

Report on Diocesan Synod Meeting 14th March 2020

The papers for our meetings and, in due course minutes as well, are posted on the Diocesan website: <https://www.oxford.anglican.org/who-we-are/governance/diocesan-synod/>

This report aims to draw out those points which are most pertinent to feed back to members of the Deanery Synod who in turn can feed back to their respective PCC's.

We were just quorate, numbers being significantly fewer than usual, because of Coronavirus.

The meeting opened with worship led by Berkshire Archdeaconry with invited guests, Reading Area Green Christians. In the light of the environmental crisis we contemplated Isaiah 58:6-8:

Is not this the kind of fasting I have chosen: to loose the chains of injustice and untie the cords of the yoke, to set the oppressed free and break every yoke? Is it not to share your food with the hungry and to provide the poor wanderer with shelter - when you see the naked, to clothe them, and not to turn away from your own flesh and blood? Then your light will break forth like the dawn, and your healing will quickly appear; then your righteousness will go before you, and the glory of the LORD will be your rear guard.

1. Development Fund Grants

It was announced that in the second round of grants from the Development Fund, 75 grants have been awarded.

2. Address

Synod was addressed by Rt Revd Colin Fletcher, Acting Bishop of Oxford as Bishop Steven is on sabbatical. It centred around the fact that our church is relational. He cited Dunbar's number - the numbers discerned by Robin Dunbar, the anthropologist and evolutionary psychologist working at Oxford University as the number of people we can maintain stable social relationships with, i.e. relationships in which an individual knows who each person is and how each person relates to every other person. We might be able to put 1500 names to faces but the limit to our more meaningful relationships is probably around 150-200. Within that there will be different levels of familiarity. We might have just a few very intimate friends, perhaps 15 people to whom we feel close, and 50 to whom we speak regularly. We can also have relationships that exist beyond the group of 150, so that we can feel a connection to people who work for the same company, or who share our allegiances to a sports team or nation, without having personal relationships. But it is no surprise that the average congregation size regardless of the number of parishioners is 150-200. It does not matter whether the parish is 4,000, 14,000 or 40,000 it won't grow to have a bigger congregation than about 150 if people want to relate to each other and to the vicar.

He cautioned against us being either inwardly focused so that we nurture only each other, or dependent on our church leader to nurture relationship for us, saying that church growth depends on every member of a church family being relational. In order to release the full potential of the church he called churches to be more flexible and to develop patterns of worship that were not just on a Sunday morning to reach Generation Z in particular, and challenged churches to ask how the largest growing age group (those aged 80+) could be a living congregation. His full address can be found at: <https://blogs.oxford.anglican.org/dunbars-number/>

3. Climate Change

A sustained period of time was given to consider a motion passed by the Deanery Synods of Bracknell, Reading and Witney, moving that the Diocese commit to declaring a climate emergency and to respond in various ways to achieve a 70% reduction in carbon emissions by 2030 and to become carbon neutral by 2035. Bishop Olivia, chair of the Diocesan Environmental Task Group, gave the presentation. This group was formed at the invitation of Bishop Steven last autumn with a mix of high calibre and dedicated people serving on it from different professions to look at current activity and identify key possible actions and their associated costs and benefits.

Bishop Olivia said these were challenging times and that the need to stabilise our global climate and bring our carbon emissions to net zero was critically urgent. She said our response will reveal our heart and our courage: we will want to do the right thing, but the right thing will be costly. Can we afford it? She asked, can we afford not to? Our diocesan response calls us to focus on being more Christ-like for the sake of God's World. Although the Motion was formed beforehand, it is a direct response to the decision taken by General Synod in February passing their motion to reduce our emissions to net zero by 2030. She described this as 'very aspirational', noting that a more realistic and achievable target was working to the timeline of 2035. The diocesan plan has been prepared in consultation with those who had great expertise, with data collected from energy audits and working with many groups of people in many different fields. The Diocesan Task Group has put in a great deal of work behind the scenes to put in place a detailed plan that is practical, achievable and, so far as is possible, costed to achieve the target by 2035.

4. Mutual Support

A presentation was given by the Archdeacon of Sheffield and the Diocesan Secretary of Newcastle on the daily pastoral and practical issues faced by two northern dioceses, each sharing experiences of financial and resourcing challenges. This debate would form part of a wider discussion when Mutual Support comes back to the Synod at a later meeting. He said the Sheffield Diocese is one of the most deprived dioceses in the country, with 20% of parishes being in the bottom of deprivation according to data collected from national statistics. Those 20% of parishes serve 60% of the population but only 0.5% attend church. Attendance has been steadily declining over 30 years by 58%. The four main challenges were Attendance, Budget, Church structure and Demographics. This was a constant challenge and difficult to interpret but thought to be linked to industrial migration and to relative poverty. Financial challenges related to a drop of parish share. This had meant a reduction in stipendiary clergy of 155 to 103 (loss of 1/3) with the same number of parishes to serve. He hoped the existing model would change but the intention was to reduce clergy numbers for the time being in order to balance the budget.

Canon Waddle spoke about Newcastle and how his role was different to that of an archdeacon. As Diocesan Secretary he, with others, was responsible for the financial and strategic operations across the Diocesan Board of Finance, which often involved the spinning of many plates, whilst wearing many hats. However, he noted that Newcastle's situation was not too dissimilar from that of Sheffield. They were in the process of moving from 101 to 80 clergy over three years and income continues to fall. He noted how their financial capacity impacted their ability to move forward with key pieces of work and were relying on a growing number of vacancies to cover the budget shortfall with some vacancies continuing for three years. He then showed a short film offering some hope on the positives of what they were able to achieve in mission terms and hoped that this work would be able to continue.

5. Safeguarding

Mr Peter Hay, Independent Chair of the Safeguarding Panel, gave an update on safeguarding, particularly the Past Cases Review exercise that had just begun. The annual safeguarding report highlights growth of activity overseen by Stuart Nimmo, Diocesan Safeguarding Adviser, particularly in relation to adults. There was great enthusiasm about being able to develop quality assurance and building on relationships with parishes. He noted how Survivor representation on the Panel had been a huge asset and insight and he hoped a number of survivors would come forward to enable the Panel to take survivor voice and engagement to the next level in Oxford. The review of past cases and update was to be complete by end of the year (since extended due to coronavirus). It concludes the failure of the last review nationally to fully respond to the position and it was right for confidence and transparency of Church. To do this work, the Diocese recognised it needed additional resources and a clear operational plan had been formed with the case review team, who were independent of the diocesan safeguarding team. The process was being overseen by a reference panel and would lead where needed to new investigations of cases, including adult and domestic abuse cases. He hoped it demonstrated the commitment being made towards making the Church as safe as it possibly can be.

6. Finance

The Revd John Tattersall, Chair of the Oxford Diocesan Board of Finance gave a verbal update on the financial out-turn for the year ended 31st December 2019. At the November meeting he warned that we would incur a deficit for 2019. Results, pre audit, show a management accounts deficit of £719k compared with a budgeted surplus of £92k. Revd Tattersall noted that although this was a significant change, with current reserves we could sustain this at the current time.

Key factors: he noted in some way this was not all bad news, we had spent more on clergy than we had budgeted for; vacancies had been at a lower level than expected, i.e. filled more quickly, and curates were staying longer than expected; additional improvements to clergy housing giving a total impact of £572k. However, we had fewer wedding and funeral fees income and a parish share shortfall of £139k in excess of budget. He noted the diocese continued to budget prudently for vacancy levels. The Market crash since the year-end had impacted diocesan investments, but not the amount set aside to spend on Common Vision commitments in 2020. There was also likely further impact ahead with Coronavirus, but this was too early to predict.

Stephanie Summerell

For Information, the members of the Oxford Diocesan Synod from the Amersham Deanery are:

Andrew Bell (Gerrards Cross and Fulmer - Ex-Officio as a member of General Synod)

Julie Dziegiel (Great Chesham - Ex-Officio as a member of General Synod)

Lawrence Tebboth (Gerrards Cross and Fulmer and also Lay Chair of Amersham Deanery)

Nigel Edward-Few (Great Chesham)

Edward Weiss (Beaconsfield)

Michael Hardman (Great Chesham)

Stephanie Summerell (Gerrards Cross and Fulmer)

Revd John Goodman (Chalfont St Peter)

Revd Canon Tim Harper (Amersham and also Co Area Dean)

Revd Cassa Messervy (Seer Green and Jordans and also Assistant Area Dean)