

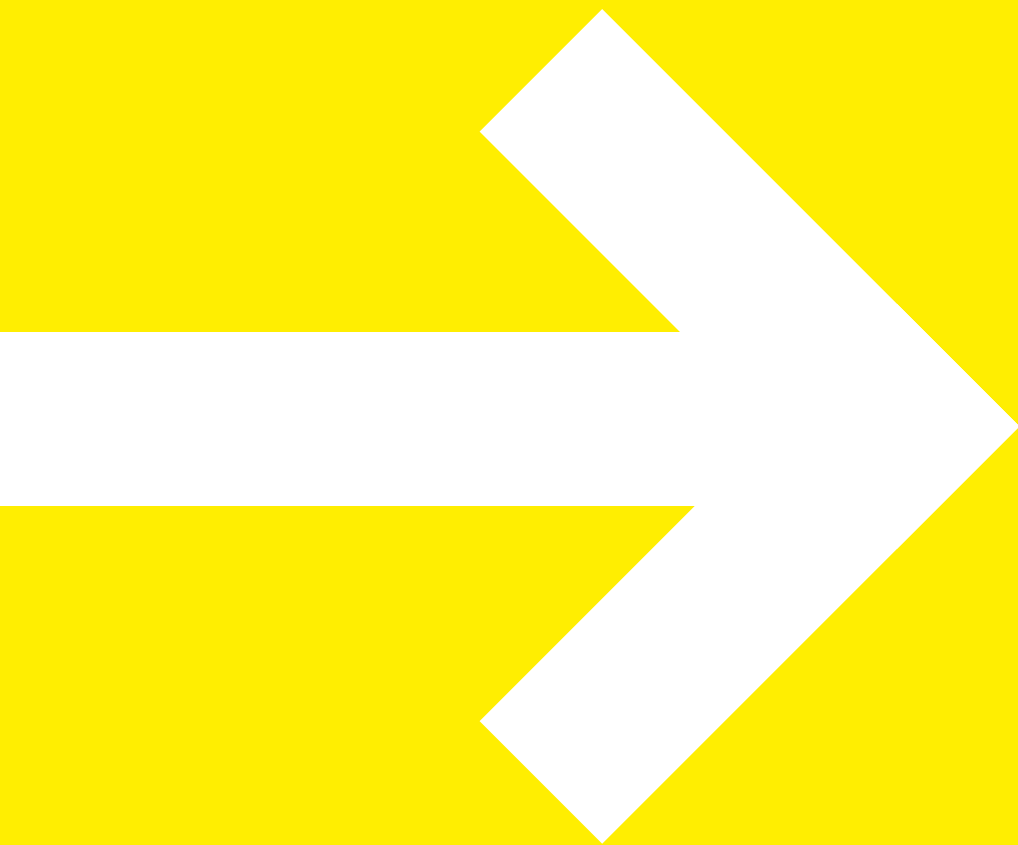


# LISTENING TO THE VOICE OF THE PIONEER

JANUARY 2025

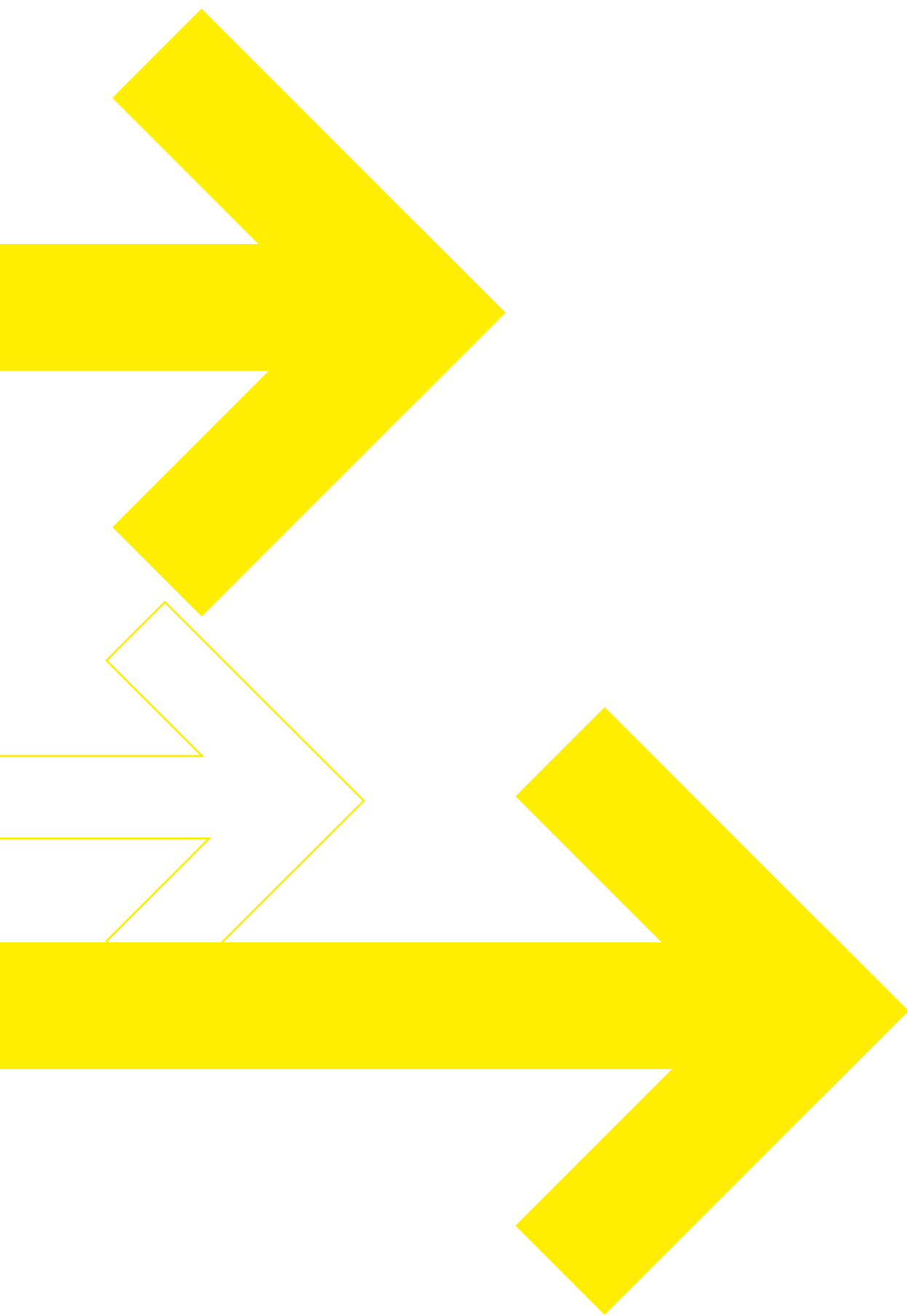


The Gregory  
Centre for Church  
**Multiplication**



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# INTRODUCTION

2024 marks the 20th anniversary of the publication of the *Mission Shaped Church* report, which was foundational in identifying and celebrating the work of pioneers across the country.

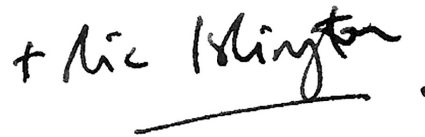
To mark this occasion, it seemed fitting that we would take a look at the current experiences of pioneers across the country working in and alongside the Church.

Pioneering, by its very nature, happens at the edge. It exists beyond the familiar. It is often unseen, and it challenges us to understand how it integrates with existing structures and the resources they offer. Yet, it is precisely in these liminal spaces that transformation occurs. As Justin Duckworth, Bishop of Wellington, reminds us, there is so much that the edge can teach the centre. It is from the margins that we learn, innovate, and grow.

I am delighted to introduce this work. At CCX, our mission is to play our part in extending the reach of the Church, especially to places where few have ventured but where God has already prepared the way. Pioneers are integral to this mission. They are voices we must listen to – voices that offer insights and experiences which can shape the future of the Church. When institutions embrace their pioneering edge and channel it effectively, they position themselves ahead of the curve – akin to the role of R&D in business, driving innovation and renewal. Recognising and utilising the contributions of pioneers within this mix is crucial. They bring fresh perspectives and the potential for breakthroughs that benefit the whole.

This research highlights several vital lessons from these trailblazers. It emphasises their distinct calling and gift to the Church, in creating Christian communities among those with little or no connection with the established Church. As a bishop in the Church of England, I am particularly struck by the need for church institutions to understand and outwardly value the work of pioneers, and also for accountability metrics to be appropriate for their work.

I believe that this report is a tribute to the work of pioneers and a call to action for the wider Church to invest in and support this crucial work. May it inspire us to embrace the edge, learn its lessons, and move forward with faith and vision.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Ric Thorpe". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style. Below the signature is a horizontal line that starts under the first part of the name and ends under the last part, with a small flourish at the end.

**Ric Thorpe, Bishop of Islington**

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

## SEVEN SIGNIFICANT FINDINGS FROM THE RESEARCH

- 1 Pioneers are deeply theological, biblically literate, prayerful, persevering, and team-focused. They have a distinct calling, doing incredible work creating Christian community amongst those with little or no connection with the established Church. The unique skills and characteristics of pioneers are a gift to the Church and world.
- 2 Pioneers thrive on being given freedom, permission, and time to get on with their ministry. At the same time, they value good supervision, accountability, support, and encouragement. Pioneers want to have a strong connection with the local and regional church.
- 3 The biggest struggle pioneers face is not being understood and valued. Pioneers say it would be good for them and the Church if the established Church had a deeper understanding of what pioneering is, who pioneers are, and how to support and resource pioneering ministry well.
- 4 Many pioneers express a 'fragility' regarding their ministries. Funding and support for their work is often short-term and provisional. They would like pioneering ministry to be recognised and supported equally, in line with other forms of more traditional ministry.
- 5 There are lots of examples of the Church already helping pioneer ministry to flourish: identifying, initiating, and investing. There are positive examples to emulate and build on.
- 6 It's essential to have the right metrics and expectations in place for pioneers. Clarifying and agreeing these early on increases clarity, reduces frustration, and enhances relationships between pioneers and the wider Church.
- 7 Pioneers value training that is relational, practical, and context-specific – while still being strongly theologically informed. They recommend a shift away from training that is abstract, prolonged, and detached from context.

## SAMPLE AND METHOD

At the start of this project, The Gregory Centre for Church Multiplication (CCX) wanted to gain a deeper insight into what is currently helping and hindering pioneer ministry in England, and to what extent current pioneer practice is connected to more traditional forms of ministry. This is known as a 'mixed ecology'.

CCX commissioned Joe Warton, an independent researcher with 12 years' experience of researching the attitudes and behaviours of Christians in a range of contexts. A research question was developed:

What helps pioneers recognise and respond to their call, develop relevant skills and knowledge, and establish faithful ministry within a mixed ecology?

## What is the aim of this research?

By listening to 15 experienced pioneers, and to five line managers of pioneers, this research aims to provide insight into:

- ➔ The internal and external factors that enable pioneers to progress from hearing God's call, to engaging in effective and faithful ministry
- ➔ The main factors that help pioneers and their ministries to thrive
- ➔ The challenges pioneers are currently facing, and the ways they are learning to navigate through these
- ➔ The extent to which pioneer ministry is currently functioning within a 'mixed ecology' – listening out for what helps healthy connections between pioneering and more traditional forms of ministry
- ➔ Modes of learning that have helped pioneers to grow and learn, and what they think effective training could/should look like for pioneers in general

The application of this learning is that CCX might develop simple and elegant solutions, which will provide:

- ➔ Pioneers with insight and practical know-how, to help them move forward with the work God has called them to do – whatever stage of ministry or ministry preparation they might be in
- ➔ Churches, dioceses, denominations, training institutions, and organisations with practical wisdom for how to recognise, encourage, train, and support pioneers, and how to better integrate pioneering ministry into their existing practice

## How was the research conducted?

Joe Warton conducted 90-minute, semi-structured interviews with 15 experienced pioneers, and 30-minute interviews with five line managers of pioneers.

The interview tool was broken down into three 'chapters', which explored the following:

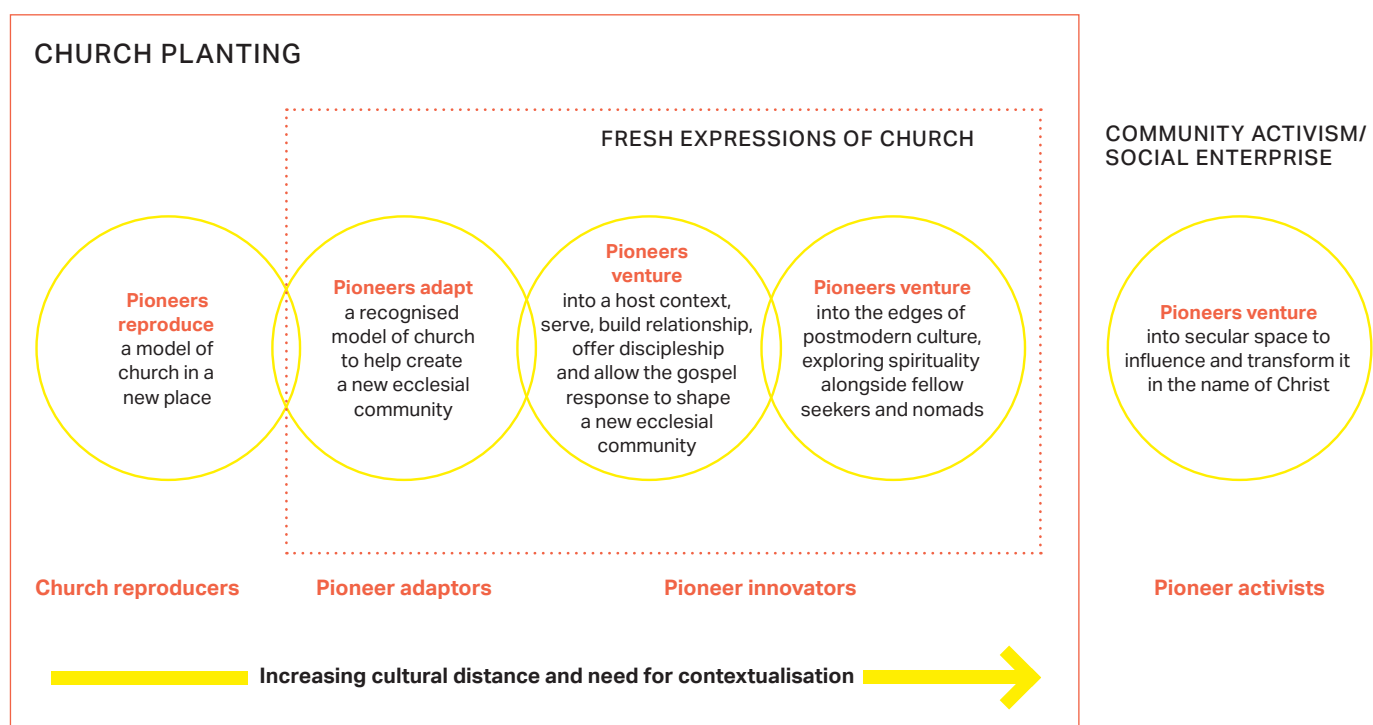
- 1 How the pioneer was called, and how they got started
- 2 The journey as a whole
- 3 Learning and training

The interview tool is available in the appendix on page 43.

Joe Warton reflected on the interviews throughout the time they were being conducted, in conversation with Phil Hoyle, Pioneer Developer, CCX. Each interview was fully transcribed (special thanks to Ruth Gabe). These were then analysed using 'thematic analysis'. This is where the researcher:

- ➔ Familiarises themselves with the data (i.e. the transcripts)
- ➔ Codes the transcripts
- ➔ Looks for themes, which emerge from the coded transcripts
- ➔ Reviews, refines, and finalises the themes
- ➔ Writes the report





## How were participants chosen and recruited?

### The pioneers

The 15 pioneers were dispersed around England, roughly reflecting the population in terms of The North, Midlands, and The South. The sample included 10 females, and five males. They are working in a range of different contexts (inner-city, suburban, estates, rural), and with diverse groups of people. Participating pioneers fit somewhere between 'adapter' and 'innovator' on the pioneering spectrum, seen above.

Regarding ethnicity, 11 identified as white-British. The ethnicities of the other four participants are not disclosed to help maintain anonymity. The vast majority of participants have no affiliation with CCX, though two participants had graduated from CCX's Pioneer School.

In order to be selected for the research, participants had to be regularly and meaningfully engaging with at least 10

people; and have either established a worshipping community, or be close to doing so. Thirteen participants are affiliated with the Church of England, with the other two being Baptists. Of the 15, 11 are ordained, and four are lay.

Some participants were recruited directly by Phil Hoyle, while the others were identified by those within the wider Church, who suggested pioneers who fitted the criteria.

### The line managers

To ensure we spoke to people who are line managing and supporting pioneers effectively, these participants were identified by the pioneers themselves. All five happened to be ordained Anglican priests. Three are currently parish priests. The other two have both been pioneers, and have worked in diocesan roles, with a responsibility for overseeing pioneers.

Of the five, three are female, and two are male.



## Context of research

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We present a summary of the conditions and context of this research, to encourage confidence in its findings.

### The researcher

Joe Warton is an experienced and trusted researcher, who has been conducting research of this nature for over 12 years. He has conducted research for a number of well-respected organisations, including Evangelical Alliance, Fusion, and LICC.

### The participants

As described above, the participants reflect a wide range of pioneers in England. The vast majority are not associated with CCX, and there was no obvious reason or incentive for them to share anything other than their real thoughts and experiences. Participants spoke openly about their own failures and struggles, as well as what they have done well.

### The interviews

The questions used were open and non-leading. Therefore, the data generated through the interviews is what has come from participants; they were not primed or led to speak about specific successes or challenges. The interviews themselves were conducted in a warm and empathetic manner, with the guarantee of anonymity, which meant participants were able to speak freely and openly.

### The data

This type of 'qualitative' research does not generate numbers e.g. '62% of participants said X'. Rather, this approach to research looks to provide a 'thick and rich' description of people's thoughts, feelings, and experiences, which are reported thematically.

After around five-to-seven interviews, something known as the 'saturation point' was met. This is the time where the researcher notices similar themes coming through in the interviews. Beyond this point, no new significant themes emerge. The interviews beyond this point add texture, nuance, and examples from different contexts. Beyond the 15, the researcher is confident that even if another 50 or 100 participants were interviewed, the themes contained in this report would most likely remain unchanged.

There was also consistent overlap between what the pioneers said, and what those line-managing them said.

### The report

This report contains a wealth of direct quotes from participants. As well as bringing life and colour to the report, these enable the reader to hear directly from the horse's mouth, as it were, and not just the researcher's reflections on and interpretations of what participants have said. Many more quotes could have been included for each theme than have made it into the final report.

### The feedback

Pioneers and pioneer enablers who have seen/heard the findings from this research say they accurately portray their thoughts and experiences of pioneering ministry.



# THE RESEARCH

# SECTION 1:

## WHO ARE THE PIONEERS?

This section explores what pioneers are like: how they operate, what makes them tick, and what matters most to them. Discovering this was not one of the primary purposes of the research. But through the process of listening to 15 pioneers, certain traits and characteristics came up repeatedly.

The 19th-century Methodist author, E.M. Bounds wrote, “The Church is looking for better methods; God is looking for better [people]”. Judging by those who took part in this research, pioneers are great people, and God is working through them.

We present ten traits these pioneers exhibited consistently in the interviews.

### THEY ARE GOD-CENTRIC

This theme came through very strongly in the interviews. Without prompting, participants talked a lot about God: their understanding of his heart, their desire to do his will, the importance of his involvement, their dependence on him, their gratitude to him. They recognise his activity within themselves, within the ministries and projects they are working on, and in the lives of those they interact with. Put simply, they love God.

... your identity in Christ is absolutely crucial.

“And then when you’re on the peaks again it’s important because you’re not caught up in your own success: you’re able to identify that success is because of who God is, about what God has done, what God is doing, and doing a little bit of recognising that he has used you perhaps to do that, but that success is not about you.

“One of the anchors I would say, that you learn, is your sense of your identity in Christ is absolutely crucial. If you do not have a strong, well-anchored, well-grounded and rounded sense of identity in Christ, you can’t do this stuff. You would not survive, because you feel like you’re tossing about in a wild sea. So without that sense of identity in Christ, you’re not going to get started.

Pioneers also have a strong operant belief in the person and work of the Holy Spirit. Many of them talked about how they had been encouraged and guided by the Spirit, whether through direct revelation, images, prophetic words, 'God-instances', or dreams.

“...and let's assume the Spirit of God is moving, and let's assume that God is already there, and God has brought these people.

“We [the team] all have the same approach of where we just want to go where the Holy Spirit is going. And as long as people are encountering Jesus, and we can guide them to the next step – come alongside them – then that's OK. But it's often not about build the church and get people to come, or even go to them and build the church – it's much more a move of God.

## THEY ARE THEOLOGICALLY AND BIBLICALLY GROUNDED

The pioneers don't just have an experiential and practical relationship with God, their minds are also filled with and shaped by theology and scripture. Whether ordained or lay, participants often expressed what they were doing in theological and biblical terms. Sometimes intentionally and explicitly; at other times casually and implicitly. They often quoted a theologian or biblical author, as well as making allusions to them. It was clear their theology and biblical literacy is 'baked in', not 'tacked on' to what they are doing.

For those less-acquainted with pioneers, they might suppose these are people who just do some nice community-type things, but without rigorous theological underpinning or reflection. This could not be further from the truth!

“It feels to me like pioneering – so two phrases that I suppose theologically really summarise my understanding and my theology about pioneering and actually just ministry in general is Bevens and Schroeder, “It's not that the church has a mission, but the mission of God has a church”. And the second is Emil Brunner, “The church exists by mission as a fire exists by burning”. And I mean mission as a reorientating to not doing or running church or doing to, but being with, in place, in context.

“My biggest scripture I work on, of all the scriptures you could choose as a pioneer, mine is simply this: “Seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and everything else will be added.” There is no other. So go somewhere, seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, which is about God's holiness, salvation, kingdom coming – so as long as you go somewhere and you're seeking his kingdom and you want to see people come to faith and become the righteousness of God, God will add everything else to you.

We've seen a lot of dechurched people come back and feel welcomed home.

## THEY HAVE A MISSIONAL MINDSET

Out of the 10 factors listed here, this pioneering trait may be taken as a given. But it's worth highlighting – and celebrating – because it came through so strongly from all participants.

Most of them talk about mission in both the broader sense of the term (e.g. God's renewing and redeeming activity in the world, people finding community, etc.), and they also talk about mission in terms of people drawing closer to Jesus, and discovering the joy of life in him.

These pioneers are particularly good at, and have a heart for, connecting with those who aren't already engaging with traditional expressions of church. They have a knack for noticing 'who isn't there', and have a desire to meet with these people 'where they're at'.

When I asked them the open question, 'In your pioneering ministry what gives you the most joy, and what are you most happy about?', the overwhelming answer was around connecting with people and helping them move forwards in their spiritual journey.

*“The thing I'm most excited about is that every Sunday night I go and worship with a group of people, most of which have always felt that Jesus hates them, the Church hates them. And actually, they recognise that neither of those two things are true.*

*“We've genuinely met and loved and drawn in and accompanied real souls, real people. When I think about the mums that I've had in my group, it's not hundreds and hundreds – I don't care, I don't have to care about numbers. It's like people are having real journeys.*

*“We've seen a lot of dechurched people come back and feel welcomed home. That utterly delights me, as much as it does encountering people who don't yet know Jesus.*

*“What I love about it is those people are still going on with God now. They may not be perfect, those that are recovering alcoholics fall off the wagon every so often. But they have a love for God, and their lives have been transformed. And it's a testimony and a witness, not only to themselves and to us, but to their families.*

## THEY PRIZE PRAYER

Through the process of interviewing these 15 pioneers, it was striking just how much they talked about prayer.

They see prayer as foundational to everything they do, and are committed to praying: alone, in their teams, and with pretty much anyone else who wants to pray with them for the people they are connecting with! They also love it when they know other people are praying for them and their ministry.

*“We had no idea – I had no idea what I was talking about and we had no idea what we would do. So we prayed for a year. So, for me, prayer is really, really important. I live and die by prayer!... Prayer, I can't even begin to tell you, prayer really has been the foundation of everything that we did.*

*“All pioneers need a deep prayer life and need to have prayerful warriors.*

*“Prayer is the bedrock of everything we do.*

# Prayer is the bedrock of everything we do.

## THEY WANT RELATIONSHIP WITH THE ESTABLISHED CHURCH

By definition, pioneers are people who are engaging in ministry with people who would not normally engage with local church on a regular basis. Much of the work they do takes place 'beyond the walls' of the gathered church, and/or they do things differently 'within the walls' of the church.

We might, therefore, imagine pioneers to be 'lone wolves', opposed to traditional forms of ministry – renegades who just want to get on with their own ministry. But that's the total opposite of what these pioneers expressed. They actively want supervision. They want relationship with the established Church. They value the accountability, support, encouragement, and prayer – both from leaders within the established Church, and the congregation.

*“When we've got ideas, we always copy our incumbent in – we make sure she is fully aware of what we're doing. And I suppose from her perspective – I mean it would be interesting to get her perspective – if she ever turned round and said, 'I don't want you to do that', we wouldn't do it. But, I think for her, she knows it's got governance. And also, what we recently started doing with the incumbent is planning joint things almost.*

*“And when people ask us, 'Well, who are you?' We can say, 'We're part of the Church of England'. Which I just think, yeah, we're not some sort of little random breakaway group.*

*“So sometimes, you go through those ups and downs and you need somebody you can talk to about the ups and downs. And they don't really need to be a pioneering person. So, for example, the things that have been helpful to me is having an identified supervisor, which I did have, but haven't at the moment.*

*“Actually it's good to have a base, where you know people are caring for you, supporting you, and cheering you on – and the church should be that. And I just think there is space for that. But I do think all pioneers need to be supervised, because we need to ensure more than ever to guarantee safeguarding for pioneers, to show that we are not just doing things our own way.*

**... we're not some sort of little random breakaway group.**

And despite the fact many of these pioneers have had challenges of remaining connected to the local church, and have sometimes been hurt by the Church, they remain loving, respectful, and hopeful in the way they speak about the existing Church.

*“I love the Church, I genuinely do... I absolutely feel part of being in the body of Christ. I suppose that's why I felt called to be an ordained minister in two denominations, because I love the Church!*



“But we wanna stay connected with church. And we wanna stay connected with the diocese, because we love being part of it – even though it frustrates us sometimes... And if it wasn't for the traditional church, we wouldn't be where we are today.

To varying degrees, these pioneers are seeking to maintain closeness with local churches, deaneries, and dioceses – while at the same time they're careful not to divert too much attention and time from the pioneering itself. They want their ministry to be part of a 'mixed ecology', as an equal and valid form of ministry alongside other expressions of church, without being 'sucked in' or subsumed by those other expressions.

“I think it's really important for me that I am part of the deanery set up in the Church of England here, and so make that an absolute priority – that us as a church have a voice at the synod as well, so that people hear the stories of what we're doing and know that we are part of them, and that we can champion each other in what we're doing... I think it's important, especially for my little community here, because we are like this outpost of the church, and for so many of [the people we are reaching] we are the only proper experience of what church is. So it's mega-important that they understand that we are connected into something much bigger that goes well beyond who we are. So we've had the Bishop of [diocese] come and just be with us because we thought this is really important for him to see what we're doing, but also for us to see that.

## THEY LOVE TO BUILD TEAM

As well as wanting relationships with the established Church and its leaders, they also want to be part of teams, and to build teams.

In general, they seek to build teams as soon as they can – ideally from the very inception of the pioneering ministry. And where they aren't able to do this, they are always trying to draw people in along the way.

In no sense did they exhibit an 'instrumental' understanding of other people: merely seeing them as helpers who make their life easier. They talked about their teams with great affection, and they genuinely value the gifts and personalities each team member brings. They don't want mere cooperation, but connection and collaboration.

Team members make valuable contributions in prayer, planning, and participation. The pioneers attribute a lot of the good things that happen in their ministries to the team as a whole, not just to themselves individually. They recognise that without their teams, there are things that wouldn't happen, or wouldn't be as effective.

When asked what brings them the most joy in their ministry, building and developing team was one of their top answers.

There's no sense that one person could do what we're doing. It's not down to this person's ministry; it's enabling people to play their part.

”

“

👤👤 *Never pioneer on your own; always in a team. If you do pioneer alone to begin with, pioneer within a body of Christ context somehow, even if that's sort of a supportive person from somewhere else. But locally I would say always go at least with one other person. God never sends you on your own. And then I think what happens is he then puts more people around you.*

👤👤 *So it is faithfulness in those little steps that thrills me. People building deeper relationships with team, because we're just having to lean on one another and God. Just that is what makes ministry and life worth living really: just deep authentic, doing the gritty work together. Even the stuff that's hard, where we make mistakes or hurt one another, and doing that authentic work.*

👤👤 *I don't know whether it's just my way of going, but it's about building a team where we work together, we work collaboratively. I can't think of anything where I say, 'That's it, this is what we're doing'. I'll suggest things and make a really strong case for it, but I notice that the giftings and experience of other people – that's where when we all listen and we all discern together, that's where I see the really significant stuff happen. It's like we call out the best not in one another, but each voice refines the whole. There's no sense that one person could do what we're doing. It's not down to this person's ministry; it's enabling people to play their part.*

## THEY ARE HYPER-RELATIONAL

Relationships are at the heart of everything pioneers do. They connect broadly within the communities where they work, and they connect deeply with the individuals they engage with. They rarely discuss numerical data, but talk about people and relationships.

The theme of building relationships came through strongly when they were talking about how their ministries began, and also when they were talking about what is going well, and what they particularly love about their work. They genuinely love and enjoy people, and thrive on getting to know people and drawing close to them.

And many of the good things that they see happening have come about because of relationships they've built, and these ministries have grown and had a positive impact through the relationships they have with people. They do not see relationships as a by-product of ministry. Relationships are ministry, and ministry is relationships.

👤👤 *So, in March 2021, when you still couldn't meet anyone, I emailed all those people, introduced myself, and then, as I could have a coffee outside with one person, I met each of those people. And for every conversation over coffee I had, that person said, 'You should meet so and so, so and so, so and so'. So I came away with five more people that they suggested that I might need to meet. So there again, Covid actually expedited my work in an amazing way. So that six months into the job, I felt like I probably knew more people in my context than a lot of other people who'd lived there for years and years and years.*



“In terms of people personally beginning to come to those points [of exploring faith], I think it's just building relationships. So put in the time as a chaplain or as a pioneer to build those relationships with people. Getting to know them just for the... kind of, the day to day, whatever it is... Just an openness to listening, and allowing people to talk about things. And then through that openness and just being in there and having a kind of a very non-judgmental approach, where I was willing to just sit and listen and provide some advice and support, relationships grew. And then when it came to moments where they were in crisis, the relationships were there, and then they sought me out for support. But it was often during those moments, of going through those moments of crisis and helping them think through what that meant.

## THEY ARE CREATIVE EXPERIMENTERS

When they talk about their ministries, it's clear how adaptive pioneers are. They often talk about particular opportunities or challenges, which for some would result in slow or no progress. But in all kinds of situations, they somehow find a way.

All of their ministries were affected by the Covid-19 pandemic and associated lockdowns and restrictions. Yet so many of them talked about how this became a particularly fruitful time for them, where they connected with people, started new things, and saw God impacting people's lives.

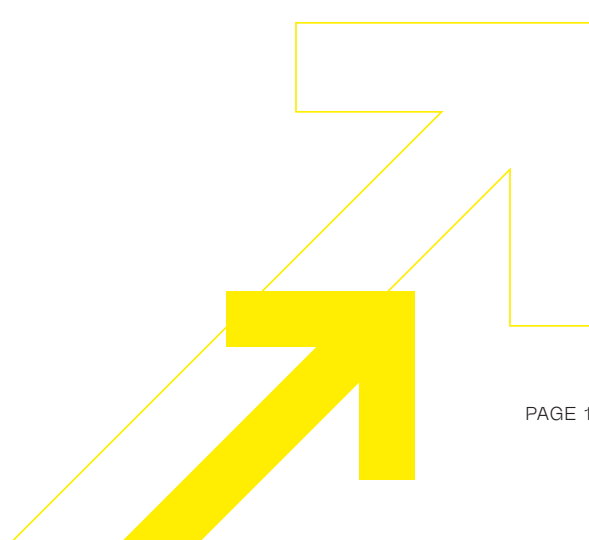
Their creativity and 'give-it-a-go' mindset means that with the many desires and ideas they have, they don't wait until they have 'the perfect plan' before they get started. They tend to have an idea, and have some time

for prayer and reflection. But then they get something going, reflect on how things are progressing, and then tweak, revolutionise, or try something else – depending on what they see happening.

They shared lots of real-life examples. During Covid restrictions, one started doing a particular activity in the local park with a friend, which people from the local community asked if they could join. They now have over 40 people joining on a regular basis. Another, again during Covid, wrote messages of hope and love on the pavements in their area, and used their fence to interact with passers-by.

Another talked about a particular event they planned, but just before the event, most of the volunteers dropped out. Instead of cancelling the event, they went ahead, and just did it in a different way that required fewer volunteers, and it was a great community event.

“Then I did my curacy and I did it very creatively. My curacy was during Covid, so for me Covid was complete *carte blanche* to do all the things I never would have been able to do if it hadn't been for Covid. So really really creative, really out-of-the-box – saying, 'Well, we can't do it this way anyway, so let's do it in this crazy different new way'. And so that gave me enormous creative freedom to think about how to reach people and just to sustain faith and create interest, which I did in a lot of different ways.



What you meet in,  
what you look like,  
how you operate,  
has to have fluidity  
and flexibility.



“That kind of says what pioneering is for me, because it’s a continually changing journey. I think you can establish a new way of being church, but often it’s got to adapt and change, because the culture’s changing so rapidly. It’s always changing. Therefore, what you meet in, what you look like, how you operate, has to have fluidity and flexibility.”

“[When asked why they thought certain things have gone well]: I think it simply comes down to the fact that I’ve never been particularly interested in thinking about what something might end up looking like.”

## THEY PERSEVERE

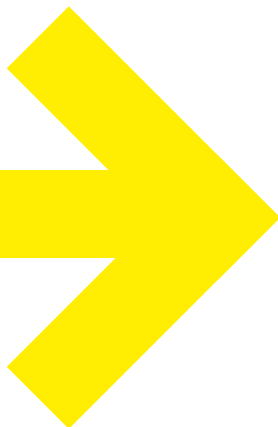
Though pioneers derive a great deal of joy and satisfaction from their work, it’s still hard! They experience disappointment and pain (see Section 3). And because they are generally starting things from scratch, progress is sometimes slow.

When they talk about what they’ve been doing, it’s clear that they are people who don’t give up easily. They persevere. Their perseverance, combined with their ‘creative experimenter’ mindset, means they are great at finding a way to make things happen – even when it’s hard, and even when it takes a long time.

On the theme of perseverance, it’s interesting to note that when participants were asked why they thought things had gone well in their ministry, they would often refer to their own ‘stubbornness’.

When these pioneers talked about their decision to keep going in the face of struggle, it was evident their perseverance is often derived from their sense of God’s call to this ministry. Even when things are really difficult, and even if they feel like giving up, a clear sense that God has called them helps them to keep on keeping on.

“But [God] called me I think partly because he knows how stubborn I am... I am an emotional person, and so I do suffer the highs and lows of this. And so when something goes wrong I feel it. I do feel it, and I do have moments where my wife has said in the past, ‘Is this sensible? If you’re not happy – do something else’. But never particularly strongly, because I keep coming back to – it’s a line Peter says to Jesus when Jesus does a hard teaching, and loads of people leave, and then Jesus turns to his disciples and says, ‘Will you leave too?’ And Peter just



*goes, 'Lord, to whom else would we go?' In terms of my own discipleship to Jesus, that's a great line. I'm so passionate about this. God has given me the gifting to do some of this stuff that I'm like, 'No, this is what I'm called to do'.*

“And so there has been a bit of sheer doggedness that has enabled us to keep going, to know this is what we are called to do. And so we do it. And somehow, even though we feel like the salmon going the wrong way against the stream.

## THEY ARE HUMBLE

In Romans 12:3, the apostle Paul provides a helpful way to understand what humility is. He frames it in terms of healthy self-understanding: 'Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought, but rather think of yourself with sober judgement, in accordance with the measure of faith God has given you.'

These 15 pioneers consistently exhibited this kind of self-aware humility throughout the interviews. They were happy to talk about their strengths and things they've done well. They also talked a lot about things they have not done well, or things that have gone well thanks to the activity of God and other people, as well as timing and circumstances.

They are quick to give credit to others, to own their mistakes and limitations, and are happy to admit if they don't know something.

A number openly shared about the joys and struggles of being neuro-diverse. And – although I'm aware of the limitations of making broad character assessments of people based on one 90-minute conversation – they seem to have a healthy and humble awareness of themselves.

“You have got to be careful, you've got to have accountability, you've got to have supervision, you've got to be able to say I'm aware of the fact that there's a resonance here and there's a need. And I've got to be careful that I'm not setting up a ministry to meet my own needs psychologically. Yeah, you've got to be careful with all of that. But essentially it's like why are we so afraid of saying that we're needy, because that's the basis of our faith: we need God, that's the basis of our faith. So yeah, come in, I'm the same as you, you don't have to worry, come in.



# SECTION 2:

## WHAT HELPS PIONEERING MINISTRY TO FLOURISH?

In the interviews, pioneers were asked about what was going well in their ministry, and why they thought those things were going well. Six main themes emerged in their answers.

Not included in the six, but which is a very significant factor behind pioneering success, is everything outlined in Section 1. A lot of pioneer ministries flourish because of who the pioneers are, and how they operate.

So, assuming a good pioneer is in post, here are six additional factors that help pioneer ministry to flourish.

### 1 Freedom, trust, time, and space

Because pioneers tend to be creative, mission-minded, prayerful, and collaborative – they don't need lots of instructions or a prescriptive plan to follow. In order to build relationships, discern what God is already doing, think about how they might join in with what God's doing, and to begin experimenting – freedom and trust are essential. Because this isn't a quick and easy process, they need time and space to figure things out and see what emerges.

Participants who described occasions where they hadn't been afforded this time and space said it limited what they were able to do, and it led to frustration. But when they have permission to get on with things, beautiful, unexpected, and God-infused results tend to follow.

Both the pioneers and those who supervise pioneers talked about the importance of this dynamic. The word 'permission' came up frequently. Some talked about the importance of 'high accountability, low control' using those exact words, while others described this approach implicitly.

“ [At the beginning of the first lockdown, the two pioneers thought they were going to be furloughed] But they took a punt on us, and went, 'No, no, no. Off you go. See what happens.' Then we were given this building, and they were like, 'This building is yours, do as you please...' ”

“ We actually agreed in the interview process, I said, 'Look, if I'm going to do this, I think we need six months where we don't do anything'. So that was actually agreed in the interview process, that you can't just come and start a thing and pretend that you know what the community needs; a one size fits all. I assume that partly helped them to think I was the right person for the job, but it also enabled me to have that freedom to go, 'I don't just have to come and have all the answers. We can pray. We can meet people without that pressure'... But it was also the freedom to then be able to just pray and walk and make connections with the people who live here, on Facebook. ”

“So [supporting churches] trusted me and they were permission-givers, which was absolutely essential. If there was someone that wanted to keep control, it would have been a different story, undoubtedly. So having permission-givers, that it was up to me to do the work, and to bring to them what was happening.

## 2 Encouragement, recognition, and support

While pioneers love to have permission to get on with what they sense God is leading them to do, that should not be interpreted as ‘they want to be left alone to get on with it’. The pioneers in this sample displayed a common desire for encouragement, from the diocese, clergy and parishioners. Many of them shared movingly what a difference it makes to them. It helps them keep going.

“To have someone in the diocese who is excited about what you’re doing and taking an interest makes a really big difference.

“Some older women who’ve seen it and seen the resistance, and they’ve got my back as well. So, they’ll come up to me on Sunday: ‘Keep going, I’m praying for you’ or, ‘Don’t you dare think of even stopping youth group or cancelling it because those kids need it’. So, I’m getting feedback, which is encouraging, because yeah, I’d have probably quit.

## 3 Support networks

During the interviews, often as an incidental detail, pioneers mentioned support networks they’ve built with people outside of the pioneering context. People in these networks include other pioneers and church leaders, people they studied with, former colleagues, and generally other people they trust and respect.

These networks provide encouragement, support, wisdom, ideas, and prayer.

“Yes, I think the other thing was I was aware that I was moving from my home in [county] – my husband and I – to a totally different context where I didn’t know anyone. And I felt quite strongly that I needed to have a network of close spiritual friends that weren’t in that context.

## 4 Partnering with local organisations

Pioneers often start new things. But they don’t always do this by themselves and with their teams – they often work collaboratively with local community members and organisations. As well as starting new things, they’re often happy to join in with and support initiatives run by others. They don’t have to be in control!

Throughout the conversations, they shared examples of how their ministry integrates with the work of others, and how they’ve built deep relationships with partners who have a shared heart for the areas they’re in. Often, they describe how it’s through these relationships with local partners that new ministry opportunities emerge.

Examples of local partners cited include building developers, doctors’ surgeries, food banks, mental health services, pubs, schools, and social groups.

“I connected quite quickly with the doctors’ offices in the town, so they used social prescribing. So instead of prescribing someone six weeks of medicine for depression, they’ll say, ‘We’ll prescribe you six weeks of going to [activity pioneer runs], and then see how you feel’.



“I spent the first seven or eight months saying let’s work with the homeless, and it was an absolute train-wreck, because the context: the place I was working in wasn’t suitable. I loved it, I love chatting with homeless people – out on the street homeless. And then the Salvation Army opened up, and I now work with the Salvation Army minister, and they have an incredible ministry for the homeless. They’re much better than us at doing it. So let them get on with it, right?”

## 5 Input from organisations

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Participants spoke about how they had benefited from the work of various organisations. These include, but are not limited to, Church Army, CMS, CCX, Fresh Expressions, and 3DM.

These organisations, along with others, have helped by providing models and frameworks, support and mentoring, developing metrics, and training. Participants often shared how the character and example of the people from these organisations has been significant to them, as well as the relationships they’ve built with them. The impact of these organisations goes beyond the information and services they provide.

## 6 The activity of God

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Section 1 of this report makes it clear that pioneers are God-centric, prayerful people. Therefore, it’s no surprise that when asked why they think things have gone well, they were quick to point to the activity of God.

Fundamentally, they don’t see the fruit of their ministries as a result of their own endeavour. Central to all of it, is the gracious and powerful activity of God. With great frequency, they talk about how God changes hearts; how God helps make connections; how God brings the right person/property/

provision at the right time; how God sustains them; and how God gives prophetic insight to them and those around them.

Pioneers don’t just think psychologically and sociologically, but also theologically.

“I think I probably needed to find the right people – I think that was part of what God was wanting me to do... And I think that’s been really important – especially now actually, because I’ve basically almost handed this community over to [name]... And he was just absolutely the right person. So what can you say, when God provides the right person for the job without you having to work too hard to find them?”

“Well, I mean, let’s be honest, nothing happens without the Spirit at work, so obviously that goes right at the top of the list – and not just because I’m a vicar and I feel I have to say that. I mean time and time again there are these moments where I’m like what are we doing? How on earth is this viable? And when we come back to the money conversation, the constant feeling of, well at some point the bubble’s got to burst surely. But then a new family pops up, someone invites a mate and that starts a whole new journey, and there are these words of encouragement. You just have to stop and go, ‘Thank you Lord’, because I cannot do this on my own.

“Going back to your question of [what factors might have led to these good things happening] – the answer is I don’t really know; except I think it’s the Spirit of God bringing transformation.

## WHAT HELPS PIONEERS RECOGNISE AND RESPOND TO THEIR CALLING?

So far, this report has outlined who pioneers are, and what helps their ministry to flourish. Section 1 noted that pioneers have a clear sense of calling. Here, we see what helps them to recognise that calling, and to begin the work of pioneering.

When pioneers talked about this, they talked about things the Church has done, as well as what was going on inside of themselves.

### Three ways the established Church is helping:

#### 1 IDENTIFYING

Some pioneers recognised their calling because their church leader helped them to see it. The church leader saw something in them – their heart, their passion, their gifting – and encouraged them to pursue training and pioneer ministry.

For some others who came to recognise their pioneer calling in a different way, or who were at least working through it, the Church still played a role by identifying them as being the right person for a particular pioneering role.

This was not the case for all pioneers in the sample. Some feel that they have found their way into pioneering despite the established Church, not because of it. But people within the established Church were a positive factor for a significant number of these pioneers.

“Then I got an email randomly from a person I did not know from [place] Diocese, who said ‘We’ve just been given the go ahead to start something new in this particular part of [location], and your name cropped up in a conversation, and it felt like it was worth pursuing. Would you be up for chatting?’ So, it was one of those. There’s a lot of pioneering stuff that happens in a quite organic kind of ‘I just already happen to be situated in

the place’ kind of thing, and this was absolutely not. This was a guy called [name] up here at [location]. They’ve got a brand new housing estate on the edge of their parish... So we have this completely unique space and they were, like, we want to do something in it. So, I was asked to come up. And at first, I thought you’re mad, this is ridiculous, this is too big a thing! But anyway, long story short, we felt God very much say ‘come’.

“I was at my church, and I was actually just trying to get involved and see what ways I could use my skills to make a difference to what their mission was. And the vicar booked a one-to-one with me, and said, ‘I’ve been praying into this position as a pioneer, and I think you’re the pioneer’. And she turned the computer screen round and showed me the course and everything, and I literally just burst into tears – like wow, that is me!

#### 2 INITIATING

Some pioneering ministries have their origin within an individual pioneer or pioneering team. But many begin because a church, a network of churches, or a diocese have a heart for connecting with people in their area, who are not currently being served by their existing ministries.

Sometimes their aims are quite broad (e.g. there’s a new housing estate being built, and they want to see the Kingdom of God revealed there), and sometimes it might be more specific (e.g. they want to reach 18-30-year-olds, or they want a pioneer with a background in the creative arts).

After prayer, discussion, and planning, they take action – with a significant part of this being recruiting a pioneer (or multiple pioneers). Many of the pioneers in this research are in roles that have been created by the established Church.

### 3 INVESTING

Obviously, if churches want pioneering to happen, it requires investment: time, money, physical resources, human resources, etc. Though there is still space to grow, it's evident that the Church is investing in pioneers and pioneering.

One of the most obvious ways is paying pioneers' salaries or stipends, ministry expenses, and training. Another way is providing the use of buildings. Though the issue of funding remains a significant challenge for pioneers (see following section, 'Money'), where the Church is investing in pioneering, it is enabling things to happen that otherwise would not happen.

It's also important to note that not all pioneers are paid. Some of the pioneers I spoke to work on a voluntary basis, and some have found funding from outside the established Church.

“Actually [network of churches]... did the right thing. Way, way back... They did the right thing. They noticed that this big development was on the horizon. And so they prayed; they talked to the local churches that are in the places that would be neighbouring the new estate; and they talked to the district council and the planning authority for the new estate. Those were absolutely the right things to do, and so started a conversation... [The network of churches] persuaded [various churches] to put up quite a significant chunk of money to fund this pioneer worker, but without a defined picture of what the result should be.

## THREE THINGS THAT HAPPEN WITHIN THE PIONEER

Not every single participant articulated all of these, but when they were asked how their pioneering journey began, these three themes came up frequently.

### 1 They recognise something different about themselves

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When sharing their 'origin story', many of these pioneers said things like they recognised there was something a bit different about themselves, that they felt like they don't quite fit, that they often see things in a different way, and that they often find themselves doing things differently to 'the norm'.

“But it dawned on me – I mean this was a 10-year process – it dawned on me as I went through those years that actually God is using me – I was acting in an apostolic pioneering capacity.

“And so I look back on that now, and there was a stirring in me to do something outside the lines.

“Since I came to faith, I've felt a deep sense of belonging and being at home within the church. And I've felt a great sense of loving being part of outreach and mission. At the same time, I have always slightly felt that I don't fit, which is a bit of a paradox, but those two things do go together.

### 2 They recognise they don't fit a traditional defined role

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As well as a difference they recognise about themselves, many of them articulated a stirring or a calling from God – often to some form of ordained ministry. When they considered the work of a 'typical' parish



priest or pastor though, they recognised those roles were not a natural fit for them. They also didn't think those roles would provide the licence they'd need to connect with those beyond the walls of the church to the extent they wanted to.

“ I'm trying to say what got me into pioneering was getting to the point where I went, 'I don't actually fit the Church of England models that are available, I'd better just be me and God can sort the rest out'. And he did.

“ And then I felt called later on, in my 50s, to ordination in the Church of England, and that itself was something I'd been quite hesitant about because I didn't really see any people in priestly ministry who were like me, and I didn't know if I would fit, and whether what I had to offer would be welcome.

### 3 The language of pioneering helped them recognise their calling, and find the right roles

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Having recognised something different about themselves, sensed some kind of call, and recognised they didn't fit more traditional forms of ministry – they found the term 'pioneer' provided them with both the language and the category to understand who they are, and what they are being called to.

They found this helpful for themselves – bringing a sense of self-understanding as well as having a sense of 'what I'm doing/ being drawn to is a real thing'. None of them said they heard about pioneering, and then decided to become pioneers. It was always the other way round – they were pioneers before they came across the language of pioneering.

They also found it helpful language for describing to others who they are and what they are doing. Many talked about how it gave a sense of 'legitimacy' to their ministry.

Also, by having the term pioneer 'in the system', it helps churches/dioceses to recruit the right people, and helps the pioneers to find the right roles for them.

“ In my journey of ordination, something that was really helpful – when I first started to explore ordination, I had this strong sense of call. But I didn't have the vocabulary to explain why I had that sense of calling, or what exactly it was exactly. I just had this strong sense of calling that I couldn't vocalise. And then, as I did my studies... CMS gave me some of the vocabulary around fresh expressions and pioneering that I didn't have before. It was them that enabled me to express more fully and formally what pioneering meant to me, and what my calling actually was about.

# SECTION 3:

## NAVIGATING CHALLENGES

### WHAT ARE THE MAIN CHALLENGES PIONEERS FACE?

During the interviews, pioneers were asked about the main challenges and difficulties they faced in the early days of their pioneering ministry, as well as throughout the whole journey.

The line managers were asked what they think could have been better, which gave them opportunity to talk about the challenges they see pioneers facing. As with the other topics, there was overlap between what the pioneers and the line managers said. The following six themes emerged.

#### 1 Not being understood

This problem seems to be the spring from which many of the other struggles flow. It's also probably the thing that causes the most pain and frustration for pioneers. Almost all participants talked about not being understood, and how they feel like they constantly have to 'justify' themselves and the work they are doing to those within the Church.

They reported this is a problem at all levels. Examples included parishioners, clergy, and the wider diocese. It's important to note that this feedback wasn't universal, but the frequency with which it appeared suggests this is a widely experienced problem.

Though understanding and appreciation of pioneering is growing, this isn't just a 'legacy issue'. Even recently trained and ordained

I've always felt I've had to justify my call as a pioneer

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“

pioneers said they had encountered this problem within theological colleges, and with recent graduates and curates. Many of these people still don't understand what pioneering is about, nor how it fits as part of a mixed ecology.

“ But you know, sometimes it feels like we're kind of less valued than more eucharistic style churches, who concentrate on having lots of services and things.

“ So, the journey to ordination has taken a long time, and I've always felt I've had to justify my call as a pioneer, and that it hasn't often been understood, and it's been difficult to do. It's been difficult to express that at times.

“ I mean, I had a 'pause' moment probably a year in. I thought, do I really give my time to working with this church, to have them understand what I'm doing?... It's not what I'm here for really. I think I'm here to work in mission and ministry outside the church to the end goal of creating a new worshipping Christian community. And if I diverted my time to trying to help the parish understand what I was doing – and it's not a pioneering parish, and it's not really a parish that's interested in the parish and the community.

## 2 Resistance and lack of support from within the Church

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Due to the lack of appreciation for pioneer ministry, all participants talked about facing some kind of resistance and a lack of support from within the local or wider Church. Some reported that this was a factor in them moving on from roles they had previously been in.

The resistance they described took different forms, including direct criticism, and sometimes people proactively making it difficult for the pioneer to get on with their ministry. And the lack of support often showed itself through poor line management and a lack of interest in the pioneering ministry from within the local church or diocese.

Even in churches where the church leader is supportive and actively involved in the pioneering ministry, there are still members of the congregation who speak and act in ways that show they see it as less valid than traditional forms of ministry.

When pioneers and supportive line managers talk about these issues, it's clear it's a great cause of sadness and disappointment. They just want pioneering ministry to be recognised and valued in the same way more traditional forms of ministry are.

*“And I mean I think of the [number of] pioneers that I'm with [in the diocese]... they've all got real disaster stories along the way. And nearly all of it's about the Church; it's not about anything else. It's about the connection to the Church. Every single one.*

*“All the resistance came from within the Church. And I'm not saying there were masses, but there were just key voices who were very loud, very vociferous and couldn't work out why we would do anything that was not in a church building.*

*“So right from the get-go, I'd say I've had very weak, poor, unsatisfactory line management.*

*“Every time I go for an MDR – ministry development review – I have to re-explain to the person every time what it is that I do and what makes that different [to other forms of ministry]. And then of course they can't then ask the questions that could be really pertinent, because they don't know. In a sense, I could frame it however I want.*

## 3 Metrics and expectations

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The participants in this research are not opposed to measuring and assessing how their ministry is going. They did, however, articulate two main problems regarding metrics.

- ➔ The first was that sometimes the metrics are imposed on them from above, and they are not the right kind of metrics for pioneering ministry. They say measurements more suited to church planting situations are applied to them. And because these are the wrong metrics for their ministry, it can make them look and feel like they are failing. These inappropriate metrics also make it hard for them to report the fruit of their ministry they are seeing.
- ➔ The second kind of problem they articulate is that sometimes the expectations are unclear, and sometimes there are none at all. In these situations, the pioneers don't know how to report what they are doing, or how their work is being judged by those 'above them' within church structures.

**I'd say I've had very weak, poor, unsatisfactory line management.**



“ You’re following where you feel God is calling you to. And the institution says, ‘These are the goalposts’. And then you get to the goalposts, and suddenly they say, ‘Well, actually the goalposts are over there.’

“ So I was very curious as to quite what the expectation was for this post. And honestly, that remains an unanswered question for me.

“ Many people who don’t understand pioneering want quick results; quick and measurable. And I was like, ‘Well I don’t really want to open the door to this place until I really know what God wants for it’.

“ They gave me some money out of the mission fund, but they did make me work really, really hard for it. And they wanted numbers and figures, and I kept saying to them, ‘Numbers and figures, I can’t give them to you. You’re asking me for something that we can’t produce. We can give you something, but it’s not what you want it to be, because you’re putting us in with all your other figures, and it doesn’t make sense. You need to hear our story really.’

#### 4 Money

Many involved in church leadership and Christian organisations talk about funding challenges, so it’s no surprise it came up in this research. In the interviews, there were three particular aspects of finances pioneers struggle with.

- ➔ Firstly, many cite the length of funding cycles. Pioneer ministry takes time, and while the pioneers are grateful for the investment of the Church, it’s often made for a limited time. But the period the funding commitment is made for is generally shorter than what they would need for their ministry to become self-sustaining – if that’s ever possible at all.
- ➔ Secondly, pioneering ministry generally connects with people who have little or no previous experience of church and Christian faith. In many instances, they connect with people who don’t have lots of disposable income. Therefore, many pioneers find that even though they are seeing people’s lives changed and being drawn to Christ, expecting people to commit to regular and generous giving is a big step. So, even where they are seeing ‘success’ in their ministry, this doesn’t easily translate into high levels of giving.
- ➔ Thirdly, those who pioneer on a voluntary basis find that as their ministry grows, more time is needed for planning and engaging, as well as doing associated administration. This makes it increasingly hard to pioneer in their ‘spare time’. In some cases, being paid would mean they could dedicate more hours to this work.

“So, we sort of, we haemorrhage money really, but we reach people. So I don't know where that's going to go with the diocese, because it's not really quite what they wanted to see, but I think missionally it's looking a lot better. I'm not sure they are as impressed as we are happy!

“This one has brought me to breaking point probably the most... So this year is about £35,000 that we're supposed to raise and when you're working with so many people who are unchurched, dechurched, I mean it is – to expect that level of giving is huge, and we're not there, we're not there... But the unchurched and dechurched will give small to begin with, really small to begin with, and it will take years for them to build that part of their discipleship in... We know that finance is part of discipleship, but let's meet people where they're at. So yeah, really hard, it's brought me to tears many times, but we think finally we're on the way with that.

## 5 Fragility

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As a result of the above challenges – especially the issues of money and not always being understood and valued by the Church, pioneers often talk about the fragility of their ministry. Sometimes they spelt this out explicitly; other times it was lurking in the background.

Many talked about the fears and uncertainties around their funding, and the fact that others within the church hierarchy could decide to bring an end to their role relatively easily. This feels particularly real for those who are in contexts where their church or diocese doesn't particularly understand or appreciate pioneers and pioneering ministry. It feels like an existential crisis.

“Everything hinges on my relationship with [vicar]... And that is kind of, there's a real vulnerability in it... It can feel like you're out on a limb, and maybe the limb that you're on is about to get chopped off the tree.

## 6 Building team

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Section 1 outlines how pioneers love to be part of teams and to build teams, but this presents challenges.

In all kinds of church-led ministries, leaders face challenges with volunteers. Volunteers' lives get busy with other demands, they get sick, they move away. Sometimes, to use the words of one participant, 'people are flaky'.

In addition to this though, pioneers face a more specific challenge in building team. The majority of Christians in established churches don't get what pioneering is about. Because of this, they sometimes don't get involved in pioneering ministry at all. They can be enthusiastic to start with, but then when the work doesn't conform to their pre-existing ideas and models of mission and ministry, they drop out.

There seemed to be a trend in the interviews. Many of the pioneers described their experiences of building team like this: Initially, there is excitement or curiosity from a number of potential volunteers. Sometimes they have what one participant described as 'tourist Christians' coming along to things to see what it's all about. Then, over the coming months, interest wanes and some volunteers drop out.

But throughout the whole process, there are key volunteers who remain, or who join in along the way, and a more solid core emerges. Though even with this solid core, the challenges noted above (e.g. life demands, health problems, relocating) still affect the team.



“But the difficulty is churches and church communities can be very parochial. So, if they can't see the connection of what you're doing to their parish and their church, then it's very difficult to get other people involved... When it's clearly connected to a church – so the youth church and the youth group and the other church where they were kind of declining – it's been easy to get people involved. But anything that's outside of that, it's been very hard to get people involved.

“Early on I tried to gather some people from local churches, because that was part of the role to establish relationships with local churches. And a few people did help me in the early days. It didn't last long, because although I could get people excited about it and they said, 'Oh yeah, I'm up for helping', they're actually too long in the tooth in their established church.

## WHAT HELPS PIONEERS TO NAVIGATE THE CHALLENGES?

There is overlap between how pioneers navigate challenges, and why things go well in general (see Section 2). For example, drawing on the right volunteers, partnering with others, and wisdom and support from their networks are all significant. These are not repeated here.

### Getting on with it

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One of the things that was striking speaking to these pioneers, is that despite the challenges outlined above, and despite the mental and emotional struggles they face, they are brilliant at getting on with the task in hand. As laid out in Section 1, they are creative and flexible. And, with a clear sense of calling, they persevere.

Because they have a very clear sense of calling and a missional draw to those outside the Church, they don't want to waste time and energy with in-house fighting and having to 'justify' what they are doing. While they do seek to educate and inspire those within the established Church who aren't supportive of their work, they guard against this taking over.

“So, I have to accept that that's who they are. But there is nothing I can do if they're getting grumpy with me because I'm not doing what they want. Because I've done the work, I've been in the game a long time now, I've found other people that are doing similar and I believe I'm being who God called me to be... Yes there's times when I've felt annoyed and angry and hurt – and really hurt by people who are anti what I've done or am doing, or you know, working against me. But I'm fortunate that actually I can go, 'If that's how you feel, you're probably better off not being with us'.

“So, how have I helped myself to overcome that [resistance from within the church]? Well, because I'm a self-starter, and I'm a pioneer, and I'm quite confident – I have just got on with it.

### Clarifying and agreeing expectations from the start

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Some of the pioneers in the sample talked about how glad they were that they'd been able to agree expectations from the start. Not all of them talked about metrics, but for those who did have metrics in place, the ones who had been involved in creating the metrics were much happier than those who had metrics imposed upon them from above.

For those who were able to be part of creating the metrics, they ensured that

they were measuring what was relevant to their mission and ministry: relationships, community impact, deepening levels of engagement, people's spiritual development. They were also able to make storytelling a key part of the measurement. Some found it helpful to elicit the help of external organisations and individuals to help with this process.

Where clear expectations and relevant metrics have been agreed, this provides clarity for the pioneer, and also helps funders and those within church structures evaluate the impact and effectiveness of pioneer ministries.

Obviously, this process requires a degree of flexibility and imagination from funders and those within church structures. Therefore, the extent to which pioneers are able to see this happen depends on the individuals, structures, and processes of those providing funding and oversight.

*“And as I said, having fallen foul of the expectations thing before, I was quite firm in saying, ‘Let’s establish something now’, because I wasn’t going to work my socks off and at the end, or two or three years in, suddenly they go, ‘Well, this is the expectation’. So, the expectation loosely to start with was to first and foremost, and I was told you must, establish community with everyone first. If you want to do church first, you’re in the wrong job. So, I knew that was my job first, which I was very happy with. And we used an external company within the first year, who helped us come up with our values and our outcomes and how we measure what we measure, so it was an external company... So that was the first, for the first three years, we measured according to those metrics that we’d designed.*

*“And right at the beginning, we set six-month measurable outcomes. One of the first of those was to know 200 people by more than just name.*

*“But with what we do, are we seeing lives transformed? Are we seeing movement? And I think this is where the measuring came in.*

## **Investing in relationships within the Church**

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As is made clear in Section 1, all of the pioneers in this study want to have a strong and healthy relationship with the established Church, and the individuals within it. All of them described steps they have taken to help create these kinds of relationships, though they report varying degrees of success.

A common emphasis from those who line-manage pioneers was the importance of this relationship building between the pioneer and those within the established Church. They too recognised the challenge this can be for pioneers, given that they are often not fully understood and appreciated.

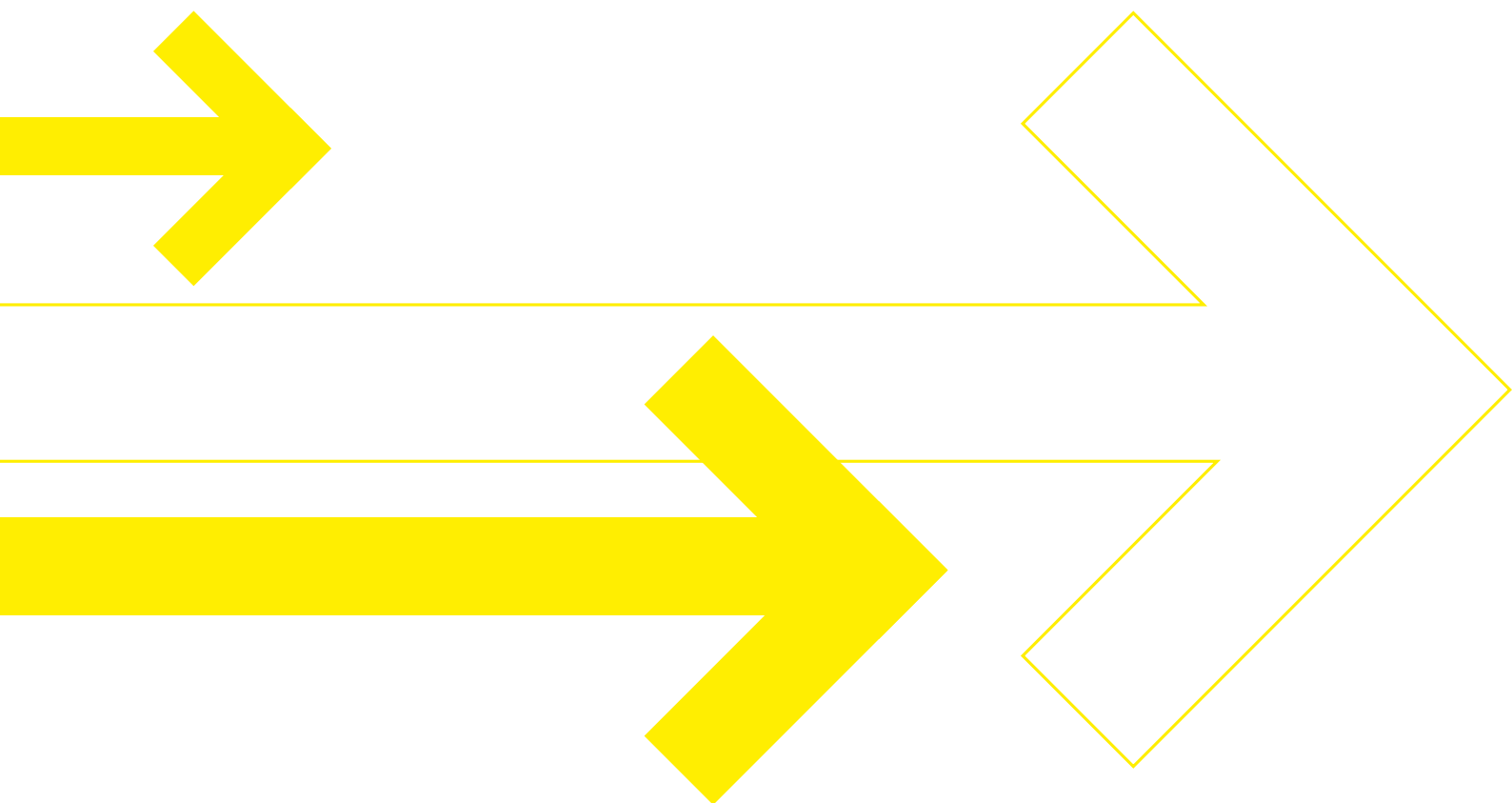
One of the ways pioneers have been able to build stronger relationships with the established Church – both at a local and regional level – is through presence. Though they recognise the majority of their time should be spent focusing on their pioneer ministries, they have found that relationships grow by spending time with those in the established Church. Some of this is done informally, over cups of tea. And some is done more formally: through attendance at services, meetings, and events.

In these interactions, they are building a sense of 'mutuality' – exchanging stories, sharing struggles, celebrating successes, and seeking to find ways that their diversity in unity is complementary, not competitive. Through this process, each gains a greater awareness of the heart of the other, mutual affection grows, and trust is built.

In some instances, pioneers and non-pioneering clergy have been able to blur the lines between pioneer ministry and traditional ministry, where connections are built between the two, without one subsuming the other.

Pioneers and line managers also talked about the importance of the pioneer using their gifts for the good of the established Church. Examples included helping to organise events, preaching/service leading, and offering specific skills e.g. assisting with tech.

“ So there's something in me that says we have to play a part. Also, helping the institution in some way fulfil their agenda; fulfil their outcomes. If what we're doing here – the new Christian community is helping this part of it – we can say that... It's interesting if you go to pioneers and go, 'What are you doing for your institution?'. 'Well, I haven't got time for that; I have got this to do.' Well, that for me says a lot about whether you'll get support or not.





# SECTION 4:

## WHAT KIND OF TRAINING MIGHT HELP PIONEERS?

### THE MOST PRESSING ISSUE

One of the objectives of this research was to find out what kind of training is already helping pioneers, and how they would like to see pioneer training develop.

A surprising finding emerged. Though pioneers benefit from and value training, it seems the most pressing need is not better training for pioneers, but for the wider Church: for theological educators, diocesan and regional staff, clergy, and congregations.

One of the main problems faced by pioneers is a lack of understanding, thus only investing in training pioneers fails to address wider structural issues. That would be like trying to fix a dysfunctional football club simply by offering extra training to one specific player. The issues are cultural and systemic. No amount of training for individual pioneers is going to sort these out. Therefore, thinking about training and support must go beyond the individual pioneers.

The hope of these pioneers, and those who line manage them, is broad and deep change within the Church.

“You might not be a pioneer yourself, but are you a pioneer enabler? Do you want other people to do pioneering within your setting? Because you want to support them and be that prayerful warrior support. And you can only do that by exposing what pioneers are, and they

can get excited by it. It might not be your calling, but it is other people's. Can you be a supporter of this person, supportive of this idea? Are you willing to see the Kingdom grow in this patch?

“There's really got to be something about the education of the parish. So I see one aspect of pioneer training as being not just about the person becoming the pioneer, but the whole context. I realise that not every situation has been like mine, but how do we cultivate pioneers in church contexts with support for their growth and development in terms of the whole church being behind that person? Because it's a bit like thinking of the way Paul operated: having people walk alongside him, travel with him, learn from him, be on the job with him.

### THE CURRENT STATE OF TRAINING FOR PIONEERS

As spelt out in Section 1, the pioneers in this sample are great people doing great work. They are seeing fruit in their ministries. W. Edwards Deming said, 'Every system is perfectly designed to get the results it gets'. Therefore, one might conclude that the current system for training pioneers is clearly working. A bad tree cannot produce good fruit.

However, from speaking to the pioneers, it seems that would be a false conclusion. Here are three reasons why.

1 For many of these pioneers, they are doing faithful and effective ministry not because of the training they've received through theological education, but in spite of it. Most of those who have been through established centres of theological education spoke negatively about their prolonged, residential courses – at least in relation to the extent to which it prepared them for ministry in the world. While they acknowledge it did help them to learn certain things, most of what they have needed to learn to be good pioneers did not come from those centres. However, they told a very different story when it came to parachurch organisations, which, with only one exception, were highly recommended by pioneers. These organisations offer courses that are much more focused on pioneers, they have pioneer specialists on their staff, the courses are shorter, and they are not residential.

2 The pioneers in this sample are very good learners. They report learning from a very wide range of sources, including organisations, other practitioners, previous life/work experience, books, podcasts, and more. Many of them also talk about the importance of learning by doing, and also by reflecting on their experience. The vast majority of their relevant learning and training has come from outside established theological training institutions.

3 As they report it, a significant reason why pioneers are able to do what they do is because of how they are wired, and because of the calling and enabling of God in their lives. Good training works with an appreciation of this reality, enhancing and refining what is already there. But that does not appear to be their experience of how theological education currently functions.

When pioneers were asked what they think good training for pioneers could or should look like, not a single one said a three-year, full-time, residential, academically-focused course! Participants gave a range of answers as to what they think would work. These answers can be grouped under three main headings.

## LEARNING SHOULD BE RELATIONAL

In talking about what has been helpful for them, and what they think would be helpful in training other pioneers, the importance of people and relationships came up frequently.

They talked about relational learning in a few different ways. Some talked about the significance of training and support from individual staff members within particular training organisations, and how these have been significant for them. There was something about who the trainer was as a person; the type of relationship the pioneer had with them; and the fact that the trainer knew the pioneer, and something of the context they're working in.

Some talked about the significance of connecting with other pioneers – seeing what they have done, hearing about what they are learning. Seeing and connecting with other pioneers, especially in the early stages, perhaps operates as a form of 'plausibility shelter'. When someone relatively new to pioneering sees other pioneers, and they see the overlap between what they are wanting to do, and what others are doing, it helps them to see they are part of a larger community. This can help them not to doubt themselves and to think they are 'weird', but that pioneering is a 'real thing'.

The general impression these pioneers gave is that meeting with other pioneers can be helpful for learning – though because each

**I think what we need is training which is highly individualised and highly flexible.**

pioneering context is different, they can't simply cut and paste from what others are doing. But other pioneers can act as a form of inspiration, support, and wisdom-sharing.

The concept of mentoring and placements also came up. These modes of learning are highly relational, and create space for specific and personalised learning. They talked about how they are mutually enriching. Mentors and mentees can ask questions of each other, and share wisdom and experiences with one another – it's not a simple case of the more experienced person transferring everything they know to the less experienced one. There's a mutuality, where the knowledge and gifting of both parties are honoured. The participants who have mentored others talked about how it had been just as helpful for them as it seemed to have been for those they've mentored.

*“And visiting places, seeing that it is possible, it is possible. I think that's really important as well. That was part of what CMS did. Actually, these people are out there doing it, so you go and visit and it excites you, because it's not just a dream out there – it is possible.”*

*“I have also felt a great need for mentoring and ongoing learning, and Phil has been brilliant at providing bits of mentoring to me. Usually what happens is that he contacts me saying – I don't know, he'll send me information about something. And off the back of that, I'll go back and go, 'hmm I'm just thinking about this at the moment'. And then we'll have*

*a bit of a WhatsApp conversation. And I would love it if again there could be some – I think what we need is training which is highly individualised and highly flexible.*

*“And I would have benefitted perhaps as a younger person, of being in a community, travelling with other people, sharing that locality and drilling down into the distinctiveness of that place.”*

## LEARNING SHOULD BE CONTEXTUAL AND PRACTICAL

Participants describe pioneering in very practical terms: it's a real thing that happens in real places with real people. Their major critique of current theological education is that it primarily involves learning abstract concepts while they are physically removed from the contexts within which they do or will work.

Therefore, they believe that good learning and training should have a strong practical element, with opportunities to 'earth' what they are learning in real-life contexts. Within this, several talked about the importance of learning from experience through reflection.

A belief many of these participants expressed is that you don't train non-pioneers to be pioneers – you train people who are already pioneers to be better pioneers. And they don't think it's helpful for pioneers to have a prolonged period of training before they actually start doing something. Therefore, a mode of training where ministry and learning happen synchronously would make more sense. As much as possible, they think training should happen in context, not removed from it.

“ So, when I did my three years at [name of Anglican training college], which were awesome in their own right and it was lovely – I really enjoyed that. And yet it was completely and utterly debilitating in terms of I'd just been selected because we think you've got really lovely leadership skills, and we want to use you, so we're now going to completely deskill you for three years and separate you out. And in terms of the pioneering thing, and I know that thankfully colleges are getting the hang of this now, but there has to be a way to actually do the stuff as you're learning it.

“ I think one of the more useful things that I did in my course that I haven't mentioned is that we did our own kind of community profile. And actually, understanding your community really well is really, really important, because everywhere's different. So you can't just pick what somebody does and transplant it into another place. You think it might work, and you think well what's not working because you're somewhere different, with different people... So I would make it very practical.

I know that thankfully colleges are getting the hang of this now, but there has to be a way to actually do the stuff as you're learning it.

“ I think [good training] would be absolutely focussed upon context. So, I don't think that any form of theological training should be done in isolation of mission. It has to be a learning journey. So I wouldn't train a pioneer unless they were

pioneering. Jesus taught and trained and disciplined his disciples whilst on mission.

“ So, training on the job. Lots of practice, lots of connecting theology and theological learning to what's happening on the ground, really earthing it.

“ ...you've got something that you can connect that theoretical training with experience. And perhaps something that also links into some sort of competency framework. So, for example, looking at the way we do ordination competencies, it's just a bit of a hash. But if we use something like an NVQ framework You have competencies that you have to demonstrate, and then you find the evidence. You have assessors that work alongside you to help you find that evidence. So perhaps something like that, where you've got people who do whatever your pioneering is, with someone who's perhaps an experienced mentor, who's gonna guide you in and role model what good practice looks like. At the same time, having theoretical inputs as to why these things are working and what the thinking is behind that.

## LEARNING SHOULD BE THEOLOGICAL

It's important to underline this third aspect, as it could be easy to relegate this, given the points above. Yes, pioneers do want training that is relational and relevant to their contexts. But as is made clear in Section 1, pioneers are deeply theological in how they think and operate, and therefore, they do value theological education.

When they talk about theology though, they want to learn theology in a way that is connected to real life – to ministry, people, and contexts. For them, theology that remains abstract, and that doesn't have



Pioneer School just helped put in a structure and actually see, oh, all these weird and wonderful things that I think I'm feeling or experiencing or where are these ideas coming from, it's now making sense.

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implications or applications for life and ministry, should not be the main focus for training pioneers!

When they talk about theology that has been useful for them, it's theology that inspires and shapes faithful practice. It's theology that fuels mission.

In addition to this, they also really like it when they have done training that helps them make theological and theoretical sense of what they are seeing in practice. They love it when they see how something they are already doing fits within a biblical or theological framework. This has both an affirming effect (helping them to see how they are already living out God's mission), and an explanatory effect (enabling them to explain to others what they are doing). We would observe that learning the theological theory helps validate their theological practice.

““ And although I'd got some theological understanding, I couldn't nail it in a way that was articulate enough. And so when I went to CMS, things like I'd followed a natural inclination to listen and love and serve the community, they were words that I'd used to people and I'd got some theological understanding. But when I looked into that, I found that there was a model that was all designed around that that other people had done, and then it led to church. And it was like oh my goodness, I think I'm joining in the

*Spirit here, because although I couldn't put that theological narrative to it at that point, I was doing it naturally. And now I was finding out there's a whole missional structure that people have done for hundreds of years, thousands of years, and I can sit there and go this is why I'm doing it. I mean it didn't persuade certain people that I was doing the right thing, but it gave me the confidence. It gave me the confidence to say I really do believe this is what God wants me to do, and I can tell you exactly why and standing up to well-established ministers, who work for national organisations...*

““ So going to Pioneer School just helped put in a structure and actually see, oh, all these weird and wonderful things that I think I'm feeling or experiencing or where are these ideas coming from, it's now making sense – it's actually a thing. So it gave it more structure and meaning, and probably like I'm not abnormal, look, there's other people doing crazier things than me. That's what Pioneer School did, it gave permission.



# LEARNING AND ACTIONS

# SEVEN SIGNIFICANT FINDINGS FROM THE RESEARCH

## ONE

Pioneers are deeply theological, biblically literate, prayerful, persevering, and team-focused. They have a distinct calling, doing incredible work creating Christian community amongst those with little or no connection with the established Church. The unique skills and characteristics of pioneers are a gift to the Church and world.

## TWO

Pioneers thrive on being given freedom, permission, and time to get on with their ministry. At the same time, they value good supervision, accountability, support, and encouragement. Pioneers want to have a strong connection with the local and regional church.

## THREE

The biggest struggle pioneers face is not being understood and valued. Pioneers say it would be good for them and the Church if the established Church had a deeper understanding of what pioneering is, who pioneers are, and how to support and resource pioneering ministry well.

## FOUR

Many pioneers express a 'fragility' regarding their ministries. Funding and support for their work is often short-term and provisional. They would like pioneering ministry to be recognised and supported equally, in line with other forms of more traditional ministry.

## FIVE

There are lots of examples of the Church already helping pioneer ministry to flourish: identifying, initiating, and investing. There are positive examples to emulate and build on.

## SIX

It's essential to have the right metrics and expectations in place for pioneers. Clarifying and agreeing these early on increases clarity, reduces frustration, and enhances relationships between pioneers and the wider Church.

## SEVEN

Pioneers value training that is relational, practical, and context-specific – while still being strongly theologically informed. They recommend a shift away from training that is abstract, prolonged, and detached from context.

# REFLECTION

## PHIL HOYLE, PIONEER DEVELOPER, CCX

I first realised I was something called 'a pioneer' in 2010.

At the turn of the century, I had regularly been involved in creating community outside the usual church culture - hosting spiritual chats in cafes, developing 'all-senses' arts worship at our local Salvation Army, being part of a community church on our local housing estate, helping form a group (self-named 'the stragglers') who would meet for wine and prayer and talk through the hurts of churches past.

But when my wife Jenny and I were approached to lead a missional community, as we called them then, by our friend Annie, a vicar in London Diocese, we discovered the Church had a name for the kind of person we were; a 'pioneer'.

Saying yes to that has led to me being ordained as a pioneer in the Church of England and now working as the Pioneer Developer at CCX. I wish I could say my journey with the Church of England has always been rosy, but it is pretty accurately described in Joe Warton's research.

We commissioned Joe to carry out the research not just because he's a great qualitative researcher, but also because he hadn't come across pioneers before! I wanted someone to look with fresh eyes on the world of pioneering and meet a varied sample of pioneers and see what the resonances were. I had to smile at his first revelation from the research, when we chatted following the interviews - 'Pioneers Exist!'. A relief to hear, but also hugely important - it is hugely

important for our times that we have a ministry in the Church of England which is distinctive, theologically deep, prayer driven, and spirit led, focused on those who are not connected to the current Church of England. Joe's reflection on the research findings suggest that the Church should value pioneers and the calling they embody.

CCX has worked with pioneers since it was founded, and our research always has a twofold aim - one, we want to know what the whole Church can learn about the subject we're looking into, but, two, and key for us, we want to know what we can best do at CCX in response to what we've learned.

As that's the case, here is what we are committing to do at CCX in response to the research findings:

- ➔ Development of oversight training
- ➔ Developing metrics for pioneer/plant settings
- ➔ Promotion of the role of pioneers in the mixed ecology
- ➔ Review of current pioneer training
- ➔ Networking pioneers

As Pioneer Developer at CCX, I hope you'll help us grow these things together - we cannot do it alone. If you want to learn more, or are working in this area and have something you want to tell us about or collaborate on - please get in touch - [phil.hoyle@ccx.org.uk](mailto:phil.hoyle@ccx.org.uk)



# ABOUT CCX



The Gregory Centre for Church Multiplication (CCX) supports leaders, church teams and dioceses across London, England and beyond as they multiply disciples, churches and networks.

Led by the Bishop of Islington, the Rt Revd Ric Thorpe, CCX equips and resources the Church to plant, grow and pioneer, reaching new people, in new and renewed ways with the good news of Jesus Christ. In 2015, Bishop Ric was consecrated as the Bishop of Islington in order to support the Diocese of London's goal of creating new worshipping communities across the capital.

CCX is part of the Church of England, but works with many denominations and networks.



Connect with us by signing up to our newsletter or find out more by visiting [ccx.org.uk](http://ccx.org.uk)



# APPENDICES

# APPENDIX I - PIONEER INTERVIEW TOOL

What helps pioneers recognise and respond to their call, develop relevant skills and knowledge, and establish faithful ministry within a mixed ecology?

## INTRODUCTION:

- ➔ Couple of minutes to say hi and relax into the conversation
- ➔ Thank them for taking part
- ➔ Remind them what this conversation is about
- ➔ Assure/remind them about confidentiality and anonymity
- ➔ Emphasise the fact this is a learning conversation – I'm not here to evaluate/judge/give advice – I just want to learn from your reality, and I really value you being willing to speak honestly about your thoughts and your experiences
- ➔ Check they are happy to record, and if they have any questions before proceeding

## SECTION 1: CALL/EARLY DAYS

- ➔ To start with, please would you share a five-minute origin story – about how your pioneering journey started?

### **Prompt questions, if needed:**

- ➔ What prompted you to start doing something? (What had you seen, felt, thought?)
- ➔ What helped you to get started? (Why do you think this didn't just stay as something you thought/felt? – explore both internal and external factors here)
- ➔ Were there any barriers or challenges to be overcome in the early stages?
  - If so, what were they?
  - How did you overcome or work through them?
- ➔ At what point did you and/or others label what you were doing as pioneering?
  - Did you think about it/speak about it in any other ways? If so, what?

## SECTION 2: THE JOURNEY AS A WHOLE

➔ As you think about the whole journey, right up to today, I'd love you to tell me about some things that have gone well or are going well. What are the things that you are most happy about, and where do you think the most progress has been made?

- For each positive area (perhaps grouping some together where appropriate) – what do you think are some of the factors that have led to this thing going well/being good?

➔ As you reflect back on the journey from the start to today, what are some of the things that have not gone so well, or have been hard, or disappointing?

- For each area (perhaps grouping some together where appropriate) – what do you think are some of the factors that have led to this aspect/thing not going so well?
- To what extent have you been able to work through some of these issues? What's helped you to do that?

➔ Before this conversation, I asked if you could find an image or object that communicates something of the relationship between your pioneering ministry and the established Church:

- Tell me about the object/picture you have chosen. (Send me picture if possible).
- Tell me more about the relationship between your pioneering ministry, and the existing church structures.
- What has helped this relationship to work?
- Is there anything that could be better?

➔ If it hasn't come up already, and if time allows – may I ask about the financial aspect of your work?

- Can you tell me to what extent money has/hasn't been an issue?

## SECTION 3: LEARNING AND TRAINING

➔ As you think about the journey as a whole, from the start to today, what are the main ways you've learnt the skills and knowledge you've needed for the work?

- Have there been things, people, methods, institutions etc, that have been particularly helpful?

➔ If you were designing training and support for pioneers, what do you think would be most helpful for them?

- What would be the main things you'd want the training and support to cover in terms of content?
- What do you think would be the best way to structure and deliver such training and support?

### CATCH-ALL QUESTION (IF TIME):

➔ Given that the ultimate goal of this research is to help churches and individuals who are thinking about pioneering, or who are wanting to develop pioneering ministry, is there anything I haven't asked you about that you think would be helpful for me to hear?

## ENDING

➔ Thank them for their time

➔ Explain what will happen next

➔ Check if they are happy for me to contact them again if we want to get in touch with any of the people they've mentioned.

# APPENDIX II - CCX INTERVIEW QUESTIONS FOR LINE MANAGERS

## Introduction:

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- ➔ Couple of minutes to say hi and relax into the conversation
  - ➔ Thank them for taking part
  - ➔ Remind them what this conversation is about
  - ➔ Remind/assure them about confidentiality and anonymity
  - ➔ Emphasise the fact this is a learning conversation – I'm not here to evaluate/judge/give advice – I just want to learn from your reality, and I really value you being willing to speak honestly about your thoughts and your experiences.
  - ➔ Check they are happy to record, and if they have any questions before proceeding.
- 1 What do you think the pioneer has done to help create a good relationship between the pioneering ministry and the existing church/diocese?
  - 2 What do you think you've done to help the pioneer and the pioneering work to flourish?
  - 3 As you reflect on the journey so far, do you think there's anything that could have been done differently?

- 4 What would be your advice to church communities or dioceses who are interested in beginning/supporting a new pioneering work?
- 5 Has there been (or should there be) any training or support for you, as you've line managed/supported a pioneer?

## Ending

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- ➔ Thank them for their time
- ➔ Explain what will happen next
- ➔ Check they are happy for me to maintain their contact details, in order to let them know when the final report is published





