Synod Summary November 2022

The Diocese of Leicester Synod met for the last time this year on the evening of Wednesday 30th November at Christ the King, Beaumont Leys. The main agenda items were the Racial Equity Strategy, the diocesan budget for 2023 and an update on the Governance Review. There was also a brief update on Living in Love and Faith.

The Synod began with worship led by Jessie Tang, the Intercultural Ministry Director, who led the Synod in two worship songs: the traditional hymn ‘To God be the Glory’ and a modern multi-lingual song.

In his Presidential address, Bishop Martyn reflected on John the Baptist’s call to repentance in Matthew 3. He said that repentance is a theological foundation for everyday faith, affecting all aspects of our lives, including money and sexuality. Commenting on the implications of this for the financial side of our lives, Bishop Martyn first highlighted some findings from the Anglican giving survey and then noted that parish contributions in the diocese have reduced by 6% between 2019 and 2022 (which is part of a national problem), leading to a significant budget deficit which is a pressing concern. He invited Synod members to take these statistics back to their churches and to ask whether our budgets have been influenced by repentance.

Turning his attention to Living in Love and Faith, Bishop Martyn offered his thanks to all who had participated in the discussion of this subject at the September meeting, which had been marked by respect, listening, care and kindness. The College of Bishops would be meeting in December and then January in order to decide on what to bring to General Synod in February 2023. Although some bishops were now making their positions public, he and Bishop Saju felt that it was still appropriate to stay silent for now. In closing he noted that whatever is decided will not be able to satisfy everybody and therefore living together well, whatever the outcome, is very important.

Introducing the discussion of the Racial Equity Strategy, Bishop Saju stressed that talking about race and ethnicity is not something ‘woke’ but something that is about the integrity of the gospel, especially in Leicester. He made clear that concern for racial equity is the responsibility of everyone. Chrispal Anand, Chair of the Diocesan Forum for Ethnic Minority Anglicans (DFEMA), then updated the Synod on progress with setting up the Racial Equity Unit. This has recently met for the first time and had generated three questions for Synod to engage with. Jessie Tang then presented the questions for discussion in small groups as follows:

1. What does scripture say about race and issues of racial justice?
2. Why is racism a collectively held problem for all, and why is it also the responsibility of Synod?
3. Is there an existing support process for the disclosure of racial abuse in your context? If not, what kind of support would you need in order to implement something?

Following these discussions, feedback was collected from around the room and each group was asked to submit brief written responses from their conversations. These will be collated for consideration by the Racial Equity Unit.

The next item on the agenda was the diocesan budget for 2023. David Palmer began his presentation by introducing the new Finance Director, Simon Wilson. He then went on to explain that the DBF trustees had aimed to bring a budget with a deficit of not much more than £1m. However, the overall budget deficit was now projected as £2.3m. There were three main reasons for this:

* National transitional funding coming to an end;
* Changes to national pooled funding; and
* A significant reduction in Parish Contribution offers.

David Palmer went on to say that the trustees are working on a revised 5 year plan to get to a breakeven budget. He was conscious that some parishes are struggling financially, but noted that others have increased their reserves over the last few years. It would be necessary to draw up to £10m from reserves over the next 5 years in order to fund the deficits.

Synod members then contributed to the discussion with comments about Shaped By God Together, the need to maintain clergy numbers, the need for transparency and the cost of auditors. Questions were answered by David Palmer, Jonathan Kerry and Claire Bampton. Following the discussion Synod agreed the budget and voted to use Total Returns Release (ie release of capital reserves) to cover the deficit.

Jonathan Kerry then presented an update on work with implementing the Governance Review including a proposed new governance structure. He explained how the Implementation Group had worked from the recommendations of the review to arrive at the proposed structure which was now being presented for comment. Contributions to the discussion from Synod members included the need for information about governance arrangements to be provided to parishes; the need to ensure adequate diversity on governance bodies; ensuring that those involved in governance have the necessary skills; and taking account of the Net Carbon Zero target in the governance structure.

Andy Brockbank briefly presented a summary of collated feedback following the Living in Love and Faith discussion at the September Synod. He noted that, although many people are anxious about what will happen in the Church after General Synod in February, it is encouraging that LLF has enabled the kind of well-mannered discussion that had taken place in September. He was then thanked for his work as LLF Advocate.

In closing business, the Synod approved amendments to the Quinquennial Inspection scheme and also approved the allocations for Deanery Synod elections by parishes in 2023 before consideration of written questions which focused on Shaped By God Together, Living in Love and Faith, and finance and risk assessment.

Bishop Martyn then led the closing prayer as the meeting ended at 9pm.