

SHARING LIFE PLUS or SHARING LIFE: MAKING A DIFFERENCE

Background

This is a discussion paper. It's not a policy document. It's a stage on the journey when I want to reflect back some of my observations and consequent ideas on how we might develop as the Christian family in the Diocese of Oxford over the next five years.

Sharing Life emerged in 2000 and as a result of wide consultation a Vision, Purpose and 5 Strategic Directions were agreed to guide diocesan life at all levels.

<i>Vision:</i>	the transformation of all human life under God.
<i>Purpose:</i>	to create caring, sustainable and growing Christian presence in every part of the diocese of Oxford
<i>Strategic Directions:</i>	creativity and flexibility for our Christian communities encouraging and resourcing innovative forms of outreach implementation at local level sustainability and refocusing of financial resources training for servant leadership (agreed 2003)

Sharing Life has been an imaginative and enabling framework, a positive, light-touch point of reference. Naturally it has had more impact in some places than in others. The question is – what now?

Looking forward

I have spent the first nine months of my time in the diocese in intensive listening. Out of that process, infused I trust by prayer, I want to offer an approach that honours the following principles:

- Not neglecting the past but building on it
- Not so much about strategy as about culture
- Not so much about structures as about relationships
- Not top-down but liberating the local
- Not targets but directions
- Not one-size-fits-all but flexibility for all
- Not complexity but elegance.

This is what I've heard, and respect. So what I'd like to discuss with the diocese is:

Sharing Life Plus or Sharing Life: making a difference

I want to promote an open conversation about the next stage of Sharing Life, but only in broad outline at this stage. Detail would be inappropriate if the conversation is to be genuinely open-ended. I'm suggesting various ways in which we might re-set the compass.

Sharing life Plus or Sharing Life: making a difference

A back-up to the purpose statement might be:

To enable every Christian and every Christian community in the diocese confidently to live and share the love of God, seen in the life of Jesus.

Sharing Life put forward four value statements about the agreed Purpose. We should be:

- Centred on God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit
- Orientated towards the world and its needs
- Connecting to people, both their communities and their culture, in new ways
- Serious about Christian discipleship

I want to suggest developing these four values (and the resulting strategic directions) into five priorities:

1. *Sustaining the sacred centre* - of ourselves, our churches, and our diocese.

Nothing happens in the Church or in our Christian lives unless the sleeping giant of our spirituality is woken up. If our spirituality is in sleep-mode, time ticks by, but that's about all. To change the image, when visiting an old country house you sometimes come across a fountain in which the water isn't running any more. Bone dry, it's a sad sight. We need the water to be bubbling up again (John 4) both in our churches and in ourselves.

Helping to achieve this is of course the responsibility of every priest in each place, but priests also run dry, and resourcing both them and their parishes in prayer and spirituality is a big job. I wonder whether it might help if we had an Adviser in Spirituality, Prayer and Liturgy to support this primary work of the parish priest?

2. *Making disciples*

This is the core task left to us by Jesus. He didn't tell us to go and make churchgoers or even converts, but to go and make disciples. At one level, we are always trying to do this, but with our church agendas and work diaries getting ever more crowded, the urgent easily pushes out the vital.

- The Living Faith day on June 7th plays into the heart of this priority.
- Making young disciples needs to be a primary priority-within-a-priority.
- The new Fresh Expressions Group indicates the end of the Cutting Edge ministries phase, and the democratising of Fresh Expressions so that they are a normal part of parish and deanery life and embedded in our mixed-economy of ministry. We need a policy both on Fresh Expressions and on intentional church-planting.
- We need a renewed emphasis on nurture, teaching the faith, and apologetics. Knowledge of the faith is alarmingly thin in our churches and we live in an increasingly hostile culture.
- We need also to have a renewed emphasis on living the faith at work and in the world, giving Christians confidence in the applicability of the faith in everyday life. That's the front line. Parishes need to be equipped and supported in this task.
- Of growing significance is the fact that our mission context is increasingly multi-faith. We need more help with how to offer firm friendship and faithful witness.
- One particular suggestion: might this key work of making disciples require a Discipleship Enabler/ Mission Enabler/ Adviser in Evangelism, one who wakes up thinking about this core task?

3. *Making a difference in society* – both local and global

The Sharing Life vision of transforming all human life under God picks up the Ephesians 1 theme of 'gathering up all things in Christ, things in heaven and things on earth'. The contemporary Church is in danger of retreating into the religious backroom when things get too hot on the street. And limited resources easily restrict us to concentrating on the housework. But without evidence of the transforming effect of faith, people are unlikely to trust our words alone. This means engagement of two types, firstly with our local communities meeting local needs in partnership with others and secondly with the global community where the biggest

issues we face are climate change and poverty (are we convinced of the theology of 'enough' and the need for radical change and sacrifice?)

I'm arguing here for holistic mission - both making disciples and making a difference in society. Sharing Life with all of life. A question which falls out of this is 'what impact does such thinking have on the structures of the diocese? How do we embody *holistic mission* served by *enabling ministry* in our boards and committees?

4. *Creating vibrant Christian communities*

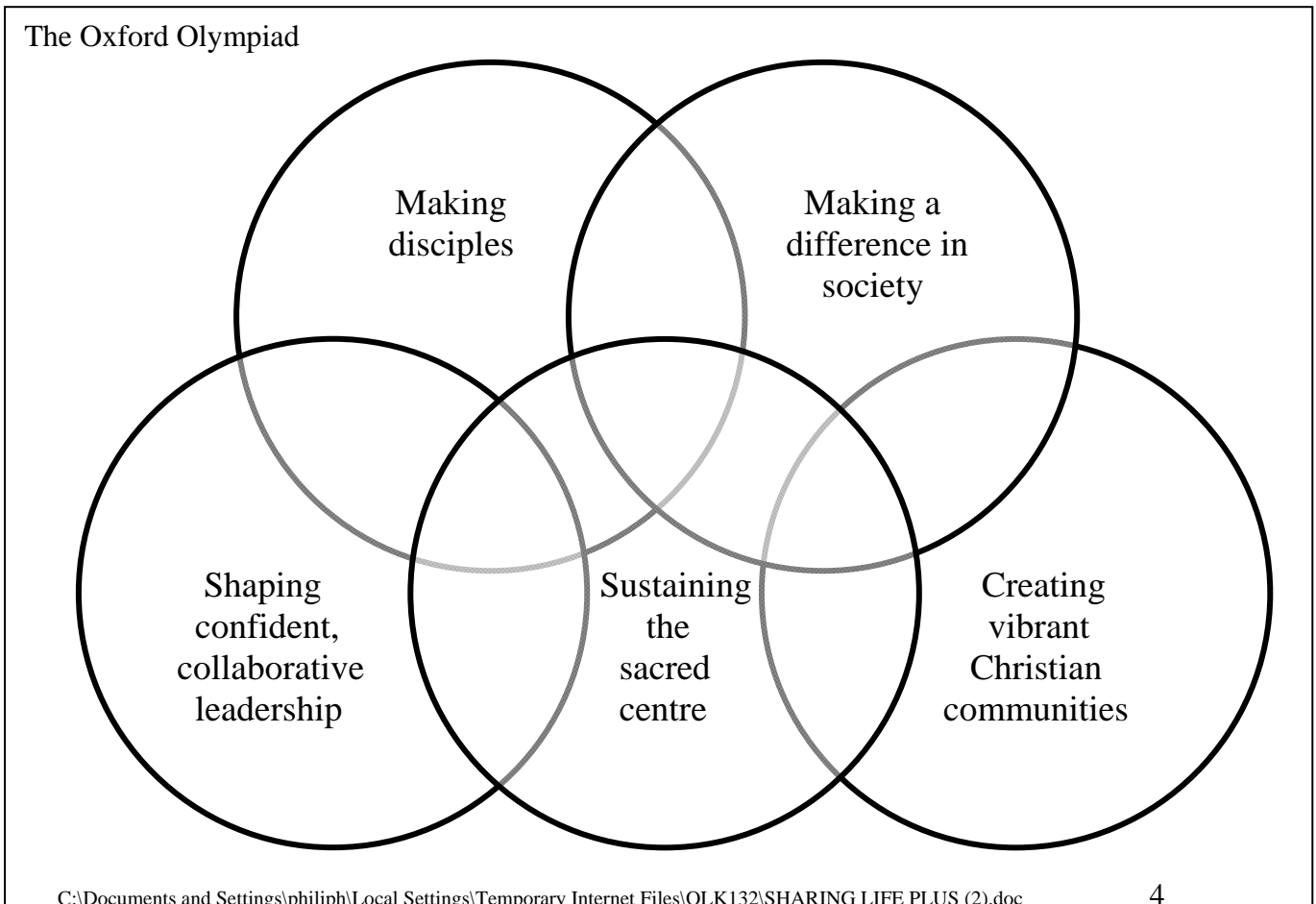
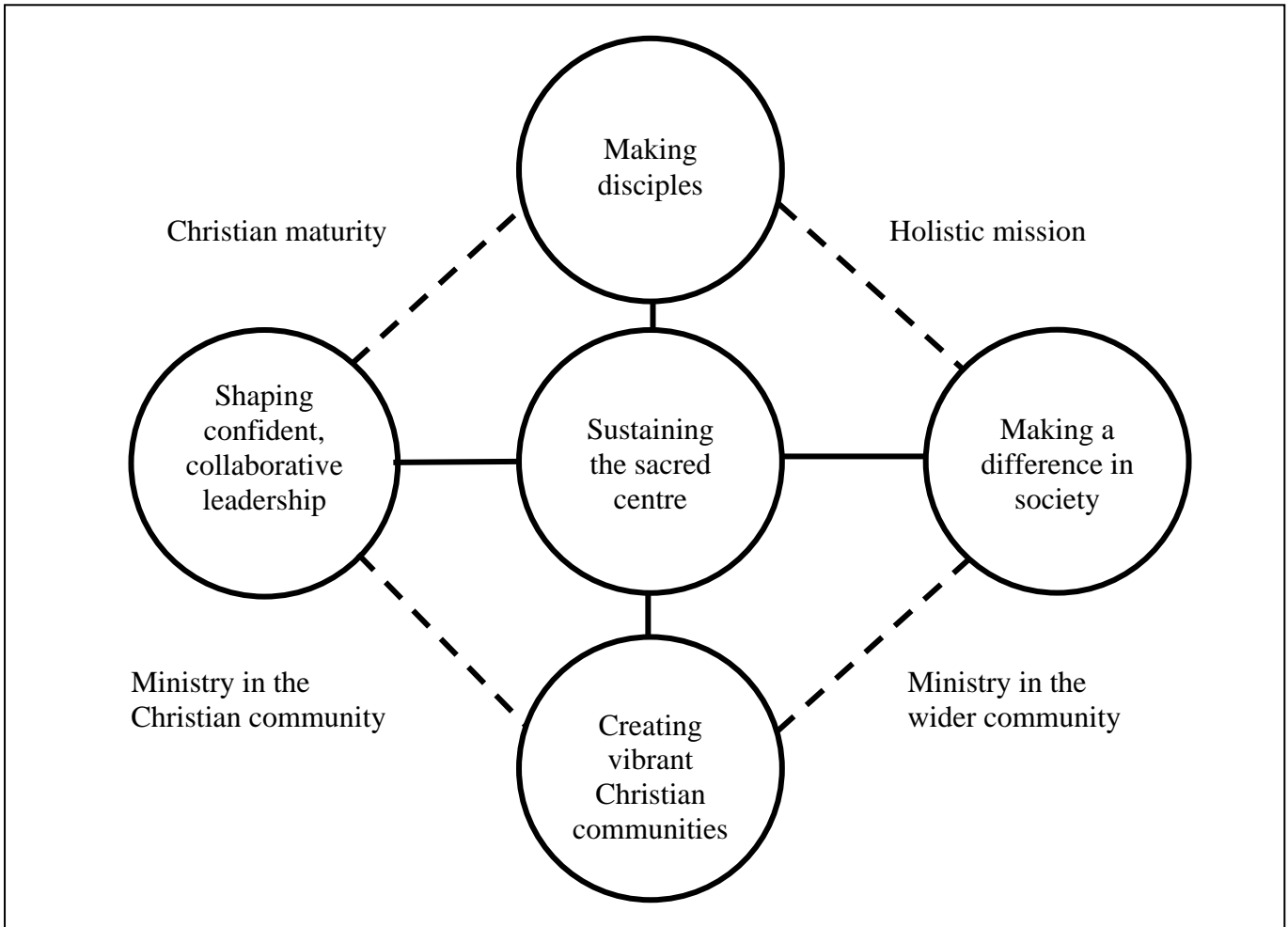
I like to call these 'communities of grace', exhibiting the character of Jesus. Such authentic communities, of whatever size or style, are immensely attractive, particularly in a society which struggles with building and sustaining community. Sadly we also know the opposite – dysfunctional church communities that repel people. Healthy churches are radically hospitable, engaged with their communities, and passionate about God. All churches can benefit from some form of self-audited health-check, such as the Healthy Churches programme, Christian Schwarz's Natural Church Development, or the five priorities in this paper. Followed by action!

All these five priorities might have menus of material to support them: courses, advisers, websites, DVDs, resource books, training days etc..

5. *Shaping confident, collaborative leadership*

- Sharing Life has worked hard and successfully on leadership through the Developing Servant Leadership programme. Collaborative leadership has been implicit and sometimes explicit. A change of gear might now concentrate on using lay gifts in more thorough-going ways (not making Chief Executives into Head Servers) and training mixed ordained and lay leadership teams together.
- I believe every community needs a 'focal Christian person' (parson), lay or ordained, full-time or part-time, who shares with others in enabling ministry. Can we identify such people in every place?
- The oversight/'episcopal' role of stipendiary clergy needs to be recognized in all our training from IME 1-3, through 4-7, First Post of Responsibility, DSL 1 and 2, CME etc Some of us are old dogs and these are new tricks.
- Area Deans and Lay Chairs have a particularly key role in fitting the Church for the future. We need to consider carefully whether in some cases the tasks of the Area Dean need to be dispersed amongst a number of clergy (strategy, pastoral, communication etc) or whether in other cases someone be appointed as Area Dean (half-time) with a smaller cure. Other variations are also to be welcomed such as the use of NSM as Area Dean.

Images speak louder than words, or reinforce them. Here are two ways in which the above priorities might be configured: if the first one looks too complex, knock out the outer dotted lines and accompanying words, leaving the five circles. The outer text simply indicates connections which are implicit in the model.



Supporting the Priorities

The five priorities above need to be undergirded by various resources.

1. *Deanery development*

There is a proper discussion about the role of the deanery. Is the deanery the driver of mission or does that belong to the parish? I believe both play their complementary parts:

- The deanery is the 'enabling mechanism' handling structural and resource issues – pastoral planning (especially with the forthcoming influx of new housing), deployment, finance, strategic over-view.
- The parish/benefice is the 'operational mechanism', the local driver of mission on the ground. Each parish is the best judge of its mission opportunities.

The deanery and the parish have to undertake their respective tasks in close conversation with each other.

Part of the deanery's role in handling the structural issues has to be having an eye to the most viable units of mission and ministry. Some dioceses talk of 'clusters', some of 'localities', some of 'mission communities.' The last term has considerable merit and allows a judgment to be made on what offers the best grouping for mission – a single parish, a benefice, a group of parishes, even a deanery. Such a mission community would need to be large enough (maybe 150-200 regular congregants) to have sufficient resources for mission of people, money, facilities, ideas, skills and so on. No one size would fit all. The rolling Deanery Plan would have the responsibility of identifying what mission communities make most sense in the unfolding life of the deanery, and across deaneries. Planning needs to become a way of life in the deanery.

Over the horizon is the question of what kind of Church we will need to be in 2025. There are evolutionary factors we can take into account, but we could also engage in possible scenario-planning, looking from the future. Bringing these two perspectives together could be the task of a '2025 Task Group.'

2. *Sound finances and a steady number of stipendiary clergy*

We are achieving the first of these, with hard work and continuous encouragement. The deanery remains the proper place for decisions to be made about apportioning the Share but the fail-safe of a diocesan method of apportionment would give (gives?) some deaneries an alternative method if the discussions are going to be too divisive. Oxford's giving proportionate to income remains distinctly average: is there a case for re-examining the 5% Church of England recommendation as a policy aspiration?

The second requirement, a steady number of stipendiary clergy, is one which a working group is tackling. The 'Sheffield formula' for allocating clergy across the country is commonly regarded as having broken down, being too blunt an instrument in a time when ministry comes in so many new forms, shapes and sizes. I have heard the anxiety about the number of stipendiary clergy and we are already exploring ways of sustaining the number of clergy across the diocese.

3. *Light-touch, supportive central structures*

Bishops, archdeacons, advisers and DCH staff are only there to support the parishes and the life of the Church. There is no alternative agenda! We need to work hard to demonstrate that we are all working to the same mission, with the same priorities, and that 'the diocese' is all of us. Suspicion of those who work supportively at the centre is unworthy of a Christian body built on respect and trust. However, we constantly need to review and minimize the amount of material from DCH which requires more administrative action from parish priests. Much of it is forced on us as a Church, of course, as part of an increasingly regulated society. Three of the problems most commonly spoken of by the clergy as I went around the diocese were *buildings, bureaucracy and being overburdened*.

What do we do with all this?

Note that these proposals for a conversation are:

- Not a new strategy but a suggested re-framing of priorities
- Not targets but directions
- Not a top-down programme but a set of priorities for growth
- Not one-size-fits-all but flexible to local needs and circumstances

I would hope that:

- Large churches would see themselves as resource churches for others working to these priorities
- Medium-sized churches might use this as a template for breaking through the 150 congregants barrier.
- Small and rural churches might be supported by new policies directed by these priorities. (Work is needed here on buildings, finance, leadership etc.)
- Ecumenical partners would recognise their priorities in here as well, and be drawn into active discussion at all levels.

I hope for an open conversation around these ideas, not a targeted consultation. This is intended to be a re-setting of the compass rather than a totally new strategy. So:

- April: this paper, amended after SSM/Synod, is sent to Bishop's Council, deanery synods, parishes, boards and committees for comment. I would hope for lots of criss-crossed conversations

- July: further comments at Synod

- November: I will report back on the conversations thus far

In this paper I have offered five priorities for the (5?) years ahead and some underlying infrastructure adjustments. There is deliberately not much detail – that would follow. But if you are asked, you can say that the new bishop wants to prioritise two things:

- Holistic mission
- Christian spirituality

And if you're pushed even further you can say:

'He wants to commend Jesus Christ, to the glory of God the Father.'

+John Oxon
March 2008