

# **Diocese of Chester**

## **Supporting and Developing Missional Communities**

### **A Contribution to Discussion**

#### **Background Context**

The Diocese largely comprises the Victorian County of Cheshire, which is now represented by the whole of the local authorities of the Wirral, Cheshire West and Chester, and Cheshire East, together with significant parts of Halton, Warrington, Trafford, Stockport and Tameside. A few parishes are now in Derbyshire or Wales. The parishes vary from among the wealthiest in the county to the poorest, including 30 formerly 'UPA' parishes.

Although very diverse in its local settings, and sense of local identity, the population of the Diocese is largely white and Anglo-Saxon, but with a slowly growing multi-ethnic presence. The overall population is increasing slowly, aided by relatively small-scale housing developments which are largely accommodated within the existing parish structures.

#### **Mission Strategy**

Parishes, as missional, praying, communities, have been at the heart of our mission strategy to date. Parishes are rooted in their communities, and all sorts of links exist between individual parishes and their communities – both the community which is resident within the parish boundaries, and the extended community which is represented on the Electoral Roll. The parish system is intended to facilitate the mission of the Church of England, and clergy are entrusted with the 'cure of souls' of all their parishioners.

Clergy are trained for this wide missional purpose, and to lead the prayer and worship of their parishes, and are encouraged to develop the gifts of colleagues, lay and ordained, and parishioners, in order to assist with these tasks.

Particular challenges and opportunities exist in relation to children and young people. In many parishes the presence of a Church school is a great blessing and benefit in the mission of the Church to children and young people, but clergy (in particular) are encouraged to offer their ministry to all schools in their parish.

For various reasons, mission and ministry among children and young people has presented increasing challenges in recent decades, and alongside the development of initiatives such as Messy Church, we have strongly encouraged parishes and benefices to consider employing specialist children's and youth ministers on either a full or part-time basis. We have tried to align our financial policies with this.

The parish system of missional communities, as centres of prayer and worship, has long been fruitful and beneficial to the mission of the Church, but questions are being raised across the Church of England about its future viability and fecundity. Some advocate a substantial move towards other patterns, or to a shift of resources into parallel and complementary 'fresh expressions' of church life. To date, we have largely encouraged 'fresh expressions', of all sorts, within the established parochial structures.

**The primary purpose of this paper is to stimulate discussion of these questions across the Diocese.** It has been written by me, in dialogue with my immediate colleagues, and is commended by Bishop's Council for wide discussion in Deanery Chapters, Deanery Synods, and any other groups or bodies which wish to do so.

**It is requested that a response should be made to the Diocesan Secretary by 31 October,** and thereafter I would hope that the responses, as digested and assessed, will inform choices and decisions across the Diocese.

### **Parishes as Missional Communities**

Our fundamental missionary strategy has been to support and develop our parishes as *missional and praying communities*. All aspects of the work which is supported by the DBF have this central purpose in mind. Parishes are essentially divisions of a Diocese, and this is the central plank of our diocesan strategy.

However, while continuing to encourage expectations of growth through 'inherited' models of church, we recognise that we need to be attentive to the broader agenda which is set by the Fresh Expressions movement, and this is a matter of ongoing attention in the Diocese. A number of dimensions might be recognised, which might be delivered with single parish/benefice units, or on a broader collaborative canvas.

## **Fresh Expressions within Parishes**

We have enthusiastically encouraged a mixed economy of Christian expression within parish life, ranging from a re-engagement with the tradition of mid-week BCP Eucharists to various forms of 'cafe', 'messy', and youth church.

A central question concerns the degree of support from DBF staff which is needed to support such initiatives and ventures. And also, should parishes and other bodies be able to bid for financial support from a central diocesan fund to enable local initiatives to go forward, as used to happen when the Church Commissioners first made special mission funding grants to all Dioceses?

## **Church Planting**

Our approach to date has been quite cautious, conscious of the mixed history of church plants. Neither do we have the large urban centres which have been the most fertile territory for recent, and well-publicised, 'church plants'. However, in recent years, we have established three new 'church plants'.

Christ Church, Chester was on the point of potential closure in 2002 when the then Vicar of St Michael, Chester, became Priest-in-Charge and his curate moved into the Vicarage. Several families from St Michael's also moved to Christ Church. A vision for a new student-based ministry alongside the traditional 'Central Anglican' ethos of the parish was gradually realised, and today Christ Church is a strong and self-sufficient parish, with a full-time Vicar.

In 2010 the strong parish of All Saints, Marple, established a church plant, God Loves Offerton (GLO) in its neighbouring parish, under a BMO. GLO has established itself, but not yet on a fully self-sufficient basis. Discussions continue about its sustainable pastoral arrangements beyond the summer of 2019.

More recently, the central Chester parish of St Peter's has been re-configured with a full-time Priest-in-Charge, to offer various dimensions of city centre ministry, including an innovative Night Church at weekends. The parish is on a trajectory to self-sufficiency over five years.

There are current discussions concerning a potential conservative evangelical plant in central Crewe, supported by a number of parishes from that tradition.

We will continue to explore other proposals for church plants as and when the opportunities arise, but always looking carefully at how such plants would interact with the established parochial system, and at their trajectory towards longer-term sustainability.

### **Ministry among Younger People**

A particular issue concerns our work among younger people, who are so poorly represented in our congregations.

We have an encouraging number of part-time and full-time paid youth and children's ministers, attached to our parishes and funded by them (currently 47, in a range of roles). How can these numbers best be increased? What support from DBF staff is needed for such ministers? There is a long history of DBF investment (with variable success), and currently we have a single full-time diocesan Childrens and Young People Officer. There are particular challenges in our urban centres (Birkenhead/Wallasey/Ellesmere Port/ Runcorn/Stockport/Crewe) where parish life is currently weak, and elsewhere, such as in rural parishes which have particular issues of transport, isolation, and small numbers of any one demographic, especially children. What initiatives are needed in these parts of the Diocese?

How is this area of ministry best to be related to our church schools, their staff and governors, the DBE and school Chaplains, and the University of Chester?

There is decreasing engagement and effectiveness in our churches generally as children and young people get older. There is a question to be addressed about where to target resources therefore, whether among age groups where there is already some traction e.g. pre-school and early primary, or where we have least contact, i.e. 14+.

### **Mission in Urban Centres**

We have identified particular needs in our main urban centres (Birkenhead, Wallasey, Runcorn, Stockport, Crewe and elsewhere). Here the inherited parish system is least obviously fit for purpose. How can we seek to structure the provision of mission and ministry in these areas? What pastoral structures would work best?

### **Special Initiatives**

Undergirding and supporting the above, the Diocese has been selected as a 'pilot diocese' for the *Setting God's People Free* initiative. We hope to use this to promote a culture of whole life discipleship in the Diocese.

Alongside this, we will continue vigorously to seek to generate more vocations to the ordained ministry, building upon our success of recent years, which has led us already to achieve the 50% increase to which the Archbishops' Council aspires. Our clergy then need constantly to be resourced and trained to be key leaders in the missionary communities which our parishes represent.

The *Believe in Birkenhead* deanery mission in September 2017, led by the Archbishop of York, was another initiative which awaits mature evaluation and, as appropriate, replication elsewhere in the Diocese.

Our Diocesan Missioner has supported our participation in trans-diocesan events and initiatives such as the Big Church Day Out, and the Zumbathon in Chester Cathedral. She has also co-ordinated the diocesan involvement in Thy Kingdom Come. We will continue to try to identify similar opportunities.

### **Diocesan Organisation**

The traditional parish system has long been the bedrock of the Diocese, with the individual parish or benefice being the main unit for planning purposes. No benefice consists of more than four parishes. Team ministries have not featured significantly in the life of the Diocese.

Deaneries are important as intermediate support vehicles, especially for clergy, rather than as planning units. Deanery boundaries are no impediment to pastoral re-organisation.

The rhythm of having suffragan Bishops based at Birkenhead and Stockport has worked well, with the two Archdeaconries (of Chester and Macclesfield) creating two informal episcopal areas in the Diocese. The overall unity of the Diocese has been promoted by allocating to each suffragan Bishop and Archdeacon a major responsibility across the Diocese as a whole.

Dioceses of similar size to Chester would typically have 5 or even 6 suffragan Bishops and Archdeacons. The Chester model is cost-effective, but leaves little spare capacity in the senior team, with particular pressure on the workloads of the two Archdeacons.

### **Review of Deaneries**

The present structure of 18 deaneries was last revised 50+ years ago, with deaneries being substantially re-aligned with socio-economic areas. I have argued for many years that a review is needed, but there has been limited enthusiasm for such an exercise. However, I now believe this is now becoming unavoidable, and urgent.

The basis for such a review needs first to be established. What is the purpose of deaneries? Broadly speaking, in the Church of England all deaneries are seen as support units, intermediary bodies between the Bishops and the diocesan administration, and individual parishes/clergy. In some dioceses, deaneries are also used as planning units, for purposes of finance, clergy allocation etc. In this diocese, heretofore, these further purposes have been related primarily to parishes and benefices, and not to deaneries.

If we want to consider using deaneries more for planning purposes, a major discussion would be required, in relation to team ministries, mission clusters etc.. This could involve a significant modification of our present approach, which places parishes and benefices at the centre of our planning process. Enthusiasm for such an exercise will vary, and mine is towards the lower end of the scale. However, even if I favoured such a review, I think it should await the arrival of a new Bishop.

If we are content with the present role of deaneries primarily as support structures for parishes and clergy, I think a review could proceed now, with a view to producing proposals for a reduction to around 10 deaneries. (I recognise that some believe that the best way to revise the intermediate support structures for clergy would be to collapse the present deaneries into a larger number of 'mission clusters'.) I realise that there will be limited enthusiasm in some quarters for such a review, but the alternative is to allow the present arrangements to decline into growing dysfunctionality.

The judgment might be made, of course, that on either scenario, this should all await the arrival of my successor. I have some sympathy for this view (!), but I raise the matter because I consider it to be urgent and important.

### **Financial Overview**

Although our budgets have often been tightly drawn, the Diocese has been mercifully free of the sense of financial crisis which has arisen in some Dioceses. In recent decades its financial affairs have been well managed under successive Diocesan Secretaries and Directors of Finance. However, it has never had large reserves, or glebe investments.

The predominant role of the DBF is to finance the provision of parish ministry, as its contribution to the overall mission of the Church. Twenty years ago the Church Commissioners met around half the costs of the parish clergy in the Diocese. As the Commissioners withdrew from funding clergy pensions, and concentrated their stipend support on poorer Dioceses, we were faced with the need to plan for a future with little or no central stipend support from the Commissioners.

A threefold strategy was adopted to meet this challenge.

*Firstly*, increased resources were devoted to promoting realistic Christian giving across the Diocese.

*Secondly*, a policy was adopted of keeping expenditure on central diocesan posts to a realistic and reasonable minimum, although permitting some creative and innovative appointments, as funding, internal and external, has permitted. This remains our policy although necessary additional core staff have been recruited in areas such as safeguarding, human resources, and church buildings. There is also the pressing question of whether the current missiological challenges which we face now require additional central DBF staff and, if so, how such posts might be funded.

*Thirdly*, a radically new parish share system was devised, to replace the previous income-based system. The new system allocates the money needed to balance the diocesan budget across the established clergy posts in the Diocese, to arrive at a standard parish share for a parish/benefice with one full-time priest. This is then modified according to the 'clergy number', i.e. whether the parish/benefice has only a fraction (or a multiple) of a full-time priest, and according to the socio-economic character of the parish, which we obtain from census data. (The parishes in the poorest areas are asked for 25% of the standard share, and those in the richest areas are asked for 145%. A broad central band, for about half of our parishes, is set at 105%, so that most parishes contribute some support to parishes in poorer socio-economic areas. These percentages have been adjusted, over time, and may yet be further adjusted. A judgement concerning (hopefully) gracious fairness and sustainability has to be made). The effect of the system, as presently configured, is to transfer in excess of £1 million p.a. from our richer to our poorer parishes.

The effect of introducing this new system has been to shine a spotlight on those parishes in relatively affluent areas which had previously had a ministry which was 'subsidised'. They could respond either by maintaining their clergy number and raising the money to meet their increased parish share, or by seeking to reduce their clergy number (through pastoral re-organisation or a part-time ministry).

Other parishes, with larger incomes, found their parish share request reduced, and were able to invest the financial savings in local projects and priorities. In a number of cases, this has assisted with the establishment of paid children's and youth ministers.

It has taken 15 years or more fully to introduce this new system, with a collection rate which has now reached the initial target of 95%. (The old income-based system naturally produced a collection rate of 98-99%, but less overall revenue). In order to phase in the changes, to help parishes adapt to them, for several years we accepted substantial deficits on our annual DBF account, thus transferring over £2 million of DBF reserves back to our parishes.

The budgeted 5% shortfall is designed to permit a certain number of appointments in 'turn-around' situations where it is judged that there is the clear potential for a significant improvement in parish life, but where the full parish share cannot yet be paid. As we have now reached, and hopefully exceed, the 95% collection rate, there will be a greater scope for making such appointments, provided they do not push the collection rate back below our working target of 95%.

The new parish share system is regarded as more mission-orientated than the previous system, and is regarded by our parishes as empowering them. Providing that they can meet their parish share target, they are largely guaranteed the corresponding level of stipendiary ministerial resource. Also, any additional revenues which they raise are 100% available for local initiatives.

The potential weakness of our system is that it locks the diocesan finances into the parochial structure. For us to cut stipendiary clergy numbers effectively releases little, if any, funds to the DBF, as it automatically also reduces our parish share receipts, although if it results in the sale of surplus vicarages the capital receipts can be used for wider diocesan purposes. (Cutting parish clergy will tend to have a positive budgetary impact if they are from lower-banded parishes, and vice versa from higher banded parishes). Our parish share system may also, on occasion, limit the expectation and encouragement of activities and posts which cross parish boundaries.

In order to acquire funds for diocesan developmental purposes (however we may wish to define 'development'), we would need either to increase parish share across the Diocese (with no concomitant reduction in the collection rate), or to utilise surpluses on our Pastoral Account, or attract external funding (eg from the national Strategic Mission Fund).

Notwithstanding this potential weakness, the new system has allowed us successfully to meet 100% of the cost of our parochial clergy, which in real terms, over 20 years, has effectively doubled the value of our parish share receipts. Its radical and egalitarian subsidiarity arguably has also promoted a strong sense of common purpose across a rather diverse Diocese.

## **Buildings and Human Resources**

Much more could be said, on a number of subjects, and I am particularly conscious of our need continually to address the questions posed by our buildings, and our human resources, clergy and lay. I have been encouraged by the recent re-ordering and re-furbishment of many of our buildings, and the additional facilities (in some cases, very substantial additional facilities) which have been provided.

## **Funding**

A particular issue arises for this Diocese because, of all the dioceses in the Church of England, we are probably the most dependent on parochial parish share contributions. This arises due to the absence of any general stipend support from the Church Commissioners, and our lack of historic resources or investments.

I am conscious that for many parishes the parish share is its greatest financial demand, and that any increase is difficult to meet. In recent years, we have managed to keep the general rate of increase to 2.5% p.a. There is very little scope for a reduction in our non-parochial posts, as they have already been reduced to a bare minimum. The diocesan stipend, reflecting the regional way that stipends have been set regionally, is 6<sup>th</sup> lowest in the list of diocesan stipends, so there is no potential for any further reduction (indeed, I would hope that we might aim to move our stipend up the list a bit).

There will be a continuing pressure on our diocesan budget from increased numbers of curates, and from the relentless increase in the legal obligations we face, in safeguarding and other areas.

We need to be vigilant and properly cautious, but I think there is a strong case for seeking to re-establish a diocesan development fund, to enable us to undertake some new initiatives alongside (and in support of) our parish system. I have in mind to suggest an initial allocation of £250K p.a. for five years, from our Pastoral Account, which is now in modest surplus. If necessary (I hope not), we may need to undergird this from the parish share account: either an additional 1% increase, or attaining a collection rate of 96%, would generate £100k+ of additional funds each year.

The resulting development fund of £1.25m over 5 years would be available for bids, either from parishes (or a deanery, or groups of parishes), or diocesan departments (e.g. Mission or CSR), or from other mission initiatives. While not restricting the funds to initiatives in relation to young people, clearly this is a priority in the life of the Diocese. After 5 years, the effectiveness of these initiatives would need careful evaluation. Bishops Council would need to establish a group which would recommend which bids/projects should be supported.

It would, of course, be possible to argue that a better use of any available funds would be to reduce the prospective parish share increases of 2.5% p.a. which are currently in our forward budget planning, thus leaving additional funds with our parishes, for local deployment. Equally, it is arguable that £250,000 p.a. is too small a figure, and we should pitch this rather higher, even if it results in the parish share requests being a little higher than they would otherwise be.

We also need to consider whether we should seek to apply for a grant from the Strategic Development Fund (SDF) of the Archbishops' Council and Church Commissioners. If so, I suggest three basic criteria should be applied:

1. Our strategy, and priorities, should be those which we believe to be the most important, irrespective of whether any contribution might be forthcoming from the central church authorities.
2. We must establish at the outset what matching contribution will be required from the DBF, and how it would be sourced. (Observations from elsewhere suggest that the DBF contribution would be expected to be at least 50%, and the new Development Fund might provide this, although the SDF process seems to require quite large projects.)
3. The question of the financial sustainability of any initiatives, beyond their initial phase, must be built into the plans from the outset. The SDF potentially assists with initial funding, and not long-term support.

I commend this paper for study across the Diocese, and look forward to receiving responses by 31 October this year.

+Peter

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