

Media Questionnaire: Priests

Your name, age and original home village, town or city (i.e. the place where you grew up):

Answer: Ian McGrath. I am 41 years old and grew up in Bebington on the Wirral but moved to Lancaster to study in 1999. I completed a degree in Religious Studies at St. Martin's College, and post-graduation, worked as the Youth Pastor.

The church in Blackburn Diocese where you are serving:

Answer: Ellel St. John the Evangelist, Galgate, Lancaster.

Tell us about your family:

Answer: I've been married to Julie for 11 years. She is from Northern Ireland and works as a Deputy Head of a local special school. We have two children: James (8) and Evie (5) and I have an elder daughter, Ellen (15) who lives in the Lake District.

If applicable, your former job before entering ministry?

Answer: During ordination training, I worked part-time as a Project Manager for a local structural engineering firm. Prior to that, I was a Youth Pastor for 10 years at St. Thomas' Church, Lancaster. During that time, I met my wife, Julie. We married in 2010 and now live in Morecambe with our family.

What led you to take the steps towards ordination?

Answer: The question around God's call to ordination was something that was there for me for a number of years, both from conversations I had with others and in my own reflections on my future. I finally decided to apply for ordination after a New Wine conference where it was mentioned, and the inner prompting to try the door and see what happens was, by this point, something I could ignore no longer.

What's been the best thing about your training?

Answer: The people I have met and worked alongside, particularly those undertaking a similar journey into ordained ministry. Their love, support and friendship has been, and continues to be, invaluable. It's also been a privilege to minister alongside new faces in different contexts, on placements and in different churches. Seeing the faithfulness of God to his people and their faithfulness to him, often over many years, is an encouragement to keep running the race he has called me to.

Can you say what is the most important thing you have learned during your training?

Answer: Last year as I was ordained a deacon, my answer to this question was not to put God, or myself, in a theological box. This year, whilst that still holds, the one thing that I am coming to learn and value more than anything is the importance of presence – being with people where they are, loving them in the normality of their everyday lives, and then seeking to be attentive to the Holy Spirit within those every day, normal relationships and experiences.

Additionally, I am more aware than ever of my own inability to do anything useful without dependence on God. People don't need me; they need Jesus. But for some reason that I don't get sometimes, God chooses to use us fallible, weak, and often awkward and difficult human beings to make himself known to others. He puts his amazing treasure in jars of clay. Keeping that in mind is teaching me to be more gracious and patient with myself and others, and to grow in my faith in God's power and strength available to all of us who believe.

Reflecting on the difficult past year, please share a few thoughts about how the pandemic has impacted on ministry at this time (you could reflect how people have adapted to the circumstances in different ways as part of this response) ...

Answer: Without meaning to sound clichéd, the pandemic has brought both immense challenges and also wonderful opportunities for ministry. On the one hand, lockdowns and restrictions separated church communities from physically meeting up, which has had a relational effect, particularly on those already lonely and vulnerable.

For some, this separation has led to a decision not to return to church, whilst for others, the struggles of the pandemic have led them to a deeper commitment to the church community. In terms of mission, we have seen people engaging with church who may have not done so before the pandemic.

Churches have had to adapt how they gather and reach others when they can't physically meet or are restricted in doing so. This has led to some wonderful and creative opportunities for mission and evangelism, as well as new forms of church and worship.

A real strength for the Church in this period has been its involvement in community

outreach, often in partnership with other organisations. Whether that be running foodbanks, providing building space, or both, the Church has been a key community support for those in need at this time.

Yet, this period of change and adaption has also taken its toll on ministers and church communities alike. All have been hit by the challenges of grief, illness, loneliness, financial hardship and uncertainty to name but a few. It's the love and fellowship of communities and the hope of Christ that has sustained people.

Meanwhile, what are some of your personal reflections on ministry in the post-pandemic period that lies ahead; the challenges and the opportunities?

Answer: I think the pandemic has taught lots of us to re-evaluate our priorities and has shown us that we are not as in control of this world or our own lives as we like to think. Into this world of uncertainty and struggle, the Church has a key message of hope in Jesus that the world needs to hear and, I think, is more open to than ever. The pandemic has forced the Church to prioritise mission and to think creatively how it can continue to share the gospel and nurture disciples.

This outward focus and adaptability are, I think, essential for us going forward as a church, but it does raise the challenge of how we integrate the old and the new; any change is going to require both letting go of some things, even good things, in order to take up something better or more appropriate for the time. There will be those desperate to get back to the way things were and others who never want to go back. Online services, Alpha Courses and the like, have meant people who may have never set foot inside a church building have encountered Jesus and his people in a way they may have never done otherwise. To what extent these people wish to become part of a local community that gathers together is still unfolding.

This also raises the question as to what gathering together looks like, and I think going forward, the Church needs to be open to new forms of church that are formed, with mission and discipleship at their heart, that are specifically planted or grow up within the specific contexts that Christians are living in and called to. Within this, there is also the challenge to avoid feeding a consumerist approach to church.

Tell us something people don't know about you that might surprise them?

Answer: I play a number of instruments to a fairly reasonable standard and have always played in worship groups in church. However, my instrument of training is actually classical guitar, though it's been a few years since I've played one.

What do you view as your most significant personal achievement, before or during training?

Answer: The privilege of being a husband and dad, whilst not really an 'achievement' is what I am most proud of, despite my failings at both at times. In terms of training, I'm proud to have survived the academic pressure of completing an MA whilst juggling various life responsibilities; I don't think I was quite prepared for how tough I would find it at this stage in my life.

How do you hope to continue to support the Diocesan Vision 2026 at a parish level?

Answer: The strapline for Vision 2026 is a summary of the gospel that I am called by and called to serve. We are, as the Church of Jesus Christ, a people faithful to him and one another, bound together in his love as his body, and yet also the chief means that Christ is revealing himself and his life to the world. Discipleship and mission lie at the heart of our identity as the Church, and ministry seeks both to build up God's people in their worship, knowledge and love of Christ and equip them to be servants and witnesses of Christ's kingdom in the world. This is what I have committed my life to as a disciple of Jesus and now as an ordained minister. In the context that I find myself in, I aim to serve and serve alongside the family of God in seeing these things emerge amongst us in our parish context (whilst also working alongside neighbouring parishes and other denominations). What this looks like on the ground is something we continually discern as local congregations. But the principles of deepening and loving relationships centred on Christ that reflect a unity in our diversity, active involvement in the wider local community both to 'muck in' and also intentionally seek to share Christ, and a focus on discipleship for all ages, are important to me and are reflected in our Diocesan Vision 2026.

How would you express your own vision for the church?

Answer: The Church is the community of God's people, rooted and grounded in Christ's love, seeking to become more like Christ, modelling life in God's kingdom, leading more people to Christ, and praying and expecting to see God's kingdom come on earth as it is in heaven. A local church community should be the place where all should feel welcomed, known, loved and accepted as they are, but also the place where people are called to be conformed to the image of Christ. The gospel that we live by acknowledges that Jesus is Lord now, and as God's people living on earth, local church communities stand as the Church of Christ in their contexts, seeking to see Jesus' love and life made manifest through them and in the world around them. That can be as a community gathered together or as individuals in their own homes and workplaces. The local church community is a family of diverse people, united together in the love of Christ, and seeking to live a life marked by mercy, grace, love and holiness.

Finally, when you get the chance, how do you relax?

Answer: Relaxation for me is spending time with my wife and children away from the normal routine of daily work and school, whether that being watching a film together, seeing friends or kicking a football about in the park. I'm definitely more appreciative of the fresh air than I used to be, and enjoy getting out for a walk, particularly by the sea. The north coast of Northern Ireland is a special retreat place for us as a family. I also enjoy playing drums / guitar / keyboard when I get a moment.