

I am sure you have heard it said many times that to fail to plan is to plan to fail. Yes, it's a bit of a cliché, I know, but nevertheless it's probably true. Which is why, over the last ten years, we as a church have had a number of plans. Well, to be more precise, two.

In June 2010 we introduced a plan that focused on six key areas of this church's ministry. It contained 33 proposals in all and, by God's grace, we managed to implement a fair few of them.

And then in April 2016 we introduced a new plan which focused on three areas of this church's ministry: community initiatives, communications and use of the building. It looked a bit like this. This contained a mere nine proposals. You may recall that at vast expense – OK, not that vast – we made available this A5 laminated card summarising the plan.

We haven't fully implemented all nine proposals; some are still ongoing. Nevertheless, the Parochial Church Council met in November 2017 for a day of discernment and vision exploration. The result has been the emergence of a new Church Development Plan which will guide our work over the coming three years.

Now before I continue, perhaps it might be helpful to say three things.

First, to have a Church Development Plan is a very normal thing. Dioceses up and down the land are encouraging churches to have Church Development Plans or Mission Action Plans or whatever you want to call them, and this Diocese is no exception. Particularly since Bishop Andrew arrived in the Diocese three years ago, and the new Diocesan Strategy was agreed, a summary of which you can see on the banner in the Tower area, each church has been encouraged to have a Church Development Plan.

Second, if something is not in a Church Development Plan, that doesn't mean it's not going happen. No – there are plenty of things not in the Church Development Plan that are still going to happen. However, a Church Development Plan does provide a handy way of identifying where particular focus needs to be given, where we need to expend extra energy, where we need to focus additional heat.

And third, because we have a new Church Development Plan, I would like to use this sermon to say a little more about it. Yes, we could have called a special meeting. But we have had a couple of those recently in connection with our thoughts about developing the church building. Also, it seemed that presenting the Church Development Plan as part of our morning worship would maximise the opportunity for you to hear about it.

What I am saying, then, is please forgive me if this isn't quite the sort of sermon you are normally used to. Also, please forgive me if it goes on a bit longer than usual. Rest assured, your roast chicken will still be OK because we are making due allowance in the timings of the rest of the service.

So what of our 2018-2021 Church Development Plan? Well let me say straightaway that one of the things that encouraged me when the Parochial Church Council along with a few additional guests met last November for our vision day led by Steve Cox, Local Mission Advisor working for the Diocese, was the significant degree of agreement among us concerning what our main priority needs to be. This we have worded as follows: To grow St Nicolas with a particular focus on the 20s to 50s.

To grow St Nicolas with a particular focus on the 20s to 50s.

I'd like to say three things about this aim.

The first concerns the opening four words: To grow St Nicolas.

Now this will surprise you if you hadn't appreciated up until now that one of the main purposes of a church is to grow. But it really is. Not, of course, because there is anything particularly meritorious about growth *per se*, but because growth is a sign of health, and if we are engaged in evangelism then a church can't help but grow.

In our first Bible reading this morning we heard the wonderful account Philip being sent on a mission to share the good news of Jesus with someone who as yet did not understand it. This is not the moment for a detailed exposition of that passage. However, let's remind ourselves that it ends with the Ethiopian eunuch being baptised and going on his way rejoicing.

Although I didn't choose this Bible reading for today – it was the one set by the lectionary – it does illustrate so very well what we should all be about all of the time: the priority of bringing the good news to those who do not as yet know it and baptising them.

If we do that, the church cannot help but grow!

Second, I'd like to say something about the final three words: 20s to 50s.

Let me say straightaway, we are blessed with some very strong connections with those in their 20s, 30s, 40s and 50s and, as is often the case, their children as well. Holiday Club, *Tots Alive*, *Kids Alive*, and particularly our Family Fun afternoons, not least our last one where there were 64 children present, all are all immensely encouraging.

So why this focus on 20s to 50s? Let me show you a slide.

Here is the age balance of our congregations. You may recall, if you were here last September, that we asked everyone to complete a simple congregational survey. One of the questions we asked you was which age bracket you are in. The results of that question are now on the screen.

There are no surprises here. That said, seeing what we already know in black and white, as it were, is fairly sobering. In simple terms, less than 20 percent of our regular congregations is below the age of 60. No wonder, then, that the PCC agreed that we really need to take this omission seriously.

And then, third and finally, I'd like to say something about the middle five words: with a particular focus on, with a particular focus on that word 'particular'.

It is important that we do not see this aim as being exclusively about 20 to 50s; it is not. It concerns all ages from the very youngest to the very oldest. So this is not a mandate for ignoring older people, whether they be in the church or outside of it. However, it is an aim that recognises that because of our significant lack in the age bracket 20s to 50s, we need to put particular energy into growing the church in that demographic.

This, then, is our stated aim for these coming three years: To grow St Nicolas with a particular focus on the 20s to 50s.

Now in a moment I want to move on and tell you a little bit more about the plan itself. However, before I do that, I want to address a question with which I have wrestled a lot, and it may be that you have wrestled with the very same question. Here it is: Wouldn't we do better to limit our efforts to growing the church in the 60 plus age profile? Perhaps we might be tempted to add, 'especially when there is a Baptist Church on our doorstep which seems to be particularly strong at drawing in younger families?'

One way of reading our current situation is to conclude that the Lord has blessed us with a healthy older congregation. Do you know, I for one am not ungrateful about this. It is a wonderful thing that despite many of our church family leaving us this past ten years – mainly because of infirmity and death – we nevertheless continue to enjoy reasonably-sized congregations, particularly at 10 o'clock on a Sunday morning.

And so it won't surprise you to learn, therefore, that I have often asked myself the question, 'Wouldn't we do better to limit our efforts to growing the church in the 60 plus age profile?' This, after all, would certainly feel like an easier task!

Well like I say, I have often asked myself that question. But in the end I can't quite be convinced that that is the right thing to do. Let me give you four reasons why I remain unconvinced that we should focus mainly on growing the church in the 60 plus age profile.

1. A broader age-profile enriches us all.

Over my time here I have heard many people bemoan the lack of families. And I agree. I would much rather this church was better represented in all age groups. The lack of people in their 20s, 30s, 40s and 50s, not to mention the children that frequently accompany those in this age bracket, is something we all feel. Indeed, I am sure God intends that, at its best, his church should be a diverse community in every way including age.

2. The future of St Nicolas cannot be guaranteed by continuing to rely on the 60 plus age bracket.

It is a matter of God's grace that, up until now, we seem to have grown in that age bracket. Hallelujah – let's give God the glory for that. But we cannot assume that in years to come people aged 60 plus will continue joining this church family. I'm not sure they will. The generation for

whom churchgoing was a more natural thing to do is fast dying out, which means that if St Nicolas is going to be here in fifty years' time, then that is only going to happen if younger people hear the gospel and come to faith.

3. The good news of the gospel is for everyone and not just those over 60!

I'd like to show you another graph. This again concerns the age profile of our congregations. However, this is set within the context of the age profile of our parish. I doubt whether you will be able to see all the detail; at this stage that doesn't matter. But again, in simple terms, what this tells us is that in our parish, at least according to the 2011 census data, just over two thirds of our parish are under the age of 60.

In short, then, this underlines once more just how unrepresentative of the age-profile of the parish around us our congregation is. Or, to put it more positively as I would wish to do, it shows what great potential there is for mission amongst those under the age 60 because they really are out there; they do exist!

Surely, if the good news of the gospel is for everyone and not just those over 60, and if, as we have seen, there are plenty in the 20s to 50s age bracket living around us, we should not limit our horizons too readily?!

4. We are a parish church and therefore we should be concerned to provide as best we can for all with whom we come into contact

We are blessed with so many warm contacts. People who come for baptism. People who come for weddings. People who come for funerals. People we connect with through our Children's and Families' Ministry. People we connect with through our Social and Events. People who just wander in to a Sunday service. I could go on.

Surely, it makes good sense to do what we can to provide for those people rather than passing up the opportunity in favour of them going somewhere else or, equally possible, nowhere.

So four reasons, then, why I remain unconvinced that we should limit our efforts to growing the church in the 60 plus age profile, despite the fact that often feels like the easier challenge.

Now, in the time that remains to us, I want to say something about the plan itself. Thus far I have talked simply about the aim. But now I want to talk more about the plan.

Here it is in summarised form.

Please don't get overwhelmed by everything on the screen. Simply, for the purposes of this morning, focus on to two aspects of it.

The first is those four boxes almost half way down: Contact, Nurture, Commitment and Growth.

People, as we know, do not tend to move from knowing nothing about Christian faith and being disinterested in it to being mature Christian disciples in one massive jump. Not usually. Generally,

their move from knowing nothing and complete disinterest to Christian maturity tends to be far more incremental, where initially perhaps they have a conversation with a Christian or see something on television or have a crisis or whatever it is, to some understanding and perhaps some contact with the church and so on and so forth, until eventually they are mature disciples of Christ.

And so nowadays there is far more recognition than there perhaps once was of the importance of pathways: the importance of providing opportunities for people to get engaged whatever the stage they're at and then move from one step to the next until they are fully committed to Christ.

What this means in practice is that we cannot rely on just one approach to grow the church. Rather, we have to provide a number of different opportunities or occasions or stepping stones, each appropriate to where people are at. These steps we have summarised in our plan as contact, nurture, commitment and growth.

Now to provide these stepping stones is immensely demanding; of course it is. However, it seems to me that if we are serious about growing St Nicolas with a particular focus on the 20s to 50s, then we are going to have to face the cost of this.

That, then, is something about Contact, Nurture, Commitment and Growth.

And then the second thing I wanted to underline is those four boxes towards the bottom of the page: Welcome, Worship, Prayer and Buildings.

We can seek to provide a number of activities or events to help contact, nurture, commitment and growth. But on their own these activities and events need the right infrastructure or scaffolding – or whatever we want to call it – around them to help them to flourish. Here are four things that we have focused on in our plan, although undoubtedly there will be other things too that will need to be in good shape if our activities and events are to bear fruit.

Welcome is certainly about the experience people have when they come into church, typically on a Sunday morning. But it also includes other things too, like whether people are invited for coffee or lunch with someone having been in church on a Sunday morning, and whether they feel included in friendship groups sooner rather than later.

Worship – in this context – has to do with the services we provide, particularly on a Sunday but perhaps at other times as well. It is the question of how accessible people find our worship and whether, having been once, there is sufficient to make them want to come back again.

Prayer, I hope, needs no explanation. However, it is my conviction, and I hope yours as well, that if what we are thinking about today is going to bear any fruit whatsoever, it is going to have to be rooted in prayer. What did Jesus say in our Bible reading this morning? “No branch can bear fruit by itself.” No it can't! We need to be joined to the vine; we need to be praying people.

Buildings are not an end in themselves. If they are, they simply become idols. However, used wisely they can be of great benefit in the mission of God. Our buildings here have to be our servant rather than our master, enabling the mission of the church to be done.

Well that, all too briefly, is something about the plan itself. If this Church Development Plan is to be of any value over the coming three years, then you'll be hearing more about it. Indeed, hopefully join in with it not least by working out how the ministries in which you are involved can help with it.

On the way out, you'll receive a summary of our Church Development Plan; please do make use of it.

Now in the time that remains to us, here are three concluding points.

First, I don't know how this is going to pan out any more than you know how this is going to pan out. And in that sense this whole thing is not a little scary. However, if our Lent sermons and our Lent course taught me anything this year, I think it is two things.

One is that the Lord often calls us to take one step at a time, meaning that the next step-but-one only becomes apparent once we have taken next step.

And the other – and this comes particularly from the sermon I preached on Nehemiah – climbing mountains is possible where God is in what we are doing.

My second concluding point is that we if we are to see growth, we need to be prepared for some change. This, I know, is not comfortable ... for any of us, for wouldn't we rather stick with the familiar and what we like than step out in a direction that is less well-known and we may not like, at least, like as much as the status quo. However, if we are to see growth, we need to be prepared for some change.

And my final concluding point is that I think this may be God's moment for us to seize the opportunity. It was about fifteen or so years ago that someone drew to my attention the distinction between two Greek words for time: Chronos and Kairos. Chronos is the time it is: half past ten or whatever. Kairos, on the other hand, is the apposite time, the right time. As we know, the time isn't always right for a particular course of action; sometimes we have to wait. However, in the life of our church perhaps this is the right time, God's time, the time that he is calling us to trust him and see what, guided and strengthened by him, can be done.

I'm going to end with a prayer for growth; you'll also receive a copy of this on the way out.