

The Area Mission and Pastoral Committee is keen to discern a vision for the next stage of development of the mission of the Church, called *Vision 2030*. We believe that conversations in deaneries and parishes would help deaneries, PCCs and congregations to engage with the need for vision, and facilitate the discernment of vision.

Setting the scene:

What shape do we need to be in by 2030 in order to be a church that is (in terms of the Diocesan vision)

- Confident (in the Gospel),
- Growing (disciples of Jesus) and
- Changing (the communities in which we are set)?

Put it another way, what do we believe God wants us to be; how is his Spirit shaping us for his purposes?

We are planning a series of conversations in the six Deaneries of the Area in order to receive a sense of the direction that needs to be set now if we are to be all that God is calling us to be as his people, his church.

I believe that there are three key principles.

The first is that as the Church of England our distinctive vocation is to be the church of the parish, concerned for everyone and everything that is *par oikia*. However, we cannot do that any longer through a minister who operates or is forced to operate a traditional approach to the cure of souls in every one of the communities in a multi-church group. Nor can we persist in thinking that church is that which happens in a particular building on a Sunday morning. We need to recognize that, whilst the gathering of the Eucharistic community is vital, church is also manifested in the School, in the house group, in the fresh expression, and incorporate these other manifestations of church in our thinking and praying and planning.

The second principle is realism. 40% of stipendiary clergy will retire in the next 10 years. The aspiration to grow vocations by 50% will not replace them. We need to be planning for these realities.

Whilst the church building is central to mission, particularly but not solely, in our rural communities, a small number are not viable and many more need to be made fit for purpose: they all need to strive to be places of hospitality and community, with as small a carbon footprint as possible.

Then there is the reality that most directly relates to our calling: we need to be thinking as much about what enables people to connect with the Gospel as what sustains the connected in their

connection. What will (in Rowan Williams) great phrase) 're-capture the imagination of our culture'?

The third principle is that the whole people of God need to take responsibility for the ministry and mission of the church. We all give thanks for the service of all those who contribute to sustaining the welcome, worship and witness of the parish church:

Churchwardens, Treasurers, Secretaries, Administrators, Musicians, Sunday School teachers, to name a few. This needs to grow so all take responsibility for being the church in that place. Quite simply churches need to claim the model of the body of Christ in their worshipping life and practice.

The passages of 1 Corinthians 12–13; Ephesians 3.14–4.16; Romans 12.4–13 speak of church as body, the body of Christ, and all three speak of love as the distinctive feature of the Christian community. Paul asserts 'We have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us' (Romans 12.6). In 1 Corinthians 12.7 he states that 'in each there is a manifestation of the Spirit for the common good.' In Ephesians 4.7, he says 'each of us was given grace according to the measure of Christ's gift.' Individual churches and multi-church groups need to take time and prayer to discover and act on the communal calling to be the body of Christ in that place, welcoming everyone to take part, to discern and offer their gifts and skills. "God has given us all that we need," says Sam Wells:

discovering that to be true and recovering that confidence is crucial. The mission of God's church in rural communities is a corporate undertaking requiring the whole congregation to be involved.

The responsibility of demonstrating in word and works the love of Jesus Christ, in a way that is deeply attractive is the responsibility of every single Christian. Always. Everywhere.'

Justin Welby said recently: "What draws people in, above all, is community. It's the fact that they belong. They discover they belong, they're part of the family of Christ, they're children of God. They are loved by others, they are accepted, they're welcomed." That is being the body of Christ according to Paul's better way in 1 Corinthians 13.

This has major implications for the role of those who are ordained. Perhaps one of the key roles of the ordained is oversight: enabling the body to grow and to function in each place. That means discerning and releasing the gifts given in the body, giving authority according to gifting and encouraging collaboration and valuing all contributions to life and work of the church in those places. For multi group churches this means working creatively within and between multi-church groups, in fellowship with other Christian traditions and in partnership with community organisations.

That role of enabling the body to function in each place also means ensuring that the community has owned love (agape) as its principal value/virtue and had identified how that works out in practice and is prepared to hold itself accountable for its practice. Our church schools offer great examples at identifying the values that make for a Christian ethos and helping the children to see how these work out! We all know that there are too many examples of a want of love in our churches and I do wonder if that can be helped by working on shared values. You could call this corporate discipleship. It is about how we are together, about relationships, as much as it is our personal walk with God. I believe that the New Testament puts far more emphasis on the corporate than on the personal – though, of course, the personal is inevitably shaped by the corporate.