



Evaluating Fresh Expressions September 2010 UK research trip

Prepared for: Interested parties

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Objective

This report is a summary of my time and reflections as a result of being in the United Kingdom, from Tuesday 14 to Wednesday 22 September, 2010. As the report will show, it was a rich time which enabled me to take forward a number of areas which I consider key to my role here as Director of Missiology. I want to thank Andrew Dutney and the LDC for the encouragement to go and the recognition of the importance of missional networks for us here at Uniting College.

Goals

The aim of the trip was fourfold

- Research - by presenting a research paper at the first ever Evaluating Fresh Expressions Research Conference
- Network - with leaders pioneering Pioneer Leader training
- Explore the Mission-shaped Ministry course - with a view to making more likely the gathering of a number of ecumenical bodies here in Australia to possibly start this as a one-year course in 2011
- Speak - to groups, both enhancing networks and blessing the Christian community (and helping fund the trip)

Research opportunity

The conference - 17/18th September 2010, at Durham, hosted by Research & Statistics Department, Archbishops' Council and St John's College - gave me a chance to present my research. The consultation was designed for those who shape policy and practice in ministry and mission at national and local levels across the Christian Church in Britain.

My paper was titled: **Evaluating birth narratives: a missiological conversation with fresh expressions**

Abstract: This paper will explore the "birthing narratives" of a number of United Kingdom fresh expressions, specifically five alternative worship communities. It will bring this into conversation with the notion of "fresh expressions of church" to explore whether the very term "fresh expressions of church" is in fact missiologically problematic. Resources for this exploration will include the "resurrection" ecclesiology suggested by Archbishop Rowan Williams in Mission-shaped Church, interpreted in light of the pictures of Christian witness embedded in the New Testament narratives.

The opportunity allowed me to present some data I had gathered in 2001 in UK, but which got left on the PhD editing floor. Given it was generated in the UK, I had despaired of ever using it, despite all the hard work of gathering it. So this conference, in the UK, gave a unique opportunity for that data to be used. The paper seemed well-received and it is planned to be published with the rest of the conference proceedings in Anvil.

Conference reflections

Thirty people gathered. It was a pretty impressive group, including Bishops, trainers, lecturers, leaders in both Methodist and Anglican church. Most of the research involved people drawing from already completed work. Other papers were as follows: Bishop Graham Cray "Evaluating FE"; Eleanor Williams "Fresh expressions in the urban context"; Jonny Baker "Curating worship"; George Lings "Reflections on monitoring fresh expressions"; Pete Ward "Reflections on current FE research and What next?"

Some of my conference impressions were as follows:

- a) Mission sea change: The overwhelming consensus is that the F Ex has been important in a widespread mission sea change in the UK. This is a real gift of God.
- b) Tensions: While much is happened, nevertheless the UK Fresh Expression scene does need to be approached with caution and realism. The conference attendees were overwhelming Anglo-Saxon, in stark contrast to the diversity of London. Progress in pioneer-



ing work is extraordinarily slow. Tensions are apparent between young leaders and the established church, between new and inherited forms. This is due in part both to polity and because of the very nature of innovation. Little research has actually been done on the impact of pioneer training, vision days and Mission Shaped Ministry course.

c) Mission? Or church?: A key conference tension worth noting separately was around two poles of faith/culture and church/mission. This was also shaped by a divergence in the presentations between those seeing church in more idealised theological categories and those involved in more ethnographic research. Two key note papers explored how the church as existing might engage with Fresh Expressions. Such a paradigm can easily shape debate around ecclesiological ideals. Reading the Routledge Companion to the Christian Church (Routledge, 2008) later that weekend helped clarify this: that there is a “major divide in ecclesiology, between those who study ecclesiology as an idealist Platonic form in some noetic heaven, and those who study it more as a realist Aristotelian form, grounded in the empirical data of historical ecclesial communities.” (Neil Ormerod, Ecclesiology and the Social Sciences, 639)

d) Stylistic gloss: With regard to the latter, one of the more interesting papers analysed the faith development of children and young people in both Fresh Expressions and the traditional church. It concluded, after extensive interviews, that Fresh expressions in fact had little impact on individual faith development. In both traditional and Fresh expressions were found people who were new to faith, and growing in faith. Commonalities were present in both contexts and are worth noting, particularly in terms of leadership development.

- a commitment to relationships and not events or programmes
- a proactivity in finding ways to give support in life change
- an ability to enfold newcomers quickly through healthy community life.
- an ability to assist the struggle with big questions (not big answers)
- offering responsibility

While Fresh expression type communities showed a greater flexibility to respond quickly to people, people are finding faith in all types of churches. It was a reminder of the dangers of styles and labels and to ensure the equipping of leaders remains able to grow healthy people.

e) Outcomes: An outcome, apart from the networking and critical reflection, of the conference was a call for ongoing research in three areas:

- mapping the terrain - of what is actually happening
- training and developing - to help analyse the effectiveness, or otherwise, of Pioneer Leader training, vision days and Mission Shaped Ministry course.
- research more critically into the theology and worldview that is shaping Fresh Expressions

A passionate plea from Pete Ward summed it up well. “If you don’t know what’s going on, do research. Stop employing trainers and do research. Else you are simply dialoguing with ideals.”

f) Cathedral shadows: The conference was held at St John’s, the shadow of Durham Cathedral. Built over 1000 years ago, it was for me an important visual reminder of how unique is England’s religious history and how we in Australia just do not have those shadows, positively and negatively, shaping our imagination of Fresh Expressions.

Networking opportunities

A key reason for going was the fact that this type of event would pull a number of key players together and thus make it easy, without a lot of travel, to make the following connections.



- Mission shaped course. One of the main reasons for going was to have a face to face conversation with the people running the UK Mission shaped ministry course. To this end, I had an hour with Andrew Roberts, plus two of the MSM Board. The conversation was positive and some ways forward were plotted out.
- Masters examiners. I went looking for a specific type of thesis examiner, who will be crucial if we want to develop the new Masters in Ministry in Missional Leadership. Conversations with John Drane were very positive and some names were supplied. So that was an important piece of the puzzle. As well I had good conversations with Peter Stevenson, who leads the post-graduate programme at Spurgeons and who could be an important future resource. In fact, some sort of mutual relationship with them would be well worth developing.
- Matthew Guest, Senior Lecturer, Durham Theology and Religious Studies. We co-authored a journal article together in 2006 and it was good to share upcoming research dreams.
- Jonny Baker. I organised to train up with Jonny Baker, which gave us three hours to trade notes on pioneer training. (I had contacted Dave Male, but he was in the United States). For Jonny, the UK pioneer leader training simply was by and large not providing an entrepreneurial and world mission-shaped edge. He has developed (over three years) what would be the equivalent of our two year diploma. Topics are outlined below and share similarities with many of our new B.Min offerings.

Pioneer training

Year 1

Theological reflection; Mission Spirituality, Mission story of church; Pioneer Ministry 1; Introduction to the Bible

Through year: Resource weekends, Sink or swim, retreat/pilgrimage

Year 2

Culture and context; Pioneer Ministry skills; Sink or swim - mission entrepreneurship; Pioneer Ministry 1; New Testament

Through year: Resource weekends, Placements, retreat/pilgrimage

Year 3

Mission leadership; Worship; Old Testament; Theology in global perspective; Sink or swim Cross cultural placement, Retreat

Jonny is keen to develop networks with us and to look to develop student exchanges in their Year 3 Sink or swim Cross cultural placement. Many of his instincts are echoed in our training dreams, which was encouraging.

Other

I delivered three lectures at Spurgeons College, to their post-graduate classes, presenting some of my recent research, in theology and popular culture. I led a session for the Methodists in Durham, on mission, leadership and congregational change. Thanks to those who worked to make this possible and for their kind hospitality.