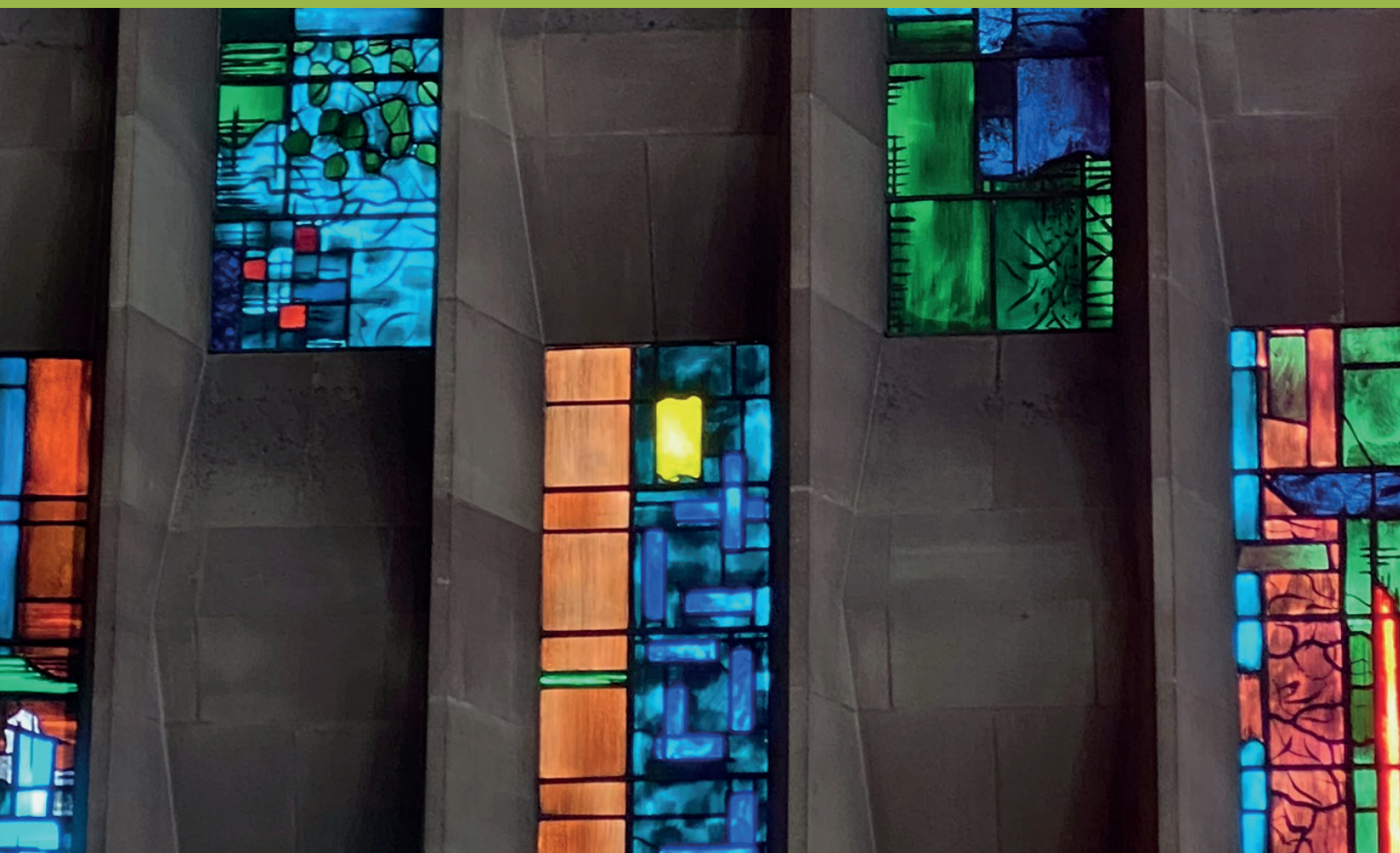




RECONCILIATION INITIATIVES

RECONCILING MISSION 2021 AN INDEPENDENT EVALUATION



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

DR JOANNA SADGROVE

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THE RECONCILING MISSION 2021 COHORT

The 2021 cohort participated in the second Reconciling Mission programme which ran from June 2021 until December 2022. There were 14 participants:

- *7 women and 7 men between the ages of 47 and 65, 12 clergy and 2 lay people;*
- *4 groups sponsored by bishops from the dioceses of Ely, Hereford, Lichfield and St Asaph (the latter with only 2 participants, after 2 dropped out at an early stage);*
- *Representing a broad range of theological, ecclesiological and missiological orientations, backgrounds and experiences.*

This programme is set in a period when churches and communities are challenged by the political, social and economic climate; and are under increasing pressure to find ways to address acute needs which statutory services can no longer resource. Within this context, the Reconciling Mission process (and emerging network) amongst Anglican clergy and laity has fostered a safe space for vulnerability and provided encouragement, peer-to-peer learning and pastoral support to leaders facing significant challenges. The experiences of a majority of participants within the 2021 cohort suggest strongly that the kind of developmental support that Reconciling Mission has offered is not easily found within wider church settings which many experience as ‘competitive’ and performative.

The non-competitive environment of the Reconciling Mission programme’s initial residential and subsequent action learning groups (**ALGs**) and gatherings has enabled deep sharing and trust between a majority of participants. They articulated how the programme offered a balance between pastoral ‘**support**’ by and for group members, and gentle ‘**challenge**’ to encourage members to develop their thinking and take action, expertly held by the process facilitators.

THE CONTEXT AND TIMING OF RECONCILING MISSION 2021

This second cohort started in June 2021 when the acute phase of the Covid pandemic was waning, and face-to-face meetings resumed. This cohort were therefore the first to experience the Reconciling Mission programme as originally designed, by beginning with a week-long residential learning conference at Launde Abbey.

As well as providing core content, ideas and input, the residential’s intention was to ensure that all group members had met each other, through a variety of conversational formats and groupings. This meant that they had established relationships prior to embarking on the intensity and vulnerability that participants experienced through the action learning groups.

“The fact that we were able to meet in person meant that relationships were formed with the rest of cohort; when we started the ALGs, we kind of knew each other and something about each other’s contexts. When you’re together for that length of time, you discover some of the issues people are facing in their contexts. The level of support we’ve offered each other feels greater because of our time at Launde Abbey.”

The residential was felt to be a timely intervention amidst the Covid-19 context. Given the anxieties that many had in returning to face-to-face meetings, the residential was reported as having been excellently paced, with strong content,

in an ideal venue and with a good use of the outdoor spaces to mitigate infection risk. Participants felt reassured by the residential and, for almost all participants, it built trust in both the programme leadership, and the process.

“I was asking myself was [our pandemic project] something that was just for Covid; or was there a bigger job for the community? Hearing inputs at the Launde conference was insightful and timely – it enabled me to open up possibilities of how we could go forward. We took decisions with partners that there was a need for a community partnership organisation. And we’ve now taken steps to set this up as a registered charity employing 3 people part-time.”

The residential significantly enhanced most participants’ experiences of the Reconciling Mission process. The relationships built through ‘eating and walking together for

a week’ fostered an ease and comfort with one another’s presence, including with the facilitation team, that was evidently transferred into the ALG sessions.

ACTION LEARNING GROUPS (ALGs)

“It’s been a real privilege to be a part of the action learning groups together and [to experience] the level of trust that’s been created through the programme – through the initial residential and then the ongoing relationships. So often, as clergy, we can find ourselves pressured in other contexts to compete. That definitely is not part of what [the Reconciling Mission process] is about. There’s been huge value in terms of the honesty of sharing and the vulnerability that people have brought at different times – and the learning that has taken place through that.”

When participants met online for the first ALGs, they met as people who were familiar with each other, having lived together for almost a week. The ALGs then formed a vital ongoing thread to this relational process. They have acted as ‘safe’ spaces within which:

- *Vulnerabilities were expressed;*
- *Relationships within the group were fostered and nurtured;*
- *An accountability was promoted for participants working on specific projects with congregations and communities, along with ongoing encouragement; and;*
- *Participants could ‘think through’ and wrestle with the application of the offered theory and models.*

PROCESS OUTCOMES

1. COLLEGIALITY

“People were exceptionally kind and generous in the [ALG] when they perceived that there was big [personal] stuff going on. The hallmark [of the process] was the depth of care, and the system of the ALG in creating that safe space. Pastoral conversations that were going on were kept separate from the ring master person; which meant that the process was solid and enabled the pastoral care to happen. I found a greater level of encouragement from the group than I’d hoped would be the case.”

ALGs were highly valued by the majority of the cohort for providing a rare affective space in which a distinctive type of peer support was offered. This was the strongest overall theme in the evaluation data and was reflected in final updates, interviews and survey responses. Whilst many

participants had experienced and were involved in ongoing action learning sets in other church contexts, the ALGs were perceived as having generated a network of support that went beyond those experienced in other spaces.

“Learning about the self is a process that’s ongoing. But [through the ALGs] you realise that you’re not doing as badly as you thought you were. That’s an aspect of reconciliation that wasn’t anticipated [by me].”

Four participants commented on how unusual it was to be in a clergy gathering that was ‘non-competitive’. There was a strong sense that the camaraderie and collegiality engendered within people’s earliest experiences of ordained ministry were lost once people moved into incumbency, and engaged in diocesan

structures and meetings dominated by agenda, strategy, objectives and management. Participants felt that within that pressurised environment, pastoral concerns and support were not prioritised; and that there was a level of performance required which, sadly, pitted clergy against each other.

“Once you take a church on, and you’re on your own, you don’t have a chance to talk and listen to each other without feeling guarded. Having that [ALG] safe space as a model helps others reconcile themselves to each other and their mission. There isn’t that safe space anywhere else, as there’s always an agenda that has to be followed.”

This non-competitive collegiality was so highly valued that some participants were seeking to draw more listening, pastoral and spiritual aspects into other spaces that tended to be overly dominated by agenda,

strategy and competition, such as deanery synods and chapter meetings. This is notable as an outcome of the process, as part of a change in culture that Reconciling Mission is subtly engendering within the church.

2. RE-ARTICULATIONS OF MISSION AND COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

The articulation of a ‘theological model of community-engagement’ and the shifting missional understanding that the process offered were strongly appreciated. One participant described the Reconciling Mission model as putting ‘flesh on the bones of the tradition that hovers around Trafalgar Square’ (i.e. from St Martin-in-

the-Fields). This articulation of mission was perceived by two participants as less ‘charismatic-evangelical’ than the current predominant Anglican models in the Church of England, and a valuable alternative missional model for Anglican churches.

“The Church has been struggling with the idea of mission for a long time ... [especially] for those of us at the woolly edges. When leading woolly Anglicans [...] in the fluid and vague theological space of parish life – where people’s theology is ‘who they are and what they do’, and not ‘what they say and preach’ – Reconciling Mission is helpful as it gives an articulation of our participation in the [wider] reconciliation of God. This puts a more robust framework around an alternative model of evangelism to the [traditional] ‘go preach’ model. [There’s extra value in the programme’s] reinforcement techniques through contact, the group, and reflection.”

The Reconciling Mission process has engendered and shifted thinking and theology in relation to mission, judging from the ways in which the majority of participants spoke about their understandings of ministry, mission, congregation and community; including about churches ‘joining in God’s mission’ and ‘coming alongside’ communities. For at least six participants, this theological and missiological approach was one that they had felt in the past, but not known how to articulate with their parishes, or act on in practice.

The understanding that participants described emerging from the programme were that the church needs to be ‘working with not for communities’ and working as a ‘servant’ to the community in response to the communities’ needs, discerned by deeper community listening processes. More broadly, these reflected a re-orientation and trust in God’s mission; and, for most, the relationship between community engagement and Christian mission had deepened.

Half of the participants said that Reconciling Mission helped them articulate a vision of a humbler church, whose evangelism takes on a different form and is communicated in different ways.

“Working alongside and serving ‘with’ rather than ‘to’ means that the church has a humbler place in its involvement with the community. Not talking down and giving prescriptions; but being a listening and supportive partner in what’s already going on. As a humbler listener, co-worker and partner, that will be a much better place [from which] to be able to share God’s loving, and our faith. In evangelism, ... if we haven’t earned the right to be heard, we don’t get anywhere. This process has driven us deeper into community partnership.”

Overall, within this cohort, the data indicate that through the residential and ALGs, the process has been successful in:

- *Fostering new conceptualisations of mission;*
- *Encouraging ways of working and engaging that shift the role of the church as a partner within God’s mission;*
- *Deepening listening to local communities, and also within their own churches;*
- *Enskilling participants to explore what these shifts might mean for practical action in diverse contexts; and*
- *Supporting clergy to lead congregations in coming alongside local communities, often in the face of resistance and challenge from their congregations, who can be finding it difficult to ‘trust God’ and keep on going.*

3. PROJECTS AND PROGRAMMES

The projects, programmes and partnerships that have been generated, nurtured, encouraged and strengthened within the life of the Reconciling Mission process are diverse and can be categorised in two broad ways:

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

- The initiation and/or development of regular community group activities within the church building: e.g. knit-and-natter groups, floral workshops, coffee mornings, music workshops, Guides, craft groups;
- Social welfare provision including: a school uniform bank; a community cinema to provide cheaper entertainment to families; warm hubs; and lunch clubs and hot meal provision for toddlers and carers / the elderly / vulnerable groups;
- Hosting community celebratory meals, e.g. linked to harvest, Royal Jubilee, etc.;
- Eco Church projects, and churchyard maintenance projects;
- A joint project with local crafters to create an art installation, suspended from the church tower; and
- Working with the wider community to re-model the internal space of a church building to enable it to be a better community resource.

Community-based partnership projects:

- A joint project with local groups to nominate Community Angels and create angel displays in 2021; repeated in 2022 with Community Stars and star decorations;
- Work with a local GP surgery's community-prescriber to support vulnerable families;
- Partnerships with local foodbanks and food co-operative schemes;
- Mutual-aid groups offering practical support and care;
- Partnerships with universities and colleges to support students;
- Work with Citizens UK, on local and national community-organizing;
- Partnerships with local shops, other churches, city councils, parish councils, local arts organisations, local voluntary association hubs, and schools – addressing a variety of social issues; and
- A partnership with a local Pride organizing group which led to constructive conversations, initiated by the wider community, on the church's position(s) in relation to LGBTQI+ people, and their inclusion.

These projects ranged in their audience and scale. Some were initiated during the national lockdowns and grew and developed during the programme, in response to changing community needs. Most reflected the impact of networking with local organisations. Some involved high levels of congregational activity and collaboration; while others drew directly on the assets of church infrastructure. All indicated ways in which the deliberate and intentional engagement of the church with the local community, as fostered, encouraged and supported by the Reconciling Mission approach, can stimulate and diversify how churches and Christians can conceptualise and find new ways to participate in God's reconciling mission.