Engage Politically - How to make change happen

"I don't need to do anything about it, because someone else will"

It is human nature to think that somebody else is more knowledgeable, has more time, more skills or is better able to achieve something or some sort of change than you can, and often we leave it to the Rector to "do something about it"… But the information gleaned by the diocesan synod political focus group suggests this is not the case.

Many initiatives began with one or two people thinking "what if...?" In most cases the vision grew into something else as more people joined the initiative with the relevant skills. In every case, one person dreamed a dream, someone else caught the vision, and others had the skills to bring the vision to reality.

Edmund Burke, Irish statesman, philosopher and MP for the Whig Party (1766-1794), has been proved right time and time again, that *"The only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is for good people to do nothing."*

Twelve Steps to bring about change

1 Local issues

The first thing to do is to identify where change is needed in your own locality.

National or even international issues may be of great concern, but they are not necessarily the top priorities for local action unless it can make a difference. It will be of more benefit to concentrate on issues which both have an impact on people locally and which can be addressed by local action.

To identify the issues which have an impact locally, talk to as wide a range of people as possible, both individuals and organisations. Ask the County Council through your local councillors. Listen to local radio and read the local press, keep an eye on social media. If there is disagreement, try to talk to people on both sides of the argument and avoid the "echo chamber".

Once you believe you have identified the issues, consider whether there is local action which would make a difference and what that action might be. Remember to review as many options as possible before narrowing them down. Your findings may be the key others have missed.

2 Do some research

Don't assume you are the first to notice the issue. Your concern might have a history, so ask around, review previous press coverage for clues and find out if anyone has tried to tackle it before and if so:

- How did they go about it?
- Did they have any success?
- Can you build on what they did?
- If they were not successful, can you learn from any mistakes they made or blind pathways they encountered?
- Try to talk to someone who was involved, if possible.

If no-one has ever addressed your concern, can you establish why not? What are the barriers which have deterred other people? What are the opportunities which they have missed? You may well uncover information no-one else has found. Engage with the process.

3 Build a team

A team is much stronger than one person on their own, however committed. And a team of people from diverse backgrounds with a range of skills is much stronger than a group of like-minded people. Include people for their skills rather than their church alliances, but make sure they share your vision. Play to people's strengths and be ready to delegate.

Expect some disagreement within the team and try to build consensus through discussion and involvement. Food often helps. Be open to constructive criticism and new ideas; don't become too "cosy" and beware of reinforcing each other's' assumptions and prejudices.

If the team is large in number, you may need to consider dividing the work into separate strands with dedicated teams for each in order to keep things manageable.

4 Build alliances with others

A community of organisations working in unity has greater ability to be heard than one working on its own: aim to work with others, even those who do not share all your beliefs or whose vision only touches your vision.

- Be aware of what other organisations are doing
- Look for opportunities to collaborate rather than competing.
- Relevant organisations may include Parish, Town, District or County Councils, charities and voluntary organisations, local businesses, local health services, the police and others.
- Be ready to work at relationships with other organisations
- Participate in cross-organisational groups.
- Avoid unnecessary duplication and look for ways to add value to existing work elsewhere.

5 Marshal your arguments

Ensure there is clarity as to what you are seeking to achieve. Are you:

- Seeking a change in government policy?
- Looking for additional resources for a project?
- Wanting to highlight a hidden need?
- Opposing potential changes that you feel will have damaging consequences?
- Aiming to develop church led new community or school services?

Is this a specific local benefice matter or a deanery/diocese/national matter? How you seek to maximise influence, publicity and /or support will be very different depending on the answers to the above.

Be clear as to priorities and make sure the aims are shared and supported with relevant church bodies. All involved must understand what is being sought. Clear and concise messaging will not only assist those who are helping with the initiative but will be more effective when trying to influence others. Mixed messaging can easily undermine any influence you have. Identifying the most important aims will help in building alliances and in consultations and negotiations where compromises may need to be made.

Make sure that the necessary consideration and research has been undertaken so you have your arguments ready as to why we are doing this, what it is for, demonstrating the need and the benefits it will have. Anyone who is attending or speaking on behalf of the church/deanery or diocese must be fully briefed on this.

Letter writing campaigns often gain more success than writing emails.

Ensure the message is clear and consistent at all times.

6 Keep the vision clear

Ensure there is clear leadership. Who will be the 'go to' person to coordinate the campaign/initiative?

If wider than a benefice, have you got the right people in place at the relevant levels to ensure you maximise influence? If for example this is a deanery initiative, has the deanery appointed someone who is seen as the lead liaison with local politicians and other key people in the area? Have you got someone who would liaise with the local press? These relationships can take time to build.

They can ensure however that you have a recognised representative able to speak on behalf of our churches on such initiatives and they can often create an easier pathway for politicians and the media to seek our views on other matters. It is harder to get a hearing if you are seen as an individual rather than being able to speak for your local churches or the local church if at that level.

7 Manage the media

Be clear at what stage media involvement would be helpful.

Often discussions to influence matters are not best dealt with via social media. Having face to face discussions with relevant politicians, officers, agencies or businesses, at least in the first instance, is likely to achieve more.

Joint press statements on new initiatives supported by our churches and either local government or business then highlight what has been achieved.

If there is a need to bring pressure on local decision makers, then any press campaign needs carefully handling. You are not in charge of how that is reported and what responses are made by others.

- Make sure that you have identified who is responsible for communications with the media for the campaign. They should authorise or send out any press release and liaise with whoever is leading the campaign as to who should undertake any interviews.
- Make sure that your media campaign is considered and agreed prior to any press release including the timescale.
- Make sure you have decided whether this includes a letter writing and/or social media campaign as well as any other activities that will potentially attract support and help influence the local agenda and maximise pressure if required on any forthcoming decisions.
- Unless it is a big and ongoing issue or campaign you are likely to get only a limited opportunity to highlight matters in the press and this might well be limited to the local paper. You therefore need to maximise its effect.
- Many local papers are short of material and therefore there are better opportunities for getting a story in if you write it! A short headline which highlights the issue is key as that is all many people will read. Certainly, ensure all the key points are briefly made in the first few sentences. See our How to? on writing a press release for ideas.
- If interviews either on TV, Radio or for the printed media are required, ensure that the spokesperson is someone who knows the core arguments as again it is key the right messages get across. Anyone being interviewed needs to ensure that whatever they are asked, they keep referring to the key arguments that you want to get across.

8 Keep everybody informed

Having a regular update email/leaflet to those involved is essential particularly if further action is required. If people know what has successfully been undertaken so far this may encourage them to support further action such as writing letters or forwarding stories via social media.

It is important for those leading the initiative/campaign to review progress and next steps regularly, including whether it has run its course. Diocesan comms team might be able to help

9 Get to know the movers and shakers

Your local politicians, both local and national MPs survive or fall by their ability to bring about change for the common good. This is their oxygen, their bread and butter. Talk to them, get them on board as soon as you have a valid argument.

Don't forget the churches' own "politicians": Our General Synod reps might also bring insights on how to bring change about. Understand their agendas and try to work with them.

10 Expect opposition

Don't expect everyone to share your enthusiasm for change. People in your local congregations may be your greatest critics.

There is often antipathy towards churches amongst local politicians who see local churches as at worst an irrelevance, and at best as do-gooders with a rose-tinted view of reality. Seek to prove them wrong by your professional arguments.

11 Be realistic

Be realistic about time scale and celebrate small victories. All change takes time. Do not anticipate easy wins or quick outcomes. It might take months or years. Refresh your vision constantly keeping your original vision in sight all the time.

Along the way there will be small achievements, someone offering skills to support your vision, gaining access to people you didn't expect to be able to meet. Tell people about them. This will build local confidence in your vision, and momentum which might bring about the change you hope for. Feed these to those praying for the vision to unfold.

There will also be setbacks. It will not all be plain sailing. Your confidence should be boosted by earlier successes. Reflect on what might have happened, and learn lessons from the experience. But if others in authority whom you trust tell you it is a non-starter, then heed their wisdom, and move on.

12 Allow others to take the vision forward

You may be only seeking to effect change by influencing others, or you might think you can bring this about yourself. You might well find others with more relevant skills than yours need to be trusted to take your vision forward.

Although this might change your role, remember that it is the vision to change which is most important.

Look for things you might have missed, there may be small victories, steps along the way. You may have to wait for other things to happen. Your timing might have to be adjusted. Keep in touch with your vision whatever happens, and never lose heart.

Pray constantly.

Have we done it before?

Addington Scheme: During a bad outbreak of swine fever, the Rector of Charsfield, Richard Addington became aware of farmers in his parish who were struggling to make ends meet and suggested to his PCC that they set up a small fund to help tide them over. The need grew, and due to failing health, he approached the diocesan rural chaplain, to see if she could help. A number of other farmers were contacted, and the Addington Fund was formed. This eventually became part of the Farm Crisis Network and is now administered nationally by the Farm Community Network. www.addingtonfund.org.uk www.fcn.org.uk

VAT on church repairs: In 1996 The organist at Barnham in west Suffolk was annoyed that the church had to pay so much VAT on its repairs, when the building was acting as a vital social hub in the community. He got the PCC to pass a motion which was adopted by Diocesan synod and sent to General Synod to gain national support. After a debate in 1998 it became Church of England policy and the Government were persuaded to launch the Listed Places of Worship Scheme, which to date has handed back over £350 million to churches nationwide. www.lpwscheme.org.uk

Town pastor schemes: A local initiative of churches working ecumenically and with local councils have started town pastor schemes in many of our towns including Ipswich, Bury St Edmunds, Felixstowe, Haverhill, Lowestoft, Newmarket, Stowmarket, Sudbury, Woodbridge & Leiston. www.townpastors.org.uk

Christians Against Poverty: With a small donation and big faith, John Kirkby started Christians Against Poverty in 1996, in his hometown of Bradford. He believed God was calling him to sacrifice his career in finance and use his knowledge of the industry to help the poor. His faith adventure led him to people crippled by debt; parents who couldn't feed their children, families facing eviction and desperate people living in fear and without hope. He used his expertise to negotiate with creditors, set up budgeting systems and offer a lifeline to those trapped in debt. Twenty-four years later it has become a respected international organisation, with over five hundred trained debt counsellors in the UK alone. www.capuk.org

Christians and climate change: In 1983 the Harris and Batty families through prayer felt God calling them to establish a charity to draw attention to environmental issues. The result was the setting up of the A Rocha Trust set up to fund a study centre in Portugal. Today the Christian charity A Rocha international encourages people around the world to engage with environmental issues, sponsors and supports the "Eco-Church" movement, and is a world leader in climate change research and practical conservation worldwide. www.arocha.org.

St Nicholas Hospice: In 1982 the Rector of Ingham observed how good hospice care was and felt God calling him to start one in Bury St Edmunds. He had his eye on a building in his parish, but it came clear that somewhere else was needed. A subcommittee of the PCC was formed and brought on board a journalist who ran an article, which was seen by someone with a building they didn't know what to do with. Fund raising took off, grants were found, and in a strange twist, the owner of the first building he thought of, became the first medical director. Some people who were inspired by Richard have gone on to help develop hospice facilities in Eastern Europe encouraging former communist government to adopt palliative care as part of their health care provision. www.stnicholashospice.org.uk

Parish Nursing: in 2001 the Rev Helen Wordsworth, a Baptist minister who had been a health visitor, wrote a master's thesis in which she advocated the development of parish nursing, a system developed by churches in the USA in the 1980's. It gradually gained acceptance as a way of assisting the overstretched NHS, with nursing professionals being employed by local churches. Today many churches employ a parish nurse, including churches in Colneys deanery, and Christ Church Moreton hall in Bury St Edmunds. www.parishnursing.org.uk

Other organisations campaigning for political change

Many churches actively support national and local organisations working for political change. Getting involved with existing groups can be equally as productive.

Look for example at the campaigns organised by:

The Womens' Institute : www.thewi.org.

The Mothers' Union: www.mothersunion.org.

School governors: many of our parishes have schools, all of them are within school catchment areas, and many people serve school governing bodies as foundation governors. There is often a need for more people to volunteer as governors, who can shape and encourage educational provision in their locality.

Clothes exchanges: St Edmunds Felixstowe have started a pushchair Pitstop offering a monthly free baby clothes and kit exchange. The Triangle church in Ipswich have a similar initiative for school uniforms.

Better Together: Churches in a town in the east of the diocese offer co-operation with the local council on civic events - "This can be 'run of the mill' but it builds relationships and we are becoming a Local port of call for sympathetic ears and publicising dementia awareness events, education on County Lines etc". Felixstowe churches are working together to encourage "men's sheds" and parish nursing.

Chaplaincy: Churches Together in Felixstowe support an ecumenical "BOOST" chaplain at Felixstowe Academy.

Talitha Koum: a refuge for women recovering from addictions or other life challenges was set up by a group of committed Christians in the Ipswich area. www.talithakoum.org.uk

Ipswich Night Shelter: is an initiative set up by Ipswich churches www.iwns.org.uk

Pop up shops: At least Five churches in Colney's deanery and others in Ipswich deanery have opened "pop up shops" recycling food from local supermarkets but avoiding need for social services referrals that many food banks have.

Young people: Red Lodge are talking to their local council to see how a joint initiative can support young people in their area.

Special needs playgroup: It came to the attention of parents at a church in the east of the County that parents with special needs children were feeling ostracised by the local play group, so they started an after-school 'stay and play' group. Led by the parents themselves and facilitated by the church, they have the church hall as their safe space for their youngsters to run around and to be with no fear of criticism from other parents.

Gatehouse: Gatehouse began life in 1986 as an initiative by Roman Catholic Nun in Bury St Edmunds keen to support young isolated mothers on a deprived estate in Mildenhall, and a day centre for the elderly. In addition, support was also offered for the lonely and housebound in Bury St Edmunds. Gatehouse also supplied hampers for those in need and a Christmas lunch for the vulnerable. It has now become a registered charity, and although it is not a religious organisation, Gatehouse works with local churches, businesses and others to continue to serve the vulnerable and those in need. www.gatehouse.org

Engaging with LGBT+: St John's Felixstowe started an LGBT+ youth group which has grown to be part of local youth provision and has funded posts, with ongoing support from the church.

Food banks: Many local churches work together to run food banks, often with advice and support from the Trussell Trust.

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