

Children, Young People and Schools | June Diocesan Synod 2023

Background

Growing active disciples of every age group remains at the core of our Common Vision. [Disciples Together](#) was written prior to the pandemic and launched in June 2020 following a long process of listening to young people, their families, their church leaders, and the many parish volunteers working with them. We heard the challenges and opportunities that affect growth in ministry with children and young people and we remain confident in our strategy and the five cultural shifts which act as both levers and indicators of change. It is important to acknowledge the impact of COVID and its effects upon ministry with children and young people. This report aims to highlight the progress with Disciples Together and the ways we have navigated the twists and turns of a post-covid world as well as the signs of recovery and hope we are starting to see.

We identified five shifts in culture needed:

1	Viewing children and young people as active participants and pilgrims A shift from viewing children and young people as a problem/deficit/challenge to children and young people as active participants and pilgrims.
2	Engaging with children, young people and families intergenerationally A shift from running separate programmes to living intergenerationally.
3	Being intentional disciple makers A shift from 'vague influencers' to intentional disciple makers.
4	Enabling those engaging with children and young people to be 'called', 'formed' and 'equipped' ministers A shift from pressed volunteers and workers to called and formed ministers.
5	Being the change, we want to see A shift from an 'adults-only' Church to an 'all-age community of grace'.

Growth

The [Church Growth Report](#) 2022 identified the key principles that parishes who are growing their ministry with young people follow. This report is important because it demonstrates that by taking some simple steps **any church can grow, rural and urban, small or large**. Growth results from:

Committed leadership: All those in leadership (Parish and Diocese) offering support, empowerment, and broader vision setting.
Intentional choices: Growth results from deliberate decisions and implementing successful initiatives.
Recruitment: Churches who prioritise growing the children's and youth ministry, seeking like-minded individuals, whether paid staff or volunteers, will grow.
Engagement from the wider church is essential
Relational investment in the whole family is a common theme

Parish Support

Here are some [indicators](#) of parish engagement. We offer tailored consultancy for every parish to develop a recovery plan through our Discipleship Enablers (based in each Archdeaconry) and Chaplaincy Adviser (Revd Charlie Kerr). Informed by Disciples Together and the Growth report we have concentrated our efforts on forging strong partnerships with key stakeholders, including Area Deans, Church Wardens, Clergy, School Chaplains and Youth, Children and Family Ministers with the intention for **every church to have identified some next steps for growth**. Further support is offered through mentoring volunteers and youth/children's teams, training and development, managing vacancies, identifying resources and funding opportunities.

Strategic focus - Growing our pipeline of people

The main priority for Focus Area discussions over the past year has been to address the challenges of 'calling, forming, equipping and supporting those who minister with children and young people'. discussions over the last year. We continue to experience significant issues with the recruitment of volunteers and employed ministers. The Church of England's chronic underinvestment in youth & children's ministry has significantly reduced the flow of quality candidates for posts (employed workers dropped from 105 in 2019 to 77 currently).

We are addressing the training and development of volunteers and employed ministers by increasing the offer of accessible training. This includes the Youthscape [Essentials](#) course, aimed at Youth Ministers and people volunteering in youth ministry, with little formal previous training, and a corresponding 'Essentials' course for Children and Families workers, both will be offered through the new Learning hub. We are currently piloting a development to the Authorised Lay Preachers Course, to enable those who mainly preach in Intergenerational or 'All-Age' settings to receive focussed training for this ministry. We expect to be offering this pathway permanently from Autumn 2023.

Despite the challenges in recruitment and retention, the number of employed individuals within the Diocese has not declined as significantly as in other Dioceses. This can be attributed to a combination of factors, including the closer relationships and support offered by the Discipleship Enablers. The Diocese has modelled its commitment to supporting its youth and children's ministers through including them as recipients of the Hardship Fund for the cost of living, there was huge gratitude and thanks from the Wycombe network of Children/ Young People/Families Ministers of this support. The Development Fund has also made a significant impact by providing financial resources for 26 Children/Family/Youth and Chaplaincy posts, and sustaining crucial positions, as seen in the case of St. Peter's, Loudwater, where the availability of funding has allowed the Parish to retain their children's worker for an additional two years. Such support demonstrates the Diocese's dedication to investing in ministers and ensuring the longevity of this important work.

Signs of recovery and opportunity

Whilst we know that engagement with Sunday morning worship has changed in priority for many families since the pandemic, we also know that church relationships with schools are thriving, toddler groups are very nearly at pre-pandemic levels (even with changes in volunteering) [191 in 2018/ 186 in total 2023], as are the number of churches offering Holiday Clubs [56 on our 2019 Prayer List/ 65 in 2022]. These are positive signs of recovery.

Discipleship Enablers hosted a **Foundations training** event which invited those ministering in any capacity with pre-school children to consider 'foundations for healthy life' and 'foundations for faith'. Over thirty leaders gathered in March to hear Dr. Louise Dalton sharing [The Oxford Brain Story](#) to help us understand how brains develop and what we can do in toddler groups to nurture and facilitate healthy brain development. We welcomed Anna Hawken from [Parenting for Faith](#) to help us understand the foundations for a life of faith and again, how toddler groups can support parents in this regard.

After a three-year hiatus ['Yellow braces'](#) Youth weekend was re-launched last year bringing 31 young people together to explore and grow in faith. This annual event has a significant impact by modelling discipleship with young people and developing young leaders.

Come and See

It has been a particular delight in the last two years to have broadened the scope of ['Come and See'](#) to include children and young people in that journey of invitation and faith exploration. The Come and See suite of resources include materials for use in schools, youth and children's groups, intergenerational and all-age services, families at home and adult groups. The 6 new films by Chaplains

and Youth Ministers have been very well received, downloaded and used widely in faith formation and provides rich resources for confirmation courses.

Space Makers

We have developed strong collaborative working between Mission and Ministry and Education through initiatives such as Space Makers training for churches and schools, work on Chaplaincy and Parish appointments as well as the development of Pilgrimage.

Space Makers has achieved remarkable success, having trained more than 248 individuals in the Contemplative Toolkit from launch. Participants include clergy, teachers, church volunteers and Heads from 143 schools within the Diocese. Impressively, just over half of the church-schools have participated in the training, with more to come before the end of the academic year.

It also noteworthy that Space Makers INSET training has really taken off this year too, with 12 schools receiving two twilight sessions introducing staff to the practices and giving them opportunities for experiencing them and discussing their impact and implementation.

The first 'Retreat' for Space Makers School Staff was well-received, with 10 participants providing very positive feedback. Among them were two Heads who found the experience to be life-affirming and enriching.

Space Makers is also being adopted by the Cathedral as an important part of their offer to schools on educational visits, so that pupils have the opportunity for a spiritual practice/experience as well as historical and cultural input. Space Makers, therefore, is increasingly becoming a *modus operandi* for delivering 'contemplative' experiences and opportunities across different areas of Diocesan life.

The forthcoming publication of [Spacemakers for Families](#) serves as another accomplishment, building on the foundation of Space Makers and Come and See family resources. This experiential learning has deeply influenced participants, many of whom have incorporated the practices into their own ministries.

Space makers for schools and families is a clear demonstration of 'Shift 1'. In that the approach recognises the value of giving young people and children agency in their faith formation and personal growth and creates opportunities for them to explore their spirituality and engage in meaningful experiences. This reflects a commitment to a more holistic approach to faith formation that values the whole person.

Schools & Chaplaincy

Chaplaincy continues to grow at an encouraging and steady rate. Firstly, with Multi Academy Trusts (MATs)- we have seen five MATs engaging deeply with Chaplaincy – EPA (Eynsham Partnership Academy Trust), SEBMAT (Slough and East Berkshire Trust), ODST (Oxford Diocesan Schools Trust), The Vale Academy Trust and Faringdon Learning Trust. This is an efficient and productive method for introducing Chaplaincy, as once the MAT buys in, then a number of Chaplaincies emerge all at once, and it allows Chaplaincy as a model to cross-fertilise into non-church schools in the MAT. An example of this is EPA has decided to bid for Chaplaincy across its 5 Church Schools and 1 of its Community Schools, but expansion across the whole MAT might well be a possibility in time.

Secondly, FE College Chaplaincy continues to develop and evolve with weekly Chaplaincy provision emerging at Bracknell College, City of Oxford and Blackbird Leys Colleges, renewed Chaplaincy at Reading College and prospective Chaplaincy at Banbury College. The absence of any paid chaplaincy in this sector does render it vulnerable to the vagaries of volunteer-only resource, but the fact that

City of Oxford College had a Christmas Service in a Church for the first time in its history this year is a cause for celebration.

Thirdly, it has been encouraging to witness the power of School Partnerships across the State/Private School divide. It is good to observe how Chaplaincy has emerged at Theale Green through partnership with the Independent School Bradfield College and Common Vision Development Funding, and this success has led to continued and ongoing dialogue with Wellington College, and very fruitful discussions with Radley College, Abingdon School and St Helen and St Katharine's Schools in the Abingdon OX14 partnership.

Intergeneration Approaches

One of the areas of ministry highlighted in Disciples Together was that of Intergenerational Ministry. There are many good reasons [[Intergenerational Church: what it is and why it matters](#)] why being connected across generations is beneficial. During the last three years intergenerational thinking has come to the foreground, sometimes motivated by need (loss of volunteers plus irregular attendance of families with children) and sometimes with the starting point of a stronger desire and vision to grow into an interconnected, interacting and interdependent intergenerational community of active disciples. Over 2021-22 we ran a series of online learning opportunities, particularly discussing the culture, environment, values and practices that are steps on the journey for a church to become intergenerational.

St Peter's Church in Burnham and Slough has transitioned its second Sunday service in the month from an "adults only" church to an "all age community of grace" by introducing a 'Walking on Water' (WOW) service. This change was made in response to a lack of volunteers for children's provisions on Sundays. By centring on children, it fosters intergenerational unity and shared faith.

In 2022 we launched an 'Intergen Greenhouse' with 9 church teams joining together as a learning community. We have particularly focussed on the values of intergenerational ministry, bringing and embedding change.

Peachcroft team embraced the Intergenerational Greenhouse, not only in response to the employed minister's passion but also to address the pragmatic need arising from changes in congregation demographics. This commitment to experimentation and growth showcases the team's dedication to continually adapting and fostering a more inclusive and intergenerational church environment.

The way forward

In the light of the Church's Vision for the 2020s and strategic priorities – **a church which is younger and more diverse, a church where mixed ecology is the norm and a church of missionary disciples**, in January 2023 Area Deans and Lay Chairs – and then Bishop's Council - agreed they would like us to put together a bid for national Diocesan Investment Programme funding. We are presently in the consultation phase of the bid. If you would like to contribute your views, we would love [to hear](#) from you. This offers us the exciting prospect of significant investment and funding to make a step change in growing active young disciples. We believe the Diocese should celebrate the adaptability and resilience of churches, schools, and households during the pandemic. While facing challenges such as loss of connection with children and young people and changes in volunteering, there has been a remarkable adaptation, experimentation and creativity shown from parish, schools and families.

There will be time for group discussion:

- Where do you see the greatest opportunity to significantly grow young disciples?
- What have we missed that you would like us to discuss?
- What are you seeing that is working successfully?

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