

Claranet connects the dioceses

of Portsmouth, Chichester, Guildford and Winchester



About the Dioceses

The Church of England is divided into 44 dioceses (43 in England and one in Europe). Each of the English dioceses has a structure of boards and councils responsible for different aspects of the Church's work, such as ministry, mission, education and social responsibility.

The Diocese of Portsmouth, for example, is one of the smaller dioceses in the Church of England. It was founded relatively recently, in 1927, and consists of 142 parishes in south-east Hampshire and the Isle of Wight. Like the other dioceses, it is a charity, and as such relies primarily on donations for funding. It plays a key role in supporting the work of the parishes and helping the local community. Staff teams perform a number of important functions, including management of and/or administrative support for human resources, finances, property maintenance, training provision, Church of England schools and community support programmes, as well as coordinating the diocese's engagement with the wider world.

The Challenge

The neighbouring Dioceses of Portsmouth, Chichester, Guildford and Winchester are autonomous, like all dioceses, and traditionally ran and managed their IT systems in a similar way; i.e. independent of other dioceses. Network connectivity within a diocese was ad hoc, primarily served the head office, and did not extend to all smaller offices and the large number of remote workers out in the community. It was primarily ADSL-based and provided by different suppliers.

The situation severely constrained the level to which information could be shared amongst workers, offices and dioceses. It was necessary to laboriously email files and folders back and forth. This made information sharing prone to error and added the headache of version control. Additionally, many remote workers had to resort to insecure and unreliable web mail to share documents.

Regional IT manager, Ian Gapp, saw the opportunity for a centralised network infrastructure that would serve as a solid platform upon which a greatly extended and enhanced IT system could be built.

Gapp already knew people at Claranet and had heard of the company's excellent reputation. His first step was to consult Claranet about the options available for a new network. After also talking to other potential suppliers, some of whom said that the project was too small for them, Gapp chose Claranet for the job.

Gapp says, "As well as connecting the dioceses internally and externally, the solution would need to allow private sharing and secure storage of information. The solution also needed to be scalable, so that it would support growth, including the addition of satellite offices and even other dioceses to the network."

Gapp's vision included the solution providing a solid platform on which major applications - such as new financial and property systems - could be deployed and run. This would allow all four dioceses to share the costs of a single licence for each programme. Having only two central applications to manage, instead of a pair at each of the central offices of the four dioceses, would also simplify upgrades and maintenance.



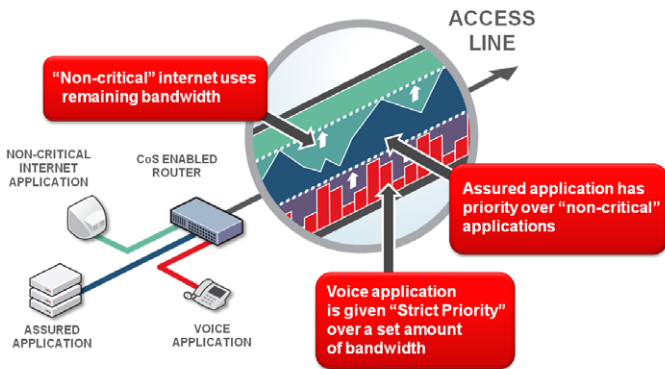
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The Solution

The connectivity solution consists of an enterprise-standard MPLS network, based on a WAN infrastructure, which intersects with a local server site, where the dioceses' infrastructure is hosted. Connectivity between the nexus of offices is managed by Claranet, which deployed the leased line network and a new server farm.

Initially, the head offices of the four neighbouring dioceses were connected to the MPLS network, as they would benefit most from improved connectivity. Following the success of this project, the network was rolled out to five other sites, almost all of which are Bishops' offices with three or more staff. This initial implementation took four months from order to go-live and the project was completed on time and within budget.



The Result

With Claranet's solution and service in place, communication is now seamless, secure and private. There are no bandwidth issues, and connectivity is reliable across all diocese head offices and other offices connected to the network. The quality of service at the smaller sites is much improved thanks to direct access to the network and centralised files and folders.

"The most important benefits to us are the ability to share resources and information across the dioceses and improve collaboration," says Gapp. "Straight away the solution has introduced a level of functionality and a range of services that the dioceses could not afford nor manage on their own. The solution also allows for hugely improved cooperative working and collaboration across teams in all dioceses. This level of collaboration and efficiency was impossible before Claranet's solution was deployed."

"I see the benefits of Claranet's managed service every day," says Gapp. "Rather than employing and constantly training IT staff, I have access to the wide range of skills of the experts at Claranet. In an organisation of our size, this benefit is invaluable. The managed service also brings peace of mind, as I don't need to worry so much about technical issues and the added cost of hiring an expert."

Remote workers out in the community and in the parishes, now have secure and reliable access to the network direct from their thin client laptops. Their work/life balance has improved as they can now reliably and flexibly work from home or any other location. Staff in general are also delighted with the new set up: "...the need to email documents between offices and back again has been eliminated, things that were arduous, such as data entry and file sharing, are now much simpler and easier and less prone to error."

The Future

The network and hosting infrastructure is future-proof and will eventually grow to serve most of the dioceses' offices. Illustrating the scalability of the solution, the tenth site is about to go live. For smaller offices and individuals, a remote system is provided. Each diocese will connect offices and remote sites up as needs and budgets dictate.

The MPLS forms the backbone of business continuity at the dioceses. Gapp is turning one of the other dioceses into a back-up site, which is only possible with the new connectivity solution. With an MPLS network, in the event of a disaster affecting connectivity at one server farm, another site can be up and running, with all servers live, almost instantly. Servers are already installed at the alternative site and the network is connected.

Gapp concludes, saying: "This solution was a significant investment for us, but the benefits make it worthwhile. Right now we are spending as much as we did before on IT, but are far better off, just in terms of levels of service and functionality, not to mention productivity and efficiency. In the long term, we will no doubt see return on investment and, eventually, major savings."

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www.clara.net