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Listening to the Voice of the Estates Planters

A report on what helps estates church plants begin, grow, and flourish

The Gregory Centre for **Church Multiplication**

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RESEARCH SAMPLE AND METHOD

At the start of this project, The Gregory Centre for Church Multiplication (CCX) sought to gain a clearer understanding of what enables and restricts church planting on estates across England. The intention was to listen closely to those already serving in these contexts, to identify the conditions that help estate plants flourish, and to explore the extent to which current practice connects with wider patterns of ministry.

CCX commissioned Rev Dr Cris Rogers to lead this research. Drawing on experience in missional formation and estates ministry, Cris designed and implemented a process that allowed practitioners to speak openly about their work, their context, and their learning.

The guiding research question was developed:

What helps estate planters prepare well, begin wisely, and grow sustainable ministry within complex and often overlooked communities?

The project brought together quantitative and qualitative insights from a broad sample of practitioners, enabling a grounded picture of how estate church planting is currently experienced, supported, and sustained.

This research involved 45 practitioners in estate church plants with experience ranging from five-to-20 years from a wide range of theological and church traditions. It also gained insights from 450 working class individuals who helped understand the training needs of working class individuals for church planting and revitalisations on estates.

What is the aim of this research?

This project set out to develop a clearer understanding of what enables fruitful church planting on estates, and which models of ministry are best suited to these communities. Alongside this, the research explored the experiences of working-class leaders within the Church of England so that training, discernment, and deployment pathways can better support those most naturally equipped for estate mission. Taken together, the aim was to identify what helps plants grow, what hinders them, and how the Church can form and release leaders who fit the culture, pace, and reality of estate contexts.

What do we mean by Estate?

By *estate and low-income communities* we mean neighbourhoods, urban inner-city, suburban, and rural, where a significant proportion of residents live on household incomes below the national median and experience ongoing economic disadvantage. This research focuses specifically on low-income housing estates within these contexts, which are often characterised by higher levels of unemployment or low-paid work, limited access to services and opportunities, increased reliance on affordable housing and social support, and compounded challenges around health, education, and transport.

Types of estate settings

- **Council Estates** – Local authority–owned social housing
- **Housing Association Estates** – Non-profit–managed affordable housing
- **Mixed-Tenure Estates** – A combination of private, shared ownership, and social housing
- **New Town & Post-War Estates** – Large-scale planned housing built after WWII
- **High-Rise & Low-Rise Estates** – Tower blocks, maisonettes, and low-rise layouts

What do we mean by ‘working class’

By the term *working class* in this research we refer to individuals and households whose primary source of income comes from waged or salaried employment, typically in routine, service, technical, or manual occupations. These roles often involve limited control over working conditions and fewer opportunities for advancement compared to professional or managerial occupations. Working-class positions may be found across sectors such as manufacturing, construction, care, retail, transport, and hospitality, and are commonly associated with lower or moderate incomes and greater economic precarity. The term is used here as a socio-economic descriptor rather than a cultural or value-based label.

Research conducted

Two interconnected streams of research were carried out.

The **estate planting research** was conducted through an online survey of current estate planters, with follow-up questions offered to a number of respondents who indicated they could provide deeper insight. This gave a broad national picture of planting models, training experiences, preparation patterns, and on-the-ground realities of estate ministry.

The **working-class research** combined an online survey with two focus groups of 12 participants, followed by individual interviews with potential estate leaders, ordained working-class clergy, and theological college trainers. These conversations explored perceptions of discernment, training barriers, learning styles, cultural fit, and the pressures experienced within academic and ecclesial systems.

Rev Dr Cris Rogers, working with Rev Dr Grace Bally-Balogun from CCX, reflected on all material gathered. Every interview was fully transcribed and analysed using thematic analysis, allowing recurring patterns, strengths, and challenges to emerge clearly across both datasets.

Participants

Participants came from a wide range of estate plants and contexts. They represented new and established planting initiatives, with roughly one-third of respondents coming from traditions outside the Church of England. This third was made up of Baptist, non-denominational and Elim backgrounds. Across the survey, focus groups, and interviews, individuals were given space to articulate their personal experiences, including joys, failures, frustrations, and the complexities of ministering on estates.

Interview questions were agreed in advance to ensure consistency, while still allowing participants to speak freely about their practice, learning, and hopes for the future.

How were participants chosen?

For the **estates church planting research**, respondents were selected through a survey distributed directly to those already involved in estates planting and advertised through CCX networks, Facebook groups and National estates networks. All participants were active or recent practitioners, ensuring that insights came from lived experience. Follow-up questions were sent to participants who had indicated a willingness to expand on their responses.

For the **working class research**, participants were first drawn from the online survey. Those who volunteered were invited into two focus groups, and additional interviewees were selected from working-class priests and expert trainers serving within UK theological colleges. This allowed voices from across the formation journey - candidates, clergy, and educators to contribute to the findings.

The researcher

Rev Dr Cris Rogers is a Church of England priest and an experienced researcher. Prior to leading this project, Cris had undertaken doctoral-level research and spent sixteen years planting and leading a church on a social housing estate. His long-term involvement in estates ministry, combined with academic and practitioner experience, provided a trusted basis for evaluating the data and interpreting the themes that emerged.

Nature of the data

The report brings together quantitative and qualitative data. Statistical patterns from the surveys are combined with narrative comments, transcribed interview material, and direct quotations from participants. This mixed-methods approach enables both breadth and depth, connecting measurable trends with lived experience and ensuring that the voices of practitioners remain central throughout.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Eight significant findings from the research

1

Incarnational and Slow Growth models are the strongest fit for estates

Across the dataset, these approaches are the most commonly used, most frequently recommended, and most consistently rated as effective. They emphasise presence, patience, deep listening, and starting small, which aligns closely with the lived experience of estate planters.

2

Fruitful estate plants are rooted in long-term commitment

Respondents believe that formal preparation may take months, but personal commitment must be measured in years. The most common recommendation is a minimum of four to ten years, often open-ended. Long presence builds trust, credibility, and local leadership.

3

Spiritual preparation and relational groundwork are essential pre-launch activities

Prayer walking, listening to residents, and understanding the culture of the estate were overwhelmingly ranked as the most important pre-launch tasks. Estate plants that thrive tend to start with prayerful discernment and relational immersion rather than strategic programming.

4

Local rootedness strongly correlates with evangelistic fruit

Church plants where a high percentage of the team and congregation live on or near the estate report significantly more first-time commitments and deeper community engagement. Local leadership development remains difficult, but where it is present, plants flourish.

5

Effective training is practical, trauma-informed, and context-specific

Planters overwhelmingly report benefitting from training in trauma awareness, mental health, conflict resolution, and poverty understanding. These areas equip them for the complexity of estate life more effectively than abstract or solely academic training.

6

Funding from denominations and networks is the most helpful

Plants rely heavily on denominational grants, network giving, and individual donors. While funding pressures are real, the most fruitful plants are those embedded in supportive systems that recognise the financial realities of estate mission. With this identified, estate planters also noted that their own personal finances had been essential alongside friends and family members' support. This point may indicate the need for personal investment into the mission work, while also may indicate that planters didn't find all the financial support needed from traditional denominational grants.

7

Estate planters consistently name the same success factors: presence, prayer, patience, and perseverance

Their advice to prospective planters echoes the patterns observed in the data: results take longer than expected, the work is harder than imagined, and meaningful fruit grows from sustained presence, relational depth, and spiritual resilience. Almost all those responding to the research identified that the work was difficult with slow results and often no denominational thanks. They did also identify the joy of seeing the small wins in people's lives.

8

Those working on estates felt misunderstood and disengaged by the wider church

Planters articulated that this estate's mission work often left them feeling on the edge and not as appreciated by the wider church community. Partly as the work was not fully understood, but also that the challenges were not appreciated by the institutions.

SECTION 1

WHO ARE THE ESTATES PLANTERS?

As we listened to estate planters reflect on their experience, a distinct picture emerged. These are not people looking for a quick project or a novel model. They are long-term, locally rooted disciples who have chosen to stake their lives on particular places and particular people.

Several strong traits appear again and again in both the data and the final comments.

They are deeply rooted in place

Our estate planters are strikingly committed to the local. Many have lived on or near the estate for years, some for decades, and the majority of their congregations are drawn from the surrounding streets. They are not simply working *in* an estate, they are seeking to belong *to* it.

One planter, reflecting on a thirty–year journey, wrote:

> *"So much of the journey has been about me being transformed by Jesus and, after 30 years of being here, in some ways I only now feel ready to take on the challenge of ministry here!"*

Another summed up their advice very simply:

> *"Work hard at living on the estate, building relationships and understanding, pray hard, train for incarnational ministry."*

These are leaders who accept that knowing a place, and being known by it, takes time. They understand that estate ministry is not something you parachute into for a season, but a way of life for the long haul.

They see this as a long term calling

Again and again, respondents stress that estates ministry cannot be rushed. It is described as a "long term calling", something that cannot be squeezed into a two– or three–year window. On average the planters felt that 10 years was a good start to think about committing to estates ministry but over 15 was actually essential for long term growth.

One planter put it starkly:

> *"This is a long term calling and going too fast leads to burn out. Walk alongside people, model life, work and family, let people join in."*

Another captured both the cost and the encouragement in three words:

> *"Never give up"*

For these planters, perseverance is not stubbornness for its own sake. It flows from a conviction that God has called them to a particular people in a particular place, and that deep change takes time.

They resist the 'us and them' and embrace mess

A strong theme in the comments is the refusal to treat the estate as a project or "*target group*". Planters are acutely aware of the danger of importing middle–class norms, or positioning themselves as outsiders who have come to fix things.

As one respondent writes:

> *"Resist at all cost an 'us and them' attitude. Develop a theology of place. As much as possible define 'success' by Jesus's ethic of love. Have a humble posture, be teachable… Ensure you're not equating middle class values with a Jesus culture. Become more comfortable with the mess."*

Another warns against treating the estate as a ministry experiment:

> *"Estates church plants need to be messy and led by people that understand working class culture and context. If you have never lived on an estate don't expect to understand its culture."*

These are leaders willing to be changed by the places they serve, not simply to change them. They also recognise the need for incarnational life that is deeply contextualised by the place.

They are prayerful and rhythm conscious.

Prayer and healthy rhythms of life are seen as essential, not optional extras. Estates ministry is demanding and emotionally costly, so planters place a high value on foundations that will sustain them for the long haul.

One respondent connects spirituality and lifestyle very clearly:

> *"Establishing healthy rhythms of life – prayer, fun, sabbath – living the kind of life you would want to invite others into."*

Another is blunt about priorities:

> *"Prayer is always top. Listening to God and being obedient. Building trust and relationships. It is hard work and costly in many ways, but totally worth it."*

These planters understand that their own formation, rest, and resilience are part of God's gift to the estate.

They hold a holistic and costly love for people

The comments show a deep awareness of the realities residents face: complex lives, mental health struggles, chaotic systems. Estate planters do not romanticise the context, but they refuse to be deterred by its difficulty.

As one leader explains:

> *"We have discovered that people have far more difficult or complicated lives than they often present with. Our biggest consistent problem is the lack of mental health support available to adults who don't have a support network and a lack of integration between those services that are meant to be helping them."*

Yet even in the midst of this, the focus is on joy and transformation:

> *"We focus on the joy found in Jesus and the freedom from oppression that is the Gospel message... The most exciting thing is seeing people grow in their own identity as leaders and as evangelists."*

These are not simply community activists, nor are they only concerned with Sunday attendance. They are holding together social reality and spiritual hope, often at significant personal cost. For the estate planter, the gospel is not only found in the words of evangelism but in the action to serve, care and get their hands dirty with the grit of estate life.

They believe fruitful ministry grows from local leadership

A clear conviction comes through that estates churches should increasingly be led by people from estates, or at least by those who have lived and ministered in similar contexts.

One comment is very direct:

> *"Estates churches need to be led by local people. Church leaders need to have had some experience of estates first."*

Another builds on this, tying leadership style to context:

> *"Local estates need long-term leaders, who grow local leaders, who plant and grow slowly, who focus on each person through the door. [It] will not grow big but will grow deep."*

The data and comments align: the more local the leadership and congregation, the deeper the impact tends to be. Estate planters are not trying to reproduce a distant model, but to cultivate something that genuinely belongs to the people who live there. These leaders looked for local people to invest into and share leadership with. They were not protective of their leadership position but wanted to open the gate to leadership development of others.

They value simple, shared, patient ways of planting

Across the responses there is little appetite for glossy initiatives or heavy structures. Instead, planters emphasise simplicity, shared ownership, and slow, relational growth.

One planter summarises it this way:

> *"Fruitful estates church planting grows from patient, local presence. It is relational, incarnational, and genuinely shaped by the people it seeks to serve."*

Another offers this advice to anyone starting out:

> *"A new planter stepping into an estate needs to recognise that they are joining something that is already going on... Look for simplicity, stability, creativity, and shared ownership rather than expensive structures."*

For these leaders, success looks less like rapid expansion and more like deep roots, shared responsibility, and lives quietly changed over time.

They are realistic about cost, funding, and success

Finally, estate planters are very honest about the pressures they face. Funding is fragile, expectations can be heavy, and there is a constant temptation to measure success by the wrong things.

As one comment puts it:

> *"Lack of long term funding [is a] major issue."*

Another urges a more careful approach to metrics:

> *"Think we need to look at what we consider success from the start, otherwise the wrong metrics will crush people."*

And yet, even here, there is hope. One planter reflects on the journey since their plant began:

> *"We learnt a lot in our journey... be prepared to take things slowly, be willing to make mistakes and learn from them, keep listening to the community and to God, and be kind to yourself because it is not an easy journey."*

Taken together, these voices reveal estate planters who are realistic but not cynical, stretched but not without hope: people who have chosen to live, love, and lead in places that many overlook, trusting that God is already at work on the estates they call home.

One estate planter recognised the need for starting with appropriate funding.

> *"The issue is if you start with too much you can't sustain that long term and you are destined for failure as the model is unsustainable. Starting with little but enough, building from what will become sustainable is essential."*

In other words the planters recognised that if an estate church starts with a financially heavy model, this may become a burden that is unrealistic in the long-term.

SECTION 2

WHAT HELPS ESTATE MINISTRY TO FLOURISH?

Six themes appear repeatedly across the dataset, supported by both numerical trends and narrative comments. Together they offer a coherent picture of the conditions in which estate ministry is most likely to take root and flourish.

Long-term, relational presence

The data shows a striking contrast:

- Preparation time is often *4–12 months*, largely focused on prayer walking, listening, and forming early relationships
- Recommended commitment, however, is usually *4–10+ years*, with many planters urging an open-ended horizon

This mismatch is revealing. It shows that while the practical work of launching a plant can be done within a year, the relational work that sustains a plant takes far longer. Respondents repeatedly emphasise that estates ministry grows only through steadfastness, relational integrity, and ongoing visibility in the community. Trust is fragile in many estates, especially where institutions have come and gone, and leaders are replaced frequently.

Many planters say that only after several years did residents begin to see them as "one of us". This insight aligns with the data showing that plants with the highest proportion of local attendees and estate-based team members also report the greatest evangelistic fruit. Trust, belonging, and presence take time, and the dataset suggests that rushing this process almost always leads to disappointment.

Incarnational and Slow Growth models outperform others

Two models dominate the dataset:

- Incarnational: 25 respondents ranked this as the most suitable approach for estates
- Slow Growth: consistently selected as the second most appropriate

These models match what planters describe in their comments. They speak of ministry built on: being physically present on the estate, taking time to listen and understand the culture, starting small and letting relationships shape the church, adapting to the pace of the community rather than imposing structures.

Numerically, these models are also the most used and most positively rated. Plants drawing on Incarnational and Slow Growth elements score higher on effectiveness and long-term fruitfulness than Replant, Hybrid, or attractional approaches. Eighty percent of estate church plants that remained fruitful and sustainable after ten years had begun with a slow-growth approach, rooted in incarnational models of church planting.

Spiritual preparation and discernment

When asked to rank the most important pre-launch activities, respondents overwhelmingly prioritised:

- prayer walking
- spiritual preparation
- listening to God and to local residents
- discernment of what God is already doing in the community

These activities consistently outranked logistics such as securing venues, designing programmes, or raising funds.

This emphasis indicates that planters see estate ministry not as a technical endeavour but as a deeply spiritual one. Many remarked that without strong spiritual foundations, they would not have survived the challenges of their context. Prayer is described not as an add-on but as the orienting force behind their actions.

The data also shows a link between spiritual preparation and long-term resilience. Plants that rank prayer and discernment highly also report lower feelings of being hindered by external pressures. Spiritual preparation appears to buffer leaders against the strain of slow progress and complex pastoral realities.

Strong local networks and partnerships

Fruitful plants collaborate widely. The dataset shows significant interaction with:

- local schools
- community organisations
- social housing teams
- addiction and mental health services
- local shops, pubs, cafés
- resident groups and grassroots initiatives

Partnerships were consistently cited as a reason plants gained credibility. Some respondents noted that early collaboration with schools or community officers provided a "social introduction" that opened doors into relationships otherwise difficult to establish.

In quantitative terms, plants with higher partnership engagement also tend to report stronger community trust and broader attendance from estate residents. Partnerships expand the plant's reach, share responsibility, and prevent the church from becoming isolated or disconnected from local realities. Effective estate ministry is rarely a solo effort. Instead, it flourishes where churches understand themselves as part of the wider ecosystem of care on the estate.

Supportive diocesan and network connections

The plants that thrive tend to be those connected to diocesan mission funds, wider church networks and stay connected to sending parishes. Those with peer mentors or supervisors also indicated a long term thriving in ministry.

Funding alone does not explain their flourishing, but respondents repeatedly name relational support from the wider Church as a stabilising factor. The most helpful forms of support include:

- prayer and encouragement
- supervision and safeguarding awareness
- reasonable expectations about growth
- advocacy within diocesan structures
- access to training and specialist advice

Numerically, the most valued funding streams were denominational grants, network giving, and individual donors. These forms of support helped planters manage the fragility of early work and allowed them to focus on building relationships rather than constant fundraising. Taken together, the data suggests that estate plants flourish when they are locally embedded but not organisationally isolated. Being "sent" and "held" by the wider church gives them the stability needed to grow at an estate-friendly pace.

Local participation in leadership

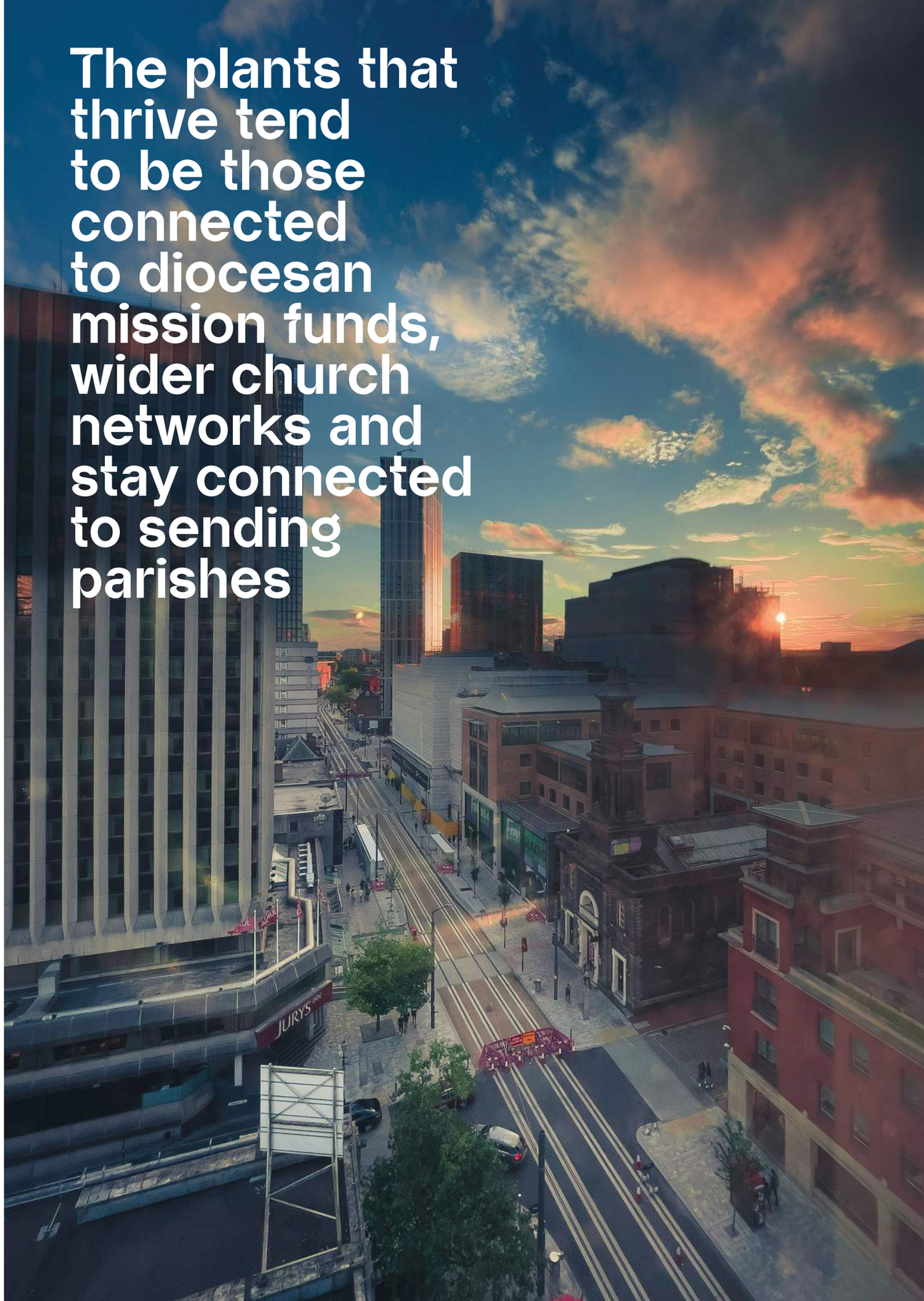
Developing local leaders is a difficult but crucial task. The dataset shows that plants with higher proportions of local team members, estate residents in leadership roles, and estate-based volunteers, report significantly higher levels of:

- evangelistic fruit
- community trust
- consistency in attendance
- positive perception from residents

This pattern suggests a virtuous cycle; the more the church reflects the estate, the more the estate trusts the church.

Comments frequently express the conviction that estates churches should ultimately be led by local people. Planters note that local leadership communicates cultural understanding, permanence, and authenticity in ways an external leader cannot replicate.

The data also shows that local leadership development takes time, often years. Many planters stress the importance of patient discipleship, safeguarding processes, and a willingness to embrace a longer trajectory of growth. Nonetheless, where local leadership has emerged, the resulting ministries are more resilient and more deeply woven into the life of the estate.



SECTION 3

NAVIGATING THE CHALLENGES

Estate ministry brings with it a distinctive set of pressures that shape both the pace and the texture of the work. While many planters speak with gratitude about the joy and depth they encounter, the research makes clear that the path is rarely straightforward. Progress is slow, trust takes time, and the realities of trauma, instability, and limited resources place steady demands on leaders. These challenges do not point to failure, but to the complex and often fragile conditions in which estate churches take root. As respondents repeatedly emphasised, learning to navigate these pressures is essential for longevity, resilience, and faithful presence on the estates they serve.

1. Slow growth and long timelines

"It is a long term calling… walk alongside people, model life, work and family, let people join in."

"Be prepared to take things slowly, be willing to make mistakes and learn from them… it is not an easy journey."

The data highlights that results take considerably longer on estates than in many other contexts. Respondents consistently describe growth as uneven, fragile, and easily disrupted by local circumstances. Trust is hard-won, and it develops slowly over months and years rather than weeks. Setbacks are normal rather than exceptional, and progress often comes through long-term relational investment rather than visible programmes. Plants frequently spend extended periods laying foundations before seeing any measurable fruit, yet this slow pace is intrinsic to estate ministry and should not be misinterpreted as a lack of effectiveness.

2. Developing local leaders

"Estates churches need to be led by local people. Church leaders need to have had some experience of estates first."

Leadership development emerges as the most consistently difficult area across the dataset. Planters describe fragile volunteer capacity, high turnover, and the life instability that many newer Christians on estates face. These factors combine to make leadership pathways far longer and more complex. The discipleship journey required before someone can take responsibility in a ministry role is often lengthy, with formation happening slowly through relationship, consistency, and pastoral care. Despite these challenges, the data shows that where local residents do grow into leadership roles, the plant becomes significantly more fruitful and trusted. Local leadership remains a key predictor of deep, long-term impact.

3. Securing sustainable and appropriate funding

Funding pressure is a reality, although it does not dominate the landscape as strongly as some might expect. The most valued and relied-upon streams are diocesan grants, network church giving, and individual donors. Trusts, local fundraising, and community giving play a smaller role. Interestingly, financial difficulty scores lower as a hindrance than relational challenges or leadership development. This suggests that while funding is essential, planters feel more stretched by the relational and pastoral demands of the context than by the financial ones. Plants manage on relatively modest budgets, but they need steady and predictable support to maintain stability.

Another factor raised by practitioners concerns the scale of initial funding. While seed funding is often necessary to begin estate ministry, several noted that overfunded plants can unintentionally create models that are difficult to sustain once grants end. When a plant begins with a financial structure beyond what local giving or modest grants could support, it risks establishing something that cannot be reproduced. Healthy estate church planting therefore requires funding that is appropriate to context, enabling the ministry to grow in ways that can eventually be sustained by the congregation itself.

4. Working in contexts of trauma and complexity

"We have discovered that people have far more difficult or complicated lives than they often present with."

"Our biggest consistent problem is the lack of mental health support available… and a lack of integration between those services that are meant to be helping them."

Planters consistently report that estate ministry requires resilience and a high level of emotional and pastoral maturity. Many residents live with trauma, uncertainty, and limited support networks, which means leaders must navigate difficult personal histories and complex safeguarding realities. Trauma-awareness, emotional stability, and an ability to hold pastoral boundaries are essential. Planters also highlight the need for wisdom in navigating social services, mental health systems, and multi-agency support networks. These complexities shape both the style and the pace of ministry, requiring leaders to adapt, respond, and support people in a way that is deeply relational and often intensive.

5. Managing expectations

"We need to look at what we consider success from the start, otherwise the wrong metrics will crush people."

Expectations, both internal and external, emerge as an ongoing challenge. Plants often face pressure to demonstrate quick growth through numerical targets or traditional measures of success. Many respondents emphasise the need to avoid growth expectations that are detached from the estate context or based on comparisons with non-estate settings. Numbers alone rarely reflect the reality of relational depth, trust, or transformation. The data suggests that plants thrive when expectations are realistic and when success is understood in relational and holistic terms rather than purely numerical ones. A shift towards story-based measures and qualitative indicators can help leaders stay encouraged and focused on the work that matters most.

"We have discovered that people have far more difficult or complicated lives than they often present with."

SECTION 4

MEASURING SUCCESS

Voice of the estate planter:

"Fruitfulness on housing estates rarely shows itself in quick results or large gatherings. Instead, it is recognised in the quiet, steady signs that people are beginning to trust, belong, and take steps towards Jesus in ways that make sense in their lives."

"Are more people pointing towards the King and his kingdom and are moving towards him?"

"Our culture has been one of fear, hurt and anxiety... so we measure a change in how we make decisions and what emotions are motivating our decisions, whether generosity is replacing anxiety."

"When the community begins to shape the church, rather than the church trying to shape the community, that's a strong sign of faithful ministry."

"I think some elements of 'counting what counts' are still important. For example numbers of baptisms, Alpha attendees, people serving on team, people committed to small groups, people giving financially."

The estate planters were asked about how they measure success in this type of ministry. It was evident from the results that the usual measurements of numbers and income were never going to convey the depth of ministry in poorer areas.

"Fruitfulness... rarely shows itself in quick results or large gatherings."

The responses from the estate planters reveal remarkable consistency. While each speaks out of their own context and personality, their reflections show a shared understanding of what fruitfulness looks like on housing estates and how it can be recognised in day-to-day ministry. Distinctive phrases vary, but the underlying convictions are deeply aligned: fruitfulness is relational, gradual, personal, and rooted in the lived reality of the community. It is not tracked through numbers, but through trust, movement towards Jesus, emotional and social change, emerging leadership, and the reputation the church holds within the neighbourhood.

1. Fruitfulness starts with trust, belonging, and relational depth

"Fruitfulness isn't counted. It's recognised in trust, stability, and the slow work of God in people's lives."

Every respondent describes **trust** as the first and most important marker. On estates, fruit rarely appears quickly, and it rarely takes numerical form. Instead, planters watch for:

- neighbours opening up
- people approaching them for support or prayer
- deeper conversations emerging
- residents beginning to look out for each other

On estates, trust is not quickly given and is often shaped by difficult histories with institutions, authority, or previous church encounters. For this reason, planters consistently emphasise the importance of watching for the subtle but significant signs that trust is forming. These include neighbours stopping for conversation, people initiating contact for support or prayer, deeper pastoral honesty, and moments when residents begin to look out for one another. One planter described noticing fruit when "people who once felt forgotten start to believe they matter," highlighting the dignity that grows when trust is earned. Another spoke about a neighbour who had kept their distance but "started to share honestly" for the first time, which they saw as a real indication of the kingdom taking root. On estates, relationships are the soil in which all ministry grows, so fruitfulness is recognised not through organisational activity but through the emergence of belonging, connection, and mutual care.

2. Small steps towards Jesus carry enormous meaning

Estate planters understand fruitfulness as movement towards Christ, not completed journeys. Planters look for:

- first prayers
- first questions about faith
- early signs of hope
- spiritual curiosity
- small acts of courage or forgiveness

For estate planters, spiritual fruit is not measured by formal conversions or rapid discipleship programmes but by the small and often fragile steps people take towards Jesus. These steps might appear small in more traditional contexts, yet they carry great weight in estate ministry. Planters name signs such as first prayers, the earliest questions about faith, a person beginning to hope again, or an individual who risks attending a community prayer space after years of mistrust. As one respondent put it, "Are more people pointing towards the King and his kingdom?" Another asked simply, "Are people taking a step closer to being transformed by Jesus?" These are not destination-based criteria but directional ones. Fruitfulness is understood as the gentle turning of a person's life towards Christ, whatever pace that may take. This reflects a deep pastoral realism: progress is usually slow, often interrupted, but always significant.

3. Signs of emotional, social, and communal transformation

Most respondents recognise fruit through **changes in the emotional climate** of the community. Some described moving from fear and anxiety to generosity and openness. Others noticed:

- increased stability in chaotic households
- people making better decisions
- improvements in mental wellbeing
- more peaceful conflict resolution
- greater resilience

One planter described tracking "the culture of decision making", noting shifts from fear-driven choices to ones shaped by their Christian values.

Another spoke of "community resilience, forgiveness, and trying again after setbacks." Others spoke about household stability improving, individuals making healthier decisions, and local relationships becoming less conflict-ridden. One planter reflected on the importance of "community resilience, forgiveness, and trying again after setbacks." Another monitored whether negative traits were slowly being transformed into Christ-like attitudes within their PCC or community groups. Together, these comments show that fruitfulness is not only about individual discipleship but also about the collective emotional and relational health of the neighbourhood.

4. The emergence of local leadership and shared ownership

A fourth shared marker is the emergence of local leadership. Several responses highlight local participation as a key measure of fruit. Planters look for:

- residents taking simple roles
- people volunteering for the first time
- new leaders emerging
- and estate residents shaping the direction of work

This reflects research from the wider project: local leadership is one of the strongest indicators of long-term health. This includes people offering to make tea, read a prayer, help with setup, or contribute ideas for community events. These actions demonstrate not only participation but ownership – and ownership is one of the clearest signs that ministry has taken root. One planter described noticing fruit when the church starts to look less like "something brought in" and more like something held and shaped by local people. This aligns with the wider findings of the research: estate churches flourish when leadership grows from within the estate itself, and when local voices are central to shaping the community's spiritual life.

5. Perception and reputation in the wider community

A recurring theme is **how the community talks about the church**. Planters seek to know:

- Are we seen as safe?
- Are we known by name?
- Is our presence valued?
- Do community groups initiate contact?
- Are we invited into local spaces?

Fruitfulness is not only about what happens inside the church community but also about how the neighbourhood experiences and interprets its presence. Planters look for signs of being seen as safe, trusted, helpful, and embedded. They pay attention to whether local groups initiate contact, whether the church is invited into new spaces, and whether their presence makes a tangible difference to the neighbourhood. One planter described their practice of "community consultation" – intentionally asking residents about the church's impact, whether people feel the community is thriving, and what their dreams and desires are. Others described mapping their "missional footprint," tracking where their influence, prayer, and compassion are taking effect. These practices help planters understand not only their internal fruit but also their external reputation.

Summary

Fruitfulness on estates is understood as slow, relational, deeply personal, and shaped by real-world transformation. No one points to numbers. No one talks about speed. Instead, they point to trust built over time, belonging formed through community, movement towards Jesus, resilience in hardship, leadership emerging locally, and how the neighbourhood perceives the church. Fruitfulness in estate ministry is measured in people, relationships, and transformation, not statistics.

SECTION 5

WHAT KIND OF DIRECT TRAINING THEMES HELP ESTATES PLANTERS?

Across the 33 respondents in this section, the training picture is strikingly consistent. When we look at the key training types available in the survey, we find that:

- **Trauma-informed ministry** was selected by **29 out of 33 respondents** (87.9%)
- **Conflict resolution** was selected by **24 out of 33 respondents** (69.7%)
- **Cross-cultural mission training**, **poverty awareness**, and **mental health first aid** were each selected by **23 out of 33 respondents** (66.7%)
- **Community development principles** were selected by **21 out of 33 respondents** (60.6%)
- **Social services navigation** training was selected by **15 out of 33 respondents** (42.4%)

Taken together, this means that **well over half** of all planters have actively sought training that helps them work with trauma, mental health needs, conflict, cultural difference, and poverty. These were the most frequently accessed forms of training in the entire dataset, far outweighing any formal church-planting courses or programme-based models.

The data reveals a clear pattern in the kinds of training that estates planters find genuinely useful. Their preferences are not shaped by theory alone but by the reality of day-to-day ministry among people navigating trauma, poverty, low institutional trust, and significant life instability. These leaders frequently work at the intersection of pastoral care, community engagement, advocacy, and discipleship, and it is notable that the training they value most aligns closely with these lived demands. Four broad themes emerge from the responses.

1. Trauma-informed and psychologically aware

Across the dataset, training in trauma awareness, mental health first aid, and conflict resolution appears again and again. These were not fringe add-ons but the most frequently accessed and most consistently rated as practically helpful. Planters repeatedly noted that the estate ministry brings them into contact with people carrying deep wounds, unstable circumstances, and complex family or emotional histories. Because of this, ministry often involves helping people navigate crises, respond to triggers, and manage high-intensity situations.

The data shows that leaders who have had trauma-informed training feel more confident, calmer, and better able to offer safe, grounded pastoral support. It also equips them to recognise when professional services are needed, and to navigate those thresholds with sensitivity. This kind of training directly supports the resilience and emotional steadiness required for long-term presence on the estate.

2. Contextual and poverty-aware

Estate ministry requires an understanding of the wider structures that shape people's lives. Respondents highlighted the value of training that names and explains the realities of generational poverty, systemic inequality, and the impact of low trust in institutions. These are not abstract concerns. For many residents, everyday decisions are shaped by financial precarity, housing insecurity, or negative experiences with statutory services.

Planters who had received contextual training felt better prepared to interpret what they were seeing, to understand why certain barriers exist, and to respond with compassion rather than frustration. They also stressed that such training helped them avoid unhelpful assumptions, especially when coming from middle-class or non-estate backgrounds. In short, training that takes the complexity of estates seriously is valued far above generic 'church planting training', which often assumes stability, resources, and cultural alignment that are simply not present in most estate settings.

3. Action-oriented and reflective

The data shows that estate planters learn best in movement rather than in the classroom. They prefer training that allows them to experiment, reflect, and adapt in real contexts. Many spoke positively about learning by doing, processing their experiences with peers, and receiving ongoing mentorship rather than long, academically structured programmes.

This kind of learning mirrors the relational and adaptive nature of estate ministry. Leaders constantly adjust to community rhythms, local crises, and emerging opportunities, and they depend on reflective practice to discern what God is doing and how best to respond. Short, focused training blocks that integrate practice and reflection seem far more effective than extended theoretical courses. Peer learning networks, where planters can share stories and problem-solve together, were also seen as vital for sustaining energy and creativity.

4. Theologically grounded but not abstract

Although estate planters consistently ask for practical training, they do not want theology to be sidelined. On the contrary, they value theology that affirms and illuminates their practice, giving them language for what they encounter on the ground. What they resist is theology that is detached from lived reality: frameworks or ideas that require them to leave their context in order to make sense of faith.

Respondents appreciated training that helps them interpret their estate theologically, understand God's presence in overlooked places, and integrate spirituality with mission. They also noted that accessible, grounded theology deepens their resilience, sharpening their sense of calling and helping them stay rooted when progress feels slow. In this sense, the theological training they value is not conceptual but missional: theology that feeds perseverance, shapes prayer, and strengthens their sense of partnership with God in the everyday fabric of estate life.

Thought

Taken as a whole, the training picture that emerges is both practical and hopeful. Estate planters do not need elaborate programmes or highly specialised academic pathways, but they do need formation that takes seriously the realities of their context. Trauma awareness, contextual understanding, reflective practice, and grounded theology combine to create a resilient, confident, and spiritually anchored leader. When dioceses, networks, and training providers prioritise these areas, they equip planters not only to start well, but to sustain ministry over many years. The research suggests that such training does more than build skill; it strengthens calling, deepens compassion, and helps leaders recognise God's presence in the everyday life of the estates they serve.

SECTION 6

HOW DO THE WORKING CLASS EXPERIENCE TRAINING PATHWAYS, ITS CULTURE, AND THEIR SENSE OF FIT?

The following research provides a rich and honest picture of how working-class Christians perceive their place within the Church of England's selection processes and training culture. Although many working-class candidates *do* enter discernment and *do* progress towards ordination, their experiences reveal deep cultural tension and a persistent sense of misrecognition.

Understanding how working-class Christians experience the Church of England's culture, training pathways, and discernment systems is essential for shaping effective estates mission. The majority of England's social housing estates are deeply, historically working-class, and the leaders most naturally equipped to plant and grow churches there often come from the same cultural background. Yet the data shows that working-class candidates frequently meet obstacles, misunderstandings, and pressures to assimilate that do not align with the realities of estate life. If the Church wants to see long-term, rooted, relationally rich ministries in urban estates, then it must pay close attention to the ways working-class leaders are formed, supported, and selected. What follows draws out how working-class experience directly intersects with the needs of estates planting, and why addressing these issues is vital for the future of mission in these communities.

Risky and misunderstood

The quantitative picture is stark. Across the survey, the most frequently selected perceptions were overwhelmingly negative: words like *"Risky"*, *"Misunderstood"*, and *"Unconventional"* were chosen far more often than *"Valued"*, *"Understood"*, or *"Trusted"*. Of the top 19 descriptors, **15 were negative**, accounting for almost **69%** of all responses. This data is reinforced by the free-text additions where participants repeatedly used words such as *"Patronised"*, *"Condescending"*, *"Second-class"*, *"Side-lined"*, and *"Token"*. Only four respondents suggested positive descriptors such as *"Essential"* or *"Welcomed"*.

The qualitative accounts show what these perceptions feel like on the ground. Candidates repeatedly described having to alter their accent, appearance, humour, vocabulary, and even their personality to fit into a middle-class church environment. As Candidate A put it:

> *"I've had to adapt in so many ways to fit the system… I've changed my clothing… I've had to learn to speak with less of an accent… tone down my humour… all of this just to fit the college."*

Similarly, Candidate S, a plumber by trade, spoke of washing in the back of his van before training sessions so he could avoid being seen in work clothes. He felt the pressure to present himself in a way acceptable to the culture he was entering.

The issue of cultural mismatch runs deeper still. Many candidates spoke of a loss of social capital when entering a predominantly middle-class academic space. In their home communities, they are trusted leaders with deep relational credit. But within the training institutions *"I realised that everything I held high and admired was worth nothing here… knowledge, information, and who you know now gives you social status".*

This feeling of displacement, compounded by the demands of academic learning, led many to experience profound self-doubt, imposter syndrome, and internalised inferiority. One working-class priest reflected that *"all the assessments were essays… for somebody with dyslexia, ADHD… it told me there was something seriously wrong with me because everyone else had no problems."*

The combination of cultural adaptation, academic pressure, and logistical obstacles (travel, childcare, cost) leaves many candidates feeling like outsiders navigating a system not built for them. Yet the same data shows that working-class leaders bring an irreplaceable perspective: realism, resilience, and an instinctive ability to connect with local communities. Many respondents see this as the Church's missed opportunity.

As one priest put it bluntly, *"The Church of England think they understand the working-class but have no clue… colleges need to wake up. They don't exist for their own existence but to help us reach people for Jesus".* For estate planting, this is especially significant. The experiences documented here show that the very people most naturally suited to leading estate churches are those who currently feel the least culturally at home in the Church's own formation systems.

Preferred training forms for working-class church leaders: what works, what doesn't, and why

The combined quantitative and qualitative data creates one of the clearest patterns in the entire study: **working-class leaders learn best through practical, relational, experiential training**, and struggle most with heavily academic, book-based, or lecture-driven modes.

The ranked data showed that:

- **Mixed-mode training** (some placement, some classroom) was the top preference, ranked first by 46% and second by 25%
- **Placement-based / apprenticeship-style training** was close behind, with more than half placing it in their top two
- **Independent learning** and **book-heavy learning** were consistently ranked at the bottom by large majorities

This preference aligns perfectly with the qualitative findings. Working-class leaders describe learning best "by doing", watching, practising, and reflecting in live contexts. One present ordinand stated that *"I didn't see the point in school. But as an apprentice plumber, learning on the job made sense. I could see the difference it was making. In my present training I simply can't see the connection".*

This is not an isolated pattern. Every focus group highlighted hands-on, shoulder-to-shoulder learning as the most effective approach. One working-class priest called for *"true apprenticeship – with learning in context, where you are serving".* Another estate priest insists *"ministry skills are best learned through modelling and apprenticeship, not theory in the classroom."*

This is reinforced by assessment preferences. The two most selected assessment types were:

- **Ministry projects** (59.25%)
- **Continuous portfolio assessment** (52.74%)

In contrast, end-of-term exams (5.48%) and video presentations (2.74%) were the least preferred.

Why does this pattern emerge so strongly?

1. Academic environment alienation

Many working-class leaders come to training without prior university experience, without family support for study skills, and often with learning difficulties such as dyslexia or ADHD. Several respondents spoke of never having written an essay before entering training. This makes traditional assessment methods feel alien, intimidating, and disconnected from real ministry.

Priest E explains the frustration:

"Rather than assessments that showed off my spiritual gifting… I had assessments that showed how poorly my written skills were."

2. Competing responsibilities

Many working class leaders have complex lives where they are also carers, parents of blended families, full-time workers, or juggling unpredictable shift patterns. Academic demands stacked on top of this can feel overwhelming. One candidate in the selection process noted that their life was complex juggling, *"time demands, family demands, and the general demands on our lives is the biggest challenge".* Numbers of candidates articulated that they are juggling elderly families, changing work patterns and children with extra needs.

3. Cultural misfit

"None of my family had ever written an essay. They were no support to me."

Academic environments often feel dominated by middle-class norms, leaving many working-class candidates struggling to feel seen or understood. They frequently reported being taught by people who "didn't understand the culture of our estate world," creating an immediate sense of not fitting in. Several described classrooms filled with "young, white, academically-gifted" peers, which intensified feelings of isolation, while college staff were perceived as unapproachable because they lacked shared life experience. Candidates spoke of having to change their accent, humour, clothing, or personality simply to blend in, with one priest recalling being criticised for how she spoke until she altered it. For some, the environment re-opened old wounds from schooling; one estates priest said college "compounded poor self-worth," and another noted that the credibility she held on her estate "was worth nothing here". Together, the data shows that without culturally aware mentors or relatable role models, academic spaces often feel alien and diminishing to working-class leaders, requiring adaptation that comes at personal and emotional cost.

4. Loss of authentic self

Many working-class candidates feel sustained pressure to assimilate into academic and cultural norms, and this constant adaptation places a heavy emotional load that undermines confidence and learning. The data shows they frequently change their accent, vocabulary, humour, and even personality to avoid judgment, with one priest saying she "*changed how I talked*", and others describing the need to "*tone down*" humour that did not fit middle-class expectations.

Appearance becomes another site of scrutiny: candidates spoke of buying "posh" clothes for diocesan events, moderating makeup, or hiding tattoos. These small but relentless adjustments leave many feeling exposed or "on show," which, as one noted, "*compounded poor self-worth,*" while another admitted worrying that suppressing his natural self would erode his ability to connect with the communities he serves. This continuous code-switching is not a minor cultural negotiation but a daily drain of emotional and cognitive energy, making academic engagement harder not because candidates lack ability, but because so much effort is spent managing how they appear within a system that does not naturally understand or value their cultural identity.

5. Practical instincts

Working-class leaders bring intuition, situational awareness, relational intelligence, and resilience, qualities shaped by lived experience and perfectly suited to estate ministry. The data shows they read situations quickly, build trust naturally, and carry deep "social credit" within their communities, enabling them to navigate complexity with confidence and authenticity. Many respondents also highlighted the practical, hands-on creativity and emotional honesty that working-class leaders bring, qualities that emerge most strongly in placements, mentoring, and real ministry environments rather than in lecture rooms. As one estate priest put it, *"Training must be fit for purpose. Learn in context. Let us show what we can actually do".* This demonstrates that academically driven training systems do not simply disadvantage working-class candidates, they obscure the very strengths that make them highly effective ministers in estates and other working-class settings.

How should we select church planters for estates? Implications drawn from the data

When the estates planting research and the working-class experience data are placed side-by-side, the implications for selecting future estate planters become remarkably clear.

1. Select for cultural fit with estates, not for middle-class conformity

Working-class leaders repeatedly experience pressure to change their accent, humour, clothing, or communication style in order to "fit" the Church's systems. Yet these same traits are what make them effective on estates.

The data supports selecting candidates who are:

- local or locally rooted
- culturally at ease in working-class settings
- unthreatened by informality or directness
- respected in their own communities

One candidate's reflection captures this well:

"Everything that gave me credibility on the estate was worthless in training. But on the estate, it's exactly what makes me effective."

This is a critical insight, the selection system currently rewards the qualities least needed on estates and undervalues the ones most needed. With this in mind we need to be careful to help people keep within the world of the estate rather than shaping them to fit a culture that does not reflect the communities they are called to serve, ensuring formation strengthens their authenticity rather than erasing it.

2. Prioritise candidates with relational capital in working-class contexts

The research showed that local rootedness is one of the strongest predictors of evangelistic fruit. The working-class research now reveals why working-class leaders have "social credit" in their own neighbourhoods, relational depth, trust, and authenticity.

One estates evangelist describes this beautifully:

"On the Estate, I am recognised and thought well of. At college I realised everything I had worked for meant nothing there."

For estate planting, this social capital is not just valuable - it is mission-critical.

3. Choose leaders who thrive in apprenticeship-style, practice-driven formation

The combined data shows that the most effective estate planters: learn by doing, grow through mentorship, prefer hands-on experience over lectures and excel in contexts of real pastoral complexity.

Therefore, estate planter selection should identify candidates who:

- show strong instinctive pastoral ability
- display emotional intelligence under pressure
- enjoy practical ministry
- value servant leadership
- are motivated by presence, trust-building, and relational depth

These traits predict success far better than academic aptitude.

4. Avoid selecting candidates who cannot realistically commit long-term

The estates data shows that most respondents believe estate planting requires **4–10+ years** of rooted presence. Working-class candidates often described complex family, caring, and financial responsibilities that made training difficult, but the same data also shows they often exhibit exceptional perseverance and long-term loyalty to place.

This means:

- Selection should not assume mobility
- Local and long-term potential should be prioritised over short-term availability
- Dioceses should treat working-class candidates as deep commitments, not temporary placements

5. Remove unnecessary academic filters from early selection

Academic competence is *not* a predictor of effective estate ministry. In fact, the data shows that academic-heavy systems actively drive out many of the most suitable working-class candidates for ministry.

If selection processes include complex forms, abstract theological writing, overly academic interview questions and expectations of prior study, then the Church will continue filtering out the leaders' estates most needed.

One estates leader shared the story of sleeping in a bus station to attend diocesan interviews. On one hand this is concerning anyone would need to do this, but it does show the degree of grit and determination the current system fails to notice.

6. Raise up indigenous leadership intentionally

Both datasets emphasise the need for more leaders *from the estates themselves*. A repeated theme across interviews was the desire for empowerment of local leaders and the conviction that estates flourish when local people lead.

One priest expressed this clearly when they said that *"We need working-class inclusion at every level, not just grassroots roles".* This means dioceses must spot working-class potential early, invest financially in local training, offer accessible apprenticeships and mixed-mode pathways, normalise working-class leadership as a central part of diocesan strategy.

7. Select for humility, authenticity, and emotional resilience

Many working-class leaders have navigated adversities such as financial struggle, family responsibilities, trauma, addiction recovery, or unstable employment. They have a lived understanding of the very challenges residents on estates face daily. One working class priest articulates this with remarkable clarity:

"The Church needs leaders with lived experience… rather than older white leaders trying to speak on issues they can't relate to."

This lived experience equips working-class leaders with authenticity, empathy, and resilience with qualities essential for estate planting.

SECTION 7

LEARNING AND ACTIONS

Nine significant findings from the estates research that directly apply to estates planting and estate leadership development.

ONE

Successful estate plants tend to be deeply embedded, relationally rich, and spiritually grounded. Presence and prayer are not peripheral but central to how ministry begins and grows. For diocesan leaders and sending churches, this underscores the value of releasing planters who are willing to root themselves in a place, and of supporting rhythms of prayer, discernment, and rest from the outset. For planters, it is a reminder that the most transformative work happens through faithful presence rather than rapid activity.

TWO

Incarnational and Slow Growth models fit estates best. They align naturally with the relational pace and long-term nature of estate life. The data suggests that large launches, heavy programming, or externally imposed structures rarely carry weight unless they are grounded in lived relationships. Future planters should be encouraged to adopt approaches that prioritise listening, adaptability, and community-shaped ministry. Dioceses can help by resisting pressure for quick numerical gains and by championing models that allow for slow, relational growth.

THREE

Local rootedness is one of the strongest predictors of fruitfulness. Plants with a high proportion of local team members and estate residents in visible leadership roles see deeper trust, more sustained engagement, and richer evangelistic fruit. This finding invites both planters and dioceses to take seriously the work of developing local leaders. It takes time, patience, and pastoral courage, but the long-term impact is clear. Supporting training pathways for estate residents, offering mentoring, and recognising local leadership potential early can help this become a reality.

FOUR

Preparation is short, but commitment must be long. Formal planning normally lasts a matter of months, yet the work itself requires years of presence before deep trust forms. This means that recruitment and deployment processes need to prioritise long-term stability rather than short appointments. Prospective planters should count the cost and consider whether they can sustainably commit to many years in the same neighbourhood. Dioceses might also explore longer funding cycles and clearer pathways for permanence to help make long-term presence realistic.

FIVE

Funding streams that come from dioceses and networks are the most supportive and stabilising. Plants that feel connected to a wider church ecosystem are better able to withstand financial fluctuation and avoid burnout. This does not remove the need for local giving, but it recognises that financial maturity typically develops slowly in contexts marked by economic fragility. Supporting plants through grants, partnerships, and network generosity communicates confidence and reduces the fragility often felt by estate leaders.

SIX

Practical, contextualised training in trauma, poverty, and pastoral complexity is more effective than generic church planting programmes. Estates planters consistently describe navigating complicated pastoral realities: trauma, financial insecurity, mental health needs, and social service systems. Training that equips them to meet these realities with wisdom and resilience is essential. Dioceses and training bodies should therefore design programmes that prioritise contextual awareness, reflective practice, and the integration of theology with day-to-day pastoral encounter.

SEVEN

Clear expectations and appropriate metrics reduce frustration and allow plants to demonstrate their real impact. Traditional growth measurements do not capture the relational depth, trust-building, and long-term discipleship characteristic of estates ministry. When metrics are unclear or imposed from unrelated contexts, plants feel misunderstood and under pressure. Establishing relational, story-based, and context-sensitive indicators from the beginning helps both planters and diocesan leaders recognise genuine fruit and celebrate it appropriately.

EIGHT

Working-class leaders need training environments that fit their learning styles, not ones that assume prior academic experience. The research shows that many thrive through mixed-mode, apprenticeship-based formation rather than heavily academic pathways. When training centres rely on essays, formal lectures, and independent study, they unintentionally disadvantage those who learn best by doing, watching, reflecting, and receiving feedback in real contexts. Dioceses and training providers can help by expanding practice-driven routes, offering creative assessments, and ensuring that working-class candidates are not judged against academic norms unrelated to estate ministry. Training should reveal their gifts, not obscure them.

NINE

Cultural fit matters as much as theological alignment when selecting estate planters. The working-class research demonstrates that many candidates feel pressure to assimilate into middle-class norms during discernment and training, and this adaptation can erode confidence and authenticity. Yet the very traits they suppress – accent, humour, directness, resilience, and cultural fluency – are precisely what make them effective on estates. Selection processes for lay or ordained ministry must therefore recognise and value working-class culture rather than treating it as something to overcome. Dioceses that intentionally identify, affirm, and invest in local working-class leaders will not only increase diversity but also strengthen the likelihood of long-term, rooted, contextually wise estate ministry.

PROPOSED WAY FORWARD

The proposed way forward is a long-term, relational, and locally rooted approach to estates ministry that prioritises faithful presence over rapid growth, values prayer and embeddedness as foundational, and aligns leadership development with the lived realities of estate communities. The findings point toward incarnational, slow-growth models supported by stable diocesan funding, extended commitments, and realistic expectations of fruitfulness measured through trust, depth, and discipleship rather than numbers alone. Central to this approach is the intentional identification, formation, and resourcing of local and working-class leaders, using training pathways that are practical, contextual, and apprenticeship-based rather than academically driven. Dioceses and networks are called to create supportive ecosystems that recognise cultural fit as well as theological alignment, resist middle-class norms as default standards, and invest patiently in people and places over time, enabling estate ministry to grow sustainably, authentically, and with deep local credibility.

Case Study 1

Learning to measure what matters at Barking Riverside

When Church at Barking Riverside first began under SDF funding, the team were given unusual freedom: they were invited to decide for themselves how they wanted to be measured. This opened up an opportunity to rethink success from the ground up. Rather than defaulting to attendance figures or financial reporting, the team asked a deeper question: *what kind of measurement actually helps us grow as disciples and stay true to our vision?* Out of that reflection emerged what they came to call their "life-giving metrics," an attempt to make the very act of measuring part of their discipleship.

They knew they didn't want metrics that would lead to anxiety or comparison. Instead, they looked for practices that could root them more deeply in dependence on God, in love for people, and in the kind of missional imagination they hoped would shape the church. As one of the team expressed, they wanted "*the practice and process of measuring to actually integrate with and encourage discipleship.*" These metrics were never meant to be abstract or institutional; they were designed to be used personally, in small discipleship conversations, or as a team, checking together whether they were still living the vision they believed God had given them: communities thriving with Jesus at the heart.

The first part of their framework centred on **reflective questions**. These were simple but searching questions linked directly to their vision and values.

Were they growing as disciples?

Were new leaders emerging?

Was their community being shaped into something more Christlike?

Were they acting out of dependence on God?

Were they remaining passionate about people?

Were they still daring to dream for their context?

These questions became a rhythm they could return to monthly or termly, helping them to notice where God was at work and where they needed to refocus their energy.

Alongside this, they developed what they called a **missional footprint**. This was a way of mapping where the life of the church was actually touching the life of the community. Each person marked out the places where they "do life", where they live, work, go to school, volunteer, or spend leisure time and then identified the places where they had influence, even informally. Over this, they shaded areas where they were intentionally praying, speaking about Jesus, or serving with compassion. This visual map gave a clearer sense of where seeds of the kingdom were being sown, where God seemed to be opening doors, and where new initiatives or new prayer might be needed.

Although the team later found it difficult to maintain this system once diocesan reporting requirements increased, they have continued to weave parts of it into their regular reflection and planning. For them, this way of measuring success remains more honest and spiritually grounding than numerical targets. It helps them remember that fruitfulness begins with presence, prayer, and relationship. It keeps their eyes on whether Jesus is genuinely at the heart of their community, not simply whether their church is growing in obvious ways. Most of all, it encourages them to keep asking the kind of questions that shape character and mission, rather than the ones that reduce ministry to output.

Case Study 2

When a planting team doesn't gel

St Matthias, Canning Town began as a small, contextual church plant built on careful listening and local presence. Although the early vision was strong, the plant was later destabilised by team dynamics, leadership immaturity in the team, and institutional uncertainties.

The planter assembled a deliberately small team of 12 missionaries who spent their first year walking the parish, praying, meeting residents, and discerning what church might need to look like for that context. The aim was to avoid importing a ready-made model and instead allow the neighbourhood to shape the plant.

Around eighteen months in, the diocese offered oversight of an existing congregation meeting in a small building. The team accepted responsibility for the vulnerable small congregation. The plant then held public worship while continuing its outward-facing rhythm of community presence.

The recruitment of the planting team became the central pressure point. The planter had chosen some members for their potential rather than their actual character. Several individuals joined with personal expectations, insecurity, and a desire for influence. Over time, patterns of competition, envy, and power-seeking surfaced.

Two couples, in particular, struggled with unresolved emotional drivers. They hoped the plant would become the ideal church they had not found elsewhere. When the emerging culture did not match their preferences, admiration shifted into criticism. These dynamics created division within the team and eroded trust. The plant did have an encouraging number of new disciples and de/re-churched people who joined in but many of their longer-term tenure was jeopardised by the behaviour or impact of the planting team.

The planters' youth had been seen as a potential point to manipulate, and the reluctance to challenge unhealthy behaviour early contributed to the instability. For nearly two and a half years, the planter doubted himself, avoided confrontation, and allowed poor patterns to become entrenched. Only after a period of personal healing was he able to draw healthy boundaries, at which point the problematic individuals chose to leave. By then, the remaining team was weary from prolonged conflict.

The later phase of the plant was shaped by exhaustion, the fallout of COVID–19. Although the team expected the diocese to appoint new oversight, the arrangements changed unexpectedly. Without a clear pathway forward, the plant eventually dispersed.

There was no formal closure moment, largely because the team did not anticipate that the plant would end. Even so, many who had worshipped and trained within the community went on to serve faithfully in other local churches, meaning the kingdom's impact endured even though the plant did not.

Case Study 3

When those who are served become the servers

Connect Church Crosby is based in Crosby, Scunthorpe, one of the most deprived wards in the country. Fiona Kirby-Smith moved into the community in 2013, choosing first to live among people rather than launch a public church. For seven years the focus was simple and deliberate: presence, relationship, and learning how to love the neighbourhood well. Gathered worship did not begin until 2020, by which point a small family of people who loved Jesus had already formed.

From the outset, the church developed around rhythms of shared life rather than programmes alone. Everything revolved around food, not only as a response to poverty, but as a way of creating a level space where people could settle, belong, and breathe. Fiona describes the table as a place that helps regulate people's nervous systems, recognising that many arrive hungry, carrying trauma, or living with constant stress. Rather than asking people to adapt to church first, the church adapts to people, starting with the most basic human needs.

Over time, a wide range of ministries emerged: a Fresh Food Project offering a weekly food shop for two pounds, families' groups, a community living room, bereavement support, and prayer offered quietly alongside everyday activities. These spaces were intentionally porous, designed not only to serve but to invite participation. The culture that developed was one where people did not remain recipients for long.

One of the defining features of Connect Church Crosby is how quickly people are trusted. Fiona speaks of taking risks on people, often before they feel ready themselves. The stakes are kept low: "Just do it and try it. If it goes really well, all props to you and Jesus. If it goes terribly, that's all on me". This posture has shaped a community where permission is given early and failure is normalised.

Small acts of service, stacking chairs, helping in the kitchen, being handed a key, become profound moments of dignity and belonging.

As people begin to serve, something shifts. Many discover gifts they have always had but never been trusted to use. Service becomes a way of re-learning who God has made them to be. Fiona describes this not as handouts, but hand-ups: making space for contribution, ownership, and growth. Those who once received support now lead others, pray confidently, and invite new people in.

Success, for Fiona, is not primarily measured by numbers, though the church has grown. It is seen when ministry happens without her, when people pray for others in the café on a Tuesday, when language shifts from "you should" to "we do". The clearest sign of fruitfulness is when a community once written off becomes a place where people know they belong, know they are trusted, and know that the glory of God rests among them.

Case Study 4

Church planting in the Catholic tradition, worship shaped by the estate

Rev Linda was invited to plant a church (Freedom Church Mereside) onto a housing estate of around 6,000 residents, four years after the previous church had closed. At first she did not live on the estate, but within months the vicarage next to a "large, derelict, boarded-up church" unexpectedly became available, so she moved in. The plant began not with a launch team and a venue, but with presence, prayer, and a conversation with a neighbour over the fence. The neighbour told her she would love to go to church, but the nearest one was too far away and "*there's no buses on a Sunday*". So Linda invited her to come round on Sunday and they held a service in the living room, just Linda, her husband, and their neighbour. From the beginning, the Eucharist was central, so their Sunday gatherings in the living room were Eucharist-centred services.

Worship was also shaped around local culture. On Sunday mornings, the main road beside the estate was crossed by "hundreds and hundreds of people" heading to one of the largest car boot sales in the north west. Rather than compete with it, the church met at 4pm. They also took a presence to the car boot sale itself, asking permission to host a small stall. They set up a candle stand with the simple invitation: "*lighting a candle is a prayer to Jesus*". They were not allowed to approach passers-by, only to speak with those who entered the tent, yet there was never less than 40 each week who came in to talk and light a candle. One woman, in tears over her mother's terminal cancer, discovered she lived 10 doors down from Linda, and was invited to the afternoon Eucharist. She came with her family, all three came to faith, and Linda later baptised and confirmed them.

Alongside worship, Linda and her husband built ministries that reflected who they were and what the estate needed. Linda began a community choir, which was unapologetically Christian, singing a mix of sacred and secular music. Her husband started a Men's Shed with a pause for thought each session. They served the local school by first asking, "What do you want from us as a church?", and were then invited to lead weekly assemblies. These community pathways steadily drew people towards worship and discipleship, until the plant outgrew the living room.

The next step was renovating the derelict church hall. Before it was restored, they held an Ash Wednesday service in a mould-blackened, damp, stinking room, lit only by battery lamps. Sitting in a circle, Linda invited everyone to speak out words of hope and positivity into the building, and every single person said something, including the children. That moment, and the sense of God's presence within it, became a spiritual marker for the work ahead. Over the following years the hall was transformed into a church and community centre with kitchen, café, and charity shop, a place for worship and a daily base for community life.

Two distinctly Catholic commitments were central to the plant's growth. The first was an open-table policy under which no baptism or confirmation was required. Everyone was welcome to come and receive bread and wine, a tangible experience of acceptance for people who often felt excluded. The second was a sacramental, sensory pattern of worship, with incense, sight, taste, and sound, engaging the whole person, particularly in a context where literacy could be low. For Linda, this was not a stylistic preference but a missionary strength; the Eucharist gathered people around the altar, and the estate discovered faith through belonging, embodied worship, and an incarnational church that lived among them.

Theological reflection

Rev Dr Cris Rogers

As I reflect on our findings in this report, I am struck by how closely they align with the shape and rhythm of Scripture. Everything we have learned about estate ministry, working-class leadership, long-term presence, and rooted, relational mission sits comfortably within the biblical story. If anything, the research simply draws our attention back to what God has already shown us about how he works in the world. Estates ministry is not a special category of mission, it is a continuation of the same pattern God has used from the beginning: entering the ordinary, choosing the overlooked, working through local people, and planting the kingdom in places others often fail to notice.

At the heart of this is the incarnation. In Jesus, God does not remain distant. He takes on flesh, enters a particular culture, speaks with a recognisable accent, and becomes part of a local community. John writes that "the Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us," not that he visited occasionally or appeared only to direct operations from a distance. He lived alongside people, learned their rhythms, joined their meals, and shared their stories. In mission terms, this is not simply theology, it is method. It is the blueprint for ministries that take place in real neighbourhoods with real people. Our data confirms what the incarnation already teaches: presence matters. Long-term rootedness is not optional. Ministry grows from the soil of daily life, and trust develops through consistent, relational presence over years rather than through short seasons of activity. Jesus demonstrates that God's mission always takes on a postcode, and our work on estates must do the same.

The incarnation leads naturally to the pattern of the upside-down kingdom. Throughout Scripture, God chooses people the world does not expect: younger sons, barren women, shepherds, fishermen, tax collectors. Mary captures this beautifully in her Magnificat, proclaiming that God "lifts up the lowly" and fills the hungry with good things. Paul echoes the same idea when he writes that "God chose the foolish things… the weak things… the lowly things of the world." Our research shows that working-class leaders often feel misread or undervalued, yet Scripture shows that these are precisely the kinds of people God consistently works through. The mismatch is not between working-class leaders and the kingdom, but between working-class leaders and the formation systems that have been shaped by different cultural assumptions. The kingdom grows through those who know how to persevere, who understand the struggles people carry, and who can hold their nerve in complex places. In this regard, estates are not marginal to the kingdom; they are fertile ground where the upside-down way of Jesus becomes visible.

Another biblical thread that resonates strongly with our findings is God's repeated habit of calling people from within a particular place to serve that place. Moses is sent back to his own people. Nehemiah rebuilds the walls of the city he loves. The man delivered in the Decapolis is told to "go home to your own people and tell them what the Lord has done for you." In Acts, the gospel spreads not through visiting specialists but through everyday believers sharing hope with neighbours, relatives, and their local community. This pattern reminds

us that local leadership is not only practical, it is theological. God raises people from the inside of a community to bless that community. Our research shows the same: estate churches flourish when they include and eventually are led by local residents. These leaders have social credibility, cultural understanding, and relational depth that cannot be taught in a classroom. They are often the ones God has already positioned as bridge-builders and bearers of good news.

The Great Commission also takes on deeper meaning when seen through the lens of estate mission. Jesus sends his disciples out, but he sends them as dependent learners, not independent experts. He tells them to stay where they are welcomed, receive hospitality, listen before speaking, and make disciples through ongoing relationship rather than quick interventions. The Commission is not a call to efficiency but to faithfulness: "as you go, make disciples." This reinforces what our data shows about long-term presence, relational pace, and patient discipleship. Estate ministry cannot be rushed or treated as a series of tasks to complete. It requires people who are willing to live alongside their community, to share life's burdens, and to walk slowly with those discovering faith.

Underneath these themes lies the foundational conviction that every person bears the image of God. Working-class communities are not mission projects; they are places where the glory of God is already present. The research highlights that many working-class leaders feel undervalued or unseen by church systems, yet Scripture insists that no background confers greater dignity than another. The early church included artisans, labourers, enslaved people, widows, and those with very limited social standing. God formed a community where every part was needed and honoured, and where leadership emerged from unexpected places. Paul's body metaphor in 1 Corinthians 12 is especially relevant here. He writes that God gives "special honour" to the parts that are often overlooked. This challenges the Church today to ensure that working-class leadership is not treated as an exception or a niche calling, but as an essential expression of the body of Christ.

Taken together, these biblical themes invite us to reimagine how we value, train, and release leaders for estates. The research shows that working-class leaders bring gifts that match the realities of estate ministry: relational wisdom, resilience, intuition, honesty, and the ability to handle complexity with grace. These are kingdom gifts formed not through academic study but through lived experience. Theologically, these gifts echo the character of the early disciples and the grassroots nature of the early church. If the Church of England is to be faithful to the gospel and fruitful in estate ministry, it must shape systems that recognise, nurture, and celebrate these gifts rather than unintentionally suppressing them.

In the end, estate planting is not simply a strategic priority; it is a deeply biblical calling. It reflects the incarnation, embodies the upside-down kingdom, honours local people as God's chosen agents of mission, and fulfils the Commission in its most grounded form. The research has helped us see this more clearly, but Scripture has been showing it all along.

A word of thanks

A massive thank you to all those who responded to the online surveys, engaged in Zoom interviews and spent time engaging with this research. I am grateful to Rev Dr Grace Bally-Balogun and the team at CCX for taking the time to support this research and read through the data to check we got it just right.

Glossary:

Slow Growth – Church plants that start small, and grow through relationships over a longer period of time.

Apostolic Leader – One founding leader who raises local leaders to take on the church of which then they move on to plant again relatively quickly.

Launch Big – Church planting team starts with major launch events to build momentum fast. Usually comes with a team of people and some finances from a mother church.

Incarnational – Church planters (and team) move into the estate community first, building trust over time before starting church services. The focus is on praying through what the church will look like on the ground and engaging with local needs.

House Church – Small worshipping group meeting in homes.

Multi-ethnic – Brings together people of different nationalities and cultures as one church.

Multi-site – One church meeting across several linked locations often with the sermon streaming from central location.

Fresh Expressions – New, pioneering and creative forms of church rooted in local culture. E.g. Cafe church, messy church or other creative forms.

Replant / Revitalisation – With an existing small congregation the work is done to renew or revitalise an existing church with new life by a team coming from another thriving church. The two groups over time become a new community.

Network / Family – A stand alone church that is connected to others in a network for support and shared vision.

Comprehensive Ministry – Combines faith-sharing with practical community and social action. Larger focus on social action balanced with evangelism holding all together.

Apprenticeship – Training of local estate leaders from within the community to plant something new either within the estate setting or close by with continued support.

Hybrid – Mixes models to suit the local context.

What next?

Our hope is that this report is an encouragement to those who are called to minister to estates and low-income communities. In response to its findings and suggested outcomes, CCX has begun compiling a pool of relevant resources and tools. Scan the QR code to find out more, or ask us questions at **hello@ccx.org.uk**

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