

**Presidential Address Given by Bishop Christopher  
at the June Meeting of Diocesan Synod on  
The Festival of the Birth of John the Baptist**

**24<sup>th</sup> June 2014**

I thought that it would be timely to attempt a brief review of where we are as a diocese in terms of our strategic development, and to set that within the context of the life of the Church of England as a whole.

For the past five years the Church of England has been working towards three Quinquennial Goals:

- Re-imagining ministry.
- Re-growing the Church (numerically and spiritually).
- Re-committing to the common good.

We are soon to begin a new quinquennium but I do not expect that these goals will change in any serious way.

Soon after his appointment, the Archbishop of Canterbury identified three priorities that would help to shape his ministry:

- Prayer and the Renewal of Religious life.
- Reconciliation.
- Evangelism.

They do not map directly on to the Quinquennial Goals but they are entirely congruent with them. The Archbishop's emphasis on reconciliation has had a considerable – and exciting – impact on Coventry Cathedral and will, no doubt, continue to influence the scope and form of the Cathedral's reconciliation ministry.

Over the past year or so, four reviews of some of the systems and structures of the Church have been initiated:

- the *Simplification Task Group*, with the aim of identifying some of the unnecessary complexities of the Church's life;
- the *Resources for Ministerial Education Group*, with the aim of considering how the education of the Church's ministers can be most effectively resourced;
- the *Resourcing the Future Task Group*, with the aim of reviewing the way the Church's still considerable historic assets are used to further its mission throughout the land;

- the *Talent Identification and Training and Development Programme for Bishops and Deans*, with the aim of discerning ways of better finding and then developing those called to the leadership of the people of God in dioceses and our cathedrals.

As I meet with other bishops and try to observe what is going on in other dioceses, I am struck by at least three things.

- Most dioceses seem to define their purpose or mission in a similar way to us, though I have heard none better than our simple commitment to:
  - Worshipping God;
  - Making New Disciples;
  - Transforming Communities.
- A good number of dioceses seem to be developing a much more strategic approach to fulfil their purpose than in the past, especially to the making and growing of new Christians.
- A number of dioceses are seeing small but significant signs of overall numerical growth..

Earlier this year I attended a ‘Mitigating Risk Workshop’ with a number of colleagues from the diocese. It turned into a rather tedious day and a large number of people from other dioceses (not our own, I hasten to add) left at lunch. I was glad I stayed, though, because I very much enjoyed a presentation by Andrew Whittaker who spoke about the big risk against which the British banks failed so seriously to mitigate. Economies need banks, he reminded us, *to keep our money safe and to lend it responsibly*. There are huge risks not only to the banks themselves but to all the people of developed economies if they fail to do so. Andrew explained how close the great banks of our nation came in failing to fulfil their simple and vital purpose. I am told on very good authority that the Chancellor was woken up in the middle of the night by a telephone call from a very senior military source telling him that as the banks were so close to collapse it would be necessary very soon to bring the army out on to the streets.

The risk for the Diocese of Coventry is that if we fail in our primary purpose to worship God, make new disciples and transform communities, thousands of people across Coventry and Warwickshire will never hear the good news of Jesus Christ and have their lives transformed by the saving love of God, good news that is of eternal significance to them. Furthermore, hundreds of communities in our patch, on our watch, will remain untouched by – as the book of Hebrews puts it – ‘the powers of the age to come’ (Hebrews 6.5) impacting them with the reality of the kingdom of God here and now.

That is a risk we must do everything to mitigate against. The primary way we have chosen to do so is by a strategy that seeks to develop the health of the local Christian communities through developing a number of *virtuous ecclesial practices*, better known as the eight essential qualities of healthy growing churches.

Is our strategy working? I suggest that on the one hand it is too early to say. On the other, though, there are small but very encouraging signs of life and growth. We may even be at a point where some momentum is building as we hear stories of more people coming to faith, church communities growing and beginning to make more of an impact in their parishes.

It is worth saying that a strategic emphasis on growth can make people nervous. I hope that I have said enough to show that we are not talking about growth for growth's sake either as a last bid for institutional survival or as an entrepreneurial quest for significance, status or success. I am aware, though, that clergy who find themselves in parishes where growth is conspicuously absent may feel downcast or depressed by expectations of growth. That is not the intention. It may well be that there are stubbornly endemic sociological and causes restricting growth in particular situations. If so, we need to be both realistic about the quality of the soil and pragmatic about ways in which we might be able to improve it, if only at the margins of the field. It may be though, that there are issues that need addressing in the life of the Church to develop its health as an expression of the body of Christ. That is where the eight essential qualities of healthy church life are invaluable. In some cases it may well be that the priestly leadership itself is not as empowering as it needs to be to release the people of God into the work of the kingdom of God. Where that is the case, let's be honest about it and seek to support, develop and grow that leadership.

Another and comparable way in which we are trying to mitigate the risk of failing to fulfil our primary purpose is by our readiness to develop new forms of Church life. The Synod heard from Greg and Catherine Bartlem at its last meeting about one such new expression of the Church, and was – I sensed – much encouraged. In the November meeting we had a whistle stop tour around the diocese from the Archdeacon Missioner on our eight or so pioneer initiatives. They are a cause of hope and celebration but they are also a challenge to think hard about how they can be properly resourced for the work that we have given them to do. I am glad to report, therefore, that a new strategic task group has been established to review the way the diocese manages its financial assets to explore whether there are ways in which we might generate more income for our missionary endeavours, and I am grateful to Graham Wright for chairing that group.

Related to but different from our pioneer initiatives are some imaginative attempts to bring new life into some parishes which, for a variety of reasons, are struggling in some way. They often involve the creative use of curates such as at St. Mary Magdalen, Coventry, Holy Cross, Coventry and at St Laurence, Meriden. In each of these, and in other comparable ones, there are real signs of a turnaround in church life.

I am also able to report that the Archdeacon Pastor is heading up another group to consider how the risk of failing to reach all of the rural communities of our diocese can be mitigated. The work of this group will be to think hard about the models of rural ministry currently used in the diocese to determine whether they are fit for purpose and, if not, to propose alternative and better patterns of rural ministry and mission.

A further aspect of mitigating mission risk is to do all we can to ensure that the Bishop's staff is as effective for the kingdom of God as we can be. Bishop John and I are hugely grateful for the quality and commitment of our colleagues and I am deeply honoured by the opportunity to lead such a team of talented colleagues whom I also count as my friends. Together we are working to review our roles, our relationships and our responsibilities in order to serve the diocese as fully and efficiently as we are able.

The biggest risk to the work of God through the Diocese of Coventry is that, like the Church of Ephesus, we lose our first love of Christ, or that like the Church of Laodicea, our works are lukewarm, neither hot or cold, or that like the Church of Sardis, we have a name of being alive but, in reality, we are dead. Remaining fully alive in Christ is our highest calling. So I am very grateful to Keith Mobberley and the team that is working with him to develop places of spiritual renewal and sources of spiritual refreshment across the diocese. I am also excited by Bishop John's plans to develop a regular pattern of Monday to Thursday prayer at Offa House from July 7<sup>th</sup>.

There are three other matters that I would like to touch upon in the remainder of this address.

The first is to say that I very much look forward to the Ordination Retreat and Ordination Services this year. The retreat will have a distinctively ecumenical dimension because it will be conducted by a Lutheran Pastor, Dr. Cornelia Kulawik and a Roman Catholic priest, Father Robert Hamilton. They will both preach at the Ordination Services and, at the priesting on Saturday, they will be joined by the Reverend Ruth Gee, the retiring President of the Methodist Conference. I hope the ordinations this year will be well attended not only to support our candidates but to witness this unique ecumenical moment.

The ordinations this year take place at the threshold of the July General Synod in which I hope that the unanimous views of the Diocesan Synods up and down the land will be reflected in the Synod's Final Approval for the Ordination and Consecration of Women as Priests. If so, the Parliamentary and Royal stages of the process will follow hard on the Synod's heels and we will be able to expect the first appointments of women bishops from some time in the latter part of 2015. As well as making possible the consecration of women as bishops the legislation will repeal The Priests (Ordination of Women) Measure 1993 and The Episcopal Act of Synod 1993.

At least one new arrangement will be needed in the diocese in order to fulfil our responsibilities in the House of Bishops' Declaration. I will need to choose a bishop 'to undertake ministry in respect of a parish which has passed a resolution'. The Declaration goes on to make clear that 'the choice should be made from among male bishops who are members of the House of Bishops of the Diocesan Synod of that or another diocese in the Church of England'.

I expect to choose Bishop Jonathan Goodall, Bishop of Ebbsfleet, for such ministry. Bishop Jonathan qualifies on the grounds of being a member of the

House of Bishops of other dioceses. However, it makes much more sense for the provision for parishes to be provided from within the diocese rather than, as it were, imported from the outside. I intend, therefore, as discussed with the Dean of Women's Ministry, other members of Bishop's Core Staff and Bishop's Council, to make Bishop Jonathan an Assistant Bishop of Coventry diocese (as he and other Provincial Episcopal Visitors are in a number of other dioceses).

I have asked the Registrar to draw up the necessary instrument and for it to take effect from the point at which Final Approval is given by General Synod to the Measure for the Ordination and Consecration of Women as Bishops. I hope that Bishop Jonathan's appointment will be seen as an attempt (in the words of the Bishops' Declaration) to 'contribute to the mutual flourishing' of the life of the Church across the Diocese of Coventry.

Finally, again looking ahead to the future, Synod will remember that in November we had an enlivened discussion about the 100<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the revived Diocese of Coventry in 2018, and the build-up to 2018 and legacy from it. I am very glad to say that the Dean has generously agreed to head up a task group to plan the celebrations and commemorations. The Dean and I are now looking for a small group of lay and ordained people to join him in that important work. We would be both very glad of expressions of interest from members of Synod or any other ideas of people who might be approached.

Christopher, Bishop of Coventry  
The Feast of the Birth of John the Baptist, 24<sup>th</sup> June, 2014