

Growing Younger – Encounter

Our Vision for Growing Younger

In Manchester Diocese we want to see children, young people and their families actively involved in and sustained in their faith by our parishes, supported in their discipleship at school and committed to continuing with their faith as they step forward to become the church leaders – lay and ordained - of the future.

To achieve this, we want to *double the number of young active disciples and ensure there is a flourishing children, youth and families ministry within reach of every young person*, aligning fully with the vision of the national church. This will mean, by 2033, increasing the number of children and young people who actively engaging on a discipleship pathway in our churches and schools from around 4,700 to 9,000; and increasing the number of flourishing CYP ministries from the 57 to 80 – at least two in each of our mission communities – so they are in reach of every young person in our diocese.

Scripture – Matthew 18.1-5

¹*At that time the disciples came to Jesus and asked, 'Who, then, is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?'*

²*He called a little child to him, and placed the child among them. ³And he said, 'Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. ⁴Therefore, whoever takes the lowly position of this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. ⁵And whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me.'*

Many of our churches now cater to an older demographic. With ageing and declining congregations, they lack the financial and volunteer resources to engage with new generations of younger people. Our congregations are often fearful for the bricks and mortar rather than being courageous about sharing the Gospel. A significant number of clergy are overseeing this process of steady decline and lack the skills, motivation and wider support to bring about the changes necessary to attract children and young people to church. Some clergy are not doing enough to empower the lay people in their parishes, to take the lead in this important area of ministry.

This passage reminds us about the role and importance of children to Jesus and what it means to '*become like little children*'. Fully involving children and young people in the life of our church has implications for how we understand our position and status, and also about our welcome. The role and importance that children and young people have in our churches tells us a lot about how we see ourselves and our parishes and what is important to us in our church lives and beyond. To achieve our vision of *growing younger*, it will be important to think about what we need to do differently in our churches and make practical and significant changes in our parishes and mission communities, and across the diocese as a whole.

Overview of our Growing Younger programme

The key elements of our Growing Younger Programme are:

- **Encounter** – to be delivered by specialist teams supporting all stages of the discipleship pathway working directly with parishes – a new approach combining the best element of Places and ManDio Growing Faith. Support will be targeted to those parishes which are likely to benefit most.
- **Equip** – a comprehensive development and training offer for those – lay and ordained – providing children and young people's ministry across the diocese.

Other elements of our strategy will help us achieve our vision for Growing Younger including:

- Ensuring that children and young people's ministry is prioritised in our **resource churches**.
- Strengthening our investment in **vocations** with a particular focus on supporting young people with their calling to leadership roles.
- Extending the **Shades** racial justice and faith project to churches and schools across the diocese, with funding from the Racial Justice Unit.
- Revitalising our **University Chaplaincy** provision in Manchester city centre and at Bolton and Salford Universities.

Encounter

We continue to be energised by the opportunities in our churches, schools and homes, to create ways for children and young people to encounter Jesus. Luke 24 tells the story of two men on the road to Emmaus who encounter each other and talk about the remarkable events of the previous days. Without realising, they are joined by Jesus whom they proceed to talk and eat with. Suddenly they realise that Jesus has been in their midst all along. Seeing the impact of that encounter, they ask, “were our hearts not burning with fire while he talked to us on the road”. The next stage of our ministry with children and young people is about creating, enabling and sustaining those encounter opportunities.

The objectives of Encounter are to:

- develop discipleship pathways to support children and young people in their faith journey at church, school and home;
- build strong links between our CE and community schools, and parishes and mission communities to encourage children, young people and their families to join their local church;
- increase the number of intentionally Christian toddler, children's and youth groups in parishes.
- ensure that the worship experience of children, young people and their families is positive and inspiring;
- develop the confidence and skills of the lay and ordained leaders supporting children, young people and their families.

Missional Design

The proposed missional design for Encounter is a new approach for the diocese, combining the most successful elements of the Places project in Bolton and ManDio Growing Faith (MDGF) in the rest of the diocese. Following on from Placeds, we are looking to set up cohesive local teams with specialist staff focusing on particular age-range specialisms. Based on our learning from MDGF, our approach highlights the value of working directly with parishes and mission communities, sensitive to the low base for CYP ministry in terms of confidence, skills and resources.

Encounter is therefore based on the following missional design principles:

- **Discipleship is a long-term commitment** to relationships with children, young people and families throughout their discipleship journey - through church, home and school, colleges and universities.
- **A contextual approach with the careful design of interventions is key**, focusing on meeting the needs of a specific geographical area is key - 'starting small' and testing new approaches.
- We will work to ensure that as far as possible **all elements of Encounter are owned and led by children and young people themselves** with adults as guides and mentors.
- **Strong relationships** with a wide range of stakeholders are essential. Building strong partnerships with parishes, mission communities and schools leads to fruitful ministry.

The key elements of the discipleship pathway and the missional opportunities it provides are set out below. Through Encounter, parishes will be encouraged to review their current offer to children and determine where further development is required with a view over time to providing comprehensive support to children and young people of all ages as they travel on their discipleship journey:

Early Years – 0-5	Families joining toddler groups create a space of connection for parents, where they can share similar experiences and questions and explore their faith. In these spaces there is a focus on stories of encounters with Jesus and of God's faithfulness, where prayer can become natural and normal, and where singing becomes worship. This stage is about welcome, conversation, relationship-building and introducing the small children and their families to God. Even in these early years, key foundations are laid that provide stability and strength for the faith they are beginning to build.
Children and Families – 5-11	The faith development theories of both Fowler and Westerhoff tell us that children have the capacity to understand much more about their faith and God than we give them credit for. By providing access to a wealth of high quality, engaging children's resources, along with support and guidance from the Encounter Team, children will be given the opportunity to understand God's great love and purpose for their lives. We encourage parishes to see children as being central to their identity as a church and a community, to treat them as participants in the life and leadership of their congregation.
Youth – 11-18	As our children journey into adolescence, our churches are encouraged to consider how they can support them in navigating issues such as relationships, exams, decisions and puberty. When young people might walk away from their faith, the message is always one of <i>welcome</i> ; when they might explore other spiritualities and faiths, the message is always one of <i>belonging</i> ; when they might doubt or question their faith, the message is always one of <i>inviting them to join in the difficult conversations</i> . Our priority is to offer a safe, holy and inclusive space for all and support them in their vocations.

Chaplaincy and Developing Young Leaders- 5-18	Connection with school - and how faith makes sense for children there - is key. Where churches are able to support local CE primary schools with collective worship, ethos groups, church visit and other opportunities, they will be able to reach pupils who are hearing about Jesus for the first time, as well as children from their congregations. Chaplaincy workers have a key role to play in ensuring a consistent approach across church and school. We recognise the opportunity our Schools Admission policies give us to engage with children, even after they have secured their secondary school place.
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In engaging with the parishes in their Archdeaconries, the discipleship pathway for children and young people will be the key focus of the Encounter Team. The Team Leader will be responsible for an initial diagnostic conversation which looks at the length and breadth of the child's and young person's discipleship journey in that particular context. They will work with the parish to map out the 0-18 pathway, taking into account the church itself, the wider mission community, local schools and other opportunities. The Team Leader will seek to bring about fundamental culture change by challenging the parish to think in the round about its children's and young people's work, mapping all the possible interventions for that context, helping clergy and lay leaders to think in a holistic way about their CYP ministry.

From Places and MDGF, we have evidence that repeatedly demonstrates that relationship is vital to supporting our parishes and mission communities in their work with children and young people. We are therefore proposing to set up an Encounter Team of five people – comprising a team leader and four specialist CYP workers - in each of our four Archdeaconries. The specialist roles will cover Early Years, Children and Families, Youth Work, and Chaplaincy/Developing Young Leaders.

Recognising that it will not be possible to address all elements of the discipleship pathway at once with a parish, it will then be necessary to identify the most appropriate interventions for the short-term with support from the appropriate specialist from the Encounter Team, and also any appropriate development and training from Equip. The Team Leader will maintain a dialogue with the parish and continue to identify opportunities for developing the discipleship pathway as specific projects are implemented and new opportunities arise. Their role is to stretch, enthuse and prepare churches to engage with the CYP discipleship pathway and develop this over a number of years, rather than just focusing on one-off interventions which are likely to have limited long-term impact.

As well as reviewing the overall discipleship pathway, the initial engagement by the Team Leader will cover the following:

- Unpacking of data from our review of parishes with local leaders;
- Creating opportunities for conversations with key stakeholders such as current CYP leaders and PCC;
- Facilitating a consultation with the relevant children or young people to hear their views;
- Encouraging conversation with the wider church so that this new ministry is seen as a core ministry.

The specialist team member will continue the supportive process by exploring:

- Leadership – identifying current and possible leaders and any development needs;
- Partnership - options for working with local parishes or other agencies;
- Resources – including relevant diocesan and national resources;
- Safeguarding - guidance on safeguarding and safer recruitment requirements;
- Implementation – building a timetable to include consultation, training, and planning;
- Impact – exploring desired outcomes and longer-term sustainability.

The specialist team member will continue to support the parish/mission community as they get underway by:

- Providing advice and support as requested;
- Attending update meetings to reflect on progress and discuss any issues or concerns;
- Continuing to invite and encourage engagement with neighbouring parishes and local networks;
- Accessing further information, resources and training as appropriate.

Building on the innovative and creative approaches developed by Places and MDGF, the range of activities that will encouraged and supported by the Encounter Team include:

Early Years – 0-5

- **Distinctly Christian toddler groups.**
- **Wiggle Worship** – to enable children to explore bible stories and Christian values with Wiggle, the Bible bookworm.
- **Lift Off** – Learning in Faith Together – helping children and families navigate the transition from home to school with a focus on God always being with us through interactive fun and learning.
- **Other New Worshipping Communities** - for families with young children who are on the fringes of church or not part of the faith community.

Children and Families – 5-11

- **Messy Church, Café Church, Junior Church** and other New Worshipping Communities.
- **Beyond** – interactive workshops to inspire children explore the journey from Y6 to Y7 in faith and confidence.
- **Emerge** – a local transition celebration for young people moving from Y6 to Y7 hosted by the local church or mission community.
- **This is Church** - a service providing a welcome, sensitive and appropriate setting and experience in church for families with a child/young person who has special needs/neurodivergence.
- **Forest Church** - a worship service that takes place outside and focuses on nature and creation.
- **Distinctively Christian holiday clubs.**
- **Local huddles and large gatherings** enabling children and young people and their families to socialise and support each other, as well as explore their faith.

Youth – 11-18

- **Youth Sacred Spaces** - to enable young people to encounter God through worship, reflection, conversation, prayer and response.
- **Distinctly Christian Youth Groups.**
- **Big Gatherings** – of children and young people, at mission community and deanery level, organised with the young people themselves.
- **Regular hubs of youth leaders** - creating space for training and mutual support.

Chaplaincy and Developing Young Leaders – 5-18

- **Ethos Groups, Christian School Groups, Discipleship Groups in Schools.**
- **Collective worship** at primary and secondary school level and in parishes
- **Engaging mid-week worship** for children and their families attending to meet school admission requirements.
- **Love your School** – a focus week for churches to contact their local schools to begin or continue their relationship with them with a staged approach to building the relationship.
- **Love your Neighbour** – church leaders and pupils from local school doing something together that serves the wider community.

The Encounter Team will also work closely with the five members of the Shades Team (funded by the Racial Justice Unit) in promoting racial justice with children and young people in our schools and parishes.

To achieve our vision, we have set ourselves the target of each of the front-line workers in the Encounter engaging with at least four parishes a year, with a view to engaging with at least 25 children and young people in each instance.

A phased approach to setting up the Encounter Team

To ensure we have a comprehensive offer for CYP across the diocese, our proposed approach is to create the Encounter Team out of the existing Places and MDGF teams, as well as recruiting new staff in line with the phased approach outlined below. Parishes have spoken to us about the need for clarity on the support that is available and we recognise the importance of presenting this next stage of our Growing Younger programme as one coherent offer, rather than three stand-alone projects.

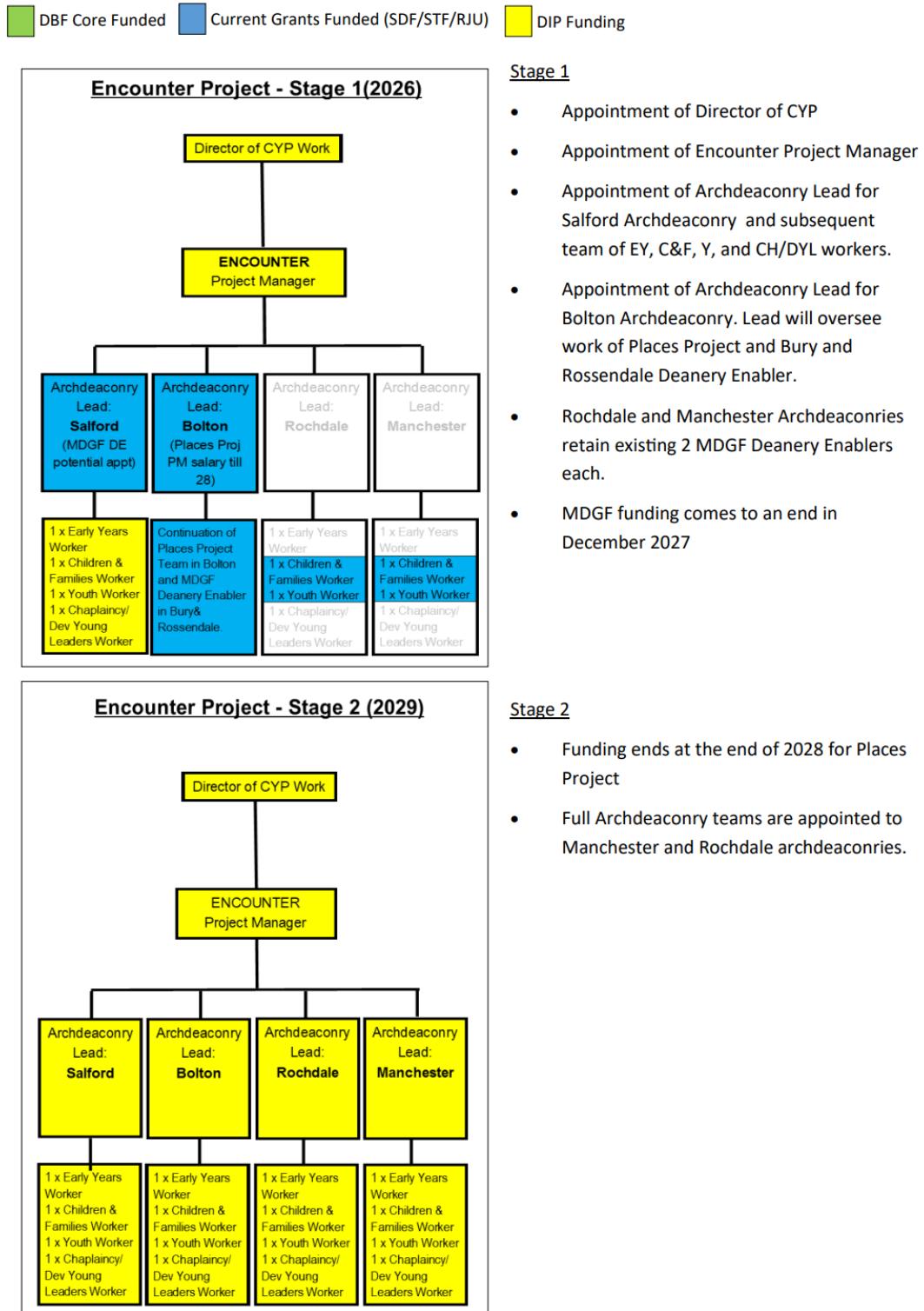
Recent leadership changes are already providing us with opportunities to join up the management of the Places and MDGF teams which is proving to be hugely beneficial in terms of sharing resources and ideas, and developing a consistent approach to CYP ministry for the diocese as a whole. This approach will also ensure continuity of staffing and expertise.

Although we are confident that Encounter will be effective over the medium-term in growing the number of children and young people in our churches, as with many other CYP initiatives across the country, we do not yet have comprehensive evidence of the impact of our relatively recently established Places and MDGF projects. We therefore recognise the need to take a phased approach to setting up the new Encounter Team to enable us to evaluate this new way of working before rolling it out fully across

the diocese and are proposing to take the following approach to setting up Encounter, as set out in the diagram below:

- At the start of 2026, we will set up a new Encounter Team in Salford Archdeaconry, appointing an Encounter Team Leader and the first team of four specialist CYP workers, enabling us to build on the existing strong relationships and support work being carried out there through MDGF.
- At the same time, in Bolton Archdeaconry we will engage the existing Places team based in the Bolton Deanery and the MDGF CYP worker in Bury & Rossendale Deanery with the Encounter methodology. We will recruit to the role of the current Places manager (which is currently vacant) so that they also line manage the CYP worker for Bury & Rossendale, enabling closer joint working between the two deaneries and a consistent approach.
- The remaining four MDGF workers in the Manchester and Rochdale Archdeaconries will come under the line management of the new Encounter Project Manager, who will lead the diagnostic work with parishes in those archdeaconries. The existing deanery workers will adopt the policies and practices of the new Encounter offer.
- We will carry out a full evaluation of the effectiveness of Encounter in all parts of the diocese in the first half of 2028, to inform our decision about its roll-out from 2029.
- Subject to this_evaluation, as the funding for MDGF and Places comes to an end, members of those teams will be able to apply for the newly created Encounter posts in the remaining three Archdeaconries. These transitional arrangements will ensure the smooth migration of our existing projects to Encounter and that we retain and build on the skills of the staff currently working as part of Places and MDGF.

Developing Stages of the Encounter Project



Outcomes

Encounter and Equip have been designed to achieve the following outcomes by 2033:

- A doubling of the number of young active disciples to over 9,000 including a 30% increase in CYP regular weekly attendance from 4,700 to 6,100;
- At least two flourishing CYP ministries in each of our 33 mission communities.

Along with other evaluative work to establish the impact and success of our strategy, we have agreed the following key indicators:

	2026 - 2028	2029 - 2033	Total
# new distinctively Christian toddler groups	12	80	92
# new Fresh Expressions	12	80	92
# new Youth Sacred Spaces	12	80	92
# CE secondary school discipleship groups	6 pa	12 pa	12 pa
# new children and young active disciples	950	3,940	4,890
# young leaders	30	50	80
# ALMs CYP elective	15 pa	15 pa	120
# Spotlight events (av. 75 attendees)	4 pa	4 pa	2,400 attendees
# clergy engaged in Equip (includes 30 curates pa)	90 pa	100 pa	770 clergy engagements