

## Ian Theodoreson

### AGM of the Diocesan Board of Finance – 10 July 2024

This is likely to be my last synod meeting. I'm afraid I am losing my battle with muscular dystrophy and no longer have the energy required to be an effective chair of the DBF. This amazing diocese deserves more than I can now bring to the task and I have asked Bishop Michael to appoint my successor as soon as possible. I will stay on in role until that person is in place.

Let me turn our attention to the financial position of the diocese going forward.

The big story is that we have lost the discipline we had, pre-COVID, to bring in the contributions needed to the Common Fund to pay for the ministry of our stipendiary clergy and their support network. Too many parishes are failing to meet their Parish Share in full and our recovery rate in 2023 was below that of 2022, at 89% of what is required.

This is a reflection of the headwinds that our parishes are facing financially but also, I suspect, because people don't appreciate that the diocese cannot function without everybody playing their part via the Parish Share system. In the short term we have bridged the gap by the sale of surplus property, but that is a strategy that will have run its course by 2026 when the supply of surplus housing is exhausted. Just as Paul wrote to the Corinthian church about everyone being part of a body (with regard to ministry) with each part having equal status, we need all our parishes to see themselves as having a part to play financially too, and that every contribution, whether large or small, is vital.

But people won't give just because we ask them to. We need to have a clear and credible vision of what we are trying to achieve as a diocese and explain clearly how the money received via the Common Fund supports that vision. I think the new benefice share system with its parts A-C is an important part of that communication piece, but let us not fool ourselves: the transition to a new system is going to be difficult and I suspect will require us to draw on our reserves to the tune of several £million before it is finally embedded.

We may be able to attract some central church funding to support our Diocesan strategy, and in the longer term we may even see a new settlement between dioceses and the monies the Church Commissioners hold, but none of that is going to happen quickly nor is it a substitute for managing a clearer dialogue with our parishes.

And while I am on the subject of being realistic, can I also observe that we don't have the funds to meet our ambitions to be a net zero carbon diocese by 2030. This is another area where we need to be brutally honest with ourselves and cut our cloth accordingly.

It's not all doom and gloom. We have done terrific work in the last few years bringing our debt exposure down from over £10m to £4m and we have brought a new focus to our

management of glebe land and investments so they are delivering around £3m of expendable income into our coffers each year.

However, there is much to be done, which can only be done if we work together with a unity of vision.