

Communications: The Second Stage

Introduction

1. In our Interim Report presented to Bishop's Council at the end of January 2011 we addressed communications within and from the Diocesan Offices, Boards and Committees. At its meeting on 16 February Bishop's Council welcomed that report and discussed how best to implement the recommendations. This report now moves on to consider what happens as regards other communications in the Diocese and how parishes/benefices and Deaneries may best feed back their responses and concerns. We have also endeavoured to clarify our thinking about the extent to which the Diocese should attempt to reach the Churchgoing or at any rate Church-connected laity through or by means of the Deaneries, and to what extent it should go direct to them or to parish structures. Our recommendations are at Annex A.
2. In examining Communications the Working Group has been considering one of the core functions of the Church: we are in the communications business. Communication between individuals and God; communication of Good News to our neighbours; and communication of Christian teaching within the family of God. Therefore, to get communications right is vital, but to achieve that other issues have to be addressed, as we found in our first report.
3. Three factors stand out as requiring urgent attention for this part of our work. The first and most important is countering the "them and us" view which sees the Diocese as something apart from the parish and the Church-goer. That necessitates disseminating very widely, in a readily comprehensible form, what the Diocese is and does¹. We so recommend.
4. The other two are, firstly, ensuring that the Diocese, the Deaneries and the parishes have what in other circles would be called a strategy which in this context will be Mission Planning; and, secondly, ensuring that all who hold office in the Church, Clergy, Churchwardens, Parish Treasurers and PCC Secretaries know, understand, and act upon the fact that they have important responsibilities to ensure that information is passed to and from their various communities. The former requires a desired end state which is clearly defined and expressed, and the regular formulation and review of plans to achieve it. In short, an active and systematic consolidation of the start made on Mission. The latter is a necessary reinforcement for the increasing or clarified role that we perceive for Deaneries within the Diocese. Until those two matters have been successfully addressed any improvements in communications to and from parish level are likely to be piecemeal and small scale. We recommend accordingly.

¹ The term Diocese in general parlance may refer to the senior leadership of the Diocese; the Diocesan Office; officers of the Diocese; or, more correctly, but much less frequently, the whole Church membership within the Diocese, geographically and organisationally. To improve communications a general acceptance that all are part of the whole is needed. Moreover, some of the Diocese's work goes beyond Church membership and potentially embraces those within its area, members or not.

5. Great efforts are being put into Mission and choosing the best means of communication to reach church-goers and non-church goers alike will be vital for that. However, even though at the parish/benefice level Communications start to go beyond purely Church internal matters so that in some circumstances, for example, there will be little difference between communications with those in the pew, and those who ought to be in the pew, we feel that recommendations on Mission would go beyond our remit. Nevertheless, we hope that at the least some of what we recommend in this part of our work will contribute directly, if only modestly, towards Mission, as well as helping indirectly by making the Church more efficient and effective.
6. Given, as we noted in our Interim Report, the major part that finance must play in communications (paragraphs 11 to 12) we have examined how the Revenue Advisory Panel (RAP) works and considered whether there are changes that we would propose. We are most grateful for the help given to us by the Financial Secretary and a number of RAP members. We have also considered how Deaneries, benefices and parishes conduct their business, though we have not been able to examine these bodies in detail.
7. Our focus was, of course, on communication but we found, as we did for our Interim Report, that looking at communications raised much wider issues about how business is conducted and we conclude that those issues have to be addressed if communications are to be improved. We have, therefore, again looked at administrative and organisational processes. Those processes are, of course, means not ends, to be undertaken, if at all, only so that the more important kinds of Mission-supporting work, including communication, may succeed the better.
8. There is obviously great variation in how business is done within and across the Diocese and we agree that it would not be profitable to impose, or seek to impose, any one model on Deaneries or parishes. Nevertheless, some common themes may be discerned and there are undoubtedly lessons to be learned, both positive and negative, from considering how business is conducted. If Deaneries are to work, each needs a clear purpose, and a locally-acceptable shape, adapted to its context. The same is in principle true of benefices and parishes but the constraints on defining purpose and shape may be more acute.

Our Approach

9. To help form our judgements we drew up a list of questions (reproduced at Annex B) which we then considered in the light of our own knowledge. We also approached all Rural Deans, Lay Co-Chairmen, Incumbents, the Archdeacons and Chairmen of Boards and Committees. We sought responses too from a small number of other clergy and laity. We are most grateful for the time and effort that people put into answering our questions and for the frank and illuminating comments that were offered. This report would have

been much less without them. That said, we would have welcomed further responses; we were somewhat disappointed that we did not receive more input from those who were approached. We were unable to study Deaneries and parishes in detail, and we recommend that in the fairly near future further work be undertaken to ascertain views on communications from the pew. We do not believe that the results would be likely to displace any of our other recommendations, rather to augment them. We were conscious that some of the issues on which recommendations are needed depend on the further work to be undertaken on the website. Nevertheless, we are confident that what we recommend in this report stands on its own merits and will not be undermined by that future work.

General Background

10. Those through whom and by whom the Church must work, who (laudably) fill parish and Deanery offices and sit on the many varied committees/councils/Synods throughout the Diocese, are, with the exception of the Beneficed Clergy and Diocesan Office staff, unpaid volunteers who very often have many other commitments and no specially relevant background. We are hugely grateful for all that they do and totally dependant upon it. However they may lack administrative or financial experience; they do not or cannot always turn up for meetings; may not always hear what they should have heard even if they are present; and sometimes fail to tell others about it. The work load on these volunteers is often demanding, and becoming more so. The leadership of the Diocese owes it to them to provide the best support possible to help their performance. The key question is how to do that.
11. We are in a transitional stage with communications; the use electronic means is not to be assumed; many of the ageing population in our churches do not use email and even some who do are reluctant to trawl through websites. Therefore, when the Diocese sends or provides information electronically it can never be completely sure who receives it and who does not. On the other hand, the younger membership looks and will look ever more to electronic communications; we cannot assume that continuing to rely on traditional methods will reach them.
12. **The Parish/Benefice.** The basic unit of the Church of England is, in one sense, the Diocese, in which the people of God are gathered round their bishop as the chief pastor (see footnote 1 above). However from the perspective of most church-goers it is the parish. The parish exists in law in a way that the Deanery does not. It is where people live, gather, worship, relate to and serve others, hear sermons, attend the celebration of sacraments and where the majority of Christians have their primary experience of the grace of God. It is the place to which, ultimately, the Diocese sends its messages and from which it receives, or should receive, feedback. Each parish is under a priest, but it is nowadays unusual in rural areas for it to be the sole concern of the incumbent. Indeed there are only two such in the whole Diocese so that nearly all its

parishes are in multi parish benefices, nevertheless retaining a strong sense of identity.

13. For the parish to receive and transmit messages it, and its incumbent, need effective processes. Sometimes both have them; more often one or both lack some desirable element. Sometimes effective processes may be quite informal, especially in and for a rural parish. The same small number of active participants fill the offices of the Church, the Parish Council, the Village Hall Committee, and so on. In those circumstances, provided that someone keeps in touch with the incumbent, the Deanery and the Diocesan Office and officers, information can be effectively disseminated; decisions arrived at; and then effectively implemented. Unfortunately that is not always the case, and such informal arrangements are unlikely to be effective in a larger or urban parish. Moreover, even, or especially, in rural parishes the PCC, often lacking the appropriate degree of administrative support or desirable expertise, can find its formal duties onerous.
14. As regards incumbents, some are supported by an effective parish office, but many are not. Some can make effective use of secretarial support; others cannot. All are heavily laden with a wide range of duties. To help them and its lay workers, particularly at parish level, the Church should be much more intentional in seeking gifted people, explaining its needs, and encouraging and training them to take on new tasks, administrative as well as pastoral.
15. Very broadly, communications from the Diocesan leadership and the Diocesan Office fall into two categories: much routine material and more occasional important strategic messages. We gave some thought in our Interim Report to distinguishing those, and we shall return to it when we examine the website. A number of respondents felt that there is too much material sent from Diocesan Office to parishes and questioned how much of it is absolutely necessary. There was also concern about the quality of material sent from Diocesan Office and the impact this has on the quantity sent out.
16. We looked at the communications recently sent out by the Hereford Diocesan Office to parishes – the Annual Return Forms for Visitations; those concerning PCC officers; and those for Finance. The number is very considerable; the complexity not very great for a properly staffed and experienced office but nevertheless often daunting for a volunteer without much experience and with other pressing commitments. A number of the forms reflect legal requirements; others seek necessary management information for the Diocese or for the Church nationally. In very many cases, however, the requirements and demands may seem remote from parish life and the concerns of the local congregations. Whether or not that is so, an incumbent receiving all the material will have difficulty sorting out the strategic from the routine, and ensuring that the former receives the priority that it deserves. The same will be true at Deanery level for Lay Co-Chairmen and Rural Deans.

17. There may be some scope for improving the digestibility and ease of completion of the forms. That, however, is likely to be limited particularly for us as a Diocese since much of it is produced at national level. More fruitful may be further efforts to explain to parishes and their officials why the information is required and to raise consciousness of their belonging to, and participating in the wider Church. There is also scope for some complex communications to be accompanied by an explanatory note, agreed in appropriate cases such as suspensions by the Archdeacon. We note with approval that the Diocesan Secretary is conducting a survey of all the material emanating from Diocesan Offices over a three month period to ascertain the extent to which the feeling that too much is being sent to parishes is justified. We recommend that when the results are known the material should be assessed with a view to critical judgements being made on the necessity, quality and digestibility of the material.
18. A further concern that has been expressed to us is over a potential need for the Diocesan authorities to provide more, not less, information to parishes in order to help them discharge their responsibilities. There is a major problem particularly for the smaller and less organisationally developed ones, in keeping abreast of changing governmental and regulatory requirements. The responsibilities of PCCs now go far beyond “co-operation with the minister in promoting in the parish the whole mission of the church...” Amongst the statutory requirements are those such as the Disability Discrimination Act, the Regulatory Reform (Fire Safety) Order 2005 and the Health Act 2006. There are also legal responsibilities for health and safety (including working at height) and safeguarding children and vulnerable adults and, in addition, the Church’s own regulations and requirements, such as the Church Representation Rules.
19. We intend, when we come to examine the Diocesan website to consider whether it would be practicable to publish there a summary of the current measures with which PCCs are obliged to comply, together with details of the websites on which they can be found and, also, to give PCC secretaries notice of new measures or changes to existing measures. One factor will be whether the Church of England as a whole should institute such practices and, if so, how that might be best effected.
20. Our parishes and benefices are not at present over-rich with administrators (or experts in communications.) However, administrative (and communications) work is a necessary part of parish (and Deanery) life and one of the gifts of the Holy Spirit. If that work can be undertaken by laity that frees up ordained ministers to do what they are good at; it reduces frustration and increases satisfaction all round. Parishes and benefices need to understand that paying for administrative help or receiving it voluntarily, even for a few mornings a week, can significantly increase the availability and productivity of their clergy.

21. At the very least, each parish needs to identify the right person to fill in and deal with forms sent by the Diocesan Office: that may or may not be the PCC Secretary. There would be obvious benefits, especially for smaller parishes, if they could pool their talents and resources. Not only would that lift what may be felt as a considerable burden, but would free energy for Mission and proclaiming the Gospel. Whilst recognising the very real difficulties that can lie in the way of such collaboration we consider that that should be looked at, in every parish, as an aspect of Stewardship.
22. Another possibility is that the Deanery may have a role in helping to organise administrative support for smaller benefices, either by arranging for the employment of someone who can divide his time between different places, or by identifying functions which can be handled from one central office. We recognise, again, that local feeling may be against this but we recommend that Rural Deans and Lay Co-Chairmen examine the possibilities for it when considering how best to support their benefices.
23. A further possible significant contribution from the Diocese and Deanery level would be providing initial and ongoing training to suitable volunteers both for administration and for communications. That might be combined with the organising of networks of people doing the same job in different locations. We recommend that the Lay Development Officer investigate whether such training can be provided.

The Deanery

24. There are certain tasks that Deaneries need to do, some of which have to be done at a certain time and in a certain way – setting budgets (Deaneries have an increasing role in finance), collecting parish share, holding debates where invited or required by the Diocesan Synod, electing Diocesan Synod representatives etc. However, they vary in their capacities and *de facto* roles and the parts played by Rural Deans, Lay Co-Chairmen, Secretaries and Treasurers differ.
25. Whilst it is not for the Diocese to seek to impose total uniformity upon how Deaneries do their business there are currently very different levels of operation and it has been forcefully suggested to us that there is a real need for more guidance. After all, the Diocese has an agenda of Mission that it believes that all should be working towards. Moreover, Deaneries should have a clear purpose - a drifting, purposeless Deanery would not serve the Church's needs.
26. The Diocesan leadership can build upon initiatives already launched, and proposals for Mission sown but not yet ripened. Whilst fostering subsidiarity wherever possible – local solutions to local issues, since imposing uniformity from above tends to stifle creativity and growth - that leadership needs to continue working at how it can most usefully assist Deaneries with their:

- a. Vision;
 - b. Mission objectives on which they would formulate strategies to be presented to the Diocese.
27. To help Deaneries with their sense of mission, and with formulating their objectives, Bishops' and Archdeacons' meetings with Rural Deans and Lay Co-Chairmen provide a significant resource, and taking specific initiatives round the Deaneries works well, as do regular visits to Deanery Synods by Support Ministers and Diocesan staff. All these should certainly be continued. We note with approval also the programme of involvement with the Archdeacons' Visitations recently inaugurated by the DAC, which should be of great help to parishes, and the invitations to Rural Deans to see the Committee at work. Of particular importance is the work currently underway by the Lay Development Officer in fostering Mission Action Planning. In addition, we believe that the Diocesan Office could help the Deaneries achieve clarity of purpose by producing a short note of what they want them to do, in other words, defining their objectives, and we so recommend. Preparing that will give the Diocesan leadership the opportunity to formulate more precisely what it expects from the Deaneries. That in turn will help the Diocesan authorities to consider how they may best continue the resource and support of each Deanery.
28. Asking Deaneries to respond with and consult upon their plans to implement agreed Diocesan plans and initiatives would enable the Diocesan leadership to ensure that agreed policies were being implemented without dictating exactly how tasks should be approached. We recommend that the Bishop's Council seek such plans (on a 5 Year basis) on a regular cycle from all Deaneries to help them with formulating a direction for Mission, with the Diocesan officers providing, if requested, a skeleton plan – not as a mandatory model, but as a help from which to develop further the Deanery action plan.
29. One Deanery at least seeks 5 year plans from its benefices or parishes and we recommend that that become general, building upon the Archdeaconry Mission and Pastoral Committees' work.
30. There is a strategic choice to be made about the role or roles of the Deanery. It can be argued that there is a growing role for Deaneries in communications to and from parishes. That is certainly the case as regards finance, the problems with which reinforce the need to communicate from Deanery to parishes much better than at present. However, on the other hand, it was suggested to us that Deaneries receive more than enough communications from Diocesan Offices and officers and would not wish to take on any more. That said, there is a difference between the Deanery being informed of something via the Rural Dean and Lay Co-Chairman and its being responsible for distributing Diocesan material.

31. There is no point in using Deaneries simply as a post box. However, they are, in the nature of things, likely to have more contact with Diocesan authorities than parishes or benefices; they can provide a mechanism whereby those authorities may filter or combine information into more useful parts. There may also be a significant role for them in dissemination of information via Parish magazines and Deanery websites. For example, the Diocesan Communications Officer could prepare a monthly short message of important information which goes to Deaneries with a clear understanding that the Deanery is responsible for putting it on its website or passing it on having added local context.
32. On the whole we judge that the better arrangement is likely be for the Diocesan communications to go directly to parishes or incumbents for action, but being copied to Deaneries so that they can play their role. However, we recommend that, when the review of the website is complete, all material sent out thereafter from Diocesan Offices and officers to parishes, other than via the website, should be reviewed so as to form judgements as to whether it should be routed through the Deaneries or sent direct.
33. To the extent that our recommendations for asking Deaneries to prepare 5 year plans, and inviting them to seek the same from their benefices/parishes, are accepted, Deaneries will need to monitor what is passed from Diocese to parish or vice versa and to check that the plans are being appropriately implemented and, crucially, whether what has been transmitted has been received and acted upon. As part of their planning processes. Deaneries should be asked to formulate coherent information plans (covering, inter alia, websites, parish magazines, and the distribution of material in all forms) for important issues, and see that they are received and understood in parishes. We so recommend.
34. The judgements to be arrived at about the role of Deaneries will involve deciding where value can be added by them and on the time and energy available from Deanery officers. The former, in turn, will involve judgements about the role of Deanery Synods (which may be an important tool for educating parishes on Mission and developments in Diocesan policy), as well as about Deanery administrative processes. With the increasing emphasis on Mission, and the movement towards 2015 and beyond, the judgements will need to cover what should be done in future as well as what is done now and will be continued.
35. We believe that Rural Deans and Lay Co-Chairmen have a vital leadership role in ensuring that their Deanery Synods, and through them the parishes and benefices in their Deaneries, are informed and educated about significant developments in the Church and in the Diocese, and that they actively pursue Diocesan objectives and policies on Mission in a manner appropriate to their circumstances. We recommend that this be emphasised to them on appointment and in subsequent visitations etc. We also recommend that in

appropriate cases they be given guidance on the chairing of committees and other bodies.

Other matters

36. **The Website** We were urged to make work on the website a priority on the grounds that if this is right many of the other issues will be improved upon automatically. We agree with the great importance of getting the website right but we believe that it is a tool and the underlying policies that will be reflected in it need to be sorted out first. Nevertheless, we do intend to turn to it next in our work.
37. **Data Bases:** The importance of an up to date single database was emphasised again, as in the preparation of our Interim Report. The decision of Bishop's Council on implementation should ensure that this point is met. The work on implementation should examine the various suggestions for maintaining it and also for providing details of clergy and others. That in turn links with the Diocesan Directory, work on which is at an advanced stage.

Next Steps

38. Subject to the views of Bishop's Council, it will be necessary to consult Deaneries, via the Rural Deans and Lay Co-Chairmen. After consideration of their views it will be necessary to work up outline management plans for Deaneries, study the material sent out by the Diocese, presently and prospectively, and produce training material. Meanwhile, the review of the website will both draw on that work and feed into it. At an appropriate stage Diocesan and Deanery Synods will have to be involved.

Recommendations

The Diocese

1. A note should be prepared and circulated very widely conveying what the Diocese is and does (Paragraph 3).
2. The Diocese should continue to evolve a strategy (a Mission Action Plan) setting out its concrete objective and the broad means of attaining them (Paragraph 4).
3. In due course, further work should be undertaken to ascertain views on communications at the ground level (Paragraph 9).
4. The material gathered in the survey of material sent out by the Diocesan Office should be assessed for critical judgements on the necessity, quality and digestibility of the material sent out (Paragraph 17).
5. A review should be undertaken of material to be sent out in future with a view to considering whether it and continuing information should go directly to parishes/benefices or via Deaneries (Paragraph 32).
6. Diocesan officers should continue to make frequent visits to Deaneries, benefices and congregations, who should be urged to seek such visits (Paragraph 27).

The Labourers in the Vineyard

7. All who hold office in the Church, Clergy, Churchwardens, Parish Treasurers and PCC Secretaries should be brought to know, understand and encouraged to act upon the fact that they have important responsibilities to ensure that information is passed to and from their various communities (Paragraph 4).
8. The Church should be much more intentional in seeking gifted people, explaining its needs, and encouraging and training them to take on new tasks, administrative as well as pastoral (Paragraph 14).
9. The Diocese and Deaneries should provide initial and ongoing training to suitable volunteers both for administration and for communications. That might be combined with the organising of networks of people doing the same job in different locations (Paragraph 23).
10. There needs to be a process for identifying the right person to fill in and deal with forms sent by the Diocese to the parish, who may or may not be the PCC Secretary, (Paragraph 21).

11. Parishes should consider pooling their administrative talents and resources to free energy for Mission and proclaiming the Gospel. That should be looked at as an aspect of Stewardship (Paragraph 21).

Deaneries

12. Alternatively Deaneries could develop a role in organising administrative support for smaller benefices, either by employing someone who can divide his or her time between different places, or by identifying functions which can be handled from a central office. This should be considered where parishes cannot themselves arrange pooling arrangements (Paragraph 22).
13. The vital leadership and chairmanship role of Rural Deans and Lay Co-Chairmen in ensuring that benefices and parishes are informed and educated about developments in Church and Diocese, and that they actively pursue Diocesan objectives and policies, should be emphasised on appointment and in later contact with Diocesan leaders. They should also be given, in appropriate cases, guidance on chairmanship (Paragraph 35).
14. More generally, the Diocese should give Deaneries every assistance in developing, defining, refining, communicating and delivering their objectives (Paragraph 27).
15. The Bishop's Council should seek 5 year plans from Deaneries and Co-Chairmen should be helped to achieve clarity of purpose by being provided, if they so request, with a skeleton Mission plan (Paragraph 28).
16. Deaneries should, in turn seek 5 year plans from their benefices/parishes to help them with formulating a direction for Mission (Paragraph 29).
17. As part of their planning processes Deaneries should formulate coherent information plans for important issues, and see that they are received, understood and applied in parishes (Paragraph 32).

The questions we posed included:

- a. What were seen as the major communications issues from the Diocese to parish level?
- b. What were seen as the major communications issues from parish level to the Diocese?
- c. Can we distinguish between those that involve the Clergy (including active retired clergy), Readers, the Laity, and the Church Officers?
- d. Do you believe that organisational and administrative issues in parishes bear upon those issues? If so, how and what?
- e. What would you like to see done to improve communications in the above areas?
- f. Can more be done to explain the needs of, and the contributions from, the wider
- g. Can more be done to explain the needs of the wider Church to parishes, and if so, what (para XX above)?
- h. What was the evidence in support or contradiction of the views offered?
- i. What further evidence might be sought, and how?
- j. What role does the Diocese see for Deaneries in communications, upwards and downwards?
- k. What role do the Deaneries see for themselves in communications, upwards and downwards?
- l. Is the impression of significant differences in who does what, and how, correct? If so, does what are the implications for improving communications?
- m. Should the Diocese seek to introduce, or at any rate encourage, greater uniformity in what Deaneries do and (a separate issue) how they do it?
- n. How can the Diocese best help the Deaneries achieve a clear purpose?