What happens after research?

How do dioceses react to and utilise large scale research into their fresh expressions of Church?

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1 Introduction

Between late 2011 and late 2013 Church Army's Research Unit carried out a large-scale quantitative survey in 11 Church of England dioceses with the aim of identifying and studying all of the known CofE fresh expressions of Church (fxC) in these areas. This research was published in January 2014 and, as far as we are aware, was the first quantitative study of fxC of such a scale or depth[1].

In each of the 11 dioceses we conducted our original research in we established a key contact person who had some form of role related to, or knowledge of, fxC within the diocese. After completing our work on each diocese we were able to analyse the data and write summary reports of our findings for that diocese. This meant that, in addition to the overall report of our findings from the whole project, each of the 11 dioceses received reports specific to them, alongside details of which initiatives were and were not considered to be fxC.

The aim of this follow-up piece of research was to discover what had happened in these dioceses since our original report was published. It had been at least 18 months since we carried out our original research (and for one diocese around three-and-a-half years) and so we aimed to establish the impact the research may have had in a range of ways, such as:

- Had there been any developments regarding fxC in the diocese?
- Had the surveying and record-keeping of fxC continued?
- What impact (if any) had the research had on the diocese?

Since our original research was published in January 2014, we have continued to survey fxC in subsequent dioceses. This is essentially the same research task but with a much higher profile – dioceses and individual fxC and their leaders will often be aware of the published research and may have adapted and learnt from it. We hope that similarly, as a result of this research project, subsequent dioceses can learn and benefit from those that have gone before them.

2 The Methods

A questionnaire was designed that asked a mixture of quantitative and qualitative questions and aimed to be brief and simple to answer (see appendix for questionnaire). This was then turned into an online survey so that the respondents could easily complete it. A link to the survey was emailed to all of the 11 original diocesan key contact persons in June 2015 and a follow-up email was sent in July to those who had not responded to act as a prompt. By the beginning of September 2015 responses from all 11 dioceses had been received.

We analysed the responses using a range of methods according to the question type. We conducted coded analysis on the qualitative answers and this allowed us to highlight and identify common topics and themes within the responses. The findings will show summaries of these coded responses as well as details by anonymised diocese.

[1] Strand 3b of the Church Growth Research Project, *An analysis of fresh expressions of Church and church plants begun in the period 1992-2012* (Sheffield: Church Army, 2013).

3 Findings

Having carried out a comprehensive survey of fresh expressions of Church (fxC) in a diocese, we wanted to know if the diocese had taken this as a starting point/groundwork and built upon this, perhaps to maintain an updating and evolving picture of the fxC in the diocese that could be used by the persons with a brief for fxC.

3.1 Record keeping

The first point to establish was whether there was a person with a brief that covered fxC within the diocese. This follow-up survey established that in all but one diocese there is a person who, as part of their role, carries the brief for fxC. In the majority of cases the person detailed was the same person we had liaised with when carrying out our original research in 2011-13. In most cases this person seemed to be working on their own, but in one case the response stated that a group had been established to carry the brief.

The people listed had a wide variety of job titles (no two were the same), with only three having 'Fresh Expressions' or 'fresh expressions of church' within their title. One had the word 'pioneer', while six had 'mission'. This suggests that in most cases, fxC are not the whole of the person's role. We also looked at the way in which the person is referred to in their title: three people were described as 'advisor', three as 'officer', one 'worker', one 'facilitator', one 'department leader' and one as 'director'. Anecdotally we have heard that the way in which a person is referred to in their title may provide some indication of how seriously fxC are taken within the diocese; some have even suggested that the creation of some roles is little more than a token gesture. Regardless of the objective truth of these claims, it is clear that the titles mentioned above carry different weights and this may reflect their voice within the diocese.

We asked how details and records of fxC were being taken and updated. A variety of approaches were given, but the overwhelming approach seemed to be updating 'as and when' they could. One respondent particularly spoke of the difficulty in relying on and discerning the accuracy of information from sources such as Statistics for Mission.

"I check all Statistics for Mission returns...this involves a rather laborious checking of many entries where it is unclear whether that which has been identified as a FXC actually is!"

In the original research we carried out in 2011-13 we used a set of 10 criteria to establish what we considered to be a fxC and whether an initiative was to be included in the research (see appendix for these criteria). We asked our respondents how helpful the 10 criteria have been in their work. 9 of the 11 dioceses said that they found the criteria 'somewhat' or 'very' useful, while the remaining two said they were 'neither helpful nor unhelpful'. No dioceses said that they found them 'unhelpful'. This echoes the feedback we occasionally received from church leaders and those we spoke to during the original research. They commented that the criteria were very useful for providing clarity to their situation and some said that they would take the criteria

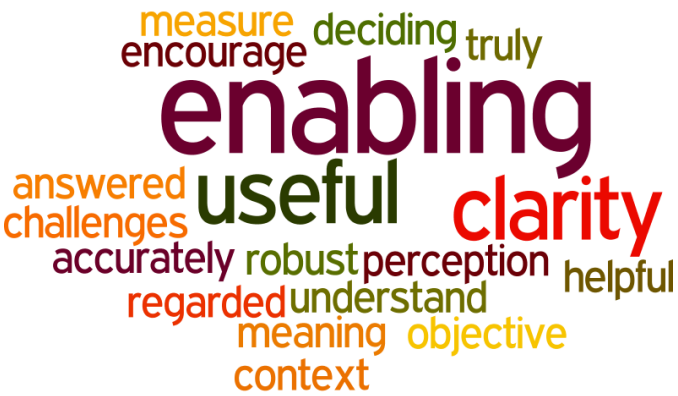

Figure 1: Words used when commenting on our 10 criteria

to their leadership teams to discuss ways in which their initiative may grow and develop. The dioceses were asked to elaborate on their thoughts about the criteria and most often used 'strong' words, e.g. robust, challenges, objective, clarity.

"[The criteria] challenges the perception that Fresh Expressions cover everything missional"

There are a variety of ways that the criteria are being used by dioceses, with several dioceses using them in more than one way:

Ways in which our criteria are being used	**Sample quote**
4 dioceses reported using the criteria for their original purpose – deciding whether or not an initiative is a fxC	*"Stops fanciful claims"*
7 dioceses are using the criteria more broadly, e.g. raising awareness about fxC	"*the criteria enable me to have a conversation about what is an fxC"*
4 dioceses have changed the criteria to varying degrees – some adding and others removing elements	"*we have expanded [the] criteria to include fxC and missional activities in inherited church"*
One diocese makes no use of the criteria	

Table 1: Use of criteria by dioceses

All but one of the dioceses are using our criteria in some way. This may well connect with the large majority of dioceses saying that they found our criteria 'somewhat' or 'very' useful.

3.2 Gaining an updated picture

6 of the 11 dioceses said that they were keeping records of further fxC that had begun since we carried out our research. We do not know if this was a process prompted by the work we had carried out or if this was something that was already being done by the diocese. Either way we want to encourage this to continue and commend the usefulness of this type of record keeping to others.

We asked dioceses how many further fxC had been established since we carried out our research. Two dioceses did not answer this question and four said that they did not know a number. The remaining five dioceses provided answers, but the numbers varied widely from 3 to potentially 40. The answers also led us to query the accuracy of some of these responses, as a response of '27' seems more considered than '30-40'. One response demonstrated the difficulty that those in a central diocesan role may have in learning the full story of what is taking place on the ground:

"approximately 10 have started (20 if you include the iffy ones)"

It may be these 'iffy ones' arise because of the confusion that sometimes occurs over the term 'fresh expression of Church', but it may also be the case that these 'iffy ones' are potential fxC and that the diocese should consider how to nurture them and help them to become less 'iffy'.

We also asked the dioceses about fxC that had died (where the worshipping community are no longer meeting). Two dioceses claimed that no fxC had died since we conducted our research and four said that they did not know. Five dioceses provided numbers (ranging from 2 to 10), but as mentioned above the responses led us to question their accuracy.

"I'd guess 10 but don't know for certain if any have [died] – 2 might be a more accurate figure"

When asked to expand on the reasons that these fxC had died, we received a range of responses, some much more detailed than others. These responses were coded and then analysed – this enabled us to draw out general themes amongst the responses and some dioceses indicated more than one of these themes.

Coded response	No. of dioceses	Sample quote
Leader left	7 of 11 dioceses	*"In every case [it was] because of the departure of the founding leader"*
Not investigated/unclear reason	6 of 11 dioceses	*"It's not clear why it stopped"*
Weakness in structure of fxC	5 of 11 dioceses	*"Too clergy dependent, operating on an old-style rota of helpers around the vicar"*
'for a season'/'ran its course'	4 of 11 dioceses	*"The feeling is largely that these initiatives ran their course"*

Table 2: Analysis of coded responses for fxC deaths

Six of the dioceses said that they had been in contact with local people involved in fxC that had died, with the aim of finding out the story, whereas the other five dioceses had not.

We also asked the dioceses if they felt that there were any lessons that were emerging from the fxC that had died, whether from speaking to the local leaders or from knowing the general story. Six dioceses reported some kind of positive outcome from a fxC's death, such as new initiatives being started, lessons being learnt and actively taken on board and teams attending *mission shaped ministry*.

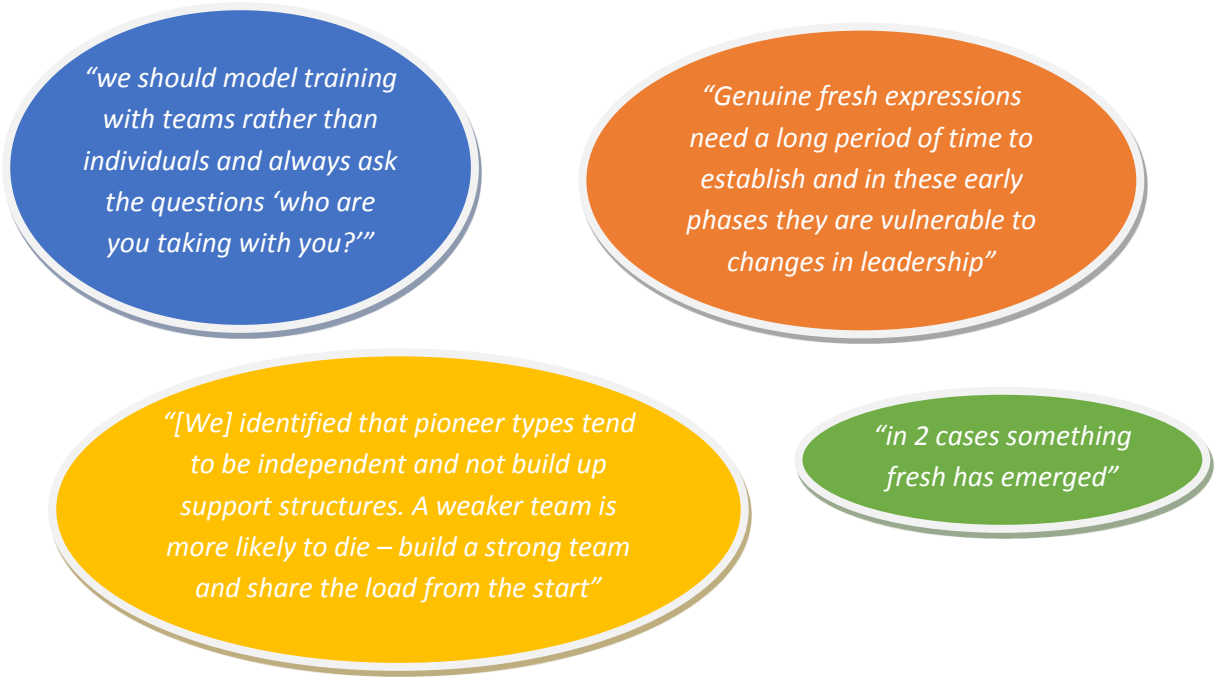

Figure 2: Lessons to be learnt from fxC that have died

3.3 The research impact

All dioceses spoke positively or neutrally about the research, both the in-depth work on their particular diocese and the overall research across 10 dioceses that was published at the start of 2014.

"It was very good to be involved in the first wave of research"

In the case of dioceses that spoke neutrally about the research, most commented that they felt that completing this follow-up survey had brought to their attention their response and that they plan to revisit the research themselves or bring it to the appropriate people's attention.

"Nothing [has been done] as yet but this questionnaire has highlighted the gap in our policies/training/mentoring in this area which we may need to address"

We asked the dioceses 'what (if any) changes have there been within the diocese, as a result of our research'. The responses broadly fell into three categories, perhaps indicating the speed of impact that the research has had on the diocese.

- 4 dioceses reported significant diocese level strategic or legal changes such as new roles being created (e.g. 'local missional leaders', 'pioneer development workers') and new vision or strategy being adopted.
- 7 dioceses noted changes from the research that we would consider to be warm encouragements, such as raising the profile of fxC, establishing best practice and a noticeable change in diocesan culture.
- 2 dioceses admitted that nothing had happened as a result of the research.

"the language of FX and Pioneering has re-entered the vocabulary"

"FXC became recognised as an authentic part of church life"

Figure 3: Words used when describing changes within the diocese as a result of our research

The majority of the dioceses gave details of a variety of changes they feel have come about due to the research. These responses were coded and analysed to enable us to draw together common themes and topics, several dioceses indicated more than one of the following:

	Coded response	
	New vision/strategy	6 of 11 dioceses
	Increase in profile/acceptance of fxC in diocese	5 of 11 dioceses
	New jobs/roles	4 of 11 dioceses
	Significant strategic developments	4 of 11 dioceses
	Encouraging new fxC	3 of 11 dioceses
	Training taking place/being developed	2 of 11 dioceses
	Nothing	2 of 11 dioceses

Table 3: Analysis of coded responses for changes that have occurred within the diocese as a result of our research

The extracts below in Figure 4 illustrate the different coded responses. The colour of each speech bubble corresponds with the colour coding in Table 3.

Figure 4: Examples of changes within the diocese as a result of our research

The majority of dioceses spoke of a new vision or strategy being adopted as a result of our research and nearly half said they had seen an increase in the profile and acceptance of fxC within the diocese. Several dioceses reported significant strategic developments having taken place including two dioceses which have set targets for the number of fxC to be established within the diocese by a certain date.

The breakdown below of the coded responses shows that while many dioceses have seen a range of changes occur, a few have seen only one or two. This is in addition to the two dioceses that reported that nothing had happened. One diocese, unusually, had no coded responses to this question; this is due to the diocese undergoing a dramatic structural change (see 'Further comments' section for more).

		Diocese										
		A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I	J	K
	New vision/strategy	✓	✓		✓	✓			✓			✓
	Increase in profile/acceptance in diocese		✓			✓	✓			✓		✓
	New jobs/roles	✓			✓				✓	✓		
	Significant strategic developments	✓			✓	✓						✓
	Encouraging new fxC	✓				✓			✓			
	Training taking place/being developed	✓			✓							
	Nothing							✓			✓	

Table 4: Breakdown of coded responses in Table 3 by diocese
NB: Dioceses randomly assigned an alphabetic code to identify them (same as in Table 6)

3.4 Support for leaders

We asked the dioceses if there is any support for leaders of fxC, whether in the form of networking, training, mentoring or something else. Every diocese responded that there was some form of support for fxC leaders, although what this support consisted of varied greatly. In three dioceses the only support available was locally organised (i.e. by the fxC leaders themselves), with nothing available or organised by the diocese itself.

We coded and analysed the details the dioceses gave of the support available and this enabled us to draw together common approaches and methods of support.

	Coded response	
	Leaders meet together/networking	7 of 11 dioceses
	Generic training (not including *msm*)	7 of 11 dioceses
	mission shaped ministry (*msm*) course	4 of 11 dioceses
	Mentoring	4 of 11 dioceses
	Formal/legal recognition of fxC leaders	3 of 11 dioceses
	No diocesan initiative	3 of 11 dioceses
	Diocese fxC representatives visits	2 of 11 dioceses

Table 5: Analysis of coded responses for support available to fxC leaders

The extracts below in Figure 6 illustrate the different coded responses. The colour of each speech bubble corresponds with the colour coding in Table 5.

Figure 5: Examples of support offered for fxC leaders

The majority of the dioceses gave details of having some form of opportunity for fxC leaders to meet together or network and there is also training available in the majority of these dioceses. The official Fresh Expressions course *mission shaped ministry* (*msm*) runs in four dioceses and a few dioceses have created ways to formally recognise fxC leaders.

The breakdown below of the coded responses shows that while some dioceses offer a range of support for fxC leaders, others only offer one or two options.

		Diocese										
		A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I	J	K
	Leaders meet together/networking	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓			✓		✓
	Generic training (not including *msm*)	✓	✓				✓	✓	✓	✓		✓
	mission shaped ministry (*msm*) course		✓	✓			✓					✓
	Mentoring	✓	✓				✓					✓
	Formal/legal recognition	✓								✓		✓
	No diocesan initiative				✓			✓			✓	
	Diocese fxC representatives' visits					✓						✓

Table 6: Breakdown of coded responses in Table 5 by diocese
NB: Dioceses randomly assigned an alphabetic code to identify them (same as in Table 4)

Three dioceses were partnering with other organisations, dioceses or denominations to provide structure and support for their fxC leaders – specifically regarding training, mentoring and creating new roles.

Three dioceses spoke of plans that had not worked out or challenges they were facing in providing support for their fxC leaders:

"I have tried forming a learning community but not many attended"

And five dioceses mentioned plans for the future or plans that they were in the process of developing:

"we are in the process of setting up a support and training network of lay pioneers"

4 Conclusions from the data

This research has looked at the ways in which the landscape of dioceses has changed in relation to fresh expressions of Church in the period since we conducted our research: late 2011 to late 2013. We have seen a wide variety of responses and reactions, ranging from a diocese admitting that nothing has happened to an ambitious and, some may say, ground-breaking new diocesan strategy involving significant financial investment.

The **10 criteria** that we used in our original research to define a fresh expression of Church were found to be helpful to a large majority of dioceses and all but one diocese are making use of the criteria in some way within their own context.

Over half of the dioceses are continuing to keep some form of **records** of fxC since we carried out our research, but with most we were able to see from their responses that this was difficult when being done by just one person. It may be hard for them to ensure coverage and accuracy with limited time available in their role.

The most common cause of a fxC's **death** was identified as the leader leaving, but in more than half the dioceses it was admitted that the reason for a fxC's death was unclear or had not been investigated. Others identified a weakness within the structure of makeup of the fxC or that it was felt that the fxC was 'for a season' or 'ran its course'.

The large majority of dioceses reported that **changes** had occurred within the diocese as a result (at least in part) of our original research. Four identified what we have termed 'significant strategic developments', with two of these developments being the setting of specific targets for the number of fxC to be seen in the diocese.

In the **support for leaders** of fxC, the most common method was arranging chances for the leaders to meet together or network, and equally as common was providing some sort of training (not including the *msm* course). On the other hand, in three dioceses no level of support was offered to fxC leaders from the diocese itself and was all organised by the fxC leaders themselves. Some dioceses had partnered with other organisations to provide leader support. Supporting fxC leaders is seen as an ongoing area of development as nearly half of dioceses spoke of plans for the future or plans that are in development.

5 Further comments

Before we go on to present our recommendations, we briefly outline below some further comments that arise from Church Army's Research Unit's reflection on the findings of this research.

Fresh expressions of Church can be found across the whole of the Church of England, in any context and seemingly for any demographic. As was found in our original research published at the start of 2014, the number of fxC being started is increasing and so they are becoming a growing fact of life for dioceses. How might dioceses value and welcome their fxC as part of the diocesan family and take steps to demonstrate this 'valuing'? One way we have seen this happen is through the creation of a role within the diocese with a dedicated brief for fxC. Some may argue that with diocesan budgets being stretched further and further there is neither the energy nor the resources for such a role to be created and sustained, but we would counter that when compared to the investment, support and structure provided for the inherited church, the creation of this role for fresh expressions of Church would be a step in demonstrating this 'valuing' of fxC within the diocesan family.

The 10 criteria that we used in our original research to define a fresh expression of Church are now being used by dioceses in a variety of ways. Some of the dioceses have changed the criteria in some way, whether by removing some of the criteria to make them simpler or by adding criteria to focus on or link up with a particular strategy or vision of the diocese. We acknowledge that this may seem appealing – adapting to fit with the diocese, contextualising the criteria. However, we believe that the confusion resulting from this approach would bear negatively on fxC as a whole. The term 'fresh expression of Church' is still viewed by some to mean church mission initiatives that lack any ecclesial identity or aspirations, a passing fad, or simply 'church-lite'. For a particular initiative to be classed as a fxC in one diocese but not in another perpetuates this impression. Having a consistent definition of fxC would also help those in fxC-related roles within the dioceses as they would have a universal foundation to build upon.

Several dioceses reported that the reason behind some of their fxC coming to an end was that they were 'for a season' or that they had 'run their course'. While this can be the case, from experience in our wider research, we question whether this is truly the cause in all cases or whether in some this label was given after the fxC had died as a means of justifying it. Could it be that in some cases, when a fxC was becoming vulnerable and weak, not enough was done to try and save it? Another of our research reports looking at the sustainability of fxC explores this further: whether there are any differences in the sustainability of a fxC in the short and long term, planning for this and whether a fxC can ever be 'for a season'[2].

Throughout the responses to our questionnaire, one diocese noticeably stood out from the others: the responses to each question were either in the negative or no response was given. By the end of the questionnaire, they acknowledged that "*our responses probably paint a pretty poor picture of our activity in this area*". This was the same diocese that did not have anyone who carried the brief for fxC as part of their role. It would seem that, as no one was responsible for the fxC agenda within the diocese, very little or no progress had been made to oversee, support or encourage them. This highlights the key importance of having at least one person with a fxC brief within the diocese.

[2] *Sustaining young Churches: A qualitative pilot study of fresh expressions of Churches in the Church of England* (Sheffield: Church Army, 2016).

The final question asked in our questionnaire was: ‘As a result of our research, what (if any) changes have there been within the diocese?’ This prompts the wider question of: ‘How does change occur within a diocese generally?’ Is it by the decree of a bishop? Where the money is spent? Is a new strategy or vision statement needed or is it a case of working with the very culture of a diocese for change to occur? One of the dioceses that took part in this research has undergone significant change in the time between our original research and this. The old diocese has been dissolved and is now part of a much larger new diocese. They spoke of the challenges that a new diocese faced and ways in which change can occur when various parts of the diocese have different histories and starting points. They felt that they had to go backwards to ensure that all parts of the diocese were on the same page and join the language and message of fxCs to wider conversations within the new diocese. This acts as a reminder that different dioceses will inevitably move at different speeds in responding to research like this, depending on factors and constraints taking place within the life of the diocese.

6 Recommendations

Reflection on the findings of this survey and our wider experience of researching fxC leads us to identify the following recommendations.

1) A universal definition and understanding of fresh expressions of Church should be agreed and used – ideally at a national level, at least at a diocesan level

2) Dedicated role(s) and briefs with the responsibility for fxC should be created within the diocesan structure, ensuring that this person(s) has enough weight and responsibility within the diocese to be heard[3]

3) Establish a process for accurate and thorough record keeping of fxC. To be done well, this requires dedicated time and resources available to the person(s) carrying out the task, as well as wider education of church/fxC leaders in fxC language and understanding[4]

4) Dioceses should invest in support and training for fxC leaders – this can happen in a wide variety of ways as there is great value in facilitated meetings, gatherings and support

5) Ensure dioceses value and care for fxC just as much as they do the leaders themselves. The establishing of a dedicated fxC role may be a first step in this direction

6) We encourage dioceses to learn from their fxC that have died and, where possible, take proactive steps based on this learning

7) The most common cause of fxC death is the leader leaving, so provision should be made for this – whether through training up 'apprentice leaders' within the fxC or through a process similar to when a parish church enters interregnum

Questions to the reader

- If your diocese has been researched by our team (or using the approach of our original research), consider how your diocese has responded. Consider what can be learnt from the dioceses included in this report and the ways in which they have responded.
- If your diocese has not been researched by our team (or using the approach of our original research), consider:
    - The value of gathering information on all of your fxC
    - Consulting with Church Army's Research Unit on the process and costs involved
    - How to prepare for the research process

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[3] We note that this is very similar to one of the original recommendations of *Mission-Shaped Church* (Rec 3). Unfortunately, there has been only limited progress here. In the light of the findings of this research, we would urge that this still needs to be taken seriously.

[4] Again, we note that this is very similar to one of the original recommendations of *Mission-Shaped Church* (Rec 7). Unfortunately, there has been only limited progress here. In the light of the findings of this research, we would urge that this still needs to be taken seriously.

Appendix - questionnaire

Fresh expressions of Church research follow-up

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Since 2011, Church Army's Research Unit has been carrying out research into fresh expressions of Church (fxC) within the Church of England as part of a national study of church growth. Your diocese was part of the first round of our research that was published in January 2014. The aim of this questionnaire is to discover what has happened since we conducted our research.

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1) Who now carries the brief for fxC in the diocese?

2) Have any records of further fxC been kept? ☐**Yes** ☐**No**

   a) If yes, by whom?

   b) If yes, how many further fxC are there?

   c) If yes, which are you finding works best:
   ☐updating your data as and when you can
   ☐setting aside a dedicated period to update all your records at once
   ☐another approach (please describe)

3) How helpful have our criteria for inclusion been?
   ☐ Unhelpful ☐Neither helpful nor unhelpful ☐ Somewhat helpful ☐ Very helpful
   Please elaborate

4) How many of your fxC have died and why?

   a) Have you contacted local people to find out more of the story? ☐**Yes** ☐**No**

   b) Do you feel there are lessons that can be learnt? Please describe:

5) Is there any networking, support, training or mentoring offered to fxC leaders – including the lay-lay?
   ☐**Yes** ☐**No** Please describe:

6) As a result of our research, what (if any) changes have there been within the diocese? e.g. policy, on-the-ground etc

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Thank you for completing this questionnaire. Please return this form via email or post to:

Church Army's Research Unit, Wilson Carlile Centre, 50 Cavendish Street, Sheffield, S3 7RZ **ask@churcharmy.org.uk**

Please feel free to contact us if you have any questions or would like to talk further.