

## Arriving Back at the Beginning

The Diocese of Leicester Synod met for the final time in 2024 on 30<sup>th</sup> November at Christ the King, Beaumont Leys. In a packed two-hour meeting Synod made time to discuss the Prayers of Love and Faith, engage with diocesan strategy development and agree the 2024 budget.

Opening comments from Chair of the House of Laity, Stephen Adshead, noted the recent deaths of two Synod members, Neil Stothers (Framland) and Steve Turner (NW Leics). Steve Bailey was then welcomed as the new Chair of the House of Clergy. The Synod meeting then began with worship led by General Synod lay representative Nathan Obokoh, who used light and coloured lenses to lead the Synod in a reflection on the light of Christ and how we respond.

Bishop Martyn began his presidential address by announcing the appointment of Karen Rooms as Dean of Leicester to warm applause. He then offered a quote from TS Eliot's poem *Little Gidding*:

We shall not cease from exploration  
And the end of all our exploring  
Will be to arrive where we started  
And know the place for the first time.

Bishop Martyn reflected that Jesus's sending out of the disciples, and of ourselves, is an invitation to explore, but one that involves coming back, where we meet with Jesus and the people of God. As we go out proclaiming the gospel, we learn more about Jesus and go deeper in our discipleship. This led to a reflection on the role of the Cathedral, which is firstly about worship but also discipleship, about learning and welcoming people of all nations. Synod had previously agreed a generous contribution to the Leicester Cathedral Revealed project. While this is an exciting new season in the life of the Cathedral, its focus on discipleship will continue.

In the Diocese, Bishop Martyn said, we will focus on Minster Communities and also the strategy development work. This will involve seeking financial help from the national church, but that comes with a risk that we lose sight of the need to continue to give generously. Above all, he said, we go on exploring what it means to be followers of Christ.

Bishop Martyn then noted that Living in Love and Faith (LLF) is also about exploring, acknowledging how society has radically changed with regards to relationships, sex and marriage. Noting the divisions in the Church on these issues, he said that he dares to believe and hope that, if we get beyond fear and anxiety, it is possible that this process can deepen our discipleship. He felt that the use of Prayers of Love and Faith (PLF) within existing services does not constitute a change in doctrine, but was less sure that this is the case with regard to standalone services. The Prayers of Love and Faith would soon be released for use in churches and it is important in this context to seek to hold together the unity of the Church in the midst of many

questions and uncertainties. He said that he would equally support those who wish to use the PLF and those who choose not to.

Bishop Martyn's plea was that we go on exploring together what it means to be disciples of Christ, in this way, being brought back again to Jesus and what it means to follow him. Synod members were then encouraged to discuss with those around them their hopes and fears for the use of the PLF and what support might be helpful from the Diocese. A range of views were expressed in the plenary session that followed including suggestions for support for conversations at PCC level.

Synod then heard a brief update from Richard Worsfold on progress on the Net Zero Carbon action plan, which is due to be discussed in more detail at the Synod meeting in March 2024.

Barry Hill then introduced a discussion on Strategy Development, saying that we are articulating a long-term strategy as a diocese, that this is a spiritual task, and that, when agreed next year, it needs to be something that makes a tangible difference. Synod members were then asked to reflect on the following questions in small groups:

- What will the Church of England in Leicester & Leicestershire look like in 10 years?
- How do you feel about that?
- How should we approach the challenges and opportunities facing us?

Feedback from the discussions reflected a range of hopes and fears, with cautious optimism alongside concern that the Church will be older, smaller and poorer. Several discussions reflected the thought that God is pruning the Church. Others saw the need to invest in work with children and young people. Some spoke of welcoming a more diverse church, while others highlighted the possibility of church building closures. Fears of division and cuts in ministry provision were mentioned, alongside the possibility of greater community use of church buildings.

Barry Hill responded, saying he was generally encouraged by the tone of the conversations and noting that work is being done in relation to Growing Faith (children and young people) and also church buildings. He asked Synod members to pray as we all discern the strategy together.

David Palmer and Simon Wilson then presented the diocesan budget for 2024 which shows a £2.15m deficit. This deficit can only be maintained for a maximum of 5 years based on existing reserves, but an increase in Parish Contributions could go a long way to helping in this situation. Questions from Synod members focused on how diocesan finances relate to the strategy work, the profitability of St Martins House and the potential impact of Living in Love and Faith. Responding to these points, David Palmer and Simon Wilson said that strategy and finance are intertwined and that all activities will need to be costed; that St Martins House is much more than just a diocesan office, for instance being well used for meetings and

large events which support Christian mission and offering the bookshop; that the cost figure that had been cited by some seems to take no account of the income it generates; and that the DBF trustees, rather than seeking to make provision for disunity, are working on the basis that those with different views can work together as a Diocese. Synod voted overwhelmingly to approve the budget as well as approving a Total Returns Release to cover the deficit. There were 2 abstentions.

There was then a brief item on governance in which Andy Brockbank presented the draft Synod standing orders for introduction from 1 August 2024. These will be voted on at the next Synod meeting. Madeleine Wang spoke, as Chair of the new Nominations and Remuneration Committee, inviting Synod members to reflect on how they could help to encourage people to get involved in diocesan governance, noting that elections will take place in 2024.

Written questions had been received from six Synod members focusing on Minster Communities, Parish Contributions, and the Prayers of Love and Faith and two supplementary questions were asked and received an answer.

In closing business, the Synod approved the allocation of places to deaneries for the Diocesan Synod elections in 2024 and Bishop Saju then led the closing prayer.