

For Such a Time as This **Key Findings from the *Listening in Deaneries* Exercise**

In May 2020 the Bishop of Plymouth invited all Deanery Chapters to discuss and respond to ten questions, five of which focused on our present experience of ministry during the COVID-19 pandemic and five which looked to the future. These questions are listed in Appendix A. All but two deaneries submitted responses to their archdeacon, with deaneries submitting a mixture of collated responses from the Rural Dean and responses from individual churches.

This report explores the main themes which emerged across all ten questions, recognising the differences in opinion and approach and highlighting areas where there are calls for change, support and recognition. This report is offered as a resource for ongoing discussion and reflection in deaneries, by diocesan officers and by senior Staff. It is anticipated that the conversation which began in chapters will be echoed across the whole diocese through a series of 'big theological conversations' later in the year.

Everything in quotation marks in this report is taken directly from the survey and has only been edited to correct typing errors or improve clarity.

Pax et Bonum

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Challenging Vocation - Wholeness, Awareness and Realignment

Sometimes it takes a planned intervention to make us realise how out of control our lives have become. The single most significant theme which emerged from the 'listening in deaneries' exercise was that the lockdown has been such a wake-up call and many clergy do not want to return to "the rat race of ministry and bureaucracy". This was expressed positively as an appreciation for "the opportunity to think about what really matters in life" and to develop patterns which model a balance of work and family life ("I would love to continue with some of the positive family routines we have established, such as having our evening meal quite early around the table together, followed by a board game"). It was also expressed more negatively as clergy looked back on their life before lockdown and saw themselves "tearing around physically", facing the "relentlessness of the treadmill" and spending their time doing ministry "which is unnecessary, could be done by someone else, or is soul destroying".

Among clergy (not just in this diocese) there is a 'habitus' (or 'group-think') which says that this is how ministry has to be, especially in multi-parish benefices. The break in the pattern of physical services, meetings and training caused by COVID-19 is an opportunity to call-out unhealthy patterns of ministry. It gives us the chance to talk about vocation and realign the priorities of clergy and those who place expectations on them (from the parish and the diocese) so that it is possible to "hold onto the freedom we have" and experience "freedom to be the priest".

In practice, this will mean continuing to promote shared leadership ("This period has seen new leaders come to the fore who will need to be encouraged to grow and develop so that their gifts can be released to bless others"), helping clergy to have a good ministry/home-life balance ("I need to prioritise my family more") and providing high-quality accessible training about establishing new

patterns of mission and worship. Although much of this thinking was already taking place in the diocese and the national church, the *kairos* moment provided by COVID-19 is that “people have accepted a huge amount of change” so in this period of flux, “we must learn from the experience and shouldn’t be aiming to do what we [did] before”.

Another lens for looking at working patterns is to consider the financial and environmental impact of using cars far less, especially reducing “long-distance travel to Exeter and elsewhere” (“one journey to Exeter [From Newton Abbot] will pay for a Zoom subscription for a month”).

Technology - Embrace and Exclusion

By moving services, meetings and pastoral care to online platforms, churches have been able to keep in contact with their own church family, as well as reaching new people and seeing “online viewers as our new front line”. Many felt an ambiguity towards this new way of working (“sometimes this has worked and been positive, with some relationships deeper than before or new relationships made. But some connections we have lost – particularly for those not connecting by phone or computer”) while others identified “A worrying division between Haves and Have-nots in terms of internet”.

The ‘Worship in Lockdown’ survey¹ which was carried out in the diocese in April revealed a creative outpouring as churches across the diocese adapted to meet the needs of their congregations and communities. Many Mission Communities began to use YouTube, Facebook Live and Zoom for online services that were either pre-recorded or livestreamed. Those who were not able to produce an online offering and those who felt their congregations would not be able to access online services produced a range of printed materials for people to use at home or began to use conference calling to run an interactive live service over the ‘phone.

In the intervening months, many clergy and lay leaders have taken the opportunity to develop what they offer, online and off. The sense is that what was being initially offered as an emergency response needed to be honed so that churches could be taken “from tech phobic to tech savvy”. One way that this learning occurred was sharing “newly found expertise with each other” in chapter meetings, another was “Media-Savy training” provided as part of the CMD programme and delivered online by the specialists from the diocesan Communications and Engagement Team.

While many people are embracing this new area of ministry (“I think many of us are already thinking about live-streaming our services as we have been so encouraged by our online presence and the wide response”) and have begun to see the possibilities for mission and outreach (“Live streaming [...] weddings, funerals and Baptisms”), others regarded online as lacking compared to physical services (“Online worship contains the parts, but it is not completely satisfactory”).

Technology has the potential to exclude, but no more so than our traditional forms of worship in physical buildings at a set time every week. This leaves Mission Communities with a dilemma as we begin to think about moving out of lockdown. Whether we focus solely on the physical or move everything online, we will leave some people out. The intuitive response is to say that we don’t want anyone to be left out of church, but the resources required to run our current online offering alongside the physical services we used to hold are simply not available, especially if we want clergy to have a more sustainable workload (see section 1).

¹ <https://exeter.anglican.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/Worship-in-Lockdown-Survey-Results-for-Distribution.pdf>

The recent *Everyone Welcome Online* study found that most people who accessed online services had a 'clear and established link with the church they have chosen'.² This implies that there is a need for online expressions of churches in a local area, rather than expecting 'a few large churches with slick online operations [to] scoop the market'³ or for the diocese to produce "central on-line-services for those parishes unable to provide it locally".

If our desire is to offer sustainable, local online provision for worship and pastoral care, we will need to ask who we can partner with in our local area?' Possible answers include working ecumenically, contributing to something which operates at a deanery level, or investing in online worship and mission across a Mission Community. We don't all have to have an online mirror of our ministry, but it does seem necessary to have good coverage across the diocese with a variety of styles and traditions represented.

Patterns of Worship in a Mixed-Economy

Being out of buildings and online has meant that Mission Communities are meeting together, some for the first time, and new people are able to access services. For some this has made the "sense of community considerably greater", leading them to conclude that "Mission Communities CAN and DO work". Other have found that they are released for a wider mission as "church [is] not so focussed around Sundays" and congregations have become "used to doing only one service".

This freedom continues to be tempered by a sense of loss. Typical responses were: "I have greatly missed Sunday services, especially singing God's praises and taking Communion together" and "Lockdown has revealed how important services are to congregations".

Looking forward, some will take the opportunity to rethink what they are offering and to keep an online and Mission Community dimension ("How do we encourage a new way of being church? We don't want to go back and indeed cannot go back") while others are resistant to change ("Sadly I think we might need to spend a lot of time defending traditional church from attack from those who want everything to change"). Other felt constrained by what they anticipated their congregations would want, saying that it is "likely that a core of people will want things to remain exactly as they were before lockdown". Some were sympathetic to this sentiment saying, "In these small rural communities I would expect it to return to normal fairly rapidly, with everyone breathing a sigh of relief, and a renewed appreciation of what they were missing".

The Eucharist is central to the discussion about patterns of worship with many people reporting a profound sense of loss as they were not able to distribute, or receive it. Typical responses were: "[I miss] Holy Communion - it not only sustains me spiritually, but it is also important for my general well-being and I didn't fully appreciate just how much this is the case until the lockdown" and "I long to be able once again to place the Sacrament of eternal life into the hands of God's people". This is not a universal feeling, however, with one respondent saying, "I realise that imaginative 'Services of the Word' with good hymns are the most appreciated on Zoom. This has also encouraged some Methodist and Baptist people to join in. I haven't missed Communion either!"

While recognising that "Communion is the driver" for many to want to restart physical services, what is clear is that some form of "mixed-economy in worship styles and practices" will need to continue for some time, with physical and distanced forms of worship, prayer and meetings taking place

² <https://www.dur.ac.uk/resources/digitaltheology/EverybodyWelcomeOnline23rdApril.pdf> Page 11 [Accessed 17 June 2020].

³ *Ibid.*

alongside each other. (“There will be no singing, no service books, no wine, social distancing would be observed. No coffee after service, no sharing the peace”). This recognition that many in our congregations will be unable to receive Communion physically has prompted some to ask for “a new approach to Holy Communion” and for “wider, ‘outside the box’ thinking about the sacraments”.

The Body of Christ - Dismembered or Deployed

One of the dimensions of meeting physically which came across in the responses was the importance of touch to human interaction. Responses also highlighted the way much of our ministry happens in the unstructured spaces between planned events and this was largely not happening in lockdown. (“I really miss the embraces and laughter-filled moments, for example, with parishioners over post-service coffee”). Others, however, found that shopping locally and walking around was helping them rediscover “the value of ‘lingering with intent’ i.e. engaging with people on daily walks around the community”. There was also the realisation that congregations were less wedded to traditional models than we might expect saying, “the church family will try relating in different ways when there is a clear need”.

There was also a prevailing sense of wariness and caution around returning to physical meetings due to the ongoing risk of contracting COVID-19 (“not everyone who previously attended regular church services will want/be able to do so”, “many will be very cautious about coming back to church, possibly until there is a vaccine” and “it will take a long time for people to trust close proximity with others”). This further highlighted the needs discussed in previous sections for a mixed-economy model of ministry, although it needn’t mean that “there will be at least two congregations for every one at the moment where some folk choose to stay at home and do not return to the church building”.

As we have begun to accept the long-term implications of the pandemic, some have concluded that “many will never be able to return to a gathered church – or not for a long time”. This has prompted theological questions such as “what does it mean to be a scattered body?”, while others stressed that “We are still the body of Christ even though it is a virtual body”.

Mission and Engagement - Seeing God at Work in the World

The restrictions and economic impact of COVID-19 have created new needs and exacerbated existing inequalities in our communities. Many were quick to identify the response to these needs as the work of the Holy Spirit, whether or not the church was central to these endeavours. Typical resolutions were “to recognise the power of the Holy Spirit and spirituality as it has become more obvious in the actions of ‘ordinary’ (maybe ‘extraordinary’) folk in our communities” and to continue “affirming God's presence in the community as well as in church”. Some also reflected that “[we have learnt] how to be better neighbours” and others commented that, in the same way as services were reaching people in their homes, so to were “confirmation, baptism and wedding prep meetings” which “happen from people’s homes rather than in a church office or hall”.

As well as creating new opportunities, lockdown has also put up new barriers to mission and ministry. The restriction of social events prevents clergy from “achieving a lot of ministry at one hit e.g. Lunch Club, Big Cream Tea, Fete” and people commented on the frustration of “not being able to get alongside people who are really suffering” and that “ministry at arm’s length is difficult”. Lockdown has also prevented congregations from engaging as they would have liked (“there are

many in our congregations – and amongst self-isolating clergy – who have not been able to join in with community responses to the virus and been frustrated by that”).

Looking forward, churches recognise the need to build on links forged through the pandemic (“We need to build on the new networks that have been formed with the communities. We need to reflect on what is valuable in our church and community life and prioritise that”). It will also be necessary to make time and space to offer support through pastoral offices to those who may seek them after lockdown (“There will obviously be a need for many memorial services and coming alongside the bereaved. Also more weddings and baptisms. It would be good to find ways to integrate these wherever possible into church life [...] This could only be feasible if people in the congregations get involved”).

Meetings - Show Up, Be Real and Get to the Point

There were typically two types of responses to meetings during lockdown. One was a sense the regular online meetings had created a new level of depth that was previously evident (“Deanery chapter has become a much closer, caring, sharing and more trusting group. It may be that simply ‘meeting’ each week is growing our relationships”). By committing to come to these meetings and to share what was really going on, some chapters have been transformed.

The other response was to recognise how many meetings were inefficient, time consuming and sometimes unnecessary. As in previous sections, the break from the previous routine has caused people to reflect on what they were doing and to “realise the limitations of the endless meetings and admit that so bog churches down”. Where meetings have moved online, the discipline of video conferencing has allowed many to become more efficient (“with the right amount of preparation, it is possible to complete a PCC meeting in 40 minutes”) and to be a more enjoyable experience (“less moaning”, “There have been no church politics during lockdown”). The fall in the number and length of evening meetings (and associated travel) has also given clergy “a much better work/life balance with my family”.

From many quarters there is a call to “rethink frequency and method of meetings”, allowing those that give life to be more frequent, but shorter and online to avoid travel time, and those that drain energy to be shorter and more focussed (“Evaluate the potential for change and how PCCs should function in future – giving life to the church rather than draining the resources available”).

Responses also highlighted the real need to consult and listen carefully to all stakeholders as decisions are made about the future shape of the church. This includes decisions which will be made at a local level (“consult carefully with Church Officers, PCC’s and Church members who seem very cautious about returning to Church”) and also for strategic decisions made by senior staff for the whole diocese (“consultation about structural changes” and “consult with PCCs and congregations on priorities”).

The Diocese - Reputation, Communication and Support

While expressing gratitude for the frequency and clarity of *Ad Clerum* and other diocesan communications, there was both a call for clearer guidance, leadership and strategy, and a plea for more trust of decisions made at a local level.

These don't need to be antithetical to each other. What is being requested is "clear communication from bishops, particularly as some decisions in the near future are likely to be controversial" alongside the permission to "let churches make local decisions" and showing "a real willingness to consider new structures and greater haste in making them a reality". There was also a plea that there should be "No big diocesan projects for a while please".

The support which clergy have received during the pandemic seems to have been received differently across the diocese. Some are very appreciative of the ways senior clergy have made themselves available ("regular contact with [our] Archdeacon [...] has been appreciated with his listening ear, pastoral care for the clergy and his understanding") and others see this as a positive change from previous patterns "[we've] seen more of [...] our Archdeacon and Bishop in the last two months than for years. Thank you". Some, however, have experienced lockdown more negatively, saying, "I hope this is not rude – but I think Bishop's staff will need to ask serious questions about the pastoral support they have offered clergy".

The public ministry of the Bishops was also mentioned in several responses. This included positivity about online services and other videos ("the 'pause and pray' is very popular - could there be more from the Bishops please", "livestream a sermon slot once per month") and also a longing for a return to "the Bishops' physical presence in our community [which] is very much to be desired and their encouragement in our mission and witness". There was a feeling that, as the pandemic has gone one, some of the impetus around communication has waned ("At the beginning of the pandemic there was lots coming out from the centre- the feeling of Chapter is that it seems to have gone quiet").

As with other clergy, the pandemic provides an opportunity for the Bishops to reaffirm their vocation to be "inspirers and heroes and innovators and enablers. Let other people administer and let priests and bishops lead by example".

As noted in previous sections, national and diocesan training has been well received ("the diocese has been excellent in its prompt and practical advice. More of the same, please!" and "we have received excellent resources during this lockdown"). Online CMD sessions have also had record numbers of attendees, prompting the suggestion that "the diocese should make better use of digital media for training and meetings" on an ongoing basis.

The need for two-way communication was also highlighted, especially in the delivery of resources ("ask what we need rather than assume that you know") and the formation of strategy ("[the diocese] could construct an environmental and missions focused strategy that helps churches combine services (with live-streaming), frees time for leaders and others to focus on reaching others across the community and offers opportunities for non-church goers to explore faith in Christ"). The perennial question was also raised about how central services could be streamlined "with a view to getting more priests back out in the communities and more investment in those rural areas".

Lightening the Load - Buildings, Admin and Finance

Much of this section can be summarised in the words of one respondent: "everyone is worried about finances going forward". While clergy feel liberated for a while from the burden of caring for buildings, the pandemic has, in many cases, exacerbated the sense of anxiety which surrounds buildings, administration and finance. Questions about the long-term sustainability of our buildings have been raised long before COVID-19, but their current closure has brought this to the fore and

some have stressed that we must not go back to “hiding in churches” and need to ask “Why are we going back into church” at all?

The decision to close churches during lockdown was contentious (“Feeling let down by the national church response to close church buildings entirely and having to field criticism about this from parishioners”) and has revealed significant differences in our theology of physical spaces. On the one hand some respondents said, “People are discovering that church is not the building. People are joining in the services, coffee mornings, home groups etc. from the comfort and security of their own homes, not having to enter an intimidating huge building”. Conversely, some pointed to buildings having “a sacramental quality, and the capacity to touch so many people”.

There is more general agreement that care for buildings is another example of an area where “we are spread too thinly” and where support from the diocese can be variable “[our] experience of the DAC [is] saying ‘no’ rather than ‘how can we help to make it happen?’” In responding to the needs of COVID-19, “things need to happen much more quickly” than the current faculty processes allow. It has also promoted the larger question “do we need this many churches and can we sustain them practically and financially?”

In common with many businesses and charities, churches have been hit hard financially and “will need to re-evaluate finances – many churches will be unable to meet their Common Fund commitments”. Since “most of my churches cannot pay all the Common Fund this year, because [there will be] so little income from giving, fees, special events [and] most only have very small free reserves to draw upon” the question is being asked “how will these churches be treated by the diocese?”

This is also an opportunity to examine the administrative needs of churches in the diocese, especially where resources can be shared or where new tasks have been introduced in the wake of COVID-19. One multi-parish Mission Community highlighted the issue saying, “The Church of England needs to do more to support rural churches by streamlining admin. We need 11 licenses to cover copyright whilst a single church with the same number of people needs only one. We pay three times as much as a single church and it’s crippling”.

Pastoral Care - Phones, Fear, Grief and Lament

Even for those with no internet connection, pastoral care is now mediated by telephone receiver or garden gate. This has been especially difficult as our congregations and communities face increased anxiety, stress, uncertainty and also have to face untimely bereavements as a result of the virus. These was both a call to make space for lament (“We will need a period to grieve/lament all sort of loss in church and community.”) and also the desire to offer hope in its place (“[people] want less lament and more hope & joy).

Some responses managed to hold these different emphases in tension, saying “While we are a people of hope – and there is a time for words such as ‘opportunity’ in the right context – we are also holding grief for those who have died, frustration at not being able to be there for people, rage at growing injustice and inequality, despair. When we do eventually gather together, we need to find the right tone.”

As in previous sections, the question “who are we missing?” is central to the decisions we make about pastoral care and these decisions themselves have contributed to the burden of the cure of souls (“during this time, there have been LOTS of decisions to make which I have found tiring despite

not being alone in that. Some found the responsibility weighing heavily. The inability to make long term plans is both good and challenging”). Recognising that “nothing we do is totally inclusive”, there needs to be a range of innovative ways to deliver pastoral care, both now and into the future. As pastoral care becomes a focus, training and strategy will require “Less talk of growth and more about ministry to a wounded world”.

Faith in the home – New Places of Encounter

As congregations have been unable to meet in churches (and unable to leave their homes) many have noted a development of personal faith as it is no longer constrained to services and the building. This has manifested itself in growth in prayer and “Sustaining our own spirituality in a different way – we can have our faith without seeing the Priests”.

There is a certain irony in the fact that the diocesan priority of ‘growing in prayer’ has been most served by closing church buildings and cancelling services, but many people report that in lockdown “a desire to develop personal prayer life has been observed” and people have been “less busy and more prayerful”. Some commented that “faith in the home has been a new feature of discipleship for some and can be encouraged to continue”. The challenge is to continue to expand this domestic front line by placing “more emphasis on discipleship and worship at home”, even as churches begin to re-open.

It's Too Soon to Tell

Many of the responses indicated that it was too early to be asking questions about the ‘new normal’ or making plans for the future when we are still in a ‘chaotic’ phase (“Everyone said it was too soon to tell with any accuracy”).

The language of stability and chaos is taken from an area of organisational theory called *Complexity Theory* which suggests ‘in complex systems, [...] change happens in the creative place where order and chaos are finely balanced’.⁴ The COVID-19 pandemic and resulting lockdown has thrown our stable (but shrinking) system into a period of chaos where even short-term plans need constant revision. The lesson from complexity theory is that permanent changes will be embedded as we come out of the chaotic phase and back into stability. If we miss this opportunity then making positive changes will be far more difficult.

As we continue to respond to these one-in-a-lifetime events, Mission Communities, Deaneries and the diocese as a whole can continue to make short-term decisions about the next few months, but longer term strategies need to be couched in terms of ‘commitments’ rather than firm plans. As one respondent powerfully expressed it, “time is needed to stand back, listen deeply, hold light to this time, to pray, to listen, to move gently and simply”.

⁴ George Lovell, *Consultancy Modes and Models*, (Hope Valley, Derbyshire: Cliff College Publishing, 2005), pp. 213-14.

Appendix A

Discussion Questions

The Present

- What are we learning from the current situation – as individuals, households, churches, mission communities, neighbourhoods?
- What am I glad to have let go of, and why?
- Is there an area of your life/ministry that has weighed heavily for you?
- What have I most missed, and why?
- How can we support and care for one another's wellbeing and flourishing now and in the demands of the coming months?

The Future

- What will be different when current restrictions are lifted?
- How will I be different – or what would I like to be different in my life and ministry?
- How might the shape of the church life be different?
- What will we most need from each other, from the Bishop's staff and from the church officers of the Diocese?
- How is this experience changing my personal priorities, and how should it shape our Diocesan priorities for the triennium?