

NEWSLETTER: LENT 2016

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

Although the church calendar has never been slavishly followed by Anglican evangelicals, most of us are very conscious of the ministry opportunities that can be presented by particular times and seasons. This being Lent, I'm reminded of the challenge I once set for my congregation at St Matthew's in Plymouth. It was for members of the congregation to mention the name of Jesus to someone – anyone, even a fellow member of the congregation – once every day of Lent. Time after time, people told me how difficult it was!

Encouraging fellow Christians to talk about Jesus is an uphill task, but the job has just been made a bit easier by Paul Williams whose short and easy to read new book 'Intentional' has just been published by 10 Publishing. It aims to help people over their fear of witnessing to Christ and I warmly commend it!

Programme of Visits

The last few months have got a lot busier for me as I have pursued my programme of meeting every diocesan bishop in order to discuss how I might be able to minister in their dioceses – and where possible also meeting senior staff teams. By the end of the Spring I will have had 30 such meetings. I hope to hold discussions with the remaining 12 diocesan bishops by the end of the summer. In my last Newsletter I asked for prayer that doors would open for ministry as a result and in a number of dioceses the Lord has done just that! I am rejoicing in particular that the new version of the 'London Plan' (covering the Diocese of London) specifically includes a role for me and that arrangements are being made for me to ordain some clergy there; that the Bishop of Manchester has been keen to agree a wide-ranging role for me in relation to conservative evangelical parishes; and that I am being well involved in Sheffield, Southwark and Chelmsford Dioceses.

My visits to churches have also stepped up a gear, so that I now have a fairly regular weekly preaching ministry. By the beginning of April, I will have:

- preached at 16 Sunday services, including two Cathedral services
- conducted 4 confirmations
- led a parish weekend
- spoken to 6 PCCs, and
- led 2 PCC/leaders awaydays, as well as a DEF morning.

Over the next two months I will also be speaking at three gatherings of evangelical clergy from different dioceses.



Congregation of Gleadless Valley church during Rod's visit in January

The Shape of Ministry

Almost without exception, I have been warmly received in the dioceses I have visited. 10 dioceses have now either appointed me as an Assistant Bishop or are discussing the possibility of doing so. These are Bristol, Chelmsford, Chester, Exeter, London, Manchester, Norwich, Rochester, Sheffield, and Southwark. Others may still consider doing so and two have said that I am welcome to minister in their dioceses at any time (Truro and Winchester).



Members of congregations which Rod is overseeing, taken after his licensing at Sheffield Cathedral on 21 Feb

So what is happening as a result?

First, I am in the process of agreeing my exact role in dioceses which have made me an Assistant Bishop. This includes preaching, confirming, ordaining, conducting Ministerial Development Reviews, being involved in decisions about the selection of conservative evangelical candidates for ordained ministry, and being involved in the appointment process for new incumbents of parishes which have passed resolutions under the House of Bishops' Declaration.

Secondly, I am encouraging dioceses to remain open to the possibility of appointing conservative evangelical candidates to non-evangelical parishes. To that end I am becoming involved – at the invitation of archdeacons and bishops in various dioceses, including those where I am not an Assistant Bishop - in providing pastoral support for individual clergy who have complementarian convictions, as well as engaging in diocesan discussions about the formation of mission communities.

Thirdly, I am initiating discussions between dioceses and a number of churches where relationships have either broken down or where churches have developed outside the structures of the Church of England. In some cases, some relatively newly planted churches are now pursuing Bishop's Mission Orders.

Are We Flourishing?

One of the questions I was asked very early on was how would I measure success? The answer to that is that my role will be successful if it genuinely helps build local congregations and thus spreads the gospel. There are various ways in which I can contribute to this: by preaching the Word of God; encouraging people to consider ordination training; brokering discussions over the allocation of resources; providing pastoral support and so on. However, I am also clear that we need more conservative evangelical bishops to assist this process. To that end, I hope the wider church will be reassured by the way in which I undertake my own role and will also see the need for more episcopal support. That will best happen if a large number of PCCs pass

resolutions under the House of Bishops' Declaration. You can read more about these resolutions by going to the drop-down menu under the 'Guidance' tab on the website (www.bishopofmaidstone.org – for anyone reading this in an email not on the website).

It's not terribly easy to keep track of those PCCs which have passed resolutions – but we do need to do so in order to demonstrate the need for episcopal support. If you are planning to discuss this in your PCC, do let me know if I can help; I have already done a number of Q&A sessions with PCCs. Please also let me or my PA (Rachel Lickiss) know on admin@bishopofmaidstone.org if your PCC passes a resolution, so we can add you to the total.

Some churches have been concerned that passing a resolution may damage relationships with their diocesan bishops. This may be a particular concern if discussions are underway about church planting or gaining a curate. There is no doubt that the needs of the local church must come first in any decision-making. However, I do believe that some concerns can be overstated. Many of those involved in discussions over church planting or clergy numbers within dioceses are very pragmatic in outlook – and if a congregation has the vision and resources to make a success of a new initiative, it will, often as not, find itself being supported irrespective of whether or not it has passed a resolution. Please also be reassured that I am doing everything possible to build good relations with dioceses so that they know that we are keen to be involved constructively in the life of dioceses, and thus any growth in our number is to the benefit of all.

Bigger Issues

In the light of the recent meeting of Primates of the Anglican Communion and the pressures that are developing in the General Synod, the topic of sexuality is still very much at the forefront of our concern for the future. In July, the General Synod will be holding its own facilitated conversations on the subject – but it is not at all clear how this might lead to any outcome. This means that the College of Bishops and then the House of Bishops will be asked to give a lead – in the hope that this might happen early in 2017.

We need to be much in prayer that the Bible's teaching on marriage and sexual intimacy will be upheld in this process and that no move is made to give any clergy permission to deviate from the Church's current policy of refusing to bless or conduct same-sex blessings.

Much has been claimed for the outcome of the Primates meeting and it remains to be seen what effect its decisions in relation to the Episcopal Church of the USA will have. My hope is that the experience will strengthen the desire of GAFCON Primates to stand together, united by their common faith as expressed in the 2008 Jerusalem Declaration. The communique from the Primates spoke about 'a fundamental departure from the faith and teaching held by the majority of our Provinces on the doctrine of marriage' on the part of TEC (the US Episcopal Church) and required that, for a period of three years, TEC's representational role on Anglican bodies be circumscribed. It is possible that, in our own situation in England, the need not to exacerbate current tensions in the global communion might make decision-makers more cautious about adopting a liberal approach to sexuality for the immediate future.

That said, none of us can see into the future. We trust our sovereign God for that. Our calling is to be faithful here and now in using what we have been given in the service of the Lord

(Matthew 25:14-30). There are undoubted difficulties within the Church of England, but there is much gospel opportunity too – and it is important that we do not talk ourselves into a position where we feel continually defeated. There are many orthodox bishops in the Church of England – and I was encouraged by the commitment of many whom I saw at a gathering of evangelical bishops last January. We must therefore continue to support and encourage Synod members and bishops in defending the truth against error.

Prayer Requests

Thank you again to the many people who have undertaken to pray regularly for me – and who ask to be kept up-to-date with prayer needs. Here is my current agenda for prayer:

Thanksgiving

- Thanksgiving for the way God is opening up opportunities for effective ministry in many dioceses
- Thanksgiving for a good number of preaching and teaching opportunities: it's always so refreshing – as well as hard work – to prepare and deliver Bible expositions.

Intercession

- For the forthcoming diocesan visits and preaching engagements (see 'Events' tab above)
- For wisdom in advising local churches about their diocesan relationships
- For wisdom in knowing when and how to speak out publicly on issues
- That the gospel would be served when I am able to help churches re-engage with their dioceses
- That God would strengthen the resolve of all of us to work steadily with our PCCs so that resolutions are passed under the House of Bishops' Declaration.
- For my PA , Rachel, in setting up new office arrangements when we move after Easter

Personal

- Thanksgiving for great family news: my daughter Lili has become engaged to Johnny Miller, with the wedding set for 10th September; and Lesley and I are due to be grandparents: my eldest son, Christopher and his wife Claire are expecting a child in July
- Thanksgiving that things are moving in relation to work for my wife, Lesley
- We have yet another date for finally moving to our permanent accommodation: 29th March. Please pray that this date will be kept.
- Please continue to pray that I will remain faithful to the Lord Jesus; that I will make the most of opportunities to tell others about Him; and that I will be disciplined in my own habits of bible-reading and prayer.

February 2016