

PIONEERING MINISTRY IN AUSTRALIA TODAY

BACKGROUND

The Anglican Church in Australia has been engaged in a conversation about its growth and decline since the early 1990s. The urgency of this conversation grew with each meeting of General Synod. Nevertheless, the number of aging congregations seemed only to increase nationally while diocesan capacity for mission appeared to diminish slowly with each meeting.

In 2004, the General Synod called for the development of a mixed economy church and pressed Anglicans to make evangelistic mission a priority. The *mixed economy church* was a concept that emphasised collaboration between existing congregations and fresh expressions of church. Many adopted the term *fresh expressions* as an umbrella that emphasised the similarity between approaches that emphasised a more incarnational approach to mission to connect with people who don't and won't go to church.

A wide variety of denominations in the UK and later Australia used these concepts to encourage the development of church planting and more contextually appropriate forms of ecclesial life. Those developing such forms have generally become known as *pioneers*, who in imitation of Christ, are among the first to enter a new space or place so that those living there might hear the good news, connect with God and form a new Christian community. The intention was not to replace the local parish church. It recognised that one style of worship could not reach or engage with everyone in its vicinity. Consequently, any parish that took its locality seriously would need to develop a variety of forms of church to engage with the diversity of people in their neighbourhood.

General Synod meetings in 2007, 2010 and 2014 passed resolutions affirming the importance of church planting and encouraging the development of appropriate strategies to encourage the development of fresh expressions of church.

ISSUES

The Anglican Church of Australia and the Church of England have followed different trajectories when it comes to capacity building for mission. One church is developing an ecosystem capable of bringing systemic change over the long-term, even when significant diminishment is anticipated, while the other lacks many of the means for finding a new future.

Both churches are characterised by small, aging congregations, heritage properties and operate in a society where each generation has half the connection with the church and awareness of Christianity of its predecessor. Australian dioceses are more isolated, less resourced and culturally inclined to work independently.

The underlying issues become evident when compared as England has made substantial progress while Australia has lagged significantly.

Approach

It is well known across multiple fields that the way a problem is perceived and approached will strongly influence the solutions selected by decision makers, whether it is a matter of personal need, familial dysfunction or a social issue affecting large groups of people.

Many Australian Anglicans are inclined to understand mission reactively through the lens of institutional survival. Such a lens is designed to filter out solutions that do not fit or conform to pre-existing institutional commitments.

By contrast, England has focussed on learning about mission which has focussed attention on evidence and effectiveness. Such a lens highlights solutions which may change institutional commitments.

The result is that one makes progress while the other finds itself in a self-reinforcing loop.

Attitude

Both churches are characterised by robust groups which operate a range of institutions that reinforce their theological interests. Talking about mission across such lines is challenging, even exhausting as each sees different implications arise from the same Gospel. Language can unify and energise people as they discover a shared perspective. It can also divide as different perspectives splinter relationships and cause good will to dissolve.

Australian Anglicans lack a shared language when it comes to mission. Concepts like fresh expressions and pioneers have been perceived as being too English or plainly unnecessary in preference to their own local terminology. They are more inclined to dismiss the value of such conversations preferring to talk with those who share their theological outlook instead. The result is that pre-existing approaches, attitudes and solutions become reinforced while the capacity for knowledge transfer around the Australian church is diminished.

Such conversations are no less tiring in England, yet they are valued more highly because they facilitate learning. Concepts like fresh expressions and pioneers have been popular because they have helped many to see the need and opportunity to follow Christ in new ways among new people. Such concepts have enabled people to see similarities without diminishing their differences. Consequently, pre-existing approaches, attitudes and solutions became open to question, review and enhancement.

The result is that one has the capacity to identify and adopt better solutions while the other normalises unsatisfactory outcomes.

Evidence gathering

Both churches have markedly different capacity and interest in research based evidence. Evidence is important because it can challenge established opinion, sometimes making hamburger out of our sacred cows.

Many Australian dioceses have little interest or capacity to quantify their congregational life. Few dioceses make use of projects like NCLS and NCD and even fewer congregations appear to use such material to inform their decision-making. Evidence is dismissed as untheological and an intrusion of profane business into the sacred ecclesia. Although it is comforting not to see discouraging numbers, it does mean that centres and patterns where growth is occurring also go undetected.

In England, several significant research projects have been initiated quantifying how and where growth was occurring. Such work shows that there is no simple reason for decline nor is there a single recipe or guaranteed pathway for growth. In 2016, some 15% of congregations in English dioceses are fresh expressions with over 50,000 people involved, 60% of whom had either never connected with church before or had re-engaged after many years.¹ Such rates far exceed conventional congregations where the overwhelming majority are long-term attenders.

The result is that one church can identify a new pathway forward while the other re-commits to the pathway already travelled.

Reshaping ministry

Evidence, interests and approach all inform how the work of ministry is understood and encouraged. This sets the basis for selection criteria, training requirements, ordination standards, deployment considerations and the ongoing development of clergy. Pioneer ministry is a new approach the nature and means of development require much discussion, clarification and evaluation.

Australian dioceses have had a superficial conversation about pioneering, preferring to see it as one more task for clergy who are already burdened by unrealistic expectations. Few dioceses have explicitly sought to ordain pioneers or planters. Fewer have developed pioneer ministry as an avenue for lay or diaconal engagement. Chaplaincy remains defined by civic institutions like hospitals and prisons.

The English church has been engaged in a deep and long-term conversation about the assumptions underpinning the practice of contemporary ministry. Pathways for pioneers into ordination and deployment have been developed. While not all ordinands may be pioneers, nevertheless pioneering capacity has been brought into selection and training processes for all clergy. Furthermore, pioneering is not confined to the ordained. Significant energy has

¹ George Lings (2016). *The day of small things. An analysis of fresh expressions of church in 21 Dioceses of the Church of England*. Church Army Research Unit. Available online at http://www.churcharmy.org/Groups/244966/Church_Army/Church_Army/Our_work/Research/Fresh_expressions_of/Fresh_expressions_of.aspx

been invested to encourage lay involvement in developing new initiatives. The interest in pioneering is reshaping chaplaincy as community based leadership rather than simply meeting the needs of inflexible government institutions.

The result is that one church has undertaken to rethink, review and recast its approach to ministry while the other re-treads safe but tired approaches. Opportunities and capacity for building chaplaincy in community are developing in one church, while chaplaincy remains subservient to government in the other.

Centres of excellence

Clergy and laity need to be equipped and educated about working contextually. The task of contextualisation remains contested. Christians are not of one mind about how missiology and ecclesiology arise from Christology. Anglican opinion is further divided as to whether mission is best approached in a didactic or reflective manner.

Australian dioceses have few centres of excellence in mission to draw upon. For the most part, Anglicans looking to explore pioneer ministry resort to a host of external third party groups for inspiration and advice, many of which have roots in American conservatism. Mission and evangelism does not figure highly in theological systems which are geared to producing theologians and pastors rather than pioneers. Few resources or programs exist for lay people and there is no centre to stimulate or advance the conversation.

English dioceses have more institutional capacity yet many of their theological colleges are experiencing similar pressures of rising costs and inadequate enrolments. Anglican groups like Church Army, CMS and the Centre for Pioneer Learning at Cambridge have developed as centres where pioneers and planters can train together. Furthermore, the Mission Shaped Ministry program has added significant capacity to congregations eager for lay people to develop new initiatives. The Fresh Expressions initiative has provided an invaluable institutional centre to stimulate and rally resources for the conversation nationally.

The result is that one church has an open system for pioneers catering to all parts of the broad and diverse Anglican family while the other church has an approach where the few, exceptionally motivated professionals are expected to find their own way.

Partnership

A three-fold cord is not broken easily. Institutions that lack the internal capacity to undertake a project by itself can build the capacity by working productively with others as each contributes according to their interests and ability.

Australia dioceses find it difficult to work together for many reasons, both cultural and practical in nature. Neither are Anglicans adept at learning from or cooperating with other denominations in mission, dismissing their insights as either too conservative or liberal. They are also inclined to rely on internal funding channels, which means their capacity is committed and limited.

The Church of England has intentionally developed a collaborative approach to capacity building. Multilayered links have been built between congregations and dioceses with a host of networks and third party groups, both nationally and internationally. They have sought partnership with individuals who have provided independent sources of funding. Such partnerships mean that each step forward enhances and improves capacity.

The result is that one church tends to operate in an isolated manner and is inclined to inaction because of inadequate resources while the other operates openly and has better capacity to find resources by cultivating relationships both inside and outside the church.

INSIGHTS

The Church of England is often depicted by the media as an ornery institution with intractable problems that is facing imminent demise. That church has all the same problems that beset the Australian church, only at great scale. The Australian church cannot replicate or duplicate the English approach. Yet there are many things we can learn from this experience.

The focus on pioneering has renewed energy and identity as God's people proclaiming God's Gospel and engaged in God's mission.

God creates a different future when God's people are attentive to learning and have an attitude characterised by gracious discovery rather than closed certainty.

Evidence is vitally important, yet patterns are not self-evident and lessons need to be implemented over the long-term.

Ministry practice must be reshaped to address future needs even if many current congregations presently lack the flexibility to harness such insights. In time, change happens as parishes can be reborn by starting new initiatives.

Centres of excellence are important because they give the conversation shape, energy and direction.

Mission only ever happens through partnership, with God and each other. When done by ourselves it becomes a hollow noisy instrument.

Pioneer ministry can revitalise chaplaincy. If the Australian church has struggled to develop a track for pioneers it may have more success by focussing on chaplaincy, which after all is ministry focussed on developing communities of faith in secular environments among people who have little capacity to engage with the church.

Reimagining and developing the capacity of Australian Anglicans to engage in pioneer-styled chaplaincy is a vital yet unexplored pathway to a new future.

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