

Minster Community FAQs

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1. The Background to Minster Communities

1.1 What is a Minster Community?

'Minster Communities' is the title we are using within the Diocese of Leicester for a community of parishes who work together in mission (without losing their individual identity), and who work closely with their church schools, fresh expressions of Church, and chaplaincies.

The intention is to strengthen local churches so they can better serve their own communities. The aim is to lift some of the administrative burden and to fully integrate the work of churches, schools, and households in growing faith.

1.2 Who decided the diocese would be structured into Minster Communities?

In October 2021, 72% of Diocesan Synod members (who are democratically elected representatives drawn from our local worshipping communities) voted in favour of the Minster Community model. This framework grew out of a listening exercise in Autumn 2020 about Everyday Faith and the challenges faced within local worshipping communities. From there, 400 Local Conversations were held across the Diocese to consider three models proposed in response to those challenges.

Based on over 80,000 words of feedback as well as discernment by the Bishop's Council, Area Deans and Lay Chairs, the Minster Communities framework was developed and overwhelmingly approved by Diocesan Synod.

1.3 Why are we forming Minster Communities?

The Diocese undertook an extensive consultation exercise in Autumn 2020. Through that, we heard that our inherited models and frameworks for "doing" and "being" church are no longer supporting our mission and ministry. Some of the 'gaps' we heard about were around:

- Engaging with younger people - those in our schools, colleges and local universities
- Our diversity and representativeness
- The difficulty fresh expressions sometimes have in becoming sustainable and the vulnerability of church plants
- Our environmental responsibilities
- The sustainability of our leadership models with many leaders at risk of burnout

During that consultation process, and increasingly so since, it has become clear that the ways we have been operating are also financially unsustainable, with a growing gap between income and expenditure on ministry.

The Minster Communities framework is intended to address these 'gaps' and enable ministry in a sustainable way. The process of forming Minster Communities as a framework for our life together

and our witness in this world, is more than simple organisational change. It is a deep-rooted process of discernment, of seeking God's guidance as we seek to use the resources God has given us to the best of our abilities.

[*An extended answer to this question is available to read here.*](#)

1.4 Is this just a re-run of the 2020 Vision?

No – the 2020 Vision was a response to a national decline in the numbers of clergy and was driven purely by questions of deployment. The aim of Minster Communities, by contrast, is to shift the focus of ministry towards a younger, more diverse mission. In this process the mission comes first, and this is followed by discussion about what resources are needed to fulfil that mission (including, but not limited to, clergy deployment).

1.5 What is the theological basis for Minster Communities?

The theological basis for Minster Communities is missional ecclesiology, within the rooted and established Anglican tradition. In this the Church exists for those who are beyond it, outside of it, and also for those who participate within it. Within our Anglican tradition we have several understandings of 'Church' (ecclesiologies), yet what is common is the Anglican understanding of Church as both local and universal – which is found within our Communion, our national, (and therefore our diocesan) expression of church. The connectivity of a local church to a wider body of Church oversight, and to a wider mission than the local is vital.

A structure in and of itself will not ensure the growth of God's Kingdom - and that goes for any structure, including our current systems. However, we need to continually organise ourselves to respond to the call of God upon us as a church, and from the earliest times the church has tried to do just that. Rather than the structure, it is the people are the ones who participate in the revealing and seeking of God's Kingdom.

1.6 Are other dioceses restructuring in the same way?

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, many of which share significant similarities with Minster Communities.

Some are reorganising into Mission Areas with Oversight Ministers and lay Focal Ministers; others are undertaking a process of deanery reorganisation; and still others are taking a Team Ministry model. Rather than doing this in a piecemeal fashion or 'reorganising by vacancy', we have chosen to go through a change process which is participatory and open.

2. Finance and Minster Communities

2.1 Is this all about money?

No. It is true that, like other dioceses across the country, we are facing a serious financial challenge as few churches are covering the costs of their own ministry. The Diocesan Board of Finance has been covering this shortfall for several years by selling diocesan assets and cutting over 20% of posts within the central support staff. But this cannot go on indefinitely and so one of the principles behind Minster Communities is that they will be financially self-sustaining.

But the proposal for Minster Communities also grew out of a recognition that to reach and serve more people in our communities, we need to keep pace with changes in society. So Minster Communities are about creating a more missional Church, with children and young people at the centre, and where everybody is equipped to live out their Everyday Faith. The facilitation process which enables groups of churches to form Minster Communities looks at where their respective strengths and giftings lie and how these can be best brought together to tap into new missional opportunities.

2.2 Can't the diocese save money by cutting central posts?

At the end of 2021, we made the difficult decision to make just over a fifth of the staff working centrally redundant in order to help reduce the deficit. This reduced our costs by just over £300,000. Further reductions in central costs, including staffing, have occurred in subsequent years. There are no plans to put clergy through a similar redundancy process as the equivalent reduction in numbers of stipendiary clergy is anticipated to happen gradually through the process of retirement and the sort of moves which happen in the normal course of events.

For parishes to operate effectively, in accordance with the law and good practice, safeguarding, HR and finance functions are best performed centrally. Devolving these functions to parishes would cost more and add additional burdens to already overstretched parish clergy and volunteers.

It is worth noting that around 20 staff are employed in the operations of St Martin's Conference Centre and Lodge, with an intention to generate income for the diocese. In addition, money from Parish Contributions does not fund the Cathedral's running costs nor the Bishop's office and its staff, so these posts could not be cut and replaced by parish-based roles.

2.3 How much is the process of forming Minster Communities costing?

The costs of the Shaped By God Together process are met through grant funding from the national church. This includes the year-long work and consultation which led to the development of the Minster Community framework, and the resourcing of the process to enable Minster Communities to form. It also includes a contribution towards the cost of our Diocesan Leadership Programme (DLP) so that we can deliver this training to a significantly larger number of people than would otherwise be possible. As we begin to form Minster Communities across more of the diocese, we will make use of

any opportunities available to seek further national grant funding as necessary. This works in synergy with the general support that diocesan support staff already provide to all parishes across the diocese.

There is essentially no additional financial burden on parishes related to Shaped By God Together costs.

2.4 Wider Finance Questions

We know that as well as having questions about Minster Communities, many of you also have questions about the diocese's finances. So, we've worked with the Finance and Generous Giving teams to produce a set of FAQs including wider finance questions. [Click here to view.](#)

3. The Process of Forming Minster Communities

3.1 How are Minster Communities formed?

Several groups of churches have been invited by their Archdeacon to join a three-phase process, supported by diocesan facilitators, to form a number of Minster Communities. Each church will only be in one Minster Community, but by beginning with a large geographical area, we can discern together which groupings are most appropriate.

The first phase is 'Preparing' - here the focus is on getting to know yourselves as a Worshipping Community and getting to know the other parishes, fresh expressions and schools in your area. At the end of this phase, the smaller groupings of Minster Communities will start to form.

The second phase is 'Forming' - small Working Groups drawn from across the churches do the detailed work of understanding the current reality of various aspects of church life, thinking through what a Minster Community could look like, practically, in their context; and what is needed to make that happen. This culminates in a proposal that is crafted from the information gathered by the Working Groups. Together, the first and second phase take around 18 months.

The third phase 'Living' is when the newly formed Minster Community begins to live out their shared vision. At this stage, governance and ministry deployment are established.

[Watch a short video about the process. \(YouTube\)](#)

3.2 Will my church be made to join with one with a different theological tradition?

The diocese will not 'make' churches do anything, but we will work with churches to take seriously our diocesan priority of developing Reconciling Communities.

This is in line with the decision of Diocesan Synod, based on over 400 Local Conversations, in favour of a model which was based on geographic proximity rather than theological tradition as the best way to strengthen Christian communities within parishes and to take seriously the local context in which they are set. This will mean some Minster Communities will bring together churches of different theological traditions. But it is not the case that they will be forced to share services.

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.

3.3 Does each PCC choose to join a Minster Community, and what happens if they don't?

Yes, it will be a choice for each PCC. No church can be forced to join a Minster Community, but if they choose not to they will miss out on the opportunities for mission and support that working together with other parishes will provide. Any church seeking to opt out of the framework will be invited to consider the implications of their decision in conversation with diocesan leadership and support staff.

Based on the vote at the October 2021 Synod, we (as a whole diocese) have committed to implementing this framework. We have also agreed, as a diocese, to focus our resources on our diocesan priorities, and to do so within our Minster Communities as they are formed. Thus, a refusal to participate will mean a reduced level of resource being available to the individual parish. However, in this situation, the Bishop retains 'the cure of souls' in the parish and will work in partnership with the Area Dean and Churchwardens to ensure continued support for the parish.

4. Minster Communities in Practice

4.1 How many churches make up a Minster Community?

There is no set number of churches that makes up a Minster Community. This will be decided in conversation between local churches and diocesan officers. The size of any Minster Community must be sustainable for mission and ministry in that place, as well as financially self-sustaining.

4.2 I can't imagine this. Can you give me an example of how this could look?

A Minster Community could discern that the focus of its mission will be:

- Schools' chaplaincy
- Focusing on rural mental health support

- Intentionally planting new churches in new-build areas
- Developing a network of lay leadership within new worshipping communities
- Deciding to put Minster Community resources into ecological work
- Providing learning opportunities across the Minster Communities to deepen discipleship
- Collaborating on social projects too big for a single parish
- Any number of other options...

This would mean focusing the paid ministry on roles that enable that to happen. It may also mean that some things that are currently happening in the area need to stop so there is capacity for the newly defined mission

4.3 Will the diocese close our church?

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 this is something that a local church decides to explore, the Church Buildings Team are available to provide support and guidance.

4.4 How will Safeguarding work in Minster Communities?

Parish Safeguarding Officers will remain in place when a parish joins a Minster Community, as will the PCC and incumbent's safeguarding responsibilities. This will only change with any pastoral reorganisation, if it is required.

Within Minster Communities there will be an opportunity for closer working relationships and group working. For example, it may be that Parish Safeguarding Coordinators can form a network to support and share good practice or that parishes join together to complete safeguarding training.

4.5 Will Minster Communities mean rural churches are marginalised?

From the 2018 Rural Commission, [Deep Wells and Green Pastures](#), we know that rural parishes in our diocese can feel neglected compared to their urban counterparts. But our Bishops remain committed to the central recommendation of that commission: that the diocese “shifts from seeing itself as an urban diocese with a rural edge to a rural diocese with urban heartlands, working in partnership and led by God’s people”, attending to and nurturing the distinct gifts of our rural churches.

Indeed, the diocese spends up to six times more of its money on ministry in rural areas than in urban areas, when measured in proportion to the population, and the majority of churches which have closed in recent decades have been in urban areas, even as their population has grown.

We are aware that Minster Communities in rural areas may face particular challenges because of the geographical spread. But we also recognise that there are great missional opportunities for these parishes, which Minster Communities can be used to explore. For instance, almost 80% of DBE

schools are in the county, creating clear Growing Faith opportunities. Many rural parishes are already part of benefices, which will have established relationships and ways of working which will be an invaluable foundation for forming Minster Communities.

In every area, rural or urban, the facilitation and formation process behind Minster Communities will be sensitive to the unique challenges, strengths and opportunities therein and seek to address the former and make the most of the latter.

4.6 How will we know whether Minster Communities are a success or not?

In 2022, we began piloting the process of forming Minster Communities (Minster Communities themselves are not being piloted) - thanks to the feedback about what worked well and what could be improved, we have been able to refine the three stages of Minster Community formation.

Once Minster Communities are in the Living phase, the measure of their success will remain the three key questions we have used as a diocese for several years: are they helping deepen people's discipleship, grow new disciples, and show loving service of the world. As Minster Communities are developed around a collective mission, we will support them to discern what change they want to see in their communities and how they will know if their efforts are bearing fruit.

In addition, we would also expect that Minster Communities as a whole will be able to point to signs of progress towards our collectively discerned strategic priorities:

- New Communities
- Intergenerational Communities
- Reconciling Communities
- Intercultural Communities
- Eco-Communities

5. Ministry provision

5.1 How many people will be employed to run a Minster Community?

Every Minster Community Team will have an ordained Oversight Minister and there will also be other clergy (stipendiary, self-supporting, retired, chaplains etc) as well as lay ministers serving in each of the Minster Communities. 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.

5.2 Will I lose my vicar?

Because of our current financial situation, we expect that across the diocese, we will have to lose 20 full-time equivalent stipendiary posts. But the intention is that this reduction will be achieved in the normal course of clergy retirement and moving over the next five years.

The framework can, of course, be adapted to accommodate an increase in the number of stipendiary clergy. If our financial position improves through an increase in giving from congregations, then we will be able to maintain or increase the number of clergy in stipendiary posts.

5.3 How will the Oversight Minister be appointed?

Bishop Martyn will invite expressions of interest, and nominations, for Oversight Minister from the incumbent level clergy licensed within the area of the proposed Minster Community. There will then be a discernment process before an offer is made to one of the incumbents. The Bishop will then commission the Oversight Minister and the other incumbent level clergy in the proposed Minster Community will be invited to enter into a memorandum of agreement, giving their consent for the proposed Oversight Minister to lead the Minster Community Ministry Team. At the launch service for the new Minster Community, the Bishop will commission the team of ministers licensed in the area under the convening and leadership of the Oversight Minister.