

A WYCLIFFE BOOKLET



# What is a Fresh Expression of Church?

A beginner's guide to a movement  
that is changing the church

JOHN BOWEN

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JANE HAD FRIENDS AT WORK WHO HAD NO CONNECTION WITH A CHURCH. They knew Jane was “religious.” She talked with pleasure (and occasional frustration) about her church, and even called it her “church family.” When the friends had problems, they knew Jane to have a wise and sympathetic ear, and would ask her to pray for them, even though they weren’t sure prayer “worked.” Sometimes they asked her questions about faith: “Why did my grandmother die?” and “Aren’t all religions basically the same?” and even, “How could I have faith like yours?”

Eventually, Jane said to them rather nervously, “I wonder if you’d ever like to discuss one of the biographies of Jesus with me? It would be a sort of reading group. If you want to understand my faith, I think that would answer your questions better than I can.” And to her surprise (and relief), they all said yes.

So five of them began to meet, on a Thursday evening every couple of weeks, at their favourite coffee shop, where they knew the staff, and the staff knew what kind of coffee they liked. And they began to read the Gospel of Mark together, and to discuss what it might mean.

Some of Jane's church family found out what was going on, and got quite excited. "Ooh, you must be an evangelist," one of them said. Jane strongly denied it. Another said, "I think this must be one of these new things I've heard about—a fresh expression of church." Jane wasn't sure about that. She'd heard the phrase, but wasn't really sure what it meant.

In that respect, Jane was like many Christians. I'm doing something new: is it a fresh expression of church? The phrase is used in widely and wildly different ways. Some churches think introducing a coffee hour after the service is a fresh expression. One church even announced that it was introducing a music group "as a fresh expression of organs"!<sup>1</sup>

So what is a fresh expression of church? The phrase first appeared in the *Mission-Shaped Church* report in the Church of England in 2004,<sup>2</sup> to describe the hundreds of new Christian communities—some quite unconventional—that were springing up all over the country.

An organisation called Fresh Expressions<sup>3</sup> was then set up to encourage and resource those trying to start such communities. Steve Croft (now Bishop of Sheffield) was the first Team

Leader for Fresh Expressions in the UK, and he offered this definition:

A fresh expression of church is the attempt to go to where people are, listen carefully to the context, and through service form new communities of faith which have the potential to grow into church in their own right.<sup>4</sup>

In other words, a fresh expression of church is the attempt to start a new church. But lots of people try to start new churches, and in many different ways, so that by itself is not an adequate explanation. What is unique about a fresh expressions approach is the way in which the new church comes about. It normally starts small and probably inconspicuously. Almost certainly it doesn't begin as a worshipping community. It is possible that nobody apart from those directly involved knows that it's happening. And although the pioneers may be hoping and praying that a new church will result from their efforts, in other cases, those involved may be taken by surprise when it grows into a church.

Let's go back to Jane's Bible study. There are three things that might happen to it. One possibility is that after a period of time—let's say a year, for the sake of argument—some or all of the group say, "Thank you, Jane. That's been great. Now we feel we understand something about who Jesus is and why you follow him. But we don't think it's for us, not right now at least." And the group will come to an end. The friendships will probably continue, and Jane will continue to love her friends and pray for them. The group will have been a worthwhile exercise,

though Jane will probably feel a bit disappointed, because she had hoped (and prayed) that at least one of her friends might have decided to follow Jesus as a result of the discussions.

A second possibility is that one or more of the friends, at some point in the discussions, will say, “You know, this stuff is amazing. I think I’d like to be a follower of Jesus too. Could I get baptised and join your church?” Quite possibly the group will come to an end then, at least for regular Bible studies, because the friends will get caught up in the life of Jane’s church. That too is a wonderful outcome from Jane’s group.

The third possibility is that this grows into a new Christian community. How is that different? First of all, the original group begins to grow. The friends start to bring friends. Some hover on the fringes of the group to check it out for a few weeks before deciding to get involved. Jane recruits one or two friends from church to help her. It becomes a community.

Over time—again, let’s say a year—some become followers of Jesus. They begin to pray together. Some of them begin to befriend and help the street people who sometimes come into the coffee shop to get warm. Once a month, they start putting on a small, informal worship service in someone’s home. About a dozen people show up. Then one of the new Christians says, “Do you think we could we do that bread and wine thing Jesus talked about?” (This is not the way older Christians talk, of course, but this is rather like a child’s first stumbling efforts to talk.)

At this point, Jane gets nervous (this recurring nervousness is normal since, as Steve Croft has said, “the motto of Fresh Expressions is, ‘We’re making this up as we go along’”) and goes to talk to her pastor, who has been following the story with interest. He says, “Well, I think it’s pretty clear. You’ve got a fresh expression of church on your hands. I’d be happy to come and do a communion service for the group, perhaps once a month. And then”—and here the conversation will differ according to the denomination of Jane’s church. If it’s an Anglican church, the minister will say something like, “I’ll talk to the bishop about how we can help this group grow into a mature church.” Other denominations will take whatever steps are appropriate within their structures to link this fresh expression of church to their wider network of churches—not for the sake of imposing control and uniformity, but in order to nurture and resource.

## The Missional Journey

This third option—the “fresh expression of church” outcome—illustrates Steve Croft’s definition:

A fresh expression of church is the attempt to go to where people are, listen carefully to the context, and through service form new communities of faith which have the potential to grow into church in their own right.

- Jane “went” to where people are. This was easy, since she worked with them every day. The connection was not an artificial one, but natural and organic.
- She “listened”—to her colleagues’ question and concerns. They trusted her. They were friends.
- She “served”—by offering the coffee shop group, where the friends were able to discuss their questions about faith in the light of Mark’s Gospel.
- Over time, “a new community of faith” gradually came into being where people engaged in Christian practices—prayer, Bible study, care for the poor, and (soon, anyway) the sacraments.
- And, with the guidance of the pastor and the denominational leadership, this new community of faith has “the potential” over time “to grow into” a mature church community.

This sequence can be illustrated like this:



This should not be thought of as a “method” or a “program.” If it were a program, that might imply a guarantee that, if the correct steps are followed, the outcome is inevitable. That is not the case with a fresh expression of church: the first two outcomes of Jane’s work I described are equally possible and equally valuable, but they are not a new church. A program might also suggest a cookie cutter approach and a standard outcome, whereas each fresh expression of church is a response to unique local circumstances.

Nor are the “steps” necessarily always followed in the order the diagram shows. Sometimes the connection with people outside the church (the “forming community” step) may come first. The community may already have formed—where you live, where you work, whatever your natural interests are. The connection may be anything from sports to quilting, from a reading

group to a concern for young people, from a neighbourhood association to a casual gathering in a coffee shop.

So the sequence may not go neatly from listening to serving to forming community. If a community already exists, it may be that the serving will come afterwards, as a need arises in or around the group. It may also be that the listening comes not at the beginning but after the community-forming and the serving have begun: “Oh, maybe this is something God has called us to, and we hadn’t realised till now!”

The main things the diagram shows are more principles than rules:

- a) Starting a fresh expression of church is a process—a journey, if you prefer—which takes time—months, and perhaps even years. It requires resilience, commitment, and “a long obedience in the same direction.”<sup>5</sup>
- b) A fresh expression of church does not begin by looking like church: it ends by looking like church. The early stages may look as much like a church as an embryo looks like an adult human being. Certainly there are similarities, but you would never confuse the one for the other. Yet, all being well, the embryo will grow in time into an adult. Rowan Williams, former Archbishop of Canterbury, when asked whether a particular fresh expression was really a church, replied, “Let’s wait and see.”

- c) Starting a fresh expression of church means being involved in a time-consuming, sacrificial way with people who do not yet profess Christian faith. It is a form of incarnation. Those who engage in this kind of work feel comfortable around people of all faiths or no faith, and are at ease talking about issues of faith as it seems appropriate. They do not mind being vulnerable when questions and criticism of Christian faith come to the surface.

All three of these things are counter-intuitive for many Christians:

- Many of us prefer quick results to slow processes: evangelism, for instance, which enables people to make instant “decisions” to follow Jesus, or a short blitz in support of Back to Church Sunday.<sup>6</sup>
- Many of us only recognise the work of the church when it takes place in a church building, led by an ordained minister, and in the context of regular services. As a result, we tend to discount the importance of other kinds of initiative.
- And lastly, many of us are happy to relate to people once they join the church (they become, as Jane knew, a family), but we seldom think of going out of our way to offer that kind of hospitality or to create that kind of community with people before they are in the church.



## A Case Study: Little Flowers, Winnipeg

The experience of the Little Flowers community in Winnipeg shows how a fresh expression of church can come into being in a context wildly different from Jane's, and yet following something of the same process, and following those same three principles.

Jamie and Kim Arpin-Ricci had been working with the poor in downtown Winnipeg for ten years when they began to think about opening a second-hand bookstore: why should people on the street not want to read good books, and have an opportunity to do so without huge expense? So The Dusty Cover was born, a second-hand bookstore with a comfortable fair-trade coffee shop attached. Patrons of The Dusty Cover also began to meet at Jamie and Kim's home for potluck suppers, at first in the middle of the week and then on Sundays.

Relationships continued to grow until, after a couple of years, some of the group said to Jamie, "You know, we're a church. Will you be our pastor?" The Arpin-Riccis were working under the auspices of an interdenominational mission, so it was not clear what it would mean to be a "church" in a formal sense. Eventually, however, they found a home in the Mennonite church.<sup>7</sup>

In their case, the sequence did more or less follow that in the diagram. They listened, and felt God directing them to downtown Winnipeg. They served needs as they came across

them. (They did not begin their work with a bookstore in mind!) Then came the growth of community, at the bookstore and in people's homes. And finally the ministry became a church—significantly enough, not because a denomination decided in a top-down kind of way that a new church was needed in this neighbourhood, but because the people in the community (not even the leaders!) discerned that this was what was emerging from the grassroots up.

That is a basic outline of what a fresh expression of church is, and how it comes about. Some readers may respond, "That's great! I can't wait to start!" But others will have questions.

## Asking the Hard Questions

Thirteen of the most frequent questions are considered in what follows. Not all will be of interest to all readers. Some are more theoretical, others are more practical. Some assume a basic sympathy to the Fresh Expressions project while others assume scepticism. So feel free to pick and choose, to skip or skim the following sections, as your interests or concerns lead you.

### 1. Is this just the Flavour of the Month?

Sometimes people will ask whether fresh expressions of church is not just the “flavour of the month,” the latest in a long series of programs, coming usually from the USA or the UK, “guaranteed” to revive declining churches. These things come and go, and each time some people climb on the bandwagon, and follow the advice of the latest charismatic leader. Sometimes the programs are “successful” (whatever that means) for a time, sometimes not. And yet, what really changes? Were these things not just a diversion from the true work of the church, and (even worse) a capitulation to some swirling current in the secular culture? In the case of Fresh Expressions, the criticism is sometimes made that it is a surrender to consumerism—giving people the kind of “church” that makes them comfortable and demands nothing, rather than facing them with the challenge of discipleship and “real church.”

In response, I would say, Yes, these things can be superficial and gimmicky. And, of course, it is the nature of our culture to look for quick fixes and for things that make us comfortable. But this is not the way of Jesus.

On the other hand, we need to be discerning. Not all new things are bad. At the end of Judah’s exile in Babylon, the prophet Isaiah had a hard time convincing the people of Judah that God was calling them to do something new, because they were more comfortable with things the way they were—and had been for the previous seventy years. He urges them: “Do not remember the former things, or consider the things of old. I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?”<sup>8</sup> Unfortunately, in spite of his pleading, many of them failed to “perceive it.” They chose to remain in Babylon, instead of returning to Jerusalem to work with God on God’s “new thing.”

Sometimes, what may be dismissed as the “flavour of the month” may in reality be a wake-up call from God, who is wanting to do “a new thing.” We need to be discerning: on the one hand, we should not embrace every new movement as a gift from God. But, on the other, neither should we assume that they are all distractions from the true work of the church.

Rowan Williams, who was an enthusiastic advocate for fresh expressions of church throughout his ten years as Archbishop of Canterbury, is one who sees the fresh expressions movement as the genuine spiritual response of a mission-minded church

to the changing culture around it:

Essentially the Fresh Expressions programme is not simply about a kind of scattered set of experiments. . . . It's about that gradual, but I think inexorable, shift [towards being more missional] in the whole culture of our church that has been going on in the last few years, and which will undoubtedly continue to grow and develop.<sup>9</sup>

Speaking for myself, having observed the fresh expressions movement for some years now, I too am convinced that this is one of those “new things” God does in the church from time to time. Not that every individual “fresh expression of church” is automatically good or healthy or orthodox—there will always be examples of the opposite—but that the heart of the movement is good and to be embraced.

## 2. What is motivating this?

The question many churches are asking is: What can we do to survive? And they are willing to clutch at any program that seems to promise they can avoid death. Unfortunately, Jesus is not terribly sympathetic to this concern. He is pretty clear: “those who want to save their life will lose it.” That's us: we want to save our (churches') lives, but he says it is not going to work: trying to survive is actually the way of death.

There is a way to survive but, paradoxically enough, it is to stop thinking about survival, and to accept the way of death: “those

who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the Gospel, will save it.”<sup>10</sup> So what is this “Gospel” —this Good News— which is worth giving our lives for, and which will ultimately save our lives?

There are a thousand ways to express the Gospel, but all of them (a) begin with God (the good news is what God has done for us) (b) centre on Jesus Christ (who communicates that good news by word and deed) and (c) invite a response (in the traditional terminology, to repent and believe).

I like to summarise the Good News this way:

- God is at work in the world through Jesus Christ (his life, death and resurrection) to put right everything that we have messed up.
- God graciously invites us to become apprentices of Jesus, so that by his Spirit we ourselves can be put to rights, and so that through us God can continue this work of putting things right.
- We respond to that invitation by giving up our self-directed lives and beginning to follow Jesus. And we signal our response by being baptised.

What then does the Gospel have to do with fresh expressions of church? The Gospel is all about God's restorative love working in us and through us, and reaching out to the whole world.

Everybody needs to experience and hear the news of what God is doing, and at least have the opportunity to respond to the message. The church is intended (among other things) to be a vehicle (by word and action) of that good news, and of that invitation.

So any time there is a community or a culture where there is need, or where the Good News is not known, and people have not had the opportunity to experience and respond to God's love, the church has a responsibility to figure out what to do. It may be that an existing church can find appropriate ways to reach out. But there may also be places where an existing church cannot and will never reach, and where a fresh expressions approach is going to work best.

You can see how this is a kind of “losing our lives” for the sake of Jesus and the Good News. If we are putting our resources (our time, our money, and our love) into reaching out to new areas, then those resources are not going into maintaining our own existence. It can feel scary, even unwise, to do this, but Jesus' promise is that this is the way to life—for others, but also for ourselves. This is maybe the most difficult part of being missional—indeed, of being a Christian!

### 3. What is the church?

In the background of much discussion about fresh expressions is the key question: what is the church? Of course, different

denominations will answer that question slightly differently. Rowan Williams offers one very simple definition that is not tied to any one denominational expression:

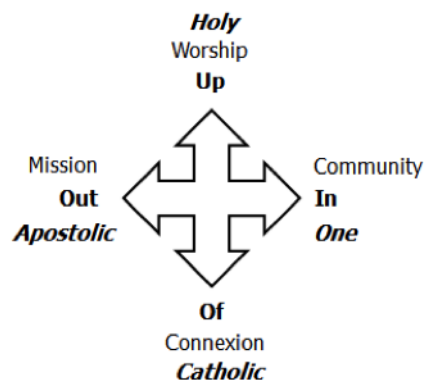
‘church’ is what happens when people encounter the Risen Jesus and commit themselves to sustaining and deepening that encounter in their encounter with each other.<sup>11</sup>

A fuller definition which also transcends traditions is that an authentic church will be “one, holy, catholic and apostolic.”<sup>12</sup>

- “One” speaks of the unity of all Christian believers.
- “Holy” implies not that Christians are perfect but that they are “set apart,” in the sense of being committed to a life of discipleship.
- “Catholic” means universal: any individual Christian congregation is linked to the rest of the Body of Christ, whether through a bishop, a synod or a fellowship of churches.
- And “apostolic” means not only that a church aligns itself with the teaching of the first apostles, but also that it shares the apostolic spirit and the way the apostles spread out to share the Good News with the world.<sup>13</sup>

George Lings, a Fresh Expressions leader in the UK, suggests that we can think of it this way: “one” indicates an “in” dimension to church (we are learning to love each other), “holy” speaks

of an “up” dimension (our worshipful relationship to God), catholic refers to an “of” dimension (we belong to a wider Christian community), and “apostolic” reminds us of the “out” dimension (love for the world outside the church). He has put this into the form of a diagram like this:



We can summarise these four marks of the church by saying a church is:

- a community of apprentices of Jesus (one)
- in solidarity with other such communities (catholic)
- gathered for worship and teaching (holy), and
- scattered for witness and service (apostolic).

Of course, all that is pretty abstract. So what does it look like on the ground? The quick answer is that church will look different in different places, but that there will be characteristics that are recognisable everywhere and anywhere.

Take as an example the Roman Catholic Church among the Maasai of Tanzania. Most of us do not readily associate the words “Roman Catholic” and “Maasai”! So what might that look like? How would it be distinctively Maasai, and how would it be recognisably Christian?

Vincent Donovan was a Catholic missionary to the Maasai in the early 1970’s. One of the convictions he worked out in his ministry and wrote about in his best-selling book, *Christianity Rediscovered*,<sup>14</sup> is that if people of a particular culture choose to accept the Christian faith for themselves, they then have to be given the freedom to work out what it means to be “church” in that culture.

One missionary deeply influenced by Donovan, Fr. Pat Patten, describes what a Maasai mass looked like in the years following Donovan’s work:

We would start in the evening when the cows were coming in and the elders would gather up green grass. Green grass is a really powerful symbol of forgiveness, and anyone holding green grass, is saying, I’m OK with everybody around here. And if I’m not, I have to go to the person I’m not OK with and get things right.

And so, as the cows were coming in the evening, people would gather the green grass and then, when the cows were milked and everybody was full and at ease, there’s a traditional song the women and men sing. They go in concentric circles, counter rotating, singing two different

songs that blend fabulously. And then each woman brings a new piece of firewood. All the fires in the households are extinguished, and the warriors start a brand new fire by rubbing fire sticks together.

And then people would start discussing in the group from the circle what story most touched them. And there would be some discussion and then kind of a consensus. And then someone would tell the Gospel story and they would tell what happened [in their lives]. And it was not always a success story, it would be sometimes, you know, “We should have been able to do this better,” or “It worked partway.”

That would be finished then with a communion service, which was done on a cow skin, on which all of their special ceremonies are done, with the olorika, the three-legged stool there, and a gourd filled with wine, and a half buffalo horn (they are sliced longitudinally and resemble an artistically shaped plate) with bread on it and everyone would be signed with chalk in the form of a cross on their foreheads. For the Maasai, chalk is a sacred symbol of new birth, of initiation, of new beginnings, and in the evening in the firelight, you would see this vivid white on these black faces.

And then people would share the gourd and the buffalo horn and there would be interspersed the Maasai songs. I don't know if you've heard the chant—they always kind of chant—there is always a verse and a refrain. Someone will lead and sing a verse and then everybody sings the response. And it's a quick back and forth interaction in

the singing, not longer drawn out verses, the way we often have.

And then in the end, one of the people from the oldest age groups would stand up and take the fresh milk from the cow and gather up all the grass, put it in the gourd, and then sprinkle everybody heavily with milk as a sign of blessing. And then the women would each take a piece of wood from the new fire and take it back to their homes.

Then we would stay there the night and leave in the morning.<sup>15</sup>

Some of the things Patten describes are recognisable anywhere in the world, in almost any denomination: the interaction with scripture, the bread and wine, and (in many traditions anyway) the insistence on being at peace with the other participants. But then there are the aspects of this service which are unknown outside Maasai culture, and which might seem strange to Westerners: the use of grass, the cow skin in place of a table or altar, the kind of music, the marking with chalk, the symbolism of fire, and the sprinkling with milk.

There is the oneness (symbolised by the grass), the holiness (embodied in the worship), the catholicity (the service conducted by an ordained priest). The apostolicity is not obvious in this story, but in fact Donovan made it a pre-requisite of baptism that new Christians would be willing to share their faith with others: and they did.<sup>16</sup>

With us too, there will be the universal marks of the church, but there will also be local variations—one might almost say local incarnations of church—which will seem odd and even alien to outsiders. That is one of the challenges of fresh expressions of church: to encourage local expressions of church, but to keep the essentials of church deep in the DNA of what is coming into being.

#### 4. Why are existing churches not enough?

One sometimes hears the argument, “There are too many churches already, and most of them are not full. Why on earth do you want to start new ones? Why not fill up the old ones first?”

The first thing to say is that many existing churches do a good job of representing the Gospel in their communities. They are known as a force for good in their neighbourhoods (in New Testament terms, they are salt and light), and they know how to welcome and integrate new people who come through their doors. May their tribe increase. Fresh expressions of church are by no means intended to replace them.

Sadly, however, not all existing churches live up to that ideal. Too many are insulated from their surrounding community, and would not know how to respond to a new person, should anyone have the courage to show up on their doorstep one Sunday. They say they are friendly communities, and so they

may be—but it is often friendliness to one another, rather than to newcomers.<sup>17</sup>

Such churches need not despair. There are resources to help them find renewal and growth. Natural Church Development is one of the most popular; Axiom and Ethos, programs of Forge Canada, and the Missional Transformation Process are two specifically Canadian resources.<sup>18</sup>

Other churches may be geographically in the wrong place to grow. I think of one church that died at least in part because it was at the end of a cul-de-sac and few people even knew it was there. In many other cases, the congregation have moved away (in the twentieth century that was often from the city centre to the suburbs, though these days it can sometimes be the reverse) and commute in order to attend services, so that the church has no organic connection to the community where the building is located. And where no ongoing relationships exist between those inside the church and those outside, new people are unlikely to darken the door of the church.

There are also some older churches which cannot grow because they do not connect with the culture of those around. To some extent, this is obvious. When we hear of ethnic churches coming into existence, it is easy to see why. We understand intuitively that people from (say) China or Nigeria or the Philippines may well struggle to find a home in a traditional “white Canadian” church. They frequently prefer their own church, where they can worship in their own language (the language of the heart)



and be with people who share their own cultural norms, and so be comfortable. Of course, many of these churches run into problems when the children of the original immigrants grow up and identify more closely with mainstream Canadian culture than with the culture of their parents' background—and a whole new set of cultural clashes occurs.

This reminds us that cultural differences are not always as obvious as language and skin colour. To take a straightforward example, what of a middle class church in a blue collar neighbourhood? Does it ever occur to the church that they may not be growing—and may not be able to grow—because there is an uncomfortable difference of culture between the present members and those outside?

Lesslie Newbigin drew attention to this problem in the 1970's. He asked what happens when the community around the church is so different from the church community itself "by reason of language, race, culture, occupation or other factors" that the church is incapable of bearing witness. Sadly, "it is not enough in this situation for the Church to say 'Come—all are welcome.' A few may accept the invitation, but only to become assimilated to the language, culture, style of the already existing congregation." As a result, they become separated from the community from which they have come—and that community still lacks a credible Gospel witness.

The solution, Newbigin suggests, is for people from the church "to go outside the walls of the Church in order to become part

of that other reality—in language, culture, style of life." And what will be the result of that going?

We ought to expect that there is brought to birth within that "place," outside the walls of the church as it is now, a community which is the first-fruit of the Gospel in that place. It should have its own proper character as distinct from that of the community from which the mission came.<sup>19</sup>

In other words, a new church will be born which reflects the culture in which it is set. This sounds remarkably like what is now known as the fresh expressions movement, but the words were written nearly thirty years before it happened.

A "both/and" approach seems to be the answer: older churches (often referred to as "inherited churches") can express the Gospel by word and deed in some places, and some cultures. In places where they cannot, there will be a need for fresh expressions of church.

## 5. Is there still a place for traditional churches in a fresh expressions world?

When new things happen, it is easy to feel threatened. Is there still a place for me? For us? For our way of doing things? Is it a case of "out with the old, in with the new"?




The fact is that there is a need for both inherited churches and fresh expressions of church. Some are now calling this a “mixed economy” of old and new, the two types of church existing alongside each other, complementing one another, with each one content for the other to do things it cannot.

Phil Potter, Team Leader for Fresh Expressions UK, has characterised the relationship as like that of a lake to a river.<sup>20</sup> Lakes form an oasis and a place of refreshment to those who visit. They are stable, familiar places for fishing and swimming. They don’t change much from year to year. Rivers, on the other hand, are always on the move, sometimes fast, sometimes slow, rough in some parts and smooth in others, but always on the move. Quite different. But where does a river come from? It often begins as the overflow from a lake. And when a river meets a flat place, what does it do? It forms another lake. So lake and river are always connected in some way.

The lake is like a healthy community church, a place of refreshment and new life—an oasis, if you like—to those around. A fresh expression of church, on the other hand, is like that river, often beginning as the overflow of the life of an inherited congregation, but less structured, more flexible in where it goes, uncertain of its future, and reaching into places the older congregation cannot go. But what is the hope of the fresh expression? That one day, probably some years hence, it will mature into a stable church acting as an oasis for its community—and which will in turn give birth to new fresh expressions of church.

## 6. Isn’t it dangerous for the church to get involved with culture?

A seminary student was once heard to say, “I hope they don’t start bringing culture into the college chapel.” This reflects a deep but widespread misunderstanding  that culture is. The implication is that “culture” is outside the church and therefore a bad thing, and that the church is a pure “culture-free” zone which needs to stay that way.

So what is culture? My favourite definition comes from Archbishop Derek Worlock: “Culture is the way we do things round here.”<sup>21</sup> It includes “language, habits, ideas, beliefs, customs, social organization, inherited artifacts, technical processes, and values”<sup>22</sup> and even “garbage trucks, radios and paper bags.”<sup>23</sup>

God has created us to be cultural beings. This is intrinsic to our nature: we all “do things round here.” That’s what we were made to do. Does this mean “culture” is always good? Of course not. No culture is pure: all are infected in one way or another by sin. Culture works best when it reflects the character of the Creator, channeled through the work of the creatures created in God’s image. Cultures which “do things” to enable human beings to flourish are pleasing to God. Cultures which “do things” to oppress, exploit and survive by violence are evil. Of course, all cultures are in practice somewhere in between these two extremes, and a mixture of good and evil. As Newbigin says, “We have to say both ‘God accepts human culture’ and

also ‘God judges human culture’.”<sup>24</sup> Followers of Jesus will thus need to be discerning about which aspects of culture to embrace and which to reject.

Language is an obvious example of how the Gospel needs to adapt to a culture. When the Gospel is taught and liturgy is led in the local language, as one African convert expressed it, “it is as though Jesus Christ was living in our villages.”<sup>25</sup>

But Pat Patten’s story shows how cultural adaptation goes beyond language. Many local customs and symbols, only meaningful to those who have grown up with them, enrich the worship and life of the local community, and help incarnate the reality of Christ there.

And, of course, discernment has to be exercised about what is and is not appropriate. Donovan described how the Maasai themselves had exercised discernment about what dances would be appropriate to bring to the Mass, and which were not. Indeed, some dances they decided that as Christians they would drop from their repertoire altogether. And all this was done without any input from Donovan, who never forgot that he was an outsider.<sup>26</sup> This kind of process of discernment will be present any time a new Christian community is begun.

“Culture,” then, is a central and God-given part of our humanity. And if we are to worship God with all we are, then all that is “cultural” about us needs to be expressed—with wisdom, yes, but also with exuberance—in the life and witness of the church. That way, says Newbigin, there is “the possibility to bring to

full ripeness the special gifts and insights that God has given to peoples of different language and culture.”<sup>27</sup>

This means that every Christian congregation brings glory to God in its own unique way—they “have their treasures to bring into the Holy City—their own treasures, not borrowings from others”<sup>28</sup>—and God is glorified and pleased by the diversity. Part of the value of a fresh expression of church is therefore that it brings glory to God in a cultural context where that glory will not otherwise be expressed, and in a way that no other Christian community can.

## 7. Has a fresh expressions strategy replaced evangelism?

Experience suggests that church planting is one of the most effective forms of evangelism. I became interested in the connection between the two when I read an article some years ago which pointed out that Southern Baptists in the USA, who had always regarded “crusades” as the most effective form of evangelism, were putting their time and energy into planting new churches instead. The statistics were fairly convincing: the article reported that “SBC churches report 3.4 baptisms per 100 resident members, whereas new churches average 11.7”—in other words, more than three times the number of people come to faith in new churches—and this in a denomination that majors on evangelism!<sup>29</sup>

Why should this be? The answers are not difficult to find. For one thing, when a community is in process of forming, it is relatively easy for new people to get involved. Relationships are fluid, roles are still being worked out, and everything is a little chaotic. New people, who are themselves a little confused, fit right in! Contrast this with a new person trying to enter into a community that has been together for years and perhaps decades. Trying to get involved can be difficult, intimidating, and occasionally downright off-putting.

Not that this is a new idea. New churches and evangelism have been connected since the earliest days of the Church. This is clear from the Book of Acts. As apostles like Peter and Paul travelled and preached the Gospel, the result was not that individuals began to follow Jesus. In every place they went, new Christian communities were founded. Christianity is essentially a communal faith. The Book of Acts mentions no less than twenty-one places (including Jerusalem) where new churches began after the Day of Pentecost.<sup>30</sup>

The connection between evangelism and church planting is therefore not a new idea, but a recovery of a very old idea. The years of Christendom, when existing, inherited churches could manage the work of evangelism, were an exception. The current growth of the “mixed economy” in church life marks a healthy development, where inherited churches and fresh expressions of church can serve different populations—and different cultures—in evangelism.

## 8. If we do need to start new churches, what’s wrong with the traditional approach?

Traditional church planting usually begins with a small Christian community moving (or commuting) into an area, finding a property to rent or buy, and beginning worship services. That community then engages in different forms of outreach and evangelism to its neighborhood, and seeks to grow.

This form of church planting worked well in the days of Christendom. Reginald Stackhouse, for example, has written about his experience of planting a new Anglican church in Etobicoke (Ontario) in the 1950’s. As new communities sprang up around southern Ontario, so the Diocese of Toronto bought strategically located plots of land for new church buildings. By 1950, twenty-two such sites were acquired, in places as diverse as Willowdale and Wasaga. By 1955, the list had increased to include places such as Peterborough, Orillia and Oshawa. As a result, in 1949, there were 2183 Anglicans in the diocese receiving communion at Easter. Within a year or two, that figure had more than doubled, to 4783.<sup>31</sup> And other denominations can tell a similar story.

There are still places and times when this kind of church planting will work—though seldom so dramatically. Not least it will work in areas where there is a cultural memory of “church,” where many people are dechurched (at some point in their lives, they have had some exposure or involvement in church) rather than unchurched (they have never had significant experience of

church). In those places, people may be willing to give a new church in their community a try.

Traditional church planting also works well among immigrant groups. People arriving from a different country are irresistibly drawn to people of their own race, who speak their own language and share their culture. The fact that “church” may be an unfamiliar idea and experience is quite secondary. Of course, this was what lay behind the rapid growth of the Anglican Church in Toronto in the 1950’s. In the same way, Dutch immigrants leaving Holland after the Second World War for a new life in a new land, formed Christian Reformed churches. Many denominations that began in Europe can tell similar stories about how they were transplanted to North America. Now, however, it is more likely to be churches of Koreans, or Brazilians, or Ethiopians, but the impulse is exactly the same.

The trouble with traditional church planting is that there are fewer and fewer places where there are “churched” or “dechurched” people who will simply show up to a new church if they are invited. For the growing number of “unchurched” who know nothing about Christian faith, attending a church service is unlikely to be their first step towards faith. The work of evangelism and church planting therefore needs to start “further back.” Attendance at a church service is likely to be some way down the road. The place to start is the first step on “the missional journey.”

## 9. How is the Fresh Expressions initiative different from the emergent movement?

I like to say that Fresh Expressions and the Emergent Church are kissing cousins.<sup>32</sup> Both are trying to figure out how the church needs to relate to the growing missionary situation around it. Both have come to the conclusion that “business as usual” is not going to work. Both are experimenting with new ways of engaging a post-Christendom course. As editor of *The Missionary Letters of Vincent Donovan*,<sup>33</sup> I am also interested that both movements look to him as part of their inspiration.<sup>34</sup>

The main difference is that Fresh Expressions is firmly under the umbrella of existing denominations, their leadership, and their theology. This is a mixed blessing: good in that it gives Fresh Expressions a solid framework within which to experiment, but a danger in that the traditional way of doing things can become the default position when things get difficult, as they will and do.

## 10. So . . . how’s that working for you?

The Fresh Expressions movement in Canada is still young and lacking in infrastructure, so evidence of what is happening on the ground tends to be anecdotal and unscientific. However, it seems safe to say that there are dozens, perhaps scores, of fresh expressions of church in various stages of development, in

different parts of Canada and under a variety of denominational umbrellas.<sup>35</sup> In the UK, however, where the movement has been officially recognised since 2004 (and was growing unnoticed for decades before that), there are encouraging statistics.

Between January 2012 and October 2013, the Church Army Research Unit, an Anglican parachurch agency, which has tracked the development of fresh expressions of church since the beginning, surveyed ten (out of the forty) Anglican dioceses in the Church of England to see what was happening. They discovered 518 fresh expressions of church, embracing almost 21,000 people—the size of “an extra average-sized diocese.”<sup>36</sup> This represented 10% of church attendance in those dioceses and 15% of the total church communities. Of the 21,000, one quarter were already Christians, 35% were dechurched, and 40% unchurched. These communities were not large: forty-four was the average attendance. Half were started by lay people, and half by clergy.<sup>37</sup>

It is interesting to speculate what the numbers might be if all forty dioceses were surveyed, not to mention the other partner denominations in the Fresh Expressions initiative—the Methodist Church, the Church of Scotland, the Congregational Federation, the Salvation Army, and the United Reformed Church, not to mention several parachurch agencies.<sup>38</sup>

This should encourage supporters of the Fresh Expressions initiative, whether in the UK or in Canada. Of course, there will always be those who say, “Numbers mean nothing.” But if

nobody was being reached by fresh expressions of church, you can be sure that those who dismiss numbers would suddenly find them very significant. Of course, this study did not look at such things as the longevity of the communities surveyed; nor did it look at how far they showed the four marks of the church (one, holy, catholic and apostolic); nor did it examine the depth of discipleship in these places (however one might measure that).<sup>39</sup> Those would be worthwhile studies, and will undoubtedly be undertaken in due time. But this is a good start.

## 11. Who can start a fresh expression of church?

As the statistics above indicate, roughly half of fresh expressions of church are started by lay people. There are at least two reasons for this, one to do with the nature of clergy, and the other to do with the nature of laity.

Firstly, most existing clergy are trained and gifted to pastor existing congregations. The skill-set required to start a new one is significantly different. And even those clergy who would like to do something innovative outside the walls of the church find that their time is severely constrained by the demands of the existing congregation. Lay people, by contrast, may be more entrepreneurial by nature, probably have more natural connections outside the existing church, do not have contractual obligations to work within the existing congregation, and

normally have a source of income unrelated to their fresh expressions work.

What clergy can do is to help laity get the vision for fresh expressions of church as a legitimate and important way of expressing the Gospel, free them from at least some of their obligations in the existing congregation, and help to support them in whatever way they need, including finance and prayer.

When a fresh expression of church reaches a critical mass, of course, and starts to look church-like—as Jane’s coffee shop group did—there will be a change of strategy which will differ according to the denomination. For example, it is not unknown for a denomination simply to ordain the person who has brought the fresh expression to this point, so that they can pastor it into maturity! But for most fresh expressions of church, this tipping point will be two or three years into its development, and lay people can take most of the leadership as long as it is appropriate.

## 12. What does a fresh expression of church cost?

Sooner or later, the question of finances rears its ugly head. What does it cost to start, to run, to staff, and to maintain a fresh expression of church? The best answer is: less than one would expect. When people assume such a thing is going to be

wildly expensive, they are usually thinking of the traditional model of church planting, which requires a building, one or more full-time (probably ordained) staff, sound systems, extensive advertising and so on.

As will be clear by now, fresh expressions of church do not work that way. Jane’s coffee-shop group, for example, cost her time and the price of many coffees (and probably a number of snacks) along the way. Of course, I chose Jane’s story deliberately because it is one of the simplest, cheapest, low maintenance models of a fresh expression of church.

Other forms of fresh expressions come with a price tag—of course. It may be as minimal as ordering pizza for a meeting with young people to discuss their needs. For one fresh expression of church in Fredericton, it involved buying (second-hand) washers and driers so their friends from among the urban poor could do their laundry inexpensively.<sup>40</sup> Setting up the Dusty Cover bookstore in Winnipeg came with its own costs. Or again, you may need to budget for property rental, or for staff time, or for refreshments or publicity. All these need to be considered.

How can that money be raised? There are several ways:

- When the Anglican Diocese of Toronto sells off its disused buildings, a proportion of the proceeds is put into a fund for innovative ministries and fresh expressions of church. People with a new idea can then apply for up to \$5,000 from that fund as seed money for their initiative.



- Some churches deliberately put a smaller amount—perhaps \$500—in their annual budget to provide start-up funding for a small new project, and invite members to apply.
- Churches which have more than one staff member can allocate a proportion of the hours of one person (usually the junior person) to ministry outside the church, perhaps starting with one day a week. This is a common scenario in the Church of England.
- If you think of fresh expressions of church as a kind of mission (which they are), it is worth remembering that the staff of many missions and parachurch agencies have supported themselves in the past century simply by asking friends to contribute \$50 or \$100 a month to support them in their work.<sup>41</sup>
- The Apostle Paul was a tent-maker by trade, and seems to have turned to making tents whenever the people to whom he ministered could not support him. People seeking to start new Christian communities these days similarly adopt part-time “tent-making” occupations to support themselves while the ministry grows.

### 13. How does Fresh Expressions support fresh expressions of church?

Pioneering is always tough. There are few rules or guidelines or programs for this kind of thing. But “making it up as we go

along,” while exhilarating at first, can be stressful over the long haul.

Fresh Expressions Canada is an organisation that exists to support, train and encourage those engaged in starting fresh expressions of church. Here are some of the resources that are currently available:

- a) Fresh Expressions staff are available to lead a one-day conference (a Vision Day or a Roots and Wings day) to jump-start people’s thinking about the issues involved in starting a fresh expression of church.
- b) There is a course (either five or six weeks long, according to need) entitled *Reimagining Church: Shaped for Mission*,<sup>42</sup> which is available for free and may be downloaded from Fresh Expressions Canada at [www.freshexpressions.ca/project/reimaginingchurch](http://www.freshexpressions.ca/project/reimaginingchurch). This goes into greater depth about the need and the issues involved in starting a new Christian community.
- c) For those ready to begin “the missional journey” towards a fresh expression of church, there is the Fresh Expressions Course.<sup>43</sup> Thirty-four sessions cover topics from “Listening for Mission” to “Team roles and behaviour,” and from “Worship and the Sacraments” to “Handling opposition, setbacks and failure.” These topics can be tackled in sequence, but students can also “cherry pick” sessions as they seem most pertinent to their circumstances. There are increasing opportunities to take this course face-to-face, but

Fresh Expressions Canada is a world pioneer in teaching the course online in real time.

- d) Fresh Expressions Canada is developing peer networks for pioneers to get together, either face-to-face or in an online environment, for networking, idea-swapping, troubleshooting, mutual encouragement, and prayer.

For more information, visit the website at [www.freshexpressions.ca](http://www.freshexpressions.ca) or email [contact@freshexpressions.ca](mailto:contact@freshexpressions.ca).

## So where do we begin?

If you recall the “missional journey” diagram (see page 7), the first step is often (though not always) listening. Someone has coined the useful phrase, “360 listening”—which means listening:

- to people in your church (of course) but also:
- to God in scripture and prayer
- to people in the community who are not involved in church
- to people in other churches
- and to civic leaders such as town councillors, store owners, the police, and so on.

Here are some ideas of what that might look like in practice:

1. Include outreach to your neighbourhood in the church’s weekly prayers. Perhaps have a sermon series on mission, and look more deeply into what the Bible says about it.<sup>44</sup>
2. Add a budget line to your church’s budget for local outreach. Begin with \$500. Announce to the congregation that the money is available for outreach projects, and that they should submit ideas.
3. Do a survey of the congregation, asking, “What gifts do you have that might be used in ministry outside the church, e.g. friendship, hospitality, speaking a second language, internet skills, financial expertise, working with children, making connections between people?”



4. Talk to leaders in your community, e.g. the local MP, the police, the mayor, or councillors. Ask such things as, “How might a church serve this community?” “Are there times in the year when you need volunteers for a service project in the community?” “Would you let us know if and when there are issues you would like us to pray about for you?”
5. Do a survey of people on the streets and store owners in your community. Ask such things as: “What do you see as the needs of this community?” “How has this community changed, for better or for worse, in recent years?” “What might a church contribute to this community?”
6. Talk to people in other churches in the neighbourhood. How are they involved in the neighbourhood? What needs are they aware of? Can they see ways in which the different churches’ efforts might be complementary?
7. Discuss the findings with your church leaders, and ask God for direction. Don’t be afraid to start, and don’t be afraid to make mistakes. Make haste slowly!

This is a process that might take six months or more before you decide what God is calling you to do. But better that than rushing into something just because you want to get on with something, and regretting it later.

## Conclusion

One Fresh Expressions leader in the UK, a medical doctor by the name of Pete Atkins, said to me once, “I hope we can stop using this term ‘fresh expressions of church’ in a few years, and just start calling it church planting.” What he meant is that we need to get to the point where we realise there is really nothing odd or unusual about fresh expressions of church. It is merely the natural, normal way to plant new churches in a post-Christendom context. The days when a new church building (A-frame or neo-Gothic according to taste), an ordained minister, and a weekly schedule of services are enough to grow a new congregation are long gone. The Fresh Expressions approach is what is needed in a culture which increasingly has no first hand memory of what “church” is, but is pretty well convinced that whatever church is, it is of little or no interest.

So do fresh expressions of church matter? They matter only if the Gospel matters. But if the Gospel is that God is seeking to redeem all things—not only all people but all cultures, the whole of nature and indeed the entire cosmos—through Jesus Christ, then any movement which seeks to co-operate with the missionary God to bring the good news to more and more people is to be encouraged.

## Notes

1. Rowan Williams, "The 'strength' of the church is never anything other than the strength of the presence of the Risen Jesus," in *Mixed Economy: The Journal of fresh Expressions*, Autumn/Winter 2008/09, 12. [www.freshexpressions.org.uk/sites/default/files/mixedeconomy-issue1.pdf](http://www.freshexpressions.org.uk/sites/default/files/mixedeconomy-issue1.pdf).
2. Graham Cray, ed., *Mission Shaped Church* (London: Church House Publishing 2004).
3. You will notice that sometimes Fresh Expressions is used with capital letters, and sometimes not. The principle is that when it refers to the growing of a new Christian community, it has lower case letters, and when it refers to the official organisation, it has capital letters.
4. Unpublished lecture, *Vital Church Planting* conference, Toronto, January 2011.
5. This phrase comes from Nietzsche, but Eugene Peterson popularised it in the title of his book, *A Long Obedience in the Same Direction: Discipleship in an Instant Society* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press 1980).
6. This is not a criticism of Back to Church Sunday, which has clearly helped many, but it can be seen as a replacement for long-term, week-by-week outreach over the long haul.
7. The story of Little Flowers is told briefly by Diana Swift in 'Brave New Bloom,' in *Green Shoots out of Dry Ground: Growing a New Future for the Church in Canada*, ed. John P. Bowen (Eugene OR: Wipf and Stock 2013). For a fuller version, see Jamie Arpin-Ricci's *The Cost of Community:*

- Jesus, St. Francis and Life in the Kingdom* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2011).
8. Isaiah 43:18-19
  9. Rowan Williams, "Gradual, Inexorable shift," *Expressions: the Newspaper of Fresh Expressions*, Spring 2007, 5. <http://www.freshexpressions.org.uk/sites/default/files/expressionsthenewspaper-issue3a.pdf>.
  10. Mark 8:34-36
  11. Graham Cray (ed.), *Mission Shaped Church: Church Planting and Fresh Expressions of Church in a Changing Context* (London: Church House Planting, 2004), vii.
  12. The Nicene Creed.
  13. "The church is apostolic because, as the Father has sent Jesus, so Jesus sends us." Rowan Williams, "One Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church," <http://rowanwilliams.archbishopofcanterbury.org/articles.php/1675/one-holy-catholic-and-apostolic-church>.
  14. Vincent J. Donovan, *Christianity Rediscovered*. (Maryknoll NY: Orbis Books 1978, 2003).
  15. John P. Bowen, ed. *The Missionary Letters of Vincent Donovan 1957-1973* (Eugene OR: Wipf and Stock 2011), 215.
  16. *Ibid.*, 164.
  17. See John Bowen, *From Visitor to Disciple* (Richmond BC: Digory Publishing 2005) for practical suggestions of how to grow into a community that is welcoming to outsiders.

18. See, respectively, [www.ncd-canada.com](http://www.ncd-canada.com), [www.forgecanada.ca](http://www.forgecanada.ca), and [www.themissionalnetwork.com](http://www.themissionalnetwork.com).
19. Lesslie Newbigin, "What is 'a local church truly united'?" *The Ecumenical Review*, Volume 29, Issue 2, April 1977, 123.
20. Unpublished lecture, The *Vital Church Planting* conference, Toronto, 2010.
21. Derek Worlock, Roman Catholic Archbishop of Liverpool (1976-1994), quoted in Michael Paul Gallagher, *Clashing Symbols: An Introduction to Faith and Culture* (Mahwah NJ: Paulist Press 2004), 12.
22. H. Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture* (New York: Harper and Row 1951), 32.
23. Thom and Marcia Hopley, *Reaching the World Next Door* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press 1993), 14.
24. Lesslie Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans/WCC 1989), 195.
25. Lamin Sanneh, *Translating the Message: The Missionary Impact on Culture* (Maryknoll NY: Orbis Books 1992), 199.
26. Donovan, 94.
27. Newbigin, "Local Church," 124.
28. *Ibid.*, 123.
29. Tim Stafford, "Go and Plant Churches of All Peoples," *Christianity Today*, September 2007. <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2007/september/36.68.html>

30. N. T. Wright sees this pattern beginning with Jesus, that he sought to "to establish . . . what we might call cells of followers . . . who, by their adoption of his praxis, his way of being Israel, would be distinctive within their local communities." N.T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996), 276.
31. *Green Shoots*, 34-41.
32. In a video made during a visit by Rowan Williams to Calvin College in 2008, he was asked a question about emergent churches—and he gave an answer about Fresh Expressions!
33. John P. Bowen (ed.), *The Missionary Letters of Vincent Donovan* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2011).
34. For references to Donovan, see Graham Cray ed., *Mission-Shaped Church: Church Planting and Fresh Expressions of Church in a Changing Context* (London: Church House Publishing 2004), 91-93, and Brian D. McLaren, *Generous Orthodoxy* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004), 91.
35. A sequel to this booklet is planned, in which more of their stories will be told.
36. This may be "average" for the UK, but there is only one diocese of this size in Canada.
37. For more details of the research, go to [www.churcharmy.org.uk/fxcresearch](http://www.churcharmy.org.uk/fxcresearch).
38. Details may be found at [www.freshexpressions.org.uk/about/partners](http://www.freshexpressions.org.uk/about/partners), under "Partners."

39. One survey has already looked at disciple-making in Messy Church, and found encouraging responses. See <http://institute.wycliffecollege.ca/2012/09/what-is-messy-church-actually-accomplishing>.

40. *Green Shoots*, 63-65.

41. I worked for InterVarsity Christian Fellowship for over twenty-five years on this basis.

42. This is based on the UK's *Mission-Shaped Intro* course, but adapted for the Canadian context.

43. Formerly known as *Mission Shaped Ministry*.

44. Some ideas for a sermon series can be found in John Bowen, *Preaching the Church's Mission: Sermons towards Self-Understanding* (Vancouver BC: Digory Publishing, 2004).

I am very grateful to a number of friends for their help in refining the content of this booklet, particularly Nick Brotherwood, Steve Edwards, Karen Isaacs, Heather Liddell, Bishop Peter Mason, Graham McCaffrey and Bishop Patrick Yu.





## What is a Fresh Expression of Church?

**T**he term “fresh expressions” was coined ten years ago in the UK, but the concept is still controversial and not always well understood. Is the fresh expressions movement flaky, consumerist, a passing fad—or a way for the future for the church? This booklet sets out clearly the basic principles underlying fresh expressions of church, and responds thoughtfully and theologically to thirteen of the most common questions people ask. John Bowen has been involved with Fresh Expressions Canada since its beginning in 2008, and has discussed and taught about the topic in seminars and conferences, classrooms and coffee shops across Canada.



**John Bowen** taught evangelism at Wycliffe College in Toronto from 1997 until 2013. He now directs the Wycliffe College Institute of Evangelism, and *Wycliffe Serves!* - a hub for the college's external ministries. He is the author of five books, most recently *Green Shoots out of Dry Ground: Growing a new Future for the Church in Canada* (2013). John is married to Deborah, an English professor. They have two adult children and four grandchildren, of whom they are ridiculously proud.

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