



A GATHERING FOR MEMBERS OF THE DIOCESAN SYNOD

**Tuesday 7 July 2020
(7:30-9:00pm via Zoom)**

MINUTES

Welcome, Prayers and News

The Bishop welcomed members to the Gathering. He explained that Diocesan Synod could not conduct formal business by means of a virtual meeting at present, but he felt it important to reassure members that business that needed to be undertaken was indeed being dealt with, and to update members on various matters. The Rev Canon Alyson Davie then opened the meeting in prayer.

Bishop James:

Alyson referred in the prayers to Eileen Doyle. Eileen was Associate Priest in the Coxheath group and she died a few weeks ago (not of Covid-related matters) and was ordained in 2011, having been a Reader in the Diocese before that. We had her funeral at Holy Trinity, Coxheath earlier today.

It's very good that we have with us tonight Mike Todd and Jon Mann from the Children's Society. They will be speaking to us a little bit later on. We thought it would be really helpful tonight to have something on our agenda which enabled us to look outwards a little bit to our wider society, and I am sure that what Mike and Jon give us will help us to do some of that.

Can I give apologies from Bishop Simon who is having a well-earned break this week, as I think are some others. Can I also bring you greetings from our companion dioceses in Tanzania, Zimbabwe and Estonia. We have in various ways been trying to maintain the connections with them, and technologically it is easier with some than with others. Some of you may have noticed that Bishop Farai of Harare contributed our diocesan weekly reflection a few weeks ago, which was available through our website and other ways. And we are keeping in touch with our brothers and sisters in their very different situations, but they send their greetings to us.

Another little bit of news for you, in case you did not pick it up. Bishop Simon and I are now duly authorised to be Honorary Assistant Bishops in the Diocese of Canterbury. And, in a reciprocal arrangement, Bishop Rose (Bishop of Dover) is an Honorary Assistant Bishop in the Diocese of Rochester.

Please do not read into this any more significance than is required! It is not precursor of any kind of merger or anything like that, but it enables a bit of cross-border working and is a signal of our intent in that regard. It is really great from my point of view to have Bishop Rose authorised to minister within this Diocese and I suspect in coming months – when we're allowed out! – we will find ways of giving practical expression to that partnership.

In my kind of reflections at the beginning of this Gathering, I do want to acknowledge obviously the really extraordinary experience of the last four months that we have had in different ways. Of course, there have been the deaths – now over 40,000 in our country of Covid-related deaths – and I think probably when we get the overall figures for what they call 'excess deaths', it is going to be something nearer 60,000-65,000. And I remember a Zoom call a few weeks ago with Bishop Given of the Diocese of Kondoa in Tanzania. At that stage we were at about 25,000 deaths, and Bishop Given is not prone to being reduced to silence but when I remarked that we'd had 25,000 Covid-related deaths, he really could not take it in. That's partly of course because, as an African, there is a kind of perception of us as being an advanced country with high level medical care and all that sort of thing, so how on earth could a pandemic of this kind cause that number of tens of thousands of deaths in the UK. But that is what we are facing. And I think it has reminded us, perhaps, of something of our vulnerability, and our confidence in our sophistication and knowledge and all those sorts of things has been somewhat shaken by this experience.

We have seen also of course:-

- The economic impact, and much of that is yet to come – the huge amounts of money that Government is throwing at this issue, the likely effects on employment cushioned at the moment by the furlough scheme but the reality will begin to emerge in the coming months. And, of course, all of these things affect people in our communities and in our congregations.
- The health impacts – very interesting the research which is now being done on the long-term effects or the longer-term. Even people who were quite mildly affected are reporting on the continuing fatigue weeks and months later beyond their infection.
- The mental health impacts, which are being well documented and highlighted in the media and in other circles at the moment.
- The educational impact in relation to children whose educations have been interrupted – those who have not been able to take their exams, all sorts of questions about what will happen even next year in relation to exams.
- The political impacts – the questions being raised not least about the relationship between Parliament and the Government, how a parliament that is meeting virtually can actually hold the Government to account. How a house like the House of Lords where quite a number of the members are well over the age of 70 is going to be able to continue to meet in any meaningful way in the future. All sorts of questions which are being asked as we face both locally and regionally and nationally and internationally some of these real tough issues.

And we have seen many more – I have just given a little flavour.

We know that our Government has been at sixes and sevens – and that's putting it quite positively – through most of this, and has really been playing catch-up all the way through and being reactive. Little wonder that the rest of us have not always known what was going on, and the Church also has found it difficult to engage.

There have been the real oddities of suddenly realising that legal things are more difficult than we once thought they were. Suddenly having to put into the Coronavirus Bill back in March provision for the General Synod to continue to meet for a year beyond its normal lifespan because elections could not take place – and that required an Act of Parliament. There was no other way of doing it. The overriding of Canon Law by Statute Law by the Coronavirus Act – not done in several centuries yet now we have had to do it. Lots of 'never before's' have occurred over these recent weeks and months.

Of course, Covid has not been the only thing that has been going on. The whole response to the murder of George Floyd in Minneapolis in the USA, and all that has flowed from that within our own nation and worldwide.

The really interesting and deep questions that have been raised by this pandemic about our relationship with the physical world in which we live and how we live within that world. And much, much more besides. There are some really big questions around which we and others are grappling with.

I want to pay tribute at this point to the huge efforts made by many – the energy brought, the imagination given – in relation to our responding to the situation. I don't just mean Zoom services and all the rest of it and the other ways in which local churches have maintained contact with their people and their communities. But also thinking about wider community engagement issues of one sort or another which have been going on. Some of you may have watched the Church of England's national online service this last Sunday. It was put together by prison chaplains and came to us from HMP Stocken in Rutland, HMP Pentonville in London, and HMP Low Newton in County Durham. It has just been one of those remarkable pieces of Christian work that, while everything else like education and all those kinds of services in prisons had been withdrawn, the chaplains were still going in. Ninety-five percent of Anglican chaplains have been able to go into their prisons. That's just a little 'for instance' of what has continued.

So huge thanks to clergy, to lay ministers, to churchwardens and other parish officers, to diocesan and Cathedral staff and to many others for all that you have been doing over these months, and for all the creativity that has been brought to it. And particularly, I think, some of the community engagement work – the pastoral care, the looking out for those who are not able to care for themselves or who are isolating in different ways, the continuing engagement with issues around homelessness and social need in many of our communities. All that has been going on. Our churches, our individual Christian disciples, our clergy, licensed ministers have been key to much of this in so many places. So great thanks for that.

With the thanks, I am conscious that we are now nearly four months down the line, and I do sense in a number of us a sort of growing fatigue. Even if one has been able to take time off, being able to take time off without actually going away or going to visit family and friends, or the usual things you do to refresh yourself, actually is quite difficult. And whether you are lay or ordained, that is the world you are living in.

And so I am aware that the fatigue is there. And it led in some places to some ambivalence about what we were going to do now that the Government is allowing us to open our churches again for public worship – albeit with an awful lot of restriction and carefulness needed about how we do it. I think the ambivalence about that – places coming back and saying “well, actually, we’re really not ready to do that yet” – is partly because of some of this tiredness which is around. So I do encourage you – and encourage you to encourage others – to take care of yourselves, to take care for each other as this goes on through the weeks and months because it becomes more difficult in a sense.

Spiritual sustenance clearly has been really important. Whether through Zoom or other ways, lots of people have been finding ways into this. One of the intriguing things has been being able to sample stuff from all over the place – Bible studies, acts of worship, different things that you have been able to join in with. My wife has a pattern of doing the Cathedral’s children’s group by Zoom every Sunday morning, and then pops into the end of the service from our daughter’s church in Edinburgh. And lots of other people are doing similar things. That has been quite fun and enriching in different way. More personally I know people have found solace in the Scriptures, and the Psalms have spoken to people quite strongly in many different circumstances as they often do in situations of some struggle or challenge. The opportunity to pray with one another online has been appreciated, or over the phone in different way, to the pastoral care offered by ringing people up. Over fifty people signed up for an online retreat in the Diocese led by the Rev Canon Susanne Carlsson and have found that hugely rewarding. Others have been part of mutual support groups of different kinds, and that has been really important.

So, in all of this, where are we and where might we be going? I’m not going to address the issues about society at large because they are huge – patterns of employment, is commuting going to be a thing of the past, all that sort of stuff. That might well affect our communities quite significantly. Perhaps in more practical terms for us, there are still lots of unknowns. When will full restoration of unrestricted public worship in our church building be possible? Well, who knows? Especially an issue for larger congregations and, in terms of the sizes of our buildings and social distancing (larger probably means a congregation which is regularly more than 50 people) – when it will be possible for more than that number to meet together in one place we really do not know. And it may not be able to happen this side of a vaccine being discovered and spread around the place. So who knows what that is going to look like? And that compounds the difficulty in the parish of making decisions locally about what we are going to do. For example, what are we going to do at Christmas? What will the situation be like? We need to be doing the scenario planning probably now and certainly in September as to how that will happen. That is the occasion when we expect our churches very often to be bursting at the seams with lots of people who do not necessarily come every Sunday. How are we going to handle that? How are we going to respond? How are we going to do something which will enrich people and enable them to celebrate the joy of the incarnation in a real way, even if we cannot have 200 people to a carol service or whatever it happens to be. That’s important for us to think about.

Other things we’re going to have to think about as we go along – we are trying to make plans for ordination services at the end of September. We think it’s going to happen with multiple washings of hands – at least episcopal hands – as ordinations go along. But even now, and it is only a few months away, we are not 100% certain that this is going to be possible. We pray, God, that it will be possible.

And there are all sorts of other practical things. And of course we do not know how the pandemic is going to go, what the virus is going to do. We are aware of Leicester at the moment and Melbourne on the other side of the world now locked down for another six weeks because of an outbreak there. We do not know what the trajectory is going to be.

In terms of the life of our Diocese – and this really a piece of information to assure you that we are thinking about these things – you will recall that we launched our diocesan framework for mission and ministry and engagement back in 2017 under the banner of Called Together, after a year or so of consultation. If we thought that we were just going to plough on with Called Together because that is what we have got, well clearly that would be totally unrealistic. So we are beginning a process of review and reshaping. The national Church is doing the same, and we will need to take account of that. But we have begun to review the 12 key strands of Called Together, and the Bishop's Council in two weeks' time will be asked to agree a programme and a shape for that review and refreshment and reshaping of our diocesan strategic framework. That will take us through the rest of this year into the beginning of next year. Is the existing pattern right? In our new situation do the 12 key strands and the 3 overarching themes still work? Are there other things we need to introduce into that? What are the implications for resources of our new situation – human resources, financial resources? Some of our older ministers, ordained and lay, may not be able to come back into ministry in the same sort of way. What will that mean in our communities? What will be our financial resources as we come out of this? What will be the support that the national Church may or may not offer to dioceses? All of these and many, many other questions are around us and with us. Just to assure you that we are beginning to develop a programme for addressing these in a realistic and thorough, and hopefully prayerful and Godly and mission-minded way in the coming months. Obviously, you as Synod will be kept in touch with that and in particular when we meet – in whatever form we meet – for our next gathering in the autumn, we would hope to be able to share with you and engage with you over a number of the details that seem to be emerging at that point. And the Bishop's Council, on your behalf, will be doing that over the coming months as well.

So that is just to assure you that we are not sitting here twiddling our thumbs and waiting to see what is going to happen but actually making some effort to try and discern where God might be leading us through all of this and what over 2021 – which inevitably is going to be a slightly mixed year not least in terms of diocesan budget – through into 2022. What might it be that is wise and Godly and obedient for us to be doing and engaging in? What are our aspirations? What are our new opportunities?

In all of this there is inevitably an internal focus in terms of our own diocesan life – what is possible, what is sustainable, and such like. There is the external or wider focus in terms of the national Church but also the outward look into our communities and our society. What has been happening over recent months has opened some doors for us. How are we going to continue to walk through those doors and engage with the people who we are able to be in contact with in our communities in different way. And of course, at its heart, not just an internal focus, an outward focus, but with a Godly focus as well in terms of the building of the life of Christ in our midst, individually, corporately and how we will shape that in the weeks and months that lie ahead of us.

That is more than enough from me! I am not planning to take questions and comments on what I have said. People are dropping things into the 'chat' facility of Zoom – notably football scores I notice, and I thought you were making holy comments about what I was saying but clearly not quite! Do put things into the chat as we go, we can capture that if we need to at the end. We will have comments and questions later on various items.

So I am now going to welcome, if I may, Mike Todd and Jon Mann from the Children's Society, a key part of the Church of England's engagement with our wider society and with its particular concern for children and families and not least for those in our communities who are among the most vulnerable and disadvantaged.

The Rev Mike Todd and Mr Jonathan Mann of the Children's Society:

Mr Todd opened the item ...

Greetings from the Children's Society, and particularly our new CEO Canon Mark Russell asked me to convey his greetings. Some of you might know him from when he was at the Church Army, and he is coming up to his first anniversary at the Children's Society. For Mark it has been a bit of a roller coaster year, being the new CEO of the Children's Society. And a big thank you to you all for your generous welcome to this virtual gathering of the members of Rochester Diocesan Synod. Like a lot of things recently, for us this is a first and we are delighted to be here so that we can chalk up that Rochester was the first to invite the Children's Society to speak. I am going to hand over to Jon, and you are going to be hearing from Jon a lot more than me because he is the Relationship Manager for the Diocese of Rochester and will probably know a lot more of you than I do. Over to you, Jon.

As Mike mentioned, it is great to see a lot of you again, albeit it virtually. Bishop Simon invited us here to speak about how we have seen the virus impact the lives of children and young people. But before we do, I just wanted to say a big thank you for your kind donations. Over the past year we have received £73,000 from parishes within the Diocese, which is an amazing amount, and even during the lockdown we are still continuing to receive fantastic support, specifically in Bromley where a group of volunteers in the deanery got together and had another first – our first group Zoom call in the organisation.

Getting back to why I am here, I wanted to convey a personal story and talk about another role I have got within the Children's Society. It is a volunteer befriender. Specifically, the team I am part of works with young people who have often fled war-torn countries, they are often separated from their families and have no support network here, and sometimes even limited opportunities to make friends. In my role, I have been matched with someone and we would normally meet face to face, do an activity together which we choose together – things like visiting a famous London landmark or museum, or playing games or sport. There is a Namco game station down at South Bank, which is a favourite of my young person and a favourite of mine, I have to admit! It helps the young person to get familiar with the new city. Again, going back to me, when I first visited London as a teenager, I did not know simple things like you have to tap in or out of buses. I remember using my mainline train card to get through the underground barriers and being confused when it would not work. So, can you imagine what it must be like for a young person from another country to experience all these nuances with the transport network?

The activities that we do together help the young people to get an understanding of British culture, improve their English, and even build their confidence. Having someone to meet up with and have fun with helps reduce isolation, helps the young people feel more welcome, specifically into London which is where the young person I am matched with is based. But since lockdown this has all stopped. Instead of going to places like the British Museum, we are having to have phone calls. We are having to look at zoos virtually, which is really difficult again over the phone and on the laptop, trying to explain which buttons to click. It is an area that I have struggled with a lot. It is difficult to communicate over the phone due to the language barrier. So there are often phrases which we might take for granted – things like 'have you eaten?' – which the young person doesn't necessarily understand. I have to think of a word that he does understand, which in my case is chocolate, crisps, until we get a reassuring sound. The young people we work with have found it extremely difficult. Often the phone calls they receive from us are the only phone calls they receive all week. I remember hearing of one young person saying they were just staying in their bedroom and waiting for a phone call from either ourselves or their case worker.

We are always looking for volunteers, be it in our shops or preaching during sermon slots, or even the role that I am doing. I would like to say that if you want to get involved, and you would like to know more, do get in touch. Throughout this presentation I will be explaining a bit more about what I am doing with the young person, but I thought what I would do is – rather than us talk at you – take a few minutes to reflect together. I was hoping that everyone could either write in the chat dialogue box or on a shared screen whiteboard what you think are the challenges young people are facing during lockdown.

Members listed the following (many were repeated by several):-

- Loneliness
- Unable to see friends
- Boredom
- Lack of motivation
- Isolation
- Poverty
- Insecurity especially around education
- Nothing to go and do.
- Confusion about future (exams etc); what is possible in terms of university, future employment etc?
- Domestic violence
- Lack of mental health support
- Wellbeing issues, anger, frustration
- fear
- Bereavement
- first awareness of mortality
- A loss of purpose and drive
- hunger
- anxiety
- School friends, school meals.
- lack of contact with grandparents
- hopelessness

- loss of routine and familiar patterns
- disorientated
- vulnerability
- poor mental health
- Disappointment
- fear that their carer will become sick and maybe not be able to look after them anymore
- social contact and touch
- domestic breakups
- stress at online learning
- loss of rites of passage
- Young people often don't like talking on the phone - they'd rather text/IM people.
- missing family
- Understanding an invisible foe and how to deal with it.
- football and other sports
- lack of contact with wider community in church and school - the extra adults who supplement the care parents can give.
- lack of family support
- some have actually enjoyed lockdown as they suffer from anxiety and can stay safely at home

I am seeing a lot of comments around poverty and isolation, and even some things that I never actually thought of – the first experience of mortality. I want to pick up on things like the isolation side of things, purely because I am going to pair that with our work on mental health. Young people have been telling us at the Children's Society for years through the annual Good Childhood Report that their mental health is declining. During lockdown they have been continuing to tell our project workers things like their sleep patterns have been affected. One thing that struck me as well was sadness due to having to cancel holidays. Things that have already been mentioned like isolation due to not being able to see friends.

Poverty has also had a big impact. One particular area that we have been focussing on is for those families who have what we call no recourse to public funding. This means that those affected do not actually have any access to public funds. It could be young people who were born in Britain and are British citizens because their parents are deemed as migrants, so they may not be able to receive funding. It could be those who have granted leave to remain but under the condition that they do not access public funding. It is an issue that has been in the news quite a lot. Recently an MP was asking the Prime Minister about some of it. Some restrictions have actually been lifted as a result of that, and now young people affected by no recourse to public funding are able to access free school meals, but this stops in September. So we are calling on the Government to extend it further than September.

But other than those two points – mental health and poverty – I wanted to end on a more positive note, so I thought I would share with you three things that young people have told us that they like best about lockdown.

- More family time;
- More time for hobbies and learning new ones, such as gardening, languages, sign language, cooking, art; and
- Doing schoolwork at their own pace without any pressure.

I am going to hand over to Mike now to speak a bit more ...

As Jon said right at the outset, it is really important that everybody hears our big thank you to you all – both for the time that you give, the money that you give, and the prayer support that you give. We could not do the work that we do without the support we receive. Particular thanks to the top five supporting deaneries, and the parishes who give the most in terms of cash, but also the ones who might support us through particularly good volunteers. The top deanery in the Diocese is Bromley, raising just under £12,000 last year, and one of the parishes in Bromley Deanery giving almost £4,000. So, thank you so much. We know you like a little bit of healthy competition, so if you want to know how your parish or deanery is going, Jon will be more than happy to tell you.

Some of you will know that our legal name is the Church of England's Children's Society. We were founded by a Sunday School teach in South London whose children had gone missing from Sunday school. And that long-term strategic partnership is still the most enduring one in our organisation. We are supported by the Church of England in prayer, volunteering, including Bishop James (who is a Vice-President of the Children's Society) and, for example, we would often brief him and ask him to ask questions in the House of Lords on issues affecting children and families.

We receive just around £4m from Church of England parishes and communities over the course of the year. Often we are a once-a-year charity with Christingle. Bishop James talked earlier about what is going to happen at Christmas. Can you imagine trying to manage packed churches for our Christingle services? So we are already talking and thinking about how we can find different ways to do that, and wanting to talk about our work, mission and impact at other times of the year. We are not just in a house box or a Christingle orange.

As Bishop James intimated at the beginning, we want to help parishes think holistically about the communities that they serve, working towards the growth of the Kingdom of God for everyone. And we want, like a parish has a geographical boundary, to be offering life in all its fulness for everyone created and made in God's image. We want to help you and support you in encouraging teaching around social justice. We want to help by interpreting the challenge in the practice of Christian discipleship, including the unconditional welcome of the stranger and the outcast. Some of the things that have been in the news most recently around the death of George Floyd, around for example the Marcus Rashford campaign around school meals, are good examples of that. We are really keen that we would widen and increase our supporter base, and help you use the things that we talk about, can brief you and resource you on, to help outreach and widen your parish connection with the communities that you serve. So thank you for listening to that little bit, and I pass you back to Jon ...

I've shared a bit about how we have transformed the way we are working, moving things like therapy or befriending to over the phone, but I wanted to talk a little bit about what difficulties the future might pose. I'm very proud of working for the Children's Society, I've been working here for eight years, and it is hard to accept that the number of referrals for our work right now has actually gone down. The usual referral mechanisms via schools and other support services are not operating as they normally would, so we anticipate a huge spike in the demand for our services as the lockdown eases and schools and wider services in our communities open.

Children returning to school is a golden opportunity to identify and support those who have been hardest hit by lockdown. Like churches, we might not revert back to the old normal but take the best things we have learned from lockdown and change things. One of the things that we have learned is that accessibility is important. Whilst I managed to move my meetings with the young person to phone calls, we have not all been able to do this. Some young people do not have a quiet place in their house where they can talk openly – the walls might be thin, they do not feel like they can talk as openly as they normally would with us. If we continue to offer some services solely online, we could cause a digital exclusion. The Government's schemes have been great in terms of getting laptops and technology out to young people but there are some issues. We have found some things like a lack of Wi-Fi, broadband, or data to access online help have caused issues. Or even sometimes there are not enough devices in a household for each family member to access the internet.

Lastly, sticking with technology, one thing that I think is going to be difficult for those working with young people is adapting safeguarding policies to keep up with technology. For example, we know that young people use WhatsApp – I was shocked to find out my 11-year-old nephew uses Whatsapp, as the terms suggest the minimum age is 16. Where does this place organisations like ours where we know the young people are using it but we cannot actually recommend it?

That brings us to an end. I do hope I have been able to explain the issues that young people are facing, but I appreciate my focus and my story has been around a young refugee. There are many other aspects to our work, like county lines, which I chose not to cover due to time but if you would like to know more, please do get in touch. We are not actually asking for donations right now, as we know volunteers cannot do their normal fundraising like coffee mornings or afternoon teas. But we are asking supporters to lend us their voice and join our campaign. If your church would like to know a little bit more about social justice, I have got lots of resources explaining how to campaign in your church, and I am happy to come and deliver a workshop. Our current campaign revolves around no recourse to public funding, and we also have another one asking the Government to give Local Authorities more money and guidance on their local welfare schemes. If you would like any more information about the resources, we are planning our first outing in the Diocese in August, so if you have spare time on 3rd or 6th, do let Mike or me know – we'd love to meet you, socially distanced of course. Thank you.

Bishop James thanked Mr Todd and Mr Mann and then opened the item up for questions and comments.

The Rev Ade Lawal (Rochester Deanery) was grateful for the presentation, saying it had been very enlightening to hear what the Children's Society do. She had found it very moving. She wondered if they could say a little more about what it takes to be a volunteer and a befriender for a young person with no family here.

Mr Mann responded by saying that the volunteer process does take a long time, even for someone that works at the organisation. He filled in an application to volunteer and, once he had had his interview, he was given training – basic safeguarding training, for example. He had thought that being a befriender would be just like hanging out with his nephews – he'd take them to the cinema, buy them ice cream, slush puppies – everything that their mum doesn't like – and they would just hang out. But you have to be very clear about the

boundaries and the roles and responsibilities. So part of the training says you are not allowed to buy the young person any gifts. You have a set budget of £7.00, which is given to you from the Children's Society, and from that you have to carry out any activity. What can you do for £7.00? But it needs to be fair and equal for everyone. Then, if I was to buy the young person a gift, if I know they might need some new trainers or we're going boxing and I want to get them a pair of boxing gloves – something that I thought I would be able to do because I'm employed and earning money – I actually have to buy it and give it to the Children's Society for the official project workers to give to the young person. So the young person thinks the gift is from the organisation and they do not form that attachment with the befriender. To recap – filling in the application, interview, training around safeguarding, boundaries with the young person, and then there was a period of six months for them to find a young person who was a suitable match for me. Before I met the young person, I had to have additional training on recognising the signs of trauma because the young person was suffering from trauma. There is something called disassociation, which he sometimes does – he will be talking with you and might just switch off. So they gave me tips on how to get around that, as well as how to deal with an aggressive situation (the young person was not particularly fond of the police). So we get matched, receive any additional training, and then we meet once every fortnight with the young peons. If you would like any more information, do let me know.

Bishop James hoped that it would be possible to get links to relevant resources on the diocesan website. He had been reassured by what Mr Mann had said, that there was a really robust process, which was not only about the safety of the young person but the safety of the befriender as well, and that it was properly structured and managed.

The Rev Nigel Bourne (Gravesend Deanery) wanted to encourage folk to get involved perhaps particularly on the fundraising side and raising the profile of the Children's Society in the parishes. Chalk parish had a long connection with the Children's Society and that had been mostly through one person. He thought that if there was a network of fellowship and the occasional diocesan event it could be a way of spreading the news and getting others involved.

Mr Todd said that one of the reasons they were delighted to be here was because all the diocesan relationship managers identified diocese in their patch as their priority diocese and Rochester was Mr Mann's priority diocese this year. In response to Mr Bourne's comment, he said that in normal circumstances the Children's Society would have been planning to bring its supporters together and invite people to bring friends, to use it as an outreach tool and to support a greater engagement. That was harder to do virtually for an organisation that is based on relationships. They were entirely committed to ensuring they supported parishes, particularly if they could align it with what the parish wanted to do in its own community, so that it was not seen as a 'bolt-on' but as part of the parish's DNA. The Children's Society was a good news story that needed to be shouted about from the rooftops.

Bishop James concluded the item by reminding members that the Diocese had strategic relationships with a number of organisations, particularly those involved in different aspects of social engagement and social justice. It was important, he felt, to keep that relationship strong. He thanked Mr Todd and Mr Mann on behalf of members, saying that we looked forward to the continuing partnership in the months and years to come.

Archdeacon Julie: Safeguarding

Thank you, first of all, to the Safeguarding Team. I know they are not here, but they have been fantastic during lockdown. Obviously, they are working from their own homes. Sometimes that involves Greg making phone calls from his car because the reception is better on his mobile in the car than it is in the house! They have been absolutely fabulous, continuing to work, and you will have seen that they have really stepped up the number of safeguarding bulletins that have been going out to parishes so they can keep abreast of all the changes. As things have gone into lockdown, started to come out of lockdown, as questions and concerns have arisen about rises in domestic abuse, for example, they have been tailoring their advice. So there has been a lot more communication coming out to parishes from them. And very much their work has carried on as normal, which has been great.

They do have a new member of the team joining them at the start of August called Caroline Smith. She will be joining alongside Claire, working to Greg. So they will be at full complement for the first time, which is really good.

On the Past Cases Review 1 and 2 – you will remember that we have been doing both of them rolled into one – we got to the interim point and the Past Cases Review Reference Group has accepted the interim report, which is an internal report only. At this point in the Review, we were coming to the end of stage 1 as everything locked down, which has worked quite well for us because it has not really held us up. So we are still on target to complete by the end of year. Our Lead Reviewer has stepped back because he has obtained a role for the national Church, which actually places a conflict of interest on him. So one of our Assistant Reviewers is going to be taking on the lead and she will be in charge of producing the final report, which will be made public. In terms of issues that have been identified in the Past Cases Review, there are a number of things that have been red or amber graded, the Safeguarding Team have been working during lockdown on those, and have turned about half of those now to what they believe to be green and are continuing working through them. By the time that we get to the end of this process, we should have turned them all to green. So a tremendous amount of work is going on, which has been brilliant.

We have also been working with a survivor of church-context abuse, who has been advising us on a number of things. I think I reported previously about how he had been advising us on communications, but we have actually been working as well on a Survivor Care strategy. That is something that will come to Synod, but it needs to come to a formal Synod, so it will probably be coming with a whole raft of things that we will need you to vote on when we can first meet legally. That will come out for you to approve and adopt. Really, it is putting into writing what we are already doing. It is already being piloted within the Safeguarding Team and the Diocese. We have spent some time with a survivor and with a survivor representative, really trying to improve how we respond to survivors.

Bishop James thanked Archdeacon Julie because, on top of the day job of being Archdeacon of Tonbridge, actually being his lead person for safeguarding within the Diocese was a not inconsiderable responsibility, to which she had brought considerable skill, devotion and time.

Before handing over for the next item, Bishop James reminded members that there was sometimes a vague impression that everything had kind of stopped at the moment, but of course most things had not.

Certainly, the Finance Team, the Finance Committee, the Investment Committees and such like had been meeting very regularly and had been working really hard. He therefore offered his thanks to Mr Nigel Pope, the various committee members, the Finance Director and the staff.

Mr Nigel Pope and the Rev Richard Williams: Financial Update and Annual Report & Accounts: 2019

Mr Nigel Pope, Chair of the DBF, introduced the item, saying there were two sections. Firstly he would cover the 2019 Annual Report & Accounts, and then he would hand over to the Rev Richard Williams, Finance Director, for a financial update.

The full 2019 annual report and accounts would be formally submitted for approval at the Bishop's Council on 21 July and subsequently filed and circulated. The financial accounts figures within the accounts had already had preliminary approval by the Bishop's Council at its meeting in May. The Annual Report & Accounts would be formally 'presented' at the Diocesan Synod in November.

What followed was a brief summary of the 2019 accounts.

For the year ended 31 December 2019, a net income on all funds (Common Fund, designated funds, restricted funds, and endowment funds) was £1.2m, compared to £2.0m net income in 2018. After a pension scheme liability revaluation, net assets overall for the diocesan accounts increased in 2019 by £3.1m from £72.1m to £75.2m.

Focussing on the Common Fund, the operating result was a deficit of £0.54m, which compared to last year's deficit of £0.38m. Both years had benefitted from £0.5m support of stipend costs from the Diocesan Pastoral Account. Against that actual deficit of £0.54m on the Common Fund, we had a budgeted deficit of £0.6m.

At 31 December 2019, the balance on the Common Fund was £6.8m, against our target of £5m as a minimum. That is an increase of £0.8m from the balance at 31 December 2018, which was £6.0m. The reason why the Common Fund has gone up, while we have had a deficit at an operating level, was mainly due to positive return on investments held by the Common Fund of £1.2m. 2019 was a good year for our investments.

Just to note that the total expenditure in the year was within the £13.5m limit authorised by Synod. The Common Fund income was £10.4m and expenditure was £11.0m so the deficit was £0.6m.

The headlines of the Annual Report & Account are that the most significant item of expenditure was on incumbents and associate ministers at £5.3m, which was 48% of total expenditure and the largest component of income was parish offers at £9.1m, which represented 87% of Common Fund income.

The overall Common Fund costs break down to show what financial contribution is required on average from each benefice with a full time incumbent.

Total cost for a full time incumbent	£41,000
Parish support cost share	£11,000
Costs of future ministry, wider Diocesan ministry and National Church of England	£14,000
net average contribution required to support parishes unable to cover fully the cost of a full time incumbent and share of diocesan and support costs	£8,000
Total per benefice	£74,000

Mr Pope then handed over to the Rev Richard Williams to give a financial update.

Mr Williams began by saying that it was a time when individuals, parishes, Diocese and national Church needed to work together and share the burden of the Covid-19 impact. That had been borne out and it had been remarkable to see that the reduction in parish offers was currently only 3% for the year looking forward. That was in line with other dioceses, such as our neighbours Southwark and Canterbury. He thought this was because parishes had been able to support their offers because they had dipped into reserves, although parish income had been severely affected in many parishes. DBF fees had been impacted, as had dividends and property rental.

At the peak of the pandemic, about 35% of diocesan staff had been put on furlough, which had saved about £90,000 and there was a moratorium on property expenditure during the Covid-19 outbreak. Overall, looking at the impact on the forecast for 2020 and the budget, in 2021 quite a severe impact was predicted on future projections which fed into the diocesan financial strategy.

Mr Williams said that a three-month deferral in clergy stipends had been secured from the National Church Institutions (NCIs), which was effectively a loan of £1.86m. The lion's share of that had been passed on to the parishes, and £250,000 of restricted funds had been earmarked for grants to parishes. Parishes had also donated to date £21,000, and the Diocese was very grateful for that. £0.5m from the Diocesan Loans Fund had also been similarly earmarked. The intention was to be able to support the most financially vulnerable parishes, those in deprived areas and those that had pressure on their cashflow.

Two meetings of the Emergency Relief Panel had taken place, and £135,000 of grants had been approved so far to 27 benefices and a further £55,000 had been earmarked for 11 more parishes that might need the funds in the next few months. So far, four parish loan applications totalling £45,000 had been processed and there were a couple more in the pipeline.

Mr Williams felt this was a way in which the Diocese had been able to work positively to help parishes and it had been wonderful to see parishes supporting each other.

The NCIs, particularly through quite a bit of lobbying from diocesan secretaries and others behind the scenes, were seeking to provide additional support to dioceses, both for 2020 and 2021, in the sum of £35m, and Rochester was looking to apply for some of those funds. The Diocesan Secretary added that conversations had been positive towards the NCIs making some contribution towards the Diocese's additional deficit created by the impact of Covid-19.

Mr Williams continued by saying that Rochester had gone into the crisis with a relatively conservative cashflow position compared to a lot of other dioceses, which had enabled the current riding out of the storm. Also, behind the scenes, the Property Team had been working hard on bringing in some planned disposals, and £2.6m had been secured this year. So Rochester had a reasonably strong position in cash terms of £7.3m at the end of May. However, it should be borne in mind that the Diocese was in a negative operating position. So liquidity this year and well into next should be ok.

Before the crisis, the Diocese was looking to adopt its base case budget, bearing in mind it did initially have a break-even intention. However, it was clear that, in terms of how the offers had come in, the budgeted deficit of the base case of £833,000 was likely. The overall contributions from parishes, taking into account the DBF fees, were flat, which had been the experience of prior years. It had been an achievement to bring in a major new thing like Indicative Offers and the DBF at the same time and maintain giving.

Taking that position into account and the support from the Diocesan Pastoral Account, the Diocese was looking at reduced parish offers of about £0.25m. The impact on other income would be another £0.25m but cost savings had been made, including the furloughing of staff and some on clergy deployment. It was hoped that the overall deficit could be kept below £1m for the year, and it was also hoped that funding from the NCIs would reduce that down to around £0.5m. The situation could, therefore, have been an awful lot worse. There was still a reliance on parishes to try and maintain their offers during this time.

With regard to the financial strategy, it was very much underpinning the diocesan strategy of Called Together. There was a desire to implement Indicative Offers and to bring home the message of what that was all about, to move into a second year. Much more was planned on the subject of Generous Giving and stewardship, and funding from the NCIs was being sourced for a Generous Giving Officer. Currently, the Diocese was working with Liz Mullins, who was doing a wonderful job of reaching out to parishes, and improving the information and resources on the diocesan website. The last three months had seen an increase in online giving, as well as online worship, and the whole movement in contactless giving and the take up of standing orders amongst givers. So there had been a positive story that had come out of a very difficult time. All priorities were subject to a 'stop, amend, continue' approach as the Called Together strategy was reviewed. Budget plans would be altered to fund that with the intention of achieving a break-even position.

The Diocesan Secretary said that he was hugely grateful to Mr Williams for the work that he and his team had been and continued to do. He hoped that the communication to parishes had been clear as to how much support there was and how keen staff were to make sure that the services provided were those needed. He was extremely appreciative of the efforts made under difficult circumstances by all diocesan staff to ensure that those services continued.

He was also grateful to Mr Pope for his scrutiny of the accounts again and again to ensure that the Annual Report & Accounts could be completed. The audit had also been undertaken remotely with no issues raised, which was a real achievement and showed just how far things had come in terms of management and financial management.

Mr Pope echoed Mr Girt's comments, saying that a very fine performance from the Finance Team and others involved had been delivered under very difficult circumstances.

Bishop James said that, as was evident from the presentation, there were many, many moving parts in all of this and certainly one of the biggest and potentially most significant was what the NCIs may or may not contribute to diocese and the basis on which they do it over the next two years or so during the period of readjustment. He had been really encouraged by the figures that Mr Williams showed of a potential deficit of £1m before any NCI support because, as had been indicated, a few months and even weeks ago much bigger figures were being contemplated. He asked therefore that Synod members take thanks back to their parishes and deaneries for the ways in which at local level people were continuing to give and to give generously to support the ministry that has continued throughout. It was important to say that the money was going to support the continuing ministry of the Church through this period, which in many places had been more intense rather than less intense. Bishop James then opened the item up for comments.

The Rev Nigel Bourne (Gravesend Deanery) noted, in relation to the 2019 accounts, that the relatively good cashflow situation seemed to be helped significantly again by the disposal of assets. He felt that should be highlighted and he wondered what the underlying situation was – if the Covid-19 issue was set aside – in terms of cashflow and the Diocese's ability to continue if assets were not disposed of.

The Diocesan Secretary responded that the programme review going to the Bishop's Council may well include 'working within the envelope'. Having pared down on everything and knowing the position in terms of parish offers, it would be necessary to set against budgetary capacity that which we wanted to do, and to see what of that if we can do. The property sales that had gone through had allowed for the replacement of some properties that needed replacing, and therefore were not all 'disposals'. One of the major changes made in 2019 was in the legal support provision and, whilst it was not an exciting change, it was a very necessary piece of management change. Those property disposals and sales would not have been carried out through the pandemic if the previous arrangements had still been in place. That would have meant cashflow would have been in a very different situation. Those assets had been planned for change for some time and they had been brought forward.

Mr Bourne said that one of the obvious ways of balancing the books was the loss of personnel, and he wondered if that was something being considered as a way of managing the issue.

Bishop James responded by noting that there were at least two different kinds of personnel – the staff employed in the Diocesan Office and satellite offices, and stipendiary clergy. A review of both kinds of staffing would be part of the programme to be presented to the Bishop's Council. As far as clergy were concerned, people might have heard the slightly ominous sounds from Chelmsford Diocese, which had posited some quite severe cuts in clergy deployment.

Firstly, the situation faced by Chelmsford existed before the Covid-19 pandemic, and was largely because the Diocese had lost £3m of income from the Church Commissioners by virtue of the Commissioners reviewing the mechanism by which they distributed funding. Chelmsford Diocese had been significantly subsidised over many years and was having to adjust to that loss. The NCIs were currently saying to dioceses that they should not make precipitous decisions on deployment because, when one looked at the overall cohort of deployable ministry nationally, what could happen was that, if one diocese made precipitous decisions, it had impact for the whole eco-structure, and so some work being done on a national level on that. Rochester would obviously want to link into that in a way that did not make it more difficult for the Church of England as a whole. But it was a valid question.

Bishop James concluded the meeting by offering thanks to everyone present. He hoped the information received had been helpful, not least in reassuring members that things were in good hands in these times in terms of diocesan life and management, and that the Diocese was beginning to look forward hopefully in realistic and faith-filled ways.

He also thanked all those who had presented during the meeting, and those who had been involved in the logistics and technology required to put the meeting together. He then asked Mrs Poole to lead the meeting in closing prayers.

Closing Prayer

Mrs Sarah Poole closed the meeting with prayer at 9:05pm.