

## 6<sup>th</sup> of Easter: Transformational Development in the diocese of Matabeleland

As you know, I came back 10 days ago from a week in Zimbabwe in the Diocese of Matabeleland, which covers the south and western regions of Zimbabwe. I stayed with the Bishop of Matabeleland the Right Revd Cleophas Lunga and the family in their home in Bulawayo. Before Cleophas became bishop in 2009, he and I were colleagues in the Caludon Team in Stoke, east Coventry, when I was Team Rector there. We worked together particularly well, and with our other colleague Revd Pam Smith (who you may recall has visited us at St George's on more than one occasion) It was therefore very rewarding to link up with Bishop Cleophas and his wife Soneni, and the family, after seven years of being called to different pastures. I hope that before too long there will be an opportunity for us all to meet Bishop Cleophas – although some of you will indeed have met him at my institution five years ago – and perhaps there may be opportunities to hear from him directly about the challenges faced by the diocese and how these are met. For the time being, however, it's through my eyes that some of the story must be told.

In Coventry, our team was enriched greatly by Cleophas' many gifts, in particular his insightful strategic thinking – something which was very pertinent in the team reorganisation I was tasked with. He was also someone deeply committed to transformation. This was evidenced first in his transformation of the vicarage garden– where he planted maize, potatoes, raspberries and beans in considerable quantities – incidentally, our Jonny used to do the mowing! I share this anecdote because my strong impression from this recent short visit to his diocese of Matabeleland, was of witnessing the outcomes of seven years of working with a strongly developmental strategy towards transforming what he had inherited. For example, we went on a very interesting visit to one of the diocesan farms, St Aidan's Farm, where, for the first time, a crop of sorghum has been grown successfully and will be harvested in a few weeks time. The sale of the grain will produce important funds for the diocese which will assist in paying the clergy. On this same farm, there are a series of plots made available to local villagers where they can learn the art of growing tomatoes or beans and then be able to do this at their own homestead and sell some of the produce at

the market. The excess tomatoes from the plots are bottled as chopped tomatoes or passata for sale locally. The working model in place demonstrates a strong combination of community-orientated development and diocesan development. The project is overseen by the diocesan director of Development Ronald Lumbiwa and his team. He was recruited following his retirement from a government development programme. Start-up funding is currently being provided by an American donor and friend of the diocese.

The question might be asked, legitimately, as to why does it take seven years to get a field of sorghum? The answer lies in the vexed matter of land use and ownership. St Aidan's Farm has been a diocesan property for over 50 years – the diocese itself is only 60 years old. For most of the 50 years this piece of land has not been claimed by the diocese and local people have encroached onto it either through building homesteads or using the area to graze their cattle. The diocese has therefore had to stake a fresh claim to the farmland and persist in establishing and maintaining a diocesan presence. This is itself hampered by the fact that the farm is 40 kilometres outside Bulawayo and without actually putting someone onto the land to live there, at some risk to themselves, it is very hard to sustain a presence and stake the claim. Two years ago a very successful crop of sugar beans was grown, but when it was nearly ready for harvest the locals put the cattle onto it, purposefully, and the whole crop was eaten and lost. There was no comeback – except that happily the local chief has taken a sympathetic view to the diocesan claims, which bodes well for the future. One way to claim land is to fence it off. This has been done with the fields in cultivation. So far it is still in place, but fencing of this kind is routinely stolen for firewood. The challenges are significant. However, there is a determination to establish a permanent presence on the farm, to strengthen its links to the local church of St Aidan and to take forward this significant project. We can see very clearly that all this takes a lot of courage and energy and commitment of resources; and it can also be seen how some leaders in the past may have chosen not to set out on such ventures, giving due consideration both to the obstacles stacked against them and the pressure of other challenges. In the present life of the diocese, however, I read into this story of St Aidan's Farm precisely this dynamic approach of *strategic development seeking transformation*.

In the diocese, it isn't only land that has to be reclaimed and developed but property as well. In past years of economic constraint and political pressure, sound management of diocesan property lapsed. This has meant that properties have had to be reclaimed involving legal process. Happily, with more determination and skill, this has been achieved. And this is by no means immaterial, as rents from the properties are another key source of finance to pay the clergy. As I relate these anecdotes, you will quickly be deducing that parish contributions (our parish share) need to be augmented in order for diocesan commitments to be met, for example in the paying of the clergy. We might note the parallel here with our own parochial setting, of how we only meet all our commitments through income from car parking on this site and income from renting out the church for example to our sister churches. These things play a key role in keeping us afloat. At the annual meeting we noted that car park income in the year 2015 totalled £12K and income from use of the church was over £10K. This amounts to approximately 18% of our turnover. In 2015 I am pleased to say that we returned a surplus for the first time in five years. This was largely due to the generous response of many to the request for raised financial commitments through 'Funding 15' – but we will see, that without our supplementary income, we, (like the diocese of Matabeleland) would be struggling that much more.

In the setting of Matabeleland, the diocesan farms, the schools and the properties play a key role in the development strategy. And we can see, I think, how important it is that the diocesan leadership grasps the nettle. And Bishop Cleophas has put in place teams of people to manage these critical diocesan assets. What is striking, however, is that these core assets are not used simply as generators of funds, but instruments of transformation: at the farm there are the plots of land for local people and the grain is used not only for sale but to be distributed to the poorest in the outlying village, at the schools children come together from different backgrounds and are brought into living contact with the Anglican church, and with regards to the properties, through the tenancy arrangements, new relationships are generated with tenants that bring the church further into the public sphere. And this is something I think we can learn from – because I think it's something we seek to achieve too – that our

involvements and relationships with community partners should not simply be about gaining support or attracting financial help, but rather they are engagements with others through which we are seeking to generate both the first stirrings of the kingdom of God and also the creation of a space where people can meet one another in new and different ways and benefit from that, and meet God in Christ and be transformed.

As I am talking about the vision being pursued in the Diocese of Matabeleland, you might be wondering, “what about the churches?!” And quite right too! I have tried to articulate something of the wider context, mission and vision for the Anglican church in the diocese. It is only meaningful, of course, as the parishes find their place within it and become expressions of it. On this recent trip I visited a number of parishes and their clergy, but I didn’t engage closely with local agendas. This must wait for another time. What I can say however is that it was very rewarding to witness the extraordinarily positive outlook of many in the churches given the realities of social and economic constraint that people live with as a matter of course. *Two things struck me as highly symbolic of the health of the churches.* At the same time as I was visiting, so was the Dean of St Barnabas Cathedral in the Diocese of Ibba South Sudan, Dean Clement Fargalla and his wife Charity. There, it will not surprise us, they face extremes of poverty and almost every kind of deprivation and threats to life itself. It was very humbling to then get to know that the Diocese of Matabeleland had decided first to link with them as a diocese, having chosen specifically to find a diocese less well off than themselves, and secondly to see how two of the larger congregations were supporting very generously an appeal made for the Diocese of Ibba, so that the Dean could take back a strong sign of solidarity and support from the Diocese of Matabeleland.

The second symptom of a church pressing forward was apparent when I went to visit the site of a new church being built in one of the suburbs of the city of Bulawayo. On a plot of land in Mahatshula a temporary structure has been erected made of wrought iron sheets which looks unmistakably like a church. Currently a conversation is going on with the local council about the terms on which the church is acquiring the land (let the reader understand!). However, at the entrance to the site, a beautiful noticeboard stands, designed as it happens

by the bishop, who's a bit of an artist. The church is once again staking its claim. The noticeboard records the dedication of the church as 'The Church of the Transfiguration', with an additional dedication to the martyr Manche Masemola, (the young woman of the minority Pedi tribe in Southern Africa, who defied her parents in taking up the Christian faith only to be killed by them for it.) I met the priest-to-be of the church, Father Busani, who has another church locally. I hope it might not be too long before I attend the opening!.... perhaps even with others from St George's! Against the backdrop of the diocesan strategy of transformational development, it seems very fitting that the next step being taken is under the symbolism of transfiguration. May it long be so. Amen.

1859 Words

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