

ST ALBANS DIOCESAN SYNOD

13 June 2026

CHURCH REVITALISATION AND PLANTING STRATEGY

1. The Missional Rationale for Church Revitalisation and Planting

Mission flows from the self-giving, sending life of the Triune God: 'the mission of the Church is the gift of participating through the Holy Spirit in the Son's mission from the Father to the world' (Torrance, *Worship, Community and the Triune God of Grace*). It is therefore of the essence of the Church to be a gifted and sent community. In 2018, the Church of England's House of Bishops reaffirmed its commitment to sustaining both traditional and emerging forms of church, while explicitly encouraging imaginative, contextually responsive approaches to mission and the development of new Christian communities (*Church Planting and the Mission of the Church*). Since then, the pursuit of new forms of church-based mission has become firmly embedded in the Church of England's strategic framework, shaping the intentional formation of diverse missional expressions.

In the context of the Church of England, a 'mixed-ecology' approach, building wherever possible on an existing parish, is envisaged as 'the flourishing of church and ministry in our parishes, and in other communities of faith through things like church planting, fresh expressions of church, and chaplaincy and online' (*A vision and strategy for the Church of England in the 2020s*). Furthermore, it seeks to create a church environment where diverse models coexist, ensuring that every individual in England can engage with a meaningful and inspiring faith community by expanding with new churches and innovative forms of Church within our parishes, cathedrals, schools, and chaplaincies.

Within that overall approach, this proposed Diocesan church revitalisation and planting strategy is offered prayerfully as a specific contribution to supporting and enhancing the wider mission of our parishes, chaplaincies and schools.

2. The Perceived Gap in Diocesan Strategy

In recent times, church revitalisation and planting in the Diocese has been ad hoc in nature and has been in partnership with Soul Survivor Watford. There have been three church revitalisations (St Peter's Watford, St John's Hatfield and St Andrew's Watford) and two church plants (Oak Church and The Hub, both of which are BMOs). In addition, there are currently church revitalisations in view at St Benedict's Bennetts End and Christ Church Watford, as well as a church plant into the Linnere housing development. There have been a number of initiatives that have been more pioneering in character (Church of the Good Shepherd, Wixams, Great Denham).

The purpose of this strategy is to address a perceived gap in Diocesan strategy with a view to facilitating a more intentional approach to church revitalisation and

planting. In particular, the desire is to develop aspects of Diocesan activity in such a way as to make it easier to respond to opportunities that arise and, while respecting the uniqueness of every context, reduce the need to start anew on each occasion, leading to an increase in the number of such initiatives.

In this strategy, the terms 'church revitalisation' and 'church planting' are used in a tightly defined manner:

- Church revitalisation refers to a situation where a leader is appointed with a team (or in some circumstances, just support) from a sending church to bring new life to a parish church in partnership with the existing congregation.
- Church planting refers to a situation where a leader and a team move to a new location (which is not a parish church) and create a new church.

The particular focus of the strategy is on church revitalisation and planting that crosses parish boundaries (which we define as 'cross-parish'), as the area where Diocesan involvement and support is a pre-requisite. As things stand, parishes are entirely free to pursue church planting and revitalisation initiatives within their own parish boundaries. That said, the distinction between 'cross-parish' and 'within parish' is an arbitrary one in missional terms and there are strong linkages between the two: cross-parish revitalisation and planting is more likely to flourish in a context where parishes are themselves engaged in such initiatives within their parish boundaries and those parish initiatives are likely to benefit from, among other things, the learning that comes from Diocesan activity as a result of this strategy.

As a way of retaining the clear focus of this strategy while attending to those linkages, the Working Group recommends that the Board of Mission and Ministry review existing support for church revitalisation and planting initiatives and pioneer and estates ministry within parishes boundaries.

Action: Board of Mission and Ministry to review existing support for church revitalisation and planting initiatives and pioneer and estates ministry within parish boundaries.

3. The Likely Shape of Church Revitalisation and Planting Activity

In the earlier stages of the strategy, it seems that church revitalisations are likely to predominate (with the exception of church planting into major new housing developments), primarily for missional reasons. As long as there is sufficient openness to missional renewal in revitalisation contexts, church revitalisation takes seriously the church's long-term presence in a place, including its network of pre-existing missional links, and resists the assumption that mission begins only with new structures (see further Stefan Paas, *Church Planting in the Secular West*). Also, church revitalisation is less likely than church planting to require the creation of a new clergy post.

The Working Group wondered whether church revitalisation and planting is also more likely to take place in urban and suburban contexts, again, for missional reasons. Given the primacy of long-term relationships in rural mission, the sending of a team from another location to revitalise a parish church or plant a new one is less likely to be effective as a missional strategy than in urban and suburban areas. Further, there are likely to be fewer rural churches with the capacity to send teams to other churches. The main two exceptions (and there may well be others) are likely to be the sending of teams drawn from parishes across a rural deanery to a parish church within it and situations where an urban or suburban church can gather a team made up of people who have been travelling to it from the rural context where the proposed revitalisation is to take place.

Nonetheless, the Working Group gave some attention to the question of church revitalisation and planting in a rural context, particularly within benefices and parishes, which it would recommend is taken forward through the work the Archdeacons of Bedford and Hertford are currently undertaking to develop a Diocesan rural ministry strategy.

Action: Archdeacons of Bedford and Hertford to include consideration of church revitalisation and planting within a Diocesan rural ministry strategy.

4. Leadership Development

A critical issue this strategy must address is how to ensure that, when a church revitalisation or planting opportunity is on the horizon, there is a leader available with the vocation, gifts and experience to lead it. As there may be implications for vocations work, discernment processes and training, the five curates on the Working Group surveyed their contemporaries, half of whom responded, about their awareness and experiences of church revitalisation and planting in those contexts and fashioned recommendations based on them in discussion with the Director or Ordinands and IME2 Officer.

The key recommendations include attending to vocations that we might hope would arise in church revitalisation/planting contexts themselves, (where candidates in discernment have capacity) opportunities to visit and reflect on a church revitalisation/plant, using the ordinands' conference as an opportunity to highlight church revitalisation and planting, observational placements for curates during IME2 in revitalisation or planting contexts, the option for curates to engage with a CCX Plant Course being undertaken by a revitalisation or planting team, the inclusion of relevant training (whether compulsory or optional) within the IME2 curriculum and guidance to training incumbents to include reflection on church revitalisation and planting in supervisions.

It is important to note that potential leaders of church revitalisations and church plants will not be restricted to curates, but will include clergy further on in their ministerial journeys.

The Working Group paid sustained attention to possibilities for lay leadership, most of which was directed at parish revitalisation and planting within parish boundaries. In reviewing existing support for church revitalisation and planting initiatives and pioneer and estates ministry within parish boundaries (see section 2 above), the Working Group would encourage the Board of Mission and Ministry to continue to promote and support lay-led expressions of such activities. In particular, many of the recommendations in relation to clergy vocations work, discernment processes and IME training may be equally relevant to Reader vocations, discernment and training.

The experience of both the consultations facilitated by the Bishop of Hertford and of the Working Group is that considerable intentionality will be required to avoid those involved in church revitalisation and planting work becoming skewed in gender, ethnicity and tradition terms.

Action: Director of Ordinands and IME2 Officer, in consultation with Deputy Director of Mission and Ministry and the Board of Mission and Ministry, to consider further recommendations for vocations work, discernment processes and IME training.

5. The Capacity and Calling of Sending Churches

Applying purely numerical criteria, it would appear that church revitalisation and planting capacity is, at present, highly concentrated in the Diocese, predominantly in the St Albans Archdeaconry, Bedford Deanery and Hatfield Team. On its face, this presents an issue for a Diocese-wide strategy, given the need for a sending church to be sufficiently proximate to the revitalisation/planting context for it to be realistic that a leader would be able to mobilise a team to join them.

Although it may still be true that efforts are required to build capacity, the Working Group's reflection is that what is key in any sending team is missional capacity (rather than any particular numerical requirement). Further, the Working Group's view is that a sense of calling to be a sending church is also hugely significant and can be evoked by encouraging churches to reflect on their own histories of being the product of or source of past church revitalisations and plants.

The Working Group recommends that a wide invitation be extended to parishes to consider whether they might have the capacity and calling to be involved in a cross-parish revitalisation or plant, whether now or in the future, what they might need to be able to do so and what opportunities they might themselves discern. It may be possible to gather together groups of such churches into learning communities, perhaps according to whether they might see themselves as involved now or in the future, including to provide a space to reflect on that vocation and its cost.

Action: Bishop's Staff to consider how to invite parishes to consider whether they might have the capacity and calling to be involved in a cross-parish revitalisation or plant.

6. The Alignment of Leaders and Teams

As well as the need to have a leader available for a church revitalisation or plant, it is also important, in most situations, for them to have the necessary time to gather a team from the sending church in advance of the revitalisation or plant. With that in mind, the Bishop's Staff has agreed that, from 2027, two of the ten stipendiary curates each year will be allocated to parishes from which there is the prospect of them being engaged in gathering a team for a church revitalisation or plant. Given the unpredictability of the timing of such initiatives, they might on occasion, on the one hand, need to begin in their new contexts as curate-in-charge or, on the other hand, need to have their curacy in the sending church extended.

There may also be situations where a leader is coming from outside the sending church. If they are a curate in the Diocese, they could transfer to the sending church for a period of, say, six months before the church revitalisation or plant. For others, it might be necessary to create an interim Associate role of equivalent length.

Action: Bishop's Staff to attend to opportunities for church revitalisation and planting in allocating stipendiary curacies.

7. The Identification of Opportunities for Church Revitalisation and Planting

Church revitalisation and planting is envisaged as a collaborative response to a discerned missional need, undertaken only where there is openness and partnership.

The key characteristic of a context where a church revitalisation could take place will be a parish where there is a recognition of the need for missional renewal, including through such mechanisms as missional listening, and an appetite for the change that such renewal could bring. Such revitalisations would normally take place in the vacancy following the departure of an incumbent but, to avoid a longer vacancy, should ideally have been identified before their departure. Deaneries will perhaps be best placed to discern such opportunities, including initiating any conversations with such parishes. Those conversations should, as they progress, seek to address fears and may benefit from interaction with existing revitalisation contexts.

In assessing opportunities for church planting, a key distinction is between what are sometimes described as 'somewhere' and 'anywhere' communities (David Goodhart, *The Road to Somewhere*). 'Somewhere' communities tend to be more rooted in place, tradition, and locality, often found in rural areas and long-established neighbourhoods. 'Anywhere' communities are more mobile and shaped by work, commuting and digital connection, rather than geography. These communities are often concentrated in new housing developments, commuter towns, urban centres, and London overspill areas. They are more likely to engage through church planting.

Within the Diocese, localities that could present opportunities for church planting include Bedford (particularly in the light of the proposed Universal Studios development), Stevenage (major housing growth), Hemel Hempstead (size,

connectivity and patterns of population movement), Luton (diverse, youthful and fast-changing urban context), Watford (youthful demographic profile), Hatfield (residential development and commuter patterns), the A507 corridor (new housing and population movement) and London overspill areas including parts of Barnet (high housing density and population church). Many of them are already the focus of Diocesan Investment Programme funding or could be the subject of future bids.

Action: Bishop's Staff, in consultation with Rural Deans, Assistant Rural Deans and Lay Chairs, to review deaneries with a view to discerning opportunities for church revitalisation.

8. Consultation and Appointment Processes

In any church revitalisation, a key task is to establish a shared understanding and agreement by all parties (sending church, leader and team, revitalisation context) in relation to the revitalisation through thorough consultation. Two particularities of church revitalisation are the need to align the consultation process to secure support for the revitalisation with the formal appointment process for the new leader and the fact that the leader will invariably be being presented as a preferred candidate, which is not the Diocesan norm. There is a more technical piece of work that could be done by the Archdeacons and the Deputy Diocesan Secretary to map out the sequencing of the two processes. Discussion of the consultation process should extend to consideration of key areas to be covered in a Memorandum of Understanding between the Diocese, sending church and revitalisation context (including shared missional assessment, relationships and communication, identified support needs and key priorities).

Church planting will typically require the creation of a BMO from day one, unless the church plant is to operate under the authority of the local incumbent and PCC, whether just in its formative stage or indefinitely.

Action: Archdeacons and the Deputy Diocesan Secretary to map out the sequencing of consultation and appointment processes for church revitalisations.

9. Initial Training and Ongoing Support for Leaders and Teams

Another critical factor in the success of this strategy will be the extent to which leaders and teams are trained for and supported in the context of the demanding nature of church revitalisation and planting. Important sources of support may include bespoke training courses (whether the CCX Plant Course or others, covering topics such as adaptive change, conflict transformation and sustainability) and learning communities and mentoring/coaching for those involved.

In order to ensure safeguarding best practice in church revitalisation and planting contexts, appropriate support, including from the Diocesan Safeguarding team, will be essential.

Action: Mission and Ministry Team to consider potential training and support.

10. Financial Resourcing for Church Revitalisation and Planting

A potential deterrent to churches being willing to send teams as part of a church revitalisation or plant is that the reduction in attendance as a result of the sending of the team will take three years to be fully reflected in their Parish Share calculations, notwithstanding the fact that those being sent could represent a significant proportion of their planned giving. A possible solution would be to adjust the sending church's Usual Sunday Attendance in its Church Membership Figure calculation by a figure equivalent to the increase in the revitalisation context's Usual Sunday Attendance in each of the first two years, which would also give the sending church a stake in the revitalisation's success. Although differences in Share Factor will have an impact, any reduction in the sending church's Parish Share would be offset to some extent by the increase in the revitalisation context's.

Further, one of the challenges of this strategy is to develop church revitalisation and planting capacity across the Diocese by enabling potential sending churches to develop to the point where they could gather a team and to ensure that leaders and teams in revitalisation and planting contexts have the support in place to enable those initiatives to accelerate growth in the early phases of the revitalisation. One way to do that might be to support those churches with time-limited Mission Initiative Grants (MIGs), allocated through the Parish Grants Committee, to help them to grow, including the possibility of supporting posts that might transfer from the sending church to the revitalisation context.

Action: Diocesan Board of Finance to consider adjustment to Parish Share calculation for sending churches and, with the Bishop's Council, to consider the allocation of additional funding for Mission Initiative Grants for sending churches and revitalisation contexts.

11. Summary of Recommendations and Conclusion

Approval is sought for the following recommendations:

- Board of Mission and Ministry to review existing support for church revitalisation and planting initiatives and pioneer and estates ministry within parish boundaries.
- Archdeacons of Bedford and Hertford to include consideration of church revitalisation and planting within a Diocesan rural ministry strategy.
- Director of Ordinands and IME2 Officer, in consultation with Deputy Director of Mission and Ministry and the Board of Mission and Ministry, to consider further recommendations for vocations work, discernment processes and IME training.
- Bishop's Staff to consider how to invite parishes to consider whether they might have the capacity and calling to be involved in a cross-parish revitalisation or plant.
- Bishop's Staff to attend to opportunities for church revitalisation and planting in allocating stipendiary curacies.

- Bishop's Staff, in consultation with Rural Deans, Assistant Rural Deans and Lay Chairs, to review deaneries with a view to discerning opportunities for church revitalisation in their deaneries.
- Archdeacons and the Deputy Diocesan Secretary to map out the sequencing of consultation and appointment processes for church revitalisations.
- Mission and Ministry Team to consider potential training and support.
- Diocesan Board of Finance to consider adjustment to Parish Share calculation for sending churches and, with the Bishop's Council, to consider the allocation of additional funding for Mission Initiative Grants for sending churches and revitalisation contexts.

The hope is that, where church revitalisations and plants occur, a number of outcomes would flow including congregations that are growing (including younger and more diverse), churches that are connecting more widely with and meeting more effectively the needs of their local communities, deepening discipleship and increased vocations and mutually supportive relationships within their deaneries.

An overall strategic aspiration would be to see ten to fifteen church revitalisations or plants over the next five years (against a backdrop where there have been perhaps as many as eight over the last fifteen years). In order to see that, the goal would be:

- Over the next five years, for two stipendiary curates per year to be allocated to parishes from which there is the prospect of them being engaged in gathering a team for a church revitalisation or plant;
- Over the next two years, to identify churches with the capacity and calling between them to send ten teams to a church revitalisation or planting context including seven churches (representing a diversity of traditions) that have not done so in recent times.
- To conduct reviews of all twenty deaneries in the next two years to discern opportunities for church revitalisation.

The value of generosity will be key in underpinning any Diocesan church revitalisation and planting policy: the generosity of sending churches in releasing long-standing congregation members, the generosity of revitalisation and planting contexts in accepting disruption and change and Diocesan generosity in supporting and resourcing such initiatives. Beyond that, for the strategy to be one which encourages the entrepreneurial charism at the heart of church revitalisation and planting and the diverse missional expressions that it will generate will take a generous atmosphere in which failure is permitted and seen as an opportunity for further learning.

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