

# Building Stable Congregations

## Preface

The task of building the Church from scratch with no support other than prayer and encouragement is daunting. Given the complexities of the endeavor it is little wonder that there are a number of good sized continuing church parishes which own nice buildings, have stable and growing congregations and full-time clergy. On the other hand, there are still a number of congregations which have not grown, have little stability, rely on a priest's secular job and seem doomed to eventual extinction.

With that said, one has to admit that our little faith is often confounded. Many congregations, almost written off, suddenly come to life in the most unexpected manner as new people move into the area and bring enthusiasm and practical help.

During the past 40 years, I have been much involved in church building, both as an observer and as a participant. The following are some observations which may be of help to those who continue to strive to perpetuate our "traditional Anglicanism" and proclaim the Good News.

## Essential Ingredients for Growth

1. A core group of people must be assembled who have enough money, or who are prepared to risk generating enough money, to erect a church building which is designed for growth.
2. The core group must be of one mind in its approach to doctrine and worship and its parish strategy.
3. It must be led by clergy who are attractive personalities.

We will examine these factors in greater depth. The Church building must be visible, functionally adequate for worship, education and parish activities and in a good area of town. It may of necessity be smaller but it must at least nice and designed for expansion. Anglicans have always believed that buildings and their contents are expressions of the Incarnation, symbolic of the redeemed and renewed nature. Without good advice, there are continuing church parishes which have built in bad areas, bought churches which look bad, built small buildings which cannot be expanded or converted houses which look temporary and as a result remain stagnant.

## Avoiding Crucial Mistakes

1. Before a mission is established, enough people of the right motivation must be located and involved to make the initial growth of a congregation possible. The fact that someone wants to start a congregation should not, of itself, determine that a congregation should be started.
2. The decision to start a mission should be made by the Diocese and the initial groundwork should be sponsored by the Diocese. By this means, a mission begins as a mission of the church and thus does not look upon itself as something locally created which happens to be affiliated to a Diocese. Loyalty must be in the foundations. It is significant that ready-built congregations received into a Diocese are often problem parishes. The membership, in a sense, founded the parish and their loyalties are primarily to themselves.

3. Care must be taken to make sure that a congregation is established in a growth area. The community must be large enough to produce the number of people required. It must be a growing and not a declining area. To succeed, a mission must eventually build a church and pay a priest. Beware of “good deals” on empty church property. Often such a building has been left because a denomination has decided to move its congregation out of a declining area. If a mainstream denomination can’t get people to go to church in an existing area because of the neighborhood is in decline, doesn’t contain the sort of people who may be recruited or is noted for crime, it is certain that a continuing Anglican church will not succeed unless it decides to build a church for such a neighborhood.
4. Initial advertizing to attract people must make use of the available social media and the internet and to a limited degree the newspaper. The language must be couched in a positive message that stresses mission and commitment to become a family church and not just a negative message of opposition.
5. Enough adults must be discovered by advertizing and by calling an organizational meeting to make the formation of a mission viable. Care must be taken to identify the type of people who respond and to discover whether such people are spiritually motivated and of sufficient flexibility to work as a team. Among these people must be identified potential Lay leaders. The initial core group must, from the outset, undertake a protracted period of study. By examining the biblical and doctrinal basis of the Church’s reality and mission, the core group may well identify and resolve differences of opinion which, if not addressed, may later cause divisions. It is also true that for a young church to prosper in mission; its members must be effective evangelists. The word “evangelists” is carefully chosen in this context. A continuing parish exists to guard and protect the faith by living the faith and not simply by using a version of the Prayer Book and bemoaning perceived errors in other Church bodies. Continuing Churchmen must be believers. They must learn to love our Lord and to feel comfortable as they talk about His Gospel and His book; the Bible. The Lord must build the house. Parishes “perish in vain” if all they offer is ecclesiastical politic and olde English.
6. The Diocese should seek to provide a clergyman not merely on his availability or location in such a community, but on the basis of his pastoral skills and suitability.
7. It seems inevitable that malcontents will be attracted to new missions. Care must be taken to make sure these people do not gain control and discipline must be invoked if such people begin to divide the congregation or drive away members.
8. However attractive or tempting the prospect, it is never wise to place a wealthy and generous person in the position where his means will prove a temptation to domination and thus create acquiescence on the one hand and resentment on the other among church members.
9. Even in initial temporary quarters, a congregation should seek to be at its best. Great care should be taken to purchase furnishings and equipment which are worthy and attractive. The clergy should be neatly dressed. The room should be clean, tidy and bright. Bulletins should be well-constructed and attractive. The core group should make sure that people are welcomed, helped through the service and involved. Visitors should be identified and contacted. They should not be treated to lectures on the Episcopal Church, or internal church politics. Sunday worship and coffee hours are not times to air dirty linen or engage in arguments.

10. As soon as possible, the mission should get a telephone number and advertize their mission including creating internet presence such as a website, social media accounts and placing ads or press releases in local papers, local magazines or newsletters. Advertisements should be clear, distinct and welcoming.
11. A Sunday School program should be adopted and teachers appointed even if few children are in the mission. It is important that people coming with children should find a program in place. Because we attract many non-Anglicans, lessons should be designed to teach newcomers as well as those raised in the Faith.
12. Worship should be bright, the hymns well-known and the sermon clear, pointed and didactic rather than merely inspirational. Ritual should suit the building and teach, rather than cater to the clergy and his initiates. Worship is the activity of the people of God and not just of the priest and his servers. Lay Readers should be chosen because they can read well and not only to fill a post and satisfy the ego of an individual. At the same time, the service each week should vary as little as possible. New people must not be driven away by constant change of service and the contents of a service. It should always be remembered that worship is for God and not an activity to suit the tastes of various parish members. As worship is also a form of evangelism, and as evangelism is the purpose of the church, it is more important to consider the need of those who may yet join than the desires of those who belong.
13. From the outset, the clergy should involve parishioners in practical evangelism. A priest is not hired to “attract” people, but rather to provide priestly care to those who are attracted by parish members. It is true that a successful mission priest must be “attractive.” By this one does not mean charming or magnetic. God uses each of us to do His will. However, we must learn to be useful channels of grace. Care in reading well, preaching intelligent and understandable sermons, greeting people and making them feel wanted and loved are all pastoral “skills” which can and must be earned. Nevertheless, parishioners must be helped to become effective evangelists. Their positive enthusiasm for their own parish church and their ability to state clearly their reason for believing are the most compelling advertisements.
14. A new congregation must be given opportunity to serve others. Obligations to the Province and the Diocese must be met, and the people encouraged to adopt jurisdictional projects and mission outreach. The congregation should also become sensitive to local community charities and projects and seek to become a living part of their area and community.
15. A congregation is a family. Families must grow together. As the Eucharist is the chief family meal which sanctifies the tables of our homes, so, by extension, regular social activities bind a church together. Although suppers can and ought to be opportunities to raise money, they ought not to exclusively concentrate on fund raising. Parish socials are also effective occasions to recruit new members. It is easier to bring friends and acquaintances to social events than to worship. The clergy should take care to mix freely with all who attend and to pay special attention to guests and new people.
16. Intelligent congregational participation in the election of members of the vestry is essential. From the outset, a revolving system should be enshrined in the By-laws – which should be adopted as soon as possible after the establishment of a mission and based on existing

models – in order to prevent founding members assuming perpetual and proprietorial positions of authority. Care should be taken to avoid patterns of government which perpetuate an adversarial relationship between clergy and vestry. Job descriptions should be carefully worded. While members of the vestry represent the laity, the vestry does not represent the laity to the clergy, whose relationship to the parishioners is pastoral and immediate.

No priest “succeeds” in all these areas. Nor should clergy feel they “fail” if they do not measure up to the standards suggested. Christian life, this side of the grave, is never judged by “success” but always redeemed by grace. Apart from the Eucharist, devotion in prayer, in the daily round of psalms, lessons and prayers for the people, is God’s greatest means of grace to a priest, who, in growing closer to our Lord, grows closer to those given to his Cure and charge. People want their clergy to be genuine, to be themselves and to care for them. All else will be forgiven or ignored.

Unlike many self-help books, this essay is not offered as a certain pattern for success. It ignores one vital factor. The people involved must be Christians and strive to place the Scriptures and the Traditions of the Church in first place, before jurisdictional allegiance and the struggles of the moment. They must also seek to live lives of devotion, care and observable love.

Some may oppose this approach to mission building as clinical and that it leaves out people who may wish to participate in mission building but live in expensive urban or tiny rural areas, or who lack the number, or resources thought necessary to begin. Certainly one does not wish to neglect faithful Anglicans wherever they are. On the other hand, if such people do not have the essential ingredients necessary to found a mission, if they do embark on such an enterprise, their fate may well be to experience grave disappointment and disillusionment. On the other hand, some small congregations are vibrant fellowships where mutual faith and love more than compensate for lack of growth or prospects. Any Christian activity is a field in which miracles may be expected. God enables the impossible to become possible. We are to do all things decently and in order, even more so when we care for the souls of those who are being called into the way of salvation.

#### Suggested Subjects for Core Group Study

1. Christian initiation. Biblical references to baptism and its relationship to circumcision. References to the doctrines of atonement, adoption, reconciliation. What the Anglican symbiosis of “evangelical” and “catholic” really means.
2. The Church, Biblical metaphors such as the Body of Christ, the Priestly Community, the New Israel are brought into contact with doctrinal definitions of the Church Catholic. This is not the time to define Anglicanism, let alone Continuing Anglicanism.
3. The Mission of the Church. Christ’s commission and biblical concepts and patterns should here be carefully studied. A clear distinction must be drawn between sectarianism and Churchmanship.
4. The Bible. Its authority and purpose and the Church’s role in interpreting Scripture. The use of Scripture in personal devotion and growth.

5. Anglicanism, its history, nature and mission. It is important to be positive in this section. Concentration on recent problems may well create an antipathy to Anglicanism. People need to feel that they are heirs to a great tradition and not rebels against such a tradition.
6. The four Orders of Ministry, Bishop, Priest, Deacon and the Lay state, their origins, purpose and function.
7. The Worship of the Church. The Godward purpose of worship. The purpose of preaching and teaching. The total involvement of clergy and laity in the act of worship. The meaning of the sacraments. The Eucharist. The Daily Offices.
8. The meaning of ritual and ceremonial and its practical use and abuse.
9. The structure of the Province, the Diocese and the local congregation.
10. The Continuing Church, its history and mission.
11. Evangelism and congregational growth in the light of all above.

*(Modified from excerpts from original document of the Rev. A.F.M. Clavier)*