

Growing Vocations 2026

Best Practice Guide for Encouraging
Ordained Vocations in a Diocese

Introduction

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 diocesan practices that led to their recommendation.

A report has been published entitled 'Ordained Vocations 2021-25'. We would recommend you reading the full findings of that report alongside this 'Best Practice Guide' which is the fruit of interviews with approximately half of the diocesan leads for vocations across the Church of England. Alongside this, we have also produced a Good Practice Guide for Parishes which can be read alongside this guide.

From the 'Ordination Vocations 2021-25' report - A snapshot of our current position

The research presented the numbers and characteristics of ordinands, candidates being recommended by Panel for training for ordained ministry within the Church of England in the seasons 2021/22 to 2024/25. A national benchmark of 665 new ordinands has been used to provide a comparator for the actual number of candidates required to enter training for the Church of England to maintain our existing numbers of clergy.

Clearly 2021-2025 has been significantly impacted by the pandemic, clergy wellbeing and other factors but in this period:

1. Only 11% of parishes and 20% of benefices have sent a candidate to Stage 2 of the discernment process.
2. Nationally, only 63% of the benchmark number of candidates required are currently being recommended for training.
3. Five from forty-two dioceses have met their proportional benchmark when measured against attendance of those aged 18-69.
4. To achieve the benchmark of 665 candidates annually, approximately 1.92 candidates per 1,000 adult weekly attenders aged 18-69 are required each year.
5. The proportion of candidates aged under 32 has fallen from 28% to 17%.
6. The proportion of candidates of Global Majority Heritage has increased to 14%.
7. The proportion of candidates declaring a disability has increased to 13%.
8. Parishes in the most deprived areas are sending around 1.4 candidates pa per 1000 attenders aged 18-69 pa vs the least deprived are sending only 1.1 candidates pa per 1000 attenders aged 18-69.
9. Half of all dioceses have at least 30% of their clergy aged over 60.

With this background and sense of urgency from the report established we will share the best practice the team gleaned from our research interviews.

Best Practice for Encouraging Ordained Vocations

We have located **ten areas of best practice**, from our interviews with Diocesan Lead Officers across the Church of England. An accessible checklist can be found at the back of this document to form the basis of a development plan for your diocese in encouraging ordained vocations.

The 10 areas are:

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| 1. The Role of Prayer | 6. The Significance of Existing Clergy |
| 2. Creating a Theological Narrative | 7. The Significance of the Lay Community |
| 3. Nurturing a Healthy Diocesan Culture | 8. Making Ordained Vocations Accessible |
| 4. The Significance of Bishops and Senior Teams | 9. Clarity of the Discernment Process |
| 5. The Significance of the Vocational Lead | 10. Being 'after recommendation' ready |

The Role of Prayer

Is prayer at the heart of what you do in your diocese in growing vocations? It may be helpful to consider:

- Using the week of Vocations Sunday to have a week of focused prayer around vocations across the parishes of the diocese using stories of calling to encourage people to pray
- Encouraging prayer for vocations regularly in the vocations team, Bishop's Staff Team, Bishop's Council, Deanery and Diocesan synod level and other places within diocesan life
- Making sure prayer for vocations is incorporated into Diocesan Prayer cycles
- Utilising Diocesan events to pray for people in different ministries – Lay ministry services, LLM/Reader Licensing, youth and children's events, ordinations.

Creating a Theological Narrative

Does your diocese have a theological narrative of vocation? For instance, in the Diocese of Sheffield their theology is built on the idea that everyone who follows Christ has received a call from Jesus which they live out in their families, workplaces, churches and communities. They always state that everyone who trusts in Jesus has received a vocation already.

The aim of their Vocations Department is to *normalise, validate, encourage* and *equip* every Christian in all our churches in the call of God in their life. In encouraging everyone in their vocation, they believe that ordained vocations will naturally grow out of that.

Nurturing a Healthy Diocesan Culture

Disciple Makers – whilst we long to raise up ordained vocations from those disciples we are developing already it is helpful to keep our attention on the great commission of Jesus and the Church of England's vocation to proclaim the good news of Jesus Christ afresh in each generation to the people of England, alongside her vision and priorities. As we prayerfully and faithfully lean into 'our reason for being' as a priority we are likely to yield new disciples from which transformative ordained vocations will be drawn. We cannot solely rely on encouraging vocation from those who know and love God already.

Attitude – dioceses cited attitudes such as warmth, vulnerability, approachability, enthusiasm and accessibility from the vocations team, wider mission and ministry teams, and senior team as helpful in creating an encouraging environment for those looking to explore vocation.

Collaboration – understanding that it is the role of the whole of the body of Christ in encouraging vocations in us all. Making sure that departments, senior teams, cathedrals, clergy and parishes are all included and linked together in thinking about their part in raising vocations.

Intentionality – Faith-filled vision, strategy, and brave resourcing have been seen to help produce ordained vocations. Schemes such as the Ministry Experience Scheme (MES), short just looking courses, and brave targets for stipendiary curate posts have contributed towards providing vocations.

The Significance of Bishops and Senior Teams

Bishops were repeatedly identified as having a significant influence on vocational culture through personal encouragement, visibility and prioritisation of vocations within diocesan strategy.

Dioceses with stronger vocational outcomes demonstrate clear vision, intentional resourcing and visible support from bishops and senior leaders. Senior Teams getting behind vocations and understanding a sense of urgency is very helpful.

Possibilities for Bishops and Senior Teams to consider:

- Working with the vocations team to draw up a vocations strategy
- Having vocations as a regular or standing agenda item on the BST agenda
- Resourcing of vocations teams and future curacy posts as a priority
- Using preaching engagements, confirmations, study days, items and addresses at deanery and diocesan synods to promote vocations
- Personally encouraging those you encounter to speak further to their incumbent and the vocations team about vocation
- Contact through attending vocations roadshows, short exploration courses, discernment groups and hosting ordinand hospitality events
- Encouraging vocations at large events such as ordinations

The Significance of the Vocational Lead

In our interviews we were conscious of the immense job Vocational Leads (with all their various role titles) do in discerning, accompanying and encouraging the next generation of ordained leaders. You have one of the most important strategic jobs in the Church of England and we hope you feel supported by the national team and your diocesan teams.

For the senior diocesan team to consider:

- Are we pastorally caring for our Vocations Lead and team?
- Are we strategically supporting them with our presence and attention to a clear vocations plan across the diocese?
- Are we resourcing them adequately as a team?

We have noticed about the Vocational Leads:

- The premium you put upon warmth, approachability and accessibility
- The curation of a prayerful and pastorally appropriate discernment process
- Your commitment to build wider teams of paid/volunteer lay/clergy people to support you in your work with candidates
- The building of pathways and bespoke support given to increase the diversity of our candidates including the addition of specialist team members to aid this
- Your networking with and encouragement and training of parish incumbents
- Your emotional intelligence and self-awareness in sharing your gatekeeper role
- Your commitment to work joyfully across the mixed ecology and traditions of the church
- Your desire to efficiently move candidates through the process in a 12-18 month timeframe wherever possible

The Significance of Existing Clergy

It is likely that an incumbent or another clergy person is instrumental in the call to ordained ministry, as an inspiration, encourager or facilitator. They are nearly always the first port of call for disciples as they consider their calling, so they are a vital part of the discernment process. It is important that we equip and value our clergy as the frontline in raising all vocations including ordained vocation.

Ordinands and curates can be excellent people to spot and nurture vocation too. As people going through the process or who have recently moved into ordained ministry, they are often attentive and attuned to looking out for people not so far from where they have been themselves. They can also be useful fresh eyes to God's people in a place.

Vocations Teams and Senior Leaders may want to give some attention to:

- Equipping clergy to nurture and identify all types of vocation amongst their people. This may include conversations, preaching and short courses.
- Helping clergy to appropriately share ministry by giving opportunities, for example, in preaching, service leading, small group leadership and social action ministry leadership so people can try things and grow in giftings
- Enabling clergy to have good vocational conversations with their people
- Using our clergy who are good at raising up vocation to reflect upon this with other clergy
- Helping clergy to understand they are a gatekeeper, reflect upon this, and will need the wider vocations team to discern with them in some circumstances
- Utilising the corresponding Good Practice Guide for parishes to help train clergy in the diocese

The Significance of the Lay Community

The whole body of Christ has the potential to see and encourage the gifts and vocation in one another. The lay community will often know one another at a deeper level than clergy can so will see gifts that clergy may not. It is also true that everyone who trusts in Jesus has received a vocation already. Therefore, our lay community is key in identifying and raising up vocation.

It may be helpful to think about:

- Equipping the lay community to identify vocation and gifting in one another
- Making sure parish clergy and diocesan teams are offering space, training and opportunity for people to step into various aspects of Christian ministry to develop their gifts and vocation
- Understanding that vocation can grow, change and develop over time. Could ministry and calling currently being exercised by members of our lay community be changing into something new including ordained ministry?

Making Ordained Vocations Accessible

- Pre-Discernment Process

In addition to all the conditions we have tried to establish already in the guide here are some ways we have found where we can meet people where they are to encourage vocation:

- **Websites and social media** – making sure your website is crystal clear about how to find out about ordained ministry. Where's the drop-down link? What's the right language for a first-time enquirer? They may have a sense of calling to something, but would they equate that with the word 'vocation' or 'ordination'? Is it clear who to contact? Are there great stories, pictures and films of a range of people who may look like the enquirer? Are you regularly featuring those stories, pictures and films on your social media content too?
- **Roadshows and exploratory evenings** – many dioceses run roadshows where they showcase different vocations. Archdeaconry or deanery in person or online evening or Saturday tasters are a good starting point.
- **Short courses** – fruitful dioceses are running short 3-6 week in person or online evening courses for anyone to come to find out more. From there people can be plugged into the first steps of the discernment process straight away if appropriate for them.
- **Accessible pathways** – Accessible pathways into discernment, including Ministry Experience Schemes (18-29-year-olds), local training opportunities and diocesan vocations events, are associated with stronger vocational engagement.
- **Diverse vocations teams** – People often think, 'if they think that they could do it, then I think I could do it too!' Many dioceses are intentionally building UKGMH, disabled and working-class team members into their direct or satellite teams. Consequently as your ordained candidates' diversity broadens then make sure stories and visibility are shared to build momentum from underrepresented communities.

Clarity of the Discernment Process

Whoever is managing the shared discernment process for ordination (or alternative discernment procedures) needs to give clarity about the process to candidates exploring before they enter the process. This can be thought about in three areas:

1. The initial information that candidates will read/watch or listen to before meeting with the vocations team. Dioceses might want to link the new animation explaining the shared discernment process onto Diocesan websites.
2. The initial meeting with a DDO needs to be transparent about what is required of the candidate at each stage of the process. This is particularly important in explaining: Stage 1 and Stage 2 panels; the Traffic Lights Conversation; the Psychotherapeutic Assessment; when the candidate meets with a Sponsoring Bishop and what happens if the candidate receives a 'No' or a 'Not Yet' at any point in the process. Alongside this, the DDO needs to be clear about the different pathways into ministry and the different ways in which training might be undertaken.
3. A written guide to process is very helpful for candidates after that meeting so they have time to process everything that has been shared with them.

Being ‘after recommendation’ ready

We have found that training, finances and future curacy opportunities are a source of potential stress for both those in discernment and diocesan teams.

We have found that:

- All dioceses aim to make sure that candidates find the right college and training pathway; are supported well in training both financially and pastorally; and discern a right place to serve their curacy within the Diocese. Within this, it is good to be as flexible as possible and working with TEIs and the National ministry team is fundamental to achieving these aims.
- Most dioceses hold no preference to any theological institution and are keen on finding the right pathway, college and location that is right for their ordinands.
- It is good to meet soon after Stage 1 to explore whether full time/part time and residential/contextual training is the right pathway for the candidate encouraging candidates to visit 2/3 colleges within that pathway before applying for a conditional place.
- It is important that candidates are well informed about the financial implications of the different pathways as they weigh their decision.

Curacies

We would encourage dioceses to think well ahead in playing their part in providing curacy posts for our benchmark figure of 665 ordained clergy per year. The continued training of our next generation of clergy is one of the most joyful and necessary of our priorities. Sustainable financial plans with curacies planned in or consideration of whether other posts can be turned into curacy posts are encouraged. It is also possible for dioceses to use their DIP funding for these posts.

We are also conscious of the generosity and sacrifice of our exporting dioceses. We would love you to consider whether you can bless the national church by providing people willing to move across the nation for the glory of Christ.

Checklist

Here is a table checklist to form the basis of a development plan for encouraging ordained vocations in your diocese.

Area	Where we are winning	Where we need to work
The Role of Prayer		
Creating a Theological Narrative		
Nurturing a Healthy Diocesan Culture		
Significance of Bishops and Senior Team		
Significance of the Vocational Lead		
Significance of Existing Clergy		
Significance of the Lay Community		
Making Ordained Vocations Accessible		
Clarity of the Discernment Process		
Being 'after recommendation' ready		