

Diocese of Ely Growth Group

Report of Meeting on 9th July 2024

Contents

Diocese of Ely Growth Group.....	1
Report of Meeting on 9th July 2024	1
Summary.....	1
The Group.....	2
How Growth has Happened.....	2
Things for “the Diocese” to Notice.....	3
For other Benefices or Parishes to Notice.....	4
What Next?	4
Appendix 1: List of Participating Churches.....	5
Appendix 2: Full Notes.....	6

Summary

Around a fifth of Ely Diocese’s churches are growing, while 80% are not. It seemed a good idea to gather those who are, and to listen to their stories. We did this in the summer of 2024, and this short paper summarises what they said.

The summary of the summary is perhaps this: there is no trick to growth, no formula or technique. Churches grow when they really want to, when they experiment and take risks. Churches grow when God comes first, and when God’s love infuses the church family. Churches grow when they value every new person enough to invite them to something else.

Also: church growth is hard work, and needs support. There are valuable lessons here about joining parishes into partnerships, about supporting leaders and caring for volunteers. The diocesan central team will reflect on how we can do this better.

Finally, there are messages here for churches that are not growing. Do not despair or give up, and do not accept non-growth as your normal. Find a partner church, so you can support one another. Learn some stuff. Try some stuff. Wait prayerfully and hopefully.

The Group

In July 2024, representatives of growing churches from Ely Diocese met to talk about how growth had happened for them, and what could be learned from those experiences.

Invitations went to benefices whose annual statistical return suggested they were growing. The comparison was between the Worshipping Community as reported in 2016 and 2022. This was analysed at benefice level, but then we also identified a number of individual parishes that were growing even though their benefice as a whole was not. It is recognised that church statistics are not always wholly reliable, so the Archdeacons were consulted, and added a few churches they knew to be growing. The final list (which is in Annex 1) included 18 benefices¹. 28 people from 14 benefices attended.

There is no simple pattern to where growth is happening. 11 of the 18 are (loosely) rural, 7 are urban. 13 out of 18 are multi-parish benefices. 7 are from the Huntingdon and Wisbech archdeaconry, 11 from Cambridge archdeaconry.

How Growth has Happened

The group was encouraged to tell rich stories rather than simplify into generalities, and so we are slightly reluctant to draw out general themes in this note. However, some common themes are noticeable. (Fuller notes of the group's discussion can be found in an annex.)

1. Many churches, in different ways, spoke about setting a clear intention to grow. They thought about everything they did in terms of growth, and they thought strategically about the pathways that might lead people from the fringe into membership. That is to say, some church activities might not feel terribly religious, and might be quite traditional – but they were organised with a view to establishing relationships and enabling conversations, and with a clear intention to invite people to a next step. Pastoral offices offer huge opportunities to invite people.
2. Listening is important, and takes time. That includes listening to God in prayer: building a congregational habit of prayer is a crucial foundation for growth. And also, before establishing new activities or congregations, listening to the local community: what is needed, where are the gaps?
3. Provision for children is key to many stories. Not only because children matter, but also because provision for children means provision for their families, and what works for children might work for almost everyone. People are particularly open to joining things when they first have children, or when the children change school, so toddler or after-school groups can reach people who want to meet people and belong.

¹ For comparison, the Diocese includes 106 benefices or groups or parishes that share clergy in plurality. Around 60 parishes showed growth, out of 304 parishes/BMOs in the Diocese. At either parish or benefice level, around one-fifth are growing.



4. Existing worshippers may need to adapt as their church grows. It is vital to keep communicating with them – care for them, but do not under-estimate their ability to flex. Even if you don't want to attend a new event, you can support it, including in prayer.
5. Welcome and belonging are the basic fuel-mix of church growth. Build a sense of *belonging* to church – you are not here as a consumer, nor just as a “churchgoer”. A good welcome is important, but so is creating a way of keeping in touch with people, and keeping track of who *isn't* here (who may be in pastoral need). Make people feel valued (birthdays, offering a meal when they are ill). Have fun together.
6. Relationships and the wider community. We don't only want people to belong to church, but we want the church to belong to its place. Build links with local organisations and institutions. Invest in your place: it might be harder to hold your seekers' course on the estate rather than in the church rooms, but do it anyway.
7. Keep experimenting. Not everything will work. Tolerate risk, encourage one another. Successful change will demand more change: a great toddler group will soon mean you need to think about an after-school club!
8. A growing church will not necessarily see growth in Sunday attendance.
9. “The key to growth is that the Vicar doesn't feel alone.”

Things for “the Diocese” to Notice

All the Anglicans of Cambridgeshire and West Norfolk are part of the Diocese, as are church schools, but this part of the discussion was focused on the institutional centre: how diocesan policy and the central team can support growth.

10. Stories and vision are powerful and inspiring. Could we share more good-news stories please? We have gold/silver/bronze medals for eco-church - but could we have medals for sharing Jesus?
11. There was a strong sense that, if we look after church leaders, they will look after everyone else. How to network them into peer-supportive groups? Could we do more forward-planning regarding deployment and vacancies, and thus shorten vacancies? (And/or provide more support during vacancies.) If the most fruitful time in ministry is often 5-7 years in, could we encourage clergy to stay longer?
12. Volunteers (including LLMs, PTO and SSM clergy) are precious, scarce and often rather exhausted. Can we provide more support (which is not the same thing as training) – paid super-treasurers? PSOs? Admin? Avoid creating more work through diocese initiatives, but rather reduce our burdens.
13. Parish-to-parish links are likely to be as or more useful than diocese-to-parish ones. Can we promote partnerships between the better- and less-well-resourced which would be mutually beneficial (e.g., for ministers in well-resourced churches who would like to do more)? Multi-parish licences? Establish a “bank” of available ministers (like nurses)? Ultimately, such links can develop to the point of church-planting: will the Diocese support this?

For other Benefices or Parishes to Notice

14. If you are not growing, then... what are you doing about it? Are you going to find out what others have done, gather some ideas, go on a course? Don't just accept non-growth as your normal.
15. "You will not get growth unless you do something different." How can you make it safe to do different things, to stop enforcing similarity? How can you reassure those who feel a bit unsettled? Belonging matters: care for them, invest in them. New and old belong to each other: both/and, not new or old.
16. Wait hopefully and prayerfully. Don't give up.
17. Parishes need companions – who are yours? Who needs you to accompany them?

What Next?

As the Group meeting was reaching its end, we asked two further questions:

Is there anything else you'd like to have heard more about?

Would you like the Group to meet again, and for what?

In response to the first question, people commented:

- Would have liked to hear more about how others equip their people for evangelism, and about work in schools.
- Communication is at the heart of growth - whether it's evangelism, web-site or social media, keeping in touch – and many churches struggle with it (either owing to lack knowledge or resource).
- What is the role of Deaneries in enabling growth, and how can they do this more effectively?
- It is interesting that no-one mentioned styles of worship – this didn't seem to be a core part of people's stories.
- We should be honest that most growth stories include losing some people. It can be best to be open about this and part on good terms, but it is still painful.
- Changing buildings can enable growth, but the faculty process is hard for parishes, and the Diocesan Advisory Committee is not always as helpful as it could be.

As regards meeting again, the main view was that it was sufficient at this time to publish a report (which you are reading). However, there was also interest in this group being used as a sounding-board in producing of any new diocesan strategy, or of a funding bid to the Church Commissioners.

Appendix 1: List of Participating Churches

The following churches/benefices were invited to the Growth Group:

- Ortons and Woodston
- Littleport
- CSK Church, Peterborough
- Grimshoe benefice
- East Leightonstone
- Ramseys and Upwood
- Buckden with the Offords
- The Paxtons
- Papworth team
- St George's, Chesterton
- St John's, Orchard Park
- St Paul, Cambridge
- Cherry Hinton, St Andrew
- Holy Trinity, Cambridge
- Whittlesford
- Anglesey Group
- Cheveley Group
- Cottenham with Rampton
- Bassingbourn and Whaddon

Appendix 2: Full Notes

1. What themes emerge from your growth stories? What might have made a difference? What are you noticing now?
 - Events for children (toddlers and carers) outside Sunday. Feeds to worship.
 - Saturday service – more informal, and for children. Breakfast before Sunday service to link the Saturday people into Sunday.
 - Establishing a pathway. Can link from baptisms (including private ones) to a Bible study group, and/or to volunteering at the food bank. Think of occasional offices as opportunities to invite onto the pathway.
 - Build relationships with people.
 - Doing what you can do.
 - Asking existing church attenders to be adaptable – keep communicating with everyone.
 - Children, families, and older people meeting together – e.g., a lunch group connected with toddlers? “Inter-generational” (worship for all) not separate groups for everyone.
 - God at the centre.
 - Café church started as breakfast before Sunday service, but was so popular it became a service. It’s for everyone, including that it attracts families. For people who don’t want to go to it, they can support it through prayer. “Support it even if you don’t agree with it.”
 - Continual innovation. Keep trying things and adapting (e.g., as the little ones grow into primary age).
 - Investing not only in communities of worshippers, but investing in the wider community – for instance, run a seeker’s course on the new housing estate. (Which costs money, compared to running it in the church building.) “Getting out there,” which has a cost in terms of money as well as people’s time.
 - Take the risk... of changing the services around (alternating traditional and café church services). We took most people with us. As an alternative on café days we offer a 9am BCP.
 - Making the church family an attractive place to be – having fun together. Out of that, “setting a bar”, intentionality about attracting people into church. Every new volunteer has an induction meeting that explains what is expected, sets a high bar of quality and service. Means we can cover the bases: our welcome; discipling people.
 - Refurbishment of an old building enabled lots of activities and groups. Doesn’t, however, necessarily grow Avg Sunday Attendance. (Another church has eight services that are not on Sunday morning.) Impact on community is worthwhile in itself.
 - Pioneering new congregations but after listening – to God – and to what the community wants and needs.
 - Good basic pastoral practice. Being a welcoming church family so newcomers feel able to join.



- “Covid was a gift” in that it drove a change of culture so people will travel more to church.
 - Welcoming culture can partly arise from having been disrupted (covid, building work).
 - It helped that little grants, DAC help, CYF meant we could try things, didn’t have to drop things. A sense that we’re not alone. “The key to growth is that the Vicar doesn’t feel alone.”
 - Covid meant we started online worship (now live-streaming Sunday) and that reaches numbers of people. Do these people count in the Worshipping Community, part of Sunday Attendance?
 - Being courageous in change. This leadership question suggests how the Diocese can help. (And managing change well involves knowing what you’re not changing them and allowing them to give people a sense of stability.)
 - Consulted congregation, sorted their ideas out in PCC then set up impact groups to deliver. Took time (handing ownership to a wide group) – risk and trust. Took a year but this returned us to a living church (after covid and interregnum). Included some “nice” things and some quite hard things (e.g., going out and finding refugee families).
 - Creating a sense of belonging to church (not a consumer, not just “churchgoing”).
 - Welcome is important – but, then, how do you keep track of your congregation? People can drop off quite easily if you don’t keep in touch with them. (Who’s on the electoral roll, who’s regular or occasional; a process for following up when people disappear.) Making people feel valued e.g., remembering special occasions, offering a meal when they are ill.
2. What questions do you want to ask the Diocese about how we can partner with you and support growth?
- How can you enable good peer support so growing churches can support those that are struggling?
 - How can you help churches to see how they can make their building more purposeful?
 - Can you encourage clergy to stay? – sometimes years 5-7 are the most open. How? Encouragement. Fewer central initiatives.
 - Can you recognise that many church workers have full-time jobs? Support us. Organise some peer support with people from bigger churches? Or reduce workload coming down from the Diocese.
 - Can you give us a forward view regarding provision of FT stipendiary clergy, regarding Ministry Share and future levels? And a clear system. Are there enough ordinands?
 - A central resource with ideas for worship including for children’s ministry. A searchable database or library.
 - How to link up churches that are well-resourced and/or running well, and churches that would benefit from some help. And linking LLMs or ALMs from



well-resourced churches so they can work in less resourced places. Inviting a spirit of generosity. (Like bank nurses, a “bank” of ministers who are more widely available.) The gift would be 2-way, at least some larger churches feel isolated. This would also be good for the LLMs, who might feel quite under-used in well-resourced churches.

- Can we promote church-planting? Especially in new-build estates?
 - Can you help church treasurers? It’s such a complex role now. Help them, or help us pay people to do this. “Super-treasurers”. Treasurer training.
 - Ditto Safeguarding Officers. Can the diocese fund deanery safeguarding officers?
 - A lot of churches feel that each church is on its own. Could you show you notice little good things? Little awards.
 - Streamlining the process towards ordination.
 - While we have medals for eco-church, we don’t have medals for sharing Jesus.
 - Recognise that the whole thing runs on volunteer time, and avoid making volunteer roles more onerous. Including SSM and HfD clergy.
 - More institutional memory.
 - Stories are powerful. Could the Diocese please share more good news stories?
 - Life attracts life. Vision.
 - Forward planning for clergy vacancy – what support will be available?
3. What questions do you wish to address to all the other parishes in the Diocese about growth?
- If you are not growing, what are you doing about it?
 - Don’t give up.
 - Learn when it will be easier to get forgiveness than permission, and when you can get away with it!
 - PUSH – pray until something happens. Wait hopefully.
 - “You will not get growth unless you do something different.”
 - The best links are about companionships – each church has gifts – are you looking for companions? What have you to offer to growing churches?
 - Can you start a toddler group? Can we help you? People do come to these, and we get to know them.
 - How can you make it safe to think differently? Absence of enforcement of similarity. Welcoming diversity. When people are a bit unsettled by change, you need to invest more in them, spend time, build relationships and connections. (Being a nectarine, with a core of belief but a soft outside, not a coconut.) Invite and welcome ideas.
 - “Belonging” matters. If people feel unchurched by new stuff, make sure you offer something traditional. A both/and culture.
 - If you’re not growing, what risks are you taking?



4. Other things to say

- Equip people for evangelism. Would have liked to know more about how people are doing this, what approach?
- Would have liked to know more about people's work in schools.
- Strategy needs to be about partnership – between parishes and “the Diocese”. Should the Diocese encourage more cohesion in how Deaneries do planning? Or indeed between Dioceses, nationally.
- What are Deaneries for?
- “To reach people no-one else is reaching, you have to do things no-one else is doing.”
- Partner with the Holy Spirit.
- No-one mentioned styles of worship. Interesting that this isn't a core part of people's stories.
- The growth agenda will mean you lose people – and that is painful.
- The Diocese of Ely is poor in responding to building projects – too long, too many forms. The DAC changes its mind between visits, over time.
- Communication is at the heart of growth: whether it's evangelism, web-site or socials, keeping in touch. Many churches struggle (either lack knowledge or resource). Holly's webinar and provision of Canva was excellent.
- We don't need a new strategy, but we do need to encourage risk-taking without the life being squeezed out by safeguarding. Some bits of “the centre” need to work better.



5. Next steps

- We'll produce a report, send to you, and publish.
- Do you want to do more? Use this group as a reference group for a new diocesan strategy.
- Feed into process for bidding to the Church Commissioners.
- Further discussion on some key ideas.