

Forget the former things; do not dwell on the past. See, I am doing a new thing. Now it springs up, do you not perceive it? I am making a way in the desert and streams in the wasteland.

(Isaiah 43: 18,19)

SIGNS OF GROWTH SIGNS OF LIFE



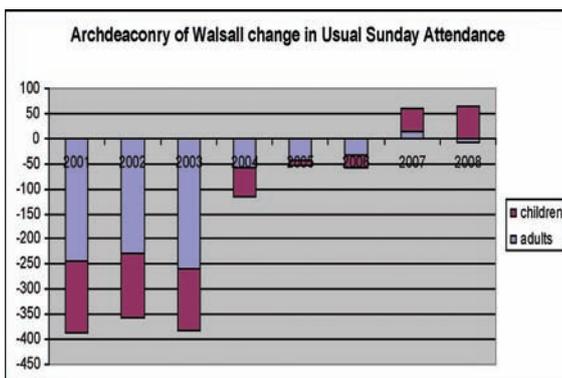
Photo: Alison Morgan

As 'Growth Officer' for the Lichfield Diocese, **Bob Jackson** (pictured) was asked to focus on generating new signs of life and hope. Here he shares some of his findings

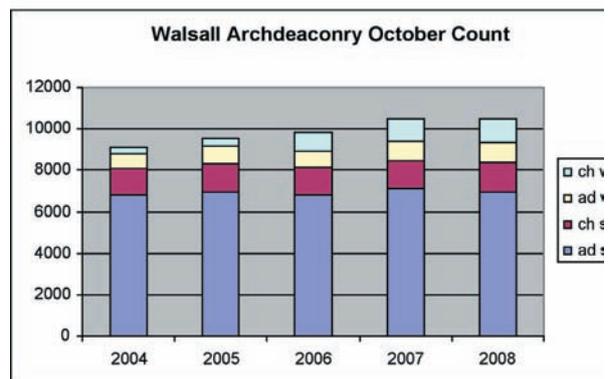
I'm afraid archdeacons get involved in endless committees, buildings problems, financial crises, cuts, vacancies, church rows, complaints, discipline procedures and other signs of institutional paralysis, human sin, and church decay.

So what does an archdeacon know about signs of life? Well, one sign of life in our Diocese was that five years ago I was appointed half-time as Archdeacon and half-time as Growth Officer to help lead a new diocesan strategy entitled 'Going for Growth'. The Diocese of Lichfield was no longer to focus on organising its own decline but on generating new signs of life, hope and growth.

So how have we got on in an archdeaconry of 108 churches in the Black Country? We had been losing 350 to 400 a year from usual Sunday attendance, children at a faster rate than adults. Now Sunday congregations are growing slightly, led by the children.



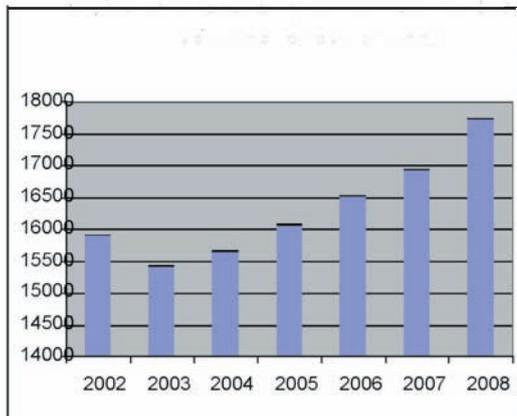
The October Count measure includes weekday attendance, and this suggests that attendance has risen from around 9000 in 2004 to just over 10,000 last year.



Christmas attendance gives an indication of the total number of people interested even minimally in churchgoing and this too has risen from 15,500 in 2003 to 17,700 last year.

The number of infant baptisms is determined mainly by Christendom sociology, but adult baptisms are a pretty good indicator of conversions – if there are genuine signs of growing spiritual life we would expect the number of adult baptisms to be rising. The number is still modest but it has risen from 125 in 2004 to 200 last year.

So there are some good signs of life in the statistical indicators we use to give us eyes to see the overall

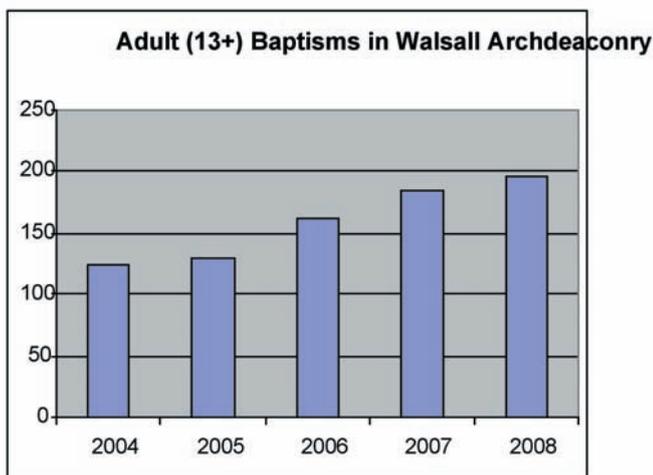


picture. And the old signs of death are in retreat. New life and growth is fragile, and sometimes hard to comprehend if you have lived your whole life with decline. It still feels like a few small springs and little streams in what is otherwise a spiritual desert. But we do see God doing a new thing and we are trying to nurture the signs of new life we find.

We have encouraged all our churches to take part in Back to Church Sunday, and great numbers of people have responded to the invitations.

We know that this turnaround is connected with our new focus and mindset from the 'Going for Growth' diocesan strategy because the numerical turnaround is correlated in specific churches with identifying policies. Here are ten of the main ingredients:

1. Churches tend to grow when they have received a grant from the diocesan 'Growth Fund' to help them with a church-growth initiative. The fund disburses £300,000 a year.
2. In particular a number of churches have been enabled to appoint a youth or children's or families lay outreach worker and these churches have led the turnaround in the numbers of children, teens and families.
3. We noticed that the fastest shrinking churches were the larger ones (100 to 250 adults on a Sunday). After a series of day conferences, consultancies and networking opportunities this size group of churches has stopped shrinking and started to grow a little.



4. We have planted three new fresh expression style churches, and encouraged the existing parish churches to start a wide range of new services, worship opportunities and fresh expressions.
5. We noticed that churches were losing people in vacancies over six months so we have accelerated the process in order to reduce vacancy lengths to a maximum of six months where we can. And we're using interim ministers in certain places. So we no longer lose so many people in vacancies.
6. We try to appoint new clergy who will be good leaders in mission.
7. We've stepped up our leadership training for both lay leaders and clergy. This is both in house offers and resources to access outside training opportunities.
8. We've asked our churches to produce and implement Mission Action Plans. These focus their minds and intentions on mission and growth.
9. We have encouraged all our churches to take part in Back to Church Sunday, and great numbers of people have responded to the invitations.
10. We've recently been developing and using a training course for churches in how to welcome and integrate newcomers. God is giving us increasing numbers of people who try us out but sadly only about 10% seem to stick. Churches that focus on welcome and appoint a welcome team can increase that percentage and then grow. It's called *Everybody Welcome* and has just been published by Church House publishing.

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'Forget the former things and do not dwell on the past' says Isaiah 43. We were a pastoral church caring for a Christian nation. But that world is dying. The new thing now springing up is a Church of England that is a missionary church to a post Christian culture. We've made a modest start on living out this new self-understanding but the results are already significant. Morale and expectations have risen, and many churches are much happier places.

Numbers aren't everything – the spiritual renewal and kingdom transformation agendas must proceed hand in hand with the numerical growth agenda. Usually churches only grow in numbers when they improve in quality – people are much more likely to join church communities and not leave if they make friends there, meet the living God and share in making the world a better place. So signs of growth are also signs of life. Let's pray for lots more of them! 

about the writer

The Venerable Bob Jackson combines his role as Archdeacon of Walsall in the Lichfield Diocese with an innovative role as Bishop's growth officer. However in August this year he is retiring to concentrate on church growth consultancy. Before then, he will take inspiration from Walsall author Jerome K Jerome and spend a week with the Bishop of Wolverhampton and the Archdeacon of Lichfield on a 'three men on a boat' tour of the Wolverhampton Episcopal Area.