



ST JOHN'S  
COLLEGE

Research strategy  
2025-2035

## 1. Introduction

St John's College is a community of students and scholars in which research and scholarship play an important role in shaping teaching, formation, public engagement, and the wider life of the College. This Research Strategy sets out a clearer approach to research at St John's, identifying four priority areas where the College has particular strengths, partnerships, and opportunities for future development.

The strategy aims to bring greater clarity to priorities, expectations, and processes, helping the College make effective use of its resources, partnerships, and intellectual traditions while creating space for new opportunities and collaborations in the service of the Church and the public good. Research at St John's takes many forms, from creative practice and public engagement to externally funded research programmes. This strategy seeks to support that diversity while strengthening coherence and long-term sustainability.

As a collegiate community, St John's seeks to act not only as a place where research is undertaken, but also as a gathering point for interdisciplinary conversation and collaboration. Through its buildings, hospitality, partnerships, and intellectual life, the College aims to create spaces where researchers, students, practitioners, and visitors can engage with questions of faith, science, reconciliation, heritage, and public life.

Where appropriate, the College aligns its governance, ethics, and integrity arrangements with Durham University policies, enabling good practice while avoiding unnecessary duplication. Over the coming years, the College will take a more intentional approach to how research centres, Fellowships, and partnerships support its priorities, including reviewing and, where necessary, concluding arrangements that no longer align.

This strategy is intended to steward research well: focusing effort where it matters most and ensuring that research contributes meaningfully to the life of the College, its students, and the wider public role of the institution.

## 2. Priority research areas

In line with the College Strategy 2025–2035, St John's is committed to developing four interconnected areas of research and engagement that address significant contemporary questions through interdisciplinary scholarship, collaboration, and public engagement. Around these four areas, the College will support research centres, projects, Fellowships, events, and partnerships involving academic staff, College Fellows, visiting researchers, and external collaborators.

These priority areas reflect existing strengths within the College while also providing a framework for future development, partnerships, and external funding. They are intended to guide and focus research activity over the life of this strategy, supporting sustained research activity and intellectual exchange within the College and beyond, while allowing scope for future development, emerging opportunities, and changes in institutional leadership and expertise.

The College's research activity sits within the wider academic ecosystem of Durham University and its partners, including through teaching, collaborative research, visiting scholars, conferences, and postgraduate research provision. In particular, the College's partnership in the DThM (Doctorate in Theology and Ministry) programme forms an important part of its contribution to advanced theological research and practice-based scholarship.

Our four current priority research areas are:

- **Theology and Practice:** research that helps the Church reflect critically and faithfully on lived practice
- **Faith and Science:** research that fosters constructive dialogue between scientific inquiry and religious belief, equipping Christian leaders for ministry and public life
- **Peacebuilding and Reconciliation:** research that equips individuals and institutions to engage conflict and disagreement well
- **History, Heritage and the Arts:** research and engagement exploring how place, memory, landscape, and creative practice shape reconciliation and civic life.

A designated academic member of staff will oversee and coordinate research and fellowship activities for each strand.

Over the life of this strategy, the College aims to support a small number of active research centres, projects, and networks that produce meaningful scholarly and public outputs, attract external partnerships and funding, and contribute to teaching, formation, and public engagement.

## Theology and Practice

We are committed to fostering research and scholarship that encourage critical and faithful theological reflection on lived Christian practice. This includes work on church planting and growth, ministry with children and young people, theological education, and global Christianity. Through conferences, workshops, webinars, training, and publications, we seek to resource churches and Christian leaders to reflect thoughtfully on practice in changing contexts.

Current and emerging work in this area includes:

- ***The Bede Centre for Church Planting Theology***  
A research centre fostering theological and critical reflection on the development of new churches. The centre hosts conferences and webinars, produces original research reports and publications, and supports dialogue between academic theology and church-facing training.
- ***Growing Faith – Children and Young People***  
An expanding area of work exploring how churches engage with children and young people, informed by theology, education, and lived experience. This strand seeks to learn from the voices and experiences of children and young people while supporting reflective practice within churches and Christian organisations.
- ***Global Christianity***  
We seek to learn from and contribute to theological reflection and practice within global Christianity, particularly in parts of the world where Christianity is growing rapidly. Through partnerships including the Relay Trust and links with theological education initiatives in Burundi, we aim to strengthen dialogue, exchange, and collaborative learning between different church contexts.

Work in this area has been supported through partnerships with organisations including the Relay Trust, the Leech Research Foundation, the Halley Stewart Trust, and the Church of England. Building on these relationships, the College will continue to develop partnerships and seek external support for research, training, and public engagement in theology and practice.

As well as staff-led research centres, doctoral students on the DThM programme will contribute to the development of this strand. The College will continue to develop the programme in partnership with the Department of Theology and Religion, supporting practice-based theological scholarship and creating opportunities for doctoral researchers to contribute to the wider intellectual life of the College.

## Faith and Science

Research into faith and science has been central to the life of St John's for over fifteen years, through our role as host institution for the internationally recognised [Equipping Christian Leadership in an Age of Science \(ECLAS\)](#) project. ECLAS is a distinctive and globally connected programme of research and engagement that equips Christian leaders to engage thoughtfully and confidently with scientific knowledge. Through this work, St John's has become an important centre for dialogue at the intersection of faith, science, theology, and public life.

Building on this foundation, we are currently delivering a global five-year research and engagement programme (2023–27), supported by a major grant from the John Templeton Foundation. The programme brings together partners across denominations and contexts to explore how attitudes to science and faith are shaped by cultural, theological, and political contexts, and how science-engaged theology can be formed in diverse settings. Research underpins ECLAS's wider work across conferences, theological education, church-based projects, and policy engagement, shaping how this work is developed and delivered.

Faith and science are often framed in public discourse as a polarised relationship. Our research challenges this framing and connects closely with our work on peacebuilding and reconciliation, focusing on how differences can be engaged constructively rather than through division.

St John's will continue to act as a leading centre for research at the intersection of faith, science, and leadership formation. Building on the work of ECLAS, the College will continue to develop research and partnerships that address emerging scientific, technological, and ethical questions shaping public life and Christian ministry. This includes work on how faith communities engage with developments in areas such as artificial intelligence, environmental change, health, and the social implications of new technologies.

As the global ECLAS network develops, the College is well placed to support further collaborative research, international partnerships, and interdisciplinary dialogue, strengthening its contribution to scholarship and public engagement.

## Peacebuilding, Mediation and Reconciliation

Conflict is a persistent feature of human life, present in personal relationships, institutions, societies, and international affairs. In a world marked by war in Europe and the Middle East, religious extremism, and continued polarisation of public discourse, there is a pressing need for research that helps individuals and communities learn not simply how to avoid conflict, but how to engage disagreement well and work towards reconciliation.

St John's is committed to developing research that brings theological, historical, ethical, legal, and political perspectives into conversation with the practice of mediation and peacebuilding. We are particularly interested in how universities, faith-based communities, and civic institutions can model and sustain cultures of constructive disagreement, reconciliation, and peace.

We invite research in this area exploring:

- Practices of mediation and reconciliation in religious, civic, and educational contexts
- The role of faith traditions in both conflict and peacebuilding
- Pedagogies of disagreement: how people are formed to listen, argue, and reconcile well.

This work will be developed through a range of research collaborations and partnerships, including a strategic partnership with [Rose Castle Foundation](#) and the establishment of a Centre for Mediation and Reconciliation. The Centre will bring together interdisciplinary research, practitioner expertise, and student formation, and will provide a framework for collaborative research projects, seminars, and conferences. College Fellows and visiting researchers working in this field will form an important part of the Centre's wider research community.

## History, Heritage and the Arts

St John's is located in a landscape shaped by conflict, faith, and power. The Durham peninsula bears the marks of fortification, religious authority, civic change, and centuries of social and political development, providing a distinctive context for research into history, heritage, reconciliation, and public life.

This work is rooted in the College's location in Durham and the North East, using the region's history, built environment, and cultural life as a living context for research with wider national and international relevance.

We are committed to research that explores how heritage, buildings, landscapes, and memory shape the ways societies understand conflict and peace. This includes historical research into the North East's religious and political past, as well as interdisciplinary work that examines how heritage can be interpreted and re-imagined to support dialogue and public understanding in the present.

This strand also includes research in theology and the arts, recognising creative practice as a form of theological enquiry and public engagement. Literature, poetry, visual art, music, and performance shape how faith, conflict, memory, and reconciliation are explored and expressed, both within and beyond the academy. This work provides a framework for fellowships and residencies that bring artists and writers into dialogue with the social and scholarly life of the College.

We invite research and engagement in this area exploring:

- The relationship between conflict, architecture, and landscape
- Heritage, memory, and post-conflict reconciliation
- The role of gardens, green spaces, and built environments in fostering reflection, dialogue, and peace
- Theology and the arts in shaping theological reflection, memory, and reconciliation.

Building on St John's initiatives such as *Secret Gardens*, our aim is to develop research-informed public engagement that opens the College's buildings and gardens to wider audiences, sharing scholarship in accessible and creative ways. We will explore the development of a Peace Garden as a living research and engagement project, linking the historical legacy of the Durham peninsula with contemporary questions of reconciliation, memory, and civic life.

This work will connect closely with our research on peacebuilding and mediation, and with strategic partnerships including with the [Institute of Medieval and Early Modern Studies \(IMEMS\)](#) particularly in relation to the study of religious and political conflict and its long-term cultural and spatial legacies.

As members of the Durham Castle and Cathedral World Heritage Site Strategic Partnership Board, we will also draw on the [World Heritage Site](#) as an established framework for collaborative research and public engagement, including work relating to the castle walls and the wider peninsula.

### 3. What will change over the next decade

Over the next decade, the College will take a more intentional and coordinated approach to research activity, building on existing strengths while creating space for new partnerships, projects, and areas of enquiry. The aim is to focus support where the College can make a distinctive and meaningful contribution through scholarship, collaboration, formation, and public engagement.

As a small institution with a wide range of responsibilities, the College will seek to develop research activity in ways that are proportionate, sustainable, and responsive to opportunity.

Implementation of this strategy will be overseen by the Research Committee, working with College Officers, the Academic Dean, and research strand leads.

#### Clearer alignment between priorities and activity

Research centres, Fellowships, and partnerships will be more clearly aligned with the College's four research priorities. Over time, the College will place greater emphasis on activity that contributes directly to these priorities and may refocus or conclude arrangements that no longer align.

#### More intentional, proportionate support for, and clearer expectations of, Fellows and research communities

The College will strengthen how Fellows are inducted, supported, and connected, in ways that are realistic and light-touch, while being clearer about the mutual expectations attached to research affiliation. Fellows and research partners will be expected to contribute appropriately and tangibly to the intellectual and social life of the College, with expectations reflected in revised procedures, application processes, and nomination frameworks. The nature and scale of engagement will vary across different Fellowships and appointments.

#### More focused partnership working

The College will take a more deliberate approach to research partnerships, distinguishing between light-touch collaborations and more substantial research activity. Stronger frameworks will be applied where activity is externally funded, long-term, or resource-intensive, while other collaborations will continue on a proportionate basis. The College will continue to work collaboratively with Durham University departments and external partners in areas of shared research and teaching strength.

### Greater visibility of research activity

The College will make more consistent use of existing forums, events, and communications to surface research activity and connect it to teaching, formation, and engagement, without introducing unnecessary reporting or bureaucracy.

### A clearer but proportionate understanding of research contribution and impact

Building on existing practice, the College aims to improve how it reflects on research contribution and impact over time. This will be done in ways that are appropriate to different types of activity, from light-touch public engagement to more sustained research programmes, and without imposing uniform metrics.

### Clearer institutional support and assurance

The College will continue to develop governance, ethics, and risk frameworks that support responsible and confident research activity, aligning with Durham University policies where appropriate to reduce duplication and administrative burden.

### Investing in future researchers

St John's is home to over 100 doctoral students, who are an important part of the intellectual and research life of the College. We will provide regular points of support and connection through termly doctoral student lunches, peer support networks, and integration into Research Forum and wider College activities.

In partnership with the Department of Theology and Religion, we will continue to develop the Doctorate in Theology and Ministry programme and support practice-based theological scholarship emerging from it. For doctoral students on formational programmes with Cranmer Hall, we will seek to provide opportunities for professional development, including, where appropriate, contributing to teaching, presenting research papers, and participating in seminars and conferences.

The College will also continue to support Fellows-in-Residence, visiting researchers, and sabbatical visitors as part of its wider research culture. Although often short-term, these appointments contribute significantly to the intellectual life of the College and create opportunities for collaboration, mentoring, interdisciplinary exchange, and public engagement.

## 4. Conclusion

This Research Strategy sets out the College's priorities, principles, and direction for research over the period 2025–2035. It is intended to provide focus and coherence, rather than to prescribe detailed processes or structures.

The practical delivery of this strategy is set out in the [Research Strategy Implementation Framework.docx](#), which brings together the governance arrangements, procedures, and expectations that support research activity at St John's College. That framework will be the primary vehicle for implementation and will be kept under review to ensure it remains effective and aligned with the College's wider priorities.

Together, the strategy and its implementation framework intend to support research that strengthens the intellectual life of the College, contributes to student formation and public engagement, and enables St John's to make a distinctive contribution within the University, the Church, and wider society.