Our Conversation; Our Future

The Case for A Diocesan Strategic Framework

Address to Diocesan Synod 15 October 2016,
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If you’ve ever had the misfortune of falling over in the street, your first reaction is, please don’t let anyone have seen this. Rather than look for help, we try to get straight back up. We don’t want a fuss. It’s embarrassing. It never happened. And we’re certainly not wasting time in the waiting room at A&E. I think something similar happens to a collective shock also.

In the last two decades, an earthquake has happened – is happening – which we pretend is entirely normal and to which we can make effortless readjustments without breaking stride, even as things fall around us and our steps become unsteady. Since the turn of the century we have collectively experienced 9/11, major wars, civil wars in big Arab states, the growing nihilism of religious violence, a global refugee crisis, developing climate change, a severe banking collapse which revealed deep and endemic flaws in the global economy, an era of austerity and lengthening inequality, a vote to leave the European Union and, across the so-called developed world, the re-emergence of demagoguery and extremist politics.

This is taking place against the panoramic scenery of a digital revolution which we imagine has taken place but which presently is no more than the slow taxiing of a plane to the runway. In the course of this century, which will belong to our children and grandchildren, they will travel to places so far away we could never imagine them. The two previous economic revolutions – agrarian and industrial – made unprecedented impacts on where and how people lived and related to one another. Our revolution in personal communication will alter the social architecture irrevocably, impacting upon lives more intimately than anything that has gone before. It is the biggest social experiment in human history. Far deeper – and more intrusive – than the communists ever dreamed of.

But still we carry on as if nothing has really happened.

For the Church this would be a mistake. Its historic calling is to a dual listening role. It should open its ears to the world: to make sense of the
changes taking place. And to the Holy Spirit, to enable the Church to respond
to these changes, that its people may live more fruitfully as disciples of Christ.

The creation of a diocesan strategy is a response to the many remarkable
things that are happening around us. In the midst of rapid and volatile
change, we need to shape our mission – through evangelism and community
action – in a way that demonstrates the coming Kingdom of God. The Church
exists to give shape and voice to Christian identity. The Diocese of Rochester
helps to give regional expression to this for Anglicans.

Some people are inherently suspicious of strategy. It conjures up images of
the hopeless David Brent and his soulless office in Slough. Of swivel-eyed,
sweaty contestants on *The Apprentice* trying to talk the language of grown-
ups. Strategy has become the defining shibboleth of late capitalism. Three
serious objections tend to be raised.

The first is that our capacity to predict the future is exaggerated and that
strategy is therefore of limited use. This certainly calls for humility as events
are not always anticipated. However, good strategy adapts to changing
circumstances in a process of evolution, which does not readily happen where
there are no existing plans.

The second objection is that strategy is little more than the business case for
controlling behaviour. When lots of things are happening all at once, we have
to pay more attention. Indeed, leaders are usually told to get a grip. The
risk is we try to manage ever more firmly what lies within our grasp until our
behaviour becomes controlling. Most of us have seen this; many of us are
guilty of it. St Paul was a fiercely controlling person before his conversion,
unable to let the new Christian sect run its course in the way Gamaliel had
suggested. That is, if it was not of God it would fail and if it was of God no-
one could stop it. Instead he took control of God and did his work for him.
His encounter with the ascended Christ took away all room for manoeuvre
and made him the ideal person to interpret the impotence of the cross and
the subsequent validation of resurrection. His controlling behaviour was
transformed by God, but he nevertheless applied deep, reasoned thinking to
the way he spread the Gospel.

The third objection has specific relevance to the Church. As Jesus noted, the
work of the Holy Spirit is about as easy to predict as the direction of the wind
at any moment. There is a rugged freedom to the Holy Spirit which the
Church should respect. But this sovereignty is not arbitrary. The letter to the
Romans 12:1-2 shows that as the people of God present their bodies as living
sacrifices, they should expect to be able to interpret the good and pleasing
will of God. If there is a sense of divine order to the purpose of God, the
planning we make should aim to reflect it.

The main cause of strategic failure, according to Matthew Raynor, is not bad
strategy, but good strategy which happens to be wrong. This is not an
argument against strategy. But great strategy depends on whether the initial vision is sound or not. Far fewer public figures speak about vision now because it’s felt to be so last century: the era of ideology. Public culture today is guarded, managerial and technocratic. If something works elsewhere, we try it and the pieces don’t have to fit together. But for the Church, there must be a vision, for without it, the people perish. Our vision as a twenty-first century Church located in south east England is sourced in the cross, resurrection and hope of a world to come. Without the power of God, the Church’s strategy is dry and unfocussed, like a diseased eye. With a good and confident sense of why we are here and what we are called to, strategy develops nimbly as it sees the goal we are walking towards.

Who, then, is responsible for the search for a credible diocesan strategy? Some think it is purely a matter for the Bishop and those who advise him, but there are risks attached to this. Our own faith history shows that the word of God often comes from the fringes and unexpected people and places. Without wider consultation, the voice of God risks being muzzled by us.

In The Wisdom of Crowds, James Surowiecki suggests that under the right circumstances, groups show remarkable collective intelligence, affording more insight than the brightest or most visionary person within it. But to work the group should be diverse and decentralised, to ensure different information is processed and that no one person dictates the decision.

Hence the search for a diocesan strategy by involving as many people as possible from diverse backgrounds. In the end, a smaller group of people chosen by and working for the Bishop will try to distil a lot of voices into something intelligible and this is a realistic goal. In the early chapters of Revelation, Jesus spoke pertinently into the contexts of several regional churches, with specificity about their personal circumstances.

There’s was a world in ferment just like ours.

*Let anyone who has an ear listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches (Revelation 2:11)*