



God for All Vision and Strategy Summary

This is a summary expression of God for All, an ecumenical vision and strategy for the Church in Cumbria. Much of this vision and strategy will be worked out and interpreted at a local level, but this document aims to summarise the key principles and approaches to the vision and strategy that will direct the Church in Cumbria for the next decade or so.

This document draws on multiple sources and previous work that has happened under God for All and the ecumenical county, as such it is not possible to attribute to single authors. However, this iteration of the strategy has been brought together by a group of editors, namely Stewart Fyfe, Richard Pratt, Derek Hurton, Kerry Roughton, and Andrew Norman.

Why vision and strategy?

Do we really need more vision and strategy? Those with long memories will look back to the Decade of Evangelism in the 1990s, Survival to Revival in the 2000s, Growing Disciples and the earlier incarnation of God for All, leading up to 2020. Notwithstanding all these strategies, Church attendance has declined steadily. In this light, particularly at a time when many of us are just focussing on recovering mental wellbeing after the Covid lockdowns, people perhaps have good reason to face a new vision and strategy with a sinking heart and to doubt whether it will make any difference. Yet the Bible says “Where there is no vision, the people perish”. (Proverbs 29:18)

For this reason, we have approached this renewed strategy with a principle of “realism and hope”. If we can begin with a realistic assessment of the challenge and devise a more realistic set of objectives, we can perhaps devise a strategy that gives us hope. It is realism to acknowledge that there are many structural factors in our society beyond our control, which make any strategy for restoring Churchgoing to levels seen in previous generations extremely likely to fail.

At the same time, we know from personal experience that the Gospel still has an astonishing power to turn around individual lives. People are still receptive to God. We also know that even a very small local Church can have a remarkable impact on its local community, and we celebrate that for generations, our churches are a Christian presence in these communities across the county. There is real hope and we can base our strategy on a realistic assessment of that hope.

Facing an uncertain future with realism and hope requires a particular approach to strategy, one that doesn't present all the answers, but allows us to explore the future together. We have adopted a recognised model for ‘adaptive change’ – navigating an uncertain future with shared purpose. The model is as follows:

1. **The whole organisation** needs to be involved in **diagnosing** what the issues are (for us, the ‘whole organisation’ means the church in all four denominations, as well as God);
2. Together, discern and re-articulate our **core values**;
3. We then devise a **guiding principle** based on the principle of **faithful improvisation**, applying our core values in a set of appropriate actions that address our diagnosis;
4. Finally, we apply **continual adaptation** – continually learning the lessons as we go and adapting accordingly.

Diagnosis and Values: the journey of God for All

For the last few years, we have been following this approach of adaptive change, beginning by involving as many people as possible across the Church in Cumbria in refreshing our God for All vision and strategy. It began in 2019 with the “**100 Days of Prayer**” and the “**100 days of Listening**”.



In the Autumn and Winter of 2021/22 we completed a listening exercise called “**Envisioning the Future Church**”, hearing from many Mission Communities across the county. And, of course, we have had continual learning over the past 8 years from the ups and downs of Mission Communities since they first emerged across County.

For Cumbria, our vision remains **God for All**. This vision is one rooted in mission and supported by four key values that frame our priorities:

1. Follow Daily:

We will help each other to follow Jesus more closely, seeking to grow as his disciples in all aspects of life, both corporately and as individuals

2. Care Deeply:

We will listen to our local communities, and respond in loving service, seeking to transform injustice, challenge oppression and pursue peace & reconciliation

3. Speak Boldly:

We will share our faith in Jesus Christ in everyday ways, seeking to connect with everyone, especially those currently unrepresented in our churches. We’ll do this in both time-honoured & pioneering ways.

4. Tread Gently:

We will strive to safeguard the integrity of God’s creation, seeking to sustain and renew the life of the earth

These are the building blocks that help us define our core purpose as Church and our main tasks. They are not, of themselves, the strategy, but rather the values and priorities to which the strategy is accountable.

Guiding Principle: how we are approaching our task

Key principles:

1. Faithful Improvisation

How we will navigate into the future is similar to the process of improvisation in music. It is not uncommon for a jazz band leader to begin with a well-known melody, a common key and an agreed progression of chord changes. To begin with, the whole band plays the familiar melody in concert. Then, each member of the band, has a solo – each playing the tune in his or her own instrument. They are invited to play the tune ‘their way’, innovating variations of melody or rhythm, based on the ‘voice’ of their own instrument and their own creativity. As the solos pass around the band, each has to pick up where the previous player left off and move the tune on in their own way. At the end, the skill of the band leader is to bring it all back together into the whole. The same tune has been played throughout, but it sounds very different according to who is playing it and the circumstances in which their turn had to be played. The final tune, though very recognisable, is usually far more exciting because of the way that each player has enriched it and found new depths and possibilities in the music.

This is how we see our journey as the Church in Cumbria. Our challenge is to find ways to proclaim the faith afresh in our generation, moving together on the core values and doctrines that underpin the faith, but encouraging individual expression and creativity as we find new ways to express the gospel which demonstrate its relevance and life-giving hope in our generation. As the story progresses, we find new depths and possibilities and create something even more exciting – yet it remains rooted and recognisably the same familiar tune! The music is about God, it is rooted in God and is for God. It is a song of love and hope for the world, and must be played with such reverence and joy that others will be drawn to it, listen to it and have the courage also to join in.



This improvisation will need to mark all our doings – at County level between the denominational partners as we open up new possibilities, at Mission Community level as we find new ways to connect with our local communities, and at individual level as we find new depths in the faith for ourselves and new ways to express it and live it out in our lives.

2. A Shared Understanding of Mission

The starting point for all mission and all our reflections on mission is God the Holy Trinity. The God who has revealed his love and purposes in his Son, Jesus Christ, and who continues to enliven and equip his Church for the work of ministry through the gift and inspiration of the Holy Spirit. The Church, the body of Christ, is a community that readily engages with the world by carrying the ongoing mission of God within it, as those who are sent to carry on and carry out the apostolic witness in and for the life and well-being of our communities. For our county, we want to recognise four areas as being key to our shared understanding of this mission:

Strength in Diversity: We believe there is strength in having imaginative, diverse, vibrant, and locally driven mission, which is lived out through local Christians and churches working together for the sake of reaching everyone with the good news of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Living in hope: Our approach to mission needs to be rooted in faith, trusting in God's purposes and provision for all that lies ahead. Nevertheless, our confidence in God is balanced alongside our awareness of decline in attendance and finance over many years, and the social factors beyond our control which affect that, a reality which has to shape our thinking and planning.

Local is key: Understanding the locality and geography of an area and the holiness of place is an important aspect of mission.

Discipling All: Both to support discipleship growth within existing church communities and encourage new people to explore faith. This includes both support for Mission Communities to build capability and confidence in sharing together in a collaborative approach to mission and targeted support for specific groups of leaders.

In having this shared understanding of mission we hope to show that with hope and confidence in the promises of God, each expression or incarnation of church should and can be enabled to flourish. That each expression recognises our shared calling into the wider mission of the Church as we seek to participate in and respond to the mission of God alive and at work in the world to reach those who are yet to encounter God's love for themselves.

Appropriate Action: Some Key approaches:

1. Mission Communities as the building block

At the heart of the strategy are our ecumenical Mission Communities, which have formed across Cumbria since 2014. They are precious because they help to keep the Church local. When God saved the world, he didn't do it with a mass programme imposed from the centre. Instead, he was born in a particular time and place, showing us what it was to "love God with all your heart...and your neighbour as yourself". Theologians call this the 'incarnation' – God taking on human flesh ('carne' in Latin). The Church, as Jesus' body, is still called to be incarnational, rooted in a particular time and place.

For that reason, the local church is at the heart of this strategy. However, as Christians we are called into one body. God, on creating humanity, said of Adam, "it is not good for the man to be alone."



God has given us the gift of each other and, through Jesus' redeeming death, has reconciled us to each other, and to him. God's Church is one Church. Like the persons of God within the Holy Trinity, we remain distinct, yet we are one. Therefore, without losing our local characteristics or traditions of faith, we are looking to navigate the future together as one body, made up of many parts.

From this, it will be understood that Mission Communities are primarily a theological idea – a response to God's call about the kind of Church he wants us to be. But they are also pragmatic. We are no longer supported by the large numbers once seen in each local community. Few of our churches appear to have a rosy future left to their own resources. However, if we simply allow our weaker churches to die, we will soon be left without a Christian presence in every community. We believe that it is by collaborating together that we have the best opportunity to retain local Christian communities across Cumbria – and for our Anglican partners, that includes a continued commitment to the parish.

A central part of Mission Communities is that local Christians will come together, under the guidance and inspiration of the Holy Spirit to:

- Discern what God is calling the Church to be and do in our various contexts, developing appropriate local strategies, priorities and plans;
- Serve our communities together in Christ's name;
- Reach out to our communities as one;
- Be a local presence of worship and prayer for our communities;
- Improvise faithfully as we proclaim the Gospel afresh in this generation.
- Resource the body of Christ so that He might be at work in us.

The key hallmarks of Mission Communities are:

- **Empowering:** they empower the whole people of God for their mission and ministry;
- **Collaboration:** they encourage collaboration between denominations, between communities, between clergy and laity, between church and community;
- **Praying** together, regularly, as a priority;
- **Ecumenical:** they seek to be Christian first and foremost and to present a united common purpose to our communities as we serve them in Christ's name;
- **Resourceful:** together, they can do more, both by sharing the gifts and calling of God's people, thinking imaginatively, and by pulling together to fund projects which individual churches could not afford by themselves;
- **Local:** they remain locally focused: planning based on local needs and opportunities and enabling mission to happen at local level, not as a central imposition;
- **Mutual accountability:** recognising the impact our actions and omissions have on one another and making ourselves accountable to each other, to God and to the episcopal leadership of the Church (however that might be expressed in each denomination).

Mission Communities are **not** about:

- **Centralisation:** We are not looking to centralise power or decision-making. There are some things that can be better done together, by sharing resources, dreaming and planning together and avoiding 'reinventing the wheel' – achieving both economies of scale and critical mass. Likewise, we need to make room for the prophetic and apostolic guidance of our episcopal leadership (as expressed in each denomination), but the main purpose of a mission community is to keep the church as locally-focused as possible.
- **Uniformity:** We are not expecting denominational or local spiritual traditions to be abandoned or amalgamated into a lowest common denominator. The primary task of a mission community is not to achieve a single joint worship service on a Sunday, or get everyone doing the same



thing. Rather, it is about how we use the riches of our spiritual heritage to explore new ways of reaching our communities with the redeeming love of God. Unity, not uniformity is our aim.

- **Exclusivism:** It would be counter to the spirit of God for All if it were to become an exclusive partnership between only the covenanted denominations. Where there are good Churches Together networks and other important denominational links, we encourage these to continue. We continue to be committed members of Churches Together in Cumbria and they, in turn, support Mission Communities. All examples of collaboration in Christ's name are welcomed and encouraged within this strategy.

2. Component strategies – what are we focussing on at a county level

We will be focusing at County level on seven components of the strategy, specific spheres of action with individual aims that we believe will equip Mission Communities. These components are organised into three groups:

Strategic assets and resources:

Ministry: helping the church to discern and release the ministry it needs, both in terms of people and gifts.

Buildings: helping Mission Communities to plan the future of our physical presence in local communities and think through how buildings can be sustainable servants of our communities.

Strategic themes:

Growing Younger: helping the Church to engage more effectively with young people.

Church Planting and Pioneering: helping to extend our reach to those who do not currently engage with Church.

Eco: helping us to achieve our environmental goals e.g. The Church of England's target for becoming Net Carbon Zero by 2030.

Strategic enablers:

Schools: supporting our local schools, particularly (but not exclusively) the Church schools family, in line with the Church in Cumbria's Vision for Education 2018 to promote Jesus' promise of '*life in all its fullness*'.

Digital: helping the Church to engage more effectively in the digital environment.

3. Oversight

At county level, we intend to work together across the denominational traditions to provide shared oversight. We recognise that micro-management from the centre is not helpful. Neither is it possible, from the vantage point of a central office, to know what is best for the local church. Much of what is done within this strategy will have to be worked out locally, but with support from those given the task of central oversight in our denominations. We see shared oversight manifesting through five aspects:

1. To see the big picture, co-ordinating information from our national bodies, our wider contacts and our overview of the local church, to give a helpful picture of what might be coming over the hill.
2. To connect us together, to help us hear one another's stories, to keep us in touch with one another and to collaborate effectively.
3. To sit outside of the everyday familiarity of the local context and to offer helpful insight, through probing questions, encouragements and appropriate challenge.
4. To have an oversight role in instigating initiatives that are key strategic priorities
5. To tell the story of what, together, we are doing.



Putting it all together- The parable of the Garden

We are not trying to pre-determine the Church of the future. We are journeying into the unknown. This is not a strategy that outlines a utopian vision of the future assuming that, with hard work, we will bring it to fruition. It is a process that helps us navigate the future together with **realism and hope**.

Nonetheless, any strategy has to start with the end in view and that requires some vision of what the Church of the future might look like and we are conceiving that as 'a parable of the Garden'. Just as Jesus told parables throughout the Gospels, we want to explore how a garden might be a parable of how the Church in Cumbria might flourish. For example, work in a garden involves ideas and practices like preparing the soil, sowing, planting, pruning, grafting, fertilizing, overseeing the whole, inspiring and building up the next generation of gardeners, a little benign neglect and allowing God space to work. A healthy garden does not need to be large to be a flourishing place of growth, reproduction and abundance.

A healthy garden is a structured, productive space, constructed around the well-established plants, those with deep roots and a visible presence, and which also represent the memory of the garden in this place. However, it is also a place of new varieties, some cross-fertilised and some imported. Sometimes you have to let things grow to see if they will work. There is an element of trial and error in the development of a mature garden.

A healthy garden contains the past, present, and future within it.

Features of our county garden might be:

- The **well-established plants**: the **traditional patterns of ministry** that remain deeply embedded in our communities will continue to be. Over time, these will change, but the transition is gradual from one planting to another.
- The **grafts**: in a garden, a graft is where you take well-established root stock and grow something out from it that works in a new way or place. A **Fresh Expression** is an equivalent in the Church – where the roots are based on the traditional elements of Christian worship and mission, but the visible expression of it looks very different.
- The **cuttings**: cuttings are taken from parts of a well-established plant and placed in new soil that grows a new plant, as vigorous as the old. **Church planting** is an established feature of Church life and we see appropriate Church planting as a feature of the Church of the future.
- The **seeds**: sometimes, in a garden, you take seeds, sow them and see what grows best in a particular place. **Pioneering** is an example of this in Church life, where we take the seeds of the Gospel out into the world and see what grows from them.
- **Working the soil**: In a garden, a lot of work is done to improve the soil to make it more receptive to the seed. During Covid we saw the power of **Digital platforms** for reaching people that we had never previously engaged with before. An effective digital presence will be an important part of the Church of the future.
- **Letting some beds lie fallow**: There are times when parts of the garden need a rest, but will come back into use in a later season.
- **Letting some parts run wild**: we cannot/should not control everything in a garden. Sometimes in managing a garden we need to let things grow and respond to what happens;
- **Pruning**: some things will have become fruitless and lifeless. Stopping doing some things will allow energy to be redistributed into more life-giving things.

Together, the whole becomes the Church. The term being used to describe this is '**mixed ecology**' – describing the Church of the future as a rich landscape of plants that look very different, but which are nonetheless part of the same garden.