

Rt Rev. Philip North; Acting Bishop of Blackburn, Address to Diocesan Synod Oct 18 2022

Then he said to his disciples, "The harvest is plentiful but the workers are few. ³⁸ Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field." (Matthew 9, 37)

We recently commemorated the death of Her Late Majesty The Queen and Lancashire parishes responded in the way we've come to expect: with agility, imagination, pastoral care and an acute evangelistic sense.

There seems to be a great deal of energy in many of our parishes right now, which is lovely to see. No wonder data shows Blackburn near to top of tables for bounce back after covid in terms of attendance and finance. There is some outstanding leadership from our priests and laypeople across the diocese.

Arguably that's due in no small part to our commitment to the parish and to retaining clergy numbers – something which makes us an outlier in the north. The MFF (Mission and Financial Flourishing) process – currently in round two of looking in detail at every parish – is laying the ground for us to put in an application for significant funds from national church which will enable us to invest even more in the local – honouring local initiatives intended to make new disciples and planting back into those areas where church life is weak.

And the same time we see a beautiful commitment from those parishes in the Parish Renewal Programme where heroic leaders are trying to turn round parishes that have faced complex issues over many years. Even as we meet here today, 32 priests and lay leaders are currently at LYCIG (Leading Your Church Into Growth) National Conference – a wonderful response.

Now this is all very exciting. But we must remember – that pledge to maintain clergy numbers is a massive commitment and an enormous undertaking. It means every single priest and every single layperson committing and playing their part. And in particular means focussing on three things.

The first is Generosity. Parish Share contributions last year were heroic; it was quite extraordinary that even during the pandemic our Parish Share collection rates went up. A massive thankyou to everyone involved in that: treasurers, PCC, clergy and above all, givers.

But nationally, times are hard financially. I don't need to go through the litany of inflation and cost of living issues we are facing at the moment. Now, at this time of national need and crisis we need to serve our communities, especially the poorest. But to do that, we must have healthy churches and stipendiary clergy. Full time priests are not a luxury. We need them! So please – continue to remind your people of boundless generosity of God. And that we respond with our own generosity; something that must include generosity in our giving.

We now have excellent support in this area, partly through nationally funded posts at the Diocesan Offices.

Secondly, vocations. It's no good trying to maintain clergy numbers if the vocations dry up! And currently the data is patchy – down one year, up the next. Significant numbers of much-loved clergy are going to be retiring over the next 3-5 years which is a challenge but also an opportunity. If your church is in that category, please especially pray for those to hand the torch to.

And above all please go on chiselling out those vocations – lay and ordained; and in this case Rev. Nick McKee and his Growing Leaders team at the Diocesan Offices provide brilliant

support. And whilst it is beautiful when anyone responds to God's call; look out for the young vocations too.

And thirdly, evangelism. The Prime Minister has recently met with certain problems for wanting to grow her way out of a crisis. Some might say we are being equally naïve in thinking we can grow our way out of a century of decline. But there's a difference – we have the Holy Spirit. It was pretty naïve of God to think he could change the world with a tiny group of fishermen with singed hair, but it happened.

And same with us. Why should we accept decline as the norm? Why should the Diocese of Blackburn not grow numerically? There is a massive hunger for faith, especially amongst the young.

The Queen's funeral showed a deep-down desire for community, story, worship. All over the Diocese new congregations are popping up; attracting families from every demographic.

So believe that growth is possible in your church. Plan for growth. And most importantly, pray for the gift of the Holy Spirit who will animate and set on fire even our weak and failing efforts.

But above all, remember the dignity of what you do. The only thing in all this cosmos that can make sense of these fragile and absurd lives is Jesus. There's only one place where we can find life, purpose, hope and it's him. Your worship, your witness, your service is literally a matter of life and death. That is the privilege God gives you as one called into his church; to save souls in Christ for ever.

It's a time of change in our Diocese. This brings fragility; and reminds us how vital it is to depend on God. Our prayers are very much with the Crown Nominations Commission (CNC) as it meets at the same time as our Diocesan Conference.

But whomever God calls, the vocation of the Church will not change. Our call to transform communities in the name of Christ will not change. So, let's get on with the job and carry it out with joy.