

## Diocesan Synod Paper – 9 March 2024

### Sharing God's love with children and young people: transforming our engagement and recommitting to our Diocesan strategy

#### 1) Update since June 2023

The June 2023 Synod reviewed progress on the implementation and engagement with Disciples Together, our Diocesan vision and strategy with children and young people (CYP), since its launch in June 2020. ([ODS 23.07 CYPs Review](#)). In response to the continuing concerns and challenges in this area of mission of ministry, the report concluded with the Bishop's Council decision to seek national funding which provided 'an exciting prospect of significant investment and funding to make a step change in growing active young disciples.'

A careful process of listening, discernment and strategic planning continues, with the Director of Mission & Ministry and the Discipleship Enabler team working closely with the Archdeacons through Area Deans, Lay Chairs, Synods and local working groups. There has been close engagement with Bishop's Staff including consultation with +Steven and the Diocesan Secretary to achieve maximum impact and ensure a focus on the wider Diocesan strategic requirements.

This paper should be read alongside the [slide deck](#) from + Steven which details further the context and strategic approach required. This vital issue returns to Synod now in recognition of the significant challenge we face, but more importantly the huge potential and opportunities before us which require a renewed commitment and specific focus in all our parishes and deaneries across the Diocese.

#### 2) Our Diocesan context

We will all be aware that engagement with children and young people has been decreasing year-on-year. This has been accelerated by the covid pandemic when we look across all criteria of measures in the annual Statistics for Mission.

Child (under 16) attendance at church in Oxford Diocese					
	% change from previous year				
	2016	2017	2018	2019	2022
Usual Sunday, Child	-2.7%	-6.6%	-7.5%	-5.4%	-20.75%
Usual Sunday, All Age	-1.0%	-1.9%	-3.3%	-2.54%	-17%
Weekly Ave, Adult	-2.7%	-2.4%	-2.1%	-2.6%	-19%
Weekly Ave, Child	-7.1%	-5.3%	-6.6%	-1.6%	-26.2%
Sunday Ave, Adult	-4.2%	-2.3%	-2.7%	-2.96%	-18.3%
Sunday Ave, Child	-6.7%	-7.1%	-8.5%	-1.85%	-24.5%

Covid has had a disproportionate impact on fresh expressions of church. The most likely fresh expression of church to have ceased due to covid was a child-friendly expression such as Messy Church on weekdays. Research across 5 Dioceses including Oxford showed that attendance in 2022 at a fresh expression was comparatively weak, reaching 67% of 2019's level compared with 79% for traditional church. There were 78% of 2019's adults but only 50% of the children.

In June 2023, our Articles of Enquiry revealed that 38% of churches currently have no provision for CYP on a Sunday, 60% are not offering a toddler group for parents and carers, and only 8% of churches are offering any midweek provision for children or young people. Of more concern is the

fragile state of our ministry where children are present. Based on the 2022 Statistics for Mission and the Average Weekly Attendance (AWA), 42% of churches have fewer than 5 aged under 16, 10.7% are working with 5-10, 8.7% between 10-20 and only 6.6% have a ministry with over 20 CYP. What has also emerged is that our ministry with young people and the transition into young adulthood present particular challenges. The one positive statistic is the increase in the number of children attending school services.

These statistics are within the wider context of a mental health 'epidemic' among children and young people, lack of provision in children and young people's services caused through local authority cuts and societal anxiety and pressure through the cost of living crisis and environmental emergency. These are very demanding times in which to be growing up.

### **3) Our response: urgency, opportunities and committing to growing engagement**

Given the context, how is God calling us as a Church to respond? Where is God already at work and calling us to follow? What are the decisions we need to take in order to transform our engagement with CYP?

#### **3.1 Deeper engagement across the whole Diocese**

What has emerged clearly from all the consultations is the urgency of the situation and the need for us to place a particular focus on ministry with CYP. Disciples Together, our Diocesan vision and strategy for CYP, remains an outstanding report, applauded beyond our Diocese for its analysis, depth and clarity of focus reflected in the 5 shifts. As the church has continued to recover from covid and despite committed and careful work by the Discipleship Enabler team, we have not seen the wider engagement or traction in parishes or deaneries across the Diocese we would have hoped.

Disciples Together points the way forward, but we need a step change in our commitment and engagement. Our primary need is for a series of small but significant shifts in local parishes and benefices to enable fresh vision along with local resourcing of CYP work. This is the whole basis of our Disciples Together strategy which encourages us to see that effective CYP work is within reach of every parish or benefice. To grow momentum and enable these shifts, we need to build a shared sense that something new must be done and a clear ownership of what that something is and how it can help.

Are we as a Diocese willing to commit to and align ourselves around this major priority to transform our engagement and ministry with children and young people (within the specific context and culture of Oxford Diocese and that this may not be our only priority area)?

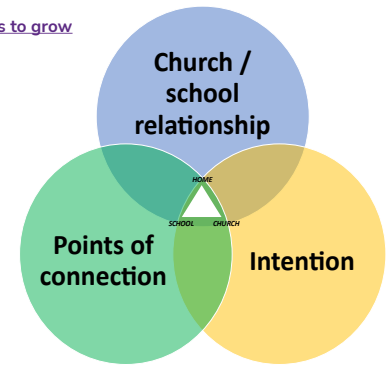
Addressing this question acknowledges the depth of the strategic and cultural shift required and therefore the need to for us to be ambitious, but realistic about resourcing.

### 3.2 opportunities and potential for growth

There are already many examples all over our Diocese of excellent ministry taking place with CYP which we can learn from and build on. Combined with the considerable experience of the Discipleship Enabler Team we have identified 3 key 'ingredients' and 3 areas of foci which we believe can lead to growth.

These are rooted in the 'church/home/school' triangle which we know can strengthen spiritual nurture, faith formation and discipleship pathways through a range of approaches.

Key ingredients to grow our ministry



**Significantly increasing our engagement with children, young people and families including intergenerationally.** This will require multiple approaches from increasing attendance at existing groups increasing frequency of provision offered to starting new events, groups and services which enable contact, nurture, commitment, and growth.

Our local schools are a primary place for building connection and engagement, with many churches already having good relationships. Within our church school community, there is considerable opportunity to build on our Space Makers contemplative toolkit. Over 160 of our church schools and scores of parishes have now received training. Accessible to children and young people of all ages and worldviews, Space Makers brings five life-giving contemplative practices into the life of our schools and churches which embrace some of the ancient wisdom of this Christian tradition and assist children in navigating the world around them.

**Being intentional disciple makers** is focussed on paying close attention to points of transition / disconnection and increase 'staying on' rates at points of transitions, eg parent return to work, children starting school, the move from primary to secondary school (Yrs 5,6,7,8).

We will need to pay particular attention to young people and the transition into young adulthood which present specific challenges. We will need approaches to intentional discipleship which foster a maturing faith and vocation within the life of the church. This will require new and innovative ways of ministering with this age group which are likely to require a partnership approach across parishes or deaneries.

**Enabling those engaging with children and young people to be called, formed, equipped and supported ministers** – this will include developing a Diocesan wide programme providing different levels of training and equipping developed to meet local needs built on best practice and models.

This missional design has been warmly supported by our national vision and strategy consultants, recognising there is more detailed work to be undertaken.

The Team have been very actively engaged in half our deaneries and have been hugely encouraged by the energy and engagement in these discussions with evidence of a clear desire to make a significant shift in their ministry with CYP. This has included discussions around the partnership / cluster approach and rather than being resisted we have discovered that parishes have already been looking independently at this approach or that clusters have naturally emerged through conversations.

### 3.3 Commitment to transforming our engagement

The Youth & Children's Growth Research (2022) found 5 key factors which they argue enables growth in CYP ministry. These include 'committed leadership that sees youth and children's ministry

as an essential priority is fundamental for growth' and 'growth is the result of intentional choices' (and a preparedness to take difficult decisions). This affirms Shift 5 of Disciples Together, 'Being the change you want to see', which calls us at diocesan level to lead and model what we are asking churches to implement at deanery and parish level.

We know a fundamental challenge is identifying those who will take forward this ministry. We are already seeing the impact that Diocesan support through our Development Fund can make to our CYP ministry. As a sign of our Diocesan commitment to this priority, at their February meeting I, the Bishop's Council committed to **50% of the Development Fund allocation being committed to supporting local churches in their ministry with children, young people, families and schools for 2024 and 2025.**

To enable a significant increase in our engagement with CYP in our deaneries, parishes and benefices, Bishops Council along with Area Deans and Lay Chairs have also supported the decision **that every deanery is tasked with discerning and developing a plan which looks to significantly increase their engagement and ministry with CYP.** Working closely with Area Teams, this process will be enabled and supported by the team of Discipleship Enablers and will include the provision of statistical data, mapping templates and resources for planning. We already have some experience in the Diocese of the difference a deanery plan can make to this ministry.

From our work with deaneries already, we believe the energy and desire to respond is there and have seen how much progress can be made in a short period of time where that is the case. Recognising the urgency of the need and task, **the proposed timescale is for Deanery Plans to be formed by the end of September 2024.**

#### **4) The National Bid Process - progress to date**

The team have been working closely with 11 deaneries spread across all 4 archdeaconries and discussions explored the cluster approach. We know that the primary focus for national funding is on larger areas of population with lower church attendance and/or areas of deprivation as most likely to receive funding. We can and should make the case for smaller locations / deaneries, but this will only be successful if the majority of the bid focusses on these larger areas.

Within the parameters of the Diocesan strategy and national criteria, the bid will include an amount for deaneries not yet identified who could subsequently seek funding in response to local plans. **We are now looking to submit our application for funding to the October Strategic Mission and Ministry Investment Board.**

We know that only a small number of places and projects will be able to benefit from the geographically-based funding we receive. Therefore, our Diocesan commitment will be to ensure that the learning and opportunities the funding brings will be available to every parish. Current thinking includes the **creation of a Diocesan 'Resource Bank'**. We anticipate that local projects will be highly creative in their use and development of resources and so will create an easy way for these resources to be made available online for all our churches. Secondly, there will be a **focus on learning and growing best practice.** All churches across the Diocese will be invited to join the funded clusters / projects in an Area focussed learning community. As learning emerges this will also be shared more widely.

**Andrew Anderson-Gear**

Director of Mission & Ministry, March 2024

**Questions for Small Groups:**

- 1) What is your response to what you heard from the young people?
- 2) What is the one small action you believe would make a difference in your deanery, parish or benefice?