

Evaluation

**Mission Accompaniers: Diocese
of Worcester**

Eido Research

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Executive Summary

Impact

The Mission Accompaniers scheme **effectively prepared churches for mission** – and was especially effective for churches in deprived contexts and churches whose incumbent had been in post for longer. The scheme had resulted in:

- **Improved strategy**
 - The scheme helped churches **define their vision** and **focus on achieving it**
 - Churches had also taken ownership of this vision: 62 percent of survey respondents agreed that church members could describe their church's specific vision, as compared to 15 percent before the program
 - Many churches had made real progress on translating their visions into action
- **Healthier incumbents**
 - 53 percent of lay Mission Accompanier group members had noticed a change in how their vicar led the church
 - These respondents said their leaders had become **less isolated** and **more strategic, confident, and hopeful**
- **Confident churches**
 - Respondents said their congregations had become **more confident and outward-looking**, with a sense of **excitement about the present** and **possibility for the future**
 - **85 percent** of respondents had seen church members try new things and take risks by the end of the scheme – as compared to 45 percent before
- **More attention to and engagement with the community**
 - At the end of the scheme, respondents were almost **twice as likely** to agree that their church took into account the needs of people attending services for the first time (80 percent after; 42 percent before)
 - Churches had improved their communication with their communities and developed new initiatives to reach them
 - Perhaps as a result, respondents thought **their churches had become better known**
- **Churches working as a team:**
 - Respondents thought their churches had improved at **working together and communicating effectively**. Their sense of community had also improved
 - Over half of churches (53 percent) had seen more laypeople take on leadership roles
 - However, some churches mentioned that the benefits of the scheme had not permeated the church beyond the Mission Accompanier group

There were also some suggestions that the scheme had increased **average weekly attendance** and led to the foundation of **new worshipping communities**. Using a median average, churches which participated in the scheme grew by five percent, while churches which did not shrunk by four percent. Likewise, churches which participated in the Mission Accompanier scheme were over twice as likely to start new worshipping communities after February 2023 (qualitative evidence also pointed to an association between participating in the scheme and founding new worshipping communities). However, Eido was unable to establish a statistically significant causal link between participation in the scheme and an increased likelihood of starting new worshipping communities or higher weekly attendance, and it is therefore possible that these changes were caused by other factors.

Sustainability

- **Most respondents (79 percent) agreed that changes would be sustainable – but few (just 18 percent) strongly agreed**
- **Reasons participants thought change would be sustainable**
 - Change had become embedded
 - In church culture
 - In new structures
 - In the incumbent
- **Reasons for scepticism**
 - The change was dependent on the incumbent or a small group of volunteers
 - Few churches had scheduled times to review their progress towards changes they had committed to
 - Questions about whether churches had had long enough with the Mission Accompanier

What caused and inhibited impact?

- **What caused impact?**
 - Buy-in from the incumbent and MA group
 - Having an opportunity for reflection and strategy
 - Guidance and support for the incumbent and the church as a whole
- **What inhibited impact?**
 - Lack of buy-in from the incumbent and MA group
 - Busyness and a lack of capacity in the local church
 - Lack of structure to enable change to spread from the MA group to the rest of the church
 - Exhausted, overstretched incumbents
 - Difficult relationships (within churches and with the Diocese)

What went well?

- **Value for money:**
 - The Mission Accompanier scheme was much cheaper than comparable interventions Eido has evaluated in the past
- **What went well for churches?**
 - Similar to causes of impact above: having an opportunity for reflection and strategy, identifying a vision, guidance and support from MA, working as a group, improved focus
- **What went well for Mission Accompaniers?**
 - Allowing relationship with clergy to develop over time
 - Listening
 - Prayer
- **What went well from the Diocese's perspective?**
 - Matching MAs and churches
 - Buy-in from church and clergy
 - Clergy having support
 - Other: MA huddles, MAs tailoring approach to context

Five characteristics of a successful Mission Accompanier

In interviews, Mission Accompanier group members and incumbents identified five characteristics of a successful Mission Accompanier:

1. Listening
2. A strong faith
3. Able to help churches make their ideas a reality
4. Not imposing ideas from outside
5. Good group facilitation

If the scheme were run again, what could be improved? (Recommendations from participants)

- **Churches:**
 - Churches should think carefully about selecting the right people to participate in the MA group
 - To ensure that the scheme benefits entire churches (and not just the MA group), churches and dioceses should think about how to inform the rest of the church about the existence and progress of the scheme in a way that helps them buy in to its success
 - To get the most from the scheme, churches should set aside time for it in advance

- **MA:**
 - Mission Accompaniers should take time at the outset to explain the scheme to churches and listen to their concerns – this was crucial to building churches’ commitment to the scheme
 - Mission Accompaniers should also take time to get to know the church and its incumbent
- **Diocese:**
 - The Diocese of Worcester could improve their support for Mission Accompaniers by:
 - Better organisation and communication of Mission Accompanier huddles
 - Revising the induction to convey what Mission Accompaniers needed to know in plainer language, with no “management speak”
 - Providing individual supervision for Mission Accompaniers
 - More external accountability might have added rigour to the funding application process
 - Improved budget management could have made the scheme even more cost effective

Additional recommendations from Eido

Dioceses implementing schemes similar to Mission Accompaniers should (in addition to reviewing the recommendations from participants above):

- **Continue the Diocese of Worcester’s good work in matching churches and Mission Accompaniers**
- **Take time at the beginning of the scheme to ensure buy-in:**
 - Communicate clearly about what can be expected from the scheme
 - Set aside time to listen to churches’ hopes and concerns
 - Consider churches’ history with the diocese: to what extent will a given church find it hard to trust the diocese?
 - Secure buy-in from everyone who needs to commit to the scheme
- **Be prepared to bring in Mission Accompaniers from outside the diocese:** dioceses should not assume that coaches will be volunteers or located in their diocese
- **Include more strategic planning and measurement:** future interventions would benefit from having a theory of change and SMART indicators for outcomes (for this project, the Diocese wanted to avoid a “one size fits all” approach to measurement, but indicators could be designed to apply across context and tradition – e.g., measures of clergy wellbeing, or the extent to which congregations can describe their church’s specific vision)
- **Improve sustainability planning:** consider winding down engagement with Mission Accompaniers at the end of the scheme (so that churches meet with Mission Accompaniers less frequently, but over a longer period) and help churches create mnemonics and build reminders of their vision into their liturgies

- **Consider how dioceses might provide more help for incumbents:** many clergy are overwhelmed and discouraged, and need more help beyond the Mission Accompaniers scheme.¹ What else could dioceses do to support them?
- **Consider how dioceses might increase churches' capacity to engage with the scheme:** could dioceses or Mission Accompaniers help churches plan how they might set aside time for the scheme? (This was part of Mission Accompaniers' original brief, but appears not always to have happened in practice.) Might the Mission Accompaniers scheme be paired with interventions such as Worcester's Calling Young Disciples program or renewal churches which provide additional staff members? (Recognising the value of combining these interventions, the Diocese of Worcester has already included additional coaching for leaders from renewal churches.)

Introduction

Evaluation purpose

The purpose of this evaluation was primarily to **learn** about the Mission Accompanier scheme so as to inform future coaching programs in the Church of England and help the Church of England Vision & Strategy team understand the benefits of scaling similar programs across the Church.

Evaluation questions

This evaluation considered the following questions:

1. What went well/did not go well about the scheme?
2. What impact did it have?
3. How sustainable was this impact?
4. What caused and inhibited impact?

Methods

To answer these questions, Eido Research examined documents provided by the Diocese of Worcester and conducted primary research. This consisted of:

1. Interviews with Diocesan representatives and consultants from Forge Leadership
2. Interviews with Mission Accompaniers group members and incumbents from five churches which participated in the scheme
3. Two focus groups with Mission Accompaniers

¹ The Diocese of Worcester's leadership development program was partially intended to meet this need.

4. A survey of Mission Accompanier group members and participating incumbents

Survey summary statistics		
Total responses	Response rate (% all participating benefices)	Response rate (estimated % all people participating in program)
66	53% (21 of 38 benefices which participated in the program)	33% (of the estimated 200 clergy and laypeople who took part)

Qualitative summary statistics	
Interviews with incumbents/ Mission Accompanier group members	9
Focus groups with Mission Accompaniers	2 (14 Mission Accompaniers attended in all)
Interviews with Diocesan representatives and consultants	6

Report overview

This report begins by considering the strategic aims and objectives of the project, before outlining how the scheme was managed, its impact, sustainability, what can be learned from the intervention, and Eido's recommendations for scaling the scheme.

Strategic aims and objectives

Context and project design

The Mission Accompanier scheme was designed to help counter church decline after the Covid-19 pandemic. Drawing on a pre-existing project in the Diocese of St Edmundsbury and Ipswich, the Archdeacon of Dudley applied for funding to:

1. Provide individual coaching to incumbents who wished to participate. This coaching would concentrate on increasing the health and sustainability of their church

2. Offer additional health and sustainability coaching to church members and incumbents through “Mission Accompanier groups”. These groups focused on helping churches identify and implement ideas for mission.

To provide these services, the Diocese of Worcester worked with Forge Leadership (who had previously helped lead the project in St Edmundsbury and Ipswich) to recruit “Mission Accompaniers”: Christian coaches to help churches become more healthy and sustainable.

Goals

While no theory of change was written for this project, the initial project bid had the following objectives:

1. At least 100 churches will be thriving as a result of having been supported in creating and delivering a good health and sustainability plan.
2. Health and sustainability plans are stronger as a result of the Mission Accompanier partnering with a church, as the clergy and church members are coached and supported to more effectively release their varied gifts and skills, in order to promote robust discussions, thinking and creation of next steps and plans
3. The implementation of the next steps and Health & Sustainability plans are stronger as a result of the Mission Accompanier partnering with a church, as the coaching will assist in maintaining focus, monitoring, learning and adjustment, and will be enhanced by collaborative ideas emerging from Mission Accompanier huddles

As the Archdeacon of Dudley noted in a 2022 project reset document, these goals were not “SMART, and therefore holding [the scheme] to account is challenging”.² This evaluation will concentrate on what can be learned for future initiatives (in Worcester and beyond) involving coaching as a means of increasing church health and sustainability.

Assumptions and understanding of risks

The initial bid listed the following assumptions and risks to the project:

Assumptions	Risks
1. Partnering with a Mission Accompanier could help churches	1. A potential lack of chemistry between Mission Accompaniers and

² This lack of SMART goals derived (in large part) from a reticence from the Diocese to impose numerical targets on churches which might not be appropriate for their context. As we suggest in our **Recommendations**, future projects might still find ways of establishing SMART goals, without (for example) holding churches to rigid targets for increases in average weekly attendance or the number of new worshipping communities founded.

<p>understand what health and sustainability meant in their context</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 2. Mission Accompaniers would help churches identify their next steps towards sustainability and begin to take these steps 3. Half of Mission Accompaniers would be volunteers 4. Some participating churches would drop out 5. Mission Accompaniers would be primarily contacts already known to the Diocese 	<p>churches. To mitigate this risk, the Diocese hosted meetings between churches and Mission Accompaniers so both parties could assess whether they would like to work together</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 2. Mission Accompaniers were insufficiently skilled. To counter this risk, the Diocese established selection criteria and a rigorous interview process for potential Mission Accompaniers 3. Inadequate project management. To ensure the project was managed well, the Diocese brought in external consultants (Forge Leadership) to oversee it
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These assumptions and risks were reevaluated when the Diocese applied for additional funding for the project in October 2023. At that time the Archdeacon of Dudley noted that assumptions three and five from the list above had not proved true: most Mission Accompaniers were paid contractors (since the scheme had received few volunteer applications), and most had not been known to the Diocese before the project was implemented.

In addition to applying for more funding for the scheme as initially envisaged, the Archdeacon of Dudley also submitted a proposal for a second phase, which would gather churches which had participated in the Mission Accompanier scheme for regular “huddles”. These huddles were intended to increase the scheme’s sustainability by:

1. Keeping churches focused on executing their Health and Sustainability Plans
2. Maximising the investment from the Mission Accompanier scheme by ensuring sustainability and longevity of impact
3. Promoting learning and growth across the Diocese by enabling churches to share together
4. Encouraging collaborative working between clergy and lay people in each setting and across the Diocese
5. Enabling each church to see the challenges they are facing in context and to gain perspective, learning and insight from others

Programme management

Governance

The project was led by consultants from Forge Leadership (Simon Barrington and Ceri Harris) with oversight and active involvement from the Archdeacon of Dudley. Project governance was strong in many respects, with good leadership from Forge and the Archdeacon of Dudley, and support from the Diocesan Board of Finance and the Bishop's Council. Nonetheless, respondents also suggested ways in which project management could improve in the **What was learnt?** section below.

Cost and reset

The Mission Accompaniers scheme cost a total of £204,177. It was funded by the Diocese of Worcester itself, with an initial grant of £161,928. In October 2023, the Archdeacon of Dudley applied for a £42,249 grant increase, noting that:

- The anticipated scheme was breaking new ground, with an untried model. Some budgetary predictions were therefore speculative and inaccurate
- This was amongst the first grant applications to the HCF [Healthier Churches Fund], so the awarding body, (Bishop's Council), had little experience in assessing applications [...]
- At the time three externally funded projects were underway in the Diocese of Worcester requiring high levels of accountability and scrutiny, as part of the national Church of England Strategic Development Fund scheme. Expertise was growing in project management, but primarily amongst those responsible for both submitting the original MA grant application and guiding the approval process for the new internal HCF, so there was insufficient rigour in the process, and a sense of "marking our own homework"
- Staffing resources were stretched, so early monitoring of spending, re-forecasting of the budget and detailed breakdown of budget categories fell short of best practice, and have rendered some elements of remedial financial review labour intensive and time-consuming

In addition to these factors, the Archdeacon mentioned that the original budget had had to be adjusted to provide for costs such as time spent on annual reviews for incumbents and travel costs for Mission Accompaniers (many of whom did not want to meet with churches on Zoom).

Recruiting Mission Accompaniers

Finding candidates

Mission Accompaniers were primarily recruited through informal networks. A non-stipendiary priest in the Diocese who was involved in Christian coaching and mentoring provided several helpful connections; the Diocese also advertised the opportunity on social media (although this was less effective). Learning from Forge Leadership's experience of delivering a similar scheme in the Diocese of St Edmundsbury and Ipswich, the scheme accepted applications from Christian coaches who lived outside the Diocese of Worcester, reasoning that it was better to work with skilled coaches, even if this implied additional travel costs. Forge Leadership and the Diocese of Worcester also dedicated a significant amount of time to this stage of the process, spending between three and five months identifying and interviewing potential Mission Accompaniers.

The selection process

Potential Mission Accompaniers were invited to in-person interviews; around three-fifths of those who attended were selected for the scheme. In addition to coaching skills, Forge Leadership and the Archdeacon of Dudley expected candidates to demonstrate that they had experience in a church context and an ability to think outside their own church tradition. All successful candidates were given a contract – even those participating in the scheme without pay – as a means of setting expectations between Mission Accompaniers and the Diocese.

Induction

Once Mission Accompaniers were recruited, they were required to attend a day-long, in-person induction in Worcester. Mission Accompaniers were then asked to attend several training sessions on Zoom.

Training focused on:

1. **Marginal gains:** The concept that what churches need to become more healthy and sustainable is not big new programs but small, achievable changes
2. **How to develop a health and sustainability plan** (the Diocese of Worcester's version of a mission action plan)
3. **"Reflective practice":** How to help Mission Accompanier groups reflect on the current reality of their churches and what they could do to become more sustainable
4. **A variety of tools** to use with Mission Accompanier groups, including drawing a timeline of the church, using church surveys, and vision casting exercises

In focus groups held with Mission Accompaniers, most respondents spoke highly of the induction process. The "training and support was great", one Mission Accompanier said; others agreed, noting that the induction was "easy to navigate, rapid, and affirming", and "helpful... especially as I was new to [the] CofE, so [I] needed all the help I could get with knowing about it".

However, some Mission Accompaniers felt that the induction was unclear, with “management speak” and “platitudes” taking the place of a “real [reflection of] the situations” they would encounter when working with churches. While this was a minority view, being careful to avoid jargon and focus the training as closely as possible on what will help Mission Accompaniers work with churches may improve the effectiveness of the scheme.

Pairing Mission Accompaniers with churches

Once Mission Accompaniers had been trained, the Diocese advertised the scheme to churches. Drawing on her knowledge of churches in the Diocese (with regard to both church tradition and temperament), the Archdeacon of Dudley matched churches interested in the scheme with Mission Accompaniers she thought would suit them. Once the Archdeacon had suggested these matches, she and a representative of Forge Leadership hosted “speed dating” sessions between churches and Mission Accompaniers where both parties asked questions and (separately) reported back on whether they thought the pairing would work. If both parties wanted to proceed, the Mission Accompanier would begin to meet with the church; otherwise, the Archdeacon would suggest another pairing.

In the focus groups Eido hosted with Mission Accompaniers, most respondents felt this process had resulted in successful pairings. The “matching worked well”, respondents said. However, some mentioned more difficult experiences, observing that they would have appreciated more time to listen to the church at the beginning of the process and that it took a while to be matched with a church. A third Mission Accompanier described a pairing which had not worked well because the “theological differences” were “too large”. “But it was handled well”, this leader added: “gracefully and positively”.

Project activities

What went well?

When asked what went well about the Mission Accompaniers scheme, churches, Mission Accompaniers, and Diocesan representatives and consultants gave different answers. This did not seem to be because they disagreed about what had worked, but because they were answering the question from different perspectives. Churches focused on what had worked for their communities, Mission Accompaniers reflected on what had enabled them to succeed as coaches, and Diocesan representatives concentrated on what had allowed the scheme to benefit the Diocese as a whole.

Churches

In the survey, we asked respondents (both incumbents and MA group members) what they thought had worked best about the scheme. Most commonly, participants said that the

scheme had helped them **identify a vision and focus on achieving it**. Others said that the scheme had provided an **opportunity to reflect and strategize**: by providing “time and neutral space to talk together”, the scheme created a “forum to think about the future” which might not have been present otherwise. Crucially, Mission Accompaniers also provided **guidance and support** as churches considered how to become more missional. Respondents valued this support both because it was consistent – they appreciated that the scheme was “delivered over a sustained timeframe” with a “dedicated individual as [a] Mission Accompanier” – and because it helped their incumbents. “Supporting those who support the church” was important, they said; the scheme was a form of “protection of our vicar, giving [them] more time for vision and planning”. Incumbents agreed: having a Mission Accompanier, they said, allowed them access to “a wise sounding board” who could help them “constructively reflect... on areas for mission”.

Finally, respondents appreciated that the scheme had given them an opportunity to **work as a group**. The scheme has created “a warm, friendly, and inviting space in which to collaborate” they said; the “group became more cohesive and took responsibility”.³

Mission Accompaniers

Mission Accompaniers attributed successful experiences of coaching to **allowing relationships with churches to develop over time, listening, and prayer**. Specifically, Mission Accompaniers observed that it sometimes took a while for churches to trust the Mission Accompanier, understand what the scheme was offering, and discern how they might benefit from it. As one Mission Accompanier noted (echoing one of the main themes from the training they had received at the induction), “small next steps was the most effective way forward”.

Listening and prayer were also crucial: Mission Accompaniers described having to “feel... the way” and make time for churches “to reflect and decide what [the] next steps were”, while praying for the encouragement of the church and the process as a whole. Some Mission Accompaniers also noted that their work was aided by churches’ strong desire for support: “the church [I was working with] was very small and delighted to have someone dedicated solely to them”, one remembered.

Diocese and Forge Leadership

Lastly, when Diocesan representatives and members of Forge Leadership were asked a similar question, they said that what had worked best about the scheme was:

1. **Matching churches with Mission Accompaniers**: respondents thought that pairings between Mission Accompaniers and churches had generally worked well, enabling trust to be established with incumbents

³ Less frequently, respondents also noted that that Mission Accompaniers had provided new ideas and a helpful voice of challenge.

2. **Buy-in from church and clergy:** diocesan representatives and consultants had seen Mission Accompanier groups and clergy “properly committing to the scheme”, which resulted in them prioritizing it and giving it the energy it needed
3. **Support for clergy:** as discussed above, clergy having a sounding board who could provide both feedback and encouragement was essential. Sometimes, this took the form of gently suggesting new ideas or ways that the incumbent could improve, but (as two respondents noted) much more often it consisted of reassuring clergy “that they’re doing the right thing, that they’re on the right lines”. In the words of one Diocesan representative, “a lot of the value is saying ‘you’re doing alright; just keep going’ because they don’t get that feedback often as a church leader”
4. **Mission Accompaniers adapting their approach** to meet the needs of the churches with which they were working.
5. **Mission Accompanier huddles:** Diocesan representatives and consultants felt that “huddles” (regular meetings between Mission Accompaniers led by a consultant) allowed them to understand what was currently happening across the scheme and created an opportunity for Mission Accompaniers to learn from each other. Mission Accompaniers were somewhat more critical: while they valued the huddles, they felt that they could have been better organised and communicated. We shall discuss this theme further in the **What could be improved?** section below

What did not go well?

To avoid survey and interview fatigue, churches were not directly asked what they thought had not gone well about the scheme. (Although they were asked what they thought could be improved, for which see below.)

However, Mission Accompaniers, Diocesan representatives, and consultants all agreed that two of the most significant barriers to the scheme were **difficult relationships within the church** and **exhausted, overstretched incumbents**. In discussing difficult relationships, Diocesan representatives and consultants mentioned division within the church, both locally and over broader issues such as Living in Love and Faith. Mission Accompaniers added that difficult past interactions with the Diocese could also be a significant barrier: when incumbents did not feel that they could trust the Diocese, they were less likely to engage enthusiastically with a new scheme.

Furthermore, all parties emphasised that it was hard for incumbents who were exhausted or mentally unwell to benefit from the scheme: when incumbents’ own wellbeing was compromised, they often did not have the capacity to improve the health and sustainability of their churches.

Mission Accompaniers

In addition, Mission Accompaniers discussed the following barriers:

1. **Unclear expectations of the Mission Accompanier scheme:** the Diocese and Forge Leadership tried to set expectations for the scheme by arranging matchmaking meetings between churches and Mission Accompaniers and asking churches to sign a contract outlining their commitment to the scheme. Nonetheless, several Mission Accompaniers noted that churches did not always understand what was involved in the scheme, how it would help them, and what they could expect from a Mission Accompanier, suggesting that other ways of explaining the scheme to churches may be necessary
2. **A change in incumbents:** When incumbents moved to a different church or retired, Mission Accompaniers had to learn to work with a different priest, which could slow progress towards health and sustainability
3. **A lack of buy-in from Mission Accompanier groups:** Mission Accompaniers suggested that when churches had not committed to the scheme, they were unlikely to be successful in helping them improve their health and sustainability

Diocesan representatives and Forge Leadership

Diocesan representatives and consultants mentioned that the scheme was sometimes hindered by **structural changes** in the Diocese (such as the reorganisation of parishes and other restructuring) and **resistance to change** in churches themselves. This resistance could stem from either the congregation or the incumbent: one respondent, for example, noted that the scheme worked less well when the “incumbent [had] less humility and was less willing to learn from the process”.

Furthermore, Diocesan representatives and consultants discussed ways in which the **design** of the scheme could have been improved. Specifically, they noted that the scheme could have benefited from more attention to:

1. **Sustainability:** while the Mission Accompaniers scheme was longer than many comparable interventions (it provided coaching over two years, with the possibility to extend if approved by the Diocese), some respondents still wondered whether having a Mission Accompanier for longer might have made more of a lasting difference for churches
2. **Impact measurement:** one respondent suggested that having a theory of change for the scheme might have enabled the Diocese to identify specific outcomes it wanted to measure and to determine how to assess them. This may be especially important because another respondent acknowledged that they had struggled to gather quantitative data on the impact of the program – in large part due to the Diocese’s reluctance to impose numerical targets which might not be appropriate for all church contexts

Note: Comparison to Calling Young Disciples

Eido has recently completed an evaluation of another Diocese of Worcester programme: Calling Young Disciples. We see several commonalities in the learning which are helpful to observe:

Programme	Mission Accompaniers	Calling Young Disciples
<p>What worked well and facilitated parish-level outcomes?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Buy-in from church and clergy • Provided an opportunity to reflect and strategize: • Provided guidance and support from MA • Mission Accompaniers adapting their approach to meet the needs of the churches • Allowed church members to work as a group • Allowing relationships with churches to develop over time • Clergy having a sounding board who could provide both feedback and encouragement was essential. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A church wanting to grow its engagement with CYP before the programme began • Space to think strategically and create implementation plans • The experience and knowledge of the ME • The ME being hands-on and giving bespoke support over a period of time • Ability to learn from other churches during the programme • The combination of the ME coming from 'outside' the parish so being able to challenge, and yet being willing to be physically present and involved
<p>What did not work well and inhibited parish-level outcomes?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Unclear expectations of the Mission Accompanier scheme • A change in incumbents • Hindered by structural changes in the Diocese 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Unclear expectations of MEs through being sent by the diocesan team but working closely with placement churches • Changes in either clergy or parish structure since CYD • Loss of key volunteers for various reasons over time

Impact

There is strong evidence that the Mission Accompaniers scheme **enhanced the health and confidence of leaders** and helped churches **improve their strategy, gain confidence in mission, engage more with their communities, and work better as a team.**

There were also some suggestions that the scheme had increased **average weekly attendance** and led to the foundation of **new worshipping communities**, which we shall explore in detail below.

Improved strategy

When asked about the difference the scheme had made, survey respondents most commonly said that it had helped them improve their strategy. Interviews with incumbents, MA group members, diocesan representatives, and consultants supported this finding.

Specifically, participants emphasised that the scheme had helped their churches define their **vision** and **focus on achieving it**. “The main change in our church is our vision”, one respondent said:

We have talked about vision statements before, and never got around to it. **[The Mission Accompanier] helped us to focus...** [and] we now have our vision statement and a focus of who we are and what we are about.

Another respondent (an incumbent) agreed: working with a Mission Accompanier had given his church a “clearer vision... and once we’ve got that, then we can communicate it and make people in church more aware of who we are”.

This clearer vision had already begun to permeate congregations: while just **15 percent** of survey respondents thought that church members would have been able to describe their churches’ specific vision before the scheme, **62 percent agreed after it**. Interestingly, this change was most pronounced in benefices with high levels of deprivation (7 percent could describe the vision before; 63 percent after) or where vicars had been in post for longer (9 percent before; 71 percent after).⁴

Moreover, **many churches had made real progress on translating their visions into action**. “We have been able to focus our energies on some of the fundamentals such as communication [with the local community]”, one respondent said. Another noted that since

⁴ We compared benefices with deprivation scores above and below x and benefices where vicars had been in post for seven years or more with benefices whose vicar had been in post for fewer than seven years.

they already had “a mission, a strategy, and an annual plan”, the Mission Accompanier helped them “break this down to [an] immediate focus, which we then achieved”.

Healthier incumbents

Crucially, respondents also emphasised that the scheme left incumbents **less isolated and more strategic, confident, hopeful, and able to promote the agency of their congregations**. One incumbent, for example, partially credited the scheme with enabling him to continue in ministry:

When you're in a rut, **if you get some help from outside, you get an extra season in ministry**... When you're stuck in a rut, you feel like something needs to change, [and you wonder] “is it me?” While now I feel like I have a responsibility to see us through, to get the church in a shape where I'd want to hand it over to someone else, **which is also the sort of shape... which makes you want to stay**.

Another expressed gratitude for the perspective the scheme offered:

It gave me the opportunity to step out of the parish and look at it with different eyes; it allowed me the opportunity to think more strategically about the future [and] allowed me to trust in God that this [the future?] is okay.

More than half of MA group members (53 percent) had also noticed a change in their incumbent's leadership over the course of the scheme. “I feel our vicar has a more positive approach”, these respondents said. “Leadership has been stronger and more strategic. [There is] less ‘just reacting’.” Crucially, incumbents had also begun to make room for the agency of their congregants: “It can be hard for vicars to delegate, but there has clearly been a change in that”, one observed. “It feels he is more able to let others lead in areas which frees up more of his time for other areas of ministry.”

Confident churches

As a result of the Mission Accompaniers scheme, a variety of respondents (Mission Accompaniers, Diocesan representatives, and churches themselves) said that congregations had become **more confident and outward-looking**, with a sense of **excitement about the present** and **possibility for the future**.

“**There really has been a turnaround in the way the church see themselves** and what they are there for”, one Mission Accompanier said. “They are now energised and active and alive in their community in a way they were not before.” Others shared similar ideas: there has been “good growth in numbers”, they said, “but more than that, **there was a buzz** that was expressed by those visiting and regulars alike”.

Churches' confidence and excitement was reflected in a changed attitude towards risk: while before the scheme **just 45 percent** of respondents had seen church members try new things and take risks, by the time of the survey this figure was **85 percent**. Intriguingly, this change

was especially marked in churches whose incumbent had been in post for longer: in these churches, the proportion of respondents who had seen other church members take risks increased **50 percentage points**: from 35 percent before the scheme, to 85 percent after. Similarly, churches in more deprived contexts saw a **47-point increase**, from 30 percent before the scheme to 77 percent after.⁵

More attention to (and engagement with) the community

At the end of the Mission Accompaniers scheme, survey respondents were almost twice as likely to agree that their church took into account the needs of people attending for the first time when planning services (80 percent after; 42 percent before).⁶ Interviewees and focus group respondents also emphasised that churches had improved their communication with the community (for example, through developing a clear and memorable mission statement or recruiting volunteers to update the church's website and social media) and often developed new initiatives to reach it: respondents discussed new worshipping communities, improved children's and youth work, and heritage open days with invitations to upcoming services.

Perhaps as a result, respondents thought their churches had become better known: 70 percent agreed that the community knew about their church and its activities at the time of the survey, as compared to 45 percent before.⁷ Encouragingly, there may also have been some early signs of numerical growth: 53 percent of incumbents had seen more people attend their church for the first time after the scheme.

⁵ Although churches in less deprived contexts ended with a higher proportion of respondents who had seen members of their churches try new things and take risks (92 percent), the change was smaller: just 34 percentage points up from a starting value of 58 percent.

⁶ Here, as was often the case in this research, churches which met with their Mission Accompanier more frequently were also more likely to agree with the "before" statement (in this case, that they already took into account the needs of people attending their church before the scheme). This suggests that the frequency with which churches met with Mission Accompaniers may derive from the extent to which they were *already* interested in mission and not from the commitment of the Mission Accompanier to meeting with the church.

⁷ Intriguingly, churches whose vicar had been in post for longer started from a lower baseline: just 35 percent of respondents from these churches thought that the community knew about the church and its activities, a figure which rose to 59 percent after the scheme. The corresponding proportions for churches whose vicar had arrived in the last six years were 56 and 81 percent. By contrast, churches in more deprived contexts seemed to be less well known overall: just 63 percent of respondents from these churches thought their community about the church and its activities, as compared to 75 percent for churches in wealthier contexts.

Churches working as a team

Due to the Mission Accompaniers scheme, respondents emphasised that churches had improved at working as a team: communicating more effectively, and forming closer, more open communities.

“We have subsequently seen a real change in our culture – relationally and spiritually – and a **greater sense of working together**”, incumbents and Mission Accompanier group members said. Interestingly, respondents often attributed this change to Mission Accompaniers’ facilitation of their discussions: Mission Accompaniers, they said, created an environment which allowed them to **reflect, come up with new ideas, question their assumptions, and focus on the future**. “It has brought us all together and enabled us to work towards the same vision”, one reflected. “We have been able to think, discuss and work together in a very positive space.” Others agreed:

It has brought the four parishes of our benefice together. **Talking with the Missioner Accompanier present, the wardens tend to open up about things that are working and not working for them**, so we are helping each other more with positive ideas.

Interestingly, churches’ commitment to working as a team seemed to have translated to more laypeople taking on leadership roles: 53 percent of incumbents said they had seen more laypeople do this since the Mission Accompaniers scheme, and none said they had seen fewer laypeople volunteer for these roles (the remaining 47 percent of incumbents had seen no change). Since the scheme took place in the aftermath of the pandemic – which saw decreased levels of volunteering in the UK church as whole – this in itself is cause for celebration.

Finally, respondents suggested that working with a Mission Accompanier had not only improved their ability to work as a team, but their wider sense of community as a church. People in the same churches had developed deeper relationships, and when a single benefice comprised multiple parishes, these parishes were now working more closely together. **“There has been more generosity and actually listening to each other”**, respondents observed. This “sharing brings generosity [and] questions like ‘How can we help?’”

Did the Mission Accompanier scheme increase churches’ average weekly attendance?

There seems to be good – but not conclusive – evidence that the Mission Accompaniers scheme increased churches’ average weekly attendance. Churches in the Mission Accompanier scheme certainly grew more than those which did not participate: using a median average, churches which participated in the scheme **grew by five percent**, while those which did not **shrunk by four percent**.

However, **it is not clear that the Mission Accompaniers scheme caused this difference.** The details of this are complex, but can be summarised as follows:

1. Typically, for a finding to be declared statistically significant we need to be able to say that there is **less than a five percent chance** that an apparent relationship between an independent variable (in this case, whether churches participated in the scheme) and a dependent variable (in this case, change in their average weekly attendance) is merely a product of random chance
2. In this case, statistical tests show that there was a **21 percent chance** that the apparent relationship between participation in the Mission Accompaniers scheme and increased average weekly attendance was a product of chance
3. Therefore there was no **statistically significant** relationship between participation in the Mission Accompanier scheme and increased average weekly attendance since the odds are about one in five (21 percent) that the relationship we observe between these variables is actually a result of chance

This does not necessarily mean that there was no relationship between participation in the scheme and increased attendance: only that the data does not allow us to claim that this relationship was statistically significant. If helpful, **Eido’s best read of the data is that the Mission Accompaniers scheme likely led to an increase in average weekly attendance – but that this increase was too small to register as statistically significant** given our sample size of churches. It is also possible that repeating this analysis two or three years after the conclusion of the scheme (once churches’ improved strategy and new activities had time to produce results) might provide a clearer sense of the true extent to which the scheme had increased attendance.

Did the Mission Accompaniers scheme make churches more likely to start new worshipping communities?

There is also some evidence that the Mission Accompaniers made churches more likely to found new worshipping communities.

Using data provided by the Diocese of Worcester, Eido evaluated the number of worshipping communities planted before and after February 2023. The results of this analysis are shown below:

Participated in MA scheme?	Proportion of churches which had started a NWC before Feb 2023	Proportion of churches which had started a NWC after Feb 2023
Yes	20%	29%
No	13%	14%

As can be seen in the table, churches which participated in the scheme were more than **twice as likely** to have planted a new worshipping community: 29 percent had after February 2023, as compared to just 14 percent for churches which had not participated in the scheme. Qualitative evidence from learning reviews with Mission Accompaniers also suggests that participation in the scheme caused several churches to found new worshipping communities.

However, the relationship between these variables **fell far short of the standard of statistical significance discussed above** (with a p-value of .79). We suspect that this may be due to working with a relatively small sample size (larger samples provide a greater ability to detect relationships between variables) and would be interested to repeat this analysis for additional churches if the Mission Accompanier scheme were repeated in other dioceses.

Limitations to the impact of the scheme

In addition, our analysis suggested the following limitations to the scheme's impact:

It was not the only cause of change

After asking survey respondents about the changes they had observed in their churches over the course of the Mission Accompanier scheme, we asked to what extent they would attribute these changes to the scheme. While **74 percent** said they would attribute change to the scheme at least to some extent, **only 29 percent said they would to a large or very large extent.**⁸ While respondents partly credited the scheme with the change they had seen in their communities, **they also clearly thought there were other causes.** The Mission Accompanier scheme was one factor, but not the only, or necessarily even the most important, one.

Change had not always permeated the church

Several respondents (incumbents, Mission Accompaniers, and Mission Accompanier group members) said that they felt that the change they had seen in their church was mostly confined to the Mission Accompanier group, or sometimes just to the incumbent. **"It hasn't yet permeated through to the wider [church] community"**, respondents observed. "We could do better at... communication with the church so they are bought into the behind-the-scenes thinking." Quantitatively, only around three in five churches (62 percent) said that, thanks to the Mission Accompaniers scheme, their church now had more of a **shared** focus on mission.⁹

⁸ Interestingly, churches in more deprived contexts or which had met with their Mission Accompanier at least once a month were more likely to say the scheme was responsible for change to a large or very large extent; 37 and 40 percent of these groups, respectively, agreed with these statements.

⁹ This proportion rose to 76 percent of churches whose incumbents had been in post for seven years or more.)

Some respondents questioned whether it had had an impact

Finally, some respondents questioned whether the scheme had had an impact. While these respondents were a **minority**, those that discussed these ideas primarily felt that working with a Mission Accompanier had not yet translated into action. “It’s a talking shop”, one survey respondent said. “I can’t say that the change has been significant yet”, a Mission Accompanier agreed.

In sum: What was the impact of the Mission Accompaniers scheme?

In most cases, the Mission Accompaniers scheme appeared successful at **preparing churches for mission** (improving church strategy, increasing the confidence of clergy and laypeople, and helping Mission Accompanier groups to work as a team) and **helping them better engage with their communities** (through making church services accessible, developing new missional initiatives, and improving their communication).

There was also **some evidence that the scheme had increased average weekly attendance and led churches to found additional new worshipping communities**.

However, respondents noted that the scheme was not the only cause of change in the areas above, and that the improvements they had seen had not always extended beyond the incumbent and the Mission Accompanier group.

Taken as a whole, these findings suggest that the scheme is effective, especially at an early stage of mission. It equips churches to reach their communities, and may also help them increase their attendance and found new worshipping communities – although a larger sample size would be needed to confirm these last two findings.

Comparison to other evaluations

In understanding the impact of an intervention such as the Mission Accompaniers scheme, it can be helpful to compare it to other interventions that we have evaluated in the past. We have therefore included several case studies below:

1. **Calling Young Disciples, Diocese of Worcester:** This program spent £1.8 million to improve how churches in the Diocese worked with children and young people. Our evaluation found that the intervention caused churches to prioritise ministry to this group, improved their strategic planning, caused them to reevaluate existing ministry to children and young people (and especially to think about how this work could be made more explicitly Christian), led them to adopt new initiatives, and made churches more open to working with children and young people and hopeful about reaching them. In addition, some children and young people came to faith. Overall, this

intervention was similar to the Mission Accompaniers scheme in that (in addition to contributing to the spiritual formation of children and young people already in church) it largely **prepared churches for mission**: while some children and young people came to faith, this was not the primary impact of the program

2. **Anonymous intervention, diocese in the midlands**: This intervention spent £2.4 million to establish an online mission resource, provide subject-specific mentors for parishes (e.g., on youth and children's work, discipleship, and mission), and provide a stipend to a coach who would administer a church health survey and help churches use the results to become more missional. The online resource was somewhat successful (59 percent of respondents who had used it had done something differently in their personal lives or their church), and the subject-specific mentors were somewhat more so (71 percent of those who had worked with them had done something differently). But **the most successful aspect of the program seemed to be the coach**. Over the course of the scheme, churches which had worked with him showed marked improvement on a survey measuring church health. This may point to the value of coaching as an intervention for incumbents and congregations
3. **Anonymous intervention, diocese in southern England**: This program spent £1.9 million to (1) promote fresh expressions by recruiting a diocesan staff member to support people interested in founding them, (2) award small grants to fresh expressions, and (3) reach a new housing development through appointing a team and funding a resource church. While attempts to reach the housing development produced mixed results, the fresh expressions program was markedly successful: over the course of the scheme, the number of fresh expressions in the diocese nearly tripled (from 39 to 116), and Eido's Fruitfulness Framework survey revealed that these fresh expressions were making a tangible difference in their member's spiritual formation. However, while this program was likely more successful than the Mission Accompaniers scheme in terms of the number of new worshipping communities it produced, it was much more expensive and may not have been successful if attempted with the smaller churches which engaged with the Mission Accompaniers scheme (which might have struggled to found fresh expressions)

In sum, the Mission Accompaniers scheme appears to have had a comparable impact to some of the programs discussed above, but at a much lower cost. While the average cost of the programs above was £2 million, the Mission Accompaniers scheme spent just over £200,000.

This is not to downplay the value of other missional initiatives – the Fresh Expressions scheme above, for instance, appeared much more successful than Mission Accompaniers at founding new worshipping communities – but merely to suggest that providing churches with Mission Accompaniers may be a cost-effective way to help them take their first steps in mission.

Sustainability

Overall, **most respondents agreed that changes caused by the Mission Accompanier scheme would be sustainable** (79 percent thought the change would still be apparent in 18 months) – **but few (just 18 percent) strongly agreed**.

Below, we consider both why respondents thought the scheme had produced sustainable changes and their reasons for scepticism.

Why did respondents think change would be sustainable?

Respondents who thought the changes produced by the scheme would be sustainable emphasised that these changes had become **embedded in church culture, church structures, and in incumbents themselves**.

Church culture

Specifically, these participants felt that the changes produced by the program were strongly supported by the church and that the church had made lasting improvements in its ability to work as a team and distribute responsibilities amongst its members. Others pointed to changed mindsets: churches were more hopeful and optimistic than they were before the scheme. As one Mission Accompanier reflected, **“hope... is what helped make it a success and drove a longer-term change”**.

Church structures

Furthermore, many participants stressed that the ideas and approaches introduced through the Mission Accompaniers scheme had become embedded in the structures of their churches. Several respondents, for example, discussed how they had incorporated regular reminders of their new mission statements into the life of their church, developing church “mottos” to remind themselves of their values, advertising the mission statement widely, and incorporating it into sermons. Others mentioned the development of new programs (with committed staff and volunteers to sustain them), making lasting changes to their church leadership structures, and scheduling times for their churches to remind themselves of their health and sustainability plans.

Incumbents

Finally, Mission Accompaniers in particular had observed growth in incumbents which they expected to ensure the sustainability of the scheme. “The incumbents have changed how they think, which should stick!” one said. Another agreed: “If there is sustainability, it will come from the skills learnt by the incumbent on the journey – I witnessed him self-coaching to good effect”.

What made respondents sceptical?

In general, respondents discussed three reasons for scepticism that the changes produced by the Mission Accompaniers scheme would be sustainable: **a lack of personnel (or personnel changes), a lack of natural reset points**, and, in some cases, **insufficient time with the Mission Accompanier**.

Personnel

Several participants felt that the progress they had made through the Mission Accompaniers scheme depended either on their vicar or on a small group of volunteers. If their incumbent left for another church, they explained, a new incumbent might decide not to continue with the initiatives that they had begun with the Mission Accompanier. Likewise, some respondents thought that progress depended on their current vicar's efforts: "if I were to be hit by a bus... and they were to face a vacancy, it could fall back", one incumbent reflected.

Similarly, several respondents worried that the changes brought by the Mission Accompanier depended too heavily on a small (or aging) pool of volunteers. As one commented, "it should be okay for the time being until we get too tired and old to do it. What we need is new communities to offer up people committed to helping down the line".

Reset points

Participants mentioned a need for opportunities to reflect on the goals they had set with the Mission Accompanier to ensure that their churches continued to pursue them. While Phase 2 of the Mission Accompanier scheme was intended to provide these opportunities, some Mission Accompaniers seemed sceptical that their churches would make use of it. The church "didn't want to go for huddles part two", one said. "It looked too clinical and it lost some of the relational aspects that had been so valuable. [It's] too wide a group with different circumstances and therefore needs".

Not enough time with Mission Accompaniers

Lastly, some respondents (Mission Accompaniers and a Diocesan representative) wondered whether the scheme was long enough for change to take root; to increase its sustainability, some Mission Accompaniers suggested that they could meet with churches for longer, but taper their involvement towards the end of the scheme, so that churches could practise implementing changes on their own.

What was learnt?

What caused impact?

Respondents primarily attributed impact to:

1. **Buy-in from the incumbent and the MA group.** Several participants felt that buy-in from the incumbent was especially important: “they have to drive it, to show passion”, one Mission Accompanier said. “That’s what brings others with them”. In some cases, churches found it easier to commit to the scheme because of the dire situations in which they found themselves: “if nothing was done, the church was dead”, one respondent said
2. **Having an opportunity for reflection and strategy:** churches found having time out of their normal activities and a coach to “make you stop and think” immensely helpful. Mission Accompaniers largely used these times to help churches refine their vision and identify practical ways that they could improve their situation: the “changes [were] due to the realisation that the next small step is all that’s needed”, one said
3. **Guidance and support for the incumbent and the wider church:** when incumbents discussed this theme, they primarily mentioned Mission Accompaniers’ coaching ability, valuing that Mission Accompaniers were not merely “interested in mission”, but also in “people and leadership”. Mission Accompaniers, by contrast, focused on churches’ need for encouragement: “Mission Accompaniers encouraging people (they tend to beat themselves up a lot) means [churches] feel more confident, and this helps to facilitate change”, one said

Crucially, these three principal causes of impact were also facilitated by a range of other, enabling causes, including the Diocese matching churches with suitable Mission Accompaniers, Mission Accompaniers praying for their churches and having the emotional intelligence to listen well and allow relationships to develop over time, and churches themselves growing in confidence and learning to work as a team.

What was required for Mission Accompaniers to be successful

In interviews, Mission Accompanier group members and incumbents identified five characteristics of a successful Mission Accompanier:

1. **Listening:** Mission Accompaniers needed to be able to understand churches – and make them feel understood – before they could help them engage in mission
2. **A strong faith:** While respondents did not explain exactly *why* it mattered to them that their Mission Accompanier had a faith, they seemed to suggest that this faith enabled them to trust the Mission Accompanier and that it was important for inspiring their congregations. Both incumbents and laypeople used language which stressed the authenticity of Mission Accompanier’s faith (“real”, “strong believer in the authority of the Scriptures”) and Mission Accompaniers’ ability to inspire others to mission (“passion for their faith”, “a real heart and desire for people to come to know the Lord”, etc.)
3. **Able to help churches make their ideas a reality:** Churches wanted to make progress in mission. Therefore it was vital that Mission Accompaniers not just assist them in refining their ideas but that they actually helped make those ideas a reality. As one Mission Accompanier group member reflected, **the Mission Accompanier “is not there to listen to our ideas; she’s there to listen to our ideas and help to develop them”**

4. **Not imposing ideas from outside:** At the same time, Mission Accompaniers needed to allow themselves to be led by churches, rather than imposing their own ideas. While drawing on their own learning and experience could sometimes be valuable, Mission Accompaniers were most effective when they recognised churches' knowledge of their local area and the value of congregations generating ideas of their own
5. **Good group facilitation:** Interviewees appreciated how Mission Accompaniers had guided their group: keeping them focused and probing when members gave vague responses, while remaining gentle and creating a space for prayer and reflection

Somewhat less commonly, interviewees also discussed the value of coaching skills, empathy and emotional intelligence, and helping churches honestly identify their situations.

Did having a health and sustainability plan help?

As part of the Mission Accompanier scheme, churches were asked to complete a "health and sustainability plan": a statement of what the church would do to improve its internal health and reach its community (in other dioceses, these documents are called "mission action plans"). Eido was asked to evaluate the extent to which these plans had helped churches become more healthy and sustainable, so we included a question on the topic in focus groups with Mission Accompaniers and interviews with Diocesan leaders and consultants.

Interestingly, Diocesan leaders and consultants seemed more favourable towards health and sustainability plans than Mission Accompaniers: they felt that they provided focus, allowing churches to concentrate on what they had committed to doing. Mission Accompaniers, on the other hand, expressed a range of views: while some thought that the health and sustainability plans helped churches commit to a defined set of objectives, others postponed using them because they sensed that there were more important issues to be resolved first (e.g., to do with church culture), or had not used them at all because they preferred other tools (such as an Objectives and Key Results framework). To avoid survey and interview fatigue, this question was not asked of incumbents and Mission Accompanier group members – but further work could explore these groups' perspective on health and sustainability plans.

What inhibited impact?

When asked what inhibited impact, Mission Accompaniers, incumbents, and Mission Accompanier group members principally discussed three barriers:

1. A lack of buy-in from churches

Mission Accompaniers were clear that when churches were not motivated to change or actively resisted the scheme it was almost impossible to make progress. One Mission Accompanier, for example, shared how in one church he had a sense that "ultimately the Diocese was driving the project, not the church"; another explained that it "only takes one or two people who are resistant to have an oversized impact". Interviews with churches

themselves revealed that **buy-in could be lost through conflict within the Mission Accompanier group**. In one church, for instance, an unrelated relationship breakdown had made it impossible for two members of the Mission Accompanier group to work together; another church had felt obliged to recruit a Mission Accompanier group member who had described herself as “not [being] a team player”. This member subsequently resisted the changes her church was trying to introduce because she thought that the process was moving too quickly.

2. A lack of capacity

Some churches struggled to change because incumbents and laypeople lacked the time or (more rarely) the skills to do so. One incumbent summarised it well:

Most clergy are running at full capacity all the time already. Having a Mission Accompanier.... [there's a] realism of “You know this is important, but week-by-week keeping the ministry show on the road and doing ministry things feels like a full-time job already”. **How can we help those taking on Mission Accompaniers to clear space in their diary to do it?** [Maybe we need to say] “you'll have to give two hours a week to make this work. What's your no that's going to enable this yes?”

While this incumbent seemed to think that better prioritisation might help him work with a Mission Accompanier more effectively, other respondents were not so optimistic. Mission Accompaniers, for instance, sometimes found it difficult to identify “members of the congregation who had the skills... time... [and] confidence to be project leaders” and noted that some churches felt that the Diocese had not factored the age and size of their congregations into their expectations for growth.

3. A lack of communication with the rest of the church

Several respondents emphasised that while the incumbent and the Mission Accompanier group had made progress through the scheme, they had not had much support in sharing that progress with the rest of their congregations. “It was kind of left up to me to vaguely make sure people were more aware of it”, one incumbent said.

[We need a] more structured approach to [questions of] how to engage the wider congregation, how does it link to mission action planning, how is it owned more widely than [in a] small group.

A Mission Accompanier group member agreed:

One thing that we failed at quite badly [was] extending the communication of what the Mission Accompanier group was doing sufficiently into the congregation. Because we didn't actually have a structure for keeping [the congregation] informed about what was going on... [we] lost a trick in terms of getting a little bit more involvement from the wider parish.

Other barriers

Somewhat less commonly, participants also discussed a tendency to focus on obstacles instead of solutions (this theme was mentioned exclusively by Mission Accompaniers), an incumbent leaving the church (as discussed above), and not liking the material used by their Mission Accompanier (this barrier was mentioned exclusively by churches).

What was learned from implementing the scheme?

We asked all respondents (incumbents, Mission Accompanier group members, Mission Accompaniers, Diocesan representatives, and consultants) what they had learned from implementing the scheme and how they thought it might be improved. The selection below summarises their responses, drawing in insights from our review of Mission Accompanier scheme documents.

Learning for churches

Respondents discussed the importance of **selecting the right people to participate in a Mission Accompanier group**, stressing that group members should want to work in a team and represent a variety of ages and viewpoints.

They also emphasised that the Mission Accompanier scheme should **benefit the whole church**, not just the Mission Accompanier group. Specifically, respondents suggested that there should be a plan for how the existence and progress of the Mission Accompanier group should be communicated to the church as a whole (a suggestion which might also inform how dioceses design future iterations of this program and how future Mission Accompaniers implement it). Participants mentioned several practical ways in which churches could be kept aware of the Mission Accompanier program: incumbents might mention the work of the Mission Accompanier group as part of sermons, or the Mission Accompanier could make a point to visit or speak during a Sunday service.

Finally, both incumbents and Mission Accompaniers emphasised a need for churches to **set aside time** for the Mission Accompaniers scheme in advance. Since incumbents and Mission Accompanier group members were busy, communicating early in the process how much time would be expected of them each month and determining when, specifically, they would meet increased the likelihood that churches would be able to prioritise the scheme.

Learning for Mission Accompaniers

When reflecting on their experience of the scheme, Mission Accompaniers stressed the value of taking the time at the outset to explain the scheme to churches and understand their concerns. (Some respondents also applied this lesson to dioceses, explaining that ensuring that churches understood the scheme and its benefits and had been listened to led to better pairings with Mission and more dedication to the scheme.) This step made churches much **more likely to commit** if they decided to proceed with the scheme.

To that end, Mission Accompaniers felt that it was crucial to dedicate time to **getting to know the incumbent and the church**. “Be around”, one said; by consciously spending time with churches, Mission Accompaniers built the trust and contextual knowledge they would need to be successful as coaches.

Learning for dioceses and consultants

Although respondents expressed appreciation for how the Diocese and Forge Leadership had overseen the scheme, they suggested that this oversight might be improved by:

1. **Better support of Mission Accompaniers:** Several Mission Accompaniers noted that while the content of the Mission Accompanier huddles had been good, **how huddles were organised and communicated could have been improved**. While it is natural that some administrative details will slip when organising a scheme such as this, respondents particularly wanted to be sure that the organisers would attend at the scheduled time and perhaps also to have more notice of meetings. (For their part, organisers also mentioned the challenge of bringing many freelance consultants together at consistent times, due to the flexible nature of their diaries.) Similarly, although Mission Accompaniers generally appreciated the content of the induction, some thought it could have been improved by minimising “management speak” and conveying what they needed to know in plainer language; some also requested more background on the Church of England to help them understand the churches they were working with.¹⁰ Diocesan representatives suggested that more regular reviews of Mission Accompaniers might improve how well they could support them and the churches with which they worked
2. **More external accountability:** as the Archdeacon of Dudley noted in her MPA business proposal, much of the Diocese’s project management expertise was concentrated in the group delivering the Mission Accompaniers scheme – a group which overlapped with the body approving funding. Therefore the Archdeacon of Dudley felt that there was “insufficient rigour in the process, and a sense of ‘marking our own homework’”
3. **Improved budget management:** in the same document, the Archdeacon of Dudley observed that staff resources were limited, “so early monitoring of spending, re-forecasting of the budget and detailed breakdown of budget categories fell short of best practice, and have rendered some elements of remedial financial review labour intensive and time consuming”. There is also need to budget for time spent on annual reviews and travel costs for Mission Accompaniers

Conclusion

This evaluation has shown much to celebrate about the Mission Accompaniers scheme. The scheme has supported incumbents and helped churches improve their strategies, become

¹⁰ One challenge for the consultants organising the induction was that Mission Accompaniers had varying levels of pre-existing knowledge on both the concepts covered in the induction and the Church of England as a whole.

more confident in mission, better engage with their communities, and work as a team. It likely also increased their average weekly attendance and led to churches planting additional worshipping communities. Findings from this report also underscore what Eido has seen in recent evaluations of the Worcester Calling Young Disciples program and the London Grow scheme: that giving churches time to think about their strategy magnifies their impact *and* that a lack of capacity in incumbents and congregations is a significant barrier to mission.

Since the impact of this scheme aligns with the Church of England's bold outcome of creating a parish system revitalised for mission, there may be benefits in scaling up initiatives similar to Mission Accompaniers in other dioceses.

Recommendations for dioceses implementing schemes similar to Mission Accompaniers

In addition to the learning which respondents suggested above, Eido would recommend that the impact of the scheme might be improved by:

1. **Continuing the Diocese of Worcester's good work in matching churches and Mission Accompaniers:** It is crucial to take the time to ensure good pairings between churches and Mission Accompaniers. It is also vital that both parties know that they can end the coaching arrangement at any time: respondents shared stories of churches, Mission Accompaniers, and the Diocese sensitively bringing coaching relationships to a close when they realised that these relationships would not be (or were no longer) productive. This approach avoids valuable resources being directed towards interventions that do not benefit the church
2. **Taking the time at the beginning of the scheme to ensure buy-in:** While the Diocese of Worcester largely did this well, it is essential to communicate clearly about what churches can expect from the scheme and to set aside time early on to listen to their hopes and concerns. **One important factor to consider is churches' history with the diocese:** Churches with difficult past relationships with the diocese may find it harder to commit to the scheme, and dioceses may wish to consider how they can build trust. **It is also vital to secure buy-in from everyone who needs to commit to the scheme,** not just incumbents and Mission Accompanier group members. How might dioceses help (for example) PCCs and even congregation members understand how the scheme will benefit their church?
3. **Being prepared to bring in Mission Accompaniers from outside the diocese:** One of the reasons the Worcester Mission Accompaniers scheme succeeded is that the Diocese revised its initial expectation that Mission Accompaniers would largely be volunteers and people already known to the Diocese. Other dioceses should similarly be prepared to bring in high-quality coaches, even if that requires working with people outside their current networks or paying for coaches' time
4. **Including more strategic planning and measurement:** The Worcester Mission Accompaniers scheme might have been even more successful if it had a clear theory

of change and SMART indicators to monitor the scheme's progress. Other dioceses should include these when planning similar programs

5. **Better planning for sustainability:** While Phase Two of the Mission Accompaniers program was intended to cement the progress described in this evaluation, not all churches thought it would be helpful. Dioceses may want to consider some of the other suggestions in this report, such as winding down engagement with Mission Accompaniers slowly (so that towards the end of the scheme churches meet with Mission Accompaniers less frequently, but over a longer period), or encouraging Mission Accompaniers to help churches build reminders of their vision into their liturgies or to create mnemonics (one church, for example, had come up with "mottos" which summarised the work they had done with Mission Accompaniers)
6. **More help for incumbents:** While incumbents found the Mission Accompaniers scheme helpful, more help is needed for clergy who feel discouraged and overwhelmed by their responsibilities. What else (beyond the Mission Accompanier scheme) could dioceses do to support incumbents in this situation?
7. **Increasing capacity:** One of churches' primary barriers to implementing the scheme was a lack of capacity: incumbents and laypeople were already fully occupied with other responsibilities. Dioceses can encourage churches to set aside time for the scheme and plan how they might do so, but, since this approach will not help the most overstretched churches, they may also want to consider other solutions. Could dioceses combine the Mission Accompaniers scheme with providing additional staff, as Worcester did with the Calling Young Disciples program and as it is currently doing for renewal churches?