

Frequently Asked Questions about Mission-Shaped Communities AA & GP Dec 2016

This set of Questions and Answers is an ongoing attempt to address the various arising comments and queries over the introduction of St. John's exploring Mission-Shaped Communities. You may wish to read the whole document or skip to the question that you personally need answering.

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2	Aren't we already effective and active in our church? Why do we need to change anything?
3	We had success back in the 80s, 90s and 00s, why can't we just keep doing what we've previously done? We have skills and a great venue for attractive evangelistic events, why do we need MSCs to reach new people?
4	What do you really mean when you say 'Mission'? - do you just mean evangelism or something more?
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1. Q: Are MSCs really all that different to home groups?

A: Home groups became popular and regular in the 70s/80s, and have held great value for millions of Christians - because they nurture faith and create a spiritual place of belonging. This is a big and positive step on from simply attending main services. However, the default position of most groups is that the group is 'For Us'. The idea of 'discipleship' is usually thought to mean 'my personal development as a Christian'. This focus on 'Me' illustrates a difference in culture between an MSC and a home group. An MSC is focused primarily on Jesus, and what he wants to do with the community. It continues to provide a place of belonging and nurture, but with a core focus on Jesus' desire to make disciples locally (including us!). An MSC uses its UP time to include listening to God and daring to follow his leading, out into the mission he sends us to. To reinforce this feature, an MSC has a monthly rhythm of UP, IN and OUT throughout a month, with a goal of regularly and intentionally building missional links with others. This is more than occasional events, it is part of the life of the group. In this sense, 'discipleship' includes 'disciple-making', which is different to a regular home group.

2. Q: Aren't we already effective and active in our church? Why do we need to change anything?

A: We are indeed a very busy church. A lot of activity is listed in our newsletters and every month has something important going on. But we have to ask ourselves what is actually 'effective'? - What do we mean by that? The simple evaluative three-word measure of UP, IN and OUT helps us to gauge the value of what we are actively involved in. In reality, a large amount of what we do is focused on existing Christians (UP and IN activities). Our services are (in the main) for us and our small groups are for us. There are of course some lovely exceptions, but our OUT activities are less frequent and usually 'event or course based' - with no ongoing input for enquiring people. Our OUT activities come to an end, and open people are expected to simply join in with our UP and IN activity. Or not. And we have to be honest about how many of us are regularly connecting with new enquirers and actually helping them become Christians. Low attendance at courses like Alpha indicate that our activity may in fact be not all that affective. To sincerely be an effective church, we need to be more intentional and fruitful in disciple-making.

3. Q: We had success back in the 80s, 90s and 00s, why can't we just keep doing what we've previously done? We have skills and a great venue for attractive evangelistic events, why do we need MSCs to reach new people?

A: The local church here has indeed had experience of success in reaching and discipling new people. At that time in the past the church was being helpfully adaptive in terms of style: to be more effective at reaching people beyond church it recognised that some things needed 'modernising' - and so we included more contemporary-sounding singing, we adopted contemporary instruments and AV. We started using media in our presentations. We ran new innovative courses like Alpha and had special guest services or mission weeks. But back then, there were more people who already had a basic knowledge of Christianity, and so our fringe of connections already understood (and were more sympathetic to) who we were and what we believed. We had an easier pool in which to fish. The world has dramatically changed in the last 30 years. Style and form changes are no longer enough to attract and persuade people. The wider world is always going to be more 'attractive' in terms of styling and technology. Something deeper is needed, which will require us to rethink what church and mission is all about.

4. Q: What do you really mean when you say 'Mission'? - Do you just mean evangelism or something more?

A: It is great that the term Evangelism is now more commonly known and understood in the UK. It is also good that many understand the importance of reaching new people for Christ. However, the word "Mission" is bigger than evangelism. One feature of the New Testament is the discovery that God himself is a missionary God (God so loved the world that he sent his only Son). It is part of his nature to go out and reach people. But what Jesus meant by mission included the transformation of everything. 'The Kingdom of

God' is a term to describe literally everything in the Universe coming into step with King Jesus (which will include fighting injustice and bringing beauty and benefit into society). In terms of reaching people, it is much more than seeking converts who sit in our services. The Commissioning of Matt. 28:18-20 is to "Make disciples (who make disciples)". We are to go further and deeper than before, teaching new people to disciple new people, so that our work multiplies to the ends of the earth. Mission is this and not anything less.

5. Why do we need to "Make disciples who make disciples?"

A: As in Answer One and Four, the actual biblical text describes discipleship as more than personal development. Jesus called his followers to not only become like him in character and ministry, but to also become like him in calling others to do the same. Jesus sent out both the Twelve (Matt. 10) and additionally the Seventy Two (Luke 10) - showing that this missionary posture is applicable to all followers and not just specialists. To be a disciple - enjoying God, becoming the person you are meant to be, discovering your gifts, INCLUDES the recruiting of others to follow Christ too (and to teach them to do likewise). As with biology where a living cell can inherently multiply, so it is in our spiritual makeup to make another who can make another. Yet recent Western Church life has often opted for a more 'Therapeutic Christianity' focused on our own wellbeing and improvement. Although this is a wonderful feature of following Christ, this singular focus has led to a situation where many have forgotten how to effectively take the faith beyond ourselves. Jesus wanted a movement that would strategically reproduce itself over and over again to the ends of the earth; carrying everything he originally taught the Twelve (Matt. 28:18-20). To achieve this we need to properly serve existing and future Christians by not only teaching them how to be disciples, but to also make disciples - who can do the same with others. If we don't, the Christian faith is only ever secure for the present generation of believers. Indeed we are presently in a season of national decline in numbers, so the rediscovery of ongoing disciple-making is urgent. We need a movement that knows how to extend and reproduce itself indefinitely. We may not all be evangelists or teachers, but collectively we need to develop communities that know how to keep on reproducing: disciples who know how to make disciples. This isn't an additional feature to normal discipleship, it is part of what Jesus originally commanded, and our newest members need to be taught how to do this.

6. Q: Are MSCs simply a different structure and strategy? And why is it any better than what we already have?

A: It is possible to read the books and hear the talks and purely sense it all as merely a new strategy and structure. Instead of small groups we're using medium-sized groups. Instead of Sundays being our focus, MSCs are our focus. But this would miss a central point. This movement is primarily about disciple-making (not structures) and about following the tangible and specific leading of Christ (not just a strategy). All of us have a tendency towards the familiar. We may have innovated 20 years ago, but now it has become set in stone. We tend towards the institutionalising of what we know and like. This MSC discipling movement is an attempt to honour the fact that God cannot be boxed in. He may want to do new things. MSCs need to be adaptable. So this is not just a change of shape, nor is it a technical fix; it is a change of culture.

7. Q: MSCs talk about sharing life more, but I don't really want to do that. Why should I?

A: We live in an era in history where the nuclear family has displaced 'extended family'. No longer do relatives live nearby and we don't all regularly get together as a normal part of life. More people live behind closed doors and technology is replacing face-to-face friendships. Yet the picture of church in the bible describes something deeper than that. 1 Corinthians 12-14 describes regular interactive informal meetings with food, prayer, gifts and guests. The 59 'one anothers' in the New Testament describe an extended family sharing time, life and things, crossing cultures and social boundaries. In Acts 2 it shows that this dynamic was a feature of the church's attractiveness to new people. Today especially, people are looking for authentic community. They want this more than they want slick services or great sermons. It may be that we Christians will have to re-learn how to share life against our initial preferences, but once we taste the benefits of belonging in a deeper way, we will have something much more powerful and rich to invite friends to experience. Our obedience to Christ's call to be one and to love one another (deeply) requires us to do this.

8. Q: Is an MSC like the Church Planting done 20 years ago?

A: The church planting movement continues to this day, and what happened at Knights Meadow two decades ago is a good example of a grassroots initiative that worked well. The difference with MSCs is that they are still regularly connected to a central shared gathering (service) rather than operating as something completely separate. For the benefit of belonging to something bigger, for the benefit of teaching input and receiving prayer from others, MSCs spend several Sundays with the whole church. On some Sundays they are away and separate (like a church plant), but they come back as part of a healthy monthly rhythm. This gives members of MSCs a bit more of a chance at sustaining the new adventure of mission, because they are attached to a supportive central meeting and leadership. As with church plants, The MSC leaders are still accountable to the church leaders still and receive special discipling from those at the centre.

9. Q: Why do you want to shift focus from Sunday being the main thing to MSCs being the main thing?

A: Traditional church gathers conveniently on Sundays. This is still very important to MSCs, and we want to endorse the regular meeting on Sundays. However, our mission-field no longer wants to come to where we are. Society is now mostly 'unchurched' and often finds our Sunday services alien and possibly unhelpful. Let's face it, a lot of our in-house Sunday experience is designed for believers, not enquirers. Guest services are less effective than before, and don't actually make a successful and real effort to bridge into the lives of people beyond church. As with Jesus who travelled from village to village and met needs where people were, so we are acknowledging the simple fact that God's mission is somewhere else - where people are. This has to become the new centre. Where God's mission is is where the church's emphasis lies. Sundays (gathered church) will be an important refueling and equipping moment for Christians, but our energy needs to be on releasing the scattered church to build relationships and share Jesus where the Spirit leads.

10. Q: Some people say that MSCs require Christians to be more committed / deeper in faith. In what ways?

A: One of the features of MSCs is a call to be more fully committed to Jesus as a disciple and disciple-maker. This requires a change of or deepening of identity. It may have been 'easier' in a more familiar form of church to rely on your own abilities and strengths, but in a context where we genuinely want Jesus to lead, we may have to let go of previous props. Therefore our deep sense of identity in Christ becomes a much higher priority. The more secure we are in Christ the more able we will be in adapting to a 'Jesus-led' group situation. MSCs also need people to be often open to the leading of the Holy Spirit. This may mean a collective discernment, with a range of gifts used. It may also require humility to follow the insights of someone else in the group (instead of your own). All of this does suggest a deeper faith being required. This is a natural and positive side-effect of being with Christ - you are changed positively by being a willing follower.

11. *Some of this sounds like Cell Church principles - a bit like what we called 'Connect Groups' here at St. John's church. In what way is it different and a better approach? Cell Church seems to have floundered - how do we know that this approach won't flounder as well?*

The UK Cell Church model emerged in the mid-1990s to early 2000s. It developed in the East as a means of responding to rapid church growth, placing a strong emphasis on combined mission and discipleship through small group settings which included the '4Ws' of Welcome, Worship, Word and Witness as key elements in every gathering. In Eastern contexts this worked particularly well in cultures already very strongly relational and less individualistic, where there is often greater willingness to comply with what is a fairly top-down, prescriptive approach. The model began to be adopted in the West, but in response to a very different missional 'challenge'. In the West, the hope was that Cell Church could *produce* rapid church growth rather than respond to it. Though it has been successful in some UK contexts, in many cases it did not produce the necessary change in church and small group culture, so that 'cells' ended up being essentially traditional home groups by another name, mostly with the loss of any strong outward focus and

without the rapid multiplication true cell church envisages. These are some of the reasons why they have floundered.

Some suggest a further reason is that the cell group (or Connect Group) size (6-12) is too small to create the kind of 'critical mass' needed for effective group outreach to unchurched or dechurched people, especially where that has not previously been at the heart of the small group gathering. MSCs are a response to this in encouraging the development of mid-sized communities of 20-40 people to engage proactively in developing deeper, disciple-making relationships. This is both more fruitful and more sustainable in the longer term. MSCs may include a cell group style meeting as part of their monthly pattern to provide more 'up' and 'in' balance, but it is not the only aspect of the community's shared life and activity.

The tendency with Cell Church was to think that, if only the model were implemented correctly, the fruit would be inevitable. Sadly this has not been the case. Such models and strategies often flounder because they are not attentive or sensitive enough to each individual setting and context. MSCs have a different starting point in that they begin from a place of listening, seeking and discerning who God is calling us to, identifying where and how the Holy Spirit is already at work and experimenting together with people who share a similar sense of calling to a specific neighbourhood or group of people. In other words, they begin from the mission not the model. MSCs offer the freedom for members to develop their own structure and rhythm of Up, In and Out around what seems most appropriate and fruitful for the group rather than imposing a particular method.

12. Will MSCs flounder in the same way as Cell Church or Connect Groups?

MSCs are by nature experimental, they don't come with a cast iron guarantee of 'success', but then neither do other approaches or simply sticking to what we know! MSCs are a vehicle for cultivating a holistic and authentic missional lifestyle with discipleship (both for ourselves and others) at the heart. The goal is to grow through being an extended family on mission, mirroring Jesus' pattern of discipleship and the picture we see in Acts 2 and in the early church. It's appropriate to explore these parallels because we now live in a society where the gospel is increasingly an unknown story and where church as we know it is a very alien culture to the majority of people. MSCs take time to form and develop since the focus is less on reproducing a model and more on nurturing a disciple making culture around everyday life. If we can rise to the challenge of the change of mindset and approach involved, in the longer term MSCs offer the potential to create deep, lasting and transformational relationships through new and existing networks, always maintaining an outward element. They are more likely to be sustainable because the 'glue' is this strength of relationship rather than say an activity, course or model in itself. MSCs may not feel 'tried and tested', but the nature of twenty-first century culture and society in the UK, where church attendance is estimated to be as low as 8% and declining, is increasingly challenging and inspiring us to be innovative, to re-imagine church and the nature of evangelism and discipleship in fresh ways. The good news is that there are others who are further ahead of us on this journey who we can learn from, and who have already identified some of the key elements which contribute to thriving MSCs.

13. Q: Is this just one of many Fresh Expressions? - what is so favourable about this over other expressions? What problem are Fresh Expressions and MSCs trying to address?

The term 'Fresh Expressions of Church' was first coined in a ground-breaking report by the Church of England and the Methodist Church called 'Mission-Shaped Church' in 2004. It's used to describe newer and more innovative forms of being church for a changing postmodern and post-Christendom culture. Both fresh expressions and MSCs are seeking to address the challenge of the enormous gap between inherited church as we know it and contemporary culture. A Tearfund survey in 2007 indicated that 33% of the UK population are 'dechurched' (have had some experience of traditional church and wouldn't choose to go

back to it) and a further 33% are 'non-churched' (have had no experience of traditional church and express no interest in engaging with it). In Kenilworth, for example, 77% of people say they are Christian but only 2% attend church. How do we reach the other 75% as well as those who wouldn't describe themselves as Christians at all? How do we help them to hear the gospel afresh and become active disciples of Jesus? Both fresh expressions and MSCs seek to find ways of connecting more effectively with these people by listening carefully to God and to the community we find ourselves in, and by going to and being with people where they are rather than expecting them to come to us. Both emphasise discipleship as a key aim, though MSCs take this a stage further in developing communities of disciples who can also make disciples themselves.

Fresh expressions exist 'primarily for the benefit of those not yet members of the church'. They do not seek to simply reproduce existing forms of church or to be a bridge back to church as we know it. The idea is that the fresh expression becomes the main and only expression of church for those who join it, so a central connection and gathering is largely lost. This can lead to a sense of isolation in what is tough, pioneering work. By contrast, MSCs acknowledge the importance of a 'red hot centre', a regular central gathering to resource, inspire, nourish and nurture the innovation and experimentation going on in communities which are scattered at other times. Additional support is provided through Huddles, Learning Communities, Coaching and Mentoring and other training. This increases the likelihood of sustainability. Fresh Expressions have discipleship as an aim but it's really left to each new fresh expression to work out how they will go about that discipleship, often starting from scratch. They envision but don't necessarily equip. This often limits the launch and leadership of fresh expressions to those who are particularly pioneering and entrepreneurial. Existing MSCs have developed an adaptable toolkit of resources, such as the 'life shapes' to offer some guidance on how to move people on in their discipleship. This means a much wider range of people can successfully lead and develop MSCs.

14. What are the advantages of starting MSCs compared to traditional church planting?

A: When Knights Meadow was successfully planted 20+ years ago it was birthed with around 25 committed members. This kind of approach still has merit, especially if such a body of people emerge with a clear call from God. However, the costs of such a model are high - the new church leaves the original church (and this can make the original church limp for a time). The new plant has to stand on its own from this point on. Whereas an MSC can begin with smaller numbers and will regularly return to the big Sunday gathering several times a month - this allows the MSC more time and security to get established, and maintains support and input from the wider church long term. Traditional church planting used to be focused on the starting of a new Sunday service somewhere else. The problem facing UK church today is that unchurched people aren't naturally attracted to our services. Simply setting up another service in a new venue isn't going to be enough to draw in new people. MSCs are different in that they begin with a local need or interest, where unchurched people already are. Just as Jesus healed sick people (meeting their presenting need), so an MSC builds positive relationships where people are. This then gives MSC members an opportunity to develop natural faith-sharing and disciple-making, leading to new members joining. Another change in UK culture is the reduction of spare time: most couples are both working, and retired people are busy with grand-parenting AND care for elderly parents. So we need a more lightweight model that can fit into normal life. The running of a fully-fledged new service every Sunday (as in a church plant) may be too demanding for a new group to sustain. An MSC can begin with simpler expressions, whilst enjoying the big original Sunday gathering run by others. In addition, there is more room to experiment with MSCs, which may sometimes fail. If they do fail, you can easily start again, as you are still attached to the main church gathering. But a failed church plant is a more demoralising and difficult experience as more was invested at the beginning. So even though a traditional church plant could be a way forward (with enough called people and a clear vision), MSCs generally are a better and more achievable model for our current circumstances.

15. Q: When it comes to implementing MSCs, what does this mean for existing ministry? Will the Leadership ignore or close down existing ministry? Can some existing ministry keep going? Can some existing ministry be changed into an MSC?

MSCs are really about opening up new possibilities with fresh imagination, so the Leadership will not be closing things down! We want to celebrate and affirm the huge amount of really positive outreach, discipleship and ministry that already exists at St Johns. Sharing and exploring a new vision of MSCs and a central purpose of making disciples who make disciples is not intended in any way to dismiss or discredit great work which has gone on in the past or current ministry people sincerely feel called to and which is bearing fruit. One of the strengths of MSCs is that they are a grassroots initiative, born out of people listening to the Holy Spirit and following where Jesus leads with others who share a similar vision for a particular group of people or neighbourhood. They will never be successful if there's an attempt to impose them from the 'top-down', as it were, and that's not what we want to do. The leadership of the church, including the PCC, is suggesting that MSCs are a significant direction of travel we want to explore and pursue, recognising that this will take time. It has been said that MSCs are about evolution rather than revolution. So far, the emphasis has been on sharing the vision, developing awareness and understanding, and actively encouraging some initial MSC experiments (e.g. Toast/Bread Group). Existing ministries continue, with encouragement to consider what and who Jesus is calling us to now, whether these ministries include Up, In and Out elements, whether they are sustainable and whether they have the capacity to make disciples who can make disciples. Are they about mission rather than just maintenance? Do they involve depth of relationship as well as breadth of engagement? We want those involved in these ministries to be the ones who discern what God is saying and how the Spirit is leading them. It may be possible for some existing ministry to develop into MSCs but it does involve more than simply 'tweaking' a few things here and there. It's about a change of culture rather than simply a change of technique or style. It may be that Jesus calls us to lay down certain things in order to focus on what he has most given us vision and passion for and/or what is most fruitful. We might be finding ourselves spread too thinly and feeling overstretched.

As leaders, we want to support people in working through these questions and hearing what God is saying. The vision for MSCs and the MSC experimentation that is happening at St John's are still in their infancy, but we believe they represent the seeds of sustainable future growth. As with any new birth in a family setting, whilst other family members are still cherished, not ignored, there is a particular focus of time, attention and energy on the newborn to ensure s/he has the best possible start and greatest potential for growth and health going forward. In the same way, the leadership and staff team will continue to give special emphasis and energy to the development of MSCs whilst still offering support for those involved in existing ministries as they continue to discern God's leading and respond to that.

16. Q: If we already have separate ministries that deliver a mixture of UP and IN and OUT why do we need MSCs to do all three together? Isn't it good to have a variety of places where people can get different elements?

It is true that as a church we have some great ministry that is focused on different elements. 8am BCP Communion provides a set devotional service for individuals to enjoy. First Sunday Family Lunch provides a great moment for church family to enjoy each other's company. 'Food and Fun' provides a much valued seasonal occasion for local parents with children on free school meals. But if our goal is 'To make disciples who make disciples', then we also need a means by which people can experience all three elements of UP, IN, and OUT with roughly the same group of people. Why? This is the model that Jesus used with the 12. He invested time in them in particular so that they grew in all three areas as a community. By doing all three elements with the same people they were more obviously accountable to Jesus and each other for their steady growth in each area. When people try to do each element in separate contexts they are less accountable and therefore grow more slowly (or sometimes not at all). Imagine a pot plant, and on one day it has soil but no light or water. On another day it is lifted out of its soil and has sun, but still no water. On

another day it is watered but has no soil or sun. How will it live? Each of the three discipling elements make more sense and have more power when combined with the same community. Read Matt. 13:1-9, 1 Cor. 5-8 and 2 Tim.2:6. Jesus and Paul use farming as a metaphor for fruitful ministry. Imagine for a moment an unwise farmer who only scattered seed, then moved on to another field to scatter more seed. This unwise farmer never returned to the field where he sowed, because he thought that his job was only to sow seed. But a wise farmer attends to each field long term, watering the seed as well until a harvest can be brought in. One common weakness in some church ministry is that we get stuck at seed-sowing but don't commit ourselves to 'growing and harvesting'. Others may only water without ever sowing. Jesus spent three years with the same 12 people investing long term into deep relationships and training them to be like him in ministry. Jesus didn't only do preaching and healing with new people, he raised up a mature family of disciples. MSCs recognise that true discipling involves the development of UP, IN and OUT in those we spend most time with, otherwise we aren't properly making disciples who can make disciples. A classic example of this is when a group from an Alpha Course stay together afterwards, so that they can keep on growing together in a place of belonging. Here's an interesting thought: At what point were the 12 'born again'? - we don't know. As with Jesus and the 12, our job is to disciple long term with a rich diet of UP, IN and OUT for those we are with - God will do what only he can do. Of course we and others can happily visit and enjoy a range of ministries across the church, but if we are serious about disciple-making, we need to concentrate on a few who experience UP, IN and OUT with us long term as a family.

17.Q: How might an MSC begin?

An MSC begins by gathering a core group of people who share a common sense of vision and calling from God to reach a particular group or network of people, or a particular neighbourhood – this might be young families, for example, or artists, or friends who enjoy baking or a particular street or venue. This core group begin to pray and meet together and invite in 'people of peace' – people outside the regular church family who have an interest and enthusiasm about the same things and are open (see Luke 10: 1-16). This is about recognising and identifying where God is already at work in people, hanging out with them and doing things with them. This can be based around everyday life, interests and things we already do – for example, going to the cinema, for coffee, for a walk and thinking who we could invite along with us. People of Peace will often draw with them a wider network of people. At the same time, we begin asking what is good news for these people? What aspect of the gospel might speak to them most at the moment? We begin to find ways of both showing and telling them the good news of Jesus. This creates an open, discipling culture from the outset. As relationships deepen, MSCs will develop a more regular monthly pattern of opportunities to meet together, making sure that across the different get togethers there is a good balance of Up, In and Out opportunities. If we are having difficulty thinking of any People of Peace, we might have to simply start by getting out and about in the community, with neighbours, in coffee shops, or taking up a new hobby, to rub shoulders a bit more with people outside the church.

18. Q: How will MSCs be developed and sustained, so that they succeed?

MSCs begin and are developed through vision, passion and prayer. They are sustained through:

- Regular gatherings and outings, deepening relationships with People of Peace and including a good balance of Up, In and Out across the monthly pattern of the MSC
- Connection to the central worship gathering which is 'red hot' to inspire, build up and nourish the MSCs as they come together
- Active support, coaching and mentoring from members of the leadership and staff team
- 'Huddling' MSC leaders to provide a space for open sharing, evaluation and accountability

- Learning Communities to provide additional training
- Keeping the structure and organization 'lightweight' so that meetings don't require huge amounts of preparation, making sure that everyone participates in making things happen (e.g. bringing food, games, providing transport)
- Maintaining a focus on making not just disciples, but disciple makers
- Growing to the point of multiplication so that newer MSC members themselves identify a vision and calling and pursue that