

Abstract: Shouts of Joy and Tears of Sorrow

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St Columba's Church, North Belfast, is a church which has survived some of the worst violence of the Troubles. Recently rebuilt as a purpose-built space to encourage a Fresh Expression of Church, it has been unable to attract new members into the worshipping community. As a member of the clergy team working in the area, I spent three years serving and getting to know the community. I wrestled with this question – 'Why was St Columba's unable to grow?'

Initially, my proposal was to reintroduce the traditional practices of the Church of Ireland. I soon discovered that liturgy was too narrow a focus for the research. What was needed was a meaningful engagement with the lives of people in the area and a consideration of how the story of the community and the local Church of Ireland could be re-engaged. I discovered action research as a discipline and decided that this would be the approach I would use. It is a multi-disciplinary approach utilising the social sciences, biblical engagement and theological reflection. It gave me the tools I needed to engage with the themes of identity and sacrament that have been the focus of the study. I also used interviews and practical projects to make observations anchored in the local reality.

I will ask some critical questions about the depth of reasoning and research that influence decisions to replace traditional church practices with a Fresh Expression. I argue that a Fresh Expression works best alongside the local church, not instead of. The strength of Fresh Expressions is its ability to effectively reach specific groups. The strength of the local church is in gathering those groups into a multi-cultural and cross generational eucharistic community through word and sacrament.

I conclude that the Church of Ireland should re-engage positively with the political and cultural lives of the people in its parishes, possibly through Fresh Expressions, while developing a robust narrative that explains clearly the purpose of the parish church in the community – to be the storied place where human beings encounter God through the sacraments.