



RELEASING THE ENERGY – Presentation to Diocesan Synod

Google “strategy” and follow the links that take your fancy and you get more than an inkling of what T S Eliot meant when he said that “the end of all our surfing will be to arrive where we started and know the place for the first time”. “Strategy”, it seems, can mean almost anything you want it to mean. Some experts will tell you that strategy is about having a plan of action; for others, the word “planning” is anathema. Gurus in the strategy business will say it’s all about “the big picture”; on the other hand, you can find things called strategies which appear to account for everything down to the last paper clip. So, it’s important that we are clear about what we mean when we talk about a “Diocesan Strategy”.

But you may ask why we need to bother with a strategy at all. Briefly, then, we live in a world where the pace and scale of change are quicker and greater than humankind has ever experienced before. The Good News of the Kingdom of God needs to be proclaimed in a way that engages with the cultures and sub-cultures, the attitudes to belief, the aspirations and concerns of our contemporaries, most of whom have moved exponentially away from the contexts within which the Gospel was first preached. In these challenging circumstances we have to take stock of our resources, do all we can to maximise their effectiveness, and set God’s people free to realise the potential of their God-giftedness. *Releasing the Energy* aims to encourage and support that process so that every part of the Diocese can engage effectively with its core purpose.

Strategy identifies resources, realised and potential, and harnesses them to the task of achieving a goal. So, it’s important to know where you’re going.

A few weeks ago I went with a group of theological students from Trinity College to Germany on a visit connected with our Diocese’s link with the Lutheran Church in Bavaria. One evening, three of us were making our way through the streets of Munich and we heard music – it was one of Rossini’s overtures and it sounded very good. The sound was coming from the arches under the Old Council House at one end of the Marienplatz, the main square. We joined a group of about twenty people who were standing in a semi-circle around a group of four musicians – violin, cello, double bass and piano accordion. They finished the Rossini and launched into another piece which was played with brilliance, enthusiasm and consummate musicianship. When it ended, the three of us looked at each other and it was clear we were all hooked. As the performance progressed, it became clear that these four guys did not take themselves terribly seriously, but nevertheless played with evident passion and for sheer enjoyment.

The crowd grew as the music went on. There were young and old, men, women and children; people of different races and nationalities, rich tourists, kids on bikes. At one point I looked round the eighty or so gathered there and all of them had big grins on their faces and were gently jiggling up and down to the beat. In between

numbers, conversations broke out between strangers; children found their parents unusually generous in supplying them with coins to throw in the violin case at the front. When it was over, we all cheered and clapped, smiled at everyone and slowly dispersed: we to the underground station, some to their hotels to steel themselves for another day's sightseeing; others to prepare for school or work the next day; back to dysfunctional families, rocky marriages, boring jobs, perhaps, or simply life as usual. But for a few moments, we had all been part of something special, we had been uplifted. And if you ask me to sum up what was going on, I'd say that, for that brief time, we were experiencing something of what it means to be part of a community of wholeness.

And that brings us back to the subject of where we're going. Many of us have become accustomed to expressing our goal as a diocese, and as churches and congregations, in these terms: *Creating communities of wholeness with Christ at the centre*. Some of us may prefer to talk of transforming lives or structures, liberating the enslaved, comforting the fearful, bringing hope to the despairing, challenging the complacent. But however we express it, our focus, our goal, is the coming of God's kingdom into the life of God's world. And if you asked me to explain what I mean by that, I might well begin by telling the story of what happened one evening under the arches in Munich. There was a sense of being raised up, of connectedness, of excellence – of gifts and talents used to uplift and inspire, of joy and fun, of seriousness and exuberance – for that moment, I would say, the Kingdom of God came near.

And that's the business we're in: making it possible, clearing the way, preparing the ground, for the Kingdom to come.

And a strategy helps us in two ways: it gets us to identify and maximise our resources so that we can be equipped to get going towards our goal; and it enables us to keep our eyes on what we're aiming at, and it reminds us to keep asking the question: "Does this or that contribute positively to the creation of communities of wholeness?" Do our activities and commitments encourage the transformation of relationships, increase a passion for justice, promote care for the vulnerable and disadvantaged, inclusion for the outcast, delight in the creation, maturity and fulfilment for individuals and communities; do they deepen faith and spiritual awareness?

And so to the Diocesan Strategy, *Releasing the Energy*.

You will be aware that there are four major strands, all of which focus on fostering the conditions that will keep us moving forward, as a diocese and as Christian communities, in the direction of our goal.

The first is that we shall continue to support the *Growth Programme*, and to encourage churches, chaplaincies, partnerships, congregations and groups to address the four areas for growth and development of Partnership, Influence, Numbers and Commitment. In the last few months the area deans and I have met with representatives of most of the parishes in the Bristol Archdeaconry to talk about the progress of their own plans for growth. The overwhelming impression is that the process is proving to be challenging and stimulating, and that it is still in its

early stages in most situations. It is true to say that there is evidence that many Christian communities are finding their focus shifting from a preoccupation with church to the context in which they, as church, are set; they are beginning to discover what it means to make the transition to thinking and acting with missional intent.

The second strand is *Developing Leadership*. A diocese dedicated to creating communities of wholeness characterised by inclusion, justice and human flourishing is bound to ensure that its own communities of faith embody those same characteristics. As it says in the *Strategy Overview*, “by focusing on leadership development, the Diocesan Strategy aims to release a greater level of indigenous, voluntary and collaborative ministry leadership in the Diocese. This will lead to ministry leadership teams of lay and ordained people, authorised to share ‘the cure of souls’ with the Bishop and lead the church into mission and growth”. This strand will take strategic advantage of the somewhat unstrategic occurrence of the vacancy resulting from the resignation of a parish priest by initiating a process of analysis, discernment and development, encouraging the church to determine the gifts and experience that will be required to move forward in mission in the next stage of their life.

The Diocese will also launch its own leadership development programme, *RELEASE*, which will be generally available to parishes at any time.

The third strand relates to *Structures of oversight and support*. I want to highlight three elements here. Firstly, the New Testament paints a picture of new relationships emerging within the community of the faithful. Distinctions between male and female, Jew and Gentile, slave and free are transformed and, in the kingdom of God, nobody lords it over anyone else. A community of wholeness is one where people grow up to maturity “measured by nothing less than the full stature of Christ himself”, where they contribute their gifts and participate fully in the life of the community. It follows that our life as a Diocese should be structured so as to make it possible for decisions to be made by the people who are going to be most affected by them. Hence, the increasing significance of the deanery and deanery leadership teams in, for example, the deployment of ministerial resources and the encouragement of giving based on the principles of generosity and spiritual growth.

Secondly, giving deaneries a more active central role in decision-making will have implications for the structures of decision and policy-making and implementation at diocesan level. These will be reviewed in order to ensure that they are focussed on supporting our strategic objectives, our core purpose.

Thirdly, last autumn Bishop’s Council commissioned a consultant to address the question: What do we need to do to ensure successful implementation of the Strategy? He told us that it was no good simply bolting strategy implementation onto the existing job descriptions of the Bishop’s staff: there had to be a dedicated team whose focus would be delivery of the various elements in the Strategy. Two effects of this which will immediately be felt, if these proposals are approved today, are that the scope of the two archdeacons’ responsibilities will change quite radically, and the work of what is now the MnM team will be differently configured.

The fourth strand is the one that relates to *finance*. There are proposals to explore other possible sources of income and to ensure that financial resources are applied effectively and efficiently. But I want to concentrate on the proposals for a new Parish Share system.

I have heard it said, more than once, that we're only pushing this Diocesan Strategy because of money: "It's all finance driven". I hope that, from what you've read and from what you've heard this morning, you will agree that, in fact, the precise opposite is true. If we had no strategy at all to keep our vision fixed on the creation of new communities of wholeness, we would run the risk of becoming the slaves of financial imperatives in the absence of anything that could lift our eyes above the balance sheet.

But there's no escaping the fact that money matters: it is one of the resources we have to be strategic about. What is being proposed is that our attitude – as a Diocese and as individual parishes – to Share-giving should be one that reflects and embodies the characteristics of the Kingdom. Parish Share should be something that evokes not feelings of coercion, guilt, resentment and such like, but is approached in a spirit of generosity and as an expression of spiritual maturity. Discussions and decisions about Share-giving will take place at deanery level and this will enable parishes to engage with issues of mutuality and interdependence, and have a clearer grasp on how the money is spent and why.

It is not unusual within the Church of England for there to be a degree of local involvement in decisions about Parish Share. In some dioceses, deaneries have for many years been the forum where the apportionment between parishes has been negotiated. Nor would we be the first diocese to implement the kind of system outlined on pages 20 and 21 in your papers. What is clear is that a system which has served us well over the last decade or so is showing signs of severe strain. We have heard earlier this morning what lies in store for us financially in the near future. What these proposals offer is an opportunity to meet increasing demands on scarce resources together, as parishes, as deaneries and as a diocese, in a way that encourages us to understand Share-giving as a response to God's grace and an occasion for generosity.

I hope that helps to set the Diocesan Strategy in its proper context and that you agree that it will indeed act as a catalyst for releasing the energy of the whole people of God so that the kingdom might come in the life of the communities in which we live, work and serve. In a time of universal change, may we be transformed by the renewing of our minds and, in the words of the ancient prayer, may things which were cast down be raised up, things which have grown old be made new, and may all things return to perfection through him from whom they took their origin, even through our Lord Jesus Christ.

Tim McClure
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