

Parish Share meetings with Parishes – interview with John Dell and Nick Aves

Introduction

Blackburn Diocese has acted positively to help parishes struggling to pay Parish Share by encouraging meetings between parish representatives and the Diocesan Board of Finance.

These informal get-togethers, which started in 2017, explore ways and means of addressing these difficulties and encouraging strategies designed to increase parish income.

We talked to John Dell and Nick Aves, respectively Chair of the Diocesan Board of Finance and Chair of the Finance Committee and both members of the Budget Committee.

Both John and Nick are passionate about supporting parishes and giving them the advice and assistance they need to address Parish Share issues as they arise.

“Our task is to work with parishes on any financial difficulties they may have, principally when a parish faces the prospect of having insufficient income to cover its total annual costs,” said John.

“The catalyst for these meetings came originally from the Bishop’s Leadership Team in 2016 as they sought to identify a positive and realistic approach to helping parishes who didn’t feel able to meet the full amount of the Share request.

“The Diocesan Board of Finance wanted to understand in more detail why parishes were struggling to pay their full share,” added John.

The initiative gave us the opportunity to meet face-to-face with parishes for the first time and listen to where they are and why.

Nick explains: “There are many instances of extenuating circumstances: some parishes have faced horrendous building repair costs – our Victorian and older churches have all manner of issues relating to their fabric and maintenance. Others are faced with the reality of declining numbers, and that impacts directly on church income.”

And so a conversation begins; suggestions can include a stewardship campaign.

“A stewardship campaign can be quite powerful,” said Nick, “Stewardship has got to be done properly and has to be done well and the diocese has excellent resources to give advice and practical assistance to PCCs and Clergy to identify the best ways of boosting church income.

John takes up the thought: “We have said to all parishes, if you think you are going to have trouble paying your share, just come and talk to us.

“Some parishes, faced with not being able to pay their full share, had been very grateful for the meeting with DBF; giving them a chance to explore their difficulties and look at ways of dealing with them.

“The aim is to get ahead of the game: knowing that you may struggle this year in advance is better than getting to the end of the year and finding yourself in difficulties,” adds John.

Both John and Nick were very keen to emphasise that this isn't a 'head teacher and problem pupil' meeting.

Rather it's a chat, where a three-person team from the Diocese that includes a senior member of staff, an Archdeacon and either Nick or John sits down over a brew with a team from the parish that will principally include the Vicar and the Treasurer.

"We are not there to be judgmental, rather we want to hear what the problems are and we hope parishes want to hear what we can offer ... like help from Stephanie Rankin, the Parish Development Officer, who is such a valuable person in assisting with stewardship."

Archdeacons have also been able to point parish teams to other clergy that have got a lot of experience in a particular area of church life.

And there are lots of lay people in the church family with lots of different skills, who can be matched up with parishes to help and support as well.

But neither is this a permanent arrangement as John explains: "It's about planning to get back on an even financial keel."

"After our meeting we expect the parish will make efforts over the subsequent months to address the situation and take on board the advice and help on offer."

John continues: "As soon as the Diocese hears from a parish that they may be struggling to make their Parish Share, we look to set up a meeting with them."

"The get-together will explore some key questions and examine some basic facts: What do you expect to be able to pay and do you feel it is challenging enough for example. God challenges us all in the church to stretch ourselves after all!"

"If we are satisfied that the parish has done all it can in terms of tackling the potential shortfall we will then agree a grant to make up the difference between their original share budget and what it is expected they will pay. This process sets up a new baseline."

"There is an opportunity in the process to tease out from the parish if any improvements that can be made in the short term, following rigorous analysis of the parish reserves and the income and expenditure trends, especially congregation and giving numbers."

Nick takes up the thread: "If we are giving a parish money that has come from other parishes' share, it is only right that there should be a challenge in the process, otherwise we are letting down those parishes that give their share in full."

"This isn't just a handout or a process whereby the parish comes to us cap in hand. It is the family saying to another part of the family 'Yes, we will help you'."

Nick continues: "Parishes often get very concerned when they have been unable to meet their Parish Share in full, particularly if this has been going for a number of years. It gets to the point where this aspect of parish life can cause great anxiety."

"The meetings focus on the current position, what is going on this year, what can be paid. The idea is that the parish team goes away from the meeting with a very positive mindset, feeling it has a realistic target and thinking that they have a chance to bring the situation under control."

John and Nick are acutely aware of the difficulties parishes can face. John explains: “We know struggling parishes feel embarrassed about their situation when they see other churches fulfilling their parish share and they don’t.

“After we have met, the team can go back to PCC and say ‘we met with the diocese about our position and it was very constructive and pleasant; it’s a good deal, and we no longer need to feel isolated’.”

According to John and Nick many want to meet again before the year is out, to review how they are doing. Discussions can also flag up issues with accounts the parish team may not have been aware of. Again, a big help.

So how effective is the initiative?

John is enthusiastic about the response so far: “It’s early days yet – but there is a positive impact on our estimates for the current year; more than we believe we would have achieved if these meetings had not taken place.

“There are other gains – the relationship between parish and diocese; being seen to be obviously supporting each other in the family.

“Our Vision 2026 strategy is important in helping parishes work their way through financial challenges as well.

“We are seeing that parishes with active Vision Champions seem to have a better result financially than those without. Financial issues of the diocese can be a distraction – we should be focussing on mission and building up disciples and our own church family.”

John adds: “With this process, we intend to free up churches to concentrate on what really matters to us all, building up the Kingdom of God here in Lancashire.

“Sound finances for all parishes are a crucial element in the achievement of our Vision 2026 strategy.

“Remember there are other parishes in the same situation as you. We can benefit from consulting with one another. Opportunities exist and this process is part of it because we can pass on the accumulated wisdom we have gleaned from an increasing number of meetings.”

John and Nick’s seven key tips and ideas

1. Do planning – don’t give up when you see the shortfall.
2. Make sure all aspects of your accounts are accurate.
3. Make sure you are bringing in all the income you can – use the gift aid scheme, it’s amazing how much this can bring in, in return for nothing but proper organisation.
4. Don’t be frightened about talking about money in our churches – Jesus wasn’t!
5. Explain to each other that giving is Biblical, and ‘tips on a plate’ are not what God wants from us.
- 6.. Know your planned givers, acknowledge their contributions each year, be clear on your base position.
7. Support your Treasurer! The Diocese has treasurer training courses!