

QUESTION TIME

1. *Mr Geoff Nankivell (Oswestry) has asked:*

In view of the recent resignation of Bishop Martyn Snow from his position of lead bishop for the LLF process & the very real possibility that some within the Church of England may feel it advantageous to press ahead without due process having been completed what would the view of this diocese be towards:

standalone services that do not adhere to accepted Biblical teaching or any clergy who may marry a same sex partner in contravention of our doctrine of marriage or any who may seek to approve prospective ordinands who would have a same sex relationship apart from the Biblical teaching of scripture;

and if any of the above were to take place before due process has been finalised would this diocese take any disciplinary action, censure those involved, or simply accept the matter as having been done?

Also if the contravention of Biblical teaching were to continue would this diocese support delegated Episcopal ministry for those who adhere to the biblical teaching on marriage?

The Bishop of Lichfield has replied:

At present it is not clear to me what the future direction of the Living in Love & Faith process is following the Bishop of Leicester's stepping down from his role as lead bishop for LLF. The question has correctly identified two particular issues as being matters on which Diocesan Synods might like to focus at some point, viz.: (a) the possibility of 'standalone' (or bespoke) services using the Prayers of Love and Faith, and (b) the possibility of a disapplication of discipline for clergy or ordinands entering into civil same sex marriages. The view of our Bishop's Council was that this is not the right time for either of these matters to come to Diocesan Synod. Bishop Martyn's resignation has also highlighted the uncertainty around (c) proposals for 'Delegated Episcopal Ministry' which had been in discussion, and it also does not seem timely for these to be on our agenda now. All three questions need careful theological analysis, and this currently being led by the Faith & Order Commission.

2. *The Revd David Sims (Walsall) has asked:*

We're all aware that there are significant numbers of vacancies in our diocese- and indeed across the UK. Much has been said and suggested regarding raising vocations in our diocese- have we looked at imaginative ways to advertise our vacancies across the UK? Some dioceses have done Open Days where interested people can meet key people, visit some churches, chat with both lay and ordained leaders in the church. Some visit key Christian festivals to advertise their vacancies and encourage people to explore a calling. Some even make it clear that they pay clergy above the minimum stipend! We don't want people moving here for the wrong reasons, but is there a plan to encourage more people from across the UK to pray into a calling to ministry here in this wonderful diocese?

The Bishop of Lichfield has replied:

There are various ways in which we are seeking to be more proactive as a diocese in encouraging clergy to come here. For example: we are piloting an offer for parishes going into vacancy to receive central support with the presentation of their parish profiles, with the idea of making profiles more attractive and accessible to potential applicants whilst leaving the content decisions with the parish; we are looking at analysis of which advertising approaches have generated successful applications and developing proposals from this; there are conversations around the possibility of open days, at either area or diocesan level. We welcome all suggestions for creative ways of addressing this important issue.

It may also be worth mentioning here both that our recent significant uptick in vocations to ordained ministry will help significantly in future years; and also that work is being done on arranging for recently retired clergy to offer additional practical and missional support (not cover) to parishes in vacancy – we hope this will help parishes to experience vacancy as a healthy and normal part of life, and a time for growth.

3. The Revd David Sims (Walsall) has asked:

The DAC provides help and support to parishes looking to steward their church buildings, whilst also wanting to make missional choices and actions about how to use and adapt those buildings. We need those decisions to be delivered as speedily and clearly as possible- particularly in light of our 10 priorities. Some beautiful buildings will struggle to welcome many more of the new 3,400 disciples as they have no toilets- others are not accessible to those with disabilities. Furthermore, when a church is actively seeking to make changes to the fabric and fixtures to enable it to better engage in mission, the process can take years of backwards and forwards communication. (I know of one example of a 60s church which is unlisted, which is not demolishing or building, for which the process took 2 years- and this was with the support and help of the DAC secretary.

What formal scrutiny, oversight, support and challenge does the LDBF provide to hear parishes experiences and to ensure that the DAC is fully serving both heritage and mission priorities- that our buildings might help more people to know Jesus today?

The CEO/Diocesan Secretary has replied:

The role of the Diocesan Advisory Committee is set out in legislation under the Ecclesiastical Jurisdiction and Care of Churches Measure 2018:

<https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukcm/2018/3/contents>. Every diocese must have one and its constitution is set out clearly in the Schedules:

<https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukcm/2018/3/schedule/2> .

In short, the DAC is the Church of England's own buildings planning function which, without the Ecclesiastical Exemption, would normally be undertaken by the local Council. In particular, it means that historic churches do not normally have to apply for Listed Building permissions for works done to their interiors. The DAC has a very specialised remit within the national planning framework which is set out in Section 39 of the legislation: *A person carrying out functions of care and conservation under this Measure, or under any other enactment or any rule of law relating to churches, must have due regard to:*

- (a) *the role of a church as a local centre of worship and mission and*
- (b) *the importance of environmental protection.*

DACs are made up of a variety of people who represent different stakeholders in the church and in the communities we serve. It includes the archdeacons, members of Diocesan Synod (Lay and Ordained) as well as a variety of experts who help to advise the process: architects, lighting and heating engineers, experts in stained glass windows, bells, clocks, the environment, liturgy, and many others. By law, there also needs to be someone on the committee who has a special focus on disability issues. It also includes representatives of various heritage bodies, eg Historic England. The DAC is always keen to hear from those with special areas of expertise who are willing to support this work, especially heating and lighting experts and those with skills in audio-visual presentation. The DAC is primarily accountable for the quality of their advice to the Chancellor of the Diocese who has overall responsibility for the care of buildings within the Diocese as the presiding judge of the Consistory Court. The DAC Secretary and his team work closely with Chair of the DAC, the Archdeacons, the Registrar, and the individual advisors to ensure that the work that is undertaken is done efficiently and effectively and is always focused on the purpose of the committee – the mission and ministry of the whole people of God in the diocese and on safeguarding the environment. The Archdeacons in particular have a key role in being the bridge (or ‘arch’) between the parish and the DAC, and will exercise this by representing the parish to the committee and the committee to the parish, as they do on so many of our committees.

The DAC Secretary works directly with parishes to support them in shaping a proposal which is likely to be approved by the DAC and the Chancellor. Parishes can speed the process of an application by planning a proposal carefully with their Inspecting Architect, consulting locally, and working with the DAC’s advice in a timely way. The national Church Buildings Council advise that major projects can take 3 years or more to get right before they finally pass – simpler projects which are well thought-through and have a clear missional goal can take just a few months.

The DAC is also required to give a report on its work to Synod once a year and there is opportunity at that time for questions to be asked. The Secretary to the DAC is an employee of the DBF and is line managed by the Chief Executive / Diocesan Secretary.

4. *The Revd Preb Brian Leathers (Utttoxeter) has asked:*

How many deacons will be ordained in our diocese this summer, and how many deacons will be priested? How many are stipendiary and how many self-supporting?

The Director of Ministry has replied:

There are 8 candidates to be ordained deacon this Petertide, 7 are stipendiary and 1 SSM. Of the 3 ordained deacon in 2024, 2 are to be ordained priest (both stipendiary), the other remains a Distinctive Deacon (SSM).

5. *The Revd Preb Brian Leathers (Uttoxeter) has asked:*

What is the latest overall vacancy rate for the whole diocese? What is the rate for each archdeaconry? How does this compare with the national vacancy rate (if this is known).

The Finance Director has replied:

We record vacancy against deployment posts that are recognised in the Budget and therefore the Common Fund formula. We do not record chaplaincies and other associated posts. Equally this does not include curates.

We do not know the National figure but in conversations with other diocese most suggest one in four or 25% vacancy rate, but I'm sure there are those with lower and higher rates.

The table below shows as at 30 June, and YTD Jan to June average. We have also added on known movements the year end estimate and year end average (based on information that we know about)

			Forecast	
	Jun-25	YTD	Yr End	YTD
Lichfield	23.12%	25.72%	26.12%	25.67%
Walsall	36.22%	35.95%	25.37%	31.35%
Wton Area	31.54%	32.29%	25.64%	29.32%
Salop	24.42%	25.43%	28.48%	26.83%
Stoke	21.86%	19.72%	26.28%	21.58%
Diocese	26.75%	26.58%	25.59%	26.12%

6. *Mr Ian Peake (Shrewsbury and Wrekin) has asked:*

How many churches in the Diocese don't currently have a safeguarding officer? In such situations, what happens/what procedures are in place should someone report/raise a safeguarding issue?

The Diocesan Safeguarding Officer has replied:

At any time there are a number of churches without a Parish Safeguarding Officer (PSO) due to retirement or recruitment. The number fluctuates – at this time the number stands at around 25. Where a church is vacant of a PSO then the responsibility for maintaining parish safeguarding policy, DBS and other requirements for safeguarding remains the collective responsibility of the PCC. In terms of reporting concerns people should be encouraged to contact the Diocese Safeguarding team by telephoning 01543 306 030 and selecting the option for the safeguarding team. As always in an emergency or where a crime may have been committed this should be reported to the Police in the first instance.

7. *Mr Ian Peake (Shrewsbury and Wrekin) has asked:*

I have recently been reading about Sir Frances Drake and how Elizabethan England and by implication the early Church of England benefitted financially from his raids on Spanish Treasure Ships loaded with gold and silver which were often mined by the enforced slavery of the indigenous South American population.

Will the team be looking at how the Church of England benefitted from this slave trade together with looking at possible reparations to South America. If not, could I please ask why?

The Bishop of Lichfield has replied:

I regret that I am unable to provide an answer to this. The important matters relating to healing, repair and justice about which the question asks would fall under 'Project Spire', which is the responsibility of the Church Commissioners; I do not know if they have any plans to consider this dimension of history.

8. *The Revd Paul Kingman (Stone) has asked:*

There are many rural benefices with large numbers of parish churches for an incumbent to oversee, which is a concerning trend in common with other Dioceses. What strategy does the Lichfield Diocese have to move towards having fewer churches for an incumbent in rural areas to oversee and thus help towards a more sustainable model of ministry?

The Bishop of Lichfield has replied:

On 22nd September this year, as part of our strategy (Seeking the Kingdom, p19), we are organising a day conference to consider the opportunities and challenges raised by multi-parish benefices and other large pastoral units. Every clergy person with day-to-day responsibility for three or more church buildings has been invited to a day which will, we hope, offer mutual support and encouragement, with time to discuss some of the issues involved in being responsible for multiple churches, and to look at models of ongoing support going forwards.

Alongside this, other measures set out in Seeking the Kingdom include plans to 'reimagine our approach to lay ministry ... so that every church can have regular Sunday worship' (StK, p20) and to 'make mission-focussed decisions about the future for each church building' (StK, p22). Our work 'to secure a home-grown pipeline of clergy' alongside developing a deployment strategy (StK, p19) is relevant, although obviously there are cost implications.

9. *The Revd Paul Kingman (Stone) has asked:*

Following the changes in regulations concerning the membership of the 'Vacancy in See' committees for Dioceses (which prohibits membership of more than one person from any roll or benefice), could the Registrar clarify whether lay members of the Cathedral congregation are eligible or not, given that the Dean is an ex-officio member of the ViS committee?

The CEO/Diocesan Secretary has replied:

As the Dean is an ex- officio member of the Vacancy in See Committee, the provisions of Reg 6A of The Vacancy in See Committees Regulation 2024 (as amended by the Vacancy in See Committees (Amendment) Regulation 2025) mean that if a lay person is on the community roll of the Cathedral then they could not be nominated or elected – but if they are not on the community roll and simply attend the cathedral then they would be eligible to be nominated or elected.

I also note that where an election has been completed before 14th February 2025 (as is the case in Lichfield), those who were elected remain members after that date (see Question 11, 15th March 2025).

10. *Dr Ros Clarke (General Synod) has asked:*

Has the diocese considered developing a plan for best practice in implementing the Five Guiding Principles which accompany the House of Bishops' declaration on the consecration of women bishops and the provision for those unable to accept their ministry on theological grounds? Given that we now have two female bishops, as well as two female archdeacons in the diocese, as well as a number of parishes receiving episcopal oversight from the Bishops of Ebbsfleet and Oswestry, it would seem sensible to have agreed working practices to avoid giving unnecessary hurt or offence, and to enable maximal mutual flourishing.

The Bishop of Lichfield has replied:

I warmly welcome the implications of this question. A proposal to require diocesan bishops to draw up plans of the kind described was recently brought to the House of Bishops by the Standing Commission on the Five Guiding Principles (which I chair). Although the bishops at that stage did not feel that such a requirement was timely, I believe that this is an area where this diocese could model good practice by drawing up such a plan, particularly given the range of mutual flourishing here to which the questioner refers. I do not anticipate that the formulation of such a plan would involve major changes to the ways in which we already operate, but it could bring welcome clarity and consistency through articulating our current practice.

11. *Mr Phil Dooley (Wolverhampton) has asked:*

At a recent meeting of the Wolverhampton Deanery Synod, there was an expression of concern about the centralisation of Archdeaconry Visitation for 2025. It is my understanding that the process is meant to be conducted in local deaneries according to the Lichfield Diocese website. Travelling to Lichfield by car can be difficult and parking problematical. Public transport connections are poor. Also, what does the increased numbers of longer car journeys associated with the event say about our “green credentials.” Although separate arrangements for the Wolverhampton Area were arranged, can we have an assurance that centralisation of the Archdeaconry Visitations will not continue beyond 2025?

The Archdeacon of Walsall has replied:

It is my understanding that for the second year running, the archdeacon's MAIN visitation for the Wolverhampton Episcopal Area was held in Lichfield Cathedral (although there were two other visitations, in Wolverhampton and Penkridge which any of the churchwardens could attend and giving us a good geographical spread). It is important that our Cathedral is included in the life of the Episcopal Area and, although I am new in post, I have heard that many people very much enjoyed being invited to such a special location. However, I am very keen that we hold our visitations in a wide variety of the beautiful and special places in our Area and look forward to working with different churches next year to arrange these.

12. Mr Geoff Locke (Newcastle) has asked:

I understand that the Diocese does not accept the automatic online update of Disclosure and Barring Service (DBS) Certificates. Is this understanding correct and, if so, what is the reason for it?

The Diocesan Data Manager has replied:

DBS checks are not updated automatically via the Update Service. A check of any changes to the information on the certificate still needs to be done by the diocese every 3 years to maintain the validity of the certificate. The DBS Update Service can be used to perform an Update check on a previous DBS check, either from the diocese or from a different organisation, without completing a full new application. The applicant must have subscribed to the service within 28 days of their DBS being issued, and the level of check required for the current church role(s) must match the original DBS exactly, including barred list checks. (For example, a school governor DBS check is likely to only include a Child workforce check and may include a child barred list check. If the church role is as a PCC member/Trustee then an Adult and Child workforce check is required without a check of either barred list and so the original DBS can't be used for an update check for the church role as the level of check does not match the original certificate. However, if the church role was for a church creche including toileting/nappy changing then a Child workforce DBS check with a child barred list check could be used as that is the level of check required for the church role.) Update checks can also not be performed for any role which is designated as home-based (clergy) as the home-based check includes a check of others living at the same address over the age of 16 and this can't be done via the update service.

If the applicant has subscribed to the Update Service and wishes to use their certificate for a role in the church, they need to show their original certificate to their PSO or Vicar who then sends a copy to the Diocesan DBS Administrator with the applicant's consent for an Update Check to be carried out. Once an Update Check has been carried out (and assuming no changes) the DBS is then valid for 3 years and the PSO/Vicar will be notified of the new expiry date. If the applicant still requires a DBS at this time a further Update Check must be requested (again with sight of the original certificate as this is a DBS requirement).