

LEAD ON

TEN TIPS FOR A MISSION-MINDED DEANERY

BY RHIANNON KING

Wish your Deanery could be more Mission-Minded?

Here in Ipswich deanery (Suffolk) we're on a mission and having fun while we're at it. Charged by our Bishops with four ambitious goals, we're now almost five years into a seven-year project to turn around our deanery:

1. Our first challenge was to **make meaningful contact with 15,000** new people in our town and at the last count we're already over 18,000. We're pleased and thankful to God for opening so many new opportunities.
2. Our second challenge was to **help 7,500 people explore faith**. This has been much harder to achieve and track. We've managed around 1,400 so far and are focussing our attention and prayers on how to get better at this.
3. Our third and main challenge was to **see 1,500 new disciples**. We're approaching 1,000 with two and a half years to go so this feels like it could be in sight and we're praising God for this.
4. Our fourth challenge was to **start 25 new worshipping communities**. It's surprised us, but we've already started 41, though seven have fallen by the wayside and a number are fragile. We're now aiming for 50.

Ten Tips

We've still got a long way to go and are learning lots but we thought it might be useful to share our top ten tips from the last five years:

1. PRAY

First and foremost, we have invested a lot of time **praying specifically for the growth of our deanery churches** and especially **for disciple-making disciples**. We have distributed thousands of prayer

cards and a small group of us have been meeting to pray for the deanery day in, day out for five years.

God has answered so many of our prayers and we take every opportunity to share the stories via social media or through our newsletter, at a baptism/confirmation or at one of our regular deanery conferences. We always ask ourselves, **'where have we seen God at work this week?'**

2. ENCOURAGE INTENTIONALITY

Ten years ago the Church of England conducted a game-changing piece of research (From Anecdote to Evidence) that confirmed a lot of the anecdotal evidence that **intentionality in mission is key**. We've certainly found this to be true too.

We encourage everyone to have a SMART Parish Plan / Mission Action Plan – setting three priorities over the next two-three years. We say: 'Think about the who, what, where, when and why. Be specific and



be intentional about how everything/anything you do could help someone on their faith journey.'

It's made a big difference, and as a deanery an important part of this has been encouraging more churches to **invest in Alpha and other invitational courses**. We know they're not for everyone so they're only one strand of our strategy, but one of our churches recently said to us 'every time we run Alpha we see people coming to faith, so we're now working towards nine Alphas a year, one in the morning, afternoon and evening of every term.'

3. IDENTIFY THE NEXT STEP

Linked to this is a lesson we have learnt from Leading your Church into Growth who led a three day Zoom conference for us in 2020: the importance of constantly **thinking about the next stepping stone for someone**.

Every time we hear of something new starting we encourage that church to think ahead to what the next step might be for someone who comes along. It might be a special event, a small group, a service, an app, a book, a podcast; anything that will help them to take another step of faith.

4. START NEW WORSHIPPING COMMUNITIES

We love to encourage everyone to step out in faith. We have found one of the best ways of doing this, whilst also helping people reach out in mission to their communities, is by starting a **new worshipping community**.

This might be a new mid-week congregation, a fresh expression or a church plant. We enthusiastically encourage all three. This helps us to meet new people in new ways in new places, to offer more flexible and accessible ways of doing church.

Throughout the week we've seen all sorts of Messy Churches, Top Up Shop congregations (Top Up Shops

are similar to food pantries) and others blossom. As well as seeing phenomenal growth in one of our church plants, River Church, we've been blessed by having two amazing, faith-filled Pioneer Developers beavering away. They see the potential, pray, train people up, help gather teams and get things going.

In addition, two years ago we added a line to our clergy role descriptions asking every new cleric in the diocese to 'help start two new congregations in their first five years'. The wonderful thing is how keen so many clergy are to do this and we often find that they have started one or two before their first anniversary. God is good.

5. SET THE BAR HIGH

'Setting the bar high' has served us well whenever we need to recruit new people into the deanery. We have an extraordinary bunch of leaders, lay and ordained. We welcome all church traditions and ensure that everyone who works here is **mission-minded, really wants to grow their church(es) and has a contagious and expectant faith**.

We don't think we had appreciated before quite how important that is. Several times now we have found that mission-minded priests, with the help of the Holy Spirit and a good team, can turn around a church within a year or two.

6. DEVELOP LAY LEADERS

Alongside our gifted clergy we have learnt that it is vital to **develop lay leaders**. We have greatly benefitted from the **CPAS Growing Leaders** course. One participant described herself as a 'sleepy Christian' before she went on the course. That is definitely not how she is now.

Building confidence levels, encouraging people to take steps of faith, supporting them to try new things and realising that everyone has a part to play in God's mission have all been important contributory factors. That, and chocolate! We always have lots of chocolate.

7. ENSURE THE ACTIVE SUPPORT OF SENIOR LEADERS

The overall **leadership of the deanery and diocese** is key. Having a visionary and supportive diocese with active support from a Bishop, Archdeacon and Area Dean/Deanery Leadership Team have made all the difference. Without the right senior leadership who support, challenge, help discern and 'hold your feet to the fire', many efforts will struggle to get off the ground.



Key leaders have also baked us cakes, cooked us meals, sent us cards and generally helped to lift our spirits, inspire us and made the whole experience enjoyable. We've found too how valuable it is to have a **project manager** involved, someone who can keep track of progress, nudge us when we're going in the wrong direction and point out trends that we need to learn from.

8. FOCUS ON GROWING YOUNGER

It is well known that most people come to faith before they leave home. **Growing Younger is therefore an integral part** of any deanery which wants to grow. We're currently investing time in setting up missional toddler groups, as well as helping our 12 Messy Churches and youth groups/ congregations to grow.

9. USE EXTERNAL RESOURCES

Accessing external resources has been an enormous help. In addition to the Church of England's vision and strategy team and our amazing diocesan colleagues, we've learnt so much from partners like Leading your Church into Growth, The Gregory Centre for Church Multiplication, Alpha, Together for Ipswich (our local ecumenical body), Kintsugi Hope, Take Time and the Church Army just to mention a few. Usually, these things start with something as simple as a friendly conversation, but they have helped us to be much more joined up and brought us great wisdom.

Similarly, we have been blessed by many financial resources too. It is often said that **where there is vision finances will follow** and we have found that to be the case. In most counties there are thousands of charities and grant-givers, but look at their accounts and you will see most churches hardly ever apply to them, let alone to all the generous national charities.. We've tried to cultivate a 'have a go' culture and over 75 successful grants later it is paying off.

10. CONNECT WITH DEPRIVED AREAS

Last but definitely not least, the places where **we've seen the greatest growth in our deanery is in the more deprived areas**. Things may be chaotic, but there is a lot of faith around and it's really worth ensuring that they don't get missed out.

A few years ago the Church Urban Fund launched their GRA:CE report which showed how good social action projects can lead people to Christ if they are intentional about it. We now have 11 Top Up Shops with more on the way, and we've been overjoyed how many people have started engaging in prayer

and our churches as a result of these. This is also true for our wellbeing groups, and all places that are intentional about sharing faith.

Onwards

So that's a high-speed tour of our top ten tips from our first five years. We've still got a way to go but if you think we could be of any help to you or you've got ideas for us, please get in touch.



SOME QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER:

- Which one of these tips is most relevant for the deanery you are in? Could you be involved in applying this?
- How will you get involved in supporting your deanery in prayer?
- What will you do to improve the culture in your church and/or your deanery?

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If you'd like to talk with Rhiannon, Karen or Charlotte, or visit Ipswich to find out more, just email them on inspiring.ipswich@cofesuffolk.org or look up www.inspiringipswich.org

Here's our Inspiring Ipswich prayer (adapted from the LyCiG prayer), the prayer we pray every day.

God of mission,
Who alone brings growth to your Church,
Send your Holy Spirit to give
vision to our planning,
wisdom to our actions,
and power to our witness.
Help your Church here in Ipswich
to grow leaders,
to grow younger,
to grow in number,
in spiritual commitment to you,
and in service to our local community,
Through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen.