a pioneer manifesto

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on behalf of Baptist pioneers.

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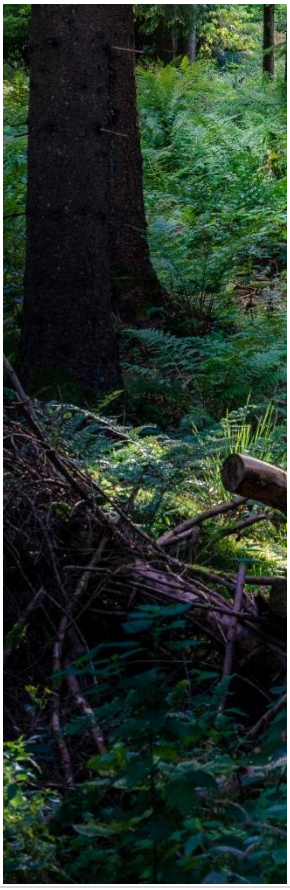
Section 1: The Story of the Forest

You're walking in the woods. This particular forest has a history going back at least four hundred years. Under your feet the occasional root pokes through, hinting at a vast tapestry hidden beneath the soil. As you wander further amongst the trees you look up and notice the branches intertwined with one another – creating a single canopy, it's unclear where one tree ends, and another begins. As your journey continues, however, you start to notice subtle differences between the trees. You recognise the spiky green kernel of the horse chestnut tree, and the familiar acorn that points to the presence of an old oak. Some of the trees are tall, and others have a distinctive bark that captures your attention. Here's one that's shorter, with its branches low, and your eyes are drawn to its colourful fruit and a well-used nest.

Indeed, as you go deeper into the forest you can hear the gentle hum of insects, a multitude of birds singing, and then a rustling sound causing you to notice something crossing the path up ahead – maybe it was a deer? Waiting for another glimpse of this majestic animal your focus is drawn once again to the forest floor. There's an old tree that must have fallen during a storm a few years ago, but covering it half-decayed trunk, moss and lichen flourish. In the midst of last year's leaf fall and discarded fir cones, amongst the wildflowers and ferns, small saplings grow. You reach down and gently touch one of them – it's fragile, and barely more than a stick with one or two leaves upon it. Both protected within, and nurtured by the rest of the forest, something tells you that here amongst this new growth, the very future of the forest is being born.

This place is more vibrant than you first imagined, rich in diversity and full of all sorts of creatures who call this wood their home.



Section 2: Language

"And the word became flesh and dwelt among us" John 1
"Words create worlds," Rabbi Heschel

As we gathered to reflect together and write this "Pioneer Manifesto" we struggled with the very word that had drawn us together: "pioneer." It felt clunky and unhelpful as we reflected on the beauty and diversity of the forest image.

Pioneer (Oxford English Dictionary) is often defined as "a person who is among the first to explore or settle a new country or area." The whole imagery is sullied by a world history of "pioneers" taking land that was never theirs to take, and in so doing displacing others.

We toyed with words like explorer, innovator, adventurer and imaginer. We batted around an understanding of pioneers as "missionaries" and thus taking a mission agency approach to supporting and deploying them.

We discussed pioneering not as a noun to describe a few individuals but as a verb applying to whole communities and churches. We acknowledged the need for listening first and being bilingual or multilingual as we found new language to help describe what God is doing and how He is calling us to join in.

There were stories of lives being changed and real pioneering initiatives emerging across our Baptist family.

But there were also tales of the divisive use of language, of pioneers and established church failing to understand each other, of hurt and isolation.

Acknowledging together the very real need for new saplings to thrive alongside more mature trees, for the reforestation of denuded areas of our nation, we have observed the need for a change in our language around pioneering and pioneers. This is part of our heritage, and as Baptists Together we continue to reaffirm that we owe our life together to a pioneering spirit which "over the last couple of decades God has been renewing" (Baptists Together website: Pioneering.)

Words like "wellbeing", "hospitality" and "experiment", for example, can link us across divides and help us find shared Kingdom values and aims. We need to name these values to help us see where God is at work in our communities and join in. This would help steer us away from the language that starts with "church" and asks how to "plant" it.

We liked many of the words discussed around adventuring and innovating but after much discussion found ourselves clinging to the old word… pioneer. So, it seems for now it is here to stay, at least for the purposes of this manifesto.[1]

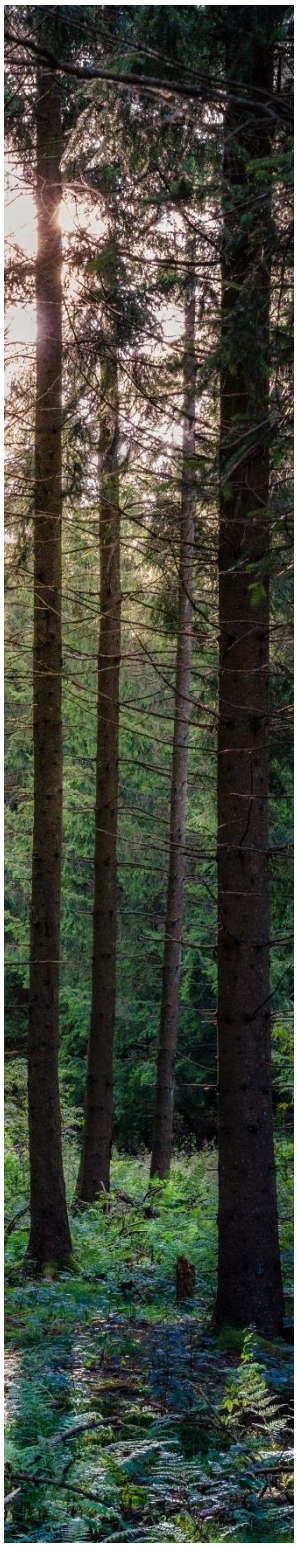
We need to ask better questions, listen, share stories, and use our words well to connect us with God, one another and culture. This remains our shared task as a family. Not learning 'one' language, but rather fostering a culture of language learning in an ever-changing landscape. Naming and not labelling individuals and communities is our challenge and our privilege… naming, blessing, recognising, releasing, calling out, cheering on… accountably, generously, honestly, lovingly... mature trees and tiny saplings side by side, cleansing the air, creating a space for life and growth.[2]

Section 3: The Baptist Family

Sadly, the narrative which opens this manifesto is not a story of how things are, but rather a vision of how we hope for them to be. The current reality is that the forest is less than healthy: a rapidly changing climate means common species are struggling to survive, and there are significant areas where old trees are dying but there are no saplings to take their place. That said, there have been those who have recognised the urgency of the situation and have long been labouring and innovating to cultivate and curate new growth on the edges of the forest.

As members of the Baptist family we want to nurture it and see it thrive! It saddens us when we see parts of the family looking inward, declining and dying, and it delights us when we see the family venturing out and birthing new life. We want to be a positive voice in the family promoting adventure and encouraging new life to flourish. We want to cultivate the soil of missional engagement beyond the church, out of which the seeds of contextually relevant new communities of faith will grow.

It is to that end that we share our observations about what is helping and what changes are needed to enable healthy pioneering practice. Critiques are also shared as part of our covenant relationship to walk together and watch over each other, encouraging one another to honour the Great Commission and be part of the transformation of the people and communities to which God has called us.



Part of our covenant to the Baptist family is our commitment to Baptist ecclesiology.[8] At its best this enables a freedom to pioneer, share faith with a variety of people groups, and birth new ways of being church. Our belief in the priesthood of all believers enables us to: partner with people of peace; craft creative and contextually relevant gatherings; and raise up indigenous leaders. The principle of hearing God through the body of Christ, enables us to discern God's voice locally in and for our particular setting. This naturally leads to an openness to recognise that God speaks through all people, and the ability to discern Him within the broader life of our communities and networks.

Aspects of our ecclesiology, however, can leave us floundering when addressing aspects of pioneering. One key challenge is that our processes rely solely on existing local congregations calling new things into being. Fresh start pioneering – starting something completely new within a neighbourhood or network – is a missionary activity and is, by definition, about sending rather than calling.[3]

If we return to our forest narrative, we note that whilst the falling seeds from the established trees may create some sustainable growth close by, flourishing and biodiversity across the forest has been lost over time and new seeds are required. Into these bare patches of the forest new seeds need to be brought in from elsewhere and new species are required to take root and flourish in places where the soil or conditions are different.

Our traditional ecclesiology works very well within a Christendom context where the key calling was for a pastor-teacher to nurture the local congregation. In our post-Christendom secularised society, which contain networks and communities with no Christian presence, we need instead to send people out in the same way that missionaries have been sent overseas. In the time of Carey, there was no calling church congregation in those unreached parts, and there is no calling congregation in many parts of our land today.[12]

The Ignite report[4] lists the marks of Baptist ministry and these are very helpful in identifying that pioneering mission is indeed ministry. Both pioneering and pastoral ministers are doing the same thing – embodying and sharing the gospel and enabling people to encounter God and grow in faith. The different contexts define the style of the mission and ministry, but the underlying principles are the same. As well as addressing the issue of recognition, we also need to ensure that the formation and ongoing development of pioneers (for example the NAMs experience) are also given consideration.

Section 4: Observations

a. Connections

Just as in an extensive network which connects trees, via their roots, so pioneers have the capacity to make connections for their wellbeing. For example, some of the larger trees can help smaller ones flourish by supplying nutrients to them. New saplings energise older species through their tender shoots interacting with the dying enzymes of rotting leaves and they also warn surrounding trees of an incoming attack. On the ground chemicals are released which attract predators that deter pests. So, for example, fungi aren't just sitting there idly, they share nutrients and information with the surrounding trees, effectively forming a sort of a mutual relationship among the trees in the forest. They organise attacks on unwelcome plants through the fungal network. The interconnectedness is essential for any tree or forest's wellbeing.

There is a tendency amongst pioneers to be creative and entrepreneurial, to be people who think outside the box. They can therefore be suspicious or resistant to anything or anyone that would dampen their enthusiasm. Nonetheless they value relationships and inevitably make connections with people and places.

Pioneers greatly appreciate connections with people who understand their calling and just 'get it'. Working in isolation (never an ideal model for ministry), they are prone to loneliness and prey to all kinds of perils that would undermine their calling. This can damage both their lives and those whom they are seeking to serve. Connectedness between pioneers, and with the wider church, fosters the healthy environment necessary for supportive, accountable and encouraging relationships.

Some lovely examples of pioneers connecting with one another can be seen in the NBA, where the cohort of Baptist ministers in training at Cranmer Hall formed a missional huddle which will continue post college. Meeting together to share, pray, listen, learn and hold one another accountable in the context of deepening, covenanted relationships, provides a model not only for pioneers but for others in ministry. In the YBA an emerging learning community has drawn together people – some ordained and others not – who are pioneering in a whole variety of contexts. In the EMBA, as in several other associations, pioneers and other missional leaders have found supportive relationships by connecting with other denominations, networks or initiatives.

Of particular encouragement to pioneers is to receive affirmation and endorsement by those who recognise their calling, who understand and are supportive and who care for the wellbeing of the person and not just the ministry they exercise. Relationships afford the opportunity for appropriate accountability, are supportive, protective and a means of blessing.[14]

One-to-one mentoring, peer support groups, online seminar and discussion forums, Facebook groups, learning communities and networks have all provided pioneers with relationships that have helped in their calling, wellbeing and ministry. Many existing and well-established, inherited forms of ministers' meetings are not always

appropriate, relevant or accessible to many pioneers. New forms of relating and connecting are being sought, and would be welcomed, as together we seek to be missional people in a changing church and culture.

b. Recognition and Releasing

Baptists Together have affirmed the priority of pioneering and planting. The recognition and releasing of pioneering missional leaders is therefore important to our family, and the public affirmation and celebration of Baptist pioneers, irrespective of accreditation, is key to this. This recognition and releasing needs to be both local and national, with support available for those associations[15] who are currently unsure about pioneer ministries.

Pioneer leaders often emerge on the margins and it is important that we affirm those joining in God's mission even if they don't look like the Baptist ministers who have gone before. One of the challenges of the National Settlement process is that it is focussed upon those with pastor and teacher giftings, rather than the apostolic, evangelistic and prophetic giftings of pioneers. Part of the difficulty here is the distinction, already referenced, between 'calling' and 'sending' – pioneers are willing to be sent as missionaries, but we lack the structure to enable this in places where there is no 'calling' church. If we are to encourage the diversity of the forest maybe new and varied approaches are required.

c. Training

It is vital, therefore, for us to continue to engage with the issues of equipping and forming missional leaders. Learning in a context of innovation is different from learning in a more established church. Often in the latter, continuing programmes and a team of experienced co-workers can help shape practice naturally through the existing rhythms of corporate life. None of this is present in the pioneering context. Pioneers therefore need **critical friends** who can come alongside them and help them shape their own agenda for learning. In SCBA, for example, each new pioneer has a support group to journey alongside until a local team has emerged.

Skills in **entrepreneurship, community organising** and **leading change** are often also needed from day one.[5] For those who have been in pioneering situations for a while, we realise how important **contextual theology** has been for our journey, even though we might not have appreciated that at the start. We desire to **make disciples** of every people group, but many of us are working with marginalised communities where there is little collective wisdom on how we might bear fruit.

Pioneers often struggle with the size of the task, and are often in danger of burnout, as many feel spiritually isolated and lack companions with whom to reflect theologically. For that reason, among many others, pioneers need good relationships with **experienced practitioners**, **mentors** and/or **spiritual directors** who can help to develop **healthy** and **sustainable lives**. Because contexts are constantly changing, there is a need for **lifelong learning**, always reflecting on how the seed of the gospel is growing and flourishing where we are.[9]

Pioneers are looking to local, regional and national colleagues for support with all of this.

As pioneers, some of us find ourselves seeding churches and starting projects before anyone has ever given us a title. By the time our ministry is being recognised, leaving our context to pursue a traditional route to accreditation would negatively impact the fruitfulness of what we have been called to be and do. This isn't an indication that we don't feel the need for further equipping or recognition, simply that we are committed to those with whom we are already ministering. We would love to explore ways that **training could come to us** and help us fulfil what God has put in our hands to do today.[13]

d. Resourcing

For flourishing to occur across all seasons, climates and life cycles different resources are required. Across the Baptist family we celebrate that we have a wealth of diverse resources. Our inherited story gifts us an opportunity to share resources in response to where the Spirit is leading. How can we encourage this sharing in the context of current challenges? Whilst there are no easy answers, we propose three principles that might help us.

- **Spiritual**

Pioneers need to know their calling is both affirmed and blessed, that they are part of a mutually beneficial prayerful relationship which comes from being recognised and valued as part of the family. Pioneering can be isolating, hard work and lonely, and we therefore need to proactive in deepening relationships[10]. For example, BMS personnel regularly publish prayer letters and updates that are circulated via the website, social media and to link churches, thus allowing them to be connected spiritually. Can this inspire us to cultivate a richer spiritual resourcing for the pioneers within Baptists Together?

- **Realistic**

It's important for us to consider the practicalities of pioneering, and to reflect upon the financial resources that can enable the ministry of the pioneer. Being realistic first means that there needs to be a shared understanding of the vision and expectations surrounding the pioneer context. When the ground is hard and damaged, much work needs to be done before a season of planting and harvesting can even be imagined. The long-term requirements in terms of accommodation and income need to be explored honestly, and such a conversation will identify possible funding streams, but also expose the need to find others.[6] There is a need to think creatively together to develop new ways of releasing financial resources. For example, Mission Housing is an instrument for investment in accommodation for pioneers, and Stewardship provide the facility to develop a community of personal supporters. How can Baptists engage with these or develop their own similar schemes in a way that works in harmony with Home Mission?

- **Sustainable**

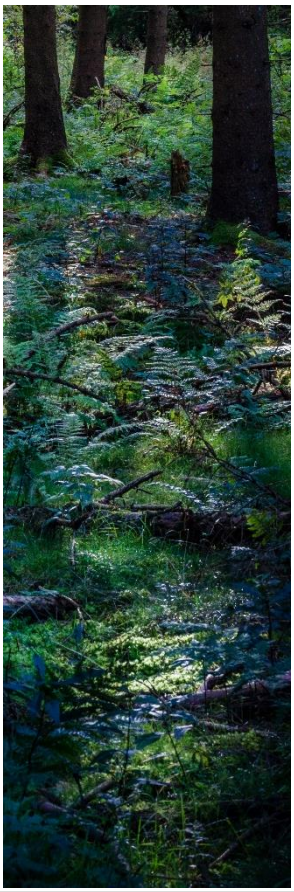
Pioneers, whilst often gifted at birthing new things, sometimes need support to enable their ongoing flourishing.[9] Working with pioneers in areas of sustainability such as finance, policy and constitutional governance would be useful not only for the individual pioneer and other pioneering contexts, but also beneficial for the wider Baptist family. It could enable a skills exchange where members of inherited congregations could offer their time and expertise whilst being inspired by the missional vision and practice of the pioneer. There is also the need for discussions about the most effective way to use the legacy of closed churches for future mission activity, and how social enterprise and charitable initiatives might be encouraged and enabled.

e. Learning and Working with other Denominations

Over the last couple of decades, the pioneering Spirit of God has been doing a new thing across the historic denominations in the UK and beyond. Whilst our ecclesiology may differ, we are nonetheless asking many of the same questions about how best to support the pioneers who seek to embody the gospel contextually in their local communities. As Baptists we still have much to learn – but we also have much to contribute to the ongoing conversation about equipping, forming and developing pioneer mission around the country.

Several creative partnerships and collaborative learning initiatives are developing with our ecumenical partners. These exist in a variety of forms, including:
the involvement of Baptists at the core of movements such as Fresh Expressions;

- Baptist engagement with training initiatives like the mission-shaped ministry course, and more formally in regional training partnerships and collaborations between Baptist Colleges and other learning providers;
- regional and national ecumenical hubs for pioneers sharing a common interest or experience, for example ministering in a context of rural or urban marginalisation;
- intentional working together, both locally and nationally, to identify a strategic approach to pioneering mission in areas of new housing.



Our vision as Baptists is to see our land impacted by the Good News, and God has been calling pioneers from within our midst to help us fulfil this vision. It is our conviction that more fruitful creativity and innovation will be the result of journeying together and learning alongside our ecumenical partners.[7]

Section 5: Recommendations

In this 'Pioneer Manifesto' we have included several recommendations. Here is a summary:

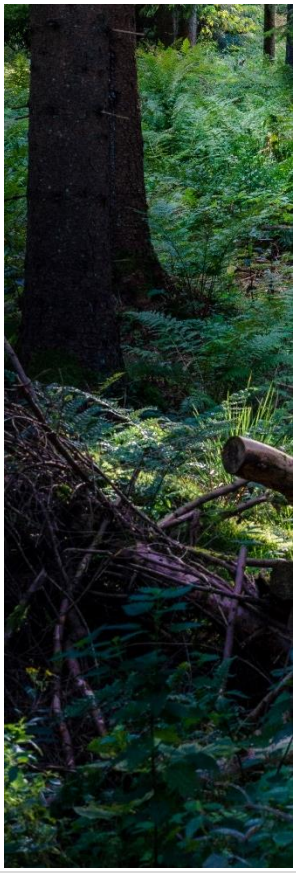
The Baptist Family

1. That we continue to use the word pioneer(ing) to describe mission that takes us beyond our usual structures and practices, acknowledging the limitations of the term.

2. That we celebrate our diversity and agree to pray for and promote each other.
3. That we also develop new language that better reflects the kind of mission and ministry that we feel is needed in these times, language that enables the whole Baptist family to bless and support what we are doing.
4. That we work together to promote and communicate the Ignite Report's Marks of Ministry as a shared framework which can celebrate the growing diversity in contemporary Baptist ministry.
5. That we develop (or promote) training for the whole family in entrepreneurial skills, community organising, leading change and missiology. Also, that we develop a community of mentors and spiritual directors to support this learning on the ground.
6. That we acknowledge that pioneering needs to be undertaken realistically, which includes honesty about finance, buildings and the time needed to establish something new.
7. That we commit wholeheartedly to the ecumenical community of pioneers, which has great wisdom and experience from which we can learn.

Pioneers

8. That we celebrate and embrace the Baptist commitment to gathered community.
9. That we commit to lifelong learning and sustainable living.
10. That we commit to mutually beneficial relationships with other pioneers and our wider Baptist family. This may sometimes require us to initiate new forms of networking and gathering.
11. That we acknowledge and welcome the gifts of the wider church to help our ministry become sustainable.

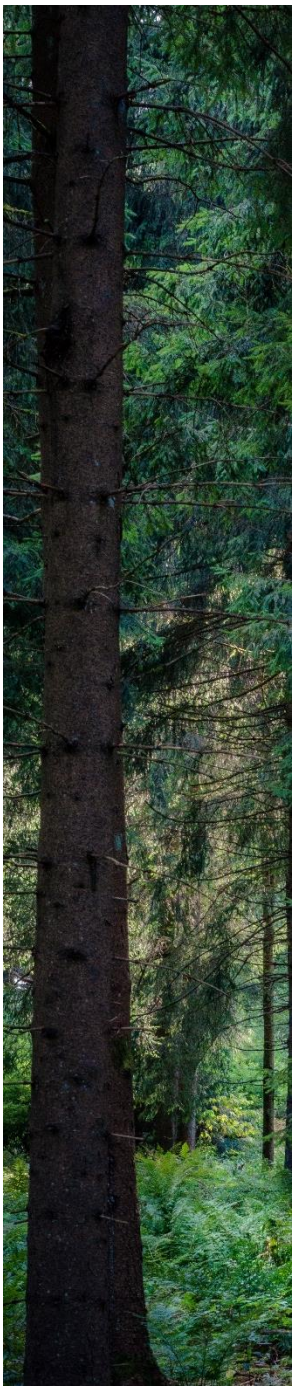


Enablers

12. That our denomination considers the analogous role of a 'missionary' as a way of celebrating and affirming a pioneering approach that is, as yet, unfamiliar to our local churches.
13. That we develop relevant and contextual models of formation for pioneers before, during and after formal training for ministry.
14. That future support of ministers and other leaders considers the specific needs of those working without inherited structures of accountability and encouragement.
15. That each Association be encouraged to develop a policy and implement best practice for the identification, training and ongoing support of pioneering ministry.

Section 6: What Next?

It is not the intention of this document to make a series of demands that need to be met by others. This 'Manifesto' instead sets out a hopeful vision for the shared life of our Baptist family, with some observations about the challenges that are currently hindering us in fulfilling that vision. The desire is that we can engage in a strategic conversation about how to overcome these obstacles, and as Baptists Together renew our commitment to the journey of transformation that is necessary. To propose how we, as authors of this 'Manifesto', potentially see this happening, we return to the woodland analogy…



Somehow, amid a changing environment, and with some of the trees not being healthy enough to seed new growth into the forest floor, the finely balanced ecosystem of the forest has been damaged. Some of the seeds that do fall are being blown away from the forest, and the diversity and vibrancy of the forest is being lost. Called by God, a group of friends, who love the forest, and dwell within it, are called together to set about finding the signs of new life emerging from the forest floor, and to nurture these tiny saplings, doing all that they can to protect them and help them flourish.

This is the nature of the call that lies behind the idea of a 'Guild' for pioneers. A guild is a group of women and men brought together by a common craft – a community of apprentices and practitioners sharing with one another a variety of distinctive skills being learned in a diversity of contexts.

Membership of the 'Guild' would be through the commendation of an existing Guild member, their 'sponsor', and would be available to all who, on an ongoing basis, could demonstrate:

(i) **'calling'** – to pioneering in a particular place or amongst a particular group of people at this particular time. It would be open to both the volunteer leader of a missional community as well as the accredited minister living in a new housing development.
(ii) **'relating'** – an active connection to a network or hub, offering accountability, support and opportunities to gather with other practitioners (e.g. an association led pioneer hub or an ecumenical pioneer community).
(iii) **'growing'** – a commitment to ongoing learning and theological reflection, whether through participation in formal ministerial formation or through reflecting through reflecting upon reading with a mentor or spiritual director.

The Guild would not seek to duplicate the role of existing networks, associations or training providers, nor to offer an alternative system for accreditation. It would, however, seek to bring together the learning of all those who belonged to it, and to liaise with our Baptist family on their behalf. It would pass on their joys – sharing stories of hope and good practice – as well as communicating some of the challenges they are facing. It would seek to identify issues that need addressing and gaps that need filling, advocating and forming new partnerships in order to create solutions.

Baptists Together have already approved the formation of a Pioneer 'Hub' or 'Round Table' and our suggestion is that a 'Guild' is the most appropriate way for this to function. Rather than a small number of interested individuals discussing and strategizing in isolation, the 'Guild' creates an opportunity for this group to consult with and speak on behalf of the community of Baptist pioneers, offering real examples of the challenges being encountered and with stories of fruitfulness and good practice.

Section 7: Over to You…

We therefore offer this document, and the story of the forest, as a 'parable' for Baptists, in a variety of contexts, to discuss further. The recommendations offer a

number of topics for discussion amongst our regional and specialist teams, but we hope it will also stimulate discussion in local churches, where, for example, the following questions might be helpfully considered:

- What is God doing?
- Where is it emerging?
- Who has a passion for it?
- How can we get behind them?

Join the conversation: **#parableoftheforest** **@BaptistPioneers**