

Evaluation of Transforming Wigan

Executive Summary

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Introduction

Church of England Attendance figures

The Church of England continues to observe a steady decline in people attending church. In 2019, prior to the coronavirus (Covid-19) pandemic, Church of England statistics showed that attendance was down 2% compared with the previous year. In the Diocese of Liverpool, between 2014 and 2019 average weekly attendance amongst adults had dropped by 14.1% and amongst children by 15.9%.¹ In 2020, due to the pandemic, average weekly attendance was 57% lower than in 2019.² In 2019, the largest source of income across the Church of England was parish giving, which (along with tax recovered) accounted for £610 million.³ In 2020, giving income fell by 7.6%, a reduction of £39 million compared with 2019.⁴

This downward trend is likely to continue. Research by British Social Attitudes surmised that religious decline in Britain is generational, with children tending to be less religious than their parents, and on average their children's children even less religious than they are.⁵

Diocese of Liverpool vision and strategy

In October 2013, the Diocese of Liverpool reaffirmed its commitment to the archbishop's quinquennial goals (which continues to be supported by the Archbishops Council).⁶ To address the declining numbers, the vision of the Diocese of Liverpool⁷ is for a bigger church to make a bigger difference, with more people knowing Jesus and more justice in the world. This was to be accomplished through 100 new congregations, 1,000 new leaders and 10,000 new disciples.

Wigan Deanery

Wigan Deanery is the largest deanery in the Diocese of Liverpool and, administratively, sits within the borough of Wigan. At the start of the Transforming Wigan (TW) project, there were 29 parishes, supported by 18 incumbents, 1 pioneer minister, 4 curates, 1 house-for-duty minister, 5 self-supporting ministers, 33 readers, 15 retired clergy with 'permission to officiate', and 2 prison chaplains. Until TW, the focus had been on established⁸ churches for both adults and children, although some new Fresh Expressions church initiatives, such as Gateway, in the centre of town and Messy Church had begun. Within the deanery, there were 33 church buildings, many in a substandard condition,⁹ 22 Church of England primary schools and one high school (The Deanery).

Wigan has an ageing population and by 2025 the 65+ population is projected to increase by a fifth. Much of this increase is due to the increase in the 85+ population that is projected to increase by almost 60%.¹⁰ At the start of the TW project, average weekly giving was £5.40 per member compared to the diocesan average of £8.57; 25% of the total offering came through fundraising. The majority of giving (75%) was made by over-50s, of which 36% was given by those aged 70+. In Wigan, only 1% of the population attends a Church of England service on a Sunday and only another 1% attend services in other denominations.

¹ www.churchofengland.org/sites/default/files/2020-10/2019StatisticsForMission.pdf

² www.churchofengland.org/media-and-news/press-releases/statistics-mission-2020

³ *Parish Finance Statistics 2019* www.churchofengland.org/sites/default/files/2021-01/Parish%20Finance%20Statistics%202019.pdf

⁴ *Parish Finance Statistics 2020* www.churchofengland.org/sites/default/files/2022-02/Parish%20Finance%20Statistics%202020.pdf

⁵ *British Social Attitudes* www.bsa.natcen.ac.uk/media/39293/1_bsa36_religion.pdf

⁶ <https://www.churchofengland.org/sites/default/files/2022-06/GS%202267%20Archbishops%27%20Council%20Annual%20Report%202.pdf>

⁷ <https://liverpool.anglican.org/about-us/liverpool-dbf/vision/>

⁸ Inherited churches

⁹ <https://churchwigan.uk/assets/documents/TW+Project+Executive+Summary.pdf>

¹⁰ www.wigan.gov.uk/Council/Data-Statistics/Borough-Story/Population-estimates.aspx

Transforming Wigan project

The TW project was the first Strategic Development Fund project funded by the Church Commissioners (CC). The seven-year project was to turn around the mission and financial strength of Wigan Deanery. A project director was appointed in 2015 through a formal application process, who subsequently led a team to initiate the changes until 2020, when the Benefice of Church Wigan (CW) was officially formed.

The three principal goals of the TW project were to: (1) renew discipleship; (2) re-orientate the church; and (3) revive the community. The strategy adopted to do this was through building a growth framework to establish one church with several parishes and many worship communities.¹¹

Purpose and scope of the evaluation

The purpose of this evaluation is to provide an independent evidenced-based assessment of the seven-year project, which closed at the end of 2021. This report provides the results of an evaluation conducted in November 2022–January 2023. The focus of the evaluation was to assess the relevance, effectiveness, efficiency, impact and sustainability of the project, and identify key lessons and recommendations.

The evaluation was mainly qualitative in nature. It collected primary data through 20 interviews with key stakeholders, nine focus groups totalling 39 people representing seven new parishes, clergy and treasurers and wardens. A SWOT and PESTLE exercise¹² was also conducted with the Clergy Team. The quantitative survey data was matched against TW project data to generate additional insight. Secondary data included project documents and related literature.

Findings

Relevance

There was general agreement amongst parishioners and clergy alike that change needed to happen to halt the decline of the Church in Wigan. In 2013 the number of clergy in Wigan reduced from 24 to 18, thereafter clergy agreed that there needed to be some outside assistance to support change, which subsequently led to the development of the Transforming Wigan bid being submitted to the CC. The successful bid identified the areas to be addressed were: (1) improving infrastructure; (2) change management; (3) church planting; (4) developing missional leaders' communities; and (5) training and coaching. It was the first large change management programme for the Diocese and the CC.

Two project teams were established to manage the change: (1) the Project Group and Clergy Team, overseen by the Deanery Synod; and (2) the Guiding Coalition to provide strategic oversight and lead change. The majority of members of the two groups shared a similar ecclesiology and desire to see change within the deanery. The lay chair was invited to meetings and had easy access to the teams, but there was no specific lay representation.

The principal focus of the management teams was to change culture through the winning of hearts and minds using John Kotter's eight-step change management model (see Appendix 1), therefore no formal framework to measure project milestones and budget was developed at the start of the project. In 2018, a scoping document was developed on how structural change would be implemented. The TW project lead reported regularly to the diocese's oversight board, who regularly monitored progress.

Effectiveness

In 2020, the new structure was implemented: the 29 old parishes ceased to exist, and a new team benefice called CW was established with seven new parishes. The Wigan Deanery Trust (WDT) was established and given charitable status. Core Services was established, and overseen by WDT, to undertake administrative, finance, buildings management communication, HR, safeguarding and funerals co-ordination. The new

¹¹ Transforming Wigan Summary Document

¹² SWOT analysis aims to identify the key Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats within an organisation. A PESTLE exercise looks at the the key external factors (Political, Economic, Sociological, Technological, Legal and Environmental) that influence an organisation

benefice is governed by a joint council and the seven parochial church councils (PCCs), for which there is no precedent within the Church of England. Therefore, it has taken time to gain greater consensus and understanding through regular meetings with the Team Rectory, WDT and CW.

CW consists of the Clergy Team totalling 13 stipendiary clergy (two less than originally anticipated at the start of TW), led by the team rector. Existing PCCs were dissolved and new PCC representatives were elected for the seven new parishes. Parishes appointed wardens and treasurers for each of the seven parishes. These roles are supported by Core Services staff. However, it has been more difficult to recruit people into the new warden and treasurer roles. Two church buildings have closed due to safety issues and another one was repurposed, leaving 31 church buildings remaining within the CW portfolio. CW is currently undertaking a buildings review.

In 2019, parishioners were given an opportunity to give feedback to the CC on the changes to the deanery. Of the 203 responses, 53% (60% of which were from three parishes) objected to the changes, with the main concerns focused on the restructuring, stress to clergy and laity, mission, finance, and consultation and communication. The restructuring of the deanery was supported by the CC and formally started in 2020. The Bishop of Warrington was appointed to oversee a reconciliation process to address concerns raised by parishioners, which also coincided with the start of the pandemic and delayed proceedings.

The Covid-19 pandemic hampered implementation of the new structure and navigating the new system has been challenging for some. Some parishioners and lay leaders in administrative roles say it has become more complicated or more time-consuming. There is also passive resistance from some churches, which do not want to engage and therefore do not provide attendance and financial data.

TW has been particularly effective at establishing missional and social justice activities, including: 29 new communities, with a total of around 750 participants; House of Prayer; a Wigan-wide Alpha course with 370 attendees; and a Pentecost event in 2016, with around 5,000 people. The project leader was keen to engage with outside agencies, in particular, Wigan Council, which paid dividends during the pandemic as relationships had already been developed. The new structure has made it easier for the council to engage with the deanery as there are no longer many parishes to contact, but rather one team.

Churches engaged in missional and social justice activities prior to TW, but activities were often ad hoc and not joined up. The pandemic acted as a catalyst to activities being co-ordinated across the deanery. CW became the council's main distributor of food to those in need during this period. Some examples are: six Wigan-wide food pantries led and run by volunteers; a Christians Against Poverty debt centre and recruitment of a manager; bereavement support groups; and piloting of the Transforming Lives for Good early intervention project, providing coaches for schoolchildren. In December 2021, CW established 'Lifted' to coordinate social action activities across the deanery.

Key activities that helped TW and CW were the training and support of lay leaders, missional and social justice activities, and financial support from the diocese and 29 former parishes, as well as support from non-stipendiary and retired clergy. Factors that acted as barriers to implementation were: poor communication; buy-in from parishes not being as extensive as initially perceived; people not wanting to change; the approach of changing hearts and minds being less tangible for some than a project framework with project milestones; and the pandemic.

Efficiency

Through CW, the financial assets of the 29 parishes became financial assets of the seven new parishes. Overall giving within the deanery has gone down, falling to 88.6% of the 2014 values in 2019. In 2020, only one parish had paid its share in full. Between 2015 and 2019, there was a 3.26% decline in giving and a sharp decline of 16.7% at the start of/during the pandemic. The addition of the new missional communities did not lead to an increase in giving. Without support from the diocese, the consequences of continued decline in giving would have seen stipendiary clergy go down to a total of eight.

Core Services costs around 13% of the CW total income. It has enabled CW to operate more efficiently and effectively. It has provided efficiencies through developing and running a centralised funerals service; saved around £58,000 on building insurance; increased churches' health and safety compliance from 25% to 75%;

improved safeguarding practice; ensured employment contracts are now legal; and provided administrative support for clergy. The challenge of funding restricts staff to being employed part-time, and only allows the service to plan for 12 months rather than having a five-year financial planning process.

Impact

The two key aims were to make Wigan a 'missional powerhouse' and turn around its financial strength. TW has been successful in its missional focus, establishing 63 worship communities in schools and the community, and engaging over 12,656 people in missional activities. The training of just under 200 lay leaders has been key to this. TW was able to provide a *permission-giving* environment through training and support of lay leaders, enabling and encouraging leaders to set up and lead various activities and courses such as dementia and faith cafes, bereavement courses, baptism support and the running of food pantries.

For those who have engaged with TW and CW, there has been positive feedback and some have been enriched through building new friendships across parish boundaries, sharing of learning and good practice, praying together and supporting one another. However, in some areas of CW there is a tension that established churches have been neglected and traditional activities are less valued.

TW was unable to halt the decline in church attendance across the deanery and observed a steady decline of 8.8% up until the pandemic, after which there was steep decline when churches closed.

There has also been significant change in the way clergy work. In general, clergy previously worked within in their own parish or (immediate parish) boundaries, but now as a team benefice they are able to work across the deanery. The Clergy Team began to work together in 2019 prior to the new structure and the pandemic. Consequently, when the pandemic forced the closure of church buildings, the team were agile and able to mobilise quickly, meeting daily using Zoom, as well as working together to coordinate daily prayer for parishioners and supporting parishioners' services using a range of media. The Clergy Team prioritise their weekly meetings and have worked to gel as a team. As a result, even with added pressures of reduced clergy numbers, clergy and curates want to remain within the deanery.

The pandemic had a significant impact on TW: in its attempts to implement a time-limited structural change programme in numerous lockdowns; challenges of recruiting new staff; closure of buildings; reduced giving; and volunteers choosing to step down from their activities; attendance figures not returned to pre-pandemic levels. Conversely, CW experienced some positive aspects: the strengthening of the Clergy Team; identifying new lay leaders; setting up and coordinating food projects with Wigan Council; and opportunities to meet and support new people in other parishes via Zoom meetings.

Sustainability

The early focus of TW to develop and train individual lay leaders using both the Local Missional Leadership diocese initiative and the TW Cultivate initiative. Some lay leaders are very positive about the opportunities presented to them through building skills and confidence to do something new, or to exploring options to go into ministry.

Feedback on the training was positive overall, though not all of the lay leaders trained were aware of opportunities to use their skills and training. Some said they felt overstretched and were concerned about succession planning to fill their roles. CW is now focusing on training of teams through the Church of England's Greenhouse initiative.

Much of the learning from TW has gone on to inform the CC Strategic Transformation Fund-supported Fit For Mission project, which is currently being piloted in two parishes in the Diocese of Liverpool. One of the key differences is that parishes will not be forced to comply with changes and will be able to opt out. CW still has much learning to share through clergy, lay leaders, working with external partners, and missional and social justice activities.

Conclusion

The Diocese of Liverpool, in cooperation with key representatives within Wigan, sought to reorientate the deanery through the TW bid by addressing its mission and finances. TW successfully started new missional

activities across the deanery through engaging and training leaders, starting new missional communities and establishing a team benefice. CW's focus on teams, both lay and stipendiary, is an important strategy going forward, not only to provide support, but to identify and train future leaders. TW has also set a precedent for the diocese and beyond in working with external partners, particularly statutory partners, in delivering deanery-wide, coordinated social justice activities. TW has been less effective in engaging some areas of the deanery, particularly with established churches.

The TW bid was ambitious, particularly in its aim to turn around the financial strength of the deanery. The research can only conclude that TW was unable to stop the downward trajectory of the finances. The financial burden of many old buildings remains for CW and will continue for the foreseeable future, even though there is now a buildings review in place. However, now that new structures such as the WDT and Core Services are in place, financial efficiencies have been made and processes to streamline and manage the deanery have been established. CW now has greater autonomy on how funds are spent, and WDT's charitable status provides an opportunity to seek funding from other sources.

The seven year project was significantly interrupted by two years of a pandemic, and continues to experience its ongoing consequences. The pandemic saw a significant drop in attendance and giving, which is still to recover its pre-pandemic numbers. However, the pandemic also illuminated how a Team Benefice was agile, quick to adapt and provide a range of support which other deaneries struggled to do.