



# Setting the Deanery Synod Agenda

## SENSE OF PURPOSE

A deanery needs a synod with a vision of what parishes, deaneries and diocese working together and engaging with the secular world can do to further the Kingdom of God. It is the deanery which must shape, inspire, and direct such a synod. The deanery officers must set the agenda.

The cliché 'setting the agenda' makes a valid point. In the context of the deanery, the deanery officers have a responsibility for instilling a sense of purposefulness within the synod. If a deanery is to influence the churches that constitute it, then it must start to do so formally in synod. If a sense of common purpose cannot be given to deanery synod members, it is difficult to see how it can be given to the churchgoer in the parish.

## LOW EXPECTATIONS

From below, many churchgoers are barely aware of the deanery, let alone enthusiastic about it. Deanery synod members reflect this. Lay awareness of the purpose of the deanery is low, so there is no parish pressure on synod members to raise questions.

From above, because there is no proper procedure for bringing the major reports of the Church to the attention of churchgoers, there is no pressure on the representative to raise questions. The churchgoer will hear of these things through the distorting mirror of the national media, but will have no idea that they could be discussed in deanery synod.

Generally today British Christians do not ask themselves what the Church is for. So the expectations they have of the Church are not formed and are not articulated. There is no mental model against which to measure the performance of the Church in their locality. The deanery has the power to change that. It can set the agenda, by producing and justifying a list of projects to be tackled collectively. It can define the task of the Church beyond the parish boundaries.

## PRIEST AND LAITY

The clergy's perception of the deanery can be very different from that of the laity. This difference springs from the nature of the relationship within the deanery. The clergy, whatever their individual opinion of it is,

whether they enthusiastically support it or studiously ignore it, have a professional relationship with the deanery as an administrative unit. They share it with vocational and professional colleagues. It shapes their relationship with the Church hierarchy. It can offer the possibility of career advancement, of practising skills beyond those of caring for and running a parish.

The laity cannot and do not share any of this. The deanery has no immediate significance to them as an administrative unit. Its staffing problems and financial problems do not impinge on their careers. If the agenda is based merely on the clergy's perception of the deanery, then it will not engage the laity.

## PARISH AND DEANERY

The deployment of resources within the deanery boundaries is only significant to the churchgoer if it means them losing the minister for their parish, or in determining the size of the parish share.

For the laity, it is the parish which has meaning and purpose. They identify with the church building, maintain and embellish it. They share in and encourage a continuing congregational, worshipping community. They look to a minister for leadership, for the organising of worship, to be a figurehead and spokesman for the congregation. Increasingly they provide for that minister.

As members of a parish church, lay people do not have to search for their own role; it presents itself to them, namely – keeping the church going. If they are not challenged to think more deeply about their own ministry as lay people, they can pass the years of their church membership busily occupied, without having to worry about the mission of the Church to the secular world. The decisions of a PCC can, and frequently do, just react to events. They very rarely shape them.

By contrast, for lay people, the deanery has no obvious purpose. The deanery has no bricks and mortar manifestation with which to identify. The deanery is not a congregation of witnessing members. The members of a deanery synod and the churchwardens will know and may have cause to appreciate the work of the rural/area dean, but they are not directly required to support or fund him or her, as they do their minister. Lay people need to be actively drawn into a working relationship

with the deanery. The deanery has to produce persuasive reasons for them to involve themselves in its work.

Any group of churches can of course create a relationship with the lay people in a parish without deanery synod members and parishes working together. It can arrange occasional services for the area. It can arrange talks and discussions. It can arrange pilgrimages. None of these, however, requires the existence of a synod, nor do they justify the existence of the deanery.

#### THE DEANERY AND THE SECULAR SOCIETY

For lay people the existence of the deanery is justified by making possible a more effective witness of the faith in the wider community. It then becomes an organisation which needs their participation and involvement. The deanery can enable and empower the parish, and individual church members, in a way that the parish church on its own cannot do. It can harness the greater power of the parishes working together rather than individually. It can give lay people a clearer picture of the challenges in their locality with which the Christian approach to life needs to engage.

Setting the agenda needs to recognise that the majority of the population are non-churchgoers and have little time for the Church. The media encourages these non-churchgoers to see the role of the Church as an agent for instructing others in inter-personal morality, particularly sexual morality and petty larceny. They are unlikely to see the Church as having any mandate to speak out on such matters as:

- a) destroying the natural world to permit increased consumption;
- b) resenting and despising foreigners and those of different faiths;
- c) putting personal convenience before the common good;
- d) valuing possessions to such an extent as to make an idol of them;
- e) making selfishness a principle of economic management.

This tendency to see the Church as irrelevant to any debate on many of the crucial issues facing contemporary society is echoed in the attitudes of churchgoers. Because secular society does not want to engage with the Church, there has been a tendency for churchgoers to withdraw, to retire into inward-looking celebration of the faith, into pietism, into discussions of ecclesiastical order, and into adopting a very narrow 'churchy' view of what counts as 'sacramental', failing to see how the Gospel engages with the world. At parish level the Church's agenda has been set by those who want to push the Church to the margins of society.

This is the great challenge that the deanery has to face. It has to persuade churchgoers that the Church has a prophetic duty to engage with secular society. Bishops and many national and diocesan commissions are doing just that. The deanery is the local point of contact between the Church prophetic and the community.

And this is not the monopoly of those who attend Anglican churches. Here is an agenda to be shared with those with affiliations with other Christian bodies. They may attend their own denominational places of worship, or, where there is none locally, a Church of England parish church. They have a valuable contribution to make. The deanery may effectively already be, or may well become, a 'local ecumenical partnership' - even where none has been formally recognised. Members of other denominations may attend deanery synods (without voting) just as other people from parishes may. They should be engaged in the life of the deanery, but it is important that they also share in the planning of joint events and projects. These will only be owned if there is an investment of ideas in their shaping.

#### "AGENDA" MEANS THINGS TO BE DONE

The deanery has to take the word agenda literally if it is to involve deanery synod members actively in the work of the Church beyond the parish church walls. The deanery officers have to initiate 'things to be done' and to steer how they are put into practice. The aim is to give synod members a meaningful role, that involves working together and working with their PCCs and congregations on projects which are outward looking. This does not imply frenetic activity; but it must call for an active, not a passive response.

There is a numbing pointlessness about those meetings of synod, which require no more than listening. They ram home the lack of purpose in parish representation on synod. This leads to the familiar criticism of synods as talking shops, though listening shops might be more apt - a pure form of non-participatory democracy.

It is unfair and unreasonable to expect synod members to initiate activity in their parishes spontaneously, simply having listened to a talk. It is the deanery officers who must initiate outreach and progress it. If the director of the Diocesan Board of Social Responsibility or of Youth Work, for example, gives a talk to deanery synod, then the follow-up activity must appear in a subsequent agenda, and must be devised at deanery level. This needs to be based on consultation with the parishes, but the initiative and the direction has to be the responsibility of the deanery.

## WHAT FORM WOULD THE AGENDA TAKE?

Such an approach would make a significant change to the synod agenda by including:

- 1) At one synod every year, a motion to be forwarded for debate at diocesan synod presented by a deanery synod member.
- 2) One survey by questionnaire each year relating to an aspect of parish activity, e.g. work with teenagers. The deanery synod members would have a major role in obtaining this information. The results of the survey would be reported to and debated in synod – and plans put in hand for appropriate action as a result.
- 3) Meetings of specialist workers from the parishes, e.g. fund raisers to share information and experience. A deanery representative or deanery officer would attend and report back to synod.
- 4) One deanery synod member from each parish to be given the task of reading the current major report by the Church, e.g. reports commissioned by General Synod, and to report back to synod in a discussion of the report, to give their opinion of the report, listing items they agreed with, or disagreed with strongly, and those items which in their opinion needed clarification. If churches are taking action on matters mentioned in the report, synod members would be asked to discuss this in synod. Synod members would then discuss the findings with their PCCs.
- 5) A discussion on sector ministry to be held in synod once a year. Representatives to be provided with diocesan published reports and asked to read them and to discuss in their parishes. Representatives would report to synod with their opinion and with views from the parish.
- 6) Synod members to have the opportunity to raise an issue they feel strongly about or which their parish feels strongly about, for a few minutes debate in synod. Entitlement to speak could be decided by drawing lots. If the issue exercises the minds of other representatives, a vote could be held on whether to have a longer debate either in synod or in a specially convened meeting.

## SETTING AN AGENDA INCLUDING THESE ITEMS WOULD ACHIEVE THESE ENDS:

- It would regularly include an issue for debate put forward by each parish - that is its right and duty. All deanery synod members would have the opportunity to play a more active role.
- Lay people in the parishes would be able to meet those carrying out the same tasks in other parishes in the deanery - non-members can be encouraged to attend though not to vote.
- Lay people would be encouraged to lobby higher synods and follow their debates.
- Occasional projects involving the whole deanery would accustom lay people to working together as part of a larger Christian unit than the parish church.
- Lay people would become aware in some detail of the work done by the diocese and others to further the application of Kingdom values to the conduct of life in today's society. Lay people would be encouraged to review all that is happening in this society in the light of the Christian message.

The overall purpose is to help synod members, lay and clergy, to see and understand the task of the Church as a witness to the community and a source of strength to those worshipping there - beyond the essential parish church task of keeping the local church in being.

Adopting a disciplined approach in this way to setting the agenda for synod meetings would encourage participation. It would lead to an awareness of and more involvement in the extra-parochial work of the Church. It would raise the status of the job of deanery synod member, beyond the essential task of keeping the local parish church going, and create a two-way traffic of ideas between the synod and the parish. The result would be a driving sense of common purpose. No longer would the synod agenda be liable to 'hi-jack' either by individual deanery officers or by determined activists wanting to pursue their own ends.

*Thanks to Maurice Vassie, Lay Chair of Derwent Deanery Synod (1997)*