

THE VISION FOR THE LORDSBRIDGE TEAM OF CHURCHES

The vision for the Lordsbridge Team is deliberately expressed as a description of a moment in the future and as such offers a direction of travel - a journey in which each parish and each worshipping community can find its place and where there is also space for new and unplanned things to emerge. This is not a 'master plan' with a fixed end point, and it is deliberately imprecise about timing, though its horizon is more likely a few years than a few decades.

So this is the story of an imagined future for the 9 by 5 mile area west of Cambridge with its villages, hamlets, arable farms, schools, business parks, shops, and meeting places. With recent and continuing edge of village development the 11 villages range in size from 250 to, now, 3500 and are still growing. In this imagined future, the Lordsbridge Team is now a supportive network of 22 worshipping communities.

TRADITIONAL FORMS OF CHURCH

In this imagined future, eleven of these worshipping communities are still based in the ancient parish churches. Each knows itself to be a community of Jesus' disciples in that place, varying in size from a half a dozen or so, to 50 or more. Some - the smallest - see their calling as prayer and faithful practice, believing in the promise that where two or three are gathered together God is with them. Others, larger and more diverse, see their calling as hospitality, explorer friendliness and growth. All are Christ-centred and, in the phrase used by the diocesan strategy of Ely2025, they 'nurture a confident people of God'.

Each of the parish church communities is well embedded in its village context, its own mission field. In the words of the Ely2025 diocesan strategy, they are 'generous and visible'. With cafes, holiday food schemes, community groups for babies or seniors, involvement in parish councils, eco-church activities, events for the seasons and good quality rites of passage, they are happy to work in partnership with others for the common good in that place. In each village there are people who say, 'I am glad that there are Christians living here: it makes this a better place.' But diversity across the Team is welcomed and each village church is confident in its own sense of calling. Each has found its own points of growth and has a fair idea what it is good at and the gifts God has given it for this particular time and place. This is mission as kingdom building.

NEW CONGREGATIONS AND FRESH EXPRESSIONS

In this imagined future, a campaign of prayer and mission, partly in response to the Bishop's call for a '50:50 blended economy' of traditional and new congregations by 2025, has created at least one new worshipping congregation in every ancient geographical parish, and some that reach across parish boundaries or transcend them. This movement has been informed by the creativity and learning of the pandemic in 2020 and 2021, too.

Each of our new congregations, in this imagined future, is growing Christian disciples beyond those in touch with traditional church, and each is a vital part of the Lordsbridge network. There is an ecumenical youth community, bringing together young people across the villages and in the

secondary school. There are several gatherings of seniors in village halls, for thoughtful conversation, company and prayers. There is a group of young adults who meet in a local café on a Saturday morning and who support each other in following a daily pattern of life in between their get togethers. There is a weekly gathering of under 5s and their carers for a simple Bible story, action song and prayer activity. The Zoom congregation that grew out of the pandemic experience has grown and is enabling those from across a wide area who cannot easily access in-person church to form a worshipping community. There is a group of people from various villages who suffer from mental illness and who find traditional church services difficult - they meet in a home for prayer, meditation and Dwelling in the Word. The post-pandemic interest in the environment and the outdoors, has left us with several intergenerational Wild Church congregations that have grown and thrived in various spaces. In a couple of local primary schools there are communities of parents, grandparents and children who gather on a weekday afternoon for Messy Church. And somewhat unpredictably as to where they will be is a gathering of people who meet to walk each month and to explore meeting God in worship and prayer as they do so. In all of these communities, there are people who are coming back to church, people who are being baptised or confirmed as Christians for the first time, and people who are not sure what they believe but connect spiritually with what is going on. Lay leadership and lay involvement are vital in providing the energy and inspiration for this diversity.

OUR NETWORK

In this imagined future, the Lordsbridge Team of Churches is a supportive network of encouragement, resourcing and accountability for each of these worshipping and journeying communities. Our corporate prayer life is strong and varied. The 'Sacred Space' gatherings and local quiet mornings now have a long pedigree in providing an oasis for contemplative prayer. An occasional exuberant, contemporary worship gathering provides a place for more energetic praise. There is a simple 'rule of life' for people to opt into for personal discipleship and prayer. More traditionally, morning prayer takes place somewhere in the Team's area every morning of the week. The annual 'Thy Kingdom Come' national prayer week has developed beyond the original Lordsbridge Prayer Pilgrimage in different ways in different villages. Worship at Home now includes seasonal podcasts, reflections posted on social media and family activities to complement larger gatherings and support discipleship and spiritual growth. The Everyday Faith project is helping people think about how to be a Christian in their workplace or wider community. Most of our churches have become eco-congregations and we are grappling with a faithful response to the climate emergency. The School of Theology, both live and as a podcast, is equipping those who want to love God 'with their minds'.

Each church community has now developed a small group of lay and ordained people who have been chosen and trained to form a local team and share leadership there. We have learned that the best person for the role of 'lead minister' in each community is not always someone who is both stipended and ordained – it depends on the community. However, the role of a stipended incumbent in the Team is still centred on the 'presbyteral' ministry of word and sacrament as well as pastoral care, though experienced alongside the local teams. Over the last few years, the role of incumbent has also evolved to include elements that are both more 'episcopal' (envisioning, equipping, overseeing) and more 'diaconal' (managing good working processes and facilitating teamworking).

The Lordsbridge Resource Hub is now well established. Administrative and operations support offered to ministers and local teams now includes DBS checks, book-keeping, and website support, alongside the long-standing weddings administration and weekly circulation of resources. The Resource Hub also maintains a huge library of home-grown resources and looks after the iKnow Church management software that streamlines many of our activities.

The core staff team now includes a wider variety of skills and roles, a mix of paid and voluntary and with different types of funding. But leadership of the Lordsbridge Team as a whole is still shared, with good working relationships and trust between colleagues for whom working collegially is natural and integral.

MEETING CHALLENGES TOGETHER

In this imagined future, the Team, like the church as a whole, has faced challenges – we have needed the courage to face up to the hard questions of an ageing membership, changing local population, the impact of Covid, new approaches to clergy deployment and financial difficulties. Some of our communities have had to change shape, some have had to reach out in different ways to different groups of people, and some have had to find again the mission-edge of what they already do. And there are still questions to be answered: how can our buildings be more blessing than burden? How can multi-parish working be life-giving not treadmill? How do we manage governance and administration to provide helpful structure not crushing weight? How does diversity enrich not threaten our friendship and our collective experience of God? How do we offer the riches of faith to the spiritually open without being institutional? How do we engage with the environmental and other ethical issues of our day? How do we support the faith of children and young people, or the elderly, or the mentally ill, across small communities? How do we, collectively, grow fragments of the Kingdom of God in this particular time and place? These are things that we are, wherever possible, already addressing together.

COMING BACK TO THE PRESENT DAY

In refining and realising this vision together, we are learning much and need courage to keep going as we address some of the more difficult challenges. We are having some creative and some hard conversations. We are working on character and calling. We are changing culture. We are engaging with our contemporary context, and all the more so as nation and church emerges from the pandemic. The signs are that we will need to be more nimble, more online, more local, and more ready to engage with those who are asking big spiritual questions. We are convinced that both continuity and innovation are necessary, as are both faithfulness and creativity. And together we are both telling 'things from of old, things our ancestors told us' (Psalm 78: 2 & 3) and 'singing a new song' for our time (Psalm 144: 9) , in the name of the Kingdom of Jesus Christ.