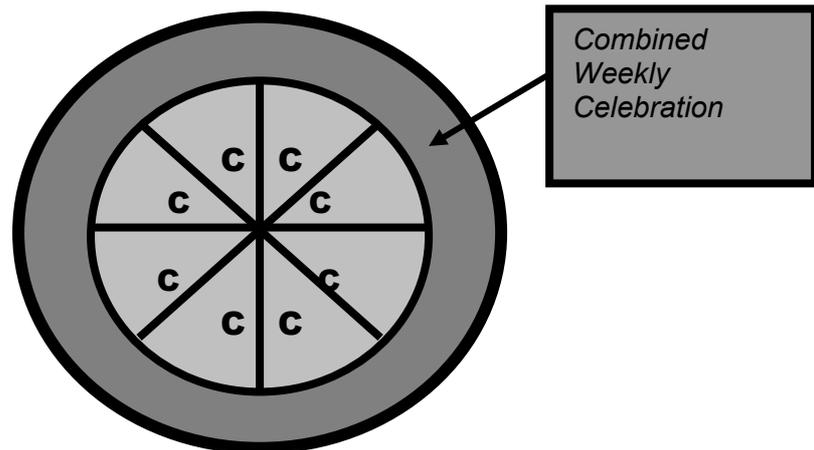


Diagram 2

It is clear from this illustration that the Cell Church model offers a more integrated and uniting way of being church. But it does require a major paradigm shift on the part of all concerned (both leaders and church members) if it is to be implemented in a church that has previously followed the home group approach. This need for a radical change in perceptions appears to have been problematic in the UK as numbers of churches have attempted the transition towards a cell model.

2.2 The Cell Church Picture in 2008

I asked a number of people the simple question, “So, where is cell church at in 2008, now that it has been around in the UK for over a decade?”

The first to answer the question was George Lings, Director of the Sheffield Centre. His perceptive reply went something like this: *“Well, you have to bear in mind that cell originated in the East to cope with the reality of church growth; whereas it was introduced in the West in the hope that it might cause church growth.”*

This perhaps gets to the heart of the matter. My take is that many people in the 1990s and early 2000s experimented with cell church in the hope that it would cause church growth. By and large it did not, resulting in a certain amount of disillusionment. But that, of course, does not negate the model per se.

Others – myself included - implemented it because they saw in it a rediscovery of aspects of New Testament Christianity. That alone (regardless of outcomes) was sufficient reason.

2.2.1 Cell Church Works – In Some Places

I was able to call in on the leaders of some (though not all, due to time constraints) of the churches I had visited back in 2000. It is pleasing to be able to say that all of these churches were still operating with a cell model; moreover, I came across others that had introduced it.

Of these, most had at least maintained the numbers of cells (overall) and some had seen modest multiplication. They seemed to be at ease with that fact that “this is the way we do church here now.” One or two were still cell based but struggling a bit.

By way of example, Howard Astin (Vicar of St John’s, Bowling in Bradford Diocese) reported that the church was now in a place where no-one would understand a different way of structuring their common life (or if some did understand the difference, they would be unlikely to prefer the more traditional approach). St John’s was one of the first to implement the cell model in the mid 1990s, and I understand that Howard was the first to get into print about it.¹² What appears to matter is that where a church – leadership and core membership – perseveres with the model, it will work, bring benefits and bear fruit; but it takes time and effort – lots of both. This may be easily said, but can feel rather difficult when such faithful perseverance leads to some people leaving the church (usually for a more traditional one). That said, this tends to happen during any time of change and transition.

Interestingly, for the first time I heard the phrase “traditional cell church”. This came from Mark Cockayne (Vicar of St Mark’s, Haydock in Liverpool Diocese)¹³. St Mark’s was another early adopter of cell church in the 1990s. By 2000 it had grown into a cell church of around 700. But it now sees many of its cells as part of the inherited model. Their recently adopted “Lake & River Church” model is entirely cell based. The “lake cells” are those that operate in “settled” (ie. “inherited”) environments (though they retain a missional component to their life). The “river cells” are those that are more overtly missional, tending to operate in “networked” (ie. “developing”) environments. The idea that holds the two expressions together is “mixed economy” – which I take to mean, “not ‘either/or’ but ‘both/and’.”

The above are but two examples of the cell model appearing to reach a mature stage. That said, everyone I spoke to conceded that the “pure cell” model from the Far East had to be modified. See below...

2.2.2 Issues With The Cell Model

Conversations identified three main difficulties with cell church, broadly speaking.

2.2.2.a East Is Not West:

The rigid cell structure that we were introduced to a decade or so ago, does not work in the UK without modification. Every church leader I spoke with indicated that some degree of flexibility was necessary. Usually the so-called 4Ws were encouraged, but not insisted upon as a sine qua non of every meeting. Most appeared to be producing notes from the previous Sunday’s teaching for groups that wished to follow them. The more missional the life of the cell group, the more lightly it sits with the traditional structure.

¹² Howard Astin: [Body And Cell](#). Monarch, 1998

¹³ See St Mark’s Website: www.stmarkshaydock.org

Some western church leaders might wistfully imagine leading a church full of people with the compliant eastern mindset. But we are where we are. Perhaps we might do well to learn a bit from them, and (having been there) they from us.

2.2.2.b Leadership Development:

Functioning cell churches require a steady stream of lay leaders. Back in 2000, people were telling me that “cell is leader-hungry”. That is true. But it is true for any form of church life that adopts the principle of delegation to a greater or lesser degree.

What appears to be in short supply is not necessarily just a pool of people willing to lead. Rather, it is leaders who bring on other leaders. In a church which values lay leadership (at whatever level), what we need is the kind of lay leadership which replicates itself. Make that cultural shift and cell church (as well as other forms of FE) could really begin to change gear. [Interestingly, I met a vicar who was about to start his sabbatical – looking at how some far eastern churches have developed lay leadership].

2.2.2.c “The 4th W”:

Cell groups follow a four-fold pattern for meeting – Welcome, Worship, Word, Witness. This fourth W is about evangelism and outreach with a view to group growth and multiplication after about two years. Most leaders, even where the model has worked well, report slow progress in the development of an outward looking culture, particularly among those who have been Christians for several years.

It has been said that on reflection small cell groups lack the critical mass necessary for effective group outreach, which is why some churches are now beginning to adopt a different model which often includes cell groups. We now turn to this more recent development.

3. MSCs – Mission Shaped Communities?

Mid-Sized Communities are being experimented with in a growing number of churches under various names. I was able to visit a number of churches, which were each at different stages of implementation, including:-

- St Thomas's, Crookes (and its sister church St Thomas's, Philadelphia), (Sheffield Diocese). Here the model is well established as the way things have been done since the 1990s.
- St George's, Deal, (Canterbury Diocese), adopted the model in 2004 with two pilot "clusters" before rolling the programme out across the whole church.
- St Paul's, Salisbury (Salisbury Diocese) is in the first year of implementation after a two-year run-in time. It has a recent history of traditional homegroups and is currently running three experimental MSGs (Mid-Size Groups).
- St Chad's, Romiley (Chester Diocese) is in the exploratory stage with a view to implementation. St Chad's, incidentally, was another of the Anglican early adopters of the cell model in the 1990s.

I was also in touch in various ways with other churches, eg St Andrew's, Chorleywood, who have been sharing the model with other interested parishes. In what follows, I'll concentrate on observations from Sheffield and Deal, given that each are far enough on in the process from which to draw at least provisional conclusions. Salisbury and Romiley appeared to be just into the process of getting off the blocks; it would be unfair to conclude anything from them at this point.

3.1 Terminology

These groups of up to 60 people are known as clusters, midsized communities, mission-shaped communities or pastorates (though this latter model may or may not adopt missional objectives). The term "cluster" originated in the 1990s at St Thomas's Church, Crookes in Sheffield. More recently (about 2003) the model was adopted by St Andrew's Church, Chorleywood. They borrowed it from Sheffield but because they had used the term "cluster" in the past for a different type of group, they had to think of a different name – hence midsized communities (MSCs). The model is similar (though not identical) to the system of pastorates used for some years by Holy Trinity, Brompton (and their various church plants and transplants). More recent adopters have tended to use one or other term. For example, St George's, Deal uses the term cluster, while St Paul's, Salisbury calls them Mid-Sized Groups (MSGs). Some churches use the HTB term "pastorate" (eg. Holy Trinity, Leicester). Whatever, we are essentially talking about the same thing in organisational terms, but for the purpose of this paper I'll use the term "Cluster" (because it is, as far as I could discern, the original term).

3.2 Vision for Mission

The essential thing for each Cluster is that it has a clearly understood missional vision. (eg. to reach out to young families, elderly people, students, the marginalised,

professionals...etc). The list is almost endless. So, a Cluster that has a vision to reach, say, young families structures itself around that. It adopts a name for itself.

So for example here is the Crookes approach:-

“Clusters are communities of people gathered around a particular vision. They exist to allow everyone in church to get involved with OUTreach to a particular group of people. Clusters will have one or more cell groups in them which allow people to share in the INward community and receive support and friendship. Clusters come together at the Sunday gatherings to be a community of communities and share in worship to God which is our UPward dimension.

We ask people to join a specific cluster because although worship patterns and cell group meetings are reasonably alike, Clusters can be quite different because they are reaching out to different people.”¹⁴

St Thomas's is made up of some 18 Clusters. Here are brief details of six (randomly chosen from their promotional material) to give a flavour of what they do (they speak for themselves):-

- *GRACE: Grace Cluster is seeking to develop the work with senior citizens in Crookes. This involves a new monthly service on Sundays. We also meet on the 3rd Wednesday of each month for praise, testimony and prayer.*
- *XTEND: We are a mixed-age Cluster – currently three cell groups. We love to meet together and hold regular social events to invite our friends to... We meet twice a month as cluster, twice a month as cell, and use the other week to “get out and do something” building relationships with friends.*
- *EXTENDED FAMILY: EF is a cluster for all ages. Currently we all meet together on Wednesday as a single cell, but it won't be long before that multiplies. We gather for food and for social events... [Note: this Cluster was a multiplication from the previous one, XTEND].*
- *PHOENIX is a daytime cluster that meets on Thursday mornings. If you're a parent, unemployed, retired, or around in the daytime for any other reason, you would be welcome to join us. We're keen to support and encourage one another as we explore issues of life and spirituality together.*
- *THE EDGE: We are a group of students who are passionate about extending the genuine friendship that we have in church to those who are outside. We actively seek to involve housemates, coursemates, and everyone on the edge of church in all that we do. We are all about showing the love of Jesus in practical ways. We meet all the time, all over the city and particularly love to share food!*
- *JUST LIFE is for those aged 18-30 who are working out, basically, how to do life. How to live that better life that God wants us to live, whether starting out on the career ladder, a call centre veteran, or finishing off that chosen degree. We believe that to live the better life, God call us to be with him in all that we do...As a group we seek to support each other whilst serving others and being a welcoming community for everyone.*

¹⁴ St Thomas's Church, Crookes - Promotional Card “Clusters @ Crookes”.

Hopefully that communicates the fundamental idea. I came across various other clusters with varying missional objectives – eg. A Cluster reaching out to the handicapped in Deal, a group meeting in a pub in Salisbury reaching out to those with questions, another in Salisbury focussed on young families.

3.3 Structure

The rationale and structure for clusters has been written up in considerable detail by Bob Hopkins and Mike Breen who pioneered the model in the 1990s in Sheffield.¹⁵ [See their book for this detail, which I cannot repeat here]. Fundamental to the model are certain values, perhaps the most important being the idea of “low control – high accountability”. Central church leadership aims to delegate as much responsibility as possible – exercising oversight but without being overly controlling. In turn Clusters take on a high degree of responsibility for the delivery of the church’s mission – hence the high accountability.

A Cluster will be a missional community of around 20 or so people – to begin with, that is (ie. a cluster of 2 or 3 cell groups). Some might start smaller for reasons to do with their specific mission, while others might start from a slightly larger base. It will understand itself as a “congregation” of the larger church to the leaders of which it is accountable, and of which it is a key component part. It will own the following purposes:-

- To establish and engage in an understood and focussed missional objective (eg. to reach out to young families, elderly people, students, the marginalised, professionals...etc)
- To determine its pattern of meeting (see 3.3 below) within the framework of the church as a whole.
- To raise up leaders for its component cell groups.
- To provide appropriate care and support for Cluster members.
- To multiply into new Clusters once the overall membership reaches 50-60. (The new Clusters may have the same, similar or new missional objectives for the next phase of their life).

3.4 Formation

Paul Maconachie (St Thomas’s, Philadelphia, Sheffield) identifies three ways clusters can start:

- A small group multiplying to form a cluster
- Gathering a cluster around someone with a particular missional vision.
- Two or three small (cell) groups are asked to come together to form a cluster.

¹⁵ Bob Hopkins & Mike Breen: Clusters – Creative Mid-Sized Missional Communities 3dm Publishing 2007

“While the third method may be used when clusters are introduced to a church, these groups are often ‘sterile’ and don’t multiply. Methods one and two are more organic and reproducible.”¹⁶

3.5 Operation

Clusters are free to organise their life together within certain broad boundaries. So a given Cluster may normally meet weekly as a Cluster and occasionally in cell groups, or fortnightly as a Cluster and fortnightly in cells, or one in four as Cluster and 3 in 4 in cells – and so on. They determine their pattern according to their missional objective.

In some churches where this model is used, some Sundays are given over to meeting in Clusters (usually for the purpose of mission). This can happen in one of two ways, broadly speaking:

1. At Crookes, for example, six Sundays a years are designated “Cluster Sunday”. On these Sundays there are no central Sunday morning services. Each Cluster meets for a missional purpose (dependent upon its vision for mission). I happened to visit this church on a Cluster Sunday, and found myself out with a team engaged in a social outreach programme (which was part of that Cluster’s vision). On these Sundays there is an evening celebration at which testimony from Cluster mission is the main focus.
2. Other parishes have their Clusters meeting out on Sundays on a rotational basis. For example, St Andrew’s, Chorleywood is no longer able to accommodate the whole church in its building at any one time. Pressure on parking precludes two morning services. Therefore, a certain number of clusters (or MSCs in their case) meet in other venues on an agreed number of Sundays. This system is referred to as a “disperse and gather” model. A similar system has been adopted in Deal. Others are exploring the model.

3.6 An Example: St George’s, Deal

Given that it is four years into the Cluster model, perhaps this church makes a good “case study” by way of example.

St George’s, at the heart of a quiet, pleasant seaside town, is perhaps an unlikely example of a larger than average church (it is one of only two larger churches in the Diocese of Canterbury). It was founded in the 18th century to serve a new community growing up around the town’s port. More recently, it experienced charismatic renewal in the 1970s and saw church growth, which resulted in a church plant in the 1980s. By 2000 the church was lively and attracting good Sunday congregations. But the leaders of the church sensed that this was insufficient. The Associate Vicar – Sheila Porter – described the church at that time as having “revolving door syndrome.” Home groups had become tired and ineffective. The attractational church model was working up to a point; new people were coming in but the average Sunday attendance remained more or less static.¹⁷

In 2003 the leaders took the decision to move beyond the attractational church model. Initially, the church simply moved to a cell church model via the so-called “big bang” approach.¹⁸ But there remained a sense that some sort of middle-size grouping was

¹⁶ Paul Machonachie: *As quoted on FE Website.*

¹⁷ From talk given by Sheila Porter. Day Conference “Shaping For Growth”, St George’s, Deal, 23.5.08.

¹⁸ For a description see my earlier Paper: “Cell – A New Way of Being Church?” p.20.

needed (larger than a small cell group, but smaller and more intimate than the gathered Sunday church).

Taking a cue from St Andrew’s, Chorleywood where a missional model for church (known as “Gather to Disperse”) had been introduced, the church restructured for a more developed form of missional church. In 2004 two cluster size groups were piloted along the lines developed at Crookes in Sheffield. But the real crunch came shortly afterwards when it was agreed that the building needed a major overhaul, which would necessitate closure for several months. The bullet was bitten, the building was temporarily closed, and the whole church met in cluster groups (as described above) in various venues around the town.

When the renovated building was reopened, the decision was taken to retain the missional cluster model. As was happening on a larger scale at Chorleywood, clusters now meet away from the Sunday gathering on a rotational basis. At the time of my visit (May 2008) St George’s comprised 10 cluster groups with varying missional objectives. The central church leadership and structures aim at resourcing these groupings.

To summarise, clusters at St Georges’s (and at a growing number of other churches) are:-

- Communities of up to 50-60 people
- Lay led by a small leadership team
- Missional in purpose, each with a specific missional objective (and name)
- Aiming to encourage emerging leaders (essential to multiplication)
- Comprised of 2 – 5 cell groups that actually multiply

Drawing on earlier work in the 1990s by Robert Warren,¹⁹ the Vicar of St George’s, Chris Spencer, gives some ecclesiological context. He describes the church’s mission in the 21st century post modern world as requiring a transition from its inherited mode to an emerging mode along these lines:-²⁰

CHURCH IN INHERITED MODE	CHURCH IN EMERGING MODE
Essentially Pastoral	Essentially missional
Still looks to Christendom	Comfortable with post-Christendom
Church = Building+Clergy+Congregation	Church = Community+Faith+Action
Pastoral/teaching leadership	Apostolic, prophetic & evangelistic leadership (as well as pastoral/teaching)
Indistinct focus	Prophetic and provocative focus
Privatised faith	Incarnational faith
Loss of spirituality	Encountering God
Church-life focus	Whole-life focus
Comfort zones important	Challenge important
About “doing”	About “being”
About attending	About belonging

Table 1

¹⁹ Robert Warren: Building Missionary Congregations. Church House Publishing 1995

²⁰ From talk given by Chris Spencer. Day Conference “Shaping For Growth”, St George’s, Deal, 23.5.08.

Of course, while the above distinctions are valid, broadly speaking, it can appear somewhat over-stated in some contexts; there will be many existing churches where the transition from inherited to emerging is underway but elements of the two remain entwined – for now. This is probably the case at St George’s and other churches experimenting with the Cluster Model. Old habits and mind sets fade away only slowly. But it is encouraging to see models of good practice where the gap between “small group/cell church” and “Sunday church” is being creatively bridged with a newer intermediate size for being church. As such, I would be inclined to identify this model as a fresh expression of church, albeit from an inherited church base; and one that has a great deal to offer. Which leads to a question...

3.7 Clusters as Transitional Church?

Bob Hopkins and Mike Breen were (as far as I can see) first into print about the Cluster Model.²¹ They clearly see it as a bridge between the inherited and emerging modes.²² Their analysis is based upon a three-fold framework which they describe as:-

- **Attractional Church:** This is a church which has adapted, updated, and reinvented itself sufficiently enough from the pastoral model to confidently attract new people – usually from the fringe of church life and the “open de-churched” (people who once went to church and are open to returning given the right circumstances). Though this kind of church has changed, it is still about a message which says, “You come to us.” As such, it remains an example of church in inherited mode.

“We would sum up the heart of attractional church as seeking to be the best ‘COME’ mode.”²³

- **Engaged Church:** This approach seeks to engage with cultural groups, connecting with their perceived needs and aspirations, staying there as long as necessary. While this will also reach out to fringe and open de-churched people, it may also be effective in engaging the open non-churched. The ultimate aim will still be to encourage people to make the journey into some form of church in its inherited (probably attractional) mode – eventually.

“We would sum up the heart of engaged church as moving outwards in ‘GO’ mode, but then inviting folk to ‘COME.’”²⁴

- **Emerging Church:** This is about creating new forms of churches without the need to invite people “to come.” [A little is said about these FEs in Section 4]. Essentially, it involves a small missional community incarnating itself in a particular context and then staying around as long as it takes to see what emerges – without inviting people to join something else.

“We would sum up the heart of emerging church in this sense, as moving outwards in ‘GO’ mode and ‘STAYING’ to see what ‘ARISES.’”²⁵

The following diagram summarises the Hopkins/Breen analysis:-

²¹ Bob Hopkins & Mike Breen: Clusters – Creative Mid-Sized Missional Communities 3dm Publishing 2007

²² Hopkins & Breen op. cit. Ch.8, p. 125ff

²³ Hopkins & Breen op. cit. p 127.

²⁴ Hopkins & Breen op. cit. p 127.

²⁵ Hopkins & Breen op. cit. p 128.

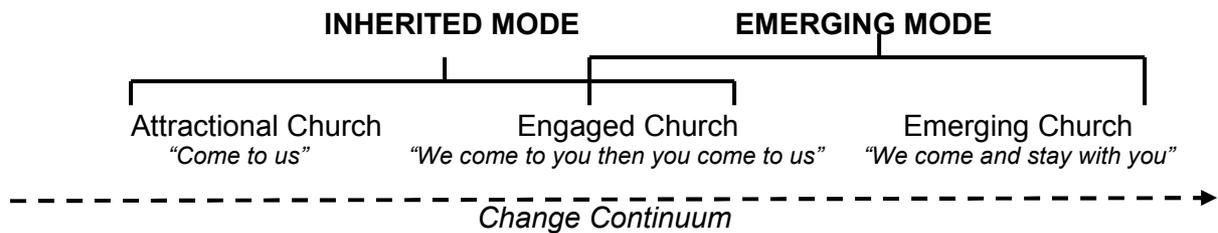


Diagram 3

However, while wanting to endorse this, many (most?) British churches (certainly most Anglican churches) are not even on this continuum. Most are somewhere in what might be called “Pastoral” or “Pre-Attractional” mode. In these churches (which form the majority) the members attend church in order to receive ministry (mainly); their underlying needs are various and sometimes complex. In short, it is an extension of Western consumer culture in that people come to “consume” church “services”. It is interesting that we call our Sunday and midweek events “services”; ie. we serve a spiritual menu and hope people will like it. Whereas, in the more missional churches I visited this term seemed to have been dropped in favour of the term “gathering”.

In the pre-attractional church it is about “what I get from it”. In the urban contexts, in which the majority of people live and work, this involves the ability to “change brands”. Just as if you no longer like what Tesco’s is offering, you can always switch to Sainsbury’s (or whatever). Like the supermarkets, churches subtly compete for more “customers” – greater market share.

Of these largely pastoral or pre-attractional churches some aspire to a more attractional expression, and some may seek to be engaged. So we might modify (and complicate) the diagram to express the current reality:-

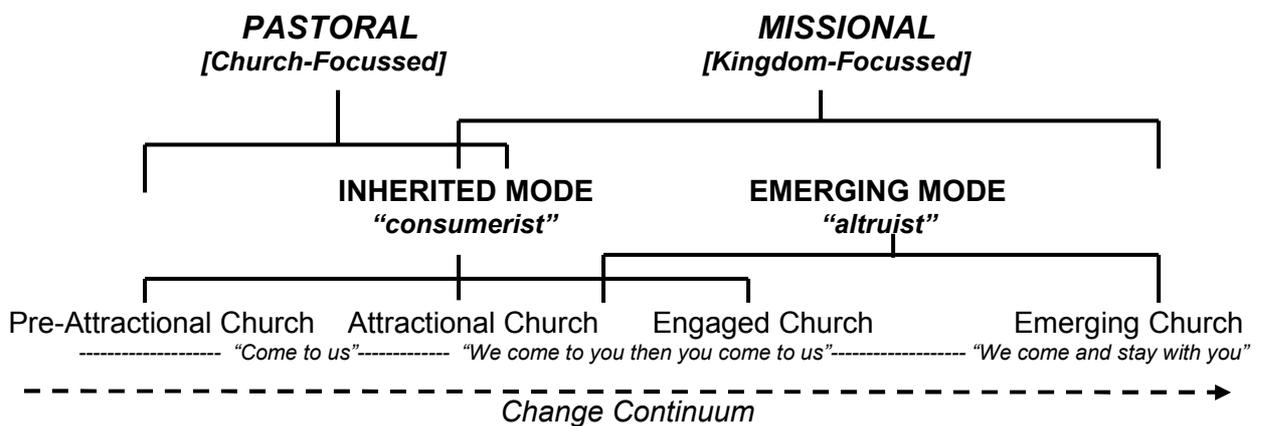


Diagram 4

What appears to be going on is that within the inherited and pastoral, the emerging and missional is beginning to break out. But it is early days. Theologically, this has to do with the priority of the Kingdom of God over the Church of God. In seeking the Kingdom we find that what we call “church” is created in authentic form. When we seek to preserve church as we know it, we cannot see the Kingdom.

But before digressing too far, and returning to the question, where does the Cluster Model fit in this scheme of things? Early experience suggests that it may be a kind of

“missing link” (between small/cell group church and Sunday church), which has the potential to enable churches to move from a largely inherited pastoral mode to the emerging missional mode. That said, Hopkins and Breen are probably right in their observation that in terms of missional engagement:-

- Emerging Church usually means starting from scratch and staying a distinct church plant
- Inherited Church can't do emerging church
- Clusters are “Transitional Church” as they can emerge and stay in the context but are linked back to inherited church²⁶

This is illustrated in the table below:-

Effective Mission Engagement	Pastoral/Pre-Attractional Church*	Attractional Church	Engaged Church	Emerging Church
Inherited Church	√√√	√√	√	χ
Clusters/Transitional Church	√	√√	√√	√
Radical emerging church plant models	χ	χ	χ	√√

Table 2

3.8 An Obvious Conclusion

From where the Church of England is positioned, the Transitional Church model represents the best option for future growth. It is well-placed to “do” every model to a greater or lesser extent. The issue is that it currently invests most of its resources in the Inherited Church model”. This, of course, has to do with certain inherited legalities, traditions and structures. However, ways need to be found to release and divert resources into the Transitional stream.

It was suggested to me that a realistic vision for a Diocese would be to divert 10% of its resources (buildings, staff, finance etc) to Transitional Church. This would appear to be a relatively modest and, hopefully, achievable objective.

²⁶ Hopkins & Breen op. cit. p130. [*NB. Pastoral/Pre-Attractional Church Column added]

4. Other Fresh Expressions

It will be clear from the above that the main focus of this brief investigation came to be the Cluster/Transitional Church model. However, opportunity arose for a cursory look at one or two other fresh expressions of church of a more “emerging nature”. [I had hoped to include “Café Church” but time did not permit].²⁷

I briefly mention two further models.

4.1 Young Adult Focused Churches

Few would doubt that younger adults (along with youth) are under represented in the average church. But in recent years there have been some welcome exceptions such as Soul Survivor, which has moved beyond holding summer youth camps to establishing congregations (or gatherings as they might prefer to call them).

Other examples include St Thomas’s, Philadelphia (STP), Sheffield, which is a church aimed (though not exclusively) at younger adults. It began as a church plant from St Thomas’s, Crookes. They continue as sister churches.

STP does not have a geographical parish. It was, in fact, planted into a neighbouring one (after a number of years meeting in a city centre venue). As Crookes (the sending parish) had been a local ecumenical partnership, STP continues as such; it is led by a Baptist minister with a staff team.

I was able to visit while in Sheffield. I attended the evening gathering, which was aimed at the student/young adult age-range (there is also a morning gathering aimed at young families). [I sat there feeling bit aged, by the way, but it was good to be there; I could see a realised vision of an expression of church relevant to my children and their generation].

The meeting was essentially along the lines of the Soul Survivor model (worship – testimony – preaching/teaching – prayer ministry). The atmosphere was relaxed and comfortable. It was the first time I have attended a church service and been able to recline on an IKEA sofa (something that should perhaps be introduced into all kinds of churches – or perhaps not.) Looking around, it was clearly reaching its intended “target”.

However, further enquiry revealed that this obvious effectiveness was the result of the adoption of the MSC/Cluster model. Like its parish-based sister church a couple of miles away, STP has understood the need for the medium size of meeting.

I came away feeling that “every community should have one of these”. Most haven’t – yet.

4.2 Alternative Churches: “Laptops & Candles”

Fresh expressions such as STP fall into the category of “engaged church”. But there are also growing numbers of so-called alternative churches which fit the description “emerging church”. These are probably the kinds of churches envisaged by Frost &

²⁷ However, see G Lings Café Church 1 & 2. Encounters On The Edge Nos. 33 & 34. Sheffield Centre.

Hirsch. I had the opportunity to visit two (and through them to hear about others). These two were similar, but with sufficient differences to suggest that they do not represent a completely homogeneous phenomenon.

B1 Church was initiated in 2000, meeting in various venues in the centre of Birmingham. It normally meets on Sunday morning with midweek small groups and other occasional activities. It is a church that is aimed at those for whom “traditional church” – pastoral, attractional or engaged – doesn’t quite work. As a fresh expression, it came out of one of Birmingham’s largest attractional churches, and is led by one its former curates. It remains part of the Diocesan structure. This probably explains why it actually felt rather orthodox. Essentially, the only difference from a “traditional” church was a low emphasis on sung worship. Other than that, it did not feel vastly different from an attractional church service. There was some projected visual input, bible reading, some personal testimony and a sermon from the church leader, and the usual tea and coffee before and after. There was also a sense of community and fellowship. It felt comfortable to me as a visitor.

Sanctus 1 has been running in the centre of Manchester for a similar length of time. It is a joint project between the Anglican Diocese and the Methodist Church in the city. Each denomination supports a full-time minister to facilitate it (they did not appear comfortable with the term “leader”). Its main meeting or gathering happens on a Wednesday evening in a café-type venue beneath the old Methodist Central Hall. Usual tea and coffee before the service was followed by most attendees retiring to one of Manchester’s trendy bars afterwards (and, yes, I joined them – at their invitation).

The meeting was led by one of the facilitators and had a meditative theme. There was lighting of candles, projected visual imagery, small group discussion with short items of input from the facilitator (hence the term “laptops and candles”).

This church attracts a similar age group to B1, but there was a significant underlying difference. Talking to a number of the members before and after the meeting it became clear that it attracted what we might call post-orthodox young adults (whereas B1 was clearly an emerging church within an orthodox framework). Many appeared to have come out of evangelical, charismatic and Pentecostal churches; others had Catholic backgrounds (both Anglican and Roman). Clearly they had struggled with inherited church in the past. Sanctus 1 had the distinct feel of a place of sanctuary and experimentation – a place to re-explore and perhaps re-engage with the Christian faith. Church with very soft edges.

4.2.1 What to Make of Alternative Churches

It was difficult to discern whether or not either Sanctus 1 or B1 were actually engaging unchurched as opposed to dechurched younger adults. Looking at various websites, I think that this question would be applicable to many other alternative churches.

I very much valued meeting with and talking to members of both these FEs. I found them refreshing, stimulating and engaging. They were a refreshing contrast to the inherited churches I have spent many years in.

Having reflected on them (as two examples of emerging churches), a number of questions come to mind (and this represents about as far as I got):-

- To what extent are emerging alternative churches truly missional? That is, how effective are they at identifying, engaging, evangelising and discipling

unchurched people? Or are they largely places of sanctuary for younger people who find inherited church personally problematic for whatever reason?

- Can these churches grow significantly? Like B1 and Sanctus 1, it would appear (and I remain open to being corrected on this) that most of them struggle to get anywhere near the 100 mark, never mind achieving greater critical mass. Most seem to have 30 to 50 “on the books” at any one time.
- A corollary of this is: Can these churches achieve self-sustainability? Ironically, they appear to remain dependent on inherited church (be it denominational bodies, charitable trusts or larger attractional or engaged churches) for the resources to sustain them. [That said, it has to be acknowledged in fairness that many pre-attractional churches have been, and still are, similarly dependent on the resources of others for decades – especially in the Church of England].
- Therefore, can they ever become more than what we might call missional experiments by, or extensions of, established churches (attractional or engaged)? Perhaps more of them should be encouraged, but in relationship with inherited church.
- Are these churches more leader dependent than inherited churches. At both B1 and Sanctus 1 (though differing in underlying theological foundation) both services appeared to have been planned, set up and delivered by one person (the minister) with the essential aid of a laptop and digital projector. Lay involvement was minimal – more minimal than a pre-attractional church. That genuinely surprised me.

It should be emphasised that these questions are not asked in any negative spirit. They are more observations from a critical friend. But as time progresses, these are some of the questions and issues that will need to be addressed. An Archdeacon in a Diocese that is encouraging FEs more than most remarked that they are our “Research & Development Department”. As we all know, R & D costs time, money and resources and many of its projects fail; but as the investment of resources is made, the occasional success stories represent the expected return.

My superficial conclusion would be that to date the average Diocese has invested very little in FEs as R&D. Most of their resources are invested in the inherited church model, much of which is slowly fading away. Therefore, in spite of potentially awkward questions, more should be invested in FEs - even if it means diverting resources from the inherited to the emerging. That given, outcomes in terms of Kingdom growth should also be expected of the “R & D Dept”.

Perhaps the value underlying the Cluster model of FE – ie. “low control, high accountability” – might be usefully applied to emerging church experiments.

5. Some Key Issues Raised

Fresh Understandings Precede Fresh Expressions

One thing that became crystal clear to me – if it wasn't already – from this period of study by observation, conversation and reading was the need to re-imagine church if we are to seriously develop Fresh Expressions of Church. That said, what is meant by this is not something previously unknown. What is required is a serious re-engagement with the apostolic (ie. New Testament) and sub-apostolic (ie. early catholic) models of church.

Frost and Hirsch illustrate this in the following comment and table:-²⁸

“Christendom, as a paradigm of understanding, as a metanarrative, still exercises an overwhelming influence on our existing theological, missiological and ecclesiological understandings in church circles. In other words, we still think of the church and its mission in terms of Christendom. While in reality we are in a post-Christendom context, the Western church still operates for the most part in a Christendom mode. Constantine, it seems, is still the emperor of our imaginations.”

Apostolic and Post-Apostolic Mode (AD 32 – 313)	Advance and Triumph of Christendom Mode (313 to current)	Emerging Missional Mode (2000 onwards)
Didn't have dedicated sacral buildings. Often underground and persecuted.	Buildings become central to the notion and experience of church	Rejects the concern and need for dedicated “church” buildings.
Leadership operating with a fivefold ministry-leadership ethos.	Leadership by an institutionally ordained clergy operating primarily in pastor-teacher mode.	Leadership embraces a pioneering-innovative mode including a five-fold ministry-leadership ethos. Non-institutional by preference.
Grassroots, decentralised movement	Institutional-hierarchical notion of leadership and structure.	Grassroots, decentralised movements.
Communion celebrated as a sacralised community meal.	Increasing institutionalisation of grace through sacraments.	Redeems, re-sacralises, and ritualises new symbols and events, including the meal.
Church is on the margins of society and underground.	Church is perceived as central to society and surrounding culture.	Church is once again on the fringes of society and culture. The church re-embraces a missional stance in relation to culture.
Missionary, incarnational-sending church	Attractional/ “extractional”	Missional, incarnational-sending church.

Table 3

²⁸ Frost & Hirsch. Op Cit. p.9

This table gives us six issues about which we might usefully gain fresh understandings before we can engage in fresh expressions. They are:-

5.1 Fresh Understandings of Resources

5.1.1. Buildings: The vast majority of churches in inherited mode have a building. This they view as both a blessing and a curse – or perhaps as curse and a blessing. When they are required to raise and spend money in major maintenance, congregations tend to view buildings as a liability. However, suggest taking the building away and they will usually fight to the last to retain it; fond memories and affections rule.

But the building-centred nature of church life is not confined to traditional churches. Many so-called new churches (meeting in community halls, schools and the like) aspire to “have their own building” (often to avoid having to get up quite so early on a Sunday morning to set things up).

Buildings can be a great blessing. They contribute to a sense of place. However, they can become something of an “idol”. FE churches sit light to buildings. They are there – whether owned or hired – to serve a purpose, rather than be a purpose to be served.

Further, the Church of England (and other historic denominations) could perhaps usefully redirect some of its buildings for the use of extra-parochial Fresh Expressions of Church, rather than selling the sites off for development (the proceeds of which are usually used to finance the managed decline of inherited church).

5.1.2 Finance: This is a major issue in the Church of England, which is often the subject of debate and disagreement.

Whatever the formula used for the purpose of calculation, the “common fund” is the backbone of diocesan revenue finance. Most – possibly all – parishes seem to view this a form of ecclesiastical income tax. The problem with tax is that it is at the same time both necessary and unpopular. Everyone agrees that local services should be provided, while resenting having to pay the tax necessary to achieve the desired outcome. The issue here is that tax (national, local and goods/services-related) is a blunt instrument. When it comes to financing mission, a greater degree of nuance is necessary if finance is to become vision-inspired, rather than vision being finance-driven.

This is not the place to debate the details of diocesan finance; the issues are well presented, for example, in a paper to the Diocese of Birmingham’s Bishop’s Council in 2003.²⁹ A key issue before the working party that produced that Report was the fact that the majority of parishes were net-receivers from the common fund, and ultimately dependent on an ever diminishing number of significant net-contributors to the fund. Two things became clear to me when thinking about finance:-

1. If significant headway in reimagining and reinventing church is to be made, dioceses will need to find imaginative ways to redirect finance into fresh or new expressions of church. Dr Steven Croft, Archbishops’ Officer for FEs, suggested to me that an achievable goal might be for each diocese of the Church of England to work towards

²⁹ Financing The New Kingdom, Birmingham DBF 2003

investing 10% of financial resources into FEs. This looks like a modest, yet achievable aspiration. But it would require a few hard decisions here and there.

2. On the other hand, FEs will need to intentionally aim for financial self-sustainability within an agreed timescale; three to five years would seem reasonable. Finance from the wider church is, of course, necessary in the initial phases of a new development; but this should be understood to be time-limited priming of the pump. The FE itself will need to take increasing responsibility as it grows and develops towards maturity.

5.1.3 Bishop's Mission Orders: While buildings and finance are two obvious resource issues, there is a third. Thought also needs to be given to the instrumentation by which FEs come into being. In 2007 a new instrument known as a Bishop's Mission Order became a new option. The details of these are outlined on both the Church of England and FE websites. Very few have actually been created as yet (it is a new thing, after all), though one or two dioceses are currently working towards their first BMOs.

Because hardly any have been devised as yet, it is not possible to make any meaningful assessment. However, even a cursory reading of the legislation and accompanying guidance, makes it clear that BMOs have the obvious potential – in the hands of mission-minded bishops and other leaders – to facilitate new ways of being church by getting around some of the obstacles of the past.

It will be interesting to see over the coming few years, how this resource is creatively used to enable the reconceptualisation and reinvention of church.

5.2 Fresh Understandings of Leadership

The second area in which Frost & Hirsch suggest the need for fresh understandings preceding fresh expressions is in that of leadership.

To recap, they say: *“Leadership embraces a pioneering-innovative mode including a five-fold ministry-leadership ethos. Non-institutional by preference.”*

This is an enormous area requiring a paper in its own right, and only a few cursory points can be made here. Furthermore, I am conscious of simply raising issues rather than addressing them.

5.2.1 Recovering New Testament Leadership: The key to the success or failure of any institution is the nature and quality of, and support for, its leadership. In the Church of England (as in other inherited forms of church), we see here and there welcome examples of pioneering-innovative leadership; but they are not the norm. In the New Testament, it was the norm. The challenge is, therefore, to find ways to make the exception become the rule.

Fundamental to Frost & Hirsch's argument³⁰ is the distinction between ministries (apostolic, prophetic, evangelistic and pastoral/teaching³¹) being understood in terms of either office or function. Unsurprisingly, they argue for a functional understanding over against the official, whereas church in inherited mode by and large tends to emphasise official over against functional.

³⁰ Frost & Hirsch op cit Chapter 10.

³¹ Ephesians 4: 11-16.

Their thought is further developed along the lines of a relationship between New Testament teaching and current (secular) leadership theory – ie. between theological and sociological models. It might be summarised in table form:-

Theological Model <i>Ephesians 4</i>		Sociological Model	
Function	Characteristics	Function	Characteristics
Apostolic	Normally translocal. Pioneering new missional works. Overseeing.	Entrepreneurial	Groundbreaker and strategist. Takes initiative. Proactive.
Prophetic	Spiritually discerning of realities. Communicating in a timely manner to further mission.	Questioning	Disturbs status quo. Challenges organisation to move in new directions.
Evangelistic	Communicates Gospel in such a way that people respond in faith and discipleship.	Communicating/ Recruiting	Takes organisation's message to those outside and sells it to them.
Pastoral ³²	Nurturing, protecting, caring. Finds fresh pasture.	Humanising	Organisational glue. Looks out primarily for those inside the organisation.
Teaching ³²	Communicates revealed wisdom of God so that believers learn to obey.	Systematising	Organises into working structure and articulates it to other members.

Table 4

To achieve truly fresh expressions of church will require an engagement with New Testament thinking, which in turn results in a fresh understanding – or perhaps, more accurately, a refreshed understanding – of leadership.

This functional approach to leadership needs to be understood as being:-

- **Soft-edged:** The distinctions between the categories are not rigid. A particular individual may – probably will – operate in more than one; probably two or three with one being the primary gifting and others being complementary. For example, Paul was clearly and primarily apostolic. He pioneered churches (principally among gentile people groups). But, secondarily, he also had a prophetic dimension to his ministry and was clearly able to teach. He and his teams saw people come to faith. Arguably, he would not score highly as being “pastoral” in a 21st century congregation, not being a people person. Similarly, we need to recreate a culture in which leadership operates according to gifting.
- **Multi-levelled:** In reality, leadership (in all four or five NT categories) operates at different levels of gifting, anointing and effectiveness. For example, all believers are called by God to be witnesses (to anyone and everyone) to the saving power of Jesus Christ in their lives. We might call this a “level one” evangelistic gifting. Others will be gifted in such a way that their witness results in people coming to faith regularly and consistently. A few will become those

³² There are those (myself included) who for exegetical reasons incline to the divergent view that the pastor/teacher is essentially one function in Paul's thought.

who exercise full-time evangelistic ministries (“level 5” or whatever). This gradation applies to other categories of gifting. Again, all believers are called to “teach and admonish one another”; yet a minority will be called to a regular exegetical teaching ministry in a local church (or more broadly).

- **Inclusive:** Following on from the above, all Spirit-filled believers will be expected to operate in one or more NT category at some level. It will be something for all.

5.2.2 Beyond Leadership by Management: The past 20 years or so has seen the Church of England (together with other churches) increasingly adopt the principles of secular management in its national, diocesan and parish spheres. This process continues, and looks set to run a course for a while yet before there is the inevitable reaction – hopefully, before it’s too late. The point here is that leadership and management are not the same thing, though there is a necessary relationship between the two. When the two are at odds we have problems; when the two are in complementarity we can have mission. Leaders dream dreams and see visions; managers conceive plans and follow processes. Leaders press ahead with dreams and visions and leave a trail of apparent “mess” behind them, which good managers (who understand the difference of function, as well as where leadership is heading) will deal with through good planning and processing. Effective expressions of church – fresh or otherwise – will require reconnection with Apostolic (ie. New Testament) leadership models over and above management structures.

5.2.3 Beyond the Pastoral/Teaching model: Part of this reconnection will involve, as Frost & Hirsch suggest, the recovery of the whole breadth of Apostolic ministry rather than just aspects of it. Most church leadership ministry tends to be modelled on the pastor-teacher function (whether understood as one or two giftings), ignoring the fact that the New Testament model includes also ministries that are apostolic, prophetic and evangelistic.

The rediscovery of this 4-or-5 fold model is problematic in church cultures that have come to assume outdated approaches as necessary and normal. Particularly difficult is the rediscovery of apostolic ministry, especially in episcopal churches which have come to assume transmission of apostolicity in a mechanistic sense (apostolic succession through bishops), whereas the NT sees this (together with other gifts) as given charismatically. Non-episcopal churches struggle for different reasons. This is an enormous topic, but for fresh expressions of church to grow and develop, thought must be given to the rebalancing of ministry.

Primarily, this will involve two issues. First, ministry needs to be restructured in ways that ensure that churches are overseen by ministry that is able to provide this 4/5 fold input at primary leadership level. The pastor/teacher model alone will not grow church in a post-modern and post-christendom culture. Second, training needs to be broadened and restructured in such a way that gifts other than the pastoral/teaching are identified, nurtured, shaped, authorised and released into the church’s ministries of leadership and enabling.

5.3 Fresh Understandings of Authority

The third major area that Frost and Hirsch identify as important in the transition from Christendom to post-Christendom has to do with understandings of authority. This is

difficult in a culture where the very notion of authority has been progressively undermined for a generation or more. They suggest a return to the decentralised approach of the NT. However, their implied assumption that the NT was totally decentralised needs to be questioned. A more accurate reading of the NT might lead to the conclusion that authority in the Church was and is intended to be both top-down and bottom-up.

There can be little doubt that the NT Church was not a democratic institution. It was overseen by apostolic ministry (often trans-local), which identified and authorised local ministry. Most of the NT was written by apostolic leadership to direct the life of various local expressions of church in the first century. That said, neither was it an autocracy in the way that this has been understood in recent times. Rather, biblically-speaking, the Church is best understood as a theocratic community seeking the spiritual reality that Jesus described as the Kingdom of God. Of course, we need to be sensitive to current negative connotations associated with the word “theocracy” generated by the rise of Islamic extremism. However, Christian and Islamic understandings of theocratic principles vary enormously.

Fresh expressions of church will require a reengagement with the NT understanding of what it is to live theocratically as a community seeking the Kingdom of God. This will in turn lead to models by which local Christian communities live in a right relationship with translocal authority to which they are ultimately accountable.

Perhaps a good contemporary expression of this is the principle of “low control – high accountability” developed in the 1990s at St Thomas’, Crookes.³³ There it was clear to me that the Church had a healthy understanding of authority and accountability. It was neither autocratic – cluster groups having considerable scope for the development of their missional visions granted by overall church leadership; but neither had it descended into democratic congregationalism, which is alien to the spirit of the NT.

Those churches which maintain an episcopal ecclesiology – especially the Church of England - are perhaps best placed to nurture such a fresh understanding. That is, so long as recent democratising trends are halted, and the integrity of broad episcopal oversight reaffirmed and strengthened. Interestingly, it can now be observed that it has been those newer church networks arising from the charismatic renewal since the 1970s (eg. Vineyard, New Frontiers, Pioneer, etc) that have adopted in some sense an episcopal understanding of authority (as opposed to an independent and congregational understanding) which have become established and seen at least some growth. Moreover, within the Anglican Communion it is the most democratised provinces (north America, Australasia and the British Isles) that appear to be experiencing the worst statistics for decline.

5.4 Fresh Understandings of Sacraments

Growing numbers of church plants and other FEs in recent years have raised the issue of sacramental ministry. For example, some churches that embraced the cell church model in the late 1990s and subsequently have wrestled with how to celebrate the Lord’s Supper in small groups (along the lines of Acts 2:42ff) without unduly offending current Anglican polity.

³³ See 3.3, p11 above.

Celebration of the two dominical sacraments lies at the heart of Anglican Christianity. They form, for example, a key component in the Lambeth Quadrilateral of 1888.³⁴

5.4.1 Fresh Understandings of Baptism: The administration of Baptism within a FE church is perhaps the less problematic of the two. It is administered occasionally rather than routinely, and can in certain circumstances have a lay person (usually a Reader) officiating. This creates space for appropriate flexibility.

Perhaps what matters here is our understanding of Baptism. In a mission-shaped church, the emphasis will be on Baptism as the missiological and eschatological sign of entry into the Kingdom of God, usually administered to confessing believers (adults or older children) and often by immersion in water (rather than aspersion). This stands at some variance with the inherited Christendom understanding of Baptism as a pastoral office usually administered as a birth-rite to babies and young children. The former understanding seems the most in tune with the NT – an argument that is being gradually won - and in a missional church this apostolic understanding needs to (continue to) be recovered. Since World War 2, there has been a growing number of calls for this transition. For example, the influential German theologian, Jurgen Moltmann, has argued for a gradual transition from the Christendom to Kingdom understanding. He went as far as to suggest the phasing out of paedobaptism in the western state churches in favour of its replacement with credobaptism.³⁵ And even many defending a continuing paedobaptism (alongside credobaptism) have called for its more discerning administration. One of the best recent works was by Gordon Kurhrt in the 1980s. He argued effectively for baptism to be reunderstood as “Christian Family Baptism” in a missiological context.³⁶

Fresh theological thinking about Baptism in post-Christendom culture has gone a long way towards the establishment of a fresh understanding which sits easily with the concept of emerging mission-shaped churches.

5.4.2 Fresh Understandings of Communion: Similar progress has yet to be made in reunderstanding Communion as a mission-shaped sacrament. Of course, it remains the case that this sacrament is more one of nurture in the household of faith for believers, and always will be. However, ways need to be found of permitting and regulating its administration in its original context – the Church in mission. The traditional “Parish Eucharist” (or whatever one calls it), normally on a Sunday morning, is not the most logical expression of NT practice, where *“they broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts”* (Acts 2:46).

In missional network based churches with a heavy emphasis and value on small group life, the reunderstanding and rediscovery of Communion as a shared meal in the home remains something to be reintroduced in episcopal churches. (Of course, non-conformist churches have been free to practice this for years).

A diocesan missionary, once said to me that his understanding was that what is not legally permissible in the Church of England is for an official Eucharistic Prayer to be used in a home – unless an ordained priest presides. However, with declining numbers of clergy and increasing small groups, getting “a dog collar” to come visit the small group is increasingly impractical.

³⁴ The Quadrilateral refers to “*The two sacraments ordained by Christ himself - Baptism and the Supper of the Lord - ministered with unfailing use of Christ's words of institution, and of the elements ordained by him*”.

³⁵ Jurgen Moltmann: *The Church in the Power of the Spirit*, Harper San Francisco, 1975.

³⁶ Gordon Kurhrt: *Believing in Baptism*, Mowbrays 1987. See especially chapter 7.

It is perhaps time for the House of Bishops to consider the formulation and authorisation of a simple rite of “Breaking of Bread” for use in the home, presided over by a suitable lay person. This is not an argument for lay presidency in a parish church or other congregational place of worship, where it is logical for an ordained minister to preside. That said, some highly eucharistically-minded Anglicans will argue that this would represent the thin end of the wedge – lay presidency by the back door. Nevertheless, the need for such a reinvention of Communion in missional churches is likely to grow.

5.5 Fresh Understandings of our Context

Frost & Hirsch’s fifth point (in Table 3) is about the need for realistic understandings of our cultural context. In case it is not yet entirely clear from the above, it needs to be recognised that Christendom is over. There may be a few residual aspects of it here and there, but we are living in the era of post-Christendom.

This is perhaps particularly difficult for us to take on board in the Church of England – the Established Church. How much longer Establishment continues remains to be seen. There are arguments for and against it, and in the broad sweep of things it probably ranks as a secondary issue. But what is clear is that for decades we have been seeing a gradual separation of the historic relationship between Church and State to the point where there are increasing voices calling for the connection to be ended. One consistent voice from within the Church of England over several decades has been Bishop Colin Buchanan. He argues that...

“...the Church must be the Church, and the world the world. For that, cut the connection and ‘let the Church of England be free.’ Soon.”³⁷

There can be little doubt that this will happen at some point, probably at the instigation of the State itself as part of a programme of constitutional reform. Whenever it happens, in the meantime we might be well advised to begin thinking ourselves into a post-establishment mindset. In this emerging landscape, as Frost and Hirsch argue...

“Church is once again on the fringes of society and culture. The church re-embraces a missional stance in relation to culture.”³⁸

When we are tempted to think and behave as though the church matters in the public sphere as much as it used to, we need to take a reality check. Missional churches will constantly take such reality checks.

5.6 Fresh Understandings of Mission

Finally, Frost and Hirsch remind us that there is a need to rediscover the NT and contemporary reality that this changing landscape calls for expressions of church that are “missional and incarnational” rather than “attractational and extractational.”

I have made the point repeatedly above that this involves a move away from primarily pastoral understandings of and models for the church.

³⁷ Colin Buchanan: Cut The Connection – Disestablishment and the Church of England. DLT 1994. p 208.

³⁸ Op Cit p9.

This will involve what we might call the reinvention of evangelism. One of the most creative recent books on this subject must be Graham Tomlin's "Provocative Church." His main point is along the lines of what worked years ago doesn't today.

By way of personal example, I came to faith in Christ in 1967 at a meeting addressed by the veteran evangelist, Dr Billy Graham. I will always be grateful to God for that moment and for Graham's ministry. However, times change. About twenty year's later I found myself, as a fairly recently ordained curate in north London, part of the organisational team for one of his large scale missions at West Ham United's football stadium. Whatever the good things that came out of that initiative, I came out of it sensing that it was a model that had passed its sell-by date. The parish in which I then worked received a total of 20 referrals from the mission organisers concerning people who had "gone forward to make a commitment." In order to get a feel for the effectiveness of mass evangelism, I decided to follow up each one personally. Of the 20, one was serious about making a commitment to Christ. Happily, he was successfully integrated into the life of the church through a discipleship course – but 19 others had not seriously engaged with the Gospel message. The age of mass evangelism is over; but what might replace it?

Tomlin asks some honest and straight-forward questions and makes some perceptive points. Referring to the post-modern landscape he says:

"Those with a gospel to proclaim, with certainties, confidence and grand propositions which claim to be true in an ultimate sense are precisely the kind of people that post-modern people distrust. The prevailing culture seems to give a pretty clear message, at least as far as religion goes: if it's OK for you, then fine, but don't push it on me."³⁹

He goes on to explore what it means to become a missional – ie. and evangelistic – church in this changed culture. Fresh Expressions require fresh understandings of evangelism. The message has not changed, yet the ways in which we communicate it need to, as do the shapes of the churches we create for that purpose. FEs are to do with creating churches that connect with where people are, rather than requiring them to come to be where they think they are.

³⁹ Graham Tomlin: The Provocative Church. SPCK 2002, p17.

6. CONCLUSIONS

This small study has given a few snapshots of, as well as a little personal reflection on what is currently going on in the area of Fresh Expressions of Church, which are perhaps best understood as the Church's "Research & Development Department".

From Section 1 we saw that FEs are essentially experimental responses to the changing social, cultural and religious landscape in which the Church finds itself at the beginning of the 21st century. In particular, we might conclude that:-

- In this landscape shaped by post-modernity and post-Christendom, these experiments are new, diverse and (in some cases) fragile and unassuming. [This is particularly so when it comes to alternative churches].
- There is an emerging and increasing body of writing on this subject, which is helping to make sense of what is going on.
- Broadly speaking, FEs can come into existence in one of two ways: (a) By existing traditional or attractional churches making significant and radical changes to their self-understanding, and then to their structures for life and mission. (b) Through new missional initiatives which are essentially stand-alone more or less from the outset.
- Essentially, FEs are about the actual and intentional transition from maintenance to missional models for being church.

Section 2 focussed on a brief review of the cell church model (following an earlier paper in 2000). The following can be concluded:-

- Cell churches have now been around long enough to conclude that, in terms of missional effectiveness (in the West), the picture is patchy. In some places they have not delivered what was expected.
- That said, there are many churches where the cell church model has become established and appears to be working well. In these situations, the model may have been subject to some adaptation.
- Two key issues are: (a) it was a model brought from the East (where it was developed to cope with church growth) to the West (where it was expected to *cause* church growth), and (b) the missional aspect of cell church has been difficult for many cell group members to engage with.

We then looked in Section 3 at a more recent development which may turn out to rectify some of the perceived weaknesses of the cell church model: Mid-Sized Missional Communities or Clusters. These are larger than a small group and so have (potentially) the critical mass to engage more effectively in mission. Ideally, they are made up of 50-60 people (maximum) or 4 to 5 small cell groups (though they start with smaller numbers and then grow). Each cluster has a defined missional purpose and vision. Conclusions are:-

- The cluster model is in its very early stages and firm conclusions would be unwise (even unfair).

- It may be that this model turns out to be a kind of “missing link” between small group life and larger expressions of church.
- Existing examples obviously need monitoring, and further ones developing as part of the Church’s “R&D”.
- It is noted that the cluster model may represent an ideal paradigm of what it is to be transitional church. This remains to be seen as time goes on.

A brief look at other examples of FEs in Section 4 drew two principal conclusions:-

- Young adult-focused churches are a small minority confined to a few larger urban areas; access to them depends on where you live. Where they are established, they appear to be working well.
- Questions need to be asked about so-called “alternative churches”. Are they truly missional, or more of a refuge for a minority of younger adults who find it difficult to engage with traditional or attractional churches?

Finally, six key issues were identified in Section 5 using observations made by Frost and Hirsch as a kind of “agenda”. Fundamental to this is the observation that **fresh expressions of church require – a priori – fresh understandings of church**. The key issues were:-

- Resources: Fresh and creative thinking is required (as a matter of some urgency) about how we use our resources – particularly buildings and finance. The National Fresh Expressions Team suggests each Diocese work towards reassigning 10% of its resources (of each) to FEs. Recently introduced Bishop’s Mission Orders provide a new instrument for facilitating the process.
- Leadership: Obviously leadership is a further resource. There is a growing need to reconceptualise leadership along apostolic lines, moving beyond the dominance of the inherited pastoral/teaching emphasis. The pioneering spirit required in FEs is unlikely to be personified in a traditional pastoral person.
- Authority: Both autocratic and democratic understandings of leadership in the church are perhaps outdated relics from the previous century. Church must lead the way by rediscovering scriptural Christian theocracy as means of seeking the Kingdom of God (while avoiding the pitfalls of non-Christian theocratic approaches).
- Sacraments: While emerging understandings of Baptism appear to be keeping up with FE thinking, thought needs to be given to reinventing eucharistic practice to allow greater appropriate flexibility in FE churches.
- Context: It needs to be officially admitted and owned that Christendom is over (apart from certain fading residual elements). Church is now operating largely on the margins and needs its FEs as one way to engage with that reality.
- Mission: Though the essential Gospel message never changes, the ways in which it is communicated have to. In a fast and ever changing world, models of mission which worked in the past – including those in our own living memories – don’t any more. FEs may provide the workshops in which the new means of communicating the Good News of the Kingdom can be developed.

Finally, let me conclude with a few suggestions which might usefully form the outline of an agenda for any Anglican diocese – including Birmingham. I realise – without apology – that this will appear a bit on the radical side to many!

- Form and resource a Fresh Expressions Action Group with a designated lead officer (who should, ideally be a practitioner based in a FE church or project).
- Draw up a plan through relevant diocesan structures for the reallocation of at least 10% of all diocesan resources to FEs (probably over a five year timescale).
- Identify a pilot group of parishes which have the potential to adopt and transition into the Cluster model of church, and encourage its development in and through them.
- Encourage paradigmatic inherited churches to initiate a FE in the next two years.
- Draw up a plan for a network of transitional churches complementary to geographically based parish churches.
- Actively and intentionally encourage and affirm pioneer ministry in all its forms.
- See what happens!

READING LIST ⁴⁰

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⁴⁰ This list comprises the Bibliography from 2000 plus additional works referred to or consulted.

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Steven Croft	Developing a Healthy Anglican Cell Movement	Conference Paper, 1998
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Richard Treacy	To what extent does the adoption of the Cell Model overcome the limitations of The Parochial model as described by David Wasdell?	MTh Thesis, Church of Ireland Theological College