

Mission Ministry and Management

Building Sustainable Faith Communities

A report to Diocesan Executive Council January 2015

1. Recapitulation

At the meeting of the Diocesan Executive Council on 23rd November 2013, a task force was set up, chaired by the Very Rev Michael J. Pitts, to elucidate the financial and structural problems facing the Diocese of Quebec. Its report was presented to the meeting of the Diocesan Executive Council of 25th to 26th April 2014. The sources for this report were the congregational statistics for 2012, a telephone survey of all clergy and pastoral lay leaders, and the collective wisdom of the task force members. Prior to the meeting, the task force had not had time to undertake two further pieces of enquiry, a survey into the collective perceptions of lay members of the congregations and a survey of individual attitudes towards and understanding of the Christian Faith. The material for these had already been prepared.

At the April meeting, in his response to the task force report, the Bishop introduced the idea of a process to be called Building Sustainable Faith Communities.

2. The next steps

At a meeting on 12th May between the Bishop, the Executive Archdeacon and The Very Rev Michael Pitts as consultant, it was decided to follow one of the recommendations of the taskforce, namely to call a clergy conference to begin the process of the dissemination of the task force report, the completion of the two surveys and the introduction of the process Building Sustainable Faith Communities. The Conference was planned for 15th to 17th September. Work was undertaken by the Executive Archdeacon and The Very Rev Michael Pitts to concretise the ideas of the Building Sustainable Faith Communities process. Bible study material was produced, an outline of what a sustainable community might look like and a third survey prepared to gauge collective congregational response to this process after it was introduced by the clergy and lay leaders.

The Conference was held at La Maison du Renouveau in Québec and had a very good attendance by the clergy and lay pastoral agents. After explanation of the purpose of the questionnaires and of the introduction of Building Sustainable Faith Communities, those present were tasked with the following:

- Finding lay members of the congregations to administer the collective survey of congregational opinion and the individual survey of faith attitudes. (It was stressed that this must be a lay led task, to provide meaningful comparison with the survey of clergy and Lay pastoral leaders undertaken by the task force.
- Introducing, through the Bible Studies and in other ways appropriate to the congregational situation, the ideas of the process Building Sustainable Faith Communities.
- Bringing together, in each congregation or Parish, a focus group to make a considered response to the process through the third survey already mentioned.

At the close of the meeting those present were asked to give an honest assessment of the number of congregations whom they thought would be able to complete these tasks. The results were encouraging. Of the 48 congregations served by those present, it was thought that 35 congregations could be expected to take part.

3. The results of the surveys.

Note: for logistical reasons the congregations of the Lower North Shore did not take part in these surveys

The collective survey of perceptions of congregational situations.

32 replies have been received in this survey. In those questions which matched the telephone survey of clergy and lay pastors, there was a broad correspondence of perceptions. This covered the following areas:

- Typical attendance at services
- Age range of those attending
- Activity in the community other than worship and fundraising.
- Looking at the likely future of the congregation in five years' time.

This correspondence generally affirmed the picture given in appendix 2 of the task force report, which is attached to this report also. It will be recalled that the report of the task force did not present an optimistic view of the diocese, and this view was reinforced by the replies to the other questions posed in the lay congregational survey. The following analysis contains those replies which are typical across the congregations of the Diocese.

What do regular members of the congregation have in common?

- English language
- Living in the area of the church building.
- Age
- Love of the church and desire to keep it open
- Family relationships
- Practicing the faith
- Sense of community

In the French-speaking and bilingual communities, language was not mentioned as a binding factor. The experience of fraternité, partage and accueil was highlighted.

Who does most of the work needed to keep the worship community going?

Most responses indicated the clergy or lay pastors and leaders, together with churchwardens. There was little sense of the work of all the laity, and the answers indicated that the work was understood as the maintenance of the present situation rather than growth, mission and outreach

What is there about your congregation that might attract new people?

- Friendliness and family atmosphere, caring fellowship
- French or bilingual worship
- Use of BAS liturgies
- The church building

A number of respondents took this question to mean what might be needed to attract new people.

Among these answers were

- Music
- More people in church, livelier worship with shorter sermons
- Community activity
- Better communication

Ten respondents gave no answer to this question, or effectively said “very little”.

Think about the people who live in your area and who might take part in worship but do not. Why do you think they do not show interest in the worship of your community?

The majority of answers to this question saw the problem as lying with those who were outside.

The following are highlighted:

- Lack of knowledge of what it is all about, widespread misunderstanding of the Anglican Church among Roman Catholics
- Marginalization of religion in social life
- Other activities and priorities
- Lack of transport
- Lack of interest
- Lack of time (though one respondent added, not lack of interest)
- Decline of spiritual concern and churchless spirituality
- Blinded by the devil
- Sunday work
- Technology
- Laziness

Eight respondents did suggest that some of the problem might lie with the church:

- Bad or discouraging experience with the church
- Poor communication by the church: we need to know what we have to offer
- Worship has not changed with the times
- Church too liberal
- Services boring

The answers to two questions about change show that even though the rapid (and in some cases terminal) decline of congregations is clear to see, change is not seen as a welcome option.

Which changes do you think your congregation is prepared to think about/explore/pursue?

- More Outreach
- Eucharist on Saturday
- More use of music
- Attending other churches' services

- Community use of building
- Better visibility and signage
- Add a washroom
- Amalgamation
- Newsletter
- Livelier music and services
- Visiting teams

In the case of sixteen (out of thirty two) respondents unwillingness to change, or to change any further, was indicated

What comes to mind when you contemplate the possibility of “fairly radical change in your way of being the church”?

- Evensong
- Renting the church
- Closer work with Roman Catholic and other communities
- Lay instead of priestly ministry
- Livelier music
- Focus on community needs
- More publicity
- Need for present congregation to change attitudes

In the case of twenty three (out of thirty two) respondents there was either no answer or an answer indicating resistance to, or fear of change.

The survey of individual attitudes to faith

In the April 2014 report of the taskforce, it was recommended that education in the faith and structure of the church, together with communication, was a vital need. This survey was intended to provide some idea of where people were in their faith and to indicate some of the special needs and possible starting points. 112 replies were received from individuals in congregations. As promised in introducing the survey to the clergy and lay pastors, only the overall results from the diocese are to be published.

The survey included fifty two statements in nine sections. Respondents were asked to score zero to five against each statement to indicate how closely it coincided with their personal way of understanding the different aspects of their faith. When the average scores were calculated, a large number fell in the middle of the range, and, comparing the results with the individual answers, this indicated wide diversity of belief across the diocese and within regions and congregations. This result was to be expected, since the Anglican Church has always striven to encompass diversity. However a number of statements consistently showed scores in the upper and lower ranges. These are highlighted below, some as potential problems that need to be addressed, others as useful starting points. These categorizations represent the personal views of the author of this report, who however believes that they also represent the views of the senior members of the diocesan hierarchy. The statements of the final section concerned sources from which respondents received news and information, and this will be dealt with in a separate section.

Responses which might indicate matters needing to be dealt with in an educational policy for the diocese.

Four statements were offered about the teaching of Jesus. Two, which spoke about how Jesus taught us to be kind and loving and taught the importance of family life received high scores (4.5 and 3.7 respectively). Two, which spoke of Jesus challenging us to change and to leave family behind, scored low (2.9 and 1.8). In the picture drawn of Jesus in the Gospels exactly the reverse is true. This points to a low level of knowledge of the Gospels and a simple type of faith.

Similarly, in a section about God, a statement about God as angry and punishing scored 0.6, which shows a lack of knowledge of much of the Hebrew Scriptures (Old Testament).

The score of 3.4 for feeling that asking “What would Jesus do?” is the way to make decisions showed little appreciation for the complexity of Christian ethics.

In addition to the above, attention needs to be drawn to two, more general, observations. As mentioned previously, there was wide diversity of thinking in all congregations. Also, in a very large number of cases, respondents were able to give equal or nearly equal scores to completely incompatible statements. Taken together, this suggests that the rivers of teaching, thought and discussion do not run deep in the churches. If we are looking for reasons for the decline in church membership in an increasingly educated world this should maybe engage our attention.

Responses which pointed to useful starting points in Christian education

High scores given to “Jesus is the divine Son of God” (4.4) and “God is Three in One, Father, Son and Holy Spirit” (4.5) indicate that the basics of theology have been grasped, though in the light of some of the previously mentioned matters, we need to wonder how much is rote learning rather than fuller understanding.

A very positive sign was the rejection of an understanding of the Bible as literally inspired (1.7) and a reasonable grasp of modern biblical scholarship on the human nature of the texts (3.6). This absence of too great literalism is also suggested by the 4.0 score for “The resurrection is part of the deep mystery which surrounds all of the Christian religion”.

A survey of the unchurched

At the Clergy conference the congregational leaders were asked, if possible, to find some unchurched people who would be prepared to answer the survey. The resulting sample was small (eleven respondents) which makes comparison with the congregational responses of limited significance. However it can still be noted that the pattern of response was, almost uniformly, the diametric opposite of the congregational response. This points us to two observations. First, church people and their leaders do not know or have contact with many non-church people and secondly there is a huge gap between the beliefs of the church and those outside the church. To hope that people will come to church if we advertise more or have livelier services is just unrealistic. A great deal of urgent bridge-building needs to be done, if we are to hope to reverse the decline in the numbers of regular participants in worship.

Communication

A final section of the individual survey asked about what sources of news and information people used for knowing about what was going on in the church. The Diocesan Gazette (2.0), The website (1.0) and Facebook (1.0) all had low scores. The highest of 3.2 went to, “I hear about what is going on in the Diocese and the wider church from announcements in church”

In this section slightly different questions were asked of the non-church group. Use of the internet generally and for particular information scored respectively 4.5 and 4.8. Both groups

agreed on a low score for a statement about only being interested in my immediate circle, not in the wider church or society.

Once again the small sample size of the non-church group prevents drawing too many conclusions from this, but the overall impression from this section of the survey suggests that we need to do work on our communication strategy both for the process of Christian education and for bridge-building towards those outside the church.

Building Sustainable Faith Communities

The themes of this process were introduced at the Clergy conference and those present were asked to introduce the ideas to their congregations in the way most suitable to their context. A summary of this vision was distributed and forms appendix 1 of the present document. A questionnaire was also provided to gain a collective response from the congregations. A letter was later sent to all clergy and lay leaders by The Very Rev Michal Pitts, to remind them of this task and of the deadline of 7th December for the replies. The letter included the following paragraph.

“... I should like to emphasise that what we are engaged in is a process rather than a program. There is no predetermined outcome. The report of the taskforce on Mission, Ministry and Management, presented in April of this year showed us a picture of a diocese in a critical state. The problems are not so much of money at a diocesan level, but of declining numbers of people and unsustainable systems of governance and financing at a congregational level. The program, Building Sustainable Church Communities is asking all church members across the diocese to be involved in sharing ideas and working together to find ways to continue, deepen and expand the Anglican presence and witness in our diocese.”

A change in date of the meeting of the Diocesan Executive committee allowed a two week grace period beyond the deadline. However by the end of this grace period, only seven replies had been received from congregations or parishes. Of these two showed distinct signs of being written by individuals rather than being the collective response of the lay people. In the light of this the only conclusion that can be drawn is that there is little or no enthusiasm for this process in the congregations. Other solutions therefore need to be found for present problems of the diocese

3. A summary of the problems to be dealt with

Taking into account the first task force report and the matters discussed in the present document the following are outlined as the problems in the Diocese of Québec currently needing to be addressed.

- Small, declining and aging congregations scattered over a huge geographical area
- Restricted and unstable financial situations in most of the congregations
- Governance, administrative and accountability structures at a congregational level which belong to a former age and are no longer workable
- Small numbers of trained clergy, some responsible for the pastoral and administrative care of an elevated number of congregations which makes their task almost impossible.
- A widespread congregationalist view of the church with a corresponding lack of understanding of the episcopal nature of the Anglican Church
- A profound resistance to change
- An underdeveloped grasp of the Christian Faith and of the nature of the church and the corresponding need for education especially in the areas of
 - Understanding our faith and scriptures
 - The history and structure of the Anglican Church
 - Baptismal Ministry
 - The missionary responsibility of the Body of Christ
- A communication strategy needing attention especially in the areas of information flow
 - Between the Hierarchy, Synod office and the congregations
 - Among congregations
 - From the membership of the church and those outside

Appendices

Appendix 1

**What could Sustainable Faith Communities look like?
A vision of what Christian communities could grow to be**

They will be vibrant, multi-generational, diverse communities.

They will, both in ethos and action, see themselves as part of a diocesan church and mission.

Through their Liturgy and community service, as well as through the everyday lives of their members, they will seek to be and tell joyful good news.

They will identify members who can become lay leaders and lay ministers of different kinds and they will support them in the preparation and training for these tasks and in the tasks as they undertake them

They will have groups that meet together for prayer and study, to understand more fully what the good news is and how it can be communicated to those who have lived with minimal or no contact with the church and its message.

They will have a special concern to communicate the faith to the post- boomer generations, in ways and language meaningful to them.

Individual members will seek to live and communicate the Christian faith in the context of family, work, leisure activities, as well as in social and political commitments and groups. The gathered community will be given opportunity to hear their stories and to support each other.

Members of sustainable faith communities will be committed to contributing sufficient money to pay all the expenses of the community, the fair share contribution to the diocese and to make donations to groups and programs undertaking work compatible with the Gospel.

Fund raising events will be of limited importance in the life of the community, and their main focus will be on community building and sharing.

Wherever possible, church buildings will be made available for activities which benefit the wider local community.

They will promote dialogue and sharing with people of other faith commitments, other religions, or none.

Where a sustainable faith community is made up of several, geographically separated, communities, the individual communities will commit themselves to amalgamating their governance and financial structures into a single governance unit as soon as possible.

Appendix 2 is repeated from the original task force report and is attached.