

**Minutes of a meeting of Lichfield Diocesan Synod
15th March 2025, 9.30 am, Telford Minster**

Present: The Bishop of Lichfield (President)
The Bishop of Shrewsbury
The Bishop of Stafford
The Bishop of Wolverhampton
57 clergy members
45 lay members

In attendance: Mr Jonathan Hill (Director of Finance)
Mrs Jess Dace (Deputy to the Director of Finance)
Mr Mark Davis (Director of Education)
The Revd Simon Foster (Head of Mission Team)
The Revd Canon Nick Smeeton (Strategy Programme Director)
The Revd Dr Jeanette Hartwell (Director of Ministry)

Apologies: 18 clergy members
15 lay members

The President assumed the Chair

1. Welcome and Opening Prayers

The Revd Preb Pat Hakins led an act of opening worship.

Bishop Michael welcomed all and thanked the Minster team for their warm welcome.

He explained that there was no discussion on Living in Love and Faith at the meeting due to changes in the national timetable, and a discussion would take place later in the year.

He then congratulated three recently elected General Synod members, the Revds Abbie Walsh, Christopher Landau and Neil Robbie, following a by election to fill vacancies created by the departures of the Revds Matt Beer and Zoe Heming, and the resignation of the Revd Damian Feeney. The new members were greeted with applause.

He also then welcomed the new Diocesan Mothers' Union President, Deb Tudor, then moving the following motion:

This Synod approves the co-option of the Diocesan Mothers' Union President, Deb Tudor, to its membership.

This was carried unanimously.

2. Minutes of the Last Meeting and Matters Arising (DS25/03/01)

The minutes of the meeting held on 30th November 2024 were approved. No matters arising had been notified.

3. Presidential Address

Bishop Michael then gave his Presidential Address, The President then gave his address, looking ahead to the items on the agenda, including a motion on Non-Disclosure Agreements, the report of General Synod including Safeguarding debate. He paid tribute to the work of our Parish Safeguarding Officers, who were at the front line of delivering our aspiration for Safeguarding to be shared pattern of our life together at every level. He also then expressed gratitude to our Diocesan Safeguarding Team and was very pleased to add that we had recently been able to increase resourcing of this team. He emphasised the need to celebrate progress in this area at a local level, whilst acknowledging that there was still much to do. There was also an item dealing with some amendments to the Diocesan Strategy, and he spoke about his

upcoming pilgrimage around the dioceses at the beginning of April to help launch the strategic framework, most of which would be on foot, with some sections on public transport. Every evening, he would be leading a Bible Study using a different text from the New Testament to encourage us to think about one of our ten strategic goals. Each of these could be found in the 8th Century St Chad's Gospels housed in our Cathedral, from which he would be carrying illustrations as a reminder of the story of how the diocese began. He went to speak about the marking this year of 1700 years since the gathering at Nicaea. The Nicene Creed, which was first formulated there still summarised the heart of the Christian faith. He commended to members the saying or singing of the Creed on Sundays and the practice of thinking about what was being said or sung about. The gift entrusted to us was a treasure of infinite value, yet so often taken for granted, and he was aiming to write soon to those in the diocese with information about the resources available in this 1700th year to help individuals and churches engage with the riches of the apostolic faith as set out in the . He concluded with the following:

As we commit ourselves afresh to following Christ in the Footsteps of St Chad, let us do so with clarity, with determination and with gratitude for the Faith which we have received and which we pass on to future generations. Let us walk in the light of Christ.

The Chair of the House of Clergy assumed the Chair

4. Announcement of the new CEO and Diocesan Secretary

The Chair of the DBF spoke about Mrs Sam Rushton, who, he was delighted to announce, would be joining the Diocese as Chief Executive and Diocesan Secretary in April. He spoke about Sam's background in retail banking and most recently as part of the leadership team in the Diocese of York. He then moved the following motion:

This Synod notes the appointment of Mrs Sam Rushton to the post of Diocesan Secretary and CEO.

This was carried unanimously.

5. Telford Deanery Motion (DS25/03/02)

The Revd Tim Carter (Telford) introduced this item regarding Non-Disclosure Agreements on behalf of his deanery. The motion being considered was as follows:

this Synod requests General Synod:

- a) Condemn and discourage the use of Non-Disclosure Agreements (NDAs) and reiterate that the use of Non-Disclosure Agreements is inappropriate in any HR and Safeguarding situation and*
- b) Request Archbishop's Council and the National Safeguarding Team to bring forward proposals for national guidelines on the use of NDAs and establish mechanisms for the reporting of NDAs and*
- c) Require any Church of England institution, organisation or body to report on and register the existence and use of NDAs relating to HR and Safeguarding matters and*
- d) Request Archbishop's Council and the National Safeguarding Team to develop appropriate guidance and mechanisms to enable existing NDAs relating to HR and Safeguarding matters to be monitored and where possible to be retracted and replaced with appropriate support.*

Speaking to a previously paper circulated he gave background to the motion, referring to the pain that could be caused by Non-Disclosure Agreements (NDAs) and the difficulty for those affected to ask for support. At the heart of the matter was trust, which he believed had broken down. And whilst he believed it was right for leaders in churches and dioceses to have space to make decisions in private, but for trust to be rebuilt there needed to be appropriate oversight and safeguards in place. He explained how the motion had come to be and had gone through the synodical process to reach Diocesan Synod via his PCC and Deanery Synod. He explained that aim was not to ban NDAs but where they were used to ensure the highest levels of pastoral care and with appropriate oversight at a national level.

Mrs Amanda Robbie (General Synod) understood the sentiment behind the motion but was concerned about the clarity of what was being referred to, e.g. was this about employees of parishes, dioceses, clergy, laity or office holders? She felt that clarity was needed before progress could be made on this. Mr Tug Wilson (General Synod) reminded members that NDAs were not illegal and were often used in the commercial world. He explained that he had helped to draft the motion and had had input from the clerk to General Synod. They had been happy with the motion although clearly there was work to be done. He urged members to support the motion, explaining that if progressed to General Synod it would be looked at by the legal team and reformatted as necessary, before being debated.

Mr Chris Gill (General Synod) was concerned about some of the finer detail in the motion. Specifically, regarding the reference to safeguarding and HR. Noting that there were cases of bullying where safeguarding team were not involved, he felt that care was needed regarding the difference between bullying and safeguarding matters.

The Revd Oliver Harrison (Tamworth) noting that 4 years ago, then then Archbishop of Canterbury had described the use of NDAs as totally unacceptable and Bishop Michael had, in his address, seemed not to be in favour of their use. He therefore struggled to understand why they were used in the diocese.

Mr John Wardle (Shrewsbury and Wrekin) had seen an immediate conflict in the motion but the had been addressed by Tim Carter in saying that there were circumstances in which the use of an NDA was valid. The wording of the first paragraph therefore could not apply.

Ms Annette Goodall (Shrewsbury and Wrekin) noting that many safeguarding issues involved an imbalance of power and there were many references to this in the Bible. She felt that we must find God in what we were doing.

Mr Andrew Buttress (Leek) was in favour of the motion, speaking about the use of NDAs to protect organisational reputation, saying that when used in the areas of HR and personal relations, they did enormous damage. He cited their use by large organisations to cover up instances of discrimination, harassment and bullying.

The Revd Julia Cody (Nominated) supported regulation, guidance and pastoral support in relation to such agreements.

The Revd Nigel Irons (Leek) referred to the word “reiterate” in the motion and asked when the matter was previously iterated.

Bishop Michael commended the motion, recognising that further work was required on it. He was not aware of the use of NDAs in the diocese but would investigate this further.

The Revd Tim Carter (Telford) thanked members for their thoughtful engagement and addressed the comments.

Regarding reiteration, he said that his thinking had been around reiterating the comments of the archbishops who had expressed a negative view of NDAs.

He accepted concerns regarding clarity and referred to the case that was illustrated in the paper circulated. The motion was concerned with NDAs relating HR and Safeguarding matters. He hoped that the motion could be passed, acknowledging that further work would be done to prepare it for consideration by General Synod.

He then moved the motion as set out.

Following a vote this was carried with one abstention.

6. General Synod Report (DS25/03/03)

Mrs Amanda Robbie (General Synod) spoke to her report of the February sessions of General Synod where the major items had been Safeguarding and adjustments to the appointment of Diocesan Bishops. The death of Geoffery Tattersall in January was noted with sadness and appreciation of his significant contribution to General Synod, particularly in chairing recent debates on Living in Love and Faith.

Mrs Amanda Robbie then moved then moved the following motion:

The report of the General Synod sessions in February 2025 be received

This was carried unanimously.

7. Diocesan Strategy Update and Amendment (DS25/03/04)

The Revd Canon Nick Smeeton (Strategy Programme Director) introduced this item which involved the Diocesan Strategy Document “Seeking the Kingdom”. This document set out the route towards our destination which was the vision set out in the strategic framework, which in turn was the result of Shaping for Mission. It was about directing and channelling our efforts over the coming years, working together as we journeyed towards our destination. It also contained an action plan setting out what would be done centrally to support our parishes, schools, fresh expressions, chaplaincies and the cathedral as we sought the kingdom together. It was important to note that the document was not static and would be updated as needed to help us continue on the best route to our destination, adapting to missional opportunities and challenges. The destination however would remain, to be a diocese that was purposeful about evangelism, engaged creatively with local communities, was becoming more diverse, and was growing younger.

The Archdeacon of Stoke-upon-Trent explained the background to the motion which proposed an amendment and an addition to the strategy. She then moved the following:

This synod approves the following amendments to the strategic framework:

1. To ensure that our terminology aligns with that used by the National Church, propose a change in the narrative under Goal 1 from:

The current worshipping congregation represents 0.9% of the population of the Diocese. Our goal is to double this. It is possible to achieve this goal if we work at increasing our individual confidence in living the gospel story.

to:

Our All-Age Average Weekly Attendance represents 0.9% of the population of the Diocese and our Worshipping Community represents 1.6% of the population of the Diocese. Our goal is to double our Worshipping Community. It is possible to achieve this goal if we work at increasing our individual confidence in living the gospel story.

2. To add a tenth goal:

To have made substantial progress towards NZC with a clear and achievable plan of how any shortfall will be resolved in the following few years.

The diocese is working with the Net Zero route map set out by the Church of England. Through the setting of milestones and resources provided centrally we will: help our congregations to understand the imperative of caring for God’s creation; consider the carbon emissions of both buildings and travel; and with the innovative use of glebe land for offsetting, aim to achieve Net Zero by 2030.

The Revd Gilbert David (Wednesbury) was excited by the strategy but asked if there was detail on how and when we would achieve the goals set out.

The Archdeacon of Stoke-upon-Trent explained that the Seeking the Kingdom document included stepping stones for the first year and would continue to be developed towards 2030.

Mr Geoff Locke (Newcastle) felt that the time allocated on the agenda for this important item was too short. He congratulated those who had put together the strategy and appreciated to work that had been done. He felt though that there were many issues in the Church, such as cases of abuse and cover ups, and a perception of confusion about our beliefs about marriage, and he felt this weakened our ability to speak to others.

The Revd Paul Kingman (Stone) referred to the phrase on page 12 of the document “pressure on parish finances is significant” and asked for clarification of this.

The Archdeacon explained that this was a recognition that all our parishes were stretched financially, and achieving net zero carbon was costly, although morally right and beneficial in the long term.

Standing Orders were suspended at this point

The Strategy Programme Director, recalling the item on Net Zero Carbon that was discussed at the previous meeting of Synod, spoke about national goals that had been set for parishes. The national goal for this year was for every parish to have replaced its lighting with an LED system. Whilst not achievable, this was an indication of the costs to come, both for parishes and for services such as the DAC.

The Revd Steve Nicholson (Oswestry) was thankful for the strategy and the goals within it. He would like Synod to have seen the progress that had been made at this one-year point and asked how Synod would be involved and reported to in the coming years.

The Archdeacon explained that the Seeking the Kingdom document set out what had happened in the last year, since the strategic goals were agreed. There would be a further update to Synod in a year's time.

Dr Michael Davie (Oswestry) was not clear about how the goals would be financed. He felt there needed to be clarity on what parishes were required to do and how it could be funded at parish level.

The Strategy Programme Director said that the strategy was about us working together across the diocese, and there was nothing in the framework that attached cost. In fact, aligning staffing with the document had resulted in a reduction in the central team and therefore in costs. In the coming years there may be diocesan wide work for which we would want to attract national funding, and this would be done through the appropriate governance processes.

Mr Rob Searl (Shrewsbury and Wrekin), asked for reassurance that the welcome reference to costings of reaching these goals was a reflection of the urgency of achieving them, including net zero carbon by 2030, rather than preparing to give a reason why we must amend them due to affordability.

The Strategy Programme Director felt that the national church was aware of the accelerated programme that had been set, and they were making funding available. There were indications that this would be the case for the foreseeable future.

The Revd Richard Grigson (Stafford) at this point withdrew an amendment which he had submitted previously.

The Revd Neil Robbie (General Synod) then introduced an amendment which, he explained, expanded the March 2024 motion and sought to clarify the relationship between those who were responsible for the implementation of the strategy and diocesan synod. He was concerned that the updates and reviews mentioned in the motion agreed in March 2024 had not taken place and synod were not being kept informed. He particularly cited the recruitment to several new diocesan roles related to strategic work, which he felt synod members had not been aware of and were at a time when diocesan and parish finances were under significant pressure. Given the order of events it appeared to him that the strategic implementation was running ahead of funding, although since writing the amendment more information had become available through the Question Time paper and conversations with Nick Smeeton and Archdeacon Megan. He felt that there was a need for better communication and for the requests made in his amendment to be met. He felt that Synod should be making decisions as the main decision-making body with responsibility for the budget, it therefore needed more information from those driving the strategic framework, and, he felt, needed to be reminded of the proper levels of scrutiny and accountability due to those holding such responsibility. His amendment did not aim to interfere with operations but to build trust. He felt there had also been a lack of consultation with Synod regarding the partnership with the Diocese of Hyderabad presented in 2023, and the very recent appointment of a new CEO/Diocesan Secretary.

He then moved the following amendment:

At the end add:

and, recognising that this synod in March 2024 endorsed the principles and priorities set out in the strategy direction paper DS24/03/06 and to receive regular updates and reviews at future meetings request that:

(i) synod receives a detailed programme for the implementation of the strategic framework (2025-2030) to include

(a) staffing structure and any contractual commitments.

(b) a detailed budget, including costs, funding sources and ongoing financial commitments with their implication on the diocesan budget beyond the end of the programme.

And

(ii) that work to implement the programme should not commence until funding for the programme is secured and approved by synod.

The Strategy Programme Director responded by saying that the three roles being recruited for were a slight refocussing and a significant reduction in the size of the Mission and Ministry Team. He did not think it was appropriate for discussion on such detailed matters to be brought to Synod for discussion as it was day to day operational business. In terms of updates to Synod, this was his first opportunity to do so and he would expect to bring updates all future synod meetings. He explained that the “Programme Board” referred to in the document was something that would be formed in the future should significant funding be used through the governance process. He commented also that the key aim Seeking the Kingdom and the strategic programme was to teach people about Jesus, to support our ministries and to build our communities. He therefore felt that part (ii) of the amendment was not helpful.

The Archdeacon of Stoke-upon-Trent added that the partnership with the Diocese of Hyderabad had been voted upon and approved by Synod.

She then confirmed that the amendment was resisted.

Mrs Penny Allen (General Synod) wanted to reassure members that the proceeds of Glebe land sales were used to support certain areas of work and projects and this helped to relieve the financial burden on parishes. She regarded the amendment as a wrecking amendment. She fully supported the presentation

of the strategy given at this meeting. Regarding communication she reminded members that the role of CEO/Diocesan Secretary was currently vacant which she felt had an impact on this. She felt that Synod already had understanding of the strategy and the aim was now to advance it. She applauded the way it had been presented as it was easily understood by PCCs and others outside of Synod. She understood there were some concerns but felt we must move forward and trust that our leaders were leading us in the right direction. She also felt that the comments made should have been made earlier in the process and she encouraged members to vote for the original motion

Mr Rob Searl (Shrewsbury and Wrekin) was not sure about the amendment but was particularly concerned about part (ii). He asked whether Neil Robbie would be prepared to withdraw this part.

Mr John Wilson (General Synod) fully supported the strategy and felt we must progress it. He did not agree that this was a wrecking amendment. He acknowledged that there would be a programme board in the future if necessary and that full financial information would be available at that point.

The Revd Ben Whitmore (Wednesbury) asked that if part (ii) of the amendment was passed and appointments were not made, would this have a significant impact on the work of staff in the mission and ministry teams and their workloads.

The Bishop of Lichfield was also concerned about part (ii) as he felt that its implications were not clear. Given that it had been stated that there was no additional funding required at this point to move on with the programme, he felt it would be helpful if this part of the amendment could be withdrawn.

The Revd Neil Robbie restated that further information had become available since writing the amendment, but his concern was the advertising of permanent posts which went beyond the 2030 timescale of the strategy. He was not trying to stop the project but was questioning the advertising of these roles without the consultation of Synod.

He then withdrew part (ii) of the amendment.

The Strategy Programme Director at this point clarified that 4.2 full time members of staff would be reduced to 3 with the new recruitments. Without these the remaining staff would be covering the work of 4 people. This was not new spending and did not require agreement from Synod and was not restructuring as was being suggested.

The Archdeacon of Stoke-upon-Trent confirmed that she was happy to accept the amendment with clause (ii) removed. She then moved the changed amendment.

A vote then took place and this was clearly carried.

The Archdeacon of Stoke-upon-Trent then moved the motion as amended, as follows:

This synod approves the following amendments to the strategic framework:

1. To ensure that our terminology aligns with that used by the National Church, propose a change in the narrative under Goal 1 from:

The current worshipping congregation represents 0.9% of the population of the Diocese. Our goal is to double this. It is possible to achieve this goal if we work at increasing our individual confidence in living the gospel story.

to:

Our All-Age Average Weekly Attendance represents 0.9% of the population of the Diocese and our Worshipping Community represents 1.6% of the population of the Diocese. Our goal is to double our Worshipping Community. It is possible to achieve this goal if we work at increasing our individual confidence in living the gospel story.

2. To add a tenth goal:

To have made substantial progress towards NZC with a clear and achievable plan of how any shortfall will be resolved in the following few years.

The diocese is working with the Net Zero route map set out by the Church of England. Through the setting of milestones and resources provided centrally we will: help our congregations to understand the imperative of caring for God's creation; consider the carbon emissions of both buildings and travel; and with the innovative use of glebe land for offsetting, aim to achieve Net Zero by 2030. and, recognising that this synod in March 2024 endorsed the principles and priorities set out in the strategy direction paper DS24/03/06 and to receive regular updates and reviews at future meetings request that:

(i) synod receives a detailed programme for the implementation of the strategic framework (2025-2030) to include

(a) staffing structure and any contractual commitments.

(b) a detailed budget, including costs, funding sources and ongoing financial commitments with their implication on the diocesan budget beyond the end of the programme.

This was voted upon and clearly carried.

8. Question Time

The Question Time paper was the discussed, which contained which contained twenty-four written questions and answers and written answers from diocesan officers. The following supplementary questions were then raised:

In respect of Question 2, Mr Chris Gill (General Synod) asked, as the Ephesian Fund giving system seemed to give a higher giving proportion than we were collecting overall in the diocese, would the diocese consider publicising the scheme to encourage a higher revenue for the Common Fund.

The Director of Finance replied that the relationship with the parishes paying through the Ephesian Fund was very good. Given the amount raised through the fund was around £250,000 against a formula of around £10 million. This was too low to enable extrapolation to know the impact of any expansion of giving in this way.

In respect of Question 4, the Revd Neil Robbie (General Synod) thanked the Finance Director for the information provided. He asked in what format should Synod ask for budgets to be presented in order to look at allocations rather than simply balancing the budget.

The Finance Director responded by acknowledging that analysis of sections of the budget was not currently done but could be looked at. He encouraged anyone with suggestions for detailed analysis on particular sections to come forward.

In respect of Question 5, the Revd Nigel Irons (Leek) thanked the Finance Director for his answer. He then asked, when the budget was set, what was the relationship between the vacancy level and projected Common Fund receipts. So did the DBF effectively decide on a vacancy level needed to remain solvent or were there mechanisms built in to allow scope for the possible reduction of vacancies in the future.

The Finance Director explained that for 2025 the projected receipts had not been based on a percentage of the overall formula but of a reduced figure which took the number of vacancies into consideration.

In respect of Question 6, the Revd David Sims (Walsall) said that around two years ago an email had been sent to clergy encouraging them to contact Bishops and Archdeacons if they needed financial help as a result of the transition from Child Tax Credits to Universal Credit. He asked if this could be repeated to remind clergy that help was available.

The Finance Director said that a letter was sent out giving all rates and allowances and this did include reference to seeking help in this way if needed. He was happy for this element to be recirculated.

In respect of Question 7, the Revd Steve Nicholson (Oswestry) asked, given concerns about activists targeting churches who were utilising the Ephesian Fund, had the diocese consulted those named about sharing this information. He pointed out also that it appeared this question was being asked at many Diocesan Synods in a co-ordinated way.

The Finance Director said there had not been any such consultation. There had however been no instruction to keep the information confidential.

In respect of Question 10, Mr Chris Gill (General Synod) thanked Bishop Michael for his response. He then asked whether the main reason for Bishop Anne Hollinghurst's appointment to the House of Bishops of our Diocesan Synod was so that she could continue in the quite demanding role of a member of the House of Bishops in General Synod rather than contributing to the governance of this diocese.

Bishop Michael responded that the appointment of Bishop Anne to our Diocesan Synod had been agreed by the then Archbishop of Canterbury in consultation with himself. This did mean that she continued as an elected suffragan in the House of Bishops of General Synod, which was a demanding role, as was her work as Principal of The Queen's Theological Foundation. He hoped though that she would be able to offer a level of episcopal ministry in the diocese, but he anticipated that her capacity to engage in governance would be limited.

Mr John Wilson (General Synod) noted that as Bishop Anne was to be a member of our diocesan House of Bishops, this could affect the balance of clergy and laity, particularly in regard to Bishop's Council and this should be kept in mind.

Bishop Michael acknowledged this and confirmed that Bishop Anne did not expect to be able to take part in Bishop's Council on a regular basis although may be able to attend Synod occasionally.

In respect of Question 11, Mr Chris Gill (General Synod) thanked the Finance Director for his answer. He then said that in several dioceses registrars had been called upon to provide clarification of the phrase "relevant connection" before elections could take place. He asked whether there was sufficient information to progress with filling the vacancies on the Vacancy in See Committee as soon as possible.

The Finance Director responded that he had consulted the registrar on this question. As far as he was aware we were in a position to seek to fill the vacancies on the committee in line with new regulations. He noted also that historically this committee had not always attracted sufficient numbers of candidates.

In respect of Question 13, a supplementary question was asked around clarification of which aspects of policy were local policy and which were national. As the safeguarding adviser was not present Bishop Michael suggested that the question be sent by email to receive an answer.

In respect of Question 16, the Revd Tim Vasby-Burnie (Shrewsbury and Wrekin) recalled that around two years ago Synod had been told that the financial deficit was such that in two or three years we may run out of reserves that could be utilised easily. He therefore asked what the position currently was regarding such reserves.

The Finance Director answered that the approval of the use of Total Return Approach (TRA) in June 2023 had been key in addressing this. It enabled us to utilise a managed amount from historical growth to protect unrestricted funds each year. Regarding reserves, if there was a collapse in income or increased

expenditure then this did increase pressure on the diocese but the introduction of TRA had stabilised this. It was liquidity though that caused the most concern as this could only be mitigated by selling investments which in turn affected future investment income. At the end of 2024 liquidity had been a particular concern, but the first quarter of 2025 had been very positive with several sales being completed. He felt reserves were significantly more secure now than two years ago.

In respect of Question 22, Mr Geoff Locke (Newcastle) was grateful for the answer but asked if a list of members by name and deanery could be provided when a new Synod was elected.

The Finance Director responded that a list of this type could be made available.

Bishop's Council Report (DS25/03/05)

The Revd Paul Kingman (Stone) raised an item from the Bishop's Council Report which concerned the project in Stoke being funded by SMMIB, asking if updates on this could be a standing item on Synod's agenda. The Archdeacon of Stoke answered that there could certainly be regular updates but was reluctant to commit to an item at every Synod meeting. She encouraged members though to feel free to ask any questions by email at any point, and thanked members for their ongoing interest and prayers.

Bishop Michael closed the meeting in prayer.

All papers and presentations are linked from the web page [here](#).

JD June 2025