



# 2021 Conference

## 5 Themes Report

At 2021 Diocesan Conference a series of discussion exercises were set with the aim to explore the five themes which will be used to draft our new Diocesan Vision. These themes were set by Bishop Cherry. It was important for this portion of Conference to be interactive and engaging. With this in mind, it was decided to begin each theme with a video on the topic and follow up with a brief poll to open the dialogue. The films were kept short (2-3 minutes) and included a mix of clergy and laity. Poll questions were developed by Archdeacon Ian. Conference Members were then placed in 'break-out' rooms with a set facilitator to lead the discussion. The majority of facilitators were clergy (MALs) and a few diocesan officers assisted. Each facilitator received a resource pack with the questions in advance so that they would be able to take notes and submit feedback on the discussion for each question. Groups were purposely kept small to allow for all members to engage in the discussion (max 8).

This report is a summary of the feedback we received from those groups.

### Discipleship

*Part 1 – In what ways do we, as a church, encourage people to grow as disciples?*

The first question brought a range of answers from groups and raised the multi-faceted concept of discipleship. When reviewing the feedback, I was able to determine there is an external angle which focuses on growing new disciples and the equally important internal angle of nourishing faith and promoting active discipleship within our church communities. I have grouped the given responses by their direction of focus below.

Two groups highlighted that a key element is establishing a definition for 'discipleship' and a request was made for a reflection on this topic so that the diocese can be working to a united goal of embodying Christ. Discussion in one group implied that 'Discipleship' is a verb as it is rooted in both action and emotion; while another group added that deeper discipleship is formed through intentional conversations and a grounding in Christian culture.

**Possible Action:** Establishing what discipleship means to us.

Current inward focuses included:

- Sermons
- Home groups, Bible studies, corporate prayer
- Courses
- Reflection, study of scripture, sacraments
- Inviting people to specific ministry when gifts are presented

Current outward focuses included:

- Supporting charities/foodbanks
- Courses (requires follow up)
- Life Events
- Welcoming people
- Being an example in the community
- Work in schools

General focuses included:

- Giving support and walking alongside people; offering strength to those seeking
- Having a clear point of contact
- Recognise different stages of the faith journey
- Encouragement to be the person God calls you to be – use your unique gifts

*Part 2 – Why are people reluctant sometimes to join in with things such as bible studies/house groups?*

The number one obstacle recorded by the group feedback for people joining small groups is fear. Based on the feedback, most of this fear appears to be rooted in a lack of confidence and uncertainty/anxiety. The second obstacle seems to be context – who are the participants, where is the group held, is it accessible and welcoming. Strong leadership and specific training are raised as solutions to these issues. The final obstacle raised is time and a lack of willingness to join. One of the groups acknowledged this is a more difficult element to tackle as it deals with Christianity being a lifestyle versus a hobby.

*Part 3 – What stops us from making more time for God in our lives? Are there things we can do to change this? (Optional)*

Many groups did not have time to address the third question concerning making more time for God. However, one group raised a lack of creativity as a barrier to finding time that is already there. Their example was on the current trend of 'mindfulness' which is another form of 'spirituality and prayer' – something that has been in practice in our churches for centuries. The difference in language forms a barrier to a possible connection with God and it is suggested that creativity could help to navigate this gap.

## Stewardship

### *Part 1 – How important is giving money?*

It is acknowledged that money is a crucial element to continuing to serve in our mission; however, it was raised that there is a need to be more transparent and honest about the costs of running churches. It was noted by a few groups that priests are hesitant to discuss these details as it can feel like a justification of their stipend from the pulpit. The practice of tithing was raised in several groups with varying views. Some feel that the practice of tithing or giving 10% should be fundamental while others acknowledge this is not possible for some individuals. Other groups raised that an individual's giving is now often spread across multiple charities. A few groups discussed the challenge of being narrow-minded in respect of money and only focusing on the bills without thought to investment in mission. Multiple groups raised the issue that asking for money is very off-putting to new members of the congregation.

The overriding feeling is that giving should flow naturally from discipleship and that these themes are inherently tied. Furthermore, stewardship is more than money. Practical support and time/commitment is of equal, if not more, importance to money.

**Possible Action:** Providing guidance on how to talk about the financial pressures faced by our churches and encourage giving that is rooted in discipleship (monetary and otherwise).

### *Part 2 – Whilst money is important, in what other ways do we 'give' to God?*

The other ways we can give were generally summarised as time, abilities, resources, leadership, and prayer. It was noted by one of the groups that the value of volunteers is sometimes unnoticed, but another group discussed volunteering as a potential means to developing deeper discipleship. When people are asked to take part by volunteering, they are drawn closer into the church community and the Christian culture of serving. It is felt that we should invest in this alternative form of stewardship as part of our church culture. Calling is not always spiritual in nature, and we should look for ways to display faith to God in our whole lives. This theme of holistic faith is repeated within the feedback for many of the discussion questions.

### *Part 3- Do we feel that the gifts and skills of all our church communities are recognised and used wisely?*

Some groups stated that they felt the use of gifts has been restricted by a 'top-down' approach and rigid structures within the church. It is felt this should be part of a wider discussion on vocations and calling. A concern was expressed about the allocation of resources across the diocese and whether further difficult decisions, such as the closure of churches will be necessary. This group was concerned about whether resources are being spread too thin; and the effects of future changes. It was generally agreed that gifts are recognised, but not always use and this can be very dependent on the choices of local leadership. Most groups agreed that there should be more recognition of the little things and one of the groups suggested a cultural shift may be needed.

## Equality and Diversity

### *Part 1- Could we do more to welcome 'everyone' into the church? Examples?*

Responses to this question were varied with regard to suggested actions, but the unanimous answer to the prompt was 'YES' we can do more. It is felt that the homophobia, racism, sexism, and other biases (unconscious or otherwise) need to be addressed in order to move forward. In addition to this, it was recognised that it is difficult to provide a space of welcome to both sides; particularly those with strong views. The need to see Christ in others; including those with contrasting views was highlighted. Specific details on the nature of these disagreements were not included in the feedback, but there were some vague references to more liberal versus more conservative views. Based on these references, I can infer that this challenge to be welcoming is felt by both sides. The concept of recognising Christ in others was repeated more in the second part of the discussion. In following the lessons of Christ, the need to walk with the marginalised and identify who they are today was raised. Finally, a couple groups proposed that the church should combat its presentation as an "exclusive club" by addressing internal power struggles, attitudes towards new people, and toxic gossip.

Solutions to these issues included preaching on inclusivity, prayer, one-to-one listening and conversations, inviting those on the margins to work with us towards change, using house groups or other small groups to enable connections, and providing education on topics – including services (what we do and why).

**Possible Action:** A reflection on creating positive dialogue between opposing mindsets and allowing space for connection. An additional reflection on the acknowledgement of faults and addressing our biases.

### *Part 2 – How does or can the realisation that we are all Children of God change our view of ourselves and others?*

It was interesting that the responses to this discussion question could be divided into two categories; those who interpreted the concept as active and those who saw it as passive.

Responses within the former group suggested we should amend our treatment of others to mirror that of God – recognising each other's unique value and delighting in the diversity of humanity and the presence of God in each of us. This response implies that we should review the way we ourselves interact with others and actively appreciate diversity. Within the active change mindset, the conversations of two groups focused on an awareness that our culture has become quite self-centred with a focus on 'my' church, 'my' God', and 'faith'. This can only be addressed if we stop insisting on our own views and actively listen to others.

The latter group of responses placed trust in God to change the hearts of others and to let love grow. It was suggested that the success of God's influence is reflected in the continued learning within the Church.

It was agreed across all the groups that this is a fundamental element of Christian faith and should have a dramatic effect on our theological thinking.

### *Part 3 – Why do you think some people feel marginalised by the church? (Optional)*

Again, most groups did not have enough time to answer the optional third question. Of the groups that did discuss this question, there was some debate as to the causes of marginalisation. Some individuals felt past hurts were responsible, as historically only those who 'fit in' were made welcome – by race, class, type. Other members added that this then shaped an internal "attitude" to those "outside" and fostered the 'us vs them' mentality. Another group raised the language of churches as a barrier through miscommunication and fear of the unknown. One of the groups concluded that the Church wasn't responsible for marginalisation, but rather individuals within it.

## **Caring for Creation**

### *Part 1 – What is the role of the church in affecting climate change?*

All groups agreed it was the unquestionable duty of Christians to care for creation and many related this to the previous discussion about stewardship. There were calls for direct action, particularly from senior leadership to challenge government officials on this issue. However, there was also momentum for grassroots efforts amongst our congregations and to partner with other charities who are already enabling work on the ground. The responses indicate that a double pronged approach is called for to address this responsibility from both the top at a provincial and organisational level and the bottom at an individual and local level. Most groups agreed that the time for 'talking' is over and action is now needed.

It was stressed by a number of groups that this is a key focus of youth, but it was noted by one group that Covid has provided an opportunity for those from all generations to reconnect with nature. Based on the feedback, it can be inferred this is a topic which has clear importance and relevance to many. Suggestions for tackling the issue ranged from education on the issues, to personal changes in habits, and eco-friendly churches. There was a large focus on buildings in many of the groups. Some suggestions were manageable at a diocesan level, such as requests for the inclusion of eco-friendly advice in quinquennial inspections; while others would require provincial support – like funding for converting older buildings to be "greener" and more energy efficient. It was noted that an 'umbrella approach' will not work as some building will never be carbon neutral; but appropriate and achievable goals could help direct change.

**Possible Action:** Creating 'green' guidance for church buildings and making parsonages as sustainable as possible. Connecting with eco-friendly charities and helping to enable their work.

### *Part 2 – The Bible says that the earth belongs to God (Ps 24.1) not to us – how does, or should, this affect our thinking and our actions?*

The feedback expressed that this is an urgent issue. As stewards of the earth, members agreed we must save it for future generations. It was added that we are the body of the Church and are custodians of creation. Two groups raised that there is a need to educate ourselves and work to persuade others to take action.

Following on from the discussion in the previous question, it was suggested that as this is an important issue for young people, it might be best that we learn from them.

A second suggestion is to take note of guidance and advice in the Bible – with particular attention to the agricultural year and seasons in the liturgy. This is already in practice in many rural parishes. This could be an opportunity for urban parishes to learn from them.

**Possible Action:** Have school eco teams come to parishes and educate PCCs or congregations on how to tackle climate change and caring for the planet. This would also strengthen links with schools. Draft toolkit on seasonal liturgy

## Social Justice

### *Part 1 – Why is it important for churches to be involved in social justice issues?*

The overriding answer to this was that this is simply what the Gospel is all about and is fundamental to the teachings of Jesus. One group highlighted that “Jesus died because he challenged toxic hierarchies”. However, it is also noted by other groups that this concept is part of a much larger dynamic which can be overwhelming to clergy and laity alike. One of the groups discussed that although it can be scary to become involved in politics, this is an essential aspect to addressing social justice - particularly if we are to “become a voice for the voiceless”. Another group stated that while the church has treated the symptoms of social injustice with food banks, it is necessary to address the root problem of poverty. There was a shared thread throughout the groups that our faith should make a difference to our actions and this taps into its holistic nature. It was agreed this is a public expression of God’s love for each of us.

**Possible Action:** Guidance on how to tackle the root problem of poverty beyond supporting food banks.

### *Part 2 – Many Christians do a lot of work for social justice through things like charity work, work with foodbanks, helping with reading in schools, helping with children and youth organisations etc. How important is it that we (as a church) show what we’re doing as part of our Christian witness?*

While many agreed charity work is part of their Christian duty, it was expressed that we should talk about our faith wherever possible. The expression of faith helps demark ‘Christian Ministry’ from ‘Humanitarianism’. The importance of prayer to our work was also raised.

One group noted that historically a large portion of social work was done by the Church before the State took over care. Many remedies for social justice have origins in the Church but this is now forgotten/hidden.

Looking forward, it was agreed that churches need to engage with communities to show our interest in them. This work needs to be clearly rooted in faith and not guilt. If we are not able to help directly, churches can still engage by signposting to others or offering support to other charities through fundraising, volunteers, and venue space. It was felt that this engagement should be on a local level as a local church can best respond to local issues.

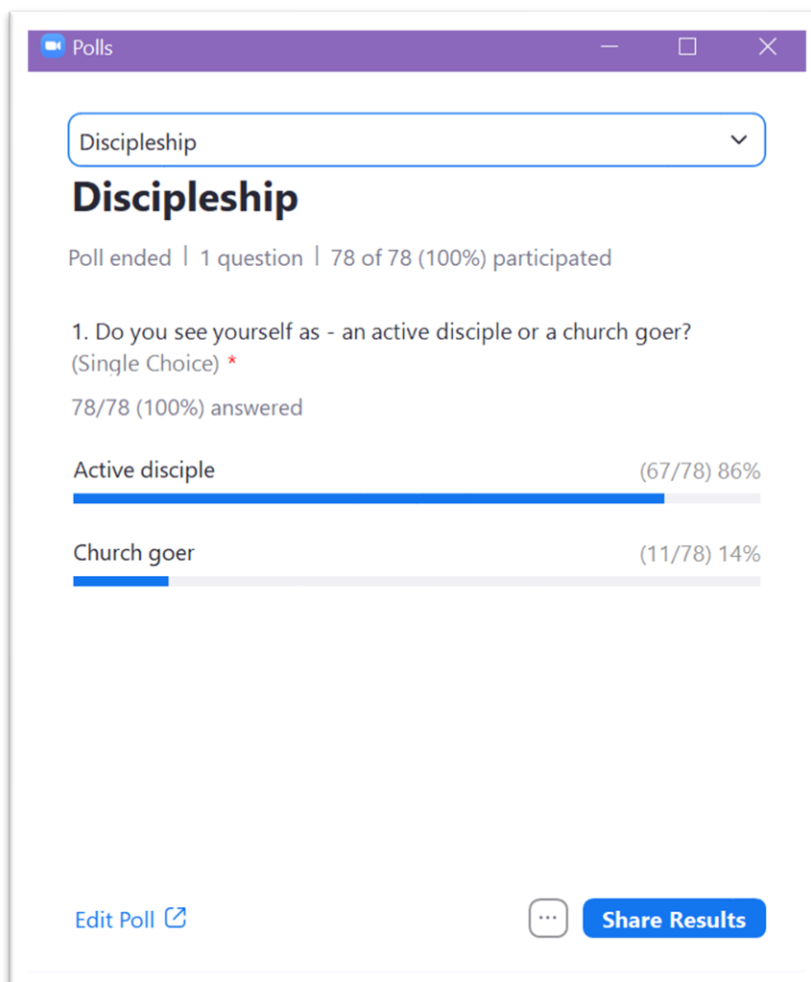
## Poll Responses

There were some concerns that despite our best efforts the poll questions might have had a perceived “correct” answer and as a result, the feedback received may not have been genuine. However, based on the poll responses and the follow-up discussions, this does not appear to have been a real issue.

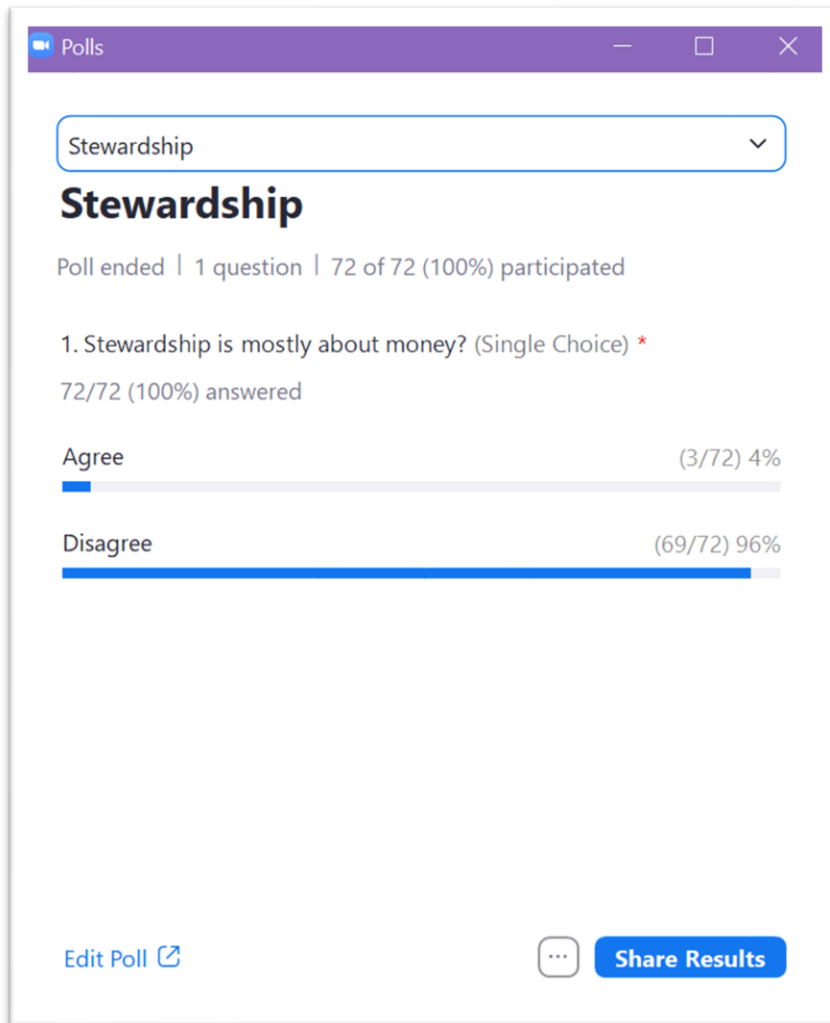
Some of the polls did display united feelings among Conference members, but others indicated clearly contrasting views. Based on this, I believe it is fair to infer that these are honest responses which give a useful snapshot of current feelings.

If these exercises are to be conducted at a local level, I would suggest including these poll questions. I believe the answers would be highly beneficial to gauge where we sit currently as a diocese on these topics and would also highlight any regional differences in feelings.

Please find the results below.



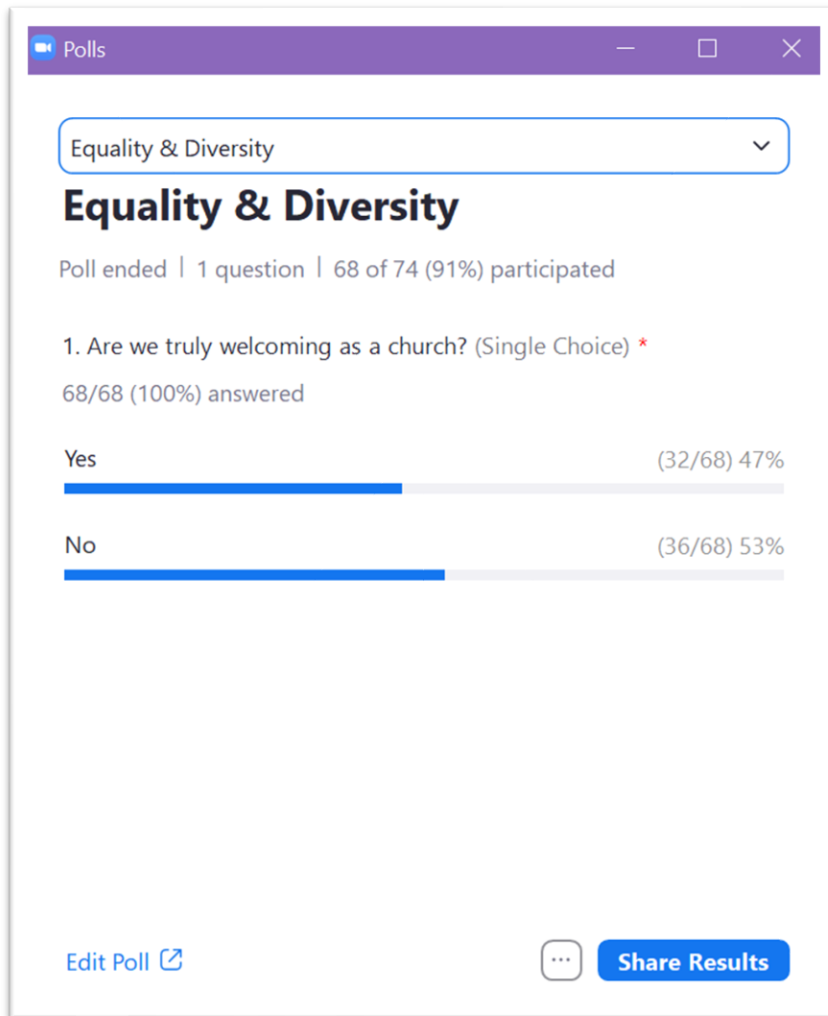
14% of members indicated that they are ‘church goers’. This is an interesting statistic because we would assume that members of Conference are likely to be more active in their churches as they have put themselves forward as representatives. It would be particularly helpful to see the results of a similar poll at the local level.



This poll gave a clear indication that most members agree that stewardship is not all about money. This is consistent with the discussion question feedback; however, those conclusions that money remains a crucial part of stewardship.

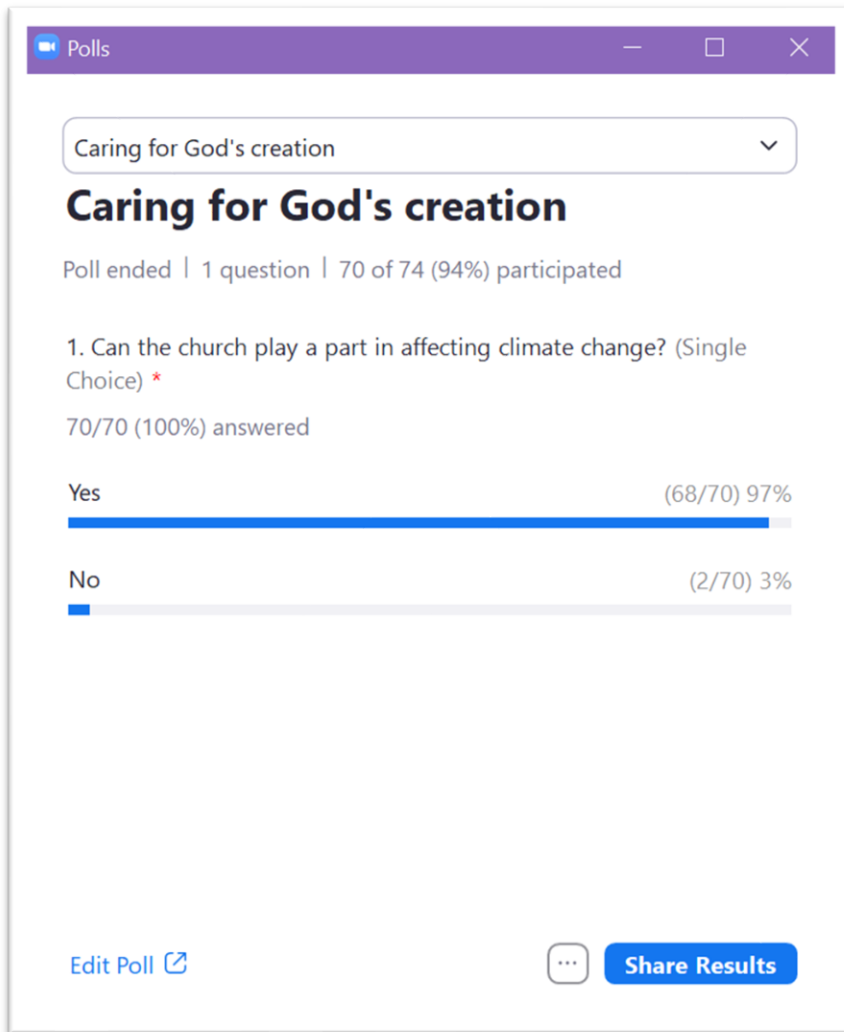
Again, I think this question would be particularly useful to ask at a local level to give an indication of what the average parishioner thinks of when they hear stewardship.





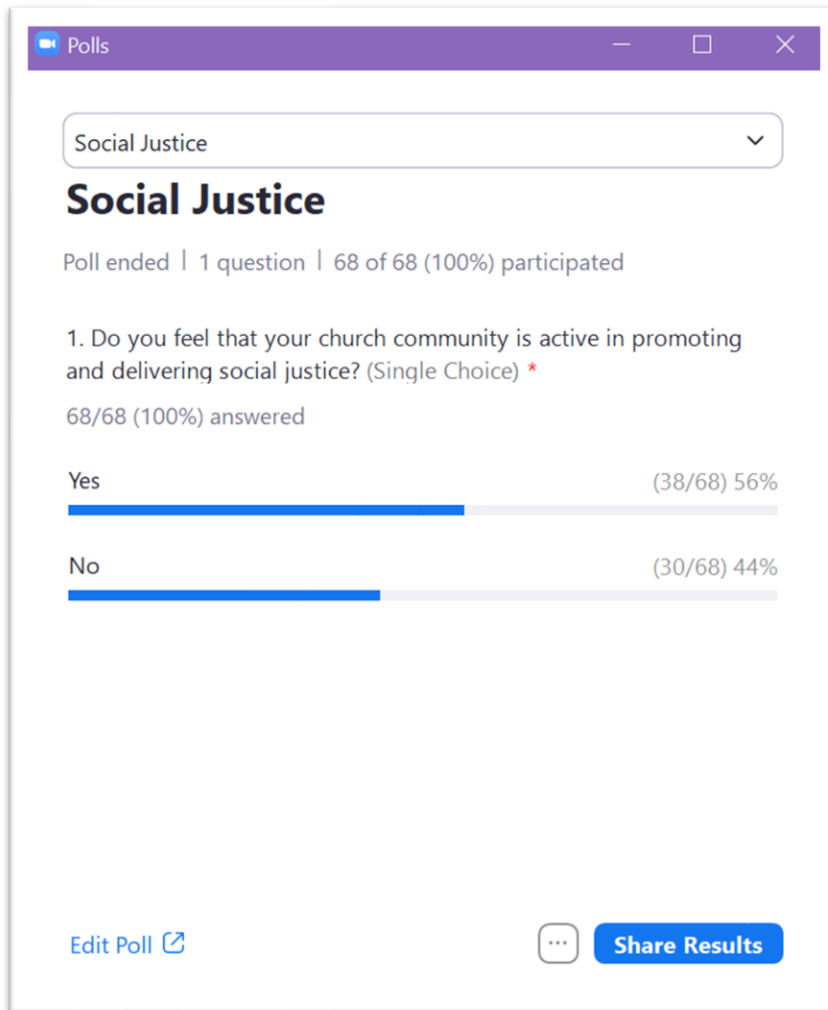
As you can see above, this poll resulted in a near 50-50 split. It can be inferred that there is clearly work to be done on this point; though it is positive that so many feel that their churches are welcoming. It strikes an interesting contrast to the discussion feedback where there was a unanimous response that churches could do more to welcome people.

The feedback to the discussion questions on this topic highlighted some of the ways we fall short and also gave solid suggestions for actions going forward.



This poll gave a clear indication that climate concerns are a critical topic for churches. It was evident from the discussion feedback that there is an urgency to do more as a church and to have a greater impact on the climate crisis.

The feedback responses offered multiple approaches to engaging on this topic. This appears to be a topic on which there is united feeling and direction.



As shown above, this poll resulted in near 50-50 split; with the majority affirming that social justice work is being carried out in their parishes. While it is positive that some churches are already engaged in social justice work, there is also space for growth and development on this topic.

While the discussion responses indicated that social justice is a fundamental and core concept of the Christian faith, it is apparent that not all churches have this focus at present. Not many of the responses offered suggested actions, so this may require further review on how best to address this aspect of our diocesan vision.

## Summary of Key Concepts

- There is a call for diocesan led approaches to these themes. This could be addressed through reflections, training courses, toolkits, or statements of strategy.
- Many of these themes are directly linked and this should be taken into account in our approach – perhaps connecting with the holistic nature of our faith.
- There is a thirst for direct action and movement. A visible response to this exercise would be well received and this connection should be highlighted in communications.
- Many of these themes require an in-depth internal look at our structures and practices. While quick solutions will be impactful, a long-term strategy will need to be formed if we are to enact cultural change.
- The varied responses to these prompts highlight the different priorities and feelings of our congregations. ‘Caring for Creation’ appears to be the least controversial and may lead itself to an easy starting point; followed by ‘Social Justice’.

Compiled by Zoe Ward

18 November 2021