



# A Northern Gospel? What Good News is at the heart of flourishing Churches within their communities in the North of England?

## Executive Summary

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**The original research** developed from Nigel Rooms' co-edited set of essays published in 2016 entitled *Northern Gospel, Northern Church: Reflections on Identity and Mission* (Durham: Sacristy Press). This was the first time the question of the North/South divide in the Church in England had been dealt with in a published work and it raised important questions for mission in the north of England. In particular Nigel's own chapter ('Bias to the North: The Meaning of the North and Its Gospel') asked whether there is a particularity of approach in mission defined by the context which is the North. Drawing on missiology from a wide variety of sources in Roman Catholic and Protestant scholars (e.g. Stephen Bevans, Andrew Walls) and their theological reflection on the history of mission, Rooms suggested that the gospel cannot be separated from the culture in which it finds itself. A project to develop and test these ideas via field research in the North of England was devised. A research assistant was quickly appointed to work with Nigel – Elli Wort (née Course), who completed her own PhD on faith and culture in Hull in 2019.

**Our first finding** occurred very quickly and it was a problem with the word "flourishing" in the research question. Church leaders we approached for subject churches stumbled over the word 'flourishing'. We reasoned that if we were looking for a Northern Gospel, we needed to be looking in places where the Gospel was real and being lived out in the lives of churches and communities, however that might look. We'd used the word 'flourishing' to indicate we were looking for churches where God was at work, where growth might be happening, where people may be discovering the 'gospel', however conceived, for the first time. The leaders felt that any new growth that was happening in churches was often fragile, struggling, on the knife-edge between 'success' and 'failure'. Researching it might not help! This gave us a first, crucial insight into a Northern Gospel: whatever that Gospel might look like, it might not look like 'success'. Thus, we began to look for churches where "something is happening" as subjects for the research.

Eventually we identified 49 churches (44 Anglican and 5 Methodist) and we **devised a survey** to be filled in by the church's leadership (some did it together, others left it to one person). We had 18 full responses (37%). The results were as follows. 78% of our respondents said their church leadership was completely or

mostly local, and 94% said their church leadership was completely or mostly Northern or regional. All our respondents said people were coming to faith in their churches: 44% saw people regularly coming to faith, and 56% saw people occasionally coming to faith. 44% of respondents said these new Christians were regularly sticking in their church after professing faith, and 50% said these people were occasionally staying in church after professing faith: 94% in total. 95% of our respondents said that the relationship between their church and the community was somewhat or completely warm and open. These churches were indeed where “something was happening”. These were churches where there was a strong relationship between the community and the church, and often where church and community would work together. These were churches with a strong sense of ‘local-ness’ and ‘Northern-ness’ in both the leadership and the congregation.

Over late 2018 and early 2019 we conducted **field research** by visiting seven churches who had filled in the survey from across the breadth of northern England, in cities and in rural areas, in coastal and inland areas, in affluent and more deprived areas. They were big churches and small churches, from Evangelical, Charismatic and Catholic traditions. We explain our methodology in detail elsewhere – given the tightness of space in this summary we’ll share what we discovered from more than 105,000 words of interview and descriptive data we collected.

We argue from the data that the Good News at the heart of “flourishing” churches in the North is:

- *Everyone's welcome* – beyond the usual rhetoric, the leaders of our churches especially lived this out, and **these churches were genuinely receptive to the ‘other’** and open to being altered by people who joined
- *The effect of this is that, at several cultural levels, including class, they are prepared to change:* we encountered the genuinely two-way street of a transformative Gospel
- The Jesus (who is in some deep sense ‘the gospel’) at the heart of these churches, is seen **both as a personal and public Christ**
- **God is present and active through the Holy Spirit** in the lives of the Christians of these churches, through that intimate and communal Jesus.

While not discerning a definitive ‘Northern Gospel’ we encountered **a Gospel with a distinctly Northern “accent” or dialect**, characterised by:

- People being down-to-earth, honest, real, inclusive, vulnerable
- Fragility and freedom – we encountered post-Christendom as embedded in Northern realities and fragility and freedom are therefore two sides of the same coin for religion in this new era.
- Intentional engagement with class as a cultural signifier and barrier.
- Emic leaders who have left their original communities, and returned with a bigger, etic horizon, a commitment to the North, and an ability to cross

boundaries to go where the Spirit is leading. We therefore complexify the notion of the 'indigenous leader'.

We suggest that we have uncovered in this research a **truly Northern contextual theology**, which is only possible to discern in a post-Christendom and post-colonial context. As political and social power in the country becomes more and more concentrated on London, communities receive less and less funding, the North becomes increasingly visible as a post-colonial locale. The institutional church in the North finds itself in a similar, post-Christendom situation, reflecting the prevailing culture and plausibility structure. The North is struggling, and the church is struggling alongside it.

As noted above we set out to ask whether we could find a Northern Gospel, and we haven't discovered one. Perhaps we were being too naïve and simplistic. But we have discovered genuinely contextual theology, and we offer this as a gift to the wider church from the North of England. We offer this theology as a comparison to other churches in post-colonial contexts, and in other countries and areas of Britain where political and ecclesial power is dwindling. We find ourselves in a place between a distinct Northern Gospel (which we originally expected to find) and the traditional 'translation' model of contextual theology where there is a concrete Gospel which can be transferred into a culture. We will develop these ideas in the book proposals suggested below.

However, out of the slow death of the institutional church in the North, **new life is arising**. Like a dead tree in a forest, the remains of the institutional church in the North becomes host to new forms like a lunch group for older men in a closed church, who asked for Communion to be held after their soup and sandwiches. The established church may be failing, but people are still coming to know and worship God. Lives are being transformed. **The gospel in the North, is, however, often fragile.**

When political and ecclesial power drains from an area like the North of England, there is a place for the power and potential of the Gospel to be at work through the Holy Spirit. This is a power like a mustard seed: seemingly small, but capable of growing into something huge and hospitable. It's easy to become pessimistic about the decline of the institutional church, but we argue that without the dying of old forms of power, we will not see the flourishing of new and genuinely Northern forms of church life.

We envisage a research poster, seminar and workshop, two books (both a 'popular' and a more critical treatment) and other resources as the **outputs of the research**.

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Nigel Rooms is a freelance consultant, facilitator, researcher and spiritual director.

He worked in senior training and development positions in a Church of England Diocese for over ten years. His doctoral research looked at adult theological education and the relationship between Christian faith and culture. His significant experience of leadership development includes engaging with experiential learning, systems thinking, group relations and unconscious processes. He holds a “P3C Practitioner Certificate in Consulting and Change” from the Tavistock Institute. Nigel consults with local churches and the systems that support them to create deep cultural change for the sake of their long-term future.



Elli Wort is a Tutor (Module Lead) for Church Army. She has a PhD in contextual theology (2019), exploring how God was at work in Hull, City of Culture 2017.