GROWING CONGREGATIONS – CHANGING COMMUNITIES

Yesterday was the 11th anniversary of my consecration as your bishop here in this Cathedral. When we carried out a review of our life as a family of congregations, the conclusion or aspiration which was expressed was that we might ‘move from decline to growth’

We probably understood that in a fairly simple way – that somehow we might find the spiritual and emotional energy to turn around that slow and inexorable process of shrinkage in the church and replace it with a more positive dynamic of growth. And we have to some extent done that – despite countless difficulties and challenges, we have kept on doing that.

But gradually we learn that we have to think in greater depth. What we hope you will do this afternoon is to reflect a little on the changes which you see around you – in your own family, in society more widely and in the church. If you think about those changes – if possible without lamenting them – maybe you might also think about ways in which we in the church might be able to respond and find growth? Our assumption is that all change risks making the church more vulnerable. But change is a given – and I think that ever-increasing speed of change is also a given. We need to find ways of responding which are appropriate and which lead to growth – both numerical growth and growth in the quality and depth of our discipleship?

I realise now that, even the bits of my own story which I thought expressed stability and continuity were far from that.

I had an email this week from a Professor in Cambridge. Can I use these quotes from your grandfather’s sermons? My grandfather was ordained in 1911. He was in ministry in Dublin during the 1916 Easter Rising – at the start of the period which led to Partition, to an independent Irish Republic and which reduced the Southern Irish Protestants – my root community – from one third of the population to 3%. Not much stability there.

I grew up in Enniskillen. Church life was rock solid. No ecumenical contact. I sang in the choir – cassock, surplice and ruff around my neck. I held the bishop’s crozier at Confirmation and got a feel for it. In my teens, I could feel the approach of the Troubles. I lived and worked through the conflict for 29 years knowing that the sectarianism to which we were all opposed had the effect of making the church appear stronger on a head count basis. In that sense, the conflict gave the churches a ‘raison d’etre’ and the partial peace which has followed is a real challenge.

And here in Scotland we live in a society which for all sorts of reasons is very secular. It is a profoundly challenging place for churches – suspicious of religious dogma, of institutions, of authority. The destination of a future Scotland is a question which is there all the time and makes us reflect and wonder about what kind of society will eventually emerge and whether it will be a society which welcomes us and our identities.

Society has changed as well. Our adult children are free to live together in long term partnerships both heterosexual and gay. We don’t seem to have common and accepted values any more. Everything is on the agenda – from wonderful technology which helps people to become parents to questions like assisted dying.

Change is a given and ever-increasing pace of change is also a given. But the church is faithfully, persistently present. There was a time a generation ago when people wondered if the Episcopal Church would survive. It is a long time since I have met anybody who believes that now. Just one indicator is that we have more ordinands and they are getting younger.

But we aren’t just in the business of survival – shrinking down to a sort of institutional husk. We are called to make disciples and to pursue growth.

What the three workshops are designed to do is to give you a way of talking about these questions – about family, about society and about the church.

As you go to do that, I want to share with you one thing in particular from my experience. We assume too easily that some of the changes which we see are just there. I used to believe that about sectarianism – yet much of my adult life has been spent learning to understand that it is a systemic phenomenon which can be understood and described and therefore addressed. Last week, I attended a meeting for church leaders with the Scottish Government. It was a chance to move further on that journey.

If that is true of sectarianism, it is also true of all the ‘ism’s’ with which we deal – secularisation, the liberalisation of our society, new freedoms in the family. We need a deep understanding of our society so that we can hear God’s call to us to be his faithful people in a new situation and to make disciples. We may feel – as I mostly do – that we belong in this new society. We may feel like exiles or like people lost in the wilderness. But God calls us to faithful discipleship. And he calls us to mission. And he gives us the tools to carry out that mission.