

DIFA Conference – The Hayes Centre, Swanwick - 15 -16th May 2018

We found this an inspiring and encouraging Conference with high quality input.

Dr Rosalie Ewell, Principle of Redcliff College and of the Evangelical Council – Evangelism and Ethics gave a superb keynote address entitle “To Speak People”, rooted in the Pentecost account of Acts using an analogy of the species which are unique to the ‘edge’ between two eco systems. She related the concept to Peter’s engagement with Cornelius in which both were out of their normal comfort zones (on the edge) and where God began a new and extraordinary phase in their respective spiritual lives. The engagement was transformational; it was there, on the edge, that both heard what the Spirit was saying and creating something new.

For Hugh, connections were made with his engagement with people of other Faiths and Beliefs. At such times one is on the ‘edge’ and become fluent in the language of both church and people of other Faiths/cultures. For Paul a challenging question Rosalee asked was: “Has relevance replaced love at the heart of what it means to be God’s church?” Is the church so taken up with trying to spread a “relevant” gospel that we have lost sight of where it all springs from – the heart of God and the fact that it is his mission, reaching out with confident love?” Learning to speak ‘people’ means being far less concerned with being relevant, and much more concerned about learning to love, to desire as God desires, which means going and tending to those edges where you’ll encounter all that is on the sheet (of Cornelius’ vision)”.

Questions: She asked what we are losing if we don’t go to the ‘edge’? Such spaces must be tended although it’s always more comfortable in our root ‘habitat’. Where are the edges in our parishes and how is the church there?

Rev’d Paul Cudsbys – Bishop’s Adviser for New Religious Movements (NRMs) asked how much we, with people of NRMs, are flowing towards a ‘common sea’? Paul’s address was interspersed with harp-accompanied songs by Alison Eve, aimed ‘to help hear things in different ways’.

Paul spoke of using boundaries, not barriers, when engaging with people from NRMs – this being the subliminal place – the edge. He reminded us of the need to be ‘wise as serpents and innocent as doves.’ Some NRMs are actively recruiting and seek validation form the Church of England. They don’t have to evangelise because they have caught the zeitgeist. They celebrate life and are about freedom and hope for the future. There is a fashion element – choosing a particular religion says something about how you want to be seen.

It is about orthopraxy rather than orthodoxy as, because it is rooted in whether something works rather than in understanding it. ‘Why does one want to interpret or translate religious experiences?’

Then some information about Paganism, Wicca, Witchcraft, Druidry, Animism and Shamanism with a look at crossovers between Shamanisms and Christianity, especially in its Pentecostal form.

For Paul it was useful to learn that there are not many NRM diocesan advisors and that we as DIFAs may need to be prepared to also deal with NRM-related queries and could refer to Paul (Cudby) for specialist advice if necessary.

Question: Why do we have common spiritual experiences?

Khayaal Theatre: Christian-Muslim stories. – Discussion following.

Theology of Christian-Jewish Relations: Information and discussion on the draft Church of England Document aimed at addressing anti-Semitism in Christian history and thinking with a view to affirm the distinctive relationship between Christianity and Judaism. We were invited to self-select into 6 small groups to reflect on 6 different aspects which are being developed into a comprehensive statement by the CofE on relations with the Jewish people. These six areas were as follows:

Part 1: 'A Difficult History'. Truth-telling, facts and key principles. The parting of the ways; the need for repentance, the distinctive relationship - a sacrament of otherness'.

Part 2: 'A Distinctive Relationship'. The Jewish roots of the Christian faith must be openly affirmed and former anti-semitism is to be repented of and rejected. All supersessionism is to be abandoned.

Part 3: 'The Land of Israel'. The Holy Land is specially significant to Christians and Anglicans are to hold two things together: a) the right of Israel to exist in security; b) the human rights of the Palestinian people.

Part 4: 'Mission and evangelism'. Bearing witness to Jesus Christ is to be carried out with great sensitivity to the painful history of Christian-Jewish relations and is most appropriate carried out now through dialogue and refraining from evangelism that targets Jewish people specifically.

Part 5: 'Teaching the Faith'. Negative stereotyping of Jewish people is to be purged from Christian the Church's teaching, preaching, liturgy, hymnody, artistic representation and more informal communication within the Church. In particular Good Friday liturgy is to be carefully revised.

Part 6: 'Ethical discernment and common action'. Christians' shared heritage with living Jewish traditions can be a source of enrichment, common insight and motivate better-informed action. This includes shared insights into interpreting the revealed word of God.

As the statement is still in its developmental stage, it is not yet ready to be tested in the public arena. For Paul it was good to be involved in contributing to a practical piece of work on behalf of the CofE and the feeling of helping build towards something of substance which is long overdue!

Kim Sadique: Religion and Crime. The fact of **religiously** motivated hate crime was investigated, looking at how prejudices are reinforced and narratives which lead to violent behaviour. Whereas prejudice is normal human behaviour, hate crime is not. Hate Crime – 'A criminal offence which is perceived by the victim or any other person as being motivated by prejudice or hate.' E.g. Anti-Jewish hate or anti-Muslim hate.

It includes unfair discrimination as well as political or social exclusion.

Religiously motivated hate crime is linked to matters of Faith and identity.

In 2017 there were 1382 anti-Semitic incidents reported in the UK (up 3% from 2016 and a 34% increase in violent assaults) and 1223 anti-Muslim incidents reported (up 8% from 2016 and an increase of 47% in on the street incidents). However, there was a 15% drop in online incidents from 2015-2016. The perpetrators were quite young whereas the victims were older (between 25 and 45 yrs). There has been a sustained increase in anti-Semitic hate crimes - linked with the Far Right.

Antidote: Engage in dialogue; share similarities (whilst accepting differences); build strong communities; speak for 'us' and for 'them' – i.e. counter the narrative.

The Role of DIFA: closing reflections offers by Kat Brealey. Some helpful suggestions about how we could develop our role, particularly in raising the profile of the interfaith advisor in the diocese. This can be both reactive and proactive.

What do you do and who knows about it?

- Be in touch with communications to see if they would like some stories for the diocesan bulletin/website/social media
- Think about who you invite/recommend is invited to interfaith events – not just the bishop every time! Make it your mission to involve different members of diocesan staff as a way to expose them to the joy of P&E.
- That said, don't be shy about letting your bishop/s know what you are doing,

Questions for Reflection

- How do you feel about your role – what are the joys, and what are the challenges?
- What tangible steps could you take as a result of this conference to raise your/P&E's profile in your diocese?

Hugh Ellis and Paul Smith June 2018