

The Open Conversations: A summary of your feedback

“I am hugely grateful to all who have engaged with the open conversations over the last couple of months. Only by working together can we ensure that people will continue to hear the Good News of Jesus throughout Worcestershire and Dudley. I am delighted that so many people and parishes took the time to hear the challenges that we currently face and contribute ideas as to how best to move forward. Thank you.”

Bishop John



Between December 2019 and early February 2020, nine ‘Open Conversations’ were held in a range of venues to discuss how we best organise and resource ministry across the diocese and how we pay for it. The Children’s and Youth Council also held their own conversation to discuss the same topics so their voice could be heard.



1080 people attended these events - that’s an amazing 13% of our Usual Sunday Attendance. There was representation from 95% of our parishes, with only 9 parishes not represented at one of the events. The very large numbers required us to at times have parallel events in different venues as the number of people attending filled the original venue. More than 350 people submitted feedback afterwards, through the feedback forms, website and by sending in emails.

This document summarises who came, and the feedback given, both during more than 150 ‘table conversations’ at the events and afterwards. We noted more than 5,000 pieces of input during the conversations, and received more than 2,000 comments afterwards. This document is inevitably a summary. It aims to reflect the most popular themes, as well as some different thinking contributed. The Diocesan Restructuring Group and Parish Share Review Group will see the full feedback, and pdfs of these are available to anyone who wishes to see them – please email openconversations@cofe-worcester.org.uk to request one (warning – they are large files!).

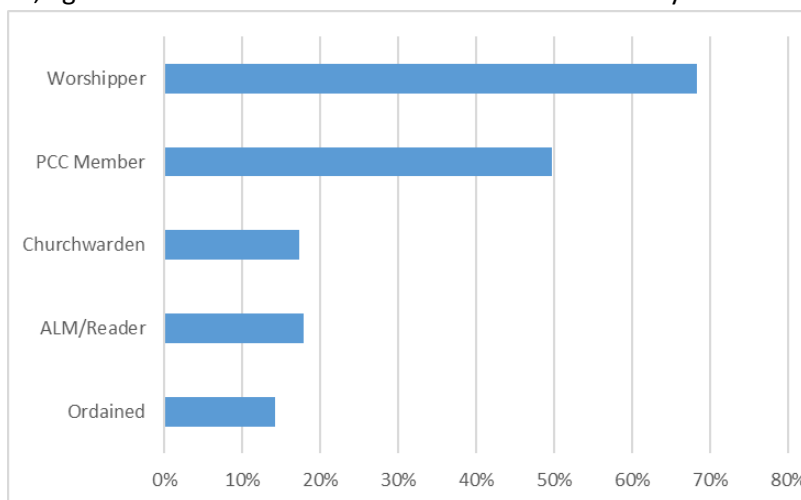


The Open Conversations: Who came?

The sheer number of people who attended meant that there was a good spread of representation from across the diocesan Church community. 350 of the 1080 people who attended completed feedback forms, and these forms asked some further questions as to role, age and location of their churches. The events clearly reached beyond those in formal church roles.

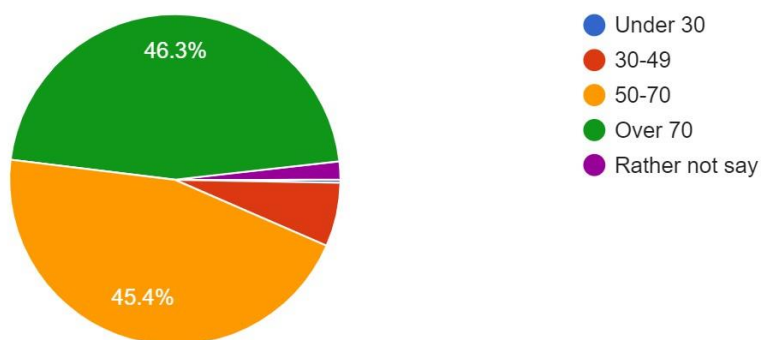
Only half of respondents described themselves as a PCC Member. It was great to see that some people had travelled to events in other parts of the diocese to understand different views.

The age profile of respondents broadly matches the profile of adults within the diocese. Nine out of ten are aged over 50, and 46% aged over 70. Only 7.5% of respondents said they were under 50.



What age bracket describes you?

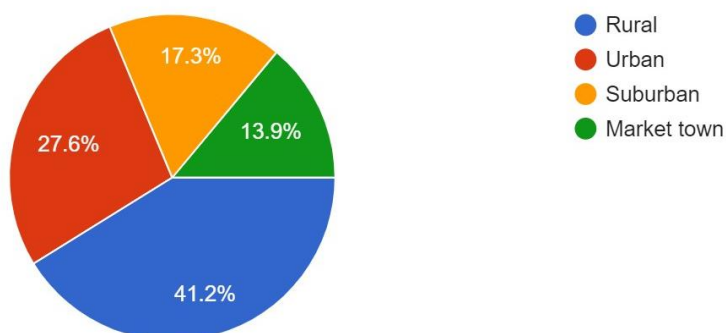
337 responses



We have already commented that there was an amazingly good spread across the diocese, with more than 95% of parishes represented. In terms of respondents who completed a feedback form there was also a reasonable spread between locations, with our rural churches being particularly well represented:

Would you describe your church as:

323 responses



Your views on the events themselves:

Your feedback on the events themselves was very positive. Whilst there were a number of logistical things we could have done better, especially where we had to add an additional venue at short notice and in relation to microphones, your overall views were that the events were well designed, well presented and were timely.

In fact, the holding of these sessions was the most common comment made during the discussions in response to the question “what do you find encouraging?” Two thirds of the group discussions made a positive comment about the diocese responding and bringing people together to discuss these issues. Some felt that this demonstrated fresh thinking, showed enthusiasm and that there were some exciting opportunities. People felt listened to. Other comments from these group discussions included “But do something - don't let us be here in 2030!”, “And make sure we work TOGETHER”, “Good it's not a done deal”, “Chance to influence”, “BUT being dictated by finance - not desire to modernise.”

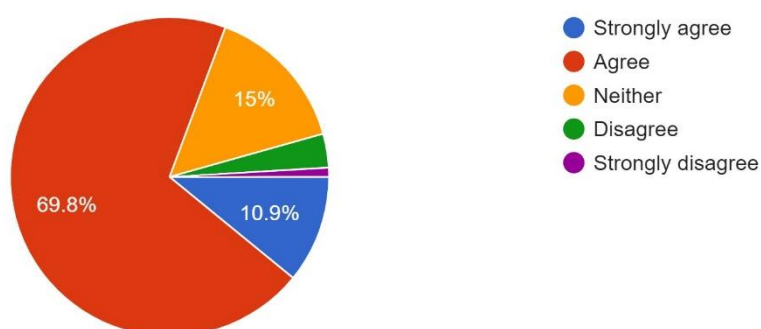
Some of you expressed the view that further events of a similar nature should be held in the future.

With regard to ministry:

Those who completed feedback forms were asked whether “overall, we are heading in the right direction with our thinking?” Four out of five, 80.7%, either agreed or strongly agreed, with a further 15% neither agreeing nor disagreeing. Only 4.3% of respondents disagreed or strongly disagreed.

Overall, are we heading in the right direction with our thinking?

321 responses



Overall comments were supportive of the need for change and to take action, but some challenged whether that change would be radical enough. More than 100 comments on “what would you affirm in our thinking?” included:

- “There is an urgent need to re-model the church and the diocese in the light of diminishing resources in congregations and in funds.”
- “Recognition that things need to change and mission has priority over buildings”
- “The feeling from the conversation I attended was that essentially we are still talking about re-arranging the deck chairs at a time when some fundamental rethinking is required.”
- “Progress, but not radical enough. And more detail needed.”
- “Please don't fall short on making it simpler - we need big changes.”
- “Take more risks and think outside the box.”
- “At last we're thinking about this, and trying to do something about it.”
- “Great to see openness to new possibilities.”
- “Exciting opportunities. Involvement from everyone. But do something - don't let us be here in 2030!”
- “Make sure we work TOGETHER. Good it's not a done deal - chance to influence.”
- “Being dictated by finance - not desire to modernise.”

At the beginning of the first conversation, we asked people to read a set of statements, and chose two: one that expressed the **most important or offers the greatest opportunity** for helpful change, the other that people felt **most concerned about or is particularly difficult**. A statement having a lower score does not mean that it is unimportant, simply that relatively few identified it as the most important, or the one they were most concerned about.

Statement	most important or offers the greatest opportunity	most concerned about or is particularly difficult	Total people mentioning ¹
Finding new ways to engage whilst preserving the best of what we already do.	243	195	426
Keeping a focus on attracting children and families.	206	229	417
Encouraging more people to participate in ministry – both inside and outside the church.	160	120	275
Ensuring all our clergy have roles that match gifting and calling and allow them to flourish.	106	100	205
Equipping church members to interweave faith and life.	82	76	157
Celebrating the diversity of gifts in our clergy and using them flexibly.	38	38	75
Supporting candidates through discernment and training for ordained ministry.	5	29	34

It is clear that there is commonality in scoring between the two headings. The statements seen as most important or offering the greatest opportunity, are also ones those people were most concerned about or thought particularly difficult.

With regard to ministry generally:

There were views expressed in both the table conversations and the feedback submitted later on the elements of current thinking that they affirmed and those they were concerned about. This section reports general views, with views on three specific areas presented in the following sections.

Topic Area:	Number of Comments
General and Local Ministry: Total	73
General Ministry: “It is good that we are not expecting clergy to take on more - thinking about logistics of them serving 2 parishes or more (dashing from 1 place to another)”; “Gives clergy permission to let go of some jobs. Will reduce their stress”; “Clergy need support”; “But strong churches could survive and weak ones die”; “Clergy to minister - not administer”; “It is good that clergy are being "forced" to let go of things”.	28
General Ministry: “Encouraged about greater flexibility & diversity”; “Use of other forms of worship and worship styles (not just Sundays) - different services, different places, different days”.	21
General Ministry: “Encouraged about growth of pastoral teams; clergy and laity working together”; “Shared ministry”	11
Local Ministry: Let churches implement their own ideas (eg: rural). Recognition that parishes are different.	8
Local Ministry: Ministering to the community - going to the people. Boys brigade; toddler group; community café; bereavement group.	5

¹ This column shows the total number of people who identified with this statement. For example, 12 people placed the top statement in **both** columns and so 426 people placed it in at least one of their columns.

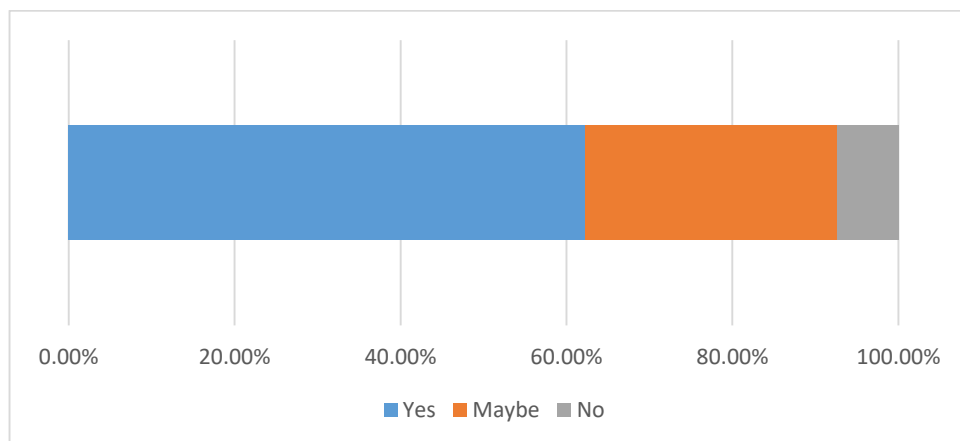
Nothing encouraging: Total	21
Nothing encouraging: “Like things as they are, nothing will change anyway”; “Not heard anything different.”	21

With regard to matters that people were concerned about:

Topic	Number of groups commenting
Change issues: “Difficult to accept change. People always scared about it”; “Old ways are embedded”; “Start new things separately - original congregations might not want to do same things as younger people”; “We've always done it that way”. “Victorian/gothic attitudes can't move to missional model”; “Unrealistic expectations of a vicar, still think in old 'vicar' terms”; “Needs to be thought through”; “People need to adapt or die”; “reluctant to change, move slowly”; “More radical change needed, need courage to change with the times”; “Has to happen gradually. The cost of change. Denial and unwilling to accept the truth and change.”	40
Recruitment of volunteers: Increases the pressure on finding volunteers. Finding volunteers who can work at time of day it's needed. Getting people to volunteer and using their own gifts to offer. Where would we get voluntary leaders from a declining church population? Will volunteers undermine the clergy in pursuit of their own objectives? Larger benefice makes it less local and harder to find volunteers. Can't have volunteers as leader - people don't have the time. Tap into lay resources at Diocesan and parish level, people with management skills not being used. Value volunteers. Recruit the right people.	25
Clergy Stress: “Fewer deaneries means more travelling RD's workload too big at present”; “Too much pressure on clergy. Should be stress-free”; “Sometimes the only person people will talk to - focal point of a church (building relationships)”; “Burn-out of leaders, lay and ordained. 1 clergy can't cover 14 churches”; “Some clergy don't delegate”.	22
Fewer clergy “means bigger teams. Reduction in clergy is counter-productive. Clergy being less visible”; “Reduction in member of clergy is horrifying”; “Lose contact with vicar/rector - reflects my spiritual needs”; “No clergy takes me out of comfort zone”; “How will remaining be supported?”	19
Less "Retired" energy available: “congregations are aging. 60s and 70s have role as grandparents but also as carer for elderly parents, don't have energy for church”; “working longer”.	13
Communication: “Some people not heard of all this. Better communication”; “Churches need to communicate with each other”; “Response from diocese, reducing central staff will make this worse”; “Are Deaneries communicating with each other?”; “More diocesan visits to churches, help explain it to the congregations. Communication is key”.	11
Leadership: “How can we have voluntary day to day leadership? How will we maintain oversight over lay leaders?”; “Lack of strong leadership”; “Cheeky to ask lay or NSM for day to day leadership. Less valued by community than clergy”; “But with congregation of over 70s where is it going to come from? Difficulties of acceptance of lay/voluntary leaders”.	10

Thinking about voluntary church leadership:

At the start of the second table discussions, we asked for people's initial reactions. One of the questions was: "The idea of voluntary day to day leadership of some of our churches is one that has merit, (even if many of the details will need working out)." Although this question had the highest number of "maybe" responses of the four questions, the overall response was still positive: 62% responded "yes", 30% said "maybe" and 7% said "no".



When thinking about things that excited and encouraged them, 93 of the 150 groups mentioned lay ministry and focal ministry:

61 groups saw developing Lay Ministry, including voluntary & lay leadership as encouraging: "Definitely positive - but will need effective oversight & training"; "Some places already do it but recognition of importance will be good - brings out talent"; "Voluntary leadership good in rural parishes, but accountability needs to be strong"; "Recognition of talent /skills", "Stop defining lay work as what they "can't do". Give them the strength and joy to work in church".

31 groups commented specifically about the idea of voluntary day to day church leadership as something that was encouraging, but "as long as there is right support"; "need right place, right person, right skills"; Some were concerned about whether people would "buy-in" and others spoke of requiring "clarification".

When asked for things that concerned them, 32 groups raised points about the prospect of unpaid day to day leadership of churches. Concerns related to:

- **Selection:** Age profile of diocese - difficult to find right people. Wrong person in focal ministry - power of putting personal agendas in place. Concern on quality of leadership. Keep quality and consistency of ministry. Age profile of diocese - difficult to find right people. People have callings, need confidence and support for this role/calling.
- **Training:** Thorough leadership training required. Need to train volunteers up. With fewer clergy, training is essential. Putting the church in the hands of 'untrained' amateurs. Train more SSM's - takes time to be well trained.
- **Pressure:** Care needs to be taken not to exploit these people. What can be put in place to protect them? They exist in practice now but some concern about being so reliant on them. Things can go wrong very quickly. Without training - focal minister role could be highly stressful. May be 'put upon'.
- **Practicalities:** How is access to minister facilitated and desire for communion?
- **Change & Perception:** It would worry me not have a vicar, cannot imagine a church without a vicar. How will they be perceived in parish?

Thinking about our Lowest Income Communities:

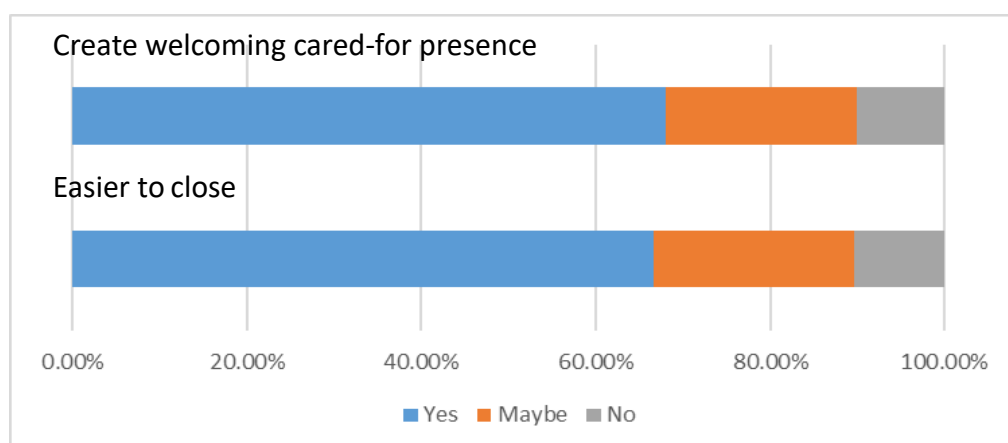
There was relatively little comment about the use of Lowest Income Communities Funding. 27 table discussions commented that it was a good thing that this money was available, and that it was enabling greater ministry to be applied to our lowest income parishes.

There was a general sense that it is right that wealthier communities support poorer ones, and important that more deprived communities do not receive less ministry because they cannot afford it. See the Parish Share section for further comments on this.

Thinking about churches being less actively used or considering closure:

Two of the questions posed at the start of the second round of table conversations related to views on scaling back our use of some churches.

The top bar below shows people’s initial reactions to: “We should help churches who wish to do so, to create a welcoming, cared-for open presence with only occasional services.” The second bar shows answers to “We need to make it easier for Churches who wish to do so, to close.” Two thirds of people said “yes” to both of these statements (67% and 68% respectively); 23% and 22% of people said “maybe” and in both cases the remaining 10% said “no”.



30 table discussions mentioned this as something that excited or encouraged them. 19 comments related to the hope that it might be made easier for churches to close, whilst 11 related to the fact that the buildings issue was being considered, and that a cared for "open" presence was becoming an option.

58 of the table discussions talked about the potential closure of church buildings as a concern.

Topic	Number of Comments
For church closures comments included: “Rare that churches want to close. Make it easier to close a church”. “Who decides?”, “Biggest worry they will lose access to worship”; “Feel we don't do enough to encourage conversations about closure. How low can the numbers get before it's gone?"; “That small churches won't be 'talked' into closing”; “If the church was business churches would close. Too many church buildings for too few people”; “Nobody wants their church to close. Sad but better to make a run of it elsewhere where most potential”; “Concerned at likelihood of churches closing but have to be realistic”; “What can happen to sale of church - where does the money go to?"; “That only PCCs can close churches?"; “Close Victorian building but enable church	32

to be the community of Christ”; “Too many churches, many don't want to lose their own but part of wider question.”

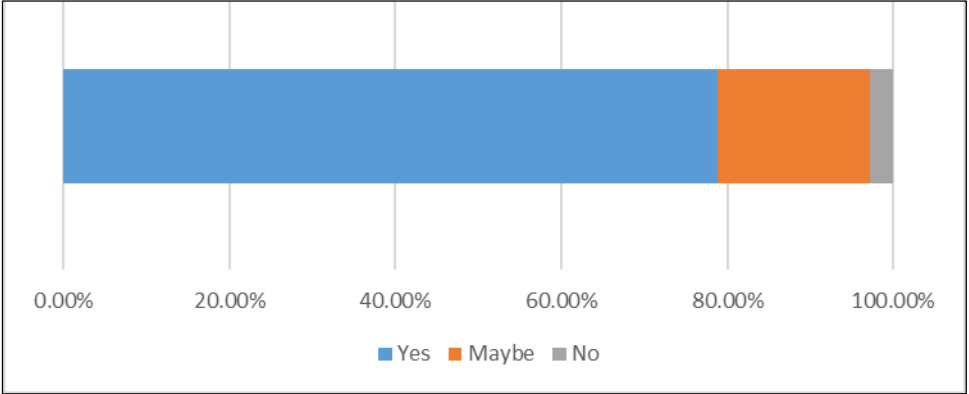
Topic	Number of Comments
Against closing churches, comments included: “Shouldn't give up lightly. Such a visual presence”; “The number of churches having to close”; “Don't underestimate affection for the building even after it is closed”; “Loss of identity”; “Will congregations move?”; “Closing would get rid of the one communal building in a village. Keep local presence”; “Need a Christian presence in every community”; “Closing church might be too easy: undermines rural community life/village”; “Use it or lose it”; “Getting rid of church buildings doesn't help church grow”; “Counter-productive”; “Reducing ministry real concern”; “closing is final, would be hard to come back from that”; “People don't always have transport”, “Save churches with good organs and choirs - keeping up the musical side of church life”; “People more tied to a building than they realise”.	26

In relation to churches being open, cared-for spiritual presence in the community with less frequent worship, comments included:

- Wide range of potential purposes for such a church – e.g. link to school, occasional offices, tourism.
- Such churches need to be covered by strong, well-motivated PCCs or Benefice councils to engage in all types of local Christian Mission and Pastoral Care.
- The development of Benefice wide links, fellowship and worship makes the Benefice as a whole stronger than the sum of the individual parts.
- Concern that whilst this might be a practical way forwards, those who live in such communities shouldn't be deprived of other ministry and opportunities.

Thinking about simplification:

The table conversations discussed the proposed simplification of church structures. One of the opening questions for people's initial reactions was “We need a considerable amount of change in the structures of how we run the Church.” This had strong agreement with 79% saying “yes”, 18% saying “maybe” and 3% saying “no”.



When asked for how people felt encouraged:

- 73 groups mentioned simplification with regards to fewer committees, simplifying things, fewer forms to complete - allowing for more focus and doing the job. Further comments here suggested that this would give “better transparency and more responsive leadership”, “better organisation, preparation & agendas”

- 46 groups mentioned simplification through reducing the number of deaneries. Comments included “But keep urban & urban, rural & rural”, 1 group discussion suggested we should be radical and abolish deaneries, conversely another suggested giving them "teeth" to get things done. There was a concern that they may become too big, and also that we should encourage growth through sharing ideas and facilities.
- 41 groups mentioned the introduction of benefice councils as helpful, whilst 3 people thought the opposite - stay local. It will reduce workload and save repetition.
- 21 groups felt that simplification of C of E structures (8 specifically said clergy structures - others could be committees etc as not specified)
- 9 groups talked about finding plans to reduce bureaucracy encouraging.

When asked about things that concerned them:

- 24 groups mentioned Deanery simplification – that it could be geographically harder to access. Increased pressure & work on area/rural dean, and then difficult to run a parish too. With fewer deaneries, difficult to get people to attend meetings. Further to travel. Less attendance. Be too large to interact. Who will fulfil pastoral care for ministers? Won't save money - bigger areas/meetings; who would stick up for the little churches? Bigger doesn't always mean better. Still need representatives from each group. Still same number of leaders so fewer services given? Not just fewer the better but how it becomes organised. Critical size for a deanery.

Making our churches attractive to the under 40's?

During the table conversations, we discussed what would make our churches attractive to the under 40's. The most frequently raised points were:

Area of comments:	No of Groups
1. Services: Greater flexibility of times, shorter services, different styles (eg: fewer eucharists), home groups. Need to be flexible - not just on Sunday. Formal & informal choices. Need to be less boring (but not happy-clappy). Not repetitive. think outside Sundays. targeting services for different people and not being afraid to do this	58
2. Spirituality / liturgy: Need to explain better (especially to the young), address their queries, be aware of their concerns (including global concerns), be more authentic, more progressive, more modern. Need to be more approachable with spirituality. Engaging topics to discuss spirituality. Spirituality doesn't necessarily attract so what does?	32
3. Engage: with children through visiting schools / messy church - (Hold messy church on a different day to Sunday. Also visit secondary schools (& vice versa - ie: schools visit church). Freedom for children to roam - be children.	28
4. Ask: ask them what they want! Show them what we do and ask for thoughts. Don't tell. "We are not under 40 so don't know"	25
5. Engage: with adults. Meet where the people are - pub, café, supermarket, sports - connect faith & life, also places of employment. Stay local - don't go "National Church"	23
6. Get rid of the jargon. Use plain English: less middle class.	22
7. Marketing: Through social Media and better marketing strategies. Communicate our energy and passion	21
8. Society engagement: the church to take part in social village activities (beer festival, music festival), go to where the children are (eg: school discos). Do sport sponsorship.	18

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|-----|---|----|
| 9. | Community: Become a community hub / encourage community friendship - promote the church as an integral part of the community, not a building | 18 |
| 10. | Offer food: - eg: breakfast services, children's lunches, café church, men's club | 15 |

Other frequent comments related to “recognising families are very busy on weekends / split families / working patterns”; “using live, contemporary music to be more engaging, being relevant to lifestyle and exploring people's need for faith rather than going to church”; “not forgetting couples and individuals with too great a focus on families”; “better use of technology and IT in church (screens not hymn books)”; “the balance between preserving buildings & mission needs to be right - exercise groups in church? Café? But remember it is a sacred space”. The Children’s and Youth Council group added “acceptance and reassurance”, “student centred activities and services” and “more creative services and activities”.

What have we missed with regard to ministry?

Comments in response to the question “what have we missed?” included:

- **Looking wider:** “Where is the bottom-up market research on what occasional or non-church attenders want/expect from their local church. The process seems to be wholly top down - what can 'we' provide for 'them'”. “Consult with relevant agencies, like Village Halls (at grass roots level) and County Council planners (at macro level) e.g. the 'new towns' developments will need 'hubs' for which churches might be able to help supply facilities and/or personnel”. “Look at the growing churches and see how God is working and why they are seeing people come to Christ and grow in their faith”. “Considering models from other independent churches which seem to be thriving.”
- **More fundamental review:** “needs a more fundamental review of the C of E, including parochial system, which no longer makes sense in 21st C.”
- **Administration:** “Haven’t looked at synergies from merging administration functions with other dioceses”. “Review of diocesan expenditure and other incomes”. “I felt I needed re-assurance about the operational capacity of the Diocese (given current financial restraints and staff cutbacks) to provide the infrastructural support and transition management needed to deliver change on this scale while simultaneously maintaining ongoing core diocesan functionality.” “Church administration should be simplified to avoid unnecessary duplication of effort”. “Perhaps the acknowledgment of the challenge of limited resources being spread further.”
- **Administrative support** and expenses are essential for 'volunteers'.
- **Mission focus:** “We haven't talked enough about bringing the kingdom to our communities.” “More emphasis on diversity of services, clergy, activities etc. It is hard but without it churches won't grow and the diocese will have to continue fire-fighting. The mission of God must be clearly central!”, “I believe too much ministry and clergy time and effort goes into providing for aging church communities, whereas the priority has to be releasing ministers to be involved/develop patterns of ministry /experiment with outreach to the not yet church members.”
- **Relevance:** “the need to address how to make the words of our services comprehensible (both linguistically and theologically/humanly) to newcomers, who are unlikely to give church many second chances”. “We need to alter the services to make them user friendly for younger families. Times and days of services needs to be looked at.” “Special services with a theme and advertise”.
- **Discipleship & Prayer:** “Need greater emphasis on discipleship so congregations all grow. This can't just be done prayerfully but needs a powerful prayer movement for growth rather managing decline”. “Resourcing prayer and spirituality through these changes.” “Train preachers in good Bible exposition, using gifted preachers to deliver this.”
- **Work ecumenically,** especially at a time of change and transition for many e.g. Methodists, URC and Baptists. How does Anglican ministry continue with and learn from that of other denominations and that of community initiatives? Consider ecumenical Mission Community model of Carlisle Dioceses;
- **Church of England schools** provide opportunities for mission. Also higher education & the workplace.

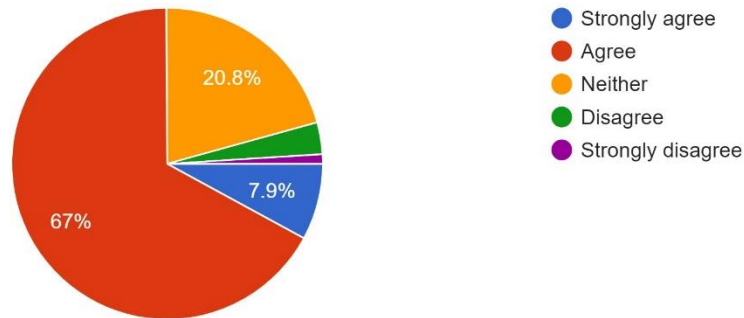
- **Alternative funding:** “Selling Rectories to raise funding and increasing the salary of priests so they can buy their own home on a mortgage”; “Pulling together purchasing power of the Diocese - should we purchase electricity/gas/paper etc. to gain discounts?”, “Engage non-churchgoers to support the building.”
- **Senior Clergy;** Any possibility of stripping the upper echelons of clergy! Some now have no parish role and therefore deprive our communities and increase the stress on clergy in the parishes? How much does the Cathedral and staff cost? Have we considered closing/ selling it? Do we need a diocesan structure and overheads?
- **Clergy Planning:** Current ideas for reducing clergy are not clear. What is the strategy? It seems as though diocese is taking advantage of vacancies regardless of the reason and their location. Elmley Castle is a case in point. A tragic event shouldn't be used as a 'vicar to lose' opportunity - that is what it looks like.
- **Clergy & Communion:** “anything about communion, will Clergy become Communion Machines?”
- **OLM/Communion by Extension:** “If we cannot afford clergy, even if we can find them, why is this diocese still not taking up locally ordained ministry and a realistic use of communion by extension? There are undoubtedly people called to a priestly ministry in churches throughout the diocese, but not to stipendiary or deployable self-supporting ministry. There are plenty of, say, younger retired people who may feel called to priestly ministry, but are settled in their own communities.” Lay presidency, or more local ordination.”
- **Giving & Generosity:** The promotion of parish giving which often results in an increased regular giving.
- **Central provision of resources:** Dwindling numbers put even more work on fewer people. Please provide more resources (e.g for children’s services) on the diocesan website.
- **Creation care and the environment** not mentioned. Important for several reasons, including: financial, becoming Eco Diocese, cost of taking appropriate carbon cutting action.
- **Focus:** We should focus on fewer but better resourced, more lively centres of worship. If some existing regular worshippers refuse to change location - that is something we may have to accept. However, such centre should be more effective at Mission work - which is essential.
- **Vision:** Absence of vision and lack of inspirational leadership at all levels. Encouraging vision and strategy. In individual churches and diocese - would impact everything we do.
- **More radical review:** “The need to re-examine our intended traditions and structure and to use whether this is the time for God to be allowed to make all things new”. “You're not focussing enough on addressing the root cause of the problem - falling numbers and an ageing congregation.”
- **Buildings:** No mention of the upkeep/burden of maintaining ancient buildings and the cost implication. Some faculty applications take more work than is justified for what they hope to achieve
- **Evangelism:** “Building the confidence of everyone in church to be able to share their faith story. I know it is part of the 'Faith Pictures' work, but didn't spot it mentioned in the booklet.”
- **Clergy Housing:** “Look at clergy housing and possibly glebe land. Some clergy still live in large houses far too big for their needs and expensive to maintain.”

With regard to Parish Share:

Those who completed feedback forms were asked whether “overall, we are heading in the right direction with our thinking?”. Slightly fewer answered this question than answered the ministry question. The feedback was slightly less positive, although 75% agreed or strongly agreed. Again, the percentage of people who disagreed or strongly disagreed was small at 4.3% as there was a higher number of people saying “neither”.

Overall, are we heading in the right direction with our thinking?

303 responses



Which principles are most important?

The first two Open Conversation events on 11/12/19 asked people to vote on their most important and least important principles:

Principle	One of my Top 2	Least Important
Sustainable	52	1
Sufficient	24	6
Clear	17	3
Empowering	13	7
Reflects Wealth	12	16
Stable	6	5
Agile	9	22

Those returning feedback forms were asked to nominate the principle which was most important to them:

Principle	“Most Important”
1. God’s generosity to us is the starting point	31
2. Sustain an appropriate Christian presence in every community	29
3a. Sustainable	63
3b. Stable	46
3c. Agile or flexible	38
3d. Sufficient	44
3e. Clear	61
3f. Empowering	35
4. That any measure of income is assessed as that of church members rather than the wider parish	30

Respondents also chose a number of other elements as their top principle. The main one was that the system should be “fair” or “equitable” chosen by 35 respondents. Others included that the share request was affordable/realistic (5 responses), and that engagement was truthful.

At all Conversations other than these first two events in December, participants were asked to score four statements on a 1 to 4 basis, where 1= Strong No, 2= weak no, 3= weak yes and 4 = strong yes. The averages for over 900 participants are:

Statement		Average Score
Statement A	The Parish Income Survey is an approach we should keep	2.9
Statement B	The cost of ministry received should directly affect a parish’s contribution	2.5
Statement C	The wealth of church members should directly affect a parish’s contribution	3.0
Statement D	It’s important that the system is simple and easy to understand	3.8

Comments relating to Parish Share

Things that respondents wished to affirm in the thinking on Parish Share included:

- **Wholesale review:** “Affirm root and branch review of the Parish Share system to really make it fair”; “We have to make some tough choices”; “That change is necessary. Utilise all church members. Need to keep what's foundational and life giving and change the rest possibly”; “We can't go on as we have 76% collection rate is nonsense. Either more must be given or the demand must reduce.”
- **For the long term:** The need to find a share model for the long term that can trusted
- **Current system broken:** “The current system has to change and views across the diocese are critical.”, “That the present system is broken and that you are seeking a more positive approach to Parish Share.”
- **Fairness, Clarity and Transparency:** “The parish share needs to be fair, raise the money required and be clear about where this money is going (and so whether it is the money actually required).”; “Clarity - most of us did not know the full cost of a stipendiary priest”;
- **Christian Presence:** Our most important commitment is to be a Christian presence in every community and to provide pastoral care.
- **Transactional thinking:** This 'transactional' way of thinking is unhelpful and un-Christian. We are all supporting the church as a whole - and so should give generously according to our ability.
- **Diocesan restructuring:** starting with Diocesan posts/structure/expenditure
- **More flexible local models:** “The idea that parishes could shape ministry locally. Needs a wealth element, but needs local freedom to influence share & ministry”; “Parishes to pay for clergy time they get”; “Leaving a church with sufficient resources to properly invest in local mission and ministry.”

Things that concerned respondents included:

- **Root Cause:** “The `root of the problem is surely not met by any parish share formula but by developing deeper spiritual experience among the congregations”; “We need to address the root cause of this issue - lack of people = lack of money! What are we doing to help people realise that they need God's love, peace and joy in their lives?? We need to bold in sharing the Gospel.”

- **Seeking Growth not managing decline:** “The enormity of the task that it is managing decline, not being brave enough to look at growth.”; “My concern is to genuinely invest in areas of potential growth and the development of new initiatives there will need to be a financial investment.”
- **Insufficient degree of change:** “This should have happened 5 years ago. Approaches are too narrow-minded. We are simply re-arranging the deck-chairs on the Titanic.”; “That with a monumental reduction in income likely, we need to plan on the basis of the Average 25% drop in income, not tacitly work on the basis of a minor reduction”; “That it is too little, too late”.
- **Difficult to be agile:** That we operate a highly centralised system, which cannot by definition be agile.
- **Giving and Mission:** “Giving should be seen as an opportunity to join in real meaningful Christian Mission. We need to shout about our successes and link this success back to funds that enabled it to be achieved”; “I was very concerned that some people in my discussion group did not think it was right that those church members who are wealthier should give more. If the preaching was about tithing being a starting point in giving rather than a goal and the teaching was Biblical, challenging and people were helped in living sacrificial lives for Christ then there wouldn't be an issue with insufficient funds.”
- **Follow up with PCCs:** “You aren't willing to push PCCs. Don't wait for the turkeys to vote for Christmas”; “that some parishes have not been made/encouraged/supported to pay their parish share which is not fair on those who have. There should be consequences for those who have not paid that could and a back-up plan for those who really cannot afford to pay. People need to understand the system and the consequences.”; “Apathy at Parish Level sustained sometimes by the erroneous view that 'The Diocese' is wealthy, really, and will pick up the shortfall.”
- **Buildings a significant issue:** “Cost of buildings difficult to do anything with”; “Church buildings drain life and money from people”; “the current system doesn't recognise the cost of maintaining buildings especially old listed ones”; “We need radical cuts and hand the buildings to other bodies.”
- **Small Congregations:** “Fairer share MUST stop! Especially in small rural villages with a very small attendance - 2 rich people completely skews the figures”.
- **Inflation:** “Any scheme must have provision for inflationary increases”.
- **Financial Management:** “Diocese needs to be much more on top of finances - this problem has not happened overnight. Jesus talked about money, so should we.”
- **Rural/Urban:** “That rural Parishes and churches with their respective small congregations and communities, are treated differently to urban churches and Parishes which in general have considerably larger congregations and communities to draw on financially.”
- **Share as % Parish Income:** That churches are asked to give away such huge percentages of their congregations voluntary giving that they are unable to fund any ministry at all. e.g. Both the church I attend and that of the person I was sat next to are asked to give around 90-95% of the voluntary income (after gift aid!) each year. Without funding ministry, how do we expect to build the church?
- **Communication:** “I wasn't aware that our church hasn't been meeting its parish share. I think if people were more aware of how much our share was and what the shortfall was they would give more. I think it needs to be talked about more and also what the money is used for”; “lack of information”
- **Pressure on clergy:** “Less vicars when are already stretched - is short sighted - need more reaching out to community”; “the pressure singing for your supper can put on clergy”
- **Simplicity:** Don't get too complicated - whatever you do people will complain
- **Why pay?** “We have been informed that we probably won't have a vicar ever again - why should we pay the full parish share.”
- **Transparency:** “We need to help parishes understand what they get is what they pay for; then make it more local and transparent. Could local churches pay ministers directly?”

- **Parish Giving Scheme:** “the move to Direct Debit regular giving. There are some elderly for whom this is a step too far. How do we teach our children as most behaviour is caught by example not taught and it helps them to value money?”
- **Action:** 'Just do it' please

What have we missed in relation to Parish Share?

Those who completed feedback forms afterwards, responded to the question “What have we missed in relation to Parish Share?”. Their comments included:

- **Greater transparency & benchmarking:** “all parishes should see what everyone contributes.”, “How about bench-marking parishes so that it is possible to see what percentage of their share parishes in similar circumstances pay (include building costs in this)? This is a motivator in schools where you can bench mark your school against others in similar circumstances and compare data.”
- **Focus on cost:** I suggest the time for subtle wealth based giving has passed, given the likely reduction in income. Therefore I suggest that benefices are required to at least pay for their priest, and thereafter offer a donation to central overheads. The idea that the diocese provides the priests should go, and we should operate a de-centralised system. No doubt an anathema to the current structure.
- **Direct Debit:** Enforcing monthly direct debit from Parishes which will pay the bulk of the share (as arrived at by new formula) with a top up in May and November?”, “My sister's diocese (Oxford) offer a discount for paying by direct debit. Should we look at that?”
- **Local Church Expenses:** I would - very hesitantly - mention a notion that local church expenses be taken into account when apportioning the Parish Share, but cannot see a way in which this would be workable.
- **Use of Diocesan Funds:** “Parishes who can't afford Parish Share should be subsidised by the Diocesan income.”, “How some investments (generate £0.917 million pa) could be used short term.”, “Making grants to parishes that can't pay their costs, but where its important a vicar is provided.”; “The level of Ministry should be maintained while regrowth and profile of the worshipping population are prioritised. This should redress the giving situation and ability to meet Share. To achieve this would inevitably dent Diocesan reserves in the interim, but would help provide a long-term solution to the present difficulties.”; “Starting a DIOCESE FUND that will grow over time from donations and the investment income being used to support ministry costs in the diocese - clear guidance being issued to parishes on how to meet parish share.”; “Enable individuals to give directly to the Diocese in order to support shared ministry.”
- **Selling Diocesan Assets:** I understand that the diocese does have considerable wealth in land, non-church buildings, assets, and properties. Some of these could be sold, or (better) used in ways to provide income to directly help in the cost of running the parishes. This would bring much welcome relief to parish faithful.
- **Relate Share to Ministry Cost:** “I am sure it would yield better results if parishes feel their payment is directly related to their clergy. I believe non-church-goers would be much more likely to contribute to parish share if they felt their payment paid for a vicar.” “If benefices cannot fund their clergy, then they should be merged until they do, or lose clergy. Pardon the hard edge here, but freeloaders should not be quietly accepted.”
- **Ministry Cost Options:** “Are there cheaper options for having a vicar than £60,000?” ; “£60,000 is a lot to pay for a clergy post. Can we make it less without leaving them worse off?”; “Do we still need to provide large vicarages? Would some prefer a smaller house?”; “A £9800 pension on salary of £26,626 looks too much.”
- **Benefice Share:** Within each benefice there are parishes that have money and parishes who have none. Why not calculate a 'benefice share'
- **Can't please everyone:** As regards the Parish Share, there's no easy plan and invariably you can't please all of the people all of the time. If a plan is seen to be fair and realistic, it should be implemented.

- **Parish Commitment:** “A formal agreement and affirmation, signed by all PCC's, that Parish Share isn't just a contribution, or even an option. But it is a fundamental requirement of mission in the diocese”, “There needs to be agreement that, unless for specific pastoral reasons, no vacancy should be filled in a parish that has not met it's share that has been fairly calculated under Fairer Shares”; “The total Parish Share should be what we believe parishes can actually contribute, with a clear expectation that it will be met 100% and any parish which cannot meet the figure should be required to explain openly why. They are expecting the rest of us to subsidise them.”
- **Wider Community:** Appealing to local residents as well as regular church-goers to keep our church open - whether believers or not, most people like to see the church open every day.
- **Communications:** Please provide detailed information by various media to churchgoers about the purpose of the parish share - where the money goes, who benefits from it and how.
- **Look at other Dioceses:** “Look at how other Dioceses seem to collect higher percentage of Share.”
- **Look outside the C of E:** “Other churches seem to be awash with money but because we are the established church there seems to be an assumption that we are largely state funded”; “Look at the Methodist system in Bromsgrove and Redditch circuit. I know their overheads are smaller, but there is consultation with all treasurers to review the money required from each church BEFORE they are published, and at this stage can be amended.”
- **Prayer:** “Bring the matter to God, as a Diocese, in one or more days of prayer, and dare to believe that he can move us to pay for all the stipendiary ministry he wants. The problem is his as well as ours.”
- **Values:** Something like the Virgin Media Value statement. (<https://careers.virginmedia.com/about-us/our-values/>)

What happens next?

This summary is being circulated to members of Synod ahead of their meeting at the end of February. It will also be sent to those that requested it and made available on the Diocesan website.

At Synod's February meeting there will be discussions on:

- The overall responses to the Open Conversations
- The timescales for further decisions.
- The initial proposals from the Parish Share review group to establish direction. Detailed proposals will go to the summer Synod.

We have heard a desire for continued communication and discussion, and so have arranged three Follow-Up Conversations at the end of April / beginning of May. These sessions will summarise this feedback, explain how thinking has developed and invite further comment, and also spend time thinking about how churches can improve their health and sustainability. Details of the three events are:

- **Tuesday 28th April 2020**, 10am – 12pm at Pershore Abbey
- **Monday 4th May 2020**, 2 -4pm at St Andrew's Methodist Church, Pump Street, Worcester
- **Wednesday 6th May 2020**, 7 – 9pm at St George's Church, Kidderminster

Those of you who left email addresses to receive this summary will also receive a further update around this time unless you request otherwise. After that, the Diocesan Mailing will be the main communication tool. If you don't currently receive this, you can sign up on the home page of the diocesan website.