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Lay Pioneering and Thriving in Mission



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Contents

1	Introduction	3
2	Being a Lay Pioneer	6
3	Neighbourhood Networks	8
4	Listening to the Neighbourhood.....	12
5	The Gravitational Pull of Sundays and a Renewed Imagination ..	15
6	Being at the Boundary	18
7	Finding Space as a Lay Pioneer	21
8	Theological Insights for Thriving as Lay Pioneers	23
9	Enabling Churches to Thrive.....	25
	Notes	27

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At Church Mission Society, we believe that every Christian is called to join in God’s mission, whether that means crossing the street or crossing continents, and we want to set people free to put that call into action.

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1

Introduction

Much of the emphasis in churches seems to be about finding ways to get lay people more involved in mission and ministry, and yet there is a growing movement of lay people who are already actively involved in their local communities and engaged in mission. They have become known as lay pioneers; people who have sensed a call from God to connect with different people in new ways. They want to see what God is doing in the world and to join in. This movement of lay mission was first recognized by the Church of England's *Mission-shaped Church* report and led to the launch of Fresh Expressions in partnership with the Methodists and a number of other denominations.¹

My own story is of being a lay pioneer, although at the time I would not have used that word. At university in the early 2000s I was asking about how church and faith connected with non-Christian friends. These questions continued to surface while working for a mission organization in Uruguay and later with social action charities in the UK. I explored these things in practice by getting involved in a missional community locally and through my studies, first a masters and then a doctorate. I now work for the Church Mission Society (CMS) and am part of the team supporting and training pioneers, both lay and ordained. It is exciting to work with these pioneers who are doing inspiring things in their neighbourhoods and communities. Because of my work I see up close the many joys and struggles that lay pioneers experience. As I embarked on my research with lay pioneers, which forms the basis of this booklet, I wanted to listen to their experiences, to be able to share those experiences with others and to help lay pioneers thrive in mission. I believe these insights from lay pioneers around mission and church can also contribute to others thriving in mission, both as individuals and churches.

Pioneers are doing inspiring things in their communities

Being a Mission-Shaped Church

Lay pioneering was formally drawn into the Church of England by the *Mission-shaped Church* report in 2004.² Despite often being viewed as a report which asked questions about church decline and how to reverse it, it was actually an attempt to listen to, recognize and share the experience of a grass roots movement of lay people engaged in mission and exploring church within their

neighbourhoods and communities. Rowan Williams, who instigated the work, recognized this movement as a sign of the Holy Spirit at work and wanted to see how the Church of England could be ‘renewed from the edges.’³ This coincided with similar questions arising within British Methodism. Together they launched Fresh Expressions, an organization to support and encourage these grassroots communities and churches. Later the term ‘pioneer’ became used as the name for people who were at the heart of this grassroots mission work.

Little research listened to the voices of lay pioneers

The term ‘lay pioneer’ is a bit clunky, but I have persisted with it because it identifies two key things I want to explore. First, this is focused on lay people, the majority of Christians—not the ordained. I was surprised to find that there was very little research which listened to the voices of lay pioneers, given that from its origins it was a lay movement. Secondly, this is about pioneers and pioneering. The Church of England defines pioneers as ‘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.’⁴

Research and Reflection

This booklet is based on a research project where I gathered focus groups of lay pioneers on Zoom and listened to their experience.⁵ In total 28 lay pioneers participated. Some were in formal paid roles within churches, some were self-supporting with little formal recognition from their local church, some were running businesses around their pioneering, and others were finding space away from formal church structures. Most had Methodist or Church of England connections, but not all. This booklet is not a ‘how-to’ guide to pioneering—there are already good ones available.⁶ It is an extended reflection on what I heard from these lay pioneers, the things which help them to thrive in their calling, and what they have learnt which can help churches to thrive in mission. I attend a Church of England church and work for CMS, which is an acknowledged community of the Church of England, and so I often draw from Church of England documents, but I believe the insights emerging are more widely applicable.

Each chapter begins with an account of a lay pioneer, using their own words as much as possible. I have used pseudonyms to protect their identity. Common themes about being a pioneer are identified in chapter two. Neighbourhood networks are one key way in which lay pioneers work, and chapter three looks at how they build neighbourhood networks. Chapter four explores the learning from those networks. An important part of lay pioneers’ experience

is how they relate to local churches. Chapter five asks questions about the place of the Sunday service and identifies patterns in the ways lay pioneering creates space to reimagine church. Chapter six expresses how lay pioneers find themselves in boundary spaces between church and world, and chapter seven asks how churches can make space to help lay pioneers to thrive in their vocation. To finish, chapter eight draws together key theological insights to help lay pioneers thrive before chapter nine suggests ways that churches can learn from lay pioneers and thrive too.

I anticipate a variety of readers. If you are a lay pioneer I hope that you will find it helpful to reflect on other lay pioneers' experiences and think about finding spaces where you can thrive. If you are someone who works with lay pioneers I hope this gives opportunities to learn from lay pioneers and think about how you can create spaces for you to thrive together. Perhaps you are suspicious or sceptical about pioneering. I hope that this might offer some insights in practice and theology which can benefit us all. I believe that the attentive listening I carry out here offers a way through some of the divisiveness that has been experienced and can help everyone to find some common ground. After all, the concrete realities of mission and ministry are more nuanced and interwoven than our categorizations allow.

2

Being a Lay Pioneer

While there are a number of definitions of pioneering, they do not always get to the heart of the experience of lay pioneering. In my conversations with lay pioneers there were some common themes: a sense of calling to connect with new people beyond the church; the focus on building relationships; noticing surprise encounters; and feeling on the fringes. This chapter unpacks the experience of being a lay pioneer and the joys, challenges and questions which come with it.

Lydia is part of a Church of England church. She is not paid for her pioneering and works to support herself. As she transitioned out of classical dancing she 'started a journey of faith, which ended up with me feeling a call to help people to learn how to connect with the body and movement in prayer.' This has been something she has been doing in different ways for 25 years. 'It was hard to get the finances' and 'people were quite often judging—"how many people did you get?"' She had felt 'on the fringe, knowing that there was something I was really passionate about, but not seeing it prioritized within the mainstream church.' It was costly and she began to feel 'Am I mad?' But discovering lay pioneering, connecting with others and getting some training has helped her to make sense of it. She is energized by people finding her workshops helpful and is excited to finally have an opportunity to develop work around well-being with another lay pioneer.

Lydia's story reveals the tensions felt by lay pioneers. Nearly all the lay pioneers I spoke to framed their pioneering as a response to feeling called by God, perhaps to the local neighbourhood, or to others not connected to church—in Lydia's case seeing possibilities through dance, movement and holistic spirituality. But there is a tension because this sense of calling puts the lay pioneer on what Lydia describes as the 'fringe.' The calling is not easily incorporated into the life of the local church, and it is costly for lay pioneers—financially costly in some cases, and costly in feeling misunderstood and judged. Yet at the heart of their sense of calling is a passion, a gifting and a set of skills. The lay pioneers were resourced and sustained by living out this calling. Tanya, an unpaid Methodist lay pioneer, identified how she was 'energized by being out in the community. And that was where my strengths

lay.' Being able to engage with the people they feel called to and doing the things they feel gifted in was a key way lay pioneers were able to thrive.

Lydia only discovered the label of 'pioneer' after years of pursuing her calling. Having felt like she was the only one, she found networks of pioneers made up of people who had had a similar experience to her, who were supportive and felt called to similar things. This helped her to make sense of her own calling. A large number of the lay pioneers I spoke to only discovered the term 'pioneer' after they had already been doing it for a while and, like Lydia, they found that identity affirming and that it connected them to supportive networks.

As well as a sense of calling, lay pioneers identified the surprising encounters and 'coincidences' which led them to where they are now. Lydia's chance encounter with another lay pioneer led to her developing well-being workshops in the local area. Lay pioneers seem to be able to notice these encounters and see them as opportunities to be explored and developed. They are opportunities to try something different.

The lay pioneers' calling often seems to bring them to what, in chapter six, I will call boundary spaces. Lay pioneers regularly find themselves straddling borders and boundaries which can lead to lay pioneers often feeling on the edges or fringes of church. Through their actions and the relationships that they build, lay pioneers begin to bring those, often artificial, boundaries down.

Some people hesitate to identify as a lay pioneer because they do not think what they do is particularly significant. However, by accepting the label of pioneer, as Lydia's story shows, they can find support and encouragement from others with a similar sense of calling. The majority of lay pioneers are not people with grand strategic plans to change the church or reverse church decline, but quite ordinary people seeking to respond to God's calling, doing things which are life-giving and energizing and which make a difference to others.

3

Neighbourhood Networks

Lay pioneers are energized by being out in the world, making connections and seeing what emerges. Many of the lay pioneers had found that their pioneering had led them to engage with or develop neighbourhood networks which stretched far beyond the church congregation and broke down the distinctions often made between church and world.

Lucy is employed by a Methodist church. Although not employed in an official pioneer role, she identifies herself as 'a pioneer by character.' 'All I've done in my life is pioneer projects, not in any recognized sense.' She has connected with local groups and services working in the community to support people who are lonely and isolated. Their community café has become a hub for many of the local services, running groups and workshops. The café provides 'a safe place for people to belong and be accepted.' People can drop in for a cup of tea and piece of cake, but that 'opens up a world of things, spiritual and not spiritual' and they support, listen and offer prayer.

She sees it as a well-being hub with broad networks. A fresh expression of worship has grown up which Lucy calls a 'church for the unchurched.' She is excited to see 'a congregation that's growing there.' Lucy reflects, 'To see people having come through the door of the of the café, and now joining the community of volunteers, and seeing them sharing in the prayer meetings and sharing in the life, the spiritual life of that community, that's what makes me get up in the morning, that's what keeps me going.'

For many of the lay pioneers I spoke to, the joy of lay pioneering was the relationships they built in the local community. Lucy had been able to host a café which had become a community hub and a place of networking. Alan's story was similar. He took early retirement to pursue lay pioneering in his local Methodist church, finding part-time work to support himself. The church building had been damaged and the church took the opportunity to rebuild it with a community café. He comments, 'We got the little glimmer of light when it was the community outside who wanted to be part of us.' They became aware of the gaps and cracks in support locally and the café became a place

of gathering and support for the neighbourhood. The lay pioneering of Lucy, Alan and others taking part in the research became increasingly focused on developing neighbourhood networks.

Different outcomes of this pioneering were celebrated. Lucy was delighted by the new worshipping congregation emerging. Alan was pleased to see the church building used to help these neighbourhood networks develop and grow. Others, like Philip, were enlivened by joining in the neighbourhood networks already present. He was an unpaid Methodist lay pioneer who decided to switch to a four-day working week to allow him to pioneer. He connected with his neighbours and a local community worker and pursued the opportunities which arose. For many I spoke to, their lay pioneering was not primarily about evangelism but, as Lucy identified, about creating spaces of acceptance and belonging. God was anticipated to be at work in the relationships that were forming.

In an increasingly individualized society, lay pioneers were finding ways of reconnecting people

In an increasingly individualized society, these lay pioneers were finding ways of reconnecting people, drawing together groups, services and networks. Lucy's café began to be used by social prescribers, NHS, mental health workers and artists. Similarly, a repair café run by lay pioneer Bridget became the meeting place for the local Extinction Rebellion group. This reweaving of social connections to bring together people who would not normally cross paths, and to work towards the common good, brought glimpses of the kingdom of God and was a small part of the reconciling work of the Spirit.

Engaging the Outside World?

Many of the lay pioneers found the sharp distinctions made by their churches between church and world were difficult to square with their experience of pioneering. Philip was surprised how his local Methodist church started talking about 'engaging the outside world.' He found this use of 'outside' telling, showing how they saw the world as separate from them. His experience was much more integrated. Whereas many churches talk about church as the place of recharging and refresh to go into the world, pioneers saw the world as the place of energy, life and God's presence. They found that the boundary between church and world was artificial, and felt it caused their local churches to struggle to engage with the people around them.

Tanya, an unpaid lay pioneer involved in supporting refugees, talked about how people from her church wanted to give things to the refugees but were frightened of meeting them. She 'breaks down the barriers' by taking them

with her to give the items, and ‘they start making friendships and things.’ It was not just the lay pioneers I spoke with who found this apparent separation of church and world difficult. Kelly, a paid lay pioneer in a coastal town, quickly discovered that many of the community workers and volunteers she connected with were Christians who no longer went to church. They had stopped attending church because it felt disconnected from the local community where they felt at home.

There are resonances here between the kinds of networks the pioneers are developing or getting involved in and the Anglican theology of parish. For Andrew Rumsey, ‘The Anglican parish is the field of proximate social relations, the common ground, in which this mutual recognition takes place: where neighbourhood is both acknowledged and practised.’⁷ While in many ways this fits the lay pioneers’ experience, they no longer saw the church as being at the centre of those relationships, but part of a network of relationships. Donna described how connecting with other pioneers helped her to see different ways of doing things. She explained:

It kind of spreads out into our friendships and just being alongside people in our communities. So even if they don’t come to our events, it still just helps us to bless people where they are. For me, it’s not about like getting people into church, which kind of doesn’t work with churches.

Rather than an aim of getting people to church, the Christian community becomes part of the web of relationships within the local community. This understanding of neighbourhood resonates with Jesus’ parables of the kingdom; the yeast spreading through the dough, or the mustard seed which grows into a tree which provides shelter and shade (Matt 13.31–33). Through the practice of lay pioneers the parish and the role of churches in it is being reimagined.

Calling them neighbourhood networks makes a connection with the lawyer’s question to Jesus in Luke 10 and the parable often referred to as the Good Samaritan. The lawyer asks, ‘Who is my neighbour?’ but the reply he gets is not quite what he hoped for. The lawyer wanted to know who he needed to love, but Jesus tells him about a Jewish man, like him, travelling from Jerusalem who is mugged. Having been left for dead he is passed by respected people from his own community, a Levite and a priest.

But a Samaritan while travelling came near him; and when he saw him, he was moved with pity. He went to him and bandaged his wounds, having poured oil and wine on them. Then he put him on his own

animal, brought him to an inn, and took care of him. The next day he took out two denarii, gave them to the innkeeper, and said, 'Take care of him; and when I come back, I will repay you whatever more you spend.' Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbour to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?' He said, 'The one who showed him mercy.' Jesus said to him, 'Go and do likewise.' (Luke 10.33-37 NRSV)

The Samaritan, from a different community with different beliefs, is not only the Jewish man's (that is, the lawyer's) neighbour, but the real challenge is that Jesus is calling him to love the neighbour who serves and offers something to him. So, rather than choosing to be like the 'good' Samaritan, perhaps the point is to notice the neighbours whom he might receive from. This is a challenge for churches who have been used to being the ones with the resources, the ones with a mandate to serve and occupy the central position in the community. What the experiences of these lay pioneers suggests is that moving towards more mutual and receptive patterns of neighbourhood, receiving as well as giving, is fruitful and life giving, opening up new possibilities.

Because many of the lay pioneers are already part of the neighbourhood, they often come in with a different posture. They seek to nurture and develop relationships, not as those with all the resources to provide for others, but as those who are also needy, and need to receive from others. These lay pioneers did not see themselves as at the centre of a neighbourhood, but part of it, interested in relationships and networks for the common good.

4

Listening to the Neighbourhood

Because lay pioneers are developing these mutual neighbourhood networks and building relationships with a diverse range of people, they frequently have a good sense of what people are interested in and seeking, and of how they view church.

Kate, at the time of the research, was an unpaid lay pioneer. She had sensed a call to ordained ministry and pursued that, but it was a slow process and took years. 'I went to the Bishop's Advisory Panel, and they hated me.' The bishop encouraged her to pursue pioneering and found the funds for her to do some training. Once trained she has not felt supported and feels, 'The diocese has never affirmed me in what I do.' She continues to follow what she is passionate about and feels called to. 'I basically work with people outside of the church, because there's loads more folk out there so I'm quite happy with that.' She worked as a missionary for a number of years but was made redundant because 'the church doesn't really get it.'

She now has a number of part-time jobs and is still in the same community she has always been in, developing relationships and supporting people. 'It's always about trying to fit yourself into this thing. Whereas more and more, I'm just being the person I have to be for God, with God, to do what I have to do.' People might not be coming to church, but Kate's experience is that many are still looking for places to talk about spiritual issues and find nourishment. She feels that churches are not listening to those 'on the edges' and that those 'on the edges' do not trust the church in return.

Kate's story resonates with other lay pioneers I spoke to and brings two key insights. First, lay pioneers' experience suggests that many people in the UK are not interested in returning to church. Secondly, despite a narrative of secularization, many people are happy to have conversations about spiritual things and are finding spaces to have those conversations.

Much of what the Church of England, the Methodist Church and other denominations are doing is aimed at getting people to come back to church. The Church of England's focus on this comes through Renewal and Reform.

One of the key documents which launched Renewal and Reform in 2015 states, 'One of the clear and intended outcomes of this work is to reverse the decline of the Church of England so that we become a growing church, in every region and for every generation.'⁸ And yet pioneers' experience suggests this is unlikely to happen. Philip reflects that he spent a few years doing alternative worship with a number of people from church and enjoyed the creativity but now sees it less positively. 'People aren't going to come to this, you know, it's very unlikely. Yes, God can do amazing things, but it's very unlikely, you're not sort of understanding where other people are at.' He concludes, 'I think my mindset now is just trying to find ways of loving people. And there's loads of connections I've made and opportunities.'

The Turn to Community

For Philip the turn to the community, discussed in the previous chapter, comes out of this realization that people are not looking to return to church. Many discussions about reversing church decline seem to focus on how to make church more attractive. Some advocate for better coffee, being more welcoming, more up-to-date music, more trendy preachers or returning to the more traditional patterns of worship, but all of these are premised on a belief that people would go to church if the experience was right. In contrast lay pioneers' experience indicates that church attendance is not even on many people's radar.

Lisa works for a rural Methodist church. She reflects that even in the more traditional atmosphere of the village, 'Church isn't somewhere people are going to go on a Sunday.' But many people are still keen to connect with the local church in some way. She sees herself as 'bridging the gap' between the church and the village. She does storytelling at the preschool and supports the local toddler groups, but comments, 'It's important to make sure that the people in our church don't think that this is a stepping stone to getting them to come in on a Sunday.' Like Philip and Lisa, many of the lay pioneers were fed up with being asked questions like, 'Well, when are they going to come on Sunday?' or feeling like they themselves have to justify not being present at the Sunday morning service. They see it as a much longer process of reconnecting the local church with the local community and exploring how to be a Christian presence within the community. They feel that the desire for a quick fix can get in the way of this.

Lay pioneers' experience indicates that church attendance is not on many people's radar

An important Bible passage for Renewal and Reform is, 'The harvest is plentiful, but the labourers are few; therefore ask the Lord of the harvest to

send out labourers into his harvest' (Luke 10.2, NRSV). But in both Matthew 9 and Luke 10 this passage precedes the sending out of the disciples (in Matthew of the 12, in Luke of the 72) to receive hospitality from those villages and to proclaim the kingdom of God as near. When they return in Luke 10 they are amazed at the things they have seen. There is no indication that more disciples have joined them, but they have connected with 'people of peace' in the villages and experienced God at work. Given the enthusiasm from the disciples and from Jesus about what has happened it appears the purpose was not primarily to find new followers to travel with them but to discover God already at work and prepare for Jesus' visit. Lay pioneers do not tend see their neighbourhood networks as a way of getting people into church but of reconnecting with the neighbourhood and being attentive to how God is already at work. This is a different way of seeing mission and one which some churches found difficult to hear and understand. Lay pioneers are engaged in a practice of mission which is attentive to God and trusting that Jesus continues to be at work through the Spirit.

Exploring Questions

As they built these local relationships, lay pioneers found that many people were more open to exploring questions around life, belief and faith. The problem was not that people were not interested, many were, but they were unlikely to turn up at church on a Sunday. Lay pioneers found that many people did not trust churches and that rebuilding trust through the neighbourhood networks was vital. Ian, who will be introduced in the next chapter, was aware that being known as someone employed by the Church of England was a barrier and some people would not talk to him because of it. Kelly reflected that Sunday morning worship is a barrier for people: 'People don't want to do that, but they'll quite happily do anything else that is connected with church and church people and all those things seem to work really well.' The message from lay pioneers is that most people are not actively looking for opportunities to return to church, but many are more open than might be expected to conversations about faith and spirituality.

The Gravitational Pull of Sundays and a Renewed Imagination

5

Perhaps the most difficult thing for many churches to hear is the way lay pioneers found the Sunday service to be a barrier to mission and to suck resources away from mission.

Ian had spent time overseas and in the UK and now works on a new housing estate. He was not previously part of the Church of England but is now employed by the diocese as a lay pioneer. He feels called 'out of church' but the estate where he lives and works has little social life and pioneering has been a lonely and hard experience. '[My pioneering] started with a conversation over the garden fence with our neighbour who was pretty much completely unchurched. We kind of did life together for a while, and she came to faith and started coming along to our church with us.' But she did not really fit in the church. 'Even though it was a culturally relevant church, it wasn't relevant to her. It wasn't her culture.' Ian and his wife felt they were 'dragging her' away from precious time with her family. Walking that journey made them think differently. Alongside that 'God made it clear we were coming [here] to do something pioneering, although I didn't have the language to label it at that time.' Although it has been difficult on the estate, Ian says, 'the hardest bit of all, has been the relationship with the inherited church.' Although the rector is supportive the church 'don't understand what I'm doing.' They expect him to be there on Sundays. 'Even though I'm a pioneer, I was spending about 60% of my time doing inherited church stuff at the beginning, because it's just a, you know, a big church monster that swallows you whole if you if you're not looking.' The local church congregation expect him to be there on a Sunday morning, to help with the tech, and join in social niceties at coffee, but he does not feel they are very interested in what he is doing, or want to support him or pray for him. In the wider church it is also tricky. He is part of the local church leaders' fraternity, but 'they had to have a long debate about whether or not I would be to begin with.' He finds their conversation is often about Sunday services and church buildings, but it is the best he is going to get in terms of support. For Ian, pioneering is 'doing what I think we're all called to do, which is reaching out to loving our neighbours, and finding a way to connect with them.'

Ian talked about the ‘inherited church’ as a way of distinguishing the more traditional congregations from the communities developed by pioneers. This shorthand does not necessarily account for the nuance of mission and practice, and as I have suggested, paying close attention to practice breaks down many of these categories. However, lay pioneers found it helpful language when talking about local churches and pioneering. Ian’s frustration is that Sunday services do not connect with the people he is meeting on the estate where he lives, and what is more, the expectations around Sunday services from members of the congregation and from clergy meant that Sunday services felt draining.

Many lay pioneers felt a tension between local churches and neighbourhood networks

Like Ian, many of the lay pioneers felt a tension between the local churches they connected with and the neighbourhood networks they are engaged in. They felt misunderstood and unsupported by their churches, and their churches felt they weren’t really involved. Pete Ward offers contrasting views of how church is imagined, as liquid church and solid church.⁹ For Ward, solid church is focused on particular meetings and imagines the church primarily as a meeting, a gathering. Liquid church sees church as networks of relationships. Ward also talks about the ‘affective gravitational pull of the church’; that people tend to judge whether something is church by whether it matches their own experience of church.¹⁰ Because Ian’s work does not seem to connect naturally with the Sunday service, the local church finds it hard to understand what Ian is doing. He comments, ‘If you’re doing something that looks like church then it is more understood...whereas...I’m just spending time with people in the street and that isn’t understood at all.’

Assumptions about Mission

People’s expectations around mission and church can also come from their assumptions about what mission is—their theology of mission or missiology. This does not mean they have decided on their theology before acting, but that their actions reveal particular ways they believe that God acts in the world. For pioneers this is often summed up in the phrase attributed to Rowan Williams, ‘Finding out where the Holy Spirit is at work and joining in.’¹¹ This is known as *missio Dei* theology, or the mission of God. Here the first step in mission is not preach, or to act, but to listen and be attentive to God’s activity in the world and then to participate. This suggests a different posture than might be commonly associated with mission, one of prayerful openness to what God is already doing.

Despite some perceptions, lay pioneering is not about reimagining church in theory, or redesigning church, but about learning together as new things

emerge in the neighbourhood. Ian's understanding of church was changed by seeing his neighbour's journey to faith and recognizing how the church service he attended was so alien for her. Another lay pioneer, Harriet, who is an unpaid licensed lay pioneer in the Church of England, explained how her pioneering comes from her own experience of feeling on the edge. She connects with other people who feel similarly and has been developing online missional communities for people who are housebound. These innovations have not come from some creative plan that they have then put into action, but through listening and responding to people and to the Spirit; seeing what God is doing and creatively joining in. They have tried things out, seen what has worked, prayed and reflected and most of all sought to be faithful to God and what they feel God has called them to do.

As discussed in the introduction, pioneering and fresh expressions did not come about primarily as response to the problem of church decline but through discerning that God was doing something through ordinary people. Through what they were doing these lay pioneers opened a space where church was being reimagined in the midst of everyday life. The last twenty years of fresh expressions and pioneering shows that the relationship between lay pioneers and local churches has not always been easy. The lay pioneers talked about feeling like 'round pegs in square holes' and how the local church tried to tidy it up, while local churches and those in diocesan leadership roles felt frustrated by pioneers not joining in with the wider life of the church and pulling in different directions. Perhaps if lay pioneering was not seen as a separate activity and lay pioneers were given space within the local church to explore their vocation it might feel more integrated.

The relationship between lay pioneers and local churches has not always been easy

Most lay pioneers would have liked to find ways for their pioneering to be integrated with the life of the wider church, and the proposal for a mixed ecology has been intended to do exactly that.¹² While the rhetoric around mission and church often identifies different camps—pioneers, 'Save the Parish,' inherited church—this research suggests the relationships in practice can be far more integrated.¹³ For example, I have already suggested that the neighbourhood networks could be viewed as a way of faithfully reimagining and renewing the parish, rather than a separate stream. Where lay pioneers are working well with local churches the relationships are far more fluid and dynamic than simply different expressions working alongside each other. A model or image which expresses the crossovers amongst people and through the relationships would be helpful to represent the grounded and lived realities of the mixed ecology better.

6

Being at the Boundary

Edges, fringes, margins and peripheries are terms which emerged a lot in the focus groups. They help to illuminate the experience of lay pioneers, and the work they are doing.

Tanya had a long-term job working for a Christian charity with a focus on issues of justice. She describes how in the last couple of years working there 'I started to feel restless and as if there was something more I could be doing.' She trained as a facilitator on a reconciliation course and took redundancy, but then lockdown happened and she found herself without employment. Through a series of apparent coincidences, she ended up connecting with refugee work where she lived. This became something she was known for locally. She identified how she was 'energized by being out in the community. And that was where my strengths lay.' Stepping down from a number of church roles freed her up to do the things which energized her. At the same time lockdown caused her to realize that she did not have to be at church every Sunday. She could connect online later, and this freed her up to get involved in other community activities. One thing she loves is Parkrun, so much so that someone asked her, 'Is that your church now?' From her church she needs space to explore and not too much expectation. And she reflects, 'I've got to be braver at knowing what is right for me to be doing at a particular time or whatever. There's never any certainty is there, but sometimes I've got to be prepared to push those doors.'

Lay pioneers find themselves at the boundaries, in the in-between spaces, the liminal spaces, at the edges. Describing church as having edges is somewhat problematic particularly given pioneers' much more fluid understanding of church and world. However, 'edge' is used to describe the way the institutional or organizational church often defines itself with a centre and in contrast to the world. While naming something as marginalized can itself be a way of marginalizing, here 'edge' is used by pioneers to name their experience of being far from power and resources. By describing these edges, lay pioneers are describing their experience of feeling distant from their denominations or outside of the expectations of their local church. The Church of England's own

definition of pioneering names pioneers as operating ‘outside the church’ and resonates with the pioneers’ own sense of feeling called to be at the boundaries.

Lay pioneers are often quite skilled at navigating these boundary spaces. Tanya found that she needed to create space to allow her to be in these boundary spaces that energized her. She, and others, described themselves as ‘bridges’ between church and things they were involved in. I have already described in chapter three how Tanya helped break down barriers between refugees and members of the church. Donna also felt the tension of being at the boundary where her local church was like a ‘big ship that is going, where it’s going and it is doing community stuff,’ but it set the terms of that work, and ‘you feel like you get on or you don’t.’ Donna initially felt forced to choose between church and her calling but gradually found networks of people with whom she could work.

This boundary space is difficult to inhabit, but it was generally where pioneers wanted to be. Despite sometimes feeling pulled into Sunday service, or pushed out because they did not fit, the majority of lay pioneers wanted to find sustainable ways to be in that boundary space where they felt called.

They found a freedom in those boundary spaces and enjoyed the relationships which formed, the surprises which occurred, and the opportunities which opened up. Natalie, a lay pioneer who runs her own business around yoga and mindfulness, commented, ‘If there was too much support and too much structure I probably wouldn’t want it.’ She liked the freedom to be responsive and to innovate. Lay pioneers who were not paid for their pioneering felt there was more space; Lydia felt ‘freer of other people’s expectations,’ and Tanya felt like the things she did were not done in the church’s name.

Lay pioneers who were not paid for their pioneering felt there was more space

Staying at the Boundary

Not all lay pioneers felt comfortable remaining in the boundary spaces of church. Laura and a number of others in the research recounted painful experiences of not finding space as a pioneer. Laura had assumed she was called to the Church of England to help it to change, but ended up leaving and finding others to connect with in her lay pioneering.

I tell these painful stories to show some of the struggles of lay pioneers, aware that lay pioneers are far from the only people who have stories of struggle and how these experiences are often complicated with long histories. My hope is that lay pioneers can find a space within their church denominations, something which I think can be beneficial for both lay pioneers and the

churches. However, to be faithful to my research participants it is important to me to name their experience and their faithfulness in following their own vocation. They have not just disappeared off to act as individuals, but have found ways of associating with other lay pioneers and have continued to build the community networks. While they reject an institutional understanding of church, they are happy to name what they experience as church—spaces where they can be vulnerable with one another and support each other. They have not left their church because they thought they could do it better; they have left their church because they could not find the space within their local church to pursue what they felt God was calling them to.

Jonny Baker talks about the ‘gift of not fitting in,’ a phrase which has resonated with many of the pioneers who have trained with us at CMS.¹⁴ It names a reality of feeling on the outside. However, some within denominational roles have complained about the term, saying it has been used as a way of justifying not getting involved in the life of the wider church. Clearly this can be unhelpful, and I will turn to explore what it might look like to make space for lay pioneers to thrive within church structures in the next chapter. Naming what pioneers bring as a gift encourages reflections on what they bring to churches such as the prophetic gift, calling attention to realities that some are missing, like the changing perceptions of church in our neighbourhoods discussed in chapter five. This is not always a comfortable gift but it is a vital one which encourages questioning and offers ways of faithfully reimagining church in practice. Alongside this they bring a gift of navigating these boundaries. They are able to help people to bridge boundaries and even break them down when they are artificial or unhelpful. The way pioneering has been framed within churches has often set it up in contrast with more traditional understandings of church. However, I think there is much to suggest that the reality is more interconnected. As I will discuss in chapter nine, there is much that is mutually beneficial and much more overlap than is often assumed.

7

Finding Space as a Lay Pioneer

While there have been a number of stories of lay pioneers feeling unsupported and misunderstood, there were also accounts of lay pioneers being given space and enabled to thrive in their calling.

Jenny has very positive experience of pioneering. 'I'm employed by the Methodist circuit; it was my responsibility to work on the outside of the building and connect with the community.' She is working in the area she has lived in for many years and supported by the Methodist church where she is a member. She has good relationships in the local areas through her previous jobs and connections. 'In my community...they see church, specifically Church of England, as boring...it's been about breaking down those boundaries and saying actually, it's not like that at all. So I've spent a long time just making those relationships to say, Hey, I'm exactly the same as you. But I just believe in a spirit of love that flows through me and enables me to do and see things slightly differently. And we now have new people so a new form of church is beginning, but it is not inside a church building.'

She has great support. 'I'm lucky that my superintendent gets pioneering. And so he's been able to make sure that the circuit get pioneering and so not only am I supported, I'm given total freedom to do what I want, which is fantastic, because it means I can be creative and kind of bend some of the rules that I couldn't do if I was in church. I also have a line manager who gets what I'm doing and his fantastic support; we meet once every fortnight, as well as being part of a pioneering group that meets every six weeks, as well as having a prayer group that, that I formed.'

Of all the lay pioneers I spoke to it, was Jenny who felt the most supported and released. She was not expected to be in church every Sunday and she had the support of key people, such as the superintendent and her line manager. They acted as gatekeepers, keeping her one step removed from some of the difficult situations other lay pioneers found themselves in. Because of this arrangement she was not continually asked to justify herself and her role. Instead she was able to 'be creative and bend some of the rules.' She was still connected with the church she had been part of for many years where she was

well known and trusted. She had friends who were supportive and a prayer group who prayed for her. She was also able to build on relationships in the community which she already had.

Some of the other lay pioneers experienced having supportive vicars and ministers, or having a good group of friends around them, but Jenny's experience indicates that more is possible. If the local church, circuit or diocese wants to see lay pioneering develop and thrive then not only do they need to be supportive; they need to create the space for it to happen. That space includes not having unreasonable expectations, recognizing that pioneering can take a long time, and that it might have little impact on Sunday attendance. For Jenny the tensions of being in the boundary spaces are held by others within her circuit who value her. She does not have to deal with her identity and role being continually questioned. Harriet similarly described having a vicar and bishop who made space for her to do her 'crazy stuff' and Andrea, a paid pioneer in the Church of England, talked about her boss being an 'advocate,' who had been there and 'completely got it.'

Ways to Thrive

This is not the only way to thrive as a lay pioneer and some have found themselves thriving further away from organized and institutional church. Laura and others who felt they could not stay connected to institutional church have found spaces to thrive by gathering with other lay pioneers, both locally to them and in online spaces.

Most lay pioneers were sustained by the pioneering work itself

For those engaging in lay pioneering these supportive relationships which provide space are key. For most of the lay pioneers I spoke to, the thing which energized and sustained them was the pioneering work itself—the relationships, the new things emerging and excitement of seeing what the Holy Spirit is doing. But lay pioneers also need support which shields them from the continual questioning of their identity, calling and relationship to church. These questions may feel legitimate to those outside of lay pioneering but when asked on a daily basis they become relentless and draining. The question of the accountability of pioneers is often raised, and it is within these supportive and enabling relationships where this can happen most effectively. What Jenny, Harriet, Laura and others have managed to do is to build relationships of trust, which are not only supportive but allow them to be one step removed from that questioning. They have found space where they can pioneer, be creative, take their time and see what happens.

8

Theological Insights for Thriving as Lay Pioneers

Here I draw together some of the theological insights so far, to explore how lay pioneers can thrive in their calling and mission. In particular I will look at recognizing vocation, inhabiting boundary spaces, and renewing the imagination of church.

Recognizing Vocation

Nearly every lay pioneer I spoke with described how their pioneering came out of a sense of calling. Often that was described as a calling to connect with those outside church, a calling to the wider community or a calling to use their gifts and skills for God. But for many this calling put them at odds with their church and made them feel that they were on the edges and fringes. Finding the label of ‘pioneer’ helped them make sense of this calling, discovering others who were trying to do something similar.

The language of vocation is often focused on ordained ministry. The report *Setting God’s People Free* has drawn attention to this in the Church of England, but it has not had much impact on practice.¹⁵ There is still a need to broaden the understanding of vocation to include all of life. If mission is God’s and the church participates, then attending to the diversity of callings within the congregation can become one key way to discern how to participate. The personal sense of calling for individuals can be part of the wider attentiveness to what the Spirit is doing in this place, with these people and help the community to discern its calling. It moves away from seeing calling as something that leaders have and others follow, and instead to see how everyone’s calling can be discerned and enacted together.

Inhabiting Boundary Spaces

Lay pioneers are called to these boundaries. These might be artificial boundaries that have been set up between church and world, and between neighbourhood and Sunday service or the boundaries of feeling on the edge of church because of the sense of calling. Rather than something to avoid, these boundaries are inherently part of pioneering, and most pioneers felt called to these boundaries. What they needed was support to be able to thrive at these boundaries and do what they felt called to do.

By inhabiting these boundaries pioneers are able to help bring them down. They help people in churches to connect meaningfully with those around them and can help the local church to imagine itself as part of the neighbourhood, rather than separate from it or at the centre of it. The practice of pioneers embodies a shift of mindset, seeing mission as participating in what God is doing in the world, rather than trying to draw people into a particular space to meet with God.

Renewed Imagination of Church

Through their pioneering practice, lay pioneers open up spaces for reimagining church, not in the abstract, but in the concrete experience of encountering God, with these people, in this place. Lay pioneering is not primarily about solving a problem of decline, but about being people who are living out a calling and seeking to respond faithfully to the Spirit. This means that the question 'But is this church?' becomes meaningless. Whether it is church or not is not really the point. The point is that they are responding to the Spirit and seeing something new emerge. It might reach sacramental expression, it might develop an expression of worship, it might bring about a new proclamation of the word, but there is no rush to name it as church. I believe at the heart of the question 'But is this church?' is actually a desire to tidy things up, to make it respectable, to bring order in the chaos. But lay pioneering is messy because life is messy. Lay pioneers are those who are able to live in the tension of this messiness and within it find concrete ways of reimagining church.

I offer these as key theological starting points for thinking about lay pioneering and church in fresh ways. It moves the discussion away from whether lay pioneering is good or not, and tries instead to ask what can be learnt theologically from this lay movement of mission that is currently going on within churches and beyond.

9

Enabling Churches to Thrive

Lay pioneering reveals that there is quite a big gap between the expectation of many churches and the realities of the contemporary culture around them. The careful and slow process of building trust and engaging with neighbourhood networks tells quite a different story to some of the strategies for church growth and the solutions to church decline, which many denominations have been pursuing. For those who are keen for a quick fix this will come as sobering reading. And yet I think the story of lay pioneering is a hopeful story for all churches, and one which has important insights.

Reclaiming the Story

It is vital to reclaim the story of lay pioneering being a grass roots lay movement rather than an organizational solution to the problem of church decline. Without this framing, pioneering and fresh expressions are seen as providing models of church to replicate. But the gift of lay pioneering is its posture of discernment and participation, and of reimagining church within the practice of mission. As I have shown, lay pioneering begins from people asking questions about how their gifts and skills can serve their church and sensing a call from God to connect with people who are not currently connected to church. This causes me to ask, just how many lay pioneers are there? If many of the lay pioneers did not know they were lay pioneers until long after they were doing what they were doing, who else is out there responding to God's call whom churches do not know about?

I am increasingly convinced that churches cannot think or plan their way out of decline and the answer to the question about the future of church in the UK will come through the lived practices of lay people in our churches and communities. The concrete practice of lay people in the midst of the messiness of life opens up opportunities for church to be faithfully reimagined, not in contrast to traditional church, as is the concern of many, but in discovering those traditions afresh in new, yet faithful, ways. This is what I believe is happening with neighbourhood networks—a faithful reimagining of parish in practice.

The future of church will come through the lived practices of lay people

Broader Attention

While this booklet has focused on lay pioneers, the insights suggest a need to be attentive to the work of lay people more broadly, not so that churches can teach them and release them into mission, but to recognize the ways in which they are already living as faithful Christians in the midst of the messiness of life and as a result are already developing spaces where church and faith can be faithfully reimagined.¹⁶ This is not just a hunch; I have begun to see this in other research projects where I and others have been listening to lay people's experience in a variety of contexts and situations.

In summary I see three significant outcomes from this booklet. First, the vocation of lay pioneers needs to be valued and recognized, and space needs to be made for them to thrive in their calling. In part, this will mean finding and recognizing people who are already lay pioneering but do not yet realize it.

Secondly, churches need to pay attention and learn from lay pioneers, seeking ways that all can thrive together. Thirdly, and perhaps most radically, churches and denominations need to spend much more time learning from ordinary lay people by carefully and attentively listening to their experience. The everyday faith and practices of lay people can open up spaces where church is faithfully reimagined offering hopeful and faithful ways forward for mission and church.

Notes

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- 15 Archbishops’ Council, *Setting God’s People Free* (Church of England, February 2017).
- 16 For further discussion of this see J Butler, ‘Setting God’s Pioneers Free? The Need to Release Lay Pioneers from the Church of England’s Narrative of Resourcing and Equipping,’ *Ecclesial Futures*, 3.1 (2022), pp 23–40 (<https://doi.org/10.54195/ef12149>). When it happened through grass roots communities which became known as fresh expressions, the Church of England was unable to recognize it. By exploring both the organizational story and the grassroots story, this paper demonstrates that the problem is the Church of England’s reflex to view everything through a lens of resourcing and equipping. This lens means all problems are framed as deficit, in this case of the laity, which are remedied through the resources of the church. The paper reveals that this lens causes it to miss the gifts and challenges of lay pioneering, and makes it unable to engage

in the mutual relationships called for in the report *Setting God's People Free* (Archbishops' Council, 2017).

Lay pioneer ministry arises not from a central church initiative but from the sense of God's call on the life of lay people in a wide range of contexts. What role do they play and what can we learn from them?

This study, based on interviews with lay pioneers in different contexts, explores the issues of vocation, discernment, freedom and guidance. It looks at how this ministry can thrive and how the church can thrive in attending to it.



James Butler teaches and researches in the areas of mission, evangelism, church, discipleship and practical theology. He has been involved in mission in the UK and South America, with a particular focus on fresh expressions and pioneering.

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