



Esgobaeth Bangor The Diocese of Bangor

Presidential Address 2024

Bishop of Bardsey David Morris

Friends, thank you for sacrificing a Saturday to be here today, coming together in this way as an important expression of our commitment to our common life as a diocese.

If a little daunting, it's my privilege and pleasure to address the diocese formerly for the first time with this, my first presidential address to diocesan conference.

I hope you're sitting comfortably, because I'm going to begin my address with two lengthy quotes, please bear with me. The first...

'It should be possible to bring together in groups, people from parishes within such areas in a face-to-face relationship. This would enable them to see themselves and their parishes in the light of the whole diocese. In so doing they will be encouraged to question their present methods of working. Are there activities which they now do separately which they could now do together? Here we might think of the sharing of buildings: a more effective pastoral ministry – lay training, youth and children's work; joint action in evangelism – what could be done together in terms of worship etc: the centralisation and sharing of finance and other resources? But parishes must also be encouraged to state what assistance they require that they cannot of themselves provide at present, in order to implement such joint actions... ..In our opinion readiness to accept change and willingness to experiment could bring back life to the Church; the obstacles are refusal to accept change; waiting on events and resistance to any form of experiment.'

[Diocesan Survey in 1969]

End quote. Here begins the second....

We have inherited a pastoral structure, whose boundaries both at Parish and Deanery levels are determined by past considerations rather than current missionary considerations. We would ask that new Mission Areas should be designated by the whole diocese, and that the designation should be made according to density of population, social need, or natural lines of communication, and according to likely future social developments and trends... ..Every Mission Area, once designated, should prepare a mission plan, including a statement of

aims and objectives, which are to be reviewed on an ongoing basis. It would include an assessment of its stock of buildings and resources, both human and material, as a priority. Within a mission area clergy shall exercise a collaborative ministry with the laity, in order to encourage the full participation of all of God's people in Christian ministry.

[From a summary of Bishop Barry Morgan's Visitation Charge in 1995]

End Quote.

One could be forgiven for thinking that these two extracts were taken from the Harries Report, the report that recommended the formation of Ministry Areas to structure our life together, following the Church in Wales review in 2012. However, despite what might seem like similarities, the first extract was from the report of a diocesan survey in 1969, and the second is taken from a summary of Bishop Barry Morgan's visitation charge in 1995. It's astonishing to think that ideas around parishes restructuring, centralising and sharing their resources as a response to decline in both church attendance and in vocations to ordained ministry, were being offered as solutions 55 years ago, and that it wasn't until 2012 – some 40 years after these surveys and reports were circulating in the Church in Wales during the 1960's – that we actually moved to form Ministry Areas, which we've been living with now for over a decade. It's interesting too, that these concerns about church attendance and lack of vocations were being raised in the 1960s when the Church in Wales is believed to have had 182,854 communicants at the start of that decade and I suspect the majority, if not all of the 80 or so parishes in the diocese that existed at that time had a vicar, and several will have likely had a curate or curates, even. The 1969 report also said: 'church goes... ..are diminishing... ..and will treble their rate of shrinkage if not kept at it. No wonder there are not enough men for the Ministry; no wonder those in it are so disheartened; no wonder so few of the sons of the Governing Body ever enter it.'

The publishing of these two reports were well within the living memory of many of our clergy and those attending our churches now, and I wonder, if we knew then what we know now about church attendance figures in the Church in Wales and the numbers of people offering themselves for ordained ministry and so on, what might we had done differently in the past four or five decades? What did we not do that we ought to have done? And what in the past half century did we do, that we ought not to have done?

It's easy to look back on the past with rose tinted glasses and deceive ourselves into thinking that all was well when we sustained a one church, one priest, one parish model, but at the time of the 1969 report the then bishop of Bangor and later Archbishop of Wales, Gwilym Williams, and other Welsh church leaders saw the writing on the wall - the church was going to experience rapid decline – and despite parish

missions, countless process evangelism initiatives and discipleship courses, back to Church Sunday, fresh expressions, and many other efforts to reverse the decline in the decades that followed, decline in number we have – in these islands at least – and much of Western Europe.

As we've declined, we've become increasingly more vulnerable, we do not have the presence and the influence in society that we once had. We are mourning a church that was and we're anxious about the future. Churches have closed, clergy are fewer, some congregations are in single figures, and funds have depleted. Naturally, as we've experienced these things in recent decades it's weighed heavy on our collective conscience, we have clergy who are running themselves ragged and carrying a sort of internalised institutional guilt as they struggle to keep the show on the road, we have within our congregations parents who are saddened that despite their best efforts to raise their children in church they didn't continue to attend church in adulthood and now their grandchildren have no experience of church. We have treasurers and church wardens anxious about where the money will come from to pay the BMF, to fix the leaky roof and who worry about whether the boiler will survive another winter. These are just some of the things that way heavy on us, which often come to the fore and dominate in ministry area and diocesan meetings.

But despite all of this, I want to suggest that none of this our fault. It's not my fault, it's not your fault, it's not the MA's fault, it's not the priest's fault, it's not the dioceses' fault, it's not the bishop's fault. And we need to stop beating ourselves up about it and we need stop looking for something or someone to blame. It's nobodies' fault that we are where we are. And until we shake this institutional guilt, which almost paralyses us as we mourn the past and remain anxious about the future, potentially we're going to consistently find ourselves harbouring feelings that the situation is hopeless, when we ought to be hopeful. As one of our clergy suggested this week, if someone had the silver bullet for church growth they'd be minted and we'd have full churches, but there is no silver bullet. There are models that work in some contexts and not others, but no one size fits all. And this might in part be because of an overdependency on strategies and predictions for growth, when theologically we know that we plant the seeds, and God gives the growth in God's own time. This is something the Bishop of Chelmsford, Dr Guli Francis-Dehqani, recently noted in a keynote address she delivered at the Festival of Preaching entitled, 'Encouraging the weary with a word', in which she identified a weariness in the church, which she described as a 'deep and invasive exhaustion with undertones of disillusionment.' 'Our weariness, and all the other emotions and behaviours' she suggests, 'are fuelled by a deep sense of fear and anxiety about our future. In particular, about the future survival of the Church. We are shrinking in numbers and influence.' 'We feel it is our responsibility to do something, do anything, to avoid this existential threat' She suggests that, 'Panic and fear'... and the ...'Grief about what we feel we've lost.'... ..is 'an exhausting cocktail.' She suggests further that,

‘Weariness, if left unchecked, can lead to lethargy and a refusal to face up to our situation in a positive way. We point the figure of blame elsewhere and look to find fault with others in order to ease our own conscious.’

And she’s right isn’t she, we have had a tendency in different quarters of church life to point the finger of blame at others for the challenges we’re experiencing; some have blamed the liberal agenda, but the church was in decline decades before women were ordained, and before homosexuality was decriminalised, and long before the church permitted the re-marriage of divorcees. Some have blamed church leadership, but all the major denominations have experienced decline – many more so than us. Some have blamed the rise of other faiths, but there are now more people of no professed faith than have religious conviction. Some blamed the swinging sixties, but some studies suggest that church attendance peaked in 1930 and has been in decline ever since. Of course, the war years had their part to play in securing this trend. The reality is that we’re now competing with an ever changing and increasingly more complex society, that doesn’t now centre its life on the local church as it once did. There is no single issue and it’s nobody’s fault. It’s not yours and it’s not mine. We need to stop blaming ourselves or blaming each other, because constantly beating ourselves up about the decline of the church isn’t going to advance the mission of the church in any positive way.

But what I do know for sure is that, despite all of it, ry’n ni yma o hyd - we’re still here. And not only are we still here, we’re still one of the largest, if not the largest, Christian denomination in Wales. And despite what we may think about ourselves as a denomination and our local situation, comparatively we are incredibly well resourced still, sustaining significant numbers of clergy and still, to a greater extent, maintaining a Christian presence in most towns and villages across Wales. We’re still here and with the resource available to us we still have huge potential. We need to somehow shift our mindset to foster and cultivate a culture of hopefulness, intentionality and expectancy. Where, as Bishop Guli puts it, we ‘strive to remain faithful with our eyes fixed on Jesus, in season and out of season... where our ...Primary calling is not to be successful in worldly terms, but to be intentional in our faithfulness and prayerful in the present moment.’

As we move into more of a minority space in society, we’re needing to perhaps revisit our earlier beginnings to understand how a smaller church with much less resource than we have now, was able to not only survive, but to make an impact that would span centuries – an impact that people like Deiniol did not witness in his lifetime. As we prepare for this significant anniversary year in the life of our diocese, 1,500 years since Deiniol founded his Clas on or very near to this site, what might the big names from the early Celtic Christian period have to teach us today? The answer is likely to be much the same as what we observe in the activity of the infant apostolic church as described in the book of Acts (2:42-47; 4:32), devotion to teaching, fellowship, sacrament, and

prayer. Togetherness, holding things in common and care of the poor were also key elements of their shared life and ministry. A spirit of generosity and goodwill existed among them, and they saw growth in faith and number. Those who believed were one in heart and soul. These are the things that will sustain us as we look to embrace this new phase in our life as a church, teaching, fellowship, sacrament, prayer, togetherness, holding things in common, care of the poor, a spirit of generosity and goodwill, being one in heart and soul.

Now you might say, 'yes, that's all well and good bishop, but they didn't have church buildings to repair, the BMF to pay, and a church hall to rent out for birthday parties'. Which is true, but they had different challenges to overcome, challenges which for some of them proved far more costly and sacrificial. Despite having shaped our life as we have in the past ten years trying to rationalise our resources, which has had mixed degrees of success across the diocese, in the coming years we will potentially need to do this more so; therefore, there's an increasing need to understand how we can be wise stewards of all we have available to us now to make as much of a lasting impact as we can and ensure that we're still here in the next 1,500 years, should the Lord not return in glory in the meantime, of course! Our hope is that ministry areas can work together to make decisions now to ensure that we can sustain our life in Christ. This isn't simply an endeavour for Ministry Areas at a local level, it's also something the Church at national and diocesan level has sought to do with its reserves to try and resource the local church and give it the best possible fighting chance to sustain our life in Christ.

As many of you are aware, the Church in Wales has launched a church growth fund and made available £100 million. There are two tiers of funding available, Tier 1, which are applications for up to £10,000 which churches and Ministry Areas can apply for evangelistic initiatives – and we'd like to encourage as many applications as possible to be made to this fund to support your work locally – this money won't be available for ever and some of our ministry areas have already benefitted from this support. Tier 2 applications are for more substantial projects over £10,000 and the diocese will, in due course, make several bids to bolster missional and evangelistic ministry in the diocese. We intend to spend time over the next twelve months listening to the needs of localities and understanding how we might best resource the diocese with Tier 2 applications.

At a diocesan level the bishop's council and diocesan council have spent time recently considering how we can use diocesan resources to support Ministry Areas, I'm delighted to be able to announce to you today a suite of support the diocesan council has agreed to make available.

We have established three funds, the first is the General Fund, which will make available £30,000 per annum for church buildings and £30,000 per annum for missional projects. MAs can apply for grants from the General Fund which we hope will enhance

our ability to worship God, grow the Church and love the world by supporting projects that improve buildings or premises used by the Ministry Area, or new projects that enhance the mission of the Ministry Area.

Secondly, the Pre-Reformation Fund will make available £90,000 per annum from historic restricted funds designated for pre-reformation churches, for MAs to apply for grants enhancing our ability to worship God, grow the Church and love the world by supporting projects that preserve, restore or reconstruct pre-Reformation churches.

Thirdly, the Welsh Language Fund will make available £10,000 per annum from restricted funds within the Diocese of Bangor to enable worship and mission in the Welsh Language within Ministry Areas.

In addition to these three funds, a further £130,000 is available to us to be distributed in the diocese called Representative Body Delegated Funds, this money has accumulated in recent years, and they are intended for individual church buildings, who can apply for grants of up to £7,500 in a three-year period. Typically, the delegated funds are around £33,500 pa for each diocese. This is a grant scheme to help local churches with repairs and improvements, such as fixing leaky roofs, restoring rain-water goods, upgrade electrical systems and so on. In line with the Church in Wales' Net Zero Carbon ambitions, the grant will also now be given to churches to help them enhance environmental performance towards the Church's net zero goal.

The Bangor Diocesan Trust is the grant awarding body for these all these grant funds and applications will normally be considered at scheduled meetings of the Trust. However, where a need is urgent, we can make decisions with extraordinary meetings. We're trialling an online application form, information and full details will be circulated in Y Ddolen. Please be in touch with your Archdeacon if you'd like to know more or make an application.

In addition to these funds for the maintenance buildings and missional initiatives we have agreed as a diocesan council to increase the stipend for Ministry Area Leaders – in addition to the usual annual stipend increases for all clergy, from the beginning of January there will be a 5% increase on the stipends of Ministry Area Leaders, meaning that they will now receive the stipend of an Incumbent of a Rectorial Benefice as articulated in the constitution of the Church in Wales. This brings their stipends in line with Ministry Area Leaders in some other dioceses and is an increase of nearly £1,500 pa. This adjustment is to recognise the additional level of leadership responsibilities our MALs fulfil and we're immensely grateful for their significant ministries of oversight in the diocese.

To bolster the support the central diocesan office provides to Ministry Areas in terms of property officers to help with Ezra reports and building matters, the book keeping team offering support with Ministry Area finance, we have also agreed to fund three full-time

administrators, one for each Archdeaconry to assist with some of the administrative demands found in Ministry Areas – for example, where there are Ministry Area Leader vacancies, they can assist with rotas, finding funeral cover and so. We hope they will also assist with updating the Church Attendance app, for example.

Finally, we have found recruitment to several vacant ministry areas quite challenging in the past twelve months. When we've advertised posts, we have received little to no interest. This is for varied reasons, but among them attracting clergy to Northwest Wales and to rural contexts has always been a challenge. To try and make our offer more attractive, the diocesan council have agreed to increase the relocation and resettlement allowances to a total sum of £8,000, approximately double the previous allowance which had remained fairly static for a good number of years. This acknowledges that costs associated with moving home have risen significantly and we hope that, this will incentivise ministry opportunities in the diocese. This increase would of course apply to movements of clergy already within the diocese.

We hope all of these provisions from the financial resources of the diocese will go some way to helping Ministry Areas address some of the challenges you're facing and alleviate some of the pressures you're experiencing.

But it's important that we do not lose sight of the truth that all these provisions and interventions count for nothing, if we are not wholly dependent on God and rooting our life in Christ. We can throw money after money at buildings and administrative resource, but if the resource does not facilitate and go hand in hand with a deepening of faith and discipleship, we will be building our house on sand.

Together we are the Diocese of Bangor, by the grace of God we're still here, and by the grace of God there is a promising and hope-filled future open to us. May God give us wisdom and courage to discern his will and to step with faith into the future prepared for us and all who will follow us.