

*This paper was largely the paper produced for the Synod in March 2020, but which hadn't been circulated or discussed because of the pandemic.*

**SUMMARY:** The structural changes agreed by Synod in 2015 have been largely achieved. The key question is therefore what shift of emphasis will help to pursue Synod's Re-visioning goal next. In early 2020 a representative group convened by the then Moderator, Revd Dr Andrew Prasad, reviewed the achievements of the process so far, and identified those changes that would further empower LAGs and resource the Synod Committees to better serve local churches over the next few years. Synod is asked to consider and endorse this overall approach as the basis for more detailed work.

## **Background**

1 In 2015 Synod agreed the principles of a Re-visioning plan. Its purpose was to encourage and develop ***'Vibrant and relevant local churches purposely engaged in God's Kingdom'***. This was to be achieved in a Phase 1 implementation plan through five structural changes:

- 1.1 Streamlining Synod structures (releasing 180 Synod Committee members back to local churches)
- 1.2 The churches forming Local Area Groups to co-operate and share resources
- 1.3 Improved co-ordination and joined-up thinking across Synod Committees/Local Area Groups
- 1.4 Focus on growth through mission and discipleship
- 1.5 Reviewing the Synod office and staffing structure in order to respond to new ways of working.

2 Whilst there are still some areas of work-in-progress these five structural changes are largely complete. At the request of the Executive the Moderator, Revd Dr Andrew Prasad called together a working group of 22 people for 15 hours of reflection to consider what the implementation priorities should be in Phase 2. The objective remained the same - to improve Synod's support to local churches in achieving the overall Re-visioning purpose. The group comprised representatives of the Executive and Synod Committees, LAG Convenors and Ministers, our work with Children and Young People, and Programme and Synod Office staff.

3 This paper summarises the discussions and recommendations of that working group as the basis for Synod consideration.

## **Achievements and Concerns**

4 The group acknowledged some considerable successes in many areas over the previous 5 years, and identified the most important ones that Synod should celebrate:

- Closer working between congregations within many LAGs
- Increased mutual support between churches, especially among lay people
- A willingness to engage with training
- A greater willingness generally to do some things differently
- An increase in mission/ discipleship projects
- A significant increase in collaboration across Synod Committees
- Better and more skilled Synod staffing

5 However, the group also identified a number of areas where progress was slow and where it suggested that more attention needed to be focused. The most important areas of need included:

- Strengthening the culture of change through sharing the vision widely
- Encouraging more open conversations about growth and decline
- Clarifying the responsibilities of LAGs and Synod Committees
- Empowering gifted lay people to help churches do more for themselves
- Reducing the time and energy spent on buildings matters
- Encouraging the take-up of discipleship resources within churches
- Raising awareness of safeguarding through communication and training
- Raising youth participation higher up the agenda

### **Phase 2: The focus for the next 2 to 4 years**

6 Given that the structural changes are virtually complete, the group saw the emphasis for the next 2 - 4 years of Re-visioning as being bold in empowerment:

- promoting and encouraging the spiritual development of individual church members
- building up the role of LAGs and local churches to move forward together
- resourcing and adjusting Synod's role in support of this as part of the whole church

7 It proposed a 12-point action plan to address this change of emphasis, based on the top priorities it identified for each of the main actors:

#### **7.1 LAGs**

- Resourcing LAGs to have a dedicated paid leader/ staff member to strengthen community
- Supporting them to develop a local vision to establish and tackle mission priorities

#### **7.2 Synod Committees/ LAGs**

- Developing improved communications and a more open forum to discuss key issues (possibly exploiting electronic media)
- Increasing collaboration to the fullest extent within existing terms of reference

### 7.3 Pastoral Committee

- Holding churches accountable for regular Church Life Review reflection – not just in a vacancy
- Monitoring and encouraging LAGs to work differently through open conversations about choices

### 7.4 Discipleship Committee

- Providing more resources to help Ministers, local church leaders and worship leaders to empower, envision and transform local churches
- Working to deepen the faith of individuals and encourage inspirational worship, and communicating positive stories of change

### 7.5 Resources Committee

- Exploring proactive funding options to support proposals for growth/ change in LAGs, underpinned by a 5 year financial planning framework
- Developing a clear strategic framework for considering buildings options based on potential

### 7.6 Synod staff

- Recruiting more trainers and mission/ discipleship enablers to work with local churches
- Providing more theological reflection to churches on the big issues of our time to broaden our shared understanding and response.

## **Measures of success**

8 It was the group's expectation that these actions taken together would help to transform Synod by strengthening "*vibrant and relevant local churches*". If successful:

- More LAGs will be active, engaged and working well – with all churches represented on the LAG and a shared commitment to the long term health of the group
- There will be an increase in Mission activity based on having more workers in the field, often replicating successes elsewhere, and showing growth in numbers of members, depth of faith and more engagement in social justice/ community projects
- There will be closer working relationships between LAGs, Synod Committees and staff, and a visible shift in attitudes and behaviours towards greater openness and a sense of equality
- Effort and resources will be directed to where they are most effective, rather than trying to do too many things and stretching resources.

## **Responsibility for implementation**

9 If Synod endorses this plan's overall approach, then implementation of those aspects that re-prioritise activities can be commenced almost immediately. However recruitment of additional resources would await more detailed costing and Synod's approval of any budgetary implications.

10 The working group proposed that the Executive Committee should be the overall "guardian" of this vision on behalf of Synod and should monitor progress with implementation initially at each of its meetings (roughly quarterly).

11 Once momentum is established then it may be able to reduce this monitoring to every 6 months, although the Moderator should be able to raise issues to be included on the agenda of any meeting as necessary.

12 Below the Executive, it was proposed that implementation should be delegated to Convenors of LAGs, who will continue to report on progress to the Pastoral Committee as now, and to Convenors of Synod Committees for actions within their areas of responsibility, including actions relating to Synod staff. Synod Committees should report in writing to each meeting of the Executive on major progress or problems, and periodically meet face to face with the Executive as invited for a fuller review.

## **Conclusion**

13 The group was conscious that it was planning for the health and growth of God's church, and that its ideas and timings are dependent on God's will. Whilst the action plan has been carefully developed, success in implementation equally depends on Synod as a whole prayerfully and openly:

- reflecting on the changes that face the whole Synod, and the new opportunities that God is calling us to grasp for the sake of the kingdom; we should trust God to address our fears
- accepting the challenges of learning what it means to be church in our present day and context, and allowing ourselves to be reborn; as resurrection people we live in hope
- being willing to give things up that seem dated or less effective in today's world, to pray boldly and use our imaginations to see how to build the kingdom of God in each place.

14 If we draw our nourishment from Christ, as the source of living water, then He will help us to flourish.

## **Appendix 1**

### **Synod Executive discussion on vision and strategy 10<sup>th</sup> September 2022**

#### ***1. Identify the strengths of the Synod***

- Wealthy Synod
- Wealth of talent
- Minister, Lay Preachers, Elders....
- Looking after our ministers
- Process of revisioning
- Buildings strategically placed
- c. 118 congregations
- Some structures work quite well e.g. annual finance meeting (needs extending)
- LAGS where they work
- Governance structures (need to be refined)
- Safeguarding
- Staff
- Welfare of staff

## **2. *What makes Thames North Synod unique?***

- Position in London and surroundings
- Wealthy
- Diversity
- One of the smallest Synods geographically
- Split between Trust and Synod

## **3. *What are the core values of the Synod?***

- Led by the Word and Holy Spirit
- Every Church, Minister and Member matters
- Encouraging diversity and equality
- Priesthood of all believers
- Ecumenism
- Mission and discipleship
- Service
- Giving voice to young people

## **4. *What are our hopes and dreams for the Synod?***

- Togetherness
- Radical transformation in perspective and vision
- Re-visioning part 2
- New era of Ecumenism
- Inspirational Synod meetings
- ministry provision for all churches (Addressing shortage of ordained ministry and communicating it)
- Ministry – the responsibilities is ours
- Support church members and leaders to be released for mission
- Other models of being church (e.g. Church without Walls, amalgamation, buildings shared with community)
- Sharing stories e.g. getting LAGs together
- Importance of Communications

Questions for consideration:

- 1. Is the overall thrust of this strategy still correct? Identify any areas which might need re-thinking.**
- 2. Do you agree with the core values highlighted by the Executive?**
- 3. Do you agree with the hopes and dreams for the Synod? Identify which ones are the most important.**
- 4. Are the number and size of LAGs correct? (Currently there are 14 LAGS ranging from 2 churches to 15 churches)**