

Exploring Fresh Expressions of Church in Deprived Urban Areas

Report on Study Leave, September to November 2009, Frances Shoesmith

Introduction

This study leave centred on exploring how Fresh Expressions of Church are developing in deprived urban areas.

Much of the publicity about Fresh Expressions tends to highlight exciting projects in suburban areas, and those in urban areas can think that Fresh Expressions are only for educated, middle class communities. Moreover, "Emerging Church" in the UK is tending to become synonymous with church for twenty- and thirty-somethings in the cities who have "moved on" from traditional church.

There is in fact a lot happening in our inner cities (not to be confused with our city centres), and many new forms of church are springing up, albeit small and slow-growing. These low numbers are, I believe, a function of the hardness of the ground in which these new churches are being planted, together with a lack of resourcing. This is exacerbated by a vicious circle in that hard ground yields (seemingly) poor results, which then makes further resources (of people and finance) harder to obtain.

But there is real fruit, and where Fresh Expressions are succeeding in raising up new disciples of Christ, the stories of transformation are often more dramatic, because of the very situations in which these new shoots are growing.

Summary of activities

A highlight of the sabbatical was a three week visit in September to "CBC", a school in a favela of Fortaleza in north east Brazil, where an English friend, Ruth, lives and works.

Together with a team of seven others from around the UK, I helped repair and re-decorate one of the school buildings, after severe flood damage earlier in the year. During break times and lunchtimes, we spent time with the children and staff ("chatting" in broken Portuguese). One Saturday we helped with *Supersabado*, a fun day for the schoolchildren and their friends, organising games and helping with feeding 400 children a hot midday meal.

I led two evening sessions at a small house church which Ruth and her husband have set up for some of the school-children's parents, and taught at one of the staff weekly sessions. As a team we sang (bilingually) with the CBC worship band, and were involved in prayer ministry, at the evening service at the school and at a local Pentecostal church.

During October and November I visited a number of urban Fresh Expressions in England, and have added to these the urban Fresh Expressions with which I was already familiar.

I met with emerging church and Fresh Expressions researchers and experts, including George Lings and The Sheffield Centre team, Stephen Skuce at Cliff College, Helen Cameron at Ripon College Cuddesdon, and Michael Moynagh, national FE adviser.

I also had a Reading Week at Fellfield, the diocesan Lakeland cottage, and took part in a diocesan retreat/conference for Pioneers and School of Leadership "graduates" at Rydal Hall, at which we focussed on "What is, What could be, and What will be", out of which have emerged a vision and a plan for the next phase of my work as a Pioneer Minister in this area.

Summary of Fresh Expressions in deprived urban areas

The following are the Fresh Expressions (or beginnings of FEs) which I visited during the sabbatical, or was already familiar with. I have grouped them based on their focus or the people group at which they are targeted.

Geographical focus

Oaks Church Plant, Tanhouse, Skelmersdale – a plant out of St John's Burscough onto a UPA estate. Activities are largely based in Oak House community house, with Sunday worship currently taking place in members' homes. Led by stipended leader.

St. Leonard's, Arbourthorne, Sheffield – a previously struggling UPA parish church which is re-focussing around Mixed Economy and Cell Church principles. Led by stipended vicar and NSM wife.

Targeting a particular people group

Older People

SORTED coffee morning, St John and St James, Bootle, and Manor Lunch Club, St Swithun's, Sheffield, both for pensioners.

Children

Messy Church: craft based play and worship for under 11s and their carers – e.g. St Swithun's church, Manor estate, Sheffield; and St George's, Everton.

GO4s, St John and St James, Bootle: - Children's church, meeting early evening, weekly in term time, with 40-60 children attending. Has now closed after 15 years, after the unsuccessful transfer of leadership from the founding couple.

Vulnerable people

Exodus, York: working with addicts, using 12 week programme, written by the NSM leader, aimed at helping addicts to break free from addictive behaviour through ministry, bible study and one-on-one mentoring.

Chocolate Box, Pittsmoor, Sheffield: led by CA officer, helped by small group of volunteers, working with prostitutes. Based on building up friendships and helping with practical needs.

Focussed on an activity or service

TANGO, St Mark's Haydock: breakfast and lunch bar, furniture and clothes charity shops, plus cell groups. Led by church volunteers.

Rainbow's End Café, Burngreave, Sheffield, set up by Christ Church, Pittsmoor: charity shop, multi-cultural volunteers, pastoral "sofa corner". Led by CA officer and vicar's wife.

Somewhere Else, Liverpool: led by half-time stipended Methodist minister, centred on twice-weekly bread baking, lunch and informal prayer, plus Sunday worship and lunch.

Missional communities or clusters – all lay led (currently)

Chill Out, St John and St James, Bootle, Liverpool: a "missional community" for adults and families on the fringe of a UPA parish church.

Shire Green and Langsett clusters: both planted out of St Thomas' Philadelphia, Sheffield.

North Bransholme, Hull: a small community based in home of diocesan officer, aimed at local families.

Qualities, strengths and weaknesses of different approaches

Common issues

In identifying the key principles underlying urban Fresh Expressions, together with the strengths and weaknesses of the different approaches, some common issues emerged:

Leadership: Committed support of leaders from above (institution) and around (peers and mentors) is simply vital. This work is essentially cross-cultural mission, and needs the sort of support which has traditionally been given to overseas missionaries. Leaders need long-term permission, as it takes time to establish a sustainable Fresh Expression. They also need firm peer support for what can often be discouraging and halting work.

Appropriate training is also important, especially for lay leaders. Lay training is particularly important in a UPA context, where lay leaders generally do not have leadership skills gained through their work, or university education.

Whether there is an ordained leader in charge of, or involved with, the Fresh Expression will also affect how the sacraments are incorporated. Having someone come in "from outside" to perform the sacraments is clearly not ideal, since it can disrupt fragile relationships, and make the sacrament feel like an optional extra, rather than flowing out of the life of the community. Communion by extension may be the best option, enabling lay leadership to lead the community in this celebration of its life together, but may leave members feeling they are something less than fully church.

Financing (principally of leaders): The growth and development of any Fresh Expression will be dictated by the time which leaders are able to give to it. Full-time, paid leaders are able to focus more, and to build up volunteer teams more effectively, and so make more progress more quickly. Volunteer or non-stipended leaders have less time to give, either to the FE directly, or to building up a team, and projects may remain smaller, and make slower progress.

A further factor is that the low numbers and limited local impact which are common in many urban Fresh Expressions also generate less publicity, making it harder to gain resources (whether of people or of finance).

The advantage, however, of the simplicity of some urban Fresh Expressions, is that minimal financial resources may be needed, particularly if no salaries or public buildings are involved.

Low literacy requires a non-book approach to worship and study, and there is a lack of appropriate evangelistic and discipleship resources. Almost all published material is aimed at literate, educated audiences. In urban areas, low-tech multi-media participatory material is needed, allowing members to explore and discover faith at their own pace and their own level, rather than being told and taught.

There is also a temptation in some quarters to equate low academic attainment with low intelligence. This is simply wrong!

Chaotic lifestyles can lead to low and irregular attendance. This doesn't prevent growth, but does lead to a different style of membership, based on relationships rather than attendance.

Fresh Expressions of Church? This question is often asked, and should be asked. Are these projects Fresh Expressions of Church, or simply a new way of doing outreach? In many cases, projects are on the way to being mature church, but are not there yet.

Michael Moynagh's précis of the official (rather long) Fresh Expression definition is useful:

Missional - It serves mainly those who currently don't attend church

Contextual - It fits its context

Formational - It forms Christ-like people through discipleship

Ecclesial - It seeks to be church

The first three characteristics determine whether something is a Fresh Expression or not. If the activity is mostly involved with already-Christians, it is not truly missional, which is the case with some alternative worship services. If the way things are done are set by the parent body or the institution, it may not truly be contextual, which can be seen in some church plants. If there is no intentional explicit evangelism or discipleship, it is not truly formational, which is the case for some community projects.

The last of Michael Moynagh's characteristics, Ecclesial, determines whether something is intentionally on the way to becoming a mature expression of church. Few have been in existence long enough, or have had enough resource invested in them, to have developed all three of the "tripod legs" of Worship, Community and Mission. Some may be Fresh Expressions of Community, such as the clusters. Others may be Fresh Expressions of Mission, such as Rainbow Café. Others may be Fresh Expressions of Worship, such as Messy Church. Others may be "fresh" in one or two of these areas, but "inherited" in others, for instance Oaks, where the Sunday worship remains fairly "traditional", based around a sermon and blocks of worship.

Only given time and commitment of resources will we begin to see mature Fresh Expressions of Church emerging from some of the many activities currently being established in urban areas.

And of course, some long-established Inherited Mode churches may not be fully three-dimensional, so by this measure, might not be deemed mature church!

Strengths and weaknesses of different approaches

Other issues, both positive or negative, apply to particular types of urban Fresh Expression to a greater or lesser extent. The following seeks to identify and explore these strengths and weaknesses.

Hard ground can be the context, particularly where vulnerable people are the target group. This can make progress very slow indeed, especially at the start. If it takes several years to build a relationship of trust with an individual, then continuity of leadership is vital. Those living in the lowest social groups have had all too much experience of short-term projects which start and stop as funding appears and disappears again. They need long-term commitment if trust is going to be gained, and a change of leadership after only a few years can lose all the precious ground gained.

When to evangelise and disciple? There is a tension between secularising the basis of the project, e.g. a charity shop, which has a wider appeal and easier access to secular funding, and keeping the project clearly faith-based, so that evangelism can take place. Does one start from day one with a "God slot" included, so that the project is clearly seen as the beginnings of church, or does one wait to introduce explicit Christian elements until a later stage?

If the former approach is taken, growth is likely to be slower since only those who are consciously looking to explore faith are likely to get involved. If the latter approach is used, then how and when is overt Christian activity introduced, and will some members opt out when it is?

In Bootle, Chill Out took the overt approach from the start and has stayed small, while SORTED, also in Bootle, took the secular approach, has grown rapidly, but many members then resisted attempts to introduce prayer, even as an optional element.

Breadth versus depth. Some projects such as TANGO and Oaks have a broad appeal across generations and people groups, and consequently are likely to see faster numerical growth, particularly if social activities are those which will appeal across the generations. On the other hand, where a project is more targeted, such as Exodus or Chill Out, less people will be reached, and numbers may stay low, but the depth of relationship built up will be greater. With lower key activities and fewer people, there is then more opportunity to focus on issues which individuals or groups may want or need to address, and so this can increase the potential to see significant growth of faith and transformation in individuals and even in families.

Participative vs. Passive? Common to a greater or lesser extent across all these Fresh Expressions is participative rather than passive membership. This is in contrast to the membership of many traditional Sunday congregations, where attendance for an hour of a Sunday can be the extent of "membership" and persist for decades. Where there is a particular focus, such as Somewhere Else or TANGO, or where the group is small, such as the clusters in Sheffield, members are likely to attend specifically because of the involvement expected and the sense of belonging felt as a result.

"Targeted People Group", or not? Several factors are at play here. If a project is very local, it may be easier to build relationships, e.g. on the Manor estate. Similarly if the target group is easily identified, such as under 11s as potential members of Messy Church, it may be easier to make initial contacts. It may also be easier to demonstrate the need for such a Fresh Expression, and so easier to gain funding. With a non-specific people group, such as the missional communities, however, new contacts are likely to be made through word of mouth, and so less potential members may be reached.

Context driven and emerging, or content imposed and replicating? It is all too easy to clone, or attempt to clone, from another successful project elsewhere. But to be truly *incarnational*, a project must have the courage to allow its own context and its own members to set the content, style, and pace of development, of the Fresh Expression.

In particular, this may mean that the emergence of truly contextual worship takes years. But the alternative is to impose the sort of worship the leaders like and have been brought up with, which may not be at all how local people want to express their worship of the God whom they are learning to love and serve.

Vincent Donovan, writing in *Christianity Rediscovered*, describes the slow and difficult process of allowing the Masai to express their own worship in their own way. Our urban contexts may be much closer to our middle-class educated roots, but we must still beware imposing our familiar ways of worshipping on others.

Pressure to conform. As a Fresh Expression grows there may be pressure from the institution to take on the church's systems, whether that is keeping a Service Register, or contributing to central funds, or having an elected council. These are issues which will be common across all Fresh Expressions, whether urban or not. Leaders will need to gauge how and when to incorporate the institution's systems in ways which are contextual and appropriate.

Summary of Findings

The following has emerged from the meetings, visits and reading during the sabbatical:

There is a lot going on beneath the radar

- Urban FE communities aren't exciting or dramatic and so are not well publicised (and may not want to be)
- This work is intensive – significant transformation is being seen in individuals, but member numbers remain low
- The difficulty of sharing evidence of "fruit" while maintaining confidentiality

This is long term work

- Projects usual start from a low base of: history of church attendance / knowledge of Christianity / experience of group membership.
- Lifestyle issues needing transformation are often deep-rooted and intertwined.
- Concentrating on small, local groups rather than flagships produces slower numerical results
- It takes 10 to 15 years to establish viable, sustainable communities

Leadership is best when it's local and lay.

- Missional communities need long-term commitment from leaders who understand local issues and culture.
- Support from local parish clergy is vital – the potential use of a BMO doesn't remove this need.
- Leaders need support and training from those conversant with MSC/FE principles.
- Inclusion of sacraments remains a difficult issue, but "parachuting in" a priest should be avoided.

Keep it simple

- The simpler the approach, the more easily it is sustained.
- The simpler the approach, the less resources, both financial and leadership, it needs.

"Fresh Expressions of Church" or not, or not yet?

- All are inherently Mission-Shaped, and some are Fresh Expressions without knowing it
- Some don't want the FE label, because it brings with it expectations of numerical "success", or maturity before they're ready for it.
- Projects may be FE of Community, or FE of Evangelism, or FE of worship, or two of these three, but may take years before all three are identifiable, and they are fully a Fresh Expression of Church.

Resources, principally salaries, difficult to obtain, particularly longer term

- Results can be seen as un-dramatic because they are personal to individuals.
- Urban FEs (in common with their Inherited Mode counterparts) may contribute little to the wider church, in terms of giving and attendance numbers.

Frances Shoesmith, April 2010

Appendix A – Three weeks at CBC school, Fortaleza, NE Brazil

The highlight of the sabbatical was a visit in September to CBC (Crianças do Brasil para Cristo / Children of Brazil for Christ), a school in a favela (slum) of the city of Fortaleza in Ceara state, north east Brazil, at which an English friend (Ruth Marques) lives and works (she is married to the founder and director of the school, Marc Marques).

The school supplements the basic (half day) state schooling for 380 local children with a morning or afternoon of lessons (state curriculum, plus citizenship, PSHE, music, dance, sport). The school was set up 14 years ago, and has just celebrated the first two of its students' graduations from university.

On weekdays, we (I and team of 7 others from around the UK) were involved in physical work, repairing and re-decorating one of the school buildings which was damaged during severe flooding earlier in the year.

I was involved in leading two evening sessions at a small house church which Marc and Ruth have set up for some of the parents of the school children, and teaching at one of the weekly sessions for the teachers. At one house church meeting, a man arrived in a desperate state, but through the ministry of the leaders, and through the message I explored with them, we were privileged to pray with him as he surrendered his life to Christ. A truly moving and unforgettable evening.

As a team we sang (bilingually) with the CBC mission team worship band, *Resplendecer*, and were involved in prayer ministry, at the evening chapel service at the school and at a local Pentecostal church service. Once more I had the honour of praying with someone as he gave his life to Christ, even though I was unaware of what he was praying in his language. I realised that night the power of praying "in tongues", allowing the spirit to transcend the human language barrier.

On school days, during break times and lunchtimes, we were able to play with the children and to chat with the teachers (though somewhat limited in scope by our lack of Portuguese!).

One Saturday we were involved in setting up and running *Supersabado*, a fun day for the schoolchildren and their friends. We organised games and helped with feeding 400 children a hot meal in just 20 minutes! After our own lunch, we ran a *Supersabado* games session for the teachers and staff, which proved a great opportunity to relax with them and to get to know them a little better.

Reflections from the time spent at CBC:

- Incarnational mission:
 - Working with those living on the doorstep – started working with street kids in centre of city, bringing them out to Agua Fria orphanage, but street kids didn't want to be there, and local parents knocking on the door wanting help for their kids – so became locally incarnational
- Integrated education and evangelism:
 - Weekly assembly is compulsory, but has a light touch; Monday evening chapel is voluntary for those wanting to explore more.
 - Friday chapel very like Brazilian Go4s – Doug Horley type songs, lots of dancing, bible story, and prayer.
- Raising up young leaders
 - JVC programme equips teenagers for mission and for leadership.

- Not just handouts
 - Bad experience with sponsorship charity – lynch mob arrived when money was reduced!
 - Parents of CBC children contribute nominal (but substantial, for them) fee towards each term's classes. To continue, children must attend regularly, and progress in their studies.
- God transcending the language and culture barriers.
 - God ministering through us to them and vice versa, and forming friendships with those with whom we share only a few words.
 - Being involved in leading worship, using bilingual song lyrics, was very moving.
 - Prayer ministry with a teenager, and later learnt he was committing his life to Christ.
- House church for parents of children
 - 2 powerful meetings, both using ideas from the Liverpool Diocesan "Unlock" worker.
 - Pass the Parcel activity resulted in mother, whose son is caught up in drug culture, receiving a "medal" which she now uses as prompt to pray for God's victory in her son's life.
 - Session on hugs and Psalm 31 followed on naturally from having prayed with father of CBC students, who arrived drunk and agitated, but who then gave his life to Christ. He now has a "ministry of hugs".

Appendix B: Notes on Fresh Expressions visited, or already familiar with

Type A: Geographical focus

Oaks Church Plant, Tanhouse, Skelmersdale.

Plant out of St John's Burscough onto a "UPA" estate.

Membership is a mixture of the original planting team and Tanhouse residents.

Activities largely based in Oak House community house, with (renewed inherited mode) Sunday worship currently taking place in members' homes.

Stipended leader (previously curate at parent church)

Finance comes from the diocese (leader's stipend and house), the parent church, and from secular grants.

Gravitational pull to "parish life" – focus on Sunday services, service registers

St. Leonard's, Arbourthorne, Sheffield

Led by stipended vicar and NSM wife.

Merger of two parishes before current leaders' arrival resulted in one congregation moving en masse to nearby modern catholic church, leaving St Leonard's, a church plant with evangelical / charismatic base.

Inherited mode has essentially disappeared, so free to do Fresh Expressions / Mission Shaped Church

Monthly Sunday lunch attracts 40-70 – initial contacts through one-off 12 week Kids Klub

Eden youth project launched Sept 08, now have leader and team of 9, some from elsewhere, some from existing congregation.

Planning to move to "organic church" model, with missional cells of 10-12, plus Life Transformation groups of 2 or 3 for discipleship.

Hope to replace weekly Sunday services with monthly Celebration, monthly lunch, monthly evening reflection service, (plus a simple Morning Prayer on other Sunday to satisfy C of E requirements).

Type B1: Targeting specific people group – Older People

SORTED coffee morning, St John and St James, Bootle

50-70 attend weekly

Occasional coach trips and seasonal bowling club

Resistance amongst members to introducing prayer or optional communion.

Leadership don't view it as a Fresh Expression but encourage members to attend Sunday worship

Manor Lunch Club, St Swithun's, Sheffield

30+ attend weekly.

Unsure of leadership when current CA officer is ordained in the summer.

Type B2: Targeting specific people group – Under 11s

Messy Church - craft based play and worship for under 11s and their carers

Manor Messy Church, St Swithun's, Sheffield

2 years old, currently meeting monthly, with 10-25 attending

Led by CA officer, who will be ordained this year, when new Deanery children's worker will take over

Attempt to start evening group for some parents, based around Start material, and as preparation for confirmation, failed in first weeks St George's, Everton

St George's, Everton, Liverpool

Publicity through local school

Many parents see it as free baby-sitting and don't stay with their children.

GO4s, St John and St James, Bootle

Children's church meeting early evening, weekly, in term time, 40-60 children attending

Worship songs, bible story and short talk, craft activities linked to theme, prayer time.

Ran for 15 years, led by lay couple from Sunday congregation.

When they were replaced by new leadership, the project struggled for 6 months and has now closed.

Type B3: Targeting specific people group – Vulnerable people

Exodus, York, working with addicts

NSM leader

12 week in-house programme, aimed at helping addicts to break free from addictive behaviour through ministry, bible study and one-on-one mentoring.

Weekly charismatic worship and prayer ministry

Chocolate Box, Pittsmoor, Sheffield, working with prostitutes

Led by CA evangelist, funded for 30 hours a week, helped by small group of volunteers,

Based on building up friendships and helping with practical needs.

Project is 3 years old,

Most contact is ad hoc on the streets or at women's homes, with attendance at weekly drop-in very low

Specific Christian input difficult and limited

Type C: Focussed on an activity or service

TANGO, St Mark's Haydock:

Furniture and clothes charity shop, plus breakfast and lunch bars,

Led by church volunteers.

Discipleship being introduced through cell groups.

Rainbow's End Café, Burngreave, Sheffield, set up by Christ Church, Pittsmoor

Charity shop on high street, with multi-cultural volunteer base,

Set up 2 years ago and led by CA officer and vicar's wife.

Sofa corner, free refreshments available, listening ear and prayer offered,

Planning to be more explicit about evangelism, but this will probably result in losing Muslim volunteers.

Somewhere Else, Liverpool:

Led by half-time stipended Methodist minister, having been started by predecessor 10 years ago.

Members are gathered from across Liverpool, mixed backgrounds, including some adults with learning disabilities, ex-homeless, those with mental illness and addictions.

Meets Tuesday and Thursday morning and lunchtime for bread-making, prayers, and lunch, and Sundays for worship and lunch.

Type D: Missional communities or clusters – all lay led (currently)

Chill Out, St John and St James, Bootle, Liverpool:

Missional community for adults and families on fringe of parish church.

Set up by Associate Vicar and Pioneer Minister 4 years ago

Weekly morning drop-in plus weekly evening Home Group

Family activities in school holidays

Camping trip to New Wine in the summer

Shire Green and Langsett clusters: both planted out of St Thomas' Philadelphia, Sheffield

Activities include weekly home group, Sunday "In" and "Out" meetings, monthly trip to St Tom's for Cluster Sunday, and kids club

Explicit and intentional discipleship. Some success stories, some failures, some start/stop.

Leaders are young professionals who have bought property on the estate.

Cluster members are local, and most are benefit class or working class

Leaders and some cluster members are members of St Tom's so receive support, training, and resource.

Relationships with local parish are said to be good

North Bransholme, Hull:

Out-of-use vicarage used as home for Social Responsibility officer.

Home opened for those who need short and medium term accommodation

Weekly mid-week gatherings of people from local area, providing community, friendship and pastoral support.

Not explicitly FE and no explicit support from deanery or diocese.