

Priority Parishes

A New Approach to Helping the Weakest

The objective

To provide over a period of 3-5 years, to no more than six parishes recognised as a priority for mission activity in the Diocese, support and resources in an attempt to return the parishes to viability as 'effective local churches in effective local communities' and to monitor and evaluate progress.

The context

This paper has resulted from a year's consultation and redrafting.

The Pastoral Committee's report on the viability of Church Buildings and Parishes suggested the designation of 'Mission Areas' into which additional resources might be directed. However, this suggestion has not been formally followed-up, although it was alluded to in the report *Changing Church and Society*. Clearly, there are many areas in which additional resources might be deployed to support the Church's mission.

- The loss of more full-time stipendiary clergy over the next three years emphasises the need for a clear policy on clergy deployment, and this is being worked on by the Bishop's Staff
- The commitment to balance the diocesan budget by 2006 emphasises the need to deploy our financial resources effectively.

The phenomenon of parishes which are failing, yet need to continue to exist if the mission of the Church of England to all parts of our nation is to be sustained, is a comparatively new one. The report *Becoming One Body*, which the Diocesan Synod approved in November, noted 45 churches with an average Sunday attendance of 25 or less or an electoral roll of less than 51. Many of these parishes exist in communities where there is already considerable disadvantage, some in the neediest 1% of wards in the country.

This paper concerns the churches among the 45 that are at serious risk of complete collapse, but where there is potential for growth and a clear and agreed need for continuing presence and ministry.

The danger of collapse can be indicated by church attendance of less than 25 or by the scale of problems that cannot be resolved by the efforts of the local congregation or even the Deanery. Under these circumstances it seems irresponsible to ask stipendiary clergy to live, work and minister in such parishes without the support and resources that could make a real difference to the church's mission. Priority Parishes would exist where there is a parish with a substantial population that Deanery and Diocese believe have a future and should not be subject to immediate pastoral reorganisation.

Given that 45 parishes were identified as being in difficult situations, there needs to be some clarity about our strategy for pastoral regeneration. Given the limited resources available, not every parish in difficulty will be recognised as a Priority Parish — including some of those that might be "turned-round" with additional resources. This paper suggests that there should be no more than six Priority Parishes in the Diocese at any time. There should be an annual review of the number of Priority Parishes the Diocese as a whole can support. Hence, the opposite side of the Priority Parishes coin is that there are parishes in difficulties to which resources

should not be deployed and which should be reorganised radically and quickly. The role of all the partners in the recognition process (Deaneries, Diocesan Pastoral Committee and Bishops) will be crucial in determining which parishes should be chosen for Priority status and those which should undergo immediate pastoral reorganisation.

The Need

Priority Parishes will have a number of specific needs.

1. Support for the parish priest's ministry.
2. Financial resources in the form of a centrally held budget to help meet basic parish running costs and launch new initiatives.
3. An audit of and development programme for church buildings
4. Practical advice and assistance from diocesan officers and a priority approach from them to assistance in the parish with particular pieces of work.
5. A commitment from the Deanery clergy and laity to the support of the Priority Parish, recognising its missionary needs and the need for local support.
6. The development of a strategic approach over the three years of the Priority Parish status with clear goals and proper evaluation.

Recognition

A Priority Parish would be recognised by The Bishop when the Deanery, Area Bishop and Diocesan Pastoral Committee have supported a parish's application.

Criteria for recognising a Priority Parish include:

- A congregation with an average attendance of 25 or less
- A parish or district population of at least *two-thirds* of the diocesan average for clergy deployment or is in an area where there are serious proposals for regeneration and a likely population increase over the next 10 years.
- On the part of the PCC a sense of missionary vision for the future (not "maintaining a presence" for the life-time of the current congregation), together with a, willingness to pursue that vision and to see necessary change in patterns of worship and activity
- A clear commitment from the Deanery clergy and laity to support the Parish practically if it is recognised as a Priority Parish
- Support from the Deanery Synod, Area Bishop and Diocesan Pastoral Committee for recognition, including a clear statement of
 - (i) the strategic importance of retaining a Church presence in this area

and of

- (ii) the potential for growth and the need to deploy a priest into the parish.

- The agreement of The Bishop to recognise a parish as a priority for the use of deanery and diocesan resources both financial and personal to re-establish the Church's mission.

The formal process would be initiated by a resolution of the Deanery Synod sent to the Area Bishop who would indicate support by forwarding the resolution to the Diocesan Pastoral Committee. The Diocesan Pastoral Committee would consider this with a view to forwarding it to The Bishop in partnership with the parish. Once a parish is recognised by The Bishop as a Priority Parish, an audit supported by diocesan officers would be carried out with the aim of working up a development plan with milestones for monitoring and evaluation. Milestones for evaluation will be agreed as part of the development plan for making each Priority Parish viable. The plan will be monitored and reviewed on a quarterly basis. It is not possible to say precisely what each plan will contain, nor what its milestones will be, until the audit has been conducted. Nevertheless, parish viability includes the numbers attending worship, ability to meet basic financial costs of maintaining the ministry and any Church buildings, improved relationships with and service to the community, increased use of Church premises. Evaluation of progress against the development plan is a crucial component of this proposal.

Recognition would be for an initial three-year period and subject to evaluation after 30 months. Any renewal (for a maximum period of two years) would require the support of The Bishop and Area Bishops and the Diocesan Pastoral Committee and would only be granted if there was serious evidence that an extension could be justified the likelihood of further progress to viability being made. There would be no more than six such parishes in the Diocese at any one time.

Diocesan officers would report each year to the partners (parish, Deanery Synod, Area Bishop and Archdeacon, The Bishop and Diocesan Pastoral Committee) on progress against the development plan.

The Commitment

1. The Area Bishop and / or Archdeacon would agree to meet regularly with the parish priest to share directly in the cure of souls in the area, review progress and provide care and support. The frequency of meetings would be by mutual agreement, but the expectation would be for a monthly meeting, and should take place no less than quarterly. On a quarterly basis this meeting would involve local laity and other partners in the regeneration process.
2. Officer time would be designated on the basis of a 'contract' to meet the needs identified in the development plan. Under the overall direction of the Diocesan Secretary the Priority Parish would be seen to have a first call on the time of diocesan staff.
3. A Steering Group for all Priority Parishes would meet once a quarter under the chairmanship of a Bishop, designated by The Bishop. Membership would include the parish priest/s, Area Bishop/s or Archdeacon/s and the Diocesan Secretary. The Steering Group would review progress, ensure that the necessary strategic support is being given, update the development plan and appoint an external evaluator as each Priority Parish is recognised.
4. For an initial period of two years grants would be made available to help meet Parish Share (or in the neediest cases to pay it) after consultation with the Deanery and Archdeacon. Towards the end of the second year this would be reviewed by the Deanery and Archdeacon who would then advise on the capacity of the Parish to resume some or all of its contribution and, consequently, the level of grant that should be made available.

5. In applications for grant aid from within the Diocese and beyond it, designation as a Priority Parish would give any application an overall priority. This would be particularly important in the deployment of grant-funded lay posts.

6. Every Priority Parish would be subject to external evaluation. The steering group (see 3 above) would appoint the evaluator at the beginning of the three-year period so that external monitoring of the process would be present from the outset. It would also be helpful if the experience and stories of the Priority Parishes are recorded and shared throughout the Diocese and beyond.

Rt Revd Stephen Lowe
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