Learning from...revitalisations by planting

Series introduction

This learning summary is part of a series of learning summaries produced by the Insights and Engagement Group in the Archbishops' Council's Vision and Strategy Team. Learning summaries draw on thematic insights from evaluations of SMMI-funded projects, together with other key learnings from across the Church of England.

Each learning summary is gathered around a particular topic, inspired by what is happening in the Church today. A learning summary may include common themes drawn from both older and newer evaluations, sometimes with references to newly-published research, and key highlights from wider research. Building on what we have learned in the past, and as a way of managing some of the complexity in evaluating projects and programmes, we also refer to the 12 characteristics of effective projects identified in Learning from evaluations as an evolving framework.

Learning summaries highlight the cross-cutting insights applicable across contexts, rather than citing individual examples. The strategic, theological and practical questions that evaluations of programmes and projects raise are complex. We provide a starting point, and signpost to other publications and resources that may help you to explore further. We also invite you to discover the case studies and project evaluations available on the Church Support Hub where you will find more details about specific projects.

We aim to inform policy decisions and enable good practice in implementing the priority areas of the Vision and Strategy, as we seek to be:

- A Church that is Younger and More Diverse
- A Church where Mixed Ecology is the Norm
- A Church of Missionary Disciples

Issue introduction

This summary focuses on the topic of revitalisations.

The term "revitalisations" within the Church can mean different things to different people. Forthcoming learning summaries will explore the breadth of this topic further. Within this learning summary as far as possible, the term has been used in alignment with both the Eido Research report and the recent Resourcing the Church report which worked from the definition of a revitalisation as "sending a leader and team from one church to another church to reboot the mission and ministry of the second church" and a resource church as "a church called to repeated parish revitalisation through sending leaders and teams to plant or graft into other localities".

Revitalisations, with or without resource churches, are part of a landscape or ecosystem of mission. As such, some evaluations reviewed here may include churches or worshipping communities that are 'revitalisations' in a different sense, but which have valuable learnings to share for work in the context of planting or grafting. One example might be a 'family of churches' operating in a local context where interchange of people and resources is fluid and informal.

The tighter definition of a resource church serves to clarify the missional approach, not demarcate a fixed 'position or role' that a particular church occupies. This set of learnings therefore highlights the specific part played by churches resourcing revitalisations by planting or grafting, within a healthy diversity of mission. However, these do not take place in isolation from other approaches to revitalisation. As such, a future learning update will seek to unpack what these other approaches to revitalisation look like, what definitions might be helpful in assessing these, and what these bring to our mixed ecology of mission and ministry.

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Learning from evaluations on revitalisations

Revitalisations, as defined by Eido Research, involve people being sent from one church to another church. The learnings captured below therefore are considerations for sending churches, receiving churches and their dioceses. Sometimes, the sending church may be a 'resource church' but this is not always the case. The sending and receiving churches may be within a single diocese or within different dioceses. Diocesan level learnings therefore need to be applied contextually.

The learnings below are structured around the 12 characteristics identified in Learning from evaluations. The review draws on both older evaluations and newer evaluations not previously available, looking for common themes in projects which had a particular focus on revitalisations. Rather than citing specific cases, the below represents cross-cutting themes which may be applied across a range of contexts.

1. **Servant-hearted: Prayer and relationships**

At the core of fruitful mission and ministry are servant-hearted people seeking God's will in faithful prayer and building compassionate relationships within the Church and within the wider community.

From evaluations relating to revitalisations we have seen:

- Prayer was a way of faithfully discerning next steps, as well as equipping people for the work. There is also an important link between prayer and discipleship (see section 7 Evangelism below).
- Personal connections and investing in supporting people are also vital influences to encourage people to step into planting vocations. Evaluations have seen planting curates come from specific churches within which they have been mentored and supported into leadership.
- In some revitalisations, opening the doors of the church to meet the needs of people (for example, starting a foodbank or a play session for children) was a way of being available to the community, and making connections, which became a starting point from which to build faith.

2. Support for ministers: teams and practical help

Revitalisation will necessarily mean change, in some way. This means it can be inherently unsettling for some people and can often call for energy and commitment from those seeking to bring about the change.

From evaluations relating to revitalisations we have seen:

- For planting curates or others leading revitalisations in parishes, a support network beyond the parish can be invaluable. Connecting with others who are or have been experiencing similar challenges can help share learning and reduce isolation. The learning communities and networking opportunities created by a project can be especially valuable for a newly designated resource church keen to explore planting.
- Dioceses need to think about the systems to support the development of a pipeline of future planting curates – not just releasing them for mission but establishing processes to provide training on practicalities such as governance, HR, and finance. (This is an outworking of good diocesan vision and leadership, as well as good project management.)
- Resource churches and revitalisations often have to tackle complex change and for this it is important to be able to draw on people with appropriate specialist skills. For example, having an operations manager or HR manager in place in a timely way can help to avoid future problems. Alongside technical specialists, churches have been able to build sustainable mission and ministry through the faithful discipleship of servant-hearted lay people who have been encouraged and equipped into these roles, working alongside church leaders. Where this is missing, clergy and church leaders can feel overwhelmed and vulnerable to burn-out.

3. Clarity: a shared theological vision and diocesan strategic leadership

From evaluations relating to revitalisations we have seen:

- Where revitalisations are to become a key part of a diocese's approach to mission and ministry, this approach needs to be set within the context of what has gone before. Developing a sense of the trajectory of change can help open up new paths. Bishops and other senior clergy have a vital role in expressing and championing this, as well as helping to remove barriers, while significant turnover in senior ordained leadership can disrupt it.

- It is important to have a diocesan-wide strategic plan for where resource churches and their revitalisations will take place. The data and thinking behind this is valuable, particularly when plans need to be adapted, and tactical or pragmatic considerations come to the fore. Key considerations include geography (such as planting along an arterial road), a detailed review of baseline needs (such as buildings), and expectations of new plants. Clear criteria for selecting plant locations can help make the process smoother.

- A clear vision needs to be developed into practical actions. In the context of church planting, embedding the vision means involving other stakeholders such as resource church leaders so that the vision is shared and owned locally. If this step is missed, resource churches might be 'designated' as such but be unable or unwilling to fulfil the role. If there are expectations on churches (resource churches or revitalisations) in terms of outcomes, this needs to be communicated and understood early on, so that those involved are not taken by surprise later.

- Revitalisations benefit from a clear vision at the church level too. This helps the church leaders to focus on their priorities when there are many different calls on their time and resources. Some churches benefited from participating in courses designed to support church growth (e.g. with CCX or LYCIG). This also links to the concept of a 'pathway' for new worshipping communities or newly revitalised churches (see below within section 7 Evangelism).

4. Continuity: consistent shared objectives over time

From evaluations relating to revitalisations we have seen:

- Project aims and objectives sometimes include an ambition to catalyse broader diocesan-wide culture change. Designating resource churches and encouraging them to revitalise parishes across a city can help endorse outward-focused mission and ministry where it is already happening and encourage those for whom it feels new. This can lay the groundwork for ongoing culture change, even where immediate outcomes may appear limited.

5. Cultural context: contextually appropriate, with committed local congregations, using social media well

A committed local congregation with a depth of missionary disciples can support church leaders in making the vision a reality. (This links with section 2 Support for ministers and section 7 Evangelism.) Churches which aim to reach out to people in the wider community need to understand and be sensitive to their local context.

From evaluations relating to revitalisations we have seen:

- Even large resource churches with a city-wide reach and remit need to be locally rooted and relevant within their own contexts. Some evaluations have found that a 'parent' resource church can provide support across multiple sites with a shared identity, whereas in other situations there is a need to have locally rooted churches which better reflect the character of their own locality. Likewise, understanding the characteristics of the local population can help churches reach people where they are. For example, student mission and ministry may look different depending on the type and location of accommodation where the majority of students are living. Social media can be a vital tool.
- In smaller-scale individual parish revitalisations, and within the church plants/grafts from resource churches, understanding the existing congregation and the local community is important. Churches which listen carefully to local people and congregations are better able to respond to their communities.
- The nature of revitalisations means change, and this can sometimes be difficult for faithful congregations in the inherited church. Handling these situations calls for sensitivity and awareness, while also remaining true to the discerned vision for the future. Some project evaluations found churches were 'releasing' things – as part of building towards an outward-facing missional culture across the church for the future. Crucially, 'releasing' sits directly alongside 'welcome'.

- Where revitalisations bring significant change to the local church context, there is a need to work well with neighbouring parishes. There is value in building relationships with other clergy across the deanery and prayerfully listening to their views. Coaching church plant leaders in listening to PCCs and building relationships across the deanery can help to alleviate tensions, while recognising that the quality of relations between local churches is the responsibility of the leaders of all those churches.

- Sometimes tensions can arise where there is a difference in church tradition and an anticipation that shared understanding may be challenging to achieve, for example if a revitalisation will have a more evangelical/charismatic perspective while surrounding parishes have a more Anglo-Catholic tradition. However, evaluations have also reported on some excellent collaborative working and mutual respect between these different traditions, noting for example the importance for both of sacramental worship and intentionality in evangelism. When there are opportunities to fund both, dioceses should take care that the allocation of resources strengthens rather than weakens perceptions of trust and fairness.

6. Social issues: community partnerships, mission with children

A key part of the Church of England's Vision and Strategy is to grow younger and more diverse.

From evaluations relating to revitalisations we have seen:

- While many churches aim to work on social justice issues as a core part of their mission and ministry, a revitalised church may find that it brings unexpected opportunities and benefits. For example, if the church is doing something new, working in a new way, good relationships with local institutions (such as the local council and charities) can help increase levels of trust, engagement and acceptance. In addition, there may be opportunities to partner with others or access funding.

- Many revitalised churches have a particular focus on working with children and young people, aiming to grow younger. Time and again churches have found that this work brings connections not just with the young people themselves but with their families, other families, and schools. The concept of "critical mass" was also mentioned – young people drawn to a church where they can find community and connection with others of their own age.

7. Evangelism: discipleship pathways, for people and for new worshipping communities

As noted above, the equipping of 'missionary disciples' (one of the bold outcomes of the Church of England's Vision and Strategy) can be key to several themes identified across evaluations including support for church leaders and reaching new people. A 'discipleship pathway' is helpful for those new to faith, but ongoing discipleship is also important for faithful congregations and for their leaders too.

From evaluations relating to revitalisations we have seen:

- Dioceses have found it more difficult than expected to link potential leaders with potential revitalisations. It some cases, this has led to a tactical rather than a strategic approach to decision-making, matching people and places based on existing connections or emerging opportunities. While valuable as a responsive solution, this can also mean other opportunities can be overlooked. The concept of a 'pathway' may also be a useful way of thinking about building a pipeline of leaders. Greater support from the project and the diocese (beyond the resource churches themselves) could help to ease this process.

- For resource churches aiming to develop and grow future evangelists and leaders for revitalisations, a culture of forming and sending can be an important factor. This culture can work across different church traditions or local settings, where there is an intention both to serve the wider Church and to bring new people to faith.

- In a revitalised church, leading and bringing new people into discipleship calls for a strong grounding for those already within the church family, as well as an intentional focus on reaching new people. For example, ensuring that church services are accessible and speak to those who are new also needs to be balanced alongside growing existing members deeper in their faith and discipleship. These aspects are intertwined.

- The 'pathway' concept can be applied at both an individual level (a person's own faith journey) and at a church level (a church's revitalisation journey). Evaluations suggested that developing a 'mission theory' could be helpful for a revitalised church. This relates closely to the vision (see "theological vision" in section 3 Clarity above), but builds on this to identify how the vision will be brought to fruition and thinking through how to put in place the necessary ingredients. The intentionality and thoughtfulness is important even as churches then need to be able to adapt, and respond to what God is doing.

8. Doing something new: resource churches and new worshipping communities

Evaluations have consistently reported that resource churches can have significant impact in terms of growing their worshipping communities and there are examples across various dioceses of resource churches supporting vibrant and flourishing revitalised parishes. This provides clear and replicable approaches that can be followed, if appropriately tailored and adapted to local contexts.

A growing body of evaluations of resource churches and the revitalisations that they support helps us to nuance the learnings.

- The concept of a 'resource church' (sometimes called a 'resourcing church') can mean different things to different people. When the development of resource churches is core to a diocese's strategic plans, it is important that there is clarity over their role, as designation alone is not sufficient. Differing interpretations can mean plans are not well implemented, but can also lead to disappointment and confusion. A diversity of approaches to 'resourcing' adopted by different resource churches can sometimes be a pragmatic choice. A better understanding of the missional approach that is specifically being sought in this model could then offer a 'normative' guide to whether such adaptations are pragmatic, and for the moment, or whether such contexts do not support a resourcing church approach at this time.

- A better understanding of the common purpose or role of resource churches could also further help foster strong links and mutual support between these churches across different traditions and local contexts. Thinking of a resource church as a missional approach, not a 'model' to adopt, provides clarity and flexibility for different traditions and different contexts.

- Resource church leaders can feel under significant pressure, and subject to high expectations. However, in some cases, they can have a sense of isolation from diocesan plans, leadership and support. In other cases, this can extend to feeling under-equipped and under-funded, raising the challenge still further. Strong supportive communication and a shared understanding with diocesan leaders can make a significant difference.

- Some resource churches can be more deeply impacted by 'giving away' and may need time to 'recover' and rebuild numbers after supporting a church plant/graft/revitalisation by sending a team.

- A clear strategic plan for diocesan revitalisations overall is important. This needs to be discerned prayerfully in discussion with key stakeholders, and also making use of data and information. Knowledge of the health and vitality of local parishes, deprivation levels in local communities, and understanding natural geographical factors are all relevant. Depending

on the local context, planting nearby or within travel distances may be more appropriate for resource churches with a high proportion of families or in more deprived areas.

9. Project management: governance and staffing

Evaluations of SMMI-funded projects have consistently highlighted the importance of getting practical aspects right. Evaluators confirm the value of using well-respected programme and project management techniques to design and implement effective systems that can support mission and ministry rather than hinder it.

From evaluations relating to revitalisations we have seen:

- A diocesan strategy that includes revitalisations, particularly where this approach is intended to be diocese-wide, needs to ensure that the project work is fully integrated into the ongoing regular work of the diocese. Embedding the project improves coordination rather than relying on specific individuals (such as senior clergy) or unstructured mechanisms to communicate across different workstreams.

- Getting staffing right – in terms of both the number and type of roles, and handling the HR aspects well – can be critical for resource churches seeking to support revitalisations. Equally, while revitalisations may have few/no additional paid staff, the volunteers around church leaders are vital to create teams that can provide mission and ministry that reaches local communities and brings people to faith. Evaluators found that projects suffered where staff were mismatched to their role and lacked relevant specialist experience (for example in operations management or HR). This can also apply to the leadership of churches/revitalisations, not just to their staff. Discerning the right leader for the current moment in the church's journey needs to be handled with prayerful sensitivity.

10. Monitoring and evaluation: perceptions and realities

When projects seek to bring about change, to do something new, it is clearly important to be able to know what and how much has changed, as well as understanding what brought about that change. Projects have found that getting in place the right kind of monitoring and evaluation to achieve this has been challenging, in both design and implementation.

From evaluations relating to revitalisations we have seen:

- It is helpful to ensure that metrics are clearly defined and understood from the beginning of a project. Where resource churches and/or revitalisations are taking place across different contexts, it can be helpful to ensure that there are (at least some) common indicators. Having finalised metrics ready early on can help with consistency in measurement across different churches and over time within a single project.
- Of particular importance in the context of resource churches, plants and revitalisations is communication between the diocese and project leaders/church leaders. Misunderstandings, assumptions and unclear objectives can be mitigated through thoughtful two-way communication. In complex multi-faceted projects, care is needed to ensure there is a shared understanding of how issues are to be managed, and clear sight of where decisions are to be made, where challenges are to be resolved and how data are to be scrutinised.

11. Financial resources: costs of missional models vary

Evaluations across a wide variety of projects have demonstrated the range of impacts they may have and the challenges in sourcing ongoing funding once project-finance ends. A project may be delivering valuable work and continue to need some form of financial support.

From evaluations relating to revitalisations we have seen:

- Financial self-sustainability may not be a realistic goal in all revitalisations contexts. Even thriving resource churches may not be in a position to support their revitalisations financially, or in some cases even their own mission and ministry, from local giving.
- Establishing resource churches and revitalisations in low-income communities will call for different approaches from those in less deprived contexts. In post-industrial towns, resource churches may need to be more deeply embedded with a local community identity (rather than seeking connections with other resource churches).
- Approaches to planting and revitalisation in low-income communities may also need to be better tailored to the local context rather than choosing to send a planting curate and small

volunteer team. Fruitful examples from projects in these contexts include: establishing new worshipping communities with particular groups (such as church services in different languages), building worshipping communities through community organising, focusing on the formation and calling of local lay leaders rather than sending teams, sharing operational support across the resource church and those in its 'family', seeking to plant/revitalise more locally rather than sending a team further away, or grafting into existing structures.

- The availability and quality of church buildings and housing can be a highly significant factor in the cost of revitalisations. It is essential that before beginning a revitalisation, these aspects are clearly understood at the strategic level, including decisions about where buildings are needed or not needed, and a realistic plan is in place to tackle any gaps. This particularly applies where buildings may be old or needing repairs, but also where church buildings don't exist or are unsuitably situated, such as when seeking to reach areas of new housing. Seeking external grant support and fundraising can be essential to supplement local giving.

- Financial resources dedicated to supporting a resource church or a revitalisation can help with factors such as quality of facilities, number of staff and publicity. However, this can be source of tension with neighbouring churches if there is a perception that allocations are 'unfair'.

12. Long-term resourcing: time to embed

Evaluations of mission and ministry projects that take place at the end of the project-funding period often note the project's ambition to lay the groundwork for something that is ongoing. Delays and challenges in starting up project work can mean that those involved feel that it is still 'too soon to tell'.

From evaluations relating to revitalisations we have seen:

- A project aim to reach financial self-sustainability within five years can feel like intense pressure. A longer time-frame of seven or more years may be more realistic. Revitalisations, plants and resources churches in more deprived areas may take longer to embed.

13. Summary and conclusions

Across the evaluations reviewed, revitalisations demonstrate that fruitful outcomes are, unsurprisingly, most often rooted in prayerful discernment, committed relationships, and an attentiveness to local context. Servant-hearted leadership, supported by lay and ordained teams, provides the foundation from which revitalisations can develop patterns of mission and ministry that are both sustainable and outward-facing. Where dioceses articulate a clear theological and strategic vision, and where this is shared and understood by those involved, revitalisations are better able to navigate the inherent change and complexity that this work brings. Revitalisations by planting and grafting require both practical and pastoral scaffolding with well-structured training for leaders, access to specialist skills, and governance and project management processes that reduce avoidable strain. In this context, the commitment and culture of inherited congregations remain critical factors. As such, sensitive handling of change, good communication across parishes and deaneries, and a willingness to balance local distinctiveness with diocesan priorities all influence how revitalisations become embedded over time. Evaluations consistently show that when these elements align, revitalisations can help nurture a broader culture of confident mission and collaborative working.

Finally, revitalisations by planting take place within financial, geographic and social contexts that shape what is possible. Expectations of financial sustainability need to be realistic, particularly in low-income communities or where buildings present significant constraints. Longterm resourcing – both in duration and approach – is often required, alongside a readiness to adapt methods to fit local needs rather than applying a uniform template. A strategic, data-informed diocesan overview, held together with an openness to learning and the flexibility to respond when plans change, provides the conditions in which revitalisations by planting can contribute meaningfully to the mixed ecology of mission and ministry across the Church.

Appendix: Note of method of analysis

The themes within Learning from evaluations formed the starting point.

This summary is therefore built around themes arising from evaluations in all contexts. These themes have then been refined and tailored specifically for revitalisation contexts, by focusing on the learnings from existing and new evaluations that are relevant to those contexts.