

Reflections on my time in the Partnership so far – May 2008

After Easter I went home to Bognor Regis for a week to reflect on my time in the Partnership so far, to gain some perspective on the situation here, and how I feel my role is emerging. My home parish of Barnham, Eastergate and Aldingbourne is a joint country parish in West Sussex, which I'd always been connected with, but where I started attending church every week when I was fourteen.

Going back to my home parish helped me to reflect on the Partnership. I realised that the personality of the vicar was one of the main reasons I started attending church and kept going. I used to look forward to his sermons from week to week because they always seemed to untangle or illuminate some aspect of my own life or what was happening in the world. This helped me to understand better the many pockets of disquiet in the Partnership to do with churches not having their own vicars anymore, while appreciating the breadth and diversity of clerical expertise which everyone can benefit from in this Partnership situation.

Part of my job description referred to being a 'tangible focus for the growth of the Partnership' – a nodal point for information and communication. So far, this has ranged from me taking enquiries for baptisms, weddings and funerals, to being responsible for the clergy rota, and the distribution of information – between and outside of the churches. I believe it also involves raising the profile of the Partnership churches in the communities, so that people know we're here – and maintaining an open and welcoming image, so that people might come and try us out, or feel comfortable enough to say what they need from us.

I have spent a lot of my time designing posters and advertising material, as well as compiling spreadsheets and lists of who does what and where, thus trying to create a dynamic and accessible communications resource, which could be used by people across the Partnership. As I become more familiar with procedures and establish routines for the house-keeping side of things, I would hope to extend my work to helping Partnership members create real mission opportunities in East Bristol. To this end I have already represented the Partnership at a meeting of the Bristol Interfaith Group.

Since I've been in the Partnership I've heard a lot about gifts, and people identifying what their own and other people's gifts are. I believe that I have the gift of asking questions, and not taking things at face-value and of looking for the deeper truth which belies things. In this spirit I am hoping to conduct interviews with priests and lay-people in the Partnership about their calling to the church, which I would then publish in written and/or audio format on the web, and as a booklet to distribute around the churches.

Furthermore I hope that in streamlining communication across the Partnership I might make procedures and decision-making processes more transparent, and contribute to a culture of openness, sharing and honesty.

One of the things I've found difficult about my time in the Partnership so far has been balancing my commitment to Bedminster Quakers, and attending services in the Partnership churches.

Until 2 years ago I had attended Anglican churches every week. I then decided to start attending Quaker meetings instead but with equal fervour. I didn't see this as at all a barrier to my coming to work in the East Bristol Partnership, but I do appreciate that I would be more accessible if I were to regularly rotate around Sunday 10 o'clock services in the Partnership churches. However I still feel that the Quakers is where I need to be in terms of my own spiritual well-being at the moment. I hope that this Quakerly perspective might be seen as an asset to the Partnership, along with my neutrality, which a non-affiliation to any particular Partnership church implies.

To sum up, I'm very happy to be working here in the East Bristol Partnership. I do not see this as the kind of job where you can just 'switch-off' at the end of the day. I already feel deeply emotionally involved with the life of the Partnership, while hopefully appreciating that boundaries need to be established. I have been continually astounded by the amount of time and dedication that very many people put into the growth and maintenance of their church and the Partnership, and have felt very humbled next to your self-sacrifice and steadfastness. I would like to thank you all for your kindness, encouragement and support so far, and look forward to getting to know you all better as we progress on this spiritual journey together.

With love from Mark