The Methodist Church

Venture FX Scheme Review

14 December 2011

Vicky Cosstick, Change Aware

When you put a cargo on board a ship, you make that venture on trust,
For you do not know whether you will be drowned or safely reach the other shore.
If you say, "I will not embark till I am certain of my fate," then you will do no trade:
the secret of these two destinies is never disclosed.
The faint-hearted merchant neither gains nor loses; nay he loses, for he is deprived of his fortune.
Only those who are zealous in their search, who faithfully seek the flame, find the light.
Since all affairs turn upon hope, surely faith is the worthiest object of hope,
for thereby you win salvation.

Rumi, Masnavi III: 3083-91

Cover picture from The Beacon Church, Dartford

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Abbreviations

CoP	Communities of Practice
DDE	District Development Enablers
DFID	Department for International Development
LMG	Local Management Group
OD	Organisational Development
PMG	Project Management Group
SMART	Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Realistic & Timed
SRC	Strategy and Resources Committee
VFX	VFX
YPS	Youth Participation Scheme

Executive Summary

Venture FX (VFX) is a scheme set up by the Methodist conference in 2008 to reach younger people with no Christian heritage. The original proposal envisaged an investment of some £7 million over 10 years to establish 20 pioneers and 20 projects to encourage new forms of church to emerge among young adults. It intended to build on the recent experience in both the Anglican and Methodist churches of establishing "fresh expressions" – new and more relevant ways of being church in our time.

At the time the review was carried out (September-November 2011), there were 7 established pioneer projects and 8 pioneers, in Dartford, Kent; Exeter; Polzeath, N Cornwall; Inverness; Sheffield; and Hanley, Stoke-on-Trent. Further projects are being or will be established between September 2011 and New Year 2012 in Nottingham, Edinburgh, North Wales, Milton Keynes, Plymouth & Exeter, and Bermondsey, S. London.

Venture FX was one of three major "strategic projects" established by Methodist Conference in 2008; the other two are the Youth Participation Scheme (YPS) and the District Development Enablers (DDE). All three are being reviewed at this time.

For the review, the consultant visited all 7 projects and met all 8 pioneers. She interviewed a total of 41 stakeholders, including the pioneers, relevant District Chairs, senior leaders from the Connexional Team and others involved locally in the work of the pioneers. The consultant understood that she was not reviewing the projects themselves, but the scheme as a whole, and approached the scheme as an experiment in social innovation in complex contexts, or localities, using complexity theory as a theoretical paradigm to underpin the approach to the review.

The review tells the story of each project, and identifies common elements in the pioneers' approaches, including their commitment to a Methodist identity, and their use of creative methodologies including art, music, sport, and community building, as well as up-to-date technology and social networking tools, to engage young people in relationships that may lead to explicit faith-based conversation and shared worship.

The review finds that the scheme is almost universally highly valued by review respondents, many of whom accept that the value of the scheme is its open-ended and exploratory nature, described as an exercise in "holy risk". While none of the work of the pioneers is unique in and of itself, the distinctiveness of the scheme lies in the potential for shared learning about evangelism in contemporary cultures that is emerging from the current and future wider pioneer network.

The review:

- **Recommends** that finance for the remainder of Phase l and for Phase ll of the scheme should be confirmed, and that a transparent account of the scheme's finances should be published. It would be shortsighted, even or perhaps in particular in the light of the present economic climate, to cut funding at this point – and cutting funding would have major negative consequences for individuals and communities in pioneer localities.

- **Suggests** that numbers of projects should be capped at the present 13 in order to focus resources on the quality of learning emerging from the scheme.
- **Finds** that support, supervision and training for the pioneers is generally adequate, but that further investment should be made in the future – to expand learning and training opportunities for pioneers and the wider pioneering network.
- **Explores** three key issues that emerge from the review: nature of the pioneers' ministry, the emerging ecclesiology in pioneer localities; and the Methodist identity of the pioneers themselves.

The review concludes that it is too soon to make judgements about the nature of the pioneers' ministry and recommends that they do not form themselves as an explicit religious community; rather that they and the wider pioneer network should develop themselves along the lines of a secular Community of Practice.

Similarly, the review concludes that it is too early to draw conclusions about the ecclesiology emerging in pioneers' localities.

It is also too soon and could be counterproductive to draw pioneers into present training schemes for lay and ordained ministries; rather, opportunities should be opened up either centrally or regionally for interested lay and ordained Methodist ministers to engage with pioneers through the activities and processes of the Community of Practice.

The Venture FX scheme has developed generally in line with the outcomes and intentions of the original proposal. The original planned and expected outcomes of the scheme are defined within the Council paper and the PMG also reviews the work-plan and priorities of the coordinator on an ongoing basis. This level of planning seems very appropriate for an innovative complex social change project. There are further adequate parameters in place – the PMG, supervision & training, mechanisms for ongoing learning – to ensure the scheme's accountability.

The review concludes that emphasis should be placed on continuing to develop the pioneers' commitment to their own Methodist identity and the Methodist identity of the work they are doing in their localities, through the learning and training opportunities offered within their own and wider pioneers' network or Community of Practice.

The review notes tensions that have emerged in some local circuits and districts, and between the Venture FX scheme and the Cluster for Discipleship and Ministries, but concludes that these tensions are both inevitable, given VFX's innovative approaches and position on the boundaries and beyond the edge of the church, and have been or are being generally well managed.

The Venture FX scheme has grown, and continues to grow organically. Potentially, it could offer the Methodist church a genuinely Methodist way of growing church widely in unchurched localities (social and geographical contexts and networks). It is currently vulnerable to institutional pressures. It needs to be owned but not over-controlled by the whole church, which can be justly proud of this rather remarkable experiment.

Appendices

Appendix 1: Project Proposal
Appendix 2: List of interviewees
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Chapter 1: Introduction and Methodology

1.1 What is Venture FX?

Venture FX (VFX) is a scheme set up by the Methodist conference in 2008 to reach younger people with no Christian heritage. The original proposal envisaged an investment of some £7 million over 10 years to establish 20 pioneers and 20 projects to encourage new forms of church to emerge among young adults. It intended to build on the recent experience in both the Anglican and Methodist churches of establishing "fresh expressions" – new and more relevant ways of being church in our time.

At the time the review was carried out (Sep-Nov 2011), there were 7 established pioneer projects and 8 pioneers, in Dartford, Kent; Exeter; Polzeath, N Cornwall; Inverness; Sheffield; and Hanley, Stoke-on-Trent. Further projects are being or will be established between September 2011 and New Year 2012 in Nottingham, Edinburgh, North Wales, Milton Keynes, Plymouth & Exeter, and Bermondsey, S. London.

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1.2 Purpose of the review

The VFX scheme was envisaged to span two phases of 5 years; or, rather, each project was envisaged to span two phases of five years – so the scheme overall might last for longer than 10 and up to 15 years. The original project proposal stated that there would be a review of the scheme in Year 3 of the first phase, on the basis of which funding would be decided for the second phase. On the recommendation of the Strategy and Resources Committee (SRC) however, Conference approved funding for 10 projects, with approval for the remaining 10 projects contingent upon a positive review in Year 3. In 2010 the SRC approved funding for up to 15 projects, prior to the review, in order not to inhibit the progress of the scheme. Firm decisions about funding for Phase 2 have not yet been taken.

1.3 Background of the consultant

At this point, I need to introduce myself personally. This is because I bring a quite specific professional and theoretical background to the review, which has shaped the approach agreed with the Head of Projects Research and Development, the Cluster in which VFX is based.

I was invited by Irene MacWilliam, currently carrying out the review of the DDE scheme and coordinating reviews of the DDE, YPS and VFX schemes, to put myself forward for the VFX review consultancy. The relevant parts of my background include a Masters in Systematic Theology from Union Theological Seminary in New York, where my dissertation was supervised by the Methodist theologian Geoffrey Wainwright. From 1985-1986 I was an editor and journalist on *The Tablet*, the Catholic weekly, and from 1987 until 2001 I worked for the Roman Catholic church. Firstly I worked for 7 years in adult formation at diocesan level –specialising in post Vatican II approaches to ministry, communion & collaboration and mission/evangelisation; secondly, for five years as Director of Pastoral Formation at Allen Hall Seminary – where I established supervision systems for students for priesthood; and thirdly, responsible for ongoing formation of clergy for Portsmouth RC diocese where, again I established a system of supervision for clergy.

Since 2001 I have worked as a facilitator, coach/mentor and consultant in the international development and aid sectors, and carried out three evaluations – or, rather, learning reviews – for programmes funded by the Department for International Development (DFID) and Comic Relief. With a Masters in Change Agent Skills, I now consider myself to be specialising in organisational learning and change processes, and my theoretical paradigm is complexity theory.

To this review, therefore, I bring advanced listening skills, some of the skills of a journalist, some relevant theological background, experience in supervising people in lay and ordained ministry, and professional interest and experience in evaluating how complex systems work. As an adult religious educator, I did some work on postmodern culture; I have always used photographs and visual images in my work, and I am an amateur student of modern and contemporary art. I know virtually nothing about sport or post 1980 music, however! While I had therefore enough professional background to give me an intuitive sympathy and understanding for much of the work of the pioneers, I am very aware of not being of the same Generation. I am Babyboomer, not Generation X or Y – the generations from which pioneers come, and amongst whom they minister.

1.4 Complexity theory as a paradigm

This is not the place to explain complexity theory in detail. However, it is necessary to say something about how it influences my approach to undertaking this review, and indeed to interpreting its findings.

Complexity theory was "founded" when a number of scientists from different disciplines – biology, mathematics, economics, physics, etc. – came together at the Santa Fe Institute in 1987 to explore common emergent phenomena (Waldrup, 1992). Since then the field has expanded enormously, gaining currency and influence including in organisational development (OD). Complexity thinking has links with, on the one hand, chaos theory, and, on the other, quantum physics. There are now many different schools of complexity thinking, but in general it can be said to challenge many of the commonly accepted principles of post-Enlightenment Newtonian scientific approaches. For example, it questions whether causality is always direct and linear and whether outcomes can be accurately predicted in the medium to long term. In complex social change projects, the shortest distance between two points is not a straight line.

Complexity thinking was the basis of my Masters dissertation in group facilitation; and has remained the underlying paradigm for all my consultancy work, including evaluations and reviews. Without being able to explain in detail, here are some principles of my approach which are influenced by complexity theory.

- The reviewer is not a neutral observer. From the moment that I start having conversations with people involved in the project I am intervening in and influencing the project. I will not be able to control the influence I am having, but I do need to be as aware as possible of the possible impact of my research. This is why I need to be transparent about my background and some potential biases.
- A review or evaluation, therefore, can be seen as a series of conversations between the consultant and stakeholders, which feed into and influences the system of the project during and after the duration of the research.
- Some of the information gathered during the conversations is collected into a report, which acts as an amplifying feedback mechanism.
- I would subscribe to a strand of complexity thinking which stresses the role of conversations in making change happen – or indeed blocking change.
- Systems theory and complexity theory overlap; I am by instinct and training a systems thinker. Where there are conflicts and tensions, I will always look for the systemic cause. While individuals and their circumstances and motives can exacerbate or minimise systemic forces, they are rarely solely responsible for conflicts and tensions.
- Systems thinking would also lead me to pay particular attention to the liminal or edge position of VFX projects. And the edge, according to complexity thinking is "edge of chaos" a turbulent and uncomfortable place to be, the "zone of possibilities" (Battram, 1998 p. 107), a place with potential for creativity and innovation but at risk of being misunderstood by the more stable "centre".
- Complexity approaches to evaluation and review are becoming more commonplace, but are still themselves at an experimental stage (Patton, 2011). They suit complex social innovation projects where identifying learning and soft outcomes are more relevant and useful than measuring "SMART" outputs and outcomes.
- Social innovation is defined as "an alteration of what is established by the introduction of new elements or forms (including new ideas, practices or resource flows); in particular the alteration of social relationships to allow for transformation of intransigent and broadly based social problems."[1] Although this definition does not specifically mention spiritual or religious aims, I think it is clear that the VFX scheme would fit this definition of a social innovation.

1.5 Approach to the review

My approach to the review was negotiated with Paul Winyard, Head of Projects, Research and Development for the Methodist Connexional Team, and Ian Bell, VFX coordinator.

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[1] Michael Quinn Patton, op cit p. 36 quoting Westley, Zimmerman and Patton, *Getting to Maybe, how the world is changed* (2006).

We agreed that I would visit all seven projects, and that I would take a narrative approach: telling the story of each of the projects, and the story of VFX as a project. It was stressed that I was not to review or evaluate the individual projects, which would have entailed a much more detailed approach. The overall aim was to assess progress of VFX against the outcomes identified in the original project proposal agreed by the Methodist Conference in 2008 (Appendix 1) , and to provide the information needed for a judgement to be made about funding for the remainder of Phase 1 and for the second 5-year phase of VFX. As the work of the review progressed, it became clear that it would also form a useful "baseline" for future reviews of the individual projects, and for the scheme as a whole.

I was also not asked to review the finances of the scheme. I was not given any budget or financial information. In fact, as the interviews progressed, it turned out that finances were very much on the mind of many respondents.

Although a further 6 pioneers and projects have been selected and are currently getting under way, I have not spoken to anyone associated with those projects. It is to be hoped that learning from this review will help the new projects as they get off the ground, and also provide some comparative data as they develop. There is of course no assumption that the new projects will develop in the same way as the more established projects.

Complexity thinking supports the view that detailed and long-term planning is problematic in complex social change projects. It therefore supports experimental approaches to project implementation, in particular those which integrate learning and review processes from the beginning. Furthermore, everyone involved in VFX knows that few concrete "results" from the projects can be expected at such an early stage. I did not speak to anyone who thought a new church could be planted amongst the unchurched in less than 10 years. A further explicit objective of the review is therefore to identify what is happening now in the projects, including unforeseen impacts and effects of the VFX project work. I am attempting to identify the key issues, questions, concerns and patterns emerging from the VFX project, and see how it is fitting or otherwise into the wider system of the Methodist church.

I did follow the principle of 'triangulation' and therefore only included issues that were mentioned by two or more people, thus attempting to avoid the risk of including personal or idiosyncratic material.

I have taken a phenomenological approach, aiming to build a picture of the VFX scheme by accurately recording people's varied perceptions and experiences of the scheme. None of these is understood to be "right" in and of itself. Rather, it is the diversity of perspectives and viewpoints that build up to create a picture that people recognise. Rather as in a jigsaw, each piece is different, and none makes any sense by itself, although there may be several of a similar colour or texture; and all are necessary to complete the picture.

In addition to visiting all seven projects, I carried out 41 interviews: with all 8 active pioneers; with 7 District Chairs in districts where there is a VFX project; with members of the Connexional Team, including Martyn Atkins and the three other strategic leaders and the Head of the Cluster for Discipleship and Ministries; with others directly involved in VFX, including present and former members of the Project Management Group and assessment process; with other key stakeholders in the various project areas.

Interviews took place either by telephone, or with the pioneers during project visits, or at Church House. Appendix 2 lists the interviews and shows how/when they took place. Appendix 4 lists the questions on which interviews were – to varying degrees depending on circumstances – based.

The initial draft was completed by 14 November. It was circulated confidentially to the Project Management Group (PMG) and I participated in the discussion about the draft with the PMG on Thu 17 November.

The Coordinator contacted all pioneers to check factual details of the stories about their projects; he also contacted all those with attributed quotes, and some of them chose to withdraw or redraft their quotes. All PMG members were given the opportunity to comment on the whole draft, although few substantive comments were received. The final document incorporates some of the shared insights and comments from the PMG discussion.

This approach is consistent with a complexity and conversation approach to review, in which evaluation is seen more as a series of conversations than simply as a written report. Indeed, the formal and informal conversations which lead into and out of the review are as important or more important than the written document itself.

This review was also lightly linked with the reviews also being undertaken in Autumn 2011 of the two other major strategic projects: the Youth Participation Scheme (YPS) and the District Development Enablers (DDEs). Irene MacWilliam, one of the two consultants involved in reviewing the DDEs, maintained contact between the three reviews. To support the reviews, there was also an online survey of all District Chairs. Although this was mainly concerned with the DDE and Youth Participation Scheme, it also contained a couple of questions regarding VFX, and responses to those questions are incorporated into this review.

1.6 Constraints, cautions and limitations

There were some gaps in my research: not many interviews took place with interested individuals from other denominations with experience in pioneer and fresh expressions ministries. I did not attend one of the VFX Project Management Group meetings (PMG) nor pioneers' monthly training days. Both might have been helpful. I met very few of the local contacts of pioneers, nor did I engage in any of their local activities. Sometimes I would have liked a longer interview, and there are one or two people I was unable to reach. I also spoke only to key actors and stakeholders involved in the VFX scheme; the District Chair online survey was the only mechanism for accessing attitudes to VFX in the wider church system.

I hope however that this review covers most of the key issues emerging from the experience of the VFX project thus far; and fairly represents the views of all those I spoke to.

This is not a reviewing of "pioneering" as a broad concept; or of fresh expressions in general, either within the Methodist church or beyond it. Many respondents drew comparisons between VFX and other pioneering initiatives and ministries, and between VFX and other fresh expressions. I can relay their comments, but I am not in position to make a judgement about them. What is important is

that when comparisons are drawn – and I am not sure that is helpful anyway – that they be based on a genuine understanding of the VFX pioneers and how they are working.

A further obvious limitation to my research and consultancy is that I am not a Methodist and am relatively ignorant about the workings and politics of the Methodist church. I know a lot more now than I did four months ago! There is an advantage in being able to ask ignorant or naive questions, and all interviewees were extremely patient with me. Everything I say, therefore, in this report about Methodism comes directly from interviews with stakeholders – and since there seem to be a variety of views about what Methodism entails, and this very variety indeed appears to be inherent in Methodism (described frequently as a "broad church"), there is much room for error and misunderstanding on my part. For which I apologise in advance, and am very happy to stand corrected.

However, in some key areas which may require decision-making around the VFX project, I am not in the best position to make definitive recommendations. I cannot, and would not tell the Methodist church what to do. I am clear that decisions about the future of VFX need to be made in the best interests of the whole church in the medium and long term; but I cannot be the best person to judge what those best interests may be.

In the current climate, and indeed in organisations across a variety of sectors, including the international development sector, there are great pressures to demonstrate provable short term results – and ironically these pressures can actually prevent a project from achieving its original purpose. These include the current pressures of economic uncertainty and global turbulence. The conditions which pertain today are not necessarily those which pertained at the time the Venture FX scheme was conceived and approved.

1.7 Ethical considerations

All those I spoke to were extremely generous with the information they gave me and their opinions and points of view. In the case of the pioneers, this often included quite personal information. No-one put me under conditions of confidentiality, although a few points were made off the record.

It was suggested via the Coordinator that some pioneers might feel "vulnerable and exposed" in 1-2-1 interviews, and so I fed this back to them by email and offered them the opportunity to be interviewed with another person present if they so wished. No pioneer took up on this offer.

Language of "fledgling" and "infancy" is sometimes applied to the pioneer projects; VFX seems to engender the need in some to protect it at a vulnerable early stage. There is a difference, it seems to me, between protection and protectiveness. The former may enable the project to grow for the benefit of its constituencies and the wider church; the latter may be counter-productive. I mention it here because I noticed this dynamic in myself as well as in some respondents, and it did influence some decisions I made about what to include in the report. I did not want to be over-protective of the pioneers or their projects, because to do so would be patronising and unhealthy. To some degree, the pioneers must choose themselves which battles to fight and how to fight them. They need to be exposed to the demands and expectations of the wider community; and the wider Methodist community needs to be exposed to them.

As the only person – I believe – who has visited all 7 projects, I consider myself to be privileged, and have a responsibility to present the work of the pioneers faithfully and sympathetically.

Clearly I feel an ethical responsibility not to misuse the information that was shared with me, and so I have attempted to represent people and situations sensitively. It is not practical to present information entirely anonymously – the pioneer projects are entirely specific to individuals and places. In general, I have referred to interview respondents by role.

I have also chosen to write this review in the first person.

1.8 What to expect

Following this chapter, which introduces the consultant, the approach and methodology and the outline for the review, Chapter 2 tells the story of each project in outline, and attempts to summarise what is common to the work of VFX pioneers. Chapter 3 identifies major issues emerging from the review, drawing on all interviews. Chapter 4 returns to the project objectives and outcomes envisaged by the original proposal and assesses the extent to which outcomes are being achieved or addressed. This chapter also summarises conclusions of the review and makes recommendations for the future of the project.

Chapter 2: Story & Stories

2.1 The VFX scheme:

The VFX Scheme was proposed to and agreed by the Methodist Conference in 2008. Credit for the original idea and proposal is generally given to Graham Horsley, Evangelism Officer for the Methodist Connexion for about 14 years, and the scheme was originally called the "Connexional Pioneering Ministries Scheme". A budget of £7 million over 10 years, with 70% of funding provided centrally and 30% by the relevant local circuit or district, in two 5-year phases, was proposed . The scheme envisaged a total of 20 projects established over 5 years on a rolling programme of 4-5 per year. The scheme was therefore intended to span potentially 15 calendar years in total. Conference approval was given to Phase 1, with future funding decisions contingent upon a satisfactory review in Year 3. Responsibility for the scheme was located in the Projects, Research and Development Cluster.

Ian Bell was appointed to be the Coordinator in autumn 2008 and started officially in February 2009, although part-time to start with as he was a circuit superintendent and studying for his MA. Ian had experience of founding ecclesial communities in empty butcher shops, a pub and a coffee shop in Hexthorpe, Sheffield, and Gateshead, most of which over time developed "the marks of church", although this predated what has come to be known as "fresh expressions".

From February to September, Ian established the building blocks of the VFX scheme, what he calls its "Identity, Ethos, Approach, Branding and Logo". Following consultation with other denominations and organisations, particularly in the Church of England and Church Army, he developed criteria for pioneers, and pioneer projects, and these have proved robust. Ads in the Methodist Recorder and online were placed in autumn 2009, inviting people to apply to be pioneers and to circuits and districts to submit projects.

The selection conference was modelled on the existing process for selecting ministers: applicants completed a comprehensive application form and 3 extensive references were collected in advance of a rigorous 2-day meeting involving an assessment panel, small and large group discussions and presentations and a psychological assessment. From the first selection conference, 5 were chosen from the 12 selected for the assessment weekend, from 24 applicants.

The coordinator describes the organising of selection conferences as hugely time-consuming. Three selection conferences have been held so far: Oct 09 (6 selected, including one job-share), June 10 (2 selected), and June 11 (6 selected, including two women). Although early selections included 2 presbyters, and a probationer was selected in June 10, there have been systemic obstacles to appointing ordained pioneers and the coordinator has "more or less given up" thinking that there will be further presbyter-pioneers.

Once the pioneer is established in their project, the coordinator's role is to visit them regularly, sit on the Local Management Group for each project, and plan and run the monthly training days, as well as maintaining regular informal contact. The pioneers are line-managed locally, and Ian's role is primarily about "support, supervision and learning".

By Easter 2013, there will be 13 projects (and 14 pioneers) in place; VFX is therefore on target with the scheme as envisaged.

Ian Bell is also identifying and developing a wider network of people doing pioneering work, which he defines as "someone who is forming a new Christian community among the unchurched". He envisages a form of "associate membership" of the pioneer network. He is in touch with about 75 people, about 2/3 are lay and 1/3 of whom are ordained; of the 75 a small number are doing similar work to the VFX pioneers.

A proposal to develop a wider support network of others doing pioneer work is at an advanced stage with the PMG.

2.2 DARTFORD

Dr Bart Woodhouse is the VFX pioneer in The Bridge, a new housing development in Kent, at the eastern end of the M25 London orbital road, just under Dartford Crossing and close to Bluewater shopping centre. Bart had a call to ministry, leadership and evangelism as he was finishing his PhD at Sheffield University in 2005. He read about the need for a "circuit mission enabler" to respond to the opportunity presented by the new housing. He saw it clearly as a chance to plant an "incarnational expression of church".

There were early tensions with the circuit, as there were some who "wanted me to boost the numbers in the existing congregation". Bart was among the first batch of pioneers, appointed by the selection conference of September 2009, and Dartford started up as a VFX project in September 2010. The work was inspired by Graham Horsley, the founding father of VFX, who "always hoped" that what Bart was doing would become a pioneer project. Other issues to be resolved were housing – Bart was initially housed with his family in an old manse – and supervision. The local management group proved not to be helpful, and so it was disbanded.

Bart is still supervised by the local Methodist minister and superintendent Tim Crome, and this is an arrangement that works well and is based on mutual trust – though Tim will be moving on next year. Bart has formed a team with his wife Rachel and Sarah, the deputy head of the primary school, and they met weekly for a year until they found a young man and married couple, first generation Christians, to join them. In 2007 he persuaded the circuit to sell the manse and buy the house in the Bridge development itself, where Bart and his young family were among the first residents; now 15-20% of the houses are complete and there are another 1000 on the way. Originally, the circuit had ambitions for Bart to work in Ebbsfleet Valley, where 30,000 houses were planned – though to date not a stone has been laid there.

The Bridge appears to be devoid of community meeting points other than having a "Learning and Community Campus" which houses the primary school, health centre and some meeting rooms, including an office for The Beacon church. The office space was donated free by Kent County Council, who see him almost as a community chaplain and offered to employ him part-time.   There are no pubs, churches, cinemas or shops: a free bus service ferries residents to Bluewater shopping centre for almost all facilities. Bart sees his work has having two strands, The Beacon Church, and the community development work. His work has included working with police and residents association, organising the Working Lunch for statutory bodies involved in the estate, and liaising with the builder, Wimpey. He and his team have organised Big Lunches for the community and garden parties. They raised £17,000 in funding from Big Lottery Fund to turn a bleak triangle of land into a garden.

Bart sees his church building ministry as influenced by John Wesley's class meetings, focussing church on small groups meeting in the home. A cell group meets in Bart's home, involving 6-12 people on a Tuesday evening. On Sunday afternoon, there is Messy church in the hall of the community centre. Bart also runs Beacon Inspire, a coffee teaching and discussion group. He meets regularly with other church leaders in the area, he runs a toddler group, and a Monday evening cell group for young people in the pub. He meets some young people one to one for coffee in Bluewater.

As a result of the relationships he has built, about three unchurched people have had an encounter with Jesus and become part of Beacon – they have "a large number of friends and family and they tag along to barbecues, and they in turn are involved in the Wharf group or I have coffee with them". About 19 or 20 are directly involved in Beacon Church, and Bart would describe himself as having an explicit faith role with them.

Bart believes he has learned much about how the church can engage with new housing developments.   The community work is, he says, an end in itself. He does not hide his Christian faith or role, but he does not work in a proselytising way: we are expressing Kingdom values, the work is authentically evangelical, and in the "cheesy phrase", we need to "love them until they ask why". Bart expresses frustration with traditional models of evangelism, including Alpha courses etc. This, he says, is far more relational. The invitation to "trust and encounter the Christian message" involves engaging people in conversations and relationships over a period of years. It is truly difficult – he has only seen about 5 people "coming to a meaningful place"; sometimes he feels like a failure and wonders if it has all been worth it. "You see how long a conversation needs to take place with someone from an unchurched background." And yet, in the last 6 months, he begins to see the possibility of the work "going viral", the evidence of transformation in people's lives – they change, and the people around them. "I'm doing this faithfully, but if you want me to do this meaningfully, it will take a long time, but when it goes viral it will go viral in a big way."

2.3 EXETER

Jon Curtis was born and grew up in Exeter. He met his wife, who is also Exeter born and bred, at Exeter University. Brought up an Anglican, he became a Methodist in the early 2000s, when he was founding a Christian football club. He has a first and second degree in theology, and about 5 years ago, he began training as a lay preacher. He was involved with Cafe Church and Messy Church and worked in a homeless hostel. With friends, he formed a collective forming music bands, writing and publishing materials. A year into his PhD studies, he saw an ad in the national Guardian, asked the advice of a local minister, applied in May 2010 and was accepted following the June 2010 selection conference.

He and his wife could not imagine living anywhere else other than Exeter, so he asked Ian Bell if a project could be developed locally. The local superintendent was enthusiastic, so they designed a project aiming to work with alternative music culture, politically left and artistic educated and self-educated in the city of Exeter. The project was approved in early November 2010 and began on 1 December 2010. "It was the strangest day of my life: you are this person and all this money has been invested in you – now what are you going to do?" "The main difference with what I was doing before was time and energy, rather than cramming all this activity into my evenings, this was my employment now."

"Now people who know I am Christian come and speak to me, about their own spiritual experiences." To give structure to his week, Jon prays in a public space three times a week; there are specific young people he meets with for coffee, lunch or dinner. Every Thursday evening, he attends the Cavern music venue, above which he shares an office with a music promoter and illustrator. He has been involved with three significant projects. In each of the weeks of Lent, he intentionally engaged with local punk rock and alternative culture, who in any event have a strong sense of questioning lifestyle choices, by giving or taking up one thing each week -- meat, or driving, money, technology, one week he volunteered for charity and another he engaged in a monastic lifestyle. People were able to join him in activities that interested them. The point of this, of course, apart from the symbolic representation of the Christian message and story, was to engage people in conversations about his actions. The people he works with are under 35, don't have families, are not in permanent relationships, and are thoughtful and like to read. They are artists, musicians, creative

people, with flexible mindsets, and they are well read, in the bible, Koran or Buddhism. He is in touch with 500-1000 overall of this wider community based on music in the city.

Jon has started a cell group, with 4 Christians and 8 non-Christians, and it has met every fortnight since January. And in November he will start an Emmaus course for 10-15 participants, every Tuesday evening for 12 weeks in a row, hiring a local produce stall. He reads widely about church planting, the new monasticism, fresh expressions.

A bigger idea for the future, through getting to know various bands from different music genres, is to start a Sunday night magazine show run by a collaborative group of Christians in a seated theatre, aimed at relatively high-brow university culture, with film, comedy, music etc.

Jon sees the work as an incarnational model: "God came down to earth and lived among us so that we could be saved and live life to the full. We are providing people who wouldn't see it otherwise a model of Christ and his followers. Through action, example, conversation, the choices I make, the things we choose to question....   The conversations I get into are about Jesus, scripture, history, church. People I know are used to me writing things – I have a column in the local paper, always about a passage of scripture, and that leads to all sorts of conversations." He goes on: "It is explicitly Christian, and I think of it as explicitly Methodist – I'm employed to be a Christian in the city centre. I'm delighted to have a cell group of 8-10 people, but I am a pioneer to all 500-1000."

Success in the future would be people hearing about Jesus and becoming explicitly Christian. Now, he thinks he has close working relationships with about 25 people, but in 5 years' time he might

have 120 people involved in cell church. Wider than that, he reckons there are about 200 involved in some sort of social action.

Jon is supervised by Ann Varker, who is the circuit FX minister. He feels well supported by her and the District Chair, Peter Pillinger. There is a Local Management Group with another ordained minister and three lay people, which meets every two months and is supportive, but Ann is not sure that, as a group, they always think strategically enough.

2.4 CORNWALL

Tubestation, in the coastal village of Polzeath, Northern Cornwall, was founded in 2006 by Gareth Hill, the Methodist minister and circuit superintendent at the time (and now Head of the Mission and Advocacy Cluster for the Connexional Team). The congregation of the little beachside church had dwindled to just six. Gareth had a vision of a new style church reaching out to surfers, and Tubestation was set up with an explicitly evangelical identity with 7 trustees, including Richard Curnow, a Pentecostal minister, Henry Cavender and Kris Lannen . The trustees included and continue to include several of the original congregation, who have embraced the project enthusiastically.

The trustees advertised for a Project Manager, and Kris and Henry put in a joint application, and were by far the best candidates. It was up to them to create the project and raise funding. The building was renovated, including a skateboarding ramp at the sanctuary end, and turned into a multi-purpose cafe and worship area. Originally targeted to surfers, Tubestation also caters for the summer tourist and second home population and considers itself to be a place of Christian

conversation. Relationships between Tubestation and the new Methodist superintendent grew difficult, and there was and continues to be a perceived hostility from some members of the inherited church in Cornwall.

A couple of years ago the new District Chair, Steven Wild, recognised the missional importance of the project and became chair of the trustees. Henry and Kris applied to be pioneers and applied last July for VFX funding for a new Tubestation project focussing more explicitly on young adults and surf culture. Its acceptance was received as encouragement at a time when the surrounding Methodist context was becoming difficult.

They are currently looking at moving Tubestation from circuit responsibility to district responsibility; in effect giving Tubestation the same status as a circuit. Meanwhile, Dave Matthews, himself also a surfer and an ordained Baptist minister and a trustee of Christian Surfers, is preaching and leading the sacraments at Tubestation. Kris says: "We are very thankful for the opportunity to be part of the community and culture of the Methodist church. We want to offer consistency of teaching and discipling on a Sunday; we have a responsibility; we want to offer something fantastic and creative on a Sunday."

Currently, 50-100 attend on most Sundays, including those from a regular congregation of about 80 locals including children, plus a high proportion of visitors in addition , which swells in summer (in season i.e. March - Oct) to about 200 across two services. During the winter, they hope to work with members in small groups.

The VFX project does not have a LMG in Cornwall as Kris and Henry are already reporting to the Trustees of Tubestation. Ian Bell has just joined that board of trustees, which is currently configured to manage Tubestation as a charity.

 While the management and integration of Tubestation into the local Methodist context seems more secure, Henry and Kris retain questions and concerns about the future of the project. Do they expand activities across other surfer communities in Cornwall? Who would take responsibility if

they decided to move on? How do they measure the success of what they do? In terms of the stories, newsletters and conversations which take place; the fact that Jesus is explicitly at the centre of everything they do. The weekend before my visit, the Jesus Longboard Classic surfing competition took place, and there were Hawaiian blessings and testimonies of Christian witness.

The bigger vision of Tubestation is reaching pockets of surfing community all around Cornwall, large, medium and tiny, to relate the Gospel to them, and now Kris and Henry have bought a van and intend to take the mission beyond Polzeath. One community they have their eye on is St Merryn, just 10 miles away.   There is the potential to "put the heart back" into a "deprived and fractured community where the tribes don't mix," which is also home to a significant number of artists.

Kris and Henry and their partners moved down to Cornwall independently over a decade ago, and met up through their shared interest in music, creative arts, surfing and membership of Christian Surfers UK. They had marketing and arts backgrounds and put on big events, playing music in different venues. They had an interest in breaking down the barriers between denominations: "for this generation, that's not important, it's all about Jesus, the relationship to Jesus and access to Him through scripture." They are members of the Methodist church – they see their work as rooted in the history of Methodism in Cornwall, as well as the monastic traditions of the Celtic saints. They have embraced the tradition and attempt to marry old and new approaches in the worship at Tubestation, including well known hymns: "people love them secretly."

2.5 COTTENHAM: CAMBRIDGE

Simon Oliver is a probationer Methodist minister, who came to Cottenham a year ago.

Cottenham Community Centre is housed in a former Methodist church in the dormitory village of Cottenham, outside Cambridge. The church is leased to the community for 1 p a year for 50 years; Simon is now a trustee, although the official Methodist church is represented by a former church member and steward.

Simon had a difficult first year as a pioneer since he started on16[th] October 2010. There were communications problems with the local circuit and difficulties finding housing. There was no manse and a manse specification rental house was not found in time; as a probationer Simon was not supposed to choose his own housing, and he had a newly pregnant wife. In the end a mediation team was brought in and the mediation was "an extremely positive experience, which restored God's peace" to the fractured situation, and an excellent working relationship with the circuit has now been established.

Simon describes his role in the community as "quite nebulous". Occasionally he wears a dog collar; and some locals describe him as "our" Methodist minister – recognising that he doesn't have a church and is specifically called to work with 20/30 somethings and families. He maintains strong relationships with local churches, who were quite "put out" when the Methodists launched a project locally without consulting them. Simon says that he works "alongside" them and the community centre. He preaches once a month on the Methodist circuit, recognising that VFX is a circuit project, and has a good relationship with the new superintendent. "The Methodist church has invested philosophically and financially so I want to the project to be properly connected to Methodism."

Now Simon and his family are installed in a comfortable home in the centre of the village, with a rather remarkable, separate "garden room", potentially ideal for group meetings, although it is not licensed for public meetings.   The house is just around the corner from the community centre, with its recognisably Methodist church shell of a building. The community centre was still fairly dilapidated a year ago, but is now a warm environment, that has "burst into life "and retains its Methodist plaques.

Wood from the pulpit was turned into toy boxes and plaques detailing the history of the church. Meanwhile, the new housing development that was meant to be built in Northstowe has been put on hold.

Simon stresses that he is meant to be immersing himself in the local context. He does shifts in the coffee shop in the community centre, he meets people (up to 20 who have dropped out of church) on a regular basis for in a low-key support network for coffee and meals, at a pastoral level, chatting about "life the universe and everything".   He is "in the process of trying to discern the way to go and what to do." In particular he wants to see how the arts and sports can be used as the basis for building Christian community. Overall he thinks he is working pastorally with up to 30 Christian and non-Christian people and he is linked with a wider circle of up to 300 people.

He and his wife are trialling a Holy Trinity Brompton marriage enrichment course in the garden room behind their house, training local leaders and ministers in leading the course. He would also like to offer parenting and financial management courses. He is leading a Dads' play group for 12+ fathers of under 5's.

An issue for Simon's work is that the trustees of the community centre are keen to emphasise that the centre is not a church, and that the centre is not there to promote Christianity. At the same time, they are giving him a massive discount of 90% to run his courses there. Now he is faced with a crunch: "If I propose stuff and they say no, I wouldn't know what I am here for."

"Building strong relationships, and building strong community is the crux of what God at work would look like. I want to do the marriage course, to add value to the community and do God's work."

Simon wants to build some sort of worshipping Christian community among non-Christians – and that involves some sort of negotiation about what is or isn't OK to have in the community centre.

For Advent, Simon has invited 12 local families to display the ultrasound scans of their unborn children, along with other bits and pieces and poetry, under the title "Advent – Fragile Hope". This idea has made the trustees nervous, he says. He would like to do a series of related film screenings, but is not sure he can get the licensing for the centre, so they might have discussion groups instead.

Simon wants some rhythm to his worship life, and so, on Sundays, his family stops at about 4:30 to read the lectionary and pray with others who may want to join them.

Simon knew being a pioneer was going to be difficult, but he didn't realise how complicated it would be, and how much it would be about how he relates to the Methodist church. It has been necessary for him to relate proactively with the Methodists and other churches in order to have gotten anywhere.

"I would be sad if there wasn't something quite Methodist about this. Theoretically, Methodism allows for multiple forms of worship and being church.... I feel excited about helping the Methodist church get back to its roots."

2.6 SCOTLAND: INVERNESS

Dave Saunders came to Inverness from Eastbourne 9 years ago, and started as a VFX pioneer 9 months ago. He first came to Inverness as a volunteer and then paid staff placement for Youth for Christ, a parachurch organisation with its roots in Billy Graham's evangelism movement. He had his office in a secondary school and was specifically charged with working with teenage and school based young people of the district.

He applied first of all as a pioneer, and then as a project to VFX: "one of the things that wasn't clear at the start was that I needed to apply as a minister, and then as a project to VFX". He has been working as a pioneer for 9 months.

Dave lives in an area of Inverness called Merkinch, known locally as "The Ferry" because of the ferry that used to cross the river Ness at this point, which was replaced by a new bridge – thereby depriving a whole neighbourhood of its traditional income and source of employment. Inverness's traditional – and typically Methodist – constituency was employed in fishing, railways and foundries. Now The Ferry is in the top 3% of deprived areas of Scotland.

Dave has established a church called Reverb, with 8 members. There are about 50 in a larger core group, and then he has built relationships with hundreds of young people in addition to the core group, as a result of his years of work in the school. Inverness is characterised by having no third level education, so anyone of 18+ still in education leaves the city. Young people who stay in the city have left school at 16, may have gone into FE college, apprenticeships, retail or nothing at all.

Reverb has written an evolving covenant, following an established Methodist tradition, and a letter to the local Methodist congregation. Its minister, the superintendent, Peter Howson, is also his line manager. Reverb attempts to have an adult-adult relationship with the Methodist congregation. They find sharing worship generally unhelpful, but meet for meals sometimes. The Methodist congregation has a barbecue on the beach every year, and Reverb members do come along. They also held a commissioning service for Dave as pioneer, and put together a service at which Ian Bell preached and there was "mind-blowing testimony" about Dave's ministry.

 Dave first came to Inverness from a house church background in Eastbourne and found the Methodist church a "weird alien world" but he has since discovered real value, history and traditions, meaning and depth in Methodism, which he feels has been lost or not communicated well. He says: "I do struggle to live in the two worlds without expressing frustration."

Peter will be retiring soon and there will be a new superintendent, but he acknowledges that we "can't have someone come who isn't on side with VFX."

Reverb used to go down to the football field in Merkinch every Thursday to teach kids to play football, guitar and basketball. They host meals for the church. Reverb "imagines we are in a battle together for love and justice. Every Sunday we get together to teach each other – we call it 'trench time'. It's the one time when we are not on mission. All the conversation is about what opportunities did God give you during the week; drawing up battle plans for the week ahead. We read the bible together." "The stories of battle are always stories of the people we've met: your story, our story, God's story."

They have had a programme of "Dig your heart out" in which local businesses and churches have sponsored gardens – 5 so far – for local residents, and some of the core group are invited to get involved in a "practical expression of love for the community". They have "Wash your heart out",

based on Jesus' washing of the feet -- as a way to get to know people: "If you tell us who you are, we'll wash your car." "Sing your heart out" took place last Christmas with carols in the football field.

This, stresses Dave, is a relationship-driven ministry. He has a blog, which is "all about relationship", and Reverb has a website: reverbchurch.co.uk. "Five to ten years down the road, failure would be that everything depends on me, and it would fall apart if I moved on. How much is it personality driven, following me rather than Christ?"

Success would be: aiming for loving God and loving neighbour the best you can, with small pockets of churches, maybe 10 churches of 10 members. Dave himself lives in Merkinch, in a purchased council house. Fellow community member Andrew is planning to move to the nearby area Dalneigh, and the obvious next step would be to establish a community there. Would Andrew also be a commissioned minister? Would the two churches meet together? The crucial thing is to have small groups engaged in conversation and meeting over a meal. He says: "you don't need a large group to achieve a lot. It's easy to engage in the "attractional model" – large events – and much more difficult to create true disciples".

Andrew was baptised and, along with another newly baptised Reverb member, had his name written into the Methodist community book. His baptism was attended by 15 Christians and 60 non-Christians, and Dave needed to explain what was happening.

Dave has had no formal theological training, but has recently found a theology course to sign up to. He feels loyal to the Methodists and their traditions: "they supported and trained me". He says "thank you" at circuit services and meetings, always finding a way to tell a story about the work he is doing.

2.7 SHEFFIELD

Ric Stott is an ordained minister and trained art therapist who as a pioneer is using art to be in the city of Sheffield and "reflect back to the city some of its life". He had actually been in circuit ministry for 6 years, and then out of ministry for three years when he saw the ad for pioneering a week before the deadline, applied and was "astounded" when he was accepted to be a pioneer. He was actually the first pioneer to start, in February 2010.

He is strongly supported by the District Chair, Vernon Marsh, and his line manager, Rachel MacCallum, and Local Management Group. Vernon Marsh says: "there is something whimsical about what Ric is doing that might seem unproductive and questionable; I would want to defend it." His unique combination of gifts as an artist and in theological reflection had been recognised by the District, but VFX gave the opportunity for him to engage in the work fulltime, a work of "evangelism and operating beyond the edge of the church".

At the present time, Ric is looking for a space in which to stage "Soul of Sheffield". He is working with a group of artists, some Christian and some non-Christian, who are interested in exploring Sheffield residents' own stories of the city. Rachel and he and I visited a large, clean empty ground floor office space accessed via a smart foyer area which he would be given rent free. Although the concept is not yet fully developed, the idea is that people would come and be given art materials to help construct a model of the city through their stories and experiences of it.

Ric's previous art installations have included "40 days in the wilderness", a Lent group show involving 18 artists held in the sanctuary of a Methodist church, which attracted over 600 visitors, and "40 clay figures" which were placed around the city, and photographed in situ. Ric has a blog which is followed by people from all over the world: www.iaskforwonder.com .

He is working with Nick, who is doing pioneering work and living on a large council estate. They have been given permission to make "advent graffiti" on empty walls around the estate. He takes me to a roundabout in the middle of the estate where he has spray painted an angel onto the hoardings. "I didn't know what I was going to paint – but the more that people spoke with me, the more they were asking for an overt symbol, so I drew an angel." The process is as important as the product, he explains. It is as much about the conversations he has with passersby who stop to inquire what he is doing, as about the finished picture. "Church happens as an event around your presence, almost as if the prophetic presence is a place. It's not bringing Jesus to the people, it's finding goodness where it already is." "I am interested in creating spaces where people can find life and become the person they are truly meant to be – for me that has involved being a Christian."

The group of artists that Ric has gathered he calls a "creative collective", aiming to "reveal the sacred". He also works as art therapist in a school. He leads retreats. He has created a contemplative space or "arts chapel" in the back room of a Methodist church, where he spends every Tuesday evening in quiet imaginative reflection on scripture, with or without others from a group of up to 12 or 15 people – this he says is the activity which is "least like church" because it is not so much about building community as about quiet meditation.

Success in the future would be a "core community or vibrant creative collective, putting on exhibitions, seeking to break open the world and find sacred space – into which we bring stories of Jesus, and hear others' stories as well."

Ric says: "there's an ambiguity about art which sits well with my experience of faith. Art doesn't necessarily sit well with Methodism, but it can reawaken our sense of mystery...." "If I'm asked what I do, I say I'm an art therapist and a Methodist minister, and, if I have the courage, an artist. The work is part of the Methodist church."

2.8 HANLEY – STOKE ON TRENT

Stoke-on-Trent is the dilapidated former home of 76 potteries, some of them famous, including Wedgewood and Royal Doulton. While the industry itself has long moved to China and other developing countries, the city is dominated by crumbling hulks of factories, and bright hopeful flags declaring the city's former glories hang from the lampposts of the main roads.

Hanley, surrounded by a ring road, is one of the 7 pottery towns that make up Stoke-on-Trent, and the one that has attracted large amounts of European regenerational funding. Inside the ring road there is a large new shopping precinct, many nightclubs, virtually no residential housing and no longer any churches.

Simon Sutcliffe is an ordained pioneer who describes himself as an "urban friar", working in Hanley. He was previously a circuit minister and superintendent, but wanted to leave circuit ministry – he told Ashley Cooper, the minister of the highly successful Swan Bank church in Stoke. Ashley had been wondering what might be done in Hanley and together they decided that Simon would apply to be a VFX pioneer, and Ashley would put forward Hanley as a project – but would ask for Simon to be assigned to it.

Now Simon has gone half time as a pioneer as he is teaching theology at Queens College Birmingham, and the project is employing Ron Willoughby one day a week; Ron is an American

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[2] Simon Sutcliffe in Hanley with Dave, the Big Issue salesman.

Southern Baptist minister who has long experience of church planting in Baltimore and has been living in the UK for the past ten years.

The VFX project is a district project; Simon is coached by Ron, and line managed by Brian Barber, a visionary lay person, who is one of an effective District Project Group.

While none of the established denominations still maintains churches in Hanley there is a substantial Christian presence: a small Pentecostal church, a widely listened to Christian radio station. There was a failed Anglican pioneer ministry: Church without Walls. There is a large and thriving Methodist bookshop, Traidcraft shop and coffee lounge, with Saltbox, a number of Christian activities above it, and Simon's office.

Simon is "truly Methodist in that I know the tradition and the system" and actively engages with the structures of Methodism. He sits on the Methodist Council. At the same time, he is exploring different models of ministry, and different language about ministry, describing himself as an "urban friar", and maintaining an active presence on twitter and through blogs.

This blog entry describes Simon's most recent project, in which 14 laminated Quick Response codes (the square black and white codes you see on advertisements sometimes which can be scanned with a smartphone app) are hidden around Hanley centre: http://www.sharetheguide.org/blog/archive/2011/10/18/quick-response-gospel-hanley-simon-sutcliffe . Each QR code is linked to a website with one of the Stations of the Cross, and each one gives a meditation and directions to the next QR code/station. Another project currently running is the "Viral Francis", which involves 7 paper carrier bags which Simon has given to people he knows. Each one has a pack of tea, a pack of biscuits, and a copy of "Chasing Francis" by Ian Morgan Crome. A letter invites the person who has acquired the bag to enjoy the tea and biscuits, read the book, replace the tea and biscuits and pass the bag and its instructions onto someone else they think might enjoy the book. They may also engage with Simon by twitter, in a conversation or simply to acknowledge receipt of the carrier bag – he has heard from 16 people so far.

Last Advent he took photos of local people to represent all the characters in the nativity and the photos were displayed in the coffee lounge next to the bookshop. The bookshop is on a side street in the middle of Hanley's nightclub district, somewhat deserted by day, but closed off to traffic and heaving at night – Simon offers late night coffee and soup to clubbers on Thursday nights.

This Christmas he may stage a "nativity" in the town centre, with people dressed as characters from the nativity wandering through the shopping centre, engaging with shoppers.

Other activities planned include travelling with the "geodome" that Simon has raised grant funding for, a large tent or "portable sacred space". More traditional activities include a Thursday lunchtime communion in the shopping centre, presided by one of the local presbyters including the District Chair; and in November a cell group with 8 (de-churched and unchurched) members will start at Simon's house. A second cell group will meet at Ron's House.

In May, the Olympic torch will come through Stoke town centre, so he is also planning a sports festival; and he would like to do something with vulnerable adults and homeless around health.

Simon is inspired by the Celtic peregrination monks; he is developing an understanding of the ministry of "urban friar" and a theology of "host and guest". The inherited church and much of fresh expressions is in the "hosting" or attractional model; whereas the "guest" is itinerant, looking to

enter into or knock on the door of others' spaces. What happens if we see the incarnation as "guest" he asks? If we see the story of Emmaus as the guest becoming host, and the host becoming guest? He doesn't much like the word "pioneer"; and wonders whether "nova" might be a better word – new people, novices, innovative ways of working ....

2.9 What distinguishes VFX pioneering?

Pioneers are of different ages and from different social and ecclesial backgrounds, with varied amounts of theological training and different theological approaches and biases. Their dialogue amongst themselves on their training days is characterised, according to themselves, by robust argument about the questions of theology, ecclesiology, ministry and mission which exercise them.

What therefore do they have in common?

All the pioneers are deeply located in specific geographical and social contexts – or localities[3] —and almost all of them were inserted in those contexts before they became pioneers and the projects were adopted by VFX. All of those contexts suffer from significant material and/or spiritual deprivation and are at a substantial distance from the life and structures of the inherited church; all of the pioneers straddle the uncomfortable gap between the two worlds, although they would each experience and articulate the way that they maintain the dual presence differently. Whether ordained or lay, none of them currently experiences a call to traditional circuit ministry, because they locate themselves in daily life and local context. None of them has their office in a traditional Methodist church or district office.

All the pioneers are rooted in their own lives of prayer and reflection on scripture, and they all explicitly own their Methodist identity and role. All of the pioneers are using some often strikingly creative combinations of art, music, sport and community building to reach young or youngish people. They are all building a range of long term relationships with people; the listening and conversations enable them to understand the world and matters of faith from the point of view of young, unchurched or de-churched people. They truly stand "in the shoes of the other". They are all engaged in intense theological reflection on the work that they do, whether or not they are trained theologians. Almost all of them are using some combination of blogging, online journals, Twitter and YouTube. They have all constructively navigated difficult times in their personal lives and/or ministries and this enables them to work both alone and collaboratively, as the situations require. Several of the pioneers' partners are actively involved in the pioneers' ministry. Pioneers have developed quite strong convictions about who they are and what they do. All of them are actively accountable to their local church and the Connexion through supervision and/or management groups, and all are actively supported by their District Chairs.

All of the pioneers have gathered or are gathering a team or a small group of people of between 8 and 20 for planning of activity and/or some form of worship; a larger affinity group around that of

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[3] The JAMWPEEEC (Joint Anglican-Methodist Working Party on the Ecclesiology of Emerging Expressions of church) report on Fresh Expressions uses "locality", drawing on Leslie Newbigin's ideas, to describe "the network-neighbourhood context of Christian mission and community." A "locality" combines the notions of social network and geographical neighbourhood, and I have adopted this word to describe the pioneers' contexts.

about 50-80, and around that much larger numbers of tangential relationships of up to a thousand or more. These are classic "community of practice" structures[4].

And all of the pioneers are participating in their own Community of Practice, with its coordinator and regular monthly training days.

Types of ministry:

Dartford is using fairly traditional community building and church planting activity in a new housing estate. Exeter (alternative music and politics) and Cornwall (surfing and holiday) are based on youth culture and affinity groups; Cottenham and Cornwall are based in old Methodist churches – although Cottenham's is explicitly no longer a church – leaving some dilemmas about how and whether it can be used for VFX activities. Sheffield, Stoke and Inverness projects work with a wide range of young adults and are intensely about the specific identity and culture of the places they inhabit.

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[4] See Appendix 3 and pp 46-47.

Chapter 3: Issues arising from VFX

In this chapter, I am attempting to raise and summarise issues emerging from the VFX experiment, and the debates around those issues, drawing on all the interviews I carried out. I should repeat that I am not claiming that this is a comprehensive or final account; others within the world of Methodism may see additional issues, or view the issues differently.

3.1 The value of VFX

It is important to note at the outset that review respondents, all of whom are or have been directly involved with the VFX scheme, were overwhelmingly appreciative and encouraging of the scheme. These are some of the quotes from respondents:

- Methodism needs to reinvent itself for the 21st Century;

- The scheme is excellent and important

- It's great, we should have had it a long time ago

- It gives people the opportunity to do cutting edge stuff

- VFX asks questions back to the church

- It is core to what we should be about, and we should be increasing investment in the scheme

- It's a key building block and sign of our intent to be a discipleship movement shaped for mission

- VFX offers a future for the Methodist church

- It's one of the most exciting and challenging pieces of work the church is doing.

- There's a growing purpose to Methodism, and it would be a pity if we can't find a place for something slightly quirky.

3.2 How VFX is perceived

3.2.1 Experiment, pilot or model?

There are a range of ways in which the project is perceived overall. How people think conceptually about VFX determines to a large degree what they think about it, and what they expect from it. There appear to be three different main ways of seeing VFX:

3.2.2 VFX as pilot

If VFX is a "pilot", the assumption is that if it succeeded, there would be a continuing stream of centrally funded pioneers. It is generally accepted that this is unlikely to happen.

There are a number of respondents who believe that the purpose of, or success criteria for VFX is that it is a pilot to establish locally funded pioneers. "Circuits have the money and could catch the spirit and principles of pioneering and would want to have one themselves."

In my view, the main question this would raise, apart from funding, would be how support and training for pioneers would be sustained. If support and training were organised centrally, pioneering may fairly quickly be institutionalised as a third strand of ministry. For example, one District Chair says: "We need a different route into ministry for those we are expecting to start new churches."

3.2.3. VFX as model

If VFX is a model of doing ministry, the emphasis moves to the way ministry is done, rather than focussing on the person. From this point of view, VFX is seen as a way to stimulate new thinking about and influence how training is carried out for traditional roles of presbyter and deacon. One pioneer says: "VFX is what ministers should be doing if they had the time."

One implication of this model is that some are looking for quick results in terms of how pioneering influences training for ministry.

3.2.4 VFX as experiment

If VFX is constructed as an experiment, there is an assumption that the church does not know what will emerge from it – either in terms of the ministerial role, the ways of doing ministry, or the forms of church that will emerge.

My own bias is towards this latter view: to think of VFX as an experiment. My guess is that the stamina, inventiveness, entrepreneurial qualities, ability to work alone and to build a team, and psychological maturity of the pioneers are not likely to be widespread, even among presbyters and deacons. One pioneer says: "Pioneering is God's imagination imparted to us".

A complexity view of implementing complex social change projects accepts that experiments with high level intentions are more effective than projects with detailed planning using detailed outcomes and targets – providing that learning and review are built into the project design from the beginning.

A number of respondents said that this was too early in the project timeline for a review. I would argue from a complexity perspective that (a) reviews in such projects need to take place early in order to be able to make adjustments that can make a difference – in traditional approaches to project cycle management, evaluations often take place too late and (b) five or ten years down the road, when VFX is judged to be either success or failure, or a combination of both, the church will want to know what factors were influential early on in the project that may have contributed to its course.

To recognise VFX as an experiment is also to acknowledge the depth of the challenge that VFX pioneers are facing, and the variety, range and creativity of methodologies and processes they are

using to build relationships, community and an encounter between the unchurched and God through Jesus Christ, and the values of the Kingdom, sometimes expressed as justice.

One respondent describes the pioneers as "at the radical edge" of Methodism; and one pioneer notes, referring to Stewart Murray (Murray, 2010) that "no other missionary organisation has found itself in this situation before. There is a culture of the rejection of Christendom. The unchurched have a kind of unconscious, benign, negative disinterest in church."

Sponsoring a genuine experiment also implies being willing to risk failure. Several respondents, including senior leaders, stated that they accepted that some projects may fail, describing VFX as an exercise in "holy risk". In that sense, the space for the experiment to take place does need to be protected. One District Chair says: "My calling is to elbow the space for the pioneer's generation". Another District Chair says: "VFX is exploratory – we're not sure where it is going to go." The minister of Swan Bank, the largest worshipping community in the Methodist church, who originally designed the Stoke/Hanley VFX project (but no longer has any official role) genuinely wanted "a blank piece of paper", with no assumptions about how and what the pioneer would do.

Pioneers are aware that they face risks – of losing touch with the Methodist tradition, of the work being too focussed on them as individual personalities, of failing to generate authentic expressions of church. One of the pioneers asks: "If a line had to be drawn, who would draw it and where would it be?"

To support and carry out the experiment, the role of what Arbuckle (Arbuckle, 1993[5]) calls "authority dissenters" and "path finding dissenters" is critical. Authority dissenters are senior leaders -- or leadership groups -- in the church who have the power to enable initiatives to happen – or close them down; path finding dissenters are those who "carry the Gospel vision through radically new language and action in response to Gospel needs."

Arbuckle notes: "For people comfortably attached to outdated pastoral methods, pathfinding dissenters are annoying because they refuse to settle for the mediocre."[6]

3.3 How VFX works

3.3.1 Project and pioneer

The scheme originally envisaged that pioneers and projects would be selected entirely separately and then matched. In fact, in six of the seven projects, the pioneer was already *in situ* when he was accepted as a pioneer, and the project was based on or expanded work that he was already doing in that locality (Dartford, Exeter, Cornwall, Inverness) or was custom designed for him (Sheffield, Stoke).

Only Cottenham could be described as a "from scratch" project; the Cottenham VFX project has a number of factors which distinguish it from the others: the pioneer is a probationer minister, and this has added an extra dynamic to the project implementation; the project is based from the start in an old Methodist church and other churches are active among the project's target population.

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[5] Arbuckle *op cit* Chapter 4: The transforming leadership of 'authority dissenters' pp. 98 – 131.

[6] Arbuckle *op cit* p. 7

This means that the VFX project in most situations is "piggybacked" onto several years of work and/or relationships built by the pioneer. The projects are very dependent on the pioneer's deep rootedness in the context in which he is working. We will see later that "place" and "space" are critical concepts for VFX pioneering.

This has implications: firstly for understanding how long it takes to create Christian community in the contexts in which pioneers are working; secondly, for how the new projects are understood – are they also taking pioneers and projects which in one sense or another have already been underway for some time? And how should projects which are "new starts" be viewed differently from those that are more established?

It would also have implications for how new pioneers and projects are selected, if the scheme continues to grow.

One criticism voiced at the reality of how projects and pioneers were selected was that the VFX scheme did not in fact start anything new. It was merely a way of centrally funding already existing projects. This would be unfair. Although it is hard or impossible to imagine any of the 7 pioneers, including the probationer ordinand in Cambridge, being located in any other place or project, the VFX scheme allowed focussing and shaping of new developments to work already being done by the pioneer/s (Exeter, Dartford, Cornwall, Inverness) or new initiatives (Stoke & Sheffield).

3.3.2 Finances

As I mentioned in Chapter 1, I was not asked to review the finances of VFX and have very little financial information. However, the finances of the scheme were raised spontaneously by many of the respondents.

Many respondents consider that £7 million over 10 years per 20 projects is a great deal to spend. One respondent is "amazed at the financial resources being thrown at the scheme". Comparisons are made with the YPS Scheme, which had its budget cut by 50%. Others point out that because VFX does not operate in all districts it is hard for some to see the value of the scheme. One District Chair noted in the online survey: "I am most disappointed with Venture FX and it seems to me to have been a very expensive way of holding the enthusiasm of a few on the edge, while not giving support to places where it might have had some value."

At the same time, the amount being spent on VFX might be compared to the £6.2 million being spent per year on all of the church's Training and Learning, according to The Fruitful Field report. Some other respondents, including some senior leaders in the church (Strategic Leaders and District Chairs), describe the cost of VFX as "peanuts" in overall terms, or "well worth the cost".

To those who see VFX as an "investment", the question immediately is surfaced of anticipated return. A number of respondents either claimed to know or speculated that the original budgets had been miscalculated and there was not in fact enough money to cover the originally planned number of projects. Some thought that future pioneers would be part-time appointments. Some people assumed that the second phase would not be financed, or would only partially be financed. Some on the other hand assumed that the commitment to 10 years of funding would be honoured. I was not in a position to confirm or deny any of these assumptions about the financing of VFX, but it did lead me to conclude that because some people inevitably measure and value things, even the things of the church, in hard financial terms, there is a lot of projecting and speculations happening with regard to the financing of VFX. Some respondents note that in the current financial context,

the whole financial viability and sustainability of the scheme will inevitably be a significant challenge. One Strategic Leader points out that it is wholly unsustainable to envisage growing new congregations that do not generate income.

Some respondents point out that many circuits could afford to establish and support their own pioneers, if they saw the value of them – while there are other circuits that would find it very difficult. In none of the projects is it possible to envisage at this time that they would become financially self-sustaining (although Cornwall has the best chance); let alone that communities would begin to generate income back to the Methodist church.
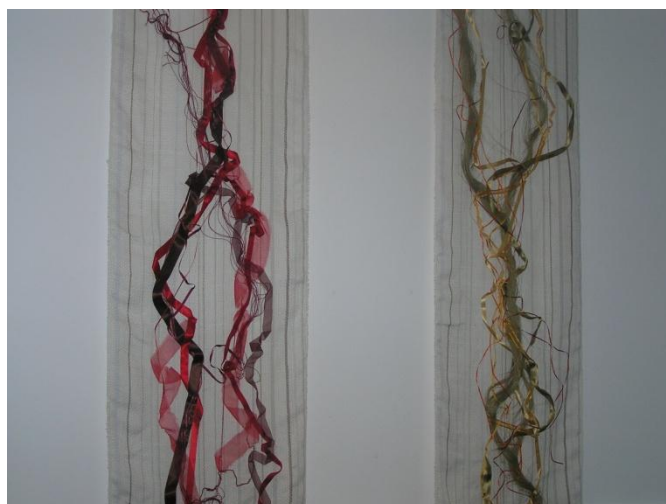
3.3.3 Training and support of pioneers

The VFX Coordinator sets up and runs the selection conferences for pioneers, which follow some aspects of the pattern of selection conferences for ordained ministry, but with significant differences. There are rigorous selection criteria for pioneers. At first, pioneering seemed to be attracting young white males, and there was some strenuous self-examination and explicit rebranding. For example, following the first selection conference from which 5 men were selected, 20 women were approached to give feedback on every aspect of the branding and application process. In the recent rounds of selection, two women have been appointed. One Strategic Leader, however, noted that pioneering might be a good way to engage men again, now that the proportion of presbyteral candidates who are women has tipped over 50%.

The main vehicle for pioneer training is the monthly meeting, and there are strong expectations for them to attend. The Coordinator visits each pioneer *in situ* regularly, about every two months, and these visits are timed to coincide with Local Management Group meetings, of which he is also a member. Pioneers have a local line manager, who may be the local superintendent or another local or district minister. Pioneers are also encouraged to have a "coach" or "mentor", although I am not sure how widely this has happened. The Coordinator may recommend or approve additional

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[7] Artwork from Sheffield "arts chapel"

training – for example, the pioneer in Inverness, who has no theological training, has recently identified a theology course he would like to take. Many of the pioneers are intentionally carving out time for reading scripture and other relevant books and articles.

Local Management Groups are a little patchy. There is none in Dartford; where the very supportive superintendent currently line-managing the pioneer will move on next year. The LMG could perhaps be more effective in Exeter. There is none in Cornwall, although it may be appropriate for the Trustees of the Tubestation (a charity in itself) to also be designated the pioneer's LMG. Local Management Groups in Sheffield, Stoke and Inverness are effective, as is the new LMG in Cambridge.

All the pioneers are deeply appreciative of the training days, which include time for theological input and sometimes a visiting speaker, as well as time for semi & informal discussion, and shared prayer. They unequivocally value the Coordinator's role and support, and the mutual support and learning of the training days.

Interview respondents also recognise the commitment, skills and qualities of the Coordinator. At the same time, questions are raised about the fact that within the Connexional team the reins of support and training are being held by one person, who, in the words of one may be perceived as having "his nose pressed a little too closely to the window." The model is seen as unsustainable, both financially and energy-wise, even as the number of projects increases to 13 and pioneers goes up to 14. From the New Year, the current model will need to change. The management of the scheme is described by one District Chair as "a bit fluffy".

The Coordinator is aware that he will not be able to maintain the present system. He is envisaging pioneers coming together in regional groups, and is beginning to use the pioneer in Dartford to share supervision.

The Coordinator is also building a network of all those in the Methodist church engaged in pioneering ministry, and plans for this are at an advanced stage.

One area that all pioneers refer to spontaneously is their growing understanding and appreciation of the Methodist and Wesleyan traditions. The issue of Methodist identity is hotly debated during training days, and pioneers are making the effort to reflect and learn more about it.

3.3.4 Monitoring & Evaluation

The Head of the Cluster for Projects, Research & Development, who oversees VFX, sees fulfilling the original proposal's requirements for Monitoring & Evaluation for VFX as one of his key responsibilities with regard to the scheme. This review is a key element of this requirement.

A number of respondents felt that it was too early to carry out the review, because it is widely accepted that forming new ecclesial communities among the unchurched is a long term enterprise, taking 10 years at least.

It appears clear to some respondents that it is too early to begin "counting the numbers" with regard to VFX projects, while there are inevitably people who are interested in the numbers. A member of the LMG in Inverness says: "The danger is that the church will consider that the project needs to be achieving a certain amount in a certain time, and that is shorter than what is required." Another District Chair notes: "We can't use traditional measures of success. Statistics are not

relevant to pioneer stuff. And potentially the mainstream church could say, 'What's the point of this?'" The Chair of the Project Management Group notes that "we need a really strong sense of monitoring" and another member of the PMG adds, "the problem is, we don't have an agreed way of measuring social outcomes. This sits uncomfortably with a Connexional Team where the entire culture shift is towards measurable targets."

The General Secretary notes the danger of an early review: "The church could be short-sighted and say 'nothing much is happening and therefore VFX hasn't worked'."

3.4 Implications for Ministry

3.4.1 Ministry

Many of the issues and questions raised about the VFX scheme are about ministry.

- Is it a way of doing *lay* leadership and ministry in the church, and if so, what are the implications?

- What are the overlaps with the diaconate and presbyterate? How does the emergence of pioneering influence how deacons and presbyters view themselves?

- Is pioneering a way of renewing ordained ministry, and if so, how and when should it begin to be integrated into traditional training for ministry?

- Is pioneering a new or third strand of official ministry?

- "Have we created a pseudo-ministry with no formation and no theological underpinning? Are we creating a third order of ministry by accident?"

To address some of these questions, first of all, let's look at what the 8 pioneers – two of whom are ordained, one of whom is a probationer minister, and five of whom are lay – are saying themselves.

3.4.2 The language of "pioneer" and "fresh expressions"

It may be helpful to acknowledge at the start that respondents seem to accept that the word "pioneer" as used in VFX is not the same as the Anglican concept, in which all pioneers are ordained. There is not the space, nor does it seem helpful, to explore in this review the differences between VFX and the Anglican pioneers.

Similarly, pioneers also make a distinction between what they do and what are commonly referred to as "fresh expressions", a term that appears to cover a multitude of initiatives defined as "church for the unchurched established by the inherited church."

Already this suggests that the language of "pioneer" and "FX" may no longer be adequate to describe what VFX is attempting to do.

Whether or not they have a call to ordination – and the lay pioneers are very clear that they do not – they do not see themselves operating in circuit ministry. This is very deeply to do with place and context, and their understanding of church. I was part of one conversation between a District Chair, the pioneer, and his supervisor. The District Chair illustrated his support for the VFX scheme by saying that he had offered the pioneer a desk in the district office, which the pioneer had refused. This was not a problem in itself, but the pioneer, who found another office in the city centre in the

middle of the context he was serving, described to me later his visceral discomfort at the idea of being based in church premises.

Although the pioneers straddle the world of their unchurched context and the world of the church, the weight is very firmly on the foot in the unchurched locality. If they feel ambivalent about one place or the other, it is always the church place that they feel ambivalent about. They are not interested in renewing Methodism. "We are not a heart transplant for Methodism", says one pioneer, who prefers to use a metaphor of birth, nurture, growth and even letting go.

3.4.3 A third strand of ministry?

Some pioneers wonder whether they could be a "missional order"; some are strongly influenced by celtic or Franciscan models of ministry: peregrinating monks or itinerant friars. Probably to speak of a new monasticism is inaccurate, since this implies a stable "monastery". The Cornwall pioneers speak about the Cornish celtic traditions; the Stoke pioneer calls himself an "urban friar", and, because he doesn't like the language of "pioneer" is experimenting with new language for the ministry.   One or two wonder about reviving the "worker priest"[8] model in which the minister is supported by an ordinary, paid job in the community.

One implication of the "itinerant friar" model of ministry is the question of how long pioneers will stay in their projects. The Connexion may be committed to funding and supporting the projects for 10 years each, but are the pioneers committed to staying that long; if not, how will the work be continued? A member of the PMG notes that the pioneers are by nature entrepreneurial in character and approach – and wonders whether all of them are likely to sustain long term commitment to their projects or whether some will want to move onto new start-ups. One respondent notes that second stage leadership will therefore become a key issue, and some pioneers are already aware of this, and of the need to ensure that new Christian communities are not over-dependent on a personality-led leadership.

To some degree, the group of pioneers are themselves being formed as a community, held together by the Coordinator and the monthly training days – and informal networking amongst them in between times. The Coordinator himself uses the language of "new monasticism", and refers to the community life of the pioneers when asked if and what is unique or at least distinctive about the work and role of pioneers. The original project proposal suggested that the pioneers might want to evolve a "Rule of Life".

However, there are respondents who are anxious at the thought that a third strand of ministry might emerge from the VFX scheme. One theological educator notes that "the theological work to investigate whether the Methodist church is being called to re-examine its orders of ministry has not been done."

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[8] The worker priest movement was founded in France by Fr Jacques Loew during the 1940s. Priests wore secular clothes and worked in factories. Attempts were made by the Vatican to suppress the experiment during the 50s, but the worker priest movement is credited with being an inspiration leading to Vatican II, with its emphasis on making the Roman Catholic church relevant to the modern world.

3.4.4 Leadership & sacrament

Some pioneers see themselves as lay leaders of communities – and for them this is raising the question of presidency at and reception of the sacraments. Some respondents, including some Strategic Leaders and District Chairs, are actively asking whether lay people should be authorised to preside at communion not only, as is presently the case, when there is a dearth of ordained ministers, but also in situations of "mission". One superintendent reflected that he has no problem with the idea that unbaptised and/or unconfirmed could receive the bread and wine. This he says is a reflection of a trend in the church over the last 2-3 years towards emphasising discipleship over membership.

The Cornwall and Exeter pioneers, for example, are comfortable leading and building a community but happy to have an ordained minister celebrate communion. Ironically, although Tubestation is based in a Methodist church, tensions with the local superintendent and circuit have meant that it is a Baptist minister, licensed to preach in the circuit, who comes in to celebrate Eucharist and baptise – 20 new Christians so far.

3.4.5 Relationship between pioneering and Ordained Ministries in Inherited church

Many respondents believe that a primary outcome and original aim of the VFX scheme was to feed back into the training and practice of the presbyterate. All presbyters should be trained and have a pioneering element to their ministry, is a common theme.

The Warden for the Diaconal Order notes the cross over or similarity between what pioneers are doing and what deacons are doing and repeats from the literature the purpose of the diaconate: *'a mission-focussed, pioneering religious community committed to enabling outreach, evangelism and service in God's world.'*

According to some respondents, the resources and attention being given to the pioneers is making ordinary presbyteral and diaconal ministry "look bad". There's a "tacit antagonism" of some ordinary ministers towards the scheme: "There's a gap between what people felt called to do and what they find themselves doing." "If lay people and deacons are employed to do the interesting things, some presbyters are feeling they've been left with the day-to-day stuff." "Ordinary circuit ministers would like the freedom and funding to work in this way, but they are weighed down with church meetings, funerals and maintaining their buildings." "In some cases, they thought that what pioneers are doing is what they were ordained for. They too would like to build Kingdom and discipleship among the unchurched."

Some respondents go so far as to speak of the "jealousy" of the inherited church towards the pioneers. Arbuckle devotes several paragraphs to the reality and effects of envy, anxiety and resentment, when a religious institution or community is facing decline, towards creative individuals, groups and initiatives. Envy can be destructive, can lead to attacks on innovators, and can be "the most effective barrier to change within contemporary cultures" (Arbuckle, 1993 pp. 138-139).

There are also difficulties with the idea that all circuit ministers would work in the same way as the pioneers if they could. The experience of the selection panels is that there are not in fact a large number of people coming forward with the necessary skills and balanced personalities required for pioneering as it is being carried out in the VFX scheme. At one selection conference, only three were accepted out of 12 applicants. Furthermore, this suggestion may not be based on an accurate understanding of what VFX pioneers actually do.

As we noted earlier, the Coordinator has accepted that there will probably not be any more ordained pioneers in the scheme – although some question why this need be the case and insist that the system can be made to work to include presbyters among VFX pioneers. One of the ordained pioneers says: "there's no specific reason, it's just that the system is unwieldy." The Cottenham pioneer, who navigated a number of systemic obstacles to do with requirements for probationer ministers during his first year, suggests one could conclude that it is "too difficult" for probationers to become pioneers.

3.5 Methodist Identity of Project and pioneer

3.5.1 To be or not to be church?

What expectations are there about the formation of Methodist-shaped ecclesial communities among respondents and among pioneers?

There is currently a wide range of views and language being used among pioneers about the idea of church. For most of them, they no longer equate ways of meeting as a Jesus-centred community with Sundays – and indeed would explicitly question whether Sunday is the best day to meet. In Dartford, there are cell groups meeting on weekday evenings, and Messy Church on Sunday; there the pioneer speaks of "organising cell-church in a pattern that echoes the class meetings of John Wesley". In Inverness, the pioneer describes Sunday evening meetings of his small group in his home for reflection and a meal as "church" – for him church is also the wider group of people that he has gathered for a range of activities in the neighbourhood. The artist-pioneer in Sheffield speaks about "church" as the space or presence he creates through his activities. For all of the pioneers, to use the word church might seem to box off some small, explicitly Christian aspect of what they are doing – rather than acknowledging the incarnational and much more ephemeral nature of a lot of their work in their localities.

It is fair to say that in most pioneer projects, some form of explicit Christian group worship is emerging: however, this begs the question of how all their work is named and acknowledged; and the question of what they envisage for the future. Some pioneers can predict that communities of 100 or more could emerge within 10 years; these communities might have a "Methodist DNA" but are unlikely to look like traditional Methodist communities. In other situations the work is more experimental – it is hard to say what might emerge. The pioneers are generally more interested in spreading Kingdom values and an encounter with Jesus, experienced through some form of community, than they are in building "churches".

The Cornwall pioneers say: "We are trying to break down the walls between denominations – to this generation, these things are irrelevant; it's all about Jesus, the relationship with Jesus, and access to scripture." They would also refer to the legacies in Cornwall of the movement of tin-mining and community building in the spread of Methodism in the region, as well as the influence of the Celtic saints and hermits. Contemporary notions of social and eco-justice and environmental awareness also make their way into the mix.

The pioneers recognise that the danger of free churches is their dependency on individuals and personalities. One pioneer asks: "Is this a Methodist thing? What kind of Christian community are we trying to create? Methodism is about connectedness, in what sense are we connected? I think it would be quite sad if there wasn't something quite Methodist about this." At the same time, another pioneer notes: "We are being allowed by the structure to play loose with the structure." The Cottenham pioneer says: "it's a circuit project and I'm trying to keep a Methodist ethos."

One pioneer asks: "How will VFX projects be authentically indigenous, effectively missional in given contexts, and at the same time remain 'Methodist' as currently the CPD defines Methodism?" A District Chair says: "New churches would look like sustainable groups, serving the needs of God and local people, with worship and praise. It wouldn't be a requirement to be Methodist." One of the pioneers' line managers says: "Evangelism does end up with a church or kingdom community, with worship, fellowship, witness and service, but quite different from church as we know it. Although it does imply a proper understanding of what it means to be a Christian." A Strategic Leader asks: "Will VFX bubble up and break away?"

The current chair of the PMG says: "Success at the end of 10 years will involve a high proportion of the projects being 'authentic expressions of mission', and the bloodstream of the church will be positively affected. I hope none of them look like traditional churches; rather, they would be prophetic signs of what the church is becoming. They wouldn't have what people now would call a Methodist identity."

Another pioneer says: "It could go one of three ways: the branch could snap off, VFX could turn out to be a dead end, or it may grow out and then back in again. Unless the church is prepared to give VFX away and give it freedom to grow, it will never feed back.

3.5.2 Methodist identity of pioneers

While pioneers are ambivalent about the degree to which the communities they build will have a Methodist identity, they all strongly identify themselves with Methodism. The Cornwall pioneers say: We are thankful for the opportunity, and feel proud to be part of the Methodist church. In Exeter the pioneer says: "I'm explicitly Christian and explicitly Methodist." He quotes the Four Alls: *1. All people need to be saved. 2. All people can be saved. 3. All people can know they are saved. 4. All people can be saved to the uttermost.*

Another pioneer says: "I feel excited about helping the Methodist church get back to its roots and be exciting." The Stoke pioneer says: "I sit more easily within the Methodist tradition. I'm a Methodist emergent."

3.6 Integration into the wider church and Connexion

3.6.1 How VFX fits into the Methodist church

It is widely accepted that VFX operates in localities beyond the margins or edges of the institutional church.

One image that recurs for me is that the pioneer has one foot in the context and constituency in which he is ministering, and another in the institutional church. But the weight is on the foot that stands in the context, and the span or stretch between the one foot and the other is quite uncomfortable. Those who inhabit the context of the pioneer project would have virtually no perception or view of the Methodist church institution. And my guess is that many of those whose primary location is the institutional church, for whom the weight is on that foot, or whose two feet are firmly planted there, would have almost as much difficulty understanding the world in which the pioneers are living. One District Chair says: "The pioneer is so many steps towards the edge that we in the traditional church struggle to understand." The Exeter pioneer says: "supposing a Methodist minister got a job as a pioneer and had to come here to the Cavern club, and then had to become

comfortable in this environment and then present themselves as explicitly Christian – it couldn't work."

Another image that I have found helpful is that of puppies on leads. By referring to the pioneers and their projects as puppies I do not intend to infer that these are infants rather than mature adults, but rather to honour the sense of newness, experimentation and sometimes playfulness with which the pioneers are interacting with their localities. Pioneers themselves use the language of "infancy", "adolescence" and "stroppy teenager" to refer to their work. To see the work of the pioneers as being in infancy is also to recognise its vulnerability; and there are those who would want to "protect" the pioneers. As I have said earlier, there is a distinction between protection, and protectiveness. Protecting the space in which the pioneer projects can grow may be a healthy and appropriate thing to do, while being over-protective of the projects and the pioneers may be counter-productive.

To see the pioneers and their projects as being on a lead or a string is helpful as they are in many ways or cases locating themselves at a significant distance, and as I am suggesting earlier, beyond eyesight of the system that is funding and supporting them. The leads or strings that connect them are held almost exclusively by the Coordinator; the nature of the lead or string is the pioneer's self-identity as a Methodist, as having been "sent" by the Methodist connexion, as being accountable and responsible to Methodism, and being tasked with setting up ecclesial communities that at least bear a Methodist "DNA".

3.6.2 The relationship with the local church

An important issue is how the pioneer relates to his local circuit and district, what expectations there are, and whether there are tensions. All pioneers are well-supported by their District Chairs. Two pioneer projects are in fact district projects (Stoke and Sheffield); and Cornwall may become a district project. There have been tensions with local circuits in two projects, and in both the District Chair acted decisively to mend relationships either by suggesting mediation – which was very effective in healing relationships; or change the supervision arrangements for the pioneer. In the other 5 there are visibly warm relationships between the pioneer, their superintendents, line managers and/or District Chairs. Several of the pioneers preach or speak regularly in their local circuits.

3.6.3 The relationship with the Connexional Team

Various parts of the wider Methodist system were represented amongst the interviewees for the review of VFX: the Cluster for Discipleship & Ministry; the four Strategic Leaders including the General Secretary; and the District Chairs.

Two main issues arise here: firstly, how VFX, and the learning from VFX feeds back into training for ministry and the wider church, and secondly how VFX is integrated into the organisational structures of the Methodist church. One Strategic Leader notes: "I want to see it healthily integrated, not left in a 'precious box', not to assume that traditional ministry can be influenced in some way."

The major structural issue appears to be the positioning of VFX within the Cluster for Projects, Research and Development which "develops and implements new ideas, and provides research, and executive and policy support". VFX arose as an initiative of the evangelism and church planting part of the pre-2008 reorganisation of the Connexional Team. However, training and support of

ministries, Fresh Expressions and Evangelism now fall under the responsibility of the Cluster for Discipleship and Ministries.

The Heads of the two Clusters have agreed that ultimately VFX needs to be integrated into the Discipleship and Ministries Cluster, and the question is not whether but when.

A theological educator who was until recently on the PMG, notes that "I suspect that the skills and dispositions of pioneers are relevant for presbyters and deacons. At its heart training for any ministry needs to involve decent contextual theology and skills of relationship building in community.' On the issue of how the project impacts upon the training for other forms of ministry (including circuit ministry) The Head of Discipleship and Ministries expresses his ongoing desire for VFX to connect with the mainstream work of selecting and training ministers. This work needs to further connect with the Ministries Committee who are charged with thinking prophetically into the future about the needs of the church in relation to its ministries.

At the same time, the Head of Discipleship & Ministries recognises that the cluster can of course be helpful to VFX, particularly in relation to reflective practice.

While the Secretary to the Faith and Order Committee, who makes the effort to maintain informal connections with the pioneers, is confident that VFX is developing in a healthy way and that the pioneers are "staying within boundaries", he notes that "because VFX is properly geared to the development of an ecclesial community, we need to make sure that community remains within the boundaries of Methodist polity and practice."

The Evangelism in Culture Officer from the D & M cluster, sits on the VFX Project Management Group; soon there will also be a representative of the Ministries Group. Some respondents believe it would also be helpful if VFX were represented on the Ministries Group.

3.7 The overall value of VFX to the church

Overwhelmingly, respondents to this review process believe that VFX is a Good Thing, although as we have seen this does not mean that they are uncritical or unwilling to raise the thorny questions that emerge, even at this early stage.

One Strategic Leader says: "We must address questions of engaging with people in a Christian spiritual journey that current church structures are not doing." A District Chair writes in the online survey: "The cumulative effect of having a VFX pioneer within the district goes far beyond the particular project. It stimulates new ways of thinking and work, and raises questions that begin to shape and change priorities."

At the same time, another Strategic Leader describes it as a Rolls Royce scheme and says: "There is a concern if it is so protected that it doesn't feed back into the ecclesiology and ministry frameworks." An unintended consequence and key risk of the scheme would be if the pioneers became a community in their own right.

"The key question is: How will VFX influence The Fruitful Field, the training and learning of ordained and lay leaders, so that they can be better at what they do? We need to train people to be bold. Methodism was built on boldness and outrageous challenges."

The General Secretary says: "Success would be if VFX helps to pull everyone towards the boundaries." This interesting comment illustrates a tension that emerges from the review between whether there is an expectation that pioneers will feed their experience, energy and fresh ways of working into the heart of the Methodist system or whether interested members of the inherited church will have their attention drawn to and beyond the boundaries, and will want to engage with the pioneers on their turf. If VFX is pulled towards the centre, its radical and prophetic potential could be diluted.

One lay member of a LMG says: "The Christian church of all denominations needs to get out of the business of maintaining church buildings and the pastoral care of people that go to them." And another respondent says: "as long as the message of VFX gets beyond the projects to the wider church it has been worth it, because it's just what we need to break out of the lack of confidence, structures and buildings. It gives us the message that God has not abandoned us but wants us to find another way of engaging."

Another Strategic Leader says: "If pioneering is successful, we will see it as the starter fuel under the bonfire that we don't need any more in its present form." "The point about new wineskins is that a wineskin, in order to hold the fizziness of the new wine, needs to be flexible. The mainstream church needs to be resilient, graceful and loving towards the newness in the church."

Chapter 4: Conclusions & Recommendations

4.0 Summary of conclusions against the original objectives

In this chapter I would like to go back to the original proposal for VFX and summarise progress towards the outcomes and other key aspects of the scheme. Then I will summarise some tentative recommendations for the future of VFX.

4.1 Objectives of the VFX scheme

The overall objective of the scheme was to: *"design a connexional scheme that will encourage new forms of church to emerge with young adults with no Christian heritage as they receive the Gospel and grow in discipleship. It will be a partnership between Connexional team, districts and circuits."*

The scheme envisaged selecting pioneers who *"are mostly young and have the ability to live in both church and non-church culture. They don't start with worship or church, they start by entering into a culture, meeting people, making friends and beginning to understand the spiritual longings of people in that culture. By adopting this incarnational approach, they begin to build community and meet people's spiritual needs in a way which encourages a Christian community to evolve organically. This community may not look like a traditional Methodist church and it may be a considerable time before worship services begin. The group will start small and often meet mid-week on secular premises. It will have a large fringe of people who share some of the values of the Christian community or who wish to partner with it in serving the wider community. This is a slow way of beginning church, but it has the possibility of building a genuinely missional Christian community within a non-church culture, and of forging links with more traditional churches and of planting/birthing further communities."*

On the basis of my research, it can safely be said that the way that VFX has unfolded is firmly in line with this vision.

My perception is that a real value of the VFX scheme is that the pioneers are all genuinely inserted or inserting themselves into the "space" or localities occupied by Generations X & Y. It is a space far removed from the context of the inherited church.

All the pioneers are firmly rooted in and have the ability to see the world, and the world of meaning, from the viewpoint of the locality in which they minister.

All of them have begun to gather small groups for some form of Christian worship, and a larger network of people with some elements of shared identity. Some of these wider networks are affinity groups based on shared interests , e.g. surfing in Cornwall, music in Exeter and/or they are based on shared identification with a locality (Stoke, Dartford, Inverness). The French religious educationalist, Pierre Babin, wrote in 1991 (Babin, 1991) that "the search for affinity communities... is one of the most pertinent signs of moral growth in the electronic age."

These groups share the classic hallmarks of communities of practice. Communities of practice were first identified as a common organisational entity by Etienne Wenger (Wenger, 1998, 2000). They are horizontal affinity groups that meet for purposes of mutual support and learning. They are loosely structured, and members opt into (and out of) membership. They require a coordinator, and have various levels of engagement, like the layers of onion, which one author has described as: Leading, Learning, Lurking and Linking[9]. Many CoP depend on electronic means of communication as well as face to face meeting.

While as we have seen, there are many questions emerging about the nature and identity of the ecclesial communities being formed, it may be helpful to find some secular language around the shape of these groups.

4.2 Four key elements of the scheme:

*4.2.1 Identify **twenty people** (presbyter, deacons or lay) who have the necessary gifts ... Identify 20 locations where such fresh expressions have a strong likelihood of growing ... Recruit teams of volunteers to begin a Christian community... Support the projects for an extended period (full support for 5 years, partial support for a further five years).*

This is in train, and being addressed by the current review. As we have seen, with regard to the 7 established projects, in 6 of them pioneers were matched with localities in which they were already active, although in some cases the VFX scheme allowed them to further focus their missionary activities. Five further pioneers and projects have been identified and will have commenced by January 2012.

The selection process for pioneers can be said to have been extremely effective, and the review raises no concerns about their suitability for their role/s.

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[9] http://internettime.pbworks.com/w/page/20095756/communities%20of%20practice

*4.2.2 Ensure a **strong network of training, support and theological reflection** for the practitioners. This will not only increase their chance of success, it will also help the distillation and communication of good practice to the wider church.*

The network of training and support for the pioneers has been established, through the monthly training days, supervision by the Coordinator, establishment of and supervision by local line managers and Local Management Groups.

Questions are raised by this review about the rigour of the theological reflection being offered, and also whether and how the good practice in evangelism is being effectively communicated to the wider church.

*4.2.3 **Risk failure by attempting the difficult task**, but put everything in place that is possible to ensure success. Not all of the 20 projects will grow to strong congregations of young adults, but all of them will provide vital learning.*

It is important to note that the original proposal envisaged a degree of "holy risk", and the scheme has stayed true to this intention. Crucially, the scheme needs to be accompanied by effective learning processes to maximise the benefits from the scheme. The proposal acknowledges that the experiment, or "difficult task" must be given the necessary resources in order to have the fairest chance of success.

*4.2.4. The projects will be set up on a **rolling programme**, per year for four years. Project leaders will also mentor a small number of other projects in their areas and where appropriate teach on the Mission Shaped Ministry course (and/or other similar courses) to pass on their learning. These projects may also be ideal settings for placements for ministers in training.*

The evidence suggests that while the rolling programme of projects is under way and on schedule, the other elements mentioned in this paragraph are not being implemented. Some of this is due to a structural separation between VFX and the Cluster for Discipleship and Ministries, under whose umbrella the training and placements for ministry take place.

This review raises questions about whether these strategies are the most appropriate and helpful ways for pioneers to share their learning.

4.3 Expected Outcomes

4.3.1 20 viable congregations of young adults (1-2000 members after 10 years) plus support given to up to 60 more district initiatives (further 2000+ young adults).

It is possible that these sorts of numbers -- an average of 100 per project -- may be achieved, although it is too soon to know what sorts of forms or 'congregations' may emerge. In my view, the success of the scheme will not ultimately be judged by the numbers.

4.3.2   *A group of leaders experienced at working with young adults.*

This is being achieved.

4.3.3. 200 placement opportunities for ministerial students.

It is difficult to see at the moment how this might be achieved and whether it is the most appropriate way of linking ministerial students with pioneering.

4.3.4 Cohort of experienced mentors.

In general, the pioneers' line managers are operating as coaches and mentors, and no doubt gaining valuable experience in how to mentor leaders of the "emerging church". There is little evidence thus far that pioneers have mentors in addition to their line managers.

4.3.5 Invaluable input into the ongoing work to initiate pioneer ministry in the Methodist church, including a group of experienced practitioners.

This is being achieved in line with realistic expectations.

4.3.6 A Methodist group of practitioners sharing with others in the ongoing task of theological reflection on fresh expressions of church.

Pioneers are linked with other pioneers through the Breakout Conference held in Sep 11, and a range of other conferences. The coordinator is currently compiling a list of other Methodist pioneers, and a network or community of practice is being established.

4.4 The Project Leader

The project will need a Connexional project co-ordinator, who will over-see the selection and training of the pioneers, and ensure that an appropriate framework for support is in place. This will include a flexible mixture of mentoring, mission accompaniment, peer network support, connection to a think tank to facilitate the thinking through of theological issues. S/he will provide training and development for mentors and mission companions.

S/he will negotiate with Districts and Circuits about the location of the projects. S/he will be responsible for co-ordinating an annual conference for the pioneers, ensuring they have access to pastoral support, oversee an appraisal process, and trouble shoot.

S/he may be the mentor for a number of the pioneers.

S/he will be an advocate for the project, ensuring that the rich theological lessons and experience of the project are channelled to the wider church.

As we have seen, there is wide satisfaction expressed with the performance of the Coordinator. Questions are raised about the fact that the Coordinator is currently managing the support and

training of pioneers single-handed, and judgements need to be made about whether this is sustainable and/or desirable. The current level of his involvement and activity is not sustainable.

With 14 pioneers, and 13 projects, spread across the country to support, and with a burgeoning wider pioneer network and potentially greater demands for training and learning among the pioneers, it would seem wise to me to share supervision with another experienced supervisor and a team to plan the training days and network learning processes.

4.5 The pioneers

Open to presbyters, deacons and lay....

The research has suggested that although the original intention was to include presbyters, deacons and lay, no deacons have been appointed as pioneers, and it has not proved practical, for reasons that appear to be systemic but are not entirely clear, for presbyters to be appointed, additional to the two presbyters and one probationer minister already established as pioneers.

4.6 Support

It is envisaged that training will be tailored to individual need. ...

Training proposals will be tailored to the circumstances of each pioneer, giving due attention to: Personal Formation, Christian formation, Analysis of ecclesiology and missiology of the reshaping church in a fluid postmodern context, Contextual learning and supervised practice to develop skills of reflective practice. Academic formation, Specialist training in inculturation and cross cultural mission. Emphasis put on collaborative ministry, and developing teams.

This appears not to be widely happening. Several of the pioneers are either already trained for ministry or have advanced degrees in theology; attempts are being put in place for the pioneer in Inverness to study theology.

4.7 Peer Network:

It is envisaged that the pioneers will meet together regularly for mutual encouragement, support and training. They will become a learning network. They may wish to evolve a Rule of Life to which they commit, to build a sense of being in a covenant relationship with each other and God.

Most of the training and support is taking place through the monthly training days, which function reasonably effectively as a learning network. Although there is the intention to form a "community", anxieties about forming a third strand or order of ministry – which could be implied by the reference to a "rule of life" are expressed by some respondents during the review. Again, the support and learning network being established among the VFX pioneers, together with the wider network of up to 100 pioneers being set up by the coordinator, has all the hallmarks of a community of practice but this does not necessarily mean it needs to be constituted as an order of ministry.

4.8 Evaluation

Considerable support for the project and the pioneers leading the project are outlined above. In addition there would be a management committee for each project, largely drawn from the district but with input from the connexional project leader or their representative. This will set objectives for the year ahead and measure last year's work against previously agreed objectives.

Most of the pioneers have effective Line Management Groups, although whether they are setting and measuring objectives, and whether this would be a helpful way to work, is a debatable point.

In year 3 there will be a more substantial review before phase 2 funding is approved.

This requirement is being fulfilled through the present review.

4.9 Summary Conclusions and Recommendations

As mentioned earlier, the advantage of reviewing the project early is that (a) it is possible to affirm what is going well and what key stakeholders are doing effectively (b) make adjustments in time to affect delivery of outcomes within the projected timespan of the scheme. While some respondents felt it was too early to review the project – pioneers have been in place for between one and less than two years – I would argue that highly experimental complex social change projects benefit from early and ongoing review.

In this case, the primary aim of such a review needs to be tracking "what's happening now", emerging questions and challenges, and identifying learning to improve project delivery rather than measurement against projected outcomes. This is the process that this review aims to assist.

I repeat that (a) I am speaking as an outsider to the Methodist church and the Connexional system; I can only make tentative recommendations and (b) the criteria for discernment of the best way ahead for VFX needs to be the medium to long term benefit of the whole church. These are the key achievements I note in the scheme at an early stage:

4.9.1 The scheme is widely valued.

All respondents began their comments by noting their enthusiasm for the VFX scheme. While all respondents had, and were invited to make, critical comments, the comments were not negative and were made out of deep respect for the scheme and the work that the pioneers and the Coordinator are attempting.

4.9.2 The pioneers are working effectively.

The pioneers have been effectively selected. They understand and are applying themselves to the task as outlined in the original proposal. They are all beginning to form ecclesial groups and wider networks of relationships in their localities.

4.9.3 Inculturation

The pioneers have been extremely effective at inserting themselves within their localities, and communicating within the worlds of meaning of the locality.

4.9.4 Support systems are effective.

Pioneers are generally effectively supported by their Local Management Groups, line management arrangements, and the Coordinator. All pioneers are explicitly valued by their District Chairs. pioneers are supportive of and learning from one another.

> ❖ *I believe the Methodist church can be justly proud of its VFX Scheme.*
> ❖ *The pioneers are functioning effectively in their localities, beyond the edge of the church's normal reach; highly creative initiatives are being developed and implemented; there are the seeds of ecclesial communities being formed; healthy questions are being raised about emerging church and ministry.*
> ❖ *While there is no claim that pioneers are unique in their practice, the added value of the VFX scheme lies in the opportunity it offers for shared reflection—including theological reflection – among pioneers and on the pioneering process.*
> ❖ *The liminal place, the edge or boundary where creative reflection and learning is happening, the "zone of possibilities" is the community of practice being formed amongst the pioneers.*
> ❖ *VFX is also operating at the edge or threshold of the institutional Methodist church, the Connexion. My hunch is that has only thrived so far because it is where it is. It will only continue to thrive as long as the value of its experimental nature continues to be acknowledged.*

4.10 My recommendations for the future are as follows:

My overall recommendation for the Venture FX scheme is that it should be seen and understood as a long term experiment in evangelism in unchurched contexts. The scheme should therefore follow, in all respects, the logic of an experiment in complex social innovation.

- The number of pioneers and projects should be capped at the present total of 13 projects and 14 pioneers, and the emphasis in the project should move to the quality of learning – learning to enhance the delivery of the programme, among pioneers, in the broader pioneer network, or community of practice, and in the way that learning is shared with the wider church.

- Funding should be confirmed for the remainder of Phase I and for Phase II. Emphasis would be placed in the future on the quality of monitoring, evaluation and accountability, but these processes would be geared towards learning rather than decisions about future funding.

- A transparent summary of the funding and budget for the programme should be published.

- The scheme should remain within Research & Development. It is not helpful to see its main purpose as in the short to medium term as feeding into training for ministry. In the spirit of a genuine experiment, questions about ministry and ecclesiology should be left open for the

time being on the grounds that it is too early to come to any conclusions about these thorny theological issues.

- Stronger relationships should be developed between the scheme and the Cluster for Discipleship and Ministries.

Here I expand on these recommendations:

A. The number of pioneers should remain at the present level, funding for the remainder of the life span of the project should be confirmed and emphasis should be placed for the remainder of the scheme on enhancing the quality of the learning.

If, as appears to be the case, there are pressures on resources for the remaining span of the programme and the money will not stretch to 20 pioneers in projects lasting 10 years each, there appear to be a number of alternatives:

a) Reduce or stop funding for the second five years.
b) Save money by having part-time pioneers.
c) Reduce funding now across all projects.
d) Reduce the number of pioneers and projects.

My recommendation is that the church follows the last option for this reason: It is emerges most clearly from the review that the VFX scheme is most usefully understood as an experiment, and that its main value is seen as "learning". This is often rather vaguely phrased and has a number of implications, which I will explore here.

It is also generally accepted that VFX is not a pilot for large numbers of centrally funded pioneers, and therefore the scheme will not continue in its present form beyond the scope of the present experiment.

"Learning" requires resources. Furthermore, the training and support system for the eight pioneers has been a heavy responsibility for one individual, the Coordinator, and cannot be sustained for 14, never mind 20. I would argue that resources should be invested in (a) maximising the learning potential from 13 projects and (b) developing the wider pioneer network.

My view is that the resources required to select pioneers and 7 more projects, place and support them does not justify the additional learning from those projects. The maximum advantage to be gained is to halt the number of projects at 13 and invest resources – time, money and personnel – to increase the quality and number of learning processes (to and from the wider church and among the pioneers). This, I would argue is not failure, it is a wise decision in the light of learning so far and realistic deployment of available resources.

I would also argue that the scheme will benefit from the security of having its funding confirmed for the remainder of Phase I and Phase II. Learning from ongoing monitoring and evaluation processes will therefore be oriented to learning from the programme and improvement of its delivery – rather than feeding into further decision-making about funding.

It would be short sighted even, and perhaps particularly, in the light of the current wider economic context, to withdraw funding at this time. Withdrawing funding would also have major negative consequences on a wide range of individuals and communities in the pioneers' localities.

B. A clear summary account should be published of the finances of the programme.

How the financial resources have been expended, whether they were accurately budgeted, the costs of running the scheme and the projected costs are not at all clear. The lack of clarity and information is leading to speculation and projections amongst many respondents. I recommend a transparent and understandable accounting report and budget for the scheme which would make clear:

a) That the calendar years for the scheme will stretch from 2008 until 2022 – i.e. 14 years, in order to allow the projects funded to begin in 2012 to run their 10 year course.
b) The costs for each project and the costs of employing a lay vs clerical pioneer.
c) The costs for the coordinator and training support of each pioneer.

I don't know what the Methodist church's normal expectations are around publishing budgets and accounting information, but I would suggest that even if it is deemed impossible or unwise to release detailed information about the financing of VFX, that some sort of summary should be produced that could be made widely available and give an accurate picture.

C. The VFX scheme should remain within the Cluster for Projects, Research and Development until the next review of the scheme. Closer relationships between VFX and the Cluster for Discipleship and Ministries should be developed.

While it is important that learning from the pioneer scheme should feed into training for ministries by some means and at some point, this is not a priority. If significant energy is devoted by pioneers into feeding into training programmes for ordained and lay ministers this will drain them of time and energy and put the innovative potential of the scheme at risk.

At the same time, I can see no advantage to an early moving of the VFX project into the Cluster for Discipleship and Ministries, with its culture of measurable targets and outcomes. There are many problems for a complex social change project with a target-driven approach (as hospitals and police forces, amongst other types of agency have discovered): one is that it assumes that that planners can imagine and predict outcomes and targets several years hence. It nearly always assumes a linear model of change, instead of recognising that in complex social change projects the shortest distance between two points is not likely to be a straight line. And it can rarely envisage the highest possibilities and creative outcomes required to address the complex problems that projects like VFX aim to address.

From my external viewpoint and experience in organisational learning, I have found it frankly odd that all training and learning for lay and ordained ministries is presumed to come under one umbrella, in this case the Cluster for Discipleship and Ministries. The exclusion of VFX from consultation and inclusion in the recommendations for *The Fruitful Field* research and report, and from the deliberations of the Working Group on Fresh Expressions and Ecclesiology, seems unhelpful and short-sighted. A more common organisational learning and training practice would have

specialist teams acting as a resource for learning processes and interventions wherever they take place across an organisational system.

At the same time, clearly the interests of the VFX and the church as a whole would be served by closer relationships between VFX and the Cluster for D&M. Currently two staff from the Discipleship and Ministries Cluster sit on the Project Management Group (the Fresh Expressions Connexional Missioner and the Evangelism and Contemporary Culture Officer) , and will they be joined by someone from the Ministries Group. Perhaps someone from VFX could be invited to join the Ministries group.

I also recommend that the VFX Coordinator accepts the invitation for assistance with theological reflection, and that further opportunities be found to bring people involved in training for ministry into training for pioneers. For example, a couple of pioneers asked: "If boundaries needed to be drawn, where would they be drawn and who would draw them?" and one suggestion was that more conversations needed to take place with Faith & Order.

D. **Develop the sophistication of the strategic thinking behind "learning" as it is being applied to VFX.**

I recommend that learning within the community of practice of the pioneers should be enhanced, with appropriate support from the Cluster for Discipleship and Ministries. I would like to outline an integrated view of learning which would encompass:

a) Reflective learning processes **within** the VFX scheme which enhance and improve delivery of the programme itself. Integrating cycles of learning (or evaluation/review) into complex social change projects can also fulfil the demands of monitoring accountability and ensure the survival of otherwise vulnerable projects.
b) **Formal learning or training** to increase the pioneers' own levels of theological understanding about critical elements of pioneering, as outlined in the initial project proposal and including: Methodist traditions; marks of ecclesial communities; issues to do with ministry & sacrament.
c) The quality of **theological reflection and action learning.**
d) Learning **from** the pioneers' and coordinator's experience of implementing VFX – to influence, firstly, the Methodist church's understanding of pioneer practice and ministry, and, secondly, learning and practice of ordained ministry.
e) Meet requirements of monitoring and evaluation for the scheme.

This would require maximising the benefit of the monthly training days.

I did not learn or understand enough about what happens on the training and learning days but I think I can imagine how they might best be used, and perhaps the group can compare this with what they are doing and decide whether they need to make adjustments. It seems to me, the precious opportunity offered by the days should include:

a) A structured action or peer learning process, in which pioneers share challenges from their work and receive questions and challenges from the other pioneers. Structuring this process would maximise the benefit of reflecting on practice. Two or three pioneers could present a scenario at each training day. The Cluster for D&M could help with designing this process.

b) Some formal theological input. This should follow a "syllabus" drawn from (i) the areas outlined in the original project proposal (e.g. the process of evangelism and making new disciples; ecclesiology of the church in a fluid postmodern context; contextual theology and training in inculturation; collaborative ministry and developing teams (ii) areas chosen by the pioneers based on their experience.
c) A time of prayerful reflection, prayer and worship.
d) Some planning time, for example, to think strategically about how they are communicating with the wider church.
e) Furthermore, resources need to be invested in circulating the training days around the projects so that pioneers can gain greater insight into each other's work. If this were thought through creatively, training days could be combined with the idea of 'regional hubs' of a wider pioneer network.

For example, how about changing the meetings to two days every 6 weeks, circulating around the projects, focussing on the specific practical and theological learning and questions emerging from that project, inviting specific external input, with a VFX pioneers training day on the first day and a wider network day on the second day, with sessions opened to local lay and ordained ministers?

The coordinator and pioneers need to think strategically about how to communicate what they are learning.

Pioneers do accept their responsibility to share their energy and experience. The question is not a matter of whether, but how. VFX could think a little more strategically about how to present their work and reflections to the wider system, recognising that their priority is to do their work in their localities.

This means choosing which invitations to respond to, and also choosing platforms. It also means thinking through and preparing carefully for events, and thinking about how to present the good news stories emerging from the various projects. Pioneers themselves are aware that they did not give a universally good impression at Greenbelt this year, and the General Secretary says: "Perceptions about how and what they do are absolutely critical". It means thinking about how to make best use of the website so that anyone within the church with an interest in pioneering can use it to link into the scheme.

Pioneers know they should be starting to write jointly and this should be encouraged. At the same time, pioneers need to be encouraged to balance their time wisely.

E. **Questions about pioneer ministry and emerging ecclesiological questions should remain open for the time being.**

My recommendation is that developments in the church's understanding of ministry and the ecclesiological implications of how the church is developing within pioneers' localities should be very slow and light touch.

If there are implications for ministry, then these should be allowed to emerge over time, and need not be a cause for immediate concern or resolution. While pioneers may want and need to reflect individually and corporately on the nature of their ministry, the pioneer network should not be intentionally developed as a form of "new monasticism".

Similarly, there is a great deal of encouragement from respondents, including senior leaders, for wide and open exploration of ecclesial models with "Methodist DNA". These experiments should be allowed to develop unhindered, and all those interested in the pioneer experiment should be cautious about the way that they express their interest, because every kind of attention is an intervention which can have a range of consequences – not always immediately obvious. For example, I am strongly aware that by having visited each project and engaged in a range of conversations, I will have had a number of effects on the pioneers and their relationships, self understanding and delivery of projects in ways that I can barely be aware of. Everyone who interacts with pioneers needs to think carefully about what impact they are having on a fragile environment.

The emphasis, therefore, should be on increasing opportunities for development of the pioneers' own self-understanding of their Methodist identity – and all of them do self-identify as Methodist – and their understanding of Methodist traditions of church order, tradition, theology and worship.

F. **Emphasis in VFX should move from expanding the number of pioneers to developing the learning and the pioneer network.**

If the number of pioneers remains at 14, and the number of projects at 13, this opens up different possibilities for the way the work of the coordinator is structured.

a) Supervision of the pioneers will need to take place differently as the Coordinator cannot continue the present level of support and supervision. I have suggested earlier that someone else with suitable experience could share supervision of the pioneers, and/or a team could be involved in planning the training days and activities of the wider pioneer network.

b) If there were no further pioneers or projects selected, this would free up some of the resources and the coordinator's time.

c) These resources and time need to be invested in developing the quality of the pioneers' own learning and training, as suggested above, and in growing the wider pioneer network.

The wider pioneer network should be developed as a community of practice oriented to mutual support and learning around the VFX pioneers. Rather than pioneers feeding into training and learning for ordained and lay ministry, the insights being developed in the wider pioneer learning

community should be accessible through conferences, seminars, digital access, written papers, etc. to anyone involved in lay or ordained ministry who is interested in pioneering. The wider pioneer network needs to develop shape – become an active email list, be included in the website and attend conferences.

G. Monitoring and evaluation

In a complexity approach to complex social innovation projects, high level outcomes for the experiment are identified, and parameters or boundaries for activity are set – but freedom is allowed within the boundaries to maximise the potential for innovation.

The VFX scheme's high level outcome was set in the original proposal and remains to: "encourage new forms of church to emerge with young adults with no Christian heritage as they receive the Gospel and grow in discipleship." There are a number of mechanisms and processes already in place which set parameters for the VFX experiment:

- The outcomes set out in the original proposal.
- The commitment of the pioneers to a "Methodist identity" and to the Methodist tradition – reinforced by the quality and rigour of their own training and learning.
- The involvement of and oversight by the Project Management Group.
- The quality of the supervision.

The wider Methodist system – be that the Conference, the strategic leadership, the Connexional team and clusters, the Districts and circuits, would need to trust that these are adequate for "holding" the experiment – without controlling it too tightly, which would defeat its purpose.

Monitoring and evaluation should be further developed with a review of the individual projects in a year or 18 months, and a further review of the overall scheme in two to three years (2014-15), two to three years after that, and at the end of the scheme in 2022.

Alternatively, a light but more integrated form of evaluation could be devised to accompany the scheme. Traditionally, monitoring and evaluation are done through formal reports and evaluations. However, in complex social change projects, M&E is more usefully thought of as ongoing learning. Since it is difficult and inappropriate to map the terrain or the journey of such projects in detail in advance, it is best to monitor and evaluate through ongoing learning processes and reviews, continually identifying key questions and adjusting the scheme in the light of the learning.

- This review aims to offer an early opportunity to reflect and make adjustments to VFX; and to provide a baseline for future reviews.

- I recommend that a review of the individual projects takes place in a year – 18 months' time – say Spring 2013. This will allow an assessment of where projects have gotten to since this review, and where the new projects have gotten to in comparison with the earlier projects.

- I recommend that the VFX scheme is reviewed as a whole at the end of its first 5 years, i.e. in late 2014. That review would reflect intentionally on questions of ecclesiology and ministry, and the appropriate Connexional home for VFX.

Critical to this view and implementation of an innovative project are the resources invested in, and the quality of the learning processes which accompany it. How does it look if all the training days, reviews, evaluations, PMG meetings etc. are seen as elements in a coherent and intentional learning process that surrounds the VFX scheme?

4.11 Concluding comments

As I come to the end of the four month process of this review, two main areas for reflection strike me above all.

4.11.1 Pioneering as a type of space

The first is the issue of seeing pioneering in the Venture FX scheme as a kind of "space". This space exists, as we have seen, well beyond the edge of the Methodist church system, but linked to it via the Methodist identity of the pioneers themselves, the funding, the all-important relationships with local district and circuit, and the training and support processes.

Traditionally, the space understood to be occupied by the church is in a specially designed building on a Sunday – a space filled by specific types of furniture, activities, and people playing specific types of roles. Much of the way the space is filled is determined by the specific denomination – in this case Methodism. Many or most of the activities of the entire church system are configured to supporting and meeting the needs of this traditional definition of church space.

The pioneers, it seems to me, are consciously, intentionally and often playfully exploring, experimenting with, and redefining the kinds of space experienced as "church" in a most creative way. I suppose one could say that the type of space that they feel least comfortable with is a church building on a Sunday. The pioneers are carving out spaces for conversation and relationship that have the potential to develop in a Christian and Methodist way that are relevant to unchurched young people.

Pioneers often use the phrase "creating the space" for a conversation or dialogue. I heard and noticed space being defined as:

- An expanded liminal or threshold space at the edge or boundary of the church;
- Conversations on the street, sometimes spontaneous and sometimes sparked by a specific activity – e.g. the Sheffield pioneer painting an angel on the side of an abandoned building, or the "dig your heart out" gardens being created in Merkinch, Inverness.
- Meetings in private homes, cafes and pubs;
- Discussion groups, community meetings, social spaces, sporting activities, art exhibitions;
- Places for play and whimsical experimentation;
- Online spaces – blogs, websites, Twitter, etc;
- Spaces for prayer and scripture study.

Some of these spaces and conversations use explicit spiritual Christian language, but some do not.

In Hanley, Stoke on Trent the pioneer, an academic theologian, is using the language of "guest" and "host" to describe the spaces he inhabits – linked explicitly to Gospel stories such as the Emmaus story, where "the guest becomes host, and the host becomes guest".

The challenge identified by this review is how the Methodist church, locally and centrally, chooses to think about and respond to the space being created and occupied by the pioneers. And this leads to the second key reflection.

4.11.2 Inevitable tensions

One of the Strategic Leaders made reference to tradition "being the flint against which the spark of newness is struck" – although he could not remember the specific source for this idea. The closest I came in an internet search was to a quote from the priest and theologian, Ronald Knox:

> **When Easter comes, the Church delights to remind herself of that newness which is the risen Christ. On Holy Saturday morning, a new spark must be struck from the flint, to light a new set of candles and lamps; new holy water must be blessed, and a new font: fresh cloths are spread on the altars, and the tabernacle itself, on Easter morning, is full of freshly consecrated Hosts.**

> **We are beginning all over again, making all things new. And we have a right to do so, for in the order of grace there is perpetual novelty.**[10]

The point I think being made by the Strategic Leader is that people on the edge doing new things will inevitably cause a degree of conflict and tension. The church can choose to respond to the tension in a loving and constructive way or can turn it into a win-lose battle. Gerald Arbuckle outlines the many possible institutional responses to change – whether it be the decline of traditional communities or the refounding initiatives that spring up: restorationism, renewal, re-founding, fundamentalism, envy and paralysis among them. A range of these various reactions and responses may of course be going on simultaneously (Arbuckle, 1993) in various parts of the system.

This review has identified tensions both at local level, between pioneers and districts and circuits, and at the level of the Connexional Team, between the Cluster for Discipleship and Ministries and the cluster for Projects Research and Development. It appears that these tensions are inevitable if pioneering work is to be genuinely experimental and innovative; and it also appears that the tensions have been or are being constructively managed.

14.11.3 Final remarks

It has been a huge privilege for me to carry out the VFX scheme review, in particular to visit the 7 projects and engage in substantive conversations with all the pioneers – but also to meet and engage with committed Christians from across the Methodist connexion. The Methodist Church, it seems to me, has much to celebrate and be grateful for both in this experiment in evangelism and inculturation, and across the wider "inherited" church. I hope and trust that the "space" for pioneers and the larger pioneering network will continue to be nourished and to flourish, and that the whole Christian church can respond generously to the questions and insights the scheme is offering about how to be church in the modern world.

The Venture FX scheme has grown, and continues to grow organically.   Potentially, it could offer the Methodist church a genuinely Methodist way of growing church widely in unchurched localities (social and geographical contexts and networks). It is currently vulnerable to institutional pressures. It needs to be owned but not over-controlled by the whole church, which can be justly proud of this rather remarkable experiment.

Vicky Cosstick
ChangeAware
www.changeaware.eu

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[10] http://catholicphoenix.com/2011/04/24/the-risen-christ-ronald-knox/

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MC/08/83

This paper was the original document outlining the scheme which was presented to the Methodist Council in 2008 and was approved by the Methodist Conference later that year as part of the Team Focus report. Inevitably there have been modifications since the scheme began to be implemented, and the figures quoted in the budget are outdated, but the paper still offers a useful summary of the scheme's vision.

Connexional pioneering Ministries Scheme

1. Background

There has been an explosion of fresh expressions of Church within the Methodist Church and ecumenical partner churches. These have been remarkably successful at persuading people to return to church and retaining people who might otherwise have left church1. They have been less successful at reaching people with no Christian heritage. This latter group is heavily concentrated at the younger end of the population of Britain and is growing2. The group of those with Christian heritage or who are still on the fringes of the church is increasingly elderly and is shrinking.

1 Typically a fresh expression of church will double or triple in size in the first two to three years. An ecumenical research project to conduct detailed analysis on that growth is currently being explored.

2 There are many fresh expressions of church engaging with children and young families. It's the young adult age range which is proving hardest to reach.

3 Nexus in Manchester, Somewhere Else in Liverpool and Sanctuary in London are good examples.

To share the good news of Jesus Christ appropriately with people of no Christian heritage demands cross cultural mission skills of a high order. It is beyond the capabilities of many churches, but is a vital task in the mission of the church.

There are a small number of people and projects within the Methodist Church who are leading the way in doing mission with the unchurched3. They are mostly young and have the ability to live in both church and non-church culture. They don't start with worship or church, they start by entering into a culture, meeting people, making friends and beginning to understand the spiritual longings of people in that culture. By adopting this incarnational approach, they begin to build community and meet people's spiritual needs in a way which encourages a Christian community to evolve organically. This community may not look like a traditional Methodist Church and it may be a considerable time before worship services begin. The group will start small and often meet mid-week on secular premises. It will have a large fringe of people who share some of the values of the Christian community or who wish to partner with it in serving the wider community.

This is a slow way of beginning church, but it has the possibility of building a genuinely missional Christian community within a non-church culture, and of forging links with more traditional churches and of planting/birthing further communities. The Connexional pioneering Ministries Scheme intends to identify people with these skills and deploy them to exercise their ministries in this vital mission field.

2. The Proposal

There is no doubt that local churches and circuits will continue to begin fresh expressions of church in large numbers. The scheme proposed here is to complement this grass roots movement not to replace it. This proposal will add a strategic dimension to what is happening by setting out to design a connexional scheme that will encourage new forms of church to emerge with young adults with no Christian heritage as they receive the Gospel and grow in discipleship. It will be a partnership between Connexional team, districts and circuits.

The following are key elements of the scheme:

☐ Identify twenty people (presbyter, deacons or lay) who have the necessary gifts to relate to unchurched young adults and create fresh expressions of church with them

☐ Identify 20 locations where such fresh expressions have a strong likelihood of growing (chosen for a good mix of different settings – urban, suburban, rural, new communities, network etc). These locations would be 'owned' by either District or Circuit depending on the style of project and local circumstances. In each instance, ecumenical consultation and whenever possible collaboration will be part of the process.

☐ Recruit teams of volunteers to begin a Christian community.

☐ Support the projects for an extended period (full support for 5 years, partial support for a further five years). The less a project has in common with our 'normal' church experience, the longer it will take to grow to self-sufficiency. However, self-sufficiency is clearly the aim!

☐ Ensure a strong network of training, support and theological reflection for the practitioners. This will not only increase their chance of success, it will also help the distillation and communication of good practice to the wider church.

☐ Risk failure by attempting the difficult task, but put everything in place that is possible to ensure success. Not all of the 20 projects will grow to strong congregations of young adults, but all of them will provide vital learning.

☐ The projects will be set up on a rolling programme, ~5 per year for four years.[4]

☐ Project leaders will also mentor a small number of other projects in their areas and where appropriate teach on the Mission Shaped Ministry course (and/or other similar courses) to pass on their learning. These projects may also be ideal settings for placements for ministers in training.

4 The current proposal is to evaluate the success of the program after two years before releasing funding for further years.

3. Expected Outcomes

☐ 20 viable congregations of young adults (1-2000 members after 10 years) plus support given to up to 60 more district initiatives (a further 2000+ young adults)

☐ A group of leaders experienced at working with young adults.

☐ 200 placement opportunities for ministerial students.

☐ Cohort of experienced mentors.

☐ Invaluable input into the ongoing work to initiate pioneer ministry in the Methodist Church, including a group of experienced practitioners.

☐ A Methodist group of practitioners sharing with others in the ongoing task of theological reflection on fresh expressions of church.

4. The Project Leader

The project will need a Connexional project co-ordinator, who will over-see the selection and training of the pioneers, and ensure that an appropriate framework for support is in place. This will include a flexible mixture of mentoring, mission accompaniment, peer network support, connection to a think tank to facilitate the thinking through of theological issues. S/he will provide training and development for mentors and mission companions. S/he will negotiate with Districts and Circuits about the location of the projects. S/he will be responsible for co-ordinating an annual conference for the pioneers, ensuring they have access to pastoral support, oversee an appraisal process, and trouble shoot. S/he may be the mentor for a number of the pioneers. S/he will be an advocate for the project, ensuring that the rich theological lessons and experience of the project are channelled to the wider church.

5. The pioneers

☐ Open to presbyters, deacons and lay. This will inevitably lead to tensions about how each project can fully express the nature of church (particularly sacramental). On balance, it's the best way to work out how to develop pioneer ministries.

☐ The selection process will seek to identify patterns of behaviour (not necessarily in the specific area of beginning fresh expressions) which are focused around entrepreneurial skills. They will include: vision, motivation, the ability to inspire others, understanding of unchurched culture, healthy work/life balance, natural relationship builder, commitment to holistic church growth, responsive to community, utilising the gifts of others, flexibility, team builder, resilient, exercising faith (within the discipline of a 'rule of life'?). It's important to avoid people who 'do their own thing regardless' and identify people who will build churches that can survive without them. The selection process will assess behaviour rather than aspiration. There are a lot of people who aspire to this sort of ministry, but do not have the necessary skills, gifts and graces. They may exercise a very fruitful ministry in a more traditional church setting, but be incapable of doing entrepreneurial work of this kind.

☐ It may be helpful to adopt into the programme a small number of existing projects which have already shown effectiveness in this area (2-3max). It is likely that any projects selected will already have a funding package from Connexion and District, so this will bring significant expertise without adding significantly to the overall cost.

6. The Projects

Locations for the projects will be chosen in consultation with Districts, Circuits and ecumenical partners. There will be a mixture of different sorts of location (city centre, suburban, new housing, rural) and different ways of relating to unchurched young adults (geographic and network). It may be advantageous to cluster the projects in regions so that training and peer support is accomplished more easily.

7. Support

It is envisaged that training will be tailored to individual need. It will take into account the setting and needs where the pioneer will exercise ministry, his or her experience, particular gifts and emerging sense of Christian vocation, all set in the context of developing discipleship. This will mean a pattern of training, mentoring or apprenticeship 'on the job' rather than outside the mission context, in which the pioneer is to exercise ministry. It might be, however, that the project to which the pioneer is assigned is different from the context in which their original pioneering behaviours have been identified.

Training proposals will be tailored to the circumstances of each pioneer, giving due attention to:

- *Personal Formation*, developing personal and corporate spiritual disciplines to undergird a pioneer ministry, consonant with a changed authorised role and growth in learning.
- *Christian formation*, the understanding of the process of evangelism and the making of disciples, and how this process might develop and take on new expression in a different cultural setting.
- *Analysis of ecclesiology and missiology* of the reshaping church in a fluid postmodern context.
- *Contextual learning and supervised practice* to develop skills of reflective practice.
- *Academic formation*, according to the pioneer's personal circumstances, prior learning and experience and ongoing ministry.

- *Specialist training* in inculturation and cross cultural mission; the ability to understand and think in the terms of the culture in which they are pioneering and the ability to understand and think in terms of inherited church culture.
- Emphasis put on *collaborative ministry, and developing teams.*

The pioneer's training may consist of a flexible mixture of units. For training in foundational Christian tradition they may be able to follow modules from within the local Regional Training Partnership. For theology of the emerging church it may be desirable for all the pioneers to follow approved course modules for instance from Cliff College, for example the Postgraduate: Emerging Church module or from York St John's. Courses for pioneering Fresh Expressions run by other organisations will also be considered. The exact way this training emerges will partly depend on how individual RTPs develop, and the needs and individual circumstances of the pioneer.

Peer Network:
It is envisaged that the pioneers will meet together regularly for mutual encouragement, support and training. They will become a learning network. They may wish to evolve a Rule of Life to which they commit, to build a sense of being in a covenant relationship with each other and God.

8. Evaluation

Considerable support for the project and the pioneers leading the project are outlined above. In addition there would be a management committee for each project, largely drawn from the district but with input from the connexional project leader or their representative. This will set objectives for the year ahead and measure last year's work against previously agreed objectives.
In year 3 there will be a more substantial review before phase 2 funding is approved.
9. Timetable

If the project is approved by the Methodist Council, the first task will be to appoint a project leader. The development and grading of job description and person specification, advertising and interview should be complete by early autumn.
At the same time a project management group will be established.
Depending on the notice period required for the project leader, the first tranche of projects will be put in place as early as possible in 2009. Ideally this would happen in the 2008/9 connexional year, but it may be necessary to defer it into the 2009/10 connexional year.

10. Costs	2007-8
The costs of an individual project have been estimated as follows:	
General costs (individual presbyter/deacon)5	
Stipend	19240
Pension & NI	3250
Housing	10000
Council tax, water rates etc	2700
Car/travel (6000 miles per annum)	2400
Phone, mobile phone, internet	540
Misc expenses	300
Office costs	300
Training	945
Total	39675

Name	Capacity	
Andrew Wood	District Chair (Southampton); Chair of FWWG	Phone
Ann Varker	Circuit FX minister & Local management group, Exeter	Exeter visit
Bart Woodhouse	pioneer Dartford	Dartford Visit
Brian Barber	Local management group, Inverness	Inverness Visit
Chris Elliot	Strategic Leader, Secretary for External Relations	1-2-1 church House
Dave Male	Tutor in pioneer ministry, Ridley Hall & Wescott House, Editor: "pioneers 4 Life"	Cambridge visit
Dave Saunders	pioneer, Inverness	Inverness Visit
David King	Ex-chair, VFX Project management Group	1-2-1 church House
Doug Swanney	Head of Discipleship & Ministries Cluster	Phone
Graham Thompson	District Chair (East Anglia)	Phone
Henry Cavender	pioneer, Polzeath, Cornwall	Cornwall Visit
Ian Bell	Coordinator, VFX	1-2-1 church House
Jane Leach	Ex-member, VFX Project management Group; Principal of Wesley House, Cambridge	Cambridge visit
Joanne Cox	Evangelism in Contemporary Culture Officer; VFX Project management Group	Phone
John Ellis	Strategic Leader, Secretary for Team Operations	1-2-1 church House
John Hellyer	District Chair (South East)	Phone
Jon Curtis	pioneer, Exeter	Exeter visit
Kris Lannen	pioneer, Polzeath, Cornwall	Cornwall Visit
Lily Twist	District Chair (Scotland)	Phone
Mark Wakelin	Strategic leader internal relationships	1-2-1 church House
Martyn Atkins	Strategic leader, General Secretary	1-2-1 church

|		House
Matt Finch	Member of pioneer Assessment	Phone
Paul Winyard	Head of Projects, Research & Development Cluster	Phone
Peter Barber	District Chair, Stoke-on-Trent	Phone
Peter Hancock	Chair, Project Management Group	Phone
Peter Howson	Local management group; Superintendent Minister, Inverness	Inverness Visit
Peter Philips	Faith & Order network convenor; member of FWWG	Phone
Peter Pillinger	District Chair (Plymouth & Exeter)	Exeter visit
Rachel Jordan	VFX Project management Group; mission and evangelism adviser, Archbishop's Council	Phone
Rachel McCallum	Local management group; DDE, Sheffield	Sheffield Visit
Ric Stott	pioneer, Sheffield	Sheffield Visit
Richard Curnow	pioneer Line Manager, Trustee Tubestation, Cornwall	Cornwall Visit
Ron Willoughby	Part-time pioneer, Stoke	Stoke Visit
Simon Oliver	pioneer, Cottenham, Cambridge	Cambridge visit
Simon Sutcliffe	pioneer, Hanley, Stoke-on-Trent	Stoke Visit
Stephen Lindridge	VFX Project management Group; Connexional Missioner for Fresh Expressions	Phone
Steven Wild	District Chair (Cornwall)	Phone
Sue Culver	Warden, Methodist Diaconal Order	Phone
Tim Crome	Line Manager, Local management group; Superintendent Minister, Dartford	Dartford Visit
Vernon Marsh	District Chair (Sheffield)	Sheffield Visit

COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE

LEARNING AS A SOCIAL SYSTEM

by Etienne Wenger

Communities of Practice in Organizations

Communities of practice exist in any organization. Because membership is based on participation rather than on official status, these communities are not bound by organizational affiliations; they can span institutional structures and hierarchies. They can be found:

- *Within businesses:* Communities of practice arise as people address recurring sets of problems together. So claims processors within an office form communities of practice to deal with the constant flow of information they need to process. By participating in such a communal memory, they can do the job without having to remember everything themselves.

Stages of Development
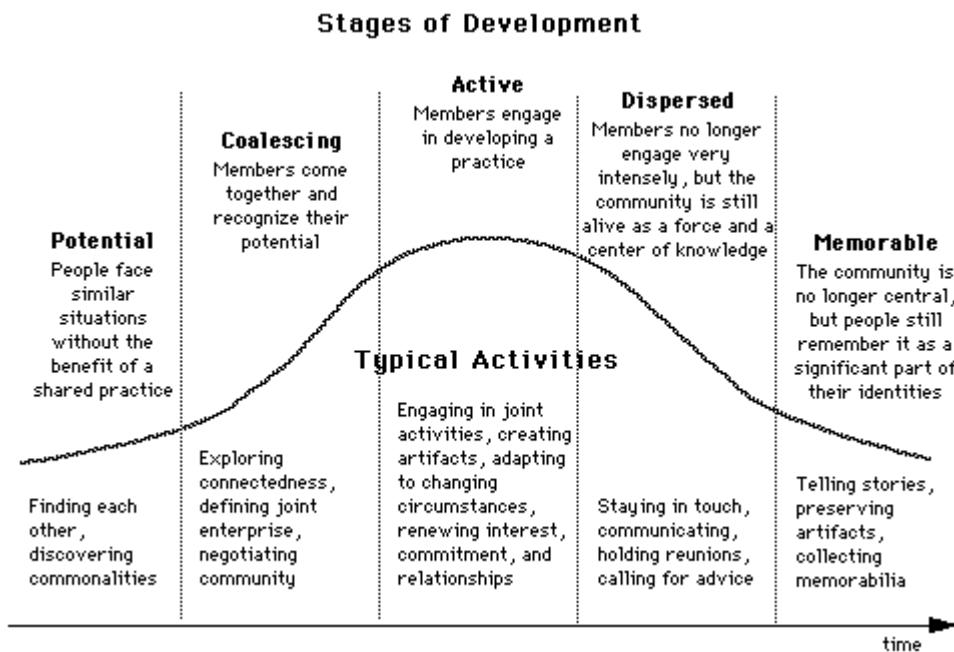
- *Across business units:* Important knowledge is often distributed in different business units. People who work in cross-functional teams thus form communities of practice to keep in touch with their peers in various parts of the company and maintain their expertise. When communities of practice cut across business units, they can develop strategic perspectives that transcend the fragmentation of product lines. For instance, a community of practice may propose a plan for equipment purchase that no one business unit could have come up with on its own.
- *Across company boundaries:* In some cases, communities of practice become useful by crossing organizational boundaries. For instance, in fast-moving industries, engineers who

work for suppliers and buyers may form a community of practice to keep up with constant technological changes.

Communities of practice are not a new kind of organizational unit; rather, they are a different *cut* on the organization's structure–one that emphasizes the learning that people have done together rather than the unit they report to, the project they are working on, or the people they know. Communities of practice differ from other kinds of groups found in organizations in the way they define their enterprise, exist over time, and set their boundaries:

Relationships to Official Organization

Relationship	Definition	Challenges typical of the relationship
Unrecognized	Invisible to the organization and sometimes even to members themselves	Lack of reflexivity, awareness of value and of limitation
Bootlegged	Only visible informally to a circle of people in the know	Getting resources, having an impact, keeping hidden
Legitimized	Officially sanctioned as a valuable entity	Scrutiny, over-management, new demands
Strategic	Widely recognized as central to the organization's success	Short-term pressures, blindness of success, smugness, elitism, exclusion
Transformative	Capable of redefining its environment and the direction of the organization	Relating to the rest of the organization, acceptance, managing boundaries

ChangeAware

43 Marius Road, London SW17 7QU

www.changeaware.eu

change.aware@btinternet.com

+ 44 (0) 7798 803 410

Venture FX Review: Autumn 2011

This review will include visits to all 7 established Venture FX projects and phone or F2F interviews with a wide range of stakeholders. At this point, 16 Oct, I have only had one project visit (Dartford) and meetings with all 4 Strategic Leaders, Ian Bell and Paul Winyard.

These are the questions I used as the basis for my conversations with Strategic Leaders and might be helpful for District Chairs and other key stakeholders.

1. What is your understanding of the genesis and objectives of the Venture FX scheme?
2. What is your perception of what is happening now with the scheme?
3. What do you see as the value of VFX to the church?
4. Do you see any unanticipated consequences to the scheme?
5. How do you see the scheme "fitting in" with Methodism in the UK as a whole?
6. What thoughts or questions is it raising for you about mission, ministry and ecclesiology in the Church?
7. How do you see the scheme developing in the future? What picture do you have of what "success" for Venture FX might look like? Or "failure"?

If you are a District Chair with a VFX project in your District, I am also interested in the following questions:

What do you see of the Venture FX project in your district?

How do you engage with the pioneer and others involved in the Project?

Many thanks, Vicky Cosstick

Potential questions for Venture FX pioneers

- What is the story of how you became a pioneer, how the project developed and was chosen, and how it has evolved until now?

- How have you been trained, inducted, managed and supported in your role?

- How well has the matching process between pioneer and project worked from your point of view?

- How do you see the objective/s of what you do? How precisely are you engaging with people and the objectives in your situation? What, however small, changes do you think are taking place – directly or indirectly as a result of your activities? What other factors are contributing to making change happen?

- What are the 'good news' stories that are emerging in your communities?

- How implicit or explicit are your assumptions about what makes the work effective?

- How would you express the theological underpinnings of your role and work, and the Venture FX scheme as a whole?

- How are you feeling now about your role and activities as a pioneer?

- Who else do you relate to in the course of your role? What part do others play in what you do?

- What is your perception of how the Venture FX scheme fits within the overall mission and system of the Methodist Church?

- In what ways does it support/is it supported by the mission of the Church as a whole?

- What do you see as the future implications of your work and the Venture FX scheme as a whole?

- Vicky Cosstick - 2-Oct-11

Appendix 5

Documents

Evaluation & Review of Venture FX projects	Draft 5 Oct 11
Venture FX Support Network	Draft 14 Oct 11
Venture FX Projects Criteria	IB, Sep 2009
Venture FX Selection Criteria for Pioneer Mission Leaders	29 March 2011
Evaluation Brief for interim review of Connectional Pioneering Ministries Scheme (VFX)	24 June 2011
Comprehensive Summary Report Connexional Year 2009-10	IB October 2010
Connexional Pioneering Ministries Scheme Paper	2008
The Fruitful Field	Ministries Committee of the Methodist Conference Autumn 2011
Comments on VFX Summary Report	Faith and Order Committee March 2011
Chapter 6: Towards a Mission-shaped Ecclesiology	Working Group on Fresh Expressions and Ecclesiology
Methodist Church District Chair Online Survey	Autumn 2011