

FEEDBACK ON ACSA VISION AND PRIORITIES – Deacon Gwynne Lawlor, Diocese of the Highveld. Dec 2020.

While Covid-19 has been brutal, it has afforded us all time to re-examine our priorities and to re-imagine all we can be as followers of Christ. For ACSA, perhaps, it is a good time to examine how to retain the virtual church services in a workable way. It also may be important to examine local and international involvement on the many and diverse committees – some of whose work would appear to overlap (e.g. SACC and CuC).

1. ACSA VISION

Anchored in the love of Christ - Committed to God’s mission - Transformed by the Holy Spirit

For me, these three parts of our Vision statement cannot stand alone, as they inter-link and form an integrated whole: Without being *transformed* by the Holy Spirit, no one could be *anchored* in the love of Christ and if they are not anchored in the love of Christ, they could not be transformed by the Holy Spirit, nor would they know how and where God wants them to be *committed* to God’s mission. It is a strong vision ... which if used mindfully would bear much fruit. It has certainly challenged Anglicans, and undergirds various ministries (Green Anglicans etc.).

However, at the moment it seems as if the momentum and guidelines to live out the vision in daily life (the mission) is coming from the top (Province/Diocese), as a directive rather than from grass-roots (parish communities and their parishoners) as a personal and communal response to a Word of the Lord (Jeremiah 1:6-7 and The Great Commission). As such I would think it is unsustainable.

2. VISION translating to MISSION in the field.

2.1. Anchored to in the love of Christ

Perhaps much more needs to be done to explore in our dioceses, archdeaconries and parishes what it means to be “Anchored to in the love of Christ”. (Who, how, why, what does it mean?), as well as how this vision is to be operationalized in every diocese, archdeaconry and parish (how is this vision to be carried out and by whom?), who is actually responding to the promptings of the Holy Spirit.... It is fundamental , I believe, to the growth and formation of every Christian to have that bedrock of the intimate knowledge of the Love of Christ upon which to build (or in which to anchor). I would question to what extent that bedrock is currently strengthened in our parishes to hold all the “anchors” which may be cast in the different waters securely. Some parishes, pre Covid-19, were doing wonderful work through their Junior Church educators, Youth groups, Bible Study groups, Home Cell groups and the preparation for Confirmation, Baptism, Marriage, as well as outreach programmes. Others were battling – very little preparation was done, and “ lip service” was paid to any form of preparation for teaching and instructing .

*At the risk of becoming prescriptive, perhaps **minimum standards for all such ministry needs to be explored, through consultation with parishioners and clergy? If we as Anglicans in leadership don’t take the formation of Christians seriously, why would our parishioners pay anything more than lip service to***

being "Anchored in the Love of Christ". Also: A Parish which relies merely on the Sunday services, baptisms, marriages and funerals is less likely to "grow" individuals for Christ, and is less likely to retain the youth... and with it is less likely to grow the parish... and ultimately the Anglican Communion.

I understand that it is a big ask if clergy are non-stipendiary, to expect more involvement from them. *Perhaps the whole model of non-stipendiary clergy needs to be re-examined on the basis that no person can serve two masters (full time church work and full time secular work) adequately and still raise a family with all the responsibilities involved there. Here a re-look at the non-stipendiary diaconate (those called to servant leadership) may be warranted, with a memorandum of understanding being drawn up with deacons on a commitment of time per week, over and above involvement in Sunday services, to their Diocese or Parish. For example, one English deacon I spoke to is employed for 30 hours a week in her secular work place, and has committed to ten hours a week in the parish, focusing on diaconal work and outreach – the Diocese/Parish pays for further theological development and for her annual retreat. This may also be worth exploring with non-stipendiary priests – a MOU setting out a time commitment, and clarifying responsibilities.*

2. Committed to God's mission . Do our Anglicans know what GOD's mission is in the geographical area in which they worship, work and play? Do they know what the social needs and social justice needs are? How do they see and understand their role in their community? What has God, the Holy Spirit laid on their hearts?

Do they hear and understand how and to what they are called within the body of the church, and what being committed to God's mission actually means ... individually and corporately (both within... and as individual parishes, archdeacons, dioceses)? ... and if they do ... where is evidence of missional service? Being committed to God's mission is about reaching out beyond the walls of the church building ... is this happening? Is the Parish meeting some of the specific social needs of the area in which they are rooted – or are they merely there for the Sunday services i.e. are they merely inward looking or are they also missional? Is there a balance in the parish, archdeaconry, or diocese?

I believe work should be done at parish level, with archdeaconry oversight. If a Diocese or the Province takes on an outreach responsibility it seems that this lets the individual Anglican Christian "off the hook" at Parish level and it rarely meets real social needs in their own community. Instead of handing out directives on how to be e.g. Green Anglicans, how to stand against GBV, or how take a stand on the global "Black Lives Matter" movement, would it not be good to encourage parishes to come up with their own location specific and appropriate ideas. It has always struck me as rather senseless to insist on Jojo tanks in each parish if the church does not have gutters to direct the rainwater into the Jojo tank...and once the water is collected, no idea of how to use it, if they have no space to plant!

3. Transformed by the Holy Spirit. This is for me both a pre-condition for and a result of being anchored in the love of Christ and a growing commitment and involvement in God mission..... therefore a focus on growth in spirituality at every level of our church is fundamental to achieving the Vision of ACSA

I am not sure whether sufficient emphasis is placed in our church communities on spending time in God's presence - to listening to God, to becoming increasingly open to an ever deepening connection with God (Father, Son and/or Holy Spirit), to wait upon Him, and to grow in love, hope and faith. It seems that currently in our parishes the understanding of prayer consists more of talking at God, beseeching Him, petitioning Him, pleading with Him.. and while there is nothing wrong with these prayers, it is often at the expense of spending time in prayer listening to God. *Regular workshops on prayer, regular quiet days and retreats for clergy and laity (children, learners, adults) may be useful - perhaps following the church calendar. Personal spiritual direction is not often offered in our parishes, whereas personal confession before a priest is almost seen as a pre-requisite for the sacraments or sacramental rites in the areas in which I have served. While prayer is threaded through every aspect of ACSA, should there not perhaps be a portfolio for Spirituality in ACSA to guide Anglicans in growing spiritually?*

PROVINCIAL PRIORITIES

Liturgical renewal and transformative worship

Much good work is being done on an ongoing basis here and the Liturgical Committee needs to be commended! However, from my limited experience and some observation, all this good work does not necessarily trickle down to the parishes, outstations and pews the tendency in the parishes (in my limited experience), and with the clergy, is to rely heavily on the existing Anglican Prayer Book (1989), especially if the language of worship in the parish is not English. Even where English is the language used in the parish, transformative worship may happen in some parishes, guilds and gatherings, but it would seem that many are comfortable to retain the liturgy with which they are familiar. Cost comes into the equation if pamphlets have to be printed for alternate liturgy, computers, projectors and screens have to be installed - some parishes simply cannot afford the expenditure.

Discipleship

I am not sure whether there is an overall standard for theological education, formation and leadership development across dioceses. It would be useful if this were in place. This is where it would be important to set the standards at Provincial level. In discerning a vocation, thought could profitably be given to the different vocations (priest/deacon/lay ministry/lay service – training, counselling, teaching, administrative work etc.) with minimum standards and training put in place. ***For the ACSA deacons vocational training in much of the above would be essential if ACSA is to use deacons in outreach ministry in their communities.***

Prophetic ministry (incl. advocacy in education, nurture of the young, women and gender, environment and health).

Here the impetus, for me, needs to come from the parishioners in relation to perceived and felt needs in their community – respecting the diversity of every community – rather than being a one-size fits all top-down instruction. It is here that the clergy (priests and deacons), together with lay-ministers and the laity in general need to be working together on issues which matter to them in their environment.

FOCUS FOR ACSA 2020 -2025? 1.To consolidate and prune. 2. To revisit minimum standards for every church office and church office bearer. 3. To merge certain ACSA committees – there appears (and I may be very wrong here, as I have limited experience) to be too much overlap between committees, taking up precious time of Bishops. 4. To entrust mission and outreach to the parishes....**requesting feedback from them to Diocese on a quarterly basis and supporting them in their efforts without dictating to them. Each Diocese to report back to Province at PSC and Provincial Synod.**