Changing Market Towns

A Lessons Learned Review for public readership

August 2024

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There is no Executive Summary as such but this index page and Appendix 5 together fulfil the role of one.

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Introduction

1.1 The Changing Market Towns (CMT) project

The project purpose, as set out in its bid for funding from the Strategic Development Fund (as it was then called), overseen by the Church Commissioners, can be expressed simply under two headings.

Growth
There was a hope of seeing a reversal of declining church memberships in deprived Fenland town churches and especially of a fall in the average age of congregations with increasing numbers of families: this to be achieved within existing parish structures and diocesan governance. There was also a real desire for spiritual growth in these congregations and a renewed emphasis on discipleship.

Transformation
But the vision was wider than congregational health alone. It also included a bold hope that these churches could impact their local communities and bring transformation to a deprived area of rural England.

The Mid-term Review which I conducted and published in November 2021 includes a section which describes this in a little more detail. This is reproduced in this report in Appendix 1 on page 17.

1.2 For whom this report has been written

The CMT project has not been replicated elsewhere to my knowledge. So its Board decided that in an effort to avoid any reinventions of wheels there would be a Lessons Learned Review so that other mission projects could learn from what had gone well and avoid some of the errors made.

This summary of the original report (dated June 2024) has been prepared for a wider readership to share such lessons that have been learned from the CMT project.

This report has a number of possible readers.

- The Mission and Ministry Department of the Diocese of Ely who have now taken the project over to bring it into the central life of the diocese.

- Those who have been involved in CMT in any way as an opportunity to ponder, now with hindsight.

- Those who plan or lead any future mission initiatives in the Diocese of Ely.

- Any other Church of England diocese planning future mission initiatives.

- Any outreach project conducted by any group of Christians.

- Researchers and writers in the field of mission.

1.3 Methodology of CMT

The leaders of the project offered CMT as a resource to a number of towns in the Fens with financial support for staffing over a five year period, funded partly by the Church Commissioners' Strategic Development Fund (as already explained) and partly through diocesan asset sales. Some towns joined in the initial cohort, a few came in later.

Staff appointments selected by these churches included those serving families, children, schools or youth, those involved in outreach projects and, for most towns, an

Operations Manager, this last appointment being a requirement of the external funder. Instead of family and schools appointments, one parish opted for a worship leader and, eventually, the equivalent of a Parish Nurse. The aim was to empower local incumbents and PCCs to make appropriate appointments.

The central staff offered project leadership, evangelism training and support, operational back-up and the collection of monthly statistics as required by the funders.

There were a number of changes part way through the project with a change in Project Leader (and a questionable cut from a full time to a half time post) and a Mid-term Review undertaken by this consultant which resulted in a number of changes.

The project is now being taken into the Mission and Ministry Department of the diocese although the governance structures for this are not at present clear. Funding will continue at a reduced level for a little while yet.

1.4 Features of this unique project

If lessons are to be learned, it Is important to understand some of the key features of CMT because it was an unusual concept that other projects are unlikely to mirror exactly. So in what follows bear in mind that CMT has the following features.

- It is a Church of England project.

- It was planned to impact one relatively deprived and rural area of one diocese.

- The target was both churches and local communities in a set of market towns.

- No other diocese has attempted anything quite like this.

- It was at heart a five-year project from the funding offered.

- The money funded a group of central staff and a range of local church appointments ('CMT Workers').

- The project was designed to fit within the wider 2025 diocesan vision (Lever 5: Targeting support to key areas).

- The Covid epidemic had a major impact on the project as also, some thought, did the closure of the Fenland Learning Community (see 1.5 below).

- The project launched in August 2018 and is currently (August 2024) ongoing in a more limited way.

1.5 Two unexpected events

The aims of this unusual and innovative project were praiseworthy. But before the project was up to full speed, Covid hit and some staff had to be furloughed. The impact of the epidemic was not all negative because town-based Operations Managers were in place to organise recording of services and, with other staff, distributions of food and other resources to those in need. Such ministry had a real impact on several towns and put the Church back at the centre of the local community, at least for a limited time. But, for a number of people, Covid hit the project hard, coming when it did.

It impacted the project negatively in four main ways. First, many project staff were unable to do their work because of lockdown. Secondly, several fresh expressions of church that had already been set up had not had time to be fully rooted and so came to a standstill. Thirdly, it hit the confidence levels of churches. Those with more elderly congregations found a significant proportion did not return after lockdown was lifted. Fourthly, it meant that many older church volunteers found a reason for standing down after years of faithful service without younger people being available to replace them.

The other unexpected difficulty, perceived by some, was the closure of the Fenland

Learning Community. This was training from within the culture of the market towns, rather than provided from wealthy, academic Cambridge. Initially it was named after the market town where it was based, but it should have been more clearly within the central structure because it was associated with the whole project. This initiative unravelled in an unfortunate way, and it came to a premature end.

1.6   **Positive assessment**

The project has its critics within the diocese, with concern at the level of expenditure for outcomes well short of original (but untenable) targets set.

But not everyone is negative about the project as might be thought from some of the lessons learned that I give in this report. Comments received from people I have been in contact with include wording such as:

- We should take pride in undertaking a project that no other diocese had attempted before.

- This project demonstrated innovative thinking and a willingness to take huge risks.

- This is an ambitious project that is well worth doing – it is hardly surprising that in hindsight we got some things wrong.

- It was a really good project to undertake – and was certainly not set up to fail.

- This is an ambitious project that was well worth doing – even with its short-comings.

- It has been 100% worthwhile.

- We have sent several staff on for ordination training.

- There have been some really excellent staff appointments.

- Both the two Project Leaders have been excellent appointments.

- There are so many stories to tell of lives that have been impacted for Christ.

- Where there is local commitment and buy-in, there has been growth.

- Where there was a real appetite for growth, the project enabled that.

- At least three of the market town churches have grown through their involvement in CMT.

- The emphasis on churches caring for and impacting their local communities has been revelatory in some towns.

A number of CMT staff appointments have been for work with schools and in the churches with families, children and teens. Churches with such appointments had much to be grateful for. In particular there has been growth in relationships with the local community, and relations built especially with heads, staff and parents of local schools. But this does not necessarily translate into Sunday service attendance numbers and needs to be measured in a more nuanced way.

An unexpected benefit of the project has been in the spiritual growth of many of the CMT Workers who were appointed. Several of these have found a vocation in full-time service including six of them (a remarkably high proportion) going on to explore ordination as a result of their CMT work.

But the Mid-term Review described eight 'fundamental weaknesses' and these are listed without comment in Appendix 2 on page 20. Recommendations that followed in that review are listed without their explanation in Appendix 3 on page 21. There was then a reset of the project under the new Project Leader and a range of changes were made.

1.7 **Purpose of this report**

This report is not designed as a performance review of the Changing Market Towns project. That was more the purpose of the Mid-term Review which I conducted in 2021 and which focused on a number of recommendations to enable greater success for the project.

The aim of what follows is not to assess the project again two and a half years further down the line. As already explained, the project is currently being absorbed into the Mission and Ministry Department for the Diocese of Ely for ongoing sustainability.

I need to state this clearly at the outset because it became clear to me that assessment was what most of my questionnaire respondents and interviewees had in mind. And, as such, there was nothing wrong with this approach. But my aim is different.

To reinvent the wheel is something of a cliché but it is what the Church is apt to do time and again. This Lessons Learned Review is designed to enable future projects to build on the knowledge base built up through the experience of running Changing Market Towns.

It is probable that there will never be another CMT project so I needed to explain the context (above) so everyone has some idea of where these lessons learned have come from. But there will certainly be other mission projects in a Church committed to mission and although market towns may not be the focus, there will be something different in context but with lessons that can still be learned from what has been undertaken by the Diocese of Ely.

1.8 **The research base**

This report is based on the following inputs.

- An online questionnaire sent to those involved in the CMT project in some way. 34 people responded, some of them in considerable detail. The multi-part questions asked are given in Appendix 4 on page 23.

- A set of twelve Zoom interviews, of about an hour each, conducted with a number of people in the project, or close observers of it, who agreed to be interviewed. The list was chosen by the retiring Chair of the Board and the Project Leader but assessed by the consultant in an effort to avoid bias. Interviews were carried out between 17th and 25th April 2024.

- The Mid-term Review report I wrote and the research that went into that, including on-site interviews in six of the market towns and with the central staff at the time. The link to the report, which is available on the Diocese of Ely website, is given in Appendix 1.

1.9 **The structure of this report**

The questionnaire explored the seven themes of purpose, achievements, change, staffing, children/young people, sustainability and models of outreach and nurture. Those were chosen as the themes respondents would be able to write about.

But in the analysis of all the responses and interviews, this report varies those seven themes somewhat, and I have selected instead the following 12 'lenses' through which to view the project, some of which cover ground in all the above seven.

12 'lenses' through which to see lessons to learn

1   Spiritual heart
2   Vision and plan
3   Leadership
4   Project Board
5   Ownership
6   Culture
7   Communication
8   Staffing
9   Placements
10   Schools and families
11   Training
12   Sustainability

I hope my readers will see these 12 as different lenses through which to view any mission initiative. None of them stands in isolation, all overlap. This is not designed as a list of separate lessons. Recommendations listed under one of these 12 headings are likely to apply under other headings too (I give just a few cross-references). Their choice is mine and there will be other possible categories that could be selected to fulfil the purpose of this review.

Use these 12 themes/lenses to check out any future project. Pay attention to them all and you will be more likely to have project success. Each lens shows up three or four recommended lessons to learn.

1.10 Terminology for CMT

CMT Workers
Staff funded by the project working in one of the market towns.

Delivery Group
A staff-based group which existed during the first half of the project.

Market Town
The overall name given to the Fenland towns to which CMT was offered.

Project Board
The quasi-Trustees, selected staff and non-execs, who acted as the Board for the project.

Project Leader
The member of staff who led the project, known as Bishop's Change Officer for the first half of the period.

Town Lead
The member of the clergy in the market town who co-ordinated the work in that town.

I have also used the term 'mission edge' in a few places to mean the towns where mission was happening as opposed to the 'centre' at Ely.

2: The 12 'lenses'

Here now is a listing of 42 recommended lessons to learn (labelled R) broken down under the 12 themes or 'lenses' (labelled L). The first recommendation in each of the 12 lenses has an asterisk. These may be taken as the most important recommendations for future projects. The list of these lenses and recommendation (without commentary) is given in Appendix 5 on page 26.

L1   Spiritual heart

If this is a project of mission and discipleship, of outreach and nurture, of kingdom growth, then this is God's work. It should not turn itself into an exercise in secular management. Beware setting a managerial agenda that assumes success in only numerical terms, whilst recognising the value of good management and governance practice. Put prayer and Bible teaching at the heart of what you are attempting, both at the centre and at the mission edge. Do not assume that human endeavour alone can grow the Church of Christ and impact communities.

R1.1*   Place Christ at the centre of all planning

Anchor any such church project in a Christ-centred perspective before any concept of management. Be warned against those who might direct it and fund it by letting it become a business proposal focused on numerical targets with a spiritual veneer tacked on to make it acceptable. This is not to decry targets, measurement and management tools as such but they should never become the focus of what the project is all about. They should be chosen to reflect not just numerical but also spiritual growth, and so should be appropriate measures of outcome for each activity.

If church growth, both spiritually and numerically, is the aim there needs to be a clear acknowledgement that real, effective growth is the work of God's Spirit. And that can sometimes result in unexpected outcomes.

R1.2   Ensure the project is surrounded with prayer

If this is to be seen as a mission initiative the staff and the Project Board need to make prayer together a priority, and it would be wise to have a supporters group informed through monthly prayer requests. Prayer should be seen to be central to all activity to enable a culture of reliance on God.

R1.3   Seek staff where Christian character features as a priority

It may not be possible to justify an Occupational Requirement under equalities legislation for every member of staff but any involved in front-line mission or leadership in any form should have one. The project needs to demonstrate that it is all about growing the Kingdom and so the Christian experience and character of its staff are vital. Seek out people called by God to this work. Ensure you can justify any Operational Requirements you place on appointments. See Lenses 8 & 9 for more on staffing.

R1.4   Provide Bible teaching if you seek to build disciples

It is of little value to aim for a higher attendance at church services if people are not being taught and nurtured in the faith. Ensure your mission edges for staff and the churches you are operating within offer good teaching and enquirer resources such as Alpha or equivalents for both staff and congregations.

It is also vital to offer training in personal evangelism so staff and church members know how to lead an enquirer to Christ.

L2   **Vision and plan**

Any work for God needs a clear definition of purpose, values, vision and therefore plan. Targets are stepping stones towards a vision but what matters is the vision. This should be something that unites and energises everyone involved. So ownership of the project (see Lens 5) depends on ownership of the vision. If the project is aiming to bring about change, it Is the vision that defines what needs to be changed.

R2.1*   **Have a well-defined, known and owned vision**

A vision is a description of what the impact of the project will show in, say, five or ten years' time. It describes what the churches will look like that is different from now. It is not the same as a purpose which is a statement of why you are running this project.

But it Is vital that all stakeholders understand and are motivated by the vision. It is of little use if there is one group passionate for it but others who are unaware of it or not energised by it. So proceed only when enough people are on board and then aim to bring others with you. It is important that all staff know they are contributing to that vision and see their work in that context.

R2.2   **Have a realistic time scale in your plan**

Mission projects need several years of work. Fresh expressions rarely become settled congregations in less than ten years so a project with a five-year time scale and staff on three year contracts are not going to achieve much in the time frame envisaged.

It is therefore essential to work with the funding agency to produce a timescale for the project itself that makes good sense even if it presents a real challenge to faith. Ten years might be seen as a minimum for many mission projects.

Appoint staff within this time context rather than on short-term contracts.

R2.3   **Allow sufficient time for initial preparation**

The Board and Project Leader need to define the project purpose, values and vision with great care before it gets under way. There should be no rush to appoint staff and a significant amount of time should be spent in initial planning. This should be set in a context of prayer and building a network of prayer supporters (see Recommendation 1.2).

R2.4   **Choose realistic targets that are appropriate**

Some form of measurement may well be appropriate but take care to set the right metrics for what the project might deliver and be very careful over specific numbers that have little evidence as being wise. A fresh expressions element will not produce financial giving within just five or so years. A schools project will not produce an immediate increase in families at Sunday services. More appropriate metrics need to be chosen in such cases.

Ensure you have the data you require for effective decision-making.

L3 **Leadership**

Leadership is a key concept in any initiative that is challenging the status quo and seeking to be innovative in a well-established culture. There needs to be a balance between leadership at the centre and at the mission edge, and between staff leadership and governance.

R3.1* **Clarify the location and operation of leadership**

The project will not be effective if its leadership is not clear. There needs to be a Project Leader (effectively a CEO to lead the senior staff team) and a Board Chair (to lead the Trustee team). Both need to be seen to have proper authority to lead with due accountability. Much of the success of the project will depend on the health of the relationship between these two people and their respect for each other.

But if the Board is part of a wider governance structure it is important to have the known leaders of that structure as the figurehead leaders over the CEO and Board Chair. Without this the project will remain detached from the wider body. For a Church of England diocesan project it is vital that there is full backing from every part of the diocesan leadership and structure.

R3.2 **Ensure the Project Leader and Board have necessary authority**

Leadership is a key concept and if any over-riding structure means that the Project Leader has their hands tied behind their back, there will be frustration. This applies in particular when incumbents, who are office-holders and not liable to report to a line manager, are expected to play key roles in a project.

The governance responsibility for the Board may be clear in an independent organisation. But if the project is part of a wider organisation, the role and authority of the Board needs to be clarified in how it relates to other governance bodies.

R3.3 **Ensure there is enthusiastic and gifted leadership at the mission edge**

Some aspects of the project may require skilled understanding and experience that those on the mission edge cannot be expected to have. The leadership of such functions then needs to be supplied from the centre. Examples include employment and management of staff for churches that have not employed lay staff before (see Lens 9).

But general operational issues should be led from the mission edge rather than the centre to give local ownership. Otherwise there can be frustration that the centre is stepping into the leadership role of the churches themselves. So it is important to define and communicate where leadership for different functions lies and to ensure that there is enthusiastic leadership in the various mission locations.

L4 **Project Board**

Any mission initiative requires a governance structure with a measure of independence so they can ask awkward questions, hold the Project Leader to account but take a real interest in the work of the staff. This may be an existing governance group in the diocesan structure if it has the capacity to do this, or an independent body provided its powers are clear.

R4.1* **Ensure there is a Project Board that has a clear role to own the vision**

There needs to be a Board to act as quasi-Trustees for the project. They should have a carefully articulated purpose in line with normal best practice for governance with a particular role to ensure the vision of the project is maintained, that the Project Leader is carrying out his or her role effectively, and that employment and management are in capable hands. Members might take a personal interest in at least one aspect of the project. While the role of staff under their Project Leader is to attend to the day-to-day operations the role of the Board is to set and monitor adherence to the vision.

This work may not be possible for an existing part of the governance structure (see Lens 3), but the Board should be clearly accountable within the overall structure.

R4.2 **Enable the Board and the staff to work together**

If the Board and the staff team are to complement each other, there needs to be joint meetings from time to time. This will encourage the Board to get to know the staff and the staff to understand the Board's purpose and operation. Such meetings could include social time not just business.

R4.3 **Expect Board members to give a significant amount of time to the project**

Although video or hybrid meetings allow more people to offer for Board membership, there is nothing as good as working together in person. Beware appointing busy people who are happy to attend meetings, usually digitally, but unable to offer the time to get deeply involved in the project by getting to know staff and holding a brief for one area of governance. See also Recommendation 9.2.

L5 Ownership

One of the most important elements of a mission initiative is to enable buy-in from everyone taking part, rather than having an enthusiastic group trying to persuade others to see things like they do. This is especially important, and far from straightforward, when a central group with vision is seeking to work through churches that are suspicious of externally imposed projects.

R5.1* **Make operational decisions within the community being served**

The centre may have an over-riding view of the project and need to initiate such decisions, but if they then take staffing or strategic decisions without involving the local community there will be frustration and a feeling of powerlessness. This will be especially true if the centre is perceived to be disconnected from the communities it seeks to serve, or to fail to understand them (see Lens 3 and Recommendation 7.1).

R5.2 **Respect the traditions of the participating churches**

If a range of churches are to take part, each tradition needs to be listened to and respected for their viewpoints. If there is a bias towards one type of church, do not be surprised if those from other traditions do not show enthusiasm for the project. See also Recommendation 6.2.

R5.3 **Take time to develop local ownership of the vision**

A group of enthusiasts in a leadership role should not expect others to share their passion without a clear understanding of the project and its prayed-for impact and a significant amount of time to pass. This calls for communication and the building of relationships between the centre and each mission edge. See also Lenses 2 & 7.

R5.4 **Work the project through a small Ministry Team in each parish**

In most churches the PCC is too large a body to hold the vision for the project. It might be beneficial to have some kind of Ministry Team, with delegated authority from the PCC, that includes clergy and laity but whose purpose is mission focused. The project can then work through a structure where people understand the spiritual issues and can become passionate for the vision.

L6 Culture

This theme views life through the lens of culture. This may be both the community culture and the church culture.

R6.1* **Understand and inhabit the local culture you are seeking to work within**

It is essential to appreciate the community culture of those you are seeking to serve, especially if the project is being initiated within or by those from a different culture. Be sure that this is a seedbed that will grow an innovative approach.

A deprived rural community is going to think and operate in a very different way from a middle-class suburban environment. A project on an urban estate needs to look very different from that for a gathered congregation in suburbia. What works well with an HTB plant aimed at a gathered model may well fail in a different and more incarnational setting. What are community problems (such as drugs, affordable housing or foodbanks) may need to be the church's targets for service so that it becomes credible and respected.

The Church needs to be seen as serving its community through integration if it is seeking to transform that community. At the same time it needs to be attractively counter cultural in the way that the Gospel is.

R6.2 **Understand and inhabit the church culture you are seeking to work within**

Simply forcing an open evangelical culture on a liberal catholic church is not going to be received well. Here the appointment of an Evangelist may fail while the appointment of an evangelistically-minded Parish Nurse may have a considerable impact.

There needs to be understanding that church tradition matters, especially if the project leadership is largely in the hands of evangelicals. If you are seeking to benefit parishes of differing traditions, it is important that people can trust the leadership which therefore needs to be taken from a variety of traditions working together. If this is not done there will always be a suspicion at every decision taken as to its underlying motives. Do not underplay the difficulties that an existing congregation might have with your bright ideas. See also Recommendation 5.2.

R6.3 **Decide whether to renew an inherited church culture or establish a separate one**

Either setting may be valid, but one cannot do the job of the other. If the aim is to renew an inherited culture, the project should work from within the inherited structures and be clearly welcomed and owned by the existing congregation.

If the aim is to set up something new and perhaps more contemporary than the existing congregation, this needs to be clear from the outset. Ideally this too needs to be welcomed by the inherited congregation because it is allowing their tradition to be honoured and continued with the new project running alongside them.

R6.4 **Do not underestimate the time needed to change an embedded culture**

Many churches operate within a culture that has developed over many decades, and an aim to change that in a matter of a few months or even years will result in disappointment. See also Lens 12.

L7 Communication

A project whose staff and churches are widely scattered needs to pay particular regard to the design and operation of effective communication channels. Without good contacts misunderstandings too easily arise and co-ordination is lost. People need to form close relations with each other: within the staff team but also with the Board and with the churches they are based in.

R7.1* **Ensure any central management is in close touch with the churches**

This will not happen without intentional communication activity. This communication needs to be in both directions: the centre needs to know and understand (and not dismiss) the views of the mission edge. The local churches need to be encouraged to share their views with the centre. This will not just happen. It needs proper channels for regular reporting in both directions, it needs excellent personal relationships built up through regular contact and meetings, it needs respect and a shared passion for the project to achieve its aims. Without these misunderstandings quickly develop and relationships become soured.

R7.2 **Keep all parts of the project linked to each other**

Even if the basic structure is of separate units (such as Church of England parishes/benefices) it is important that each mission edge keeps in touch with the others. There might be some regular publication or occasional meetings when 'good news stories' can be told. Mission is always tough and means of encouragement are essential. Early adopters can then share with others how they are building on the project and seeing growth.

R7.3 **Ensure one member of the central team holds a communications brief**

This is so important a topic within a mission project that one person needs to know they are the one responsible for ensuring communication channels are devised and operate effectively. This cannot be left to the Project Leader. The Comms Lead should be the one to whom people go when communications break down or structures are not tight enough.

L8 Staffing

The key resource offered to churches has to be staff; but staff who are seen as fellow-workers with the congregation rather than external resources that will challenge church members. This lens sees staffing through the ideas of structure, Lens 9 will cover the area of placements.

R8.1* **Appoint ministry staff not so much to undertake ministry as to enable it**

If you appoint staff to front ministry, then it is possible for volunteers who have been involved until now to disperse and assume the paid member of staff will do it for them. This is especially true if the church is not having to pay for the staff concerned. When the staff leave the ministry comes to an end.

So develop a culture where staff are paid to enable ministry through others rather than to do it all themselves. Write this very clearly into job descriptions and only appoint when the church is aware of this and prepared to work with the staff in this way. The staff members also have to appreciate this aim and work to it, even if that means ministry is performed less well than if by professionals alone.

This is also a key point for sustainability – see Lens 12.

R8.2 **Beware sharing staff members between two unconnected churches**

Sharing operational staff between two separate churches in differing communities may make sense on paper but has a range of difficulties that are hard to overcome. Both churches may need to see such staff at similarly timed Sunday services, or need them on the same weekday evenings. Expecting someone central to a church's administration or operations to be giving 0.4 or less of their 0.8 time shared with another church will prove unsatisfactory.

R8.3 **Appoint Operations Managers only if Administrators are already in post**

There may be very limited understanding of what an Operations Manager is. This is not a Senior Administrator but a leader with responsibility for all operational aspects of running the church and, in particular, the setting of plans to turn visions into action. An Operations Manager where there is no Administrator will default to that latter role.

Ideally, the Manager needs to be a member of the worshipping community and so visible on a Sunday.

L9 **Placements**

This is a second lens concerned with staffing, but this time the theme relates to the placement of staff in churches that may not be familiar with the skills of employment and management. Or where there is no desire to develop liturgy and methodology to attract a new generation.

R9.1* **Appoint staff to churches that are enthusiastic to welcome and work with them**

Staff appointed to churches need to have a PCC and congregation keen to work with them towards a vision. So it is important to spend adequate time explaining to the Council and congregation how the addition of a staff member might impact them, and encouraging them to partner with the staff member. Staff should be appointed only to churches eager to work with them and not to churches suspicious of a diocesan imposition to get them to change their services and activities.

R9.2 **Do not assume a PCC will understand how to employ lay staff**

Employment of staff is a major responsibility which cannot be given to a PCC unused to employment without detailed training. It involves compliance with a wide body of employment and safety legislation, a thorough selection process, proper documentation, pastoral care, issues of Occupational Requirements and, if necessary, decisions on dismissal. This requires a small sub-group of a PCC who have experience and knowledge of the requirements and can advise the Council. There also needs to be professional HR advice available to all PCCs that employ staff. If all this is not possible, staff need to be employed by the project's centre where necessary skills and experience can be focused.

R9.3 **Do not assume an incumbent will understand how to manage lay staff**

Line management is another area that requires understanding and application of good practice, neither tight supervision nor laid-back freedom. Any project staff deserve high quality management which may itself require some detailed training or evidence of past experience. But if a church has not employed staff before, it is possible that the Vicar has no experience of management and will see it either as tight supervision which stifles initiative or as such a light touch that there is no guidance or motivation passed on. Again the alternative is to employ from the centre.

L10 **Schools and families**

Many of the project staff appointed to various market towns had roles to develop schools work, to run families and children's activities and to build youth programmes. Much of this has been successful in the short term.

R10.1* **Define a specific vision for schools or young people's work in the long term**

A busy church programme for families or even a Messy Church event with good attendance may look impressive but, if shallow, may have little long term benefit for the Kingdom. There will be no one vision that fits all churches so do not be afraid to have something quite different from schools or families work in other towns. The vision may need to be for some time ahead such as ten years, so this means seeing staff appointments being longer than just something like three years. See Lens 8 and also Recommendation 12.3.

R10.2 **Aim to build relationships with school heads, staff and parents**

In a mission context, when working in schools' and families' work you serve the children but should seek to build key relationships with their teachers and parents. When running events for children it is likely that you will not have sufficient numbers of volunteers for safeguarding requirements, but if you run the activities with teachers and/or parents taking part, you can build up strategic links and then develop those links with the adults. So this points to the appointment of older people with past experience as well as younger adults with energetic enthusiasm.

R10.3 **Define your planned outcomes and communicate these**

Church members may expect any form of schools or families work to lead to increased Sunday attendance, but this is simply not feasible when dealing with those who have virtually no understanding of the Christian faith. In addition, Sunday is a busy day for most families for both travel and sport so that church attendance would not appear an attractive option. So define your expectations of outcomes and seek to get the message through to everyone.

Your expectations might be to open doors into wider schools work, to lead on to some kind of Messy Church events, to lead to enquirers' groups, to improve the church's image in the local community or other outcomes. But expect this to be slow work over a long time scale.

R10.4 **Grow families' ministry through new families rather than the present members**

Grafting a new families' work on to an existing more elderly congregation who are reluctant to change is unlikely to work well. A better if risky approach would be to build leadership from families being reached so they own the activities planned for them. This means that there is no inherited expectation that worship will take place on a Sunday morning or even what it might look like. It is also important to build a youth ministry so that children reaching Year 7 are not left stranded by the church.

L11 **Training**

There may be a heartfelt desire to get on with the work of mission, but time spent in a thorough training programme should be time well invested in the longer-term view.

R11.1* **Expect training to play a major part in the project, especially at the outset**

For long-term sustainability the human resourcing needs to shift from external staff brought in to the development of local leadership and innovation. It follows that appropriate training should play a major part of the programme. This can take many forms but needs to be resourced from the outset. It should include:

- Skill training for work in the project such as management, employment, IT
- Induction training for staff, especially for younger staff with little experience of church work
- Training on elements such as teamwork, sharing one's faith and self-management

R11.2 **Model training in the local culture**

Normal, academic training may not be appropriate for projects set in areas of deprivation. It is important to model training within the local communities that the project is working in. See also Lens 6.

R11.3 **Train clergy in skills such as change management and team leadership**

Many clergy, especially those who were ordained several year ago, have few skills in areas such as change, teams and staff management. But these are the skills needed to transform a parish into a growth initiative, in addition to teaching, pastoral care, outreach and worship leading.

You need to offer resources to churches where the clergy leader is both enthusiastic for growth but also has the skill set necessary to support such growth. The traditional Anglican model is pastoral rather than developmental.

R11.4 **Do not neglect training in personal evangelism**

In a mission project there may be a false expectation that staff know how to lead someone from interest in the faith to personal commitment and on to discipleship. If you are seeking people to be converted, train your staff team in how to guide anyone through the process of leading them to faith in Jesus Christ and then nurturing them.

L12 **Sustainability**

One considerable danger for an externally funded project is that once the funding flow is brought to an end, the project collapses and the final position is no better than before it took place. So it is essential to build in plans for sustainability. See also Recommendations 8.1 on staffing and 11.1&2 on training to add to the three points below.

R12.1* **Build the project into existing structures**

It is more likely to continue in the longer term if already built into structures that will continue to exist after funding is withdrawn. Many of the questionnaire replies I received and comments made in one-to-one interviews, saw a need for any special

project to be firmly set within existing diocesan structures, rather than floating uneasily as a semi-independent organisation.

This means it then has long-term viability and can more easily morph into the ongoing diocesan programme when the external funding comes to an end.

R12.2 **Ensure the project has a thorough skill buy-in element**

This takes Lens 11's focus on training one stage on. If you are employing staff you need access to professional HR advice. If you are relying on external grant funding you need experienced grant-seeking application writing. You may also need those who can supervise team working and train others in line management. Most churches will not have these (and many other) skills and experience and so they will need to be provided by a source within the wider structure or bought in. This all needs to be identified and actioned before the project launches and not when a need suddenly arises.

Some of these specialities look unnecessary when all is working well but when something out of the ordinary happens their lack becomes painfully obvious. An HR need may not arise for some months and then you find yourself with a maternity leave to sort out or a disciplinary issue to tackle. A more professional approach to ministry will assist with long-term viability.

R12.3 **Take a long term view for future viability**

Little can be achieved in five years if there is a significant culture shift sought and you are starting from a low base. It is known in BMOs (more experimental parishes set free from ecclesiastical legislation that might stifle them) that expectations need to be seen in a time frame of at least ten years, and that should be the same here. Otherwise a premature close down will have achieved too little in mission progress to enable it to last.

On a related point the Church of England model for clergy succession often leaves a church without clergy leadership for as much as a year or more. There needs to be a new succession plan for incumbents so that those leading a church in a project have their successor appointed with virtually no period of vacancy. Leadership in mission needs to be continuous. See also Lens 2 and Recommendation 10.1.

3 Summary

This report has as its aim not to be an assessment of the CMT project but to set out practical lessons that might be learned from the way the project has been run.

It has been written with the generous permission of CMT Project Board and staff leaders to offer help to other mission projects that the Diocese of Ely, or any other set of churches, might run in future years. It therefore places in the public domain the experience of leading this unusual and innovative project so that others might build on what has been found to work well and avoid errors that may have, with hindsight, been made.

To give a structure to such lessons learned the recommendations have been listed under twelve themes. These have been listed as 'lenses' through which the project might be viewed, and there is therefore some measure of overlap between them.

The input for this report has come from replies to a descriptive questionnaire sent to those who played some part in the project and a few observers, to twelve personal interviews with key players in the project conducted by Zoom and to this writer's earlier Mid-term Review which included visits to six of the market towns, another questionnaire and a range of interviews and sight of a considerable amount of written material.

CMT has been a trail-blazer of a project and all those involved would no doubt arrange things with some major differences based on hindsight. That is the purpose of this report. We learn from experience. That can only be good.

Responsibility for the text and its structure remains with the author who wishes to place on record his admiration of the courage and dedication of those involved in this unusual project who have encouraged the publication of this report. It is his prayer that the outcome of this lessons learned exercise will benefit the wider Church in different ways, but all for the glory of the Lord Jesus Christ.

My thanks

This review has been a team project. I wish to place on record my thanks to the following who have played a significant part in the production of this report.

- The Ven Hugh McCurdy and The Revd Jon Randall who initiated this review and who have worked with me over several months in planning the review, designing the questionnaire and checking the draft reports.

- James Owen and David Wells for their help in arranging and designing the online questionnaire and its distribution.

- All those who responded to the questionnaire, sometimes in considerable detail.

- Those who had a Zoom one-to-one with me.

- All those who have prayed for and supported this review in all kinds of ways.

Appendices

APPENDIX 1: CMT as described in the Mid-term Review

The following text forms part of Section 2, *The setting,* of the Mid-term Review.

1   **The origins of the CMT project**

The Changing Market Towns project came about through a successful bid by the Diocese of Ely for a grant from the Church of England's Strategic Development Fund (SDF). The diocese submitted the bid in June 2018 and they were awarded a total of £2.13 million which they matched from reserves and sales of land to give a total investment over a five-year period of £4.36 million.

The idea for such a project is unique to the Diocese of Ely. Other dioceses have used grants from the SDF in other ways, such as to set up and staff 'resource churches' with the idea that, given appropriate clergy and lay staffing, such churches will then plant new congregations and so enable growth.

But the Ely concept, of 'targeting resources to key areas' as part of their 2025 growth strategy was different. The diocese includes one, relatively wealthy, city (Cambridge) plus its satellite areas all of which have seen significant investment through the university and scientific research centres. But much of the rest of the diocese, to the north of Cambridge and including parts of Peterborough, has seen disinvestment by national bodies. It is an area much of which is distant from the UK motorway and main line railway networks, where indices of deprivation are among the highest in the country, and where local retail and other industries are struggling.

Yet apart from Cambridge one third of the diocesan population is based in towns of over 7,000 people. The diocese has used the title 'market towns' since most of these have hosted a market at some point in their history.

How counter-cultural and, it might be argued, how like the origins of the Christian gospel, to give special attention to areas which other agencies are ignoring. The Bible frequently indicates that God seeks to bless the poor and needy.

The idea is to invest in various market towns spread throughout the Fens. The initial focus was on eight: Chatteris, Downham Market, Huntingdon, Littleport, March, Ramsey, Whittlesey and Wisbech. Later on in a Phase 2, St Neots was added. Huntingdon straddles both Phase 1 and Phase 2.

The Bishop's Change Officer started work in 2018 and a celebration for members of all the participating churches at the time was held in the town of March in October that year. The first staff appointed to the towns started work that autumn. If there can be in any sense an official start date it might be seen as August 2018.

A second bid for SDF money was not successful so Phase 2 of the project has more limited funding from the diocese alone.

2   **The aims of the project**

A mid-term review needs criteria by which to assess success or failure. Here the diocesan website explains the original aims.

"The aim is to enable and sustain church growth in small and medium-sized towns as part of the diocese's commitment to;

- engage fully and courageously with the needs of our communities;
- grow God's church by finding disciples and nurturing leaders;
- deepen our commitment to God through word, worship and prayer."

The project works across the whole of each town and so in some cases may work in one parish but in others there may be separate parishes or a team ministry.

The project aimed to launch new congregations, to set up fresh expressions of church and to expect organisational change to enable church leaders to focus on mission. The diocesan website states that an aim is "to see a significant number of Fresh Expressions of church appearing as new parts of the community are reached."

Major elements of the project, against which its success or failure should be measured, are stated to include:

- "support and training for clergy and congregations;
- the development of a learning centre at Wisbech;
- co-ordinated town-wide approaches for community action and church growth
- seeking to bring in several waves of major new investment
- looking to appoint a growing number of highly motivated community workers working for social transformation;
- churches and schools working closely together to support children and families;
- revitalising existing churches and multiplying fresh expressions of church;
- planning to plant new congregations, drawing on the strengths of larger churches."

These are very ambitious statements which still exist on the diocesan website (last accessed 25th October 2021) and although there have been some wonderful examples of success within some of the points, it has to be said that the results fall short of the feel of what is being described. However, Covid could never have been anticipated.

There is also a stated target that the project results in 800 people encountering faith. This is a firm figure but a vague concept. It does not mean people in Sunday services, but how do you define it?

Initial results seemed to be positive. By October 2019, less than one year from the appointment of most initial staff, there was growth of over 50% in the number of people exploring discipleship – but this was from a low base. The Covid pandemic then of course delayed progress and placed struggling churches in financial and attendance trouble. It is therefore very difficult to assess progress just at the moment.

One feature of this project is the lack of tidy start and end dates. The five years of funding applies to staff appointments from the moment they are made, but start dates have varied widely as some posts have proved difficult to fill, some workers have moved on leaving vacancies, and finding a Town Leader in one case has provide elusive even at this point. Most of the towns have seen new lead clergy appointments since the project's launch.

3   **The impact of Covid**

As already noted it is only fair to point out that the Covid lockdowns have had a considerable impact on the project. While the clocks for the five years of funding continued to tick, many of the CMT workers found themselves with limited actions they could take while working from home and some were furloughed for short periods of time.

Meanwhile Operations Managers found themselves with a much increased workload as they sought to enable churches to switch to recorded or live streamed services while

preparing risk analyses and editing recordings.

But the impact has not only been in staff work but also in church incomes which have received a hit, first from lack of room hire income and secondly from a downturn in congregational giving.

It is therefore difficult to interpret what the project has achieved with such a major, and totally unexpected, discontinuity. Even if everything were to recover, and that is far from certain, initiatives have stuttered, new contacts have been lost, and CMT workers are having to build again from a lower base than they had in early 2020.

Note that the full report, and the subsequent Delivery Plan, can be found by scrolling to the end of https://www.elydiocese.org/church-in-action/changing-market-towns/market-towns-mid-term-project-review.php. The page also includes other information and reactions to the report.

APPENDIX 2 Fundamental weaknesses reported in the Mid-term Review

The report of this earlier review included a range of strengths of the project and then listed, with explanation, eight fundamental weaknesses with the way the project had been set up and run. These were, here without the explanation of each one, as follows.

1   A focus on towns instead of leadership

2   An over-optimistic view on changing a culture

3   A matrix structure that confuses

4   The appointment of Operation Managers without Administrators

5   Insufficient planning for future sustainability

6   A general suspicion of the diocese as an institution

7   Local ownership that is worryingly weak

8   Fractured and strained relationships

These points were all taken into consideration in the subsequent 'reset' of the project.

APPENDIX 3: Mid-term Review recommendations

The list of fundamental weaknesses was followed by a range of recommendations for changes to be made at this point in the project's life. They are summarised here.

1   **Strengthen links to the centre**

The 'staff', by which I mean those employed as CMT workers, Operations Managers or on the small central team, have, to date, been locally or departmentally managed. This has in several cases not worked well leading to considerable frustration. You can seek to solve this by training Town Leaders in how to line-manage well, or you can arrange for others more skilled to undertake the line management still in the local towns, or you can restructure line management back to the centre. My recommendations would be:

R1.1   Appoint the CMT Project Operations Manager as line manager for the local OMs

R1.2   Give the CMT Project Leader responsibility for appointing line managers for CMT workers

R1.3   The Project Leader should line manage each of the other three central staff

R1.4   Offer a training session to line managers

R1.5   Establish a staff team

R1.6   Clear these arrangements with the employing PCCs and Town Leaders

2   **Provide leadership in both staffing and governance**

You have until now talked in terms of the activities of management and resourcing (through finance), but little about leadership. Yes, you have Town 'Leaders' but some of them see CMT as an add on to their priestly responsibilities rather than as a priority – and this is hardly surprising. But a project that seeks to be innovating and which acts as a contrast to normal, inherited church culture is going to be stifled by the status quo, and many people who fear change, unless there is inspirational leadership and effective staffing. You have some very gifted staff. What you lack is the concept of overall, visionary leadership, though the potential is there in your new CMT Project Manager or, as I recommend below, CMT Project 'Leader'.

R2.1   Give the Board clear responsibility for vision and finance

R2.2   Link each Board member with a specific town

R2.3   Retitle the CMT Project Manager role as CMT Project Leader

R2.4   Provide the 0.5 CMT Project Leader with EA support

R2.5   Disband the Delivery Group as you now have a Staff Team

3   **Rethink mission and staffing in the context of each town**

The project needs shared understanding of mission and an appreciation of its challenge to the inherited culture of the churches you are working within.   For example, what does work with teenagers look like when the host church consists of people aged over 50 with traditional liturgy? Also, what can you learn from each other's shared experiences of work to do? What targets make sense, what does success look like?

Note that there are currently three CMT staff posts which need to be filled. Current action on these will need to be taken in the light of these recommendations.

R3.1   Set up a small central group to work on an understanding of mission

R3.2   Establish a clear, unique plan for each town

R3.3   Rethink Operations Manager roles within the context of sustainability

R3.4   Give OMs responsibility for one town alone and pay them as other staff

R3.5   Develop new communication channels

R3.6   Outsource HR issues

R3.7   Liaise with the Church Commissioners

4   **Promote a spiritual heart to the whole project**

The whole project is not a secular social services project but a local-church-based work of God. This needs to be emphasised and the project operated as though this was the case. In particular you need to improve working relationships throughout.

R4.1   Ensure prayer is at the heart of every aspect of the project

R4.2   Re-envision the project

R4.3   Place an Occupational Requirement on each Operations Manager post

R4.4   Tackle the relationships issue

These recommendations were all taken into consideration in the subsequent 'reset' of the project.

APPENDIX 4: The online questionnaire for this report

The following gives the wording used for the online questionnaire for the Lessons Learned Review. It was sent to 55 people and 34 replied. Of these 55, 17 were Church Wardens in participating churches but only 1 of these responded which may say something. Of all others therefore 33 replied out of 38. Some of these replies went into considerable detail.

I am so grateful to all those who responded and so helped shape this report.

Thank you
Thank you for taking the time and trouble to take part in this exercise. We are relying on a response from everyone receiving this questionnaire for the results to be of value. We need to have heard from you by **Monday 12th February** (2024) so please do not put this off. Your input will be a valuable part of this exercise.

Purpose of this exercise
This questionnaire is part of an exercise to enable us to **learn lessons** from the CMT project to date, both for the benefit for our Diocese but also for us to make available to the wider Church. This is different from an **assessment** of CMT which was more the thrust of the mid-term review we held in 2021. So this is more about the future than the past. We hope you will provide an honest, prayerful response.

Reviewer
Your response will be confidential to John Truscott, our independent reviewer, who conducted the mid-term review in 2021 and so is familiar with CMT. You do not even have to give your name if you would prefer not to but if you do, he will not make this information available to anyone else although may include short unattributed quotes from responses in his report. He is also Zoom interviewing about a dozen representatives of different categories of people involved in the project.

Questions?
To answer any queries you may have about this exercise, we are holding a drop-in session by Zoom on Wednesday 31st January from 10.00 to 11.00 am for anyone to ask questions. Join us at any time within that hour. *(Zoom details)*

At other times, if you have questions about the exercise you are welcome to email or phone David Wells (works Tuesday to Thursday each week), his details are: *(details)* Alternatively, if you want to contact John Truscott his details are *(details)*.

The questions that follow
Section 2 asks some very brief questions about you. In Section 3, there are eight clusters of questions. Some may not be relevant for you, so leave these if so.

The cluster approach is designed to enable different groups of participants to see different aspects of the issue. The bold heading for each one gives the theme; the questions are examples.

The boxes will expand with your writing. Write in as much length as you wish but in sufficient detail to make clear the points you make.

Changing Market Towns Project (CMT) 2024 Questionnaire

Required: Some information about you
Please provide a little information about yourself in the section below.

1   Name (please provide your name, if you wish)

2   Please tick to identify your role in the Changing Market Towns (CMT) project. (This question requires an answer).

> *Town Lead*
> *Other Town Clergy*
> *Children & Families Worker*
> *Operations Manager*
> *PCC*
> *Churchwarden*
> *Diocesan Team*
> **Other*

3*   If you answered "Other" in question 1, please specify the role in the space below.

4   Are you answering from a local experience of one market town alone or from a wider perspective across the project as a whole, or both?

        (If both, please make clear which perspective each answer relates to. We would value having both perspectives).

> *Local experience of one market town*
> *A wider perspective across the project*
> *Both local and project wide*

Your Perspective

The cluster approach is designed to enable different groups of participants to see different aspects of the issue. The bold heading for each one gives the theme; the questions posed are examples.

The boxes will expand with your writing. Write in as much length as you wish but in sufficient detail to make clear the points you make.

5: **Lessons to learn about purpose**
   - What do you see as the main purpose for the CMT project concerning mission and growth outcomes and how well do you feel this is communicated to you and others who are taking part?
   - How might this have been done better to bring everyone on board?
   - Is there enough emphasis on personal faith journeys and growth of discipleship?
   - If not, should there be and, if so, how?

6: **Lessons to learn about achievements**
   - What can we celebrate about the project's achievements for the growth of the kingdom of God?
   - What actions led to each of these?

7: **Lessons to learn about change**
- Are we realistic about the cultural change we are expecting and, if so, how might we have approached the project differently at the outset?
- To what extent is it possible to graft new ways of thinking onto an inherited church culture through clergy leadership?
- How might we encourage greater local ownership of the project by PCCs?
- To what extent are lay leaders brought into the centre of the project?

8: **Lessons to learn about CMT church and central staff**
- What can we learn about consultation with local churches before staff are placed within them?
- How well are CMT church and central staff employed and managed and how might this be improved if necessary?
- How well has the idea of appointing Operations Managers to churches worked?

9: **Lessons to learn about work with children, young people and families**
- How effective is the project working out in children's and schools' work and what alternative approach might be more effective in attracting children, young people and their families?

10: **Lessons to learn about sustainability**
- How might we make the project more sustainable both locally and centrally?
- How might we introduce more effective succession planning? Consider activities, volunteers, local funding, etc

.
11: **Lessons to learn: Overall**
- What are we learning about models for nurturing discipleship and reaching new people that might translate into other settings?
- What principles might stand in a more general church context?

12: **Lessons to learn: Other**
- Please add any other lessons you feel we could learn from the project which have not been suggested by the questions above.

APPENDIX 5 Summary of the 'lenses' and recommendations

Here is a listing of the 42 recommendations in their lenses as covered earlier in this report.

Lens 1 Spiritual heart

R1.1* Place Christ at the centre of all planning
R1.2   Ensure the project is surrounded with prayer
R1.3   Seek staff where Christian character features as a priority
R1.4   Provide Bible teaching if you seek to build disciples

Lens 2 Vision and plan

R2.1* Have a well-defined, known and owned vision
R2.2   Have a realistic time scale in your plan
R2.3   Allow sufficient time for initial preparation
R2.4   Choose realistic targets that are appropriate

Lens 3 Leadership

R3.1* Clarify the location and operation of leadership
R3.2   Ensure the Project Leader and Board have necessary authority
R3.3   Ensure there is enthusiastic and gifted leadership at the mission edge

Lens 4 Project Board

R4.1* Ensure there is a Project Board that has a clear role to own the vision
R4.2   Enable the Board and the staff to work together
R4.3   Expect Board members to give a significant amount of time to the project

Lens 5 Ownership

R5.1* Take operational decisions within the community being served
R5.2   Respect the traditions of the participating churches
R5.3   Take time to develop local ownership of the vision
R5.4   Work the project through a small Ministry Team in each parish

Lens 6 Culture

R6.1* Understand and inhabit the local culture you are seeking to work within
R6.2   Understand and inhabit the church culture you are seeking to work within
R6.3   Decide whether to renew an inherited church culture or establish a separate one
R6.4   Do not underestimate the time needed to change an embedded culture

Lens 7 Communication

R7.1* Ensure any central management is in close touch with the churches
R7.2   Keep all parts of the project linked to each other
R7.3   Ensure one member of the central team holds a communications brief

Lens 8 Staffing

R8.1* Appoint ministry staff not so much to undertake ministry as to enable it
R8.2   Beware sharing staff members between two unconnected churches
R8.3   Appoint Operations Managers only if Administrators are already in post

Lens 9 Placements

R9.1* Appoint staff to churches that are enthusiastic to welcome and work with them
R9.2   Do not assume a PCC will understand how to employ lay staff
R9.3   Do not assume an incumbent will understand how to manage lay staff

Lens 10 Schools and families

R10.1* Define a specific vision for schools or young people's work in the long term
R10.2   Aim to build relationships with school heads, staff and parents
R10.3   Define your planned outcomes and communicate these
R10.4   Grow families' ministry through new families rather than the present members

Lens 11 Training

R11.1* Expect training to play a major part in the project, especially at the outset
R11.2   Model training in the local culture
R11.3   Train clergy in skills such as change management and team leadership
R11.4   Do not neglect training in personal evangelism

Lens 12 Sustainability

R12.1* Build the project into existing structures
R12.2   Ensure the project has a thorough skill buy-in element
R12.3   Take a long term view for future viability