

Ad Clerum: June 2020

Dear Friends

Then the angel said to me, "This is the word of the LORD to Zerubbabel: Not by might, nor by power, but by my Spirit, says the LORD of hosts. Who are you, O great mountain? Before Zerubbabel you shall become a plain. And he shall bring forward the top stone amid shouts of 'Grace, grace to it!'"

Then the word of the LORD came to me, saying, "The hands of Zerubbabel have laid the foundation of this house; his hands shall also complete it. Then you will know that the LORD of hosts has sent me to you. For whoever has despised the day of small things shall rejoice, and shall see the plumb line in the hand of Zerubbabel." Zechariah 4.6-10

It was easy for the people of God in the post-exilic era to become discouraged. Yes, they were home (some of them) from the far reaches of Babylon; and yes, work had begun on the rebuilding of Jerusalem, and even of the temple. But in number, this generation was tiny by comparison with those who had gone before them; and in glory, the new temple had nothing like the one which Solomon had built.

But the LORD was at work among his people all the same, by the power of his Spirit, blessing with his grace the paltry work of their hands – and at a time when it was easy to despise the day of small things, the LORD promised that the work he had entrusted to his servants would be brought to completion and that even the sceptics would rejoice to see it.

It's not hard to make the link to our own times. Even before the pandemic, we were aware that our congregations are not as substantial as those of former years; it's easy to look back on the golden days of our church and of our Diocese. But the LORD invites us to see the work he is doing in and through his people today, not by might, nor by power, but by his own Spirit for the sake of his coming kingdom. He invites us to look to him, and to pray that 'grace, grace' will crown the work of our hands in his service. The day of small beginnings is never to be despised if the LORD is among us. And even during these past 11 weeks of lockdown, we have indeed been aware of the Spirit of God at work in and through us, by his grace.

In February, I undertook to write at monthly intervals, to bring you up to date with the progress of the Diocesan Strategy: renewed, released, rejuvenated. This letter is the latest instalment in that series of communications.

Renewed

* hearty thanks to LJ (our Comms Manager) and John Hibberd in the Parish Support Team for stimulating such engagement with an online version of 'Thy Kingdom Come' in the period between Ascension Day and Pentecost.

* To my delight, there are now over 785 members in the Diocesan Prayer Community, joining together in saying the Diocesan Vision Prayer and the Lord's Prayer and reading at least one verse of Scripture each day and in the progress calling upon the name of the Lord to enable our Diocese to flourish and grow. If you'd like to join the prayer community you can do so here: <https://sheffdio.org/pray2025>

Released

* after months of hard work by Christine Gore, Director of Formation for Ministry, and by the Parish Support Team, our Senior Staff will be considering a proposal next week for the calling and training of Focal Leaders and Focal Teams.

* The '*Lights for Christ*' initiative, designed to mobilise the whole people of God for the whole mission of God continues to progress well, with at least 739 people in 65 small groups having now used the materials for our homegrown 'Shining as Lights' course. If you've not yet discovered the resources available on our www.lightsforchrist.org website, do visit.

* Some of the work we had begun on releasing our church buildings to be more fully assets in the Gospel has been paused for obvious reasons (including the furloughing of key staff) but we expect to resume it once more in the coming weeks.

* We have successfully secured funding from the national church for two new Generous Giving Officers to give effective proactive support to parishes in promoting giving and Christian stewardship. We expect to recruit to these posts in the next month.

Rejuvenated

* It was a joy to celebrate the 5th anniversary of the Centenary Project last month and to look back on the fruitfulness of that outreach to children, families and young people – we are immensely grateful to Helen Cockayne, the project leader and to her team of extraordinarily dedicated and gifted men and women.

* Work on our ambition to establish 25 school congregations and 12 resourcing churches across the Diocese has paused for now, again for obvious reasons (again, including the furloughing of key staff), but we expect the work to resume in the coming weeks. Meanwhile, we have been taken aback to discover, across the Diocese, an online mission field and will be investing in some exploration of its significance and potential.

Meanwhile, we continue to work up a bid into what is now called the Diocesan Transformation Fund (formerly the Diocesan Sustainability Fund) and we still hope to submit that bid in the autumn. This month and over the summer work is being undertaken particularly to explore how we can most effectively resource and support clergy and parishes in their administrative burden of compliance obligations (around finances, GDPR, safeguarding, insurance, risk assessments and so on). Committed as we are to good practice in all these areas, and above all in safeguarding, we are also aware how often key leaders, lay and ordained, find that their best time and energy is taken up in paperwork when they could be invested in mission.

And finally, as I was able to indicate in the update last month, we are now finally at the point at which we can once again appoint selectively to vacancies for stipendiary incumbents in the Diocese. Indeed, we are now in a position to progress 8 appointment processes. These stipendiary posts (all of which will be to oversight minister roles in respective mission areas, with role descriptions carefully adapted according to the local context) fall into four categories.

1. Three posts funded out of 'lowest income communities funding'

For some years now, the Diocese has received a subsidy from the Church Commissioners to help us to sustain stipendiary ministry in the economically most deprived communities of our Diocese. It amounts to £1.7m a year. Previously, we have not targeted this funding particularly – it has generally been absorbed into the kitty of the Diocesan Board of Finance as a contribution to the total costs of stipends. Last autumn the Bishop's Council gave approval to a proposal to focus this much more sharply on the 25 lowest income communities in the Diocese (according to a careful formula we have devised which takes population size as well as deprivation indices into account), in effect to guarantee funded stipendiary posts in the mission areas encompassing our

most deprived communities. This means that when there is now a vacancy in such mission areas, we can confidently proceed to an appointment. We are now therefore taking steps to recruit to the mission areas encompassing the parishes of **Mexborough** in the Wath Deanery (to enable an interim post to become a common tenure post as oversight minister), **Stainforth** in the Snaith and Hatfield Deanery (vacant since 2018) and **Clifton** in the Rotherham Deanery (vacant since 2018).

2. One post funded by the Diocesan Board of Finance in a mission area which is below the allocation set in the recent consultation with deaneries over the deployment of stipendiary incumbents.

Now that Area Deans and Deanery Lay Chairs have completed their consultations with PCCs, and the Bishop's Senior Staff Team has been able to complete its overview of how a reduced number of stipendiary incumbents (78 in fact) might most fairly be deployed across the Diocese as a whole, we are able to make appointments where vacancies occur in mission areas which are currently staffed at a level below their allocation.

There are three mission areas in which such appointments are possible at present, but we are not able to afford all of them at once. Given that stipendiary clergy resources in the partner deaneries of Rotherham-Laughton are the most stretched of all at present, it is likely that our first appointment will be in that part of the Diocese. We are working with the Area Deans and Deanery Lay Chairs to evaluate the options and will publicise a precise vacancy to be filled shortly.

As retirements and other clergy moves reduce the number of stipendiary clergy across the Diocese as a whole, we expect to progress appointment processes in the other mission areas which are currently below their allocation of stipendiary oversight ministers. On this 'waiting list', priority will continue to be given to deaneries where existing stipendiary clergy are, in the eyes of the Bishop's Senior Staff Team, most thinly stretched.

3. Two posts funded by the Diocesan Board of Finance in benefices which are net contributors to the Common Fund

The Bishop's Senior Staff Team regard it as prudent to proceed to appointment when vacancies occur in parishes which have demonstrated over a sustained period their capacity to be net contributors to the Common Fund. We hope this might act as an incentive to other parishes which are not quite net contributors at present, but we are also aware of the potential risk of a collapse in Common Fund, which we can ill afford, if no appointment is made in such cases.

We acknowledge that it will seem as if richer parishes are being given preferential treatment, and this is one reason why we have felt it important to refocus our 'lowest income communities funding' from the national church on the most economically deprived communities in the Diocese, so that they, also, receive preferential treatment. But it is the generosity of the net contributors to the Common Fund which enables us to place stipendiary clergy in other, less prosperous, parts of the Diocese and the members of the Bishop's Senior Staff take the view it is right to invest in these places which are a key resource for the Diocese as a whole.

There are two such parishes now vacant in the Diocese (**Ecclesall Bierlow** in the Ecclesall Deanery and **Owlerton** in the Hallam Deanery) and the Archdeacon of Sheffield and Rotherham is liaising with the PCCs concerned to progress those appointments to oversight minister roles.

4. Two posts funded out of 'Mission Priest Capacity Funding'

You will recall from the equivalent update in March the news that we had persuaded the Church Commissioners that in certain circumstances, a strategic parochial appointment can be a step towards Diocesan sustainability if it enables us to make an appointment we could not otherwise afford to a parish which could realistically become a net contributor to the Common Fund. (At present we have only 22 benefices which are net contributors to the Common Fund, with 12

paying over £70,000 pa and another 10 paying over £50,000. Part of the challenge must be to find the 23rd, 24th and 25th such benefice, thus growing our capacity to fund stipends in benefices which, for the foreseeable future, are bound to be net recipients of the Common Fund). You may recall that the Strategic Investment Board approved our request to fund 5 such posts for a five year period. *These posts are additional to the 78 posts which featured in the deployment allocation consultation with parishes in the first three months of this year.* The Bishop's Senior Staff Team has now identified the first two such posts, and in the process of appointing the Revd Chris Tufnell to the parish of **Oughtibridge** in the Ecclesfield Deanery, and the Revd David D'Silva to the parish of **Scawsby** in the Adwick le Street Deanery.

There are a further three such stipends at our disposal, but no firm decisions have yet been reached about where these will most effectively be deployed.

Canon Sophie will be initiating a conversation with curates who are approaching the end of their curacy terms about the options open to them with respect to these vacancies. We are aware of a small number of further vacancies which will arise during 2020 and 2021 in categories 1, 2 and 3. At this point, it is our intention to proceed with those oversight minister appointments too, as far as financial constraints permit, as they occur.

While it is true that for the foreseeable future, most (but not all) 'oversight ministry' posts will not be to single-parish benefices, but to mission areas incorporating more than one parish, this is not the essence of 'oversight ministry'. By the term 'oversight ministry' we are simply seeking to emphasise what is central to the ordinal: that those who are called to the ordained ministry are called above all to mobilise the whole people of God for the whole mission of God, enabling all the baptised to live out the fulness of their vocation, having received the light of Christ, 'to shine as a light in the world to the glory of God the Father'. *'Guided by the Spirit, priests are to discern and foster the gifts of all God's people'*. This nurturing, empowering, enabling ministry is not 'one size fits all': it will take a different shape in each local context. But the consistent emphasis will be, for stipendiary oversight ministers to release the people of God to be signs, first-fruits and agents of God's kingdom in the world.

In addition, we anticipate that there will be a number of new opportunities for self-supporting priests to take up incumbency positions as oversight ministers, and also at least one new house for duty post. And there will be many, many opportunities for self-supporting priests to take up associate positions as focal ministers. We will have more information about this in due course, hopefully in next month's update.

The future remains extremely uncertain, of course. None of us can be sure how our society will look a year from now, let alone five years from now, particularly in terms of the financial impact of the present pandemic on our communities. The same is true of our parishes and deaneries. But I hope in the midst of the uncertainty, you will be encouraged by these signs of life and growth and purposeful activity. The Lord is good and his kingdom is coming.

With every blessing



The Rt Revd Dr Pete Wilcox
Bishop of Sheffield