

In 2015 the Bishop of Liverpool, Paul Bayes, shared with Synod a short paper titled *Fit for Mission*. In the paper Bishop Paul quoted his own words some months earlier when he first came to Liverpool as diocesan Bishop and inherited a shared commitment to growth:

The Bishop's Growth Agenda is my agenda now, and I am fully committed to it. I intend to sustain and strengthen the direction of our Diocese as a growing community marked by disciplined prayer, intentional evangelism and a practical commitment to justice.

To continue in this direction we need to address the issues and problems we have already identified. We need to renew our financial base, to solve the problems raised by so many of our buildings, and to foster and multiply vocations to ministry, especially among younger people. Each one of us needs, by God's grace and in his strength, to share ideas and wisdom to address these challenges so that together we can resolve them.

Our parishes, church plants, fresh expressions, schools and chaplaincies need to be free to engage in God's mission and to make new disciples where they are. And if we are to be a growing church and to make a growing difference to people's lives, we need structures that are fit for purpose.

Six years later under Bishop Paul's leadership we are drafting a new strategic document, *Fit for Mission 2*. The similarity of title is intentional. We have often quoted Eugene Petersen's phrase, 'a long obedience in the same direction' and our future strategic direction reflects that long obedience. Our goal is to move forward on this journey, prayerfully, at pace and at scale.

Bigger Church, bigger difference

We have for some years now framed our vision as, 'asking God for a bigger church to make a bigger difference.' Affirming from the start the priority of prayer we have a vision of a flourishing and transformed diocese:

- *Introducing people to Jesus:* everybody will have the opportunity to come to know God in Jesus Christ, joining a worshipping community, available and accessible.
- *Deepening discipleship:* every church member will have the opportunity to know God more fully, living as disciples of Jesus and guided by a diocesan Rule of Life.
- *Developing Christian leaders:* every disciple will have the opportunity to discover and use God's particular calling for them in all aspects of life and to leadership in church and community.

- *Working for Justice: every church community and body will model justice in its own life, deal justly with others, witness to God's call to justice, and serve the needs of its community.*

Fit for Mission 2 is built on expanding our hard learned best-practice in terms of growing disciples and leaders, and increasing our focus on them. It turns the aspiration of Fit for Mission 1 into an implementation strategy and we believe that on this faith journey of long obedience in the same direction we have arrived at a key point of decision and delivery. It requires of us an alignment to our shared strategy which goes beyond agreement and assent to ownership and engagement and all appointments are made in this expectation.

Facing the challenges

Our vision is not careless of the realities facing our churches and our diocese. Prayerful reflection and listening and the forensic nature of preparation for a significant STF bid lead us to identify five key problems and challenges:

- *The long-standing and deep-rooted decline of the Church of England and our diocese of Liverpool.* We are approaching a tipping point at which our missional decision making freedom is constrained by finance and ever increasing cuts to clergy numbers and core spend.
- *Being under-resourced on the front line.* As a diocese we lack the financial resources of most dioceses, many of our churches are financially vulnerable and we have limited capacity to invest in mission.
- *Unrealistic expectations on people.* Clergy and lay people are increasingly overwhelmed whilst often operating in a degree of isolation from the resources of the wider body of Christ.
- *Unsustainable buildings.* Whilst many buildings are in good order and serve the mission of the church and there are creative ways in which buildings can be used and developed, it remains true that many church buildings were built for a different age and the money and people resources to care for them are scarce. Our buildings and how we manage them is close to being unsustainable in every sense.
- *Lack of diversity.* As a church we are largely one shape, one demographic, one colour and we struggle for relevance not least to younger generations.

What does flourishing and transformed look like?

We envisage that a hope-filled, growth led vision looks something like this:

A **discipleship culture** characterised by:

- an overriding focus on growth and deeper spirituality
- a radically expanded network of kindness
- many more lay leaders
- many new and diverse worshipping communities
- a growing giving and income base

... enabled by **re-imagined structures**

- radically fewer parishes, properly resourced
- fewer buildings

... underpinned by **new ways of working**

- aligned and accountable culture
- genuine collaborative and collegial teamwork

How we plan to get to where we want to be

Our primary focus is working creatively and collegially with deaneries around six integrated solutions to address the challenges we face as a diocese and to move towards a flourishing and transformed diocese in respect of our clergy, our lay people, our congregations old and new and our governance and missional structures.

- Develop a discipleship culture that releases lay people in a full range of vocations in the world and the Church. Key is the Cultivate programme (aligned with our well established Directions course) which engages ordained leaders together with emerging lay leaders with a focus to start, lead and grow new worshipping communities locally and to refresh inherited congregations.
- Create leadership teams over larger areas, of lay and ordained people, to share skills and capacity together more evenly and effectively. Focussing on mission, these teams will create life-giving supportive environments to reduce the isolation of leaders and the energy drain of replicating or trying to be all things in all places on small resource / ageing congregations.
- Develop the capacity for core services in deaneries so that administrative tasks are managed collectively, allowing leaders to focus on the four missional priorities.
- Develop agreed and positive one to one and peer accountability structures for all leaders to support individuals well and to aid progress alongside clear lines of accountability and structures beyond the deanery for supporting resolutions not able to be reached locally.
- Make at least one Larger Single Parish (LSP) in each deanery to ensure that the solutions above can be fully supported by a local leadership with the authority and ability to make strategic missional decisions on the ground.
- Face the buildings issue head on, with assistance to make good decisions and then close or change the use of those that are surplus.

Conclusion: treasures old and new

In another context, but one germane to our challenges, to our vision for a flourishing and transformed diocese and to our confidence in the Gospel, Bishop Paul writes the following:

In fact we're surely called, like the householder in our Lord's story, to bring out of our treasure what is new and what is old (Matthew 13:52) - to do so in a way appropriate to our context, and most importantly to do so in a spirit of faith and confidence, no matter what difficulties may beset us.