

These notes were originally produced for the Executive Committee planning the National Larger Anglican Churches' Conference in October 2015 at High Leigh, but have since been updated, and it has been decided to circulate them more widely. They simply describe some of the reasonably recent research findings on the subject with which I'm familiar, but they are not meant to be a comprehensive statement on the topic nor an attempt to evaluate the pros and cons of starting new churches.

Definition

What is a "church plant"? (a) It is normally taken to mean where a particular church or congregation starts a new congregation usually in a separate building, not necessarily an ecclesiastical building, but it also can mean taking over an existing church congregation when it is in poor shape (as the Bishop of London from time to time asks Holy Trinity Brompton to do).

(b) Building a place of worship on a new housing estate, for example, would probably also feature as a "church plant" even if its origin was more with the (Anglican) Diocese than a particular local congregation or "mother church".

(c) Fresh Expressions has become a phrase or term used to describe new churches started as mission-minded churches, café churches, pub churches, or churches with similar terminology, and, especially in Scotland, "churches without walls", a movement now officially incorporated into Fresh Expressions. One part of Fresh Expressions is Messy Church, an organisation of its own, led by Lucy Moore, and financed by the Bible Reading Fellowship (which publishes many of the Messy Church books).

(d) I am sure there are other definitions as well but for simplicity I have combined all the above in these notes, usually without differentiation between one type and the other. Essentially a "church plant" is a new worshipping congregation of people, which, for statistical purposes when conducting Church Censuses, is further refined as "meeting at least monthly, primarily for worship, and open to the public" (so would include, for example, new services started at a boarding school, or Armed Forces chapel, or occasionally even in a hospital chapel). Services held in little-used churches at Easter or Christmas or on special days do not count as a church plant.

Number of churches started

The book *UK Church Statistics No 2 2010-2020* (ADBC Publishers) gives the number of churches by county in England, by denomination, for selected years between 1989 and 2020. If there were, say, 12 URC churches in Bedfordshire in 1989 but only 11 in 1998, then it means that at least one church must have closed in that period. It could mean that, say, 3 churches had closed offset by 2 opening, but the statistical detail is not refined enough to elucidate that. It can only give the net figure.

A count of all these church changes for every county and denomination was made and is given in the article on Page 16.1, which shows that between 1989 and 2020 an estimated 9,800 churches were started across all denominations in England, but 8,300 had closed, giving a net increase of 1,500 congregations. These *exclude* Fresh Expressions.

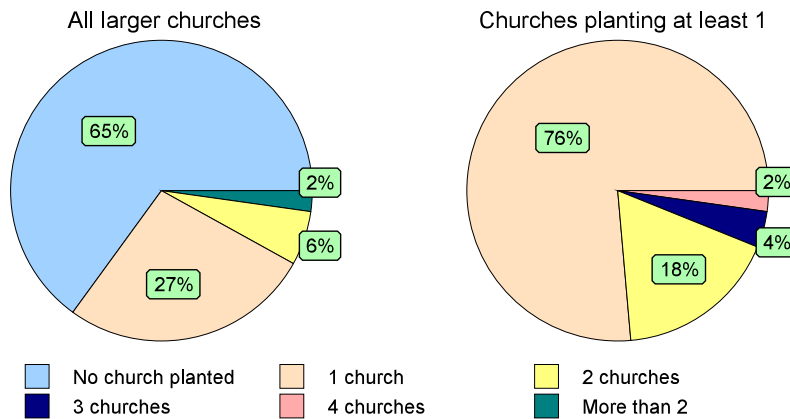
- The starts do not come uniformly across *time* – more congregations started between 1998 and 2005 and between 2010 and 2015 than at other times (the latter helped particularly by the many new Immigrant churches).
- Nor are they uniform across *denominations*. Those starting the most are, respectively from the largest, Immigrant churches, Pentecostal churches and New Churches. Those closing the most are, in order, the Methodists, Roman Catholics and Anglicans.
- Nor are they uniform *geographically* across the country – more churches opened than closed only in the West Midlands, South East (north and south of London), and Greater London itself (especially the black charismatic Pentecostal churches where more than 1,300 started). This is illustrated in Figure 16.1.3.

Planting by larger churches

A 2008 survey of larger churches¹ (those in excess of 350 attending on a usual Sunday) showed that a third, 35%, of them had planted at least one church in the previous 5 years. The larger the church the greater the likelihood of having done so. Rather more Anglican and Independent churches had started another church than Baptist churches (two-fifths to one-fifth). The average was 1.3 churches for churches planting at least one.

Reactions to the experience of church planting were mainly good. A few churches (under 5%) said that "church planting" for them had meant starting an extra congregation within their own church. Not all were successful, however. Two out of 67 new congregations planted had closed and a further two were "very fragile". A frequent comment (16%) was that church planting was "very hard work", others (9%) saying it was "very costly in terms of group leaders and finances", one explaining that "we gave away our best people". The consequences for the "mother church" were, however, generally positive with a quarter, 25%, saying they themselves had experienced growth as a consequence.

Figure 16.4.1: Number of churches planted 2003-2008 by larger churches



Evangelical churches

A 2012 survey² asked a random sample of evangelical churches across all denominations if they had planted a church. A fifth had, with Anglicans and non-Anglicans the same. The survey found that male ministers were more likely to plant a church than female, and that churches started before a minister was 50 were slightly more likely to succeed than those planted when the minister was older. Most churches planting at least one congregation had planted just one (74%), the remainder had planted two or more, again an average of 1.3 for those planting at least one.

Commenting on the out-turn of their work (in an unstructured way), two-fifths (41%) were positive about their experience, and 17% were negative. Of the remaining two-fifths, a sixth (18%) stressed how hard it was to do church planting, and the remaining quarter (24%) made other comments, mostly about the type of church that had been planted or the leadership necessary for it.

It was clear that a number of success stories were seen – one plant grew into an independent church of 250 people, others were thrilled by the impact it had had on the “home” congregation. Many commented that it took time, care and cost. Some of the churches started were Messy Churches as they are called, one or two were Café style churches, one or two were Pub churches. Many indicated that it took a long time, was immensely hard, challenging work, but was worth doing in the long term.

On the other hand, some failed. It is difficult to judge how many were started and failed, but the Pentecostal experience in the north-west of England in the mid-1990s, focussing around the JIM [Jesus In Me] Campaign, found that one plant in four failed within two years. That broad ratio would seem to be roughly replicated in this 2012 study in the experience of the ministers concerned, judging by the comments made. A lot depended on the leadership of the planted church, but failure is not always down to this.

Would those involved plant another church if circumstances permitted? The overwhelming answer was YES, by 97%. Did the planted church have an ongoing relationship with the “mother church”? About half, 49%, said YES, Anglicans slightly more likely than non-Anglicans to have such (52% to 45%).

London's churches

London's church experience generally between 2005 and 2012 was exceptional.³ In those 7 years some 700 new churches were started – at an average rate of two a week. The growth was mostly seen among the black charismatic churches (Black Majority Churches or BMCs), but it was also seen in the large number of churches started (mainly by the Roman Catholics) to meet the spiritual needs of immigrants from Catholic countries, especially from the EU. Seven new Croatian churches were started by the Catholics as just one example in these years.

Many of these new churches used the premises of existing church buildings – some 21% of London's churches lend or rent their church to another, often of a different denomination (as it happens exactly the same percentage as churches in Melbourne, Australia⁴). Some denominations, like the Orthodox and Pentecostals, are especially strong in London – half their total UK attendance is actually in London! Both groups started many churches, although “many” for the Orthodox is measured in tens, but in hundreds for the Pentecostals. One feature of so many churches is the huge number of languages spoken across the capital in church services. One-seventh, 14%, of all the church services held in London are not in English.

Church planting in recent London history is therefore exceptional. Failures in the church plant were fewer, perhaps as low as 7%, while struggling church plants tended to survive longer, perhaps for 5 years rather than two years.

How were the churches in London started? This question was asked in the London Church Census of 2012; answers were as follows:

- 43% By an individual or small group of people
- 30% As a planned offshoot from a mother congregation
- 19% An initiative by a denomination or a church-planting organisation
- 8% In other ways (such as a church splitting, or churches merging when, say, a Local Ecumenical Partnership was being formed).

Of the denominations mentioned, the large majority of church plants were black Pentecostal, followed by the Roman Catholics (Jesuits or Legion of Mary). Some of the organisations involved were American or South African (like Rhema). The UK churches most mentioned included Holy Trinity, Brompton, St Helen's, Bishopsgate and other Anglican churches; Ichthus Christian Fellowship, Newfrontiers, Vineyard especially as New Church streams; and various Pentecostal churches including Kensington Temple. People mentioned as stimulating plants included Nigerian leaders but also the Canadians John and Carol Ascot (from Toronto), American Rick Warren and South African Alan Platt as well as others.

The average size of a new church was 28 people, but half of them doubled this number within 5 years, a quarter more than doubled their number, and the remaining quarter stayed below 50 people. New Churches, Anglicans and Baptists started with larger numbers on average (44, 39 and 32 respectively), but the average did not vary by churchmanship or area within London. Interestingly, churches with a current attendance of between 100 and 200 people tended to start a church with more people than a church with a larger congregation (that is, over 200), 43 people to 31.

Half of the new churches in London, 53%, started with a recognised full-time leader, and a fifth, 20%, with a part-time leader (not all leaders were ordained as such). One in seven, 14%, was lay-led. New Churches were more likely to have a full-time leader (71%). The average age of the leader of a newly planted church was 46 (against 54 for existing churches), with three-fifths, 63%, of the new leaders being under 50.

The average annual budget for a newly started London church worked out at £25,000, or roughly £1,000 per initial attendee. Anglicans and New Churches had larger budgets (double the average), but Baptists, Immigrant and Pentecostal churches were much smaller. Three-quarters (76%) said their new church was financially self-supporting within five years.

Who were the people who initially attended these new churches? Many church plants were targeted at those speaking particular languages or who were of a particular nationality, something especially suitable for London with its continuing influx of new immigrants. Others focussed specifically on people in a certain area – such as Canary Wharf workers, Docklands, Isle of Dogs inhabitants, or just simply local families, or those on the local Council Estate. Some, especially Methodists and Roman Catholics, sought out those of the same denomination. Others focussed particularly on students, or senior citizens, or young professionals, etc.

Does all the hard work involved in church planting work? Again, the answer was an unequivocal YES. The London Church Census was financed by the London City Mission, and in a non-published confidential report to them on church planting in London, it may be said without breaching confidentiality, that there were some parts of London where hardly any church planting had taken place, often in deprived areas where white (not black or coloured) people lived.

Fresh Expressions

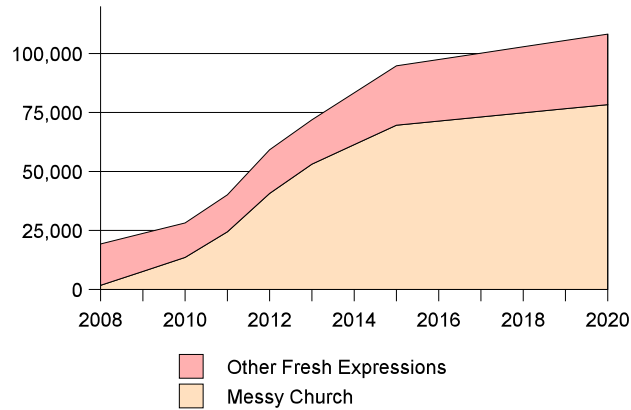
Fresh Expressions are a type of church plant although not always seen initially as an attempt to become such. One might just be started to help the families in a local church get together more, or in a more imaginative way, rather than a determination to start a new church as such. The formal definition of a "Fresh Expression" includes the desirability of a group forming a congregation leading to a new church, but probably not every gathering called a Messy Church or Fresh Expression has such aims, at least initially.

Fresh Expressions are popular. As explained above, under (c) in Definitions, they encompass a wide variety of groups. Collectively, however, in 2015, some 95,000 people throughout England were attending them, a not insignificant number, and some 3% of all churchgoers.⁵ About three-quarters of these are attending a Messy Church. As part of the research work commissioned by the Church Commissioners, Rev Dr George Lings of The Sheffield Centre, the Church Army's Research Unit, evaluated the impact of Fresh Expressions in a number of Church of England Dioceses, which has been published on the web.⁶ George Lings also co-wrote the useful Grove Booklet on church planting,⁷ and on the Church Army website in December 2014 there was also a helpful article by George Lings.⁸

Fresh Expressions may perhaps be summarised as Fun, Food, Families and Fellowship, but they also include Welcome and Worship. The number of them has increased almost 6-fold in the 5 years 2010 to 2015. In 2010 Anglicans were just over half their number (57%) but by 2015, with now other denominations included, Anglicans, with 900 Fresh Expressions, are only a third, 35%, of the whole. Methodists have almost as many. The movement's speed of growth may be seen in Figure 16.4.2. These new churches or churches-yet-to-be should be taken into account when considering the number of Anglican closures; the two almost balance each other out.

Fresh Expressions come in a variety of sizes. Their average size is 43, but 5% are over 100 strong, while a fifth, 19%, have less than 20. Almost half, 47%, meet every week, a few, 8%, fortnightly, and the remainder, again almost half, 45%, once every month. Two-fifths, 42%, meet on a Sunday, half, 51%, during the week, and the remaining 7% on a Saturday. Half, 52%, of the leadership is ordained, the other half, 48%, lay. Two-fifths, 42%, meet in a church, a fifth, 20%, in a church hall, but two-fifths, 38%, meet in a secular venue such as a village or community hall or school.

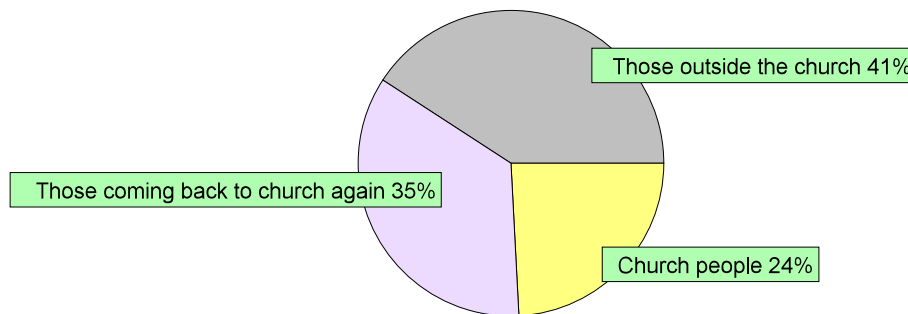
Figure 16.4.2: Numbers attending Fresh Expression groups



Where are Fresh Expressions mostly located? About 13% are in city centres or other urban areas, 13% in suburban areas, 16% in towns or new towns, but 28% are on Council or private estates, and 30% in rural areas.

The key finding from George Ling's research in some ways was ascertaining who attends Fresh Expressions, summarised in the pie-chart as Figure 16.4.3. Two-fifths of Fresh Expression attendees are (or were) outsiders. That's almost 40,000 people coming regularly to a worship service who previously did not attend church of any kind at all (accumulated over several years). While that number is insufficient to compensate for the many who die (Anglicans, Catholics and Methodists take over 17,000 church funerals every month) or who stop attending for other reasons (about 16,000 a year), it is at least a step in the right direction.

Figure 16.4.3: Who comes to Fresh Expressions?



The pie chart also shows that of those coming to Fresh Expressions, over 30,000 are in effect coming back to church. Again this number is cumulated over several years but is probably of comparable order of magnitude to those who restart attending church because of the "Back to Church" Sunday usually held in September each year and who are still coming 6 months later (of the order of 3-5,000 per annum across all denominations).

Final comments

The above observations come from different pieces of research, each of which asked questions pertinent to the interest of those funding it. There is therefore little overarching consensus on questions, though some interact. Collectively, however, they help form a picture of current church planting, and who is doing it, which may further the discussions which need to take place on this key topic.

Endnotes

- 1) *The Significance of Larger Churches*, Research report by Brierley Consultancy, 2009.
- 2) *Living the Christian Life*, Research report for Langham International Partnership, Brierley Consultancy, 2012.
- 3) From *Capital Growth*, Peter Brierley, ADBC Publishers, Tonbridge, Kent, 2013.
- 4) Paper by Prof Ruth Powell, National Church Life Surveys, Australia at the Lausanne International Researcher's Conference, May 2015, in Malaysia.
- 5) Based on the numbers given in *UK Church Statistics No 2, 2010-2020*, ADBC Publishers, Tonbridge, Kent, 2014, Page 16.8
- 6) Church Army web site: www.churchgarmy.org.uk.
- 7) *Church Planting in the UK since 2000*, George Lings and Stuart Murray, Grove Booklet, 2012.
- 8) *Church Plants and Fresh Expressions of Church – how do these terms best relate?* George Lings, Church Army, *Snapshots* Issue 3, December 2014.