

CYD Cohort 1 Commissioning

It seems such a long time ago that we began talking about a project that would enable churches across the diocese to better engage with children, young people and their families. Back in May 2016 we advertised for the Project Director, describing the role as an exciting opportunity. We said,

“We are looking for someone who will face a substantial challenge, catch and run with the vision we've been developing, and work with others under God to make a significant difference across the Diocese. It's not a post for the fainthearted. ... For the right person, it's an excellent opportunity to offer your gifts and experience, working with others to make a significant difference for the Kingdom of God.”

Ruth was appointed, and over the following months we drew together a great team of Mission Enablers. I have always been so thankful to God for the high calibre people who applied for these roles, formed a fabulous team and have taken forward this ground breaking project.

We made clear that in addition to recruiting, line managing and overseeing the deployment of the MEs, the PD would also work with host parishes, helping them prepare for, and make the most of, this opportunity, saying that the project would be ***about enabling a significant cultural shift that affects the tone and fabric of church life across the whole Diocese.***

The people in this gathering are the first of those host parishes. Thank you for being our guinea pigs and letting us learn with you. I think it became clear very early on in these initial placements that although children and young people form the primary focus the project touches on a far broader range of challenges. For churches to engage better with C&YP ***always involves change – and not everyone finds change straightforward.*** Many of the challenges MEs have worked through with you have been about how we bring change much more holistically in our churches, how we think and plan strategically to extend our welcome, adapt our practices, organise ourselves around our agreed priorities and communicate well.

The learning from this project has fed into our diocesan vision to grow as kingdom people in healthy and sustainable churches, and you have been the trailblazers, the pioneers.

You have seen much fruit from your labours, but also, perhaps even more than the later cohorts, experienced the frustration of the last year as the new things that had started, the new volunteers who had been fired up with enthusiasm, the new people joining our churches, have all been stifled in their growth. Fragile plants need a healthy growth environment, and this Covid year has impinged on that environment hugely.

Relationships are harder to build on zoom, furloughing has reduced engagement, in person worship has been halted in ways we could not have begun to imagine in 2016. Change, massive change, has become the norm in every aspect of our lives, so what started as a dream to enable a cultural shift has been significantly impacted as everyone has had to learn new ways of being, and of doing pretty much everything!

Now, as we limp out of lockdown in fits and starts, knowing that the only thing we can be sure of is that we can't be sure of anything, and that the roadmap is provisional, and as our European neighbours experience a new wave of the virus, anxiety levels rise again, we can only put our trust in God, and answer his call on our lives to grow as kingdom people, and help others to come to know Jesus and grow as disciples too, others of all ages.

In this gathering there is huge potential to bring about change. Yes, your work has been stalled, but this season will pass, and all will be well, and the hard work you put in at the beginning will eventually bear fruit again. In our new deaneries, you will be the story tellers, the sharers of hope, the encouragers. As other congregations, less far along the journey of change to be more welcoming and inclusive of C&YP hear your stories of transformation, they too can catch the vision. We've learnt a lot about R rates and how things are passed on in the last year. Let's use that learning to infect others with our enthusiasm to call young disciples.

I know that each of you will have examples of how things have changed in your lives and your churches as a result of being involved in this project. Share those stories whenever you get the opportunity. Be a part of the new thing God will be growing as we emerge into a new kind of normal. I implore you to take forward the collaborative ways of learning you have been introduced to as we move into the next phase.

Although your part in this learning community will be ending, in a sense this is more a beginning of the next stage. You have been called and equipped to be ambassadors for Christ, to bring about the change needed in our churches that will make them welcoming and accessible to children, YP and their families. Please keep going, please keep receiving from God through his Holy Spirit, and please keep praying.

I am going to pray for you now. If we were meeting in person, I would anoint you with oil, but sadly that's not possible. So instead I ask that you draw a cross on your hand, or on some paper if you would rather, and hold it up to the screen, as an act of commitment to play your part, tell your stories, and pray for the ongoing fruit of this project.

Pray

In the name of God, Father, Son and HS, I commission you to take forward the work of this CYD project into the future. May God bless each of you, fill you with grace and wisdom, unite you in purpose, and overwhelm you with joy in your calling. May you know deep in your heart that you have been chosen for fruitfulness, and may you hear God's voice gently showing you the way forward in your context, that as kingdom people together, we may continue to grow in healing and sustaining communities.

Amen