

UPDATE FOR DIOCESAN SYNOD MEMBERS ON CORONAVIRUS AS IT AFFECTS THE DIOCESE

The impact of coronavirus has of course been massive on us all. This paper summarises some of those implications and how we have been handling them, as background to the opportunity on 13 June to have a sharing of experiences, comments and questions about how the situation continues to unfold at parish and diocesan level. Attached to this paper is Bishop Steven's report to the May Bishop's Council meeting, which we thought you would also find of interest.

Diocesan communications

A regular rhythm of emails across the Diocese has been in place since March: one to two technical guidance notes each week; a pastoral email from Bishop Steven most weeks; and one-off event announcements. These have been well received, and the data shows us engagement is high. A dedicated section of the website has been built and continues to be updated each week - <https://www.oxford.anglican.org/coronavirus-covid-19/>. This includes examples of best practice in parishes and has been developed throughout this period.

Diocesan streamed worship

Diocesan live/as-live streamed services are complementing what has been offered locally by many parishes and are attracting an online congregation of c. 3,000 people at each service: <https://www.oxford.anglican.org/coronavirus-covid-19/livestream/>. There has been a streamed service every Sunday, plus additional streamed service for significant occasions (Holy Week and Easter) or for specific purposes (particularly the Diocesan School Assembly on 22 May). Feedback to these has been excellent and it is intended to continue with them for the foreseeable future.

Structure in place

The diocese already had in place a structure for managing emergencies which uses the emergency services gold (strategic)/ silver (tactical)/ bronze (operational) classification. A 'gold' team has been meeting since early March (twice-weekly in March/ April, now weekly) to receive updates, to ensure coordination and to consider and take decisions on handling the situation as it affects the diocese. It comprises Bishop Steven, Bishop Steven's Chaplain (as chair), Archdeacon Judy, Director of Communications, Director of Human Resources, Director of Education, Thames Valley Lead Police Chaplain and me. There have been separate 'silver' teams for Church House (which I lead) and for the archdeaconries (which Archdeacon Judy leads) and 'bronze' teams meeting with Area Deans.

National coordination

We have been in very regular touch (initially daily) with Church House, Westminster in receiving advice and in contributing to national views being formed. The CoE's medical adviser Brendan McCarthy deserves particular mention. All the various networks of diocesan officers, not least of Diocesan Secretaries, have been very active through this period, in sharing information and seeking to adopt complementary approaches.

Church House

We reduced to a skeleton staff only on 18 March and then had to close the office completely immediately after the Prime Minister's announcement on 23 March. All staff have been working from home, with all phone extensions being forwarded. We rolled out MS Teams to all staff in just 24 hours. Staff are working well with it and many of us have been having several meetings every day on it ever since. We quickly adapted to meetings being held by electronic means, usually MS Teams but with occasional use of other tools for larger meetings (for example the scheduled consultation with deanery treasurers on 25 March went ahead with a record 'attendance' of 46).

We have furloughed about 20% of our staff (those in adviser roles usually for shorter periods, those in facilities roles usually for the whole period) under the Government's scheme (by which the Government covers 80% of costs, up to £2,500). We have wanted to be wise financially whilst also ensuring appropriate cover of all key functions and indeed providing additional cover where needed (for example communications and funeral management). We have put in place appropriate HR policies.

Staff have been in good heart, adjusting well to the massive changes in working life and are supportive of the decisions that have been taken. We have been realistic that those with young children at home may not be able to carry out their full role at this time and have put in place appropriate arrangements.

We are very aware that many staff, particularly those who live on their own, have missed the social contact they normally enjoy and so have paid particular attention to wellbeing; a virtual coffee morning every day – with no work matters being discussed – has been appreciated by many. The general principle has been that all meetings continue, by MS teams, and line managers and other staff have been using it to keep more closely in touch with staff. We have several staff who have been instructed to shield themselves for 12 weeks, or where their partners have been, and are providing particular support to them.

In general, workload has remained similar to a normal level. Where there has been any capacity, we have been using this as an opportunity for us to update websites and enhance online training. We envisage this being of benefit across the diocese both during and beyond this period (which will then reduce the need for travel, thus also supporting Synod's declaration of a climate emergency).

We are re-opening Church House in a limited way on 2 June. We can only use around half the desks at Church House due to social distancing and will have even fewer staff than that in the building for some weeks. It will be necessary for many staff to continue to work from home for many months. We remain closed to visitors at this stage. We are reconfiguring committee rooms 1 and 2: inevitably capacity will be far more limited for as long as social distancing requirements remain. This will continue to necessitate for many months major changes in how we deliver meetings and events, with the exception of smaller meetings (of up to about 14) which we hope to start resuming at Church House by September, whilst accepting that some members or staff at any one time will be self-isolating or shielding.

Finance

Like all other dioceses, we have been very concerned from the outset about the effect on diocesan and parish finance of Covid-19. Parishes who are very dependant on Sunday collections are needing to switch that giving to direct debit/ standing order/ parish giving scheme. Those who receive a significant amount of income from lettings or from fundraising events will have found those sources are falling to close to nothing. Fee income has largely evaporated for this period, though we would hope that marriage fee income will simply be deferred. We took the decision that funeral fees would not be charged for funerals at crematoria, in concert with many dioceses, for a period between April and May: fees are being charged for all funerals booked after 7 May.

We would like to think that, with the benefit of the various categories of Government support, regular committed income (about 60% of parish income) will largely continue, and indeed some will be able to give more as their expenditure will be significantly curtailed by the current restrictions. We have sought to take a measured approach and after careful consideration and various soundings Bishop Steven, John Tattersall and I wrote on 25 April (<https://mailchi.mp/oxford.anglican.org/diocesan-and-parish-finance>) to incumbents, Churchwardens and Treasurers. We asked Deanery Treasurers to advise us by 31 May if information available to them suggests it will not be possible to pay the parish share at the normal level, so that we can understand those implications, and draw on that in diocesan planning. We can update on the position at the meeting; it is too early to draw firm conclusions, and we recognise the position will continue to evolve.

We have been reviewing all aspects of the diocesan budget and have identified savings of over £500,000 in 2020. Many of these savings inevitably have implications (such as delaying work to vicarages) and we ask for understanding where this is the case. It is, however, the case that the current situation has delayed several of our curates securing incumbency posts and so there are additional unbudgeted costs relating to curates in their fourth year. We are also completely revisiting the 2021 budget, which will therefore only come to Bishop's Council for consideration in July and Diocesan Synod in September.

Our investments have of course been hit by the reductions in investment values this year. From a year-end position of £100m, the investment portfolio managed by Newton dropped to £83m but as at the date of writing has fortunately now returned to over £90m. Whilst we are hopeful later this year that there will be some further bounce back as confidence returns, none of us know for sure. In this context we have had to look at what these means for our total return calculations and consequent spending, and have taken legal advice as part of this. Our top priority is still to be able to legitimately justify providing the offset to parish share in 2020 and 2021 on which our parishes critically depend (parish share would otherwise have to increase by nearly 20%). Beyond what total return accounting allows, the diocese is not allowed to draw on its investments as these are permanent endowment (as will be the case for some PCC investments).

If we are to encourage a sense of hope in being a Christlike Church we also need to keep momentum with Common Vision activity and the development fund which is being appreciated so much by parishes. We decided to cancel the May round of the development fund, but have said that the autumn round will go ahead in the knowledge that many parishes

have been developing projects which will be as or more relevant in the new context. We have cut down on planned recruitment but are proceeding where there would be a material medium term detriment if we did not.

Our cash position is secure for this year. Our unrestricted reserves are adequate but as they were at the level of 3.2 months in December 2019 (as against 5 months a year earlier) it is most unlikely that we shall be able to adhere to our policy of keeping reserves at a minimum of 3 months' expenditure this year, and if there is a large reduction in parish share receipts these reserves could be almost completely eliminated (in which case we would then have to start replenishing them). Drawing substantially on reserves will be absolutely consistent with what we are asking our parishes and deaneries to do.

Clergy moves

Removal firms have not generally been functioning during this period. An understanding was reached between dioceses that, as a general rule (but with exceptions), clergy would stay where they were during the lockdown period. The Bishop's senior staff team are keeping under the review the implications for all clergy due to move post or begin curacies.

Parish-facing advice

We have been passing on to parishes advice as soon as we have received it. There was particular concern about APCMs, given the time of year, which is now resolved. We have posted new advice about HR matters for those parishes that employ staff, and data protection. We are providing what additional support we can to parishes on websites and streaming services. A new quarterly digest for PCC Officers is about to be launched.

Other matters

An electronic ballot to identify the next Chair of the House of Clergy took place. The Reverend Canon Geoff Bayliss emerged as Chair-Designate and the House of Clergy will be invited formally to appoint him at the next physical meeting; in the meantime, he is informally carrying acting in that capacity at Sue Booy's request.

A formal petition has been submitted to the Dioceses Commission by Bishop Steven, following endorsement by Bishop's Council in May, for the appointment of a new Bishop of Dorchester following the retirement of Bishop Colin.

As you know, it is hoped to go ahead physically with Diocesan Synod in September and November with social distancing, but it is too early to be able to confirm whether this will be possible and whether if so it will be possible for some members to be part of the meetings remotely. We will update on this the end of July.

Mark Humphriss
Diocesan Secretary
1 June 2020

The Bishop of Oxford's report to Bishop's Council

4th May 2020

I thought it might be helpful for Bishop's Council to have a sight of my report in advance of our meeting on Wednesday to leave maximum time for questions and discussion. My focus, as you would expect, is on our response to the pandemic.

I'm immensely grateful to clergy and lay leaders across the Diocese for responding to the crisis in ways which are contemplative, compassionate and courageous. Our website lists just a fraction of these but they are worth reading to give a flavour:

<https://www.oxford.anglican.org/advice-and-inspiration-in-uncertain-times/>

I'm also grateful to senior colleagues and to colleagues in Church House and Area offices for their outstanding leadership and support.

Structures and staffing

Mark outlined the structures we have in place for emergency planning, the national co-ordination, the implications for Church House and parish facing advice in his briefing to Bishop's Council on 8th April.

Streamed prayer and worship

There has been immense creativity at parish level in the streaming of daily prayer and Sunday worship through a variety of media. Numbers attending have been very significant. We have this week commissioned some more detailed research into what is happening and what this means (in dialogue with the national church digital team and others). This is co-ordinated by my research assistant, Simon Cross.

We took an early decision as a diocese to offer diocesan streamed worship on Sundays and Holy Days. We want this Diocesan prayer and worship to be sustainable over the long haul, collaborative, creative, accessible to all traditions, reliable and prioritising not competing with the local.

The Revd. Charlotte Bannister-Parker has joined my personal staff team as Associate Chaplain (at no financial cost to the Diocese) and is leading the preparation and delivery each week of Church at Home. Our Sunday services are attracting congregations of several thousand people "as live". From 26th April this was also available as a dial in by phone. We envisage there will be a need for streaming and Church at Home for many months to come.

I began a new weekly series of podcasts for the Diocese: "Reflections for a Church in Lockdown" based on the Psalms two weeks ago.

Funeral ministry

At the beginning of April, it looked as though the number of funerals would rise very significantly with most services moving very short windows in crematoria with few (or possibly no) mourners. Although the number of deaths from virus is deeply tragic, the numbers of funerals has not yet risen to this degree and the length of services has not been reduced. The lead from the national church to waive funeral fees, which we followed as a Diocese, now needs to be reviewed. There has been an excellent response from clergy and lay ministers to

the needs of this new ministry. The Mission Team have developed a single point of response back up service to support funeral directors seeking to arrange funerals. Again, this has not been needed to date but it is good to have in place.

Pastoral care

Again, clergy and congregations have been responding remarkably to the pastoral challenges of the situation with all personal contact moving to phone or video conferencing.

The Area Teams similarly have invested a great deal of care in clergy with systems of regular video conferences and meetings.

Care for our communities

There are many powerful local stories of churches engaging with foodbanks and community endeavours and the homeless, always in partnership with others. In the recession which will follow the pandemic the role of the Church within local communities will be vital and vital too will be the support and care of this work which we offer as a Diocese.

Supporting our schools

This has been a time of significant challenge for all educational institutions including our own Church schools and the schools we support through our network of MATs. Colleagues in education have been feeding the concerns of schools, heads and governors into our regular planning meetings.

Listening to the Diocese

The pandemic seems likely to affect our nation, our own communities and the Church profoundly. It seems vital therefore to listen as carefully as possible to what is happening across the Diocese. I've therefore begun a series of virtual consultations with Deanery chapters across the whole Diocese, with senior colleagues, beginning on 5th May and have made a parallel offer to lay chairs to meet virtually with groups of lay leaders in deaneries.

Ordinations and licensings

We have taken the decision to postpone the Petertide ordinations to Michaelmas this year and the DDO team are in contact with our new deacons, who will be licensed as stipendiary lay ministers from 1st July until ordination.

Licensings are proceeding virtually where appointments have already been made. By and large recruitment processes to parishes have now been put on hold until we are clearer on the timetable for moving out of lockdown and social distancing.

Common Vision

Every part of our life as a diocese will need to be re-imagined in the light of the pandemic and its aftermath. However, it is clear already that the heart of our vision – the call to be a more Christ like Church for the sake of God's world – is deepened, sharpened and strengthened by the pandemic. We should hold onto and press into our vocation to be a more contemplative, compassionate and courageous church through the pandemic and beyond it and explore this even more fully in the light of our present circumstances.

My own evolving sense is that as a church we are being stripped back to what is essential in worship, service and care and that there are vital lessons to be learned from the journey.

Our work on climate change is prophetic and will need to be sharpened and deepened through the pandemic. Some revision will be needed (for example helping us learn the lessons of remote learning and decreasing transport costs). Our work on community engagement and social action will need to deepen and be further extended in the coming years as the economic effects of the pandemic bite further.

The pandemic will provoke many to reflect more deeply on Christian faith and seek God. Our parishes need to be ready to provide opportunities for learning and community, both online and in person through the year. The experience of Church at Home during lockdown is an illustration of the power of new congregations connecting with diverse groups.

The need to support our schools, develop chaplaincy and re-imagine the church-school relationship will be even more vital after the pandemic. The need to reimagine and revitalise our work with children and young people along the lines in the present strategy will be equally important.

Emerging well from lockdown

Attention is now turning in the country to how we will emerge from lockdown, including as a Church. We await guidance from the government as to the timetable. The national Recovery group led by the Bishop of London has identified the following three stages of returning to church buildings:

1. Access to very limited numbers of people for enhanced streaming
2. Private prayer and some socially distanced ceremonies and celebrations (e.g. weddings, funerals)
3. Limited congregations allowed to meet.

The decision by the Archbishops and Bishops to advise clergy not to pray in or stream from their church buildings has been controversial. Changes in government regulation will be necessary for (2) and (3) above though not for (1).

And finally...

It is clear that no-one has a monopoly of wisdom in this uncharted territory and we can only navigate forward well by listening and paying careful attention to the world around us, to one another and to God. There is a great deal to discuss here (even leaving aside the financial implications of the pandemic which we will address later in the meeting). We will not be able to discuss everything during the Bishop's Council but I would be glad to reconvene at a separate time virtually to go deeper as required. Thanks in advance for your engagement

+Steven Oxford