

Who We Are – Bishop’s speaking notes Diocesan Synod Nov 2018

When I visited Deaneries in 2015 to discuss ‘Renewing Hope – Pray Serve Grow’ it was clear that no-one wanted to manage decline.

I asked three questions: “What do you pray for?”, “Whom do you serve?”, “How will you grow?” These are simple and powerful questions.

Renewing Hope has really caught on – there are many stories about how it has helped people focus on the positive, plan and renew hope in practice at local level.

It is clear that there is a lot of very good work going on.

And a few really good things stand out about God’s small miracle that is the Diocese of Salisbury.

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

Our church attendance as a proportion of the population is 3rd highest in Church of England. Our church buildings are better cared for than ever and we are relatively financially healthy;

Our churches are mostly well rooted in and supported by local communities. People feel more positive and confident when they are 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 Local Ministry. Churches which are well led have a sense of purpose – “mission”!

While traditional patterns of church can and are growing.

1 in 3 parishes is trying something different,

We have nearly 100 new worshipping communities..

All sorts of churches are being imaginative and creative in the way they live the Christian life.

We are elderly Church, especially on Sundays.

In some ways this is a considerable strength of the Church of England in this Diocese.

And we do have a lot of contact with families and young people, particularly through our Schools and through weekday initiatives such as Messy Church, youth groups, and so on.

Did you know that the Church of England is the largest provider of youth services in the region? The reality and the potential is amazing.

Lots is going well, but there are also some strains and anxieties, particularly about keeping the present structures open and handing on the Christian faith to the next generation. Actually this must have been true in every generation. From the earliest days the Church has always been one generation from extinction. Always Christians have been concerned to pass the faith on to the next generation.

And these can be broken down into buildings, people and finance.

Firstly, Buildings:

– do they get in the way of mission or are they our greatest asset?
It's a bit of both actually, but they are a big responsibility.

If we were a business, we would close our worst performing branches. But we're not a business and we are committed to a thriving Christian presence in every community.

The Church of England exists most clearly and strongly in its local form.
The parishes are what matter most.

Most of our buildings are beautifully cared for. As a diocese, we would only seek to close them if the local community said that the building is beyond them and no longer needed. That does not often happen.

Often the wider community helps look after the buildings because the church prays, serves, grows and renews hope for the local community.

Secondly People:

Some churches of all types are growing numerically. Yet overall across the diocese the picture is slow, steady, decline, as across the C of E.

More specifically there are some parishes where it is difficult to maintain the current structures and find people to be office holders. So in a number of places we are looking at modifying structures.

Then there is of course Finance:

There is a wonderful commitment in this diocese to our shared finance which is reflected in a fairer share collection rate of 98%.

By much faith and hard work you do brilliantly.

Even so, some find it increasingly difficult to meet the costs.

Where there are problems - they are deeply felt.

In the end money is a faith issue: people give sacrificially to the Church because they believe it matters.

It's also a mission issue: the more people who are committed the more the financial load is spread.

Who knows if this decline can be reversed? In a way it is God's business; but we want to turn this slight decline to growth

Because even slight growth would make a world of difference, renewing hope for us as a Church and for the people we serve.

All renewal begins with prayer. The Christian life is a call to loving service. It is the way of life by which we grow as people, churches and communities.

Worship and prayer are at the heart of what we do and who we are.

If God is, then God is everywhere.

Now I am the luckiest Bishop in the Church of England to be the Bishop of both the Marlborough Downs and the Dorset coast and all the places in between. It is not only the most beautiful part of the country. There is an ancient Christian heritage, from what is probably the earliest image of Christ anywhere in the world (from the floor of a Roman villa in Hinton St Mary) to great figures who are part of the DNA of the diocese, like Aldhelm, Cuthberga, Edith, Osmund... and Richard Hooker whom the Church of England remembers today.

Our church buildings are 'thin places' where heaven and earth seem almost to touch, places hallowed by prayer. It is easier to pray where others have prayed/ are praying.

We know this from our own experience of the ways in which church – place and people - supports us.

One of my former Churchwardens was attracted to church because "the prayers seemed so real".

You know it when you meet it.

So do those who come for baptism, weddings, funerals and all the other community events we host.

Something like 5 million people attended a wedding in the Church of England each year – that is an extraordinary opportunity. If we make their conversion the aim of the wedding we will miss the mark.

If we do the wedding well so that what happens is good, true, deep then we will help people know that they matter to God and that church matters to them.

You see we have to do the core business of prayer and worship well.

What we want above all else is deep church that is real with people about God.

There can be no renewal without prayer.

Jesus said we should pray for what we want. He said, "Ask and you shall receive."

To support this renewal of prayer I have given a renewing hope candleholder to each parish and each school as a way of bringing Christ presence into all we do.

We have also had great success with our two Praying Together Lent Booklets with 25,000 to 35,000 issued each year – more to follow next year.

Service is about caring for people, building them up, making them more fully human.

Ephesians tells us...

"The gifts he gave were that some would be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until all of us come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ."

There are a myriad ways of doing this.

Of course people say "the resources are scarce and we don't have the people".

That is nonsense! God has been amazingly generous with people in this Diocese .Just look at this list.....

746 Churchwardens
946 school governors 201 Licensed Lay Ministers
214 Lay worship leaders
413 Retired Clergy with Permission to Officiate 205 Stipendiary clergy
93 Self-supporting clergy
756 Lay Pastoral Assistants

We people are an astonishing wealth of resource.

And this is in addition to all the other volunteers and helpers who are not authorized or ordained, but just get on and do things for others.

I am constantly delighted by people who are Opening the Book with children in schools, by the pilot projects Energising Local Ministry, Ministry 4 Mission etc etc.

These are deep commitments by people and God's prodigal generosity of spirit to the Church of England.

But, the age profile of lay and ordained ministers is such that we need to increase the rate of replacement.

To maintain our current pattern of ministry, instead of the 120 priests we would expect to train between 2017 and 2027, we will need to train 180.

In 2016 Synod agreed to three priorities:

Our aim is to grow in depth, confidence and the impact of our discipleship.

Bishop's Council agreed to provide assistance and resources for to help people and parishes develop their discipleship including through exploring different types of prayer.

Deepening discipleship for all people isn't just a core part of our faith, but key to identifying more vocations. Vocation flows out of discipleship as people respond naturally to God's grace. Later today Bishop Karen and I will confirm 40 people in the cathedral.

Discipleship starts a 'virtuous circle': growing disciples, leads to more vocations, leading to more disciples.

Identifying a significantly increased number of vocations to lay and ordained ministry is key to reversing decline.

We also need more lay ministry vocations, as Licensed Lay Ministers also have an ageing profile. Clergy are key in finding new lay ministers and developing all lay people's ministries. We have seen some success already. This year we have 12 new people training for ordination compared to the average 8 of the last few years.

The growth in the number of lay worship leaders in the last three years has been amazing. We had 35 in 2015 and now we have 214!

The Diocese's financial position is healthy, but training additional clergy and lay ministers will cost money.

Our Diocesan share per worshipper is currently 27th lowest in the C of E and it is likely to remain among the lowest.

This means the Diocesan Board of Finance won't be able to maintain budgetary increases at the rate of inflation.

But we will hear more about that later.

The good news is that the National Church is also committed to significantly increasing the number of vocations and is deciding what level of additional investment is needed.

We hope that they will provide financial support to dioceses towards these additional costs. Unfortunately, until more details are available from the National Church, we cannot absolutely finalise our own plans.

But we will continue to communicate our thinking and come back to you before our plans are finalised.

If our primary focus is on prayer and serving others we will enjoy this Christian life and we will grow.

Christ came that we might have life, life abundant.

This is not a gift just to individuals.

This gift of life is for the community of the Church and for all the world.

If we ourselves do not become bigger people because of Church it is hard to know why anyone else should think we are worth joining.

We are a diverse Diocese in more ways than one, as this map of the Diocese shows:

50% of the population live in 8% of the parishes.

There is a big difference between urban: rural.

The size of parishes ranges from 10 to nearly 23,000.

In these very different contexts a small church is not necessarily a failed big church.

More good news....

There is growth in all types of church – small and large, urban, suburban, small town and rural; broad church, catholic and evangelical; traditional and contemporary styles of worship.

You can measure church effectiveness in any number of ways.

In this Diocese the Fairer Share count has been a stable measure for many years in that we started counting the committed membership in relation to financial giving in 2004.

However it is not the only way to measure church effectiveness.

Others might be worshipping community, average weekly attendance, the ways in which churches support their local community or school, the number who attend discipleship courses, the number who come to what are still communal events such as Harvest, Remembrance, Advent/Christmas.... As well as the imaginative use of events like All Souls Day when many parishes invite the families of those who died in the last year; or Valentine's Day when it is possible to gather those who want to give thanks for or renew their marriage and so on.

Yet we can't get away from a sense of overall decline number we use we are still declining.

At parish or church level, however, it's a more complex picture. In the last five years, measuring by all age worshipping community count.

It is true that nearly half of all our parishes have declined

But over a third have grown

The rest remain constant.

And it is not as simple as the growing parishes are good and the declining ones are not.

The numerically 'successful' parishes will have as many questions to answer as the ones that look 'less successful'

And it's worth remembering that at the cross all the disciples ran away.

There are places where because of the context, a parish, priest and people, are working hard and effectively just to stand still numerically.

But we are committed to a thriving Christian presence in every community.

And no one blue-print can be imposed to work everywhere.

In any case none of us can do everything and all of us have to make choices. That is particularly true in small parishes.

There are benefits in working together.

Growth and decline is not entirely in our control – as St Paul remarked...

“Paul planted, Apollos watered but God gives the growth.”

Our responsibility is to take care for proper sowing and nurturing. We can gather the harvest but it is God who gives the growth.

It often feels as though we live in a very secular country and for more than the lifetime of any of us in this room, we have lived with overall decline.

And yet,

*60% of the UK identify themselves as Christian, 63% in our Diocese.

*People still attend the Church of England in large numbers at Christmas, for baptisms, weddings and funerals and community events.

*An astonishing number of people in England visited a church at least once in the last year, perhaps nearly 80% of the population.

*60,000 new houses are planned to be built in the Diocese in the next 10years.

In this context we ought to be able to move from overall decline to growth.

Growth in numbers would change the feeling about Fairer Share from being a heavy load that we continue to struggle with because we believe in the Church and our life in Christ together.

At root this is not about money but about evangelism, ministry and mission. People don't join a church to save an institution, to save the Church of England.

But the financial load becomes a bit easier to bear because 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.

We are now three years into was presented as a 10 year plan, not so much a strategy as a vision statement or, perhaps better, a framework for people to use locally.

Whilst there have been challenges in places we have had some successes.

- Numbers of people exploring vocations both lay and ordained are up
- The Rural Hope project has been launched and funded by the National Church until 2022
- Confirmations are up
- New mission hubs have been established
- Mission policy for new Housing areas has been adopted
- And the DBE is successfully supporting Children and Young People

And today I am able to announce that we are the first of 42 dioceses to become an Eco-Diocese. 70 parishes have registered for the scheme, 25 have got bronze awards, 5 silver and Hillfield Friary was the first in the country to receive gold. The care of God's creation is a core part of our ministry and mission.

The recent IPCC report on climate change and the WWF report on the destruction of biodiversity means the care of God's earth is urgent. I hope that becoming an Eco Diocese will encourage us to do more and better and that other dioceses will also receive this award very soon.

It is Renewing Hope: pray, serve, grow.

There is no blue-print, but there are some challenging questions that will need to be answered by us together as a Diocese and in the local context.

So for the next 5 minutes I want you to talk to each other about what struck you and how your parishes are answering the 3 questions:

What do you pray for?

Whom do you serve?

How will you grow?

Over to you....