

Oxford Diocesan Synod

A summary of the meeting held on Saturday 14th March 2020 at Green Park Conference Centre, Reading

1. Opening Worship

The Rt. Revd Colin Fletcher, Acting Bishop of Oxford, welcomed Synod members and visitors to the meeting. Following this, the meeting started with opening worship led by Reading Green Christians, supporting in prayer the response to the Climate Emergency agenda item. The reading was taken from the Book of Isaiah Chapter 58.

2. Notices:

A number of notices were read: Revd Canon Sue Booy, Chair of the House of Clergy gave a special welcome to The Rt Revd Olivia Graham, Bishop of Reading at her first meeting since her consecration in November 2019, to The Ven. Stephen Pullin, the newly installed Archdeacon of Berkshire; Maranda St John Nicolle and Jackie Davies, representing the Climate Emergency Task Group; The Ven. Malcolm Chamberlain and Canon Shane Waddle and Mr Peter Hay, who were our visiting speakers, and to Sisters Jane and Helen for providing a continuing praying presence during the meeting.

Canon Booy updated members on the latest tranche of Development Fund applications, noting 27 grants totalling over £500, 000 had been awarded. Details would be published in due course. She invited Canon Mark Humphriss to update the Synod on the evolving Covid-19 situation and how that was impacting the diocese so far, communications can be found on the diocesan website at <https://www.oxford.anglican.org/coronavirus-covid-19/>.

Canon Booy then invited Bishop Colin to read a statement written by The Very Revd Prof. Martyn Percy, relating to the ongoing media interest in the situation at Christ Church Cathedral. The Dean was not able to be present, but he had asked for members' prayers. Bishop Colin also asked the Synod to hold Martyn, the Cathedral Chapter and College of Canons in their prayers personally at this difficult time.

3. Presidential Address:

Bishop Colin gave an address. Focussing on some of the highlights of his 20-year tenure as Bishop of Dorchester. In particular, his work with children and young people across schools' assemblies and the parishes, where he had blessed many toilets in our churches thanks to funding made available to do projects of this kind. He spoke of what is known as 'Dunbar's number' – the numbers discerned by Robin Dunbar, the anthropologist and evolutionary psychologist working at Oxford University 'as the cognitive limit to the number of individuals with whom any one person' (at any one time) 'can maintain stable relationships'. He noted that if you had ever wondered why churches in the Church of England grow and then stop there, one answer lies in Dunbar's number. 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. His full address can be found at: <https://blogs.oxford.anglican.org/dunbars-number/>

4. **MINUTES** of the meeting of Diocesan Synod held on 16th November 2019 were approved and signed.

5. CLIMATE CHANGE

Canon Booy invited the Bishop of Reading, The Rt. Revd Olivia Graham, as Chair of the Environment Task Group, to give a 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. Bishop Olivia noted how we were in challenging times, not just Coronavirus, but in our climate emergency and challenged anyone not to be aware of that situation and the mountain we all had to climb in stabilising our global climate and the critical need to reduce our carbon emissions to net zero. She noted the question was not "What has to be done, but how and by when?" Our diocesan response calls us to focus on being more Christ-like for the sake of God's World. Our commitment to these questions is addressed in the [Background paper](#) and although the Motion was formed beforehand, it is a direct response to the decision took by General Synod recently passing their motion to reduce our emissions to net zero by 2030. She noted how our diocesan plan had been drawn up and considered a more realistic and achievable target was working to the timeline of 2035. It had 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.

A joint Motion passed by Reading, Witney and Bracknell deanery synods was presented to the Diocesan Synod and there was an opportunity for debate to agree the final wording. [Full wording here](#). During the debate there was reference to costs and whether we could afford this, to which a response was 'can we afford not to do it?'. Lydia Messling was invited to give her proposal speech and then immediately following Revd Dr Hannah moved his amendment, which we re-presented the motion and was passed. Revd Mark Bennet spoke to his amendment which was also accepted. After a period of debate, the final motion, that all parties had worked together to reach agreement on was moved on behalf of the Deanery Synods of Bracknell, Reading and Witney and voted on. The new Motion was overwhelmingly supported by the Oxford Diocesan Synod and was carried with two votes Against and one Abstention. The next stage would be for the second part of the Motion to go to the General Synod for consideration by their business committee as a future agenda item.

6. MUTUAL SUPPORT

The Ven Malcolm Chamberlain, Archdeacon of Sheffield (*The Diocese of Sheffield*), and Canon Shane Waddle, Diocesan Secretary (*Diocese of Newcastle*), were invited by the chair to address the Synod. The Synod heard two different perspectives and some of 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.

The Archdeacon noted the brief was to give Synod a snapshot of activities, speaking of Sheffield Diocese he noted it was 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 fte clergy over 3 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 to 3 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, which struck a good balance. This can be found at: [LINK](#). Following this there was an opportunity for questions and response.

The background paper can be found at [LINK](#).

7. CATHEDRAL ANNUAL REPORT

The annual report and accounts for year ended 31st July 2019 were noted by members in the absence of the Dean, giving a flavour of some of the work undertaken by the cathedral over the past year. Download report [here](#). Members were invited to raise any questions via the Diocesan Secretary after the meeting.

8. SAFEGUARDING

Mr Peter Hay, Independent Chair of the Safeguarding Panel, was invited to give 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. He paid tribute to Josephine Stein, who had now left the Panel, for her skill and experience of giving survivors a voice 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.

9. FINANCIAL YEAR END RESULTS OF THE OXFORD DIOCESAN BOARD OF 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 quicker, 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.

10. REFLECTION:

A Reflection was led by The Revd Canon Sue Booy, Chair of the House of Laity and a General Synod member for the Oxford Diocese. Sue would be standing down as Chair of the House of Clergy once the elections for a new chair were concluded. She gave a brief synopsis of her time as a General Synod member reiterating the importance of the General Synod's work, and the power that the Diocesan Synod had in being able to have a voice in raising important issues and taking matters to the General Synod as had been demonstrated today. She noted the new General Synod would be elected this year, and this was a high-profile election and those with a passion should consider standing to represent our Diocese. She noted it commands commitment, prayer and passion; adding when passions run high, often we end up in apparent disagreement. She noted it was a great strength to be have inter-play between the groups and this should create continuity. She encouraged those thinking of standing for General Synod this year to take seriously the expectations of this position and not only have a commitment to attend the General Synod but also the Diocesan Synod so this continuity can link across the diocese. She noted her joy at BSL signers being present at our meetings bringing a beauty of hymns signed and representing an important minority group. She hoped her legacy in terms of managing debates would be taken forward.

Bishop Colin paid tribute to Sue giving thanks from the Diocesan Synod for her work as Chair of the House of Clergy and nationally as Chair of the Business Committee of General Synod. A presentation of flowers was made to Sue.

11. The Bishop of Reading also paid tribute to Sue as a colleague before leading the closing prayers.

Future Diocesan Synod meetings:

Dates of further Diocesan Synod meetings in 2020 (All Saturdays) from 0900 – 1300 (or as advised):

13th June 2020

5th September (tba)

14th November 2020

Please keep these dates in your diary for now. We will issue further details as soon as we are able to.

Elections for new Deanery Synods will be held in 2020 (3-year term of office). Please refer to the guidance sent to PCC Secretaries re APCMs. [Link](#)

2020 is also an election year for General Synod elections (5-year term of office). Further details will follow in due course.