

Fresh Expressions young adults conference - feedback

Introduction

On Saturday 13th (London) and Thursday 18th (Sheffield) April 2013, the Fresh Expressions Young Adults Round Table gathered two groups of practitioners working with fresh expressions amongst young adults to share Beth Keith's 'authentic faith' research with them, gather their responses and learning and listen to their stories and wisdom.

Beth's research identifies five 'realities shared in common' - values which were seen across all or most churches involved in the study:

1. **community;**
2. **authenticity;**
3. **doubt;**
4. **spirituality;**
5. **change.**

The conference attendees in the main found deep resonance with these five values. They felt that some of the terminology might require clarification - for instance, it was felt that doubt was an expression of the ability to question both theology and practice and, ultimately, of discipleship.

There were other themes identified that ran through these values: family, leadership, mission, discipleship, celebration, questioning, personal development, diversity.

The other main comment from those at the conference was that it might be helpful to have Christian, Jesus or as an explicit value - although in the context of the report it was acknowledged that it ran through all five values.

The research also makes seven recommendations, which found broad agreement at the conferences:

1. **five distinct types** of young adults' church should be recognised, understood and encouraged by the wider Church: **church planting hubs**, **youth church grown up**, **deconstructed church**, **church on the margins** and **context shaped church**.
2. access to **communal spaces** or community homes can be crucial.
3. **small sacramental communities** need to be recognised, endorsed and supported and issues around permissions, authorisation and the administration of sacraments need to be understood and considered.
4. more needs to be done to encourage **open and supportive connections** between the wider Church and these fledgling communities, however unconventional they may look.
5. **church planting hubs'** role in attracting, retaining and discipling young adults needs to be recognised and valued.
6. **fresh expressions for young people** should make provision for subsequent development of a young adult church.
7. **specialist denominational appointments** to work with young adults are as, if not more, important than those to with children or youth.

What would you like to say to Fresh Expressions?

These responses will be fed directly into the Fresh Expressions core team.

1. Release young leaders into leadership.
2. Advocate for us - negotiate permissions, clear blockages and make fresh expressions of church a normal part of the wider Church.
3. Share stories and learning about growing and leading multiple context-based churches (one person leading several things).
4. Enable local networking of those working with fresh expressions amongst young adults.
5. Communicate clearly and proactively with appropriate language. Don't become defensive. Affirm existing expressions of church as well as championing fresh expressions of church.
6. Ways of measuring and tracking progress or success that aren't solely based on numbers.
7. Appoint a young adults missioner/enabler to the Fresh Expressions core team to ensure that work with young adults is listened to and learnt from, to provide leadership and to facilitate training.
8. Establish a pioneer problems 'hotline' or equivalent channel of information.
9. Find a solution, not a fudge, to the problem of administering communion.
10. Create (or commission) high-quality (non-American) resources and materials about Christianity for those with no church background, knowledge or experience.

What would you like to say to the wider Church?

These responses will be fed into Fresh Expressions' partner denominations and agencies through their representatives on the core team.

1. Release young leaders into leadership!
2. Improve leadership training, particularly team leadership and entrepreneurial skills.
3. Affirm our ministry - whilst allowing us to ask questions and express doubt.
4. Release finance and resources - see investment in us as investment for the future.
5. Measure and evaluate us on an equal footing with inherited church.
6. Ensure that the values and practice of fresh expressions of church are embedded into denominational structures - e.g. pioneer chapters, pioneer archdeacons, fresh expressions advisers involved in strategic and visionary discussions.

Resources

- We already have good provision of theological training (69% already have it, only 17% want it right now, 26% would have valued more of it at first).
- Biggest needs are spiritual directors (43% want one, 43% already have one), mentors (35% want one, 30% have one) or leadership coaches (30% want one, 39% have one).
- The biggest thing that current practitioners would have valued more of at first is leadership training (43%), followed by a physical network/annual gathering (30%).
- Practitioners also want local ongoing support (sympathetic sponsors, advocates, trustees, guardians) and community (working in teams or pairs, support, challenge, encouragement) from other local fresh expression leaders.

Issues and solutions

Issue	Solution
Leadership - how do we train and release leaders?	
Finding new leaders. Leaders moving on. Supporting, nurturing and inspiring existing leaders and caring for them pastorally?	Active discipleship, leadership, inspiration, permission. Decrease expectations of people. Be patient.
Vocation of community over self - starting not with your agenda, but that of the community.	Obedience and humility.
A pioneer who won't journey their project into church despite people being ready.	Training of pioneers in vision/creativity, strategy and management.
Lack of senior staff time.	Refocus on value-adding work.
Discipleship, mission and evangelism - how do we disciple people in a pluralistic world? how do we remain focussed on new people whilst also discipling new Christians?	
How do we grow? Commitment/participation. Going wider, deeper, growing community. When to start discipleship.	Loving communication of values, risk letting people go. Intentionality and prayer. Experimenting and being willing to fail.
Apathy or ambivalence. Lack of relevance of faith in lives of young adults.	Team, vision. Release people to have real relationships with non-Christians. From 'pass the stapler' to 'let me tell you about Jesus'.
Many sources of theology and teaching via the internet - what do we believe?	Discipleship - speaking often of our values.
Getting young adults to engage with mission when life is all-consuming.	Mission in the workplace etc. Good models and examples. Challenging priorities.
Balancing cultural relevance with countercultural call.	Contextualise according to where each person is.
Insularity when things are good - how to keep a mission edge. Maintaining outward focus.	Training new disciples as missionaries and evangelists. Generous permission for it not to be all about conversion.
Lack of confidence in the gospel. Objective truth in a subjective or questioning world.	Telling stories of the good news at work. Confidence in the gospel!
Discipleship in multi-cultural and different economic backgrounds - language, churchy people, unchurched, lifestyle all in one place.	
Expectations - how to manage our own and those of the traditional church?	
Wide range of expectations, unrealistic expectations.	More discussions about what the community needs to be and clarifying that it can't be everything to everybody. Permission and space with no expectations. Mentors,

	guardians. Give yourself permission. Education of the wider Church.
Expectation of fast numerical growth	Different measuring tools
Listening but not hearing	Ignoring expectations!
Changing our goals to see success	Hold fast to original goals
Institution - how to maintain a healthy relationship with it?	
Lack of recognition or help. Disconnection or misunderstanding. 'Speaking a different language'. Lack of acceptance or acknowledgement. Taking the church with you. Lack of generosity. Not fitting, having to argue the case for being different. Lack of support from local church. Squashing.	Spiritual directors and mentors. More conversations. Bilingual people to 'interpret'. Show examples, how they biblically connect and are church. Education, training. Conversation and communication! Patience. Sustained support from other places than the local. Pray. Give, not just take.
Limited permission (e.g. communion). Celebrating the sacraments	Better understanding of priesthood of all believers!
Being sucked into church (culture). Church addiction.	Mess with the system! Go cold turkey, hold your nerve. Permission-givers and champions who can work the system.
Inflexible structures	Greater vision put into action to change structures that stifle growth
Having to give a doctrinal line or justify a doctrine	Being honest and fair and not unnecessarily critical
The invitation to experiment and potentially to fail is not taken seriously	Change it from within, persevere
Resources and finance	
Financial worries and constraints. Becoming self-financing.	Enterprise. Grants. Being resource-light in needs.
Short-termism in funding	Smaller amounts for longer periods of time.
Meeting spaces, housing (particularly when working with those without either)	Subsidised housing, letting out manses, housing grants/loans. Discipleship of finance.
Team	Local church releasing workers for mission.
Materials in plain English (not American or 'Christianese')	Can Fresh Expression produce or commission resources?
Complexity of issues (resulting in paralysis)	Just get going anyway!
Lack of time	More help
Personal questions	
There were various specific questions about issues affecting particular individuals.	

Reflections from Adrian Chatfield (Sheffield day)

Voice [or issue] 1: what is the church?

- Some of us, even in the movement, are uncomfortable with some forms of church. Spiritually we need to recognise that God is using those forms. We need to be riskily accepting of others' ways and styles.
- What are the dynamics of having a conversation about whether something is 'actually church'? Are making a rod for our own backs by taking this question slightly too seriously at times? We have to answer our detractors, but is it becoming a shibboleth [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Shibboleth] rather than a thought-through theological question?
- If we were to agree that the church exists for the sake of the Kingdom of God, not itself, might we have to exclude some established churches that are not carrying on the will of God? Is not the primary criterion one of faithfulness to the call to be the people of God?
- Is there an assumption in the established church that 'they will grow up, or get over it', which resists the idea that what is being learnt from young fresh expressions of church might require a radical transformation of the whole church? Are fresh expressions of church amongst young adults called to be a prophetic voice to the whole church?

Voice 2: subversive leadership

- In introducing themselves, several said things like 'I am going round in circles', 'I don't know what to do with that', 'I have failed more times than I have succeeded; that's why I'm here'. This was a commendably honest, vulnerable and authentic voice, which matches the fact that young adults require honesty and vulnerability of their leaders.
- At the same time, in a context where many feel bruised and uncertain, we need to recover confidence in Jesus, in the power of the Holy Spirit and in the missional plan of God for ourselves. Somehow I think that we need to be reminded and remind ourselves of the fact that the gates of hell will not prevail against the Church of Christ.
- There are many who are supportive of fresh expressions of church but it sometimes seems that their voices aren't being heard by practitioners. At the same time, I wonder whether we are we also being unsupportive of one another at times. However, there is a real generosity of spirit towards the inherited church amongst pioneers, a striking and remarkable response to an often resistant institution.

Voice 3: change is a dangerous place

- Change is a dangerous place: transitions need to be managed well. Discipleship is crucial and the liminal [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Liminal] experiences of moving between life stages need to be taught, mentored and understood as central to the Church's ministry.

Voice 4: the languages that we use

- Are we turning talk of 'missional community' and 'new monastic movements' into cliché?
- Are we being an either/or people in a both/and world? Do we need to learn that people may be for Jesus if they are not against Jesus, rather than the other way round? This links in fairly complex ways with the need to be culturally in touch with a postmodern world without selling out to it. Perhaps we need to release people to be more risky, less black and white about issues.