

Setting God’s pioneers free? The need to release lay pioneers from the Church of England’s narrative of resourcing and equipping

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ABSTRACT

THIS PAPER ARGUES THAT the reason that the Church of England has struggled to relate to lay pioneering is because its primary mode of engagement of resourcing and equipping is out of step with the realities of lay pioneering. It argues that despite numerous recommendations to release the laity in mission and ministry, when it happened through grassroots communities which became known as ‘fresh expressions’, the Church of England was unable to recognize it. By exploring both the “organizational story” and the “grassroots story”, this paper demonstrates that the problem is the Church of England’s reflex to view everything through a lens of resourcing and equipping. This lens means all problems are framed as deficit, in this case of the laity, which are

remedied through the resources of the church. The paper reveals that this lens causes it to miss the gifts and challenges of lay pioneering, and makes it unable to engage in the mutual relationships called for in the report “Setting God’s People Free” (Archbishops Council, 2017). The paper calls for a deeper engagement by the Church of England with grassroots stories of lay pioneers and to allow the narrative of resourcing and equipping to be interrupted. It suggests that attentive listening to lay pioneers and their stories can lead to more mutual and reciprocal engagement and as a result enrich the Church of England and other denominations.

Keywords: Lay pioneering; Setting God’s People Free; resourcing and equipping; laity; mutuality

INTRODUCTION

At the heart of this paper is a question about lay pioneering. For all the evidence that pioneer ministry is a lay movement and a rich site of mission and ministry, why is it that lay pioneering is the poor relation to ordained pioneering? And why has it been so difficult for the Church of England (CofE) to embrace lay pioneering as it has emerged? The CofE website defines pioneers as those who are

able to see a new future, and have the skills and gifts needed to make it a reality now. Pioneers connect with people outside of Church, creating new ways of doing Church together in their community. Pioneers are leaders of innovation, with a gift for seeing what God is doing and responding creatively to it. (“Vocations to Pioneer Ministry”, 2021)

In this paper I argue that the lens through which the CofE has viewed lay pioneering is problematic. I will name this lens as the ‘equipping and resourcing lens’ and describe how the CofE has a tendency to name the problem as deficit and to see the solution as resourcing and training. I will argue that the CofE needs to return to its earlier instincts in *Mission Shaped Church*, to embrace this as a lay movement which it has hoped to initiate for many years and adopt a more reciprocal pattern of learning and ministry. To do this I will take a hermeneutical approach comparing and reflecting on a number of CofE documents and reports on the laity and pioneering.

TWO STORIES OF FRESH EXPRESSIONS

A discussion of lay pioneering in the CofE must include the *Mission Shaped Church* report and fresh expressions. When I teach about fresh expressions I tell two stories. The first is one about the *Mission Shaped Church* report (Cray, 2004), about how it encouraged a growth in these fresh expressions of church, of dioceses encouraging and resourcing these fresh expressions, of the designation of Ordained Pioneers, and the Strategic Development Fund (SDF). The second story is my story, arriving at university in the year 2000 and meeting a whole group of people who were connecting with the 24-7 Prayer Movement (Greig, 2003) asking what faith meant to our fellow students with little interest in church, and dreaming about small communities who gathered to pray and engaged the wider community through mission and social action. It was a time of seeing similar Christian communities appearing in different places. We were excited when we discovered that the CofE had taken notice and wanted to provide a space for such communities where it could learn from them and be renewed by them. One story is told from the perspective of the ecclesial organization, the other from the grassroots. These stories are completely inter-related, but they are two distinctive views on the same story. Steve Taylor (2019) and Sabrina Müller (2019a; 2019b) have both engaged in qualitative research around fresh expressions and pioneering and have noticed similar trends. Taylor distinguishes between “first expressions” which are “defined as initial experiments in ecclesial innovation”, whereas “Fresh Expressions” describes “an organisational initiative” (Taylor, 2019: 4–5). Müller describes the way in which movements like fresh expressions have a relational and dialogical ecclesiology which can seem in contradiction with organizational definitions of church. They certainly offer a critique of institutional church and yet by valuing context and tradition try to find a place within the church, the “mixed economy” (Müller, 2019a: 142). Müller and Taylor will be helpful conversation partners through this exploration of lay pioneering.

By keeping these two stories, the grassroots story and the organizational story, in mind I will explore the development of lay pioneering in the CofE and use it to identify some of the possible reasons why the relationship between lay pioneering and the CofE has not been straightforward. The words “grassroots” and “organizational” have been carefully chosen to avoid the unhelpful connotations associated with the language of institutional. Following the practical theologian and ecclesologist Clare Watkins I see the use of centre and edges within the fresh expressions literature as referring to ecclesial structures and would

distinguish that from a more “edgeless” ecclesiology seen and experienced in practice (Watkins, 2020: 147–50).

IN SEARCH OF THE LAITY

The *Kingdom Calling* report identifies “The idea that the renewal of the church for mission” as hinging on “enabling the fuller participation of the laity became widespread in the decades following the Second World War” (Faith and Order Commission, 2020: 4). The report *Towards the Conversion of England* (Commission on Evangelism, 1945) names this clearly, calling for the laity to be recognized as the priesthood in the world, and trained appropriately. Similar questions about the recognition of the laity were raised by the report *All Are Called* (Board of Education, 1985) and the *Formation for Ministry in a Learning Church* Report (Archbishops Council, 2003) called for the training of the laity. 60 years of reports recommending that the laity be recognized and release seemingly made little difference. The *Mission Shaped Church* report offered a different perspective; rather than the need to mobilize the laity, it identified a largely lay movement.

Mission Shaped Church

Mission Shaped Church (Cray, 2004) was an initiative of Rowan Williams, who had just become Archbishop of Canterbury. Taylor, drawing out themes from his interview with Rowan Williams, describes how fresh expressions came out of Rowan Williams’ attentiveness to what was going on. He saw how these emerging groups and communities were developing and wanted to see how they could help shape the church more widely. Flowing from a conviction that the church should pay attention to the edges and is renewed from the edges, fresh expressions was seen as a way that the life of the edges could be brought together with the “inherited” church. As Taylor states,

There is no evidence of [fresh expressions] being rooted in concern about the decline of the church, a desire for managerialism and restructuring or a search for relevance. Rather, by deciding to be located ‘in the middle of things’, in the life of churches, and by a practice of discernment which ‘watches’ ecclesial life, an innovation has taken shape. (Taylor 2019: 101)

“Fresh expressions” was the church paying attention to the grassroots story and seeking to discern God’s mission, not an organization responding to organizational pressures.

Mission Shaped Church recognized twelve different emerging expressions of church. As the report notes, many of these were lay led, and would continue to need to be lay led.

If the missionary challenge we face is to be met, many new initiatives will be lay led. They are also as likely to have emerged unplanned through local discernment of the mission of God, as to have been meticulously planned in advance. This raises new challenges for the discernment, training, recognition and authorization of leaders. (Cray, 2004: 135)

The Church of England should develop procedures that provisionally acknowledge the work and gifting of existing and future lay leaders in church plants and other expressions of church. A pattern should develop that provides training as part of a process of discernment for- authorization, rather than training subsequent to discernment, or the removal of existing leaders for training elsewhere. (Cray, 2004: 147)

The report identified the challenges this emerging pattern of lay leadership brought to the traditional patterns of training and asked how this emerging leadership could be recognised and trained without disrupting what was emerging. It clearly locates this in a theology of the *missio Dei*, of discerning and responding to God’s mission in the world.

The Church Army’s research into fresh expressions, *The Day of Small Things* (Lings, 2016), brought quantitative evidence of continuing lay leadership in fresh expressions and pioneering. It found that about half of fresh expressions were led by lay leaders, 67% of those lay leaders were women and about 40% were voluntary (Lings, 2016: 175). This demonstrated a very different pattern of leadership, one which some found threatening and some celebrated. In a church which had previously lamented the lack of lay participation and over sixty years had set targets to increase it, this surge in lay participation and leadership seemed a great opportunity. This grassroots lay movement was exactly the kind of thing that the CofE had been hoping to initiate.

Setting God's People Free

It is therefore somewhat surprising that the next big report focused on lay mobilisation, *Setting God's People Free* (2017), has no reference to *Mission Shaped Church* and only fleeting references to fresh expressions as some of the things lay people are involved in. It fails to recognise fresh expressions as a predominantly lay movement. *Setting God's People Free* has a focus on liberating the laity for fruitful ministry in both church-based ministry and 'in work and school, in gym and shop, in field and factory, Monday to Saturday' (Archbishops Council 2017, 1). Through the exploration of these themes, the report identifies critical shifts in culture and practice which are needed to enable this.

1. Until, together, ordained and lay, we form and equip lay people to follow Jesus confidently in every sphere of life in ways that demonstrate the Gospel we will never set God's people free to evangelise the nation.
2. Until laity and clergy are convinced, based on their baptismal mutuality, that they are equal in worth and status, complementary in gifting and vocation, mutually accountable in discipleship, and equal partners in mission, we will never form Christian communities that can evangelise the nation. (Archbishops Council 2017: 2)

In these two critical shifts there is an emphasis on mutuality, on equal worth, and complementary gifting and calling between laity and clergy.

In this brief overview of some of the key documents around the laity from the CofE over the previous 80 years, it is possible to hear the two stories speaking but not necessarily recognizing each other. Many of these reports begin with the organizational story and a concern for the reversal of church decline. *Mission Shaped Church* is, at least in its origins, a recognition and articulation of what is happening in the grassroots. So how does this idea of two narratives help us to explore the understanding of laity in the CofE?

Setting God's people free from whom?

Setting God's People Free identifies two key cultural shifts: lay and ordained together equipping lay people, and mutuality and partnership of clergy and laity. While there are some recommendations toward mutuality, the dominant language of the report is about resourcing, equipping, enabling and empowering. This is the organizational story; mobilizing in response to the threat of decline. Equipping and resourcing becomes the key lens through which everything is read. This may seem reasonable, and indeed there is an important role for the

CofE in equipping, resourcing and training, but inherent in this language is the assumption that learning and resources flow from the organizational centre to the edges. Calls for mutuality and partnership become lost.¹ To help to illustrate this I will turn to a few examples. The report offers a whole series of 'stories that illustrate the shifts that are needed' (Archbishops Council, 2017: 5). The first story shared, and one which seems to be regularly repeated, quotes a teacher who says, "I teach Sunday school 45 minutes a week and they haul me up to the front of the church to pray for me. I teach in a school 45 hours a week and the church has never prayed for me" (Archbishops Council, 2017: 5).

Because of the training and equipping lens, stories like this are interpreted as lay people lacking confidence to live out their faith in their daily jobs. The report responds that "the Church of England must urgently find ways to 'liberate' the laity to become confident disciples in the whole of life". But that is only one way to read this story, and perhaps not the most obvious. A better reading might well be that the teacher already knows the significance of their work, they are just highlighting that the church does not seem to. Rather than lacking self-confidence this teacher is highlighting that their teaching does not matter to the church. The turn to resourcing and equipping would therefore be misplaced and the challenge effectively ignored. The report itself notes that "lay leaders say they struggle with a perceived lack of understanding within the Church about their vocation and calling" (Archbishops Council, 2017: 15), but turns this into the need for the laity to understand their own calling. It laments how lay people lack confidence and "have never been given a vision for their role in wider society" (Archbishops Council, 2017: 12). "Lay people don't just need theological resources to grasp the range of ways they can be fruitful for Christ in the world, they need the theological imagination to see the ways they already have been" (Archbishops Council, 2017: 14). Rather than value what is happening and recognizing the challenge from the laity, the report continually identifies deficit in the laity and the need for the CofE to provide the resources to overcome that.

This emphasis on training and equipping draws the focus away from mutuality and towards an understanding of the laity as passive and unaware of their calling. This may be true for some, but it is also clear from the stories that the report itself tells that there are a whole range of lay people who have a

1. I am grateful to Tricia Frith, an MA student with us at CMS, for drawing my attention to the lack of attention paid to baptismal mutuality in the resources which have come from the report.

good sense of their vocation but feel undervalued and unseen by the church. This subtle shift from mutuality to resourcing can be seen in the report where it lists the support lay people would like to have; one of the items is “connections to others to learn from and share with”. However, once this is explored in more detail a few pages later it becomes “Easy access to, and signposting of the best available tools, resources, approaches, case studies, stories and experts to inspire and support people in their whole life discipleship and vocational journey” (Archbishops Council, 2017: 21). What was requested was relational spaces of mutual learning, and yet this was translated into signposting of resources; the “experts” who have the wisdom to release these unconfident and oblivious lay people. Framing the problem this way means that the call to mutuality is lost. Laity continue to be seen as the ones who need training, and clergy as the ones who train. This leads to my biggest question about the report, what or whom do lay people need to be set free from? In this paper I am suggesting that there is a need to be set free from purely an organizational story and to bring the richness of the grassroots story fully into the dialogue.

THE PROBLEM OF TRAINING AND THE NEED FOR MUTUALITY

The biggest problem with the kind of training being suggested is that it does not seem to work. *Setting God's People Free* identifies this itself. Talking about resources it states, “Available resources are thin. Take-up is also low, reflecting the fact most have never been given a vision for their role in wider society” (Archbishops Council, 2017: 12). It repeats a similar claim later, noting a “low awareness of the resources and networks that exist” and that take-up of these resources is low because “few have been given a vision for whole-life discipleship” (Archbishops Council, 2017: 12). The report identifies that the current resourcing approach is not working. But it blames this on lay people claiming that they have no vision for their Christian life, which is asserted with zero evidence.

David Heywood's *Kingdom Learning* (2017) was released the same year as the report and, as Heywood notes in the introduction, has a very similar diagnosis. He wants to see “missionary disciples” equipped and released. He emphasises how most learning takes place informally in the midst of life, builds on past experience, happens in relational ways, and often in social spaces (2017: 49–57). He advocates for reflective and relational learning, and yet when it comes to expressing how this is done he turns to programmes of learning with

learning outcomes, and sees the clergy or church leader as the one who shapes the learning and knows best what people need (Heywood, 2017: 129–44). This is the organizational story, where resourcing comes from the centre and sees a deficit which needs to be resourced.

Mission Shaped Church seemed to take a different approach, recognizing a movement of lay leadership within fresh expressions. However, once recognized, the CofE begins to shape it through this organizational lens. The Mission Shaped Ministry course was seen as the flagship training designed by the fresh expressions team, and yet *The Day of Small Things* report found that only 6.6% of leaders of fresh expressions had done the course (Lings, 2016: 165) and that training had not had a big impact on what had occurred.

Another piece of research carried out by the Church Army, this time focusing particularly on pioneering in the Portsmouth Diocese, looked at a different training programme. The diocese ran “How to Pioneer” workshops. What they found was that the training did not attract the people it was aimed at. Though they were originally aimed at lay people exploring pioneer vocations, many attenders were either clergy or lay representatives of congregations looking to do pioneer ministry themselves (Church Army’s Research Unit, 2021: 30).

This programmatic approach to releasing lay pioneers did not connect with those lay pioneers it was aimed at. The report notes comments from clergy saying it had been helpful for their congregations moving them from a more passive to active engagement in the church. While this is helpful, the clergy’s perspective perpetuates the organizational story. There is no clear lay voice included in the evaluation.

This issue of training not connecting with those who have a particular calling to pioneering or fresh expression has been recognized by the CofE team supporting pioneers. They have developed a new programme called Greenhouse which has a much more relational and community approach. It has based the training around teams coming together to reflect and learn from each other. It uses the “loving-first” journey of fresh expressions, which I discuss below as an example of the two stories coming together. It is described as a just-in-time model of learning which uses “the Godsend [phone] app, so that teams prayerfully discover what they need to know, when they need it, to move to the next stage of the journey” (Donaldson, 2021: 2). It is in the early stages but is clearly recognizing some of the problems of resourcing from the centre and trying to take a more responsive approach.

LAY PIONEERING

While lay pioneering has been a significant movement since before the *Mission Shaped Church* report in 2004, it is surprising how little research has been done into lay pioneering, and how little theological work has been done articulating lay pioneering. Much that has been written and explored continues to reinforce the organizational narrative. The *Guidelines for the development of lay ministry in fresh expressions of church* pick up the recommendations from *Mission Shaped Church* around authorization, training and support (Archbishops Council, 2007). Of the eight recommendations, seven relate to training and one relates to authorization. The focus is on the potential and the initiation of pioneering and fresh expressions, rather than on the fact that there is already a large number of lay people involved in pioneering and fresh expressions.

The biggest piece of research done by the CofE with a particular focus on lay ministry is in *The Mixed Ecologist* report. It is particularly interested in lay ministry as something which is released by Mixed Ecology Ministers. The research therefore focusses on the experience of ministers as they look to release lay people into lay pioneering. It retains an emphasis on empowerment of lay people by clergy and it notes that “These findings identified the importance of clergy as advocates and enablers, pointing lay leaders towards appropriate training and networks” (Perrin and Olsworth-Peter, 2021: 32). Once again, the interest is in the organizational story – how these lay people were resourced and equipped.²

In my own research into small missional communities many lay pioneers did not experience this encouragement and equipping; instead, they faced many barriers and challenges from their churches and leaders who dismissed the need and failed to recognise the lay pioneer’s calling (Butler, 2017). Jonny Baker, a leading voice in supporting pioneering, set up the pioneer leadership training at the Church Mission Society; he describes this different perspective – pioneers have the “gift of not fitting in” and are “dreamers who do” (Baker, 2014: 1). He describes pioneering as a difficult gift, one that can feel more like a curse at times. He identifies how the church struggles to understand pioneers and prefers to recognize pioneering when it looks and feels most like church as

2. Since this paper was peer reviewed a report has been released by the Centre for Church Multiplication (Bruce & Brooks, 2022), interviewing twenty “lay planters” about their experience of church planting. It is good to see further examples of the close attention to lay people advocated in this paper and I will engage with it further in future work.

it is already experienced. He describes how “there is an invisible gravitational pull that is always seeking to pull pioneers back into business as usual” (Baker, 2014: 8). In this view the organizational story is problematic and undermines the gift brought by pioneers, trying to shape them into the organization’s mould. Baker highlights the need for leadership as dissent, critiquing the structures and proposing alternatives. In the organizational story, business as usual is preferable to dealing with people who are going to critique and challenge, but Baker identifies the grassroots challenge as vital to helping the church fulfil its mission. He concludes:

Newness that has depth is found by driving to the heart of the tradition and reclaiming it over and against itself, by refounding, and not by rubbishing it and leaving it. In the light of these anthropological insights perhaps it is not surprising that the Church has found that this gift is as difficult as it is essential (Baker, 2014: 11).

The relationship between pioneers and organizational structures of the church is unlikely to be an easy one, and yet it is vital. The problem with the way the church focuses on this organizational story and reads pioneering through the lens of resourcing and equipping is that it closes itself off from receiving the gift and wisdom of pioneers and their communities. There is almost nothing in the CofE’s reflections on lay pioneers, nor on lay ministry more generally, of what might be received from lay people, what lay pioneers might bring as part of their gifting and how the space can continue to be made for that within the organizational story.

Space within the organization, according to Taylor’s reading of fresh expressions, is exactly what Rowan Williams had in mind when he talked about the church being renewed from the edges. Taylor describes how Williams saw a need for mutuality in relationships. The edge needs the church and the church needs the edge. The organizational story allows the grassroots to participate in something bigger than their own programme, and the grassroots help the church to be attentive to what God is doing (Taylor, 2019: 103). Taylor describes fresh expressions as “organisational innovation’ which is designed to draw the whole church into this vision” (Taylor, 2019: 117). This describes an organization where there is mutual and reciprocal learning between the organizational story and the grassroots story. The church learns from the grassroots practice, and is able to make space for, support and encourage such practice in a way in which both become mutually enriched. Paying attention to pioneering, as Williams highlights, could contribute to the CofE discerning God’s mission and seeking

to participate. But as I have demonstrated, in the subsequent reflection on lay pioneering and on lay ministry in general this organizational story has dominated, the flow is one way, opportunities to be attentive to what God is doing are missed and this pioneer gift of dissent, as Baker puts it, has become lost and no longer valued. Even more problematically the lens of resourcing and equipping which accompanies the organizational story means that it becomes increasingly difficult to value lay pioneering. The gifts that are present get lost, and a narrative of lay deficit and organizational empowerment become the norm. The rich interplay between organization and grassroots is missing, and pioneers either need to be drawn into the organizational story or leave entirely to thrive.

CONTROL AND MAKING SPACE

In his excellent critical survey of church planting, Stefan Paas notes two types of control which denominations exert on church plants. Control through the horizontal planning of the organization and control through the vertical planning of clear ecclesiological or confessional outcomes (Paas, 2016: 201–2). He describes how both of these kinds of control stifle church planting. Horizontal planning turns to models and patterns, it wants universal principles and risks closing people off from what God is teaching them in the midst of practice. Vertical planning asserts that the new community must fit within the confessional tradition, limiting what can emerge. As Paas states, ‘Horizontal planning makes the mistake of thinking that renewal can be imported from the outside, vertical planning errs seriously in thinking that renewal means to copy the past’ (Paas, 2016: 212). We can see elements of these two types of planning appearing in the organizational story, planning based on the managerial and confessional wisdom at the organizational centre, and missing the learning from the grassroots and the opportunities to discern the *missio Dei*.

Paas turns to innovation as a way the two stories can be brought together and identifies three biotypes of renewal: free havens, which provide a countercultural space far from the centre living out radical solutions; laboratories, which create spaces for a diverse group of people to come together to solve shared problems; and incubators, where an organization makes a space for innovation within its own structures (Paas, 2016: 224–39). Paas identifies fresh expressions as an incubator, where the CofE has intentionally made space for innovation which can enable renewal within the organization as a whole. Again, the richness comes in the space to see what is emerging, to learn from it and respond to it. This is definitely not an abandonment of tradition but faithful

improvisation; confessions are seen as authority examples of faithful witness to Jesus Christ, providing a pattern rather than a “once and for all definition” (Paas, 2016: 212).

Müller in her reflections on church development highlights the importance of mission, relationality and dialogue. She notes that while these emerging church groups such as fresh expressions are a contra-motion and critique of organizational church, the organization also offers stability and continuity to the emerging community (Müller, 2019a: 142). But importantly this connection is through relational dialogue rather than more formal structures.

Within the framework of fresh expressions of church, sustainable church development has to be grounded in tradition and challenged by context. The potential of this approach for church development theories is exactly this fruitful interplay of sound theological anchorage and the actual situation of people, networks, and neighbourhoods. (Müller, 2019b: 255)

This interplay between the tradition and context called for by Müller is closely related to the interplay between the organizational and grassroots stories. The church holds the organizational and confessional tradition, and the grassroots is attentive and responsive to life at the edges. Hopefully it has become clear that what I am arguing for in relation to lay pioneering is to move away from a purely organizational story to reengage with what is at the heart of the vision for *Mission Shaped Church*, a mutually enriching relationship, an interplay between the grassroots story and the organizational story, and a shift away from the singular lens of training and resourcing.

REVERSING THE FLOW

What we have been observing in these reports around pioneering is a tendency for the organizational story to view lay people through a lens of deficit and needing to be equipped and trained by the organization. Al Barrett, in his reflections on the churches relationship to outer urban estates, identifies an ecclesial turn in political theology which positions the “church’s own ‘performance’ as the ‘true’ site of meaning-making, and a participatory politics which overcomes wider society’s divisions of race and class, among others” (Barrett, 2018: 85). What he identifies in his case studies is an “outward flow” of resources from the church which reinforces power and privilege leaving them unchallenged. There

is a “flow which while it originates in God, is directed quite clearly through the church and out into the world” (Barrett, 2018: 87). This assumption that resources flow from the centre to the those lacking resources on the edges is a powerful one which prohibits the organization from seeing the gifts, wisdom and resources present at the grassroots, and perhaps more importantly, the challenge to its vision which comes from the grassroots. Barrett reveals how this flow privileges the white middle class. As Willie James Jennings argues, western theological education, and indeed western education as a whole, is about producing self-sufficient white men. Education is used as a means to maintain homogeneity and hegemony; the self-sufficient, white man making the world in his image (Jennings, 2020: 7).

What Barrett and Jennings both call for is relationality and mutuality. For Barrett it is a radical receptivity, engaging relationally and dialogically with those on the edges, being prepared to receive the unexpected and perhaps unwelcome gifts which bring interruptions and an awakening to the work of the God in their midst. For Jennings the model is Jesus and the crowd, a diverse group of people who would never otherwise be together, listening to Jesus. The crowd is not a means to an end, but “the beginning of a joining that was intended to do deep pedagogical work” (Jennings, 2020: 13). The logic of flow from the centre to the edges, the domination of the organization story over the grassroots story needs to be interrupted and re-formed. In light of these analyses, it is not surprising that the recommendations in *Setting God’s People Free* were reinterpreted through the lens of resourcing and equipping, rather than embracing an invitation to mutuality and reciprocity – a more “edgeless” ecclesiology which seeks to discern the *missio Dei* across the church.

EXAMPLES OF MUTUALITY AND RECIPROCITY

The question is, can these mutual models really develop? There are indications of mutual learning within fresh expressions. In all of the accounts of fresh expressions listening has been absolutely at the heart. When the fresh expressions team was first developed, Steven Croft the team leader spent a year travelling around the country listening to practitioners (Taylor, 2019: 112). Listening was a common theme across different emerging communities (Müller, 2019a: 140). And listening was picked up by fresh expressions as the first step in the “loving first journey”. This model came straight out of the observations of the fresh expressions team. It begins with listening, moves to loving and serving, then building community, exploring discipleship and then

church taking shape, before the process can begin again in the next community (Moynagh, 2012: 208). I know from my own engagement with lay pioneers and leaders of fresh expressions that this model resonates with their experience. Some only found this model after they were well on the way to developing a fresh expression and found that it matched what they did. For others it was a helpful starting point and fruitful guide through setting up a fresh expression. It is a great example of where attentiveness to lived practice has been brought into the service of the wider movement and the organization. Of course, all models come with risks and can be unhelpful when imposed from above, but for many, this model has been affirming and resourcing. The Greenhouse programme discussed above draws heavily on the listening first journey and is a good example of how training can be more mutual and reciprocal, focusing on teams who lead fresh expressions rather than individuals, and responding to their needs and context.

This paper is part of a qualitative research project into lay pioneering.³ Early findings from focus groups with lay pioneers suggest that where reciprocal and mutual work is present it is often at a local level and enabled by strong relationships. This is particularly clear in some of the Methodist lay pioneers participating in the project. While they highlight that their experience is not necessarily true for all lay pioneers in the Methodist Church, they shared about the freedom and trust which is given them in their local district and circuit. The Methodist Pioneering Pathways (2021) offers a national network of support which it describes as a 'community of pioneers' and includes lay and ordained together. It offers some formal training but what was particularly welcomed by participants was the regularly online gatherings to share their experience and learn from each other. Where it was working well they noted how their local circuit and district had made space for them. They were trusted to get on with their pioneering and not required to contribute to Sunday church services. They had "good gatekeepers", line managers and clergy, who understood what they were doing, supported them, and were able to protect them from some of the institutional pressures. They identified other circuits and districts who were less supportive of their pioneers. Their suggestion was that the clergy in those areas be encouraged to attend pioneer gatherings, experience more of what is going on and build better relationships.

3. This research will be carried out in the first half of 2022 with funding from the Susanna Wesley Foundation, part of Southlands Methodist Trust. <https://susannawesleyfoundation.org/>.

THE WAY FORWARD FOR LAY PIONEERING?

So, how can God's pioneers be set free? Not just free to pursue their own vocation, but to see that vocation in relation to the wider organizational story, and as a gift to it. What I believe is needed is a re-engagement with the grassroots stories of lay pioneering and to enter into these reciprocal and mutual relationships. Yes, there is training that can be helpfully offered by the organization, but it needs to move away from this reflex of resourcing and equipping, and turn to a posture of open learning and the attentiveness propose by Williams at the beginning of fresh expressions.

This is not just a struggle for the CofE. Müller's work (2019a) points to similar struggles in other traditional denominations across Europe. These churches need be attentive to what is already happening and to welcome the gifts, challenges and wisdom from the grassroots. They need to embrace a mutual and reciprocal pattern of work and relationship, not simply because this will be a better way of supporting lay pioneers, but because it enables the church as a whole to begin to discern God's mission together. For me, my next step in this is to engage in a small qualitative research project of listening to the experience of lay pioneers to begin to articulate the gift they bring and the theology embedded in their practice. For church denominations I hope they can find ways of being attentive for the purpose of developing reciprocal relationships, learning and discerning together, rather than simply identifying what needs to be resourced and equipped.

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