

**THE BISHOP OF ST ALBANS' PRESIDENTIAL ADDRESS**  
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Last week it was announced that Canon Michael Beasley is going to be the next Bishop of Hertford. Michael studied at Imperial College, London and Oriel College, Oxford. He trained for the ministry at Cranmer Hall, Durham and served as curate at Newport with Longford, Chetwynd and Forton in Shropshire.

From 2003 to 2007 he was Chaplain at Westcott House, Cambridge and then Tutor in Mission and Vice Principal from 2007 to 2010. Michael combined work at Westcott with the role of Director of the Partnership for Child Development, an organisation that works to improve the health and education of school aged children in low income countries, based in the Department of Infectious Disease Epidemiology at Imperial College, London

Since 2010 he has been Director of Mission for the Diocese of Oxford where he is also a Canon of Christ Church, Oxford. Michael is married to Lizzie and they have two children, Charlie who is 3 and Constance who is 19 months. His interests include gardening, beekeeping and hill walking.

We look forward to his episcopal ordination on Thursday 14 May in Westminster Abbey at 11.00am. There will be a service of welcome in the Cathedral and Abbey Church of St Albans on Saturday 16 May at 3.00pm. Please pray for Michael, Lizzie and the children as they prepare to move.

The main focus of this presidential address is to reflect for a few minutes on what has become known as 'fresh expressions of church' and I want to draw on some of the material on the Fresh Expressions Website and other material produced by George Lings.

My personal interest arises from the fact that I chair a small working party which is seeking to encourage the development of fresh expression across the Church of England and also because I was the co-chair of a working group which produced a report called *Fresh Expressions in the Mission of the Church* which was attempting to do some serious theology (or to use the more technical language, ecclesiology) around this area.

Last December I visited *The Hub Church* which meets in Hitchin. It is run by a team led by a young couple, Dan and Alex Drew. As their website says: *We meet in the Market Theatre, but don't worry we'll have someone to welcome you and show you where to go. We provide free tea and coffee, may sing sometimes, listen to talks, discuss, pray for the world and people in it, and there may even be moments of fun.*

The evening I was there we met in a pub and as I was preaching people were texting questions which were coming up on the screen behind me. As a church they are deeply involved in the town of Hitchin and have been involved in a local festival, in providing free lunches for children during school holidays, litter picking and offering free car washes.

Something that may be more familiar to many of you is Messy Church which is found in many parts of the diocese. For example, this week's See Round features the Messy Church at Toddington, which has led to baptisms, confirmations and has produced a new Deputy Churchwarden. The Messy Church at St John's Watford was instrumental in helping Fr David Stevenson discern the need and develop the support for a new school, which will open next year.

There's a growing range of other fresh expressions, Café Church in Codicote, lunch clubs that include prayer and worship, discussions in pubs that are growing a community, and dog walkers in Hatfield Hyde that meet to pray and read the Bible. In addition, we are gradually growing our number of pioneer ministers, in new housing areas such as Leighton Buzzard and Great Denham, amongst young people in Stevenage, and on a large estate in North Bushey.

But let's pause to set all these examples in a wider context of what has been going on across the country over recent years. In 2004 *Mission-Shaped Church* was published and sold more copies than other church reports since *Faith in the City* twenty years earlier. Since then there has been an extraordinary growth of new styles of churches across the country and it has been estimated there are about 3,000 new churches, based in every main line Christian denomination across the UK and that tens of thousands of people attend such churches.

So what is a fresh expression of church? It is a 'new gathering or network that engages mainly with people who have never been to church. There is no single model, but the emphasis is on starting something which is appropriate to its context, rather than cloning something that works elsewhere'.

Those working in the fresh expressions movement provide a useful definition:

'A fresh expression is a form of church for our changing culture, established primarily for the benefit of people who are not yet members of any church.

- It will come into being through principles of listening, service, incarnational mission and making disciples;
- It will have the potential to become a mature expression of church shaped by the gospel and the enduring marks of the church and for its cultural context'.

They stress that a fresh expression of church is not:

- 'an old outreach with a new name ('rebranded' or 'freshened up');
- a bridge project, to which people belong for a while before going to 'proper' church - some people do end up moving into a more traditional church,

others see the fresh expression as their church, while others again have a foot in both’.

Now the reasons that so much work has been done on the nature of fresh expressions of church is because the term is sometimes used to describe anything and everything. At one stage there was a website where people could register their ‘fresh expression’ and it included the most amazing range of activities, such as a Christian counselling charity, which was a really important piece of ministry but was not really a fresh expression.

The key factor is the *intention* behind any new initiative:

- ‘If the intention is to work towards establishing a new community or congregation especially for those who have never been involved in church (un-churched) or once were, but left for whatever reason (de-churched), then it is a fresh expression of church in the making. A fresh expression of church like this may look very different to traditional church.
- If, though, the intention is to do mission better or more imaginatively in order to attract people to an existing church, it isn't a fresh expression (although doing that is always an excellent idea). The aim of a fresh expression is not to provide a stepping stone into existing church, but to form a new church in its own right. So it is important to decide the direction you are heading in, before you begin the journey’.

Now before anyone dismisses this phenomenon, let me remind us that it is having a major impact upon all the main Christian denominations and especially upon the Church of England and on this diocese. Last year some research was published, which had undertaken a detailed study of all the fresh expressions in ten dioceses of the Church of England

Interviews were conducted by researchers with the leaders of 518 fresh expressions in the dioceses of Liverpool, Canterbury, Leicester, Derby, Chelmsford, Norwich, Ripon & Leeds, Blackburn, Bristol and Portsmouth. These dioceses were chosen to reflect variety in context, geographical spread and different stances towards fresh expressions.

One of the significant findings was that by 2012, four to five times as many fresh expressions were being started per year compared to 2004 when the *Mission-shaped Church* report was launched and that ‘The growth has been noticeably marked in the past three years. Some 44% of the fresh expressions in the research were launched between 2010 and 2012’.

Evidence suggests that for every one person involved in the setting up of a fresh expression of church, there are now two and a half more people. A typical fresh expression begins with 3-12 people and grows to 250% of that initial team size.

The main findings were summarised in seven points:

- an estimated 24.5% of those attending fresh expressions of church are already members of a church, 35.2% are people who used to belong to

church but who left for one reason or another while 40.3% are those with no previous church background at all.

- the 13.5% of parishes in the dioceses surveyed had started a fresh expressions of church.
- 52% of the fresh expressions of church are led by people who are not ordained, 40% are led by people who are not formally authorised. Two out of three lay leaders are women, two out of three ordained leaders are men; but the men are more likely to be paid and the women working voluntarily.
- there are at least 20 different recognizable types of fresh expressions of church and the average size is 44.
- fresh expressions of church can be found in all traditions in the Church of England. The fresh expressions of church meet in all kinds of venues at various times, days of the week and geographical settings. The world of fresh expressions of church is described as one of 'varied and smaller communities'.
- 78% intentionally encourage discipleship, not just attract attenders. Over a third have communion services and a third have had baptisms. Half are taking some steps toward responsibility for their finances and two thirds for how they are led, very few have formal legal status within the Church of England.
- the majority, 66%, either continue to grow numerically or maintain the growth gained. Of those surveyed, 25% did grow but are now shrinking while 9.7% have come to an end. Growth patterns vary according to a wide combination of factors, including the kind of fresh expression, social area served and frequency of meeting.

The reason I am focussing today on fresh expressions is to alert us all to what is going on, to celebrate this new life and those who are working hard to develop these new forms of church. I also want to encourage you to explore whether a fresh expression of church is what is needed in your parish.

One of the best ways of exploring this possibility is visiting one of the fresh expressions near you or keep an eye on the many accounts of different fresh expressions that are reported on the fresh expressions website (<http://www.freshexpressions.org.uk/>).

It is also important, however, to stress that I am not saying that everyone is going to have to go down the fresh expressions path. I don't want to discourage those who are members of our existing congregations. The last Archbishop of Canterbury used the language of 'mixed economy'. We need both new and old ways of being church and we need each to learn from the other and support one another as we seek to proclaim Christ to this generation.

+Alan St Albans  
12 March 2015