

So what do you think? What will the Church of England look like in 50 years time? Will your parish church still be here, with a committed congregation? Those are the sort of questions I find myself asking as we celebrate 50 years in 2014 of the building of our existing church. I believe that the answer to both questions is a resounding 'Yes', but I do believe that the church, both nationally and locally, will look very different. Let me start with two images of the present church, as it looks at the beginning of 2014.

The first is a Sunday morning early in February, as we launch our year of Jubilee. This Sunday our 10.00am service was called: 'Celebrating Community: Giving thanks for who we are'. To prepare for this service we asked the groups who meet at St Peter's week by week to bring something about themselves. The theme, 'You are the light of the world', came from the Gospel for the day. I still find it hard to take in what happened. We filled the church with over 250 people of all ages, a lot of them children and young people. And, as part of the service, we heard the moving stories of groups - of Tots and Co, of Wednesday Ladies and Mothers Union, of the Day Centre and the Carers' Group, of Scouts and Boys' Brigade, of Girls' Brigade and Families Together and several others. Some groups have been around for 50 years. Others for only a few years. Together we realised that those of us gathered together represented something vibrant and precious: a community of people gathered around a church. And we knew that even the 250 of us did not represent the sum total of those involved in the life of St Peter's. For every person present there was probably another we could name who could not be there for some reason. Like a number of people I spoke to, I came away inspired. This is a church which connects with many people locally and in a variety of ways, and this is a foundation to build on.

You could paint another picture though. You could take a look at some graphs of church attendance and age profiles, as I did at a meeting in London, at Church House, Westminster, the administrative headquarters of the Church of England. What this shows is a sloping line, consistently downwards, from average Sunday worshippers of around 1.2 million in 2007, to a theoretical 100,000 in 2057 - based on present trends. These, we are told, represent only a reduction in one person per congregation per year. What makes the statistics even more shocking is the age profile of churchgoers. In 2007, for example, those in church aged 18-24, represent about 2% of the whole, (while the number of that age group in the total population represented about 12% of the whole). At the other end of the scale, the 2007 figures for those aged 65 and over are 47% of the church compared to 20% of the whole congregation. And what about the middle? Well, of 35-44 year olds, 11% are churchgoers, compared to 19% of the population.

In ministry we are at present losing more ordained ministers in active ministry than we are ordaining. In finance, between 2007 and 2011 overall those attending and those giving regularly have declined by 5.3% and 5.6% respectively. At present over 70% of the Church's current income currently comes from those aged over 55 and 42% from those aged over 65.

So much for the doom and gloom. What are the positives? Well, the truth is that not every congregation is getting smaller: some churches are growing. Some churches, like St Peter's Hall Green, still reach a large number of people of all ages even when average Sunday attendance hovers around the 100 mark. Cathedral congregations, for example, show consistent growth in numbers. The giving of the Church of England in Birmingham, one of the poorest Dioceses, both in inherited wealth and in average household wealth, is the most generous in the whole of the Church of England, at over 5% of income per head. As a charity, in times of austerity, not a single one can equal the consistency and generosity of giving in the church.

These are encouraging signs, but we still have to reverse the downward trend if the Church of England is going to continue to serve even at present levels, and, above all, to be a truly effective part of God's mission to the whole world. So what do we do about it?

When I was sharing this gloomy news with a Reader colleague at church recently he was reassuring. 'It's a pattern repeated everywhere. All sorts of organisations and groups are having difficulty retaining their membership. It's cyclical and the cycle of attendance and commitment will return. I have no doubt that a lively church will be around in 100 years.' That was the gist of what he was saying.

So, first of all, I believe, we hold our nerve. We remain faithful to the Gospel as it has been handed on to us and we continue to seek ways 'to proclaim it afresh in each generation'. This may mean some significant changes in the ways we do things. We can and do make use of digital media, for example. But essentially the message hasn't changed. We just need to continue to find fresh ways of telling it. However, a lot of fussing about internal matters, things that we prefer to remain untouched, over indulgence on time consuming and morale reducing arguments, both in local and national churches, is not going to have any impact at all, the reverse in fact. Churches squabbling always put people off.

Secondly, being more united, both within our churches and between denominations of the church, will enable a more efficient use of resources. If, for example, we can train local leaders in mission and ministry by running one course for all the churches instead of 6 separate courses then not only will we learn more about one another, but we will not be competing in the same mission field.

Thirdly, we must not be afraid of variety and diversity. Human beings find different ways of engaging (or not) with their creator. We don't have to do everything in the same way to be united. In the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity this year, our preacher, a Moravian minister, reminded us of the saying of one of the founders of the Moravian Church, Comenius, quoting St Augustine of Hippo: "In essentials, unity; in non-essentials, liberty; in all things, charity."

Which brings me to my fourth point, which is that in the matters of interpretation on which the church is divided - I am thinking particularly of sexuality and of the position of women in the church - a strong dose of charity could go a long way to win the hearts, minds and souls of those who are sceptical of the claims of Christ. 'I pray, that you may all be one, as we are one', said Jesus Christ. We have a long way to go, and we will never all agree, but disagreement may be a healthy sign of intelligent debate rather than bitter argument! It does mean being a bit more generous in our judgments and unselfish in our opinions. It could be costly.

So my fifth point would be that the costliness of discipleship is, we have to agree, the essence of the Gospel - 'take up your cross and follow me.' He really didn't promise it would be easy to follow him. It's a road which many may well shy away from taking. Sacrificial giving and sacrificial ministries will be part of the answer.

So, as Lent begins, Christians have the chance to to a bit of a 'stock-take', a 'full service' of our spiritual lives. A healthier and growing church will result, surely, if we explore the foundations afresh, unite for strength, rejoice in our diversity, be strong on charity, and never underestimate the cost.

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