

New Congregations Q&A

The following questions arose from the February 2023 Diocesan Synod workshop about the work of the New Congregations Team

Question: Is there funding available for us to start a new congregation?

Answer: Yes, parishes can apply to the Diocesan Development Fund for local projects that are missionally creative, reflect where God is at work in the community, and encourage wider learning across the diocese.

Question: What experience can the team share on new congregations in intercultural and multi-faith urban parishes and deaneries?

Answer: St Paul's in Slough is our UKME Resourcing Hub and the reason they were granted funding to do that work was in order for them to become a beacon of good practice in terms of growing church within inter-cultural areas.

The Archdeacon of Oxford oversees our multifaith missional work. There are many social initiatives such as Community Organising, environment concerns, sewing projects for refugees, community art projects, where people of all faiths can share and work together as well as exploring each other's beliefs in the process.

Question: Post COVID there's a real need to support children's education: could an outreach project be helped?

Answer: Yes we find that new mission initiatives that begin with loving your neighbour and listening to the needs of the local community are the most successful. Generally, you can start to build relationships and see how things go from there.

Question: How do we define New Congregation? Is it linked with worship or is it about drawing people together in community?

Answer: There is a clear definition. We have a lot of potential new worshipping communities or new congregations that are moving towards being actual new worshipping communities. In other words there is a point at which an outreach activity intentionally reaches a place of worshipping for maybe half an hour with all the hallmarks of worshipping that you would expect. We know that there are certain characteristics about the hallmarks of worshipping and that we can describe quite easily.

Question: Does a new congregation count if it takes place at work?

Answer: Yes absolutely - if it's meeting all of those characteristics of worship.

Question: How do we avoid being "church centric"- getting people into buildings - when it comes to sharing the good news?

Answer: That's a key factor in exploring new worshipping communities because many of them are taking place outside of the church building and / or on a day other than Sunday. It

doesn't have to be, and particularly in rural areas, the church building is often very important. But what is important is being church centric in a different way. You are taking church to the people, you are taking Jesus Christ and the good news to the people, meeting them where they are.

The Early church did extraordinarily well in the first few centuries without formal church buildings. Why? Because they emphasised that (a) the church is about people (Living stones), not bricks and mortar, (b) they had a passion for mission – to take the gospel to people who hadn't heard it, and (c) they were simply obeying the Great Commission in Matt.28.18-20. Buildings came later as resource for mission, not simply as places of worship.

Question: You say new congregations are contextualised; how can a church discern what is needed?

Answer: Listening carefully to God and the local community is the key. There are two books which the Diocese recommends (please contact a member of the team to buy a copy). The first is *21st Century Christian* (Michael Moynagh & Michael Adam Beck, A Fresh Expressions Book, 2020), and the second is a *Godsend: A Handbook for New Christian Communities*, (Michael Moynagh, 2nd Edition, Fresh Expressions 2023). Some people use something called needs-based evangelism, which comes from a Methodist writer in America who said, look at the needs within your community and if you base your groups around that then people will turn up. I would start by asking, 'What are the needs within your community?' and address those needs to engage with people. The work we do in in the Learning Communities (Greenhouses) is very much based on being context based and responding to people's needs.

Question: Is our aim to build the church or the Kingdom of God - would ecumenical partnerships be more effective reaching some new groups?

Answer: The Diocese is committed to working ecumenically, which is particularly important when planting churches into areas of New Housing: in Bicester and Witney, for example, this has been done with great care, sensitivity and respect. Churches across the denominations have worked together closely and supportively, avoiding any sense of competition.

There is also an ecumenical youth work project in Didcot.

Question: Why would a new congregation grow when an existing congregation in the area is in decline?

Answer: Often with a new congregation you are engaging with a completely different community which is not related to the existing congregation. It can be enormously fruitful to do that. Think of the nets being let down on the other side of the boat. If the new congregation begins with the local need, the people we reach are often on the fringes of or outside the boundaries of church.

The older, existing congregation might have lost a sense of mission (going to where people are) and instead be still relying on a Christendom model of attractional growth (hoping people will come to them). Mission-Shaped Church (2004) urged the C of E to accept that we are in a critical missional situation with most people in the UK never likely to darken the

doors of a church for Sunday worship. Accepting this is vital to make that critical missional change.

Question: what guidance is there to parishes on positive elements in new congregations that should be applied to existing congregations?

The key people here are the Parish Development Advisers (PDAs) who members of the New Congregations Team. They can take those principles (missional learning) and apply them into regular parish ministry. The New Congregations programme does not undermine or devalue parish ministry, the NC programme could enhance and enrich traditional patterns of ministry. It's a simple case of 'Enlarging the size of your tent' (Isaiah 54)

Question: Is there any correlation of churchmanship in successful development of new congregations?

Answer: No, the research shows that churches of all traditions are able to engage with it; the key pieces of research are from anecdotal evidence published some years ago: it is the practices of the church rather than the tradition within Anglicanism that makes a difference. A desire to share the good news with others and want to see new people brought to a living faith in Christ is what matters.

Question: Often our narrative in this area prioritises our success and implicitly raises the stakes - how do we ensure that trying - even if we seem to fail - is a live part of our culture?

Answer: That's a really important question because actually, we will only learn as we experiment and things don't work everywhere. So one of our tests collaboratively, as we go forward, is to ensure we are talking about the stories and things that don't work as well as the things that do, to encourage each other and to create a learning culture.

Question: Do you intend that new congregations will always remain separate from the parish church, even as they mature overtime?

Answer: This is best understood as an extension of the ministry of the parish, **rather than** an activity that is separate, running alongside traditional church. So, in the same way that most parishes will have Sunday morning and evening services (and a midweek service perhaps), so the new congregation should be considered as part of the normal weekly pattern of services. It should be advertised in the church bulletin, the Parish magazine and on the church website. It must come under the auspices of the Incumbent and PCC (very important for safeguarding and monitoring), and the leaders of the NWC should be invited to report regularly to the PCC/AGM, to join in the parish/church festivals (like a Harvest Supper or a church anniversary), and to attend the Church weekend away.

The imagery of expanding your tent, is not about being in the parish church or out of the parish church, it includes all church within the parish including new and different expressions of church. Many of us will have multiple congregations even within our own churches at different times and those people may or may not meet each other. We need to think about it as an extension of meeting church where people are, so they are all part of that one church within the parish even if they are being served in different parts of it.

Question: What is the difference between BMOs / church plants and other new congregations?

Answer: A church plant is a specific way of growing a new congregation where a group of people from a church go and plant a church somewhere else, with relevant permissions and a Bishop's Mission Order (BMO) is often created when that church is planted, and they need some form of structural authority that is recognised within the parish in which they are operating.

Most other new congregations or fresh expressions of church will operate within existing church or parish structures.

Question: Given the intention to revive 'old' congregations via other initiatives (eg environmental) bringing communities into our churches - what is the right priority to give to 'new congregations'?

Answer: The call before us all is to ask who is not here and how do we reach them? They are not mutually exclusive because what we know is that many people are passionate about the environment and there are lots of opportunities for us to engage with people who are not in our churches, through environmental initiatives, so it is not an either / or but both / and. There may be a capacity issue as well, if you are passionate, engaged and growing things through the environmental initiatives, and you say that you cannot engage in developing new congregations, then of course, that is your discernment and you have to work with the capacity that you have.

We need traditional church to run (environmental) initiatives that reach people, and we need to allow NWCs to reach people right outside our normal congregations. To set them in opposition is pointless. Release our church people to where they feel called to serve!

Question: Serving the community is a valid and important mission imperative, but how do we know we are growing new congregations, rather than stopping simply at answering a social need?

Answer: Growing a new worshipping community from a missional/social activity is intentional. We set out with that intention of developing worship. Other missional / outreach activities are valid in and of themselves because they're loving and they're building relationship, but if you are going to develop that into a worshipping community, there are more intentional steps to take.

Question: Can you share an example from a rural village community?

Answer: On our case studies page there are examples of new congregations in different contexts.

In one rural benefice in our Diocese, with five or six parish churches, the largest monthly congregation was a Café Church, with the event starting with breakfast, newspapers, and chat. A time of worship followed that was low-key, seeker-friendly, and all-age!

Question: Before we are looking for a new congregation should we care for and look after our current groups?

Answer: Yes and No! In the team we have had experience of trying to grow new communities which have made no difference, and others where it has worked. If you're waiting for your church to be absolutely perfect, you're missing a trick because it will regenerate what you are doing at the centre by working there. You absolutely need some energy, but you really need to have the courage and conviction to make sure you go forward and just give it a go!

Both / and ! Of course we should care for our own flock – that's our pastoral responsibility. But an Anglican minister also has the Cure of souls for the whole parish, which means that he/she needs to be the mission-leader as well as the pastor. To get sucked in to one of these, and to neglect the other, is not what a priest signed up for at his/her ordination!

Question: My experience has led me to conclude that the role and gift of the evangelist is massively undervalued / under-appreciated in church planting, how can we encourage this vocation?

Answer: We hugely under-appreciate the gift of evangelism in the church; we need to lift it up much more and we are beginning our complete re-formation of our process of formation for discipleship and lay ministries in the Autumn. We will have more details in a few weeks' time about that. Basically the opening module every year of our 'open access' year for those preparing for lay ministries will be mission and evangelism including the formation of new congregations. So, I'd really encourage you to think and pray about who from your deanery and benefice can be encouraged to come to learn about evangelism and be formed in different forms of ministry at the beginning of September.

Our pioneers in NWCs (lay and ordained) are likely to be our evangelists, so the team aims to spot them, release them, support them and pray for them!

Question: How would the team suggest starting a new congregation in an area of mixed industrial units with new housing, where occupants are out at work each day?

There is no simple answer here! So here are some suggestions to get started and see what God might be doing... There are really two separate communities here. One is the workforce that commute in for the industrial units; the other are the residents who commute out, but live here. Seeing them as two separate groups means that you can start by getting to know both groups and listening to their interests, concerns and needs. As the Holy Spirit gives church members insights and promptings, opportunities to serve the two communities will emerge. Start small, take it slowly, build relationships, pray for openings, look out for people of peace and God will do the rest!