

PIONEER MINISTRY COUNCIL - REPORT 2025

Membership

Rt Rev David McClay (Chair) (3/3)
Mrs Hilda Connolly (3/3)
Rev Canon Dr Maurice Elliott (1/3)
Rev Captain Isaac Hanna (3/3)
Mr Joe Kelly (2/3)
Mr Robert Neill (3/3)
Ms Stella Obe (appointed) (2/3)
Rev Abigail Sines (resigned)
Mr Alan Williamson (2/3)

In attendance – Pioneer Ministry Leadership Team

Rev Robert Jones – National Director
Ven Barry Forde – Operations Lead
Mrs Ingrid Brennan – PA and Administration

Introduction

Pioneer Ministry stands in the widening gap between the church and contemporary culture with the aim of reaching those with little or no connection to church. Pioneer Ministries seek to engage people where they are, rather than inviting them to come to us. Over the last 50 years, attendance and membership of the Church of Ireland has progressively declined as has also been observed in many other Christian denominations in Western societies. This has resulted in a narrowing of the fringe of people with whom traditional church can connect. There are now many more people in our communities who have no engagement with the Church and no understanding of the Christian message. Pioneer Ministry seeks to reach those people outside the church and to create new ways of doing and being church. From embedding a pioneering culture and supporting activities in parishes and chaplaincies across the island, to setting up networks within each diocese to support and resource pioneering, to funding and training new leaders in full-time Pioneer Ministries, Pioneer Ministry seeks to encourage the whole church to reach those outside our walls. The Pioneer Ministry movement will play its role as part of a 'Mixed Ecology', with traditional and new ministries complementing each other, honouring the other through mutual prayer, respect, recognition, partnership and learning.

Pioneer Ministry was formally launched in February 2023, is fully endorsed by the House of Bishops, has received significant generous financial backing from the Representative Body, and the first Pioneer Ministry Council was formed at General Synod 2023. From inception the Pioneer Movement has worked towards 5 key objectives, and for consistency the report of the Council each year will address each of these in turn.

1. Governance and Leadership

The Pioneer Ministry Council and Pioneer Leadership Team are two important building blocks in the leadership and governance structure. The Leadership Team reports to Council, the Representative Body, and House of Bishops, and the Council reports to Standing Committee, and General Synod.

The leadership team is comprised of the Rev Rob Jones and the Ven Barry Forde, is supported administratively by Mrs Ingrid Brennan, and receives consultancy support from Canon Phil Potter.

The Pioneer Ministry Council has met throughout the year both online and in person, and has overseen the first year of selection, deployment and inauguration of new trained pioneers and pioneer ministries. To this end the Council is grateful for the support of the Pioneer Ministry Approvals Body and the Representative Body. A key learning for the Council in this past year has been to observe the range of needs of those coming forward seeking support for new projects and training, and to be able to adapt to meet the reality on the ground. Some require financial support for both project and training, others simply want to resource current volunteers

or employed staff through the new pioneer ministry training programme. This is detailed further in section 3 below.

The Council receives reports from the Leadership Team and is planning for a residential in the Autumn of this year to establish a working plan to support and plan for pioneer ministry, and the sustainability and growth of the leadership team.

The Council wishes to express its gratitude for the contribution made by Rev Abigail Sines who resigned from membership of the Council in this past year, and to welcome Mrs. Stella Obe to the work of Council.

2. Diocesan Pioneer Ministry Hubs

Pioneer Ministry Hubs, or teams, are groups of people within each diocese who will work to advocate, champion and support pioneer ministry in their own setting. It is vital that Pioneer Ministry is contextualized and shaped to fit our diverse contexts. To date 14 Hubs have been established (see map below) at different stages of development across the island, with more to come online over the next year. To help drive these Hubs forward 10 dioceses have now appointed a 'Diocesan Advocate', with the last diocese close to appointing, to be the point person for Pioneer Ministry in their diocese. The Pioneer Leadership team will work closely with the Hubs and Advocates to help support, train and resource these vital networks that, in turn, can help and equip parishes, chaplaincies, and volunteers on the ground, along with supporting funded pioneers and projects.

We had the wonderful opportunity in November 2024 to bring together Advocates and Hubs from across the whole church to the first ever Church of Ireland Pioneer Ministry gathering. The first of two days was invested in gathering the Diocesan Advocates for a time of team building and learning from one another. On the second day, representatives of the Hubs joined with us, despite the best efforts of Storm Bert to curtail attendance. This gathering of lay and ordained attendees, from all manner of churchmanships and hailing from all parts of the island, listened to presentations and worked in small groups on the opportunities and challenges for pioneer ministry in their contexts. The feedback and learning received from participants formed the basis of a report and action plan created by the Pioneer Ministry Team and will be worked through with each Diocesan Pioneer Advocate, their Pioneer Hub, and their Bishop. The gathering concluded with a celebration of Holy Communion.

These two days were enormously encouraging, and it is hoped will prove to be catalytic in the growth of pioneer ministry in the years that lie ahead.

3. Identify, Train, Deploy and Support Volunteer and Employed Pioneers

2024 marked the first year of identifying, selecting, approving, and then deploying new pioneers into training and new funded ministries into being. This has been an experience of encouragement and learning. From the outset of the year the 'design' of the process was geared towards identifying and approving five full time pioneers in five full-time projects, with each of the five persons beginning training on the new Church of Ireland Pioneer Ministry course. During this process four full-time projects emerged that were assessed as being suitable for funding, but a further four persons emerged who are already undertaking pioneering type roles in their own setting who were seeking support for training only. By agreement with the Representative Body, we were able, within the same budget, to 'pivot' and approve four full-time new ministries with four full-time pioneers, and a further four pioneers in training for non-funded ministries. In addition, one of the full-time projects is being co-led by a married couple, with the central funding grant shared across this team and with the diocese meeting the training costs of the second spouse. Incredibly this means that in its first-year pioneer ministry has nine pioneers in training, is providing central funding for four new ministries, and is increasing the pioneer skills and capabilities of four further pioneers in ministries that already exist within the church. This is a good news story, proving a willingness and capacity to pivot and be creative in how the church applies the agreed resources to fit the context and needs of the church. To this end we express our continued support and gratitude to the Representative Body.

This first intake of nine new Pioneers commenced training September 2024, with funded projects also commencing at that time. The Pioneers have all been licensed by their own respective diocesan Bishop at six separate services. Each service had a sense of continuity and discontinuity with the other, as parallel patterns of licensing took place within different settings and types of service, befitting each local and diocesan context.

4. Establish and support new pioneer communities and churches

Closely related to the identification and deployment of new pioneers are the ministries they will be deployed into. These new pioneers and ministries are:

Pioneers in training with RB grants to the Pioneer Ministry

Diocese	Ministry	Pioneer
Dublin & Glendalough	Parish Partnership congregation	Mr Shane Maguire
Connor	Church Plant	Rev Peter Meenagh (OLM)
Tuam, Limerick, Killaloe	Spiritual Pilgrimage Community	Mrs Valerie Raitt
Down & Dromore	Church Renewal Project	Mrs Lorraine and Mr Nevin Anderson (role share)

Pioneers in training with RB support for training only

Diocese	Ministry	Pioneer
Cashel, Ferns	Lismore Cathedral Partnership	Mr Ross Barrett
Cork, Cloyne and Ross	Ballincollig Centre	Ms Louise Hockey
Down & Dromore	Suitcase project	Mr Tim Burns
Down & Dromore	Centre of Mission	Ms Natalie Trainor

The map on the following page illustrates the locations of the eight Pioneer Ministry, four receiving RB grant funding and 4 not receiving grant funding. More information on each may be found at www.pioneerministry.org, where you will discover ministries that are very diverse, innovative, and that are spread across the island – north, south, east and west. They range from projects with refugees, to centres of mission, to church plants, to rural spiritual tourism and pilgrimage, and new pioneer congregations set up to revitalize declining parishes. Over the last 6 months the pioneer team has been making videos to highlight the vision of these Pioneer Ministries and those involved, and such videos may be found on our website and social media feeds.

It is to be hoped that the work of the diocesan hubs will see the development of smaller, local pioneer initiatives that are volunteer led, so that the story of pioneer ministry on the island is not confined to those places that receive central funding. It is our hope that new communities and expressions of church will emerge within the Church of Ireland, through the Church of Ireland, to reach those with little or no connection to the Church of Ireland. We would encourage anyone in any parish or chaplaincy who wants to know more about how to begin the work of pioneering in their locality to get in contact with your diocesan advocate and hub – the details of which may be found at www.pioneerministry.org.

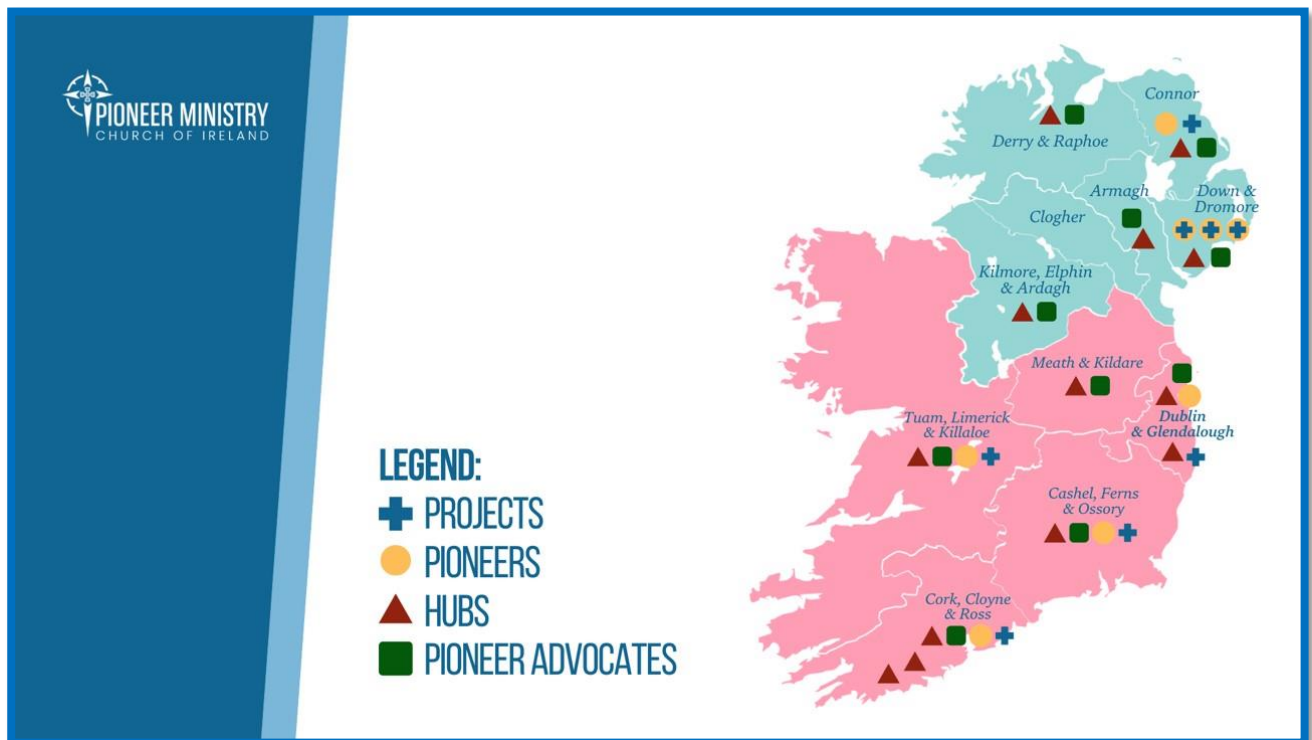
2025 proposals

At the time of preparation of this report the Pioneer Ministry Leadership Team and Council are working on applications for Pioneer Ministry Projects and Pioneers for 2025. We are delighted that there is very strong interest in bringing forward new applications, and we look forward to working with other dioceses as future applications for PM training and RB Funding are received.

For information the grant available, payable over 5 years, for ministries commencing in 2025 (with the expectation that applicants will provide the additional funding required to support a full-time pioneer in his or her ministry) is €118,500 / £103,000 with a further allowance towards housing and expenses of €18,593 / £15,804 (payable over 5 years).

5. Integration of Pioneer Ministry into the culture and structures of the Church of Ireland

The past two years have been truly encouraging. Pioneer Ministry is an initiative of the House of Bishops, resourced and funded by the Representative Body, with a Pioneer Ministry Council established by, and reporting to the General Synod. A Leadership Team is being resourced, that in turn has been able to work towards the appointment of diocesan advocates and the creation of pioneer ministry hubs in every diocese. An accredited training course has commenced in partnership between the Church of Ireland Theological Institute and Church Army, with 9 people in training for 8 pioneer ministries across the island, with 4 receiving central grant funding. In 2025 we fully expect to add a further 5 new ministries to this cohort. The central gathering in November 2024 brought together around 70 people from across the island with a heart to reach those with little or no connection to church. The map below illustrates how all this is emerging across the island.



This is exciting, and yet it is also embryonic. This is step-by-step, and the Pioneer Ministry Council is grateful to all those working in step with us. We express our gratitude to the House of Bishops, Representative Body, General Synod and Standing Committee, the Church of Ireland Theological Institute and Church Army, along with our hopes and prayers for the Diocesan Advocates and Hubs and continue to be thankful for the hard work of the Pioneer Ministry Leadership Team. This is an ongoing journey of learning and discovery as, working together, we seek to help the whole church to reach those with little or no connection to church.

To pick up a guidebook, sign up to our newsletter, or to find out more, please go to our website, www.pioneerministry.org along with visiting the Pioneer Ministry stand at General Synod.