

Growing Church: Bishop's Report

Beginning

In my charge earlier today I encouraged us to see ourselves in the spirit of the Acts of the Apostles, as a courageous and convincing people reaching beyond sacred walls into public spaces and issues of the day.

Progress

Last Synod I said that I hoped Brechin would be recognised as 'the most improved diocese'. Whether we have achieved that is perhaps for others to say but I hope you sense that things are happening and that we are moving forward. I believe that our public profile is better and that we are starting to tackle local problems, some of which are long-standing and tricky.

During 2012 I completed my Diocesan Visitation, worshipping in charges, meeting with Vestries and the clergy. So I now better understand the stories and issues around people and places which are always in my prayers. Although much is encouraging, where things are just not as good as they should be we must expect more challenge and change.

Our annual diocesan statistics suggest that we able to put the brakes on some measures of decline. We now need to put our foot on the accelerator. Numbers for their own sake are in vane but Christian growth in faith and numbers is a Gospel imperative and if we see ourselves as Chapter 2013 of the Acts of the Apostles then growth is encouraging, capacity-building and enables us to be increasingly influential in wider society.

Resources for change

Information is powerful. Twenty-two charges responded to my letter enquiry last November about growth in faith, numbers and outreach. Congratulations to St Luke's Dundee and St Drostan's, Tarfside who were the earliest to reply and to all respondents for your particularly frank or ambitious reflections.

There are some significant no-shows so I hope that the remainder will reply by Easter because your stories are important to the diocesan family as a whole. You will appreciate that I cannot report in detail today but what emerges is a mixed picture of denial and anxiety, effort and imagination with some reward, often in small increments but sometimes quite dramatically, for example attendances at Christingle services doubling or unlikely community links forged. Some churches are experiencing growth in numbers or outreach reach; others are at risk numerically and financially; others have real potential with the right spiritual and strategic leadership.

The key reason for my request for information is to encourage every priest and Vestry to consider what Growing Church means in an intentional and structured way. Remember, research shows that growing Episcopalian churches have common features: a clear sense of purpose, confident clergy and lay leadership, younger members and an absence of local conflict.

So there is good news to share, but also some realities to be faced. A fuller consideration of the responses and the heartbeat of the diocese will take place in our boards.

Our regular clergy study days at Edzell and annual retreat are appreciated and well attended. They represent a theological, professional and vocational investment in our workforce, building friendships, support networks and a sense of Team Brechin.

The Clergy Review & Development Scheme is being re-launched this Spring. Licenced clergy will have a review with the Bishop or Dean every two years with a follow-up in the intervening year. It helps clergy and churches flourish if priests are empowered in their vocations as reflective practitioners and that vestries have strategic clarity in what we are intending to achieve.

Important training days for clergy and vestry members on Spirituality and on Charity Trustee Responsibilities is planned during the coming year. Please take advantage of them. If the engine room of our interior life is not fed then as Christians we dry up and are lethargic and unattractive to seekers.

There is a tendency sometimes for Vestry responsibility for decisions as charity trustees to be undermined rather than informed by congregational discussions. Our Church is episcopally led and synodically governed. That means the Bishop-in-Synod we experience today as a diocese is replicated locally in each Charge by the Rector or Priest in Charge in Vestry.

Phase One of our new Diocesan Website was launched as planned in December, highlighting Christmas Services and turn of the year news. We are indebted to Karen Willey in Arbroath for the considerable hours she has spent pushing this 'shop window' project forward with our specialist contractor. Providing churches send us news, stories, photos and up to date data the Diocesan Office can upload material on a weekly basis. Phase Two will follow when we assess the initial impact and understand what additional functions will assist the diocese.

The Bishop's House and the Diocesan Office are combining a new telephone system, the office has new computer and printing equipment and is regularly used for meetings of all kinds. Costs have been driven down through more competitive procurement and contracts. Our culture is Christian and voluntary but increasingly professional rather than amateur. We hope to secure architectural/building surveying consultancy support for the diocese shortly from a Dundee practice.

People

Various appointments both incoming and outgoing have happened over the past twelve months and a list is provided in your pack of papers. I hope I have remembered to thank all our officers and volunteers as we have moved through our agenda today. Our Swaziland companions have a catch-all phrase for mentions on formal occasions such as this: 'All protocols observed.' In short, we are grateful to all who serve in our diocese in such varied ways.

We record with sadness Joyce Mumford's death in September and thank David Mumford for his service as Dean of the diocese, overseeing an episcopal vacancy and welcoming a new bishop. In December Jean Kelty retired as a seasoned Bishop's Secretary and was given a warm 'thank you' by the clergy and Administration Board. The welcome appointments of Dr Francis Bridger as Dean and Jacqueline Milton as my able Personal Assistant are already enhancing the life of the diocese. Helen and Francis Bridger are reviving Broughty Ferry and we hope to be recruiting a priest for Montrose & Inverbervie soon.

Earlier today we indicated our gratitude to Alastair Dorward for his fine work as our Diocesan Registrar over many years and welcomed his successor, John Thom, also from the legal firm Miller Hendry.

I am delighted that Synod has confirmed Ann Johnston's appointment as our new Diocesan Secretary. She has much to offer in reshaping this strategic role.

As Bishop I am concerned for the quality of our all people, that under God we encourage the gifts and skills, energies and aspirations that will move us forward, in a continuing process of achievement and improvement.

Strategy

The Growing Church research is a helpful starting point to consider how we plan as a diocese. I believe we need to establish the right body to develop policy and to strategically lead the diocese month by month between our infrequent synods. The answer lies somewhere amongst the membership of the Cathedral Chapter, Conveners of Boards, and diocesan officers and key volunteers. My plan is to explore this matter in the coming months with a proposal coming to our Synod in the autumn.

There is a growing urgency to review the scope and sustainability of our Episcopalian presence here in this city area. Like my predecessors I am not in favour of closing churches. However unless we reinvent some and their programmes more radically they will die because they are small, aging, declining and focussing too much on traditional models of priest and the Sunday Eucharist (important as that may be) rather than exploring different ways of being disciples in a differently focussed Church. Forget nursing them back to health – think surgery.

I believe that some of our assets and have been 'sleeping' – we need to use all the resources of people, money and buildings at our disposal more effectively. Every Vestry in the diocese can (indeed should) audit its assets, with sometimes surprising results. I am convinced that we have more than we think we do and need to be far more imaginative.

Preview

Particular good news will be the arrival of Felix Smith, currently at Cuddesdon Theological College in Oxford, to be ordained Deacon on 29 June to serve with the Provost and Cathedral community. Felix will be the first and youngest stipendiary curate to train in our diocese and St Paul's for a very long time.

A number of other individuals are in conversation with our Diocesan Director of Ordinands and Vocations Adviser and I am confident that we can over time grow additional ministries.

Furthermore I am delighted to tell Synod that we are in advanced discussions with the Church Army, a longstanding Anglican evangelistic society, who will be establishing a Centre for Mission in our diocese, in Dundee, embracing fresh initiatives at St Luke's Downfield and the Cathedral, but with encouraging and practical input across the diocese. A couple of evangelists are likely to be appointed in 2014 and costs shared by Church Army, the charges, the diocese and the province. This is a major gain for the Scottish Episcopal Church and will help Brechin Diocese to grow in new and durable ways that serve our 21st century communities more effectively.

Visits to both our Companion Dioceses in Iowa and Swaziland last autumn convinced me that we can extend the scope of these long-standing relationships. The Swazis continue to appreciate our help and I would like to see more young people and clergy moving around the companionship. A Celtic pilgrimage from Iowa is visiting us in July and we hope to welcome Bishop Alan and Bishop Ellinah to our diocese at a special Synod Celebration at Dundee University Chaplaincy Centre on 19 October. Watch out for further details.

Personal

In my own ministry I am very focussed on leading our diocese forward and am being careful about what else I say 'yes' to. I have no desire to sit on lots of General Synod committees and would rather do fresh things which connect with my main role here. However I am pleased on behalf of the College of Bishops to be the Bishop for the Mission to Seafarers Scotland, visiting ports and local chaplains, and it seems I will have an advisory role in the forthcoming marriage and sexuality considerations across the province.

In Dundee I enjoy the oversight of St Margaret's Residential Home and have recently been appointed as a Governor of Abertay University. I continue to write a regular column in the *Courier* and this month my book, *Managing Clergy Lives: Obedience, Sacrifice, Intimacy* is published by Bloomsbury and will hopefully stimulate discussion about contemporary priestly ministry.

Concluding

So there is much to celebrate alongside some serious challenges to be faced and tough decisions to be made. Under God we are led into the future.

We began our day with the story of Peter and John and we need their faithful conviction and courage in the opportunities that are undoubtedly around, reflected in our business agenda and presentations. Luke records that people took notice of the apostles because 'they had been with Jesus' - my prayer is that it may be so for us in our diocese.

Rt Rev Dr Nigel Peyton

Bishop of Brechin