

It is a little known fact that once upon a time the Scottish Episcopal Church owned an island just off St Kilda known as the island of St. Jude, the patron saint of lost causes. And on the island of St Jude the SEC had its home for clergy widows, which was dedicated to St Rita, the patron saint of wifely endurance. Within the home was a wing for those over 90, dedicated to St Agnes martyr, ask me later.

Three old girls aged 92, 95 and 101 sitting having tea one afternoon discussing how they would like to die,

The first aged 92 said I would just like to fly forever with Rupert Murdoch. The second aged 95 said I would like to sail away into the sunset with the Bishop of Argyll and The Isles lookalike George Clooney and the third aged 101 said there's no fool like an old fool – I have one wish to be shot – by a jealous wife.

Vision or Fantasy

The vision of wisdom; that unique blend of a vision of how things might be, a vision that something can happen blended with our experience of - How to make things happen – How things might be – How to make things happen. Blended with the enthusiasm and the energy to make the Vision real:

To make things happen.

Vision or Fantasy.

The vision is of communities who pray and who hear The Holy Spirit, quietly gently confidentially whisper “You must be the charge you want to see”

The fantasy that if we wish hard enough, numbers will increase, Sunday Schools will be oversubscribed, money will be no object and we will all be 50 years younger. And of course the people who will pack our churches will all be like us and change will be unknown.

Mission: Ministry: Money in the Diocese of Argyll and The Isles, vision or fantasy.

Mission: The Vision

People have asked me since I came to the Diocese what is your vision. And my vision remains the same. It is that every member of the Diocese meeting their next door neighbour in the Post Office on Monday morning, the neighbour saying why do you go to that church. The reply is simply:

“Because there I have an experience of the living God”.

One very simple sentence. But to utter that sentence, wisdom will tell you, you need to feel God's presence in the reality of our sacramental life. Holy Communion, Holy means set apart Communion relationship, Jesus promised to be with us in bread and wine. You are invited to feel the reality of God and when you don't, as all of us know – we must remember the wisdom of Teresa of Avila. When you least feel God's presence receive the sacrament! – more. Because you open yourself to God's grace.

If you feel you want to be with, know God then you seek to understand who, what, how, the Holy Spirit speaks through scripture, prayer And because you want to know who God, Jesus, the Holy Spirit is – then the energy and the enthusiasm get you out of bed, put up with the cold and make the questions and the doubts exciting. Because the questions and the doubts feed faith, because whatever faith is it is not certainty.

There is a vision that is exciting, informed, energetic:

“I have an experience of the living God.”The fantasy is that it will just happen if we have the right Bishop, priest, leader, more money, -fantasy. It is people in congregations, who communicate the sense of Vision.

And Building the Vision over the last five years has offered congregations a means of looking at who they are, being absorbed in scripture and tradition and now we have come together with plans for the next year through which we will make the vision real.

And it works.

St Paul’s Rothesay and Holy Trinity, Dunoon have proved – you must be the charge you want to see – and make the vision real.

They have moved in five years from stipend support to financial viability. They are able to pay the full stipend. Of course Dean Andrew has provided leadership but it is the congregations who have made the Vision real and who give to make it real.

And remember Holy Trinity, Dunoon is stuck on a hill, outside the town. The day I instituted Dean Andrew as Rector, there were huge problems trying to park in the car park.

Beware of increased numbers which bring Change, and children expect to be noisy, and to be taken seriously.

As we looked at the car park Dean Andrew said to me – when I was interviewed they said all they wanted was to see the car park full.

In every one of the vacancies I have handled since I came to the Diocese I have worked with Vestries and congregations to help realise the vision of building the Kingdom of God in that unique and particular place. The Cathedral, Lochgilphead, Stornoway all are very very different and so in the past year I decided I would work very closely with the West Highland Region.

At this point I would apologise to many of you, I haven’t always managed to visit as often as I would have liked because working with a congregation means extensive Sunday commitment.

Three things have emerged in the past ten months:

1. There is basically one congregation with six buildings.
2. The geographical area and the distances involved are vast.
3. There is enormous potential for Mission realising the Vision, for building the kingdom of God in West Highland Region.

Sunday by Sunday, working with the congregation of the West Highland Region And here

pay tribute to the team Jeremy Rivers and Geoff Headden, Lay Readers who have helped maintain worship. My ordained colleagues who have all celebrated the Eucharist more than once, giving the congregations a vision of the wider Diocese. This is the Diocesan team and do not underestimate its importance.

Working with the West Highland Region, what has emerged is there is enormous potential within the area. School rolls are expanding, there is significant building going on. The existing congregation is incredibly faithful and very much a centre of prayer.

What we did was to invite, basically, experts in Church growth to look at the whole area. They too recognise the potential and so a scheme has emerged with the Church Army to enter into partnership with the Diocese to form in the West Highland Region a Centre for Mission. A Pioneer Ministry:

What this means is the Diocese will appoint a priest in charge while in parallel the Church Army will appoint and pay for, an "evangelist" someone skilled in working with communities to identify their needs and their resources. To a certain extent to use the process we have been involved in – Building the Vision – to take that process a step further.

One of the aspects of this project, which makes it so exciting is that the congregations offer a praying heart which will energise the work of evangelism, of offering people an experience of the living God.

That is the Vision, which can be made real through schools work, youth projects, through worship which is aimed at those who may not ever have been in a church. Carol services for people who do not know "Her virgin eyes saw God incarnate born" or "Christians awake salute the happy morn".

This project is taking a long time to come to fruition and there will be even more frustration when it does because at the heart of such a project is the fact, the fact that those coming in to form a Centre for Mission will take months to pray and to listen; to the communities they seek to serve.

As I have said to every congregation in every vacancy – it takes time to make the right appointment because we are not seeking a chaplain to ensure we are all buried, we are seeking to make an appointment that will lay the foundations for the Vision and witness of this congregation for the next 25 years.

Two other centres of our mission and Ministry are of course our Diocesan retreat Houses on Cumbrae and Iona.

On Cumbrae, Andrew and Amanda Wright arrived in September with the energy and enthusiasm for a Vision of a centre for spiritual renewal and growth. They have put in an enormous amount of work since their arrival to make marketing and booking, wider, more efficient while all is upheld in prayer. Andrew and Amanda – we wish you a very happy season.

Toben and Sarah on Iona are leaving Bishop's House this June although not leaving the island. They have given an enormous amount of themselves in the ministry of the House over the last three years. The building extension really was baptism and entry by ordeal. To Toben and to Sarah may you be richly blessed in your future work and ministry.

The mission of our Retreat Houses is a focus of the mission of each congregation and of our Diocese, the Vision we seek to make real through ministry.

Ministry:

The fantasy is that if we had limitless money and one full time person in every charge then everything would be as described in the S.E.C. handbook of 1916.

The Vision is of congregations working together lay and ordained, rooted in the communities in which they find themselves and able to offer and articulate “an experience of the living God”.

Our Lay Leaders in the Diocese do an outstanding job in making that Vision real. The training days twice a year are both challenging and informative. The last day in November on Godly Play, showed again the potential in our congregations to work in ways, of which I have no real conception or experience but ways which are incredibly exciting. And perhaps at this point again we ought to explode the fantasy that children are our future and those at the other end of the spectrum need no change.

Children have spiritual needs now, whatever age they are it is our responsibility to seek to meet those needs, The old, are not all seeking to make it all as it was in 1916. As more than one old woman or man has told me, much of my past is best forgotten, my prayer life needs attention now, why do I find it so difficult to pray?

Why do I find it difficult to pray. If you are asking that question perhaps you should go to Arran in July where Father Simon and one of our Ordinands from the Scottish Episcopal Institute are running a ‘pop up’ school for prayer. Father Simon , ‘pops’ up with Eucharists regularly. One of the aspects of this project is that Jonathan Livingstone, the young student from Edinburgh due to be ordained next year. This is real ‘fieldwork experience’ for Jonathan on an island in a rural diocese.

Taking that concept of training for ordained ministry we remember that Elaine Garman and Rosemary Bungard were ordained deacon last June and will be priested on islands this June.

The ordination to the diaconate at the Cathedral was a great Diocesan event and Provost Nicki made it run so smoothly through meticulous organisation and rehearsal. And despite the Bishop.

Rosemary and Elaine will speak for themselves. But I should say that the whole Province is interested and has noted the innovative mode of their training. Placements in other Diocese, clergy supervision from other Diocese – these are real innovations.

For those stipendiary clergy who are members of the Pension Fund our regular meetings on Cumbrae for three days of prayer, study, reflection and recreation. These meetings are becoming increasingly important to us all and prove the concept of team, thanks to Canon Anne Dyer of Edinburgh whose facilitation is outstanding. Father Alexander and myself could do without the games – I don’t know whether we are colour blind or dyslexic or simply operating from the other side of our brains. But we always end up together with Father Alexander trying to explain to me what to do with my counters.

Mission, Ministry and so to –

Money.

The fantasy – that if we had endless money everything would be perfect.

The Vision of Wisdom – You must be the change you want to see.

It is a statistical fact that congregations who give just enough to keep it all going , such congregations will decline.

Those congregations which have a Vision that they can be, must be, will be the charge they want to see, they are congregations where there is significant growth and the money comes.

We have no money, we have no children and we are all old – not elderly but old.

As I have said in every report – make that statement and it becomes a self fulfilling prophecy.

Meet as a congregation who pray that they may share their experience of the living God and the vision becomes the reality.

That is from my own experience, pray and celebrate and the money will come.

Worry about money you haven't got, children simply because they are young, and your age, and you will decline.

In all the congregations I've been in and led, that has been my experience.