

Christians in the Community
Challenging Injustice and Need - Consultation Paper November 2012 – January 2013.

St Andrew's Yetminster PCC response to the Diocesan Consultation Paper, prepared by Prebendary John Parfitt on behalf of the PCC.

The statement by General Synod ... 'affirms that radical social action and comment are essential elements of the Biblical witness and Christian tradition'. This statement underpins all action undertaken by the leaders of parish churches in their benefices.

The task facing us is therefore: 'to identify priorities and to structure diocesan support to help each benefice meet the needs of local communities' within our benefice.

In response to the above, we therefore need to identify our priorities. These fall into three areas or categories, namely:

- Meeting the needs of an ageing population
- Education of the young in the Christian faith
- Caring for our local rural environment and forging links with rural industries which play a prominent role in the benefice.

Taking the above in the order as listed:

First, the benefice has an ageing population heavily skewed towards the 60plus age range. Those facing terminal decline and in particular people who are terminally ill, are choosing to spend their remaining years in their homes with appropriate medical and social support, rather than in hospitals, nursing homes or hospices. It should be noted that our local hospice of St Margaret's is currently revising its strategy to one which reduces the number of beds but increases the support to terminally ill patients in the community. The concept is entitled Hospitals Without Walls (HWW). This change of policy is partly driven by finance and also endeavours to meet an increasing demand by patients to remain in their homes, but with appropriate support. In addition, the new structure will inevitably place greater responsibility and pressure on Church of England parish priests who are the only salaried spiritual leaders left in many rural areas.

Furthermore, NICE (National Institute of Clinical Excellence) in its report dated December 2012 pleaded for an increase in the Spiritual and Religious support given to those facing physical decline and terminal illness.

The implications of these developments indicate that CE parish priests will have to assume greater spiritual and religious responsibility for the sick and the terminally ill in their benefices. Furthermore, they will have to give greater priority to the care of the bereaved in the period following the death of a loved one. This responsibility is already clearly stated in Canon Law and of course is enshrined in the charge given to parish priests regarding 'the Cure of all Souls'.

It is my view that across the benefice as a whole, we need to radically improve our provision in this area and make it a major priority for action.

Secondly, the majority of our children attend local nursery groups, primary and secondary schools. Currently, the primary and secondary schools are CE VC and therefore the Church of England has a legal right to serve on the governing bodies of both schools. As CE VC schools, according to current law, the daily act of collective worship has to be in accordance with the tenets of the Anglican Church. Furthermore, the secondary school has a .5 Anglican priest as chaplain, whilst the PiC for the Wriggle Valley serves as a foundation governor of the St Andrew's CE VC primary school, which also nurtures a nursery unit. It follows therefore, that the CE has a legal access to the Christian education of most

children between the ages of 3 and 18. In the near future, if not already, the secondary school will become an Academy, and such status gives the opportunity to further strengthen the links between church and state education. If at some point, the governors of the St Andrew's primary school choose to opt for Academy status, as indeed they now have the right to do so, the links could be strengthened further.

Whilst applauding the efforts made by the leaders of the Wednesday Club and the Messy Church group, nevertheless the question remains 'Are we using to maximum effect the present and future structure to educate the young in the Christian faith'? Personally, I think not and therefore our second priority must be to strengthen the educational opportunities which are available to educate children and young people of the Benefice in the Christian faith.

Thirdly, the benefice serves a very rural area, containing farms, market gardens, nurseries, equestrian units etc., to name but a few. In addition, the Friary has embarked on a major project concerning the future care and protection of the environment. For centuries there has been a very close relationship between the people who work in the countryside and the Christian church; witness the wide range of festivals which occur during the course of the Christian year, many of them linked to the history and fabric of this country and the countryside. Some contacts continue, notably at harvest, but the opportunities to link the Christian faith and church with rural based industries have been sadly neglected in recent years, partly due to the mechanisation of rural industries and the changing nature of the population in villages and the countryside.

The list of opportunities for forging closer links between rural industries and the church is broad: e.g. the four seasons, Autumn, Winter, Spring, and Summer; Plough Sunday, Lambing services, Rogation tide, Lammas tide, Horse riders services, Harvest, Horticulture and gardens to name but a few.

We cannot spread ourselves too thinly and run the risk of trying to do everything and failing lamentably. I believe that by concentrating on the above, the Christian church and its leaders in this benefice could make a greater impact on meeting the needs of the people in this benefice.

However, one final point concerning the provision of resources and in particular human resources. The Diocese must take urgent action to ensure that rural parishes and benefices are staffed appropriately. At a recent meeting, the Chairman of the BDF noted publicly that today there are more active priests in the Diocese than at any time in history. Furthermore, the NSM and SSMs actually outnumber the stipendiary priests.

The early church began its work with a small number of trained professional priests together with many priests and leaders who earned their crust in the market place, teaching the Christian faith at weekends and in the evenings. It is worth reflecting on what they achieved. Between them they established the Christian church. It seems to me that with financial constraints and a smaller number of stipendiary priests, we are moving towards a similar pattern or *modus operandi*. What is required is a radical review and restructuring of the deployment of priests both stipendiary and non stipendiary as well as active retired priests with permission to officiate, so that all benefices are given the appropriate staffing to undertake the work of the church. In order to achieve this, the diocese must think outside the 'box'. Sadly at present, I see no evidence of this restructuring being advocated.

John Parfitt

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