Fresh expressions of Church in Sheffield Diocese

This research looks at fresh expressions of Church in the Diocese of Sheffield from 1992 to 2014. It is sponsored by both Church Army and the Church Commissioners as part of a national project that aims to build upon the work of Church Army’s Research Unit, which formed part of the Church Growth Research Programme and the report From Anecdote to Evidence.

By the end of 2015, all of the many leads provided, and 12 discovered on the way, had been contacted. Officials of the diocese had kindly, at short notice, provided an initial list which was unpruned. In fairness, we went back to them later and agreed, by examining all those excluded, that with more time they would not have sent us 35 examples. Thus the number of cases for assessment reduced to 181; these included church plants as they were seen as one type of fresh expression of Church (fxC) by the report Mission-shaped Church in 2004. Data from the 56 that qualified was further analysed. Usually there were phone calls and emails with the leader of the fxC, but if needed with the incumbent who knew the story. As with other dioceses, there are signs of encouragement and of vulnerability. The diocesan leadership will have to decide how the information is shared, policy is informed, and what further work follows. Some broad comparisons are made with data derived from other dioceses.

Some characteristics of Sheffield Diocese

At 2160 people per square mile, it is the 7th most populated diocese. Sheffield, Rotherham and Doncaster are 3 dominantly urban areas, but with outlying villages to the north and east. It serves a population that has increased by 5.1% from 2006-13, but in the same period its AWA (Average Weekly Attendance) has decreased by 1.6%, or 300 people. It is a small-sized diocese, measured by its number of churches, with only 5 dioceses having less, if what was Bradford were included. It also comes midway in a diocesan table of AWA. Also at 1.51%, it is the 10th lowest out of 43 in a table of the percentage of the population attending, which ranges from 1.12% – 3.13%. These figures paint a snapshot of traditional Anglican struggles in urban and industrial areas, this being more common in the north, with its mixture of opportunity and weakness. The exception to this is Hallam deanery with its few very large churches and further substantial ones.

Some headlines

Attendance figures: 2449 people

Our criteria excluded 125 of the cases examined, but the 31% minority, or 56, qualified. All but eight are ongoing and one left the Church of England but still exists. The 2449 attenders at the Sheffield fxC as of 2014 are made up of 1179 people going out to start something, 62 people already in churches partnered with and 1258 new attenders.

A growing trend

It is clear and encouraging that the trend to start fxC is growing. 6 from 1992-98 was followed by 10 between 1999 and 2005, and then a leap to 26 begun between 2006 and 2012, with 14 further examples in 2013-14 alone.

When were fxC started?

This last figure does not include the six we know of started in 2015. If it turned out to be true that the 2013-14 rate continued, then the 2013-19 period would have 49 examples. In addition we excluded two begun prior to 1992, both of which still meet. Furthermore, having lived in Sheffield since 1997 and visiting it for research in 1992, I am aware of other prior examples of various kinds, including the too well-known Nine O’Clock Service, that have since ceased.

We are grateful that this research is funded, in part by Church Army and in part by the Church Commissioners. Both work with the Church of England in areas of need and opportunity.
The figures show that Sheffield is like other dioceses in seeing an upturn since Mission-shaped Church was published in 2004. But it is unlike some other dioceses in having a longer history of prior planting. We have no firm data to comment as to whether there have been connected background changes in the diocesan culture over this more than 20 year period.

What variety of types of fxC are there?
We list 20 different types of fxC to select from, of which 18 were represented. We now comment on these (below). As fxC often multiple classify themselves, the figures can be misleading.

- Unusually there were no new traditional services. Less surprising was the absence of cell types, perhaps because the larger churches in Sheffield now promote missional communities.
- The single largest group is the 27% in the Messy Church stable, but this compares with a 32% average from our first set of 11 dioceses.
- The next most common is All Age worship at 23%, which is similar to other figures seen outside London diocese.
- The third most common choice at 20% was Community development plant, our term modified from that employed by Mission-shaped Church p. 57. These classically occur in areas of deprivation and it is encouraging that they are twice as common in this diocese as elsewhere.
- 18% were Traditional church plants. These occur across the whole time band but with a gap between 1995 and 2004.
- 77% are deliberately for all ages and families, not mainly for children.
- 18% draw only adults, whereas 5% seem to focus on children or youth alone.

When do the fxC meet?
The examples are spread across weekdays, with a marginal preference for Wednesdays, but a clear preference to meet on a Sunday at 57%. It is also the case for several that they meet on multiple days, so figures cited do not sum to 100%. 43% could be classified as in the week, and 11% on a Saturday. While Sheffield is close to the average for non-Sunday gatherings across recently surveyed dioceses, the reality is of a spread from 28%-55%.

In general terms the range of choices may be evidence of a desire to fit with local cultural realities as well as facing social factors against meeting on Sunday, like sport, and divided or extended families. On the other hand, work schedules including shifts can mitigate the usefulness of holding midweek church.

35.7% of the fxC meet monthly, less than most dioceses. The weekly figure is 48.2%, with another 16.1% being fortnightly, the latter being more than usual elsewhere though still the least used frequency. Frequency of meeting links to fxC type; this is most obvious with 13 of the 15 Messy Churches meeting monthly, and all of the Traditional church plants meeting weekly. All Age worship fxC divide between monthly and weekly, whereas the Community development plants choose between fortnightly and weekly. We suspect all this connects both to resources needed and needs of the areas served.

When do the fxC meet?
The examples are spread across weekdays, with a marginal preference for Wednesdays, but a clear preference to meet on a Sunday at 57%. It is also the case for several that they meet on multiple days, so figures cited do not sum to 100%. 43% could be classified as in the week, and 11% on a Saturday. While Sheffield is close to the average for non-Sunday gatherings across recently surveyed dioceses, the reality is of a spread from 28%-55%.

In general terms the range of choices may be evidence of a desire to fit with local cultural realities as well as facing social factors against meeting on Sunday, like sport, and divided or extended families. On the other hand, work schedules including shifts can mitigate the usefulness of holding midweek church.

35.7% of the fxC meet monthly, less than most dioceses. The weekly figure is 48.2%, with another 16.1% being fortnightly, the latter being more than usual elsewhere though still the least used frequency. Frequency of meeting links to fxC type; this is most obvious with 13 of the 15 Messy Churches meeting monthly, and all of the Traditional church plants meeting weekly. All Age worship fxC divide between monthly and weekly, whereas the Community development plants choose between fortnightly and weekly. We suspect all this connects both to resources needed and needs of the areas served.
Missional factors

Christians, De-Churched or Non-Churched?
We asked the leader of each fxC what group (or a mixture) they intended to reach: Christians, De-Churched or Non-Churched (the categories employed in Mission-shaped Church). Then we asked them to compare this intention with what happened.

Thus in this second tranche of work, we asked the leaders to estimate the percentage of attendance across the three groups (rather than give a score on a scale of 0-3, where 0 meant not true, 1 a minor reality, 2 the major reality, and 3 the only or overriding factor). As ever the responses contained both stories of surprises and disappointment, with some aspirations never met. We still urge some caution. Though these figures accurately represent what the leaders told us, there may well be a margin of error in their estimate.

Percentages estimated by the leader

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Christian</th>
<th>De-Churched</th>
<th>Non-Churched</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Percentage</td>
<td>34.8%</td>
<td>26.6%</td>
<td>38.6%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

If their impressions are close to reality, then the missional picture is encouraging:
- the Christians present are below the average of 42% seen with this system
- the de-churched are over one quarter of the overall number and average
- the non-churched are nearer to two-fifths, well above the 32% average of more recent dioceses

This can be of some encouragement to the diocese. We ask the diocese to note that these comparisons are favourable among the second tranche of dioceses, but less favourable compared with the first tranche, albeit that was using an earlier and cruder system. The data here, as elsewhere, runs in the face of the myth that the impact of fresh expressions of Church is only to attract overwhelming numbers of existing Christians.

Comparison of intention and what happened shows an overall picture of fresh expressions of Church aiming low for Christians yet still drawing over twice as many as they aimed for, though only a third of the whole picture. They attracted a few less de-churched than they tried for and a quarter less non-churched than they hoped for. Such differences are seen elsewhere.

Types of social/geographical area
Those interviewed from the fresh expressions of Church selected from 11 possible urban to rural categories, often choosing more than one so totals do not sum to 100%. The spread was wide across various groups: 34% were in urban priority areas, 29% in urban, 27% on mixed local and private estates, 25% in expanded villages and 23% in suburban areas. A further 18% served exclusively local authority estates, with only 4% in towns. 4% were classified as rural, 2% on private housing estates and 2% as city centre. This range reflects the diversity of contexts known to be in the diocese. None selected ‘new town’ and the diocese does not have those kind of areas. Adding some groups together, 66% were in social settings that the Church has historically deemed demanding, such as deprived urban, estate contexts and more demanding urban contexts. Only the diocese will know if this accurately represents what is on the ground. Yet it does seem that the fxC can put down roots in all of a diocese’s contexts. The database record of each qualifying example does not have a deanery field, so we cannot comment on what the spread is in the rural deaneries of the diocese. However, the Parish Support Team may well be able to deduce this from the further spreadsheet supplied to them where this data does exist, and from the map of the distribution shown to the bishop’s staff.

The figures in each successive 7 year period are small so there is limited value in comparing the figures across the whole period, but that raw data is given to the Parish Support Team. It may indicate a slow decline of starts in the urban areas and an equivalent increase in expanded villages and the suburbs.
We have also been asked how the spread of what has started fits with suspicions that Sheffield city may be different to the rest of the diocese. The data below should be read against a background of the population served in the two groups.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Area of diocese</th>
<th>No. fxC (live)</th>
<th>No. fxC (died)</th>
<th>No. fxC (left CofE)</th>
<th>Total no. fxC</th>
<th>fxC (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>4 Sheffield city deaneries</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>62.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8 remaining deaneries</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>37.5%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

To have 63% of the fxC serving 44% of the overall population must be some level of mismatch, but we do not have data that explains why it occurs. We have also plotted the live and died genuine cases and the arches (see the end of the report for that definition). It is then apparent that there are few in the broad Rotherham geographic area and also to the very north east of the diocese.

We also asked how typical those who came were of the area served. 77% of fxC leaders thought their attenders were either mainly or totally typical, synonymous with results elsewhere. 7% served a wide diversity of ethnic backgrounds, and a further 46% had a few. 46% of fxC were of people from one ethnic background. Readers should note that in two cases 'one ethnic group' refers to language-based congregations. Only the diocese will know if this fairly reflects the diversity of settings within the diocese. We did not investigate the ethnic mix in the different postcode areas as served. The 2011 census for the Sheffield diocesan area is 87.36% White British.

**Motives for beginning fxC**

Seven options were offered and could be compared with similar national data from 1984-1997. Motives can be combined, so percentages cited do not sum to 100%. What has become clear across the country is that it is less common now for planting initiatives to be a response to church buildings being full, or finding an area of a parish without easy access to a church. It is more likely to be due to cultural factors such as identifying a distinct people-group as unreached (86%), or the desire to provide increased diversity of ways of being church (39%). The sheer desire to grow was also strongly present (36%). In some areas with low church attendance it is understandable that 25% cited inadequate penetration of the parish. Reacting to full churches was 7% of cases, as was initiative coming from the diocese. Response to new housing was never cited. We understand that, beyond our research period ending in 2014, this is now beginning to be addressed. The standout figure is the very high score for the motive of unreached people group. It has been high throughout the entire historical period. We wonder if this reflects commendable high awareness of a high diversity of cultural and ethnic groups in the city, together with recognition that church attendance is low so something different is needed.
Neighbourhoods or networks?

In 75% of all cases their meeting place remained within the sending parish and a further 5.4% within the benefice concerned. Some argue that parish structures and their boundaries are all that is needed. However, it is also true that fresh expressions of Church drew people from a more complex picture than parish.

We asked each fxC leader what broad proportion of attendees came from a neighbourhood roughly coterminous with the parish, and what broad proportion came out of wider relational networks. 63% of the cases intended that no one would come from wider networks, but in practice this was less true, being only 54%. 21% expected network to play a major role, but 27% found that it did. Network as a major or overriding factor was anticipated to be operating in 7% of cases, but the reality turned out to be 9%. Furthermore, 36% of cases thought that network would play a significant role. Here are bits of evidence that network has a notable but minority role, often underestimated, to play in Sheffield diocese’s mission. It is some evidence showing that both neighbourhood and network matter in the mission of a diocese and reliance on geographical parish alone will be an error.

Team sizes

As elsewhere, most teams were small. 3-12 members was true in 70% of cases, more than other recent dioceses and closer to the prior 74% average. 11% of teams were of 1 or 2 people; 9% were in the 13-19 size. Only 7% of examples had 20-49 team members, and 2% (1 example) were 50 plus. Any stereotype of starting further churches, based on stories from London diocese, of the large team sent out from a larger church to begin a transplant, has not applied in this diocese, as the next section underlines.

The pioneer-progression variable

Leaders were also asked to what extent they were responding to a context of church weakness or absence (pioneering), or alternatively were they building on its existing effective presence and strength (progression). Various combinations between the two factors could be selected, but the single largest group (43%) felt they were entirely in a pioneering context. This may relate to the 86% serving an unreached people-group. 71.4% considered pioneering was the majority or overall variable. People taking risks, by embarking on an adventure in mission, is to be celebrated, as are the 37.5% of cases building on the good work and influence of the past.

What support did they have?

77% of cases had support from the sending parish. This links to the high percentage of cases whose meeting place was still within its boundaries. It is possible that this parish-focused work is related to the relatively large population served, on average, by each parish. Sheffield has the 6th highest figure after London diocese, for large population per parish, here at 7,102. However, in 5 cases the leaders had relocated, moving house to some distance away and were more like starting from scratch, the so-called seed dynamic. Like most other dioceses, few were either transplants (2) or grafts (3).
Leaders of fresh expressions of Church in Sheffield is 52% Lay and 48% Ordained, with the former including one Reader, seven Church Army Evangelists, four licensed lay workers and two others who were authorised in some way. The ordained include 25 incumbents and seven who are priest-in-charge. Among assistant clergy, there are six curates, one team vicar, four NSM or SSM, but no OPMs or chaplains.

The lay average across the dioceses so far is 52%. What is historically new, compared to previous decades, is the rise of the local lay person (here the single largest group at 37%), whom we have dubbed the ‘lay-lay’, meaning without any other ecclesial badge or prior training. This figure is average for the overall picture so far, with the previous 18 dioceses revealing a range of 21-52%.

Because in some stories the leadership has changed over time, there are 99 who have led. 56% of the Sheffield leaders are male, 44% are female; slightly more males than has been typical of dioceses 12-18, but an inverse of dioceses 1-11. 53% are full time (not necessarily with all their time devoted to the fresh expression which is true of only a few), 23% part time and 24% lead in their spare time. Nationally the most frequent combinations are men as full time and ordained, with lay women working part and spare time. Elsewhere we have found this is not solely attributable to women more commonly leading Messy Churches.

We also asked how many leaders had been through any fxC training. Despite it running in the diocese for some years, only 7% had been on mission-shaped ministry, though 10% had studied a planting module. 14% had other forms of training such as for Messy Church. 13% had received consultancy and 19% brought previous planting experience. 30% had no training whatever and with another 14% it was not known. Prior correlations suggest the provision of consultancy is highly effective.

Progress with discipleship
Leaders were asked if they mentored people 1-1, provided courses, ran groups, or drew people into working teams. A commendable 93% of cases did at least one of these, higher than the 78% average. We also note that 25/47 of the live Sheffield cases are still young, having only begun during or since 2011. Working 1-1 (73%) was higher than the previous average (47%). Choosing to run groups came at 52%, a bit above the average. Running courses (38%) is similar to the most recent dioceses surveyed. ‘Serving in teams’ is at 38%, somewhat below the 47% average in recent dioceses but more than in the prior 11 dioceses. Overall, there are indicators that fresh expressions of Church are not merely interested in attendance and are trying to form disciples, which is an area of growing concern in all churches.
Use of the sacraments

Our team do not think this is the best and certainly not the only measure of being church. But being dominical, the sacraments rightly demand inclusion at some stage in the maturing of fresh expressions of Church. 51.8% of the 56 cases have had communion services, higher than the 39% average. 42.9% have held baptisms, slightly above the 35% average. 30.4% have held confirmations. Of the communions, none occur weekly, 14% fortnightly, 38% monthly and 7% bi-monthly. A further 41% have been infrequent. We do not know why this particular set of figures occurs but note that there is wide difference across the dioceses. However, we do know that the different kinds of fxC set a different value on the sacraments and their different starting points lead to different rates of progress in this direction. It may be that we need to recognise that fxC mature ecclesiually at different rates, depending on the people and age group they work with. The prevalence of certain types in particular dioceses then contributes to the variety we have seen. We also add that with all three measures (Communion, Baptism and Confirmation), roughly 2/3 of those not offering these describe the reason as 'not yet' rather than not seeing any need.

Engagement with Scripture

All examples are doing this in one way or another. 87.5% have a form of talk, the highest figure we have seen. Both storytelling and creative activities are a little higher than the average, perhaps linked to the contribution of the 15 Messy Churches. Bible passages read in public worship is at the average, but encouraging private Bible reading is the third lowest seen thus far. We do not know why.

3-self identity
(financing, governing and reproducing)

We register intention, and note steps taken towards these goals, rather than only recording full completion of becoming self-financing, self-governing and self-reproducing. Only three cases have not taken any steps down these paths towards maturity and it may be significant that two of these are among those that died.

61% have taken some steps towards covering their costs that can include encouraging giving. This is nearly average for 'self-financing' in recent dioceses surveyed. 64% have taken a step towards being self-governing, through a local leadership team who take the week by week, or month by month, decisions about the ongoing life of the young church. This is rather below the recent average of 78%. As everywhere, the self-reproducing figure is the lowest of the three factors, despite flexibility that it can include the emergence of indigenous leaders, or of ordinands, not just the starting of a further fxC. The Sheffield set's figure of 39% is made up of 11 cases where indigenous leaders have been grown, plus there are 2 other cases of intention for this. Four have seen ordinands emerge. Four further fxC have started and 7 further fxC intend to do this. One example has sent out two overseas missionaries.
The fxC contribution to the diocese

Throughout our research since 2012, the closest comparison with diocesan numbers we have been able to make is to measure the latest figures then available from the Church of England, against those we have gathered from the leaders of the qualifying fxC. If, which is uncertain, the fxC attendance was included in the 2013 AWA of 18900, then the 2449 at the fxC is 13.2% of diocesan attendance. If they had not been counted in, that figure becomes 11.8%. Conversations with this diocese suggest that attendance at some fxC has not been recorded, whereas attendance at some other things, which then turn out not to be fxC, have been recorded. This problem is common elsewhere.

The diocese has 208 churches. If all 56 fxC are included in the diocese’s number of churches (the national returns are patchy), then fxC make up 26.9% of them. Should only the 47 extant examples be included, that figure falls to 22.6%. The proportion of younger churches is well above the current average of 17% and the numbers of people involved is also encouraging, compared with the prior average of 9.3% and with the later set of dioceses of 10.6%. These figures reflect well upon engagement with the fxC agenda across the diocese. At present around 1 in 4 of the ecclesial bodies in the diocesan family are current, or recent, fxC. A wider critique exists that fresh expressions of Church are only peripheral to the life of the Church of England. In this diocese that dismissal cannot stand, although proportions of fxC vary across all other dioceses surveyed, from 6.0% to 35.6%.

Steps taken in evangelism

All averages here are from the 12th diocese studied onwards, as this is when this question was first put. As elsewhere, the three most common threads are: building relationships (71.4% - 75.5% average), inviting others to worship (82.1% - 70.3% average), and inviting people to events (53.6% - 66.9% average). Less common choices are: putting on enquirers’ courses (23.2% - 37.0% average), members sharing their story (39.3% - 43.9% average), and acts of service in the community (37.5% - 39.4% average). Only 5.4% describe themselves as not at this stage, the average elsewhere.

Venues used

54.7% of cases used an existing church, 17.2% used a church hall and 28.1% a secular venue. Thus the clear majority meet on some kind of church premises; conversely, it could be said that 45.3% meet at some distance, culturally or geographically, from a church building. This may underline the need for a both/and, not an either/or mentality, and to be sensitive about choices made in context.

Wider considerations

Different sizes of fxC

A few things stand out from the attendance log. The fxC are considerably varied in size. The mean size is 49 people, far smaller than the diocesan church mean of 91, but this feature is typical of elsewhere and the diocese does have a few very large churches. In turn the fxC median is 35 due to one larger fxC example and we understand the diocesan median to be 66. The range of sizes is from 398 to 6. Four are over 100, and five are 70-99. Five are 50-69, with eighteen between 30-49. Eleven are 20-29 and another eight less than 20, to make up the 47 living Anglican examples in 2014. Four examples whose size is included have since stopped.

We always examine longitudinal attendance. With about a third of cases we cannot draw conclusions, as we have less than three years’ worth of attendance figures. Of the remainder, 29.7% continue to grow in size, 5.4% grew and then plateaued, while another 29.7% quickly plateaued. 10.8% of fxC had fluctuating numbers and 24.3% grew but later shrunk.

The fxC contribution to the diocese

Throughout our research since 2012, the closest comparison with diocesan numbers we have been able to make is to measure the latest figures then available from the Church of England, against those we have gathered from the leaders of the qualifying fxC. If, which is uncertain, the fxC attendance was included in the 2013 AWA of 18900, then the 2449 at the fxC is 13.2% of diocesan attendance. If they had not been counted in, that figure becomes 11.8%. Conversations with this diocese suggest that attendance at some fxC has not been recorded, whereas attendance at some other things, which then turn out not to be fxC, have been recorded. This problem is common elsewhere.

The diocese has 208 churches. If all 56 fxC are included in the diocese’s number of churches (the national returns are patchy), then fxC make up 26.9% of them. Should only the 47 extant examples be included, that figure falls to 22.6%. The proportion of younger churches is well above the current average of 17% and the numbers of people involved is also encouraging, compared with the prior average of 9.3% and with the later set of dioceses of 10.6%. These figures reflect well upon engagement with the fxC agenda across the diocese. At present around 1 in 4 of the ecclesial bodies in the diocesan family are current, or recent, fxC. A wider critique exists that fresh expressions of Church are only peripheral to the life of the Church of England. In this diocese that dismissal cannot stand, although proportions of fxC vary across all other dioceses surveyed, from 6.0% to 35.6%.

Steps taken in evangelism

All averages here are from the 12th diocese studied onwards, as this is when this question was first put. As elsewhere, the three most common threads are: building relationships (71.4% - 75.5% average), inviting others to worship (82.1% - 70.3% average), and inviting people to events (53.6% - 66.9% average). Less common choices are: putting on enquirers’ courses (23.2% - 37.0% average), members sharing their story (39.3% - 43.9% average), and acts of service in the community (37.5% - 39.4% average). Only 5.4% describe themselves as not at this stage, the average elsewhere.

Venues used

54.7% of cases used an existing church, 17.2% used a church hall and 28.1% a secular venue. Thus the clear majority meet on some kind of church premises; conversely, it could be said that 45.3% meet at some distance, culturally or geographically, from a church building. This may underline the need for a both/and, not an either/or mentality, and to be sensitive about choices made in context.

Wider considerations

Different sizes of fxC

A few things stand out from the attendance log. The fxC are considerably varied in size. The mean size is 49 people, far smaller than the diocesan church mean of 91, but this feature is typical of elsewhere and the diocese does have a few very large churches. In turn the fxC median is 35 due to one larger fxC example and we understand the diocesan median to be 66. The range of sizes is from 398 to 6. Four are over 100, and five are 70-99. Five are 50-69, with eighteen between 30-49. Eleven are 20-29 and another eight less than 20, to make up the 47 living Anglican examples in 2014. Four examples whose size is included have since stopped.

We always examine longitudinal attendance. With about a third of cases we cannot draw conclusions, as we have less than three years’ worth of attendance figures. Of the remainder, 29.7% continue to grow in size, 5.4% grew and then plateaued, while another 29.7% quickly plateaued. 10.8% of fxC had fluctuating numbers and 24.3% grew but later shrunk.
The scores are similar to elsewhere for the following: those which continue to grow, those which fluctuate and those that subsequently shrink. Two factors stand out by comparison to other dioceses. The number of examples that grow for some time but then plateau is far lower, but those that quickly plateau is higher than usual. These factors might well be followed up by the Parish Support Team.

Without further qualitative work we cannot be confident what factors operate in determining which fxC expand, which plateau and which shrink. It might be prudent for the diocese to find out. Our wider experience suggests that factors tending to lead to a plateau include the following: limited capacity of lay spare time leaders, no suitable public buildings to grow into, lack of a relational fringe in a small congregation, reaching the natural unit size of either particular social groupings or a particular kind of fresh expression of Church, and the lack of vision or leadership resources to aid reproducing elsewhere. Our work at the national level across the first 11 dioceses has investigated this, and was published in 2014 (this work is available at www.churcharmy.org.uk/fxCresearch).

Growth ratios
Across the 56 fxC, 1179 people have been involved in beginning one. This is the 2nd highest figure we have seen irrespective of the number of fxC per diocese, which might seem very encouraging. But the figure is influenced by the 600 deemed to be involved in starting St Thomas Philadelphia. The resultant attending figure is 2499, with a resultant growth ratio of only 2.1, meaning only 1.1 new people for every one person sent. This compares unfavourably with an average gain in recent dioceses of 2.8 people. Once again the Philadelphia story influences this figure, as the current leadership estimate present attendance as just under 400. That figure does not include those attending those further fxC started from Philadelphia such as Streetwise or the Iranian congregation (neither does it include other numbers at their so-called missional communities, virtually all of which the current leadership explained were not considered fresh expressions of Church, but in effect their smaller group system). When the data from St Thomas Philadelphia figures is removed, then the ratio between those sent and attendance rises to 3.6, or 2.6 persons coming for each one sent, which is the present national average.

Another factor is the proportion of growth among children; here it is at a growth ratio of 3.3 compared with 1.7 for adults, yet adults make up 65% of those attending. Despite these caveats, it is still true that starting fxC is an investment of resources bringing a missional return seldom matched elsewhere in English Anglican missional life.

Ecumenical partnerships
One was undertaken in informal ecumenical cooperation, but ten were under an LEP, of which nine are under the overall umbrella of the LEP for St Thomas Crookes and Philadelphia. The latter is higher than the recent dioceses we have usually seen, yet comes with the comment that the proportion falls with each succeeding seven year period and none since 2013. 80% were solely Church of England initiatives, typical of dioceses 12-19. The ‘Anglican only’ proportion is higher than that noticed among church plants 20 years ago. While beyond the scope of this data, perhaps each denomination is taking its own initiatives, although aware of one another and not in competition.

Which Anglican traditions do this?
The traditions of Anglicanism are not evenly split in any diocese. Nor are the traditions usually in neat distinction, but are often combined. In these cases, figures do not sum to 100% and are given for cases owning a tradition in part or as a whole: Evangelical 79%, Charismatic 54%, Central 27%, Catholic 14% and Liberal 4%. Thus all are represented to some degree, and across the dioceses surveyed the prevalence of ‘Central’ may be the surprise to those who think beginning fxC is an Evangelical and Charismatic preserve. Here it is lower than the recent dioceses’ average of 34% and 42% in dioceses 1-11. Because groups multiple designate and sometimes the sent group are not of the same tradition as either the sending church or the context sent to, we have not investigated how this variance in tradition may correlate between deaneries.

A comment on mortality in the fxC
With only eight cases, or 14.3%, deducing patterns is tendentious. Examining each one, resources issues – either money, lack of people or energy – come up half of the time. Two could be described as adverse changes of context and one an inability to draw further new people. But it should be noted that the mortality rate is higher than the prior average of 9-10%.
Overall

Ways in which the Sheffield fxC are fairly typical
Sheffield results are in similar proportions to the average across the first tranche of dioceses in relation to the following:

- a story of a growing number of starts across the four 7-year periods surveyed
- 77% of the fxC felt that the newcomers are typical of the context served
- 36% of fxC seeing networks play a significant role in attendance
- 3-12 people being the most common team size sent
- leadership, measured by gender, being nearly equally spread
- the proportion that are lay-lay led
- the proportion that meet weekly
- those which have taken responsibility towards being self-governing
- a minimal number of grafts and transplants but with a few seeds

Encouragements in the Sheffield set of fxC

- The far higher than average proportion of fxC to other diocesan churches.
- The fxC attendance figures, as a proportion of diocesan AWA, being higher than average.
- There is a story of more fxC starting as the years unfold. There were none started between 1995-99, 0-2 per year during 2001-07, then 4-6 per year across 2008-2013 and 9 in 2014.
- The figures for attracting non-churched people are better than most recent dioceses surveyed.
- The fxC occur in a wider variety of social settings.
- The 1258 people added, according to leaders interviewed, could well be an encouragement to set alongside the prior numerical decline, from national returns, of the diocesan AWA by 300 in the years 2006-2013.
- The fxC are drawing significant numbers (606) of further children into the church. But this work will need building upon with suitable provision as the children reach teenage years.
- 29.7% of them continue to grow in size. This should not be taken as the sole indicator of health as there is growing awareness that fxC may have natural unit sizes at which plateau occurs.

- More of the fxC are taking some steps in discipleship, compared to the average.
- The figures for engaging with the sacraments are above average, even for recent dioceses.
- Two factors suggest some welcome pioneering. 71% of the fxC felt that they were in a pioneering situation and 86% started by identifying an unreached people group.
- Nearly all examples are doing at least something about evangelism.
- It also has the following fxC leadership features that can be seen as positives. Both ordained and laity are involved in leading fxC; 37% of the latter are not formally trained and recognised, of whom the majority are women. The latter are steps broadly welcomed in surrounding English society, although not always in the Church.

Signs of vulnerability in the Sheffield fxC

- The high proportion at 69% of cases excluded, despite the retrospective process to exclude those the diocesan team would have pruned out from their initial list. The figure demonstrates widespread lack of clarity around the term fresh expressions of Church. This confusion in turn can create unrealistic or inappropriate expectations.
- 35.7% meet monthly, which over time may herald limitations.
- 24.3% grew in size but then shrunk.
- 29.7% quickly plateaued. When we include all kinds of plateau and those that fluctuated, it becomes 46%.
- Whether so many (34%) are incumbent (or equivalent status) led may, or may not, be a weakness. If it should indicate lack of time or energy to develop the life of these young churches, it would become a constraint.
- Fewer than the average meet outside Sunday and a church venue.
- 14.3% have died – higher than the 10% average seen elsewhere.
- It appears that not as many in the liberal tradition have engaged compared to elsewhere.
- The very low ratio of 1.1 further people drawn into their life, for every one sent out, should be discounted in view of the data from Philadelphia, as explained earlier, which renders the rest of the diocese as following the average elsewhere of 3.6 (that is, 2.6 further people).
What was included and excluded

It was finally agreed, both with the diocese and with the respondents, that 125 examples should not be included. This was based on our pre-existing ten criteria for assessing all cases (see appendix for full list). These results underline that a significant lack of clarity exists nationally and locally around what counts as a fresh expression of Church.

Those excluded are normally divided further into several categories.

[A] Arch 28 Either steps towards, or onwards from, a fxC but not an fxC in itself
[I] Infrequent 3 Meeting less than monthly, so unlikely to build a sense of community, but otherwise meeting our criteria
[N] Not fxC 72 This category contained a variety of other reasons (see below)
[2] Double 11 Double entries in the data because of a name change over time
[NY] Not Yet 3 Examples known to be planned, but not yet started
[L] Left CoE 1 Left the Church of England and went independent
[X] Excluded 8 Began prior to 1992 or post 2014 – in this case a 2015 start

We do not know why there were so many duplicates. This can be the result of unregistered name changes or weakness in diocesan systems for following up claims made under statistics for mission returns.

The [N] group includes a wide mixture of categories: 13 re-badged existing services or groups, 38 outreach projects to bring newcomers back to that local church, 8 new events for Christians, 1 was chaplaincy, another classified as an infrequent event and 7 that did not last at least two years (one of our criteria). 2 were never Church of England in the first place.

Rebadging does not impress us, but outreach as a stepping stone to existing church is commendable and some of the large number of these might be developed in partnership with the diocese. Programs to assist Christians have some value, but neither they nor outreach projects are fresh expressions of Church.

We repeat that we have included church plants, for Mission-shaped Church listed them as one type of fresh expression of Church. We concur with that view and have taken 1992-2014 as the period of research. 1992 saw the setting in motion of the report Breaking New Ground that brought church planting to the attention of the Church of England.

We also included in our analysis 8 examples that died (as their data contributes to the overall picture and longitudinal patterns from 1992-2014) as well as the one example that elected to leave the Church of England. But data from them was not included in the current attendance figures.

Part of the follow up to this report might be closer inspection of, and where appropriate contact with, the 28 examples we classed as an Arch. This is one of the higher proportions we have found so far and they could be fruitful examples to develop to play their part in the ongoing mission of the diocese. The same benefit might be found in support to the fxC unregistered because they began in 2015.
Further comments

The data took 3 months to collect, 4 days to analyse and a few days to write up. The time taken in gathering data, which would average at least 40 minutes per phone interview, and achieving a 100% response rate, encourages us to assert that the data has an acceptable level of integrity.

Limitation includes the accuracy of perception of the leaders interviewed and only work with members could test this. The simplicity of the scoring also brings in modesty about figures derived. Church Army’s Research Unit is also currently working on a survey among fxC attenders, which should report in June 2016.

Church Army’s Research Unit has now completed this exercise with 18 other dioceses, applying the same criteria of inclusion, process in collection and analysis. Only by this will most substantive similarities and differences between dioceses appear. Headlines from dioceses 1 to 11 were aired in January 2014. A similar report on the next ten dioceses is planned for June 2016.

The hope is that now that fresh expressions plants are being discovered and analysed, we will be able for the first time to have a more fully informed indication of the nature of their contribution to overall diocesan growth and decline and the part they play within the mixed economy of the mission of the Church of England.

Canon Dr George Lings
13th January 2016
Church Army’s Research Unit
Appendix

What is an Anglican fresh expression of Church? - Ten Criteria

The Church of England’s research and statistics department use the following definition. A fresh expression is any venture that works mainly with non-churchgoers and aims to become church. A fresh expression is ...

1. Missional – it intends to work with non-churchgoers  
   2. Contextual – it seeks to fit the context  
   3. Formational – it aims to form disciples  
   4. Ecclesial – it intends to become church

Church Army’s Research Unit have taken this further:

1. Is this a new and further group, which is Christian and communal, rather than an existing group modified, adapted or changed?  
   2. Has the starting group tried to engage with non-church goers? There was intention to create a fresh expression of Church (fxC), not to do an outreach project from an existing church. The aim was to help the Christians sent out to start the fxC to understand a culture and context and adapt to fit it, not make the local/indigenous people change and adapt to fit into an existing church context.  
   3. Does the community meet at least once a month?  
   4. Does it have a name that helps give it an identity? An active search, not yet yielding a name, is allowed.  
   5. Is there intention to be Church? This could be the intention from the start, or by a 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 of Worship). The key is that it is not seen as a bridge back to ‘real church’, but as Church in its own right.  
   6. Is it Anglican or an Ecumenical project which includes an Anglican partner? ‘Anglican’ here means the Bishop welcomes it as part of the diocesan family, not whether it only uses centrally authorised worship texts, or has a legal territory (parish).  
   7. Is there some form of leadership recognised by those within the community and also by those outside of it?  
   8. Do at least the majority of members (who are part of the public gathering) see it as their major expression of being church?  
   9. Are there aspirations for the four creedal ‘marks’ of church, or ecclesial relationships: ‘up/holy, in/one, out/apostolic, of/catholic’? We see the two dominical sacraments (communion and baptism) 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. Is there the intention to become ‘3-self’ (self-financing, self-governing and self-reproducing)? These factors may look different in each local context, but are some marks of advancing ecclesial maturity. They are not to be interpreted as indicators of congregationalist independency, or breakaway tendencies, but of taking responsibility.

Application of the criteria:

Examples that do not meet criteria 1-7 are deemed to not be Anglican fresh expressions of Church. Factors in criteria 8-10 may be more like ‘health’ or developmental issues; their absence may indicate the need for further maturing, present weaknesses and/or dangers, but not necessarily exclusion. The presence of these factors is healthy and indicates maturing.

Variables in the criteria:

- We still consider examples that have since died, but lasted at least two years of life.  
- Contextualisation of all criteria; thus no. 5 does not require public use of the word ‘Church’ where it was unhelpful in the context, but it does need an understanding that this is what is forming.

Church Army’s Research Unit

---

1 This instinct is early: cf Ignatius, ‘but whatever he (the Bishop) approve, this is also pleasing to God’. Smyrna. VIII  