



Focussed Study 2

# The Mixed Ecologists

Experiences of Mixed Ecology Ministry in  
the Church of England

May 2021

LIVING **ministry**





# The Living Ministry Research Project

## Aim

Living Ministry supports the work of the Church of England's Ministry Council and the wider church by providing ongoing, in-depth analysis to help those in dioceses, theological education institutions and the national church understand what helps ordained ministers flourish in ministry.

## Objectives

- To understand the factors that enable ordained ministers to flourish in ministry;
- To understand how these factors relate to ministerial education and continuing development;
- To understand how these factors vary according to person, background, training pathway, type of ministry, context etc.;
- To understand how ministerial flourishing changes and develops over time and at different stages of ministry.

## Methods

- A ten-year, mixed-methods, longitudinal panel study, launched in 2017;
- Focussed qualitative studies reporting on specific topics or perspectives.

## Reports and resources

Findings from Living Ministry are disseminated to dioceses, theological education institutions, the national church and associated organisations to inform understanding and good practice. In particular, as well as supporting the work of the Ministry Council and the Remuneration and Conditions of Service Committee, Living Ministry analysis has informed and continues to contribute to the General Synod initiative to promote and support clergy wellbeing through the 2020 Covenant for Clergy Care and Wellbeing. Research reports and practical resources are available online at <https://www.churchofengland.org/living-ministry>.

### Panel study reports

- *Mapping the Wellbeing of Church of England Clergy and Ordinands* (2017)
- *Negotiating Wellbeing: Experiences of Ordinands and Clergy in the Church of England* (2018)
- *Ministerial Effectiveness and Wellbeing: Exploring the Flourishing of Clergy and Ordinands* (2019)
- *Moving in Power: Transitions in Ordained Ministry* (2021)

### Focussed studies

- *Collaborative Ministry and Transitions to First Incumbency* (2019)
- *The Mixed Ecologists: Experiences of Mixed Ecology Ministry in the Church of England* (2021)

### Resources

*How Clergy Thrive: Insights from Living Ministry* (2020) is available in print and online along with a range of accompanying resources.

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# Executive Summary

## About the research

This study, part of the Living Ministry research programme exploring clergy flourishing, examines an expanding area of ordained ministry which sees ministers engaging in pioneering initiatives alongside 'inherited' parish church work. The findings draw on 17 in-depth interviews with clergy across England, conducted in May and June 2020. As such, analysis includes discussion of the implications of the coronavirus restrictions on this kind of ministry.

## Key findings

Mixed ecology ministry is an area in the life of the Church of England that has much to offer. It is providing wonderful opportunities to connect with new people in new ways. It has the ability to bring new life to the discipleship and missional outlook of existing 'inherited' congregations with the potential to transform the life of the parish. Those who are exercising Mixed Ecology Ministry are to be celebrated and have a passion for the existing and the emerging church.

Three key headlines from the research are briefly described below.

### 1. The mixed ecology can grow the missional reach of the parish

Cultivating the engagement of hospitality, generosity, accessibly, relevance, creativity and flexibility are seen as important in growing new things in a mixed ecology. New expressions of church initiated by the existing parish church tend to draw in de-churched and the parish fringe which the inherited church hasn't managed to do. Fresh expressions can stimulate relational trust and a contextual approach to mission within inherited church communities which can lead to further initiatives. Although not the intention, both expressions can be a missional entry point for people engaging in one and then settling within another. Many mixed ecologies tend to have more than one new expression of church. These fresh expressions tend to be networked with one another along with more traditional parish outreach projects such as foodbanks or toddler groups which combined, can prove effective in extending the missional reach of the whole parish.

### 2. The mixed ecology can re-invigorate the life of the existing inherited church

The research identified a common need to deepen the missional perceptive and personal discipleship of congregation members, challenging introspection and the belief that things don't need to or indeed can't change. Where this is achieved there is often an overlap of lay or ordained leadership between different expressions of church. Lay ministry of inherited church members is often developed within a mixed ecology and flourishes where a culture of participation with permission to fail is fostered and where the potential of individuals is noticed and supported.

Special occasions such as Christmas or Harvest often see a gathering of all within the mixed ecology convening at the inherited church. Leaders and members within new expressions of church often regard the inherited church as ‘our church’ and is seen, along with the clergy, as a hub or node. New expressions of church can shift the perceptions of inherited congregations by deepening missional thinking. Where fresh expressions use the parish church building as their venue, the rehabilitation of the building as a ‘common space’ can be seen, e.g. as a café, a gallery, concert venue or use of outside land. The disruption due to the Covid-19 pandemic is also seen as a pivotal moment to re-evaluate what should stop, what should start and what should be re-founded. Digital engagement and the growth of the hybrid mixed ecology has proved an opportunity to expand the reach of the parish.

### 3. Mixed ecology ministry takes time, team and temperament

Having ‘a foot in both camps’ is demanding and exhausting but most said they do this out of a passion for all in their parish. Mixed ecology ministers are often creative, innovators, equippers, risk takers, visionary and persistent, which is to be affirmed and celebrated. The attitude of the inherited congregation can help or hinder the growth of a mixed ecology and where the latter is the case ‘unblocking’ is often needed. Confidence of inherited congregations was noted as something that can make or break the development of a mixed ecology. Team is key to enable appropriate capacity and combat isolation of mixed ecology ministers. It takes time to pioneer new things and also time to change the outlook of inherited church members. Collaboration and enabling are often effective leadership models. Diocesan support is also important for the development of a mixed ecology. Where this is lacking ministers struggle, where this is present things begin to flourish. There was a feeling that Church of England structures are not always equipped to allow a mixed ecology to grow, especially where there is a strong emphasis on only maintaining the inherited church and where a precedence for mixed ecology isn’t present.

## Action

The report concludes with detailed action points to help the national church, TEIs, dioceses and Mixed Ecology Ministers develop, support and engage with Mixed Ecology Ministry. In summary:

### The National Church

- **Celebrate and champion** the importance of MEM and its place within the new vision and strategy of the Church of England, creating **structural precedence** to allow MEM ministry to find its place and to flourish.
- Create **national and diocesan hubs** for Mixed Ecology Ministers to connect together and find support.
- **Support dioceses** in the discernment, formation and deployment of MEMs, including producing national guidelines.

- Commission follow up **qualitative research**: (1) with lay MEM leaders; (2) with inherited and FXP congregations; (3) with ordained MEM to explore post-pandemic developments.
- Design **intentional discernment pathways** for MEM and the related formation needed.
- Create life-long **discernment tools and processes** to enable those already in post to identify as a MEM.

### Theological Education Institutions (TEIs)

- Develop **theological and reflective practice modules and placements** for those called to MEM.
- Ensure all those in initial ministerial education are **aware** of mixed ecology and are **supported** to begin to discover their place within it.
- Work with sponsoring dioceses to provide a **MEM-shaped curacy** with a trained MEM Training Incumbent.

### Dioceses

- **Recognise, celebrate and affirm** the specific ministry of MEM, incorporating this into their vision casting and policy making, with permission for clergy to stop things and to reshape their roles.
- **Grow MEM opportunities** in all churches to extend the reach of the parish.
- Appoint a **diocesan champion** for MEM, to (a) support clergy, (b) conduct research, (c) assist the deepening of discipleship in existing congregations.
- **Incorporate the learning from MEMs** into the restructuring of dioceses in the light of Covid plans, harnessing learning from the pandemic regarding adaptation and innovation.
- Develop better and more intentional **discernment** for congregation members, lay ministers and clergy in post. **Train** those who oversee, those in lay leadership and those who are MEM practitioners (see MEM section below).
- Create **specific MEM posts** with the appropriate permissions, training and support, and work with congregations to prepare the ground well.
- **Work flexibly and patiently with church leaders and congregations** seeking to grow a local mixed ecology, to allow a long-term approach providing support and affirmation.
- Offer more **deployment opportunities** for clergy that are specifically and intentionally MEM-shaped to enable a fruitful mixed ecology to grow.

### Mixed Ecology Ministers (MEMs)

- Work towards **developing existing congregations for mission** as well as starting new initiatives, by: learning to handle resistance; helping congregations to see missional needs and potential for transformation of the inherited church; growing a culture of participation and ownership.
- Be **realistic** with themselves and the communities they serve and seek to grow that it takes time, team and tenacity to grow a local mixed ecology.
- Invest in **discipleship** with intention from inherited congregations.

## Introduction

### Why this Research?

Pioneer ministry in the Church of England is defined as follows:

*‘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’.* (Ministry Council 2017)

Over the 15 years since the publication of the Mission Shaped Ministry Report (2004) which advocated for pioneer ministry and the development of fresh expressions of church, there has been an increasing number of people who seem to be starting new pioneering initiatives and are also engaged in and leading an existing, time honoured (referred to as ‘inherited’ in this research) parish church. Some of the people doing this may well be pioneers who have found it difficult to find a role outside parish ministry and so are pioneering within in this space by default. This is important to notice, and work is being done nationally in the Church of England to increase the deployment opportunities for pioneers, but this is not the focus of this research. There are others, however, who for a number of years have been leading and starting different expressions of church simultaneously but are doing so out of choice, feeling a call to ‘extend the reach of the parish’. Parishes seeking to reach new people in new ways, in whatever form this may take, is to be celebrated and is in itself nothing new. Not all parish ministry, however, adopts a ‘contextual,’ pioneer approach, as defined above. Therefore, those who are engaged in mixed ecology ministry will be specifically interested in exploring the relationships between pioneer and inherited expressions of church, and passionate about maintaining their distinctiveness, but will want to hold these together in one local community or ecosystem. This often seems to come out of a desire to reach people who for many reasons will not step over the threshold of the inherited church or who find the transition from a community event to church too much. Fresh expressions and pioneering communities often run in parallel, not as a feeder into the existing inherited church. The people leading and initiating these new churches can be lay or ordained and are often part of the inherited church.

Two publications have highlighted the variation in leadership that exists in pioneering and Fresh Expressions of church. Firstly, *The Pioneer Spectrum*<sup>1</sup> identified a variety of methodologies in the ways leaders were forming fresh expressions of Church. Some were ‘innovating,’ some were ‘adapting’ and some were replicating,’ highlighting that there is not a one size fits all approach to

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<sup>1</sup> [Pioneering Mission is...a spectrum | Tina Hodgett and Paul Bradbury \[ANVIL vol 34 issue 1\] - Church Mission Society](#)



pioneer ministry. Secondly, *The Day of Small Things* research<sup>2</sup> revealed that of the 21 dioceses in the sample, 49% of the leaders of Fresh Expressions were clergy not designated as pioneers and who were also leading inherited churches. This has always been intriguing and with the rise of more people seeking to identify themselves as ‘mixed ecology ministers’ more detailed research was needed to understand this better. In addition to this, one of the three objectives of the recent vision and strategy for the Church of England for 2020-2030 is that ‘mixed ecology is the norm’. This being the case, there is a need to create more opportunities for discernment, formation and deployment at a national and diocesan level for mixed ecology ministry. Understanding better the motivations and practices of such leaders will assist in this. One final point to note is that the evolving language of mixed ecology encompasses a wide variety of Christian ministry such as digital and hybrid church, chaplaincy, church planting etc. The purpose of this study is to focus specifically on the ecology of the inherited church and pioneer ministry.

## Aim of the Research

As part of the wider *Living Ministry* research project, this ‘deep dive’ into the experiences of clergy involved in mixed ecology ministry (from here on MEM), was commissioned in March 2020. Its aim was to explore the experiences of those simultaneously engaging in inherited ministry and developing contextually appropriate pioneering ministries and/or Fresh Expressions (FXs) of church within their parishes. Initially it had four core questions:

1. What enables or prevents the flourishing of MEM and the ‘re-imagining’ of parish ministry?
2. How far do such multiple expressions of ministry interact, and to what extent do they expand the missional reach of the parish?
3. What enables the releasing of lay pioneers and leadership in such contexts?
4. What are the motivations and experiences of clergy engaging in MEM and what causes them to thrive or struggle personally?

Clearly, given that the Coronavirus outbreak occurred during the timescale of the research, a fifth theme was also pertinent:

5. What has been the initial impact of the Covid 19 pandemic on MEM and how might it shape such ministry for the longer term?

Each will be examined in the findings, along with some overall observations about the range and diversity of MEM in the Church of England. Ultimately, the aim is to explore how MEM can be done well, and to inform policy and practices that encourage it as a way of expanding and sustaining parish ministry in contemporary England.

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<sup>2</sup> [Church Growth Research Project \(churcharmy.org\)](https://churcharmy.org)



## Methodology

In order to gain a geographically diverse range of participants, and ‘take the temperature’ of as wide a range of locations as possible, invitations to take part in an online interview were issued to clergy via a variety of media. This included emails and social media postings through diocesan, pioneer and FXs networks and snowball sampling.<sup>3</sup> Clergy who had been in post for at least 12 months and self-identified as being engaged in MEM were invited to respond by email to the researcher. Based on their location, 17 were selected for interview.

Ultimately, seven female and ten male participants from 12 dioceses took part. In some cases, the diocese had a track record of encouraging MEM, whilst in others they were the first or sole mixed ecology minister. The majority were aged between 40-65; a significant number having come to ministry as a second career. Beyond this, the sample was extremely diverse. Contexts included: coastal, rural, market town, estates, suburban and urban parishes. Their inherited ministries ranged from large urban evangelical churches to rural benefices with multiple, small, mainstream congregations. They also held a wide range of responsibilities and posts. The sample included: full and part time curates, incumbents, non-stipendiary clergy, team rectors, those ordained as pioneers or with BMOs and/or with diocesan responsibilities.

Interviews lasted on average an hour and were conducted via Zoom during May-June 2020. Each was recorded, transcribed, and analysed using NVivo software. All names, locations and ministries have been anonymised to preserve confidentiality.

## Reflections on Methodology

All research methods have strengths and limitations, usually dictated by pragmatic necessities. This study is no exception. It involves detailed conversation with a relatively small sample of self-selecting participants. Nonetheless, the sample included individuals and ministries at different stages of development and from a wide range of geographical and socio-economic situations. Conducting interviews using technology (Zoom) made this possible even during a period of lockdown.

It should also be noted that MEM is diverse and creative, with a wide range of manifestations. Not all pioneering ministry fits the definition of a FX (i.e. a distinct congregation within the parish.) Some of the ministries in this sample were adaptations of existing church services or events, aimed at making them more accessible. Others were at a pre-congregation stage – better described as outreach activity. The picture painted in this report illustrates that diversity.

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<sup>3</sup> A research methodology where one participant recruits others among their acquaintances and thus the sample grows – like a snowball.

As has been noted in previous research (e.g. “The Day of Small Things” 2016), many FXs are initiated and led by lay and ordained licensed ministers. However, as part of the wider *Living Ministry* research project this work focussed on the experiences of clergy. As such, this report represents the perspective of ordained ministers rather than their lay colleagues and congregations.

Finally, it should be acknowledged that the research interviews took place in late May/early June 2020 when all churches were in lockdown and clergy were experiencing ministry in unprecedented circumstances. Inevitably, all ministries – inherited or pioneering – have been, and will continue to be, affected by the pandemic. Findings, then, are based on what existed before lockdown, and although invited to consider the future, participants could only speculate as to what the outcome for their MEM might be.

## Findings

### Introduction

Clearly, a sample of 17 participants from such diverse settings does not provide the complete picture of MEM within the Church of England. However, it does provide insights and indications. Rather than universalising theories or statistical patterns, qualitative research aims to provide ‘rich’ data. It examines ‘how’ and ‘why’ questions, allowing for experience and circumstance to be explored in more depth. Interviews also paint a picture of the creativity and diversity of current contextual pioneering activity, plus the challenges and opportunities of holding that in tension with inherited ministry. Ultimately though, there were factors highlighted by enough of the participants to legitimately consider them as indicative, or at least as suggestive, of MEM more widely.

The interviews also highlighted how unhelpful it is to compare different forms of MEM. They illustrated the richness, creativity, and variety of ways in which MEM is undertaken. Given that each parish is unique, and that context is central to all forms of pioneering, it is important to recognise that MEM can be inhabited in many ways. Just as the range of parishes was enormously diverse, so was the range of ministries. Some were extremely innovative (sufficiently so that describing their activity makes maintaining anonymity almost impossible). Others were following models designed by others but that they considered fitted their context. Several participants were newer in post, still engaged in listening and exploring what might be most effective, or using well recognised models like messy church, food banks and toddler groups to reach out into the community.

Several stated that, while their pioneering efforts were not obviously impressive and were unlikely to attract wider attention, nevertheless such ministries had never before been undertaken in their location. One participant stated, “None of this would make its way into a glossy, FXs video or whatever. Frankly, all of it is just what church should do, it’s just not what has been done here.” Similarly, another reflected,

“A lot of this isn’t pioneering, it’s just what I would call bog-standard parish work that any good Baptist church would be doing, that Catholic priests in the inner cities once upon a time were doing. It’s only pioneering because the church, [at] both ends of the spectrum, just withdrew when the state took over, that’s the only reason that most of it seems pioneering!”

A third laughed, observing of their former parish. “It was a much easier place to do lots of what other people called innovative, but I thought was just bog-standard, because there wasn’t a lot going on. The context is always interesting as to what we mean by pioneering!”

Finally, participants’ ministries were at different stages of development. Some had only been in post a year or so; their early activity curtailed by the lockdown. Other FXs had been developed over many



years and were well established, identifiable as a worshipping congregation. Some clergy were pioneering single handed whilst serving small, inward-looking inherited congregations, or knew their time in post was limited by finances. Others were financially secure and part of staff teams or ecumenical groups leading alongside capable, motivated lay volunteers. Comparison then is unhelpful. One candidly admitted he was jealous of the finances, diocesan support, and other resources some of his colleagues had. Nonetheless, he – like all the participants interviewed – was trying to undertake creative, contextual ways of engaging the wider community whilst still faithfully serving their inherited congregations. Their accounts and vision were inspiring.

Findings are structured around the five key research questions and will be addressed in that order.

## 1. What enables or prevents the flourishing of MEM and the ‘reimagining’ of parish ministry?

As already stated, interviews were intentionally conducted with as diverse a range of clergy as possible. The aim was to move beyond the specifics of any one location or diocese and identify broader patterns. Four common areas emerged from the 17 interviews:

- The attitude and circumstances of the inherited congregation/s
- The attitude of the diocese more broadly
- The specifics of the local context and the ability of clergy and inherited congregations to understand and engage with those
- The ethos and values of the FX or Pioneering ministry (FXP from here on)

### The Attitude and Circumstances of the Inherited Congregation/s

All the participants spoke at length about their inherited congregations. Their observations and experiences were as diverse as their contexts. However, it was clear that the attitude of those congregations was amongst the most significant as to whether MEM flourished or not. Essentially it shaped their capacity to participate, and thus the amount of time and energy the participant had to invest in the pioneering activity. Congregational responses ranged from being strongly resistant to any form of change through to those enthusiastic about and engaged with FXP.

Some had no grasp of mission at all. One participant said of his congregation, “Very few of them understood any concept really of mission or discipleship, and quite a few have shown themselves actually to have no patterns of personal prayer or worship. They were entirely relying on Sunday.” For others, the heart of the issue was confidence that their efforts might make a difference. Another tension was whether they saw pioneering activity as a mechanism to “restock Sundays” and sustain their congregation, or whether they perceived the value of serving a FX which might have little direct impact on their (possibly) dwindling numbers. One described her benefice, “Most of them wanted chaplains to minister to them and look after them for whatever time they had left rather than having any sense of reaching out into the communities around them.”

For some participants, the wider congregation was sympathetic or interested but key individuals were blocking their efforts. Others were keen to see younger generations in church, but it was beyond their capacity to facilitate that, or having tried and failed, they had given up. A number described congregations who in principle were positive for others to engage in pioneering but personally wanted to remain within existing structures. However, there were also those inherited congregants who were enthusiastic about participating in mission to their community. Essentially, their vision, perspective on faith and church, plus physical and emotional capacity to engage with creativity and change made the difference. This was not necessarily related to church tradition or

demographic. In many cases retired members of middle of the road congregations were at the very heart of pioneering activity.

### **Previous Incumbents**

Participants identified several factors that underpinned the attitude in inherited congregations. Primary among these factors were the long-term ethos and the effects of previous incumbents. These made a significant difference to the receptivity or hostility of the inherited congregation. In some cases, previous clergy had begun a gradual cultural shift with the inherited congregation which meant they were ready to embrace or embark on creative forms of ministry. Over a period of years, they had come to understand that they needed to adapt or at least that their preferred way of expressing faith was not always accessible to non-churched neighbours and family. Others had already been discipled and enabled to initiate missional activity and now just needed encouragement. One participant spoke of the residual favour within the wider community from a long-standing minister who had been dead for some time, but whose legacy meant people were inclined to be sympathetic to church initiatives. In essence some were fortunate that others had already “ploughed the ground” for them.

Conversely, the legacy of former clergy could also be negative. In some cases, participants were having to work hard to change the ethos or undo the consequences of previous incumbencies. Clergy who were out of touch with the community, resistant to change, unwell - thus often absent, or paternalistic had all left legacies. These manifested in low confidence, weak discipleship, fear of change or simply exhaustion. One spoke of his inherited congregation experiencing several short-term postings each followed by an interregnum in just a few years. Keeping “the show on the road” by running services had left even the motivated and capable in the congregation exhausted and disinclined to try anything new. He described them as simply being “in survival mode.”

### **“Unblocking” Congregations**

It was not only the influence (or lack of) of former clergy which shaped inherited congregations. Many of the participants spoke of needing to “unblock” power structures such as PCCs, Church Wardens and even ordained colleagues. Some had structured ministry responsibilities within their benefices to allow colleagues to “manage the inherited services” while they undertook pioneering activity. Others described gradually removing those resistant to change from positions of influence and encouraging those with an openness to it. One spoke of having to deal with members of the PCC who had long outstayed their tenure, forming an insular “club”. Several described needing to inspire PCCs to spend church savings on mission, to think creatively about re-ordering buildings, or do something new with the church grounds. Often cautious about doing so, once they began to see fruit from small scale initiatives or caught a vision for what might be possible, such groups often became allies within the congregation for other pioneering initiatives, but it took time to “win them over.” One summarised the demands of the flexibility necessary for pioneering. “It’s much freer and



we see where God takes us, and who God leads us to, and where the Spirit is leading us. We're holding things much lighter, which people in the church don't like, they like a planned movement of things."

In some cases, individuals had been the challenge. One spoke of a church member who had controlled the small congregation for some years and when asked to modify their role immediately left. Another described the conflict between two long standing church wardens that held the congregation in limbo and scared away newcomers. On occasion colleagues were those opposing any form of change, anxious about their own capacity or that initiatives might fail. Trying to negotiate the necessary changes was not an easy or pleasant task for incoming clergy, but it was interesting how many spoke of this as the key to changing the ethos within the inherited congregation and opening up the possibility of pioneering and the eventual creation of a FX. They were digging the ground themselves.

### **Demographics for Partnership in Pioneering**

In addition to attitude, the capacity of the inherited congregation was a significant factor in the success of MEM. It influenced the extent to which the ordained minister was carrying all the responsibility; needing to generate the energy and drive for new initiatives. How far there were others to take leadership in the inherited congregation influenced the freedom participants had to engage in pioneering activity. Likewise, individuals with vision, community connections and capacity to take responsibility in the FXP liberated participants to develop further strategy. It was hard work to be doing this ministry alone. Almost all the participants spoke about the significance of team and of encouraging partnership – including ecumenical partnership. A number who were isolated in their ministry felt that keenly and expressed their desire for just one or two individuals with whom they could dream, discuss, and pray. Wider networks of pioneers were helpful, but they also wanted colleagues on the ground - be they ordained or lay. A number recognised that a lone pioneer cannot create ministries with longevity - that team, delegation and leadership transference were vital to prevent FXP from simply being a "pet project" which failed when the pioneer moved on.

### **Demographics**

It was also evident that demographics played a part in the successful development of ministries. It was ideal to have "some of the kind of people you are trying to attract". For good or ill, Homogenous Unit Theory has long argued that people are most likely to come to faith when the gospel is presented by people like them. Participants recognised the value of diversity but, for example, noted that strategically what they needed were "one or two young families" in the mix to attract others:

“The villages around here are trying to do fresh stuff but unfortunately the people they’re fielding are pensioners trying to attract young families. It’s always good to have a couple of grandparents around, but it hasn’t provided the level of energy and relationship-building. I think it’s difficult because you can’t magic those people [up]. [But] you have to develop it somehow!”

Indeed, many of the most successful projects described had involved an individual or group reaching out to others like themselves within the wider community, building relational networks which then evolved into something with a spiritual dimension.

Related to this, several participants described the challenge of integrating new and established groups within inherited congregations. In some cases, the age, socio-economic background, and cultures of the two groups made it difficult. Those new to faith might find the structure of the service incomprehensible. Alternatively, the established members felt threatened or distracted by those newly arrived. Often participants were not pressing new members to join the inherited congregation, but rather parallel ministries were emerging. At one level this is nothing new, churches have often held multiple services with different styles, but it is demanding for clergy or the small number of volunteers who are part of both/all congregations. One described it as “feeling schizophrenic sometimes!”

### **Transforming the Culture of Inherited Churches**

This was something almost all participants spoke about at length. Often it was deeply frustrating. They wanted to get on with pioneering, introducing the un-churched to Jesus, but much of their energy was going into incrementally transforming the outlook of the congregation. Such transitions took time. Introspection was not linked to size or church tradition, indeed in some cases larger churches were inward looking; their size insulating them from any urgency to engage in mission. A key factor was the willingness to reflect on themselves and their community. One participant described resistance to change being “really challenging – like taking the Egypt out of the Israelites!” He added, “I think that sometimes pioneering is so far off normal church people’s idea of how you do church, that it takes a long time for them to see it. Until you actually do it a few times and they actually see it’s happened they don’t really get it.” Another explained about his inherited congregation. “It’s a sort of ‘New Wine-y’ kind of spirituality but I think to be honest it was very inward-looking. They kind of knew that they needed to not be, but it’s costly to be missional!” A third explained how staff absences meant,

“At the point where we needed really to be engaging with the inherited church - so they felt honoured and valued and that new isn’t a critique of the old - that was exactly the point we didn’t have the leadership capacity to do that. It created all sorts of issues. I’ve got a very thick complaints file! We had a choice to push on or retreat back and just honour the inherited for the next three or four years, then slowly get to the place where we can start



something new. We decided, we won't allow the vision to be held hostage, but we'll do the best we can to mobilise the whole people of God. That's an ongoing journey!"

Trying to balance the tension of the inherited congregation and the pioneering ministry was complicated.

"We've just got to keep thinking creatively about how the gospel can impact people outside of the church. But we also [need to] say, 'What's in your hand?' That whole Moses thing. What's been in our hand is like the remnant of that original St. X's congregation. [They] are a very faithfully committed bunch of people, so they're in our hands, let's honour them, let's include them to be part of what we're doing, and take them on a journey with us rather than doing something that is so very off the wall that they can't get it or connect with it."

Methods to move cultures which participants adopted will be considered later, but participants recognised some of the reasons behind congregational anxiety or passivity. Despite their frustrations they also had concern and compassion for their inherited congregations. Often those with confidence, ability and initiative were already busy, committed to other things with limited capacity to engage in pioneering. One spoke of how hard the lives of his elderly UKME congregants had been. They were risk and change averse because they had needed to battle so hard, for so long, over so many things. Church was their place of safety and the thought of altering that was difficult for them. Others spoke of hopelessness, particularly in socially deprived areas. No one believed change was possible, or that their efforts could make any difference on the levels of deprivation or spiritual apathy. They wanted change but felt powerless to contribute and were either resigned or wanted clergy to make it happen. Another factor was lack of confidence in the gospel, or themselves and their ability to articulate it. Likewise, a sense of inability to communicate across generations and fear of failure. It was sometimes necessary then, for participants to go "back to basics" of discipleship with their inherited congregation in order to lay foundations for them to engage in future missional activity.

One described starting by not instigating anything "too glossy" but with simple activities that the congregation felt were within their reach, gradually building confidence and changing their perspective to think beyond the Sunday congregation. Others described intentionally creating a culture of honouring people, building their self-esteem and confidence, or coaching individuals with potential. Encouraging imagination, supporting small initiatives, and celebrating successes were all strategies they adopted. Much of this is described in detail later but it is important to note that this takes time and energy. An inherited congregation cannot be transformed overnight.

Some were candid about their mistakes in trying to move a congregation faster than it was ready for. They acknowledged that this was partly a result of their own impatience or certainty that the changes were the right thing to do. One described how she had needed to apologise and hear the sense of being overwhelmed from her inherited congregation. This resulted positively in renewed



vision for them all. Another expressed her regret at the pain she had caused members of the choir she had radically altered in her enthusiasm to expand the missional reach of that ministry. A third recognised that only part of his inherited congregation had got on board with the change in structure and vision he had initiated. Consequently, he was now spending a lot of time “firefighting.”

For other participants, shifting the culture of their inherited congregation had proved too difficult. They described doing their best to faithfully serve and honour the congregation whilst pioneering something in parallel. They did not expect members of the inherited congregation to engage with it but rather were finding partners from elsewhere, such as other churches. As will be described later, some considered that the Covid 19 pandemic would radically alter the shape of their ministries, for example, reducing the capacity of retired volunteers. However, typically they were more optimistic about the future of their pioneering activities than the future of their inherited congregation.

## Diocesan Support and Expectation

The second key factor in the thriving or struggling of MEM was the attitude of the diocese and other clergy to participants’ endeavours. In some cases, they described an intentional strategy for MEM; posts created, funding provided and good support in place. Typically, those dioceses who had intentionally focussed efforts on MEM had done well on providing training and supportive networks. Given that many were in ministry as a second career, a number described training as pioneering or MEM curates, often within their local congregation. Several were now replicating what they had learned within the same diocese; a sort of ‘snowball’ effect. A number also named individual bishops, diocesan officers, or training agencies (most commonly CMS) who had been flexible in creating opportunities beyond normal Church of England structures. This ‘out of the box’ thinking had provided time and opportunity to build on foundations or experiment with new ideas – something which they greatly appreciated.

For others, their position only had short-term funding, and this created a sense of anxiety. While they recognised the logistical challenge and understood why that was the case, it was an additional pressure to know that they were the “last chance” for their inherited congregation or that there wasn’t enough time to build the relationships necessary for pioneering activity to become a sustainable FX. They were doing their best but recognised it was unlikely their initiatives would outlive their tenure unless the inherited congregation developed greater capacity (which seemed unlikely).

A significant number were something of an experiment within their diocese. This could be frustrating. Some mentioned tensions, particularly around funding, models of ministry or bureaucracy which was limiting their capacity. Others felt misunderstood by their colleagues,

“Church structures as they are, certainly the institutional ones such as Methodism and Anglicanism, just aren’t set up for pioneering. So, you’re constantly having to go back and

re-explain, re-explain and re-explain, and either they're not really getting it or it just doesn't match the reality of what they're trying to maintain or create."

Although some described diocesan refusal to allow them to try certain initiatives, they more typically described a benign benevolence towards their activities. Individual diocesan officers might be curious and sympathetic towards their "odd activities" but were typically not proactive in support. In one case the participant was enthusiastic about his diocese's lack of interest; it allowed him to do whatever he felt was appropriate without interference. Others wished they had more contact or encouragement but had typically found alternatives in groups of local ministers from other denominations or pioneering networks.

The ideal, it seemed, was a diocese with an intentional strategy to encourage MEM and financially invest in it. Plus, within that, a diocesan officer who functioned as a champion, providing support, creating networks and training. In addition, structures and systems which valued the previous professional skills of clergy and allowed flexibility, time, and freedom to innovate and experiment on the ground.

## Capacity to Understand and Engage the Local Context

### Listening and Discernment

A third factor which many of the participants identified was the parish context, and the time and ability to 'read' that. Repeatedly they spoke of needing to "listen well", to walk the streets, talk to the people, sit in pubs and coffee shops, get to know the local school. One commented,

"Pioneering is relationship, relationship, relationship. Mission is relationship, relationship, relationship. Discipleship is relationship, relationship, relationship. So, I spend a lot of time out there. I just spend a lot of time going where people have coffee."

Strategies included surveying parents in a local school, chatting to all the local shopkeepers, or inviting the community to a "parish vision day" to listen to people's dreams for their own neighbourhood. Understanding the needs of the community, the challenges they faced and the opportunities that were present was at the very core of MEM. They were essentially engaging in cross cultural mission and as one put it needed to "exegete the community." Within this, prayer was clearly vital. Almost all spoke of the need to discern what God was already doing, to identify, encourage and partner with what was already good in the community, and to spot and encourage those individuals being stirred by the Holy Spirit. As one summarised, "You have to go where people are and then listen to the Holy Spirit." Another said MEM involved asking, "Where is God [already] working? What does God want to do with these people? How is God drawing these people together? What will it look like for them? I hope that we've set something up that works for them rather than [just] what we think will work."

## **Flexibility, Critiquing and Perseverance**

Success included the flexibility to discern how the gospel is relevant to the needs of those communities. To offer support people are looking for and to answer the questions they are actually asking - rather than presenting faith in a form alien to their perceived needs. Examples of diverse local challenges included the residual respect for tradition in rural communities, but the isolation, dearth of local transport and social facilities. One explained, “The problem is people here don’t have cars and the buses are really bad, so people won’t go even one and a half miles to church so even if I did do something fantastic in church they just won’t go!” Others described new, dormitory, housing estates where there were no histories, no relational networks, and often busy, affluent, transient professional communities. “We’ve struggled to do much in the community publicly as a church. That’s partly the nature of this kind of suburban area, it’s been hard to know how to do that well when there are not clear practical needs to meet.” Conversely some spoke of multi-cultural contexts where prayer and “faith talk” was widely accepted or areas where poverty, violence and drugs were dominant with single parents struggling to cope and children going hungry. One described how his former experience of “setting up a hip coffee bar for young adults” in an affluent town was light years from the UPA in which he was now ministering. However, he did note that although the initiatives he was undertaking looked entirely different, the process of discernment was the same. “Listen lots, pray lots, try some things”. Another commented. “We just need to take church to people and not expect them to come to us!”

Participants were typically candid about initiatives that “should have worked on paper” but had not. They speculated as to why that might be but were trying similar (rebranded) activities again - or exploring alternative strategies. For example,

“We had a missionary there for ten years who achieved almost nothing. It’s just really hard and I don’t understand. I don’t have a clue yet. But it’s not as if I’m the only thing... the church is failing, the community service is failing, the village hall is failing, it’s a sense that everything’s not really working. It’s about going back to basics and trying to do community development from the ground up again, just starting with nothing and seeing what happens. My intention is to keep going until I make some better connections.

Participants also had different strategies for introducing the subject of faith. Some – from the very outset of their pioneering activity - included a spiritual dimension. For example, prayers or a Bible ‘thought’ and chance to respond. Others did so much more gradually, allowing the spiritual dynamic of their activity to evolve over time, one noting that he had “made it too religious too fast and scared people off”. Some had initiated social cohesion activities in which they tried to encourage ‘big conversation’ rather than chit chat or were hosting events with a much broader theme of wellbeing while introducing a spiritual dynamic or drawing from the gospel in a low-key way.

The ability to critique endeavours (including failures) and try something else appeared to be a common trait amongst the participants. One explained that his business background had equipped him for entrepreneurial challenges, another said she had learned, “To see challenges as opportunities that force us out of a rut.” Others clearly enjoyed the creativity of initiating new projects and training up teams. Some gave theological explanations for their capacity to press on - perseverance was part of the gospel and of their own calling.

Participants spoke of a desire to bless and bring hope, of the building of genuine relationship and trust between the church and community, and a transformation of that community by addressing needs, ultimately with the desire to see spiritual engagement. They all also spoke about the time it takes to achieve those things. Building relationship, rebuilding trust and any sense of the church as relevant, was a long-term project. A number explained that it was taking longer than they had anticipated to break down barriers of suspicion and apathy:

“Looking back now from nearly four years, it’s obvious that the work is still beginning. It’s what everyone tells you, but until you experience it you don’t know that this stuff is long term not short term. There is no low-hanging fruit in terms of evangelism. People aren’t queuing to join the church if only a more friendly vicar turns up. That’s just not true - well not here anyway!”

## **Breaking down Barriers and Building Connections**

### ***Building trust***

A key tactic to breaking down assumptions and barriers was for participants to be overt about their religious identity. Wearing their ‘dog collar’ as they walked the parish, or in the pub or supermarket; becoming school governors, members of local societies and building relationships with community gatekeepers like publicans and shop keepers were some of the ways they had tried to integrate. Some of those with the most effective FX had been in the community for decades. They had earned trust and built strong networks, in some cases prior to ordination.

Obviously, there were locations where external opportunities and circumstances were more – or less - favourable to the endeavours of MEM. Supportive wider agencies and individuals, often referred to as “people of peace”, were key in the establishment of new initiatives. Publicans who were willing to host regular church events, supermarket managers sympathetic to funding local community events, schools and nursing homes where head teachers and managers were supportive of events and programmes. Local counsellors, social workers and police officers were all mentioned as key individuals in the success of pioneering activity into the community. Once again though, trust – developed in relationship and over time – was at the root of these connections.



### *Collaboration*

Similarly, getting to know other clergy and church leaders was a core part of that activity. Many spoke of ecumenical partnerships, the value of collaboration rather than competition and a willingness to be strategic or complementary to each other's ministries. In one location, four different churches were each struggling for volunteers to run Messy Church. The solution was to close all the Messy Churches and relaunch as a cross-congregational partnership which had new energy and plenty of support. Others spoke of town or community wide festivals, drawing together not just churches but schools, local businesses, and other organisations. Food banks, social prescribing, mental health projects, gardening and creative initiatives were all run in partnership with the aim of providing bridges towards not just their inherited church or FX, but any church community. One participant said,

"We're all trying to work together to give people opportunities to engage with faith but in different ways. I don't care if people come to my church or not, but I want them to know Jesus. That's my ethos. So, whether that happens through chatting to [other denominational ministers] and then joining a missional community rather than church, that's fine!"

### *Technology as a tool*

The use of technology was also part of this process of public engagement; the revamping of websites, use of social media to disseminate or advertise, and the recognition that different groups access information in different ways. Some bemoaned their lack of technical skills, but most had found other people to support that. A number commented on the difference a strong digital presence had made. Most recognised the importance of this and during the Covid 19 pandemic had moved both FX and inherited congregations on-line. Several described their surprise at the amount of community engagement with digital forms of faith.

Overall, developing MEM is clearly an intuitive process: exploring and understanding the community, trying to discern God at work, and then experimenting with possible ways to reach out or engage with perceived needs before discerning how fast to move the ministry forwards. This is a complex task involving multiple abilities which may be why so many of the participants were somewhat older, bringing experience and skills from former professions. Not only does it require strong people skills and capacity to initiate FXP, it involves prayerful discernment, wisdom as to how to move forward, who to engage with, which risks to take, and patience to wait or try again if something fails.

## Ethos and Values within MEM

### Hospitality and Generosity

The final recurring factor in establishing a successful MEM appeared to revolve around an overall ethos. It was clear that at the core of successful FXP ministries within MEM contexts were the values of hospitality and generosity. Food was mentioned repeatedly, ideally free but alternatively ‘pay as you feel’ or a voluntary donation. In the current economic climate providing food was not just a nice gesture but something which genuinely helped - a demonstration of God’s provision. They ranged from cream teas to ‘prayer and paratha’, ‘church and chips’, multi-cultural ‘bring and share’ meals. Others gave ‘welcome packages’ including a bottle of wine to newcomers on the local housing estate. Some described how their FX always included a meal. People knew they would be well fed and for some that was a genuine lifeline, not just a nice ‘extra’. One participant explained,

“Messy Church has grown significantly because people are hungry around here, hungry physically. So, people turn up with their four or five children who are very hungry. We can have up to 100 people at Messy Church, the parents eat as well, there’s lots of relationship breakdown. We ran Alpha quite early but with a full-on meal. So, meal, pudding, coffee, chocolates, we had really interesting take-up on that.”

During lockdown some had delivered hot meals or prescriptions, and several spoke of the increase of foodbank use, though often they were frustrated that Covid 19 restrictions had prevented much meaningful interactions with those accessing them.

Friendliness and an inclusive welcome were also things participants mentioned. One described needing volunteers who were, “Friendly, approachable, non-judgemental. The sort of people that everyone can chat to and not [demonstrate] the judgement stuff that you find in churches. You do get to hear [people’s] really interesting stories if you’re patient and don’t ask too many questions!” Some described intentionally recruiting those with these skills or spoke of the value of long standing ‘guests’ taking on those roles themselves. Others identified the challenge of those who “commute to church” from outside the area and thus do not understand the lives of those within the parish. Whilst inherited congregations could function with a disparate membership it seemed that local people, recognised in the community, were often most effective at offering that hospitality. In several cases this had meant families or small groups being proactive with their neighbours. One participant who had only been in post a year or so explained,

“My vision is that we are seen as people that help and people that welcome and that if anybody’s got an issue or a problem, that they know that if they come here it’ll be a safe place that they can get the help that they need, or if we can’t help them ourselves that we can definitely point them in the direction. And rather than a church full of Christians, my vision is a building full of questioning people really who are sceptical of faith so that when

they do (because I do believe lots will) become Christians, they'll become Christians that have actually thought it out and realised that part of that faith is that we actually have to do something, we can't just turn up on a Sunday and sing songs."

An incredible diversity of hospitable activities was described. Certainly, Messy Church was common but other events aimed at children, 'community tables', craft workshops, debt counselling, parenting courses, singing lessons, Alpha courses and many more were mentioned. What they all had in common was an emphasis on non-judgemental hospitality, friendliness, and generosity. Clearly funding was a factor. Some described creative ways they had raised finances, including sponsorship from local businesses, encouraging giving from the inherited congregation, and pursuing local grants.

### **Accessibility, Relevance, and Informality**

Related to this ethos was the participation of 'guests' which several mentioned; inviting them to voice their thoughts, bring their creativity, and to be involved in organising and 'owning' the ministry. This contributed to a sense of accessibility, that this setting was safe and relevant for 'people like them', addressing their issues, and exploring the questions they were asking. This included timing – which was the best day of the week and time of day. Informality and knowing what to expect were important. Several participants spoke of how difficult it was for non-churched individuals to access formal religious activity, it was simply "too big a leap" and the traditional services were "just too alien". Similarly, some discussed the ideal size for a FX, recognising that once something became too big it was harder for new people to join. One speculated that perhaps 30-40 was the ideal.

"If it gets too big then it's harder to join, less attractive to some people. Obviously if you want to remain anonymous it becomes more attractive but, but we're, we're going for people who want to belong to a family and discover faith for themselves for the first time hopefully and become, become part of the body of Christ as a result."

Presenting the gospel in accessible and relevant ways was at the core of what people were trying to do. Many acknowledged that they were "way back" in the journey to do that. They were simultaneously still establishing relationships, building trust with the community, and trying to move the perspective of their inherited congregation, or identify individuals who might be willing and able to take part in outreach.

### **Creativity**

Finally, in addition to informality and accessibility, creativity was mentioned regularly. Something with a 'draw' for the community – again this was contextually specific. Arts, ecology, sport, music, community festivals, trips to the beach, toddler groups, coffee mornings, local craft beer tasting, showing movies, gardening. In some cases, non-religious community spaces were the venues of

choice as they were more suitable logistically and more accessible physically and psychologically. (Having no water or toilets does not make a church a good venue for most activities!) On other occasions the space of the church was used creatively. Participants described using the church as a venue to show films, screen football matches, to host concerts, exhibitions, and community events. The idea was often to make the building accessible to the community. Most were still wrestling with what Covid 19 restrictions might mean in the long run, but they were trying to create hubs for community engagement, in part because almost all of them recognised social isolation and loneliness as significant problems in their communities.

In summary then, the participants believed that the core ethos for FX were:

- Hospitality – a friendly, non- judgemental welcome
- Generosity – food and other blessings freely given,
- Accessibility – an informal, appropriately sized environment at a helpful time, where individuals can be known and contribute
- Relevance – providing the support the community needs and answers to questions people are asking
- Creativity and flexibility – and being open to evolve as necessary

## Summary

Overall, it is clear to see that there is no simple formula to the establishment of a flourishing MEM. It is a complex task which makes high demands on those in leadership. Serving and developing an inherited congregation whilst pioneering in a local un-churched community is demanding, requiring imagination and discernment, patience, and resilience.

Time, team, and tenacity seems a good summary. A supportive engaged congregation who care about their community; a diocese with vision, flexibility and patience; the personal ability to read both the context and identify God's activity; and a team with whom to establish an FXP with the right ethos are some of the key factors in whether MEM thrives or struggles. Rather than sudden, dynamic change, MEM is essentially long-term, cross-cultural mission. It reshapes individuals, congregations, and communities from the ground up, and demands a wide range of skills from and support for those in leadership.





## 2. How far do such multiple expressions of ministry interact, and to what extent do they expand the missional reach of the parish?

The short answer as to how multiple expressions of MEM interact in any given parish, benefice or wider area is that it varies. This is no surprise given the diversity of situations described during the interviews. However, there were some recurring themes which emerged from the data.

### Overlapping Leadership

The first is that there were cases where the clergy participant or another pioneering individual was the only overlap between different expressions or ministries. More commonly though there tended to be a small cohort (usually including clergy) who inhabited both the inherited congregation and FX(s). Frequently, those who had been involved in initiating the FX and/or served in a leadership or ministry role also maintained a presence in the inherited congregation. This pattern could continue for some time, particularly if the FX was less frequent – E.g., once a month. Typical examples were those who attended inherited weekly Sunday morning services but also monthly Messy Church, mid-week activity or congregation of some sort. Although numbers might ebb and flow, participants often described a committed core of individuals who had bought into the ministry and were investing considerable time, effort, and prayer. Over time, as the FX became more established or regular, more than one participant noted that such levels of dual commitment were “probably not sustainable for people.” Some had opted to commit to ‘full time’ and moved away from the inherited congregation. This was most frequent with individuals who had a personal connection with the form of ministry. For example: those with children or grandchildren in the local school which was the hub of the FX; those with elderly parents in a specific care home; or those living on an estate amongst those they were ministering to.<sup>4</sup> That emotional investment was most likely to make the FX their priority when the time came to choose. It should also be noted that lay members of these teams who were long term and strongly committed made a considerable impact. At least two of the participants spoke of decades invested in a project or community and the relational and spiritual fruit that had born over this extended period. More so even than clergy leadership, these

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<sup>4</sup> For more discussion on different approaches to residence, see <https://churchmissionsociety.org/resources/contextual-inhabitation-exploring-the-where-of-the-pioneer-charism/>

individuals had made considerable impact as a deeply embedded and invested member of both the community and congregation.

In other cases, the situation was reversed and at the point of needing more commitment, individuals withdrew from the FX, choosing to remain worshipping in the inherited context. This seemed particularly common when the pioneering team was ecumenical, drawing in individuals from a wider range of denominations and congregations. Several participants described how, at that point the team struggled as the 'buy in' was not equal from all members, or loyalty to their earlier congregation overruled being able to commit. They had been willing to serve, to get the FX up and going but did not feel able to "put all their eggs in that basket" as one phrased it. In some cases, the clergy participant had been left carrying much of the responsibility, which weighed heavily. Sometimes this was the result of committed core members relocating or experiencing personal difficulties but for others it seemed that the FX being an 'extra' was fine, yet they still wanted 'feeding' from the inherited church and thus felt unable to sever those longstanding personal ties. It appeared that often those core members involved in pioneering were also lay leaders in the inherited congregation: Church Wardens, Children's Workers, Lay readers etc. So, when the time commitment became too onerous, they had to choose which responsibility to continue with and which to lay down. Often the pull 'back' to the inherited congregation was stronger than the pull 'out' to the FX.

## **Drawing in the De-Churched**

A second recurring theme was that FXs often seemed to attract the de-churched. A number described examples such as the coffee & prayer mornings, or creative art spaces drawing in those who no longer attended church but had some sort of faith. Publicity had attracted their attention, or personal invitation had caused them to reflect and choose to re-engage with their former or dormant Christian identity. One spoke of three older men, spouses of regular congregation members, who, drawn by aspects of the FX, had re-engaged with inherited church together. Several reported that individuals who were 'fringe' to the inherited congregation had become regular attenders at the FX. One described the makeup of their FX beyond the core leadership. "About half were not from the church and not from church backgrounds. The others have some link into the church but many of those are from on the fringes." Gradually individuals from these groups were engaging in serving and even leading. She noted that the 'fringe' members often saw themselves as "unofficial helpers."

Participants' observations as to why these diverse forms of fellowship might attract de-churched and fringe individuals were that they were often informal, friendly, creative and relevant to those who were disillusioned, hurt or bored by inherited forms of worship. The emphasis on hospitality and authenticity seemed to draw back those who were looking to re-engage and had some sort of Christian heritage or latent faith. Likewise, particularly in distinct estates or isolated communities,

small local ministries were more emotionally and physically accessible than having to travel a distance to reach a church building. An opportunity for social, and low-key spiritual interaction in a home, local community centre, or other close venue was more accessible than having to get a bus or walk into an unfamiliar building – particularly for those who were disadvantaged or elderly.

## Occasional Events

A third pattern was that some participants described establishing a pattern of occasional events which drew both individuals from the inherited congregation and those from the wider community. Often particularly focussed on local hubs, like a school or nursing home, the aim of these was to build community and momentum over time. They might be quarterly, a seasonal festival, or focussing on a specific theme. One described attendance as having, “A definite overlap, with a biggish group from the [inherited church].” Another said hers was a

“Fluid community in that it just depends on whether they’re free that week. I personally think that’ll always be the case, people connect in different ways nowadays, and they don’t put things in their diary, especially at the weekend - bless them - because they’re so busy putting things in their diaries all week!”

Rather than committed or established groups, these were more flexible with a cohort who typically came and a wider group that dipped in and out. One participant reported,

“We did a harvest in the village because that seemed again something that a rural place understands. And it was exciting in two ways. [Firstly] because about 15 from both of my churches came. I said, “There’s no service this morning, this is our service.” 15 came and they thoroughly enjoyed cafe church, round tables... some of them hadn’t done it before. But also 7 non-church folks came along. I’d have been happy with 1, but 7 was great! It’s small, but it’s a start.”

## Crossing Points for Parallel Congregations

There were some cases where individuals used the FX as a ‘bridge back’ into the inherited congregation. One participant noted, “Some people have come to [this FX] and then come a bit more on a Sunday morning or on a Sunday evening which is more contemplative.” Typically, it was only one or two individuals making the transition or attending both after beginning with the FX. There were examples though, where long-term ministries in small communities had become such an integral part of community life that participants had made the journey into the inherited congregation. For example, a group of young people, having been part of a FX as children and pioneering youth-work as teens had asked to be confirmed in the inherited church. It appeared though, that most commonly, the two congregations existed in parallel - as “discrete communities,”

with just leadership, or a few individuals from the inherited congregation providing a link. Nonetheless there did seem to be two common outcomes.

### **Influencing the Inherited Congregation**

Firstly, there were occasions when despite the limited overlap, the inherited congregation had adapted as a result of the ethos of the FX. As individuals occasionally attended the FX or pioneering event and enjoyed the experience it had led to not only a shift in their own perception but to them becoming overtly supportive. As has already been discussed, moving the perceptions of an inherited (often elderly) congregation can take some doing, but if gatekeepers within the inherited congregation do begin to buy in, and trust the initiatives of clergy and others, then this can have a significant influence, particularly in terms of wider hospitality. One participant explained,

“One particular lady - Betty, a stalwart of the Mothers Union, said “I wasn’t sure about this, I didn’t think it was a good idea.” Her family said, “Well why don’t you give it a go?” So, she did, and she loves it. She’ll tell anyone she loves it! She’s not going to stop going to traditional church, but she loves seeing the children, she loves having the chance to chat.”

Another explained that inherited congregations needed to, “See things a couple of times. Until they see it happening, they don’t really get it.” However, they added that having done so, “The church are reacting very positively to that. For me it’s a real joy to see how positively the church are reacting.”

### **Ownership of ‘Our Church’**

Secondly, several participants described a scenario where members of the FX considered the inherited church to be ‘theirs’ too. They understood themselves as daughter congregations of the same parent church. Sometimes the links were just clergy, a few individuals, or meeting in the same building. Nonetheless, parallel congregations might gather for special occasions: harvest in rural areas, Remembrance Sunday in areas with a strong military presence, or weddings and baptisms. Christmas was an obvious time to join, with Christingle and carol services being popular with many. As several pointed out, this was not that different to having multiple inherited congregations with different worship styles – for example a traditional 8am and contemporary 11am cohort - joining occasionally; “Separate congregations that celebrate together,” as one put it.

It is then important to note that members of a FX may well consider themselves to be part of ‘St X’s’ even if they rarely cross the threshold of the church building or attend a Sunday service. One participant commented, “I think that all of those people feel that they are part of the wider family but not necessarily to come on a Sunday morning.”



## Utilising Church Buildings – Creating a Community Sanctuary

Although many of the FXs met in local buildings such as schools, a significant number of the pioneering projects (which would not yet match the typical description of a FX) were working towards engaging communities by using the contextual resource of the church building. Particularly in rural areas and smaller communities, participants described the ongoing emotional significance of the church building - even if people rarely ventured inside or engaged with spiritual activity. In cities with more transient communities, space for community events was in demand. The opportunity then was for the church to show hospitality to community groups. In some cases, this was to help with revenue, but others spoke of wanting to be generous and create a community hub within the building – a sanctuary for those attending, and a possible first step towards them engaging with spiritual matters. Three different examples from a small town, inner city and rural context were:

“it’s a lovely, prominent building, so I’m looking at how we use that as an asset, as a building for different, more entrepreneurial things. It’d be a gift to put on talks and concerts and different things. So we’re looking at how that could be used in a very positive way to connect with the wider community; having events that will speak of something to do with our faith and who we are as human beings and our spirituality, along with also being an income stream as well.”

“I think they’re attracted more by the building and what we do, because we run a monthly coffee shop. It’s just locally roasted coffee and locally made cakes for local artists and local musicians, local poets to come and share if they want, and so that’s attracted them too. It’s more the community stuff than the faith stuff that’s attracting people in reality - but they’re coming.”

“I think there’s many things in our rural parish churches that people really do want if they can access it without the tutting ladies who have a go at their children. They like the sense of history, the sense of spirituality, which I think our buildings still exude at their best. Our people keep the churches so beautiful. They’re clean, they’re tidy, they’re light, they’re very traditional but they’re well-loved and they’re always flowered. People who come in for baptisms, weddings and funerals (which I do quite a lot in the rural church) tell me and I can see it in their faces, that this place is important to them - this space. So, I think I would unashamedly say that I was looking for people to come back to church. I don’t need them to come on a Sunday and I don’t need them to sit on a pew, but I do think the place is important, there’s a spirituality of space and place that even in this transitory world they know we’ll be here.”

Examples of this rehabilitation of the church building as a community space came in multiple forms. Some used it during the week for foodbanks, coffee shops, art installations or concerts, often



integrating those with spiritual opportunities for reflection and prayer. Others engaged locals such as the primary school, nursing homes and other community groups in decorating the church for special events - giving them a sense of ownership. Some spoke of turning the surrounding land or the vicarage garden into a community space, initiating gardening groups or working parties of interested locals. One had given a small local start-up brewery storage space in the crypt and was encouraging a local charity to use the sanctuary as a training space for its vulnerable clients. Another had widened the church Christmas market to become a community fair, partnering with local groups and businesses. She said,

“It was just church people and it moved more and more to be something for the community and now it’s become this Christmas fair where we invite people in the community, and they are also involved in running it and people just want to come and sit. Some come and sit for the whole day and just enjoy the church space and it becomes this place which reaches out into the community but also allows the church to interact with the community - which they don’t always!”

Essentially, the priority of participants was to begin to engage the community in viewing the building as an accessible place where they might feel safe and familiar, know they were welcome, and where help was available. Occasionally this had resulted in individuals attending inherited Sunday services, but a number commented that the cultural leap from unchurched to a formal service was a big one for people to make.

## Interaction of Pioneering Ministries

Commonly, different pioneering activities and FXs interacted with each other. This was about building relationship in a variety of settings, gaining trust and then offering personal invitation. Those drawn into one established FX congregation had come via multiple links with the community, some of which were longstanding.

“They are people [attending the FX] that we’ve got to know either through that [long term mission team], or through a community garden that we were running. Or they got to know us through our toddler group at the church which has about 40 or so people all from a BAME background coming every week, and our Messy Church is really thriving as well. There are these kind of bridging things.”

Messy Church, food banks, school’s ministries, parenting courses and community festivals all fed into each other as a network, meaning that clergy and other volunteers built up relationship with families and individuals in multiple settings across the community over time. This, in turn might lead to people eventually attending a FX. For example,

“The sort of stuff that I’m running like ‘Church and Chips’ and Christingle, there’s a connection between the families that come to [them]. The first time I might have met them

was on a trip to the beach but then they'll turn up six months later at Church and Chips - they'll turn up at different things. I'm trying to create a safe environment for families that's not too weird, because a lot of church is weird, we don't realise it but it is weird. I do get quite a lot of crossover [between ministries] but it's mainly the more the family-related stuff. We're not getting much feed-through to the formal [inherited church] stuff."

It is evident that in many cases there are multiple pioneering activities going on within MEM and that these feed into each other. Although individuals may only engage in one of them, even just occasionally, there are those who access several. This impact is extended when groups of church leaders and congregations partner together. Participants typically spoke in generous terms about such collaboration, playing to each others' strengths. Be those Anglican or from other denominations, the common desire to bless the community clearly expanded their missional reach. A number described town-wide 'festivals' often branded as "LOVE [location name]". In partnership with local business, charities, and other organisations these mixed community events, spiritual activities and addressed local need. One participant described his delight that a local supermarket had essentially funded his summer mission and evangelism activities! Those involved in these events emphasised that such endeavours build momentum with time, and stressed importance of them being free - and including food. They were physically, socially, and spiritually trying to feed the needs of the local community.

### **Summary - Expanding the Missional Reach of the Parish**

Clearly, MEM does increase the missional reach of the parish, whether that is rehabilitating people's perspectives on Christianity as relevant to their lives; providing a space of physical and spiritual sanctuary; or trying to address different needs within the community while provoking reflection on spiritual matters. In the current cultural climate, many are so far from understanding the Christian faith that multiple small steps are what they need to take to begin to grasp the gospel. Often multiple different pioneering ministries appear to overlap, or form a network, with the clergy member functioning as a 'node'. This allows for the facilitation of relationships across multiple settings and the building of trust although it can be overwhelming if there is insufficient voluntary support from other people.

Although some individuals do make their way back into an inherited congregation, that was not the typical pattern; instead, the congregations tended to run in parallel, but with points of overlap - be they people, buildings, or celebrations. However, FXs did appear to be stimulating relational trust, spiritual reflection and community cohesion which are all sorely needed. MEM also endeavours to encourage those in inherited congregations to reach out in ways that are contextually appropriate for their community. And for those that do engage this can have significant personal impact. However, it would appear that FXs tend to become separate communities rather than a bridge back

into traditional forms of inherited church and so congregations need to understand this is not a way of “restocking the pews on a Sunday.”

In fact, many of the participants were keen to stress that “getting people into church on Sunday” was not the aim of their pioneering or FX, though one laughingly commented, “I’m not going to stop them though!” Likewise, they stated that they were not precious about which church individuals chose to attend, particularly where there was genuine ecumenical partnership across the location. One said, “My attitude is, hey if you’re a Christian and you want to come and join us, come and join us! I don’t mind which church you go to. This is what we’re looking to do, this is where we’re connecting. So, if you want to come and join us, come and join us.” Another summarised the ethos among local churches, “We work together to cover the ground, without being precious. How do we make sure that the good news of Jesus goes out? We all can do our own thing, but we don’t want to be precious, we want to share this load, let’s work together, let’s encourage one another!”



### 3. What enables the releasing of lay pioneers and leadership in MEM contexts?

A series of recent research papers published since 2016 have revealed the significance of lay leadership in the instigation of pioneering ministries and establishment of FXs.<sup>5</sup> These findings identified the importance of clergy as advocates and enablers, pointing lay leaders towards appropriate training and networks. As clergy numbers are reassessed in the Church of England it is vital to understand how this process works and can be encouraged. Exploring this from an MEM clergy perspective was a key part of the research and it revealed clear patterns. Despite the diversity of their contexts and ministries, almost all participants spoke in similar terms about empowering lay leaders.

#### Enablers and Encouragers

Many participants described their leadership style as being to ‘enable others’. A number had experienced this themselves, being encouraged into leadership roles when they doubted their ability and were intentionally emulating that process now. Some had begun their ordination journey from the place of initiating FXs and identified the benefit of the longevity of their involvement - even if their title had changed. Others used language like “naturally collaborative”, “delegator” or a “team player” to describe themselves. One laughingly said, “I’m the opposite of a control freak!” His aim was to create a culture of “low control, high accountability” in the ministries he had oversight of and modelled a “light touch, permission giving” style of leadership.

“My approach has been to trust a team of people, to delegate to them and to provide support. I’ll take the blame if anything goes wrong - I want them to feel like I’ve got their back. I do attend pretty regularly because I want to, but I don’t interfere and I’m hardly ever on the rota. I trust them. And we do talk obviously. I don’t meet with the team very often, but I have a cup of coffee with two or three people on the team fairly regularly, just to help them with their own personal development really. I think that’s how I take the temperature of trust, by having a cup of coffee with two or three of them.”

He and several others recognised that it would be much quicker, or more efficient to do things themselves, and for busy clergy the temptation to do so was strong. However, rather than become a ministry “bottle-neck” they were committed to investing the time in giving away responsibility for the long-term good of the ministry, their congregation and ultimately themselves.

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<sup>5</sup> ‘The Day of Small Things,’ Church Army Research Unit; ‘Playfully Serious,’ Church Army Research Unit; ‘National Ministry Team Consultation for Lay Pioneering.’



It was striking that a number described these attitudes and skills as things they had learned in previous careers. Be it in education, the public sector or business, they were now putting those management skills to work creating enabling cultures, building capable teams, and raising up individuals within all forms of their MEM. Although one described it as “plate spinning”, noting how stressful all the innovation could be, he was still firmly committed to a model that took risks on people, celebrated their successes and picked them up when things failed.

## **Theological Rationale**

Some provided a theological rationale for their enabling model of leadership. One continually returned to,

“Ephesians 4, [where] Paul talks about how the role of what we do is to equip the saints for the works of ministry - good works; to build up the body. For me that’s what it’s all about, my role and my gift as a teacher, as a vicar, is to equip the saints, the church. It’s to encourage the people, to enable and encourage them to be the church in that place, in who they are.”

Others spoke about “every-member ministry”, or their commitment to “the priesthood of believers”.

“I’ve always seen being clergy as holding vision, helping people keep true to the faith, and enabling the priesthood of all believers. I see that like we all have jobs around the house, whether it’s loading the dishwasher, washing the car, doing the accounts or whatever, we all have a part to play. The priesthood of all believers is our reflecting God into the world. I’m very big on the big picture of the Bible - the vision of the new heaven and the new earth, God’s kingdom. The church is here to serve that, it’s not a thing in its own right - and therefore everybody has a vocation.”

He went on to offer a critique,

“Churchmen [sic] use the word ‘vocation’ so narrowly to do with ordination and yes, that is the vocation of some and we celebrate that, but everybody’s got a vocation. Catherine of Sienna said, “Be the person God has made you to be and you’ll set the world on fire.” It can be disempowering, [that] just an elite few can do anything. So much is about [church] culture.

Of course, there were other participants who were temperamentally different, more directive in leadership style - yet they still wanted to equip volunteers. Others were the primary creative force behind any form of outreach and were trying to inspire their inherited congregation to participate by modelling and then inviting participation. One had personally initiated various activities and gradually as she gained trust some of the congregation were getting on board. Another intentionally

approached specific individuals to participate in outreach activities and ministries. He was quite candid that this was because there were those in his inherited congregations he did not want involved. He wanted people who were, “friendly, chatty... just normal and non-judgemental!”

“I deliberately approached the people that seemed to respond to me personally and I never have quite enough people but I do it [the activity] anyway. The levels of confidence are very variable and that’s okay - that’s part of the job. I’ve got one or two that are very outspoken -that’s okay too, I don’t mind that at all. They do take leadership and I can trust them. If I ask them to do something, they’ll do it. But it’s a minority within a minority. The church is a tiny minority of our community, and the people who want to be active in the church are a smaller minority, and the people who want to be active in what I’m doing is a tiny fraction of the people available. I’m hoping eventually that some people come through from the outreach work and non-Christians will start volunteering, I’m hoping that will happen - but it’s not happened yet!”

## Creating a Culture of Participation

We have already addressed some of the challenge participants described when it came to congregations or individuals being passive, resistant to change or nervous because of the attitude of previous clergy. However, the positive side of that journey is the creation of a culture of participation - which many described their efforts to achieve. One church had renamed its leadership the “ministry enabling team” – part of a wider change in ethos, shifting the congregation’s expectation on the roles of both themselves and the leadership. Such cultural shifts do not happen by accident though, and several described the intentional steps they had taken over a period of time. One had struggled to take his congregation on the journey he felt they needed to make. His reflection was that he had perhaps pushed too fast, rather than allowing enough time for a sufficient proportion of the congregation to have engaged with the vision. Some had got on board but many more were only nominally engaged, and he had had to do a good amount of “fire-fighting” among the dissatisfied. Others described how previous clergy had done much of the groundwork for them, and that the congregation were ready to engage with innovation or outreach as a result of the patient “drip-feeding” of ideas and teaching over a lengthy period. One spoke of validating the current identity, actions, and networks of individuals. Rather than pushing them to do more, initially they were encouraged to reflect on what already existed.

“I’ve been teaching them [the congregation], “You’ve just got to be yourself, as you walk alongside them [non-believers], all you’ve got to do is just pray for them, pray for them at home. If they ask for prayer in the workplace you can offer that if that’s agreeable, but you’ve just got to be yourself and just walk, love and support them - you’ve not been asked to preach!” There’s something around [people] being valued and encouraged in who they are. Identity and value matter because people are fearful. There’s work to be done in terms of

vision and understanding [of mission], but I think what's at the core is people being recognised for who they are and being valued."

Creating a culture of honour and affirmation was mentioned by several: "In church I spend a lot of time bigging people up, saying "look at what they've done, look at this, [for example] look at the Open the Book team!" I've also been doing lots of teaching and just spending time with people so that they can grow and understand that I'm not going to do it for them, that they're quite capable."

Others described gathering ideas from the congregation and enabling them to make those things happen, supporting their initiatives rather than bringing all the creativity themselves. "It's saying to them. 'so how can I help you realise that dream you have, that God put on your heart? What can I do to help you put that into practice?'" Several had invested time in exploring the passions of individuals in their congregations, encouraging them to take small steps to initiate outreach to neighbours; essentially being a sounding board. They had offered to 'come along' the first time, or to help facilitate and resource small events, but with the clear understanding that theirs was a supporting not leadership role. Setting up coffee mornings, community events, practical service, both one off and on-going small ministries within individuals' networks were described. One explained, "Now we've been here a while and people have got to know us [they understand] that we are warm to ideas that come in. So, people are more likely to voice them. That trust built over time is that we will be encouraging and positive about their suggestions and ideas, people really value that."

Another, recognising the inward focus of his large church took them on a two-step process. Firstly, they encouraged participation,

"With national programmes like for the homeless, for debt counselling, foodbanks. We set those up and one of the biggest breakthroughs was having a night shelter for the homeless in our church hall so people could actually not go too far out of their comfort zone - because they were on their home ground - but meet people they inherently didn't understand or were fearful of and see their need. That did a lot to help the church move into a 'let's look beyond ourselves mentality'."

Having moved the culture over several years by promoting these ministries (many of which were ecumenical), step two was to hand them over to other local churches and, rather than "franchising" ideas, the congregation were encouraged to be more entrepreneurial; creative around the needs they saw in the community. Some of what had been developed was remarkably innovative, eventually evolving into functioning FX congregations for marginalised groups.

A third participant described creating a specific service at which everyone who attended would be expected to be a learner, to take part and grow in some form of ministry to eventually facilitate a church plant. At the end of a year of such activity a group of 6 or 7 individuals had emerged ready to lead. One FX was also based around a similar model. As they arrived, individuals and families were

given cards with their task for the meeting on. These might be creative, practical, musical – but the whole ethos was around engagement. As the participant said, “Everybody gets to play, wherever their faith is at.” Although members of the inherited church were reluctant to participate at first, those who were new to faith or seeking were delighted to be included and have some ownership – it was genuinely “their church” because they made it happen. It was obvious from several accounts that establishing the culture in a FX is typically easier than transforming the culture of an inherited church. Shared meals, small group discussion, bringing testimony, writing liturgy, contributing a prayer or song were described as normal in many of those newer congregations. It had been that way from the outset and so was normal for those who joined.

## Permission to Fail

What was clear is that clergy do set the tone, either empowering or undermining confidence to participate. This takes considerable generosity, trust and risk taking. One participant laughingly described the “glorious failures” of his attempts at pioneering. Others were less enthusiastic about things that had not worked, but recognised the need for perseverance, flexibility, and adaption of vision. Many spoke of things that had not worked as they had hoped they would. However, personal ability to reflect on, rather than be crushed by failure, is one thing. Supporting disappointed individuals or groups is another. A few spoke about walking with lay people through the disappointment of pioneering failures, helping them to learn from those experiences and try something else rather than giving up. Those from business backgrounds seemed particularly well equipped for this, drawing on their professional entrepreneurialism, ability to adapt and develop ideas. One described trying to create an, “ethos of ‘have a go’. If it fails it doesn’t matter - you’ve had a go, [so] just try!” Part of that was their transparency about their own struggles and failures, recognising the power of authenticity. The right amount of support and supervision was the key, and as one participant pointed out,

“Some people are up for it and they’ll go, “Yeah let’s have a go, fine,” and some people you have to hold their hands a bit more and walk alongside them. In that sense you treat people as individuals, and you have to have a variety of different ways of working with them because they are individuals and their contexts are different.”

## Identifying Potential

Not all the participants had the luxury of capable, willing lay leaders or teams to encourage and work with. In small churches they had often needed to seek out those with potential. Several spoke of their commitment to, “Intentionally working with those God has given me.” Frequently they



described a lack of confidence in lay people. Those in more deprived and rural areas noted this as acute. They had various theories as to why this was the case:

- A “Father knows best” attitude amongst previous generations of clergy
- The passivity of “paying subs for receiving a service – like the working men’s club”
- The traditional “Liturgical one person show” which is all many had experienced
- The structures of formal lay training, which were simply too academic and set them up to fail
- Low aspirations or confidence in their own innovation, encouraged by generations of “Knowing your place on the shop-floor rather than in management.”

The common response was to intentionally identify those with potential within the existing congregation, and what some described as “people of peace” or gatekeepers in the community. “Spotting those who have the heart [for the community]” was how one described it. This involved listening to people’s dreams, praying with, and encouraging them to step out, take a risk. “I said to them “look, you’re connecting with your neighbours, what’s God saying to you? Can we just pray about this?” That’s how their work evolved.”

However, particularly for those lacking confidence the important thing, it was universally agreed, was to invest time and energy into those individuals. Building their faith and confidence went hand in hand - a matter of discipleship; affirming what was already visible and encouraging them that they had a greater contribution to make. Many told stories of unlikely individuals who had flourished and grown into leaders with such time and support: often women, the marginalised, uneducated or recent converts from challenging backgrounds who were able to empathise and minister to others in their context. The sense of pride participants expressed was tangible, many describing the journeys of these unlikely leaders at length. For some it was the high point of their current ministry; what sustained them when things were challenging. One explained, “There’s nothing greater than to enable somebody else to find they can do stuff they didn’t think they could, and if you’ve had a part to play in that it is such a privilege!” The following is a good example of one of many such stories, in this case of a woman now involved in helping to lead a FX.

“She had no confidence in herself, felt she couldn’t teach anybody else, that she didn’t have the basics grasped herself. But sitting and listening to her she had the passion for it. It was just sitting with her, listening to her story, listening to her thoughts on the Bible one to one. She’s the sort of person that said, “Oh I’d rather be in the kitchen, but I’m in the kitchen because the ladies come to me and want to talk and then I can have these really good conversations about faith with them.” It’s hearing that and saying, “Actually that’s a real gift in itself you know, don’t always be in the kitchen but I can see that that’s also [part of] your gifting!”

Many participants stated that this process is intensive and costly in terms of time; several acknowledged that it would be easier to do things themselves. However, they considered the time

invested a privilege, what they were called to do in making disciples, and necessary in terms of making FXs sustainable. One pointed out that projects are most likely to falter when leadership is handed over and thus this investment was vital for their longevity.

The investment had come in a variety of forms. Some had intentionally invited individuals or groups with potential to read and discuss a book or co-lead a short course of some sort with them. Others had mutually initiated something and then spent time discussing, giving feedback, and learning how to develop those things. Observation is clearly an important method of learning and so inviting that and modelling before delegating was the tactic some used. Others had leveraged their social contacts to provide networks, or like-minded individuals to inspire and encourage those they were training. One had even helped an individual's lay training, transcribing their dictated coursework since writing essays was beyond their capacity. Whatever the strategy, the motivation was the same – to invest in, and build up the faith, gifting, and confidence of those with even the smallest amount of potential to take responsibility.

## Summary

Overall, it was clear that those who choose to be involved in MEM tend not only to be creative and visionary themselves, but also want to encourage those traits in others. Equipping their congregations and those in the community to step out, take responsibility and risk failure were at the centre of their way of working. This needs to be intentional though, and whether identifying and mentoring individuals, developing teams, or shifting the whole culture of a congregation, it takes considerable time, generosity, and willingness to trust others. It also means that establishing ministries may take longer than anticipated since encouraging a shift in perspective, inspiring confidence, and skilling up teams and individuals is costly in terms of time yet absolutely vital. Most were passionate about this aspect of their ministry, enjoying seeing others flourish and rise up, while also recognising that it was also necessary for the long-term future of the MEM. These management skills, whilst undoubtedly inherent in some, were also abilities many had learned during long careers, both within but particularly outside the church. That does not mean young clergy cannot facilitate such processes, but it does show the value of experience, maturity and confidence in mentoring and encouraging lay people from all parts of the parish, whether inherited congregations, FXs or the wider community.

## 4. What are the motivations and experiences of clergy engaging in MEM and what causes them to thrive or struggle personally?

Clearly the answers to this question overlap with many of the findings already described. However, it is worth recognising some of the recurring patterns that emerged from participants' accounts.

### Motivation

With regards to their motivations, all spoke of a sense of calling, of God directing and inspiring them. They considered that God had directed them to their current location or opened doors and opportunities for them to minister there. Although some were tired or feeling overwhelmed at the time of interview, as they spoke about their ministry most became animated and enthusiastic about the possibilities and potential around them. It was clear they were passionate about their ministry and had faith that even the small steps they were taking, or signs they were seeing, were God at work. One said, "I'm lucky in being able to see the Kingdom everywhere!"; others described having trained themselves or learned over time to take joy in small victories and encouragements.

A significant number had come to ministry at a later age or as a second career. Others had moved from traditional inherited ministry or pioneering roles into MEM positions (or diocesan positions which encourage that). It was evident that considerable professional and life experience underpinned their perspectives and vision. They were drawing on skills developed through time and/ or in other contexts. Many were bringing entrepreneurial, management, training, and community development skills with them. Several commented that these were not skills they had received any IME training for.

Temperament was also part of the mix. Individuals typically described themselves as creative, imaginative, or innovators, but also equippers and collaborative in their leadership style. This included the raising up of individuals and teams from within their inherited congregation but also beyond - collaborating with anyone who shared the vision for transforming local communities and introducing people to Jesus. Several spoke of a level of discomfort within Church of England structures, of not fitting 'the system' and of being a "risk taker", "boundary pusher" or visionary. Some used the language of being a prophetic voice to the local and larger church. Others frequently self-described as being tenacious, passionate, resilient, and determined. Often, they spoke about failures and challenges as opportunities. Clearly no-one likes their endeavours to fail, but the ability to evaluate, reassess and try something else was often mentioned, demonstrating a growth mind-set rather than a fixed one. They appeared to have developed strategies to remain optimistic and resilient rather than be overwhelmed and disillusioned. Of course, these are not qualities unique to

MEM clergy, but it was interesting to note that so many of them understood themselves in these terms.

It seemed self-evident to them that pioneering ministry was vital, and that it needed to be contextually appropriate and accessible to un-churched communities and that alternative forms of worshipping community, including FX, were part of the solution. Many were also adapting their inherited services as well as initiating FX. Typically, they described the tension of doing this alongside honouring their inherited congregation. They wanted to encourage them to be outward-looking towards the community. Certainly, they were willing to serve the congregation, but it was evident that they wanted to inspire them to be missional in nature, and this was one of their greatest challenges – and often frustrations. One commented,

“I’m very much for not just abandoning everything that’s old and traditional, I’m an Anglican at heart, (albeit a very low one) but I believe that we need for the established church to support what we are doing in fresh expressions, to support the new, imaginative, creative stuff - because there’s no money really for it.”

Several spoke in terms of “being a bridge” between inherited church and FXP. Having “a leg in two camps” was how one described it. Others spoke of being pulled in two directions simultaneously and needing to resist the pull to the inward-looking gravitational centre of their inherited congregation. One commented, “The first two years were really quite tough. The inherited church stuff took a real pull, wanting more of my time when I really needed the time to go out, listen, talk. The inherited bit pulls towards you because there’s always enough to do there.”

## **Frustrations**

### **Inherited Congregation**

When asked about their greatest frustrations the most common responses were the attitudes of their inherited congregation/s and their reluctance to change, particularly when they were newly in post. Several spoke of conflict, misunderstanding and feeling isolated in their first couple of years. Some described being aggressively criticised or challenged. Others had lost congregants or been disappointed at the lack of mature discipleship they encountered. For some, needing to have difficult conversations and manage conflict was not a problem, for others it was emotionally costly, but they saw it as necessary, however there were also those for whom it was extremely challenging and emotionally draining. At one level managing their inherited congregation and its expectations was just as hard – if not more so – than the pioneering aspects of their ministry. For example,

“On a good day I find it [MEM] really energising. Somebody once said that gravity will always be towards the centre and so it’s trying to push the gravity the other way, [at least] sometimes it feels like that. But I knew that when I took it on, and I’d rather be in it and doing that than not! Inevitably there will always be those who don’t want others coming and

disrupting their stable and safe church. They don't want people who are a little bit difficult and our [FX] deals with a lot of people with mental health problems. I'm aware that as Christians we should be over-accepting - that's how I feel anyway - and then other people don't feel like that, they're 'no we need to protect our church congregation'. It's those personal conflicts I find tiring."

Another explained his observations:

"There's inherited over here - that looks like this, and here's pioneer over here. And you've got your poor team or minister running between the two being pulled in two different directions, almost turning kind of schizophrenic trying to persuade some people to go this way or some people to go that way. The whole pioneering on the frontier model is an exhausting one. Most people are settlers because that's what we're meant to do, we're meant to settle down and get into patterns and that's how most people live their lives. Most people don't try and start new stuff or break into a group and try and create something new. It's hard work!"

### **Church of England Structures**

For others, the frustrations were with internal Church of England structures and policies. A considerable number described feeling misunderstood or lonely, irritated at having to repeatedly explain the rationale behind what they were trying to accomplish both to congregations and fellow clergy. Given all they were juggling, structural demands were an unwanted additional pressure.

"Oh, the constant thing of trying to work within the system because it's so powerful. I will spend too much of my time in PCC meetings and deanery synods and diocesan synods and responding to the diocese and all the rest of it in such a clunky way! It permeates all the way down through to everything we do on the parish level because it's about high control and low accountability, with virtually no supervision, no support unless it's reactive, unless something goes really badly wrong."

More simply another explained, "I think my biggest frustration is with the diocese, that it's trying to keep fundamentally a broken way of church going and not been really prepared to invest in the new thing." From a more supportive diocese another described, "There's definitely been a 'We want to support you in what you're doing' [attitude]. I guess, but the weakness has been, 'We have no precedent for what you're doing, and so we don't really know how to help you do that. Apart from giving you the time and trying to help you find resources that will help you'."

Others described feeling "like second class citizens" in comparison to church planters or pioneers. The resources they were given were paltry alongside the grants and support being offered to other types of ministry. Several considered that this was because what they were doing was slow and relational, in rural or deprived areas - neglected parts of the country.



## **Rate of Change and Workload**

The speed of change was also frustrating. As already mentioned, some recognised that they had pushed things too fast, creating negative outcomes. Others were deeply frustrated by the Covid 19 lockdown and the ways in which that had further slowed the development of fledgling ministries. Almost all recognised that pioneering and building FXCs was a slow process. One explained, “There is the sense of you come in all guns blazing, we’re going to change the world, and you realise it’s a slow, gritty work. And it’s not that people have rejected the church, because it’s not been something that they’ve known to reject, it’s just never been part of their life!” Nonetheless most wanted it to move faster and were having to develop patience or feared they would run out of time and funding before they saw any fruit. One candidly spoke of how “The diocese thinks I’m wonderful because of all the things I’ve initiated, but I want to see people come to faith. I’m not sure how to take those next steps with people and I’m near retirement age. I feel like I’m running out of time!”

Clearly isolation, under-resourcing, the requirement of long-term perspective and being misunderstood were tiring for participants. A number spoke about the strain this had taken on their well-being and mental health. Several said things like “I was massively overworked, let’s be clear about this. I’ve got a lot of energy, but I was working 24/7 all the time.” Or “A number of half-time jobs that add up to more than one full-time one!” Yet, almost all – by the end of the interview – were telling stories of hope, dreams for the future, possibilities as yet untapped. Only one spoke of being ready to leave and even he described God speaking to him, giving him new vision during lockdown. He noted that ALL forms of ministry were demanding and costly.

“Yeah it has been costly but then none of my clergy colleagues - traditional, mixed mode or pioneering - none of them can say they’ve had an easy ride. They’ve all had a cost in some way. It just goes with ministry doesn’t it? You can’t go into ministry thinking ‘Oh because we believe in Jesus we’re going to be blessed,’ because it doesn’t work like that. God doesn’t promise to protect us [from difficulty], he promises not to leave us. Though sometimes I’ve had trouble believing that bit! (laughing)”

## **Encouragements**

### **Seeing People Grow**

Given this tendency towards optimism in their interviews, participants were asked to explain what sustained or encouraged them. Almost all of them spoke about the joy of seeing people grow, be that in faith, in confidence, or in vision and ministry. For example, “There’s a much bigger high out of seeing others grow because of what you’ve invested in them than pushing yourself to the front!”

New believers were obviously a delight to them but watching members of their inherited congregations engage with vision for the community and step up to take responsibility was clearly

a source of great encouragement. One explained, “Honestly, it’s like being missionaries in a part of the world that no-one has ever experienced the gospel before - with all the joys and challenges that go with that. Joys are it does feel everything is new for people, even the remnant of the old folks in the congregation, faith is new.” Many of them told stories of unlikely individuals taking on leadership, or their enthusiasm for the successes of others. Their inclination towards collaboration meant that other people’s successes were also theirs – and vice versa. A good example was,

“My biggest joys are always seeing people engaging with God and going forward. Just seeing God doing things in people’s lives and the effect that that has, whether it’s somebody who’s been in the church since they were a tiny dot or somebody who’s new to, new to faith and it’s also fresh and exciting. It’s seeing the fire at work, feeling the glow is amazing. That’s definitely the joy and it’s the thing that keeps me here and wakes me up every morning.”

### **Perspective and Small Victories**

A number explicitly spoke about “small encouragements” and “God encounters” in conversations in the community. Finding “people of peace” or opportunities and openness to the gospel brought hope and revitalised them. One said what kept them going was “Grit and determination (laughing). And seeing fruit, celebrating posts on Facebook indicating a sense of belonging - tiny little wins. I think a long obedience in the same direction sums it up!” Many spoke about perspective, both in terms of this ‘micro’ evidence of God at work and the macro – keeping connected to wider networks or conferences where they could share stories and encouragements. “Seeing it as part of a bigger picture. [That] this is part of the kingdom growing. For me that makes a huge difference, particularly when you feel small or insignificant.” Others saw the value in being able to look back over an extended period to see change, or development in congregations, ministries, and individuals. Many used farming or gardening metaphors and spoke of the need for time and patience for “seeds to bear fruit.”

### **Supportive Relationships**

Relationships were also central to a sense of encouragement. Participants spoke about mentors, spiritual directors, training incumbents and diocesan officers that provided support and wisdom. A majority spoke about like-minded collaborators as a source of inspiration - peers, networks of pioneers and local clergy to whom they did not have to explain themselves; those who “just get it”. The energy and commitment of teams and enthusiasm of volunteers clearly inspired them, as did spouses. Many described partners (and in some cases adult children) who participated in FXP

activity themselves or acted as sounding boards. One summarised, “People sustain me, people’s encouragement, that sense of working with others in this great, great adventure.”

### **Self-Awareness and Self-Care**

It was also noticeable that most appeared self-aware and were candid about their own failings, insecurities, and struggles. Several spoke about their history of mental health challenges and how they had learned to manage those, developing habits of self-care. Indeed, almost all participants described routines they had developed over time for juggling the multiple demands placed on them. Exercise, friendships, regular spiritual retreats, and commitment to personal devotional habits were all cited. One spoke at length about intentionally developing prayer habits of “surrender and finding joy” in order to cope with “all the plates I’m spinning”. Another described how he had learned to manage repeated professional disappointment and find a sense of vocation in his current situation. Some explained that they had come to these habits later in life having previously overworked. However, many admitted they still did far too much, the result of passion for the community and those without faith, commitment to their inherited congregation, and simply having too many demands placed on them.

### **Summary**

In short, these MEM clergy were motivated by a sense of God’s calling and a desire to see individuals, churches and communities thrive. They wanted people to encounter Christian faith and have their lives transformed – be they inside or outside the existing church. They were convinced that although there is value in existing models of church - which they wanted to honour, there was a need for pioneering mission including the establishment of FXs. Often innovators, many experienced being misunderstood, feeling undervalued, pulled in multiple directions and isolated. The process of ‘re-evangelisation’ and the creativity and discernment needed for that process were relational, time consuming and slow. Personal frustration was often compounded by external pressure to produce results quickly. Their pioneering was missionary work, often with completely un-churched communities. Likewise, changing the mindset of inherited congregations to orient it to be outward looking was often experienced as more frustrating than the pioneering aspects of their ministry.

However, just as relationships often caused the most strain, they also provided the most joy. Almost all described being encouraged and sustained by the ‘small wins’ of seeing individuals grow, develop and find faith for the first time. Establishing fledgling faith communities, inspiring creativity, and faith in others, and developing other leaders were all sources of joy. Participants had learned to celebrate the small wins, to try to keep perspective that they were part of something bigger and longer term. Most had experienced being overwhelmed at times but, through experience and in some cases illness, had found ways to take care of their own well-being and personal faith.

Proactive and relational by temperament, they had been proactive in finding partnership, support, and resources to facilitate their ministry.

What was striking from the 17 interviews – despite the challenges – was the sense of hope, of partnership with God, and faith that what they were doing was making, and would ultimately make a difference. It was hard, slow, often unrecognised work but they were committed to serving both the Church and community for as long as they possibly could.



## 5. What has been the initial impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on MEM and how it might shape such ministry for the longer term?

### Change in Rhythm

Given the timing of this research, during the first lockdown of the pandemic, many participants were wrestling with the present and future realities of the pandemic on both forms of their MEM. A number described enforced rest as a positive thing, giving them opportunity to slow down, pray and reflect. For some that had been a relief; respite from the hectic pace of MEM or from particularly challenging situations. For others time to read and reflect had given them a new sense of perspective or calling. One described specifically engaging with questions raised by the Black Lives Matter movement during lockdown. This had refreshed his sense of vision to develop both pioneering and inherited ministries in a hugely diverse parish. For others it had caused them to consider how much of their former activity was genuinely productive, and in what ways ministry and church life could be helpfully restructured after restrictions were lifted. Several spoke of their joy at having time to talk and pray with those in their congregations and communities.

### Expanding Missional Reach

Some had been extremely busy, particularly in the early stages of the lockdown, engaging with the physical needs of those in their communities. This had helped the reputation of the church and expanded their missional reach. Several commented on the advantage of their embeddedness in the locality. One had been out walking the parish, chatting to those she met taking their daily exercise and trying to support the lonely. She commented,

“I think that’s become so evident in this Coronavirus time that actually the social workers and the housing association people they’ve all not been able to be here, they’ve been working from home and yet the clergy particularly, but local Christians are all here - we’re here in the parish alongside people, living alongside them. The people from the housing association rang me and said, “Oh could you just visit this person and get her some shopping”. They trust me because they know me.”

Another had rallied his congregation to cook hot meals for local families referred by schools and adult social care. He noted that, “Unlike the statutory sector we can move very quickly” and felt that their presence created by earlier pioneering activities meant,

“The local statutory sector knows us and trusts us because it sees us working in different community centres and involved in voluntary boards and groups. So, there is a sense in which our presence is much bigger, and our impact and influence is greater. Reputationally



we are going to come out of this really well. The next question is how to use that to do more kingdom work?”

Given the significance of food in many FXs and pioneering ministries it was unsurprising that this was a way in which several reported serving their communities during lockdown. A significant number were already running foodbanks, but one in a rural area reported,

“We’ve had more people through the Foodbank, ten times the numbers pre-Covid 19. I’ve had to gear up and use skills that the church never taught me (laughing). I’ve raised a lot of money and am running three food projects rather than one small one. My colleague is making sure that everybody who asks gets prescriptions delivered to their houses, because loads of our old folks are self-isolating and a lot of them live in places where they can’t get to the pharmacy because there’s no public transport.”

He did acknowledge the cost of all this activity, “We’ve got a range of volunteers who are getting a bit fed up but have been doing that for ten weeks/eleven weeks now. Just being out and about. Our church response, I think has been really good.”

## Stalling of Pioneering Projects

However, almost all also spoke with disappointment at the stalling of fledgling pioneering ministries which had just begun to gain traction in the community. Or having to halt projects and young congregations. Obviously, none knew what would become of those initiatives. Some had been able to move to online versions but given the relational dynamics and stage of development for some this was a poor substitute. However, others with more established groups had found that their participatory culture had translated well on-line. One described an online “Wellbeing in lockdown” discussion event that was well attended by individuals from the community even though no-one from his inherited congregation attended. Several were also concerned that those involved in leading or volunteering for pioneering or FX ministries might be unable to return. Given their age or health, even enthusiastic older members seemed unlikely to be able to return to the same level of activity, even if ministries were able to fully re-start at some point.

Interestingly, although concerned, few participants seemed overly anxious. Perhaps (as previously discussed) because experimentation and willingness to risk failure are often part of their DNA, those drawn to MEM seemed able to roll with the challenge and innovate around it. Some were positively excited by the new possibilities. Most were keen to ‘get going’ again and to ‘re-imagine’ rather than simply return to old patterns. One went as far as to say, “The mixed ecology we’ve got at the moment is showing a different way of doing church and the Covid 19 thing is helping move it, move us in that direction.” Another explained, “I feel like an asteroid has hit the church and the dinosaurs will die, they will fade, but the mammals are this FX thing that we’ve already started. Because we are already happy to gather on a Thursday evening in silence, and we can be socially distanced and that’s fine!”



## The Pros and Cons of Digital Church

Most spoke of their inherited church moving on-line in some format, ranging from pre-recorded Sunday services, to zoom church or Facebook live-streaming of daily offices. Others sent regular emails containing devotional material. For some this had been helpful in creating community beyond Sunday services and for encouraging an atmosphere of participation. Given the importance of lay initiative and leadership in MEM, it seems that digital small groups may be an excellent format for increasing confidence. One explained, “Lockdown’s been brilliant for this, we’ve done some courses online, like the Bible course for example, and then people have joined a Zoom small group. It’s definitely bringing people into church by feeding them into a small group. One or two are emerging out of the shadows and are being able to lead in a way that perhaps they just weren’t able to in traditional church before Covid 19 happened.”

Another described having an interactive, “unprofessional” Zoom service across the churches in their benefice to encourage participation.

“We have a challenge of the week on a theme where people bring a picture or drawing or something. We have two pieces of music, each one of which is picked by someone from a different church and they give a minute testimony to introduce it. We never call it a testimony but that’s what it is; beautiful, moving. We had the most extraordinary talk about infertility the other week from someone who just wouldn’t have had the confidence [normally]. It was desperately moving, as a way of introducing the song about God’s love. Then we have a four minute sermon that tees up nine minutes in small groups - there hasn’t been particularly a culture of small groups here. Frankly all of this is a mile away from where it needs to be, and it’s very scrappy and I’ve been involved in large churches that have all of this sorted years ago, it’s nothing revolutionary, but it’s small steps.”

Several also described their awareness that individuals beyond the normal congregation appeared to be engaging with online services or registering for email or Facebook devotional material. They speculated that anonymity, convenience, and it being less scary to engage digitally than walk into a church building were among the causes. For example:

“We had a huge number of people just having a look but when you went into the statistics some of them were only staying for a few seconds. As things have settled down a little bit I would say we’ve probably got a third of our existing congregations engaging really, really highly, and we’ve got another third of people who we never saw on a Sunday engaging pretty regularly.”

“We used to run a physical Wednesday morning prayer group which had about eight or nine people coming to it, we’ve now put it online 40 people [are] viewing it. So one of my dreams is we really need to learn how to blend the physical and the internet together and how to

connect with some of those people who are coming online; there's some work to do with that!"

There were concerns, however:

- How to build real relationship with anonymous YouTube viewers?
- Or avoid creating a consumerist environment? (simply a different version of attractional church and therefore at odds with their desire to grow participatory FXs)
- How to make sure that those who were disadvantaged or more elderly didn't get left behind in the shift to digital church?
- Others recognised that the limits of their own technological capacity had made the shift online problematic.

These are questions and issues leaders of all church are asking, but MEM clergy are, once again, trying to juggle connections and ministry often with two cohorts who often have varying needs.

### Longer Term Impacts, Hopes and Fears

Longer term, particularly those with smaller, multiple, or rural congregations were anticipating financial problems in their inherited churches and across the dioceses. Most expected: accelerated decline in elderly congregations; being unable to have retired (therefore vulnerable) clergy fill rotas; drops in income; unfilled vacancies; and consequently, closures of small congregations. A number questioned the ethics of re-opening and putting vulnerable congregants at risk.

Some pointed to financial challenges, for example:

"95% of our income is from Sunday morning plate collection, so 95% of our income has gone down. We can manage because we have some money in a fund that helps us a bit but we'll not be able to do that forever and if nothing else, just with a dwindling congregation we may end up having to close because we just can't afford to keep the place open."

Or

"A lot of our money comes from either fundraising activities which have all ceased or people putting money in the plate which has ceased, or the things we charge for, like weddings, which have ceased, so our budgets are shot, with no real, no sign of when that might change."

What they were more optimistic about were structural changes, the FXP aspects of their ministries. Several spoke of how lockdown had changed the perspective of the congregation, making them more open to alternative ideas of what church might look like. One, from a larger church, described how they had embarked on a teaching programme encouraging,

"A theology of the household which is just as strong as the theology of the temple [in Scripture] and that largely, for consumerism, for professionalism, just for sexism [has been

neglected]. I think over the years we've got a far stronger theology of temple than household and that needs addressing."

Many anticipated new patterns which they were positive about. One said,

"I feel as though God has ripped the walls of the church down because suddenly we all go off into our holy huddles here and everywhere, it just can't happen, we are not allowed to do it by law! So, we've had to go out, we've had to go beyond the walls of the buildings that are all locked up anyway. And the wonderful image [I have] is of the text in Isaiah about stretching the tent, widen the tent pegs, and I feel that's what God's doing in amazing ways."

They were keen not to go back to former hectic rhythms but to try and find new ways of doing ministry. Most spoke of reflecting on, "What we will jettison from when we get back", "Letting one or two things die", or "Stopping replicating in multiple parishes". They wanted to listen to their congregations, communities, and to God, then making wise choices about what to lay down and what to initiate. One summarised their desire to, "Start again with a blank sheet and not immediately start anything back up. First of all, we need to hear everyone's stories and lament with people for what they've lost and what's not been able to happen. Then we need to re-imagine what we started three years ago or and ask what is the Lord calling us to do?"

## Summary

To state an overused sentiment, 2020 has been unprecedented. However, despite their pastoral and financial concerns, most participants in this study were positive overall about the opportunity for change that the lockdown might bring. Whether renewing vision, giving them time to catch their breath or providing new opportunities to serve the community, they spoke of possibilities for moving forwards. Perhaps already equipped for establishing new things and reordering inherited ones, most could see scope for mission and ministry that might emerge, and opportunities to resolve challenges presented by some dimensions of their MEM.

## Conclusions

In conclusion, it is evident that MEM – although demanding – can stimulate community, spiritual engagement and demonstrate new and accessible routes to Christian faith for non-churched groups. It can also encourage inherited congregations to be flexible, outward looking and grow in faith and confidence. Even if the two (or more) groups have limited interaction, the sense of being one church can still exist and cause both to flourish. However, MEM is a demanding form of ministry, requiring clergy to juggle multiple demands and requiring creativity, flexibility, discernment, and resilience. It is clear that to establish a flourishing MEM and for the clergy involved to thrive there are a number of factors to consider.

## Time

MEM is based on relationship, within both the inherited congregation and the wider community. Establishing trust, in order to bring about change, takes considerable time and energy and both diocese and clergy themselves need to recognise this and have realistic expectations. There are at least three particular time-related dynamics to consider:

Firstly, the time and energy it takes to broaden the perspective of an inherited congregation respectfully and graciously. If that has not already been done, then managing expectations and inspiring vision for change is time consuming. The extent to which the incumbent has to do the work of building trust, confidence, communicating vision and preparing them for a shift in focus will significantly impact how fast FX can develop. Very often congregations see FXP as a way of ‘restocking Sundays’ and helping them understand the realities of MEM is crucial, as is understanding their history, hopes, fears and capacity. Similarly, prayerfully identifying those who might be encouraged and trained to lead an FX and engaging those gatekeepers who are resistant, are important processes of discernment. All this requires wisdom, prayerful reflection, and time.

Likewise, the process of establishing FX congregations is a long-term project. It involves getting to know the community, their issues, needs and what already exists in the area. It requires establishing trust, key relationships, partnerships, and collaborations. Again, this takes patience, time, and prayerful discernment. Recognising where God is already at work and what is required cannot be rushed. There are likely to be false starts, failures, and the need to evaluate and be flexible and creative in trying something else. This is not short-term process.

A third time-consuming, but vital component of MEM is the identifying and encouraging of lay leadership. For either form of MEM congregation to have longevity, members must buy in and be willing to serve and lead. Participants described investing considerable amounts of time in developing others. Sometimes this was relatively straightforward; there were confident and capable individuals already involved, for others it involved the gentle encouragement of those with



little obvious capacity. Creating a culture of participation, ownership, and vision takes time and patience. It needs clergy who are able to enable and empower others.

It is vital that dioceses, clergy themselves, and congregations all understand that developing a thriving MEM is a relational, gradual and time-consuming process involving creativity, flexibility, much prayer and discernment; it cannot be rushed and needs sufficient resourcing to allow for that.

## Team

It is also evident that MEM is most effective when undertaken as a team, or in partnership. For clergy to endeavour to lead an inherited congregation and initiate FXP simultaneously and alone is unrealistic. Either one (usually the inherited congregation) exerts an excessive pull on the minister or both forms will suffer, with the minister feeling overwhelmed, inadequate, and frustrated. The need for conversation partners who share the same values and with whom clergy can collaborate and create vision is vital. Whether they are members of the inherited congregation, lay leaders, other clergy, or ministers from other denominations and networks, the need for team is clear. MEM is demanding on many levels and despite their commitment and enthusiasm clergy are unlikely to thrive in this ministry alone nor are the ministries likely to have impact and longevity. The creation of team by encouraging lay members has already been noted and managerial skills to draw out the best in those is crucial. Many of those interviewed described themselves as highly relational, collaborative by nature and were actively creating or pursuing such groups. Those without often lamented their loneliness and the ways in which their capacity and creativity was stifled.

The power of team also extends to diocesan level. Creating a culture that values MEM and provides appropriate resources, training and active encouragement requires intentionality and flexibility. Just as it works outside established structures, so training needs to do the same. This includes recognising that MEM involves cross cultural mission, for which training is invaluable, and also that sometimes lay leaders who have initiated FX might be most effective if allowed to build on existing networks, remaining in context. The results when diocese are intentional and proficient, are clergy who feel supported, affirmed, and understood. Such policies appear to have a ‘snowball’ effect, encouraging others to embrace MEM. Overall, it means that clergy feel less misunderstood or isolated ‘on the edges’ of the wider institution, frustrated by constantly needing to justify their ministry to colleagues, and more positive in general.

## Temperament and Experience

Personal qualities are also clearly significant in the formation of thriving MEM. Most of those interviewed were mature, with considerable experience of parish ministry or other professions. They typically demonstrated high levels of self-awareness and a number commented that the skills they brought to MEM were not those learned in IME but in other contexts. Management (including

conflict and change management), entrepreneurialism, problem solving, teaching, training, mentoring, networking, fundraising and more were the skills needed for the complex multi-tasking they undertook on a daily basis.

Temperamentally many described themselves as creative, flexible, collaborative and ‘boundary pushers.’ They were visionaries and enthusiasts who tended towards optimism and problem-solving. A ‘can do’ attitude tempered with mature realism and an ability to critique failures and disappointments certainly help with personal resilience. Several spoke of how they had developed that, in some cases through mental health struggles or burn out. A strong devotional life, commitment to prayer and long-term perspective of God’s kingdom were also crucial; qualities that often develop with life experience. Understanding that small positive signs were God at work and celebrating them, plus a strong sense of calling and vision, also played a part in their ability to minister. Some were lonely, despondent, or frustrated, particularly with the attitudes of their inherited congregations, but often became animated when talking about their vision and the possibilities in their context.

In terms of their personal thriving, in addition to deep relationship with God and a well-developed devotional life, it was clear that friendship, family and networks of others involved in missions or pioneering enabled them to thrive - providing inspiration and perspective. Leisure activities, exercise, intellectual stimulation, and creativity also factored into their wellbeing. Although their time was pressured, those able to create and hold healthy boundaries (particularly with inherited congregations), delegate well, and have confidence in their own calling and vision were most likely to thrive.

It seems likely then that some clergy are more suited temperamentally for MEM than others and that training and placements need to be carefully tailored and considered. Most research participants were most enthusiastic about the FXP they were undertaking and the equipping of others. It was self-evident to them that pioneering was necessary in unchurched communities. Nonetheless they wanted to honour and inspire their inherited congregation to seize opportunities and to grow in their faith. A number believed that their roles would change as a result of the Covid epidemic, that their inherited congregations would no longer be tenable, and yet they were positive about the possibilities for new and creative forms of worship and ministry in the community and online.

MEM has the potential to encourage vibrant and creative worshipping communities, which are hospitable, flexible and accessible to non-churched and de-church communities. It is undoubtedly extremely challenging and the dangers of disillusionment and burn out are real. Nonetheless, given appropriate training, time, resources and support it is possible for clergy to raise up teams with vision for their communities and confidence to offer the hope of the gospel to them.

## Epilogue

Twelve months on from when the interviews for this research were conducted, things have moved on. England has been through two further lockdowns and the disruption has lasted far longer than perhaps many anticipated when they were interviewed in the summer of 2020. Some significant developments to note are as follows:

- 1) The rise of hybrid church, where physically gathered and digital church combine. This represents a new form of local mixed ecology in its own right.
- 2) A digital mixed ecology has begun to emerge, with some fostering 'church online,' livestreaming what happens in the physical space of church, whilst others have experimented with 'online church' where they have sought to form community and worship in the digital space.
- 3) A theology of the household has laid the foundations for what some are calling 'domestic monasteries.'
- 4) Out of necessity, there has been increased experience of churches needing to innovate and think in new and creative ways. This is as much about how to carry on as normal in unprecedented circumstances as it is about noticing the need to do things differently.
- 5) Those who have led FXs over this time have varied in their ability to adapt. Some have adapted well, moving online, focusing on building the depth of relationships with those they were in contact with already, or meeting outdoors in new ways. Others have struggled because of the Covid lockdown restrictions preventing them from meeting physically.
- 6) Since this research was commissioned, the Church of England has produced its 10 year vision and strategy for 'The Emerging Church,' which includes an aspiration for mixed ecology to become the norm.



## Action

The following action points, taken from the findings of this research, are offered for (a) the National Church, (b) TELs, (c) Dioceses, and (d) Mixed Ecology Ministers, to inform policy and practice for mixed ecology ministry in the Church of England.

### National Church

#### Vision and structure

- Celebrate and champion the importance of MEM and its place within the new vision and strategy of the Church of England.
- Create structural precedence in the Church of England for MEM, to allow MEM ministry to find its place and to flourish. This will involve advocating nationally for Mixed Ecology Ministers so they do not feel like second class citizens in the inherited and pioneer worlds.
- Promote the creation of national and diocesan hubs for Mixed Ecology Ministers to connect together and find support.
- Gather dioceses who have invested in MEM with a positive impact and dioceses who want to invest in MEM for a national discussion to identify how dioceses can make MEM part of their policy making and future strategy.
- Produce national guidelines that enable dioceses to invest further in MEM ministers.
- Collate good practice case studies and research that show the benefits of time, team and tenacity in MEM.
- Commission follow-up qualitative research: (1) with lay MEM leaders to develop some of the themes arising from this research; (2) with inherited and FXP congregations in MEM parishes to understand their challenges, perceptions and aspirations; (3) with ordained MEM to explore post-pandemic developments.

#### Discernment

- The National Ministry Team to create life-long discernment tools and processes to enable those already in post to identify as a MEM.

#### Formation and life-long learning

- Promote the importance of MEM content and learning across all forms of leadership training.
- Advocate for and identify: (1) the need for mixed ecology as the norm and (2) the specific training for clergy who feel called to be a MEM.
- Advocate that any MEM training should include some of the key areas identified in the conclusion of this report, such as management training, problem solving, networking, fundraising and enabling of others, as well ensuring good pastoral and spiritual formation development.

- Provide opportunities for senior and diocesan leaders to be better informed and motivated to advocate for the specifics of mixed ecology ministers.

## **Deployment**

- Link MEM into other national Church of England initiatives which focus on role and place.
- Continue the initial National Ministry Team's work on deployment and further develop the future shape of MEM.

## **Theological Education Institutions (TEIs)**

### **Discernment**

- Inform current, emerging and future church leaders in training that MEM exists and is a valid form of ministry.

### **Formation**

- Develop theological and reflective practice modules for those called to MEM.
- Ensure all those in initial ministerial education are aware of mixed ecology and are supported to begin to discover their place within it.
- Devise MEM-shaped formation placements that affirm and provide opportunity for formational development.

### **Deployment**

- Work with sponsoring dioceses to provide a MEM-shaped curacy with a trained MEM Training Incumbent.

## **Dioceses**

### **Vision and structure**

- Recognise and celebrate MEM more specifically at a diocesan level, incorporated into their vision casting and policy making, creating a culture that values MEM. Reflect this in budgets and financial support.
- Resist a one size fits all approach to mixed ecology ministry by allowing variation in approach and delivery.
- Grow MEM opportunities in all churches to extend the reach of the parish.
- Appoint a strategic diocesan champion for MEM, who is integrated into the decision making process to: (a) support clergy who hold these roles (by default or in a specifically designed post); (b) conduct good local research of where MEM parishes are, so as to focus support where it is needed; (c) conduct some focused work to see how MEM can also deepen the discipleship of existing congregations. This could involve intentionally focusing discipleship projects and workstreams in the dioceses into MEM parishes.





- Incorporate the learning from MEMs into the restructuring of dioceses in the light of Covid plans, harnessing the learning from the pandemic regarding adaptation and innovation.
- Overhaul financial modelling as necessary to orient further towards reaching those in the missional context.

## Discernment

- Develop more intentional discernment for congregation members, lay ministers and clergy in post, both those who feel inspired to engage in MEM working across FXP and the inherited church, as well as those who attend one expression of church (inherited or Fresh Expression).

## Formation and life-long learning

- **Overseers:** Provide training for leaders who want to be well equipped for growing a local mixed ecology but may not feel called to lead across different expressions of church themselves.
- **Lay leadership:** Train laity in cross cultural mission, growing a FXP and in how these new initiatives connect into the wider church and the missional community.
- **Practitioners:** see MEM section below

## Deployment

- Create specific MEM posts with the appropriate permissions, training and support.
- Work with inherited and FXP congregations in preparing them for new MEM posts and helping to further their understanding of the work of existing MEM clergy, including that MEM can extend the reach of the parish.
- Work with flexibility and patience with church leaders and congregations who are seeking to grow a local mixed ecology, so as to allow a long-term approach, providing support and affirmation. This should include permission for clergy to stop things and to reshape their rolls, so MEMs are not pulled in different directions.
- Offer more deployment opportunities for clergy that are specifically and intentionally MEM-shaped to enable a fruitful mixed ecology to grow. Accompany such posts with the time, finance, training and support needed.
- Adjust the expectations of dioceses and local churches to allow the appropriate time to grow a mixed ecology and for new lay MEM leaders to emerge.

## Mixed Ecology Ministers (MEMs)

- Develop an accomplished ability to read the context and God's activity.
- Invest in growing a team with the right ethos.
- Work towards developing existing congregations for mission as well as starting new initiatives, by: (1) actively working to adjust the expectations of the PCC and congregations to see that FXP initiatives are not intended to restock Sundays; (2) learning to handle resistance; (3) helping the congregations to see the missional needs of the community and

to understand that this can be part of transforming the inherited church too; (4) growing a culture of participation and ownership, building teams to be part of the MEM work.

- Be realistic with themselves and the communities they serve and seek to grow that it takes time, team and tenacity to grow a local mixed ecology.
- Invest in discipleship with intention from inherited congregations.



## National Initiatives

The national church has developed on a number of initiatives that are already supporting local leaders to grow a mixed ecology of church and to start FXP. Below is information about three Church of England initiatives which support the action points listed above.

### Mixed Ecology Learning pathway (MELP)

MELP has been developed by the National Ministry Team and is designed for MEM's who feel called to engage in a traditional and pioneer approach and want to develop this further, exploring the relationship between the two. There are a number of national cohorts running throughout 2021 as well as several dioceses running their own cohorts using the leader materials provided. For more information, email [pioneers@churchofengland.org](mailto:pioneers@churchofengland.org) or visit [Mixed Ecology Digital Learning Pathway | The Church of England](#).

### Greenhouse

Greenhouse is designed to connect teams of people with others who are also finding new ways to share the Good News with their community and grow a fresh expression of church that enables them to grow in their faith. Participants don't need to be a member of clergy or consider themselves to be a "pioneer" to participate. We know that fresh expressions are very often led by lay people. And, because there is a lot of variety in fresh expressions, they don't usually look the same. It's this simple: if someone has the seed of an idea and are feeling creative, then the practical help offered through participating in a Greenhouse will help them to get started. For more information email, [heather.cracknell@churchofengland.org](mailto:heather.cracknell@churchofengland.org) or visit [What is Greenhouse? | The Church of England](#).

### Inhabiting Innovation

'Inhabiting Innovation' is a pioneer development project from the Church of England designed to inspire and support a pioneering culture change through 15 pioneering principles:

- **Spiritual Foundations:** Jesus centred, prayerful, calling, bi-cultural identity, responsive obedience.
- **Inward Qualities:** discerning, self-giving, playful, hospitable, resilient.
- **Outward Practices:** notice, adapt, experiment, co-create, persist.

These 15 principles underpin the new shared discernment framework and the new ministerial formation criteria for pioneer ministry in the Church of England. They will inform the development of IME1 content and will be useful in underpinning diocesan training and development programmes.

## The Book

As part of Inhabiting innovation, a specially commissioned multi-author book will be published in 2021 which deep-dives into each of these principles and explores the relationship between them. Contributors bring specific research and experience to their area of interest. This book deals with the 'who,' the vocation of the individual and of the collective congregation, with the hope of 'ploughing the ground' in order for new missional seeds to be discovered and planted. It is aimed at local church leaders who want to lay the groundwork for something new as well as being a resource for pioneer discernment candidates and diocesan vocation advisers. It will be published by Church House Publishing in Autumn 2021. For more information, email [ed.olsworth-peter@churchofengland.org](mailto:ed.olsworth-peter@churchofengland.org) or visit [Church House Publishing](https://www.churchhousepublishing.org).

Resources for dioceses and TEIs will be developed to accompany the book.

## Authors:

Dr Ruth Perrin and Rev'd Ed Olsworth-Peter

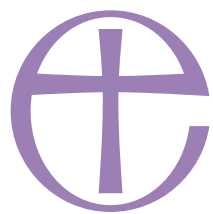
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For further information or enquiries about this report please contact  
[liz.graveling@churchofengland.org](mailto:liz.graveling@churchofengland.org)

National Ministry Team  
Church House  
Great Smith Street  
London SW1P 3AZ

<https://www.churchofengland.org.uk/living-ministry>





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