ST ALBANS DIOCESAN SYNOD

14 June 2025

QUESTIONS – FIRST NOTICE PAPER (with answers)

1) Mr James Stewart (Sharnbrook Deanery) to ask the Diocesan Board of Finance:

"Can the DBF assure synod that all income received into the Diocesan Stipend Fund (or 'total return' attributed to it) can only be used to offset the "stipend contribution" component in future parish share calculations?

Dr Tim Coulson, DBF Chair, will respond:

Yes, this requirement is set out in Diocesan Stipends Fund Measure 1953 and therefore the DBF can give this assurance.

2) Ms Emma Robarts (Buntingford Deanery) to ask the Diocesan Board of Finance:

"Does the DBF's policy with regard to the stipend support provided by the Diocese's stipend endowment seek parity between current and future generations?"

Dr Tim Coulson, DBF Chair, will respond:

Uncertainty about future values of market investments, and of land and building assets, makes achieving strict parity very difficult. However, intergenerational fairness is a key objective in determining the use of Diocesan assets to generate income now and to provide future resources. This will be a factor considered in the review of the total return investment policy in 2025.

3) Ms Emma Robarts (Buntingford Deanery) to ask the Diocesan Board of Finance:

"Is the current 3.5% total return distribution consistent with the DBF's policy and why is its total return distribution rate currently so conservative, when: (1) Oxford and Gloucester DBFs for example have been distributing over 6% for the last five years; and (2) maximising returns for clergy stipends should legally be the Diocese's top spending priority. "

The Diocesan Secretary will respond:

The DBF adopted a total return investment policy from January 2022 which incorporated a three-year review requirement. This review is happening in 2025 and will impact on budgets from 2026 onwards. The DBF adopted a cautious distribution rate in 2022.

In response to comparison (1) the experience of other dioceses varies based on realised gains on sales of assets. The review in 2025 will consider past and potential future gains on sales of assets.

In response to point (2) the diocesan stipends fund may only be used for the payment of clergy stipends. Beyond the diocesan stipends fund, there is no legal duty to prioritise clergy stipends over other charitable needs.

4) Ms Becky Mynett (Ampthill & Shefford Deanery and General Synod) to ask David White, Diocesan Secretary:

"How many churches in the diocese are placing limitations on how their parish share contributions can be used, by withholding parish share, donating through the Ephesian Fund or similar third party, or through a special arrangement with the diocese, such that their contributions cannot be used to support all churches and clergy in the diocese? How much money is affected by these arrangements?"

The Diocesan Secretary will respond:

Four parishes gave through the Ephesian Fund during 2024 and continue to do so. One further parish started giving through the Fund in 2025 and a second is expected to start shortly. It is possible they will be joined by two more, but these have not been formally confirmed. No other arrangements have been made either with another third party or directly with the Diocese.

One church has reduced its parish share by 20% and another church has requested that the amount that could be viewed as being over ministry costs be given specifically as support to another parish and any further excess from that to parishes of a similar outlook.

All other parishes are paying the full amount of parish share through the Fund and have not made a request for contributions to be limited in scope. The reduction for 2024 as a result of parishes moving to pay parish share through the Fund is £12,611. The sum with limitations placed on it is £3,714.

This may increase in 2025, but it is not material currently and is not seen as a problem to our financial support to parishes across the Diocese. Generally, parishes have viewed this move as making a theological statement rather than a financial one and so, as the figures demonstrate, have almost entirely retained the financial status quo.

5) The Revd James Sawyer (Rural Dean of Buntingford) to ask David White, Diocesan Secretary:

"Given the hiatus in national funding for deanery projects, and in particular those being developed for rural areas, what consideration is being given to active steps to support and develop ministry in rural parishes, and what part are rural ministers in this diocese being invited to shape that support to work in our context? "

The Diocesan Secretary will respond:

The Diocese has a clear recognition of challenges in rural ministry and a desire to develop initiatives to support rural parishes and benefices.

In March, as a first stage in this process, Bishop's Council received a presentation on many aspects of ministry in the 160 parishes with populations of under 3,000 – which are overwhelmingly rural. The presentation covered rural population, church attendance of adults and children, stipendiary clergy provision and financial contributions through parish share. Members of Bishop Council then offered their thoughts on priorities in rural ministry.

The Bishop's Staff team are developing a plan to initiate pilot projects in up to four parishes/benefices to provide evidence of the difference that can be made in rural ministry through new approached and (potentially) additional resources. This plan will be further discussed with Bishop's Council in July.

A critical next stage will be discussion with the deaneries with substantial rural population to gain local input and ownership. It is anticipated that pilot initiatives could be launched in 2026. Depending on the results achieved it is feasible that rural ministry initiatives could be a component part of a future funding bid to the Strategic Mission and Ministry Investment Board.