

Fresh Expressions

“Fresh expressions” is a movement that began in the Church of England and British Methodist churches but soon spread to other denominations in England and now to churches in many countries.

Fresh expressions refers to relatively new worshipping and serving communities that are reaching those not previously reached by churches. These are not new efforts to include people in existing worshipping communities. They may be initiated by people within congregations but not as an entry point into their churches. The culture in most existing churches is different enough from the culture of those who never attend church that the fit is usually not right.

The goal is to begin worshipping and serving communities of faith that fit local contexts of the unchurched. The hope is that as these communities grow with new disciples, they can then reach others for Christ within their own cultures. Fresh expressions are attracting those who might not otherwise go to church. Leaders estimate that just under half are new Christians, about one-third attended church at some time in the past, and the remainder are existing Christians. Half of those attending are under 16.

A fresh expression of church seeks to be

- Missional — to serve those outside church
- Contextual — to listen to people and enter their culture
- Educational — to make discipleship a priority
- Ecclesial — to form church

Some characteristics the Church of England seeks in these new worshipping communities include:

- It is Christian, communal, new.
- It serves others in the community.
- It engages non-church goers.
- It meets at least monthly.
- It has a name to establish its own identity.
- It is church (not something ancillary to a “real church”).
- There is some form of recognized leadership.
- It is the major expression of church for most members.

This is not a traditional denominational program. Fresh expressions is more locally instigated and shaped, though often with support from beyond. Because the movement is so contextually oriented, there is no one model. Some researchers identified at least 20 different types of fresh expressions in

the Church of England alone. About half meet at churches, though not necessarily in the sanctuary, while a quarter meet in public venues. Some meet in a mixture of venues. Less than three percent meet in homes. While only a tiny percentage of churches are establishing new worshipping communities in this way, the result in England alone is thousands of persons are now reached.

Are they sustainable? Researchers examined those started at least three years prior. They found that two-thirds were continuing to grow or were maintaining their growth. About a quarter were continuing with fewer participants than previously. Only ten percent had died. These results are as good as for new church starts in the U.S., though fresh expressions tend to average fewer people (about 44 by one average). However, the fact that they can function well with fewer people makes beginning a fresh expressions church more viable for smaller existing congregations.

Fresh expressions often have supporters, but the goal is to be self-sustaining for as long as there is a need unless the context makes that unrealistic. Some of the practices of fresh expressions make long term viability more likely. For instance, over half are led by lay people (about equally by men and women) who do this as volunteers.

Virtually all churches are seeking ways to reach people who are so different from their most active constituents that while these unchurched may be open to faith, they are not comfortable in the local church culture that still nourishes so many current members. Fresh expressions seek to permit faith to flourish in the cultures more native to those outside the church. It appears to be doing just that in many cases. As one fresh expressions leader put it about those who had joined, “God is completely new to them.”

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For further information: Fresh Expressions US [freshexpressionsus.org] | Fresh Expressions UK [freshexpressions.org.uk] | Fresh Expressions Canada [freshexpressions.ca]

To read more about the Church of England research, see the Fresh Expressions portion of the larger report “From Anecdote to Evidence” at churchgrowthresearch.org.uk.

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