

Commentary on 2017 Ministry Statistics

The Research and Statistics Department has once again provided a clear and full picture of ministry in the Church of England in 2017. The picture is very similar and the variations between the two sets of data are mostly marginal. This means that the areas of concern shown last year have not seen immediate and significant improvement. For example, the clergy data on diversity and in particular on ethnicity continue to provide concern. The downward trend in stipendiary clergy numbers continues, though the overall reduction of around 50 from a total of over 7,000 within one year is less than 1 per cent and is probably less than is popularly assumed.

There are positive signs too. The clearest area of growth is in the numbers entering ordination training which grew by 14% in 2017 (and a further annual increase of around 6% is expected in 2018). The hard work of dioceses and the prayers of many are being answered and this will have a growing influence. The projections of future numbers of stipendiary clergy to 2035 based on the 2017 statistics are worth pondering: as the 50% increase in ordinations to which we aspire is reached and sustained for a decade, this will have a major impact on ministry in the Church of England and the life of parishes, chaplaincies and missional communities across England.

There are also some interesting shifts within the overall figures. As the number of stipendiary incumbents decreases, the proportion of assistant and especially trainee curates increases. As the number of paid chaplains remains stable, their proportion in relation to parochial clergy increases. These and other trends of increase such the number of pioneer leaders will affect the shape of future ministry: being a vicar becomes more demanding and also more clearly an option among several routes for ministers, rather than necessarily the automatic choice.

Looking ahead to this time next year, I hope that by the time the 2018 figures are published there will be some more meaningful data on the variety of lay ministries, beyond Readers. SDF funding has been given to explore and share the information available on lay ministry and that this new work will begin in the autumn 2018. There is evidence of a wide range of licensed, diocesan authorised and locally recognised ministries emerging across the dioceses. Capturing data on these will give a truer picture of the vitality and growth of the ministry of the Church of England as a whole, and maybe displace the tendency to be diffident and even pessimistic in the light of ministry statistics. We are seeing change: some continued decline as older stipendiary clergy retire, but also growth and innovation, and grounds for greater confidence for the future of ministry.

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31 July 2018