



A toolkit for Deaneries

Deaneries - a history

Deaneries (originally, rural deaneries) are designated groups of parishes within an archdeaconry who work in partnership with each other to celebrate and to share the Good News of Jesus Christ with the people entrusted to their care. In the middle of the nineteenth century, a deanery was a creature of statute. Nowadays, a deanery may only be created, altered or dissolved by a pastoral scheme under section 33 of the Mission and Pastoral Measure 2011.

Initially, the focus of a 'deanery' was the rural dean. Their existence is noted as early as the reign of Edward the Confessor to have inspection of the behaviour of clergy and people and to convene rural chapters. The office declined and disappeared with the emergence of archdeacons. The office was restored by the Bishop of Norwich in 1837 to encourage lax clergy and the institution quickly spread.

At the first meeting of Clergy on 16 December 1869 in the Newington Rural Deanery in what is now the Diocese of Southwark, the Rural Dean insisted that "unity and fellowship were needed in this neighbourhood on account of the great amount of ungodliness, and of wide prevalence of Dissent.

The revival by bishops of the office of rural deans in the first half of the nineteenth century, each one responsible for a deanery, quickly led to the establishment of deanery chapters and in due course to rural-deanery conferences with lay representation. With the passage of the Synodical Government Measure, 1969 these conferences gave way to deanery synods co-chaired by the Area/Rural Dean and a Lay Chair, often under model rules published by General Synod. These rules and the framework they provide give a shape to the life of the meetings, regulating membership, ensuring fair handling of business and assumes a remit of activity that takes in "the whole mission of the Church, pastoral, evangelistic, social and evangelistic and ecumenical." (s.5(3)(2)(b) Synodical Government Measure 1969). The scope, therefore, for what may be undertaken in its activity is considerable.

Collaboration between parishes or joint ecumenical endeavor did not begin with deanery synods, but deanery structures do facilitate them. Today, deaneries tend to reflect strong local geographical identification or more recent civic boundaries.