

JESMOND CONFERENCE STATEMENT 2017

REFORMATION IN THE NATION AND CHURCH

On the 27th and 28th February 2017 Anglican clergy, together with Christian church workers, charity leaders and educationalists, met together in Jesmond, Newcastle upon Tyne for 24 hours for the third of the modern Jesmond Conferences. Entitled *Reformation in the Nation and the Church* this was convened by the vicar of Jesmond, David Holloway. It was at a time of great confusion in the Church of England as a result of a report by the House of Bishops following controversial “Shared Conversations” on homosexual relations. The report was presented to the General Synod just prior to the Jesmond Conference. However, it was rejected when presented by both orthodox and theologically liberal clergy and laity. It has been described as “a fudge” that “effectively advocated an official policy of institutional hypocrisy by proposing maintaining the Biblical doctrine of marriage in public, but giving even greater affirmation to same sex relationships in private” (Jonathan Pryke). The Archbishop of Canterbury wrote after the rejection of the report that we need a “radical new Christian inclusion”. In the present moral climate, what did that mean? The theme of the conference and the session subjects seemed relevant in such a context.

The first session was on *The need for a new Reformation in the year of the 500th anniversary of the Lutheran Reformation in response to what is happening in the wider world and the Church.*

We began by reminding ourselves that much of the modern urban world is pluralistic rather than secular, with secularism declining (except in Europe), and the world growing more religious. But pluralism, as its varied religions or philosophies become more self-confident, leads to “a naked public square” certainly in the West. That is because it is less and less easy to unite around a common purpose or under one “sacred canopy”. Outside Europe, however, things are different. For by 2050 it is projected that 80% of all Christians will come from the Southern Hemisphere (from just 20% in 1900). But also we need to note that from 2000 to mid-2016 while the global population was growing at 1.19%, Christian growth was 1.30% which is good. But Muslim growth was 1.87%.

Nearer home the need for a Reformation was very evident. For in the autumn of 2016 attendance at Church of England services was seen to have dropped by half between 1980 and 2015. Statistics showed that 960,000 adults and children – less than 1.5% of the population – went to church each week during the sample month of October 2015. One recent survey was particularly depressing. It showed that disbelieving clergy are correlated with church decline, for example, only 50% of clergy from declining churches agreed it was “very important to encourage non-Christians to become Christians”, compared with 100% of clergy from growing Churches. Also 100% of clergy and 90% of worshippers from growing churches agreed that “God performs miracles in answer to prayers”, compared with 80% of worshippers and 44% of clergy from declining churches.

However, we learnt from Luther’s example that we should pray for a new vision of God and his goodness and greatness, first. Moral issues will be easily dealt with. “His [Luther’s] attack on indulgences in 1517 was in large part an attack on abusive pastoral practice driven by church greed; but it was also rooted in his changing theology which saw the sale of indulgences as cheapening God’s grace, trivializing sin and misleading the laity” (Carl Trueman).

Our second session addressed *The cultural and spiritual vacuum in the West requiring in Britain, the catholic western, English Reformed tradition that is the Church of England as defined by Canon A5.*

It was said that the 2016 votes for Brexit and Trump were evidence of that vacuum. And they were in line with Walter Russell Mead's US analysis as early as May 2016: "What makes Trump so appealing to so many voters is that the establishment does seem unusually clueless these days. With the PC crowd and the Obama administration hammering away at transgender bathroom [*toilet*] rights as if this was the great moral cause of our time ... even as an epidemic of drug abuse and family breakdown relentlessly corrodes the foundations of American social cohesion, it's hard to believe that the establishment has a solid grip on the moral principles and priorities a society like ours needs."

We heard how Europe is on a suicide mission, having the worst fertility record in the world at 1.6 (children per child-bearing woman – with population replacement being 2.1). But with one of the pillars of the West's new negative morality being that "gay marriage (the ultimate sanction of infertility) has to be championed around the world", as David Cameron and Hilary Clinton have decreed, it is hard to see that figure changing enough.

It was clear to us that the religious and moral vacuum needs to be filled by the Christian tradition; and that the Christian faith is not only true but will give meaning to virtues. For the Christian tradition will ground ordered liberty, and reduce anarchic sexual decadence. But what Christian tradition?

We heard an argument how the Catholic, Western, English, Reformed tradition (that is the Church of England) has merits as being more biblical than other Reformed traditions. That claim for the "Church of England" could be made if the Church of England is not identified with its Synodical government or its structure of Bishops, clergy and laity. Synodical Government only came into force in 1970; and there was a Church of England before that! Nor can it be identified with its buildings – they come and go. Nor can it be identified with a single congregation. We heard that an answer to its identity was given in the judgment of an Employment Tribunal in 2011 when a disaffected clergyman was taking his Bishop and Diocese to Court. The judge, however, ruled: "The Church of England has no legal personality ... the title 'Church of England' denotes an amalgam of what sometimes seemed an infinite number of bodies with no precise or clear picture ... of how the various jigsaw parts interact ... the ultimate authority to restructure lies with the Church's parliament, the General Synod, subject to the Westminster Parliament" (so the Synod is an ultimate body for restructuring but not for revising doctrine or ethics). And this judgment, after a reversing appeal by the clergyman, was upheld after a diocesan final appeal by the Supreme Court of Appeal.

That judgment helps us define the ultimate identity of the Church of England, which is not in its structure, nor even in its ordained ministers. For as the doctrine of the Church determines the authority of the bishops and clergy, we have to go to *The Church of England (Worship and Doctrine) Measure 1974* for the defining doctrine of the Church of England. It is there in these words:

"The doctrine of the Church of England is grounded in the holy Scriptures, and in such teachings of the ancient Fathers and Councils of the Church as are agreeable to the said Scriptures. In particular such doctrine is to be found in the Thirty-nine Articles of Religion, the Book of Common Prayer, and the Ordinal."

Those also are the words of Canon A5. And it is those words that give you the Christian faith according to the Catholic Western English Reformed tradition. And that is the established faith of this nation and defines the Church of England doctrinally. We consider that that faith needs to be recovered by a new Reformation.

In our third session, we considered *The crisis in governance and leadership in the State and the Church of England and necessary action*.

We saw how the loss of a commitment to Canon A5 resulted in a pluralism in the Church of believers and non-believers (e.g. in the Empty Tomb according to the survey), and moralists and immoralists (promoters of “homosexual genital acts that fall short of the ideal [of sex within a permanent heterosexual married relationship] and are to be met by a call to repentance and the exercise of compassion” - the doctrine of the Church of England).

However, because the bishops have for so long accepted the defiance of the Church’s teaching and rendered the Church pluralistic, they no longer see their function as leading the Church towards its identifying and agreed agenda, Canon A5. Rather they see their role ...

“not to further what is common but to insure a social order within which people, who regard one another as strangers and potential enemies, can follow differing beliefs and ways of life without in the process doing unacceptable harm to one another ... “Inclusivity”, which in the context of the new authority is interpreted as the amalgamation of people with vastly differing beliefs and ways of life, becomes not only the method but also the end of the exercise of authority. *In theory* that is the way the new authority works. *In practice* things are often quite different in that those who inhabit the postmodern world of plural world views and who are invested with authority fail again and again to act in impartial ways. Instead they seek power as a means to pursue a particular set of interests and to use their authority to further those interests.”

So writes Philip Turner. All this means that the leadership of the bishops - witness this latest synod report - has been reduced not to leading the Church to what the Church universal judges to be its common good, but to the desire for “good disagreement”. And that, theologically, is between good and evil goals and objectives, with the aim being for the proponents of those divergent goals and objectives “to walk together”.

That, of course, may be possible in the world, but quite forbidden in the Church. Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 5.9-11:

“I wrote to you in my letter not to associate with sexually immoral people - not at all meaning the sexually immoral of this world, or the greedy and swindlers, or idolaters, since then you would need to go out of the world. But now I am writing to you not to associate with anyone who bears the name of brother if he is guilty of sexual immorality or greed, or is an idolater, reviler, drunkard, or swindler—not even to eat with such a one.”

In the fourth session, we considered *7th century lessons from the North East for the evangelization of Britain in the 21st century and the way ahead*.

Our conference, meeting in the cradle of British Christianity in the North East of England, encouraged our thinking about the future in the light of its Celtic history.

We revisited that history and the Celtic evangelization of Britain and particularly the mission of Aidan and his pupil Chad. We noted that the Roman mission of Augustine in Canterbury and Rochester failed, but the Celtic mission of Aidan, evangelizing from Lindisfarne, succeeded. We noted, too, John Finney's observation that ...

“The Roman pattern was to set up a skeleton organization and then evangelize. The Celtic pattern was to gather the people and then set up an appropriate framework for them.”

We know that at the Synod of Whitby the Roman model won the day, but a parish system was not fully established for centuries. There is now strong argument that the time has come to try again, alongside the parish system, a Celtic model of church order and evangelism – the minster model with missionary bishops. Churches like Holy Trinity Brompton, in London, most famously, but other churches, including Jesmond Parish Church, in the North East are operating in a Celtic way in urban areas. This already is meaning, and will mean, a “mixed economy”.

Rowan Williams spoke of this when he said:

“Church is what happens when the call of Jesus is definitively heard. God calls. God makes a difference. God draws together a community of people. We hold to Scripture and sacraments as the essential common language God has given. But what then? Then, I suspect, it's a lot more chaotic than we have usually assumed. In Wales, we used to talk about the 'mixed economy' Church - that is, one which is learning how to cope with diverse forms and rhythms of worshipping life. The parish system works very well in some contexts. It's just that we are increasingly aware of the contexts where it simply isn't capable of making an impact, where something has to grow out of it or alongside it, not as a rival (why do we cast so much of our Christian life in terms of competition?) but as an attempt to answer questions that the parish system was never meant to answer” (Archbishop Rowan Williams, *Presidential Address at General Synod*, York, 14 July 2003).

If Williams is right we need to think of the Church future not unlike the State with nationalized enterprises, on the one hand, and, on the other hand, privately owned enterprises but all under the same commonly agreed agenda – from Canon A5. But as our statistics showed, the Church of England as it now is, is in a condition of “Slow Death”. For these changes in a Celtic direction to be a reality, we need much prayer and the work of the Holy Spirit. But also the management category of *Deep Change* (Robert Quinn) for businesses in “slow death” needs to be considered. Deep Change is distinct from “peace with pay”, doing nothing; or “quick exit”, jumping ship and joining another group. “Deep Change” is when someone in the system, *one*, takes significant risks; *two*, “builds bridges while walking over them”; and, *three*, is prepared to break some rules (like the Celts) that are strangling the organization.

For those involved it is nerve racking. But in such circumstances as we are, God's promises, “I will never leave you nor forsake you.” So we can confidently say, ‘The Lord is my helper; I will not fear; what can man do to me?’” (Heb. 13.6).

JESMOND CONFERENCE RESOLUTIONS 2017

In the light of all the deliberations and discussions, the conference agreed the following that

1. Celtic evangelism should be explored and encouraged.
2. Bishops should secure appropriate clergy discipline for sexual immorality (defined by the General Synod resolution* following the debate in 1987 initiated by the Revd Tony Higton)
3. That all ordinands should sign their agreement to the above General Synod resolution and to Canon A5 before ordination.

* "That this Synod affirms that the biblical and traditional teaching on chastity and fidelity in personal relationships is a response to, and expression of, God's love for each one of us, and in particular affirms:

1. that sexual intercourse is an act of total commitment which belongs properly within a permanent married relationship;
2. that fornication and adultery are sins against this ideal, and are to be met by a call to repentance and the exercise of compassion;
3. that homosexual genital acts also fall short of this ideal, and are likewise to be met by a call to repentance and the exercise of compassion;
4. that all Christians are called to be exemplary in all spheres of morality, including sexual morality; and that holiness of life is particularly required of Christian leaders."