

Presidential Address – 1st March 2014

Although this address was written by Bishop Stephen for the Chelmsford Diocesan Synod, we, as his episcopal colleagues, have also put our names to it, as a sign of our collegiality and as a clear indication of our determination to build a mixed economy church, not just on the issue of Fresh Expressions, but on pastoral and sacramental provision for those who for reasons of theological conviction cannot accept the ministry of ordained women, and in the hope that facilitated conversations will enable us to become a church where issues of human sexuality do not divide us, where gay and lesbian people find a welcome in our church, and where homophobia and other inappropriate prejudice is out behind us. We want to be a church where there is good disagreement, and where we have established the boundaries and the behaviours in which this disagreement takes place.

+ David Barking

+ John Bradwell

Oh dear, I am going to begin this address with some words bishops should never utter, “When I was a Vicar...” Ok, I know it was a long time ago, and I know things have changed, but I was a vicar once and this did happen. In fact it is quoted in the *Mission Shaped Church* report, but not attributed. So. Here goes. When I was a Vicar, I inherited a Wednesday morning Eucharist. About five or six faithful souls attended each week. However, during my first year in the parish I noticed it was growing. A young mum came with her two toddlers. Another very fringe member of the Sunday congregation was there most weeks. An older woman whose husband I had buried came along.

I visited these people, and although I was at pains to tell them how welcome they were and how good it was to see them on a Wednesday morning, basically, if I’m honest, the purpose of my visit was to tell them that they really ought to come along on Sunday. After all, Sunday is proper church. They, however, persisted in coming on Wednesdays; and over the course of the following year also started bringing others along. The young mum brought another young mum and another toddler. And nobody had told the older woman that in the Church of England you are not supposed to tell people you are a Christian and she had been telling all her friends about her new found faith and how much she enjoyed the Wednesday morning service. So, there was now a little gaggle of new Christians, all over 65.

It was at this point the penny dropped. I was fighting a rear-guard action to keep Sunday special. Meanwhile the Holy Spirit had danced on ahead of me and was blessing Wednesday. And when I poured some resources into Wednesday – nothing fancy, just singing a couple of hymns, taking a bit more care over the sermon, having coffee after the service, and once a month going back to the Vicarage for some sort of nurture group (of course, if we were doing it today it would be a *Pilgrim* course) – the congregation grew even more. By the time I left that parish, and please bear in mind it was a fairly ordinary council estate parish - it wasn’t unusual to have thirty people at our Wednesday morning mass, and over half of them never came on Sunday.

Too often when we speak about fresh expressions of church, we think of the big, bold, challenging and imaginative ventures, like our own DNA Networks, or Legacy XS, but forget

that there are opportunities in every parish to think creatively about developing new forms of Christian community and new ways of worshipping. Fresh Expressions present us with a spectrum of opportunity that challenges us to think outside the box of Sunday morning. It opens up the possibility for new forms and inherited forms of worship and Christian community to flourish together within a mixed economy church.

I am so delighted that George Lings is with us this morning and will share so much about this with us a little later on.

When I was Missioner in the Wakefield Diocese we did some research on church going habits. To our surprise we found that very few people come to church every single week. Work and family obligations, and the changed nature of Sunday within our culture, mean that for many people it just isn't possible to make this commitment. Many Christians come regularly, but less often. But we also found that wherever a church held regular weekday worship they were attracting people who for all sorts of other reasons couldn't or wouldn't come on Sunday. In my parish that young mum couldn't come on Sunday because her husband wouldn't allow it. The fringe member of the congregation worked most Sundays. The older woman was visiting her family, so Wednesday just suited better.

In the Chelmsford diocese we have two clear strategic aims for the development of Fresh Expressions. First of all and very simply, we want them to become business as usual. We don't want them to be seen as special projects, or even just big projects that only a few churches undertake. We want every church and every Mission and Ministry Unit to think about what opportunities there are to create new communities of faith.

At one end of the spectrum this may be a slightly enhanced weekday Mass, or an after school service. But secondly, and at the other of the spectrum, it will be planting and expressing Christian faith in the cultures that we encounter in the myriad communities we serve, and where church may look very different from what many of us are used to. In particular we want to develop a co-ordinated and strategic response to the many new housing estates being built in all parts of the diocese, so that we can establish new forms of Christian community in each of them. This will, of course, involve ecumenical cooperation. But it will also be a matter of the Church of England rising to the challenge of its historic vocation to be the church for the whole nation.

In every case – in every fresh expression of church as with every traditional expression of church - it will be the same given ingredients of word and sacrament, but cooked up with a flair and imagination that will make it taste and smell fresh and enticing. And in-between, we could all do far worse than simply getting on the Messy Church bandwagon and trying to make sure that in every locality there was an opportunity for families to encounter Christian faith in this way.

As Bishop David looks towards his retirement at the end of his month, the debate this morning provides us with a fitting opportunity to thank God for his pioneering ministry, not least in the championing of the Fresh Expressions agenda through his chairing of the Mission Advisory Group and through his own very distinctive ministry as evangelist and teacher. And I do want to say a few words right at the very end of the Synod about Bishop David's contribution to our diocese but perhaps for a moment here we could pause and thank him for this particular bit of his ministry. David, you are a fresh expression if ever I've seen one.

I am also happy to announce that from September this year Archdeacon Annette will oversee our work with Fresh Expressions, and with the help of Roger Matthews, and especially of course Charlie Kosla whom we also owe so much for the development of this ministry in the diocese, we will develop these two strategic priorities: fresh expressions in every Mission and Ministry Unit; and a strategic response to each of our housing estates. We are setting the bar high.

It is also important to remember that there is nothing new in this. The Christian faith has always been creating new recipes from the same ingredients, discerning what is essential and must be carried forward from one generation to the next, and what is secondary, something that mattered and worked in one context, but is no longer relevant or effective in another. We read about this in the New Testament itself in some of the theological and liturgical controversies and challenges our forebears faced. Should a gentile convert be circumcised before baptism? What food should Christians eat? How do we handle disagreement?

This is our centenary year. Let us remember again the reason we exist. It is to better serve the communities of East London and Essex with the beauty and good news of the gospel of Christ. There is a mission imperative that in this year of all years we rise to the challenge of not just proclaiming this faith afresh, though I do hope that all our parishes are working to put on a Mission Weekend this year, but of finding the appropriate cultural expression of faith that will not only enable people in our context to hear and encounter the gospel, but also live it and celebrate it in a way that is culturally appropriate. This is also the Anglican way. We translated the Bible into the Mother tongue of ordinary people. Now we need to translate the faith again into the cultures we serve. Therefore, at one end of the spectrum we simply cannot ignore the fact that Sunday has changed. And at the other end of the spectrum we must acknowledge, for instance, that young people growing up today with little or no knowledge of the Christian faith are more likely to encounter Christ in a service and community that speaks of that faith in the language of their culture than one that ignores it. Nor can we ignore the fact that issues of gender and sexuality that, for us, seem to have taken on disproportionate importance are, for them, simply not issues at all.

Finally, and mindful that this afternoon we vote on the new package of legislation for the ordination of women to the episcopate, and that the publication of the Pilling Report and the recent House of Bishops statement on same sex marriages has created all sorts of interest and uncertainty, let us remember that the missiological questions that every new culture poses the church, are also theological. Despite the pain that I carry over the hurts and divisions that these issues cause in our church, I am not one of those who says, 'If only we could leave them behind and get on with the real business of preaching the gospel'. These issues are the real business of preaching the gospel. That is why they are so painful. They bring us face to face with the question, 'what does it mean to be made in the image of God?' The Book of Genesis offers us two narratives, so let us not be too quick to say, 'this is what scripture says', and that is the end of the matter. Faithful Christians reading scripture faithfully have reached different conclusions on issues of gender and sexuality.

On the issue of gender, I want you to know that I fully and unequivocally support the ordination of women as bishops and I look forward to the day that they work alongside me in this diocese. I am also deeply thankful that in this new legislation the five principles, that

we will hear more of later, create a framework within which those who happily agree with this development, and those who, for reasons of theological conviction, are still against it, can live in harmony and mutual flourishing within the one church.

On the issue of human sexuality I want you to know that I am aware of and feel for the hurt that the House of Bishops letter has caused to some people, and that I fully support the facilitated conversations that will be set up later this year to help us respond and minister appropriately to gay, lesbian and transgendered people.

On the issue of gender the Church of England and the Anglican Communion has been able to agree that those who accept and those who cannot accept the oversight and ordained ministry of women are both faithful Anglicans. We do not have that sort of good disagreement on the issue of sexuality. That is surely why we need to talk about it.

Since the publication of the House of Bishops Pastoral Letter on same sex marriages, I have received a lot of mail. Some hurt and angry. Others relieved that traditional teaching is upheld. However, that letter begins by making it clear that LGBT people are welcome in the church and welcome in the ministry of the church. I want that to be known in our diocese. I want gay and lesbian Christians to know that I do believe there may be ways of enabling them to flourish in the church. I also want those who continue to hold to the traditional view to know that as far as I am concerned they are not homophobic. Indeed, this remains the position of the Church of England wherever we stand on this issue. Nothing in our doctrine or practice has changed. However, to the eyes of the society in which we serve we look homophobic, and this should cause us all concern.

But most of all I want it to be known that I believe we need an honest conversation. And we need it for the sake of the gospel.

The context in which we minister has changed. We need to rise and meet the challenge that this culture poses, not least from sisters and brothers within our own community. The outcome of the facilitated conversations is not, therefore, already decided. Far from it. But the agenda is set. There are real and substantial theological and pastoral discussions ahead of us. Faithful gay and lesbian Christians are often forced to live a lie within the church they serve so well. This grieves me. It can't be right. At the same time, faithful followers of Christian tradition feel as if the carpet of the faith is being pulled out from under them. This grieves me too. I want us to have an open conversation where we can be honest with one another, and hear more clearly whatever it is that the Spirit may be saying to the church.

Of course this will be difficult. Of course it will be painful. Of course we have to take heed of our brothers and sisters in other parts of the Anglican Communion. I go to Kenya next week. So I am very well aware of this. But behind the presenting issues of gender and sexuality there are other vital questions which will form the agenda for these facilitated conversations. What sort of church does God want us to be? One where we all agree? Or one with diversity and difference? And if so, what are the boundaries of legitimate disagreement? And how can we live with diversity? And what does it mean to be made in the image of God and yet made with such variety and difference?

We find ourselves standing where our forebears have stood before, taking the gospel into the uncharted territory of post-modern, post Christendom, 21st century culture. There are

things to embrace and there are things to resist. The gospel will stay unashamedly and determinedly the same. But as we open ourselves to this missionary challenge I believe we will discover, within this unchanging gospel, new depths and new insights; and speaking it in the strange tongue of this culture, hear it as if for the first time.

Brothers and sisters, in all our debates today, whether it be the pioneering agenda of fresh expressions or the decision to open up the episcopate to women as well as men, and in all those other challenges that lie ahead, let us love one another. Let us be patient with one another. Let us not look at ourselves but gaze upon God and ask the Holy Spirit to orchestrate our differences in such a way that leads us beyond the disharmony of adversarial competition to a vision of that new humanity we have in Christ, that we may speak the gospel, its challenge to repentance and its promise of new life, to every person and every culture.

+Stephen Chelmsford