

NEW THINGS

**A theological investigation into the work of
starting new churches across 11 dioceses in the
Church of England**



**CRANMER HALL
DURHAM**

Centre for Church Planting
Theology and Research

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1. INTRODUCTION

1. Introduction

This is a theological investigation of the work of starting new churches as carried out by 11 dioceses in the Church of England. The title of this report however omits the word, 'church', and this is deliberate. It is hard to find a comprehensive term to describe what it is that these dioceses have been starting. The language – as we shall show – is diverse and multivalent, hence the term 'new things.'

Despite the variety in the terminology however, what couldn't be clearer is the extent of the energy and resources that have been put into the task. Each of the 11 dioceses we spent time with have been intentional about starting new things and have drawn on the broader intentionality at the core of the Church of England. The Church of England's vision and strategy for the 2020's includes the vision to see a mixed ecology Church where new communities of faith are the norm, and in 2021 announced plans to establish over 10,000 new worshipping communities over the next decade. Since 2014, the Church Commissioners have awarded £176.7 million through Strategic Development Funding (SDF) to dioceses for missional projects, of which at least £82.7 million (47%) was designated for starting new churches. This is a massive investment – almost comprehensive across the Church — in one idea; that starting new things is a good thing to be doing.

This report explores the process of starting new things across 11 dioceses in order to investigate what is going on theologically. In this sense, it is what we have called a piece of empirical-theological research. It is exploring what is going on, with a view to the question at the heart of the report: what is God doing through this? The goal of the report then is to contribute to wise and faithful practice: that the Church might better understand on its own terms why it is doing what it is doing, and how it might proceed with even greater faithfulness.

The Centre for Church Planting Theology & Research

This report has been produced by the Centre for Church Planting Theology and Research, based at Cranmer Hall in Durham. The centre exists to provide the church with quality theological reflection on the activity of starting new churches, for the benefit of the whole church.

We are convinced that good theological-practical work is beneficial for both the practice of starting new churches, and for theologians. In the first instance, starting new churches – since the Church is God's – is a theological endeavour all the way down. Every decision we make about churches, from structure and resourcing through to styles of worship and buildings, says something about who we think God is and what He is doing in His world. Second, starting new churches provides the Church with a rich opportunity for reflection on missiology, ecclesiology and theology. In this sense, starting new churches should be received as a theologically generative activity.

We are aware that the conversation about starting new churches in the Church of England, has not always been carried out in a spirit of openness to learning and challenge. Rather it has tended to be marked by a polarity: between those who are doing deep ecclesial reflection, and those who are seeking substantive impact. Such a divide is harmful to the church. It risks allowing practitioners to go about their work without the valuable and vital theological reflection that will allow them to start genuinely faithful churches, and it risks theologians being able to carry out their work without recourse to the vital learnings from new churches in their engagement with the world. Specifically, we are aware that this divide has left certain parts of the Church - for whom fidelity to ecclesial forms and practices is central - feeling outside of the planting conversation.

In response to this, the research centre exists to provide research that is:

- Driven by mission
- Driven by an empirical-theological methodology
- Driven by a theological vision
- Driven by partnerships

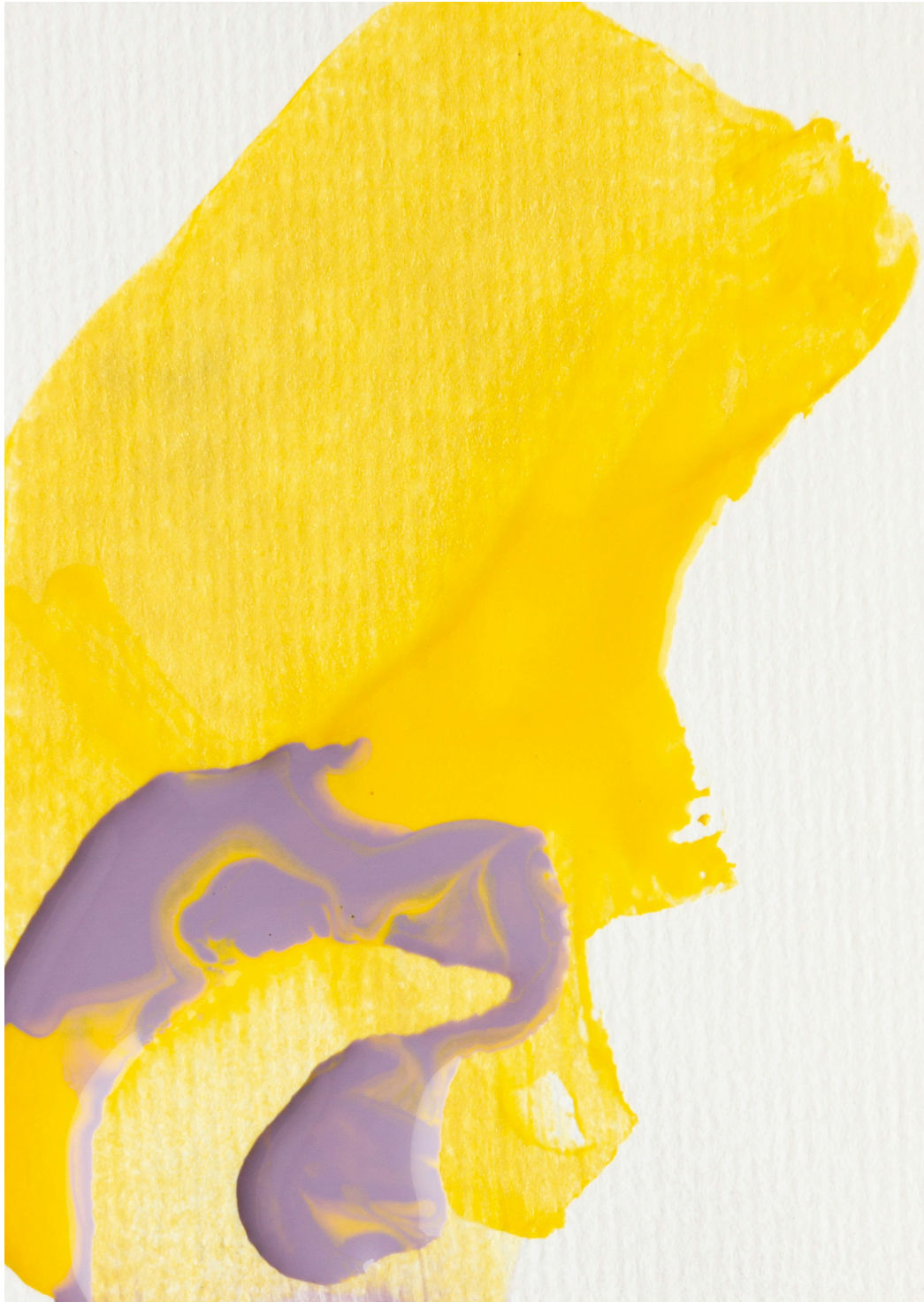
There are two foci to our work:

1 | Transforming the quality of the conversation about starting new churches.

Our hope is for a theologically rich, and constructive conversation about starting new churches so that every part of the church might see starting new churches as having integrity as well as making impact.

2 | Unique theological-empirical research into the activity of church planting.

We will seek to serve the Church by helping discover a) what is going on and, b) what we are learning about God, mission, and the Church from existing praxis.



2. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

2. Executive Summary

This is piece of research conducted between November 2022 and June 2023 by the Centre for Church Planting Theology and Research (CCPTR). The remit was to explore the theological issues that are emerging with the starting of new churches within the Church of England. The research therefore had both a limited fact-finding intention (what is going on?) and a reflective one (what might this mean, theologically?) We carried out an interview with a representative from each diocese, following their completing a simple questionnaire. We also used information available to us from each diocese (website, vision and strategy documentation, SDF bids etc.) There are some key findings from the research, and some emerging theological themes.

Part 1 | Key Findings

1 | *New Things Started*

All 11 dioceses had started new things within the last 10 years, with around 900 new things (on the dioceses' own terms) started. 89% of these are integrated within the existing parish system rather than existing as stand-alone churches. Anecdotally, these new things were seen to be growing in perceived contrast to most inherited churches. This includes 40 new resource churches (brand new churches and churches becoming resource churches). 8 of the 11 dioceses had started or were about to start resource(ing) churches. Only 5 of these 900 new things can be said to exist within the catholic tradition.

2 | *Language*

There has been an emergence of new ecclesial language across the church of England; what we could call an espoused ecclesiology. That this has happened very quickly. That this espoused ecclesiology is affecting an operant theology within the Church of England, that is, that the new language is shaping dioceses mission and ministry. Each diocese is using a 'main descriptor' for their new things, and there was diversity across the 11 as to the terms used. Not one diocese used the term 'church' in their main descriptor. 'Church plant' is not used by any of the 11 dioceses. Only one diocese used 'fresh expressions' of 'pioneering' in its descriptor. 9 of the 11 dioceses had given parameters as to what constituted a valid form of their chosen descriptor. 8 out of the 11 used the language of resource(ing) church. Mixed ecology / economy

language is ubiquitous. The dioceses had chosen their favoured descriptor with the purpose of allowing for variety and range of ecclesial expression.

3 | *Vision, Strategy, and SDF*

All 11 dioceses had engaged with the SDF process. There were significant learnings about the impact of the resourcing, especially as it relates to the integration of this new funding stream into the life of the diocese.

4 | *Culture Shift*

10 of the 11 used the language of 'culture change' to describe the place of new things within the dioceses. There was significant diversity in the extent to which the activity of starting new churches was integrated within the diocese. There is a spectrum here, from dioceses where the activity of starting new things was fully integrated at every level – possibly part of a wider diocesan strategy – and dioceses where new churches were being started as stand-alone entities, as additional and supernumerary to what was already.

Part 2 | Emerging Theological Themes

1 | *The Language of Church*

There is growing variety in the designators used for new things. This is significant because these designators are really the espoused ecclesiology of the dioceses; they are both illustrative and shaping of an ecclesiology. That the term 'church' is not used, in favour of other terms (community, congregation etc.) is worthy of theological reflection. We explore whether the question, 'what is church?' is worth asking.

2 | *Vision-Strategy-Culture*

The language of vision-strategy-culture was ubiquitous across the 11 dioceses. The language was proving to be an effective way of making sense of both the task and its impact within each. However, its use prompts good theological questions about how we adopt language from elsewhere, and whether we need to think hard about the ends which the church is called to pursue, and the means at its disposal to get there.

We need to reflect hard on what we think we are doing when we seek to change things via the means of investing resource.

3 | Resource(ing) Churches

The majority of dioceses had started or were about to start at least one resource(ing) church. There was variety across the 8 as to what the term referred to, and what was envisaged in terms of the shape and purpose of these churches. We investigate the language of resourcing church and the potential theological basis for the idea within the Church of England.

4 | Pioneers and Planters

The research data supports the fact that we have seen a shift in the past decade from a focus on fresh expressions of church, towards starting new churches. We explore the roots of the distinction, the theological distinctiveness of each, and what it might mean that the Church of England seems to be moving away from fresh expressions/ planting as normative.

Part 3 | Recommendations

In light of this report, we recommend that the Church of England gives time and resources to further theological reflection about its operant ecclesiology in the light of the activity of starting new things and emergence of a new espoused ecclesiology. That this reflection should give appropriate consideration to:

- a) The diversity and range of descriptors of new things across the dioceses and the implications of this fact for the church's ecclesiology and shared vision and purpose.
- b) The relationship between resourcing, and outcomes, and the implicit goals in starting new things.
- c) The language and function of resource(ing) churches.

d) The Church's stated previous commitment to pioneer ministry and to fresh expressions of church following *Mission Shaped Church* and whether this is sustainable in light of recent focus.

e) The reasons behind the absence of Catholic engagement in this area of the Church's life.



3. AIMS & SCOPES OF THE RESEARCH

3. Aims and Scope of the Research

There is no such thing as a 'comprehensive' piece of research. This is more a qualitative than quantitative piece, although there is a quantitative element (how many churches started within the 11 dioceses, type of SDF bids etc.) What we want to do here, therefore, is be clear about the boundaries of the research: of what we were trying to look at, why we did what we did, and therefore what the research can offer. The language used here is of boundedness rather than 'limitation'. Our goal was not to be comprehensive, but to contribute to the whole, through a tight focus on some aspects.

Theological Research

This research is a piece of theological research into the activity of starting new churches, within 11 dioceses in the Church of England. By theological research we mean research that is theological in the sense of being primarily about God. Our research was motivated by the question: what might God be doing here? Theology is missiology (the work of God in reconciling to himself all things) and ecclesiology, and so we were thinking in terms of what the data reveals about both mission and the church in our context 21st Century UK context.

Our research questions are thus tiered, moving from the immediate to the most generalised:

- i) What is going on, theologically, in the starting of new things within the Church of England?

With a view to shedding light on:

- ii) What wider theological questions are being posed by the starting of new churches in our context?

With a view to shedding light on:

- iii) What can we learn about mission (missiology) and church (ecclesiology) in our context?

This research has been driven by the conviction that both mission and the church are most basically about God. As such, we cannot speak of the church (or her mission) without recourse to theological categories and concepts. What are being explored here, it is argued, are not simply instances of human communities and groups, but are in a real sense divine events. We cannot but think theologically about what is happening here.

That said, the church is always and inevitably mixed; the work of God through very human means. Therefore, the theological research must really be research (what is going on) and not just an academic gloss or imaginary set of principles. 'Church' is a reality that can only exist in the sense of particular churches, and thus our ecclesiology must always be about the real, 'concrete' church. Put differently, we can't theologise from distance, and there is an impetus on us to discover what is happening on the ground. This is why we have carried out this research.

Limitations of Research

There are at least 5 ways in which this research was bounded:

1. As Theological Research

As stated, the research is in a limited way a piece of quantitative research. We sought to discover what work towards the end of starting new churches has been carried out in each diocese and where this sits within the wider missional vision and strategy. The emphasis in the research however has been on the theological questions that this work raises. The two are integrated: the theological reflection must be rooted within the realities on the ground. Thus, the flow of the research is from 'what is going on' to 'what questions does this raise.' Because of the emphasis on the theological questions, the quantitative aspect of the research may come across as frustratingly limited to some. We are not releasing fresh data on a host of important issues: where are these churches started; who is attending them; who is leading them; what sort of connection do they have with their local communities? We believe such questions are important.

However, at CCPTR it has been our conviction that there has been a lack of theological reasoning around our activity of starting new things, with the practical questions driving the conversation. This research is thus an attempt to redress that, and it is thus weighted more towards the theological. Again, we don't believe that theology can be done in the abstract, and thus the theological reflection is rooted in, and springs from, the realities on the ground. Put simply: this is a reflection on the theological questions that emerge from the activity in these 11 dioceses. There may well be practical recommendations from this – and we believe there are – but these will come through the theological reflection rather than by going around it.

2. 11 Dioceses

There are 42 Dioceses that make up the Church of England, and we spent time looking at 11 of these. We did seek some variety within the selection of dioceses (across both provinces, for example). Further, the dioceses were chosen for other (e.g., logistical) reasons than on the basis of their work with starting new churches. Some of the 11 dioceses have been very public about their work, and some have held starting new things as integral to a diocesan vision and strategy. Others have been far less so. We cannot make the claim that these 11 are especially representative of the whole Church of England, and it will ultimately be up to the reader of this report to determine whether they feel that what is presented here is recognisable from within, or bears any sort of comparison with, their own context. What is clear is that we encountered an extraordinary amount of diversity within the 11, in terms of their work in starting new churches on almost every measure. In this sense our research lends support to the thesis that in the task of starting new churches, the CoE is ultimately driven by the diocesan implementation as much as any other aspect of mission and ministry. The CoE very much remains its 42 dioceses.

3. 11 Dioceses

This is a theological engagement with the starting of new churches, however we have not spent time researching any churches, but rather have been looking at this work at the diocesan level. It is important to name this, given that the goal of this research is to explore questions of missiology and ecclesiology. There are vital issues that emerge

only from close inspection of the on-the-ground interface between church and context. And dioceses – just as with any institutional level above the immediate local – are always in danger of thinking too macro and, at worst, in fictionalised ways; imposing narratives from above without correlation with what is in fact going on. There is an important theological point to make here too, about the CoE's commitment to place, and to the conviction that God is found in the local. This, after all, has been the foundational conviction behind the parish system in the CoE, and the sense of the structures serving this end.

Thus, there is not a CoE which is not 42 different geographical areas, and there is not one of these 42 which is not an amalgamation of how ever many hundred geographically bound parishes. In this sense the 'value' is held at the peripheries: the whole show is set up to ensure that local, place-particular mission and ministry might happen. Thus, from the start we have been aware of the issues of doing theological research at a diocesan level. We do however believe that there are in fact some significant learnings that come from spending time here. Ultimately what each interviewee saw themselves doing was facilitating and enabling or enhancing the very local work of the churches. (Certainly, not one of them was 'above the fray' in the sense of being ignorant of local issues). Dioceses then are not the churches, but they are – in CoE ecclesiology – supposedly of the churches, and for the churches. At very least it should be clear that what goes on at a diocesan level has direct impact on the ground and in this sense although 'ministry' cannot happen from a diocesan level, the thinking and decision making that leads to it, enables it, or even hinders it, very much does. Again, this is not to deny that there is indeed something unique about close study of particular churches, as close to the ground as possible. This piece is not an attempt to override that sort of work, and we would see research like this (e.g. ethnographic study of new churches or interviews with pioneers and leaders) as necessary, and as complimentary to this piece.

4. One person at each

Our insights from the dioceses came in majority measure through one individual at each. There are obvious issues with this approach. Not only was there significant variety in terms of the portfolios of the individuals (i.e., their role within their particular diocese), but more substantially we faced the challenge of subjectivity overwhelming any possible objectivity. Were we likely to receive a 'diocesan' perspective at all, or was

this inevitably to be (merely) an individual's personal reflection? Indeed, the transcripts do demonstrate this issue: individuals did very often share their own perspectives and give a personal 'slant', whether this was a theological instinct/agenda, or simply a subjective or experiential sense.

A few things to say on this issue then. First, we were very much aware of this issue from the start, and thus in our questioning sought to embrace personal narrative rather than working against it, or attempting to 'get beneath it' in order to mine an imagined normative truth. The gold largely came through the questioning of the individual's personal reflection: 'why do you think this is good?' 'What would you do differently'. We also asked about the representative nature of views ('is this what the whole diocese thinks?' 'Are there many who disagree; what might they say?').

Secondly, there was a level of triangulation going on, in the sense that alongside the interviews were able to explore reports and data from each diocese and espoused theologies in the form of websites and other materials.

Thirdly, our research had the approval from the diocesan bishops in each instance, and the consent form made clear that the individual was representing the diocese. Whether the individuals willingly stuck to this came down essentially to her or his own decision, however the remit and intention was made clear. Finally, it is worth saying that the fact of these individuals – within the particular role they serve – was itself worthy of reflection. These individuals have been selected by the dioceses to carry out the work they have been given and thus in that sense are themselves a crucial aspect of the dioceses work. We did not in any sense imagine that their perspective could be representative of the diocese (and certainly not in a 75 min interview) however they are part of the dioceses, and – at least in the task of starting new things – are integral to it. Thus their theological and personal perspectives are of real interest. Put differently, dioceses are made up of people; and this was an insight into some of the people who are working to start new things.

5. *Focus on starting new things*

This is related to the above point. Each diocese is a multi-faceted and complex institution and thus, even when there is apparent commonality between dioceses in terms of structure (leadership, governance etc), there will always be significant

variations in culture and people. We did not expect to get very much at all in terms of wider diocesan culture (even, health) from the research, and instead were very transparent about the focus of the research: the work of starting new churches within the dioceses mission. The issue however is that this is not zero-sum game, and, like every aspect of diocesan work, one cannot possibly separate out an element like this without regard for wider issues. Amongst other things, most interviews addressed issues of: lay involvement (or lack of); clergy recruitment, deployment and training; funding structures; diocesan restructuring; disagreements around traditions; closure of churches.

In some senses, 'starting new churches' is something of a trigger issue for most dioceses or, at least, an issue that is necessarily connected to a host of other ones. We made the decision early on for example to include within the research a focus on SDF and how this was playing out within each diocese given that this seemed so integral to whatever work a diocese was doing in terms of starting new things. Beyond this, we were open to the conversation going in the direction that seemed right. What we could not possibly push into however were the manifold complexities of culture in each diocese. It is very clear that as with all our mission and ministry there is always a great deal more going on than pure theology or missiology, and its implementation; as though there were a simple move between those two things.

No one can do ecclesiology in a vacuum, and thus the starting of new things in each diocese was inevitably shaped by innumerable factors. From theological differences, perspectives, and agendas, through to funding and structures, and everything in between. The very 'human' nature of this work is a theme of this research. Clearly beyond our remit were the particularities of all these factors, and especially the nature of some of the stark 'issues' that did emerge in a few instances (for example, historic dysfunctionality in structure and governance, unhealthy culture etc). We were able to note them, without exploring them in any detail.

6. *Church of England*

This is a report about 11 dioceses within the CoE and in this sense offers some immediate relevance for the CoE. That said, since it is a theological piece of research, our hope is that it also offers insight that transcends the CoE and is in that sense very much for the whole church, and especially here in the UK. Every denomination is

wrestling with essentially the same basic issues: how do our churches really connect with the people and places of 21st Century Britain? How can we ensure that our institutional structures enable rather than hinder the work of God, and especially that work at its most local and immediate level? How do we receive the inheritance of our infrastructure and traditions, in a way that allows us to be faithful now and into the future? And what role do new churches have to play in all this?

There are specific issues here for the CoE in how it answers them, of course. The nature of its being an established church, its (for want of a better word) peculiar historical inheritance, the unique diversity of theological traditions within it, all mean that the way it answers those questions will have a particular character. However, the questions are the same. And quite often seeing someone else's approach helps you find your own way forward. In this sense, our hope is that just as researching 11 of the 42 dioceses might offer some sharp insight for the whole CoE, so too a reflection on the CoE might offer insight for the whole church, in her glorious, unified diversity.

A word on language and scope

We approached each diocese, asking them about the 'activity of starting new things'. We used signifiers and suggestions within the questionnaire ("new churches", 'new worshipping communities', 'fresh expressions' etc...) However we recognised in pilot work that there was significant diversity between the dioceses as to what could be counted here. Where possible we garnered the figures of all the new things started (including, for example, Messy Church, and new congregations). However, because each diocese is working with a different descriptor, and set of measures it is hard to find uniformity across the range. Some dioceses had to hand the data on all new things started, however some had only the data for the things they had deemed to be, for example, a 'new worshipping community', or 'new Christian community', with only anecdotal evidence of fresh expressions or experimental new services, for example. Others had engaged in fresh expressions work for some time (since, for example, MSC in 2004) but had since taken a different tack and had focused energies now on revitalisations, grafting, and planting.

Thus, unlike other projects (Anecdote to Evidence) we did not establish our own set of strict criteria as to what should or should not be included. Again, to be clear about our goal: we were not seeking incontrovertible statistical evidence in support of any one

claim, rather we were seeking empirical insight for the purposes of sharpening theological questions. This does not mean the data lacks precision. We were consistent in what was asked across the 11 dioceses, and in interviews we pushed into the data, seeking clarification where needed. Thus we are confident that what we have here is an accurate representation of the activity of starting new things in the 11 dioceses over the last decade. The language each diocese was using (NWC / revitalisation etc.) and thus what they were measuring, and valuing was itself an object of the investigation. Where there are questions over what is counted, we have included additional information to this end.



4. FINDINGS FROM THE RESEARCH

4. Findings From the Research

1. New things started

Key findings

All 11 dioceses had engaged in work around starting new things. Across the 11 dioceses, around 900 new things have been started. The overwhelming majority (89%) of these new churches are integrated within existing parish churches rather than existing as stand-alone 'new' churches (with, e.g. a BMO). Churches were either revitalisations and grafts, or new congregations within existing churches (e.g. messy churches). There are very few exceptions (approx. 98 out of 900, with one diocese accounting for around 50 of these).

- Around 40 of the new churches started (including grafting / revitalisation) are designated resource / resourcing churches, with 8 of the 11 dioceses involved in establishing at least one resource(ing) church.
- Very few (less than 5) of the new churches sit within the anglo-catholic or liberal-catholic traditions
- A significant number of these new churches have been started intentionally in areas deemed to be areas of deprivation. 9 of the 11 dioceses named this as a priority in their activity of starting new things.
- In all 11 dioceses, new churches were statistically bucking a trend of decline, that is, in comparison to the overwhelming majority of churches, these new things were growing numerically, and statistically connecting with more un or de-churched people than inherited churches.

Further Details

The immediate takeaway from the data is that starting new things in the CofE is extensive and, in terms of diocesan engagement, comprehensive. Across the dioceses, there is variety in terms of the extent of this activity. Some dioceses have started many things, some a few. Ultimately, we should not take the starting of new things lightly: it is worthy of deep theological reflection, simply because it is so evidently a core part of the Church of England's ecclesial landscape. That said, the numbers of new churches started remains low in relation to the number of parishes in total (3162) across the 11 dioceses. In some of the dioceses, the number of new things is a very small number in comparison to the number of parishes.

The data would seem to challenge some of the common assumptions around starting new churches in the Church of England:

- The vast majority of these new churches are not city-centre resource churches, larger (100+) churches, and do not originate from the likes of Holy Trinity Brompton (HTB).
- The overwhelming majority of these new churches are not disconnected as it were from the existing parish churches but are integrated within that system. Many of these new churches are grafts/revitalisations into and of inherited churches. Most of the fresh expressions of church happen within or as part of inherited churches.
- Looking at the data, we can make a conjecture that the vast majority of these new churches are small and local rather than big and supra-local.
- Many of these churches are part of a diocese's strategy to redress a perceived failure to engage in areas of material deprivation. Although, as stated, we cannot trace a simple line between SDF and starting new churches, it is interesting to note that the findings from this research support the claims made in the independent report on SDF that deprived urban areas receive proportionally more than other areas. Again, the research could not proffer whether these attempts were working (there were some good examples of where it clearly was), however what is clear is that the intention is very real. Taken as a whole, this 'movement' of starting new things should not be seen as a project aimed at expanding a middle-class Church.

- It was clear that each diocese was essentially positive about the impact of their activity to start new things. It was a shared theme across all 11 dioceses that these new things were generally growing and making a positive contribution to the life of the diocese. All 11 interviewees had positive stories and statistics to share in this regard. A few interviewees made direct comparison with inherited churches in a negative sense (i.e. new things growing compared to inherited churches declining), but generally the sense was more positive: these new things were growing, but this in no way devalued the inherited churches.
- The lack of new churches in the Anglo-Catholic tradition will be unsurprising to those of us who have been observing this movement for some time. This has been, and remains, essentially an evangelically driven project.

2. Language

Key findings

There was a 'main descriptor' term used by each diocese, even if internally other terms were employed to help distinguish various types of activity. All 11 dioceses had sought terms that allowed for breadth and variety in ecclesial form.

'Church plant' is not used by any diocese as a main descriptor.

6 used language of 'worship' in their main descriptor

2 used 'congregation'

7 used 'community' in their main descriptor

There was little mention of 'fresh expressions' (Fx) in the questionnaire responses and in the conversations. Only one diocese used the language of 'pioneering' or 'fresh expressions' as a main descriptor. 6 dioceses referred to Fresh Expressions and/or pioneering within their online material about new things. However only 4 of these included Fx/pioneering within their strategy and vision documentation.

9 of the 11 dioceses had worked to define their main designator, (i.e., a definition of what, say, a 'new worshipping community' (NWC) or a 'worshipping community' (WC) is) and to set some parameters around this definition.

8 of the 11 dioceses had started new resource/resourcing churches, with one in the process of doing so, and one designating an existing church as a resourcing church.

Further detail

There are a number of observations to make about the language being used across the Church of England.

There is a lack of uniformity in our ecclesial descriptors. This both in terms used, and in the justification, explanation and parameters of these. In this sense, each diocese is working with a unique ecclesiology; a way of addressing the question: 'what is a church'? Some of these differences were stark. Especially when it comes to the issue of traditional ecclesial forms (worship, sacraments etc), with some dioceses recognising these as central, and others less so.

A lack of uniformity does not mean a lack of precision or care. Dioceses had been careful about their use of language.

- 9 out of the 11 had developed parameters to their terminology that were clear, and functioning within the diocese.
- 7 of these 9 had wrestled with the question of when a 'thing' became a NWC, WC etc., and had come up with a way of conceiving an entity as on the way to becoming a fully-fledged expression of whatever the designator was.
- All 11 interviewees spoke about how they were working hard to combat misperceptions. For example, all 11 had avoided 'church planting' primarily because of the baggage the term carries (i.e. that these will be HTB /Church Revitalisation Trust (CRT) supported city-centre resource churches).
- Only one diocese was working with a designator that was rooted explicitly in Anglican sources (in this instance, the 39 articles).

There was variety in the way in which resource / resourcing churches were conceived.

- Some dioceses had started brand new resourcing churches, purchasing property to this end.
- Some had grafted into / revitalised interested churches, providing a new leadership to what was already there (there is a vast range here: from empty, derelict buildings, through to churches with existing congregations and PCC).

- Some had designated existing churches resourcing churches, adding capacity to the existing ministry
- One diocese had intentionally started a rural resource church

The concept of 'mixed ecology/economy' was a given in each of the interviewees, and in most cases within the dioceses' public portrayal of its activity. In the interviews there was variety around what the mixed ecology offered the diocese:

- A positive in and of itself (variety seen as a good)
- Necessitated by a new historical situation: either because of demographic diversity within place, and/or because of a decline in attendance at tradition and inherited churches.
- A way of justifying the pioneering / entrepreneurial activity that was taking, and had already taken place.

We had to push hard to receive any data about Fresh Expressions, which is supportive of the sense that the CoE has experienced a shift away from pioneering/Fx towards planting, grafting, and establishing new worshipping communities. One diocese was the exception to this; a diocese which had prioritised pioneering/Fx at every level, and had seen significant fruit in this regard.

3. Vision, Strategy and SDF

Key findings

10 of the 11 dioceses had a diocesan vision and strategy, which included the starting of new things. Out of these, 6 had the starting of new things as central element to this vision and strategy, with 3 including starting new things as a secondary aspect within the wider strategy.

All but one of the 11 dioceses referenced the SDF process when asked about 'starting new things.'

All 11 interviewees spoke of the need to have someone in the dioceses driving the activity of starting new things. This could be a bishop, however in at least half of the cases, the bishop was supportive without being the driver for the work.

All 11 dioceses had received more than one SDF award towards the activity of starting new things. 8 out of the 11 interviewees were in an SDF funded role.

There was significant variation in the bids and what the funding was used for. Each diocese had spent some money on front-line projects, and on support and infrastructure (e.g., a training centre, new diocesan roles focused on planting) but the balance varied between dioceses. What was bid for is revelatory of a) the dominant ecclesial vision within the diocese b) the extent of missional engagement across the whole diocesan structure.

SDF had been a learning journey for each diocese, all accepted that early bids had not worked out exactly as expected.

Further Detail

One immediate finding from the research is that it is very difficult to separate the activity of starting new things from the wider strategy, vision, and missional activity of a diocese. Thus, the activity of starting new things should be seen as one part of a wider missional commitment in each diocese. 4 of the 11 dioceses, for example, were undergoing significant pastoral reorganisation as part of a wider vision and strategy. In each case, the starting of new things was seen as just one aspect of a wider program of change. Over half of the dioceses spoke of ensuring that incoming clergy are appointed on the basis that they will re-enliven existing churches. This work was seen as just as vital as that of starting new things.

All 11 dioceses had invested time, energy and personnel in the SDF process; a process that in all 11 cases had a wider impact than simply the discrete SDF projects (see below). The 'tell me about starting new things' question in the interview was answered in 10 of the 11 interviews with reference to SDF. The two are connected, with SDF being the accepted means of starting new things.

A number of dioceses were involved in bidding for STF (strategic transformation funding) towards a diocesan restructuring program that takes mission as a priority.. Indeed, what the interviewees most wanted to speak about was this commitment, and it was often hard to get them to focus explicitly on the new things.

In all but 1 instance there had been careful thought about a 'theory of change' in regards starting new things. These 10 dioceses had recognised the structural implications of starting new things if these new things were to be a) sustainable in their own right and, b) integrated within the wider diocese. Common areas impacted were:

1. Vocations, selection, training, curacy, IME3 and CMD. Dioceses recognised the challenge of finding and then training leaders who are able to lead in pioneer contexts, to enable others to lead, and, potentially, to lead a team.
2. The role of archdeacon. In most of the 11 dioceses, the archdeacon has been a key figure. The archdeacon – in navigating the relationship between diocesan / bishops' senior team, and the deaneries and parishes – has borne much of the weight of change and has had to work hard in establishing trusting relationships at a local level.

3. Housing. Starting new churches in new places requires dioceses to engage with the housing / rental market beyond their stock of vicarages. This has been costly for some dioceses.

In 1 diocese, there were significant problems faced by the team who were being funded by SDF to drive the activity of starting new things. Simply put, the diocese spoke positively of starting new things, but the structures (and especially the bishops' core team) had not embraced the necessary change required to implement a viable strategy. There is a significant step that must be taken from willingness and intentionality, to strategy.

It was interesting to hear of how the activity of starting new things has been worked out within existing diocesan structures. For 3 of the dioceses, starting new things was clearly important but had not become fully 'integrated' into the life of the diocese, as marked by its place within the diocesan vision.

The role of the bishop was a theme of the interviews. She may not be the visionary behind the work, but she must be an enabler of it. This role is more than a 'supporter'. Because of the significant structural implications of starting a project of new churches (vocations, curate training and deployment, funding, new roles within the diocese etc.) the bishop must be part of the drive towards change and prepared to shoulder some of the cost of that change.

The language of 'disruption' was used by a few of the interviewees; that the diocese must somehow allow space for those who seek to stretch / push existing structures. However this was seen as a necessarily precarious role to hold within a diocese.

The research highlighted the tensions identified elsewhere between structure and the realities on the ground. The pandemic provided the most obvious example of unexpected challenge to SDF projects. However, each diocese spoke of the very real challenges around implementation. It is unsurprising that each diocese would – with hindsight – have approached their first bid differently. There was a range here, from those who questioned the original bid in toto, and those who saw room for improvement.

The SDF report uses the language of 'common missional theories' and this was a theme that emerged clearly in the research. To it we would add, 'ecclesial theories.' The bids reveal, for example:

- Whether focus is on ecclesial communities, or on pioneering projects. Is the most basic goal church or is it evangelism and outreach?
- Whether the focus is on reimagining and enlivening existing structures, or more on starting new things.
- The extent to which 'gaps' in missional engagement have been identified, for example whether what is suggested is aimed at reaching specific demographics (i.e., under-represented groups) or places.

This research highlighted some of the specific areas of implementation: the challenges of timescales when it comes to establishing new churches / congregations, and especially in pioneer contexts; the issue of funding (the impact of an SDF award on a diocese's budget and reserves).

There was a range in terms of the impact of SDF on the Diocesan structures. For some of the dioceses the SDF churches were very much supernumerary. For others, they were more integral. One common theme was around the challenge the new funding system presented to the existing structures. Most of these dioceses have had to work hard (and the role of project manager has been vital here) to integrate SDF churches within existing deaneries and benefices, as well as working out how things like housing and expenses will work. Starting a new church within existing diocesan structures is not a simple task.

There is a lack of information in the public sphere around a diocese's SDF bids, awards and distribution, with only 8 of the 11 dioceses including this information on their website. Clearly, online information is only one aspect of a diocese's communications. It does not, for example, take into account the intra, local communications (at deanery synod and parish level for example).

4. Culture Shift

Key findings

10 of the 11 used the language of 'culture change' to describe the place of new things within the dioceses. This was used to refer to a) local church culture (i.e. in inherited churches) and embodied by congregations and by lay and ordained ministers, and b) Diocesan culture (i.e. diocesan staff, archdeacons and bishops).

9 of the 11 spoke of challenges of starting new things within a) diocesan structures and governance systems and/or b) existing church / diocesan culture.

There was significant diversity in the extent to which the activity of starting new churches was integrated within the diocese. There is a spectrum here, from dioceses where the activity of starting new things was fully integrated at every level – possibly part of a wider diocesan strategy – and dioceses where new churches were being started as stand-alone entities, as additional and supernumerary to what was already.

6 dioceses named the fact that five years was not enough to establish something that can last

At least one diocese had experienced significant financial pressure as a result of receiving SDF, having to part-fund projects from diocesan budgets.

8 dioceses do not have any information online about SDF bids and awards as they relate to their strategy and vision.

Further Details

The research supported the findings of the independent SDF report that for many dioceses, the SDF process had catalysed or affected a change in the diocese's strategy: "Almost everyone we spoke to in dioceses and the SDU said that engagement with the SDF funding process had spurred significant improvements in strategic planning, structure, accountability and other programme disciplines at the diocesan level." We refer to this as 'culture change'; the language used by the majority of the 11 dioceses. We also note that this change was witnessed not merely at a diocesan structural level but was perceived to be happening in the parishes too.

- Such cultural change is clearly not a simple process, and a perceived resistance to change was noted. There was a range to these responses:
- Some saw speed as the issue: dioceses/parishes wanted to change, but the structures and systems were not effective in enacting this change
- Others noted a resistance to change: because of suspicion and (mis)understanding.
- 7 of the 9 named 'discipleship' as an issue in effecting change, that is, a perceived lack of Christian maturity within the existing churches resulting in a) a shortage of leaders for new things b) an unwillingness for those involved – diocesan and parish level – to take the necessary risks required in starting something new.
- Only three noted an explicitly named theological pushback to their activity of starting new things. The Save The Parish movement was named in each instance.

5. Other Learnings

A good number of churches that were started now do not exist. 8 out of the 11 interviewees gave examples of this. In one diocese, 44 new worshipping communities were started quickly, and 29 of these remain. In another, 40 is now 33. Covid was named as one of the factors in this.

There was a theme through the interviews that many new things remain essentially vulnerable for a significant period of time. This was evident when the interviewees spoke of the impact of Covid, naming the reality that many new things ended as a result of the pandemic, with those that did survive decreasing in number, frequency of meeting, and in levels of engagement. The 'fledgling' communities however were seen in contrast to more well-established new things, notably the resource/resourcing churches. The interviewees reported that these churches struggled as a result of Covid, but that they remained on the whole secure.

As well as churches started and ending, some have struggled to get going at all in relation to SDF lans. There were a number of reasons given for this:

- A struggle to appoint leaders
- Mis-match between diocesan plans/vision, and the plans/vision of the leader(s) and/or team on the ground
- Contextual challenges. The most common was the challenge to get congregations established on housing estates

5 of the 11 interviewees spoke of how good inter-personal communication between diocese and parish had helped to overcome fears, and increase local buy-in. It was apparent that the more relational such work could be (i.e. person to person, rather than through comms) the more effective at easing fears and misunderstanding. Most spoke of the importance of earning trust and of local 'buy-in' as local churches were invited into the process, through consultation. A number of dioceses named the fact that starting new things in estates and in areas of deprivation is difficult. There were reasons given for this:

- The challenge of finding adequate public spaces in which to meet

- The challenge of building trust within well-established, and defined communities; the time that this process can take, in relation to numerical targets.
- The challenge of finding leaders to lead such churches, recognising the (perceived) cost
- The challenge of finding local lay leaders to serve and grow the church, and the ongoing challenge of ensuring that this is locally led rather than 'imposed.'



5. THEOLOGICAL THEMES, ANALYSIS AND QUESTIONS

5. Theological Themes, Analysis, and Questions

What is going on? What do these espoused theologies, and practices, reveal about the Church of England?

One way of approaching these question is to think of it in terms of change. Imagine for a moment that a member of the Church of England from 1923 stepped forward in time and found themselves in 2023, listening in on these interviews and studying the data we have here. Perhaps it is a lay person, a diocesan bishop, an archdeacon, or a priest. What would they find here as resonant with their experience; what would they recognise? And what might they find strange, new, different? What might interest, or even encourage them, and what might disturb them?

They may well recognise a great deal of what is here. The fact that amidst the various definitions and descriptors, many of the interviewees spoke of ‘parishes’ as the basic unit of ecclesial organisation. They would recognise the role of bishop and understand the complex relationship between centre and periphery; between the diocesan understanding of things, and what is going on the ground. It would be unsurprising that dioceses were spending a lot of time focused on the selection, training, and deployment of clergy: ordained priests as the locus of ministerial activity. They would be unsurprised by the fact that within the broad category of ‘priest’ there were differences in vocations: although the language may not have been explicit, they would have known of pioneering or entrepreneurial priests, and of the specific charge given by bishops to some to go and try new things, perhaps in what are perceived to be challenging contexts. They would, we think, recognise too the sense of diversity in ecclesial forms. They would know of the role of archdeacon, and the part he (it would have been he) played in navigating and negotiating within all of this. So too it would be unsurprising to hear of networks and movements. Such groups – often established along lines of tradition and churchmanship – were a prominent part of the ecclesial landscape since the 19th Century.

And what of the big picture? Of starting new churches? Well, there would be nothing here in principle that would surprise or shock. We know that the 19th Century – the 100 or so years preceding our friend-from-the-past’s time traveling adventure – had seen dramatic changes to the ecclesial structuring of the CoE, with over a fifth of

all parish churches built after 1801. The massive social and cultural changes initiated by the industrial revolution had a dramatic impact on the CoE. By 1901, there were over 5,000 more churches in the country than 70 years previously, and by 1896 7,500 new parishes had been formed. And all of this does not include the supra-parochial missionary work that was happening in this period – mission huts and halls (sometimes known as ‘tin tabernacles’), children and youth projects (including Sunday schools), and multiplying services. Thus, long before the language of ‘mixed ecology’ was normative, the idea that one might find at the local level all sorts of types of ministry, events, and services happening would not have been a shock. So the idea at the heart of all of this – of starting something new, or adapting a settled ecclesial structure – in order to allow the church to be more present, and connect with more people and in a richer way – would not have felt alien.

It is because of all this that many have been able to make the claim that church planting is not a new phenomenon in the Church of England.¹ And they would of course – broadly – be right. And more than that, what this research suggests is that not only is the intention and general process nothing new, but so too the presenting issues – strategic and theological – are largely unchanged. How do we conceive of the relationship between old and new? How do the centre and the periphery work together? What is the place of the clergy in all of this? How should the Church respond to social and cultural changes whilst maintaining its theological and ecclesial integrity?

Yet, there are some things that our visitor would find new. First the descriptors. Inevitably someone from 1923 would have questions to ask here. What is a ‘new worshipping community’, or a ‘new Christian community’? Are these the same thing as ‘churches’? And if not, how do they relate to the existing parish church? Indeed, if they were this way inclined, they might well ask, ‘how are these things Anglican, or at least, Church of England churches?’ That is, what makes these different from – say – the nonconformist chapels or meetings? The language of ‘resourcing’ churches would be new, even if it were to resonate with their experiences of bigger and influential churches, or - historically - with the idea of the minster church. Likewise, the language of ‘leadership’ would stand out, that is, as a supra-category sitting somewhere above and over that of the three-fold order of deacon, priest, and bishop. Certainly, they would be surprised by the amount of conversation around lay leadership, at least as it

¹ For example, see ‘Bishops set out Principles for Church Planting’, Church of England, at <https://www.churchofengland.org/news-and-media/news-and-statements/bishops-set-out-principles-church-planting> [accessed 07/07/23]. And the paper to which the article refers, ‘Church Planting and the Mission of the Church: A Statement by the House of Bishops’, June 2018 (No longer accessible online).

relates to leading churches and/or congregations. And other terms too would feel new. 'Vision', 'strategic', 'culture', and 'cultural change' for example.

There are some other obvious some significant differences in the way in which these new things are seen to come about. 'Starting a new church' in the 19th Century meant a certain thing. In particular, a new church essentially meant a new church building. Further, funding for such projects was generally not from 'central' funds but through patronages and local benefactors. When money did come from the 'centre' it was not from the 'Church' (commissioners) but from parliament.² The idea that the central Church – and then, accordingly, a diocese – would have a nation/diocesan wide commitment to starting new churches, and a funding strategy to that end, would be novel. Finally, it would seem like a strange thing indeed that this movement of starting new things has been basically an evangelical project. The boundaries around, and influence of, various forms of churchmanship have changed in the past century of course, and it is beyond the parameters of our research to explore why and how evangelicalism (and a low-church ecclesiology) has come to dominate the Church's missional activity. But we can assume that someone from 1923 would certainly be surprised by the way in which evangelical activity has so vastly outstripped and outpaced catholic work. They might wonder why – given both the legacy, and the fact of resources being on offer – more within the catholic tradition have not taken up the opportunity.

Other differences are more subtle. Although we argue in this research that on the whole the movement to establish new churches should not be seen as a rejection of the parish system (and is fact serving in fact to re-enliven it in many place) there were still some notable examples of churches or new congregations being established as a means to reach a type of person, a group or certain demographic, or as a way of connecting with given institutions (e.g. schools). The idea that new churches might be started other than because of a geographical commitment, and the desire to have a church that would reach all within a given locale, would be new. Similarly, what would feel different is the sense that new churches might be started with a strategic or macro goal in mind, rather than as means to minister to the locale in which the church is started. And all of this is connected to the wider issue of the fact that a diocese is engaging in this work as a whole, through a joined-up strategy (something made an assumption by the SDF process). The idea for example that a diocese might close

² The 1818 New Churches Act, See UK Parliament pages at <https://www.parliament.uk/about/living-heritage/transformingsociety/towncountry/towns/overview/publicbuildings/#:~:text=The%20New%20Churches%20Act%20of,new%20ones%20had%20been%20constructed> [accessed 06/07/23]), which came a century after the 1710 New Churches in Westminster and London Act.

some churches in one place but invest in a new church a few miles down the road would seem odd to someone from 1923, where both the connection between parish church and her place, and between parishes and the diocese was very different.

Finally, there would be lots in the theological rationale given for these new things, that would feel very new. We explore this in more detail below, but essentially, the idea that church might take different forms – that 'church' is as much a verb ('doing' church) as a proper noun (a/the church) – would have felt odd to the vast majority of people within the Church of England in 1923 for whom the church was simply what was there; that is, the actual church (parish, ministers, systems and structures) in its given form.

Let us now consider in more detail four theological themes emerging from this research. We hope these themes will provide further points of reflection for future research and strategy. We provide, alongside our reflections, a list of emerging questions which we hope bring to the fore some of the important theological issues emerging from contexts.

1. The Language of Church

There is growing variety in the designators used for new things. This is significant because these designators are really the espoused ecclesiology of the dioceses; they are both illustrative and shaping of an ecclesiology. That the term 'church' is not used, in favour of other terms (community, congregation etc.) is worthy of theological reflection. We explore whether the question, 'what is church?' is worth asking.

Almost all of the dioceses had chosen a descriptor that allowed for breadth in ecclesial form. It functions as a blanket term. In this sense, the language is related to the ubiquitous use of 'mixed economy / ecology' language. Dioceses were careful to over-define these new things since this would be seen to limit the possibilities. The language also aims to establish a common purpose across the variety of forms; the claim is that despite very significant differences, these things are part of one purpose. The language thus also serves to connect new and old, pioneer/planted and inherited. 'Christian community' for example transcends the old/new divide: the descriptor works for both.

There are immediate questions to be asked about the fragility of some of this language, and the looseness of some of the definitions. 2 of the dioceses had not worked to delineate the boundaries of the main descriptor and in this sense the term

was purely descriptive rather than in any sense orienting. Further, we should recognise how many of the dioceses continued to use a wide variety of terms on their website and other materials, despite working hard to establish a main descriptor.

There are however at least two deeper questions that we should ask about the implications of this trend. First, what might it mean for the Church of England to have substantive variety in its ecclesial definitions across its dioceses? Second, what might it mean that the language of 'church' is not used here, and has become subsumed within these other descriptors?

The first is a question of consistency across the Church. The question is whether it is possible to hold together the Church if the local churches differ in their fundamental self-understanding. In the first instance we should not ignore the variety. 6 used language of 'worship', 5 didn't. Likewise, 6 used community, 5 didn't. If these descriptors are illustrative of ecclesial commitment (and we argue that that they are) these differences do matter.

Second, it is important to note that only one of the dioceses had drawn from the Church's own formularies in order to establish its descriptor. Specifically, the descriptor 'congregations' comes from the 39 articles, along too with the secondary definition ('wherever the pure word is preached and the sacraments are duly ministered'). The other 8 dioceses that had worked to establish parameters around its descriptor had drawn on other sources or ideas in order to do so. For example, at least 5 of the dioceses used the language of 'marks' (i.e. 'must be 'new'; 'Christian'; 'community' etc.). Only one other diocese mentioned the sacraments within this definition.

We thus have a situation whereby the majority of dioceses are potentially working with an ecclesial norm that a) does not derive from the Church's own traditions and forms and, b) is diverse from the other dioceses.

The second question is around the language of church. The fresh expressions movement, following *Mission Shaped Church*, was keen to keep 'church' as a qualifier ('fresh expressions of church') and so it is interesting to note that these more recent designators have jettisoned that. The goal again seems to be one of allowing for maximum breadth. 'Church' feels immediately restrictive and limiting. But it is worth asking why this might be the case. Is it because 'church' feels too unachievable for the majority of things that are started? This would not be a surprise given the

simultaneous prominence of the term 'church' in the case of resourcing churches. If these larger, well-resourced churches have become the benchmark of what church is, then it is little surprise that we need to find other designators to describe the multifarious smaller expressions. But the other reason why 'church' might feel restrictive and limiting is because it seems too wedded to a particular form – whatever the size – and this form is likewise unobtainable for many of these things started. Thus, if church means sacraments, episcopal oversight, church discipline, discipleship and so on, then of course it is easier to shift the language: to define these things as something other.

One final point to make about the descriptors is that at least 4 dioceses used the language of 'becoming' readily to allow room for new things that are on the way to becoming fully-fledged fresh expressions, or NWCs or whatever the descriptor might be. These dioceses were happy to apply the descriptor if it could be shown that these new things had the intention of fulfilling whatever criteria / parameters had been set. The important thing here therefore is about the direction and intention of these new things, rather than an established form.

Interestingly however, at the same time as we see a shift in the language – away from church to other descriptors – we should recognise some of the other shifts in ecclesial approach over the past decade. Two points are worth mentioning here.

First, it was interesting how many of the dioceses were, alongside their activity of starting new things, also looking to reimagine and re-enliven existing parish churches. This comes in the form of revitalisations, as well as the appointment of mission-minded priests following vacancies.

Second, it was a surprising finding of the research that many dioceses were using deaneries as vital units in ecclesial ordering. The deanery is an interesting unit for the Church of England; a seemingly disempowered mid-point between the far more affective parish and deanery. In many respects, its offering is dependent upon the particularities of each place and the churches it encompasses. It was therefore interesting to see the deanery taking on a new significance in many places. For these dioceses it had become the point of shared ministry, of local consultation, and the holder of accountability for new projects. With it, the role of area-dean had taken on new significance.

Taken together then – revitalised parishes, and energy given to the deanery – it is interesting that despite the loss of the designator ‘church’, this movement of starting new things cannot be neatly categorised as anti-institutional. It is in many respects a reimagining of the Church of England’s settled forms and quite possible, a reenergising of its local commitment.

Finally, we should point out that the research reveals a move away from pioneering towards planting as normative practice in the Church of England in recent times. We explore this below (planting and pioneering) however, it is worth naming the fact that the shift towards establishing things that look more like established churches – in contrast to pioneer projects / fresh expressions of church – perhaps reveals a tendency for the Church of England to revert to established forms.

Theological Direction

Following *Mission Shaped Church*, and the subsequent movement to start new expressions of church there was a great deal of discussion around the Church of England’s ecclesiology. In particular, the questions that seemed most urgent concerned our definition of church. In one sense, many of these new things were not in any sense new. What was new was the claim that these things be designated as ‘churches’. The obvious pushback therefore was that these things were not really churches, at least not by any measure previously used within the Church of England.

As has been noted elsewhere, *Mission Shaped Church* drew on a range of sources – beyond Anglicanism – in order to establish an ecclesiology for the movement of starting new things.³ It did however make central the Apostle’s Creed (the 4 marks), as well as offering brief reflection on the sacraments, and episcopacy. What the report marks however is a way of addressing the question of church that is driven primarily by pragmatic rather than theological concerns. That is to say, it was answering the question, primarily, ‘given these new things exist, and others are starting, how can we make sense of them as churches? And what might an ecclesiology need to look like that has the space within it for these new things.’ To be clear, we are not here questioning this approach as a form of ecclesiology. It should be noted that our ecclesiology must be always engaging with the concrete church, and this includes the

³ See Davison, Andrew and Alison Milbank. *For the Parish: a critique of Fresh Expressions*. (London: SCM Press, 2014).

reality of new expressions and emerging churches. One of the consequences of this focus however is that ecclesiology inadvertently from this point tended to be done in the negative than in the positive. That is to say, the question was asked: ‘what is the bare minimum that must be in place in order for this to be ‘really’ a church?’ We might call this an ‘ecclesial minimum.’ And of course this can be answered in a number of ways, depending on one’s ecclesiology.

At the same time, *Mission Shaped Church* also is a product of another trend in much of the western ecclesiology, namely the shift from church as a reality to church as an idea or concept. This tendency can be witnessed in much of the theological work that springs from *Missio Dei* theology which has been so prominent in the 20th Century.⁴ In this theology, ‘church’ is always relativised by a theological commitment to the primacy of God’s work of reconciliation. God’s mission is primary; the church is means to this end. *Mission Shaped Church*’s indebtedness to this way of thinking pervades the report, and it cites two quotations to this end: ‘there is Church because there is mission, not vice versa’ and ‘It is not the Church of God that has a mission in the world, but the God of mission who has a Church in the world.’⁵

What happens here then to the concept of church? Essentially it results in an inherent fluidity to the being of the church. The church in any one form is secondary to the mission of the church which is always primary. The church is the church only to the extent that she participates in this mission: it is this participation that makes the church the church. And once that happens, the particularity of church form becomes malleable. Much of the Catholic pushback to *Mission Shaped Church* was representative of what was perceived to have been lost here. The counter-claim was that the church cannot take different forms, given that the church simply is what the church is, namely that body gathered around word and sacrament under the three-fold order of deacon, priest and bishop and using the authorised liturgies of the Church.⁶ Of course, within this there is the possibility for flexibility (note e.g. Canon B4), however the point was that we cannot simply pull the idea of ‘church’ away from the concrete forms that the church has taken.

⁴ See as exemplary statement of this idea, *Ad Gentes: On the Mission Activity of the Church*, Second Vatican Council, 1964 and ‘A Statement on the Missionary Calling of the Church’, *International Missionary Council*, 1952. See David Bosch, *Transforming Mission* for a summary of the theology of *Missio Dei*.

⁵ The first is from David Bosch, the second from Tim Dearborn. Both on p.85. of *Mission Shaped Church*

⁶ See, for example, Angela Tilby, ‘What Questions Does Catholic Ecclesiology Pose for Contemporary Mission and Fresh Expressions?’, in *Mission Shaped Questions*, ed. Steven Croft (London: CHP, 2008).

What *Mission Shaped Church* represents, therefore, is the way in which ‘church’ in this theological tradition has become a concept divorced from a given form. This is why we can speak of ‘doing church’ or ‘being church’ or ‘becoming church.’ This report is not a critique of that trend, rather it is a reflection on the data. What we propose is that it is this same trend that lies behind the dioceses adopting descriptors that do not use the language of ‘church.’ The sense is that these things can be church in the sense of being an expression of an idea or concept of church. Thus, church can be – for example – wherever there is worship of Jesus, community, and mission.

Once again, the purpose of this report is not to undermine such a conception of church. We simply wish to ask whether and how this idea might function within a Church which has taken church form of central importance through its history. A diverse ecclesiology such as we have reported here is surely a new phenomena for the Church of England. Diversity itself – as we have argued – is nothing new, but the diversity around the basic unit of ecclesial form (church / Christian community / NWC etc.) surely is.

One issue is clear: it will be very hard for those from a more Catholic tradition to engage in a movement that has an inherently loose definition of church, and church form. This might be one of the reasons why we have not seen a great deal of engagement in starting new churches from Anglo-Catholics. Put simply, if a church is the gathering of those around the word, and sacraments as administered by a priest and according to the authorised forms, then ‘new worshipping community’ or ‘new Christian community’ will always be inherently weak as a descriptor.

Emerging Questions

1. What are the implications of the one Church holding within it a significant range of descriptors for new things? Is it important that we have some consensus on this?
2. Does the emergence of new forms in all their variety ask questions of our ecclesial norms: are they forcing us to redefine what we think (a) church is in the Church of England?
3. Do we think that the question of ‘what is a church’ fundamentally matters? Is the Church of England’s relative silence on that question (besides the brief description in the 39 articles) due to an inherent elasticity, or is it more an historical

particularity (the answer was basically assumed: a church was ‘that thing over there, which is like all those other things’)?

4. What might be the theological implications of dropping the word ‘church’ as a descriptor of new things?
5. If we were to seek greater consensus on this issue of descriptors, what might be some of the parameters we might wish to consider? Is it important that ‘worship’ be mentioned, for example? What might be some of the problems with having ‘community’ in the main descriptor?
6. What are the expectations of the new things started by the Church of England, in terms of their form? Do we think this is an issue worth exploring further, and seeking consensus on as a church?

2. Vision – Strategy – Culture

The language of vision-strategy-culture was ubiquitous across the 11 dioceses. The language was proving to be an effective way of making sense of both the task and its impact within each. However, its use prompts good theological questions about how we adopt language from elsewhere, and whether we need to think hard about the ends which the church is called to pursue, and the means at its disposal to get there. We need to reflect hard on what we think we are doing when we seek to change things via the means of investing resource.

As noted above, one feature of the contemporary Church of England is the ubiquitous use of the language of vision, strategy, culture, along with its various iterations (culture change, strategic implementation etc.). As well as the language, the activity of starting new things is itself marked by a focus on the concepts represented by the language, that is new churches have been a part of the wiser diocesan activity of establishing vision, of strategic implementation, and of intentionally affecting cultural change. We suggest that such language, and the concepts imbibed within it, is worthy of further theological reflection.

Clearly the language does not relate specifically to the issue of new things. However, there is a crossover here. Starting something new is necessarily an intentional act. It stands in contrast to a posture of reception, where one receives and

continues (possibly shaping or adapting) what has come before. This move of intentionality is where the language of strategy and vision come to the fore. That is to say, if one is starting something new, one must be deliberate about the steps one is making: there is a clear goal to be achieved; the establishing of something that wasn't previously in existence. Vision (what is being aimed at?), strategy (how will we go about it?) and culture (what is it we are establishing?) are therefore integral to the planting process, even if this precise terminology is used.

Further, it was clear that the activity of starting new things was serving as a stimulus for the emergence of this kind of language within the dioceses:

- First, and as stated above, since new churches were predominantly connected to the SDF process, the starting of new churches is one important aspect of what the independent review spoke of as improvement in 'strategic planning, structure, accountability and other programme disciplines at the diocesan level.'
- Secondly, and relatedly, it was clear that the starting of new things had shown up some of the limitations and deficiencies in the way dioceses tend to function. It is inevitable that when a new approach is established from within an existing institution that points of resistance will quickly emerge. 10 of the 11 interviewees spoke of these points of resistance when it comes to starting new churches. These points of resistance can be categorised as:
- Process limitations: the way in which a diocese's structures and systems function makes it difficult to start and/or sustain and integrate new churches. This might include budgeting, recruitment and training, accountability structures etc. Because – as stated above – starting new churches is seen to require change at a number of these levels, the activity of starting new churches was frequently met with obstacles.
- Culture limitations: the way in which a diocese's prevailing attitudes and norms of behaviour make it difficult to start and/or sustain and integrate new churches. Depending on one's definition of culture, we could argue that it is the cultural limitations that incorporate the process limitations; some of the interviewees made this claim. The cultural piece is interesting theologically. Some of the interviewees worked backwards from the difficulties they had faced at a diocesan level to consider an underlying cultural problem, and this was often expressed in theological terms. That is to say, the cultural limitation was understood in terms of a

theological deficiency, for example prioritising one view of mission over another, or working with a perceived to be overly 'rigid ecclesiology.

The claim that we heard repeated through the interviews was that there are significant differences between: vision and intention; intention and strategy; strategy and strategic implementation. It is the dioceses that had moved through these steps that seemed to have the most integrated approach when it came to starting new things, that is, an approach in which new churches were sustainable, connected to the inherited churches, and in which there was trust at the local level of both the new churches and the central diocese. Where there were issues faced in starting new things it was understood that the diocese had not worked properly through the steps (for example, stating a willingness to start new churches, perhaps under the auspices of 'mixed ecology' language (vision), but not taking the steps of local consultation that would enable by-in from other churches, and leading therefore to inevitable conflict and resistance).

A particular set of issues emerge around the role of money and financial resourcing when it comes to establishing new churches. From the interviews it was clear that money is of relative importance when it comes to establishing healthy and integrated new churches. Generally money had been most successful in three areas:

1. Buildings. Purchasing new spaces for worship, which can become multi-faceted spaces for mission and ministry. Or renovating existing (church) spaces as part of a revitalisation. It is impossible to evaluate the impact of this money (i.e. to ask 'could this new thing have been possible without this new/renovated space?') however the anecdotal evidence from the interviews was that these projects were well-worth their expense, and that it was often vital.
2. Leadership, in the form of new curacy and incumbent posts. Again, it is difficult to measure 'impact' of these. But given how many of these new churches were essentially clergy oriented (see below) there is a close correlation between money spent on leadership, and the possibility of starting and sustaining these new things.
3. Supporting structures, and enabling roles. Many of the dioceses had received SDF money in order to employ or to release existing diocesan staff, to support the work of new churches. These roles varied but were essentially about: establishing good local buy-in, through relationship building; representing the

projects of starting new churches within diocesan team or bishop's team meetings; training lay and ordained planters or pioneers. The effectiveness of these roles seemed to vary across the 11. Where the role was fully integrated within existing diocesan structures, and the individual(s) had clear remit and authority it had proved extremely effective. In particular, this individual served to 'join the dots' in the diocesan strategy, ensuring that each aspect worked well towards a shared goal. In other dioceses the role was more supernumerary and seemed non-integral. In these instances, there was some frustration expressed; that they were unable to achieve what they had been tasked with, given how much the starting of new things – if it is to be done sustainably – requires the whole apparatus of the diocese.

In each instance, the money received brought with it the necessity to measure and report. This is a central part of the SDF process. It connects with the vision-strategy-culture question, since each project must be able to demonstrate both how the money is being spent, and the impact it is having, in regard to this. We might say then that the vision-strategy-culture conceptual framework has shaped the very resourcing structures of the Church of England in regards starting new things. In the interviews it was clear that money was understood in a pragmatic sense, namely as the means to get things done. About a third of those interviewed however spoke of some sense of 'learning journey' in terms of financial resourcing. Essentially these dioceses were able to speak of both the impact and the limitation of money in regards new things. What was clear was that money alone could not generate the sort of sustainable and effective new churches that were envisioned. They had come to recognise other factors as more important (most notably, leadership), with the money as at best serving these. In at least two interviews, the money issue had led to significant negative outcomes, that is, when the money was perceived to have led to very limited or even counter-productive impact. There was a felt frustration and even embarrassment that significant monetary resources has seemingly been 'wasted.'

What are we to make of the ubiquity of the language, of the activity of vision-strategy-culture and the resourcing structures now shaped by this? It is our claim that this is an underdeveloped area in the Church of England's theology and that this lack of theological reflection leads to some unhelpful praxis. If the language and activity remain under-explored, that is, if it lacks theological foundation, then two things are able to happen simultaneously. In the first place, the language and activity will continue to be used, albeit uncritically. Loosed from theological roots, the conceptual framework inevitably looks for other sources for its guidance, namely business and

management theory. As we shall suggest below, borrowing from these areas is not a problem per se. However, it can become so if those fields direct the use of this language and activity. Essentially, what happens is that we stop merely using the tools of these fields (vision-strategy-culture) and are also driven by their ends (whatever these might be). Alongside this however, the failure to ground the language and activity within theological foundations inevitably leaves it open to suspicion and misrepresentation from others within the church, who cannot but see the changes effected as necessarily driven by some agenda other than a theological one. This leaves many in the church unable to engage with what is perceived to be a deficiently theological project. In terms of starting new churches, we are left with a bizarre situation in which the task of starting a new church itself is perceived to be somehow a rejection of our theological and ecclesial inheritance.

It is critical therefore that the Church engages theologically with the vision-strategy-culture language and activity.

Theological Directions:

There is a great deal of wariness expressed within the Church of England today about the perceived 'managerialism' and 'corporate' nature of our praxis. It is an easy critique to make. But what lies beneath it? At core, essentially, is a concern that the Church loses something of her identity when she adopts agendas and approaches alien to her own life. In this instance, what is in view is the possibility that the Church become dominated by the functionalism and maximisation that so characterises late-modern capitalism, and free-market thinking. This, after all, is the context from which the vision-strategy-culture way of thinking emerges, that is, from the world of business and management, which exists within the capitalist context.

Beneath the conversation therefore lies a host of deeper theological issues, most central of which is the question of how we are to conceive of the nature of the church in relation to the world and, specifically, the nature of that which we label 'secular.' For some, it is important that we stress the distinction of church and world, so as to ensure that the church remains other. Some make the argument that late-modern capitalism is inherently antithetical to the things of God, to His kingdom and thus must be withstood as a matter of urgency. There can be no 'mixing' of these worlds (church, as shaped by the kingdom, and the world). Others however might look to find a

different way of navigating the relationship of church and world, in which the distinctions are less clear-cut. There may, for example, be a way of conceiving of God's working through the things of the world; that all human projects (in this case, the free-market) are inevitably a mix of destructive tendencies, and some good. In this way the 'secular' is relativised, and it is difficult to draw simple lines across the things of God and everything else. The task here becomes one of wise discernment: how and where God is at work, and where goodness has become warped into idolatry and harm.

We must therefore offer one another more time and understanding as we consider these issues, enough time that is to get beneath the presenting concerns and dig into the deeper theological commitments at play. It is as unhelpful to shout 'managerialism!' at something, as it is unhelpful to apply a model from secular management into a church's vision and strategy documentation without critical thought.

One thing that the Church will need to wrestle with is how it makes sense of the fact that things can be done well, and can be done badly. In all of the interviews it was clear that there were important lessons that needed to be learned by all involved in the starting of new things: that activity could be started and continued in ways that effected positive outcomes (conceived in a wide- range of ways) and in ways that were sub-optimal. This, we believe, might be the best place to start when it comes to the language and concepts of vision-strategy-culture. Simply put, what these concepts are getting towards is very simply the question: how do we do things so that a) they do actually happen and, b) they happen well? And when we put it like this, we see that these are questions we must all be asking all of the time, whether one is establishing a diocesan vision and strategy, or planning for a regular Sunday service. In this sense, the language might be seen simply as a way of framing what is standard human behaviour: of framing the fact that God does call to us to act, and gives us the means of grace in order to do so.

Some important issues flow from this, however.

a) What are the means, and what are the ends?

First, we need to recognise that the second question (b, how this will be done well?) is incredibly broad, dependant as it is upon how one conceives the meaning of that word, 'well'. The question moves us, again, towards that of ends. What is the end to which we believe we are working? And this, we think, is where the use of business

-management tools can become problematic. As stated earlier, we must distinguish between the means (the tools) and the ends (the goals for which these things are directed). The question for the Church then is to determine her own ends, and then to establish the appropriateness (or not) of certain means towards this. Vision, strategy and culture may well be vital aspects of our given vocation which has been shaped by faithful ends. However, it might also be that they are so tied to certain ends, that we need to question their use. Can it be, in other words, that the language of vision, strategy and culture might be adopted towards the ends that is the kingdom of God through His church? Or is the language, and the conceptual framework, so wedded to certain principles (notably maximisation, functionality and control for example) that it is beyond use?

We argue that one reason why the Church finds itself so frequently divided over these issues is that it does not always adequately articulate what it believes its ends are, in relation to mission and ecclesial praxis. Those dioceses that were starting new things in an integrated manner were able to do so because they had worked hard to do this work. They had, for example, explained the purposes of the changes that were happening at a local level, and sought buy-in, by naming the hoped-for goals that starting new churches, or parochial reorganisation was for. The frequent suspicion is that new churches are driven essentially by the goal of numerical gain in a manner that bypasses other perceived vital purposes, namely local presence, service, chaplaincy and engagement with local institutions (not least through church-schools). If this is the perceived fear, then the language of vision, strategy and culture seems to fit all too comfortably. This is, so the argument goes, simply the means of maximisation, multiplication and growth. It is market language for the market-like goal of increasing a customer base. In response to such lazy thinking however, dioceses had done well where they had been clear about their ends, which were always broader than the zero-sum game of numerical growth. They have been able to articulate a vision for new churches that are broad in their missional engagement, committed to their locale, and making strong contribution to the common good. When these sorts of aims (essentially aims that resonate with a vision of the kingdom, and with how that vision has been mediated through the Church of England's history and ecclesiology) are articulated well, the actual procedures of vision – strategy – culture can be welcomed as gifts that serve the Church.

So too, the financial investment. The dioceses that seemed to have gone on a learning journey in regards resourcing were in agreement that financial resource cannot generate the impact that is often sought. In a few cases it was clear that the

money had stifled the new church because it had equipped it with resources well beyond its assets. Thus, some churches had a very small congregation, and limited volunteer engagement, and yet were resourced with a ministry team, which resulted in a mis-match between church and team, and the inevitable pressures that come with an rapidly advancing financial cliff-edge as the project funding runs out. As a result of these learning, these dioceses had decided that they should only resource where there is already something significant happening, and which resourcing would thus help to further. In this sense, their resourcing from this juncture was to be both responsive, and relative (appropriate) to what God had already been doing.

b) Why stuff works (or doesn't)?

What does then seem to be lacking in the Church of England (and we would add, the wider Church at least in many parts of the Global North) is an adequate theology of our activity, in relation to God's. Put simply, what is needed is an examination of why things work well (or not) and what we think is going on here. Clearly one of the central differences between a capitalist economic model, and the work of the church is that we expect that for the later outcomes cannot be so readily defined in advance. There is inherently an element of 'mystery' in Christian mission, not because – as in the 'free-market' – there is an evolutionary emergence that can never quite be perfectly controlled, but because we believe there is a primary agent, but that this agent is not us but God.

Thus, all Christian mission must be shaped by an essential passivity, within which our activity finds its relative place. We might call this 'faithfulness'. And faithfulness is a very precarious position to be in. We submit to be guided, and neither the outcomes, nor the means to get 'there', are ever our own. And yet, at the same time, we also know that what we do has impact, and that this impact can be positive, and it can be negative (however these are to be conceived). That is, although we say that the primary agent in our mission is God – and that the outcomes are his – we also know that if we do certain things, we will end with certain outcomes. This, after all, is what has driven the SDF process and the movement of starting new churches. If we invest here, or plan there, then we will see these sorts of results. And the point is that none of this of course is without reason – precisely the opposite. We do these things because they seem to work. This was true throughout the interviews: there was really very little theological rationale behind the starting of new things. Rather, there tended to be a more generalised, broader theological vision, within which the particular strategy was guided by experience and evidence. 'We have seen this work well elsewhere'. Or, 'We

have seen this work well in one part of the diocese, and so we want to replicate and multiply it.'

We are thus left with something of a gap between some of our theological claims (namely, 'God is the primary agent in mission') and our praxis (namely, 'if we fail to do x, then we risk y'). We need therefore to investigate what we think is going on here so that our activity might have theological integrity. To state again, the failure to do this really tends towards one of two directions. In the first instance we tend to over-emphasise the possibility of our own agency. One outcome of this overconfidence is the tendency to readily assign blame for the perceived decline in the Church of England. Of course, if we believe that we can affect the required change by doing certain things, then 'decline' must by necessity be our (or, more likely, someone else's fault). In this instance, we become therefore obsessed by technique: 'if only we did x, then we could achieve y'. On the other extreme however, we are so suspicious of any idea that we might be able to affect some change, that we simply jettison all responsibility for change completely. In this instance, the task becomes one of simply performing what it is we have always done, driven by the conviction that our faithfulness must necessarily look like fidelity to what has been received.

Both of these are theologically deficient, and both must therefore be questioned. The first because it overplays human agency, the latter because it underplays it. It is beyond the scope of this report to determine what an adequate theology – that's somehow holds this tension well - would look like, but it is simply to say that such a theology is surely needed if therefore our activity is to hold integrity. Where do we think God is at work in and through our activity? What is our theory of change?

Emerging Questions:

1. What are the 'ends' of starting new churches, and within which vision-strategy-culture might be located?
2. How are these ends correlative with the broader ends of the Church of England? Are they the same ends as other (parish) churches, and areas of mission and ministry (schools, chaplaincy etc)?

3. How are these ends different from the ends of our contemporary world and, most notably, from the free-market capitalist context within which vision-strategy-culture language and conceptual frameworks has emerged? To what extent are they kingdom ends?
4. How do we understand our agency as a Church in starting new things and other related missional activity? What role does our vision-strategy-culture work have in relation to God's work? Is God only involved in the 'vision' part of this, leaving the strategy and culture-creation work up to us?
5. What theological resources might we draw on for such a task? What is there within the Church of England's formularies, and theological history, that could help us here?
6. Why do some new things seem to work, and others don't? Do we have a way of formally recording this – moving beyond the anecdotal - in a way that has integrity and is transparent? What would we do with this information?
7. What role do we think money serves in the establishing of new things? Is money required to start a new church? How do we ensure that the right funding goes to projects and places where God seems to be at work already?
8. How do we hold the tension between an awareness that certain projects and forms 'work' (and thus implementing these in other places) and the sense that God is always doing a new and place-specific work? In other words, are new church 'models' helpful to us as a Church of England? How do we avoid reinventing the wheel by adopting well-tried, effective approaches, and yet allow for local and distinctive expression?

3. Resourc(ing) Churches

The majority of dioceses had started or were about to start at least one resource(ing) church. There was variety across the 8 as to what the term referred to, and what was envisaged in terms of the shape and purpose of these churches. We investigate the language of resourcing church and the potential theological basis for the idea within the Church of England.

8 dioceses used the language of resource or resourcing church. In the interviews we sought some clarification of the term. It was clear that there was variety in the meaning of the term, and indeed in the level of clarity around how the term is used. In some dioceses for example, the term is used in a broad sense to mean a larger, growing (and potentially influential beyond its locale) church. In other dioceses however, the term refers to something more specific, for example a church which will plant other churches.

The interviewees spoke of some of the confusion that can be caused at a local level by the language. Three of the dioceses named the problem that the language had given other churches a false impression that resources from the resource church would be available to them. For example, a worship leader or a preacher or even financial resource for a new project. It has had to be explained that this was not the intention behind the model; that 'resourcing' here means something different than providing skills, materials or personnel at the point of need.

Resource/resourcing church is not language that the Church of England has used before the past 10 or so years. And yet it is now normative within the Church, part of her operant theology and ministerial practice. We therefore have an obligation to examine the language. In particular, we need to establish whether and how the concept (even if we jettison the language) is a good one, that is, faithful to the Church God is calling us to be.

From this research we conclude therefore that the Church of England needs greater clarity on the language of resource/resourcing church, and should establish some formal theological recognition of the concept.

Theological Directions

It is beyond the scope of this report to the language and concept of 'resourcing church' theologically. Some things we would need to consider were we to do so:

- In terms of the scriptural narrative, the place church of the church in Antioch within the book of Acts – a crucial passage for those who have sought to reflect theologically at some level on the idea (Acts 11: 19-26).

- Historically, the role of minister churches within the UK prior to the emergence of the parish system in the 10th / 11th Century.
- The historical fact that some churches grow bigger than others, and have influence beyond their immediate locale; a fact that we have as a Church tended to celebrate and give thanks for.

Two dangers are upon us here, however. On the one hand, we run the risk in this conversation of simply applying models from other times and places onto our current situation, without responding to the reality of our present context, and our ecclesial inheritance. To do so would be to attempt to construct a 'theology from no-where'; a seeking after a timeless model which is not faithful to our historical moment i.e. to where God has us to be now. The opposite response is equally unhelpful however: of refusing to address the issue of resourcing churches simply because it seems somewhat foreign to what we have now.

Neither of these is helpful. The first because it imposes a new model uncritically, the second because it imposes an old one just as uncritically. The approach must be wiser than either of these: given who we are as a Church, and who God has called us to be in this place, might resource / resourcing churches play a part in the Church of England's ecclesiology?

Again, we must follow the formula articulated above; of thinking through this language critically, avoiding the dangers of either imposing a model from a different time and place (in this instance, first century Antioch, or 7th-9th Century Britain) without recourse to the particularities of our context, or of rejecting the language off-hand simply because it is new, or doesn't immediately fit within our inherited ecclesial structures.

Emerging Questions

1. What lessons are we to learn from deeper investigation of both Acts and 7th – 9th Century minister churches? Where are the points of correlation and difference between those contexts and our own?
2. How is our ministerial and missional context different to that of the first Christians in Antioch and that of 7th-9th Century Britain? Both in terms of the socio-cultural situation (In Antioch: the plurality of religious commitments, Jewish diaspora, the trade routes of the ancient Roman world etc. In Britain: the long-term legacy of Roman rule, forms of association and local governance etc.) and the historical-theological situation (In Antioch: Christianity as an alien construct within this world, i.e. a buffeted minority sect within a pre-Christendom context. In Britain: the incredible 'success' of re-Christianisation and the emergence of Christianity as a dominant political and socio-economic force)?
3. How does this history relate to our situation now and, specifically, to a) the fact we do have many existing churches each within a designated geographical area of responsibility and, b) the fact of well-established larger ecclesial units (i.e. Diocese, deanery, National church) which allows for a plurality of churches to in some sense share as one?
4. What is going on theologically when we designate certain churches 'resourcing' churches in contrast to other churches?
5. What understanding do we have here of a particularity of ecclesial forms; of the possibility that certain churches have a charism or gift that sets them apart (or at least in difference to) other churches? Is there room for such an idea within our history as a Church, and within the historic formularies of the Church?
6. To what extent might this concept erode or support the mutuality of our churches, and the sense of 'partnering in the Gospel'? Can we say that some churches are resourcing churches without losing a sense or reciprocity: that all churches have something to offer the whole?
7. What 'resources' is it that we imagine to be of value here? That is, what do we value that we would invest in order to see that grow enough so as to be given away? Is it

a financial resource, personnel (and numbers of people), skills etc? Or is it about a spiritual resource; something less measurable?

8. To what extent does the model draw from economic theories, and in particular, from free market thinking? If it does, to what extent is this a problem? Where might we need to draw some lines and define the concept more tightly (for example, rejecting the concept that, 'as the water level rises, every boat goes up')
9. Is there a possibility that we do end up with two 'models' of church within our ecclesial system: those that are (broadly conceived) 'parochial' and those which are 'membership-defined'? We resist using the word 'attractional' here in contrast to parochial, as many do, simply because it seems an unhelpfully negative portrayal of both: implying that the parish cannot (or should not!) be attractional, or that the alternative is somehow disinterested in its locale. The research doesn't allow such a contrast, as shown for example by the numbers of stories of resource churches doing imaginative, effective social engagement and transformation work in their local communities. Resource churches are however necessarily established to think beyond their parish and thus have a different sense of their relation to place. Because they are established to give themselves away, they exist in a predominantly missional mode rather than a pastoral one, and thus the church must in some sense think in terms of members rather than its parish. Further, the language implies a gathering of 'resource', which in large measure means personnel. Resource churches must therefore gather a significant number of (committed) people from beyond its immediate locale if it is truly to be a resource. (Again, this is not to preclude the possibility that many will come from within the locale). This is certainly how minster churches functioned. So the question must be asked: How might these two models work in genuine partnership?
10. What resources do we have within the formularies of the Church of England to make sense of a non-parochial ecclesial model (where the language used is almost universally of 'the parish')?
11. Might we need to rethink our understanding of 'place' so as to make sense of the potentially vital contribution resource/resourcing churches might make? We can presume for example that Minster churches did not think of themselves as exiting outside of place, or as parasitic upon place. But they may have thought of themselves as existing for a bigger place, committed to local places in less obvious but no less vital ways.

12. What is the role of cathedrals in this conversation? If we understand cathedrals as diocesan 'churches', then we should recognise that we do already have an existing model for an ecclesial form which transcends any one parish yet serves many. Cathedrals are centres of resource in a number of ways and historically have been so (in terms of quality of worship, learning, architectural skill etc). In concept at least, they serve as a locus for mission and ministry across the wider geographical space that is the diocese.
13. Is there a difference between: a) accepting that some churches grow bigger and have wider influence as a natural and organic phenomenon within our ecclesial landscape, and, b) intentionally seeking to establish such churches through strategic implementation? Can a resource church – understood in a rich theological sense – be manufactured?
14. If we do find a theological space for the idea of resourcing/ resource churches, what might be some of the practical measures we might need to put in place to ensure that the concept is enacted well (i.e. in ways that are consistent with what we have deemed to be other critical ecclesial principles (mutuality, reciprocity etc.))?

4. Pioneers & Planters

The research data supports the fact that we have seen a shift in the past decade from a focus on fresh expressions of church, towards starting new churches. We explore the roots of the distinction, the theological distinctiveness of each, and what it might mean that the Church of England seems to be moving away from fresh expressions/ planting as normative.

The data supports the fact that we have seen a shift in the past decade from a focus on fresh expressions of church, towards starting new churches. Overall, the dioceses (bar one, possibly two) were investing strategic focus and resources into projects that look far more like church plants, than into pioneering. Most of the dioceses were able to identify examples of fresh expressions within their diocese but in all but one instance fresh expressions were not seen to be an integral part of the diocesan vision and strategy.

To offer some background to this. Following *Mission Shaped Church* in 2004, the CoE invested time, energy and debate into what became known as ‘fresh expressions of church’. These new expressions of church were essentially about new communities that were established from within existing social and cultural forms, with the goal to see church emerging from within contemporary culture. The hope was that such pioneer churches would be able to reach those who existing parish churches were not able to. Fairly quickly most Dioceses were engaged in work of establishing fresh expressions within their bounds, and data collected in 2016 suggested that there were something like 2100 of these fresh expressions in existence.⁷

In its infancy, ‘fresh expressions’ was about starting new things in general, and the term was a loose one, capturing any new missional activity or group started. As time wore on however, the language became sharper, and there has been an attempt to make clear the distinctiveness of fresh expressions, in contrast to other groups. This move was always in the water. Following *Mission Shaped Church* for example, the CoE developed a new training pathway, called the ‘pioneer pathway’, which sought to select, train and equip ‘pioneer’ ministers, who would have specific vocation to lead new congregations. In fact, the 2016 data revealed the vast majority of these fresh expressions were actually being led either by existing (parish) clergy, or by lay people, many of whom had received little or no training. However, the fact that the Church had carved out a different type of leadership track always meant that there was the possibility that there was something distinctive in the pioneer vocation, in contrast to other forms of ministry, and even from the ministry of starting new things from within the parish system.

Furthermore, a new movement emerged within the CoE, formally represented by the body ‘Fresh Expressions’ (note the capitals), which over time became a locus for pioneer activity. What we have witnessed then is a sharpening of the definition of fresh expressions, in contrast to other activity of starting new things. Thus, in contrast to the earlier looser definition, ‘fresh expressions’ are now specifically: ‘new forms of church that emerge within contemporary culture and engage primarily with those who don’t ‘go to church.’ And the emphasis here is on the contextual nature of these expressions: they are to ‘emerge’ from within the context. As the Fresh Expressions Website puts it:

⁷ See George Lings, ‘The Day of Small Things: An Analysis of Fresh Expressions of Church in 21 Dioceses of the Church of England’, Church Army’s Research Unit, 2016.

Fresh Expressions don’t impose or assume a certain way of doing things, they listen and learn from the groups they’re connecting with and allow them to shape the culture of their new community of faith.⁸

The closest someone has come for arguing for the importance of a distinctive form of starting new things would be Michael Moynagh who has suggested that there are two models when it comes to starting new churches: ‘worship first’ and ‘serving first’.⁹ Although Moynagh does make clear that these are ‘models’ rather than literal description, it is clear that he does see here a crucial difference, and one which I think plays out in the ways we have tended to approach starting new churches. The former – serve first – is about listening and responding to what one finds. Church here emerges: from the context one finds oneself within, and the people encountered. One might well expect such a process to take time and there may be multiple steps (the introduction of the reality of Christ carefully and appropriately) before what emerges can be defined as ‘a church’ by any accepted measure. The Fresh Expressions movement puts this in terms of the ‘fresh expressions journey’: a movement from listening to loving and serving, building community, exploring discipleship, church taking shape, and then doing it again.¹⁰ This is the ‘pioneering’ approach. Pioneering because it is church that seeks to be for and in the ‘edges’. It is necessarily contextual because, so the claim is made, established (inherited) church culture is necessarily an obstacle for many. Thus, rather than seek to bring people in from the outside as it were, it seeks to form church where people are, and in a form that is relevant, appropriate and accessible for the people or place one is seeking to be present to. In contrast, Moynagh’s ‘worship-first’ approach, which most resembles what we would call classic church ‘planting’, is about forming church intentionally as a first rather than second step. In the pioneering model, worship may not emerge for some time whereas in the planting model, worship happens immediately, and people are invited into this.

Since *Mission Shaped Church*, then, the CoE has been somewhat on a journey when it comes to defining its work of starting new things. From fresh expressions as a

⁸ See ‘Fresh Expressions Values’ at <https://freshexpressions.org.uk/fx-values/> [accessed 07/07/23].

⁹ See Moynagh, *Church for Every Context* (London, SCM, 2011); *Church in Life* (London, SCM, 2017), chapter 2. Like any model, they do not mirror reality, but are generalizations and simplifications of it. ... They offer partial, not complete knowledge. So while the models are to be taken seriously, they are not to be taken literally. Nothing in real life is quite like a model.”

¹⁰ ‘Fresh Expressions Journey’ at <https://freshexpressions.org.uk/get-equipped/the-fresh-expressions-journey/> [accessed 10/07/23].

broad, catch all term for starting a host of new initiatives, the language has become tighter, with 'pioneering' understood in terms of a unique vocation or charism within the Church ecology; captured well by Moynagh's 'serve first' journey. However, at the same time that fresh expressions has become narrower as an approach, so too we suggest that this research demonstrates that the actual activity of the Church has shifted to embracing approaches that look far more like Moynagh's 'worship-first' approach (i.e., church planting). It is noticeable in the independent review of SDF, for example, that of the 94 projects awarded SDF funding, 37 of them were about starting resource churches, or helping large churches to become resource churches, with over half of all funding going towards these projects. If we had to compare the two, it is clear that SDF is overwhelmingly an investment in planting than in pioneering.

Does this piece of research uphold the claim that we have seen a shift in the CoE's operant theology, from a theology/missiology of pioneering to one of planting?

On the one hand, the research suggests that the distinction between the two is untenable. In the first instance, it was clear from the interviews that most of the dioceses saw no fundamental difference between a fresh expression and a new church. Indeed, as was pointed out, one common reason for using the chosen descriptor was to allow for breadth. In fact, one of the key findings from the research is that on the whole dioceses were broader rather than narrower in their ecclesial definitions, and thus any distinction between, say, pioneering and planting was swallowed up by many dioceses.

This is what lies behind the embracing of 'mixed ecology' language, which was universally accepted within the 11 dioceses. This metaphor has allowed for the possibility of holding these various approaches together – pioneering and planting for example – each relativised within the broader vision of starting new things. To this end, it is interesting to note for example the role of the Gregory Centre for Church Multiplication and Growth (CCX), a project that has its origins in the planting and revitalisation work in the Diocese of London, but which has – through the appointment of a bishop for Church Planting – a national remit.¹¹ Because of its origins, the centre began with a clear focus on 'planting' and 'multiplication', however over time this has evolved, and now the centre incorporates much of the work done by Fresh Expressions, with a deliberate and intentional emphasis on the unique role of pioneers.

¹¹ See: <https://ccx.org.uk/> [accessed on 15/03/2024]

Is it the case then that the difference between pioneering and planting has been essentially overcome in the CoE thinking, with mixed ecology undercutting the need for any such distinction? We believe that the data from the research suggests not, at least not in the sense of parity of focus and investment. As stated, the issue is not simply one of language but of form. The strategic goals, and the theories of change at play within 10 of the dioceses were overwhelmingly focused on the starting of new communities / churches. If the essence of pioneering is developing new forms, for new people, through experimentation and risk, and seeing church emerge, then it is clear that the overwhelming majority of things started in 10 of the dioceses are not this. This is represented by the language. 6 out of the 11 Dioceses use 'worship' within their main descriptor, with two using 'congregation', and one 'revitalisation.' In that sense, 9 out of the 11 were describing their work of starting new things predominantly in terms of new ecclesial forms, rather than as pioneering activity. Further, our research supports the SDF data: the amount of money invested in resourcing churches across the 11 dioceses far outweighs that spent on pioneering (selection, training and resourcing). Thus, although the descriptors used might imply an equality of church forms (fresh expressions and planting) in reality, it is new churches that have become the norm.

Theological Directions

The first question to ask is whether the focus on planting over pioneering really matters? There are a variety of ways we might seek to answer this.

- a. In the first instance, the question is worth asking, given the Church's espoused commitment to a mixed ecology. That is, as a matter of integrity, it is worth exploring the gap between what is stated, and what is invested is important. Those who are committed to pioneering and fresh expressions surely have a keen interest in the answer to this question.
- b. Secondly, however, this is an issue worth exploring because it might be that the investigation reveals something important about the Church's ecclesiological commitment, and even its theology. In this sense the 'operant' theology of the dioceses – shown in this activity – is revelatory of deeper theological and epistemological commitments.

We should ask whether the distinction between worship/serve first is ultimately theological tenable. The danger is that this model perpetuates a way of conceiving of church without one or the other happening as central. In the first instance, it is impossible to conceive of 'church' theologically without recourse to worship. Arguably, worship is not simply the first thing that the church does (as though it has a list of 'tasks' it must complete) but is definitive of her very existence. She is that which worships the Father of Jesus Christ, in the power of the Spirit. In his book 'Holiness', the theologian John Webster argues that since the church is what she is only by God's grace, she must therefore be shaped by a certain posture:

The Church is what it is by grace...there is, accordingly, a proper passivity to the being of the Church, for faith – that is recognition and assent and trust in the word and work of God...is the fundamental act of the Church's existence.¹²

Because of this posture of 'passivity', worship plays a central role:

Praise is the great act of rebellion against sin, the great repudiation of our wicked refusal to acknowledge God to be the Lord. In sum, therefore: the Church is holy as, day by day, it magnifies God and worships his name, ever world without end.¹³

This is core to the Church of England's understanding of the church; that the church simply a congregation which gathers around word and sacrament (Article 19). Historically, as is often stated, the Church's orthodoxy has been inexorably tied to her orthopraxy - *lex orandi, lex credendi* – hence the central place of the Prayer Book for the Church of England's self-understanding. Given this, it should be of little surprise that the Church of England would revert – almost as an instinct – towards a way of imagining new things that centres on the gathered, worshipping congregation.

However, at the same time, the Church of England has been driven by a strong commitment to local congregations, in each place. The parish 'ideal' (or 'principle') commits the Church to local particularity; to close listening to the context, and appropriate ministry as response. This seems inherent to the vocation of the priest, who is to not only 'proclaim afresh...' but also to 'serve the community in which they are set' and to be 'expectant and watchful for the signs of God's presence as he

¹² John Webster, *Holiness* (Grand Rapids, M.I., Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2003), p.63.

¹³ John Webster, *Holiness* (Grand Rapids, M.I., Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2003), p.76.

reveals his kingdom.'¹⁴ In this sense, it seems incumbent upon Church of England churches to be responsive to context, engaged and contextual in their form.

Rather than perpetuate a divide between the two things, therefore, it might be better to think though the theological instincts at play in each, and establish what would be important to hold fast to. In part this might entail some empirical reflections: does the distinction make sense of what we find on the ground. That is, to what extent are churches pioneering / plants? Through this we might explore how the theological instincts are thus playing out. On the whole, the pioneering approaches emphasises the importance of contextualisation, and of church as emerging from within. Negatively stated, it is working against a perceived colonial approach to starting new churches, in which a model or system is imposed from outside upon the new context. What is sought instead is a journey of listening and responding. In that sense, pioneering is really about a certain posture to missional practice: one of humility. The 'planting' model however holds worship as primary (in whatever form: both sacramental and 'low' forms). The instinct here is around invitation into worship of God, through the particularities of the church form through which others have and are experiencing God (sacraments, teaching, community and fellowship etc.). In this model, context is not irrelevant but is also not determinative of the church's form. Both hold weight, and both perceived weaknesses. The planting model – with its commitment to worship – is clearly at danger of imposing upon a context, failing to respect and respond to God who is already at work in that place. The pioneering approach on the other hand – with its commitment to responding to cultural form – is in danger of assimilation, of merging with culture and thus failing to speak in its form of anything truly distinctive or different. Now clearly both assimilation and sectarianism are ever-present dangers within all Christian mission, and both planters and pioneers will argue that, done rightly, these dangers can be avoided. Any theological-empirical work would need to explore whether and how these differing instincts are at play in new churches and whether, in fact, the distinctions are tenable.

The question for the Church of England, is whether and how it can maintain the instincts of both approaches within its ecclesial forms and structures, so that it avoids the dangers suggested here. This could happen through a mixed ecology construct (see below), that is, a variety of church forms – pioneering and planting – within the one 'ecosystem'. However, it might also attempt to establish how it might be that each church as a local body is incorporating the instincts of both. What does a mature

¹⁴ Ordination of Priests at <<https://www.churchofengland.org/prayer-and-worship/worship-texts-and-resources/common-worship/ministry/common-worship-ordination-0#mm013>> [accessed 19/07/23].

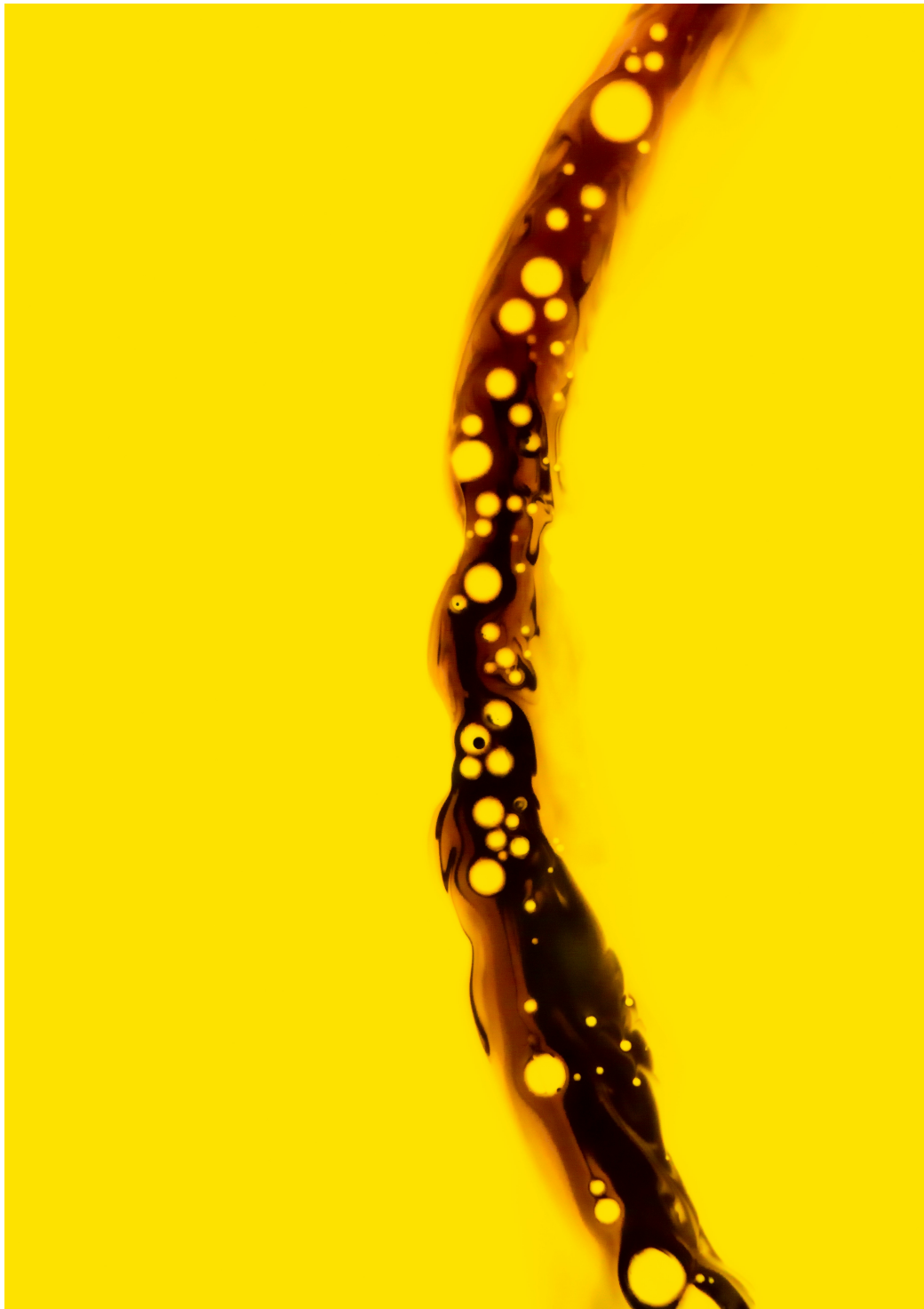
ecclesiology look like, which takes account of these instincts? Is it possible to imagine pioneering churches, which hold worship – word and sacrament – at the very core of all they do?

Emerging Questions

1. In the first instance, why is it that the Church, since *Mission Shaped Church*, and the resulting embrace of fresh expressions, has shifted towards a worship-first model of starting new churches? Has this happened deliberately, or has it emerged over time? Is this an example of the ecclesial system, complete with its dominant ecclesiology, reasserting itself? Thus, is what we are witnessing here is a reassertion of a fairly 'concrete' ecclesiology, one built around the idea of a community, gathered locally in worship (word and sacrament)? That is to say, the Church has in starting new things not drifted at all far from its received (inherited) ecclesial form. Thus, the movement to start new things can be seen essentially as a reenergising of what is, rather than as a fundamental shift in ecclesiology, as represented by the pioneering approach. Whether one receives this as the case, and how one responds to it, are of course a matter of perspective. From those who are wedded to the parish as is, for example, the new movement feels very unorthodox and challenging. Whereas for those committed to pioneering, the Church's new churches look and feel utterly consistent with what has been, that is, a continuation of an ecclesial status quo.
2. Was there ever really the space – theologically and ecclesiological – for something like fresh expressions, and pioneer ministry to become normalised and widely implemented across the Church of England? Despite attempts to reimagine the Church's ecclesiology so as to ground the movement theologically, was pioneering inevitably to remain something anomalous to the Church's received and settled theology of church?
3. What questions does pioneering ministry, and fresh expressions pose of the Church's understanding of its leadership? It is interesting that the diocese which has prioritised fresh expressions and pioneering is able to identify a high number of lay leaders. Do fresh expressions of church give greater space for local lay leadership? Does the alternative model (planting) perpetuate a certain ecclesial form which, by necessity requires ordained leadership?

4. What is the relationship between pioneering / planting, and the parish? Will Foulger argues in his book *Present in Every Place*, that the CoE's new churches should not be seen as a rejection of the parish vocation, but have the potential to be part of its fulfilment.¹⁵ However, to large extent the reason that claim is possible is because most of the new churches started through SDF investment have looked great deal more like inherited (parish) churches than not. The earliest critiques of Fx following MSC argued that Fx were a shift away from the parish model, and indeed from received Church of England ecclesiology. In one respect, we might say that those arguments have won the day within the Church. The CoE has not normalised pioneering but has rather directed its energies at forms that are additions to and adaptations of, the existing structures.
5. What was (and is) the contribution of fresh expressions and pioneer ministry?
6. Looking back, we should ask: what correctives were being suggested by this movement in the first instance? We might even speak in terms of a prophetic challenge: what were the perceived inadequacies or limitations of the existing system that meant this movement emerged (and was embraced by the whole)?
7. In the current situation: What might be lost if we overemphasise one approach, namely the planting model? In this instance, what vital contribution to our ecclesial form do we miss if we side-line, or lose, the pioneer instinct? How might our models of starting new things refuse unhelpful dichotomies and draw from wisdom of a variety of approaches?

¹⁵ Will Foulger, *Present in Every Place* (London: SCM, 2023).



6. CONCLUSION

6. Conclusion

This is the second piece of research launched from the Centre for Church Planting Theology and Research.¹⁶ It is a wide-ranging piece of research which raises important questions about the church strategy and growth. My thanks go to Will Foulger for this remarkable piece of work. As a centre, we aim to stimulate a conversation around planting which has three key features:

Theological We recognise the need for in-depth theological thinking on church planting; the conversation cannot be resourced only by better practice or strategy. Starting new churches is a theological endeavour all the way down.

Critical We offer a critical voice in the conversation to help guide best practice and future strategy and to encourage careful and theologically informed thinking on church planting. While we are passionate about church planting and its potential, we want to ask difficult questions which will stimulate deeper thinking and practice.

Practical And, lastly, we seek to provide practical means to resource church planters to engage theologically and be equipped for the ministry God is calling them to. We seek to build partnerships and collaborate with others for the good of the whole church. We don't want to have a theological conversation detached from what is happening on the ground.

This report exemplifies these qualities in abundance and highlights the need for a conversation around church planting which is robust in all of these three areas. I hope it will shape our conversations in the years to come.

There are already numerous questions which Foulger has raised for us in this report. I do not intend to add to these. Underlying these questions, and many of the issues raised by the report, is the conviction that the practice of starting new *things* is always a theological endeavour. Because of this, our practice must not primarily be shaped by what is most innovative, timely, or effective. As Foulger has highlighted so importantly, our primary stance in the Church is one of passivity, starting not with our own ideas and schemes, but with the work of God.

¹⁶ See, Foulger, Will (ed.) *Shaping Place: 4 Reflections on SDF Funded Projects in Durham Diocese*: <https://www.cranmerhall.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/11/Shaping-Place.pdf> [accessed on 15/03/2024]

In his wonderful, but often overlooked essay, “The Difference Between a Genius and an Apostle”, published in 1849, the Danish theologian, Søren Kierkegaard explores these themes of ecclesial priority in his typically provocative manner. Kierkegaard begins the essay by lamenting that within his own context (in the Danish Lutheran State Church), Christian leadership, or what he calls ‘apostleship’, had become confused and conflated with human excellence— we have become interested not with apostleship but with *genius*. This error, of confusing apostleship for genius, comes about, Kierkegaard thinks, when the church tries to normalise and rationalise away the paradoxical nature of God’s revelation. For example, in thinking about the growth of the early church, it is all too common to attribute these to Paul’s “genius” strategies, or his eloquent writing. In making this error, Kierkegaard writes, ‘an apostle becomes neither more nor less than a genius...then good night to Christianity. Brilliance and spirit, revelation and originality, the call from God and genius, an apostle and a genius— all this ends up being just about one and the same.’¹⁷

True apostleship is not defined by a capacity for written eloquence, perfect church strategy, or the ability to persuade others. Instead, Kierkegaard claims, the apostle is the one who has been given authority by God, often to the indifference of genius! The church grew not because Apostle Paul was a genius— Plato and Shakespeare far surpass his written abilities. Nor was his ‘success’ a matter of strategic nous— there are many more capable figures in the history books. The Church grew because Paul was given authority by God. Because he was an apostle, not a genius.

We are in a timely moment in reflecting on Church planting in this country. I do not need to tell you about the realities of institutional church decline, or the shrinking number of those who profess to belong to the Christian faith. In a time of immense change, we are rightly asking questions about the shape and direction of the church in the decades to come. Kierkegaard’s challenge in this cultural moment — as it was to the church of 19th century Denmark — is to ask where we are looking for answers to these questions. It is tempting to reach first for innovation, strategy, for genius. These provide quick fixes, immediate results, and might persuade a few people to return to the church again. Looking for genius in crisis feels instinctive: “We have to do something different, because the old things are just not working!” is the cry of genius.

¹⁷ Kierkegaard, Søren, *The Book of Adler*. Kierkegaard’s Writings, XXIV, edited and translated by Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998), p.173.

My hope is that through our reflections together on what the Church is, and where it is going, that we come to see that our greatest need is not for greater genius, but for the work of apostleship; to hear the voice of God afresh, to be moved by the power of the Spirit. May this lead us to many new things, not for the sake of innovation, but as an outworking of the new things God is doing in our communities and churches.

Joshua Cockayne,

Director of the Centre for Church Planting Theology and Research,

March 2024

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