

Believe in Change

*The Rapid Parish Development Programme approach to transforming churches
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1. Introduction

The Church of England has an amazing offer, which is especially relevant and timely. Parishes are committed organisations with a unique message, located in the heart of all our communities. We should be successful.

We have, though, in so many places fallen into a 'management of decline' mode, (whether declared or not) where buildings have become more a liability than an asset. And yet we want and hope to play an animating and leading role in our communities as bringers of light, hope, belief and joy. This will mean a fundamental rethink in our approaches and messages even as our core values and many of our principles stay the same.

We also live in interesting times with rapid and radical economic, technological, cultural and social change evident in all communities. Churches are not keeping up, nor are they shaping/leading these changes and it is likely that some of them will close as the financial realities can be borne no longer. There is a danger that without a rapid and fundamental shift, some church communities will become irrelevant to the culture and communities they are located within. This shouldn't and needn't be the case; we have a wonderful world and life transforming message.

This short article outlines the thinking behind and the implementation of the Rapid Parish Development Programme. Our initial approach was to work with some of our parishes that were thinking about developing new community facilities. It quickly became evident that the (re)development of new facilities was actually the least important issue. We were in danger of adding to the many churches that were burdened with poorly thought through and poorly delivered (re)development projects. It was very clear that there had to be a rethink from first principles about the purpose, mission and offer of these parishes to their local community and wider markets before any such ideas could properly be considered.

2. Background

In the centre of most of our neighbourhoods is a parish church. How do we turn this incredible legacy into an asset so that it can provide a dynamic and sustainable resource for our mission and be a centre of light, hope and belief for all? We believe that it is in our local communities where we can see, experience and best understand the extent of change and disadvantage. We also believe that the Church of England has both a spiritual and temporal obligation to be present, act and provide leadership in these places. We need to be less bashful about it.

Resourcing Mission Bulletin

Jesus, the early and innovative churches, other faiths, successful local schools, business and community-based groups/networks all show that amazing change is possible, even in the most difficult and/or disadvantaged areas. Ironically, change can sometimes be more easily achieved where the circumstances are apparently more difficult. All churches are faced with similar challenges but some are on a lower temperature setting. So it all starts from an honest and realistic assessment of where the particular local church sits within its community.

In some areas, the church is now experienced as an outside organisation, and given the level and extent of change in many communities, it may mean that even the oldest churches now effectively need to operate as new ones. Communities have changed so much (demographics, patterns of life, greater diversity, atomisation etc) that they have to re-introduce and sell themselves in a place of transformed expectations and context. They need to behave more like a start-up organisation than an old incumbent one.

Change is not just local – wider ideas of employment, being younger or older, as well as gender relations for example have all changed dramatically in recent decades. The very idea of how time and space is ‘used’, socialising, and our expectations and ambitions, these are, for many, unrecognisable from even those held in recent decades. Within this ferment, there is a strong and growing desire for ‘something’: ‘nourishment’, ‘peace’, ‘spirituality’, ‘love’ and ‘friendship’ etc., that is expressed by many people.

Fortunately, we also have a high level of goodwill for the local parish church – there is some recognition of its identity and role in local community life. As communities change and face increasing challenges, there is an historic opportunity to valourize this role and realise this goodwill.

We can’t afford complacency, denial or defeatism. Thinking alone or ‘business as usual’ is no longer viable. This is why we have developed the Rapid Parish Development Programme. We are ambitious for mission and impact and we want our churches to be successful in a way that is meaningful to them, their context and community.

3. Programme

The Rapid Parish Development Programme (RPDP) is a unique programme for local parishes that are considering new ways to engage with their community and / or a building project. It uses adapted social / business development techniques to help participants think in a focussed and creative way about the potential role of their Church in bringing light, hope and belief to their community through new engagement and ambition.

The RPDP was developed by the Council for Social Responsibility (CSR) at the Diocese of Portsmouth and it is now working with the Church Urban Fund to share learning. The programme works best as a collaboration between selected local parishes, their diocese and CSR. It provides an opportunity for parish teams to:

Resourcing Mission Bulletin

- i) *Develop a positive understanding of the dynamics and opportunities in their community.*
- ii) *Identify what specific elements their mission work and/or proposed development will need to include, in order to align and proactively reposition themselves within their local community, and bring high-profile and sustainable benefits.*
- iii) *Present clearly and positively their vision, objectives and their ambitions.*

The RPDP generally consists of two group workshops, with three parish teams and a parish presentation (in varying formats) with each of the parishes. In some cases, workshops have been run with individual parishes, although this is relatively more expensive. The peer challenge and example between parishes has been a useful and positive element.

Where appropriate, at the end of a programme a tailored project prospectus has been produced, covering key findings and messages.

The group and parish workshops cover:

- Social and cultural challenges facing local churches
- Identification and engagement with emerging opportunities in the local area
- Clear statement of the real priorities
- What can the parish offer the local market?
- Development of a positive pitch about the offer
- To whom and how will this be sold?
- What is needed from the buildings?
- How can these ambitions be resourced?

The programme encourages parishes to rethink, from first principles, their role in their local market place. If appropriate, additional work is required from participants between workshops to engage with new local stakeholders to help them identify new opportunities for their parish. Contributing/participating parishes are asked to provide a team (a minimum of 3 – the vicar and two lay members) and pay a fee (no exceptions) to participate in the programme. (People value what they pay for and are more likely to turn up.) The willingness to think differently and prioritise new ways of working is crucial to the programme's success.

Providing outside facilitators, time out, challenge and creative ideas provides a unique opportunity for parishes to think about their role and what they have to offer in their changing local community.

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So far RPDG has been run in 11 parishes with great success. All have come out of it with a clearer idea of what it is they want to achieve. Key elements of what has been learnt so far include the following:

- Where in some parishes a new building was a possibility, now, in several cases, they have realised that they do not need a big new 'vanity' project as previously envisaged. This alone has saved parishes at least £10million. Two churches now have plans to walk away from their current buildings entirely (only one of them is modern). It is often about seeing and using our existing buildings in new and better ways.
- It quickly becomes apparent to participants in the programme that it is not about buildings at all but about people and communities and how church communities engage with them. Once the church community has come to a view about what its mission and priorities should be, other things fall into place. Questions about buildings then become based on how the current or redeveloped buildings can serve the mission, rather than how the community can serve the buildings, (i.e. rather than the tail wagging the dog). Church Councils don't need or want to be asset managers, although it is all too easy for them to fall into it.

This has to some extent to be fun. If it is not an enjoyable experience for people to come together to consider these things, why should they bother or come back, or keep coming back?

Some parishes are already engaging with their communities in important and useful ways. Sometimes the form is there but tired and what is needed is a simple refreshing. For others it is a more major re-thinking, re-engaging, re-positioning and a re-launch.

Several parishes have stated that they want to work more closely with young people. They have even been prepared to construct multi-million pound buildings to achieve their goal, often without asking any young people whom they want to see inside it if they would go near the place. Often it turns out that the annual PCC budget for youth work is a few hundred pounds, or less. The fact that some parishes' hopes and expectations are unrealistic has to be (and is) challenged if money is not to be wasted unnecessarily. There is little point in pandering to people's mistaken expectations and displacement activities. There is a great deal more to be gained by challenging them to come up with something better. Often this can be achieved for a much lower cost.

Parishes often behave as supplicants. 'Can we do this?' 'Will we be allowed to do that?' They need to move forward more confidently with a stronger offer and better evidenced realistic vision, asking instead those same people, 'why wouldn't you support this fabulous vision?'

Resourcing Mission Bulletin

Parishes have often been held back by trying to work in partnership with everyone, partly out of guilt, and then finding that nothing happens because it takes too long to agree. We encourage them to move ahead either on their own or with those who want to work with them positively and creatively but are ready now. There is no point trying to bring along those who are not interested or who want to talk but do nothing. It is okay to create some parish envy. Others can be attracted to what is being done at a later stage.

We have also sought to prioritise churches in areas of disadvantage. This has been the best place to work. They know that the idea of doing things in the same old way is over and has to change. They are far more ready to think radically and make the leaps of faith necessary to do something worthwhile and distinctive. Some even have money salted away 'for a rainy day'. The message is that it is raining now, in some cases pouring. The time to invest, as long as it is in the right things, is now. The right things are those which build up the church, its engagement with the community and preferably make a surplus to allow further reinvestment. (No talk of grants, or public sector handouts, those days are over).

4. Conclusion

We need to move out of the survival mode of thinking. Such an approach would guarantee that many of our vital parishes will close. Our experience is that RPDP is proving to be a promising approach to facilitating a shift in thinking, approach and delivery. Taking risks is never easy but many of the communities that we are seeking to serve need constructive risk taking (and that means allowing some ideas to fail in order to discover what works). You reap what you sow, and for too long we have not sown nearly enough.

A successful (re)development and/or a new approach to mission is not primarily a technical exercise, but rather it is a process of re-thinking, re-engaging, re-positioning and re-energising our unique offer (we try and demonstrate this through the way the programme works i.e. it's fun). We take a positive approach to change, but in the programme we have not shied away from strong and challenging messages. We are driven by the urgent need to move beyond denial, helplessness and/or complacency.

We have decided to offer this programme to other dioceses. It does not come cheap as it involves a significant input of time and effort by several people but we believe it is worth it to see places transformed. In terms of savings from not doing the wrong thing, it has saved millions of pounds. Dioceses would usually have to subsidise it substantially but we encourage them at least to make a small charge to parishes for the reasons outlined earlier (something in the region of £500). The full cost for a three parish programme is £10,000. A single parish programme is about £5,000. For parishes in areas of disadvantage, the Church Urban Fund, with whom we have worked, may be willing to help cover some of the costs.

As a result of the work undertaken so far we are developing some new lines of work which will in due course be open to others to find out more. We are setting up a new Joint Venture which will be a one stop shop package development company for churches, other faith groups, and community groups. We are looking at the

Resourcing Mission Bulletin

possibility of helping to finance good projects by means of a community bond which we hope to pilot first locally. We believe this could raise significant sums of money. And we are developing a leadership and enterprise programme with an inspirational secular enterprise school in Denmark.

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