

Problems with “pioneering” mission: Reflections on the term “pioneer” from Germany, South Africa and the UK

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ABSTRACT

THIS PAPER BRINGS TOGETHER four voices in an autoethnographic manner to ask questions about power, and missionary imperialism in the birthing of new contextual churches. These narratives come from three nations, each with a history and inheritance of cultural and missiological imperialism. The narratives explore our own wrestling with being men in ecclesial settings, inhabiting spaces of power, while seeking to do so critically. The paper opens up a conversation about the term “pioneer” as default language in many of the historic denominations in the UK, Germany and South Africa. It explores the use of the term and also asks how the language can be problematic. Finally, it offers the term “pilgrim” as an alternative word which we believe will be more sustainable.

Keywords: pioneer, imperialism, colonialism, mission, power, liberation

INTRODUCTION

This paper brings together reflections from South Africa, Germany and the United Kingdom on the use of the word “pioneer” in the birthing of new contextual churches. Ben draws on experience as a priest in the province of Southern Africa. Adrian reflects on his visit to the UK ten years ago and questions the helpfulness of the term in his own German context. Finally, Luke and Rajiv write together considering their work in the UK. We ask if the word “pioneer” has simply been adopted without any real critical appraisal.

The paper sets out the problems inherent in the term before briefly explaining the autoethnographic research method we employ. We move on to address the issues of the language in the South African and German contexts before

returning to the UK and finally offering an alternative term we think may be more effective.

Pioneering: a term inherent with problems

“Pioneering” and “pioneer ministry” is finding increasing currency in historic denominations in the UK, especially the Church of England and other mainstream church bodies. Increasingly those putting themselves forward to ordained ministry are being offered the opportunity to train as a pioneer via a special training pathway. Lay people too are inhabiting roles allowing them space and freedom to start new initiatives in places where the church has struggled or failed to connect with people. The Church of England defines pioneers as “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”.¹

The Oxford Dictionary’s first definition of the term pioneer is, ‘a person who is among the first to explore or settle a new country or area’ (2020). That this is the primary definition of the word raises a major issue in view of the Church’s history of corroboration and even involvement in the colonising of the Majority World. For us, this is not a distant history, but one that we are in danger of repeating in the present day. Perhaps we already are. If a pioneer is someone who becomes the “first to settle” a new area, and who opens it up for “occupation and development by others”, what might this mean for the inhabitants of the spaces the Church seeks to reach through pioneering mission?

The ongoing discourse between pioneering, fresh expressions and church planting within the Church of England is a crucible within which these complications become red hot. Jonny Baker points out that, ‘the word pioneer is a metaphor and therefore laced with possibility and ambiguity’ (Baker & Ross 2014:2). Going further, he questions whether the term, ‘once used at the edge is now used at the centre has become uncomfortable or shifted its meaning over time.’ But there is unfortunately little to no wrestling with the negative notions of exploitation, subjugation, power, colonialism and residual imperialism in the word *pioneer* and therefore its negative effects. We suggest that this word needs to be rigorously scrutinised and made redundant.

1 <https://www.churchofengland.org/life-events/vocations/vocations-pioneer-ministry>.

Both of the contexts in which I (Luke) have exercised ‘pioneer ministry’ have been ethnically diverse and economically disparate. As a working-class person, I see a great danger in the Church of England, often characterised as dominated by white middle-class people seeking to occupy community spaces which belong to ethnically, culturally, socio-economically and even religiously diverse communities. Anglican theologian Tim Gorringe suggests that to “so easily forget the church’s collusion with imperialism, patriarchy and racism today borders on indecency” (2004:20). I have personally witnessed the way that well-meaning but potentially misguided ‘pioneers’ entered into a space, without paying due attention to their own situatedness, and have ignored and patronised local people who are already doing many good things for the community.

However, we all recognise that there is a danger here of getting bogged down in semantics. Much of the literature on pioneering takes context very seriously, and often emphasises discerning the work that God is already doing in a context before the pioneer arrives (Male 2016:20; Baker & Ross 2014:22). Some of us have written previously on contextual and pioneering mission (Aldous 2019, 2021, Larner 2016, Schleifenbaum 2021) and the vital necessity to understand that God is already at work before we arrive.

Pioneer ministry emerged in the Church of England as a response to the Mission Shaped Church Report published in 2004 (2004:6-7). Mission Shaped Church proposed new contextual forms of Church for a changing cultural landscape, often called Fresh Expressions of Church (2004). The document recognised two ways to do this, “progression” planting and “pioneer” planting. Progression planting builds on a significant existing presence of Christians in a network or area, whereas “pioneer” planting is aimed at planting in ‘places and cultures in which at present there are few, if any, known Christians’ (2004:110). This is interesting language given that the document is focussed on the English context. It is hard to imagine a place in England where there are few if any known Christians, one wonders if some ‘particular’ form of Christian is being sought? The report wisely recognises that pioneer teams should work with smaller resources and numbers of people because “large groups might appear to be like an invasion of do-gooders to the present inhabitants” (2004:111). Instead, a small number of “gifted, resilient and visionary people” is seen as essential (2004:111). The parallels to the colonial use of the word pioneer bear a close resemblance. Indeed, the theological underpinnings of Mission Shaped Church share this problem, drawing from the creation mandate, and seeking a Church which can “reproduce” and “fill all creation” (2004:93). The implications of this for people of other denominations and especially other faiths is alarming. Mission Shaped Pioneers, it would seem, really are the first to settle and

prepare a place for occupation and development by the Church. The expectation of finding communities with few or no known Christians feels dangerously close to the ‘doctrine of discovery’ – a “set of legal principles that governed the European colonising powers” which “emerged from a series of fifteenth century papal bulls” and allowed European Catholic nations to “expand their dominion over ‘discovered’ land” (Charles and Rah, 2019:15). The problem with the doctrine of discovery is, “you cannot discover lands already inhabited” (2019:13). For Luke, indeed for all of us as authors of this paper, this is a major problem with pioneer ministry – it too often sees new places as areas of potential discovery and colonisation, not as places where God is already at work among the indigenous people.

Linked to the doctrine of discovery, we also acknowledge Anthony Reddie’s (2018:12) challenge to White theologians (like some of us writing this paper) to take a critical look at their Whiteness and to reflect upon the ways in which White supremacist thought and action has exerted a profound and corrosive influence upon the Christianity faith. The historical thought forms that have arisen from White normativity have not only advantaged White people, but also exerted unimagined pressures and negative traits upon Black people.

In many ways, therefore, this is an autoethnographic and confessional piece of writing reflecting back on our journeys in ministry and detecting the fissures and ruptures of our own privilege and superiority complexes in other intersections of identity.

Additionally, Reddie (2018:11) reminds us that,

White Practical theologians may reflect on the fluid complexities of what it means to be a human being, but they rarely foreground their own embodied reality as a White person as they do so. For too long now, many White theologians have written as if their very Whiteness (or maleness) carried no ethical or epistemological weight in their attempts to undertake constructive God-talk.

There appears to be a new willingness in the UK context at least to begin some of this work, evidenced by the substantial number of people who attended the #DismantlingWhiteness webinar hosted by Oxford Centre for Religion and Culture.² But this point is important. One of the fundamental problems of

2 <http://www.rpc.ox.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/Dismantling-Whiteness-symposium.pdf>.

Whiteness is that it has been rarely interrogated, turned over or questioned. For Reddie (2018) Whiteness has been epistemologically weighed, measured and found wanting.⁷ The assumption is that as White people we will/should/can occupy the centre of gravity. Whiteness according to Willie James Jennings is more than simply a skin pigment issue but rather an ontological issue – a way of being in the world. Jennings (2020:9) says that the, “use of the term ‘whiteness’ does not refer to people of European descent but to a way of being in the world and seeing the world that forms cognitive and affective structures able to seduce people into its habitation and its meaning making.” Moreover, he clearly articulates that the ideology of Whiteness leads to a formation predicated on, “the image of a white self-sufficient man, his self-sufficiency defined by possession, control and mastery” (Jennings 2020:9). Whiteness above all else desires control and tends to make love secondary. Whilst this may seem tangential to pioneering we wondered about the extent to which well-meaning pioneers have been complicit in this way of being.

Given the site of existential anxiety that most historical denominations operate from it is hardly surprising that the gift and potential of pioneering has at times been co-opted or appropriated by the centrifugal force of the institution. The institution has a tendency to manipulate and coerce the fragile things at the edges and propel them towards the centre by their institutional gravity. As ‘pioneering’ becomes more acceptable as a term, in the Church of England for example, it is embedded into the strategies and structures of the organisational language of the institution most readily seen in the recent vision for the C of E in the 2020s which claims to want to be a simpler, humbler and bolder church and where the mixed ecology is the norm.

Research method: A word on autoethnography

In this paper we have loosely employed an autoethnographic method. ‘Autoethnography connects the autobiographical and personal to the cultural, social, and political. In autoethnography, the life of the researcher becomes a conscious part of what is studied’ (Ellis 2008:48). Autoethnography brings into play both the internal, personal reflections of the researcher and the cultural context that they inhabit. By recalling snippets or fragments of interactions and conversations in a setting these can act as key moments in self-conscious reflections on practice. Heather Walton (2019) has reminded us that autoethnography has become gradually more important for theology and theological reflection. Drawing from Walton (2019:6) we wish to write ourselves into a deeper critical

understanding of the ways in which our lives intersect with larger sociocultural pains and privileges. Taking these seriously, we each reflect on how we have inhabited privileges and witnessed pain, sometimes of our making, however inadvertently.

This is what Ellis and Bochner (2003:213) call ‘epiphanies’. These are, ‘remembered moments perceived to have significantly impacted the trajectory of a person’s life...times of existential crises that forced a person to attend to and analyse lived experience.’ Therefore the ‘epiphanies’ that follow act as a way of bringing into focus a particular issue or problem we have encountered in the use of the language of pioneering and fresh expressions during our ministries. Each of us have lived in different cultural contexts (whether Cape Town, East London, Frankfurt or Luton) each with its own set of complexities. By reflecting on particular moments from our own stories we believe we are, ‘disclosing our location and assumptions upfront, in order to contribute with humility and responsibility’ (Vellem 2017:1).

SOUTH AFRICA: SIMPLY NEO-COLONIALISM AND THE IMPORT OF BRITISH IDEAS?

In 2011, whilst still a new priest in the Anglican Church of Southern Africa (ACSA) in the diocese of Natal I (Ben) was offered an opportunity by the then Bishop to speak off the cuff on fresh expressions during a clergy gathering. I was ill prepared as I was asked 20 minutes before I was due to speak. On the hoof I tried to give a simple account of the shifts in culture and the church’s sometimes inadequate response to those changes whilst explaining the missional impetus of fresh expressions of church and potential in a nation in a place of flux in a post-*Apartheid*, post-colonial, dying-embers-of-Christendom context. I asked if any of the clergy had a response. Right from the back of the Cathedral’s Colenso Hall a senior Zulu priest in his mid 60s stood up and said, ‘This sounds like neo-colonialism to me. It’s just the import of British ideas.’ I mumbled an insubstantial reply and sat down probably looking as bemused as I felt. And so began a journey of research around fresh expressions and whether it was an authentic missiological process or tool for a Southern African context. Is it simply a form of missiological imperialism? When the main protagonists of the movement in South Africa were initially White middle class heterosexual evangelical men what does the movement have to say, with any cultural and ecclesial sensitivity to the largely black, poor, high Anglo-Catholic Anglican church? From my experience in South Africa for 10 years, usually not very much.

But more than the external implications of this priest's terse comments began a reflection of my own role as a white, middle class, English (Cornish) man occupying a central space of power in the oldest and one of the largest Evangelical Anglican churches in South Africa. What right did I have to be there? Was my advocating for fresh expressions in a province largely shaped by high church Anglo-Catholic spirituality actually a form of evangelical imperialism when evangelicals were almost always white and of English descent? In South Africa the still lingering wounds of apartheid continue to fester in racial tensions and ongoing disparity. The #Rhodesmustfall movement, continued issues around service delivery and mistrust and scapegoating across the racial boundaries all reveal problems that mean language is always loaded and potentially problematic. Perhaps rather than being a healing balm my presence and advocacy for pioneer ministry was, in fact, more like prickly heat; annoying and certainly not to be welcomed.

As I reflect on the fresh expressions movement and pioneering mission in South Africa I think it has had minimal impact on the ASCA for several reasons which I outline below. Firstly, whilst it is rooted in contextual theology and is by and large committed to a process of listening, loving, serving, creating disciples and seeing church emerge it has had ecclesiological assumptions that in many ways were as brittle as the ecclesiology of the inherited church it often criticised. Too often examples of fresh expressions being lauded looked like what Martyn Percy calls "evangelical playthings" – made up of people who were bored of Sunday morning and would prefer to sip a Latte³ in 'café church'. Whilst that may well be contextually appropriate for post Christendom white middle class 40-somethings it looks confusingly irreligious and un-Anglican to 90% of clergy and lay people in the South African context. My suspicion is that the first parts of the 'Loving-first' cycle, namely listening, loving and serving were not really embedded into the posture and practices of those advocating for the movement especially in truly navigating intercultural or majority black spaces. Often those beginning the journey of establishing a new church already had the end result in mind. In black working class communities, which make up 80% of the country's population, fresh expressions and pioneer ministry look alien, bizarre and simply out of step with indigenous culture and notions of spirituality.

3 As the Twitter handle "Star of Bethel" so beautifully points out <https://twitter.com/StarofBethel1/status/1411282108182564866>.

Secondly the language of “fresh expressions” my first Bishop told me, with a smirk on his face, sounds like a bakery product. But it’s more than just mere flippancy or cynicism. The term ‘pioneer’ in the South African context cannot be uncoupled from its translated equivalent in the Afrikaans language of *voortrekker*.⁴ The term is impossible to use without listeners immediately thinking of the great trek beginning in 1836 by the Dutch speaking people of the Cape Colony to the interior of the country. As O’Brian (2013:29) states, ‘The journey of the Voortrekkers who escaped British rule into the interior would become an important focal point of Afrikaner nationalism, and the single most important event in Afrikaner history and mythology.’ D F Malan used the image of the voortrekker to create a powerful myth for Afrikaner identity during the 1930’s, a time when it was in great crisis. This image and its polyvalent sub themes connected to chosen people, the *volk*, and the need for separation to preserve cultural and racial purity were all the antecedents for the Nationalist Party’s Apartheid policy fully instituted in 1948. The term pioneer is very closely aligned with Afrikaner ideology.

Thirdly, disentangling this history from the term ‘pioneer’ from its dangerous past, I would argue, is almost impossible. Therefore, it is perhaps unsurprising that those belonging to historic mainline churches like the Anglican Church of Southern Africa, which is now largely Black and poor, would find the language of *pioneer* repellent. Whiteness, superiority, violence and imperialism are bound together in an almost impenetrable knot, each strand wrapped tightly into the other. In the late 1970’s at the height of tensions caused by apartheid laws and in the shadow of the Soweto uprising, claims of innocence were to be bid farewell. Allan Boesak (1977:4) writes,

it is a farewell to innocence for white people. In order to maintain the status quo, it is necessary for them to believe and keep on believing, that they are innocent. They are innocent because they “just happen to have the superior position in the world,” or in some mysterious way they have been placed in a position of leadership over blacks by nature, by virtue of their “superior” culture.

4 Voortrekkers were the ‘pioneers’ or ‘pathfinders’ who took part in the great trek from 1836 seeking to settle beyond the control of British administration. Ironically, they were seeking a freedom from the tyranny of British colonialism but also contributed to the decline and collapse of the Zulu kingdom.

But Boesak (1977:6) notes that is also necessary for black people to dismantle innocence since, ‘an affirmation of personhood is a powerful act that constitutes a farewell to innocence.’ Building in a way on Boesak, Vuyani Vellem (2017) suggests that a Black Theology of Liberation does not simply affirm personhood and dignity of black people but in fact has to participate in un-thinking the West as an epistemological process, ‘rejecting the architecture of Western knowledge as the final norm for life’ (2017:1). But Vellem says this is not simply an academic exercise but a spiritual one. Vellum in his critique of the West starkly points out that, ‘Western civilisation is no longer helpful to make any meaningful contribution to black life, especially when one interrogates growing fascism in the West, ostensibly in defence of the supremacy and superiority of one race against all others in the world’ (Vellum 2017:3).

Is it any wondered that the senior Zulu clergyman stood up and so vehemently opposed what he saw as cultural imperialism embodied in a white baby-faced priest like me!

GERMANY: PIONEERING LIKE IT’S 1989

When “Mission shaped church” was published in the UK in 2004, it didn’t go unnoticed within the German church. Pastors, theologians and other church-enthusiasts visited our neighbours in the UK in search of ideas and concepts they could apply to a German context (e.g. Baer-Henney 2015). As a student of theology, I (Adrian) made my trip to Nottingham in 2011 and volunteered at St. Saviour’s Church.⁵ Here I met a church that listened to a neighborhood and put the information to good use. In this case, St. Saviour’s transformed a traditional church into a soft-play ground that cares for social and spiritual needs. As German visitors to the UK we found something worth considering. A church style that inspired many of us. Some left the island with a sense of doubt (Koll 2012: 219-236), some were convinced they had found a set of best practices and others were inspired to rethink church in Germany (Bils 2015). Overall, there was a lot of enthusiasm which made us eager to copy and paste what we saw.

Over the last ten years, this inspiration manifested in publications, meetings, networks, jobs and sometimes even fresh expressions of church. A small

5 <http://www.churchinthemeadows.uk>.

and diverse movement came into being, trying to pass on those ideas and concepts that were worth considering.

Many of our role models in the UK put “mission” at the center of its church-life. This is somewhat alien to church as it takes place within the EKD (Protestant Church of Germany). In my context mission feels like it’s something to be suspicious of. It is for some a practice that belongs to the core of colonialism. Maybe it can be accepted in theory, when it’s viewed as the *missio Dei* i.e. a dynamic God is responsible for. But mission as a practice, something that shapes the identity of our church? That was essentially unheard of.

Being slightly awe struck by the missional church movement I found in Nottingham, I grew frustrated with the slow tempo in which this mindset was being worked out in Germany. The structurally and financially dominant Protestant EKD has old traditions and a management that was slow to react. Therefore, it sometimes seemed unwelcoming towards innovation.

However, looking back a decade later, I am convinced that part of the reason for this slow-to-arrive concept is not only a slow reacting German church. The missional church movement is also something that cannot simply be copied and pasted. Because the concepts we came across as visitors have their faults and down sides. Some elements of the movement shouldn’t be copied, really. And when these ideas didn’t gain much traction within a mission-suspicious EKD, there may be good reasons.

Copy and paste pioneer missioning

It is my understanding that passing on inspiration is successful only by transforming the original concepts and ideas. These ideas need to fit into the narratives that shape their destination. A copy and paste approach does not work: at least not completely. Copy and paste hasn’t worked for the Church Plant movement in the 1990s and it hasn’t for the fresh expressions of church movement in the 2010s. Part of the reason is that the original narrative we tried to copy has its own logic. It works best in the environment it is derived from. The narrative of pioneering is a good example for that. Even within the Anglican context, pioneering has its flaws and limits (see the perspectives of Luke, Rajiv and Ben). In the German context, pioneering has a political and ideological ring to it.

In Germany, whenever one talks about pioneers (*Pioniere* in the German), one would not think of an incarnational style of mission. Most assuredly before 1989, one would think of young boys and girls in multi-colored uniforms, standing in front of a flag pole, saluting socialism. “Junge Pioniere” was the

name of the Socialist Party's youth organization in the German Democratic Republic. Most children were part of that organization. It was meant to shape generations by promoting Marxist-Leninist ideology among East Germany's young people. Through this youth organisation children were meant to dismiss political, religious and cultural ideas of the past, now deemed outdated, and instead of these old values, they were meant to embrace the graces of socialism.

This association of young boys and girls standing in front of a flag pole, shouting "Für Friede und Sozialismus – immer bereit!" ("For peace and socialism – always ready") is not simply a bizarre image. To me, it reveals a telling parallel, that shows the flaws and limits of a pioneer missioning approach, gone wrong. Pioneers can often be seen as those who want to change people's concepts and ideas from the wrong outdated ones to the new shiny mission shaped ones. Or put in terms of the "Junge Pioniere", to change the invalid outfit for their set of blue colored neck-ties and uniforms. It wants people to stand in front of a flag pole, saluting the right concepts and ideas.

As I said this is my idea of pioneer mission, gone wrong. Sometimes pioneering mission is not actually interested in the people and neighborhoods the church interacts with. It is interested in expanding the intellectual territory of their concepts and ideas, however just and holy one believes them to be. This however is not necessarily the idea of mission that people have in mind when using the term pioneering. One may use it with an intention that is quite different from the one I have just described. Still, this is the effect which the term "pioneering" has on me. Moreover, whenever I discussed the term 'pioneer' with other German people, I usually get a set of raised eyebrows and a dismissive shaking of the head. Further, in German theological discourse, "mission" itself is a highly controversial term, often dismissed for its violent history and the negative effects it has had on people. Adding a "pioneering" to "mission" it only adds fuel to the fire. It will simply be viewed as another attempt to gain intellectual territory rather than being fundamentally about serving and loving communities.

Looking into the missional literature in Germany, however I find that this is a perspective not commonly shared. People within the German Fresh Expressions of Church movement use the term "Pionier" quite normally (e.g. Henney, 2017, 141-158). I believe this is a result of a copy and paste approach. However, there are alternatives which Sandra Bils and Maria Hermann have demonstrated. Instead of speaking of a "mixed economy", an ecclesial term derived from an economic logic, they speak of "Mischwald" (mixed forest). With this metaphor they describe the variety within God's kingdom as a growing, flourishing and healthy forest. I find that much more fitting than speaking

of God’s kingdom in terms of a profit driven competition. Maybe we can find a term, that fits a missional style, interested in the social and spiritual wellbeing of the people and neighborhoods we interact with as church. I find some of these ideas resonating in the term “peace-seeking-mission”. Because as church, we are looking for peace on earth as much as we are looking for the peace of Jesus Christ. And in this endeavor, we are not alone. We can find allies within the community we live in.

UNITED KINGDOM

Luke and Rajiv say ‘our skin makes us different.’ Whether tattoos, or skin tone, who we are stands out from the crowd within the church communities we serve. My (Rajiv) first in-depth grappling with “pioneer ministry” came as I approached the application for ordination training. I had to demonstrate if, and why, I was pioneering. I could not articulate if I was pioneering. I am a second-generation Christian migrant, born and raised in the East End of London, with a working-class outlook on life. My multiple identities born of my ethnicity, cultural heritage, and geographical location, should mean that I fulfil the criteria for being “a pioneering presence” by the Church of England’s own definition, at the outside of the traditional Church of England congregation. South Asia may be my heritage, but “Arrivals” at Heathrow airport is when I am home. But the conversation surrounding pioneer ministry made pioneering sound like cool coffee machines, a good haircut, and a really snazzy Instagram profile. The three case studies in the Church of England website only reinforce this image.⁶ The implicit assumption of “pioneering” is of a white middle-class cis gendered world, in which people resource and equip each other before going out on mission into the wilderness of the world. This wilderness defined by cultures and communities outside the predominant culture of the pioneer can be a one-way process. Successful pioneering is demonstrated when these communities reflect the culture of the pioneer. Such cultural imperialism has no space for someone outside the dominant community. Iris Marion Young outlines cultural imperialism as one of the five faces of oppression (Young: 1988). This is the reason I found it difficult to self-identify as a pioneer.

6 <https://www.churchofengland.org/life-events/vocations/vocations-pioneer-ministry#na>.

The first time I (Luke) ever heard of a ‘pioneer minister’ was when I showed up for a college open day for the Church Mission Society ‘Pioneer Mission Leadership Training’ course in Oxford. At the time I was about 9 years into a career as a bricklayer and general builder. A mate from the motorcycle club I belonged to suggested the course to me. The term ‘pioneer’ was new to me, but I liked what the speakers said about “the gift of not fitting in” and “dreamers who do” (Baker, 2014:1). This resonated with me as someone who has always felt outside the ‘inside circle’ of Church – which I have later come to realise is largely down to my social class. But through the years during which I cut my teeth as a lay pioneer minister in Luton, once voted the worst place to live in Britain, I’ve begun to question the term ‘pioneer’, especially in relation to the kind of relationship this suggests to the land and to the indigenous people.

Deacons within the Church of England are called “to serve as heralds of Christ’s kingdom” (the Ordinal). Faith in action seeks to actively serve the community, and to meet the needs of God’s people here and now. In that way, there is little difference between the call of a deacon, and the work of pioneers. And yet the concept remains problematic, not least due to underpinning assumptions surrounding privilege, class, and cultural imperialism. Mission Shaped Church embraces the call to “remember the poor” as “incumbent upon all churches exploring church planting or fresh expressions” (2004:7). It notes the influential legacy of Base Ecclesial Communities which emerged among poor communities in Latin America (2004:47). But this may not have been a good legacy to draw from. Argentinian liberation theologian Marcella Althaus-Reid saw in the BECs the continued legacy of western domination and exploitation. Privileged male leaders training in European universities, and visiting European bishops saw something strange and exotic in these new forms of Church which emerged among the poor (2004:34). Had Marcella Althaus-Reid lived to see the days of pioneer ministry, I suspect she would have seen something of the coloniser in this language too. There is good reason to ask what sort of person the would-be pioneer minister is being formed into through their training. This is certainly something I have considered in my own journey. What kind of heritage do the terms “gifted, resilient and visionary” carry? As already noted above I can’t help but think of Willie James Jennings image of the end product envisaged in much of Christian formation – the “white self-sufficient man, his self-mastery defined by possession, control, and mastery” the son of the plantation master ready to take mastery of his inheritance (2020:102).

A key problem with the term “pioneer” is that it is only used of one person in the Biblical cannon – Jesus (Hebrews 12:2). The danger of the Christian minister or missionary over-identifying with Jesus the Father’s son, is that those

shaped and formed in the western academic tradition that Jennings critiques, bear more resemblance to the son of the master than the Son of Man. In this sense, I have recognised my over-identification with the male redeemer who in submitting to the father seems to lose it all, but in reality gains a heavenly reward (Tonstad, 2017:261).

Christianity’s radicalism is this: it serves those who are in need. Cornell West affirms that, no matter how much we fail at this, the message of Christianity has always been “to serve the least of these” (West 2020). We are yet to hear of an invading or occupying group whose actions serve the marginalised in this way. Archbishop Tutu celebrates the concept of Ubuntu-of your humanity being wrapped up in mine, together we are human. This understanding is beyond binary limitations. And this understanding is at the heart of Christian theology. We are all called to partake in the Eucharist. Whether we term it communion (Jennings, 2010) or the Mass (Leech, 1988); Jesus’ actions at the heart of the gospel, in the last supper, are a pilgrim presence: that sees and acknowledges and loves the other without question. It is a love that breaks bread and shares with Judas. It is a love that defies death, breaks through all social boundaries, and brings heaven and earth together. Such love does not need sales agents; just witnesses – pilgrim witnesses of God’s love. That is how Christianity first spread, how it continues to spread, and how it continues to serve the poor, the lost, the oppressed, and the marginalised. As it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be; world without end. We wonder sometimes whether this fundamental ‘being with’ and breaking bread together can get lost in the pioneer mantra of taking the land.

A SUGGESTION FOR THE WAY FORWARD – PILGRIM NOT PIONEER

We have sought to show that a search for language and terminology that rejects a narrative around territory, exploitation, power and subjugation is very important if the underlying assumptions inherent in pioneering language are going to be addressed. We propose the metaphor of pilgrim over pioneer. Where pioneering has difficult engagements with mission, imperialism, and domination of culture, we suggest adopting Stroope’s call towards “pilgrim witness” (Stroope, 2017:355). This is not simply as a resolution to the issues named above; but as a liberation of the *imago Dei* in us all. It is only by laying aside the binary understandings of the world that one can fully engage with each individual and community, wholly and holistically. Current conversation surrounding pioneer ministry, with inherent cultural imperialism and dominant

narratives are thus limited by their binary foundation. pilgrim witness potentially allows an engagement with communities as they are; building on the lessons of postcolonial missiology. Sanneh is correct, translating the message is key (Sanneh, 1989).

It's our understanding that Christians are not primarily invited to be pioneers but to be "aliens and exiles" (NRSV) or "strangers and pilgrims" (KJV). What would it look like to see the Christian missionary minister in the western context not as a pioneer, but as a stranger and pilgrim? A pilgrim has a very different relationship to the land and to the indigenous people than a pioneer. A pilgrim does not come to prepare for domination, but rather to discover what God is already doing. Dutch missiologist Stefan Pass believes that the use of the terms "aliens and exiles" in 1 Peter 2 means that Christians are "different" and "without power" (2019:169). He argues that a 'pilgrim' denotes a positive meaning of being a stranger, it is a rediscovery of true Christian identity, and it is a "clear warning against all missionary dreams of 'culture change' and 'church growth'" (2019:170).

We acknowledge that 'Pilgrim' is itself not without problems and was also used in the context of North American occupation of indigenous lands. In its Christian usage, however, it is a chance to see mission as a journey – where God is met in the stranger on the way and at work in already-holy lands to which one travels. It is language that reminds us of its potential misuse, but which offers us a different way – to travel lightly. We suggest this shift from "pioneer" to "pilgrim" may be a powerful contribution to this ongoing debate.

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