

## Christmas Newsletter

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

As your churches and places of work hold events in the run-up to Christmas, I am praying that God will grant hearing and believing of the Gospel to many. I've had the privilege of seeing some of the special activities, services and evangelistic endeavours for myself, both in the north and the south of the country and it has been a huge encouragement to me.

I am conscious that many are praying for me too. Thank you so much for this – and to those church staff meetings which have included me in their prayers. God is opening up opportunities for ministry in different dioceses – and what follows is an attempt to convey a flavour of this.

### ***Diocesan Relations***

By the end of this year I will have had meetings with ten diocesan bishops as well as with a number of suffragan bishops and archdeacons. A further 14 meetings are scheduled for the first five months of 2016. All of these people have been very friendly and most have explicitly said that if conservative evangelical PCCs were to pass resolutions under the House of Bishops' Declaration, they would look to me to provide episcopal ministry. However, this has not been uniform; in some cases this has been because a PEV is already provided or because the purpose of the likely resolutions would be to enable parishes to advertise for a male incumbent when a vacancy arises, rather than to secure a change in the current male episcopal oversight.

A good number of dioceses either have, or are in the process of, appointing me as an honorary assistant bishop. These include London, Southwark, Chelmsford, Rochester, Chester, Sheffield, Exeter, and Manchester. The Bishop of Norwich has also said he is open to this possibility. I am hoping that there will be yet others.

There are various reasons why it is helpful for me to be appointed as an assistant bishop:

- It makes it much more likely that I will be asked to provide episcopal oversight for those parishes in the diocese which pass resolutions, irrespective of whether or not there is a female bishop;
- It makes it more possible for me to be involved with parishes where the incumbent is complementarian in conviction, but no resolution has been passed by the PCC;
- It makes it possible for me to minister to different parishes simply because there is a need (irrespective of churchmanship) or they are keen to receive (or experience) my ministry.

Some diocesan bishops have said that they do not see a need to make me an assistant bishop, because I would be welcome to minister anywhere in their dioceses at any time (eg Winchester and Truro). The Bishop of Chichester has said he would be happy for me to preach in any conservative evangelical church in his diocese.

I am hoping that one of the end results of my programme of visits and meetings will be the establishment of good relationships. A number of the issues we are concerned about (eg

selection for ordination training and appointments) involve many diocesan staff, so the greater the extent to which these relationships are easy, the better I will be able to help if particular issues arise.

### ***Assisting Local Churches***

Since my consecration on 21<sup>st</sup> September, I have visited 13 local clergy teams, and in six cases have been able to spend a large part of a Sunday with their congregations, preaching and meeting wardens and PCCs. I was also invited to join the Co-Mission staff for 24 hours and had a good number of very helpful discussions with the ministers there. In addition, I have conducted my first three confirmations! What a joy it has been, meeting the candidates for confirmation and hearing about how the Lord has worked in their lives!

So far, six churches have either been passed to me for oversight or are about to be, as a result of passing resolutions under the House of Bishops' Declaration. I know that many are in the process of setting up the necessary discussions in their PCCs. My hope is that by the end of my first year of episcopal ministry there will be at least 50 churches under my oversight. Several clergy have sought my advice about passing resolutions – and the way forward varies for each. In some cases it would not be helpful for the parish to seek my oversight. At the end of the day, what matters is a course of action that will best help the Gospel ministry and witness of the local church. In addition, I have been delighted to act as a sounding board for clergy, and, in the case of some of those parishes under my oversight, to discuss their plans and to pray for them.

A further area of work since becoming a bishop has been to draw alongside clergy in some relatively new church plants in order to help foster good relationships with the dioceses in which they are situated. In some cases this means helping to regularise their situations and pursue the possibility of Bishop's Mission Orders – with a view to continuing to supporting them through my ministry.

### ***A Voice in the Church of England***

Last month I had a good time meeting ordinands at Wycliffe Hall and I am looking forward to visiting Oak Hill in April. I have also been asked to speak at a clergy conference that same month in the Lichfield Diocese. I was a signatory to the letter that was published in the Daily Telegraph about Extremism Disruption Orders in November and attended the launch of the Defend Free Speech campaign at the House of Commons. At the time of writing, I am about to join the House of Bishops for two days of meetings.

I am very grateful that a number of clergy have agreed to form a preliminary advisory group to help me review what is taking place, to think through the challenges that lie ahead, to suggest ways forward and to pray. These are Angus MacLeay, Mark Burkill, David Banting, Lee Gatiss, Mike Ovey and Simon Austin. In due course, I hope to form a similar group specifically to do the same thinking and praying in the Northern Province.

### ***Prayer***

I'm often asked how people can pray for me. Please keep asking, because it's both a wonderful encouragement and a good reminder that any worthwhile achievement is the Lord's doing.

My key prayer points are:

#### Thankfulness

- for warm opening discussions with Diocesan Bishops
- for the work done by my assistant, Chris Benson, when I was in Plymouth – who organised the web site, set up the initial visiting programme and did my accounts

#### Intercession

- Doors to open as I visit Diocesan Bishops
- Progress to be made where churches and individuals are seeking to regularise their situations – and that this would serve the Gospel
- Development of good relations with Diocesan staff
- Wisdom to know how best to advise parishes
- The right content and tone when I speak at the House of Bishops
- Sensible diary planning
- A good start for my new PA, Rachel Lickiss
- Well-being for Lesley and me; for finding and settling into an appropriate local church; and for the further move when we leave our present address in February in order to move to Lingfield in Surrey.

#### ***Finally***

I've put weekly 'date nights' with Lesley in my diary for 2016 – and if you're married, I hope you have an approach that works for you in making proper time for each other. Married or single, we all need time off without guilt – after all God gives us the privilege of joining in His work, but the success of that work doesn't depend on us! (1 Corinthians 3:7)

I know that for some, the prospect of the New Year is not one of excitement at possibilities, but of sorrow at losses. I do pray that we will all support one another in our different situations – and especially those where we are most reminded that this world is not our permanent home.

Whatever our situations, may God be glorified by our praises, our ministry, and the fruit of the Spirit in our more private lives as we go into the New Year.

Every good wish

Rod Thomas