



PIONEERING
MISSION IS...
A SPECTRUM

ANVIL: Journal of Theology and Mission
VOL 34, ISSUE 1

Tina Hodgett and
Paul Bradbury

This article has grown out of recent conversations surrounding the use of the term of ‘Pioneer Minister’. Initially an overview of the terminology is given before the ‘pioneer spectrum’ is offered. The pioneer spectrum invites a broader means of understanding pioneer ministry and in particular encourages a deeper appreciation for those pioneer ministers working in innovative ways to see ‘the future emerging in the present’.

PIONEER DEFINITIONS

The search for a definition of the word ‘pioneer’ in a Church of England vocational context began over ten years ago. I (Tina) remember a debate at theological college over a draft proposal made by Dave Male, now National Adviser for Pioneer Development. It has taken much of the intervening period to arrive at the current definition, approved by the Ministry Council:

Pioneers are people called by God who are the first to see and creatively respond to the Holy Spirit’s initiatives with those outside the church; gathering others around them as they seek to establish new contextual Christian community.¹

Meanwhile other definitions have gained currency in other contexts. Jonny Baker’s succinct description of pioneers as people with ‘the gift of not fitting in’² grew out of his contact with pioneers on the CMS Pioneer Mission Leadership Training course. The apparently paradoxical term ‘loyal radicals’³ used to describe those who were totally committed both to the inherited church and to missional change, was welcomed as a defence against the accusation that pioneer work was superficial and uninformed by theology and tradition. George Lings develops a typology of pioneer ministers that identifies the differences in individual charism and character

which lead some to be serial initiators and others to sustain what has already been started, and helpfully addresses the frequently-posed question, ‘Isn’t everyone a pioneer?’⁴ Most recently Dave Male has made the distinction between parish-based pioneers and fresh start pioneers.⁵

It seemed presumptuous to begin work on an additional typology for defining the pioneer vocation, but fresh in post in a diocese which had put pioneer work at the centre of its new diocesan strategy, I was regularly involved in conversations where participants were working with their own personal interpretation of the word ‘pioneer’ with all the risk of miscommunication that entailed. In a situation where policy depended on engaging everyone to move together towards a shared destination, it seemed vital that all participants were sharing the same interpretative framework when they spoke of pioneers. I began to sketch out a diagram I could use with colleagues to give context to our discussions, developing it in dialogue with representatives of different constituencies.

TOWARD A SPECTRUM OF PIONEER VOCATIONS

The roots of the Pioneer Spectrum (see Figure 1) lie in a conversation I (Tina) had with a member of a diocesan committee. A fellow pioneer minister who specialised in a form of church planting he endearingly called ‘bish-bash-bosh-bouncy-castle’⁶ asked me and a colleague (also pioneer ministers, engaged in what I would call ‘exploring spirituality on the edge’) how we saw our call and ministry. It was clear he didn’t fully understand what we were about, and was, I suspect, concerned about our orthodoxy.

The generosity of his question allowed us to explain, and he was reassured and subsequently encouraging of our work. However, the conversation made me realise that even within the ranks of people who self-identify as pioneers there is potential for significant misunderstanding, and for insecurity and suspicion to creep in and undermine what God is doing.

Sometime later through contact with the CMS pioneer community I was given a document entitled Best Guess Typology of Current Approaches to Church by Richard Passmore.⁷ This typology spanned a range of

¹ <https://www.cofepioneer.org/pioneermeaning>

² Baker, J. and Ross, C. (eds) *The Pioneer Gift: Explorations in mission* (Canterbury Press Norwich, 2014)

³ <http://acpi.org.uk/2017/09/13/loyal-radicals/>

⁴ Lings G, *Looking in the Mirror; what makes a pioneer?* in Male, D. ‘Pioneers 4 Life’ (BRF, Abingdon, 2011) p30- 47.

⁵ <https://www.cofepioneer.org/types/>

⁶ This refers to the process of gathering people through community events with the aim of building bridges with unchurched people and having opportunities to share the gospel

⁷ Richard Passmore’s typology is adapted from Gerald Arbuckle, *Refounding the Church*, (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1993)

ecclesiologies from traditional through modal/sodal⁸ to what Passmore terms ‘missional sodal’, or ‘sobornostic’ (from the Orthodox Russian concept of sobornost). This latter category describes an approach to church which foresees the possibility of venturing off the edges of the existing ecclesial map into uncharted territory. This may appear threatening to the more orthodox mind, but it may also represent the route the church has to take into the future in order to be the most contextually appropriate means of gospel transmission for subsequent generations, and to be the deeply enculturated expression of church needed in the coming world.

INNOVATORS, ADAPTORS AND OTHER PIONEERS

Independently I (Paul) was reading Gerald Arbuckle’s *Refounding the Church* and finding it a rich resource to help clarify the particular vocations of pioneers. Arbuckle makes the distinction between innovators and adaptors:

Both are creative persons and needed, especially the innovative and refounding type; both threaten the group because they dissent from the acceptable ways of doing things, but it is the innovator that particularly endangers the group’s security...⁹

What we term ‘pioneer innovators’ are therefore these deeply committed sodal or ‘sobornostic’ pioneer leaders who with their teams venture out beyond the edges of the church’s structures to explore the creation of faithful expressions of Christian life among people of a new context. Their innovations, which provide an initially disturbing influence on the inherited church, in some cases become welcomed by the broader church in time. It is important to affirm, however, that the length of ‘time’ may well be unknown, certainly significant, a time in which the church needs to protect the vocation of these pioneers, trusting that the fruit of their ministry may be a generation or more in the making.

It is ‘pioneer adaptors’ who have the creative gift to adapt these innovations to their own contexts. In addition, ‘pioneer adaptors’ are also skilled in adapting in the other direction, as it were, taking tropes of the established church’s ritual and rhythm and adapting them into new environments.

These distinctions map closely onto a growing experience in the pioneer ministry community: that a number of innovative pioneer projects have now been adopted,

“Pioneers are people called by God who are the first to see and creatively respond to the Holy Spirit’s initiatives with those outside the church; gathering others around them as they seek to establish new contextual Christian community.”¹

adapted and applied by others. Messy Church, as one example, was an innovative piece of pioneer ministry when it was first created by Lucy Moore in Portsmouth, and continues to innovate in new areas such as among the elderly and armed forces. Those who have applied the model may be ‘pioneer adaptors’, faithfully listening to context and shaping the model to fit their own context. Meanwhile the many iterations of cafe church are a good example of ‘adaptors’ working in the other direction.

There are also contexts in which replication is applicable, where a context is seen to be sufficiently comparable so that a successful model of church can simply be repeated. There is a risk in replication without sufficient reflection on context, or openness to the innovative influence of local culture. Some models by their very nature leave little room for adaptation. They are freighted heavily with the culture of those leading it and may struggle to engage deeply in cultures disconnected from inherited forms of church. We term the leaders of such initiatives ‘church replicators’.

There are also those we call ‘pioneer activists’, whose gift and vocation is to shape place in ways that seek to align a community, network or industry with the values of the Kingdom. Seeing themselves as missionaries, but without the express intention of planting a church, these pioneers are nevertheless creating highly innovative Kingdom

⁸ Winter, R.D. *The Two Structures of Redemptive Mission*, based on a paper given at the All-Asia Mission Consultation in Seoul, Korea, in August 1973

⁹ Arbuckle G, *Refounding the Church*, (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1993),109

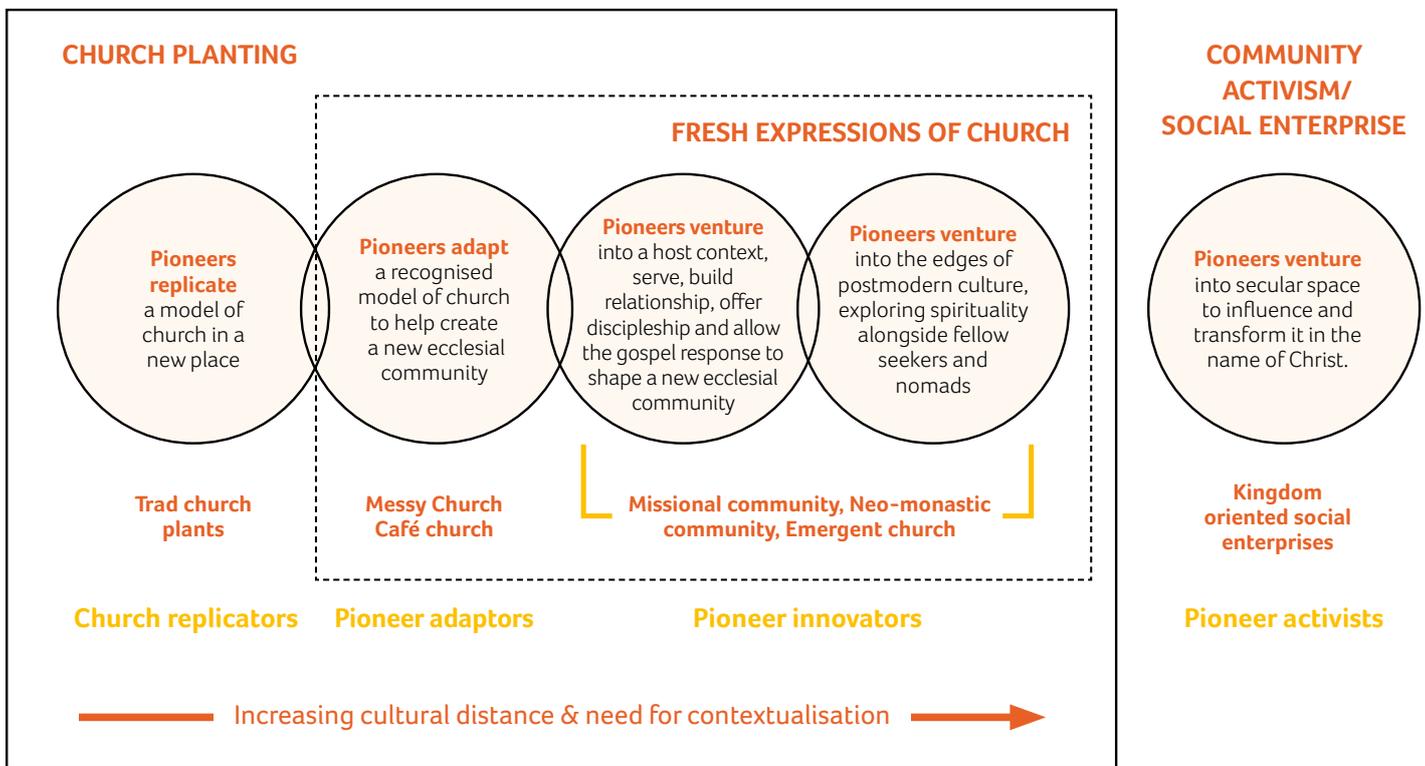


Fig 1 Pioneer Spectrum – shows the range of pioneer ministry vocations on an axis of increasing ‘cultural distance’ from the missionary or missional team. Also shows how these vocations relate to the intention of planting churches and to the concept of fresh expressions of church.

responses to the pressing issues of our communities. There is an important vocation which deserves recognition and support.

CULTURAL DISTANCE

The spectrum has helped positively identify the particular charism of a variety of pioneers and church planters. Furthermore, we began to realise that it did so in ways that mapped onto a spectrum of ‘cultural distance’. Cultural distance is a concept that tries to assess how far from any meaningful engagement with the gospel a subculture or people group is.¹⁰ It visualises the reality of our post-Christendom context where issues of race, language, history, religion/worldview create a complex and diverse cultural landscape in which mission takes place. The cultural distance from, for example, a rural village in Wiltshire to an urban housing estate in London is immense. Culture is also no longer purely about place, as neighbourhoods become increasingly diverse and people identify with networks more than neighbourhoods, as well as form significant strands

of identity on the internet. Hence at one end of the spectrum is a culture similar in character to that of the missional team; at the other end is a culture with significant barriers of language, worldview and attitude to those engaging with it.

CONCLUSIONS

In the confusion around our use of language for pioneers and with the competition for resources that is the reality in many denominations (and certainly in our own Anglican structures) we believe the pioneer spectrum is helpful. It says to the pioneer innovator who is working slowly in an incarnational mode among, say, poor urban young adults, that their vocation and ministry is very different and yet equally as valid as the resource church¹¹ leader up the road. These two pioneer leaders may be only a mile apart, but they are ministering in very different worlds, something this spectrum makes visible. Mapping these vocations onto an axis of cultural distance also lends weight to the argument that the particularly precious vocation of many pioneer innovators must be

¹⁰ For an explanation and exploration of cultural distance see Hirsch A, *The Forgotten Ways*, (Baker, Grand Rapids, 2006), 56 -63

¹¹ ‘Resource church’ is an increasingly common term in the Church of England for church plants that tend to replicate a Sunday service and program-based congregational model of church. They have emerged as a concept from the Holy Trinity Brompton network of churches and

given space and time. Our cultural context has not settled into some kind of post-Christendom consensus. The only given is that of continuous change. The experience and learnings of our innovators, in failure as well as success, are the seeds of a significant element of the future of the church.

As well as ensuring an understanding of the range of pioneer vocations that the Holy Spirit has conceived, the pioneer spectrum protects the possibility of a broader range of ways of being church than those we have already imagined and begun to see emerging. In particular it is vital to draw the attention of all those concerned with the future of the church to the concept that there may be more radical, exploratory, imaginative ecclesial communities than we have yet seen, and to give space within our structures and systems for these embryonic churches to be implanted and take shape.

The pioneers who carry the responsibility of bringing these God-ideas into the world will need understanding, encouragement and support as they work in a prophetic way to make them visible, a sign of the future emerging in the present.

Tina Hodgett is Evangelism Team Leader in the Diocese of Bath and Wells and **Paul Bradbury** is co-ordinator of the South Central RTP Pioneer Hub



are rapidly becoming a significant element of the church planting and mission strategy of many Dioceses.

ANVIL: JOURNAL OF THEOLOGY AND MISSION



To contact the editors please email
anvil@churchmissionsociety.org



Photography by Jonny Baker unless otherwise stated
www.flickr.com/photos/jonnybaker

Church Mission Society is a mission community acknowledged by the Church of England

Registered Company No. 6985330 and Registered Charity No. 1131655 (England and Wales) and SC047163 (Scotland) Also part of CMS: The South American Mission Society. Registered Company No. 65048 and Registered Charity No 221328 (England and Wales), The Church Mission Society Trust. Registered charity number 1131655-1 (previously 220297), Registered and principal offices of all above entities: Watlington Road, Oxford, OX4 6BZ.