

Synod meets by Zoom for the first time

Diocesan Synod met to discuss the impact of coronavirus on church life and ministry on Saturday 15 May. This meant that for the first time in its history, a meeting of Synod was held via Zoom.

After an initial welcome and an explanation of Zoom protocols from David Wilson, Chair of the House of Laity, the Synod was led in worship by Bishop Guli, Pauline Cummins and Richard Worsfold.

Bishop Martyn began his Presidential address by thanking Synod members for their work in difficult circumstances. He noted that, because of the impact of the pandemic, it had been necessary to make some big decisions without a great deal of consultation and it was right that Synod should now have a chance to offer its views. Although church buildings were closed, the Church as people had been present and active and it was clear that prayer and pastoral care are absolutely at the core of our ministry. Churches had also been responding to the evident spiritual hunger of our nation, and this was therefore a time to proclaim the Gospel, sensitively but confidently. Plans were being made for churches to reopen, but it was unlikely that all churches would be able to reopen as soon as restrictions on meeting were lifted.

Bishop Martyn also noted the impact on schools and asked for prayers for school leaders. He reported that many DBF staff had been furloughed and that St Martins House and Lodge were still closed, as was Launde Abbey. The Community of the Tree of Life continued to function as a dispersed community. All appointment processes had been frozen and the strategic planning exercise would now have to be revised in the light of the changed situation. In June the DBF would begin to engage with parishes to get feedback on their financial situation. Although it was clear that diocesan finances would be hit hard, it was also true that some dioceses were in a worse situation. In all of this, Bishop Martyn reflected that God was reshaping the Church. He then asked the Synod to break into small groups to discuss the following two points

- Who are we called to be and what are we called to do at this time?
- Practical questions about the life of the Diocese at this time.

Following the group discussions Director of Finance, John Orridge, spoke about the financial challenges. He said that the Church Commissioners had given excellent support and that this had resolved any short term cashflow issues. Staff furloughs would save around £200k, but these were clearly challenging times.

Peter Hooper, Chair of the House of Clergy, then sought to summarize issues raised in group discussions around themes. The first of these was whether the increase in numbers attending online services represented a form of revival. Claire Wood said that there were already conversations taking place about how church could be done differently in future and that she was hopeful of new beginnings.

The second issue was about whether weddings and funerals would be possible before churches reopened. Bishop Martyn said that this was being looked at by a working group which included the Archbishop of Canterbury, but that there was no change at present.

The next theme was around the issue of lament and how to move forward in a situation where there was also much to grieve over. Bishop Guli said that this was being looked at by the Diocese as part of the remit of the four working groups established. These were:

- Budget Review
- Learning and 2026 Planning
- Community Partnerships
- Wellbeing and Return

It was clear that events would be needed to mark the various emotions that had been stirred up by this crisis.

Finally, the feedback from groups reflected concerns about the freezing of appointments and the impact on curates. Bishop Martyn said that it was not possible to give a full answer at present, but conversations were being held with those affected to allay anxiety. There was budgetary provision for curate stipends for some time beyond the point where they were signed off and it was hoped that some movement on appointments would be possible in the near future.

Two written questions had been submitted. The first of these concerned the Bishop's Leadership Team's view on remote consecration. Bishop Guli responded that the diocesan approach on liturgy and worship generally was to be permissive where possible, allowing for diversity and flexibility and encouraged churches to think deeply about how their Eucharistic practice is flexible and responsive to context while remaining true to Anglican tradition. She also noted that lockdown gave an opportunity to show solidarity with and learn from the persecuted church, whose members could sometimes go for months or even years without receiving communion. A fuller version of her response is [available separately](#).

The second question was about the delay in the publication of the Living in Love and Faith resources and about the impact of the House of Bishops statement which had appeared in January. Bishop Martyn said that the delay in publication had been decided because the House of Bishops had felt that the resources simply would not get the attention they need at this time. A clear commitment had been given to publish the resources as soon as it is felt to be appropriate. The diocesan working group had also been suspended for the time being. Bishop Martyn added that he knew that the January House of Bishops statement had caused a great deal of hurt and both he and Bishop Guli had apologized for their part in it.

Peter Hooper noted that other questions would be responded to in writing.

Bishop Martyn closed the Synod with prayer.