

St Chad's Church Conference 2011 – Vicar's keynote address

Bishop Mark told us last year that undertaking an audit process was a brave decision because in doing so we are opening ourselves both to criticism and to the possibility of change – the way things are now is not necessarily the way they are going to be in the future. And the duration of the audit process itself, including our discussions this morning, is sometimes called “liminal space” – which feels uncomfortable, because we are shifting from one position and haven't settled on another. But the answer is not to settle on the new position too quickly, rather to stay in the uncomfortable place, the liminal space, because that is where the Holy Spirit can work – it is creative. I do want to thank Patrick Playfair especially for bringing his wisdom and experience to bear in leading us through this process, knowing that he would be the focus for some of the discomfort.

One of the questions that we have been asking through the audit has been “What sort of church is St Chad's, and what should it be?” It's a key question in Shrewsbury, where there are so many churches of all denominations within walking distance. What is distinctive about this church? And we discuss that question this morning against the backdrop of the crisis at St Paul's Cathedral. I was very struck by two paragraphs in yesterday's Church Times, one by Giles Fraser, and the other by the Bishop of London. This is Giles Fraser:

“For too long the Church has been obsessed with its own internal workings and with silly arguments about sex. Now is the time for a new debate and a new emphasis. For if we are not fully involved with complex discussions about the relationship between financial justice and the way our financial institutions work, then we might as well give up on being a proper Church and admit that we are the spiritual arm of the heritage industry.”

And this is Bishop Richard Chartes:

“I believe that this is a moment in which St Paul's, and the Church in general, has been shown how it can get away from an in-house ecclesiastical agenda and its passion for elaborating defensive bureaucracy, in order to serve the agenda of the people of England at a critical moment in our history.”

Pertinent words for us as we come towards the end of a period in which of necessity building and heritage matters have been at the top of our agenda (as they also have at our sister church St Alkmund's). What are these two iconic buildings upon which we have been spending so much money, time and effort, for? Part of the answer to that has been given by two decisions: first, that taken by the PCC in 2001 upon the recommendation of the deanery, to redraw St Chad's parish more narrowly around the town centre. The second was the united benefice created last year out of the two separate parishes of St Chad's and St Alkmund's. What those two decisions do is to focus our energy, our mission, outwards upon this town in service and in collaboration with each other. I have always tried to take this seriously in my personal ministry, and one of the challenges the audit raises is how we as a church can take this outward looking, town centred focussed ministry seriously as a collective responsibility that we all share. It is significant that at both this and the previous conference the aspect of Christian ministry that people felt least confidence about has been mission and outreach. And I do want to return to that lack of confidence later.

We have divided our thinking today into four sections – worship, nurture, mission and outreach, and sustainability and income generation. You might say that there ought to be a fifth – communication and administration. We haven't included that because the message of the audit was clear – improve it! So rather than prolong discussion unnecessarily, I have asked Chris Pennington to produce a report for the PCC about these vital aspects of church life, with achievable recommendations to improve what we might call “management”. Chris has a career background in senior management in the private sector, in engineering, and worships at St Chad's with his wife Pat. He will bring clear thinking and intelligence to that task and I am grateful to him for undertaking it. I am also very pleased to announce that in response to something many people raised in the audit, we will be launching a seasonal publication, hopefully this Christmas, under the editorship of Charlotte Dowd (supported by her husband Kevin). For this she will need human and financial support – please keep that in your prayers.

Our mission statement is “Open doors, open hearts, open minds”. This has particular relevance to our task of serving the town centre in the name of Jesus Christ. We need to apply its philosophy to each aspect of our church life – starting with worship. I believe that the pattern of worship that we have now on Sundays is good, and that the standard of liturgy and music is excellent. The average Sunday attendance in 2010 was almost exactly the same as five years earlier, in 2006. That means that the numbers coming to church for the first time balances those who for one reason or another, stop coming. That is a good achievement in a church with an average age over 60 (the average age in the Church of England nationally is 61). So we shouldn’t fall into the easy temptation of beating ourselves up too much. Music is much discussed – do we have too much? I am very clear that in this challenge of being distinctive, we must offer a standard of music which is both excellent and inclusive. David Leeke and I believe music must serve worship and that it is a vital and effective part of our mission. So we are and will continue to be as long as I am Incumbent, a choral church. One of the most frequent comments in the audit was the desire to grow our ministry to children. This means prioritising their contribution to our musical life, but also establishing the first Sunday in the month at 10am as a eucharist which is more informal, more participative and shorter. I commend Lesley’s work here, and the long term goals she is setting us, and I will return to this later.

As part of our mission to the town under the heading of our mission statement, we are also supplementing our regular Sunday worship pattern with what we are calling “celebrations” of different aspects of the community we serve – our civic services for the town and armed forces, and services to celebrate Valentine’s day, Volunteers work, All Souls, and the music festival in May among others. The 6pm Service is now always evensong, supplemented by a 7.30pm Service once a quarter. And I am pleased to announce that in Lent next year we are starting a monthly midweek Service of healing jointly with the Roman Catholic Cathedral.

The Second heading is nurture – education and spirituality, our inner life and relationship with God. When we launched the building and beyond campaign, we said that we were committed to the renewal of the inner life of the people of God here, as well as the renewal of the external structure of the building. Many people in the audit have expressed a desire that this should be a priority for us now, and I want to respond to that by making it my priority for the next 18 months. I would like to announce two initiatives for 2012. Firstly, the Community of St Chad, which is being launched in Lichfield Cathedral on March 3rd, St Chad’s day. This brings together three key themes of St Chad’s own ministry – prayer, discipleship and mission – and applies them to our life today. Individuals who commit themselves to this commit themselves to a simple rule of life, including their weekly worship and daily prayer, but also to meeting together with 5 or 6 others once a month for mutual support and fellowship. I hope we will adopt this as a church because it seems to answer a real need that the audit expressed both for a deepening of individual spirituality and small group fellowship. Philip Swan, the diocesan director of world mission, who is launching the community of St Chad, is coming to St Chad’s at the end of February on Sunday morning to talk about this initiative.

Nurture involves both education and spirituality, in order that we may grow as people of God and disciples of Jesus. It is responsibility I share with Chris Walker and Richard Hayes to encourage that to happen, and so next autumn I will be leading for our two churches a Bishop’s Certificate Course, which is being redesigned by the diocese to make it suitable for parish use. This will encourage participants to take their own discipleship and Christian ministry seriously, and to become more confident in their faith. Greater confidence in faith will lead directly to more effective mission and outreach, the third heading this morning.

This is partly an individual responsibility, but also partly a collective one. St Chad’s has always taken its collective responsibility for the poor and vulnerable in the town seriously. The Ark, which is such an effective example of that commitment, has its roots way back in Christopher Spafford’s ministry here as Vicar. The Street Pastors scheme, which is being launched at St Chad’s next Saturday evening, is an extension of that commitment. It has the support of all the churches in Shrewsbury, as well as the police, local authority and diocese. Initially just on Saturday nights those who have been trained as Street Pastors (including Gareth Ingham from St Chad’s) will go out in three’s between 11pm and 3am and literally act as pastors to those who need their care. It has worked well in a number of towns and cities and Bishop Mark is launching it here. Please come if you can next Saturday evening, and keep it in your prayers.

Mission and outreach both encompasses an individual confidence in and readiness to share your faith, and a collective owning of the ministry St Chad's offers the town under the Open doors..... banner. Many people in the audit expressed a desire that our outreach to children should be more effective. I do want to commend the quiet and long term effectiveness of Lesley's work here, but to say that for this ministry to be effective, it must be owned by the whole congregation not just left to her! In particular I am delighted that thanks to her initiative St Chad's has been validated as a centre of learning for the Children's University, so that children will be using our church as a special building for worship, looking at its history and in particular at what are called gorgeous Georgians like William Hazeldine. And like so much of our children's work at St Chad's, this is a Monday to Friday ministry rather than Sunday.

Finally we come to Sustainability and income generation. The task we set Action Planning and now David Tudor was not just to raise the necessary money for the work that was needed to the tower and organ, but also to tackle the long term challenge of making us financially sustainable. You will be aware of the different plans to make better use of our building and to improve the hospitality we offer. Both building downwards and making a crypt under the outer vestibule, and making better use of the under-used gallery are being discussed. Personally I have found that taking on both the building and beyond campaign, and simultaneously becoming RD has been very demanding, and I hope to be able to restore the spiritual, educational and evangelistic emphases of my ministry in coming months. I don't think that implies giving up being RD because I committed myself to the five year period and I am not by nature a quitter. But I will always listen to advice from my colleagues.

One final thought before I hand over to you. Our role as town centre church is to speak into the wider community for the church, and to speak for the wider community into the church. It is to offer the life of the community to God and to represent back to the community a God who cares about that community and who never abandons us. It would seem that that principle has something to say to the St Paul's Cathedral situation. More specifically our role as a town centre church, and our mission statement imply that we are about public faith, that we are not a congregational or gathered church, but rather one which collectively takes responsibility for bearing witness to the reality of God and to the faith dimension of human life in all the public arenas we touch – local government, education, music and leisure, the environment, the private and corporate sectors. That means I would argue that we are not a parish church, and it may be that we need a new name to indicate that. Belonging to the Greater Churches Network has helped us greatly to think through the implications of this extra-parochial role that we play, and learning good practice from other churches who have a similar context. Some of those churches – like Halifax and Sunderland - have taken on the designation of Minster to denote both what they are and what they are not, and that is something I shall be discussing both with my ministry team colleagues, with the PCC and with Bishop Mark, in coming months.

Mark Thomas
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