

## Deanery Consultation – A Future for Deaneries

I don't know how many of you have read 'Salmon Fishing in the Yemen', or seen the film, but if you haven't I heartily recommend it. As he muses over his vision of bringing salmon fishing to the Yemen, Sheikh Muhammed remarks, 'If God wills it, the summer rains will fill the wadis and we will pump out water from the aquifers and the salmon will run the river. And then my countrymen, all classes and manner of people will stand on the banks, side by side, and fish for salmon. And then nature too will be changed. They will feel the enchantment of this silver fish and the overwhelming love that you know and I know for the fish and the river it swims in. And then when talk turns to what this tribe said or what that tribe did, or what to do with the Israelis or the Americans and voices grow heated, then someone will say, 'let us arise and go fishing.'

Well, perhaps if we are finally going to get clergy and laity working collaboratively together for the sake of the Kingdom, we need to abandon all our fancy strategic plans and simply encourage and resource each deanery to create their own salmon fishing club – perhaps slightly more challenging in Hackney than in Harrogate! I begin with this story only to illustrate what is my long held view that if we are serious about creating a future for deaneries as effective units of mission and ministry in the Church, we need, first of all, to break the cultures of clericalism and parochial tribalism which continue to blight the church.

You may have read, as I did, the recent review of The Church in Wales. In response to that review the Church Times printed this letter from Canon Andrew Bowden. 'Your report and article', he writes, 'on the review of the Church in Wales suggest that ministry in rural areas needs to be delivered in a radically different way. Amazing! So said Tiller in 1983, so said the Archbishop's commission on Rural areas in 1990. The reviewers appear to believe that the root of our problem is our cultural devotion to the parish, but much more important is our cultural devotion to clericalism. A recently published survey of the movement 'Ordained Local Ministry in the Church of England' charts how difficult it is to shift us from this cultural prejudice, even when the need for

radical change stares us in the face. As the church report 'All are called' put it in 1985, 'we are all called, no matter what our occupation may be. There is no special status in the Kingdom for those with important responsibilities; nor does our calling depend on any kind of ordination. What is more, this calling comes to us all, for all our days and for all of our activities.' Until we learn to walk that talk, he concludes, there is little long term hope for the church in rural or urban areas.

A vision for the church of the future in both rural and urban communities will both recognise and begin to address the challenge of how we enable all the baptised to believe not just in their heads but in their hearts that they are - we are - created in the image of God. 'In ancient times', writes Diana Butler Bass, an American pastor and theologian, 'the temple was not simply a building one went into to worship God; no, it was believed that the temple was the actual location of God, where one went to see God. When Paul reminds his friends in Corinth that they are temples of God, he is not saying; 'repair your building and you will be a pleasant place for God to visit.' Rather, he is insisting, 'you are sacred space; you are the one where the Divine One dwells. Others see God in you; you are holy geography – you are holy geography! Until and unless we really believe that of ourselves, the baptised people of God, no amount of structural change will make any substantial difference to our witness to the inclusivity of God which is God's call to the church.

When we care to look back into the history of our faith, we discover that the most vibrant practitioners of the Christian faith have known that human beings are the face, hands, and feet of God in the world. God became human so that humanity could become like God.

The Church is the Body of Christ. This means that it is called to be, in the words of the Church in Wales Report, slightly amended by me

- A channel of God's grace, renewal and pastoral concern for each disciple who is called to faith and fullness of life in Jesus Christ
- A source of fellowship and community in our society, as the church calls people into renewed relationships with one another

- An agent of change in the world, as the church is called to be open to the leading of the Holy Spirit and to bear witness to the justice and peace which are the marks of God's Kingdom

To fulfil that vision we have to enable all the people of God to be stewards and ambassadors of God's love.

Nearly ten years ago, in the Diocese of Bath and Wells, we launched a new strategy for ministry and mission – 'Changing Lives, Changing Churches for Changing Communities.' It sought to answer two key questions

1. What kind of a church does God want us to be?
2. How will we shape our ministry and mission to become that church?

The deaneries were a key part of that strategy and through their pastoral committees were given the responsibility of dividing the deanery into local ministry groups – groups of parishes which could be linked together informally – both to support one another and to resource one another in ministry and mission; they were also given the task of identifying where the allocated number of fulltime stipendiary clergy for each deanery should be deployed.

These local ministry groups were not to be seen as structures, set in stone, but as models of working together in a local area. We hoped that the development of lmg's across the deanery would encourage the growth of local ministry teams in each parish – it was a hope that has required much more energy than we had first anticipated – the team ethos still doesn't sit well in enough of our parishes. The mentality of my faith, my church, my parish; my deanery is still prevalent and increasingly I want to see boundaries that are porous and not fixed, where we come to understand that we are interconnected and that we are stronger when we act together. Consequently we wanted the diocese, in the future, to do more to encourage people to get together in local ministry teams for planning, for training, for co-operating with schools, for working together in community and for supporting clergy. No one alone became an important principle for ministry – lay and ordained working together with an eye for the whole locality, sustaining and developing ministry, sitting light to both parish and deanery boundaries – and in most deaneries RD's work with an Assistant RD and the Lay Chair.

This rightly raised the question about the role of the clergy. For years we have talked about the priest not being the one person band who is the key to everything in the parish. 'Changing Lives' invited people to take this more seriously. Hans Reudi Weber's observation 'the laity are not the helpers of the clergy so that the clergy can do their job, but the clergy are the helpers of the whole people of God so that the laity can be the church' became another significant phrase. To support the deaneries in implementing the strategy, the 'School of Formation' was formed – its primary purposes

- To support the development of clergy in leadership skills and in enabling the people of God to be the church
- To offer a range of opportunities to resource lay people in different ministries – LPA's, worship leaders, mission enablers, etc
- To offer consultancy to deaneries and parishes in the development of local ministry teams and groups
- To work with parishes in vacancy – a key moment of opportunity to effect change
- To encourage and support lay vocations
- To provide appropriate resource and support for clergy who are trying to manage change in a continuing culture of resistance; work based learning groups – two new groups – clergy in transition and team rectors

In all of this we recognised that the Rural Deans and Lay Chairs were key – in the handbook just published the bishops affirm that Rural Deans, Assistant Rural Deans and Lay Chairs play vital roles in the work of the Diocese and in the mission of God. That work combines legal responsibilities, pastoral responsibility for those in their particular deanery and a strategic role in ministry and mission. It continues, 'A deanery offers different opportunities for clergy and laity to support one another and to learn together. Working together effectively in the key roles entrusted to you is an example of an important strand of Changing Lives, that no one is alone, and is in itself a statement about the collaborative nature of ministry that the church often talks about, yet sometimes struggles to live out.' From a fairly confrontational model of bishops meeting with rural deans once a year when I came into post 6 years ago, we now have three meetings a year, one of which is a 24 hour

retreat, and at least one which includes the lay chairs. We are fortunate that we can also make use of the Southern Regional Institute and their annual consultation for Rural Deans – and all new Rural Deans are expected to attend this 36 hour consultation as part of their induction to the role.

I cannot pretend that 'Changing Lives' has been a rip roaring success, and there have been times when the urge for a new initiative has been strong, but we have resisted and decided we needed to stick with it – in some places local ministry groups have taken off – in others they have barely reached first base if I am honest I think there is also a health warning around the work load of Rural Deans which we need to be sensitive to. However, there have been some good stories – let me mention just one. In Camelot, a group of ten rural churches, change had often been resisted, but the new incumbent invited the School of Formation' to run a 'gifts evening' – encouraged by it, some offered themselves for training as lay Worship Assistants. Nine have now been commissioned and work in different ways in parishes according to their gifts – some in family services; some sustaining small elderly congregations, others have a higher profile in representing the worshipping church in their communities.' Changed lives, observed the rector, should remain changed, but how can lives be changed?

Few of us, if we were really honest, can say we look forward to change in the things that are closest to our hearts and souls. In our parishes and schools, as well as in our vicarages and rectories, even those who recognise the need for change feel vulnerable. Some will allow their feelings of inadequacy for the task to affect their way of thinking to such an extent that they deny any need for things to be different. Perhaps it is helpful to make a distinction between linear change and chaos change. Some of what we are about is linear change; there are relatively simple things that can be fixed by a different approach or just by doing it differently. An example might be adjusting service rotas in a multi parish benefice, or adjusting to new legislation on fees – the latest bombshell from the General Synod. But much of your task as Rural Deans and Lay Chairs, and much of my task as a Bishop is dealing with chaos change; there are unpredictabilities, deep discomforts and often a lack of confidence. An example might be trying to create a new shared ministry across parishes

who have historically not had much to do with each other, or having to learn to introduce new liturgy for a new pastoral situation.

We have to continue to listen carefully to each other, to give each other time and space to work our way into new situations. Our task as church leaders in Deanery and Diocese is to try to offer the kind of resources that will enable our clergy and lay leaders to exercise the kind of ministry that will enable the whole people of God to be the Church.

The Deaneries in our Diocese are now ten years into 'Changing Lives'. What we had planned for then on the basis of where we could predict the Sheffield' numbers would take us has changed and the Deanery Pastoral Committees are having to look again at what the future shape of the church might be – different models of ministry are being talked about and planned for – none of which are particularly new or radical. However, the difference, as I perceive it, is that those discussions are now taking place in an environment which is now firmly committed to the principles of 'no one alone' and 'doing things differently'. In the past year two deaneries have held conferences on the shape of the church to come and have attracted significant numbers of lay people and a recently appointed Rural Dean is planning a similar event to, in his words, 'review our ministry, to try to capture a vision for the future and to work much more closely across parish and benefice boundaries.'

Among our Rural Deans there is now an overwhelming acceptance that we are going in the right direction – 'the way we do things round here is changing', said one. While the shift may take a generation to achieve, it is starting, particularly among younger clergy and those new to ministry. What ministry will look like in the future may continue to remain something of a mystery, but what is clear is that the work done in the deaneries, formally through chapters, synods and committees, as well as informally in developing loving relationships, is where much of the hard work will need to be done in providing the structures and support for confident Christian communities to grow and flourish.

+Peter Taunton

So, with your RD or Lay Chair hat on, perhaps you could reflect on two key questions

What kind of church do you think God is calling you to be?

How can we shape our ministry and mission to be that church?