

Pioneer Ministry Council - Report to General Synod 2024

Proposer - Revd Canon Dr Maurice Elliott

Archbishop, the formal inauguration of Pioneer Ministry in St. Patrick's Cathedral in February 2023 marked potentially one of the most significant moments for the Church of Ireland since Disestablishment, and it is therefore a particular pleasure to have been asked by the newly formed Pioneer Ministry Council to present its first ever report to the General Synod.

From its inception in the 16th century Anglicanism at its best has represented a fruitful blending of the 'old' and the 'new'. The reformers brought in a settlement which was uniquely both catholic and reformed; and over the centuries that followed the Anglican pattern of faith has existed as a vibrant hybrid of traditions, be they the warm-hearted discipleship of the evangelical movement, the colourful revival of the Oxford movement, or the Spirit-led renewal of the charismatic movement. And to all of that heritage we in the Church of Ireland have now added Pioneer Ministry.

As captured in its strapline, the purpose of this ministry is 'to reach those with those with little or no connection to church', and in attaining towards this (as indicated on p.204) the plan insists that such emergent ministries should be 'missional', 'contextual', 'ecclesial' and 'formational'. According to the Church of Ireland understanding, that which is genuinely 'pioneering' will satisfy each of those criteria, and these four marks continue to provide an important point of reference for all the work which the Pioneer Ministry Council is seeking to oversee.

In bringing this to today's exciting stage gratitude must be expressed to the Pioneer Leadership Team – Revd Rob Jones, Ven Barry Forde, and Ms Ingrid Brennan. Together Rob, Barry and Ingrid are like an engine driving the entire project, and as a Council we very much wish to acknowledge every way in which they have been energetic and visionary, yet also mindful of the need for these new expressions of church life, far from becoming either niche or detached, to move in lockstep with the wider Church itself.

This of course is one of the reasons behind the Bill which was considered and passed a few days ago. Going forward, therefore, Pioneer Ministry will exist alongside diocesan and parochial structures, and in virtually every way it will be dependent upon these for its success and flourishing.

Equally, we are grateful to the bishops for their collective willingness to endorse the Pioneer Ministry project, and to the Representative Body for its generous financial support, which extends initially over a period of ten years. To this point that support has allowed for the secondment of the Leadership Team and for the establishment of the training partnership with Church Army. And whereas much has already happened in a relatively short period of time recently, it would be remiss not to acknowledge the very significant work undertaken at an earlier stage by Bishop Alan Abernethy and, in particular, by Bishop Patrick Rooke without whose sterling and creative efforts I doubt we would even be at this point.

Most recently the Selection process has been carried out and those now recommended for training by the Council will commence this autumn a three-year, context-based Certificate programme, delivered primarily through Sheffield but with indigenised inputs at various points through CITI in Dublin. Those going into training will be working simultaneously with their specified projects, and (as indicated in the video) I am pleased to report that there were four projects initially selected and which have now been submitted for final approval – one each from Dublin and Glendalough; Connor; Tuam, Limerick and Killaloe; and Down and Dromore (although this latter does not yet have a designated pioneer in training). In addition, at the request of the bishops a further four candidates are being put forward for training for whom no project grant-funding is required. So, our hope is that this first group of seven, or possibly eight, in training will serve to kick-start both the process and the profile of Pioneer Ministry across the Church of Ireland, and speaking on behalf of CITI can I also say how delighted we are to be associated with this new venture.

The Report itself begins on p.202 in the hard copy, and on p.276 in the digital copy, and perhaps what might be helpful is to explain what Pioneer Ministry is by way of emphasising what it is not. Four points might be made very briefly:

- 1. Pioneer Ministry is not a silver bullet for the challenges of church decline. Many of our parishes and structures are under significant pressure, and in a number of areas the impact of the global pandemic has accelerated a pathway towards church decline. Naturally Pioneer Ministry will seek to make a contribution towards the reversal of that trend, however it cannot in and of itself be the only answer.
- 2. Pioneer Ministry is not an entirely delegated matter. There are those such as the Leadership Team and pioneer ministers in training who are very much at the coal face. But part of what is essential is to begin to change the culture of the whole Church. Hence the report makes important mention of the need for diocesan hubs – and my colleague, Hilda Connolly, will say more about that in seconding this report.
- 3. Pioneer Ministry is not simply a source of funding for new church projects. During the Selection process it became apparent that some of the diocesan proposals were at more of a conceptual phase and hence ongoing discernment would be needed in conjunction with the Leadership Team to ascertain whether they should ultimately go forward as Pioneer, or perhaps be more suited to seeking support, for example, from the Priorities or the Church Fabric funds.
- 4. As is made clear in the report, Pioneer Ministry is not a pathway to ordination. That is not to say that those who undertake Pioneer Ministry and who may be licenced to that end might not in due course be considered for ordination training. However, the Pioneer Council and the bishops have rightly insisted that in order to get these new ministries properly established, there should be a clear demarcation, and DDOs have also been appraised of this differentiation.

In the season of Epiphany one of the collects in the BCP addresses ‘Almighty God, [who] in Christ makes all things new’. It continues by asking the Lord to ‘transform the poverty of our nature by the riches of [his] grace, and in the renewal of our lives to make known [his] heavenly glory’. As a Council, and I trust also as a Synod, our hope is simply that Pioneer Ministry can become an expression of how that prayer might be answered – that there would indeed be new life; that by God’s grace this new facet of ministry might help to re-envision our sometimes flagging zeal for mission; and, most of all, that through all of our collective efforts many can be brought into a relationship with Jesus Christ through word and sacrament. Archbishop, I have much pleasure in proposing that the report of the Pioneer Ministry Council be taken into consideration.