

### 3. A VISION FOR THE FUTURE

#### Bath and Wells in 2015? An Ecodiocese

*If the environmental commitment is made and taken seriously, how might the diocese look in a few years time? The ecodiocese is a possibility.....*

The ecodiocese is organic. No two churches are the same; no two congregations; no two communities. But together they form a network, a kind of community, a type of eco-system.

In many places the church is seen as a catalyst for community projects. In others the church is where those who are active in the community go to gain energy, vision and hope for their work and their life. In this period of significant change other models are emerging.

Community life is becoming increasingly localised. The ministers of the local church are local people. They are supported by small groups of lay members and clergy who work over a wider area and who in turn are supported by the diocesan organisation.

#### Lives Changing

Eco-congregation and other programmes have helped many local churches explore how care for the life of the earth is a feature of Christian living, and to work with their local communities in bringing about changes in habit, outlook and lifestyle.

People are now aware of the need to drastically reduce travel costs. Food miles are cut down. People are looking for food that as far as possible is locally grown with respect for the soil, animals, plants and wildlife, and is fairly traded. Farmers' markets are used. There are new and revitalised allotment schemes and churches encourage these.

#### Churches and Churchyards

Churchyards are places for the living as well as the dead. Sections are now kept for wildlife, with long grass, more trees and bird boxes. Wild flowers are spared the strimmer and no longer called weeds, and children as well as adults are involved in keeping track of the birdlife spotted in the churchyard.

In some parishes there are wildlife trails or wildlife pilgrimages, with stops to both appreciate the setting and to pray or meditate. Information on these is available in the church. Church magazines and newsletters carry information about recycling services, tips and new ideas, and are forums for debate. In many churches there are recycling collection boxes for small items like batteries, print cartridges, bottle tops. Some churchyards include a site for small communal skips and compost bins. Heating systems are being replaced with woodchip burners, combined heat and power or electricity from renewable sources.

Cremation, with its high fuel consumption and mercury pollution is now in decline. Burials are becoming more common. Churches have encouraged the development of green burial sites, with trees in place of stone monuments and biodegradable coffins.

Church buildings are also becoming significant sites for energy generation. Their south-facing roofs are becoming increasingly the site for photo-voltaic cells, and a few have wind turbines in the churchyard. Like the church clock, the electric lighting, and the carpet on the floor, these new developments are becoming widely accepted, particularly as people realise the challenges that society faces.

#### Worship

Churches and schools have played a part in helping people realise what is happening in the world. They have helped people see that such approaches as recycling, re-using and repairing are not just the virtues of eco-freaks or the elderly who can remember the post-war years, but an essential way of living on a planet with finite resources. In their worship and pastoral care churches have helped people deal with the loss of their dreams, as they have had to come to terms with the fact that a future of increasing comfort and consumption is not a possibility.

In recalling the past people of God journeying into their unknown future, and the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, churches have helped many people discover a new hope. This is not born out of technological optimism but from faith in God. Within their communities many churches are seen as healthy living centres, concerned with health in all its dimensions: of individuals, communities, societies and the planet.

In the pattern of worship in many churches Creation Sunday is now restored, and the liturgies include an appreciation of creation in litanies, intercessions and the Eucharist. The Ministry of the Word is often a serious attempt, not only by preachers but by the whole congregation, adults and children, to engage the scriptures with the issues they know humanity now faces. Worship and study are not simply a lifestyle choice for the religiously inclined, but characteristics of communities which realise that the world is in crisis.

#### Awareness and Prayer

The exploration of the various spiritual traditions within the church is helping people discover the joy of simplicity. Through contemplation they have an increasing awareness of the glory of the world and of themselves as part of the whole web of creation. From this comes a realisation of how having less can mean enjoying more and how the basics of life, like food and water, are precious gifts to be treated with respect, and their provision celebrated.

## Communities Changing

People are continually reducing their need to travel, and the impact of what travelling they have to do. Like many others, local clergy now travel more by cycle, sometimes using electric bikes. Diocesan staff are using hybrid cars. Meetings are arranged with a view to public transport being used, and websites or e-mails publish the lists of those attending so that there can be the sharing of cars. A result of this is that people have more conversations in shared vehicles, and more time to reflect as they use public transport. Life is becoming less frenetic. There is time to look and appreciate the world, to address one's fears, and to pray.

In villages, as well as the towns, life is becoming more local. Through the internet, e-mail, telephone and teleconferencing people keep in touch with others across the diocese, and the world. Personal interaction is more local. Churches are developing as centres for the arts, concerts, plays and exhibitions. There is local debate about local and international issues, sometimes conducted with a sense of urgency. The old assumptions about social stability and economic growth are now gone. Debate is about the best way to live this time of change.

## Diocesan Action

The churches play a key part in this. The Diocesan Environment Officer contributes to the regional debates about energy generation, local housing, transport provision, and land use; and works to support local churches as they contribute to the local debates - clarifying practical and theological issues, pointing towards sources of information and opinion, and linking people who can help each other.

The School of Formation has for some years been helping people develop their theological skills so that they can contribute with their thinking informed by their faith, develop the skills of debate and argument, and find the inner resources for public protest and declaration.

## Laughter and Liberation

There was humour and for many a sense of liberation when church members joined in the 'Refuse' campaign, unwrapping their supermarket goods to leave the wrappings behind and carry their goods home in reusable bags. Like the earlier fair trade and organic produce campaigns this had a serious impact on the supermarkets. People look back with amazement at how, only a decade ago, they were creating so much waste, without a thought.

## Serious Business

Discussions and debates are often serious. The move away from consumption has affected the national economy. Many businesses have adjusted to this. Some new ones have flourished. But others are struggling. Green taxes have brought in diminishing returns, and there are heated discussions about healthcare, welfare

and education provision. The old economic arguments of two generations ago are being revived, but people are also developing new models.

As climate change bites across the world big migrations are taking place in Africa and South Asia. Rising sea levels are already affecting the British economy. Politics is becoming extreme. People are looking for scapegoats. There are those in Britain who want to pull up the drawbridge. In this situation Christians are working hard to argue that the millions who are on the move are our neighbours, whom we must love as we love God.

## Global View

Whilst the trend is for people to live and act locally, the churches are helping people maintain a global view. There is not only a flow of information on what is happening in the world but connections are being maintained and developed, like the diocese's link with Zambia. Such links are enabling local churches here to support local projects in other places which help people adjust to the changes there; to learn from them more of the meaning of faith and hope in the midst of struggle; and to prepare spiritually for possible significant climate changes in this country. Key words here are not only compassion and care, but also justice.

## Church Growth

In all this the churches are growing, in faith and in numbers. Church members are working alongside others in local projects across the diocese, and a sense of community is growing around these common tasks. Some people who have ignored the church for years are delighted to discover that the church is concerned with things that really matter to them. Now that it is under threat people are becoming increasingly appreciative of the mysterious, complex and beautiful life of the planet. And they are finding in Christian faith an affirmation of its significance as God's creation, and in the church's life a source of hope and vision for the future.

