

Fresh Expressions of Church: How Context Can Change the Church

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Introduction

Mobility and new communication media are reshaping social structures and, with them, the community of the Church. Spatial structures such as the classic parish are losing significance, and this is accelerating as parishes are merged into ever larger units. What determines a person's sense of belonging is less the place where they live than the network in which they move. Many people travel several kilometers to attend the service of "their" community even though the official parish church is much closer.

Around the turn of the millennium, the Church of England saw the emergence of a movement that responds to this shift: the *fresh expressions of church*. The thesis examines the ideas behind the movement and presents two Catholic, non-parochial communities that did not arise as part of it but share much with it. It also asks where the model reaches its limits in the German, and specifically Catholic, context.

1. What Is a Fresh Expression of Church?

The term was coined by the working group behind the 2004 report *Mission-shaped Church*. It alludes to the Declaration of Assent, which clergy of the Church of England make at ordination: the faith is to be proclaimed "afresh in each generation." The report deliberately gave no strict definition and instead grouped the phenomena into twelve types, stressing that the point was shared values rather than fixed models.

Because the term soon threatened to become a label for any activity, the Fresh Expressions team formulated a definition in 2006. A fresh expression is a form of church for our changing culture, established primarily for people who are not yet members of any church. It arises through listening, service, incarnational mission and making disciples, and it has the potential to become a mature expression of church. This definition proved insufficient, since about 54% of the churches reported by the dioceses did not meet its criteria. The team therefore condensed it into four features:

- **Contextual:** sensitive to the culture and milieu in which it lives its mission.
- **Missional:** making God's action in the world visible, and oriented towards people with no connection to God or church.
- **Transformational:** participatory and life-changing.
- **Ecclesial:** understanding itself as church, not as a preliminary stage of it.

The “fresh expressions journey.” The origin of a fresh expression is usually described in stages. It begins with *listening*, a “double listening” to God and to the people in their context. As Rowan Williams put it, the task is to see what God is already doing and join in. Next comes *loving and serving*, where pioneers go out in small groups and build authentic relationships. Then comes *building community*, which rests on an incarnational rather than an attractional approach: it is a mistake to start with a worship service before relationships exist. The last stages are *exploring discipleship* and *church taking shape*.

Common features. Most fresh expressions rely on small groups, meet outside Sunday mornings, and form around a specific network of people, such as a workplace, a school or people sleeping rough in the same spot. They are often post-denominational, and for their members the fresh expression is their actual congregation.

2. Two Catholic Examples

Neither community was founded as a fresh expression, but both can be read as such. The study draws on expert interviews and participation in their gatherings.

The Exodus Community (Hanover)

Exodus grew out of a group of young adults around the youth café Tabor in the Diocese of Hildesheim. As they outgrew youth ministry, many felt they had no place in the parish structures, and one founding member said she had “actually already given up on the church in the classic sense.” In 2012 they founded Exodus as a “community on the way” that celebrates a simple Eucharist once a month. The services have good worship music and sermons that engage with real life, and they take place in unusual venues:

- a cemetery chapel
- a church ruin
- a concentration camp memorial
- a parking-deck roof
- cultural centres

Today they are often hosted by the Protestant youth church in Hanover. About 120 people attend, mostly in their mid-20s to late 30s, and the group is now asking how to make services suitable for families with children. Although Catholic in its roots, Exodus practices an uncomplicated ecumenism. Canonically, it is “not represented in the structure of the diocese,” and members feel treated with an attitude of “let them play.” The community values its loose structure but finds it increasingly ambivalent, and it is exploring founding an association of the faithful under canons 215–216 of the Code of Canon Law.

The Gatherings around the Jug (Kraków)

This is a small group of homeless people and people at risk of homelessness in Kraków. It began at a low-threshold soup kitchen run by the Capuchin friars. Some guests wanted to explore their faith together but felt unwelcome in ordinary church settings. One of them said: “You can feel people watching you and holding their noses when you enter a church as a homeless person.” After an attempt at praying the rosary on a park bench, they discovered that Scripture mattered to all of them. In Advent 2011, five people met for the first Bible conversation in the friars’ kitchen, and nine came to the second. Almost two years passed between the first idea and that first meeting. One participant describes it as recharging his batteries for the whole week and beginning “to really believe in God.”

The members did not know the fresh expressions concept at the time of the interviews. When the author later introduced it, it gave them new impulses for their mission and prompted an interesting reflection on their own ecclesiology.

3. Critical Reflection

The Church is the Body of Christ, and it is always present in a particular context. Because the local community makes the whole Church present in a given place and time, plural forms of church do not threaten unity. What binds communities together is sharing one faith and one mission, not uniformity. The author also warns against seeing the movement as a cure-all. Some parish mergers have produced absurd sizes: St. Urbanus in Gelsenkirchen-Buer has over 40,000 Catholics, and a single parish is planned for Saarbrücken with nearly 100,000. Yet *Mission-shaped Church* itself says “create, don’t clone,” so the movement offers inspiration rather than ready-made models. Michael Schüssler’s critique is taken seriously: he sees in the movement either an extension of the parish model or a cipher for a more fluid discovery of the Gospel.

Conclusion

The thesis closes with a quotation from Pope Francis, who urged religious to act “where the cry of life is heard” and said he prefers a church that errs because it acts over one that grows sick by turning in on itself. The fresh expressions offer no simple solutions. What convinces is their attitude of listening to God’s will, searching for fitting forms, loving service and authentic discipleship. The “one size fits all” stance is outdated. They see themselves not as rivals to parishes but as equal forms of being church, and the Church needs both a reliable parish structure and experimental, contextual communities. Quoting Sabrina Müller, the author likens a living church to good jazz, in which all the elements of the music are taken and constantly improvised anew in the situation and context.