

Background information on the Cowley Deanery Synod motion

The extent of inequality in Oxford Diocese

The 2,200 square miles covered by Oxford Diocese contains a staggering variety of different settings: rural areas, both remote and well-connected; villages and small towns; suburbs and larger conurbations; new towns and older cities. Geographical, historical and economic context combine to shape very different life experiences for individuals and communities - on a large scale; between different parishes, even in the same Deanery, and within parishes.

Oxford Diocese is one of the most affluent dioceses. However, the lived reality for many communities, and churches, can be very different. Our document, 'For Richer for Poorer: poverty and livelihoods in the Diocese of Oxford' explores this terrain in some depth.

The 615 parishes across the Diocese vary considerably in geographical area and population size. Analysis at the National Statistics 'neighbourhood' level allows true diversity of experience, and increasingly apparent inequality, across the Diocese to be seen more clearly. While average rates for poverty may be low, this hides a considerable range. In 2015:

- 27 neighbourhoods were in the top 10% for child poverty in England, and a further 43 in the top 10-20%
- 36 neighbourhoods in the top 10% for pensioner poverty in England, and 62 in the top 10-20%
- Using the wider, Index of Multiple Deprivation measure - 13 neighbourhoods (1% of the Diocese) are in the 10% most deprived in England; further 42 neighbourhoods (3%) are in the 10-20% most deprived

Inequality and poverty may affect us all, whether we or our communities are perceived as rich or poor. Poverty comes in many guises – people can be disadvantaged in any number of ways which are both caused by and contribute to income poverty. Poverty can also be hidden – by the relative affluence of a local area (a danger of statistical averages) and because financial or other aspects of marginalisation may not automatically be obvious.

For example, in 2015 the average (mean) neighbourhood rate of Child Poverty across the Diocese was 12%, but this ranged between 0.7% and 62.1% in the poorest neighbourhoods. Average (mean) neighbourhood rate of 'Pensioner Poverty' in the Diocese was also 12%. Actual neighbourhood rates ranged from 0.8% to 54.2%.

Facilities in churches

We do not currently hold any data at diocesan level on what facilities all our church buildings have. The first step in addressing this (which our DAC team had already identified as something for us to consider) would be a diocesan-wide assessment of our churches and the facilities (water, gas, kitchens, level access) that they do or do not have. This would then enable us to establish a baseline of data for each church's practical facilities and then review it in the context of the information provided by the finance and mission dashboards for each parish to identify those that are doing exceptionally well and may be able to support others with advice, those that may require a considerable amount of support and expertise from diocesan staff and those which fall somewhere in between who could help themselves should the appropriate resources be available to them. We are at the early stages of considering a pilot of this kind of study and there has been

a visit to Hereford diocese this year to learn from their various projects and assessment tools which they are developing.

This kind of 'strategic review' of buildings is being encouraged nationally by the Church Buildings Council and several dioceses have made a start (some with SDF funding). However, in order to produce something of value (which in itself would require a scoping study) a project such as this in Oxford would be a considerable task and require far more staff time than the existing teams could provide. This is not realistic for us any time soon: we will need again to increase the resource in the DAC team (which is under consideration) simply to keep up with the ever-increasing demand for faculties and related advice.

Conclusion

We therefore have no data on which to say to what extent inequality and deprivation in our communities' maps onto inequality of provision of facilities within our churches. It is unlikely to be a straightforward relationship. Whilst some parishes will be more able to update their physical plant from the greater relative wealth of their congregants, other parishes may take the view (especially where a church is used for only a few hours a week or month) that this is not a sufficient priority and that, frankly, even if funds were available they might consider that the value from spending money in other ways was greater. A relevant consideration for rural churches will be the extent to which the church is, or would be, used for community purposes taking account of location, the expense of updating facilities and the local availability of other space used for community purposes.

Our Parish Share system takes account of ability to contribute, with relief for areas of deprivation. Our Development Fund criteria allow for applications for running water/ toilets, and deprivation data will be amongst the data available to the Panel, but clearly the current Development Fund funding is limited and there is likely to be a desire by the Panel to reflect a wide range of missionally creative projects.

A relevant consideration is local ability to manage the complex process of identifying and approaching grant making bodies and also running a fund-raising appeal to those who are not (regular) congregation members. The proposed Working Group would need to include in its work an analysis of what grant-making bodies exist which might support such a project and the possibility of mutual support between deaneries and parishes in terms of people with the time and skill to manage such fund-raising efforts.

If this motion is supported by Diocesan Synod, Bishop's Council (as Standing Committee of the Diocesan Synod) will set up a working group, reporting back to Bishop's Council. Whilst there would be some opportunity costs in supporting the Working Group, the principal resource issues would arise when proposals were made.

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