



## Everything's changed

### Briefing for Area Deans & Lay Chairs from Bishop Rose

November 2020

Changed Lives → Changing Lives has always been more than a tagline. It's at the heart of what we're about as a diocesan family. As I said at our meeting in Wrotham, it's one of the things that drew me to the diocese in the first place. We were clear, back then, that Changed Lives → Changing Lives changes everything. We weren't to know how much change would be forced upon us - and how quickly.

The speed and creativity of local churches' response to Covid has been simply amazing and I'm so grateful for your part in that. Now we need to be even more creative. For the Church, as for many other organisations, uncomfortable truths which were becoming apparent quite slowly before the pandemic, are now blindingly obvious. So, as I made clear at our recent Diocesan Synod, everything is on the table.

### Flourishing and sustainable

Our finances tell their own story. We cannot keep shoring up deficit budgets with property sales. Neither can we expect others to bail us out repeatedly - today's Church should pay for today's Church. We need to be financially sustainable.

But money is not the place to start. We were dreaming, back in January, of a flourishing future. We wrote each other postcards - further developed at the Synod in March - which, between them, paint a picture of a Church with scripture at its foundation, prayer at its heart, generosity as its life blood, and growth flowing naturally from every Christian's confidence in Christ. Now is the time to take some clear, positive steps towards that future.

### Local decisions

One of the great strengths of our diocese is the confidence we place in planning at deanery level - and in our Lay Chairs and Area Deans in particular. You know your patch better than anyone. Faced with the reality that things cannot go on the way they have been, you are best placed to discern what kind of ministry and





mission are needed – and what will be affordable – as we move towards a sustainable and flourishing future.

Of course, I don't expect you to do this alone. Your archdeacon will be with you every step of the way and will work with you to discern what support and accompaniment is needed over the coming months, as well as to begin to discern what is needed – and affordable – in the longer term.

### **Hard choices**

It's not just at deanery level that tough decisions will need to be made. I'm sure we all have views about the way that our financial resources are being used. It is right for us to question whether the way we spend money at a diocesan level is the best it could be to support the work we are all now engaged in. You have my assurance that, while you look hard at your deaneries, spending across the board is being forensically examined – in order to meet the challenges facing us, it is clear that absolutely everything must be on the table.

These choices come in the context of a listening and discernment process that we are all engaged in. When I asked us to reflect on what we are noticing and learning in early September, I didn't expect that God's voice would speak so loudly also through our spreadsheets, budgets and cash-flow! But we shouldn't be surprised. Jesus talked about money and mission together: often in the same parable.

### **Inside out**

Perhaps the most exciting of the 'golden threads' [emerging from the that listening process](#) is the sense that 'God has been turning his church towards the world.' The pandemic itself – and the light it sheds on the environment, on justice issues and on how we live the gospel in a hyperconnected world – have forced us to look outwards more than ever.

So when we look at what needs to change, we cannot simply try to spread the same ministry more thinly. We must do things differently, re-examine our priorities, and put mission at the heart of our life. We must seek to engage more





(and more diverse) people, ordained and lay, paid and unpaid – in partnership with those in our churches and wider communities who want to build a better world.

### **Doable change**

The cry of “Change the law!” at Wrotham was heartfelt and understandable. But there is much we can change in the meantime. Ministry is not meant to be done mainly by stipendiary priests. We expect to have fewer of those in the coming years, so we will need to equip and deploy them better. Increasingly we will all be in the business of releasing and equipping the ministry of others: readers, ALMs, self-supporting ministers, and – most of all – the ordinary Christians who are best placed for mission on the frontline.

We might look at Focal Ministry, where a suitably authorised person can take responsibility for particular worshipping communities. Group Ministries are a quick(ish!) and flexible way of allowing collaboration across parish boundaries. Festival Churches, freed of the pressure of weekly worship (and weekly heating), can find their role as a witness in themselves, and a haven of peace and prayer for all. And schools can be – and often are – missional communities in their own right, offering space for worship and a lively mission field.

### **Timelines and deadlines**

If we thought we had plenty of time to think about all this, Covid has shown us otherwise. The generosity of the past has bought us some time, but by the end of 2021 we need to be owning and working with a compelling vision, a balanced budget, and a clear way forward. Without these ingredients, why should anyone give generously? Gone are the days when people trust an institution just because it has always been there.

In practical terms, this means we have until Easter 2021 to get our plans into shape. That would be a ridiculously short deadline if we were starting from scratch. But we’ve been thinking and praying along these lines for many years. Our diocesan strategy has been moving steadily in this direction and across our diocese many are eager for change. Maybe it’s not so far-fetched to quote Mark’s





Gospel: “The time has come. The kingdom of God is at hand. Repent...” (which always means “change”).

### **Called to live**

It's lives that we're seeking to change. Our structures, ministry and money, our cherished traditions and radical visions mean nothing without that overriding call of Christ. It is not some kind of mechanical management exercise which I believe we're called to. I want our diocese to flourish, not for its own sake, but for the sake of those we serve, and for the glory of the God who loves them – and us – more than many have yet realised.

So, in the end, the quality of our relationships will determine whether we live up to this challenge. That has come through powerfully in our listening and discernment process. We often focus on our differences and allow ourselves to be torn apart – but if we ‘disagree well’ and listen beyond our own preconceptions for God's voice, then our diocese will truly be worth sustaining. More than that, I am confident that we will flourish.

As the longed-for vaccines are rolled out and we seek to rebuild, the next twelve months will change us all - as deaneries, as churches, as a diocesan family. But before we think about how others need to change, we must look to ourselves. Only as we open ourselves to the ever-changing breath of the Spirit will we find our Changed Lives → Changing Lives.

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Thank you for your partnership in this important work,

+ Rose Dover

