

Diocesan Synod questions June 2023

Robert Barbour (Kidderminster & Stourport) asked two questions under Standing Order 71:

1. Meeting in Ely in 2019 representatives of 7 dioceses referred to market towns as 'an overlooked scale of community (falling between urban and rural)' whose churches 'have the potential to act as centres for the resurgence of surrounding rural churches.' To what extent do churches in market towns form a key part of Worcester Diocese's plans for renewal?
2. What steps are being taken to proactively engage parishes in vacancy into the Mission Accompanier's scheme?

Archdeacon Nikki Groarke responded:

Thank you Robert for thoughtfully engaging with the strategic plan, and asking these two questions.

As you are aware, our strategy seeks to grow the number of healthy and sustainable churches across the diocese, helping them to discover what that means in their context, setting and tradition. We have been able to attract national strategic funding for our priority to have a sizable church, around 150 AWA, in each of our areas of significant population. This will enable investment in six churches in Dudley and one in Redditch. Pershore, Evesham, Malvern and Worcester already have churches of this size or growing to be so, and we have identified Kidderminster and Bromsgrove as other significant towns in terms of population as places to explore for a second stage.

Within the diocese we also have smaller market towns such as Bewdley, Stourport and Droitwich, and many, many villages and hamlets. There is support on offer for all churches wishing to grow and experience renewal, whatever their size, but it will look different in each case. We have not overlooked those in the middle, and our strategy includes them. We hope the 'market town' churches will explore starting new worshipping communities, doubling their engagement with children and young people, and tapping into the resources on offer for equipping minsters for mission. We hope too that they will network with each other and work collaboratively, sharing ideas and new learning opportunities, both locally within the diocese, and also more widely with those convening gatherings such as that in Ely to which your question refers. In some places it works well for a market town church to become a resource hub for surrounding rural churches, in others it's proved more missionally impactful for the rural churches to work together in rural mission areas. One size doesn't fit all.

In answer to your second question, the model we are working with for our MA scheme is one in which the MA works with both the incumbent and a small team from the parish. By accompanying and coaching the incumbent in their leadership, they are enabling sustainable change. We have one or two churches which are about to go into vacancy who are part way through their MA journey, and this will continue, as the teams and direction of travel are already underway, and someone from the team will step up to take the lead with the MA. This also happened to cover maternity leave of an incumbent. The model doesn't allow for a church without an incumbent to begin work with an MA, as it is vital that the new incumbent eventually appointed is involved in setting the strategic journey towards health and sustainability, working in partnership with the parish and the MA.

We do, however, offer interim support to parishes in vacancy who wish to work with a coach or mentor on pulling together the best parish profile, and would very much hope that when appointed, a new incumbent would be glad of the opportunity to join the scheme – it can feature in the profile as part of the attractive package we offer in the Diocese of Worcester.