



Mustard Seed Thinking: Stepping Up in Low-income Communities

Andy Wier and Heather Black
July 2026





Foreword

What would happen if we chose to specifically invest in the ordinary people of our low-income communities to equip them for mission within their communities in a way that most makes sense to them?

The answer to that question is found in the pages of this report, but it is the power of asking that question and the belief in its commitment that shapes Mustard Seed thinking!

Mustard Seed has grown out of a deep listening to the people in our communities within the Diocese of York and a deep listening to the Spirit of God amongst us. Much has been learnt together over many years, and this report is a wonderful way to share this learning with others.

You will find in these pages stories that will inspire and encourage you.

You will find deep theological insights that can shape your own understanding of God's ongoing mission in our world.

You will also find strategic and programmatic learning that can help to inform how the church can continue to be formed and grow.

Above all, you will find a window into a growing community who are both the treasure of God and a community who has learnt to partner with Jesus in unearthing the true treasures of his Kingdom.

I hope that you will be also both inspired and convicted that we must not overlook the God given potential within the lay people of our low-income communities. I pray that you too will find that by investing in home-grown leaders you will also see sustainable long-term fruit.

From my own experience across our Anglican Communion, I have learnt that there is a paradigm shift that takes place in our thinking and our living when we put missionary discipleship to the fore. The Mustard Seed journey provides a deep dive into this shift, and this report powerfully shares the kinds of changes in learning and approach that happens when we choose to grow missionary disciples. I pray that you will embrace the different way of learning and being that is encapsulated in this report.

Above all, I pray that these Gospel seeds will continue to spread and change the life and shape of our churches and, as a consequence, the 'upside down' Kingdom of God will flourish in even greater abundance!



Rt. Revd. Dr Eleanor Sanderson

Bishop of Hull and Core Group member
of the Anglican Communion Commission
for Evangelism and Discipleship



Mustard Seed Prayer

Six years ago, we planted a small seed in the Diocese of York, not knowing what would grow. We have used this simple prayer every time we gather, and the prayer is woven into personal and church prayers across the Mustard Seed programme.

It aligns our hearts and lives with God's mission and trusts him to give the growth. As you read this report, you will see how our prayers have been answered as God's Kingdom has come among us in unexpected ways.

Lord Jesus, you show us what life could be. Help us to plant your seeds of hope in places where life is tough, so that people can find your love and your way. We offer this small prayer, like a mustard seed, For your Kingdom to come among us.

Amen



Acknowledgements

We are very grateful to the Stepping Up participants and Mustard Seed Community Ministers who shared their stories and experiences, and to all who contributed to the research. We also thank the clergy, parishes and mentors who supported people through Stepping Up, especially those clergy who took part in research interviews.

Thank you to the Diocese of York for having Mustard Seed like faith to believe in this work, and to everyone who has prayed for and supported Mustard Seed. We especially thank Bishop Alison White, who during her time as Bishop of Hull, led the early working group in deep listening across low-income communities in the Diocese of York. Thank you to Bishop Eleanor Sanderson, who joined us from New Zealand as Bishop of Hull in 2022, bringing the same vision for missional discipleship from the other side of the world!

Huge thanks to everyone who has been part of the Mustard Seed team over the years for faithfully investing in lay people and nurturing them in faith and mission. We also thank the Mustard Seed project board for its excellent oversight and guidance.

Thank you to Church Army for partnering in this research project, especially former CARU staff Lu, Dan and Andrew.

We are grateful to the Church of England Strategic Development Fund and Benefact Trust for their generous funding, which has enabled Mustard Seed to develop and invest in people and parishes on the edge of the Diocese of York.

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Heather Black (Mustard Seed Programme Leader)
Andy Wier (Lead Consultant, Winging It Consulting)

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Executive Summary

This report tells the stories of people from low-income communities who have stepped up in mission through York Diocese's Mustard Seed Programme and Stepping Up learning communities. It shares the findings of a five-year collaborative research partnership between external researchers and the Mustard Seed team, reflects on how God appears to have been at work, and considers how the Church should respond.

Part 1 - Mustard Seed Stories

In part one, we hear the stories of Michelle, Chris and Ann – three people who have completed Stepping Up, a year-long learning community where lay people come together to grow as disciples of Jesus and explore how to develop mission in their local community.



Part 2 - Exploring the impact of Stepping Up

Key insights from our research about the impact of Stepping Up include:

- **People do Stepping Up for many different reasons**, but they all want to grow in their faith and have a sense that God has something more for them to do.
- **Much of the initial growth on Stepping Up is beneath the surface** as people grow deeper in their relationship with God. In time, this enables more visible outward growth and missional 'fruit'.
- **Growing in confidence is a 'golden thread'** throughout many people's experience of Stepping Up – they grow in confidence in their relationship with God,

confidence in themselves, confidence that God can call and use them and develop competence and confidence in their skills and abilities.

- **People step up in mission in all sorts of ways** as they become Community Ministers after Stepping Up. They create spaces of belonging and spaces for faith exploration and discipleship. Stepping Up is an effective catalyst for mission and becoming Community Ministers enables people to be taken seriously by others.
- **Stepping Up seems to be different from many other approaches to lay leadership development** because it is more person-centred and communal. There are no essays to write but input is "chewed over relationally".

Part 3 - Mustard Seed Thinking

Dwelling with Jesus' parable of the Mustard Seed leads us to identify five 'windows' that are key to kingdom growth:

1. **The potential of the smallest seeds** - Jesus encourages us to understand the kingdom of God by looking for small seeds that may go unnoticed but are full of potential to grow.
2. **Deep roots** - If people are going to flourish and be fruitful, especially in tough places, they need to develop deep roots in their relationship with God.
3. **Messy growth** - Mustard Seed growth is often unexpected, disruptive, and messy.
4. **Transformation and fruitfulness** - The fruits of the mustard tree, the seeds, bring about transformation. Stepping Up is a story of people allowing God to shape, re-orientate and transform their lives.
5. **Nest building** – Just as birds gather twigs, moss, and even bits of rubbish to build their nests, Stepping Up encourages everyone to use the gifts and resources within themselves, their churches and communities to create spaces where other people can find a place to belong and grow in faith.

Part 4 - Scattering the seed

We identify three reproducible principles from Stepping Up that connect with the Church of England's three priorities for the 2020s.¹

1. We must not overlook the potential or treasure within lay people in low-income communities.

The wider Church has sometimes only seen people in low-income communities as beneficiaries of the Church's 'help', but the experience of Stepping Up points to their giftedness and potential. A Church of England seeking to become "younger and more diverse" needs to take the treasure within lay people in low-income communities more seriously.

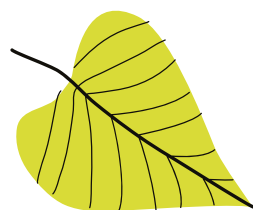
2. Investing in home-grown leaders yields sustainable long-term fruit.

Investing in local people who are already deeply embedded in their local community generates many long-term benefits. For a Church of England seeking to become "a Church where mixed ecology is the norm", this also provides an alternative or counterbalance to a dominant model of over-relying on leaders from outside.

3. Growing missionary disciples requires a different kind of learning

Becoming "a church of missionary disciples" requires taking seriously the intimate connection between discipleship and mission and encouraging people to attend to what is going on beneath the surface (listening to God, self and others) before stepping up in mission. This requires creating spaces for deep transformational learning and 'chewing things over relationally', not just the transfer of information and head knowledge.

¹ <https://www.churchofengland.org/about/vision-and-strategy>



Introduction

In 2020, the Diocese of York launched a new programme called Mustard Seed with a vision of “growing disciples in places where life is tough”. The programme was developed in response to a period of deep listening to clergy and laity in the low-income communities of the diocese. In this report, we describe how that small seed has grown in all kinds of unexpected ways and hear the stories of people from low-income communities who have flourished and blessed others through ‘stepping up’ in mission. We explore some of the insights emerging from a five-year collaborative research partnership between the Mustard Seed team and external researchers, before going on to reflect

Mustard seed thinking – an ability to reflect and understand the world in a way that does not disparage or doubt what God can and does do through small, insignificant or seemingly unpromising beginnings.¹

Klyne Snodgrass

theologically on how God appears to have been at work. This is an example of what the theologian Klyne Snodgrass calls ‘mustard seed thinking’ - an ability to reflect and understand the world in a way that does not disparage or doubt what God can and does do through small, insignificant or seemingly unpromising beginnings.² We conclude by considering how the wider Church should respond to this learning. We believe that insights from the Mustard Seed programme are relevant for the whole Church, not just York diocese, so hope and pray that this report will resource further ‘mustard seed thinking’ in many other contexts.

About Mustard Seed and Stepping Up

Stepping Up is part of the Diocese of York’s Mustard Seed Programme, which has a vision of “growing disciples in places where life is tough”. Focused in low-income communities found at the edge of the diocese, particularly in Middlesbrough, Hull and coastal communities, the programme has three strands of work, developed in response to listening to clergy and lay experience of mission and ministry in these places.

- 1. Stepping Up:** Local learning communities, where lay people can grow as disciples of Jesus and in confidence for mission in their local community.
- 2. Growing Churches:** Worshipping communities developed as places of hospitality and support for local people in the challenges they face. Offering opportunities for prayer, experiencing the love of God, exploring faith and encountering Jesus.
- 3. Advocates:** People and parishes from across the Diocese of York who have a passion to support Mustard Seed mission, growing generosity of prayer, support and financial giving.



² Klyne R. Snodgrass, *Stories With Intent: A Comprehensive Guide to the Parables of Jesus* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 2008), 227-8.



Stepping Up



Stepping Up is the first step for a parish to be involved with the Mustard Seed Programme. It provides an opportunity for lay people to come together once a week with people from other parishes in their deanery, to grow as disciples of Jesus, and to explore developing mission in their local community. It is a year-long learning community, with a different focus for each term:

Term 1

Listening - to God, to others and to ourselves

Term 2

Being with - a commitment to be with the people and the community where God has called us to serve

Term 3

Sharing faith - joining with God's mission in our local communities, sharing God's love in action, words and prayer.

There are no formal assessments, but each participant keeps a journal where they record their learning and development. Each week participants are asked to complete 'take home activities', which are recorded as a written reflection or using art, photography, film or audio recordings. This works well for people who are not confident with written assignments or who struggle with their reading and writing.

Each participant has a mentor who accompanies them for the year, meeting regularly to reflect on their Stepping Up journey, and supporting them to discern how they will 'step up' in mission at the end of the year.

At the end of Stepping Up, participants are commissioned as Community Ministers within their parishes, to develop new or existing mission within the local community. A few step up into part-time paid roles to continue developing their ministry.³

Everyone is invited into the Mustard Seed

mission community, continuing to learn and grow together by following a rhythm of life. This roots the learning of Stepping Up within the ongoing growth of each Community Minister, as they commit themselves to:

- **Listening** to God, others and themselves,
- **Being with** the people and community where God has called them to serve
- **Sharing faith** in words, prayer and action.

Stepping Up launched in 2021 with five groups each year. So far, more than 130 people from over 40 churches have completed the programme. Small start-up grants have supported the development of 67 mission activities, and 16 New Worshipping Communities have emerged. There are currently 12 paid Community Ministers, with more stepping up during 2026. Churches are becoming younger and more diverse, reflecting the communities they serve, with new people worshipping across Sunday services and in New Worshipping Communities.

Evaluating Stepping Up

Since late 2021, external researchers and the Mustard Seed team have been working together on a five-year collaborative research project to assess the qualitative impact of Stepping Up and reflect on stories about how God has been at work.⁴ Drawing on some of the principles of Theological Action Research,⁵ this research partnership has involved the Mustard Seed team and external researchers working together, as 'insider' and 'outsider' teams, to design research tools, collect data, theologically reflect, and share learning. Over the last five years, we have assembled a rich and extensive body of evidence about the impact of Stepping Up. In sharing and reflecting on some of this material, the rest of this report is loosely structured around the four stages of Laurie Green's 'Doing Theology' spiral.⁶

- **EXPERIENCE** – In Part 1, we hear stories from three people who have completed Stepping Up.
- **EXPLORE** – Part 2 summarises some of the key insights emerging from the five-year collaborative research project about the qualitative impact of Stepping Up.
- **REFLECT** – Part 3 contains reflections on Jesus' parable of the Mustard Seed and the 'Mustard Seed growth' seen within Stepping Up.
- **RESPONSE** – Part 4 considers how the wider Church should respond to the learning from Mustard Seed.



³ Funding is for up to 14 hours per week at Real Living Wage

⁴ This originally began as a partnership with Church Army's Research Unit (CARU) but, following the closure of CARU in July 2025, Dr Andy Wier (CARU's former team leader) has subsequently continued the research through his private consultancy practice Winging It Consulting.

⁵ <https://theologyandactionresearch.net/theological-action-research/>

⁶ Laurie Green, Let's Do Theology: Resources for Contextual Theology (London: Mowbray, 2009)

Part 1: Mustard Seed Stories

We hear the stories of three people who have completed Stepping Up. They have all experienced growing in faith through the programme and have 'stepped up' in mission in their local communities.³

Michelle Reid

I'm Michelle, I was one of seven children and grew up on a rough council estate. My dad was a heavy drinker and gambler, there was a lot of domestic violence and when my dad left my mum turned to alcohol and drugs. My older siblings left and I was left to care for my three younger siblings aged just 12, we often went hungry, I remember knocking on neighbour's doors asking if they had any food, it was really hard. I eventually ended up in foster care at 14, but I think growing up I was really angry and really fearful, and I grew up learning to lie to hide the truth. My teenage years into my adult life was a series of abusive relationships, that's what I'd grown up with, so I didn't know anything different and it was really hard to escape.

One day, I know now that this was God, but I didn't know then, I was laid in my bed, I took a bad batch of drugs the night before and had a horrific night. I was crying and I just said "God", I actually said "God, I just want my kids back please, I don't want this life anymore." The next morning, I woke up and I had no edge whatsoever for drugs, and I knew that I had to make a plan. Gradually every day became easier and I've never touched a drug since.... amazing and I got my kids back. Then something happened that



blew my world apart again, but I knew that something had to be different that I couldn't go back to drugs. I had to be strong, to show my kids a good example. At this point, I didn't have God, but I had my friend Emma. We'd lived on the same street and I'd seen something in Emma. I went up to the church, and she sat with me in the community garden, and I opened up. She prayed with me and honestly, did I feel different? Probably not but I believed in something, I believed that this God that changed her life must be available to change my life.

Emma kept inviting me back to things at church ...and then asked me to volunteer. When I started volunteering, I was around prayer, I was around people's lives being



changed, stories, testimonies and I thought this God sounds like cool, I kind of want to know who he is. I asked if I could go to the bible discovery group... then little by little, I started to believe that this God could be for me that this God could be a person in my life, he just wants me to be his friend.

Mark the vicar and Emma said they wanted me to do Stepping Up, and I said yes because for the first time in my life, someone believed in me. It was on Stepping Up I started hearing God, because I was given the tools to help me recognise God in my life and I started learning how to pray. It gave me a really different look at how listening to people is important, and being real and authentic, it gave me insight into how I can do that safely, and I felt like I was, you know heard. But I think this confidence thing, it's given me a confidence that I never knew I had. I had quite a bolshy confidence before, where everybody liked me because I was cool or you know I've been a girl that you could go and take drugs with, but that ain't confidence....God's built me with a confidence 100%.

At the end of Stepping Up I heard God say you've got a gift from life, and now I'm working with broken people, where I can really talk into people's lives, you know

from God, but I can talk into people's lives because I understand, I can empathise, and I can give wisdom where it's needed. It's been a challenge stepping up in a place where I'm known, where people know my story, and I've had to ask God to help me, and he's put this protection on me where it don't pierce me anymore.

I'm now part of the Hope Hub, with the Restore food pantry, where we had team prayers before we opened. But then we felt we needed to start sharing from the bible and open it up to people who were waiting outside. That's how Hub Church started and yesterday I think we had about 60 people there. Tuesday, I work with Emma running bible discovery in eight weeks blocks, we've got 13-14 people on that and community breakfast on Thursday, which has become massive, and what's beautiful is people are finding friendships and, and we pray for people. Like this guy who was homeless and needed help, and we helped him and he kept coming back, asking us to pray with him and last Sunday he was baptised and asked me to be his sponsor.

Chris Stringer

I'm Chris, I'm married with 3 children and 7 grandchildren, and I serve at St. Hilda's Church in Grangetown. I came to this church as a child and apart from a few years as a young man when I moved away, this has been my church. I am head server, I love my worship and creating church, we're a "high end" church with smoke and bells.

I decided to do Stepping Up back in the beginning, the first group in Middlesbrough. I just wanted to explore my faith even further, get inside the Bible, and community work, giving insight to how I could help, and how I could progress myself and grow in my faith. I got thinking "I've always wanted to explore my faith further than what I was getting in the church... with our old vicar we didn't do much on courses, or anything else."

Through Stepping Up I grew up, I learned more about the Bible. Reading and writing is not my strong point, but we got showed bible apps you can use on your phone, and the bible came alive for me. It gave me a lot more insight to the Bible, and to the work that Jesus did, and how I could then continue the work in my own life. It was good getting to know people from other churches and working as a group, a faith community. We were all there as friends, problems you could air and it wouldn't go no further than that group, it was fully supportive, with love and kindness.

At the end I said to me wife, "we're gonna come up with a project to do with the community". She'd heard on the radio about baby banks, there were a lot of food banks in the area but nothing for people struggling with baby clothes, equipment and essentials. So now the baby bank happens here on a Thursday, we get 6-9 families each



week and they get to choose clothes and equipment - what they need. People bring the clothes back and get the next size and bring equipment to be re-used so it doesn't go into landfill.

We work with local midwives - they bring a brand-new Moses basket and basics for babies and then parents can choose from the baby bank what else they need. Health visitors send people too, and families come via Facebook and word of mouth, I counted last year we've helped 565 families!

And now we have Busy Bees, a parent and toddler group on Fridays that grew from the Baby Bank, where they can come from being babies and grow within our group. We have a baby corner, and physical play, construction, messy play and crafts. We have story time and songs with puppets, and I take them into church. At Christmas we went into church for a crib service, and one or two families are now part of our church and wanting to get confirmed.

I'm just pleased I did Mustard Seed, because what has come out of it with the two projects is unreal....it's what the community needs, and it helped me along with the faith as well.

Ann Wilkinson

My name is Ann, I've lived in Hull all my life and was raised in a non-faith family. At a very young age, I noticed that I was different to my peers, and I struggled to fit in. At the age of 9, I joined Girls Brigade and it was during this time that I started to feel someone was with me, looking out for me and steering me on particular paths, especially with safe adults. At 12 years old, I joined a voluntary group called Youth Action and started working with adults and children with learning disabilities, and autism. I found myself fitting naturally into this group, as if I'd found 'my tribe.' And then, at 18, I went into nurse training to become a registered nurse for people with learning disabilities. It was during this time, I realised I was autistic, and then whilst on a SEND school placement, I worked with two Christian teachers who explained 'the someone' I was feeling was God.

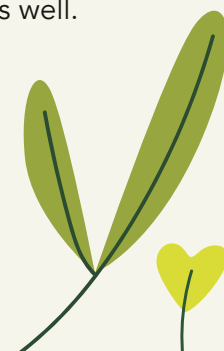
I have tried several churches over the years, my adopted daughter has learning disabilities and autism, and it has been hard to feel part of the church community due to our needs. I eventually found a home in Hull Minster, where God was very clearly calling me and my daughter.

One day I picked up a Mustard Seed card from a local church, and it sat in a cupboard whilst we were shielding during Covid. When my daughter started back at college, I knew God was nudging me to do Mustard Seed. I found Stepping Up to be an amazing programme, to learn about listening to God through various ways. I also learned that what I was feeling and noticing about what God wanted from me was very strong. Stepping Up enabled me to discern what it all meant. I did struggle at times, due to my autism. However, the support I received enabled me complete Stepping Up, and learn that my differences were in fact my gifts for stepping up into mission.



It was very strong, the nudging from God to work in Hull Minster, and advocate for people with different learning abilities, who are often excluded and on the edge of society. I can relate to this, yet God says we are all fearfully and wonderfully made in his image. Therefore, it makes sense that God is asking me to use my life experiences and gifts, as I understand what being different truly means. Also, my training as a nurse has enabled me to use my skills and gifts to work as a chaplain.

Over the past two years I have worked on values of inclusion and belonging at Hull Minster, that all are welcome, loved and able to worship. We work with local colleges and other organisations to welcome young people on work experience, with the opportunity to stay and join our volunteering community. With the right kind of support, we are seeing them flourish and find a place to belong. A growing number of people with different abilities are now part of our Sunday worshipping communities and we are planning to develop the bible teaching and worship opportunities offered to people with different learning abilities. I also lead a prayer team which develops creative and accessible prayer spaces for the thousands of people who come into Hull Minster, last summer 500 children and their families took part in our summer of prayer activities.

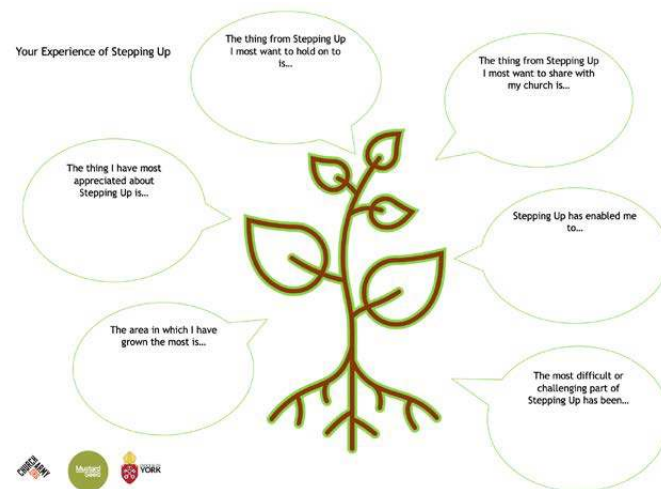
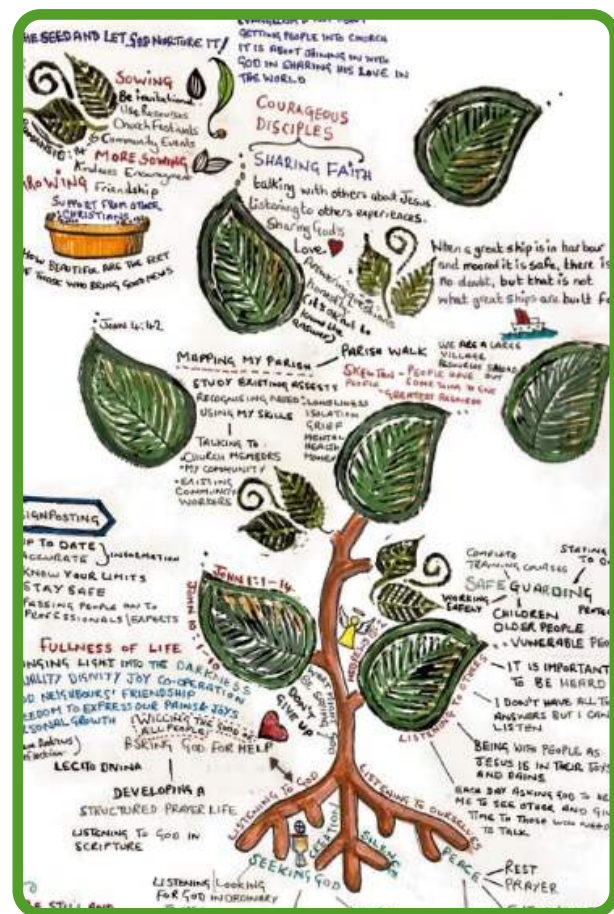


Part 2: Exploring the impact of Stepping Up

In this section, Dr Andy Wier (Lead Researcher) summarises some of the key insights emerging from a five-year collaborative research project evaluating Stepping Up.

As outlined in the introduction, the Mustard Seed team and external researchers have worked together over the past five years to assess the qualitative impact of Stepping Up and reflect on stories about God at work. During this time, we co-produced a range of creative exercises like the ones pictured

below, to enable participants to reflect on their learning and growth during Stepping Up. These included a 'tree picture' exercise that invited participants to draw or write different ways they have grown, and short prompt-based statements such as 'the thing from Stepping Up I most want to hold on to is...'.



Exercises like these served a two-fold purpose. First and foremost, they were designed as reflective tools to help Stepping Up participants notice and reflect different ways they have grown. But they also served as research tools because, with the permission of the individuals involved, completed tree pictures and anonymised responses to other reflective exercises were shared with the 'outsider team' of external researchers. The researchers then helped to analyse the rich qualitative 'data'. In addition to these creative exercises, the researchers also conducted interviews and focus groups, as well as reviewing other data compiled by the Mustard Seed team. Over the next few pages, we summarise some of the key evidence and insights emerging from all these sources, drawing particularly on the following:

- **Tree pictures** completed by 66 Stepping Up participants as part of a creative reflection exercise during their time on Stepping Up
- 81 responses to an **end of Stepping Up** six questions exercise (as pictured above)
- 52 responses to a similar **Twelve months on from Stepping Up** six questions exercise
- **Interviews and focus groups:**
 - Ten interviews with **people who have completed Stepping Up**
 - Two focus groups with **Community Ministers** (attended by 13 people in all)
 - Eight interviews with **clergy** who have accompanied Community Ministers
- **Mission monitoring data** collated by the Mustard Seed team – based on 50 Community Minister Reviews
- Some have been Christians for a long time already; others are newer to faith.
- Many are very "capable" people with "great potential" who (for a range of reasons) have had limited previous opportunities to think about how they might grow and develop.

Who does Stepping Up?

Over the past five years, over 130 people have completed Stepping Up. Everyone lives and/or worships in a parish in the low-income communities of Hull, Middlesbrough and coastal communities around Redcar, Whitby, Scarborough and Bridlington. Each learning community has been enriched by the diversity of ages (from 21 to 80+ years), church background and life experience.

People do Stepping Up for all sorts of reasons, but the common thread is that they all want to grow in their faith and have a sense that God has something more for them to do. Those who have journeyed alongside Community Ministers observe that:

They were very used to the Vicar does everything model so the thought of stepping up into leading was a scary thing.

- Quite a few people feel called to something but do not know precisely what.
- Some are held back by low confidence and low self-esteem.

She was both 'confident and unconfident' – not sure if she'd heard [God] right and seeking reassurance.

How people grow during Stepping Up

For many participants, it seems that, during their time on Stepping Up, there is a lot of growth going on both **beneath and above the surface**. For example, within their completed 'tree pictures' and responses to other creative exercises, they often record evidence of:

- **Putting down 'deeper roots'** – e.g. developing stronger patterns of prayer and other spiritual practices; recognising and processing their emotions; and becoming more confident and resilient with a greater capacity for "weathering chaos". This 'inner growth' is often linked to the emphasis on listening to God, ourselves, and others in the first term of Stepping Up.

- **Growing up and outwards (new 'branches, shoots and leaves')** – increased knowledge and skills (e.g. 'mapping my parish') and involvement in different areas of church life; experience of more of 'life in all its fullness' and greater confidence in sharing faith.
- **Early signs of missional 'fruit'** – new areas of mission and ministry beginning to emerge or renewed vision for existing ones.



When people talk about their experiences of Stepping Up (whether in research interviews or activities like our 'six questions' exercise), the word 'confidence' kept coming up repeatedly. Confidence was a 'golden thread' running through many people's experience of Stepping Up. Participants report various ways they grew in confidence during their time on Stepping Up. These include:

1. Confidence in their relationship with God

"My awareness of how much God loves me, and to go and love others."

"Accepting myself. Seeing myself as God sees me and realising he sees my potential more than I do."

2. Confidence in themselves (self-worth)

"[Growing] in confidence and learning to understand myself better... I needed to learn to love myself and know my self-worth."

"Accepting myself."

3. Confidence that God can call and use them

"Confidence to be who God created me to be."

"Stepping Up has enabled me to be more confident in using the gifts God has given me."

4. Confidence and competence in their skills and abilities for mission

"I've become a different person. I have more confidence in praying in front of people or praying for someone else."

"Trusting the nudges of the Holy Spirit and acting on them."

"Confidence sharing my story."

Life beyond Stepping Up

People go on to do all manner of missional activities after Stepping Up:

- Community café's, food pantries, homeless meals and warm spaces
- Children and family's ministry – toddler groups, Messy Church, Lego clubs, youth groups; supporting children and young people with additional needs
- Leading new worshipping communities and discussion groups, bible studies and Alpha courses
- Craft groups, film nights, walking groups, community gardens
- Ministries with people in recovery – e.g. 12 steps groups
- Creating prayer spaces in church and community settings
- Home visiting
- Other ministries in Church - helping lead services and sung worship, being church warden or safeguarding officer
- The confidence gained has led to some discerning a call to ordained ministry.

Though there are many different facets to these ministries, much of this work seems to be about creating:

- A sense of belonging, safety, community and family in 'places where life is tough'
 - "People who are isolated and lonely will come away with just a sense of belonging, love... and safe space."
 - "You just see people flourishing and coming out of themselves and seeing who they're really meant to be."
- Spaces for faith exploration and discipleship journeys
 - "And the really interesting thing that we're seeing is people being discipled and clearly changing well before they've even made a commitment to Jesus."



The impact of Stepping Up

When asked whether the missional fruit and growth they are seeing can be linked back to doing Stepping Up, Community Ministers reflected on:

- **Stepping Up as a catalyst for mission** - Several participants clearly said they would not have started various missional groups / ministries if they had not done Stepping Up first. And others reflected that Stepping Up had helped them develop, adapt and expand missional activities they were already running. Stepping Up appears to be very intentional about encouraging and expecting people to step up in mission, but without creating an unnecessary sense of anxiety. Or to put it another way, Stepping Up is clear about outcomes (expecting participants to grow as lay leaders and to step up in mission) but without burdening them with unrealistic targets.
- **The enduring impact of learning from Stepping Up** – Various community Ministers talked about ideas and insights from Stepping Up that had stayed with them that they continued to use in their mission and ministry. In this regard, they particularly valued what Stepping Up had taught them about listening to God, self and others, timing, patience and delegation.
- **Stepping into leadership** - Most participants said that they had not thought of themselves as leaders before doing Stepping Up. Though Stepping Up did not explicitly include any content about leadership,⁸ participants suggested that Stepping Up was good at “teaching you leadership by the back door” and identified valuable leadership lessons they had learned. Some still struggled with the term ‘leader’, preferring to see themselves as ‘servants’.
- **Being recognised and taken seriously** - Participants also talked about the increased ‘oomph’ and sense of responsibility that Stepping Up and becoming a Community Minister had given them. Several also said it had enabled them to be taken more seriously by others in the Church.

“Stepping Up opened up the doors for people like myself [who have always] ... wanted to be able to offer themselves to God, but never been allowed to. And I think Stepping Up opened up eyes and opened up pathways for people like me to be able to go ‘I really want to do that’ and to be given the opportunity to do it.”

⁸ Instead, York diocese offers Stepping Up participants who go on to lead teams the chance to participate in LEAD learning groups, using the LEAD leadership development resources developed by Church Army. <https://churcharmy.org/growing-faith/lead/>



What's different about Stepping Up?

When asked “What, if anything is different or distinctive about Stepping Up’s approach to lay leadership development?”, clergy who have accompanied Community Ministers reflected on the following distinctive features of Stepping Up:

- **A person-centred approach** – Whilst other lay training courses sometimes seem to involve a “sausage factory” approach of “squeezing a person into a box”, those interviewed felt that Stepping Up places a high value on recognising that “each candidate is different”. As one interviewee put it, Stepping Up involves saying: “Here is a space. Where in this space might God be calling you to be?” In this sense, it is more individually directed and personalised.
- **A communal journey** – Several interviewees reflected on the deep, mutually supportive relationships that Stepping Up facilitates through local learning communities. In this regard, one ordained minister commented “it’s very much like our formation training that we did at [theological] college for... clergy training. It’s so supportive.” This often has wider ripples in the life of a Deanery because people from different churches are now “speaking to others... in ways that they wouldn’t have done before”.
- **More than just head knowledge** – Interviewees also suggested that Stepping Up is different from other models of training that focus primarily on “transmission of information” and academic “classroom learning”. Within Stepping Up, there are no essays to write but input is “chewed over relationally”. This was felt to be a “really positive” and “very effective” model, particularly for those who may find an overly academic approach inaccessible, irrelevant or intimidating.



Further Reflections

This section has summarised some of the insights and evidence emerging from the various data collection tools we have used to evaluate the qualitative impact of Stepping Up. As 'insiders' (the Mustard Seed team) and

'outsiders' (external researchers), we have reflected together on this data at various points over the past five years, and the following further observations have emerged from our discussions:

- **Seeking the treasure** – Mustard Seed and Stepping Up have deliberately fostered an 'asset-based' approach to seeing the treasure and the potential within lay people in low-income communities – including people with low literacy or significant experiences of trauma. The wider Church has often overlooked people with experiences like this (or at least only seen them as people to be 'helped') but the experience of Stepping Up participants and Community Ministers points to their giftedness and potential.
- **Home-grown leaders** – The Mustard Seed approach of investing in home-grown local leaders is also a helpful corrective to the wider Church's tendency to sometimes assume that leadership in low-income communities always needs to come from outside. The experience of offering some Community Ministers part-time paid roles in their own mission contexts offers a creative, and potentially more sustainable, alternative to a dominant default model of using external funding to bring in full-time 'experts' from outside.
- **Missional discipleship** – People involved in Stepping Up reflect that it "isn't a training course, its missional discipleship". As noted already, learning to listen to God, self and others lies at its heart, with

participants encouraged to attend to what is going on 'beneath the surface' (deep roots) in term one-before considering how they can step up in mission (branches, shoots, leaves, fruit and nest-building). In this sense, Stepping Up provides a scaffold or trellis for missional discipleship that the wider Church can learn from.

- **Enabling partnership in the gospel** - Enabling lay people to step up in mission is not always easy – either for the individuals involved, their incumbents or their churches. And within low-income and / or trauma-experienced communities, some of the challenges and risks associated with doing this are amplified. Some of the clergy we interviewed spoke candidly about the unlearning and letting go they have had to do in allowing Community Ministers who are 'wired differently' to them to grow and flourish. As one incumbent put it:

"It really is about releasing into ministry, and trust... We've got to release the laypeople into ministry, and not micromanage, and not watch over their shoulders. And not pull them up. Let them do it the way they want to do it. ... They do stuff completely different to me, because their brains work different to me. And just accepting that means that we do so much more."



Part 3: Mustard Seed Thinking

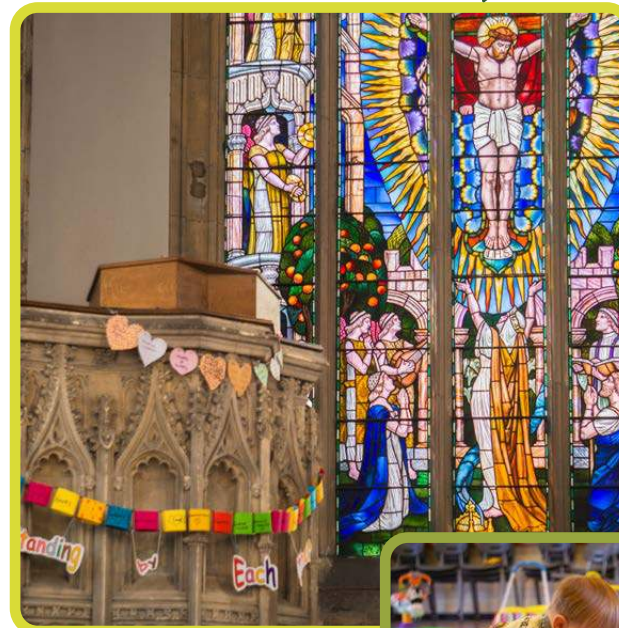
In this section, Heather Black (Mustard Seed Programme Leader) reflects further on Jesus' parable of the Mustard Seed and the 'Mustard Seed growth' seen within Stepping Up.

"With what can we compare the kingdom of God, or what parable will we use for it? It is like a mustard seed, which, when sown upon the ground, is the smallest of all the seeds on earth, yet when it is sown it grows up and becomes the greatest of all shrubs and puts forth large branches, so that the birds of the air can make nests in its shade." Mark 4:30-32 (NRSV)

The Mustard Seed programme is deeply rooted in this Kingdom parable. It has become a key theological resource that shapes and informs all that we do. The theologian Kenneth Bailey has written:

'If the parable is a house in which the listener/reader is invited to take up residence, then that person is urged by the parable to look on the world through the windows of that residence'.⁴

We have dwelt with this parable for over six years, looking out into the churches and communities where the programme is working. We have listened to the voices of people on Stepping Up, Mustard Seed Community Ministers and clergy; we have reflected as a staff team and with the programme board. This is 'theology from the roots up' emerging from the contexts in which the Mustard Seed programme is set and incarnated.¹⁰ We have discovered five windows that are key to the Kingdom growth we are witnessing through the Mustard Seed programme.



⁹ Kenneth E. Bailey, *Jesus Through Middle Eastern Eyes: Cultural Studies in the Gospels* (SPCK: London, 2008), 280-1.

¹⁰ Laurie Green, *Let's Do Theology, Resources for Contextual Theology* (Bloomsbury: London, 2012), ix

Window 1: The potential of the smallest of seeds

The first window draws our attention to the smallest of seeds. Jesus turns our thinking upside down in this parable, he encourages us not to look to the large, great and grand things around us to understand the Kingdom of God but to look for the smallest of things, that may go unnoticed and overlooked, but are full of potential to grow. Feeling small and insignificant, asking 'how can God use me?' were all common experiences for people joining the Stepping Up programme. Yet we have repeatedly seen that with the right kind of support, each person has been full of potential to grow. Small learning communities, safe spaces that are mutually supportive, have provided the right environment to nurture this growth. Stepping Up is a year-long programme, which is a significant commitment, but has allowed the generosity of time for each participant to experience a journey of growth and transformation.

Each one of the people who have completed Stepping Up was faithfully serving in their church and community, but most had experienced little or no opportunity for training and development. Bishop Lynne Cullens reflects on the millions of people from working-class areas who are 'intelligent, articulate, resilient and with strong skill sets and passionate faith'. She states, 'we are each called by God and we should each have opportunity to flourish, to respond, to serve'.¹¹ Stepping Up has given participants a new opportunity to grow, investing in and raising them up as local people, who are experts in their own communities. As noted in the previous section, people have grown in confidence in their relationship with God, confidence in themselves, confidence that God can call and use them, competence and confidence in their skills and abilities for mission. And many are doing new things they never imagined!

"Since doing Stepping Up, my Christian Faith has grown from a small mustard seed to a blossoming flower."

"I have truly appreciated being part of this whole journey. We have laughed, cried, shared, prayed, and even sang. It has been an amazing journey that I will never forget. I have gained so many skills that I know will be put to good use and also share with others."

Window 2: Deep roots

Mustard trees, growing in arid places develop deep roots up to five feet or 1.5 metres, and so this second window invites us to pay attention to our roots. If people are going to flourish and be fruitful, especially in the tough places where the Mustard Seed programme is working, they need to be deeply rooted in the Christian traditions of prayer and scripture. Various writers have highlighted the urgent need to move 'from shallow Christianity to deep transformation'¹² and Stepping Up seeks to do just that. Stepping Up is serious

about people developing deep roots in their relationship with God. Learning how to reflect on their daily lives using the Examen, finding a rhythm of bible reflection and prayer, learning how to hear God's voice for themselves in creation, through their senses and the stillness of contemplative prayer. With the support of their personal mentors, people learn to grow deeply in their walk with God, and many mentors report that they are both inspired and challenged by the people they are mentoring.

"They develop a rhythm and a pattern of prayer and Bible reading, and it becomes just part of their life and because they've been on that journey with others you can see it's really embedded."

"Since doing Stepping Up my Christian Faith has grown massively, I feel closer to God and Jesus. I think more about God in almost everything I do and my everyday day life is filled with faith and fellowship."



¹¹ Lynne Cullens, Some Notes on Class Relevance and the Church <https://lynnecullens.wordpress.com/2019/02/15/some-notes-on-class-relevance-and-the-church/>

¹² This phrase is the subtitle of Peter Scazzero's book, Emotionally Healthy Discipleship: Moving from Shallow Christianity to Deep Transformation (Zondervan: Grand Rapids, 2021).

Window 3: Messy growth

The third window offers a view that is not a neatly cultivated field or garden. We have found that Mustard Seed growth is often unexpected, disruptive, and messy. Paula Gooder in her book on parables reflects on the description of the Roman naturalist Pliny, that the mustard seed 'grows entirely wild' and 'when it has once been sown, it is scarcely possible to get the place free of it'. She suggests that this description of the mustard seed offers an image of the Kingdom of God that is an 'unsettling, disruptive force in the world that can never be eradicated' and that it 'attracts outsiders and outcasts to its shelter who will disrupt the neat expectations of the person sowing the seed'.¹³

As we have reflected with the Mustard Seed team and external researchers, particularly on the reflective 'tree pictures' produced (as explained in Part 2), one of the big themes that emerged was the idea of 'God at work in the Chaos'.¹⁴ We have witnessed the joy of transformed lives held in the love and purposes of God. God speaking into the often chaotic situations where the Mustard Seed programme works, bringing light, life, order, purpose and fruitfulness.¹⁵ Seeing unexpected people stepping up in mission, with all kinds of messy sometimes disruptive growth as their churches become more diverse like the communities they serve.

"Since doing Stepping Up my Christian Faith has had its ups and downs. At times it has felt immense and I really felt I was filled with the Holy Spirit, but also at times I was unsure about what I was doing and whether it was really what God meant for me."



Window 4: Transformation and fruitfulness

As we have witnessed the Mustard Seed programme grow, we have recognised that growth is not simply about size but fruitfulness, an image that is woven into the biblical narrative from the very first page.¹⁶ The fruits of the mustard tree, the seeds, bring about transformation, being used to transform the flavour of food.

So, the fourth window provides a picture of transformation. Stepping Up is a story of transformed lives, people allowing God to shape and re-orientate their lives, described by some as 'whole life' transformation. This transformation often shapes the mission that people step up into. Stepping Up helps people to recognise that the very thing they may believe excludes them from serving God, their story and lived experience, is central to the way God is calling them to serve in mission. There are many examples of Mustard

Seed Community Ministers sharing God's love through the tough things they have experienced, for example bereavement, being a single parent, experiences of homelessness and addiction, neurodiversity, deep loneliness and isolation.

The transforming power of being known and loved by God is beginning to spill over into churches and wider communities, bringing about growth by multiplication not simply addition. Other people are inspired by the transformation they witness and, recognising these are 'ordinary people just like me,' are joining Stepping Up to become leaders in mission themselves. In some churches, there are now second or third generation people on Stepping Up, who have found faith through the witness of people in the earliest Stepping Up groups.

"Since doing Stepping Up my Christian Faith has developed to a level that I never thought possible. I feel a deep sense of peace even though life can be difficult at times. I know I can give God all my cares and concerns to lighten the load sometimes."

"Stepping Up has enabled me to see myself more fully as God sees me and to accept myself and my whole story. As it is me and my story that God uses to reach others."

"Since doing Stepping Up my Christian Faith has grown in ways I never dreamed of. I often see God at work more clearly, what he wants me to do. I can share my faith more easily and when challenges come and I can't see where I'm going, I know God is leading me. I now have hope and faith in the seeds of faith that are growing for me personally and in the wider context."

¹³ Paula Gooder, Biblical Explorations: The Parables (Canterbury Press, London, 2020), 21-22

¹⁴ We are very grateful to Dan Ortiz (former researcher at Church Army's Research Unit) who first articulated this insight in an internal report for the Mustard Seed team.

¹⁵ Genesis 1

¹⁶ Genesis 1:22, Psalm 1:1-3, John 15:5-8.

Window 5: Nest building

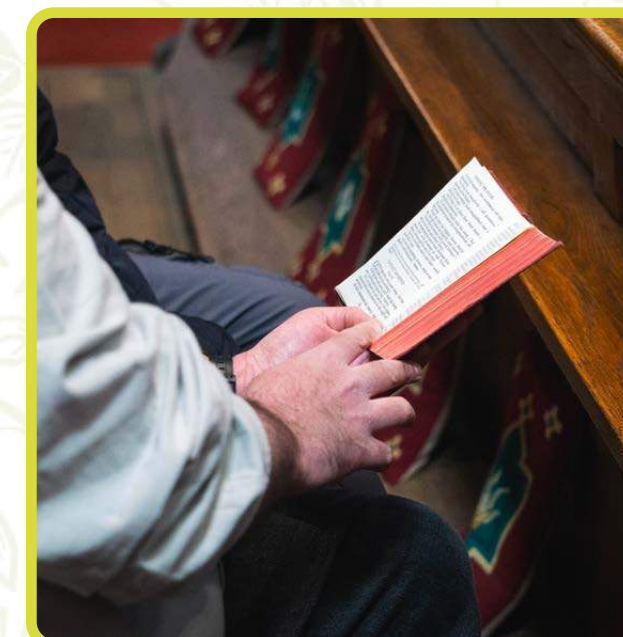
The final window invites us to consider the birds building their nests, gathering twigs, moss, even bits of rubbish to create a home where they can nurture their young. Stepping Up encourages everyone to look within themselves, their churches and communities, and use the gifts and resources they find there to build nests. Safe, welcoming spaces, where people can feel at home, build relationships, receive support and prayer and begin to explore and grow in faith. Built with local resources, these nests are authentic to that community, safe spaces that are built by local people, and therefore places where local people who might see themselves as outsiders can dwell and belong. They include Toddler groups, youth groups, community cafes, warm spaces, bereavement groups, family activities and food communities.

As Andy reflected in Part 2, Stepping Up's approach of 'seeking the treasure' and working with what is locally available (not relying on large amounts of money) is an example of an 'asset-based' approach to mission in low-income communities, rooted in wider principles of Asset Based Community Development.¹⁷

The Mustard Seed programme provides a small start-up grant, a modest investment that strengthens the nests and makes new mission possible. In a small number of cases Community Ministers receive an employment grant, up to two days a week on a Real Living Wage, which adds capacity to build and grow significant areas of mission. This asset-based approach to developing mission is authentic, realistic and sustainable.

"[Another] great thing about Mustard Seed is that it takes people who are embedded in a community, it trains them up and helps them to stay and be more effective in that place where they've started."

"Doing Stepping Up has helped me develop a brand new community ministry that's enabled me to bring intergenerational practice into the life of the Parish – building relationships with people in the community, being the bridge with the church."



¹⁷ See the Church Urban Fund's helpful resource: Exploring Asset Based Community Development https://cuf.org.uk/uploads/resources/Knowledge-Bank/CURRENT-CUF_ABCD_Nov_2025_Interactive_2.pdf

Sowing, growing, nesting

The Mustard Seed parable is also the foundation to the model of mission that runs throughout Stepping Up (based with the author's permission on Laurence Singlehurst's *Sowing, Reaping, Keeping*).¹⁸

Sowing

More sowing

Growing

Nesting

Sowing: We are called to 'be with' people in our communities, which may be in a variety of ways such as those mentioned in Part 2. People experience church as open and welcoming, a place where God's love is known. This widest part of the diagram represents the greatest number of people. 'Success' at this stage is not measured by conversion, but by many more people experiencing their local church as good news.

More sowing: As we spend time with people, we are sowing seeds about who God is, sharing his love, sharing our faith sometimes in practical actions and sometimes in the words we say. There are opportunities to sow more seeds as we listen to people, we

can share something of our own faith story, offer prayer, invite people to experience and explore faith in different ways e.g. seasonal services.

Growing: We are attentive to people and seek to recognise when seeds of faith may begin to grow. We offer the opportunity for people to find out more, ask questions and begin to explore and grow in faith. This is likely to be in small groups using appropriate resources.

Nesting: Creating welcoming communities where people can belong, worship and pray, and be nurtured to grow and flourish. This may be an established worshipping community or a new one.

¹⁸ Laurence Singlehurst, *Sowing, Reaping, Keeping*, People Sensitive Evangelism (Intervarsity Press, Nottingham, 2006)



Part 4: Scattering the seed

In this section, we explore how the wider Church should respond to this report's findings. We consider how Stepping Up might be replicated and identify three core reproducible principles emerging from this work.

It is encouraging that the Church of England is now forming a national strategy to support the vocations (lay and ordained) of people from working class backgrounds.¹⁹ We hope that the learning from the Mustard Seed programme will help to inform this strategy and offer this report as a contribution to thinking especially about the calling and vocations of lay people from low-income communities.

The Mustard Seed team are currently starting work with the Anglican Diocese of Leeds to pilot Stepping Up and Mustard Seed learning in three deaneries. Similar conversations are on-going with other dioceses, some have already taken learning from Mustard

Seed and MPower²⁰ and transplanted it into another context.²¹ Stepping Up has been developed in the particular context of the low-income communities of the Diocese of York, and so as we begin to scatter the seed further afield, we want to consider the core values and principles that are essential to the programme. We also explore how these values connect with the Church of England's strategic priorities²² and the Diocese of York's vision of Living Christ's Story.²³ We hope and pray that the learning outlined here will resource 'mustard seed thinking' across the Diocese of York and beyond into many other Church settings.



¹⁹ <https://www.churchofengland.org/resources/diocesan-resources/ministry-development/addressing-classism-church>

²⁰ <https://www.blackburn.anglican.org/m-power-lay-leadership-training-in-urban>

²¹ <https://southwark.anglican.org/introducing-magnify/>

²² <https://www.churchofengland.org/about/vision-and-strategy>

²³ <https://dioceseofyork.org.uk/our-diocese/living-christs-story/our-vision/>

1. Seeking the treasure in low-income communities

We must not overlook the potential or treasure within lay people in low-income communities

As noted already, the wider Church has sometimes only seen people in low-income communities as beneficiaries of the Church's 'help', but the experience of Stepping Up participants and Community Ministers points to their giftedness and potential. This is extremely relevant to the Church of England's stated priority of becoming '**a Church that is younger and more diverse**'. Within conversations about diversity, considerations about class and classism (prejudice against people belonging to a particular social class) are sometimes overlooked. In view of the experience of Mustard Seed and

Stepping Up, we think it is important for any strategy on lay vocations to be informed by an 'asset-based' approach to valuing the gifts, skills and lived experience of people in low-income communities, not a 'deficit' model of focusing on what is broken or lacking. The stories in this report illustrate what can happen when the Church takes seriously the treasure within lay people in low-income communities and facilitates safe and supportive learning communities where they can grow in confidence, and their gifts and lived experience are developed in mission.



2. Investing in home-grown leaders

Investing in home-grown leaders yields sustainable long-term fruit

Stepping Up's approach to developing home-grown local leaders also provides an alternative to the dominant default model in many Church settings of over-relying on leaders brought in from outside. Investing in local people who are already deeply embedded in their local community and often are likely to remain there for the foreseeable future generates many long-term benefits. It can lead to the establishment of locally rooted projects and ministries, which are potentially more sustainable than those heavily reliant on external leaders who come and go. The initial investment of Mustard Seed has also generated wider ripples because people who complete Stepping Up often tell other people about it, saying "come and see" (like the woman at the well in John 4:29). There are now several 'generations' of people who have

been recruited to Stepping Up through peer-to-peer word-of-mouth recommendation. The 'generosity of time' spent supporting the growth and development of home-grown leaders seems to provide an excellent 'return on investment'. Churches will obviously need external appointments as well, stipendiary clergy with the skills and experience to spot and nurture the potential within local lay people. But becoming **'a Church where mixed ecology is the norm'** (one of the Church of England's three strategic priorities) requires creating an environment in which different forms of ministry and leadership can flourish. And in our view greater attention and imagination needs to be given to the nurturing of different kinds of home-grown leaders.



3. Transformational learning for missionary discipleship

Growing missionary disciples requires a different kind of learning

Insights from Stepping Up are also extremely relevant to the Church of England's stated ambition of becoming **'a church of missionary disciples'**. Stepping Up provides a strong foundation for missional discipleship by encouraging people to attend to what is going on beneath the surface (the 'deep roots' of listening to God, self and others) before considering how they can step up and bear fruit in mission. Or to put it another way, it assumes that there needs to be an intimate connection between 'becoming more like Christ' and 'reaching people we currently don't' (two of York Diocese's goals from Living Christ's Story²⁴). Church training programmes and courses often inadvertently promote an unhelpful separation or siloing of 'mission' from 'discipleship' but Stepping Up intentionally integrates them through local learning communities where lay people can grow as disciples of Jesus **and** in confidence for mission.

The safety and nurturing of the learning communities alongside the prayerful support of mentors is vital to the transformational growth that has been evidenced. A safe space where the trauma and tough things of life can be held, and the generosity of time that allows people to journey with Jesus to a place of greater wholeness, where their lived experience becomes a gift in mission. As noted already, clergy working with Community Ministers suggest that Stepping Up's person-centred and communal approach to learning is key. This 'chewing things over relationally' goes beyond head knowledge and allows deep transformational learning to take place.

The case study that follows provides an example of how one person's journey through Stepping Up has inspired others, a pattern that is now being repeated across the Mustard Seed programme. People growing in confidence as missionary disciples, now leading to second and sometimes third generation people stepping up in mission.



²⁴ <https://dioceseofyork.org.uk/our-diocese/living-christs-story/our-vision/>

Six marks of missionary disciples: a mustard seed story

This model was developed with Bishop Eleanor Sanderson and a small group of practitioners in the Diocese of York. Although the missional journey is shown as a circle, it can begin at different points; for example, people may first find belonging in a church group before they encounter Jesus.



Cerrie's story

Cerrie was one of the first people to complete Stepping Up; Ken and Julia followed later.

I started to go to church with my mum as a child, but when I was a teenager, some tragic events happened which carried through into my life as a young adult leaving me angry, hurt and grieving. I could no longer face



going to church and life became dark and hopeless.

The birth of my daughter some years later was a miracle, she was 'a gift from God.' I remember when she was 5 years old and Sam the local vicar visited her school, this little 'gift from God' asked me to take her to church. It still felt too difficult, I couldn't face going over the threshold of a church, but my daughter kept asking. Eventually I plucked up the courage and went to Church@4 which happened in the community building and not the church, which felt OK. One day there was an offer of prayer, I agreed for the vicar to pray for me, and it was like all the pain and loss lifted, a really deep encounter with Jesus. This is when I really began to follow Jesus, it felt as if I had come home and the church was a loving, welcoming family where with my daughter we could belong.'

I remember Sam the vicar inviting me to join the first Stepping Up group, I didn't really know what it was about, but I wanted to grow in my faith. I had started to lead the Little Lambs toddler group where parents and carers enjoy playing together each week with prayers and songs. I realised I cared deeply about my local community and through the Stepping Up year I began to discover that God was calling me to work with local children, families and young people.



Making and Multiplying: Julia and Ken's story

Julia and Ken first came to church for their grandson's christening. Ken reflects: "At that time I had never been in a better place in my life and strongly felt the need to find a place of worship to give thanks to God for all I had in life. I discussed it with my wife, and we agreed to give Holy Nativity a chance. We were so impressed, the next week we took our grandchildren."

Julia began bringing her grandson to Little Lambs and soon became involved. When Cerrie asked her to help lead the group, she immediately said yes. Julia says: "We have never looked back. We were both confirmed in January 2023. I said to Ken we will go to church enjoy and then come home. Well that never happened!"

Like Cerrie, Julia and Ken have also found a place to belong, and they too have completed Stepping Up. Julia reflecting on her Stepping Up journey says, "it's helped me deepen my understanding of what it means to follow Jesus, strengthen my prayer life, and given me the confidence to say yes to God's call."

Julia has started a bereavement group and Ken a men's group, safe spaces where people can come and belong. Recognising that sometimes people need to find a place to belong, before they begin to explore faith and follow Jesus.

Cerrie now leads the children's and youth work in the church. During the summer holidays Cerrie took seven families who had started to attend the church or community activities on a Christian Family Summer camp. Her prayer is that they will encounter Jesus through sharing with other families, the worship and teaching and choose to follow Jesus as she did nine years ago.

²⁵ This model has informed the proposal for Vision36 for the growth of discipleship with church planting across the Anglican Communion, from the Anglican Communion Commission for Evangelism and Discipleship (ACCED).

Afterword

"This work has shown that where we have eyes to see, God has blessed the Church with the most extraordinary gifts in those considered the most ordinary of people. These stories of Kingdom transformation point to the importance of invitation, of permission-giving and of the steady building up of confidence, and they give those of us working in and with low-income communities, the encouragement that the resources to evangelise these too-often-forgotten backwaters, are actually scattered – by God the gracious Sower – all around us."

Rt. Revd. Lynne Cullens

Bishop of Barking and Chair of the Estates
Evangelism Task Group

"Jesus taught that the Kingdom of God is like a mustard seed: small, easily missed, yet full of extraordinary potential. These stories bear witness to that truth. They are signs of God's Kingdom taking root, growing, and offering shelter, hope and belonging to many. As we read them, we are reminded that the question is not whether God is able to do more through his Spirit, but whether we are willing to place more of ourselves in his hands. May this report encourage us to recognise the mustard seeds God has planted among us and to trust him for the growth."

**The Most Rev. and the Rt Hon.
Stephen Cottrell**

The Lord Archbishop of York.



To find out more...

You can find out more about the Mustard Seed programme, read many more stories and watch some inspiring films through visiting the website www.mseed.org



Dr Andy Wier is a researcher, consultant and practical theologian who supports churches and faith-based organisations in mission. He has been accompanying the Mustard Seed Programme as a research consultant since 2021, initially through his previous role as Team Leader of Church Army's Research Unit and subsequently through his consultancy practice Winging It Consulting. Alongside his work with Winging It Consulting, Andy is also a part-time Tutor at St Hild College, a Fellow of St John's College Durham and a Lay Reader in the Diocese of Sheffield.

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Heather Black MA has been leading the Mustard Seed programme in the Diocese of York since 2020. She has a master's in theology and ministry and has worked collaboratively with Andy Wier in exploring how God has been at work through the Mustard Seed programme. Heather has lived and worked in Low-income Communities in the Diocese of York for over 25 years and describes 'the edge' as the place she loves to be.

heather.black@yorkdiocese.org



The image features a logo for 'Mustard Seed' centered within a solid olive-green circle. The text 'Mustard' is in a white, sans-serif font, with a horizontal line underneath it. Below the line, the word 'Seed' is also in a white, sans-serif font. The background of the entire image is a light green, detailed line drawing of a mustard plant, showing its stems, leaves, and clusters of small flowers or seed pods. The plant appears to be growing upwards from the bottom right towards the top left.

Mustard
Seed