

## **Discerning Ministries – a vision for local ministry**

**Draft version for piloting – May 2021**

### **Part 1 - Introduction**

At the start of 2020, a small group of lay people, clergy and staff from the diocese finished a report on a deployment strategy for the Diocese of Bath and Wells. It offered a new vision for ministry in the diocese,

As the report was considered by Area and Lay Deans, Bishops' Council and Diocesan Synod last year, the thinking developed and evolved, and what has emerged and is still emerging is a new vision for ministry in the Diocese, based on the principles set out in the Deployment Report. These principles include the mutuality of lay and ordained, creating posts that allow their holders to 'serve with joy' and the principle of 'no one alone', of support for each minister. The full report is available to read on the diocesan website.

Discerning Ministries is our response to the mandate set out in the deployment report - to ensure a Christian presence throughout the diocese and to ensure that every person is equipped for the ministry and mission to which God is calling them, regardless of whether they are lay, ordained, paid, voluntary part time or full time. We pray for the emergence of a visible ministry, that looks different from place to place and as skills and needs allow, in every community.

This commitment to local ministry is a way of being church that focusses on communities and allows church leaders to have roles that fit their calling and gifts. It aims to liberate people and churches to respond to God's love and calling in their own community. It is also recognises the need to allow pioneers to emerge from their own communities and encourages people to try out new things without fearing failure.

Discerning Ministries offers a vision that seeks to liberate us all, whatever our place, our tradition, our skills, to find ways of serving God and our communities with joy.

## **Part 2 - A vision for local ministry**

The original deployment report recognised that there can be no 'one size fits all' approach. Those who are best placed to imagine what ministry might look like in their community are those who are already on the ground themselves, living in that place. This is why the vision is committed to establishing a range of local ministries which works for each community in its own context.

Discerning Ministries offers a vision for developing ministry in three areas:

### **1. A diversity of lay ministries**

God calls people to a wide variety of ministries within their local churches or communities. In healthy churches, ministry is exercised by various people in different ways, while on the other hand, it is usually a sign of poor church health when ministry is purely dependent on the input of the parish priest.

One of our diocesan priorities is "to identify, develop and release the gifts of all God's people". Discerning Ministries seeks to encourage the growth and diversification of ministry as people grow in the use of their God-given gifts and discern what they are called to in the local church. It also encourages a cultural shift, away from thinking about filling gaps on the rota, and towards encouraging people into roles that fit their gifts and that they can fulfill with a sense of vocation.

These ministries may be within the life of the church, such as a worship team leader, small group leader, or pastoral team leader. They may also be more community focused, such as ministry to young people or leading a parish visiting team. People in more formal church roles, such as churchwardens or parish administrators, are also encouraged to consider how this may be a ministry to which they are called, as well as a job that needs doing.

### **2. Focal ministry for parishes**

A key part of Discerning Ministries is the encouragement and growth of focal ministry. The concept of focal ministry is that within a multi-parish benefice, there are people whose ministry is focused on one particular church. The ultimate aim of this is that every church would have an identified focal minister who provides the ministry presence in that parish.

Focal ministry offers a way of understanding ministry in multi-parish benefices that relieves the pressure on a system that otherwise is dependent on increasingly stretched parish priests. It builds on the strong ties that parish churches have to their local community by offering an identified person for ministry in that community, and providing dedicated ministry at a very local level, to complement the oversight ministry of the parish priest. More information on focal ministry is found below.

### **3. Focal ministry to other communities**

This vision for focal ministry goes beyond the geographical community of the local parish and encompasses "non-geographical communities" – the networks that shape people's day to day lives.

In our diocese we have seen real growth in pioneering – ministries that re-imagine what church looks like for those who have no contact with the church; and chaplaincy – ministries which serve people outside the church, in the communities and organisations where they live and work. In the diocese there are already many examples of people leading Messy Church or café churches, starting fresh expressions, being chaplains to a local school or care home, or creating new community spaces to welcome people in Christ’s name. All of these can be understood as a kind of focal ministry.

The new emerging vision for the Church of England talks about a “mixed ecology” of church. Discerning Ministries encourages the mixed ecology by seeing chaplaincy and pioneering as part of a spectrum of ministry alongside those who serve in parochial roles.

## **Part 3 – Understanding focal and oversight ministry**

### **Focal ministry**

A focal minister provides leadership and ministry to one specific church. “Focal” means both that the minister focusses their attention on that church, and that they provide a focal point for the ministry of that church. The word “church” is used here, because although in most cases we are talking about a single parish within a multi-parish benefice, there are some places where several parishes have been merged, but the same number of churches remain.

As with oversight ministry, the definition of focal ministry needs to be flexible enough to meet the needs of the local context. Within that flexibility, the common characteristics of focal ministry are:

- A person recognised by the church and local community as a representative and leader of the church.
- Building a good relationship with the wider community and being a visible presence and point of contact for the church within that community.
- A leader able to guide the church in mission and to help shape the ministry of the church to the needs of the community.
- A team player, able to work well with the oversight minister and, in the local church, to enable the gifts of others, building a ministry team.

The exact nature of an individual’s focal ministry will depend on an individual’s gifts, and it is likely that aspects of the ministry will be shared with others. There is, though, a core expectation of:

- being present and contributing to main church services and events.
- ensuring pastoral care.
- praying for the church and community.
- helping each church member grow as a Christian disciple.
- Providing leadership of the mission of the local church.
- encouraging the church to work with other community organisations and local churches.

Each focal minister will need to fulfill this ministry in way which enables them to use their own gifts as well as delegating and enabling others to use theirs.

The last point is crucial to healthy focal ministry. It is not the intention that focal ministers hold the entire ministry of the church in their own hands. Just as oversight ministers are called to identify and release the gifts of focal ministers, so focal ministers are called to do the same for those in their communities, building the body of Christ as all work together.

It is important to think of focal ministry as a role, rather than an office in the church, because it is something that can be done by a variety of different people. A focal minister might be a Reader, a self-supporting priest, or a Churchwarden. The role could be also be assumed by someone who currently has no formal office.

It is important that a focal minister is someone who has a recognised ministry. The role is not simply one of administration or co-ordination. For example, many churches have a person who draws up all the rotas and ensures everything runs smoothly. This does not automatically make them the focal minister. On the other hand, such people, especially those who have been doing it for some time, often also demonstrate the kind of leadership and pastoral care which would be the characteristics of a focal minister. In other places, someone may currently have a specific ministry such as youth leader or lay pastoral minister, but also have the leadership qualities that would enable them to be the focal minister while delegating some tasks to other people.

Identifying a focal minister requires spiritual discernment. The process of discernment should begin in conversation with the potential oversight minister. The diocese will also need to develop a consistent framework for the discernment and recognition of focal ministers, as well as good quality training to enable them to carry out the role - the training and vocations teams will be working with deaneries and parishes over the coming months to do this.

Focal ministry in partnership with oversight ministry brings a new dynamic to parish life in multi-parish benefices. There is a widespread cultural assumption that incumbents should attempt to cover as much of the life of their benefices as they can physically manage. Even with the most enabling and permissive of incumbents, this inevitably creates a bottleneck and a limit on the growth of church life, making it dependent on clergy presence. Placing the incumbent in a more episcopal role and allowing the focal minister to shape the ministry of the local church breaks this dependency. The practical implications of this will vary from place to place, but to take the most obvious example, the service rota no longer needs to be predicated on the need for the incumbent to take as many services as possible on a single Sunday.

There are many questions to explore as focal ministry emerge and becomes established as part of the life of the diocese. These questions include issues around authorisation, ecclesiastical structures and boundaries, and sacramental worship (to name a few of the most obvious). The best way to answer these questions will be to begin the journey and to learn how focal ministry works best, as we see it in action. Parishes, deaneries and diocese need to approach this in the spirit of discernment – being imaginative, experimenting with new ideas, learning together, and developing good practice. In this way the model of focal ministry will be in development over the next few years, before it settles into a mature form.

### **Other focal ministries**

The following pages explore how focal ministers might have a ministry to other communities, using the vocations of chaplains and pioneers as examples. We have growing networks in both these areas in the diocese, and anyone exploring a call to chaplaincy or pioneering is welcome to get in touch (contact details at the end of this document). This does not assume that pioneering or chaplaincy are the only ways to recognise focal ministry

to the community. There may well be people who God is calling to this kind of role, but do not see themselves in either group.

### **Chaplaincy as focal ministry**

Chaplaincy is an outward-focused missional ministry, a growing part of the mixed ecology of the church, helping us to be younger and more diverse and there for the 95% who do not have regular (monthly) contact with the local church. Each chaplaincy could be described as a focal ministry. There are as many models of chaplaincy as there are of the local church, yet each chaplaincy meets people where they are and offers spiritual and pastoral care to all in the community. Chaplaincies serve many kinds of communities.

**Community Chaplaincy:** Some chaplains serve what we might commonly define as local communities, such as villages or estates. When these chaplaincies exist within larger benefices, they are classic examples of focal ministry. Yet like all chaplaincies, they are intrinsically outward-focused, reaching out into every part of the community and meeting people where they are, rather than being based at church.

**Chaplaincy to organisations:** Some are chaplains to communities where you need to be authorised by the organisation or community to minister. Such authorisation gives chaplains both open access to every part of the community and the trust that is essential to minister in pluralist or sometimes definitely secular organisations. These contexts include hospitals, hospices and care homes, schools, colleges and universities, sports clubs, offices, businesses, transport and industrial sites. In large communities and organizations, for instance a hospital, chaplaincy assistants may be focal ministers to wards or wings of the hospital, under the oversight of the lead chaplain.

**Network Chaplaincy:** There are chaplaincies to communities and networks, such as the farming community, nomadic peoples or the deaf community. Such chaplaincy ministry recognises that not all of our identity is local or geographical. Like all chaplaincies, chaplains to networks meet people where they are and journey with them from that place.

### **Pioneering as focal ministry**

Pioneers come in different guises. They are old and young, fashionable and frumpy, extravert and introvert. Some work close to the heart of the existing church, some serve deep in the community. Their vocations have different shapes and emphases. They carry the apostolic gift to go out to new people groups with the gospel and the prophetic gift of seeing something of the coming kingdom of God. This makes them heralds and enablers of new things. They are often also pastors and evangelists so they can share the good news sensitively with people who haven't heard it yet. The word 'pioneer' can sometimes arouse fear of change or loss or inadequacy, but pioneers are usually ordinary people wanting to be faithful to God's calling. They are often capable of leading a traditional church community.

Pioneers as focal ministers will often be long-standing members of a congregation who see the gap between the church and the surrounding community and are already finding ways of bridging it. They will focus on by paying attention to the life of the local community in a

variety of ways while pastoring the church congregation. They will aim to grow new disciples and new worshipping communities for those who find the current church inaccessible or foreign. They do this by developing individual relationships, sharing in community partnerships and engaging in social action. They will invite the existing congregation to join in with this local mission in ways that are appropriate to their gifts and inclinations. The proportion of time the pioneer focal minister spends in the local community and in the church would be ring-fenced in the role description.

The fruit of the pioneer focal minister's work in the community may refresh the life of the existing church in unforeseen ways, or the pioneer focal minister may enable the existing congregation to grow alongside a fresh expression of church in separate but connected spaces. In some cases the pioneer may offer palliative care to a very elderly congregation whilst growing one or more new Christian communities elsewhere.

In some cases a parish or benefice may decide to recruit a full- or part-time pioneer as focal minister with the sole aim of creating a new worshipping community. They would pastor this as it grows.

A gift for pioneering is sometimes found in people who hold official roles such as Reader, lay worship assistant, schools worker and chaplain. This gives them the authority to try new things within their current role. However, most pioneers are currently female, lay and unpaid, and do not hold official roles. They start pioneering at the instigation of the Holy Spirit and what they do is often not well understood by the existing congregation and its leadership. To enable these people to be identified and affirmed as potential focal ministers particular discernment and education will be needed.

## Oversight ministry

Oversight ministry is the essential complement to focal ministry. “Oversight” is used here in the theological sense of *episcopus*, the shepherd of shepherds, who leads and cares for those in ministry in their “patch”. Every focal minister will have an oversight minister to whom they are accountable, and who has a responsibility of care and supervision for them in their ministry.

In most cases (initially in all cases), the oversight minister will be the incumbent parish priest. In Bath and Wells there are no plans to appoint full-time oversight ministers who do not have their own parish. This also means that focal ministers generally will not be expected to carry the legal responsibilities of the incumbent. In many benefices, it is also quite possible for the incumbent to be a focal minister as well as an oversight minister – this will be the case where there is one larger or more central parish where the incumbent has a natural focus for their pastoral ministry.

In the longer term, situations may emerge where the oversight minister is someone other than the parish priest. Deaneries and PCCs are encouraged to prayerfully use their imagination and to discern the shape of ministry that is most appropriate for each place. Archdeacons and the diocesan support team will work with parishes to help them pilot and develop their ideas, learning together (and from the experience of others) and shaping the future of ministry.

The role and character of oversight ministry needs to reflect the context, and so will vary from place to place. However, the common elements of all oversight ministry are:

- Identifying and encouraging the vocations of potential focal ministers.
- Maintaining a good relationship with the focal ministers, meeting and praying together regularly for mutual encouragement and healthy collegiate working.
- Providing accountability for the focal ministers.
- Offering an appropriate balance of guidance and permission-giving to enable the focal ministers to grow and flourish, to the benefit of the community being ministered to.

To be an oversight minister does require certain personal and professional qualities. Oversight ministers need to be comfortable with the delegation of ministry to others, and able to balance the relationship with the churches in their care with giving focal ministers space to grow and minister in their own right. They need to be effective team leaders, able to get the best out of those under their oversight. The diocesan training team will develop appropriate training for those taking on oversight ministry roles.

It can be helpful to think of oversight ministry as a re-imagining of what incumbency looks like. In many benefices there is a culture of dependency on the priest, and a lack of imagination about lay ministry and the potential it has for the growth of the church. In these places, oversight ministry offers a framework to help both priest and congregation to move into a new way of thinking about church. The principles of oversight ministry can be applied even when there are no formal focal ministry roles – the ideas of enabling leadership, permission-giving, and light-touch accountability are helpful in all contexts.



On the other hand, there are many benefices where these principles are already well established, even if the terminology of oversight and focal ministry is not being used. These places need to be encouraged not to re-invent the wheel, but to continue developing in the same direction, and to share what they have already learned with their deanery and the rest of the diocese.

Oversight offers a vision for ordained ministry which is both hopeful for the future and rooted in the essential nature of ordination. Priests are charged, when they are ordained, “to discern and foster the gifts of all God’s people, that the whole church may be built up in unity and faith”. As oversight ministers, priests are able to follow their own vocation while also enabling the vocation of others, growing the shared ministry which is essential for the church of the future.

## Next steps

**For deaneries** – DMPGs are encouraged to share the vision of Discerning Ministries with their deanery synods and with the clergy and parishes of their deanery. Deaneries developing a plan for the future deployment of ministry should consider how the thinking about focal ministry can be worked into the plan.

**For benefices** – Incumbents and PCCs are encouraged to spend time prayerfully considering the vision for local ministry outlined in this guide, and how it might affect the ministry of their own benefice. Incumbents should begin to consider whether there are people who are potential focal ministers in any of the parishes of the benefice.

At this stage (May 2021), this material is in a pilot stage and a small number of benefices are using it as part of their vision building. If you represent a benefice or deanery and are interested in being part of this pilot, it would be very helpful for a member of the diocesan support team to work with you, in order to share the learning as effectively as possible.

Please talk to your deanery accompanier or contact one of the support team:

Jane Chamberlain (Head of Ministry for Mission)

[jane.chamberlain@bathwells.anglican.org](mailto:jane.chamberlain@bathwells.anglican.org)

Charlie Peer (Head of Strategic Programme)

[charlie.peer@bathwells.anglican.org](mailto:charlie.peer@bathwells.anglican.org)

Julia Hill (Discipleship Team Leader)

[julia.hill@bathwells.anglican.org](mailto:julia.hill@bathwells.anglican.org)