

## **2014 15<sup>th</sup> November Diocesan Synod: Renewing Hope – Bishop’s plans for Deanery Visits Epiphany – Easter.**

### **Introduction – The story so far**

In my first year I visited every Deanery. I needed to get to know you: you needed to get to know me.

### **Let Us Talk**

This was followed by ‘Let Us Talk’, a conversation about the personality and character of the Diocese and the local church. For those that took part, about 60% of the Diocese, it proved to be a rich experience. A few things stood out.

Most churches want to be open, outward facing and serve the community.

The more positive and confident feel connected to others rather than isolated and on their own. These relationships are varied and can be within a Benefice or Deanery, through Ecumenical links, or Networks and Movements, such as New Wine or Energised Lay Ministry.

Churches which are well led have a sense of purpose – “mission”!

We are elderly Church, especially on Sundays. This is a considerable strength of the Church of England in the Diocese.

We have a lot of contact with children and young people through our Schools and through weekday initiatives such as Messy Church. The C of E is the largest provider of youth services in the region.

We also found some strains and anxieties, particularly about keeping the present structures going and handing on the Christian faith to the next generation. There are some parishes where it is difficult to find people to be office holders – such as Churchwarden, PCC Secretary and Treasurer and there are difficulties recruiting School Governors. Where this is a problem it is deeply felt.

It is also the case that there are also 848 Churchwardens and 1266 school governors, 991 Lay Pastoral Assistants, 203 Licenced Lay Ministers, 35 Lay worship leaders, 391 Retired Clergy with PtO, 198 Stipendiary clergy and 107 Self-supporting clergy. This is an astonishing wealth of resources representing deep commitments by people and God’s prodigal generosity of spirit to the Church of England.

## **Renewing Hope**

One of the things we wanted from these conversations was for people to think about the life of the local church without the weight of having yet more things imposed by the Diocese. We want to be helpful, not to impose.

The Bishop's Staff decided that our job is to create a culture in the Diocese which is about Renewing Hope. We committed to our own priorities to pray, grow (self and others) and serve in the manner of Jesus Christ.

That caught the imagination of the Bishop's Council who can see that as we can't do everything this Renewing Hope though Prayer, Grow and Serve is a good way of establishing our priorities.

## **Pray**

As Bishop's Staff and Bishop's Council we begin every meeting with a Bible reading and prayer. Nothing very new about that for Christians at a church meeting but it is foundational. We then spend a few minutes telling stories about what has renewed our hope since we last met.

It does seem to changing the culture from one in which our focus was on difficulties and failure to one in which we recognise that God is transforming lives and communities.

## **Q1: in 2's and 3's: What has renewed our hope since we last met?**

So, there is a positive and remarkable story to tell about the Diocese of Salisbury. We are resilient and by and large in good heart.

Nothing will happen unless we root our lives in prayer and the spiritual is at the heart of what we are about as a church. Of course we all know this, but we need to rediscover it time and again.

## **Grow**

The purpose of the Christian life is to help us grow into the people God wants us to be. Christ came that we might have life, life abundant. This is not a gift just to individuals. We are bound together. This gift of life is for the community of the Church and for all the world. If we ourselves do not become bigger people it is hard to know why anyone else should think we are worth joining.

The C of E has been thinking about how we get an accurate account of the state we are in and base our actions on evidence rather than our hunches.

Key statistics from my point of view include:

60% of the UK identify themselves as Christian, very slightly higher in our Diocese.

85% have visited a church at least once in the last year.

We have a lot of contact with people who are not regular church-goers through baptisms, weddings and funerals. E.g. > 5 million will have been to a church wedding in the last year.

That suggests a rather different picture of Church to the average Sunday attendance of about 1 million and average weekly attendance of about 1.3 million.

This week the C of E has published its national annual statistics. There is always a bit of a health warning that they are only as good as your returns.

The headline is that our regular Sunday congregations continue to decline. Only Ely, London, Guildford, Leicester, Manchester and Newcastle have grown their active core membership 2009-11. Coventry and Ripon and Leeds have remained steady. The rest of us have declined.

The picture is much more complicated than that and in this diocese much more encouraging.

We count our activities and membership in a variety of ways: those who are Baptised, Electoral Roll, Christmas attendance, Church schools, other church based or church-led activities.... In this Diocese Fair Share numbers provide a consistent count and now give a view over a number of years.

There is a very high commitment to Fair Share. The collection rate is c.98.5%. Our shared finances are a symbol that we belong together in the body of Christ.

At any one time there will be a few who are in trouble. This is more likely to be a ministry and mission issue than a financial one but sometimes the finances are a way of highlighting the underlying issues and helping a church address them.

What we can't really avoid is that since we started counting in this way at the turn of the millennium the number in our Fair Share count has gone down at c. 1% p.a.

This is not a constant across the Diocese. 45% have declined (215 parishes) but 34% are growing (164 parishes) and 21% (99 parishes) are maintaining their numbers.

Growth and decline is not entirely in our control – “Paul planted, Appollos watered but God gives the growth.” (1 Cor 3.6)

We know context matters, both the big cultural context – 1% decline in regular membership is pretty much average for the C of E) – and the local context.

In a Diocese in which 50% of the population lives in 8% of the parishes it is important to recognise that a small church is not necessarily a failed big church.

If your parish has lots of new housing and church isn't growing there's a disconnect that needs attention.

It would make a big difference to us as the Church of England in this Diocese if we could move from 1% decline to 1/2/3% growth. Growth in numbers is not a financial issue but it would change the feeling about Fair Share from being a heavy load that we continue to struggle with because we believe in the Church and our life in Christ together, to being a load that becomes a bit easier to bear because more there are more people involved.

There are mixed motives here but sometimes we see the need to do things differently out of self-interest or for economic need.

## **Q2: How are you going to grow?**

### **Serve**

The Christian life is lived in response a call to love God and love our neighbour as ourself in the manner of Jesus Christ. This involves foot washing; serving our neighbours. Eg's from Pramacare to South Sudan

There are some core Diocesan commitments to support, sustain and nurture this life of service.

The most basic and obvious is that as a Diocese we are committed to there being a thriving Christian presence in every community through the system of parishes, the inherited model of life in the C of E. In places this is under strain but it continues to serve pretty well in this part of England.

Of course, parishes are very different. 50% of the population of this Diocese live in 8% of our parishes. 50% of the population live in 92% of the parishes. There are

differences in the pattern of urban and rural but Pray, Grow, Serve would not be a bad common core because the C of E exists not for its active core members but for the whole community.

Service is at the heart of ministry and mission. Churches need to be entrepreneurial in the way we serve – eg M4M and Energising Local Ministry

We also need to develop some non-parochial experiments. Eg Poole Missional Community

But if are committed to the parochial model of church life, given the age profile of our lay and ordained ministers we need to grow the number of new vocations significantly. We need to make this need known. There is a simple question to put to every member of the Church if we are to sustain and develop the pattern of church life:

### **Q3: What is your vocation?**

#### **Deanery Meetings**

So, there are things for us to face as a Diocese but we will need to work this out in the context of the local church, our Deaneries, benefices and parishes.. Therefore I am going to visit every Deanery between Epiphany and Easter.

These will be 90 minute meetings in each Deanery but not of Deanery Synod.

I want to meet with the local leaders of churches and church schools but it is in an open meeting so no-one is excluded.

We are looking for 'cafe style'. i.e. with people sitting in groups, preferably at tables.

The agenda will be about Renewing Hope with its focus on Pray, Grow, Serve.

I want to ask each Deanery to address some challenging questions about how we can better love God, grow as Christians and serve God's world. I particularly want to ask about how we are going to grow vocations to lay and ordained ministry.

We are still planning the meetings but I very much hope the Diocesan Synod will endorse the process of Renewing Hope with its priorities of Pray, Grow, and Serve. Please encourage your own church and Deanery to take part.