

# fresh expression = new form

by Travis Collins, Director of Mission Advancement and Southeast Regional Coordinator, Fresh Expressions

When I arrived at Richmond, VA's, Bon Air Baptist Church in 2002 to be their pastor, one of the best things going on there was a new (one-year-old) form of church that had sprung up out of Bon Air. This new form of church was for people in recovery. "Northstar," as that new form of church became known, had exceeded everyone's expectations, and had resulted in lots of transformed lives.

At the time, I'd never heard of "fresh expressions," but when I did I thought, "Northstar is a fresh expression of church!" Soon people from our congregation had begun a fresh expression (new form) of church in the international community and the prostitute community. After a while, the fresh expression in the prostitute community didn't make it, but that is part of the fresh expressions story, too—the willingness to try things that might not work.

In 2014, I left the full-time pastorate to join the Fresh Expressions U.S. Team. For two years, I was a small part of what God is doing through the Fresh Expressions movement across the U.S. I missed being a pastor, and accepted the call to be pastor of First, Huntsville, AL, in 2016. My deep belief in fresh expressions as a means of reaching unreached people followed me to Huntsville.

We have begun fresh expressions of church in the recovery community, the arts community, and in an underserved neighborhood. I don't know what the future of those new forms of church will hold—remember, the willingness to risk is part of the commitment to fresh expressions—but people are already talking about the next fresh expression of church. We met recently with some young adults interested in a fresh expression of church among the online gaming community!

The term "fresh expressions of church" appeared in the Church of England report titled *Mission-Shaped Church* in 2004, and a year later the network/movement called "Fresh Expressions" organized. **Fresh Expressions U.S.** now supports attempts to launch these new forms of church.

Defining a Fresh Expression is a bit like defining love. Nevertheless, here is a definition of a fresh expression which originated in England:

*A fresh expression is a form of church for our changing culture established primarily for the benefit of people who are not yet members of any church.*

So, a fresh expression is *not* a new worship service, a mission project, or Church-lite. A fresh expression *is* ...

- often initiated by an established church and connected somehow to an existing/inherited church.
- outside the walls and traditions of established churches.
- primarily for those who are not likely to engage with an established church.
- contextualized. Indigenous.
- attentive to a micro-culture or sub-culture—i.e. a group of people who share a similar interest, hobby, need, or meeting place.
- usually small-scale and usually led by volunteers.
- putting the church that Jesus loves closer to where the people Jesus loves actually are.

A fresh expression begins with an agenda no more complicated than loving people and wanting somehow to be like Jesus to them. From that grow opportunities to invest in people's lives, ways to serve them, conversations about things that matter, and, after time, invitations to some sort of get-together in a home or neighborhood gathering spot. As God provides sacred openings in people's lives, there will emerge some form of discipleship, worship, fellowship, ministry/service to each other and to others, and even an outward orientation toward missions and evangelism. A full-blown fresh expression has been born when there is a Jesus-centered community of faith exhibiting all these elements of Church—just not in the form of Church that you and I probably know—among people who probably never would have come to your church building or mine.

Remember, this is not a faddish program to grow the attendance at our churches. It's not a gimmick to funnel people in through our doors. It is true that our congregations grow if someone who attends the fresh expression then decides to come to our church or if people hear about our fresh expressions and are drawn to our missional reputation. God's Spirit might use the launching of a fresh expression to revive and renew a stalled, lethargic congregation.

To see a fresh expression as a means to grow your present congregation, however, is to miss the point. The point is the Great Commandment and the Great Commission.

Samuel Shoemaker asked, "Can your kind of church change your kind of world?" It's a poignant question. If you cannot answer with a strong affirmation, don't chuck your church; use the strengths of your congregation to begin a fresh expression.

*You can find out more about fresh expressions of church at [freshexpressionsus.org](http://freshexpressionsus.org).*