

Gleanings From Those Already on the Road

An Information and Discussion Paper

"You Don't Get to New Places by Following Established Tracks"

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Gleanings from those 'Already on the Road'

The purpose of this paper is to inform and stimulate current discussions on improving our missional fruitfulness. It draws on the experiences and thinking of those who have already travelled some of the journey, and in part may help us avoid reinventing the wheel, or worse the 'Square Wheel'.¹ It is intended to provide an initial selection of research-grounded key findings, comments and observations which are of particular relevance to consideration of the development of Missional Communities in Australia.

It particularly draws on the very comprehensive and wide-ranging research carried out by the 2013 'Church Army Research Unit' in the United Kingdom in a twenty-year longitudinal study of '*Fresh Expressions of Church*' (FxC) established in ten Anglican Dioceses. The findings of that report are modified here as appropriate by the further analysis of the 2016 '*Day of Small Things*' (DOST) report from the same source which extended the research to cover twenty one Dioceses. Such modifications are noted where they are made.

It should be noted that-

- The FxC term use by the Anglican Church in the UK is in essence the same in meaning as the Missional Community term used by the author and which is used by other organisations both overseas and elsewhere in Australia.
- Given the very large quantity of material contained in the two above mentioned reports in order to keep this paper digestibly brief I have pulled out key findings and expressed them as bullet points with comment as appropriate.
- Where particular words, phrases and sections are emphasised it is by this author
- It is essential that any adoption of any of the missional strategies examined by the reviewed reports that we might consider must be undergirded by a rigorous biblical theology. This must not mean however that '*missional babies*' are thrown out with doubtful '*theological bathwater*'.

¹ <https://unboundedchurch.com/2017/10/28/the-square-wheel-delusion/>

- While this paper has been produced in the context of the Anglican Diocese of Sydney, its conclusions are I believe of relevance to, and useful for, the broader Australian church landscape.

1. Definition of an Anglican 'Fresh Expression of Church? (fxC) p.10

The UK researchers went to considerable length to exclude Christian groups that were not actually FxC (Missional Communities). One way in which they did this was by applying the following diagnostic grid to any candidate group.²

1. Was something Christian and communal brought to 'birth' that was new , rather than an existing group modified?

- MJB comment – My experience in a number of locations is that it is possible in some cases to modify an existing group to become a full *Unbounded Church* type Missional Community. Actual examples are various Playgroups and the Self-Defence group at Eagle Vale Parish. It is all about vision and intention.

2. Has the starting group tried to engage with non-churchgoers? There was intention to create a fresh expression of Church, not begin an outreach project from an existing church. The aim was for the Christians to change, to fit a culture and context, not make the local/indigenous people change, to fit into an existing church context.

3. Does the resultant community meet at least once a month? In cases of monthly meetings further questions about how to deepen community, build commitment and increase discipleship follow.

4. Does it have a name that helps to give it an identity? An active search, not yet yielding a name, is allowed.

5. Is there intention to be Church? This could be from the start, or by discovery on the way. This admits the embryonic fxD (fx of developing community) and cases of fxE (fx of evangelism) and even some fxW (fx

² The result of this exercise was that the more than 1000 groups the original ten Dioceses submitted as FxC were whittled down to under 600. The extended reach of the 2016 DOST report again increased the number of MCs evaluated to over 1000.

of worship). The key is that they are not seen as a bridge back to 'real church'.

6. Is it Anglican, or an Anglican partner in an Ecumenical project? 'Anglican' here means the bishop welcomes it as part of the diocesan family⁴, not whether it only uses centrally authorised worship texts, or has a legal territory such as a parish.

7. There is some form of leadership recognised within, and also without.

8. At least the majority of members (who are part of the public gathering) see it as their major expression of being church.

9. There is aspiration for the four creedal 'marks' of church, or ecclesial relationships: 'up/holy, in/one, out/apostolic, of/catholic'. We question validity in an absence of 'mission/out'. (Our Church Army team see the two dominical sacraments as a given consequence of the life of a missional community which follows Jesus, but not the sole or even best measure of being church.)

10. There is intent to become 'three self' (self-financing, self-governing and self-reproducing). These factors need contextualisation, but are some marks of advancing maturity. They are not to be interpreted as indicators of congregationalist independency, or breakaway tendencies.

2. Proportions of Christian, de-churched and non-churched

P.22,23

"Analysis of the first ten dioceses studied shows that in approximate terms, in the opinion of the interviewed leader, 25% of attendees were Christians, 35% from the de-churched and 40% were non-churched. It is arguable that these are proportions quite unlike those known in parish life and is good news about the effect of fresh expressions of Church within the mission of the Church of England'

"This data is of limited depth, derived from the opinion of the fxC leader, not surveying individual attendees. It should be treated with caution, as explained above. However, it offers refutation of the charge that fresh expressions of Church primarily attract existing or bored Christians by transfer. It would be very rare that a parish church has

these high proportions of de-churched, and certainly non-churched, as attendees”

Modification from DOST Executive Summary P. 1-

“Setting aside flawed figures from the first report of 2013, more accurate figures from the second round of dioceses give the leaders’ views that the fxC are made up of 40% Christians, 27% dechurched and 33% non-churched.”

- MJB Comment –
 - i) While this gives a lower non-Christian (Newcomer) average attendance it is still 60% as against Sydney Diocese 8% and similar single digit percentages across Australia and falling.
 - ii) The two sets of figures are not directly comparable because as DOST itself says -
*“These figures were partly lowered because the 2nd tranche contained more **church plants, which attract fewer non-churched people and have a higher percentage of Christians.**” (DOST)*

3. The Size of the Team used to begin FxC

1 to 2 - 10%

3 to 12 - 73%

Over 12 - 17%

- MJB comment- It can be seen that the vast majority of Missional Communities are started by seeding with ‘Communities’ **not individuals or couples, or by ‘Classic’ Church planting.**

4. The Number of FxCs started each year increased exponentially from 2002 p.29

- MJB comment- There is I believe a very important issue here. This was about the same time that following their experience in the

1990s the C of E (as a result of research) retreated from Classic Church planting as its major growth strategy.

A point of I think highly significant note is that this is also the very same time as two things happened that are worthy of research.

i) Sydney Diocese moved in the opposite direction and adopted and strongly encouraged Classic Church Planting as it's primary missional strategy.

ii) This also about the same time as the percentage of 'Newcomers' in Sydney congregations begin its now 17 year (at least) long decline.

This begs a very important and seemingly largely unasked Question – **Causation or Coincidence?**

- DOST comment – *"Today four times as many (FxCs) per year are being started compared to 2004"* – Executive summary P. 1
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5. Diocesan Decline and FxC Growth p.32

*"It is then striking and notable that in 7 out of 10 cases the growth attributable to fxC attendance **more than offsets** that decline and in two further cases nearly does so."*

6. Return on Investment p. 35

"Any parish that grew over time by 25% would be considered effective and advocated as a good example. The fxC steadily outperform that.

*For every one person sent, at least another two and a half are now present. This is a 250% increase over time. **There is nothing else in the Church of England that can do anything like this"***

7. FxC Age Spectrum p. 43

'One factor stands out: most of the fxC by intention and attendance are all age, with that average being 74%. It is not the case that most of them serve specialised niches, which critics, perhaps nervous of creeping consumerism, have feared'

8. Average FxC Attendance by Age p. 44

Under 16- 40%

Adult 60%

- MJB comment- Missional Communities can be designed to reach all ages not just ANKs (Adults with no kids)

10. FxC Meeting Days p. 44

*"fxCs meet across all the days of the week, with the majority **NOT** on a Sunday"*

11. FxC Locations p. 45

"fxC can begin in all kinds of geographical and social settings, with only a limited inclination for their birth occurring in the kinds of areas in which the Church of England has flourished."

12. Steps towards Discipleship p. 48-50

MJB comment - One of the criticisms frequently made of the Missional Community concept is that it is *"actually, or even necessarily, church-lite"*. However, 78% of FxCs (DOST 83% p.114) have in place mechanisms in addition to the main meeting to disciple members. These include one to one, small groups, Courses and serving ministries.

13. Lay and 'Lay-Lay' Leadership p. 60-61

"The trend over the 20 year period is the sharp increase in lay leaders, the largest group of whom are not formally licensed, and evidence shows only 39% were in any sense trained. Nevertheless, what they have done is more to be celebrated than regretted".

MJB comment - The Growth of MCs in the UK is to a large degree a lay led movement. One important finding of the survey is the

discovery of what is termed the 'Lay-Lay' leader, which I will designate here as a 'L2' leader.

L2s are those who are not licenced, and often without formal training. In fact, of the leadership of MCs started in the period 2006-2012, 42% were led by 'L2s'.

'Learning from the Research' An extract (p. 100 FxC report)

"The overall framework of understanding to work within, at all times, is that fresh expressions of Church are made of two elements. Just as water is composed of hydrogen and oxygen, so fxC are made of missional and ecclesial elements. Take either one out and the result may be of value but it is not a fresh expression of Church.

False assumptions to avoid

- **"Buying a fxC off the shelf really works.** *It can be done, but is usually a mistake. We urge readers not to slavishly copy, or replicate, what others have done.*
- **Only big urban congregations can do this.** *We have seen fxC started even by small rural churches, which went well.*
- **It takes a team of 50 to do it properly.** *This is not true. The most common team size is 3-12 people, see p 26. The evidence of subsequent growth in size and maturity is not mainly dependent on team size.*
- *Laying on an act of worship is the best starting point. A steady flow of reflective writing commends a longer process of loving and serving people, making relationships that naturally include spiritual conversations and only then evolving public worship.*
- **All fxC do the same job.** *The evidence denies this. They can be likened to different tools; a hammer should not be used to put in a screw. All the kinds have attendant strengths and weaknesses; they take different resources and have different natural unit sizes.*
- **The point is to get new people to the main church.** *That can be a by-product, but it is not the aim. The call is to add to the*

diversity and number of interdependent churches, in order to express the mission of God.

Missional lessons to learn

- *Be clear on the groups of outsiders the fxC is for. **Ensure the leader[s] and team are focussed on those not attending church and proactive in connecting with them.***³ *Studies elsewhere reveal the downside of disaffected Christians joining.*
- ***Different kinds of fxC connect better with different missional groups in society,** see p 25.*
- *Discern and discover what God is calling for in your context and its mission. There is much variety to choose from, see section 5.5, and the following bullet points.*
- *Discern how often you plan to meet, see pp 72-73. Fortnightly is the most risky, p. 88. Either weekly or monthly can work. Local stories suggest changing to meeting more frequently later can be difficult.*
- *FxC can start in any kind of geographical context pp. 37-39 though it may be slower work in some of them, see pp 89-90.*
- ***Think culturally not just territorially,** see p 65. What social or cultural groups are missing from your existing church and which of those groups do you have relational links with?"*

Final Comments (MJB)

- The above findings are based on comprehensive, longitudinal studies, and while we may (indeed I do) have points of disagreement in terms of 'Theology' in some areas, there is no doubt that in terms of 'Missiology' there is much we can learn.
- Great effort was taken to produce output that is a true reflection of the results of the large-scale efforts put into FxC (MC).
- Results in terms of reaching the multiplicity of the church-alien cultural universes of the lost and drawing in 'Newcomers', are far greater than the parochial system has achieved, is achieving, or is likely to achieve.

³ This currently is rarely a significant focus of parochial leaders and even less so among congregational members.

- The vast majority of new FxC are seeded by communities rather than individuals or large groups.
- This is a largely lay led movement
- Licencing is minimal.
- Discipling of Newcomers is intentional in 80% of MCs.
- Developing MC networks is vastly less expensive and, on the evidence of these in depth and long term studies, much more missionally fruitful, than traditional mission strategies.

I hope this paper will help stimulate more creative and energetic thinking as we address the growing missional 'Crisis'.

Unbounded Church is an idea – the idea that the church needs to be set free from its rigid, cumbersome and change-averse 'Christendom' influenced forms, structures and thinking, in order to be –

*'A church as we haven't known it
for a society as we haven't known it'*



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