



Ever felt like you don't fit in? Consider yourself blessed. Pioneer youth ministry legend **Jonny Baker** continues his three-part series with the reminder that 'not fitting in' is a precious gift, and an essential quality in any potential pioneer

I walked past St Pauls' Cathedral in London, at the height of the Occupy campaign. The camp was on the steps and around the group was barrier tape which read: 'Another world is possible'. It grabbed me as a statement. It was so simple, so obvious, and yet so easy to forget. It's amazing how you can get used to business as usual, to the way things are so much so that another world is actually often unimaginable, unthinkable, undreamable. 'Nothing will ever change', we think to ourselves, 'We're stuck! There's no point trying even! It will only cause trouble...'

There are plenty of people who have vested interests in the status quo, and surprisingly enough they tend to be those in charge, those in power, those doing rather well off the system as it is - rulers, kings, dictators, shareholders, politicians, big church leaders, company directors, footballers, arms dealers etc. They don't actually want another world and they certainly don't like people who go around suggesting another one might be possible.

How does change come? How does genuine newness emerge and another world become possible when cultures, organisations, churches and dare I say youth ministries get stuck? In the last issue I suggested a simple way of thinking about the adventure of the imagination to create something new, using the example of Vincent Donovan - a missionary to the Masai. I want to reflect here on the kind of person who is able to make this pioneering journey, and how we might handle and nurture this gift.

I am a member of and work for the Church Mission Society. Pioneering is one of our core values. We have trained and sent out pioneers in mission all over the world for over

200 years, men and women who have crossed borders and cultures to share the gospel and plant churches and work for transformation. William Wilberforce was one of our founders and with the group that started CMS, the Clapham Sect, he also got involved in campaigning and dreaming that another world was possible from the one in which people were sold as slaves. I now lead a training course for CMS where we are training pioneer leaders for mission not just in other places in the world but for pioneer ministry in the cultures and communities here in the UK. When I meet people interested in the courses they often get to a point where they say something like, 'To be honest I just don't fit'. That's often a sure sign that they might have the beginnings of what it takes to pioneer something new.

So my shorthand now for this pioneering gift is 'the gift of not fitting in'. I first thought about this phrase when I was involved in the alternative venue at Spring Harvest leading a band a few years ago. I was having a terrible week. Having been invited to do something different the pressure was immense to just do what everyone else did. During the week one of the wider team leaders said that he would like to meet up for a conversation, because he had a word for me from God. We met later in the week and it proved to be a very helpful conversation. The thing that blew me away in the conversation was that he said at one point: 'You don't fit and that is who you are'. He was not in the venue I was in and had no idea that my whole experience that week was of being squeezed into a box that I had no interest in being in. I felt such relief at having this characteristic named as a gift and as part of who God had made me to be because it certainly didn't feel like it a lot of the time. I was just about ready to jack it all in. It was a moment of God's kindness to me.

It's clearly not enough just not to fit in (people could just be awkward). So let me say a few things about it:

The gift begins with seeing

Pioneers are those who see differently. They are imagineers, dreamers, artists, prophets, poets. They see, imagine, speak and dream a new world. This gift of imaginative sight is absolutely key to nurturing genuine newness. Imagination is hugely under-rated. I have no idea why. Anything that has been created by someone must have been imagined. The

kind of imagination that dreams new worlds is prophetic. In the pilot year of the course I don't know what I thought we would be talking about but I was caught by surprise at just how much seeing and imagination were part of the conversation.

Newness with depth is found by driving to the heart of the tradition and reclaiming it over and against itself, not by rubbishing it and leaving it

There are two moves in this seeing - grief and amazement. Those who see differently evoke grief and catalyse the shedding of tears where we have become numb, where we have got used to death or slavery or shopping. And they create amazement that new worlds are possible. We might conceive of this in relation to capitalism or where the Church has become stuck and wedded to particular ways of acting and being.

Moses is a good example of this 'seeing'. Jews hold Moses up as one of the great prophets along with Elijah. Moses' reality is terrible. The people are oppressed by Pharaoh, dominated by the empire as slaves. They have become numb, satiated and there is no future. By the time Moses has finished the gods of Egypt have been mocked and overthrown, slaves have been set free, and an alternative community with a completely different way of life has been born. Talk about transformation through seeing that another world is possible.

Jesus is another great example. Through seeing a different upside down kingdom - the empire of the mustard seed in which he tells stories and enacts a new kind of meal - the old empires and the religious power base of the Jewish authorities collapse and a new world is born. It's one of forgiveness, healing, over-

coming death, welcome for sinners and those on the margins, in which the poor are blessed; a new heaven and Earth.

The gift requires dissent

There won't be any constructive change unless there is some form of dissent. Dissent is a strong word but by it I mean the proposing of alternatives to the way things are now. Any system that is not continuously examining alternatives is not likely to move forward - it will get stuck. Organisations like the Church are built to administer, maintain and protect from harm that which already exists; in contrast pioneering or dissenting people are designed to give birth to that which has never been in existence before. So dissenters threaten the well-oiled structures. The alternatives they propose are seen as chaotic, and something to be vigorously avoided by those taking comfort in the predictable and safe ways of tradition. Jesus Christ, all of the prophets and most of the saints throughout history have acted as dissenters.

This aspect of the gift is tricky. It can be fractious - so new worlds don't come through any old dissent. There are a couple of conditions. One is that those who carry the gift need to dissent out of love - for people beyond the edges of the Church, for Jesus Christ, and for the Church. All the grief and seeing must come from a place of love and commitment. Newness that has depth is found by driving to the heart of the tradition and reclaiming it over and against itself, not by rubbishing it and leaving it. The second is that dissent in itself is not enough. As well as the pioneering youth minister who forges a new pathway, for change to really happen you also need someone who is a structural person, a sponsor in authority, who gets it and will advocate and broker the space, and ideally resource the pioneer and take the flack in the system.

The gift requires community

There is a stereotype of a pioneer as a lone individual who goes off to stick their flag in the land to begin something new, or of a prophet who lives alone in the wilderness communing with God and appearing occasionally to deliver their message. I think these are really unhelpful pictures. The kind of seeing out of which genuine

newness might emerge is much more likely to be a communal one. In the case of the Old Testament, prophets operated in groups and pioneers were rarely alone. So as well as seeing and dissenting, the nurturing of this gift also requires community. New possibilities will come through dreaming and reflecting with others, knocking around ideas, eating together and conversation. Community is where dreams of new possible worlds are nurtured and enacted.

This all sounds well and good but the pioneering journey is not an easy one; it invariably leads through wilderness, darkness, liminality, Gethsemane, or chaos on the way to the new. While the Church says it wants pioneers, actually their experience is often very bruising, and they are perceived as threatening by many.

I have already got plenty of sad stories. But the gift is honed through the struggle, and pioneers need to learn to live with chaos in this space.

Ben Bell is a youth ministry pioneer. I spoke to him recently about his experience of the gift of not fitting in:

'I have often felt like I haven't fitted in, like I don't belong in the many and varied situations I have found myself in. As a child I found it hard to conform and my teenage years were marked by trouble and an almost permanent state of not fitting in, which was hard and distressing. The welcome, acceptance and love that was extended to me by Kenneth Habershon and his youth ministry team is what both saved me and gave me a purpose, a vision for doing youth work. It was simply their gracious acceptance of me which gave me a people and a purpose to belong to.... even though I still didn't quite fit.'

Like a lot of church-based youth workers, Ben had a vision to work with marginalised young people and so 20 years ago was taken on by St Stephen's Canonbury in London. Their vision was to add to their number by reaching out beyond the already established youth group to 'at risk' young people on the streets of the parish. Ben quickly got to explore the Bible and pray with young people in homes, pubs and on the streets, but apart from a few exceptions, this did not deliver the outcome of young people in church. At times this led to tension and pressure with the church. For many years it also kept Ben pretty much on the outside of mainstream youth ministry

conferences and thinking. But at the same time it was this gap that created the energy for change and the imagination to pioneer something new.

'My eyes were opened for a different kind of ministry. As I met young people on the streets, I also met their struggles, pain and difficulties - substance misuse, problems at school, abusive parents, recruitment into criminal gangs. And we began to respond to their needs in the name of Jesus and let go of our church agenda.'

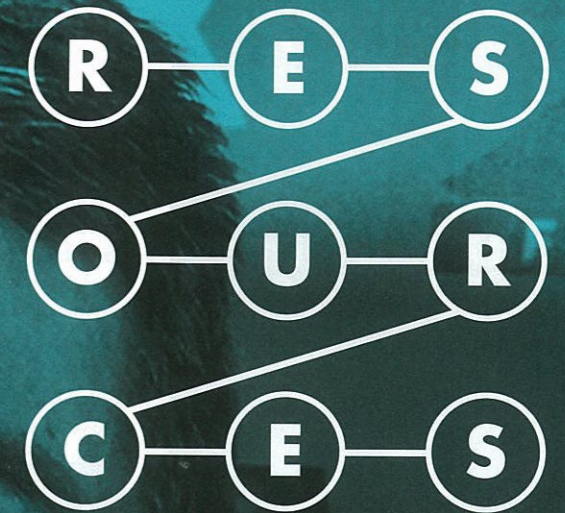
Through this gift of not fitting in and dissent Ben managed to create something genuinely new and different: a missional approach to the practice and theology of youth ministry in urban contexts. This has now led to the creation of Urban Hope, a fantastic hub for young people in Islington. Ben is one example and there are many others. I thank God so much for this gift in youth ministry. We so need it. In a survey of youth workers done by *Youthwork*, Church Urban Fund, Streetspace, and Frontier Youth Trust, over 70 per cent wanted more freedom in their roles to invest in missional youth work, and a staggering 92 per cent of church-based youth workers want to work with people who are marginalised from society. This suggests to me that there are lots of potential youth ministry pioneers! It's actually why I wanted to publish this series of articles in *Youthwork* and not in any other ministry magazine. Of course pioneering is not the only gift - we also need pastors, teachers, administrators and structure people in youth ministry. For those of you who have the gift of not fitting in - thank you! I know it's not always an easy gift to bear. For those of you in power, it may seem counterintuitive but this gift needs to be recognised as essential, welcomed and given space to flourish even if it rattles a few cages. Encourage and set if free for the sake of the kingdom of God.

NEXT MONTH:

Jonny concludes his series with some practical pointers for how to begin pioneering.

JONNY BAKER

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The Church says it wants pioneers, but they are often perceived as threatening

THIS MONTH'S MEETING GUIDES FOCUS ON PROPHETS. PROPHETS WERE PEOPLE WHO WENT AROUND SAYING THINGS THAT WERE TRUE, BUT THAT PEOPLE DIDN'T WANT TO HEAR. SIMON COWELL SAYS THINGS THAT ARE TRUE AND THAT PEOPLE DON'T WANT TO HEAR.*

ADAPTABLE MEETING GUIDES
IN THIS ISSUE: **OLD TESTAMENT LEADERS**

ELIJAH: A LEADER IN THE WILDERNESS

ELIJAH: A LEADER WITH PERSPECTIVE

ISAIAH: A LEADER WHO WORSHIPPED

ISAIAH: A LEADER WHO PROPHESED

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