

A group of bishops gathered at Church House on 27 January 2015 to discuss city centre resource churches. Chaired by the Bishop of London, the meeting received a presentation from Ric Thorpe, London diocese's church planting advisor, plus contributions from bishops and church planters with experience of creating a city centre resource church. This note draws on the presentations and discussions, and considers what is meant by a city centre resource church; and what needs to be done to create one, including the role of the bishop, and the church planter and their team. The note ends by considering some of the wider questions for the Church of England which are raised if it is to create more city centre resource churches.

A city centre resource church?

'It would be great for every diocese to have a resource church – and not just one but two or three' – the Archbishop of Canterbury.

St Paul's mission strategy focused on reaching cities first which, in turn, spread to surrounding areas. 250 years ago 5% of the world's population lived in cities, now it is 50%. This trend is largely reflected in the UK. People are moving to cities faster than the church can keep up. Statistics from the 2011 census tell us that 82% of the population in England and Wales live in urban areas. Therefore, focusing on the cities, and thus influencing the large population centres, is a key way of reaching a whole nation with the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Yet the Church of England does not have a strong engagement with many cities (especially those in the midlands and the north of the country).

Younger people, international migrants and the poor are attracted to and disproportionately represented in our cities. Cities are full of diversity and dynamism – crossroads for ideas and people across the world. Yet cities are disproportionately under-represented in terms of ministry.

The Church needs a greater focus on cities and cities need lots of different kinds of churches in order to flourish: churches in the city-centre, inner-city and suburbs; large churches that can resource wider ministries, smaller churches that can go local and deep – and everything in between. The churches of a city or region are healthy when each one knows its own unique calling, when each one is not threatened by other churches playing their part, and when each one recognizes the role it plays in the wider church of that city.

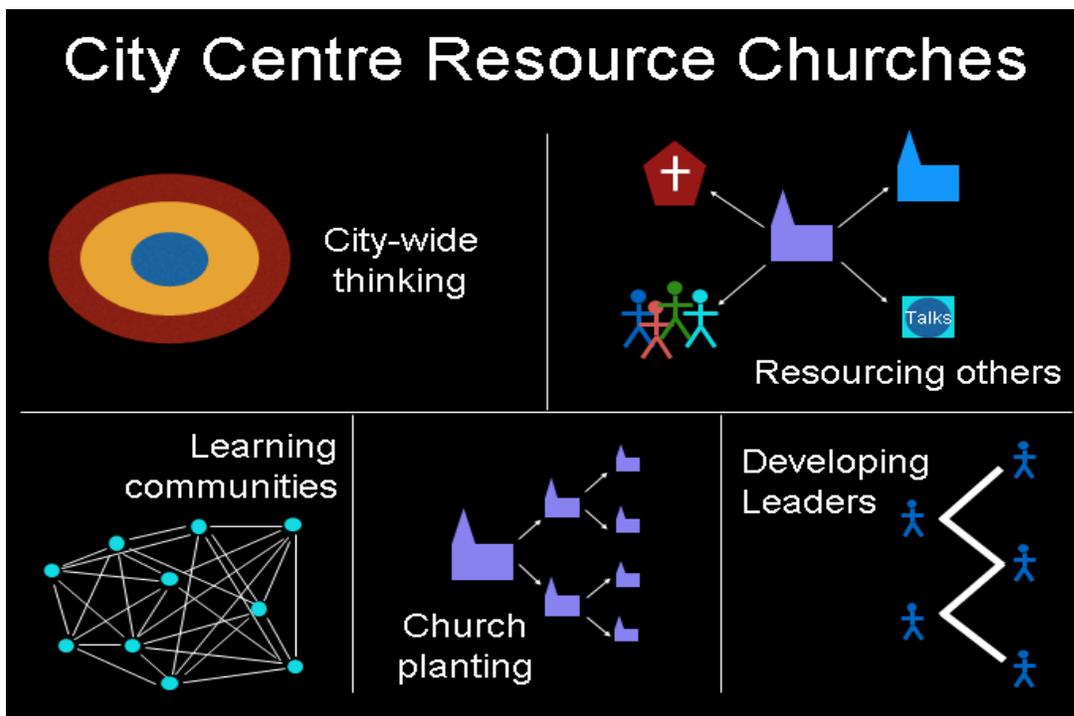
Cities are particularly in need of larger city-centre churches which fulfil a resourcing role. Typically, such a resource church will be drawing people from across all or part of the city and will have a Godly vision to see a wide impact around the city and the practical abilities to make that happen.

The capacity provided by such resource churches offers a unique opportunity that, if positioned right, can release huge blessing to mission in a city as a whole. A big vision is

needed for this to happen and it should be shaped around blessing the city, rather than the church simply getting bigger for its own sake. It requires an emphasis on some core values which will catalyse a missional flow of ministry that will genuinely resource the church across the whole city. These include:

- **generosity** – give away what we have been given (church planting, resources, teams, etc);
- **partnership** – work with others to reach our city (diocesan bishop, churches, other denominations, businesses, charities, etc);
- **audacity** – re-evangelise our city and help transform the structures and communities (with a vision big enough to capture the imagination of the city and only achievable with God)
- **humility** – serve the city and its churches (play our part, listen and serve the city)

Even the biggest city churches cannot reach the city on their own, but they can release their capacity to energise a city vision that many other churches can get behind. City centre resource churches can do this in 5 ways:



1. City Wide Vision (Supporting Bishops)

Diocesan bishops have a big view of their city and so can city centre resource churches. The bishop’s work can be enhanced by having a good working relationship with large resource churches and working through how they “fit”. The resource church should be asking “how can we help you achieve your vision for the city?” and the bishop can give permission and encourage the city-wide vision and mission of that church.

2. Resourcing others

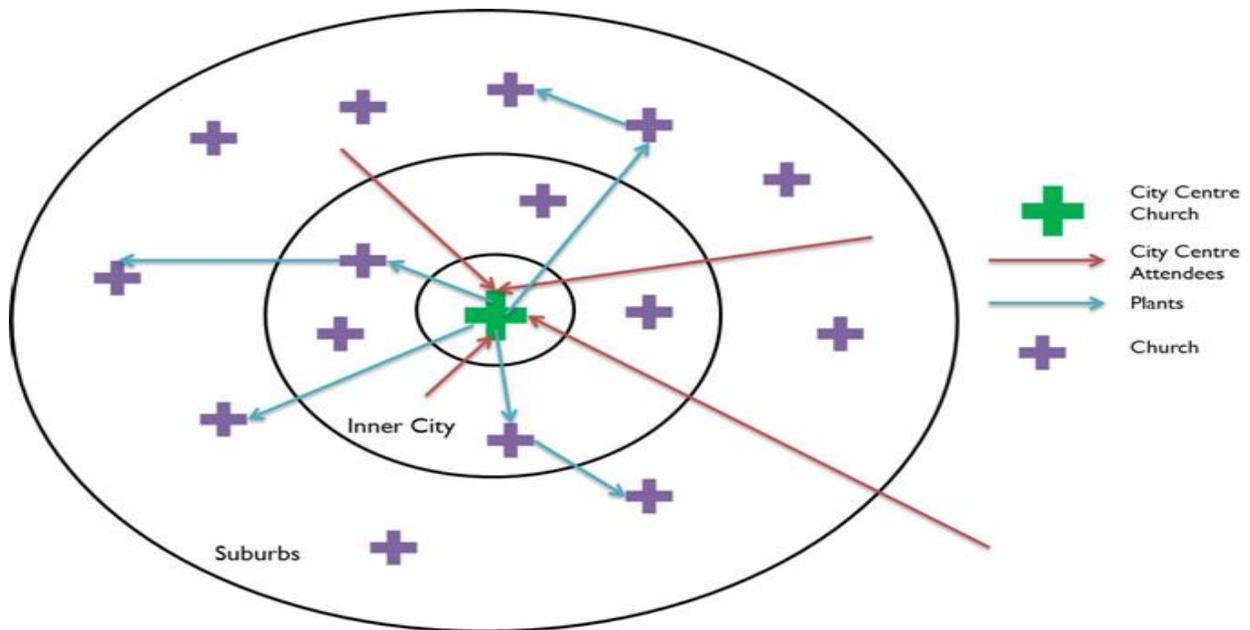
Larger churches are more able to support staff who develop specialisms and resources. If these are focused on the needs of the city and not just the needs of that church, the city centre church can enable many other churches to get involved in receiving and using these resources, as well as joining in with the development of the impact of these resources across the city. Examples include promoting marriage and family life, debt advice, caring for ex-offenders, evangelism courses, etc. Resource churches can equip and enable their members to visit other churches in ministry teams to help run courses, lead worship, give testimonies and talks. For churches called, for example, to highly contextual mission this can be an enormous blessing and encourages mutuality and reciprocity.

3. Learning communities

Large churches can also act as learning communities – on issues internal to the Church but also on wider issues, bringing together political, business and charity leaders to discuss matters relevant to the city and nation.

4. Planting churches

Larger churches can plant other churches that will multiply mission across a city working with the bishop and other churches. Experience suggests that churches which plant churches attract leaders and members who themselves want to plant and this helps, even if it doesn't replace, those they send. Partnerships as well as plants can also be a key source of renewing struggling parishes using church planting methodology. Strategic planting with other churches and denominations should also evolve as parts of the city in greater need begin to be targeted for resourcing. It's important to work with the demographic footprint of a city. A vibrant church in the city centre will draw people to it who live in the inner city and surrounding suburbs (although they may well work in the city centre). Over time, if suitably resourced, this church should be able to plant into other parts of the city, and those churches should in turn plant into their adjacent areas.



5. Developing leaders

Larger churches, simply on account of their size, have more leaders and are well placed to develop leadership training programmes to accelerate the development of character and leadership competence. These programmes need to be set in the context of raising up leaders to resource and equip the whole city. With a longer view, leaders of different disciplines can be developed for church planting into specific contexts and helping other churches across the city e.g. cross-cultural leadership in areas of different ethnicity.

Creating a City Centre Resource Church

Where to start?

Where city centres have existing large churches, bishops can ask: how could this church resource the city? Could it help to catalyse mission across the city as a whole? Often, however, large churches have been viewed with suspicion by diocesan teams – or simply as a source of giving income (a ‘cash cow’). In return, large churches have been disengaged and mistrustful of ‘the diocese’. These tensions need to be overcome for the sake of the gospel so that the vision of re-evangelising the nation is aligned with the energy of the larger, thriving churches. Bishops need to have a personal relationship with their larger churches, not merely a bureaucratic one. Bishops may not particularly favour or enjoy the style of worship of such churches, but can still bless and encourage their ministry. The style of Anglican worship has always shown variation and flexibility over history; the question ‘is a church really Anglican?’ should be assessed with reference to Anglican doctrine not a particular style of worship.

If there isn’t an existing church capable of being a resource church, the bishop and their senior team have the opportunity to work together to encourage one to be established. The leadership and resources required to plant a city centre resource church are immense, and are likely to require help from outside the city (and diocese) as well as inside, but such a plant has the potential to transform mission to the city. Examples of such plants over recent years have been Brighton (which has recently planted in Hastings), Norwich, Lincoln, and Bournemouth¹. Birmingham diocese has recently bought an old gas works in its city centre to accommodate a new church plant.

It is important to get the right building for a city centre resource church; in particular its location, practicality and condition. A building near to a student hub is desirable as students are a key grouping for city centre resource churches. A building in a visible location near to the city centre is a hugely significant factor too. The building should ideally be large enough to seat many hundreds of people (at least 400) and have flexible space (no boxed pews!) which can be used throughout the week for other activities. Similarly, a building with additional rooms or extra buildings is ideal for small groups, children or offices. The condition of the building should also be taken in consideration when trying to identify a building for a city centre resource church. The Brighton church

¹ Case studies on the Brighton and Norwich plants can be found at http://www.churchgrowthrd.org.uk/UserFiles/File/Resourcing_Mission_Bulletin/July_2014/02_Church_planting_in_Brighton_and_Norwich.pdf

plant is in a fantastic location, but its building has required significant expenditure – with more planned.

The Bishop's role

The role of the bishop is key in the creation of a resource church e.g. developing and communicating the vision, facilitating discussions with local partners (including other denominations) about the new venture to build support, being prepared to back the investment of resources in the plant, and overseeing the appointment of the right leader for the church.

The Bishop needs to stay closely engaged with a church plant and its leader for the first 12-18 months. The clergy leader is likely to face daily and unexpected challenges, and will require support. There may also be continuing local tensions to cut through. It is important too for a bishop to ensure that those leading the plant maintain the vision of the church acting as a resource church for the city and diocese. Church plants can, left to themselves, become introverted. There may be value in having a memorandum of understanding between the bishop, leader and resource church, which sets out the vision, expectations, and values of the church (e.g. the priority of prayer).

It is important to think ahead to ensure that the resource church is sustained and developed. And to ensure that it fulfils its role as a resource church, e.g. by planting elsewhere in the city. This requires bringing together the leaders of city centre and other churches in the city. There is a need to network those involved in church planting, so that church planters can support and resource one another. Bishops are well-placed to help deepen such a network and facilitate the engagement of church planters from other denominations.

The leader's role

The churches of a city are healthy when each one knows its unique calling, and do not feel threatened by the part other churches are playing in the mission of God. Equally important for city centre resource churches is to know and understand the specific culture and context of their city. City centre resource church leaders need to think about the character and implications of the gospel and about the culture of the city into which they are planting. They have a responsibility to use this to guide and inform their analysis and decision making processes in order to develop a city centre resource church whose ministry and vision is fruitful. As an example, the new Bournemouth city centre church is ministering to the large number of students that live around it, but also to the homeless and drug addicts on its doorstep.

Having experience of leading a larger church can help better prepare a city centre resource church leader as they are likely to have an understanding of church size dynamics. Making connections and partnering with other churches is also part of the leader's role. These partnerships can provide support and prayer in the build up to and on-going life of a new church plant. Leaders of large resource churches have a responsibility to one another and to their congregations to meet regularly to share learning and encourage one another.

A city centre resource church leader needs to be entrepreneurial. It is not uncommon for them to find themselves starting a church with few resources, so understanding how best

to use the resources that are available is vital. Furthermore, if a resource church is to take church planting seriously, it needs to allocate dedicated funds towards it. It is then a responsibility of the church leader to ensure that the plant remains financially sustainable, particularly if they hope to initiate another plant in the future.

The role of the core team

There is not a 'one size fits all' approach to church planting; each church plant is different and should be treated accordingly. Similarly, the initial core team that plants a church will differ in size and how it is made up. For example, when Revd Archie Coates led a plant to St Peter's, Brighton in 2009 he took a team of 30 people with him. The Revd Jim Prestwood was part of a team of just 9 that moved to plant in St Swithins, Lincoln where they were joined by 6 additional members who were sent from a nearby church to form a team of 15. This core team contains those with experience of youth and children's work, which is to be a vital part of the church's ministry to local schools and students. Having a core team and starting with a staff team creates momentum (the movement of people following a leader) and is one of the unique features of a church plant of partnership.

'Top tips'

Some essential factors to create a city centre resource church are to:

- Establish and maintain a supportive and collaborative relationship between bishops and the resource church.
- Carefully select the leaders and core team – be sure to evaluate the suitability of the leader's experience.
- Get the right building in the right location.
- Explore who you can partner with (e.g. other churches), in what ways you can partner with them and what you hope to achieve through this partnership.
- Maintain an outward vision in order to keep the church acting as a resource church.

There will inevitably be failures. The Church of England needs to take more risks not less. The trick is to learn from failure. In relation to church plants, failures have arisen where there has been tension between the planting church and the bishop/diocesan team; where the planting church has become enfeebled by sending out the plant team; and by the church plant reverting to 'pastoral' rather than mission/growth mode.

Some Questions

Can a plant start in a parish where there is already a viable congregation?

There is room in a large parish for a number of church plants. The critical issue is whether the leader of the church plant will have ultimate leadership of the parish or will report to the incumbent. Church planters will normally want full control and there may be problems if the leadership arrangements are not clear. A parish can be split (e.g. by a bishop's mission order) in order to give proper recognition to a church plant.

Where are the black church planters?

In churches other than Anglican ones! It will be good to create stronger partnerships with black majority (non-Anglican) churches, in order to strengthen the Church in England. Could churches be bold enough to deploy ministers from other denominations and swap training posts?

And the women church planters?

It is still early days in terms of female church planters. Offering training posts to women in church plants would be a helpful way forward.

Are there leaders available to lead city centre resource churches in the north?

Long-term, northern dioceses need to 'grow their own' talent. In the shorter-term, there may be some people leading churches in the north who are suitable to lead a resource church and there are northerners leading churches down south who could be persuaded to go north. Those who are pioneers by nature want to take up difficult challenges and need to be given the opportunity to do so. There needs to be a vision throughout the Church of planting out and away.

Are city centre resource churches the only way to reach a city or diocese? What about the need for mission in council estates or market towns?

Creating a city centre resource church will not solve everything; it needs to be complementary with other mission initiatives (e.g. the creation of the resource church in Birmingham was one part of its 'Growing Younger' strategy). The Church of England is generally very weak at ministering in council estates and needs to be intentional about addressing that. But resource churches, over time, can help provide resources and energy to help develop mission in a number of different contexts across a city and diocese.