

Archbishops' Council

Posted by Robert Cotton, 4 February 2016

On Monday, the results of the election of two clergy to the Archbishops' Council were declared. I came in third position, and so my membership of the Council comes to an end. Having served since 2011, I am glad to have had the opportunity to see some of the leadership of the Church of England at close quarters. It was an enjoyable experience, and a privilege to be involved in one of the inner sanctums of the church. I have enormous admiration for some of the officers and senior figures in the church. They show great patience in adversity, put up with disgraceful criticism and hostility at times, have talent and enthusiasm, and display a determination that is in equal measure admirable and frightening.

I have seldom spoken about my time on the Council, and certainly not blogged about it. The archbishops (along with others) have to spend so much time in the public eye, that I have taken very seriously the need for privacy and confidentiality. During the five years that I served, it was noted (by our external advisor as well as ourselves) that we became less dysfunctional, more trusting of each other, and readier with the key skill of practising subsidiarity. In an organisation that has such a strong sense of devolved responsibility it is vital that those "at the centre" do not take away the authority and motivation of those who have to make decisions at a more local level.

So being a Council member has required a high level of reticence, of not saying everything on one's mind, of listening to others in the room as well as the thousands who will be affected by one's decisions who are not "in the room". I hope that I have grown in humility and wisdom, as I realise how best to use the role of having my hand (very lightly) upon the tiller.

That is what is required of all council members. In addition I have pondered what my personal contribution has been. At times I have felt like the grit in the oyster; at times, like the stone in someone's sandal; and at times, I have been treated like something unsavoury that sticks to the bottom of your shoe. The council has behaved in two ways that (sadly) are too often characteristic of the Church of England as a whole: it has not used well the talent that is placed at its disposal, and it does not value thoughtful reflective wisdom. Increasingly I see, in the council, the General Synod and the Church as a whole, a readiness to listen to special advisors from one's own tribe - people who are "one of us". There are two names in particular (theologians who I read and treasure highly) who are demonised by the council in a shameful way: when their names are mentioned, a hiss seems to go round the room. I will be writing to both of them next week to encourage them and to urge them to keep on saying the words that may be "out of season" (but which are vital to the health of the church).

As I leave the council, one of my greatest concerns is that "they" are increasingly believing their own rhetoric (without having it challenged, and checked against reality by awkward voices). There is a programme of change being developed within the structures of the Church of England called "Renewal and reform". In principle it is excellent; timely action is required on a number of fronts. But the rhetoric (which has motivational value) states "unless we do XYZ now, there won't be a Church of England in 20 years' time". That is dangerous nonsense, which displays an ignorance of history and a disdain for the faith that we profess. Yes, we are in a generation when numbers of worshippers seems to be steadily dropping, and numbers of clergy are falling quite fast. But to equate that to the extinction of the church is not to believe in a God who has guided the church for 2000 difficult years already, and whom we know as "the God who brought Jesus back from the dead". Allied to this, there is an unremitting demand for everyone to do more mission - spoken about in such a way that feels like bullying. At such times, I hear little recognition of the attitudes that (I believe) characterise this parish: dedication to worship and regular prayer, generous hospitality, engagement with many aspects of civic life, and commitment to service that is often active way beyond the walls of the church.

As I relinquish my seat at the table, I am so grateful that I am rooted in a Christian community that prays, thinks, serves and looks for signs of God freshly at work in new ways. That has supported me in my five years on the Archbishops' Council, and gives me hope for all that lies ahead.