



# Pilgrims in a barren land: pioneer ministry in rural Ireland

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*This article considers a pioneer ministry in rural and small-town west of Ireland, at a time of social change and financial crash. It considers what was expected, what actually happened, how the parent denomination responded, and what on reflection may feed into the wider discussion of new ways of spreading the Christian gospel. This article is a companion to the author's article 'Modern pilgrimage in the west of Ireland', published in this journal (Volume 2, Issue 1, pp. 115–126).*

PIONEER MINISTRY • EVANGELISM • IRELAND • PILGRIMAGE • COUNTY CLARE

## Introduction

Pioneer ministry is an attempt to serve local people, working in new or unexpected ways. It also seeks to serve the parent church, by pointing to new ways of engaging with the gospel.

It is a challenge to try to connect with people who are no longer sure what church is, whether it is relevant or true, who do not talk about God, but may have a deep experience of the spiritual, and will certainly bring issues that challenge church life. Discussion often starts with a focus on aspects of daily life that already engage them, and through which they connect to the deep human desire for something beyond themselves.

More pragmatically, pioneer ministry has arisen in the churches because traditional means of attracting and maintaining a steady body of members are not working. Sunday services have to compete with other activities. People do not join 'clubs' any more. There is often indifference, and grave suspicion of the institutions.

For *how* it happens, the context is key, because every pioneer ministry is different. This is a personal reflection on one pioneer ministry, formally constituted in an ecumenical small-town and rural setting. It may seem initially only to offer locally relevant experience, but as the churches seek to move forward into unknown territory, it is hoped that reflections from different areas may be of help in building up a larger picture. In the meantime we can gain ideas from each other.

This pioneer ministry occurred in the western Ireland context of County Clare. It was set up in expectation of the continuing situation produced by the 'Celtic Tiger', the years of economic boom. In practice it took place during the financial crash of 2008 onwards. This means that the ministry had a considerably unexpected role. Some saw it as a failure because there was no obvious increase in the number of churchgoers, still less in financial independence; nevertheless, new work was set up which developed under other auspices.

Usually, pioneer ministry is based in a place with a growing population and little church 'plant', and with a core of people willing to explore new patterns of being church. This was not the case in Clare, where at first glance a youth work specialist appeared to be needed. There were no active ministerial colleagues other than those leading new evangelical churches, often while holding other jobs, who were focusing on their own congregations. Context

was significant, but so were the specific skills of the appointed minister; and these determined much of what happened and did not happen.

Pioneer ministry, because it is highly dependent on context, will have differing local forms. It is this writer's view that it has three key aspects. One is that it has to be pastoral to attract people. Another is that there has to be flexibility to look at new openings, and new ways of doing things that may come to nothing. Third, it is not necessarily about growing in numbers: in places populated by a mobile or migratory population, the work may focus on small numbers developing their faith and ministry, and then taking it with them to other places.

## The background

The ministry was based in Shannon town, where there was a church and a small Church of Ireland National (primary) school.<sup>1</sup> The town was built when, in 1962, the airport was developed to accommodate inter-continental flights, and when it developed a tax-free industrial zone which attracted international businesses and brought in skilled people, mainly from Britain, continental Europe and South Africa. Some found the quality of life good, and stayed in what was an unusually liberal town with a mobile population. Aeroflot planes breaking the American blockade on Cuba refuelled here, and the staff, in this intensely Catholic, conservative and anti-Soviet Union nation, stayed in what became known as 'the Russian village'. Many people from Ireland, or Irish returning from Britain, made their homes there, especially after the Troubles broke out in the north of Ireland in 1968.<sup>2</sup>

There were three drivers that led to this project of the Home Mission Department of the Methodist Church in Ireland, in a context where there had been joint work with the Presbyterian Church for many years, and in Shannon itself a formal relationship on ministry with the Church of Ireland.

The church in Shannon had been lively but had declined numerically, despite Shannon seeing a new influx of people, including many from African Protestant churches, during the 'Celtic Tiger' years. Many came from Zimbabwe and Nigeria, often because one family member was offered work in the industrial zone, especially in aeronautics.

The second driver was the belief that there had been a substantial increase in Nonconformists throughout the county. Nearly 700 people described

themselves as Methodists or Presbyterians in the 2006 census, as opposed to the usual 65 or so identified in earlier censuses.<sup>3</sup> This meant that various ways were considered of reaching them and seeing if their spiritual needs could be met. It was assumed that many would be African, while others would be of British or Northern Irish background, brought in by the increase of work. It was thought that the pioneer ministry might also serve disaffected Catholics as that church went through a major diminution of worshipers and social power as the historic abuse of children came to light.

The third driver related to County Clare's long coastline, some of it ideal for surfing; the Shannon basin in the east, and in the north the unusual karst limestone landscape of the Burren, which attracted scattered new residents, people with second homes and tourists, including walkers. There was a desire to develop understanding of 'Celtic' spirituality, and of what was described as the 'Celtic carpet', pilgrimage between ancient sites, with attendant exploration of the spirituality of the areas the walks would pass through. It was hoped that these would tie in with the interest in long-distance walking that is currently prevalent, and would explore the native spirituality ecumenically. This aspect of the work has been written up separately.<sup>4</sup>

This was not the first pioneer ministry in County Clare. Crossard were the ruins, now under official Protected status, of a late eighteenth-century Moravian church. This had had a resident minister but never touched any but the local Protestant gentry and farmers, except on major occasions, when a large Catholic audience would attend a sermon (possibly to get a free English lesson and impress their landlord, as much as for spiritual nourishment). The chapel was abandoned during the 1798 Rising, when local Protestants fled to the towns, and it was eventually sold to the Catholic parish for a school. The ruins were used in this project as a focus on prayer pilgrimages around the county, and an image for the need of both persistence and the right ways of ministry for a given time. They served as a reminder that 'speaking the language' of the people, and entering into contemporary culture are essential if new ministries are to engage with people who might not otherwise see the Christian message as relevant to their lives or open to their needs and inner yearnings. The Moravian experiment, and that of the Methodists, with whom they had an uneasy relationship, was not undertaken in Irish, and the records indicate no organic relationship with the majority culture. The same issues can be apparent today, though the parameters are different.

## What happened

In a place with no ecumenical tradition, it took three years to find out what churches there were and to gain their trust. This was achieved most effectively by developing personal relationships and having something to offer, starting with small, time-limited projects.

Large events, including the opening service for the ministry, funerals and services at the end of some prayer walks, led to full churches, but many attenders were Catholics committed elsewhere, or occasional attenders, and it proved that the core members were few and they increasingly became geographically dispersed. The cost of fuel for people who were supporting family in their home country as well as struggling in the recession meant that people limited their journeys; and they worked the shifts they could get, including on Sundays.

The Nonconformists of the census were never found. Some attended new Black-majority churches, but many are thought to have left the country. The collapse within Catholicism left pastoral openings, but these did not translate into regular engagement, 'turning' having major historical and cultural resonances, even in modern Ireland. Other means were sought of addressing people on an individual level, seeking to develop house church, and reviving the use of a 'summer church' building.

With regard to walks and events in ancient churches, a few African congregation members took part in some, but on the whole there were two distinct ministries, one that involved building church in new ways based on the traditional congregation, and another developing rural pioneer ministry.

Many things evolved: worship in people's homes; prayer groups; public events, often well attended; and talks, organised by the project or in conjunction with historical societies. African traditions were used, praying in the homes of bereaved members, and singing to different rhythms and languages. Church members were filmed for the State Broadcaster's RTÉ 1 *iWitness* programme, a daily, one-minute, late-night faith slot. They included a young businessman who had been robbed twice, a business student from South Africa, another student repeating her school exams, and her mother, a middle-class woman from Harare who was working as a kitchen cleaner in a care home. Financial constraints meant that these programmes were re-broadcast several times, giving unexpected coverage. In the case of the last-mentioned woman, who was studying to become a local preacher and was the only member of the

original group still living in Clare three years later, it gave her a prayer ministry in the home, to the surprise of, but with the accord of, the nuns in charge. A Sunday service was broadcast on the radio. A regular column appeared in the local paper, the *Clare Champion*, and access was ensured to this source and to local radio for advertising events. To a lesser extent the national religious papers also publicised events.

When the church building burnt down, it provided short-lived press coverage but, although the building had been in the wrong place, it proved a serious blow. Spontaneous events can only take place if premises can be used spontaneously. The Catholic community offered the use of their church. In the meantime, the local GAA<sup>5</sup> were approached: this proved unfeasible but it proved a healing move at a time leading to major political commemorations. The fire was also a reminder that most Methodist churches were a gift in previous times: there is no right to expect to own property, and losing it does not mean disaster.

It also showed that some people did not want the physical exposure of small numbers and a high level of commitment: for some, an occasional visit to the back row of a traditional church, and occasional associated social activities, proved more congenial.

Many forms of ministry were short-lived. Bible studies and other regular events proved difficult to establish with people working different shifts. Young people moved away. We did not wish to appear in competition with existing churches, yet as they had little experience of co-working, they sometimes grasped at an idea, perhaps in desperation, and copied it, which confused the publicity. A series of talks in one town was agreed with other churches: however, one of these set up a similar, concurrent, series. One historic church was opened up every month for three years, serving mainly the tourists who came: towards the end of the ministry a hitherto unknown group began to open it daily in summer as a historic site but not as a place of worship. Work with the county museum and the local libraries was more successful. The museum co-led a series of talks on war one November, allowing an avoidance of the controversial issue on whether to attempt to have a Remembrance service in a country with no tradition of, and some opposition to, such events.

Preaching and occasional services provided the opportunity for initiating conversation in new ways. Bible studies offered rare but lively opportunities in which the African experience of receiving Christianity, literacy and the opportunity to own a copy of the Scriptures at much the same time as

colonialism, was discussed, and took on a new perspective when compared to the Irish threnody on the birth of the State. The New Testament texts that featured people from the African continent proved engaging, and opened the doors to considering other marginally represented groups in Scripture, in particular women. Similarly, but with a different indigenous audience on the pilgrim walks, it proved possible to use stories about the lives of Irish saints as pointers to their scriptural parallels, often using the references to women and marginal groups of people.

The project failed, in the timespan, in getting churches to work in sympathy and unison with each other. The traditional midnight Christmas service was emulated, so three poorly attended ones occurred at the same time. Another joint occasional service, which had been advertised publicly, was cancelled on the day by the hosting church. This was disruptive, not only of the actual event and of the forging of productive relationships, but also served to make all the Protestant churches appear erratic, in consequence limiting attendance. In Holy Week the same church suggested, without intending injury, that we abandon our publicised and prepared Maundy Thursday service and attend their service instead, a move that would have effectually cut out all African, and indeed Irish-language, input. Where communications were impossible, patient endurance was required, knowing that the independent churches and the local voluntary and community sectors also had the problem of frequent duplication of ideas, which weakened their ability to serve well.

Irish society has benefited, especially in the west, from an influx of new people in the last 20 years. It is hoped that this pioneer ministry was one of a number of small ways by which new forms of worship, new expectations and new energies have been given expression. But within the timespan the project failed in the other direction, of assisting newcomers to enter into the uniqueness of the existing culture and its spiritual assets. Discussions started with individuals on 'belongingness' and what it means, and on traditional spirituality and where it relates to Christianity, but these explorations were in their infancy. Even on a purely cultural level there was limited assimilation: some newcomers had been in Ireland for a decade without having visited the county's major tourist sites or places of natural beauty. While they had come to work, and often worked sacrificially to support a family at home, the experience they had was of the Western lifestyle, with the deeper elements of the indigenous culture passing them by. Plans to overcome this began with the practical, such as courses on food foraging, identification and access conventions.



While personal friendships were made within the Methodist district and beyond, there were times when a lack of understanding of pioneer ministry, common vision and collegiality were not present. This may be a common experience for those engaged in pioneer ministry across denominations; and where it comes to the surface, it deflects people from engaging with the churches. Yet without the support – financial, theological and ecclesiological – these projects may easily go their own way and wither.

The parish unit was clearly the Catholic parish, but the scandals to hit that Church reflected on all denominations. This affected applications for project grants, including one to adapt premises for church use. On another level, there were moving ways in which pastoral issues were being addressed. Another success was not obviously 'church' at all but consisted of the Shannon congregation's input into creating a successful social history of the town.<sup>6</sup>

Whole areas of potential contact proved impossible in the time frame, without a team with the relevant contacts and knowledge. One cultural example is the huge popularity of traditional music. Many Catholic churches will use the Mass settings based on traditional music tunes by the composer Seán Ó Riada (1931–1971), and others who have composed religious music along these lines. However, there is little that connects with what happens in a secular, bar 'session' where people play together, a different person taking the lead for different tunes, and others with instruments joining in as and when they can. There are some specific events, such as the annual collection for overseas aid charity Trócaire (the 'Trad for Trócaire' week), but an exploration of what is actually happening when music is played together could lead to engagement in deep conversation relevant to the living out of faith, on the nature of listening and contributing in this communal setting.

When planning for Shannon, it was assumed that the model would be the Acts of the Apostles' description of the church at Jerusalem, constantly welcoming new members. Instead, the group found the key text to be the description of the church at Antioch: small but strong enough to serve others in times of famine; brave enough as a band of different races and social backgrounds, meeting, praying and sending members to serve elsewhere; called upon to be generous, not to grow in numbers:

Now in the church at Antioch there were prophets and teachers: Barnabas, Simeon who was called Niger, Lucius of Cyrene, Manaen a member of the court of Herod the ruler, and Saul. While they were worshiping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, 'Set apart for



me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.' Then after fasting and praying they laid their hands on them and sent them off. (Acts 13:1–3)<sup>7</sup>

With due notification, and under financial pressure, but just at the time when it felt that in several areas of the county the work was taking off, the finance for the post was terminated. It proved necessary to mothball some work, pass on other work, publish material for those who would seek to walk the pilgrim routes themselves, and provide a written record so the ministry could at some stage be revived.

## Reflections

It proved possible to visit afterwards, to see what had emerged, what had ceased, and what had continued to function. It proved that across the county much more than had been expected had taken on new life, but in the main this was no longer under church auspices. The Shannon congregation itself no longer met as such.

Some key elements emerged, many of them familiar.

Pioneer ministry is slow. It costs money. Planning for seven years might be reasonable: an incomer businessman said he had needed four years just to establish himself. There is a need to move courteously, to allow suspicion to be allayed and relationships established. This project was beginning to take off when it came to an end.

Patience is required by the funders. A pioneer ministry may produce a lot of small successes that appear to lead nowhere, but may in time produce a network of growing activities.

It is important not to compete, or undermine: if work is being done by another church group, the required role may be to wait. This is the case with other churches, also thinly spread, as well as with small business enterprises and other groups.

Teamwork is desirable wherever possible, but the partners may be in the community rather than in other churches or their leaders. Conversely, indifference or even disruption should not itself put an end to anything that seems likely to grow.

The demographics and the focus may change. In this post the recession led to the young leaving for work or study. A church may be called to flourish by deepening the faith of a few and letting go of members graciously rather than necessarily increasing its numbers.

It is important to be sure not to raise expectations then vanish; something that has plagued church experiments in Britain. It was established from the outset whether any new project could be passed on or completed, or left in abeyance without doing harm.

Pioneer ministry needs to be flexible, to allow at times only short-term success; to allow failure; and to change ways of working. There may be no prior engagement with new churches, and the old ecumenical structures were irrelevant. There may be perceptions to overcome and communications to negotiate. In this ministry, 'Black people come to services, but won't help to run things' was balanced by, 'White people come to worship but they won't get involved.'

A church needs to be a place where questions can be asked and views challenged, as much as a place of listening. The expectation that churchgoing is a passive activity is no longer working, but the alternative is less comfortable for long-standing members and perhaps especially for church leaders. Our society is not used to listening to another speak without a question session at the end; and group sessions normally include some courteous divergence of opinion as well as 'teaching'. We need to provide for those in church leadership, and we can use pioneer ministries as a means, to expect to be challenged, and to be ready to provide in a church context the opportunities for debate.

The prayer of the wider Church, a channel of two-way contact with it, and the checks and balances this could provide, needs to be present, together with active support. Although the project was written on regularly in the *Methodist Newsletter*, there was a sense that it was perceived as peripheral, with no input to offer for ministerial development. A key aspect of pioneer ministry is whether it flows back into and influences the life of the parent church. This project felt more like sowing on the wind and trusting to a harvest elsewhere, or in years to come.

Pioneer ministries are meant to function free of traditional congregational life and structures; nevertheless, they are accountable within these structures. There are areas of tension. There is the justifiable need to preserve both the corpus of faith and the particular charism of a denomination at a time when

the organisational structures that have upheld them are unlikely to survive but are being clung to tenaciously. There is also the fact that new members may have no experience of churchgoing, and no understanding of church as something with these boundaries; nor may they be aware that a financial commitment is expected. There needs to be a time of diaconal ministry, of giving without tangible return. Churches need to ask whether they can host pioneer ministries and the people they attract.

This leads on to how a pioneer ministry is regarded by the parent church. Recently, Huw Spanner indicated how hard some of the resistance is in England.<sup>8</sup> Pioneer ministry can seem frightening, and while some of this can be mitigated by in-house training, this only works if the attenders are present willingly. Traditional ways of working provide comfort to traditional ministers as well as attenders, and buffer the time of inevitable change. There is no guarantee that the denominational structures will continue to exist for another generation.

Confronting the possibility that ministry will not continue in its present form is not always addressed in theological colleges. Much of the preparation for pioneer ministry requires fitting the right person for the right place and time. Ideally this is someone with family backing or a small team, for without it the work is harder and depends heavily on what the individual comes with, and the extent to which they can make an impact on local society, and be accepted.

When comparing the Irish experience with colleagues in Britain, it transpired that in some ways Ireland is an easier society for the Protestant traditions to function. They are all small minorities in the Republic, so while decisions are taken in the North, the centre is not threatened by what happens in the South, and expectations outside of the cities can be limited. Traditional churches may continue in slow decline, some perhaps as sources of prayer and encouragement, and others as closed clubs, but there are also signs of new and flexible approaches to the expression of faith in community.

## Conclusion

Pioneer ministry may not seem relevant to all, and some churches are good at ministering in well-trodden ways. In other places, pioneer ministry is an alternative to death, or more positively a way of dying well and passing on the inheritance to others.

Whether it is either the consequence of new growth or slow death, the experience gained from pioneer ministries must be an essential tool in discerning the way forward at a time of change. The wisdom derived from John Wesley's vision is still relevant, along with the models of conflict, growth, loss and restoration found in the early Church, mirrored in contemporary experience.

In coming years there will be challenges to all churches to support, and learn from, ventures sown without tangible guarantee of return; widening the doors to welcome the stranger from different Christian traditions, as members, ministers and enquirers. There will be new challenges to faith, to be thought out theologically, and challenges to structures, as things once taken as permanent come to their end.

This ministry was a joyful privilege, walking in new ways with many people. At a time of great change in society, in church life and ministry, the healing of old religious wounds and the gracious welcome of the stranger give a hint that much is happening in Ireland. The churches may not be the leaders, but they can be part of that process.

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## Notes

1. The Church of Ireland was disestablished in 1869 but still had a social role as the expected 'lead' Protestant Church. Like all the main denominations, including the Methodists, it is organised on an all-Ireland basis, and like the other Protestant Churches, the greatest number of adherents are in Northern Ireland, where policies are formed.
2. See Carey 2014. For the Catholic parish, see also Ó Donnabháin 2014.
3. See CSO – *An Phríom-Oifig Staidrimh: Central Statistics Office*: <http://www.cso.ie/en/census/index.html> (accessed 29/03/16). The census is taken every five years, and by 2011 the numbers were much closer to the norm again. It is believed that in 2006 many recent incomers identified themselves by the church they had belonged to at home. Some may have joined the new Black-majority churches while others ceased attendance or saw the attachment as nominal. In 2006, 'Methodists' was among the five options that could be ticked, but by 2011 their place had been taken by 'Muslim'; a Methodist would have had to tick 'Other' and then write it in.

4. Power 2016; see also Power 2015.
5. The GAA, the Gaelic Athletic Association, has a huge social influence across Ireland as the leading voluntary provider of sports facilities and social activities. It long prevented members of the North's police forces from becoming members and was in consequence perceived as hostile to Protestantism.
6. Carey 2015.
7. NRSV translation.
8. Spanner 2016.

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