

From the DioSec

February 2024

When five years ago this month I applied for the role of Diocesan Secretary, I was inspired by the vision to be a more Christ-like Church for the sake of God's world. I still am and hope you are too.

But those mustn't be empty words, a slogan for the website that doesn't affect what we actually do. And so this month, I am reflecting briefly on the five areas that we believe continue to be the right areas for particular focus.

Let's start with children, young people and schools. The pandemic has often been harsh to children's and young people's work in churches: our latest data suggests a drop of about 25% in average weekly attendance. We know across the diocese there is a desire to see a transformational increase: the Church of England has set the target of doubling the numbers of children and young people in church communities. Our area deans and lay chairs and Bishop's Council have all just committed to a very major strategic focus on this. We want to work in partnership with every parish to support you in drawing in and retaining many, many more of the families you are blessed with in your locality.

In the five years since Diocesan Synod declared a climate emergency, churches have reduced carbon emissions by over 11%, over 25% of churches are now registered with EcoChurch, many of our schools now have LED lighting, and we are just starting our ten-million-pound project to bring our vicarages towards net zero. It was so encouraging to have Oxford's motion so strongly supported at General Synod last July. There really feels to be a momentum around environmental work being a gospel imperative; and as further funding becomes available at national and local levels there will be so much more that can be done.

It is encouraging that over 100 new congregations have emerged, and so many other parishes of all sizes and types are trying out new initiatives and thinking afresh how you are engaging with those not currently in our churches to grow God's Church. Our area teams are now proactively working with lots of parishes and will be only too happy to help you consider whether a new congregation is the best way to help your church to flourish in the future.

Addressing poverty and inequality has become ever more important with an ongoing cost of living crisis. As with all the strategic work, we keep re-evaluating how our limited resources can achieve greatest impact and respond to changing needs. Having accommodated 201 Ukrainian nationals, and issued well-regarded cost of living resources, a key focus *this* year will be on providing materials to help parishes engage on election priorities.

Finally, we know how important Christian formation and discipleship are in our walk with Christ. It is good that Come and See is again this year proving so popular, starting on Ash Wednesday. Several hundred people are already making use of our new Learning Hub, launched in September. We are looking at what other resources would be helpful including in evangelism, mindful that our vision is *for the sake of God's world*.

So how are you seeking this year to become a more Christlike Church for the sake of God's world? We know none of this is easy – Kingdom work rarely is. Do check out more information on each focus area on the website and access the resources available and tell us where we can help further. I have not been describing the *Church House* vision – this is what we have all in partnership discerned God to be saying is *our common vision*.