

**Minutes of a meeting of Lichfield Diocesan Synod
16th March 2024, 9.30 am, Telford Minster**

- Present: The Bishop of Lichfield (President)
 The Bishop of Stafford
 35 clergy members
 34 lay members
- In attendance: Mrs Julie Jones (Diocesan Secretary)
 Mr Jonathan Hill (Director of Finance)
 Mrs Jess Dace (Deputy to the Director of Finance)
 Mr Mark Davis (Director of Education)
 Mrs Jules Smith (Strategic Ministry Development Officer)
 The Revd Catherine Matclock (Pioneer Missioner)
 The Revd Greg Bakker (Church Mission Society)
- Apologies: The Bishop of Shrewsbury
 22 clergy members
 16 lay members

The President assumed the Chair

1. Welcome and Opening Prayers

The Revd Matt Beer led an act of opening worship.

2. Minutes of the last meeting and Matters Arising (DS24/03/01)

The minutes of the meeting held on 18th November 2023 were approved and signed by the President accordingly. No matters arising had been notified.

The Chair of the House of Clergy assumed the Chair

4. Vexatious complaints Policy for Ratification (DS24/03/02)

The Revd Neil Robbie (West Bromwich) brought back this item following revisions resulting from discussions at the last meeting. The document had been circulated to members in advance. After talking through the revisions, he then moved the following motion:

This Synod welcomes the policy for identifying and handling persistent, unreasonable and vexatious complaints and encourages its use in the diocese.

Mr John Wilson (General) Synod thanked Neil Robbie and the team who had worked on this much needed policy.

The Revd Brian Leathers (Utttoxeter) asked if the policy should be taken forward to General Synod for discussion.

A vote on the above motion then took place at it was clearly carried with 1 abstention.

The Chair then moved the following additional motion:

This Synod thanks the team for its hard work and requests that this item of business moves forward to General Synod for debate in line with current discussions.

There followed a vote on this motion, and it was carried unanimously.

5. Approving the Revision of the Stafford AMPC Constitution (DS24/03/03)

The Bishop of Stafford spoke to a previously circulated paper setting out some amendments to the constitution of Stafford AMPC. This had been approved by the AMPC and the DMPC. The proposal was to change the quorum required for a meeting to 50% (in line with other AMPCs), and to provide that on the relinquishment of membership by a Rural Dean or Lay Chair, their replacement in that role would serve the remainder of the term of office.

The Bishop of Stafford then moved the following:

This Synod approves the revision of the Stafford AMPC constitution.

A vote took place, and this was clearly carried with 1 abstention.

6. Mothers' Union Presentation

Mrs Helen Palfrey (Nominated), the Diocesan Mothers' Union President, gave a presentation updating on the organisation's work in the diocese, nationally and internationally, with over 4 million members in more than 80 countries. She also spoke about its founding and history, and work, for example in providing health and social care, and literacy and finance training, enabling women to gain respect and confidence and become leaders. Amongst much work in the UK, they supported the provision of holidays and days out for those living in stressful situations and worked with prisons with visiting and supporting prisoners after release. There were also partnerships with Women's Aid and the Clewer Initiative, and the Rise Up initiative relating to domestic abuse. However falling membership was a challenge in the UK, and elections would take place soon for the diocesan president and trustee board, and also worldwide. She encouraged members to contact the Mothers' Union office with any questions or for further information. A video was then shown illustrating the impact of Mothers' Union worldwide in 2022. Helen concluded by asking members to pray for the organisation, and she then moved the following motion:

This Synod endorses and encourages the work of the Mothers' Union

Mr Chris Gill (General Synod) Thanked Helen for the presentation and her work in leading the Mothers' Union in the diocese. He had had the opportunity at General Synod to hear about "Rise Up" and all the good work going on nationally and internationally. The idea of deanery-based Mothers' Union groups had emerged and he asked if there were any such groups in the Diocese.

Helen answered that there had been a deanery structure but this had largely ceased. She agreed that the idea should be taken on board and considered.

The Revd Zoe Heming (General Synod) echoed these thanks and had been inspired by the presentation to promote the work of Mothers' Union. She had thought about the mothers around the world standing up in solidarity across boundaries in response to issues such as war and knife crime. She wondered whether Mothers' Union could be part of this kind of work, given the division in the UK currently.

Helen appreciated this comment and felt that Mothers' Union as a whole could possibly be involved in work around reconciliation in this country.

The Revd Alison Morris (Walsall) a member of the oldest Mothers' Union branch of Pelsall. She thanked Helen and the leadership team and for their hard work, discussion and debate which had led to much change and perpetuated the organisation's work.

Mrs Penny Allen (General Synod) was a member of a Mothers' Union Deanery Group. She spoke about how the group had started and the considerable work it had gone on to accomplish, including supporting several of the programmes mentioned and various charities. The group had also grown considerably in the last five years.

Mrs Linda Savage (Wem and Whitchurch) had been involved with Young Farmers Clubs and she was particularly pleased to hear about the Mothers' Union support of this group, which was much needed.

Mrs Amanda Robbie (General Synod) was delighted to learn of the praying partnership with Nigeria and South Sudan, as her church had members from these countries. She encouraged these overseas links which were often also taking place in parishes such as hers.

The Revd Preb Pat Hawkins (General Synod) had been encouraged and cheered by the presentation. She was excited to hear about the church-based pilot, and was keen to hear more about creative ways to encourage parish involvement, having experienced the closure of her parish branch.

Helen concluded by saying that there was no right or wrong way to be Mothers' Union, with groups meeting in various configurations and contexts to continue the work. She would publicise more information about the church-based pilot as soon as it became available.

Bishop Michael commented on the participative and appreciative nature of the discussion and added his own appreciation of the presentation and the quality of information within it. He also thanked Helen and her colleagues personally for all their work. He encouraged members to wholeheartedly support the motion.

There followed a vote on the motion, and it was carried unanimously.

7. Our Response to Environmental Challenges – an update (DS24/03/04a-c)

Members of the Diocesan Green Team gave presentations updating on our response to environmental challenges. The Revd Abbie Walsh (Lichfield) gave an introduction about the team, and set out the biblical basis for the vision of a renewed relationship with the natural world, which was made possible by the work of Christ. A video on Creationtide from the Revd Richard Clarkson was then shown. The Revd Debbie Loughran (Telford) then gave a presentation on Eco-Church, including a video from St Michael's Church, Rushall, the first in Lichfield Diocese to achieve a gold Eco-Church award. The Diocesan Secretary then spoke about the imminent recruitment of a Net Zero Carbon Project Manager, for which funding had been obtained from the national church. The national church document "A Routemap to Net Zero" had been circulated to members and the Diocesan Secretary asked that it should be taken back to PCCs for its challenges to be considered, she also asked for their prayers for the upcoming recruitment. The Chair then moved the following motion:

This Synod takes note of the update.

A vote took place, and this was clearly carried.

8. General Synod Report (DS24/03/05)

Mrs Penny Allen (General Synod) spoke to her previously circulated report of the February sessions of General Synod. She pointed out that she had been unable to attend in person and had taken part online.

Mr Chris Gill (General Synod) was concerned that there were possible errors and personal views in the report, and he encouraged members to look at the General Synod web pages where reports and recordings could be viewed.

Bishop Michael added that in his experience at these sessions there had been a tone of courtesy, listening and acceptance of finding a way forward together, despite the diverse range of views relating to Living in Love and faith in particular.

The Revd Matt Beer (General Synod) added that the proposals on Living in Love and Faith could not be brought back to General Synod in the current form and so discussions it may be some time before discussions could continue.

The Revd Preb Pat Hawkins (General Synod) pointed out that the business could return in the current form with the permission of General Synod's presidents.

Penny Allen responded that she had reported from her own perspective, and she endorsed the advice of Chris Gill for members to access the General Synod web pages for further information.

She then moved the following motion:

The report of the General Synod Sessions in February 2024 be received.

A vote then took place, and this was carried with 15 against and 3 abstentions.

9. Question Time

The Question Time paper was discussed, which contained nineteen questions and written answers from diocesan officers. The following supplementary questions were then raised:

Regarding Question 1, Mrs Laurina Rushworth (Hodnet) asked if a discussion could be held at a future meeting of Synod regarding churches facing possible closure, and the alternative options available to them.

The Diocesan Secretary said that this should be passed to the Agenda Planning Committee for consideration.

In response to Question 3, the Revd Paul Kingman (Stone) asked in view of the problems in terms of reaching out to the community, what essential changes would be made in the ministry of the churches mentioned to reshape for mission, e.g. how would priorities be reviewed in our traditional churches?

Bishop Michael felt that this question needed to be taken and applied to each church individually in the context of Shaping for Mission.

Regarding Question 4, the Revd Tim Vasby-Burnie (Shrewsbury and Wrekin) asked whether there was awareness that some families were facing a drop in income of £8-10,000 and what conversations had taken place around this.

The Diocesan Secretary answered that while the diocese did not have knowledge of individual circumstances, there had been a conversation in the diocese. There were discussions taking place at a national level around clergy remuneration which were being closely monitored. In the meantime, she encouraged individual clergy experienced difficulties to privately contact their Archdeacon. This would help us to gather data on the level of need, with a view to forming an appropriate, affordable and sustainable response.

Mr John Wilson (General Synod) represented the Diocese on the Queen Victoria Clergy Fund which was able to make grants, and the diocese was in receipt of such a grant. This funding could be used in many ways including supporting clergy in difficulty. He suggested that the Revd Treena Larkin may be able to help with this in the first instance.

In response to Question 5, the Revd Neil Robbie (West Bromwich) asked if the DBE were assessing anxieties amongst school senior leadership teams or governors about the potential for complaints related to the policies referred to in the question.

The Director of Education said this had not been done in a formal way, however the Diocesan Christian Distinctiveness Advisers visited virtually every church school each term, and so picked up on such matters. So far this had not been an issue, but the DfE guidance was awaited.

In response to Question 7, the Revd Preb Brian Leathers (Uttoxeter) was concerned about the number of clergy leaving the diocese for other posts, and asked what action was being taken to reverse this.

The Diocesan Secretary said that the Bishop's Staff team were extremely aware of the vacancy factor and were continuously looking at how to better attract applicants when advertising. However, there was a lack of applications for posts in more difficult areas, and this was having a significant impact in the diocese.

Bishop Michael endorsed this and added that this was a national issue, and was also related to numbers of retirements.

The Revd Zoe Heming (General Synod) asked if there was a diocesan policy on the duration of interregnums.

The Diocesan Secretary said that there was no such policy, and the desire was to fill vacancies as quickly as possible. There was also flexibility around the deployment of interim ministers where appropriate.

The Revd Richard Merrick (Wolverhampton) felt that we should be considering this matter more structured prayerful way, and suggested a day of fasting and prayer to address it.

The Diocesan Secretary agreed to put this to the Bishop's Staff Team.

In respect of Question 9, Bishop Michael wished to add to his written answer, saying that there were plans for Area and Suffragan Bishops to undertake a Ministry Development Review process which would not be with their Diocesan Bishop.

In respect of Question 10, Mrs Amanda Robbie (General Synod) was concerned about the decrease in numbers of children over the age of ten attending church. She asked if there could be some case studies in churches where the numbers were higher so that lessons could be learned, and examples of good practice emulated. She also suggested a synod debate on this.

The Diocesan Secretary said that she would ask the Mission Team to consider the matter but acknowledged that there was a drop in attendance when children left primary school. This needed addressing in a more structured way.

In respect of Question 11, Mrs Amanda Robbie (General Synod) referred to the figures indicating an increase in those over 70 and in particular in four deaneries the increase was over 10%. She noted the implications of this, asking if there was research around how these churches could be supported, and also looking at those churches where this was not the case.

The Diocesan Secretary answered that there had not been analysis around this, and there was a national issue regarding attracting young people. The strategy framework to be discussed later however contained workstreams relating to this issue.

In response to Question 12, the Revd Mark Wilson (West Bromwich) said that the figures given did not give a true picture of his own Church due to the way method of collection.

The Diocesan Secretary suggested that he contact Richard Barrett at the Diocesan Office for help with this.

In response to question 13, Mr Chris Gill (General Synod) asked if there was any financial commitment required from the Diocese relating to the work of the West Midlands Racial Justice Board.

Bishop Michael answered that this was not the case and measures had been out in place to ensure this. He added also that the Revd Graham Adamson had accepted his invitation to become the co-convenor of the Diocesan Racial Justice Task Group following the upcoming retirement of the Archdean of Walsall.

In response to Question 14, Mr Chris Gill (General Synod) was grateful for the explanation of the phrase “deconstructing whiteness” but recognised some unease with it. He asked if any thought had been given to the possible perception of the phrase in dioceses, particularly in areas where there was racial tension.

Bishop Michael felt this was a very fair question and accepted the possible perception of the phrase and the range of view associated with it. Those involved in the project were aware of the concerns and would continue to monitor its reception.

In response to Question 16, the Revd Paul Darlington (Oswestry) asked how many people had passed or would pass a BAP to start training this September.

The Director of Ministry did not have this information to hand but would ensure an answer was provided.

In response to Question 18, The Revd Kate Watson (Wolverhampton) asked if it was anticipated that there would be a settling in periods for the new Bishop of Wolverhampton before the recruitment of the Archdeacon of Walsall would begin.

Bishop Michael said that the recruitment of the Archdeacon was a priority to be worked on with the new Bishop. It was not clear whether this might begin prior to the new Bishop’s arrival, and experience had shown that timescales were difficult to predict. The Revds Julia Cody and Jim Trood had kindly agreed to continue as Acting Archdeacons until at least Easter 2025.

Mr John Wilson (General Synod) felt that there was insufficient lay representation of those from the Area on the Advisory Panel for the recruitment of the new Bishop of Wolverhampton.

Bishop Michael said that there were two lay people and two clergy from the Area and he felt that this was fair representation.

In response to Question 19, The Revd Kate Watson (Wolverhampton) asked about the curriculum and delivery of the Chad programme.

The Director of Ministry said that the programme focussed around 6 modules, and information was available on the diocesan website ([here](#)). The material was primarily delivered in house by herself, Clare Whitney, the Revd Steve Hollinghurst. There were conversations around increasing in house delivery of training programmes and she encouraged anyone who wished to be involved in this to make contact.

10. Presidential Address

In his Presidential Address, Bishop Michael said that he was pleased to be back and in particular as the strategic framework was now being discussed further and potentially taken forward. He then thanked all who had sent messages, letters and cards, assurance of prayers, and shown great kindness in so many thoughtful ways. He looked forward to the strategic discussions and hoped that members would endorse the framework. He stressed that at all times we must pray in humility, expectation and trust, knowing that our gracious God would bless us. Full text available [here](#).

The Chair of the House of Laity assumed the Chair

11. Strategic Direction, Principles and Priorities (DS24/03/06)

The Bishop of Stafford and the Archdeacon of Stoke-upon-Trent gave a presentation beginning with a moment of prayer. This accompanied a previously circulated document setting out a strategic framework for 2024 – 2030 which followed much work and consultation. The document was a working out of how the 4 shaping principles might look in practice, with clear goals alongside some key cross weaving themes. Before coming to Synod, the document had been looked at by Bishop's Council and a conference of Rural Deans and Lay Chairs as critical friends. The many challenges it created had been noted, such as the boldness and ambition of the goals set, and the need for very clear communication across a range of groups and contexts. There had been concerns also around increased workloads and what support would be needed, acknowledging that we would also need the humility to know that all we do is dependent upon the mercy of God. There had also been a feeling of positivity towards the clarity a direction provided in the framework and a sense of excitement, hope and purpose. The Archdeacon spoke in detail about each of the 9 goals set out which were the result of considering where we would wish to be in 2030. These were not however 9 isolated projects but were there to shape our thinking and actions across all that we did. There were four cross weaving threads spanning the 9 goals which the Archdeacon also explained. Much thought had gone into these, and it was hoped the framework would shape our life and work together for the coming years. Members were then asked to discuss the framework during a break, around what excited them about it, and any questions they wished to ask. Following this a plenary session was then held.

Bishop Michael then moved the following motion:

This Synod endorses the principles and priorities set out in the strategy direction paper with regular updates and reviews at future meetings.

This was voted upon and carried with 3 abstentions.

Bishop Matthew concluded by saying that much work was still to be done to achieve the goals and it was noted that the recruitment of a new Director of Communications, plus a new nationally

funded strategic role were both important in the implementation of the strategy and would be actioned immediately following Synod's endorsement of it. Members were asked for their prayers for these appointments and for the 9 goals set out in the strategy. It was intended that presentations would also be made available to all deaneries.

12. Pioneering Parishes (DS24/03/07)

Greg Bakker of the Church Mission Society, and Catherine Matclock (Pioneer Missioner) spoke about the work of Pioneering Parishes, which provided tools to help parishes become more outward looking, enabling parish priests and their churches to extend the care of souls to all in the parish, and how this could be worked out in the diocese, particularly in the light of the new strategic framework.

The Chair then moved the following motion:

This Synod takes note of the work to support our on-going outreach efforts

The Revd Andy Simpson (Tutbury) asked if this was something for parishes who didn't engage in pioneering ministry, or was it there to help those who were already doing so, or both.

Greg commented that in his experience, capacity was always an issue, and letting go of things that no longer served us required transparent conversations. He felt though that the tools offered were helpful in both situations.

The Revd Matt Beer (General Synod) asked how Pioneering Parishes could help us to reach new disciples.

Greg spoke about his own experience of a pioneering project on an estate where church building had closed, and with collaboration between people from the parish church and pioneers, people had slowly become Christians. This was about churches changing and shaping their thinking and their way of operating so that they could place themselves on the margins and engage with unconnected people. Pioneering was also about starting new congregations and communities of faith where there was space for people to discover and be nurtured in faith and so was about discipleship for everybody.

The Revd Ben Whitmore (Trysull) suggested that the motion be slightly amended to:

This Synod takes note of the work of Pioneering Parishes in supporting our ongoing outreach efforts.

Synod consented to this change. This motion was the voted upon and clearly carried with 1 abstention.

The Chair thanked all for their attendance and participation. He also asked members to speak in the deaneries and parishes about the forthcoming elections and to encourage participation. He also informed members that he did not attend to stand for the role of Chair of the House of Laity in the next triennium and encouraged lay members to consider this also.

Bishop Michael thanked Julian Francis, the Archdeacon of Walsall on the occasion of his last meeting before his retirement in May.

The Archdeacon of Lichfield led prayer for Julian as he moved into retirement.

Bishop Michael closed the meeting in prayer.

The following items were deemed to have been noted by the Synod:

- Standing Committee Report (DS24/03/08)

All papers and presentations are linked from the web page [here](#).