

# Paper 13

## Traditional and fresh: ways forward for Fresh Expressions and pioneering in the United Reformed Church

### Mission Committee

#### Basic information

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<b>Action required</b>	Discussion.
<b>Draft resolution(s)</b>	N/A.

#### Summary of content

<b>Subject and aim(s)</b>	Fresh expressions and pioneering in the United Reformed Church. This paper aims to generate conversation on the challenges and opportunities that fresh expressions and pioneering offer, with a view to contributing to the Church Life Review and to setting out a way forward for pioneering in the URC.
<b>Main points</b>	The paper explores the contexts within which the church finds itself. It considers how we live in a liminal time and what that means for the Church as it responds to God's call to mission. It invites members of Assembly Executive to consider a range of key questions generated by involvement in fresh expressions and pioneering.
<b>Previous relevant documents</b>	
<b>Consultation has taken place with...</b>	Education and Learning Committee, Ministries Committee, Children and Youth Work Committee, Faith and Order Committee, Mission Enablers Network.

#### Summary of impact

<b>Financial</b>	
<b>External (e.g. ecumenical)</b>	

## 1. Introduction and definition

- 1.1. Fresh Expressions are new forms of church that emerge within contemporary culture and engage primarily with those who don't 'go to church.'<sup>1</sup> Examples of fresh or new/different expressions of church are present across the URC, and include among others Messy Church, Muddy Church, some Café Churches, Mindful Church, Forest Church and some new forms of church that have recently emerged online. They develop when a need is discerned in a specific context, and might be started by a small team from a local church, or be part of an ecumenical/synod-led project. Fresh Expressions are always focused on discipleship, sharing faith and bringing new people to Christ.
- 1.2. In the URC, Fresh Expressions may be lay led, led by the local minister of Word and Sacraments or by a specially appointed or Special Category Minister.<sup>2</sup> Across the denominations, the people who lead new expressions of church are normally referred to as Pioneers.
- 1.3. The existence of these exciting new expressions of church raises questions about how they can be accommodated into the denomination – a dilemma that is facing many denominations, not only the URC.

## 2. The purpose of this paper

- 2.1. This paper is instigated by the Pioneer and Fresh Expressions Enabling Group, a group set up by the Mission Committee which also includes representatives from Ministries, Education and Learning, Children and Youth Work, Faith and Order and the URC Pioneer network. The group's remit is to explore how fresh expressions thinking and practice can be supported and embedded in the life of the URC.
- 2.2. This paper aims to encourage engagement with ideas, challenges and opportunities relating to our understandings of the nature, structure and mission of the church. It explores the contexts within which the church finds itself, both in society and internally. It goes on to consider how we live in a liminal time, exploring ideas prompted by the steps that the Synod Moderators set out at General Assembly in July 2021. Finally, it invites members of Assembly Executive to discuss questions that relate specifically to the life of the URC and think about ways in which pioneering and fresh expressions of church might become more widespread and central to the life of the URC. We offer this paper in the hope that it will feed into the work of the Church Life Review or may be a step towards bringing recommendations to General Assembly 2022.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://freshexpressions.org.uk/what-is-fx>

<sup>2</sup> For some examples of these variations in the URC, see

- Church Without Walls in Milton Keynes <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yf8ibE4T3W0>,
- Church by Nature in Sleaford <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0D3kd39wIC8&t=6s>,
- Muddy Church in Darwen <https://www.facebook.com/muddychurch>,
- Playhouse Pioneering in Elephant and Castle <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0D3kd39wIC8&t=6s>

### 3. Contexts

#### Our society

- 3.1. We live in a time where churchgoing is not the norm, and where consumerism, an apparent fear of commitment and an attitude of ‘*because I’m worth it*’-seem to dominate. However, that is not the whole picture and recent research indicates that many people are open to faith, though not wanting to attend a Sunday morning church. Although culture has changed, there is also evidence of ‘spiritual seeking’, which is backed up by research by Tearfund (2007) and Savanta (2020) and more recently by a survey of 2,075 adults age 18+ in September 2021, revealing that 51% of 18–34 year olds pray at least once a month, compared with 24% of those aged 55+. It also showed that 49% of that age group attended a place of worship every month, compared with 16% of over 55s.<sup>3</sup> Although this survey was not limited to Christian prayer and worship, the results seem surprising, given the popular view that faith and belief are irrelevant to people younger than middle age.

#### The Church/our churches

- 3.2. One of the challenges for the church, however it is embodied, wherever and whatever it is for the moment, is what God is calling us to do and be as we move into God’s (and our) future. Although there is no easy answer to the challenges, statistics across most denominations imply that part of our task is to manage decline. Of course, there are exceptions, and many good stories, but church membership statistics have long been on a downward trajectory.
- 3.3. Despite the statistics, however, we believe that God has many future plans for God’s church, including the URC. We need to take up the challenge to look more carefully and intentionally for the new things that God is doing and embrace the new ideas that are emerging for doing and being church. In short, we need to bring new disciples to Christ through both existing churches and channels, and new ways of being church. This is what is known as a ‘mixed ecology’ of church.<sup>4</sup> David McCarthy of the Church of Scotland comments: “*Church, in both its inherited and fresh expressions, is a gift from God.*”<sup>5</sup> Whilst Sara Savage reminds us that: “*Emerging churches need the profound theological and liturgical resources of the historic church, and the traditional churches need emerging churches to understand how to incarnate the gospel into our changed culture.*”<sup>6</sup> So, what should the URC be doing in order to expand further our ways of being church? How can we be more of a ‘mixed ecology’ denomination?

### 4. How is God calling us to respond?

- 4.1. In their report to General Assembly in July 2021, the Synod Moderators suggested that these are liminal times, which they explain as being ‘when old securities are ebbing away, and new structures have not yet emerged.’ They call liminal times disorientating, difficult and scary.<sup>7</sup> For many local churches, the pandemic focused and accelerated their thinking about the future, and some

<sup>3</sup> <https://comresglobal.com/polls/prayer-and-church-attendance-survey/>

<sup>4</sup> <https://freshexpressions.org.uk/the-mixed-ecology/>

<sup>5</sup> David McCarthy, *Seeing Afresh, learning from fresh expressions of church* (St Andrew Press, 2019)

<sup>6</sup> Sara Savage in Louise Nelstrop and Martin Percy, *Evaluating Fresh Expressions: explorations in emerging church* (Norwich: Canterbury Press, 2008)

<sup>7</sup> United Reformed Church General Assembly 2021, Book of reports, page 26

are facing difficult times as they struggle to embrace new technology and changing culture.

The Moderators suggested that we need to be prepared to do the following:

- a) Hold steady and be prepared to wait for the way forward to emerge.
- b) Deepen our communal discernment about what God would have us do.
- c) Shape our institutional memory, telling our story.
- d) Clarify our purpose, asking who we are, who we serve, and what God is calling us to be next.
- e) Be ready to see the way forward emerge out of the chaos of the passing of the old ways.

In drafting this paper, we have used these steps to guide our reflections and discussions.

### **a) Hold steady and be prepared to wait for the way forward to emerge**

4.2. Holding steady and waiting might seem counterintuitive. As attendance numbers reduce, many churches feel a need to 'do something' to bring Sunday worship back to 1960s numbers. However, holding steady and waiting does not mean doing nothing. In the Fresh Expressions movement, this is recognised as the 'listening' phase, being vigilant and listening to what is happening around; seeing what God is doing and joining in.<sup>8</sup>

4.3. Prayer is essential to this listening/waiting stage. It is not passive, but active – trying to discern where God is moving. Tough as it might seem, churches need to understand and accept that culture and context have changed since the heady days of the 1960s, and now we need to embrace 21<sup>st</sup> century culture and work with it. Every generation must re-embody the Gospel: pray, encourage, support. In children's and youth work, holding steady is about constant change, catching the next wave.

- How can we help our churches to pause and listen: to God's prompting and to the needs of their communities?

### **b) Deepen our communal discernment about what God would have us do**

4.4. We need to deepen communal discernment by creating ways of being together, listening to God and each other – together. The listening continues, and churches need to listen to the needs of their communities and look outside, before committing to financially expensive ideas. Communal discernment requires churches to develop 'contextual intelligence' which is explained by Leonard Sweet and Michael Adam Beck as "...a distinct kind of intelligence which recognized that what worked in one season or location doesn't necessarily transfer to another..."<sup>9</sup>. It is important to include children and young people in discussions throughout this discernment process. Eugene Peterson points out that '*children and young people act as 'spiritual canaries' What is toxic for them will kill everyone eventually: the spiritual lungs of adults are just less sensitive*'.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> <https://theologyeverywhere.org/2016/11/21/see-what-god-is-doing-and-join-in/>

<sup>9</sup> Leonard Sweet and Michael Beck, *Contextual Intelligence, unlocking the ancient secret to mission on the frontlines* (HigherLife Publishing, 2021)

<sup>10</sup> Eugene H. Peterson, *Like Dew Your Youth: Growing Up with Your Teenager* (Michigan: William B Eerdmans Publishing, 1959)

- In what ways are our churches equipped to look beyond their own walls to see where God is working?
- How do we practice discernment rather than simply offer opinions and ideas?

### **c) Shape our institutional memory, telling our story.**

- 4.5. There is a possibility that the memory of what we were and of what we hoped to be in 1972 (as some understand it, a church which was ‘born to die’) might prevent us from moving forward. The URC should celebrate its unique characteristics positively, acknowledging that we are not (for example) Anglican, Methodist, hierarchical etc. and embracing our inimitability as we bring more disciples to Jesus through various expressions of church.
- 4.6. We need to find ways to tell our discipleship story in new ways to every generation, so that it is heard afresh. Our story is the positive story of our faith journey together. It is not just a list of ‘what we have done’, but a recounting of the faithful witness of a community through the generations. The story itself will shape our sense of identity. It is open-ended, with the invitation to become the next chapter. It needs to communicate the transformational love of God.
- How can we help our churches to tell their stories in compelling ways, including excitement and innovation, whilst also celebrating the risk-taking and blessing the disappointments?

### **d) Clarify our purpose, asking who we are, who we serve, and what God is calling us to be next**

- 4.7. We need to ask ourselves which aspects of being church are lifegiving – to the community around us, to those who gather for worship, and to individuals on their own journey of faith. We need to turn the language of ‘members’ and ‘adherents’ into that of ‘disciples’. Each local church has a specific mission and cannot simply transplant good ideas from another local church. However, God can use the gifts and experience of people of all ages within each setting. This means enabling everyone to play their part and taking seriously the voices of all, including children, young people, and those who are on the margins.
- How can we encourage churches to ask the deep questions about the purpose of church and what is important?

### **e) Be ready to see the way forward emerge out of the chaos of the passing of the old ways**

- 4.8. This is scary for many of our churches: our default is good order. For many, it means letting go – of control, of traditions, and of ways which they find comfortable. Our understanding of what is church needs to be transformed, whilst being part of the church needs to be transformational. New ways will be led by children, young people and young adults, who are ‘natives of the new’. Pioneers need to be empowered to find new ways, enabling others to see the paths that they can follow.
- 4.9. Some new ways are already emerging. Of URC stipendiary ministers 8% are available to be called to Special Category Ministry (SCM) posts. These posts might be helping to lead the way ‘out of the chaos’ and represent an attempt by the church to recognise its missional task ‘outside of church’. A number of these

SCMs serve in pioneering roles, creating new Christian communities where people are.

- 4.10. Various groups within the denomination are now looking at other ways of identifying and supporting people with a fresh expression or pioneering gift in different missional contexts, which has led to ongoing wider conversations about training for ordained and lay pioneers.
- 4.11. New opportunities have been grasped by local churches when they unexpectedly had to close their buildings due to Covid-19, causing many to adopt a 'hybrid' accessible form of Sunday worship, including live streaming, recording and live action. This has led to new people joining and to new congregations emerging.
  - How do we encourage and support these new forms of church?
  - How do we encourage and enable those who are called to lead them, but do not fit our traditional models?

## 5. The challenges for the URC

- 5.1. In light of the reflections and questions above, the Pioneer and Fresh Expressions Enabling Group would like to offer the following questions to the Assembly Executive for further consideration and conversation.
  - What is church for in an increasingly secular society and for people who have no experience of faith?
  - How can we encourage more flexibility – enabling churches to adapt more readily if called to do so?
  - Do we need a way for meetings that are not church/congregation to connect into and be part of the URC much more easily? For instance, small groups (where two or three are gathered together in Christ's name), or groups that do not display all the attributes that are usually essential to being a URC?
  - How might we resource new ways of doing church, both financially and with personnel, including raising new leaders from within the congregations?
  - Some denominations have set targets for developing specific numbers of fresh expressions within a given period of a few years. Should the URC be similarly more intentional and strategic – especially as we come to celebrate 50 years?
  - How far should we ensure a level of accountability, communication, support and action that will enable fresh expressions of church and pioneering to become the norm in the URC?
  - How can we connect people who consider themselves to be, or want to be part of the URC, but don't connect to their local church? Do we need new understandings of membership?