

Learning from evaluations (summary)

In Autumn 2024, we looked at the evaluations of which had been completed so far of mission and ministry projects with churches and communities, to see what learning could be gleaned. We celebrate all that the projects have achieved, and we are grateful to those who have led the way and whose work will help us learn. The projects themselves faced unprecedented challenges (much had been impacted by the covid pandemic), and their circumstances are complex and nuanced. Here, we have simplified that complexity as we seek to find learnings that can be applied more widely.

We have grouped the learnings we found into six themes. These relate to the approach we take (being servant-hearted and being clear), the activities we choose to do (being relevant and balanced), and the practicalities of how we do our work (being organised and wise). The learning shows that where these things are in place then mission will be more fruitful.

Below is an abridged version of the six themes. [The full document is available on the Church Support Hub.](#)

Servant-hearted

Prayer and relationships

Prayer and support are important for all involved. This includes prayer for the direction and challenges of work itself as well as prayer for people. Being generous with time and building friendships can open up opportunities for discipleship.

Adequate support is needed for ministers who can be isolated in their work

Peer-to-peer support and networks for ministers and practitioners within communities are an invaluable source of strength and ideas. Additionally, high-quality coaching or mentoring can make a big difference as long as it complements any existing networks.

Teamwork is key for success.

Teams can help overcome obstacles, provide encouragement and deliver continuity in ways that individuals cannot. Teamwork includes networking between peers, being part of a diocesan or national initiative or working collaboratively.

It can be helpful if a project's design includes some form of central team providing practical support, advice, resources and guidance. This type of support helps to deliver the 'back office' needs of a project while freeing up missionaries for their core work. Relevant training and guidance can give leaders more confidence and deepens their faith.

Clear

Strategic vision from diocesan leaders

It is important that the diocese has developed a clear vision and consistently supports a coherent strategy even when other priorities arise. This means that senior leaders have a shared commitment to the common aim which they are all working towards.

Whilst senior leadership is vital to set the vision, projects are more likely to do well when the vision is owned and shared at all levels.

Communicating the vision needs to be about inspiring others, not just sharing information. Two-way contact is needed.

Continuity across projects

The delivery of objectives can be adversely affected by the starting and ending of projects. Some ways to help manage this include clarity over how current activities fit into new activities and building the work of the project into core diocesan activities to reduce the 'cliff edge' feeling.

Relevant

It is important that approaches are intentionally contextually appropriate

The first step before preparing plans is to understand the local situation. Projects benefit from taking a contextual approach that is sensitive to and respectful of the culture of the people with whom they are working. This is particularly relevant when projects seek to reach previously underrepresented groups.

Awareness and sensitivity to the values and demographics of the inherited church is important to deliver change well. The level of support of the local church for mission initiatives and outreach activities within the local area is a key factor for the successful delivery of a project.

Change needs to be communicated well and care needs to be taken to ensure that those in the inherited church do not feel undervalued.

Social issues

Many projects include work on social issues as part of their outreach which can create opportunities to partner and build relationships with other non-church organisations. Working alongside existing bodies as partners can build trust and help reduce concerns from local people when a church is new or working in a new way, and it can also create opportunities for the church to work in different ways.

Listening to children and young people is important to welcome them into faith communities, as well as bringing evangelism opportunities with families and schools.

Balanced

Overt evangelism

Projects are more successful at bringing people to faith when there is an openness about Christ and a commitment to evangelism. Projects that consider the journey of faith and that are able to lead people onto a pathway or steps towards discipleship are able to build upon initial contacts. This is not easy to do well and it can take time.

It is not just new disciples who can be guided by a clear pathway, the same logic can apply to new congregations too. Some projects focusing on creating new worshipping communities can benefit from a structured process.

Doing something new

Resource churches can be an effective missional model for generating impact and building a large worshipping community. However, new resource churches can sometimes encounter friction with other local churches in the community. Awareness and sensitivity can help.

New activities and approaches within the 'mixed ecology' can help engage communities that are underrepresented within the Church and bring people to faith. When new people are reached through mission work they need to be fully welcomed into the church and feel they belong.

Doing something new can create momentum and opportunities to supplement existing ministry, and it does not necessarily have to be large or novel in its approach. However, it does mean being prepared to take some risks and adapt to the circumstances.

Creating a culture where lay leaders are empowered and encourage to follow up on their ideas can release new initiatives.

Importantly, adapting to change works well where good relationships are already established, and where people are willing to try new things or adapt existing models.

Organised

Project management

All projects need good programme governance and project management with clarity about roles and responsibilities, and an appropriate budget needs to be allocated for this. A strategic programme office can help to ensure projects are kept on track. When programme governance is missing it creates problems with project delivery.

It is important not to compromise on the quality of staff, even if it can take a long time to find them.

Where projects were able to recruit high quality staff and retain them, the continuity was instrumental in maintaining momentum and retaining learning. Changes in senior leadership can impact on the level of commitment to the project.

Monitoring and evaluation

Thinking about recording outcomes and impact needs to happen early on, including measuring baselines and deciding on metrics. It is important to note that projects can have very different approaches and measures and may not be directly comparable.

Wise

Sufficient financial resources

Projects may support healthy, growing, worshipping communities and yet be unable to reach financial sustainability. Recognising this and making informed decisions will help resources to be best directed.

More focused investment that lasts for longer can help a church community to be sustainable.

Plans for new congregations or new worshipping communities need to include consideration of how they will be part of the parish's longer-term financial plans.

Funding for church leaders (particularly any ordained clergy) is particularly important. Churches or fresh expressions that rely on lay, volunteer or self-supporting leadership can be more financially sustainable, but this depends on people giving their time and energy, which should be acknowledged and their generosity celebrated.

Long-term resourcing

Results take time. Projects aiming to reach out to new communities or deliver culture change need to be adequately resourced and allow sufficient time for change to become embedded.