

GENERAL SYNOD

Revitalising our Parishes for Mission**Summary**

The parish remains at the heart of the Church of England's vision for the 2020s and beyond, and its vitality is essential for the delivery of all of the bold outcomes. The centrality of the parish is evidenced in the significant financial support given to the parish through Strategic Development Funding and Lowest Income Community funding streams, as well as our commitment to sustaining and even increasing stipendiary clergy numbers. The Church is working and praying towards a bold outcome to see the parish revitalised for mission, flourishing in every place so that each person in our nation may have the opportunity to hear and respond to the Good News of Jesus Christ. The report *From Anecdote to Evidence* (2014) provided insight into the eight factors which correlate with local church flourishing, and subsequent experience has largely confirmed these insights. A process of mission action planning or similar – an invitation to a strategic conversation about priorities, opportunities, strengths and resources – has often proved to be valuable for local churches seeking to grow their missional effectiveness. Finally, flourishing and revitalised parishes require flourishing and revitalised ministers, and so the issues around support for clergy well-being need to be addressed alongside support for the parish as a unit.

The bold outcomes of the Vision and Strategy

1. Our vision and strategy for the 2020s are expressed in the six bold outcomes, priorities for which we work and pray, and our best measures for the progress we make. One of these is the revitalisation of our parishes for mission.
2. All of these outcomes depend on the missional vitality of our parishes and other worshipping communities. For example, the bold outcome to double the number of young disciples in our churches will only come about in the context of revitalised parishes.
3. So as we talk about one of these outcomes it is important to remember that they are all interconnected, and that the vitality of our churches is at the heart of them all.

National Church support for the parish through Strategic Development Funding (SDF) Lowest Income Communities Funding (LinC) and Innovation Funding

4. The Independent Review of LInC and SDF identified that more than half of SDF support has gone to working with existing churches - £94.9m over 2014-2021 (figure 12, page 31).
5. Examples of where funding has gone include:
 - Rural sustainability – e.g. in Salisbury investing in providing experiences for ministry experience scheme participants, ordinands, and clergy to experience rural ministry.
 - From large church to resource church - helping parishes which are relatively strong to better support others in areas where they have expertise. E.g. in Brighton and Hove – St Peter's Brighton from an evangelical tradition, and All Saints Hove from a sacramental tradition, have been funded to form apostolic partnerships with other parishes – including, at All Saints Hove, through choral music, a social enterprise cage, and training in theology, ministry and mission
 - Children and youth – in Bolton, working with schools and parishes to build on existing relationships and create clearer connections at transition points between toddler groups, primary, and secondary-age provision in both schools and parishes.

- More diverse – in Leicester, working with four parishes to develop and explore inter-cultural worship, supporting practice to increase the number of worshippers from a UKME background.
6. The Independent Review also noted that LInC funding (totalling £102m in 2020-22) supports ministry in at least 1,700 parishes, with an average of £14,000 allocated per parish supported, roughly equivalent to a quarter of the cost of a clergy post. Dioceses report that many of these parishes would not have the same level of clergy provision without LInC funding. It also noted that the percentage of funds confirmed as going to the 25% most deprived parishes increased from 35% in 2017 to 56% in 2020.
 7. Innovation funding has supported a number of parish initiatives, for example:
 - St Chad and St Mark, Wolverhampton, in its work building mission and discipleship with refugees and migrants;
 - The Church Mission Society's work on Pioneering Parishes – supporting parishes to develop innovative engagement with their local communities in a contextual way.
 - New Wine's Raising Generations Minsters – churches with a thriving ministry to invest in parishes of a similar tradition which don't currently have youth and children's work, to establish the work and provide support
 - Youth Mission in Communion in London – a network of churches working together in collaborative youth ministry rooted in the sacramental tradition
 - Swindon New Town parish, building models of good growth in a traditional Catholic context

Support for stipendiary clergy

8. Statistics for Mission 2020 shows that:
 - Number of candidates starting training for stipendiary ministry has increased by 100 (30%) between 2016 and 2020 (table 10, page 37)
 - Number of ordinations to stipendiary deacon lags this trend, but has increased 10% between 2016 and 2020 (table 13, page 41)
 - Overall numbers of stipendiary clergy are staying broadly consistent (1.5% decline between 2016-2020, compare with 11% decline between 2015 and 2019 for Average Weekly Attendance)
9. In 2019, the number of stipendiary clergy held steady year-on-year, probably for the first time in decades
10. Comparing with ministry statistics in 2016, 37% of stipendiary clergy served in rural areas, while 38% do in 2020 – so no change in the absolute number of stipendiary clergy in rural areas.
11. These figures represent the results of a significant national investment in increasing the number of vocations to ordained ministry, which has included £8.9m in commissioners funding for vote 1, and £31.5m for curates, in 2020-22. These commitments continue in the 2023-25 triennium.

How do parishes flourish and grow?

12. *From Anecdote to Evidence* and the subsequent resource *From Evidence to Action* highlighted eight factors which correlated with growth in the broadest sense in local churches. (The language varies slightly between the two reports. The following is based on the later language in *From Evidence to Action*)
13. The eight factors were found to be:
 - A clear mission and purpose with an intention to grow in every sense
 - Active engagement with the local context and those who don't currently go to church
 - Willingness to reflect, change and adapt

- Lay people as well as clergy in leadership roles
 - Active engagement with children and young people
 - A culture of welcome and ongoing relationships
 - Ongoing discipleship, equipping people to live out their faith every day
 - Leaders who innovate, motivate and envision
14. Although no equivalent piece of research has been undertaken by the Church since, time and experience have broadly supported these eight factors which remain key to parish revitalisation.
15. Additionally, the concept of focal leadership found in *From Anecdote to Evidence* (a local leader for each worshipping community who can be clergy or lay, stipendiary or not) has increasingly been understood and adopted in some dioceses.

Clergy well-being: revitalised parishes require revitalised leaders

16. Clergy wellbeing is inextricable from the wellbeing of a parish. Strung out and anxious leaders make for strung out and anxious parishes.
17. At a national and a diocesan level there is an increasing emphasis on clergy well-being. This is to be welcomed and continued
18. Clergy and their parishes do not exist in a vacuum. Even though they are doing ministry in a local context, they are fundamentally impacted by the institution of which they are a part. Narratives of growth and success need to take account of parishes where, for good demographic reasons, significant numerical growth is unlikely, and where this can at times be experienced as implicitly critical.
19. The task for clergy of paying attention to the narratives of the parish, the diocese, and the national church can at times be experienced as a point of tension and challenge.
20. Clergy of parishes which are already vital, and are also small and poor, need to be reminded that they are seen and valued, and that their parishes are inherently valuable in the economy of the Kingdom of God. Our theology must continue to cherish the small and the fragile: “a bruised reed he will not break.”

Mission action planning and parish revitalization

21. At the heart of parish revitalisation is the call to pay attention to *discernment* (asking ourselves what God is doing and wants to do) and *planning* (asking ourselves what we can do to serve the work of God as we have discerned it). It is after all the Spirit who ultimately gives life (‘vita’). Sometimes the Spirit will do things that have been neither planned nor discerned beforehand, and the task of leaders is to change tack and follow!
22. For some years, many dioceses have encouraged a process of mission action planning (“MAP”) as a tool to develop vision and think intentionally about their mission. Whilst the evidence is difficult to assess, there appears to be a correlation between the use of Mission Action Planning and church growth¹. This led Bob Jackson to conclude: “Adopting MAP is no magic bullet and there may well be disappointments, but persuading churches into intentional planning for mission and growth does seem to pay off. MAP is a genuine lever for change and growth and there is more potential to be unlocked.”² Some dioceses have adopted other approaches to missional discernment and formation such as Partnership for Missional Church.

¹ See for example, the case studies from the Diocese of Southwark presented in Chapter 7 of Mike Ireland and Mike Chew, *Mission Action Planning* (London: SPCK, 2016)

² Bob Jackson, *What Makes Churches Grow?* (London: Church House Publishing, 2015), p.84

23. A survey of approaches adopted in dioceses across the country reveal that there is no one model, but there are some common characteristics. These are helpfully summarised by the Diocese of Southwark mission action planning resource³ as:
- a) Consultative - incorporating deep listening, hearing the needs and views of both the local church and the wider community;
 - b) Audit - conducted by the church leadership (lay and ordained) which includes the information from the consultations and a review of the church's current mission and ministry;
 - c) Vision-Centred - articulating a vision that is commonly held by the church leadership and specific to the parish and context;
 - d) Priority Areas - acknowledging that no church can do everything straight way, but discerning the right priorities in the next period;
 - e) 'SMART' plan - with resources and people matched to goals, which are regularly reviewed;
 - f) Owned Widely - communicated, publicised, understood and owned by the whole congregation.

Whatever the process may be called and however implemented, these qualities will be evident in any effective approach to discernment-based planning.

24. Any missional discernment and planning process must be locally owned; when it is imposed from the centre as, for example, a pre-requisite for securing funding or other resource, it can very quickly become a "box-ticking" exercise. In addition, if the diocesan leadership initiates a programme of encouraging parish level mission action planning, it will be important that there is a process and space to hear the outcomes of the plans and incorporate those outcomes into the diocesan strategy going forward.
25. The approach requires strong diocesan support (for example, the Diocese of Sheffield offers support from diocesan officers to help facilitate discussions⁴) and needs to be adapted for different contexts, with some parishes needing more support to ensure they do not feel overwhelmed by the process. Perhaps some parishes might need simply to reflect on the question, "What is God calling our parish to pay attention to in the coming 2-3 years?" But the principle remains, intentional and vision-centred planning will be critical for if the bold outcome of the revitalisation of the parish for mission is to be realised.

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³ Mission Action Planning: A How to Guide (available at: <https://southwark.anglican.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/MAP-booklet-FINAL-2020.pdf>), p.6

⁴ Mission Action Planning 2023 (available at <https://www.sheffield.anglican.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/04/MAP-2023-for-screen-viewing.pdf>), p.8