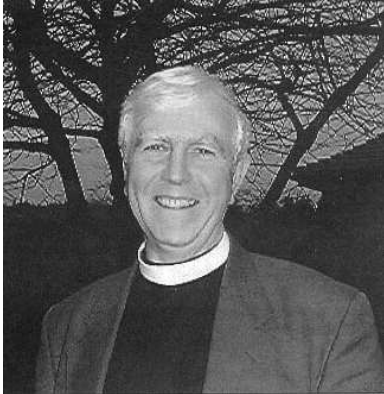


Keeping up with God.

Margaret Thompson found this optimistic article in "Across the See" the diocesan newspaper for Norwich. She pointed out that Clifford Offer had been a BPC curate in the 1970s and would be known to many in our congregation. It is reproduced with the kind permission of "Across the See".

The Venerable Clifford Offer, Archdeacon of Norwich, finds cause for optimism:



The other day I had reason to count the number of clergy in Norwich Diocese. In 1980 it was 317 whereas today it is 306. This led me to look at the national statistics. Unfortunately I couldn't easily find the numbers for 1980, but in 1987 there were 10,791 clergy and 11,305 in 2001. My guess is that a random poll of churchgoers would have painted a more gloomy picture and spoken of a church in decline. But the Church belongs to God and we need to ask ourselves what God is doing. How is He responding to the new cultural landscape in which we all find ourselves?

Well, one of the realities behind these figures is that there are now many non-stipendiary or unpaid clergy in these numbers. They bring a wealth of experience from working outside the Church and in many ways are well suited to help us address issues of culture and of how we can be the Church in the modern age.

Counting clergy led me to go back to 1980 to look at the number of Readers we had then as compared to now. In 1980 there were 159 Readers in the diocese as compared to 214 now. Since 1980 Readers, like clergy, have officially to retire at aged 70 so when this is taken into account the real comparison is 159 - 340, more than double! What this tells us is that while the number of full-time clergy has gone down God continues to provide for his Church in different ways. There is no shortage of people with the ability to teach the faith and sustain the worshipping life of the Church if we are prepared to employ our resources wisely and creatively.

As part of my work it is my privilege to act as a Bishop's Selector, testing the vocation of those who feel called to the ordained ministry. Over the years I have met at Selection Conferences some wonderful and able people, many of them still very young. But what I particularly notice is how many of the candidates come from an evangelical background and have a real heart for mission. It would be wrong to give the impression that it is only evangelical candidates that have a heart for mission, but the overall trend gives me the distinct impression that God is resourcing his Church for a new phase of mission. Change will not happen overnight, but I sense God is building into his Church of the future a more mission-orientated priesthood to meet the needs of the present age.

One of the problems with a secular society is that we get so drawn into it ourselves that it takes our focus off God, and we become more conscious of what is happening around us than in how God is responding to it. So when we realise that secularism is fading and a new hunger for spirituality is emerging we need to try and discern how he is responding to what is happening and how we can co-operate with him. What we do know is that institutional religion is out of favour and so we can't sit back and assume everyone will eventually beat a