

## David Durston

I was not at the Diocesan Synod meeting so I did not hear what you said, but Bridget kindly sent me the printout of the slides, so I am responding to your questions, and in particular the question about priorities.

I find it difficult to be clear about priorities without being clear about the assumptions we are making about the **context** in which the Church of England and the Diocese of Salisbury are set. What are people of England thinking and feeling? What are their hopes and aspirations? What are their anxieties and fears? And what does the Gospel of Jesus Christ have to say to people who are thinking and feeling like this?

I see this as less a matter of demographics of age, occupation and ethnic background, more a matter of experience, understanding, attitudes and emotions. Three aspects seem to me of particular significance.

**1** Many people today do not know much about the Christian faith and most have no sustained experience of Christian worship.

This is a sharp contrast with previous generation. In 1958 some 50% of children and young people had a period of at least three years as a member of a Sunday School or church organisation. They experienced regular Christian worship for some years. For half the generation now in their 60s worship in church is not unfamiliar. In 1998 that figure had fallen to 14 %. Only one in seven people in the generation now 25-40 are familiar with worship. This is the generation of today's parents with young children.

At the same time knowledge of the Christian faith has declined as from around 1960 onwards education in schools shifted its emphasis from providing information about the Christian faith to raising awareness of different faiths and religions.

**2** Religions (all kinds of religions) are today widely seen as dogmatic, judgmental and divisive. Religious differences are seen to lie at the heart of many of the world's most bitter and destructive conflicts, e.g. Northern Ireland, the Balkans, Israel-Palestine. Religious institutions are distrusted and suspected of being corrupt and hypocritical, e.g. in their response to child abuse. Faith is often marginalised in public discourse and privatised. One consequence is that it often burst into the public arena in extreme and often disruptive forms, creating a very negative image.

My impression is that many people are very ambivalent towards the Christian faith and the Church today - valuing it because of the way it can be very supportive at particular times, and very moving, BUT hating it for the reasons in the last paragraph. As a result they are quite confused, nervous, even frightened, about getting involved, and want to keep religion at arm's length.

**3** Areas of life in which the Church 100 years ago had a leading role, such as education, health and social care, have now been largely taken over by government, with massive amounts of public money spent on them, and with many large secular charities. The churches have to find niche roles they are particular well equipped to fill.

As someone aptly said: The churches are now having to re-invent what it means to be "church" in a post-Christendom situation.

Many of the changes and developments in the Church of England in recent years represent attempts to respond to these changes in the context in which we live and work. We shall be better able to carry through these developments if we understand this context clearly.

This is an unfinished piece of work, but I am not sure how to carry it forward until I know how far it is a shared analysis of the situation which offers a basis for reflection on priorities.

Many thanks for the challenge you have given us