

Diocesan Conference Report 23rd – 26th June 2008.

One of the most interesting aspects for me about attending the diocesan conference in June was seeing how the churches of the EBP fit into the wider diocese. It felt encouraging to know that we are part of a larger network of churches, and to find out about the situations of other parishes and partnerships and see how they are getting on.

It was also important for me, in my role as Partnership Coordinator, to make contacts with clergy and lay from across the diocese, and try to raise the general awareness of the EBP amongst other Anglicans in Bristol. Because the idea of working in Partnership in this way is still a relatively new concept, and every Partnership that has been set up in Bristol is unique in its own way, I found myself explaining our particular situation to many people, both clergy and lay. Everyone I spoke to seemed really interested in what we are doing, and I received various suggestions for how we might work together in the future. The whole experience helped me to reflect on what the Partnership actually is, and to focus on where we are going within the wider context of the diocese.

I believe this was the first diocesan conference (formerly known as ‘clergy school’) where lay-people were invited. This included many lay-ministers and church wardens, but also some people like me, lay people employed by the diocese to work as coordinators, facilitators, administrators, project-managers and the like. I felt this was an encouraging sign that the ministry of all, in its diversity, is being recognised and celebrated. I felt this also reflected our Partnership vision, which repeatedly refers to the enabling of lay people. I felt this was especially reflected in the fact that our name-badges simply bore our name, without reference to title, such as Reverend or Canon etc. In this context we were able to meet each other simply as fellow humans, and to commune together with God.

The main event of the conference was series of lectures by Sylvia Keesmat and Brian Walsh about their book ‘Colossians Remixed’ (see review), two very learned and accessible biblical scholars and religio-environmental activists, with a message from the bible utterly relevant for our lives today.

Interspersed with these lectures was the opportunity to take part in small group seminars. There was a wide variety to choose from, however the first one I attended was a discussion about women’s spirituality and physicality. We talked about body-image and the media, and touched on such topics as anorexia, female genital mutilation and the concept and image of Christa – the image of Christ crucified portrayed as woman. We drew many links between how women experience their physicality and how this relates to their spirituality. We also looked at the concept of the ‘other’, women portrayed in society as objects, and how this conflicts with Jesus’

approach to women, especially his deep and complex relationship with Mary Magdalene.

The second workshop I attended was a Samoan Circle style debate on homosexuality. With this being a hot topic in the Anglican Communion at the moment, this style of debate was a useful way of approaching the subject. Only the person sitting in the chair at the centre of the circle could speak, and before the next person could take the chair, the moderator would sum up what the last person had said. There was a wide range of views expressed. As a gay person myself, finding myself working for the Church of England, I was particularly happy about the way in which this discussion was conducted. However, it made me realise how much more difficult it must be for a priest who is gay to be open about his or her sexuality to the community in which they serve. To my mind, there is still a 'don't ask – don't tell' culture, which I believe is detrimental to an individual's feeling of self-worth. More than just being tolerated, I believe that gay people working for the church should be celebrated, and their relationships sanctified as an expression of God's love, equal to any other.

There was also an additional lecture which everyone attended about 'why men don't go to church', given by a well-known Bristol psychologist. The gist of his talk was that there was too much sitting still and flowers to interest boys in church. He produced many statistics to back up his assertions, which indicated various differences between men and women in their approach to church. Interestingly there were no differences between male and female clergy in their approach to church, which was disproportional to the differences between men and women in society at large.

Alongside these sessions were regular meetings for worship, including traditional-style services, more evangelical-style worship, and multi-sensory installation worship, put together by Janet Lunt, who organised the Partnership children's workshop in June. I found these installations particularly moving. Amongst other things there was the opportunity to thread your prayer into a tapestry, symbolised by coloured pieces of material. There was also a video of various images of Christ, with beautiful music accompanying it, which was lovely to just sit and watch. On the final evening of the conference there was a Eucharist for all attending (over 200!), presided over by Bishops Mike and Lee.

I was very glad I was encouraged to attend the conference, and I would highly recommend it to others in the Partnership, should the opportunity for lay people to attend occur again. I feel that I came away with a fresh perspective and understanding of the work of our Partnership, and I hope this will feed into my work as your coordinator in the months to come.