

THE BISHOP OF BEDFORD - PRESIDENTIAL ADDRESS

DIOCESAN SYNOD

9 MARCH 2024

In Him was life and that life was the light of all.

In 1989 I had the privilege of overseeing the construction of a new church building. A replacement for the earlier church on this tough housing estate in Sheffield that had been demolished and the conclusion of a pilgrimage from the congregation that travelled through the church hall until the boiler blew up; the Baptist Church until that was also demolished; and the back room of our vicarage. Alongside the worship space there was a hall, lounge, offices, fully equipped kitchen and good loos!

From the start I had insisted that the budget included money for art. We were able to commission a number of things including a set of five windows where coloured glass depicted the themes of the first five verses of John's Gospel. All of them sought more contemporary reference, connections with South Yorkshire and a world facing focus.

For the middle one that focused on verse 4 – *In Him was life and that life was the light of all* – I requested something that expressed the whole people of God. It's probably the only church window that depicts a shopping centre – Meadowhall, along with other Sheffield buildings. But I mention it now because it also includes a crowd of people – God's people – God's diverse people. There are those who are black and those who are white; there is young and old; there is those of other faiths; and there is a lady in a wheel-chair. I am not sure at the time that I realised how prophetic the window is.

This morning hold that image before you – sadly I couldn't find a picture of it – that image of a church that is diverse in every way. The church that we are committed to as we take forward our priority of becoming 'younger and more diverse'.

Diversity that is about the racial diversity which we focused on last Synod with the inspiring contribution from Revd Guy Hewitt, the Church of England's Racial Justice Director. But Diversity that is about far more than just race.

According to the 2021 Census 17.8% of the population of England and Wales was disabled – that's 10.4 million people. Approximately 7.5 % of the population were 'limited a lot' by their disability. 32% of homes contained at least one disabled person. Most of us will experience some form of disability in our lives, not least as we grow older.

Thankfully many disabled people do find a home in our churches. But many do not – for some they simply can't get in. For others once they are in, they struggle to participate for a whole host of reasons. For too many there can be a lack of appropriate welcome.

The booklet 'All Stand' which you have, was commissioned by myself and compiled by Revd John Naude as part of the work of the church's national work on disability which I chair. It is thirteen testimonies of disabled people in our churches. Do read it for it celebrates the gifts that those who are disabled bring to the life of our churches, but also expresses the pain and frustration of that engagement. Among those included is Andrew Whatling from Biggleswade with Down Syndrome. Andrew among other things is a member of his PCC, and who is not afraid at lengthy meetings of saying to his Vicar: 'Reverend, let's get on!'.

One other contributor is Sal Brinton, Baroness Brinton of Kenardington, a member of St Luke's Watford who, I am delighted to say, will be addressing us this Synod. An opportunity for all of us to reflect further on how we enable disabled people, along with those who are deaf, neurodiverse and with mental health concerns to participate fully in the church. To have a full voice in our common life.

The concept of class in contemporary society is not easy, it raises all sorts of questions, although I note that General Synod in its debate on 'Estates Evangelism' refers to the working classes as a required source for future leaders.

However we describe it, we know that all too often the Church of England has struggled to be fully inclusive of the social and economic strata's of society. Many years ago, when first in Sheffield – not that estate where we built the church but another housing estate where I was fulfilling my ACCM recommendation that I spent two years doing something different – that was working in a cutlery factor and running youth clubs – I read Ted Wickham's book 'Church and People in an Industrial City'. It includes a description of the poorer people of the area around St Stephen's Church where I was living, in the latter part of the nineteenth century I think, watching as the rich churchgoers rolled up in their carriages. Class is not a new issue for us.

Luke Larner, the Vicar of St Andrew's Luton has recently edited the book 'Confounding the Mighty – Stories of Church, Social Class and Solidarity' published by SCM. It is a collection of essays that explores how class relates to faith, vocation, justice and much more. A challenge and a reminder that diversity includes the presence of the whole community, not just some.

And finally, one more publication. Many of us will know John Wallace who for many years was Lay Chair of this Synod and worship at All Saints', Leighton Buzzard. In his seventies John completed his doctoral thesis on Anglo-Catholic Church Planting. It has subsequently been published by Sacristy Press.

Comparing the stories of two Victorian builders of new churches with contemporary church-planters he reminds us that church planting, fresh expressions and flourishing churches is not exclusive to one church tradition. It calls us to that diversity of church life that is rich in every way – from the more protestant to the more catholic. Becoming 'younger and more diverse' is for us all, for the flourishing of all.

Three written works all linked in some way with our Diocese. Three aspects of diversity that are all significant; that all expand our horizons. This Synod, not least with Sal Brinton, is part of taking that Agenda forward.