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# Shaped By God Together

# Forming Minster Communities – learning from the pilots so far

*February 2023*

In October 2020 our Diocesan Synod voted to approve the framework of Minster Communities. Since then, we have started working in three areas of the diocese to pilot the process of forming Minster Communities. We are anticipating the first Minster Community to officially be commissioned after Easter this year.

We have captured and reviewed our learning throughout the past year. This has been shared with and discussed by the Bishops Leadership Team and Bishops Council. The learning to date is summarised below, along with an indication of how we are responding to that learning so that it is informing and being integrated into the ongoing work. It starts by identifying the single most significant piece of learning, and then has been grouped into “cultural” or adaptive learning which informs the broad approach of how we work and the ways we do things, and “technical” learning which informs the practical “nuts and bolts” of what we do.

We are grateful for the generosity and graciousness of all involved in the work of starting to form Minster Communities, particularly all those from the local parishes, who have helped us to learn and learnt with us as we do this work together. Learning will continue as we work across the diocese to form Minster Communities in the coming years.

Key Learning: Enabling **more local active participation in initial grouping decisions** is important.

Response and Action: We have learnt, particularly through the process in Pilot 2, that we need to enable more local active participation for churches in the initial grouping that will work together to explore forming as a Minster Community. For this reason, we have developed and adapted our process so that we will work across larger areas in the early stages, and then involve all the local churches in deciding together what the groupings of churches should be that will work together in more detail to develop proposals for each Minster Community.

Key Learning: There is a **variety of understanding of the ‘why’** of Minster Communities, and of the journey we have undertaken as a diocese to reach this point.

Response and Action: We continue to share the factors of why we are creating Minster Communities, and the multiple factors behind the decision by Diocesan Synod to approve this framework. However we have also learnt that diocesan officers and diocesan communications alone cannot ensure everyone in every church hears and understands this message. We continually encourage everyone to play their part in sharing information and enabling others to understand.

**Why are we doing this?**

* **The world around us and the society we live in has changed significantly over recent years and continues to change. We need to continually learn new ways to engage with the changing world**, as we **live out our faith** and seek to grow in numbers of disciples, depth of discipleship and loving service of the world.
* We are **looking to the future** and **seeking to discern how God is reshaping us.**
* We are seeking to prioritise our work with **children, young people and families**, especially through partnership with our **schools**.
* The **pastoral burden** on clergy, lay ministers and church officers is huge.
* The **wellbeing** of our clergy, lay ministers, church officers and volunteers. We have heard time and time again that we cannot continue as we are, and simply stretch our resources ever thinner.
* Our **financial challenges** are significant.

**What is the measure of success?**

The extent to which we see the **Kingdom of God** growing in our midst. Christian communities around the diocese **increasing in their efforts** to lovingly **serve the world**, actively **witness to the gospel**, **deepen their devotion** to God, and give birth to new communities of faith.

## Cultural (adaptive) learning

Learning: There is a **tension between expectations of Christian discernment and traditional change management.** Holding people and the process within this tension is important but can be uncomfortable.

Response and Action: We openly acknowledge and name this tension which helps to surface frustrations so that we can work together. Explaining the reason why we are using both of these approaches together is important. We are working together as churches seeking the Kingdom of God. We therefore believe that as we form Minster Communities we should be seeking God’s guidance and calling. Doing this together, through prayer, bible study and reflection, and allowing that to inform our decision making is a form of Christian discernment. We therefore include prayer and reflection on Scripture at every stage of the process through the [“Holy Habits” of Dwelling in the Word and Examen](https://www.leicester.anglican.org/content/pages/documents/bw-holy-habits-current.pdf). Minster Community proposals will include something about where they see God at work in their midst and the Joint Archdeaconry Mission Committee (JAMC) will also reflect on this question when they read proposals. Minster Communities will mean change across the whole diocese. We are therefore drawing from the breadth of good practice in organisational change management and applying this within our process. This helps us to bring rigour and robustness to our planning. An example of this can be seen in two of the questions that are considered by the Joint Archdeacons Mission Committee (JAMC) when Minster Community Proposals are being developed:

1. Is this proposal aspirational and disruptive enough to help bring about change?
2. Is this proposal realistic and specific enough to be achievable?

Learning: **Trust building is key** - between local churches, between churches and diocesan leadership, between churches and facilitators.

Response and Action: We have slowed down the earlier stages of the process to enable more space for getting to know each other and each other’s churches. Through working in Pilot 3 in particular, where there is a significant diversity of churches, we have developed and integrated a new way of helping churches get to know each through “Storyboards”. This enables churches to share something of their own history, character and aspirations with others. In understanding more of each other’s story, we can grow relationships that are generous and trusting.

Learning: There is a **patchy understanding** of “why” of Shaped By God Together, and “what” of Minster Communities. In every gathering there is a mixture of those who have been very involved throughout Shaped By God Together and have a good knowledge and understanding, those who are hearing about it for the first time, and everything in between.

Response and Action: We acknowledge this breadth of understanding each time we gather, and affirm that it is to be expected. We include summaries of the Shaped By God Together journey at every stage in the process and integrate it into wider diocesan communications. The most important way of growing understanding of Shaped By God Together and Minster Communities is local people with good knowledge and understanding sharing this with others in their churches and we seek to encourage and equip people to do this.

Learning: There is need for **deepening discipleship**. There is a need to connect our faith in Jesus with our individual choices and actions as well as our communal decision making.

Response and Action: There are many places where discipleship is faithfully being lived out and developing, but people don’t have the language or confidence to articulate it. As Christians we are called to a lifetime of discipleship, growing in relationship with God. There will always be a need for us to deepen our discipleship and we are committed to supporting church leaders as they enable this amongst their worshipping communities. Resources, advice and training is available through the Parish Transition and Ministry Development (PTMD) Team. Part of deepening discipleship is the discernment of vocation. The PTMD team can also provide support, advice and resources for those exploring their own vocation and those who are enabling others to discern vocation. We have also seen and heard many stories of people doing things out of their faith that they did not feel to be ‘worthy of sharing’ but that are hugely significant in the life and witness of the local church. The move to licensing lay people as Associate Ministers gives more flexibility in how they shape their roles locally. This helps us because we are not constrained by historic patterns and expectations of lay ministry that might not be appropriate for reshaped ministry in Minster Communities. This is an area of ongoing learning for us, and we need to keep reviewing what we are learning. The increasing profile of Locally Authorised Ministry should begin to address the issues of recognition, local discernment, decision-making, and enabling. More information about vocations and lay ministry is available on the website: <https://www.leicester.anglican.org/info-for-leaders/vocations/>

Learning: **Our facilitators face a paradox** as they seek to equip people to do the work that deep down they know they need to do, while the same people are also asking for the answers to questions they need to grapple with for themselves through the process.

Response and Action: Whenever possible we work ‘With’ groups and avoid doing ‘To’ or ‘For’ them. Recognising the “now and not yet” nature of our approach to forming Minster Communities is important. Many of the questions people have at the very beginning of engaging in forming a Minster Community relate to very practical, concrete implications for their particular church (e.g. will we still have a Communion service every Sunday? What stipendiary roles will minister to us in our church?). We try to help people understand that the answers to questions about what their potential Minster Community will actually be like are largely shaped by them collectively through the formation process. This is an important part of the approach we are taking, to ensure that the framework of Minster Communities is one that is applied and shaped locally. As Minster Communities form across the diocese we will seek to share their experiences and learning of doing this in practice. We will offer to connect people with those who have already formed their Minster Community, so that they can give support and encouragement.

Learning: **Local convening leadership** is important.

Response and Action: In Pilot 1, local leadership for the process quickly and naturally emerged from amongst those already ministering in different roles in the area. This local leadership has brought focus and energy to the process of forming a Minster Community, and support and encouragement to those involved locally. We will aim to ensure that every group of churches working towards forming as a Minster Community has one or two people (ideally one ordained and one lay person working together) identified as holding this local convening leadership role within the process.

## Technical learning

Learning: **Clarification** of language and documents. How much detail to share and when.

Response and Action: A first draft of documentation and resources was used with Pilot 1 around Launde. Their feedback informed a second draft used with Pilot 2 around Coalville and the surrounding area. Further feedback from both groups of churches has fed into significant work of editing, refining and clarifying the written documentation used within the process of forming Minster Communities. Pilot 3 in North East Leicester has tested a third draft which is the basis for the resources and documentation that has been developed for use throughout the rest of the diocese. Having learnt from Pilot 1 that our requests for information was often felt to be overwhelming, we have developed our resources and documentation so that the core information is as succinct as possible, with more detailed information available to those who would like it. Some of the resources and documentation are still being refined during early 2023. We have also become better at collating and sharing the information that is held at both diocesan and national level in a way that is understandable and useful.

Learning: **Time** taken for different stages of the process. Setting of dates and timings.

Response and Action: We now have a tested understanding of how long different stages of the process take and this has enabled us to develop indicative timelines for each group as they begin to form a Minster Community. Churches in Pilot 3 considered their indicative timeline and decided they wanted to take more time over the early stages of the process to help them get to know each other better, and therefore their working timeline was adjusted to enable this. The indicative timeline has enabled us to set dates and times for the key meetings in the process earlier so that we can give more notice, and also work with a local Coordinating Group to adapt plans if there are significant local clashes on particular dates.

Learning: There needs to be a clear communication **link** for every church.

Response and Action: At the beginning of the process, we will ask every church to agree a nominated lay liaison person who will be the communication link for their church, taking responsibility for receiving information and sharing it locally, and for ensuring that any information or responses that need to be sent back to the facilitators are provided in a timely way.

Learning: No matter how clear the written and verbal communication, people read and hear what they expect or fear. How best to **support** the overwhelmed/ fearful/ disengaged.

Response and Action: Clarity of written and verbal communication is important and has been developed as outlined above. We recognise that people also have an emotional response to any change process. Facilitators will work to ensure that people are supported and have space and time to have their feelings and perspectives heard. Facilitators may draw from others in the wider diocesan support team to help with this as appropriate to individual needs.

Learning: **Getting to know each other** is really important and can’t be rushed.

Response and Action: In planning the meetings when we gather and begin to form as a potential Minster Community there can be a temptation to push all the activity into as short a meeting time as possible. We want to honour the time that people are giving and we have refined the meeting plans and structures to make the best use of time that we can. We have also heard feedback of how much people have come to value the informal conversations over refreshments/lunch. It is in these encounters that relationships between churches are beginning to flourish and there are already examples of new shared activities and mutual support that have been enabled through these relationships, including in a new service of Evensong for families in Launde, and a joint Alpha course in the Coalville area.

Learning: How to inform and engage with **neighbouring** parishes

Response and Action: Each time we invited a group of parishes to be part of a Pilot to explore forming a Minster Community we also wrote to those parishes who are their geographical neighbours to inform them that this work was going on “next door”. We offered the opportunity for representatives from neighbouring parishes to be kept informed about the progress on forming a Minster Community and there has been some uptake of this offer. We have found that mostly it has been initial interest and questions which has lessened as the process has continued. We will continue to take this approach, but it is likely that it will be through occasional emails and an open invitation to neighbouring parishes to get in touch and ask for updates rather than planned sessions or meetings to provide updates. There is also an open invitation for neighbouring parishes to have a conversation about whether they feel they would like to join the group exploring a Minster Community in that locality.

Learning: **Clear discernment points** for churches to discern their engagement in the process and ways of enabling this are important.

Response and Action: There are a number of significant decision-making points for churches – firstly the decision to take part in the process of exploring the formation of a Minster Community in their area, and then a formal PCC decision to join the Minster Community as is set out in the proposal that is developed and written by the churches involved through the process. We have learnt that there are some churches who may wish to join in after everyone else has started the work and have developed ways of supporting them to do so such that they can “catch up” with the others and be integrated into the process. This is based on the principle that all invited to be part of the process have a seat at the table, whether or not they initially choose to take it up. As the whole process is one of discernment, we have also learnt that for some churches, their discernment is that they no longer wish to continue in the process. We have developed ways of supporting this discernment so that churches are sure that their decision is well-informed and what it means for their future participation in a Minster Community.

Learning: Building up a bank of FAQs to **resource facilitators**. Importance of prep time and facilitator notes. Ways of recording where we’ve got to in each pilot.

Response and Action: As we have developed our work across all three Pilots we have understood more about the background resources and information that facilitators need to enable them to facilitate well, and to be equipped to support and resource people in local churches. We have developed a facilitators resource pack, which is flexible and we will continue to add and refine this as our learning continues. We have used some of the national church funding secured in 2022 to invest in software that enables us to effectively record and monitor how the process is progressing across the diocese.