

CASTING THE NET WIDE

The Process for Discerning a Vision for the Diocese of Chester

Report by Harriet Roberts,
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Preface by the Bishop of Chester

Thank you! Thank you! Thank you!

I am deeply grateful for this vision process and to all who facilitated it, participated in it, and prayed for it.

We set out to listen to each other, to our communities, and to the Lord. Harriet Roberts has done a remarkable job in enabling this listening process and I know I speak for many of us when I say how grateful we are to her for this work. It has been amazing to hear of the Vision Cafés that sprung up all over the Diocese of Chester, and to see the breadth and wisdom of the responses people offered.

I am grateful for the clarity that emerged as we considered the feedback and for the way that Synod and others have worked with us to agree this. Standing together in faith to serve the 1.5 million has emerged as a deeply Christlike and clear focus.

I look forward to the next stage of this work together, as we develop vision into strategy into action, together in Christ, sharing hope.

So, thank you. Please keep praying as we look forward together. In many ways the hard work starts now (but Christ always equips those he calls). As one of my very favourite verses puts it, *the One who calls you is faithful* (1 Thess 5.24). This is His work, in His diocese, and we are His people.

May the Lord bless, protect, and guide as we journey forward together.

+Mark

The Right Reverend Bishop Mark Tanner
Bishop of Chester



(Photograph: Bishop Mark greeting children at the Nantwich Show after the 2023 Bishops' Tractor Challenge).

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1 Introduction

A momentous milestone was reached on Saturday, 17 June 2023, when Diocesan Synod, representing members from across the Diocese, unanimously voted in favour of Bishop Mark's summary of what we have heard for the Church in the Diocese of Chester.

The agreement reached by the synod was the result of an extensive consultation and discernment process that spanned several months and is the first vision process of its kind for a generation in the Diocese of Chester.

Bishop Mark said: "It is such a privilege to be part of a diocese like Chester with a clear focus on serving all of the 1.65 million people who live and work in this area. We have best news to share together in signs of Christ's hope in all of our communities."

The vision narrative is entitled: ***Together in Christ, sharing hope*** and has four core themes which will shape a mission strategy:

These are:

Growing braver, fuller faith
Blessing the 1.5 million, one life at a time
Transformative loving service (in practice)
Engaged locally, working together in loving generosity

To achieve our vision, we have also agreed the following priorities which will help us plan what we invest in and how we grow together:

We believe in the Gospel.
We believe in the local and seek transformation.
We care about the environment, locally and globally.
We want to engage with young people and the 'disconnected'.
We want to do bigger, better, bolder things together simply.
The 1.5 million people in our diocese matter.
We want to build new communities of faith.

This report explains ***Casting the Net Wide***, the grassroots-led process of discernment which led to this vision. It explains some of the background to these conclusions and how the strongest themes and priorities have been discerned.

2. Background

Together in Christ, sharing hope came out of a 12-month process of grassroots engagement, research, and discernment. Across the Diocese, everyone was invited to help discern the answer to one key question:

'What do we believe that God is calling this diocese to do and be?'

2.1 Casting the Net Wide

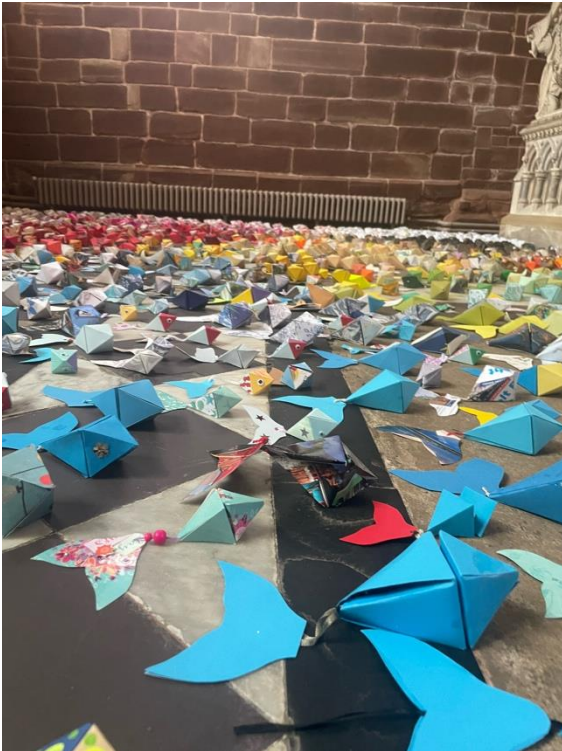
Casting the Net Wide was an engagement programme of creative activities and events designed to elicit responses to this question. Between September 2022 and March 2023, people of all ages and were asked this question and invited to share their hopes and dreams.

With worship and fellowship at the heart of our conversations, we prayed for God to share His vision to be our vision. Many people embraced the opportunity to contribute to the process and to have their voices heard. All the answers were fully transcribed and thematically analysed.

There were over 80 individual conversation events, over 100 online surveys completed, and thousands of individual responses were collected on a ten thousand mile journey across the north, south, east, and west of the Diocese.



2.2 Community art project



Parallel to this consultation was a twelve-month community art project led by Wirral-based artist, Wendy Williams.

Across the Diocese, people came together in creative discussion groups and used recycled paper materials to create a shoal of three-dimensional fish containing messages of hope and prayers.

2000 fish were created, collected, and displayed in Chester Cathedral along with the responses gathered in the Vision Café events.

2.3 Vision Café

A creative, pop-up engagement event called a Vision Café was developed, with interactive activities and questions. Respondents used differently shaped pieces of paper to give their ideas and answers to questions. These were displayed on fishing nets and collected in other deposit boxes.

Vision Café questions:

- What is the elephant in the room?
- Holy Cow – what do we need to sacrifice to grow?
- What do you treasure – what should we keep?
- What makes you sad – what do we need to leave behind?
- Where would Jesus go?
- What would Jesus do?
- What are the signs of the times that we need to respond to?
- How can our churches be a blessing not a burden on the environment?
- What is your dream for the Diocese of Chester?
- What is God calling us to be?

2.4 Poetry writing

A network of poetry writers from across the diocese used their April poetry meeting to take inspiration from the discernment process. A selection of these is included below:

Casting the Net Wide by Sue Dolley

People in pews and fish
in the nets are fewer by far
than we would expect.

So, let's cast our nets wide
to increase and renew.
There is so much to consider
and lots we must do.

It's hard to imagine, why,
and where we will trawl,
to encourage more people
and make good our haul.

Churches are lighthouses.
inland of the sea.
Safe havens, like harbours
in life's stormy seas.

If no people ... no churches.
And if no boats, then no fish.
So, where will we search?
And for what will we wish?

In every community, yet known to man,
we rely on our skippers
to guide our life's plan.

Just like the fisherfolk,
let's make good our nets, and our boats.
Let's shine our lights brightly,
like beacons of hope!

Let's all pull together,
and sing as we go!
No discords, no bycatch
and no cast-aside.
Tell all of God's people
they're welcome inside.



Casting the Net Wide by Derek Buckthorpe

Somewhere to sit, somewhere to say, what you think
about the world today,
To relax, to share, to know a place, where your point of
view is listened to with grace.
To tell what matters, your hops, your dreams, of what you
think is important for 'me'.
To have your say, to tell it your way, casting the net wide in
the Vision Café.

We know the blogs, the wheels, the cogs, of how to
engage, to make your point change.
The way we do things, respond and plan, in bringing God's
love to whomever we can,
The messaging, the chat, what it means to fast track, to
alter the ways, the Church does things today.
To simplify, maintain, build, and create, to express, sustain
Christ in different ways.
Come helps us with your say, to tell it God's way, casting
the net wide, in the Vision Café.



It's time to reveal, what in your heart you feel, about the love
we can share, in your community here.
Speak out, and say, as it really is today, give your point of
view, of how the Church should start anew.
Begin again, to make God's love plain, for people to see the
light in you and me.
To tell us what. You see, the ways to get clean, what needs
to change, to lead us in a better way.
Help us say it again, the reason why Jesus came, casting the
net wide in the Vision Café.

We're local and open to whatever views are spoken, no need
to be quiet, about your heart's desires.
Just down your street, where others you'll meet, ready to
welcome you in, reveal all we can give.
Just enter and express, what you want to address, help save
those who need the love that is deep,

Your voice can rebuild a life that's been stilled, take ills away, open the door for Jesus to stay.
So just come and see, what God's love can free, casting the net wide in the Vision Café.

It's acceptance you'll get, from the Lord's fishing net, your part of the catch, the mix, and the match,
What you bring to the table Jesus will enable, us to use and to pray, for what needs healing today.
His mighty presence will transform our sessions, as we eat by the fire, of his loving desire.
So come and bring whatever is in, or just listen and pray about what's in your heart today,
The promise is here, Jesus is waiting near, casting the net wide in the Vision Café.

2.5 LEGO® creative facilitation



As well as a tour of deaneries, chapter meetings and individual parishes, there were meetings with committees, networks and forums including Committee for Ministry, urban churches, New Wine churches, large churches, chaplains, children, and young people's workers.

We also met with members of the Society of Catholic Priests and the Chester Association. LEGO® was often used as a creative facilitation tool.



2.6 Children and young people's engagement

The Casting the Net process listened to the voices of children and young people and those who work with them. As well as 'in person' events and activities there was also an online focus group for anyone interested in the development of this area of ministry. We held an away day for children's and young people's workers in the Diocese to share their hopes and dreams. We engaged with Ethos groups in Church of England primary schools, spoke to children and young people in youth club settings, and held a drop in Vision Café in Hartford High school over a week.



3. Scriptural context: Luke 5:1-11



The process was inspired by the gospel story in St Luke 5:1-11 in which Jesus encourages the disciples to take their fishing boat further out into deeper water. Despite having caught nothing all night, and doubting that this will yield a catch, the disciples trust Jesus and let down their nets as he instructs. There are so many fish that their nets are nearly breaking, and their boat begins to sink. Jesus tells them not to be afraid and that from now on they will fish for people.

4. Vision prayer

Written by the Bishop's Chaplain, Rev Andy Stinson, this is the vision prayer that we encouraged people to use whenever engaging or thinking about the vision process in the Diocese of Chester.

**Eternal God,
whose Son, Jesus called his disciples to cast the net wide:
open our eyes to glimpse your vision,
open our ears to hear the needs of the world,
prepare our hands to do your work,
show us the gifts we have and the treasure we must seek,
unite us as your people across the Diocese of Chester
to worship, to witness and to work
for the glory of Christ our Saviour.
Amen.**

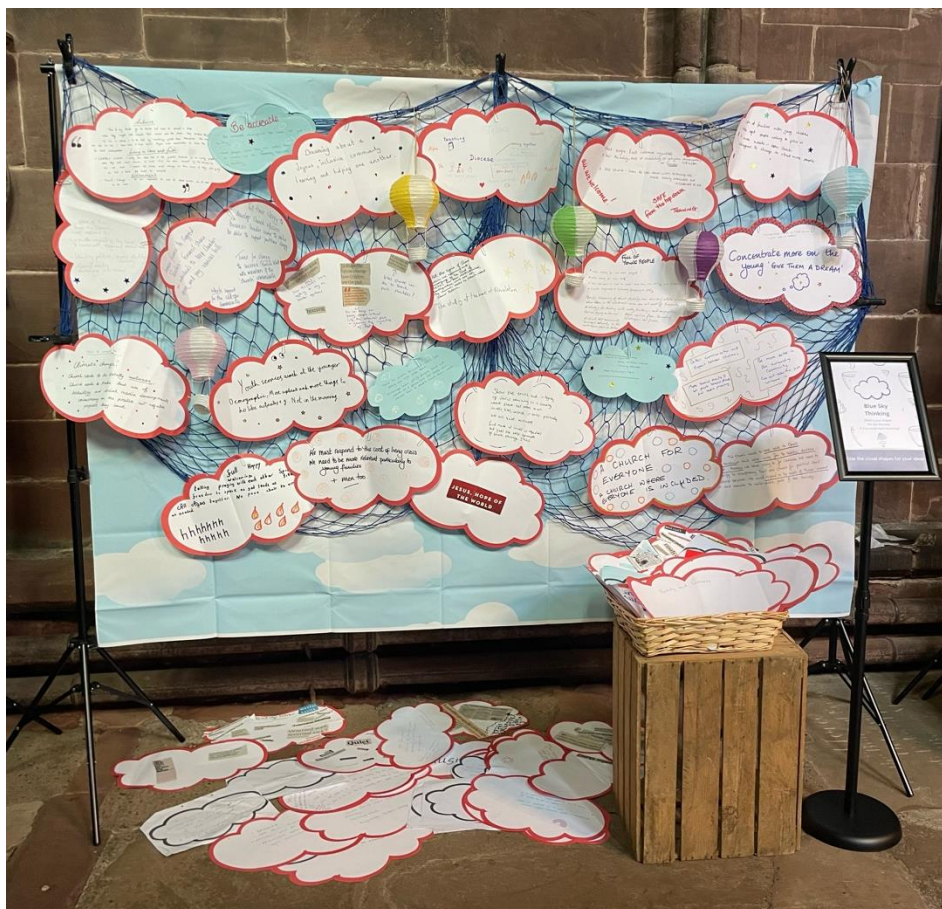
5. Frequently asked questions

There were some common questions which people asked so that they could understand and engage with the process.

5.1 'Why are we doing this, and why now?'

When the Diocese of Chester began the process to appoint the 41st Bishop of Chester, the statement of need confirmed that churches wanted a leader who would bring churches together under a clear vision and strategy.

Bishop Mark's tenure began during the pandemic and in the first two years this, and other matters such as safeguarding and forming a new team, meant that the process could not begin until 2022. Funding from the National Church and the appointment of the Director of Development (Vision & Strategy) to lead the visioning process took place in February 2022, and the process began in June.



5.2 'What do we mean by 'The Diocese'?

When we asked people to think about a diocesan vision, it was highlighted that most members of the Church of England worshipping locally, have little interaction with, or concept of, what it is that we mean by 'The Diocese'.

The Chester Diocesan Board of Finance is limited company with charitable status as but it was pointed out that 'The Diocese of Chester' is not an entity. Some people took 'The Diocese' to mean the administrative central team at Church House. Others felt we were referring to the episcopal leadership, represented by bishops and archdeacons.



When talking about a vision for the Diocese of Chester in this context we are talking about a future story for the whole network of urban and industrial, rural, and coastal parish churches. These span a vast geographical area that covers mainly Cheshire but also takes in parts of Greater Manchester, the Liverpool City Region, Derbyshire and to the edges of the border of

England and Wales. 'The Diocese' in this context includes, but is not simply, the administrative structures, policies, and procedures.

Some people said they could only answer the questions in the context of their own church setting. These were still pertinent. Collectively, these local reflections built up a combined picture of how churches want to be Christ in communities and revealed the most identified, parallel issues that are perceived to be holding back growth.

5.3 'How can we have one vision for all churches?'

The Diocese of Chester is perceived to be an area of affluence, but we are both prosperous and poor. This region includes historic estates, new build housing developments and socially deprived areas. Our communities include tourist centres and science and technology parks. We are agricultural and industrial with both modern and monastic histories. We are a church of churches, a community of communities, with a mosaic of worship styles and theologies.

From the outset, people wanted to talk about the challenges of being a large, diverse diocese and often used the word 'divided' in this context. Geographically, there are some areas that 'look' more like our neighbouring dioceses and crossing authority boundaries might feel more natural to look to the cathedrals of Manchester or Liverpool, rather than Chester as their mother church. What we share is bigger than our differences and our distances. We share the same commission to be disciples and make disciples. We share the same hope that we want to share with the 1.5 million we serve together in Christ.

The Great Commission: Matthew 28:19-20

"Therefore, go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely, I am with you always, to the very end of the age."

The challenge for our diocesan vision is making the most of the advantages of our size and prioritising the things that we can do well together to serve all who live and work in our diocese.



5.4 'We have our own church vision. How does this apply?'

Our diocesan vision will empower, support, and enable churches to be the best they can be in their own local context whilst harnessing the power of working collaboratively as a diocese. From the outset, there has been clear directive that transformation can only happen in local settings, and this was reflected in our conversations. Our vision needs to be as precise as the postcodes in our parishes, and as broadly embracing, expansive and unlimited as God's Kingdom, holding both the micro and the macro. It must be able to be shared and delivered on all our doorsteps, reflecting the diversity of our diocese, localness, and uniqueness of the communities we serve.

A diocesan vision celebrates all the individual pieces of the vast jigsaw of the Diocese of Chester. Our vision celebrates our shared DNA and connects and unifies all our churches in their different community settings, under the same call to action.

A diocesan vision recognises that there are a few things that we can do together which will have a greater impact. It is also as much about how we do things, as well as what we do.



6. Shaping the visioning process

Between June 2022 and November 2022, a programme of conversations took place with rural deans. Rural deans had been identified as the main drivers in communicating the vision process to the clergy within their chapters. The commitment and capacity of each individual rural dean strongly influenced the level of awareness and engagement in each place.

The rural deans arranged for meetings with deanery chapters. They also took responsibility for finding suitable venues, engaging with individual churches, and arranged for engagement at deanery synods.

6.1 Barriers to engagement

Typically, as with many consultation processes, at the beginning there was a degree of scepticism, cynicism, and suspicion about the validity of the vision engagement conversations. Some people were concerned that this was a tick box exercise, that their voices would not be heard, and that decisions had already been made.

There was also a fear of redundancy and church closures in struggling parishes. Some clergy of larger and successful churches did not engage with the process because they felt that they had clearly defined local mission action plans. It was felt that the questions might confuse church members who had taken part in local vision exercises.

For some there was an immediate wariness or negativity to something or somebody coming from 'the diocese' which was seen as a faceless organisation. There was an 'us and them' mentality of the diocese being something that imposes a parish share and is perceived as being generally slow or unhelpful in processes such as building changes. The 'diocese' is seen by many to be remote and there is no real sense of what it exists for and what people do.

For many, having been through similar exercises before, there was a consultation weariness. Many have taken part before and seen little change as a result.

Frequently heard comments were:

'Small is beautiful'
'Power to the parish'
'Power from the ground not the top'
'Not another initiative from the Diocese ...'
'We've got our own vision and mission action plan - no point.'
'The Diocese doesn't mean anything to the average churchgoer.'
'Nothing will change.'
'We have been here before ...'
'Just close down churches now if this is where it's going.'
'We do not want strap lines.'
'God is love that's it - what else is there to say?'
'There was a strategy in the past - it was to let parishes get on with it.'



A series of webinars with Bishop Mark helped to demystify the process and to answer questions and concerns. Bishop Mark explained that there was no secret plan to close churches but that because of the new vision and strategy the hope is for more worshipping communities not fewer.

Because of this repeated expression of being overwhelmed, tired, demoralised, and frustrated it was decided to create a creative, relational engagement tool that encouraged people to meet in community venues with hospitality to facilitate talking and listening in a relaxed context. This was called a Vision Café.

Other forms of consultation took place including creative facilitated forums, face to face conversations, online and telephone one-to-ones, focus group discussions between similar types and sizes of churches, online questionnaires, special network meetings, and forums.

By the end of the process, the feedback about the process itself was positive with support from some of those who had been most sceptical but were grateful to have had their voices heard.

'All I can say is thank you so much for what you have done...'

'Talking to you has really made me feel listened to and given me a bit of hope for the future. God is very much active in the Diocese, with the appointments which have been made of our bishops, and with you and I am hopeful that there will be some positive and constructive change.'

Being able to talk and to be listened to has generated hope and anticipation in the new Bishops, the newly appointed staff in the leadership team, and the forthcoming vision. Many who have become tired or disillusioned expressed their trust in the quality of the engagement and their hopes for continued listening and something fresh and purposeful coming from the vision process.

The process gathered momentum as churches began to organise Vision Cafés for themselves, inspired by the opportunity to share in the discernment process and even to use the tools for their own envisioning and mission planning.



6.2 Hopes and dreams



Change and the fear of change is hard for many. For others, change in the Church of England feels exciting, urgent, and necessary but hard to imagine because of the existing default strategy to use our resources to maintain historic ministry patterns.

There is an appetite to be released to try new things. A sense of longing for permission to be able to be creative and for resources to be able to reach new people in real and relevant ways.

Many vocalised their hopes for the vision which can be summarised as follows:

- **A vision is ambitious, bold, and brave and capture something of the scale, might, power and magnitude of God.**
- **A vision that could be measurable with built in measures of success, transparency, and openness so that everyone is accountable to each other.**
- **A vision that was encouraged new thinking, creativity and encouraged an entrepreneurial spirit.**
- **A vision that is rooted in scripture.**
- **An outward looking vision for places that might bring prosperity.**
- **A vision for those without a voice which might change policies in situations where we need to rise and pour out God's love.**
- **A vision that is not a catchy strapline but a realistic, deliverable picture of how we see the change becoming reality in the future.**

7. Online consultation

Around 200 people took part in the online survey, submitting their answers via a simple questionnaire or printing the questions out, completing by hand and returning by post.

Online Survey Questions:

Fast track question:

What is your dream for the Diocese of Chester?

Longer survey questions: (Based on the Five Marks of Mission: Tell, Teach, Transform, Tend, Treasure)

- How do we communicate a clear message that God is real and relevant?
- How do we reach the 1.5 million who are not connected with a church?
- What does it mean to be more 'Jesus Shaped' and 'Christ Centred'?
- What is most effective at bringing people to faith and teaching them about the Gospel?
- What activities encourage and help us most to deepen our faith in God?
- How could we be more effective in helping people to link their faith journey with their everyday lives?
- How can worshipping churches relate to the wider communities and minister to bring hope and healing?
- Where, how and in what situations can we minister to the spiritual needs of those outside of our buildings?
- In these challenging times, what are the big themes that resonate across the Diocese? What is causing hurt in all our communities? Where do people need help?
- How can our faith have an impact outside of church buildings to transform the lives of people and places across the Diocese?
- How do we give more attention to the ethical, moral, and societal issues facing individuals, families, and communities?
- How do we listen and respond to those who are isolated and on the margins across the Diocese?
- As a Diocese how do we respond to the Church of England 2030 Net Zero challenge?
- What opportunities are there for our churches to be a blessing not a burden on the environment?



8. Where are we now?

A 'temperature check' exercise was given to provide a non-scientific gauge on how the diocese, our churches and organisationally we perceive ourselves. 70 descriptors were provided with a space to add additional words that were not on the list. This is not a scientific measure but is an interesting marker of where we are now and what that means for us moving forward.

The descriptors were ranked according to (#yes - #no)

% agreeing = #yes / (#yes + #no)

Highest ranked descriptors

Rank	Descriptor	% agreeing
1	Caring	92%
2	Prayerful	91%
3	Spiritual	90%
4	Religious	89%
5	Loving	88%
6	Traditional	87%
7	Helpful	84%
8	Welcoming	83%
9	Respectful	85%
10	Safe	84%

Observations:

The top ten is dominated by positive descriptors. It is unclear what individuals understand by 'religious' and 'traditional'.

Lowest ranked descriptors

Rank	Descriptor	% agreeing
61	Growing	38%
62	Poor	36%
63	Playful	35%
64	Pioneering	33%
65	Bold	34%
66	Flourishing	33%
67	Adventurous	32%
68	Modern	31%
69	Repressive	29%
70	Agile	14%

Observations:

Although near the bottom of the ranking, still nearly 30% of respondents rated the church as **repressive**.

Many of the poorly ranked responses are related: **playful, bold, adventurous, agile, pioneering...** *[Many of these descriptors are often associated with entrepreneurial attitudes?]*

The highest rating descriptors fit with the responses to a Vision Café exercise about what people treasured about 'being church' and what they would want to keep and take forward into the future. In the 'Blessings and Burdens' exercise, participants were asked to use gold edged card and a treasure chest to think about what is important to retain. Friendship, fellowship, and a sense of being family were strong themes.

These are qualities which will help the church to find strength and strengthen each other during continued times of anxiety, change and uncertainty.

The areas where the people perceive the Church as being weakest show that we lack the qualities linked to being good at change and adapting. In moving forward with our strategy, this indicates that this diocese will need support to be pioneering, bold and entrepreneurial.

This also tallies with the responses to the question about blessings and burdens. Participants were asked to write down the things that make them sad about 'being church.' These are the things that they would like to leave behind which were deposited in a waste bin. The things we would like to get away from link with culture change, rigid structures, a sense of being stuck inside buildings, remoteness, poor communication, and inflexibility.



9. Where have we come from?

Using engagement questions such as 'naming the elephant in the room, asking what we would like to leave behind and thinking about the 'sacred cows' we need to sacrifice, prompted people to think about where we have come from and the challenges that we face in moving forward.

Being able to identify and voice these issues and more importantly, to be heard was an important part of being able to move from the 'what is' to the 'what if' and to think creatively about solutions for transformation.

There were several identified, shared experiences that have created trauma in all worshipping communities, in other denominations, and within the Diocese of Chester corporately, in our recent past.

These issues profoundly influenced the conversations and the consultation in our envisioning process to a greater or lesser degree, depending on the individual experiences.

Participants were asked to identify these and to think about the contextual backdrop and the season within which we find ourselves. This was also part of an exercise called 'Wake Up Church' which identified 'the signs of the times' that we must respond to.

9.1 Global pandemic

Individually, organisationally and as communities, we are recovering from the short-term losses and grappling with the long-term impact of Covid 19 and the lockdown which closed Churches, creating crisis, distance, and division. There are long-term mental, physical, and psychological changes which have impacted church attendance, volunteering within church as well as societal and cultural changes.

A few clergy reported that the pandemic had been a positive time to try new things. One vicar said that he had never felt more 'alive' and released to minister. Some clergy, released from their buildings went into overdrive and were able to pivot using technology or to find other creative ways to continue ministry. Some said that there were advantages and a sense of being more connected and Spirit led, when the church was closed in lockdown and people were physically disconnected.

9.2 Safeguarding: Past Cases Review 2

There is a sense of mourning and disbelief that has come from the safeguarding mistakes from The Past Cases Review 2 (PCR2). This ran in all Church of England dioceses between 2019 – 2022 with the publication of its findings in October 2022.

More than that, many clergy and congregations are feeling overwhelmed and dispirited with the work that has come from that process and the necessary ongoing changes that must be made.

People are embarrassed and ashamed of the reputation that this gives the Church and concerned that it is another barrier to people coming to faith.

9.3 Living in Love and Faith

Since 2017, the Church of England has been journeying together exploring some of these questions by means of a suite of Living in Love and Faith resources that were published in November 2020. The bishops of the Church of England invited church communities from across the country to use the resources to learn together, to listen to one another and to God. Everyone who took part was encouraged to share their insights, stories, and reflections to contribute to the bishops' discernment about matters of identity, sexuality, relationships, and marriage.

This is a live issue in the National Church and a sensitive subject which creates division amongst conservative and liberal churches and between individual clergy and laity.

During the envisioning process, people talked about Living in Love and Faith. There were passionate views on both sides of the debate in our conversations. In some of the discussions, individuals became quite angry and distressed. Inclusivity and the Church of England's divided opinion about blessing same sex marriages was felt to be a blocker to growth, particularly with young people.

9.4 Economic crisis

The cost-of-living crisis including rising prices in food and energy means churches in all our parishes are now fire-fighting the fall out of another global crisis, supporting people on their doorsteps providing places of welcome, warm hubs and foodbanks, whilst struggling to make ends meet and heat their own spaces.

9.5 Diocesan leadership and organisational culture

Other internal, organisational factors which were identified as contributing to a sense of instability and anxiety which influenced the responses. This includes the change in Bishops and also many new members of the leadership team over the last few years.

Under previous leadership, the 'upside down' management style or absence of an overarching strategy, was perceived as entrusting each parish with the autonomy to deliver according to local context with little interference. Some clergy who flourished well under this strategy were concerned that a diocesan vision might threaten their independence. However, some clergy, officers and lay workers cited this strategy as a cause of them feeling isolated, ignored, frustrated and unsupported. This was linked with, what was reported as, an unfair distribution of resources and a remoteness in terms of the relationship with Church House and the team who work there.

Clergy reported feeling overwhelmed with the amount of work that is not related to mission. In some cases, this was coupled with a strong sense of being abandoned, left out in the field, isolated and overwhelmed, with less volunteers due to ageing congregations and reduced numbers. There was an identified need for mental health support, coaching, better supervision, and pastoral care for clergy.

There is a passion for the vision to retain localism and power to the parishes. However, there is a call for a more collaborative management style with strong leadership, clear objectives, and accountability.

The vision process is an opportunity to kick start moves towards a culture change where we have begun to listen, learn and adapt to societal shifts in working and lifestyle habits. People also see it as a way of reviewing what we do and why we do it in terms of our structures and meetings. This included the function of deaneries and in particular clergy chapter meetings, where the purpose is often unclear.

9.6 Declining trends and sustainability



On a national level, the Church of England has been declining for the last 30 years over which time Sunday church attendance has reduced by 45%. In the last ten years, these figures have dropped by 25 per cent, accelerated by the pandemic.

Although church attendance has dropped by 45 per cent since 1989, however we still have 80% of our buildings. We have also lost 35% of our clergy. There are now fewer people having to do more things. A diminishing number of attendees have been required to fund historic ministry structures. There is a sense of grieving and loss and a desire to hold onto what we cherish and treasure about our churches. However, in the process we discern that we need to be doing fewer things and some things differently to grow.

9.7 Summary

Although we are divided in many ways we are also intrinsically connected, impacted by dramatic environmental, political, cultural, and economic changes. We are all living with a sense of chaos and decisiveness. This is exacerbated by social media which inherently impacts our collective psyche and society.

Many clergy and congregations reported a sense of long-term fatigue and adrenalin exhaustion. For these people, the prospect of more change feels overwhelming. The world of work has changed and society along with it. Clergy talked about being clear about the need to respond locally, seeing the opportunity for mission and outreach on their doorstep but not having the resources to minister beyond keeping the church going. There is a felt unworkable tension between being the parish priest and looking after the pastoral needs of the church family and being able to pioneer and plant new things. One member of the clergy talked about the temptation to leave full time ministry to be freed to do unpaid full-time ministry. Clergy talked about being burdened with the responsibilities of buildings, safeguarding, finance, training volunteers, difficult pastoral situations etc. Some people asked why these things could not be centralised or done by paid support staff with expertise. At the beginning of the process, the thought of a new diocesan vision and a new direction felt, for many, like a step too far, facing the unfamiliar world in a rapidly changing environment.

10. Where are we going? What's our vision?

The responses were gathered and categorised, according to the things people felt were most important, to help identify repeated patterns across all the conversations.

These are the 7 things we noticed most strongly:

- We believe in the Gospel.
- We believe in the local and seek transformation.
- We care about the environment, locally and globally.
- We want to engage with young people and the 'disconnected'.
- We want to do bigger, better, bolder things together simply.
- The 1.5 million people in our diocese matter.
- We want to build new communities of faith.

10.1 We believe in the Gospel

The quality and level of engagement in the process and the passion in which discussions took place is a measure of our belief in the Good News of Jesus Christ above anything else. But we agree that are things we can do better together to remove barriers and spread a message of hope, to tell people about the Gospel and that Jesus loves them in these turbulent times when there is so much uncertainty. People want to be equipped to step out and talk about Jesus in their own settings. There's a desire to remove whatever gets in the way of the messaged being received.

Because of that there is a willingness to think creatively, challenge systems, and change perceptions of what it means to 'be church', and to find ways to actively invite people to engage with the Gospel message. People talked about making Jesus real and relevant in a language that is accessible, communicated well and using mediums that meet people where they are in the digital sphere and elsewhere.

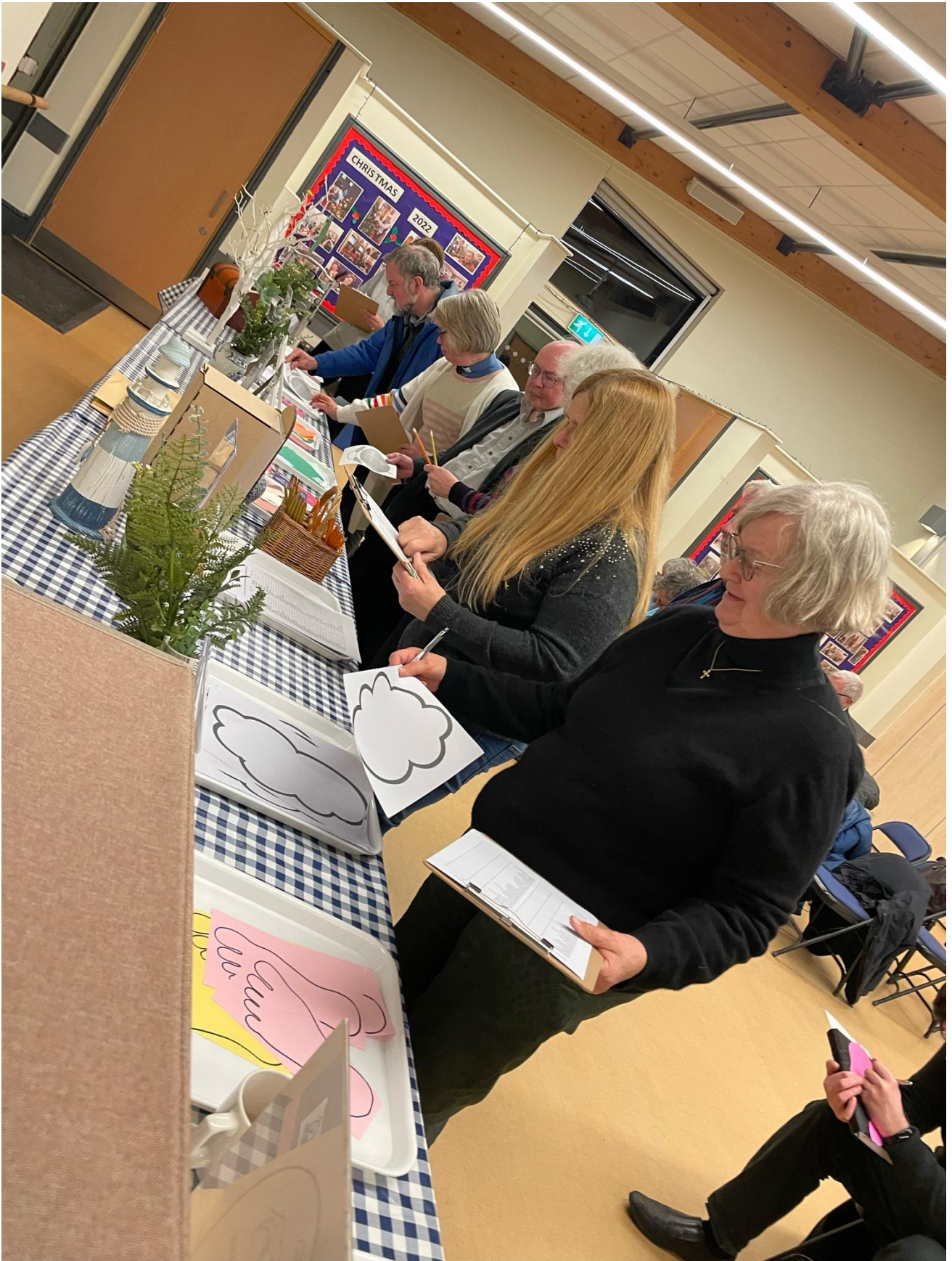
"You can't bring new people into church for worship – it's an irrelevant idea today. Worship is the result, not the beginning. Being taught and respecting the teaching is what we understand, but it must be in everyday language.

"Often the gospel is reflected as a palatable, alternative consumable, spiritual self-help strategy. This thinking seems to demonstrate a perceived need simply to outwit culture and present an acceptable God with a familiar message using trigger words of love, inclusive, welcome, and affirming. All these terms are not out of place with the New Testament and the gospel, but they arrive and are perceived in a way that directs from their biblical roots and instead champion another meaning, which is more in line with the dominant culture than biblical truth."

"Lay education is critical. I'm not a theologian or a bible scholar but people are vague when put on the spot, about what they believe in and basic facts about the Great Story."

"Share the truth and integrity of Jesus teaching in a country where there has been much unrest, lies, broken trust, U-turns, politically we all make mistakes - God made us, love us regardless and give the best example of truth through Jesus."

"We need to be more honest about Kingdom Coming - that was always the plan. It's about redemption - that's the message - not diluted"



10.2 We believe in the local and seek transformation

There is united passion for the power of the parish to be actively involved in and bring transformation to our local communities. There is also a priority to get out of church buildings and rethink the old model of trying to get people to come on Sunday mornings. We don't want to be a 'holy huddle'. We care about the local areas where we are called to serve and we want to bless our towns and villages, schools, and workplaces to transform places, as well as people.

A broad and diverse range of community spaces, community networks, community activities were put forward pointing us outwards and into the local places we serve. We agree that we want to be where people gather and where people are most in need.

"We need to be rebuilding local communities in our increasingly self-obsessed world".

"Mental health and suicide are huge issues we must respond to - people are at breaking point, dementia, counselling, affects all age groups and levels of society".

*"Walk the streets and fields, entering places where refugees are houses, prisoners, shops, clubs, homes of unhappiness, crematoriums.
through the arts and emotions ...expanding our spiritual access - via hobbies, crafts, participation".*

"We need to start with our neighbours in our own parish".

"Looking out and serving is central to creating an environment of encounter - God will do the business if we step out and step forward".

"We need to reach out to busy families, be inclusive, focus on things that impact people daily, stop navel gazing, focus on bible truth, offer practical support in the community, be willing to listen, stop being elitist, we are not better- we are different, we are the hands, feet, eyes and ears of Jesus, we are living Bibles".

"My dream for the Diocese is growth - to be the centre of community/communities".



10.3 We care about the environment, locally and globally

From the very young to the very old, there is a shared urgency for the Church to be 'a voice' for the world that we have been tasked to look after on a local, national, and global scale. A common theme was the opportunity for the Church to harness the power of local eco partnerships, and the climate anxiety of young people in the communities with serve, to do something about global warming. Our vision is for churches to take a stand for the issues on their doorstep which affect the environment that our children and young people will be living in tomorrow.

"Climate is the biggest issue the world and the church faces and we are simply not taking it seriously or investing enough or really demonstrating against Government inaction. It's time to talk about it, it's time to act".

"This is a missional opportunity for the Church of England to take a moral lead".

"We as a church could do something about reparational - we could adopt a parish within Melanesia perhaps - and the Diocese could be more proactive in this - twinning idea".

"You need within a community, a voice to bring people together - it doesn't come out from obvious place - the church has brought people together - this is a really obvious focus for people to get behind".

"The diocese needs to share best practice for going green. don't expect us to chase around trying to re-invent the wheel. Somebody has probably already done it and the diocese needs to send out the info. The planning, the funding, permissions needed. The worthwhile results and the negative results."

"By embracing modern technology and relaxing the rules about we can and can't do with our ancient buildings Also, asking the questions - do we need to keep our massive, energy hungry buildings open - can we scale back or use alternative worship spaces - make environmental concerns part of everything we do as a church - prayer, liturgy, practice, conversation, activism."

10.4 We want to engage with young people and the 'disconnected'

Despite the diversity of our diocese, our churches do not reflect this, not just in terms of race and skin colour but we're also lacking in diversity in other ways, particularly in age. The diocese has 340,000 children. Only 2,900 of these are church going. A third of churches in the diocese have no children in their congregations. These statistics have declined far more rapidly than the overall decline and the Chester Diocese is significantly ahead of the national trend.

In our discernment, we understand that to grow, we need to need to address our widespread failure to engage with younger children and the opportunity to work with schools.

Our vision is for churches filled with families, children, and young people knowing Jesus and having opportunities for personal encounter and spiritual growth. Our vision is for churches to work with schools to keep the doors open to Christian teaching and to connect with communities.

By 'disconnected', we mean those people and groups of people in our communities who we do not engage with now.

"In my church the congregation is gradually getting smaller. Most of them are quite elderly. Why aren't young people attracted to the church. Is there something putting them off? Does the church not seem relevant to their lives? If this elephant is not talked up and nothing is done, my church will wither and die. I don't want that to happen."

"Common fact: 95% of young people never go to church. However, 99% of young people go to school. 84% of people come to faith before the age of 20. 95% of young people come to faith before the age of 30. Solution: equip the church to reach young people in schools. Most people do not know about Jesus, Christmas, Easter etc. Their parents also do not know and have not got faith. I feel so passionately that the church needs to rise up and reach this lost generation. I would love to help equip the church to do this. If we don't this faith will die with the older generation. Romans 10 - how will they know - Psalm 78 we will tell the next generation"

"Young families are at work during the week and need weekends to be together - activities such as football, running, cricket etc are often on Sundays - shops are open every day - hold services at different times - go to clubs as Church and offer food and drink."

"The local Roman Catholic church has access to all our schools although there is just one out of 7 that is Roman Catholic. These youngsters are both the church of today and tomorrow - let's face change, the door is open, but it won't be for ever."

"The feedback from our Ethos group was - 'church' after school on Friday, 'church' outside, 'church service at their forest school'".

"We want to supply a pack for everyone moving onto a new build on a housing estate. Message = welcome to the place - that means working in partnership, needs permissions, council involvement, businesses etc. – leaflets."

"We need to work with organisations linked to older people's ministries in care homes and residential schemes."

"Our church will grow. Reach out to 40/60-year-olds who will bring their children and grandchildren. Try for social groups outside of church in the hope they will grow into Christianity. I love the closeness of our church family. They look after each other."

"More things available mid-week like an evening meal together than putting the pressure on people's home which is casual for different ages to meet - ie one night for 30-40s, one for 50+ one for families etc to get to know your peers."

"Where would Jesus be? In the British Legion, down at the football match, in the job centre, healing the sick, challenging the religious, spreading God's news."



10.5 We want to do bigger, better, bolder things together simply

In our churches, there is a local, community focus but we are Kingdom hearted. We see the bigger picture and want to make a big difference: to make a stand for God and share his love with everyone. There is a desire for a cultural change in the diocese to be more unified, more creative, and braver in our mission.

"The legacy of a church building in every area of the diocese- an amazing starting point if they are beacons in the community. These churches can be a visible point of contact. identifiable to those who live nearby. That they can be a financial burden nowadays may be another story ..."

"My dream is for the diocese to love heroically, to learn what it really means to be welcoming inclusive and diverse. I dream of a diocese that would have more fun 'rejoice' - would be more grateful, would be more generous, would be younger, would have more volunteers, would seek more partnership working, would be more prayerful, would be more willing to take risks, would learn..."

"My dream for the diocese is a church that looked outwards before anything else - towards God/Christ and lived the experience of Christ in the world. A church which cooperated, worked together, didn't hurt, lived with disagreement positively."

"As a divided Diocese there are beautiful things either side - there needs to be mutual appreciation with the infrastructure provided to equip us to build bridges within the church and also outside the church."

"I would like to see churches working together more, both interdenominationally and within the CofE, across wide geographical areas, more sharing of ideas and resources, more affluent areas getting a chance to see 'how the other half lives' and to learn from those who are financially poor but rich in other ways."

"We're colleagues, we're together - mutual support, collaboration, culture of sharing and best practice."

"Across deaneries we have a fantastic skill set - but we can't do everything really well - let's work across parish boundaries and utilities the best people to do the best things."

10.6 The 1.5 million* people in our diocese matter

Since his arrival, Bishop Mark has shared his personal conviction and compassion for the 1.5 million who do not know Jesus Christ. Over the past three years, through prayer, persistency, and consistent repetition that message has become key. There is a strong sense of the need to focus on our calling to introduce Christ to those who haven't met him yet, in whatever way that feels right for each church, guided by the Five Marks of Mission.

*The results of the 2021 Census released in November 2022 confirmed that less than 50% of the population of the UK identifies as Christian. This means that Christianity is now a minority religion. According to the latest research (July 2022), in a population of 1,650,000 it is estimated that church attendance is 1.6% per capita. Therefore, across the Diocese of Chester there are approximately 1.5 million who do not know Christ or are not actively engaged in a worshipping community.

"I think that loneliness is very hurtful for many people. Alcohol, drug abuse limits lives so much. The way life is presented by the TV news for example that everything is so awful - we need as a Church to show a better way - that life with God by your side is full of so much - that his love is there for all."

"Telling the lost, lonely, and vulnerable that they are precious to God and showing them- church in action."

"Who do we need to reach? Everyone that doesn't know Jesus ... not just the young. Also, the thousands that used to come to worship but don't anymore. How? Talking to people, asking them questions just like in a vision cafe, link into people's spiritual searching. Seeking and providing for the lost and the vulnerable".

"How to reach the lost? Leave the church buildings - have confidence in going out to meet others. Be genuinely interest in their lives, listen well. Offer no quick fixes for situations, just be with people - share a meal and get to know others who are different - be prepared to risk being rejected more than once - be prepared to be there for the long haul."

"One of the big problems. is that the general population have a perception that church is only for old people, religious people. they are not like ME and will not be welcoming to someone like me."



10.7 That we need to plant new communities of faith

We are being challenged as churches to 'think outside of the box' and to get outside of our boxes. Already there are green shoots of growth as worshipping communities begin to grow in unusual and unexpected places. As a diocese, we are being called to do new things that may not look like what we understand traditional church to be on Sunday mornings.

"We are developing a strand of outreach through our schools - volunteers reading in primary schools. In secondary schools we are developing a Christian Union to support those young people who go to any church in the town".

"It drives me mad when people say - 'well we set up a coffee morning and no one came' - Why don't you go to where the people are in Costa?"

"We need to work with organizations linked to older people's ministries in care. homes and residential schemes ..."

"I believe we need to stop thinking of church as walls and programmed spaces. First Jesus said, 'come' and then he said 'go' into all the world. We need to come to faith then equip the saints to go and make disciples. It is not about bums on seats but reaching the lost and then equipping them to reach more souls. We need a sense of the urgency of these times."

"God is challenging churches to get out into their communities and become relevant to the young people as well as old. He is challenging us to open our minds and think beyond tradition."

"... bring the church to the people not vice versa - include more types of people embrace our differences ..."

"God is challenging churches to get out into their communities and become relevant to the young people as well as old. He is challenging us to open our minds and think beyond tradition."

11. Together in Christ, sharing hope

Together in Christ, sharing hope is the title of our future facing story. It is the overarching theme that unites us. This is the vision statement which explains both an aspiration of who we are, what we are doing and what we aim to be as we look to fulfil our commission to be disciples and make disciples of Christ. The identified seven priorities can be grouped under the overarching theme using four sub-theme headings. These sub-themes are like chapters of the story, interlinked and overlapping.

- Growing braver, fuller faith
- Blessing 1.5 million lives, one life at a time
- Transformative loving service (in practice)
- Engaged locally, working together in loving generosity



12. Vision themes

12.1 Growing braver, fuller faith

Together in Christ sharing hope is about getting out of the boat and taking steps of faith that feel strange and scary. We trust God as we develop new ways and in unfamiliar places to make new disciples to live, love and grow in Christ.

12.2 Blessing 1.5 million lives, one life at a time

Together in Christ sharing hope is about pointing people to Christ in everything we say and do. We are prioritising introducing people to Jesus, sharing hope and inviting others to engage with the Gospel message.

12.3 Transformative loving service (in practice)

Together in Christ sharing hope is about sharing the love of Christ in diverse ways through the 'five marks of mission': -

To proclaim the Good News of the Kingdom.

To teach, baptise and nurture new believers.

To respond to human need by loving service.

To seek to transform unjust structures of society, to challenge violence of every kind and to pursue peace and reconciliation.

To strive to safeguard the integrity of creation and sustain and renew the life of the earth.

12.4 Engaged locally, working together in loving generosity.

Together in Christ, sharing hope means responding and relating in creative expressions of loving service, faith, prayer, and worship at local level and in partnership, according to the diverse places and local communities we serve.

13. Key questions

We also agreed four useful questions to help us discern how we go forward.

These will help us decide what we prioritise to do and what we stop doing. These questions also reflect our values, our openness to taking risks, and where our energies need to be focussed:

We must ask ourselves:

Is this a step of faith? (Are we being encouraged to get out of the boat/let out the nets)

Where is the creativity or joy? (Are we being encouraged to dream? Think outside the box? Explore new ideas?)

What might we imagine together? (not 'what is' but 'what if?')

The single most important question is:

Does this make a difference to the lives of the 1.5 million?

This is the ultimate question that we must ask ourselves in our decision making as we shape our core strategy centrally, as we discern what the diocesan vision means for our local church, and as we go about our daily lives as individual disciples on our Christian journey.

Appendix

Feedback service and prayers



A service of celebration for the vision process was held at Chester Cathedral on Saturday 20 May 2023. All the responses were displayed for visitors in the week beforehand, next to the community art installation.



The service at Chester Cathedral was an opportunity for Bishop Mark to share the key emerging themes for the first time. In response to the engagement feedback, four other venues were set up for people to be able to connect with and contribute to the event remotely from other parts of the diocese. This was also a symbol of our aspiration to work locally and together to achieve bigger, bolder dreams.



The Rt Rev Julie Conalty, Bishop of Birkenhead joined from Christ Church Birkenhead. The Rt Rev Sam Corley, Bishop of Stockport joined from Holy Trinity, Stalybridge. The Archdeacon of Macclesfield, Venerable Ian Bishop joined from St Michael and All Angels, Macclesfield and the Archdeacon of Chester, Venerable Dr Mike Gilbertson, joined from St Wilfrid's, Grappenhall.





The multi-venue simultaneous watch party broadcast was an ambitious and technically challenging pilot which enabled all the venues to both watch and participate at the same time.



The service was also made available on You Tube and can be viewed on the Diocesan website.



Prayers for the diocesan vision by Hartford High School (20 May 2023)

Heavenly Father, sometimes it's easy to be a Christian in our own families and churches. But there's a whole world out there who doesn't know you. A whole world that needs to hear the life-transforming message of Jesus Christ. Make us like Peter, willing to step out of our comfort zone and take a risk for you. Help us to see others as you do and love them as you do, knowing that if we take steps for you our faith will grow, so your church will grow here on earth, as it is in heaven. Amen

Father God, there are so many people that know me but don't know Jesus. Help them to know Jesus because they know me. Help me to believe you for a massive harvest of souls. Lord, I believe you for 1.5 million young lives saved before 2030. Give us the faith to believe it, the passion to pray for them in courage: to share your Good News, one life at a time. Amen

God of all love, you first loved us and called to love one another. Break our hearts for the things that break your heart: that we may see the broken, the hurting, the lost, the afflicted and the marginalised with your eyes. Lord, you died for them. Help us to put our faith into action in our schools, colleges, workplaces, churches and communities, following your perfect example of servanthood. That our communities might be transformed by loving service done in your name and for your glory. Amen

Thank you, Lord for the communities in which we live. Help us to love and bless our neighbours and to show them Jesus through word and deed. Help us to be generous and tender hearted and to practice hospitality. We pray that you would fill us with your Holy Spirit. Give us your words to say and help us to love our neighbours as we love ourselves. Amen

Lord, many people are suffering, silent, disempowered and alone. We pray for those in homes where all is not well. For the sick and those who are struggling. You always reached out to the marginalised. Lord, help us to do the same. We pray that they would know that they are loved, valued, and accepted, and that you have a place for them in your Kingdom. Please use us, Lord, to spread your love through this love-starved world. In Jesus name we ask it. Amen.