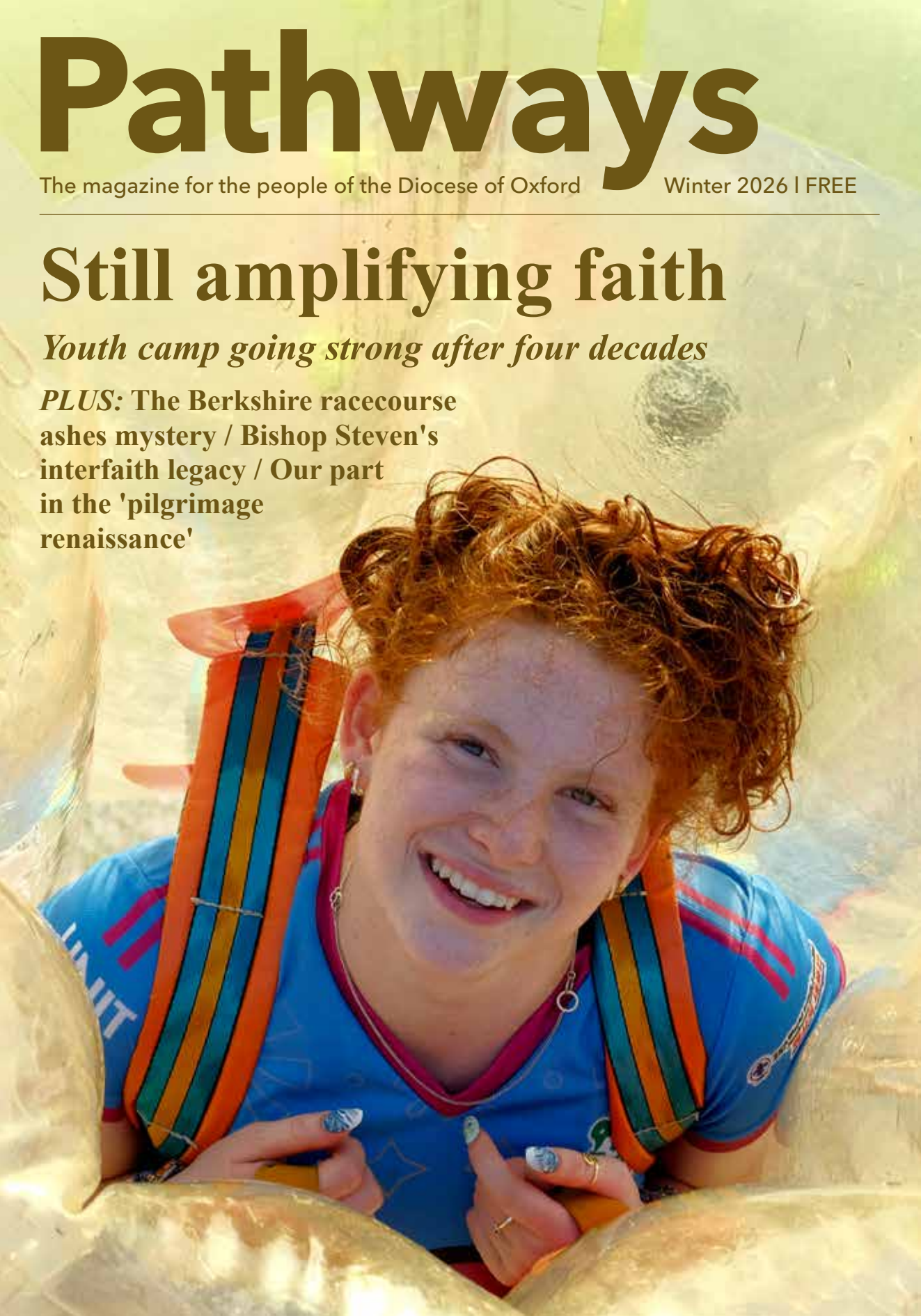
Pathways

The magazine for the people of the Diocese of Oxford Winter 2026 | FREE

Still amplifying faith

Youth camp going strong after four decades

PLUS: **The Berkshire racecourse ashes mystery / Bishop Steven's interfaith legacy / Our part in the 'pilgrimage renaissance'**



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Introduction

Welcome to the winter 2026 edition of *Pathways*. Since the summer, I have been serving as Acting Bishop of Oxford, and during these months I have been continually inspired and encouraged by the faithfulness and generosity of so many people across our diocese.

In our parishes, in our schools and communities, and among colleagues, I see every day the many ways in which people are working together to share in the Church's ministry, worship, witness and service.

The Diocese of Oxford is a wonderfully diverse place, and it is a privilege to serve among you. I am especially grateful to those who have supported me and shared the load during this period of transition.

Hopefully, this edition of *Pathways* provides a flavour of that diversity.

The pages that follow contain stories about new pilgrimage paths, the interfaith work of our leaders and congregations, the compassion of our clergy in unusual circumstances and initiatives to deepen faith among young people, as well as personal reflections on curacy and the potential introduction of RE to the national curriculum.

As we continue to await the appointment of our next Diocesan Bishop, this feels like a moment not only of waiting, but also of looking ahead.

Times of change can bring uncertainty, but they can also be opportunities to renew our trust in God and deepen our sense of purpose. As we look to the future together, I believe we are called to do so with **prayer**, **confidence** and **hope**.

Prayer, because we recognise our dependence on God and seek his guidance and provision for all that lies ahead.

Confidence, because whatever challenges we may face, we know that God is with us, leading us through difficult times and into the future he has prepared.

And **hope**, because our confidence is rooted not in ourselves, but in God. Christian hope is never something we keep to ourselves. It is a gift that overflows into the lives of others,



The Rt Revd Gavin Collins

bringing encouragement, renewal and restored relationships in our communities, schools, workplaces and homes.

My prayer is that we will be known as people of hope because we serve a God of hope. As we continue our shared life and mission across this diocese, may we look to him with confidence, and may his Spirit enable us to be signs of hope for the wider world.

As St Paul writes: *"May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit." (Romans 15:13)*

With every blessing,

The Rt Revd Gavin Collins,
Bishop of Dorchester and
Acting Bishop of Oxford

A selection of Diocese of Oxford news from June to September



Bishop Dave ordained new deacons at a service at Christ Church Cathedral in July

June

Bishop Gavin's first presidential address

Diocesan Synod on 13 June marked the first presidential address from the Rt Revd Gavin Collins as Acting Bishop of Oxford.

Bishop Gavin spoke of the importance of remaining rooted in faith and shared three words that spoke to his personal calling: unity, growth and joy.

A significant part of Synod was devoted to the future of mission and ministry in Milton Keynes.

The meeting also marked the retirement of the Revd Canon Geoff Bayliss, attending his final Diocesan Synod as chair of the House of Clergy.

Hundreds of pupils gather for service

Hundreds of Year 6 pupils from Church schools across the diocese gathered at Christ Church Cathedral for the Oxford Diocesan Board of Education School Leavers' Service.

The children came together to mark the end of their primary school journey and look ahead to the opportunities and challenges of secondary school.

Bishops ordain 21 priests across diocese

Twenty-one deacons from across the diocese were ordained priest over the last weekend in June.

The weekend began at All Saints' Church in High Wycombe, where candidates serving in the Buckingham area were ordained by Bishop Dave Bull. Later on the Saturday, attention turned to Reading Minster, where Bishop Mary Gregory ordained priests serving in the Berkshire area.

On Sunday morning, the celebrations moved to Dorchester Abbey, where Bishop Gavin Collins ordained candidates serving in the Dorchester area.

The final service of the weekend took place on Sunday afternoon at St Clement's, Oxford, where Bishop Mary ordained candidates serving in the Oxford area.

Traditional portrait of bishop unveiled

The traditional portrait of the departing Bishop of Oxford was unveiled at Church House Oxford.

The painting of Bishop Steven was shown for the first time to members of Oxford Diocesan Board of Finance and Oxford Diocesan Board of Education staff at a lunchtime event to mark his retirement.

The portrait was painted by Duncan Shoosmith, the 2019 winner of the Sky Arts Portrait Artist of the Year competition.

You can watch a time-lapse video of the making of Bishop Steven's portrait by scanning the QR within the image to the right.



Bishop Steven unveils his portrait with its creator, artist Duncan Shoosmith

July

Services mark start of ordained ministry

Twenty new deacons were ordained at services in the diocese marking the beginning of their ordained ministry as they prepare to serve churches and communities across Berkshire, Buckinghamshire and Oxfordshire.

Ordination services took place at Christ Church Cathedral on 4 July, with Bishop Gavin and Bishop Dave leading the services.

Gypsy, Roma and Traveller celebration

People across the diocese marked Gypsy, Roma and Traveller History Month with a special service at Christ Church Cathedral.

The service brought together local primary school children, including some from Traveller backgrounds, who played a central role in leading worship.

The afternoon continued with a performance of Crystal's Vardo in the cathedral gardens. The production explores Gypsy and Traveller history, culture and identity while highlighting the prejudice that these communities have faced across generations.

Bishop's warning over AI during Lords bow

In his final speech to the House of Lords following his retirement, the Bishop of Oxford backed calls for governments to regulate artificial intelligence as he warned of the risks posed by rapid technological change.

Bishop Steven was speaking in a 24 July debate brought by Baroness Kidron on national sovereignty and digital and technology policy.

He told peers he was 'immensely grateful' for having had the chance to serve in the House of Lords and on the Select Committees on Artificial Intelligence and Climate Change.

Speaking at the start of the debate, Baroness Kidron paid tribute to Bishop Steven's leadership in campaigning for



The Archbishop of Canterbury celebrated the contribution of parish safeguarding officers at an event in September

digital systems to reflect ethics and values.

Lord Clement Jones, the Liberal Democrat peer, paid tribute to Bishop Steven's record describing him as an 'influential and instrumental voice' in the Lords on AI.

August

Bishop visits our link diocese in South Africa

The Bishop of Reading visited one of our link dioceses – Kimberley and Kuruman in South Africa. Bishop Mary spent time with churches and communities across the diocese before joining its clergy school for several days of teaching, discussion and shared theological reflection.

The Diocese of Kimberley and Kuruman covers an enormous area – twice the size of the UK – so Bishop Mary spent plenty of time on the road.

Bishop Mary spent time with a group of widows who have few resources of their own but are generous in supporting those with even less, and she also visited a soup kitchen at St Philip's, Boegoeberg.

She took part in the funeral of Fr Peme of Seoding, with more than 1,000 people coming together to celebrate his life and mourn his death, as well as finding out how Altar Guilds involve young people directly in worship and the life of the Church.

September

Hong Kongers' story is focus of national videos

The story of Hong Konger church communities in the Reading area (which was featured in the last edition of *Pathways*) was the focus of a series of National Church videos highlighting the impact of strategic investment.

The videos, which feature personal testimonies about Hong Konger congregations at Trinity Earley, have been shared with dioceses across the country to share lessons about how investment can help churches respond to the changing needs of their communities.

The first Cantonese services began at Trinity Earley in 2022. Today, more than 300 people worship there, while a further 200 attend a congregation at Winnersh, which was planted out of Trinity Earley.

Projects highlighted at Lambeth Palace event

The work of the diocese was showcased at a national event celebrating the contribution of clergy, lay ministers and those exploring vocation from Global Majority Heritage and UK Minority Ethnic backgrounds.

The event, hosted by the Archbishops of Canterbury and York at Lambeth Palace, brought together people from across the Church to celebrate progress and share examples of work promoting racial justice.

Among those invited to speak were representatives of two Diocese of Oxford projects.

Katie Woo, National Church Hong Kong Communities Enabler in Berkshire, highlighted the success of the Strategic Development Fund Berkshire Hong Kongers (SDF BHK) project, while the Revd Polly Falconer, the diocesan Diversity Adviser, spoke about racial justice work taking place in Church of England schools.



Bishop Mary during her visit to Kimberley and Kuruman



The Archbishop of Constantinople arrives at the University Church of St Mary the Virgin

Archbishop of Constantinople in historic visit

The Archbishop of Constantinople – Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew I – addressed the University Church of St Mary the Virgin in Oxford during a week-long trip that also saw him visit His Royal Highness King Charles at Balmoral.

The Patriarch, known for his environmentalism and interfaith work, is the leader of 300 million orthodox Christians worldwide. His address – *Religious Liberty in Contested Ecosystems: Law, Religion and Foreign Policy in a New International Order* – touched on the issues of universal religious liberty, faith as a pillar of democracy and how religious institutions are crucial, non-partisan actors in a fracturing international order.

The Revd Canon Dr Will Lamb, vicar of the University Church, said: "In recent years we have hosted a number of ecumenical guests, and this was the first time ever that an Ecumenical Patriarch has given a lecture at the University of Oxford."

Archbishop celebrates safeguarding volunteers

Fifteen parish safeguarding officers (PSOs) from the diocese were joined by the Archbishop of Canterbury at a recent service of recognition and thanks at Lambeth Palace.

The service was one of a series held nationally to celebrate the contribution made by the Church of England's PSOs, who help build safer church communities in parishes nationwide. Other services were held at Bishopthorpe in the Diocese of York and at St Paul's Cathedral.

Michael, PSO in Cublington and who attended the service, said: "I certainly felt there was a real and strong commitment in the Archbishop and her team in their care for a safer Church."

The diocese's head of safeguarding, Louise Whitehead, said: "We were delighted that 15 of our PSOs were able to attend to represent the 500 or so PSOs who do so much great work in our diocese."

Respect, compassion and the mystery of the racecourse ashes

Berkshire vicar believes her church's actions in the strange case of the burger van urn should be celebrated in an age of widespread indifference



Revd Gail Minter: "The Christian faith teaches that every person matters."

There are some pastoral situations for which theological college prepares you rather well – funerals, baptisms, the general demands of ministry and even the debate over whether the church hall thermostat should be adjusted.

Then there are the situations for which no training manual exists.

The unexpected appearance of an urn, apparently containing the ashes of a man called Gary Bonsor, abandoned on the counter of a burger van at Newbury Racecourse, would appear to belong firmly in the latter category.

In the summer of 2025, racegoers at Newbury were busy enjoying the day. Around them, staff kept a watchful eye on a long list of prohibited items. Visitors were not permitted to bring glass containers, picnics, drones, balloons, flags, klaxons, garden furniture, laser pens, or anything that might reasonably be described as offensive.

However, there was no specific prohibition against bringing an urn of human ashes.

When precisely such an item was discovered sitting beside the ketchup and mustard, staff understandably took the matter seriously.

Attached to the urn were two labels. One read simply: "RIP GARY BONSOR." The other carried the moving inscription: "MY DAD, MY HERO."

What followed was an effort by numerous people to reunite a deceased gentleman with his family.

Racecourse staff checked ticket records. Potential leads were followed. Police became involved. Crematoria were contacted. Enquiries were made with possible family. Nobody came forward. The identity of Gary Bonsor remained a mystery.

Eventually the urn found its way via Thames Valley Police to St Mary's Church in Greenham.

The Revd Gail Minter, who had recently arrived as vicar, found herself faced with an unusual pastoral responsibility.

"Most clergy expect to face a few peculiarities and sensitive issues when they arrive in a parish," she says. "I don't think many of us anticipate dealing with an unidentified urn rescued from a burger van."



St Mary's Church in Greenham, near Newbury, where the 'ashes' of Gary Bonsor are buried

> *Had the story ended there, it would already have been unusual enough. But then came the twist.*

After a period of reflection, Revd Gail sought permission for the ashes to be interred in the churchyard.

The Consistory Court of the Diocese of Oxford granted this in June of this year and a simple burial followed after Sunday service, with the entire congregation in attendance.

It was, Revd Gail said, "a fittingly moving experience".

She added: "Many of us spend a great deal of our lives worrying about reputation, achievement and recognition. Here was somebody known only by a name on a label. Yet he was still worthy of prayer, respect and care."

Had the story ended there, it would already have been unusual enough. But then came the twist.

The mystery of Gary Bonsor's ashes had been covered in the media – with the BBC, the Guardian and the Daily Mail all running the story.

Intrigued by these reports, journalists from the Daily Telegraph decided to try to locate members of Gary Bonsor's family.

When they found them, a story emerged that was very different from the one everyone had assumed.

Gary Bonsor had indeed existed. He had died in 2021, aged 58, in Nuneaton. He had worked as a theatre technician and had lived a complicated life. Family relationships had fractured.

Sadly, he was estranged from his children. Following his death, a small group of relatives raised the money for cremation.

Most significantly of all, his ashes had already been scattered years ago.

The contents of the urn discovered at Newbury Racecourse were not human remains.

According to the family, the urn had contained wood ash and miniature whisky bottles. It had reportedly been created as part of a stag party prank connected with one of Mr Bonsor's sons (as might have been expected given that it was a stag party, the whisky bottles had disappeared by the time St Mary's Church came into possession of the urn).

In other circumstances, this might have caused a degree of embarrassment.

But Revd Gail remains unflustered.

"Clergy become accustomed to discovering that things are rarely quite what they first appear," she said. "In this particular case, it turns out we may have conducted a respectful burial for a quantity of fireplace debris.

"Of course, if one is going to make a mistake, it is probably preferable to err on the side of kindness."

That sentiment captures the heart of the story.

At every stage, people acted according to the information available to them. Racecourse staff did not ignore the urn. Police officers did not dismiss it. Churchwardens did not throw it away. The church did not treat it as an inconvenience.

Everybody assumed that the ashes were genuine because every indication suggested they were.

"I don't feel embarrassed at all," said Revd Gail.

"Actually, I feel quite the opposite. If somebody places what appears to be human ashes into your care, the right response is to treat them with respect and compassion.

"Had we done otherwise, and had they turned out to be genuine, that would have been a very different story."

There is, she thinks, a broader lesson.

"The Christian faith teaches that every person matters. We don't care for people because we know everything about them. We care for them because they are human beings made in the image of God.

"In this case, we didn't know the full truth. But we acted in good faith and with compassion. I think that's something to be grateful for rather than embarrassed about."

As for the ashes now resting in consecrated ground, Revd Gail said: "Churchyards contain many surprises accumulated over centuries. I suspect these ones are among the more unusual."

The whole affair retains an air of slightly tragic absurdity. A mystery urn. A racecourse burger van. A police investigation. An ecclesiastical court. A stag-do prank that escaped entirely from its creators' control. Yet beneath this lies something genuinely encouraging.

In an age often accused of indifference, dozens of people invested time, effort and care into ensuring that a stranger was treated with dignity.

Whether the contents proved to be human ashes or wood ash is perhaps not the most important part of the story.

The more important fact is that, when presented with what appeared to be someone's final remains, people chose compassion.

And, in the end, that is never something to be embarrassed about.



Newbury Racecourse, where the 'ashes' of Gary Bonsor were discovered

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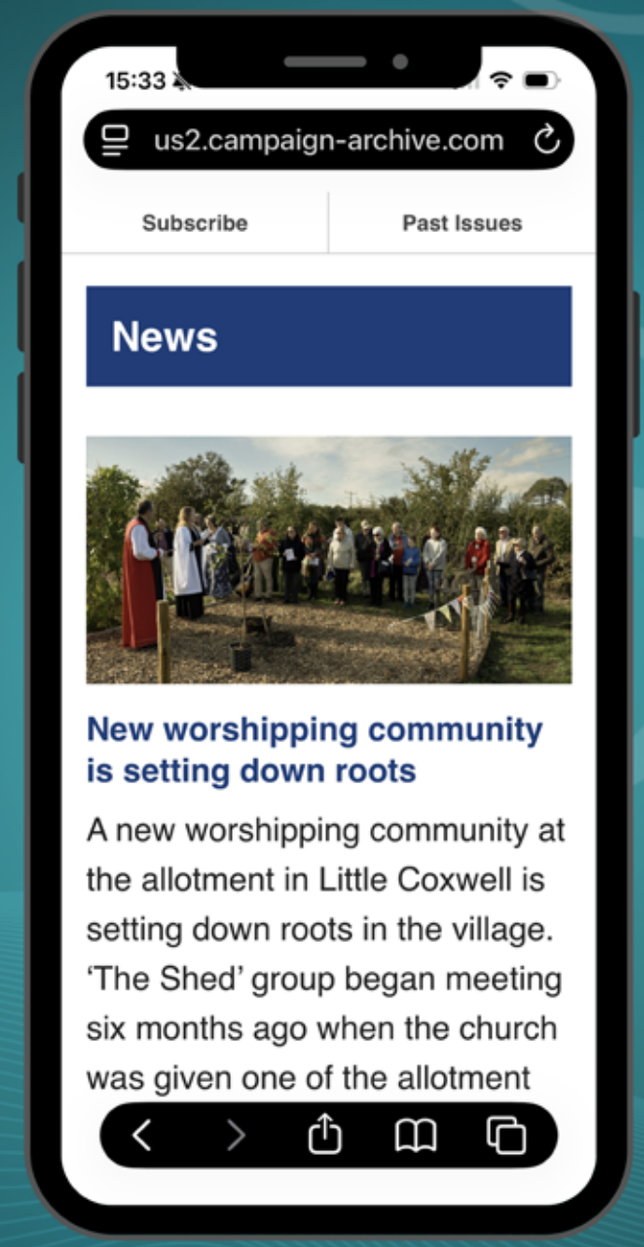

Friendships and faith amplified at diocese's adventure weekend

More than 40 years on from its inception, the Diocese of Oxford's annual youth camp continues to connect young people from different places



The Bishop of Reading threw herself into the less formal aspects of Amplify Adventure

More than 100 young people from across the Diocese of Oxford gathered this summer for the largest Amplify Adventure camp to date, coming together for a weekend of worship, friendship and outdoor adventure.

Held at the Adventure Plus site in West Oxfordshire, the camp blended energetic activities with opportunities for prayer and reflection. Alongside giant zorbs and water games, young people took part in worship, small-group devotions and discussions exploring faith and discipleship.

Amplify Adventure, formerly known as Yellow Braces, has been a fixture of diocesan youth ministry for more than 40 years. Relaunched under its new name in 2024, the camp continues to focus on helping young people deepen their relationship with God while building connections with peers from across the diocese.

For Kathryn Aboud, the diocese's discipleship enabler for children, young people and families, one of the defining features of the camp is the way young people are encouraged to shape it themselves.

"The camp captures our commitment to seeing young people not simply as recipients of ministry, but as active participants in God's mission," she says.

That commitment is reflected in the growing role played by young leaders, who help lead worship and influence the direction of the programme.

"We have intentionally increased opportunities for young people to take ownership and leadership within the camp," Kathryn explains.

"Young leaders play an increasingly active role in shaping the programme, leading worship, contributing to teaching and helping influence how the camp is run."



Amplify Adventure brought together more than 100 young people from across the Diocese of Oxford

For Kathryn, the value of Amplify Adventure extends far beyond a single weekend.

"We don't want to be crowd control, but to invest in the lives of young people," she says.

One of the most powerful aspects of the camp, she believes, is the way it connects young Christians from very different places.

"You can get one or two young people from a church right at the very top of the diocese, and one young person come from the very south of the diocese and see the friendships and connections made year after year," she says.

"These relationships help people realise they are part of something bigger and to go back to their church with a deeper sense of who God is."

James Wood, Children's and Youth Ministry Enabler (Buckingham) and Diocesan Schools Mission and Young Adults Lead, described the weekend as "full of joy, faith and a fair amount of chaos in the best possible way".

But what struck him most about this year's event was the leadership shown by the young people themselves.

"What stood out was how much of it was led by young people themselves," he says. "They led worship, activities, games and supported one another throughout the weekend."

> *It is so important for our young people to recognise that their faith is shared with their peers*

The camp's teaching centred on Jesus' words: "I am the vine; you are the branches", encouraging participants to reflect on what it means to remain rooted in God's love.

"It was wonderful to see young people making new friends, growing in confidence and discovering that their voices and gifts matter," James says.

The Bishop of Reading joined the event on the Sunday, celebrating Holy Communion before surprising participants with a super soaker water attack that quickly developed into a full-scale water fight.

Reflecting on her visit, Bishop Mary highlighted



This year's Amplify Adventure was full of 'joy, faith and a fair amount of chaos'

the significance of young Christians gathering together in such numbers.

"It is so important for our young people to recognise that their faith is shared with their peers," she says, "that there are others just like them who are seeking to live distinctively and to follow Jesus."

For those who may be one of only a handful of young people in their church, the experience can be particularly valuable.

"For this joyful weekend, they were among a significant majority, in ways that I hope encouraged them and built them up," she says.

She also admitted to thoroughly enjoying the less formal parts of the programme.

"It was a real joy for me to join Amplify Adventure for the Sunday, to worship with the camp, to preach and to take part in a water fight," she adds. "Something I enjoyed far too much!"

Among the campers, the response was equally enthusiastic. Naysa, 13, described Amplify as "a great way to bond with friends and strengthen your relationship with God, too", while Annabelle, 14, said simply: "It has really strengthened my faith."



As Amplify Adventure continues to grow, organisers hope it will remain a place where young people can encounter God, discover their gifts and gain confidence in their faith.

Judging by the enthusiasm and friendships on display this summer, it is a vision that is already taking root.

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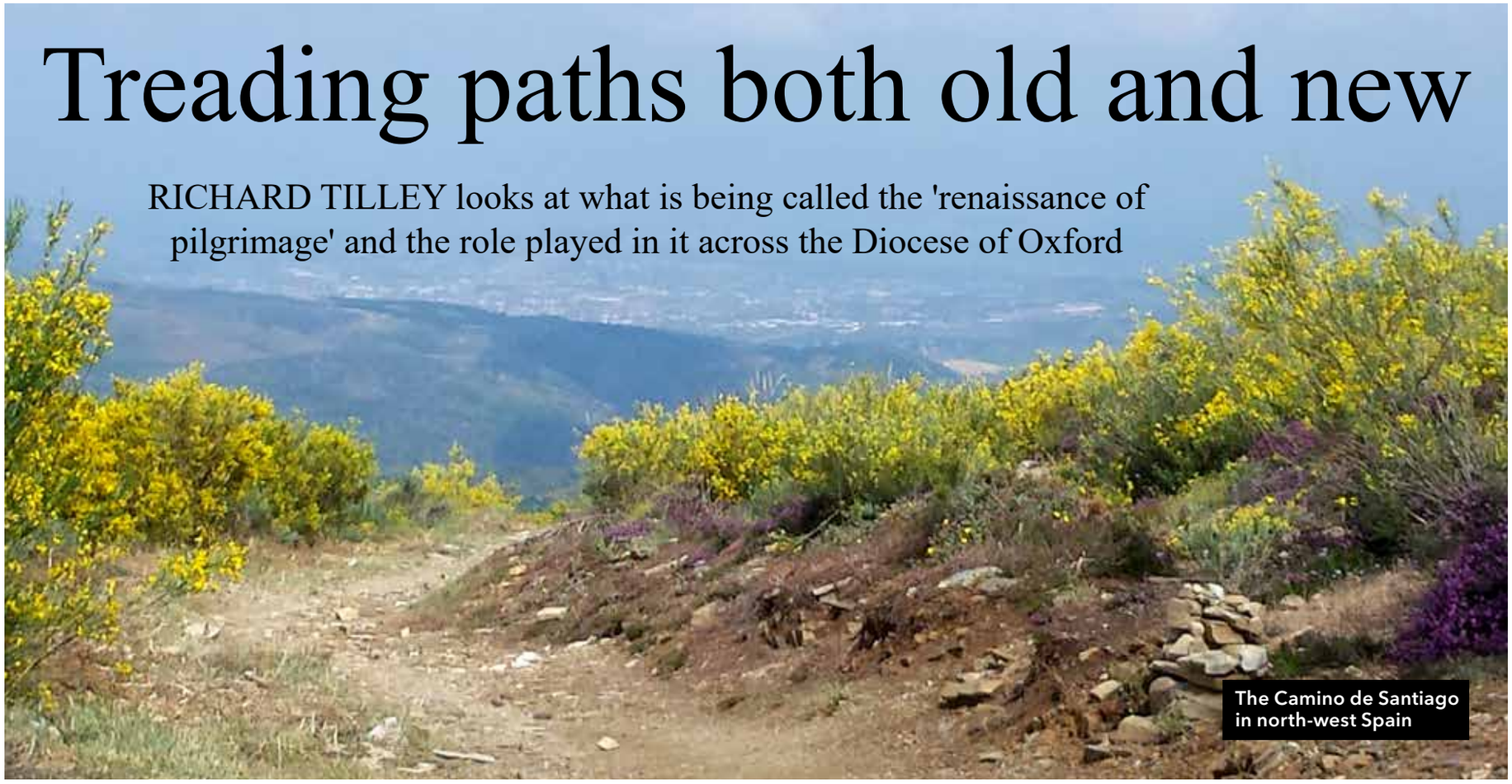
Our Diocese

Treading paths both old and new

RICHARD TILLEY looks at what is being called the 'renaissance of pilgrimage' and the role played in it across the Diocese of Oxford



The Camino de Santiago in north-west Spain

When a new milestone marker is installed in Oxford next spring, it will signal more than the addition of another wayfinding feature. It will mark Oxford's place on one of the great pilgrimage routes and provide further evidence of a revival taking place across Britain.

At Christ Church Cathedral, pilgrims have been visiting the Shrine of St Frideswide for centuries. The Saxon princess and founder of Oxford's original religious community was once among the most revered saints in Medieval England.

Her shrine drew pilgrims from across the country, including Catherine of Aragon, who prayed there in the hope of bearing a son.

Although pilgrimage to St Frideswide came to an abrupt end during the Reformation, when the shrine was destroyed on the orders of Henry VIII, the tradition has flourished of late.

Today hundreds of pilgrims each year make their way to Oxford to visit the reconstructed shrine in the cathedral's Latin Chapel.

Since 2024, however, Christ Church has become more than a pilgrimage destination. It is now also an official starting point on the Camino de Santiago, the pilgrimage route that ends at the cathedral of Santiago de Compostela in Spain.

Pilgrims leaving Oxford follow St Frideswide's Way – a route through churches, footpaths and sections of the Thames Path and Ridgeway National Trails to Reading Abbey.

The route initially followed the Thames Path for 40 miles between Oxford and Reading, but it was revised and updated this year, with 12 miles and 16 more churches added.

At Reading, pilgrims join the existing St James' Way to Southampton – starting from the Roman Catholic Church of St James in the grounds of Reading Abbey.

> *Supporters of pilgrimage believe that the appeal lies partly in the turbulent nature of modern life*

The St James' Way, which was waymarked in 2022, runs for 68 miles and takes in Winchester before finishing at God's House Tower in Southampton.

In its first year, just a few dozen pilgrims walked the route through Berkshire and Hampshire to the South Coast. Last year, the number doing so had risen to several thousand.



The Shrine of St Frideswide in Christ Church Cathedral, now a starting point for the Camino de Santiago in the UK

The role of Oxford and Reading in pilgrimage reflects a much broader trend. Across Britain, a growing number of people are setting out on journeys to places of worship in search of meaning and spiritual connection.

From revived Medieval paths to newly created walking routes, pilgrimage has moved from the margins to the mainstream. Once regarded as a niche religious activity, it is now attracting people from a wide range of backgrounds, including many with little or no formal connection to Christianity.

Some observers have even described Britain as experiencing a pilgrimage renaissance. Historic churches, cathedrals and shrines are reporting growing interest from visitors seeking not only heritage and architecture but also opportunities to pause and make sense of their lives.

Pilgrimage was once a defining feature of Medieval religious life. Following the Reformation, however, many shrines were dismantled and the practice largely disappeared. Although there were small-scale revivals during the 19th and 20th centuries, widespread public interest only began to return in recent decades.

One of the most striking examples can be seen on the Camino de Santiago itself. Just 209 pilgrims completed the route in 1980. By 2025, annual numbers had risen to more than 530,000.

Supporters of pilgrimage believe that the appeal lies partly in the turbulent nature of modern life.

The simplicity of pilgrimage is central to its attraction. Walking for days, or even weeks, creates space for contemplation. While pilgrims of earlier centuries often travelled to seek God's guidance, forgiveness or healing, today's walkers

frequently combine spiritual exploration with personal reflection and physical challenge.

Guy Hayward, co-founder and director of the British Pilgrimage Trust, believes the resurgence reflects a deep cultural need.

"Pilgrimage is growing in popularity because people are searching for something deeper than consumption," he says. "In a culture that often tells us that happiness can be bought, many people are discovering that meaning, purpose and belonging cannot."

He argues that pilgrimage's appeal also lies in its accessibility.

"One reason pilgrimage resonates today is that it doesn't require people to sign up to a particular set of beliefs. It is an ancient practice that can meet people wherever they are. Whether someone arrives with faith, a spiritual curiosity or no religious framework at all, the journey creates space for reflection and transformation."

Ultimately, Guy sees pilgrimage as a response to some of the defining challenges of the age.

"We face challenges such as environmental anxiety, loneliness, digital overload and social fragmentation. Pilgrimage is not a new invention designed to solve modern problems. It is an ancient practice that has endured because it speaks to enduring human needs.

"In many ways, pilgrimage offers an ancient answer to the challenges of modern times."

Research suggests the resurgent interest is pilgrimage is substantial. A YouGov survey commissioned by the British Pilgrimage Trust found that 9.2 per cent of adults have already completed a pilgrimage, while a further 20 per cent would like to undertake one.

Among those who have made a pilgrimage, 40 per cent identified as Christian, ten per cent belonged to other faiths and 40 per cent described themselves as spiritual but not religious.

For churches, the revival offers a significant opportunity. Research among cathedral and church visitors consistently shows that even those arriving primarily as tourists often experience something deeper.

Visitors speak of lighting candles, attending services, sitting quietly in reflection and contemplating questions of faith and purpose.

Initiatives have emerged to help churches respond. Faith in the North has developed resources enabling churches to become designated Pilgrim Places, encouraging them

> *"The hall has been welcoming pilgrims for three years and is the only registered Sanctuary in the diocese*



St Frideswide's Way follows the Thames Path through Abingdon and takes in St Helen's Church



Above: Reading Abbey, the start of the St James' Way. Below: Sulhamstead & Ufton Nervet Village Hall, which is the only British Pilgrimage Trust-accredited Sanctuary in the Diocese of Oxford

to be welcoming and hospitable spaces where visitors can rest, reflect and explore faith.

That emphasis on hospitality has become increasingly important as more people undertake longer pilgrimages.

One challenge identified by the British Pilgrimage Trust is cost. Multi-day pilgrimages can quickly become expensive if walkers rely on commercial accommodation, potentially placing them beyond the reach of many people.

In response, the trust has established a growing network of Sanctuaries. These simple, affordable overnight stops are often churches, church halls and village halls, although some operate from sports pavilions, farm buildings or campsites.

One such sanctuary is Sulhamstead & Ufton Nervet Village Hall on the St James' Way just south of Reading. The hall has been welcoming pilgrims for the past three years and is the only registered Sanctuary in the Diocese of Oxford.

Hall trustee Simon Lindley says the arrangement benefits both pilgrims and the local community.

"It is a way of generating income. We don't charge but we ask that pilgrims consider making a donation, which they do," he says.

"This is also something that our insurance firm was really happy about, because having people in the hall at night is better for security."



The hall typically hosts two or three pilgrim groups or individuals each month, with visitors contacting the trustees in advance and being met on arrival.

"I would wholeheartedly recommend it," says Simon.

It is a small initiative, but one that captures the wider spirit of Britain's pilgrimage revival.

Whether it is a Medieval shrine in the heart of Oxford, a newly established Camino route crossing southern England or a village hall opening its doors to weary walkers, pilgrimage is increasingly being understood not simply as a religious practice but as a way of responding to some of the deepest questions of contemporary life.

To find out more about the British Pilgrimage Trust Sanctuary Network, or to register a venue as an official sanctuary, visit britishpilgrimage.org/sanctuary-network.



Participants in last year's YouShape programme during their pilgrimage

A pioneering pathway that is deepening faith

We look back on the first year of YouShape – a journey of discipleship, community and discovery for young adults

A new cohort of young adults has just begun the Diocese of Oxford's YouShape programme, building on a pioneering first year that saw faith deepen, friendships flourish and vocations explored.

This autumn a new group of young adults is setting out on a journey of discipleship, community and discovery. The second year of YouShape, the diocese's year-long discipleship and leadership programme for 18- to 30-year-olds, is now under way, welcoming a fresh cohort ready to explore where God may be calling them.

Their journey follows in the footsteps of the first YouShape participants, whose pilot year concluded this summer after 12 months of worship, learning, pilgrimage, prayer and friendship.

Eighteen young adults from hubs in Oxford, Aylesbury and High Wycombe completed the inaugural year, gathering with family, friends and supporters at Christ Church in Oxford for a commissioning service in July.

The celebration marked the culmination of one chapter and the beginning of another, sending participants back into their communities with renewed confidence to serve God where they are.

> *The sense of mutual support and encouragement left a lasting impression on many participants*

For many, YouShape proved to be far more than a programme.

Designed as a year-long journey of discipleship and leadership, YouShape invites young adults to grow in faith through monthly hub gatherings, residential experiences, retreats and pilgrimage. Participants learn and practise spiritual disciplines, explore vocation and calling, and discover how faith can be lived out in everyday life.

The first cohort quickly discovered that some of the most important growth happened through community.

At the first-ever YouShape residential at the end of last year, 18 young adults gathered from across the three hubs for a weekend focused on discipleship and belonging. Between worship and reflection, there was space for conversations by the fire, shared meals, walks outdoors and plenty of laughter.

"It felt safe and really warm," one participant reflected afterwards. Another spoke of the joy of "getting closer to God and feeling connected to him again".

One of the year's defining experiences was a shared pilgrimage.

Reflecting on that experience, Darius, from the Oxford Hub, said: "I was encouraged by many of the people. From the leaders who supported me on the first day when I thought I couldn't climb Mam Tor, to people carrying my bag on the last day when I was also struggling, I felt really loved and appreciated."



July's commissioning service at Christ Church



Rest and reflection during this year's pilgrimage

The sense of mutual support and encouragement left a lasting impression on many participants.

Beth, from the Aylesbury Hub, summed up her experience of the year in just a few words: "Soul and spirit changing."

As the second cohort begins, the structure of the programme remains rooted in the same vision: helping young adults deepen their relationship with Jesus while discerning how God is calling them to live and serve.

Over the coming year they will gather monthly in local hubs for food, prayer, scripture and conversation. They will meet together for a residential weekend, share a retreat day, undertake a pilgrimage and, next July, gather once again for commissioning and celebration.

Yet organisers are clear that YouShape is not simply a course to complete. It is an invitation to develop habits and practices that sustain a lifelong journey of faith, while building friendships with others navigating similar questions about vocation, discipleship and service.

The commissioning service in July celebrated what God had done through the first year. The start of the new cohort suggests that story is only just beginning.

For the young adults now embarking on their own YouShape journey, the invitation is the same: to pay attention to God, to grow in community, and to discover how their gifts might become a gift to the world around them.

Making spaces in which people can grow in their faith

MATT RAYNER reflects on the joys and challenges he has encountered in his first year of curacy at Hazlemere Church

Life as a curate is now well under way at Hazlemere Church, where I previously served as an ordinand. It has been an incredibly encouraging season, playing a part in what God is doing across our three locations.

Just before my curacy began, in September 2025, I had the privilege of helping to launch a new congregation at our newly refurbished Good Shepherd site in Widmer End.

Several families moved from our packed Manor Farm congregation to join those who have faithfully served that community for many years, people who had been praying and longing to see God do a new thing.

Since then, we have seen the congregation grow, a midweek toddler group begin, worship nights come to life, and a new evening young adult community take shape.

With growth comes a deepened sense of responsibility and discernment over those the Lord has entrusted to us.

One of the recurring themes I have found in stepping into full-time ministry is how, throughout Scripture, God calls people to stand in the gap between Himself and His people.

That has often been where I've found myself, both one of the most rewarding and most challenging aspects of ministry.

It involves creating spaces where people can encounter Jesus, grow in their faith and flourish in who God is calling them to be, while also walking closely with them through moments of doubt, grief, questioning, and struggle.



Revd Matt (second left) says his first year of curacy has been a 'steep learning curve'

While it is a real blessing to see so much happening at Hazlemere Church, there has also been a steep learning curve in discovering how to live out this calling at a pace and rhythm that honours those I serve, while also nurturing my own relationship with Christ.



Revd Matt supported by friends and family at his ordination service

> *Much of ministry happens in everyday spaces, like the school run, through intentional conversations*

I have been greatly supported in this by an incredibly wise team of clergy and staff, whose guidance has been invaluable in these early stages of frontline ministry.

One of the most meaningful gifts I received before my ordination was from my wife, Naomi – a framed piece titled *A Liturgy for Ordination*.

It has become something of an anchor for me. It reads: "Father God, You have called me by name. You have made my path straight. In everything I do, let me fully surrender to You. Amen."

I keep it in my office and return to it often, especially before beginning any task.

It serves as a reminder not to strive for things outside of God's will, but to rest in the truth that my calling and worth are found entirely in Him.

In moments when ministry feels heavy or all-consuming, this has helped to lighten the load.

With two young children who are still figuring out what their dad actually does, it has been a joy to build strong relationships with their school, just up the road from the congregation I lead.

I am learning that much of ministry happens in everyday spaces, like the school run, through intentional conversations with parents and teachers.

Many have grown curious about the faith that has led me into this calling, and it has been exciting to see some of them attend our community events Last year, around 200 people joined us for our 'Rowdy Carols', a joyful mix of Christmas chart hits, traditional carols and a hog roast, which was a wonderful moment of connection with the wider community.

It continues to amaze me how much God can do when we give Him our full 'yes'.

As I step further into ordained ministry, my desire is to begin each day with that same wholehearted response, saying 'yes' to where He is leading, to those He is entrusting to me, and to the work He wants to do within me, so that I might represent Him faithfully in my community and beyond.

Creating a compelling vision for the future of religious education

The Government is set to consult on plans for religious education to be part of the national curriculum for the first time. Oxford Diocesan Board of Education director **TONY WILSON** talks about his role in the proposals.

There are moments in education when it becomes clear that change is not only desirable but necessary. For me, the growing momentum behind bringing religious education into England's national curriculum is one of those moments.

Having served on the Religious Education Expert Advisery Task and Finish Group, I have had the privilege of working alongside colleagues from an extraordinarily diverse range of backgrounds and perspectives. Representatives of different faith traditions, secular organisations, educational bodies and professional associations came together around a shared question: what knowledge and understanding about religion, belief and worldviews do young people need in order to flourish in modern Britain?

What makes this work remarkable is not simply the outcome, but the process itself. In a field that has often been characterised by competing viewpoints and strongly held convictions, we found common ground. We listened carefully to one another. We challenged assumptions. We sought consensus rather than victory. That spirit of collaboration gives me real hope for the future.

The case for change is compelling. Religious education remains a compulsory subject, yet it currently sits outside the national curriculum. As a result, the experience of pupils can vary significantly depending on where they live or which school they attend. Over many years,

> *It nurtures curiosity rather than suspicion, understanding rather than prejudice, and dialogue rather than division*

concerns have grown about inconsistency in both the content and quality of provision. At a time when our society is becoming increasingly diverse and complex, that inconsistency matters.

I believe every child and young person deserves access to high-quality religious education. Not because RE is simply about learning facts regarding religions and beliefs, but because it helps pupils make sense of the world around them. It enables them to encounter different perspectives, wrestle with profound questions of meaning and purpose, and develop the understanding needed to live well alongside people whose experiences and convictions may differ from their own.

In recent years, we have witnessed increasing social division and misunderstanding. Against that backdrop, religious education has an essential role to play. Done well, it nurtures curiosity



Pupils at Wootton St Peter's Church of England Primary School, near Oxford

rather than suspicion, understanding rather than prejudice, and dialogue rather than division. It helps young people appreciate both the things that distinguish us and the values that unite us.

That is why I have long believed that the inclusion of religious education within the national curriculum is an important and necessary step.

Establishing a nationally consistent framework would help ensure that all pupils encounter a broad and balanced understanding of religion and worldviews, while still allowing schools the flexibility to build upon those expectations in ways that reflect their own contexts and communities.

As someone working within the Church of England's education system, I am also encouraged that these proposals recognise the distinctive contribution made by Church schools.

The suggested framework creates greater consistency while preserving the freedom for schools with a religious character to continue delivering rich and distinctive provision that is rooted in their vision and ethos.

Of course, curriculum reform on its own is not enough. If we are serious about raising standards, we must also invest in teachers. High-quality religious education depends upon knowledgeable, confident and well-supported professionals.

The challenges around recruitment, training and subject expertise are real and must form part of the conversation as reforms progress.

Yet despite those challenges, I remain deeply optimistic.

The most important outcome of this process has been the development of a genuinely shared vision. People and organisations that do not agree on every issue have nevertheless found agreement on a fundamental principle: that all children and young people should have the opportunity to learn about religion, belief and worldviews in a way that is balanced and intellectually rich.

For me, it has been both an honour and a privilege to contribute to that work. I have seen first-hand what can be achieved when people approach complex questions with humility and a commitment to the common good.

A broad coalition has come together to articulate a compelling vision for the future of RE.

It is my hope that this vision becomes a reality.

If it does, future generations of children and young people will benefit from an education that equips them not only with knowledge about faiths and worldviews, but also with the wisdom and empathy needed to thrive in a diverse and interconnected society.



Imam Monawar Hussain with Bishop Steven and Louise Gordon from the Oxford Jewish Congregation

From lunch to ten years of friendship

Imam Monawar Hussain on the role Bishop Steven and the Diocese of Oxford have played in the flourishing of interfaith

When Imam Monawar Hussain looks back on the past decade working in interfaith in the Thames Valley, what stands out is not a particular meeting, media statement or public event. It is friendship.

"One of the first things I wanted to do when the new Bishop of Oxford started back in 2016 was to invite him to lunch," the co-chair of the Oxfordshire and Thames Valley Civic, Community and Faith Leaders groups recalls of the Rt Revd Dr Steven Croft's arrival at the Diocese of Oxford.

What began as a welcome meal grew into a partnership that would help guide Oxfordshire and the Thames Valley through some of the most challenging moments faced by faith communities in recent years.

"That was the start of a decade of friendship and of working together," says Monawar. "It was ten years of real trust during which Bishop Steven's wisdom was amazing to tap into.

"Working with him as we drove forward the development of the Oxfordshire and Thames Valley Civic, Community and Faith Leaders groups has been a privilege."

With Bishop Steven now retired after ten years leading the diocese, few people are better placed than Monawar to reflect on one of the defining aspects of his ministry: a commitment to interfaith relationships that has helped make Oxfordshire and the Thames Valley examples of how communities can work together across faith boundaries, even during the most difficult times.

"We've seen a real commitment to interfaith within the Church in Oxfordshire and the Thames Valley," Monawar says. "And at the head of that has been Bishop Steven with his leadership, vision and clarity in terms of purpose."

Monawar's own contribution to interfaith work is significant.

An executive committee member of the World Congress of Faiths, he has been a recipient of the Sternberg Interfaith Gold Medallion, previous winners of which include Pope John Paul II.

Monawar leads the national United for Peace: Communities United Against Extremism initiative, which builds on his work as imam at Eton College, where he developed the first educational programme in the West tackling the radicalisation of young Muslims.

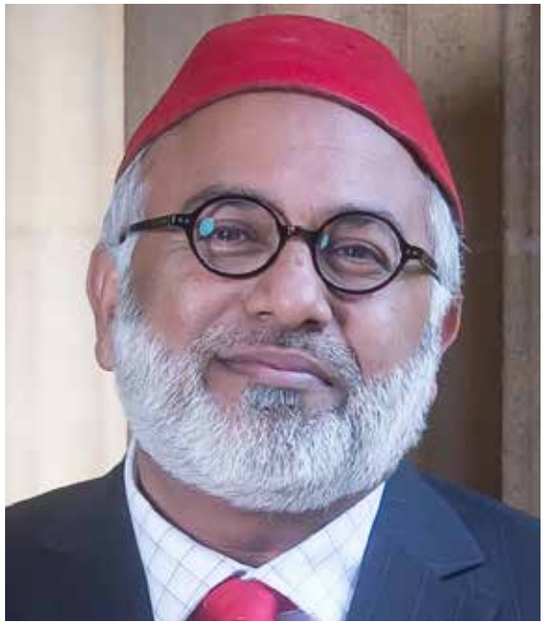
And he is also the founder of The Oxford Foundation – which aims to promote trust between faiths and inspire young Muslims to achieve and contribute in a meaningful way to British society – as well as being a founding member of the Oxford Council of Faiths.

"I see interfaith as one of the great legacies of Bishop Steven," Monawar says. "He is a very humble man, an exceptionally thoughtful person and his counsel has been full of wisdom.

"Even within a group where people are aligned on goal and purpose there have been times when people who come from different backgrounds and have different considerations are going to see certain things differently. Bishop Steven's tact and diplomacy ensured that we always stayed united for peace.

"Good leadership with the motivation and energy to build relationships has been central to what has made interfaith particularly powerful here. You also need leaders who are willing to listen to each other and to understand each other. Bishop Steven ticked all of those boxes.

> *We've seen a real commitment to interfaith within the Church in Oxfordshire and the Thames Valley*



Imam Monawar Hussain

"Together we were able to able to establish the Oxfordshire Civic, Community and Faith Leaders group and then the Thames Valley group. In those groups we were able to ask ourselves what, in the most difficult and grim situations, can we do and how can we respond?"

Monawar's own journey into interfaith leadership began long before he met Bishop Steven.

His father ran a petrol station near Henley-on-Thames, and Monawar followed in his footsteps, running a garage in Clifton Hampden, near Abingdon, between 1988 and 2009.

He spent many years combining work with study at Oxford Polytechnic and then at Oxford's Westminster College. For a time, he imagined his future might remain in business. Then life took an unexpected turn.

"My wonderful mother had a stroke and was very disabled for about a year and a half," he says. "It was like an earthquake moment. A moment where I realised I didn't have the drive for business."

Having just reached the end of his theology degree at Westminster College, he told his tutor that he wanted to become an imam. He was directed towards the Muslim College in



Bishop Steven and Monawar Hussain

London and, in particular, Sheikh Zaki Badawi, an influential Muslim scholar whose interfaith work would profoundly shape Monawar's future ministry.

"Interfaith has always been at the core of what I am doing as an imam," he says. "Sheikh Zaki Badawi had so much knowledge in this area and, importantly, bags and bags of wisdom."

Badawi championed the idea that Islam should find authentic expression within British culture, something Monawar describes as "a breath of fresh air". That vision of 'a British Islam' has underpinned much of Monawar's interfaith work.

While he acknowledges the significant role played by Bishop Steven in the flourishing of interfaith in the region, Monawar is keen to recognise the contribution of the wider diocese and the enthusiasm he has encountered among clergy and congregations for engaging with neighbours of other faiths.

"The passion for interfaith within the Church of England in the area has been incredible. The success of building relationships has been in large part down to them."

He has seen churches host interfaith gatherings, support community initiatives and work alongside mosques on practical projects that strengthen neighbourhoods.

> *We would really want to see young leaders from within the Church of England coming forward*

"Good faith means working for the common good of all of us," he says.

"If we have an inclusive and thriving society in which people respect each other and work together and have strong friendships, work for the vulnerable and take care of them, and take care of our communities, then we have a chance of making a genuine impact."

As Bishop Steven's retirement opens a new chapter for the diocese, Monawar hopes that commitment to relationship-building remains central. He would particularly like to see a new generation of leaders emerge, including younger voices from within the Church of England.

"We would really want to see young leaders from within the Church of England coming forward," he says. "We must develop that ability to have those difficult conversations honestly and be a group of people of different faiths who can move forward together in promoting the common good."

In an age of increasing division and polarisation, he believes the need for such leadership is only becoming more urgent.

"We are living in a toxic and divisive culture that is going to get worse before it gets better," he says. "So, we need people who embrace diversity and who embrace each other as brother and sister, as fellow human beings in one family."

It is a vision he believes Bishop Steven embodied throughout his time in Oxford.

"The people leading the Diocese of Oxford and the people within it have demonstrated that for the last quarter of a century while I have been involved in interfaith around here," he says.

Then comes the verdict of a friend reflecting on ten years of shared work and shared purpose.

"Bishop Steven has left a great legacy," says Monawar. "But we need to build on that."

Obituary

DAVID WINTER was an author, former head of religious affairs at the BBC and parish priest in both Berkshire and Oxfordshire



The Revd Canon David Winter – writer, broadcaster and former parish priest in the Diocese of Oxford who served as head of religious broadcasting at the BBC – has died at the age of 96.

Revd Canon David was well known for his work in religious broadcasting and particularly for his contributions to *Thought for the Day* on Radio 4 and regular columns in *Church Times*.

He was the author of more than 50 books, including his autobiography, *Winter's Tale*, which he completed just before his wife, Christine, died in 2002.

Revd Canon David served as priest-in-charge at St Bartholomew's, Ducklington, in West Oxfordshire from 1989 to 1995, and then at St Mark's, Cold Ash, in West Berkshire.

Born in 1929 in north London, Revd Canon David was evacuated to Wales during the war, becoming fluent in Welsh, his grandmother's native language. He did National Service as a nursing assistant and read English at King's College, London.

After some years of teaching, he went into journalism and eventually became editor of the evangelical magazine *Crusade*.

He came to know the singer Cliff Richard and encouraged his conversion, remaining a mentor and friend, sometimes helping with song lyrics.

A founding member of London's Arts Centre Group, he helped establish Christian charity Tearfund and worked with Richard on projects that included co-writing the film *Two a Penny*.

He was the natural choice to write a celebrity biography, *New Singer: New Song*, which covered Richard's story into the late 1960s.

Revd Canon David joined the BBC in 1971 as editor of the new radio programme, *Sunday*, eventually rising to become head of religious broadcasting.

Ordained in the mid 1980s, Revd Canon David was parish priest of St Bartholomew's, Ducklington, and then at St Mark's, Cold Ash, until he retired and moved to Clifton Hampden, near Abingdon.

He was a columnist and book reviewer for *Church Times* for 28 years up until 2019 and was also a member of the committee responsible for overseeing the Diocese of Oxford's media relations.

Sarah Meyrick, now editor at *Church Times* but previously director of communications for the Diocese of Oxford, said of him: "An unassuming man, he wore his significant experience at the BBC lightly, and provided a great deal of quiet encouragement and support for trying out new ideas and approaches."

She added: "Conversations were warm, unhurried, and rich with insight. He was the very best kind of mentor."

His funeral took place at St Mark's Church, Cold Ash, on 18 September.





Our Churches



All Saints' Church in Bisham is notable for its Norman tower, its monuments and its stunning setting on the River Thames

Standing on a small rise above the Thames just upstream from Marlow, All Saints' Church in Bisham is a historic village church whose roots stretch back to at least the time of the Domesday Book in the late 11th century.

The most striking part of the building is its 12th-century Norman tower, built from local clunch stone and topped with 15th-century battlements. The church was restored and augmented over the following centuries, particularly during a major Gothic makeover in the mid 19th century.

What makes All Saints' truly special, however, is not its architecture and its setting but its fine collection of monuments. The church's Hoby Chapel contains some of the finest late Tudor and early Stuart funerary sculpture in England, including the alabaster tombs of Sir Philip and Sir Thomas Hoby and Lady Elizabeth Hoby.

The church also has fascinating connections to both literature and major historical figures.

One of the figures commemorated here, Sir Thomas Hoby, is thought to have inspired the character of Malvolio in Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night*, while Lady Elizabeth Hoby was the aunt



of the great philosopher and scientist Sir Francis Bacon.

Another highlight is the Hoby Window, dating from around 1600. Unlike traditional stained glass, it uses an enamel technique.

Make a day of it

The lovely town of Marlow with its shops, pubs and cafes is a short walk away. Fancy a woodland walk? Bisham Woods is a Site of Special Scientific Interest owned and run by the Woodland Trust.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