



The Flexible Deanery

2012 National Deaneries Conference
Summary Report and Study Notes

120 people took part in the 2012 National Deaneries Conference on the theme: **“The Shape of Things to come? – The Deanery’s task in God’s Mission”**

The question was not so much, “Is your deanery in good shape?” (a question worth asking!), but rather:

- **What shape would you expect your deanery to have in five years time?**
- **What shape would you prefer or aspire to?**

Two bishops set the scene:

A FLEXIBLE DEANERY ...

In his introductory address to the Conference, **Bishop Alistair Redfern**, Bishop of Derby, located the deanery in *“the weak middle ground”* between the diocese and the parish. The deanery, he suggested, is essentially *“flexible”*. The problem is when it lacks clarity of purpose and is merely *“floppy”*.

Bishop Alistair identified three ways in which a deanery’s shape might be visualised:

1. **A tool of compliance:** This can often be the default position where deaneries merely *“do what they are told to make the system work”*. Synods discuss what they are asked to discuss by the diocese or General Synod; they are used by the diocese to pass information or instructions to parishes – doing only *“what the Church requires to keep ticking over”*.
2. **An agent of management:** In many dioceses deaneries are being asked to take responsibility for managing pastoral reorganisation and negotiating how parishes share diocesan-wide costs. Other conference speakers offered a variety of tools to strengthen the deanery’s ability to take on this role. But Bishop Alistair commended a third way:

3. **A Forum for inter-active leadership:** Bishop Alistair identified three strands in Anglicanism: We are ***Apostolic*** (a people sent to serve God’s mission); we are ***Diaconal*** (called to carry the Good News not just by word but in deed – serving others); and we are ***Synodical*** (seeking to maintain a space where *“the Apostolic and the Diaconal are tested, negotiated and refined”*).

Bishop Alistair emphasised the fluid ‘Franciscan’ character of this Synodical role - envisaging the deanery as a space for *‘comparing independent testimonies’* (cf the vision of Charles Gore, a pioneer of the Synodical process) about *“how to find a more flexible approach to mission and ministry in an urbanised world where the Parish system remains vital but many people do not find their identity and direction in such a located way”*.

THE FULL TEXT OF BISHOP ALISTAIR’S ADDRESS, WITH NOTES ON THE DISCUSSION THAT FOLLOWED, IS AVAILABLE AT www.chdg.org.uk/

... FOR A FLEXIBLE MISSION

Bishop Peter Maurice, Bishop of Taunton, provided the second main input to the conference, highlighting how deaneries are contributing to a more flexible approach to mission in the diocese of Bath and Wells.

Nearly ten years ago, the diocese launched its strategy for ministry and mission under the banner: **‘Changing Lives, Changing Churches for Changing Communities.’** The deaneries were a key part of that strategy.

Deaneries were asked to group their parishes into informal *local ministry groups* to support and resource one another in ministry and mission.

Bishop Peter emphasised that the local ministry groups were to be seen, not as ‘structures’, but as

models for working together in a local area. “I want to see boundaries as porous and not fixed,” he argued. “We are inter-connected and stronger when we act together”.

“No one alone” has become an important principle of ministry – lay and ordained working together, reversing traditional expectations. Bishop Peter quoted Hans Reudi Weber: “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”.

In support of the deaneries – now normally being led by a team including Rural Dean, Assistant Rural Dean and Lay Chair – the diocese has established a ‘School of Formation’. This provides resources and training to help the local ministry groups to develop shared ministry teams and help those in leadership roles to cope with resistance to change.

Bishop Peter warned that even those who recognise the need for change can feel vulnerable. He distinguished between ‘linear change’ (e.g. adjusting service rotas in a multi-parish benefice) and ‘chaos change’ – where outcomes are unpredictable and the process painful, and where those in the middle of it can easily lose confidence.

A key development is that different models of ministry are now being planned in many places. “Doing things differently” is becoming as important a principle as “No one alone”.

The whole ‘Changing Lives’ strategy is built on finding answers to 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?

THE FULL TEXT OF BISHOP PETER’S ADDRESS, WITH NOTES ON THE DISCUSSION THAT FOLLOWED, IS AVAILABLE AT www.chdg.org.uk/

A NEW HANDBOOK FOR RURAL DEANS AND LAY CHAIRS CAN BE DOWNLOADED FROM <http://www.bathandwells.org.uk/formation/deaneries/>

Is change inconceivable in your congregation?

Bishop Peter offered this parable:

FLEAS IN A JAR: If you put a flea in a jar and tightly screw on the lid, the flea will try to jump as high as it can. But soon, the flea accepts its limit. From that point on, even if you take off the lid, the flea will never, ever jump any higher than the perceived lid.

THE BRISTOL EXPERIENCE

The third major input to the Conference came from Oliver Home, Chief of Staff to the Bishop of Bristol.

Bristol Diocese is following a distinctive path, investing time, effort and finance in order to develop collaboration between senior staff and Area Deans and Lay Chairs. The number of deaneries had already been reduced to seven, when, in a decisive move about six years ago, the bishop appointed new Area Deans, and gave them a budget and an allocation of two days per week for the work.

Two organising principles: 1. Subsidiarity:

Too many decisions in dioceses are taken too far from the coal face, the bishop believed. “We wanted a balcony view rather than an aerial view and, whatever the limitations of deaneries as a perspective, it was the structure we had; so let’s make use of it.”

2. Inter-dependence:

By involving deaneries in the oversight of the diocese, it was hoped to overcome the ‘us and them’ attitudes between parishes and their diocese (and vice versa) that do not lead to mission. ‘Us and them’ breeds “on one level dependency, on another level distance and distrust.” Taking unpalatable decisions at deanery level requires the decision-makers to look their neighbours in the eye – and both the decisions and the outcomes, it is believed, will be better in the long run – “better than using distance as a tactic for diffusing anger.”

Two key matters were delegated to the deaneries: deployment and income generation. This involved both a “*trust and letting go*” but also collaboration with the central decision-makers in the diocese, involving both accountability and support. Bristol Diocese was not attempting to create “*seven dioceses with seven infra-structures.*” Difficulties in getting the balance right have revealed how hard it is to break clear of the old ‘us and them’ mindset.

Recently the focus of the collaboration has shifted from Area Deans and Lay Chairs to larger ‘Deanery Leadership Teams’ involving lay and ordained who are focused on encouraging mission. Constructive collaboration within deaneries is now beginning to happen; levels of giving are increasing; and in Chapter meetings clergy are becoming much more open about their success and failures. No longer is there a general sense that “we’re all doomed”.

Oliver sums up the Bristol strategy as follows: “*Our deaneries strategy comes under the ‘Structures of oversight and support’ strand of our strategy; and let’s be clear that structures serve mission. We believe that God’s mission takes place where Christian disciples relate to those outside the Church. We do see deaneries as shapes for management.*”

READ THE FULL TEXT OF OLIVER HOME’S PRESENTATION FROM BRISTOL DIOCESE AT www.chdg.org.uk/

Are deaneries ready to share in oversight?

Oliver offered this parable:

PATRONISING PARENTS: (= “Father knows best”?) A daughter had been routinely ignored by her parents and generally treated as a non-achiever. Despite this, one day her parents tell her they want her to start managing part of the family business. How will it work out?

The daughter will lack confidence and experience, frequently make poor decisions and probably test the boundaries to see if her parents are for real.

The parents will often forget that their daughter now has a role in the business. They will struggle to let go, not least when they have to clear up after the mistakes they feel their daughter is making.

Working through from a dysfunctional parent-child relationship into a healthy partnership between adults is no straightforward matter!

An agreed goal?

All the conference speakers seemed broadly to concur with the goal as expressed in a phrase attributed to Archbishop Rowan Williams: “***a flourishing Christian presence in every community.***”

But do we all agree what this means? Of all the speakers Bishop Alistair offered the most radical vision when he referred to St Francis.

“Francis is part of the response of the Church in the 13th Century, to what we recognise now as the urbanisation of Europe. Instead of the great majority of people living in settled rural communities, which still presupposes the Parish model, people began to gather into towns – what we call urban living.

“This meant that the Parish, as the basic unit of doing Church, was less and less well equipped to do its traditional job. The numbers got bigger, people were moving about more – the early marks of urban life.

“The response of Francis and Dominic, and others, was to create a style of mission and ministry that complemented the Parish system.”

It seems we must be careful not to assume that ‘a flourishing Christian presence’ can only mean ‘a self-perpetuating parish church congregation’ or that ‘every community’ can only mean ‘every geographical parish’.

FOUR STUDY THEMES

The clear message of the Conference is that there is no single 'shape of things to come' for deaneries in the future.

Each deanery is challenged to find its own shape, partly in response to the needs of the diocese, but primarily in response to the needs of its context.

In finding their own shape, however, four characteristics will be crucial:

DEANERIES ARE CALLED TO BE

1. Communities of learning
2. Mission enablers
3. Synodical decision-makers
4. Witnesses to God's grace

These study notes offer ways in which your deanery can reflect on these four themes as they were developed during the Conference, asking questions about how your own deanery is changing in shape. Suggestions for Biblical reflection and other resources are also provided.

1 COMMUNITIES OF LEARNING

Bishop Peter pressed the need to understand the nature of 'church' before we shape our ministry and mission – and Bishop Alistair stressed the need for 'clarity of purpose'. These are fundamental matters that local congregations need to think about before they come to '*compare their independent testimonies*' at the Deanery Synod.

Our understanding about God, God's mission and God's Church shapes how we 'read' our local communities and what we decide is our calling as disciples and ministers of the Gospel – in other words, what we need to be and do as God's Church in order to be effective witnesses to God's grace right here, right now.

TESTING OUR ASSUMPTIONS

- Bishop Alistair's distinction between 'apostolic' and 'diaconal' could misleadingly be thought to imply that mission (apostolic) and ministry (diaconal) are entirely separate parallel activities.
- More positively, the distinction might suggest that most ministry is more diaconal than priestly and is the practical expression of the discipleship of all faithful Christians.
- We may also need to test an assumption that the Bible always provides 'answers'. For every 'proof text' someone is sure to find something contradictory!
- Can we look instead for 'pointers' – evidence for the leading of the Holy Spirit – signs of the trajectory, the direction of travel on our journey with the Holy Spirit today? Christians in other traditions could easily already have noticed something we have missed thus far!

A BIBLICAL REFLECTION:

LUKE 9, vv1-6 AND LUKE 22, v35: Learning by doing – action and reflection – or should it be 'unlearning by doing'?

Joanna Cox in her sermon at the final Conference Eucharist explored the lessons the disciples were invited to draw from their experience. These two passages in St Luke's Gospel show the disciples having to unlearn their assumed priorities. What *don't* they need?

God doesn't ask us to do anything without providing the resources we need (as opposed to what we think we want!).

BOOKS AND OTHER RESOURCES

THE NATURE OF CHURCH – BEVERLEY HOLLINS

This first-rate four-session course of study for deaneries and local churches is downloadable from the Oxford Diocesan web site:

http://www.oxford.anglican.org/documents/336-living-faith-study-courses/view-category.html?ascdesc=DESC&orderby=dmdate_published

THIRSTY FOR GOD – JOHN COLE

This booklet explores where people are finding the Holy Spirit's living water today, and describes some surprising implications. Questions for local churches are included.

Order from www.parishandpeople.org.uk

DOES THE COFE REALLY VALUE THE BIBLE? – DAVID EDWARDS

In letters to Church Times a couple of years ago, Dean David Edwards drew attention to the Deanery as a context for studying the Bible together. The letters are available in a Parish & People booklet entitled 'Does the CofE really value the Bible?'. Order from www.parishandpeople.org.uk

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MISSION ENABLERS

The 2012 Deaneries Conference heard extensively from two dioceses, Lichfield and London, where considerable use is being made of statistical analysis to support deaneries and local churches as they work towards a more purposeful missionary engagement.

FOR MORE DETAILED INFORMATION ABOUT WHAT THESE DIOCESES ARE ACHIEVING, TOGETHER WITH NEWS FROM CONFERENCE PARTICIPANTS ABOUT WHAT IS HAPPENING ELSEWHERE, VISIT www.chdg.org.uk

TESTING OUR ASSUMPTIONS

- *‘Comparing independent testimonies’* (as commended by Bishop Alistair) is not the same as comparing performance.
- The data charts now provided by many dioceses collating the parish returns are not the equivalent of school league tables!
- Maintenance and mission are not simply to be opposed. Appropriate maintenance is necessary for mission, but it is not an end in itself.
- Is the parish congregation really the basic unit of local mission – as we are at risk of assuming if we only look at parish return data – or are there more flexible units both bigger (e.g. local ministry groups) and smaller (so-called ‘base ecclesial communities’)?

It is true that church structures exist to serve mission. However, it is not the Church’s mission but God’s – so how can the structures release the energy of Christ’s people to engage in what God is doing in our locality?

Do the diocesan data tables tell us all that we really need to know?

Are these more flexible units in the service of God’s mission – both larger and smaller than the parish congregation – really containable (and therefore solely accountable) within the Church of England?

If the deanery is recruited as an agent of management, do the advantages outweigh the risks?

A BIBLICAL REFLECTION:

HAGGAI 1, vv 4-10: Resources will always be in short supply if we are pre-occupied with the wrong priorities. ‘Rebuilding God’s temple’ today is not a matter of bricks and mortar, stones and lime-wash; it is about building life-affirming community within a fragmented, individualised and self-focused society. And we ourselves should not be so self-focused as to suppose that we will find the God-given resources we need only within our own fellowship and church institutions. “Go into the hills and get timber!”

ADDITIONAL SOURCES OF DATA:

CHURCH OBSERVATORY

Visit <http://www.churchobservatory.org.uk/>. This site offers national statistics for deaneries and parishes. Registration may need to be authorised via your diocesan office.

THE UK DATA SERVICE – SUPPORTED BY THE ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL RESEARCH COUNCIL.

Visit

<http://www.esrc.ac.uk/funding-and-guidance/tools-and-resources/research-resources/data-services/uk-data-service.aspx> for information on this new service. Increased access to non-academic users is gradually being introduced during 2013. 2011 census data is included. Registration may be necessary.

BOOKS AND OTHER RESOURCES

I AM A CHURCHGOER – GET ME OUT OF HERE!

Like fleas who still think they are trapped in a jar, local congregations can get stuck at many points on the road to renewal. A simple quiz may reveal where your church is on a journey where the only certainty is that we have not yet arrived. Download a PowerPoint presentation and the associated booklet from www.parishandpeople.org.uk

CHURCH - WITHOUT PRICE – JOHN COLE

This short booklet challenges local congregations – and the wider Church institutions – to recognise when their strategies owe more to market capitalism than to a Gospel of reconciliation. As Bishop Alistair suggests, could the deanery be the ideal environment where different communities within the same Christian family can practice a style of relationship that does not follow a commercial model?

Order from www.parishandpeople.org.uk

BEING A MINISTERING COMMUNITY – A STARTER WORKSHOP

<http://www.newway.org.uk/publications/MinisteringCommunityTaster.pdf> Described as ‘an experience in three sessions’, this workshop invites church groups to discover the potential and the dynamics of small Christian communities – where everyone’s a minister, where all the world is church, and where ministry and leadership are shared.

One of Bishop Alistair's two key assertions was that we are peculiarly *well qualified* as Christians to make decisions and judgements, in a way the world could learn from; and Deaneries may have a role in this distinctive approach. Both Bishop Alistair and Oliver Home reminded us that there is a proper tension between the responsibilities of those called to exercise oversight and the need for a committed consent from the community as a whole.

Bishop Alistair highlighted the synodical process as being the complex space where this tension can be negotiated. The complexity – and the inevitable flack from all sides – means that synods tend to become places of compliance or management, not least because it is hard to get the right people to give the time and commitment to resource the process.

In politics and society as a whole, Bishop Alistair asked, *“Where is the space for meaningful, intelligent and gracious conversation, shaping how we think and what our values are?”*

It is here, argues Bishop Alistair, that the Church can make a prophetic statement, and deaneries above all can exercise prophetic leadership. The unique thing about the deanery is that *“it is small enough for people to know each other (if you meet regularly), to listen to each other, to respect each other and to engage with each other. It is small enough to do that. But it is big enough to bring together a healthy variety of local churches with their own particular experience of God's grace and call.”*

A BIBLICAL REFLECTION:

ACTS 15 - THE COUNCIL OF JERUSALEM

Bishop Alistair's commentary: It was not easy. You have difficult parishes in your Deanery; here you have got Jews and Gentiles, with totally different gods and traditions. Somehow they were graced through this Synodical

process to exercise a moment of leadership that was decisive for how oversight happened and how local Churches operated.

In this synodical space where *independent testimonies were compared*, and people listened graciously and in spiritual mode, and reflected theologically, God allowed them to find a new flexible way of being a Church and serving people. Here we can discern what could be described as a kind of Franciscan moment.

It took time, it took passionate debate; it took drawing on biblical and traditional resources that said you could not be a proper member if you were not circumcised, for instance. All that had to be confronted. But the key is the way the decision was made and emerged.

The key was bringing together a relatively small group of people who actually knew each other pretty well.

Paul, and his followers who went there, had already spent time in a Synodical engagement with some of the other Apostles and characters while they had regular visits, their regular coming together. We see in Acts 15 the creation of a space which could be intimate enough for people to listen and pray and respect each other and work together; and yet radical enough for something prophetic to emerge as an act of decisive real leadership, for the new shape of the Church to emerge.

Bishop Alistair's conclusion: A good Deanery should be a robust place, like that meeting in Acts, where people come with different experiences of God's grace and God's call - experiences that seem incompatible. How healthy that God has made such variety and such challenge!

But, it can only be handled when further up the chain the Diocese and the national Church can be informed by this intelligent, prayerful, spiritual engagement. The calling for all of us is to listen humbly to the image of Christ in others and to the way Christ is shaping his Church, to be willing to be challenged and changed, and at the end of the day to be committed to going away from meetings saying *“Well at the moment it seems good to us and the Holy Spirit that we can walk forward like this”*.

TWO QUESTIONS

What would be the two things that you could really challenge each other about, engage

with each other, and create this space that is vibrant and life-giving for you and others?

What two things can you identify amongst the parishes that make up your Deanery – where you need to discern the leading of the Holy Spirit?

TESTING OUR ASSUMPTIONS

- Participants often assume that church meetings can only be expected to generate one of three outcomes:
 1. The chairperson gets his (or her) way
 2. The vocal minority vetoes what they cannot accept
 3. A majority vote divides the congregationNeed it always be so?
- On this basis, it is then assumed that the first of these is the least bad option. A top table, with other participants seated in rows so that they cannot see each other's faces, ensures that this is the most likely outcome. How can your PCC and Synod be re-arranged so that you can relate to each other and listen graciously to each other?
- It is also often assumed that anything more than a minimal number of the most perfunctory of business meetings is a waste of time. Quite the reverse! Time is needed for participants to get to know each other, to socialise and eat together, and come to cherish each other, before anything worthwhile will happen. Both clergy and lay people need to be committed to invest time and effort in church meetings in order to make them work.

BOOKS AND OTHER RESOURCES

Three modest publications produced for deaneries by Parish & People seem highly relevant. All can be ordered from www.parishandpeople.org.uk

DISCERNING THE MIND OF THE DEANERY – JOHN COLE (2010)

In what spirit and in what manner should Christian communities take counsel together? This booklet includes evidence from other Christian traditions and cultures, and addresses issues of power and status, 'insiders' and 'outsiders' etc – with questions that every deanery should be asking.

GOOD LISTENING – PAUL AND JENNY ROLPH (2011)

Sub-titled 'The lifeblood of a creative learning community', this booklet explores what is needed if groups of Christians, meeting together, are to hear each other and hear the Holy

Spirit – drawing on the authors' rich experience as counsellors and teacher trainers.

STUDYING THE BIBLE TOGETHER – KEITH WARD AND OTHERS (2010)

A follow up to Dean David Edwards' vision of the deaneries as places where studying the Bible together is central to their role in enabling Christ's disciples to serve God's mission.

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WITNESSES TO GOD'S GRACE

In his main presentation to the Conference, Bishop Peter quoted from a letter by Canon Andrew Bowden to Church Times:

"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 [our cultural devotion to clericalism], 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, Andrew Bowden concludes, there is little long term hope for the church in rural or urban areas.

Bishop Peter continued: The Church is the Body of Christ. This means that it is called to be – in words adapted from a recent Church in Wales review:

- A channel of God's grace,
- A source of fellowship and community in our society,
- 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.

TESTING OUR ASSUMPTIONS

Even if we outwardly recoil from the following four statements, is there evidence that these assumptions still govern our actions?

- Only those who are trained and ordained or authorised can engage in ministry.
- Getting people into church to sustain congregational life is the top priority.
- The parish congregation is the primary unit of mission, and only the ordained can lead it.
- The Church of England is the sole agent of God's mission in this land.

A COMMENT FROM AN ARCHDEACON

A slight précis of a comment made by a Midlands Archdeacon in the discussion after Bishop Alistair's talk: "Mission happens when everybody who is part of the Church touches the outside world. If we want to empower our churches to be 'missional communities', we can't do it from the centre. The expertise needed for engaging in God's mission locally is already there on the ground (embodied in faithful lay people).

However there is often not enough resource, fellowship or diversity of opinion in individual congregations to provide the encouragement these local 'experts' need. The deanery is the God-given environment for this encouragement to happen.

If in this environment opinions and ideas emerge that those in wider leadership roles (like Archdeacons) don't like, maybe they must beware: These thoughts may just be 'the Word of the Lord' – God's voice speaking to us!

TWO BIBLICAL REFLECTIONS:

LUKE 9. Vv 51-56 – GETTING READY FOR CHRIST'S COMING

Bishop Peter in his reflections on Luke 9 towards the end of the Conference did not make any connections with Christ's coming at the end of all things. Instead he highlighted Jesus, "**resolutely** setting his face towards Jerusalem" – the place of God's peace, but also a place of conflict.

This **resolve** is a matter of not being diverted from Christ-like values. We are to resist the temptation to call for 'fire to be rained down' on anything or anyone that frustrates us – be it parochialism, clericalism, church buildings (especially the pews!), or recalcitrant 'corks in bottles'...

We are to remain on the road, despite its ups and downs; and on the journey we must find flexible space where we can converse openly together about mission and purpose – and be on the look-out for situations where we can be surprised to discover God already at work.

ROMANS 8 Vv 31-39

We cannot know whether 'things to come' will be more or less congenial than what we have already known; but St Paul, writing to the Romans, suggests that is not a reason for us to be frightened. "Nothing will ever separate us from the love of God."

Joanna Cox, in her sermon, invited us to read the earlier chapters in Paul's letter. Having the confidence to face a changing future depends on re-discovering the deeper value of what we have known up to now. We can only start from where we are, and we can only encourage people to accept change in the course of their journey of faith if we start from where they are. Paul was trying to help Jewish and Gentile Christians to move forward together – so he both affirms Jewish 'zeal for God' expressed through obedience to the Law and invites them to rediscover a deeper relationship with God, the faith of Abraham, the father of the Jewish race.

SOME FINAL THOUGHTS

Quoted by Joanna Cox from 'Red Letter Christianity' – a conversation between Shane Claiborn and Tony Campolo (Hodder 2012)

TC: Sometimes we find the Holy Spirit in mega-churches and sometimes in small country churches – and at work in struggling inner city churches. Size is not a criterion for defining the greatness of a church.

SC: If you are only existing for the sake of yourselves, you implode. We have to exist for Jesus' vision of the Kingdom of God, for the mission outside of the church. If we don't, our churches become unhealthy and die.

Joanna concludes: Our challenge is to let the Holy Spirit blow, and then we'll be an instrument of grace – and not die.

13th National deaneries Conference "The Shape of Things to Come"

SUMMARY REPORT AND STUDY NOTES

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