

ST ALBANS DIOCESAN SYNOD

14 March 2026

Discipleship and Vocations Background Paper

The Whole People of God Serving the Whole Mission of God

Discipleship, Vocation and the Flourishing of the Whole People of God

1. Purpose of this paper

This paper accompanies the Diocesan Synod discussion on discipleship and vocation.

Time in Synod is necessarily limited. This paper therefore provides:

- fuller context for the data and trends related to vocations
- a theological reading of those figures
- material to support reflection before and after the Synod debate

It is intended both as pre-reading and as a resource for wider diocesan discussion.

2. An important starting point - vocation begins with discipleship

Before engaging with numbers, pathways, or roles, it is important to name something essential:

Vocation begins with discipleship

The Church flourishes when women and men are helped to live for Jesus and serve him in the whole of life - in homes and families, workplaces and schools, neighbourhoods and communities.

From this shared life of discipleship:

- all are called into faithful Christian witness and service of Christ
- some into recognised lay ministries and leadership
- others are called into ordained ministry
- many into forms of service and mission as parish / chaplaincy / school role or office holders

These are not competing callings. They are different expressions of the shared vocation of the whole people of God.

This theological starting point matters, because without it the data risks being read only through the lens of shortage, capacity, or institutional anxiety.

3. What the data tells us about lay ministry

Over the last five years, the Diocese of St Albans has seen consistent and substantial participation in lay formation and training.

Lay Leaders of Worship (LLW) [Lay Leaders of Worship - The Diocese of St Albans](#)

The Lay Leaders of Worship Training involves 3 evening and 1 whole day sessions.

The number entering LLW training each year has been:

- 2021: 37
- 2022: 32
- 2023: 37
- 2024: 69
- 2025: 50

This represents **225 people entering LLW training over five years**, with annual cohorts consistently in the range of 30–70 participants.

The demographic profile of those entering LLW training shows:

- the largest age groups are 50–59 and 60–69, with a significant number aged 70+
- relatively small numbers under 40
- Global Majority Heritage participation ranging from 1–7 people per year
- and a small but consistent number of disabled participants

These figures confirm that Lay Leaders of Worship are not a marginal feature of diocesan life. They represent a large and committed body of lay ministers sustaining worship and leadership week by week.

Enabling Ministry Course [Enabling Ministry Course - The Diocese of St Albans](#)

Enabling Ministry is a 9-month course (Sept to June).

Participation in Enabling Ministry (previously known as Foundations) has also remained steady:

- 2021: 20
- 2022: 15
- 2023: 24
- 2024: 17
- 2025: 26

This gives 102 people entering Enabling pathways over five years.

As with LLW training, the age profile is weighted towards those over 50, though there are small numbers of younger adults and a consistent, although modest, presence of Global Majority Heritage and disabled people.

These figures point to:

- strong willingness among lay people to step into mission, pastoral, and discipleship-focused leadership
- ongoing questions about how access, imagination, and participation might be widened to enable greater diversity (the whole people of God serving the whole mission of God)

Readers in training [Readers in Training – The Diocese of St Albans](#)

Reader training usually lasts for two years (though bespoke pathways are possible), after the completion of the one year [Enabling Ministry Course](#).

Numbers entering Reader training are smaller, but remain relatively consistent:

- 2021: 9
- 2022: 5 (including 2 on the Pioneer pathway)
- 2023: 5
- 2024: 8
- 2025: 11

This represents 38 Readers entering training over five years.

While these numbers are modest compared to LLWs and Enablers, they continue to represent a significant commitment to licensed lay ministry, teaching, and leadership within the diocese.

What this adds up to

Taken together, between 2021 and 2025:

- **225** Lay Leaders of Worship,
- **102** Enablers,
- **38** Readers

have entered diocesan lay ministry training – **over 360 people in total**.

This numerical picture underlines a simple but important reality – lay ministry carries a substantial proportion of the Church’s worship, discipleship, pastoral care, and mission across the diocese.

In many places, these ministries are not supplementary. They are essential to making church happen.

4. Pressure points in parish life

Alongside this significant lay participation, both the data and lived experience point to increasing pressure in parish life.

Some of the most vital lay roles are becoming harder to fill:

- churchwardens
- treasurers
- parish safeguarding officers
- PCC members

While diocesan data captures formal training pathways, it does not fully quantify the strain being felt in these roles. However, the combination of:

- sustained lay ministry training numbers
- an ageing demographic profile
- and increasing role complexity

points to a pattern where the same faithful people are increasingly asked to carry responsibility for longer periods, often with fewer others to share the load.

This should not be read as declining commitment. It is more accurately described as faithfulness under pressure.

5. Frustrated vocation

Alongside the visible figures sits another reality that is harder to quantify.

Across lay leadership contexts, we increasingly hear of frustrated vocation:

- people who are gifted and willing
- who sense a call to do more in leadership or mission
- but who do not always feel encouraged, trusted, or permitted to step into these roles

This is particularly true for many younger people, and for those from Global Majority Heritage communities, disabled people, and others who have not always seen people like themselves encouraged into leadership or ministry.

This is rarely about formal policy and more often it is about culture:

- habits of expectation
- confidence (or lack of it) to enable others to flourish in their vocation
- and imagination about who can lead and how

When vocation is sensed but space and encouragement is limited, calling can stall rather than deepen. This represents a loss not only for individuals, but for God's mission of love in and for the world.

6. Ordained ministry: the numerical context

The data on ordained ministry needs to be read within this wider picture.

Ordinands entering training (St Albans)

Ordinands entering Training (St Albans); 2020-2025

Year	Diocesan total	GMH	% GMH*
2020	19	3	16%
2021	16	2	13%
2022	12	2	17%
2023	15	1	7%
2024	6	0	0
2025	14	1	7%
TOTAL	82	9	11%

This gives a total of 82 ordinands over six years, with significant year-on-year fluctuation and a notably low point in 2024. However, a reading of the ordinand numbers over many years shows that numbers ebb and flow. This said, more needs to

be done to enable more people (particularly younger and more diverse people) to explore a vocation to ordained ministry.

Global Majority Heritage representation across this period stands at:

- **9 out of 82 ordinands**, approximately 11%. This is encouraging but we have so much work to do to continue to widen the opportunities for all people to pursue their God-given vocation.

The national picture – a sharp decline in ordinand numbers

The diocesan picture needs to be understood within a wider national context. Over the last decade, the Church of England has seen a significant and sustained fall in the number of people entering training for ordained ministry.

For many years, national planning assumptions were based on around 600 new ordinands per year – broadly 400 stipendiary and 200 self-supporting. In recent years, however, national figures have fallen well below this level, with annual totals closer to the mid-300s, and some years lower still. This represents not a gentle fluctuation but a marked step-change.

While numbers have always ebbed and flowed over time, the scale and persistence of this fall raises serious questions about sustainability, capacity, and future patterns of leadership across the Church.

Encouragingly, the most recent year has seen a modest increase of around 50 ordinands nationally. While it is too early to draw firm conclusions from a single year's data, this suggests that trends may not be fixed and that renewed vocational encouragement across the Church may be beginning to bear fruit.

Importantly, this national trend:

- pre-dates the pandemic
- is not unique to one diocese or tradition
- and reflects wider cultural, generational, and ecclesial shifts

It also reinforces a crucial point – the future of the Church cannot be secured by recruitment to ordained ministry alone, however necessary and valued ordained ministry remains. Nor can it rest on patterns of ministry and leadership that remain inaccessible or unimaginable to many younger people and people from more diverse or historically marginalised backgrounds.

Clergy age profile (as of Feb 2026)

The age profile of stipendiary clergy highlights future pressure:

- Under 30: 2
- 30–39: 16
- 40–49: 24
- 50–59: 66
- 60–69: 57
- 70–79: 1

This indicates:

- a strong concentration in the 50–69 age range
- sustained waves of retirement ahead
- and ongoing implications for sustainability, pastoral coverage, and wellbeing

These figures matter. They affect sacramental life, oversight, and the resilience of those who remain in ministry.

Self-Supporting Ministry age profile (as of Feb 2026)

Alongside stipendiary clergy, the age profile of Self-Supporting Ministers (SSMs) also shapes the future sustainability of ministry across the diocese.

SSM Associate Ministers

Under 30: 0
 30–39: 1
 40–49: 2
 50–59: 8
 60–69: 11
 70–79: 3

SSM Curates

Under 30: 0
 30–39: 2
 40–49: 3
 50–59: 12
 60–69: 3
 70–79: 0

This indicates:

- a strong concentration of SSM Associate Ministers in the 50–69 age range
- very limited representation under 40

- a pipeline of SSM Curates also weighted towards those in their 50s

Self-Supporting Ministers make an indispensable contribution to sacramental, pastoral, and missional life across the diocese. In many benefices, their ministry is foundational to parish sustainability.

However, the age distribution suggests that, as with stipendiary clergy, a significant proportion of SSM ministry will reach retirement age over the next decade. Without renewed encouragement of younger and more diverse vocations into self-supporting ordained ministry, pressure on both stipendiary and lay leadership is likely to increase.

This is not simply a question of numbers. It raises wider questions about:

- how vocation is imagined across different life stages
- whether self-supporting ministry is visible and accessible to younger generations
- and how the Church enables those in the workplace, education, and other sectors to discern ordained calling alongside and within parallel employment

Seen theologically, self-supporting ministry embodies the truth that ordained vocation is not confined to one pattern of life or funding model. It reflects the manifold nature of the Church's ministry - diverse, contextual, and deeply embedded in everyday life.

Retention following curacy

Alongside the number entering ordained ministry, it is also important to consider how many priests remain within the Diocese of St Albans when moving from curacy into first incumbency.

At the end of curacy, the percentage remaining in the diocese for first incumbency has been:

2021: 39%

2022: 43%

2023: 64%

2024: 46%

2025: 48%

Across these five cohorts, retention into first incumbency averages just under 50%.

Movement between dioceses is natural within a national Church, and some mobility reflects healthy deployment, family circumstances, and vocational discernment.

Retention is therefore not a simple measure of success or failure.

However, these figures still encourage us to reflect on how we nurture belonging, sustainability, and long-term flourishing in ordained ministry.

The transition from curacy to first incumbency is one of the most significant stages in ministerial life. Our diocesan First Incumbency Pathway is now well under way, providing structured peer, practical and spiritual support at this critical point of transition. Strengthening this culture of support will remain an important part of sustaining ordained vocation in the years ahead.

In the context of a clergy age profile weighted towards those in their 50s and 60s, and in a national environment where ordinand numbers have fallen significantly, attention to retention and wellbeing becomes both pastorally and strategically important.

7. Reading the data honestly and theologically

The data does not point to a single crisis with a single solution.

Instead, it reveals a structural and cultural shift already underway:

- significant and sustained lay leadership
- increasing pressure on a smaller pool of people
- and ordained ministry that must be held within a broader ecology of vocation

The future of the Church cannot rest on:

- fewer ordained ministers
- and an increasingly stretched group of lay leaders simply doing more

What is required is a deeper culture of discipleship and vocation, in which:

- more people recognise their calling
- gifts are named and developed earlier
- leadership is shared more widely
- and both lay and ordained vocations are nurtured together

This represents not a departure from tradition, it is a recovery of a deeply biblical vision.

In the New Testament, the Church is imagined as a people living for Christ in all the world – baptised, gifted, and sent. Within that vision:

- ordained ministry does not replace the ministry of the laity,
- nor does it sit alongside it as an alternative,

- **it exists for its flourishing.**

Lay and ordained ministries are not competitors. They are distinct gifts, held together by the Holy Spirit, for the life and mission of the Church.

Against that vision, the contraction we are experiencing – in numbers, resources, and confidence – can feel like loss. Yet, what looks like loss may in fact be the soil in which God is growing something new.

8. What we are already doing as a diocese

Across the diocese, important work is already underway.

- **The Alban Way** is rooting formation in belonging, discipleship, and vocation, with particular attention to young adults and people of Global Majority Heritage.
- **Lay ministry pathways** – including Lay Leaders of Worship, Enablers, and Readers – are being strengthened and affirmed as ministries in their own right.
- **Ordained ministry** continues to be supported through discernment, formation, and renewed attention to wellbeing, sustainability, and diversity.
- **Vocations work** is increasingly focused on understanding barriers, widening access, and nurturing a culture in which calling can be named and trusted.
- **Discernment of a new ministry strategy** – identifying the ministries, training pathways and ongoing support required over the coming years. This Synod discussion forms an important part of this strategy by focussing on discipleship and vocations.

This work is adaptive and ongoing, responding to a changing context rather than assuming a return to earlier patterns.

9. Why Synod's contribution matters

A culture of discipleship and vocation cannot be created by policy or programmes alone.

It grows through:

- a commitment to prayer
- shared imagination
- trust
- local ownership

- and attentiveness to what the Holy Spirit is already doing

Synod's reflection will help shape:

- the diocesan approach to discipleship and vocation as part of the ministry strategy
- future lay and ordained pathways
- and how parishes, chaplaincies, schools, and communities are supported to nurture calling well

10. An invitation

The future of God's Church rests on the flourishing of the whole people of God serving the whole mission of God – women and men growing as disciples of Jesus, learning to live for him and serve him in the whole of life.

The Holy Spirit is already at work:

- calling
- gifting
- and sending God's people in many and varied ways, often beyond our expectations

Our task is not to manufacture vocations or simply to fill roles. It is to cultivate a culture of discipleship in which God's call can be heard and answered by anyone, in any context, with courage and joy.

Revd Canon Dr Tim Lomax

Director of Mission & Ministry

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