



“Do not dwell on the past. See, I am doing a new thing! Now it springs up. Do you not perceive it?”

Isaiah 43:19

Preface:

Within this document I use the term pioneer often to talk about the work or our aims for the next three years. Pioneering is merely the ability to see more than what currently exists, to see the possibilities and create pathways to make these possibilities, realities. Within the Bible we are shown many pioneers who have set off in faith and obedience to God’s call facing risks and leaving the safety of their known world to journey towards something new. Pioneering, therefore, is not a new concept, however the use of the word ‘pioneering’ has come more to the fore in the Church in the UK over the last few years off the back of Mission Shaped Church and Fresh Expressions. The work of pioneer mission has evolved over the years as has the language and like with all things if you are not part of that world, the language can be unfamiliar. My hope is that within this document I will adequately illustrate the journey of The Ark from the beginning and have attempted to explain the climate we currently inhabit and our response to that.

Introduction:

In this document our purpose is to reflect on the journey that we, as a project, have taken from the original concept to our aims and aspirations for the next three years.

We have learnt a great deal through our various encounters, and this has undeniably shaped our work. The Circuit also has faced some considerable change over the years. The undeniable decline in the number of Ministers, the average age of our membership and the disconnect between ‘Church’ and community are part of the landscape that we inhabit. The Ark Team believe that they are being challenged to take stock and question where God is calling them to be and what is being asked specifically at this time.

The original concept:

The original proposal for The Ark was that it would be an innovative and pioneering project that would provide alternative ways of sharing God’s love and demonstrating faith. It provided opportunities to be outside our Church buildings and reach into communities to seek differing ways of communicating and connecting with people and putting faith into action.

The core aims:

1. To seek opportunities to demonstrate and share faith within communities by working with local organisations.
2. To strive to discover diverse and accessible ways in which we can communicate and illustrate faith to each differing community.

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3. To inspire, equip and strengthen members of local churches who are striving to reach out into their communities but may be lacking resources, ideas or confidence.
4. To compliment the work of the Churches already engaged in outreach or mission work.
5. To provide unconditional hospitality, conversation and a highly visible, yet different presence of faith at festivals and community events.

these are rooted in the five marks of a Missionary Church;

- A missionary church is focussed on God the Trinity
“The starting point for any discussion about the shape of mission and ministry in the church must start with God – whose mission and ministry it really is. The danger is that mission and ministry become seen as human endeavours and God is often sidelined. Worship is our priority, and God is always the source of mission but first the object of our passion and adoration”
- A missional church is incarnational
“A missionary church seeks to shape itself in relation to the culture in which it is located or to which it is called. Whenever it is called to be cross-cultural then its long-term members or initial team lay aside their cultural preferences about church to allow the emergence of a form or style of church to be shaped by those they are seeking to reach. An incarnational church seeks to be responsive to the activity of the Spirit in its community.”
- A missionary church is transformational
“A missionary church exists for the transformation of the community that it serves, through the power of the gospel and the Holy Spirit. It is not self-serving, self-seeking or self-focused. The kingdom of God is its goal, and church is understood as a servant and sign of God's kingdom in its community, whether neighbourhood or network.”
- A missionary church makes disciples
“A missionary church is active in calling people in faith in Jesus Christ, and it is equally committed to the development of a consistent Christian lifestyle appropriate to, but not withdrawn from, the culture or cultures in which it operates. It is concerned for the transformation of individuals as well as the transformation of communities.”
- A missionary church is relational
“In a missionary church, a community of faith is being formed. It is characterized by welcome and hospitality. Its ethos and style are open to change when new members join.”

Over the years we have supported Church members in their desire to explore outreach opportunities and been a presence of ‘Church’ where one does not usually exist. We feel that we have been in a privileged position to be able to work with so many people across the Circuit from a variety of settings both within our Churches and with other organisations. We understand that relationships form the foundation of our work, as it is through positive and energetic relationships that we can begin to share our faith. Getting these relationships right and maintaining them is pivotal to the success of the work. Being authentic in our desire to work alongside people, being consistent and trustworthy continue to underpin our approach. We understand that relationships take time to grow and flourish which is why we have allocated extended periods of time to work in geographic areas; so that we can develop relationships and look for opportunities to have conversations about faith and life. We understand that there have been differing starting points for each piece of work and consequently, different expectations. However, we have been stringent in

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ensuring that our aims remain central to each piece of work in which we have been involved. We have spent time reflecting on the various strands of work and have used the learning to inform future pieces of work.

What next?

“What are we being asked to do” is the question that has been at the forefront of our mind. How, facing the challenges that exist and with the current social climate, can we be the most effective in developing new or different opportunities whilst supporting our existing Church membership? How can we extend our work practice to ensure that we are a catalyst for lasting change and growth?

Where is God leading us?

At the heart of the Ark is the desire to share God’s love which connect and resonate in ways which are relatable and accessible. It is of paramount importance that we speak into current culture and seek ways to break new ground and share faith in far more diverse and adventurous ways than those that may be offered from our inherited models of Church. We must be willing to respond flexibly to the rapid pace of change that exists in society otherwise the gap between Church and society will become increasingly difficult to bridge.

To reach into uncharted waters requires courage and faith. It demands that we be radically open to God’s future without constraining or limiting the outcomes by preconceived thoughts or personal ideals. We must see things afresh and see God at work within our communities. To move forward we must use a language that changes culture rather than just recreating the same that has gone before. There must be the desire to understand that ‘different’ or ‘alternative’ ways of sharing faith are equally as meaningful and valuable to those who attend as Sunday morning worship. It is not about one being ‘more’ than the other - they must be viewed as equal and held parallel in conversations and in our understanding. Often pioneering projects are viewed with a degree of caution or are misunderstood as they hold a degree of non-conformity. To work in different, unfamiliar ways is uncomfortable and not without challenge to all those involved. Yet, we believe that this is the route that should now be fully seized and championed.

The next three-years:

Our three-year strategy consists of four strands which interconnect, are underpinned by the original aims of The Ark and all demonstrate elements of the pioneering spectrum.

1. To foster a greater understanding of the nature of pioneering
2. To facilitate missional opportunities by arranging circuit- wide events
3. Support local Church missional activities
4. Build the missional capacity of the Circuit by leading and facilitating pioneering projects

1. To foster a greater understanding of the nature of pioneering.

To enable people to comprehend the nature of pioneering mission work we must have a platform where we are able to talk about it in all the same settings as those of established ‘Church’. The nature of pioneering should be interwoven and transparent within our structures and there must be a growth in understanding that this method of working is of equal value and is not just an extra. We must foster a culture of understanding that reinforces ‘other’ as normal and non-threatening, that ‘other’ does not mean that something else is ‘less-than’ or failing. Pioneers are an asset to Church and community and so we must enable a permission giving culture where there is freedom to

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experiment and explore possibilities. The established Church must learn to value the risk takers and those that challenge the status quo.

The Ark team will seek to talk about the nature of pioneering at every level both internally (our Circuit) and externally (community). The team understands that telling stories of our work and our own experience is one way that we can talk about the nature of pioneering in a non-threatening way. Exploring our use of language can help enormously in bridging some of the gap which exists.

2. To facilitate missional opportunities by arranging circuit- wide events

3. Support local Church missional activities

The team will continue to build and develop on the work that has been achieved to date; supporting Church members in their desire to develop or realise their mission opportunities, to build positive relationships and to seek opportunities to demonstrate our faith in what is considered secular spaces. Each piece of work we support will be an intentional move to increase understanding of pioneering mission, whether it is messy play, festivals or the Easter and Christmas activities are all valuable ways of introducing people to faith and talking about God. Through our relationships we can share stories of the successes and frustrations that come with trying different things and we can learn from one another, offer support and reduce the sense of isolation. We can use all these experiences to reinforce the value of these more unconventional methods of engaging people in a personal relationship with God

4. Build the missional capacity of the Circuit by leading and facilitating pioneering projects

- Transform culture

The Reimaging Circuits in 2017 event acknowledged some of the stresses that Circuits find themselves under and emphasised the need to look at ways of doing things differently and perhaps pushing the boundaries a little. The Ark team feel that they are being asked to step out and develop initiatives that will encourage new areas of growth and discipleship external to our existing Church structures. This model of working sits at the far right of the pioneer spectrum but we feel that now is the time to push these boundaries far more intentionally and assertively. This work is rooted in an understanding that we are involved in doing theology practically, “to really engage in the world in the quest for God’s transformation of it and ourselves who inhabit it” (Green, 2012).

The team have already been testing the ground and there are certainly areas where there is an energy that is palpable. There are people willing to engage and be the catalyst resulting in a shift of culture altering the paradigm of Church’ and a bursting forth of new energies. We strongly believe that if this model of work is adopted with absolute commitment and faith it will bring rewards, blessings and an ability to share the Gospel in ways which are relatable to those we serve.

We are proposing that we work strategically and intensively in three or four geographic areas with the singular aim of developing sustainable fresh expressions of Church within these selected communities. This will inevitably mean that adequate staff time needs to be allocated if we are to maximise our chance of success.

- To build capacity

The Connexional Pioneering Pathways group bring together individuals who are all involved in pioneer initiatives. There is a great strength of meeting together, sharing experiences and learning from one another. There is also a common language and understanding within these groups that is reassuring and reduces the sense of isolation. The Pioneering Pathways group has raised the profile

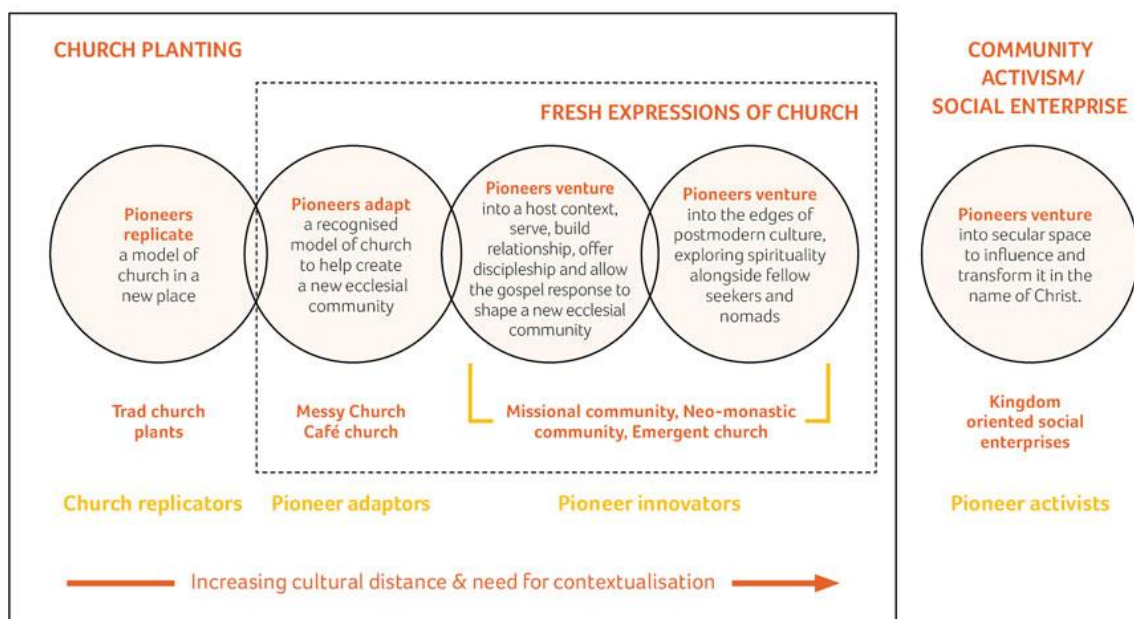
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of pioneering across the Connexion which is has been vital. However, the visible acknowledgment that pioneering is a 'calling' and therefore should be resourced and supported in equal ways as are the more recognised routes such as presbyteral ministry, local preacher or pastoral worker within our structure is still not common place.

We are proposing to build capacity of grass roots pioneers from across our Circuit. There is need to search for and call people who have a sense that they are called by God to participate in work within their communities specifically within pioneering initiatives. We feel that it is imperative that we intentional invite individuals to join with us. We know that they are people already within our Churches who feel stirrings or a desire to try to reach out using approaches that are more flexible and fluid. We are also aware that there are others within our wider community who feel God's presence in their life , but are unsure as to how to demonstrate or acknowledge it as the only guide they have is that of the mainstream Church establishments, and they do not feel that they fit within those structures. We know the importance and benefit of gathering people together for support, inspiration, advice, knowledge and hope. In addition, there is greater strength of purpose when we join with others in a shared vision, this can further act as a catalyst for the cultural shift that is required within landscape of Church life.

Pioneer spectrum:



This is an ambitious and multifaced approach to the next chapter for The Ark. We believe that this is where God has led us and therefore surely, we must stride forward with faith and assurance.

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