

**Oxford Diocesan Synod**

A summary of the meeting held on Saturday 13th June 2020 via Zoom.

**1. Welcome and Opening Worship**

The Rt. Revd Dr Steven Croft, Bishop of Oxford, welcomed Synod members and visitors to the meeting. In particular he noted that The Revd Paul Cowan, Mr Ian MacDonald and Mrs Yvonne Morris would be speaking, and Synod granted permission for them to do so. He reminded members that this was not a formal meeting and that Standing Orders would not apply. Following this, the meeting began with opening worship using *Dwelling in the Word*, and the passage Acts 20.17-38 was read by Mrs Caroline Kallipetis. The Synod then broke into groups of three to reflect and discuss what God was prompting them to do today.

**2. Presidential Address:**

Bishop Steven gave an address. He began with words of thanks to the congregations, clergy and lay ministers of the Diocese for their "remarkable and deeply humbling response to the COVID 19 pandemic and all of the challenges of the last four months". He thanked all those who had demonstrated exemplary leadership and praised those who had lived out their faith and discipleship in such challenging times, thanking the whole diocese for the extraordinary response to the financial challenges being faced both locally and regionally. He noted when meeting with Deanery Chapters how colleagues had also shared positive stories of fruitful ministry, appreciation of their congregations, the discovery of new gifts and a sense of wonder at God's provision.

The focus was on how should we as a Church move forward in these challenging, important and unpredictable times? What kind of Church are we called to be? A more Christ-like Church for the sake of God's world: more contemplative, more compassionate and more courageous.

Following this there was an opportunity for reflection and the Synod heard from *Mrs Stephanie Summerell, Mr Gavin Oldham, Revd Mark Bennet and Ms Jayne Ozanne*. There had been an appreciation for the positivity on the focus of moving forward and entering a new phase where learning new lessons from the pandemic would secure the future of the Church.

Bishop Steven's full address can be found at [LINK](#)

**3. COVID-19 Update (Non-financial aspects) (Paper No. ODS 20.05)**

The Venerable Judy French, Archdeacon of Dorchester introduced the paper and discussion focussed around handling the Covid-19 pandemic (other than finance). The Archdeacon explained that discussions had been taking place at different levels following a process akin to the emergency services, using Gold, Silver and Bronze teams. The Gold team had significant input from national sources and was a first call for reporting new information to all clergy.

The Archdeacon outlined some of the many issues that had been faced: a change to policy for weddings and funerals and a strict policy and process to keep socially distanced and not being able to gather in large groups. Provision for the deaf and hard of hearing had been a challenge and something that needed to be taken forward; finance had caused concern and how to hold focus on sustainability. Pastoral care had been a difficult and painful part of ministry with restrictions in place and frustration to clergy not being able to offer the normal level of care to bereaved families in particular, having a need to recognise the possibility of putting their own health at risk too when dealing with the parishioners and public. Appointment processes for clergy had changed and clergy were unable to move between dioceses as houses were unavailable and tenants could not be given notice to leave properties having a knock-on effect. Licensing services had been done differently. Livestreaming services: the diocese had a well-established pattern now of doing 'Church at Home' every Sunday but many churches had adapted to their own patterns of worship online, experimenting with different technology platforms.

Many clergy had experienced fatigue trying to manage coping in different ways. Most clergy were in good heart though and some had experienced Covid-19 in their own families but were now recovering and some feeling isolation where people were living on their own. For some there were the shared problems, in common with parishioners, of everyday practical matters such as home schooling.

The Archdeacon noted that we were now moving from emergency planning to a phase of Recovery going forward and again that would bring challenges of a different nature. The Synod had fallen on the day when churches had been given authority to re-open for private prayer, but many would need time to prepare for this. Life for many would be very different from now on and a period of adjustment was needed.

In debate, *The Revd James Kennedy, The Revd Ross Meikle, Mr Mike Powell, The Revd Marcus Green, Mrs Julie Dziegiel* all contributed positive and encouraging stories. Foodbanks had demonstrated their worth and had been a particular need in some areas and communities had volunteers serving meals and distributing craft packs to families which had been welcomed.

There was concern at how advice had been disseminated to define churches as buildings when it was reminded that it was the people that make a church. It was hoped the government would get this message if we continued to push it. It had been exciting to see the focus on prayer and involvement with young people and interactions on blogs noting development and growth in communities. There was a plea for churches to look at engaging with other ways of giving to their churches when they cannot meet physically.

There was an opportunity to share reflections, as well as to raise questions with Archdeacon Judy, the Chaplain to the Bishop of Oxford, The Revd Paul Cowan (who has chaired the diocesan emergency planning team) and the Diocesan Secretary, Canon Mark Humphriss.

The Revd Paul Cowan noted that links continued through many channels and The Thames Valley Local Resistance Forum (TVLRF), which had included reps from Emergency services and County Councils had been represented through the Thames Valley Police Chaplain, The Revd Helen Arnold. Paul had been liaising with the National Gold Team, through the Revd Dr Brendan McCarthy, Chief Medical Adviser for the Church of England.

Further reflections from *Revd Sarah Fitzgerald, The Revd Richard Lamey* were noted before the Archdeacon summed up noting that local decision making would be the key to moving forward in future. It would be likely that churches would still offer 'at home' services for some time and maybe mixed mode and we were still in challenging times.

Bishop Steven thanked Paul for his contribution in keeping the diocese informed and for Archdeacon Judy for presenting the paper and the work of all the archdeacons during this difficult time.

#### **4. FINANCIAL OVERVIEW** (*Financial Aspects*)

Bishop Steven introduced The Revd John Tattersall, Chair of the Oxford Diocesan Board of Finance who gave a verbal presentation on the 2019 outturn, 2020 (including Covid-19 related aspects) and 2021. He started by thanking everyone who had worked so hard in continuing to collect parish share as this was the key to survival across the diocese.

Some of the key points: 2019 Outturn: This would be presented formally in September Synod but in 2019 clergy costs had been higher than anticipated because there were fewer vacancies and curates in training were staying longer than anticipated. Parish share receipts were 96.7% (budgeted 97%). Statutory accounts when presented in September would show a management accounts deficit of £720k but a small surplus in accounting terms because of the pension credit (expected cost of future clergy pensions).

2020: Reserves were operating at 3.2 months at the beginning of the year (equivalent cash £5.9m) and it is those reserves that would be called upon to see us through the Covid-19 pandemic. He noted with thanks the responses from diocese and deaneries throughout the pandemic, which had been impressive. There had been much discussion about the wealth of the diocese, but he noted that it reflects the wealth of the populations of our counties overall. However, we should acknowledge that areas of deprivation still exist in the diocese and are real. John noted our wealth was therefore owned by our congregations as well as being contained in our diocesan investment portfolios. He spoke of the impact of Covid-19 in our diocese as being vastly unequal. He noted how the economic impact had discriminated in a disastrous way against those who were poor and deprived, particularly in minority ethnic populations. There were still many who were in desperate need now. A statistic released from a recent survey described how 48% of the population felt better off or at least no worse off, while 52% felt worse-off at present. He noted that there were therefore pockets of funds still available overall in our diocese where congregations had not been adversely affected. The Bank of England had published the savings ratio which had risen several times to 17% suggesting that some people were now able to save a little more during this crisis. He noted that savings differed by age groups; disposable income had increased for those groups of people whose

income had not reduced and were no longer spending in the same way, primarily in social and leisure activities which had now been suspended. All of this did not mean maintaining church incomes had been easy this year. But it did mean that we did not need to panic and make hasty decisions. In his role as DBF Chair his priority was supporting mission in the diocese, particularly clergy numbers which should be a priority to maintain as the previous session had demonstrated. Following positive discussions with deaneries, there was an anticipated shortfall on parish share income in 2020 of only 7.1% (£1.5m) that compares with a budgeted shortfall of 2.2%: this was a much more positive outlook than it might have been. Identifying savings of around £600k on diocesan expenditure had not been easy as the bulk of our expenditure was attributed to clergy stipends and associated costs of housing, pension contributions and national insurance etc. He noted that the net outcome for the current financial year would likely be a deficit of between £1 and £1.5m and 2021 would also be a challenging year.

2021: despite economic forecasts, there would most likely be an up-turn in 2021; however, he noted it would be a difficult year for the Church generally and nationally. The budget being presented to PBSC, Bishop's Council and then to Synod in November would propose no increase in clergy stipends and consequently would allow there to be no increase in the overall parish share requested. Individual parishes/deaneries would vary because of different elements such as the refund of fees and changes in electoral roll and average attendances. Although the budget prediction was for a deficit of parish share in the region of 5% given the uncertainty of recovery, we were forecasting a deficit overall of between £6-700K. PBSC and Bishop's Council would look at how much more funding can be released from Total Return Accounting over the next triennium 2021-23. The current portfolio of investments, although somewhat diminished, was now showing signs of recovery and would continue to support parish share in future years. The Cowley Working Group report which would be shared later had flagged up a need to provide support for deprived areas and church buildings where they lack basic essentials. The mutual support issue for other dioceses still exists and Oxford had not drawn on national funding where many other dioceses had no choice as it was their lifeline. The challenges of our Common Vision Strategy would remain. John concluded by again thanking everyone for working hard at seeking alternative sources of income in difficult times.

A panel made up of the Diocesan Secretary, Revd John Tattersall and Alison Jestico, Director of finance were on hand to respond to questions from *Mr James Macnamara, Mr Mark Burton, The Revd Richard Lamey, Ms Jane Ozanne, The Revd Mike Smith, The Revd Mark Bennet, The Revd Andrew Lightbown, Mr Mike Powell and The Revd Philip Hobday.*

There were differing views of perception of the message which some had felt was unrealistic relying on national statistics that did not seem representative. It was felt that it was too soon to know the full impact on the economy and there was evidence that with food banks being needed more this should not be overlooked. A question of how our strategic priorities should be reassessed was noted. A question on how the validity of looking at the population generally with 48% no worse off and transferring that to the Church of England in our congregations generally held up. There was a request that all share should decrease overall for everyone. Most churches had been drawing on reserves this year which would mean in 2021 reserves would be depleted and with a recession this would amplify the struggles in parishes leading to tough times ahead. Clarification was sought as to which area the diocesan savings had come from.

Canon Mark Humphriss responded noting his own thanks to all concerned as a whole community responding to this crisis in such a generous way. He noted that there was significant pain to follow and we needed to be prepared to travel together. It had been a hard task to identify as many savings as possible at diocesan level, £600-700k this year with other identified savings in 2021, but he warned that savings would have implications, for example taking funds from the buildings budget would impact on work that could be done to vicarages for instance. The repairs budget would not be cut as this was essential work, but we had delayed, or not proceeded with, recruitment to various diocesan posts; all of which is being replicated throughout all other dioceses. There were some savings on meetings and travel, which were nominal in comparison but other savings where less clergy had been moving around and therefore savings on removal grants. He noted how he was humbled that 30 staff members had chosen to make a salary sacrifice of up to 10% on a voluntary basis. He felt the diocese was making sensible plans to navigate the future as far as they could predict.

Revd John Tattersall noted it was right that the process of re-evaluating our priorities and strategy would be key going forward. He noted that when preparing the diocesan budget, consideration to the overall position of all parishes in the diocese had been given. Many parishes had looked at alternative ways of giving to increase regular income.

It was noted that as a Church we had an opportunity to be prophetic, compassionate and courageous and generous but only if we could find a way to move more swiftly. The question raised was in the current DBF structure who was

the voice for the poor? If we really were in a Kairos moment would we return to the dispersed, fragmented way of doing Church or would we adapt to new ways? How would that conversation be started? Other comments were about technical accounting terms and solutions and should they not take a back seat; and reframing our conversations around money through Common Vision could have a broader scriptural base. Some concern was expressed about the approach taken. Reviewing giving should include deeper conversations which allow those to be able to reduce their giving if that is helpful, being more courageous. Some felt there was much optimism to celebrate whilst others took a more negative view. Other sources of income such as from church halls was also meaning that because of closures of churches this income had been lost but it was felt more important to see these facilities open to communities as soon as possible and look at more creative ways of using them. A further question was raised asking why the diocese had not suspended recruitment altogether.

The Revd John Tattersall responded to all questions noting there was further work to be considered and members' comments would be carefully considered. The Diocesan Secretary responded to the recruitment question noting that all vacancies were being assessed as they come up and fewer posts were being recruited. However, key posts would have to be filled.

## **5. DISCIPLES TOGETHER: (Paper No. ODS 20.06)**

Bishop Steven introduced Mr Ian Macdonald, Diocesan Youth Adviser and Mrs Yvonne Morris, Children's & Families Ministry Adviser for the Oxford Diocese, who spoke to the official launch of the Report 'Disciples Together' as part of the work of one of the focus areas for Common Vision. They gave background to the report and the need to put young people at the heart of mission. The report does not reflect one size that fits everyone, or that there is a need to do everything in the report. This was about growing and developing connections and relationships through partnerships.

The need to take seriously 'faith in the family' was affirmed. There was an underscoring of the need to genuinely involve young people in decision making and thinking. There would be resources being released over the next months to support the report for parishes to work out how to become more inter-generational, alongside contemplative toolkits for families, young people and adults, including engagement with schools. Over the summer there would be a series of webinars inviting those who would find it helpful to experiment and facilitate local 'learning communities' and extend personal discipleship plans. The report invited all members to take this back to their PCCs for discussion with an aspiration to open up a dialogue between parishes and diocesan teams.

The synod broke into small groups in chat rooms to explore the question "What does *Disciples Together* mean to you?" There was not time for general feedback but some of the responses are noted to be able to learn from the affirmation, questions and concerns. There was no pushback on the Shifts identified, which seemed to have resonated with Synod's experience. Some very encouraging comments on the report itself, but also a question of 'who is it for?' underlying that this was written to a wide context in the Diocese. Alongside the positives there were useful questions about exploring the language and implications, particularly around the what, how and why of intergenerational approaches (some articulated a desire to move from silo thinking, and a hope that we can do more that includes all in our churches). The challenge for the rural church emerged although a counter point from one group that felt the report might be too rural.

The breadth of conversation in the groups made it hard to pick out all the arenas that were discussed. It has however all contributed to refining the thinking and action as this moves into an implementation stage. One group noted, cultural change was hard to deliver and that is likely to be a challenge.

Bishop Steven welcomed everyone back and invited general comments and questions. *The Revd Rob Glenny, Mr Thomas Walton and Mrs Stephanie Summerell.*

A question of resourcing was raised about how to cover multi parish benefices and where there is a lack of leaders to support the work with expertise and commitment. How would the aspirations and reality be measured against success? There was a call to identify what is distinctive to the Church and to talk about Jesus in a more open way. How would this be communicated to parishes?

Yvonne noted there were some excellent resources already on the website, but this would also be updated shortly. Comments and reflections were noted confirming the message and need to work intergenerationally. Bishop Steven noted communicating this would be through our usual mailing systems at Church House which was now well established.

Bishop Steven thanked Ian and Yvonne for the communication of this report which had been the culmination of several years planning.

The report can be found on the diocesan website at [LINK](#).

## **6. REFLECTION:**

A Reflection was led by The Bishop of Oxford reflecting on some of the positive aspects of being able to conduct meetings in this way which had never been attempted before. He then led the closing prayers.

### **Future Diocesan Synod meetings:**

#### **Dates of further Diocesan Synod meetings in 2020 (All Saturdays) from 0915 – 1315 (or as advised):**

5<sup>th</sup> September (AGM) – additional meeting

14<sup>th</sup> November 2020

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