

This is the first of a series of videos that we're offering as a way of sharing some of the principles that have shaped our work on Ministry Areas. As we prepare to hold meetings for each of the new Ministry Areas, I want to begin by addressing two questions that have been asked fairly frequently over the last few weeks.

The first is, 'why this?'

Quite simply, and for no other reason, we're establishing Ministry Areas because we believe that it's where God is leading us. God uses the raw material of our experience to guide us into the new, and our experience over the last few decades is sobering. It's been one of declining membership and church attendance: the number in some of our congregations is now in single figures and continuing to go down. Many of our congregations have few if any members under 60: the life of the church doesn't look sustainable beyond a decade or so. There's a growing demand on our finances with increasing costs and many of our buildings needing significant repairs. And we live in a world that seems to have little interest in faith and little time for organized religion. To do nothing would be an abdication of our responsibility and calling.

Whilst the picture is a challenging one, we do not lose heart. Rather, we trust in God who continues to be at work both in the Church and in the world. And we trust God to lead us into the new and shape us for the mission and ministry to which we are called. This, we believe, means working more closely together, sharing the resources that we have with one another and benefitting from the significant economies of scale that Ministry Areas will give us. It will also involve discovering ways of being church, of nurturing disciples, and of engaging with our communities that will help us to connect with at least some of the 99.9% of population who aren't members of the Church.

For those who fear that this is a covert way of closing church buildings, let me assure you that this is not the purpose of what we're doing. The local church building is a powerful sign and symbol of God's presence in the community. But some of our buildings are vulnerable because of the picture I've just described, and we believe that establishing Ministry Areas as we have, gives us the best chance of ensuring sustainable future for them.

The other question being asked is, why now?

Our diocese has been on the journey towards establishing Ministry Areas for at least five years. Although progress has been hampered for a number of reasons, we believe that the time has come to complete the work. We all work better when the structures are clear: when we know who our partners are and who we are working with; when we are clear what our resources are and who is in the team that is leading us. At the moment, in many areas of our diocese, these things are not clear and this is hampering our ability to move forward together. It's also preventing us from being as effective as we can be with the resources that God has blessed us with.

With our church buildings closed and our lives so restricted over the past year because of the pandemic, a fairly large group of people has had the time and space to draw together the Ministry Area plans. The group consisted of the stipendiary clergy and some lay members of the DBF and Standing Committee, as well as the Diocesan Staff and Bishop's Staff Teams,

The vaccines are now being rolled out and the hopes of getting back to some sort of normality are in sight, so we're now in a good and more hopeful place to begin implementing the plans locally.

I look forward to seeing and hearing from at least some of you at the Ministry Area meetings.