

## AGM June 2025

**2024 started on a foggy January morning with our independent safeguarding audit**, the first of a new national programme across all dioceses. Making the church a safer place for all is fundamental to how we are together.

By the end of the year significant failures in church safeguarding had led to the unprecedented resignation of the Archbishop of Canterbury. The turmoil carried through to the spring General Synod this year. The national church is now in a transition to new structures for safeguarding scrutiny and in some aspects of operational delivery.

The DBF trustees (the Bishops Council) responded to a Charity Commission enquiry regarding any limitations to their compliance with their legal duties arising from the General Synod decisions.

Our audit helped to highlight the central role played by our Parish Safeguarding Officers (PSOs). It was good later in the summer to meet many of them in Bishop Stephens and Carol's garden for 'thank you' events. Most I spoke with had never been invited there before. As an audit recommendation we have further developed our support to PSOs and now offer monthly online drop-in sessions which are very well attended.

The audit called on us to undertake a Healthy Culture survey the results are now in discussion and show that we have work to do to improve the way the voice of victims and survivors is heard.

There was good news last week when the Church Commissioners announced initial funding for the redress scheme for victims of church-based abuse and funding to support the creation of the new safeguarding structures

Safeguarding remains a priority on DBF resources as a missional imperative. My thanks to Suzy Fitcher and her team for all their work. I am delighted that Suzy has now joined the DBF leadership team to play a full part in diocesan leadership.

Throughout the year the DBF continued to align our work to the **Diocesan vision and strategy**. We have recognised **three urgent challenges**: declining attendance, missing generations and diminishing resources. We are in a season where **courageous Christian Leadership** is needed for us to be good news in the communities we serve.

Making Jesus Known is an invitation to **creative partnerships in local mission**; I have been encouraged by the wide range of conversations across the diocese which show the local church forming partnerships and creating new opportunities. This is a locally focused and locally led strategy. We recognise that the church *could* play a leading part in fostering and developing connected communities which bring people together; forging trusted relationships which span generations and political affiliations, reaching out to people who feel left behind, bringing practical hope.

Bishop Stephen has announced a significant turning point that we now have the national funding commitment to support the acceleration of our vision and strategy in 13 focus churches. My thanks to Stuart, Nick, Jonathan and the whole team, plus all those in the 13 hub churches who worked to engage with this opportunity- now the real work begins!

As we establish the first 13 Mission Hubs, we will be working with other local leaders to develop our approach to a second phase of hubs, thereby expanding the impact and reach of this initial investment.

In our vision to Make Jesus Known we respond as part of the worldwide Anglican communion with our **5 marks of mission**.

Within this we are committed to **working for justice as integral to mission**. Last month, with the support of national church racial justice fund we held the Sanctuary Road conference. A high percentage of those attending were from the Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities, the largest ethnic minority population in the diocese. We heard that the Church must wake up to the inequalities experienced by these communities. Betty Smith-Billington, of the Dorset-based charity Kushti Bok, said:

“As a Romany Gypsy woman, I am pleased to see the Church taking a lead in partnering with Gypsy, Roma, and Traveller communities to stand against the racism and prejudice my community has faced for centuries.’

**The fifth mark of mission commits us to action for the climate and nature.** Thank you for the work you are doing to ensure we have a clear baseline by collecting the data with the energy footprint tool. We must have this data to be able to make effective plans & secure funding and investment. The property team are completing an EPC survey of every clergy home, and we have invested national church net zero carbon funds in demonstrator churches. **At its heart the commitment to climate action is a missional commitment.** We are developing ongoing intergenerational engagement on this- delighted to have Revd Mike Perry now appointed as Bishops Advisor.

Making Jesus Known includes a commitment to **finance the future sustainably**. 2024 saw the roll out of a new basis for requesting Share, led by Archdeacon Antony. Antony has now retired, and I am delighted to welcome Elizabeth Harvey to the role, working closely with Olivia Otieno who is promoted to the role of Head of Finance. We are now fully transparent about the costs of being church. As Elizabeth will share in a moment, she is now reviewing all our options to **close the persistent gap between share income and share request** - which shows up once again in these accounts as an operating deficit of a £1m. With the support of Anna and Harry many parishes are working creatively to engage and encourage people in their regular giving and for all the creative work done to make use of digital giving tools as we move away from cash in our pockets.

We recognise that there is a limit to how much can be asked in share given all the other commitments of your PCCs. We need to achieve a realistic approach together.

Whilst the annual report and accounts focus on the use of resources by the DBF, the missional impact of these resources is largely down to the **voluntary effort of people** in church communities.

I have been inspired by the stories shared in the #Shareyourstory campaign, seen in these posters, created by our brilliant communications team, Rebecca, Allana and William. Tomorrow I am attending the third of our **volunteer celebration events** -we will be in Lyme Regis with Bishop Karen thanking those, nominated by their own churches, who have made an outstanding contribution. The witness and actions of these ordinary and extraordinary people is Making Jesus Known.

As the DBF moves forward with MJK, investment in people is now centre stage. Alongside +Stephen’s decision to reduce the number of Archdeacons from 4 to 2 the Archdeacons will be supported by the new post of People Director. Laura Kelly with a background in the Presbyterian Church in Ireland joined us last week. Laura will be helping the ADs and Bishops lead a future looking approach to ministry deployment as well as taking the next step in staff employment and support to volunteers.

**Finally, my thanks to you all for your ongoing engagement and feedback, as synod and through our committees on which you serve and are represented.**

The **2024 DBF Services Review** showed us that we have more to do to be consistent in the service we provide. It also highlighted the significant challenges faced in managing **our historic church buildings**, the DAC review is now underway, and its results will impact the way we support and work with you.

In a global context of much uncertainty. **Our focus is clear- we are about enabling the local church to build creative partnerships in local mission** as part of the worldwide church. We will be continuing to invest in developing courageous Christian leaders; we are developing our commitment to climate action and working for justice, and we are responding to the ongoing challenge to be a diocese that is financially sustainable; all of which is underpinned by our ongoing commitment (from foggy January to mid-summer) to ensuring that our churches are safe places for all.