

Questions and Answers under Standing Order 69

6th June 2026

Mr. Richard Buzzacott (Tiverton and Cullompton) to ask the Diocesan Secretary

‘At one of the recent Diocesan Synod meetings there was a discussion about the numbering of individual paragraphs in papers and minutes presented to the Synod and various committees. This received a sympathetic response and the practice has been adopted in some papers. However, could this practice now be adopted in all papers and in the minutes of meetings as it makes finding paragraphs on computer screens and referencing paragraphs in further discussions or papers more practical?’

Response from Mr. Stephen Hancock, the Diocesan Secretary

Thank you for this question. Yes - paragraph numbering can be helpful for accessibility and for referencing during discussion/correspondence, and many papers already follow this practice. We will encourage all those submitting papers and minutes to adopt consistent paragraph numbering as standard. Where timescales are tight and a paper arrives without numbering, the Synod secretariat will, where practicable, apply paragraph numbering at the point of publication to support members’ use of the papers.

Mrs Ann Pangbourne (Ottery) to ask the Assistant Secretary of Diocesan Synod

Papers sent out to Synod frequently have a high level of complexity according to the Gunning Fog Index (GFI). For instance, two randomly chosen paragraphs in a recent paper have a GFI score of over 17. This indicates that anyone reading it would need about 17-18 years of formal education, in order to understand it at first read. It corresponds to a university graduate or post-graduate reading level, roughly equivalent to someone who has completed a Bachelor's degree and is partway through or has finished advanced studies (such as a Master's or Doctorate). *AI analysis using "ClickHelp" and "Analyse my writing"*.

An acceptable level is considered 7-12. The King James Version of the Bible has a score of 12; The New King James Version 7-8. The Guardian newspaper around 7.

Would it be acceptable for those who write papers for Synod to be asked to simplify their language, maybe using tools such as Readability Analyzer or Readable to help them, and so make the papers more easily understood?

Response from Dr. Ed Moffatt, the Assistant Secretary of the Diocesan Synod

Thank you for your question about the language used in formal diocesan papers.

Diocesan Synod papers aim to be clear, accurate and transparent. However, some papers necessarily address complex matters (for example governance, finance, safeguarding, legal and technical issues). In those cases, precision matters, and the vocabulary and sentence-structure can become more specialised than in general communications. For the most part this is appropriate for Diocesan Synod papers given that members are typically 'specialist' readers (having an advanced knowledge of the context of the issues being discussed, if not the issues themselves), a factor not accounted for in generalised 'readability' metrics. That said, accessibility remains important, and we want papers to be as widely understandable as possible therefore we will remind authors to focus on clarity (recognising that no single score can by itself determine whether a paper is "clear").

Synod papers are circulated in advance to allow members time to read and digest the content. This timing also enables members to contact the authors for any clarification they require.

Mrs Ann Pangbourne (Ottery) to ask the Diocesan Bishop

As I understand it, the purpose of the Church of England's parish system is to provide a geographical, **localised** network of care, ensuring that **every single person** living in England **has access** to the ministrations of a priest and a place of worship, regardless of whether they attend church.

45% -so less than half - of Devon's population are said to live in the three urban hubs of Exeter, Plymouth and Torbay. Around 50% of the county is made up of rural communities inhabited by the rest of the population. In many of these areas, the merging of parishes, reduction of church services, and clergy being expected to cover large geographical areas, make this access increasingly difficult, even impossible.

For instance: The weekday bus service for the 2 mile journey from West Hill to Ottery, meant the round trip for a 15-minute appointment was predicted to take me three and a half hours. Like many rural areas, there is no bus service on a Sunday. A large number of areas in Devon are much more remote and some have no public transport at all. Although I appreciate what is said in the Budget Strategy and in Growing in Prayer, neither seem to me to make provision for the **urgent need** to reverse the trend of exhausted and demoralised clergy ministering single handed to multiple rural churches. In order to spread the gospel, should we be prioritising **redeploying** clergy and **increasing support systems** in rural areas, rather than concentrating resources in large urban churches, were there is a greater likelihood of having an abundance of able laity to assist with ministry?

In many rural communities the remaining congregation is both faithful and hardworking, but elderly. Without support to these areas, the legacy of our generation will be to deny the majority of the population access to the gospel. Could you please give Synod an indication of Diocesan policy on this?

Response from the Right Revd. Dr. Mike Harrison, Bishop of Exeter

Thank you for the question. A few observations before answering the substantial question.

1. The number of incumbent-level clergy in the CofE is now 7000 – 10 years ago it was 8000. There are simply not the priests to cover the churches of the land in the way in which it was seen in earlier decades such as the 1950s.
2. There is therefore a challenge to generate new vocations to the ordained ministry. The present system means it takes around seven years from identifying a calling to ordained ministry to realising an incumbent-ready cleric.
3. Rural posts are not as popular as urban posts. Again the South West is not as popular a region as for example the South East. It is not straightforward to draw clergy to the areas specified.
4. The question assumes we can simply redeploy clergy at will. While I may wish that there was such deference to episcopal authority, we cannot dictate to clergy that they leave one context (to which they feel absolutely called and which was discerned as an authentic calling by parish, patrons and prelates alike) and are high-handedly assigned

another context. Additional to issues of calling and discernment are of course familial and other considerations.

5. There is sometimes the assumption that churches in different contexts have automatically by dint of that context greater resources to share and should do so. Many of our churches in urban areas including some of the “large urban churches” have just as demanding a ministerial load on them and do not have “an abundance of able laity”. The situation is in short highly nuanced across different rural and urban contexts.
6. I would resist a blanket description of our clergy as “exhausted and demoralised”. I have made it my business to meet 1-1 with a very high proportion of our clergy in Devon and have found the vast majority to be energised and highly motivated. Of course there are clergy who are feeling over-stretched and in need of further ministerial capacity but again the picture is varied, across both rural and urban areas.

More points could be made but turning to the question re diocesan policy, all five of the strategic priorities (found here on the website <https://exeter.anglican.org/our-five-strategic-priorities/>) speak to the issue – the obvious one being to cultivate an intentional vocational culture which enables the identifying and training for ministry, including the ordained ministry. In the present situation (see 1. above) we need to ‘grow our own’ as well as seeking to attract quality clergy. We are ordaining 31 priests and deacons this Pentecost – considerably more than in recent history – and we are set to have excellent numbers next year too. Many of these will be exercising ministry in a rural context. The other strategic priorities (missional leadership, missional DNA, Children and Young People and a Mixed Ecology) all in different ways focus on strengthening outward facing Christian communities looking to engage with all ages in ways which make the gospel accessible and develop discipleship pathways for those who do so engage. This then provides a foundation for more ministry (in and out of the Church), capacitating the local church whether it be rural or urban. Of course, in all of this we depend on the movement of God’s Spirit to stir up vocations - ⁶ I planted the seed, Apollos watered it, but God has been making it grow. ⁷ So neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything, but only God, who makes things grow. 1 Cor 3.6-7

Supplementary question from Mrs Anne Pangbourne

I probably didn’t phrase the question very well but in using the word ‘redeploy’ I was thinking not of moving people who are already in post, but is it possible to look at not replacing clergy in well-resourced areas when they leave and instead opening up new opportunities in rural areas?

Response from the Bishop of Exeter, the Rt Revd Dr Mike Harrison

I suppose a number of points I’ve already made still stand there. What are we talking about when we talk about ‘well-resourced’? And they become well-resourced precisely because of the creative and excellent work of an incumbent which needs to be continued, and do you continue to water the green patches? Discuss. In other words, it depends on the context. Of course, I’m as keen as anybody else that we provide clergy for our rural parishes and benefices. The fact of the matter is that at the present time it is more attractive it seems for clergy to be in urban and suburban areas than rural areas, so there’s

the question for instance of how we enable ordinands and curates to experience rural ministry in a way that whets their appetites but also attracts them to the South West.

Dr Francis Sansbury (Christianity) to ask the Diocesan Director of Finance

According to Paper 09, Budget Strategy 2027 and Beyond, Section 12.8 on page 26 says: "The Bishop's Diocesan Council has confirmed that a full review of the existing Common Fund system should commence in the second half of 2026...The Terms of Reference for the review will be agreed by BDC in May 2026." We have not yet seen those ToRs (Terms of Reference). Could we see them now please? It could be helpful to have them as we discuss the Budget Strategy. On that timetable, the review will be well underway by the time we next meet.

Response from Mr. Neil Williams, Diocesan Director of Finance

Yes. The Common Fund Review Terms of Reference have been agreed by BDC and can be made available to Synod members (see separate attachment). They have been deliberately written with as broad a scope as possible, so that all areas and alternatives can be explored.

Supplementary question from Dr Francis Sansbury

Thank you very much for the terms of reference. I noted amongst the Common Fund Review Group that there are no lay members who could not be perceived as a direct conflict of interest as in benefits of the DBF as BDC, and could there be a plea for there to be some lay people who do not have quite such a direct conflict of interest? I would also like to say it would be lovely if you were able consider these options before we have to vote on them, but that might be construed as a second question.

Response from Mr. Neil Williams, Diocesan Director of Finance

The purpose of the group is just purely to steer the process and help shape it. The fundamental way it will work is by us coming out and speaking with people out in our deaneries. There will be opportunities for me to invite groups of people to come together for focus groups and there will also be an opportunity for individuals to contribute into the review. Ultimately it will be Synod that decides what the replacement system, were there to be one, would look like and there's enough people in that group, certainly the clergy membership, I've tried to draw that when you've only got three people from as broad a range, and I don't think people who are necessarily from BDC would have a conflict of interest if we're doing the review in an open and positive way. We want to hear what people have to say because we all have to come up with a way this will work long term.

Dr. Francis Sansbury (Christianity) to ask the Bishop of Exeter

According to Paper 09, Budget Strategy 2027 and Beyond, Section 13.1 on pages 26-27 says "A plan to reduce stipendiary clergy numbers was agreed in October 2024 and a reduction applied to the 2025 budget (reducing from 165 Full Time Equivalent (FTE) mission community stipendiary clergy post holders to 158.2). However, with the funding now approved by...(SMMIB), these plans were paused for 2026."

Ian Paul on 15/05/2026 in <https://www.psephizo.com/life-ministry/is-the-church-of-england-growing-at-last/>, reports that his diocese has committed not to reduce the number of stipendiary clergy or combine parishes into groups and teams, and in 2025, saw an 8% increase in adult, and 11% in child attendance. Without expecting comment on other dioceses, should we not simply pause reducing FTE mission community stipendiary clergy numbers, but be aiming to get them back up to higher than 165? Should not the aim be that (re-) growth in stipendiary ministry leads to gospel (re-)growth, which should lead to (re-) growth in giving, which will continue to grow stipendiary ministry?

Response from the Right Revd. Dr. Mike Harrison, Bishop of Exeter

Francis, in short, I find it hard to disagree with the virtuous circle that you propose in the final question you ask. I firmly believe that ordained ministry, focussed on sharing the Gospel and rooted in its particular community and context, grows the church. I would though want to nuance that answer by also championing the fundamental role of all locally-rooted vocations – ordained *and* lay – in making new disciples of Christ. LLMs and our new commissioned roles are vital local leaders in mission too.

But if I return to your focus on ordained ministry, this summer we will, God willing, see 20 new deacons ordained for service in our local churches, with a similar number in the next cohort of Exeter curates. Our Vocations team are doing great work in enabling a wide variety of candidates for ordained ministry to enter the discernment process as expeditiously as possible. However, given that it is reckoned to take some seven years from exploring vocation to being ready for a post of first incumbency, this is not work that can be rushed, so the pause in our planned stipendiary ministry numbers seems prudent at the current time.

As we begin to see the impact 'Pray, Grow, Serve 2035', my belief is that we will see the growth in vocations which both you and I long for, and a renewed living out of the Great Commission by all God's people.

Supplementary question from Dr Francis Sansbury

This builds slightly on Ann Pangbourne's question and answer in that one of the things in Ian Paul's article which I recommend comments on is not combining parishes into groups and teams and some of those groups in Exeter are really quite large and I've observed where I'm on the electoral roll in Broadclyst, it is a struggle, particularly if illness becomes a problem. How might you see us alleviating those problems in those rural, very large multi-parish benefices?

Response from the Right Revd. Dr. Mike Harrison, Bishop of Exeter

It's a problem for the Church of England as a whole, as yet unsolved. I think one of the ways forward for us is to generate assistant ordained ministry as swiftly as we can, to provide not only sacramental but also pastoral coverage. As I mentioned in my answer, that's already bearing fruit in terms of, we'll have about 31 ordained deacon priests this year, and it's likely to be 40 next year deacons and priests, so we are generating at pace. The only thing that must be said is that we must not continue to grow the size of multi parish benefices not least because nobody will apply for them. However, there are other constraints in terms of population and in terms of finance, and all ideas are very welcome.

The Revd. Graham Hamilton (General Synod and Newton Abbot) to ask the Bishop of Exeter

In your Holy Week *Ad Clerum* of 26 March 2026 you wrote concerning the Common Cup in eucharistic services,

“I would now ask that the practice of offering the common cup resumes across the diocese. We should not be offering individual cups as this is not our practice (though I am aware that some have) and where intinction is offered (the priest dipping wafer into wine before distribution or individuals dipping for themselves), this should now be replaced with the common cup. Please be aware that to receive in 'one kind' is perfectly acceptable if that is the communicant's preference (bread or wafer only). To do so is still to receive communion in full, even where wine is not consumed. This means that it is perfectly in order for communicants to receive only bread and decline the cup temporarily if they are feeling unwell. Where it is not happening, I would ask that the common cup resumes as soon as possible.”

However, many congregations are still deeply uneasy about the use of the common cup.

The Chair of the House of Bishops stated told General Synod in November 2021 that “We clearly as the House of Bishops and as bishops individually are not interested in policing this (discipline against clergy who continue to use individual cups at eucharistic services) in an inquisitorial or a punitive way.” (quoted in GS Question Paper Feb 2022 Q77)

The [Legal Advisory Commission](#) stated on 13 June 2024 that “there are two respectable views on the matter of the use of individual cups at Holy Communion”.

The practice is also found in many other parts of the Anglican Communion (such as our link diocese of Thika). Much fascinating historical background can be found at: <https://www.psephizo.com/life-ministry/history-law-and-individual-cups-at-communion/>

Would the Bishop confirm that the practice of using individual cups is not unlawful?

Response from the Right Revd. Dr. Mike Harrison, Bishop of Exeter

Graham, thank you very much for your question, which has provided me with new insights. Until now I thought that Canon Law and the BCP were sufficient for the use of individual cups to be regarded as unlawful. However, the legal interventions you highlighted appear to have clouded the otherwise clear water that had previously existed.

As a result, to my mind, the position is now unclear from *all* perspectives as the statement linked in your question also states categorically in paragraph 8 that to use individual cups is unlawful. Such mixed messaging is not helpful for anyone – either parish priests or diocesan bishops.

Providing a definitive answer is, therefore, not something that I can do independently, but rather appears to be a matter for the House of Bishops to take forward, consulting with the Legal Advisory Commission and requesting that they reach a definitive conclusion. As a member of General Synod, asking a question on this matter at the next group of sessions is clearly an additional option that is open to you in terms of pursuing this matter further.

My Ad Clerum, to which you refer, was written in response to requests for my own position to be made clear. As such, I remain comfortable with the language used in relation to practice around Holy Communion of "should" i.e. strongly encourage as opposed to "must " i.e. legally required.