



A sermon for the Cathedral Eucharist at Wells Cathedral, preached on Sunday 11 January by the Reverend Richard Priestley, Christian Communities Development Adviser and Developing Ministries Adviser in the Diocese of Bath and Wells.

Making a choice to grow the church

How many people have attended a professional football match this season?

I like football and I think it's a good thing for many people and communities. I went in September to see Bradford City!!! In February, I will go to Luton to see them again ...

It is the first time for many years that I have attended a match.

The average attendance on a regular weekend for the top 4 leagues is 818,000. The C of E weekly attendance is 702,000 (<600,000 on Sundays).

Bradford are in Division 1 which is actually the third division where average attendance is 10,000 at a match. Last year in the bottom league, average attendance was 6,000. Bradford home matches average around 20,000! Bradford asked the question: 'How do we build our following? Then made changes including new investment in family provision and accessibility. They also lowered prices, cutting revenue. They made calculated sacrifices in order to build their following and increase regular attendance.

I am often asked how parishes can increase the attendance. At Christmas many parishes saw many people who haven't been since last year. They mostly say they are Christians but don't attend a church regularly. I posed the question in Connect, a Diocesan digital communication, how can we enable these people to engage with faith and worship on a more regular basis? I have sometimes said to church members that those who want to worship in the way you do each week in your parish probably already do! Now I know things are a little different in a Cathedral.

If we want to enable more people to encounter Jesus in their lives and grow the church, that is the body of Christ, we need to be willing to embrace diversity in the ways we enable people to engage.

Paul, writing to the Philippian church said " in humility value others above yourselves, not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others." (Philippians 2: 3-4)

We need the humility to say the way we like it is not the only way and may not be the best for everyone.

We have to be careful not to make assumptions too. I remember as a young youth leader 35 years ago, I was running a youth weekend with what I thought was the way to lead worship that connects to young teenagers and one lad said he could not stay for Sunday morning as he was in the Cathedral choir. I told him he didn't have to sing, he could have a week off and really enjoy worshipping with the other young people. He told me how he really enjoyed worshipping at the cathedral and singing in the choir. That taught me an important lesson early on in my ministry. Don't assume you know how people will encounter God because of generalisations or our own preferences. We have to get to know people and what they like and need in life.

The Church of England has a vision to be a church where every person in England has access to an enriching and compelling community of faith by adding new churches and new forms of church to our parishes, cathedrals, schools and chaplaincies.

In Matthew 28 (The Great Commission), Jesus says “*Go, make disciples of all nations.*” Peter in Acts 10 was challenged in a vision to escape from the restrictions of the Jewish tradition to reach out to and connect with Gentiles, Does anyone remember a children's chorus J-O-Y?
Jesus first, yourself last and others in between!

If we put others before ourselves, and we think about Jesus' words 'Go, make disciples'; if we learn from Peter's vision to not be bound by the traditions we grew up in and somehow find the humility of Jesus to sacrifice our own desires, then rather than just being welcoming and inviting people to join in with how we encounter and worship God we will look for ways to go, to be with people and walk alongside them, understand the way they interact with the world, find out what their loves are, their concerns. Maybe they are open to faith, maybe they came at Christmas but their preferred way to spend Sunday is not in the Cathedral.

Jesus taught people in many places outside of the temple and synagogues and often used the surrounding environment to engage people with their faith, discipleship and understanding of God and their relationship with him. He met people and served them in their own context. Maybe we can do something different, help people to encounter God in a different way.

Now don't misunderstand me and think I am saying stop doing what you do! I think the Dean may have something to say about that! But in the Church of England vision it talks of a Mixed Ecology of church. In our own Diocesan vision

and strategy it talks about creating new worshipping communities. It's not that the existing ones are wrong or outdated and need replacing. No, it's because some of us listen to Radio 3 and others to Radio 1, some of us like reading, some of us like watching football... some people encounter the divine in church as we know it and some while walking in the countryside.

What we need if we are to truly be a Church of England for everyone in England, is to have a diversity of worshipping communities involving, listening to, and serving a diversity of people, coexisting with mutual benefit and affirmation. It's not about replacing one with another, it's about creating a church that is truly for all people, where different groups of people appreciate each other and support each other while not necessarily joining in with the same things.

The Cathedral has been engaging with different people, different ages in different ways with different events. I wonder what it would look like if rather than events, we saw new communities popping up, regularly 'being ' church together, worshipping in ways that suit them. Some of that worship may happen outside in the grounds and not involve singing! Another might be in the North Transept on a Saturday with young people playing jazz music and creating art as their worship and prayer.

I could go on. I don't know what would make up the diversity as I don't live in Wells or know the people around here. But you do, or at least some of you. And in the Diocese we have a growing number of examples of doing church differently.

Today, we remember Jesus' baptism and what followed transformed the world. At the beginning of this new year and in this Year of Prayer in the Diocese, I encourage you to pray about how God may want to grow a vibrant ecology with a diversity of worshipping communities in this part of God's family.

And finally, I want to reiterate, I am not saying you all should be part of a new worshipping community in the Cathedral, but I am asking you to encourage others, pray for those who may feel called to connect with different people and start something new, and support them in one way or another.

If you are sensing a call or have a desire to do something new or help people you know to encounter God in a different way to what already happens here, speak to the Dean. I run Greenhouse as a facilitated listening space for those wanting to explore this and go on a 'Listen first missional journey.' AMEN.

The Reverend Richard Priestley

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