

Growing Vocations 2026

Good Practice Guide for Encouraging
Ordained Vocations in Parishes

Introduction

A group was recently commissioned by the National Ministry Development Team to research 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 recommend reading the full findings of that report alongside this 'Good Practice Guide' which is the fruit of interviews with approximately half of the diocesan leads for vocations across the Church of England. We have also produced a Best Practice Guide for Dioceses, which complements this guide.

Using the data from the MDS portal, we have been able to identify churches that have produced a good number of vocations over the last five years in proportion to the average weekly attendance. We have spoken with the leaders of three churches which are loosely characterised as large, medium sized and small as measured by average weekly attendance.

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 of 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 per 1,000 attenders aged 18-69 pa vs the least deprived are sending only 1.1 candidates 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 good practice the team gleaned from speaking with churches that have raised up vocations over this time.

Good practice for parishes

We have identified **five key principles of good practice** from our interviews with three churches across the Church of England. These churches are St George's Church, Leeds (a large church in a city), The Haven Church in Gosport (a medium sized church plant in a town), and St Nicholas, Bradfield (a small sized church in a rural setting – this church had a prolonged vacancy between 2023-6). This guide will explain these principles and offer suggestions for how those principles can be put into practice in each context. Alongside this guide, we aim to produce audio/visual resources from all three churches that will enable parishes to apply them across a range of contexts.

The five key principles are:

- **Praying**
- **Nurturing**
- **Involving**
- **Discerning**
- **Supporting**

Pray intentionally

Is prayer at the heart of your work in encouraging vocations? Across all three churches, prayer is key to seeing vocations grow. It may be helpful to:

- **Pray that God would raise up people within your church for a variety of ministries and vocations.**
- **Ask for God's wisdom and guidance as you encourage and discern potential vocations in others.**
- **Continue praying for individuals as they explore where God may be calling them.**
- **Find ways in the service to pray for those already serving in lay ministries and volunteer roles. This is a key part of what they do.**

Notice and nurture gifts

Consistent across all three contexts were both ordained and lay leaders being intentional about noticing potential gifts in others and finding ways for those gifts to be nurtured. To do this you might:

- Look for the gifts, talents, and leadership potential that God has placed in people.
- Name and affirm these gifts when you see them, encouraging people to explore them further.
- Create a culture where people feel seen, valued, and supported in their discipleship journey.
- In the large church there was often less opportunity to serve and test those gifts, so leaders needed to keep an eye out for individuals who showed signs of a particular calling or aptitude for ministry.
- In the medium church they were really intentional about working with those who had come to faith recently and nurtured gifts in those who were young in their faith.
- In the small church there were lots of opportunities to serve, but leaders had to be intentional in noticing what was the right role for someone, not just using them to fill gaps.

Create opportunities for people to be involved

Vocations can only be discerned if they start to be tested. In all three churches, there were leaders, ordained and lay, who were willing to create space and opportunities to allow people to get involved. This often means not trying to do everything yourself and accepting that things might not always need to be at a certain standard. To do this you can:

- Encourage everyone to get involved in serving; volunteering is an important part of discipleship and spiritual growth.
- Invite people to try new areas of ministry and discover where their gifts might best be used.
- Ensure a wide range of people have opportunities to lead, preach, teach, or take on responsibility.
- Provide meaningful opportunities for people to develop confidence and experience in ministry.
- In the large church there was a specific challenge to ensure that no one felt like they could not be used by God.
- In the medium church they were intentional about removing barriers for people who did not think they could do it. In particular, this enabled ordained vocations from working-class backgrounds.
- In the small church they had to make sure that people were supported and could reflect on their experiences and not be left on their own.

Provide space for discernment

Alongside giving people opportunities, all three churches provided space for members to discern whether God might be calling them to something different through what they were experiencing. They did this by:

- Teaching about how to listen to God and how to discern different calls.
- Offering opportunities for reflection and vocational exploration: in the large church this was through events such as vocation lunches or discussion groups. In the medium church and small church this was done one to one with the vicar, who invested time to help those people who were particularly hearing a call to church ministry.
- Organising events specifically designed to help people consider ordained ministry and other forms of church leadership. They connected with events in their diocese and invited people to specifically come and speak about vocations.
- Sharing information about different pathways into ministry, including resources such as the Church of England's vocation and discernment materials.

Support people through the process

The discernment journey towards ordination does not end when you send a candidate to the DDO. Across all three churches, support was continually given to candidates as they entered the shared discernment process. Support was given by:

- Walking alongside individuals as they discerned and pursued their vocation. In the large church they had to find structures for this to be done. In the medium church this could be done by the vicar. In the small church the vicar could do it, but when they were in vacancy, other volunteers were found alongside other clergy in the deanery (eg. the Area Dean)
- Continuing to have positive, encouraging conversations throughout their journey.
- Building and maintaining good communication with the Diocesan Director of Ordinands (DDO) and other relevant advisers.
- Offering prayer, encouragement, and practical support at every stage of the process.

Final bits of advice

Finally, the three parishes offered the following additional advice:

- Run ordination lunches for those who might be interested and get ordained people to come and share their story.
- Give as many people as possible the opportunity to lead and preach and be intentional about ensuring that many different people are seen 'up front' so that they can model ministry to people who otherwise might not think they could do it.
- Help people become familiarised with the pathways towards ordained ministry through both national and diocesan resources.
- Incorporate calling into a Sunday service, this might be on Vocations Sunday or at another time of the year.