

Background

Fit for Mission is a large, complex and exciting piece of work. As a discrete project it has been at least 2 years in the making and has involved hundreds of people across the diocese in working groups, consultations and discernment. We have successfully completed stage 2 of our Strategic Transformation Funding bid to the national church and have been formally offered significant funding (c. £7.5 million) to take Fit for Mission forward over the next 6 years.

This paper seeks to summarise the core aims, approaches and outcomes of Fit for Mission. It seeks to set Fit for Mission in an open, honest and absolutely blame-free assessment of where we are as a diocese, the challenges we continue to face and the stark realisation that we won't be able to look to a vibrant and sustainable future unless something fundamental changes about our approach to mission, outreach and discipleship. It needs to be read and understood in the context that Fit for Mission is not a centrally controlled and managed process; rather it is locally owned, shaped and delivered with support and capacity being given to existing leaders – lay and ordained – as they seek to chart a new future for the deanery.

Fit for Mission is a major step in that long obedience in the same direction that we are committed to as a diocese. The submission of stage 1 and 2 bids was supported by Bishop's Council and the DBF Finance Committee, as well as the Bishop's Diocesan Oversight Team. It has also been included in the diocesan Statement of Need for the next Bishop of Liverpool, which was unanimously endorsed by the Diocesan Vacancy in See Committee. And after significant and robust scrutiny by the Strategic Investment Board of Archbishop's Council we were awarded Strategic Transformation Funding (STF) by the national church. There are various things to note about this funding:

- *It is the largest STF grant awarded, and probably significantly higher than was anticipated.*
- *There is a high degree of confidence in us as a diocese to deliver it.*
- *There is a very clear fit between Fit for Mission and the national church Vision and Strategy (led by the Archbishops) for a simpler, humbler, bolder and Jesus-shaped church which seeks to grow younger and more diverse. We would not have the funding without this fit.*
- *As part of the funding conditions there will be a review of the progress and impact of the cohort 1 to satisfy the Strategic Investment Board that the project is delivering as intended. We are very supportive of this condition.*

Fit for Mission seeks to release all God's people into their God-given vocation and call. It seeks to ask and answer difficult questions honestly and straightforwardly. And above all it seeks to give substance to our diocesan vision of a bigger church making a bigger difference so there are ever more people knowing justice and ever more justice in God's world.

Summary

A refreshed vision and a serious attempt to implement it

The vision for the Diocese of Liverpool is that we are asking God for a bigger church to make a bigger difference so that there are more people knowing Jesus and more justice in the world. Fit for Mission does not change that vision. However, Bishops and Archdeacons have identified 4 mission priorities which are foundational to this vision:

- i. Introducing people to Jesus
- ii. Deepening discipleship
- iii. Developing Christian leaders
- iv. Working for justice

This vision and these priorities are not new in the Diocese of Liverpool. What is new is our clear focus and a serious attempt to change what holds us back, in our capacity and training, in our use of resources, in our church and diocesan culture. If we can do this we hope to see a real transformation. The four priorities become a yardstick by which to decide whether any future activity is helpful or distracting. These will be used as the high level framework for accountability conversations and mission planning.

During 2021 a number of parish and diocesan leaders have been praying and working together to discern the best way forward. They started with vision and then moved to strategy, informed by listening to and learning from a wide variety of voices. The result is a proposal based around sustainability and mission.

Fit for Mission (FFM) is an ambitious, growth-orientated and locally-delivered change programme to enable mission and ministry to flourish in the Diocese of Liverpool. It simultaneously invests in the 4 mission priorities.

It does this while dealing head-on with the deep-rooted problems that significantly inhibit growth (life-sucking structures, inappropriate buildings, inability to deliver plans and reach goals). Each deanery will be supported and resourced to work through a 2-year change process. We will start off with a pilot of 2 deaneries and, once we have begun to learn key lessons, move in years 3 and 4 to a bigger cohort of 6 deaneries. Crucially, each deanery will shape its own detail and make its own plans.

In September and October 2021 we explored with four deaneries, who already had some good experience of collaborating internally, whether they might be part of a cohort 1 pilot, and since then we have been working with the PCCs of St Helens and West Derby in more detail. We are grateful to the clergy and lay leaders of these deaneries for their serious efforts and consideration of the proposals, which has included additional away days, Synod and PCC meetings, 1:1 meetings, other open events, reading of documents, a lot of listening and conversations. These PCCs are voting in March / April about whether to go on the Fit for Mission journey with the other parishes of their deanery.

Our national and diocesan context

The challenges we face in this diocese are not unique. Across the Church of England people are asking the same questions about how we can be good news and reflect the light of Christ into places where there seems only darkness, or at most glimmers. The story of the Church of England in recent generations has been of decline – in numbers, in influence, in reach, in reputation. This was happening before most of us were born, let alone were practising Christians. It was happening before our watch; but it is now happening on our watch.

This has been recognised by Archbishops Justin and Stephen, by the national church and by Bishops Paul and Bev. And frankly we all know it ourselves as well. But we are also seeing really good work; we are seeing lives and communities touched through the work and witness of churches and Christians; we are seeing and hearing stories of hope.

In many ways this is the last chance for the Church of England as we know it. If we don't turn around the long-standing decline, if we don't reach out to the missing generations, if we don't release the people of God in the home, the school, the workplace, the social spaces – then we will be handing in the keys to all our churches, either sooner or later. But we have so much left to build on, we have so many good people. If we have the courage, the boldness, the prayerfulness to step forward in faith then we can become a brighter beacon of hope – in our communities and, through our diocese, to the wider church. It really is up to this generation; it is up to us.

What is preventing us from moving from decline into growth?

After consultation during 2021 we have identified five key problems and challenges of our diocese:

- i. *The long-standing and deep-rooted decline of the Church of England* – as we say above on just about every measure the Church of England was in decline throughout the 20th century and certainly in the 21st century. It is getting to a critical point in our diocese.
- ii. *Being under-resourced on the front line* – as a diocese we are significantly under-resourced compared to most of the Church of England. This means the churches of our diocese are increasingly financially vulnerable, and we have limited and decreasing capacity to invest in our mission.
- iii. *Unrealistic expectations on people* – there is a twin issue here: more and more is expected of fewer and fewer people, coupled by the fact that we tend to work in isolation of small church communities under pressure to each replicate all of the essential and sometimes complex roles and responsibilities required. It is reaching a critical point as dedicated lay and ordained members, trying to do everything themselves, are being overwhelmed by the demands of the task. The solutions to our challenges cannot lie in asking everyone just to work harder or better; we have to work together towards realistic outcomes and share the burden.
- iv. *Unsustainable buildings* – one of the main burdens we have is caring for our buildings properly with many built for another age or having had decades of

underinvestment. With scarce financial resources and the demand falling often on time-poor volunteers without specialist training or skills in buildings management, our current buildings and the way we manage them are close to being unsustainable. The last 30 years have seen a 55% decline in attendance, but only a 6% decline in the number of buildings.

- v. *Lack of diversity* – our churches, even with our current efforts are largely actively inhabited by worshippers of narrow ages, cultures, colours and physical gathering places. The breathtakingly low numbers of children and young people in our churches show that we are struggling to be attractive and accessible to those different to us, with an ever widening chasm for younger generations to have the opportunity to meet Jesus and be disciplined in the Church community of faith.

Alongside these five obstacles we have identified three big changes in the way we need to work if we are to reverse the decline:

- i. We need to stop working on our own and start working in teams covering bigger areas and focussing on mission and growth.
- ii. We need to stop just doing our own thing in our own way and instead work together to make the very best of all the gifts/capacity we have.
- iii. We need to plant more new congregations and justice initiatives and they in turn need to plant more new congregations and justice initiatives and so on.

What we have learned about growth

We have all been trying very hard to grow over the past decades. Indeed 22% of our churches have seen sustained attendance growth which is fantastic. However 70% have been in sustained decline and we need to face that reality and take the best action we can.

Three years ago the diocese formally adopted Leading your Church into Growth (LyCiG) as a partner and means for some churches to grow numerically and spiritually. LyCiG has proven successful for many churches, with around 30 attending up to end 2021, and continues to be a source of encouragement in Liverpool diocese.

With significant financial support from the national church we have been able to invest in five Resource Churches. The aim of a Resource Church is to grow to scale so that it can then be a sustainable resource to deaneries and beyond by sending teams out to plant and revitalise. Our resource churches are mainly still in the growing phase but we are seeing good growth, which is encouraging.

Also with support from the national church we have invested in growth through smaller, largely lay-led worshipping communities – in Wigan and through the Joshua Centre. Since 2015 these have planted around 60 new worshipping communities. In Wigan alone, 45 have been planted, involving 1400 people of which 600 are new disciples.

The learnings of success and failure from each of these models will be part of FFM, which includes:

- Clergy and other missional leaders can thrive in teams where there is a culture of high support and high accountability.
- Bringing in new leaders is less helpful than supporting and enabling the existing team into new ways of working.
- Until a deanery has leaders who are determined to make fully diverse growth the number one priority, and to hold each other to account for this, deanery mission plans will be, at best, hit and miss. We have also learned from Wigan that there needs to be more resource to enable local leaders to implement key decisions.
- People identify closely with their church and their leader. They feel the loss – or threatened loss – acutely. Provision of high quality and available pastoral care is vital.
- There is significant untapped capacity among lay people to lead and plan new worshipping communities and justice initiatives. Covid has had a major disruptive influence on this and we expect that Covid may also cause a significant re-shaping of church commitment amongst an exhausted laity. However, we remain committed to the key point that there is significant untapped missional leadership capacity if lay people are properly encouraged, envisioned, trained and supported.
- The current structures of the Church of England are not helpful in freeing up people and investment in mission. The weight of the institution is enormous and a significant barrier to change. Again, this may have been sharpened by Covid and we may find that people are no longer prepared for what is increasingly seen as the grind of institutional church life. Changing these structures sufficiently will be costly, the cost of not changing them, is higher.
- Culture change is hard and progress is uneven. Culture change is expensive. The active support of senior leadership is a vital element of the culture change. Emphasis on good local communication and dialogue is essential.
- You don't necessarily need a lot of money to plant a new small worshipping community or justice initiative.
- Working together over wider areas makes more things possible. When Covid19 hit, Wigan Council partnered with Church Wigan to respond to food poverty across the borough. This could not have happened with the previous 29 parishes.
- By not dealing with the buildings issue head-on we put a significant drain on missional activity. Conversely a fit for purpose building portfolio will enable mission. In Wigan buildings were not addressed and remain a current problem.
- Justice, including climate justice (net zero carbon), is a major motivator for young people's engagement.
- However positive the overall case for change, change always comes with a cost. And the cost is real, not just perceived and cannot be fully mitigated.

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What is the radical change?

FFM2: The plan for growth



What?

To develop this missional culture we propose to:

- Invest significantly in lay leader development through Cultivate, our home-grown training, mentoring and leadership support programme. These leaders will be commissioned as Local Missional Leaders. Our experience shows that God is calling lay people to plant new diverse worshipping communities and justice initiatives, as well as calling people to vocations in the workplace and the church. Cultivate helps people explore God's calling.
- Plant many small lay led worshipping communities, focussing significantly on creating a younger and more diverse church.
- Intentionally and visibly invest in justice initiatives, key to engaging the missing generation.
- Form local leadership teams (lay and ordained together). These are vital to make sure that each deanery focuses on how best it can deliver the 4 priorities
- Provide facilitator/coaches to enable teams to develop:
 - good collaborative relationships, improving mutual support and wellbeing
 - an overriding focus on growth and discipleship, with portfolio working across larger parishes

To overcome the deep-rooted problems we will:

- Intentionally change structures, moving to just one or two large parishes in each deanery
- Make good local decisions on:
 - Buildings use – investment in high use buildings, repurposing other buildings with community partners where appropriate, closing buildings which are no longer needed.
 - Deploying stipendiary and other leaders and resources
- Design leadership teams to have a clear leader (Rector) accountable to the Archdeacon and to develop relationships and a culture of support and accountability for all clergy and lay leaders
- Supply change resource to enable difficult decisions to be taken and then take the burden of delivering on those decisions away from already hard-pressed leaders.
- Create support services in each deanery so that leaders have more time for mission and ministry

The end result of this programme will be growth and resilience because:

- Local leadership teams will have the resources, tools, support, training and authority to develop and implement mission plans for their area of responsibility
- Local and diocesan teams will have received the coaching and support they need to make the changes necessary to move to this new way of working.
- This way of working will be embedded in the culture of the Diocese of Liverpool, with systems that reinforce it, and a real programme of accountability for all
- The larger parishes will have flexibility and responsiveness to ensure worshipping communities and justice initiatives develop in an even wider range of traditions, styles, contexts and times.

Within 6 years we would expect to see:

- Signs of a sustained annual increase in the number of people in worshipping communities
- Clear signs of a maturing discipleship culture
 - 100-200 new worshipping communities led by Local Missional Leadership teams
 - 200-400 newly commissioned Local Missional Leaders who plant new and refresh existing worshipping communities with a focus on younger and more diverse leaders and disciples
 - 25 Deacons (some deployed, more in training) growing the ministry of missional outreach and pastoral care
 - 125 new justice initiatives (some of which will be or become worshipping communities)

- Re-imagined structures beginning to work well
 - 80% of current parishes in new larger Parishes
 - 100% of deaneries with a dynamic Deanery Leadership Team with robust cycles of mission planning and implementation
 - Emerging pattern of breakeven budgets over a three-year cycle by sticking closely to fiscal rules and financial disciplines

All of the above will be underpinned by prayer in parish, deanery and diocese, with discipleship strengthened by further embedding the diocesan Rule of Life.

The overall package of support within FFM can be described as follows:

- Leadership support
 - Leadership coaching; justice coaching; programme management; administration
- Church growth support
 - Cultivate; Leading Your Church into Growth (LYCiG); outreach in schools
- Buildings support
 - Local leaders making decisions and support staff implementing them; local assets management and development
- People support
 - Helping nurture discipleship and vocation
 - Invest significantly in lay leader development through Cultivate, our proven training, mentoring and leadership support programme. These leaders will be commissioned as Local Missional Leaders.
- Systems support
 - Simplified and integrated finance & administration systems which make it easier for everyone
- Clearing the path support
 - All diocesan structures geared to making it easier for the new parishes to remain focussed on mission with the correct support to make it most possible for plans to be enacted.

Each deanery will have a core mission plan, developed by the deanery leaders with support including: strategies and plans for growth, planting and nurture, and people and buildings development. These plans will be created, measured and monitored by local leadership teams.