Church members from all over Wales met together for two days in November to share their “2020 Vision” – their ideas, hopes and plans for the Church in Wales as we look ahead to the centenary of its disestablishment in 2020.

The Time Is Now conference was held in Venue Cymru, Llandudno, on 21st – 22nd November and was attended by 230 people.
Coming Together to Share, Learn and to be Inspired

The 2020 Vision inspired by the 2012 Church in Wales Review report re-imagines the Church for a new century as truly the prayerful heart of each community. As its emphasis is on responding to local community needs, it has been taken forward in different ways by each of our six dioceses. Such diversity and experimentation during this period of change has been encouraged by the Governing Body. The Time is Now conference was held to provide a forum for dioceses to share and reflect on their experiences to date and their plans for the future. It also brought together a significant number of people to inspire each other for the tasks ahead through prayer, discussion and Christian fellowship.

The Conference Experience

Each diocese brought at least 30 delegates, with others joining from partner churches and organisations. The 24 hour programme placed three main acts of worship at the centre of the conference experience, with the presentations and discussions that followed taking inspiration from three key worship themes:

- Where are we? A time of hope and change;
- Who are we? Are there enough of us? Shaping ourselves to serve the people of Wales;
- Why are we? What is the Church for?

Presentations were led jointly by two or more dioceses, and members were given the opportunity to discuss matters through groups made up of delegates from each diocese to enable a true sharing of different ideas and experiences. Feedback from delegates suggests that these informal discussions were at least as informative and useful as the more formal presentations.

Key Contributors

A wide range of people contributed to the Conference in one way or another, from the diocesan-led presentations to the provision of music at worship to participation in the group discussions. However, the following played a key role throughout the Conference:

- The Archbishop welcomed delegates, provided an introduction to the Conference and presided at the closing Eucharist;
- The former Presiding Officer of the National Assembly for Wales, Lord Elis-Thomas, acted as Facilitator. An active member of the Church in Wales, he spoke in support of the aims of the conference wholeheartedly, saying, “This is our chance to serve the people of Wales even better than we have been doing so for nearly the past 100 years.”
- Canon Dr Christina Baxter provided a series of theological reflections linked to the main business sessions;
- Dr Mark Clavier preached at the opening and closing acts of worship.

As former Presiding Officer of the National Assembly of Wales, Lord Dafydd Elis-Thomas was well equipped to keep time and order as the conference facilitator. Now still the Assembly Member for Dwyfor Meirionnydd, Lord Elis-Thomas is an active member of the Church, having previously served on its Governing Body.

The Conference was planned by a small team chaired by Nigel King, a lay member from the diocese of Swansea and Brecon. Worship was designed and led by the Reverend Jan Gould, the Reverend Dr Trystan Hughes and the Reverend Mary Stallard.

Archbishop’s Welcome and Introduction

The Church in Wales needs to re-imagine itself in order to serve its communities more effectively, the Archbishop of Wales said as he opened the conference. Dr Barry Morgan said changes were already underway following a full-scale review aimed to help churches grow and minister more effectively.

The Archbishop said, “This conference is about the need for us, as a church, to relate more effectively to the people and communities of Wales as we approach the centenary of our disestablishment. How can we, as laity and clergy together, be more effective in our mission and outreach? The Church in Wales Review, chaired by Lord Harries, was undertaken in the light of that question. Since then, the Church has been exploring the challenges set out in it and its recommendations, and is aiming to set an agenda for growth through its 2020 Vision.

“Much of this work has been carried out by dioceses and at a local level, with an emphasis on reimagining the Church in such a way that it is truly equipped to serve the communities and people of Wales. We have been required to revisit long-held understandings of how we provide ministry, by and to whom, and how we relate to our communities.

“It is not about doing more with less but more about a cultural change in the kind of church we are – realising that the mission and ministry of Jesus has been entrusted to the church as a whole, not just to bishops and clergy. How then do we together seek to worship God and serve His world?

“We are still only at the beginning of our journey, and so this is an ideal opportunity to come together as a Church and share – openly and honestly – our experiences and plans so that we can learn from one another.”
Worship

Worship played a key role in the life of the Conference, in supporting and informing its business, and inspiring delegates. There were three main acts of worship:

- An opening service of evening prayer entitled *Where are we?* during which the *You cubes* (see below) were received;
- A contemplative service of morning worship using music, poetry and images entitled *Who are we?*
- A celebration of the Holy Eucharist to close the Conference entitled *Why are we?* which provided a joyful send-off for delegates.

Music was provided throughout by a small band of musicians led by Andy Hughes.

**YOU CUBES**

Delegates were asked to think outside the box and tell their stories of faith on You Cube ahead of the conference. 1,000 large cubes were sent to congregations and church schools across Wales and people were asked to use them to tell their stories of faith by decorating each side with words, pictures, photographs or collages. Once they were completed about 30 from each diocese were taken to Llandudno where they were used symbolically to build a wall, a refuge and finally an altar as part of the worship sessions. At the end of the conference, the You Cubes were handed out to different delegates for them to take back to their churches.

"Be rooted in God's kingdom and soaked through with prayer" - Dr Mark Clavier

The Revd Dr Mark Clavier, acting Principal of St Michael's College, Llandaff was the Conference Preacher for the opening and closing services of the Conference. He took the theme of *Where Am I?* for the first service and *Why Are We?* for the concluding one.

"Where the heck am I?" was a question he was well familiar with, he said, as a keen hill walker who sometimes lost his bearings. It was a question, he said, we could only answer if we appraised our situation honestly and took action to get back on course by "figuring out where you as an individual, as a parish, as a future ministry area, as a diocese, and as a province are right now, at this moment... taking real stock of where we are now, why we have ended up here, how we've fallen short of God's vision, and what we must do to get back on track."

That, he suggested, could only be done by making God's kingdom our vision and being "soaked through with prayer":

"We need to be so rooted in God’s Kingdom, so entwined among God’s people, so formed by the stories, symbols, practices, traditions of God's Kingdom, with minds so shaped by Scripture and soaked through with prayer that we start to glow with the fire of God’s grace in such a way that people will be drawn to us not by the cleverness of our initiatives, the innovation of our gimmicks, the dashing good looks of our bishops, the happen'-style of our vicars, but by the fervour of our love and the abundance of the life God has visibly given us.

"Without our being seized by that vision of the Gospel, without our finally taking truly to heart what it means to be part of the Kingdom of God, no amount of structural change or bright new ideas will effect the change we so desperately want, that Wales do desperately needs."

Rounding up the conference in his second sermon, Dr Clavier offered an “outsider’s” answer to the question, Why are we as a church?

"Our behaviour suggests that we believe we exist to continue, as best we can, the quasi-established heritage of the Church, primarily by relying on a dwindling number of devoted people with a fading grasp of the Faith to continue the public ministry of the Church... Our motto should be 'We are lights to the world'; too often it’s actually, 'Why seek ye the living among the dead?' Rephrasing the question to Why were we created? he said that God created and redeemed us to reflect His love. “Sharing God’s abundant life with others is the light that should beckon others into God’s Kingdom and fill us with purpose.”

He suggested we might exhibit that redeemed love in our churches back home in a number of ways. Firstly, we had to learn how to love ourselves for our own sake. Then how to love God for His own sake and finally how to love ourselves for God’s sake.

“May I suggest that our task as the laity, clergy and bishops of the Church in Wales is to get our churches over themselves and their own narrow definition of Christianity? We must expand our vision of the Gospel and our love for God and for our neighbours beyond our narrow vision. We need to express in our lives, loves, conversations and teaching the freedom, generosity and delight to which God calls us all. We must encourage each other to become lively servants of God—actively seeking to be the first blossoms of the new creation to the people we encounter. It is by such activities that our communities may learn to love God for his own sake, to delight in him for his own sake, and thereby become astonishing places of abundant life."

Soul Space

Dedicated space was provided for prayer and contemplation away from the main meeting hall. The *Soul Space* used a range of sensory stimuli to help delegates to reflect on the issues under consideration at the Conference.
The Conference was guided in its discussions by the internationally acclaimed theologian, Canon Dr Christina Baxter CBE. Now retired, Dr Baxter is a former Principal of St John's Theological College, Nottingham, and a former Chair of the Church of England's General Synod's House of Laity. She has been a Reader since 1971 and is a lay canon of Southwell. As the Conference Theologian, Dr Baxter introduced and reflected on the themes of each session.

The first session, she said, had inspired her. “I hear and see something remarkable going on as you grapple with these opportunities. This seems to me a church called by God”, adding “Where we are going is into fellowship with God.” She urged everyone, particularly lay people, to play their part and to be given opportunities to use their gifts. “Every person has a part to play,” she said, “They are not the same but they are essential. Change will be different in different places.” God, she said, would provide for us, “As He comes He gives us gifts… not always what we want or dream of. God will gift us and will gift us with what we need.”

Dr Baxter warned that taking more responsibility would mean stepping out of our comfort zone. It could be painful and anxiety-inducing but was essential. “We all have a circle of confidence and God invites us to step out of that and trust in Him. As we do the circle expands,” she said.

Reflecting on the second session, Dr Baxter said the Church needed courage to face up to some hard truths about who we were and what the Church was for. We had to be prepared for big changes, she said, such as being less reliant on clergy to run everything. “The truth is that God wants the church to grow and that happens mostly in parts of the world where there are fewest clergy,” she pointed out. “What worked once may not work today - it may take lay people like myself a long time to come to terms with that. But we must feel free to fail.”

She said we must make opportunities for lay people to be taught how to take on new roles and set them free to do them. Priests needed to learn how to let go and supervise. “As a church we find it hard to let go of things.” she said. “We need to do that before taking on more.” Most importantly, however, she said, we need faith and prayer – “We need to be leaning on God and praying - enormous things occur when all we do is undergirded with prayer… A lot of time in parishes we don't invest the time in God which would enable us to change.”

In the final session Dr Baxter looked at the role of the church in the community and outlined the scale of the task facing ministry. She urged churches to be make people feel welcome and to feel that they belonged. That, she said, would require us to be as flexible as possible. “How do we invite people to the faith?” she asked, “For many people belonging comes before believing. For many the Christian faith is a closed book.

“One of the things that we need to bear in mind as we move towards 2020 Vision is how much people understand of the Christian faith. As the Church goes into all kinds of new ministries - we need to make it possible for people to find out more about Jesus Christ. “If you give people space they may do things that aren't part of the plan but we just need to say thank God that they are doing it!

“Be flexible - as flexible as you can be as you move forward with 2020 Vision.”
Session 1: Where are we? A time of hope and change

The opening session after worship on the Friday evening was led by representatives of all six dioceses, and considered the questions Why are we changing? and What does hopeful change look like? The conclusion to the latter question was:

- It has momentum;
- It releases the gifts of all of God’s people;
- ‘No more tinkering’.

Canon Richard Lowndes from Llandaff told delegates that we should not all be working harder but working more effectively. “Implementation is the hardest and most important bit. Jesus does not call us as disciples to never change, to stand still, he calls us to go out and proclaim the gospel,” said Canon Lowndes.

Mrs Lesley Cox, Llandaff Children’s adviser and regional co-ordinator for Messy Church told the conference of the work being done with Messy Church. “Lay people are doing a great job with Messy Church. We have a huge resource in the church with people: let’s dare to use them,” she urged.

There was also an inspiring presentation from Laura Williams and Oliver Wright, members of the St Asaph Youth Forum. Formed under the guidance of under 25s officer Tim Feak, the Youth Forum met for the first time over a weekend of outdoor activities and prayerful reflection in Pensarn.

Laura and Oliver explained that the Youth Forum has come up with a strap-line from the book of Joshua in the bible. “Whatever you have commanded us we will do, and wherever you send us we will go.” (Joshua 1:16)

The Reverend Kevin Hasler (diocese of Monmouth) outlined four priorities the diocese had identified for successful leadership of a Ministry Area. He said it was providing a framework and approach for the formation, education and development of Ministry Area leaders to allow the change of understanding, thinking and behaviour to become rooted and established.

The four areas were: personal spiritual health; enabling others to grow in discipleship, holiness and spiritual anticipation; building, guiding and safeguarding missionary communities; and leading the church in relationship with the wider society.

“We are working to prepare, equip and support our leaders as they transition to these different ways of being a priest and serving the Kingdom of God,” he said.

Case Study: Clean Comedy Clubs

For the late-evening session Tim Feak explained about the work he has been doing setting up comedy clubs in the diocese. He explained that although they have raised some eyebrows, they are helping to build communities and meeting the needs of those communities. He even shared anecdotal evidence about people who have come to church on the back of a comedy evening.

After explaining how he sources comedians and encouraging other dioceses to get involved, Tim introduced the comedy character Barbara Nice who finished the evening off with a short comedy set.

Session 2: Who are we? Are there enough of us?

This session was led by the dioceses of St Davids and Monmouth, and concentrated upon the challenges of developing and equipping ministries (lay and ordained) for the challenges the Church faces in the near future.

The Reverend Canon Paul Mackness (St Davids) described the diocese’s Growing Hope strategy and how it aimed to release the potential of all people in its churches. It was, he said, about “re-imagining ministry to revitalise churches and rejuvenate people”.

He outlined the approaches being taken. They were:

- Discipleship – encouraging a growing awareness that all Christians are called to discipleship and ministry not just those who are ordained. Canon Mackness said nearly 100 people were using the Exploring Faith programme to train in discipleship;
- Lay Ministry – The diocese wished to take lay ministry as something that was serious, relevant and well resourced. It was about unlocking the potential of all God’s people and using their gifts and talents for his Church. But Canon Mackness warned that this would require training, funding and a recognition by the whole church of the value of lay ministry through remuneration, housing provision and a universal training pathway;
- New Forms of Ministry – Canon Mackness said 11 people had been ordained as Self-supporting Ministry (Local) to operate in their own communities as clerics. It was hoped they would be priested this year (2015). The diocese was also looking at pioneer ministry.
- Focal Ministry – The diocese aimed to have a focal minister, either lay or ordained, in each church to lead congregations spiritually and pastorally. They would be overseen by an ordained Local Ministry Team Leader.
- Equipping Local Ministry Areas – The diocese had held a successful course on Leading your Church into Growth, which was now being rolled out across the Diocese. A successful conference Growing Hope was held to enable discussion and the sharing of ideas and resources and a second conference was planned in 2015. Growing Teams courses were being prepared for all new Ministry Teams as Local Ministry Areas are formed.

Archdeacon Ambrose Mason (Monmouth) talked about the changing style of leadership and what this meant for those called to be Ministry Area leaders. He emphasised that the diocese was putting resources in place to enable everyone to play their part in the new structures. It was looking at developing adult discipleship and ministry, children and youth ministry, administrative and financial life and provincial support (for matters such as safeguarding).
Session 3: Who are we? Shaping ourselves to serve the people of Wales

This session was led by the dioceses of St Asaph and Bangor, and considered recent experiences of adapting ministry to better meet the needs of our communities.

The diocese of St Asaph shared details the move to create Mission Areas in Flintshire and work that is going on in Caia Park in Wrexham.

The Reverend Martin Batchelor and evangelist Rocky Bateman talked about the Deaneries of Hawarden, Holywell and Mold meeting together and deciding to form four Mission Areas. They explained this process and talked about some of the work going on there, including Truefood Cafe in Sandycroft.

The Reverend Canon (now Venerable) John Lomas explained the way work is developing under the banner of 2020 Vision in Wrexham – particular at St Mark’s Church in Caia Park. John explained that the Church has started to get alongside the community and they did this by thinking about the language people use in Caia Park. Now referring to themselves as “St Mark in the Park”, they are starting to work with local voluntary groups in the area. John (pictured below) said the language of the Church has been alien to the culture – especially from the Anglican prayer book. Instead the Church, led by the Reverend Eric Owen, has started to use positive language that people can relate to.

John concluded: “We need to be a Church that lives on, so that people are loved and cherished every day of their lives. We are blessed because we start to speak the language of the people we serve.”

One of the key aims of the Church’s 2020 Vision is to reach out to more young people. Bangor described how they have embraced this aim wholeheartedly by appointing four lay people as Children’s, Youth and Family Ministry Enablers – or CYFMES for short. All four were at the conference to describe how they were getting on.

Jon Price of South Meirionydd Synod talked about two new youth clubs for secondary school children run by ecumenical teams and how they were helping to build a sense of community with the church and encourage young people to feel confident in their faith.

Jennifer Roberts, of Bangor Synod, described the Open the Book scheme that takes Bible stories into schools. Naomi Wood, of North Meirionydd Synod, talked about a summer camp for families and also how family services should by properly prepared to engage all ages all the way through.

Kirsty Williams of Anglesey Synod described ministry to teenagers and helping them to discuss life issues that affect them on a day to day basis, giving them a faith that is real and they can rely on. Kirsty also shared the success of Messy Church on Anglesey, which has been taken by storm and families love it from the grandparents to the children, providing a stepping stone onto the community.

Meanwhile, the Archdeacon of Bangor, Paul Davies, described how the diocese had set about re-organising itself into Ministry Areas. The Reverend Canon Beth Bailey talked about her experience of bringing five parishes in the diocese together to form the Bro Ardudwy Ministry Area and then to lead it. New patterns of worship had opened up, she said, offering a diverse range for everyone. Training was important, as was providing opportunities for lay people to be more involved, she said. “God is doing a new thing in Wales and together we can journey towards 2020.”

Session 3: Why are we? What is the Church for?

The final session considered the Church’s purpose and its mission to the world. The discussion was led by the dioceses of Llandaff and Swansea and Brecon.

The diocese of Llandaff shared details of the Ministry Area Conversations (MACs) currently being rolled out across the diocese. A film of one of these MACs which was held in Neath in the summer was shown, in which the Revd Zoe King said the general feeling was one of hope.

Llandaff resources officer Richard Jones said that to grow and be successful did not necessarily mean doing more. “The question is not just about getting more – it is to being more. Our attitudes and structures need to bear that in mind. Ministry areas can mean different things in different areas of the diocese and that is fine” he said.

The Archdeacon of Brecon, the Venerable Alan Jevons, described how the diocese had embarked on a process of consultation for re-drawing boundaries and providing a place where ministry and mission would be done in new and creative ways.

He produced some passages to inform discussions on two questions: How are we already revealing God’s Kingdom in the communities in which we live? and What does it look like to be a Church without walls?

The first passage was from Norman Shanks, a Scottish theologian, which asked whether our mission was about collecting Christians together or transforming the world in which we live, or both. The second was from Dietrich Bonhoeffer, which talked about a church giving itself away and offering itself for the world. The third was this quote from Pope Francis: “I prefer a church which is bruised, hurting and dirty because it has been out on the streets, rather than a church which is unhealthy from being confined and from clinging to its own security.”

The diocese then showed a film about some of the work of its Faith in Families project which co-ordinates family centres in the diocese. This, said Archdeacon Alan, raised the question about mission as ‘going out’ rather than ‘gathering in’.

Follow-up

Follow-up events are in the process of being held in each diocese: please contact your diocesan office for details. A short film of the Conference may be viewed on the Church in Wales website at:

www.churchinwales.org.uk/review/the-time-is-now
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