

CATHOLIC EVANGELISM AND VISION 2026. ARE THEY COMPATIBLE? (021215)

BISHOP JULIAN'S INPUT TO THE DEBATE

I am very grateful that we can have this conversation tonight. The fact that some in the diocese have questions about Vision 2026 is a very positive thing. It means that it is being engaged with, rather than ripped up and ignored. And that is heartening. So thank you for being here, giving up an evening and taking Vision 2026 seriously. That is really appreciated.

In my contribution this evening, I have a number of points to make, which I hope will be helpful. My contribution is not a lecture, such a Philip has offered us, or a response to what he has said, but an apologia for the Vision. **6 things the Vision is not.**

1. The Vision agenda is **not out of step with the rest of the C of E**

The National C of E is currently pursuing a national reform and renewal programme. We are doing what many dioceses are doing. That underlines the urgency for change, not in our message, but in how we proclaim and live out that message. The current way of being and doing church has not delivered what we had hoped for...the sad news is that while what we have done for the past 30 years has slowed down the decline, it has not halted or reversed it.

Doing nothing, making no changes to who we are and what we do, will only lead to further decline. This emphasises the urgency of Vision 2026. But change is deeply unpopular especially with quite traditional communities, such as we find in many parts of Lancashire and Vision 2026 will be resisted, resented and opposed, simply because people are resistant to change

+ John Pritchard recently gave a lecture in the Cathedral entitled, 'slaying the dragons, bringing change to settled church communities' and spoke of doing a 'major refit while at sea'. That is what we are about and it is and will not popular, but we are in good company.

2. The Vision agenda is **not primarily setting up growth as the goal**

The focus is to make Churches healthy, because healthy churches grow. This focus on the health of the local church is because there are too many examples where our churches are unhealthy, chewing up the clergy, engaging in power struggles, not offering a warm welcome, being unchristian in their behaviour, driving people away, not drawing them in.....Vision 2026 is about health, not growth

3. The Vision agenda is **not the Bishop's vision**

It has passed through Bishop's Leadership Team, Bishop's Council and Diocesan Synod. This is our vision as a diocese and I want to resist all attempts to pin it to me, as if it were mine and my agenda only, without the support and backing of others. This is a really important message, as the Vision agenda is not intended to be a top down imposition, but something to enable and encourage us to be healthy churches transforming communities, to be salt and light and express the arrival of the rule of Christ into every aspect of this world.

Vision 2026 must be seen in that bigger picture, in which the kingdoms of this world shall become the Kingdom of our Lord Jesus Christ. In this advent season we prepare for the second coming of Jesus to judge the living and the dead, when every knee shall bow and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord. That's the sense of direction we have committed ourselves to.

4. The Vision agenda is **not a churchmanship regime change.**

The health of a church is not about style, where we put ourselves on the candle, but rather about making church all the things Jesus intended us to be as His body. We will never fully agree about

styles of worship, and that is okay, but whatever our label or tradition, we must all aim to be a Christian community, which is healthy in its relationships, its spiritual temperature, its concern for the Kingdom to come, its worship, its giving, discipleship, witness and leadership.

The Apostle Paul said that when Christians do things differently, that is okay, as long as Christ is preached. Similarly, Vision 2026 is not about a certain churchmanship, but about being a healthy Christian community, whatever our tradition.

5. The Vision agenda is **not intended to add to an already full workload.**

I know that many are at full stretch now with little extra capacity and the thought of trying to fit more into the day and the diary is enough to make some want to throw in the towel and retire early. I understand that.

+ John Pritchard spoke of the importance of setting priorities, giving up certain things in order to focus our energy and resources. He said we can only bring in the new, if we make space for it, ie we face the challenge of deciding what good things we will stop, in order to have the time and energy to focus on those areas that desperately need attention. We cannot do everything. Vision 2026 highlights what should be our priorities.

6. The Vision agenda is **not a full ecclesiology**

The Vision doesn't say everything there is to say about what a church should do. What we have done is to identify the areas where we are weak and need to focus our attention during the next 10/11 years.

Yes, there are all kinds of things missing in the Vision. It is not meant, it cannot, say everything. But it does drill down to certain key areas where there is work to do. Some have said they do not recognise the language, but that is because it is picking up those spheres of ministry that have not been prominent in many of our churches and which need to become more mainstream. And of course what may be normal and understood language for us in church needs to be translated for those who have no Christian background and Vision 2026 seeks to do that.

I have chosen the **three themes of the Vision:**

Making disciples.

Matthew 28.20 Go and make disciples. The reason for this focus arises out of the need to help church attenders become disciples, creating a deeper faith, warming up the spiritual temperature, knowing the scriptures better, ie dealing with the considerable biblical illiteracy, praying with greater urgency for the Kingdom of God to come, ie being serious about the spiritual agenda, and offering a more generous stewardship to further the cause of Christ, ie improving the giving of ourselves. Bible, prayer and stewardship are all central C of E themes.

Being witnesses

The reason for this focus is because we have a glorious message to pass on but we have been reluctant and slow to share the story of Jesus. We have retreated into our ghettos and we need to increase our confidence in sharing the Gospel of salvation.

The Talking Jesus research has some fascinating statistics to encourage us to be bold. A church without an enquirers course of some kind, and it doesn't matter which, says it is not in the business of trying to bring others to faith in Jesus Christ. The existence of any such opportunity to talk about what it means to be a Christian is such a positive message to those without faith.

William Temple...'the church is the only organisation which exists for the benefit of non-members.

This witness must be demonstrated, not only in word, but also in deed, in caring for our neighbour and showing compassion. This is what gives a level of credibility to our witness, builds bridges and creates opportunity to show the love of Jesus in really practical ways.

One of the greatest opportunities, a golden one, is when we are approached with a request for a baptism. Too often our expectation of what it means to turn to Christ has been less than it should be and we have let parents and godparents down by not preparing them adequately for the important step of declaring in front of others what they believe. And sadly, we have not been good at providing the right kind of follow up afterwards. Sandra Millar's training day yesterday for 80 clergy was full of excellent ideas and inspiration.

And because we are currently closing or merging churches in a kind of spiral of decline, we intend over the next 11 years to renew or plant 50 strategic congregations. This is an intentional effort to reverse current trends.

Crossroads 2016, a four day mission with the Archbishop of York and bishops from the Northern Province, will take place in the diocese from 8-11 September and will I hope be used by God to bring many without faith to a decision to become followers of Jesus Christ.

Growing leaders

This theme covers a swathe of ideas but essentially is about succession planning, finding ways of providing leaders for the future. We aim to do so by:

- a) Encouraging the current leadership for today's tough and demanding missional context
Identifying leaders for each Christian community, ie not spreading leaders so thinly that they cannot lead
- b) Bolstering the role of lay leadership
- c) Reviewing our shop window, our services of public worship, so that the newcomer, the visitor, is made to feel welcome and wants to return
- d) Prioritising work among young people and schools.....this is one of our greatest opportunities, yet greatest weakness...there is insufficient connect between our church schools and the local church.

In summary

This sounds to me like an Anglican agenda....to make Jesus Christ more widely known and do what it takes to persuade others to become His followers with us.

My prayer is that enthusiasm for Vision 2026 spreads, becomes infectious, and helps us do that major refit at sea, so that in 2026 there is much to celebrate and give thanks to God for.