

ABSTRACT

A Biblical, Theological and Practical Examination of a Mixed Ecology Model of Church in an Irish Context.

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A mixed ecology model of ecclesiology has been developed over the past twenty years within the Church of England. The claim is made that this approach enables traditional congregations to exist in an effective missional partnership with fresh expressions. This dissertation is an attempt to assess that claim within an Irish context. A sizable proportion of the population now declare themselves to be non-religious and are disconnected from the Church. At the same time, the Church of Ireland bishops have encouraged parishes to develop new communities of faith for their own contexts. This study probes whether the mixed ecology model enables parishes to connect effectively with secular society, and whether diverse expressions of Church can happily co-exist as the model claims.

The research was conducted in three parishes in the Republic of Ireland and involved clergy interviews and lay focus group discussion. The focus groups included equal numbers of traditional and fresh expression members so that an accurate assessment of the model's missional effectiveness could be achieved. At the academic level, there was an examination of the biblical basis for mixed ecology in Acts of the Apostles and an assessment of the theological arguments for and against the approach.

The dissertation affirms the model's biblical and theological legitimacy, finding it to be reflective of the pattern of relationship within the Trinity and in line with the practice of the early Church in Acts. The three parishes were relationally interdependent, faithful to the *Missio Dei*, and committed to serving their community in unity with one another. The research highlighted the importance of a communal vision and acknowledged the difficulty with the creation of segregated, homogeneous groups. Nevertheless, it also demonstrated the missional effectiveness of fresh expressions and the strategic initiatives undertaken to ensure unity within them. The leadership challenges, alongside the importance of collaborative ministry, were fully recognised.