

A BLUEPRINT FOR CHANGE?

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Next month, the Church of England's General Synod will consider two very surprising papers. The first is the **Archbishops' vision for change** and the second is a manifesto **about discipleship**.

As Australian Anglicans return from their annual beachside holidays, we would do well to notice them. We might also ask, if our church are suffering from the same or a similar crisis afflicting our church then what are our church leaders doing about it?

The first paper modestly calls for a 'new direction for the Church' and boldly sets out a vision for investment to realize the goal of spiritual and numerical growth. Of course, calls to better finance mission are nothing new. Actually committing money to this task when a system is already experiencing diminishing financial health is radical to say the least.

The paper proposes to shift funding formulas away from subsidies for existing albeit ineffective ministry and towards investment that might realize diocesan plans for strategic growth, especially in poor neighbourhoods. The sum? About £50m (\$A93m) or 4% of total expenditure.

The English Church wants a new funding model for ministry simply because the gap between what dioceses need to have for future ministry leadership and their capacity to provide it is growing alarmingly wide.

The second paper, aims to spark a conversation about discipleship, particularly the patterns suitable for the contemporary world and the means by which parishes develop it. I can almost hear the howls from here after all in the church, its like parenthood – no one likes to think of themselves as being bad it.

The core issue is the 'clericalised culture of church and ministry.' Sadly when Anglicans do talk about vocation and discipleship it gets narrowly focussed participation through institutional ministry. In particular, it is an institutional culture where all available energy and attention is diverted to clergy in the expectation that such leaders will, well lead.

Unfortunately, too little is left over for developing the vocation of God's people generally. The result is that people's involvement in God's mission through community is completely overshadowed. In turn, vocation and calling is simply treated as the purview of the ordained while the rest is simply expect to pray, pay and obey.

Of course, the two reports intersect and not simply because the approach opens the door to funding new forms or fresh expressions of church, which are often low on the priority list when diocesan thinking and efforts are devoted to the stipendiary parochial model.

The reports cultivate a forum for conversation where rethinking ministry and discipleship becomes possible. These reports will provoke people to respond, to say what they think.

As Anecdote to Evidence showed, capable lay people are leading more than half of all fresh expressions of church. If the English Synod simply decides that these leaders should be clergy or worse merely adds this expectation to the burden of existing clergy it will fail miserably.

The conversation is significant for Australian Anglicans two reasons.

First, it gives different groups the opportunity to reply. People have the opportunity not merely to tell others of their experience but to also listen and appreciate how others participate in God's mission. When was the last time Australian Anglicans spoke openly about our church's financing for mission? We have programs and projects but too little transparency or accountability.

Second, the differences may help us to see the needs of particular neighbourhoods and distinctive groups for whom our normal cultural assumptions don't apply. Charismatics, evangelicals, progressives and liberals don't approach discipleship the same way. We try to smooth over these differences for the sake of peace and quiet all too often. Our challenge is learning how to leverage such different perspectives for the transformation of real communities.

Of course, these papers and the UK's General Synod won't solve the problem of an aging and diminishing church. That is the business of parishes. What Synod can do is to encourage and invest in thought, reflection and action systemically.

These papers may not be the blueprint or a comprehensive plan for change than many desire. But it is a worthwhile step in a conversation of review and reorientation that has been going for more than a decade.

Now I'm sure, many Australian diocesan councils and even our national Standing Committee of General Synod will not have their wakefulness disturbed even faintly by such reading material. Our bodies are stocked full with champions of the status quo, people with vested interests to protect.

Many will offer excuses for not paying attention. They will bleat about how different we are and how we lack the centralisation or the money of mother England. Sadly, many people will believe it and leave the vested interests untroubled.

What Australian Anglicans lack are not finances but boldness and the capacity to learn from difference. What we lack is the capacity to use our institutions to challenge the status quo, especially concerning our priorities, areas of blindness and things we won't talk about.

The conversation in the Australian Church about fresh expressions of church remains shrunken and underdeveloped because we won't talk about money or the matter of lay vocation for that matter.

The conversation about diocesan viability may focus attention on our institutional sustainability but it needs to open up the conversation about what we invest in and how to develop lay involvement in God's mission.

Sadly, its not the kind of a conversation that will happen over lamb chops and sausages this Australia Day or any other day.

By Archdeacon **Wayne Brighton**