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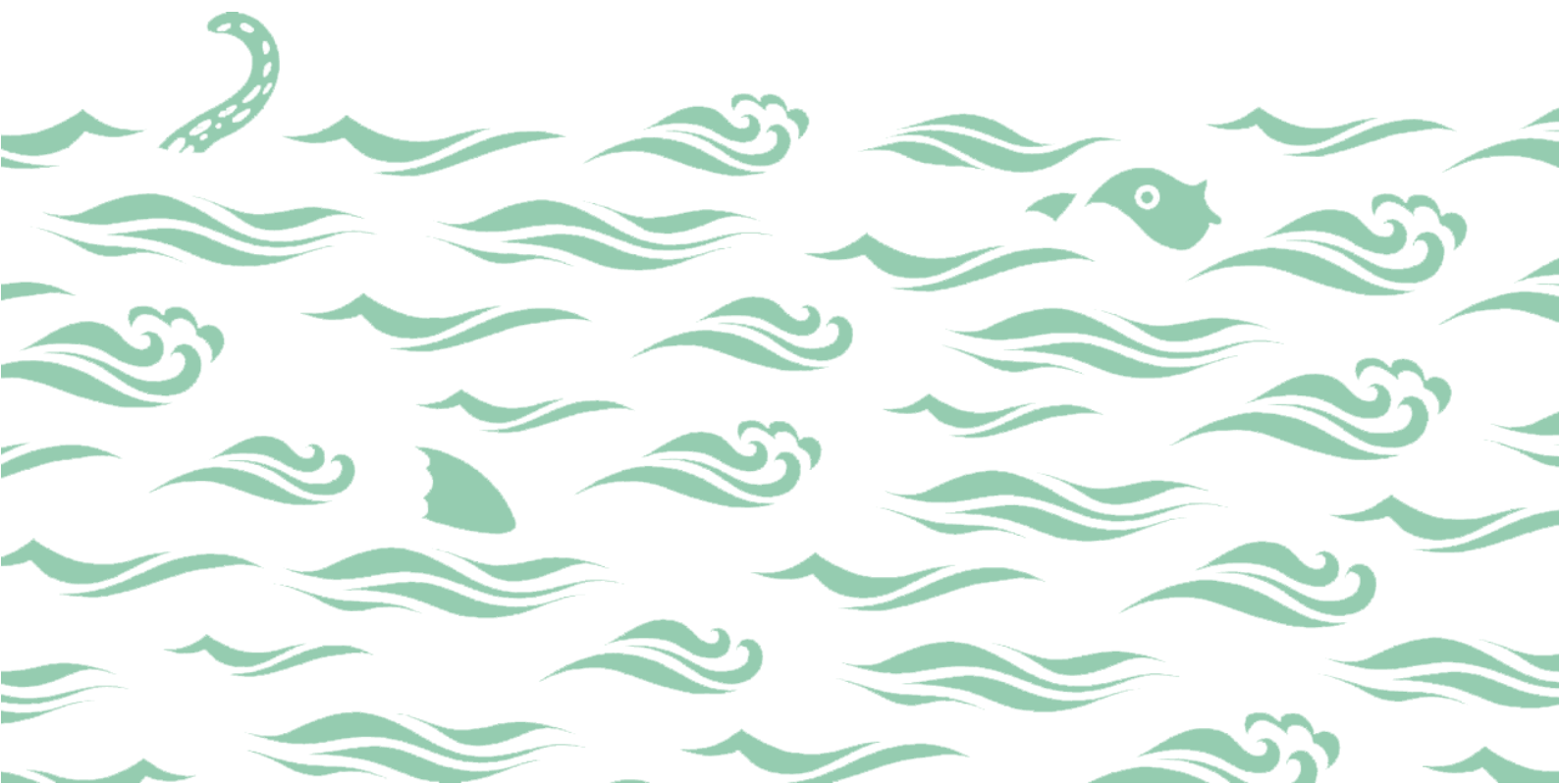
What's in our Hands?

Rural Mission Learning Review

For Vision and Strategy Team, The Church of England

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Introduction

This report was commissioned by the Church of England's Vision and Strategy Team to support the development of a learning community around rural mission. It will do so by providing a review of six completed evaluation reports and interviews with four ongoing projects, and will identify the key learning from these reports in the following areas:

- The strategic design of projects that focus on making disciples in rural areas
- Revitalisation or growth in rural parishes and fresh expressions of church
- Thematic areas of focus for a learning community.

The review was also asked to identify what the Church of England's Bold Outcomes look like in rural ministry, and how small resource-poor and/or rural churches can begin to make progress in the direction of these.

The six completed diocesan evaluation reports¹ that were analysed were:

- Carlisle, "God For All" Strategy Implementation 2017-2019 (no author or date given)
- Hereford, Growing Intergenerational Mission 2017-2022 (RS Consult Ltd, November 2022)
- Salisbury, Tending The Seedlings: Rural Hope 2017-2023 (Brendan Research, February 2023)
- Exeter, Unearthing The Treasure: Growing the Rural Church 2016-2023 (Brendan Research, November 2023)
- Winchester, Going Fast or Going Far? Mission Action Programme Phase 1 2017-2023 (Brendan Research, October 2024)
- Bath and Wells, Pioneer Project 2017-2024 (Church Army, October 2024)

The four ongoing projects that were interviewed were:

- Southwell and Nottingham, The Potting Shed, 2017-2025
- St Edmundsbury and Ipswich, Lightwave: Growing God in the Countryside, 2018-2026
- Hereford, Youth Hubs pilot project, 2023-2026
- Winchester, Growing Rural Parishes Programme (2023-2028)

Not all the projects or reports had a uniquely rural focus, although they took place in dioceses that have significant rural areas. A further complicating factor for this analysis is that the projects whose evaluations were included had very different foci and priorities, making direct comparison difficult. Projects varied from the use of buildings to training exposure to rural ministry for ordinands to the development of benefice identity and teams to intergenerational missionaries to pioneers who might or might not have had a rural focus. This worked against the desire for consolidated learning about strategy from across the projects.

One of the main findings of this report is that it is very difficult to identify transferable outcomes from these projects, but that a great deal has been learned about creating a sense of possibility and a renewal of hope, albeit one that will take time to bear fruit.

What is presented here is structured as a thematic analysis of the six evaluation reports supplemented by interviews with the four ongoing projects, thereby allowing the data to speak for itself. These are reported in the Rural Realities: What Do The Reports Tell Us About The Rural Context? section. The implications for the Six Bold Outcomes in Rural Areas are then considered, before some Conclusions and Recommendations for the Learning Community.

¹See Appendix 1: Summaries of the six evaluated projects.

Rural Realities: What Do The Reports Tell Us About The Rural Context?

Issues relating to the rural context

One of the key questions behind this research is whether there are issues that are specific and exclusive to rural contexts, or whether they are simply perennial issues of mission and ministry that are shaped and influenced by the rural context. In other words, are they context-specific or context-shaped? The Winchester report noted the existence of the following *“very healthy dynamics, e.g. each context is unique, local wisdom exists to respond to ministry and mission challenges, not everything will succeed, and some things need time to form”*. This claim to uniqueness might seem perennial, but it is for this reason worth paying attention to. Context really matters. Simple transferable models are not identifiable from these reports. The themes that emerge from this analysis are about people and process, not methods and strategy.

The main issues faced in rural contexts are resource constraints, resistance to change (or to ‘being changed’), and complex leadership challenges (especially in multi-parish benefices). One report includes a stinging indictment, stating that *“a lack of missional imagination is a significant stumbling block to growth”*. It should be noted, however, that several of the projects were considered successful in that they had begun to unblock this logjam, releasing creativity and provided a new sense of hope and encouragement even if tangible results were hard to measure or to find.

In addition, there is more than one kind of rural context. Three different rural contexts were noted in the evaluations – deep rural (small dispersed villages), connected rural (villages with good connections to nearby towns, which thereby often function as commuter settlements or dormitories), and market towns. These differences have implications for resource availability (money, expertise, lay leadership) and definitions of growth, raising the question of what is possible in resource-constrained contexts (and what unique and positive opportunities actually emerge in such environments).

More than one diocese observed the parallels between rural ministry and ministry in urban outer estates. Both might be characterised by scarcity, by clergy isolation, low resource, low energy, and a pressure to simply *“keep the show on the road”*, all of which make it difficult to inspire new missional energy. However, in many cases the ability to help parishes to overcome their sense of independence and to recognise their interdependence with other parishes in their benefice helped to create a critical mass that allowed them to feel that they could do something new. The ability of parishes to work to a common vision and to feel part of something bigger, even while retaining their own distinct identity, was noted by several dioceses as one of the healthy outcomes of the projects being evaluated.

In addition, it was argued that resource constraint might be considered an asset rather than a limitation.² It was important to *“dream small”*, because small acts really matter. The implications of this are explored later in this report.

Lower numbers of young people in deep rural areas make youth engagement difficult, and the perennial problem of old church buildings takes up a lot of energy and attention. In addition, rural areas tend to be more conservative and traditional with change being slow and hard-won. Population tends to be characterised by stability rather than fluidity or turbulence (there are fewer people moving in and out of these communities, and they tend to stay for longer).

² Rural areas offer the opportunity for the Church of England to work out what it means in practice to be “Simpler, Humbler, and Bolder”.



It has long been recognised that churches are more likely to grow in areas of significant population mobility. To put it kindly, in rural areas *“church cultures and structures are robust at defending what they know”*.³ This has implications for the leadership skills needed in rural areas and, as noted below, is a strong argument for a robust mixed ecology of church.

The tension between the conservatism of many rural contexts and the recognised need for change is encapsulated by the following quotation:

*Missional leaders love God’s people, and they value the traditions and witness of the communion of saints who have brought us thus far on the way. But they are also passionate about keeping God’s people moving. They understand that we may have to dis-organize old patterns, systems, and relationships - not for the sake of change, but in order to re-organize our communities and our world in the shape God intends. They preach, teach, organize, facilitate, and embody a way of life that is not invested primarily in the preservation of institutions. Rather, they bring the fruits of tradition as they follow Jesus, forming missional Christian communities that can move as boldly as the God whose reign we anticipate.*⁴

Although few of the projects achieved the goals they had set, positive outcomes were identified and morale was lifted. The mere existence of large-scale projects focussed on rural areas helped churches to think that their diocese and the national church believed in them (Exeter). The projects had impacts that were described as catalytic, attracting new church leaders to the diocese, creating a community of pioneers, and starting to move some churches that were not previously engaging positively in mission (Hereford) and contributed to a wider culture of creativity and confidence in rural parishes (Exeter, Winchester).

Issues relating to discipleship, mission and church

A quote from the Winchester report will summarise the key learning here: *“success in rural contexts is subtle. Growth in attendance is modest at best or is about maintaining numbers”*. Similarly, Southwell and Nottingham spoke of growth being less than expected, and of *“having to reduce or manage expectations with regard to rural mission”*. In rural areas the journey to faith is a long slow one. Large numbers of contacts rarely translate into significant increases at existing worship services.

The reports identified a lack of clearly understood steps towards greater involvement in the life of the church. Even in situations with a high number of initial contacts and reasonable numbers of ‘new disciples’ (e.g. Hereford), this did not translate into growth in church membership. This led to a suggested need for a clear pathway with small steps that help people progress to owning their own faith, with church providing different activities that encourage movement to deeper faith and participation in church life. The only dioceses that made any reference to having done so were St Edmundsbury and Ipswich, which had adapted Laurence Singlehurst’s *Sow, Reach, Keep* strategy to one of *Sow, Nurture, Flowering, Fruit*, and Hereford’s very similar *Connect, Engage, Commit, Grow*. However, there was only limited evidence from Hereford that this was effective, with their report commenting *“it is clear that the journey to faith is one that can take a while in our society”*.

This suggests that we need to ask how ‘discipleship’ differs from ‘attendance’? Church planting approaches that assume a participation-faith-discipleship process will struggle in underpopulated rural areas. What does a discipleship pathway look like in such contexts, and how might this inform our wider thinking about discipleship? What personal discipleship habits are needed, rather than communal ones?

Smaller and more static church communities tend to be strong in bonding social capital (i.e. they are characterised by long-term close relationships) and this can make it difficult to reorient them to be outward-focussed for mission and hard for outsiders to break into. The reports noted the need for an outward community-facing understanding of church among its members.

³ A phrase found in the Winchester report.

⁴ Stephanie Spellers (2010), *“The Church Awake: becoming the missional people of God”*, in *Anglican Theological Review*, Vol 92 No 1, p44.



This is seen to be a vital enabler of the effectiveness and sustainability of any sort of mission initiative and a key point for church leadership to address. Securing the understanding and buy-in of the local church to the priority of mission is vital for the effectiveness of these initiatives. This is because de-/un-churched people who connect with local churches have an impact on the existing ways of doing things, to the dismay of existing congregants. In addition, the highly relational approaches of some of the new initiatives in the reports led to unfulfilled expectations when new people began to connect with existing churches. This creates a recipe for dissatisfaction on both sides. Southwell and Nottingham have noticed an increasing acceptance of a mixed ecology as a solution to this, which allows existing churches to continue in their traditions and practices while creating new worshipping communities for those who need different approaches to worship and discipleship.

The initiatives examined in these reports highlight the need for creativity in finding new ways to engage and to form community, and offer a challenge to what we understand 'church' to be. Fresh expressions of church are too often not seen as 'real church' and many are fragile and unsustainable, which doesn't help their claim to ecclesial status.

Rurality leads to questions about outdoor spirituality and pilgrimage (rather than locating most or all of our worship inside buildings). This leads us to ask about our assumptions regarding mission, opening up the imagination to new ideas about spirituality, discipleship, and church. Perhaps what the current rural realities give us is space for reflection, to imagine new possibilities, to have permission to fail, and to allow time for things to emerge. We can reimagine rural contexts as incubators of the new, not as remnants of the past.

Leadership issues

It was noted above that rural contexts produce their own specific leadership challenges. The ability to lead change is something of a commonplace⁵, with the wider challenge of leading such change in multi-parish benefices/mission communities rather than in the single vicar/single parish role. Expectations of and longings for this latter role among established church communities does not help this process. This reinforces the need, identified in more than one report, for effective training for the realities of rural contexts at IME1, IME2, and as CMD, where the challenges might be better described as context-specific rather than context-shaped (i.e. substantially different to leadership in well-resourced contexts).

Although there is a desire to move away from a focus on stipendiary church leadership and stipendiary pioneers towards the facilitation of lay leadership and ministry, demographic realities will make this difficult. Many rural churches exhibit a lack of available lay leadership. It's all very well saying that stipendiary clergy will move into more of a collaborative ministry role, but there need to be people in the churches with whom they can collaborate. It is not clear whether this dearth of available lay leadership is a rural issue or a post-Covid non-return phenomenon or a lack of confidence among potential lay leaders due to a narrative of decline. Or perhaps a combination of all three. What is clear, however, is the lack of an appetite to take on the institutional maintenance issues that characterise so much of rural ministry. It is proving more fruitful to support people into the kinds of projects and ministries that they want to pursue for themselves.

This corresponds with one the most widely noted pieces of learning, mentioned across the reports and interviews with 'live' projects, which is that it can be preferable to work with the people you already have, rather than to try to recruit new people to identified 'gaps'. This was described as *"identifying your stars and what's on their heart. What have we already got?"* (St Edmundsbury and Ipswich). Hereford learned from their earlier project by asking for their new project, "Not 'Where's the gap?' but 'Where's the energy?'. This means it's not just about finding the right place but also the right people. Salisbury's rural internship scheme struggled to recruit external participants and so it was abandoned and replaced with a programme of investment in their own rural young people. This focus on leadership development was strongly confirmed by Southwell and Nottingham, who were just now beginning to see the fruits of a ten-year leadership development pipeline in the diocese. The learning from this is now starting to be applied to a more specific rural leadership development process.

⁵ The January 2025 Living Ministry Wave 4 Report, *Trust that God will Work His Purposes Out*, focusses primarily on change management skills and abilities as being central to clergy wellbeing.



Project management issues

There were recurring issues with project and programme design and implementation. This included the need to be clear about the project aims and focus (is it buildings or discipleship; is it about meeting needs or investing in potential), the need for very careful participant selection and consultation, the tension between maintaining 'business as usual' vs 'starting some new things', effective governance, the need to adapt or flex a project part-way through, the use of action learning strategies (rather than postponing all learning and evaluation until the end of a project), and the problem of unrealistic targets.

These issues came up across all the reports. It has been suggested that as these were early SDF projects, these issues have already been identified and taken account of. There is no evidence of this in these reports and the recent dates of many of the reports (written in 2022-2024) does not support this assertion. They are noted here because they occurred frequently in the reports and because they are perennial issues that should not be forgotten.

One of the most important things to note is that you cannot spend too long on the process of selecting, preparing and supporting locations, whatever kind of additional input or specialised support is envisaged. One key question is whether support is prioritised towards struggling locations (to prevent further decline) or towards those with most potential for growth (these might not appear to be the most needy locations at first glance, but they will provide the strongest return on investment). This includes the above question about the willingness (or otherwise) of rural churches to change, to learn and adapt, and to be outward focussed.

It is also essential to take time to recruit the right people, rather than rushing to fill posts or locations. It is better not to appoint than to hope for the best. Southwell and Nottingham spoke of *"holding their nerve"* when making appointments, even if this led to longer interregnums. They said that *"good enough"* was no longer good enough, and the difficulty of filling rural vacancies was not to be used as an excuse for premature appointments.

There must be a strong commitment to the project process by any incumbents, supervisors, and/or PCCs, and a willingness to stay the course and not to leave before project end. It was notable that several reports referred to this as a common problem.

Communication within dioceses is essential. One cannot overcommunicate enough. Despite considerable investment in communication by some of the dioceses in relation to their projects, awareness was often patchy. If you think you've said it enough, say it again.

Measurement and metrics

Demographics in deep rural areas mean that maintaining Sunday attendance numbers is growth in disguise and that 'scaling up' approaches with ambitious targets are unlikely to work. The lack of similar targets for existing/inherited church activities did not inspire confidence that the new projects were being fairly treated. Five-year project timescales are too short for new initiatives to become fully sustainable. Hard numerical targets do not inspire confidence that the rural context is properly understood, and 'big is beautiful' might be more appropriate for urban/suburban church contexts where the population numbers are so much greater. Reflection on what grows disciples in more urban contexts, such as small groups and Alpha courses, needs to include an acknowledgement of the contextually specific dynamics that contribute to their success there and we should note that these may not be replicable in more rural contexts.

Expectations regarding growth or ROI in rural areas need to recognise that numerical growth targets are often unrealistic. There was little evidence of substantial discipleship impact in these reports (this might be a life stage issue, with fewer young people around). One report stated that perhaps *"arresting decline"* is a good enough definition of growth.



There were some tensions over quantitative measures, which were seen as unfair on the new initiatives because they were not being applied to existing inherited churches. Sometimes measures were notable by their absence, with the Bath and Wells report commenting that *“the Project would have benefitted from a clearer and more widely shared understanding of what was necessary and possible in measuring success”*.

Different metrics for ‘success’ in rural contexts were suggested. Some of these took the form of lead indicators (how many church members are involved in other community groups; whether the PCC - however small - is engaged and enthusiastic) and others as lag indicators (annual attendance at carol services, harvest services, Remembrance Sunday, and funerals; how many community groups meet in the church building or churchyard; take up of what the church offers in terms of outreach e.g. food banks). More thought should be given to the development of appropriate measures of impact for rural mission (qualitative measures as well as quantitative ones). The Exeter report noted that

Rural clergy frequently highlighted the importance of qualitative metrics when measuring growth where the boundaries between church and society are often faint or non-existent, the numerical growth tracked by annual parish returns tells only a minute fraction of rural churches’ ministry and mission.

Are the most important changes hard to measure?

It is worth noting that the Anglican Communion has adopted the Five Marks of Mission⁶ as a characteristic of missionary discipleship, and the Church of England has itself stated that it wishes to be shaped by these. It was surprising that, despite the Five Marks being stated in the Church of England’s vision statement, they were not mentioned in any of the reports or interviews. It is suggested that these might provide a suitably comprehensive metric against which to develop some appropriate qualitative and quantitative performance measures.

Issues for the learning community

The issues of leadership and project management discussed above raise a fundamental issue for any future learning community to consider, that is, how best to manage and release change agents. Investment in people is a priority. In the reports, change agents are described as catalytic but also disruptive. Any proposed change is a criticism of the status quo and is likely to invoke defensive responses (especially in change-averse rural areas). Some dioceses reported suspicion that their new projects would take young people and families away from local parish churches (although these suspicions were not always borne out in reality). Being an agent of change is costly. Peer-to-peer networking and peer coaching support were much valued by all and were missed when absent. In addition, how do supervisors, incumbents, dioceses, and bishops provide good support and cover? There was a frequent request in the reports for clear governance, ongoing commitment and support, and for active oversight from a senior diocesan level.

In parallel to this, how are issues of entrepreneurial learning and innovation incorporated into these processes and projects? How should outcomes change and flex as the project develops? How is learning captured and disseminated more widely? How do we go about creating a culture of experimentation, creativity, and confidence?

⁶ The Five Marks of Mission: to proclaim the Good News of the Kingdom of God; to teach, baptise, and nurture new believers; to respond to human need by loving service; to seek to transform unjust structures of society, to challenge violence of every kind and to pursue peace and reconciliation; to strive to safeguard the integrity of creation and sustain and renew the life of the earth.



The Six Bold Outcomes in Rural Areas

The Church of England has stated the following intention for itself:

One Vision

A Church for the whole nation which is Jesus Christ centred, and shaped by, the five marks of mission. A church that is simpler, humbler, bolder.

Three Priorities

- To become a church of missionary disciples where all God's people are free to live the Christian life, wherever we spend our time Sunday to Saturday.
- To be a church where mixed ecology⁷ is the norm – where every person in England has access to an enriching and compelling community of faith by adding new churches and new forms of Church to our parishes, cathedrals, schools and chaplaincies.
- To be a church that is younger and more diverse.

Six Bold Outcomes

From the three strategic priorities we have identified six bold outcomes.⁸

A church for everyone through:

- Doubling the number of children and young active disciples in the Church of England by 2030.
- A Church of England which fully represents the communities we serve in age and diversity.

A pathway for everyone into an accessible and contextual expression of church through:

- A parish system revitalised for mission so churches can reach and serve everyone in their community.
- Creating ten thousand new Christian communities across the four areas of home, work/education, social and digital.

Empowered by:

- All Christians in the Church of England envisioned, resourced and released to live as disciples of Jesus Christ in the whole of life, bringing transformation to the church and world.
- All local churches, supported by their diocese, becoming communities and hubs for initial and ongoing formation.

These bold outcomes were determined after the six original projects started, and the very use of the word 'bold' can sound ambitious in small rural churches that are barely holding on. However, taking account of their size, their precarity, and their available resources, what examples were identified in the reports that might help us to define what 'boldness' looks like in such a context?

⁷ "The mixed ecology describes the flourishing of church and ministry in our parishes, and in other communities of faith through things like church planting, fresh expressions of church, and chaplaincy and online".

⁸ www.churchofengland.org/about/vision-and-strategy. The six bold outcomes are slightly different in the Salisbury report, as it include some elements that are now described as the Priorities: become a church of missionary disciples; be a church where mixed ecology is the norm; be a church that is younger; a parish system revitalised for mission; create ten thousand new Christian communities; local churches as communities and hubs for initial and ongoing formation. www.churchofengland.org/about/leadership-and-governance/emerging-church-england/vision-and-strategy (link accessed November 2022; now broken)

Doubling the number of children and young people

Carlisle reported significant growth between 2016-19 in its youth-focused FXCs, known as Network Youth Church. Whilst the exact level of growth is difficult to ascertain due to different figures in the report⁹, the Network Youth Church is considered 'possibly the most successful of our Fresh Expressions of Church, but is dependent on the employment of specialist workers. This has meant that the capacity for growth has been dependent upon our ability to employ them...'. Carlisle reported having 7 FTE staff as well as the Director of Innovative Mission and Fresh Expressions (funded by SDF support) to service this project. Whether and how sustainable this has been since the report needs further investigation. Despite questions over its sustainability and the discrepancies over final numbers, it is clear that growth has taken place in the Network Youth Churches. It is recommended that Carlisle Diocese examine the project further to identify additional lessons learned now that some time has passed.

Hereford ran an intergenerational mission project in six communities from 2017-2022, with a strong focus on reaching u35s. It was not helped by the disruption caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, and the conclusion was that it was not especially effective in reaching young people and they had more frequently focussed on children and families. Even here, the numbers who were integrated into local churches were low, largely for the relational disconnect reasons noted earlier in this report.

What was helpful, however, was the experience and learning gained from this project and the way this then shaped their current follow-up project. This is a youth hubs model that seeks to be very flexible to local realities, and which is focussed more on *"where is the existing missional energy?"* rather than *"where are the needs to be met?"*. This new project is at a very early stage and so it is not yet possible to identify any meaningful outcomes, but the key lessons that they have applied are that you start with the people that you have, and that plans should evolve and develop and remain flexible and adaptable to local realities. 'One size fits all' is not appropriate.

Fully representative of the community

Other than the issue of children and young people noted above, this outcome was not identified or discussed anywhere in the reports.

Parish system revitalised for mission

The most valuable interventions in this area relate to capacity-building among church leaders, especially in the form of peer-to-peer support and low-key relational expert support (coaching and mentoring).

In the case of multi-parish benefices, Winchester's Benefice of the Future (now Growing Rural Parishes) programme offers a positive example. Benefices were offered funding for administrative support, tailored leadership training and team coaching to support their working together while respecting the individuality of each parish. Ministry team leadership models were developed, local lay and ordained leadership was released, and parishes now give sacrificially to support the distinctive ministry of other parishes in the same benefice. The report noted that peer learning opportunities such as action learning sets *"gave clergy and lay leaders time and space to reflect, pray, plan and problem-solve in ways we've not seen in other rural projects"*. After the SDF funding was completed, the diocese took on the funding and planning of this process for the next two years (which has not yet been concluded). The aim is for these activities to become locally-funded and local-organised after the end of this current period of diocesan support.

⁹ One part of the Carlisle report suggests an increase from 450 to 784 core members; 10 to 77 young leaders; and 70 to 1020 fringe between 2016 and 2019. Elsewhere in the report, it is suggested that there are 560 members and 735 'additional participants attending network groups' (without clarifying what the term 'network groups' means)



It was also noted, however, that

Many of the outcomes were achieved because of the type of rural context – connected rural – with easy access to amenities and good transport links that attract a good number of working or retired professionals who are happy to offer their skills on a relational basis.

And even here, many of the volunteers are aged 70+ and there is a noticeable absence of under-55s in the churches, so the volunteer pipeline is likely to run dry at some point. There is a question, therefore, of how replicable this model would be in 'deep rural' areas and also how sustainable it might be beyond the present.

Learning around any movement towards financial sustainability was requested. This learning to date is perhaps best illustrated by quotations from two reports.

The outcome from the project cannot be described as having generated a step-change in mission. The growth in disciples is modest, the impact on the churches is mixed and the initiative demonstrates fragility in the ability to sustain it both behaviourally and financially (Hereford).

Regarding the original aims around sustainability, the burden of funding remains with the local communities and Friends' Groups have saved some rural churches from closure. The looming problem of a significant number of rural churches becoming the responsibility of the DBF has not been avoided (Exeter).

Creating new Christian communities

Salisbury noted that the number of new worshipping communities is encouraging but it was not possible to say whether they could be classed as fresh expressions of church. Only a few reported any newcomers in attendance, and it was not clear that these new initiatives were a result of the Rural Hope initiative that was being reviewed. Bath and Wells reported some encouraging small outcomes but described them as being far removed from the existing visible church, often involving de-churched/'done with church' people, and with very few coming forward for baptism or confirmation. This was not helped by some of the pioneers being unable to work constructively with the existing church. The Exeter pilgrimage initiative was similar, noting that

Pilgrimage is not unlike cathedral mission to spiritual tourists and visitors; few question the value of cathedral mission despite the one-off and sometimes serendipitous nature of encounters. However, to see residents disciplined through pilgrimage will take more intentionality and greater effort.

The lack of discipleship growth was highlighted when one report concluded that there was a need for "examples of where Christians have grown in a rural context and why", which implies that it hadn't happened through the initiatives being reported on.

The best case to be drawn on is the report on the 'God For All' strategy of Carlisle Diocese, which reported encouraging FXC growth that outweighed the decline in traditional church attendance and was in effect a fourth archdeaconry in the diocese. The report states that most of these FXCs were connected to existing churches rather than meeting in third spaces, although the latter were helpful in showing what might also be possible. It is not clear from the report how much of this was transfer growth or was the result of new people coming to faith.

It is worth noting from both the Salisbury and Carlisle reports that FXCs tend to lead to church attendance when they are connected to a local church, whereas those that are more independent do not tend to the same outcome. As the Carlisle report notes, "the vast majority of our Fresh Expressions are directly connected into our Mission Communities and local churches".



This is not to say that the more independent ones are not worthwhile, but it is worth recognising that they lead to different outcomes. Whereas the former type of FXC can be likened to a church plant, the latter tend more towards the category of interreligious dialogue with the “*spiritual but not religious*”.

Winchester’s *Growing Rural Parishes Programme* is intended to invest in the renewal of the parish system, and they have moved away from the pioneer ministry element of their original Mission Action Programme. They observed that pioneering struggles to fit with the parish system and is seen as competitive. This tension was also noted by Southwell and Nottingham, although it has more recently become evident that harmonious coexistence is possible and has its advantages, reducing the tensions between established church members and new participants who have very different expectations of church. In Southwell and Nottingham, close and integrated co-working between inherited and pioneering forms of church were more likely to lead to growth, and this contrasts sharply with the lack of corresponding growth in Bath and Wells where this integration was seen to be lacking. Carlisle diocese was able to identify examples of both. The case for pioneering and for new worshipping communities remains, however, because in Hereford, in Southwell and Nottingham, in Carlisle, and in St Edmundsbury and Ipswich, it is in such places that new disciples are gathering.

In support of this, it is worth noting the recommendation in the Winchester report:

It would be great a shame if pioneering - where church is guest not host - was not ever tried again due to this experience with the pioneer hubs. It is still unknown just how much Resource Churches grow by transfer growth; the Student Evangelism Project suggests there has been less conversion growth among young people than hoped. The uncomfortable question lingers: who will reach people in contexts that Resource Churches can't? Where 'reimagining church' remains a key diocesan priority, what affordable pioneering models may evolve as a contrast to attractional church for those who say they 'don't do church'?

Living as disciples as the whole of life

The question of how Christians could live out their discipleship in every aspect of their lives was not identified or specifically discussed anywhere in the reports. Discipleship questions are noted elsewhere in this report.

Churches as communities and hubs for initial and ongoing formation

Salisbury gave this the most focussed attention, with a series of initiatives that were aimed at increasing the number of leaders with a vocation to rural ministry. A Rural Ministerial Experience Scheme sought to attract young adults to an internship experience that might lead to a future vocation to rural areas. It failed to attract a meaningful number of applicants and so was discontinued. A similar placement scheme for curates also fell below target due to a lack of available curates, and while it led to some moving into rural ministry, it helpfully confirmed to others that this was not what they were called to. Some of those who did move into rural ministry also then left those posts prematurely. The most successful part of their project was a Rural Training Pathway at Sarum College. Although it is too early to track the outcomes of this pathway in terms of applications for rural incumbencies, the programme was well received and a few stakeholders asked whether such training ought to be standard in rural dioceses, rather than ‘opt in’. Overall, however, these programmes were better at presenting the pressures of ministry in rural multi-parish benefices than inspiring people for mission in such places.



The Bold Outcomes in Rural areas

When considering the overall question of outcomes, bold or otherwise, it is perhaps best to look at some of the report titles listed in Appendix 1: Tending The Seedlings, Unearthing The Treasure, Going Fast or Going Far. None of these imply significant results in terms of growth. Many of the outcomes were small, below expectations, and very provisional. However, what they do speak of is potential, of green shoots, of first fruits, and of initial encouraging signs. The report from Hereford Diocese described the missionary role as “*an essential journey but not a step change*”, adding:

It has had a catalytic impact on both diocese and churches and the points of friction are key missional topics: what the church is here for, how best to live out faith, outward vs inward facing views and relationships with the community. It is highly unlikely that these issues could have been tackled without the use of a missionary-type role, be that an existing church leader or an implant. An agent of change is needed to kick-start the germination process of growth.

This final quotation summarises well the primary outcome of many of these projects, which was to begin to open people up to the possibility of something new and different. They represent the start of a journey, and one that may well take some time to complete.



Conclusions and Recommendations for Ongoing Learning and Innovation

The key learning from this analysis is that in rural areas, it is proving more fruitful to think in terms of people and process than methods and strategy. This is in part a reflection of the very varied projects undertaken by different dioceses. It is also notable that growth or impact was often described as ‘below expectations’ or ‘subtle’. It was argued that to “*think small*” is perfectly legitimate in rural contexts.

This is not to say that there were not some healthy outcomes. These include positive examples of co-working between parishes and a stronger sense of shared identity; a sense of being valued and that the rural context was still worthwhile; and an increase sense of possible, creativity, and confidence.

Leadership development should be a central part of any future rural strategy. Invest in the support and development of clergy, of pioneers, and of lay leaders of all kinds. As St Edmundsbury and Ipswich recommend,

Invest in your stars. Look for people who are already doing something, people who don't quite fit in. Focus on the character and integrity of the person you are funding.

The relative ineffectiveness of the more detached and free-floating pioneer projects should not distract from the positive synergies that emerge when there is a close relationship between the inherited church structures and those that are newer and more emergent. The projects and reports provide strong evidence for the value of a mixed ecology of church.

As noted above, the main sense that can be drawn from these earlier rural experiments is that of firstfruits, and of this being the start of a journey. So what might mean for rural contexts to become “*incubators of the new*”, as suggested earlier in the report?

“What is that in your hand?” (Exodus 4:2)¹⁰

Rural contexts often feel some resource-constrained. Somewhat paradoxically, resource-constrained environments can act as places of innovation more effectively than do resource-rich ones (because in the latter cases one can usually find sufficient resource from somewhere to maintain ‘business as usual’, as illustrated by Winchester’s “connected-rural” context). This process of making do with whatever one has to hand is known as ‘bricolage’.

We define bricolage as the making do with any resources at hand to provide innovative solutions for needs that traditional organizations fail to address in an adequate way.¹¹

Through bricolage, solutions to problems are found by creating anything possible using the limited resources at hand. The social entrepreneur or ‘bricoleur’ deals with resource scarcity in an innovative way, with a problem-solving attitude characterized by a continuous generation of innovations and experiments. It has been described as “*creating something from nothing*”.¹² A focus on bricolage obviates the question as to whether you start with the situations in most need or where there is most potential; you start with what you’ve got.

¹⁰ A similar metaphor, “What’s in your Fridge?”, is explored in depth in Dave Male (2016), *How To Pioneer (Even If You Haven’t A Clue)*, London: Church House Publishing

¹¹ Frank Janssen, Alain Fayolle, and Amélie Wuillaume (2018), “Researching bricolage in social entrepreneurship”, in *Entrepreneurship and Regional Development*, Vol 30 No 3-4, pp450-470

¹² Ted Baker and Reed Nelson (2005), “Creating Something from Nothing: Resource Construction through Entrepreneurial Bricolage”, in *Administrative Science Quarterly*, Vol 50 No 3, pp329-366



More than one diocese argued strongly for smaller amounts of money to be made available for longer periods of time than is currently the case. Too much money can be a distraction or even counter-productive, and projects when it runs out projects have to stop. Giving less money over a longer time period gives more room for experimentation, learning, and planning. This, combined with the earlier focus on working with the people that you have, corresponds closely with the concept of bricolage.

“Develop and adapt as you go” (Hereford)

Social entrepreneurs rarely succeed at their first attempt. Instead they are willing to proceed by trial-and-error, learning as they go. The projects that were analysed above did not produce simple and conclusive findings to inform future strategy, but they did contribute to an emerging culture of experimentation and creativity. All the dioceses who were interviewed ‘live’ for this research provide good examples of where learning and reflection from early initiatives has led to adaptation and change for subsequent stages or follow-on projects.

Often we begin to find a way forward in complex and intractable situations by admitting what we do not know. Over-familiarity can be a problem in stuck contexts (*“we’ve always done it this way”*), and prior experience in any field of interest can hinder learning, imagination and creativity. Perhaps surprisingly, *“genuine ignorance is profitable because it is likely to be accompanied by humility, curiosity, and open-mindedness”*.¹³ The aim should be to create openness to possibility and potential, rather than closing things down through simple or prescriptive definitions and methods.

Noting that the DIP criteria tend towards ideas that have already worked elsewhere and which might be called *“tried and tested”*, there needs to be more scope for innovation, experimentation, and risk, and *“to try left-field stuff in rural areas”*.

This leads us to the question of the kinds of organisational processes that might facilitate innovation and learning.

People, not programmes

It is useful to make a distinction between the organisation’s processes and policies (and the degree to which they support or hinder innovation and risk-taking), and the autonomous, extra-role, change-oriented behaviour of its people. The ideal is to have both. You need more than the right systems and culture; you also need those whose entrepreneurial aspirations already exist, independent of the culture of the organisation. Having the right policies is good, but having the right people is essential.

Entrepreneurs rarely succeed on their own. There has been a move away from the popular notion of the heroic entrepreneur towards a more balanced approach that sees them operating in, belonging to, and requiring connections across a wider social context. The successful pioneers identified in this review were those who were able to cooperate with the organisational structures and with other people. There is *“an ongoing reinterpretation of entrepreneurship as not so much an individualistic self-interest-driven phenomenon, but rather an activity embedded in a social context”*.¹⁴ The ideal is a ‘socially-supportive culture’ that relies heavily on social capital and cooperation, not a ‘performance-based culture’ that seeks to reward achievement. This conforms to more than one diocese’s plea for measurement and reporting to be flexible according to context, and to be more focussed on broad impact than on specific activities or measurable outcomes. Having noted this, policy frameworks do have a role to play, including the stories told within an organisation (i.e. who gets held up as an example?), an acknowledgement of the value of risk-taking, and the encouragement of teamwork and knowledge-sharing.

¹³ Ian Colville, Annie Pye and Andrew D Brown (2016), “Sensemaking processes and Weickian learning”, in *Management Learning*, Vol 47 No 1, pp3

¹⁴ Ute Stephan and Lorraine M Uhlener (2010), “Performance-based vs socially supportive culture: A cross-national study of descriptive norms and entrepreneurship”, in *Journal on International Business Studies*, Vol 41, pp1358



It is difficult to be any more specific about the steps that need to be taken to achieve this, as entrepreneurial opportunities are unpredictable. Innovations usually emerge in a space-in-between, meaning no one person can claim the credit for them. Sometimes all we can do is create the conditions where they become more likely. This has been called an 'adaptive space'. What is needed is 'enabling leadership', which is *"the enabling of conditions that effectively support and sustain adaptive space"*.¹⁵ This brings together those with ideas and the desire for change and provides them with the opportunities and resources they need to generate new approaches and initiatives.

*It is the enabling function of leadership that bounds the organization within the safety of policy, bureaucracy and administration, whilst also enabling the people within the organisation that comprise the complex adaptive system to find freedom to experiment, innovate, and respond to new realities.*¹⁶

Rev Dr Richard Tiplady, Brendan Research
May 2025

Statement of positionality

The author of this report has worked as CEO of a church-planting mission agency, as principal of an interdenominational theological college, and on the leadership team of an Episcopalian theological college, with academic interests in mission and leadership. He has lived for most of his life in villages or small towns that can be described as "connected rural" (i.e. within travelling distance of a larger population centre). He was not involved in the production of any of the reports listed in the Appendix.

¹⁵ Mary Uhl-Bien and Michael Arena (2017), "Complexity Leadership: Enabling people and organizations for adaptability", in *Organizational Dynamics*, Vol 46, pp14

¹⁶ Rob Elkington and Antony Upward (2016), "Leadership as enabling function for flourishing by design", in *Journal of Global Responsibility*, Vol 7 No 1, p139



Appendix:

Summaries of the six evaluated projects

Carlisle, “God For All” Strategy Implementation (2017-2019)

The project looked for outcomes in four areas:

1. Establishing 35-40 Mission Communities by end-2020.
2. The development of new Fresh Expressions of Church and an expansion of networks such as Network Youth Church, leading to 1500 new churchgoers.
3. An overall increase in church attendance through conventional and fresh expressions of church.
4. Across the county, through BigReach, a measurable awareness and engagement with the ideas and reality of a Christian God using a variety of media.

Hereford, Growing Intergenerational Mission (2017-2022)

The project aimed to stimulate spiritual and numerical intergenerational growth in churches in six communities over five years, three market towns and three of the poorest communities in the Diocese by placing an Intergenerational Missioner in each location to work with the incumbent and congregation.

Salisbury, Tending The Seedlings: Rural Hope (2017-2023)

Rural Hope consisted of four projects. Three were designed for rural ministry formation to increase the number of leaders with a vocation to rural ministry, to better equip them for rural contexts, and thereby increase the number of strong applicants for vacancies. These were 1) the rural Ministerial Experience Scheme, 2) rural placements for curates, and 3) the Rural Training Pathway at Sarum College. The fourth project, Leading Into Growth, focused on parishes and benefices, building additional strength and capacity for mission and evangelism, developing the untapped potential of lay leaders and a culture of collaborative ministry.

Exeter, Unearthing The Treasure: Growing the Rural Church (2016-2023)

Through employing staff in a rural church buildings team, the programme aimed to support rural Mission Communities (roughly coterminous with multi-parish benefices) in Mission Action Planning. An array of creative solutions were developed to explore sustainability and help ease the burden of building maintenance at local level. Partway through, a further aim was added of establishing new – or growing existing - initiatives and services.

Winchester, Going Fast or Going Far? Mission Action Programme Phase 1 (2017-2023)

A complex project with four only partially-related elements, not all of which were rural in focus.

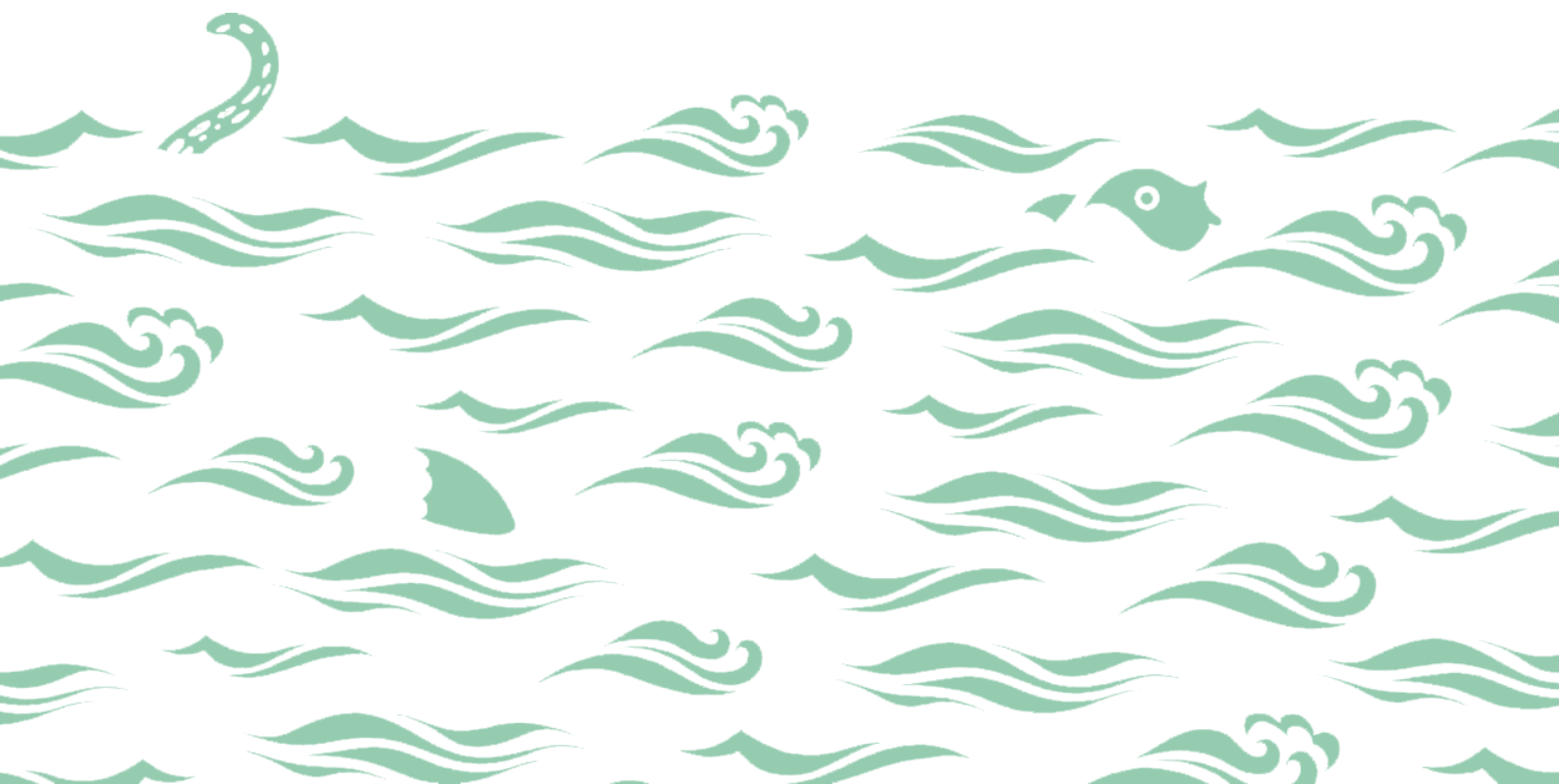
1. Benefice of the Future to pilot working toward efficiencies of scale, intentional diversity and differentiation to support vibrant rural ministry.
2. Invest for Growth to support the establishment and growth of Resource Churches in major conurbations, church plants (overlapping with plans for Resource Churches and Major Development Areas), and new pioneer hubs to grow fresh expressions of Church (fxC) in areas of urban deprivation.
3. Major Development Areas to develop ministry and worshipping communities on new housing developments.
4. Student Evangelism to look for new models in student evangelism within Further Education (FE) and Higher Education (HE).

Bath and Wells, Pioneer Project (2017-2024)

Nine full-time pioneer posts were established in nine deaneries, including work with young people, in the arts and in the contexts of new housing, Magnificat parishes and rural areas. Each pioneer had a two-fold role as a ‘signpost pioneer’. Firstly, this meant signposting people to faith, setting up at least one sustainable worshipping community and thus being active in evangelism. Secondly, it meant signposting parishes, benefices and deaneries to the characteristics and opportunities of pioneering ministry in general, and thus helping to foster a pioneering culture in the diocese as a whole, working with the existing church. The evaluation aimed to capture specific learning from the three main elements of the Project:

1. the nine pioneer appointments
2. the promotion of pioneering at a grassroots level through lay pioneer training
3. the establishment and embedding of a culture of pioneering and innovation in the diocese





About Brendan Research

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