

What sort of a church in what sort of a diocese is God calling us to be?

Having consulted the diocese and waited upon God the following ideas and plans are offered in the belief that although we have experienced decline for many years, this decline is not inevitable. God wants his Church to grow so that it can have a greater impact in the world. And our world is in such need of the things we have been given in Christ. Nor do we believe the decline we have experienced is because of any failure of faithfulness or nerve. The tectonic plates of our culture have shifted and we find ourselves ministering in rapidly changing contexts. We have to learn how to adapt.

So we are not proposing to organise and align the resources of the York diocese around an expectation that there will be less of everything and that the church will only get smaller and smaller. But neither do we over-optimistically assume that changes we make at the so-called centre, or for that matter organisational shifts or changes in resources in parishes or deaneries, can automatically lead to growth.

These are the theological principles that can guide and inspire us –

- God is the evangelist and God is the Lord of the harvest;
- Growth comes in due season; a tree in winter is just as healthy as a tree in spring ;
- Faithfulness leads to fruitfulness; growth and decline, like the wheat and the tares, are very likely to grow up alongside each other.

Therefore, we do believe the church can grow, but there will be *seasons of growth* and that growth will often be unpredictable and erratic.

There will also be times of decline. Things will change. But because we believe the church can grow, we intend to **organise and align the resources, people and parishes of the diocese in such a way that will best sustain the church as it is at the moment, best enable the church to grow, and best support new growth where we see it**, particularly in unexpected places. We are looking to see how a transformed way of being the Church can lead to growth and enable the Church to fulfil its mission to be Gods' presence in the world.

We do not know what to call this. We are not 'going for growth', that very optimistic slogan that some dioceses have used. We are expecting growth, but at the same time acknowledging that in some places decline will continue.

We want the Diocese of York to move towards a minimum sustainable resource and ministry that will enable us to serve every locality and community in the diocese, but at the same time be flexible enough to support new initiatives and get behind the growth when it occurs. That seems to be the overwhelming conclusion of the consultation

In order to do this our first emphasis in the transformation of finances and structures must be a **renewed vision that ministry belongs to the whole people of God**. Every one of us has vocation to serve Christ and live Christ's story in ways that are appropriate to our different circumstances, gifts, energy and resources.

We hope to stop thinking of the diocese of York as being someone else or somewhere else. We are the diocese called to live Christ's story together in all our parishes, chaplaincies, schools, mustard seed and multiply ministries.

Bearing in mind that our first objective is to become more like Christ, we may well make a first act in the implementation of the strategy that follows from this vision, **a simple series of pledges about how we propose to live together as the people of God in this diocese**. This will be about the life of prayer, our commitment to the local church and its worship and life, and an understanding of discipleship that is rooted in the five marks of mission and God's purposes for God's world, what our sisters and brothers in the Anglican Communion describe as *a Jesus shaped life*. For us, to live Christ's story must be about a rootedness in Christ as people of prayer, and as Christ's servants in the world, be it the service of our local community or the global climate emergency.

From this, we expect God to raise up new ministers - stipendiary and self-supporting ordained ministers and a huge proliferation of licensed and authorised lay ministers. We don't know what this will look like at the moment but developing this vision for ministry will be a key priority.

Whereas in the past we have tended to think a priest is a priest is a priest, we now recognise that we will need **a variety of ways of exercising ordained ministry**. We will need some clergy who will exercise a ministry of oversight over a number of churches and chaplaincies and other ministries. But the ministry itself will not simply be done by them, it will be a team of people. A vital part of this will be facilitating, encouraging and overseeing the ministry of others. Other clergy, often in self-supporting ministry, will provide other sacramental, pastoral and evangelistic ministry. Wherever possible some of the money used for stipendiary clergy will also go to pioneering ministries to revitalise parishes that are struggling and develop new ministries to new communities. With a coherent strategy in place, we will also be better able to apply for funding to support this.

Similarly, we used to think a parish is a parish is a parish. That model of one priest in one parish with one building serving one clearly identifiable geographic area has not been possible for very long time. Whether it was for necessity or theological vision, other models have developed. This has caused a little anxiety in some places where some people have concluded the parish is under threat. We understand this. However, we believe in the local church and we want local church and local ministry to flourish. We have come to believe that the best way to save the parish is to help it adapt to changed circumstances. Paradoxically, rural communities have often been in the vanguard of finding ways of collaborating in ministry where churches are grouped together and a single minister has oversight of more than one parish. This mixed ecology model of the church, which intentionally includes our church schools, Mustard Seed and Multiply ministries, fresh expressions, chaplaincies, and those many examples of digital communities of faith that have blossomed all over the diocese in the past year, will be our future. We will intentionally sustain and develop church life in the different places in which we live our lives, which is online; at work or in education; in places of leisure as well as in neighbourhoods.

In recent years, we have often balanced the books by losing parish posts in an ad hoc fashion or by selling property. This can only go on for so long. We have to plan for a more sustainable future and one that can support the growth of the church. In this way, we will develop and revitalise the parish system, acknowledging and working within the constraints of finance and resource that we know we have to live with.

There cannot be a one size fits all solution. Bishops and Archdeacons will work alongside deaneries to find the pattern of ministry that will best serve that context. What develops in rural areas will be different from urban areas. This is not a problem, it is an opportunity. The diocese will know where it stands (and here I think some good Yorkshire straight talking will help) and then be able to discern not just a sustainable future but one which has potential to grow and flourish as we catch hold of the whole vision of living Christ's story together, becoming more like Christ, growing churches of missionary disciples, reaching out to those who do not yet know Christ, and serving the needs of our world.

In developing these reflections, we have been hugely encouraged by the findings of the recent Consultation that favoured local decision-making. We trust our deaneries to make good decisions, supported by good information and in conversation with Bishops and Archdeacons who will work to ensure that the local fits within a coherent Big Picture.

We also recognise a desire for teaching about evangelism, discipleship, different ways of pioneering new ministry and planting new churches, as well as very practical help with sustaining the life of the church where there are limited numbers of people and very limited resources, particularly in some rural and urban areas of deprivation. We also note that the consultation specifically and overwhelmingly asked for help with ministry to children, families and young people. This will become another priority

There are resources at the so-called centre of the diocese, through the ministry of bishops, archdeacons and the Diocesan office itself. Just as we are going to have to discern what is affordable in the deaneries and parishes, so we will also look at what is affordable at the centre. Some things such as safeguarding are mandatory. Others, such as finance and housing, are essential if we are to maintain a stipendiary priesthood. Beyond these mandatory and essential services **we will only fund things at the centre that directly support the direction of travel of this vision, i.e. those things that we have agreed together are essential to support ministry in the deaneries and parishes.** Ongoing and developing support for mission and ministry will therefore continue.

With these four things in place –

- **A 'rule of life' (we need another name for this) so that the whole diocese can have a sense of unity about living Christ story ;**
- **An emphasis upon ministry belonging to the whole people of God and an expectation that this will lead to more ordained and lay ministers serving our church, and in a great variety of ways;**
- **Agreed and understood boundaries around what can and cannot be resourced and then local decision-making, especially in deaneries, about how that finds expression in different contexts; and**
- **Diocesan resources focused on serving the ministry of the deaneries and parishes,**

I believe we can arrive at a place where the York diocese is be able to arrest its decline, develop its ministry and mission in sustainable ways and even begin to see growth. Our aim is not the survival of the institution of the Church, but a vision for every Christian person to live Christ's story in such a way that others will come to know Christ and that the Christian faith will have an impact in the world.

*+Stephen
Archbishop of York*