



## Growing fruitful churches in the Diocese of Durham

### Team of Interim Change Ministers appointed as ‘enablers of change’.



The Diocese of Durham started appointing Interim Change Ministers (ICMs) in 2023 under the umbrella of Growing Mission - a development programme funded by the Church of England's Strategic Mission and Ministry Investment Board (SMMIB) - which links Deanery Planning with the Vacancy Audit Partnership (reviewing parish needs) and ICMs. To date they have appointed five ICMs working as a team with an additional appointment in process.

The programme evolved through the work of the Archdeacon of Durham, The Ven Libby Wilkinson, a former business analyst, who has dual responsibility as both Archdeacon and effectively Director of Mission and Ministry (**See IM Viewpoint**): ‘One of the things I have focused on is what it means to be a healthy church in terms of attitude and ethos, spirituality and mission. My catch-all phrase is: given the resources we have, where we are, and the people we have got, what is the healthiest we can be?’ says Archdeacon Libby. ‘It’s working extremely well for the diocese. We can see it is making a significant difference.’

This marks a shift towards Innovating with interim appointments within a strategic framework. The job description is couched as intentional interim ministry: ‘come to terms with the past and find new hope’; ‘consider future witness, mission and ministry’; reassess resources, needs and priorities’; ‘identify where change is needed’; ‘prepare for the next chapter of life.’

These posts offer greater resourcing, security, sustainability and support over a longer timeframe than other IM posts: ICMs are appointed for 7 years on a diocesan employment contract (rather than under Regulation 29 of the Clergy

Terms of Service Regulations), with a salary equivalent to mid-band 6 senior staff (currently around £47,000) allowing ICMs to live own homes to avoid moving between appointments. It circumvents the common IM pitfalls of being a short-term, insecure post, while also giving the diocese a greater degree of flexibility than Regulation 29.

The new model attracted experienced interim clergy, including from outside the Diocese, at a time when many vacancies are going unfilled, prompting Durham to grow the team by an additional three ICM appointments funded wholly from diocesan funds rather than partly by SMMIB investment. Another distinctive element is the use of language: *Interim Change Ministers* intentionally signals that these roles are about change, to steer away from the common misconception that IM is a form of vacancy cover or a stop-gap between permanent appointments.

ICMs are also part of a wider process of planning for the development of healthier, viable churches – Durham uses the language of ‘fruitful’. The appointment of an ICM follows a Vacancy Audit Partnership process where VAP enablers work with parishes to review their needs in terms of mission, buildings, finance, leadership and governance.

Durham tested the approach in 2022 with the appointment of an experienced team Rector, David Brooke, to an unsustainable 5-church parish which was struggling to manage its buildings and worship rota. The result was a plan for radical change, involving building works, culture and governance improvements, and reducing the parish to two worship centres in future. One church was moth-balled for a possible church plant.

It was an important learning exercise for the diocese: 'It was a far bigger project than anybody realised: it was a 10-year job, not three years. Three years would be the top end of an ICM appointment now and we are more likely to appoint for 6-12 or 18 months, mainly because it's harder to maintain the rhythm of parish development over a longer period,' explains Alexander Jones, Durham's Growing Mission Strategic Lead, who line-manages the ICM Team.



'We also learned that we needed a clearer plan for how to end a placement; and also, that waiting for the next appointment doesn't work for IM, as you lose momentum: you need to start the appointment by saying what does this look like

when the ICM leaves, what do we need to have in place? It also taught us the value of having non-resident ICMs, and that with a bigger set of challenges you might need a wider skill set, which might mean appointing different ICMs across the process – the leadership style of one person might not be needed for all the journey.'

As a consequence, Durham is exploring shorter placements: the newest member of the team, John Davis, has worked on 3–6-month appointments across two parishes (each half-time) to clear the ground, quite literally - 'We've found that John and a skip is a powerful combination!' says Alexander - and the follow up appointment may be another ICM with a different skill set.

There are currently 5 ICMs: Lindsay Southern, John Musson, Shaun Conlon, Doug Heming and John Davis on a sequential placements in one or two parishes for a maximum of 3 years, however in practice most will stay about 2.5 years. They span a variety of theological traditions with sufficient flexibility and geographical spread to serve the dioceses' needs.

Licensing has also required careful thought: ICMs are licensed as SSM Priests in Charge to their placement parish and have a lower key welcome service than a normal licensing; and when not in placement they serve on a SSM Public Preacher license, the downside of which is 'we do quite a bit of re-licensing,' says Alexander.

ICMs are embedded in the planning process, helping to 'whiteboard' the objectives of the placement before they start. They monitor progress throughout and conduct a placement review 6-months before the end of the placement to clarify next steps. They also retain involvement after the conclusion of the placement, remaining available to the churchwardens for ongoing support and advice.

The appointment of ICMs has been one of the most successful elements of the Growing Mission programme and one which the diocese plans to continue regardless of whether the posts are externally funded. 'We have no

anticipation that this programme will end, we would continue with ICMs with diocesan funds. We have looked ahead and seen that if we had enough ICMs we could use them three times over – there are so many places where we could have a change brief, but it's about seeing where best they can be deployed in terms of geography, timing and where they can have most impact,' says Alexander.

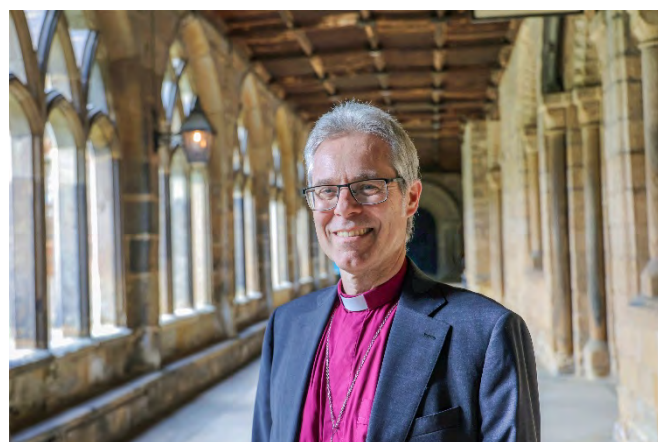
Durham defines success, not in terms of hard outcomes because it is too early to measure, but in terms of how churches are moving towards becoming fruitful, healthy churches. 'ICM is a way of getting there. We cannot yet show fruitfulness, but we can demonstrate they are on a change journey in terms of addressing problems with buildings and governance, understanding who they are and consolidating,' explains Alexander.

'Growing mission and healthy fruitful churches can only be effective in context. It isn't a 'one-size-fits-all' approach, planting one team from here to there.



ICMs help us to find out what that looks like locally and so they are a key part of our contextual approach on the ground, building trust and working authentically with that place to work out what to prioritise and what the future looks like there.'

The Rt. Revd. Rick Simpson, Bishop of Durham, sees the significant role of ICMs as enablers of change: "We live in times when many parish churches are wrestling with the need for change. Challenges to do with buildings and finance are significant; above all, all our churches need to learn how they can be places where the Christian faith may be explored and discovered, which will often mean creating a more varied approach to worship and learning. Interim Change Ministers can offer leadership that enables change – sometimes including the grasping of particular nettles – and helps develop the mission of the church. They can help parishes work through issues and problems that would otherwise stand in the way of necessary change and of developing into churches of missionary disciples."



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