

The Woodstock Deanery Synod proposes a motion that in multi-parish benefices (three or more), where there is only one stipendiary priest, that the diocese funds additional administrative support so that the priest is freed to fulfil their missional objectives in relation to serving and caring for the people of God.

The Background

This motion, unanimously passed by the Woodstock Deanery Synod at its meeting on 6 March 2025, seeks to address how the Deanery and Diocese could support its incumbents with the growing demands of ministry, especially administrative, in today's world.

The Woodstock Deanery

The Woodstock Deanery, forms part of the Dorchester Episcopal Area within the Diocese of Oxford. The area it covers is predominantly rural although it includes the larger town of Woodstock and the fast-growing villages of Yarnton and Long Hanborough. It contains 8 benefices which serve 24 churches and a population of around 28,213 (of which 53% identify as Christian) according to the 2021 Census (<https://www.oxford.anglican.org/who-we-are/episcopal-areas/deaneries/>).

There are eight separate ministry groupings in the deanery {(Eynsham and Cassington), (Stonesfield and Coombe), (Steeple Aston, North Aston and Tackley), (The Bartons), (Yarnton with Begbroke and Shipton on Cherwell), (Woodstock and Bladon), (Hanborough and Freeland), (Wootton with Glympton and Kiddington)}. Only one (Wootton with Glympton and Kiddington) is designated as one parish. Four have two parishes and of the remaining three, two have three parishes and one has five. Support for clergy varies between the benefices as some have the support of a PTO or curate, however, many overwhelming reliant on one priest. An example is the Barton Benefice, with its five parishes and six churches. This benefice has one stipendiary priest, two LLMs and a part-time administrative assistant who works a few hours per week. The administration of a Benefice having three or more parishes places heavy demands a sole incumbent.

Addressing the Demands of Ministry – A Way Forward?

At an ESRC sponsored workshop held on 24 October 2024, “Beyond Calling? Addressing the Demands of Ministry”, these demands were identified from research literature;

“As the efforts that clergy expend to fulfil expectations of their role as well as the psychological demands emanating from the nature of that role. Such demands can overwhelm the resources available to clergy including time, energy and external support. Demands can conflict with each other creating tensions which are difficult to resolve. Overwhelming demands challenge wellbeing and can lead to burnout.” (Symon et al 2024, p4)

The workshop focused not only on the demands of ministry but on how these might be addressed. Prof Neil Conway on behalf of the research team from the Supporting Effective Ministry Project (<https://www.royalholloway.ac.uk/research-and-education/research/research-impact/supporting-effective-ministry/>) outlined a two-

stage project within Sheffield Diocese exploring how clergy motivation is affected by activities during their working days and their opportunities to enact their calling.

- In the first phase, and using an innovative daily diary method, the team found that clergy reported **admin as their most time-consuming task**, taking around 3 hours per day. By contrast they spent only 1 to 1.5 hours per day on activities more closely associated with their calling (e.g. preaching, pastoral ministry etc). These activities were associated with varying levels of motivation with those able to enact their calling reporting higher motivation than those less able to enact their calling.
- On the basis of these results, an intervention introducing shared admin assistants was implemented which enabled clergy to spend more time on their more calling-oriented activities.
- A follow-up survey indicated that clergy with support worker spent more time on and were more satisfied with, for example, mission activities, organising novel events and training volunteers, while also experiencing higher weekly attendance at church and increased income.

Implementation

In reviewing and identifying how clergy could be helped in the most efficient and effective way with the demands of ministry, the Woodstock Deanery Synod agrees with the findings of the above research and proposes that as a first step, where there is a multi-parish benefice (three or more) and only one stipendiary priest, that the diocese funds additional administrative support so that the priest is freed to fulfil their missional objectives in relation to serving and caring for the people of God.

The Woodstock Deanery Synod fully acknowledges that finances have become more constrained, however, the amounts being sought are not excessive but would significantly help incumbents with overly demanding administration in their core work.

In the Woodstock Deanery only three benefices fall within this category. Two of these have three parishes and one has five. The cost below is based on three hours a week for the third, fourth and fifth parishes, paying £14.20 per hour. For benefices with three parishes this would be £42.60 per week, £2,215.20 per annum. For the benefice with five parishes this would be £127.80 per week, £6,645.60 per annum. The total cost for our deanery would be: £11,076.

The Woodstock Deanery Synod recommends this motion to the Oxford Diocesan Synod.

References

(2024) *“Beyond Calling? Addressing the Demands of Ministry”* held on 24 October 2024. Prof Gillian Symon

3/10/25