

Acceler8

End of project review

December 2021

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1 Executive summary

Acceler8 was an early strategically funded initiative in the Church of England. It was a bold initiative by Coventry Diocese to speed up growth by improving church health and intentionally focusing on the 20s to 30s age demographic.

- It expected to see 1000 extra disciples added to the worshipping community in the diocese in the five years to January 2021 (including 400 in the 20s to 30s age range), 20 additional 20s/30s entering vocations, 4 pioneer plants and a general strengthening of the health and growth of churches (numerically and financially).
- Overall, it is estimated that around 930 people have become disciples in the diocese to the end of 2019 (i.e. pre-Covid), comprising 416 in their 20s/30s and 513 in other age ranges. This is a good outcome given that it had a further year to run and without the significant disruption of the pandemic its run rate suggests that it would have passed the aspirations set at the start.
- In terms of specific aspects of the programme:
 - Over 40 people in their 20s/30s have explored vocations, including 14 in 2018 and 13 in 2019 reflecting a wider shift to more participation from younger leaders in the life of the church (commented on by interviewees). It is, however, not clear how many of these are actually proceeding into the ordination process.
 - There is good evidence that those churches who actively embraced NCD have grown, with growth tracked in both urban and rural settings even over the relatively short period of time measured. However, the overall diocesan picture for attendance and finances has weakened rather than strengthened reflecting the mixed level of engagement by churches in the healthy church initiative and the loss of existing members across the diocese (through death, moving etc).
 - Only two (of the four anticipated) 20/30s focused worshipping communities were started. One only lasted two years before it faded away and the other started in 2019 and stopped meeting as the pandemic broke. There are therefore no lasting plants.
 - The deployment of the Development Leaders to boost younger engagement with church life has certainly had an impact but at the churches concerned there is no visible difference in the demographics and size of the congregation over the three-year period examined. This is, however, a short period of time over which to observe impact and the data is weak.
- Key learnings for other dioceses and programmes from Acceler8 are:
 1. A focus on church health is valuable in encouraging church life and growth. There is good evidence, even in the limited time studied, of the value of this in established church settings. Health provides a route to increasing intentionality for those churches concerned about mission and discipleship
 2. NCD provides a robust approach to addressing church health that is easily used by all types of church tradition, if introduced sensitively.

3. The use of 20s-30s Development Leaders can make a positive impact on church engagement with this vital age range. However, the long-term effectiveness of these sort of ministry roles is heavily dependent on their context, especially:
 - a. Being placed with an incumbent where there is a good chemistry
 - b. An aligned vision of the role, and
 - c. The wider commitment of the church to support the role.Without these factors in place impact tends to be short term or muted.
4. The power of strong, shared sponsorship in a diocese to make broader strategic initiatives happen (e.g. creating intentional churches). This leadership can make or break the impact of these.
5. The importance of churches engaging properly and consistently with the use of social media to reach out and build communities with 20s and 30s. Despite its importance it remains a significant gap in church communications. Repeated examples of the use of promotion via apps like Instagram and Meetup, communications both group and 1:1 on WhatsApp and messaging and the quality of presentation and graphics confirms the importance of this. The church has to compete for attention.
6. The challenge in measuring 'new disciples' which established Church of England metrics do not address. Where this measure is selected as an objective it needs to be measured directly and should be augmented by additional expectations in statistics for mission (SfM). It is not clear that SfM are picking up church participation effectively.
7. There is a significant cultural challenge in ageing churches because of resistance to the sorts of changes needed to engage younger adults more effectively – in terms of visible leadership roles, meeting approaches (e.g., interactivity, social gathering), communications methods (social media) and experimentation. This reinforces both the value of church plants where purpose and activity are set freshly and the importance of points 1 and 8 for leaders in established settings.
8. The importance of mobilising the local church effectively in order to spur health and growth i.e. get as many people involved and on board as possible around a key initiative. This factor seems to shape the sustainability of growth. It demands work by leaders before and during any church initiative.
9. The importance of *just doing something* and trying *new* events, activities or approaches to engage the community. These may or may not work but that matters much less than trying new things out to engage outsiders to the church and then building on the ones that work. This was exemplified by the Development Leaders work in Acceler8.
10. It is very difficult to sustain new activities both in terms of finance and sponsorship - even with five years to do so. Communication gaps in the expectations of who is responsible for financing or sustaining the work easily leave it exposed. This needs to be addressed upfront in terms of responsibilities and expectations and be a key aspect of planning any initiative.

2 Background

Coventry Diocese launched the “Acceler8” initiative in 2015.

It was rooted in the development of a diocesan strategy adopted in 2010 that used a focus on growing church health as a foundation for growth. This used the Natural Church Development (NCD) framework with its 8 Essential Qualities (8EQs) of church health (See appendix).

Significant energy was put into this strategy, building it into many aspects of diocesan life – including parish profiles, role specifications, MDRs, recruitment and discernment processes – in the following years.

This was combined with an increasing focus on the ‘missing generation’ of 20s and 30s in churches through the diocese, but especially in urban and more deprived settings where the underrepresentation was especially marked and efforts to address the weakness needed to be strengthened. Funding had been gained to train those 20s and 30s in congregations in deprived areas in leadership and missional activities with some positive impacts.

Much of the work was spearheaded by the Archdeacon Missioner, Morris Rodham, from his appointment in 2010. Following the encouragement of the Synod in 2010 he worked to build momentum around the initiative:

- Nearly 90 presentations were given around the diocese to explain the content and value of the 8EQs and the value of self-assessment of strengths and weaknesses to develop actions to build church health.
- Work was done on the language of the NCD survey tool to help make the terminology more Anglican friendly and encourage its use.
- In 2013, a new Healthy Churches Mentor was appointed to work with churches to help on the survey and the development of actions flowing from it. He then built a network of 17 volunteer mentors to support churches, and
- Around 100 churches (i.e. 40% of the total) used the surveys to help diagnose what to work on in church life.
- A web-site (www.healthychurches.org.uk) was created to help guide churches through using the framework

This led in 2014 to the Bishops Council unanimously approving the strategy and the Acceler8 programme. This was further endorsed by a very positive vote in the Diocesan Synod early in 2015 which led to a successful SDF application and launch in late 2015.

The project was expected to cost £1.6m with £0.9m coming from the diocese and the Church Commissioners funding £140k for two additional part-time healthy church mentors, £480k for 2 full-time and 8 part-time 20s/30s Development Leaders to work in selected parishes with high concentrations of this demographic and £50k for additional staff time and IT.

The aim was that this would fund the first five years and it would then become financially sustainable.

3 Project objectives

ACCELER8 was a bold initiative to work on church health across the Coventry Diocese and accelerate growth, especially in the 20s/30s age range.

It anticipated the following outcomes from the initiative:

- 1000 extra disciples across the Coventry Diocese by the end of 2020, including 400 in their 20s/30s
- Significant improvement in long term health and growth (numerically and financially) in churches after five years
- Increased financial strength as attendance trends move from decline to growth
- 20 extra 20s/30s entering the vocations process
- 4 pioneer church plants led by 20s/30s from existing churches

It comprised two separate elements but both rested on the overall focus on healthy churches and use of the NCD framework and tools to support that goal. These are summarised below:

Project Element	Initial Goals
<p>2 F/T and 8 P/T 20s/30s Development Leaders Deploy in 6 deaneries (5 with high concentrations of 20s/30s and one rural) embedded in a church but sharing learning and training across the deanery and more widely.</p>	<p>400 extra 20s/30s disciples across diocese</p> <p>20 extra vocations</p> <p>4 pioneer plants from growth in this age range</p>
<p>Heathy Church Mentors (1 existing and 2 additional part-time) Support churches in the adoption and use of NCD framework to encourage use of the NCD survey tool and action planning as a result to strengthen church health</p>	<p>1000 extra disciples (inclusive of the above 400)</p> <p>Improved financial strength after 2020 from reversing of trends of decline and aging congregations</p>

In short, as the original application summarised the aims the programme was designed to promote: “growing faster...growing healthier...growing younger”.

4 Achievements and good news stories

Summary outcomes

Although this was an early programme with support by strategic funding, there was a good deal of tracking both of outputs and outcomes from the early stages which has been very helpful in seeing the progress made against the original goals.

There are however caveats to this tracking:

1. The Serving Christ¹ programme was launched shortly after Acceler8 and with overlap in terms of outcomes and approach. The Diocese has consolidated reporting the results for both in the submission of outcomes from Serving Christ.
2. As noted in the annual reports as Acceler8 progressed, there has been a constant challenge to identify on any consistent basis 'new disciples'. The most effective approach has been to triangulate a number of different sources that asked churches how many new disciples they have seen, notably specific Archdeacon's articles of enquiry, the NCD surveys, SfM, and direct feedback from the Development leaders. This is as much art as science. It is being done more effectively with the Serving Christ programme but it adds some uncertainty to the numbers for Acceler8.
3. The onset of Covid-19 from the start of 2020 has presented an enormous obstacle to Acceler8. It undermined most aspects of the work of both the 20s/30s Development Leaders and the overall Healthy Church programme. With this in mind and the presence of good tracking from the start, the achievements in this report are measured on the basis of only four years (to end 2019) rather than the five originally planned. This is a very short period of time for any initiative with an aspiration to impact a diocese.

Despite these caveats, there is strong evidence of significant outcomes and progress from the initiative, even by the end of year 4:

- Overall, it is estimated that around 930 people have become disciples across the diocese with the help of Acceler8², comprising 416 in their 20s/30s and 513 in other age ranges. Both these figures exceed the anticipated outcomes for the programme over this time period.
- Over 40 people in their 20s/30s have explored vocations in the diocese, including 14 in 2018 and 13 in 2019 reflecting a wider shift to more participation from younger leaders in the life of the church (commented on by interviewees). Although this is not due entirely to Acceler8 and it is not clear how many of these are actually proceeding into the ordination process. The initiative has supported

¹ Serving Christ was launched in June 2017 and created a team of six learning mentors (each with a defined area of expertise, some of which relate directly to the 8EQs). These support a list of priority churches (Those 70-100 in size and with the potential to grow (as identified by NCD data)) and offer support with a wider variety of tools/modules and training than the healthy church mentors did under Acceler8. It concludes in the second half of 2022.

² The totals are totals for all new disciples in the diocese – reflecting the diocesan-wide reach of the healthy churches initiative which shaped all communications and the approach to churches.

the work of the Diocesan Young Vocations Team and the encouragement of the Development Leaders has been a significant driver for exploration.

- The general aim to strengthen the financial health of the churches (through their overall growth and increased discipleship) has produced a mixed response. Although there is evidence that those churches engaged in NCD have grown (see below) the financial picture is weaker, and the overall diocesan picture for attendance and finances has weakened rather than strengthened.
- There have been significant local impacts, illustrated in the examples cited in the next section and the resulting level of intentionality and initiative are noticeable in the responses to the Archdeacons Articles of Enquiry (data from 2018 was examined). This includes not just Alpha, Messy and Breakfast Church initiatives but also the use of 'growth' groups (e.g. walking, dancing, music with bible study and prayer), volunteer programmes (e.g. working with Syrian refugees), Alzheimer's and bereavement groups, 4 minute preaching schemes (to encourage the identification of gifted teachers) and the development of a rhythm of life approach (Crown).
- Two (of the four anticipated) 20/30s focused worshipping communities were started. One however only lasted two years before it faded away and the other started in 2019 and stopped meeting with the pandemic. The Development Leader engaged with this has moved on to another parish as he went forward to ordination.

Looking at the outcomes element by element:

Outcomes from Churches with 20/30s Development Leader

There was a significant and detailed process of capturing the impact of the Development Leaders in the churches that they were engaged with. This was done quarterly by the Leaders at their team meetings where they were asked to record both outputs and outcomes. This exercise was begun shortly after the project started and continued until lockdown at which point the event and outreach activity was halted. This did not, however, stop Development Leaders continuing with individual contact and mentoring which several did.

The outcomes over the duration of the project, specifically from the leaders' engagement in their churches were:

EVALUATION OUTCOMES	TOTAL
New disciples 20s/30s	139
20s/30s in new leadership roles	126
New services/expressions	30
1 Off Social Events	193
1 Off Discipleship Events	32
1 Off Evangelism Events	28
Regular Events	12
Regular Groups	45
Residentials	21
Alpha/Start/Christianity Explored	36
Church plants	0
Learning Communities	7
Sharing learning	69

This gives a good flavour of the scale of activity pursued and the immediate impact – aside of the wider impact within the diocese on 20/30’s and healthy church.

There is, however, no evidence that this grew the churches involved in either absolute terms or relative to the rest of the diocese. The SfM data was analysed for the short time period on which data was reliable (2016-19) to see if any differences emerge but they suggest very little difference to the rest of the diocese in terms of outcomes, indeed if anything they might be weaker. The table below summarises this (a full copy of the worksheet is available at the end of the report).

USA child	USA adult	Elec Roll	WC Total	WC (0-10)	WC (11-17)	WC (18+)	WC (18-39)	WC (40-69)	WC (70+)	
0	-31	9	1	17	20	-31	-4	-27	-5	DL churches
132	592	749	1138	181	76	595	214	381	286	DL churches base
0.0%	-5.2%	1.2%	0.1%	9.4%	26.3%	-5.2%	-1.9%	-7.1%	-1.7%	Difference as % of base DL churches
-5.6%	-0.8%	-8.1%	-7.5%	-4.6%	-15.0%	-6.4%	7.4%	-6.0%	-2.6%	Difference as % nonDL churches
5.6%	-4.4%	9.3%	7.6%	14.0%	41.3%	1.2%	-9.3%	-1.1%	0.8%	Comparison

The final line of the table provides an indication across the 9 churches involved the difference between their data and the rest of the diocese. This does not look good but there are significant caveats to the analysis

- The data is incomplete. There are four data points (on WC) in the base data and two churches missing from the analysis. Urban Hope did not provide data till 2019 and data for St Johns Westwood, a key church near the University shows anomalies in the count that have meant it needed to be excluded. These are significant omissions, especially for St Johns which is a large church with a strong younger adult ministry
- Also very importantly, St Marks Coventry, a City centre church plant by Gas St and HTB opened up in 2017. This targeted the same age range and undoubtedly adversely impacted several of the Development Leader churches directly because of their proximity to the centre of Coventry. Its growth also impacts the relative comparison with the rest of the diocese (as in a relatively smaller diocese it inflates the diocese as well as undoubtedly attracting this age range from some of the DL churches)
- The advent of Covid means that we have only a 3-year comparison. This is a very short period of time for any trend data to be compared across and for this kind of initiative.

- The target age range of 20s-30s does not readily register on the core USA metrics nor the electoral roll. The worshipping community measure also tends to be a much more loosely collected metric.
- Half the churches with Development Leaders *did* grow over the period, and this included numbers in the worshipping community in the target age range.

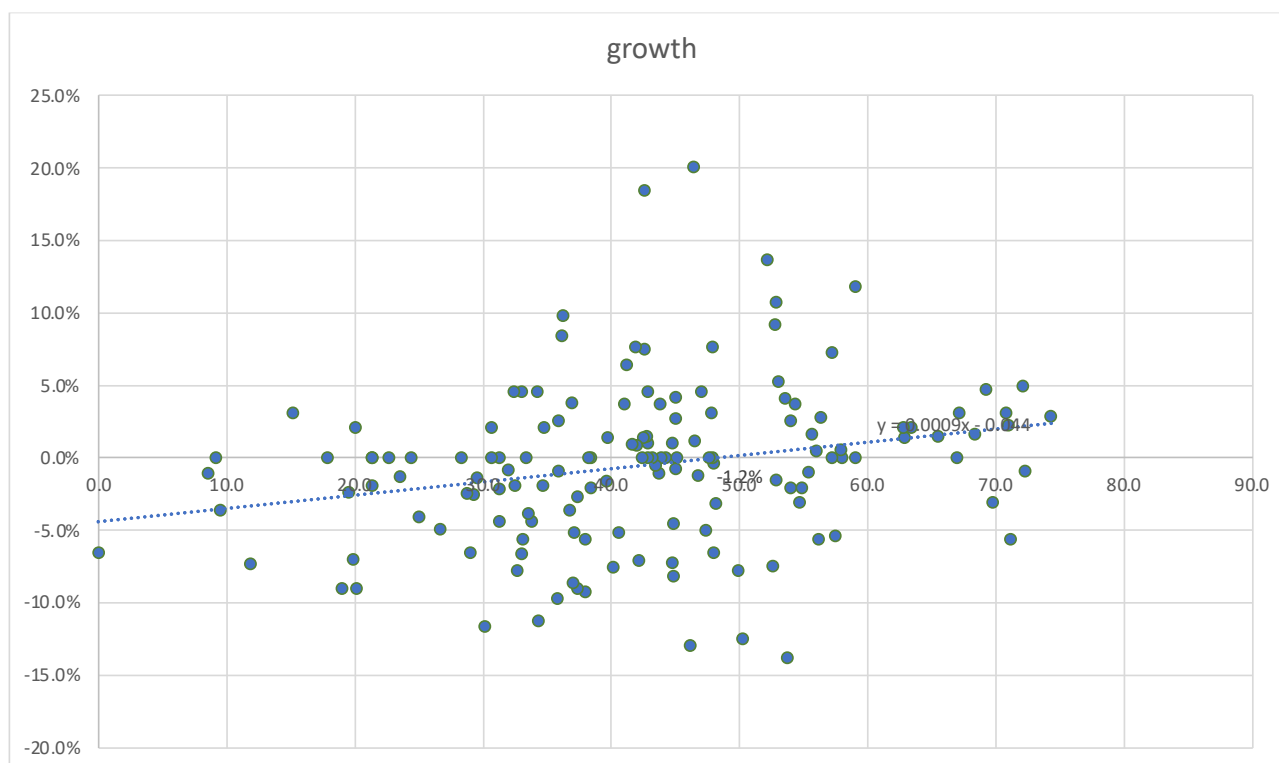
In conclusion, this suggests to me that the initiative did produce some good results on the ground both in terms of outputs and outcomes, albeit not consistently. However, this is unlikely to have been sustained because of Covid, the impact of St Marks on the Coventry based churches and the departure of the Development Leaders with in many cases no immediate follow-on approach.

Outcomes from the Healthy Church initiative

For the healthy church initiative, parishes that engaged with NCD gathered a lot of data in the survey process, not just on perceptions of the 8EQ's but also on attendance. This provided a rich data set from which to study the overall impact of this aspect of the work.

Rural Churches

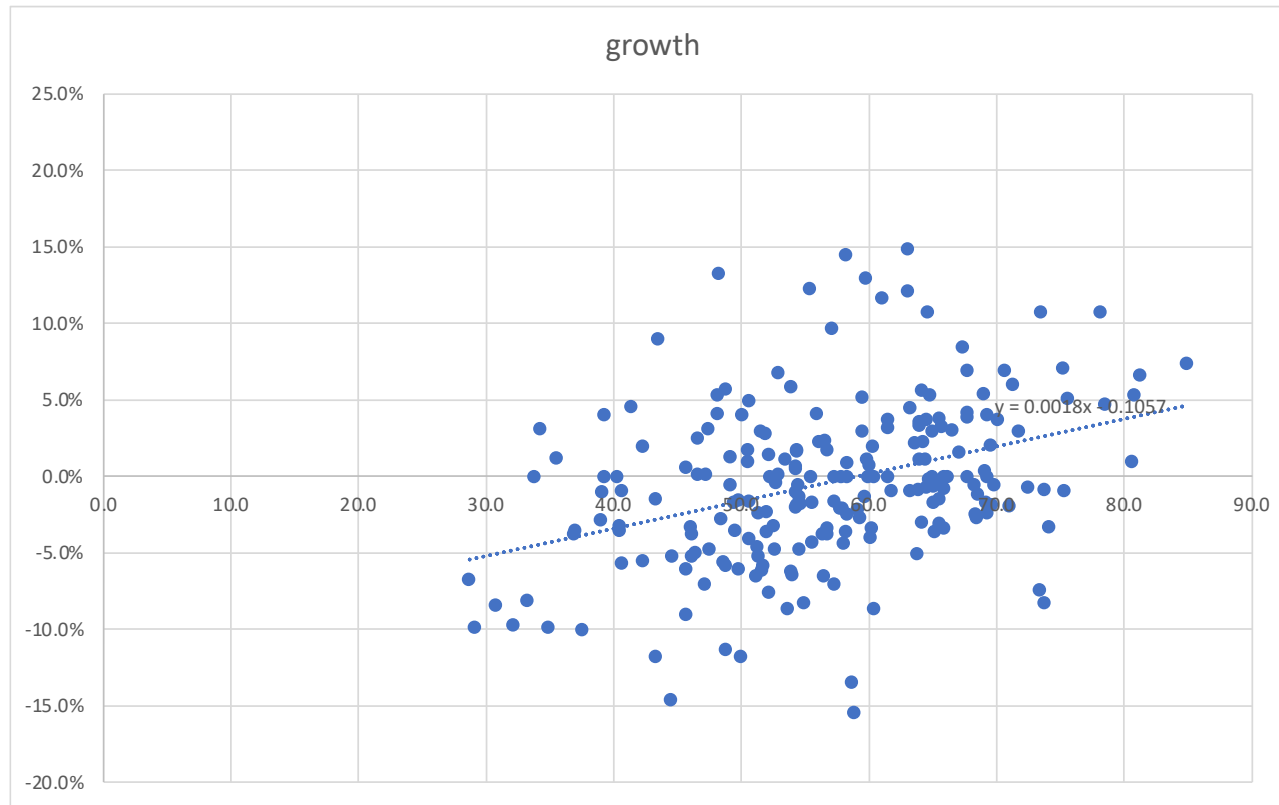
These grew on average by 0.9%p.a. for each 10%pts of increased health and started to grow once they reached an average of 49 points on the 8EQ's.



(Vertical axis is growth rate and horizontal axis is NCD health score and rural is here demarcated as a parish of under 4000 people.)

Urban churches

The impact was more marked in an urban setting. These grew on average twice as quickly, by 1.8%pa for each 10%pts of increased health and moved into growth once they reached an average of 59 points of health.



(Vertical axis is growth rate and horizontal axis is NCD health score and urban is here demarcated as a parish of over 4000 people.)

Whilst there are limitations over the duration of measurement and there is no explicit control group, this growth progressed at the same time as overall diocesan attendance continued to reduce.

Furthermore, this echoes the wider experience and data held by NCD.

NCD has a global database which it uses to calibrate the ratings in the surveys and which Coventry used with the surveys. Globally they suggest that sustained growth only starts to take place in a church when all the 8EQ's are rated as at least 65. This was true for few churches in the Coventry Diocese but still the improvements made by the mass of churches had a positive impact on growth.

The Coventry experience validates this and this was corroborated by the interviews. It suggests that the use of a structured health church framework and toolset, like NCD, can provide a valuable platform for making operational changes in the life of a church that boost its health which in turn boosts its attractiveness and growth.

Work was done to examine if, as some initial analysis had suggested, the use of NCD had helped in the turnaround of declining churches, i.e. that churches where attendance had been in decline for some time, embraced NCD and moved back into growth. The experience of 11 cited churches was explored but no consistent evidence of a turnaround in attendance following the adoption of NCD could be found in the SfM or NCD data for these churches. There were individual examples (see below) but not a clear pattern.

Examples of the impact of Acceler8

These examples are typical of the aspirations of Acceler8 and its impact, when it worked most effectively in parishes.

Leamington, St John the Baptist (DL and NCD)

This church was taken on by a new minister at the start of 2017. He made use of both NCD to promote church health and participated in the Development Leaders initiative because he saw the importance of this demographic to the church.

He used the opportunities of Acceler8 to engage the church through NCD (which he says was 'superbly well received') and to tap into the Development Leaders where he found a like-minded, passionate group seeking to reach young adults.

He has launched with the church many different activities by engaging in the local community and using the programme. These include a choral evensong targeting men in their 20's which attracted 20 people, starting on a food kitchen through lockdown, a summer club that has led several regular young people's groups and experiments with a contemporary eucharist and breakfast café.

The church has grown under the minister by around 100% over 3 years.

Warwick, St Mary's (NCD)

The church leader was a reluctant user of NCD with concerns about its fit with St Mary's and its use of metrics (above narrative). However, he felt he needed to work with it given its emphasis in the diocese and surveys were conducted in Nov 14, Jan 16 and Jun 17). The surveys were used to get people together and discuss what might be done to address the weakest of the 8EQ's.

Initiatives included the creation of a monthly prayer diary (to address passionate spirituality), starting a home group (holistic small groups).

The leader believes the church is unlikely to do another survey but that it was 'well worth doing' even though he was 'skeptical and could see flaws' in it. He sees the biggest benefits in it in the opportunity it provided to bring people together and so is using this principle with more open-ended questions going forward.

The church grew by around 30% over the three years from the first to the last survey.

Coventry, St James Styvechale (DL)

St James provides a good example of what can be done when a Development Leader is placed into a church that supports the development of young adults. The Development Leader got involved in the church search process at Warwick University close by and built up a group of students who bonded socially over lunches, small group and Alpha. This group widened beyond students and developed a community of 15-20 young adults.

Building on the example of a successful games café in Warwick, the Development Leader started up a similar venture at the church in 2019 which attracted on average 30 most non-Christian young adults and an online following of 400 before it came to a halt with Covid-19.

The Development Leader also sought to plant a new missional café meeting with one of the Serving Christ mentors but this did not establish itself before Covid-19 closed such activity down.

Coventry, St Anne & All Saints (DL)

This church is situated in a somewhat deprived area with many students and young adults and it had a Development Leader for the full term who has now gone onto ordination. Over 10 people came to faith in that time and nearly double that took on leadership roles in the church.

Initially the Development Leader started a new evening service off the back of a series of outreach events to students and young adults. This grew to 20+ and provided the foundation for further growth. After 3 years a café project was started in the church building.

Outreach events (e.g. pancake parties, Christmas parties and bands) worked well to allow relationships to be built and were advertised through social media and the network of previous attendees and as with other leaders 1:1 coffees and networking was a vital part of their work.

In 2019 he started a new worshipping community in his house as a network church which garnered a group of around 10 and ran for a year. 2 people came to faith in this group before lockdowns and the departure of the Development Leader for ordination.

Even so he is still in touch with several of the group who continue to grow in their discipleship.

Coventry, Urban Hope (DL)

Urban Hope is a church plant by the Cathedral started in 2012 in a very deprived area of the city with lots of young adults, many with significant challenges and facing social and economic deprivation.

This plant has seen some 26 young adults come to faith over the five years of the work of the part-time Development Leader who previously led the attached youth work.

She organised a variety of gatherings – Saturday morning and after-school for young parents, Messy Church and bible story and children's activities and many communal social activities (on a shoestring budget).

Three church families grew to ten but little of this is evident in service attendance because of the background and situation of the adults. In this demographic with zero hours contracts and single parents, families have become part of the church family but that does mean that they consistently attend formal church services. Worship builds from helping them to find 'wow' moments, discipleship aided by 1:1 Alpha because of shift work, practical support on food vouchers and benefits advice, facilitated open forums to discuss life and faith and even one group that meet in a mental hospital with several members with autism and mental health challenges.

Many have taken on leadership roles in the church and the groups involved here.

Bearley St Mary the Virgin (NCD)

This small rural church of only 10 people situated in a village of 2000 initially felt that they could not use the tool (there were not 30 people to do the survey!) However, they used it and scored themselves relatively low on church health with empowering leadership and need oriented evangelism being their weakest qualities. They made small changes (e.g., consciously improved their welcome, created a prayer tree at the back of the church and improved their parish magazine). They repeated their survey of all members and added additional actions. Over four years they self-assessed a 50% improvement in their 8EQ's (only up to around an average of 50) but they also grew from 10 to 15 during that time.

Disappointments

Within the outcomes there are some disappointments. Notably:

- The lack of widespread committed adoption by churches in the Diocese of the NCD tools and principles to address church health. By the team's best estimates about 40 churches really committed to using the tools (evidenced by the timely repetition of the surveys and the knowledge of the mentors) but the majority of others would be better described as simply 'compliant' with the process (perhaps to secure a new minister or to avoid criticism) and few churches registered the actions that they decided to undertake following the results of the surveys.
The NCD approach was most readily adopted by churches of an evangelical tradition and there was considerable resistance from other traditions. However, these initial attitudes did not seem to impact its relevance and value when used. Indeed, and perhaps ironically, Ebbsfleet churches are continuing to use the approach with mentoring support despite the winding down of the Diocesan initiative.
- Despite the evident support both from Diocesan leaders and data to encourage the focus on younger adults, many of the interviewees commented on a culture in many churches that was very defensiveness of change, of the encouragement of younger leaders and different ways of doing things.
- Initially there was extensive use to be made of volunteer mentors who would support churches on NCD whilst doing other diocesan roles. This however worked very badly because of the lack of time and focus that they devoted to this and the low level of expertise in NCD and poor facilitation skills. The experience in Coventry would suggest that this is not the best path to follow and that properly trained and focused mentors were essential to make the initiative work well. The result was the increased dependence on the 3 core mentors.
- Despite Acceler8, and its impact it has not succeeded in stemming the decline in headline attendance experienced generally by the Coventry Diocese. The result has been that the wider anticipated benefits of strengthened churches and finances has not happened. What new disciples have joined the church have been more than offset by those leaving or dying.

5 Missional theory/project design

The foundation of the Healthy Churches initiative was grounded on the NCD framework. The Coventry Diocese investigated this before its adoption. This confirmed the value of using the 8EQ's in churches to identify and work on the weakest aspects of health as an effective strategy for God to grow the church.

The underlying theory of mission for the 20s/30s Development Leaders was built from prior experience in the diocese and learning in conjunction with Birmingham Diocese especially in deprived areas. However, the principal elements of this activity were based on a combination of:

- The prior church leadership experience of the core group who designed Acceler8 and positive examples of, for instance, the CFM role in the Coventry Diocese
- The positive experience of the first cohort of MA's that had been in present in parishes from 2012
- Work done with churches on the 'Transforming Church' strategy since 2009
- The SDU analysis of Coventry Diocese and the need for a stronger city centre presence and a drive to engage a younger demographic

The logic is summarised in the table below:

Element	Original theory	Theory changed or validated?
Development Leaders	<p>To provide pioneering staff to a willing incumbent and church who will both work on the ground and support and mentor other volunteers (to empower leadership in NCD terms) in new initiatives that 20s and 30s in the area</p> <p>Organising and publicizing activities that reach out to this demographic in intentional mission and community building.</p> <p>Aiming to build real relationships of friendship, trust and support that would bridge and support personal faith development.</p> <p>Key features of theory</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Work hand-in-hand with incumbent as a leader - Outward focus on 20s/30s and community building and empowerment - Ideas and innovation backed up by capacity to lead in this age range - 5-year commitment to embed and shape the church culture and accessibility for this age range <p>Providing examples and ideas that could be shared to spark activity in other churches with 20s/30s</p>	<p>No change. The more fruitful churches validate the concept and there are good examples of this operating well – even though overall it is not possible to detect an impact on the growth of the church and the participation of the demographic (for possible reasons see p9).</p> <p>Care was taken to ensure a good chemistry in the match between incumbent and Development Leader, to place leaders in priority areas (with a lot of younger adults) and to engage with a variety of churchmanships.</p> <p>Nonetheless, possibly as a result of seeking to have a diverse base of churches, some worked better than others and many exhibited particular points of tension:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - In some cases, the match between the churchmanship and experience of the Development Leader and the Incumbent led to stresses and disagreement over the best strategy - In addition to chemistry there needs to be a match in the vision of the work between incumbent and leaders. This was not always present - In many cases Development Leaders felt a sense of 'ageism' that resisted using new ideas and younger leaders and reflected a lack of church commitment to the goals

Element	Original theory	Theory changed or validated?
		<p>Despite many examples of the communication efforts of the leaders and presentations on the work there is little evidence of a catalytic effect on surrounding churches. Engagement was poor.</p> <p>The sustained impact of the role was severely damaged by the advent of Covid-19 which limited outreach to effectively a 3-4 year period. However, in many cases the work may well have faded at the end of the placement through a lack of planning and support to ensure sustainability in the church.</p>
<p>NCD and Healthy Church Mentors</p>	<p>Fundamentally the basic theory is that a healthier church is more likely to grow and that the level of health is correlated to growth. This is quantified and statistically validated by the overall NCD international dataset.³</p> <p>The initiative therefore sought to encourage churches to become healthier by using the NCD 8EQ's to enable churches (all sizes and traditions) to remove the obstacles to health by:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Becoming more transparent to their real strengths and weaknesses - Promoting collective insight, discussion and action on church health - Using this as a consistent framework for church life, recruitment and appointment and discussion <p>This was supported by mentors to work with church leaders (at their request) and their teams in the use of the underlying principles to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Help churches catch the vision to invest in their health (supporting presentations, Q&A etc) - Understand and respond to the use of the NCD church survey - Facilitate the development of actions in response to survey results - Reinforce and sustain their actions through ongoing coaching 	<p>No substantive change in this theory. The initiative supports both the hypothesis that links health and growth and the approach through the use of suitably qualified mentors.</p> <p>The 8EQ's were used by many churches (and of all traditions and sizes) to facilitate a discussion on health, for new staff and as a basis for action planning.</p> <p>There is strong evidence (both inside and outside the diocese) that this helped churches to improve their health and that this positively correlates with growth. Indeed, in the diocese the evidence is that it can promote growth at even lower levels of health than generally emphasised by NCD itself.</p> <p>The principles and approach were used effectively by a wide variety of churches.</p> <p>It is not possible to specifically quantify the impact of the mentors. However, there was universally positive feedback on the value of their support from interviewees and the advantage of having a well-informed, skilled and encouraging outside coach to support the use of NCD. Mentors also seem to be critical to help churches understand the process and overcome fears (see below).</p> <p>There are, however, some key additional learnings:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The use of NCD is best offered and adopted rather than mandated. It is often rejected by the minister. Reasons appear to be the 'felt' pressure

³ The NCD dataset overall suggests that churches need to realise a metric of over 65 on all 8EQ's to really start to motor on growth and the approach counsels focusing church action on the weakest quality emerging from each survey to progress.

Element	Original theory	Theory changed or validated?
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Provide greater accountability to act on the results of their health assessments <p>It is then assumed that, just as in the natural world, a healthier church will become a growing church as God brings the growth and the church removes obstacles in the way of this.</p>	<p>to use it, fear that the survey results would be used against the incumbent in MDR's, stylistic differences or because of its diocesan sponsorship. As a result of these issues NCD was not consistently used across the diocese and not committed to by even a majority of churches. There is little evidence of a diocese-wide impact from its application</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - A more cascading approach to communication at the start with greater detail on the process and explanation of the questions used in the survey would help to gain wider commitment - The mentors provided not just coaching support but also pastoral support for church leaders, at least initially, which may well have helped but reflects more on the limited support to incumbents rather than a test of NCD

6 Implementation

Programme implementation was very systematic and it very largely followed the plan set down in the application until the pandemic struck in 2020. Changes were only in the placement of the Development Leaders as the programme responded to specific challenges in individual situations.

Particularly effective aspects of the implementation were:

Staffing

The initiative got off to a very prompt start because it was able to quickly staff the key roles that it needed, despite the fact that many of these (in the case of Development Leaders) were part-time.

In practice all were in position by late 2015. The ease with which this was achieved reflected the strong sponsorship and energy behind Acceler8 by Morris Rodham (Archdeacon Missioner), a clear sense of team and a proposition that had a strong appeal to those who joined because of its emphasis on mission and on engagement with young adults on the part of Development Leaders and church health for NCD.

The search for people also made very good use of networking to find suitable people quickly. As a result, almost all staff stayed with the programme right into Covid and only one Development Leader left prematurely. Indeed, two of the Development Leaders have now moved onto ordination.

An integrated programme

Particularly in the use of NCD, the diocese approached its application with the aim of integrating it into the way that the diocese operated. This was a potentially very powerful lever for change in church life and a good approach to bringing the principles into business-as-usual in the diocese.

Aspects of this included:

- Mandated use of the 8EQs in parish profiles
- Mandated use of the 8EQ's in criteria based interviewing approaches for appointments and staffing
- Encouragement to the appointment of younger leaders to Synod and other diocesan bodies
- Encouragement to use NCD in the development of 20/30s work and with the Development Leaders
- Active communications of the nature, experience and value of NCD and the way that churches had used it to set agendas for their own health
- Experimentation in using the 'Empowering Leadership' quality in MDR's (quickly dropped because of an adverse reaction)
- Use of multiple approaches to track and triangulate impacts

This approach persisted largely to the end of the project period although it was weakened by the change in Archdeacon Missioner part way through the project.

Team building and learning

There was a regular pattern of meeting together for the Development Leaders that was established very quickly. Leaders met one day a month. Sometimes this involved training but for the most part it comprised:

- Sharing – on the practical situation, what people had been doing, working with incumbents, ideas and events, use of tools
- Prayer
- Encouragement
- Data gathering (collecting impact data)

This led to both good dissemination of ideas across the team and to diligent tracking of the impact of activity. The gathering also encouraged one or two clergy (who were part-funded as a part of Acceler8) interested in developing young adult work to participate for learning and encouragement.

Communications

There were many aspects of the initiative which benefited from effective communications execution:

- Seeking out and explaining the value of NCD
 - Morris Rodham spoke to over 90 different diocesan bodies, churches and groups especially in the early stages.
 - The Healthy Church Mentors also engaged with church leaders and their teams to explain the nature, purpose, process and value of NCD and explore its application the specific church situation
- The innovative use of infographics and presentations from data in the NCD surveys on church health (e.g. use of a human shaped heatmap to represent health as well as bar charts and other graphic data presentation). These were used with churches and in reports in the diocese
- The Development Leaders spoke at 70 events over the four active years of the initiative sharing what they were doing and its impact
- Sharing case examples of churches using NCD and its positive impact

Nonetheless these efforts did not succeed in engaging the whole diocese in healthy church nor neighbouring churches in the opportunities provided by Development Leaders.

Budget

The original budget for expenditure on the programme was £1.61m over a five-year period (2015 – 2020) comprising £969k of diocesan funding and £639k of strategic funding. Subsequent tweaks to the budget modified this to the figures in the table below (£1.58m, comprising £925k of diocesan funding and £655k of strategic funding):

£'000	Budget			Actual		
	Total	Diocese	SDF	Total	Diocese	SDF
NCD						
Staffing	237,995	139,227	98,768	273,952	148,224	125,728
NCD survey costs	160,395	93,831	66,564	73,431	41,709	31,722
20s-30s						
Staffing	1,064,074	623,159	440,915	1,000,500	568,275	432,226
Miscellaneous	117,168	68,543	48,625	40,096	22,775	17,321
Total	1,579,632	924,761	654,871	1,387,979	780,982	606,997

Actual expenditure was only £1.39m, some £200k less than budgeted. Particular areas of underspend against the budget were:

- Lower spend on NCD survey costs due to fewer churches using the surveys and less frequent use than expected (£90k)
- Lower spend on Development Leader salaries (£65k) as staffing movements and covid disruption curtailed the five-year period for many leaders
- Lower miscellaneous spend cost for Development Leader programme (£75k). Some of this was disruption later in the period (eg cancellation of conferences) but more is to do with over-budgeting in the work done at the start of the programme (after the original application budget)
- Higher staffing costs for NCD mentors (£35k) as more use was made of paid mentors vs volunteer mentors because of their effectiveness

Closer tracking of the relative SDF/Diocesan funding was not done as no more specific allocation of monies by line item was made at the start of the project.

Tracking and measurement

Although Acceler8 was an early SDF funded initiative, there were significant efforts made to measure and track its progress against the anticipated outcomes and outputs from the beginning.

On the 20/30s side of the work, this was done in the monthly gatherings of the Development Leaders when it was realised that this was the only way of assuring regular and granular assessment. With NCD, one of the healthy church mentors with good skills in analysis took on the tracking and analysing of the healthy church data and its presentation.

The overall assessment was undertaken for the annual reviews and involved drawing together both these sources along with data drawn from SfM and specifically tailored Archdeacons' Articles of Enquiry in order to estimate the outcomes especially in the areas of new disciples.

This initiative grappled with the same issues that others have faced in trying to assess issues such as disciples vs attendees. Learning from this work has been taken into a strengthened framework for the assessment of the Serving Christ programme.

7 Learning

Specific lessons for each missional element of the programme are captured in the section on Missional Theory (see in table right-hand column) and there are many other valuable points noted in the annual reviews put together by the team. The lessons below are those that apply more widely across the programme.

Identified learnings by participants

There were only three learnings that were mentioned by multiple stakeholders, the rest were identified by individual contributors. Those identified by multiple stakeholders are highlighted first.

1. The value of church health

Several of the interviewees felt that the focus on health was one which had proved its value in use through Acceler8.

It brought:

- A more communal ownership of the issues and actions for the church,
- A great way to interface with diocesan-wide functions and structures,
- A good quality of practical action which impacted the church

This was observed to be the greatest with those who would not naturally run with a framework like NCD.

2. The need for church ownership and support for initiatives

Several stakeholders felt that the mobilisation of wider church support was a critical factor in making both the NCD and 20/30s initiative work effectively. It empowers the changes needed to capitalise on the opportunities that they create and also to sustain them over time. Without it obstacles are presented to changes, to the integration of initiatives into core church life and to experimentation. This mobilisation appears to be a critical task for church leaders.

3. The difficulty of engaging church leaders across a diocese

There were great efforts made to communicate and engage with churches both on NCD and 20/30s – including around 200 presentations to diocesan and deanery forums, the introduction of younger adults into many interviews for new posts, into diocesan decision-making bodies, paid mentors and informal connections. However, respondents repeatedly highlighted the paucity of engagement from other churches.

Other individual learnings are:

4. The value to churches of having a church mentor over a sustained period of time – able to provide accountability for action and support and encouragement for progress on church health.

5. The importance of connecting with where those outside the church see spirituality – their ‘wow’ moments (e.g. in simply going to a country park and being somewhere green for those in an inner city location).
6. Being prepared to always do things differently to enable them to work in your specific environment (e.g. doing 1:1 Alpha rather than group).
7. The value to be unlocked by good external communications and graphics when working with young adults – using good practices in the online/social media space and in the physical environment offered.
8. The importance of consistency across a diocese mission strategy so that initiatives do not interfere with each other. The planting of St Marks Resourcing Church in the centre of Coventry in 2017 was seen to have adversely impacted a number of the churches engaged in 20/30s work as it sucked that demographic into the centre of Coventry and away from churches that had invested in this age range.

Additional learnings

9. Do something and try something different! An observation of the approach of the 20/30’s Leaders interviewed was that they achieved their impact often simply by trying things to engage people outside the church.
If an individual initiative did not work, they would simply try something else and happily borrow from others. They felt a real commitment to engage with people in their role and used every opportunity to do so – using whatever insight they could gain to succeed.
10. The importance of investing in personal (1:1) relationships. The impact of the Development Leaders (and, to a lesser extent, of the Healthy Church Mentors) was significantly influenced by their willingness to build and invest in 1:1 personal relationships and become someone who was a genuine friend. Time and again this led to opportunity to support individuals, for open and deeper conversations and for people to come to know Jesus for themselves.

Whilst the Development Leaders engaged in programmes of events and activity, all commented on the impact and significance of the relationships many of which have continued beyond their role and which survived the end of events brought about by the pandemic. A focus on genuine friendship and investing in these is highlighted strongly as perhaps the key driver for outreach and faith development.

11. The need for clarity in executing new models of church. Within the vision of Acceler8 was the desire to plant new worshipping communities for younger adults (e.g. The Vine, The Collective). This was greatly facilitated by the presence of a programme structure to give permission, to provide seedcorn finance and support but it highlighted a challenge for those churches seeking to develop this type of planting initiative.

There is no practical guide to 'oversight' or readily available protocols for how to support and oversee these new communities or training in how to support them and their leaders effectively. Issues such as finance, safeguarding, resources, degrees of freedom, accountability and communications with the 'sending church' all would benefit greatly from more attention and guides to help church leaders undertake this well.

This was not an issue raised specifically in Acceler8, but that was mainly because of the programme structure. In a normal approach, especially with a lay leader these would be significant open questions.

8 Next steps

Coventry is investing in 'Serving in Christ'. This runs to 2022 and has adapted some aspects of the Acceler8 initiative. It has created a team of 6 learning mentors. Five of these mentors focus on supporting churches in 1 or 2 of the 8 essential qualities and indeed as the goals of this team overlap with that of Acceler8, there has been close working between the groups (including some joint initiatives) and the impact assessment for Serving Christ includes many of the core impacts expected from Acceler8.

The diocese however is not expected to continue to support NCD or 20/30's Development Leaders to the same extent. The programme very largely came to halt with the onset of Covid. This halted the embryonic church plants, curtailed the meeting together and face to face work that underpinned the 20/30s work and similarly stopped the work on NCD. The NCD mentors were furloughed or reassigned. Going forward the widespread sense across all interviewees was that the focus on health in NCD has been dropped by the diocese in favour of church planting.

The team dissolved by the end of June 2021 and for the diocese:

- On NCD, it will not be employing mentors nor mandating use of the 8EQ's in the way it has previously and will not be financing the surveys. Individual parishes who want to continue with NCD will free to do that.
- On 20/30's Development Leaders, there is no plan to continue to finance them centrally. One or two churches have either continued with a similar role or are considering it (post-Covid)

9 Advice to dioceses

Key lessons for the wider church

The experience of Acceler8 highlights lessons of value to the wider church in its pursuit of mission and discipleship:

2. Focusing on church health is valuable in encouraging church life and growth. There is good evidence, even in the limited time studied, of the value of this in established church settings. Health provides a route to increasing intentionality for those churches concerned about mission and discipleship.
3. NCD provides a robust approach to addressing church health but needs clear diocesan sponsorship, effective local explanation and implementation support and sustained focus for it to have a material impact beyond churches who already see the value in health.
4. The use of 20s-30s Development Leaders made a positive impact on church engagement with this vital age range. However, the long-term effectiveness of these sort of ministry roles is heavily dependent on their context, especially:
 - a. Being placed with an incumbent where there is a good chemistry
 - b. An aligned vision of the role, and
 - c. The wider commitment of the church to support the role.
 Without these factors in place impact tends to be short term or muted.
5. The importance and impact of strong, shared sponsorship in a diocese for creating an intentional church. A coalition of senior leaders at the heart of the diocese built with strong effort on communication, a coherent approach and supporting structure was able to build momentum around the NCD initiative. As this coalition dissipated so too did the energy.
6. The importance and value of effective use of social media to engage with 20s and 30s (and indeed increasingly older adults). Repeated examples of the use of promotion via apps like Instagram and Meetup, communications both group and 1:1 on WhatsApp and messaging and the quality of presentation and graphics confirms the importance of this for these demographics. The church *must* compete for attention.
7. There is a real challenge in measuring 'new disciples' which established Church of England metrics do not address. Where this measure is selected in projects it needs to be measured directly and should be augmented by additional expectations in statistics for mission and other community measures to help ensure that the overall aims for church growth are addressed.
8. There is a significant challenge in ageing churches because of resistance to the sorts of changes needed to engage younger adults more effectively – in terms of visible leadership roles, meeting approaches (e.g., interactivity, social gathering), communications methods (social media) and experimentation. This reinforces both the value of church plants where purpose and activity is set freshly and the importance of points 1 and 8 for leaders in established settings.

Additionally, the interviews reinforce other reviews lessons on the approach to mission:

9. The importance of church leaders focusing on building teams and mobilising the local church. This factor seems to shape the sustainability of growth. It demands work by leaders before and during any local initiative, elements include:
 - An outward facing church looking to bless the community
 - A shared desire to encourage relationships with Jesus
 - Willingness to volunteer to lead and staff activity - not rely on paid staff only
 - A focus on building personal friendships within the community and investing the time (often 1:1)
 - A commitment to 24/7 discipleship
 - Trying new things

What might you do differently with the benefit of hindsight?

In addition to aspect of the key points above, interviewees identified the following additional areas that they would have changed:

- Introduce NCD better to the diocese by providing more detail on the questions and process, adopting a cascade across churches rather than a blanket approach and not mandating it so early on. This was identified by several interviewees as a way to help overcome the defensiveness of church leaders, many of whom rejected the applicability of the approach on presumed issues with, for instance, the questions and approach – which were subsequently addressed by effective communications.
- Providing a wider remit to the 20/30s Leaders to engage with other churches in the area so that it was less ‘competitive’ between churches and to build a bit more momentum and a network (given the low numbers of Christian young adults already involved).
- Providing more general training and a greater emphasis on the focus in Acceler8 to clergy across the diocese. Clergy are seen to be somewhat isolated and defensive to initiatives because of the pressures that they currently feel.
- Broaden communications and engagement especially on the 20/30s agenda with diocesan functions to build the focus better into their ways of working and co-opting the support they might provide.
- One interviewee specifically felt that the deployment of teams rather than individuals would be a better approach (eg a team of 20/30s working an area across churches). This would help to overcome the isolated nature of the role and build greater momentum.

Resources generated

There are several resources that the project has developed including:

- Extensive resources to support the effective introduction and deployment of NCD in churches.

- 12 session plans and video and card materials for fresh expressions gatherings for young adults (building on themes like love, anxiety) to kick start monthly/fortnightly gatherings.
- The Crown rhythm of life materials
- Much is available online on the Equip Hub.

For further information on any of these resources please contact Kim Jones at Hilltop House.

Glossary of terms

NCD Natural Church Development

8EQ's The 8 essential qualities in church health as identified in the NCD framework*

CofE Church of England

SfM Stats for Mission

SDU Strategy & Development Unit

USA Usual Sunday Attendance in the statistics for mission

*(Empowering Leadership, Gift-oriented Ministry, Passionate Spirituality, Functional Structures, Inspiring Worship Services, Holistic Small Groups, Need-oriented Evangelism and Loving Relationships)

Interviewees

Person	Role with respect to Acceler8
Lyn Chetcuti	Healthy Churches Mentor
Jonny Dant	20s/30s Development Leader
Steve Hood	Healthy Churches Mentor (and compiler of the data on NCD use in Diocese)

Josh Maynard	Vicar of St James Styvechale, Coventry who used NCD and which had a 20s/30s Development Leader
Tim Mitchell	Healthy Churches Development Mentor
Kim Morgan-Jones	Team lead for 20s/30s Development Leaders
Stephen Parker	Vicar of St John the Baptist, Leamington who used NCD and involved himself in the 20s/30s Development Leader network
Vaughan Roberts	Vicar of St Mary's Warwick which used NCD and had within the team a 20s/30s Development Leader
Morris Rodham	Archdeacon Missioner and Initiative Lead
Beks Rothnie	20s/30s Development Leader
Mark Seabourne	20s/30s Development Leader
Ian Sweeney	20s/30s Development Leader

Supporting data files

Analysis of SfM data 2016-19 for churches with a Development Leader

