

# **Susanna Wesley Foundation Conference 2017 - *Changing Church***

## **Case study: The Diocese of Bangor**

### **Siôn Rhys Evans**

#### **1,500 years ago...**

The Diocese of Bangor is one of six dioceses that make up the Church in Wales, the Anglican / Episcopal denomination in Wales. The spread of the Roman Empire and the post-Roman dynamics of the Celtic world allow the diocese's formal roots to be traced back to the early sixth century, and it not unusual for a church (and a village, invariably Llan-something) to be named after a Celtic saint who lived a millennium and a half ago by a holy well or in a glade next to where the parish church now stands. "We" have been around for a long time. More recently, the growth of nonconformity in Wales in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and the depth of class and language divisions caused "us" (Anglicans) to be viewed, not unreasonably, as the English, "posh" ecclesial presence: to be properly Welsh meant going to chapel, not to church.

The rapid decline of nonconformity from the 1930s means both that Wales is now the least "Christian" part of the UK according to the 2011 Census returns, and also that the Church in Wales and the (Roman) Catholic Church are now the two best-attended denominations in Wales (in the latter's case, largely due to post-nineteenth century immigration), with the Church in Wales being the only denomination with a dense national infrastructure. This national presence is, however, marginal. About 200,000 people live in the area covered by the Diocese of Bangor, though over ten times that many people visit each year as tourists. About 3,000 attend our churches on an average Sunday, more than doubling on special feasts and occasions. Our annual turnover is about £5m, and we raise about £2.5m in voluntary donations; we employ about 65 people.

#### **Eight years ago...**

Eight years ago, a new bishop was elected. He inherited a diocese that had, since the 1960s, known that all was not well, and that had attempted some structural and cultural changes, but had not been able to agree on any substantive changes to its common life to make it fit for purpose. It's possible to outline the challenges that faced the diocese eight years ago in two ways:

1. The "big picture" challenge was the decline of institutional Christianity in the West - a general, post-1930s ebbing away of members / congregants

that has been particularly pronounced for Anglican, Lutheran, Methodist and Reformed churches across what used to be Latin Christendom. Acknowledging this broad situational sweep is helpful. It means that it's not all "our fault" - the handful of office-holders or the few hundred volunteers who are struggling to keep the show on the road at the moment, and often failing, should not shoulder all of the blame. It also brings a historical perspective to what can otherwise be a "this depends on me" vs "this depends on God" dichotomy when reflecting on change and leadership - there are broad social, technological and demographic forces at work amid which the Church's human agency and divine agency must do their work. Finally, this broad sweep helps to bring clarity to the magnitude of the challenge. The big picture trend shows "us" disappearing altogether, in my lifetime; in order to prevent this, "we" will have to think and work in ways that require changes of a scale not seen in our organisation since the Protestant Reformation. Faced with this, being in touch with the broad sweep of our ancient historical roots also brings the ultimate comfort - if there are fewer churchgoers in the Diocese of Bangor now than there were in 1930, there are more than there were in 630: growth was (and is) possible, and "we" have made it happen before.

2. A more granular view of the challenge eight years ago could be seen in several "burning platforms" - low ministerial / staff morale (exhibited in bad internal relationships marked by passive-aggressiveness, defensiveness and mutual suspicion of commitment and motivations); a concerning ministerial / staff demographic (overwhelmingly male and elderly, though this had begun to change); declining attendance figures, and an increasing per capita financial burden on those who remained; and a catastrophic attendance demographic (overwhelmingly elderly, and almost no Gen-X, Gen-Y and older Millennials).

### **Over the last eight years...**

The past eight years have been years of needful change. That change can be examined from two perspectives:

1. Some of the change has been to the organisation's structure. Parishes and deaneries had become too small, and then informally merged without streamlining structures or paying sufficient attention to patterns of oversight. Over four years, 122 parishes became 27 parishes (called Ministry Areas) and 12 deaneries became 4 deaneries (called Synods). Odd though it seems to note it, this is the biggest structural change for the organisation since the establishment of the parochial system in the High Middle Ages. (A similar streamlining has taken place for central diocesan

committees and groupings.) The new Ministry Areas and Synods are organisations that have the capacity to make meaningful decisions about mission, strategy and resources. Served by Ministry Areas Teams, Ministry Areas also demand a new model of ministry, especially from vicars / incumbents (called Ministry Area Leaders): their ministry is more episcopal than clerical ministry in the past, more marked by the exercise of oversight, more demanding of shaping and sharing rather than sustaining and surviving.

2. Some of the change has been to the organisation's intentionality. Three broad, catholic, ageless principles have been intentionally identified and reiterated: we are here to worship God, grow the Church, and love the world. These principles have been repeated – in sermons, liturgies, prayers and publications; they have become the controlling categories for diocesan events and activities. Equally significantly, three priorities have been intentionally identified and resourced – three areas where we know we are failing at the moment, and at which we need to get better with some urgency: we want to nurture disciples, to grow new ministries, and to welcome children, young people and families. These priorities have become the lens through which we have seen the reorganisation of our diocesan central team and the reallocation of financial resources. Alongside establishing these clarified principles and priorities, we have sought to encourage and enable planning by each Ministry Area around mission (defined as advancing our principles and priorities) and around the two key infrastructure burdens that a Ministry Area carries: property and finance. Again, resources have been directed to encourage and enable this planning.

It's also possible to identify two significant enablers of change over the past eight years:

1. An important initial and ongoing enabler of change has been the senior leadership team. Beginning with the Bishop but involving all members of the team, the senior leadership team has had a vital role in recognising the need for change, in articulating and sustaining a public and united narrative supportive of change, in empowering itself to be a catalyst of change within a traditionally conservative and inert organisational framework, and in authorising specific step-changes. A side effect of the importance of a key role for the senior leadership team has been that stress and fractured relationships within the senior leadership team (inevitably present over time) have had a marked effect on the pace and effectiveness of the change process – something exacerbated by organisational ineffectiveness in addressing HR problems.

2. A similar initial and ongoing enabler of change has been securing and sustaining what in other organisations would be termed “middle-management” engagement. This has involved the establishment of structures and the setting aside of significant time to ensure space for proper engagement – listening, consulting, sharing, reiterating, challenging, apologising, soft-launching, receiving feedback, praying and worshipping.

### **Over the last four years...**

As a relative late-comer to this change process (I arrived about a third of the way through), I’ve been struck by four change-related dynamics:

1. The importance of a vision. A vision that is shaped collaboratively but intentionally, shared time and again through as many media as possible, used to make decisions about the allocation of resources (including time), edited and amended where necessary but not replaced by the next new thing, and so crafted to last for a substantial period of time.
2. The challenges of embedding a strategic way of working. The prevailing drivers of organisational culture have been the need to keep the show on the road; the importance of being attentive to the needs, sensitivities and complaints of the gathered congregation, no matter how small and how parochial the congregation might be; and the imperative of working within tight territorial boundaries. This has led to an underemphasising at all levels of the importance of planning, of stepping back to understand the bigger picture, and of the other steps necessary (especially on the part of leaders) to enable a strategic allocation of resources and an assessment of organisational success or failure.
3. The pastoral and vocational dimensions in Church life. At its worst, an attachment to a particular sort of pastoral care can lead to difficult decisions being avoided, feedback being suppressed, inappropriate behaviour being rewarded, and organisationally beneficial changes being set aside. At its worst, an attachment to a particular sort of vocational understanding of ministry (especially the stipendiary ministerial priesthood / presbyterate) can lead to toleration of underperformance, inattentiveness to professional development, time-consuming and unsatisfactory quasi-HR processes, and an excessive emphasis on the needs of a few rather than the many. At their best, pastoral care and a vocational understanding of ministry show the Church at its best in the lives of Christian disciples; but this happens too rarely, especially when it comes to internal organisational matters.

4. Changing at scale. It has mattered that we have changed as a whole diocese, within a national church that is also embracing the need for change. This has enabled collegiality in many ways: learning together, sharing good practice, sharing frustrations, encouraging the reluctant, encouraging the pioneering. All of this has enabled relatively swift change, in a context where swift decline needs to be averted.

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