

Seeking Church Flourishing in Post Industrial Parishes: A Report

Executive Summary

Our nation has been scarred by our transition from industrial manufacturing to an economy based on service industries. This change has seen not just transformed livelihoods but abandoned communities left stranded around the old infrastructure which had given meaning, purpose and shared vision. Some of these communities have been transformed by the coming of new industry, others remain in limbo, but often the parish boundaries of the Church of England reflect the old world too.

This is our mission field. The Church seeks to serve and inspire these communities where they are with the Good News of Jesus Christ. Some churches in post-industrial towns are growing and thriving – others are not. What skills, strategies, approaches and priorities are leading to this flourishing, and can sharing key themes help others flourish too?

This report contains case studies and survey data drawing out key themes around flourishing in Post-Industrial contexts, including:

- Investment in the arts & heritage
- Depth of investment in community engagement & community cohesion
- Serious, intentional engagement with schools

And barriers to flourishing:

- Absence of hope reflected in casual negativity in the narrative within and outside communities
- Clericalism
- Inflexible, non-contextual models of leadership

Evidence from the report suggests that hope in our Post-Industrial churches and communities is not rising in most places. To increase flourishing and remove barriers will take joined up thinking with other parts of the church also addressing social inequality and a reconsidering nationally of what investment in these areas looks like. We ask the questions:

- How can the church promote the models of distributed leadership, investment in creative arts and relationships in education which have proven themselves in these contexts?
- How can the church change the narrative of casual negativity within its own structures which can stop our mission before it starts?
- How can we promote collaboration and mutuality between Post-Industrial practitioners to share best practice and raise hope?

Where do we go from here?

It has been our hope in completing this project to contribute to the process of **naming, nourishing, illuminating, and connecting** areas of flourishing and barriers to flourishing in post-industrial parishes. Therefore, our recommendations for future action and response involve us and others taking **targeted actions** in this ongoing process of naming, nourishing, illuminating, and connecting.

Over the course of six months we have accrued a huge amount of data, stories and analysis from the relatively small percentage of the Church of England's Post-Industrial parishes that we have engaged with, but even within this small sample and with the extraordinary variety of experiences of life and worship evidenced, we have seen quite clear patterns which hint at some factors which could really impact positively on the capacity of Post-Industrial parishes and the church communities within them to flourish.

There is no formulaic answer, but **we would encourage a raised profile for Post-Industrial parishes**, so that they receive the same degree of attention given to other areas at risk of being "left behind" such as the outer estates and coastal communities. One way of achieving this raised profile will be for us to:

share a summary of our report with dioceses in receipt of lowest income communities funding who have a significant number of post-industrial parishes.

We strongly believe that ***the delegates of the annual Post-Industrial conference should be encouraged to keep meeting together, drawing others to join in with them*** and to begin to drill down to consider concrete areas in which Post-Industrial churches have found flourishing, which more could benefit from. This will contribute to the naming and illuminating both of good practice and of areas for development. To help with this, we will:

develop the case studies into a blog each for publication within the Renewal and Reform stories and share the executive summary of our report (with full report on request) with those at the workshop.

From the research we have done, we think that the concrete areas for further naming, nourishing, illuminating, and connecting include (but are clearly not limited to):

Support for parishes to learn to live in and beyond the disorientation

Respondents to the case studies, the questionnaire and attendees at the conference shared many stories of feeling left behind, of inadequacy and of lack. The work done with the parishes involved in the Widnes, Warrington & St Helen's case study perceived a real benefit in the work done with them to explore the theology of orientation, disorientation and new orientation. It allowed them to better express where God is to be found in what a number of our respondents referred to as "exile" and "wilderness". Particularly for those parishes that find they are "stuck" or "stagnant" this could provide a new framework for hope, for

confidence and for vision – three things which many of the most struggling parishes felt that they lacked.

We would therefore like to offer the model of theological exploration of orientation, disorientation and new orientation to a wider group of post-industrial parishes.

The church in community

Stories of hope and confidence from Post-Industrial parishes through the questionnaire, the case studies and the conference were for the most part full of examples of the church acting in positive ways within its community. These have included a wide variety of significant social action projects, particularly amongst the most vulnerable and marginalised, but also churches acting to consciously draw together disparate parts of their community to provide safe and healthy ground upon which to build relationships.

The evidence shows that there are also a lot of churches struggling to build community, to work in ecumenical or interfaith partnerships or to understand their place within a community in which they now feel like minorities, or like a leftover vestige of a bygone age. Continued stories of successful community engagements or relevant social action campaigns could help attenders at future conferences, or those who otherwise engage with the Post-Industrial church community to begin to reach out within their own contexts, and models of best practice and advice from those who have walked the road before would increase confidence among those who have not attempted such things before.

In addition, it is clear that parish flourishing cannot simply be measured by numbers of worshippers or church financial strength. Flourishing, as it has been expressed to us, is “out there” in the communities where conversations about faith often begin in the context of the parent and toddler group, the night shelter or the Foodbank. We should seek ways to help Post-Industrial parishes to have their stories heard and appreciated, where what might feel like a tiny success of one or two people coming to faith or finding peace and wholeness in their community can be truly celebrated. This needs to be reflected in the aspiration of potential funders, so that churches who could never realistically measure success by increased church attendance or financial strength can access the resources that will help them to flourish in their communities.

We will therefore encourage those working in Post-Industrial communities to continue collecting and sharing these stories and examples of best practice, encouraging increased ecumenical, inter-faith and inter-community working and to find avenues to share these stories and a greater understanding of life in Post-Industrial parishes with the wider church

The church, the arts and the creative heart of God

A small but significant number of respondents to the questionnaire, as well as some contributors to the conference and two of our case studies, bear witness to the power of the arts in creating community and confidence and in directly influencing flourishing, both in the lives of individuals and in the local church. The power of arts, architecture and heritage in giving space for the Spirit of God to move and speak in the lives of an incredibly diverse range of people cannot be underestimated.

We would strongly encourage further work to be done in this area, drawing on the positive experience of those Post-Industrial parishes already benefiting from the flourishing that they have seen.

Hope through schools

Work with local schools, whether they be Church of England schools, or community schools, was a leader in the causes of hope, joy and flourishing according to the questionnaire, and yet nearly seventy percent of respondents had no paid or voluntary children's workers. There would still appear to be a strong desire to work with local churches in the vast majority of settings, and a way for Post-Industrial parishes to share best practice and resources, as well as to resource less confident parishes with fewer people to take steps to build new relationships with their local schools could increase flourishing enormously.

We suggest that schools engagement should be a topic for a future post-industrial parishes conference in the next couple of years, and that representatives of the National Society and of Diocesan Boards of Education should be invited to both present at and participate in the conference.

Distributed leadership

Both through the case study dedicated to this topic, and through responses to our questions on leadership, it is clear that patterns of leadership in Post-Industrial parishes vary widely across the Church of England, as do the way that leaders are called, equipped and authorised. For many Post-Industrial parishes, the old-style form of leadership where all authority and much of the work-load rests upon the incumbent, is not a model that leads to flourishing in the current environment. Reducing numbers of stipendiary clergy, now shared across multiple parishes, and the impact of a change in clergy on engagement with schools, ecumenical partners and community relationships were all evidenced in the questionnaire as reasons for a lack of flourishing in a variety of parishes. Places where the leadership is distributed across a broader range of members create more opportunity for stability, creativity and support, but this means sharing leadership with those who will need different modes of training

Other interest groups, such as the Estates Evangelism Task Force have done much work with several dioceses to forge new pathways for those who might not have the academic experience to thrive in traditional leadership training models, but these are in early phases and not well spread through the dioceses in which there are hundreds of Post-Industrial parishes.

We believe much more could be done to ensure appropriate models of discernment and training are made nationally available to raise up a locally-grown but excellently-resourced generation of leaders for the Post-Industrial church. We would also like to see more emphasis on understanding and valuing the Post-Industrial context with all its fragile beauty within our training establishments, to encourage vocations to and within these parishes.

Joined-up thinking

During our research and conversations, we were increasingly aware of the overlap between the Post-Industrial flourishing project that we were undertaking, and other groups that have formed and research that has been done in recent years, particularly in Outer Estates (nearly 50% of Post-Industrial towns), Coastal Towns (about 10%) and other areas of relatively high deprivation. We strongly suspect that few if any of the roots of or barriers to flourishing for the parishes we have been looking at are unique to Post-Industrial areas. For this reason, much greater collaboration with groups including the Estates Evangelism Taskforce / the National Estates Church Network, the research being done by the Church Urban Fund GRA:CE Project and others will ensure that Post-Industrial areas do not get left behind in the church's endeavours to ensure flourishing in more deprived areas of the country.

We will therefore share this report with the Estates Evangelism Task Group Group and arrange a discussion at a future meeting (via Dave Champness) and with NECN.

It might be that the annual conference which has taken place for the last two years could form the basis for a similar interest group representing the needs and voices of our Post-Industrial communities to ensure that they are not drowned out by louder voices within the Church of England, in the way that many feel they have been by larger or more powerful towns within their own local areas.

Conclusion

Our overriding sense, having completed this initial phase of research, is that we have done little more than scratch the surface of the reality of life in our Post-Industrial parishes, and that this is just the start of the work. There is real fragility in places of lack and lost hope, but there is also real potential.

Authored by Rev Canon Abigail Thompson (St Alban's), Rev Ann Richardson (Birmingham), Rev Canon Dr Ellen Loudon (Liverpool), Rev Graeme Fancourt (Oxford), Rev Canon Ian Flintoft (Newcastle), Rev Jon March (London), and Rev Canon Rachel Firth (Leeds), and sponsored by Debbie Clinton (Director of Renewal and Reform).