

Commentary by the Ven Julian Hubbard, Director of Ministry for the Archbishops' Council.

The annual Ministry Statistics are a key source of information for the Church of England and those involved in its life and mission, and who pray and plan for its future. The present set of statistics are of particular interest as they cover the period from 2012 to 2015. This gives an opportunity to review in detail more than just a single year snapshot and to focus on longer term trends.

The overall picture confirms what is widely known about the challenges we face. While the number of stipendiary ordinations showed a welcome increase between 2012 and 2015, this is not sufficient to redress the gathering effect of clergy retirements predicted over the next ten years.

With 25% of stipendiary clergy aged 60 or over, at present rates of ordination this trend will have a material and growing impact on the number of those available to serve in ordained roles across the dioceses. The statistics on the age and ethnicity of clergy show that we still have some way to go to ensure that the whole cohort fully reflects the demographics of the wider community.

These statistics invite more than just a realistic assessment of the Church of England's situation. They also provide a baseline from which to move forward from a pattern of gentle numerical decline into growth.

The good news is that there is a growing readiness to meet these challenges. Some dioceses have adopted strategies for growth in the number of candidates for ministry and of the kind which they need for current and future mission need. They are already showing encouraging signs of increase. There are also ambitious plans and initiatives through Renewal and Reform to plan and work for an overall increase of 50% in ordinands by 2020 and to nurture vocation particularly among young people and those of black, Asian and minority ethnic backgrounds.

My hope is that these statistics will help to strengthen the efforts already being made and provide a stimulus for developing further the kind of determined and imaginative response required to make the significant difference we need to see. Those efforts begin with prayer as a first priority, asking God for a Church renewed in its calling and for an increase in the number of those offering to serve as ministers and servants of the Gospel and the Kingdom.