COPING WITH COVID-19
The spring meeting of Standing Committee (SC) was overshadowed by the ongoing coronavirus emergency, which hit the diocese shortly after the 2020 Synod ended.

With lock down restrictions beginning to be relaxed across the Diocese, beginning with Cyprus, Standing Committee met via Zoom on May 20th to take stock of the situation.

A financial update was high on the agenda, as Financial Director John Banfield outlined the effect of the crisis on the budget agreed by Synod in February (see page 2).

It was decided that next year’s Synod should take the opportunity to reflect on the experience, and to think what it has taught us about being the Church.

To help resource the discussion SC agreed to accept the (free!) offer of a customised survey, similar to one promoted by the Church Times newspaper in the UK. The survey will be produced under the auspices of the College of York St John in England, in close collaboration with Archdeacon Christopher.

It is hoped that all Synod members, other clergy and as many lay people as possible will complete the online questionnaire, which seeks to discover how we coped, what we thought was good, and what we couldn’t wait to be free from! There should be plenty to reflect on.

Many churches have been streaming worship online, organising Zoom Bible studies and other events. SC congratulated Maggie Leroy on the way she had adapted her ministry to the new medium, and which has been much appreciated.

So, how are we coping?

Basically, thanks to Zoom, the online meetings service.

Acts of worship are provided using this method in many Cyprus parishes and Gulf chaplaincies.

Others are keeping in touch via other channels, such as Skype, Facebook, YouTube and WhatsApp.

Churches throughout the Gulf remain closed although those in Cyprus have just re-opened.

Bible study and other educational activities are widely provided online and the telephone offers opportunities for pastoral support.

Food parcels for refugees and vulnerable people are still being provided and are delivered in several places, including Iraq and Nicosia.

Diocesan teams and committees are also meeting online, including Ministry (see P4)
FINANCE: The crunch could come in ‘21

Finance Director John Banfield has written to parish priests, senior chaplains and the Houses of Clergy and Laity to warn them the diocese faces “a serious deficit” in 2021 if - as seems likely - parish contributions fall short of what is planned.

“Most of you have either already paid diocesan contributions budgeted for this year or are confident of being able to do so,” he wrote. “Our current forecast suggests total parish contributions of €400K in 2020 only €15K below the plan level.

“The concern is more likely to be contributions for 2021. About half of you are reasonably hopeful of being able to make the contribution budgeted for 2021. However the balance includes four of the larger Gulf chaplaincies and if their contributions were to fall significantly below the plan level there would be an obvious impact on diocesan cash flow. At this stage it is very difficult to predict the size of that problem.”

Looking ahead

Although churches in Cyprus have re-opened, social distancing means fewer people can attend and there is little chance of Gulf church compounds following suit soon.

Canon Banfield presented Standing Committee with plans to reduce spending this year by €50,000 and to hold that level through next year. “Until Gulf churches reopen it is impossible to predict what will happen next year. Hopefully it will become clearer by September when we will need to start putting together plans for 2021 and 2022. In the past we have looked to prior years accounts to calculate future parish contributions but as some of you have pointed out Covid-19 means that will no longer work.”

A CANON - JUST IN TIME

Archbishop Michael visited Bahrain in early March and was finally able to install Fr Harrison Chinnakumar as a canon of the cathedral.

A dedication service for the newly completed multi-purpose building took place on the same day.

Then the lockdown struck. A programme for visiting the ruler and some other dignitaries was cancelled at the last minute and the visit had to be cut short so Archbishop Michael could get back to Cyprus before flights were shut down completely.

Welcome back, Geoff

The Revd Geoff Graham began a return to ministry at St Helena’s, Larnaca, in February following an operation.

Archbishop Michael visited just before the restrictions began and received a Russian Orthodox member of the congregation into the Anglican Communion.
Everyone who attended Synod was given the chance to provide feedback on their experience. But of the 100 or so who attended, only 26 filled out the form. This is a selection of their observations.

All respondents rated Synod either excellent or good (1 or 2 on a scale of 5)

The spiritual addresses by Dr Rima Nasrallah and the diocesan video were most frequently singled out as highlights. The addition of sub-titles to the video was especially welcomed.

The workshops received a 24/26 approval rating. Some thought they were held too late in the evening.

Worship was also popular although some felt the chapel was too noisy and the liturgy insufficiently varied. Some thought the timing of Night Prayer was too late.

Most were also happy with the accommodation, the food and the service provided by hotel staff although some felt there were not enough spaces for informal socialising and conversation.

Members also offered several suggestions for improvements, notably to discussion groups and workshops. These will be addressed as planning for next year’s Synod, in Cyprus, gets under way.

MAKING A MOBILE-FRIENDLY WEBSITE

A draft proposal has been submitted to Standing Committee for a new diocesan website that will be more compatible with the mobile devices increasingly used to access it.

Mobile traffic has increased by over 200% since the current site was launched and now accounts for over half of internet use. Most websites are now designed first for mobiles and then for PCs. That will be the case for the diocesan site, if the plans are approved.

The new site also plans to address issues raised by users, arranging content more logically.

“The new website will be a modern responsive one that offers the different functionality required,” the designers say.
MINISTRY: Taking a mixed approach

The Ministry Team held a Zoom meeting on 28 April 2020, joined by all members as well as Archdeacon Bill Schwartz.

Each member described how the current crisis had affected their work on behalf of the team.

On Budget, the Director of Ministry, John Holdsworth, reported that figures and estimates based on the minimal expected work of the Team, had been submitted for next year.

Exploring Faith groups are continuing to meet via Zoom or Skype. But the transient nature of the diocese provides some problems for continuity in groups when members move away at short notice. That has happened recently in Jebel Ali, but a new group is being formed there with Dr Paul Burt as facilitator.

There was concern that attendance at group meetings was not always being given the necessary priority. Therefore, an attendance record is to be introduced and sent to the office. Facilitators should remind participants that Queens would be informed if the attendance requirement was not met.

It was also agreed that if work responsibilities meant that students were travelling or had other urgent necessity, attendance via a digital platform would count. However, this should be the exception rather than the norm.

But work submitted continued to reach a high standard and there was evidence within it of formation and increasing maturity.

An Exploring Faith Management Group meeting ("The Liverpool Meeting,"") is one of a number that have had to be rescheduled. 2021 is a triennial year in which there should be a meeting of the validating Theological Educators’ Group.

The dates for the next Summer School at the Near East School of Theology in Beirut have been agreed and are in the NEST diary. In view of the Summer School, it was decided that extended placements, such as those arranged for ordinand students this year, should be postponed till 2022.

The next selection conference (Bishop’s Advisory Panel) has been put back to November but planning is in progress. It was noted that there may be at least one additional candidate for the conference. Incumbents will be notified once it becomes clear that the conference/panel could proceed as scheduled.

Resources are also a problem. With limited deliveries being made across the diocese at present, hard copies of course books could be difficult to access. It was urged that best use be made of electronic copies where available, which could be downloaded to laptops. A mixed approach was what was needed.