

# The Mixed Ecology: A Christ-Shaped, Generous Imperative for the Future of Church

## **Context and Consultation**

This paper stems from the Diocesan FX advisors network. This group was tasked to explore the theology and experience of the mixed ecology of church on the ground as experienced by pioneers on the ground. A consultation took place with 18 dioceses through feedback from 60 pioneers. The author (Richard Passmore) then took this initial consultation and used AI to help identify the key themes emerging from the consultation and the previous work of the FX Advisors group. I then produced a draft paper, for a two day conversation and listening exercise that also included the FX Advisors, Church Mission Society, CCX, Fresh Expressions and local practitioners. This final paper is an updated version of that and includes some personal reflections of the two day conversation.

## **Introduction: The Church as Gift and Guest**

The future of the church is not a question of survival or strategy, but of identity and posture. The mixed ecology is helpful as a metaphor, but it is important to note that is an oxymoron as an ecology is either mixed or it is dead. Biodiversity is key and will be a natural outworking of contextual mission. At the heart of the mixed ecology lies the invitation to become, in every expression, a gift and a guest—an embodiment of the Christ who resists the pressure to perform, provide, or possess; who dwells in complexity with clarity and ambiguity; who speaks to fear, anxiety, and angst; and who calls us to radical receptivity and truth-telling.

## **I. The Christ Who Resists Performance: The Church as Guest and Listener**

### **Luke 10 and the Posture of the Guest**

Jesus sends his disciples as guests into the world—vulnerable, unsettled, and open to the disruption and hospitality of those they encounter. This is the opposite of a church that measures itself by what it does, owns, or controls. The Christ who resists performance calls us to a humble way of relating, to question our relationship with power, and to embrace a posture of listening and waiting.

### **Flourishing in Hope and Relationship**

The “wood wide web” metaphor—that unseen, interdependent network beneath the soil—reminds us that flourishing comes from relationships, not visible achievement. Pioneers, whether found or trained, are called to wait in hope, to listen deeply, and to

allow the Spirit to shape their journey. This is a church that asks, “Whose are we?” rather than “What do we have?”

### **Kenosis and Rootedness**

“I’m just kenosis”—self-emptying—challenges the church to give itself away, to value rootedness over vision, and to celebrate fruitfulness in hidden, slow places. This is a theology of time and unfolding habitus, where questions are more important than answers, and where the journey itself is the way.

### **Missional Listening and Narrative**

An approach to church rooted in missional listening means hearing stories, inviting others to name their gifts, and creating space for everyone to contribute. It means reading the Bible through a pioneer lens, seeing diversity as a gift, and recapitulating the imagined past only as it serves the present and future.

### **Challenging Power and Ego**

This Christ calls us to question where the pressure to perform, provide, or possess comes from—internal or external, historic or immediate. It invites us to balance the idea that “healthy things grow” with resisting the pressure to measure success by numbers or visible outcomes. It asks, “How can we embody the relational Christ?” and “What are the humble ways?”

### **Way Forward**

The church must create ways to notice and recognise what God is doing, to develop a language that captures stories and builds trust, and to learn to say “no” well. It must ask, “How can we join others with Jesus?” and “Are we reaching our rootedness rather than our vision?”

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## **II. The Christ Who Dwells in Complexity: The Church as Pilgrim and Pioneer**

### **Incarnational Presence and Apostolic Sending**

Jesus as pioneer, the theology of place, and the call to be an apostolic, “sent” church all point to a way of being that is rooted yet open to movement and change. The mixed ecology values both the “given” (tradition, parish, historical forms) and the “formless” (innovation, experimentation, newness).

### **Listening to the Prophetic Voice**

The church is called to listen to God’s prophetic voice, especially through those outside its walls. It must be ready to accept the unknown, to be deeply rooted in Christ (John 15), and to dwell in him with faith. It must wonder, “How am I called?” and “What is home?”—recognising that home is both a place and a journey, a starting point and a constant renovation.

### **Learning from the Margins**

The voices and stories of those on the edge—pioneers, the unchurched, the overlooked—are essential for the church’s renewal. The mixed ecology must be a place where these stories are heard, valued, and allowed to shape the whole.

#### **Way Forward**

The church must embrace practices that help it live as a pilgrim people, to be in Christ, to connect with him, and to keep faith in the midst of complexity. It must ask, “Are we ready to accept the unknown?” and “How can we be incarnated like Christ?”

### III. The Christ Who Speaks to Fear: The Church as Community of Abundance

#### **Abundance, Not Scarcity**

The mixed ecology is an ecosystem of mutual flourishing, where different expressions of church support and feed one another. Endosymbiosis and the “tree of life” imagery remind us that life multiplies when relationships are healthy and diverse.

#### **Theology of Trust and Living with Fear**

The church is invited to co-create a future of hope, to celebrate small signs of growth, and to resist the temptation to measure everything by numbers or visible “success.” Rather than denying fear, the church can face it honestly—asking what it reveals about our loves, our idols, and our hopes. In Christ, perfect love casts out fear, making space for authentic, vulnerable community.

#### **Way Forward**

The church must foster a culture of storytelling, celebration, and mutual support—sharing stories of hope, healing, and God’s surprising provision. The mixed ecology should be a place where dreams for the future are named, fears are confessed, and hope is cultivated together.

### IV. The Christ Who Speaks Truth: The Church as Space for Radical Receptivity

#### **Prophetic Challenge and Radical Listening**

Fresh Expressions and pioneers often bring uncomfortable truths to the centre, challenging the church to examine its biases, its use of power, and its openness to the Spirit’s new work. The mixed ecology must be a space where all voices are heard, where difficult conversations are held with grace, and where reconciliation is pursued as a sign of the kingdom.

#### **Submission to Christ and the Good News of Mixed Ecology**

Ultimately, the church’s authority and identity are rooted not in roles, jobs, or prestige, but in discipleship—submission to Christ and his way of humility, service,

and love. The good news of mixed ecology is for those who don't know Jesus, for pioneers, for planters, for clergy feeling lost, and for the institution itself.

### **Way Forward**

The church must intentionally create spaces for truth-telling, for holding tension without fear, and for practicing radical hospitality. The mixed ecology will thrive where there is a willingness to listen, to be changed, and to seek the good of the whole Body of Christ.

## **V. The Church as Gift: New Worshipping Communities and the Generosity of Christ**

### **The Gift of Communal Life**

The church's call to witness afresh in a new missional era can be expressed through the language of gift. The church becomes most fully the body of Christ when it joins in with the generosity of Christ—when it gives itself to others just as Jesus gave himself to the world. This gift is offered through pastoral care, social and ecological justice, resource-sharing, and especially by offering communal life with Jesus. No other organisation can bring that particular gift.

### **Receiving Before Giving**

As part of the Spirit's ministry of generosity, the process begins by receiving first. Jesus received his humanity before he gave his life. As an infant, he received from his parents before giving anything back. As an adult, he accepted hospitality before offering the hospitality of the kingdom. The church does likewise when, before it gives, it receives from others—listening to their hopes and longings, heeding their advice, and accepting their offers of help.

### **Giving Appropriately**

The gift of community with Christ must be offered in a manner that can be welcomed—contextually appropriate, yet true to the giver. Like Jesus, who never lost his integrity when being a gift, the church must remain authentic. Its generosity must express who the church is, its identity as an Anglican expression of the body of Christ. This requires an "empathetic dialogue" in which the perspectives of the recipients and of the giver are drawn together.

### **Letting Go**

Aided by the Spirit, the church must let go. Echoing Jesus who released himself into the hands of his human recipients (even his enemies), communal life with Christ must be released into the hands of those who receive it. Otherwise, it is not a gift. Recipients must be encouraged to receive the new community in their own way, helped by the Spirit and the resources of Scripture and tradition, but ultimately the church must let go. This may be painful, as the gift may not be accepted in the way hoped, or the community may diverge from the giver's theological expectations.

### **Acceptance and Return Giving**

Acceptance of the gift creates or strengthens community. When community with Christ is accepted, bonds are forged between givers and recipients. These relationships are deepened when recipients give back to the church. Teams offering new worshipping communities should have strong links to the parish church and the wider church, so that the to-and-fro of generosity can continue.

### **Sharing the Gift**

A gift only remains a gift if it is shared with others. Like Jesus, who is a perpetual gift because he constantly shares what he has with the world, the new worshipping community must repeat the process by which it was brought to birth: receiving first, giving appropriately, and so on. This is a Eucharistic enactment—the body is passed on from one context to another and from one generation to the next, all for the benefit of the world.

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## **VI. Living the Mixed Ecology: Partnership, Coexistence, and Mutual Transformation**

### **Symbiotic Relationships and Mutual Change**

The mixed ecology is like a wildflower meadow or a farm, where different plants and organisms support each other. Old trees (traditional churches) offer stability, while new shoots (Fresh Expressions) bring vitality and innovation. Both traditional and new forms of church are transformed by their interaction. The Eucharist becomes a shared table, nourishing all on the journey and embodying unity in diversity.

### **The Value and Challenge of Pioneering**

Pioneers are essential catalysts in the mixed ecology, bringing a slow, relational approach that allows for deep roots of discipleship to grow. Their work is often undervalued or misunderstood, especially when institutional structures prioritise quick results or regular worship services over long-term, Spirit-led engagement.

### **Legitimacy and Theological Contribution**

There is a pressing need for the Church to recognise the legitimacy of pioneering vocations—not as a stepping stone to parish ministry, but as a calling in its own right. Pioneers are not just practitioners but theologians, offering new insights into how God is at work in contemporary society.

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## **VII. Risks, Opportunities, and the Future Vision**

### **Reframing the Conversation**

The Church must move beyond seeing Fresh Expressions as less-than or as temporary bridges to “real church.” Instead, all forms of church should be valued for

their contribution to the ecosystem, and the conversation must be reframed around relationship, mission, and the movement of the Spirit.

### **Ancient/Future Faith and Eucharistic Imagination**

The mixed ecology brings together ancient spiritual practices and future-oriented innovation, making the riches of the Christian tradition accessible to new generations and contexts. The table becomes the central image—a place of gathering, nourishment, and sending, where all are welcome and all are changed.

## **The Mixed Ecology as the Hinge point for the national priorities**

The Church of England's three national priorities—becoming younger and more diverse, fostering a mixed ecology of church, and nurturing missionary disciples—are not parallel tracks but deeply interconnected. The vision of a mixed ecology, understood as a Christ-shaped, generous imperative, is the hinge point that makes the other two priorities possible, sustainable, and authentically Christian.

At the heart of the mixed ecology is the conviction that the church is called to embody the self-giving love of Christ. This is not just about co-existence between traditional and new forms of church, but about a radical interdependence and generosity that mirrors the life of the Trinity. Each expression of church—parish, Fresh Expression, pioneer community—has its own identity and integrity, yet is called into deep relationship with the others, sharing resources, praying for one another, and rejoicing in each other's strengths. This is not a strategy for growth but a theological imperative rooted in the very nature of God.

The mixed ecology is the hinge because it provides the relational, theological, and practical framework within which the church can become younger and more diverse, and within which missionary disciples can be formed and sent. Without this integrated, generous, and Christ-shaped approach, efforts to reach new generations or to nurture disciples risk becoming fragmented, transactional, or driven by anxiety and scarcity.

### **1. Becoming Younger and More Diverse**

A church that is truly mixed in its ecology is already set up to welcome and value difference. The Christ-shaped, generous church does not simply invite young people and diverse groups to join existing structures; it listens to them, receives from them, and allows their gifts and perspectives to shape the life of the community. This is the essence of the "wood wide web" metaphor—life and growth come from unseen, interdependent relationships, not just from visible programmes or events.

When the church is open to new forms of community, new ways of gathering, and new expressions of faith, it becomes accessible and relevant to those who might otherwise feel excluded. The process of starting new worshipping communities—offering the gift of communal life in forms that make sense to young people and those from diverse backgrounds—is only possible when the wider church is committed to a mixed ecology. This means letting go of control, trusting the Spirit, and valuing diversity not as a challenge but as a gift.

## 2. Nurturing Missionary Disciples

Missionary discipleship is not a solo endeavour but a communal, relational journey. The mixed ecology provides the context in which discipleship can flourish—where every Christian is invited to be both guest and host, receiver and giver, and where discipleship is woven into the fabric of daily life. The Christ-shaped, generous church forms disciples by modelling humility, creativity, and abundance, and by creating spaces for honest conversation, storytelling, and mutual support.

In a mixed ecology, discipleship is not confined to Sunday worship but is lived out in everyday contexts—at work, at home, in the neighbourhood. The gift of community with Christ is offered in ways that are accessible and authentic, and disciples are empowered to share that gift with others. This is only possible when the church is committed to the ongoing gift-exchange of community life, where every member is valued and every voice is heard.

## The Practical Outworking

For the mixed ecology to be the hinge point, the Church of England must take practical steps to embed this vision at every level. This includes:

- **Celebrating and championing the importance of mixed ecology ministry**, creating structural precedence to allow it to flourish.
- **Building connectivity and collaboration** between different expressions of church, so that resources, learning, and support can be shared.
- **Supporting pioneers and new communities** by recognising their legitimacy, providing resources, and creating pathways for collaboration and mutual learning.
- **Fostering a culture of listening and generosity**, where every member is invited to contribute and where the gifts of young people and those from diverse backgrounds are valued and nurtured.
- **Offering Space and Spaciousness**, where those on the ground are given the space to thrive and creating spacious places to wrestle with the theological, practices and insights emerging.
- **Cultivate Art and Embody new practices** where metaphors are embraced in embodied practices, intentionally integrating creative and experiential learning into its meetings, processes, and governance. So that innovative methods

become visible and valued fostering transformation beyond purely rational or academic outcomes and where the medium and the message are aligned.

## Naming and Addressing Dissonance

The dissonance between espoused theology (articulated beliefs) and operant theology (lived practices) emerges as a critical tension. A central finding from the consultation is that, while pioneers and leaders often express a theology of the church as gift and guest—embodying Christ’s posture of openness, service, and humble presence—the reality on the ground can look quite different. In practice, there is sometimes a pull towards strategies focused on growth, measurable outcomes, or maintaining existing structures. This creates a tension between the espoused theology of being a gift and guest, which celebrates radical receptivity and trust in God’s provision, and the operant theology that emerges in response to real pressures and expectations. The result is that pioneers, leaders and even bishops can feel caught between their vision for a church that is truly present and generous, and the practical demands of leadership and mission. Recognising and addressing this gap is essential if the mixed ecology is to be more than just a metaphor, and instead become a living reality embodying radical hospitality, interdependence, and missional courage.

## Conclusion: The Christ-Shaped, Generous Church for the Sake of the World

The mixed ecology cannot and should not be reduced to a technology for growth or even survival. It is a theological imperative—a way of being, a way of inhabiting the world with Christ who resists performance, dwells in complexity, speaks to fear, and calls for truth. It is a church that is humble, creative, and relational—open to the needs of the community, attentive to the movements of the Spirit, and committed to the flourishing of all.

As the church learns to live in this mixed ecology, it will discover new depths of rootedness, new possibilities for mission, and new expressions of hope. The table is set, the Spirit is moving, and the invitation is open—to all who will come and be changed.

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