Learning from evaluations

In Autumn 2024, we looked at the evaluations of mission and ministry projects with churches and communities which had been completed so far 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.

Thanks and acknowledgements go to the authors of the evaluations for their work. Any errors in interpretation are my own. The following (in alphabetical order) conducted one or more evaluations which have contributed to our learning in this summary:

Alan Cruickshank Consulting, Brendan Research, Church Army's Research Unit, Eido Research, RS Consult Limited, Sarah Newnham Consulting and others.

We have grouped the learnings that we found into six elements of effective projects:

- Servant-hearted
- Clear
- Relevant
- Balanced
- Organised
- Wise

We explore each element in its own section with separate boxes providing generic examples drawn from real projects. Not everything will necessarily be relevant to every context.

Servant-hearted

(1) Prayer and relationships

Prayer is needed throughout

Some project evaluations mentioned the role of prayer in the project, specifically praying for God's guidance in the work.

> Praying for the community and praying for staff members are important. Praying through challenges and about next steps can also help to find the way forward.

People respond to personal and compassionate connections in the Church and within the community

The quality, warmth and respect of relationships are important both within the Church and with those the Church seeks to engage. This could be, for example, the working relationship between a missioner and a parish incumbent. Equally, pioneers and practitioners reaching out to communities do this by getting to know people, listening and sharing God's love.

> Activities that serve communities build relationships and trust, which create opportunities for evangelism and open up a pathway towards discipleship. Sharing time with people who are not part of the existing church community is important, focusing on building friendships, not just doing activities.

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

A network of support for ministers in mission initiatives can be invaluable for their work and for their wellbeing

Evaluations picked up the value placed by missional leaders on their contact with peers. Particularly when the project design involves placing people in communities or churches, a network that connects these people across the diocese regularly can be an invaluable source of both strength and ideas.

> Lay leaders appreciate opportunities to meet with and support each other. Support from other practitioners may be valued more than oversight. An online community that connects people who are doing similar work can help build energy and encourage shared learning.

Coaching and mentoring can make a big difference and is valued by practitioners

Practitioners who have been supported by expert coaching or mentoring value this highly. This can work very well if formally provided and resourced as part of the work. Alongside this, the availability of senior clergy, project and diocesan staff is also appreciated for encouragement and guidance as appropriate. Supporting others to grow in faith can also deepen leaders' and mentors' own faith.

> Ongoing coaching for those in leadership can be helpful. If mentors are offered, they need to be suitably trained and be able to dedicate time and energy to their mentoring role. Whether coaching, mentoring or other support is offered, it should sit comfortably with and complement existing support networks.

Working in clergy and lay teams (rather than as individuals) has many clear benefits

Across a wide variety of projects, missional models, contexts and roles, the evaluations consistently identified that teams were able to overcome obstacles, provide encouragement and deliver continuity in ways that individuals could not. There are three different important aspects to this: (i) networking between peers, (ii) being part of a wider diocesan or national initiative, (iii) working collaboratively with colleagues.

> A good team which is clear about its priorities can be better at addressing problems through the mix of skills and talents among team-members, including building connections, practical abilities and gifts of preaching. Teams comprise both clergy and laity. Feeling part of a team can mean being in a small local group as well as the sense of being part of something bigger across the Church.

There is a need for practical support for missional leaders

When a project's design included some form of central team providing practical support, advice, resources and guidance, this was generally highly valued by practitioners. This type of support helped to deliver the 'back office' needs of the project while also freeing up missioners for their core work. Relevant training and guidance helped to give leaders more confidence and also deepened their own faith. The absence of these elements was also felt.

> Practical support (e.g. with finance or buildings) can free up local energy for mission and ministry. A support function (whether at diocesan, deanery or local levels) that serves several churches/parishes can help reduce administration and make statutory compliance more straightforward. Safeguarding may also be supported by a central team.

Clear

(3) Strategic vision from diocesan leaders

Diocesan vision and good leadership can be critical in the success of projects

It is important that the diocese has developed a clear vision and consistently supports a coherent strategy. This needs to have sufficient width and depth of support to cope with changes in key personnel and the immediacy of 'business as usual' demands.

> Senior leaders need a shared commitment to the common aim which they are all are working towards. Leadership from the bishop and other senior clergy can help overcome challenges - for example, by ensuring the necessary people are involved. A shift in focus at diocesan level could leave existing activities feeling sidelined so there needs to be consistency about supporting the strategy if and when other priorities arise.

The theological vision and a clarity about how this fits with activities and structures needs to be shared by the diocese, the project and the locality

While strong senior leadership is vital to set the vision, projects are more likely to do well when that vision is owned and shared across all levels. Communicating well is key here and can influence the wider culture of the diocesan context.

> Communication needs to be about inspiring others, not just about sharing information. Thoughtful selection of appropriate communication channels is needed to make sure messages are reaching people as hoped. Good two-way contact between the diocese and practitioners can be key to effective delivery of a project.

(4) Continuity across projects

The delivery of objectives can be adversely affected by the starting and ending of projects

Evaluations identified several instances where additional projects (within the SDF programme itself) had negatively impacted on the ongoing delivery of existing projects. This might happen for one (or more) of four reasons: (i) the new initiative works with the same population as the existing project which creates competition or confuses the attribution of outcomes, (ii) the new initiative pulls management time and attention away from the existing project, (iii) the new initiative represents a strategic change of direction for the diocese which deprioritised the existing project's approach, (iv) a feeling of a 'cliff edge' when funding is due to cease. A funded programme with discrete, time-limited projects needs to manage these risks.

A change in strategic direction can reduce the focus of senior leaders on older or existing initiatives, unless there is a sense of a continuous narrative about how current activities fit with future activities, in a way that can maintain purpose. Successive projects each with time-bound funding can feel disconnected or uncertain about the future. Building the work of the project into core diocesan activities can help reduce the 'cliff edge' feeling.

Relevant

(5) Cultural context

It is important that approaches are intentionally contextually appropriate

Evaluations found that projects which were sensitive to and respectful of the culture of the people with whom they were working benefited from taking a more contextual approach (and the reverse was also observed). This is particularly relevant when projects seek to reach previously underrepresented groups (for example, when working with low-income communities).

Projects need to ensure that they do not create barriers for low-income communities (for example, by requiring a lengthy application process or match-funding). Training for lay leaders needs to be in a format that is accessible and relevant for those who are coming forward (cost and course pre-requirements could be barriers). Congregations and churches which truly reflect the communities they serve need to understand their local populations and local situations. This understanding is important before preparing project plans, which need to be relevant and appropriate for the local community. The type of language used to describe the project is one element, for example. Gaining the support of informal local community leaders can help build acceptance. Support for those involved in mission and ministry is more relevant when rooted in a shared context: learning from others who face similar challenges.

The same principle of context applies when projects seek to develop the missional culture of the inherited church or existing congregations

Awareness and sensitivity to the values and demographics of the inherited church is important to deliver change well. In some cases, if a particular change is inevitable, clarity of communication of this can be helpful.

Church leaders need to be attentive to how people feel (both newcomers and existing members) when new people are joining the congregation, and ensure that all feel welcome. When new things are happening, there is a risk that those in the inherited church can feel that their long-term dedication has been undervalued. Thought needs to be given to the meanings attached to church language and how particular terms (such as 'evangelism') may be interpreted differently. Sometimes it can be better if planned changes are carried out more quickly, to avoid drawn-out uncertainty and unease.

The commitment and mobilisation of the local church is essential for all work with existing parishes

The level of support of the local church for mission initiatives and outreach activities within the local area is a key factor in the successful delivery of a project. Evaluations found that projects faced difficulties in progressing their missional goals where this was new to the culture of the inherited church locally (its congregations and its ministers, lay and ordained). Involvement of senior clergy and relevant diocesan or project staff can help to allay concerns or encourage participation.

> Sustainability of a local church community is likely to depend on the commitment and culture of its people. Church leaders may need to help their existing members to embrace an outward-looking culture. And if a change is planned there must be sensitivity about how to communicate well and with whom (e.g. PCCs).
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> Initiatives with new requirements which are seen as coming from outside may be met with resistance to change in local churches and limited acceptance. For practitioners feeling challenged by low commitment locally, connecting them with the diocese (e.g. directly employing them) can help to reduce the pressure on them.

Some projects have intentionally chosen to work with those who are already willing

Some projects have tried to assess cultural readiness as a necessary condition before commencing participation, but this is difficult to gauge. Evaluators have indicated that more impact and greater fruitfulness may be found where there is already a receptiveness to the intended work.

> More can be achieved by working with those who are already willing, so a strategic focus on places where the level of local support is deep/wide enough for the planned activity can help. Initiatives which already have local support and energy are more likely to be successful. Lay leaders need the genuine support of their local clergy if they are looking to start something new (a fresh expression or a new worshipping community).

Managing expectations of parishes is vital to maintaining goodwill

While some parishes may be reluctant to embrace change, others may be disappointed when resources and investment seem to be being directed (or concentrated) elsewhere. This needs to be anticipated and handled with good communication, listening and early engagement.

> Some churches can feel left behind when others are selected for support. Project plans may need to consider how to build connections so that neighbouring churches do not feel vulnerable because of the changes taking place around them.

Social media can be a particularly powerful tool for engaging new people

Several projects made effective use of social media during the pandemic but beyond livestreaming services it can be helpful for reaching and engaging with whole communities, and with young people especially.

> Joining in community groups on social media can help to build the local church's role and place within the community as using smartphones and social media is the reality of communication for many communities. Regularly updating the church's online presence can connect with new people.

(6) Social issues

Working on social issues across the community can help build trust and partnerships

Some evaluations observed that projects had included work on social issues as part of their outreach. This was relevant, for example, in low-income communities where this work had created opportunities to partner with other (non-church) organisations and build relationships.

> Building trust with local bodies and institutions (e.g. local council, charities or housing bodies) can create opportunities to work in different ways in partnership together. Making it simpler for external organisations to reach the Church collectively (rather than as several separate individual parishes) can help. Good local connections can also help to reduce concerns of local people when a church is new or working in new way.

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

Working with children can itself be evangelistic, but it frequently also brings opportunities to engage with families, schools and the wider community.

> Working with children can create opportunities to engage with the wider community around them if the church can adapt to meet with them. Activities which connect schools with local churches can build relationships and create opportunities for young people to invite their friends. Parents and carers may be reached when their children ask about participating in church activities they have heard about through their school and other local groups.

Balanced

(7) Overt evangelism

Project design benefits from some form of 'discipleship pathway' that can help reach and encourage 'unchurched'/'de-churched' people

Evaluations were clear that projects were more successful at bringing people to faith when there was an openness about Christ, a commitment to evangelism. Projects that had considered the journey of faith and that were able to lead people into a pathway or steps towards discipleship were able to build upon initial contacts successfully, but there was an acknowledgement that this is not easy to do well.

> The journey to faith can take time and needs supportive steps along the way. Sometimes a more challenging aspect is not so much making initial contacts but building on this to create connections. Maintaining continuity can become the default unless there are thought-through opportunities to explore faith in more depth. A pathway can help.

Projects developing new worshipping communities also benefit from a pathway approach

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

> Although missional approaches may vary, they are likely to go through some similar stages of development. A clear structure and regular reviews can help those working on the development of new congregations to track progress and to keep focused. Some fresh expressions may need external support to help to progress along the faith journey and avoid 'getting stuck' at the early stages.

(8) Doing something new

Resource churches have demonstrated significant impact but face other challenges

Evaluations of projects which include resource churches indicate that this can be an effective missional model for generating impact (both deeply and widely) and building a large worshipping community. However, new resource churches can sometimes encounter friction with other local churches and the community. Awareness and sensitivity can help.

Resource churches with a culture of church planting can be successful in building large congregations. While a resource church can be an opportunity to bring about significant change, other approaches may be more widespread and smaller scale.

A significant church plant (and/or local churches they partner with) may unintentionally end up competing with other churches, and even with other diocesan projects, that seek to reach a similar demographic (such as young people). Other local churches may feel overshadowed, with a comparative lack of funding and connection.

New activities and approaches within the 'mixed ecology' can help engage with communities that are underrepresented within the Church and bring people to faith

Doing something new can create momentum and opportunities to supplement existing ministry, and it may not necessarily be large or novel in its approach. Support may be needed (from the local parish or the diocese or the national church) to connect these new initiatives and the people they reach into the wider Church community. Some pioneers placed more emphasis on other (more inter-personal) aspects of their work.

When new people are reached through mission work they need to be fully welcomed into the church, and to feel they belong. Fresh expressions of church may be able to provide a place of welcome for people who would not otherwise be attending a church. When new worshipping communities are integrated into the inherited church it can grow the faith of lay leaders, encourage clergy and provide connection for newcomers. Pioneers may not necessarily be involved in setting up new congregations or worshipping communities – their outreach may take a different form.

Projects which are agile and adapt to changing circumstances (while respecting the legacy of earlier efforts) and try out ideas are able to make the most of emerging opportunities

The projects covered by existing evaluations were amongst the first to receive SDF funding. Those which were both clear about objectives and flexible enough to respond were able to embrace the risk of trying new things, stopping things which were not working and pivoting towards the opportunities. Several projects have made use of small grants to help enable this.

Being clear about the overall aim and then being flexible about how that is achieved locally can help. This can work particularly well where there are existing good relationships, and where people are willing to try to take some risks to try out new things or adapt existing models for what will work in their own specific circumstances e.g. if the current premises are not suitable there could be various different options to consider to address the problem. Creating a culture where lay leaders are empowered and encouraged to follow up on their ideas can release new initiatives, potentially through small grants (which may be funded from underspends on other budget lines).

Organised

(9) Project management

All projects need good programme governance and project management with clarity about roles and responsibilities

Evaluations show that dioceses took care to learn lessons from earlier projects in the way that subsequent projects were governed and managed. The Vision and Strategy team has also learned from its experience in grant-making and monitoring.

> The structures of the diocese should align with its strategy. An ambitious project with activities across the diocese needs a level of good governance at diocesan level which reflects that and can support it appropriately. A strategic programme office, properly budgeted for, can help to ensure projects are kept on track. When programme governance is missing it creates problems with project delivery.

Projects benefit from allowing time to recruit well and considering succession planning

Where projects were able to recruit high quality staff members and retain them, the continuity achieved was instrumental in maintaining commitment and retaining learning. Conversely, projects suffered when there was high staff turnover (whether within the project, incumbent clergy or diocesan teams).

> Changes in senior leadership can impact on the level of commitment to the project. Given that projects are already time-limited, changes in project-paid staff in churches can set back progress as relationships have to be rebuilt and it is difficult to create sustainable church communities if leaders stay in post for a relatively short time. It is important not to compromise on the quality of staff, even if it can take a long time to find them. Recruitment can be very difficult: it can take months to find people for all the posts planned for some projects.

(10) Monitoring and evaluation

Monitoring and evaluation have been difficult to conduct well, particularly if people perceive a pressure to use quantitative measures

There has been a widespread appreciation of the importance of gathering and using data about projects well, alongside a recognition of the challenges of this within the Church context. The evaluations found that tracking of progress against indicators and intended outcomes faced significant challenges including (i) some local resistance to measurement, (ii) contribution to or attribution of outcomes across overlapping initiatives, (iii) loosely defined outcomes, (iv) changing objectives over time.

> Thinking about recording outcomes and impact needs to happen early on, including measuring baselines and deciding on metrics. Where there may be different overlapping actions happening, it must be clear what will be counted as project activity. Attributing results to specific interventions can be difficult in these situations. Very different projects with diverse objectives can be in place and caution must be used if comparing projects. Simple measures of attendance growth will not necessarily be the most appropriate metrics in all circumstances and more nuanced measures are needed too.

There can be a perceived contrast between the monitoring of projects and that of the inherited church

In some projects, evaluators noted the inherent challenges in the difference between the relative rigour of projects in measuring their deliverables and the relatively fewer monitoring requirements for the inherited church. Developing an evaluative culture across the whole Church (both projects and the inherited church) would mitigate the risk of creating tensions or divisions.

> The difference between the relative intensity of measurement for projects compared to the inherited church can create tension and division. Breaking down artificial divisions can be eased through a culture of outward-looking mission and ministry that encompasses the whole diocese.

Wise

(11) Sufficient financial resources

Not all missional projects will be financially self-sustainable

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.

> Depending on the type of community that a local church serves and the level of paid ministry, it may not be possible for it to become self-sustaining through giving, even if it has a large congregation, and it may need ongoing external support of some kind (whether from the wider Church or elsewhere). More focused project investment that lasts for longer can help. Plans for new congregations or new worshipping communities need to include consideration of how they are part of the parish's longer-term financial plans.

Missional models vary in terms of the financial input required to support them

One of the (many) factors to be considered in the choice of missional model will be the level of financial input required relative to the level of voluntary input required, and the magnitude of the intended (short-term) impact. The value of volunteers' time (a real cost for them) should also be acknowledged, and their commitment recognised and celebrated. Different models will continue to be appropriate and effective for different aims, contexts, circumstances and types of community.

> Where grants have been given for new worshipping communities, the biggest costs have often been leaders' pay. There can be a mismatch between the need for funding for church leaders (particularly any ordained clergy) and the level of congregational giving (if any). Building new worshipping communities or fresh expressions that rely on lay, volunteer, or self-supporting leadership in some form may be financially more 'sustainable' but it needs to be acknowledged that this is only through the generosity of these people in giving their time and energy. It can be less costly to begin to reach out to new communities with small-scale initiatives that are led by existing local churches. Some approaches combine different elements, e.g. church revitalisation and fresh expressions.

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(12) Long-term resourcing

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

Growing more diverse must mean reaching people and communities that are underrepresented in the Church of England. Actively reaching out in this way can be resource intensive and take years to establish well. In low income areas, leaders may be reluctant to ask for money but see the generosity and willingness of people in their worshipping communities to step up and contribute both their time and their gifts. This needs to be supported appropriately.

More resources (of all kinds) are likely to be needed beyond the timescale of the project such as additional funds for salaries and equipment. Existing inherited churches tend to provide the majority of giving, with new worshipping communities generally providing less towards parish finances until they become more established. One option could be to spread the activities and costs of the project over a longer timescale, to allow them to become more rooted before the project ends. In low-income communities, leaders may be reluctant to ask for giving, but people are generous (for example, giving their time/skills and sharing meals).

LInC funding and DIP funding working together can provide a basis from which to build mission in LInC areas

"Good Practice Guide: Mission and ministry in low-income communities and estates" (see more on the Church Support Hub) provides practical guidance for thinking about the allocation of funding streams to different work strands.