

The Aston and Cuddesdon Deanery Synod supports the concern for people with the cost-of-living crisis and the need for our churches to do all that we can to help parishioners and is pleased that the Diocese sends out notes to encourage us to do this.

The Deanery Synod also recognises the financial pressures on parishes, exacerbated by Covid and compounded by ongoing increases to Parish Shares. It notes too the additional stress that this causes the clergy and laity and the fact that increases are unsustainable. Synod accepts that this situation is not only a factor of the current economic situation but also as a result of the changing nature of charitable giving, and of religious affiliation and church attendance. Synod further notes the publication by the Diocese of 'On the Money' setting out the ways in which our money is currently being spent and appreciates the explanation and the good work done at Diocesan level in support of parishes.

However the Deanery Synod does not believe that they overall framework of funding within the local and national church is sustainable. It also accepts that any challenge to the current system this needs to go beyond our own Diocese to the national church, acknowledging that we are not alone in our struggle.

This Synod therefore asks that:

- 1. the Diocese take our concerns to the national church for a fundamental review of parish funding.*
- 2. the Diocese seek a radical review of the structure at all levels across the national church so that a sustainable model can be developed; one that ensures not simply the survival of our parishes but their flourishing.*
- 3. the Diocese continue to review its own structure, ways of working, and areas of activity so that it can help model alternative ways of working.*

Background and Notes

This motion arises from a basic recognition that some parishes within our Deanery are struggling year on year to make ends meet. Discussions on this have been an annual feature of Synod meetings for very many years. However the current situation and the obvious stress that finances are causing in our parishes led to a Synod decision to seek to take some action. It was felt that we needed to look beyond the formula to a more radical consideration of how the Church of England is financed.

Whilst not every parish in the Deanery is struggling, for some parishes the parish share is a huge burden which is only part of the story. Historically some communities have inherited large church buildings which need work to maintain them for future generations and also cost a substantial amount to keep them running week by week. The burden of this weighs down clergy and laity alike and takes much time and energy away from ministry.

The method of calculating parish share has long been a difficult one and we acknowledge the work that is done on this. However with the wider changing culture the current method puts a huge burden particularly on communities that find themselves subject to substantial additional housing. With the best will and effort to reach out to new communities, it is a simple fact that it will generally be a small percentage of new residents who come to join the congregation. The general cultural change in view of religion has been shown in the most recent data from the Census. One could look to other national statistics which would suggest that this is not a trend that will be quickly reversed; not least due to the more rapidly growing population of those of other faiths.

This does not undermine in anyway the Gospel imperative or the enormous energy that goes into pursuing our mission. Clergy and laity pray for their communities and work hard to reach

out to them. However diminished resources limit what is possible. The threat that not being able to meet the parish share determined due for your parish will result in the further loss of clergy, the pressure that if 'you don't pay' then the rest of the Deanery will lose their subsidy feels tantamount to emotional blackmail and weighs people down. The threat and fear that comes with the parish share demands is not a Gospel message.

Alongside this message of threat we are told that there is 'lots of money' available from the Diocese by way of grants. If less money were taken there may be less for grants, but the cloth has to be cut in an affordable and realistic way. Taking money from source in parish share is a tax which reduces discretionary spend. If less were taken there would be more for maintenance and mission with the pastoral win of reducing stress for those on whom this burden rests. Further grants come with hurdles to mount, criteria to be met thus taking a managerial stance from the diocese or national church and lessening the freedom of ministry in the parish. We are told that people are available to help with applications – people paid from the parish share?

Within this scenario there is also some frustration when the Diocese announces new funding streams for initiatives when parishes are struggling. The question which, perhaps not surprisingly, arises is 'what about funding the existing churches?' We appreciate that some of this is down to the funding decisions made by the Church Commissioners where money is earmarked for specific work but hope that the Diocese can appreciate the issues for parishes where innovative work is being modelled in many places. We ask that creative ways to use any such funding so as to support existing parishes are considered.

The comment so far may seem as if we are in a Parish v Diocese situation, but our plea is that it is not taken as that but rather as a reflection of the frustration and angst felt at parish level. In Deanery Synod discussion the work done at Diocesan level was widely acknowledged and valued by many. The simple fact is that the church is buckling under a system set up for a past generation. A quick trawl of the internet will add several different strands to this note. On one hand we have the challenges from the large Evangelical parishes who are struggling theologically with some of the direction of the Church of England at this time.

The Save the Parish movement, supported by the Archbishops of Canterbury and York, sets out something of this plea. With this senior support it seeks for a strengthening of the parochial system, the return money from the centre to the local to better resource at parish level. It is a challenge to the Church Commissioners to revisit the past and make changes fit for today and tomorrow. Yes, the Church Commissioners do make generous funding available at time as last year when £3.6bn was made available to a number of parishes for the coming decade to seek to halt decline. This is great for those parishes in receipt of the money, but it is also a paternalistic way of working belonging to a former age. We would like to see our Diocese openly support this movement and support our General Synod representatives who sit of the Steering Committee.

The Deanery is grateful to Bishop Gavin and the Diocesan Secretary, Mark Humphriss, for coming to meet with us to explain some of the funding issues. However the key concerns which, as set out in the first to points in our motion, are first and foremost addressed to the national church and remain and we do earnestly seek Diocesan support for the sake of the future of our parishes.

In this motion to Synod and the summary comments in this background note the surface of this issue is merely scratched. It moves from the premise that everyone who works within in the structures of the Church of England does so with a Christian heart, doing their best in the place within which they find themselves. But for too many this is a place in an archaic system no longer relevant for today. From time to time every organisation has to review its

structure and ways of working. Our plea from the bottom of the hierarchy, the parish, is to make a start. There is no illusion of a quick fix and no doubt that there will be anguish along the way. But for the sake of our own generation and those to come we have to ask the difficult questions and make a start at the necessary change.

There will be flaws in our thinking. This is not document which sets itself up for critical evaluation or one which claims a comprehensive review of where we are at. That work has yet to be done. Rather it is a plea from the beating heart of the parishes that a review is undertaken, that our Diocesan leaders speak up in the national church on our behalf, and that radical change is made so that we are fit to continue God's mission now and in the generations to come.

Aston and Cuddesdon Deanery Synod
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