

Summer 2016 Newsletter

Dear Friends

I have been so helped by the Bible teaching I have received over the past couple of months. I thought this year's EMA was excellent – and I particularly enjoyed Simon Manchester's exposition of 1 Kings 19, when Elijah is on the run and despairing of his ministry. Simon concluded that just as the LORD wasn't in the wind or the earthquake, so too He wasn't in the still small voice. In other words, there was to be no special intervention by God; there was no Plan B. Elijah simply had to return to his business of working on Plan A! It was a great encouragement to keep going even if events don't seem to be favouring us.

I recently had a meeting with the Archbishop of Canterbury to bring him up to date with my ministry since my consecration last year. The chart below is the summary that I presented to him. However, statistics cannot tell the whole story, so I have followed it by highlighting a number of issues we need to address.

Facts and Figures: The Ministry to Date

Work strand:	Facts and figures:
Meetings with Diocesan Bishops:	36 (and 2 arranged)
Meetings with Senior Leadership Teams:	9 Dioceses
Appointment as Assistant Bishop:	10 Diocese (Norwich, Chelmsford, Exeter, London, Manchester, Sheffield, Southwark with arrangements for Chester, Ely, Rochester). Possibility to be discussed in Bristol, Lichfield and Carlisle.
Conservative Evangelical Parishes passing resolutions:	39 passed, 29 that we are aware of actively considering.
Meetings with groups of clergy in particular geographical areas:	18 (12 meetings held and 6 arranged).
Advisory Group set up comprising:	Angus MacLeay, David Banting, Mike Ovey, Lee Gatiss, Mark Burkill, Simon Austen
Ordinations arranged for this summer:	2: St Thomas, Oakwood, London and St Helen's Bishopsgate, London
Confirmations taken:	12 by the end of 2016 (8 taken already and 4 arranged)
PCCs visited:	15 (10 to date and 5 more arranged before end 2016)
Parish weekends spoken at:	4 (3 to date and one more arranged for this year)
Parish visits (including confirmations and PCCs)	47 by the end of 2016 (35 already visited and 12 definite arrangements made)
Speaking engagements at conferences or colleges:	8 engagements so far, 7 more arranged before end 2016 eg JAEC, Theological colleges, Renew and Reform meetings.

Work strand:	Facts and Figures:
The website bishop of Maidstone.org has been set up:	17 published pages covering the Bishop's work, the purpose of his role and guidance on passing a House of Bishops' resolution. 3 newsletters have been published so far and forthcoming events are listed. The website has had 33,466 visits to date with around 600 unique visitors each month.
Office and administrative systems:	A PA appointed has been established and the office has been equipped and set up. Working procedures have been established covering diary and itinerary management, accounting, record keeping and episcopal visits. Research into resolution parishes continues.

Passing PCC Resolutions

Some 40 PCCs of conservative evangelical churches have now passed resolutions requesting that arrangements be made for them under the House of Bishops' Declaration. More are planning to do so over the summer and autumn – not least because the old 'Resolution B' ceases to have effect in November. My hope is that by the end of the year some 70 PCCs will have passed resolutions. We very much need that number to increase so that the Church of England as a whole can see the significant part we play in its life.

I'm conscious that for a number of parishes it will take some time before they are in a position to vote on a resolution. However, it may be possible to do it sooner rather than later by clarifying the effect that a resolution has:

- It does not need to alter or adversely influence current relationships with bishops;
- It does not mean that a parish is separating itself from its diocese – on the contrary, passing a resolution is a good way both to achieve satisfactory arrangements and to ensure that a parish can continue to play a valued part in diocesan life; and
- The wording of a resolution can be changed from the form recommended in the House of Bishops' Declaration to make it clear that while there are differing views on men's and women's ministries, arrangements are needed (particularly when it comes to filling a vacancy) to safeguard unity within the congregation.

In the next couple of months, I will be publishing a new explanatory leaflet about passing a resolution under the House of Bishops' Declaration, particularly with PCCs in mind. This will be available on the website (www.bishopofmaidstone.org), as a pdf and in print. Over the last few months, some incumbents have invited me to speak either to their PCCs or to address more general church meetings at an early stage so that discussions can then get underway about whether or not to pursue a resolution. If you would like to do something similar, please do get in touch and I will do what I can to help.

Questions about Mutual Flourishing

The 'Five Guiding Principles' to which all bishops are committed twice refer to helping us – and others – to flourish within the Church of England. What does this look like in practice? Conservative evangelicals have long believed that what really matters for the future are ordinations, appointments, and the generation of new congregations. The ease with which we can do this varies. In some dioceses, conservative evangelicals are openly encouraged to apply for vacancies. Some dioceses (even those that would be regarded as having liberal leadership) nevertheless warmly welcome new church plants led by conservative evangelicals.

However, difficulties can arise when PCC representatives from non-conservative evangelical parishes effectively veto candidates for vacancies because of their views on the ministry of men and women. Similarly, some female clergy can feel aggrieved when conservative evangelicals want to plant a new congregation with a Bishop's Mission Order in one of their parishes. In the case of the latter, careful and reassuring consultation is essential, but at the end of the day, the granting of a BMO does not require everyone affected to agree. In the case of the former, it is vital to stress positively what the heart of our ministry is – namely opening up the Word of God and reaching out to our communities. The practical conclusions we draw as a result are matters for individual consciences, so PCC representatives should be assured that there would always be room for people to disagree with their incumbent!

What Ministry Can I undertake?

If a diocesan bishop responds to a PCC resolution by suggesting that I offer them 'extended episcopal care', what might happen? There is no set list of things for me to do. The House of Bishops' Declaration simply says 'the precise extent of the ministry entrusted to the bishop is for the diocesan to determine ... But the expectation is that there will be many similarities with the range of responsibilities carried by any suffragan bishop within a diocese.'

Normally when I am formally approached to offer ministry I meet the diocesan bishop in order to discuss the ministry he (at the moment it has only been a 'he') expects me to undertake. In two cases, bishops have agreed this in writing. The Bishop of Manchester has agreed to me undertaking confirmations, being involved in ordinations, being able to discuss with him any 'headship' candidates turned down by BAPs, chairing appointment panels for parishes under my oversight, and conducting MDRs on request. The Bishop of Sheffield has also formally committed to me, in relation to conservative evangelical parishes which have passed a resolution, responsibility for 'arranging or providing all or any of: ordinations, confirmations, admissions to communion prior to confirmation, chrism eucharists, institutions and licensings and intervention in parish disputes ... he will be directly involved in the appointment process for incumbents (or equivalent) and assistant ordained staff.' The Bishop of Peterborough has said to me that he would welcome me offering ministry in every area to 'resolution' parishes with a conservative evangelical theological position, so long as I keep him informed.

Challenges in 2017

Various possibilities are emerging for running training events, which I am actively going to explore. One is that of helping incumbents prepare their candidates for BAPs; another is helping curates who are applying to non-conservative evangelical parishes for their first incumbencies; a third is putting on sessions on expository preaching as part of continuing ministerial education (CME) of curates – and agreeing with dioceses that these could form part of their formal CME work. I will, of course, wish to take advice from my Advisory Panel before pursuing these possibilities.

The biggest challenge facing us all in 2017 is likely to relate to any decisions the House of Bishops takes on the issue of sexuality. It seems likely that there will be a preliminary discussion, about where the 'shared conversations' have left us, at the College of Bishops in September. The fact that Scottish and Welsh bishops have been invited to join the College for two of its four days may add to the pressure on English bishops to introduce liberalising changes. It may then be up to the House of Bishops to chart a way forward at its meeting in December. David Porter, the Archbishop of Canterbury's Chief of Staff has said that while he detects no enthusiasm for changing the canons of marriage, the issue of what happens next will be 'how generous' bishops wish to be in their 'pastoral accommodation.' This suggests that offering more by way of pastoral support for same-sex couples is viewed positively.

Whilst all of us would wish to offer the very best pastoral support for people, any suggestion that this should include public prayers in church following a same-sex marriage would be the first step towards liturgical change. Since the Church expresses its doctrine through its liturgy, this would be a very retrograde step. In his recent sermon in Liverpool Cathedral, Jeffrey John, a senior clerical advocate of same-sex marriage, quoted Jim Cotter who described how the Church of England changes its mind:

*Remember there are always four stages to any challenge to the church's tradition:
First it pretends the challenge isn't there
Then it opposes it vehemently
Then it starts to admit extenuations and exceptions
Finally it says "that's what we really thought all along."*

There is little doubt in my mind that introducing the possibility of public prayers following a same-sex marriage as a 'pastoral accommodation' would mean the Church of England had already reached Stage 3 of the 4-part process. This would be extremely serious and it is likely that many would respond by regarding themselves as in impaired communion with those giving permission for such developments within their dioceses. How events might then unfold can only at this stage be a matter of speculation – but it does behove us to pray earnestly over the next few months. I was much encouraged by a sermon on Luke 11 at Christ Church Central recently. The ESV translates v8 thus as it describes a friend's response to his neighbour's urgent appeal for bread to feed an unexpected guest: 'I tell you, though he will not get up and give him anything because he is his friend, yet because of his impudence, he will rise and give him whatever he needs.' The NIV uses the word 'persistence' instead of

'impudence,' but the context doesn't suit that translation. The essence of it is 'shamelessness' – in other words the needy neighbour is so desperate that he puts all sense of shame to one side. Jesus then says in v9 'Ask and it will be given to you ...' It's as we come to our Father in desperation – offering nothing except our need and our total reliance on Him – that we are assured by Christ that we will be given what we ask for. The path the Church of England is taking may seem completely beyond our power to change but nothing is beyond our Father's capacity. So let's throw ourselves on Him in desperation and total reliance.

Read Any Good Books Recently?

It's too late for me to recommend books to read on the beach, but may I commend two anyway? Jonathan Fletcher recently gave me a copy of Mark Ashton's little book: 'Christ and his people: eight convictions about the local church,' published by Christian Focus. It's both a tonic and a challenge.

Secondly if you want a well-developed theological study, I can commend Mike Ovey's latest book entitled 'Your will be done: exploring eternal subordination, Divine monarchy and Divine humility,' published by the Latimer Trust. This addresses the accusation that complementarians are Arian for stating that Christ, while being equally God, is nevertheless eternally subject to his Father. This particular controversy has rumbled on in the blogosphere since 2012 and even the other day I was questioned on it by Simon Butler (chair of the General Synod's House of Clergy) at a meeting of the Southwark DEU. I was delighted to be able to take Mike's book out of my case and wave it around!

Lastly

I do hope to see as many of you as possible at the conferences that are taking place in early autumn. I will be speaking at the Junior Anglican Evangelical Conference at the end of August and will be attending ReNew on 19th and 20th September.

Have a good refreshing break over the summer.

With love

Rod Thomas