

**Into Deep Water:**  
**following our call to become**  
**a more Christ-like church for the sake of God's world**  
*a resource for the reviewing and renewing of our local mission*

From early on in our Common Vision process we were asking how the local church might be supported in their own exploration of this vision. As Director of Mission I was tasked with researching, reviewing and then, together with others, shaping some resources which local church(es) could use to discern, explore, decide, and implement their plan for mission through the lens of our shared call to be *a more Christ-like church for the sake of God's world*.

I have been involved in parish development in different roles for nearly 30 years and made use of many books and programmes which have emerged in that time. They all have merit and have had some impact, but often not what either the local church or I might have hoped or planned for. From our shared experience as a group and listening carefully to the local churches we work with, we were deeply aware that any resource our churches were being invited to engage with had to be practical and able to be applied across the many and varied contexts of our Diocese. Three guiding principles have emerged which have shaped our work:

1. "This call to be more Christ-like, to sit at the feet of the Lord, is not the preliminary work we need to do before we find a new strategy. It is the vision and the strategy. It is the response we are called to make. **It's not the appetiser before the main meal. It is the whole banquet**". (Bishop Steven at Diocesan Synod 2018)
2. **"the focus of our diocesan strategy should be on the local"** - across our Diocese there are many good missional things happening which we need to affirm, proclaim, learn from and develop to their full potential.
3. **The local church is not a 'problem' that needs 'fixing'**. The danger of any parish development tool is that it can feel imposed and raise feelings of failure, particularly at a time when the church is anxious and concerned about its survival. This resource is offered in the belief that 'you are where you are as a church', that God is present and active and has a vision for the future of every church in the unfolding of His Kingdom of love and healing of the world.

Our aspiration for this resource is that, **'every local church is a place of hope and confidence in God and ourselves;** that our missional activity will be more clearly experienced as being in response to God's call.

Taking the time necessary to listen to God, each other and our context is a challenge to our culture which in its anxiety pushes us into problem solving and the desire for quick results. If we are to be a more Christ-like, more contemplative church, then any process seeking to discern God's call will need time and space. In terms of how time is spent, our shared experience of most local planning processes is:



## A resource rooted in Appreciative Inquiry

The more we as group have explored and practiced appreciative inquiry, the more we have felt the approach to be an excellent 'fit' against the values of Common Vision. It is an approach, an attitude, more than it is a tool. It has everyday application – from a 5 minute discussion in a PCC meeting all the way to a 3 year strategic planning process. Its strength is that it builds on all that is good within our local churches and through this appreciative approach grows hope and confidence in God and ourselves. It is well tested over many years in every church context we find across our Diocese. We also know it can work inter-generationally.

It offers a balance between contemplation and action and discernment and planning. It has been well tested in many denominations over the past 10 years and we've seen the emergence of Appreciating Church (<http://appreciating.church/>) as a national organisation and resource. This approach seeks to hold together a process which is simple, but also takes us deeper into God's vision for the local church.

### How will it work?

An iceberg offers a helpful way to imagine the journey a church will engage with.

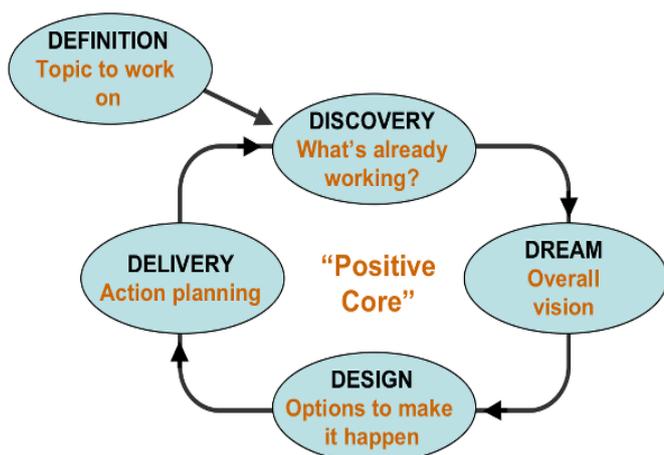
#### 1) Above the surface

If a church hasn't yet engaged with Common Vision together, they are invited to begin with exploring what it means to be '*a more Christ-like church for the sake of God's world*' using the range of resources produced over the past 18 months - particularly the Beatitudes and Lazarus material and the Colossians resource just published.

Secondly, as we ask 'where are we' as a church, we recommend investigating the key data available using the Parish/Benefice dashboards (<https://www.oxford.anglican.org/parish-dashboards>) and the excellent For Richer, For Poorer disadvantage and deprivation tool (<https://www.arcgis.com/FRFPtool>).

#### 2) Below the Surface – 'Into Deeper Water'

The appreciative inquiry process guides us through 5 phases



**Discovery** – this will involve activities such as a church timeline event where we engage with the good and challenging stories our churches, but also think about sources of hope.

The life-giving part of this process is where churches engage in 'appreciative conversations', which might be 1-2-1, or in groups. These conversations and interviews explore the strengths, skills, capabilities of individuals, communities and organisations and focus on the 'high points'. You will be encouraged to engage

with as wide a group of people as possible - all ages inside our churches, those on our fringe and those in the wider community.

**Dream** - 'what can we aspire to?'. This is based on reality and a church's shared history of 'what is best'. This is a time of missional creativity, imagining new possibilities, generating new (and actionable) ideas. This reminds us of the raising of Lazarus and Jesus' promise of abundant life; of the presence and action of the Holy Spirit which brings newness of life and transforms reality in unexpected ways.

**Design** - bridging the best of 'what is' with the ideas of 'what might be'. As the local church continues to ask '*what are we noticing*', this is where creative ideas are turned into action, 'the scaffold is constructed'. It is a time for 'prototyping' ideas and methods, with the church as a learning community. Experience suggests this part of the process is not to be rushed

**Delivery** - creating 'what will be'. Planning is still central to an appreciative Inquiry process – it isn't all loose and fluffy! However, too many of our existing church plans are too big, too demanding or unrealistic. Here the move is from possibilities to inspired action, ensuring there is intention, flexibility, clarity of purpose and simplicity.

### **How will this be supported and delivered?**

It is likely that some churches will welcome some support in learning and applying an appreciative inquiry approach and this may include requesting a facilitator. The group have become aware that there are already people around our Diocese skilled in the use of appreciative inquiry, but we also are committed to developing a network of skilled appreciative inquiry facilitators wherever we can so that requests from churches and deaneries can be responded to as soon as possible.

We know from our experience with the Partnership for Missional Church process that there is huge value in churches undertaking a process like this together, journeying together as they explore their call. The group encourages churches in a benefice or locality to think about networking together through the process.

We know that in this Diocese, 'one-size fits all' rarely works. There are no shortages of parish development and planning processes already and you may be committed to an alternative planning process and/or have a clear plan for mission already. This is to be celebrated and when this local plan is due for reviewing, churches are invited to consider using appreciative inquiry as an approach.

### **Conclusion**

When Jesus called out to the disciples to 'put out into the deep water and let down your nets for a catch' (Luke 5.4) they had been fishing all night without success, they were tired and lacking in confidence that they would catch anything and yet trusted Jesus and obeyed. If we are to discover a new missional creativity, the Spirit of innovation and learning, can we together be courageous enough to admit that there is not a neat or simple 'answer' to the challenges of our mission context today. This resource invites churches across our Diocese to take their own step 'into deep water', that in doing so we will find our trust and confidence in God and ourselves renewed.

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on behalf of the working group  
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