WHAT’S THE BUZZ? TELL ME WHAT’S A-HAPPENING.

When I was an innocent young curate, blissfully unaware of the absurdities of church politics and the fallibility of bishops, I used to take my youth groups to see the musical Jesus Christ Superstar in London. Forgive me if this passes you by, but it was a reasonably priced train journey from Birmingham to London and I nearly always came back with the same number of young people I’d taken. And in that fascinating musical was a song with the first line, ‘What’s the buzz? Tell me what’s a-happening.’ And that line keeps returning to my mind at odd moments.

So here it is again. ‘What’s the buzz? Tell me what’s a-happening’ in the world and the Church that we’re here to serve. What’s going on and what are we doing about it? What’s the context for our mission as 21st century clergy? It’s a fascinating, bewildering, ambiguous, creative moment to be involved in ministry, but above all it’s an exhilarating time to be a Christian.

So let’s imagine we’re looking at Google Earth, first with the big picture and then closing in on our own diocese and where we are on 24th March in the year of our Lord 2014.

1. **The big picture; the scene worldwide [slide].** At present there are 2.3 billion people who claim the name Christian. That’s nearly a third of the world’s population. And the number is growing at the rate (net growth) of 70,000 more Christians every day. That’s a huge growth rate, and happening particularly in Asia, Africa and South America. It’s estimated that by 2050 China will have the largest Christian population on earth. I spent two days at Eton College in January delivering the Lyttleton lectures and various other things, and I received a thank you note from the senior Chaplain which contained this little piece: ‘This morning a mother phoned me to ask ‘who was that bishop who’s the story-teller? My son James tells me that he’s an ace cool dude who’s made him want to be confirmed – which has upset his father’ (who’s a Senior Vice President of the People’s Republic of China). The chaplain ended, ‘You never know who’s listening in this place!’ I don’t think there’ll be many here who think of me as an ace cool dude, but the Christian message has its power, always and everywhere. It can even subvert the People’s Republic of China. And yet Christians today are under serious persecution in many parts of the world as well. Rupert Shortt in his powerful book Christianophobia puts the figure at at least 200 million living in real danger.

2. **Let’s keep the Google Earth big picture. [slide]** I always maintain when talking about RE that you can’t understand the modern world without understanding the **place of religion.** Most of this religion is healthy and transformative and life giving, but some of it is unhealthy, destructive and diminishing. But the one thing you can’t do is ignore what motivates at least 75% of the world’s population. You don’t stop drinking water just because some of it, somewhere, is polluted. We need water, and faith, to stay alive and flourish. It seems that we’re hard-wired for belief. Leaders of any kind have to ‘do God’ in today’s world.

3. **While we’re out here with the big stuff, there are huge global issues** where the ancient wisdom of the great faith traditions is seriously needed. [slide] The physicist Neils Bohr once said, ‘Prediction is very difficult – especially when it’s about the future.’ But think of the terrifying new forms of biological warfare or the rise and rise of terrorism. How can
Christianity and other faith traditions contribute to a new discourse of peace? Climate change and environmental degradation – how can we bear witness to the Genesis principle of stewardship of this good earth? Financial fragility – how can we get our message of character, integrity, and the pursuit of the common good, heard above the aggression, greed and short-termism of the world’s financial institutions? Hunger, poverty, corruption – we have a message of a new creation, a cleansing of the universe - how can it be embodied both in the Church and in politics? I look at my little grandchildren of 6,5,4,3 and think ‘they’ll probably be alive in the year 2100 – what sort of a world will it be then?’

4. Still out there with the big picture, it’s hard to overestimate the revolution that’s taken place in communications. [slide] It’s a continual revolution, never slowing up, and quickly leaving the faint-hearted behind. The PC is already on its way out. Soon the smartphone will do everything for us except make our morning tea. Young people conduct their lives through social media. In the United States 18-24 year olds send or receive an average of 110 text messages per day. And, significantly, we speak of the Word made flesh. What does that mean now in a digital age? How should we embody the Word? What new media should we use and what should we resist? Tricky questions.

5. Now let’s start bringing Google Earth in on Western Europe. [slide] If religion is such a big deal why is Europe so secular? In truth the old secularisation thesis is pretty well dead. Religion hasn’t just faded away, though many people’s interest in it may have done. It’s hard to think of a book like John Robinson’s Honest to God capturing the interest of our culture and being a best seller today. Alex Ferguson’s autobiography sold over 800,000 copies in its first three months; a Christian best seller might sell 10,000 in a year. But the new secularisation thesis is more subtle than the ‘religion is dead and gone’ variety, and it distinguishes between religion and spirituality. 48% of under 30s answered ‘None’ to the census question about their religion. But spirituality in all its profound and crazy forms is alive and very well

6. At the heart of that new secularisation, however, is the question of God. And yet here again I would say the question is complicated. Of those 48% of young people who say they have no religion, only 43% say they’re atheists. The aggressive new atheists have shot themselves in the foot by their graceless arguments. [slide] And many people are wistful about their loss of faith. ‘I don’t believe in God,’ said Julian Barnes in his BBC Lent talks two or three years ago, ‘but I miss him.’ The historian Roger Scruton wrote, ‘Once we came before the presence of God with a song, now we come before his absence with a sigh.’ So what place does apologetics have in our ministries? The Archbishop of Canterbury and I were both taken to task in the Times at Christmas for not presenting the case for God vigorously enough. I think I’m doing it all the time, but there you go. Must do better.

7. Now here’s a humdinger. As Google Earth hovers over Europe we see a massive shift in morality, even among Christians. [slide] Robert Warner from the University of Chester wrote this in the Church Times last month: ‘The 1960s moral revolution has had a double impact. First, the traditional moral constraints of the Church were overturned. Then the Church increasingly came under judgement from the new moral consensus. People no longer considered themselves to be behaving immorally, let alone ‘living in sin’. Instead they have embraced a new morality, and it is the Church that is now considered immoral.’
He concludes, ‘From the perspective of the new paradigm, the Church has become a bastion of reactionary attitudes and moral blindness... It’s lost its moral credibility and is seen to defend indefensible prejudice.’ All this, mark you, comes out of a three year study of undergraduates who would call themselves Christians. This view of the Church as toxic is quite new in my 40 years of ministry. We have some painful thinking to do, but it’s an opportunity to dig deep into our faith and to find channels of renewal in our theology and practice.

8. Let’s go in further with Google Earth, into the UK. [slide] What’s the place of the Church of England in society now, and what is faith meaning to people? Let’s ask some of our parishioners (Vox pop video). The Church of England may be less understood, less honoured, less respected – almost certainly. But it’s still needed to handle people’s celebrations, crises and transitions. It’s still appreciated at times of national significance [slide] – the death of Diana, the millennium, the Queen’s Diamond Jubilee. It’s still deeply committed to education and structurally related to Parliament, the Armed Forces, prisons and much more. And above all, we’re present – present in every community in the land, in 16,000 churches, in over 10,000 clergy, in caring for children, for the sick, the elderly, the wider community. In loving and encouraging and helping people on to their feet. In hatching, matching and despatching. In giving cohesion and hope to individuals, to families and to whole communities. The life of the Church is in its parishes; the rest of us are really support services. But the Church is also struggling with smaller and older congregations, financial shortages, fewer clergy, clergy stress, and religious machinery that sometimes chews people up. So how radical do we need to be in rethinking our role in society and our way of being present in every place, and faithful to our historic vocation? But how radical can we afford not to be? It’s a kairos time for the Church.

9. Now let’s take Google earth back out.[slide] All the factors I’ve described throw us on to God. And the image and scale of God that we carry into our ministry is crucial. If we’re anxious about the survival of the Church, our God is too small. If we’re worried that people’s unbelief means God might fade away, our God is too small. If we think the world’s problems are unmanageable, our God is too small. I’m not betting on the survival of the Church of England until the Parousia, but I’m totally confident that the Kingdom of God is unstoppable. We just have to get into the slipstream of God’s being and energy while we’re passing through this vale of joy and tears. But if light from the Big Bang has been coming towards us for 13.7 billion years at 186,000 miles per second we can’t be talking about a little God who’s been pushed to the edge of life and is worried about getting a mention in the weekly newspaper. In the words of the children’s song, ‘Our God is a great big God.’ And rather bigger than big. Remember, ‘love never ends’, and therefore neither does God.

10. I’ve sketched 9 factors in answer to the question ‘What’s the buzz? Tell me what’s happening.’ For someone who recently wrote a book called Ten that’s remarkably restrained. What about a tenth factor? Well, that’s for you to decide. I’d like you now to spend 5 minutes talking with your neighbour about the things I’ve been saying, what you agree with and what you’d want to question. And then I’d like you to think what your tenth
factor would be. What else do you see in your big picture of the world and the Church, as they are now and as you serve them both?

Part 2

Scott Entsminger was a lifelong fan of his American football team the Cleveland Browns. He died last year but he’d made a final request, respectfully asking that six members of the Cleveland Browns act as pallbearers at his funeral so that, as he put it, ‘the Browns can let me down one last time.’ Sadly they declined but they sent the family a team jersey instead.

Well, the Church of England is not going to let the nation down one last time. And in particular we’re not going to let this diocese down. Faced with all those challenges we’ve just seen from Google Earth, we’re carrying on worshipping and praying, listening and loving, opening hearts and minds to the beauty of Jesus Christ and serving our communities in a thousand ways. And over the last five years we’ve put a framework around all this called Living Faith. [slide] As you know, it’s not been a top-down strategy but a set of priorities in the form of a palette of colours from which you’ve been able to mix your own colours and paint your own works of art.

Nobody has asked the impossible of you. The method has been one of invitation and offer – high trust, high support. The artist Christopher Hart was once asked how to be a genius and he answered: ‘Get up, have a cup of coffee, sit at your desk and begin.’ Living Faith hasn’t asked anyone to be a genius in any other sense than that – to get on with the core tasks of mission and ministry within the framework of, and supported by, the five priorities of Living Faith.

This year the focus is on Shaping Confident Collaborative Leadership, which is why we have these three conferences with clergy first, then LLMs, and then laity - and us too - at the Grand Day Out. And one of the hopes we have for these three events is that we’ll become clearer how to build further on the Living Faith model and embed it more deeply in our diocesan DNA.

We got hold of some Trust money to fund consultants to do a rigorous piece of work evaluating Living Faith. [slide] The report runs to over 240 pages of detailed findings, all on our website, but you have an executive summary in your packs. There’s loads of material in the main report which we’ll be digging into as we discern the way forward. But it was good to find that 82% of clergy and LLMs had engaged with Living Faith to some extent, and 63% of PCCs and churchwardens. 14% of clergy chose not to engage, with larger churches sometimes having their own strategic planning tools and some small rural churches feeling it wasn’t relevant to them. The five priorities were used in very different ways, from providing the framework for a deanery’s Mission Action Plan and helping a parish shape its whole life around the five priorities, through to hundreds of people coming to conferences [slide] on Leading Your Church into Growth, Discipleship, Good News for Young People, Mend the Gap, Living Faith in the Community (?), Living Faith Worldwide, Mission Action Planning for PCCs (?) and so on. The Simple Guides on Prayer, Reading the Bible, Christianity, Giving, Pilgrimage, Making a Difference in the World and so on have gone in their tens of thousands, and a few books have been written too.

But let’s be more specific and see what’s been going on in our diocese in the recent past, and let’s hear from real people and places. The central priority of Living Faith is **Sustaining the Sacred**
Centre because without that everything drifts to a halt. Let’s hear from a couple of places and see what they’ve done [video]. The Simple Guide to Prayer [slide] has been much used – or at least, 40,000 copies have left DCH. I was sorry more people didn’t want to take up the offer of An Hour Out [slide], a chance to talk with clergy about God and prayer rather than the roof and the Parish Share. But it’s still available! There were lots of courses on prayer and spirituality, and quiet days and retreats, labyrinths, pilgrimages to Iona and Taize, the Holy Land [slide], and the next door parish. And a very successful Festival of Prayer has been run at Cuddesdon for three years.

An absolute core task is Making Disciples [slide] and a lot of effort has been put into this priority. It’s taken many forms; let’s have a look at a couple [video]. We’ve taken Jesus at his word and wanted to ‘make disciples of all nations’, rather than just converts or church-goers or hymn singers, but to grow the church through growing disciples. You may have seen the report which came out in January ‘From Anecdote to Evidence’ with its statistics that 18% of churches grew in the decade just gone, 55% stayed the same, and 27% declined. Not surprisingly it found that leadership is absolutely key and where clergy prioritise numerical growth that’s where growth was more likely to happen. Other key ingredients of growing churches were [slide of list]: having a clear mission and purpose, being ready to reflect and learn, developing and rotating lay leadership, actively engaging children and teenagers (do you know that 48% of our CofE churches have fewer than 5 under 16 year olds?), actively engaging with those outside the church in practical support (like debt counselling, night shelters, food banks, work with dementia sufferers and so on ). Other ingredients for growth included being willing to change and adapt, offering a good welcome and follow up for visitors, commitment to nurturing new Christians, and finally and firstly, vision.

I was fascinated, though not surprised, by other factors from that report. [slide] Where there are reasonable numbers of children and young people churches are twice as likely to be growing, and, fairly obviously, churches with a children’s or youth worker are more likely to be growing too, with services carefully designed with children in mind, youth programmes, camps and retreats, and church schools all being especially helpful. The report says that success in church growth isn’t a function of churchmanship or worship style – interesting. And one for Bishops Staff – amalgamations of parishes are strongly associated with decline. Cathedrals are growing amazingly – 35% in ten years; what do we learn from that? And Fresh Expressions have added up to 80,000 new congregants, or two new dioceses, with 40% of attendees being non-churched.

In our own diocese there are so many strategies for making disciples – Messy Churches all over the place, Café church, men’s nights in all shapes and sizes (the nights and the men!), film nights, sports evenings and fun days (we did a lot with the Olympics), holiday clubs for young and old. The list is remarkable.

The third priority of Living Faith is Making a Difference in the World. That’s a great challenge! How are we a blessing to the community around us? Let’s get some ideas [video]. One of the things we saw when Archbishop Justin [slide] got going on bankers and payday loans and credit unions was how effective the Church can be when it gets on to the front foot. The welcome the police have given to Street Pastors and the amazing response to Alison Webster’s day events on food banks, debt and other dimensions of poverty have all shown the same thing. We have
credibility when we’re seen to be doing what Jesus did, and being committed to compassion and justice and advocacy for the poor. Do you remember that fascinating statistic running around recently that church members contribute 22 million hours of voluntary help in the community outside the church, every month? I wish we blew our own trumpet a bit more.

The fourth strand of Living Faith is Creating Vibrant Christian Communities. I’m reminded of the t-shirt I saw on a heavily pregnant young woman a year of two back, which simply said ‘Under construction’. Which is pretty well what our churches are – always under construction under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, the Master Builder. Let’s see some examples [video]. We didn’t actually do a very good job of resourcing this strand of Living Faith [slide], but when you think of it, it’s what we’re doing all the time, trying to open our churches to the gracious, colourful, vibrant energy of the Spirit, so that people taste and see that the Lord is good. There’s no secret formula you can put on a petri dish and replicate for general use. God never repeats himself. But the Health Check for churches [slide], a self evaluation tool we’re revising at the moment, should be pretty useful.

Which brings us back here, the fifth priority of Living Faith, Shaping Confident, Collaborative Leadership, and four days here as God’s ordained leaders, taking counsel together (that’s what you call it at the bar isn’t it?) Another short video will illustrate some of the possibilities.[video] Bill Hybels of Willow Creek said, ‘The local church is the hope of the world, and its future rests primarily in the hands of its leaders.’ But those leaders have to work together, seriously work together, lay and ordained, SSM and LLM, chaplain and lay pastor, focal Christian people in every village and locality. There’s lots of ways to do it, but we must do it together.

[Living Faith circle] I was ordained in 1972. (Amazing, you say, and still breathing…) I’ve changed a lot. I’m thicker round the stem (I’m told). I start washing my face and forget when to stop. I sing along to jingles on the TV, and I’ve stopped trying to hold my stomach in, no matter who walks in the room. But some things haven’t changed, and one is my passion that people everywhere might have a life-enhancing encounter with Jesus Christ. That encounter, which took place over a period of time in the fair city of Oxford, turned my life around. How can I not want to share the best thing I’ve found? I often quote words I read then which appear at the very end of a book called Christianity and History by Herbert Butterfield, a Professor of History at Cambridge. He wrote of a principle that gave him both a firm rock for his life and flexibility for his mind. It was this: ‘Hold fast to Christ, and for the rest be totally uncommitted.’ If we hold fast to Christ, everything else will fall into place. That’s what motivated me then; it motivates me now.

And who is this Jesus for me? Let me offer you, finally, a quote from Lord Hailsham. Story…Lord Hailsham wrote: I looked at the gospels again, and quite suddenly a new portrait seemed to stare out of the pages. I had never previously thought of a laughing, joking Jesus, physically strong and active, fond of good company and a glass of wine, telling funny stories, using, as every good teacher does, paradox and exaggeration, giving nicknames to his friends, and holding his companions spellbound with his talk. As I reflected on this I came to the conclusion that we would have been absolutely entranced by his company.’

Let’s stay entranced by Jesus Christ.