

**George Lings**

## **Evaluating fresh expressions of Church 1**

One of the big questions we face today, particularly in relation to Fresh Expressions, is what we mean by 'church'. In this article George Lings provides us with an overview and some critique of a number of existing lists and criteria on offer to evaluate church. He then explores in more detail the additional question of what it means for a church to be Christian, offering four distinctive characteristics. Finally, he critically explores the deeper question of our image of church and tracks four paradigm changes in this over recent years before concluding with a reflection on how the interpersonal paradigm can combine with the distinctively Christian features of church to assist in evaluating fresh expressions.

### **I. Which criteria to evaluate church?**

*Green grow the rushes oh, what are your twelve oh?  
12 for the 12 apostles, 11 for the 11 who went to heaven...*

It's a bit like that folk song when listing how many different ways there are to decide whether something is church or isn't church. The list explored here contains a variety of concerns. Some approaches seek to determine legitimacy or identity questions. Others are more designed to assess health, with yet further ones to measure maturity. Both of the latter categories - health and maturity - assume there is a church identity already. The breadth of the list will contain schemes very familiar to some, while others may be much less well known. The limits of space means that only a brief comment can be offered on each of them.

#### ***Eight is for Schwarz and Natural Church Development (NCD)***

I don't think this health check, set out by German church growth consultant Christian Schwarz in his *Natural Church Development: A Guide to Eight Essential Qualities of Healthy Churches*, 2 has caught on very widely in the UK and is perhaps used mainly in middle class non-conformist/free churches. The eight criteria it identifies are:

- Empowering leadership
- Gift-oriented ministry
- Passionate spirituality
- Functional structures
- Inspiring worship services
- Holistic small groups
- Need-oriented evangelism and
- Loving relationships.

I like its emphasis on the biotic - though it makes church sound like yogurt - and the stress that what is healthy develops and grows naturally by itself. However for me

NCD has not sufficiently escaped the overly pragmatic church growth mentality and the selection of its eight magic indicators seems arbitrary.

### ***Seven is for Warren and Growing Healthy Churches* 3**

Boiled down from Robert Warren's original ten factors, these seven factors are

- energized by faith
- outward-looking focus
- seeks to find out what God wants
- faces the cost of change and growth
- operates as a community
- makes room for all
- does a few things and does them well

Interestingly that final factor of 'doing a few things well' could be an antidote to the extensive and high standards sometimes being required.

### ***Seven is also for Lings and 'Seven Sacred Spaces'***

These criteria are lessons derived across varying traditions of monasticism about seven characteristic locations - and their specific purposes - all of which are needed for the long term healthy functioning of Christian community:

- Cell
- Chapel
- Chapter
- Cloister
- Garden
- Refectory and
- Scriptorium.

This is in stark contrast to the widespread traditional reliance on one building well-suited to the 'chapel' function but poor at facilitating the other six. 4

### ***Seven marks of life* 5**

Seven also comes from a sideways source about what is alive - that of biological teaching. It contains the acronym, MRS NERG:

- Movement
- Respiration
- Sensitivity
- Nutrition
- Excretion
- Reproduction and
- Growth.

That list could be fun to play with in evaluating all churches!

*Six is for....*

Six is currently blank and I doubt we need to invent something to fill the gap.

### ***Five is for ACC and the Five Marks of Mission***

The Anglican Consultative Council's five marks of mission is a grand comprehensive scheme that most local churches are helpfully stretched by and sometimes unhelpfully dwarfed by:

- To proclaim the Good News of the Kingdom
- To teach, baptise and nurture new believers
- To respond to human need by loving service
- To seek to transform unjust structures of society
- To strive to safeguard the integrity of creation and sustain and renew the life of the earth 6

### ***Five is also for Mission-shaped Church and its accompanying five values of missionary churches***

I think by lack of time to reflect we, the writers of *Mission-Shaped Church*, got this in the wrong order. I myself favour an order that reflects a missiological chronology:

- Trinitarian
- Relational
- Incarnational
- Disciple making and
- Transformational. 7

### ***Four is for the creedal marks***

I find this an enduring source to explore identity:

- One
- Holy
- Catholic
- Apostolic

*Mission-shaped Church* likened them to four dimensions of a journey, all of which need the others, and also a set of relationships. 8 Steven Croft has called them 'a brilliant example of distilled ecclesiology' and 'a simplicity that lies beyond complexity'. 9 However, at the same time the classic marks are frustrating because of the history of diverse interpretation of each mark. Avery Dulles in *Models of the Church* 10 and Martyn Atkins are both commentators on this complexity. 11 I also question the hermeneutical privilege set by putting the category 'One' first, which I

argued in my doctorate derives from its Cyprianic third-century Roman understanding of oneness. 12 Today we can question this both through reading Cyprian in his time and, probably more important, through application of Trinitarian study to ecclesiology.

### ***Four is also for the Lambeth Quadrilateral***

This feature may work well for Anglicans:

- The Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments as the revealed Word of God.
- The Nicene Creed as the sufficient statement of the Christian Faith
- The two Sacraments of Baptism and the Supper of the Lord ministered with unfailing use of Christ's words of institution and of the elements ordained by Him
- The Historic Episcopate, locally adapted in the methods of its administration to the varying needs of the nations and peoples called of God into the unity of His Church.

However, the fourth category, 'the historic episcopate locally adapted', has been a pill too hard for ecumenical partnerships to swallow and it has more often been gagged upon. Nevertheless, Steven Croft made a case in 2006 for using a modified form of the Quadrilateral to guide fresh expressions of Church within Anglicanism. He adds fresh content that takes the laity more seriously and also a fifth parameter, the ACC five marks of mission, which he then terms 'core values'. 13

### ***Another four?***

Four could also mischievously stand for an implicit Christendom assumption which was alive, well and widespread until the middle of the last century:

- Parish
- Parson
- Posh place to pray and
- Prelate

Few of those remain as unchallenged marks today. Most fatally that list is oblivious to the cardinal contribution of having an indigenous community of Christians. 14

### ***Three is for Venn (and Co 15) and their Three Self Thinking***

This three-fold set of criteria act as both a goal and a measure of maturity:

- Self-governing
- Self-financing
- Self-reproducing

I am aware some want a fourth factor of being self theologising. What is crucial here about the first three is that the principle itself is invoked, not an imported interpretation of it. An example of misapplication would be that self-governing must mean a local church council run in middle-class cultural terms or that self-financing means paying all the costs of a full-time stipendiary person. These kinds of unhelpful imports are still around in some diocesan thinking.

***Three is also for Smail from his book Like Father like Son***

Tom Smail argues that the distinctive features of the Trinity should be reflected in our humanity. To me that is sufficient argument that they should cash out too in ecclesiology. Thus I would look for evidence for the three-fold characteristics which he calls:

- The initiating source of the Father
- The obedient responsiveness of the Son and
- The perfecting creativity of the Spirit. 16

This makes healthy room for church community values of ‘initiating, responding and fulfilling’ 17 and holding together qualities like creativity, suffering and persevering.

***Two is for the Reformers and their two notes of Word and Sacrament.***

We should, however, note that these are reforming features, not foundational ones from biblical and patristic times, and thus they assume too much that is not made explicit. Moreover, they describe only the church’s public worship, telling us little about what church actually is. Equally damaging, in historical retrospect, is that they are leader-centred, weak on community and non-missional. Furthermore, they are highly dependent upon a value judgment about what is right teaching and legitimate administration of the sacraments. 18 Ever since, both Catholics and Protestants have both believed they satisfy these criteria, thus actually engendering more division, so their value is limited. 19 Although rightly, through dominical warrant, they urge word and sacrament on every expression of church, questions of public worship neither answer issues of identity nor provide contextual engagement. My apologies are extended to shocked Reformed folk if this seems a full-frontal assault on their much loved ‘notes’, but the critique of them is extensive.

***One could be for the Fresh Expression team’s definition of a fresh expression of church***

The Fresh Expressions initiative, drawing on and reflecting upon the experience of a number of years has offered its own definition of a fresh expression of church:

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

- It will come into being through principles of listening, service, incarnational mission and making disciples.
- It will have the potential to become a mature expression of church shaped by the gospel and the enduring marks of the church and for its cultural context. 20

The limitation is that this wording focuses more on who fresh expressions of Church are for and how they form, which is functional not ontological work. Then it adds that they should mature as church. The headlines of how that occurs are good, which is that they will need to be shaped by the gospel, context and the enduring marks of the church. However, for this purpose, what those 'enduring marks' are, is frustratingly not spelt out but is most likely to be a nod to the four creedal marks noted above. This only takes us back to the challenge of their historical ubiquity yet variety of interpretation.

### ***One could also be for David Watson's contention - Love***

Watson holds that the one mark of the Church is love. 21 He roots this in Christ's command and example. This is thus primarily a Christological mark and only then spiritual and moral. His biblically based comment, which stands upon an interpersonal base, is always worth including within both theory and practice. Such thinking is now congruent with views that derive ecclesiology from the Trinity.

## **II. 'But is it Christian?'**

Despite the plethora of lists and criteria examined, I want to propose that in that final category of 'one' there is another essential question - 'Is it Christian?'. I suggest this has become necessary today in the presence of a number of factors: varied contemporary spiritualities, a society that is pluralist, fractures in hitherto orthodox communions of churches, and the presence of empty buildings in the landscape, culturally still called 'churches', but actually as life-giving as the shells of dead tortoises. Even values like 'One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic' are not inherently Christian: an Al-Qaeda group could claim 'oneness' in its strong inner solidarity, 'holiness' in its dedication, 'apostolicity' in its ideological mission and 'catholicity' in its inheritance within Islam. The same critique could apply to other lists of criteria such as that of the three self thinking.

Of course what it is that makes something a 'Christian' church is neither simple nor undisputed. It beckons us into the search for phrases and language that are both fresh and faithful, that communicate the core of that way of being corporately Christian that we refer to in the shorthand of the word 'church'. Here it is salutary to remember that originally the term *ecclesia* was secular, not ecclesiastical. The word itself is not inherently Christian, so we have to dig deeper.

It is well known that Archbishop Rowan has been coining some suggestive sentences in this area of re-imagination. His foreword in *Mission-shaped Church* includes: '... "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>22</sup> A few years later, at the Lincoln 2010 gathering for Fresh Expressions, he spoke about Church being 'the space opened up by Jesus' and 'having the shape of Jesus', or being 'an echo of the divine word'. This Christo-centric language and approach about the heart of being church suggests to me that we can identify four essential realities about all churches, not just fresh expressions of Church.

*Firstly* the church is highly and intrinsically *dependent*. It is dependent on the call of God the Father: it is an elect people. <sup>23</sup> It is dependent on the ongoing mission of God the Son: it is a met, rescued and sent people. It is dependent on the ministry of God the Spirit: it is an inhabited and changed people.

Such dependence is recognized in the vocabulary that reminds us Christ institutes the Church and the Spirit constitutes the Church. Such deep inherent dependence should foster humility and spirituality. It is what happens when Jesus encounters people. Tragically, in practice it is all too easy to account entirely for the activities of a church without any necessary reference to God and to resort to describing it merely by its practices, which is to confuse its life with its outer form.

*Secondly*, it follows that 'church' is a *derived* theological construct. How we see it will be shaped beforehand by how we understand the Trinity. That in turn affects how we see ecclesial issues of diversity and of uniformity. It seems to me determinative of what we call 'the church' is that it was shaped by the mission of Trinity which itself is focused in the Son. Thus it is not accidental that one master image of the church is 'the Body of Christ'. Our understanding of what it is, and what it is for, needs to be shaped by the pattern of Christ and his understanding of what a disciple is.

This means that, like all those others parts of our theology that are evidently derived, ecclesiology is wise not to have too high a view of itself and become self-referential. Furthermore, it is always to be critiqued through the lenses of Trinitarian and Christological understanding. I'll try to apply some of that method in what follows.

*Thirdly*, we know too that the Church is related to the kingdom as instrument, as sign and as the foretaste of the kingdom, to select three increasingly high ways to describe that link. My third criterion then, is that, like the kingdom, church has *an inherent 'now and not yet' quality*. This criterion is consequential on it being a sign pointing to something more than itself. It also follows from its foretaste identity which promises us that substantially more lies ahead. In addition, the church is fallen and being redeemed; it thus contains the dreadful alongside the glorious. This means that any language that suggests the church has fully arrived or claims that it fully lives up to its name will be an illusion and theological error. Moreover, any ecclesiological fundamentalism about the church's shapes and patterns confuses the provisional with the permanent. On the other hand and equally, to give up hope on the church is to fail to discern the bride who is chosen, flawed, yet still in waiting.

My *fourth* essential is one that I have come to in the last few years, catching up late on Ralph Winter's thinking that Church is *both modal and sodal*. <sup>24</sup> This contrast explains that the church is to be found in a normal, usually territorial, and enduring shape (modality) but that it also takes a mobile, specialist, flexible, shape (sodality).

Why should this be? I suggest that the mission of God, the two-fold nature of the Incarnate Son of God, and the enabling-yet-disturbing Spirit of God, all demonstrate patterns that embody both the continuity of modality and the change that needs sodality. This is where modality and sodality originate. God is ever the same and ever new; ever faithful and ever creative. To have a modal and sodal church is a consequence.

This pairing is not just good tactical missional thinking by God (which could be a limitation of Ralph Winter's otherwise fine work). The root is far deeper; it is the outworking of Trinitarian patterns. In that sense, along with paradigm shift thinkers, I am not at all surprised or discomfited that there always have been fresh expressions of church. In the past, it might have been through the ministries of Anthony or Martin, Francis or Dominic, Luther or Calvin, Xavier or Ricci, Wesley or Whitefield, Booth or Carlile. Fresh expressions are just the wave of the continual sodal tide which is part of how God is and how God works.

If we connect this point with the previous one, then further points arise. Perhaps the temptation for the settled or modal approach is to think it is the perfection of 'now' church and the temptation for the mobile sodal approach is to imagine it fully embodies 'not yet' church. Both are healthy when they are in symbiotic relationship with the other. This is an intended asymmetric relationship that God intends to endure.

What then makes church 'Christian'? In summary, it is dependent on Jesus, derived from Jesus, focused on and following Jesus, yet living both now and not yet, as he promised. It will take both the modal and sodal patterns within God until the 'not yet' truly becomes 'now'.

### **Interlude and personal reflection: where have we come to thus far?**

I suggest that our opening section makes it absolutely clear that we are not lacking criteria by which to evaluate both fresh and prior expressions of church. A number of these are frequently used in the world of fresh expressions of church. This shows that the movement is not as naïve, ecclesologically unaware, missiologically imperialist, or ideologically consumerist, as some critics write and think.

I hope the second section has communicated that 'the one thing necessary' is that these communities are Christian. The other factors will matter over time. They do contain healthy advice and wisdom which helps order the life that is the gift of God beyond all of them. But they are consequent upon being corporately Christian and by themselves often do not ensure that.

I have wondered, in writing this, if it may be that we have too many ways, but rather I think it is the case that there are too many to use all at once. The discernment, like that of the GP presented with a patient, is the intuitive selecting of which source to draw upon to investigate the symptoms presented and then to promote life and health in the community that presents.



Should we then plead for a level playing field across all expressions? Sometimes I think the criteria we adopt should be sauce for goose and gander. It is worth considering how many inherited congregations would understand these criteria let alone pass them! Yet in practice the inertia of tradition, the fears and complexity of closure, and the unwillingness to confront a dying patient all often collude to preclude such examination.

This is beginning to change at the higher levels. Thus the Canadian diocese of Toronto now operates with four categories: unsustainable, static, strategic and sustainable. This is code for 'close them' as non-missional and without resources, 'wake them up' as having resources but no missional engagement, 'invest in them' as missional but lacking resources, and 'cheer them on' because resources are going into mission.

Sydney diocese also has a related model but with seven self explanatory classifications:

- A = Growing but not viable
- B = Growing and viable
- C = Plateaued and viable
- D = Declining and viable
- E = Declining and not viable
- F = Plateaued and not viable
- G = Reinvented (back to A and B)

Behind the question, and its very varied answers, of how we judge whether something qualifies as church, as well as parameters assessing how healthy an example is, lies something deeper, but which may have changed more than we realize: our controlling images.

### **III. Tracking paradigm changes in our image of church**

In this section I seek to show that how we evaluate any expression of church itself depends to a significant degree on our assumptions, or controlling images, of what it is that we think we are evaluating.

Two notable ecclesiologists, Dulles and Minear, are very clear that images are far more than illustrations. Dulles, partly drawing on Minear, 25 knows how frequent, evocative and even self-fulfilling images are. 26 As such they are part way to being models, and Dulles compares a *model* to a paradigm. Speaking figuratively, a model is an interpretative lens, so it sees all aspects of church through this filter. As such it offers a unified system and tries to explain everything that is seen. 27 I want therefore to skip through four successive background images that I think I have seen in my lifetime, most not drawn from Dulles' famous models or Minear's long list of images.

#### ***The Institutional***

In the institutional image of church any people wanting to join the church did so by incorporation, or, if you are a sci-fi fan, by Borg-like assimilation, into exactly the style, and under the rule, of the existing church. The institutional Roman Church in particular was understood as the perfect society, the only one true church, from which any departure was at best schismatic and likely to be heretical.

Dulles in *Models of the Church*, originally written in the early 1970s, thinks that this model ceased its dominance around the time of World War Two and that Vatican Two completed its relegation to a secondary place. He sounded the death knell for that image as being primary and adequate by itself. <sup>28</sup> His book went on to chart the rise of no less than five other models in the succeeding thirty years. This is a notable admission that we live in times of ecclesial re-imagination (and the words 'image' and 'imagination' are of course related).

In the same decade, but in 1975, I recall the advent in Britain of Church Growth thinking, brought in by the Bible Society in the humorous and persuasive style of Rev Eddie Gibbs. The controlling image was an American one and thus, unsurprisingly, it was...

### ***Managerial and Mechanical***

Church Growth had a managerial and mechanical model as it was done by making internal improvements to the existing local church with the consequence that numerical growth was by addition and inward attraction. The symbols alongside it could thus be written as a mathematical plus sign and an inward facing arrow. The journey was never more than 'out and back'. This approach also thought in the consumerist language of customers. Change was construed in modernist terms: growth was analysed, planned, timed and costed. The church was a machine to be tinkered with and tuned up. Quite apart from the critiques about its lack of holistic mission and rage about encouraging the practice of the homogenous unit principle, such thinking is now castigated by writers like Frost and Hirsch as merely attractional. <sup>29</sup>

During the 1980s this view was in turn subverted by its successor -

### ***The Horticultural/Biological***

In England in 1984, Monica Hill was the editor of the first English Church Planting book. <sup>30</sup> Bob Hopkins also wrote in 1988 and then in 1989 penned a second Grove booklet in which he and I coined a horticultural taxonomy with Runners, Grafts, Seeds, and Transplants. <sup>31</sup> In turn it got taken, in modified form, into the 1994 Church of England report *Breaking New Ground*. <sup>32</sup> Although, in some senses, Church Planting was the son of Church Growth - for which the likes of Professor John Hull have never forgiven us <sup>33</sup> - it was different in several crucial ways.

The first shift was one from thinking in terms of organisation to organism, from inanimate and structural growth to living and biological growth. This was welcome.

Secondly, there was another large shift. Church planting went beyond thinking in terms of addition, to consider the radical shift to multiplication. Both Church Growth and Church Planting were interested in growth, but the latter was by creation of further examples. To change from more in church, to more churches was a significant move. The same period saw the attempted importing of the thinking of the movement DAWN (Discipling A Whole Nation) through a 1992 congress. This included an intentional policy of planting one church for every thousand people, with targets for the year 2000 which at best were faith-stretching and in retrospect disabling and invited ridicule.

Inherent in this second change was a third factor of significance. This was to see mission as no longer mainly inward, but as being inherently outward. So the mathematical operative symbols of church planting are different from its parent. The key sign is the mathematical cross meaning multiplying, not adding, and an arrow facing outwards.

Christian Schwarz's work NCD (Natural Church Development) work, discussed at the beginning of this article, perhaps straddles the two paradigms. It appears fundamentally biological yet the style is strongly controlling. Biological engineering one might say.

But then two things happened. Firstly, in the 1990s, even by the publication of *Breaking New Ground* in 1994, those of us observing the situation saw the types of church plant diversify in a way we had not anticipated. An illustration of this would be the differences between multiple services on a Sunday and an Alternative Worship event. The second trajectory in this period was increased attention to the diverse and post-Christendom mission context of the British Isles. The language of contextualized church became more frequently used. 34

The problem with 'planting' is that you get exactly what you expect, whereas you may not know what is needed until after you start. Strawberries tend to produce more strawberries. That is fine, unless you need raspberries or have a demand for runner beans. Thus some forms of planting were heavily criticized, both by Stuart Murray in print 35 and myself in lectures, for their tendency towards cloning. In fairness to science, most plants, understood at the genetic level, do reproduce non-identically, so it was ironic that the 'strawberry runner', which does not, was the particular fruit chosen to illustrate church planting. The problem here then is not the plant kingdom in itself. The problem is a human one that likes to pre-plan, control outcomes and quality, and that invents images that support that aim. As ever it is the problems in a paradigm that then opens the door to a necessary reimagination beyond it. It is now ironic that Dulles remarked long ago:

Those botanical models, however, have obvious limits, since they evidently fail to account for the distinctively interpersonal and historical phenomena characteristic of the Church as a human community that perdures through the generations. 36

I therefore suggest we are emerging beyond the botanical to our fourth image -

### ***The Interpersonal***

I think this shift from the horticultural and biological to the interpersonal assists necessary changes of perception and also offers us appropriate greater flexibility in assessing all expressions of church. Of course it is still an analogy, but it offers further progress.

The first change is from thinking that we are observers who control church, to realizing and accepting we are involved participators. The church is no longer to be viewed as outside us, as 'ours' to which we do something or which we make do something. As Brian McLaren says in one of his books, about the church, 'it is not ours, it is us'. 37

The change of language is also striking. If we accept this change of master image, churches are not 'planted' for they are not vegetables (though sometimes you wonder!) - they are 'born'. They do not merely close - they 'die.' They do not just grow - they should 'mature'. They will not merely passively exist - they must have the active capacity of continued change and adaptation; they are learners. The change of language invokes not only greater personal investment in the process, it inherently joins together the best of pastoral skills to the mission task and it encourages greater responsibility in the process. There is a profound set of differences between accountants planning organizational change, farmers planting crops and a couple having a baby. The joys and losses for the third are the most profound and life-changing.

Some resist this change to thinking in human terms in the light of the many positively employed horticultural images in scripture. These include the vine in John 15, or the grafting process of Rom 11. But the task of theology, that needs both courage and humility, is to sift the variety of biblical images and suggest which are controlling ones. Thus Paul Minear who did just this, sifted the ninety-six images he found and came up with four master images: the people of God, the new creation, the fellowship of faith, the body of Christ. All include the interpersonal. None are fundamentally horticultural, let alone mechanistic.

There is also another deep theological reason for insisting on this change. It is the renewed emphasis on the Eastern view of the Trinity. This serves as the best base we have for thinking in interpersonal terms, about both humanity and the church, and for embracing diversity as intrinsic to a Christian view of unity. 38

So this human interpersonal view once more subverts the previous botanical planting one. Growth is still by multiplication, and still facing outward. These are enduring features. However, it changes from the apparently simplistic planting image in two important related ways.

Firstly, growth is necessarily, rightly and exclusively by non-identical reproduction. The first person to apply the biological term 'non-identical reproduction' to churches, in published form, was my PhD supervisor Martyn Atkins, perhaps out of our supervision conversations as I worked on the thesis that reproduction is a forgotten

mark of the Church. <sup>39</sup> One narrow biblical source to underpin this view would be John 12 and Jesus' image of the seed falling into the ground, in which both elements of non-identical reproduction are significant. This leads to the plant being both related to, and different from, the seed. Consonant with this is Jesus' own resurrection body. His new ability to appear and disappear and yet still be recognisable is intriguing testimony to that two-fold reality which exhibits a dynamic of continuity and change. A wider reference would be to re-read the book of Acts as demonstrating the discovery, utterly surprising to the early church, that it was to multiply and reproduce in non-identical fashion.

The second change is that multiplication is necessarily accompanied by diversity. This is a shift from duplication to diversification. However, this is a principled change, not merely seeking transient relevance. Context legitimately shapes church. The simple sentence of three words, 'mission shapes church', tried to explain this, but has been usually misinterpreted as merely meaning prior church adding a mission flavour to its existing wares.

In my view, the deepest root of both these changes is Christological. It is the exemplar of the eternal Son who took flesh, with the consequence - previously unknown - that the specific cultural and historical person, Jesus of Nazareth, was born. This Jesus did not inhabit heaven beforehand. I think it is fair to this line of incarnational thinking to claim that Jesus of Nazareth was a 'fresh expression' of God the Son. It is then diagnostic and significant that this process embodies both *continuity*, which is held in the Son's divine identity, and also a set of *changes*. <sup>40</sup> These changes include those encountered though the incarnation process itself, however precisely this is understood in the kenotic debate. <sup>41</sup> I would add that among the changes are the resultant contextual engagement by Jesus, the ups and downs of his ministry, the hitherto unknown mystery that the immortal dies, and then that Jesus is raised by the Father.

This twin dynamic, of continuity and change, provides a Christological undergirding of contextual engagement, of dying to live, and of legitimate diversity, all of which necessarily lead to non-identical reproduction as characteristically Christian and ecclesial. Such a gain is vital. It could not easily be derived from the previous horticultural paradigm because two peas or a pair of beans, look much like another except for size, but significant difference is obvious in the interpersonal human paradigm. We know that our children are ours, but we are equally sure they are not identical to us.

## **Conclusion: The interpersonal image and evaluating church**

The interpersonal view, I suggest, needs coupling to the earlier questions around discerning whether any particular group is Christian. Together these deeper questions take us nearer to where we need to be in assessing all expressions of church. We realize we are not so much assessing others, but referring to ourselves. We are the church, giving birth to churches.

It brings us also more clearly into the recognition that the maturity and effectiveness we seek are far more subtle. They cannot be properly computed in the terms loved by the legal mind, financial brain, ecclesial pedant or liturgical fundamentalist. To be human is far more than having a legal identity, financial security or set ways of speaking and acting in public.

And so we are brought back to the issue of whether there should be the same sauce for the fresh expressions goose and for the inherited church gander. I think this is not all that helpful, for the criteria to assess the life and health of a child are, in some respects, different to those we apply to an adult or how we view a frail old person. Here the analogy with being human instantly opens up both generosity and flexibility.

In assessing all expressions of church the deeper goal we are seeking is not something akin to the measure of adulthood. Rather, we should first seek for the ecclesial equivalent of what it is to be human. <sup>42</sup> A dignity is thus given to all expressions of church that does not arise from words like 'experimental', 'new' and 'provisional'. Only after that dignity is given is it appropriate and helpful to search for the complex and often elusive quality of maturity, with generosity and flexibility, expecting that what has begun will and should develop. This will occur both as the body grows over time and as it continues to engage with context. Thus any true expression of church will demonstrate both continuity and change, which reflection on Christ and church history suggests is normal and normative.

I am not suggesting that that the interpersonal view now has no need of the three images that came before it. It is more that interpersonal Christian communities are not adequately described by the three previous paradigms, though they have some reliance upon them. It is how the four are held together and which paradigm controls the others which is vital. Here is where we need to acknowledge the downward gravitational pull of the earlier models, not least the institutional. We could say 'good' gravity stops people flying off the planet, but 'bad' gravity prevents us flying at all. I would prefer to use the analogy of an anchor. There are times to be rooted and held secure, and also times to haul up the anchor and set sail, knowing how and when to lower it again.

Another set of connections between the four paradigms are that humans share many biological traits with the rest of living creation. We have also drawn upon the mechanical ever since the invention of tools and we organize ourselves in ways that form traditions and institutions. One might say that a human being has need of blood and breath, that one's fingers are mechanically wondrous and that it is very useful to have a skeletal structure, but none of those make up what is the essence of being human in the image of God.

Imagine two different dioceses, or Methodist districts, that both contain examples of fresh expressions of Church. One overall leader says to you, 'we have some interesting experiments'. The other says 'these are our children'. <sup>43</sup> Is it not clear these are utterly different and also which ones will thrive?

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## Endnotes

- 1 At the September 2010 Durham Conference called *Refreshing Church Research I* presented a paper which explored how we might evaluate fresh expressions of church. The first two sections of what follows are from that presentation. The original paper's third section, tracking paradigm changes of image about church, has now been developed further since its original presentation in the light of the conference and other subsequent presentations on later occasions
- 2 Schwarz 1996
- 3 Warren 2004
- 4 Lings 2009b
- 5 Lings 2000: 20
- 6 For a recent discussion see Walls and Ross 2008
- 7 Church of England 2004: 81-2
- 8 Church of England 2004: 99
- 9 Croft in Croft 2008: 189
- 10 Dulles 1988
- 11 Atkins in Croft 2008: 25-6
- 12 Lings 2009a: 154-8
- 13 Croft 2006: 181-2
- 14 See also Warren 1995: 92 who suggests a change from church is building, priest and stipend to community, faith and action
- 15 It seems Henry Venn in the UK and Rufus Anderson in the USA came up with the same idea in the same period
- 16 Smail 2005: 157-95
- 17 Smail 2005: 159



18 van Engen 1991: 37 concurs that they 'had no way of empirically verifying what...[he refers to word, sacrament and discipline]...meant in practice'

19 Jay 1977: Volume 1, 187-88 also notes this difficulty, himself going back to the Congregationalist, Erik Routley and approving of his comment that Article 19 of the 39 is 'so vague as to include any doctrine whatever' (Routley 1962: 187). Moreover, van Engen 1991: 63-4 confesses the two marks became a source of internal Protestant division

20 Graham Cray at [www.freshexpressions.org.uk/about/introduction](http://www.freshexpressions.org.uk/about/introduction)

21 Watson 1978: 356f

22 Williams in Church of England 2004: vii

23 Lesslie Newbigin's work provides a number of excellent treatments of how election, mission and eschatology work together - see his easier *Household of God* (Newbigin 1953) or tougher *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* (Newbigin 1989)

24 Winter 1999, originally an address given in 1973 and available online at [resources.campusforchrist.org/images/4/48/The\\_Parachurch.pdf](http://resources.campusforchrist.org/images/4/48/The_Parachurch.pdf)

25 Minear 2007 (originally published in 1960)

26 Dulles 1988: 20-22; Dulles, *Models of the Church* (Dublin: Gill and McMillan, 1987 2nd Edition) pp20-22. Minear 2007: 22-26 argues that images convey impressions of the known, act as a model for perceiving a given reality that is not easily visible or measurable and advance self-understanding by a society

27 Dulles 1988: 29 comments that for a period the Roman Church, seen as the perfect society, operated in this way

28 Dulles 1988: 198

29 Frost and Hirsch 2003. A definition of what they mean can be found in the glossary at p225

30 Hill 1984

31 Hopkins 1988, 1989

32 Church of England House of Bishops 1994

33 Hull 2006

34 See, for example, Frost and Hirsch 2003: 76ff

35 Murray 1998: 124ff

36 Dulles 1988: 25

37 McLaren 2000: 7

38 Hints of this way of thinking have already surfaced in 'Fresh Expressions growing to maturity', my chapter in Steven Croft's edited book *The Future of The Parish System* - Lings in Croft 2006: 138ff (here especially p151)

39 Atkins 2007: 222-3, 241

40 Another witness to a similar process is the eternal Word speaking only in local dialects and the underlying Translation Principle, explained by Andrew Walls in, for example, chapter 3 of Walls 1996: 26ff

41 Sally Nash explores her own classification of no less than nine understandings of kenosis in Nash 2002 (see especially pp 135-6)

42 It is some time since this connection was explored, along with the coining of 'inherited' and 'emerging' language about church. See, for example, Warren 1995: 114-28

43 It is vital to bear in mind that the word 'children' does not mean 'childish'. I have three of them and they are all wonderful adults, related to me, but not me!