

CHURCH TODAY

It's not all bed news in America

By James Woodward

Listening to the experience of a sabbatical can be rather like looking at a neighbour's holiday photographs — hard to share the interest unless you were there. I have just returned from time at Virginia Theological Seminary, Washington and The University of Chicago, enriched and enlarged by three months with The Episcopal Church. I now don't share a parishioner's ambivalence about America who surprised me with the comment, "I am delighted that you are having a break but sorry you are going to that dreadful country and church!" I have been surprised by similar negative attitudes that surround the people and communities that make up the Anglican Church in the United States.

We have much to learn from them. This is a church in good heart. My excitement about the groups and congregations that I encountered focus on the intelligence, humanity and openness of this province. Let me explain.

After the morning Eucharist in the shadows of the White House, Washington (good music, superb liturgy, brilliant sermon, friendly welcome), I was hoping for a coffee and advice about a lunch venue. Instead, I was drawn into a corporate sandwich-making exercise. A diverse group of folks across class and age "rolled up their sleeves" and made 1,000 sandwiches for homeless people in the city.

I got to know my fellow worshippers whilst cutting slices of tomatoes and was astonished by their commitment to the poor in this practical way. This church gave away over 15 per cent of their income to a range of good causes — social justice was at the heart of their understanding of discipleship. This scene was replicated in a University Chaplaincy as students gave up food for Burma, money was raised for Darfur and ordinands volunteered their time to work in Africa. I detected no self-satisfaction but a moving sense of belonging to a wider world where social action was part of the identity of being Church.

I join the University of Chicago Episcopal Chaplaincy in Brent House for their Sunday evening Eucharist presided over by a talented and humane woman, an encouraging and joyful presence alongside a group of "peer ministers" who work as a team to share an open, inquisitive, integrated faith. These Anglicans are people of the book — their Prayer Book is much loved and most students know the liturgy off by heart.

Each Sunday, a student preacher — and this evening, a first-year reflects on faith in the light of the challenge of the Gospel. Articulate, searching, honest — it is an impressive homily. Students respond and there is a shared enthusiasm to know and live the Gospel. The worship overflows into supper where strangers and searchers are welcomed and listened to. The student preacher practices what I found in all churches of The Episcopal Church: a quality of teaching in and outside the liturgy.

Back in Virginia Theological Seminary, I live alongside a diverse group of students from a range of theological traditions. There is respect and desire to listen and include. The college mark Martin Luther King Day with lec-

tures and seminars. There is regret (and repentance) at the way the Church discriminated against and excluded blacks. We listen to black Bishops and theologians struggle with the Bible challenging ministry to dialogue and change. I have never seen the Bible taken so seriously as it is broken open to reveal God's desire for renewal and hope.

The intelligence of this Church is grounded on its theological education and an enthusiasm (especially amongst lay people) to learn more about faith. There is realism too. These Americans are aware of the fragility of the Anglican Communion — they pray and work for its unity. They are also concerned for the Church's mission — sessions on the St Andrew's Covenant are as important as lectures on the environment and climate change. Students and teachers are keen to engage with my English experience.

Back in Chicago, I battle through the wind and rain to St James' Cathedral for the celebration of Pentecost. The people express their solidarity with those South African children and women living with HIV and Aids. The liturgy has colour, movement, texture, beauty and the power to move me to tears. A stunning sermon involves the spirit to blow through our stable and secure habits so that we might transform our homes, workplaces and communities. There is vision and energy and love.

As I share my hopes and fears with Christians here, there is encouragement and realism. These are places where congregations sustain the ministry by paying for it entirely from stewardship. There is a mutual accountability and a shared ownership of an Anglican vision of service and outreach. There is a lightness of touch from Bishops and "the Diocese" whose attention is to support parishes and chaplaincies in their work. I constantly hear the Bishops talk of their responsibility to enable, support, energise and care for parishes and priests. This is a province where clergy well-being is a priority and is resourced to enable clergy to remain humane and realistic about work, life and expectations.

Of course, there are challenges and difficulties. Any reflective American is aware of the contradictions of its society — I never met one who was "comfortable" with Iraq or the widening gap between rich and poor. But this sojourn with American Anglicans has refreshed my confidence and renewed my hope. Change — we all need to change in different ways — and my change will have been enabled, in part, by the Episcopal Church in its depth of humanity, its quality of intelligence and in its joyful evangelical fervour in mission. God bless America.

The Rev Dr James Woodward is Master of The Foundation of Lady Katherine Leveson. Further reflections about his sabbatical can be seen on his weblog www.jameswoodward.wordpress.com.



Andrew Carey
Lambeth Notes

Discrimination in faith schools

Discrimination is a dirty and politically-incorrect word nowadays. Any whiff of discrimination is widely seen as society's unforgivable sin in many quarters.

Yet 'discrimination' is a bigger and better word than many of its critics seem to understand. If we are decent human beings we spend our lives discriminating between what is good for us and bad, what is good for our families and what is not. In this sense, all it means is making a judgement among a number of options. And this kind of decision-making will, of course, imply that one option is better than another.

The latest spat over 'discrimination' came at the weekend with the launch of Accord, a coalition of religious leaders, unionists, and academics, "which seeks to end the discrimination of faith schools in the appointment of teaching and non-teaching staff and in admission arrangements."

The commentator Melanie McDonagh questioned these aims in *The Independent on Sunday*,

arguing that 'discrimination' was precisely what made a faith school into a faith school. She wrote: "Actually, can we cut to the chase here? Most of them are actually church schools run by the Church of England and the Roman Catholic Church — they're the ones that secular-minded parents are lying and cheating and going to church to get their children into."

"But it's precisely the fact that they are discriminatory that makes them Catholic, or Anglican, or Jewish, or Muslim".

In a rather humourless response, Jonathan Bartley, of the Christian think-tank Ekklesia, said: "It is refreshing to hear a defender of faith schools tell the truth and accept that faith schools are routinely discriminating in both employment and admissions. It is deeply regrettable though that such discrimination should be the basis of what defines and forms the religious ethos of a school."

The point being made by McDonagh is incontrovert-

ible and persuasive. If you can't insist on appointing an Anglican head teacher, you don't have a Church of England school. The ethos of a Christian, or Muslim, or Jewish school is as much in the hands of the staff as in its founding intentions. If there are no Christian staff in a church school, then there is no religious ethos, which is a determining factor in making these schools such popular places for parents to send their children.

With regards to admissions policies, the debate is much more open. Christians involved in education have always had a missionary impulse of not just educating their own, but offering education to all with no strings attached. I would prefer that to be part of the purpose of all Christian schools, though I can't speak for every denomination, or faith. I can quite understand the need to have a certain bias in favour of a proportion of churchgoing children, in order to help maintain the ethos of the school, but this must have its limits.

A tale of two campaigning groups

It always amuses me that the self-described 'independent Christian think tank' Ekklesia, can be relied on to take the side of secularists, atheists and humanists in any debate about religion in public life. I often think of this small, two-man-and-a-dog organisation as the other side of the coin to the equally marginal extremist evangelical group, Christian Voice. Whereas, the latter can be found trying to impose Christian standards on the whole of society, the former is always trying to impose secularism on the Church. Stephen Green of Christian Voice exaggerates the effects of inequitable treatment of Christians by politically-correct bureaucracies, Jonathan Bartley of Ekklesia denies that there is any disparity.

At least the existence of two such reactionary organisations points to a middle space, which thankfully the vast majority of Christians occupy.

Why Jeffrey John should not go to Bangor

News that Jeffrey John could be appointed to a Welsh bishopric could damage relationships in the Anglican Communion even further. In press coverage, the outspoken Vicar of Putney, Giles Fraser, suggests that because Jeffrey John is 'celibate' there can be no reasonable objection to his consecration as a Bishop. Liberals, of course, have always maintained that so-called theological conservatives are revealed as homophobic and hypocritical for opposing his appointment as a bishop, while being silent on other equally liberal appointments of heterosexuals.

Yet that is to miss the point. If it was indeed true that conservatives only opposed John on a matter of theological disagreement this would indeed be hypocritical. Opposition to John's appointment primarily rests on two related points. Firstly, his writings on same-sex partnerships, as a kind of covenant which the church should bless, are

extraordinarily influential. Recent leaks of correspondence by the Archbishop of Canterbury confirms the pre-eminence John has in the liberal movement to change church teaching on sexuality. When you couple this notoriety of teaching with the fact that for most of his ministry he has been involved in such a 'covenanted partnership' with a fellow clergyman then you have significant grounds for controversy and scandal. It makes no difference whether this relationship is now celibate, because taken together the 'covenanted' relationship and the teaching that accompanies it, pre-empts the theological debate which John has called for.

When you consider that bishops have a wider apostolic and representative role within the Church as foci of unity, teachers and defenders of right doctrine, then it is surely impossible for any of the Welsh electors to support Jeffrey John's appointment?

