Home Thoughts from Abroad

Thank you for your invitation.

You probably know more about the Diocese of Albany or about Southern Sudan than you do about the Scottish Episcopal Church. So I’m glad to have the opportunity of sharing a bit of its life with you.

So how did I end up there? Why it happened is to do with the Spirit. How it happened is because the SEC elects its bishops through a canonical process rather similar to that used by the Episcopal Church of the USA – open and very public. Some in Scotland claim that it favours outsiders because nobody has yet seen their feet of clay. Maybe so. If you want snapshots of how life and ministry are for me, you might visit my blog at www.bishopdavid.net

Our diocese stretches from Stirling across to St Andrews by way of Dunfermline and the Forth Bridge - and up to Blair Atholl, Kinloch Rannoch and Killin. It’s the most beautiful place you could imagine.

Within the diocese, we have contrast. Lochgelly, in the old mining areas of Fife, has the cheapest housing in Britain. Up in Highland Perthshire, I got quite a shock because the SEC is the church of the Scottish landed classes and so I hear no Scottish accents. It’s a bit like Co Meath must have been like before the Anglo-Irish left. Somebody recently said to me at Sunday lunch, ‘Do have some pheasant, bishop. It’s on the Aga’

We are a minority church – 3% of the churchgoing population in Scotland. If you’ve visited, you’ll know that it is catholic in culture. Sometimes I’m a bit out of my comfort zone – as Hammie Leckey used to say, ‘I just put the bookmarks on to be sure.’ It’s also very liberal – but not exclusively so. We have some clergy in Civil Partnerships – particularly in Edinburgh. We also have some very strong congregations of conservative evangelical ethos. So we too experience the divisions of world Anglicanism as intra-provincial as well as inter-provincial. We also have a sort of ‘thing’ about the Anglican Communion. Ask when Cinderella went to the ball - and they will tell you that it was when the Scottish Bishops consecrated Samuel Seabury as the first bishop of the American Church in 1784.

In general it has been good for me – particularly spiritually. I think that conflict sharpens and radicalises. So I came away from here with very clear and simple pictures of my faith and what I believed in. The breadth of response which people seek from me – particularly in spirituality - has really challenged me and sent me on a personal journey of spiritual growth. I went through a period of some negativity after I moved – looking back and asking myself if all I and we had done through the troubles was to protect people from the worst
excesses of where their divisions would lead. I remain clear about the low level of sectarianism which artificially strengthens churches here. I can see that that won't last. And, even before I left, I was beginning to see the post-traumatic effect of the ending of the troubles in disturbed minds and hearts. So I can see that new and challenging times lie ahead for you.

Scotland of course is entirely different. Secular to vanishing point. Churches - particularly the Church of Scotland - have been in rapid decline. While there are signs of hope in the Church of Scotland - particularly the Church without Walls Project - I think that much of that decline is irreversible. The SEC has undertaken a number of initiatives - you may have heard of Mission 21 and we have seen significant development in Collaborative Ministry. My sense is that those have slowed but not stopped decline because they have focused on ministry as primary rather than mission. But I think the key question is whether a small church with the strengths of catholic ethos in spirituality, worship and prayer can offer a home to people who are spiritually searching.

I find myself at the heart of that debate - having just become convenor of the Mission and Ministry Board which holds together ministry development of all kinds with the management of our non-residential training agency - TISEC - the Theological Institute for the Scottish Episcopal Church.

And in the diocese, we're coming to the end of the development of a major Diocesan Policy initiative which will transform every aspect of diocesan life. It's Think Again but in a totally different environment - but I am so grateful for what I learned here in how to gather together a sense of common purpose and how to energise a diocese for mission. I have to say that the response of people - perhaps because they realised that they really needed a new approach - has astonished me. We're ready to shape a new future in mission and evangelism, in training and community engagement - under the overall title of Casting the Net.

Can I say finally that I am very happy in Scotland. I feel a deep gratitude for what I learnt here and deeply privileged to have the chance of applying that in a different environment. I wish you well and hope that we can all play our part in the major challenges which lie ahead of us at Lambeth and beyond.