

Address on 6th September 2020 – What is a ‘Benefice of the Future’?

by the Rev’d Anthony Smith

Introduction

This time of year, as we come back from summer holidays and the schools start up again, is often a time for looking ahead. 2020 is an unusual year, to state the obvious, but I thought today it would be good to pause and look at what the Diocese is expecting of us over the next weeks and months and to think a little about what it means to be a Benefice of the Future (BoF)

The heart of the matter

The basic idea of a BoF is to create something new in our rural areas which will help the church to grow. Church growth is the ultimate aim for two reasons

1. Jesus told us to go and make disciples. In the great commission at the end of Matthew’s gospel we read these words; “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you.” (Matthew 28:19)

To put this another way, the church exists for those outside it. Our calling is to reach out to others with the love of God.

2. The second reason we need to concentrate on growing the church is because if we don’t, then there won’t be any church in 20 or 30 years’ time.

As I said in my sermon two weeks ago, in many of our churches, particularly in the rural areas, there are missing generations. It is hard to find people in their twenties, thirties or forties in many of our churches, let alone children. Therefore, we can’t go on doing things the way we did them in the past. We need to do things differently, in an innovative way, to grow the church of the future.

That is not to deny all the good things about our rural churches, in particular the place that many have at the centre of our communities, but we need to reinvigorate them so that mission and outreach are the core of what they do.

If I was to suggest four key principles for a Benefice of the Future, they would be these:

1. Growing the church
2. Prioritising mission
3. Targeting the missing generations
4. Serving the local community

What will our BoF look like?

Our BoF will include 8 parishes (and 10 churches). These are

1. Ramsdell
2. Wolverton with Ewhurst
3. Hannington
4. Baughurst
5. Kingsclere
6. Ashford Hill with Headley (2 churches)
7. Burghclere with Newtown (2 churches)
8. Echhinswell with Sydmonton

My dog’s favourite walk is to walk across the fields at the back of the church at Burghclere. From there I can see clearly across to the mast on the downs at Hannington but it looks a long way. Why would the Diocese want to draw together so many parishes over such a large geographical area?

Concentrating our resources

One reason for drawing parishes into a bigger benefice is to concentrate our resources. In the past in our rural churches we have often tried to repeat the same things in each of our churches. There was a time, for instance, when all of our churches were trying to run Sunday Schools. We now recognise that this isn't possible to sustain. So it may be that in the BoF we concentrate our children's work in just one or two places. Not every church will provide something for young people but the provision will be there and every church will contribute to it.

Similarly, for those who want a more traditional form of worship this may not take place at all our churches, but in some it will and so the option will be available. What we won't be trying to do is to do everything everywhere. We will concentrate our resources so that where we are doing something we are able to do it well.

Establishing new patterns of worship

As a result of concentrating our resources we will need to work together across the BoF to decide which type of services should be held in which church and when. We will look at what churches are used to, and the contribution that they can offer. For instance, as far as I know, Burghclere is the only church with a choir. We would not want to lose this choral tradition in the new BoF.

Identifying and training lay leadership

We will have ten churches in our BoF but only two clergy. We will not be able to run the BoF without the addition of lay leaders to help in all sorts of ways but in particular with the leading of worship. St Paul reminds us in his letters that we are all part of the body of Christ and all have a part to play. One of the roles of the clergy in the BoF will be ministry development, identifying and training lay leaders to help with leading worship, preaching and in pastoral roles.

The diocese has a training programme to help us with this. It is called the Bishops Commission for Mission. The courses are focussed and usually last one term. We hope to make good use of this.

Centralised administration

One thing that the early BoFs have all done and found useful is to centralise administration in one place. They have all created an office for their BoF and employed an administrator. This takes a lot of pressure off the clergy (eg arranging funerals, baptisms, weddings etc and dealing with day to day enquiries) and frees them up to concentrate on strategy, oversight and doing ministry.

Simplified governance

Our BoF currently has eight PCCs. If we want to create unity in our thinking then we will almost certainly want to reduce the number of PCCs and to simplify our governance structure. This is not something we have to rush into, and it will need careful thinking through, but some of the other BoFs now have a single PCC for the whole BoF.

Creation of a new identity

What other BoFs have found is that branding is important. An overarching name for the BoF and a single website helps us all to feel part of the same thing. We will need to think carefully about what we call ourselves and what we can do to create an inclusive feeling across our BoF

Next steps

None of the above is set in stone. These are ideas which have helped others create successful BoFs. Our next step is to form a Working Group to take this further.

Prayer

Lord, we pray, help us to catch your vision for this place and all the villages in our BoF. May we make positive changes and see your church grow. We ask in your name. **Amen**