

chalk
lab

National Church Planting Network
Scoping Research
Executive Summary
Autumn 2021

CHURCH PLANTING: national picture

1. Introduction and scope

In autumn 2021 the National Church Planting Network (NCPN) Steering Group commissioned a preliminary piece of research on a national picture of church planting, to discern how they can best facilitate, support and develop a collaborative national initiative to see a significant growth of church planting in England. The scope of this research was individual Zoom interviews with 19 people who responded to the invitation in time for inclusion, each representing a national church planting strategy for their denomination/networks. The aim with this small initial sample was to include a range of church traditions and ethnicities.

Answers were then synthesized and analysed to draw out themes and areas for further reflection, on the following areas:

- **Plans:** strategy, history, metrics
- **Process:** models and definition of church
- **Pounds:** self-funding and scale of initial investment
- **Place:** geographical focus/mapping
- **People:** demographic groups, identifying and training leaders
- **Partnership:** local research, ecumenical perspectives

The full report with findings and quotes under each of these areas is available, and summarized below.

2. Reflections

2a. On the national church planting picture

The presentation of a national church planting picture is challenging. There are differences in theological perspectives, understanding of terminology and language, attitude towards use of metrics, history, personality, ecclesiology and governance. Church planting is happening across the nation, in all kinds of ways, and changing constantly. The groupings and themes that emerged within answers brought together denominations who may not normally be seen in the same category. There is a shared desire to see more followers of Christ, in more churches, in more parts of the country, led by the Holy Spirit.

We heard in the interviews a gap between what they aspire to seeing, and their praxis, or inclination. These are not right or wrongs, but are creative tensions shared by many.



2b. On the journey of collaboration

The responses to questions around partnership revealed four approaches to a national initiative: those keen to be connected, those questioning the purpose, those willing but with reservations, and those where the top leadership's ecumenism is not necessarily reflected locally. Collaboration requires mutual recognition:



Groups based on locality and shared approaches could produce more application than necessarily grouping around churchmanship, denomination or ecclesiology.

2c. On NCPN's role in collaboration

Mutual recognition could bring greater mutual appreciation

- There is scope to help people move from competition and critique to acknowledgement and recognition of different contributions. This can be through the design of the gatherings to facilitate this and to intentionally convene groups together for relationship and trust building.
- The national church planting picture can help to facilitate conversations as it is presented in a way where denominations and networks can identify how they are similar and different to others and how they fit into the bigger picture.

There is not yet - but could be - confirmation and ownership of a united vision for a preferable future

- Missional agreement would give a sense, as one put it, of 'travelling in the same direction'. What are the core fundamentals we seek to see for collaboration?
- If everyone had a vision of every type of church being in every type of place there is an opportunity to see each others' distinctives as a contribution rather than a threat.

The language we use can corner people where actually there is consensus - so it requires care

- It is subtleties in language which lead conversations around new churches towards either collaboration or suspicion. So - there is a need to clearly identify the vocabulary in this area which is contested (i.e. used with different meanings and implications by different groups); vocabulary which is used to communicate 'tribal' identity; and vocabulary where we can all agree and meet. Thankfully, Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit seem to be where we meet.
- For those who are wanting to collaborate, including the NCPN, there is a need to lose any naivety around language. Some phrases will mean we corner others and hamper meaningful communication. Sometimes this is only perception.

3. Interview synthesis - headline summary

3A. PLANS

Strategic approaches described could be categorized as relational and flexible (Baptist, FCC, New Frontiers); shaped around a common identity and movement (RCCG, FIEC), pioneer initiated (FCC, Baptist, Methodist, Elim, NTCG, with different interpretations of 'pioneer'), and there was also mention of an attractional growth strategy aided by incentives for invites. When moving from, as one put it, 'opportunistic, to intent, to strategic', training is often the bridge between stages. This means that creation of training resources becomes an act of defining identity in some cases, which can mean sharing or borrowing training is low on the agenda.

Even where there is central oversight or aspiration, the drivers and initiators are usually either individuals - "apostolic entrepreneurial types" - or churches who have been planted once and want to plant again. Both rely on a deep prevailing culture of multiplication and planting. Those we spoke to were at very different stages in their formulation of a strategy. There was reference to a 'seven-year itch': it may be helpful to think more in terms of a cycle than a linear path. When asked about metrics, many had planned targets (RCCG, Commission, Regions Beyond, AOG, Pioneer, CofE, CRT), and some are exploring different methods (Methodist, FX).

3B. PROCESS

There was clearly consensus on the central role of the Holy Spirit, but different understanding of what 'church' is. As one put it, 'before a church is [self-sustaining], the leader, depending on which book they've read, they might call it a fresh expression, missional community, small group, church plant...'

The catalyst is either

- an individual or a fresh expression ('Start incarnationally, evolve organically, look for opportunity'): described by Commission, New Wine, Pioneer, RCCG, Methodist

"The Holy Spirit kicked this thing off. The Holy Spirit is always a missionary Holy Spirit. How can we join in?"

"It should be evangelism first, then strategy. We need to change a mindset so we think evangelism and mission is first, then church is there to facilitate that".

"Many existing churches are stuck in their ways. Maybe there's no point trying to change with that level of resistance, so instead we create a new model, new energy."

"Planting revives the church itself and creates an impetus. It has always been the driving force for the growth of the church."

"We want to see gospel witness in those areas. It might not necessarily mean a church."

"Church planting: it's a nice idea. Pretty brutal, but we can't do anything else."

- a team ('lay-led commissioned', 'mother church birthing', 'under the umbrella'): described by FIEC, Nazarene, Baptist, FCC, Vineyard, Apostolic Nigeria
- strategy for multi-site and revitalisation: described by New Wine, FCI, New Frontiers

Some draw a distinction between church (gathering, often in a home) and the parallel process of recognition, either by moderators or charity commission. Where this is the case, the official recognition is spoken of as less important. Some would say a church needs to self-replicate at 50, others that it needs 70 for stability. Some CRT plants start with a far greater number and would expect it to grow further for a sufficient critical mass to plant successfully.

"Whilst any church has the possibility, the reality is that those who have planted or been planted are most likely to plant again: generations of churches."

Tracking progress of church plants may be by using metrics, often driven by finance (CofE, AOG, Baptist Home Mission), and by using a three-fold approach: personal relationship structure, gathering stories and annual returns/limited metrics. Challenges raised included tracking conversion growth vs attendees (New Wine, Baptist) and what to track and how (Pioneer, FIEC).

"It's a dance around what God is saying to individuals, how we support that, as well as what we're doing as a network."

When asked how long it takes to know if a church has taken root, the majority consensus was 3-5 years, with some saying you know very quickly if the time isn't right, or the church is meant to be temporary. These questions were suggested on knowing how a church plant is doing.

- "If this community went through a crisis next month, would it survive as a church?"
- "Does someone who is not a Christian say, 'this is my Christian community'?"
- "Anything with fewer than 50 people is very fragile. One marriage can blow it up. Is it self-sustaining?"
- "We look for viability but can be differently defined depending on context. 12 young Africans, probably viable, 12 old white pensioners who've never led anyone to Christ, probably not. Can they lead themselves? Can they support themselves? Can they have an imagination around replicating themselves?"
- "If the church disappeared tomorrow, would anyone notice?"

"The important thing is to allow the Holy Spirit to create spaces for community for people. If those spaces - spiritual spaces, for want of a phrase, facilitated by the Holy Spirit - then if they evolve or transform into more identifiable pictures of churches, so be it." (RCCG)

"We get hung up on whether church can stand on own two feet and be grown up, but purpose is people finding faith."

3c. POUNDS

- Outside the Church of England, roles are not full-time salaried ('bi-vocational', 'tentmaking' '1-2 days a week max), and grants are minimal (mainly for start-up equipment, £3-10k, sometimes given as a loan).
- As one said, 'the bottleneck is not money, it's leadership'. But a lack of intentional discussion around the financial aspects of becoming a church planter could contribute to this bottleneck. As one put it, "maybe a better model would be to mobilise a group to start something else, but then who would want to leave their location to go elsewhere without being full time pastor or missionary? We don't have resources to fund that."
- Options were presented as tithing, tentmaking (full/part time employment) and social enterprise. The only hint at a missionary support-raising model came from those talking about fundraising from mother and partner churches.
- Comments about money were about practicalities and process, rather than discipleship or training. The 'by faith' language you would perhaps hear from missionaries wasn't used.

Answers indicated the following:

1. Resource church model receives significantly more funding than anywhere else
2. New Frontiers is perceived as being 'resource heavy' but funding depends on sphere and location
3. Three years of initial seed funding - sometimes tapered - is offered (answers from Methodist, FIEC, Baptist, Nazarene)
4. Buildings can be a barrier to growth, either if not available or enabling inertia over innovation
5. Many have a central startup fund of up to £10k, usually less (answers from Elim, FX, FIEC, Pioneer, Nazarene, New Wine, Vineyard)
6. Some are loans, not grants (AOG, GCC)
7. New churches may need to fundraise from their mother church and other local churches, and create new networks for funding (NCI, NTCG, Apostolic)
8. 'Resource Light' churches are the norm (answers from FCC, RCCG, FCI)
9. Bi-vocational is the default, either almost always (FCC, RCCG, FCI, Elim, Vineyard) or a mixture (AOG, New Wine, FIEC, FX)

Bi-vocational leadership was presented as for three main reasons: income, wider connections ('mission in everyday life rather than setting people apart as those who do ministry - everyone doing ministry, not hiring someone to do it') and because a church planter may not need more than 1-2 days a week at the start.

3D. PLACE

- Urban and suburban areas are the focus, with only a small number of organisations addressing rural outreach (“because there’s less resource, it requires more creativity”).
- Where mapping takes place, it is patchy, and is not directive: the initiative is still more likely to come from individuals.

Answers fell into 6 groups:

1. Focus on strategic cities (FCI, FCC, AOG)
2. Focus on suburban/towns (Pioneer)
3. Rural awareness (FX, Methodist, CRT)
4. ‘The next town along’ (answers from New Ground, FIEC)
5. Where there isn’t a church like us (Vineyard, RCCG, New Wine, Elim) / “Where there isn’t a gospel witness” (FIEC)
6. Where the movement/apostolic team feel led (New Frontiers, NTCG, Baptist)

3E. ON PEOPLE

- Where new churches rely on leaders to identify and recommend new potential leaders, the likelihood of diversity is reduced
- Retaining and attracting Christians (referred to by more than one as ‘rearranging deckchairs on Titanic’) can detract from outward-facing mission.
- The language of ‘sheep-stealing’ and the pain, even when planned, of ‘giving away our best’ takes a toll on church leaders
- Leadership succession is a gap. There are key areas to explore around what prevents people wanting to become leaders and church planters.
- Discipleship is a shared challenge, but with common language
- Practitioners most want to hear from other practitioners.
- The growth of diaspora churches is under the radar and unaccounted for among some groups.

If you go to a church planting conference everyone looks the same.

“There has been very little mapping of the UK. Where are the unreached groups?”

“Different services for multiple language groups can be a very effective way of reaching entirely new communities in the same building.”

“The leadership is the critical thing. The bottleneck is not finance, it’s leaders.”

- Intercultural church planting is spoken about all the time by a small number of more multicultural denominations. Some would say it depends on the leader (Vineyard, AOG, Commission, Regions Beyond, NTCG, Elim), others 'not as much as we could' (CofE, New Wine, Baptist, NFI, FX, Pioneer)
- Three denominations - Elim, Methodist and Nazarene, heard the question about demographics and answered in terms of class rather than ethnicity.

There are some public tools describing a criteria or discernment process. In the answers given, three key themes emerged: Denominational 'fit' (answers from Pioneer, Elim, Vineyard, FIEC), Specific evangelistic gifting (answers from Baptist, NFI), Calling (answers from Pioneer, Vineyard, NTCG, FX). Some shared challenges raised in answers, which could be explored further:

- What happens when you don't have a clear discernment process? (Elim, Vineyard, Pioneer, New Wine, FIEC)
- How do we balance pastoral care and a drive to mission? (Methodist, FX, Pioneer, New Wine)
- How do we meet the challenge of succession? (Pioneer, Elim, NFI, Vineyard)

A minority of groups distinguish between training for church planters and training for church leaders towards ordination, authorisation or recognition. Some require a residential degree level qualification, others recommend online modules, often weekly or monthly with residentials.

Prayer is more frequently seen as part of the broader mentoring and relational support structures. There may be scope for some imagination around new ways of focusing prayer support around new church planting initiatives.

"I hear the Church of England say the average age of church planter is 36 and you reach people 10 years younger and 5 years older. This stacks up for us. The church ages and seasons are important. [The balance of building and planting church] is a tightrope. You want to serve leaders well but also drive our mission forward. It all comes down to Romans 1 - I want to impart spiritual gifts to make you strong but my heart is going to Spain. If you let one take one over, you grind to a halt."

"In Western society we want to fill people with knowledge, but I think it's about hands-on walking it. I'd rather we move away from that, and say practical experience is as important for delivering contextual Christian communities."

3F. ON PARTNERSHIP

The challenges faced by pioneer-led churches are very different to those started by a team from a resource church. There is very little common ground between them, but much between those who take a pioneer-led approach. So - any learning communities may be most productive if they are based around locality, shared approaches, rather than churchmanship, denomination or ecclesiology.

It is subtleties in language which leads conversation around new churches towards either collaboration or suspicion. So - there is a need to identify clearly the vocabulary in this area which is contested (i.e. used with different meanings and implications by different groups); vocabulary which is used to communicate 'tribal' identity; and vocabulary where we can all agree and meet.

When asked about new church plants using local research and connection, some use data on demographics (CofE, RCCG, New Ground, FCC, FIEC), some look for church leaders in the same network (New Frontiers, FX), church leaders from other networks (Pioneer, New Ground, Vineyard, AOG, FX, Apostolic), or opportunities for ecumenical mission (Regions Beyond, NTCG, Apostolic Nigeria).

There were also some collated comments on transfer of Christians between churches, an area requires sensitivity in local ecumenical mission.

We asked, 'would a national network bringing together multi denominations serve you?'. Answers fell into 4 groups:

Keen to be connected (New Wine, Pioneer, New Frontiers),
Probing the purpose (Methodist, Nazarene, FX, Baptist, FCC)
Willing, with reservations (Elim, Vineyard, Apostolic, AOG, FIEC)
Top leadership there, not yet locally? (FCI, RCCG)

"Churches Together or fraternals can be that it is all about being unified - for me, it's boring, BUT if we can encourage mission together and support and help resource one another."

"Around church planting there seems to be much more not worrying about theology. We want to reach people with the gospel. They've got to be evangelical but there's no way we can do it by ourselves - we've got to do it together."