

Mission Pilot Project

Report to Port Phillip East Presbytery – June 9 2021

This report is presented at the conclusion of the first round of the Mission Pilot Project, on behalf of the Mission Pilot Steering Group.

SUMMARY

The report provides a summary of the processes used in preparing, implementing and evaluating the Mission Pilot project

- A. Background
- B. Project Planning
- C. Promotion and Selection
- D. Budget
- E. Project Implementation (Intensives, Coaching, Coaching Group, Action Learning, Ministers Peer Learning Group, Learning Resources, the COVID effect, The Learning Sequence)
- F. Evaluation (Participant feedback, Steering Group Review, Critical Questions for the Presbytery)

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. That the Report be received
2. That the Presbytery express its appreciation to the participation congregations and their Mission Teams, and the Steering Group, for their involvement in the Project 2019-2021.

DISCUSSION

There will be time for questions after the presentation of the report. Discussion in breakout rooms will be offered the following questions:

1. *Given the overall enthusiasm for the project, why were only two applications received in 2019?*
2. *Is the scope of a mission experiment too narrow? Should more attention be given to other ways in which congregations need assistance with engaging in mission?*
3. *Is broader learning or capacity-building leading to mission engagement needed across the Presbytery?*
4. *Given that we don't seem to be returning to pre-COVID life, to what extent does any project redesign need to take this 'new normal' into account?*

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A. Background

A Congregational Mission Pilot proposal was submitted to Port Phillip East Presbytery and approved in early 2019 to be part of Stage Four of the *Cultivating a New Future* plan. A working group was established in May 2019 consisting of Craig Mitchell (subsequently Convenor and Project Manager), Greg Fry, Dev Anandarajan, Belinda Clear and Phil McCredden (Facilitator and then Consultant until March 2021). This group became the Steering Group for the Project. Jay Robinson joined the Steering Group in March 2020.

The stated goals of the project were:

- to design a process to assist and support congregations to respond to the challenges of the post-Christendom missional context
- to give tools to the pilot congregations to help them discover how to be the people of God together in this new context
- to identify and improve methods in which the Presbytery can support congregations wishing to embark on this journey

The stages of the project were as follows:

1. **Project Planning** - May to September 2019
2. **Promotion and Selection** - September to December 2019
3. **Implementation** - February 2020 to March 2021
4. **Evaluation** - March to June 2021

As noted in more detail below, there was significant impact on the project and its time frame due to COVID-19, extending the project by three months.

The Steering Group reported to the Mission Development Committee. The MDC was disbanded early in 2020 and subsequently reports were presented to the Standing Committee. From June 2021, the project will report to the Mission and Leadership Development Committee.

B. Project Planning

The missional pilot process is designed from the outset to enable participant congregations, their ministers and the Presbytery itself to learn from the experiment, both during the process and following its completion. In this regard it is an action research project, as experiences during the process can shape the direction that congregations take in their mission experiments, and shape the project design itself as it proceeds.

From the Stage Three Congregation Missional Pilot Proposal

The Steering Group were provided with a series of assumptions to underpin the project:

1. God is active within our congregations and in the world.
2. We hear strongly the voice of God calling us to join with this activity.
3. As the people of God situated in this post-Christendom environment, we have a two-fold task to discern what we will do in the world and how we will shape ourselves around this cause.
4. We acknowledge that shaping ourselves around this cause will lead us to new shapes and practices and push us into territory that will be uncomfortable.
5. We know that God is with us as we move forward.

Project planning involved consideration of the project's assumptions, designing an action-learning process, establishing time frames, determining eligibility criteria, designing a promotion and selection process, identifying learning resources and determining a reporting framework.

Craig Mitchell designed a research and evaluation framework to align action learning with action research. This raised some questions about the clarity of the intended outcomes of the project. The research framework was focused on these qualitative questions regarding participants:

1. How have people's understandings and experience of **church** changed?
2. How have people's understandings and experience of **mission** changed?
3. What are people's learnings about being **participants** in mission?
4. What have people learned about **change** for the sake of mission?
5. How have people's experiences of **God** and **faith** changed?

C. Promotion and Selection

The project design required decisions regarding possible participant congregations. This included the importance of having the minister in placement involved (hence excluding congregations with no minister, or where the minister was departing or taking significant leave eg. long service leave), having the number of people needed for a 'mission team' (4 to 8 people), shared expectations about mission and mission projects, financial implications, and finally, Church Council endorsement.

A project launch was held at the Presbytery meeting in July 2019. A promotional brochure and video were prepared and made available to all congregations. (Video at <https://tinyurl.com/missionpilotprocess>) There seemed to be a high level of enthusiasm. Craig had conversations with several ministers from potential churches. At the close of applications on 31 August 2019 there had been two expressions of interest and one application. The application deadline was extended and a second application received in October.

Glen Waverley UC and **Cheltenham-Mentone UC** were accepted into the project. Craig met with each Church Council prior to their applications to enter the program.

D. Budget

The 2020 budget included funding for the Consultant (\$13,000), weekend training Intensives and research. Congregations were asked to contribute \$2000 each if possible, and were able to request financial assistance from the Presbytery if needed. We also included a budget to purchase some video equipment for the Presbytery as this was seen to be valuable for telling the story of this and other projects.

The Presbytery agreed to make funds available for congregations to undertake their pilot projects if needed. An IOMF (Interest Only Mission Fund) grant was used to help fund the project. Changes to the project reduced the level of funds required. Congregations were only asked to pay \$1000 each in 2020.

E. Project Implementation

The Project involved *teaching, coaching, and action-reflection learning*. Glen Waverley appointed a Mission Team of six people including Rev Neil Peters. Cheltenham-Mentone appointed a Mission Team of nine people including Rev Greg Fry (one person later withdrew from the team).

- **Intensives** - Three teaching intensives. An initial residential weekend at Phillip Island, and two separate Saturdays during the year (moved onto Zoom). the first Intensive was held in February 2020. The second intensive was postponed from May to August, and the third postponed from August to October.
- **Coaching** - Monthly coaching meetings with each Mission Team. Coaches: Glen Waverley (Craig Mitchell and Dev Anandarajan), Cheltenham-Mentone (Craig Mitchell and Jay Robinson).
- **Coaching Group** - The coaches met monthly with Phil McCredden as a reflective practice group.
- **Action-Learning** - The teams were encouraged to be active throughout the process, with the coaching and Intensives designed to assist with action-reflection.
- **Ministers' Peer Learning Group** - The ministers were to meet every two months with Craig to reflect together on their roles and learning, however with COVID and other issues, this proved to be too much. Instead, the ministers became involved in occasional meetings with the coaches.
- **Learning Resources** -Team members were also provided with journals to assist their reflection and discernment. Readings and audio-visual materials were also used.

In addition to the above, the Steering Group met monthly, and the Project Manager (Craig) and Consultant (Phil) met once or twice a month.

The project had two foci - **Mission Experiment** (a practical local mission project) and **Mission Posture** (seeking in influence the stance of the congregation in relation to local mission). This involved three phases:

- **Discern** - seeking to engage with the local community in fresh or deeper ways, build relationships, and discern with whom God is calling us to be in mission.
- **Design** - engaging with a particular group of people to begin to shape what 'being in mission' with them might look like
- **Develop** - shared action to evolve the mission experiment as a practical project

1. The COVID Effect

- **Project Pause**
The advent of COVID-19 resulted in the **Discern** phase being put on hold from the beginning of April until late May 2020. The teams recommenced meeting in late May via Zoom. This continued until the conclusion of the project.
- **Social Isolation**
The extended COVID lockdown changed the whole dynamic of the project, for all individuals involved, for their congregations and for their local communities. This is explored in more detail below.

- **Online engagement**
All meetings went online with very mixed results. This seemed to work better for the Mission Teams meeting by themselves than for coaching or intensives.
- **Data Collection**
The research design had included using the National Church Life Survey congregations' and leaders' survey tools as pre and post Project indicators of attitudes in relation to church, faith and mission. However the COVID restrictions were imposed just as the surveys were about to commence! Hence these measurements were abandoned as they would have produced no reliable measures.
- **Limiting the Focus**
In addition, the Steering Group agreed to keep the focus on the *Mission Experiment* but remove any expectation regarding *Mission Posture*.

2. The Learning Sequence

a. First Intensive

The focus of the February 2020 Intensive was on community-building, recognition of the challenges facing the church in a post- Christendom era, understanding some dynamics of change, and exploring mission. in the early church. We also introduced people to the practice of discernment.

b. Coaching

The focus on the initial coaching was on helping Mission Teams to get to know their local community better and to begin to explore with whom they might seek to be in mission. Due to COVID, this involved observation, telephone calls, internet searches and contacts, and a 'virtual' Google map neighbourhood walk. We also utilised Census data and other demographic information.

c. Second Intensive

The August Intensive was held on Zoom and involved an interactive process to help each Mission Team discern the 'people group' with whom they would seek to be in mission (originally this would have been held in May). It proved more difficult than expected to gain consensus. Cheltenham-Mentone chose to focus on new residents, particularly those experiencing loneliness. Glen Waverley chose to focus on new residents who were migrants from China.

d. Coaching

The second series of coaching involved helping the Mission Teams to explore how they might begin to engage with their identified group of people – how to design their mission experiment. Again, this was exceedingly difficult during COVID isolation and began to be more about planning future action than taking action. However, some small but significant steps were made. We also introduced the notion of incarnational mission as “being *with*”, using the work of Rev Dr Sam Wells from the UK. This became a key lens for seeing mission engagement.

e. Third Intensive

The October Intensive (originally scheduled for August) further explored “being *with* in mission”, but was mainly focused on *how* we worked together as teams. We introduced triple loop learning and explored this interactively.

f. Coaching

The third series of coaching was intended to help teams move further in mission action, but with COVID restrictions still affecting our churches and communities, it developed into something of an exercise in frustration.

g. Evaluation

Data collection that had originally been planned as mid-project evaluation (June-July) was conducted in November-December, with written surveys and interviews with the Mission Teams, Ministers, and Steering Group (including coaches). These were conducted and analysed by Craig Mitchell and Belinda Clear.

h. Final Stage

An outcome of feedback received and meetings held with the Mission Teams in February 2021 was the decision to conclude the Project from March. This was partly because the twelve month period had concluded, but also because both teams felt as yet unable to take any significant mission action until the COVID situation was better resolved. It was agreed that more talk about what *might* happen would be increasingly tedious and frustrating. Each team expressed a desire to take a break and to come back to taking some initiatives later in 2021. The Steering Group indicated a willingness to offer assistance if it was later requested.

F. EVALUATION

1. Participant Feedback

The following is a summary of feedback received from participants in November-December 2020.

a. Effects of COVID-19

- **Personal lives** All participants in the project experienced social disruption, confinement, isolation which affected outlook and mood.
- **Building relationships** Limited contact and lack of physical presence, including informal conversation, meant less opportunity to build relationships throughout the project.
- **Meeting on Zoom** While existing relationships within congregations were enhanced by Zoom, the overwhelming consensus was that project planning via Zoom was difficult, limited, and impersonal.
- **Social restrictions** One of the most significant effects for the teams was the restriction on social contact which severely limited the possibilities of face-to-face contact with people in the wider community, a key aim of the project.
- **All talk, no action** A result of the above was that the Mission Teams in particular felt that the project was an endless cycle of discussion without real action.

b. Learning about Mission

- **Defining Mission** A significant number wanted mission to be explored or defined early in the process, and likewise found it difficult to proceed with ambiguity about mission.
- **Understandings of Mission** These were varied and included "being with" others on their terms, sharing about God's love in word and action, care and compassion in everyday relationships and encounters, joining in with what God is doing in the world, and being open to God's leading.
- **What was helpful?** Some of the reading and resource materials, group conversation / sharing, particular concepts/paradigms ("being with" or incarnational mission), time to

consider and reflect, having to try to discern, new insights about the local community, and insights from other cultures.

- **Cultural insights** At several points the value of including more culturally diverse resources about mission was suggested, particularly given the multicultural nature of the wider communities.
- **Mission and discipleship** Steering Group members identified the need to make the learning more inclusive of daily discipleship and faith sharing, rather than simply as a group project for the church.

c. The Mission Pilot Process

- **Clearer outcomes and process** This was expressed in various ways by all groups, including "What is an experiment?", clearer outcomes from the Presbytery, more work prior to commencement, clearer steps for mission teams. Some were seeking more mission strategy planning, more re-thinking of what it means to be church, or a simpler guide to action.
- **Clearer roles and participation** This was expressed by Steering Group members and the Ministers - "What is expected of us and how do we contribute to the overall and ongoing design?" What skills or training are needed?
- **Team development** This was expressed as a positive by the Steering Group and particularly the Mission Teams, along with the need for more intentional work on this at the beginning of the process.
- **Mission Learning** While clearly there was positive learning about mission (see above), there was confusion and mixed expectations about **how** people were to learn about mission.
- **Stilted Process** All parties expressed frustrations with the Project process as it started, stopped, stalled, etc, with limited opportunity to "do" things.
- **Coaching and Intensives** Some were positive about new insights, external views, research, online learning and concepts presented. Others found concepts confusing or irrelevant, wanted more time for conversation, more examples, more action, more encouragement/affirmation. Zoom was mentioned mainly in negative terms.

d. Leadership

- **Learning as Leaders** It is important to say that the project leaders themselves were "learning on the go" a lot. Steering Group members, coaches and the ministers themselves need capacity/skill-building prior to the process, and in more targeted ways during the process.
- **"Being with" Mission Teams** It was difficult for the coaches to build a relationship with the teams during COVID.
- **Leadership Styles and Expectations** There seemed to be some differing expectations of the coaching sessions and the learning intensives by Mission Team members. Some wanted coaches to be more directive, some less so.

e. Experiences of God

Where did participants say they experienced God in the process?

Steering Group, Coaches and Ministers

- In conversation, in seeing people gain new insights and grow
- In the struggle and persistence, trusting God's leading and timing
- In people's enthusiasm for mission and making new connections

Mission Teams

- In group conversation, discussion and discernment
- In contacts with people in the wider community
- In prayer
- A lack of experience of God or expressing frustrations to God

2. Steering Group Review

The Steering Group is currently reviewing learnings from the Project and will make recommendations to the Mission and Leadership Development Committee and Standing Committee ahead of the August meeting of Presbytery in Council. The overall aim is for a revised Project design for implementation in 2022.

The Steering Group recognises some key planning and process issues in going forward

- the value of community-building early in the process
- the need for prior training of coaches and ministers for their roles
- the value of teaching intensives
- the value of peer learning environments for participants
- the importance of action-based learning
- planning some learning for the whole congregation

The Steering Group expressed great appreciation to Phil McCredden in March for his facilitation, wisdom, and encouragement throughout the process.

3. Critical Questions for the Presbytery

At this stage we can raise some critical questions for consideration.

- a. Given the overall enthusiasm for the Project, why were only two applications received in 2019?
- b. Is the scope of a Mission Experiment too narrow? Should more attention be given to other ways in which congregations need assistance with engaging in mission?
- c. Is broader learning or capacity-building leading to mission engagement needed across the Presbytery?
- d. Given that we don't seem to be returning to pre-COVID life, to what extent does any Project redesign need to take this 'new normal' into account?