



# RESOURCING MISSION

## Reviewing Parishes' Health and Viability

Over the last few years, a number of dioceses have undertaken systematic tests of the health and viability of their parish ministry. The aim of such exercises has been to ensure the resources are deployed more effectively for mission.

In its report, *Resourcing Mission for a 21<sup>st</sup> Century Church*, the Resourcing Mission Group recommended dioceses should pool their knowledge on the strategic issues they were addressing. As a first step, National Church Institutions' staff organised a research seminar earlier in the year drawing together a number of diocesan secretaries to explore issues such as:

- How can an assessment of the health and viability of existing parish ministry help resource allocation within a diocese?
- By what methods should parishes' health and viability be assessed?
- What follow-up action is required once a health and viability assessment has been made?

The seminar involved a case study of one diocese's approach to health and viability issues with reflections also from the experiences of other dioceses.

### Case Study: Reviewing Parishes' Health and Viability in London Diocese

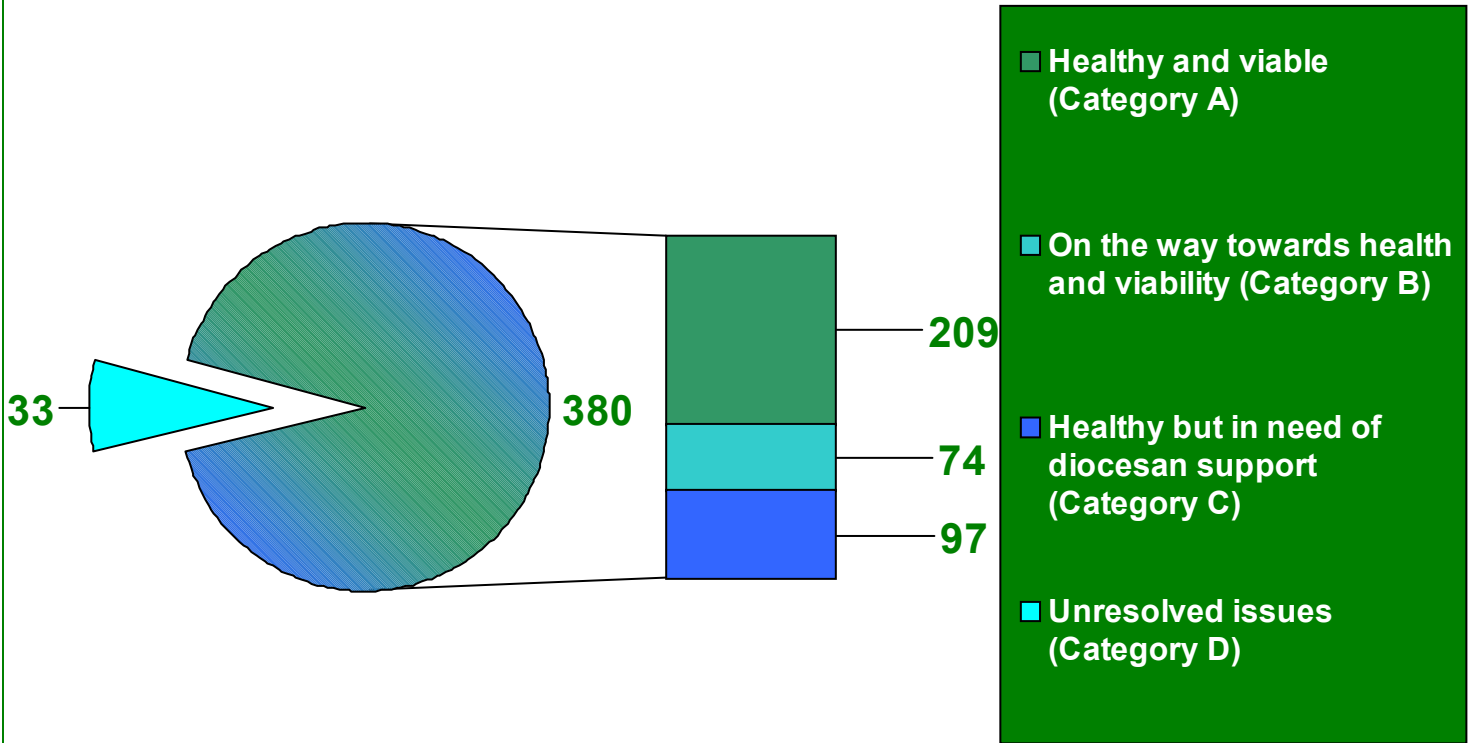
There had been discussions about the issues of health and viability in the Diocese of London for at least ten years, but little systematic action. It took the difficult financial situation of more recent years (in 2002 it had a deficit of nearly £2 million) for the diocese to wake up to the need to do something. Consultation among parishes about how to address the financial challenges revealed strong calls for a radical redesign of the diocese for mission. There was particular concern that growing churches were being squeezed to 'prop up' those which were not.

This led to the Bishop's Council's decision in 2003 to review parishes' health and viability.

### *The Review Exercise*

A high-level Mission and Ministry Group, chaired by an area bishop, was formed, its first task being to provide a framework for parish (and non-parochial community) classification. The original classification (A. Healthy and viable; B. Diocesan Supported Parish; C. Other) was refined during the process to ensure an accurate picture of diocesan health. For example, the initial framework did not recognise that some parishes under category A were not particularly healthy, even though they were financially sound (eg. they supported their ministry not via their congregation's giving, but by the income gained from renting out a hall). It was also important to use a framework that recognised and encouraged parishes that were actively progressing towards health and viability.

The final classification and the numbers of parishes assigned to each category are shown below.



## Making the Assessments

A number of objective criteria were used to make the viability assessments (see box right). However, an element of subjectivity was inevitable in decisions about parish health. This meant it was important to involve local personnel in initial assessments (area deans or other local representatives), as they were best placed to make these judgements. The diocese had deliberately avoided a top-down approach, with the Mission and Ministry Group's role one of auditor to try to ensure common standards. The final say on parish classifications was left to area councils.

It was expected that all parishes needed to take action regardless of their category.

### The Group recommended that:

*Category A* parishes should continue to plan for growth and maybe plant a church elsewhere.

*Category B* parishes should put in place action plans, enabling them to reach health and viability by dates set by the diocese.

*Category C* parishes should be challenged to avoid a dependency culture.

*Category D* parishes need to resolve their problems.

### Assessing Viability

- The extent to which a parish was covering its costs.
- Electoral roll/attendance figures (and recent trends therein).
- Parish population.
- Geographical proximity to other churches.
- State of repair of buildings.
- Deprivation statistics (was it in an Urban Priority Area?).
- Was there a dynamic mission action plan in place and was it regularly reviewed?
- How did the parish rate against the 'healthy churches' criteria produced by Springboard?

## **Problem Solving in Category D Parishes**

The exercise's credibility rested largely on successfully addressing category D's problems, which stemmed mainly from poor, usually clerical, leadership. The Group's suggestions were:

- resolution of personnel issues through greater engagement with the incumbent or, if necessary, offering them an exit package;
- pastoral reorganisation; or
- a church plant in a parish.

If no action was taken, the parish would not be eligible for any diocesan loans or grants. It was also possible for bishops to withhold an incumbent's stipend (a policy approved by the diocesan synod, although not yet implemented).

Positive results had been achieved by tackling the isolation of clergy in D parishes. Greater direction from the bishop and seeking to pair an incumbent with another of a similar tradition had both reaped rewards.

### **The original aims of the exercise had been that:**

- all parishes and non-parochial units should be places of worship, mission, growth in numbers, growth in discipleship, growth in relation to their community and growth in fellowship;
- all parishes and non-parochial units that could pay their Common Fund costs were doing so;
- all parishes and non-parochial units that could support others in partnerships were doing so through the Bishop of London's Mission Fund;
- all non-viable parishes had been identified and action taken to change them.

### **To date the exercise has:**

- provided a clear focus to the diocese's mission work;
- ensured funds for mission are more effectively deployed across the whole diocese (eg. helping direct the allocation of the diocese's CUF grants; the diocese's gutter cleaning programme for parish buildings was free for 'C parishes');
- set clear work agendas for diocesan staff (eg. the Community Ministry Adviser now works almost exclusively with parishes in category C);
- helped make transparent the need for mutual support within the diocese.

Making the case for mutual support was particularly important since it could not be presumed that better-resourced parishes were willing contributors to mission in the rest of the diocese. The health and viability exercise has been helpful in showing category A and B parishes the strategic needs of those in category C and in demonstrating resolution to confront category D issues. The exercise has led to the creation of the Bishop of London's Mission fund, which encourages better-resourced parishes to support category C parishes, either in direct partnership or more generally.

## **Reflections**

### *What drove the exercise?*

It was hard to escape the conclusion that financial difficulty was the most significant agent for change in the Church. However, other factors had built an environment conducive to reviewing health and viability over many years. These were:

- the development of diocesan mission action planning tools
- a parish share system that did not tax growth and encouraged voluntary mutual support
- the transparency of costs and subsidies, with each parish given an annual statement comparing common fund contributions against ministry costs
- developing deaneries as coordinators of mission and resourcing strategies, particularly by appointing skilled people as area deans
- movement away from a committee culture.

Diocesan and area bishops had a key role in gaining approval for the review process, whilst diocesan staff were the vital force in driving it forward. At a local level, the involvement of area deans had been crucial to maintaining the desired 'bottom-up' approach.

### *What were the difficulties?*

It was accepted from the start that there would be an element of subjectivity in judgements about health. This inevitably risked some inconsistency in classifications, particularly in relation to whether parishes belonged in categories C or D.

There was little objection to the review itself (despite the risk involved in making parish classifications public), but some concerns were expressed on churchmanship grounds about how the exercise was being taken forward. The diocese is engaging with these, for example, by asking some priests in particular traditions to develop health and viability strategies.

### *Sustaining progress*

A health and viability exercise is a dynamic process. The classifications of some parishes have changed and will continue to do so in response to changing circumstances. It is the area councils' responsibility to update them, as well as ensure action plans are followed through. It is the Bishop's Council which maintains overall responsibility and needs to encourage continued vigilance and on-going communication about the exercise's purpose and direction.

## **Views from other dioceses**

- The environment in some dioceses might not currently be conducive to a health and viability review, but London's exercise raised issues of importance to all parts of the Church.
- In the wrong environment, this exercise might meet defensiveness, arising from a fear of multiple church closures, especially in parishes used to a top-down approach to resourcing mission.
- In these cases, it might be best to take a 'dying to live' approach, focussing on the rationalisation of ministry in specific areas and making fresh starts.
- Some of the energy currently used on maintaining church buildings needed to be freed up to spread the gospel, making some closures necessary.
- Less well-resourced dioceses, with more Category C parishes and less in Category A might find it difficult to implement London's review.
- In rural areas it might be better to focus on assessing health because low population density can make accurate measures of viability difficult.
- Senior Church leaders tend to focus on pastoral issues, but it is important that they give others the freedom and authority to develop, as well as implement, health and viability strategies.
- The Church suffers in many areas of its life from its unwillingness to differentiate between 'success' and 'failure'. There needs to be a clearer notion of what is and is not acceptable clergy performance, which should feed through into ministerial reviews.
- Effective strategies are often those developed locally, but that requires a collaboration culture between parishes which takes time to achieve. It is important that local strategies do not merely replicate current models of the Church across local boundaries.

This information was gained via a research seminar held on Wednesday 3 January 2007.

In attendance:

- Jane Easton, Leicester Diocesan Secretary
- Keith Robinson, London Diocesan Secretary
- Mike Eastwood, Liverpool Diocesan Secretary
- Peter Hill, Southwell and Nottingham Chief Executive
- Stephen Marriott, Guildford Diocesan Secretary
- Paul Bayes, National Evangelism Advisor, Archbishops' Council
- Catherine Evans, Policy Researcher, Church Commissioners
- John Preston, National Stewardship and Resources Officer, Archbishops' Council
- Philip James, Head of Policy Unit, Church Commissioners

A separate document records the result of discussion on diocesan strategies for investing in new mission opportunities.

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