



RECONCILIATION INITIATIVES

RECONCILING MISSION 2022 AN INDEPENDENT EVALUATION



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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FEBRUARY 2024

THE RECONCILING MISSION 2022 COHORT

The 2022 cohort participated in the third *Reconciling Mission* programme which ran from June 2022 until October 2023. There were 25 participants:

- *13 women and 12 men between the ages of 34 and 72;*
- *6 groups sponsored by bishops from the dioceses of Durham, Lincoln, Monmouth, Newcastle, Southwark and York;*
- *Representing a broad range of theological, ecclesiological and missiological orientations, backgrounds and experiences.*

Over the course of the programme, one female participant was appointed to episcopal ministry so left the programme in mid-2023. There was some informal attrition during the process, with patchy participation by some participants. However, the heart of this cohort comprised a committed core group whose investment in and gain from the process was clear across the various data that they provided during the programme.

I knew that the Launde Abbey residential was one of the most significant teachings I'd received in my life. My sense was that what I was learning on this course was going to impact the whole of my future ministry. The teaching itself was transformational. My deepest sadness was that we didn't get to do the whole week.

The third *Reconciling Mission* cohort was impacted by the ongoing challenges of Covid-19. Sadly, the opening residential was mired by a Covid outbreak within the group, which curtailed the conference. Many participants experienced this as a significant loss, citing that the time that they had managed to spend productively at the residential indicated the high quality of the design, materials, speakers and content. The loss of time spent together building relationships at the initial residential was felt throughout the life of the process, and likely explained the limited connectivity outside the formal programme spaces. This was reflected in the comparative lack of collegiality within the cohort, compared with the two previous groups.

However, the data gathered indicate that through the careful selection and refinement of speakers and materials, a theological maturation and confidence developed, that communicated clearly with participants. Highly motivating and appealing was the language of:

- *different 'missional economies';*
- *the differentiation between 'church questions' and 'God questions';*
- *the idea that communities are laden with 'treasure'; and*
- *the reconceptualization of the work of mission as 'treasure-seeking'.*

That the **Reconciling Mission** process has found a robust language to communicate itself, its ethos and theology more clearly to participants has enabled committed participants to move outwards in their communities with confidence, and frequently to bring their church congregations with them.

The resourcing of the *Reconciling Mission* process through a range of diverse, articulate and compelling practitioners and theologians has created an excellent balance between ‘theory’ and ‘practice’. This has resourced participants to build on examples given, to reflect on the balance between ‘church’ and ‘God’, and to begin confidently to hold and navigate this balance for themselves as ministers, for their communities and congregations.

ACTION LEARNING GROUPS (ALGs) AND WEBINARS

I loved having the wisdom and experience of others in the Action Learning Groups. The idea of being able to be heard and listened to, and gently encouraged to move in a new direction – or to be encouraged to be brave in what I was trying to do, was something I really valued. The webinars enabled us to keep focussed. I also appreciated the opportunity to share with others what we were learning together.

To compensate for the time lost at Launde Abbey, additional content was offered through a series of webinars. Participants appreciated the reiteration of the central elements and ideas of the programme and how these had been applied in practice.

There were conflicting appraisals of the ALG sessions. For half of participants, the ALGs were positive experiences and encounters, offering a good fit with their ‘learning styles’ and generating real energy and enthusiasm:

I absolutely loved the ALGs because of my learning style. Whether observer or listener asking perceptive questions or observations, everybody was involved in actively learning. It was a type of discovery that I'd never experienced before. Every single issue I brought, I got wonderful things out of it, which I took and applied in ministry.

ALGs created anxiety for some of those who stepped up to be coached, related to 'learning styles' or personalities. The format that placed pressure to respond immediately to a set of questions did not work for all: **'It was hard to be in the hot seat; it was stressful for me to be honest.'**

The ALGs were particularly appreciated as **time** and **space** away from the demands of parish life to **reflect** and to **learn**, particularly through the experiences and wisdom of the wider group. The impact of the ALGs as **'listening spaces'**, in which participants were encouraged to listen well to others and to be listened to, centred the discipline of intentional listening which contributed to shifting participants' orientation towards community engagement.

PROCESS OUTCOMES

1.COMMUNICABLE THEOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK FOR MISSIONAL PRACTICE

*There was a lot put into the programme to give us the resources that we needed to get the most from the training. The speakers that came were really good, especially relating the practice of Reconciling Mission to the theory. These were people on the ground who'd done it and were doing it, and engaging with the theory at the same time. And for us to do that too and report back in the ALGs. It's an **accountable practical theology** that gives time to think about what you are doing and holds you to account.*

The most striking outcome for this cohort was the confidence with which participants were able to articulate, communicate and apply the principles, methods and theology of the *Reconciling Mission* process within their congregations and communities. The curriculum has been finessed and refined to make it highly effective.

Arguably, this confidence reflects the maturing of the *Reconciling Mission* theological framework, approach and, importantly, language. Confidence on the part of the leadership team has been expressed through the development of the idea of shifting from 'church questions' to 'God questions'. This was felt by participants to be distinctive:

This programme is different in the idea of the church being the 'guest'. God is already there working within the community. This is distinctive. In all the previous teaching I'd received, no one had mentioned that God is already at work and that we need to be good guests, and reconciling the church within herself as to how we are in community.

This theological reorientation was supported through the reiteration of simple yet powerful phrases that support clergy in seeking out God at work in the community, such as: ‘bumping spaces’, ‘treasure-hunting’, ‘people of peace’, ‘community connectors’ and the ‘missional economies’ of ‘counting in’ and ‘giving out’. These have enabled clergy to learn the ethos of the process and communicate it to their congregations, who have taken on terms like ‘treasure-hunting’, which has helped them to embrace a new missional economy.

This powerful missional discourse has strengthened the ability of the *Reconciling Mission* process to communicate and understand itself and its ethos internally and externally. *‘I’ve always had a heart for community. But Reconciling Mission has released me to do something that I was intuitively doing and didn’t know that I had permission to do.’* This process of giving ‘permission’ to pursue aspects of ministry that might not be valued by those fixated on getting people into the church (the ‘counting in’ missional economy) emerged as narratives within the earlier cohorts. For cohort 3, the emphasis on a more robust interdisciplinary theology – more firmly embedded within the disciplines of sociology and geography – had a powerful strengthening impact.

In particular, the work and thinking of Al Barrett and Andrew Rumsey were well received: *‘Andrew Rumsey’s keynote was the best thing about the whole two years – the reflection on place and context. He reminded us that we are here for everyone, as an established church.’* The theoretical thinking about the theology of place, strongly influenced by the discipline of human geography, offered a robustness to thinking about context and place which underscored the core community mapping exercises that characterise an asset-based community development (ABCD) approach. The drawing together of ABCD, the theology of place and placemaking, and Al Barrett’s language for communicating this complex practical theology, have together produced a highly valuable curriculum.

The methodological approach, through a range of learning encounters (residential, conference, ALGs and peer-to-peer learning, reading materials), and methods for long-term accountability (ALGs, video updates) were distinctive and enriching for most participants, including those who struggled with some aspects of the process. Overall, participants reported the process as being of value; and, for half of the cohort, it was transformative:

This was an approach that was so radically different from – ‘get out there church, and do what you can for Jesus’. The fact that ‘God is already at work, there is treasure out there’, the mind shift that ‘God is a God of abundance not scarcity’, coupled with a year and a half to embed it, made it unlike anything I’ve ever done and better than anything else I’ve ever done.

Overall, within this cohort, the process had been successful in:

- *Fostering new conceptualisation and language of/for mission through a robust curriculum and the creation of a learning community of peers;*
- *Fostering an excellent balance between a theoretical approach and modelling practical examples through the support of experienced practitioners;*
- *Encouraging ways of missional praxis that shift the focus from the church to the work that God is already doing in the local community;*
- *Deepening listening to the local community, and developing communication about mission within the church;*
- *Skilling participants to recognise opportunity and ‘treasure’ within church and community and confidently to pursue those people, connectors and opportunities for mission in ways that generated new collaborations and action.*

2. RE-ARTICULATION OF MISSION AND BUILDING WIDER STAKEHOLDER COLLABORATIONS

What have I learnt about Christian mission? I think it is about listening. The emphasis on listening to God through the community outside. That has changed me. And it links together with scripture, so that you notice something in Morning Prayer, and it helps you to notice that what you hear in the community resonates with scripture. It focusses attention on ‘where do you see God at work?’.

The success with which the process has built a robust theological, sociological and contextual language, ethos and curriculum has enabled participants to become better community listeners. The combination of an openness to the community, and more intentional listening has facilitated a striking range of new collaborations and conversations in the community with a dynamic set of partner organisations, in surprising and creative ways. Many participants said that they would not necessarily have pursued or even taken notice of community actors and opportunities without the ‘reminder’ or ‘pressure’ of the Reconciling Mission process to remain vigilant for them. These partner organisations included:

Local councillors & MPs

Soroptimists

Uniformed organisations

NHS and local social prescribers

Homelessness charities

Local shops & restaurants

Women’s Institute

Local and regional mental health agencies

Local youth justice service

Local makers groups

Local foodbanks
Rotarians
Local housing developers
Local faith leaders
Local forces barracks
Local Pride organisations
Local music groups
Local ecological charities
Other local churches
The police force

Schools
Fitness trainers
Council-run leisure facilities
Local voluntary service associations
Local art groups
Local prisons
Local food producers
Ecumenical organisations
Local history societies

Five of those interviewed spoke in detail about the breadth of community stakeholders they had engaged with because of the encouragement and ‘permission-giving’ of the *Reconciling Mission* process. Whilst many initiatives pre-dated the programme, the process has encouraged participants to develop and expand existing work by engaging with new partners. A few cases were notable for the number and breadth of community organisations involved and the range of stakeholders with whom they were collaborating, resulting in large-scale community events, several of which were reported in the local press, including:

- *An annual 3-day cultural festival incorporating local venues, craft and heritage activities, live performances, workshops, talks and a makers’ market;*
- *A quarterly ‘Fiesta’ in the church grounds incorporating stalls, a market, activities for children, musical performances, local artists and art installations, the promotion of local produce and activities to promote wellbeing and creativity; and*
- *A ‘Meet the Neighbours’ community day which attracted 450 community members, statutory bodies, local businesses, shops and charities to think collectively about their assets and needs, and how the community could work collaboratively for its own good. The day was catered, free-of-charge, by a local restaurant.*

3. PROJECTS AND PROGRAMMES

Diverse projects, programmes and partnerships were generated, nurtured, encouraged and strengthened during the *Reconciling Mission* process. They can be categorised as follows:

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

- *The initiation/development of regular community group activities within the church building: knit and natter groups, coffee mornings, uniformed groups, craft groups, men’s conversational groups, groups for the socially isolated, toddler groups;*
- *Social welfare provision, including a proliferation of warm spaces often coordinated with other agencies to ensure daily neighbourhood coverage, breakfast club, wellbeing café and long-Covid support group, menopause café, fitness activities for elderly people, food banks and food provision;*

- *Working with the local Youth Justice Service: inviting them to undertake reparative community service work within the churchyard; and running an event on youth crime and justice for the wider community;*
- *Managing anti-social behaviour around the church and the church yard by partnering with a local fitness organisation and hosting sport and fitness activities in the church hall for young people;*
- *Eco church projects, churchyard maintenance projects: bee-friendly garden, wildlife trail, tree planting initiatives, volunteer community gardening project; and*
- *Community days, community markets and events and festivals hosted within church yard spaces and partnering with a range of local stakeholders.*

Community-based partnership projects

- *Initiation of a multi-stakeholder, annual community cultural festival;*
- *Parish nursing project and health-related activities in dialogue with local NHS trusts and social prescribers;*
- *Partnerships with local foodbanks, shops donating food waste and food co-operative schemes, involvement in a community growing project, support of holiday food provision schemes for children;*
- *Running a community café in a residential care home;*
- *Partnerships with refugee charities and supporting refugee 'drop in' spaces; and*
- *Partnerships with local shops, churches, faith organisations, city and parish councils, local arts organisations, local voluntary association organisations, schools, care homes, barracks, and prisons, addressing a variety of social issues.*

These projects ranged in their audience and scale. They reflect feedback from only 60% of participants, so the impact of the *Reconciling Mission* process was likely higher. All reflect the impact of networking with local organisations; and many reflect a significant expansion in community connections that happened over the course of participating in the programme.

Some collaborations involved high levels of congregational activity and collaboration; others demonstrated churches offering support to initiatives run by volunteers and agencies in the wider community ('moving from host to guest'). Some drew directly on church infrastructure: church yards, halls, buildings, equipment and policies or bureaucratic capacities, including safeguarding, risk assessment, and fund-raising.

All indicate the ways in which the deliberate and intentional engagement by the church with the local community, as encouraged by the *Reconciling Mission* approach, stimulate and diversify the ways in which churches and Christians can conceptualise and participate in God's reconciling mission.