

Complexities of Challenge and Change

Diocesan Synod met on Saturday 13th May looking at a range of issues where the complexities of challenge and change are evident.

Change was evident firstly in the choice of venue, with the Synod meeting at Emmanuel Loughborough for the first time that anybody could remember. Another first was Bishop Saju presiding at the Synod in the absence of Bishop Martyn who is currently on sabbatical.

The Synod began with worship led by children from Loughborough C of E Primary School, Emmanuel Church and Spark Lunchtime Bible Club. This being a Saturday, the worship was led via a pre-recorded video so that no children were required to give up their weekend.

The Synod then heard a presentation from the Diocesan Board of Education which focused on the role of the Learn Academies Trust and in particular the role of the SEND Chaplain. Stef Edwards, the Trust Leader, outlined the history of the Learn-AT which had started as a group of schools around Market Harborough and is now in a stage of significant growth, with an estimated 3000 pupils and 20 schools by next year. After outlining the Trust's core purpose of learning and its core value of fellowship, she went on to talk about the challenges presented by the Special Educational Needs and Disabilities system, which she described as 'broken'.

She then introduced Nadine Weedall, the Trust's SEND Chaplain, who talked about the chaplaincy project, explaining that the vision, which draws on biblical imagery, is to see people's experience of navigating the SEN system transformed from a valley of hardship and heartache to a gateway of hope. Nadine spoke movingly of her work as chaplain and of her desire to build links between families with SEND children and the schools and churches who are seeking to support them.

Responding to questions from the floor, Stef Edwards said that the chaplaincy project is seeking to demonstrate a tangible difference so that wider support can be gathered, and noted that, as Learn-AT is a mix of church and community schools, there is a focus on the common good. Responding to a question about resourcing of the DBE, Bishop Saju said that it is exciting that the Diocese is taking schools seriously and engaging more with them and that the budget will be looked at in this context, but the financial position is difficult.

Synod then moved on to more detailed discussion of the financial position as the next agenda item was the Annual General Meeting of the Diocesan Board of Finance (DBF). Chair of the DBF, David Palmer, presented the Annual Report and Accounts, explaining that 2022 had been another difficult year with a net deficit of £1.82m, slightly higher than the budgeted deficit of £1.6m. Although steps have been taken to reduce diocesan central staff and numbers of clergy, and although there are reserves of around £8.8m, deficits of this magnitude can only be sustained for a few

years. Simon Wilson, Director of Finance, then presented the accounts in more detail, highlighting in particular the worrying trend in relation to Parish Contributions and highlighting how inflation increased costs at a time that income is falling.

Questions from the floor focused on gaining access to Archbishops' Council funding, the viability of plans to reduce the deficit and on the potential impact of Living in Love and Faith. Responding to the first of these, Jonathan Kerry, Chief Executive of the DBF, said that there are plans in place to access Archbishops' Council funding, but that this is allocated for specific things, not as general support for parish clergy costs. David Palmer then explained that the vast majority of the DBF's budget relates to the costs of parish ministry and it is impossible to balance the budget without a significant impact on clergy numbers unless parish contributions see a large increase. He added that the risks of loss of income resulting from Parish Contributions were being looked at, but he also encouraged parishes to look at increasing their contributions, which his own parish has done. Following this discussion, the Synod, in its capacity as the AGM of the DBF, approved the Annual Report and Accounts for 2022 and the appointment of Hays McIntyre as auditors.

In his presidential address, Bishop Saju told the Synod about a recent conversation where a priest had told him that complexity in itself is not a problem, but that layers of complexity are challenging. He said that 'bewildering' is a biblical word, relating to the experience of being in the wilderness. In the challenges of change and growth we can know that God is with us in bewilderment. Reflecting on the DBE presentation, he remembered a conversation with the Bishop of Delhi who had described the Diocese of Leicester's 97 schools as a gift. One word for school in India is 'palicurum'; this literally means 'alongside the church'. This acts as a reminder that young people in Leicestershire are hungry for something that only the gospel can satisfy. Finally Bishop Saju quoted from the Diocese of Leicester Book of Celebrations from 1947, noting that although times change, many things seem to remain the same: through all of this we need to fix our eyes on Jesus.

The presidential address was paused briefly for prayer for Bishop Martyn and ended with prayer for Bishop Saju.

Roy Faulkner (General Synod) had submitted a written question about parish contributions which Claire Bampton responded to along with a supplementary. She emphasized that the diocesan framework of Minster Communities, approved by the Synod, seeks to strengthen the mission of local churches by working in partnership.

Following a break, Jonathan Kerry introduced the work of the Governance Review Implementation Group, which was now coming for approval following previous discussion at Synod as well as extensive consultation with Bishop's Council, the DBF trustees and others. Corinne Aldis explained the reasons for the proposed changes, which drew on the work of the independent Governance Review report from 2021. James Badger then explained the main impact of the changes. The key points were around bringing together finance and strategy in one place through the

proposed Trustee Board; clarifying the responsibilities of all bodies through Terms of Reference; working on getting a good mix of diverse people with the skills and experience to do governance work; and attending to culture. Jonathan Kerry then explained the next steps which will involve bringing revised Synod standing orders and DBF Articles of Association back to Synod for approval so that the changes can come into effect from August 2024.

Contributions from the floor focused on the need to ensure parish voices are heard, that the Audit and Risk Committee needs to have authority commensurate with its responsibilities and the need to be inclusive of theological traditions. Following discussion Synod adopted the proposed new structure by majority vote with none against and two abstentions.

Claire Bampton and Stuart Burns then introduced an item about Minster Communities inviting five Synod members to bring their thoughts: Gordon Arthur, Madeleine Wang, Crystal McAllister, Vic Allsop and Clare King. All stressed in different ways the importance of building relationships between churches, getting to know each other and looking beyond differences to areas of common interest.

Following these five contributions, Claire Bampton said that many churches are keen to get on with implementing Minster Communities and work is being done on how to speed up the implementation process. This will involve seeking money from the national church in a bidding process. Contributions from the floor focused on how the conversation prompts are used and the role of vision and values in the formation of Minster Communities.

In final business, Synod received the Annual Report of the Diocesan Advisory Committee for the Care of Churches and also noted a brief summary of feedback provided to the bishops about Living in Love and Faith following the March Synod.

The meeting closed with prayer led by Bishop Saju.