



Pathways

The magazine for the people of the Diocese of Oxford | Winter 2022 | **FREE**

Grace upon grace

Christ's continual presence

PLUS: How to be resilient | If Jesus were chancellor | Focus on reconciliation



**COME
AND
SEE**

Hope and resilience

On news of the death of Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II, our churches, schools and chaplaincies were there to offer comfort and consolation, spaces to grieve in, and opportunities to come together and reflect.

The crisis in government that emerged in the weeks that followed led to worry and hardship for many in our communities. Once again, churches and community centres have stepped up to offer warm spaces¹ and church-run foodbanks report unprecedented demand for their services.

Our society faces many challenges, but none is more serious than climate change and the environmental crisis. In November COP27, which took place in Egypt this year, concluded most unsatisfactorily but, once again, we have a key role to play.

A recent report from the Lords Environment and Climate Change Committee (on which I serve) found that one third of greenhouse gas emissions reductions up to 2035 require change by individuals to reduce their carbon intensity². What will you do?

In this edition of *Pathways* we explore the economy through the lens of scripture, and how our faith brings us hope and resilience when life seems uncertain. We also take a look at the vital skill of seeking reconciliation when things go wrong. In a world of polarised views there is much wisdom in seeking to find common ground.

1. [oxford.anglican.org/cost-of-living-crisis](https://www.oxford.anglican.org/cost-of-living-crisis)

2. blogs.oxford.anglican.org/behaviour-change-as-part-of-the-pathway-to-net-zero-emissions

Come and See

The coming weeks and months will be a time to offer both a warm welcome to seekers and strangers in our worship and opportunities to learn and re-learn what it means to be a Christian.

There are many ways to do that but Come and See, which was born in the first year of the pandemic, is our big, warm open invitation for an adventure in faith and trust that takes place during Lent. It's something for everyone, it's completely free, and all are welcome.

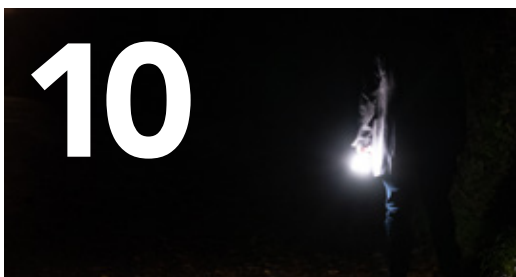
At the centre of our exploration this year will be text in Matthew 5, the Beatitudes, which come at the beginning of the Sermon on the Mount. They are the first words that Jesus speaks in the Gospel of Matthew and are tremendous words of affirmation and promise.

Week by week during Come and See we will read the text through six different lenses: what it means to be human; the Beatitudes as a mirror to ourselves; the picture and character of Jesus; the ministry and saving work of Christ; the work of the Spirit in our lives; the habits and disciplines in which we're formed as Christians.

To take part, or to offer Come and See in your church, register online at [oxford.anglican.org/come-and-see](https://www.oxford.anglican.org/come-and-see)

Bishop Steven

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We hope you enjoy reading *Pathways*. Email or write and let us know what you think. Contributor enquiries are welcome.

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Around the diocese

Russell Hemmings



The Living Room

Part of the Oxford Winter Night Shelter and in partnership with St Clement's Church, the Living Room Day Centre offers a welcoming and safe space of respite and hospitality to those who are homeless and vulnerably housed in Oxford. Free washing, laundry and internet facilities enable clients to maintain their dignity and take care of themselves.

oxford.anglican.org/homelessness-housing

For regular news and updates, visit the website: oxford.anglican.org/news



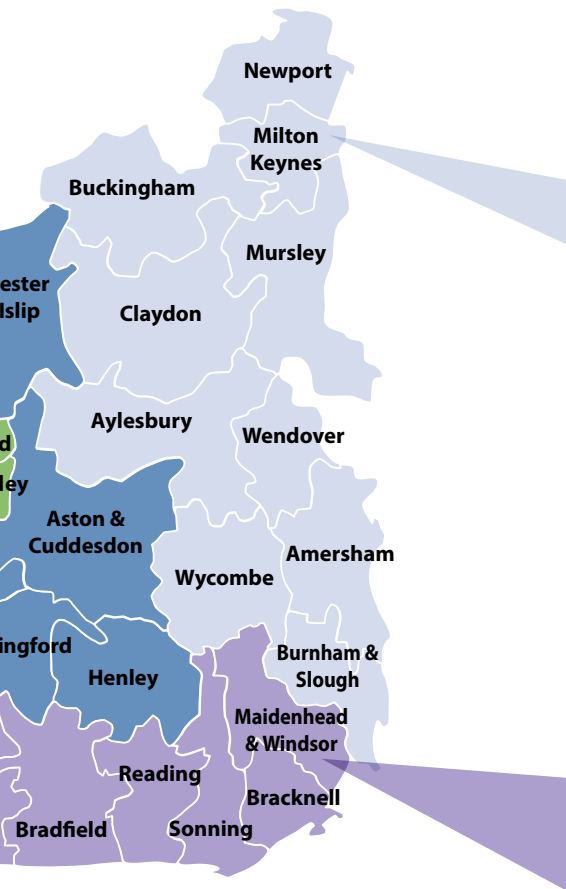
Jo Paton



The Learning Café

At the Cornerstone project in Charlbury, a uniform bank provides school uniforms that would otherwise be unaffordable, and a group of retired teachers and education professionals supports pupils from the local primary school with additional one-to-one learning.

oxford.anglican.org/poverty



Shutterstock

Sanctuary

The cost-of-living crisis has a significant impact on women and children escaping domestic abuse. St Mark's Church leads the Sanctuary Network of church communities in Milton Keynes, supporting survivors of domestic abuse. The network provides safe and welcoming spaces for women and their children, where they are listened to and supported.

oxford.anglican.org/cost-of-living-crisis



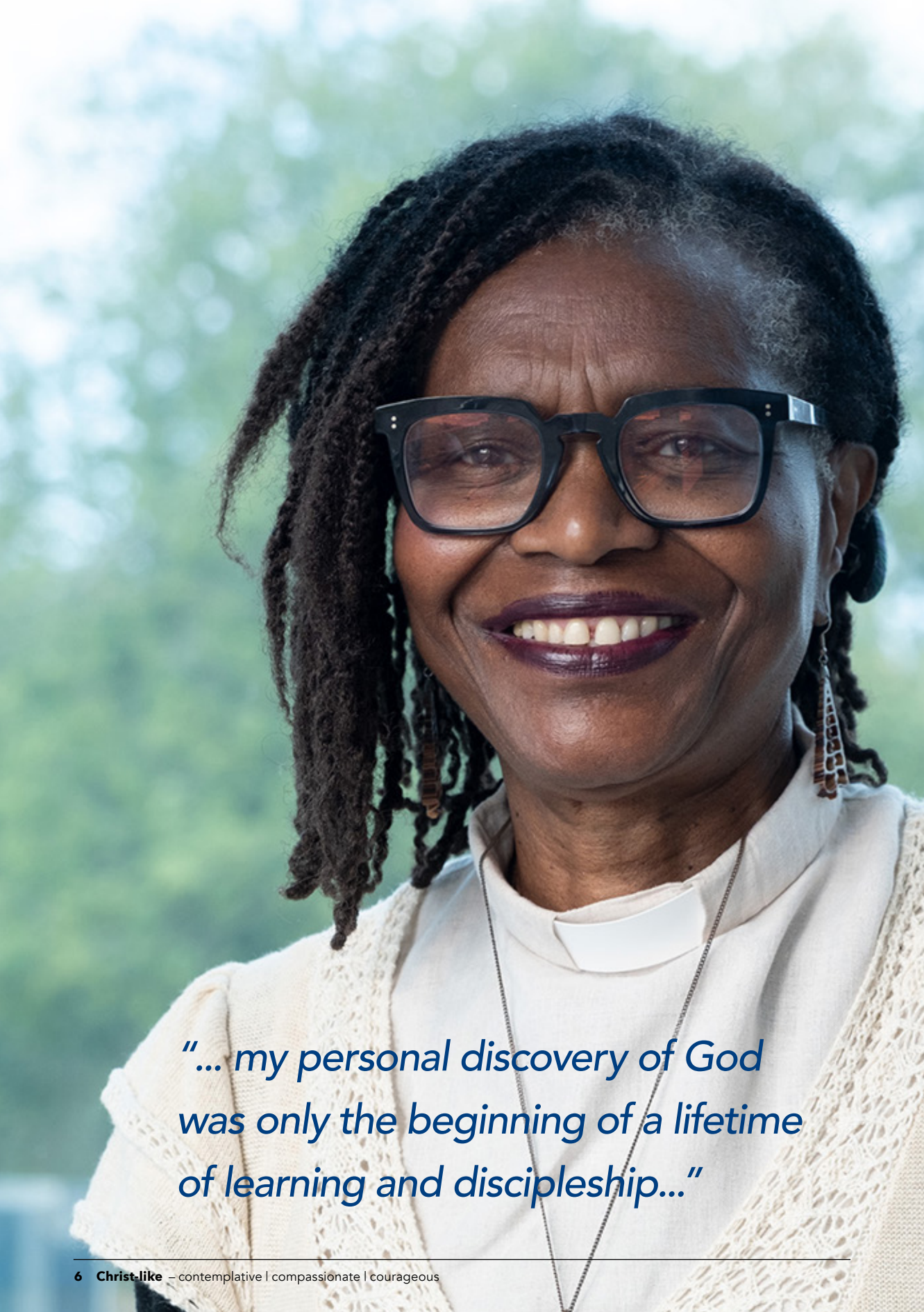
Emma Thompson

Warm Welcome

During the cold winter months St Luke's Church, Maidenhead has opened its doors to provide a warm space for local people struggling to heat their homes. Part of the Warm Welcome initiative, every Thursday lunchtime the church offers a warm space, food and company.

oxford.anglican.org/warm-spaces

We're on social media too.
Search "Diocese of Oxford"
on Facebook and Instagram.



*"... my personal discovery of God
was only the beginning of a lifetime
of learning and discipleship..."*

Hannah Akibo-Betts

Authorised Listeners encourage a culture of dignity and respect in ministry and at work. The Revd Hannah Akibo-Betts shares her story of listening.

Reflecting on the person specifications of an Authorised Listener has heightened my appreciation of my time in my mother's shop, a community hub for her diverse customers and the many "others" she served and walked alongside.

My mother listened with respect without judgement, empathised without attachment, and was resourceful as an enabler rather than a rescuer, empowering and encouraging many.

As a child and adolescent, my mother was also a friend from whom I learnt the intricacies of navigating life's journeys; in particular, the centrality of God in her life through faith, thanksgiving, forgiveness, prayer, compassion and so much more – skills that are fundamental to my listening role.

The importance of faith in my life is not only based on what I assimilated from my mother, but also on my personal experience of God when early results indicated that I had failed the eleven-plus exam. Broken-hearted but confident I had done enough to pass, my response was to pray ceaselessly. The manifestation of answered prayers came a month later. For me, the change of results confirmed the existence of God, activating my child-like faith and relationship with him.

This position was challenged a few years later when, in spite of much trust and prayers, my mother did not survive her terminal illness. The pain of the loss left me with a sense of confusion and betrayal on God's part. What I did not know was that my personal discovery of God was only the beginning of a lifetime of learning and discipleship with and through him.

Over the years I have grown a closeness to God that guides me towards him each day and cannot be easily impacted by life's events. It was this guidance that led me into priesthood and the ministry of listening.

The role of an Authorised Listener is not only a privilege but also an opportunity to serve the "other" during their challenging times, offering hope in a Christ-like and neighbourly manner. Our listening is done in the context of trust and knowledge of the Holy Spirit as an enabler working in the situation through our life's desert experiences: speaking, listening, encouraging, empathising, exploring and praying. At the same time I recognise my own limitations and that of the administrative controls in place. In this context I mindfully and prayerfully suggest and make referrals as appropriate.

Hagar's experience in Genesis 21:15–20 and my own life lessons remind me that my role is not to rescue but to accompany until sense is made of the other's situation. For me, an Authorised Listener is an enabler who allows new possibilities and encourages in a pathway of hope. ¶

Words: The Revd Hannah Akibo-Betts, Milton Keynes

Photo: Emma Thompson



The Church should foster relationships of the utmost integrity. Get to know our Authorised Listeners:

oxford.anglican.org/authorised-listeners



 Creative repair helps us to build resilience in an ever-changing world. Young people from across the diocese attend Yellow Braces each year and achieve just that. Find out more at oxford.anglican.org/yellowbraces

How to be resilient

Resilience is generally understood as the capacity to bounce or spring back from pressure. The Revd Dr Anne Holmes explores what helps us to be resilient in an ever-changing world.

Here are a few hints for you to consider:

First, an essential quality of resilience is the capacity to face reality. Over-optimism and naivety can be a handicap in stressful situations. Resilient people have a down-to-earth view of the need for survival. Those who are in denial put themselves at risk. Jesus modelled this when sending off the disciples: "See, I am sending you out like sheep into the midst of wolves; so be wise as serpents and innocent as doves." (Matthew 10:16).

Second is the importance of a sense of purpose or meaning. This might seem obvious for Christians, but it depends on the type of faith we have. If it relies on God seeming to answer all our requests, then disappointment in God's apparent lack of response can weaken a person's faith. The answer is to develop a more open-minded approach to what God might be saying to us. Viktor Frankl's experience of imagining his wife's image during the Holocaust led him to discover: "The truth – that love is the ultimate and the highest goal to which man can aspire" (from *Man's Search for Meaning*). This helped him to survive and inspired his later work on the human search for meaning. For Christians our supreme purpose and meaning is the dual commandment to love God and love our neighbour as ourselves.

Third is the importance of a flexible imagination and capacity to be ingenious about finding solutions to problems as they present themselves. For example, during the lockdown periods of the recent pandemic, clergy and others became very skilled at producing online services, streaming them from church or even their own homes. Since then, it has been routine in many churches

for an in-person main service to be streamed simultaneously. This hybrid practice has helped many who are still anxious about attending social gatherings, including worship.

Fourth, the regular practice of *creative repair* can help to resource us as we go along. While this usually involves engagement with the creative arts, other recreational pursuits such as exercise, gardening and cooking can also be restorative. It is important for each person to notice what drains them and what restores them. Given the demands of ministry, it is even more important that Christians identify pastimes that resource rather than drain them and see them as necessary self-care. Such pastimes should be in the diary and be part of our regular spiritual disciplines.

Fifth, in a fast-changing world, it is vital to review current practice regularly. Just because you did do something doesn't mean that you have to *go on* doing it. Likewise, just because you *can* do something doesn't mean that you *need* to do it.

Resilience must be worked at. Our emotional and psychological energy needs to be replaced intentionally and routinely. 📌

Words: The Revd Dr Anne Holmes, psychotherapist and Associate Priest at St Giles' and St Margaret's, Oxford. Read Anne's article on coping with uncertainty in Pathways, Autumn 2022: [oxford.anglican.org/pathways](https://www.oxford.anglican.org/pathways)

Photo: Ian Macdonald



What nourishes you? How can you schedule that into your week ahead?

Hope

As Christians we have access to hope. This is not something shallow or illusory, but a reflection of our confidence in Christ. The poem opposite celebrates Christ's continual presence.

Gerard Manley Hopkins' poetry challenges our ears as well as our eyes. His poetry stretches the conventions of syntax and metre. He could be described as a theologian of sound.

Hopkins (1844-89) was a High Church Anglican who converted to Roman Catholicism while at Oxford, and later joined the Society of Jesus. While studying at St Beuno's (now a celebrated retreat centre) he produced some extraordinary sonnets, including "The Lantern out of Doors".

The poem explores and expresses the creative presence of Christ in the everyday world. Christ's incarnation is not a restricted historical event; he upholds and sustains all things in existence at every moment. His presence is nothing other than the creative love which is the source of all life.

Hopkins uses the image of a light going past a window, which causes us to wonder: who is that, where are they going, what will happen to them in the great wide world? People come and go, time passes and – however bright a life may shine – all things come to an end: "Death or distance buys them quite."

Hopkins' poetry is mentally challenging. Jesus said that we are to love God with all our mind as well as our heart and soul. Could you benefit from a bit more profound thought, perhaps as you read his poetry aloud?

Our minds cannot hold together the infinite potential which confronts us at any individual moment. With characteristic daring, Hopkins jumbles the word order of lines nine to eleven, expressing the impossibility of drawing together all that is provoked by these endless possibilities.

Our limits do not leave us at a loss, however, for all things are held together in Christ. The climax of the poem comes in those two long "i" sounds – "Christ minds". The fluid sentences, running almost out of control, are embraced by those two words, by the enormity of Christ's love. All is and shall be well because Christ minds, because everyone and everything is bound up in his love. The poem ends with an assurance of that wellbeing – a cascade of verbs with short staccato sounds falls and folds into the arms of Christ, slowing up like a final musical cadence.

Christ is "their ransom, their rescue, and first, fast, last friend." That final line is Hopkins at his best. The tender initial "r" sounds are followed by the softness of the "f", repeated in a half rhyme (first, fast) and then rejoining the "r" in the warmth and safety of the final rhyme. The rhyming word is "friend", and it is Christ's own (John 15.15).

Hopkins was adamant that poetry should be read aloud. To read and hear this poem is to participate in prayer and in thanksgiving to the God whose love embraces and sustains everything. Christ minds. ¶

*Words: The Revd Canon Dr Peter Groves,
Assistant Archdeacon of Oxford
Photo: Steven Buckley*

The Lantern out of Doors

Sometimes a lantern moves along the night,
That interests our eyes. And who goes there?
I think; where from and bound, I wonder, where,
With, all down darkness wide, his wading light?

Men go by me whom either beauty bright
In mould or mind or what not else makes rare:
They rain against our much-thick and marsh air
Rich beams, till death or distance buys them quite.

Death or distance soon consumes them: wind
What most I may eye after, be in at the end
I cannot, and out of sight is out of mind.

Christ minds: Christ's interest, what to avow or amend
There, éyes them, heart wánts, care haúnts, foot fóllows kínd,
Their ránsom, théir rescue, ánd first, fást, last friénd.

Gerard Manley Hopkins

Hopkins explained that as the eye follows the lantern light from side to side, it has a winding motion.

If Jesus were chancellor



Dr Justin Thacker is
*Academic Tutor, St Hild
College, Mirfield.*

I was asked to write this piece the day before the mini-budget of 23 September. At the time, the editor wanted a piece that addressed the “current state of the economy through a Christian lens”. When I agreed, neither of us realised that this topic would be quite so live! Nevertheless, this article is written to try to provide some Christian thinking about our economy and where we should be headed.

Of course, Jesus never wrote a budget, and it would be entirely misplaced to argue that the scriptures give us a detailed economic plan. Nevertheless, what the Bible does suggest are overall goals to pursue in what we call “our economy”. To my mind, there are at least three aspects to an economic policy that is going to be morally praiseworthy. They are, in no particular order:

- Ensuring adequate employment for all that can work;
- Enabling sufficient funding for good public services;
- Controlling excessive inequality.

Undergirding all of these is keeping inflation under control, for high inflation defeats them all. There exists a clear biblical basis for all of these.

Adequate employment for everyone

One of the misunderstandings that can occur in relation to the book of Genesis is that we think of work as a consequence of the Fall. The garden of Eden is pictured as an eternal holiday where we lie around, eating the fruit that drops from the trees with no effort whatsoever. Work is thought only to emerge in response to Adam and Eve’s disobedience: “By the sweat of your face you shall eat bread” (Genesis 3:19). But the reality is that work was given to humanity prior to any disobedience. In Genesis 2:15 we read that “God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it”, literally cultivate it, and that is before the Fall.

The point of this is that in our very being we are made to be productive. We were created to use the talents that God has given us to generate a flourishing earth.

Can scripture speak to our ideals for our economy?

Dr Justin Thacker explores three key principles to a moral economic framework.

This is our God-given mandate. But such work must be adequately rewarded. We have words for work that brings no benefit to the worker: slavery or servitude. That is not what God intended. Hence, a sound economic policy is one that creates decent employment. Crucially, the employment created is not merely work for work's sake. It is work that is adequately remunerated.

This is where our economic crisis is highly relevant. Economic commentators from across the political spectrum have pointed out how high inflation diminishes the economic value of work, as the pound in your pay packet buys less than it previously did. Unemployment may be relatively low, but if our energy prices are going up, if our food is going up, if our rent or mortgage is becoming unmanageable, the value of those jobs diminishes. Whatever else a government does, it needs to ensure not just the provision of jobs but the economic value of those jobs. Any measures that increase inflation are not the direction of travel we need.

Sufficient funding for public services

Any sound economic policy needs to ensure the populace is provided for. Now, of course, some would argue that this is misguided, that instead we need to encourage people to “stand on their own two feet”, and not be reliant on government handouts. Indeed, the scriptures are

full of encouragement to take responsibility for ourselves and work for our living (Proverbs 6:10–11; 2 Thessalonians 3:10–12). None of what I’m suggesting undermines that truth. However, the problem is that some have pushed the argument for self-reliance too far. This is the case in at least two different ways.

“... there’s no such thing as a self-made person in the West”

Firstly, there are some public services that we simply cannot perform ourselves. The obvious example is national security, but even at a more local level we need the police, prison and judicial systems to protect us. Just spend a short time in a country without a functioning state to discover the

impossibility of business entrepreneurship in such an environment. This is just one of the reasons why there is no such thing as a self-made person in the West. In the UK at least, any wealth creation has been entirely reliant on a foundation of security, education and healthcare, all of which were provided free at the point of delivery by the state.

The second reason we cannot just “stand on our own two feet” is that many in society are vulnerable. Until a few months ago, I had regular contact with a homeless drug-addicted man who was offered his first joint by his own mother at the age of three. She continued to fill his childhood with a drug-infused environment. Asking such a man to stand on his own two feet is simply cruel. Not all stories will be so extreme, but there are numerous people in society who badly need well-funded public services to support them.

In the book of Galatians, in the midst of heated debates regarding the precise boundaries of the new gospel message, the one thing the early believers all seemed to agree on was that we need to “remember the poor” (Galatians 2:10). Jesus repeatedly put at the heart of his message the command that we are to love our neighbour, pointing out elsewhere that our neighbour is whomever is in need (Luke 10:25–37).

So the questions before us are these: are we loving our neighbour when over a million elderly people in need of social care cannot get it? Are we loving our neighbour when over two million can't afford their own food? Are we loving our neighbour when mental health services are so poorly funded that some people with severe issues are waiting years for the specialist care they require? Loving your neighbour means well-funded public services, and an economic policy that starves the public coffers is the precise reverse of that.

Controlling excessive inequality

In his outline of the mini-budget, the chancellor (Kwasi Kwarteng) suggested that we must choose between growth and redistribution, and we should choose the former. As many others have pointed out, this assertion does not quite meet the facts. In his book *The Price of Inequality*, the former World Bank chief economist and economics Nobel Prize-winner Joseph Stiglitz argued that highly unequal societies actually curb economic growth. If we compare ourselves to two nearby countries, France and Germany, we see that both have lower levels of inequality than us and both are growing faster than us. It is a myth that tackling inequality depresses growth. Indeed, the reverse appears to be the case.

Even if that were not true, there are good biblical grounds for tackling inequality on its own terms. When Paul encouraged the Corinthians to give to the church in Jerusalem, he told us:

“I do not mean that there should be relief for others and pressure on you, but it is a question of a fair balance between our present abundance and their need, so that their abundance may be for your need, in order that there may be a fair balance.”

2 Corinthians 8:13–14.

In other translations, we read “the goal is equality”. The point of this is not to suggest that there could ever be any absolute economic equality between people. Even considering the examples of redistribution by the early church in Acts 2:44–5 and 4:32–5, it does not appear to be the case that everyone had exactly the same provision. Rather, the point seems to be that redistribution occurred, at least in part, in response to need. The Jerusalem church was struggling, so Paul encouraged sharing of gifts; some in the early church were in need, so the believers sold their possessions and shared the proceeds. The question is whether we are in that position today. Are we in a situation where some have plenty and others are in need? The answer is that of course we are. As such any economic policy needs to find ways to redistribute, not just for the sake of growth, but more especially to demonstrate love for our neighbour.

If the former chancellor's motive for his mini-budget really was full and adequate employment, good public services and fostering a work hungry mentality (i.e. productivity) then at the very least we can applaud his aim, even if the way he went about it was deeply problematic. Growth that delivers those things is indeed largely good. However, that is not what occurred. Perhaps he would have done a better job if he had simply paid attention to the disciples' advice to Paul, “They asked only one thing, that we remember the poor” (Galatians 2:10). ¶

On the money

We spend around £29 million each year supporting the mission and ministry of the Church of England, our schools and partner agencies. A new publication explains how we're funded, and how that money helps our churches and schools to thrive.

What are the costs?

You probably know that the Diocese of Oxford is one of the largest in the Church of England, but did you know that three of our four episcopal areas are often larger than entire dioceses elsewhere?

Around 2.4 million people live in a parish that's served by one or more of our 810 churches and 284 church schools (soon to be 285).

Mission and ministry in the diocese costs around £29m each year. That's a huge amount of money for us all to raise, so we have a duty to spend it well. Our support costs are just 4.2% of overall expenditure and 90 pence in every pound comes back to our parishes.

We thought it would be helpful to summarise some of the facts and figures from the new publication *On the money* in this edition of *Pathways*. You should know how we're funded, and how that money helps our churches and schools to thrive.

But before we begin, what, or who, is the diocese? The answer is that every congregation, church, church school, parish and benefice make up the Diocese of Oxford, and that's how we most often refer to ourselves: the diocese is all of us working together for the sake of God's world.

The parish share raised by our church congregations will account for an amazing 70% of the money the diocese spends from the core budget in 2023. And it's thanks to the generosity of our predecessors (realised today as the income we generate from our assets) that parish share allocations today are a lot lower than they would otherwise have to be.

Parish share

The parish share is the amount that each parish is asked to contribute to support the mission and ministry of the Church in the Diocese of Oxford and beyond. Without it we simply would not be able to support and pay for our clergy. With it, we're able to ensure appropriate levels of ministry provision across all 284 benefices.

Parish Share is an immense undertaking that raises over £18m each year – a feat that's possible only because of the long-term financial commitment of our congregations. Thank you!

But how does it work? Parish share is a formula-based system built on generous, gracious giving and the principle of mutual support. It is administered in partnership between the diocese and each of our 29 deaneries, using a formula that's fair, transparent and reflects the ability of our congregations to contribute financially.

As well as funding the ministry costs within each parish, the parish share is a commitment from every place to ensure that the work of the Church of which we are all a part reaches into every community: there are places across our diocese where people contribute to God's world in amazing ways, but they just don't have the financial resources to meet the cost of ministry.

That's why it's so important to recognise that the work we do in our own parishes is only a part of the mission of God's church. By offering up our share, we're each ensuring that the work of the church of which we are a part reaches into every community. Together, we fund work and worship in every place.

Continues overleaf...

How we spend it

Our annual income comes from parish share, our land holdings and commercial properties (known as Glebe), fees, and other investment income. It means that we can support, house and train our clergy and be a generous, self-sustaining and growing community of Christians – one that’s capable of funding the level of change required for the future Church.

We currently have 706 licensed clergy, 491 clergy with Permission to Officiate (PTO), and 280 Licensed Lay Ministers, with around 30 people beginning their curacy in the Diocese of Oxford each year.

Parochial clergy, including all our curates, are paid a stipend for their ministry. It’s by far the biggest area of our expenditure and accounted for 52% of budgeted expenditure in 2021, some £13.9 million. Taking housing and training costs into account, it costs over £19m each year to resource ministry in this diocese.

A further £750,000 each year goes to supporting our schools, poorer dioceses, vulnerable families, and the developing world. And about £1m each year is available as grants to parishes from the Development Fund.

The balance goes to supporting and maintaining current ministry provision (and preparing for change when it happens), financial management, good governance, and HR, and, of course, resourcing our common vision of a more Christ-like Church for the sake of God’s world.

In fact with support costs of just 4.2% of overall expenditure, the Diocese of Oxford is comparable with other large dioceses in the Church of England. But while others are sadly having to cut costs and clergy posts, thanks to your support the number of stipendary clergy in this diocese is forecast to remain broadly stable for the next three to five years and we’re able to plan for 16 stipendary curates entering training each year between 2024 and 2026.

Myth busting

- **The government funds the church!**
We get no direct funding from the government. The responsibility for funding parish ministry rests with us.
- **The national Church funds us!**
The Church Commissioners support the ministry of bishops, and parishes benefit from grants made to the diocese, but parish and archdeaconry costs rest with us.
- **Top-heavy decision making!**
The majority of those taking allocation decisions are elected by parishes, and distribution of parish share is calculated by the local deanery.
- **You delay recruiting clergy!**
Stipend savings and income from lettings is factored into parish share (share could increase by up to 10% if there were no interregna); savings aren’t the primary consideration.
- **We don’t have to pay share!**
If a parish cannot or will not meet its share allocation then that means the balance will have to be met by other parishes in the diocese.
- **You have too many staff!**
We keep staff numbers under active review. The full-time equivalent headcount funded by core budget in 2021 had not increased from 2018 levels.

Further information

These pages are a short extract from *On the money, how we’re funded, and how that money helps our churches and schools to thrive*. It is one of several resources that explain diocesan finances and the difference we make together. Find out more at oxford.anglican.org/finance



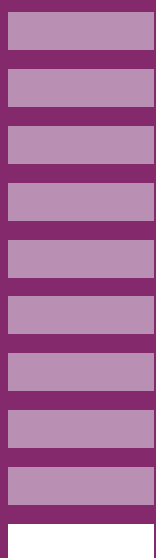
Talking about money and generosity, especially in the midst of a cost-of-living crisis, can feel next to impossible but remains crucial. Our Generous Giving team helps parishes to nurture a culture of giving and generosity within the context of Christian discipleship. Find out more at oxford.anglican.org/giving-and-fundraising

Did you know...

90 pence in every pound comes back to our parishes in:

- 
- **Clergy** - stipends, pension contributions, housing and ongoing training
 - **Curates** - selection, training, stipends, pension contributions and some housing
 - **Support for parish ministry** - mission, church buildings, safeguarding, etc.
 - **Development Fund** - grants to parishes for missional projects.

10 pence in every pound goes to:

- 
- **National Church costs**, including support to churches in poorer parts of the country
 - Our contribution towards the funding of **initial ordination training** at a national level
 - Other diocesan **support and administration** costs.

Reconciliation

One of the most common impacts of being caught up in conflict or a difficult relationship is a sense of being stuck. It can often leave parties feeling that what they say or do doesn't make a difference.

That sense of "stuckness" is part of why conflicts can be so exhausting, both emotionally and spiritually. In conversations with those in that frustrating situation, one of the things I like to explore is what choices people think they have.

Often we might feel we have little or no choice, at least until the other person changes or leaves. Sometimes our choices really are limited, but we probably have more options than we realise.

Some of those choices are about ourselves and our responses to what is happening (or what we perceive to be happening). Sometimes they relate to where our focus is. Conflict tends to narrow our focus until the "problem" becomes all-consuming. Stepping back and widening our perspective can reveal more opportunities.

In all communities, the most difficult relationships can consume much of our time and emotional resources. Changing the focus to relationships we can develop more positively might be one choice that is open to us. Developing a wider group of people who are working well with difference and disagreement is like reinforcing our community's conflict immune system, which enables us to handle more knotty tensions better.

There is deep uncertainty on many of the issues facing us today; the ongoing conflict in Ukraine and its potential to destabilise energy supplies, the increasing polarisation of society, the rise in threatening social media posts towards those in public life. And, as we also grapple with huge financial pressures, there's profound concern about what this might mean for a society which

appears riven by inequalities of health and opportunity.

Against such a backdrop, it's not easy to see how we can make any difference – what options do we have to live out the gospel of reconciliation in meaningful ways in such a precarious, anxious world? It's my belief that there is a connection between the choices we make in the everyday and the large-scale issues of conflict on a local, national or world stage. It may be a long or shaky connection, but it's still real. The choices we make can contribute in some small but significant way to the building of a society which is able to navigate these uncertain days with some measure of grace towards those with whom we disagree.

Reconciliation isn't just about large-scale conflicts. It's about the daily choices we make in situations or relationships which seem stuck, or which leave us at a loss. I wonder what choices we might make in the days ahead – to move towards those with whom we disagree; to listen and speak in ways which invite understanding rather than winning an argument; to be willing to change in the face of what we might come to learn?

Grappling with these choices is tough and demanding work, but it has the capacity to be transformative. As Archbishop Justin Welby says, "It's precisely because reconciliation is so difficult that it is so powerful." ¶

Words, this page: Liz Griffiths, Director of Training, Bridge Builders – a small Christian charity that provides training, coaching, consultancy and mediation services to those in situations of conflict.

Take a step back

Getting stuck on a problem means it can loom larger and larger and become all-consuming. Take a step away and give yourself space and time to gain a different perspective.

Build your community

Working with a wider group of people can strengthen our community and ensure no pressures fall on just one person's shoulders. Who can you ask for help or support?

Start small

Small things can make a big impact, and they all help build towards a more Christ-like world. How could you choose to be more gracious this week?

Seek wisdom

The wisdom tradition within the scriptures helps us to understand how to balance different points of view and to live with paradox and tension.

Be a peacemaker

Christ calls us to be radical in our generosity and welcome. It's a call to see others in their full humanity, to persist in seeking their good.

Contemplative practices

The Contemplative Toolkit practices available on the diocesan website can help to avoid "it's this or that" thinking and reduce feelings of anger, fear or judgment.

John 1:1–18 contains some of the most well-known words in the New Testament – but they may also be among the least understood. This winter may be the perfect time to make space to reflect more deeply on John’s words.

The Word became flesh

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. ² He was in the beginning with God. ³ All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being ⁴ in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. ⁵ The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.

⁶ There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. ⁷ He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. ⁸ He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light. ⁹ The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world.

¹⁰ He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him. ¹¹ He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him. ¹² But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, ¹³ who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God.

¹⁴ And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father’s only son, full of grace and truth. ¹⁵ (John testified to him and cried out, ‘This was he of whom I said, “He who comes after me ranks ahead of me because he was before me.”’) ¹⁶ From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace. ¹⁷ The law indeed was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. ¹⁸ No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father’s heart, who has made him known.

These verses are from the New Revised Standard version of the Bible, copyright © 1989 the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America.

Dwelling in the Word

In the beginning was the Word... These words are often read in church around Christmas, and for some they mean Christmas as surely as turkeys, holly wreaths and tinsel. That makes them some of the most well-known words in the New Testament.

After all, lots more people go to church at Christmas than on a normal Sunday. But it also makes these words amongst the least understood in the Bible. The reason is simple: who's really in the mood for theology at Christmas? Who's ready to think through some of the deepest truths in the universe at 11:45pm on Christmas Eve or 10am on Christmas Day? Isn't half your mind on whether your friend will like their gift and the other half on whether you've bought enough brandy butter for all your cousins? Christmas isn't a good time to do theology.

Except that's what makes it the perfect time to do theology – especially the theology in these verses, the kind of theology we celebrate at Christmas. The verses are about someone or something called "the Word", who has existed since before the beginning of time, who was with God, but who also is God. That's hard for us to get our heads around, but in the time of the original writer, it was not so unusual; other thinkers had thought about "the Word" before.

What's new and exciting in this passage is verse 14: "the Word became flesh and lived among us." That verse says that the Word, who is God himself, became flesh. God himself became a human being, made out of bone, fat and muscle. The one who no-one can ever touch or see has suddenly become a human being, called Jesus, with ears and nose and arms and legs.

Why's that important? To be honest, we spend the other 364 days of the church's year answering that question. God becoming flesh affects everything else. It means that God cares about this physical world and everything in it. God has a fleshy body that people at the time could see and touch; therefore, God cares about things we see and touch. When we're deeply enmeshed in the needs and concerns of this physical world, that's sometimes when we're closest to God.

For many of us, Christmas is a time when we spend our energy trying to serve our friends, our families and our communities, in very practical, material ways. We give gifts, we cook meals, we visit the people we love. It can be hard to find time for God and he can seem a long way away. But the message of these verses is that that's when God is nearest: when we're serving real, physical people in real, physical ways. Because that's exactly what God did. Being busy serving others can make it harder to concentrate on these words, but perhaps easier to understand them. So let's get busy serving others, like God did, all the year round. 🙏

Words: The Revd Michael Dormandy, New Testament Lecturer, Ripon College, Cuddesdon, and Curate of St Mary's Church, Wheatley



Jesus warned Martha that sometimes serving others gets in the way of listening to him (see Luke 10:38–42). How do you make decisions about what to focus on?

For light in dark times

Loving God, when times are hard
and it feels like everything around us
is falling into darkness and chaos,
gently lift our faces back towards the light of Jesus Christ.

Let your Holy Spirit shine
into every part of us that needs healing.
Guide our hearts that we may see your dazzling beauty and
love overflowing into every forgotten corner of the world.


Remind us that when we are in the shadows, you are with us,
holding our hands and promising to never let us go.

Assure us that even when we feel forgotten,
unheard or overlooked, that we are never too hidden away
for your light to find us and lead us home.

Help us to know that whenever we feel overwhelmed,
or struggle to emerge from the depths of grief and pain,
you are the light of the world, who reaches us always.

Loving God, may your presence among us be an eternal flame,
a flame that dwells deep within us and warms our souls,
that strengthens us with your love, and lights our path
with the assurance of the everlasting hope and comfort
we are given in our Saviour, Jesus Christ.

Amen

 Between rising energy prices, a fall in real-term income and political unrest across our continent, this winter will be the hardest many of us have ever faced. Find support for individuals in need and resources for churches looking to serve their communities at:

oxford.anglican.org/cost-of-living

*Prayer: The Revd Cara Smart, Curate at St Paul's, Wokingham
Photo: Shutterstock*

Spring Harvest told me...



I was first told about Christianity and Jesus by my family members and my church. They were the first ones to introduce and teach the Bible to me – though due to my young age, I didn't really understand it until I had my first real encounter with Jesus.

If I am being honest, it didn't really make a difference to me at first. It just felt like another story, teaching me good moral lessons, but I didn't really pay attention or believe they were true. That is, until I was 13.

At the age of 13 I went to a Christian festival called Spring Harvest, which I thoroughly enjoyed. I made friends, got to stay up late and enjoy some great music, but the greatest thing of all was my first encounter with Jesus. I felt the Holy Spirit for the first time. Since then, I have had multiple encounters with Jesus, many of them at a youth event called New Day.

Not much changed after first *hearing* about Jesus but it all changed after I had my first encounter with him. After meeting him, I've felt my faith strengthen and I know that someone is always here, helping me.

My faith has really helped me get through some tough times, mainly because of my anxiety, and school doesn't really help with that. It's really nice to know that there is somebody always listening

and understanding what you are going through. It's also just really reassuring knowing that it's not just anybody, it's Jesus.

If I had come to faith at an older age then I wouldn't have had Jesus to help me during those tough times. It's nice having him to lean on as a young teenager.

I go to two churches at the moment: St Peter's and Greenhouse. Greenhouse started out as just a few families getting together talking about Christ, but it is becoming more established now. I went with St Peter's to New Day, and I have to say it was an amazing week. It was a huge camping trip, five days' long with over 7,000 teenagers! I had the privilege of getting to know Jesus even more there, and I will never forget the day I had my first encounter with him.

I would say to any young people considering faith, find a friend who is a Christian who can take you to youth events – they are the best places to get to know Christ. I also find that being around kids my age really helps, as you feel more comfortable praising God when everyone is doing the same.

*As told to Pathways by Ben Churchill.
Photo: Churchill family*



Your local Discipleship Enabler can help connect young people with church, events and resources to build a life of faith. Scroll down this page to find your Discipleship Enabler:
oxford.anglican.org/children-young-people-families.php

COME AND SEE

Answering deep questions of faith

Come and See returns for Lent 2023. It's our big open invitation to ask deep questions of faith. Join us.

oxford.anglican.org/come-and-see