

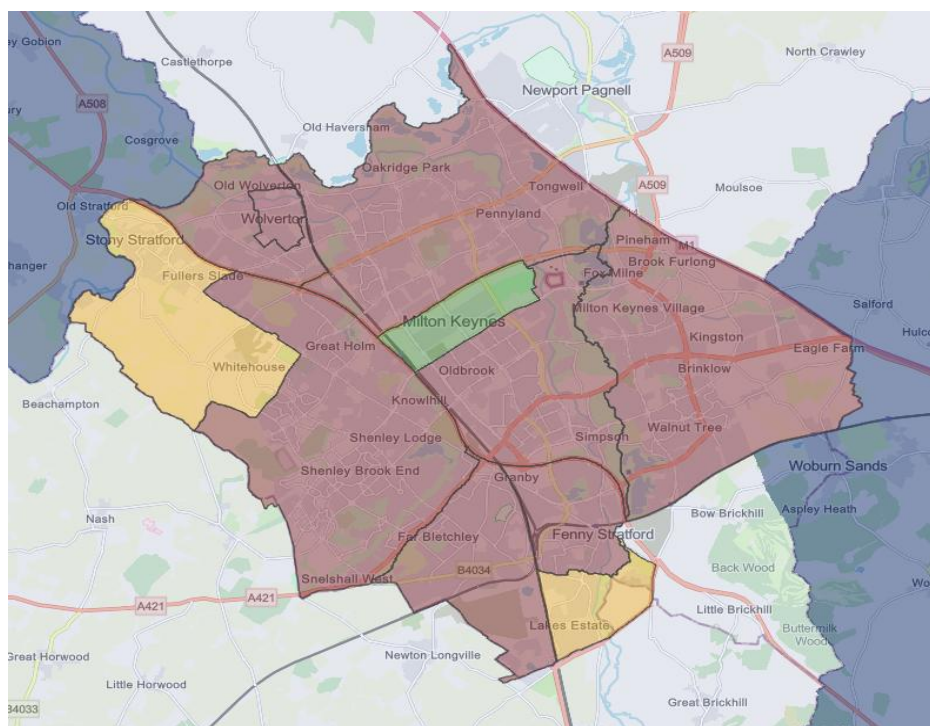
OXFORD DIOCESAN SYNOD

A 2050 Vision for Spiritual Renewal in Milton Keynes

Our strategy for ministry, mission and growth

Executive Summary

At the heart of this strategy is a deep longing to see more people in Milton Keynes come to know the love of Jesus Christ, through the spiritual renewal of the city. This means a city where the values of the kingdom are lived out; where injustice is challenged, where human need is met, where love, compassion, and community is visible in every grid square, and where people are blessed and are a blessing to others. This means thriving local churches, filled with disciples who are equipped and resourced to go out into and serve their community, and to invite that community into a relationship with Christ. This strategy is intended to set that transformation into motion, by rebuilding the foundations for a healthier, more sustainable, more active and growing local church. It sets a long-term plan to 2050 with an initial shorter delivery timescale, but recognises this work will continue well beyond any set date. Our vision will not be delivered by a one-off set of projects or the work of a few individuals; rather our strategy is intended to revive the role and work of the church in Milton Keynes so that it is thriving, communities are being blessed, and people are flourishing in and through Christ.



This work of transformation will take time, resource, prayer and partnership. Our initial strategy to initiate and accelerate change can be summarised as follows:

Overall vision: the spiritual renewal of the city of Milton Keynes by 2050

Strategy: This is a comprehensive strategy to begin the journey of spiritual renewal in the largest city in the Diocese of Oxford. By addressing our historic underinvestment in leaders, limited mission, and structures that have hampered growth, our goal is to create local churches that are visible, active, missional and innovative, full of people who will bring blessing to the city. This means increasing attendance to at least 1% of population levels and doubling the number of active young disciples. Renewal in some churches and an effective new Deanery leadership team are encouraging signs that a Spirit-led work of culture change has begun and is poised for acceleration as significant investment is made.

Renewal of the city will begin through an integrated strategy focussing on three vital strands

1. Renewed Leadership

A strengthened generation of clergy and lay leaders, working in partnership with churches across the city in a culture of hope and faith.

- Investment in at least 5 new clergy posts
- 50 lay leaders trained & deployed
- 300 volunteers for local mission
- Visible & effective vocations work
- Clergy health & wellbeing support

2. Renewed Mission

A new wave of visible, intentional missional activity, embracing youth and children, church planting, evangelism and social justice.

- Beacon church for the city-centre at Cornerstone
- At least 15 new CYP initiatives
- Up to 3 new Church Schools/sites
- 3 Pioneers in new housing areas
- Grow 3 new social / justice projects
- Smart missional approach in each grid square

3. Renewed Structures

A new church ecology of restructured LEPs, strengthened leadership & interfaith networks, focussed investment and effective governance

- 5 renewed LEP parishes (via resource, structural change and/or leadership reset) including mended governance at Cornerstone
- Investment in a vibrant Restore:MK
- Strong civic and interfaith networks
- Robust Deanery-wide governance

This strategy will be delivered through both ongoing spiritual discernment and rigorous project management:

- Places where the Holy Spirit is instigating new life are prayerfully discerned by a partnership of diocese, deanery and parish
- Plans to nurture this life are created by clear-sighted financial and operational planning and rigorous governance

This strategy also recognises at its heart that this is kingdom work. While establishing a clear level of ambition and developing coherent, deliverable, plans, we know this work can only be done with and through the Holy Spirit. God is already at work in Milton Keynes and we must move in step with where He is calling us. We will hold the diocesan values in all that we do, seeking to be contemplative as we pray for God's guidance and discern his will through prayer, and honest reflection about what is working and what needs to change. We will be courageous in our decision-making, where it aligns with God's will for the deanery and demands we take radical action for the glory of his kingdom. And we are rooted in compassion – for those who minister, volunteer, live and work in Milton Keynes, with our eyes firmly fixed on our deep-longing for all to come to know the love, grace and peace of Christ in their lives.

Why Milton Keynes?

Milton Keynes is the fastest growing area of the Oxford Diocese. It is already the biggest population centre at c. 287,000, and this population is projected to nearly double by 2050 to 500,000. It grew by 15.4% between 2011 and 2021, compared to an average 7.5% increase for the Southeast of England. It is – and will be – unlike any other urban centre in the diocese, or indeed the UK.

Milton Keynes is completely unique. It emerged from farmers' fields in the 1960s, driven by a powerful vision for a city that would be known for its innovation, economic success, scale and entrepreneurialism – but also its commitment to sustainability, its community-focus, its inclusiveness and its diversity. Its uniqueness is core to its identity and the creation of an entire city from scratch in little over fifty years is remarkable. There is something in the DNA of the city that means it thinks big, and it thinks to the future. As it has developed, Milton Keynes has prided itself on green spaces, connectivity across the grid squares, a thriving city centre and links into London and elsewhere. The MK City Plan 2050 will take forward Milton Keynes City Council's Strategy for 2050, which has set out a bold and ambitious vision for MK over the next 24 years, including equal opportunities for all, 'lifelong' homes that suit people at all stages of their life, and a pioneering mass rapid transit system. This work is underway and the city continues to grow – in terms of population, housing, industry and economics.



But as this work of transformation has taken place - as fields have become shopping centres, as country roads have become grid squares and as the villages have merged into the city, the church has not been able to follow. Rather than keep pace with the change, it has been left behind and has been unable to adapt, respond, and thrive in an exciting, growing mission field full of opportunity. The current clergy and lay leaders are dedicated, committed and outstanding ministers, but are overstretched and unable to do more than maintain the status quo, meaning reach, mission and service into the community is naturally limited. And this becomes a vicious circle, as the church in Milton Keynes is overall in decline. At 0.6% adult attendance per capita, it falls behind the next key urban centre in Reading, at 1.1%. And this falls to 0.3% for U16 attendance per capita – despite it being a relatively ‘young’ city demographically, with the median age being 39 years old.¹ Indeed, 50% of the population is under 35, 26.1% is under 20, and 22% are in full time education, percentages which are not reflected in those who attend church. There is no Anglican church with a single congregation of over 200 – which is unique for a city of this scale. There are only three Church of England schools among the 113 schools in and around the city. And perhaps most tellingly, the ratio of clergy to population is an average of 1:20,000, compared to a national average ratio of 1:8,000. This ratio will continue to increase as the population grows – by 2050, 62.5 FTE clergy would be needed to match the national 1:8,000 ratio. Historic decisions by deanery and diocese to reduce resources, rather than invest in, this growing city have had significant consequences, and this context presents both huge challenge and exciting potential.

This moment represents a once-in-history opportunity to ensure the long-term future of the church in Milton Keynes, our biggest city. It represents the chance to reimagine how we can be church and to learn valuable lessons as we journey forwards. This is an opportunity to be seized.

Our ambition and defining success

As we seek the spiritual renewal of the city of Milton Keynes, our prayer and aspiration are that we grow local churches which are equipped, resourced and energised for mission. This means churches that are growing, that are regularly and sustainably engaged in mission relevant to their context, and that are beacons of light, hope and compassion. We seek growth in church attendance so it reaches at least 1% of population levels, so that the church can begin to have a meaningful and effective presence in the communities in Milton Keynes. Success will mean substantial progress made towards growth, with a sustainable leadership (lay and ordained) pipeline, enabling local contexts and effective parish and deanery mission. We will be

¹ Statistics provided the Vision and Strategy team at the national church

disappointed with any signs of a return to the pre-investment context, where roles and mission become unsustainable and those in worshipping communities fall away.

Key barriers to mission and growth

Three main areas of challenge have been identified as we embark on this strategy. The decline of the church in the deanery has been continuing steadily over a long period of time, and to reverse this trend, these will need to be addressed:

1. Insufficient resourcing that leads to caution about embarking on mission and reduces missional capacity
2. Limited local mission, accentuated by the challenge of a largely ‘invisible’ church and resulting in an ageing church which is ultimately unsustainable
3. Local inherited parish structures that limit missional capacity

1. Insufficient resourcing in an increasing mission field

There is collective desire and genuine excitement among local leaders for transformational change in Milton Keynes. However, current resourcing levels have resulted in overstretched clergy and volunteers across all parishes – not just the LEPs – reducing capacity for focusing on mission. This mismatch between resourcing and the mission field is because:

1. **Overstretched leadership** is not simply a problem in the LEPs, but is true across nearly all the parishes. While a very different context, Reading deanery has a comparable population size at 235,000, but with 25 parishes and 25 FTE. Milton Keynes deanery has 11 parishes and 12.5 FTE for 243,000 population. This has an impact on clergy capacity to focus on intentional mission, as they are stretched over huge areas of responsibility. There is a risk of losing the current cohort of clergy, which would be a huge loss of skill, talent and experience, and carries hidden costs in terms of vacancy processes and reduction in local giving over time.
2. **There is a limited lay leadership and volunteer base** to support the clergy, who don’t have the capacity to identify, train and disciple new and existing volunteers. Data available tells us there are currently 19 authorised lay preachers or LLMs across the deanery (compared to 46 in Reading), and a survey done in 2023 revealed there were c.110 volunteers with a CYP focus (342 in Reading) – but in varying numbers across the deanery, with five parishes having less than 10 volunteers.
3. **Historic but largely unfulfilled commitments to Milton Keynes** have left a sense of caution about the likelihood of change, meaning some parishes have focused on maintaining ‘business as usual’ rather than seeking new resourcing opportunities. In 2018 a vision document was set out as part of Common Vision, with a desire to make a step change in MK but this was never fully realised and indeed the focus

area ‘celebrate and bless Milton Keynes’ was ultimately abandoned. Some clergy have felt left to manage on their own and have not actively sought partnership with the deanery or the diocese.

2. Limited local mission: an invisible church

The unique layout of Milton Keynes within a grid system, and the lack of movement within the city other than for commuting, means that the church is often invisible, inhibiting local missional efforts.

1. **Most of the buildings are physically hidden** within a grid square, and are often non-descript, functional buildings that don’t stand out. There is no high street footfall outside the main city centre such that you would find in any other ‘city’.
2. **The visible church (Christ the Cornerstone) has struggled with mission** as a result of leadership and governance challenges associated with the LEP. So although there does exist a church that stands out as a ‘beacon’ in the city, it has not been able to fulfil its full potential and serve the city centre in the way it was envisioned.
3. **New housing estates** are being developed right now with many more planned, without a guarantee of a church building or worship centre. This makes visible mission into these communities challenging – culturally, church is not an assumed part of local life; there are limited missional opportunities for traditional outreach (seasonal services etc) or pioneering outreach models enabling people to gather; it also means that a sustained Christian presence is difficult without a church leader or pioneer to move into the area. The learning from new communities indicates that despite the complexity of identifying buildings, developing the transition from community engagement to church attendance is more challenging without a place to gather.

3. Limited local mission: an ageing church

The church in Milton Keynes is declining but particularly among young people, leaving ageing congregations with no long-term future. And this is despite a relatively young demographic across the city:

1. **The impact of the pandemic** on mission – particularly children and youth ministry shouldn’t be underestimated; this was true across the whole diocese, where children’s and youth groups are still recovering, and some have never restarted. The break in relationships and habits has meant many children and families have never returned to church, as well as the volunteers who ran the children’s ministries.
2. **The scale of the challenge, and opportunity, is vast:** There are parishes such as Watling Valley with a deep commitment to connect to the local schools in the deanery – church schools or otherwise. However, in that parish alone there are over

20 schools. This means the clergy are spread incredibly thinly, especially when there aren't the volunteers to support them, and encounters in outreach activities such as collective worship are not resulting in sustained discipleship pathways leading children to attending church.

3. **The transient nature of the city** also means that young adults, those aged 18-30, may come to the city for a short time for work, and then leave again. The university caters for an older demographic, therefore those over 18 tend to leave for university. This adds to the challenge of sustaining ministry for these age groups, and developing young leaders that can be integrated and embedded into the future life of the church.

4. Challenging local structures

Five of the eleven parishes in Milton Keynes are part of Local Ecumenical Partnerships (LEPs), which have inherited structures, governance and ways of working that can make mission more challenging. This is because:

1. **The organisational complexity** of LEPs can accentuate the challenge of mission. Without additional capacity, local incumbents are naturally those responsible for the governance and local relationships within the partnerships. This important work can leave them unable also to attend to new missional opportunities.
2. **The partnerships are unequal and overstretched**, as regional denominations have struggled for resource, leaving some existing Anglican clergy in the partnerships over-burdened and limited in their capacity for wider mission. This is made even more acute by the huge size of some of the LEPs as populations have grown over time; for example in Watling Valley, there is a population of 52,000, making it one of the largest parishes in the Church of England, with only 2.7 FTE clergy.
3. **The partnerships are holding together very different demographics** and cultures within the same parish, partly due to their size. In some instances, this has made serving the local congregations more challenging for those in leadership and has caused tensions between congregations that sadly have been unable to work together well.
4. **The nature of the LEPs means it is difficult for the parish to offer a clear identity.** As people move into Milton Keynes, many will be unfamiliar with worshipping in the context of ecumenism. Christians are often looking for their nearest denominational church and overlook an LEP, while non-Christians are unlikely to have come across ecumenism at all. This means it becomes harder for a partnership to express its identity, mission and ministry to the growing local community
5. **The focus on unity of the partnership risks diluting missional focus.** In the Church Army Research, which was carried out to better understand diocesan pioneer projects set up pre-Covid, a specific comment about ecumenism was made: "Though ecumenical working has brought many benefits, it may have in some

cases diluted the pioneering focus on developing something targeted at the non-churched.”²

A time-critical opportunity for change

There has never been a more critical or opportune moment to embark on this work in Milton Keynes. The ground has been well laid for the work that needs to be done, and the sense of momentum is building:

- Over the last eighteen months, discernment and engagement has happened at parish, deanery, archdeaconry and diocesan level, with support for a plan that seeks to deliver ambitious change rather than incremental progress.
- There is also crucial support at the level of the regional denominational leaders and civic leaders, who recognise the need for change and are ready and willing to commit what limited resource they have available to enable the flourishing of the church in Milton Keynes.
- The national church has recognised the strategic significance of Milton Keynes and has indicated they are interested in supporting our plans. We would be seeking to apply to them for a significant level of investment that would bring our strategy to fruition.
- This would be alongside a unique opportunity we have in the diocese to allocate some investment from a key land sale in Milton Keynes towards these plans, enabling the maximum possible level of resource and ensuring the best conditions for success.
- With the growth in new housing comes the opportunity to enter new mission fields, identify new Christians moving into the city, and pioneer new models of church and ministry.
- The diocese also has an existing strategy to grow children and youth ministry (CYM) across the whole diocese, with a new Head of CYM in post, clergy training underway via Launchpad and an established Development Fund to support investment into parish-based children and youth work.

Our strategy for change

The Anglican church in Milton Keynes deanery has declined by c.17% since 2016³, despite rapid and ongoing population growth and hard work from local clergy. This is because of fundamental challenges in the inherited governance structures in the LEPs,

² New Communities Pioneer Pilot Projects: an evaluation for the Diocese of Oxford – summary report, Church Army’s Research Unit, February 2021, p.8

³ According to Stats for Mission AWA, which includes the LEPs made up of other denominations

local leadership capacity, and a lack of effective mission. This strategy sets out our response.

Vision: the spiritual renewal of the city of Milton Keynes

What this looks like: local churches that are visible, active, missional and innovative, full of people who are bringing blessing to the city.

Key indicators:

1. Increase in Anglican church attendance to at least 1% of the population
2. Increase in self-identifying Anglican membership of our LEPs (baseline TBC), using annual membership lists from the five parishes
3. Double the number of young active disciples
4. Mission activity effectively and regularly serving people in every grid square in Milton Keynes

Interventions needed to enable growth:

Strategic outcome 1: Renewed leadership - a strengthened generation of clergy and lay leaders, working in partnership with churches across the city in a culture of hope and faith.

This strand addresses the challenge of insufficient resourcing in an increasing mission field; it recognises that it will be critical to ensure sustainable, flourishing and equipped leadership at all levels, to release capacity, support local mission and drive forward the vision for spiritual renewal. In order to achieve this we will need to:

1. Invest in our current clergy so they are released, equipped, valued and supported, and can refocus time and energy on moving beyond 'maintenance' to 'mission'.
2. Invest in a new generation of clergy to increase levels of resource for mission across the city, adding capacity, new skills, and pioneering approaches.
3. Nurture and grow lay leadership to increase local capacity, and create a community of confident disciples who can effectively lead mission and evangelise.
4. Nurture and grow local volunteers to support new missional activity, release leaders, and continue developing the leadership pipeline as more people experience participation in church life
5. Develop sustainable and effective CYP ministry teams to initiate and resource local CYP mission across all age groups, and support engagement with local schools

Strategic Outcome 2: Renewed mission - a new wave of visible, intentional missional activity, embracing youth and children, church planting, evangelism and social justice:

This strand will focus on addressing the challenge of limited local mission. We seek to mobilise new missional activity across the city in order that more people can encounter Christ's love through the activity of the church, and be invited on a journey with Him, wherever they are. In order to achieve this we will:

1. Focus on four key areas of children and youth, church planting, evangelism and social justice work
2. Deploy pioneers across a range of contexts to support the above key areas
3. Ensure mission is visible, intentional, collaborative and appropriate to context
4. Explore innovative, pioneering models to develop social enterprises that support overall sustainability

Strategic outcome 3: Renewed Structures - a new church ecology of restructured LEPs, strengthened leadership & interfaith networks, focussed investment and effective governance

This strand seeks to firstly pilot, and then apply, different approaches to local governance to ensure parishes and/or partnerships have the best conditions for mission, sustainability and spiritual renewal. These approaches would be a mixture of 'hard' structural change, 'soft' structural change and no change, so we learn what are the best conditions for sustainable, flourishing local mission that over time will enable rather than inhibit the growth of the church. In order to achieve this we will:

1. Work initially with three parishes, which have been identified for the first phase of investment and will each take a different approach
2. Develop subsequent approach to remaining parishes, based on learning and experience
3. Ensure early participation in new initiatives such as Restore:MK, which will foster strategic mission across faiths and denominations.

These outcomes provide clear focus as we begin this journey of change, but we remain mindful that we must be responsive to learning, need and opportunity, and our governance structures will allow for flexibility, reflection and the leading of the Holy Spirit alongside rigorous and robust project management.

Project development

Work has already taken place to identify the key risks and dependencies of the project, to develop a robust sustainability plan, and to create appropriate governance arrangements for both the earlier phase of the project and the longer-term work. Details of initial diocesan expenditure (of around £1 million) for the first phase have been worked up, and all these elements will be in a more detailed document, prepared for Bishop's Council in July 2026. This includes allowance for project management, to ensure ongoing oversight of project scope, finances, timescales and delivery.

Conclusion

This is an exciting, time-critical and imperative opportunity to ensure the future of the church in Milton Keynes and to enable the spiritual renewal of the city we so long to see. We acknowledge the challenges before us, and will be guided by constant prayer which will underpin all that we do over the coming years. We remain confident that God is already at work, and goes ahead of us as we seek to do his work in this unique city. It is a place of creativity, diversity, innovation and welcome, and a place that will profoundly shape the whole diocese in the coming years. We look forward to the journey ahead and the vital contribution Milton Keynes will make to the kingdom of God in this diocese and beyond.

Bishop Dave Bull

On behalf of the Milton Keynes Strategy Group

May 2026.