



Deanery Reorganisation

Introduction

I am very grateful for the extensive consultation that has taken place regarding the proposal to amalgamate the existing 20 deaneries of the Diocese of Manchester into 7, and to seek to appoint a full time Area Dean to each. I note that the consultation included 20 public meetings, one in each existing deanery, alongside an on-line consultation exercise which gathered some 336 responses. Other submissions were made in letters either to me or a diocesan officer. All submissions were presented to the Diocesan Mission and Pastoral Committee (DMPC) who have now provided me with their own formal feedback. I would like to express my gratitude to all who have participated in this huge exercise, and especially to those who staffed and presented at the deanery meetings, and to the members of the DMPC, for their diligence and wisdom.

Explanatory note

This paper contains my considered decision on the matter of deanery reorganisation considered by the Diocese of Manchester over recent months. It sets out the decision I have reached together with my reflections on the matters of import that have been drawn to my attention during the process. These latter are presented as a matter of information; in that same spirit of openness that we have sought to model throughout this particular process, and more generally in the common life of our diocese. They do not represent an invitation to reopen the decision, call for further consultation, or in any way imply that my decision is other than final. I hope that they will first and foremost help readers share the rationale with fellow Anglicans in our diocese, and with our civic and ecumenical partners. Beyond that, I would hope that any who still disagree with my conclusions will nevertheless recognise that they are the result of both rational thought and reasonable decision making.

Coronavirus considerations

In receiving the advice of DMPC, I have reflected on whether the coronavirus outbreak, whilst having had minimal impact on the formal consultation, places the Diocese of Manchester in such a new situation as to require the present process be aborted and for a fresh look at the matters which led to the initial proposals to be undertaken at a future date. I note that there is only a fairly low level of support for such an approach from DMPC. My considered view is that the missional drivers behind the proposals are if anything strengthened by the issues that emerging from coronavirus will require us to deal with. The arguments in favour of fewer and larger deaneries do not lose strength in a context where churches will have significant rebuilding of ministry to undertake, and where the challenges set out in the original consultation documents will not have diminished. Moreover, the additional work required to amalgamate the deaneries and to appoint Area Deans, is not in my view, nor has it been substantially advised me by DMPC, so extensive as to provide significant distraction during the period of emergence from the virus.

I am also minded that any failure to make a clear decision at this time will prolong uncertainty, leave us in a position that some 94% of survey respondents felt needed addressing, and be a greater distraction from facing the challenges we have before us. I am therefore satisfied that the Covid19 outbreak does not provide substantial grounds for my delaying a decision on this matter.

In coming to the view above, I recognise that practical issues around the timing of the UK recovery period from the virus may favour a short pause or delay in any implementation of proposals, either amalgamation of deaneries or appointment of Area Deans, or both. These are matters that can be considered apart from my reaching a decision on the substantive matters.

Summary of decision

Having read carefully the submissions from the consultation, and the considered views of the DMPC, I determine that the amalgamation of deaneries, as set out in the consultation documentation, and the move to seven full time Area Deans should take place. I have considered whether any alternative way forward has been presented during the process, that carries sufficient weight to warrant a fresh consultation on a revised set of proposals. My decision is that no such substantive alternative has emerged.

I will set out my response to the most substantial issues raised in the advice given to me, in subsequent sections of this document. Issues not directly addressed therein are ones that do not, in my view, have sufficient materiality. Time does not permit a thorough response to every point raised by every individual in such an extensive consultation; however, I remain grateful for all who took the opportunity to apprise me of their views. All have been considered, even if not addressed in writing.

Statistical note

It is standard practice for 5 point Likert scales of agreement to have the two "agree" categories, and separately the two "disagree" categories, combined when analysing the data. The academic evidence in favour of that approach can be accessed by anyone interested elsewhere. Whilst the difference between the "strong" and "slight" responses is referred to on a small number of occasions in the DMPC paper, I do not believe such distinctions add anything of substance to the understanding of the data, and am therefore following the convention of combining each pair.

Balance of opinion

Some 94% of those participating in the survey agreed that major change is required. Support for the status quo barely reaches the 5% level of statistical significance. Nor have any substantive arguments in favour of the status quo (other than as may be referred to later) been put before me through the consultation and the advice from DMPC. I am satisfied that some substantive reorganisation is both necessary and of urgency. The question is whether the particular proposals on which consultation has taken place represent the right step to take.

That the total responses amount to something in the order of only 2% of the diocesan family is to be noted. However, this is still a large number of individual responses for a diocesan level consultation. It is not to be wondered at that many churchgoers do not feel competent or motivated to respond to a matter that does not obviously and immediately impinge on the life of their own parish, and that the vast majority (around three quarters) of respondents were in some position of church leadership. I am content that the number of responses received is sufficient to help me reach my decision on the matter.

Of those responding to the survey, 47% agreed with the deanery amalgamation proposal whilst 38% disagreed. For the appointment of full time Area Deans, the figures were 55% in favour and 33% opposed. I note comments that the figure in favour of amalgamation was below 50%, nevertheless there are in each case majorities well beyond (as some have noted) those required for electoral purposes. It is noteworthy that respondents were more likely to support full time Area Deans than the 7 deanery plan. Whilst this might seem odd, given that the latter is not possible without the former, my view is that this primarily reflects the presence of concerns about the exact nature and boundaries of the proposed deaneries. I will address some matters relating to that later on. For now, I will note and accept the strong support for full time Area Deans and the positive weight in favour of the amalgamation proposals in total.

All submissions and survey responses were considered by DMPC members. I am advised that 15 members expressed themselves in favour of implementation, 2 members as clearly opposed, with 9 other members being to some extent supportive, whilst also asking for particular issues to be considered and addressed. I shall seek to address many of those issues and concerns in this document. For now, I note that a clear majority of DMPC favoured the proposals going ahead in their present form.

I will now go on to address issues raised during the consultation and in the DMPC response.

Piloting the proposals

One suggestion, though mentioned only a few times, is that the proposals could be piloted in a smaller part of the diocese, with a view to rolling them out more fully at a later point in time, had they proved successful.

The piloting of new ideas is something to which I am not in principle averse. Indeed, piloting was used a few years ago when we looked at a bottom up approach to planning for existing deaneries. That pilot process involved four distinct deaneries, and enabled lessons to be learned from their diverse experiences of the process. It has helped feed in to the current plans. It also allowed a phased approach, recognising that the substantial central support required to make each deanery plan work would only be practicable for a certain number of deaneries at any one time.

Piloting in the present circumstances would however, have to involve a large part of the diocese in order to have more than a single example to follow. It would involve significant delay in making change, when 94% of respondents felt this was now necessary. Moreover, a pilot of this nature would most likely have to run for some considerable period of time if it were to generate data that could be used to revise wider rollout. Progress would potentially be blighted for some years in those parts of the diocese not part of the pilot. Finally, lessons learned in the early years of full single phase rollout can be accommodated in changes to the new system as and when such prove timely. Accordingly, I am not minded that the proposals should be subject to a pilot phase.

Specific geographies

Two issues have emerged from the consultation that apply to particular areas of the diocese, namely the large size of the Ashton/Oldham Deanery as proposed and the possible case for a City Centre Deanery.

The current deanery boundaries in the City Centre area have long been a matter of concern. The boundaries largely follow the division of the centre into the twin cities of Manchester and Salford. The notion of creating a specific city deanery, which would comprise of those parishes which draw substantially from the increasing numbers of city centre dwellers, and those which exercise a wide ministry from a city centre base, has significant attractions; accordingly, it has been considered as a distinct possibility for some time. Under the current proposals it would continue to be the case that the Salford part of the city centre area remained in a separate deanery and archdeaconry from its Manchester neighbour. The creation of a single small deanery at a time of amalgamations of deaneries would cut across the principles of the proposals. In any case, in the most recent times the city centre parishes have begun to work more closely together notwithstanding the deanery and archdeaconry boundaries. It is my view that this cross boundary cooperation provides the better way to proceed at the present moment in time, than to create a separate city centre deanery structure.

The proposed deanery covering Ashton and Oldham would be undeniably numerically large, notwithstanding that it has been pointed out that in the past a previous deanery in the Oldham area had more stipendiary incumbents than the proposed deanery will have. Were the whole of the Metropolitan Borough of Tameside within Manchester Diocese there would be a stronger case for the creation of two separate deaneries, but the border with Chester stands across any such proposal. I note comments that the consideration of diocesan boundaries could have been part of the consultation, for this deanery and elsewhere (such as the Rossendale area) however, from many years of experience, I am convinced that attempting to bring neighbouring dioceses and their deaneries and parishes into a larger process would have resulted in many years of delay and consultation. Limits have to be set, and limiting the present work to the Diocese of Manchester is, in my view, necessary in order to bring it to a timely fruition.

Amalgamating the two Oldham deaneries, whilst leaving Ashton separate, would lead to one deanery too small to function well under the new proposals. Nor has the consultation come up with significant support for any alternative amalgamation process that would achieve more equal sizes. Consideration of how to reduce numbers of deaneries did, from the beginning, look at alternatives that might produce a very even distribution of size, the most likely of which were widely publicised. However, there were sound reasons against such a reorganisation. It would have done violence to existing deanery relationships by separating parishes from neighbours they have worked with over many years. Versions that emphasised equivalence of size would have also created more complex interactions and inconsistencies with civic boundaries. On balance I am satisfied that the existing proposals are the best way forward for the Oldham and Ashton areas. It will be important to monitor the impact of numerical size over the next few years.

Roles of Area Dean, Lay Chair, other officers, and how larger deaneries will function

Some respondents have identified a lack of sufficient clarity in how the roles of Area Dean and Lay Chair have been set out to date, and have asked for greater detail as to how larger deaneries will function. Along with this, suggestions have been made about the value of appointing assistant Area Deans and (informally at least) assistant Lay Chairs of deaneries. It has been queried whether the unpaid role of Lay Chair might be too onerous for suitable candidates to take on. And the question has been asked about what level of administrative support, via deanery secretaries as at present or otherwise, these deanery officers will require, in order to exercise their responsibilities effectively.

I accept however the view that the level of detail being asked for, can adequately be addressed during the early stages of the implementation process, rather than being required in advance of my giving approval to the overall proposals. Role Descriptions and Person Specifications will need to be drawn up in order to inform electorates and appointing bodies. As has been said, the boundaries between what Archdeacons do and what falls to Area Deans will need attention, and the opportunity may be sought for Area Deans to take on some aspects of work, such as around the support of local clergy, that currently fall to Archdeacons. It will be important that Area Deans Role Descriptions are shaped so that they are not seen as a tier of diocesan level management, but as enablers of ministry and mission in the local church. As bishop, I will require sufficient clarity on such matters ahead of the formal amalgamation of deaneries or the appointment of persons as Area Deans to the new deaneries.

Larger meetings, greater distances of travel and the challenges of finding time to engage with those of very different backgrounds, whilst being acceptable consequences, in my judgement, of the new proposals, may cause deaneries to consider whether their current pattern, mostly of evening midweek meetings, is the right one to adopt for the future. I would hope that under the new arrangements deaneries will give thought to how, when and where they meet, and creatively explore other options instead of simply seeking to replicate the past.

Finally, I note comments about the alternative of having 2 half time Area Dean posts instead of one single full time post, in order to root the post holders in specific day to day parish ministry and to allow for the two post holders to more fully cover the breadth of the Church of England as present in that deanery. Whilst this proposal has attractions, I consider there are two very major reservations that would make it difficult to operate in practice. Firstly, I cannot see how having two Area Deans, even if legally possible, would not risk confusion leading to the work being less effectively done. Secondly, 20 years of episcopal experience has convinced me that when a parochial post is combined with a wider role, it is extremely hard for the post holder to resist pressures to spend far more than half their time on their parish duties. At the heart of the proposals is the intention that the role of Area Dean should no longer be carried out in the amount of time that can be carved out from parish life, as that model has notably failed. To create half time posts would be to frustrate a central pillar of the proposals.

Geographical size and diversity

Responses have included reference to the fact that the larger size of deaneries will require additional travel for lay members attending meeting, specifically Deanery Synods. Most Deanery Synods meet however on no more than a handful of occasions a year. Additional travel time over a full year will not typically amount to more than a couple of hours for each individual member. Similarly, the additional time spent travelling for clergy attending both Synod and Chapter is not in my view excessive. Total travel time would still be less than is incurred by many members of Deanery Synods and Chapters in rural and more sparsely populated dioceses of the Church of England. Whilst any extra travelling is undoubtedly an inconvenience, I am content that the extra travel here is minimal and should not be a material consideration as to whether the proposals are appropriate.

Others have raised that some deaneries will include very distinct areas - Prestwich and Radcliffe are a long way, in more than miles, from the Rossendale Valley. However, I see no case that deaneries should be homogenous, indeed there are substantial arguments for a wider diversity, encouraging Christian disciples from very different backgrounds to meet and share fellowship.

Affordability of full time Area Deans and its impact on parochial clergy numbers

Whilst the appointment of full time Area Deans was very strongly supported through the survey, questions have been raised as to whether these extra posts are affordable at a time when the diocese may need to reduce its payroll costs both to meet the budget deficit already present in the 2019 outturn figures and to weather the extra storm of the coronavirus. It is argued that the appointment of clergy should focus on maximising the number of parochial posts, rather than creating an additional tier of stipendiary positions.

The need for the diocese to reach a position of financial stability and sustainability is a clear priority for me, for my colleagues on the Board of Finance, and across the diocese more widely. A move to full time Areas Deans must be embedded in such a plan. Recruitment should not take place until such a time as plans for sustainability are sufficiently advanced. This does not mean waiting for the full impact of the coronavirus to be known, which may take several years. Rather, it is a matter of being able to demonstrate that the appointment of such Area Deans will assist the change processes needed to achieve sustainability, not delay or derail them. I am minded that full time Area Deans will have a crucial role to play in the necessarily substantial changes of the years that lie ahead. I will expect significant work to take place on sustainability over the summer, ahead of any recruitment of Area Deans. I have heard the view that full time Area Deans, not having parishes to lead, might be seen as remote from the realities of parish life. However, I am persuaded by the comments of the Vicar of Bolton, based on his own experience, that a priest in a non-parochial post, much of whose work involves direct contact with clergy and laity in parishes, can be fully in touch with the demands of frontline ministry. The proposal to create full time Area Deans, instead of following the patterns of some other dioceses and adding further archdeacons, is precisely to ensure that appointments remain more focussed on the local church than on diocesan structure.

Sufficiency of information

A small number of contributors have indicated that greater information would have assisted them to decide whether or not they can support the proposals as they stand; for example, a case study of amalgamations of deaneries in other dioceses.

On the general point of more information, whilst additional data can always be welcomed, I am satisfied that the consultation process was informed to an extent more than sufficient to allow for a decision to be taken.

On the specific question of examples from other dioceses; whilst other dioceses are looking at bringing together smaller deaneries, and some have done so, I am not aware of a directly comparable example, let alone one that would be sufficiently mature for a robust analysis to be undertaken. I am aware that the Manchester process is being followed with interest by other dioceses, who may look to bring forward their own proposals in due course.

Ecumenical considerations

The Church of England declares itself to be *part* of the Church of God. That designation grounds a presumption that our relationships with other Christian bodies, not only our Anglican partners overseas, matter. In practice, ecumenism is at its strongest at the most local level, between churches of different denominations ministering in the same neighbourhoods, and then at the strategic level, where denominational leaders come together. In retrospect, sharing the proposals with our main denominational partners at an earlier stage would have been an act of courtesy towards them. However, in my view, there is little in the proposals likely to harm ecumenism. Indeed, moving to larger deaneries will more closely reflect the processes that have taken place in other denominations in recent times, for example Methodism moving to larger circuits

Concluding comments

In making my decision, I am hopeful for the future of the Manchester Diocese and the mission and ministry that takes place within it. Much progress has been achieved in recent years to increase the capacity of the diocese to support its constituent parts through some very changing times. The coronavirus epidemic has itself demonstrated that we can move quickly and show flexibility when called to worship and witness, nurture and serve, in a very changed situation. The progress of recent new initiatives, from our Salford Resource Church to our Antioch Network and the Children Changing Places project, show how we can extend our reach and increase the numbers we can reach with the Good News of God in Christ Jesus. We now need to extend that flexibility of approach across a wider range of our activities. The new Deanery structures and full time Area Deans will have a major part to play in helping us to achieve the necessary changes so that we can ever more fully inhabit our calling to be God's *Church for a Different World*.

+David Manchester

Feast of St Philip and St James