

Speech to Synod February 2024

A year ago I went to preach at a new church on an estate in Blackpool. I sat at a table with a mother and her two children. The mother looked grey and tired and was so riven with anxiety that I later found out that this church service was the only time she ever left the house. The children were painfully shy and took a long time even to make eye contact. The father was at home and had no time for church or faith. The whole family felt bound by poverty and fear.

Just before Christmas I went back to that church. The mother now has a full-time job and has just been promoted. The father has come to faith and is doing the Diocesan M:Power course which forms lay leaders from urban backgrounds. And the shy little boy was up front, dressed as a donkey, narrating the nativity play and grinning from ear to ear.

That family has been unbound by the Gospel. How was it possible? Because of a loving, serving, worshipping Christian community confidently present on that estate.

Five years ago, General Synod voted unanimously that there should be such a Christian community on *every* significant social housing estate in England in order that stories like that one might be commonplace. So how have we done?

There have been many advances. There are plenty of stories of new estates churches planted by all traditions. A number of dioceses, for example Southwark, Norwich, London and Southwell and Notts, have appointed advisers. £100 million of Lowest Income Communities Funding and around £40 million in SDF funding have gone to estates or economically deprived communities.

But there have also been significant setbacks. No one in February 2019 could have guessed the massive impact that the Covid pandemic would have on every aspect of our common life. At least ten more estates churches have closed in the past five years, most with no plan for replanting. There are still at least 850 significant estates that are not served by a Christian community and so where stories of lives changed are untold.

Therefore this motion is an invitation to Synod to make that commitment to the social estates of England afresh. Before you decide whether or not to do so, let me answer the obvious questions. Why? How?

Why should we do this? First, because of the Gospel. To vote for this motion does not mean we are neglecting the countryside or suburban England. Of course we are not. But Jesus brought about a transformative ministry by going to the marginalised places and the people living with poverty, knowing that when you do that, the rest will catch up. Just like cultural transmission, Gospel transmission runs from poor to rich. If we can renew church life on our estates and in our deprived communities, we will renew it everywhere.

And second, because of our wider agenda as Synod and the national church. In this synod we have committed ourselves to racial justice. Well 85% of the global majority heritage population of the UK live in our estates and lower income parishes. We have committed ourselves to being a younger church. Well two thirds of under 19 year olds live in our estates and lower income parishes. One in three children of the children we long to reach are growing up in poverty. If we continue to walk away from the estates, those commitments, and many others that we have made, are meaningless.

And then, perhaps more challengingly, how should we do this? This motion outlines three ways.

The first is strategy. The power to plant and renew churches on estates does not lie with this Synod. It lies with the dioceses who are independent charities and set their own direction. By passing this motion we are issuing a bold invitation to every diocese to prioritise estates and income deprived communities in their strategic planning. So if you vote yes, take that 'yes' home to your Diocesan Synod and Bishop's Councils.

The second is finance. We are a wealthy church, but the money is not always in the right places. The real terms freeze in lowest income communities funding has not helped dioceses to deliver on the 2019 motion. The wealth disparities between dioceses are a scandal that we cannot allow to endure. How can it be fair that estates parishes in the north are paying more in parish share than wealthy communities in the south east simply because of the historic endowments of their dioceses? The time for excuses is over. We need a new and just financial settlement across the whole church which moves the wealth to where it is most needed if the church in our poorest communities is to survive. That is a Gospel priority.

And the third is leadership. I have been delighted to hand over the chair of the National Estates Evangelism Task Group to Bishop Lynne Cullens. In fact she should be giving this speech, but sadly Synod's rules don't allow it. Bishop Lynne has brought fresh energy and vision to the work. And she has done so with heartfelt passion because she is that shockingly rare thing – a Bishop from a working class background. Estates churches and the wider church desperately need leaders called from our estates and deprived communities. This motion encourages every diocese and TEI to think about ways of forming lay and ordained leaders from those backgrounds. There are some great examples of this, but we need many more. I'm convinced that there is an underground army of evangelists out there which a culturally middle class church is simply missing.

This motion also allows Synod to acknowledge and thank a remarkable group of people which is those laypeople and priests who minister on our estates. Over the past five years they have faced an extraordinary array of problems: a pandemic which impacted poorer communities disproportionately, a cost of living crisis that has forced millions into destitution and placed enormous burdens on church-led community projects, a growing housing crisis that leaves many residents feeling anxious for the future, a culture of low pay combined with the shameful erosion of the benefits system forcing millions into destitution. The work of the churches in our nation's most deprived communities, most of it unseen and unmeasurable, has been utterly beautiful. Thank you for all you have done on our behalf in witnessing to the Gospel in word and deed.

And now, as those called to leadership, it is imperative upon us to ensure that such vital Gospel work can continue. We must act now to reverse the slow erosion of Christian life on our estates. That will require sacrifice, it will require prayer, it will require huge courage. But it is essential if the Gospel is to flourish once again in our land. Please lend your support to this motion.

+Philip Blackburn