

pioneers just can't help it!

In *CL66* we probed Dave Mail about his work as tutor in pioneer ministry at Ridley Hall and Westcott House, Cambridge. We returned to quiz him further on how to recognise and develop pioneering new leaders.



Pioneer ministry'. What's your current definition?

Put simply, a pioneer minister is someone who opens new possibilities to create Christian community with and for people who are currently outside the church.

We need to be careful that people don't think a pioneer is one type of person. There is a variety of pioneer types. Also I think entrepreneurial skills are important for pioneers, but again people have wrong associations with the word entrepreneur. For example you don't have to be like Alan Sugar or Richard Branson. There are people who are already pioneers who would not give themselves that title. Recently I met Jean Vanier, founder of the I'Arche Community movement – a pioneer in every sense of the word, but nothing like a conventional CEO! In short, 'pioneer' is more about what people actually do than it is about definitions!

How do you see pioneer ministers making a contribution to today's church?

How about these two phrases: 'inspired chaos' and 'faithful improvisation'?

A pioneer needs the boldness and ability to create, under God, a kind of positive disorder. I guess it's all about a divine dissatisfaction with the status quo – and being willing to take risks with new vision and new development. A pioneer has to be a catalyst for change, who's ready to provoke all areas of the church to serious self-questioning.

I'd temper this focus on innovation with a need for what I call 'faithful improvisation'. Cricket fans will know all about the recent controversy over star player Kevin Pietersen's



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'switch hit' technique – to some a shocking departure from the spirit of the game, to others (including the MCC) a bold, natural development, creating new excitement and interest.

Pioneers are continually pushing the boundaries, as they have to in a society where churches have little or no contact with 75% of the population (Tearfund survey, 2007). But it's important to stress that you push the boundaries from the inside! Pioneers are always going to be opening up new possibilities, and that is not always easy for the institution.

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In your view, what are the essential character traits of a pioneer minister?
Much the same as for all ministers: the development of a robust spiritual life. But this is particularly important for those who live 'on the margins' and who represent Christ to people who have little experience of him. They need to love people and be with people, where they are. And a pioneer has to have the capacity to be fairly thick-skinned to be able to follow God's call in a new place. Finally, they need to be willing to take risks, push boundaries and ask some hard questions of themselves, others and of God.

Probably the most important element in all this is a firm underlying sense of call. This is absolutely essential – and it's true for both lay and ordained pioneers.

What if such traits don't 'mesh' with traditional ideas of ministry?
'Not meshing' can be an issue and pioneers often are going to cause problems for institutions, and the Church of England has a tendency to be 'risk averse'! But we do need pioneers in our present missionary situation.

To use a paradox, pioneers blow gales of 'creative destruction'! Or as someone,

slightly cheesily, put it – let's be Anglicans, not Anglican'ts!

Apart from praying earnestly, how should we identify and develop pioneers?

Pioneers are going to pioneer – they can't help it! So it's important to look for evidence of things already done, not just in church situations but in other areas of people's lives, as well as looking for certain character traits. For example, in comparison to others, pioneers have a lower perception of risk.

Quite simply, we should be prepared to allow people to take more risks. How often have young people given up on church having been denied the opportunity to try out an idea? We should foster an environment that is more 'risk friendly' than at present – that 'safe space' where it's OK to try out the new, the imaginative, the 'edgy'. That's one of the benefits of environments such as Soul Survivor and Greenbelt.

I was chatting recently to a venture capitalist who told me that of 100 initiatives, twenty will do fabulously well and make a lot of money, twenty will crash and burn and sixty will survive. My experience suggests these proportions are not unrelated to new fresh expressions of church. With this in mind, we need to accept that not all new initiatives will be roaring successes and some initiatives will not work out – it's inevitable. But we need to learn from both those that work and those that don't for the continual development and improvement of fresh expressions.

One thing, I'm certain, is absolutely crucial. The current wave of fresh expressions is helping to bring to faith a cohort of people who have minimal 'Christian baggage' in terms of their expectations of how the church operates. Hopefully many of them will be a large part of the next generation of leaders and they will be able to take us into new areas and directions. So it is essential that we encourage and support them as much as we can. We daren't risk losing them.

Are pioneers 'made' that way – or can the essential qualities be instilled?

Yes to both! Natural characteristics can be developed – it's all about creating the right

environment, one in which people can 'catch fire'. There are lots of pioneers in our churches already – sadly, many have been labelled 'pains in the neck', the people with the mad ideas. We have to use discernment to draw these people in, to harness their energy.

What encourages you most about pioneer-ministry developments?

Well, it's great to have a name. The fact that we now have Ordained Pioneer Ministers helps people to see that they have a role – a big step forward. For lay pioneers there's the development of the *Mission Shaped Ministry* course (from Fresh Expressions) and the developing work in training from the Church Army. Ultimately, we need to realise if this is really to grow and develop everywhere, it has to be a lay-led movement.

Any warnings or challenges?

Along with my welcome for recognition comes a warning against the danger of institutionalizing pioneers. We have to find way of ensuring that they remain dangerous!

My challenge to the church is about resources and funding. Without serious investment we will remaining playing around at the edges. Some hard questions need to be asked about investing in the future for a church with declining finances.



Go to the CL website to read an extract from Dave's new book *Church Unplugged* and for a link to Dave's blog: www.davemale.typepad.com/churchunplugged

