

To all clergy and lay ministers

Date: September 2021
Our Ref: MJS/ec-bp9529

Dear Sisters and Brothers,

Greetings in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. I hope this summer has brought you at least some rest and refreshment and that you are ready to celebrate the [season of creation](#) (harvest) with all its reminders of God's abundant provision and God's care for all of creation. I found myself thinking of this while holidaying on the Isle of Skye, rediscovering that simply contemplating the beauty of God's creation restores my soul and fills me with gratitude. And how we need reminding again and again, that God in Jesus Christ has given all that we need to live a fruitful and flourishing life, both now and for all eternity.

This is a rather different sort of pastoral letter which I hope you might feel able to share with others in your churches and communities (please feel free to forward the email or print this letter and pass to others in your church). I am writing because we will soon reach a very significant moment in our shared life within the Diocese of Leicester. As part of the Shaped By God Together process, Diocesan Synod will be asked on Saturday 9th October to approve a new framework or structure for the diocese. And although we don't yet know the full details of what will be put before Diocesan Synod (Bishop's Council will be considering this on 13th September), I want you to be aware of what is under consideration and how you and your church will be able to participate in the continuing process.

However, before I get into any details, it is probably worth me giving a reminder of the background. Discussions first started about the future shape of the diocese in 2019 (as we were coming to the end of what was called the '2020 process') and in the knowledge that we were going to need to make significant changes if we were to continue to be fruitful in answering our 'Three Key Questions'. These questions speak of our core identity and purpose as Anglicans: how are we growing in the depth of our Christian discipleship? How are we enabling growth in the numbers of disciples of Jesus? And how are we serving our communities? (If you want to know more of what this means, see my recently published Grove booklet 'Anglican Discipleship'). So Shaped By God Together is all about enabling us to answer these questions in the context of the profound changes going on in our world. I know that there have been concerns that this whole process is all about finance and balancing the books. And it is true that we are facing considerable financial challenges in the diocese as a result partly of lost income during the pandemic and lockdown and partly the

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long term and growing gap between parish contributions and expenditure. But we started the Shaped By God Together process before we knew the extent of these challenges, and we would be doing it even if our finances had been unaffected by recent events.

When the pandemic hit and the government imposed a series of lockdowns (particularly prolonged here in Leicester), we learnt a lot about ourselves as a church. Firstly, we discovered that we are more resilient and more creative than we thought. Many churches moved their worship and community life online. Others found creative ways of staying in touch with people and caring for them even when they couldn't visit in person. We didn't get everything right and we were heavily criticised in some quarters, but behind the scenes many of our churches were at the heart of the response of their local community to the grief, loneliness, isolation and fear that swept through society as well as to the practical needs of their neighbours. We were also reminded that our buildings matter to us (and to many in our society) but they are not the only thing that matters to us, and their care and upkeep is only one part of our wider service to our communities. Yet as the months went by, our creativity and service were sorely tested as many of us became tired and exhausted. Indeed, in my recent round of meetings with clergy in the diocese, (during August I met with most licensed clergy – about 120, with another 20 to come in September) the most commonly expressed feeling has been that of tiredness, followed closely by anxiety about the future. So we've all been learning a lot about caring for ourselves even as we care for others.

I am aware that the Shaped By God Together process has itself caused considerable anxiety and even fear. For some it feels like 'just one more thing' on top of everything else. For others, it has created great uncertainty and raised questions about 'my place in all of this'. For still others, it plays into their feelings of inadequacy or guilt – feeling that they can't do all that's expected of them, or if only they had done their job better, the church wouldn't be in this situation. All of this explains why we chose the title Shaped By God Together – it is God doing the re-shaping, not us, and we are seeking to respond together, not alone. And since this is God's work, we operate with an economy of grace, not criticism or condemnation. And we can be sure that God will supply all that we need to be fruitful and to flourish both now and in the future.

So, God has been reshaping the Church even during the pandemic. This has been painful, and I am sure the experience and the learning are not over yet. But now we face the challenge of putting in place a new framework for the diocese which will enable us to be fruitful in responding to our Three Key Questions about discipleship. It may be that we will have to operate with fewer stipendiary clergy in the diocese, but I see this as part of God's work of re-shaping us. Could it be that we have simply been too reliant on stipendiary clergy? Could it be that God is calling us to release the gifts of all those in our churches and communities? I don't say this in a simplistic sense of asking volunteers to do all that our clergy are currently doing. Rather I mean that we need to ask some deep questions about the role of our ordained and lay ministers. We have seen an encouraging increase in the numbers of people offering for ministry in the last couple of years – God is still calling

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people, often from the most unlikely of backgrounds! And I want to be absolutely clear that the church will always need lay ministers, deacons, priests and bishops, just as we will always need and cherish parish churches which serve every person living in that parish. But how our ministers and parishes operate will start to look different in the coming years.

And now, after months of conversations at local and diocesan level (and I do want to express my thanks to all those who took part in the local conversations – nearly 100% of our churches took part in some way), we are nearing the point of decision. It is not my intention to set out the exact framework under consideration – that will be communicated in multiple ways after Synod – but I can give a broad overview. It is very likely (depending on Bishop's Council and Synod agreement) that we will ask all parishes, schools and fresh expressions of Church to work much more closely with a group of other churches and schools, sometimes clustered around a larger 'minster' church acting as a hub for training and support, sometimes with multiple hubs across a wide geographic area. It is very likely that these 'groupings' (whatever name we may choose to give them) will be supported by a diverse team of stipendiary clergy, non-stipendiary clergy, lay ministers and administrators doing a variety of roles – some in oversight ministry (supporting other ministers), some focussing on pastoral work with particular congregations and some focusing on schools, children and young people. Leadership will be shared but every congregation will have a designated minister (lay or ordained) who will be the first point of contact for the local church. And training for all ministers will have a much stronger focus on team working. In addition, my own personal hope is that there will be a much greater focus on our work with schools within this new framework, with even more time and energy being given to teaching the faith and training children to lead worship in school as well as church.

The process for enabling this change will involve a series of facilitated conversations with the legal rights of Incumbents and PCCs fully respected while also being clear that all ministry in the diocese is shared with the bishop and with the whole people of God. The facilitated conversations will also address buildings, with parishes asked to undertake an audit of their buildings, assessing their missional purpose as well as their soundness. And the conversations will also address finance, with parish contribution much more closely linked to ministry provision. We anticipate that the facilitated conversations will start in early 2022 and there will be a phased approach across the diocese over the following two years.

I realise that this very brief description will raise as many questions as it answers. But it is our intention to communicate as clearly as possible in the coming months (recognising that this is often done better in person than by letters or emails) and all the paperwork for Diocesan Synod will be made available on our website. We know that none of this can be done without your support, which is why we have tried to develop a process which is as inclusive as possible, with everyone's voice heard and with decisions about the framework being made by the representative bodies of the diocese (Bishop's Council and Diocesan Synod) as well as DBF Trustees. And when it comes to implementing this framework in the villages, towns and city of this diocese, PCCs will have the final say but hopefully always in a

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spirit of partnership knowing that one part of the body can only flourish as the whole body flourishes.

Finally, can I ask for your ongoing prayers for this process? Two key dates are 13th September (Bishop's Council) and 9th October (Diocesan Synod) – you might like to use your Sunday intercessions or other prayer times during the week to pray for this process. This is the prayer we have been using at many of our recent meetings:



This comes with my sincere gratitude for your continued partnership in the Gospel of Jesus Christ and my prayers for each one of you in your varied ministries.

In Christ,

The Rt Revd Martyn Snow
Bishop of Leicester

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