

GENERAL SYNOD

Vision and Strategy

Summary

This paper focuses on one of the three priorities from within the Vision and Strategy – a Church where mixed ecology is the norm. It reminds Synod of the two specific and deeply-connected bold outcomes that we pray will result from making this a priority.

The paper sets the priority firmly in Scripture. The paper also shows how previous General Synod debates have laid the ground for this priority. Building on this work we look forward to a future

- where mixed ecology is the norm in every local context
- where the parish system is revitalised for mission from which flows a flourishing of new Christian communities
- where every person has the opportunity to encounter the transformation that a life centred on Jesus Christ can bring.

Introduction

1. The central ideas of the vision emerged in 2020 from a wide-ranging series of discussions deliberately involving a wide cross-section of the Church of England, including many Synod members. They were adopted by the College of Bishops and the Diocesan Secretaries of the Church of England at a meeting in September 2020, then shared with General Synod at its November 2020 and February 2021 meetings, and subsequently Synod voted in July 2021 by an overwhelming majority to take note of the strategic priorities and bold outcomes.
2. Over the next few sessions of Synod we hope, with the permission of the Business Committee, to have time examining each of the three strategic priorities; including a Church of missionary disciples and a Church which is younger and more diverse. Firstly, we want to focus on the priority which has had the most discussion and reaction so far: a Church where **mixed ecology** is the norm.
3. Of course, the three strategic priorities are linked together, and the church where mixed ecology is the norm needs to be a church of **missionary disciples**. It will also be a church which is **younger and more diverse** - where we put more energy and resources into working with children and young people and schools and families to reach our bold outcome of doubling the number of young active disciples and where we seek to serve those diverse communities that make up the variety of the life of our country today.

A Church where mixed ecology is the norm

4. The many conversations from which the Vision and Strategy emerged identified two specific and deeply-connected bold outcomes that will, we pray be the result of this priority. The first is a revitalisation of the parish system, which was expressed as the need for a parish system revitalised for mission so there is a pathway for every person into an accessible and contextual expression of Church. Alongside this, and flowing from it, is the second and much discussed

aspiration of creating ten thousand new Christian communities across the four areas of home, work/education, social and digital. We have been very clear that these two outcomes are closely interrelated as most new worshipping communities will spring from the parishes.

5. The mixed ecology is the outworking of the vision of being a Church focussed on, and shaped by, Jesus Christ. The mixed ecology reflects the nature of Jesus' humanity and mission. Professor Andrew Walls writes, 'The Church must be diverse because humanity is diverse, it must be one because Christ is one... Christ is human, and open to humanity in all its diversity, the fulness of his humanity takes in all its diverse cultural forms.' As Paul makes clear in the Letter to the Ephesians, the Church is a celebration of cultural diversity but through Christ also the union of humanity through the breaking down of the wall of partition. The communities of the mixed ecology in Christ are different bricks being used for the construction of a single building (Eph 2.19–22).
6. Of course, this is not a new aspiration at all for our Church. It builds on the direction for the last twenty-seven years following the *Breaking New Ground* report in 1994 and the *Mission Shaped Church* report of 2004. More recently it was voted for overwhelmingly by General Synod in July 2019. Synod agreed to encourage every parish and diocese to be part of this movement, forming new disciples and new congregations through a contextual approach to mission with the unreached in their community; and many parishes and dioceses have already done exactly that to reach the communities they serve.
7. In the General Synod debate in July 2019, the Bishop of Oxford, Steven Croft drew us back to Scripture and the Acts of the Apostles: "There is an important moment in the Book of Acts, in Acts 11, when we read that large numbers of Hellenists come to faith in the Lord Jesus in Antioch. That does not happen because of a plan or a strategy; it happens because of suffering, because the Church was scattered through the martyrdom of Stephen. The good news of Jesus cannot be contained within the structures of the Church and news of this comes to the Church in Jerusalem. The apostles look around the room, as I imagine the scene, and they try and discern whom to send to Antioch. They decide to send, thank God, Barnabas. Barnabas comes to Antioch. He sees what God is doing and rejoices and then joins in as best he can. Barnabas goes to Tarsus and finds Saul. For an entire year, Luke tells us, they associated with "the Church" and the word *ecclesia* is used very deliberately. A new Church has been birthed in a different culture by the Holy Spirit. The apostles discern God's grace in what is happening and **their calling, they believe, is to nurture this new venture and to connect the Body of Christ together.**" My hope is that General Synod members will play an important role in this ministry of encouragement and connection in this quinquennium.
8. The book of Acts shows us that mixed ecology is therefore of course not a new concept but a very old one. The mixed ecology has been part of the Church of England for a long time – so that together with our parish churches it has been in the life of our religious communities (presently almost 8,000 people across our 34 recognised and 16 acknowledged religious communities), in our chaplaincies (presently at least 1,300 lay and ordained chaplaincies in contexts including health care, armed forces, prisons, education and industry) and in

church plants through things like ‘daughter churches’ . More recently this has also included thousands of fresh expressions (of which three-quarters are based in parishes), over two thousand Messy Churches and one hundred Resource Churches (of which 85% are historic parish churches), as well over 8,000 online church communities created within months during the first half of 2020. Our recent history clearly shows that the ecology of the Church is constantly developing, it never has been static.

9. The challenge the priority in the vision makes, is for this mixed ecology –, vibrant, connected and coherent –to become normal: that every local context has a network of Christian community serving the local, work/education, social and digital contexts, enabling every person to know the love of Christ. As Archbishop Rowan said in the introduction to the *Mission Shaped Church* report , “we have begun to recognise that there are many ways in which the reality of ‘Church’ can exist ... What makes the situation interesting is that we are going to have to live with variety: the challenge is how to work with that variety so that everyone grows together in faith and in eagerness to learn about and spread the good news.”
10. The real meaning behind the phrase ‘mixed ecology’ is therefore not about abandoning or dismantling one way of being the Church in order to develop another. It is about taking hold of the historic vocation of the Church of England to be the Church for everyone everywhere, paying attention to the different ways and the different places in which people actually live. The history of Christian mission, ever since the Book of Acts, has been the history of such cultural adaptation. The gospel doesn’t change. But the languages in which it is translated do. And the refining fire of the questions that different cultures pose reveals to us new depths and new truths within that gospel. We don’t want mixed ecology to be the norm in our Church for the sake of having a mixed ecology, but instead because we believe it will enable every person in England to have accessible discipleship pathways into a community of faith.
11. As part of being a mixed ecology Church we need to continue to be bold in holding fast to our calling to be a local church: there because the people are, in all their rich diversity. There to listen and serve, as well as speak and proclaim the gospel, in order to see the Kingdom of God flourishing in every neighbourhood. We need to pay attention to the different spaces in all our lives to be truly local.
12. So, the vision of mixed ecology is simple, humble and bold. It is one where every person can access an expression of Church in ways that make sense for them. I am excited to pray for and dream about the possibilities for mixed ecology in every local context in the next ten years. What might this look like in the future?
13. Maybe that in many parishes there are different expressions of Church, prayerfully supporting and encouraging one another, which have formed in and remain engaged in their networks and neighbourhoods – for example there might be the congregation that meets in a church building, an eco-church, an online church community, a praise and worship gathering, a multi-generational church in the school, a contemplative prayer group in a workplace, a gospel

choir, sports chaplaincy etc (including all denominations). They mutually serve each other (for example, on each other's rotas) and co-operatively serve their local area. Maybe in many areas, particularly rural areas, the mixed ecology will develop and flourish across a deanery or in a cluster of parishes working together.

14. The overriding aim for the future is that any worshipping member of the Church of England, when asked by their friend where they could go to explore their faith, would be able to recommend an expression of Church locally that would really suit them.
15. Of course, this work all happens under the oversight of bishops and clergy, though many of these new initiatives will be lay-led with clergy and laypeople working creatively and collaboratively together to support and equip the whole community in their vocation and ministry in their daily lives.
16. That is in essence the mixed ecology; working together to ensure every person has the opportunity to experience the transformation that a life centred on Jesus Christ can bring, and can participate in a community to nurture an ongoing journey of faith life of prayer, worship and service in our everyday lives. And perhaps like Barnabas, this Synod will have a ministry of encouragement so that a flourishing and nurtured mixed ecology becomes the norm.
17. As Archbishop Justin said in the General Synod in July 2019, "There is no magic answer. There is no single sentence, no single response that will enable the light to shine more brightly and force back those dark clouds. There has to be a portfolio of responses. There has to be the prophetic but there also has to be the local, the messy, the untidy, the small, the welcoming of those who are natural pioneers, entrepreneurs and inventors, and their blessing."
18. The historic vocation of the Church of England is to be the Church for everyone. This is expressed most powerfully through our parishes. But chaplaincy in prisons, hospitals, schools and universities had always been part of this, as has the witness of the religious life – and in recent years the developments associated with church planting, fresh expressions and pioneer ministry. But we must all be pioneering. And we must enable every tradition across the breadth of our Church to flourish. Just as no one expression of Church will be sufficient, nor can one tradition.
19. Therefore, in order to fulfil this vocation today we need to adapt again to the changed circumstances in which we minister and the smorgasbord of cultures we serve. This revitalised parish system at the heart of a mixed ecology Church will be the way we connect with and serve our nation, enabling ministry to grow and flourish in every neighbourhood and network.
20. We look forward to Synod's critical engagement and prayerful support.

Stephen Cottrell
Archbishop of York

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