

# Sustaining young Churches

A qualitative pilot study of fresh expressions of Church in  
the Church of England



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## Executive summary

This report presents the findings of a qualitative pilot study on the sustainability of fresh expressions of Church (fxC) in the Church of England. This research was conducted on a part-time basis by Andy Wier of Church Army's Research Unit between 2014 and 2016.

**Chapter 1** introduces the two main research questions that this study sought to address:

- What does it mean to talk of sustainability in the context of fresh expressions of Church?
- What encourages and inhibits sustainability within fresh expressions of Church?

**Chapter 2** describes and justifies our methodology. To explore the above questions, we opted for an exploratory, appreciative and primarily qualitative approach. Two main research methods were used:

1. Interviews with 13 strategically placed conversation partners (leading thinkers, writers and commentators from within the fresh expressions movement and wider Church)
2. Case studies of 12 fxC within the dioceses of Derby and Liverpool

**Chapter 3** presents our findings with relation to the question: 'What does it mean to talk of sustainability in the context of fresh expressions of Church?' In summarising these findings, we suggest that:

- Talk of sustainability needs to take seriously the reality that most fxC in the Church of England still operate within the parish of their sending church and continue to have strong supportive links with that church. In this sense, they are 'runners', not 'seeds'.
- The sustainability of a fxC is often intimately connected to the sustainability of its parent church. Most are sustainable only as part of a wider whole.
- Sustainability should not always be equated with permanence, but we would caution against uttering the words 'only for a season' too readily.
- The classic 'three-self' principles (self-financing, self-governing and self-reproducing) appear more helpful and relevant to some fxC than others. They need to be broadened out to place more emphasis on the wider ecclesial environment within which fxC are sustained.
- A more fully developed theology of sustainability for fxC is also needed.

**Chapter 4** then considers the question: 'What encourages and inhibits sustainability within fresh expressions of Church?' Three different types of contributing factor are identified and discussed:

- **Internal factors** – A fxC can promote its sustainability by *discovering* sustainable rhythms and practices, *adapting* and *evolving*, *involving* others, *receiving* and *giving*, *persevering* and *following* (in discipleship).
- **Factors in the wider ecclesial environment** – The attitudes and behaviours of the sending church and wider Church also have a crucial bearing on a fxC's sustainability.
- **External variables** – Other external influences on a fxC's sustainability include type of mission context and the level of financial resources invested in it.

**Chapter 5** concludes by summarising the key implications of our findings for fxC, parent churches and the wider Church. In view of the inevitable limitations of an initial pilot study like this, various topics for further research are also proposed.

# 1 Introduction

Lots of fresh expressions of Church have been started in recent years and there is now a significant body of quantitative evidence about these.<sup>1</sup> However, relatively little is known about the extent to which these new ecclesial communities are sustainable, or indeed, what it means to talk of ‘sustainability’ within the context of fresh expressions of Church.

This report summarises the main findings of a pilot study on the sustainability of Anglican fresh expressions of Church in England recently completed by Church Army’s Research Unit. This research was undertaken on a part-time basis between 2014 and 2016. As an initial pilot study, our report does not attempt to provide a comprehensive, definitive or statistically verifiable answer to every conceivable question about the sustainability of fresh expressions of Church. Instead, it tries to begin to explore, and open up for further inquiry, two overarching research questions:

- What does it mean to talk of sustainability in the context of fresh expressions of Church?
- What encourages and inhibits sustainability within fresh expressions of Church?

In exploring these questions, the report draws on the experience of 12 case study churches that agreed to participate in the research. Alongside their voices, the report also draws on the perspectives of a number of strategically placed conversation partners within the fresh expressions movement and wider Church and weaves these together with insights from other relevant studies and research. It is written with the following three audiences in mind:

- Leaders and members of fresh expressions of Church
- The ‘parent’ or ‘sending’ churches of fresh expressions of Church
- Decision-makers, policy setters, permission-givers and funding bodies in the wider Church

## 1.1 Some provisional definitions

### 1.1.1 Fresh expressions of Church

Within this research project, we used the same definition of fresh expressions of Church (hereafter referred to with the abbreviation fxC) that was employed in our 2013 report on Strand 3b of the Church Growth Research Project.<sup>2</sup> In short (and in keeping with the view of the Church of England’s statistics department), we regard a fresh expression of Church as any venture that works mainly with non-churchgoers and aims to become church. Alongside this broad definition, we have also developed a more detailed set of criteria for discerning whether, within an Anglican context, a particular initiative should be regarded as a fxC. A full list of these criteria can be found in Appendix 1. Using these criteria, the 12 case studies that we focus on in this study were all assessed and verified as fxC within our previous round of research.

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<sup>1</sup> See G. Lings, *The day of small things: An analysis of fresh expressions of Church in 21 dioceses of The Church of England* (Sheffield: Church Army’s Research Unit, 2016). See also our 2013 report on Strand 3b of the Church Growth Research project (hereafter simply referred to as the ‘Strand 3b report’: Church Army’s Research Unit, *An analysis of fresh expressions of Church and church plants begun in the period 1999-2012: Report on Strand 3b of the Church Growth Research Project* (Sheffield: Church Army & Church of England, 2013). Both reports can be found at: <http://www.churcharmy.org.uk/fxcresearch>

<sup>2</sup> See pp. 10-13 of the *Strand 3b* report.

In the title of this report, we make explicit our view that all fxC which meet these criteria are ‘young churches’. However, it is important to stress that across the various types of fxC that exist, there appears to be a range of different understandings about what it means for a fxC to be Church. While some of the case study fxC examined by this project described themselves as ‘a church’, others expressed their ecclesial identity in other ways. As we explain more fully in later chapters, most Anglican fxC still operate within the parish of their parent church and continue to enjoy a close relationship with that church, a relationship which is characterised by a high degree of inter-dependence. Within such a context, most of the parish-based fxC surveyed for this study were not aiming to become a completely separate church. However, they still clearly saw themselves as a distinct expression of Church. For some fxC, this was expressed through the vocabulary of ‘congregation’ or ‘service’, while others described themselves as ‘a church within a church’ or the sending church’s ‘church for’ a particular demographic group. In Chapter 3 we explore these ideas further through the vocabulary of ‘seeds’ and ‘runners’. As we will see, this distinction has a crucial bearing on what it means to talk of sustainability in the context of fxC.

### 1.1.2 Sustainability

Sustainability is a complex and multi-faceted subject that is hard to pin down. However, the following dictionary definitions provide an accessible entry point for beginning to understand the term.

<p><b>sustainable</b> <i>adjective</i></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>1. able to continue over a period of time</li><li>2. causing little or no damage to the environment and therefore able to continue for a long time</li></ol> <p>Source: Cambridge Dictionaries Online <a href="http://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/sustainable">http://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/sustainable</a></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>1. able to be maintained at a certain rate or level</li><li>2. able to be upheld or defended</li></ol> <p>Source: Oxford Dictionaries <a href="http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/english/sustainable">http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/english/sustainable</a></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>1. able to be used without being completely used up or destroyed</li><li>2. involving methods that do not completely use up or destroy natural resources</li><li>3. able to last or continue for a long time</li></ol> <p>Source: Merriam-Webster <a href="http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/sustainable">http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/sustainable</a></p>
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The fact that there are several different definitions reveals that sustainability is quite an elastic term that is used in different contexts to mean slightly different things. While some approaches define sustainability in relatively narrow terms, focusing on something’s durability over time, others place much more emphasis on that something’s relationship with and contribution to the wider environment in which it lives. This is an important distinction that we return to later in this report.

It is also important to acknowledge that there are vast bodies of literature on sustainability across a wide range of academic disciplines. The fields of biology, geography, economics, charity studies and theology (to name just a few) all bring different perspectives to bear on what it means to talk of sustainability. Exploring these in depth was beyond the scope of a study like this, but at various stages in this report we will refer to different disciplinary perspectives – for example, in discussions about whether the sustainability of fxC should be conceived in primarily financial or ecological terms.

### 1.1.3 Sustainable fresh expressions of Church

One of the major research questions that this study sought to address was: ‘What does it mean to talk of sustainability in the context of fresh expressions of Church?’ As such, we did not enter the research with a fixed definition of what constitutes a sustainable fxC. Instead, we sought to explore the meaning of sustainability with a series of fxC leaders and conversation partners in the hope this might cast fresh light on what it means to talk of sustainability in the context of fxC.

To inform these conversations, we prepared a discussion paper, a copy of which can be found in Appendix 2. This briefly reviewed the classic ‘three-self’ principles (*self-financing*, *self-governing* and *self-reproducing*) which are often regarded as providing a helpful starting point for understanding sustainability and maturity within new churches. Consideration of the weaknesses and limitations of three-self thinking then led us to sketch out some initial thoughts on a potential alternative way of thinking about sustainability in the context of fxC. This suggested that a sustainable fxC might include the following four conceptual components or building blocks:

- Durability over time
- Organisational capacity
- Ecclesial maturity
- Fruit that lasts

We shared this provisional framework with our conversation partners, stressing that it was very much a work in progress, not a finished product. We invited their feedback on this and the wider question of what it means to talk of sustainability in the context of fxC. We present the outcomes of this in Chapter 3. Later in our Conclusion (Chapter 5), we also reflect further on the need for a more fully developed theology of sustainability for fxC.

## 2 Methodology

This chapter begins with a brief overview of our research methodology, before going on to provide a more detailed description of the two main research methods employed. The chapter then concludes by considering the strengths and limitations of our approach.

### 2.1 Overall approach

As already indicated in Chapter 1, the principal aim of this research was to explore two inter-related research questions:

- What does it mean to talk of sustainability in the context of fresh expressions of Church?
- What encourages and inhibits sustainability within fresh expressions of Church?

In investigating these questions, we opted for an approach that was:

- Exploratory – opening up an under-researched field for further enquiry
- Primarily qualitative – but backed up by and drawing on quantitative data from our other research projects<sup>3</sup>
- Appreciative – drawing out lessons about sustainability from fxC that have been going for some time

Two main research methods were used:

1. Interviews with 13 strategically placed conversation partners (leading thinkers, writers and commentators from within the fresh expressions movement and wider Church)
2. Case studies of 12 fxC within the dioceses of Derby and Liverpool

The data gathered took the form of interview transcripts (conversation partners and case studies), accompanied by observation notes and supporting documents for the case studies. Qualitative data analysis techniques were then used to explore what the material said about the study's main research questions. This involved highlighting excerpts that related to each of the research questions and organising these thematically using a system of codes and sub-codes.<sup>4</sup> The key themes identified through this process form the basis of the sub-headings used in Chapters 3 and 4.

### 2.2 Conversation partners (CP)

In beginning to explore the question 'What does it mean to talk of sustainability in the context of fresh expressions?', we wanted to draw on the wisdom and experience of some of the leading thinkers, writers and commentators on fxC from within the fresh expressions movement and wider Church. From our existing network of relationships and contacts, we identified 16 individuals or couples who we thought may be able to offer insight and clarity on the question of sustainability and contacted them to see if they

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<sup>3</sup> Our original discussion paper suggested there would also be a quantitative analysis strand, exploring what statistical data from other Church Army research projects has to say about the sustainability of fxC. With only limited resources devoted to this project, we have not had the capacity to deliver a separate quantitative strand. However, we refer to quantitative data from our other research projects at various points in this report.

<sup>4</sup> The coding process was assisted by a qualitative data analysis software package called Dedoose.  
[www.dedoose.com](http://www.dedoose.com)



would be willing to participate in the research. 13 agreed to take part and telephone or face-to-face interviews were arranged with the following:

- CP1 - Kevin Norris (Strategy Development Unit, Church House)
- CP2 - Selina Garner (Vicar and Pioneer Youth Minister)
- CP3 - Tim Ling (National Adviser, Continuing Ministerial Development, Ministry Division)
- CP4 - Stuart Murray Williams (Urban Expression and the Anabaptist Network)
- CP5 - Michael Moynagh (Wycliffe Hall and Fresh Expressions team)
- CP6 - Jonny Baker (CMS)
- CP7 - Cathy Ross (Ripon College, Cuddesdon)
- CP8 - Phil Potter (team leader, Fresh Expressions)
- CP9 - Beth Keith (Associate of Church Army's Research Unit; Doctoral researcher at Durham University)
- CP10 - Bob and Mary Hopkins (Anglican Church Planting Initiatives and Fresh Expressions team)
- CP11 - Sally Gaze (Diocese of Norwich; Convenor of rural fxC group)
- CP12 - Steven Croft (Bishop of Sheffield)
- CP13 - Neville Willerton (National Operations Manager, Church Army)<sup>5</sup>

In advance of the conversation, participants were sent a copy of the discussion paper in Appendix 2. The conversation that followed was then loosely structured around the following questions:

- How well does our provisional framework capture the core elements of sustainability for fresh expression of Church? Can sustainability be measured?
- What factors are you aware of that either encourage or inhibit sustainability?

Each conversation was quite different since some participants felt more qualified to comment on some questions than others. The conversations were not digitally recorded but detailed notes were taken throughout and written up immediately afterwards. In writing up this report, quotes attributed to particular conversation partners were then checked with the individuals involved.

### 2.3 Case studies (CS)

In exploring fxC's experiences of sustainability, we conducted 12 case studies of fxC across two English dioceses – the Diocese of Derby and the Diocese of Liverpool. Each case study generally involved:<sup>6</sup>

- An initial telephone interview with the leader (including checking and updating information about the fxC that we already had on file through our 'Strand 3b' research)
- A desk-based review of relevant documentary sources
- Participant observation at a visit to the fresh expression of Church's main gathering
- An in-depth interview or focus group with the main leader(s)
- An interview with a representative of the wider Church (e.g. the fxC's sending church or diocese)<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Though some conversation partners have changed roles since, we have listed the roles they were in at the time.

<sup>6</sup> Appendix 3 provides a more detailed description of each of these elements and a list of the interview questions asked. Note that a slightly different list of questions was asked in CS9 (Oaks) which served as a pilot.

<sup>7</sup> Main interview leaders were digitally recorded and transcribed. Wider Church representative interviews (often conducted over the phone) were not recorded in this way but detailed notes were taken and written up immediately afterwards.

Our main reasons for adopting this approach were as follows:

- We wanted to hear what fxC which had been going for some time were learning about sustainability
- Case studies provided a way of drawing on several different data sources to consider a particular fxC's experience from multiple vantage points
- Conducting 12 case studies enabled us to study a variety of different fxC types, resourcing models and contexts (while also being manageable in the time available)
- Selecting case studies from two dioceses enabled us to consider the experience of fxC in contrasting ecclesial environments
- In view of the findings of our previous research on fxC in the dioceses of Derby and Liverpool, we felt that these dioceses would provide a reasonable mix of different fxC types and contexts, as well as an insight into contrasting ecclesial environments<sup>8</sup>

6 case studies were completed in each of the participating dioceses. The criteria used for selecting them were as follows:

1. Meets Church Army's fxC criteria (10 indicators of an Anglican fresh expression of Church) - as verified through our previous survey work
2. More than 3 years old
3. A sample spread that is reasonably representative of fxC in the diocese, particularly with relation to:
  - Age
  - Type of fresh expression
  - Frequency of meeting
  - Geographic / social context
  - Leadership variables
  - Size of fresh expression
  - Growth patterns

The process for identifying and approaching case studies that met these criteria was essentially the same in each diocese. This involved:

- An initial meeting or phone conversation with someone responsible for fxC in each diocese
- Reviewing with that person the list of fxC in each diocese arising from our previous survey work (this had identified 46 fxC in the Diocese of Derby and 78 in the Diocese of Liverpool)
- Drawing up together a shortlist of potential case studies that appeared to offer the best possible way of achieving the above criteria
- Contacting potential case studies to see if they were willing to participate. This involved sending them an invitation email and information sheet (a copy of which can be found in Appendix 3) and then following this up with a phone conversation.

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<sup>8</sup> Detailed profiles of the fxC landscape in each of these dioceses are available from <http://www.churcharmy.org.uk/fxcresearch>

The 12 case study (CS) fxC that agreed to part in the study are listed below:

**Derby diocese**

**CS1 - Messy Church S45 (Pilsley)** - a monthly Messy Church in a former mining village.

**CS2- Messy Church D72b (Weston on Trent)** – a monthly Messy Church in rural Derbyshire

**CS3 - Edward Bear** – a midweek church for pre-school children and their parents / carers in the market town of Ashbourne

**CS4 – The Order of the Black Sheep** – a Chesterfield-based fxC for those who feel like the 'black sheep' of society

**CS5 - Friendship Group** – an older people's church in west Derby

**CS6 - Church But Not As You Know It** – a café-style 'seeker' service in the expanded village of Eckington. Due to an interregnum in the parent church, this fxC was not meeting at the time of our visit.

**Liverpool diocese**

**CS7 - Holy Trinity Redgate** - a long-established church plant (started in 1992) in Formby that meets in a school hall

**CS8 - Messy Church L25** – a monthly Messy Church in an urban priority area in south Liverpool

**CS9 - Oaks** – a 'community development plant' on a deprived estate in Skelmersdale

**CS10 - Open Table** – a fxC for Liverpool's lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) community

**CS11 - Ozzys** – a midweek fxC for primary school age children on the outskirts of Liverpool

**CS12 - Zone 2** - a café-style service for all ages at Liverpool Cathedral

The table over the page provides a brief comparison of some of the case study churches' distinguishing features.

Table 1 - Case study variables

ID - Name	Start date	fxC type <sup>9</sup>	Support type <sup>10</sup>	Geographical area	Relative affluence <sup>11</sup>	Congregation in 2011/12	Leader payment?
CS1 – Messy Church S45 (Pilsley)	2011	Messy Church	Runner	Expanded village	39%	35	Part of a wider paid role
CS2 - Messy Church DE72b (Weston on Trent)	2011	Messy Church	Runner	Rural	78%	40	Voluntary
CS3 - Edward Bear	1999	Church based on under 5s Child-focused church	Runner	Town	46%	40	Voluntary
CS4 - The Order of the Black Sheep	2011	Network church Special interest group New monastic community	Seed	Town	16%	40	Full-time dedicated role
CS5 - Friendship Group	1998	Older people’s church	Runner	Urban	29%	38	Voluntary
CS6 - Church But Not As You Know It	2010	Seeker Café church	Runner	Expanded village	81%	16	Part of a wider paid role
CS7 - Holy Trinity Redgate	1992	Traditional church plant	Runner	Private estate	78%	64	Voluntary
CS8 - Messy Church L25	2009	Messy Church	Runner	Urban priority area, Local & private estate	10%	78	Voluntary
CS9 - Oaks	2004	Community development plant Clusters, cell church, new monastic community	Seed	Urban priority area, New town	6%	57	Full-time dedicated role
CS10 - Open Table	2008	Special interest group Community development plant Network church	Runner	City centre	16%	15	Voluntary
CS11 - Ozzys	2006	Child-focused church	Runner	Urban priority area	5%	33	Voluntary
CS12 - Zone 2	2011	Multiple Sunday congregation Café church	Runner	City centre	16%	50	Part of a wider paid role

<sup>9</sup> For further explanation of these terms, see the glossary of our 2013 *Strand 3b* report (pp. 108-111).

<sup>10</sup> We explain these terms later in Section 3.1. See also p. 111 of the *Strand 3b* report.

<sup>11</sup> Source: [www.neighbourhood.statistics.gov.uk](http://www.neighbourhood.statistics.gov.uk). A high score denotes ‘most affluent’, while a low score denotes ‘most deprived’, based on the government’s English indices of deprivation 2015. The figures cited reflect the ‘Rank of Total Deprivation’ for the neighbourhood within which the fxC’s stated postcode falls. For example, Ozzys (CS11) was in one of the 5% most deprived neighbourhoods in England.

## 2.4 Strengths and limitations

As we explained at the beginning of this chapter, we have adopted an exploratory, appreciative and primarily qualitative approach in this research project. Given the level of resources available, the under-researched nature of the subject area and the inherent slippiness of the term 'sustainability', we consider this an appropriate approach for a study of this kind. This approach, however, has a number of limitations that need to be acknowledged. These include:

- **Limited sample size** – Although we have tried to include a variety of types of fxC, our sample of 12 case study fxC from two English dioceses does not necessarily provide a (statistically) representative sample of fxC nationally.<sup>1</sup>
- **Not studying fxC that have died** – One consequence of our decision to focus on what fxC which have been going for some time are learning about sustainability is that fxC which have died are not included in our study.
- **Researcher bias** – All research projects are vulnerable to the possibility of researcher bias and this study is no exception. The lead researcher and author of this report is a white middle class man with professional background in the charities sector who is a member of an inner city Anglican parish church. These and other identities and prior commitments will inevitably have had some impact on the way the research was conducted and how the results were interpreted. But this does not necessarily invalidate the research. It is increasingly recognised that no research is ever completely value-neutral and that, rather than compromising the research process, the researcher's prior assumptions, standpoint and position simply need to be acknowledged.<sup>2</sup>
- **Experimental approach** – We have conducted this research as a pilot study, tweaking and adapting the questions we asked as the study progressed. For a larger scale or quantitative study, a more consistent approach would be required.
- **A snapshot at one point in time** – Had we been able to track fxC's experiences over a given period of time, we would have gained further insights on sustainability.

In view of these limitations, the conclusion of this report suggests various avenues for further research. Readers may also need to be reminded that the particular focus of this study has been fxC within the Church of England. Though we hope that our findings will be of interest to those from other denominational contexts, they need to be read with this disclaimer in mind.

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<sup>1</sup> In this regard, we are aware that the fxC landscape in some English dioceses (particularly London and Southwark) is very different to that in Liverpool and Derby. See our individual diocesan reports at: <http://www.churcharmy.org.uk/fxcresearch>

<sup>2</sup> On the necessity of bias, see J. Swinton, "Where Is your church?' Moving toward a hospitable and sanctified ethnography', in P. Ward (Ed.), *Perspectives on Ecclesiology and Ethnography* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2012), pp. 71-92.

### 3 What does it mean to talk of sustainability in the context of fresh expressions of Church?

In this chapter, we present our key findings with relation to the first of the two overarching research questions that this study sought to address: ‘What does it mean to talk of sustainability within the context of fxC?’ Here we will explain how the 12 case study churches seemed to understand sustainability while also drawing on insights from the 13 conversation partners. In response to these findings, we will go on to suggest that there needs to be a significant shift of focus in conversations about the sustainability of fxC. Rather than focusing solely on whether particular fxC are sustainable or not, talk of sustainability needs to be broadened out in order to give greater recognition and acknowledgement to the wider ecclesial environment within which fxC are sustained.

#### 3.1 Seeds and runners

A key distinction which we refer to at various points in this chapter is between fxC which are ‘seeds’ and those that are ‘runners’. As we will go on to see, the distinction between ‘seeds’ and ‘runners’ appears to have a crucial bearing on what it means to talk of sustainability in the context of fxC. The text box below provides a brief explanation of these horticultural analogies.

##### **Types of support to fresh expressions of Church**

The *Breaking New Ground* and *Mission-shaped Church* reports both used the horticultural vocabulary of ‘runners’, ‘grafts’, ‘transplants’ and ‘seeds’ to distinguish between four different categories of church plant. Of these, two appear particularly relevant to fxC. Within the 10 dioceses surveyed for our 2013 Strand 3b report, the overwhelming majority of fxC uncovered were either runners (91.3%) or seeds (6.2%). The following definitions are taken from the glossary of that report (p. 111).

**Runner.** This term, taken from the propagating habit of strawberry plants, normally means the fresh expression of Church started within the parish of its sending church and has strong existing supportive links with that church.

**Seed.** This is based on a horticultural analogy by which small seeds can be blown on the wind some distance to start a new plant. It means the situation when people are sent out, and in that sense with support, but usually have to move area and house to begin a new work elsewhere, with permission, but largely on their own.

Just 2 of the 12 case studies included in this research were seeds - The Order of the Black Sheep (CS4) and Oaks (CS9). The remaining 10 were runners.<sup>3</sup> Interestingly, the two seeds in our sample had very different financial models and governance arrangements to the other case study fxC. These were the only case study churches with formal legal status, a full-time paid leader dedicated solely to the fxC and their own dedicated building. Throughout this chapter, we explore the significance of these distinguishing features for understandings of sustainability. We begin by considering the relationship between sustainability and permanence.

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<sup>3</sup> In this regard, our sample is broadly consistent with the balance of seeds and runners across the 10 dioceses surveyed for our 2013 *Strand 3b* report. Just 6.2% were seeds, while 91.3% were runners (p. 27). It is important to acknowledge that the picture in Southwark and London dioceses, which we surveyed in 2014 and 2015, is considerably different. Here, we found considerably more ‘grafts’ and ‘transplants’ than in other English dioceses. Section 5.7 of our 2016 report, *The day of small things*, provides updated national figures that reflect this.

### 3.2 Is sustainability all about permanence?

One of the questions we asked when interviewing leaders of case study churches was: 'Do you see this fxC as something permanent or only for a season?'

Few respondents answered this question in completely 'zero sum' terms (i.e. only emphasising permanence or only seasonality). But some fxC appeared to have a leaning towards permanence, while others seemed more open to seasonality.

#### Relative permanence

Within leader interviews, 6 of the 12 case study churches emphasised the relative permanence of their fxC. Two of these were the 'seed' fxC mentioned above. Here, it would seem that the significant level of investment required in establishing a completely new work somewhere else (with its own legal status) was a feature that led to sustainability being linked to an emphasis on permanence:<sup>4</sup>

'From my point of view, I always thought it would be permanent... I've always felt this wasn't short term, that it was a long term calling to a place that needed you to be there a long time... I was always thinking it was a permanent [church] plant. I didn't anticipate starting something that was going to stop.'

(Leader interview, CS9 – Oaks)

Four of the 'runners' (CS 1, 3, 8 and 11) also emphasised relative permanence in interviews. Here, however, relative permanence was attributed not to the establishment of a completely new entity but to becoming accepted as an integral part of its sending church:

'It [Messy Church] is part of what we do. Sometimes there is a natural life cycle of things... But I can't foresee it [stopping] at the moment. As far as I can see, it's part of our church. And it's valued...'

(Leader interview, CS8 – Messy Church L25)

#### Questioning permanence

Other participants placed considerably less emphasis on permanence, appearing more open to the possibility that their fxC would not continue (in its current form at least) indefinitely. As the examples below show, a variety of different reasons for this were cited:

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<sup>4</sup> Given our small sample size, it would be wrong to draw too many conclusions from this about seed fxC in general. Further research is still needed to explore the extent to which seeds differ from runners in their financial models and governance arrangements.

### **A bridge into other congregations?**

'The things we've done so far have brought people to God... Some of them have gone on to become members of the [sending church] congregation. Some have gone on to join other churches. Though some haven't, I don't think anybody's had a bad experience... And the fact that it hasn't continued into something [permanent] isn't necessarily a problem.'

Leader interview, CS6 – Church But Not As You Know It (a fxC currently 'on hold' due to interregnum in the sending parish)

### **Ageing membership**

Friendship Group (CS5) and Holy Trinity Redgate (CS7) were the two most long-standing case study churches, established in 1998 and 1992 respectively. Both engaged mainly with older people and reported that their number of members was slowly declining. In each case, this was attributed to an ageing membership base and difficulties recruiting sufficient new members to offset those they had lost through death or ill health. In view of such trends, leaders of both fxC acknowledged that they may not be able to go on indefinitely.

### **Not needed indefinitely?**

'Long-term, ideally our job is to make ourselves redundant. That's the "promised land" picture - that a ministry like ours doesn't need to exist.'

Leader interview, CS10 – Open Table (a fxC for LGBT people)

### **Evolving into something different?**

'I wouldn't ever say it's just for a season in the sense that there isn't a fixed end date. But it will change and become something different... Something will exist. But whether it's Messy Church or something slightly broader as an expression of Church, I don't know.'

Leader interview, CS2 – Weston on Trent Messy Church

These comments find resonance with insights offered by some of our conversation partners who also questioned the necessity of permanence for fxC. Sally Gaze (CP11), for example, observed that within rural contexts there is often a pattern of fxC working for a season then ceasing to be viable and returning back to the parish church. Expecting permanence in such contexts may be both unrealistic and unhelpful. Similarly, Jonny Baker (CP6) suggested that certain types of fxC are more likely to be seasonal, for example those arising from workplace ministry or town centre chaplaincy. In view of these considerations, Michael Moynagh (CP5) suggested that it may be more helpful to think of sustainability in terms of 'fruit' and 'flows' (into other Christian communities). As Moynagh explains in his book *Church for Every Context*:

'Because some new churches will be seasonal, the accent would be on the fruitfulness of the community while it lasts rather than on permanence... [If] an initiative comes to the end of its natural life, members will be supported in finding an alternative community. In some contexts, sustainability will be more about maintaining church ties during transitions than durability.'<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> M. Moynagh, *Church for Every Context: An Introduction to Theology and Practice* (Norwich: SCM, 2012), p. 407.



In keeping with this vocabulary of fruit and flows, another conversation partner, Phil Potter (CP8) mentioned several examples of fxC that had ended either transitioning into a new fxC or flowing into (and bringing life to) an existing Christian community. In this sense, the 'death' of a fxC may not always be a bad thing.<sup>6</sup> Bishop Steven Croft (CP12) expressed similar ideas, drawing on Bob Jackson's analogy of the Church as a garden<sup>7</sup> to suggest that not all fxC need to be permanent:

*In a garden, there will be some trees, some bushes, some perennials, and some things that are only for a season. We need to look at the ecology of church life across a whole region. Within a 'mixed ecology', we will need some points of stability (trees). But it would be wrong to expect more fluid or seasonal expressions to become trees.*<sup>8</sup>

(CP12, Steven Croft)

In view of these insights, several conversation partners went on to suggest that within conversations about the sustainability of fxC, it may be more helpful to think about the sustainability of the overall fxC landscape within a particular area or region rather than expecting every individual fxC to be sustainable on its own.

As Steven Croft observed, these ideas find expression in the Diocese of Sheffield's vision statement. Rather than focusing on the sustainability of individual congregations, the emphasis here is on growing 'a sustainable network' of Christian communities (including inherited mode churches and fxC).

'The Diocese of Sheffield is called to grow a sustainable network of Christ-like, lively and diverse Christian communities in every place which are effective in making disciples and in seeking to transform our society and God's world.'

[www.sheffield.anglican.org](http://www.sheffield.anglican.org)

#### A note of caution about seasonality

As a research unit, we find ourselves broadly sympathetic with many of the reasons for questioning permanence outlined above. We acknowledge there are at least some good reasons why some fxC may be only for a season and that in this context it may be more appropriate to think of sustainability in terms of 'fruit' and 'flows'. As a counter-balance to all this, however, we would also caution against uttering the words 'only for a season' (within the context of fxC) too readily. fxC are young churches that need to be given enough time and support in order to thrive. With a strong emphasis on seasonality, and the accompanying expectation that fxC may be short-lived, comes the risk that something which is precious-yet-fragile may be discarded too easily. The wider Church does not take the decision to close inherited mode congregations lightly (often doing everything it can to maintain them). The same should be true of fxC if they are to be taken seriously as church.

Similar sentiments were expressed by one of the leaders of Zone 2 (CS12). Responding to another leader's suggestion that at some point in the future there may no longer be a need for Zone 2, he commented:

'I kind of agree with you in the sense that I'm not assuming Zone 2 will be here in the year 3000. And it might morph or change its shape. But surely if you've got a place that is offering that type of community... I'd be really unhappy for the cathedral to lose having that sort of a thing.'

(Leader interview, CS12 – Zone 2)

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<sup>6</sup> We acknowledge the need for further research on this in our conclusion.

<sup>7</sup> B. Jackson, *Hope For the Church: Contemporary strategies for growth* (London: Church House, 2002), p. 132.

<sup>8</sup> The use of italics here and elsewhere indicates this is a paraphrase, not a direct quotation.

### 3.3 Three-self thinking revisited

We now turn to consider whether the classic ‘three-self’ principles are a help or a hindrance in discussions about sustainability and fxC. As we briefly explained in Chapter 1, three-self thinking (which was originally developed by the nineteenth century missionary strategists Henry Venn and Rufus Anderson) suggests that in order to become sustainable missionary ventures needs to become **self-financing**, **self-governing** and **self-reproducing**.<sup>9</sup>

Historically, these principles have often been seen as a benchmark within the church planting movement and more recent thinking on fxC has drawn on them as well.<sup>10</sup> In our previous discussion paper (see Appendix 2), however, we highlighted that three-self thinking has been criticised for over-emphasising independence and under-stating the case for mutual inter-dependence between ‘inherited mode’ churches and fxC.<sup>11</sup> The discussion paper also sketched out some initial thoughts on a possible alternative framework for conceptualising a sustainable fxC and sought our conversation partners’ feedback on this.

The conversation partners’ feedback on our discussion paper was broadly supportive and encouraging, with a number of participants saying they thought we were ‘onto something’ by trying to move beyond the narrowness of purist three-self thinking. Some also suggested that three-self thinking:

- Is a legacy of the classical church planting movement and is too imperialist and colonial
- Tries to get new churches to jump through hoops that many established churches cannot reach
- Overlooks the importance of being part of a wider denomination or family of churches

Other conversation partners, however, cautioned against ‘throwing the baby out with the bathwater’, suggesting that the three-self principles continue to be helpful, particularly when evaluating certain types of fxC (e.g. traditional church plants and fxC with a Bishop’s Mission Order). One also commented that within our discussion paper there was ‘not enough about money’, which in part was a consequence of attempting to move beyond three-self thinking.

Some conversation partners also observed that in our discussion paper the focus was still very much on whether an individual fxC is sustainable or not. As a potential alternative (and building on insights shared around seasonality and permanence), they suggested that there needs to be much greater focus on the sustainability of the wider ecclesial environment or eco-system within which individual fxC are sustained.

Building on all this, we spend the rest of this chapter revisiting each of the three-self principles in the light of the experience of the case study churches. Looking at the areas of finance, governance and reproduction in turn, we assess the usefulness and relevance of three-self thinking and consider whether each of its components could be broadened out to place greater emphasis on inter-dependence.

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<sup>9</sup> For a helpful overview and critique of three-self thinking, see M. Moynagh, *Church for Every Context: An Introduction to Theology and Practice* (London: SCM, 2012), pp. 405-408. As Moynagh acknowledges, the three-self principles are sometimes accompanied by a ‘fourth self’ – self-theologising.

<sup>10</sup> See, for example, *Mission-shaped Church*, pp. 121-123.

<sup>11</sup> In the following article, Claire Dalpra summarises the case for understanding maturity and sustainability in terms of inter-dependence (rather than independence), drawing on the lifecycle thinking of Betty Carter and Monica McGoldrick: C. Dalpra, ‘How is maturity to be understood?’, *The Sheffield Centre Research Bulletin*, Summer 2011.

<http://www.churcharmy.org.uk/archivedbulletins>

### 3.4 Financial sustainability

A purist interpretation of the three-self principles would suggest that sustainable fxC need to be completely self-financing. In order to assess whether or not this is a realistic and appropriate expectation, we analysed the income and expenditure of the case study churches and asked fxC leaders and wider Church representatives about their perspective on financial sustainability.

Across the 12 case study churches, we found a variety of financial models at work. The matrix below attempts to classify these, distinguishing between staffing costs and premises costs.

Figure 1 – Financial models

<b>Staffing costs</b>	<b>High</b> (fxC has paid full-time leader)		CS4 The Order of the Black Sheep CS9 Oaks	
	<b>Medium</b> (leader paid as part of a wider role)	CS1 Messy Church S45 (Pilsley) CS6 Church But Not As You Know It CS12 Zone 2		
	<b>Low</b> (unpaid leadership)	CS3 Edward Bear CS5 Friendship Group CS8 Messy Church L25 CS10 Open Table CS11 Ozzys	CS2 Messy Church DE72b (Weston on Trent) CS7 Holy Trinity Redgate	
		<b>Low</b> (free use of sending church's building)	<b>Medium</b> (hires other buildings on an hour-by-hour basis)	<b>High</b> (fxC rents or owns its own dedicated building)
		<b>Premises costs</b>		

At first glance, the gaps in this matrix suggest a clearly discernible gulf between the financial model employed by the two 'high-high' cost fxC (CS4 and CS9) and the other 10 case study churches. The analysis that follows explores in more depth contrasting perspectives on financial sustainability within each of the quadrants.

#### 'High-high' cost fxC

The two fxC in this category are the two 'seeds' referred to at the beginning of this chapter, The Order of the Black Sheep (CS4) and Oaks (CS9). Both had paid full-time staff and their own dedicated building. As one leader acknowledged, these were 'hugely expensive experiment[s]' (Leader interview, CS4 – The Order of the Black Sheep). But substantial funding from the diocese and other sources had been given because of the under-resourced nature of the mission contexts – alternative subcultures (CS4) and a deprived estate (CS9) and the challenges inherent in pioneering something new there.

Member giving was a feature of church life in both seed fxC and each was paying its host diocese a negotiated parish share. But both acknowledged that the amount they were contributing fell a long way short from covering the full cost to the diocese. On the surface, this would appear to suggest that financially resource intensive fxC

like these fail the 'self-financing' criteria and could be deemed unsustainable.<sup>12</sup> However, it needs to be noted that this is not untypical of the situation of many 'inherited mode' parish churches in challenging contexts which are also financially dependent on their diocese. Reflecting on this, one fxC leader commented:

'Do I think we'll ever pay the diocese back the full cost of a minister? Not at the moment. But who knows? But do I think we're self-financing? Well if the same as any other church in a deprived area, yes. We're already there.'

(Leader interview, CS9 – Oaks)

Such insights challenge the assumption that financial sustainability should be equated with being completely self-sufficient. If left entirely to their own devices, many parish churches would be financially unviable. They are sustainable only as part of a wider whole. We suggest that the sustainability of source resource-intensive fxC needs to be understood in similar terms.

#### 'Low-low' cost fxC

At the other end of the spectrum, 5 of the case study fxC fell into the 'low-low cost' category – they had unpaid leaders and no (direct) premises costs. These were generally much easier to (financially) sustain than the 'high-high cost' examples considered above. But even with these 'cheaper' models, the extent to which they could be considered completely 'self-financing' is debatable.

Though 4 of the 5 case studies in this category invited some form of financial contribution or donation from members, one (CS11 – Ozzys) did not. This was attributed to the fact that it does not cost a lot of money to run Ozzys (they receive lots of donations in kind) and the fact that its members are all children (who are considered 'a bit young' for talk of giving and tithing).

In the other four 'low cost' case studies, the consensus among leaders was that members' financial contributions were more or less enough to cover the direct cost of running the activities (though given the relatively small amounts of money involved, income and expenditure were often not closely monitored). But this does not necessarily imply that these fxC are completely self-financing. A 'full cost recovery'<sup>13</sup> approach would also take into account indirect premises costs such as heating and lighting. In this sense, the fact that these fxC are not charged for the use of church premises may be seen to suggest they are not quite as 'low cost' as they initially appear. To one degree or another, they are still being subsidised by the sending church.

When asked about this, most sending church representatives we spoke to said they had no intention or desire to charge fxC for using their facilities. One incumbent, for example, commented: 'We see Friendship Group as part of our mission as a church and want to support it' (Wider Church representative, CS5 – Friendship Group). Within some interpretations of the three-self principles, this might be said to be a sign of unhealthy dependence. An alternative (and, in our view, more compelling) approach, however, is to see this as inter-dependence that needs to be recognised and made visible.

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<sup>12</sup> The Order of the Black Sheep had also attempted to run a café as a social enterprise, but this had proved unsustainable financially.

<sup>13</sup> 'Full cost recovery' is a term that funding bodies sometimes use to describe the full or total cost of delivering a project. This takes into consideration the 'indirect' or 'overhead' costs associated with running a particular activity (e.g. rent, utilities and administrative support) as well as the more obvious direct costs. See: [www.fundingcentral.org.uk/Page.aspx?SP=6238](http://www.fundingcentral.org.uk/Page.aspx?SP=6238) and [www.biglotteryfund.org.uk/funding/funding-guidance/applying-for-funding/full-cost-recovery](http://www.biglotteryfund.org.uk/funding/funding-guidance/applying-for-funding/full-cost-recovery).

### 'Low-medium' cost fxC

Similar dynamics were also observed with the 3 fxC that had 'low' premises costs and 'medium' staffing costs (CS1, CS6 and CS12). Member giving and donations were generally sufficient to cover direct running costs, but the provision of 'free' meeting space and leadership / staffing support (e.g. someone who helped lead the fxC as part of a wider paid role)<sup>14</sup> meant that these fxC were effectively subsidised by their sending church. To reiterate the point already made, this is not necessarily a bad thing, but it exposes the difficulties involved in assessing whether a fxC is (and should be) self-financing.

### 'Medium-low' cost fxC

Of the various financial models considered, the 2 fxC that had 'medium' premises costs and 'low' (non-existent) staffing costs (CS2 and CS7) were arguably the most financially sustainable (in full cost recovery terms). Meeting in secular venues and with unpaid leadership, they were in no way financially supported by their sending church. And member giving and donations were sufficient to cover what limited costs they had.

### 'Self-financing' revisited

In the light of all this, our main conclusions regarding financial sustainability are as follows:

- Assessing whether a fxC is completely self-financing is a complex undertaking – many 'low-low cost' and 'low-medium cost' fxC are more expensive to run (in full-cost recovery terms) than initially appears.
- Nevertheless, it is evident that 'high-high cost' fxC (those with their own dedicated staff and buildings) are much harder to sustain financially than fxC with other financial models. Though neither of the two 'seed' fxC in this category from our sample were completely self-supporting, further research with a larger sample would be needed to discern whether this is typical of other financially resource-intensive fxC.<sup>15</sup>
- Whether all fxC should be expected to be (completely) 'self-financing' is debatable. Within other research projects, we have employed a more flexible interpretation of the term, suggesting that a healthy fxC should take responsibility for how it is financed and not be overly dependent on its sending church for financial resource (see text box on the following page). But even this looser approach is vulnerable to criticism on the grounds that determining whether a particular fxC is 'overly dependent' on its sending church involves a considerable degree of subjective value judgement.
- This study has revealed that many fxC are financially sustainable only as part of a wider whole. In this sense, too rigid an adherence to 'self-financing' vocabulary may be unhelpful. Recognising that different contexts require different levels of resourcing, we suggest financial inter-dependence may sometimes be a more appropriate goal than independence. Given this, the language of financial viability may need to be complemented by that of visibility (making the full cost of a fxC and the level of inter-dependence visible, for example in annual accounts).

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<sup>14</sup> For two of the three fxC in this category (CS 1 and CS6), the leader paid as part of a wider role was a vicar. The third, Zone 2, was supported by two paid staff, each of whom also had a wider role in Liverpool Cathedral: a canon missionary and part-time mission pastor.

<sup>15</sup> It is also important to acknowledge that a fxC's financial model may change over time, becoming progressively less resource-intensive. Conversations with The Order of the Black Sheep, for example, suggest that having their own dedicated premises was critical in this fxC's first phase of development but may not be essential in the longer term.

- That said, we also acknowledge that one way or another a fxC's costs still need to be paid for. Given limited resources, this will have a bearing on how many 'high cost' fxC the wider Church will be able to sustain. We return to these issues later in the next chapter (Section 4.3.2) when we reflect on different models of resourcing.

**A looser interpretation of 'self-financing'**

'All healthy fresh expressions of Church should take responsibility for how they are financed. Only occasionally will this mean them financing a full-time stipendiary minister of their own, but it could mean negotiating an appropriate diocesan parish share, bearing in mind they deal with a large proportion of newcomers and as has been said, 'The last part of a person to be converted is their wallet.' For fresh expressions of Church planted within a parish context, 'self-financing' instincts include having visible accounts, keeping costs low, being led by self-supporting leaders and encouraging a culture of regular giving (even if modest to begin with). The key is that a fresh expression should not be overly dependent on its sending church for financial resource, and whatever degree of dependency exists should be financially visible.'

(From the glossary of our 2016 report, *The day of small things*)

### 3.5 Sustainable governance

A purist interpretation of the three-self principles would suggest that all fxC need to take responsibility for their own governance and decision-making. As we will see, whether or not this is a realistic and desirable expectation depends on whether this is conceived in terms of formal or informal self-governance.

Table 2 - Formal governance

Participant ID	Name	Legal status of fxC	Formal governing body
CS1	Messy Church S45 (Pilsley)	None	DCC of sending church
CS2	Messy Church DE72b (Weston on Trent)	None	Other
CS3	Edward Bear	None	PCC of sending church
CS4	The Order of the Black Sheep	Bishop's Mission Order, registered charity and company limited by guarantee	Mission Order Council and board of trustees
CS5	Friendship Group	None	PCC of sending church
CS6	Church But Not As You Know It	None	PCC of sending church
CS7	Holy Trinity Redgate	None	PCC of sending church
CS8	Messy Church L25	None	PCC of sending church
CS9	Oaks	Conventional District (DCC of sending church) <sup>16</sup>	Constituted planning group
CS10	Open Table	None	PCC of 'host church'
CS11	Ozzys	None	PCC of sending church
CS12	Zone 2	None	Cathedral chapter

The table above summarises the formal governance structures of the 12 case study churches. This shows that few fxC are formally self-governing in the sense of being completely separate and autonomous from their sending church. Only two of the case study churches (the two 'seeds') had their own legal status and even one of these still (technically) functioned as a Conventional District of its sending church. 8 of the remaining 10 were still formally governed by and accountable to the governing body of their sending church (PCC, DCC or cathedral chapter). The other two had slightly more unusual governance arrangements.<sup>17</sup>

Although few of the case studies were formally self-governing, evidence of informal self-governance was observed in them all.

<sup>16</sup> Oaks is technically a DCC (District Church Council) of its sending church 10 miles away but is effectively autonomous and has its own constituted planning group.

<sup>17</sup> Weston on Trent Messy Church (CS2) was now recognised as a fxC within its benefice, distinct from the parish church with which it had initially been associated. It was now effectively autonomous but, because the benefice is not a legal body, it reported annually to the APCM of another church within the benefice. Open Table (CS10) initially emerged out of a 'Changing Attitude' group that involved Christians of several different denominations but was not affiliated to any particular existing congregation. As such, Open Table does not have a 'sending church'. In this context, it is more appropriate to speak of it having a 'host church' or 'adoptive church' (St Bride's Liverpool) that now provides a home for Open Table.

Table 3 - Informal governance

Participant ID	Name	Leadership team or planning group
CS1	Messy Church S45 (Pilsley)	✓
CS2	Messy Church DE72b (Weston on Trent)	✓
CS3	Edward Bear	✓
CS4	The Order of the Black Sheep	✓
CS5	Friendship Group	✓
CS6	Church But Not As You Know It	✓
CS7	Holy Trinity Redgate	✓
CS8	Messy Church L25	✓
CS9	Oaks	✓
CS10	Open Table	In development
CS11	Ozzys	✓
CS12	Zone 2	✓

11 of the 12 had some kind of leadership team, planning group or committee that took lead responsibility for most aspects of the fxC, and there were plans to establish one in the 12<sup>th</sup>. These groups varied from case study to case study in a number of respects, including size (from 3 to 9), frequency of meeting, formality and level of contact with the official governing body (PCC or equivalent). However, most reported being allowed a considerable degree of freedom and autonomy alongside appropriate integration and cross-linking with their parent church. All this appears consistent with the wider interpretation of ‘self-governance’ that we have employed within other recent studies:

‘All healthy fresh expressions of Church should be able to take responsibility for their own strategic decisions within the overall governance structures of the parish church. Self-governing does not necessarily or usually mean the fresh expression will be utterly independent of its parent church. “Self-governing” instincts include growing a stable leadership team (that can survive the departure of a founding leader or a change of incumbent), planning for the longer-term and gaining representation on appropriate church councils e.g. PCC or deanery synod.’<sup>18</sup>

#### ‘Self-governing’ revisited

In summary then, the vast majority of Anglican fxC studied in this report were not aiming to be completely self-governing.<sup>19</sup> They experienced a complex relationship of inter-dependence with the parish, diocese or other ecclesial body with which they were connected.<sup>20</sup> As such, their sustainability was intimately connected to that of the wider whole. However, this is not to say that fxC’s relationship with their parent church was always straightforward. As we consider more fully in the next chapter, this relationship was sometimes fruitful and sometimes a cause of tension.

<sup>18</sup> From the glossary (Appendix 2) of our 2016 report, *The day of small things*.

<sup>19</sup> In this sense, the experience of fxC is not dissimilar to that of parish churches.

<sup>20</sup> It is important to stress that even the two ‘seeds’ emphasised the importance of continued inter-connectedness with wider Anglican structures.



### 3.6 Self-reproduction and fruit that lasts

A purist interpretation of the three-self principles would suggest that all fxC need to be 'self-reproducing' in the sense of planting or giving birth to further new churches. Across the 12 case study churches, we found mixed evidence of this.<sup>21</sup> While some had already helped to establish further fxC, others had no intention to reproduce. The two case study churches that appeared to have greatest experience of self-reproduction are briefly profiled below.

**Zone 2 (CS12)** was the only case study that had tried to multiply by launching a new congregation in the same locality. The establishment of a second Zone 2 (meeting in the same venue but at a different time of day) had been triggered by increasing numbers attending the original Sunday morning gathering and the prospect of outgrowing the room they met in. The new congregation met for a year but came to an end in April 2014 when two of its key leaders needed to step down due to changes in circumstance.

Alongside this, the leaders of Zone 2 also expressed self-reproducing instincts by:

- Advising other churches looking to develop something similar to Zone 2 (two examples of this were reported and more were intended)
- Setting up a website to share Zone 2 resources (e.g. service outlines, creative prayer activities) with other churches looking to develop an all age, café style worship service. See: [www.oldoakresources.com](http://www.oldoakresources.com)

**Open Table (CS10)** had not directly planted any further fxC themselves but reported considerable interest from LGBT Christians and churches in other localities who were interested in reproducing what they saw at Open Table.

In some cases, this simply involved sharing Open Table's experience with people who came to visit who have then since 'gone away and done something similar'. In other cases, however, this has also involved agreeing to the reproduction of the Open Table brand and visual identity.

At the time of our visit, this fxC was helping a United Reformed Church in Warrington prepare for the launch of a new monthly inclusive service under the 'Open Table' banner. Similar opportunities in other localities were also being explored.

Both these fxC seem to have developed a model that other churches are keen to reproduce. However, comparison of these two case studies suggest that they differ from each other in some significant respects. Zone 2's ability to play a wider resourcing role is attributable in part to its close relationship with the Joshua Centre for Pioneer Ministry (a partnership between Liverpool diocese and Liverpool Cathedral focused on starting new congregations)<sup>22</sup> and in part to its level of resourcing. Although Zone 2's staffing costs were only designated 'medium' (leader paid as part of a wider role) by the matrix of financial models in Section 3.4, it is significant to note that two members of cathedral staff played an active role in this fxC – a canon missionary who has led on

<sup>21</sup> This is consistent with the findings of our 2013 *Strand 3b* report. Working with a looser interpretation of 'self-reproducing' (see text box at end of this section), this found that 37.5% of fxC surveyed had self-reproducing intentions. *Strand 3b* report, p. 47.

<sup>22</sup> See: <http://www.liverpool.anglican.org/Joshua-Centre>

advising other churches and a (part-time) mission pastor who administers the ‘Old Oak Resources’ website. Open Table, in contrast, appear to have been less deliberate about reproduction. When we originally surveyed this fxC back in 2011, they reported no intention to become self-reproducing. But as their journey has continued, Open Table has attracted the attention of others who are looking to develop fxC with LGBT communities. In this sense, something reproducible seems to have been stumbled upon rather than deliberately sought. And while Zone 2’s reproduction has been greatly helped by paid leaders, Open Table seem to have developed something reproducible with significantly less staffing and finance.

This mention of contrasting financial models leads us on to consideration of the two ‘high-high’ cost ‘seed’ fxC in our sample. Both Oaks (CS9) and The Order of the Black Sheep (CS4) had generated further outreach projects, but neither had yet planted or given birth to a further fxC. The Oaks leaders were very keen to establish a further fxC but acknowledged that the high financial cost of their original financial model may be potentially prohibitive:

‘The only thing on my mind that way at the moment is how do we plant next? Does that involve a small team without lots of start-up costs or does that mean we need another community house?’  
 (Leader interview, CS49 – The Order of the Black Sheep)

The Order of the Black Sheep (CS4) was much younger than Oaks and, perhaps as a consequence of this, had some reservations about reproducing too quickly:

‘We had someone in Brazil asking if they could do an Order of the Black Sheep and because it was very early days we said no.... In a sense we still haven't found our own identity enough in order to be able to translate it somewhere else. So I think the possibility's there but it's not there yet.’  
 (Leader interview, CS4 – The Order of the Black Sheep)

The Order of the Black Sheep also had some uncertainty about the replicability of the fxC’s original financial model (which involved renting town centre shop-front premises). Nevertheless, it was suggested that there may still be something reproducible within this fxC’s identity, name and ethos.

Consideration of the remaining eight case studies (all of which were runners) reveals that most had no intention to reproduce further fxC. The only exception to this was Weston on Trent Messy Church (CS2). Here, various other gatherings and discipleship groups had already begun to develop. And the leader discussed the possibility of Messy Church evolving into some kind of wider expression of Church with multiple gatherings.

Intriguingly, none of the five case study fxC that had, to varying degrees, engaged in reproduction (CS2, CS4, CS9, CS10, CS12) had what might be seen as a conventional parent-child relationship with a parish church. The tables that follow illustrate this using information about governing bodies taken from Table 2 in Section 3.5.

*Table 4 – fxC seeking to establish further fxC*

<b>Participant ID</b>	<b>Name</b>	<b>Formal governing body</b>
CS2	Messy Church DE72b (Weston on Trent)	Other
CS4	The Order of the Black Sheep	Mission Order Council and board of trustees
CS9	Oaks	Constituted planning group
CS10	Open Table	PCC of ‘host church’
CS12	Zone 2	Cathedral chapter

Table 5 – fxC not seeking to establish further fxC

Participant ID	Name	Formal governing body
CS1	Messy Church S45 (Pilsley)	DCC of sending church
CS3	Edward Bear	PCC of sending church
CS5	Friendship Group	PCC of sending church
CS6	Church But Not As You Know It	PCC of sending church
CS7	Holy Trinity Redgate	PCC of sending church
CS8	Messy Church L25	PCC of sending church
CS11	Ozzys	PCC of sending church

Table 5 shows that the seven case study churches which were not seeking to reproduce further fxC all occurred within a parish (or in one case district) context and remained closely connected with their parent church. Given our limited sample size, we do not know whether this picture is typical of fxC more generally. At the very least, though, these emerging findings do raise questions about whether expectations around self-reproduction (in the sense of planting further fxC) provide appropriate evaluation criteria for all parish-based fxC.

Within our other recent research projects, we have employed a somewhat looser interpretation of ‘self-reproducing’, suggesting that this can be expressed in a variety of ways:

‘All healthy expressions of Church, fresh or inherited, should include the potential for reproduction. More than growth of the fresh expression of Church by addition (“producing” more Christians), “self-reproducing” instincts go further to seek developments in nurturing further leaders or multiplying ministry gifts, seeing the fruit of holiness in members’ lives, fostering vocations, establishing new mission projects, and in time planting further fresh expressions of Church.’<sup>23</sup>

This goes some way to addressing the concern that, as a legacy of the classical church planting movement, ‘self-reproduction’ puts inappropriate expectations on parish-based fxC. However, within our previous discussion paper (see Appendix 2), we also suggested that ultimately what matters is bearing ‘fruit that lasts’ (following John 15:16) and that, even interpreted more loosely, the capacity to reproduce is only one indicator of this. Other potential indicators of long-term fruitfulness the discussion paper suggested included ‘growing the church’ (particularly new Christians), ‘signs of the kingdom’ (including social transformation), becoming more Christ-like (the fruits of the Spirit) and contributing to the wider Church.<sup>24</sup> Comments from some conversation partners also added weight to the idea that sustainable fruitfulness cannot be easily measured or restricted to any particular list of indicators. Building on the insight that sustainability should not always be judged in terms of organisational permanence (see Section 3.2), some went on to suggest various other types of sustainable fruitfulness that can outlive a fxC which has died:

- Making ‘lifelong disciples’ and ‘sustainable Christians’
- The partnerships and culture that are left
- The quality of the theology that has been generated
- Flows into other Christian communities and resourcing the wider Church
- Leaving behind sustainable patterns of evangelism

<sup>23</sup> From the glossary (Appendix 2) of our 2016 report, *The day of small things*.

<sup>24</sup> We certainly found evidence of these across the case study churches, but evaluating fxC against such a broad set of criteria was beyond the scope of this study.

## 'Self-reproducing' revisited

In the light of all this, our main conclusions regarding self-reproduction and fruitfulness are as follows:

- **The idea that sustainability should be judged in terms of capacity to reproduce (in the sense of planting or giving birth to further new churches) appears more relevant to some fxC than others.** To risk making an over-generalisation from a limited sample,<sup>25</sup> it would seem that this principle may be more likely to connect with seed fxC (as in CS4 and CS9), some 'special interest group' fxC (as in CS4 and CS10), higher cost fxC with paid staff (as in CS4, CS9 and CS12),<sup>26</sup> and runners with a wider resourcing role (as in CS12) or considerable freedom or autonomy from their parent church (as in CS2 and CS10). It is less likely to connect with more conventional parish-based runners that remain closely connected to their parent church.
- Expanding the definition of 'self-reproducing' as we did in our *Strand 3b* research goes some way to addressing this mismatch. However, we also contend that **ultimately what matters is a fxC's long-term fruitfulness** and this cannot be restricted to self-reproduction (whether narrowly or broadly defined).
- **This is not to say that self-reproduction is not important.**<sup>27</sup> Indeed, in our conclusion we highlight the need for further research on whether some fxC have a natural unit size beyond which they can only grow by multiplication (not addition). Our key point is simply that sustainable fruitfulness cannot be judged solely in terms of reproduction.

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<sup>25</sup> We acknowledge that this topic requires further research.

<sup>26</sup> Premises dependent models, it would seem, are harder to reproduce.

<sup>27</sup> For an extended discussion of the case for reproduction, the following book is due to be published next year: G. Lings, *Reproducing Churches* (Abingdon: BRF, 2017).

### 3.7 Summary of key findings

Our key findings with relation to the question ‘What does it mean to talk of sustainability within the context of fxC?’ are as follows:

1. The sustainability of a fxC is often **intimately connected to the sustainability of its parent church**. The two cannot be considered in isolation from each other.
  - Most fxC are not seeking to become completely separate, autonomous or independent from their parent church and continue to receive a variety of resources (e.g. money, staff time, free use of premises) from them. In this sense, most fxC are **sustainable only as part of a wider whole**.
  - Most fxC also enjoy a healthy **‘give and take’** relationship with their parent church. As well as receiving resources from the parent church, fxC also enhance and enrich the wider Church’s life in a variety of ways. In this sense, a fxC can help to sustain its parent church (as well as vice versa).
  - It would appear that the majority of fxC are moving towards a relationship of **inter-dependence** (neither completely dependent, nor completely independent) with their sending church. As such, the sustainability of any individual fxC is intimately connected with that of the wider Church of which it is a part.
  - These insights lead us to suggest that rather than focusing solely on whether particular fxC are sustainable or not, discussions about the sustainability of fxC need to be broadened out in order to give greater recognition and acknowledgement to the **wider landscape within which fxC are sustained**.
2. In view of the above, we would **question whether sustainability in fxC should always be equated with permanence** since there are at least some good reasons why some fxC may last only for a season. It may be more appropriate, in at least some cases, therefore, to talk of sustainability in terms of sustainable ‘fruit’ and ‘flows’ into other Christian communities.<sup>28</sup> This kind of vocabulary is consistent with an emphasis on ensuring that within any particular area or region there exists a sustainable network of Christian communities (as in the previously quoted Diocese of Sheffield vision statement), some of which may be more durable than others.
3. As a counter-balance to the previous point, however, we would also **caution against uttering the words ‘only for a season’ too readily** (within the context of fxC). FxC are young churches that need to be given enough time within the right conditions in order to thrive. With a strong emphasis on seasonality, and the accompanying expectation that fxC may be short-lived, comes the risk that something which is precious-yet-fragile may be discarded too easily.
4. The distinction between **‘seeds’** and **‘runners’** seems to have a crucial bearing on what it means to talk of sustainability in the context of fxC. Further (quantitative) research is needed to better understand how these correspond with different financial and governance models.
5. The classic **three-self principles appear more directly relevant to some types of fxC than others**. Further research is needed here, but as a general rule they seem better suited to assessing sustainability within traditional church plants and seed fxC. A purist interpretation of these principles is less likely to connect with the ecclesial environment that many parish-based runners inhabit.

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<sup>28</sup> M. Moynagh, *Church for Every Context*, p. 407.

6. Nevertheless, there is at least some scope for **broadening out the three-self principles** to give greater attention to the wider ecclesial environment within which fxC are sustained. Discussions about sustainability and fxC should increasingly focus on:
- **The financial sustainability of the wider ecclesial landscape** across a particular area (not just whether individual fxC meet the 'self-financing' criteria)
  - **The need for inter-dependent, give and take, relationships** between fxC and parent churches (not just whether individual fxC are completely self-governing)
  - **Long-term fruitfulness** (not just self-reproduction)
7. Finally, we also suggest there is a need to develop and articulate **a theology of sustainability** for fxC.<sup>29</sup> Such a task is beyond the scope of this study, but later, in the final chapter, we outline some initial thoughts on what this might involve.

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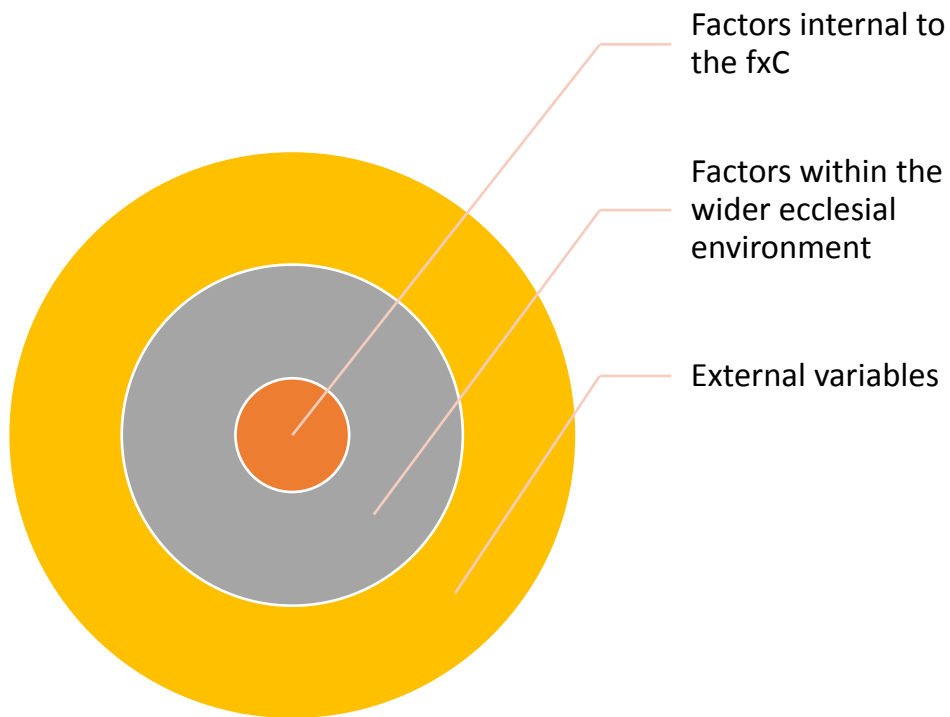
<sup>29</sup> We are grateful to our conversation partner Beth Keith (CP9) for this insight.

## 4 What encourages and inhibits sustainability within fresh expressions of Church?

This chapter presents our key findings regarding this study's second main research question: 'What encourages and inhibits sustainability within fxC?' It focuses mainly on lessons about sustainability that arise from the experience of the case study churches, though in places it draws on insights from our conversation partners and other research projects as well.

In the analysis that follows, we distinguish between three different types of factor that either encourage or inhibit sustainability within fxC:

*Figure 2 - Three types of factor*



Over the course of this chapter, we consider each of these three types of factor in turn.

## 4.1 Internal factors – the fxC’s role in promoting sustainability

We begin by considering things that encourage or inhibit sustainability which are (to some degree or another) within a fxC’s field of influence. Some of these concern specific practices and habits. Others are more about the internal culture that a fxC seeks to develop.

### 4.1.1 Discovering

The first key internal factor we have identified concerns the discovery of **sustainable rhythms and practices** that express a fxC’s emerging sense of identity. Important features of this uncovered by our case studies include:

**1. Establishing a relatively consistent format (but with scope for experimentation and creativity)**

A number of fxC leaders commented that establishing a relatively consistent format for the fxC’s main gatherings had been helpful. This made the task of planning fxC gatherings more manageable. It also helped to establish a sense of distinctive identity among its membership.

**2. Meeting frequently enough to grow a sense of community (but not so often it becomes a burden)**

Of the 11 fxC that were meeting at the time of the study (1 was on hold due to interregnum), 6 met weekly, 1 met fortnightly and 4 met monthly. Our case studies suggest that all of these frequencies are potentially sustainable and that each has its own inherent opportunities and challenges.

Table 6 - Frequency of meeting

Participant ID	Name	Frequency of meeting
CS1	Messy Church S45 (Pilsley)	Monthly
CS2	Messy Church DE72b (Weston on Trent)	Monthly
CS3	Edward Bear	Weekly
CS4	The Order of the Black Sheep	Fortnightly
CS5	Friendship Group	Weekly
CS6	Church But Not As You Know It	(On hold) <sup>30</sup>
CS7	Holy Trinity Redgate	Weekly
CS8	Messy Church L25	Monthly
CS9	Oaks	Weekly
CS10	Open Table	Monthly
CS11	Ozzys	Weekly
CS12	Zone 2	Weekly

The fxC that met monthly (3 of which were Messy Churches) often stressed that this felt more manageable than weekly. But they faced the challenge of continuing to grow together as a community outside of their monthly gatherings. The fxC that met weekly also identified various benefits, with one leader commenting:

‘Having led a network of fxC that met monthly or fortnightly, I’m converted to weekly.... There’s just something about building community in Zone 2 which has been monumentally different to Dream [another fxC] because it’s this weekly thing which fits into your rhythm of life. And with that, weekly has forced us to make it simpler, which has made it easier to involve other people. So doing something

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<sup>30</sup> Here, one leader suggested that the decision to move from weekly to monthly has been one factor in this fxC beginning to run out of steam.



monthly, you get more ambitious... A week comes quickly so you need to have a simple enough structure so you can do it again. And it's then more do-able for other people to get involved.'

(Leader interview, CS12 – Zone 2)

### 3. Eating together (regularly and on special occasions)

Food played an important part in many of the case study churches and eating together served to deepen the life of the fxC. Quite understandably and appropriately, the way this was expressed varied from context to context. In order to provide a brief snapshot of this, the text box below briefly records the food that was shared within each fxC on the particular day we came to visit.

#### What we ate on our case study visits

- Spaghetti bolognese followed by ice cream (CS1 – Pilsley Messy Church)
- Coffee, juice and pastries (CS2 – Weston on Trent Messy Church)
- Christmas party food - then a leader interview over lunch (CS3 - Edward Bear)
- A bring and share Indian meal (CS4 - The Order of the Black Sheep)
- A three-course Christmas dinner (CS5 - Friendship Group)
- Tea and biscuits after the service - then a leader interview over lunch (CS7 - Holy Trinity Redgate)
- Fish fingers and chips (CS8 - Messy Church L25)
- A bring and share meal (CS9 – Oaks)
- A Eucharist service – bread and wine around an 'open table' (CS10 - Open Table)
- Drinks and biscuits (CS11 – Ozzys)
- Coffee and cakes (CS12 - Zone 2)

### 4. Creating annual traditions that connect with fxC members and the mission context

Examples of this included:

- Going on holiday together every year (CS5 – Friendship Group)
- Marking World Aids Day and annual events in the LGBT calendar (CS10 – Open Table)
- Celebrating the fxC's birthday – especially landmark ones e.g. 5<sup>th</sup>, 10<sup>th</sup> or 20<sup>th</sup>

### 5. Finding symbols and objects that visually express a fxC's identity

Some of the case study fxC had created a logo and visual identity that reflected their name or constituency. Others had symbols that played a similar function (for example a giant 'Edward Bear' teddy at CS3) or used locally made objects in their worship:

'And everything in there [cross, altar cloths, etc.] is made by members of the congregation. They feel it's theirs - their building, their contents. They feel they belong more because of that.'

(Leader interview, CS7 – Holy Trinity Redgate)

### 4.1.2 Adapting

Alongside the need for consistency (as highlighted above), many of our case studies stressed that being sustainable also required them to continually adapt and evolve. Although finding a format that worked and felt manageable was important to the case study churches, fxC leaders stressed the risk of becoming too wedded to this. As one leader put it:

‘To me the danger is you end up in a rut and think you've sussed it - [thinking] “that’s the service we're going to use every week because that works now”.’

(Leader interview, CS11 – Ozzys)

Continuing to keep things fresh by trying new things was important for sustainability. Key to all this was ensuring that the fxC continued to be responsive to its context and mission field. As we consider in more detail later in this chapter (section 4.3.1), contexts vary in lots of different ways. In order to continue to be relevant to their mission context, fxC may need to adapt and evolve in response to changes in the age and stage of life of fxC members, demographic trends in the local area (often linked to the housing market) and wider social trends among the target group.<sup>31</sup>

The research participants also suggested that the following attitudes and qualities were important in enabling their fxC to continue to adapt, evolve and stay fresh:

- **Being willing to try things and learn from mistakes**  
‘Trying lots of things and if they don't work we don't push it - see what works and go with that.’  
(Leader interview, CS4 – The Order of the Black Sheep)
- **Holding things lightly**  
‘Instead of having an idea of what we're doing, it's “well let’s see where it goes” and holding it rather than dragging it.’  
(Leader interview, CS10 – Open Table)
- **Being intentional about values but flexible about structure and shape**
- **Being open to messiness and discomfort**  
‘You need people who are comfortable with being uncomfortable.’  
(Leader interview, CS2 – Weston on Trent Messy Church)
- **Working with the grain of the context**  
‘You can't change the culture. If you try to change the culture, you can't and it won't be sustainable.’  
(Leader interview, CS9 – Oaks)

Many of these comments also highlight the next factor we will now go on to consider – involving others.

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<sup>31</sup> For an older people’s church like Friendship Group (CS5), this might require attending to changing lifestyle preferences and habits among new generations of retired people.

### 4.1.3 Involving

*If you want to go fast, go alone. If you want to go far, go together.*<sup>32</sup>

The experience of our case study churches suggests that ‘going together’ is vital for fxC. Involving others (both team and fxC members) is key to sustainability in that it cultivates a deeper sense of ownership and belonging among fxC members, as well as making the task of leading more manageable by sharing out the work. Key dimensions to this include:

#### 1. Growing a strong team

Across the 12 case studies, we encountered teams of different shapes and sizes. But all seemed to place a high value on fun and enjoyment alongside prayer and hard work.

#### 2. Sharing out tasks

In many of the case studies, we encountered fxC leaders (lay and ordained) with strong delegation skills who were very good at sharing out tasks across a wider team. This often required a high level of organisation and thinking ahead, as well as an ability to notice and draw out other team members’ gifts and strengths. For other fxC leaders, however, delegation was more of a challenge. In this regard, the tendency of some (highly capable) leaders to leave things to the last minute sometimes inhibits sustainability. In the words of one commendably honest fxC leader:

‘Maybe because of the job I do, I can turn things around pretty quickly. I tend to find with my just-in-time approach to things, I’ll have a few ideas and then everything happens a few days before Messy Church. That means it gets done, but that approach also becomes its own worst enemy. It means I don’t contact people and draw a team together in the way that would help it become more sustainable.’

(Leader interview, CS2 – Weston on Trent Messy Church)

#### 3. Breaking down ‘us and them’ barriers

One potential downside of having a strong and capable team is that it means there is sometimes less incentive to get fxC members involved. This has the potential to create an ‘us and them’ or ‘provider-client’ dynamic within a fxC that ultimately inhibits its sustainability. Some fxC, however, were very deliberate about breaking down such ‘us and them’ barriers. As the wider Church representative for Pilsley Messy Church (CS1) commented:

*In some Messy Churches, many of the core team don’t go into the ‘worship time’ because they’re clearing up craft activities or preparing the meal... But at Pilsley, they leave clearing up to the end and another team (from the sending church) comes in to serve the food. This frees up the core team to join the children and parents for the worship time and the meal, establishing a sense of ‘doing church together’.*<sup>33</sup>

(Wider Church representative, CS1 – Pilsley Messy Church)

#### 4. Opportunities for everyone to contribute

Across the case study churches, we observed a variety of ways in which community life was enhanced by inviting all fxC members to play a part. These included:

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<sup>32</sup> According to numerous websites, this is an ‘African proverb’, but whether there is any truth in this assertion is unknown.

<sup>33</sup> The use of italics indicates this is a paraphrase, not a direct quote.

- Bring and share meals at Oaks (CS4) and The Order of the Black Sheep (CS9)
- Creative and participative all age worship activities at Zone 2 (CS12) and the three Messy Churches<sup>34</sup>
- Community fundraising events at Edward Bear (CS3) – e.g. sponsored ‘toddles’ and teddy bears parachuting off the church roof
- Putting out tables and chairs at Holy Trinity Redgate (CS7)

## 5. Discerning together

Although strong leadership was sometimes important, some fxC leaders also emphasised the importance of involving the whole congregation or community in discussions about the future direction the fxC should take. At both Holy Trinity Redgate (CS7) and Open Table (CS10), for example, this had involved facilitated away days to which all fxC members were invited.

## 6. Letting potential leaders have a go

Reflecting on an event the previous evening that had not gone particularly well, one fxC leader commented:

‘Last night was an example of us trying to do something - too much we came to it with our thoughts and what we've been used to... If we'd included people like X and Y [two emerging local leaders] in planning it, I suspect they'd have come up with different ways of doing the evening.’

(Leader interview, CS9 - Oaks)

She then went on to comment that in getting other, less experienced people from the community involved in planning and organising events, ‘you’ve got to think way ahead and know you’d probably be in for a bit of a bumpy ride’. The benefits of this, however, would greatly outweigh the costs:

‘It may not be perfect but if you talk to people after it, it’s touched them. And I think it is because they're doing stuff that they know will probably work with people. And we'd have done things differently.’

(Leader interview, CS9 – Oaks)

Across the 12 case studies, we found encouraging examples of all six ways of involving others highlighted above. As a general theme, though, our sense is that many (though not all) of the fxC studied found involving team members easier than involving the wider membership. The latter seemed to be a particular challenge for some child-focused and family-focused fxC. The text box that follows explores this in more depth.

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<sup>34</sup> On the Sunday we visited Zone 2, for example, members were invited to break into smaller groups to draw or write a ‘recipe’ for a relationship with God. In the feedback time that followed, they were then invited to share their recipes with the wider congregation.

### **'Us and them' dynamics: Challenges for child-focused and family-focused fxC**

For some of the child-focused and family-focused case study churches, growing local leaders and getting members involved in running the fxC (rather than just turning up and receiving) seemed a particular challenge. Key obstacles in this regard were:

#### **1. Roll-on / roll-off membership**

Most child-or-family-focused fxC appeal to people at a particular stage or life of with a certain age of children. As such, they often have a roll-on / roll-off membership. This seems to sometimes make it harder to grow leaders from within the fxC and raises important questions about whether indigenous leadership is always achievable and desirable.

#### **2. An abundance of helpers from the sending church**

Within such a context, the fxC is often carried by a team of leaders or helpers from the sending church, many of whom are at a different stage of life (e.g. retirement) to fxC members. While there are many benefits to this (including inter-generational interaction), there are also potential drawbacks. As one Messy Church leader put it:

'Perhaps because we have quite a lot of other people there [helpers from the sending church], it probably isn't seen by those who come as something we might need involvement with. People might think "this is OK and doesn't need us".'

(Leader interview, CS8 Messy Church L25)

#### **3. Low expectations of members**

In some child-focused fxC and Messy Churches, we also observed some reluctance on the part of the leaders to get fxC members (whether parents or children) involved in helping out. As one leader put it:

'You shouldn't be asking people to do things when they're there for us to help.'

(Leader interview, CS3 – Edward Bear)

Reflecting on these issues, we observe some deeper tensions at work. On the one hand, we can see that the relative longevity of fxC like Ozzys (CS11) and Edward Bear (CS3), which have been running for 10 years and 17 years respectively, is attributable in large part to the consistency of a dedicated core group of helpers who have journeyed alongside successive waves of children and families. On the other hand, however, relatively low levels of member involvement or indigenous leadership can be seen as a barrier to growing a sustainable fxC (particularly for those with ageing leadership teams). In this sense, a durable children and families ministry is not necessarily the same as a sustainable fresh expression of Church.

#### 4.1.4 Receiving

The next two factors concern a fxC's attitude to receiving from and sharing resources with the wider Church and others in its community. Although there is a sense in which a fxC needs to take responsibility for itself, this does not require it to be completely self-sufficient. Indeed, too much self-sufficiency may inhibit sustainability. The experience of our case study churches suggests that the sustainability of fxC may be aided by a continued willingness to receive from the wider Church and others in the community in a variety of ways. This might include being willing to receive:

- **appropriate levels of financial support**

As we saw in the last chapter, most fxC remain (to some degree) financially dependent on their sending church. One leader also suggested that 'high cost' fxC in deprived areas may sometimes benefit from having some (but not too many) high-earning committed Christians on board:

'It helped us that we brought with us one or two people with financial clout - a good job. But if we had too many of them, we'd have culturally changed the nature of what we do. There's a balance. At the moment we could really do with a couple who have at least one of them earning, who come in as full-on Christians. But if we bussed in half a dozen couples like that, we'd be financially great but would probably wreck the church.'

(Leader interview, CS9 – Oaks)

- **donations in kind**

Some child-focused fxC and Messy Churches told us that one of the reasons their costs were so low is that members of the sending church regularly give them resources and materials.

- **helpers**

Some of the child-focused fxC and Messy Churches said that, alongside their core team, they also benefited from a wider pool of volunteers from the sending church who came to help them with specific tasks. One Messy Church leader, for example, commented:

'People turn up at different times, rather than committing to the whole thing... There's maybe five or six who help with food but maybe only three of them will be there on any one month. And there's two women who do tea and coffee every month... And there's a team who come in to help with clearing away, and some more who come in to wash up...'

(Leader interview, CS1 – Pilsley Messy Church)

As we saw in the previous section, too much outside help carries the risk of restricting opportunities for member involvement. But careful and strategic use of outside helpers also has the potential to enhance sustainability.

- **visiting ministers from other churches**

Several fxC reported being appreciative of and grateful for ministers from other churches who sometimes came to preach, preside at communion, or conduct baptisms, confirmations, weddings or funerals for fxC members. In general, fxC with lay leaders were more likely to comment on this than those with ordained leaders. We acknowledge that this observation has the potential to open up wider debates we do not have time to go into here about possible over-dependence on clergy and the role of lay leaders. But as a general principle, we see some openness to receiving from other ministers (lay and ordained) beyond the fxC as a healthy sign.

#### 4.1.5 Giving

Alongside this continued willingness to receive, it also appears that having a generous and imaginative outlook (looking beyond the fxC) can aid sustainability. The text box below provides one example of this. Though the data gathered does not enable us to explain precisely how or why a generous outlook can aid sustainability, there seems to be something about engaging together in a shared outward facing cause that can draw a community together and generate momentum, thus preventing it from standing still and stagnating. That said, there is also a sense in which this remains a mystery. The ideas that sustainability might be found not in self-preservation but in sacrificial generosity resonates with the biblical insight that:

'[U]nless a kernel of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds.'

(John 12:24, NIV)

##### **Beyond self-preservation**

One potential criticism of the three-self principles is that they can very easily lead a fxC or church plant to over-emphasise 'self' – becoming overly concerned with its self-preservation and self-perpetuation.

But some of our case study visits gave us glimpses of a more generous and imaginative outlook that stands in stark contrast to this.

For many years, Holy Trinity Redgate (CS7) have prayerfully and financially supported 'Imagine', a charity that works in Mozambique which was set up by a couple from Formby. Over time, every fourth Sunday at Redgate has become known as 'Imagine Sunday'. Here there is a particular focus on Imagine during the Sunday service and donations from Imagine collection boxes are received. Several members of the Redgate congregation have also been out to Mozambique to visit over the years. Reflecting on the connection with Imagine, one leader commented: 'It wasn't just that we were giving money to a charity... With every person in Redgate, it's a really personal connection.' Another then went on to suggest that this was a key factor contributing to Holy Trinity Redgate's sustainability:

'To me the two things that help sustain it [Holy Trinity Redgate] are this contact with Imagine, because it's personal to us – it's not just a charity out there that we give to... Plus the social life we've got as a church...'

(Leader interview, CS7 – Holy Trinity Redgate)

#### 4.1.6 Persevering (but also knowing when to stop)

One of the interview questions we asked fxC leaders and wider Church representatives was: 'How has this fresh expression managed to last as long as it has?' Their responses to this question often used words like 'commitment', 'determination', 'stickability' and 'patience'. Sometimes these words were used in relation to the fxC's members or core team. But it was often the particular commitment of a key leader that was emphasised (usually by wider Church representatives):

'It's been a hard slog... Duncan and Oaks have shown great determination and doggedness - huge commitment in the face of great challenges.'

(Wider Church representative, CS9 – Oaks)

'Warren has been a consistent point - prepared to persevere when others might not have done.'

(Wider Church representative, CS10 – Open Table)

Determination, stickability and patience were considered important partly by virtue of the mission task with which fxC were engaged. (As one wider Church representative commented, 'Fresh expressions in tough areas have to work [extremely] hard'.) But these qualities were also considered important because of the challenging ecclesial environment within which fxC sometimes operated. Some had experienced quite difficult relationships with their sending church. Others had needed considerable 'patience in being prepared to go at the speed of the Anglican Church' (Wider Church representative, CS10 – Open Table).

Some of the conversation partners said the long-term commitment of the pioneer is often crucial. But Stuart Murray Williams (CP4) also stressed that the extent to which stickability is desirable depends, to some degree, on the particular gifts and calling of the individual involved. In this regard, it may be helpful to distinguish between 'pioneer starters' who are brilliant at initiating things but need to know when to move on, and 'pioneer sustainers' who are more gifted in developing others and seeing things through.<sup>35</sup>

These insights also raise wider questions about the different gifts, skills and temperaments that are needed to both start and sustain different types of fxC. In our conclusion, we identify this as a potential area for further research.

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<sup>35</sup> For a further explanation of these and related terms, see G. Lings 'Looking in the mirror: What makes a pioneer?', in D. Male (Ed.), *Pioneers 4 Life: Explorations in theology and wisdom for pioneering leaders* (Abingdon: BRF, 2011), p. 31.



#### 4.1.7 Following

Our seventh and final key internal factor concerns the place of Christian discipleship in sustaining fxC. In one sense, discipleship provides an overarching banner for the six other factors previously considered (discovering, adapting, involving, receiving, giving and persevering). Following Jesus requires all these things and more. In another sense, though, it seems important to single out discipleship as a critical factor in its own right. Although discipleship was not the primary focus of our research,<sup>36</sup> the experiences of our case study churches seem to point to two different ways in which discipleship promotes sustainability within fxC.

##### 1. Spiritual practices that sustain fxC

The importance of this was highlighted to us by an email we received from a fxC leader one week after we had interviewed her Messy Church team. In this, she commented:

‘On reflection there was one point that didn't come up in the interview and that was the part that prayer plays in underpinning and sustaining our Messy Church sessions. Before each session we ask the Sunday congregation to pray for the preparations and the sessions. As a team we pray before the start of each session and individual members pray regularly for families they meet during sessions. I appreciate that this probably sounds quite informal and ad hoc but it is still vital to our ministry. I hope it is not too late to include this in the research...’

(Email correspondence, CS8 – Messy Church L25)

##### 2. Discipleship and growing leaders

In the last chapter, we listed making ‘lifelong disciples’ and ‘sustainable Christians’ among the key indicators of a fxC’s long-term fruitfulness and legacy. To this we would add that enabling fxC members to grow in Christian discipleship plays a key part in a fxC’s sustainability as well. It would seem that making disciples and involving others (as described in Section 4.1.1) are closely related and that these in turn have a significant bearing on a fxC’s capacity to grow locally leaders from within its membership.

All this, however, is easier said than done. Many of the leaders we spoke to acknowledged they still had a long way to go in taking their fxC on a journey ‘from consumers to disciples’ (wider Church interview, CS12 – Zone 2).

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<sup>36</sup> For a more in-depth recent study on discipleship (though not focused specifically on fxC), see the Saltley Trust’s ‘What helps disciples grow?’ research findings at <http://www.saltleytrust.org.uk/whdg/>.

## 4.2 What the wider Church can do

We now turn to consider what the wider Church (this includes but is not restricted to a fxC’s sending church) can do to either support or inhibit sustainability within fxC. This builds on some of the ground already covered in the previous section (particularly with relation to receiving and giving), but considers this from the perspective of the wider Church.

### 4.2.1 A supportive parent

The case study fxC reported generally positive relationships with their parent church, identifying a variety of ways in which the sending church had been supportive. However, we also identified a number of sources of tension in relationships with sending churches. One participant’s comments that ‘the wider Church doesn’t really understand what we are’ was not an altogether-uncommon sentiment. In the table that follows, we list some of the main practices and actions through which parent churches can either encourage or inhibit sustainability.

Table 7 - The parent church's role

Encouraging sustainability	Inhibiting sustainability
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Allowing</b> the fxC freedom, time and space to form their own identity</li> <li>• <b>Recognising</b> and publicly affirming the fxC’s identity and legitimacy as ‘church in its own right’</li> <li>• <b>Communicating</b> – ensuring open channels of communication and accountability with PCCs (or equivalent) and incumbents</li> <li>• <b>Releasing and enabling</b> clergy – encouraging (lay) fxC leaders to take the lead wherever possible but providing appropriate back-up where necessary<sup>37</sup></li> <li>• <b>Letting</b> fxC make mistakes and helping them learn from the experience<sup>38</sup></li> <li>• <b>Giving and receiving</b> – open to receiving from the fxC as well as giving (a ‘give and take’ relationship)</li> <li>• <b>Connecting</b> - seeing opportunities for integration and cross-linking with other aspects of church / parish life</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Expecting</b> - sending church members asking questions like ‘When are these people going to start going to church?’</li> <li>• <b>Interfering and controlling</b> – e.g. micro-management by clergy</li> <li>• <b>Overloading</b> - fxC leaders not sufficiently released from other responsibilities in the sending church<sup>39</sup></li> <li>• <b>Obstructing</b> - PCCs being generally awkward!</li> <li>• <b>Disregarding</b> – Not giving the fxC adequate support when the sending parish goes into interregnum or a new incumbent arrives</li> </ul>

<sup>37</sup> At Ozzys (CS11), for example, a new vicar deliberately decided not to take over the leadership but play a more supportive 'spare pair of hands' background role.

<sup>38</sup> As one leader commented, ‘You need to have a little core of people [you can go to] when it goes totally and utterly wrong - they're supportive enough to say “that didn't work, let’s not do that again just yet. But next time if we do that this way, it might work better”’ (Leader interview, CS11 – Ozzys).

<sup>39</sup> This appeared to be a particular challenge if fxC leaders were lay readers or church wardens.

#### 4.2.2 The wider ecclesial environment

Data from case study churches and conversation partners suggest a series of further factors within the wider ecclesial environment (e.g. diocesan and wider Anglican structures as well as local ecumenical networks) that encourage or inhibit sustainability. Here it seems there is a balance to be struck concerning the right level of support for fxC. As one conversation put it, 'Fresh expressions and pioneer ministries still need championing within Anglican structures. But it is also possible to stifle them' (CP12, Steven Croft). It is important to acknowledge that different types of fxC appear to need different kinds of support from the wider Church. To explore this, we return once again to the distinction between seeds and runners.

The two seeds in our sample, The Order of the Black Sheep (CS4) and Oaks (CS9), had a different kind of relationship with their diocese than the other fxC we studied. In one of these, The Order of the Black Sheep, the diocese was the sending church, and in both cases the diocese was a major funder. Key factors identified within the wider ecclesial environment that helped the sustainability of these two seed fxC include:

- **Relational goodwill with senior diocesan staff**

Mark Broomhead, the leader of The Order of the Black Sheep, for example, commented:

'Because Bishop Alistair put me forward for ordination knowing about this and was quite excited about doing things differently, he's very supportive and wants this to work...'

(Leader interview, CS4 – The Order of the Black Sheep)

- **Realistic expectations about timescales**

The Oaks leaders gratefully remembered their (former) diocesan bishop acknowledging 'three years isn't going to be enough' (Leader interview, CS9 – Oaks).<sup>40</sup>

- **Pioneer support networks**

Mark Broomhead (The Order of the Black Sheep) talked about the benefit of being part of a group for other pioneer ministers organised by the Diocese of Derby's Fresh Expressions Officer. Duncan Petty at Oaks regularly met with a support group that included Liverpool diocese's Director of Church Growth and trusted friends.

- **Integration and cross-linking with other aspects of diocesan life**

Reflecting on possible future opportunities, leaders of both seed fxC commented that they were becoming increasingly integrated with other aspects of diocesan life and that this enhanced their sustainability.

The ten runners in our sample, in contrast, tended to have less direct contact with the wider Church. For the parish-based runners, in particular, most interactions with the diocese or with other local churches were generally still conducted by the parent church. Nevertheless, we still found among runners the following examples of ways that the wider Church helps sustain fxC:

- Like the two seeds, Zone 2 (CS12) benefited from integration and cross-linking with other aspects of diocesan life. This was partly at least because of its status and position within Liverpool Cathedral.

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<sup>40</sup> Comments from some conversation partners suggest that many other seed fxC do not always have such understanding dioceses.

- The three Messy Churches (CS1, CS2 and CS8) all benefited from the support and advice of their diocese’s Messy Church Advisor (Derby diocese) or Children and Families Missioner (Liverpool diocese).
- Weston on Trent Messy Church (CS2) had also been helped by the diocese’s Fresh Expressions Officer when its relationship with the sending parish was becoming strained.
- The leaders of Open Table (CS10) reported that the diocesan bishop had given them helpful advice when their fxC was at an earlier stage.

Alongside these positive instances of support, we have also identified factors within the wider ecclesial environment that appear to make some parish-based runners more vulnerable than other fxC. These concern the degree of recognition and legitimacy that the wider Anglican Church accords fxC and their leaders and the extent to which it is prepared to fully recognise them as Church. Two different ways in which these issues manifest themselves are explained below:

### 1. Protecting fxC with no legal status

FxC with no legal identity of their own appear particularly vulnerable to interregnums and changes of incumbent. Indeed, at the time of our study one of the case study fxC was currently ‘on hold’ due (in large part) to two recent interregnums in the sending parish. The team were waiting to see what the recently appointed new rector wanted to do before deciding whether to continue meeting as a fxC. It would be wrong to infer too much from one case study, but some of our other studies also suggest that fxC with no legal status may be particularly vulnerable.<sup>41</sup> Reflecting on these issues, one wider Church representative asked the question:

*What recognition or status is accorded to Messy Church within, for example, a parish profile? Is it recognised and valued as an integral part of the church - a legitimate congregation like an 8 a.m. communion service? Or is it seen as an optional extra?*

(Interview with a wider Church representative)

### 2. Recognising lay leaders

One ‘lay-lay’<sup>42</sup> leader told us that helping fxC members to recognise the community that was forming around their Messy Church *as church* was quite difficult when people still had to go to the vicar (who was otherwise not involved in the fxC) for the ‘hatch, match and dispatch’ activities they had traditionally associated with Church. For her as a leader, this created questions of legitimacy and a feeling of ‘tension between established expressions of Church and the things starting to grow out of that [which are] very different’ (leader interview, CS2 – Weston on Trent Messy Church). There are no easy answers to this, but we suggest that within a mixed economy of inherited church and fxC, it is important to acknowledge the way the established practices of the one have a bearing on the sustainability of the other.

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<sup>41</sup> *Strand 3b* report, p. 94.

<sup>42</sup> This is a term our *Strand 3b* report used to describe fxC leaders with no centralised formal training or official authorisation. *Strand 3b* report, pp. 60-61.

### 4.3 External factors

Here we consider two different types of external variable that appear to have a significant bearing on sustainability.

#### 4.3.1 Contextual differences

Across the case study churches we researched, sustainability was often either aided or inhibited by a range of factors associated with the type of context it was based in. Significant factors here included:

- **Poverty / affluence** – The experience of Oaks (CS9) illustrates the challenges of sustaining ‘high cost’ fxC within socially and economically disadvantaged contexts. As we saw in Chapter 3, Oaks was only sustainable as part of a wider whole (i.e. with continued diocesan support).<sup>43</sup> And with relation to growing genuinely indigenous leadership in non-churched contexts, its main leader commented: ‘I think it takes 15 years to develop a leader from scratch on these estates’ (leader interview, CS9 – Oaks).
- **Numbers of non-churched people engaged** – In many ways, the establishment of a fxC with a high proportion of people from non-churched backgrounds is a sign of success. But establishing a culture of financial giving within such a context is likely to be much harder than in church communities with a high proportion of long-established Christians. In terms of financial sustainability then, there is a sense in which fxC with high proportions of the non-churched may be victims of their own success. As one leader commented:

‘You reckon that when somebody joins a congregation from another church, it often takes them up to six months to decide to give regularly. And they’re coming from a tradition of giving. If you’ve got people not coming from that tradition at all, I’m not sure I even know how to start introducing that in a way which isn’t “I expect you to pay for this” but “Out of all that God has given you, there’s a biblical principle about giving back”.’

(Leader interview, CS1 – Pilsley Messy Church)

- **The age / stage of life of fxC members** – FxC that engaged primarily with people of one particular target age group (e.g. parents and toddlers, primary school age children, older people) faced particular sustainability challenges because of the ‘roll on, roll off’ nature of their membership. Some seemed to have well-established measures and networks in place for continuing to attract new members, while others appeared more open to accepting that the fxC might exist only for a season (in its current form at least).
- **Stability of context** – Some age-specific fxC reported that continuing to recruit new members was relatively easy for them because of the relative stability of their local area. Edward Bear (CS3) and Ozzys (CS11) leaders, for example, commented that successive members of the same family often passed through their fxC. In other contexts, in contrast, changes in the local housing market had contributed to a reduction in the numbers of people of particular age groups living nearby. For Weston on Trent Messy Church (CS2) and Friendship Group (CS5), this made long-term durability harder.

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<sup>43</sup> This resonates with the comments of Cathy Ross (CP7) and David Dadswell in their 2013 report on church planting: ‘Plants in such [poorer] areas will need to adopt a model of low costs or of subsidy from elsewhere, if they do not have access to sources of income other than giving.’ D. Dadswell & C. Ross, *Church Growth Research Project: Church Planting* (Cuddesdon: Oxford Centre for Ecclesiology and Practical Theology, 2013), p. 54.

- **Receptiveness to Christianity** – The mission contexts of some fxC appeared more favourable to Christianity than others. Some of the fxC in village contexts, for example, suggested that their sustainability had been aided by relatively receptive attitudes to Christianity. As one leader commented, in a middle class village context it is fairly ‘normal to engage in some form of church activity’ (leader interview, CS2 – Weston on Trent Messy Church). This is not to say that receptiveness to Christianity was confined to middle class areas. A key factor behind the popularity of Ozzy’s (CS11), which was based in an urban priority area, appears to have been a close link with a very supportive Church of England school.

#### 4.3.2 Financial resourcing

We turn finally to the question of finance and the bearing that different levels of resourcing have on fxC's sustainability. Here we draw not only on the experience of the case study churches, but also on contrasting perspectives offered by our conversation partners.

What is clear from our discussion of contrasting financial models in Section 3.4 is that 'high-high' cost fxC (those with their own staff and buildings) are much harder to financially sustain through member giving alone than other less resource intensive models. However, the question of which model offers the best return on investment or most sustainable fruit is a far more complex one. And on this, the wider Church representatives and conversation partners we spoke to were divided.

On the one hand, some conversation partners were quite critical of 'over-provided for fresh expressions' (CP12, Steven Croft) and suggested that a full-time paid leader model inhibits sustainability. This is not only because it is difficult to sustain financially, it can also very easily lead to an over-reliance on paid staff that inhibits member involvement. Along broadly similar lines, and in view of his experiences of several fxC, one participant told us he had concluded: 'The less I spend, the better the results' (wider Church representative, CS10 – Open Table).

Other participants, in contrast, made the counter-argument that 'shoestring [models] won't always work' (wider Church representative, CS12 – Zone 2). Reflecting on his previous role in Liverpool diocese, Phil Potter (CP8) suggested that (paid) pioneer ministers often bring considerable 'value added' or spin-off benefits. He told us that, as well as their contribution to a particular fxC, pioneer ministers in Liverpool diocese had played an important wider resourcing role - helping to create a 'mixed economy mentality' across the diocese that contributed in time to further fxC. This would appear to suggest that paid leaders may have an important role to play in helping to generate some of the kinds of 'sustainable fruit' described in Section 3.6.

As such, the question of which financial model offers the most sustainable fruit or best long-term return on investment remains an open one. While suggesting that this topic still requires further research (see Section 5.3), we also note that some conversation partners offered insights that have potential to help move discussions about sustainability away from the polarised dichotomies of 'cheap church' versus 'costly church'.<sup>44</sup> Jonny Baker (CP6) and Beth Keith (CP9), for example, suggested various possible ways in which paid fxC roles might be reimagined. Challenging the traditional default assumption of 'one leader, one church', these included an increasing emphasis on thinking regionally and enabling others, for example through the creation of more paid roles that support the development of fxC across a deanery or group of churches.

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<sup>44</sup> For more on these terms, see D. Dadswell & C. Ross, *Church Growth Research Project: Church Planting*, pp. 53-54.

## 5 Conclusion

As we explained early on, we see this research on the sustainability of fxC as an exploratory, appreciative and primarily qualitative pilot study. As such, this report should not be seen as providing definitive answers or ‘the last word’ on sustainability. It is better, we suggest, to see this research as a first attempt at an explorer’s guide to previously unmapped territory. In this final chapter, we provide a summary of our key discoveries and insights so far and point to further areas that still need to be explored.

### 5.1 Rethinking sustainability

The first major question that this study sought to address was: ‘What does it mean to talk of sustainability in the context of fresh expressions of Church?’ This was explored in Chapter 3. Our key findings are as follows:

1. Talk of sustainability needs to **take seriously the reality that most fxC in the Church of England still operate within the parish of their sending church** and continue to have strong supportive links with that church. Or to put it another way, the vast majority of fxC are ‘runners’, not ‘seeds’. In this regard, the way the wider Church thinks and talks about fxC needs to catch up with reality on the ground. Our case studies suggest that the distinction between ‘seeds’ and ‘runners’ has a crucial bearing on what it means to talk of sustainability in the context of fxC.
2. The sustainability of a fxC is often **intimately connected to the sustainability of its parent church**. Most enjoy a healthy ‘give and take’ relationship with their parent church and are moving towards a position of **interdependence** (neither completely dependent nor completely independent). Many are **sustainable only as part of a wider whole**.
3. We would **question whether sustainability in fxC should always be equated with permanence**. There are at least some good reasons why some fxC may last only for a season. However, we would also **caution against uttering the words ‘only for a season’ too readily**. FxC are young churches that need to be given enough time within the right conditions in order to thrive.
4. The classic **three-self principles appear more directly relevant to some fxC than others**. They appear most helpful when evaluating seed fxC and traditional church plants, but a purist interpretation of the three-self principles is less likely to connect with the ecclesial environment that many parish-based runners inhabit. Nevertheless, we see some scope for **broadening out** the three-self principles to place more emphasis on the wider ecclesial environment within which fxC are sustained. This requires giving greater consideration to:
  - The **financial sustainability** of the wider ecclesial landscape that supports fxC
  - The interplay between **formal and informal governance** arrangements for fxC<sup>45</sup>
  - The **long-term fruitfulness** of fxC
5. Finally, we suggest there is a need to develop and articulate **a theology of sustainability** for fxC. The text box that follows offers some initial thoughts on this.

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<sup>45</sup> Within many of our case studies, the fxC was still formally governed by its parent church, but there was a healthy degree of informal self-governance.



### **Towards a theology of sustainability for fxC**

In response to our original discussion paper, one conversation partner encouraged us to think about the need for a theology of sustainability. Constructing one was beyond the scope of this pilot study, but we have sketched out some potential avenues for further reflection below. These are loosely structured around the areas of UP, IN, OUT and OF, which correspond with the 'four classic marks of Church'.<sup>46</sup>

#### **The abundance of God (UP)**

For a Church with limited financial resources, it is tempting to conduct conversations about sustainability in panic mode. This involves operating out of a paradigm of scarcity, 'the deep belief that no matter how much we have, it is not enough'.<sup>47</sup> A paradigm of blessing or abundance stands in contrast to this, providing a more hopeful foundation for a theology of sustainability. To believe in abundance is 'to believe we have enough...[e]ven in the wildness of an uncertain future'.<sup>48</sup>

#### **Discovering and valuing what's already there (IN)**

As we saw in Chapter 4, some fxC had a strong core team of leaders but were less good at getting wider members involved. This leads us to wonder if principles from Asset-Based Community Development (ABCD) may be helpful for fxC. Founded on the idea that effective change can only happen by identifying and mobilising the gifts or assets that already exist in a community, ABCD seeks to build strong sustainable communities from the 'inside out'. Though not an explicitly Christian methodology, some commentators suggest that ABCD's core values and methods 'resonate deeply with Christian theology and practice'.<sup>49</sup>

#### **Generosity (OUT)**

In Chapter 4, we also briefly introduced the idea that sustainability for fxC might be found not in self-preservation, but in the sacrificial generosity of 'giving yourself away' (see 4.1.5 on giving). This is related to the *Mission-shaped Church* report's concept of 'dying to live'<sup>50</sup> and the insight that 'the practice of a belief in abundance makes more available'.<sup>51</sup> Though at heart this remains a mystery, we suggest that further biblical and theological reflection on the dynamics at work here may be helpful.

#### **Inter-dependence (OF)**

This report has noted that many fxC's relationship with their sending church is characterised by inter-dependence. At various points, we have also begun to move beyond the descriptive to the normative by (at least implicitly) suggesting that such inter-dependence is a good thing. This is informed by an instinct that, for fxC, interpersonal analogies are generally more appropriate than horticultural ones.<sup>52</sup> However, a theology of sustainability for fxC would need to explore these issues more fully.

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<sup>46</sup> See *Mission-shaped Church*, pp. 96-99.

<sup>47</sup> P. Block, W. Brueggemann & J. McKnight, *An Other Kingdom: Departing the Consumer Culture* (Hoboken NJ: Wiley, 2016), p. 2.

<sup>48</sup> Block et al, *An Other Kingdom*, p. 9. See also W. Brueggemann (1999), 'The liturgy of abundance, the myth of scarcity', *The Christian Century*, March 24-31.

<sup>49</sup> A. Barrett, *Asset-Based Community Development: A Theological Reflection* (Church Urban Fund, 2013), p. 1.

<sup>50</sup> *Mission-shaped Church*, p. 30.

<sup>51</sup> Block et al, *An Other Kingdom*, p. 3.

<sup>52</sup> See G. Lings, 'Church plants and fresh expressions of Church – how do these terms relate?' *Snapshots – Stories From the Edge*, Issue 3, p. 5, <http://www.churcharmy.org.uk/snapshots>. See also C. Dalpra, 'How is maturity to be understood?', *The Sheffield Centre Research Bulletin*, Summer 2011, <http://www.churcharmy.org.uk/archivedbulletins>.

## 5.2 Promoting sustainability

In Chapter 4, we explored this study's second major research question: 'What encourages and inhibits sustainability within fresh expressions of Church?' The following summary draws out the implications of our findings for three different audiences in turn:

### 5.2.1 What a fxC can do

The experiences of our case study churches suggest that a fxC can enhance its sustainability by:

1. **Discovering** sustainable rhythms and practices:
  - Establishing a relatively consistent format and meeting frequently enough to grow a sense of community
  - Eating together – both regularly and on special occasions
  - Creating annual traditions and finding visual symbols and objects that express its identity
2. **Adapting** and evolving:
  - Responding to changes in the local area and the age / stage of life of fxC members
  - Being willing to try things and learn from mistakes
  - Being intentional about values but flexible about structure and shape
  - Being open to messiness and discomfort
3. **Involving** others:
  - Growing a strong team and sharing out tasks
  - Breaking down 'us and them' barriers between fxC members and team
  - Creating opportunities for everyone to contribute
  - Letting potential leaders have a go
4. **Receiving** from others  
This includes being willing to receive financial support, donations in kind, helpers, and ministry gifts from the sending church and others in the community.
5. **Giving** - a generous and imaginative outlook  
There is something about engaging together in a shared outward cause that can draw a community together and generate momentum, thus preventing it from standing still and stagnating.
6. **Persevering**  
Sustainability requires determination, commitment and patience in the face of challenges from the mission context and wider Church. However, fxC leaders also need to know when to stop or move on.
7. **Following** (discipleship) – As well as the above 6 factors (which are all expressions of discipleship), this includes:
  - Prayer and other spiritual practices that sustain the life of the fxC
  - Helping other fxC members grow in discipleship and leadership

Just as the presence of these factors encourages sustainability, their absence is likely to inhibit a fxC's sustainability. However, the above list should not be seen as providing a definitive set of factors. In order to better understand the threats to fxC's sustainability, a separate piece of research on fxC that have died is needed.

### 5.2.2 What parent churches can do

As with all parenting, the role of the parent church will vary from case to case (depending, for example, on whether the parent is a parish church or a diocese) and a lot will depend on the particular needs of the 'child'. However, from the various examples we encountered of both positive and strained relationships between fxC and parent churches, we discerned several recurring themes. These lead us to conclude that:

**1. A parent church can encourage a fxC's sustainability by:**

- Allowing the fxC freedom, time and space to form their own identity
- Recognising and publicly affirming the fxC's identity and legitimacy as 'church in its own right'
- Communicating and ensuring open channels of communication and accountability
- Releasing and enabling lay leaders wherever possible
- Letting fxC make mistakes and helping them learn from the experience
- Giving and receiving – being open to receive from the fxC as well as giving
- Connecting - seeing opportunities for integration and cross-linking with other aspects of Church life

**2. A parent church can inhibit a fxC's sustainability by:**

- Expecting fxC members to attend the sending church
- Interfering, controlling and micro-managing
- Not releasing fxC leaders from other responsibilities in the sending church
- Disregarding the fxC when there is an interregnum or a new incumbent arrives
- Being generally awkward and obstructive

### 5.2.3 What the wider Church can do

In view of our findings, we suggest that the wider Church needs to:

- 1. Take seriously the reality that most Anglican fxC still operate within the parish** of their sending church. Much that is said and written about fxC in the wider Church does not always give that impression (with greater prominence given to more 'exotic' or 'glamorous' examples). Indeed, one conversation partner (CP12, Steven Croft) suggested that *Mission-shaped Church* may need updating to give greater acknowledgement to the reality that most Anglican fxC are still within parish contexts.
- 2. Recognise that 'seeds' and 'runners' may need different kinds of support.** Though both are important, we suggest that particular attention may need to be given to the latter because these can be easily discarded or overlooked. Often having no legal status of their own, parish-based runners are particularly vulnerable when there is an interregnum or change of incumbent. One of the key ways the wider Church (and particularly their diocese) can support them at such times is in treating them not as an optional extra, but as a valued expression of Church.
- 3. Be more creative, imaginative and discerning in the way it uses financial resources to support fxC.** Though many fxC do not require a paid leader, we recognise that some contexts need additional resourcing and that paid roles have the potential to generate considerable (though not always recognised) 'value added' for the wider Church. We suggest there are various ways in which paid fxC roles could be imagined to include a greater emphasis on thinking regionally (developing sustainable networks of fxC) and enabling others.

### 5.3 Future research tasks

Though this pilot study has begun to provide new insights on the sustainability of fxC, our findings also suggest the need for further research on a range of topics. The list of potential future research tasks that follows has also been informed by:

- The limitations of this study (as discussed in Section 2.4)
- Ideas for further research suggested by our conversation partners
- The findings of other recent research projects

#### 1. What can be learned from fxC that die?

This could take one (or maybe both) of two possible angles:

- Investigating cause of death
- Assessing the legacy and 'lasting fruit' that survives a fxC

#### 2. The impact of the departure of a founding leader – and how a fxC can prepare for this

One of our other small-scale studies suggests that the departure of a founding leader is a major threat to the sustainability of fxC.<sup>53</sup> Further research is needed to better understand and prepare for this.

#### 3. Contrasting resourcing models among seeds, runners, grafts and transplants

The two 'seeds' in our sample were different from our other ten case study churches (which were all 'runners') in that these were only the fxC with formal legal status and a 'high-high cost' financial model. Further research with a larger sample would be needed to assess:

- Whether this pattern is true of fxC more generally
- The implications of these distinctions for fxC's sustainability

We have also briefly noted in passing that Southwark and London dioceses have considerably more 'grafts' and 'transplants' than other English dioceses. Their experiences also need to be considered when comparing and contrasting different resourcing models.<sup>54</sup>

#### 4. Inter-dependence in the mixed economy – exploring the relationship between parish churches and fxC

In view of the fact that most fxC in the Church of England are parish-based runners, further research may be needed to better understand:

- The nature of a fxC's relationship with its sending church
- The factors that contribute to the sustainability of a fxC's wider ecclesial environment
- A fxC's contribution to the sustainability of the wider whole<sup>55</sup>

#### 5. Experiences of sustainability within other denominations

This research has highlighted the number of Anglican fxC that remain within parish structures and the impact this has on questions of sustainability. Given the ecumenical nature of the fresh expressions movement, further research is still needed to explore the way that fxC within other (non parish-based) denominations relate to their parent churches.

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<sup>53</sup> See E. McGann, *What happens after research? How do dioceses react to, respond to and utilise large scale research into their fresh expressions of Church?* (Sheffield: Church Army's Research Unit, 2016), p. 4.

<sup>54</sup> See our individual diocesan reports for Southwark and London, D. Dadswell & C. Ross, *Church Growth Research Project: Church Planting*, pp. 53-58, and T. Thorlby, *Love, Sweat and Tears: Church Planting in East London* (London: Centre for Theology & Community, 2016).

<sup>55</sup> This might include using parish churches that have not pursued fxC as a control part of the research.

## **6. Growth patterns, life cycles and natural unit size**

One issue to be explored here is whether some fxC have a natural unit size beyond which they can only grow by multiplication (not addition). This would require a longitudinal study tracking fxC's experiences over a sustained period of time.

## **7. What bearing does the psychological profile of fxC leaders have on fxC sustainability?**

This report has identified 'involving others' and 'persevering' (among others) as key factors in a fxC's sustainability. We have also made brief reference to the distinction between 'pioneer starters' and 'pioneer sustainers'. Further research is needed into the bearing that psychological type has on this.

## **8. The place of Christian discipleship in sustaining fxC**

Similarly, our report has briefly highlighted the significance of discipleship for sustainability, but we have not been able to explore this in more depth. One potentially fruitful avenue for further research would be to explore how the experiences of fxC in this regard compare with those of the (mostly) inherited churches that participated in the Saltley Trust's 'What helps disciples grow?' research project.<sup>56</sup>

## **9. What sustains fxC leaders?**

One of our conversation partners (Tim Ling, CP3) also helpfully drew our attention to the Church of England's Experiences of Ministry Project (2011-15), a five-year process of research and consultation that aimed to develop understanding of 'what supports and sustains the flourishing of priestly ministry'.<sup>57</sup> Using a similar methodology, it may be helpful to explore:

- The similarities and differences between experiences of ordained fxC leaders and those of other priests
- The similarities and differences between experiences of lay fxC leaders (including the 'lay-lay') and those who are ordained

## **10. The sustainability of fxC in poor and deprived contexts**

We have highlighted financial sustainability and raising up local indigenous leaders as particular challenges in these contexts. Future research is needed to explore possible responses.<sup>58</sup>

## **11. A theology of sustainability for fxC**

One conversation partner helped us appreciate that there is a risk of conversations about sustainability being conducted in a way that only addresses pragmatic and functional concerns. Though practical considerations are clearly important for fxC, they need to be rooted in a theology of sustainability. Earlier in this chapter, we have outlined some initial thoughts about what such a theology of sustainability might involve. But developing these fully was beyond the scope of the current project.

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<sup>56</sup> See: <http://www.saltleytrust.org.uk/whdg/>

<sup>57</sup> See: <http://www.experiencesofministry.org/>

<sup>58</sup> Previous studies on which this would need to build include H. Cameron, *Poverty and Fresh Expressions: Emerging Forms of Church in Deprived Communities* (London: Church Urban Fund / OxCEPT, 2012).

## Appendix 1 - What is an Anglican fresh expression of Church? Ten indicators<sup>59</sup>

The Church of England's 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 Was **something Christian and communal brought to 'birth'** that was **new and further**, rather than an existing group modified?
- 2 Has the starting group tried to **engage with non-churchgoers**? There was intention to create a fresh expression of Church (fxC) not do an outreach project from an existing church. The aim was to help the Christians sent out to change, to fit a culture and context, not make the local/indigenous people change, to fit into an existing church context.
- 3 Do the resultant community meet **at least once a month**? In cases of monthly meetings, further questions about how to deepen community, build commitment and increase discipleship follow.
- 4 Does it have **a name** that helps gives an identity? An active search, not yet yielding a name, is allowed.
- 5 Is there **intention to be Church**? This could be 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 they are *not* seen as a bridge back to 'real church'.
- 6 Is it Anglican, or **an Anglican partner** in an Ecumenical project? '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 There is some form of **leadership** recognised within, and also without.
- 8 At least the majority of members (who are part of the public gathering) see it as **their major expression** of being church.
- 9 There is **aspiration for the four creedal 'marks' of church, or ecclesial relationships**: 'up/holy, in/one, out/apostolic, of/catholic'. We question validity in an absence of 'mission/out'. We see the two dominical sacraments 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 There is **intent to become 'three self'** (self-financing, self-governing and self-reproducing). These factors need contextualisation 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.

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<sup>59</sup> Reproduced from p. 10 of the *Strand 3b* report. See pp.10-12 of that report for further explanation.

## Appendix 2 - Our original discussion paper on sustainability

# The sustainability of fresh expressions of Church Discussion paper

Andy Wier, Church Army Research Unit, June 2014

### Purpose of this paper:

- To explain to potential conversation partners the background and intended scope of Church Army's proposed research on the sustainability of fresh expressions of Church;
- To outline some initial thoughts and questions that provide a potential starting point for further discussion.

### Overview

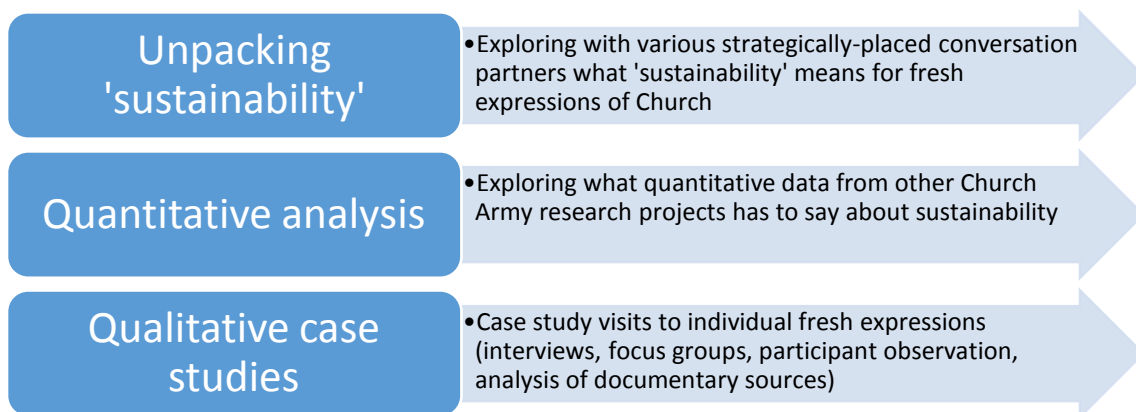
We are in the early stages of a small-scale research project exploring the sustainability of fresh expressions of Church within the Church of England. The key questions that the research is intended to address are:

- What does it mean to talk of sustainability in the context of fresh expressions?
- Are fresh expressions of Church sustainable?
- What encourages and inhibits sustainability within fresh expressions of Church?

It is hoped that the research will inform and influence the policy and practice of the following audiences:

- Church Army
- Strategic-decision makers and permission-givers within the wider Church
- Leaders and members of fresh expressions of Church

The research strategy we propose using is made up of the following three strands:



### Input from conversation partners

The area on which we'd particularly like to hear from conversation partners is 'unpacking sustainability'. Following some background reading and internal discussions, we have outlined in this paper some initial thoughts about what 'sustainability' might mean for fresh expressions of Church. These are presented in the form of a provisional conceptual framework which we hope might provide a helpful starting point for further discussion. In order to help us clarify and refine our thinking, we would greatly value people's feedback on this framework, as well as any further thoughts regarding sustainability.

# What is a ‘sustainable’ fresh expression? A provisional framework

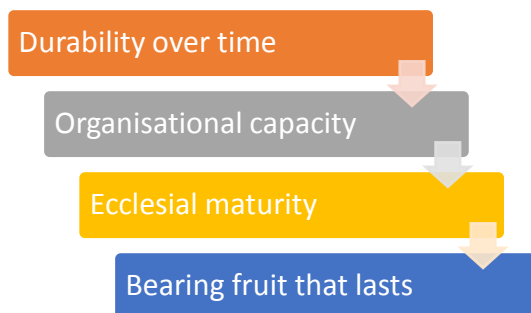
For the purposes of this research, we follow the definition of fresh expressions of Church that has been employed within other recent Church Army research projects. But what does it mean to talk of a ‘sustainable’ fresh expression?

Firstly, it is important to acknowledge that in discussions about fresh expressions of Church, the meaning of ‘sustainability’ is contested. The classic ‘three-self’ principles (*self-financing, self-governing and self-reproducing*) are widely recognised as providing a helpful starting point for understanding sustainability and maturity.<sup>1</sup> These are also sometimes accompanied by a fourth ‘self’ - *self-theologising*. However, ‘three self’ / ‘four-self’ thinking can be criticised for over-emphasising independence and self-sufficiency, and under-stating the case for mutual inter-dependence between ‘inherited mode’ churches and fresh expressions.

As an alternative to this, Michael Moynagh argues for a more flexible understanding of sustainability based around ‘four Fs’: *fruit, flow, family and freedom*.<sup>2</sup> Moynagh’s framework is helpful in extending and widening the meaning of sustainability beyond narrowly conceived notions of self-sufficiency. However, it is vulnerable to criticism on the grounds that important elements of the three-self model are omitted and that it makes sustainability more difficult to measure.<sup>3</sup>

In the light of the strengths and limitations of these models (4-self and 4 Fs), a more complex and multi-faceted understanding of sustainability is needed. Drawing on these models, we suggest in this paper an alternative way of thinking about sustainability that provides a provisional conceptual framework for this research project. As shown in Figure 3 below, this is based around four conceptual components or building blocks, each of which goes progressively deeper than the one before.

**Figure 3 - Components of a sustainable fresh expression of Church**



We will now briefly unpack our understanding of these four conceptual components.

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<sup>1</sup> See, for example, *Mission-shaped Church* pp. 121-123.

<sup>2</sup> M. Moynagh, *Church For Every Context: An Introduction to Theology and Practice* (London: SCM, 2012), pp. 405 -408.

<sup>3</sup> Moynagh himself acknowledges some of these limitations, suggesting that his framework may be more appropriate for situations that are fluid. Moynagh, *Church For Every Context*, p. 408.



### 1. Durability over time

In assessing the sustainability of fresh expressions, one factor we need to consider is their longevity. How long do they last for? What is their life expectancy? Are fresh expressions of Church a short-lived flash in the pan or can they stand the test of time?

These are important questions but we suggest that durability alone cannot be seen as a litmus test for sustainability. Some fresh expressions are only for a season and here a focus on ‘flows’ into other Christian communities may be more appropriate than a narrowly defined view of durability.<sup>4</sup> It is important to look beyond durability because on its own this provides little indication of quality, health and depth. As we now go to unpack, there are a variety of further considerations ‘beneath the surface’ that also need to be considered.

### 2. Organisational capacity

Informed by the three-self principle, a further consideration in assessing the sustainability of a fresh expression of Church is its organisational capacity and ability to stand on its two feet. As already noted above, too narrow a focus on independence and self-sufficiency may be unhelpful. Nevertheless, it would seem that one indicator of a fresh expression’s viability or sustainability is whether or not it is taking an appropriate degree of responsibility for its own governance and finance.

### 3. Ecclesial maturity

A fresh expression may appear durable and organisationally or financially viable (particularly if it has wealthy members) but these factors, we suggest, are not the sole markers of sustainability. At a deeper level, it is important to ask questions of ecclesial maturity. In assessing whether a particular initiative or ministry is a sustainable fresh expression of Church, we suggest that the four creedal marks of Church may be particularly helpful.<sup>5</sup> Within a sustainable fresh expression, there will need to be evidence of increasing depth and maturity in worship (UP), community (IN), mission (OUT) and relationship with the wider Church (OF).

### 4. Bearing fruit that lasts

Finally, consideration needs to be given to the wider impact or fruit that a fresh expression is generating, and whether that impact is long-lasting. This component is linked to the ‘self-reproducing’ strand of the three-self principles. However, we would also stress that the ability to reproduce is only one indicator of fruitfulness.

Other indicators of fruitfulness may include:

- Growing the church – particularly new Christians
- Development of indigenous leaders
- Signs of the Kingdom – including contributing to social transformation
- Becoming more Christ-like – the fruits of the Spirit
- Contributing to the wider Church

Consideration here also needs to be given to the question of return on investment – i.e. how the fruit that is generated by the fresh expression relates to the resources (e.g. people, time, money) that have been invested in it.

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<sup>4</sup> Moynagh, *Church For Every Context*, p. 407.

<sup>5</sup> See *Mission-shaped Church*, p. 96-99; G. Lings (2006) ‘Unravelling the DNA of Church: How Can We Know That What is Emerging is “Church”’, *International Journal for the Study of the Christian Church*, vol. 6.1., pp. 104-116.

Can sustainability be measured?

Having identified four components of sustainability for fresh expressions (durability, organisational capacity, ecclesial maturity and fruitfulness), we now turn to the question of whether these can be measured.

With this in mind, the middle column of the table below maps out various quantitative indicators that correspond to the four dimensions of sustainability highlighted above. Data on many of these is already being gathered through Church Army Research Unit’s other programmes of research with Anglican diocese across England.<sup>6</sup> Material from these will be fed into the ‘Quantitative analysis’ strand of the sustainability research.

There are also, however, various aspects of sustainability that are harder to measure because they involve some degree of subjective value judgement. Such qualitative considerations are summarised in the right-hand column of the table and will be explored through the ‘Qualitative case studies’ strand of this research.

	<b>Quantitative indicators</b> (things that are measurable) <sup>7</sup>	<b>Qualitative considerations</b> (harder to measure)
<b>Durability over time:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Stable or growing numbers</li> <li>Life expectancy</li> </ul>	Numerical growth <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Proportions of growth, plateau and decline in fxC</li> <li>Type of growth (churched, de-churched, or un-churched?)</li> </ul> Mortality within fxC	Seasonality – some fxC may be for a season: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Viable for its lifetime</li> <li>Good endings - flows into other Christian communities</li> </ul>
<b>Organisational capacity:</b> An appropriate freedom and responsibility re governance & finance	Steps towards ‘three-self’ maturity (self-financing, self-governing) <sup>8</sup> <p><i>Additional indicators:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><i>Financial indicators – income versus expenditure (full cost recovery?); sources of income</i></li> <li><i>Governance indicators (different legal identities?)</i></li> </ul>	Different interpretations of ‘three self’ maturity (What does it mean to be self-financing self-governing, self-reproducing?)  Healthy inter-dependence with parent Church: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>An appropriate freedom</li> <li>Increasing responsibility</li> <li>Giving and receiving</li> </ul>
<b>Ecclesial maturity:</b> Growing in UP, IN, OUT and OF	Practices associated with: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The Bible / Scriptures</li> <li>The Sacraments</li> <li>Discipleship</li> <li>Evangelism</li> </ul>	Quality of relationships: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>With God (worship)</li> <li>Within the body (community)</li> <li>With the world (mission)</li> <li>With the wider Church</li> </ul>
<b>Bearing fruit that lasts:</b> signs of the Kingdom, growing the Church, generating not exhausting resources	Growing the Church: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Numerical growth</li> <li><i>New Christians ‘produced’</i></li> <li><i>Establishment of new fxC and mission projects</i></li> </ul>	Wider impact – how to assess <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Signs of the Kingdom?</li> <li>Generating not exhausting resources – contribution to the wider Church?</li> <li>Growing indigenous leaders?</li> <li>Becoming more Christ-like?</li> </ul>

<sup>6</sup> See [www.churcharmy.org.uk/fxcresearch](http://www.churcharmy.org.uk/fxcresearch) .

<sup>7</sup> Text in italics denotes quantitative indicators not covered by Church Army’s current quantitative research programme.

<sup>8</sup> Self-reproducing is incorporated within ‘Bearing fruit that lasts’.

## Conclusion

We have outlined in this paper some initial thoughts about what 'sustainability' might mean for fresh expressions of Church. These provide a provisional conceptual framework that will guide our mixed method (quantitative and qualitative) programme of sustainability research.

As we have stressed, we see the provisional framework presented here as a work in progress and a starting point for further discussion, not a finished product. In order to enable us to continue to clarify and refine our understanding of sustainability, we would very much welcome other people's comments on this. We are already aware of a number of potential weaknesses and limitations within the understanding of sustainability outlined in this paper. But we also look forward to hearing what other people think!

The questions below provide some potential conversation starters, though this is not intended as an exhaustive list:

- How well does our provisional framework capture the core elements of sustainability for fresh expression of Church? What's missing here? What might need to be developed?<sup>9</sup>
- Can sustainability be measured? Is there evidence to suggest that particular types of fresh expression are more sustainable than others? Is it possible to compare the sustainability of fresh expressions of Church with the sustainability of 'inherited mode' churches?
- What factors are you aware of that either encourage or inhibit sustainability?

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<sup>9</sup> We are aware, for example, that our current framework does not directly address issues of Christian discipleship. Does there need to be a more explicit focus on remaining in Christ (John 15:1-17)?



## Researching the sustainability of fresh expressions of Church

### Case study Visits - Information Sheet

Thank you for being willing to help us with this research.

We have prepared this document in order to give you an overview of what we are trying to do and ensure that our time with you is as productive as possible.

#### **Overview of this research**

We are researching the sustainability of fresh expressions of Church within the Church of England. We think that this is an important but under-researched topic. We are keen for this research to both inform and enhance the activities of fresh expressions, Church Army, and the wider Church.

The overall research questions that we want to explore are:

- What does it mean for a fresh expression of Church to be sustainable?
- What encourages and inhibits the sustainability of fresh expressions?

Our research strategy for exploring these questions has three main strands. These are:

1. Case studies - A series of qualitative case studies of individual fresh expressions
2. Statistical analysis - Exploring what quantitative data from other Church Army research projects has to say about sustainability
3. Unpacking sustainability – Exploring understandings of sustainability with various strategically-placed conversation partners

The rest of this document explains in more detail what the case studies strand of the research will involve.

## Case study Approach

Each case study will involve the same core elements:

### 1. An initial telephone interview with the fresh expression leader

Here, we would:

- Check and update the information we have about your fresh expression from our previous survey
- Ask some basic background questions about the way that your fresh expression is financed and resourced
- Ask you to supply us with any relevant background documents (see below)
- Discuss the practicalities of coming to visit and conducting the other elements of the case study

### 2. A desk-based review of documentary sources about the fresh expression

During the telephone interview, we would ask you to provide us with copies of any available background documents that will help us begin to build up a picture of the fresh expression. Depending on the nature of your fresh expression, these might include:

- Publicity material and website details
- Vision / mission / purpose statements
- Financial reports over the lifetime of the fresh expression
- Annual reports / progress reviews
- Previous studies / articles / reports about the fresh expression

We recognise that some of these may not be available for your fresh expression.

### 3. Visiting a gathering of the fresh expression

We would like to come to a gathering of your fresh expression as participant-observers. We want to gain a better understanding of what you do by participating in activities, observing what happens, and talking to people informally. We would value your suggestions and advice about how and when we do this.

### 4. A face-to-face interview or focus group with the main leader(s) of the fresh expression

Whether we conduct an interview or focus group will depend on what seems most appropriate in your context.

The interview / focus group will pick up on, and explore in more detail, some of the background information about your fresh expression that we obtained in stages 1 and 2.

### 5. An interview with someone from the wider Church (parish or diocese)

We would like to speak to someone from the wider Church who is not directly involved in your fresh expression but willing and able to offer the perspective of a 'critical friend'. Depending on your context, this might be someone from the parish or a diocesan representative. We would invite your suggestions about who this should be.

### **Confidentiality and Permissions**

We want to be able to reveal the identities of the fresh expressions studied within any report that arises from this research. We therefore cannot promise complete anonymity. Having said this, we recognise that the research process may gather sensitive information that you do not feel comfortable being released into the public domain. Prior to publication, we will therefore give you the chance to read, comment on, and veto any sections of our report that mention your fresh expression.

We will also ask for your permission to audio record the interviews / focus groups that we conduct. The information we gather will be stored securely and used for no other purpose than this research.

### **Further information**

If you have any questions or concerns, please contact:

**Dr Andy Wier**

Research, Review and Training Officer

Church Army

Wilson Carlile Centre

50 Cavendish Street

Sheffield

S3 7RZ

General line: 0300 123 2113

Direct number: 0114 252 1667

Email: [a.wier@churcharmy.org.uk](mailto:a.wier@churcharmy.org.uk)

Thank you once again for your help.

## **Interview with main leader(s)**

Introduction, background and purpose of interview; Permission to record?

1. What motivations led you (or others) to set up this fresh expression of Church?
2. How has this fresh expression managed to last as long as it has?
3. Could you describe this fresh expression's relationship with the 'sending church'? How has this relationship developed and changed over time?  
(Possible follow-up questions about governance)
4. Are you aiming for this fresh expression to be completely self-financing? How far along the road to this are you at the moment?
5. Can you see signs that the people you're reaching are growing and developing in Christian discipleship?  
What do you see as the greatest barriers or obstacles to this?
6. Do you think that this community is maturing and growing as an expression of Church?
7. In John 15:16, Jesus talks to his disciples about going to bear fruit – 'fruit that will last'. What lasting fruit do you think has come out of this fresh expression?
8. Do you see this fresh expression as something permanent or only for a season? If it was to stop tomorrow, what would happen?
9. What do you see as the biggest threats or challenges to the sustainability of this fresh expression?
10. Is there anything the wider Church could learn from your experience (with particular regard to sustaining fresh expressions)?
11. Is there anything else you'd like to say?

## **Interview with someone from the wider Church**

Introduction – background and purpose of interview

1. What's the nature of your relationship with this fresh expression? How long have you known it for?
2. How has the fresh expression developed and changed over the time you've known it?
3. What kind of relationship does the fresh expression have with the wider Church (including the sending church'?)
4. Financially, is the fresh expression above to fund its own running costs or does it receive external financial support? Is it realistic to expect a fresh expression like this to be completely self-financing?
5. What signs are there that this fresh expression is maturing as a church?
6. What long-term fruit has this fresh expression generated?
7. Overall, how sustainable is this fresh expression?
8. What challenges still face the fresh expression with relation to sustainability?
9. What, if anything, might the wider Church learn about sustainability from the experience of this fresh expression?
10. Is there anything else you'd like to say?