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Eleanor Williams

Urban Fresh Expressions: Sustainability in the Mixed Economy

Drawing on parish experience and on research interviews conducted in preparation for a written project on the viability of Fresh Expressions of Church in urban deprived settings, Eleanor Williams surveys the findings of the research, drawing out key insights. She concludes by raising some challenging questions about the sustainability of new forms of church at the margins of society, and the meaning of the concept of 'mixed economy'.

When you mention Cambridge to most people one of the images that is likely to come to mind is the lovely view of Kings College chapel from the Backs. I have lived in a very different part of the city, on the outskirts, in an area consisting of four estates, mainly local authority housing, grouped around the golden arches of the community hub, McDonalds. Moving in to work with a local church, not long after the publication of *Mission Shaped Church*, we came with a realisation that this was not an easy area, but with a great sense of enthusiasm and desire to get to know the area, build relationships and try new things. Then, several months after we arrived, there was a very serious assault at the church, which had an enormous impact on the community, the church, and on us, and the process of coming to terms with this was not easy. Someone said to me at the time, 'But you're a doctor, you must have seen lots of difficult things before.' What I reflected on was that although I had worked as a GP in a deprived area of the city, I had always lived away from where I had worked. Living there and being part of the community made a very significant difference. 1

In working through this experience we found ourselves asking many questions, but in particular 'What would work here?' - amongst people with significant needs, poverty, and all of the different issues associated with living on an outer estate? Is it Fresh Expressions of church? This became the starting point for my MA research. Having read John Hull's paper which raised questions about consumerism and how Fresh Expressions related to the poor, 2 the questions I focussed on were:

- How does a fresh expression relate to traditional ways of being church?
- Isn't this just pandering to consumerism?
- Are we actually reaching the unchurched?
- What about the poor?
- How is a fresh expression sustainable in this context, with these resources?
- And an underlying question: how do we keep going? 3

The research comprised three components:

1. An analysis of the Ely Diocese responses to the 'extra question' about Fresh Expressions added to the 2006 'Statistics for Mission' returns.
2. Interviews with leaders of Fresh Expressions - mainly in urban deprived contexts, both those that were on-going and those that had come to an end.

3. A week with 'The Message Trust' in Manchester, visiting several Eden projects, and visits to Urban Expression teams in London - referred to as 'intentional communities' in the *Faithful Cities* Report, the 20 year follow up report to *Faith in the City*. [4](#)

For this article I have reviewed the original research and have also been able to present some updates from a number of the original participants. I have concluded with some reflections and questions.

Ely Diocese research

In 2006 an extra question was added to the annual 'Statistics for Mission' returns, asking about whether there had been 'any new, regular activities that you would call a fresh expression of church since 2000, and whether there were plans to begin a fresh expression of church in the next 2 years'. Details were also asked about what age group this was intended for, and also what level of contact existed with the church. I was given permission to analyse the answers to this additional question from the returns for Ely Diocese. Looking at the findings: 32% of parishes reported starting a fresh expression of church (a similar percentage to the national figures), increasing to 44% when including those who planned to start something in next two years. A questionnaire was then sent to these parishes exploring what was understood by the term 'fresh expression of church', what the vision was, what was done, what resources and support were needed, and thoughts about future development.

From the range of responses to the questionnaire there was a strong sense that 'ordinary' clergy in 'ordinary' parishes were encouraged and inspired by Fresh Expressions. There was a sincere desire to be outward-looking and culturally relevant, but some churches were starting so much further back, such as a tiny village church which has only ever known the Book of Common Prayer beginning to experiment with less traditional forms of worship, and calling this a fresh expression. As one respondent put it: 'None of these has been cutting edge or would seem unusual in more adventurous congregations'. The term 'fresh expression' seemed quite often to be applied quite loosely, to very significant attempts to become mission-shaped, but perhaps not quite grasping what was distinctive about being a fresh expression of church. This was also shown by the fact that most of these initiatives were set up for those who were frequent or occasional attenders - that is existing church members - or those on the fringe, and less than a third for those who were non-attenders, i.e. the unchurched. Most did still work from a 'come to us' approach, based on worship as the entry point for people, though a few were engaged in initiatives outside the church building, going out and being a presence in the local community.

Other findings from the research were that for some there was a significant question about sustainability because initiatives had been set up by curates who would be moving on in the next few years. Dave Male, Fresh Expressions Adviser for the Diocese of Ely, looked in detail at the responses and concluded that perhaps some might be better described as 'Fresh Expressions of worship' rather than Fresh Expressions of church. [5](#) But overall what came across from the Ely research was the beginnings of a picture of the mixed economy.

Looking back three years on from then, there does seem to be a clearer understanding both of what a fresh expression of church is and what is mission-shaped. At the diocesan level there

is a lot of good will towards the mixed economy and towards the support of Fresh Expressions, but also a desire to affirm the small steps that are being taken by others to look outwards. Applying a very tight definition of what is a fresh expression of church could be very discouraging for some. There are also significant questions about where to target resources, particularly when there may not yet be easily measurable outcomes.

Urban Fresh Expressions - the interviews

I was able to conduct 33 interviews, mainly by phone, with leaders of 26 on-going and 4 'ended' Fresh Expressions of church, almost all in urban deprived areas. These areas are characterised by high indices of multiple deprivation, poverty, poor nutrition, chaotic lifestyles, benefit culture, high levels of crime, substance abuse, mental illness, low literacy rates, large numbers of single parent families, and what for me is probably the most difficult: children left to fend for themselves on the street for large parts of the day.

Most contacts came through the Fresh Expressions website directory of initiatives self-identified as Fresh Expressions, and then by searching for key words: 'urban', 'social', 'deprived' or 'deprivation', 'estate', and 'community'. I was also able to speak to some leaders of initiatives that had come to an end, including some of those that had been running in the early 1990s, well before the use of the term 'Fresh Expressions'. Some of these early projects have been studied in depth (e.g. in the series 'Encounters on the Edge' [6](#)) and have significantly contributed to the development of ideas about Fresh Expressions. Because one of my underlying questions was 'what leads to sustainability?' I was interested to explore the factors that led them to stop and what might have led to them continuing. Because of the sensitivity of issues around 'endings', and also relationships with the wider church, all of the interviews were reported anonymously. The interviews with projects which had ended had particular need for sensitivity because for many there had been a huge amount of personal investment of money, time, and emotional engagement, and there was often a deep sense of loss, failure and bereavement. The interviews were semi-structured, asking about vision, factors leading to sustainability or ending, and for participants' thoughts about how what they were doing related to the question of 'What is church?', and how their understanding of church had changed or developed.

Urban Fresh Expressions - primary focus

I used as a tool for assessing the core vision or motivation of each Fresh Expression a model proposed by Stuart Murray based on Robert Warren's model of the three key aspects of being church - 'Mission', 'Community', and 'Worship' - and his observation that 'when they come together spirituality develops'. [7](#) One aspect of the research therefore looked at which of these was the primary inspiration and focus of each Fresh Expression. The following is a brief summary of this primary focus with some examples:

- 'Mission' - those inspired by a concern to reach out, e.g., youth and children's clubs, café church, church planting teams.
- 'Community' - those serving and building community, e.g., drop-in, play scheme, after school club, charity shop, café, clean-up and various environmental projects.
- 'Worship' - exploring a fresh approach, e.g., through alternative worship events.

All of the urban deprived Fresh Expressions were serving their communities in some way, whatever the primary inspiration and focus. Most initiatives were small, many based in church buildings, or other community buildings and centres, some in converted shops, pubs and some in homes. With many there was evidence of a growing spirituality over time, with common themes, and issues, related to the context. There was perhaps optional prayer and Bible study - at another time or in a different room - and sometimes there were dedicated prayer spaces available. Where there was group worship this tended to be informal, often multi-media and multi-sensory, with minimal or simplified spoken liturgy. The aim was to avoid reliance on reading ability, and to reach those from a non-book culture. Careful thought was given before using sung worship, with sensitivity to people who didn't want to sing or would not be able to identify with the words. One issue for some was that there was quite often resistance to change if a prayer or worship element was introduced after a project had been running for some time. There was also the issue that where a Fresh Expression was lay-led there was sometimes a difficulty in introducing the sacraments.

Urban Fresh Expressions - the values

For many of the Fresh Expression leaders there existed the common values of 'Incarnation', 'Community', and 'Service', which come as no surprise, but what was striking was what these meant in the urban contexts.

'Incarnation' meant a commitment to being present in a particular geographical community, a commitment to a particular group of people, and to bringing the love of God, often by moving in to live there. There was also a commitment to being present for a significant length of time, recognising that it was going to take a long time, nothing short-term or quick-fix. Many said that they were committed for 'as long as it takes.' § 'Incarnation' meant a commitment to listening - to God, and to looking for where God has already been at work. There was also a commitment to listening to the context, not coming in with pre-conceived ideas and models. Courses like Alpha were often felt to be too book-based and middle class, and difficult for people with a lack of confidence to contribute in group discussions. Sometimes this was learned the hard way by having tried things and finding that they didn't work. Listening meant not coming in with a sense of having the answers, of being able to do something for other people simply because of being educated or from a different class. This quotation from one of the interviews sums this up:

So there's a need to make things appropriate. People don't drink coffee around here - they drink tea - and every half an hour you have to stop because they need a fag break. And people haven't got £5 to spend on a booklet, they haven't even got £1. They have no money, they're all up to their eyes in debt - it's just a massive issue. . . So just not to underestimate the difficulties I suppose, and the time it's going to take. ¶

'Community' meant breaking down barriers of hostility against the church, authority figures, those perceived as thinking they are better than you. And it means making relationships by building open, accepting, hospitable, generous, life-giving community - often around meals.

'Serving' meant loving service, with no strings attached, and in ways that related as much as possible to the needs of the community. In the words of one interviewee:

And we're trying to sort of 'journey' with them in faith, hopefully to a place where they'll be free of their addiction and be able to explore other ways of behaving. But at the moment it's all they can do to belong and be part of a community, and I believe they're journeying in faith. 10

Urban Fresh Expressions - sustainability issues

There were a number of common themes about sustainability which related to on-going and ended Fresh Expressions. Some of these are now very familiar, and with time we have become better at dealing with some of the issues. A summary of these has been published elsewhere, 11 so I will discuss these very briefly, particularly in relation to urban deprived contexts.

- It is very important not to underestimate people's needs and the time needed for real change.
- Finance is a very common issue - both at the start and on-going - especially where local people are not in a position to give much financially. A lot of time was spent fundraising (perhaps a significant training need for pioneers!).
- Should leadership be ordained or lay? Being clergy-led means that a community may be eucharistic from its start, which may be harder to incorporate later if lay-led, but there are other issues if a fresh expression of church is initiated by clergy. I was taken aback a few weeks ago to hear that some people on our estate referred to us as 'The people who live in the big house'. The vicarage is indeed much bigger than any of the other houses in the area, and is set back from the road behind a high fence, which creates additional physical and symbolic barriers for those who may already feel alienated - especially from authority figures, including the Church. There is also the significant challenge of growing local leaders, when reading skills are poor, and self-esteem is low.
- Support, training and accountability must be relevant to the local context and the needs of local leaders. Many respondents spoke about the problems of not having support and accountability structures in place, with the dangers of giving out all the time without being 'fed' and the possibility of subsequent burnout. A model put forward as ideal was one in which there was accountability and support, but without too much external control over what was done.
- There must be an appropriate model of church, simple enough to be sustainable. Some of the very creative alternative worship models can be very labour intensive, and are dependent on highly skilled leaders.
- Issues surrounding time commitment: whether leaders were released to be full or part-time, for long or short term.
- Questions about relationships with the wider church - particularly when Fresh Expressions ended, when issues of misunderstanding, resentment of perceived 'success', fear of loss of members or potential members and difficulties in accepting the validity of something different.
- Personal and family cost - living and working in some of these areas of significant need does take a toll. One issue which a number of leaders faced was that of the educational needs of their own children. Living in areas where there may be 'failing' schools, with low levels of academic achievement is a challenge to faith. Believing

that God has called and will provide may still leave a parent feeling anxious for the future for their children.

Urban Fresh Expressions - what is 'church'?

Common themes in response to this question were:

- Is what we are doing 'church'?
- What would 'church' look like here with these people?
- How do we grow in maturity?
- How do we hold together very different expressions of church: what we're doing, and what's going on in the wider church?

Urban Fresh Expressions - 2010 update

I was able to contact a few of the original interviewees, and was encouraged to hear about signs of growth (usually small and fragile, not dramatic, but continuing). Leaders were still asking questions about what maturity and discipleship look like in these contexts, and there were on-going questions about sustainability, particularly over the issue of curates moving on. Some were becoming more mature as 'church', whilst for others, it was becoming clearer over time that they were unlikely to become a mature expression of church, but were more clearly focussed on mission or community. ¹² These are some recent comments from my interviewees.

'We are looking to develop the spiritual side even more over the next year to eighteen months, by offering "deeper" discipleship teaching and are investigating various ways of providing this.'

'We would still not call ourselves a Fresh Expression of Church, but a Fresh Expression of Christian social action.'

'Many of the members (and leaders) are growing, some significantly. Two have mentioned feeling a calling to leadership (or even ordination!!)... Of course it's always three steps forward, one step back...'

'We do have the joy of seeing people becoming Christians but old habits and world views inhibit our view of maturity and discipleship... We have to evaluate everything for funders but interestingly I don't know how to evaluate growth of maturity and discipleship.'

Concluding Questions

Having had three years to reflect on the original research, and taken the opportunity to discuss the issues further with some of the original participants, I would like to draw out some concluding questions for reflection.

The mixed economy - what are we?

I am slightly surprised that leaders of Fresh Expressions are still asking 'What are we?', particularly where they have not set out to be 'church'. But even for others, there seems to remain some hesitancy about calling themselves 'church'. This seems to be linked to the questions:

- What has to be there for it to be 'church'?
- What does 'maturity' look like?
- How do we get there?

These questions are not unique to urban contexts of course. They were, for example, some of the pressing questions at the recent 'Messy Church Round Table' at Wycliffe Hall, Oxford in September 2010. As Fresh Expressions of church are still growing, developing and evolving, perhaps we need to be patient, keep asking questions, and wait for the answers to become clearer.

The mixed economy - what does it mean in practice?

I have already discussed the issue of calling something a 'Fresh Expression', as well as the tension between tightening up on definition on the one hand and affirming what people are doing to become mission-shaped on the other, particularly when working together in dioceses and districts. But there remain further questions:

- How do we encourage those who are becoming Fresh Expressions of church towards maturity while still affirming those which may remain mission-shaped but not actually become a Fresh Expression of church?
- Where should energy, money, and continuing efforts be focussed?
- How do you measure and evaluate what's going on in fragile, young Fresh Expressions? Those who make decisions about allocation of funds often want to know 'facts' and 'figures', but those involved in leading Fresh Expressions are anxious not to disturb fragile growth by the kind of research which may be intrusive and threatening to those who come. 13

The Urban Context - what would work here?

'What might "church" look like here?' and 'How do we sustain it?' These were my original questions and in conclusion I want to return to the values articulated by so many of my interviewees, which seem to be crucial to the growth of any kind of expression of church in these areas - and which Fresh Expressions of church need to take seriously.

Service

In urban deprived areas there are significant needs that are in-your-face and cannot be ignored, but I think there are real questions about how to work towards meeting those needs without perpetuating helplessness and passivity. But it needs very long term intensive and

specialist input, and it will take working collaboratively with other agencies. It could drain all available resources, and there will be tensions about how to balance serving the community and making disciples, but neither are optional.

Community

I sense that renewal of both church and society will come through the re-emerging of forms of Christian community that are homes of generous hospitality, places of challenging reconciliation, and centres of attentiveness to the living God. 14

Community is about building spaces of welcome and hospitality which are open and accessible to all: whether to an alcoholic single mother, or to a man with mental health issues. It will involve simple and sustainable models of worship. And it will involve a long term commitment - at least five years, and probably more like 10-15 years. There will need to be provision of context-relevant training, support, accountability and theological reflection, in order to enable people to keep going.

Incarnation

Incarnation may mean quite literally 'moving in', in the steps of the One who 'became flesh and blood and moved into the neighbourhood'. 15 I have been very moved by the commitment of many to move into some of the most difficult areas. The 'Faithful Cities' report drew attention to 'Intentional Communities', referring to the Eden projects in Manchester and Urban Expression teams - groups who have made a radical commitment to move into poor areas and seek by their presence to bring about transformation. The report refers to the creation of:

proximity places...where people who are quite different from each other can interact in an atmosphere that encourages talk about faith, values, and shared concerns...The challenge to longstanding local churches is to rejoice in the exceptional commitment that is emerging in so many diverse expressions. 16

This level of incarnation may be very costly, and should not be undertaken lightly, but as Andy Dorton put it in 2004, based on his experience in Hull:

We have tried to take the Bible seriously; it says go to the ends of the earth. One of those 'ends' in our society is most certainly the outer estate. We can't believe God wants all his name-owning salt and light in the suburbs. We think it should take a special dispensation not to go and do likewise. 17

So what would work here?

In this article I have looked at the question of whether - thinking specifically about urban deprived areas - Fresh Expressions of church are part of the answer to the question: 'What would work here?'. There are significant issues and questions which are not new, and many churches working in these areas have wrestled with these as they have served faithfully over many years, seeking to love and care, create community and be present as salt and light. The

development of Fresh Expressions of church has given new life and hope in some areas, and presented fresh opportunities to engage creatively with the community: to serve, to love, and to explore what it means to be church. But it is still early days. Growth is small and fragile. But we pray, and hope, and trust in the love and grace of God.

Eleanor Williams is Vicar of Burwell with Reach in the Diocese of Ely. She has spent 6 years living in Barnwell, east Cambridge, and was a GP in north Cambridge for 20 years.

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Endnotes

- 1 These initial reflections have appeared in an expanded version in Williams 2009
- 2 Hull 2006
- 3 See Williams 2007
- 4 Commission on Urban Life and Faith 2006: 82 (para 8.25)
- 5 Male 2008
- 6 For further details, see www.encountersontheedge.org.uk
- 7 Murray 2006: 44-45, 149-150
- 8 Williams 2007: 45
- 9 Williams 2007: 47
- 10 Williams 2007: 50
- 11 See Top Tips on Share website - www.sharetheguide.org/examples/urban. Also Savage and Boyd-Macmillan 2007: 132-3

- 12 I am indebted here to Frances Shoemith for insights from her Study Leave Report 'Exploring Fresh Expressions of Church in Deprived Urban Areas' (unpublished report, 2009)
- 13 Lucy Moore of Messy Church has reflected on maturity and discipleship in Messy Churches in her blog www.messychurch.org.uk/pages/5510.htm
- 14 Brother Samuel 1998 online at www.biblesociety.org.uk/products/280/49/handling_difference_summer_1998_mission_and_community
- 15 John 1:14 in Peterson's *The Message*
- 16 Commission on Urban Life and Faith 2006: 82 (para 8.27)
- 17 Dorton 2004: 63