

## **March 2015 Meeting of Diocesan Synod Presidential Address**

### **Introduction**

Dear members of Synod, people often say that 'Church-time' moves at a slower pace than in other spheres of life. There may be some truth in this. When your business is eternal realities and you belong to a body that traces his earthly origins to the call of Abraham about 4000 years ago you are bound to have a longer perspective on things. Nevertheless, at this point in ecclesiastical history it feels to me as if time is moving rather fast. Whether one thinks of the bright news of the consecration of the first woman bishop in the Church of England, a process in which we have played our own part as a Synod, or the gloom of violent chaos in the Iraq and Syria where ancient Christian communities are being driven from their land and buildings, the map of Christian identity seems to be changing with terrifying rapidity.

Within this picture are other changes and challenges that the Church in the west is facing as the culture shifts around us and we find ourselves in an increasingly missionary age. In several addresses to Diocesan Synod I have sought to outline some of these challenges and describe some of the changes we are making or need to make if we are to respond to our calling to be the body of Christ, the Messiah, in this place, participants in his messianic mission to proclaim the kingdom of God in our time. In my June and November 2014 addresses I tried to set our own strategic missionary development in the context of thinking and planning that is happening on a national level. That national activity is moving apace. It was warmly received at the February General Synod and its direction of travel largely adopted. Very briefly, these national initiatives seek to:

- develop and invest in ministerial education of clergy and lay people in a series of bold initiatives, including a determined recruitment drive;
- simplify the legal framework in which the Church of England operates, making it more agile for its missionary task;
- optimize the role of the National Church Institutions, so that they serve the missionary work of dioceses effectively and efficiently;

- grow a leadership in the Church that adds a greater level of skill to God-given gifts;
- and target the historic financial assets of the Church to the support of strategically determined missionary activity in dioceses.

If I had to summarise the principles behind these changes in national practices it would be in terms first of *recognition of urgency* (the task of making Christ known to the nation and rebuilding his Church cannot be delayed), second, *supporting the local* (it is not for the National Church to dictate but rather to support the apostolic work of the Church led by Bishops in Synod) and third, *investing in the future* (money in the bank in the future will be of no use to the Lord if there no Church left to do his work.)

I have said before that these principles mirror the sort of ways that we have been trying to reshape and retool in the Diocese of Coventry. In my own prayer and thinking I return frequently to the Charge that was given to me by the Archbishop of Canterbury when I became Bishop of Coventry. It is a mandate that derived from the Diocese's statement of needs during the appointment process and I have come to all it my Apostolic Charge. To remind you, its first and overriding call is to 'release the missionary energies of the Diocese of Coventry by building the capacity of the Church, and through your own teaching and preaching'.

There is a great deal I like about those words. They recognise that the 'missionary energies' are inherent to the Church, they belong to the Church as the Church. What else could be the case of the body of Christ, the Messiah, the one sent by the Father who, by the Spirit, sends us? At the same time, the Charge acknowledges that the Church's capacity needs to be built up. Human bodies need their capacity to be built up for all sorts of reasons. It might be because they are young and immature. It might be because they have been ill or injured. It might be because they are facing a new challenge like running a marathon or climbing a mountain and need a greater level of capacity if they are to have the energy and strength to achieve what is set before them.

The same is true for the body of Christ, and always has been. The disciples needed time with the Lord to listen and observe. They needed the experience of being sent out and then reporting back on

what had worked well and what had seemed to fail. The embryonic Church after the day of Pentecost needed to be built up by the apostles' teaching, the breaking of bread, fellowship and prayers. The Church of the early centuries defined its marks as unity, holiness, catholicity and apostolicity and developed ways of sustaining each of them so that the Church could be the naturally expanding organism that it was created to be. In the Reformation, the faithful preaching of the word and the right celebration of the sacraments were identified as the fundamental ways in which the life the Church is built up.

The life of the Church today is built upon that foundation of the apostles and prophets (with help from the Reformers). Within that framework it is necessary for the Church of every age to discern other layers of that which I have called in the past *virtuous ecclesial practices* that will help the Church to be formed in its (to use the words of the Common Worship *Ordinal*) 'health' and 'well-being'. It is for that purpose – the forming of the Church in health and well-being – that I have found the Eight Essential Qualities of Church Life very helpful. They identify certain practices which, when enacted in a particular attitudinal manner, form healthy – and *therefore* growing – Christian communities. They are leadership that is *empowering*, ministry that is *gift-based* (rather gap-filling), spirituality that is *passionate* (alive and authentic), structures that are *functional* (fit for purpose and effective), worship that is *inspiring*, small groups that are *holistic* in their activity (cells of Church life), evangelism that is *oriented to real human needs* and relationships that are loving (Christ-like).

These essential qualities of healthy (and, therefore, growing Church life) have been identified by some serious research. The Natural Church Development organisation has been honest about this method and has not tried to pretend that they first emerged from biblical study. At the same time, the eight essential qualities, individually and severally, can most certainly be found in the shaping of Israel and the Church in scripture. They can also be seen in different periods of the Church's life, especially in periods of spiritual renewal and heightened missionary activity. It is interesting to see how they map quite closely onto the eight factors in growing churches that have been identified in the Church of England research projects of *Anecdote to Evidence* and *From Evidence to Action*.

It is our responsibility as Bishop in Synod to keep the Eight Essential Qualities under scrutiny and to ensure that we are developing proper ways of measuring their impact on the Church. We need to keep refining our understanding of them, indigenising and improving our application of them and to continue to ensure they remain our servant not our master. At the same time, we would be wise to allow them time to have a long-term effect on the life and growth of the Church. We have been very clear that there are no-quick fixes, no silver bullets or simple levers that will overnight rebuild the church in Christ's image and reform the nation for Christ. The work of forming the Church, as any pastor knows, is a long-term business, especially when the Church has faced decades of erosion and weakening.

The strategy of building the capacities of the Church through encouraging every level of the Diocese to engage with the Eight Essential Qualities is now embedded in all sorts of ways: appointment processes, plans for the future work of the Diocesan Training Partnership, on-going analysis of the life of a parish and the setting of parish priorities and so on. As the progress of our Acceler8 bid has shown, we are considered to be a diocese with one the clearest strategic approaches in the Church of England. Strategic clarity will become an increasingly important criterion for the drawing down of national church funding and it is important that we are seen to be united and resolute in our leadership.

I have not said a great deal about the Acceler8 bid itself but I hope that my analysis of the Eight Essential Qualities and my references to the urgent need to invest in the Church's future will be sufficient to show not only my full support for the bid but also my view that it is thoroughly consistent not only with our own strategy but with the strategic development of the whole of the Church of England in these days when 'Church-time' necessarily needs to move into a faster pace. If I may be permitted one little postscript, though, it is that on my travels around the diocese I see very, very low numbers of people in their 20's and 30's and, consequently, fewer and fewer children. That is a clear and present danger to the work of the kingdom of God in our land.

Christopher Cocksworth, Bishop of Coventry, 21<sup>st</sup> March, 2015