

THEOLOGICAL BASIS FOR FRESH EXPRESSIONS

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'It is your garden now, little children,' said the Giant, and he took an axe and knocked down the wall. And when the people were going to market they found the Giant playing with the children in the most beautiful garden they had ever seen.'

'The Selfish Giant' by Oscar Wilde

Moved from the winter of selfishness the Giant in Oscar Wilde's children's tale opens up to others not only his garden, but also his life. He changes dramatically as boundaries are broken down and ownership is shared. Yet, heart-warming as this story is, the Giant continues to remain within the security and comfort of an invitation, one which he makes. But what if something else had happened: what if he had left his garden to others and had travelled to places, fair or foul, where gardens were unknown, or at best only a plaintive imagining? What if he had shared with others by growing new gardens in different places? This is the journey of fresh expressions of church.

In Wilde's story there is a great giving and receiving of life; this echoes the joy when church in its traditional or inherited expressions breaks down the walls, whatever they may be, and shares Jesus with others. Through the power of the Holy Spirit it engages, invites and reconfigures. There is nothing deficient or second class about this approach; there is only a lack of monopoly. This is an important way in which we can engage in mission, but it is not the only one. Inherited and fresh expressions of church are complementary streams of the Spirit's work and they should celebrate, support, comfort and challenge one another. We must never lose sight of this complementarity; we must not fall into a mire of fear, insecurity, jealousy or arrogance, which would hinder us from understanding who God is and blind us from seeing what He is doing.

WHAT IS CHURCH?

Church, in both its inherited and fresh expressions, is a gift from God. It is enlivened by the Holy Spirit and given to us by the Father through Jesus who leads it. It is deeply and fundamentally relational: it is 'One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic.' These relationships through Jesus form a matrix as we relate to one another in unity and fellowship, to God in dependence upon His grace, to the Church universal through time and space and to our communities and wider world in mission.

'... we need to have a clear and robust understanding of what the church really is. It is not in the New Testament a carefully constructed human society, organising itself in local branches, with members signing up to a constitution. Instead, it is what happens when the news and presence of Jesus, raised from the dead, impact upon the human scene, drawing people together in a relationship that changes everyone involved, a relationship that each person involved with Jesus is now

involved in ways that can be painful and demanding, but also lifegiving and transforming beyond imagination.'

Rowan Williams, *'Mixed Economy'*, Issue 1, 2008, page 13

WHAT IS A FRESH EXPRESSION OF CHURCH?

If church is this relational matrix, in what particular way(s) is this nuanced in a fresh expression of church: an expression of church that is intentionally missional, contextual and focused on making disciples?

- First, fresh expressions of church are self-consciously focused on these relationships. Appropriate practices are seen to develop from their outworking: the community of the church is therefore not essentially defined by specific practices, though practices consonant with these core relationships will develop and may be shared across time, space and cultures.
- Second, the experience and reflection of many pioneers has identified the following process as critical in the development of robust fresh expressions of church (they have a strong resonance with our best practice in cross-cultural mission).
- Go, commit to stay and intend to develop church in this new context. If the intention is to engage people, draw them back and welcome them into the sending church (even a 'reconfigured' one) this, while being an entirely valid form of mission engagement, is not a fresh expression of church.
- Listen to God and to the new context; we must not assume that we understand this new culture. Genuine open hearted, minded and spirited listening is essential; this will change us, our understanding and our actions.
- Develop loving service. As we listen, in this new context, we begin to integrate into a community and we begin to understand how this community can best be loved and served. We begin to do this more as 'insiders' rather than 'outsiders' who have been parachuted in.
- Encourage and participate in the community which will develop from the catalyst of this loving service.
- Begin to make disciples. As relationships develop within the community that is forming we expect, not only for Jesus to be seen in us, but also for natural conversations to develop and people begin to be transformed as they meet Jesus (even before they have come to a clear understanding of faith).
- Help shape an appropriate, full expression of church community. This community will be true to both what church is and to the cultural context in which it is being expressed.
- In time repeat the process: go from this new expression of church into a fresh context.
- The whole process is undergirded with prayer. The community in mission is not only aware of its vulnerability and limitations, but also that this mission is God's mission and that they are given the gift of sharing in this: it is not their possession.

FRESH OR FROTH EXPRESSIONS OF CHURCH?

Are fresh expressions of church merely a pragmatic quick fix or are they a profound expression of God's grace and love? Are they deeply and fundamentally grounded in our understanding of God; God who loves, sacrifices and reigns? Four realities, which are central to our Christian faith are foundational to the development of a fresh expression of church and should be reflected within its life:

- Trinity, Incarnation, Kingdom of God and the 'Wildness' of God. If these realities are present, then there is substance, not froth.
 - Trinity: The mystery of the Trinity speaks, among many other things, of
 - diversity in utter unity of being,
 - love mutually and equally given and received,
 - communion-in-mission
 - the reality of communication;

It declares that a relationship of uncompromised love is at the core of reality. If a church, whether traditional or fresh in its expression is to have integrity it must not just reflect, but radiate these qualities. A fresh expression of church intentionally aims to integrate this quality of life into its DNA:

- As stated earlier a fresh expression of church explicitly understands church in relational terms. These relationships are comprehensive and are focused in and through Jesus. There is an

intentional attempt to model communion-in mission: where love is mutually given and received and where it is uncompromisingly expressed to others.

- There is a deep exploration of diversity and unity. This is reflected not just in all being encouraged to use the experience and gifts which God has given them, but to radically live out the 'priesthood of all believers', and, among other things, to shape our understanding of the 'ordained'/'lay' dynamic in the light of this. John 14-17 speaks of the Trinity in action and how all are where the one is. How do we understand delegation and representation in the light of this? What does this say about service, discipling, the delegation of the administration of the sacraments? Fresh expressions of church explore how the dynamic of this interdependent relationship should shape our practice, rather than letting inherited practices become principles by which we interpret our relationships.
 - Communication is understood, not just in intellectual terms, but in and through the reality of relationship; it is expected that God will make himself known, in new contexts, through the integration of our presence, words and actions.
- **Incarnation:** George Lings at the Church of Scotland Emerging Ministries Conference (2012) posed the question, 'Was the incarnation a fresh expression of the Second Person of the Trinity?' If it were, this would have significant implications for how we understand our identity and how our engagement with context should shape the expression of church.
 - Philippians 2:1- 11 speaks of the humility and love of Jesus and calls us to follow his example. It speaks of Jesus truly becoming one of us, not just pretending. This means that the context had a significant role in the expression of the incarnation. A fresh expression of church takes both this radical humility and the significance of context as central to mission. In the incarnation neither divinity nor humanity were compromised, so in a fresh expression of church neither the integrity of being church nor the cultural context will be compromised, The context must be allowed to be an active agent in shaping the expression of church if we are to follow the model of the incarnation.
 - As with the incarnation there will be a giving up of power and a willingness to accept sacrifice in our active loving of others. This underscores that our motivation for developing church is not one of seeking power, maintaining prestige or guarding comfort, it is one of love, love for the other; especially love for the one who is not already included. Our identity is neither self-centred nor self-denying.
 - The incarnation is not static: in the sense that we now relate to the post-resurrection Jesus, time and place are important. Fresh expressions of church, also, must develop and change so that they may reproduce and share the life of Jesus. They are also, as George Lings pointed out in the conference mentioned earlier, part of the body of the risen, ascended Jesus and this affects how we apply the model of the incarnation to our contexts.
 - **Kingdom of God:** Central to the Kingdom of God is the death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus, which heralds the New Heaven and the New Earth and underscores its reality.
 - The full expression of this Kingdom is in our future, but it must radically inform how we live and be church today. The death, mourning, suffering and injustice of the 'old order of things' (Revelation 21:4) needs to be challenged at a practical level, not merely a theoretical one; this can only be done as we engage with the reality of people's worlds in the contexts in which they live. Loving service, which is aimed at transformation, not just relief, is central to this and is intentionally expressed within fresh expressions of church.
 - By developing a fresh expression of church in new contexts we consciously work for the Kingdom of God to be expressed and experienced in these contexts, rather than calling people to experience it elsewhere. This deeply reflects the reality that Jesus is King in every context.
 - **'Wildness' of God**

'Aslan a man!' said Mr Beaver sternly. 'Certainly not. I tell you he is the King of the wood and the son of the great Emperor-beyond-the Sea. Don't you know who is the King of Beasts? Aslan is a lion – the Lion, the great Lion.'

'Ooh!' said Susan, 'I'd thought he was a man. Is he – quite safe? I shall feel rather nervous about meeting a lion.'

'That you will, dearie, and no mistake,' said Mrs Beaver; 'if there is one who can appear before Aslan without their knees knocking, either they're braver than most or just plain silly.'

'Then he isn't safe?' said Lucy.

'Safe?' said Mr Beaver, 'don't you hear what Mrs Beaver tells you? Who said anything about safe. But he is good. He is the King, I tell you.'

'The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe' by C S Lewis

'He (Aslan) is not the slave of the stars, but their Maker. Is it not said in all the old stories that He is not a tame lion?'

'The Last Battle' by C S Lewis

For a variety of reasons we are tempted to try and domesticate God. We, like Susan and Lucy in Lewis' story, misunderstand safety. We too readily exchange the anchor of God's goodness for the flotsam of our wisdom. The adventure of mission calls us to both risk and to an openness to sacrifice, but it does so in the context of love; love which is equally for us and for others. Fresh expressions of church celebrate this wildness and call; they intentionally cultivate a seeking of the presence and action of God in the wild, open seas of our world, not just in the inland waters of the well-mapped.

'The price of encountering reality, we might say, is precisely the recognition that there isn't an alternative to it. And the challenge is whether we can believe that, often in spite of appearances, it is the well-spring of joy. Hardest of all is when the very vehicles of faith or trust seem to become empty ...and how it is necessary to hold on to what may feel like – at best – a deeply uncertain vision, haunted by all the ingenious ways in which it can be distorted and turned into falsehood.'

'The Lion's World' by Rowan Williams

Our record of the 'Council at Jerusalem' and its immediate consequences (Acts 15:1-35) reminds us that, from almost the outset, the church has struggled to understand what it means to follow God who is untameable and who delights in giving birth to fresh expressions of church.

Heartfelt opinions, which deeply reflected believers' sense of identity and theological perspective, were presented as the expression of church from within the Jewish culture debated and legislated on how and on what grounds they should relate to the fresh expression of church from within the Gentile community. What practices should they demand of this new community if they were to be considered part of the true church? Three key conclusions were affirmed:

- That God, who will not conform to our expectations or comfort, is Lord of the Church (v7-18).
- That being part of the Church is, through grace, the result of a given relationship; it is not through adherence to traditional and/or cultural religious practices (even if these practices had been given by God and, at one time, had been significantly helpful for those in a particular culture developing and deepening their relationship with Him) (v8-11).
- The priority of mutual respect, encouragement and fellowship between the different expressions of church (v24-34).

A Benediction for the whole Church

Ephesians 3:20-21 is both a benediction and a challenging declaration of and for the whole church, whatever its expression: inherited or fresh. Across time, place and culture it calls us to celebrate and live out the radical gift of being church; it is a good place to finish and also to begin ...

'Now to him who is able to do more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever! Amen.

(NIV)