

PIONEERING PIECES:

An evaluation of the Church of Scotland's Pioneer Pilot Project

Church Army's Research Unit, October 2020

Summary Report

What is the Pioneer Pilot Project?

The Church of Scotland's General Assembly of 2014 called for the '*development of a scheme to recruit, train and deploy pioneer ministers*' to respond to declining church membership and an increase in the number of people in the 2011 Scottish Census declaring no religious affiliation. This pilot was conceived on behalf of Ministries Council as a response to that call, albeit as '*an intermediate step*' in a denomination that is relatively new to pioneering.

The pioneer pilot project was launched in 2016 with full-time funding for five ministry posts until 2021. Working in contexts where it was felt that something different from a traditional minister role is needed, the learning from these posts will help shape and inform pioneer ministry.

Presbyteries submitted applications to take part in the pilot with the implication that, beyond 2021, these posts would only continue if they were part of their presbytery plan and locally funded.

Listed in order of start date, the five posts are:

Presbytery	Mission focus	Pioneer start date
Glasgow	Artists, galleries, workshops and studios of Glasgow	October 2016
Lothian	New build housing estate in Bonnyrigg, Midlothian	December 2016
Stirling	Students at the University of Stirling	December 2016
Greenock and Paisley (now part of Clyde)	Those who live, work and travel through Ferguslie Park and the north end of Paisley	August 2017
Ayr	Farming communities in Ayrshire	September 2017

For more information on the five posts, see <https://www.churchofscotland.org.uk/news-and-events/news/2019/pioneering-kirk-ministers-talk-about-church-without-walls>

What this evaluation sought to do...

Commissioned in September 2019, this evaluation focused on assessing:

- The impact of the pilot project
- The learning for the Church of Scotland and the church as a whole

The full evaluation report for the Church of Scotland's (now) Faith Nurture Forum and General Assembly can be found online: **[Pioneering Pieces: An evaluation of the Pioneer Pilot Project in the Church of Scotland.](#)** (URL)

Qualitative interviews with the five pioneers, presbytery representatives, national consultants and local people involved in the work of the pioneer were conducted between October 2019 and March 2020. See p. 4 of the full report for methodology and p. 42 for the list of stakeholders consulted.

The full evaluation report contains:

- A summary of stakeholders' perspectives pp. 5-22
- External reviewer impact assessment pp. 23-28
- Priorities for the pilot's final year and strategic issues and questions for ongoing pioneering pp. 29-31
- Pioneer reflections on COVID-19 and wisdom for further posts in these types of mission context pp. 32-41

Progress-to-date

For more on learning around impact, see pp. 9-15 of the full report. For more on external evaluation, noting evidence against stages in Hollinghurst (2013) *Starting, Assessing and Sustaining Pioneering Mission* and the 2015 Ministries Council paper on what pioneering ministry should emphasise, see pp. 23-25. Here are some highlights:

Glasgow

In January 2019, pioneer Peter Gardner recorded key highlights so far:

- 6 different site-specific installations, including *Against the Grain* and *Nest A While* seen by 100s of visitors
- Over 12,000 people estimated to have seen the *Peacemaker's Loom* since 2014 (predates pioneer post)
- Daily conversations take place with some of the 80 artists based in The Briggait
- Monthly Morphe arts group meeting in their studio with around 10 attending regularly

Presbytery representatives commented on the following ways the post has had an impact:

- Local ministers in pastoral charges not only being aware of pioneer but challenged to pioneer themselves
- More installations per year and more pastoral opportunities than expected at start of pilot
- Nurturing a group of artists meeting monthly

Evidence noted against Hollinghurst's stages (2013) and Ministries Council paper (2015)

Being with people in their territory	Studio-based in the Briggait so regular interaction with artists. Good networking.
Listening to culture and 'learning their language'	Good appointment made - post-holder already familiar with culture and quick to learn more.
Advocating on behalf of mission context; feeding back to wider church	Creative work with churches in presbytery to help them understand post. Good speaker, seen as a 'safe pair of hands' in a culture the church can find alien.
Imagining new possibilities	Designing studio space and website, creating site-specific installations.
Working collaboratively with others	Work/conference speaking with Morphe network. Collaborative work inevitable due to reliance on invites to exhibit. Steering group small but sufficient.
New ecclesial communities	See p. 25 of the full report.

Lothian

In January 2019, pioneer Elisabeth Spence recorded key highlights so far:

- 35-50 people attending Hopefield Connections events (including Harvest, Remembrance and Christmas)
- A further 6 community events organised, including car boot sale, Advent windows
- Social media e.g. Facebook post being liked 891 times and shared 29 times, reaching 2,298 people
- A fortnightly 'pop-up' Coffee Stop for getting to know parents outside school

Presbytery representatives commented on the following ways the post has had an impact:

- A few new faces coming to existing church events
- Organising local people to contribute to a project and, in a few cases, empowering them to lead
- Developing friendships and pieces of the ministry that could come together and be built on

Evidence noted against Hollinghurst's stages (2013) and Ministries Council paper (2015)

Being with people in their territory	School and school gate presence, local events, local Facebook groups, Rainbow Unit.
Listening to culture and 'learning their language'	Possibly less cross-cultural than other posts. Active listening to residents through above activities. Liaising with others such as Community Education Officer.
Advocating on behalf of mission context; feeding back to wider church	Influence with local councillors. Limited reporting at presbytery, although learning from post has been shared with a few in similar contexts.
Imagining new possibilities	Hopefield Connection events and other community events and activities.
Working collaboratively with others	Council and local school. Steering group not operated. Liaising with line manager.
New ecclesial communities	See p. 25 of the full report.

Stirling

In Spring 2019, pioneer Janet Foggie recorded key highlights so far:

- Student community garden, with 63 gardening weekly over three years.
- Twice weekly sewing group Patches4Peace, with 59 group members and wider 'one-off' attendance.
- Two 'Table Talks', with 20-25 students for consultation on the Good Food Nation Bill (with Nourish Scotland).
- Student lunches, with discussion ranging from Brexit to UN Goals for Climate Change. 250-300 engaging.

Presbytery representatives commented on the following ways the post has had an impact:

- Modelling a different way of engaging with matters of faith
- The university recognising and acknowledging her role
- The presbytery has a live connection to the university community

Evidence noted against Hollinghurst's stages (2013) and Ministries Council paper (2015)

Being with people in their territory	Desk-based at the university, joining in uni events as well as running own groups.
Listening to culture and 'learning their language'	Multiple languages and cultures. Trusted by university staff. Acting on student issues: gender equality, transgender awareness, environment, mental health.
Advocating on behalf of mission context; feeding back to wider church	Supports the students to speak out about issues for themselves. Reports to presbytery well-received, but intermittent relationship with presbytery.
Imagining new possibilities	Gardening club, Patches4Peace and events and fundraising/campaigning projects. Groups are a costly long-term investment where transformative relationships grow.
Working collaboratively with others	Working well with other chaplains, Students' Union and student support services. Trustee work with Nourish Scotland. No steering group in early years.
New ecclesial communities	See p. 25 of the full report.

Greenock and Paisley

In January 2019, pioneer Stuart Davidson recorded key highlights so far:

- Delivering 'Father's Love Letter', a gospel tract to 1,700 households within Ferguslie Park
- A weekly drop-in has attracted around 14 men and women, most struggling with life-controlling issues
- An annual holiday club hosted with the help of 19 team members, attended by 38 children and 4 teenagers
- A 2018 Christmas community gathering attracted 15 children and 7 adults

Presbytery representatives commented on the following ways the post has had an impact:

- It has been a positive experience and is breaking down barriers of cynicism
- A tentative group has emerged
- The pioneer is committed even when ministry is tough

Evidence noted against Hollinghurst's stages (2013) and Ministries Council paper (2015)

Being with people in their territory	Walking area, networking with agencies, consulting with other drop-in centres.
Listening to culture and 'learning their language'	Possibly harder for any pioneer to make quick progress when 'parachuted in from outside'. Organising drop-in/listening activities. Befriending regular attenders.
Advocating on behalf of mission context; feeding back to wider church	Some reporting at presbytery and 'in an endearing way'.
Imagining new possibilities	Weekly drop-in, home group, kids' work as well as annual holiday club.
Working collaboratively with others	Works with St Ninians's outreach worker. Steering group met only a few times.
New ecclesial communities	See p. 25 of the full report.

Ayr

In January 2019, pioneer Chris Blackshaw recorded key highlights so far:

- 3 annual farm-based worship events: farm walk and praise (200 people attending), harvest thanksgiving (40) and carol service (250), and 5 hampers donated from offertory money collected
- 57 visits to Ayr Market and 4 drop-in clinics organised
- 76 pastoral home visits and 2 occasions of leading farmers' funerals
- A short media clip made by BBC digital programmes viewed 163,000 times (as of January 2019)

Presbytery representatives commented on the following ways the post has had an impact:

- Praise from partnering agencies
- The pioneer is accepted by presbytery and there has been interest from other presbyteries
- The pioneer is accepted in the context

Evidence noted against Hollinghurst's stages (2013) and Ministries Council paper (2015)

Being with people in their territory	Home visits, phone calls, weekly market visits, agricultural shows.
Listening to culture and 'learning their language'	Good appointment made - post-holder already familiar with farming culture (where outsiders can find it hard to feel they are welcome).
Advocating on behalf of mission context; feeding back to wider church	Mediation work, press coverage, political lobbying, church press coverage, reporting at presbytery meetings, CofS rural working group.
Imagining new possibilities	Launched 'help-line' ministry, occasional farm-based worship events, fundraising, health-check clinics.
Working collaboratively with others	Working with agencies for referrals. Steering group small but effective.
New ecclesial communities	See p. 25 of the full report.

Perceived strengths and weaknesses of the pilot project

Here is a summary of the main issues mentioned most often by stakeholders in interviews, with illustrative quotes from pp. 20-21 of the full report:

Strengths	Weaknesses
<p>Despite seismic denominational challenges and changes, pioneering has been kept on the agenda.</p> <p><i>'It's also very difficult I think to start a pioneering initiative when institutionally you're in crisis mode.'</i></p>	<p>Presbytery support has been too passive. Because these posts have been centrally-funded, presbyteries have been happy to let this project happen, seeing it as a project being driven by the 'centre'.</p> <p><i>'Presbyteries have had no skin in the game.'</i></p>
<p>This pilot has enabled presbyteries to imagine what is possible, despite considerable organisational upheaval as presbyteries regroup and must make hard decisions about allocation of resources.</p> <p><i>'...it would be a very brave person I think who would stand up in presbytery now and say we don't want pioneer ministry, whereas previously it was a brave person that had to stand up and say we want pioneer ministry...'</i></p>	<p>For most, support/steering groups have not worked in practice. The sense of connection with a local group of people sharing in, understanding and supporting the pioneering ministry is not always there.</p> <p><i>'...we just didn't really know anything about pioneering, so it was a bit of an odd situation, we're here to kind of steer, but we're not steering and I think it got quite frustrating in the end...'</i></p>
<p>It has created time and space for ordained national ministers to concentrate entirely on mission.</p> <p><i>'...we have all become so constrained by our procedures that it might be constraining the creativity that people have but don't feel that they can use, or ... have time to use... And ... pioneer ministers can go and do all this sort of stuff.'</i></p>	<p>No central staff with availability to ensure the project remains faithful to its original intentions. Liz Crumlish has been instrumental in supporting the pioneers, but she has done this alongside other job responsibilities. The turnover of central staff and recent council mergers have not helped.</p> <p><i>'We haven't done a good job of explaining [the pilot].' 'The very, very obvious support structure from the centre was lacking.'</i></p>
<p>Evaluation is an expectation of the pilot.</p> <p><i>'I'm so pleased the review work is being done so there is a sense of us being a learning church.'</i></p>	<p>Formal training has not been a compulsory aspect of this project. The pioneers are all highly competent and gifted people, but without formal training in planting new ecclesial communities, it is perhaps not surprising progress in this area has been tentative. A culture of resistance to CMD for ordained ministry in general might play a part in this.</p> <p><i>'...do the pioneers understand what they need for this project?'</i></p>
<p>The project has not been overly prescriptive but had flexible outcomes. A generous approach expecting creativity, fragility and even failure has, by and large, been communicated.</p> <p><i>'You can't visualise the conclusion or the end because it had to be pioneering ... and be open to what is required rather than actually having an idea of the endpoint.'</i></p>	<p>Not enough intermediate goals or stages have been set. While holding a degree of flexibility about outcomes is valued, some are concerned that too much freedom has been given to the pioneers. It is recognised that accountability and appraisal systems are not part of existing ministerial culture, which makes it very hard to introduce them into this project.</p> <p><i>'... some clarity about what pioneering and the goals of this are and ... some shared expectation...'</i></p>
<p>Openness to learn important lessons in these five different contexts.</p> <p><i>'...we want to learn as a church what it is that works, see what lessons can we learn as a church from what they're doing in their different areas, and that becomes ... that's very real.'</i></p>	<p>There are pieces of pioneering, but there is no 'joined-up' thinking across the denomination. This one project offers a relatively narrow interpretation of all that pioneering could be. How can laity be involved in this? This project must not be the only way pioneering is developed.</p> <p><i>'This is how people are understanding pioneering now.'</i></p>

External evaluation:

Strengths (p. 26 of the full report)

1. These posts have been strong on modelling a ministry of presence. The pioneers have been effective in listening to - and finding ways of speaking the language of - their cross-cultural context. All posts confirm that the 'gap' between church and culture is widening; exploring what is possible to bridge that gap is needed more than ever. The five pioneers in this pilot are a potential resource to coach others in cross-cultural mission.
2. These posts show what can be achieved when ordained ministers are released from the routines and responsibilities of their pastoral charges. The reflections of these post-holders suggest it is more difficult to juggle existing ministry and pioneering mission in practice.
3. This project has been wise to deploy pioneers at presbytery level rather than parish. In *Refounding the Church*, anthropologist and theologian Gerald Arbuckle advocates for the principle that '*the new belongs elsewhere*'. He argues that pioneering ministry should not normally be placed in the midst of existing ministry '*where prophetic people would be under constant critical assessment by members of the community and required to waste invaluable energy "apologising" for what they are doing*'.
4. To say that - at the start of this process - presbyteries were thought to lack the vision to implement pioneering themselves, this pioneer project has helped presbyteries catch a vision for pioneering. Whether all five presbyteries will be able to *secure funds* for the posts to continue beyond 2021, it is important to recognise that presbytery representatives are submitting proposals to advocate for a continuation of pioneering in some form.

Challenges (pp. 27-28 of the full report)

1. Assuming that the planting of new ecclesial communities is a key priority of this project, note that some contexts are more difficult to plant in than others. The more stable and cohesive a community, the easier it is to plant; if too diffuse with a high degree of turnover (people moving on), it may be too difficult to justify the resource. Also, if the pioneer's 'hands are tied' in being able to fully acknowledge the overall aim of planting a new ecclesial community, expectations must be realistic (see pp. 28 and 39).
2. Some stakeholders speak passionately about mission and the kingdom of God yet remain diffident about how church fits into this equation. While a controversial area of theological debate, church cannot be omitted altogether. As Lesslie Newbigin famously said, '*An unchurchly mission is as much a monstrosity as an unmissionary Church*'. Further theological reflection is recommended here.
3. Having no fixed goals in a project like this can be just as problematic as too strict a set of goals. Without any goals, no one is sure if the ministry is bearing fruit and a process of review and adjustment becomes impossible. Deciding on definitional indicators of new ecclesial communities would aid monitoring and evaluation.
4. There are two issues where further coaching might be useful. Firstly, it *is* possible to work with unknowns *and* work with stages of development simultaneously and coaching from those who know how to do this would help. Secondly, if the goal of the pilot *is* to plant new ecclesial communities, one-to-one discipleship must transition to a *group* dynamic that enables regular communal discipleship. Facilitating occasional worship events is a beginning point, not an end point; coaching on planting small-unit churches would help.

Priorities for final year of project (p. 29 of the full report)

- Pioneers should be consistent in reporting. Continue to collect numbers on a regular basis. Be creative about qualitative reporting. As one pioneer is doing already, draw on the comments and stories of local people 'benefitting' from the ministry, so effectiveness is not always offered from the perspective of pioneer alone.
- There is a strategic conversation to be had about whether these contexts have shown evidence of favourable conditions to sustain the planting of a new ecclesial community. Are there too many contextual factors or hurdles that prevent planting?
- The pioneers who look as though they will continue in post and feel they are called to develop new ecclesial communities should be asked to engage in bespoke training that takes seriously their existing skills but gives them additional support as these new ecclesial communities take shape and grow.

- For those continuing in post, training should be provided for those members of presbytery who will hold the brief for managing the pioneers and assessing the effectiveness of a pioneering project.
- For those posts that will cease in December 2021 and will not be adopted into presbytery plans, it is vital that they end well and are celebrated at national level and presbytery level. So much has been invested, sacrificed and risked. Even though it is a pilot, some may still feel confused, upset or disappointed when a post stops.

Wisdom for this project beyond 2021 and future projects (p. 30 of the full report)

For presbyteries:

- With your pioneers, decide together on the longer-term hopes for sustaining ministry and what steps are needed to see this achieve. For example, should teamwork be prioritised? Should indigenous leaders be identified and mentored? Should a local church get more involved? What other income streams are there?
- If a new ecclesial community *is* forming, what additional training can presbyteries and pioneers access about what *type* of church is emerging? Are there other examples to learn from, as well as videos, websites or books to access? See pp. 38-41 of the full report for advice on planting in these five contexts.
- Where possible, hold out for as much continuity as possible for key advocates involved in the setting up and monitoring of pioneering posts. Ensure the main protagonists don't move on prematurely. If it cannot be avoided, ensure there is a thorough handover.

For the National Offices:

- While the management of these posts will revert to presbyteries in 2021, there is still the question of who, at a senior denominational level, holds the overall responsibility for this and other pioneering endeavours within the Church of Scotland.
- While line management, support and reporting are expected to be done by presbyteries, some presbyteries may need help on how to offer a support group that functions effectively and helps the pioneer flourish.
- Develop a framework to research and assess pioneer initiatives. As above, if new ecclesial communities are an ongoing priority for these kinds of pioneer posts, agree a definition so all involved know what they are aiming for. If new ecclesial communities are not the goal, then articulate what the aims of the project are.

Wider strategic questions (p. 31 of the full report)

- How can there be greater collaboration between all those working for pioneering in the Church of Scotland across the different projects and approaches? They seem to be 'pulling in different directions' in an unhelpful way.
- Do you want this kind of ordained pioneer ministry to be strongly linked into the planting of new ecclesial communities to help implement the vision to see 100 new congregations planted in 10 years? Or do you want ordained pioneer ministry to remain a separate piece of work with broader aims e.g. a ministry of presence or 'new ways of doing ministry' that probably will *not* lead to the planting of new congregations?
- If you *do* want this kind of pioneering to prioritise the planting of new ecclesial communities, are you serious enough about this to invest in training for ministers and for lay leaders? I note that since compiling this report, two presbyteries have already decided to pioneer with lay leaders rather than ordained.
- As you devolve responsibility and oversight of pioneering mission to presbyteries, how can presbyteries be equipped to do this or how can they be helped to equip themselves?

Like any effective pilot, there are strengths to be built upon and challenges that require discussion and action. In addition, the COVID-19 outbreak has curtailed the length of time the pioneers can minister in these posts. The pioneers share their reflections of - and responses to - lockdown on pp. 32-37 of the full report.

My thanks to all who gave their time to offer their reflections for this evaluation.

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