

## FUNDAMENTAL QUESTIONS

### The nature of fundamental questions

What I want to achieve today is this. Not a set of answers or solutions but that we make progress towards having a common understanding of the challenges which face us. You may see it as a great knot of issues which cannot be disentangled. You may have decided that there are challenges enough within your own congregation without worrying about what is outside. But it is all interlinked and we need to talk about it. If you have the courage to name it and face it, then you are on the way to solving it. I'm starting what will be quite a long journey - starting with clergy because that is the key relationship.

I went to London last Saturday for a baptism. And as Alison and I flew home, I pondered again the question of belonging and how far I have got in my journey towards belonging.

It is of course about knowing people and places. But I suppose that the best indicators of whether I am starting to belong are whether I catch myself feeling strongly about things - hope and determination about the future; frustration, irritation and impatience at things that aren't as they should be. In short, have the challenges and problems which we face now become my problems as well and am I fully engaged with them. And I think the answer to that is Yes.

There is another indicator which I mention with tongue in cheek - because people have been universally wonderfully warm in their welcome and open in their acceptance of me - is 'Am I still being unfailingly nice to everybody and are they still being nice to me? Or am I allowed to bicker like the rest of the family? I think the answer to that also is Yes.

And there is one other indicator which all of us who exercise ministry pastorally and in leadership understand - that in a world of difficult issues and strong personalities we stand and withstand so that others have something solid to measure against and push off or push against so that everything doesn't just fly off in all directions. Not a dictatorial presence but a strong presence, a father in God presence.

The first part of today is about the kind of questions to which there are no immediate answers - and for which time, thought, sharing and prayer are required. Let's ask ourselves about mission and growth, about outreach and evangelism, about the future and about hope. Let's think about the Great Commission to make disciples, about the body growing and knitting together and growing into Christ, about the sowing of the seed as an indiscriminate act of generous evangelism. Let's ask what it would take for us to become a church

which - steadily - through prayerful, disciplined hard work in response to the action of the spirit - grows.

And of course in part we are already that. There are heroic things happening, amazing faithfulness and determination in ministry in the most difficult of circumstances. But we seem - I struggle for the word - preoccupied, burdened, anxious about ourselves and our life.

There is good reason for that and we all know them - small, aging congregations; lack of children; finance, finance, finance, the lack of it constantly constraining decisions and, I think, at the root of a lot of the conflict. If we were the C of E, we would be the church in the centre of town and able to claim a place at the centre of community life. If we were the C of I, we would be sustained - to some extent artificially sustained - by the way the church serves as a marker of identity for a supporting community which isn't actively engaged in church life. And of course that is the soft edge of sectarianism.

We don't have any of that to lift us. We function out of our history - Episcopalian in a culture once dominated by the Kirk and now increasingly secular; English church whenever anybody wants to caricature and put us down. So life is tough for us and always will be. Yet I think that the strange thing about the church and the Kingdom is that to be preoccupied with the church as institution is to accelerate decline - because it immediately locks us into our own world.

How is mission to be pursued. I have some questions - which are all about confidence.

Do we have the confidence to believe that what clergy have stood for and what clergy do actually still works. I mean dedicated pastoral work - the graft and grind of knowing people, penetrating networks, being there; recognising that behind the façade of successful coping which is modern life, people often find life challenging and difficult. I mean building attractive and open communities of faith and service; being flexible and swift in our responses and decision making; offering people not necessarily what they want - but what they need in a form in which they can recognise it and accept it. That means worship and all sorts of other hand holds and access points which are ways in to the life of the Christian community.

Do we have the confidence to test new ways of working - new ways of getting into contact with people, creating opportunities, using today's technology in websites and so on. Do we have the confidence to form new partnerships among ourselves - in the cause of mission and not because we are forced by finance. Do we have the confidence to work with other churches and groups in supportive

co-operation even if it doesn't seem to bring immediate benefit in terms of people in pews.

I want now to mention two things which seem to be inhibitors of that confidence.

The first is finance. It is the elephant in the living room of this church. This area should be covered by smugly prosperous congregations. The fact that it isn't and that our level of giving is historically low - and that giving in the SEC is low compared with the C of E - seems to me to say two things. One is that we are working on a membership model of congregational life - people give enough to pay their share in terms of how much they think is needed. But giving does not seem to tip over into an act of thanksgiving which is not measured against the needs of the congregation. Secondly, I suspect that people give in response to vision not in order to sustain an institution. And while part of what we shall have to do is to challenge people in their commitment and their love, we also have to offer them a vision which excites and stirs them.

Once again there is a confidence question. We have been managing decline. Combining, stretching, augmenting. If we do not have the confidence to challenge, then our management simply accommodates the size of the church to the available finance and decline continues. I'll say some more about this this afternoon.

The second inhibitor seems to me to be the way in which our congregations work. I believe that you and I are to be leaders of mission - working with people of course; recognising that the most effective mission will almost always be carried out by laity not clergy. But, of course, it isn't as simple as that. In the management of our charges, the clergy/vestry relationship is not always easy and many clergy feel constrained in ways which I find difficult to accept. At times others seek to limit our ability to offer leadership. We have enormous focus on the ministry of the laity and I am, as you know, deeply committed to that. But at times its focus seems to be on how our life is organised internally rather than reaching outside to the world. And we receive strange signals because there is also a rush to ordination which seems to suggest that we have not yet devised satisfying models of lay ministry.

We have a wonderful pool of skill, experience and ability. I think we need to be much more disciplined, determined, fastmoving and flexible - clear about who we are and where we are going - ready to overcome the limitations of our small congregations by pooling and sharing resources for mission and study, teaching and evangelism.

I think I have said enough now. I think I should have said more about what we might actually do - but I think that the place for doing that is in the individual

charge, in training, in the Area Council and so on. For now, I think the primary task is to find out whether the picture I have given you is one which you recognise - or whether you want to tell me as part of my learning that I have got it badly wrong.