

# CHURCH GROWTH IN EAST LONDON:

*a grassroots view*

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with a response from Stephen Cottrell  
Bishop of Chelmsford*



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## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

# FOREWORD

Jesus tells a number of parables which relate to fruitfulness and growth. The Kingdom of God is like a mustard seed – initially the smallest of all seeds, but growing to be the largest of the garden plants, becoming a tree in which the birds can come and find a home (Matthew 13). By contrast, he also tells the parable of the fig tree, lamenting its lack of fruitfulness (Luke 13).

What exactly are fruitfulness and growth, flourishing and success, in Kingdom terms? This is a vital question for the Church's ministry and mission. Yet it is an issue on which there is a great deal of disagreement and confusion. Some church leaders identify 'Kingdom growth' entirely with attendance at worship, and find it difficult to see the value of any forms of ministry which do not lead to conversion. Others seem content with patterns of ministry which are entirely focused on worship and community engagement, and have no strategy for evangelism. We have written this report because we have repeatedly encountered leaders whose attitudes lie at each of these extremes - and we believe that both positions articulate important aspects of the Church's mission. We also believe it is important to combine theological reflection with practical research. This report, and our research on church planting in east London, are offered to help the wider Church to move towards a clearer and more holistic understanding of mission, and to learn from the many examples of good practice in deprived and diverse neighbourhoods.

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*Lent 2016*

# 1. INTRODUCTION

## 1.1 PURPOSE

The discourse surrounding church growth is controversial and complicated. This report draws on new research which illustrates the challenges and opportunities of church growth in mainly deprived communities across east London. It explores how local church leaders understand the term ‘church growth,’ how that understanding is shaped by experience and by theological reflection, and how it influences their practice of ministry.

## 1.2 OUR APPROACH

The approach we have taken is to begin by listening. We have done this by surveying the existing research on the subject of church growth, and then (between March and May 2014) by interviewing 13 church leaders in East London from a range of contexts, congregations and Christian traditions.

We chose Church leaders from different denominations and from across five London Boroughs – Hackney, Tower Hamlets, Newham, Southwark and Lewisham (including part of the Church of England Dioceses of London, Chelmsford and Southwark).

We asked questions about their local church demographics, the ways in which they relate to their local communities, their goals and priorities, changes they have seen over the last five years, and what they hope to see in the next five years in their churches and communities.

Whilst a survey of 13 people is certainly not statistically representative, we sought out a mix of churches in a range of contexts in order to explore the range of experiences and views which are currently at work in east London. We believe the findings are illustrative of the debates which are ongoing, and highlight some interesting thoughts.

Of the 13 local church leaders, 8 were from the Church of England, 1 was Baptist, 1 Pentecostal, 1 Catholic, and two ‘other’ expressions of Church that are not part of any wider formal denomination.

The size and demographic structure of the churches represented by our sample varies widely:

- **There were 2 churches with around 850-900 members attending multiple services - one Catholic, and the other Pentecostal. Both had a Black or Minority Ethnic majority congregation, and were mixed in terms of age.**
- **There was a church with 220+ members on average, organized into 9 mixed, all-age ‘community hubs.’**
- **There was another couple of churches with 100-180 attendees, across several services. These were very much family churches, including a lot of children. Both had an Afro-Caribbean majority.**
- **A few churches hovered around the 100 mark, including children and were majority Black.**
- **A handful of churches were smaller, with 40-50 worshippers, consisting mostly of young professionals, and with majority White congregations.**

### 1.3 THIS REPORT

This report begins with a brief overview of the national debate about church growth. It then focuses on the findings from our interviews and discussions of the main points arising. We are delighted that The Rt Revd Stephen Cottrell, the Bishop of Chelmsford, has written a response to our findings, and this is included before we offer our own final reflections.

In our research findings we review the contexts within which churches in east London operate, and some of the challenges they are contending with presently. Three main themes are observed from the interviews: challenges relating to immigration, demographic transience and congregational ‘churn,’ and finally, economic deprivation.

These contextual challenges ultimately implicate understandings of Church growth, which will be discussed. Three main ways of articulating growth can also be discerned from the interviews: numerical growth of the congregation, growth in terms of deepening faith and commitment of the congregation, and lastly, growth in terms of an increasing presence in the surrounding community. Each of these understandings will be unpacked, with anecdotal illustrations.

The majority of ministers interviewed expressed a keenness to see numerical growth, however a few did not. The question of Church ‘growth’ clearly transcends a simple ‘yes’ or ‘no’ response, and these complexities emerged in each interview. Differing attitudes towards the meaning of ‘growth’ yield varying understandings of how growth is attained, with some church leaders pursuing growth more strategically than others.

Lastly, this report examines the implications of growth, asking the question of how the churches in east London are changing, and in what ways.

It is our hope that the report will contribute to the on-going discussion surrounding church growth – bringing to the field further reflection from the grassroots. It is hoped that the findings might serve in working towards new kinds of questions in the conversation surrounding growth and its importance. The answers offered by interviewees reflect the complexity of the question, and its demand for nuanced consideration.

## 2. THE NATIONAL CHURCH ‘GROWTH’ DEBATE

David Goodhew’s introduction in his ‘Church Growth in Britain’ (2012) offers a good summary of the state of the debate surrounding national church growth. It serves as a useful starting point for this report, as he prompts us to important questions about growth and decline, and the most appropriate tools for further research and reflection.

Goodhew describes how the narrative of ‘Church Growth’ has become dominated by the idea of decline – falsely. It is widely assumed – in academic and ecclesiastical circles, and in wider public discussion, that decline is a ‘given’. Stories of growth, therefore, have been largely underestimated and overlooked. The ‘secularization’ thesis has not only prevailed, but is increasingly being internalized by churches, breeding a somewhat fatalistic outlook towards the future of the Church and potential growth. Growth is not explicitly prioritised because there is a general sense of resignation in the face of seemingly universal and chronic decline.

Goodhew seeks to rectify this picture. He argues that while there is some truth in the decline narrative, there is a less known story of growth to be considered. He challenges us to not shy away from this story by succumbing to more pessimistic views of chronic decline.

*“A positive antidote to internalizing decline or neo-liberalism is not to shy away from theological analysis of church growth as somehow impious, but to develop a nuanced theology of church growth. Such a theology would recognize that ‘growth’ in theological terms could mean something other than numerical growth – but such a theology would dare to value the numerical growth of congregations and face the*

*theological questions posed by numerical decline. There is something too fatalistic and even too convenient about the indifference of many theologians and church leaders to church growth”*

Stories of growth, he suggests, have become lost in the dominant national narrative, which often exaggerates decline. He responds to this by presenting his edition of a ‘mosaic’ of micro-studies; ‘histories from below’ that account for local dynamics rather than national statistics. This picture of both growth and decline, he explains, is complicated further by region, churches, and ethnicities. The impact of ethnicity and presence of migrant groups has been largely underestimated – “multicultural Britain has led to marked church growth in Britain” – as have ‘new’ churches.

Other recent research supports Goodhew’s more nuanced picture of growth and decline. The findings of the Church Growth Research Programme (2011-2013) concluded that there is indeed ‘no single recipe for growth, and no simple solution for decline,’ but indeed that there are a number of ingredients, or factors which might lead to a degree of predictability in terms of growth and decline. This report sought to assert, also, that numerical growth is only one aspect of growth.

It is our hope that this report responds to these calls for a holistic, yet contextualised picture of the Church in East London, and in doing so, identifies where there is hope in the vibrancy of the church, and also some of the challenges it faces. This contextual reflection is grounded in the experience of church leaders ‘on the ground’, from a variety of denominations and ‘flavours’ of Church.





# PART A

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*Voices from the grassroots*

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## 3. FINDINGS

### THE EAST LONDON CONTEXT

Firstly, what are the contexts within which the churches of east London are operating? What are the challenges that these churches are contending with and how does this inform church leaders' thinking about growth?

Three major patterns emerge from the interviews; themes which are prevalent more generally for urban churches. These are immigration; economic deprivation and hardship; and demographic transiency and congregational 'churn.'

#### 3.1 IMMIGRATION AND MULTICULTURALISM

9 of the 13 churches visited have Black majority congregations. In a number, there is a significant presence of Asian and other ethnic-minority groups. Two ministers reflected that this was a big factor in their churches' numerical growth. One described how a predominantly White church had rapidly become a Black majority church over the last 14 years. This congregation is now 70% Afro-Caribbean. While the demographic change is notable, so too is the numerical growth seen in this particular church having grown from around 70 to 120 worshippers in recent years.

Another minister described a similar phenomenon. The congregation, having grown from 50-60 people to 180 in the last 5 years, is now spread across 3 services in order to reflect the diverse expressions of worship in a largely mixed congregation, representing 15-20 countries. He added,

*"One single service won't reflect the diversity of the area and so we're trying to find different expressions of worship that reflect this local diversity"*

Elsewhere, there is a similar story of growth amongst Afro-Caribbean groups within previously White churches. One minister noted that his church is becoming increasingly Afro-Caribbean, with White and Asian individuals constituting a minority. This congregation has expanded from one morning service to a second Urdu service to cater to a growing group of Asian Christians (that service currently sees 15 worshippers). Another minister accredits migrant groups with the gradual growth of his own congregation. He adds, however, that within a predominantly Bangladeshi Muslim context, explicit evangelism is more difficult, and is not really pursued.

One minister estimates that his congregation is 60-70% from Black and ethnic minority backgrounds. He adds that the parish remains 60-70% White, and relatively older. Another church has a congregation which is 95% Black, Asian and other ethnic minorities, with around 90-120 worshippers, while another is almost entirely Black. The minister remarks, somewhat bemused,

*"You can count the white people on two hands, and they are generally married to a black man or woman."*

The presence of African, Asian and ethnic minority groups represents a two-fold challenge, both within and without the congregational context. Very real problems arising from precarious immigration status, underemployment, and chronic economic hardships impoverish congregations. Immigration also presents a broader challenge to the Church: how do we deal with diversity and difference? Whilst a challenge, many ministers acknowledged that our increasingly multi-ethnic context serves also as great opportunity for growth, both numerically and spiritually.

*"Because of the nature of the congregation, especially those from West Africa, we don't have many people coming to the church who are complete explorers or new Christians. Most have been brought up in the church. It's trying to develop this into a deeper commitment to the church body, and getting involved in the outreach stuff. There is some extent of just wanting to come to church, being blessed and going..."*



### 3.2 ECONOMIC DEPRIVATION AND HARDSHIP

Structural economic deprivation relating to housing instability, chronic food poverty, unemployment, low wages, and insecure immigration status are all realities that churches in our sample are contending with, both inside and outside of their congregations.

One minister, with a 900-strong congregation consisting largely of Eastern European, West African and Asian migrant groups, explained how a considerable number of his congregation and those in the surrounding community are on benefits, many more in unskilled jobs or holding several jobs to make ends meet. Time and time again, ministers described the incredible faith of Christians in East London.

*“For members of this congregation, their faith is the first thing that they reach for and that is the fundamental thing about them. It’s very humbling to find that strength of faith...”*

Ministers expressed discouragement in the face of daunting social justice issues, but also see a great opportunity to serve the poor and further Kingdom growth. Chronic poverty lies on the doorstep of each of these churches, and some chose to view this as a gift.

*“Stuff happens quite literally on your doorstep, crying out for solution. The need can’t be ignored when the Gospel is to hand, and in this area I think we are in a very good position to live out our faith”*

In areas where the majority of people are renting accommodation and becoming increasingly insecure in terms of their housing situation in the face of redevelopment and gentrification, one interviewee was reminded of the Anglo-Catholic socialist cry that ‘there is no point worshipping Christ on the altar if Christ is suffering in the streets’. There is a gospel conviction to face economic hardship square on.

*“Housing is a basic human need. There is no point saying to people ‘look at the birds of the air...do not worry’ if they have to worry to pay their*

*rent or feed their kids...Speaking out for the poor helps the Church of England parishes, locally, to maintain credibility.”*

Another reiterates the importance of the church engaging with the practical needs of those inside and outside the congregation.

*“Theologically, we are concerned about the material needs of people in the community as well as their spiritual needs. It’s important that we try to do what we can. The two – spiritual and economic wealth – should go together, and often, they don’t. It’s important that we have a means of addressing these issues – and that’s why TELCO<sup>1</sup> is important to us”*

To others, this insecurity is far more daunting and the source of unending discouragement and frustration.

*“We are so often ‘on the brink.’ Complex housing issues, for example, mean that we are losing key families through nothing you’ve done but external circumstances.”*

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<sup>1</sup> TELCO is the The East London Communities Organisation, part of London Citizens

### 3.3 DEMOGRAPHIC TRANSIENCE AND CONGREGATIONAL 'CHURN'

With economic uncertainty, congregations and their surrounding communities are ever in 'flux,' a state of 'fluidity' and 'fragility' that poses many challenges. This was a common narrative across the board.

*"I worked out that 25% of the congregation are facing major change/life issues with regards to work and housing, which impacts their staying in London, and ultimately, our church."*

Several ministers feel hard-hit by this transience, noting how the departure of key families within their congregation - by choice or because of circumstance - results in a vacuum of resources and leadership within the church. In such instances, congregations remain static in terms of numbers, experiencing rapid turnover that often renders the church in 'survival mode' as it seeks to be inclusive and adaptable.

Churches that once drew almost all of their congregation from the immediate locality increasingly see attendees coming from further afield. Those in particularly gentrified areas have to grapple with the fact that many young professionals find their community far outside their residential locality. One minister reflected on how the church needs to realise the implications of, and gear up towards this uniquely urban dynamic.

*"This area is transient and becomes increasingly polarised as it becomes gentrified. Turnover will increase. This leads us to question: how do you hook people in quickly in a way that is good? It's a poor expectation to think that when we hook people in, they'll stay forever. So we must gear up the church to cope with this transience. There is a sense that it's a church in flux, and it's important that relationships can happen"*

Many acknowledged that this demographic transience and congregational 'churn' demands intentional preparation and structural response in order to welcome people in quickly. Gearing up towards

this, one minister added,

*"I would like to see how the church responds to changing demographics in the area...I'd hope we'd have one more Sunday service drawing in a different congregation"*

The contexts of churches present a stark picture of both profound challenge, and exciting opportunity in terms of growth. There is an increasing realisation that churches must be conscientious and active in engaging with their local contexts.

## 4. FINDINGS

### HOW IS GROWTH UNDERSTOOD?

Common to all interviewees was the acknowledgement that the ‘growth’ they are called to pursue is not simply a matter of numbers. For all, the notion that ‘growth’ refers only to the church attendance figures was hotly contested. How, then, is growth understood?

#### 4.1 A ‘NUMBERS GAME’?

Around two-thirds of our respondents were clear that numerical growth was a priority, although they differed in both the extent to which this was prioritised and the ways in which they sought to promote such growth. 1 in 3 stated that numerical growth was not a priority being actively pursued.

Three reasons were given for regarding numerical growth as a priority: One was that it is Biblically mandated. As one interviewee said:

*“In light of the Great Commission – it is [a priority]!... There is a theological impetus to build the kingdom of God, which ultimately involves conversion. There are ... very different ways of doing [this]. A lot is about tackling living conditions and social justice, and being explicit for the reasons for doing this! The concept of making people of faith make a tangible difference to their communities is key ... we have to create an environment where growth happens spiritually, numerically and relationally.”*

The interrelationship between numerical growth and other aspects of kingdom growth was a common theme. Many ministers echoed the quotation above, indicating that faithfulness would lead on to numerical growth – although one made the point that numbers lead to an increased capacity for faithful action. This offered a second motivation for valuing numerical growth:

*“Everything you want to do is connected to numerical growth. For social influence, you need numbers. To bless the community with a massive event where we can help the homeless – the more people we’ve got on board the better. The only thing I would bring up again is discipleship; the numbers you do get, you can quickly lose them if they’re not disciplined.”*

A third argument presented for the importance of numerical growth was that people need the Gospel. This was put most compellingly by someone ministering in a context where there has not been dramatic numerical growth:

*“I feel a certain sadness that the vast majority of people – while claiming to be a spiritual generation – don’t care. They might be spiritual, but have no part in congregational worship. The spiritual life needs input and encouragement. Everyone has the spirit of God in them, but it needs to be grown. If people don’t bother to think about it, it’s empty. Lives could be richer and better and fuller if people thought about it.”*

All the leaders who said numerical growth was important rejected a simple identification of numerical growth with ‘Kingdom growth,’ as these quotations indicate:

*“Growth is a sign of a healthy church, but it’s as much about developing a committed community, and nurturing and developing that committed faith to the body of Christ.”*

*“Numerical growth on its own is pretty useless, it’s not just about ‘bums on seats’ and we have to create an environment where growth happens spiritually, numerically and relationally”*

*“Numerical growth and growth in terms of faith, spirituality and discipleship have to go hand in hand”*

Some of those who valued numerical growth felt it should not be pursued directly:



*“We would like to see more people come to worship with us – but we are also aware that it is not something that we can pursue directly. We can’t focus on getting numbers in Church. We don’t think that is the way God wants us to approach it”.*

A minority of those interviewed dismissed numerical growth as a priority altogether. One minister commented,

*“I’d much rather have a church that’s functioning and making a difference, where people are contributing”*

another added,

*“I don’t care, really. I’d prefer to have a core group of 40-odd people. I’d rather have people who come and go and who are doing some good works in their community. It’s more about linking communities than bums on seats...that concerns me more than having a collective group of Christians who go in and sing worship songs and don’t do anything else. Jesus only had a few people and they all went off everywhere!”*

Still others perceived numerical growth to be somewhat daunting, and perhaps not a priority in the context of their particular congregation.

*“Any growth would change the feel and dynamic of the congregation – you do notice new faces! Growth can be difficult, especially if people are damaged – it can be overwhelming. It becomes difficult for the church to hold them if they are.”*

## 4.2 BEING FAITHFUL AND BEING PRESENT

This varied response to the idea of numerical growth led on to discussions about what else ‘Kingdom growth’ should mean. To some, growth meant being faithful to the local context and being visible in community.

*“There are many avenues, some of which don’t work, and there are very different ways of doing it. A lot is about tackling living conditions and social justice and being explicit for the reasons for doing this. The concept about making people of faith make a tangible difference to their communities is key.”*

Several ministers made a compelling case for the importance of keeping their sights local and remaining faithful to their context in order to see growth.

*“I am committed to the parish system, which is not very trendy in today’s world. But I do think it’s important to have an area so that you can think locally and ask, what is the expression here? An MP is responsible for the welfare of people in their constituency, just as the priest has an obligation for the spiritual welfare of those in his parish... It’s about being relevant in our community, and responding to a very local context...I don’t think the answer is to get more ‘bums on seats,’ and it’s naïve to say that where there is a good vicar there is a good church. Context is important. We must remain faithful to the Gospel; which isn’t trendy!”*

Another agreed with maintaining the pastoral/neighbourhood church model, over the programme/network church model.

*“As a neighbourhood church we’re much more able to engage with local issues because we keep our sights fairly local. If my congregation was coming in from all over London, I would be distracted in all kinds of other ways.”*

The church building was a repeated topic of conversation, and a way in which many ministers actively see to engage with the surrounding community.

*“I saw my job as opening up the Church and giving it back to the community, and they really see it as theirs now”*

The notion of locality was challenged, however, by one minister's illustration of the 'tentacles' of a church. His response was particularly compelling, in that he questioned what indeed we mean by 'church' and how we measure it's so-called 'success'. Should 'growth' be measured by the number of worshippers in church on a Sunday, he asked, or rather, in terms of the number of people the Church is reaching in the week elsewhere?

*"Our values shape our goals and we are unwilling to be manipulated by a story of success which always tries to put figures on things...this puts limits on us, and extends our capacity, and we work too thinly for the sake of numbers. How much does a Sunday morning define the success of the Church? What is perceived as success and growth if the Sunday gathering of Christians is smaller but the tentacles of reach is greater? If you measure church growth numerically as how many people come on a Sunday, it's not our priority"*

Another minister articulated clearly that engagement with social justice issues and practical need was a priority above all, and to do so with transparent motivations.

*"If we go back to basics, our main goal is to affect the lives of people in God's name. The central goal of any church has to be about getting the message of Salvation that comes through Christ...the message of Salvation is most effective if we are showing that we care for the community that we are part of. Caring for our community is key to us"*

What about when the surrounding context is a predominantly Muslim one? Again, this has very real implications for the ways in which ministers understand growth. For some, the multi-faith context means that relationship building and inter-faith friendship takes priority over explicit evangelism and numerical congregational growth.

The initiative 'Belief in Bow' grew out of a frustration that Christian and Muslim communities were not mixing. One minister explained his view that friendship and openness between diverse communities is more important than in inward focussed church community. This was

echoed elsewhere,

*"We are not shy about being evangelistic. However, we are wise as to where we can evangelise. We do not see our interaction with 'faithful friends' as an evangelistic opportunity, but rather, community building"*

Another minister noted how the local foodbank – run in partnership by other Christian denominations, synagogues and secular organisations – is not an appropriate site of evangelism – but primarily about different groups coming together to meet local needs; prioritising cooperation over conversion.

### 4.3 COMMITMENT AND DISCIPLESHIP

A number of interviewees stressed the internal as well as the external dimensions of 'Kingdom growth'. Strengthening and deepening of faith and commitment to the church community by means of intentional discipleship and worship were priorities.

*"Numerical growth is an expression of health, and the priority must be health. If we can't reproduce, then we are not fruitful in the way that Jesus promises. But growth must be undergirded by discipleship. Jesus called us to make disciples, not the Church – He says, I will build my church. This is the basis of the discussion we are having around here about healthy discipleship – we must look carefully at the life Jesus modelled. If you don't do that you are not building church but a construct – you can put a label on anything and call it church. Jesus' first call and last command was to make disciples"*

This was echoed elsewhere...

*"When the congregation is big, you've got your numbers, the question becomes how to use them? We've got 900 people every Sunday coming here to listen to the word of God, taking Communion, working together, talking together...how is that for evangelical outreach? I'm not sure you can beat that."*

*“The tool of evangelisation is the Christian community – if this is weak, then evangelisation is weak...This is the living of your gospel in your own life and community, in a way that raises a question in the life of the people that you meet.”*

One minister emphasised the futility of seeking to draw in huge swathes of people without intentionality behind discipleship. Indeed, strength might be found in numbers, but this is not the be-all and end-all.

*“A lot of people think that if you focus on evangelism, your church grows, but what you get is a wide entrance, but a massive back door exit. So, discipleship is huge”*

Time and time again, the importance of worship was reiterated. As one minister reflected,

*“Spiritual growth is the key think. Everything arises from a central vine. IF you’ve got the relationship with God – it brings everything else into sync.”*

In all, growth is understood to be about all three elements; numerical, depth in faith, and presence. As one minister aptly illustrated, the church must seek to ‘grow up,’ ‘grow together,’ and ‘grow more.’

## 5. FINDINGS

### WHAT ARE THE MAIN STRATEGIES FOR GROWTH?

Having reflected on their main priorities, and where numerical growth came into that, ministers were asked what the main strategies of their church were in striving to achieve their goals. The responses reflected a scale of intentionality, some clearly more strategic and goals-oriented, while others were less specific in their expression of how to attain goals, including growth. The responses were also very varied. Strategies were articulated in terms of vision statements, church models, leadership, and structures for welcoming newcomers.

#### 5.1 STRATEGIES

There were a number of church leaders making deliberate efforts towards growth. One minister illustrated the church’s transition from a ‘pastoral’ to ‘programme’ church as intentional, in order to develop growth. His hope is that this church will treble in size. How? By having a focused plan of action, which is answerable and robust. Similarly, in another church, the leader talked about the deliberate culture of discipleship,

*“In this ‘culture’ there is potential for multiplication – unless you try to regain control...There is decline in parts of the church and this may outstrip some aspects of growth – but it can’t outstrip it for long if people are serious about making disciples...”*

Others expressed that they were less sure as to how to go about it, and indeed whether there is a strategy at all. One stated,

*“It’s a priority, but it’s not clear what works...Of course we would like to see numerical growth, but in my experience, I don’t understand it, it doesn’t seem to correlate with effort.”*



This was articulated elsewhere as another said,

*“I don’t think our growth has been strategic at all. It’s been about building relationships and creating a welcoming environment, it’s nothing that I’ve done!”*

*“The workings of the spirit are a mystery – it’s not a slot machine!”*

Others asserted that in order to attain growth, the key was to remain faithful, and to continue doing what they are currently doing. According to one,

*“Decline is a lack of faithfulness, a lack of churches engaging in what it has to do: worship, community, serving the poor. If it’s weak in these three areas, it will decline. You need to ask if you are being faithful to these three things”*

Growth by way of living out faith was discussed by several ministers. For them, growth did not seem to result from an explicit evangelistic or outreach programme, but rather, remains rooted in discipleship and a missional attitude...

*“For me, evangelisation is not about going out onto the street, but ensuring that my large congregation deepens their faith, understands what they believe, look after the poor, and connect with the community. Evangelical outreach is not about programmes, but a dignity of worship, access to Sacraments, people being confident in their faith”*

Others have explored different ways of ‘doing church’, shying away from formal evangelistic programmes such as Alpha, and instead drawing people in to church, or into community, in less explicit ways.

*“Some have structures and strategies like Alpha to translate relationships into formal evangelistic opportunities, but we don’t. We*

*run afterschool clubs, we provide support for other people, and the other stuff that is a little bit more low-key, not as an outcome to get people to church necessarily. We believe the Christian life is the best life to lead, but that’s not just about coming to Church on a Sunday”*

Still others talked about making the church building more accessible and open as a way of encouraging people through the doors throughout the week and on a Sunday.

*“We are continuing to develop the building as a community hub, and would like to see the church building open 24 hours a day. Historically, churches have been places of sanctuary. People live in cramped conditions, with people sleeping in every available space and so there’s little space for community development and engagement. Getting the building open will have a big impact on this”*

## 6. FINDINGS

### HOW IS THE CHURCH CHANGING IN EAST LONDON?

How is the church coping with its context and what does this mean for growth? How are churches changing and what difference does it all make?

#### 6.1 RECENT GROWTH AND CHANGE

Of the 13 church leaders interviewed, 7 reported numerical growth in their congregations within the last 5 years – just over half. These growing churches were from different denominations. A handful of these had grown significantly – 3 had more than doubled in the last few years.

Although our sample is not statistically significant, it is interesting to note that there was a strong correlation between those who expressed a lack of interest in numerical growth and congregations which had not grown.

One church in particular has seen 80% growth in 2 years; another has gone from 50-60 worshippers to 180. This begs the question of whether there is a pattern in growth. Others have seen only slight growth in numbers, and yet others have been weakened by transience and are seeing slight decline.

In our sample, perhaps unsurprisingly, it does seem that the degree of intentionality behind growth is related to the likelihood of growth. Those that have seen significant growth, it seems, have made structural changes in terms of leadership or ‘models’ of church. They have transitioned, or are in the process of transitioning, from the so-called ‘pastoral’ church to the ‘programme’ church. In this model, potential for growth is recognized. Coupled with a clear vision of their goals, as well as being contextually faithful, this conscious self-reflection in some instances has reaped numerical reward.

In one of the churches studied, the minister attributed significant growth to the church’s capacity to be more ‘relevant’. The hope is that this church will continue to grow in numbers, and is in the process of moving to a larger venue in the near future.

#### 6.2 THE WIDER PICTURE

Some ministers expressed anxiety about what will happen when the older generations of church goers, those who are ‘paying and praying,’ are gone. Others wonder what will happen when young, third generation Afro-Caribbean individuals ‘stop going to church with their devout grandmother’. Others are worried about the damage-control of people burnt out and disenchanted by the ‘consumer church.’ Others remain discouraged and frustrated by wider church structures that are often seen to hinder creativity and new ways of ‘doing church.’

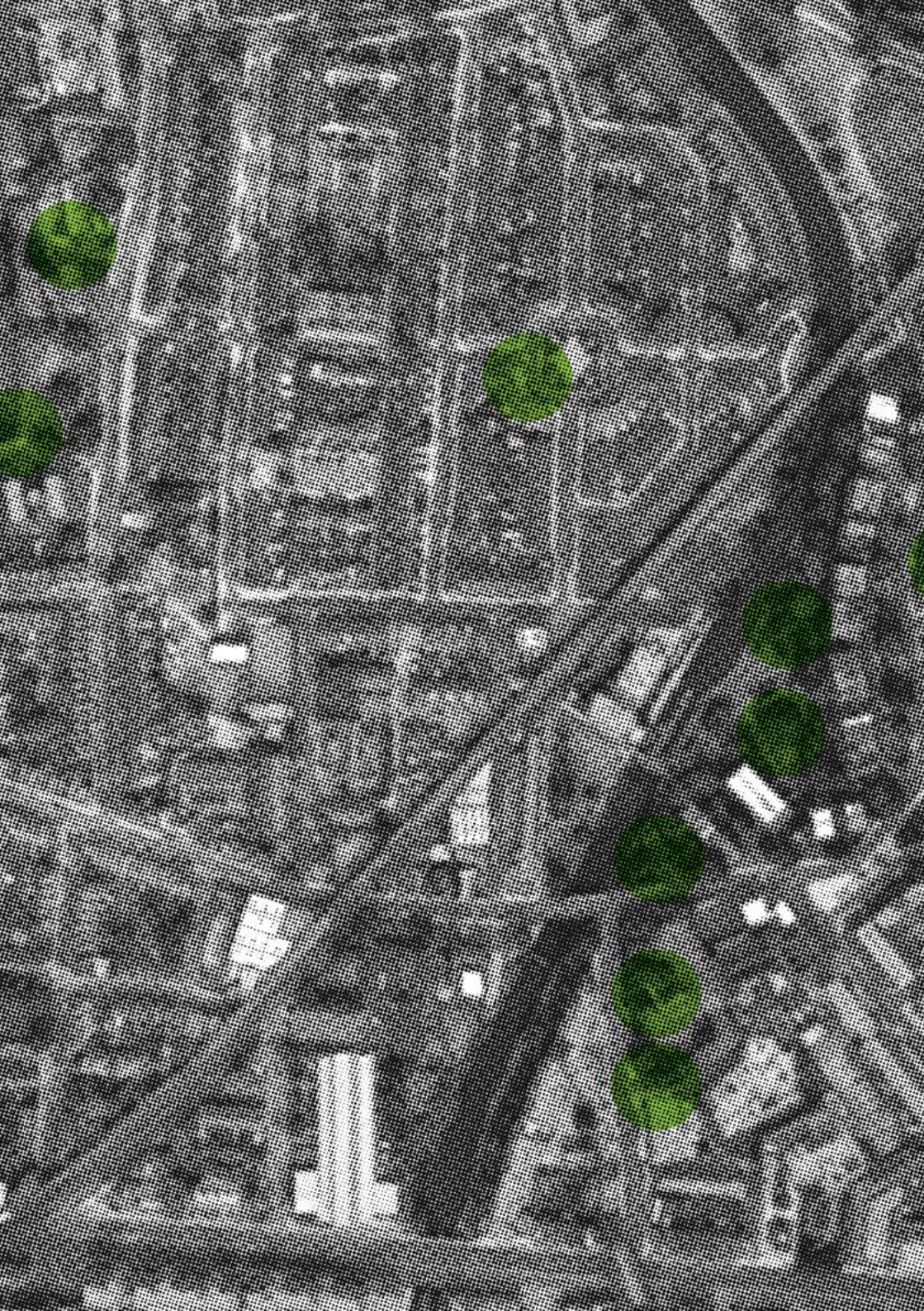
Others are more buoyant. One says:

*“We are an Easter People – rebirth means new life in individuals, but also corporately, in the Church. Some of the structures that we have might need to die in order to be reborn...There is evidence of God at work in people’s lives and God is calling us to be Church in a different way in the future. Little churches are doing a lot in community, and perhaps because it is so counter-cultural to go to church these days, the small number of Christians are more committed than those who went to church before by default!”*

Another says,

*“I think society would miss us if we disappeared. For me, in the end, God holds onto stuff and He keeps it going, He won’t let the ship sink. Our church might close, who knows, but new things will pop up. As long as people have a vision for serving others, telling the Good News, I think God will keep people like that”*





## PART B

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### *A Response*

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## 7. REFLECTION

### BY THE RT REVD STEPHEN COTTRELL, BISHOP OF CHELMSFORD

#### 7.1 INTRODUCTION

The research undertaken by the Centre for Theology and Community makes one thing clear: growth is about more than numbers. But in response I want to begin by emphasising that it is not less than numbers either.

To a certain extent, this feels like a tired debate. I thought we had all long since agreed that it was ‘both/and’ not ‘either/or’ when it came to the so-called distinction between growth in numbers and growth in impact and service; but perhaps - and not for the first time - I am over optimistic. But I do agree with the interviewee who pointed out that everything we do is connected to numerical growth in one way or another. If there is no church, there can be no ministry. Therefore growing the church and growing the kingdom can never be opposites. And for those of us with a high theology of the church - and I know not everyone shares this view either - the church itself, as I want to go on to argue, can be, and is indeed called to be, a sign and foretaste of the kingdom.

But let me start with a cautionary tale: I knew a priest in a diocese where I served some years ago who was a man of great personal holiness, of prophetic vision and of indefatigable service to the poor. He shunned worldly or ecclesiastical preferment, gave himself to working with the poor and excluded; and when he retired his church closed. Why? Because although his own personal ministry had an enormous and lasting impact in the lives of many individuals and in the whole

community, he never saw it as a priority to care for the church itself or to invite people to be part of it. There was almost literally no one left worshipping when he retired.

His ministry was completely of the gospel, but evangelism and any sort of church growth were, for him, dirty words. The fact that his church ended up closing when he retired does not negate the substantial good his ministry achieved. But it did mean that to a very large extent that when he left the ministry that he pioneered ended with him. There was no community of faith that was living out that vocation and drawing others into a community of love and discipleship whereby the world might be changed and the ministry and impact of the church increased.

#### 7.2 GROWTH AS TRANSFORMATION

So lest we get drawn into the same either/or debate can I suggest we change the language. Instead of talking about bums on seats, let's instead talk about disciples being made and hearts changed; or best of all, let's talk about lives transformed. It seems to me that the best way of answering the question, what sort of growth do we need, is not to say shall it be numbers or shall it be impact, or even to say shall it be

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both, as if these things were different from each other, but to say let it be growth in transformation. This is what we look for, and we see it happening in a number of different ways.

First it is the theological vision which underpins, inspires and motivates all ministry: we long to see the whole of creation

transformed, “for it waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God”. (Romans 9. 19) This is the great biblical vision - and

may I remind our rural friends, it is a thoroughly urban vision. The bible starts in a garden, but ends in a city – the new heaven and the new earth; a new creation where the city of God, coming down out of heaven, brings a new order and a new intimacy and harmony with God and with each other, the city that needs not sun nor moon, “for the glory of God is its light”. (See Revelation 21. 1-2 & 23). Or put it another way: there are kebab shops in heaven! And Balti restaurants, and dosi bars, and sushi and jellied eels and Chinese takeaways. The banquet of heaven is an ‘eat as much as you like for free’, multicultural smorgasbord, an image and a gathering together of diversity, where the promise that in Christ difference is reframed - no Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female - but “a great multitude that no one could count, (and) from every nation, standing before the throne and before the Lamb” crying out, “Salvation belongs to our God” (Revelation 7. 9-10).

It sounds to me a lot like the church in East London. Or should I say the church in East London, with its astonishing diversity as well as its

## “ THE BANQUET OF HEAVEN IS AN ‘EAT AS MUCH AS YOU LIKE FOR FREE’, MULTICULTURAL SMORGASBORD

enormous challenge and potential, is a more potent and challenging sign of the kingdom than the church in the suburbs or the country.

But, wherever we are located, it is this theological vision of the gathering together of the nations and the new world order that is the biblical promise that motivates and inspires us: it

is this we are working towards; it is this we see in Christ and which we believe will be fulfilled when Christ returns: the vision that God is going to bring all things together and all things to a good end in Christ.

Mission is our participation in the outworking of this vision in the world today, beautifully summed up in the five marks of mission of the Anglican Communion<sup>2</sup>. In this regard we should not speak about the ‘mission of the church’, but ‘God’s mission of love to the world in which

the church participates’. And as you know, the word ‘mission’ does not appear in the bible. It is our word. But behind it is the central biblical notion of ‘the God who sends’; the sending God whose purposes are to bring peace and harmony to the whole of creation; the sending God who has called forth a people to bear his light to the world; the sending God who from the root of the stump of this beleaguered and backsliding nation, sent his Christ into the world. And Christ himself has also called forth people to know him and follow him and be his presence in the world. “As the Father has sent me”, says Jesus, “so I send you” (John 20. 21). Thus the church is called to the apostolic life.

## 7.3 AN APOSTOLIC CHURCH: SHARING FAITH IN MULTI-RELIGIOUS CONTEXTS

The word apostle means ‘one who is sent’. But in the church today we seem far more at ease talking about discipleship, as if being Christian only meant following and learning, rather than the apostolic life, the ‘sent out’ part of our vocation, and perhaps some of our misunderstanding and false dichotomies about growth, come from our favouring of one conceptual way of thinking about our vocation over another.

Jesus didn’t seem to care very much about bums on seats. In worldly terms his mission was a bit of a flop. Not many people followed him, and those who did fled when the going got tough. But he did care about people, and he cared very much about their transformation. And he went on caring even when people opposed him and even when they killed him. ‘Father forgive them, they don’t know what they’re doing’ are words directed at the church today as much as at the soldiers at the cross. Both groups, and myself included, have been pretty good at stifling the spirit and snuffing out Jesus. That is because we have all too easily seen the work of the church as an end in itself – building an earthly empire here – and therefore seeing evangelism as, at best, recruitment, and, at worst, scalp hunting for Jesus.

<sup>2</sup> These are: to proclaim the good news of the Kingdom; to baptise and nurture new believers; to respond to human need by loving service; to transform the unjust structures of society, and to strive to safeguard the integrity of creation and to sustain and renew the life of the earth

But Jesus also cared very much about gathering people together and sending them out (being a disciple and an apostle), so that they would be his presence in the world, doing his will and bringing to others the medicine of the gospel.

If the church is God's agent of transformation, the gathering together of the beloved of Christ, not because they are more beloved than anyone else, but because they are those who have seen and responded to God's call in Christ, then the ministry of the church is to be the people who live out and embody and proclaim God's apostolic purposes of love to bring all things to that good end in Christ. And because the church tends to get it wrong. And because we tend to get it wrong. And because pendulums swing and other people's grass so often looks greener, the church also needs, endlessly, to be reformed and transformed itself in order to simply be itself. As Hans Kung has observed, 'to stay the same when everything else around you changes, is not to stay the same'. Therefore the other, equally dangerous side of this coin is that we don't do evangelism at all. That we stop caring about sharing and communicating the gospel to others; that by saying bums on seats don't matter we end up saying people don't matter.

The uncomfortable truth about the Christian faith – or else it is not truth at all – is that if it is good news for me, then it must, by definition, be good news for everyone. And before you object, let me also add that 'make disciples of all the nations' does not trump 'love your neighbour.' How we communicate and share this faith is just as important as whether we share it. But we are called to live and share the gracious invitation that in Christ God is making all things new, and all people and all creation are invited to be part of it.

Inevitably, this brings us into dialogue with those of other faiths as well as those of none. Both dialogue and proclamation are necessary parts of our engagement with other faiths. Following Karl Rahner, for instance, we can appreciate the goodness in the religions of those who do not know Christ and whose own reverently held faith is largely a consequence of history and culture. But we can also recognise that God has done something particular in Christ that is conclusive

and fulfilling for all. And certain faiths, not least Islam; and certain beliefs, particularly the new atheism, are unapologetic about their own missionary purposes. We need not be embarrassed about our own. And even if we temperamentally favour the idea of dialogue over that of proclamation, we need to recognise that even dialogue can be understood as conversation potent with the potential for conversion. We should not be fearful of this. The possibility for conversion runs both ways. What is important is that we bear faithful witness to the truth as we have been called to live it and express it; and that we are prepared, even eager, to listen to and be challenged by the truths and insights of others.

When Christians meet and share with someone of another faith it is wise to remember the biblical sting in the tale, that we will be surprised by those whom God calls, and that Jesus held up people of others faiths and traditions – a Syrophenician woman, a good Samaritan, a Roman Centurion – as models of faithfulness and as godly good examples.

In my experience, what people of other faith traditions find most perplexing, is either our reluctance to talk about faith at all, or our

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SHARE THIS FAITH IS  
JUST AS IMPORTANT  
AS WHETHER WE  
SHARE IT.**

apparent willingness to place on the negotiating table that which we believe most crucial. Thank God, the immigration that has fuelled the growth of the church here in East London has not only buoyed up our numbers, but also our confidence in speaking about Christ. The professional footballer from

Africa, who unselfconsciously crosses himself when he walks onto the pitch, is a small and compelling sign of a public faith which indigenous English culture lost a long time ago, private pietism giving way to the absence of God altogether. Let our vision be catholic as well as apostolic: the nations coming here have put the apostolic vocation back on the



agenda and with it the mixing and sharing with others faiths. And because it is God's mission we care about, not our market share, then there are also many occasions where people of different faiths and all people of good will can unite around issues of common concern, both ethical and political.

So this is what being a disciple/an apostle means. We are the ones who have heard and responded to the call of Christ. We are members of his household, the church, and we are participating in God's mission of



## **WE ARE THE ONES WHO HAVE HEARD AND RESPONDED TO THE CALL OF CHRIST**

love to the world. Therefore our transformation – my bum on this seat - cannot be separated out from the world's transformation. God has this uncomfortable habit of working out his purposes in and through the creation he has made. I am the object

of God's love. I am also the means whereby that love is communicated and shared. Jesus has entrusted his mission to us.

Since I am called to be God's agent of transformation (I am part of this mission, not just its recipient) then I too must be transformed. I too must place myself in the sending flow of God's apostolic mission.

## **7.4 CONCLUSION**

At the heart of growth is a transformation. At the heart of transformation is discipleship and the apostolic vocation. And at the heart of this on-going transformation, as we “with our unveiled faces seeing the glory of God as though reflected in a mirror, are being transformed into the same image” (2 Corinthians 3. 18), is prayer. It is this dwelling in the presence of God and seeking the face and the mind of Christ, and this understanding of the apostolic life, that will save us from the false and bedeviling distinctions and tired debates that see growth as either numbers or service. The call to evangelise is the call to

make disciples; and since a disciple is someone who is called to share the apostolic vocation, these two versions of growth are actually the same thing, and is, of course, the growth we need. In order to make disciples we need an intentional ministry of proclamation, formation and catechesis, that ministry of evangelism that is expressed in many different ways but must always be central to the life of the apostolic church. But it is for a purpose; and its purpose is the kingdom of God. We are not simply initiated into a set of doctrines or behaviours, but into the apostolic life, whereby we share with God in his great work of transforming the world into the likeness of Christ: “Go, therefore, into all nations... make disciples.” (Matthew 29.19)





## PART C

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*Facing the future*

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## 8. CONCLUSIONS

Bishop Stephen's reflections provide an inspiring and challenging call to mission - a mission which is grounded in the mission of God (through prayer, listening and theological reflection) and therefore has a holistic vision of personal and social transformation in Christ. How can we help this vision to become a reality in more and more congregations - particularly in multi-religious contexts? How can we move beyond the persistence of 'either/or' attitudes to growth which led CTC to undertake this report - and which are still evident in some of the responses we record?

### 8.1 RECOMMENDATIONS

From the existing research on church growth, and our in-depth interviews, we offer five key recommendations:

#### 1. Churches need an intentional strategy for growth

Clearly this recommendation needs a number of caveats, which have been provided above: numerical growth needs to be understood as a means to the ultimate end, which is the renewal of lives and communities in Christ. But, as we have seen, numerical growth is a Biblically mandated and practically vital means to that end - both because every 'bum on a seat' should also be a life which is being transformed by Christian discipleship, and because a church without people will in the end be unable to achieve any of the other ends to which God has called it.

The evidence of our research (and of the wider body of literature in the subject) is that growth which is both numerical and holistic is most likely to occur where it is intentionally pursued. Unless a church's leadership is constantly reflecting on the changes in the demographics of the area, and on how the church can connect with people from its range of cultures, social classes and generations, such connection between church and context is unlikely. It is also clear that numerical growth is possible in a wide variety of church traditions. There is

evidence - both from our own research and from the wider literature - that a key reason evangelical churches are growing faster is not that their theology is uniquely compelling but that it has led them to a more intentional pursuit of numerical growth. Bishop Stephen's reflections offer a powerful reminder that Christians of all traditions are called to that same intentionality.

The intentional pursuit of growth does not seek to prescribe the activity of the Holy Spirit - any more than an intentional strategy for stewardship or for social action would limit the spontaneity of God's work. What is crucial is the way growth is pursued: beginning with prayer and discernment, and resisting the temptation to make a simplistic identification between 'Kingdom' and 'numerical' growth.

#### 2. The case still needs to be made for 'both/and' growth

Bishop Stephen expresses an understandable surprise that the case for a 'both/and' vision of growth still needs to be made! There is undoubtedly an increasing awareness among evangelical writers of the need for holistic mission, and an increasing emphasis is being placed on evangelisation in catholic theology. The evidence of our interviews, and indeed our experience more generally, is that this 'both/and' vision still needs to be shared more widely. It cannot be taken for granted, and should be a high priority in theological education and ministerial development.

#### 3. The practices of community organising can help churches grow

Community organising seeks to strengthen grassroots institutions through action for the common good. It is a powerful embodiment of a "both/and" approach. It is indicative of the continuing lack of a holistic approach to mission that, in the UK, it continues to be understood largely as a means of promoting social action.

Community organising has a track record of helping churches move from a focus on maintenance to effective mission<sup>3</sup>, and the

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<sup>3</sup> See Simon Cuff, *CEFaith - the beating heart of community organising worldwide*<sup>1</sup> online at [theology-centre.org.uk/faith-the-beating-heart-of-community-organising-worldwide](http://theology-centre.org.uk/faith-the-beating-heart-of-community-organising-worldwide)

practices which it seeks to cultivate within participating churches are demonstrably connected with church growth. The “hallmarks of an organised church” include integrating theology, spirituality and action, intentionally developing new leaders through action and having an instinctive willingness to work with those beyond the church’s walls<sup>4</sup>. There is a striking overlap between these “hallmarks” and the characteristics identified in recent research as correlates of growth. From Anecdote to Evidence: Findings from the Church Growth Research Programme 2011-2013 identifies “having a clear mission and purpose”; “assigning key roles to lay people” (and ensuring lay leadership rotates) and “actively engaging with those outside the existing community” as some of the key factors. Because these factors also include “being ready to self-reflect and learn continually” and “being willing to change and adapt”, Action Learning Communities (ALC) are a particularly powerful way of promoting these practices.

In 2014-15, CTC and Citizens UK piloted an ALC on Congregational Development through Community Organising, and the successful pilot has led on to longer-term programme. The early signs are very positive, and we hope more congregations and denominational bodies will work with CTC and Citizens UK to harness the potential of community organising to contribute to numerical growth as well as social justice.

#### **4. Good practice builds theological and practical confidence**

One of the greatest obstacles to the ‘both/and’ vision is suspicion: the suspicion amongst some of those who prioritise evangelism that a more holistic vision of mission somehow soft-pedals the imperative to make disciples, and the suspicion amongst those who express disinterest in church growth that evangelism is necessarily predatory or hectoring.

This suggests that a key factor in winning support for a ‘both/and’ vision is sharing case studies of effective, holistic mission. CTC has sought to do this through a number of our recent publications (most notably our *Just Church* report and the book *Just Love: Personal and Social Transformation in Christ*, which we have co-authored with the Church Urban Fund). A number of the churches whose leaders were interviewed for this report provide equally compelling stories of holistic mission. Another obstacle to holistic mission is confidence - that is the feeling in some churches that effective outreach is only possible in churches of a particular type or size. One of the most encouraging findings of our research, which we are keen to share, is that growth is possible in a wide range of contexts and traditions, and can start from a low numerical base.

In this context, the Church of England’s appointment of Ric Thorpe to the new Bishopric of Islington, to focus on church planting and growth, is to be welcomed - as is his commitment to use ALCs to promote growth in different church traditions and for different sizes of congregation.

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<sup>4</sup> See Selina Stone, ‘Building Powerful Congregations’ online at [theology-centre.org.uk/building-powerful-congregations](http://theology-centre.org.uk/building-powerful-congregations)



## 8.2 A FINAL REFLECTION

People often feel a tension between planning and letting the Spirit roam freely. A key message of this report is that the two are not – must not be – mutually exclusive! To be intentional about growth is an imperative if the church is to promote the fruitfulness of God's Kingdom.

The point is made with characteristic passion by Pope Francis – who leaves us with three questions which we need to address, whatever our denomination or context:

**No one is excluded from life's hope, from God's love... The Church is the home where the doors are always open, not only because everyone finds a welcome and is able to breathe in love and hope, but also because we can go out bearing this love and this hope. The Holy Spirit urges us to go beyond our own narrow confines and he guides us to the outskirts of humanity.**

**However, in the Church all of this cannot be left to chance or improvisation. It requires a shared commitment to a pastoral plan which brings us back to the essential and which is solidly focused on the essential; that is, on Jesus Christ...**

**We need a plan animated by the creativity and imagination of the Holy Spirit, who urges us to take new paths with courage without becoming fossils! We might ask ourselves: what is the plan of our dioceses and parishes like? Does it make the essential visible, namely Jesus Christ? Do the various experiences and features that the Holy Spirit grants journey together in harmony?**

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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### LONDON BOROUGH OF HACKNEY (IN THE COFE DIOCESE OF LONDON)

|                          |                            |
|--------------------------|----------------------------|
| The Revd Betsy Blatchley | St. Luke's, Hackney (CofE) |
| The Revd Rob Wickham     | St. John at Hackney (CofE) |

### LONDON BOROUGH OF TOWER HAMLETS (IN THE COFE DIOCESE OF LONDON)

|                        |                                    |
|------------------------|------------------------------------|
| The Revd Brian Ralph   | St. Barnabas, Bethnal Green (CofE) |
| Mike Houston           | Bethnal Green Mission Church       |
| The Revd Debbie Frazer | St Mary, Bow (CofE)                |

### LONDON BOROUGH OF NEWHAM (IN THE COFE DIOCESE OF CHELMSFORD)

|                        |   |
|------------------------|---|
| The Revd Pat Mossop    | Parish of the Divine Compassion, Plaistow and North Canning Town (CofE) |
| The Revd Chigor Chike  | Emmanuel Church, Forest Gate (CofE)                                     |
| The Revd Bruce Stokes  | Woodgrange Baptist Church, Forest Gate (Baptist)                        |
| The Revd John Armitage | Parish of Royal Docks (Roman Catholic)                                  |

### LONDON BOROUGH OF SOUTHWARK (IN THE COFE DIOCESE OF SOUTHWARK)

|                          |   |
|--------------------------|---|
| Fr Andrew Moughtin-Mumby | St. Peter's, Walworth (CofE)                      |
| Phil Stokes              | The Well Community Church                         |
| Fr Peter Packer          | St. John Chrysostom Parish Church, Peckham (CofE) |

### LONDON BOROUGH OF LEWISHAM (IN THE COFE DIOCESE OF SOUTHWARK)

|                      |                              |
|----------------------|------------------------------|
| Pastor Michael White | The Tabernacle (Pentecostal) |
|----------------------|------------------------------|

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