

Report on the New Congregations Programme

The Vision

The Diocese of Oxford wants to see a thriving mixed ecclesial ecology where traditional parish churches flourish alongside new churches and congregations, in rural benefices, urban areas, new housing areas, market towns and suburban communities. Church plants and revitalisations delivered through the SDF funded Resourcing Hubs, Diocesan-funded Resourcing Hubs and larger churches all have their part to play. The most significant aspect of the New Congregations Programme, however, will be growing a wide range of new worshipping communities of many shapes and sizes. Our hope is to see these develop as an integral part of the missional life of benefices across the Diocese. They will comprise existing outreach initiatives with potential to evolve a new worshipping community (particularly important in rural settings), the replication or adaptation of new models that have been fruitful elsewhere (Messy Church, Café Church, Missional/Monastic communities, etc.), and other new approaches that are bespoke to the context.

Key Development 1: Resourcing Hubs

Resourcing Hubs in the Diocese of Oxford make the following five commitments: to resource mission and ministry beyond their own parish or benefice, to be 'generous givers' through the deployment of finance and people to help others, to establish a culture of church planting / fresh expressions of church, to identify, equip and send people in mission, and to work in partnership with others, including the bishop, the deanery and other local groups.

They have a key facilitating role by being an inspirational model for the whole New Congregations Programme: by embracing the opportunities to give themselves away in order to bless and serve others, across churchmanship and parish boundaries; by recognising the areas of experience and learning that they can share more widely with other in the Deanery, Diocese and beyond; by growing new congregations of any shape or size to connect with different ethnic/people/age groups, planting up to 10 new congregations each over the next 5 years; and by bringing to birth new Christian communities and revitalising others who are longing to realize their mission potential.

The following Resourcing Hubs have been identified so far and are in the process of being trained and coached into their new roles:

- Greyfriars Reading (SDF funded - launched)
- St Andrew's, Hatters Lane, High Wycombe (SDF funded - launched)
- St Mary's Bletchley, MK (SDF funded - launched)
- St Frideswide's, Water Eaton, MK (SDF funded - pending)
- St Paul's, Slough (SDF funded - pending)
- St Mary's, Cogges, Witney (Diocesan funded - launched)
- North Aylesbury Team (Diocesan funded - launched)

Key Development 2: The Wider New Congregations Programme

‘Greenhouses are an approach that supports small teams that are starting new congregations’ – Dr Mike Moynagh. Each Greenhouse will comprise five important components: (a) **a shared focus**, as teams progress through ‘the loving-first missionary journey’ (Listening to the context, Loving and serving, Forming community, Sharing the gospel, Letting church take shape there, Repeating the process again) (b) **just-in-time learning**, using the Godsend app, so that teams prayerfully discover what they need to know, when they need it, to move to the next stage of the journey, (c) **regular gatherings**, in which teams will come together twice a year for planning, team and personal formation, and mutual support, (d) **a community presence on social media**, so that between gatherings teams can support each other by exchanging news and prayer requests, sharing ideas and materials that work and asking each other for advice, and (e) **coaching/mentoring** from the Deanery Greenhouse team to help teams when they get stuck.

A Greenhouse might contain between 8-12 local mission initiatives, each of which has the potential of growing into a new worshipping community. Our policy is that Area Deans are intentionally drawn into the conversations at the first opportunity and Associate Archdeacons are kept informed of what is happening in their Areas. These constitute an important link to the Bishops’ Area Teams.

Conversations are going on in 20 deaneries about forming Greenhouses: Amersham, Bicester and Islip, Bracknell, Bradfield, Buckingham, Burnham and Slough, Claydon, Cowley, Henley, Maidenhead and Windsor, Milton Keynes, Newbury, Newport, North Aylesbury, Oxford, Reading, Sonning, Wallingford, Witney and Wycombe. Ministry-focussed, diocesan-wide Greenhouse discussions are happening about Messy Church/Inter-generational church and Youth congregations. Realistic prospects for starting Greenhouses would be 14 after three years (2021 – four; 2022 – five; 2023 – five). An optimistic projection would be 20 by the end of 2023.

Key Development 3: Navigating the challenges and opportunities of Covid-19

We are very aware, talking to clergy on the ground, of the frustrations and challenges of the pandemic, particularly in clergy and lay exhaustion, diminished resources and programme timetables being delayed. It has affected all our neatly laid plans and the latest lockdown has slowed us down, but the mood may well change when people can see the pathway out of lockdown.

We are also aware of the wonderful opportunities that have arisen from this period of ‘doing church differently’, and we are very optimistic about the relaunching of church post-Covid-19. We are keen to observe how the ‘new normal’ will embrace what has been learnt during this time and, consequently, how churches will see the synergy with what the New Congregations programme has to offer them.

The ‘Building on opportunities after lockdown’ webinar (26th Nov 2020) is recorded and available to watch on the New Congregations webpage. It was an opportunity to share our experiences of taking church online during the pandemic and to discuss ‘what ideas have we got about doing church differently and how can we build on these opportunities in the future?’.

Key Development 4: Developing a Communications Plan

Bishop's Area Training Days have been planned for after Easter but they will now be re-planned in the light of the restrictions of lockdown (the NC Core team are in conversation with the Area Staff Teams to work out the best way to move forward). Most likely they will take the form of webinars in the Spring to launch the Programme with a physical gathering of people in the autumn.

The website page on New Congregations has been updated and re-worked, with stories from around the Diocese of new worshipping communities, including inspiring accounts of how some churches have responded to the challenges and opportunities of lockdown and connected with people not previously linked to church and have been growing new on-line worshipping communities. Our new Project Manager is taking charge of this and making sure it is updated, relevant and emergent.

All incumbents have been invited to complete a short questionnaire to ascertain where new congregations are forming and what stage they are at. It also invites them to tell us whether they have mission initiatives that could grow into new worshipping communities. This was accompanied by a document that defines what potential and actual new congregations are, using the four widely accepted criteria (missional, contextual, formational, and ecclesial).

Key Development 5: Forming a Core Team, a Governance Structure, a Measurement Framework and a Stakeholder Involvement

Our Core Team now consists of a Senior Responsible Officer and Chair of the New Congregations and Resourcing Hub Boards (Archdeacon Jonathan Chaffey), a Project Manager, Hannah Mann, bringing monitoring, evaluation and reporting rigor with creativity for the Communications plan, a New Congregations Enabler, Rev Sarah Flashman, who will work with deaneries and incumbents in development of Greenhouses across the Diocese, a New Administrator (0.8FTE), Denise Dempsey, holding the administrative centre of the programme and providing PA support to the Core Team, and our Diocesan Consultant, Rev Dr Mike Moynagh, offering expertise (based on 20 Year of working and writing in the field of Fresh Expressions) and 'emergent wisdom'.

Oversight and Governance of the whole programme are given by the Resourcing Hub Board and the New Congregations Board, both chaired by Archdeacon Jonathan and both with clearly defined Terms of Reference, including monitoring, evaluation and financial accountability (of both the SDF and Diocesan-funded investments).

It really matters to us that we can measure progress in terms of the growth of new congregations across the diocese, so our project manager is in the process of working out the best way of doing this. She is drawing on statistics from the annual Mission Stats returns, the questionnaire to incumbents, the Development Fund applications, and the number of new initiatives in the Greenhouses. We have clarified definitions of what constitutes a new worshipping community, and what has the potential of becoming one.

Our Associate Archdeacons have all kindly agreed to be on the New Congregations Board and to be the point of contact for Area Staff Teams. The Core Team are steadily meeting with Area Deans and visiting Area Staff meetings to ask how we can support their local, contextual mission initiatives.

Key Programme Risks

Our most pressing concern is the impact of Covid-19 and the effect it has had on missional energy: will the churches have vision and enthusiasm for connecting with people right outside the normal scope of Sunday worship? Will they be pre-occupied with re-building their regular congregations or growing new ones?

Related to this is the possibility of insufficient Diocesan buy-in: will our rural parishes feel that this programme will help their ministry and mission? Will our communication strategy be effective and comprehensive to ensure all parishes understand the opportunities and how the NC programme can help them? Will it be perceived as top-down and coming from the centre, or local and emergent? Will senior diocesan staff be able to give it an important place amongst all the other things that demand their attention?

Our concern is also that the Programme is not underpinned by prayerful reflection: in Acts 13.1-3, the church leaders in Antioch were gathered for prayer, worship and fasting. In that setting, the Holy Spirit said: 'Set aside for me Paul and Barnabas for the work to which I have called them'. This was the start of Paul's first missionary journey when he started to plant churches all over the ancient Near East. Will our church planting initiatives be birthed in prayerful listening, allowing God's Spirit to direct the churches' mission?

We so value your involvement, support and prayer – thank you!

Rev Will Donaldson,
Head of New Congregations
19 Feb 2021