

Bishop of Maidstone: Spring Newsletter 2017

I want to start this newsletter by talking about encouragements, because, as we all know, the background is looking increasingly bleak.

There's a tendency to use the word 'encouraging' simply to mean that we have found something to be positive: 'We had an encouraging time yesterday'. However, I want to draw attention to a number of events that have been encouraging in the sense that they have really emboldened me in my desire to promote evangelical ministry.

In the last three months (up to 31st March), I have visited 24 parish churches for one reason or another. In nearly all of them, steady growth in numbers and growth in discipleship is taking place. Where members are not increasing, I have found the example set by the clergy of steady perseverance and, in many cases sacrificial service, very humbling.

On the growth side, I have just returned from a weekend with two churches where a total of 35 people were either baptised or confirmed – and in many cases they were people who had been converted in the last two years. I have had similar experiences elsewhere. On some visits, I have arrived shortly after the completion of building expansion plans. Some are seeing revived Sunday Schools and others are rejoicing over gaining new members of staff, including curates. There really is much to be thankful for – and to be encouraged to continue confident as Anglican evangelicals.

Update on 'Resolution' Matters

At the time of writing, 96 evangelical churches have passed resolutions under the House of Bishops' Declaration on the ministry of Bishops and Priests. There are some 50-60 others in the process of moving towards a PCC decision. A full list of those which have passed resolutions appears at the end of this newsletter. If you know of any churches that should be added to this list, or if your PCC is moving towards a decision and has not had any contact with my office, please let my PA, Rachel Lickiss, know on admin@bishopofmaidstone.org

The provisions of the Declaration have been dealt a huge blow by the events surrounding the withdrawal of Philip North from his appointment as the next Bishop of Sheffield. In one sense these events will have little impact on our ability to pass resolutions and act on them, but the implications are serious for the longer term. I issued a statement at the time (published [here](#) on my website), describing Philip North's situation as having been 'hounded out,' and as a body blow to the concept of mutual flourishing. If a prospective diocesan bishop cannot be seen as acceptable by a large number of clergy, purely because of his theological convictions over the ordination and consecration of women – and despite his track record of fairness and encouragement in relation to female clergy, then it is clear that 'mutual flourishing' means we are in the Church of England on sufferance rather than with welcome. It is clear that many in the Church of England feel the same concern – and I was delighted that on 24th March, the two Archbishops formally referred the issue to the Independent Reviewer for an investigation into what went wrong. Ultimately, confidence will only be restored when a diocesan bishop is appointed who does not ordain women.

One or two have questioned whether it was right to criticise those opposed to Philip North's appointment, since as evangelicals we cannot support aspects of his theological outlook. My own view is that although as a Protestant I am in a very different position from Philip North, I nevertheless recognise his openness towards, and encouragement of, evangelical ministry. The fact that most of the opposition was on the grounds of his view of men's and women's ministries did, however, mean that on this issue it was important to stand with him, since the whole concept of 'mutual flourishing' was at stake.

The Sexuality Crisis

In the wake of the General Synod's refusal to 'take note' of the House of Bishops' Report on Marriage and Same-Sex Relations and the subsequent statement by the Archbishop of Canterbury commending 'radical inclusion,' the challenge we face is now becoming clearer. As evangelicals we will not be presented with a clear set of proposals that we can either accept or reject. Rather, we will be told that the doctrinal position of the Church is not changing, but our pastoral practice is. On the face of it, this seems inoffensive, but that is because of our understanding of pastoral practice. We tend to think of it as essentially private and personal – perhaps something that a vicar and a parishioner might be praying about together. However, proponents of change – and there are many within the College of Bishops – see it as having an expression in church services too. This means that a same-sex couple might enter into civil marriage and then come to church, not for a blessing, but for recognition of their relationship, for prayer, and for joining with others in Communion. In such circumstances, 'radical inclusion' will mean open acceptance of same-sex marriage, even though formally the doctrine of the Church remains unchanged. It will, of course, only be a matter of time after that before the General Synod comes to the view that such practices are hypocritical and that we therefore need to change the doctrine of the Church.

Although there are various dioceses where such developments might be expected (eg. Liverpool, where the bishop, Paul Bayes, has said that he will actively pursue 'maximum freedom' within the law), evangelical clergy have been very concerned by recent remarks made by the Bishop of Chelmsford. In a speech to his Diocesan Synod he explicitly envisaged the possibility of prayers of thanksgiving and services of Holy Communion for those entering into same-sex unions. He then said that those who disagree with each other on the issue needed to recognise that they were all faithful Anglicans. Again, this might seem relatively inoffensive: the bishop is not offering 'blessings' nor is he advocating that the Church should change its doctrine of marriage. Furthermore, in correspondence with me, he has said that in wanting people to recognise each other as faithful Anglicans, he is simply seeking to promote dialogue and doesn't want anyone to feel excluded. However, there are two serious issues here:

- The first is that in making mutual recognition as 'faithful Anglicans' a pre-condition of dialogue, he is requiring evangelicals to change their doctrinal position before discussions can take place. We do have important things to say about Scripture and we want others to hear us – but not if the price of doing so is effectively to say that whatever we decide we are both being faithful to Christ. For us, our understanding of Scripture, shared by the vast majority of commentators and Christians worldwide, is that sexual activity outside of marriage between a man and a woman is sinful and

should lead a Christian person to repentance. What we are being invited to do is join a discussion on the basis that we will no longer hold this view of sin. This is something we cannot do. We have an 'Apostolic' difference (to use a term expressed in a recent paper from the Faith and Order Commission) which prevents us from accepting that sexual intimacy outside marriage between a man and a woman can be an expression of 'faithfulness'.

- The second issue is that in defining those on both sides of the disagreement as 'faithful Anglicans' and in offering prayers of thanksgiving and services of Holy Communion to same-sex couples, the Bishop is clearly indicating that he does not believe they should be called to repentance. He may well argue that he is not advocating any change to the Church's doctrine of marriage, but he is clearly implying that their sexual relationships are not inconsistent with it. That seems to me to be a step towards changing our doctrine.

What should we do in these circumstances?

First, we need to recognise that we identify as members of the Church of England because of its doctrine rather than through involvement in its institutional life. We are 'confessional' Anglicans. That means we can stay in the Church of England while its doctrine remains unchanged on the basis that we are being properly faithful Anglicans, even if we have to distance ourselves from some forms of institutional involvement in some dioceses.

Secondly, we need to 'contend for the faith that was once for all delivered to the saints' (Jude 3). That means continuing to be involved in deanery and diocesan synods, writing letters, and promoting a Biblical understanding of true human flourishing. What is more, we need to strive for evangelical unity in doing this. Philippians 1:27 urges us to "strive side by side for the faith of the gospel".

Thirdly, it is important that we state publicly where we stand, but in view of the innovations in church practice that we will face, we need to recognise that statements are not enough. The danger we face is that over time, our congregations, PCCs, and clergy will get acclimatised to unfaithful developments despite the statements we have made. What is needed therefore is action which progressively stiffens our resolve. This action needs to take two forms: negatively, we need to distance ourselves (2 John 10) from those promoting ungodly living (eg by making clear that they have broken communion with us so that we can no longer attend Communion services with them) and positively we need to engage in closer fellowship with other churches which are standing firm. The recent move to establish regional gatherings of PCC members to discuss how to promote the gospel more effectively is one way of doing this.

Promoting Women's Ministry

I recently had a meeting with Carrie Sandom (Director of Women's Ministry for the Proclamation Trust) in which she said that paid posts for those working in women's ministry were declining (or at least not growing) in CoE churches but were on the increase in independent churches. She suggested that the former had been influenced by budgets

tightening in the face of austerity and the latter by an element of catching up with what others had been doing. I very much hope that any church whose PCC has passed a resolution under the House of Bishops' Declaration will be doing all they can to promote a Biblical approach to women's ministry. To that end, I would like to ask you to consider the possibility of inviting me to undertake 'commissioning' services for women's workers. These would not be licensings (which would involve people in a wider discernment process) but they would be a way of demonstrating to congregations the seriousness with which we take this ministry – and they might act as an encouragement both for the women's workers and those who might consider such ministry in the future.

Preparing Candidates for Ordination Selection

As you may know, I am holding a half-day for incumbents at St Andrew's Church, North Oxford, on Thursday 4th May, in order to consider how we can better select and then prepare members of our congregations for ordination selection at Bishops' Advisory Panels. **IF you haven't booked yet and would like to do so, please let my PA, Rachel Lickiss, know now on admin@bishopofmaidstone.org**

The programme for our time together is below:

10.30 onwards	Arrival Coffee, tea and biscuits	
11.00	Welcome and Opening Remarks	Rod Thomas
11.10	Why preparation with prospective ordinands must be a priority Talk followed by time for questions	Paul Williams (Christ Church, Fulwood)
12.00	Practical preparation for candidates Talk followed by time for questions	Phil Moon (Bishop Hannington, Hove & BAP selector)
12.50	Lunch – a sandwich lunch will be provided	
13.45	A candidate's perspective Observations from Matthew Lawes who was not recommended at his first BAP but was successful at his second panel. Talk followed by time for questions	Matthew Lawes
14.25	Joint session – discussion on identifying, and working with, candidates	Rod Thomas with Phil Moon and Paul Williams
15.00	Questions and Discussion	
15.30	Coffee, tea and biscuits Departure	

Points for Prayer

- For wisdom, grace and courage for all the clergy in the Chelmsford Diocese who are seeking to defend the gospel in the light of recent statements by some of their bishops – and the same for me as I engage Bishop Stephen Cottrell in correspondence.
- For unity among evangelicals over the issue of sexuality. We seem likely to act in different ways and under different levels of provocation, but we have a common desire to honour the Lord and obey His Word, so we need to work at ways of expressing our unity even if we take different initiatives.
- I have been invited to submit evidence to the Independent Reviewer over the Philip North debacle. Please pray that what I say will have positive impact.
- David Banting and I are planning a pre-ordination retreat in June for one curate whom I am ordaining as a presbyter. Please pray that it will prove to be a useful precursor to more such retreats in the future.
- Later in April, I am working with others in Reform to consider how the Panel of Reference could be further developed in the future to enable us to encourage more people into ministry both lay and ordained. Please pray that we will be blessed by insight, creativity and realism!
- For the Incumbents half-day in May that the result will be greater effectiveness in presenting people for consideration as ordinands.
- Personally – please give thanks that my wife Lesley has found a job that seems right up her street; and please pray that following the conclusion of a Christianity Explored course I ran locally in February and March, I will have enough people interested to run another one in the next month or two.

Resolutions passed by evangelical churches, as of 31 March 2017

Diocese	Parish	Diocese	Parish
Birmingham	St Stephen / St Wulstan, Selly Park St Agnes, Moseley	Exeter	St Matthew's, Elburton St Leonards Exeter Christ Church, Paignton
Blackburn	St Bartholomews, Ewood The Church of the Saviour Blackburn Wellfield Church St Andrews Ashton on Ribble St Andrews Leyland	Guildford	St Andrew's Frimley Green & Mytchett
Canterbury	St James Westgate Christ Church Ramsgate All Saints Loose	Lichfield	Oswestry, Holy Trinity Castle Church Stafford St Luke's, Wolverhampton
Carlisle	St James, Burton in Kendal Houghton and Kingmoor St John's, London Road, Carlisle St John's, Hensingham	Liverpool	St Philemon's Toxteth
Chelmsford	St George Dagenham Chadwell St Mary St Peter's Harold Wood Immanuel, Brentwood Henham, Elsenham and Ugley Becontree St Elisabeth Christ Church, Leyton St Peter and St Paul Dagenham Fordham St Paul's Harold Hill and St Thomas Noak Hill St Michael's Braintree St John's Great Clacton	London	St Thomas', Oakwood St Helen's Bishopsgate St Anne's Limehouse St Botolph's in Aldersgate St Luke's Hampstead St Paul's Hadley Wood St Andrews Chelsea St Peter's Barge, Limehouse St Peter's Fulham
Chester	St John's Lindow St John's Church, Over St Mary's, Cheadle St John's, Knutsford Holy Trinity Poulton Lancelyn Christ Church, Wharton	Manchester	Christ Church Chadderton
Chichester	Holy Trinity, Eastbourne All Souls Eastbourne Little Common, Bexhill Emmanuel Hastings Bishop Hannington Hove All Saints Crowborough	Norwich	Christ Church Lowestoft
Derby	St Peter's Stapenhill Little Eaton St Alkmund's, Duffield St Mary's Chaddesden St Giles, Normanton Trinity Church Buxton	Oxford	St Ebbe's, Oxford St Paul's Banbury St Mary's Maidenhead
Europe	Leipzig	Peterborough	St Peter and St Paul, Moulton
Ely	St Andrew the Great, Cambridge Christ Church Cambridge All Saints Little Shelford	Portsmouth	St James Ryde
		Rochester	St Nicholas, Sevenoaks St Johns, Tunbridge Wells Christ Church, Bromley St Peters Bexley Heath St Peters, Tunbridge Wells
		Salisbury	St Johns Wimborne
		Sheffield	Christ Church, Fulwood St Andrew's, Kendray St Thomas Kilnhurst Christ Church Endcliffe Gleadless Valley
		Southwark	St Nicholas Tooting Emmanuel, Wimbledon Dundonald St Luke's, Wimbledon Holy Redeemer, Streatham Vale St Stephen's, South Lambeth Holy Trinity Wallington
		Southwell	St Mary's, Wollaton Park
		St Albans	Holy Trinity, Frogmore
		Winchester	St Mary's Basingstoke Christ Church Westbourne Sherbourne St John, Basingstoke
		Total	95