

LEARNING

from

LONDON

Church Growth in Unlikely Places

Jason A. Fout

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ISBN: 978-0-88028-478-3

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Printed in the USA



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Foreword

It is rarely a good notion to mark one's own homework. The temptation for those responsible for the leadership of any institution, including the church, is to shelter behind comforting stories that suggest things are not really as serious as the figures might suggest. Candid friends are needed to help fulfill the first duty of those in charge, which is to tell the truth about current problems and the challenges that lie ahead.

Jason Fout is just such a friend. Having heard rumors of a surprising reversal of years of decline in the Diocese of London, he decided to investigate for himself. He took the trouble to assess the evidence and talk to some of those involved in Capital Vision 2020 with its watchwords of "Confidence, Compassion, and Creativity." The results of his research are published in this book.

I was ordained in the early seventies and experienced the twenty years from 1975-95 as a time when the church in London was fearful and bewildered.

On one side of the faction-ridden leadership of the church was little more than the dull echo of the secular liberal consensus, while on the other side, there was an obstinate adherence to an anachronistic clericalist vision insufficiently rooted in Anglican tradition.

Traces of these tendencies survive. It is always a difficult task for yesterday's self-designated avant-garde to admit that they are today's busted flush.

We were an introverted church wasting our energies on liturgical fidgeting and much ado about “ministry” while elaborating a defensive bureaucracy, half a generation after other organizations had begun to simplify.

Underlying the changes discussed in this book were some fundamental pre-suppositions.

- This world cannot be understood simply as a theater of human willing. There are laws and limits, which if defied result in destruction.
- The business of life is to become attuned and aligned with the Holy Spirit.
- The task of a leader in the church is to revere the tradition but to see it as a dynamic communication between generations that must change in order to maintain the whole economy of truth.
- The leader must listen and watch expectantly for the activity of the Spirit in his or her generation, working to clear away debris and obstacles and to establish a direction of travel without being prescriptive about the details in a way that can risk overlooking opportunities.
- There must be constant reference to the way of Jesus Christ who has been revealed as the human face of God and the embodiment of God’s plan for the spiritual evolution of the human race. He is the figure who is coming to meet us from the end time when the work of creation will reach its consummation.

I was consecrated as a bishop in 1992 when Francis Fukuyama’s celebrated book *The End of History* was published. His thesis that the world was firmly set on a

course of liberal democracy and market economics that would ultimately bring about the consummation of the human project now seems less convincing. It is time for the Christian church to recover its own eschatological vision and to confute those who believe that heaven was about twenty years ago and whose prayer is simply, “Lord, let it last my time.”

The Rt. Rev. Richard Chartres
Bishop of London, 1995–2017

Chapter 1

A Growing Church: Bucking the Trend

From 1990 to 2012, the Diocese of London in the Church of England grew by around fifty percent. That the church would be growing substantially in a city that is one of the world's most diverse, multi-faith, cosmopolitan, and pluralistic is counterintuitive, to say the least. In the Episcopal Church, or more broadly among mainline Protestants in the United States, these factors are typically cited for why we need to lower our expectations and prepare for inevitable decline. In London, they are just part of the scenery.

I first heard about “something” going on in the Diocese of London back in 2009 or so. I wanted to learn more, and so when I was putting together a travel course in 2013, I included several days in London to talk with a couple of people there. What I uncovered surprised and intrigued me. I instantly wanted to learn more.

I applied for and received several grants to go back to London to spend time with folks, getting to know what was going on at ground level. I talked to people in the leafy western stretches of the city and people in the hardscrabble east; I met with people in the northern and central parts of the city; I even ventured south of the Thames to have coffee and a chat with a

team of folks working in the Diocese of Southwark. I met with bishops, archdeacons, priests, pioneer ministers, lay leaders. I got to know London, its church, and its people in a much different way than I ever had. In all of these meetings, I got to hear about how these folks approach ministry in London, what they have learned, and how their churches are growing.

Since that time in 2013 and 2014 getting to know the diocese, I have led (by mid-2019) seven more travel courses, all focused sharply on the life and ministry of the Church of England in London. In those five years, about 75 people from around the world have participated: lay leaders, deacons, priests, ordinands, a bishop or two, as well as many Christians from other denominations.

Over this time, I have come to the conclusion that four key elements are contributing to the unexpected growth in the Diocese of London:

Identities and churchmanship

One of the elements I've observed on the ground in the Diocese of London is a collegial spirit across church parties.¹ There are distinctly evangelical, Anglo-Catholic, and liberal churches in the diocese. Yet I've seen much less rivalry and condescension among London Anglicans toward their siblings than I have elsewhere. I was part of a group that visited a prominent progressive church in London, and we mentioned we had just come from a well-known evangelical church. The rector spoke warmly of this other church's ministry while also differentiating it from her own church's approach. Where I expected a bit of sniffiness, there was appreciation. This is not to say that there is never any criticism or backbiting, but there seems to be more willingness to get along and even to learn from each other than I have seen in other places. This mirrors

the attitude of (now retired) Bishop Richard Chartres, who was distinctly and unapologetically Anglo-Catholic in his own convictions and yet encouraged and blessed all forms of life and growth that were arising in the diocese.

Another noteworthy aspect of the Diocese of London is that it encourages distinct churchly identities. Rather than being everything for everyone and risking being nothing in particular for anyone, each church pursues its own distinct vision of its life. Each church works to be inviting and welcoming, but people are invited and welcomed into something distinct. The churches of various deaneries, when they gather, worship in the mode of the host church: evangelical, charismatic, catholic, and so forth. The diocese does not impose a “diocesan standard” when clergy or other church groups worship together, one that pretends to include all styles (and ends up disappointing them all). There is strong encouragement for churches to be who they are, and to own that identity, while also being in conversation with those who are different.

While each church tends to have a very distinct identity and to welcome people into this distinct identity, each church also has a clear sense that it is called to serve its parish—the surrounding neighborhood. (A number of “attractional” churches draw people from across the city and the region, but these are the exceptions and, through their church planting programs, are moving toward being more locally settled.) This means that the churches in the Diocese of London are focused on serving the surrounding area and its needs, not only for evangelism but in all kinds of service. This means that while a church might develop a very particular identity featuring, say, a very traditional Anglo-Catholic high mass, it does so with a clear sense of call to a very diverse local community rather than being a private club of the like-minded.

This leads to what, for many in the world, might seem a counterintuitive observation: there are blessings to establishment as it is lived out in the Church of England today. There's much more that can be said about establishment; for now, it is enough to note that part of what it means is that the Church of England is called to everybody and not just "our kind of people." While there are, without question, benefits to not being an established church, as in the United States, Kenya or Australia, it's not all gain.

Early in 2015, I attended an ordination service in the Episcopal Church during which an American bishop told me a story. He told me about a college chaplain who was leading a ministry with participation of about twelve people total, situated on a university campus with around 30,000 full-time students in residence. The bishop asked why the chaplaincy wasn't connecting with more people. One of the students piped up, saying that: "We're just not for everybody." Apparently, those involved in the chaplaincy ministry figured it ought to focus on the very few enlightened souls who already "get it." This attitude is common not only in chaplaincies but in all kinds of churches across the United States: we are too often chapels for "our kind of people."

As Episcopalians, we are too often content with—even proud of—being self-selected elites. In case this seems overdrawn, consider a cathedral congregation in one American diocese. A demographic survey of their congregation found that, among other matters, fully 92 percent of their people had a graduate or professional degree—and this in a nation where roughly 33 percent of the population has earned even a four-year bachelor's degree. I don't mean to suggest that education is anything to be ashamed of: It is certainly not. After all, I am a professor at a seminary! But this congregation, which considers itself "diverse," is anything but. Denominations in America often think of themselves as having a particular niche.

For Episcopalians, very often the niche is the educated and upper-middle class—and, in some areas, former members of other denominations. We tend to focus our efforts on these groups, “our kind of people.” But this isn’t the mission of Christ’s church.

The Church of England, for all its foibles and imperfections, at times has a clearer sense that they are not merely a voluntary organization for “our kind of people” but are called to serve all in society in the name of Christ.

Creative evangelism

I have also noticed that evangelism in various forms is more intentionally embraced in many of the London churches, and not just the obviously evangelical ones. There is a sense that people ought to be able to talk about their faith to others, and the church needs to be able to invite people into faith. Part of this attitude may come from the reality of post-Christendom in London: the church recognizes that it can no longer take for granted that everyone knows what the Christian faith is and what Christians believe. If church members don’t talk about who Jesus is and what he means, then it either won’t happen at all or others will articulate the Christian faith for us, often quite poorly (think of Richard Dawkins’ caricature of the faith, for example).

This need to name and explain the Christian faith has spawned programs such as the Alpha Course (and others), which are designed for people who are unchurched or de-churched to explore the faith, and be honest about questions or doubts. Beyond these explicit introductions to the faith, churches think about how they can serve the people who live, work, or otherwise move through their parish/neighborhood. The churches think not only about how to serve people but also how to *reach* them with the message of faith. Contrast this with

a longstanding, widespread reluctance in the Episcopal Church to engage in evangelism (despite an explicit commitment in the baptismal covenant).

Countless stories illustrate the sad state of our approach to evangelism. Consider this real-life example: a candidate for rector of an American church asked the search committee about their evangelism efforts in that congregation. After an awkward pause, one person responded that they have an annual rummage sale, and everyone is welcome to come. Another added: “We’re Episcopalians. We don’t really do evangelism. We’re not really interested in growing.” This forthrightness might be an outlier, but I would wager it is not far from many people’s experience.

I have hope that this may be changing with leadership from Presiding Bishop Michael B. Curry and other innovative programs in the American church such as Evangelism Matters, but I believe we still have much opportunity to grow when it comes to our attitudes about evangelism.

Culture of mission

Another key to understanding the church’s growth in London is its culture of mission that has been instilled at both the diocesan level and in individual churches. The Diocese of London has devised several seven-year plans that articulate goals for growth and new life. They contain challenges and “big hairy audacious goals,” but they also have been designed “from the ground up”—not from “top-down” directives. That is, these plans have been developed after listening to what was already taking place in congregations and building upon successful initiatives.

Another component of the culture of mission is the diocese’s expectation that churches will use Mission Action Plans (MAPs). MAPs help congregations translate their vision

into action, providing specific tasks with particular people accountable for and empowered to carry them out.

This culture of mission is not only found at the top though. Many churches make mission (in some form) an absolute priority. Some of these are longstanding churches, such as Holy Trinity Brompton or St. Barnabas, Woodside Park. Over the past thirty years, Holy Trinity Brompton has planted sixteen churches. St. Barnabas is committed to forming Missional Communities in its area. Other, newly planted or restarted churches are intentional about incorporating mission from the very beginning of their lives. St. Paul's, Shadwell, is one example. Restarted in 2005, the church expresses its vision as: making disciples, transforming communities, and planting churches.² St. Paul's takes seriously all three of these commitments to mission: Among other things, they have planted three other churches in ten years.

This culture of mission is supported and extended by a number of ecumenical Christian ministries such as London City Mission and the Centre for Theology and Community. For more than 180 years, London City Mission has worked to bring the gospel to people in the city, particularly the poor and marginalized. They provide evangelists, youth workers, prison chaplains, and community outreach workers; some of the ministries are attached to a church and some are standalone. The Centre for Theology and Community equips churches to be agents of change in their communities through the practices of community organizing, theological reflection, and prayer. Community organizing becomes a means of congregational development that benefits both the church and the broader community. The Centre also undertakes research to help churches pursue their mission. Although London City Mission and the Centre for Theology and Community are different in their missions and emphases, they both provide support for the church in London and contribute to a culture of mission.

About the Author



Jason A. Fout has taught at Bexley Seabury Seminary Federation (and before that, Bexley Hall) since 2009, as associate professor of Anglican theology. Originally from Chicago, he studied at the University of Illinois at Chicago, Seabury Western Theological Seminary, and The University of Cambridge. He now resides in the Columbus, Ohio, area, dividing his teaching between Chicago and London. In London, he teaches a course called “Learning from London,” a weeklong dive into the mission and ministry there, building on the foundation laid by this book. Although he does not serve a congregation, he is passionate about helping to stimulate conversation among clergy and lay leaders about creative, faithful ministry.

It has often been remarked that England and the United States are two nations separated by a common language. Jason often finds himself in the situation of translating the Church of England (in which he was licensed to serve for four years) to the Episcopal Church (in which he has been a priest since 2001), and vice versa. We are, it seems, two churches separated by a common tradition.

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