

Church Growth – What are we aiming for?

I'm an evangelist at heart – my longing is to connect people with God, see lives renewed through a living faith in Jesus and the kingdom of God worked out in our time. I have to admit though to being uncomfortable with some aspects of 'church growth' strategy. Church growth seems to be high on the Christian agenda. Books have been written on it, programmes have been devised to achieve it and churches are proud of it but we frequently misinterpret what it is. One of the first questions anyone asks me when they find out I'm a Vicar is 'what size is your congregation?' To be honest I find this annoying. The Church media doesn't help. Week in, week out church attendance is analysed and commented upon. Numerical growth is an attractive aspiration for Churches in the face of marked decline. The financial and human resources that come with such growth can protect against extinction but we cannot let survival instincts override our calling from God. Genuine evangelism is not a marketing strategy for a church organisation but a means of building long term, unconditional relationships with those who don't know Jesus. We have to recognise that it is a demanding task, one that takes considerable time, effort, patience and the desire to put others first rather than see them as the solution to our own situation. Evangelism is about participation in God's work of redemption and reconciliation and that is not achieved by simply adding to the congregation. Authentic evangelism does not guarantee an immediate return in terms of numbers or survival of our existing churches.

The talk of growth also raises the expectation that it is in fact attainable for every church. It gives us the glimmer of hope that we can all avoid the painful process of change or dissolution. Yet it is such change that we have to face, not just for our sake, but for that of the world in which we live. The reality is that we are past the time when traditional expressions of Church can reach unchurched people with the gospel. The longer we delay change, the more our country will turn away from God.

New ways of being church (fresh expressions) are emerging. They are enabling people with no previous Christian experience to come to a genuine faith in a way that is best for them. Fresh expressions are not the means of filling the existing churches; temporary structures that bridge the gap to 'real church'. They are churches in their own right and are probably early examples of the shape of church to come. Some established churches will, and I believe, should survive but there is not room for the number of established local church organisations that we have in place today.

Jesus said to his followers 'whoever tries to save his life will lose it and whoever is prepared to lose his life will save it' (Luke 9:24). We have to live with the very real possibility that many churches will have to die in order for genuine evangelism to happen and God's kingdom purposes to be enabled. Jesus also speaks of the grain of wheat that dies and falls to the ground producing many new seeds (John 12:24). As for us at St. Thomas' our vision statement speaks of transformation not growth. What does this mean for us?