

Diocese of Salisbury, Social Justice Working Group Report for the year 2014

At Synod in February 2014, the Social Justice Working Group reported on its activities for the previous year and set out some priority areas to be addressed in the year ahead. These were:

- **Food** — Food poverty, Foodbanks, Food security
- **Finance** – Credit Unions, impact of changes in social welfare
- **Fuel** — including our work on environment, but also supporting the Winter Fuel Allowance campaigns run by the two Community Foundations.
- **Fast** — Carbon Fast during Lent, a significant new campaign
- **Franchise**—preparing for the General Election, encouraging people to vote.
- And along the way we hoped we would have some **Fun** together.

This report highlights work done in response to these areas as well as some other work related to the Social Justice programme.

Food

Food poverty and the growing demand on Foodbanks made this area of work an obvious priority. About 24 Foodbanks serve people across the Diocese, most of them work independently while a few are associated with either Faithworks Wessex or Trussell Trust. All have reported increased demand over the past few years.

In order to understand this change in our society we organized an event in Gillingham, chaired by the Bishop of Sherborne, where users of the foodbank told their own stories about how they had come to need that support. Fifty local politicians and churchleaders attended a very powerful and moving event that challenged all sorts of myths about poverty, highlighting in particular the difficulties experienced by people on benefits when they have a change of circumstance.

The report on this event included advice on how similar events might be organized around the country and was used by Church Action on Poverty in their campaigns, and to inform the process used by the All Party Parliamentary Inquiry into Hunger and Food Poverty in Britain. This input was notable in the way users of services were invited to contribute evidence directly to the Inquiry.

The Inquiry was established as a result of widespread concern about the rising number of people depending on Foodbanks. Much of that evidence for that increase came from the Salisbury-based Trussell Trust and as a result there was a strong Salisbury contribution to the Inquiry with John Glen MP taking a leading role, and one of the four hearings to gather evidence taking place in Salisbury.

“Time and again we are told that the key presenting issue at the foodbanks is that of delays in the processing of benefits. A change of circumstances in a family home can result in weeks without the necessary support provided through the benefits system. It may be argued that most benefits are processed within the DWP’s target timescales, but for people who have nothing, on time is not the same as in time. Eight weeks seems extraordinarily long to deal with changes that are known to a wide range of agencies.”

Bishop Nicholas in his evidence to the Parliamentary Inquiry.

The Inquiry's final report, *Feeding Britain* was published in December with seventy recommendations, many of them simple and inexpensive to implement, and a call for the setting up of hubs across the country encouraging organizations, including churches, to work together to tackle poverty and hunger.

"We believe it is time to look again at the state of our country and to review the fundamental values that led to the creation of our welfare state. We propose in Feeding Britain a strategy for renewing the welfare state so it can better reflect and encourage the relationships which contribute to the wellbeing of our citizens, including the poorest. We think such a rationale is needed at a time when, sadly, we appear to be drifting towards more and more atomisation and less and less sharing of common values."

Rt Revd Tim Thornton, Co-chair of the Parliamentary Inquiry, in his reflections for the final report, *Feeding Britain*.

A meeting is planned to look at the possibility of a Feeding Britain hub in the Salisbury area, and we have been promoting the MakeLunch initiative which opens up church and community kitchens to provide meals during holidays for children who would get free school meals in term-time. The Devon and Cornwall Food Association provides an interesting model for using surplus food to supply schools and other community organisations. Local parishes might also be able to look at community food projects including allotments and orchards, cookery skills, and affordable markets.

Finance

Many of the benefit-related issues, including issues around spare bedrooms and the length of time taken to process changes, were taken up by the work done to provide evidence to the All Party Parliamentary Inquiry.

In the early part of the year we were invited to provide information to the Archbishop of Canterbury's team looking into ways of delivering a fairer financial system offering savings accounts and responsible lending. We were able to show how the Diocese has supported the Credit Union movement across Dorset and Wiltshire for fifteen years, with promotion of the benefits of membership, provision of space for collection points, and grants from St Mary's Fund towards set-up and running costs. Inquiries from parishes showed that there is an appetite to develop this work.

A meeting of credit union officers from across the South West, organised by Colin Brady, demonstrated the need for support in improving governance and marketing, with significant differences in the development stages of credit unions across the region. All areas of the Diocese are covered by Credit Unions now with effective collaborative work between them adding to their ability to serve local needs. One example of good practice for our parishes is in the development of a link between the Archdeaconry of Sarum and the South Wiltshire Credit Union. We will continue to promote Credit Union membership, and in particular, encourage church members with experience of finance and banking to play a part on Credit Union boards.

Synod heard from Antony Macrow-Wood on the development of the Churches' Mutual Credit Union, and we offer our congratulations to Antony and his team as that work comes to fruition.

Fuel

Each winter some 350 vulnerable people die of cold-weather related causes in Dorset, a further 200 die in Wiltshire, and many hundreds struggle with heating bills. For the past two years the Social Justice Working Group has supported the Surviving Winter Campaigns run by

the two Community Foundations in our area. The campaign invites people, especially those who receive a winter fuel allowance but feel that they don't need it, to make a donation to a fund which is used to improve insulation and warmth for those who struggle with the costs of heating.

Andrew Marx, a parishioner of All Saints in Enford, donated his winter fuel allowance last year.

"This was a simple, practical, way to help my neighbour", says Andrew. "My wife volunteers with Age UK, so I'm aware of how poverty hits many older people.

"Sometimes, the cost of restricting a benefit to those in need can be more than providing it to everyone. That's true with the winter fuel payment, but I think those of us who don't need it have a duty to help those who really do."

Grapevine

With thanks to Gerry and Michael, our colleagues in the Communications team, this campaign receives a high level of publicity in Diocesan communications including frequent mentions in the e-bulletin.

In a somewhat contrived way our Fuel priority also includes the work of the Diocesan Environment Group. This group, chaired by David Morgan who worships at St John's in Wimborne, has grown in strength this year. David is the regional Arocha representative, an international Christian organisation that works on issues of environment including the well-known Eco-Congregations scheme in the UK. Our environment group includes scientists, campaigners, and parish priests; a combination that keeps the group focussed on actions that are suitable for our local situation. Speakers are available, and advice on Living Churchyards, Eco-Congregation accreditation, taking account of Creation issues in worship and prayer, renewable energy, and some technologies. This work is strengthened by a strong partnership across the dioceses in the South West of England and useful information and resources are now available at www.ecochurchsouthwest.org.uk

The Environment Group has been particularly encouraged by Synod's support for a pilot scheme to place renewable energy technology in parsonages, believing that this will be good for those living in our properties, good for the environment, and a visible sign of our commitment *"to strive to safeguard the integrity of creation and sustain and renew the life of the earth."*

Fast

The Ecochurch Southwest Group encouraged people across the region to take up the challenge of a Carbon Fast for Lent 2014. This was based on the idea that it may be relatively easy to give up luxuries and treats but more challenging and hopefully more beneficial to take steps to reduce the impact of our lifestyles on the resources of Creation. Working with Tearfund, a set of daily reflections, scripture passages, and ideas for action were provided in a booklet and by daily emails. Colin Brady took on responsibility for collecting and editing this on behalf of the group and an estimated 3000 people took part in various ways. Parishes were encouraged to look together at the environment and our collective responsibility for the care of Creation. The Carbon Fast was, of course, given an added boost by the Bishop of Ramsbury's commitment to give up his car for Lent; a commitment that encouraged others to think seriously about what they could do. A number of Diocesan officers, feeling unable to take such a radical step, limited themselves to driving at under 50 miles an hour throughout Lent – quite a challenge for some, but a simple step that makes a difference.

Materials for Carbon Fast Lent 2015 have been put together by the regional group looking at the theme of water. Sign up for daily emails on www.ecochurchsouthwest.org.uk

Franchise

With the General Election known to be expected in May 2015, the Social Justice Working Group wanted to ensure that people across the Diocese are encouraged to participate and exercise their votes. Local Churches Together groups have a longstanding commitment to organising hustings in the run-up to elections. Guidance on how to organise a hustings was collected and has been made available on the Diocesan website. Further support and advice for organisers, especially those chairing hustings, can be made available with thanks to Rob Key.

Other activities

A Diocesan Social Justice conference held in June was very successful with 100 attendees and inspiring speakers including Ann Morisy, Bethany Eckley from the Church Urban Fund, and Bishop Nicholas. We are very grateful to Ron Hart who organised this event.

Synod was asked by Rosemary Macdonald, Chief Executive of Wiltshire Community Foundation and a Canon of the Cathedral, to explore the possibility of making transfers from trusts to establish endowed funds with both Community Foundations that would have the possibility of attracting 50% match-funding. The options turned out to be very limited, but the Trustees of the Diocesan Social Welfare Fund identified benefits from the scheme for church-related social action and made £100k available in two grants to Dorset Community Foundation and to Wiltshire Community Foundation. The additional 50% match-funding established two funds that will be able to make small grants to parishes addressing local needs into the future. This partnership will raise awareness of the work undertaken by our parishes in their communities and increase the possibilities for advice on further funding, while the Diocesan Social Welfare Fund has retained the ability to make small grants directly to local church groups, and to continue its support for the Chaplaincy to Gypsies and Travellers.

Adrian Brook, Chaplain to Gypsies and Travellers, moved to a parish in Devon during the year. Jonathan Herbert, a priest who lives at Hilfield, will take up the post in June 2015.

The Hilfield Community hosted our first training event for our developing network of Social Justice Champions. Combining prayer, discussion, resource sharing, and fun, this was a successful start to what will be a programme of events at the Friary to support our volunteers. Twenty-five people have become part of the network, engaging with the programme in ways that are appropriate for their experience and available time. Our next event will be at Hilfield Friary for a Social Justice retreat over the weekend 24th – 26th April. Some places available for others who might be interested.

There is much left to develop in each of our areas of work but the Social Justice Working Group has been encouraged by support across the Diocese in 2014 and looks forward to furthering the work in 2015.

Colin Brady
Social Justice Programme Manager