



PAID PIONEERS: FROM THE MARGINS TO THE MAINSTREAM?

Summary Report

Church Army's Research Unit
June 2022

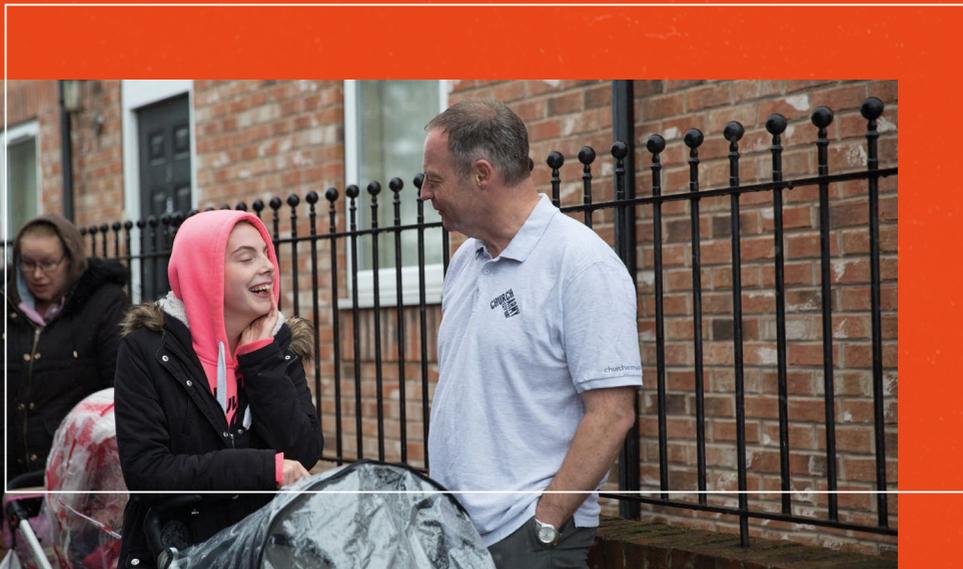
FOREWORD

It's the 25th anniversary this year of Church Army's research unit! Over these years we have sought to discern how God is active in mission and how the Church may better join in. We remain committed to this endeavour.

The shift over this time of 'pioneering' from the margins of our institutional expressions of Church to the mainstream has been striking. In our collective wrestling with how we are active in God's mission, we mirror generations before us who have sought to serve faithfully. Like our predecessors, innovations have been met not only with suspicion, confusion, and fear but also with joy, hope and courage.

We are most grateful to all those who have partnered with us in our research and who have helped us to discern better our situation. The team's work over time and across contexts has enabled it uniquely to provide a synoptic account of pioneering ministry. This report draws on a range of contexts and experiences as it tells a story that transcends simple binaries and offers causes for hope and challenges for the future. In recognition that we are still on a journey it asks us to consider the question: from the margins to the mainstream? I hope that we are all disturbed by the question, the report's reflections, and are inspired to continue taking risks in reaching out and calling out: Come, Lord Jesus!

Dr Tim Ling
Director of Learning and Development, Church Army



WHO WE ARE AND WHAT WE OFFER

For the past 25 years, Church's Army's Research Unit have been working with the Church to discern how God is active in mission, and to understand how churches' participation in that mission can falter or flourish.

We explore these questions through innovative, excellent research and consultancy that equips and informs the Church, our funding partners and our colleagues at Church Army. Our bespoke, wide-ranging work includes customised survey design, focus group facilitation, quantitative data analysis, project evaluations, strategic reviews and participatory action research.

We warmly welcome opportunities to carry out new research that serves the people of God, and we invite you to benefit from the findings of our work to date. Find out more at churcharmy.org/research.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We are very grateful to the Church of Scotland, the Diocese of Oxford, and the Diocese of Portsmouth who commissioned some of the research on which this report is based, and to all the pioneers and other individuals from across these organisations who were willing to be interviewed.

We would also like to thank all the Church Army Evangelists who have helped us with our research on pioneering over many years. This report would not have been possible without them.

Although I authored this report, I am very grateful to the members of Church Army's Research Unit and other Church Army national staff who contributed to this research. Thank you especially to Andrew Wooding, Claire Dalpra, Dave Lovell, Elspeth McGann, Lu Skerratt, John Tomlinson, and Phoebe Leaver.

Dr Andy Wier
Research Team Leader, Church Army

Read the full report at www.churcharmy.org/paid-pioneers

INTRODUCTION

Over the past two decades, many Anglican dioceses and other denominations have begun to embrace the language of pioneering and financially invested in projects that involve appointing paid pioneers in a way that would have been unthinkable in previous decades. This, it might be said, is one sign that pioneering is moving from the margins to the mainstream of church life. However, our research also highlights the diversity, complexity, and contested nature of contemporary pioneering and suggests that the relationship between paid pioneers and the wider Church is sometimes still an uneasy one. This report draws together recent learning about the experiences of paid pioneers by summarising the findings of three evaluations of pioneer projects conducted by Church Army's Research Unit (CARU) and brings these into dialogue with insights from CARU's internal research on Church Army Centres of mission. The four main sources we draw on here are as follows:

- *Pioneer Mission in New Communities – An Evaluation for the Diocese of Oxford* (Church Army's Research Unit, February 2021)
- *Pioneering in Portsmouth - Evaluating the Diocese of Portsmouth's Pioneer Project* (Church Army's Research Unit, May 2021)
- *Pioneering Pieces - An Evaluation of the Church of Scotland's Pioneer Pilot Project* (Church Army's Research Unit, October 2020)
- *Mission in a Pandemic: Church Army Centres of mission in 2020/21* (Church Army's Research Unit, September 2021), and various other internal sources about Church Army centres of mission

This summary booklet provides a short overview of our main findings. A more detailed fuller report is available at: www.churcharmy.org/paid-pioneers

DEPLOYING PAID PIONEERS

Though the different projects considered in this report all involved appointing paid pioneers, deployment models varied in several notable respects:

- **Scope and Scale** – The Portsmouth, Oxford, and Church of Scotland projects each involved the creation of 5-10 paid pioneer posts. Church Army, in contrast, currently has 50 paid Evangelists in 32 centres of mission across the British Isles and Ireland. This makes Church Army (in partnership with host dioceses), as far as we are aware, the largest provider of paid pioneer ministry in the British Isles and Ireland.

- **Mission Contexts** - The four contexts all engaged with mission contexts or communities thought to be beyond the reach of the traditional church, but the nature of these contexts varied significantly. Some engaged with a diverse range of contexts, while others had a more targeted missional focus. The Diocese of Oxford's New Communities Programme, for example, was a strategic response to an unprecedented level of new housing development and population expansion, while Church Army centres of mission mainly operate in areas of high deprivation.
- **Funding Pioneer Posts** - Time-limited external funding was a feature of the Oxford, Portsmouth, and Church of Scotland projects. Most new posts were funded for up to five years, but some in Oxford were renewed for a further five years. Church Army centres of mission are established in partnership with host dioceses, with Church Army and the diocese sharing the financial costs. The length of the funding commitment varies from context to context, but for many centres of mission the initial commitment is for five years, with the potential for continuation beyond that subject to a review after the first three years.
- **Lay and Ordained Pioneers** - The Oxford and Church of Scotland Pioneer Projects involved mainly appointing ordained ministers. The Portsmouth Pioneer Project involved a mix of lay and ordained pioneer posts. Within Church Army centres of mission, most but not all pioneers are commissioned Church Army Evangelists. Though the majority of these are lay people, some Church Army Evangelists are also ordained.
- **Pioneer Teams** - The Church of Scotland, Oxford, and Portsmouth projects all involved appointing one person in each mission context. That person was, in most cases, responsible for trying to establish a new ministry 'from scratch' on their own. Church Army centres of mission, in contrast, typically involve appointing two full-time staff in each new mission context – a Lead Evangelist and Pioneer Evangelist. Though this makes establishing a centre of mission more expensive than setting up a standalone pioneer post, the centre of mission model offers greater potential for collaboration and teamwork.

WHAT IS BEING PIONEERED?

PIONEERING AND FRESH EXPRESSIONS OF CHURCH

Across all four projects, there was a common expectation that paid pioneers would help establish new worshipping communities or fresh expressions of Church (fxC). However, our research has found that the relationship between paid pioneers and fresh expressions of Church is not always straightforward. The work of paid pioneers often encompasses a diverse range of activities, much broader than the establishment of fresh expressions of Church. Though for some pioneers, the establishment of a new worshipping community or fxC was a central overarching aim, for others this was a more marginal or distant aspiration. We also found different pioneers operating at different places along Bradbury and Hodgett's 'Pioneer Spectrum', with some focusing more on community activism or social enterprise and less on establishing new worshipping communities. All this suggests that pioneering is a much broader undertaking than landmark reports like *Mission-Shaped Church* at times appear to suggest. In this regard, we think it is important to note that:

- Not all paid pioneers establish new worshipping communities or fresh expressions of Church. Some express pioneering instead through community activism or social enterprise.
- Not all fxC are established by paid pioneers; many are led by spare-time volunteers. Pioneering is not only about what paid or formally designated 'pioneers' do.
- The relationship between 'grassroots pioneering' and church planting based on a resource church model is a source of contention within contemporary pioneering circles, though there may also be scope for them to complement each other or be creatively combined.

For more on the potential for mutually beneficial relationships between 'grassroots pioneers' and resource churches, see p.18 of the full report at www.churcharmy.org/paid-pioneers

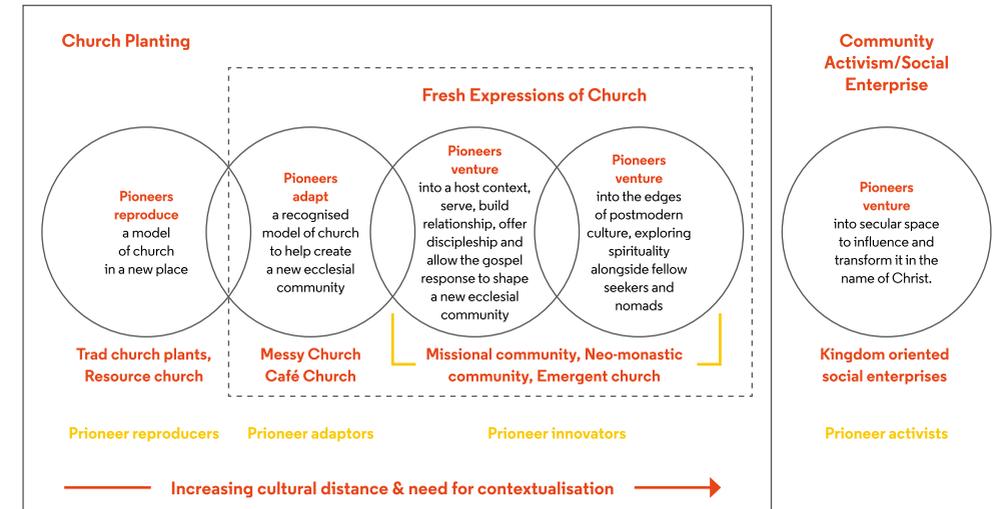


Figure 1 – The Pioneer Spectrum (reproduced with the permission of Anvil journal)¹

THE CASE FOR PIONEER EVANGELISM

Evangelism was not explicitly mentioned in the espoused aims of the of the Portsmouth, Oxford, and Church of Scotland projects. Instead, the aims of pioneering were often framed and articulated with reference to the wider, more inclusive, category of 'mission'. In many ways, this mirrors much wider contemporary discourse on pioneering. For Church Army, in contrast, there is an explicit linkage between pioneering and evangelism, with the work of centres of mission clearly aligned with Church Army's 'DARE' strategy for doing, advocating, resourcing, and enabling evangelism. As part of an organisation committed to transforming communities through 'faith shared in words and action', we think it is important to reflect on the absence, or at least reduced prominence, of evangelism within wider pioneering initiatives. In our view, any decoupling of evangelism from pioneering is problematic because:

- Without evangelism, church plants and new worshipping communities need to rely on transfer growth (people joining from other churches).
- Without some element of faith sharing or evangelism, pioneering community work or social engagement easily becomes indistinguishable from secular community projects.

¹ Tina Hodgett and Paul Bradbury (2018), 'Pioneering Mission is a Spectrum', *Anvil* 34.1. <https://churchmissionsociety.org/resources/pioneering-mission-spectrum-tina-hodgett-paul-bradbury-anvil-vol-34-issue-1/>. More tools and resources on this can be found at <http://www.pioneerspectrum.com>.

ASSESSING IMPACT

Across the four projects, assessing, and measuring the impact of paid pioneer posts in a consistent manner was a recurring challenge. Assessing and comparing the impact of paid pioneering in different localities is often difficult because:

- The aims and intentions of different pioneer posts vary.
- Evaluation frameworks focused specifically on the establishment of worshipping communities are more useful and relevant to some pioneer posts than others.
- For some projects, project aims / intended outcomes significantly change or evolve over time.

We have also uncovered deeper tensions around target setting and measurement, with some pioneers critical or suspicious of particular approaches to measuring ‘results’. In this regard there seems to be a tension between the desire of many pioneers to let things emerge gradually and not be too prescriptive about intended outcomes at the outset, with a wider institutional focus on target setting and measurement. Our research findings suggest that the impacts of new pioneer posts are often wide ranging, encompassing:

- social impact
- faith impact
- resourcing impact.

In this regard, we suggest that further work is needed to better understand the relationship between missional social action and the dawning of faith. And despite all the challenges of measurement, it is important to find ways of combining stories from pioneers with relevant quantitative measures.

SUSTAINING PIONEERING

Most pioneers had made some progress with relation to sustainable governance, finance, and local leadership. But if sustainability is defined primarily in terms of being able to cover all the costs associated with a full-time minister, all the projects still had a long way to go. As one team member from a pioneer project in Oxford diocese put it, the new worshipping community established was “certainly sustainable” in terms of the commitment of the team, but “when you add in financial implications, that’s a different matter”. Or in the words of another church leader:

In terms of sustainability, my goodness there’s a work of God happening on that estate without a shadow of a doubt, but the financial side is a tricky one.

Most of the projects studied employed a relatively high-cost financial model which involves paying for at least one dedicated full-time Pioneer Minister in each new area for 5-10 years. Replicating this model in every new mission context is unlikely to be sustainable so we suggest that some paid pioneering roles may need to be reimagined to include:

- A greater emphasis on resourcing and enabling others within some pioneer roles
- Moving beyond the traditional default assumption of ‘one leader, one church’
- Exploring ways to enable pioneers to work together, support and learn from each other

Some of these things are features of Church Army centres of mission which operate on a slightly different basis to the other pioneer projects researched.

RELATING TO THE WIDER CHURCH

Though not the primary focus of our recent research, some of our recent projects have gained valuable insights about the joys and frustrations of paid pioneers. We have found that most pioneers particularly enjoy connecting with new people and getting new initiatives off the ground, but many also appreciate support and recognition from the wider Church and seeing strategic change at a wider, for example, diocesan level. However, relating to the wider Church and employing or sponsoring organisations is also a frequent source of frustration. Key challenges identified in this regard include:

- Pressure to meet targets and objectives or deliverable ‘measurable results’ from project funders who ‘don’t completely grasp pioneering’
- Onerous reporting requirements – a sense of being ‘checked up on’
- Worries around short-term funding and the longevity of pioneer projects / posts

Drawing on our wider observations over the past two decades, we suggest that some pioneers are more comfortable and temperamentally more suited than others to negotiating the opportunities and challenges associated with being funded by the institutional Church.

PIONEERING RISKS AND KEY MESSAGES FOR THE WIDER CHURCH

The fact that there has been such significant investment in the creation of paid pioneer posts is an indication of how far the Church has come in its acceptance of pioneering since the days of *Mission-Shaped Church*. But our research also highlights that the relationship between paid pioneers and the wider Church is often an uneasy one. Within the current pioneering landscape, we identify four key risks with relation to pioneering, and four key messages in response:

Risk 1 - Dismissing Pioneering

The relationship between 'grassroots pioneering' and church planting based on the resource church model is currently a source of contention. Some of the pioneers we interviewed expressed concern that within some contexts, the former is being quickly disregarded in favour of the latter. However, we suggest that grassroots pioneering and traditional church planting do not have to be seen as mutually exclusive alternatives. There is potential for them to support and complement each other or be creatively combined.

Key message for the wider Church:

Discern carefully which models of pioneering (e.g. grassroots pioneering, traditional church planting, social enterprise) are most appropriate in different mission contexts and how these might be creatively combined.

Risk 2 – Domesticating and Stifling Pioneers

As pioneering has (in some ways) moved from the margins to the mainstream of church life, the wider Church has rightly required the pioneers it has funded to be accountable. But the very high expectations and demands that the Church places on pioneers can often be a source of significant frustration and distress, which distracts them from the core task of pioneering.

Key message for the wider Church:

Create space for risk-taking alongside appropriate accountability. Be careful not to impose over-simplistic performance management frameworks which can easily alienate pioneers. Instead, build in regular, relational reviews alongside contextually sensitive approaches to impact measurement.

Risk 3 – Decoupling Evangelism from Pioneering

As part of an organisation committed to doing, advocating, resourcing and evangelism, we suggest that greater attention needs to be given to the place of evangelism within pioneering and the distinctive role of the pioneer evangelist alongside other forms of pioneering.

Key message for the wider Church:

Put the 'evangelism' back into 'pioneer evangelism' and train pioneer evangelists.

Risk 4 – Dismissing Unpaid Forms of Pioneering

Whilst affirming the need for significant financial investment in paid pioneer posts, alternative forms of leadership such as those embodied by many Messy Churches should not be overlooked. Some paid pioneering roles may also need to be reimagined to include a greater emphasis on resourcing and enabling others.

Key message for the wider Church:

Look below the radar. Don't only take an interest in what you fund!



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