

Aston and Cuddesdon Deanery Synod motion – Briefing Note

Diocesan finances

The diocese recognises the substantial financial pressures being experienced by most parishes, exacerbated by Covid. We have consequently worked hard to keep all part of the diocesan budget under rigorous review. The amount requested from parish share did not increase at all for three years (2021, 2022 and 2023), despite the effects of inflation on the diocesan budget. Some of this was achieved thanks to a welcome reduction in the cost of the clergy pension scheme (its benefits were not reduced), but we have also made a range of savings in the budget. Staffing reviews have taken place of every department at Church House, Oxford to ensure that we are providing the services that are most needed and that we are as lean as is consistent with that.

The same pressures on the cost of living that affect us all do mean that the budget does need to provide for annual increases in clergy stipends (and staff salaries). The majority of the diocesan budget is on clergy stipends and pensions and there will be annual increases in the diocesan budget as a consequence. We will always consult carefully over what level of average parish share increase is manageable, which will in turn inform the decision Bishop's Council takes each year on the level of stipend increases (as well as other part of the budget).

The Finance Committee is carrying out a further limited review of parish share, but is very conscious that any changes that reduce the ask of some deaneries will increase that on others. Just as the national Church does in its apportionments, our own parish share system asks those deaneries judged to be in wealthier areas (which will include Aston and Cuddesdon deanery) to pay more than those deaneries in poorer areas of the diocese.

We carried out a major Governance Review in 2021 and will update this in 2024 to look for areas where we can be more effectively run. We are always looking for ways of working more smartly and I will be happy to discuss any ideas members of Diocesan Synod may have.

We welcome the affirmation of 'On the Money' from the deanery, as we have had from many others, and will continue to develop our communications over time to give clarity to diocesan finances and to the resources available to support parishes, chaplaincies and schools to flourish. Deaneries keep under review their stipendiary deployment but it is encouraging that this year as many deaneries have asked to increase slightly their stipendiary deployment as have reduced.

We are considered to be a very well-resourced diocese, relative to others. Parish share would be at least 25% higher if we did not have the benefit of our investments. This means that we cannot rely on any of the funding that the Church Commissioners channel via the Archbishops' Council to dioceses in greatest need.

Our levels of giving as a proportion of income are lower than that of many of the poorer dioceses. Recognising that some will have their finances in their property, we have recently produced additional legacy resources for parishes (on which the Church is far behind many charities). We will also continue to update our resources to help clergy and others in speaking about sacrificial proportionate giving and our Generous Giving Adviser Joshua Townson is always ready to help.

National finances

Around 10% of the diocesan budget is paid to the national Church to help fund ordination training (which is provided and funded centrally), the various policy and support functions at Church House, Westminster and support the clergy retirement housing scheme. An increasing proportion of these

costs have been grant funded by the Church Commissioners. Without this support the request made to dioceses – and, through them, parishes) to fund national Church functions would now be up to two-thirds higher. Additionally, we are able to bid for national Church funding (we are currently working on a national Church bid for work with children, young people and schools – where the resource will be parish-focused). The largest element of the Church Commissioners’ available funding is available for such grant programmes to support future mission and ministry.

We do maintain a high level of challenge as well as engagement with the national Church. We have also suggested that there might be a more efficient configuration of dioceses, which could free up more funds for support of local clergy provision (although the benefit of this to Oxford diocese is likely to be small as it is already a large diocese).

The national Church has provided the following comments in response to this motion:

“The Church Commissioners and Archbishops’ Council provide grants to dioceses in support of their diocesan strategies for mission, in support of priorities like the ambition to double the number of children and young people in our churches. Those grants are for helping churches to grow. They are not intended as a subsidy for existing churches unable to pay parish share. They are provided in response to needs identified at diocesan level.

The Church is much weaker in poorer areas, urban areas, and areas with younger and more ethnically mixed populations, and in the north. Not by a coincidence, attendance is higher in areas where we currently provide more clergy – which tend to be richer, more rural or suburban, older, whiter and more southern areas. Therefore, the national grants – while available to support all forms of Church – are often targeted towards the areas that need more support, and where ministry resources at present are fewer.

With thanks to diocesan colleagues, it might be helpful to demonstrate this by noting that there are 0.83 stipendiary clergy per 10,000 population in Burnham and Slough deanery and 0.50 stipendiary clergy per 10,000 population in Milton Keynes deanery, compared to 2.48 stipendiary clergy per 10,000 population in Woodstock deanery and 2.70 in Chipping Norton deanery.

The system of parish share is intended to ensure that the main costs of today’s Church (notably stipends, clergy pensions, clergy housing, clergy training, lay ministries, safeguarding and parish support) are met wherever possible by today’s congregations. It includes an element of fellowship, intended to allow wealthier areas and wealthier congregations to contribute to supporting the Church in poorer areas.

However, noting the financial pressure many parishes and dioceses face at present, not least since the pandemic, a review is proposed of the system of national funding, including the Lowest Income Community Funding, which is targeted to help the poorest parts of the country, and the diocesan apportionment. This would start with a thorough look at the state of diocesan finances. This is in line with the suggestion in the deanery synod motion and it is helpful to know that this sort of review is supported.

As noted by the diocese, in terms of assets Oxford diocese is the wealthiest in the country and has also nobly committed to helping other dioceses through mutual support.

The archbishops, as well as the Archbishops’ Council and the Church Commissioners, are committed to helping parishes, as well as other forms of church, and consider their financial support with this in mind. However, any system for funding is based on the premise that parishes should, where they can, pay for the resources they need rather than expect to be funded by someone else.”

Mark Humphriss
Diocesan Secretary
27 October 2023