

Parishes can do pioneering too!



Dean of Pioneer Ministry **Greg Bakker** explains how parochial ministry can also be pioneering

PIONEERING and parochial ministry are often considered hostile rivals. The grievances between these two streams of ministry abound.

For instance, the language itself used around pioneering frequently has stirred irritation. Many lament that somehow ‘parochial’ is disparagingly linked with ‘moribund,’ while pioneering is seen as ‘exciting and spirit-filled’.

Part of the hostility is that pioneering has been explained exclusively from the perspective of pioneers. So, what if we reframed the narrative about pioneering and explained it from a parish church point of view?

I am a parish priest. My dream has always been to see parish churches recognised in local communities as ‘purveyors of hope’. My aspiration is that parish church congregations, with their clergy, embody the important responsibility of caring for people through intentional listening, loving generously, connecting unconnected people with a hopeful community, sharing Jesus, and nurturing faith.

As a parish priest, I am also committed to pioneering activity within and beyond the parish church. Pioneering is an integral part of a vibrant parish church.

It is the joyful and challenging movement outward to connect with people who are unconnected with the church.

Pioneering is both the expression of our willingness to adapt what and how we do things within our congregations, as well as our commitment to go to those who will not come to us.

‘Pioneering is about embracing a diversity of approaches’

The need for pioneering activity does not mean the parish church is no longer valued. Far from it. Pioneering activity is simply about helping parish churches to diversify the types of ministries we offer to engage a wider range of people.

I have learned much from pioneers. One of my pioneer colleagues had refounded a Christian community on an outer urban estate where a parish church had been closed and demolished.

Over eight years, the community hub he launched became a hive of pioneering activity. Operating out of a small store front, this pioneer and his small team

listened to the local community, served well based on what they heard, built relationships, nurtured faith, and launched a new worshipping community that had grown to over thirty regular participants. This pioneer commented: “People think my project is fresh and innovative. It is not like that. It looks like good, old-fashioned parish ministry.”

Pioneering is not a label. Pioneer ministers or parish churches are not pioneering until they are doing something. Nor would those engaged in pioneering activity be happy to say, “We’re already doing this; we’re good.”

Pioneering requires dreaming, adapting, and doing to make the most of our opportunities. Pioneering is about embracing a diversity of approaches to engage a wider range of people.

Some pioneering activity can take place inside a parish church building. Much of it takes place on weekdays and in venues outside of our church buildings.

What makes something pioneering is the activity which expresses the intention to build community, share Jesus and shape an environment where unconnected people can be nurtured in the Christian faith. Find out more on www.portsmouth.anglican.org/pioneer