



# RECONCILIATION INITIATIVES

## RECONCILING MISSION 2020 AN INDEPENDENT EVALUATION



### EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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# THE RECONCILING MISSION 2020 COHORT

The 2020 cohort participated in the inaugural Reconciling Mission programme, which ran from June 2020 until December 2021. There were 16 participants:

- 8 women and 8 men, between the ages of 30 and 62;
- 4 groups sponsored by bishops from the dioceses of Coventry, Gloucester and Llandaff, and from the province of the Scottish Episcopal Church;
- Representing a broad range of theological, ecclesiological and missiological orientations, backgrounds and experiences;
- Working in diverse ministerial contexts across 3 different Anglican provinces, in England, Scotland and Wales.

For the majority of the participants, the Reconciling Mission programme has played a significant role in challenging, affirming and changing their approaches to ministry and community-engagement.

For 8 of the participants, Reconciling Mission proved fundamental in affirming their ministries, nurturing new strengths and revitalising their sense of vocation.

*“The process was enriching, a sanctuary, an oasis in the pandemic, which could be bogged down with producing risk assessments. In a time which felt so isolating in many aspects of ministry, it’s been a real joy to connect with people from so many different dioceses and contexts, and to share experience. This collegiality, and the reflective practice it has stimulated, has been invaluable.”*

## CONTEXT: THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

The inaugural Reconciling Mission programme coincided with the Covid-19 pandemic. This posed major challenges for delivering the process, as originally conceived. Most notably, it required the planned initial residential to be delivered in an abbreviated form online, via the Zoom

platform, without the relationship-building opportunities of an in-person event. This meant that the group did not meet face-to-face as a cohort until two thirds of the way through the 18-month programme, and, even then, without everyone able to be present.

*“The impact of Covid has been enormous. It prevented us physically gathering together until late in the process. It prevented mixing with people at a local level, to form the qualitative relationships which are the foundation of everything else. It prevented us gathering for worship for long stretches. The psychological and spiritual challenges of all this have been immense. It’s amazing that we were able to achieve anything at all! However, not only has the programme been very worthwhile despite all the challenges, in some ways it’s helped us navigate our way through the pandemic.”*

For participants, the pandemic limited their capacity and ability to cope with the considerable stresses of running churches ‘in crisis mode’. Several participants became ill with Covid, and at least one remains suffering with long-Covid. However, despite the complexity of the context, a surprising number of community-oriented projects and interventions were initiated or developed.

Whilst limiting action, the pandemic created imperatives and missional

opportunities, and elicited an openness from local stakeholders to new types of community-engagement. It also forced a critical period of existential interruption which prompted reflection on change, and on the future of parish ministry.

The timing resulted in Reconciling Mission providing critical psycho-social support to participants in a number of ways, helping them to navigate the profound challenges of the pandemic season.

## PROCESS METHOD & RESOURCES

Participants have drawn on and utilised the content offered by the Reconciling Mission programme in various ways. The material comprises theological content, a theoretical framework, a variety of case studies, and relevant books and reports which exemplify ways in which different churches have re-oriented themselves to their local communities. The content was offered via an advance reading list (with one key later addition), an initial online

conference (with supporting handouts), and subsequent webinars, which included recorded interviews with diverse practitioners.

The theoretical framework focuses on developing and broadening the conception of Christian mission. It fosters a movement beyond thinking about mission as responding to basic needs, such as providing a food bank, to effecting greater social and systemic change.

For participants, the ideas embedded in the framework fostered a deepening of practical and pastoral responses to local issues. The programme content

also enabled a more pragmatic and open acceptance of unexpected opportunities that presented themselves through the course of the pandemic.

*“The theoretical framework has given really helpful learning in moving us on as a parish: from meeting basic needs to seeing the wider scope of mission – challenging unjust structures, getting to the roots and heart of issues ... Being interrupted, making the most of the parish – theologically it has strengthened a sense of the importance of context and the noticing of interruptions or unexpected things – it has clued me in a lot more to that.”*

The action learning groups (ALGs) were appreciated for ‘the structured questioning that digs down into the heart of a problem’ and the creation of a ‘safe space’ for colleagues to ‘actively listen and offer non-judgemental support’. ALGs became key spaces for

fostering trust and friendship within the group. They generated support for leaders struggling to sustain themselves and their communities through the ups and downs of the pandemic restrictions and pressures.

*“It’s been an incredible experience to see how readily others have created a safe space in which all, who wanted to, were able to share situations or problems that they were going through. I found the structured approach really helpful in getting to the actual issue(s).*

*I also found the webinars informative, engaging and interesting. These were times in my diary that I looked forward to.”*

The group coaching process used in the ALGs affirmed those participants who were committed to community-engagement as central to Christian mission, but who felt that this was not always supported

by diocesan priorities. The coaching process emboldened participants to develop new relationships and ministries in collaboration with local partners.



It also encouraged them to recognise new outreach opportunities. Further, it supported individual vocational discernment and deeper theological reflection, enabling at

least half of the participants to explore fundamental questions about personal vocation and ministry.

*“I’ve always seen community-engagement as important; but that’s been re-enforced and perhaps deepened through the programme. It’s not an add-on to other aspects of mission, it is mission. The incarnation, after all, is God’s ‘community-engagement’.”*

*“Reconciling Mission has been a gift. It’s far deeper than other processes, and it enables you to understand where you are as a priest. It asks questions on a much deeper level. The questions were very scary but necessary. I felt safe in that environment. It has managed to be both pastoral and theological in a really deep way; and that is quite rare.”*

## PROCESS IMPACTS

The evaluation data indicate that the 2020 Reconciling Mission programme had a wide range of impacts on both the lives

and ministries of the participants, and on the communities they served. These are summarised under four headings.

### 1. COLLEGIALITY

The first impact was the benefit of inclusion within a diverse and pastorally-supportive peer group. This benefit was amplified for those who were part of the better-functioning diocesan groups, which met as groups outside the programme gatherings. However, it was true even for those participants who appeared to gain least from the programme (and who typically invested the least in it).

The range of the Reconciling Mission process enabled it to be effective across the

wide Anglican tradition represented by participants from three different Anglican provinces, with different emphases and histories, and with participants drawn from diverse theological traditions.

The larger group provided a breadth of experience which was drawn on in the ALG group coaching process. The programme also nurtured a common sense of mission and purpose across a diverse and inclusive group.

*“I’ve most appreciated its collegial nature. The camaraderie of being part of something bigger, diverse and inclusive. I know that this should be the reality of the Church; but we too often get parochial and factional.”*

## 2. MISSIONAL THINKING & VOCATIONAL DISCERNMENT

The second impact is the way the programme has (re-)connected participants with fundamental questions about mission, ministry and personal vocation. For some, this was challenging, liberating and affirming. Such deep engagement with aspects of identity and personal calling has, at times, entailed a questioning and discernment about personal ministry within the broader institution of the church.

Tensions around the relationship between individual vocation, the functioning of the parish and wider diocesan structures point to a concern raised by participants about where they and their participation in Reconciling Mission fitted into diocesan-articulated strategies for mission. It would take intentional work and planning on the part of senior diocesan staff and participants to discern this. However, in most cases, such work was largely missing.

*“Through the programme, I’ve become much more comfortable that there’s a breadth to mission, a breadth of understanding that the church has yet to learn. Let go and let God. I love that sentiment – but we don’t usually do it when it comes to mission and evangelism.”*

*“Reconciling Mission is like guerrilla tactics. The church institution fights in trenches; but this is guerrilla warfare and infiltration. It’s a guerrilla mission – to create, utilise and discern missional opportunities in spaces that wouldn’t normally seem open to growing fruit – a bit like guerrilla gardening.”*

## 3. PRIORITISING LISTENING

The third impact arises from the elevation of a missional (re-)orientation premised on outward-engagement and collaboration, especially with those outside the church.

The Reconciling Mission programme promotes a community-building model primarily built on listening.

Listening to the concerns, experiences, challenges, needs and assets of whomever participants and parishioners might find themselves in conversation with. It is a pragmatic orientation, and receptive to whatever might be offered. It primes programme participants to be attentive to what crosses their paths, and to where God, through the Holy Spirit, is already at work within a community.

The programme's model of mission prioritises conversation, along with the sharing of ideas and assets, to foster

relationship-building and deeper understanding within three distinct groups:

- a community of peers,
- members of local congregations, and
- wider local people and organisations in the community.

Whilst ministry for the gathered worshipping congregation will always remain important, this approach to mission is seen 'not primarily as a means to try to draw people into the structures and agenda of the church, but to recognise the Kingdom of God appearing outside as well as within the church'.

*“Big outreach ministries are all well and good, but I’m less interested in projects. For me, Reconciling Mission is about deepening the quality of our life together, and listening – this is what the church is for – its community service. How does the church serve the community? How can that carry on? It’s about focus. If the church is focussed on the community, then it’s reconnecting with its roots.”*

#### **4. PROJECTS, PROGRAMMES & COMMUNITY COLLABORATIONS**

The fourth impact is evident in the tangible projects, programmes, community networks and collaborations that have emerged or deepened during the programme. These are broad in focus and at different stages of germination. Some were initiated prior to the pandemic; the origins of others correlate directly with involvement in

Reconciling Mission. Some emerged from the opportunities presented by the pandemic, including new community roles and connections. Most have drawn on the encouragement and validation of the Reconciling Mission process in their development and deepening.

*“Reconciling Mission is current, and our training has come at a brilliant time to say ‘Yes, we have tools for this; and, yes, we can enable that.’”*

Projects linked to the Reconciling Mission programme fall into three types:

#### Projects drawing on the assets of a church building or grounds:

- Liturgical adaptations to encourage new people to experience gathered church
- Spatial rearrangements inside buildings to allow for better community use, including removing pews, and re-orienting internal spaces
- Encouraging wider groups of people to use church assets through the establishment of community garden spaces, nature trails in churchyards and developing eco-church projects
- Establishing a community shop within a church building, selling locally-sourced produce.

#### Projects involving partnership with others:

- Intentionally supporting activities in other community spaces, including parishioners volunteering to cater for regular coffee mornings and pub nights serving local people
- Nurturing town-wide and further education chaplaincies, ecumenically
- Campaigning work with Citizens Cymru Wales
- Working with local volunteer networks to provide food, including for children during school holidays
- Developing relationships with schools, including pastoral listening services both for children and their parents
- Establishing pastoral listening services for people facing mental health challenges, in collaboration with local counselling networks and GP services
- Setting up a bereavement group with local partners, with the church moving from host to guest.

#### Projects adapted from existing work:

- Re-structuring projects, to ensure that they embed listening and sharing aspects; and thinking about how to develop projects to effect greater systemic change
- Setting up a charity for an ecumenically-managed shop to provide affordable second-hand clothing and to fund a Christians Against Poverty debt-counsellor.

These projects range in their audience and scale. Some reflect the impact of networking with local organisations; some involve high levels of congregational activity and collaboration; others draw directly on the assets of church infrastructure; while some build on serendipitous one-on-one conversations with diverse community members and organisations. All point to the breadth of possibility nurtured by a shift in thinking, prioritisation and praxis engendered by the Reconciling Mission programme.