



Archbishop Stephen addressed York Diocesan Synod today. The address follows in full

In praise of the local church

I think it was Bill Hybels who said that the local church was the hope of the world. Or something like that. I've not been able to track down the quote.

And I think it was Rowan Williams who defined church, saying, though here I am quoting from memory, and because I rather like my version haven't even tried to track down the quote, "that the church is that bunch of women and men who have been so impacted by the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, that in the transforming and refining power of his Spirit, they have formed a community centred on him and are trying to change the world".

And as Cardinal Czerny put it to me on my recent visit to Rome that the big theme of Pope Francis' ministry is the defeat of abstraction, or as the Pope puts it in his encyclical on fraternity, *Fratelli Tutti*, "Goodness, together with love, justice and solidarity, are not achieved once and for all; they are to be realised each day." It is what we do, not what we talk about. And we don't stop doing it because we think our small offerings are insufficient. We are indeed a church of mustard seeds and widow's mites. But also, a church of yeast, where small things can have a huge impact.

Therefore, for us in the Church of England and in this Synod, we fulfil our vocation to be the church for everyone everywhere by clearly affirming the centrality of the local, meaning that bunch of women and men, etc. etc. who are focused on actualising and making real and available the fruits of the gospel, a Jesus shaped life. And we trust that God, the Lord of the harvest, will take what we offer and use it and multiply it.

Moreover, we celebrate and marvel at the presence of the church in every village, every town, every city, and commit ourselves to revitalise every parish so that there can be a viable flourishing presence into the future.

We call this growing healthy churches. It is something we all need to be committed to. We want every church to flourish. That's what healthy things do. But it will flow, primarily, from the renewal of our own lives in Christ and from a recognition of the need that is before us and our receiving the vocation to serve our communities and share the gospel. I will say more about this in a minute, for a new missionary situation requires a new missionary mindset. But first of all, back to this key word 'revitalise', which is referenced in the Church of England's bold outcomes for the 2020s and also in the work we are developing in this diocese as part of Living Christ's Story.

Under the Growing Healthy Churches heading, Revitalise as a project will be working with small cohorts of parishes and benefices, looking first to those places where there is potential to move into viability and greater flourishing quickly, since this will be not only good for the individual parish, but for the deanery as a whole. And in making choices about which parishes we invest in first, we are, of course working with area and lay deans, and your own carefully formulated deanery plans.

This is a really exciting development. It is only just beginning. And of course we have much to learn. But the parishes working together on this will themselves form small learning communities. And in due course, this learning will be shared across the diocese, and new cohorts of parishes will be included in the project.

Let's be clear; there will not be 'one size fits all'. We are a very diverse diocese, and different approaches will suit different contexts. But in all of this, the core principles of Living Christ's Story: Becoming more like Christ; Reaching people we currently don't reach; and Growing churches of missionary disciples that are younger and more diverse will be central.

This will mean change. But it will be change that is continuous with our core vocation and purpose. We dare to hope that we will see the diocese move into growth and to do this we will dare to try new things, learning from the experiences of other dioceses, and using the resources of some of our stronger churches to help those who are struggling, particularly through church planting where that is appropriate. But also focusing on ministry with children, young people, families and schools as a way of revitalising the whole parish. There are inspiring examples of this happening in other parts of the country. We need to learn from this.

We need a new missionary mindset. We need to be mindful that the parish system we have inherited and that we cherish, was the fruit of focused missionary endeavour, where the church understood itself to be the 'sent out' people of God, nurturing strong centres of prayer and resourcing, but giving this away for the greater glory of God and in order to share the gospel with everyone. As Bishop John helpfully pointed out to me, when I shared a draft of this address with him, "Parish is a mission word since it speaks about those around the house as the focus of those in the house, literally 'para oikos'". This upends the view of parish as an internally focused word, especially when expressed as parochialism. It is the opposite. It is about our concern for our neighbour and for the whole community.

What then developed was the system we have inherited, a parish system to serve a whole a nation. When you ask an Anglican minister how many people they serve, they won't tell you the number of the Sunday congregation, but the population of the parish. We set the bar of our expectations high.

We live in a new missionary situation, where most people grow up knowing very little about the Christian faith and having virtually no experience of the church. There is much we can learn from the first evangelisation of England, and particularly from the Anglo-Saxon Saints of the North, and the movements of mission that shaped our land and gave birth to the church that we've inherited. Their flexibility and sacrificial approach to mission; the way they established intentional communities of prayer; and their willingness to be vulnerable and to go to people where they were inspires us today.

In this way, we will renew our parishes and therefore renew our diocese. But there will be a focused attention on the local; on service to the local

community; and on evangelism, sharing with others the good news we have received and therefore paying attention to our own receiving. Hence the really important work on Rhythm of Life that we have introduced this year. We then learn to share the story of Christ that we have been called to live.

I believe this can lead to growth. More churches in the York diocese, not less. But it will be a mixed ecology of Church, where, within our ministry units, we will find ways of revitalising our parishes, but often we will find the best way of doing this is by also focusing on new initiatives, and new communities of faith that reach out to new groups of people.

We will pay attention to the whole ecosystem of the Church. This will include chaplaincies as well, a vital part of how we reach into and serve networks as well as neighbourhoods. But we will do all this so that the local can thrive. And the local means that bunch of women and men who have been so impacted by the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, that in the transforming and refining power of his Spirit, they have formed a community centred on him and are trying to change the world. This church in which we are a part is the hope of the world. It is not an abstract proposition or a set of ideas. It is real women and men in real places serving real needs. It is what we are called to and it is actually what every single item on our Synod agenda is working towards.

In the summer of 2023, the Diocese of York's Diocesan Mission and Ministry team conducted a survey for people across the diocese, framed around missional discipleship and everyday faith.

This survey will help the diocese understand the picture of spirituality and discipleship as the journey continues of Living Christ's Story.

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