

Diocese of York
Group Ministry

What is a group ministry?

A group ministry is a formal legal structure that obliges the incumbent and/or priest in charge of each benefice within the group to assist each other in making the best possible provision for the cure of souls in the group as a whole. Each incumbent and/or priest in charge of each benefice in the group has the authority to minister throughout the group. Those offices and services that would normally be performed by an incumbent or priest in charge may be performed by any member of the group in any benefice within the group. Each incumbent and priest in charge in the group has a duty to assist one another. The members of the group ministry must meet regularly as a chapter to discuss matters of general concern or special interest to the group.

How does group ministry affect the authority of the incumbent or priest in charge in their own benefice?

Each incumbent retains their rights and authority as incumbent of their own benefice. The group structure permits each incumbent or priest in charge to minister in the other benefices in the group without the need for a formal licence or authority. When ministering in a benefice other than the incumbent or priest in charge's own, each member of the group must act in accordance with the directions of the incumbent or priest in charge of that benefice. In providing directions, the incumbent or priest in charge of the benefice must have regard to their duty to work collaboratively.

How is a group ministry established?

Normally, the proposal to establish a group ministry will come about as a result of parishes and clergy in neighbouring or like minded benefices working together and wishing to progress collaborative ministry. If parishes are considering group ministry, as with any form of reorganisation they should contact their Archdeacon at an early stage. The Archdeacon will be able to help parishes with their consideration of the way forward and advise on process. A group ministry is established by means of a legal process which involves the PCCs passing resolutions, a report to the Diocesan Mission and Pastoral Committee by the Archdeacon and an Archdeaconry working party following a meeting with parishes, and formal consultations with interested parties (clergy, PCCs, rural dean and deanery lay chair, patron). If no objections to the proposal are received or remain unresolved, a Pastoral Scheme or Order will be drawn up which will give authority for the group ministry to be created.

Why do we need a formal group ministry structure? Can't the clergy simply agree a working relationship between themselves?

There is no reason why clergy should not agree a collaborative working pattern. However, such an arrangement remains in place only for so long as the individual office holders agree. A group ministry scheme is a permanent arrangement that applies to the benefices within the group whoever is in office. The incumbents and priests in charge in the group can't withdraw from the group except by resigning their office. When an individual ceases to hold office, the group arrangement applies to the new office holder. In addition, any regular, informal arrangement made between clergy to minister in each other's benefices requires the approval of the Archbishop and appropriate licensing arrangements need to be put in place. Clergy who are licensed to minister in each other's benefices are licensed as assistant curates. The group scheme removes the need for any cross – licensing or other additional permission from the Archbishop as working patterns develop. Members of a group retain incumbent status when ministering in another benefice.

What are the implications of group ministry for assistant clergy and lay ministers?

Although the terms of the formal group ministry scheme will provide only for the collaborative ministry of incumbents and priests in charge in the group, it is particularly important that others ministering in the group are involved in the collaborative working structure as equal partners with others of the same status in the group. Assistant curates, readers and lay workers will require licences to enable them to work in other parts of the group. Such licences may relate to part of the group or the whole of the group, as appropriate. The group chapter should consider meeting regularly with the wider ministry team to discuss matters of common concern and identify areas where joint working is possible and appropriate.

How are appointments made to a vacant benefice in a group ministry?

The normal legal procedure for the appointment of an incumbent or priest in charge to a vacant benefice is followed, involving the parish and the patron in the usual way. However, it is important to consult more widely than normal about the proposed appointment, including with the other incumbents and priests in charge within the group, and the parish profile should make specific reference to the group ministry and its work and to the personal qualities that are required of a member of that group.

Who is in charge of a group ministry?

Each incumbent within the group is of equal status. The scheme may provide for a chair of the group or group chapter may appoint their own chair to take a leadership role as a "first among equals". The appointment of an independent third party to have oversight of the group ministry might be helpful, similar to the role of a Visitor in a Bishop's Mission Order, who could provide a

point of reference for matters of concern within the group, be given a formal duty to initiate periodic reviews of the group ministry and act as a consultant to the group.

What is the position of individual parishes within the group?

Parishes continue as they did before the creation of a group ministry scheme. Each PCC remains responsible for its own parish. Each incumbent or priest in charge is a member only of the PCCs in the parishes within their own benefices.

Can PCCs of the parishes within a group join together?

PCCs of parishes in a group cannot be united unless the parishes themselves are united. It is possible for a group council to be established for the area of the group, either in the group scheme itself or under a scheme made under the Church Representation Rules. A group council will come together to discuss matters of common concern and opportunities for joint initiatives within the group. A group council is a good means of bringing together the whole ministry team and the laity in the group. Individual PCCs may delegate some of their functions to the group council.

Can a group council have finances separate to those of the PCCs?

A PCC is a corporate body, which exists in law even if it has no members. As a corporate body a PCC may own property or assets. A group council is not a corporate body and has no separate legal existence. It cannot therefore own assets. It may be convenient for the PCCs to open a joint bank account for the group. In law, that account will belong to the PCCs, not to the group council and each PCC must account for its share of the group account in its own annual accounts.

Can a group council employ staff, such as a group administrator or a youth worker?

As the group council has no separate legal existence, it cannot be an employer.

If the group council can't own assets or be an employer, what arrangement can be made across the group for financial matters?

Arrangements must be made by each PCC, acting jointly and in collaboration with each other. It may be that one PCC will agree to take the lead in dealing with group matters. For example, one PCC could act as the employer of a group administrator on the basis of an agreement by the other PCCs to contribute to the costs of employment, either directly to that PCC or via a joint group bank account. One PCC could arrange for insurance for a group event, with the other PCCs contributing to the cost of premiums and the insurers giving consent to the arrangements. Such arrangements can be legally complex and the advice of the diocesan office or the registry should be sought.

How do ecumenical relations work within a group ministry?

Any arrangement for a group ministry must take account of ecumenical relations already existing in individual parishes or across the area of the proposed group as a whole. Work may be required to link a number of initiatives within the new group. The creation of a group may give new opportunities for ecumenical partnerships. The advice of the relevant diocesan ecumenical officer should be sought in all cases.

What about changes to benefices or parishes within the group ministry?

A group ministry is all about collaboration and so discussion of possible changes amongst all the parishes should be encouraged. For example, if two or more benefices within the group ministry consider uniting, this will have an effect on the group ministry as a whole, and so the other benefices in the group should be involved in early discussions.

How long does a group ministry last?

A group ministry is a permanent arrangement that continues until dissolved by a pastoral scheme. It is recommended that the working of the group ministry is reviewed from time to time. A review might conveniently be carried out on a formal basis every five years or at other appropriate intervals. Such a review may be undertaken with the assistance of a "Visitor", if appointed. It can be instructive to have members of the group who resign their office give a report on their experience and to offer suggestions.

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