

GROWING THE BODY OF CHRIST

A Strategy for Growth for the Diocese of Sheffield 2011-2021

The Diocese of Sheffield is called to grow a sustainable network of Christ-like, lively and diverse Christian communities in every place which are effective in making disciples and in seeking to transform our society and God's world.

In November 2009 the Diocesan Synod formally adopted this vision statement which has at its centre a call to grow a network of Christ-like communities. In 2010 we prayed and reflected on this vision together. We also reflected on the ways in which we can understand and deploy our clergy so that our Diocese is able to grow a sustainable network of Christ-like communities through the major document: "Sustainable Patterns of Ministry".

The purpose of this second major policy document, "Growing the Body of Christ", is to unpack what it will mean for the Diocese to grow this sustainable network of Christ like communities over the next decade and how we should focus our energies to see that happen. This document also explores what it means for every community to be effective in making disciples.

A third major strategy document will be developed in 2011 which will explore what it means to grow Christian communities which are effective in seeking to transform our society and God's world.

The first part of the document sets out some theological principles about growth and the life of the church. The second explores what this growth might look like. The third and fourth parts set an agenda for action in two key areas. The final section ties in the growth strategy to the other work we are doing together.

Part One: Theological Foundations

Why do we find thinking about growing the church difficult?

Some members of the Church of England in South Yorkshire at the beginning of the 21st Century find it difficult to think about growing the church. Why is this? For two reasons.

Our understanding is shaped by our experience

The first is that our understanding of growth and what is possible is shaped by our own experience.

The church in the United Kingdom has lived through a difficult hundred years when our story has been overall one of decline rather than growth (with many exceptions). Growth therefore seems to many of us to be extraordinary rather than normal in the life of a church.

However in the whole history of Christianity, the opposite is the case. The growth of the church is normal rather than exceptional. Christianity has grown from tiny beginnings two thousand years ago to the largest of the world faiths today. Across much of the globe, the Christian church is growing rapidly in many different traditions. The first thing we need is a change of perspective to see our own

experience over the last century as unusual and a departure from what is normal for the Christian community.

Living through a long period of decline in church attendance has understandably had a serious affect on our morale and our self understanding. We are tempted to see this decline as failure. Some of us are drawn into blaming ourselves. Perhaps we did not pray enough or preach well enough. Some of us are drawn into blaming others. It has all been the fault of the bishops or the clergy or the laity or those of another tradition. Both of these responses sap our energy and faith.

However, it is wiser to see the period of decline we have lived through as primarily caused by significant change in the world around us. The twentieth century was a difficult century for faith in northern Europe. The signs are that the twenty first century is a different climate and it will be possible for the church and to grow again as a whole, providing that we seize the moment. We find ourselves, however, in a new and evolving situation with more of the population knowing less and less about Christian faith. We will need to discover imaginative ways to begin where people are and build from there.

For much of the second half of the twentieth century the idea that human society will evolve away from religious faith as it “advances” held the public imagination in Britain. This secularisation thesis is now losing its hold on the public consciousness. Faith is acknowledged not as a relic of the past but as part of the living present reality of twenty first century England. Faith communities are seen as offering a vital contribution to society, none more so than the Christian church. The Church of England has slowly recovered its confidence and sense of mission to the whole of our society and its calling to make disciples and to plant new congregations to connect with a greater proportion of the population.

There are now Anglican churches in every part of the country which are growing in a healthy and sustained way and making a significant difference across society, including many in the Diocese of Sheffield. These churches are of many different traditions. If this growth can happen in some places then surely it can spread to every place, by the grace of God.

We react against the insights of the Church Growth Movement

Anglicans are often hesitant about the idea of church growth for a second reason. Many people associate the language of growing churches with the stream of Church Growth thinking which emerged from Fuller Seminary in the United States of America in the 1970's and the 1980's. Although this movement produced some helpful insights which have influenced the Church in the United Kingdom, it was based on a narrow theological understanding of mission as winning converts (as opposed to engaging in the whole breadth of God's mission to the world in loving service and seeking to transform unjust structures).

The church growth school has also, over time, distorted the life of churches by turning an under-emphasis on expanding attendance to a distorted over-emphasis. Churches were encouraged to put *all* of their energy into those activities which increase attendance or membership. This has led, in some cases, to the church becoming driven by the wrong kind of results and mis-shaped by consumer demand (however that is understood). Churches of all traditions recognise the dangers in this. In the last analysis it is far more important for a church to be faithful to the teachings of Christ and the whole of our calling than for it to be numerically large.

We need therefore to reclaim the language of growing the church from the church growth movement. We also need to ensure that our use of this language (and the strategy we develop) is grounded on a

secure and full Anglican understanding of what it means to be the Church of Jesus Christ and what it means to engage in God's mission.

In order to do this we need to return to the Scriptures and understand afresh what they say about growth and the church.

What should we therefore believe about growing the church?

1 Growing the Church is a gift from God and the normal activity of God

Throughout the New Testament, it is clear that growth is God's gift. God gives the gifts for ministry and God grows the church. Growth is also normal rather than exceptional. It is in God's nature to grow things.

The growth of the Christian community is foreshadowed in Jesus' own ministry as larger and larger crowds gather to hear his teaching. However although this growth is seen as normal and natural, it is not seen as absolute. There comes a point at which the number of followers grows smaller again because following Jesus becomes more costly. The parables of the kingdom are, in the main, parables of growth (see for example the parables of the sower, the growing seed and the mustard seed in Mark 4). Others emphasise the value of that which is lost and outside the community and the importance of welcome and joining again (such as parable of the lost sheep, the lost coin and the two sons in Luke 15)

The Book of Acts sets out the story of the growing church from the Day of Pentecost onwards as the normal and normative story of the church in mission. This growth is against a background of struggle, difficulty and persecution. The growth is not even. It is sometimes greater than expectations and sometimes less. There are setbacks and difficulties, points of expansion and consolidation. The growth varies from place to place. However it is always God's gracious gift and the normal expectation of the apostles:

"And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved" 2.47

"Yet more than ever believers were added to the Lord, great numbers of both men and women" 5.14

"The word of God continued to spread; the number of disciples increased greatly in Jerusalem and a great many of the priests became obedient to the faith" 6.7

"Meanwhile the church throughout Judea, Galilee and Samaria had peace and was built up. Living in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit it increased in numbers" 9.31

"But the word of God continued to advance and gain adherents" 12.24

The early Christians reflect on this pattern of growth in their letters to the early churches. They see it as the activity of God. The Greek verb "*auxeo*", to grow, features regularly in their writings. God, not the apostles, is normally the subject of the verb. We need to re-learn this grammar of church growth.

The language of growth and of the growing God is unpacked and explored in two pictures (or clusters of pictures). The first is the picture of farming, the second the image of the Church as the Body of Christ. We can learn lessons from each.

Writing to the Corinthians, Paul uses the wonderful phrase "the growing God", using the picture of farming to describe key task of making of disciples:

"I planted; Apollos watered; but God gave the growth. So neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything but only God who gives the growth" (literally "the growing God") 1 Corinthians 3.6-7.

However we should not assume that God's gift of growth is random or unpredictable or automatic. Our part in enabling growth is an active one. The metaphors in Paul are ones of partnership with God in this task of enabling growth. In the same chapter, Paul uses the three pictures of parenting (3.1-3); farming (3.5-9) and building (3.9-15).

“For we are God's fellow workers; you are God's field; God's building” (1 Corinthians 3.8).

These pictures are clear. Again through God's grace, our active partnership in ministry is essential for the gift of growth. Like farming, the work of sowing and reaping is about accumulated skill and wisdom, discipline and hard work.

We must be careful to thread this principle of “the God who grows the church” through all of our language and strategy. As so often we must avoid two balancing dangers. On the one hand we must avoid talking about growing the diocese as if it were a human activity only. On the other we must avoid talking about growing the diocese only as a divine activity which we can do nothing about. We are God's fellow workers in this task and God is at work ahead of us, around us and in all that we do.

2 Growth is three dimensional

The numerical growth of the church cannot be separated from our growth in becoming Christ like and in our growth in serving and transforming the world around us.

The agricultural metaphors used by Jesus and Paul run through the whole of scripture. One way in which they are used is the idea of “fruitfulness” – a much more biblical word than our modern term success. Within these agricultural metaphors, the product of growth is not a bigger tree but better fruit. When we ask what God is seeking from his people, we can be confident that he is seeking three kinds of fruit:

- The fruit of social righteousness and a transformed society (as in the parable of the vineyard in Isaiah 5)
- The fruit of personal holiness and transformation (as in the fruits of the Spirit in Galatians 5.22 etc)
- The increased numbers of disciples of Jesus Christ (as in the fields white for harvest in Matthew 9.37 and the miraculous catches of fish in Luke 5 and John 21 which are clearly connected to the picture Jesus uses for the disciples as fishers of people)

Our theology of growth must embrace each of these kinds of fruit. Whenever we focus on one or other (as we must from time to time) then we must keep the wider context in our minds.

There is now and there has been throughout history a clear relationship between growth in social righteousness; a growth in becoming more Christ-like as a community and a growth in the numbers of disciples. These different forms of growth are reflected in the five marks of mission of the Anglican communion and in the different parts of our own diocesan vision statement:

- 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.

In practice this means that the ways God has given to grow the life of the church in the Diocese are not primarily special missions or events or extra things we may do (though these have their place). God has provided the means of grace to grow the life of the church in each of these three ways through the word of God read and proclaimed and through the administration of the sacraments; through the worship of God's people gathered week by week; through fellowship and through the prayers (Acts 2.42). These are the means by which God's people grow in their Christ-likeness and are equipped in the whole of God's mission.

This paper does focus on the numerical growth of the church. However this focus must be seen in the context of the whole of our developing strategy. Other strands focus and develop the ideas of becoming more Christ-like and better serving our society.

3 Growth is seasonal

We must avoid applying the language of industrial production to the life of the Church. The language of the American school of church growth is particularly at fault here as it envisages continuous expansion of a congregation. However some growth strategies produced by dioceses and local churches fall into the same trap and lead to an overextension of resources and a decline of the quality of church life in pursuit of greater numbers. The local church is not an industrial unit of production but a living community. Our aim in seeking to grow the local church must not be higher efficiency or attempting to do more and more continuously with less and less. Growth in a local church is unlikely to be continuous year on year but episodic and seasonal.

To continue with the agricultural metaphors, Jesus uses the beautiful picture of the vine in John 15. The vine metaphor makes it clear that a branch which is connected to Christ will bear fruit in due season. Seasons of growth (including growth in numbers) are likely to alternate with seasons of resting. Fruitfulness will normally grow with these seasons. A vine, like most other fruit bearing trees, crops once each year in normal times. I have tried to ponder what this might look like in the strategy below.

The truth that growth is seasonal applies also to our desire as a diocese to grow a sustainable network of Christ-like communities. All too often, engaging in evangelism as a church has been about becoming frantically busy for a season. Evangelism and making disciples need to be built in as a normal and sustainable part of every church's life and balanced with every other element in the cycle of the year.

4 Things grow differently in different soil

The language of agriculture is also helpful to us in reflecting about different kinds of "soil" we might find even across the same diocese. Jesus' parable of the Sower might even be better titled the parable of the soil. The same seed of the gospel may grow and bear fruit in different ways because the ground is very different. Ministry in some of our communities seems very much like "ploughing up the unploughed ground". In others there is a ready spiritual harvest.

Why does this happen? Sometimes it is because of observable social factors: a young, rapidly changing population full of people making major life decisions may be more fruitful soil than an older, stable population which is declining in numbers. Sometimes the factors which affect the soil may be spiritual and not open to ready analysis.

However this picture is vital to us as we begin to explore the language of growth as it should prevent us from jumping to superficial conclusions about ministry and mission in different places simply on the evidence of numbers alone. The value and worth and cost of discipleship and ministry in different

places must be assessed by very different means. We are committed as the Church of England and as the Diocese of Sheffield to sustaining Christian communities in every place. Growth will be variable according to the soil and we will need one another – which brings us to the second of Paul's two images.

5 Growth is about being connected to Christ and to one another

Paul uses the language of growth in connection with a second major image of the life of the church, the picture of the Church as the Body of Christ.

The language of the Body of Christ is used in a major way in four of the Epistles. In Romans 12 and 1 Corinthians 12 and 14, the language of the Body of Christ is used to stress our interdependence and the variety of different ministries which are of equal value. These ministries are themselves to be seen as the gifts of God's grace.

However Ephesians and Colossians develop the language of the Body of Christ in significant ways.

The assumption of these texts is that when the Body of Christ is properly connected, it will grow organically and naturally in all three ways described above.

- The Body of Christ needs to be connected to the Head (to Christ) through faith.
- The Body of Christ needs to be internally connected in fellowship through love
- The Body of Christ needs the right perspective on the world and the coming kingdom of God and to live in hope.

In Colossians we read:

Do not let anyone disqualify you, insisting on self-abasement and worship of angels, dwelling on visions, puffed up without cause by a human way of thinking and not holding fast to the head, from whom the whole body, nourished and held together by its ligaments and sinews, grows with a growth that is from God. Colossians 2.18-19

Growth here seems to be the normal and natural organic experience of the Body of Christ which is connected to the head and well connected to each other. It seems absolutely safe to assume, as with the agricultural metaphor, that Paul is speaking of growth in numbers, growth in Christ-likeness and growth in the ability to serve as the Body of Christ in the world.

The same truth is underlined. As we seek to grow the diocese, we should not think of this growth as somehow a separate activity from deepening our connection to Christ and to one another. As we deepen our connection to Christ and one another so the life of Christ will flow through the body and result in growth.

This language of the Body is extended and deepened still further in Ephesians, particularly in these two passages. The first uses the metaphor of the building and the second that of the body.

So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone. In him the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord; in whom you also are built together spiritually into a dwelling place for God. Ephesians 2.19-22

One again the text stresses the importance of being connected to Christ and to one another.

But, speaking the truth in love, we must grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and knitted together by every ligament with which it is equipped, as each part is working properly, promotes the body's growth in building itself up in love. Ephesians 4.14-16.

Once again growth is not a separate activity of the Body of Christ but the natural outworking of God's grace and life poured into a community who are connected to the head and connected to one another.

The Church which is the Body of Christ grows naturally in numbers as well as in other ways as we seek to live more deeply in Christ; live in a better and more connected way with one another and live in the right relationship with the society around us.

Therefore we should not think of growth in the life of the diocese or the life of parishes to be first and foremost about doing more or working harder or doing different things but about nurturing the connections of the Body with our world, with one another and with Christ. The Bishops, clergy and lay leaders of the diocese are its ligaments and sinews. Our calling is to connect the body together and together with Christ so that we might grow. The whole of what we do serves to grow the Church in the Diocese in healthy and sustainable ways.

It is against this background that we turn to look at what a healthy goal might be in our growth in numbers as a diocese and what skills, wisdom and practices we might need to grow together to see this growth come about.

6 There are dangers in focussing too much on numerical growth

As in many areas of the Christian life, a balanced approach is key. It can seem as though much of the Church of England focuses far too little on the numerical growth of the church and concentrates only on growth in Christ-likeness or serving or transforming our society. As we have seen, such an approach does not do justice at all to the New Testament emphasis on evangelism, to the idea of the spiritual harvest and to the concept of the God who grows the church.

However at the same time we must recognise the opposite danger that it is possible for some in the Church to become too focussed on numbers and numerical growth to the neglect of other parts of our life together. When this happens the results can be pride and triumphalism (for those parts of the church which are growing) or despair (for those parts which are not).

As long ago as David's census (recorded in the Book of Kings), there is an ambivalent attitude in scripture about counting the people of God. Statistics are helpful if they give us a fuller picture of what is happening, if they drive us to our knees in prayer, if they help us learn from what is working well or not so well, if they lead us to ask questions and in many other ways. However they can also be misleading or lead us into more dangerous paths of pride or consumerism – or of thinking we can measure something which in the end is immeasurable.

As a Diocese we need to learn how to ride with balance on this particular bicycle. We need to leave behind some of the slogans we have been fond of which are used to dismiss the other's position and take a more sophisticated view. We need to find the right emphasis on numerical growth without this kind of growth distorting the rest of our common life.

Part Two: What do we envisage this growth in numbers might look like?

I find it helpful to have in my own mind a picture of what healthy, normal growth in the Diocese of Sheffield might look like over the next decade.

Are we talking about something just a bit more than holding our own? That would certainly be an advance on the last decade (probably just a bit less than holding our own). However it's not a vision of growth which stretches faith or calls for any new programme of action other than doing things a bit better. So I want to dismiss that picture.

On the other hand I don't think we can necessarily predict at this point a decade of great revival either. A vision or a goal to see the Church of England double in size in this diocese over the next ten years seems unrealistic at this point (though I am open to being convinced otherwise). This kind of vision seems to stretch faith beyond what is reasonable. This kind of growth as I argued above may not be sustainable in any case over a ten year period.

I think, therefore we are looking for a picture, an image of what growth might look like across the diocese which stirs and stretches faith and imagination and calls out the best in each minister and congregation but which is realistic and achievable given our present situation.

My initial suggestion is that over the next ten years we agree together to pray and to work to see God growing the Church of England in the Diocese of Sheffield very substantially and unmistakably over ten years. I believe we should also pray and work to lay such a strong foundation in this next decade that, by God's grace, this kind of growth continues and deepens in the two following decades.

The question I have found it helpful to ask myself in thinking about the growth of the Diocese is to ask what we would need to do in order to see God grow the Church of England in the Diocese grow by as much as 20% over the next decade. I name this figure not as some kind of "target" for the Diocese – and still less for churches. The figure helps me imagine and see more clearly the kind of growth which stretches my faith, which is very substantial and yet which would be sustainable over the long term. It is a big enough figure to signal that we are talking about a step change in our aims and our prayers and expectations. It is a reasonable figure for our financial, ministerial and deanery planning and to shape the question: if God is calling us to grow as a Diocese by this kind of ratio over the next ten years, what do we need to do next?

The historian and sociologist Rodney Stark has calculated in some detail the rise of Christianity in the first three centuries of the Church¹ by taking the best data we have on the number of Christians on the Day of Pentecost and at the conversion of Constantine in 350 AD and at various points in between. His calculation is that the worldwide church grew on average in that entire period by around 43% per decade. If that is the norm when Christianity is expanding, to aim to grow as a Diocese by 20% over the next decade seems reasonable in the light of our story over the last fifty years, providing that this next decade provides a platform for further sustainable growth in the future.

Our vision statement indicates that we are called to grow a sustainable network of communities. Each of those communities will have its own story and should not be seeking to grow at the same rate as every other. Whilst I think it will be helpful for deaneries and parishes to pray about what kind of growth they might envisage or work towards, I believe it would be profoundly unhelpful to impose specific targets on local churches. The letters at the beginning of the Book of Revelation make it very

¹ Rodney Stark, *The Rise of Christianity*, pp.4-8

clear that the churches in townships in the particular region of Asia John is writing to are facing very different histories and local environments. Some are challenged very sharply but one is encouraged simply “to hold fast to what you have” (Revelation 3.11). There will be churches in the Diocese which are not in a place to grow at all over the next decade and which may decline. To balance these churches, there are also churches in the Diocese which have grown very rapidly over the last ten years and, by God’s grace, will be able to sustain and deepen this growth over the next decade (as well as to pass their lessons on to others). We also need a clear and definite strategy to grow the number of congregations and churches over the next decade, each of which will add to the growth of the Diocese.

I would hope that this kind of growth would be measurable across a range of statistics including usual Sunday attendance, electoral roll, confirmations and (so that it can be sustainable) people training for all kinds of lay and ordained ministries. However it will be important to stress that we are looking to grow our numbers of children and young people as well as the number of adult worshippers. We are also in a situation where many people have primary work and family commitments on Sundays which is changing the pattern of Sunday attendance even for committed Christians. Therefore one of our key baseline figures, I recommend, should be the statistics collected for all age, seven day attendance each October. Only this figure includes children as well as adults. Only this figure measures worship on other days of the week than Sunday.

This section therefore leads to the following recommendation:

That we commit ourselves under God to pray and plan and work towards the Diocese of Sheffield growing substantially over the next decade and laying the foundation for that growth to continue over the following two decades.

The remaining three sections focus on the practical outworking of this goal. Part Three addresses the key question of making disciples through the life of each local church and community. Part Four addresses the key challenge of planting new congregations and communities. Part Five relates all that is in this strategy paper to wider questions before us.

Part Three: Making Disciples

As we have seen, making disciples is not the whole of Christian mission. However, throughout the history of the Church, the making of disciples has been a vital part of Christian mission. Matthew’s gospel gives a massive priority to this task in setting Jesus great commission as the very last words of the narrative:

“All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And remember I am with you always to the end of the age.” Matthew 28.19-20

The priority of making disciples is established also by Luke in the Acts narrative, as we have seen. The Church in each place is formed, sustained and renewed and grows through the proclamation of the gospel and the making of disciples. As we have seen, St. Paul uses in 1 Corinthians 3 the three metaphors of parenting and nurture, of sowing seed and seeing a harvest and of building to describe the task of Christian formation from first beginnings to maturity.

In a time in which we are seeking the Church to grow we therefore need to give due priority to the making of disciples through the life of the local church (children, young people and adults). We need to do all we can to ensure that there is a steady stream of new Christians coming to faith. This means

giving due priority once again to the core habits and disciplines of Christian formation within the life of every church and congregation. If these pathways to discipleship for children, young people and adults are not visible or made a priority in the life of every parish and congregation then we are no longer being obedient to the great commission.

In times of pressure and difficulty or change, these core habits and disciplines become lost or submerged in the activity of church life. They become “optional extras” to be fitted into our common life when we have time instead of being at the heart of what we are called to do as a community.

What are these habits and practices? The first is the discipline of offering the gospel in a lively and engaging way to those who are outside or on the edge of the life of the church (sowing the seed). The second is the discipline of offering year by year a way for people to explore the Christian gospel for the first time leading to baptism and confirmation (nurturing the young plant). The third is the discipline of offering a regular diet by which young Christians are able to grow to maturity as Christian disciples within the life of every local church (seeing people come to fruitfulness).

Each of these three core disciplines will be worked out in a different way for children, for young people and for adults.

These habits and disciplines are often grouped together under the title “catechumenate”. The term catechesis is a very ancient one. In the preface to his gospel Luke says his purpose in writing for Theophilus is “so that you may know the truth concerning the things about which you have been instructed (literally “catechised”). In the early centuries of the Church, a process of instruction leading to baptism developed in major centres of the Christian faith led by the bishop and known as the catechumenate. The season of Lent was originally a time set aside for candidates to prepare for baptism at Easter and the catechumenate has historically shaped other parts of the Church year.

The Church in every tradition has always paid particular attention to what should be taught to new Christians in the form of the different catechisms. In recent decades the Roman Catholic Church throughout the world has revived the catechumenate as a response to a changing mission contact under the title of the Rite for the Christian Initiation of Adults. Some of the same developments lie beneath the widespread take up and use of the Alpha course, Emmaus and other similar materials.

There are many good examples of churches in the Diocese which have kept these habits and disciplines alive. There are traces of them still in most places. However they are not as strong or as evident as they need to be.

I am therefore proposing that we begin a ten year process of renewing the catechumenate in the life of the Diocese as one of the two principal strands of our growth strategy.

We need, I believe to allow many different patterns and models to evolve reflecting the different mission context, stories and traditions of our different congregations. We also need to allow these new habits and disciplines to grow over time, often from very modest beginnings.

For these reasons, I believe the most helpful structure to put in place will be a simple annual cycle in the life of the Diocese structured around three seasons:

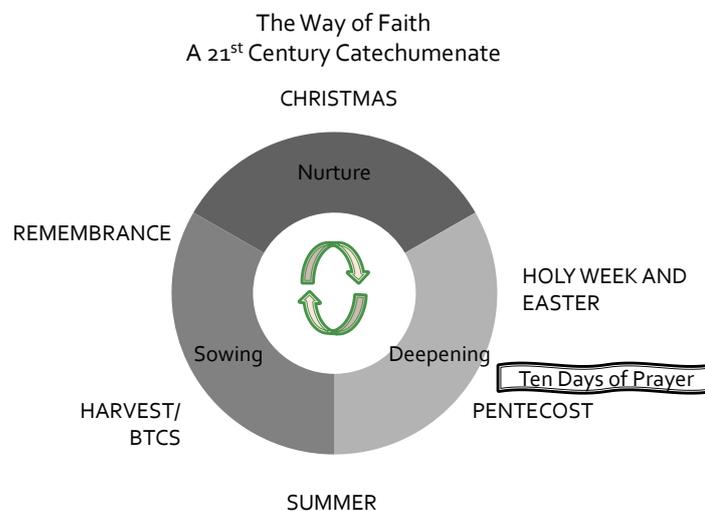
We are all used to the cycle of the Christian year. The pattern of the year is of a resource for teaching the faith; for telling the story of the gospel; for making sure our diet is balanced.

My suggested pattern is that every autumn we focus together on proclaiming the gospel to those who haven't heard it before: that we get outside the church in some way onto the streets and into the market

place and the schools and meeting places. There are a thousand ways to do that. The great festivals of harvest and remembrance and Christmas all help us. So does Back to Church Sunday. Let's encourage each other to proclaim the gospel with humility and confidence in every place. Let's sow the seed and see what happens.

Then from the late autumn through to Easter I suggest we focus together on seeking to nurture the faith of enquirers and new believers. Lent was originally a time to prepare new adult believers for baptism. I want to recover that tradition and make it central to our life again: to renew the catechumenate as a normal and natural part of our life. Some churches might be working with just one or two people each year. Praise God for them and care for them. Others might be working with half a dozen people exploring faith. Others might be working with far more. Groups might begin in November or January or later but they would run up to Easter.

Finally, from Easter to the summer, I suggest we focus together on deepening the faith of the disciples – both the new Christians and the existing church. Let that time of year be a time of encountering Christ in deeper ways; of spiritual refreshment; pilgrimage; renewal; learning. As we move towards this cycle and pattern, this will be our main season for confirmation services as it is also our season for ordination retreats and ordinations. It is also the season of our Ten Days of Prayer between Ascension and Pentecost as year by year we seek God's grace for this cycle of proclaiming the faith; working with the enquirers who come and deepening the discipleship of the whole people of God.



This annual cycle will, I hope, be true to the principles about growth in the first part of this paper. It is more of a three dimensional spiral which will deepen our life year by year than a flat circle. Through its dependence on prayer, it reflects the truth that growth is a gift of God. I would hope that the prayer life of congregations and communities could be deepened and grow in other ways over the next decade. Each part of the cycle ought to be part of a healthy local church in any case. Evangelism and making disciples will not become a separate activity but a stronger and normal part of the life of every congregation. Through it I hope we will rediscover the inbuilt mission potential of the liturgical year as we rehearse and enter into the foundational story of our faith at different life stages and as we enter and grow into discipleship.

This cycle needs be present in our engagement with children and young people every bit as much as with adults alongside the regular patterns we offer for children and young people to experience

worship, community and mission as part of the life of our parishes. In particular it should shape the ways in which we draw our children and young people into baptism, into sharing in Holy Communion and to confirmation and Christian service. I believe it also has great potential to set a rhythm for the life of our Church schools.

The times and seasons in the diagram are meant to give an *idea* of the rhythm of the year. The lines between the seasons are not exact. Hopefully some of each season will be present in every other season. There are no “rules” to follow. Nor is it meant to be a continuous cycle of activity. There will need to be times for resting and fallow years in every community.

This deepening cycle of our life together is deeply engrained in the Anglican way of being Christian. I long for such a cycle to capture the imagination of every congregation and community as we rediscover this kind of rhythm as one of the keys to growing Christ-like Christian communities. It frees us to see evangelism and the making of disciples not as something we bolt on to the life of the church but something which flows from and into our worship and community. It frees us to see evangelism and making disciples not as the activity of a few enthusiasts but part of the normal and organic life of the people of God. Different people will be involved at different times in welcome and teaching, in pastoral care and prayer. Through baptism and confirmation, this growth is celebrated in our liturgy as a normal and profound part of our common life.

I would hope to use four kinds of tools each year to develop and strengthen this cycle annually.

The first is the simple tool of example in that I hope this three fold pattern will set the annual cycle of my own ministry and that of the other members of the senior staff. This begins in 2011 with “Exploring God’s Mercy” offered in the Cathedral and in Doncaster and Rotherham Minsters.

The second is the simple tool of encouragement with accountability. I will write to every PCC at the beginning of each year inviting them to introduce another element to this cycle year by year. We began in 2010 with the Ten Days of Prayer. In 2011 I will write asking every PCC again to engage with the Ten Days of Prayer and plan for a short course to nurture new Christians in 2011 to 2012. The Diocesan Development Day will strengthen and support this part of the cycle. In 2012 we will add something else with each part strengthening the other.

The third will be a variety of tools for building capacity in congregations to strengthen this aspect of their ongoing life such as Mission Action Planning; training in using nurture courses; short term missions to the local area, refreshing work with children and young people and so on.

The fourth focus will be a review and strengthening of the role of confirmations as a way of celebrating and marking the journey for those coming to faith not only for the candidates but for the parishes and deaneries. I am encouraged by the care invested in candidates for confirmation in many different places. However I am praying and looking forward to the time when every parish church will have adult candidates for baptism, confirmation (or renewal of baptismal vows) year by year as a normal part of our common life again.

There is much more which could be said about renewing the catechumenate. I hope this is sufficient to set a direction and a way forward which each parish and deanery can follow. As we put this kind of structure in place we will see, I believe, a growing stream of new Christians coming into the life of all our churches who will be well initiated into Christian discipleship and by this means, through the grace of God, we will see our churches grow.

Part Four: Fresh Expressions of Church

Over the course of the last decade, the Church of England has realised, with our ecumenical partners, the need to plant fresh expressions of church as part of and alongside parish churches in order to connect with every part of our society.

Patterns of association are changing along with the pattern of Sundays. More and more of the population know less and less about Christian faith. Some are now two or three generations away from any Christian tradition in their own families. We therefore need intentionally to develop a mixed economy of church life if we are to be faithful to the Church of England's mission to seek to serve and proclaim the gospel afresh to the whole of our society. Growing the church in the next generation will be about more than calling people back to existing communities. It will increasingly involve going to where people are, sitting and listening and forming new communities in that place.

The experience of the last decade has demonstrated that church planting and fresh expressions of church has the capacity to enrich the life of Church of England parishes and dioceses and to contribute to the significant growth of the whole church.

We therefore need to ensure that we support these developments actively within the life of the Diocese at every level and that the ideas and principles in Mission-shaped Church and the fresh expressions movement are understood and practiced wisely.

The majority of fresh expressions of church across the Church of England find their place within and as part of the ministry of parish churches. As Anglicans we are already familiar with offering one kind of service at 8.00 am on Sundays and another at 10.00 am for different congregations. It is not therefore a major step from this to offer a youth congregation in partnership with other churches in the deanery or a Wednesday afternoon all age Messy Church. Careful attention needs to be paid to binding the whole together, to the ligaments and sinews in the Body, alongside growing the new venture. The whole movement serves to strengthen and develop the parish system and our commitment to grow Christ-like communities in every place.

Alongside this variety of new congregations and communities within parishes and deaneries, there are now and will be in the future a significant number of fresh expressions of church which are in effect new communities which sit alongside the parish system. The Church of England has a long and distinguished history of church planting and establishing new churches. Many of the churches in the diocese were originally planted and established from other parishes. They may originate as church plants or partnerships between different parishes or mission agencies. They may be licensed, like some of our present congregations, as Extra-Parochial Places. They may be licensed and recognised through Bishop's Mission Orders through the recent Dioceses, Pastoral and Mission Measure. Often they may be a growing aspect of our ecumenical partnerships with other growing communities.

As these new communities continue to develop we will need to be alert to the need to ensure the health and life of the whole Body of Christ in the Diocese. This will mean exercising careful discernment about particular proposals; excellent communication and the development of clear policy and wisdom.

In order to help and support this movement in our own diocese we will need to do the following:

- Make available to deaneries and parishes the full range of tools which can be used to grow the vision for fresh expressions of church (Vision Days; Mission Shaped Congregations; Mission-shaped Introduction; stories of fresh expressions of church within our own diocese).

- Support the regional Mission-shaped Ministry Course and integrate the course as fully as possible with our other training for lay and ordained ministries. The course will be relaunched in South Yorkshire in September 2011.
- Encourage parishes to begin new congregations as an integral part of their life and witness and to see those new congregations grow new disciples.
- Encourage deaneries to think strategically about how they might begin new churches and congregations where these may be needed and to think creatively about the renewal of existing parishes through turnaround teams or grafted church plants from other centres.
- Enable deaneries to create roles for lay or ordained pioneers to develop new congregations as part of their deployment and planning policy. It would be good to see at least one new experiment – fresh expression of church - in each deanery by the end of 2012.
- Build a community of pioneers within the Diocese who are able to learn lessons together and support one another.
- Become very skilled in growing local indigenous leadership for these new communities and in drawing them in to the fullness of life in Christ.
- Invest as a diocese in the encouragement and brokering of church plants, particularly from the larger congregations in Sheffield.
- Develop rapid and flexible policies for recognising and connecting new congregations through the careful use of Bishops Mission Orders.

We have very significant resources within the Diocese to assist our development and growth in all of these areas in the wisdom contained in our own churches and the innovation which has flourished in Sheffield from the earliest history of the Diocese. The first Bishop of Sheffield established a Commission to assess the mission needs and priorities in the Diocese from 1915-1917. Among this commission's chief recommendations were the formation of Conventional Districts under the sole charge of Missionary Clergy – undoubtedly an earlier attempt to develop pioneer ministry and new congregations. Bishop Leslie Hunter pioneered in post war years a radical new engagement in industrial mission and chaplaincy. In different ways all of my predecessors have encouraged the growth of new communities and congregations for changing times.

As we face this particular change in the 21st Century we can also draw on the wisdom and expertise of a number of national movements which have their bases in Sheffield, not least Anglican Church Planting Initiatives and Church Army.

We are also able to draw on our partnerships with other churches through Churches Together in South Yorkshire and in particular our partnership with the Methodist Church through the Anglican-Methodist Covenant. The local Mission-shaped Ministry course is already a partnership between the Diocese of Sheffield and the Methodist District.

Part Five: Sustainable Ministry and Serving and Transforming our Society.

The themes of this strategy paper connect very closely with our developing strategy on sustainable ministry and on the ideas being developed on serving and transforming our society.

If we are serious about growing the church numerically and in Christ-likeness we must take seriously the challenge to expand and develop lay and ordained ministries in a whole variety of ways so that the whole body grows together.

We need also to pay careful attention to the way in which a growing church effectively engages with its wider society in service and in transformation: we are not aiming to grow a large organisation for its own sake but as part of God's mission and the proclamation of the kingdom of God.

Frequently asked Questions

Are there resource implications?

The adoption of this policy by the Diocese of Sheffield will not call for additional resources centrally. We have already anticipated the strategy in the appointment of a Director of Mission and Pioneer Ministry. The strategy will form a key part of making other senior appointments in the next year and will be the responsibility of the whole Bishop's Staff to carry forward.

If growing the Diocese is about how we prioritise and use our existing resources then it has implications for every parish and deanery about working together towards these aims and focussing our existing resources.

The proposals in the section "Making new disciples" have implications for how we focus our existing energy and resources but do not call for any major additional expenditure.

However there will be a need for major fundraising by the Diocese (from internal and external sources) to develop new initiatives and congregations in their early years.

We already make a substantial contribution to new initiatives through the Mission, Growth and Development fund and we will need to keep this under review in the coming years.

Where can parishes obtain further help and support?

There are a range of published resources to resource parishes in this field including

- The Growing Healthy Churches material
- Leading your Church into Growth courses
- Natural Church Development
- Mission Action Planning
- Richard Impey's material on church development

Mark Wigglesworth stands ready to advise parishes as do the Bishops and Archdeacons and our network of Deanery Evangelism Enablers.

Communication

We intend to publish the final version of this strategy in an attractive format for churches and small groups to explore together.

A much shorter version of this strategy will be produced to support discussion in parishes and deaneries together with a short You Tube film.

I am planning to hold evenings in Deaneries in the autumn of 2011 (similar to the evening meetings in my first cycle of visits around the Diocese) to communicate and share this vision with PCC's and all who want to come. These evenings will focus on the rhythm to the year and the section on making disciples.

And finally

When Jesus called the first disciples by the lakeside, according to Luke, these skilled fishermen had been out all night and caught nothing. They were tired and somewhat dispirited. Yet they heard Jesus say to them very clearly: "Put out into the deep water and let down your nets for the catch".

They had the faith to do as Jesus asked and their nets were filled to breaking point. They needed to call in all their partners to bring in the catch. More wonderfully still, they were together filled with a sense of awe at the grace of God as Jesus calls them to the task of fishing for people for the rest of their lives.

There are many lessons in this story for the growing of the church. The best of them, I think, is the sense of disciples being summoned back to the adventure of fishing in deep water and exploring again what our gracious giving God is able to accomplish.

+Steven Sheffield
4 March 2010

A motion for the Diocesan Synod

This Synod:

- 1 Commends the document "Growing the Body of Christ" for careful study in Deaneries and Parishes
- 2 Commits itself to pray and work to see God grow the Diocese of Sheffield substantially over the next decade
- 3 Supports the renewal of the catechumenate in the ways outlined and calls on every church to make provision for sowing the seed of the gospel, nurturing new Christians and growing disciples each year
- 4 Affirms the vital importance of parish churches and parish ministry to fulfil our vision to grow as a sustainable network of Christ like communities in every place.
- 5 Supports the collaborative and orderly planting of new fresh expressions of church as a parish, in deaneries and across the Diocese as part of a mixed economy of church life.