

by Adrian Chatfield

resource sheet 12

church of england: obstacle or opportunity?

Over the last few years, you have become more involved in the life and worship of your local church. Your contribution is much appreciated but lately, sermons and comments by friends are making you wonder whether God is trying to say something to you. Is God calling you to a new kind of ministry, to greater responsibility, to a full-time involvement, to ordination?

And then it dawns on you that this church where you are so much at home has connections. It is part of the Church of England, though this hasn't featured very much in your thinking – or in the worship and life of your congregation. Now the questions flood in. What do English Anglicans stand for? Where is the Church of England going? Do I want to commit myself to something so broad and diverse? Or, more fundamentally, what is the Church of England?

So you begin a little research, and discover that figures for the Church of England don't make much sense. In rural and suburban areas, 'Christmas

tourists' increase congregations by 500% or more, and over half the population uses a church building for some indeterminate spiritual reason every year.

A handful of city Anglican churches have a regular attendance in the high hundreds, but the average Sunday attendance is well under 70, with many churches in single figures. In about 20% of our churches, growth by conversion is transforming the Christian community; elsewhere, an aging group seems to face inevitable closure.

Attitudes are even more confusing. Many folk take the local parish church for granted. It's there and available when they want it, kept in cold storage the rest of the time. They assume that it's theirs, and woe betide attempts to change it. 'None of this happy-clappy nonsense here, vicar....' Increasingly, however, weddings take place in the local hotel, humanist funerals are on the increase, and christenings are kept until the extended family can be gathered,

often years after the birth. Even the so-called 'occasional offices' appear to be under threat.

And, let's face it, for the vast majority of the population, Christianity is not just puzzling but irrelevant, never thought about at all. The antics of parts of the Church of England may provide the tabloids with fillers, but this is merely Sunday Sport entertainment in which the questions 'True?' or 'False?' don't feature.

Inside these churches sharing the 'Church of England' tag, the proverbial Martian might be excused for doubting his sanity: charismatic, catholic or conservative, liberal or evangelical, believing in nothing, believing in anything. One vicar in rural Devon preached reincarnation, many hundreds doubt the resurrection of Jesus. No wonder that one villager presented his daughter for confirmation with a Sufi 'christening' certificate.

Many committed Christians find this seemingly chaotic approach to

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Christianity hard to live with. We want to model our churches on something much closer to the New Testament – in worship and teaching, fellowship and lifestyle. The thought of having to associate with such chaotic breadth and confusion is distasteful, the impediment of crumbling buildings a waste of valuable resources, the atmosphere of decline an offence to the gospel of Jesus Christ. Who'd want to fish from a sinking boat?

What do Anglicans believe?

Anglicans like to describe themselves as 'catholic and reformed'. Catholic, as part of the worldwide Christian community through history, reaching back to the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. Reformed, because the Church of England was radically reshaped by the Protestant concerns of the 16th century Reformation. Before anyone is ordained as a minister, or licensed to serve, they make a Declaration of Assent, formally agreeing that 'The Church of England is part of the One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church, worshipping the one true God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit'. It professes the faith uniquely revealed in the Holy Scriptures and set forth in the catholic creeds, which faith the Church is called upon to proclaim afresh in each generation.

George Carey, former Archbishop of Canterbury, says that for him, 'one of the long-term attractions of the Anglican way has been the fact that it is rooted in Scripture as the foundation for our understanding of the faith.' (*Celebrating the Anglican Way*, Ian Bunting (editor), page 14). The official starting point for what Anglicans believe is the Bible. Creeds and doctrinal statements are all dependent upon the Holy Scriptures, and derive their authority from them alone. This is strongly underlined by the sixth of the Thirty-nine Articles, which remain Anglicanism's primary doctrinal text. In 16th century language, it says that the Bible 'contains everything that we need for salvation. Anything that you can't find in the Holy

Scriptures may not be thought of as an additional requirement.'

So when we hear of an Anglican minister, or a group within the Church of England, doubting a particular scriptural truth or principle, we can be quite clear that they are deviating from the Anglican scriptural centre. The great reforming archbishop William Cranmer was so convinced of this, that he changed the whole way of worship of the Church of England to fit the principle that 'ignorance of God's word is the cause of all error'.

We are a Church which encourages people to explore, to question, to debate, so that they grow and mature in their faith. This is a risky business, because some come to the wrong conclusions. But underlying the risk of open discussion is our profound confidence in the truth and power of the Holy Scriptures, our commission to teach and preach only what can be found in, or proved from them, and the challenge to confront error.

So it is essential that anyone who thinks that God may be calling them to ordination in the Church of England can answer the questions put to them in the ordination service with a good conscience. These include: 'Do you accept the Holy Scriptures as revealing all things necessary for eternal salvation through faith in Jesus Christ?' and 'Do you believe the doctrine of the Christian faith as the Church of England has received it, and in your ministry will you expound and teach it?'

How do Anglicans worship?

If you Google the two words 'liturgy' and 'boring' together, you get tens of thousands of results, and that sums up many contemporary Christians' opinion of liturgy! Liturgy, however, means 'the work of the people' – in a Christian context, our duty and our joy to worship God.

Discussion of Anglican worship has

to start with two books: the *Book of Common Prayer* (BCP), and *Common Worship*. The BCP sets the standard of Anglican worship – it is a strong diet of Scripture and prayer that everyone can join in. It has a clear pattern of praise, repentance, thanksgiving and intercession. It doesn't depend on the mood of the congregation or the whim of an individual minister. Rather, it is faithful to the commands of Jesus: to baptise, to teach, to break bread together, to care for one another.

Christians from other traditions who visit a Church of England service often remark on how scriptural the liturgy is. Not only is the worship full of Scripture readings; the prayers and canticles (traditional songs), the responses and actions regularly echo or quote from the Bible. Daily prayer, morning and evening, public and private, is built on psalmody and scripture. It is a glorious diet.

Because the BCP is approaching its 400th anniversary, *Common Worship* has from the beginning of the 21st century incorporated these standards and patterns into a series of services which are more varied, to fit a wider range of contexts. It allows for much more flexibility and local planning and participation in the leading of worship, still based on the same patterns. It holds fast to the idea of common prayer, locally adapted, rooted in the Scriptures, using resources from many contexts.

The idea of 'common prayer' is treasured, because it reminds us that we are part of a worldwide community, and even in the local setting we cannot be individualistic. Anglicans who visit their sisters and brothers in another part of the world may not understand the language, but they recognise the family likeness, and feel immediately at home. The shape of Anglican worship gives us a rhythm to our life which is God-centred rather than driven by the pressures of modern life. It is a framework which is able to accommodate artistic and dramatic expression and all our

emotional states, as well as those 'God moments' for which all good worship must be prepared. We respond, after all, to a sovereign God.

What is the shape of this church?

Local and missionary

In most villages, and in some towns, the Church of England is the only Christian body today which maintains a worship and pastoral presence. The parish system means that there is no one in England for whom the Church does not feel responsible. This means that the local congregation has a missionary care for all the people in the parish: to proclaim Christ to all, and to love and care for all, regardless of their religious or spiritual state. 'Parish' is our way of responding to the parable of the Good Samaritan: we are neighbours to all who cross our paths.

Part of that remains the ministry of the 'occasional offices.' Most clergy welcome the opportunity to care for their people at the threshold moments of their lives, even when they have little to do with the regular life of the worshipping community. It's a chance to preach the good news of Jesus Christ, and to show the love and compassion of Jesus to all.

This has its down side. There are some who feel that they have a voice in the life of their parish church, though they rarely attend, or only doubtfully believe. The heritage mentality sometimes threatens the spiritual health of our smaller churches. But it is an enormous evangelistic opportunity, and doors are still opened to leaders of the Church of England in a remarkable way.

Apart from the parishes, the thousands of Church of England schools, and the chaplaincies in which Anglican ministers still predominate, create a Christian presence across the land, where Christian faith and values are taught, Christian care given, and Christian life modelled by licensed ministers and

countless volunteers. In an increasingly fragmented and disturbed society, it is our way of being salt and light in every place and across the land.

National

The Church of England is also regional and national. Organised into dioceses which are led spiritually by bishops (overseers), it is able to resource the local churches more effectively, and influence regional and national government both formally and informally.

The Church of England is established, which puzzles many. It certainly does not mean that the reigning monarch is the head of the Church of England. Jesus Christ is! The Queen is the 'Supreme Governor' and the task of government is legally in the hands of parliament. In practice, all such government is delegated to the General Synod and parliamentary interference is a thing of the past. Among the many Christian MPs, however, there are many who have the best interests of the Church of England at heart, and work hard behind the scenes for it.

The strength of the establishment link lies in the voice which it gives the Church in the House of Lords at present and the informal access to the centres of influence in government, commerce and industry. The weakness is that there is the possibility of compromise, because 'power corrupts.' In reality, many Christians, not just Anglicans, are very glad that Anglican bishops are able to speak out on matters of national interest from a Christian moral perspective.

International

The senior bishop in the Church of England is the Archbishop of Canterbury, regarded by Anglicans worldwide as the focus of unity, and it is under his chairmanship that diocesan bishops from around the world meet every ten years at the Lambeth Conference. English Anglicans are part of a global family in which each province is independent and self-governing, though all hold

to the *Book of Common Prayer* and the Thirty-nine Articles as defining features. Anglicans often like to describe themselves, therefore, as interdependent, taking each others' needs and concerns into consideration, and working very hard to stay together.

In recent years, this communion or fellowship has become very strained, particularly over the ordination of gay ministers and the blessing of same-sex marriages. The position of the Anglican Communion remains clear, and is described in Resolution 1.10 of the 1998 Lambeth Conference: 'while rejecting homosexual practice as incompatible with Scripture, [the Conference] calls on all our people to minister pastorally and sensitively to all irrespective of sexual orientation and to condemn irrational fear of homosexuals, violence within marriage and any trivialisation and commercialisation of sex.' It is likely, therefore, that the vast majority of Anglicans worldwide who hold to this resolution will strengthen their fellowship in the not too distant future by entering into an even closer covenant relationship, while keeping the doors open for continuing dialogue with those who have moved away from Anglican norms, in the risky way that we have chosen to operate.

Free to grow

Does belonging to the Church of England restrict our freedom in worship and mission, or compromise us doctrinally or morally? Not at all! Over the past 40 years or so, evangelical Anglicans have recovered their confidence and reasserted the catholic and reformed character of the Church of England. It is a Church founded on scriptural truth, and it is a missionary church, obedient to Jesus' command to go and make disciples.

In recent years, initiatives like the Decade of Evangelism and working reports from *Mission-shaped Church* onwards have brought us back to our primary responsibilities. They have also

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made the Church realise that it needs to adapt its missionary and church-planting strategies to new cultural and social realities. The many experimental fresh expressions of what it means to 'be church' are like a wind blowing away decades of routine, formalism and tradition. Google may link 'boring' with many traditional aspects of Church, but the Church of England is an exciting, challenging and scripturally grounded setting in which to serve the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Further reading

Something In Common, Adrian Chatfield, (St John's Nottingham, second edition 2006). A study guide to Anglicanism written particularly for Anglicans in Africa, Asia and Latin America, but also useful for putting English Anglicanism in perspective.

Celebrating the Anglican Way, Edited by Ian Bunting, (Hodder & Stoughton 1996). Gives an excellent overview of the Church of England today.

Anglicanism: A Very Short Introduction, Mark Chapman, (Blackwell 2006). This is an easy-to-read book, written from a historical perspective.

A Companion to Common Worship, Volumes 1 and 2. Edited by Paul Bradshaw, (SPCK, 2001 and 2006). These are comprehensive guides to *Common Worship* services and patterns, with historical and practical notes.

Taking the Long View: Three-and-a-half Decades of General Synod, Colin Buchanan, (Church House Publishing, 2006). This sounds dry but is a good evangelical overview of ways in which the Church of England has wrestled with issues of doctrine, practice, worship and ethics over the life of General Synod. It's very readable, and written from a clearly evangelical perspective.

Is the Church of England Biblical? Colin Buchanan, (DLT, 1998). A comprehensive analysis of the scriptural basis of a wide range of Anglican doctrines and practices.

Being Anglican, Alastair Redfern, (DLT, 2000). A short introduction to the history and ethos of the Church of England and the wider communion.

Useful websites

www.cofe.anglican.org is the official website of the Church of England, well-organised, up-to-date and informative.

www.anglicancommunion.org is the official website of the worldwide communion, and gives links to other dioceses and provinces. It's a useful place to keep up with current discussions and developments.

www.fulcrum-anglican.org.uk 'Renewing the Evangelical Centre'

www.anglican-mainstream.net 'Anglican Mainstream is a community within the Anglican Communion committed to promote, teach and maintain the Scriptural truths on which the Anglican Church was founded and which guarantee its catholicity.'

www.awesome.org.uk Anglican Women Evangelicals

www.reform.org.uk 'Reform is a network of churches and individuals within the Church of England, committed to the reform of ourselves, our congregation and our world by the gospel. Yet the Church of England seems to have lost confidence in the truth and the power of the gospel, and we believe that responsibility in changing this must belong to the local church.'

The Rev Dr Adrian Chatfield is co-ordinator of mixed-mode training at Ridley Hall, Cambridge.

resource sheets

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