

Coventry Diocesan Synod – 9 March 2024 – Minutes

Minutes of a meeting of the Coventry Diocesan Synod, which took place on Saturday 9 March 2024 at 9.30am at St Nicolas Parish Church, Nuneaton.

The meeting of the Diocesan Synod of the Diocese of Coventry, opened under the Standing Orders 2009. The President, the Acting Bishop of Coventry, The Rt Revd Ruth Worsley, took the Chair.

1. Opening prayer and worship

Charles Higgins, chaplain to Diocesan Synod, led worship on a theme of service and shared the Diocesan Synod Election Prayer.

2. Notices and apologies for absence

It was recognised that it is the last meeting for Hannah Gregory as she is due to move to Australia. 11 apologies were submitted for the House of Clergy and 13 apologies for the House of Laity. The meeting was quorate.

3. Minutes (DS 24-02)

An amendment is required to page 2 section 7: it should read *post* Christian age.

The minutes of the Diocesan Synod meeting held on 18 November 2023 were **approved subject to the amendment**.

4. Presidential Address

Bishop Ruth addressed Diocesan Synod, demonstrating her pastoral staff which is inscribed with words from the Old Testament prophet Micah: *act justly, love mercy and walk humbly* and encouraged diocesan synod to bring these qualities into synod. The full address can be read on the diocesan website.

5. Annual Safeguarding Report (DS 24-03)

Sarah Price, Diocesan Safeguarding Adviser spoke to her annual report (DS 24-03), highlighting that cases continue to increase. 2023 saw a 59% increase in cases compared to 2022; cases vary from parish support to concerns to allegations. The most common case categories are mental health and domestic abuse. The move from a 5 to 3-year renewal for DBS checks has also put immense pressure on the Safeguarding team, this has been mitigated by support from the Mission and Discipleship Team and following the successes of this, DBS checks will move into the responsibility of the Mission and Discipleship Team. It is anticipated that this, along with the additional resource will increase the Safeguarding Team's capacity to deal with the increasing case load. Safeguarding benchmarks will provide standards and churches will be able to identify their strengths and development areas whilst working towards to the five standards. Joan Beck, DSSG Chair since 2020, passed away suddenly on 24th February. Options for an interim Chair are being explored. Natalie Thompson from CRSAC has been appointed to DSSG and a nomination from Coventry Probation is soon to be confirmed.

No questions or comments from diocesan synod. Bishop Ruth thanked Sarah Price and confirmed that condolences have been sent to the family of Joan Beck.

The Chair of the House of Laity, Phil Swards, took the chair

6. Vacancy in See

Phil Swards shared that the Statement of Needs was signed off on 15th January and is now available on the website. Six members have been elected to join the Crown Nominations Commission: The Revd Jonathan Jee, Sarah Mount, Fr Simon Oakes, Tim Pollard, Alicia Sampson and The Very Revd John Witcombe. The public meeting on Zoom was well attended and Steven Knott and Jonathan Hellewell spent a day in the Diocese seeing projects and churches. The Crown Nominations Commission will begin shortlisting in spring

and interviews are scheduled to take place in September with the appointment expected to be made in November. Prayers are requested for all those involved in the process.

7. General Synod feedback

The Revd Claire McArthur provided feedback from the February 2024 General Synod:

“This February was a very full on agenda once again for the five days we spent in Church House in London. As you may or may not know it has been quite costly for us as representatives to sit and listen to the debate on Living in Love and Faith, whatever our views are. Unusually all members were sent an email from the Bishop of Leicester who is one of the lead bishops as the Bishop of Newcastle had stood down earlier in the week. He said he had hoped that we might be able to find a similar way of generating a different sort of conversation at Synod. He made a plea that we all speak with kindness and generosity. We are a broad church with a rich mix of traditions; Synod at its best displays to the world that it is possible to disagree and live in communion. This was followed up in the presidential address by The Archbishop of Canterbury who said that observers of the Synod’s deliberations in recent times had noted the “angst-ridden tone” and “unfair attacks”, bitterness and personal abuse had become normalised in the Church. His presidential address finished with: *God is greater than our fears, than our enemies and in our failures. God is unbreakably faithful to covenant and promise. When that is our comfort and peace, then in this world, at this time, off its hinges, we can in all our troubles, be truly the church we should be, truly God's Church in God's world.*

The agenda was packed, in no particular order:

- It was agreed the funeral fees for conducting services at crematoria that went to the DBF would now be given back to parishes.
- There were three debates around bullying, a code of conduct for PCC members, a discussion on the behaviour of lay officers, and even one of expected behaviour of synod members, it was agreed that there would be reviews and all three motions were passed to enable guidance to be issued to enable the removal of said officers. That bullying and misconduct is to be taken seriously.
- The Church of England received two significant Safeguarding reports: the Wilkinson Report and the Jay Report.
 - The Wilkinson Report reviewed the Archbishop’s Council’s actions in disbanding the Independent Safeguarding Board. Wilkinson made six key recommendations around trauma-informed practice, risk assessments, the lack of independent scrutiny and recourse, the setting up of a new governance body and the mechanisms for implementing lessons learned from case reviews. Archbishop’s Council accepted all these recommendations and laid out first steps in beginning to address them.
 - The Jay report was published just a few days before the Synod met, and laid out recommendations for the formation of two new independent charities, funded by the Church, one to deliver safeguarding processes in the Church of England, and one to provide scrutiny and recourse.
 - There was limited time to respond to these papers, safeguarding remains on the agenda and an internal team will review the recommendations, talk to survivors and come back to synod.
- The Bishop of Norwich proposed a motion calling on us, as local and national church to manage the land we own well, responding to climate change and supporting biodiversity, this was heavily supported.
- The Bishop of Oxford introduced a debate on the changing nature of work. That the world of work is changing due to the advancement of technology such as AI, including debate on how we, the church treats workers fairly. There was a call for us to adopt the Rome Call for Ethical Use of AI, but there was not time to vote on the overall motion.
- Racial justice was the topic brought by the Bishop of Dover, this was a good debate and everyone from a minority group got to speak, she called for people to reject culture wars, be awake and, recognise the racial injustice in church and society. We had a report by the Racial Justice Commission which

concludes this autumn, and the motion was about receiving that report and committing to undertake the work that was needed to progress it.

- The debate on PLF was that Synod “welcome” a set of ten commitments to the process. It felt a better atmosphere in the chamber but after an amendment calling for “legally secure structural provision” had been defeated, the Archdeacon of Liverpool, the Ven. Dr Miranda Threlfall-Holmes, proposed that the debate be cut short through a procedural motion. Members agreed, in the expectation that more concrete proposals will be brought back in July.
- There were also debates on clergy pensions, the war in Ukraine and Church Commissioners Response to Transatlantic Chattel Slavery.
- We had two speeches from our dioceses:
 - My maiden speech in the discussion of investment into estate evangelism and the continued commitment for resource
 - Bishop Ruth spoke eloquently and represented us well in the LLF and PLF debate, putting reconciliation at the heart of the debate and how we are called to live together despite our differences.”

Questions from diocesan synod members:

There has been a 50% fall in church attendance in ten years, this is massive, have general synod considered this?

We want more investment in key areas, brought in in different areas.

It was reiterated that General Synod Representatives can take questions to general synod. Diocesan Synod members are encouraged to liaise with the General Synod reps on matters they would like raising.

8. *Our Shared Future – Loving One Another*

Neil Masih, Intercultural Mission Enabler, shared how when his parents arrived in England in the mid-1960s, they did not know much English but they were welcomed into the church in Foleshill and today he is still part of that church, has served as church warden and continues to be a member of the diverse PCC. Yet, he posed the question: Does Racism need to be addressed in the Church of England?

In June 2020 the Church of England’s House of Bishops agreed to the creation of an Archbishops’ Taskforce. The ‘From Lament to Action’ Report, published in 2021 considered more than 20 reports from the mid-1980s onwards with more than 160 recommendations made. Although there have been motions and debates little has been done and the flourishing of UKME and GMH Anglicans is hard to discern. The report sets out 47 specific actions for different arms of the Church of England to implement across five priority areas: participation, governance, training, education and young people. Without these changes the Church risks denying and disregarding the gifts of a significant part of the nation.

Bishop Rose Hudson-Wilkin carried a motion at Synod to continue the recommendations from Lament to Action including a move towards all parishes developing local action plans to address racial injustice. There was also a recommendation that dioceses should collect relevant data on race and ethnicity. Coventry Diocese is looking at data and moving forward. There has been an increase in ethnic groups settling within Coventry Diocese above the average for England in the last 10 years, but from census data, this is not reflected in parishes but Neil is encouraged by the response from clergy and laity when discussing this fact with parishes.

Racism divides people and communities, as Christians we should address this. Neil has taken the recommendations from Lament to Action to start work in the diocese enabling: Amazing Grace, Race and Bible talks, Unconscious Bias Awareness Training and setting up a Clergy Advisory Group from ethnic diverse churches which meets on a quarterly basis to discuss issues, provide support and consider how national developments can be implemented. Further current activities include:

- West Midlands Regional Racial Justice Bid which could result in a grant to fund a Training Officer and Theological Officer to work on Racial Justice.
- Identifying parishes with a higher proportion of UKME/GMH in order to obtain the views of UKME/GMH and find out how the church is serving them.
- Let's talk About Race workshop offered to holistic groups to generate debate
- The Race Equality Advisory Group, to share experiences and viewpoints.

Neil then posed three questions for synod to consider in groups and written feedback was collected:

- What do you think our role as Christians is to address racism?
- What are the joys of having a more diverse congregation?
- What challenges have you experienced/or can think of in trying to promote or gain more diverse participation in your parish?

The session closed with the sharing of a song in Hindi, celebrating the life of Jesus.

The Chair of the House of Clergy, Revd Claire McArthur took the chair

9. Our Shared Future – Healthy People

The Revd Tim Cockell shared the clergy wellbeing working group work plan which covers six areas of work distilled from the 2022 clergy wellbeing survey:

- Publish Dignity & Work Policy**
This was first mooted 8-9 years ago, in the last 6 months there have been consultations and reworking to ensure it is fit for publishing after Easter 2024. The policy is for clergy and lay people regardless of role.
- Restate commitment in the Clergy Covenant for Clergy Care and Wellbeing**
Parishes are to be encouraged to revisit this, details of this will be released after Easter to ensure parishes are up to date.
- Publish Menopause Policy**
This will highlight the potential effect on women clergy and recommend appropriate and reasonable adjustments, showing care and providing support.
- Improve understanding of neurodiversity and wellbeing**
More people are being diagnosed, including clergy. There will be awareness raising and time at a study day delving into working with and supporting neurodivergent people.
- Review and recommend improvement to Ministerial Development Review Process**
Work-life balance and physical and spiritual wellbeing will be looked at with the view of a revised programme being in operation in 2025.
- Re-establish proactive pastoral care for clergy**
There are to be more visits to clergy in their location, time is set aside in Tim Cockell's diary. It was reiterated that this is not a negative visit and it is hoped that as many clergy are visited as possible by the end of this year.

There are two further policies that are not listed on the workplan:

- Clergy Sickness Policy**
Covering how the diocese will respond to long term sickness.
- Process for Clergy Approaching 70**
Bringing together practice and how we operate into one policy to ensure clarity.

All four policies will be published on the diocesan website with a letter of introduction from Bishop Ruth.

A request for members to join the Wellbeing Group was made, in particular persons who are able to assist on harassment cases, any interested person should contact Tim Cockell.

Tim introduced the group activity, highlighting that wellbeing is not just about clergy but also recognises the vital importance of laity within our churches. The following questions were posed relating to laity, and written feedback was collected following the group conversations:

- What challenges are our lay leaders/minister facing today?

- What practical steps could we take to support them in their wellbeing? [*'We' being individuals, PCCs, congregations, CDBF.*]

10. Deanery Motion (DS 24-04)

Shipston Deanery Synod to move the motion:

That this synod, mindful of the dire financial situation of many parishes who are exhausting their reserves:

- Seeks the Church Commissioners to increase its share of annual running costs from the current 20% to at least 30%.*
- Will submit a diocesan synod motion (DSM) to General Synod, requesting the above increase.*

George Heighton spoke to the motion:

Having started in deprived urban ministry George went on to rural ministry where he has been shocked by the levels of deprivation in villages. Yet, his churches are relying on reserves, covering the running costs of 5 listed churches, 6 churchyards, cemetery, paying parish share in full. There is a population of around 3,500 and regularly 100 people in church but overhead costs are high and so plans for further work are stunted as there is a real struggle to pay the bills to keep the doors open, one church in the area is on track to be bankrupt within 3 years. George remains passionate about rural ministry and does not want to be in a situation where villages churches have to be abandoned.

Steve Coomber to move the amendment:

"That this synod, mindful of the dire financial situation of many parishes who are exhausting their reserves and, at a time when the national church is reviewing the funding it offers to dioceses: a) seeks the Church Commissioners to increase its share of annual running costs. b), will submit a diocesan synod motion (DSM) to General Synod, requesting increases in funding in specific areas, like lowest income communities or buildings for mission funding or grants, similar to the 2022 energy grants, which can be distributed by Dioceses to PCCs to directly support our parishes in areas where it is needed most."

Steve spoke to the amendment:

A response from the Chair of the CDBF:

"We need to set the context behind the motion proposed at this meeting. The 2022 accounts for the Church Commissioners state that the contribution towards running costs at £117m represents 20% of the running costs of the Church of England and that 66% goes directly to parishes. This needs to be set in the context of previous years. In 2021 the amount of support was £87m (17% of the running costs, 71% directly to parishes) and in 2020 £98m (not stated and 70% resp.).

The annual report for 2022 indicates that funding for the period 2023-25 will total £1.2bn, an increase of £0.3bn on the previous triennial.

As a Diocese, approximately three quarters of our income is spent on parochial ministry and the remaining quarter on supporting missional work.

Nearly 80% of our income is generated within the Diocese, through the deanery share and investments. We receive about 12% from the Church Commissioners. Much of this has to be applied for and can only be used for specific purposes, for example supporting vocations, additional curates, or creative mission projects. Some monies we automatically receive, for example funding for our Bishops and for mission in lowest income communities.

Since 2017, Coventry Diocese has been successful in applying for £3.5m/about £0.5m pa from the strategic development fund for 3 specific projects (Acceler8, Serving Christ and Church Urban Plants). Last year, we received £234,000 from the Strategic Ministry Fund.

These monies have enabled us to place more curates in our parishes or provide ordained ministers in areas of greatest deprivation, develop resources to support our lay and ordained colleagues and work on revitalising ministry.

The funding for our lowest income communities has totalled £3.8m in the last 6 years.

This has enabled some parishes to recruit lay workers, for example children and young people workers or deanery administrators and, in some cases, capital build projects. We are also very fortunate that our charity partner, Together for Change, is able to further extend this income, which in 2021-22 totalled just under £1m. And very occasionally, dioceses will receive funding for exceptional circumstances for example in 2022, £309k which we distributed in energy grants to PCCs and cost of living grants for those clergy in greatest need (out of £18m provided nationally by the CC)

In conclusion,

Rather than asking for a general increase, this motion needs to call on the Church Commissioners to increase their funding allocations in specific areas like LiNCs or grants which directly support our parishes. But we need to recognise that funding from the Church Commissioners has increased in previous years and their stated intention is that this should continue.

Note also, with this motion, just because we are asking for an increase in funding from the Church Commissioners it doesn't mean we, as Coventry Diocese, will receive more money."

George Heighton responded:

It is understandable that there is a need for specific purposes and projects but in small villages it is not possible to produce the need but help is still needed, villages are reducing. Urban Plants are creditable but there is not equivalent or support in villages or the deep south of the diocese. There is concern that we will entrench away from villages, church in the centre is not what we are called to do.

The **amendment is not supported** as the money would not go to parishes. We need money for all parishes, whether they have a big project or not.

Questions and comments were welcomed from Synod:

Against the amendment: It was highlighted that money from grants rewards good grant writers, *the writing of grants takes time away from lay leaders, with so many forms, is it a good use of our time?* It was proposed that money could be allocated rather than applied for. *With the talk of Church Commissioners allocating £100 million to anti-slavery work, surely the descendants of slaves are in our congregations so why is this money not going to parishes to do the work? Years ago, pension provision was moved out of parish share, why are we asking for parish share? Why aren't Church Commissioners providing?*

If we are a church for every community, communities vary massively and there is targeted funding for pockets of work. What our baseline funding looks like for parishes is a needed conversation. If we take this to General Synod we need to do more thinking. A question that will come back is that we have high resources of our own, this needs considering.

Bishop Ruth said, 'as we ask more of others, more may be asked of us.' Having visited another church and looked at their magazine, it included a letter from the vicar, an invitation to join the Parish Giving scheme with an explanation. This has gone to every house in benefice, a simple request, why the money is needed. An example of not just sitting back and it falling into our laps.

It as highlighted that there is a Rural Hub, that should be included in the conversation.

It was highlighted that when asking for more resources, you also need to ask where you are going to economise in order to generate the increase of recourse. This is asking National Church to use up the reserve just as has happened to the parishes. *What should National Church spend less on, the environment, racial justice? Hard choices are within the motion. Save the parish communities need help and support, we are a mixed diocese.*

Anthony Rich proposed an amendment to the amendment (with the Chair's permission):

That this synod, mindful of the dire financial situation of many parishes who are exhausting their reserves and, at a time when the national church is reviewing the funding it offers to dioceses:

- a) *seeks the Church Commissioners to increase its share of annual running costs.*
- b) *will submit a diocesan synod motion (DSM) to General Synod, requesting increases in funding in specific areas in particular rural ministry and mission or lowest income communities or buildings for mission funding or grants, similar to the 2022 energy grants, which can be distributed by Dioceses to PCCs to directly support our parishes in areas where it is needed most.*

Barry Dugmore responded regarding the Rural Hub:

As a diocese we recognise mission and ministry has receded in poorest areas and we are addressing this in our mission to re-evangelise England. There is a cost to rural mission. Alcester is the first rural hub; the extra post is funded by drawing on historical assets (we are one of richest diocese) we called on synod to release funds for this. A bid will be developed for the Strategic Mission and Ministry investment Fund for work across the diocese. Some projects will be urban but rural communities will be included as well. We are looking at changes in rural mission and areas. Looking at the whole diocese including rural and that will be included in our funding asks.

Appreciation was shared for what has been put in and there is a keenness to reimagine how we can do mission and ministry but *this will not pay the bill when a congregation of 100 needs to care for six buildings which is the rural issue, we cannot fund anything else.*

Steve Coomber **accepted the proposal to amend the amendment.**

George Heighton concluded:

We are giving out of reserves. We do not have time to apply for grants. The Rural Hub is great we get resources and prayers for rural ministry but we don't get money. Church Commissioners have £10bn earning interest, this needs to go to rural churches. Mission is being swamped by paperwork.

Voting on the amendment of the amendment:

In favour: 23

Against: 10

Abstentions: 5

Amendment to the amendment **carried**

Voting on the amended amendment:

In favour: majority

Against: 3

Abstention: 3

Carried

That this synod, mindful of the dire financial situation of many parishes who are exhausting their reserves and, at a time when the national church is reviewing the funding it offers to dioceses:

- a) *seeks the Church Commissioners to increase its share of annual running costs.*
- b) *will submit a diocesan synod motion (DSM) to General Synod, requesting increases in funding in specific areas in particular rural ministry and mission or lowest income communities or buildings for mission funding or grants, similar to the 2022 energy grants, which can be distributed by Dioceses to PCCs to directly support our parishes in areas where it is needed most.*

11. Member Motions

No member motions received.

12. Items to note

- Governance Review – update on progress so far and next steps (DS 24-05) - noted
- Triennial elections – timeline (DS 24-06) – noted

13. Questions received under Standing Order 69

One question was received, a written response was provided and circulated on 8 March. No supplementary question was asked.

14. 2024 meeting dates

Tues 2 July (evening), Sat 16 November

Locations to be confirmed.

Bishop Ruth thanked synod for their helpful engagement and introduced Geoffrey Cotterill, Deputy Diocesan Registrar, before closing the meeting in prayer at 12:29.