

New Diocesan Synod meets for first time

The newly elected Diocesan Synod met for the first time on Tuesday 3rd September 2024 to share in a eucharist and to discuss the strategy and draft diocesan budget for 2025.

The meeting began with worship and a eucharist at which Bishop Martyn presided. The sermon was delivered by Bishop Saju, who reflected on the gospel story of Jesus instructing Peter on how to fish. Bishop Saju emphasised the theme of obedience, noting that Peter's obedience, leaving everything to follow Jesus, serves as a model for Christian discipleship in our diocese. Shayne Ardron led the prayers, setting a contemplative tone for the meeting.

Bishop Martyn then delivered the presidential address, during which he introduced the diocesan strategy. He highlighted the role of strategy not as a mere management exercise but as a process of discerning God's will. Bishop Martyn stressed that the church's approach must start with God, acknowledging human fallibility and the need for ongoing learning, forgiveness, and grace. He described the strategy as a living document that must adapt to a rapidly changing world, referencing census data from 2001, 2011, and 2021, which show a marked decline in those identifying as Christian. He cautioned against simplistic solutions and instead encouraged Synod members to discern how God is calling the church to respond to the contemporary context.

Bishop Martyn acknowledged the challenges posed by the changing religious landscape, emphasising that the Diocese of Leicester is now in a missionary context that demands a fresh approach. He identified unchanging elements such as God's call to deeper discipleship, but also pointed out areas where prioritisation and change are necessary. In this context the five strategic priorities are important, but it is not expected that every parish will address all of these areas. However, every parish needs to reflect on how to engage with the new missionary context.

Noting the hopes that some have around national church funding will save the situation, Bishop Martyn stressed that financial support from the national church is limited and will not solve the diocese's budget challenges. There are two main funding streams available: support for the lowest-income communities and the Diocesan Investment Programme (DIP), which targets investment in diocesan strategy focused on sustainable growth. He confirmed that the diocese plans to apply through the DIP stream, particularly focusing on work with children and young people.

Following the address, Synod members engaged in small group discussions about the strategy, prompted by questions about what excited or puzzled them about the document, and whether they could express broad support for the strategy. Feedback from the floor showed overall support for the strategy and enthusiasm about intergenerational work, but also concerns related to there being too many priorities,

that prayer is not clearly stated as a foundation, that getting into schools can be a challenge and that operational decisions such as the closure of the Christian Resources bookshop are challenging.

Bishop Martyn acknowledged these issues in his summing up, expressing gratitude for the engagement and noting the importance of focusing on priorities, even as difficult decisions loom. The Synod then voted to approve the strategy with 59 votes in favour, 8 against, and 12 abstentions.

The next item on the agenda was the presentation of the draft budget for 2025 by David Palmer, Chair of the DBF. He outlined the significant financial challenges facing the diocese, with a projected deficit for the current year of nearly £2.4 million, largely due to declining parish contributions. It was noted that clergy costs, particularly stipends, remain the main area of expenditure and that further reductions in clergy posts are expected, though reluctantly. The point was made again that national church funding, which focuses primarily on new projects rather than existing financial pressures, is unlikely to cover the deficit. While the diocese can cope for a few more years by selling assets, this approach reduces future income and is not sustainable.

Contributions from the floor included suggestions for setting clear targets for parish contributions offers and maximizing access to national church funding through the Diocesan Investment Programme in order to revitalise parishes. Members of Synod also reflected on the net cost of St Martins House and the impact of the Ephesian Fund, as well as the potential impact on parish contributions of clergy vacancies. Responding to these points, David Palmer acknowledged the challenges of the financial situation and that there are not easy solutions.

The next item was a brief update on the continuing implementation of the new governance structure. Steve Bailey, Chair of the House of Clergy encouraged Synod members to get involved through participation in the committee structure, contributing to discussion at meetings, submitting questions and suggestions for agenda items.

Finally, the Synod received responses to written questions which focused on the impact of having an unstaffed reception at St Martins House, specifics of the Minster Community implementation process and the impact of clergy vacancies on parish contributions.

The meeting closed with a prayer led by Bishop Martyn.