

**FORWARD IN FAITH  
NATIONAL ASSEMBLY 2018**

**ITEM 4: ADDRESS BY MR WILLIAM NYE,  
SECRETARY GENERAL OF THE GENERAL SYNOD  
AND THE ARCHBISHOPS' COUNCIL**

I am going to talk about the work of the Archbishops' Council, and I am going to focus in particular on the work known as Renewal and Reform. Some of you, I suspect, may have heard some version of this talk before, if you are on a diocesan synod, because I am very happy to talk about Renewal and Reform as often as I am invited to. But I hope that today I will be able to speak particularly to the situation of Forward in Faith and Society parishes, and their place in the Church of England.

If you will forgive me, I might just begin with one or two personal notes. I have now worked for the Archbishops' Council as Secretary General for almost exactly three years. At one level, by church standards, I still feel something of a new boy. And I am certainly still learning, and have much still to learn, about the variety and the specific contexts of the work of the Church of England all across our country. Before I came to work for the Church, I had not had any previous role in national or diocesan church responsibilities. The highest position I had reached was as a churchwarden in my parish – where I was churchwarden for rather longer than the Churchwardens' Measure actually envisages – and I am now once again a churchwarden there. I had very occasionally met an archdeacon, and once or twice even been to a deanery synod. But nothing more than that. So, when I started three years ago, I did feel I was being thrown in at the deep end.

Before I came to work for the Church, I was a civil servant. For ten years I was in the Treasury. This has left me, I should warn you, with a love of figures and diagrams. I will be drawing on some figures today. I know from experience that some people in the Church love numbers and analysis and others are absolutely allergic to them. For those who feel allergic to numbers and graphs, I can only apologise in advance. But I would urge you to look beyond the numbers, and recognize that each number I use refers to one or more precious human soul. In using numbers, I am simply using them as short-hand for people.

One other word by way of prologue. I have quite often spoken to dioceses – bishop's councils, diocesan synods, etc – about what the Archbishops' Council does and about Renewal and Reform. When I do so, I like to talk about what is happening nationally. And I also like to talk about what appears to be happening – so far as I am able to understand it – in the particular diocese or archdeaconry or area of the country that we are thinking about. In the course of this talk I will do something similar for Society parishes – for the aggregate of those parishes, represented here today through Forward in Faith. This will build on the excellent work that your colleague Anne Gray has done, with the assistance of the Research and Statistics team at Church House, in helping the traditional catholic movement have a better understanding, perhaps, of who you are and what you look like. I think this is a really valuable thing to do, and I hope it offers the chance for some real reflection about the contribution, and the achievements, and also the challenges, for Society parishes. I hope to prompt some discussion today and subsequently. But I do need to emphasise that, in talking about Society parishes in the aggregate, I am not suggesting that that set of parishes should be thought of as a collective set-up entirely separate from the rest of the Church of England, nor, in the hackneyed phrase, as a 'church within a church', nor as the equivalent of a diocese. Obviously, that is not the way the

National Church Institutions think of your role and contribution, and I hope it is not how you think of yourselves. I would urge you to think of yourselves, in the spirit of mutual flourishing, as a network that brings together like-minded parishes, but also as parishes and groups of parishes who have much to contribute to the local mission of diocese and deaneries where you are situated. Forgive me for labouring this point. But I do not want to be misunderstood.

So, what is Renewal and Reform? Renewal and Reform is a body of work which seeks to provide a narrative of hope to the Church of England in the twenty-first century. I want to start with clarity about Renewal and Reform. In an institution other than the Church of England, we might call Renewal and Reform a national programme for change. But the Church of England, though it is national, and a national institution, is not organized as a top-down single structure, and we don't have national programmes in that way. As you will know very well, the core unit of the Church is the bishop and the diocese, or the bishop with his – or her – clergy and people acting together. So Renewal and Reform is not dictated from Church House and sent out to dioceses. It is a set of activities, a body of work, intended to support the work of dioceses, parishes, chaplaincies, Fresh Expressions, schools etc. And it is about a narrative of hope.

We believe that the Lord of the harvest will help us if we pray for workers for the harvest field, because the harvest can be plentiful. But we need to start with a realistic assessment of where we are. Then we can think about what work the workers need to do in the harvest field. That can generate hope for the future, and in turn produce a growing church – a growing church for all people in all places. I truly believe that is possible. And the reason why I am so grateful to be doing the job that I do, is that this is a time when we can realistically and prayerfully hope and expect to achieve that plentiful harvest of a growing church for all people and in all places.

But we need to begin with we need the realistic assessment. And here I am going to depress you, I am going deliberately to depress you. And the reason for this is that sometimes in the Church we do not want to face up to those unwelcome facts. I completely understand why that is. Our church has been shrinking or declining for fifty or sixty years. For all my life time. For all or most of the life time of most people in this room. Throughout the period of ministry of almost all serving clergy. And that is a really painful thing to contemplate. It is such a painful thing to contemplate, that people have been giving their lives in sacrificial service to an institution which has in aggregate throughout this period been declining, that sometimes people do not want to contemplate it. But we need to start with the truth.

This slide shows some figures just for the last twenty years between 1995 and 2015. If we had the data in the same format I could go back thirty or forty years before that. But those data we do have show that in only twenty years the average age of our worshippers rose by eight years. Usual Sunday Attendance fell by over a quarter. And an 81-year-old is now eight times more likely to be church attender than a 21-year-old.

Moreover, it gets worse. Attendance – and I am using attendance as the main measure, but it could be electoral roll, it could be the number of givers, it could be almost any other measure – they all move in parallel. Attendance per capita is now 1.7%. That's not a very memorable number, so actually rounding up I prefer to use the figure of 2% – one in fifty. That is the number that burns in my mind. One in fifty, only one in fifty people across our country are regular attenders in our national church. And it varies across the country. It's higher in rural areas than urban areas. It is dreadfully low on council estates: 0.8%. In some large but economically depressed towns it can be as low as 0.5%. 0.5%! That means you have to walk past 200 people in the street before you get to one churchgoer. In some areas it is higher. In

one diocese, the Diocese of Hereford, it reaches the heady heights of 3%. Yet, even in Hereford, they know full well that this is no cause for complacency. Very nearly half of regular attenders in the Diocese of Hereford are over 70 years old. These figures are, and I say this deliberately, heart-breaking. And in some places, they are, well, marginally less heart-breaking.

And how is happening? This slide gives a simplified view. It is deliberately a simplification, but it gives a good enough picture. Every year from our worshipping communities 10,000 adults die or become unable to attend church. Every year 7,000 more leave our churches than join them. And perhaps most striking of all, every year on average only 3,000 children grow up to become adults in our churches. Only 3,000. That compares with around 100,000 or so 11-year olds who leave Church of England primary schools every year.

So, how is the Church responding? Under Archbishop Justin and Archbishop Sentamu, and with the guidance of the House of Bishops and the endorsement of the General Synod, we have developed the body of work called Renewal and Reform – a set of initiatives designed to help dioceses and parishes respond to this grim reality and move into a more hopeful future. What does work in the harvest field look like?

At this point I would just like to address one concern some of you may have. There may be some people in this room who are worried that Renewal and Reform is some form of evangelical conspiracy to re-mould the Church in one preferred form. I know there are some people in the Church who believe this, because I have read the blogs where they say so. But I am here to tell you that – speaking as someone who goes to a church where we too have the Angelus after Mass – if there is a secret evangelical conspiracy, then it must be very effective indeed to have deceived me as well.

I am not going to go through all of the various initiatives, because that would bog you down in rather a lot of church jargon. But I would like to highlight a few.

First, Renewal and Reform is about the National Church Institutions trying to support dioceses in formulating and implementing their visions for the future. We are providing leadership training for bishops and deans, and for groups of clergy who may be among the leaders of the Church in the future. This includes a learning community which has several cohorts, where we are making efforts to ensure that all strands in churchmanship are represented. We are providing grants – mostly to dioceses, but also sometimes for non-diocesan areas of spending – to promote growth in the Church. And when I say growth, I mean that as short-hand for bringing more people to faith, for spreading the Gospel, for evangelization and for discipleship. And to create more of a learning culture across the Church, we have established a programme of peer review of dioceses, in which small teams of trained peer reviewers – who are themselves people who understand how dioceses work – visit other dioceses and help them reflect on their capacity and progress.

There are a few specific areas of work I would like to highlight. One I am particularly proud of is our digital effort. This includes the new Church of England website, the revamped A Church Near You website – and if you are not yet effectively using and populating A Church Near You for your parish, please, please go away and start now. It includes a Lent Campaign and an Advent and Christmas Campaign, and lots of other work through social media.

‘Setting God’s People Free’ is, I confess, a bit of church jargon – but it is the name of a report promoting discipleship for the laity across the Church. Now, I happen to worship in a church

where the word ‘discipleship’ has probably very rarely been used from the pulpit in my twenty years there. So, if the word ‘discipleship’ does not resonate for you, you might prefer to think of it as faithfulness, or deepening faith. This work focuses on helping lay people to feel and express and develop their faith in their whole life, a seven-day a week faith or, to put it another way, a faith that is for Monday to Saturday, as well as having been sent out on Sunday.

The whole church is working hard on increasing vocations to the priesthood. Rather unusually, and I think quite counter-culturally for the Church of England, this is an area where we have actually set a national target – or at least a national aspiration: to increase vocations to the priesthood by 50% over five years. And we are well on the way. The number entering training for the priesthood this autumn was 585, that is 22% higher than two years before. Surely that is a sign of hope?

We have made a commitment to evangelism – or evangelization if you prefer – in estates. And of course, the leader of this, who has challenged the whole Church on this area and set a pioneering example, is Bishop Philip North.

We are doing what we can to simplify some of the many rules with which the Church of England is so richly endowed – or over-endowed. We are looking for practical simplification of laws and regulations to help with the work of mission.

So that is some of what Renewal and Reform is about. I will come back in a moment to how it is going.

But in the meantime, what is the situation in the Society parishes? And here I must re-emphasise what I said at the beginning of my talk, that in talking about Society parishes in the aggregate, I am not suggesting that we consider them as if they were one or more dioceses.

Still, as you know, there are a little over 400 Society parishes. That is 3% of all the parishes in the Church of England. But these parishes are on average larger in population terms than the average English parish, because more of them are urban. So, though you comprise only 3% of all parishes, that accounts for a population of 3 million people, around 6% of the population of England. That is broadly equivalent to the population of Dioceses of Birmingham and Liverpool, or indeed to the population of Wales. And your task is to minister to these 3 million people, to bring them to faith and bring the Gospel to them.

Moreover, as we know from the work which Anne Gray reported to you last year, there is in Society parishes a very real bias to the poor. 84% of your parishes are in the more deprived half of the country, and only 16% in the wealthier half of the country. And perhaps most striking, of the 10% most deprived parishes in the country, 176 of them – that is 14% of the total – are Society parishes. These 176 parishes have a population of 1.4 million people – 1.4 million, that is, of the poorest people in our country. The old picture of Anglo-Catholic priests and parishes among the poor still holds true, it seems.

And now the crunchy bit. How are you doing? Let me just highlight a few figures. Total average weekly attendance – 31,400. Remember, you are serving a population of around 3 million. That means that attendance per capita in Society parishes is around 1.0%, or 1 in 100. Some parishes are growing, rather more declining, most have no growth trend. This is, I should say, a very typical pattern for diocesan attendance statistics too. Though remember that almost all dioceses have overall average attendance higher than 1.0%.

But let me highlight one interesting thing. The median attendance – and for those of you whose Maths GCSE or O-Level was rather a long time ago, like me – let me remind you that the median means the figure for an average parish, that is the parish in the middle of a distribution – the median attendance in Society parishes is 65. Whereas the median attendance for the Church of England as a whole is only 39. So yes, in one sense the average Society parish is larger than the average Church of England parish – purely in terms of size of congregation.

Another couple of slides about comparisons. Here is one view. I mentioned Wales earlier. As you can see from this slide the population, and the adult attendance, for Society parishes, and for the Church in Wales, are very similar. But the Church in Wales covers the whole country, and therefore includes many more parishes, including lots of small rural villages of the kind that the Society often doesn't cover. Let me compare Society parishes a bit with the rest of the Church of England. On the one hand, you do not have nearly so many small village parishes – hence your median is larger. On the other hand, you also do not have such a high proportion of large suburban middle-class parishes, typically, though not exclusively evangelical, which tend to boost the average attendance for most English dioceses.

So I asked the Research and Statistics team at Church House to do a comparison between Society parishes and the others. The next slide gives the result. I think it is a reasonably fair comparison, though no comparison can be perfect. It looks at the 300 or so parishes in the poorest three deciles across the country. And it compares these with the Dioceses of Birmingham and Liverpool taken together, where there about 350+ parishes.

In the very poorest areas (the lowest decile), median attendance in Society Parishes and in Birmingham and Liverpool is about the same, 60 to 65, though in both areas less than 1% of the population – perhaps slightly higher in the Society parishes. In the second and third deciles – slightly less poor areas – median attendance in the Society Parishes is about 70 – 1% of the population – whereas in Birmingham and Liverpool it is around 100, somewhat over 1% of the population. In short, while there are many Society parishes in poor areas, those Society Parishes are doing no better, but also not markedly worse, than parishes in those areas across the spread of traditions.

But that is, I'm afraid, no cause for congratulation. We cannot be satisfied, surely, with only 1% of the population in our congregations. That is particularly acute in deprived areas where there may be little or no other expression of the Christian faith of any kind.

And remember, Society parishes cover 3 million people. The job of those parishes after all – your job, collectively – is not simply to minister to and comfort and support the 30,000 worshippers in your churches. As with the rest of the Church of England, it is to reach out and minister to and evangelize and bring to Christ as many as possible of those 3 million people. Yes, by all means pray for them. Yes, by all means, remember them daily at the Mass. Yes, certainly, do what you can to help feed and clothe them, as Bishop Frank Weston and so many Anglo-Catholic leaders have always said. But are we sure we are doing everything that can be done to bring them to know Christ?

What resources do Society parishes have for this task? I would just make two practical points. First, the great gift that most Society parishes have – not all, but most – is people. If attendance at the average Society parish is higher in absolute terms than in the average Church of England parish, then you have the gift of people. It may not always feel like that. They may need

encouragement and energizing and galvanizing and confidence building. So do people in all parishes, of all traditions. But you have people. Think of them positively, and what you can do with them as a gift.

And secondly, we are here to support you. Renewal and Reform is intended to support every parish and every tradition – including all your Society parishes.

We are increasingly looking at how we can help support and resource those ‘average-sized’ parishes – the parishes in the middle third of the country with congregations of between 20 and 60 or 70. So that we are not just helping, as sometimes people think, large and very large parishes, but we are seeking to support evangelization and discipleship in every type of church.

And how are your parishes responding? You will have heard already about the Society’s document on a vision for evangelization, ‘Forming Missionary Disciples’. I was very encouraged to see the Society developing this vision, and I was fascinated to read Fr Damian Feeney’s account of it in his lecture earlier this year at Wakefield, which was published in *New Directions*. Your vision has, of course, distinctively catholic elements, and rightly so: ‘excellence in worship’, as we experienced this morning, and ‘celebrating sacramental priesthood’.

But it also meshes completely with the national Church’s overall vision, as expressed in the ‘quinquennial goals’ which underlie Renewal and Reform. They are on the right hand of this slide; on the left hand are the six elements of ‘forming Missionary Disciples’. It’s all there. Numerical growth – yes. Spiritual growth – yes. Reimagining ministry – well, that means both priesthood and formation – so, yes. Serving the common good – absolutely, yes. Your vision for evangelization is a vision that chimes with the mission of the Church nationally, and which the Church nationally should encourage. That still means, of course, working with and alongside other non-Society parishes, as part of diocesan strategies for growth, in the spirit of mutual flourishing. But it also means making the most of your own Society network, and encouraging growth all across it.

I promised a little while ago a few words of hope. What has been the impact of Renewal and Reform so far?

First, there are some areas where we are definitely seeing fruits, and the prospect of a plentiful harvest. In highlighting some of these areas I would encourage you to think in each case: how does this bear on Society parishes? How can it help my parish? How can I make use of this development in my parish? How can I join in? How can I reach out for support to help participate in this contribution to growth?

I mentioned already that this year no fewer than 585 people are starting training for the priesthood – up 22% in only two-years. I am so thankful that the Church had the courage to set an aspiration of increasing vocations to ordained ministries of 50%, with the result that we have achieved 22%. Had we set a target of, let us say, 20%, we might have achieved 10%, and been pleased about it.

Vocations is, I imagine, an area where your parishes should be quite strong, given your commitment to priesthood. And the national Church wants your parishes to be strong in this area, to be encouraging more people to hear a possible call to priesthood or the diaconate. Keep doing all you can.

The second area I want to highlight is digital. We have had a number of digital campaigns, both for discipleship and for raising awareness and helping encourage people to church. Last year's Advent and Christmas campaign, #GodWithUs, reached 6 million people digitally. This year's campaign, #FollowTheStar, will, we hope, do even better. Every church, of whatever tradition, can join in and make use of these resources and campaigns.

Messy Churches – not per se part of Renewal and Reform, but very important. There are 2,000 across Britain, 1,400 across the Church of England. They can be adapted for every tradition. As it happens, I sometimes take my daughter to a Messy Church, when I am occasionally able to get away from work on a weekday afternoon to do so. It happens to be in a parish that is partly Society-affiliated, and it works very well indeed there. I recently visited two tiny village churches in Herefordshire, each with an electoral role of under 20. Yet each of those two churches had also reached out to the families in their village by starting Messy Churches.

Perhaps the most obvious headline for Renewal and Reform is the Strategic Development Fund, which has awarded £44 million pounds of grants for 23 projects. The vast bulk of this is rightly for diocesan projects. But dioceses, in the spirit of mutual flourishing, should engage all traditions in their strategies for growth, and Society parishes – if they have the will and the intention – have as much chance as any of participating in initiatives funded through SDF.

One promising area for growth has been the spread of resource churches – churches that aim to grow in order to help other churches, to plant further churches, and to give themselves away rather than just growing in one site. Many of these so far have been in city centres, often in areas of student population. And rightly so. We need to reach out much more effectively to students and young people. But in many dioceses we are also seeing candidates for resource churches for rather less glamorous towns, not just the obvious main cities. I mean no offence to the inhabitants of any of these places when I say it is tremendous that the Church is now reinforcing its efforts in places like Swindon, Crawley, Grimsby, Dudley, Mansfield, and so on. But are there thriving Society churches which could take on this role, as part of a diocese's contribution to growth? Are there Society parishes in areas close to universities and colleges – and there are almost 200 university campuses across England now, many of them almost completely unreached by the Church – who can reinvent themselves, or create new parallel congregations, designed to appeal to students and young people, while still being true to your catholic traditions?

There are other areas of work at an earlier stage, where the prospects are looking good. 'Setting God's People Free' is a real effort to improve discipleship or faithfulness, or confidence in the Faith amongst the laity. And surely that is as relevant in catholic parishes as in any other? And what about planting churches? The House of Bishops has issued a policy statement saying that it favours planting in general, and making clear that this is something for all traditions to do. If planting churches is working well as a way of bringing more people to faith in the evangelical tradition, why not in the catholic tradition as well? And then there are the digital efforts.

We are developing networks across the country, to try and bring together parishes in similar contexts so that they can learn from each other, and share ideas. The strongest of these so far is Bishop Philip's Estates network, which is inspiring hope for our mission in previously neglected outer estates. But we are also looking at developing networks for rural areas, for coastal towns, and for other groupings that might benefit from working together.

These are, I hope, all ways in which the initiatives of Renewal and Reform can support and complement the vision of 'Forming Missionary Disciples' – and vice versa. Please make use of these initiatives, draw on these resources, demand support – from diocesan and national sources – for your vision and commitment to growth.

Can I end with one further thought? The vision for growth needs to be a vision for everyone to participate in, for everyone to contribute to. 'Forming Missionary Disciples' rightly talks about being intentional in evangelism. Being intentional. Being deliberate. Making the effort to reach out. Having the confidence in our faith to reach out – and to overcome our English, Anglican, often middle-class scruples and reservations about talking about Christianity – and invite people to come to church and experience our faith.

I mentioned 1 in 50 earlier – the proportion of the population in our churches – as a number that burns in my mind. Here's another way that it should burn in your minds. Imagine that we became more intentional. Imagine that we became more invitational. Imagine – just for a moment – that many more people in our congregations had the confidence to invite people they know to come to church. Imagine that most of our congregations had the confidence to do that. Well, we would like as many as possible to do that. But here's the thing. From all the people who might invite their friends to come to church, it only takes 1 in 50 of the people in our congregations successfully to do so once a year, and for that person to stay – for the decline in our churches to stop. If, in each year, you can have the confidence to ask enough people to church such that just 1 in 50 of the congregation successfully asks an extra person who stays, then our churches will stop shrinking. Surely that's do-able? And if we could have more than 1 in 50 people successfully ask people to come, then our churches would start growing. Trust me, I know how hard, how counter-cultural this can be. Speaking for myself, I have only very recently got over my inhibitions about inviting some of our non-church-going friends to our carol services and family masses, and they haven't all started coming. So I do understand the challenge. But it is so worth doing. Remember, it will make a difference even if only 1 in 50 invitations leads to someone coming to faith.

I want to end with a prayer. And I trust you won't mind that it's Lutheran, rather than catholic...

Lord God, you have called your servants to ventures of which we cannot see the ending, by paths as yet untrodden, through perils unknown. Give us faith to go out with good courage, not knowing where we go, but only that your hand is leading us and your love supporting us; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.