

## **BUILDING CHURCH**

So why are we here?

Over three Saturdays something over 700 parishioners and members of the Diocese will gather in one of three venues. I am often being told that communication, the sharing of information and openness is the key to understanding and getting people to join together in a common enterprise. Building Church is an exercise in doing just that. It is not easy to get a lot of people together in the Diocese, and its not cheap. But it seems to me now is a very good time to do just that. In 2014 we will 100 years old as a Diocese. It is a good time over the next few years to look at what we need to do to enable the Good News of Jesus Christ to be heard and lived in this area in the most powerful way we can. We share that task with our fellow Christians, but we cannot avoid the call that we have to be church.

One of the great influences in the formation of my Christian vocation is the Society of Saint Francis. This is the Anglican religious order that seeks to follow the spirituality of St Francis of Assisi. It was brothers of the order, who I first met when they visited the school I was at, who awoke in me the realisation of the excitement and hope of the Gospel.

It has led me over the years to read quite widely about the spirituality of St Francis, and in the one and only sabbatical that I have had in my ministry, I spent some time in reading the foundation documents about St. Francis.

The classic story of his call to a life of Holy Poverty is well known by many people. As a young man he was clearly going through a crisis, knowing that he was called to a radical living out of the gospel, but not knowing what that meant. He spent many hours in a rather run down rural church. He found here the sanctuary and the peace that allowed him to find that depth of prayer that penetrates the soul. It was while he was

contemplating the ancient and ornate cross hanging in the sanctuary, a remarkable product of the Eastern church in the style of an Icon, that he seemed to hear the voice of God:

“Francis, go and repair my church which, as you see is falling down.”

Well, in a way that would gladden the heart of any Diocesan Advisory Committee for the Care and Repair of Churches, never mind English Heritage and the Churches Conservation Trust, Francis took this vision literally. He began to physically rebuild the battered little parish church, much to the astonishment of the parish priest. He of course was able to just do this without the need for faculty, and he supplied the wherewithal for the materials, or rather he used his father’s money to get the materials.

Of course what then happened was the realisation that it was a spiritual re-building that God was calling Him to carry out. So started an astonishing spiritual awakening that transformed a church corrupted by its own wealth and power. It was done by a very literal living out of the Gospel. Francis renounced all worldly goods and embraced poverty, putting all his trust in God. He did it in a terrifyingly austere way. As with many holy people he was difficult to live with and alarming at times. Yet he attracted people by the thousand in his own lifetime. His enduring love for God’s world and people, came because he loved God in Jesus Christ, and he knew that God loved his creation.

So what? What has a 13th century reforming , saintly Christian got to do with us?

I think every generation has to build church. Please note the way I put it. I am not coming here arrogantly saying that clearly the Church of England in Suffolk is falling down, and it needs

rebuilding. Much as I admire and love the little poor man of Assisi, I make no pretence of imitation!

But we are called to proclaim the Gospel afresh in each generation. That means that there are timeless truths that endure, and the wisdom of generations that we should be foolish to ignore. But it also means that we have our own particular times and circumstances, and we have to be alert to how we let the Good News of Jesus Christ be heard.

This in essence is what Building Church is about – asking what we are doing to let the Gospel be heard in our time. Asking if we are doing all we can to proclaim that Gospel afresh.

Building Church. Not “re-building” because we are building on the heritage of faithful Christians through the centuries.

Building Church. Not “the Church” because it is about building the body of Christ, and not confining ourselves to the physical building, though the part that has to play is important. Not “the Church” because we build as fellow Christians with many other denominations. We are called to be the Church of England, but we are an inclusive Church that takes a full part in the ecumenical enterprise that many tell me is in the doldrums at the moment, but which nevertheless has made astonishing strides over the last sixty years.

Building Church is about building us up as the Body of Christ. Getting us beyond a “them and us” mindset, to seeing how every community may know enthusiastic ministry in the name of Jesus Christ.

When a new Bishop comes to a diocese, there is an ancient ceremony known as the “Confirmation of Election” which takes place in the “Court of Arches”, or St Mary-le Bow Church in London. It is part legal, as at that moment the Bishop actually takes possession of the responsibilities of the See and has to

learn to sign documents in quite a complicated way in the case of Saint Edmundsbury and Ipswich. (It was my punishment for having the easiest signature in the Church of England before when as Bishop of Stockport I only had to add “port” to my name!)

But in that ceremony the most important part can be missed. The Archbishop gives a very direct charge to the new bishop. Some of it is the Archbishop’s wonderful extempore preaching on a scripture passage chosen by the new bishop. But part of it is a formal document listing some of the crucial issues that are alive at this time for the church. They might seem general, but they are actually a distillation of the document that the Diocese put together as a “Statement of Needs” for the Diocese in the appointment of a new Bishop, and what the Archbishops’ Appointments Secretary, and the Prime Minister’s Appointment Secretary found when they visited the Diocese and spoke to literally hundreds of people in the churches and society about their perceptions.

The key tasks at that moment were set out like this:

- Open people’s eyes to the power of the gospel through your preaching and teaching and, building on the foundations that you have been given, kindle a spirit of excitement alive to the possibilities for a growing and flourishing Church.
- Nurture the developing life of Suffolk and encourage parishes as they take the Good News into their local communities. Cherish the strong tradition of church in community that is handed to you and support those who are seeking opportunities to plant the seed of the gospel in new and growing towns and cities.

- Connect the wider church with the developing social and economic agenda across the diocese and region and work closely with ecumenical partners and neighbouring dioceses to make the vision of God's kingdom a reality on earth.
- Share your wisdom with all those who are involved in the leadership of the Church. Shape and hold a vision for the ministry and mission of the Church, which can be seen and understood by all, and guide and strengthen parishes, deaneries and diocesan office as they play their role in delivering this.
- Love and care for your clergy and lay ministers and equip them for the journey. Engage creatively with those in rural areas to discern a realistic and fruitful pattern of ministry and mission.
- Build a church community which values and loves the diversity of God's creation and where all feel that their voice can be raised and listened to.

Notice the word "build" in the last point.

The first point is basic, after all if the Bishop isn't excited and enthusiastic about the gospel he is not going to get anyone else in the same frame of mind. But actually it is a general thing about the church in this land. It is so easy to get trapped into the crisis of the time that we lose the good news and forget to proclaim it. We need to convey a sense of excitement about our faith that is not just about the enthusiasm of the moment, but a spirituality that sustains. It is important that the bishop comes to communities to be an encourager in all that. Hence the deanery visits last year, and this very exercise now.

The second point acknowledges one of the great assets of the diocese, that we are represented in every community, and usually in rural areas church is regarded by all as part of the community, even by those who are not active participants in church life. But there are towns and housing areas that are growing where we are not represented, and populous urban areas where we are thin on the ground. So I am glad that we have begun to get off the ground some of the mission posts that we have carefully budgeted for over the last few years. In Ipswich a Minister for New and Emerging Communities is starting ministry. In the populous town of Haverhill a pioneer post is being developed. Similarly in the developments at Red Lodge in Mildenhall we hope that new ecumenical outreach can begin.

The third point is about the church playing a full part in the life of the county. We often forget as a Diocese the crucial role of our church schools. But they make a significant contribution to the education of our children, and there are possibilities for that contribution to increase. But there are so many areas where we need to work with others who are concerned for the well being of the community, from local government to voluntary organisations.

Just recently I opened the re-furbished Post Office in Haughley. Here is a fine example of the church serving a community. The Post Office had to close through the retirement of the local Postmistress. It happened that the local church was the beneficiary of a generous legacy. The PCC decided to use a large part of that in purchasing the Post Office building and then setting about an imaginative refurbishment. The Village Community were fully behind the scheme and happy to work with the church. The result is an excellent Post Office and a Community room which is of immense benefit to the community generally.

We certainly need to work with our fellow Christians. We haven't begun to mine the resources of the Anglican Methodist Covenant. A covenant I may say not between two churches, but a covenant with God in unity for mission. Increasingly in areas of training and administration we are going to have to be so careful with our resources, and that will involve sensible working with the dioceses of the eastern region.

The fourth point is about a collaborative episcopacy that shares with all those who are in a role of ministerial leadership. The holding of a vision for ministry and mission that can be understood has become more urgent because of the world wide economic crisis. To help the church flourish in these times will require all of us working together and trying to understand what each contributes. The deaneries I am convinced will have a crucial role in this – yet too often I hear people say “deaneries don't mean anything to people, they don't know what deanery they are in.” Well if local consultation and working together is to become a reality that is where it will happen. But above all it is vital that as a Diocese we become just “US” not “Us and them.” I would like at this point to pay tribute to our hardworking Diocesan Staff.

The fifth point is unashamedly about the care of the ordained and those in Lay Ministry. The outside visitors to the Diocese did raise a point about morale. I have asked the question fairly directly in some quarters and get the response that on the whole the morale of the clergy is very good. But on pressing that I think that anxieties rest in two areas. The first is that in a large area with many churches, the clergy do feel stretched. Multi parish benefices are demanding of time and organisation, and when the resources are there they flourish. But where unrealistic expectations are raised then anxiety sets in. We have a real, and I would say constructive task to create enough ministry for there to be enthusiastic ministry for every community.

The other area is the vexed question of the relationship of clergy to the raising of parish share. On the one hand they feel highly responsible for motivating people to meet the request for share made. But they are very aware that most of this goes to cover the stipend and costs of the parochial clergy. It does feel like singing for your supper. Often if the share is not met, they are left with feelings of guilt or inadequacy. I don't necessarily say that this is a widespread phenomenon, nor would I want to exaggerate it, but it is one of the areas that the support of the whole church is vital. I will have more to say later on that.

A church community that loves the diversity of God's creation is one that shows its stewardship of that creation. The Diocese is taking seriously the care of the environment, and that will be something that we need to be constantly alert to. But the point here is also about those in the community that don't get heard. There are many people now being affected by the downturn in finances, but there has been hidden rural poverty for a long time now, and sometimes in unexpected areas. How do we begin to show the love of Christ to those most needy in our community?

So to sum up:

Excitement and enthusiasm for the Good News of Jesus Christ

Encouragement and Nurture

Connection with the wider community and church

Establishing collaboratively a vision for effective ministry and mission

Pastoral care and proper resourcing of clergy and lay ministry in realistic ministries

Building a Church that listens carefully and loves God's creation in all its diversity

Different language, but St Francis would have recognised much of that.

We are well served by the five marks of mission in keeping focussed in these areas:

They have been in the Diocesan bloodstream for years now, but a reminder of what they are:

### The Five Marks of Mission of the Worldwide Anglican Communion

- To proclaim the Good News of the Kingdom
- To teach, baptise and nurture new believers
- To respond to human need by loving service
- To seek to transform unjust structures of society
- To strive to safeguard the integrity of creation and sustain and renew the life of the earth

So how do we build church?

There are certain structural things that are already happening. We have had a consultation about the number of Archdeacons and the configuration of deaneries. Whilst that is not the big answer to our mission it begins to ask questions of what we want deaneries to be. We need to finally answer the question of how many Archdeaconries we are going to operate. For over five years we have run three Archdeaconries with two archdeacons. The current structures review which has recently gone to Diocesan synod recommends that now is the time to go to two Archdeaconries. It asks Deaneries to begin to work together as, four already have in two pairs, and ask the question about future sizes and numbers.

We are also bringing in leaner governance by bringing together policy and finance and the new Diocesan Mission and Pastoral Committee. There have been difficulties about separating policy and finance, and we have to be much quicker on our feet nowadays in these matters.

But structures can only be servants. What we want is enthusiastic ministry in every community. If we are to do that we have to decide what sort of ministry and how it is to be trained. The local church will be vital to our call to be the church to the nation, as opposed to offering chaplaincy to our congregations.

Recently the bishops met, and were challenged by the Church Commissioners not to get into the mood to retrench and reduce.

Many urge me to do that one way or another. “We cannot go on with these many churches.” “We have too many clergy in rural areas.”

Well the First Estates Church Commissioner quoted the French general in the first world war reporting to Marshal Foch. “Hard pressed on my right. My centre is yielding. Impossible to manoeuvre. Situation excellent. I shall attack!”

Actually in the face of all the gloom of recession, our fears about an indifferent secular society, how about going for growth?

How about aiming to put more ministry into the parishes? It won't be full time stipendiary ordained ministry. The overall numbers of full time clergy available nationally will be declining over the next ten years, so we know that we might have a reduced number there whatever we do. But what about the deliberate seeking of Self Supporting Ministers and Ordained Local Ministers? We are incredibly blessed in this diocese with many able retired clergy. What about a better package of offering House for Duty for the retired in the early stages of retirement?

What about that marvellous resource of Lay Ministry? I would love to see Readers numbers boosted, and to explore all the ways that such ministries can offer recognised leadership in the

parishes in more rounded ways than at present. We have comparatively few “Acknowledged Lay Ministers” such as Pastoral Assistants, we could develop things there. If Elders, which are a popular category of ministry in the diocese, are to flourish, what more training or support would help?

If we want to attract more people to join us in being part of the body of Christ, what resources are we prepared to put into developing serious Youth Work? We have just appointed a development officer for youth work, how good it would be to be able to devote serious resources to that task.

There are many new forms of mission and outreach which are enthusing people, and we are not behind in our embracing of these. You will I expect have heard of the “Fresh Expressions of Church” initiative. Members of the national “Fresh Expressions” team have visited the Diocese this year, and it was very gratifying that they found in a day many wonderfully creative examples of fresh initiatives, reaching out to people.

Some of the possibilities for the future will be shown to you in the Building Church event.

But these cannot just come as a top down initiative. It is the local church which needs to be supported in seizing the initiative. I hope that over the next phase in the life of the diocese we can be much more proactive in planning for mission. Many dioceses ask parishes to draw up Mission Action Plans or Growth Action Plans and provide the support to help them do that.

It is that sort of proactive approach that I dearly want to encourage.

Some of the possibilities are shown on Archdeacon David’s DVD

At “Building Church”, you have seen a snapshot of what we are doing as a diocese now. You will have seen the nature of the work done by many parts of the church. Often we just don’t know what is being done, and where help can be found for what we want to do.

This is the fourth diocese I have ministered in in this country and the fifth overall. I do want to assure you that we are well placed to go for a positive and brave future. I have had the humbling experience of working for five years in a very poor part of the Anglican Communion. I saw a small, poor church seeking to minister over vast distances with poor communications. The Church didn’t have a fraction of the resources we have. Yet it still survives and with growth in numbers. The Gospel cannot be suppressed. That is why our link with the Diocese of Kagera is so important for our spiritual health. In these times of recession I hope we can be even more generous with our practical support, and certainly with our prayers.

But even in the Church of England we are fortunate. So, I hope that we can now begin to focus on what we can do, and to ask the question “How can we build Church?” We will have to be imaginative, creative, faithful and courageous.

But that is what being a Christian is about. I hope that we can convey the excitement and opportunity of being part of the Body of Christ in this lovely part of the world in our time. I hope that you will be willing to join in looking for ways of building church, and not get sucked into a downward spiral of fear and retrenchment.

Yes, and I haven’t mentioned it so far, it will need a generous approach to funding the mission. If we are not poorer as a result of the crunch, the world tells us that we ought to be feeling

poorer. That is just the time for a Christian to be more generous with time talent and wealth.

Just recently we had at Diocesan Synod an excellent presentation from Dr John Preston the national stewardship adviser. There is a new report going to General Synod this July called "Giving for Life."

He gave us a little snapshot of what is going on in the Diocese in our Giving.

Today is not about giving, but it is notice that we are going to become more pro-active about this.

Yes, that applies to me too. This is not about guilt inducing appeals, you can only give what you can, but it is a call to courage and daring. If I say this am I prepared to say that this is an enterprise worth generous giving?

Yes I am.

As with anyone else I have had to learn courage in giving. The penny (forgive the pun) dropped when I was in the developing world where so many lived on subsistence wages. There I saw the embarrassing kindness and generosity that very poor people so often have.

I also learnt that whatever you give, and give unconditionally, so much more is given to you. I now have a Charities Aid Foundation account, and I use Gift Aid Envelopes wherever I can. One way or another I follow the tithe for the Church and give 10 per cent of my income to the Church. Partly through the local parish, partly through gift aided donations. Other charities are not excluded, but they are in addition to that. Now that is the particular point that I have reached. It is something that needs reviewing each year, and I would like to think that I can do better than that. Of course I am lucky, in that my

accommodation is provided. Of course it is easier to give 10 per cent of a generous stipend than 10 per cent of a small wage or pension. As the report to General Synod learning to live generously, and being generous for life that is the real key to this before a set formula.

If as a diocese we could get somewhere near the national targets for giving it would make a huge difference. Even reaching the national diocesan average of giving would make a significant difference.

So where do we go from here? I hope eager to plan for the future. Ready to assist in your parish and deanery with plans for mission. Ready to look for hope and to be an outward looking church wanting to serve not preserve, wanting to thrive rather than survive.

. But please remember that word “build” and think “what can be constructive?” What have I got to say that will build church.

Of course not everyone can be at one of the three Building Church events– we will get a flavour of the day to all parishes, and try to build the vision and confidence of our church.

Find a time to pray about all this. Pray for all our fellow Christians, and for all the people of the county whom we seek to serve. Pray for those with responsibility to minister, to inspire, to teach and preach and all those who serve in the rich variety demonstrated today.

Above all pray for you part in building Church.