Diocesan Synod 14th November 2026
Developing Pathways for Parish based Ministers

Introduction

The Church of England faces a twin challenge in the present and coming decades: the number of clergy retiring is likely to be disproportionately large in the next few years; the number of ordinands entering training has been falling consecutively since 2020. In this period, an average of 508 clergy have retired and around 407 ordinands have entered training each year. (For context, there are currently 6753 stipendiary clergy nationally.)

The fall in numbers entering ordination training, anecdotally, may be attributed to concerns over clergy wellbeing and challenging theological/political contexts, including LLF.

Year	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024	2025
No. In training	1175	1241	1342	1364	1383	1285	1102	927	861	917

The slight upturn in 2025 is more than accounted for by the provision of a new pathway (the Elizabeth Pathway) on which 61 ordinands started training. The old pathways entered 856 ordinands. The Church of England faces the challenge of finding sufficient clergy to maintain the system as it is. The diocese of Oxford is unlikely to be immune to this challenge.

Elizabeth Pathway

In recent years, St Mellitus College pioneered a one-year pathway in which candidates undertook vocational discernment and ministry training alongside each other—designed to enable people with significant life and ministry experience to be ordained ("the Caleb pathway"). The Ministry Development Board of the Church of England did not deem it sufficiently robust to warrant national church funding. In 2023, the diocese of Oxford in partnership with Ripon College Cuddesdon began a pilot two-year training pathway for those over 55 years of age with significant life and ministry experience.

Vocational discernment was undertaken in the first year alongside training. Those on this Ordained Assistant Ministry Scheme were ordained at the end of their second year of training. The Church of England adopted this pilot scheme nationally, branding it "the Elizabeth Pathway". It is fully funded by the national church. Theological colleges which had been offering the Caleb pathway are now offering the Elizabeth pathway.

The Ordained Assistant Ministry Scheme has been given a one-year extension, and proposals are being put forward to the Ministry Development Board to move to an Elizabeth pathway for a first intake in September 2027. Our diocesan Elizabeth pathway

will offer the first year of training through our Learning Hub, and the second year of training will be undertaken in one of Wycliffe Hall, St Stephen's House, or Ripon College Cuddesdon. This means that all ordinands on this pathway should be able to train in the tradition of their sending church as the normal expectation on the Elizabeth pathway is that ordinands serve in their sending church after ordination.

Further training

However, the challenge cannot be met by increasing numbers of ordinands alone. The role of lay ministers needs to be better appreciated, and lay ministry more fully integrated into the ministry of the Church of England. In the diocese of Oxford, we continue to offer Licensed Lay Ministry (LLM) training for those who want to become LLMs (under canons E4-6). We have also drafted a process to increase the number of lay ministers with specific ministries (e.g., lay evangelists) so that they can be licensed under canons E7-8. This is currently with the bishops. We continue to offer authorised ministry training, and we are working on pathways for training people for a variety of lay ministries. These will be presented to the bishops in due course.

Revd Dr Andy Angel
Director of Formation for Ministry
and Warden of Readers

Breakout Groups – Discussion

What should be our priorities in encouraging parish-based ministry vocations?

Notes

A group was recently commissioned by the National Ministry Development Team to research into the current numbers of ordinands being recommended for training and the parish practices that led to their recommendation. At diocesan level they highlight the significance of prayer and a positive 'culture', of Bishops, Senior Teams and Clergy giving clear focus in this area, around resourcing for DDO teams and the clarity of discernment processes. At a parish level they identified five key principles:

- *Praying intentionally - for those already serving and for God to raise up people for a variety of ministries and vocations.*
- *Noticing and nurturing gifts – creating a culture where people feel seen, valued and supported in their callings.*
- *Creating opportunities for people to be involved and volunteering – consistently inviting people to try new areas and removing barriers for people who feel unable to serve.*

- *Provide space for discernment – teaching about how to listen to God and discern different callings with opportunities for exploration individually and in groups.*

- *Support for people through processes – building good relationships with vocations advisors and DDOs and offering prayer, encouragement and practical support at every stage.*

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