

Diocese of Oxford, Diocesan Synod, Cowley, Saturday 11<sup>th</sup> March 2023

## Growing New Congregations wherever we can across the Diocese

### Why New Congregations?

The National Census results published in November 2022 confirmed what we have all been aware of that less than half the UK population identify as Christian for the first time in 1,500 years. Clearly, we are becoming more diverse as a society and those of *'no religion'* are the fastest growing group. The Census has served as a timely reminder of the missional challenges we face during this next decade and the imperative of the call *'to proclaim afresh the gospel to every generation'*

2023 also sees the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the publication of the seminal report *'Mission Shaped Church'* and much of the report still speaks powerfully into our church context today. This includes its call to take seriously

*'the discipline of creating new communities of Christian faith as part of the mission of God to express God's kingdom in every geographic and cultural context'.*

Following the decision of the Diocesan Synod in 2018 to commit to the new congregations programme, the bid for national Strategic Development Funding was made just as we were entering the covid pandemic. It highlighted both the present challenges and future opportunities we faced as a Church;

*'We hold to the conviction that flourishing local churches will be even more vital to the communities we serve in the coming years as centres of community and care for the vulnerable and as places of prayer and worship. It is already clear that the ways of being Church will continue to evolve in many different ways which match, we believe, the scale and the vision outlined in this bid.'*

Our churches are still recovering from covid which has left many exhausted and depleted, but now showing signs of renewed energy and returning confidence. This is supported by the recent analysis of church attendance across the Diocese in October 2022. As Bishop Steven highlighted this has revealed two important indicators; that,

*'we are 80% there in terms of this long regathering...That's an amazing achievement after the disruption of COVID and all of the ongoing demands...Both of these snapshots lead us back to our central calling to witness to the love of God in word and in action: to be a more Christ-like Church for the sake of God's world'.*

### Where we are currently?

The new congregations programme received £2m from the national Strategic Development Fund (SDF) to enable five Resourcing Hub Churches in our large urban and often more deprived areas of our Diocese to grow and develop new congregations and church plants. These communities have been historically under-resourced with a percentage of congregation to population of less than 1%. The SDF Resource Church Hubs are located in Reading, High Wycombe, Slough and two in Milton Keynes.

Alongside this, and by way of matched funding to secure the SDF grant, the Diocese allocated a further £2.5m to support the growth and development of new worshipping communities wherever we can, in every context and with all ages across such a large diocese. The figure of 750 new congregations by 2030 was adopted to signify the scale of ambition and importance of this Diocesan

missional priority, which represents around one in each parish. This included the funding of 2 Diocesan Resource Hubs in Cogges, nr Witney and Aylesbury, contexts which fell outside the criteria for SDF funding.

Over the past 3 years, and despite all the challenges and set-backs presented by covid, the New Congregations team have worked carefully and methodically to build strong foundations, adapting and responding as required to local needs and feedback. We have been hugely encouraged by the steady growth of momentum and signs of God at work in individual local leaders and churches which leads us to have confidence that our 'target' is reachable, by God's grace.

Our 7 Resourcing Hub Churches are established and making good progress with their visions and plans for church growth. We are now seeing evidence of the impact SDF monies can have on the missional capacity and resourcing of others through the appointment of additional associate ministers and local project managers. Each Resourcing Hub has identified their key strengths and developing expertise in particular aspects or contexts of mission eg intercultural mission, church planting in areas of new housing, market towns, community organising and church growth. 5 of the Resourcing Hubs are convening Greenhouse learning communities for their deaneries in particular areas of mission unique contributions which will enable them to better resource others with the particular expertise they offer. Specific outcomes include:

- Milton Keynes - revitalisation of Whaddon Way from St Mary's Bletchley
- North Aylesbury Resource Network in Aylesbury (NARNiA): launch of Greenhouse for Aylesbury Town with 20 teams, many drawn from a deprived part of Aylesbury.
- St Paul's, Slough: becoming model of intercultural best practice being shared with 12 other churches, working with the Diocesan UKME Development Adviser
- Reading Greyfriars – planted into Reading Gateway in 2020 and growth of this church is already leading to exploration of next location for further planting.
- High Wycombe St Andrews – working on behalf of the deanery to convene local discussions with a view to supporting and enabling development of a church revitalisation

The Diocesan wide programme together with our Resource Hubs has enabled and supported 87 new worshipping communities which are emerging at different stages of development with 102 lay leaders being supported in their skills and abilities to lead them. The primary source of support, learning and development of leaders of these are through learning communities known as Greenhouses. 8 Greenhouses have already been launched with a further 8 launching during 2023. Of the ecumenical network of 20 Pioneer Ministers across the Diocese, half are actively involved in convening and leading Greenhouses, providing essential experience and wisdom to local leaders.

The new congregations team has supported the Development Fund team through providing advice and support to 33 parish applications for grant support which have a new congregations focus. This has led to grant awards totalling £495,000 for this work.

As required by the SDF, we have established clear data collection, monitoring and evaluation processes alongside rigorous governance provided by the New Congregations Board (now chaired by Bishop Steven) and Resource Hubs Board (chaired by the Archdeacon of Buckingham). This data is enabling us to chart the growth and development of new worshipping communities since 2020 in different ways, including increasingly in digital map format. Of equal importance has been the listening to and gathering of stories of emerging new congregations. These stories are in turn becoming a key source of inspiration and practical wisdom for other churches wanting to 'have a go'. A revised communications strategy will see greater emphasis placed on these stories from a very wide spectrum of churches being shared across all our parishes in 2023.

### **Where are we going? Future plans and direction of travel...**

*Recognising & nurturing signs of life* There are many encouraging signs of life and hope across the diocese. We have become increasingly aware of potential new worshipping communities emerging quite naturally from across a mix of differing contexts (including rural) and church traditions. This indicates there are significantly more new congregations across our Diocese than the baseline survey originally revealed and we are seeking to capture details of these through this year's Articles of Inquiry.

*A relational emphasis* As the primary place of mission, we continue to prioritise engaging with our local churches through spending time listening to clergy, church officers and other lay leaders in their own contexts. This is steadily enabling greater understanding of why growing new worshipping communities is important and at the same time helping churches to notice what might be possible where they are. We do not underestimate the importance of this *modus operandi*; it is loving, it values and ultimately helps create deeper foundations and therefore sustainability.

*Local, Deanery, Area and Diocese working in partnership* - Building on the strong foundations of this past 3 years, from May 2023 we will see Area Teams take the lead responsibility for new congregations work in their episcopal area, signalling an important shift in how the engagement, support and delivery shifts closer to the local. This partnership between the local, deanery, Area and Diocese will release greater joint working across teams in the Department of Ministry & Mission. This will provide more focussed support across all contexts, ages and traditions.

*Growing engagement, learning and development* - We will continue to ensure that the Greenhouse learning communities adapt and develop so that they provide the key place for individuals and churches to nurture and grow their new worshipping communities. Along with our Resource Hub leaders, local Greenhouse Convenors play a vital role and we are currently responding to significant learning arising from a recent consultation with them.

*The need for cultural shift* If we want to reach out to those in our communities not currently in our churches growing new congregations will need to become 'business as usual'. Often this will happen through small 'one degree shifts' in attitude, understanding and experimentation uncertainty. We are clear that this does not mean dismantling the parish system but rather strengthening it by moving further towards a mixed ecclesiology of church.

*Sustainability* of new worshipping communities and church plants is a key consideration as we go forward. This is far from straightforward in this post-covid financial climate and we will continue to invest time and prayer as we seek practical and creative ways forward drawing in expertise and wisdom from across the Diocese and national church.

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### **Small Group Discussions**

Following a presentation, Synod will have the opportunity to:

- Submit questions for a Question & Answer session to be responded to by a panel comprising the Bishop of Oxford, Andrew Anderson-Gear (Director of Mission & Ministry), Sarah Flashman (New Congregations Enabler) and Toby Wright (Incumbent St Mary's Witney). Please write your question either during the presentation or before the small group discussion for collection.

- Small Group – to discuss your response to 2 questions:
  1. Please share a story from your deanery or parish/benefice of either a new congregation or missional activity reaching those not currently in your church
  2. If you were wanting to begin a new congregation what would be the primary challenge you would need to overcome (aside from finance)

Andrew Anderson-Gear, Director of Mission and Ministry

Will Donaldson, Head of New Congregations

Sarah Flashman, New Congregations Enabler

Emma Firth, New Congregations Project Manager

February 2023