

Notes of the Open Meeting for the Five Kent Estuary Parishes, 15th October 2025.

Introduction

The open meeting was called by the KEMC Leadership Team as a first step in responding to the Archdeaconry Mission and Pastoral Committee (AMAP). It had asked the Team to establish a process through which the parishes (in partnership with the local Methodist churches) can find a shared vision, along with a sustainable pattern of ministry and an appropriate form of governance. Approx 70 people attended the meeting.

The meeting's aim was to share information about the challenges and opportunities that the parishes face and then to establish one or more working group to consider the vision, pattern of ministry and governance arrangements. Their proposals will be discussed at a second open meeting in January, before being considered formally by each PCC. The outcome of the process will then be reported to AMAP, whose role includes ensuring that the Church's resources are being used effectively.

Bryan Kerr, as Mission Community Leader, opened the meeting with prayer and introduced Archdeacon Vernon Ross who had been asked to chair it. Vernon confirmed that the meeting was the start of a process that needed to be shaped by local needs, circumstances and opportunities. He then introduced Canon Richard Snow and Canon Anne Pettifor.

Listening to PCCs

In January they had met with each of the 5 PCCs, listening to what they had to say about their parishes. Richard focussed on what he had heard about them as worshipping communities and about mission.

He spoke of the energy and enthusiasm that had been evident and the strength of faithful service and regular worship. Alongside this, he had heard of the congregations being generally weighted towards more elderly people and the consequential pressures this brought now, as well as concern for the future.

He said that the churches all seemed comfortable having what he called "fuzzy edges" – being part of the community for people who may not actually attend – or only at Christmas or other special occasion. All were aware that this presented potential opportunities.

He had heard of missional things happening in each church, using specific opportunities relevant in their community and often with ecumenical partners. He particularly highlighted connections with schools, Open the Book, Messy Church and KEY.

Anne then referred to the conversations about money and buildings. She referred to a varied financial picture across the 5 parishes, but all had some current pressures and all expressed anxiety as they looked to the future. There were real questions as to whether the current level of paid-for ministry was sustainable.

Each PCC clearly valued their building, and all were seeking responsibly to maintain them. Recent reordering in some had been focused on making them more welcoming and enhancing them for wider community use. The buildings were seen as an important symbol of the Christian presence in the villages. Anne reported that the general feeling had been that they presented real opportunities, but also considerable challenges.

When the conversations had looked to the future, all the PCCs had seen the importance of maintaining a presence in their community, looking to increase engagement. Those with schools had emphasised growing involvement with them and villages with new housing had seen the opportunities that created. At the same time, it seemed that all were aware of the implications of their age profile and the financial pressures.

Richard and Ann concluded by commenting that they felt the PCCs were keen to be proactive in seeking to manage the future, not simply fall back into "it will see me out".

Ministry Offer

Sophie Hodge (Diocesan Stewardship and Local Ministry Enabler) had been asked to talk about the wider diocesan financial picture. She started by explaining that the budget for the next three years had just been approved. The national church's decision to increase the stipend by 10%, the Government's increase in NI, continuing inflation and the requirement to invest in Safeguarding had made the process particularly challenging this year. Only a fortuitous surplus carried forward from previous years had averted cutbacks.

The budget priority is local ministry. The diocese receives funding from the national church to meet the costs of particular diocesan posts and for specific projects such as the Growing Younger Strategy and church planting, but must directly meet the costs of local ministry. Its main source of income is the Ministry Offer. 100% of this goes on local ministry but this only covers £4.3m of the £6m cost. The balance comes from investment income and the reserve.

Sophie gave a potted history of the journey from Parish Share to Ministry Offer and now, Partnership Agreements. Parish Share had been effectively an imposed tax. When it was replaced by the Parish Offer, the income initially dropped by 40%, threatening a substantial cut in the number of stipendiary clergy posts. A more proactive dialogue between diocese and parishes has subsequently seen 4 years of growth in the Offer, albeit not fully matching inflation. However, the new 2026 Offers have dropped again.

The current focus is on developing three-year Partnership Agreements on Mission Community footprints. These are collaborative mutual agreements based on realistic assumptions about the desired pattern of ministry and the predicted level of the Offer. They give more certainty to both congregations and the diocese.

Turning to the Kent Estuary, Sophie said that in 2021 the 5 parishes had paid a total of £136,000, against a local ministry cost of £125,000, thereby giving £11,000 to support ministry in poorer areas of the diocese. In 2026 the offer is £11,000 short of the cost of ministry in the five parishes. A swing of £22,000 and meaning that the cost of our two priests is no longer being covered. This is not sustainable.

Question time

In answering questions, Vernon emphasised the importance of working ecumenically. He also spoke about examples of new patterns of ministry around the Archdeaconry, mentioning an ecumenical partnership that draws Anglican and Methodist clergy into a single shared team; family or community outreach workers being appointed instead of a priest and a paid administrator freeing up clergy time for pastoral work.

He emphasised that where there is a Partnership Agreement, the diocese would use its best endeavours to fill any vacancy rapidly, but that Cumbria does have difficulty recruiting. Beth Honey (Diocesan Director of Missional Revitalisation) pointed out that this highlights the importance of intentionally growing our own leaders and ministers – something which is already evident across the County. She also pointed out that growing the leaders of tomorrow is a key part of the Growing Younger Strategy,

Vernon suggested that in areas like ours (and there are many), we can passively let things gradually die, or we can take a strategic and realistic approach to refreshment and renewal, acknowledging our finite energy and resources, but purposefully seeking to grow. At the heart of this he suggested was prayer and listening to God about what we might let go of, as well as what we might do. There followed a time of prayer.

Working Group(s)

The Leadership Team had decided that the best way of being open to the Spirit and taking the next steps towards a purposeful and sustainable future, was to ask for volunteers to form one or more Working Groups who will suggest a **vision** for the area, along with a **pattern of ministry** and **governance arrangements** that may help us fulfil it. The proposals will be presented to an open meeting in January and then formally considered by the 5 PCCs. The decisions of the 5 will then be reported to AMAP.

It was felt that a Group should not be more than 10 people, all of whom would be individuals, not representative of a particular parish. The clergy will support and be available to help the Group(s) but not be active participants.

Volunteers from the 8 KEMC churches were invited either to sign up at the meeting or to contact one of the clergy or Peter@heversham.com, as soon as possible and no later than 26th October.

The meeting closed with the Lord's Prayer and the Grace