

VISION FOR BLACKBURN DIOCESE

DIOCESAN SYNOD FEBRUARY 2015

Introduction

This document builds on the earlier summary text that was handed out to Synod members in October 2014 and has also been available on the Diocesan website since that point.

The text has been revised in the light of the comments and suggestions which have been passed on in the last three months.

Those contributions have mainly arrived via the email address which was set up (vision@blackburn.anglican.org) and have been most helpful, as together the Church of England in Lancashire seeks to form a vision of where we are heading as a diocese and what it is we are seeking to achieve.

Bishop Julian would like to thank everyone who contributed.

This latest version is an expanded version of that earlier document to provide greater clarity and takes on board feedback received. There is also now a short theological introduction, setting the framework for what follows.

1. The context

1.a Our current service

There is lots to celebrate in all kinds of good and creative work around the diocese, seeking to address the challenges of doing ministry and mission in the 21st century.

The front line work in parishes and chaplaincies; The Shape of Things to Come; Reshaping Ministry for Mission; Mission Action Plans; Leading Your Church Into Growth and the ongoing work of Diocesan departments speaks clearly of the immense amount of Christian service being carried out week after week.

The changes which are proposed in what follows are challenging. To some there may be an implication that previous activity has not been as fruitful as we would have hoped and that we may not have had the right priorities.

In light of this, it is important to state that it is recognised that in many places clergy and congregations are at full stretch and face considerable challenges in living out the Christian faith in an increasingly secular and multi-faith culture.

In fact the recent 'resilience survey' responded to by a number of clergy in the diocese revealed that the pressure of work was a significant negative in terms of their well-being.

It should be stated clearly that none of what follows is intended to suggest that no effort is being made or to imply any criticism of what has gone before. It is simply intended to create a vision of what we are seeking to achieve and so give a sense of direction and purpose to our service and a wise use of the limited resources available to us.

What is true is that lots of very good things are going on, but it is not very joined up or coordinated, and therefore is less effective than it could be.

We need to draw the threads together and meet the demand for:

1. A coherent sense of direction for the diocese, so we know where we are heading and why
2. A clear purpose, against which we can set priorities and plan our budgets
3. A coordinated way of working, so we work as partners and share the load

1.b The national picture

It needs to be stressed that what we are doing here in Lancashire is not out of step with other dioceses around the country. Most dioceses face similar problems and challenges. Some are more acute than others. The recent Anecdote to Evidence report by the National Church spells this out clearly.

There is much talk about vision setting, about not managing decline, about using resources to support growth and most of all about a desire to reverse the tide of decline and marginalisation of the church in many areas.

It's important that we see this broader context. One diocesan bishop has been heard to say that the Church of England (note he did not say Christianity) will slide off the radar in his diocese in about 10 years, unless there are changes.

Furthermore, the Archbishops' Council is exercising much greater scrutiny in the way it distributes the funds of the central church. It is becoming more intentional in the support of projects that promote growth, and more resistant to grants that are only managing decline. As a diocese that receives a large annual grant from central funds, we have to justify the way those funds are spent here with a carefully thought through vision and strategy.

In addition to this, four new reports are being debated by General Synod in February 2015, which led to the following headlines in the Church Times on 16th January:

- 'A shake-up of C of E'
- 'A new reformation'
- 'We've got to find new ways of doing Christ's work'

- 'Group wants to cut red legislative tape'
- 'C of E needs new input on Christian living'

It is obvious that at a national level change is considered to be necessary.

1.c The burning platform

From the facts on the ground we are in a serious situation, one that is described well by the image of a burning platform. Doing nothing and keeping things going as they are is not an option. We must resist the danger of complacency on the one hand and of pretence that things are better than they are on the other. There needs to be an honesty about the facts and we must listen to them:

- Electoral Roll numbers continue to decrease
- The average age of congregations reflects a high age profile
- Many parishes continue to struggle with a lack of finance for their buildings and Parish Share
- The availability of stipendiary clergy continues to decrease
- The change in demographics in parts of the diocese means some parishes are increasingly populated by those of other faith communities.
- The rate of decline in church attendance in the Diocese of Blackburn over recent years is faster than elsewhere in the UK

So it is not unfair to say the situation is serious and requires radical change. Hopefully, the idea of being on a burning platform creates a right sense of urgency for change.

We are aware of the danger of statistics, because God is the God of the unpredictable. But without His intervention and if we carry on as we are, the graphs tell us there will be no C of E in Lancashire in 2050.

1.d The social context in Lancashire

There are important lessons from our social history in Lancashire. The cotton industry here was thriving 100 years ago, but as various challenges came, the industry failed to change and reinvent itself and consequently began to decline. As is evident now, that industry has ceased to exist and we can learn something from that for where we are as the Church of England.

John Walton's 'A Social History of Lancashire' claims:

'The root of the trouble lay in the way the industry was organized, and the near impossibility of changing it to meet new needs and problems' Page 330

'An industrial structure that had served Lancashire well during its years of prosperity proved quite unable to adjust to the new stark realities of the 1920s and 1930s.'

Page 331

'Much of cotton Lancashire became custom-bound, ageing, inward-looking and defeatist, as the rising generation failed to respond to new stresses and new needs.'

Page 352

'The vast majority of the people in the industry were firmly rooted in their culture, sceptical of innovations and slow to rouse.' Page 358

It is clear that an unwillingness to change and adapt seems to have been the issue. Our argument is that unless we as the Church of England in Lancashire choose to change and adapt, we shall continue to decline.

1.e The theological context

'God is working His purpose out'. He has revealed His plan for the redemption of the world, through the saving work of His Son Jesus Christ.

The rule of His Kingdom is extending year by year, as more and more turn to Christ and by the power of His Spirit live out a righteous life. The Christian community serves as salt and light in the transformation of the wider communities where He has called us to be.

All this is in preparation for the day when every knee will bow and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father, and justice and mercy will be seen in all the earth.

Our work today needs to be understood within that overall purpose of God for His created order, which because of His promise and His power will be fulfilled. We proceed ahead in the confidence that He will have the final say and all that challenges and opposes Him will be brought to nothing.

Jesus' parable of the sower has been a further important theological piece of input in this process. The account in Mark 4 was the set reading for Bishop Julian's day of interview in January 2013 on which he had to deliver a homily and it has appeared in the lectionary at certain key moments since.

One of the many messages from that parable is about how to make the soil good, so the seed of the Gospel and the ministry of the Word of God bears fruit, 30 fold, 60 fold, and 100 fold. In order for that to be the case, the seed must be nurtured by confronting spiritual opposition, by addressing spiritual superficiality and by encouraging spiritual loyalty.

So part of the context of this vision process must therefore be to heed what the Spirit is saying to us as a diocese about preparing the ground; sowing the right seed of the

Gospel, and nurturing the growth of that seed. This is the extraordinary means by which God has chosen to fulfil His purposes in the world.

Those several challenging contexts have driven us to want to create a vision of the Church of England in Lancashire, so we know where we are heading and know what it is we are seeking to achieve.

But the uncomfortable point is that this requires a radical change, not a few tweaks and minor adjustments, but something that turns the tide for faith in Jesus Christ in Lancashire and transforms lives and communities.

2. The timescale

We haven't got much time and there needs to be a focus to help us take action. To give us that impetus, the Diocese of Blackburn will be celebrating its 100th birthday in 11 years' time. What will we be celebrating on that important occasion?

Bishop Julian will have had to retire before 2026, so that takes the vision into the next chapter, but only just, and then it will be open to be reviewed by the next Bishop of Blackburn. But an agreed vision for these next 11 years will serve as a helpful guide in what priorities we should pursue and where resources should be deployed.

It will also be helpful if we put certain markers in the ground, as objectives to be achieved at certain points during these next 11 years, say after 3, 5, 8, and 10 years.

3. Proposed Vision Statement

HEALTHY CHURCHES, TRANSFORMING COMMUNITIES

Such a statement is:

Inward and outward looking

Challenging and encouraging

Present and future

Reality and potential

4. The aspiration of a healthy church

It is too easy to accept the current situation as the way it will always be. It is much harder to think things might be different. But imagine a church community in which the congregation:

4.a Are wholehearted disciples, living Christ-like lives in healthy fellowship with each other

4.b Take the biblical revelation seriously

- 4.c Meet together for times of intercession
- 4.d Expect and are provided with purposeful and focused leadership
- 4.e Support work among families with young people and children as a priority
- 4.f Are flexible about patterns of worship, so that they provide for those who believe, as well as being accessible and appropriate for the first time visitor, who is not used to being in church, who has no faith but wants answers to their questions.
- 4.g Make the most of the opportunities of sharing the Gospel in Baptism preparation and follow-up, so that it is clear what it means to 'turn to Christ'.
- 4.h Make strategic plans for growth, new congregations and fresh expressions
- 4.i Gain a reputation for serving the needs of the wider community, as salt and light, for making a difference to people's lives
- 4.j Work collaboratively with neighbouring churches in sharing resources and engaging in mission
- 4.k Unashamedly engage in evangelism, seeking to bring others to a personal faith in Jesus Christ.
- 4.l Give generously and so provide an income that meets expenditure

The value of imagining such a church is that it raises our expectations of what church might be and we could say ought to be; a church that attracts rather than drives people away and so has a transformative effect on the communities where we live.

5. How might we reinvent ourselves?

This latest document distils our focus from the list of twelve to three key areas only, as the main tasks before us during the next eleven years, in order for church to be healthy and to make a deeper transformative impact on the society in which we live.

This adjustment from the earlier document seeks to take account of the comments received over the past three months, and particularly that twelve areas are too many and not easily memorable. The following three headings attempt to include and cover what was outlined in the previous twelve.

5.a Making disciples of Jesus Christ

In words prayed in Morning Prayer each day, we ask to have hearts set on fire with love for Him. That kind of spiritual passion needs to be reawakened across the church. We see it in Lancashire in a different setting on the edge of the football pitch: a commitment, an enthusiasm, a passion for a cause.

What God needs more than anything else is not better programmes, better ideas, better strategies, better buildings or even better visions, but godly people, who are committed to Him and the spread of the Gospel. A renewal of discipleship is a call for wholehearted discipleship, people who are not just attenders, people for whom church is more than a social club.

How can this happen?

5.a.1 Knowing the Scriptures better

It is understood that many in the church have questions about the Bible and its authority, but without a return to 'the faith uniquely revealed in the Scriptures' there will not be a renewal in discipleship. Here is an anchor that we need to hold on to.

Sadly, the content of the Bible is not very well known and sometimes is not believed. Yes, it may be read in church, but some choose not to take it too seriously and sometimes it is not explained or taught.

So a renewal of discipleship involves the ministry of preaching and teaching as a key component in the formation of disciples.

5.a.2 Learning to use the gift of intercession

The letter of James contains the chilling rebuke of the early Christians, 'you do not have because you do not ask. When you ask, you do not receive because you ask with wrong motives, that you may spend what you get on your pleasures'.

Our current needs and challenges should be driving us to our knees, not just in private prayer, but in corporate prayer, and not just the prayers in a church service, but times of waiting upon God and praying for His Kingdom to come and His will to be done here on earth, as it is in heaven.

So often it sounds as if we are not really serious or urgent in our praying. A renewal of discipleship will mean prayer is the first thing we do, not something we turn to as a last resort, and something in which we, like Hannah, are able to 'pour out our soul to the Lord'.

5.a.3 Giving generously to the cause of Christ

Banging the drum for money to keep the shop open will never work. As our discipleship deepens, so we shall release the necessary funds for mission.

'Generous giving follows on as a response to the generous grace of God towards us' (2 Corinthians)

The Parish Share Review Group has not advocated a change in the way Share is calculated, but rather a change of culture, so that the reason for and the benefits from paying Parish Share are clearly understood.

Stewardship programmes are vital in providing a focus on teaching about giving and encouraging disciples to discover what we say in our liturgy is true.

‘All things come from You and of Your own do we give You’ 1 Chronicles 29

A Diocesan vision and the way it is reflected locally will help people to know where their giving is going and whether we are a cause worth supporting sacrificially.

There are many other dimensions to the making of disciples, but these three seem particularly apposite for us as a Diocese at this time and need to be given special attention.

5.b Being witnesses to Jesus Christ

This happens in all kinds of ways, spoken and unspoken, by the words we say and by the way we live, by our love for God and our love for our neighbour, by our commitment to truth and concern for justice.

But underlying it all has to be that conviction that there is an urgency in our evangelism, that it really matters what people believe, not just for life here, but also for eternity.

There are many versions of the Gospel around these days and that’s one of the causes of our malaise. Returning to the parable of the sower, we are not always sowing the right seed.

The Gospel is not what we do for God. It’s about what He has done for us. So it is much more than just attending church, joining the fellowship, knowing we are loved by God and are made in His image, or receiving the dominical signs of the sacraments of Baptism and Holy Communion.

The Gospel call is for repentance from a life without God at the centre, to one where He is Lord and we are His servants. It is a:

- Gospel of salvation that saves people from their sins,
- Gospel of redemption that redeems people from the slavery of sin
- Gospel that rescues people from an eternity without God
- Gospel of deliverance that sets people free to live life to the full
- Gospel that justifies and declares a person not guilty before God
- Gospel that brings assurance of forgiveness and eternal life
- Gospel that requires a response of repentance and faith in order for these blessings to be received

We must learn again the lostness of the human race without Jesus. As the hymn puts it: 'lost indeed without You'.

We must resist the temptation to water down the Gospel and take things away from 'the whole counsel of God' ... a Jesus minus approach. We must also resist the temptation to add to the Gospel ... a Jesus plus approach. And while the Gospel is not always welcome and is an offence, if we preach the foolishness of the cross, it is 'unkind to be unclear' and not say how it really is.

It was the Holy Spirit who emboldened those early Christians to be witnesses, in fulfilment of the promise of Jesus in Acts 1.8. On our own we are fearful, but with His power we can be confident.

Each disciple is a witness. It is not a task just for the Clergy and Lay Leaders. And in order for us to convey the message that we are serious about proclaiming the Gospel and wanting others to come to faith, each church ought to have a regular enquirers' course, giving the opportunity for enquirers, doubters and opponents to ask questions and hear the arguments for faith.

The Archbishop of York and other Bishops of the Northern Province are coming to Blackburn Diocese in September 2016 for a week of mission. That will only bear fruit if we are intentional about our evangelism and witness now. We should seek to build on the deeply moving and encouraging evening in the Tower Ballroom in Blackpool last November.

The other dimension to all this and which gives credibility to our words is our service of the communities where we live. And in Lancashire some of those communities face us with very pressing social needs, which require our involvement. Part of love for neighbour is the demand that we do not pass by on the other side.

Getting our hands dirty and demonstrating that our words are not empty is a vital part of evangelism, showing the unconditional love of Jesus to the most needy and vulnerable in our society.

Considerable work is done in the diocese along these lines. But it would seem appropriate that as a sign of commitment to their local community, each parish should consider a project that identifies and then seeks to meet a local need, which is not being met by others. The motive for this is to share the compassion of Jesus, in the hope that recipients will hear His call to them to be followers, that the seed of the Gospel through a life well-lived will fall into good soil and bear fruit in due time.

One of those fruits ought to be the establishment of new congregations. They could be either a new service in an existing church building, or a gathering in a different venue, either a traditional and formal event or something contemporary. The birth of messy church and other fresh expressions of being church have been a welcome addition to the menu of things we offer in the diocese. But we need to be more

strategic in the way we identify opportunities and needs and then resource the setting up of new congregations.

Is there a reason why we should not expect to create at least five new congregations around the diocese each year for the next 10 years? To achieve this, we would have to be purposeful and allow for not always getting it right. But it is not wrong to have such aspirations and plan for growth in strategic ways. A church planting policy in place now could give us much to celebrate in 2026.

The above proposes ways in which we can be and must be witnesses to Jesus Christ in purposeful and intentional ways.

5.c Growing leaders for Jesus Christ

The challenges of our day call for a flexible approach to leadership in the church. Patterns of leadership and ministry that may have been appropriate and effective in the past need to be adapted for the very different circumstances of 2015 and beyond.

That means we must re-equip our current leaders, lay and ordained, for today's missional context. We have to have a much more strongly evangelistic edge to leadership, using all those pastoral contacts at weddings and funerals to bring those without faith to a place of commitment to Christ.

And there is an urgency to grow new leaders for the future. Serious work needs to be done in the area of vocations, not just to leadership in the church, but for Christians in education and in many other areas of life. The Archbishop of York's example during his visit in November, inviting young people in school to consider what God might be calling them to do, must be a pattern we follow.

Lay leadership also must be encouraged. Yes, there are questions about authorisation and whether formal arrangements and qualifications are the kiss of death to lay ministry. But growing new lay leaders to share in the cure of souls formally is a vital area of work. We must get to the point where we can give permission for new initiatives, local decisions, and less red tape.

In order for each local Christian community to grow there must be at least one leader, lay or ordained, paid or volunteer, who provides that stability and continuity of presence when that community meet for worship, prayer and planning. And then there needs to be a real drive for every member ministry, discerning and developing the gifts of the Spirit in each disciple.

Instead of reducing the number of leaders and merging parishes in pastoral reorganization, which increases pressure and workload onto already hard pressed leaders, we should be aiming for a Missional leader in each Christian community.

5.c.1 Focus on youth and children's ministry

A key area is the growth of leaders for work among families and young people. It is uncomfortable to realise that 48% of churches have less than five under-16s.

The work of a leader in Sunday School or Children's Church is vital. No-one should ever say: 'I am **only** a teacher of the children'. It is one of the most important roles in church. We must train up leaders who can teach and model Christian discipleship for the next generation. They are not providing a crèche, so that the real thing can go on uninterrupted in church. Good materials should be encouraged.

Alongside this must be work on increased effectiveness of the relationship with church schools, as a key part of our mission to young people.

With so many church schools in the diocese, and many community schools with favourable links with the local church, we have a God-given opportunity to work among young people. Each local church needs to identify how it can engage in the life of the schools in the parish and to do so really effectively.

For that link to church to work, it is essential that we make church life so good for children, young people, and their families that it is the kind of place they want to come to.

That means developing initiatives like messy church and carefully planned all-age worship, which engages with and relates to young people.

5.c.2 Fresh consideration of our service patterns

Public services of worship are our shop window and it is essential that we conduct them in such a way as to commend the Gospel and build up the faith of those who come.

Leaders, lay and ordained, need to aspire to making each aspect of those gatherings of high quality. That requires careful preparation. Most important of all, they need to be times when the Holy Spirit is at work, so that there is a real sense of worshipping in Spirit and in truth. Going through the motions is easily spotted. There must be a reality about our worship, in order for it to be honouring to God and convincing to others.

Fresh thinking about patterns of worship is always a sensitive area and has to be treated with care. Most service patterns are geared to minister to the faithful and therefore most Sunday morning services are Eucharists. In the last century these were rightly reintroduced as central to the life of the Christian Community, and not just for those attending at 8.00 am.

But now we are in a new situation, a more missional environment and need to rethink the current patterns of services. It is not a question of 'instead of', but 'as well as' with the reintroduction of a stronger emphasis on the ministry of the Word and the Spirit.

In addition the kind of welcome we offer has to be improved. What happens at the door, as people arrive for a service, is a key factor in a visitor choosing whether to return or not. The importance of training for welcomers for this significant role cannot be rated too highly.

5.c.3 More thorough Baptism preparation and follow-up

The current National Projects on weddings, funerals and baptisms highlights the importance of carrying out these occasional offices as opportunities for passing on the message of the Gospel.

Requests by parents for their children to be baptised are greater in number in the North West than in other places in the UK and we have therefore have an opportunity to explain the Gospel to those who come asking for a baptism. It is a God-given and a serious moment when people are asked in a public setting whether they turn to Christ. It is our responsibility as church to say what that means.

It has been calculated that with about 2000 baptisms a week in the Church of England, each with up to a 100 visitors on average, there could be around 200,000 visitors in church each week up and down the country.

We need to make more of this opportunity in explaining what it means to turn to Christ and calling family and friends supporting the baptism by their presence to hear His call to them. There is an argument that we should make baptism services specifically evangelistic and more accessible to the visitor.

6. Conclusion

This expanded version of the vision is designed to explain in more detail some of the thinking behind the brief outline produced last October and develop it in the light of the comments made by many since.

Obviously, it has not been possible to include every point that has been made, but the general thrust has been heard and this revision hopefully reflects the general response.

And importantly, it is hoped that the format of a Vision statement and the three headings of **making disciples**, **being witnesses** and **growing leaders** gives greater clarity.