

Building Missions

Sharing some experience from Christ Church Auvergne

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Go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.” Matthew 28:19

One body and one Spirit, one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all. Ephesians 4:4-6

Christ Church Auvergne: Who we are?

Christ Church Auvergne started in 1996. Today’s membership includes about 35 families of which 90% are expatriates. Our congregation includes more than 10 different nationalities and welcomes Christians from many denominational backgrounds.

Our Mission Statement: “Christ Church Auvergne is an English-speaking congregation that seeks to reach out to our community to spread the good news of Christ Jesus throughout Auvergne. Our fellowship professes faith in Christ through worship, fellowship, education, stewardship and outreach. We welcome people of all backgrounds, nationalities and denominations at any stage of their journey of faith. Christ Church is a mission of the Convocation of the American Churches in Europe.”

Over the course of the years our congregation has gathered some insights that have been very helpful for the development of our mission. Sharing these insights might help others starting a church. We have two main focus points:

1. A short history of mission building, in three steps
2. Building stones of a mission community.

1. A short history of mission building, in three steps

In retrospect the development of our congregation can be listed in three steps:

Step 1: Encouraging the initiative and providing basic resources

Validation

When a call is made for a congregation to become a mission (most of the time by Anglican/Episcopal Christians or by some American / English speaking Christians living in France) it is important to value this initiative and encourage it if possible.

Minimum basis

A group is ready to start if there is a plan for regular worship gatherings, demonstrating a love for the Lord, his Word and his Sacraments, and a willingness to worship in the tradition of the Episcopal Church.

First support

The Convocation can support this initiative with pastoral encouragement and by providing the basic books: the Book of Common Prayer and Hymnals.

Step 2: Recognizing this “prayer group” as an “Episcopal Mission”

Structure

The starting mission starts with organizing itself: gathering in a chapel or church; establishing a bishop’s committee; and some basic financial planning.

“Logistical” support

The Convocation offers the congregation a priest for Eucharist, beginning on a monthly basis. The new mission also receives support for theological training (offer of participation in Convocation education events, of Bible studies, participation in the annual Convention, ...)

Step 3: Establishing itself as self-supportive congregation.

Permanent minister

The new mission starts a discernment prayer process and develops a solid financial and congregational support plan to have a priest in charge (part-time or full-time).

Ministry and outreach program

The new mission also develops a wider ministry and outreach, such as Sunday school, youth group, Bible studies, ...

“Theological² and “technical” resources:

The new mission receives the support of the Convocation in a variety of spiritual and biblical resources, such as financial planning, social security, taxes, Church Pension Fund, church accounting, and church administration.

Resources, such as the *Vestry Handbook* or the *Small Church Growth Strategy Handbook*, help to guide the new community as an Episcopal Church structure.

2. Building stones of a mission community

Reflecting on the Mission of the Lord and our prayerful dedication at the basis of starting a mission, we today can list a number of key facets that were indispensable for us in our congregational development.

1. Focus on the basics

Most parishes and missions in Europe are multi-denominational. The integration of a variety of Christians can be a challenge as well as an opportunity.

The great opportunity mentioned by most members of our mission is the fact that this context of our mission leads us back to the basics of Christianity. The liturgical and traditional differences turn out to be relative, sometimes even superfluous. What binds us together is the unity in the Lord. Focusing on our Christian faith, we discover how much we are different but also alike, how much more we are united in the Spirit, how much freshness relies in these crucial basic components of our love and faith in Jesus Christ.

2. Prayer group & Bible study

Prayer and Bible study are indispensable for a strong spiritual foundation of a mission. It is hard to generate enthusiasm in the Spirit without prayer and Bible study. The members of the mission must take the initiative. It cannot be forced from outside: it must come from within the mission. Without this spiritual heartbeat, it becomes hard to survive.

3. Support of the larger church community

Knowing that this young sprig is rooted in the garden of the larger community is more than comforting.

Getting in touch with the support of the Convocation is critical: Annual Convention, Education (European Institute for Christian Studies), Mentoring Program for clergy, retreats, the bishop's support, ...

4. Gradual process and shared leadership

Expectation can grow high, especially once a mission exists for more than a year or two and the membership has crossed the twenty threshold. This can have a reverse effect. Disappointment becomes bigger than necessary at times of a fallback.

Running ahead can change the dynamic into an "official, structured" setting. The homey, welcoming, enthusiastic atmosphere from the beginning is replaced by a stricter environment.

Sometimes, this difference in expectation and capability can cause burn out of mission leaders. A number of approaches can prevent these types of disappointments:

a) Trust in the Lord

Ask God for guidance and help in giving you his priorities for your mission. Let the Spirit guide you.

b) Welcoming house

It is important to keep the group open. One single church view or one particular spirituality should be avoided. Input from all members should constantly be encouraged.

c) Openness for change and walking together

Growing as a mission means there needs to be room for growth. The temporary character that comes with an expatriate community contributes to this aspect of a mission. The quick turnover in membership forces us into openness for change. The group walks together, willing to embrace the various stages of each person's journey with Christ. There are few rules to make sure the dynamic is flexible and ready for adjustments. In a mission we walk and grow together, with room for mistakes, new initiatives and necessary change.

d) Shared leadership and strong stewardship

There are different types of leadership. Each particular mission may need its own type. From our experience we have learned that collaborative leadership or shared leadership is important. The vibrancy of a mission relies also on the involvement of every member in the community. Creating room for sharing different opinions facilitates the sense of belonging and unity in the membership. The annual stewardship campaign is therefore called a stewardship emphasis, with focus on participation of all members by dedicating personal talents, time (& space), besides financial contributions.

Unless the Lord builds the house, the labors work in vain. Psalm 127