



In the final part of his series, pioneer youth ministry legend **Jonny Baker** provides a framework for beginning your own pioneering journey

Mission is seeing what God is doing and joining in. Simple right? Youth ministry could take a leaf out of mission thinking and aspire to do the same – to see what God is doing and join in. Mark Yaconelli, in his wonderful book *Contemplative Youth Ministry*, comes close to this as an approach. I used to think that mission was something I did to take God with me to people, to share with them what I had, but now I realise how naive that was. God is reaching out to the world in an overflow of love. Mission is participating with that through the Spirit. God is ahead of us and with us and behind us. It's reassuring!

The emergence of the current interest in pioneer ministry in the wider Church can be traced directly back to questions in youth ministry 25 years ago or so, about how to reach young people outside of Church culture. Youth ministry has been fertile ground for pioneers. Many of the students training with us at CMS on the pioneer mission leadership training courses are either involved or began pioneering in youth ministry.

This is the third in a series of articles on pioneer youth ministry. In the first I wrote about an adventure of the imagination. By that I mean a journey in mission to pioneer something new driven by the experience of a gap between the reality of what we experience and what we thought youth ministry should be about when we signed up. In the second I explored the nature of the pioneer's gift. My shorthand for it is the gift of not fitting in. It involves a different way of seeing things, acting in some kind of dissent which is best nurtured with others rather than alone. It's an uncomfortable gift to carry and the Church finds it difficult to know how to deal with prophetic people and always has, but at the same time she badly needs them. Think of almost any saint remembered by the Church. They are likely to be someone who had this kind of gift, though it's usually only recognised in hindsight.

So... let's say you are thinking 'yes I identify with that' (or can recognise someone else who is a pioneer) and want to go on this adventure of the imagination. What next? How do you proceed?

I have seen a whole range of things pioneered and lots have begun in different ways. But there are a few pointers and common threads in the process that we are learning about with the pioneers training with us at CMS. One of the verses in the Bible I have found really helpful is Hebrews 11:8:

*'It was by faith that Abraham obeyed when God called him to leave home and go to another land that God would give him as his inheritance. He went without knowing where he was going.'*

**Step 1 - Setting out into the unknown**

The first step is always the most difficult because it requires going somewhere or doing something that takes us away from the familiar, without knowing exactly where it will lead. Tom Peters reflecting on innovation in business suggests that 90 per cent of success is getting started. You have to take the risk of letting go of the old, taking a first step towards the new without knowing what is going to happen. It is real risk. At this stage you may have identified a context or culture or particular group of young people you are seeking to reach. Or the first step might be that you simply need to leave the old to move towards this and begin to create the space for it.

It would be so much easier, so much more comforting if you could set up the new and then all of a sudden jump from the old to the new without so much as a blink or any struggle. But we have discovered what pioneers have known for centuries - the journey to the new invariably leads through wilderness, desert, chaos, liminality, darkness, and unknowing. It's a between space, a limbo. In the diagram I drew in the first article, the journey to the new led through Gethsemane. No one wants to go there! But it is also a creative space, a space where God shapes us and we have to learn to trust when other things are stripped away. I suspect that it is this stripping away that is so important - to genuinely create something new we have to let go of our temptation to do the new thing with the old tools from the old paradigm.

**Step 2 - Border crossing**

Having taken the first step in journeying to the new, sooner or later a border will have to be crossed! This occurs when going to a people group beyond the reach of existing church or youth ministry. The limits of our understanding and ways in which we have always done things have to be revised so that the gospel can be reinterpreted in newly relevant and meaningful ways.

One of our pioneer students, Andrea, discovered this when she began to see an interest in spirituality among her un-churched friends. It became clear that this reflected something going on in the wider culture. She wondered if it might create a point of engage-

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ment for the church which was reacting defensively to what they perceived as growing acceptance for the occult. Having seen a connection point for mission, God then confirmed she was on the right track when at Spring Harvest she heard a talk by Yvonne Richmond, then the curate at Coventry Cathedral, who had recently contributed to research entitled 'Evangelism in a Spiritual Age'. She spoke of a group in Guildford called Eden People who were going to fairs and offering to pray with people. In that moment Andrea knew God wanted her to do the same at Kingston's Green Fair. This was the largest environmental fair in London and attracted thousands of visitors. When she returned home she gathered a team and prepared to pitch her tent. However, it was then that she encountered opposition from Christians who accused her 'of going to the devil's territory'. It was almost as if these spiritual seekers had

already made their choice and were beyond redemption.

For many in the Church, a pioneer's crossing of borders is threatening - it challenges their secure assumptions about God and his sphere of influence. Yet on the day of the fair, Andrea's team was overwhelmed with people who wanted to talk about their spiritual experiences and receive prayer. What astounded them most was that God was already at work in the lives of those they encountered. All they needed to do was point that out.

The other thing to say about crossing borders is beware. Nothing is ever the same again! Andrea discovered that having seen the hunger of those beyond the walls of Church, you cannot go back to being content with business as usual. Having experienced first-hand the disconnect between our faith communities and those who God wants to reveal his transforming and unconditionally affirming love to it is impossible to settle with the status quo. This has led to a lot of frustration and a good deal of hurt at being misunderstood. But the pioneer course has provided Andrea with a community where the struggles have begun to make sense and she is beginning to see herself as a gift to the Church, albeit an uncomfortable one.

Richard Passmore and Jo Dolby have written a small booklet on pioneer youth ministry that has just come out. In it they suggest a cycle once you have taken these first couple of steps.

### Step 3 - Listening

Once you have heard God's call, taken that initial step into a different space and crossed a border, the next stage in the pioneering process is to be present in the new context. You need to listen to those who identify themselves in that space and learn to see the world through the filters of their experience. This is difficult for pioneers. The instinct is to rush in and do. Yet to imitate Christ in mission, we must first incarnate his message. If anything we do or say is to have authenticity and relevance it must come out of relationship. There are no short cuts and it is hard to trust God when it appears that nothing is happening. This process can be even more lonely and challenging when the sponsoring church or organisation is anxious to see tangible results in return for a financial investment. However, the Church has a long

history of providing what they think people want without humbly coming alongside to listen and learn. There is plenty God reveals regarding our own cultural blind spots when he sends us to cross cultures in mission.

### Step 4 - Discerning

One of the ways this next stage could be thought of is as double listening. Having listened to the culture, it is essential to listen to the Holy Spirit and discern where God is already at work and how we might partner in seeing the kingdom come more fully. Pioneering is a dynamic process that relies upon and stretches our relationship with God. The Trinity could do it without us but, I believe, they love to engage in our grappling with challenges of theology and practice so we grow in self-awareness and dependence upon them.

### Step 5 - Innovating

It is out of this discernment, and the changes in attitude and belief that might accompany it, that new possibilities can emerge. This does not mean a foolproof blueprint floats down from heaven! Failure is how we learn. The key is not to be put off by it but being willing to recognise what went wrong and how the original plan could be adapted to creatively solve the problems encountered. It is important to involve others in this process and build team to share the journey as well as spark further ideas and pose practical questions. The innovating and building needs to include questions of resourcing, infrastructure and sustainability.

Jo talks about how she can see this model at work in the initial stages of setting up One Eighty. She says: 'Knowing I was called to set up something to work with the skateboarding community, I began hanging around the skate park regularly, building relationships with those in the skate community.' She conducted a survey of around 100 skaters to ask specific questions about characteristics, problems and needs. She then collated the results and compared them with her previous experience of skate culture. 'With the help and guidance of a steering group and my line manager, I attempted to filter the information to create the main principle behind 'One Eighty' - a mobile, indoor skate project that would give the opportunity for young

people to explore the Christian faith in a relevant way. After creating a business plan, building a team and fundraising for equipment, One Eighty was launched and began weekly sessions. Through regular reflection and evaluation new initiatives were created to meet new needs that showed themselves through further listening and learning. We set up a schools programme, continued with regular detached work, wrote Switch, campaigned for better local outdoor facilities, created a Junior Leadership Scheme and a separate graffiti project...I kept repeating the process, listening, discerning, creating and reflecting. When there was nothing else to create and all that was needed was to sustain the existing, I moved on and a co-worker took over the project.'

One of the things that is quite tricky about pioneering in these early stages is that it is hard to work out from people who seem intuitively to spot opportunities and make things happen what it is that they are actually doing. I have discussed this several times with Richard Passmore and he concludes: 'I think it is connected to opening yourself up to the Holy Spirit'. Which brings us back to where I began - seeing what God is doing and joining in. Developing attention and awareness through contemplative prayer can really help. But when all is said and done, there is no prescribed formula, nothing you can pull off the shelf with a model guaranteed to work. It is an adventure of the imagination, an exciting and rewarding journey that we undertake with and in response to the Spirit of God.

### JONNY BAKER

leads the CMS Pioneer Mission Leadership Training course - see [www.pioneer.cms-uk.org](http://www.pioneer.cms-uk.org) - and blogs at [jonnybaker.blogs.com](http://jonnybaker.blogs.com). He also teaches mission and youth ministry at Oxford CYM.

Read this month's case study about innovative youth motorbike project REV, as an example of pioneering in practice.



## THE REV PROJECT

### WHAT IS THIS?

Occasionally we hear about slightly alternative youth work projects - youth leaders out there trying innovative ways of reaching young people. Here we profile one such project, to give you the ideas and inspiration you need to try something new.

**PROJECT:** The REV project

**LAUNCHED:** Full Throttle UK was founded in 2004, with the REV Project starting in 2007

**LOCATION:** Based in East Kent, but soon to be rolled out across the country

**AIM:** To promote safe and responsible motorcycle riding, and to provide young people with an opportunity to hear the gospel in a biker-friendly environment

### THE PROJECT:

The REV Project, created by Full Throttle UK, is a specialist ministry that uses the iconic imagery of motorcycling to communicate the gospel. Equipping churches to create inclusive communities for 16-25 year-olds who are interested in riding motorcycles, it uses the central concept of life as a journey to explain key aspects of Christianity, with the motorcycle becoming a literal vehicle to explore faith, community and social inclusion. We understand that in today's culture you have to earn the right to share the gospel. This project enables churches to build up quality relationships with young people and young adults who are outside of church circles, and to share the gospel within that context.

The REV Project has been running in Kent for seven years, where Full Throttle



on the way. For example, when we rode into Scotland we had a five mile tail-back behind us. Several lorry drivers, who overtook us, swore at us for being road-hogs!

If we were to do anything differently, we would look at how we have built relationships with young people. Unfortunately some young people have left over the past few years, due to misunderstandings or through some form of bullying by other group members. We value our relationships with our young people, and when these get damaged it causes real heart-ache. If we had a TARDIS I am sure we would want to go back and change some events that might have been preventable!

### FIVE GOLDEN RULES FOR RUNNING A YOUNG RIDERS MINISTRY:

1. Never forget what you were like when you were young. It is easy to get frustrated with young peoples' actions and behaviour. When we remember our own youth, we find that we were probably just the same, or had friends in a similar place!
2. Do not encourage illegal and anti-social motorcycle riding, but encourage the best riding and promote continued training.
3. Don't think 'I can't run a youth work project'. If God is calling you, surround yourself with people to inspire you and follow God.
4. Beware the comfort zone! Many churches are not radical because they have become comfortable. To follow Jesus is similar to walking on hot coals - it keeps your faith moving!
5. Running a REV Project cannot be done in isolation. It needs to have strong connections to a church that is willing to accommodate any new Christians.

### DANIEL HARRIS

is the founder and project director of Full Throttle UK.