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## Methodology

To answer the question posed by Bishop Martyn and the Parish Transition and Ministry Development Team - ‘What do we need to pay attention to, to enable church leaders to thrive during the transition to Minster Communities?’- we ran 14 focus groups with clergy, curates and ordinands, lay ministers and church wardens who were not involved in the three pilot areas. There were five main questions discussed through the focus groups:

- 1) What are your fears about the transition to Minster Communities?
- 2) What are your hopes for the transition to Minster Communities?
- 3) What are your goals for Minster Communities?
- 4) What would get in the way of that goal being achieved?
- 5) What would help you achieve that goal?

Participants’ responses were captured on post-it notes, with additional notes from the discussions also being noted. These responses were anonymised, collated by role, and then thematically analysed.

For those unable to attend the sessions, we disseminated an online questionnaire with the same questions. We received 31 responses, which were added to those gathered from the focus groups. This report provides a thematic summary of the findings from both the in-person discussions and the online questionnaire. A copy of the responses in full is available separately.

## What are people’s fears about the change?

### Fear of the unknown

Many people phrased their fears as questions, pointing to the **feeling that they lacked clarity** as the overarching anxiety. These questions included:

- Who will be included in our Minster Community?
- Who will lead it, and how are they chosen?
- Does it have to be geographical or can it be a theological network?

- What is the role of PCCs and DCCs in the new structure?
- Can PCCs choose to not be part of a Minster Community, and are there any ramifications if they refuse?

A lack of clarity was having a tangible impact on the morale of both leaders and congregations. For example, one vicar who responded to the survey said they “find it hard to hold people’s anxieties around the transition and lead them through it when no one can answer the detail questions that are often being asked. I feel as if no one really knows what is going on, how and when it will happen, or what it will look like.” Similarly, a lay leader wrote that, “there is so much uncertainty that rumour and hearsay abound, thus establishing a siege mentality in some parishes.”

*What would help: Clarity on boundaries and parameters - what are the hard lines/ must-haves and what is open to being shaped by members of the Minster Community? Clear timelines and supporting early conversations among potential Minster Communities and support to facilitate the culture-change necessary for Minster Communities to work.*

### **Reduction in the number of priests – remaining clergy spread too thinly**

- This fear had two distinct components: the impact of a reduction in priests on the church and wider community, and the implications of reduced job opportunities, job security, and changed roles for the clergy themselves.
- There was a fear that the church and communities would be poorer for receiving **less pastoral care**, losing a visible local presence to turn to, and lacking a leader who understands the community well. As a result, we heard, there was a **risk of people leaving the church or stopping giving** if they felt they had lost ‘their vicar’. Without a priest to lead a local church, we also heard that the prospect of growth was unlikely.
- For the clergy themselves, there was the **fear of being made redundant** and, with the loss of their job, that they would lose their homes and their families would be severely disrupted.
- Then there was the concern that the role of a priest in a Minster Community would be so altered that it would **not be the role they had felt called to** – e.g. they would be left as ‘sacrament dispensers’ or essentially managers. Both clergy and churchwardens feared the impact of the loss of connection between a priest and the local community. E.g. one churchwarden said “I think the local guidance of a community may get overlooked. Clergy just too busy and don’t ‘get’ the congregation.”
- Similarly, many people at the focus groups feared that clergy would be left **overworked** and too much would be demanded of them (especially if the number of churches in the Minster Communities was too big) – some from benefices felt that their priest/s were already being stretched too thinly.
- For Anglo-Catholic leaders, there was a particular concern about a reduction in priests because of the central sacramental role they play.

### **Not having enough lay leaders to fill the gap**

- More burden on lay leaders and church officers who are **already overworked** – e.g. one churchwarden’s fear was of not having “much – if any – of a vicar/ priest, so we’re running everything, including services, on our own”.
- One commonly expressed fear was that the new model relies more on lay people but that there aren’t enough to step in – e.g. “There’s a wilful blindness to the dearth of volunteers”.
- This was said to especially be the case in **more deprived areas**. E.g. one vicar noted that the recent economic downturn had meant lay leaders and volunteers they had been relying on had to go back to work, leaving those initiatives “floundering”.
- Then there is the concern that, even where there are lay leaders and volunteers, without a priest having oversight of them, they **won’t be properly supported** and they may be asked to work outside their sense of calling. E.g. “Fewer ministers could mean lack of positive oversight – leading to burnout, heresy etc.”

*What would help: Training, mentoring and other support for lay leaders who take on new roles within the Minster Community.*

### **Unworkable partnerships**

- A very common fear was of being grouped with a church which was “fundamentally theologically opposed” to theirs. This particularly concerned inclusive churches being paired with Conservative Evangelical ones, or those which accept female ministry with those which do not. It was observed that SGBT is bringing churches closer together at the same time that LLF is making their differences more pronounced.
  - There was a fear this would cause harm to both members of congregations and church leaders, and questions were raised about whether the ‘mutual flourishing’ of female leaders could be assured.
  - N.B: a couple of focus group members had the opposite fear: that if Minster Communities were theologically homogenous, they would lack diversity, and that it could be a strength if churches from different traditions could work together.
- Separate from **differences on doctrinal grounds**, there was also a fear of **dysfunctional teams**. Some had had bad experiences of team ministry; some had been in a Mission Partnership which had failed; and others simply observed that, in general, PCCs and clergy weren’t used to working collaboratively. E.g. one churchwarden’s fear was of “being forced into a community where we don’t/ can’t integrate and don’t know anyone”.

*What would help: Having the ability to shape Minster Communities within a flexible framework.*

### **New power dynamics**

- There was a commonly expressed fear of losing their independence and distinct parish identity by being **subsumed** into a larger group (or the orbit of a larger church). Some used the language of ‘disenfranchisement’ or being ‘left behind’ to express this.

- Related to this was the fear that some churches in the Minster Community would be **more equal than others**. This was particularly pronounced among smaller, rural churches. E.g. one ordinand asked, “How are we to prevent richer/ bigger churches having more of a voice in the formation of a Minster Community?”
  - Similarly, two members from Society churches expressed the fear of being seen as a burden rather than a blessing.
- Several focus group members were concerned that the new structure will increase the **administrative burden** on them by adding another layer of governance – e.g. “Being bogged down in ever more layers of bureaucracy and structure”

*What would help: a process which enables different church leaders to articulate their sense of identity and mission and finds ways for the different strengths to be recognised and utilised.*

### **Our church will close ‘on my watch’**

- The majority of people we heard from described the closure of some church buildings as something which would help them thrive. But the opposite sentiment was more common among churchwardens. A phrase which was repeated by a number of church wardens based in small churches was that theirs would close ‘on their watch’.
- The prospect of their church closing felt especially painful for those who had worked hard to grow the congregation and had some success, but perhaps – they feared – not enough to save it.
  - “I suspect my church will be closed and everything I have worked for will be lost”.
- Others who feared church closures added that they feared the controversy this would provoke or the negative impact on ‘traditional worshippers’.

*What would help: Other focus group members described the importance of ‘giving a good death’ to any buildings or projects which have to be ended or closed through the SBGT process. This must include recognising the labours and fruits of all who led and supported it.*

### **That Shaped by God Together will not solve the problems in hand**

- While many people recognise the realities of declining and ageing congregations and financial shortfalls, they could not see how Minster Communities would deliver growth and help churches engage more young people.
- Some were confident that Minster Communities would exacerbate the problems which the Diocese faces. We heard several times that churches only grow where there are full-time priests to lead them, so reducing the number of stipendiary priests would cause **further reduction in church congregations**.
- There is a fear that people will be lost along the way because the change proves too great, they ‘lose their vicar’, the process itself demands too much in terms of energy (physical and emotional) and time, and/or people are unwilling to travel to another community for services.

- With the further decline in numbers or at least increased mistrust of ‘the Diocese’ will come a **reduction in giving**, exacerbating the Diocese’s financial problems.
- Similarly, rather than encouraging more collaboration, there is a fear that it will prove a **divisive process** by ‘forcing’ the issues on which people differ.
- There is a concern that the energy and time required for the process itself, and solving the problems it throws up internally, will be a **distraction from mission** and outreach – “We become too inward and focused on structure with endless meetings”.
- And, rather than reducing the workload on clergy and supporting their wellbeing, it will **demoralise** them further - e.g. “Another structural change leading to further decline and burnout”.
- For Anglo-Catholic leaders in particular, there was a fear that a reduction in the number of priests, and increased dependence on lay leaders, would lead to an **erosion of the Catholic tradition** within the Diocese and that the centrality of the sacraments and the “ontological grace, privilege and burden of holy orders” would be undermined.

### **The change is too radical... or not radical enough**

- Some people at the focus groups hope that Minster Communities never come to pass and would like the Diocese to ‘leave them alone’.
- Related to this was the fear that the parish system or parish ministry would be lost through Shaped by God Together – e.g. “Disestablishment by the back door and the loss of parish system”
- But others had the opposite fear: that the process would be aborted, overtaken by events or not be thoroughgoing enough. Fears which were expressed along these lines included:
  - “That CofE rules, tradition, conservatism and lack of risk-taking might snuff out the potential of the Minster Community model and process”
  - That Shaped by God Together “results in downsizing, not a restructure. If Minster Communities are seen as an attempt to keep the ship afloat, it will fail. But if it’s a genuine way of doing church in a new way, then it’ll be more positive.”
  - “That the objective of Minster Communities will be to maintain every parish church with services and buildings however small and unviable – without any effective attempt to rationalise.”
  - “That the change to Minster Communities might not be fully implemented. Might be watered down in the transition with too many compromises. We have been through so much in the last 25 years, where the vision has gradually faded and benefits for mission and sustainability lost.”

## What effects are the prospect of Minster Communities already having?

In the focus groups, participants infrequently brought up the effect that Minster Communities were already having on the life of their church. When we asked some groups directly if it was having an impact on people's involvement in, or willingness to give to, the church, the responses were mixed:

- About half a dozen leaders said that they had seen a **fall in giving** from congregation members as a result of increased distrust of the Diocese.
- But the majority said that, as they avoided bringing up Shaped by God Together until there was something more concrete to relay, they hadn't seen a reduction.
- Some comments suggest churches might be giving less towards the Diocese in order to shore themselves up as much as possible against upcoming changes. E.g. one churchwarden said "We hold onto our small pot as we will need it." One church gave another within their cluster some funding with the explicit caveat that it couldn't be given to the Diocese.
- Two priests mentioned that uncertainty about who will have a post in the future configuration – and that the upcoming changes are known about more widely – is having an **effect on recruitment** or causing people to leave. In particular, they mentioned Shaped by God Together was a particular deterrent for Anglo-Catholic clergy. One survey respondent also mentioned that she was looking for a post elsewhere to avoid the transition.
- Slightly more commonly expressed among clergy was a **fear of retiring** in case they were not replaced.
- But while not many participants observed that the prospect of Minster Communities was already precipitating a decline, several did observe that it was **stymieing growth**. E.g. one priest from a Resource Church said that it was difficult to invest time and energy in that project while on a short-term contract in case there was no new incumbent appointed to the church. Another commented: "The anxiety felt in the parish at the moment will freeze any growth before Minster Communities".
- Similarly, a number of clergy said they were reluctant to start anything new that would not be sustainable under the new model. In this case, the uncertain timelines and lack of clarity about what Minster Communities will look like seems to be causing **anxiety and atrophy**. E.g. one participant asked: "What happens while we wait and meanwhile the church is running out of money and people are getting anxious?". Another simply wrote: "What is the point of going on?"

## What potential positives do people see coming from Minster Communities?

- The most commonly heard hope for Minster Communities was that it would enable the **sharing of resources, skills and expertise**.

- Having dedicated staff for administration, meaning church leaders can focus on ministry, and for children's work, which could help lead to growth.
- **Less isolation** for church leaders and new friendships
- **More efficiency** – for some this involved closing church buildings – e.g. 'Put energies into things that make a difference rather than maintenance of churches'. Some also mentioned a rationalisation of activities and administration – e.g. 'stop doing things we don't need for mission'.
- **More missional focus** – e.g. 'The walls of the Church come down figuratively so we get out into wider communities'.
- More opportunities for new expressions of Church and church plants (N.B. This was less likely to be seen as a benefit among those who support the parish model).
- **Less clergy-centric** culture – enabling 'every member ministry' and a particular increase in the value given to lay ministry (N.B This was less likely to be seen as a benefit among Anglo-Catholic clergy)
- Less territorialism and parochialism – renewed sense of being **One Body**
- Greater variety in worship (e.g. one lay leader would like to hold Taize or Iona-style services which might not appeal to many in her current church but could draw people from across a Minster Community).
- Celebration of **diversity**
- The new model will mean the Church is fit and equipped for future generations – e.g. 'We will achieve a slimmer, fitter local CofE that reflects local culture and diversity more closely and can respond to local needs more quickly and effectively.'
- Some focus group participants hoped that the Shaped By God Together process would "wake people up" to "realise things have to change".

## What do people want Minster Communities to deliver?

Focus group participants were unsure of the Diocese's goal for Minster Communities. But, based on our discussions, it appears many would be compelled by a vision which **is mission-focused** and helps build the Kingdom of God (rather than about managing decline or driven by finances) and:

- Enables **outreach** into communities
- Reaches and involves **young people**
- Supports **growth** and deepens **discipleship**
- Retains a visible Christian presence in every community and allows each church to maintain their distinct identity
- Is **sustainable** – e.g. 'That the 'structure' will be flexible enough for future change too – growth or shrinkage – and therefore free from constant 'crisis' management.'
- **Empowers and equips** more people to use their gifts rather than diluting ministry – e.g. 'Opportunity to share ministry across a community, releasing everyone's gifts.'
- Creates roles which are better aligned with leaders' gifts – e.g. 'I get to do more of what I'm called to do and less of what I'm not.'

## What will get in the way?

Many of the fears which people described also came up when they were asked to think of what would get in the way of Shaped by God Together. This included power struggles and poor relationships between leaders, theological differences, uncertainty, and not having enough leaders or volunteers to drive the change. Other hindrances which people noted were phrased in the negative (e.g. poor communication) but also positively, when asked what could help the process (e.g. good communication). So, to avoid repetition, the positive articulation of these enablers/ obstacles have been included under 'What can help?'

Across the focus groups, there were consistent themes regarding what would get in the way of the formation of fruitful Minster Communities:

### **Two-way disengagement**

- A consistent theme throughout the focus groups was that people wanted SBGT to not be a top-down intervention – they wanted to be engaged and to help shape the Minster Community they become a part of. There were fears that the process would be hidden from them, a fait accompli, or treated as a purely administrative decision by people disconnected from parish life (e.g. 'is there someone in Church House drawing red lines on a map?')
- But, at the same time, there was a recognition that some members of the clergy, PCCs and congregations may themselves be unwilling to engage with the process, and that their refusal to cooperate could jeopardise the reorganisation. The reasons for this can be broadly divided between distrust of the Diocese and general attitudes.

### **Distrust and Disillusion towards the Diocese**

- Suspicion that Minster Communities are another rerun of 2020 Vision and Mission Partnerships prevents people from taking it seriously or encourages defensiveness. E.g. "Lack of stability – too many change processes not completed leads to loss of purpose and hope, makes people more defensive of status quo and more selfish/self-centred."
- There was an often-expressed suspicion (or "cynicism" as some people put it) that the process is really about money – and although, people didn't want it to be "driven" by money, others wanted the Diocesan leadership to "be honest" about how finances came into it. As one leader put it, "Most people assume the why is financial but never had a definite statement to that effect – we can't accept change without a why."
- On one hand, we heard people suspect that the Diocesan leadership already has worked-out plans for how Minster Communities will look and work. But, we also encountered the opposite suspicion: that we are "making it up as we go along".
- Some people had the perception that the Diocese is wealthy – people pointed to the physical assets of St Martin's House and Bishop's lodge, and the renovations to the Cathedral – or that it is a 'financial black hole'.

*What would help: transparency, opportunities to build relationships or work relationally with the SGBT team.*

## **Energy and Attitudes**

In addition to these perceptions of the Diocese, focus group participants noted a range of attitudes and tendencies within congregations, PCCs and among leaders which could prevent engagement with Shaped by God Together or the effectiveness of Minster Communities. These included:

- Parochial rivalry or envy – ‘us and them’ thinking
- Protectionism – e.g. ‘the reluctance of villagers to see Christianity beyond "their" unsustainable church building’
- Conservatism – ‘this is the way we do things here’
- Inflexibility and resistance to change – e.g. people unwilling to travel across boundaries
- Lack of humility
- Lack of honesty - people ‘burying their heads in the sand’.

When these attitudes came up, often the age of congregations did as well – people observed that it was hard for the older members of the church to understand and accept change. One leader asked if it was unfair to expect people over 70 to radically adapt their understanding and experience of church.

## **Tradition and Expectations**

Related to this conservatism is the tradition which people want to protect – one priest called this ‘the weight of church culture’. As another priest put it, ‘the notion of university-educated resident parson has only been true for 100-150 years’. But that is ‘people’s preconception of what church is/ should be’ and is likely to prevent congregations from ‘buying in’ to the vision of Shaped by God Together.

Several survey respondents mentioned that while closing unviable church buildings was a necessary move, it would ‘not go down well’ - with members of congregations and local residents – and, therefore, ‘take up a lot of time and energy’.

One participant said “MCs have the potential to be exciting for those concerned with ‘discipleship’ but for the many who are ‘churchgoers’ it makes very little sense”. This points to the fact that even where church leaders recognise that a church is not just the building and its Sunday services, that may be the attitude of many in their congregation. For them to accept the new model would mean them embracing a new ecclesiology –which they may not have the energy or drive to do.

A couple of clergy also described feeling caught between the pressures and expectations of their parishes on one hand (i.e. of one vicar per parish, and keeping the church going as it has been) and the financial pressures of the Diocese on the other. This in turn has an impact on clergy wellbeing, we heard.

## **Lack of Finance**

- Not having enough resources to make Minster Communities a fruitful reality was raised across all focus groups. As one put the dilemma: “How will a bankrupt diocese afford it? Can we afford not to do it?”
- There were also questions raised about finances within Minster Communities, how they would be shared, and whether the expectation of sharing would prevent better-resourced churches from joining Minster Communities.

## **Busyness**

- Church leaders already feel stretched so there was a concern they would not have the capacity to support the change process, especially as the relationship-building which is key to the success of Minster Communities will take time.
- It was felt that the Diocese already put a lot of demands on their time and energy – which one participant described as ‘initiative overload’.
- The heavy workload on leaders was connected to burnout, mental and physical health issues – without positive wellbeing and engaged leaders, Minster Communities cannot get off the ground

## **Legalities**

- The practical, legal and governance implications of restructuring the parish system regularly came up in the focus groups as a barrier to the Shaped by God Together process – e.g. “If the wider/ national parameters don’t change, can anything else? I.e. communion required every Sunday, right to baptism, APCM and PCC regularity etc.”
- Some of the legal issues which came up included charity law (which prevents charities, including parish churches, from donating to one another), the role of deaneries and PCCs, parish boundaries, and the legal complexities of closing church buildings. One churchwarden spoke for many when he said he had “little confidence that the Shaped by God Together team have this in hand.”
- In addition, Church of England rules and regulations around the sacraments (e.g. who can give communion by extension and when does it need to be blessed) came up as relevant to the functioning of Minster Communities.

*What would help: confidence that the SBGT team were aware of some of the governance and legal issues raised by the process and that they were in hand.*

## **Speed**

Going too fast or losing momentum were both noted as risks to the process:

- E.g. One person hoped “that good process isn’t sacrificed on the altar of haste as deadlines or financial expediency dictates”
- Others feared “Drag – the process takes too long and it never gets completed.”

- Related to this was the fear that the process would be overtaken by other events, whether in the national church, wider society, or a change in Diocesan leadership, making the new model no longer relevant.

## What Would Help?

### Being Shaped by God

The sense that this is a **spiritual journey led by God**, discerned through prayer.

- Because people want the process to be shaped by God, bear spiritual fruit and grow the Church, they want it to have **scriptural underpinnings**, be informed by **theological reflection**, and above all, **rooted in prayer**.
  - A specific suggestion made several times was for regular/ monthly prayer meetings (held in a central location with a Zoom option) and for resources (like a liturgy designed for Shaped by God Together) so prayer for Minster Communities could be embedded into churches' worship. E.g. "Regular prayer – a strong network of home groups so that people feel that this matters."
- As well as praying for direction, there were suggestions that the journey may also need to be a sanctifying one as people recognised that particular **virtues** are needed for this process to succeed, particularly humility, compassion, and generosity.

### Clear and Honest Information

As mentioned above, not having clarity was at the root of a lot of people's fears. Therefore, essential to people from all focus groups being able to thrive was having a **greater understanding about Minster Communities**. This included:

- Clarity about roles and responsibilities
- Information about the oversight role, how it will function and how the person in that post will be selected
- Clarity regarding expectations, timescales, and which churches will be in each Minster Community
- Information about what level of finance will be available to each Minster Community

However, although people almost unanimously wanted clarity, they also wanted **flexibility in how Minster Communities would be shaped** and several used the word 'organic' in how they wanted them to evolve. Therefore, what is probably most important is clarity about the parameters of what members of future Minster Communities can shape and influence, and what aspects are non-negotiable.

Closely related was the theme of **transparency**: focus group participants described wanting honesty from the Bishop and his team about the drivers behind the Shaped by God Together process, how they were going about it, and what results it was having.

### Regular Communication

Accordingly, **good communication** invariably came up as something which would help people to thrive during the transition to Minster Communities. This meant:

- Avoiding mixed messages – if there are changes in how the process will work or what Minster Communities will look like, this should be stated explicitly, to prevent confusion and frustration.
- Communication to all levels – including people in the pews, the wider community, PCCs, DCCs, and priests – about **what is happening, why, and what the vision is**. Ideally priests would like 2-3 sentences to sum up what a Minster Community is and to help ‘sell’ it to congregations
- Regular **updates from the pilots** – lessons learned, what is working and what isn’t as well as stories of God at work.
- Being in **plain English**, avoiding jargon or managerial language
- Communicating in **multiple forms** – face to face sessions, emails, letters, Zoom calls, monthly or quarterly bulletins so that everyone can stay up-to-date
  - When it comes to email, the ideal message would be a series of bullet points with the main headlines, with links to places where they could find more detailed information (rather than lots of attachments)
- We heard that too much information was better than too little. As one priest put it: “We might get irritated by yet another email about it, we are going to moan, but we need to be engaged because it is important.”
- When it came to communicating the vision behind Minster Communities, we heard that this should win hearts and not just minds, speak to the imagination, and nurture hope.

### **Good Leadership and Champions**

- Those leading the Minster Communities, particularly the ‘Oversight Minister’, were regularly mentioned in the focus groups as being key to their success. E.g. “Strong, fair leadership encouraging all to take part”.
- Those leading the Minster Communities, it was noted, have an important role to play in sharing, and getting people excited about, the vision – one recommendation was to “Invest time in key people who are willing to engage with Minster Communities – others will follow if trust and understanding is built.”
- Many focus group participants wanted to know more about how these leaders would be discerned and selected, and how they would be equipped for this new role. Phrased negatively, there was a fear of “unsuitable leaders electing themselves”.

### **Training**

Leadership and training went hand in hand across the focus groups, as people recognised that both clergy and lay leaders would likely see changes to their roles, and that there is a need for more people to be trained to take on leadership roles. Suggestions along these lines included:

- “Invest in leadership teams – training, development, mentoring and responsible structures – to envision and run Minster Communities”

- “Lay training to be diverse in terms of learning mode i.e. not all academic”
- “Deeper theological and leadership training for LLM so they are properly equipped for being the named person for a church”
- “Training for ministers on how to prepare congregations well for Minster Communities – spiritually, attitudinally, generous orthodoxy”
- “Change management training”

As churches will increasingly need all members to be active in its life and mission, one recommendation was for more people to be enrolled into the Cursillo course as several focus group participants reported that it had proved very effective at increasing people’s level of engagement with a church’s mission and ministry.

### **A Pastoral Approach**

The sensitivities involved in the Shaped by God Together process cannot be overstated. We heard of people being scared for their **families’ livelihoods**, losing their **sense of vocation**, seeing their labours to grow a church come to naught, and of their flock “being told that what they have done for decades is wrong.”

With this in mind, we heard that people wanted to be **accepted and valued** in a process that could easily focus on weaknesses and deficits – e.g. one priest said “It being okay for each church to be where they are” would help.

So when it came to what would help them thrive, as well as seeing fruit from Minster Communities, feeling a sense of **purpose**, and being **supported**, and **listened** to regularly came up when people were asked what would help them to thrive.

Part of a pastoral approach to the transition to Minster Communities would also include support through loss. Whether the loss is in terms of people, buildings, or an aspect of church life, we heard that people should be helped to ‘grieve well’ and there should be **space for lament** as well as joy.

### **A Flexible Approach**

At the same time as wanting clarity and direction, focus group participants unanimously wanted flexibility in how Minster Communities were shaped, rather than a prescribed formula being imposed on them. For example:

- ‘Empowering churches to develop shared visions with each other from the ground up’
- ‘Seriously listening to what is being suggested and the centre not being so fixed on what it wants’
- ‘Serious consideration of the situation on the ground in parishes including ethnicity, language, age, affluence/ deprivation, education, faiths present etc’
- ‘Local decisions on local structures and appointments’
- ‘Developing slowly into cohesive groups which could be any size’

As indicated by the last quote, a common concern was that Minster Communities would be 'too big', so people wanted to be **able to choose which churches, and how many**, were included in their Minster Community. Some individuals from churches with particularly defined doctrinal positions wanted to be able to be part of a network of theologically aligned churches, rather than a geographically defined one.

Similarly, several participants from churches in the city mentioned that the demographic of their area should form part of the thinking around Minster Communities there. For example, leaders who did not have a Church of England school in their parish (and where the vast majority of local children belong to other faiths) thought it would be unfeasible to make engagement with schools a pivotal part of their Minster Community.

### **Preparation and Facilitation**

On the whole, focus group participants wanted to start engaging with the Shaped by God Together process now, even if they had not been formally invited to form a Minster Community yet. This was likely linked to the fear of the unknown and wanting to actively engage with the process, rather than having it done with them. Ideas about what would help along these lines included:

- "Early conversations to start the process"
- "Providing frameworks for churches to begin to think about their vision and ministry focus"
- "Good facilitation for parishes to come together for conversation"

As well as starting to build relationships between the churches within a Minster Community as a whole, it was mentioned several times that the Diocese should help support the four stipended people within a Minster Community to begin building a constructive relationship – given the importance of their teamwork to the rest of the model.

The focus groups themselves were regularly mentioned as a positive form of engagement which people would like repeated, with the invitations extended more widely. For example, one churchwarden said he would like "More of what we are doing today during the process. PCC members, not just church wardens, should be invited to local forums and their responsibilities made clear."

In addition to facilitated discussions, a number of focus group participants mentioned wanting "facilitated change management at the grassroots level" or training in change management, so they could guide their congregations through the transition and hopefully bring about the culture change needed for Minster Communities to thrive missionally.

### **Wider context**

In order to help people across the Diocese to understand and accept the proposed changes, some people mentioned that examples from elsewhere and a sense of wider context could help. This included, for example:

- Looking back through Church history at similar changes (and the origins of our current model, which we may be more recent than people think)
- Information about the financial situation of other Dioceses and how they are trying to address them so that people can appreciate that it isn't just in Leicester that a restructure is being proposed (e.g. one focus group participant mentioned that in Worcester, churches are being asked to raise about £60,000 p.a. in order to pay for their own priest).
- Similar information about other denominations may also be relevant, so we can learn from their examples as well.
- Recognition of the 'perfect storm' that the wider Church of England is in – falling numbers, financial difficulties, ageing congregations, LLF, and continued tensions over women's ministry.

Information about what is happening elsewhere is related to the theme of transparency – once people know what challenges our Diocese and others are facing, what ways forward are being considered and with what effects, then they are more likely to understand the necessity of a restructure here in Leicester.