

Advent 2021

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

This morning I found myself playing with a fox in the garden at Bishop's Lodge. We've long had a family of foxes who enjoy our lawn and the overgrown garden next door, but each generation seems less cautious around humans. This particularly beautiful, young fox came and sniffed my hand and then started dancing around me. It was a beautiful moment and one that I will treasure.

As we enter this season of Advent, we are reminded that Christ will come again. This is not mere wishful thinking but a reminder that the glimpses of God's kingdom which we catch every now and then are a foretaste of all that is to come. The beauty of this world, and the signs of healing and justice and new life are an indication of what life will be like when God's kingdom comes on earth as in heaven. Our calling then, is to have our eyes open to see what God is doing.

During Advent, I am using the resources from [The Advent Project](#) at Biola University to guide my reflections. This poem spoke to me:

Annunciation
by Marie Howe

Even if I don't see it again—nor ever feel it
I know it is—and that if once it hailed me
it ever does—
And so it is myself I want to turn in that direction
not as towards a place, but it was a tilting
within myself,
as one turns a mirror to flash the light to where
it isn't—I was blinded like that—and swam
in what shone at me
only able to endure it by being no one and so
specifically myself I thought I'd die
from being loved like that.

I know that this autumn has, for many people, been even tougher than the periods of lockdown last year. Weariness and exhaustion have been combined with uncertainty and concern over the future. And to some degree, our debates over the future of the church have not helped – many are worried about what is happening in the Church of England. But whatever your feelings at this time, I appeal to you this Advent to focus on Christ and what it means to proclaim that Christ will come again. This is not to dismiss our current concerns (they are very real) but it does offer a different perspective. When we 'tilt' within ourselves,

we start to see things differently. This is our Advent hope – a hope which can inspire us and offer fresh energy in the midst of this world’s sufferings.

This letter contains a few updates – I’m sorry that it is so long – but I hope it will be helpful.

Covid guidance

The news this last week has reminded us that the pandemic is far from over. [Guidance from the national church](#) is being updated, but I want to suggest that we return to encouraging everyone to wear masks in church and that we keep buildings well ventilated (suggesting also that services may need to be kept short in these cold, winter months). However, the situation may change rapidly in the coming weeks so please check the national and [diocesan websites](#) regularly for updates. I know that it is hard for clergy and church officers when people currently have such different expectations and are weary and anxious, but please continue to call on your Archdeacon or Area Dean if you find yourself being put under pressure. There is a real need for extra grace and kindness as we seek to navigate these uncertain waters.

Christmas

As I said in my last letter, it is entirely up to Incumbents and PCCs to decide what to do on the Sunday after Christmas. However, in the interests of the wellbeing of clergy and lay ministers and given the experiences of the last year and our learning around virtual services, I want to point out that services do not have to be ‘in person’ and can be pre-recorded or indeed shared with another church. The Cathedral will have a service on the 26th at 10.30am which will be livestreamed (accessible on the Cathedral Facebook page).

I also want to strongly urge all clergy and lay ministers to take a proper break after Christmas. I know it can be difficult to find cover for funerals and pastoral care, but I hope this is something you can discuss with deanery colleagues to ensure you get a proper break at some point (and by proper break, I mean at least one Sunday off, and several days when you do no work). Additionally, if you need financial help to go away for a time, we have funds available – please contact me or your Archdeacon.

On the subject of wellbeing, we now have dates arranged with Launde Abbey for Bishop’s Retreat Days for the first half of 2022. These are intended as a gift to those in active ministry – a day to enjoy the hospitality, beauty and peace of Launde and to be refreshed. Please email my office: bishops.office@leicestercofe.org to book. The dates are:

Thursday 27 th January	Thursday 24 th February	Tuesday 22 nd March
Thursday 7 th April	Tuesday 17 th May	Monday 20 th June

Launde are also offering [bursaries for NHS staff](#) to take a retreat – you might want to mention this to others in your churches.

Shaped By God Together

As mentioned above, there has been some coverage in the press and on social media of our Diocesan Synod decision to work towards a new diocesan framework known as Minster Communities. Sadly, much of this coverage was ill-informed and played into fears about

what is happening in the national church or anxieties over hidden agendas. I want to assure you as clearly as I can that there are no hidden agendas (I have been as honest and transparent as I can in every communication), there is no threat to the parish system (I am 100% committed to ensuring that there is a Christian presence in every town and village of Leicester and Leicestershire) and we are not replacing all priests with lay ministers (we need both!)

Our website has more information concerning [Minster Communities](#) including an updated Frequently Asked Questions sheet. Please do read this and contact us if you have further questions. We have already received a good number of expressions of interest from parishes wanting to explore being part of a Minster Community. We are very grateful to these parishes and in the new year we will start discussions with a view to establishing two or three pilot Minster Communities in 2022. If you are invited to be part of one of these, a member of diocese staff will help facilitate conversations between parishes, and others will offer training and support. Regular reports on the progress of these pilots will be given in Diomail.

Even if you are not part of one of these pilots, there is still plenty that you can be doing to prepare for the changes which will eventually affect every parish. In particular, you can:

- **Pray for the renewal of God's church** – continue to pray that God would lead us in all our conversations together, but also pray for your neighbouring churches as you encourage people to think about the needs of others.
- **Partner with neighbouring churches** – start some informal conversations with neighbouring parishes (even if they are very different to you!) Partnership starts in prayer and grows through practical acts of support and generosity.
- **Promote vocations** – we are going to need lots more non-stipendiary priests as well as lay ministers in the future. Is there someone you know who you think should explore this?
- **Prioritise school links** – at the heart of our plans for Minster Communities is a radical shift towards working with children and young people. You can begin this shift now by prioritising work with your local schools (whether church or community schools).

Current clergy vacancies

Current proposals for the 2022 budget include a slight increase in the number of stipendiary posts. This is because we have been holding so many vacancies in 2021. If this budget is agreed by Diocesan Synod this week, we will begin work on making several new appointments to parishes in the new year. However, it is important to state that this means that we will be running a large deficit budget for the next few years (using our reserves) and we can only do this because the Minster Community plan offers a clear route to a break-even budget by 2026.

It is also important to state that we will not be able to fill every clergy vacancy immediately and decisions about which vacancies will be advertised will be made with a view to the wider diocesan picture. All benefices in vacancy will be hearing from their Archdeacon over the next few weeks. With the Shaped By God Together process ongoing, all appointments will be made with Minster Communities in mind. So, although appointments cannot yet be

made to Minster Communities (remembering we're only likely to be piloting the initial two or three next year), where vacancies are advertised it will be expected that the benefices in question and the prospective appointees will indicate their commitment to fully participate in a future Minster Community.

Bishop of Loughborough elect

You will know that we recently announced the appointment of Rev'd Saju Varghese Muthalaly as the next Bishop of Loughborough. We are hoping (though we have yet to receive confirmation) that his consecration will take place at St Paul's Cathedral, London on 25th January 2022 (he will be consecrated alongside Lusa Nsenga-Ngoy who is to be Bishop of Willesden). It is likely that this will be a ticketed event and we have not yet been told how many tickets will be allocated to Leicester Diocese. As soon as we know more, we'll let you know. In the meantime, please pray for Saju and for Lusa.

We have also provisionally fixed for Bishop-elect Saju to be welcomed to the diocese at a service on Saturday 5th February in the afternoon. As yet, we don't know where this service will take place as the Cathedral will be closed (building work has already started and the Cathedral will be closed from January 2022 to Autumn 2023). Again, we will be back in touch when we know more but it is our hope that all clergy and licensed lay ministers will attend alongside many others from all our churches.

This letter comes, as always, with my warm greetings and the assurance of my prayers for a blessed Advent and a joyful Christmas.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Martyn". The signature is stylized and cursive.

The Rt Revd Martyn Snow
Bishop of Leicester

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