

Sowing the seeds of mutual flourishing

Northern dioceses share a model for dialogue that builds trust and friendship

Bishop Libby Lane and Bishop Philip North were in Manchester for the first of a series of events planned to encourage mutual flourishing between the Women's Chapter and The Society Chapter in the diocese. The event built on the trust and friendship that has been developed between the two groups in the diocese which have been meeting together regularly for 20 years.

Bishops Libby and Philip reflected on their ordinations that occurred within a few weeks of one another last year.

Bishop Libby recalls that Bishop Philip was one of first to get in touch with her after her appointment as Bishop of Stockport was announced. "He wanted to be present at my ordination and be seen to say this was part of his prayer for our church. To be at one another's ordinations was significant and important. I'm thankful for the ongoing relationship and shared ministry that grows out of our love and friendship for one another."

Bishop Philip's call to ordination and urban ministry came from his experience of working with other clergy in the catholic tradition. He observed that they were making churches work in some of the toughest areas of high unemployment; bringing an holistic theology and a sacramental presence.

He said, "The consecration of Libby was a joyful event because it was the will of the majority in the Church of England. My consecration as Bishop of Burnley provided a route for the preservation of catholic bishops. The graciousness of the first women to be consecrated has been very important."

Also, closer to home, in Blackburn Diocese some who were opposed to his consecration have become great friends, which has brought great joy. Bishop Philip finds Blackburn Diocese an amazing place to minister. He says "Lancashire does theological diversity as part of its DNA!"

Looking forward he says "The Church doesn't have the luxury of living with division. We face tremendous challenges is sharing the love of Jesus in the present age, attracting good clergy, engaging with secular authorities and providing pastoral love and care. We have to work together to tackle the important issues and share our faith with the nation. Mutual flourishing isn't just for our own benefit; it's for the benefit of the world so we can be more effective in sharing the Good News."

Bishop Libby paid tribute to the courageous and prophetic action of the two Chapters in Manchester which have been steadfastly committed to meeting together though the ups and downs of the last 20 years.

Archdeacon of Rochdale, Cherry Vann said "Initially there was no contact between the two groups, we had separate Eucharists at a clergy conference and there was bitterness and distrust. We recognised that this was not a good witness for the Church and that we had to find a way of living together. Representatives of the two Chapters began to meet regularly for a meal, to pray and to talk about our differences. We held an annual vigil together, organised quiet days, and made sure that at least one of the Eucharists at the following Diocesan Conference was one at which all could receive communion. We have met regularly for 20 years. Despite the struggles, we have stuck together and built mutual trust and respect.

Canon Simon Killwick of the Society Chapter, said, "After the legislation in November 2012 fell in Synod, some of us considered whether to stop meeting. But we decided that mutual flourishing was an important aspiration and we would do what we could to enable mutual flourishing to take place."

A series of meetings is planned of which this was the first. The next will explore mission from a catholic perspective.

Simon continued, "We are all children of God no matter how much we disagree. We have to engage, find mutual respect and love within body of Christ. It's hard, but we want to look for common ground not dodge the difficult areas. It's better to speak the truth in love than not to speak."

Cherry Vann added, "Over the years, significant friendships between the two groups have grown and I'm convinced that this is the way forward. We can also model this in other areas of disagreement, such as sexuality. Some members of the Manchester group who took part in the regional 'shared conversations' have continued to meet, and we are committed to trying to move forward together in friendship and greater understanding of one another's perspectives".