

Private Members' Motion

Mission Action Planning in the Church of England

That this Synod

- a) recognise the urgent missionary task facing the Church of England to reverse decades of numerical decline and make new disciples for Jesus Christ in every community in our land;***
- b) affirm the experience of a remarkable and growing number of parishes that find mission action planning to be a strategic tool which helps them grow in faith, in numbers and in service to their community; and***
- c) call on the Archbishops' Council to work with the central structures of the Church of England to produce a national mission action plan that will support parishes in growing the number of worshipping Anglicans, enabling them to grow in faith.***

The Urgent Missionary Task

In his presidential address last November Archbishop Rowan outlined three overriding priorities for the next five years; the first of these was 'to take forward the spiritual and numerical growth of the Church of England – including the growth of its capacity to serve the whole community of this country'. This call to us to prioritise and work for the growth of the Church of England is very timely. In the 40 years since the formation of the General Synod in 1970, the number of adults attending public worship in the Church of England has fallen by approximately half. Among children and young people the fall has been even sharper – by 80%.¹ This decline in membership, and the accompanying rise in average age, means that fewer people are becoming disciples of Jesus Christ, and that the Church is able to have less impact and influence in the public realm, both nationally and in the transformation of local communities.

As a Synod in its first year, we are faced with a stark and urgent choice: do we spend the next few years managing decline, or do we go for growth? In other words, do we accept the continual numerical decline of the Church of England as inevitable, or do we dare to believe a different future, that God might want his Church to grow, in holiness and in numbers?

Archbishop Rowan's words about 'spiritual and numerical growth' remind us that growth is not just about getting more people into church – Jesus' Great Commission, which appears in different forms in each of the Gospels, is about making disciples (not just converts).² A study of churches that are experiencing growth indicates that the key to numerical growth is supporting people as they make their way on their faith journeys.³ Discipleship is a life-long process, which transforms both individual lives and the communities in which we live out our discipleship.

Our vision for a growing church needs to be rooted in a clear theology of mission. The church is called into being by God not for its own sake, but to be a sign, instrument and foretaste – that is, a sacrament – of the Kingdom of God.⁴ Seen within this context, a strategy for growth is essential,

¹ Estimated on basis on national returns for usual Sunday attendance of adults and electoral roll membership, and on uSa figures for children.

² Matthew 28.16-20; Mark 16.15; Luke 24.47-49; John 20.21-23

³ Feedback from those participating in *Leading Your Church into Growth* courses.

⁴ This way of describing the Church is both Anglican and ecumenical. It is expounded in the Anglican-Reformed agreed statement, *God's Reign and our Unity*, and in the ARCIC agreed statement *Church as Communion*. It is also found in

not to preserve an institution, but to enable us more effectively to further God's mission in the world. A church that is shrinking and ever losing people of all ages, though most notably the young, is less able to be a sign and instrument of God's Kingdom, and has fewer people and resources to further the common good of society.

Going for long-term, sustainable growth in the church starts with prayer, seeking to discover the missionary heart of God, so that we might identify and further the work of God's Spirit in the world. The Holy Trinity is a God of mission: indeed the word 'mission' has its origin in the sending of the Son by the Father, and the sending of the Spirit by the Father and the Son.⁵ Mission is an attribute of God, not simply an activity of the church. Only God can make his church grow – as Paul reminded the Corinthians, 'I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth.'⁶ A decision to go for growth begins with urgent prayer, that we might be guided by God and empowered by him.

However the decision to go for growth will also require planning and willingness to change. It is folly, as we know, to keep doing the same things over and over and expect a different outcome. For Synod, deciding to go for growth will mean in particular, as Archbishop Rowan has challenged us, reimagining the Church's ministry for the century coming, so that there will be a growing and sustainable Christian witness in every local community. It will also mean redeploying our resources, focussing them where there is both greatest need and greatest opportunity.

Mission Action Planning as a Strategic Tool

Growth is happening in parishes across the country - the headline figures of average decline across the Church mask the fact that in any given year approximately one third of parishes see an increase in their numbers. Many churches that are seeing consistent growth have found that mission action planning is a useful strategic tool. The concept of 'mission action planning' (MAP) was developed by Bishop David Hope in London diocese in the 1990s, as a way of helping his new diocese to refocus on its primary task of mission.⁷

MAP is a process which enables a local church to prayerfully discern the priorities God has for it, and to plan the mission activities it is going to undertake over the coming months and years. It is an accessible form of strategic planning, and as such builds on the insights of businesses, schools, hospitals and other organisations, which have to plan carefully if they are to thrive in a complex and challenging environment. A key part of the process is involving the whole church in seeking God and developing a clear vision statement. A vision statement is different from a mission statement – a mission statement describes what an organisation or church **is for** now, whereas a vision statement describes what the church wants to **become** over the next five years.

Once a good vision statement is agreed, it acts as a magnet (drawing people together around the agreed vision) and a compass (pointing the direction of travel). The next phase is for the PCC to work out what steps are needed to achieve that vision, who will be responsible, and what resources need to be redirected to achieve the vision. A clear vision statement helps a busy or struggling church overcome the conflict of competing agendas – if a proposal won't help deliver the vision, it is not a priority. The agreed actions are then written up in the mission action plan, which becomes a working document, reviewed and updated in the light of experience.

the *Meissen*, *Porvoo*, and *Reuilly* statements with the continental protestant churches. See also, A Dulles, *Models of the Church*, pp58-70

⁵ See David Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, p.1

⁶ 1 Corinthians 3.6

⁷ See Mike Chew and Mark Ireland, *How to Do Mission Action Planning*, (SPCK, 2009)

Mission action planning (or a similar process) is now commended as a tool in the growth strategies produced by at least twenty of the dioceses of the Church of England.⁸ Every diocese has now sent a copy of its growth plans to the Church Commissioners, and mission action plans are mentioned frequently in them as a means of enhancing the mission focus of the Church's existing ministry. Evidence from London, York, Lichfield and Blackburn dioceses shows that those parishes that have engaged with MAP in a meaningful way (as opposed to just producing a piece of paper to send to the bishop) are significantly more likely to be growing in numbers than those that have not.⁹ MAP is most likely to be an indicator for growth where

- church leaders are trained and supported in mission action planning, or a similar process
- a member of the senior staff comes alongside a parish in the process of developing their mission action plan, and stays in touch
- the diocese offers grants (perhaps from its parish mission funding) to enable parishes to implement their plans for growth
- the senior staff in the diocese follow the same principles and develop their own mission action plan for the diocese as a whole
- there is a culture of mutual listening, where parishes are involved in shaping the vision of the diocese, and encouraged to contribute their insights and experience

On the other hand, where a diocese produces a MAP for its central structures without consulting the parishes or involving them in prayer, there will be little ownership or energy to implement the plan. Similarly, if a diocesan MAP is produced without engaging with each of the boards and committees of the diocese and helping them to see their place within it, diocesan staff may see the plan as irrelevant to their work. Likewise, if the vision statement is not clear and exciting, and is not regularly communicated at every level of diocesan life, few people will remember it or take it on board. Or if there is no attempt to identify the specific goals that will be necessary to realise the overall vision, or to task individuals with responsibility for delivering each goal, then little action will result and the diocesan strategy will remain purely aspirational.

A National Mission Action Plan?

This accumulated experience of mission action planning at parish and diocesan level also needs to be applied to the national structures of the Church of England. The motion before Synod calls on the Archbishops' Council to work with the central structures of the Church of England (including the House of Bishops) to produce a national mission action plan that will support parishes in growing the number of worshipping Anglicans, enabling them to grow in faith.

Since this PMM was tabled last October, the Archbishop of Canterbury has given three very clear priorities to General Synod in his inspirational presidential address last November:

‘Three main themes have emerged with absolute clarity. We are called –

- (i) to take forward the spiritual and numerical growth of the Church of England – including the growth of its capacity to serve the whole community of this country;
- (ii) to re-shape or reimagine the Church's ministry for the century coming, so as to make sure that there is a growing and sustainable Christian witness in every local community; and
- (iii) to focus our resources where there is both greatest need and greatest opportunity.’

⁸ Ibid., p.7

⁹ Ibid., ch.7

This provides a bold and clear Vision Statement for the church, with (ii) and (iii) clearly following on from (i).

This was taken up in GS1815, *Challenges for the New Quinquennium*, debated by Synod in February. However in that paper the vision is less clear, with the three themes being phrased slightly differently:

- Contributing as the national Church to the common good
- Facilitating the growth of the Church
- Reimagining the Church's ministry

The danger in this change is that the growth of the Church moves in our thinking from being the driving and unifying theme, to become simply one of three agendas competing for time and resources in a busy church. History should make us aware of the reality of this danger. At least twice since the War the Church of England has endorsed the priority of making new disciples – in William Temple's report *Towards the Conversion of England* (1945) and in the Decade of Evangelism - only for the primary focus on evangelism to be lost. The recommendations in the excellent report *Towards the Conversion of England* were never carried through because the church was exhausted by six years of war, and focussed on restoring its damaged buildings. Likewise focus on the Decade of Evangelism arguably suffered through it also being a Decade of major liturgical revision, a Decade in which major financial pressures arose (through the pensions question and some serious losses by the Church Commissioners), and a Decade in which much energy was taken up with internal debate about women priests and provision for those for whom this was an unwelcome development. This said the fruit of the Decade of Evangelism is perhaps now becoming visible in the new century in the development of Fresh Expressions, the growth of Alpha and Emmaus, the development of Messy Church, and a general renewed commitment to the priority of evangelism in many parishes.

Taking forward the spiritual and numerical growth of the Church of England will result in the growth of its capacity to serve the whole community of this country, as we win new generations to become disciples of Jesus Christ, striving to transform society with the values of God's Kingdom. However turning around the overall attendance trends of the last 60 years to move from decline to growth is a massive undertaking, which will require joined-up thinking and action by the House of Bishops, the Archbishops' Council and all the central structures of the Church of England. It will require clear leadership and willingness to change. It will also require pruning in some areas, and will demand that we trust each other more, and continually seek the Holy Spirit for his guiding and empowering.

The parishes of the Church of England are not looking for top-down directives, but they are looking for the Archbishops' Council and the House of Bishops to take the lead in finding new ways to work and pray together, and, with the Church Commissioners and the staff of Church House, to combine their energies and resources to support local parishes in growing the number of worshipping Anglicans, enabling them to grow in faith. This motion affirms that God does want his church to grow, in holiness and numbers, and that mission action planning is a useful tool to help the leadership of the Church of England to pray and plan for growth.

***Jesus said, 'I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing.'*¹⁰**

¹⁰ John 15.5