



# Fresh Expressions Cumbria Review 2022

## Introduction

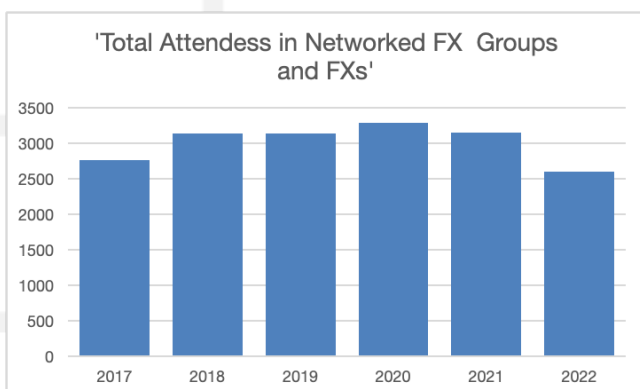
Before the pandemic these reports focussed on a mix of detailed data and statistics, year on year comparison growth and areas for development. We last reported in 2020 and whilst we completed the data gathering in 2021 we did not write a full report as we were still in a state of flux. Consequently this report tries to draw on the data of the last three years but is less technical and more reflective in approach than in previous years.

## Where are we now

It clearly is a mixed picture of new growth and the ongoing impact of the pandemic. In 2020 we reported that Fresh Expressions<sup>1</sup> in Cumbria have held up pretty well in COVID and this continues to be the case for many of the established FXs. However in 2021 we noted that 31 groups (a mix of fledgling FXs and new groups that had been emerging pre covid but did not yet meet all the FX criteria) were “on hold”, having not restarted since the pandemic. Unfortunately 59 groups formally ended in 2022. So we are clearly seeing the ongoing impact of covid and whilst many new groups are emerging (or re-emerging) on the whole they are smaller and more fragile as many leaders remain tired or focussed on other areas.

	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022
Total No. of FXs	99	112	107	85	74	75
No. of Networked FXs	23	24	30	22	20	20
Total new groups		26	39	18	33	31
Total new FXs in year		13	10	11	14	17

In 2019 there were 3408 people involved in over 107 live FXs and whilst these numbers declined quite slowly during 2020 and 2021 due to the pandemic we probably have a more accurate picture this year. In 2022 there were 2717 people involved in over 75 live FXs.



As mentioned a key shift were the groups on hold that formally ended this year, but other observations include:

- A few key people have left the county

<sup>1</sup> A Fresh Expression of church meets regularly reaching new people in new ways and they must be 1. Missional - it intends to work with non-churchgoers 2. Contextual - it seeks to adapt to the context 3. Formational - it aims to form disciples 4. Ecclesial - it intends to be church

and **two of these people accounts for over 65% of the decline** in overall numbers because they ran several key Networked Based FXs<sup>2</sup> that are now on hold.

- Less well established FXs are always fragile and as we experienced such strong growth in recent years these new FXs were more susceptible to the impact of the pandemic.
- The reduced key staff team have been unable to provide on the ground support and this was particularly reflected in two ways. Firstly the feedback from Messy Churches and those working with Children expressed the need for more central support. Secondly, in previous years we have run a project that specifically supported missionally active groups to progress. Although we still try to resource this project it remains difficult and this does mean less through put of new groups.
- As we continue to improve the rigour and understanding of the four marks of church (Missional, Contextual, Ecclesial and Formational) several groups felt they were no longer meeting the four marks but are still active missionally. Of the 13 FX groups that reported they had died only 7 have fully ceased. 6 continue as missionally active groups but don't meet all 4 of the FX criteria.

## What's been emerging

We are pleased to report 17 new Fresh Expressions have started, our highest number since 2018.

Common factors that can be seen in the new groups include:

- ◆ The majority of new groups have emerged either around a paid lay worker or an ordained person focussed on pioneering. Whilst this may seem obvious in previous years the majority of FXs emerged from volunteers.
- ◆ Whilst many new groups are related to children and young people (possibly reflecting the paid staffing) another clear pattern has been the emergence of Mens groups.
- ◆ Wellbeing in one form or another continues to be a key factor in the new and fledgling groups.

## Challenges

A series of interconnected issues were identified through examining the questionnaires and phone call feedback.

- ◆ A key issue reported by nearly 1 in 4 people related to lack of staffing and volunteers, 1 in 3 if you include funding as much of this conversation was in relation to staffing.
- ◆ Secondly it was identified that support was needed for advertising, social media etc, possibly because this is something we used to specifically offer from the central team. People also reported that they were struggling to

<sup>2</sup> Networked Based FXs are where several groups inter-relate meeting different elements of the 4 marks but are so interconnected they get recorded as a single Fresh Expression.

grow and were seeing smaller numbers on average. The two issues advertising and growth were often connected but reduced post covid returners is a pattern many groups are seeing.

- ◆ Lastly, as mentioned specific support for Messy and Childrens support was requested and we have referred people to the CF network but people also wanted resource ideas and themes. Again this was something regularly provided through the central team either formally through training and events or informally through one to ones and coaching but is no longer available.

## Time honoured and Fresh Expressions of church working together

As reported in 2020 what COVID demonstrated is how well and how quickly the church can adapt when it has to, and how many new church/community connections emerged but we noted two key questions:

1. What are churches going to give up to have the time to build on the connections with those new people?
2. Have people really engaged with the missional imperative to go out and make new disciples and **stay out with them**, to establish new worshipping communities or fresh expressions, or do they still see these groups as a feeder into church which evidence shows if often less effective?

What has been interesting from some of the Reaching Deeper reporting is the increase in Average Weekly Attendance (AWA) in churches connected with the Northern Mission Centre and Fresh Expressions. In part this can be explained by the intentional focus on growth by these outward looking churches (hence the connection to FXs). However there is also some evidence that many Time Honoured churches are applying the early stages the FX Journey (listening, loving serving etc) as outreach rather than to establish new FXs. This could well be an outworking of questions 1 and 2 above as evidence suggests that many churches are trying to keep all their balls in the air. This, with the decreased central support and pressured local situations, means sufficient time cannot be dedicated to the new fledging worshipping communities. The great news is if the AWA growth continues it seems that the culture shift we have been promoting is underway and despite the pressures the missional impetus continues across our churches as we seek to support the mixed ecology of church in Cumbria.

## Conclusion

Whilst the central team's reduced capacity since the diocesan re-organisation continues to impact what we can deliver, there are number of things we are doing to respond to the findings of this FX report. Firstly we are trying to use Curators (experienced pioneers) to support some of the new groups exploring FXs. Growbag is a training day that will be delivered locally, using the capacity that has grown through the ecosystem supported by Reaching Deeper<sup>3</sup>

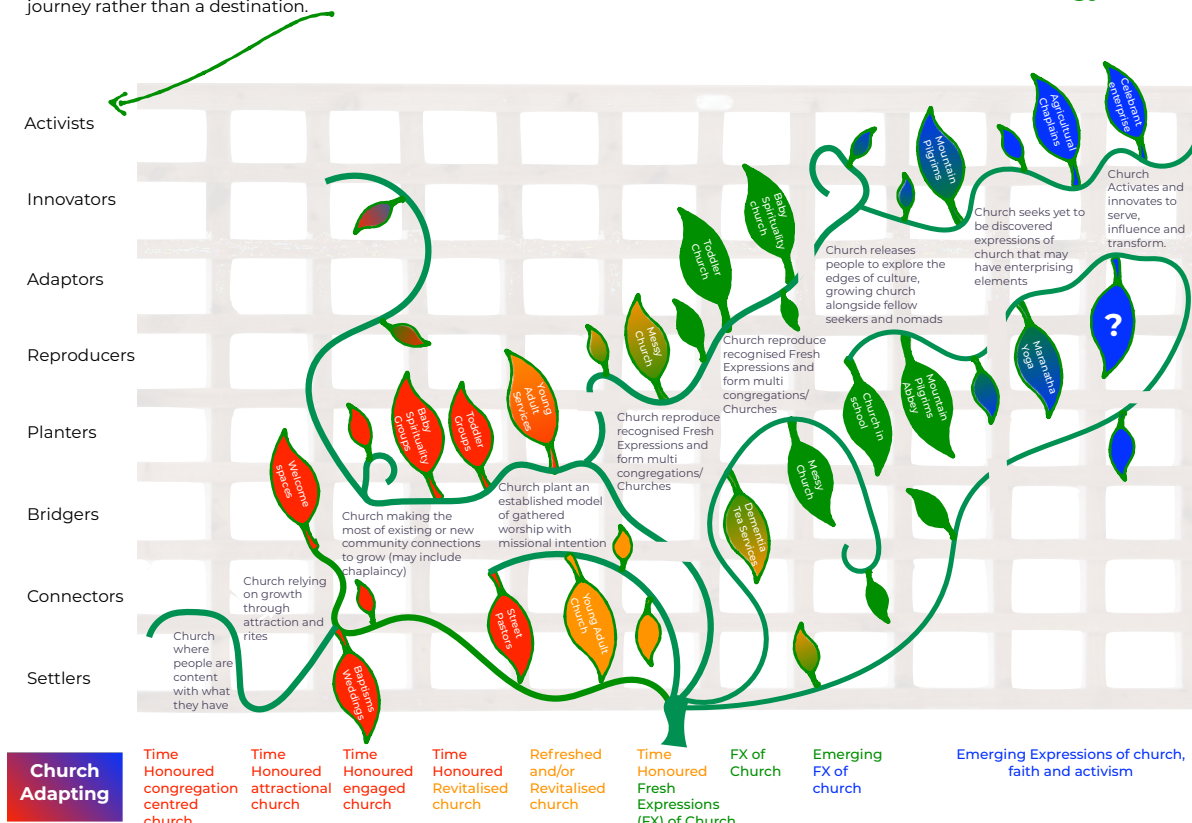
---

<sup>3</sup> Funded by the Strategic Development Fund

initiative and the establishment of the Northern Mission Centre (NMC). A new Seedbed grant scheme to encourage people to try something new was launched as part of the Vision and Strategy tour by the Bishops. The Northern Mission Centre, Pioneer Enablers and associated training courses are ideally placed to particularly support the growth of Faithful Improvisation and the Mixed Ecology identified within the overall God for All strategy. Indeed the work we have done on the Mixed Ecology trellis has been very received locally (and nationally) and it has helped several mission communities plan for the future.

A more adaptable approach to church and a greater sense of church as a journey rather than a destination.

### The mixed ecology of church



If you want more information on the trellis or generally on Fresh Expressions and Pioneering in Cumbria please download the **Imaginative Mission in Around Cumbria** booklet via <https://godforall.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/FX-Booklet-2022-FINAL-RFS.pdf> or request a paper copy.