

PRINCIPLES FOR MISSION UNITS

1. The Background

This paper sets out opportunities for some significant experimentation with the organisation of the Church at a local level. The background is well known. During the last century we have seen a steady decline in churchgoing in the West. That decline was especially steep in Cumbria during the 1990's. Recent research suggests that during these ten years, we lost almost a quarter of adult church members and about 60% of our children and young people. These are very serious statistics and they go hand-in-hand with an inexorable drop in the number of clergy working in Carlisle Diocese.

Allied in part to falling numbers is our current financial situation. The transfer of responsibility for the bulk of clergy stipends and pensions from the Church Commissioners to Dioceses has been a massive challenge, here as elsewhere. Our response has been heartening but remains inadequate. Roughly 7% of Parish Share remains unpaid each year and our level of per capita giving is the lowest in the country relative to personal income.

2. The Way Ahead

However, all is not lost - by a long way - and there are many signs of hope. Some of our churches are growing; there are plenty of examples of 'good practice'; the 'Healthy Churches' exercise has been completed across the Diocese; and a strategy for the future is being developed. God is clearly at work around the county in some excellent people (lay and ordained) and several encouraging situations. Our primary responsibility is to discern what he is doing, and make sure we co-operate.

If that co-operation is to be effective, we need to devote time and effort to doing three things. These are:

- (a) Recognise the reality of what is going on around us. On the one hand, society is changing. For example, mobility levels are much higher than in the past and many people are disinclined to make lasting commitments. 'Networks' have not actually replaced neighbourhoods, but they have changed them, so that many now define their 'communities' in terms of leisure, work and friendships rather than geographical locality. In this changing culture, we want to maintain the important Incarnational principle of 'being a church for everyone in the country', but also know that we can no longer meet all the traditional expectations of the Church of England.

So, on the other hand, we admit that endless 'pastoral reorganisation' is simply a recipe for demoralisation and burnout when it means amalgamating more and more parishes in which fewer and fewer clergy are expected to do exactly the same as their predecessors. Nor is the answer simply to try and do the same things with lay people acting as 'quasi-clerics' in order to plug the gaps. Basically, the model no longer works. Despite the large numbers (around 70%) of people who tell pollsters that they 'believe in God' or even 'are Christians', our society as a whole is now, for the most part, massively indifferent to Christianity. In that context, trying to maintain the old

model at all costs does little more than perpetuate ‘unworkable burdens, irrelevant boundaries and unrealistic expectations’. Hence the need to do a second thing which is:

(b) Experiment with some new structures.

Structures in themselves can never generate growth. But they can enable it, just as wrong structures can impede it. To quote from a new report entitled ‘Mission Shaped Church’, that has been produced by a House of Bishops Working Party, “in a time of profound missiological need, it will be tragedy if legalism and fear of upsetting clergy prevents creative new initiatives”. (p.81)

We have, therefore, identified some possible ‘experimental areas’ in the Diocese. Any or all of these could be crucibles in which we can try out new ways of working and develop different patterns of ministry. Local creativity and initiative will be crucial to their success, rather than a blueprint ‘from above’. But in all these areas, we would expect to do a third thing, which is:

(c) Emphasise mission.

As the House of Bishops’ Report points out, “The existing parochial system alone is no longer able to deliver its underlying mission purpose. We need to recognise that a variety of integrated missionary approaches are required”. In particular, we need to admit that the old ‘come to us’ strategy won’t work any more. We have to ‘go to them’.

So it was heartening to read the response from one PCC in the Diocese to a proposed Deanery Plan:

“If we merely reorganise for old methods of parish ministry, we will simply preside over declining churches as less and less people attend our worship services or require the involvement of the Church’s ministry in their lives. Can we go back to basics and look at how to double the number of disciples in the Deanery in the next ten years rather than looking at how to minister to half the number we currently have because that is the way things are going?”

But what already ‘is’ won’t change without some vision of what ‘could be’. To quote Robert Warren, “The vision of the kingdom, and the values and nature of the new creation and of the life of the Age to come, are not intended to take us out of the world, but rather to energise us for mission in this world”. We are in the process of trying to encapsulate that vision, to express what it means for the Church to be a sign of God’s Kingdom, in a series of ‘Vision Leaflets’. Behind that vision lie a number of ‘mission principles’ which together provide a practical agenda for our experimental areas. They are as follows:

3. The Principles

(a) Growth

We would expect the leaders and church members of any experimental areas to

share a commitment to growth of every kind. Growth is a fundamental kingdom value (cf the parables) and includes growth in numbers. This will involve:

- A clearly articulated local Vision, consistent with the ‘Diocesan Plan’ and Healthy Churches exercise. This should include both long-term aims and shorter-term goals.
- Maximising the use of God-given Gifts. An important part of this will be discerning and developing the gifts and ministries of all lay people, perhaps with the help of a tool called ‘SHAPE’ which the Training Department is currently producing.

In addition, it will mean making sure that all clergy in the unit are able to play to their strengths and (if appropriate) develop specialist ministries. If at all possible, individual clergy will not be identified with particular buildings or villages, but seen (and used) as a resource for the unit as a whole. Their role will include, in particular, the training and resourcing of lay people.

- A strategy for Evangelism and Outreach which seeks the transformation of individuals. This will take account of existing ‘networks’ since ‘fresh expressions of church in the countryside start by reaching networks of mobile people over a larger geographical area than the single parish’. (House of Bishops Report). It will be open to church-planting and new ways of ‘being church’ (including youth congregations) and explore the effective use of existing opportunities (eg Church Schools and Occasional Office contacts). Available resources include the Diocesan Officer for Evangelism (John Reeves) who is available for advice and guidance; and the ‘Telling your Story’ short course which has already been held in one Deanery and should soon be running throughout the Diocese.

(b) Teamwork

One of the primary principles of each Mission Unit is that there will be more than one Ordained Minister; and that the clergy will work and pray together, supporting each other. In some Mission Units, it may be appropriate for the clergy to live in the same place (as, for example, they already do in the Kirkby Lonsdale Team). However, it needs to be clear that the clergy, by themselves, do not constitute ‘the Team’.

We would anticipate each Mission Unit having its own Vision Team, which would consist of clergy and lay members, perhaps eight or so in number. This could be an existing ‘Ministry’ Team or could be appointed from scratch. Each team could be trained to focus on three specific areas of the unit’s mission, namely:

- Purpose: helping to determine and articulate the unit’s vision and ongoing priorities

- People: ensuring that gifts are discerned and properly used for mission in the unit
- Prayer: praying for the church's life and mission

This Team could act as a think-tank for the PCC (or PCC's - not all Chaired by the Vicar). Its role would then be fundamental to effective mission and collaborative working within the 'Unit'.

(c) Nurture

Each unit should have a programme for the teaching and nurture of new and existing members. This may include:

- An Adult Basics Course, run regularly, which includes teaching on Christian stewardship and lifestyle as well as core beliefs.
- Periodic Sermon Courses and continuity of teaching in worship
- The use of Deanery and Diocesan teaching resources (including Foundations Course; Short Courses; Bishops Teaching Days etc)
- Development of spirituality through Quiet Days, Unit Weekends etc

remembering that the Church's task is to help people develop their relationship with God - not keep them happy. (cf Matthew Fox: "Fewer and fewer persons are attracted to Christianity in the 'First World' countries because there is so little practice, so little spirituality in religion").

(d) Worship

The main principle here is that each unit should allow for a variety of different types and styles of worship. These should be shaped primarily by those the Church is seeking to reach: ie. culturally appropriate and not afraid of developing a variety of congregations. This may involve:

- A mixture of traditional (BCP); contemporary (eg Common Worship); all-age; seeker-friendly; reflective; exuberant and youth-orientated Services, perhaps in different places within the unit.
- Experimenting, as necessary, with main Acts of Worship on weekdays rather than Sunday (many people no longer regard Sunday as 'special' or 'church-time').
- Capitalising on one-off events and Special Services.
- Undertaking a review of BUILDINGS in the unit (with Diocesan assistance) and providing a flexible plan for their strategic use within the unit and for the wider community. At present, our ministry is dangerously building-driven. We need to explore the

Minster Model where that is appropriate; and alternative uses of the buildings we have. Within a unit, it may make sense to use one building for Weddings and Funerals; one for family worship; one for BCP Services - and so on. We don't have to do everything in every building (or anything in some!).

(e) Community

Part of the PCC's role will be to identify particular needs in the community and suggest ways of tackling them. Mission Units must be about the transformation of communities as well as the transformation of individuals. This will include:

- Social Action Projects undertaken by church members.
- The involvement of church members in community activities (eg. Local Government; School Governors; Residents' Associations; Neighbourhood Watch Schemes).
- Social gatherings for developing relationships within and beyond the church community.
- Using church buildings for wider community activities (and reordering the buildings, where necessary, for this purpose).

In all this, it is vital to remember that the quality of relationships within the faith community is at the heart of effective mission. There are already powerful examples within the Diocese of this kind of transformational work, and resources available to Mission Units include the Diocesan Officer for Social Responsibility, our Urban Officers and the Council for Agriculture and Rural Life.

(f) Pastoral Care

This could be co-ordinated locally by 'shepherds' who are resident in the village or neighbourhood and suitably accredited (as NSM, Reader or Commissioned Lay Minister). Overall provision of pastoral care in each unit may include:

- Small groups (Cells or Home Groups) for church members which focus on outreach as well as mutual care and support.
- Occasional Offices administered by members of the Unit Staff Team.
- Pastoral Visiting Teams, suitably trained and caring for the wider community as well as church members.
- Pastoral Link Schemes, such as those developed by the Anglican Stewardship Association.

It is important not to lose sight of the integral connection between consistent pastoral care and church growth. There is plenty of evidence that effective pastoral care can be a major factor in bringing individuals to faith.

(g) Unity

We cannot and should not do all this by ourselves as Anglicans. The Church must be the first sign of what it preaches - which includes unity. The recently ratified Anglican-Methodist Covenant offers some encouragement here, and ecumenical activity in each unit may include:

- Shared Mission Projects.
- Sharing resources, especially buildings and sometimes Ministers.
- Exploring the development of appropriate ecumenical partnerships.

Churches Together in Cumbria is currently thinking in these terms and may be able to support exploration of this kind.

4. The Application

There is nothing new in any of these principles. But it is important to stress that there is no departure in any of this from the Christian tradition. Quite the opposite, in fact, since several of the suggestions (eg. Minster Model Churches and Area Staff 'Teams') simply take us back to our Celtic missionary roots. What they do challenge is the view that we should continue to do things as we ourselves have always done them.

These seven principles apply equally in rural and urban areas. However, their specific application will vary considerably according to the context. That is why 'local' vision and initiative is so important. No one size fits all and, in some places, it may well be that existing parishes themselves form ideal 'Mission Units': The virtue of our principles is that they can be applied wherever there are sufficient resources for the mission they under-gird.

Good collaborative leadership at every level is the key to implementing mission of this kind, though the fruit of that mission will always be God's work. So we recommend this way forward to build not only his Church - but, above all, God's Kingdom here in Cumbria.

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