

Pioneer Project Mid-Term Report

September 2021

Introduction

The Pioneer Project in the Diocese of Bath and Wells launched in January 2018 following a successful bid to the Church Commissioners for mission funding. The grant from the Strategic Development Fund came to £1.5M and was match funded by the Diocesan Mission Development Fund.

The funding was to be applied over a 5-year term to the end of 2022. However, the nature of the Project means it will not be technically complete until the last pioneer post comes to an end in March 2026.

We have decided that the end of 2021 – four years on from the award of grant funding – is an appropriate point to offer a mid-term report of progress on the project. The format of the report is to look back to our primary aims, pick out five key areas of learning for each aim, and report on the progress measures included in Section 7 of the original bid document (pp 38-9).

Thank you for reading! We hope you find it informative and encouraging.

Aims and Learning

The aims of the project are (as stated in the Pioneer Project plan January 2018):

Aim 1: Create 9 new pioneer posts by 2020

- 9 full-time paid posts for pioneers were created by March 2021 in nine deaneries
- The pioneers are gifted, skilled, conscientious, theologically grounded contextual missionaries
- Most are not ordained
- They cover specialisms of youth, young adults, the arts, new housing, Magnificat parishes and growing the rural church younger



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- To date 6 of the 9 pioneers are in line or ahead of expected progress according to the timeline of pioneer ministry
- 2 are engaged with the local community in creative and constructive ways but have not yet been able to gather groups with a sustained life
- At the end of September 2021 the Tone Deanery ‘Growing the church younger’ pioneer regrettably resigned stating Covid as a main cause
- The pioneers are engaging with their communities in a variety of ways: growing food, distributing food, creating outdoor spaces for sanctuary, remembrance and well-being, and furthering environmental awareness; upcycling furniture; advocating for their communities with local councils; coaching; chatting to staff and building relationships in cocktail bars, libraries, book shops and special schools; offering pop-up coffee stations, pizza evenings, art classes for local youth; training and leading teams in detached youth work; partnering with local agencies and charitable organisations; convening local artists. This is not an exhaustive list.
- Through the above activities they are in the process of helping to grow others in spiritual awareness; engaging people in conversations about faith; running Muddy, Picnic, Farm Church and online church.

Five key things we’ve learned from this process:

1. There is a large community of called, committed, and qualified people seeking this kind of pioneer role

Most of the signpost pioneers are not ordained. They are largely self-trained through previous church and professional experience and training, and capable of managing their own continuing missional professional development with a basic level of financial support for a bespoke, just-in-time learning programme. They appear more capable of divergent missional thinking than most priests.

2. High profile pioneers catalyse more pioneering

Full-time paid (signpost¹) pioneers have an allocation of time in their role description towards fostering pioneer understanding in their parish, deanery and diocese. This has helped catalyse more pioneer activity, understanding and capability. The extent of the influence of signpost pioneers

¹ Signpost pioneer is the term we have given to the pioneers paid under the SDF Pioneer Project as they were appointed to act as signposts. For the church they are signposts to pioneering; to the community signposts to Christ.

ranges from the local church to the national arena, depending on personality and call. The signpost pioneers may affect one influential person significantly or many people to a small degree, but in all cases their presence and activity stimulates a shift towards more contextual mission.

3. The role of pioneer advocates² is vital

Pioneers need at least one dedicated and informed advocate in their base church and another one at least in the commissioning body support services team to ensure that space is held for pioneers to exercise their call and not be drawn into a pastoral or maintenance role within the local church. The advocate gives authority for the pioneer to engage in contextual mission with a high degree of autonomy, provides encouragement, support and advice for the pioneer, interprets the role of the pioneer to the congregation and helps to identify new pioneers. Advocates need training, peer support and encouragement to do this well. The more people in the church structure playing this role, the more pioneer mission will flourish.

4. Pioneer roles need to be drawn up with both a tight focus and a wide-angle lens

The balance between giving pioneers a blank sheet and giving them a role description needs to be carefully drawn. Roles are best with both a tight focus and a wide-angle lens. The tight focus might apply to the demographic group the local church aims to reach (eg young adults), or the area of operation they will work in (eg ecology and the environment). The wide angle lens applies to the way this will be realised on the ground (eg through a variety of available possibilities) and also to the individuals and groups who will be partners in the work. (Surprisingly the involvement of pre-existing teams who expected to host a newly appointed signpost pioneer have not been a successful aspect of the project, however prayerful, insightful and constructive the teams and their members have been).

5. Pioneer mission requires re-visiting concepts of measurement of success

Pioneers are likely to report marks of success in different categories to the commissioning body or local church, for example by the degree of freedom pioneers are given to follow the guidance of the Holy Spirit, or the decision of a young person in psychological distress to prioritise a pioneer sanctuary space over all other support offered. Pioneer mission requires re-visiting the traditional idea of measurement and drawing up new baselines and criteria for success. Few of the pioneers

² Pioneer advocate is a term given to people who have permission-giving roles in the organisation and use their role to encourage and support the pioneer, whilst also interpreting their role to the church and ensuring they are able to fulfil their pioneer vocation as effectively as possible.



currently in post is doing what they expected to be doing on a day-to-day basis, nor what the commissioning team expected them to do. Their work is growing organically through authentic relationship and local circumstance, taking surprising turns. For them this is a good thing, a sign they are following the leading of the Holy Spirit, but it makes it tricky to draw a straight line between inputs and outcomes. A great deal of work remains to be done here to measure what's important so that it is visible and continues to flourish.

Aim 2: Foster a wide range of pioneering at grass roots level

- There are at least 100 individuals known to the Pioneer Project team engaging in pioneer mission across the Diocese. Some are ordained, others have gone on to be ordained as pioneers, others continue to lead Fresh Expressions of church as volunteers with no specific lay role or training. Some exercise their pioneer vocation in their capacity as readers, lay worship assistants, youth leaders and schools' workers. Their pioneer activity takes many forms.
- Two cohorts of students have completed the year-long Church Mission Society Certificate in Pioneer Mission. 25 students have received certificates.³ Some are in the process of being recognised as Local Lay Pioneers by their parish and deanery. Many have found the course transformative for their understanding of themselves and the mission of God.
- Students who have completed the Certificate in Pioneer Mission course have offered their services in a variety of roles across the Diocesan pioneer community to support the development of the pioneer mindset and grow missional capacity in the system.
- Pre-Covid Hubs for Café Church, Messy Church and Outdoor Church were established as spaces to share good practice for churches offering these forms of Fresh Expression. Only the Messy Church Hub was sustained through the pandemic months.
- Post-Covid (January 2021) an Encourager of New Christian Communities was appointed to come alongside parish and benefice leaders to support them in growing Fresh Expressions of Church. They have initially focused on fostering more forms of outdoor worship and outdoor faith communities.
- A monthly online story-telling event for pioneers called 'Max's Boat' brings pioneers together from across the Diocese and the country.
- A Talking Pioneering podcast has been recorded monthly to share stories of pioneering in the

³ By the time of the Pioneer Project Board on 21 October

Diocese in the form of a 1:1 conversation.

- A YouTube playlist has been set up within the Bath and Wells YouTube channel to inspire budding pioneers, promote the CMS Certificate and share learning.
- Pioneer Hotspots – spaces for pioneers to meet locally – operate in Taunton, Portishead, South Somerset, Weston super Mare, and Frome.
- The Pioneer Project Leader has led a series of four webinars called Pioneering Parishes which has been attended by c. 20 church leaders in the Diocese.
- A day of initial ministerial training in pioneering and Fresh Expressions is provided annually for curates and readers.

Five things we've learned from this process:

1. High-quality training in pioneer mission enables a kind of 'metanoia'⁴ in individuals and groups, enabling participants to make the mission of God in the world the focus of their energy. It starts by freeing them from putting the needs of the existing church at the heart of their Christian service, releases them from the need to conform to the expectations of others (often those within the church) and to become more fully who God created them to be. It also enables them to be part of an itinerant community that models hospitality, openness, vulnerability and diversity. It teaches them to see the culture gap between the church and world and to start to learn to follow the guidance of the Holy Spirit in imaginatively bridging it as ambassadors of Christ and the wider church.
2. We need more training of this kind for everyone in the church, to enable them either to be more pioneering themselves, to create spaces for pioneering mission to happen, or to support pioneering through prayer, team membership, listening and understanding, and financially.
3. Digital media supports and encourages the pioneer community. As pioneers are often in a minority, online media can bring them together easily and enable the sharing of new ideas and approaches. It has the capacity to include a wider diversity of people with different learning profiles and experience.
4. Being in the pioneer space energises and excites 'old hacks'! Those who have been in the Anglican Church for decades can be taken aback by the sense of possibility, joy, energy and confidence in pioneer gatherings which stands in contrast to the atmosphere in other meetings they have

⁴ Change of mind

attended. This excitement and energy appears to have resonance with the experiences of the early church as they were led into newness by the Holy Spirit.

5. Full-time paid pioneers – ordained or signpost – are essential on the ground to help co-ordinate and support pioneer activity in a particular area. The employed pioneers have the capacity, authority and access to resources to foster a mini pioneer ecosystem among the part-time paid pioneers or the volunteers in their area and this should be part of the remit of full-time pioneers (lay and ordained) in the future. Without this investment of co-ordinating activity, cohesion can be lost.

Aim 3: Establish and embed a culture of pioneering and innovation in the Diocese

A culture of pioneering and innovation is evident in some parts of the Diocese and not at in others. It is patchy. It is hard to draw a direct line between the Pioneer Project and the emerging culture of pioneering and innovation in the Diocese, particularly in the light of the impact of the pandemic which gave an urgent impetus to improvisation and innovation. There is however ample evidence of pioneering and innovation of all kinds, and it would be reasonable to suggest that the messages around pioneering, innovation and imagination, sponsored by Diocesan leadership over the two years prior to the pandemic, have contributed to this flourishing of new forms and initiatives. Some of this evidence includes:

- A recent clergy post was drawn up for a single person to play a split inherited/pioneer role. The successful candidate would act as rector of a benefice of three rural churches for 50% of their time, and a pioneer activist in the area of environmental activism and social justice for 50%. This role has attracted much interest among ordained pioneers locally and nationally. It is the second rural pioneer post advertised in the Diocese for an ordained person in the last two years.
- A benefice in the Wells archdeaconry is pursuing a proposal to turn a large parsonage with beautiful spacious garden into a spirituality and retreat centre.
- Locking Deanery is re-shaping itself into a pioneering deanery with initiatives in Weston super Mare across pioneer spectrum: church planting, church re-vitalisation, Fresh Expressions, incarnational pioneering and social and community activism are all in evidence there.
- Outdoor expressions of spirituality and church are growing rampantly in both rural areas and towns: pilgrim pathways, mown labyrinths, quiet gardens, social prescribing community gardens, Muddy Church, Celtic, contemplative and other forms of outdoor worship.
- Imaginative new chaplaincy roles are emerging, including a Hedgerow Chaplain.



- The major Christian festivals were celebrated throughout the previous 18 months of the pandemic in immensely innovative ways, doing church ‘inside-out’: drive-in carol services, harvest displays ‘down your street’, psalm readings for Hallowe’en, donkeys parading through villages on Palm Sunday, angels in the churchyard for Christmas, compelling the church congregations to go to where the people are rather than requiring them to come to us.
- Most churches responded to the Covid challenge by going digital in some form or other, and all managed to innovate to some degree.
- Pioneers and pioneer advocates say anecdotally that the culture has changed in respect of pioneering and they feel space has been made for them to do what they are called to do without structural opposition.

All the above relates on a tiny proportion of the outward-facing, community engaging, imaginative contextual mission that has happened in the last four years. Some of it was happening before the start of the Project, but to a lesser degree. The theory of change behind the Project proposed that by publicising positive stories of innovative contextual mission on Diocesan communications channels and through local story-telling, more people would feel inspired to follow suit and believe they had permission to follow where the Holy Spirit was leading them. This does seem to have happened.

Five things we’ve learned from trying to establish and embed a culture of pioneering and innovation:

1. Culture change takes place over a long period of time – rapidly in some places, glacially slow (or not at all) in others. Some deaneries show little sign of culture change.
2. Change happens more swiftly in response to necessity. The pandemic created an urgent need for innovation and this accelerated the pace of change.
3. Culture change needs authority figures to affirm what is going on and commission structural changes to respond to and embed emerging developments, or the gains won by the investment of financial and human resources will be lost.
4. It’s not easy to determine scientifically what factors contribute to a particular change in culture without a really sophisticated research framework (which we don’t have).
5. There is still a massive lack of missional imagination and vision for what the church of Jesus Christ



could be - and what it needs to be - in the existing and coming age. Recent changes to support staff structure and financial plans show that the majority of resources are still assuming that a form of church that arose and belongs in an earlier age is viable today and into the future. Without a much larger understanding of what the Holy Spirit is doing in the world and a willingness to let go of power and control to join in with this ground-level movement, we risk missing the moment and the joy and spiritual growth that comes from adventuring with God into the unknown and seeing the Holy Spirit do 'more than we could ask or imagine'.



Report on progress measures:

By the end of 2023 we aimed to reach the following targets:

7.1 Principal progress measures	Between January 2018 and September 2021	Notes
9 new fte pioneer posts will be established	Complete	Sadly the Tone Deanery pioneer has resigned so there are currently 8 posts.
There will be at least 100 lay and ordained pioneers across the Diocese measured as those participating in some form of network, training course or learning hub	At least 100 are involved in pioneer development groups	The Café and Outdoor Church Hubs didn't meet during Covid times; the Hub structure is now being re-shaped by the Encourager of New Christian Communities.
There will be a team of at least 10 experienced pioneers acting as coaches and/or critical friends to newer practitioners	Two people at least are acting as coaches following advanced training	24 church leaders and pioneers were trained in coaching skills in Jan 2020-2021. Three groups of 3 continue to meet , developing their coaching. Six people have taken up the offer of coaching at least once.

Continued over

7.1 Principal progress measures	Between January 2018 and September 2021	Notes
At least 10 new teams will have completed the Mission-Shaped Ministry course	1 team completed this course	Mission-shaped Ministry hasn't taken off. This is mainly due to a capacity issue in the Project team but could have other causes. The Encourager of New Christian Communities is an expert in MSM and may contribute to ensuring this goal is met.
There will be at least 5 Local Learning Hubs... ...and at least 5 Specialised Learning Hubs (for different forms of church e.g. Messy, Outdoor, Café, New Housing).	Local Learning Hubs didn't arise in fact, although CMS Certificate students meet in small local groups to consolidate their learning, and there are local hotspots. There were 5 Specialised Learning Hubs prior to Covid.	The small groups for the CMS Certificate are situated close to where the students live and group facilitators live and change each year depending on addresses. Hotspots are in Taunton, Weston, Portishead, Frome, South Somerset. The Encourager of New Christian Communities is re-shaping this aspect of the work to respond to the post-Covid context.
The proportion of people discerning a vocation as potential pioneers through the Diocesan Vocations process will be around 20%		Proportion of pioneer (ordained) vocations: 2018 - none 2019 - 8% of total 2020 - 12% of total 2021 - 13% of total.
At least 25 people will have gained the CMS Certificate in Pioneering Mission	25 people have gained the Certificate.	21 of these are Bath and Wells people. 2 were with the Diocese of Bristol, 1 from Exeter, 1 from Cornwall.

7.2 Fresh Expressions: measurement of growth	Between January 2018 and September 2021	Notes
<p>At least 10 new sustainable and growing fxC with an identified leadership team, with a total of 500+ worshippers.</p>	<p>88 probable fxC were identified in the 2019 Statistics for Mission forms. This double the number in the Church Army audit of 2017.</p> <p>38 probable fxCs were identified in the 2020 Statistics for Mission forms. Many fxCs were in abeyance.</p>	<p>It remains to be seen if the fxCs that could not meet in person face to face during the pandemic will be revived in the coming year. In the responses it was clear that some churches had taken their Fresh Expression online, or stayed in touch in other ways. Data is not 100% reliable as not all who complete the Statistic for Mission forms complete them accurately.</p> <p>We don't yet know how many new worshippers are included in these fxCs. A full independent audit is planned with the Church Army for 2022.</p>
<p>A further 10-20 new fxC at the 5 year point (which may be at an early stage of development), engaging with a further 500 people (at least) outside the footprint of the inherited church.</p>	<p>In progress.</p>	
7.3 Lead measures to show direction of travel and signs of growth	Between January 2018 and September 2021	Notes
<p>Number of people attending “flushing out” and introductory events.</p>	<p>These didn't happen.</p>	<p>Pioneers were largely 'flushed out' through the grapevine, Comms messaging, the vocations teams and already existing networks.</p>
<p>Numbers of people engaged in hubs, hotspots and networks</p>	<p>As with most church gatherings, numbers declined or groups were suspended from March 2020 – July 2021.</p>	<p>However, it was telling that 85 people attended the 'Beginning Outdoors' led by the Encourager of New Christian Communities webinar held in March 2021. The total number of engagements with any pioneer gathering since January is 187.</p>

Continued over

7.3 Lead measures to show direction of travel and signs of growth	Between January 2018 and September 2021	Notes
Drawdown of seedcorn (start-up) funds by signpost pioneers in post	2020 expenditure: 2,809.40 2021 expenditure to date: 1,817.69	This money has been spent on: horticultural equipment, a pizza oven, a set of hoodies for detached youth workers, a gazebo and coffee machine for a pop-up café, a schools' worth of Easter eggs, and various other sundries to help pioneers engage with community members during the pandemic. It has also gone towards course fees for training in areas that will enhance the signpost pioneers ministry long-term.
Number of recognised lay pioneers (correlated against the Pioneer Spectrum and Training Pyramid)	There are 43 lay pioneers in the diocese excluding lay people running Fresh Expressions such as Messy Church or Café Church.	There are additionally ten pioneers who have been locally recognised and ordained since January 2018, four more in training, and at least four curates not designated as such who have sought out pioneer posts since ordination.
Number of teams beginning Mission Shaped Ministry training	1 ecumenical team has completed MSM.	For reasons given earlier this course hasn't played a significant role in growing culture change.
Number of students completing the CMS Certificate in Pioneer Mission	23 students from Bath and Wells have completed the Certificate since May 2019.	Those who wish to and are deemed to have demonstrated the required ability and understanding will be recognised as Local Lay Pioneers in their own parish and/or benefice at services led by their Area Dean.

Conclusion

The Diocese has made distinct progress in terms of becoming more pioneering, innovative and imaginative in mission since January 2018. It is more capable of finding out what the Holy Spirit is doing and joining in. Many factors have contributed to the culture shift that is starting to take place: the need to respond to pandemic conditions, initiatives such as Partnership for Missional Church and spiritual practices such as Dwelling in the Word, the growth of the Everyday Faith programme and its investment in developing lay people to name just a few.

The distinctive contribution of the Pioneer Project has been to release numbers of lay people who believed their gift of creative outreach to the margins of the church was previously either unwelcome or unrecognised. It has been to affirm the place of dreaming, experimentation and risk-taking in our church culture, and show it's good to have a go at things. It has introduced the idea of context and culture as critical concepts in mission, and extended parishes in their thinking. It has put 9 gifted pioneers in the field, supported by parish priests, who are widening the circles of those who come into contact with Jesus and will be offered the gift of life in terms they understand. It has extended the thinking of pioneers to be more radical and out-of-the-box. It has given excitement and energy to a system that is often slow-moving and lacking in vibrancy. It has taken turns that were unexpected, but that is in the nature of pioneering, and we trust we are under the mysterious but loving direction of God.

The critical task now is to enable the seedlings to survive, thrive, grow, blossom, bear fruit and generate more seeds. This is a long-term task and it has only just begun. To make it as fruitful as it has the potential to be will require a commitment to pioneering across the whole diocese, the establishment of structures to embed practices that have been begun, ongoing training for all as the pioneer landscape continues to grow and change with the movement of the Spirit, and the ongoing investment of resources in funding potentially transformative pioneer posts.

We pray that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ will do more than we ask or imagine (even if not quite what we had in mind!) as we play our part with vision and courage.

Tina Hodgett
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