experiences of pioneers

a report on the experiences of pioneers, November 2010

The following report represents the views of Fresh Expressions practitioners, outlining the lessons they have learnt through their experiences. It seeks to highlight good practice and areas for future development.

Introduction

Between March 2008 and June 2010, seven focus groups of pioneers met across England to discuss the challenges and opportunities in pioneering fresh expressions of church. Sixty four practitioners were involved, working in a variety of contexts, including those in cities, towns and rural areas, developing fresh expressions of church with a diverse range of people and from a variety of social and economic backgrounds.

The criteria for practitioners chosen for this included their proven ability to a start a fresh expression of church. Participants could be lay or ordained, paid or voluntary and were from a range of denominations, however the majority were Anglican.

'Working within the mixed economy offers both opportunities and challenges for pioneers.'

The following report represents the views of these practitioners, outlining the lessons they have learnt through their experiences. It seeks to highlight good practice and areas for future development.

1. The mixed economy

Working within the mixed economy offers both opportunities and challenges for pioneers. The majority of pioneers were aware and affected by the level of favour and support they experienced from the wider Church. A supportive relationship between traditional and fresh expressions of church has an important role at the outset, both for the new initiative and for ongoing mutually beneficial connections. Positive examples of this often occurred when fresh expressions of church were started from a strong base.

For example where:

- a Diocesan strategy enabled good working relationships between traditional and fresh expressions of church;
- practitioners were connected to a mission organisation such as Church Army or CMS. This offered practitioners training, ongoing learning support and accountability;
- new frameworks such as Bishops' Mission Orders or VentureFX enabled fresh expressions of church to develop;
- practitioners were sent out from a resourcing church. Examples of these included parish churches, Minsters (old and new) and Cathedrals. Where churches had multiple fresh expressions of church, these formed a 'family' of fresh expressions which offered support for pioneers alongside opportunities to share resources.

Many pioneers, while affirming the principle of the mixed economy, did not have positive experiences of working within it. Whilst they were aware of the pressures felt by the wider Church through declining attendance and resources, they were frustrated that the maintenance of existing churches reduced the opportunities and resources for mission and evangelism.

For example:

- pioneers repeatedly reported issues with mixed posts where pioneering aspects were not clearly defined. Maintaining existing churches, fulfilling traditional curacy requirements, or working in church structures remained an ongoing pressure greatly reducing the opportunities for mission;

a number of pioneers experienced antagonism and conflict from traditional churches and clergy. In a number of cases the pioneer was authorised by the diocese to develop a fresh expression of church but the local parish opposed the initiative;

there were conflicts where the natural boundaries of a mission context did not relate to existing parish boundaries. A pioneer working from a GP surgery related to the surgery's catchment area, not the parish boundary.

Conclusions and challenges

Those pioneers released to work among non churchgoers engaged well with their context and were more positive about the wider Church. By contrast the pioneers sent to work within existing church structures struggled to engage with the non-churched and vocalised more frustration. Their concerns need taking seriously.

Developing good working relationships across traditional and fresh expressions of church may reduce the conflict and misunderstanding present and enable a flow of resources across the Church.

Encouraging fresh expressions of church to develop their own identity, whilst remaining connected to the wider Church is a challenge for all parties.

2. New expressions of church developing

Developing church from contextual mission has created an environment in which practitioners have explored new modes of ministry. These practices have developed alongside re-examined ecclesiological understandings and a retrieval of monastic and other sodal models of church. This has enabled a more fluid approach to ecclesiology revealing many creative gifts within the Church. Other developments mentioned include the growth of lay leadership, ecumenism for mission, and diverse approaches to financial support and accountability structures. As practitioners have reflected on the question 'what is church?' they have notably drawn on the following resources:

- the monastic tradition;
- sodal mission organisations;
- networking with other current pioneers;
- the four relationships of church - one, holy, catholic and apostolic.

Conclusions and challenges

There is the need for responsive and flexible clergy who can work with and alongside these new churches.

The growth of lay leadership raises a number of questions about support, training and celebrating the sacraments.

The development of accountability structures which enable connection to the wider church without placing inappropriate demands on these new churches are necessary.

With such fluidity pioneers can feel unconfident about new practices especially where they differ from the practices they came to faith through. Learning networks can support pioneers to helpfully reflect on their practice.

3. Developing sustainable and fruitful fresh expressions of church

It is unlikely that any pre-selected models of sustainability and fruitfulness will be appropriate for the variety of fresh expressions of church developing.

Pioneers talked of an exploratory process in which the new Christian community develops sustainable rhythms and patterns of church life. Balancing worship, community, mission and relationship with the wider Church develops seasonally, and over time, with the context, type of fresh expression, and resource invested greatly affecting the size, expectations and frequency of meetings.

Developing a core group of members or a leadership team significantly determines the church's ability to be sustainable and fruitful. Developing the vision, commitment and skills required for this can be a lengthy task. Some practitioners noted the growth towards a maturing community as the move from consumers, to community, to mission.

Some fresh expressions of church have found adopting monastic patterns and rules of life have helped to develop a core community, who in time, sustain the wider community, worship and mission.

The transition beyond the founder needs careful support.

Fresh expressions of church led by spare time leaders often have a slower development time, meet less often, struggle to stay connected to the wider church and have complications in celebrating sacraments.

Conclusions and challenges

Fresh expressions of church need support and time to develop their own patterns of sustainability.

Pioneers will benefit from training in team and leadership development.

4. Financial support

Many fresh expressions of church have received start up funding from traditional congregations, or as deanery and diocesan initiatives. However with resources within the Church reducing, this is not seen as a widespread funding solution.

Some pioneers have the gifts and skills to take a proactive and creative approach to financing fresh expressions of church. This often involves a blended multiple source approach to funding rather than a simple gradation from start-up funding to own-member funding.

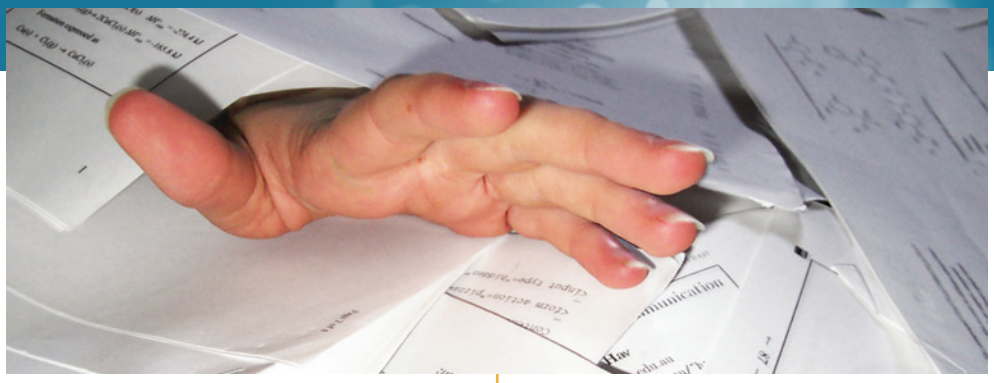
Funding sources include; grants from the wider church, grants from local funding sources for services provided, revenue streams from cafés and other fee paying ventures, direct giving from the growing community, direct giving from individuals and churches supporting the venture, and funding from trusts.

Different funding structures were evident, associated to the type of church developing and the mission context.

Pioneers working successfully within a blended approach to long term sustainability stressed the vital contribution of start up funding from church sources.

However:

- many pioneers begin developing a fresh expression of church with no clear guidance on the short and long term financial expectations;
- many fresh expressions of church are started with no plans for financial sustainability beyond three or sometimes five years. However research suggests that developing a fresh expression from scratch to financial sustainability is likely to take ten years and may be longer depending on the context . Church Army and some dioceses now deploy pioneers on longer contracts with appropriate periods of review;
- there may be some expressions, for example, those working with some of the poorest communities, who will always struggle to be financially sustainable and will depend on the resources of the wider church;
- some pioneers have developed fresh expressions of church with no funding. These churches rely on the commitment and resources of spare time leaders. Whilst remaining financially sustainable this arrangement poses other challenges. (See section 5, lay leadership).



Conclusions and challenges

Financial expectations should be clear and planned from the outset.

Realistic expectations are needed on time spans necessary for a fresh expression of church to become financially viable.

Training in financial sustainability is necessary and yet notably absent in current provision.

5. Developing leaders

Developing indigenous leaders was noted as key to both the sustainability of local expressions of church and in being the seedbed for potential ordained pioneer ministers. This requires a close working relationship between local fresh expressions of church, lay and ordained training providers and the selection processes, providing a supportive balance between contextual training and understanding practices across the traditions of the Church of England.

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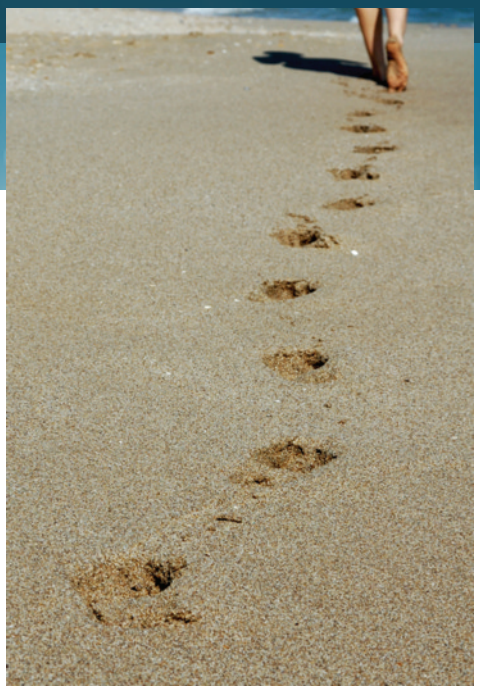

Ordained Pioneer Ministry selection and training

Encouraging indigenous leaders to leave their fresh expressions to gain more experience of the wider church as part of the selection process often has a detrimental effect on the sustainability of the local fresh expression. It can blunt the missional edge of prospective pioneers and hinder their ability to re-enter their host culture. It also engenders disenchantment with the wider Church.

Selection and training processes have been off-putting for more radical yet loyal pioneers.

There is evidence that men and women use different language to talk about pioneering with men finding it easier to be selected and resourced.

Applying IME 4-7 requirements for both traditional and pioneer curates can be difficult. Some dioceses have adapted existing training by setting up learning networks, mentoring and enabling attendance at national pioneer training events. Some dioceses are starting to work collaboratively on this where pioneer numbers are low.

Lay leadership

More recognition and support is needed for training, supervising and supporting lay and spare time leaders which are appropriate to their competency, experience and time.

Some pioneers, struggling to find appropriate leaders within existing congregations, have discipled leaders who used to be non church goers. This should be expected to be a longer and more complex process.

Resources

Sodal organisations such as Church Army and CMS have expertise in training, supporting and the ongoing learning of pioneers.

The *mission shaped ministry* course has helped train ordained and lay leaders.

Learning networks, with peer mentoring, provide places of support and challenge.

Conclusions and challenges

Selectors and permission givers should be flexible in recognising a variety of pioneering gifts.

OPM training should allow leaders to stay within the context of their fresh expression of church.

Further investment is needed to develop ways the Church can support fresh expressions of church led by spare time leaders.

The Church continues to struggle to develop younger leaders (18-30 yrs).

Moving Forward

The development of such a variety of expressions of church is evidence of the commitment of pioneers and the wider Church, to distribute resources, as together we follow the call to share the gospel and serve the needs of local communities. Significant progress has been made in authorising fresh expressions of church, and in identifying, training and deploying leaders. However, considerable challenges remain in how, together, we can best make this work in the spirit of the mixed economy.

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