

Diocesan Synod – September 2026

Bishop Martyn's Presidential Address

The report “Deep Wells and Green Pastures” was published in 2018 and was the result of several months of hard work and consultation by the “rural commission” which I set up, and the previous Dean of Leicester chaired. It was launched at a special celebration event at Brooksby College and distributed widely around the diocese.

So now, 8 years on, you may have seen that a question has been asked about the follow up to this report – a very fair question - and I decided that it would be easiest to answer through my Presidential Address rather than a short, written answer.

Of course, a lot has happened since 2018, most notably, we've had a pandemic, during which the city of Leicester experienced a much longer lockdown than anywhere else in the country. We've had quite a few changes of government, as well as major international events which have directly affected communities in Leicester – I'm thinking of the war in Ukraine – many households across the county and city opened their homes to Ukrainian refugees. And the Oct 7th massacre in Israel which led to the dreadful destruction of Gaza – which in turn led to political changes here – I live in a constituency which now has an independent MP who stood on a pro-Palestinian ticket.

There's much more that could be said about how our world has changed since 2018, but I'm very pleased that our attention is being drawn back to the learning of the rural commission.

In the forward to Deep Wells and Green Pastures, I wrote: “If the work of this Commission helps us to change our self-understanding, it will have been a great success. For most people outside of our Diocese, the Diocese of Leicester conjures up pictures of a dead king, a football team surpassing all expectations and a multicultural and multifaith melting pot. But this is only part of the picture. This report is a step along the way to reminding those of us who live in the Diocese that the typical Leicestershire church is small, beautiful, and vibrant, made up of farmers, business people and retirees, and so embedded in the life of the community that even those who call themselves atheists, still volunteer to cut the churchyard grass or ring the church bells.”

Now I realise there will be a variety of perspectives here on whether the Commission was a success in terms of changing our self-understanding. I still visit many rural congregations who feel overlooked and ignored by “the diocese”. In my Lent pilgrimage two years ago, I deliberately went to rural churches which don't have a service every

Sunday and struggle to find clergy to cover what services they do have. I've heard the concerns.

However, the Rural Commission, and the pandemic which followed not long after, did make it very clear to me that something had to be done to help support our rural churches. Simply carrying on as we were, was a clear recipe for clergy burnout and church closures. So we began the whole diocesan conversation which led to the development of the idea of Minster Communities. So, of course, you won't find any mention of Minster Communities in the Rural Commission report, but you will find plenty of references to partnership working, encouraging lay ministry and working closely with schools – all principles which lie at the heart of Minster Communities.

Will this address all the challenges being experienced by rural churches – of course not. We never thought that it would. But it will go some way to ensuring that clergy feel better supported, that schools and young people are put at the heart of all we do, and congregations have their own “focal minister” – it is my ambition that every single church in the diocese should have their own minister – some will be ordained, some will be lay, some will be stipendiary and some will be self-supporting – but every church needs to have a local minister.

In addition to this, I want to say something briefly about our hopes for national church funding to support this work. Since 2018 our own financial income as a diocese has gone down very considerably. We saw a very big drop during the pandemic and even though it has gradually increased since then, it is still nowhere near where it would be with an inflationary increase since 2018. So we are increasingly dependent on national church funding – and in particular that means Lowest Income Communities Funding. Now there is no getting away from the fact that the vast majority of our lowest income communities are in urban or semi-urban areas – so that's where the majority of national church funding is going.

But, you will also know that we planned to apply for a grant from what is called the Strategic Mission and Ministry Investment Board or SMMIB. Sadly, despite lots of hard work, the decision was taken by our trustees to stop this application process as it became clear that SMMIB were unlikely to look favourably on our application. So over the last year, we have been exploring other options. And I am very pleased to announce this evening that our trustees have agreed to use the income from sale of land to create ten new stipendiary posts in the diocese.

I am sure that you will agree that this is a significant increase and hence very welcome news. However, before you all get too excited thinking this means we will be able to fill every vacancy in the diocese and every church will have its own vicar – I do need to be

clear that the ten new posts will not be created all in one go – it will be a gradual process, and they will all be deployed within Minster Communities, allowing us to gradually move to the position where Minster Communities have the stipendiary clergy that they pay for.

So while I am very conscious that I have not been able to mention every recommendation in the Rural Commission report, nor have I been able to highlight all the amazing ministry taking place in our rural communities. I hope you will feel that the learning of the Rural Commission has shaped and informed subsequent work – and we are doing what we can to support and resources churches in every part of the diocese.