

***To all clergy and lay ministers***

Date: 22<sup>nd</sup> June 2021  
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Dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ,

Having counted up, I think this is the twenty-fourth pastoral letter that I have written to the clergy and lay ministers of the diocese in the past fifteen months – roughly one every three weeks. Before that, it was maybe two or three per year. Just one more indication (if any were needed) of what an extraordinary period this has been. And I would like to hope that I won't be bothering your inbox again before the autumn, but much will depend on when and how restrictions are finally lifted.

At least such frequent letters have given me the opportunity to thank you again and again for your ministry. I remain deeply grateful for the faithful service of so many in praying for others and aiding those most in need. This is the living embodiment of the 'everyday faith' which we talk so much about in this diocese. So thank you for who you are and what you do.

Over the past fifteen months, the challenges we have faced have changed. From the height of the pandemic when the NHS was so stretched and so many experienced anxiety and loneliness, to the challenges of enduring the lifting and reimposition of restrictions. And now as a diocese, we face a new set of challenges. Our financial deficit is running at about £2 million, and we face the prospect of some redundancies among diocesan staff and a similar (proportional) reduction in the numbers of stipendiary clergy that we will be able to support in the future. We are doing everything that we can to avoid redundancies and maintain clergy numbers, but I would ask for your prayers, particularly for all involved in the current process of reshaping our staff team. Your patience and grace would also be much appreciated when you contact staff – everyone is feeling the pressure at the moment. And we hope to have a better sense of the numbers of stipendiary clergy that we will be able to support (or at least, best- and worst-case scenarios) by the time Bishop's Council meets in July (understanding that the process for any reductions will focus on retirements and normal clergy moves).

Some have asked why we are proposing to make changes to staff posts while we are also in the middle of the Shaped By God Together process? The honest answer is twofold – firstly, we have to make savings to our expenditure, and we need to do this quickly; but secondly, we also want to be ready to support parishes and fresh expressions of church once a decision is made about the future shape of ministry / finance / buildings. So a central part of the proposed changes is to put in place a 'Transition and Wellbeing Team' who will seek to accompany ministers and churches in whatever changes are needed. We don't yet know what these changes will be, but we know that they are likely to be far reaching given our current circumstances and all we have been learning through the pandemic. So we want to do everything possible to ensure a good process of accompaniment and conversation as we go through this transition.

So, can I also thank you for your participation in the Shaped By God Together process. Nearly all churches have hosted local conversations and sent in feedback. We know that these were not easy

conversations – we have not been able to supply lots of detail and it has had been hard to picture what the proposed ministry models might look like and how these relate to finance and buildings. But this is a gradual process of discernment, listening to what God is saying to us. And all your feedback will now go to the Extended Bishop's Council meeting (including Area Deans and Lay Chairs) which is taking place from 6<sup>th</sup> to 8<sup>th</sup> July. At that meeting, people will be asked to make a decision on which of the three ministry models will be explored in more detail. This will then allow Diocesan Synod at its meeting in October to decide if it is right to start implementing this new approach.

### **A renewed call to prayer**

In view of all that I have outlined, I would like to appeal to you once again to pray for the Shaped by God Together process, and in particular to pray for the Extended Bishop's Council meeting in July. The gathering starts on Tuesday evening (6<sup>th</sup>) and runs through to Thursday late afternoon (8<sup>th</sup>). Could you commit to praying each day – maybe once in the morning and once in the evening? We have an external facilitator for the meeting – Andy Brookes; and we have two theologians joining us to help us reflect – Cathy Ross (one of our Canon Theologians) and Shemil Mathew. Please pray for them and for all the participants as we seek to hear what God is saying to us at this time. And please pray for all diocesan staff who face uncertainty over the future.

### **Some good news**

In the midst of these challenges, I am pleased to be able to report that we have been given permission to appoint a new Bishop of Loughborough. This is funded by the Church Commissioners (as is the Bishop's Chaplain role which has also been recently advertised), so while we recognise the sensitivities of making these appointments at this time, they have a negligible effect on our diocesan budget, and they add to our ability to support ministers and churches. So, we are hoping to interview for a new Bishop of Loughborough in early September with a view to having someone in post by the beginning of 2022. Please pray for this appointment process.

Finally, in the hope that this is the last letter I need to write to you for a while, can I reiterate my plea from an earlier letter that you make sure you have additional time off over the summer to rest and be renewed. I am myself taking an additional week off in August after a two-week family holiday in July. I know that I need this as this last year has taken its toll on me, as I know it has on many of you. I realise that many lay ministers and self-supporting ministers will not be able to take time off work in this way, but I hope you can take time off 'active church ministry' and simply live the life of a disciple – one who sits at the feet of the master to listen and to learn.

With my heartfelt thanks, and my prayers,



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