

Strategy Development – Diocesan Synod, November 2023

Since starting formally in October, work has continued to further discern and develop our medium and longer term strategy as a Diocese, and consider how best it is supported and resourced. If Synod members have not seen the [update video from Bishop Martyn in which he discusses this new phase of our work](#) or [short interview with me about what this entails](#) they may find these helpful background.

The video and interview highlight this work is not new. Much of the key foundations and parameters for our diocesan strategy have been [previously agreed by Diocesan Synod](#) and remain in place. Our vision remains the Kingdom of God. Our *Three Key Questions*, which reflect diocesan strategic thinking going back over twenty years, help us both see what the Kingdom of God looks like in practice and usher it in. Minster Communities are integral in helping us sustainably enable this. Our [five Diocesan Strategic Priorities](#) help us attend to and properly resource core aspects of living the Kingdom which either historically have been under resourced or can be overlooked amongst the demands of the day-to-day and yet are key to our calling and future.

As this work is not new, we continue to draw heavily on the extensive feedback offered during the range of recent consultations. In addition, Synod members will have a variety of informal and formal opportunities to help shape this work over the coming year, culminating in two key joint gatherings of Diocesan Synod, Bishops Council, DBF Trustees, Area Deans, Lay Chairs, representatives of the Bishops Children and Youth Council and the Bishops Leadership Team before a formal proposal at Synod next Autumn. A much more detailed timetable is available to Synod members on request but in summary:

27th January Gathering

Discuss, improve and agree an outline of the medium and longer-term diocesan strategy, and provide steers on options as to how it is supported and resourced

Pre-Summer Holiday Gathering (19th June)

Discuss the detailed plans drawn up following January's meeting, including the overall mission, people, support and financial plans

26th September Synod

Vote on the long-term strategy, including plans to be submitted to the national Church as part of a nine-year Diocesan Investment Proposal

This is in parallel with detailed discussions with the national church about scope and focus of support. It is important to note we are not simply working on a 'funding bid' but a long-term strategy, out of which flows the request for further national church investment.

Across those gathering in January and July, there is a helpfully wide variety of people, including those who have been very involved for some years, alongside some for whom the context and conversations is newer. To help prepare us, what follows is a two-page reflection on the scale of the challenges and questions facing us and how we got here. Some will be well familiar to some, some less so. This is not a statement of diocesan policy, but a reflection to help us land well as together we craft what next.

At Synod in November, some time will be spent in groups discussing this, followed by plenary time to share together. These questions might help guide thinking beforehand and those conversations:

- What do you think the Church of England across Leicester & Leicestershire will look like in 10 years?
- How do you feel about that?
- How would you propose approaching the challenges and opportunities facing us?

Kicking the nettle down the path?!

Life tempts us to live in the age of the immediate. Whether the demand to respond instantly on social media, the seemingly relentless demands of day-to-day activity, or an annual round that shocks us with how quickly time can pass (just x days to Christmas!). If we can zoom out, however, we can notice how history is rarely in a straight line, where growth or decline just continues on its existing path. Instead, often history is determined at key inflection points when the very shape of the curve changes and after which change gathers a momentum now outside our control.

Human history has often been defined by our response to approaching inflection points. Sometimes they might be personal, like a change of job, health or relationship, sometimes society-wide, like the invention of the light bulb or fall of the Berlin wall, sometimes they may even be within God's Church. The two most common mistakes are to *ignore these key moments until it is too late* (especially if we are exhausted, as many of us are), or to *experience them as things done to us* where we react from the gut, understandably defending what we deeply cherish and rely on. Both responses miss the opportunity, however unwelcome, that such points bring to consider what the right direction is, and journey into that future as a choice, rather than live passively as mere recipients of events.

As humans have approached these key points in history often two, sometimes seemingly opposing, things appear true at the same time. Given, as Christians, our faith is grounded in paradox (we find life by losing it, unless a grain falls to the ground and dies it cannot produce many seeds) we may have some natural advantage in living well at these inflection points, but may not make it any easier.

This is all made somewhat harder though by there not being a single 'Church of England'. Across over forty dioceses and sixteen thousand churches we have huge differences in almost every regard:

- **There are vast imbalances in historic assets and their ability to support the current systems** – most readily seen diocese by diocese, but also possible to observe parish to parish, especially in parishes now in more affluent city centres or if recipients of legacies. This is further compounded or reflected by the wide diversity of deprivation amidst the communities we serve;
- **Population movement since the industrial revolution has affected all dioceses but in quite different ways**, allowing those who have been net recipients of large population growth to develop and sustain a 'one parish, one priest' model, whilst causing a series of ever harder sustainability questions for those in areas where the population was much larger two hundred or a hundred years ago than today. Some dioceses, like ours which appear in the mid-point of diocesan comparisons, but in reality comprise a few large population centres surrounded by very large rural areas, are struggling more than most. For example, in Leicester Diocese our largest parish, which has one time-honoured Parish Church, one fairly new church plant and one very new lay-led fresh expression of Church, serves as many people as $\frac{1}{4}$ of all our parish churches put together;
- **A third, but perhaps most critical, difference is around age profile.** In 1980 the average worshipper in the Church of England was 39 years old, today we are 67. The gift of experience and wisdom of the years is not to be underestimated, but neither is the missional or sustainability challenges if our average age at the end of the next decade is 85. Already significant numbers of parishes in the Diocese are unable to find sufficient church officers, and the huge costs associated with maintaining so many listed buildings are unsustainable if on the shoulders of so few. In this too we know age profiles are not uniform, with a few churches having thriving ministry amongst young people, whilst many churches have very few or no children, families or young people worshipping regularly.

Taken together, these imbalances mean not all dioceses are at the same inflection point at the same time – a few dioceses will be able to continue largely as they are for many years. There can be pressure to just try and copy what is working for a very different context elsewhere, but these are sticking plasters at best as the timings maybe different but the trajectory most are on is similar. This

combination of factors has meant we have been living in Leicester with a reliance on the family silver for some years with free reserves, which can cover deficits, falling by over half in the last six years and most parishes not able to cover the cost of ministry (even after excluding costs of diocesan support staff). Over £2m p.a. of increased Parish Contributions or further cuts are needed as a matter of urgency.

The situation is rapidly reaching an inflection point, with – at current rates – our reserves able to cover deficits/subsidy running out in five years. Change takes time to implement so the window to respond is already very small. Alongside this arguably the current system is running out of road. It appears we are reaching/have reached the point where it will be impossible to ask fewer stipendiary clergy to sustain the existing model of mission and ministry without even greater and very significant impacts on wellbeing, sickness, effectiveness, conflict and, in time, the diocesan ability to discern or ‘recruit’ clergy.

How, then, shall we be? We can no longer kick the can down the path, the nettle must be grasped.

Whilst rejecting a ‘them’ and ‘us’ version of church populism, where the problem is located in another, the extent to which we can proactively and positively respond to this key moment for us as a Diocese largely depends on our ability to have a grown-up conversation well, where we avoid the two common pitfalls described earlier and can hold apparently irresolvable tensions creatively. More than anything though, is the challenge to approach this as a spiritual task, what is God saying to the Church and calling us to be, rather than it being a solely management, organisational or functionally atheistic financial one.

Time and again in the Bible God meets human fear with divine promise, whilst not immediately lifting people from exile or suffering, such promise offers hope and reminds us we are a small but essential part in God’s story of redemption. If anywhere on the face of the earth, any organisation should have a healthy relationship to death and new life it should be us, and yet it is easy to get into a muddle when things we deeply value appear at stake, and when our personal resources to address this feel limited. God is at work amongst us. The hope and life of Jesus Christ offers all changes everything.

Over coming months, discerning a way forward requires us to pay attention together to these tensions:

- Many want ‘an answer’ given (after all is that not what bishops are for?!) but we also want to work it out ourselves in our context. What might ‘being on the same side of the table’ look like?
- The Parish system is a key reflection of our incarnational theology and calling, whilst it already looks and will inevitably further look very different to how it has. The national church is releasing more resources to support but not currently to cover the cost of existing ministry we cannot;
- Clergy are key to the church’s flourishing and fulfilling our sacramental calling, and may not be possible in the numbers we have known. Deployment often remains more correlated with locations of listed buildings than population or church size, but we cannot abandon our calling to all;
- Lay ministry and creative Monday to Sunday mission is key to seeing the Kingdom of God come near but increasingly demands/numbers can have a magnetic pull to keeping the show on the road roles;
- Church buildings are a beloved sign and enabler of local missional presence, whilst it is hard to see all can be fully maintained by the congregations or even communities, in which they are set;
- We place a high value on collaboration and partnership, yet the instances where conflict and control undermine or prevent this are often very great;
- Our Three Key Questions and Five Strategic Priorities are designed to help us as parishes, schools and chaplaincies serve *all* 1.1m parishioners, but often the important can be squeezed out by the urgent. What do we need to help us embody the Kingdom of God in better reflecting, serving and reaching the diversity of the communities in which we are set?
- So often in Christian history ‘solutions’ to seemingly irresolvable challenges have come in part from the margins. We are a settled people and one called to be on the move.
- Confidence in God’s provision often goes hand in hand with lament where both pain is real and deep and God is at work. The pain of death and the promise new life are inextricably entwined.