

Renewing the Church on the Estates

A Talk to the Diocese of Southwell and Nottingham Conference 2016

At the synagogue in Nazareth Jesus explains to a scandalised crowd the purpose of his ministry. *'The Spirit of the Lord has anointed me because he has sent me to proclaim good news to the poor.'* It is interesting how often you see that quoted with the last three words left off. But whether we like it or not, Jesus says 'to the poor.' An affluent society tries to broaden the interpretation of the word and remind us that poverty can be spiritual as well as material, and of course that is quite right. But nonetheless we must also take the word in its literal sense. Good news *'to the poor.'*

So how is the Church of England doing when it comes to proclaiming good news to the poor? We can look in two directions to answer that question, the stats and the stories. The statistics are chilling. Church attendance on the estates at 0.8% of the population is less than half the national average of 1.7%. The rate of decline over the past ten years has been four times faster than the national average. Now you might naïvely think that faced with such a crisis in the most needy areas, the Church would be investing extra resource in the estates. Not so. On average the Church of England nationally spends £7.90 per head of population. In some rural areas that rises to £24 per head. On the estates it is just £5.09, by far the lowest.

That's the stats. What about the stories? Here is a typical one about a friend of mine called Tim. He served a very successful curacy and was then placed onto a large social housing estate on the edge of Blackpool. To begin with he thrived and threw everything into his ministry, but after a few years he was feeling a sense of disillusionment that much of what he had tried was apparently bearing little fruit and he started to feel isolated and forgotten. I spoke to his Bishop and suggested that it was time that Tim moved but he shrugged and said 'Where do I put a priest like that?' In other words Tim was being seen as part of the problem, blamed for the failings of an incredibly tough parish. In the end Tim was stuck on that estate for 19 years, feeling abandoned and forgotten, and he eventually had to retire early on grounds of ill-health. I wish that were an isolated story, but I hear similar versions of it repeatedly from all corners of the country. All too often clergy who heroically commit themselves to estates ministry feel isolated and marginalised.

Or take the story of the Blackburn Diocese. On almost all our major estates – Mereside, Grange Park, Stoops and Shadsworth – the church has been closed down and the clergy withdrawn (though I am pleased to say this situation is now being very speedily reversed). When I worked as a Pastoral Assistant in North Sunderland there were 7 priests and two religious for 6 estates Churches. There are now just two Churches left with a clergy staffing of 1.5. In addition we have massive issues of recruitment. When my former Parish in Hartlepool, which had two flourishing churches, recently fell vacant it was over two years before a priest could be found. When you compare that to a Parish in central London which was vacant at the same time and had 123 applicants you begin to see the true spiritual health of the Church

of England. For this is a spiritual issue, because if we are institutionally uninterested in the poor, what sort of faithfulness are we showing to the teaching of Jesus?

The stats and the stories unite to lead to a very clear conclusion. Much as we love to speak the language of a bias to the poor, we are part of a Church that has taken a clear preferential option for the rich.

So why does this matter. There are two reasons, one scriptural and one practical.

The scriptural one is obvious and derives from the passage from Luke 4 with which I began this talk. Jesus came to be the evangeliser of the poor. Look where he spent his time. Look whom he called to be his disciples and followers. Look how he spent his own life. And that is why every single effective renewal movement in the history of the Church has started with the poor. Think of St Francis and the community he called around him. Think of St Vincent de Paul and the way he renewed the French church of the seventeenth century by reaching out to the galley slaves, the urban poor and the orphaned. Think of the crowds to whom Wesley preached. Think of the speed with which the Oxford Movement moved from the study of ecclesiology in the libraries of Oxford to the service of cholera victims on the streets of Plymouth and the East End. The leaders of these renewal movements knew that the Gospel message is empty unless it is lived out in service of the poor. We live in a culture that values authenticity perhaps above all else. When people see a Church listening and responding to the cry of the poor, then they will start to respond to the Good News we proclaim.

If Jesus is the evangeliser of the poor, then a Church that abandons the poor has abandoned God. Yes of course we could quite easily have a nice, viable financially sound Church by letting go of the estates and focussing all our resources elsewhere, because the Church on the estates, even when growing, will always require a financial subsidy due to the nature of the communities it serves. An economist would doubtless tell us to close the estates churches down as they don't make financial sense. But that Church, run on market lines, would no longer be the Church of Jesus Christ. If we're not proclaiming good news to the poor, we lose the right to proclaim it to anyone.

This issue of subsidy is also an interesting one. Whilst I was in Camden I was on the phone once to a member of the Diocesan staff team who said to me, 'Of course you are a subsidised parish.' And I realised that on a very deep level I felt myself, as an urban priest, to be a recipient of charity, my stipend and housing costs met solely because of the munificence and graciousness of the rich. But who is subsidising whom? Whilst arguably a small financial subsidy might flow from rich to poor, a vast spiritual subsidy flows from poor to rich, for without the poor the rich can no longer claim to be the Church. If you are from an estates Parish, never ever let anyone tell you that you are subsidised. It is your heroic ministry and the faithfulness of the Christian community you serve that subsidises the rest of us.

The second reason why the health of the estates church matters is a practical one. I hugely enjoyed estates ministry. But they can be hard places to work where ministry often seems to go unrewarded and where the challenges are massively heightened. The estate can therefore be a testing ground for effective evangelistic strategies. It can be a sort of laboratory, offering extreme conditions for testing new approaches to evangelism. Because if something works on an estate, it is a sure bet that it will work anywhere.

So take the example of **Ordained leaders**. If you can lead an estates Church into growth, I would suggest that you will have developed transferable skills that will enable you to lead almost any church into growth. So we should be forming clergy in the context of the estates. The rise of contextual trainings has been a really significant development. But in the south, to host an ordinand your Parish needs to contribute £16,000 per year. Once again it is rich church for the rich. We must find ways of training more clergy on the estates, and seek ways to turn some of our large unfillable estates Parishes into training colleges. In the same way all clergy should be challenged to spend some portion of their ministry on an estate, not least for their own personal formation. That may only be four or five years, because we need to be much more adept at deploying clergy in flexible ways and manipulate our appointments processes to take out long and unnecessary vacancies between clergy. But time spent on an estate teaches vital lessons which can be applied to many other contexts. If you can get it right on an estate, you can get it right anywhere.

Or take the example of **lay leaders**. We know the central importance of forming and developing lay leaders if our churches are to grow. However on the estates, where lives can be challenging and even chaotic, where people often bring with them a great deal of baggage and where confidence levels are low and leadership experience scarce, the vital process of forming indigenous lay leaders is hugely complicated. It can take as much as six years to develop a lay leader in this way and it requires huge attention, including patient, one to one personal mentoring, strong relationships and accessible and contextually appropriate discipleship opportunities. It is very tempting to take the short cut and ship in lay leaders from another Parish, but this undermines fatally the development of local leaders.

We mustn't forget the prophetic importance of raising up lay leaders on the estates. I remember once taking a funeral for a woman in Hartlepool and at the visit the family very proudly told me that she was 'the wise woman.' It emerged in conversation that the tenement blocks which were replaced by that estate were richly resourced places, run by women with a wide range of skills. Some acted as nurses, some delivered the babies, some laid out the dead, some offered advice. Over the years, for very good reasons, we have professionalised these roles and farmed them out to external middle class professionals. This has left many estates lacking community leaders and with a deeply embedded culture of dependency. So when we form lay leaders for the estates Church, we are offering a vital service to the wider community in rebuilding a culture of local leadership. This is where churches can work so effectively in partnership with organisations such as London Citizens who specialise

in identifying and training indigenous leaders in urban communities. The Lay Leadership Task Group which is part of Renewal and Reform will soon be laying its report before the Church, challenging us to change the culture when it comes to lay formation, ministry and leadership. Again if we can get this right on the estates, we can get it right anywhere.

Or think about the **content of our proclamation**. When engaged in evangelism, we so easily fall back onto neat, tidy, pre-packaged and often simplistic phrases to explain the Gospel. Jesus died for our sins, life in all its fullness, etc. This won't do an estate. They'll cut you to ribbons. What good is some trite spiritual cliché if you're dependent on a foodbank, or your children are in trouble with the Police, or you can't meet your debts, or you are having to choose each night between food or fuel? On the estates we do not have the luxury of divorcing proclamation from service. If we are not serving people and meeting their basic needs, the Gospel we speak is empty hypocrisy. Conversely if we serve but do not proclaim we are depriving people of the greatest gift of all which is that of knowing Jesus as Lord. The two must work hand in hand.

Again on the estates our evangelism has to be founded on profound listening which leads to a genuine desire to answer the questions people are asking rather than the questions that Luther or Calvin were asking. On the estates, apologetics matters. And if we can get it right there by speaking good news in a way that connects and makes sense, we can get it right anywhere.

Or take as a final example, **resources**. In recent years we have been smothered with a vast range of resources for mission, evangelism, faith sharing, discipleship and youth and children's work. These are great, but too many of them fail to make sense in the context of the estate. In areas where lives are differently organised, where running a diary is a minority occupation and where the word 'course' carries intimidating connotations, our resources simply don't work. There are some excellent exceptions available, for example Jesus Shaped People, Messy Church and some of the material coming out of Leading your Church Into Growth. But we need more. And again resources that are developed on an estate and work there will work anywhere.

Pope Francis has talked about the Roman Catholic church being a 'poor Church for the poor.' It is a powerful soundbite. If we can reach the poor, we can reach anyone. A Church of and for the poor is a Church for everyone.

And it can be done. In the Blackburn Diocese Tim Horrobin has made an enormous difference to a church on an estate in Lower Darwen. The first thing he did was to restore the kitchen so that he could develop a ministry strongly focussed on food, welcome and hospitality. He has ensured that the buildings are constantly alive with activities and meetings of various groups. He invests huge amounts of time and energy in developing lay leaders, showing immense patience in so doing, and is pioneering a 'strawberry plant' approach to establishing small, new, lay-led Christian communities so as to enable the ministry to reach deeply into the estate. Or again Fr Lawrence and Fr Terry in Accrington. When the Diocese agreed to start 50 new

congregation, we set up a committee filled with bright young evangelicals who started to talk about definitions and structures and resources. Meanwhile these two Anglo-Catholic clergy simply heard what we were trying to do and, with no resources at all, started a new church in a school which now attracts 80 people a week. Sadly these stories are all too rare. We are in severe danger of losing the Church on the estates altogether in the next ten years which makes the task an urgent one. So what is being done?

On a national level it is very good news that Estates Evangelism is now its own strand in the Renewal and Reform programme which gives resource, accountability and legitimacy to the work. The group will meet for the first time later in the year and will have a full and busy agenda. It will need to make the case for investing financially in the estates and ensure that money allocated to this context is well spent and not wasted. It will need to understand and champion fresh expressions and experiments in new forms of church life on the estates. It will need to challenge the culture of certain aspects of Church life, for example clergy selection where a system which basically constitutes three days in a public school delivers an almost exclusively white, middle class priesthood. It will need to find ways of offering advice to Dioceses on clergy recruitment, deployment and support. It will need to take the theological aspect of the work seriously, asking what the good news is on the estates and reflecting on how we measure 'success' there. It will need to focus very strongly on leadership, both lay and ordained. It will need to grapple with the issue of contextually appropriate resources.

And behind all its work it must keep up the priority of evangelism. Jesus proclaimed *good news* for the poor. We cannot allow a challenging context to be an excuse for failure or poor quality ministry. Nor can we allow context to be an excuse for not doing any evangelism. Often our ministry has descended into being social work with the proclamatory element almost entirely forgotten. We need to remember the words of Pope Francis in *Evangelii Gaudium*, ' *"I want to say with regret that the worst discrimination that the poor suffer is the lack of spiritual care... We must not fail to offer the poor his friendship, his blessing, his word, the celebration of the sacraments and a journey of growth and maturity in faith."*

But of course work that lies at the centre can only achieve so much in a Church that is decentralised and basically unmanageable. There are implications for Dioceses and I know that this one is thinking them through very seriously. And there are implications for each one of us as individuals, for even if we are not called to estates ministry we need to reflect on how we are supporting it.

At an day for estates practitioners in the Leeds Diocese last week, a gentle Churchwarden from a deprived Parish put a very powerful question. He said, 'What I want to know is this. Does the Church of England in its heart of hearts really want to have Churches on the estates?' That is the question that I leave with you.

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