

Fresh Expression of Christian faith

Introduction:

What a blessing it is to have study leave. The gift of being able to take a little time away from the relentless demands of Parish ministry in order to study and reflect has been a great boon for my ministry.

The area that I choose to spend a week studying and engaging on is the area of Fresh Expressions and the local church.

But first I would like to show you a little of the context of my church life that lead me to the decision of why I felt it was important to look at a fresh expression for the church. I am a recently minted minister who in fact was only eligible to take study leave from the beginning of this year. Our church like many Presbyterian churches faces huge issues in our rapidly changing Post-Christian context.

These issues are: we live in a small rural community with many churches but most of the churches seem to be struggling to grow and to reach out to an every changing community. I serve in a small congregation with about 20-25 people of nearly all older aged people. St Paul's however through a fluke of history was granted some large tracts of land in the original survey of the land. This land combined with some adept stewardship has meant that the church is well and truly financially independent.

Recently the church has under taken a number of community initiatives, including a joint parish-community Creation Care Project where a tract of Church land has been extensively planted with native trees and a walkway developed through it. This land will soon be gifted to the community for all to enjoy.

The Church has also created a full-time Children's and Family Worker position which has founded and developed a thriving kid's club ministry that attracts around 20 children or just under a third of the local primary school. The Kid's Club has an overt Christian focus by being part of the Scripture Union Super Kids Program and has a large energised team of 12 helpers and leaders.

While the Kids Club and the Creation Care Project is currently very successful and has led in the case of the Kids Club to some other ministries being started

such as Youth Group. It doesn't answer the existential question of what can be done to turn around the Sunday morning service. Or what would happen in the long term if the Sunday morning worship service is not able to be turned around. What would the future of Presbyterian parish look like in ten years time in Kaikoura?

The purpose of this study leave is to consider what options we have available to us if we get any spiritual fruit from our ministries. Do we channel these people into our traditional Sunday morning service or should we attempt to create a contextual new "wine skin" or worshipping community for the people who our community ministry connects with but who do not yet worship at any church.

It has been looking for this new wine skin that has lead me to "Fresh Expressions."

As part of my Study leave I read a study report by Wayne Matheson; "Together in Ministry," and several books on fresh expressions including; Pioneer and Ministry and Fresh Expressions of the church, Fresh Expressions of Church and Kingdom of God, For the Parish a Critique of Fresh Expressions, Mission Shaped Church, Mission Shaped Evangelism, The Road to Missional, as well as, meeting up with Barry Kelk for an interview about how to start a Fresh Expression in Kaikoura.

But first what is a Fresh expression?

Their web site says:

'Fresh expressions of church' is a term coined by the Church of England report [Mission-shaped Church](#) and used in the Church of England and the Methodist Church for the last five years.

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

*which is appropriate to its context, rather than cloning something which works elsewhere.*¹

Fresh Expression came out of the Church of England's Mission Shaped Church report back in 2004 and it has since probably to the surprise of the Anglican church has become a best seller and gone viral around the English speaking world.

While there are many definitions of what Fresh Expressions are about. One of my favourite definitions that manages to get to the incarnational element of what Fresh Expression is about is a quote from *Pioneer Ministry and Fresh Expressions of the Church*

*The difference lies in the fact that pioneering ministry is not about trying to persuade people to belong to the church; it is about belonging and ministering to Gods people in the world in such a way that every community is transformed into church.*²

Instead of seeing church as a one hour program on a Sunday morning the aim should be to incarnate the gospel and Christian faith into the other six days and in doing so, by the Holy Spirit's leading and direction we can create a distinctive new worshipping community.

Or to put it another way if a thoughtful missiologist team arrived in a town which had a radically different culture to their own they would not cut and paste their own church model from their own home country into that context but rather with plenty of prayer and reflection they would hope with the Holy Spirit's power to incarnate the gospel into the new context, realising that while the truths of the Gospel are universal the way in which the Christian community will develop and grow may have little in common with a hour at church on a Sunday that we see throughout much of NZ.

An example of this pioneering mission is the "gathering place" in South Wales. The author states:

In addition to providing space for various activities throughout the week such as parent and toddler groups coffee morning's etc. the Gathering

¹ <http://www.freshexpressions.org.uk/about/introduction>

² Angela Shier-Jones, *Pioneering Ministry and Fresh Expressions of the Church*, SPCK, London, 2009, p7.

*Place hosts a fresh expression of church on Sunday's called Mosaic a cafe style church.*³

Another Fresh Expression has been the creating networks of Christian love and care on the London bus system where people regularly commute to work on the same bus every day without talking or relating to each other.

It quickly becomes clear that there is little that can be cut and pasted from one pioneering Fresh Expression to the next, even though some Fresh Expressions such as Messy Church have some portability from one context to another with varying degrees of success.

But one element that can be cut and pasted according to the Rev Barry Kelk minister of B@tCH is courage. His comments line up with David Warnock, he writes:

*Try it; don't worry about failure (after all that is certain if you do nothing.) Try things in a simple, cheap prototyping way to see what will work. What does work will surprise you?*⁴

Of course it is easy to say don't worry about failure but when fragile egos and the desire to "succeed" are put on the line, it does take courage to try new things or to get up after a "failure" and to try again.

Fresh Expressions like any significant movements have had their detractors, as well as their advocates. Rev Wayne Mathesons excellent study report "Together in Mission" brings out some of these criticisms particularly from Davidson and Milbank book "*For the Parish A critique of Fresh expressions.*"

Archbishop Rowan Williams paraphrasing one of the Critiques says:

*One of the sharpest Criticisms of the new look in mission represented by fresh expressions- That new look which I stress at the outset, I am in entire sympathy- is that it accepts without challenge a private and apolitical perspective that simply colludes with the general culture of consumer choice and the search for what makes feel better rather than what is true.*⁵

³ Angela Shier-Jones, *Pioneering Ministry and Fresh Expressions of the Church*, SPCK, London, 2009, p 9.

⁴ Angela Shier-Jones, *Pioneering Ministry and Fresh Expressions of the Church*, SPCK, London, 2009, p46.

⁵ Edited by Graham Cray, Ian Mosby, Aaron Kennedy, *Fresh Expression and the kingdom of God(Ancient Faith, Future mission)*, Canterbury Press, Norwich, 2012, p1.

I have no doubt that in some of these movements such as the Fresh Expressions they are indeed “guilty as charged.” But given the wide diffuse nature of Fresh Expressions and the fact that many churches of all sorts of styles and theologies will have some compromise due to the culture that planted them or the culture that surrounds them, Fresh Expressions is surely not the only one guilty of this.

One of the things that struck me about Fresh Expressions is that it is not meant to be another program or gimmick added to an already crowded minister’s schedule, such as adding a café service in the evening and saying I’ve done a Fresh Expression, rather it is at its heart about a change of values.

In the mission shaped church booklet Paul Bayes says that as a young minister he felt anxious at the declining church levels and felt the need to do something, anything, so he attended all the conferences and joined all the bandwagons hoping that one of them would be the “answer” to the steady decline of his church. Yet, in a funny way one of the conferences did have an answer for him and it was through a person called Ralph Neighbour who said, “We don’t think you should change a single structure until you have established the right values in your Church.”⁶

I think Paul Bayes is getting to the heart of the issue. A cafe church or a breakfast church like B@tch simply cut and pasted into Kaikoura or wherever would be a huge mistake; rather we need to look at our values and see whether those values are a true reflection of Christ’s values.

These values are a deep, abiding love for God and a belief that God loves the people of Kaikoura and is already at work in our town. A value of listening to God and to the community and discerning what God might be doing and how we can join, because as the often quoted statement, “mission is simply finding where God is already at work and joining in.” To do that requires listening to God and those in the community hearing their stories of pain and joy and in hearing those stories desiring to hear God’s still quiet voice about what a faith community might look like incarnated into their lives.

This has led to some lessons for me that have required further reflection.

⁶ Paul Bayes, *Mission Shaped Church, Ev 67*, Grove Booklets, United Kingdom, 2004, p 4-5.

Firstly, while it is a scary thing to think that one may have heard from God. I have to say that I felt a sense of excitement as I read the books and listened to Barry and the people of B@tch. I wonder if this excitement and desire to see God do a “new thing” in Kaikoura has come from God. I know that at least in myself my desire to see a Fresh Expression planted in Kaikoura has been slowly growing.

Secondly, I may not be the one to lead that Fresh Expression. Barry mentioned that when he planted B@tch he was not a minister, rather he was a photographer who had a significant longstanding connections in the community. Pioneering ministries need to draw on a deep well of trust and connections and local wisdom that come from years of serving, listening and building trust within a community. While I can't find it in my notes I remember reading about one Fresh Expression team who did ministry in a housing estate in England. They poured vast amounts of time, love and energy, listening to the people in the community and they produced well thought out programs only to discover they were still moving too fast for a Fresh Expression to start. In Kaikoura it may well be that God will raise up someone who is already in the community and who has a robust faith and deep relational connections.

Thirdly one of the exciting things that has eventuated is we well might *already* be at the very embryonic stage of planting a Fresh Expression. Since my study leave we have started an informal get together. We have had a number of adults with their children come and share dinner with us. Afterwards the kids have taken part in a bible talk and a fun activity. All of those involved have no active church affiliation, yet have been connected to the church via one of our ministries.

To conclude my one week's study leave was overflowing with information to read and absorb but has been very useful to sharpen my missional thinking here in Kaikoura.

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Alistair

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