

Reflections on my sabbatical, April-June 2008.

Purposes.

The Chelmsford Diocesan Guideline state that a sabbatical should be about 'renewal, refreshment and rest'. After eleven years of ordained ministry and seven years at Ingatestone and Fryerning, such an experience was a welcome concept.

Programme.

There were two distinct parts to the planned programme.

1. A ten day course at St. George's College Jerusalem on the theme of 'Experiencing the Orthodox Easter'. This was to be followed by an extra week in Jerusalem.
2. Six weeks at Ridley Hall, Cambridge. Here I would be living amongst ordinands. With the guidance of Revd. Dr. Adrian Chatfield I would be considering developing Christian community and also so how the Christian community interacts with the wider community. Under my own initiative I would be able to organise visits to churches and events in Cambridgeshire and beyond to consider these questions. I would also be working with Revd. Jane Keiller on prayer visualisations. This would mean that the time at Ridley would combine all the elements outlined in the purposes.

Reflections: St. Georges' College.

In order to fully appreciate the teaching of Dr. Hugh Wybrew and the experiences to be undertaken, it was necessary to dedicate time to background reading. This needed to cover both the Orthodox Church and also the contemporary situation in Israel. I was fortunate to be able to go to Somerset to undertake this reading. St. Georges' College is part of a complex including the Anglican Cathedral and a Guest House, with a School across the road. It is based in east Jerusalem and is comfortable walking distance to the Damascus Gate and entrance into the old city. It is an ideal situation for exploring the old city, for

experiencing life for Palestinians and seeing how the Anglican Cathedral operates in this context.

Dr. Hugh's lectures were very thorough and knowledgeable. The course was structured so that at the beginning of Orthodox Holy Week we had a number of lectures that provided background information before attending many services from Thursday to Saturday. For example, on Thursday we attended foot-washing services that were Greek Orthodox, Armenian Orthodox and Syrian Orthodox. On Friday we attended an Armenian service focussing on the coffin of Jesus. We also attended a Greek service focussed on the burial shroud of Jesus, where it was processed around the Parvis, the paved area in front of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre. On Saturday I attended the extra-ordinary Holy Fire service in the church, despite there being difficulties with the Israeli Security Forces which meant that half of our group were excluded. The service, where fire is passed dramatically and rapidly amongst five thousand pilgrims, was literally breath-taking. In the evening we went to another Holy Fire service, this with Ethiopians on the roof of the church. This had a real African feel.

Being in east Jerusalem it would be impossible and also highly inappropriate not to experience the situation for those who live everyday in the state of Israel. I will have lasting memories of huge numbers of young Israeli soldiers throughout the old city, with large guns on their backs. Walking through the Muslim part of the old city and then going straight into the Jewish part is an extra-ordinary contrast. Being at the Western Wall and hearing the sounds of Jewish prayers and looking up to the Dome of the Rock is also unforgettable. We heard about the problems of the Christian community and also those who live with the reality of the security wall and how this is affecting life. To stand in front of the ten metre high wall and read the graffiti, 'friends cannot be divided...from the Warsaw Ghetto to our ghetto' is very emotional. We visited a Christian run hospital

and also a school that works with Palestinians to see the situation.

Having extra time in Jerusalem was very important as it gave the opportunity to reflect on experiences and also to simply spend time in places where we had inevitably had to rush. To spend a day in the Church of the Holy Sepulchre and experience the frenetic activity of numerous services was amazing. To be able to explore some of the archaeological sites was also a privilege. This extra time beyond the course gave many possibilities.

It was also good to meet with fellow course members and others who were at St. Georges' during the period. Talking with senior clergy and others from the Episcopal Church in the United States of America and Canada gave interesting insights into questions concerning the Anglican Communion.

Ridley Hall.

Having undertaken my initial training for the ministry at Ridley Hall between September 1995 and June 1997 it was good to return eleven years later. Living amongst ordinands for six weeks was a great privilege. I was surprised to find how broad the age range was among the ordinands, from 20 to 53 years. The community is referred to as 'a community of grace'. This title is thoroughly deserved. They were a welcoming and engaging group of people to be amongst. It is twenty years since my own giving of my life to Jesus when I was in a hospital bed awaiting emergency surgery and expecting to die. Being amongst the community that included a former doctor, teachers, city traders, members of the armed forces etc who have all given their lives to Jesus and know that he wants the best for them was very renewing and refreshing. Revd. Dr. Christopher Cocksworth, who left as Principal in June to become the Bishop of Coventry, called this 'the D.N.A. of the place'. To me it felt like the very air that was breathed.

The focus of the work with Revd. Dr. Adrian Chatfield was 'Developing Christian community'. So that this could have practical application to a parish context, this was interpreted as both developing the local Christian community and also how this community interacted with the wider community. I met with Adrian for a weekly supervision. We looked at the whole question of emerging churches and how they define themselves as church. We considered the nature of a Christian community. I visited Earls Court to meet with the Revd. Tom Gillum who has set up a dispersed Christian community and to consider how this works in practice. I also organised a number of visits to churches in Cambridgeshire to see how they engaged with their local communities. We looked at the concept of 'the Angel of the Church' as in the letters in the Book of Revelation. Rarely in parish ministry do we have time to stop and examine practices. I have never had the opportunity to visit other churches. Working with Adrian was very valuable and will lead to actions in parish ministry.

With Revd. Jane Keiller, Ridley Hall Chaplain, the focus was personal spiritual engagement using prayer visualizations. We met for an hour each week. To have the time and space to be able to undertake this activity under Jane's skilful guidance was a great blessing. This time was truly refreshing and renewing as we tackled in depth personal issues. Above all this time was a reminder that God loves me and wants the best for me. I have always know this as a reality in the last twenty years, but it was very rewarding to have this brought again to the surface and to be renewed in the implications.

Conclusion.

The sabbatical has been a wonderful experience. It is ironic that organising the sabbatical was quite stressful, with a number of proposed visits falling through as communities and institutions failed to see the purpose of studying Christian community from within a community. The possibility of going to Ridley Hall only came out of desperation to find somewhere to go!

I note that the Diocese will now be organising a day to help clergy plan their sabbatical. This is a very positive development that may well help with practical issues, such as those of funding.

Revd. Patrick Sherring, Rector of Ingatestone and Fryerning,
June 2008.