


The Filling Station as a Fresh Expression of church for consideration in the local congregational context: A practical-theological investigation

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Dates:

Received: 13 Mar. 2017

Accepted: 11 May 2017

Published: 26 June 2017

How to cite this article:

Nell, I.A. & Mellows, S., 2017, 'The Filling Station as a Fresh Expression of church for consideration in the local congregational context: A practical-theological investigation', *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 73(4), 4544. <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v73i4.4544>

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The findings of the Archbishop's Council in their 2004 report, to the effect that traditional forms of church in Britain are under threat because of changing cultural patterns, emphasise the need to re-think church for our contemporary contexts. The 'Fresh Expressions of church' movement is one such initiative identified and approved of by the Archbishop's Council. This article reports on research undertaken in a practical theological interpretation of The Filling Station, a Christian ministry that has grown significantly in its 10-year history and was formed as a missional endeavour in recognition of declining church attendance in traditional churches in Britain. This work explores whether The Filling Station is a Fresh Expression of church and whether it meets the values of authentic missional churches. In examining whether The Filling Station ought to be considered for import into appropriate local congregational contexts, it enquires whether it satisfactorily addresses prevailing social trends affecting churches, including consumerism and the need for identity.

Introduction

The Archbishop's Council's (2004:40) conclusion reached concerning the spiritual status of Britain in its instructive report titled 'Mission-shaped church' is deeply disturbing. It is stated therein: 'The reality is that for most people across England the church, as it is, is peripheral, obscure, confusing or irrelevant' (The Archbishop's Council 2004:11). This statement drives home the necessity of re-thinking church for our contemporary contexts. Traditional forms of church are under threat because of shifting cultural patterns and churches therefore have to seek new ways of being perceived as culturally relevant (The Archbishop's Council 2004:12). It is trite that church attendance in England has been in steady decline during the 20th and 21st centuries thus far.

South African mainline denominations have followed a similar pattern. According to Hendriks (2003:8), Independent African churches are growing, but he records that 'it is evident that all the established churches that came to South Africa from Europe and that have retained their European identity and theology, have basically lost their marketshare'. Walker (2014:202) warns of the inability of churches in Britain to attract adults with no churchgoing history as a child. He notes a link between church attendance as a child and adult attendance, with adult church attendance presently under threat because of greatly reduced church experience among children (Walker 2014:3).

The decline is attributed to modern trends, including consumerism and materialism, with religion viewed as a choice with no right or wrong decision (The Archbishop's Council 2004:4). Society has changed over the past decades and people's lifestyles have altered. Sundays, traditional church-attending days, have increasingly become days for leisure, home maintenance and family activities (The Archbishop's Council 2004:1–14). For a church to be suitable, therefore, it must fit perfectly to a person's lifestyle. The person will otherwise simply indulge in 'church shopping' to find something that is better or more conveniently suited (The Archbishop's Council 2004:9–10). The church, therefore, needs to find radical new ways of adapting to the differing contexts in which it finds itself, to make itself relevant in people's lives.

One initiative aimed at adapting to different contexts is the movement known as Fresh Expressions. Another similar initiative is The Filling Station, which has grown significantly in prominence in England (The Filling Station 2016), and accordingly warrants closer scrutiny. The Filling Station's expressed purpose is that it seeks to bring spiritual renewal and evangelism to a specific region (The Filling Station 2016).

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Fresh Expressions

A Fresh Expression of church is 'a new form of church for a fast-changing world that serves those outside the existing church, listens to people and enters their culture, makes discipleship a priority and intentionally forms Christian community' (Fresh Expressions 2016:13). Fresh Expressions, which the Archbishop's Council investigated in its 2004 report, is a movement originating in England, with a recently established local base in South Africa. Moynagh (2012) summarises the report's flexible approach to new expressions of church as follows:

It [*the report*] urged the church not to rely on a 'come to us' approach to mission, seeking to incorporate Christians into the current pattern of church life. Rather, the church should seek also to go out to people in innovative ways. It called for new expressions of church, perhaps meeting in unusual places at unusual times, to help people toward transformed lives via fresh commitment to Christ. It sought not the demise of the local geographically based church, but its renewal through other types of Christian community alongside it and linked to it. (p. 51)

Methodology

The empirical part of this study utilised phenomenology as methodological approach, commonly considered to be a useful methodology to which researchers can turn to identify the essence of an event, defined by Given (2008) as:

the reflective study of prereflective or lived experience ... the study of lived or experiential meanings and attempts to describe and interpret these meanings in the ways that they emerge and are shaped by consciousness, language, our cognitive and noncognitive sensibilities, and by our pre-understandings and presuppositions. (p. 614)

Phenomenological research, as an exploration of lived or experiential meaning and consequent attempts to describe that meaning, results from time one of the researchers (Mellows) spent at The Filling Station. From 25 to 27 March 2015, she interacted with the leadership of The Filling Station, namely Rev. Richard and Josephine Fothergill, and also experienced a Filling Station meeting with them at Chew Magna, a village outside of Bath, England. This exercise entailed seeing The Filling Station from an 'insider' perspective through the eyes of the people being observed (cf. Babbie & Mouton 2001:271).

Research method: Qualitative method with case study

The study consisted of qualitative research with a case study. The reason for selection of The Filling Station as a case study is that it has been in existence since 2006 and has an established track record. It has received public endorsements from numerous reputable Christian leaders (The Filling Station 2016). The Filling Station is non-denominational, but has a mandate from the Church of England for the initiative.

The Filling Station has, in its 10-year history, shown itself to be sustainable. It has multiplied rapidly over the past few

years and there are now 81 Filling Stations throughout Britain, as well as four established in Europe and two in North America (The Filling Station 2016). Because the afore-mentioned credentials are impressive and attention-provoking, The Filling Station ought to be examined with a view to serious consideration for more widespread expansion, including in South Africa.

Practical-theological assessment

A practical-theological assessment of the nature and purpose of The Filling Station has been undertaken considering the desirability of replicating the model in a local South African context as a Fresh Expression of church. In order to substantiate any recommendation, research into the following queries was conducted concerning The Filling Station:

- How does it relate to a Fresh Expression of church?
- Does it meet any generally recognised sociological need?
- Is it successful in combatting passive church attendance or does it fall prey to the influences of consumerism?
- What one can observe when one looks at the model through the lens of theology?

Empirical exploration: How does The Filling Station relate to the Fresh Expressions vision?

The Fresh Expressions vision was firstly explored, followed by the extraction of the distinctive features of The Filling Station, whereafter the two entities were juxtaposed.

Overview of Fresh Expressions

There are currently in excess of 3000 Fresh Expressions in the United Kingdom, which are attended by 20 000 people (Potter, Cray & Moynagh 2016:16). During the course of our research, one of the authors (Mellows) participated in an international conference where three defining features of Fresh Expressions were found to be noteworthy:

- Fresh Expressions are more about 're-imagining church than re-structuring' (Potter et al. 2016:2). It indeed entails a complete paradigm shift. The image of a person swimming in a swimming pool was shared at the conference, whereby the pool represents the church. Instead, with Fresh Expressions, the pool is replaced by a surfboard on the ocean, as the surfboard can go where the waves take it. It is tempting, though, for churches, in effecting change, to build a wave machine for their swimming pool, instead of taking the more radical decision of taking to the sea (Potter et al. 2016:2-3).
- According to Potter et al. (2016:14), Fresh Expressions are distinctive churches shaped by the believers' culture. It starts with prayerful listening, then becomes loving and serving as the Holy Spirit leads through open doors, followed by building community and developing into discipleship with church taking shape. In this way, there is great diversity in forms and no 'one size fits all'.

- Finally, Fresh Expressions are 'attaching rather than attractational' (Potter et al. 2016:12–13). Here, the image presented is that of a lighthouse surrounded by rafts. Just as people can no longer see the lighthouse, representing the church, they are still attaching themselves to rafts, which are the networks to which they belong. As unstable as the rafts are, the people are clinging to them for their security. It is the role of Fresh Expressions to go to those rafts, instead of expecting the people to go look for the lighthouse.

Discerning the nature of The Filling Station

Time spent at the Chew Magna Filling Station meeting and with the leaders revealed that The Filling Station is a once-a-month, 'celebration-type' gathering that aims at forming new Christian communities. It is held in non-church venues and attended by approximately 4000 people. About 40% of those who attend the meetings are de-churched, and 20% are unchurched. At least 150 conversions to Christ have resulted directly from Filling Station meetings. The remaining 40% are Christians who describe themselves as frustrated at Christian life in churches in the region (Fothergill 2015:1).

The distinguishing features of a Filling Station meeting are warm hospitality reflecting God's love and lavish provision, a good speaker, contemporary sung worship, testimonies of how God has been evident in people's lives and prayer ministry (Fothergill 2015:2). The leaders intend to promote unity in the church in the particular area and they work with the churches rather than in any competition. They desire that many who have had a marginal faith find a safe place to know God at a deeper level. They believe all can experience the empowering of the Holy Spirit and exercise spiritual gifts as a result (The Filling Station 2016).

The Filling Station Trust was set up to facilitate any local group wishing to start a meeting in their area. Rev. Fothergill is one of the trustees. It provides human and practical resources, guidance on how to establish a successful local meeting, advertising materials, liaison with local clergy, prayer support, prayer ministry training workshops, promotional tools, plus trained and experienced speakers for meetings (The Filling Station 2016).

Juxtaposition of Fresh Expressions with The Filling Station

The case study research method necessarily entails the juxtaposition of The Filling Station with the Fresh Expressions movement in the process of determining the nature and purpose of The Filling Station. While not formally falling under the Fresh Expressions umbrella, Rev. Fothergill, as founding director of The Filling Station, nevertheless believes that The Filling Station vision correlates closely with the Fresh Expressions' intent (Fothergill 2015:2). In fact, the banner headline on The Filling Station website proclaims 'a new and informal way of expressing the Christian faith' (The Filling Station 2016:n.p.), which sounds remarkably similar

to Fresh Expressions. In amplification of this statement, Fresh Expressions aim to transform communities and individuals through initiating new congregational forms with differing styles, depending on the context of the group they are trying to reach (Fresh Expressions 2016). This is equally one of the goals of The Filling Station. In addition, Fresh Expressions work alongside Christians from a range of denominations and likewise, The Filling Station describes itself as ecumenical and neutral, working across different church traditions (Fothergill 2015:1).

Fresh Expressions enter into the context of those they are serving who are mainly outside the church. While The Filling Station's meeting is overtly Christian in nature, its relaxed atmosphere is designed to make those outside the church feel comfortable. The Gospel is intended to be presented in an attractive, yet authentic fashion to those who are currently outside the church. One can infer, therefore, that there is much overlap between the intentions and practice of The Filling Station and Fresh Expression, which raises the question as to whether it is *de facto* a Fresh Expression of church. The parameters are not at this stage firmly fixed. Percy (2010:75) speaks of a 'plethora' of Fresh Expressions and deliberately avoids defining a Fresh Expression, electing instead to describe the numerous examples encountered at one local festival (Percy 2010:68–69).

On this basis, The Filling Station could indeed be a Fresh Expression of church, while not specifically calling itself such. It is beneficial, in describing the nature and purpose of The Filling Station, to be able to attribute some definition to the entity, and to have done this by way of comparison.

Does The Filling Station meet any recognised sociological need?

Insight into how society operates in our current period of history is to be gained from the sociological studies of Manuel Castells. In particular, his theory relating to the construction of identity in a network society provides guidance as to contemporary sociological needs.

Castells (1997:6) asserts that the process of constructing an identity is the source of meaning and experience for a person. He understands identity as connoting a process by which a person recognises him- or herself and attributes meaning from a set of attributes (Castells 1996:22). Castells (1996:500) hypothesises that the Information Age has ushered in a society based on networks. A person may, therefore, have a network interconnecting work, home, children's schools, sports, leisure activities and the like. Out of these networks, they will construct an identity for themselves, as this is essential in order to carve out meaning for their lives.

Taking the need for identity and meaning further, Castells (1997:69) asserts that globalisation and informationalisation brought about by wealth, power and technology have caused a sense of a loss of control as society, as we know it, is transformed. What Castells terms 'legitimising identities' are

stripped away in that the structures around which civil society was organised are no longer in existence. For instance, political ideologies around which governments were formed have ceased to be of meaningful relevance.

Why this assertion of Castells is relevant is that it demonstrates the desire for identity as a recognised current sociological need prevalent in society. There are indeed several facets of Castells' network and identity theory that are arguably pertinent to The Filling Station and provide evidence of The Filling Station's role in addressing a sociologically recognised need. These include the following.

The role of 'local' in resistance identities

What has emerged is what Castells notes as a paradoxical scenario of the prominence of the 'local' in an increasingly globalised environment. With globalisation, where the world seems hostile and uncontrollable, people react by anchoring themselves in local communal societies that give them meaning and collective identity (Castells 1997:65). Castells notes that these defensive identities are culturally based with a shared set of values. As far as the 'local' factor is concerned, The Filling Station is to a great extent placed in a local context and it is evident that it is constituted from a shared set of values. The Filling Station can be interpreted as a counter-cultural reaction by Christians who share a communal worldview of living in obedience to Christ. The Filling Station is providing people with a sense of meaning and belonging as they come together to grow communally in the Christian faith, thereby implicitly sharing a distinct common identity.

Community transformation

Castells notes that these resistance identities can be built around traditional values of God, the nation and the family and that they frequently have community transformation as their aim (Castells 1997:356–357). The Filling Station could be inferred to be the source of a resistance identity built around these values, more particularly the values of God as revealed in Christ, with its desired intention to be instrumental in community transformation.

Re-envisioning tradition

Castells quotes with approval from Giddens, who comments that people are no longer concerned about following tradition at all costs and are instead making choices for their lives independent of their heritage (Giddens 1991:1, 5 cited in Castells 1997). Significantly, it was a reaction concerning tradition, and the need for re-interpretation, that triggered the establishment of The Filling Station, as the newly converted Christians could not relate to the churches based on centuries-old traditions no longer relevant to contemporary life. The first group was formed in 2005 upon conclusion of a city-wide Alpha Course initiative in Bath. The group had tried visiting rural churches in their area, but many were highly liturgical, offering the 1663 liturgy on a Sunday, which was culturally foreign to the formerly un-churched (Fothergill 2015:3).

When Rev. Fothergill accepted the invitation to lead them as a consultant, he recognised the need for the re-envisioning of traditional church. For instance, he gratefully accepted the offer of a local Methodist minister to use their hall, as it had been renovated and did not resemble a stereotypical stark church hall. He described it as welcoming, comfortable and with non-churchlike features such as lights on dimmer switches to facilitate a relaxed ambience (Fothergill 2015:2).

Given the fact that The Filling Station is immersed in a local context, that it aims to transform its surrounding community and that it re-envision tradition, it is conceivable that The Filling Station would satisfy a recognised sociological need. It is accordingly likely that a person would derive meaning and identity through a sense of belonging to a communal entity of shared values in Christ. Walker (2014:233), while denying that Fresh Expressions possess the richness of parish church life, nevertheless concludes that the Fresh Expressions movement has 'enriched and reinvigorated the way many parish churches approach mission'. He acknowledges the role that Fresh Expressions have played in providing an identity for non-churchgoers that traditional church would not have done. This, therefore, is a strong motivating factor endorsing The Filling Station as a potentially new congregational form. Another feature of contemporary society is consumerism, and the question naturally arises as to whether The Filling Station adequately addresses this phenomenon.

Consumerism

Consumerism, whereby people find their identity in what they acquire, is pervasive in church life and the Archbishop's report alludes to the need for it to be addressed (The Archbishop's Council 2004:9–11). Gabriel and Lang (1995) describe this self-indulgent cultural trend as follows:

Pleasure lies at the heart of consumerism. It finds in consumerism a unique champion who promises to liberate it both from its bondage to sin, duty and morality as well as its ties to faith, spirituality and redemption. Consumerism proclaims pleasure not merely as the right of every individual but also as every individual's obligation to him- or herself ... The pursuit of pleasure, untarnished by guilt or shame, becomes the new image of the good life. (p. 54)

Essentially, therefore, consumerism promotes what has been termed 'hot tub religion', which embraces anything that makes us feel better about ourselves. If we examine The Filling Station in the light of consumerism, it demonstrates a consciousness of consumerism. It will be demonstrated how it both accommodates consumerism where necessary and combats it in other instances.

Accommodation of consumerism

The leadership of The Filling Station is aware of taking the dominant consumerist, post-modern culture of our times into account in planning the context for Filling Stations. They elect not to struggle against consumerism, but instead to accept it as a feature of modern-day life. A good example of

this would be the first meeting planned to launch The Filling Station in 2006 (Fothergill 2015:3–4). Rev. Fothergill, whose background was in public relations and marketing prior to ordination in the Anglican Church, recognised that, in order to make an impact in the area, The Filling Station had to be introduced as though launching any commercial brand. The essentials were a high-profile speaker and good advertising of the event.

Pursuant to this strategy, The Filling Station managed to secure Nicky Gumbel (minister in charge at Holy Trinity Brompton, London, and well-known author, as well as founder of the Alpha Course) as a guest speaker for its launch. Publicity included a large Filling Station banner produced for the occasion (Fothergill 2015:2). When news spread, such a large crowd responded that a move to a significantly larger venue was necessitated for the introductory Filling Station meeting. There is no doubt that the launch of The Filling Station was fed by a consumerist culture where the target market would be asking ‘What is in it for me?’ It is arguable, though, that there is merit in The Filling Station’s dealing with wide-spread consumerism in this way. In The Filling Station’s approach, there is an appreciation of consumerism as a normal feature of life and a decision made to be creative in working with it.

Criticism against accommodation of consumerism

Some theologians would, however, object to The Filling Station’s accommodation of rampant consumerism and argue that they ought to be combatting it outright. Percy (2010:70) is highly critical of Fresh Expressions, insinuating that it may simply be ‘a form of collusion with contemporary cultural obsession with newness, alternatives and novelty’. He labels Fresh Expressions as ‘a pure, but subtle form of consumerism’ (Percy 2010:74) and is concerned that it is reducing religion and faith to ‘consumable commodities that constantly require updating, some discarding and regular (novel) replenishment’ (2010:71). He, therefore, portrays a negative impression of Fresh Expressions and impliedly advocates revisiting the traditional English Parish system (Percy 2010:73). This is in spite of the Parish system being widely acknowledged as manifestly ineffective in attaining growth on its own, according to the Archbishop’s report (The Archbishop’s Council 2004:11–12).

Listening to The Filling Station leadership strategising, it was evident that The Filling Station was intentionally seeking out occasions to reach the un-churched. This inevitably entailed taking account of consumerism and accommodating it on occasion. Despite its apparent acceptance of consumerism, The Filling Station also displays an acute awareness of the dangers of consumerism and deliberately addresses it. Two effective ways of challenging consumerism are to build a community based on laypersons’ leadership and to develop disciples, rather than passive church attenders.

Awareness of consumerism through lay leadership

Authority for the assertion regarding laypersons’ leadership countering consumerism is to be found in the example of St. Andrew’s in Chorleywood, England, through the creation of what they called ‘mission- shaped communities’ or MSCs (Stibbe & Williams 2008:52). These were mid-sized groups created in recognition of the passive, consumerist approach to church, which abandoned the ‘come to us’ paradigm in favour of a ‘go to them’ paradigm. In places where the congregation lived and worked, they would go and create missional communities.

Of concern to the leaders of St Andrew’s, Chorleywood, had been an aspect of consumerism whereby an expectation of professionalism at church had crept in. A consequence was that this level of excellence was prompting the congregation to say, ‘Everything here is done so professionally, so why would you need me?’ (Stibbe & Williams 2008:40). Through the MSCs, the leaders saw passivity being addressed and gifts in the congregation being released in a significant way so that lay leadership grew significantly. Various aspects of organising, hosting and leading a Filling Station meeting are undertaken solely by lay people who are willing to discover, and use, their gifts to serve (The Filling Station 2016:8). They are given a mandate to lead the meeting, and clergy are in fact discouraged from doing so. It is self-evident that this approach is strongly advantageous in combatting consumerism as people are transformed from passive consumers into active participants.

Awareness of consumerism through discipleship focus

Authority for combatting consumerism through discipleship is to be found in Moynagh’s (2012:xvi) statement on the importance of discipleship in Fresh Expressions: ‘Forming disciples is vital if new churches are to avoid being “frothy expressions” – consumerist expressions of church that fail to encourage an obligation to local people and a commitment to the whole church’. Percy too (2010:72) provides authority for the statement that discipleship is an effective means of tackling consumerism. One of Percy’s criticisms is that Fresh Expressions may just be appealing to those who desire meaning and fulfilment through the Christian faith, but who discard the demands of duty and service which belonging to a group entails. He labels this discipleship, tacitly endorsing it as an effective defence to consumerism.

Willard views discipleship as the reality of God at work in our world by transforming followers of Christ into Christlikeness. His approach to participation in the Kingdom of God is through spiritual formation by way of spiritual disciplines (1998:116). For Willard (1998:27) ‘full participation in the life of God’s Kingdom and in the vivid companionship of Christ comes to us only through appropriate exercise in the disciplines of life in the Spirit’. At this stage, Rev. Fothergill concedes that it is not possible for The Filling Station to focus heavily on discipleship within Willard’s meaning

of development of spiritual disciplines, owing to the infrequency of meetings only once a month. The Filling Station nevertheless recognises the crucial aspect of discipleship in Christian life. For this reason, the leadership encourages the people attending The Filling Station to connect with a home group at a local church for Bible study, prayer and the development of other spiritual disciplines (The Filling Station 2016:8).

However, discipleship goes beyond teaching Christian doctrine and entails moulding hearts and establishing godly habits (Smith 2009:17–18). The key to being a disciple is the person of Jesus and embarking on a journey with him. Discipleship, as emphasised by the Fresh Expressions conference (Potter et al. 2016:8), is therefore deeply embedded in relationships demonstrating a counter-cultural way of life modelled on Christ's example. Discipleship and consumerism are mutually exclusive and so discipleship is critical to reversing the trend of passive, reduced church attendance. Moulding hearts and desires and journeying with Jesus inevitably require time, commitment and investment in relationships. We believe that The Filling Station has the capacity to focus on discipleship, particularly if it draws on current resources of lay leadership.

A theological reflection on The Filling Station as a Fresh Expression of church

Emphasis on mission

The Archbishop's report (The Archbishop's Council 2004:81) enumerates five values for missionary churches from which we can gauge their authenticity. As the researchers observed The Filling Station through the lens of theology, it was deemed appropriate for it to be tested against the five values detailed in the Archbishop's report. The Filling Station's praxis should accordingly reflect the following five values.

A focus on the Trinity in knowing and worshipping God as Father, Son and Holy Spirit

A Trinitarian Christian faith is undoubtedly the doctrine of The Filling Station. Rev. Fothergill articulates the theology of The Filling Station as follows, in so far as what he calls the 'non-negotiables' of the teaching and living out of the Christian faith are concerned: The Bible is the full authority for their faith; the Trinity is taught, where God is worshipped as Father, Son and Holy Spirit; Jesus Christ is Saviour and Lord; repentance is necessary for a saving relationship; and the Holy Spirit is immanent, with roles including conviction of sin and dispensing gifts (Fothergill 2015:5–6).

In essence, The Filling Station impliedly adopts Migliore's (2004:69) description of the Holy Trinity's creative and redemptive work: 'The biblical narrative of God's reconciliation of the world through Jesus Christ and of God's bringing the work of salvation to completion by the power of the Holy Spirit implies a Trinitarian understanding of God'.

Incarnational in nature

A Fresh Expression of church is incarnational in that it shapes itself according to the culture in which it is formed (The Archbishop's Council 2004:81). During our research, we observed how the leaders of The Filling Station take the following factors into account in adapting to the dominant culture of their context as they seek to be incarnational (Fothergill 2015:6–8):

- Sundays are no longer seen as traditional church days, so The Filling Station deliberately does not hold meetings on a Sunday, but instead uses a weekday evening timeslot.
- Great care is taken not to appear 'churchy'. At one meeting, the minister of a church in the area, who was supportive of The Filling Station, arrived in her clerical robes and stood at the door welcoming people. She had to be politely deterred from doing so, as Rev. Fothergill said that the de-churched often have such an aversion to the church and a fear thereof that they cannot bear even to cross the threshold of one. This fact is endorsed by Nell and Grobler, who mention one of the Fresh Expressions churches visited as intentionally avoiding religious language and customs that could alienate people (2014:4).
- They select their venues carefully. Present Filling Stations take place in village halls, schools, a coffee shop, museums, pubs, barns and at golf courses. The Chew Magna meeting was held in a building that was originally the village brewery and is currently used for ballet and karate classes and community events.

Transformation of the community it serves

The Kingdom of God is the goal and the missional church is intended to be a sign of God's Kingdom in the community (The Archbishop's Council 2004:81). This would accurately reflect the way that The Filling Station sees itself. As an example, one of its projects is the production of a quarterly, colour magazine called *The Good Life*, which is distributed free to those in the community. The magazine intends to appeal to the un-churched and contains stories of changed lives through the power of Christ (The Filling Station 2016).

Disciple making

Disciple making, based on Matthew 28:19–20, would involve growing in the Christian faith by focusing on the person of Jesus and the life he modelled. Having been discussed above, this value for authentic missionary church has been satisfactorily canvassed.

Relational in nature

The final value for authentic missionary churches against which The Filling Station ought to be tested is whether it is relational in nature. The giving and receiving of love and friendship, as well as the practice of hospitality, are expressions of life in community, which is God's intention (Migliore 2004:77, 78). When we test this criterion of being relational against The Filling Station, we find that it is

satisfactorily achieved. From the video insert on The Filling Station website we can infer the importance of relationships and community forming (The Filling Station 2016). The visit to The Filling Station at Chew Magna gave the distinct impression of an authentic community.

Conclusion: Reversing the downward trend of church attendance

It is clear from the Archbishop's report (The Archbishop's Council 2004) that traditional church attendance has been plummeting over recent decades. Gibbs and Coffey (2001: 17–22) also provide detailed, worldwide statistics of Western, English-speaking countries from which the decline of church attendance is beyond dispute. Creativity is, therefore, called for in finding new ways of doing church.

Fresh Expressions is such a movement that provides hope for tackling this task. The Archbishop's report (The Archbishop's Council 2004) states that Fresh Expressions should not simply be promoted because it is a new and currently popular movement. Instead, however, the Archbishop's report (The Archbishop's Council 2004:80) recommends that it be welcomed as a sign of the Spirit's creativity in our age and a sign of the advancement of the Kingdom.

Far from being a novel and untested phenomenon, Moynagh (2012:3–50) places Fresh Expressions churches squarely in a historical setting, providing validity for them as entities with an established history. He traces God's activity down the centuries and demonstrates how 'the church has translated that divine activity into a dazzling array of cultural contexts'. While The Filling Station may not look like a form of church we are used to, it is arguable that the initiative is part of a lengthy heritage of contextual churches formed within the specific culture of a group of people. The concept is also not one that has suddenly seen a 21-century interest. Instead, the likes of Newbigin (1995: 59–65) had, during the last century, already called for a missionary church and for re-imagining the church to halt ongoing decline.

The Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams, under whose leadership of the Anglican Church the Archbishop's report was published, discerns signs of a more mission-minded church (from indications such as an increase in adult baptisms), which he attributes to the Fresh Expressions movement. He expresses hope that the Archbishop's report is a hypothesis that could be proven to be true in the hands of new contextual churches (Goddard 2013:60–61).

In time, we will see whether the hypothesis is proven true and whether Fresh Expressions reverse the decline in church attendance. We believe that The Filling Station's track record

so far is promising and that it is a sign of the creativity of the Holy Spirit in displaying diversity in our contemporary context.

Acknowledgements

Competing interests

The authors declare that they have no financial or personal relationships which may have inappropriately influenced them in writing this article.

Authors' contributions

I.A.N. was the study leader in the project and made conceptual and structural contributions. S.M. did the literature study and wrote the article.

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