

Some Frequently Asked Questions about Minster Communities and the Shaped By God Together (SBGT) process - autumn 2021

What is a Minster Community?

The term 'Minster Communities' is bespoke to the long and collaborative process we have been undertaking to create a framework appropriate to the context of Leicester and Leicestershire. It is based on the views of our worshippers and worshipping communities which we have gathered and analysed in continuing conversation with them since 2020. It is not copied from other Minster structures in any other diocese.

In some of our 20-25 Minster Communities (MCs) a particular church building will be designated (by local agreement) as the Minster, but this won't necessarily be the case everywhere. However, each MC will continue to have lots of local church buildings and they will have a MC Ministry Team, based locally, sharing resources and providing support for the various mission and ministry priorities of its constituent worshipping communities and parishes. Where appropriate, parishes will be working much more closely with our church schools and prioritising work with children and young people.

All of this was arrived at through an ongoing, prayerful process of conversation with people in our parishes and was strongly endorsed by the elected members of our Diocesan Synod, who live with the reality on the ground. It is based on feedback from worshipping communities in our parishes, almost all of whom took part in meetings and other consultations over a period of a year. It was shaped from the elements which our communities liked most from proposed models which had themselves been drawn up following earlier input from members of those parish churches and other worshipping communities.

Are Minster Communities a threat to the parish?

MCs are all about supporting worshipping communities in their parishes. We continue to champion local parish worship and witness as well as sacramental ministry. The MC plans were supported by 72% of Diocesan Synod members who are elected by their parishes via the Deanery Synod system and have been involved in our budget and financial decision-making. These democratically elected representatives of our local worshipping communities voted overwhelmingly in favour of the new MC framework on 9 October 2021.

The framework can, of course, be adapted to accommodate an increase in the number of stipendiary clergy: an increase in sustained giving would see an increase in stipendiary ministry.

What happens next and what will happen in parishes?

Every Minster Community Team will have an ordained Oversight Minister and there will also be other clergy (self-supporting, retired, NSM, chaplains etc) as well as lay ministers serving in each of the Minster Communities too. One member of each Ministry Team will have a special focus on linking up the work between schools, churches and households under the banner 'Growing Faith'. Within the

framework, it will be up to the local parishes and worshipping communities to work out together, prayerfully and in structured discussion with each other and with support from the diocese, the precise details of the best combination for their own Minster Community. Sacramental ministry will, of course, be maintained and every worshipping community will have its own named, local minister as well as other support.

The legal rights of incumbents and PCCs will be fully respected, while also recognising that ministry in the diocese is shared with the Bishop and with the whole people of God. The intention is that reduction in numbers of stipendiary clergy posts (which is sadly necessary for financial reasons) will be achieved gradually over time during the next few years as parishes discern their way forward and that clergy changes will happen naturally through retirements and clergy moving elsewhere as they do in the normal course of events.

You can find out more about what will happen next [in this video](#).

We are confident that through a process of continued conversation, the vast majority of incumbents and PCCs will see the benefits of this approach. No one will be forced to do anything. We know that some parishes will adopt this more quickly than others and 2026 allows for churches to move at different paces.

We expect that by 2026 we should be able to fund around 80 full time equivalent (FTE) stipendiary posts from the diocesan budget without having to use reserves to make up a deficit: this amounts to a reduction of about 20 FTE posts from what we currently have. The intention is not to reduce clergy numbers more than that (the ministry team structure is a minimum) and the intention is that this reduction will be achieved in the normal course of clergy retirement and moving over the next five years.

We're very proud of the track record we have in the diocese of encouraging lay ministry and this is not done at the expense of ordained ministry. The precise make-up of each Ministry Team will be determined by its parishes as they discern their way forward within the framework.

How flexible is this new framework and how can PCCs influence what happens?

The intention is that the new framework is far more flexible than what we have previously experienced. Local conversations will be key as we move forward, and PCCs will be key in these. In the New Year, churches and benefices will be encouraged to think about their own sense of calling (what is it that is particularly important to us as a local church ... what do we discern God calling us to do and be in mission ... what are our unique opportunities in our parish and context?) and what specifically they may have to offer to any future Minster Community they find themselves in, and how they might help to benefit from what others in a Minster Community might bring to the table. Minster Communities will only work and flourish if they take seriously the local context in which they are set, so the voices of local congregations, PCCs, church leadership, and schools will be vital in establishing strong Minster Communities.

What's the thinking behind the new framework?

Our Shaped By God Together process is designed to help our worshipping communities across the whole diocese work together to discern where God is taking us and how we should together tackle the challenges of living out our Everyday Faith in the 21st.

We continue to hold to the Church of England principle of a Christian presence in every community but it will continue to be the case, as now, that not every community will be able to have its own stipendiary vicar. However, each will have a named local minister and the support of a local MC Team to help shoulder the burden of administration and building maintenance as well as resource to help them work with schools and their locally-discerned mission and ministry.

There are already many hundreds of lay volunteers in our churches, schools, chaplaincies and fresh expressions who are leading Bible studies, prayer groups, preaching and hosting Alpha courses, leading choirs and worship bands, leading and helping in youth groups, children's groups and Messy Church, etc., as well as taking on all sorts of tasks in looking after buildings, finance and administration. One of the challenges is that some churches have literally scores of people doing such things whilst others have none. This framework aims to help churches and other worshipping communities to learn from each other and to support and encourage each other.

The aim is to strengthen local parish Christian community and enable them to worship and live out their Everyday Faith in their own parishes working with the realities on the ground.

Parishes have long worked in benefices and teams with the cure of souls shared by priests, bishops and the whole people of God and our aim is to resource that work more effectively.

Is this just about reducing costs?

No, Shaped By God Together and the new Minster Communities framework for our diocese isn't all about reducing costs. Finance plays a significant part in all of our considerations at the moment but we had begun the process of looking to create a new framework for the diocese before the Covid-19 pandemic and before the extent of our current financial position was known. It could be argued that our finance challenges are in many ways a consequence of a century of decline caused in significant part by the outdated models of mission, evangelism and discipleship that these new proposals seek to change.

Can't we cut spending on central diocesan budgets so that we can afford more stipendiary clergy posts?

The law and good practice in relation to safeguarding, HR and finances mean that some central diocesan support continues to be required for parishes to function well. Devolving these functions to parishes would cost more and add additional burdens to already overstretched parish clergy and volunteers.

For the past few years, income (of which the largest proportion is parish contributions) has been declining, but we have been dipping into our reserves to maintain the level of support for parish ministry. It was always clear that this situation could not go on indefinitely, and the covid pandemic has hastened the need to reduce expenditure. Therefore we are, sadly, making immediate cuts in our central diocesan staff numbers by just over a fifth in order to make savings of just over £300,000 from

next year. The equivalent reduction in numbers of stipendiary clergy will be achieved more gradually, over the next five years, and by process of retirement and the usual movement of clergy that happens in the normal course of events, rather than the forced redundancies that many diocesan staff are having to face.

This framework can, of course, be adapted to accommodate an increase in the number of stipendiary clergy: an increase in sustained giving would see an increase in stipendiary ministry.

(For information: money from Parish Contributions does not fund the Cathedral's running costs nor the Bishop's office and its staff.)

Is this just a process of closing buildings?

No, while it may be that eventually some buildings close, SBGT has not been devised as a process with this in mind. Legally church buildings can only be closed at the request of that church's PCC, so it would not be possible for the diocese to impose closure on any church. We are aware of the tremendous blessing our church buildings can be, but also of some of the challenges that accompany having to maintain and look after an ancient building, and our Church Buildings Team is always happy to advise churches who have particular issues or concerns with the use or maintenance of their buildings.

What happens if a building does close?

The decision to close a church building can only be taken by the local PCC and there is a formal process for this which includes gaining agreement from the national church (Church Commissioners). If a building is closed, responsibility for it passes to the diocese and therefore the costs of maintaining it appropriately (eg. insurance) have to be borne out of core diocesan funds.

Will stipendiary posts be allocated to big churches?

Not necessarily. Stipendiary posts will be allocated to the Minster Communities, and each church in a Minster Community will have a recognised minister (whether lay or ordained) who may or may not be stipendiary. The details for each Minster Community will be worked out through facilitated local and diocesan conversations over the coming years.

How will existing people and posts eg Youth Workers transfer and who will pay for them?

That partly depends on who is paying for them now. Most youth workers are paid for by the parish they work in from that church's internal giving, and churches within a Minster Community will continue to give some money to the diocese as their Parish Contribution, and to invest some of their own internal giving in the mission and ministry of their own church. If youth workers are currently being financed by historic Growth Fund grants then all of those grants were tapered and of a finite length with the ultimate expectation that the local church would take on their continued employment once the Growth Fund period had passed.

What is an operations manager? And what would their role be?

A number of churches in the diocese already have their own operations manager, so it is not an entirely new or unknown concept. At Minster Community level this would be one of the stipendiary equivalent posts funded by the diocese, and might be filled by either a lay or a clergyperson. The role would be different from that of a parish administrator (although might contain elements of that, or some oversight and co-ordination of administrators in parishes) and would have a strategic focus, enabling the management and administration of a Minster Community to function effectively and efficiently across the whole piece.

Why didn't we look at a model with more clergy as that would mean bigger congregations and churches paying higher parish contributions?

The number of clergy posts is not directly dependent upon or a consequence of the model of ministry. All three ministry models that were considered during the earlier part of the SGBT process, and discussed extensively in Local Conversations, could be undertaken with a range of numbers of clergy posts. Within the Minster Community framework, the number of stipendiary (paid) clergy posts being planned for is the number that we realistically think can be afforded across the diocese by 2026. The biggest determining factor of this number is the Parish Contributions paid by churches across the whole diocese. Alongside stipendiary clergy posts, Bishop Martyn has said clearly that he is looking for a significant increase in self-supporting clergy, to work together with stipendiary colleagues and lay ministers.

Why are we short of money when the Church of England is so rich?

There is a difference between having assets and being able to realise those assets in capital form. As a diocese we receive funding from the national church to specifically support ministry in areas of deprivation, as well as towards the costs of training new clergy and specific projects like Intercultural Worshipping Communities and Resourcing Churches. In relation to our diocesan finances, we had a significant deficit budget last year and while we are working hard to address this, we anticipate that it will take several years to return to a break-even position. Since long before the pandemic, only a minority of the churches in our diocese are paying enough Parish Contribution to cover the cost of the ministry they receive, which year on year is an unsustainable position for us to be in. At the same time, notwithstanding challenges faced by some individual parishes, the collective total of parishes' financial reserves has grown in recent years.

Will a Lay Leader role in the MCs be seen as substantial as an ordained person?

If a lay person is called by God, trained, and gifted for ministry then there's no reason at all why they shouldn't be seen as being as "substantial" as a clergyperson. No one clergyperson is likely to be equally skilled at preaching, admin, pastoral visiting, children's and youth work, managing staff, counselling, teaching in small groups etc. However, the older models of ministry often seemed to make an

unrealistic assumption that they would be. Teams of leaders including skilled and trained lay leaders seems a much more realistic proposition.

What will this look like in rural areas where churches are far apart?

The phase of SBTG that we're entering will see us beginning to wrestle in detail with questions around what Minster Communities will look like across the whole range of settings (rural, urban, suburban). We are looking for one of the pilot areas to be significantly rural in context. Our belief in the parish system remains central to our thinking, and so a combination of local facilitated conversations and wider diocesan conversations will take place in the coming years to enable us to begin working on the detail, all the while being mindful of the fact that we're essentially "a rural diocese with urban heartlands."

Can we learn from the schools and MATS (Multi Academy Trusts)?

There's lots to learn from the experiences of setting up MATS in recent years. We are in regular conversation with the Diocesan Board of Education and seek to learn from both a governance and participative perspective. It will also be important to connect with the stories of local schools within the formation of their MATS and to seek to learn from their experiences and insights.

Would we be working with Church of England Schools only, or also with Community Schools?

Looking to mutually benefit from good relationships and engagement with all schools (Church of England and Community) is an important aspect of parish life. However, in the earlier stages of SBTG we would anticipate that the conversations between parishes and schools would predominantly be focused on Church Schools who already see themselves as part of the Diocesan family and with whom in many cases we already enjoy close working relationships.

Have you spoken to Head Teachers as part of the process yet?

Recognising the significant pressures on school leaders over the course of the pandemic, we haven't undertaken a formal consultation process. However, we have spoken with headteachers informally on a number of occasions and feedback has been very positive. Many school leaders want to explore opportunities to strengthen partnership working with their local churches and would welcome the chance to work within a larger "team".

How do we know that schools want to engage?

Our experience of working with our Church Schools around the diocese is that the vast majority of them are very enthusiastic about partnering with their local churches and are likely to welcome further

strengthening of those links and our commitment as churches to the spiritual flourishing and wellbeing of our schools.

Does this mean parishes in interregnum will now be in interregnum until 2026?

No, Diocesan Synod will be considering the budget for 2022 at its next meeting in December. Then we will begin work on making several new appointments to parishes in the new year. However, it is important to state that this means that we will be running a large deficit budget for the next few years (using our reserves) and we can only do this because the Minster Community plan offers a clear route to a break-even budget by 2026.

We will not be able to fill every clergy vacancy immediately and decisions about which vacancies will be advertised will be made with a view to the wider diocesan picture. All benefices in vacancy will be hearing from their Archdeacon over the next few weeks. With the Shaped By God Together process ongoing, all appointments will be made with Minster Communities in mind. So, although appointments cannot yet be made to Minster Communities (remembering we're only likely to be piloting the initial two or three next year), where vacancies are advertised it will be expected that the benefices in question and the prospective appointees will indicate their commitment to fully participate in a future Minster Community.

How will discipleship be encouraged in this new framework?

Discipleship is key to this process and to almost every challenge faced by the Church of England. The Three Key Questions and "Everyday Faith" remain central to our Diocesan vision, and clergy and lay leaders will continue to encourage congregations in their discipleship, individual Christians will continue to be encouraged to prioritise and take responsibility for their own discipleship, and resources will still be made available from the diocese to help equip Christians in their everyday experiences of faith.

Will we still have regular services/communion?

Yes, we are a sacramental church and the celebration of the Eucharist is at the very heart of all that we do and are. It is worth remembering that in addition to stipendiary priests we are blessed with the ministries of self-supporting and retired priests, and it is anticipated that the number of self-supporting ministers is likely to increase over the next few years.

Will parishes of different traditions be asked to work together in Minster Communities?

Yes, the likelihood is that most Minster Communities will be geographically proximate and theologically diverse, containing churches representing a range of traditions. This may at times provide challenges, but in most cases they should not be insurmountable. Theological diversity in the Church of England is not a new thing, and we already have benefices where individual churches within the benefice are

drawn from different traditions, churches work together across traditions in Deaneries, and diocesan committees and central staff teams also span the range of Anglican traditions.

Have any other dioceses tried this model before?

All dioceses are having to wrestle with similar problems around finance, buildings and ministry, and all are coming up with solutions that they hope will best help them in their particular context. Some have elements that are similar to parts of our, but it's far too early to compare as, like us, most dioceses are still in the process of discerning their future shape.

Does the Minster Community framework take into account findings of the “From Anecdote to Evidence” report?

The Church of England report “From Anecdote to Evidence” was published in 2014 following research into factors relating to church growth. The report concluded strongly that “there is no single recipe for growth; there are no simple solutions to decline”. The report identifies a “common ingredients strongly associated with growth in churches of any size, place or context” as:

- Good leadership
- A clear mission and purpose
- Willingness to self-reflect, to change and adapt according to context
- Involvement of lay members
- Being intentional in prioritising growth
- Being intentional in chosen style of worship
- Being intentional in nurturing disciples

The Minster Communities framework strongly reflects all of these factors.

The report also includes two major findings that give insight into church decline. Firstly, the challenge to retain younger generations. This is a challenge we have clearly identified in the context of the Diocese of Leicester and the significant emphasis on Growing Faith, with churches focusing on work with children and young people, in church, school and household, demonstrates our commitment to addressing this factor.

The second of these major findings is the effect of amalgamations. The report’s findings show that “single church units under one leader are more likely to grow than when churches are grouped together”. Furthermore, the research highlights that where large amalgamations of parishes occurred, the role of clergy becomes increasingly focused on the burden of administration, buildings management and simply sustaining Sunday worship, with little time left for wider mission or activities which have an association with growth. This highlights some of the challenges that have been spoken of since the beginning of our Shaped By God Together process, namely that clergy are overburdened by administrative tasks, and that the current model is not sufficient or fit-for-purpose to support our ministry and mission in the years to come. The report says that “churches are more likely to grow when there is one leader for one community”. We take this finding seriously, and it is why the Minster

Communities framework states that there will be a named minister for every church in the diocese. However, this leader may not be ordained, and may not be stipendiary, although all churches will receive sacramental ministry. The Anecdote to Evidence report has not looked into whether leadership that is non-ordained or non-stipendiary has any correlation or impact on church growth. Its suggestion that simply amalgamating parishes into ever larger groups and expecting clergy to minister in the same way across a greater number of communities is detrimental to church growth is important. It supports the intention behind the Minster Community framework to ensure that we embrace a new way of doing ministry and mission in order to see not just numerical growth, but the flourishing of our churches across the diocese through Everyday Faith, deepening discipleship and loving service of the world.