

Presidential Address – Diocesan Synod September 2024

For those new to Synod, it's our custom to begin with a Presidential Address – a chance for me to highlight certain areas of diocesan life or wider societal issues. I'm never entirely sure how useful they are, but hopefully they give you a chance to learn a bit more about what is on my mind as I seek to oversee this wonderful diocese. Today, I'm using the opportunity to give an overview of our Diocesan Strategy, which also happens to be our first item of business. So after my address, I will leave you with some questions to discuss around your tables, before we go into the formal debate on the motion. I'm very conscious that some of you have been part of discussions on strategy for the past year or so – others coming to this for first time.

And the first thing that I want to say, is any strategy comes with a number of caveats. This is not simply a management exercise – the sort of thing any business or charity might do. Rather this is a discernment of what God saying and doing, how we should respond in the coming years. So, our starting point is God – and salvation history as it is revealed to us in the Bible. From this, we discern what God is doing today, at this moment in history, in our particular contexts. And then we work out how we think God is calling us to respond. This means there is lots that we won't get right, lots that we will need to learn, and much need for forgiveness, and for kindness and graciousness with one another

Secondly, when writing a strategy, it is almost guaranteed that it will be out of date as soon as it is written. The world is changing rapidly, and so our strategy will have to change and evolve over time. So the document you have in front of you is a living document. It will not simply be placed on a shelf to gather dust in the months to come. It will be used to guide of our decision making, our allocation of resources, and it will be updated as and when needed.

So with those caveats, let me say a word about the context in which we find ourselves.

Religion	England 2001 Census		England 2011 Census		England 2021 Census	
	Numbers 2001	% 2001	Numbers 2011	% 2011	Numbers 2021	% 2021
Buddhist	139,046	0.3	238,626	0.5	262,438	0.5
Christian	35,251,244	71.7	31,479,876	59.4	26,167,895	46.3
Hindu	546,982	1.1	806,199	1.5	1,020,531	1.8
Jewish	257,671	0.5	261,282	0.5	269,303	0.5
Muslim	1,524,887	3.1	2,660,116	5.0	3,801,178	6.7
Sikh	327,343	0.7	420,196	0.8	520,093	0.9
Other religion	143,811	0.3	227,825	0.4	332,405	0.6
Total religions	38,190,984	77.7	36,094,120	68.1	32,373,843	57.3
No religion	7,171,332	14.6	13,114,232	24.7	20,715,657	36.7
Not stated	3,776,515	7.7	3,804,104	7.2	3,400,555	6.0
Total all	49,138,831	100	53,012,456	100	56,490,055	100

This table will be familiar to many of you. It documents the change in religious affiliation over the last three censuses – 2001, 2011 and 2021. Now again, census questions come with all sorts of caveats which I’m not going to spend time on now because the overall trend is clear to see.

In 2001, 71.7% of the population of England ticked the box Christian.

In 2011, the figure was 59.4%

In 2021, 46.3%. So for the first time in 2021, less than half the population said they were Christian.

I’m not telling you anything you don’t already know. But it’s important to be reminded because sometimes in the church, we blame ourselves for the general decline in church attendance and finance and volunteers and so on. The reality is that no one is to blame. Rather the tectonic plates of society are shifting, and our job, once again, is to ask: what is God doing in our world today, and how is God calling us to respond?

In addition, I want to say:

- It’s natural to feel nostalgia, but there is no going back.
- It’s natural to see this as a problem to be solved, but this is a condition that we are going to have to live with (it won’t change in our lifetime).
- Anyone who offers a simple solution, hasn’t understood the situation.
- I’m NOT saying that churches can’t grow – we have lots of good examples of growing churches, but I am saying that we are in a new “missionary” context.
- So what are we learning ... (discipleship)?

Well here’s the summary of what we are learning.

1. Some things never change – God; God’s kingdom and God’s invitation to us to be a part of that kingdom.

2. God's call to go deeper in our discipleship – or our learning about what it means to be a follower of Jesus of Christ; God's call to make disciples i.e. grow the church; and God's call to loving service of the world. All these remain unchanged.
3. But at this moment in history, I believe we are called to prioritise certain areas of our church life – we're calling these our five strategic priorities:
 - a. Intercultural communities – welcoming, including and learning from people of different cultures and backgrounds.
 - b. Intergenerational communities – welcoming, including and learning from children and young people, alongside adults of all different ages.
 - c. New communities – the work of church planting, fresh expressions of church and revitalisation of existing churches – this is where we are seeing real growth in the diocese at the moment.
 - d. Eco communities – caring for God's creation
 - e. Reconciling communities – learning to live well together across difference.
4. Then there are areas where we are clear that things do need to change – our work around vocations and leadership; finance, church buildings, safeguarding, Minster Communities and our diocesan support services and governance.

All of this is set out in detail in the strategy document and the appendices. I hope you've had chance to read it – even though it is quite long!

I'm conscious that a lot of this may sound like it is long way away from ordinary parish life. So a few more things to clarify:

- Not saying that every parish needs to do everything.
- Not saying that every parish even needs to know about the strategy – this is for Synod and diocesan leadership.
- We are saying that every parish needs to reflect on our new “missionary” context – hence this is where the Minster Community process starts.
- We are saying that we face some very difficult choices – and the strategy is needed to help us make these choices.
- We are saying that prayer is the foundation of all we do - so we are asking Synod join in prayer for the future of God's church.

So in a minute, I'm going to invite you to discuss the strategy around your tables, before we go into a formal debate. But finally a word about national church funding. There are two main streams of financial support that we can now access from the national church:

- Lowest Income Communities Funding – we receive about £1million / year to support ministry in these communities. We are re-evaluating how this money is allocated in the light of Minster Communities.
- Diocesan Investment Programme – we can apply for grants to support ministry where there is a proven track record of growth, and where there is a clear plan for sustainability beyond the period of the grant.

- We plan to apply soon for funding to pilot Growing Faith hubs (with children and young people), with the possibility of making a bigger application in a few years' time.

We will be returning to this at future Synods as we progress our work on funding applications.

So an opportunity now to discuss this, with some questions for starters:

- When you read the strategy, what excited you?
- When you read the strategy, what puzzled you?
- Are you broadly supportive of the strategy and the application for a national church grant related to piloting Growing Faith with children and young people?