

The Chaplain writes...*about a crisis of faith*

The Church of England is facing a crisis of faith. And the means that are being adopted to tackle this crisis are at best dubious.

Let me clarify that rather dramatic statement. The *crisis of faith* first of all. Crisis means – in this context at least – a moment of *judgement*. *Decision-time* in street parlance. In this, the Church of England is not alone. Most mainstream parts of the Church in Western Europe have noticed declining attendances for decades. But the panic has now set in with the latest set of statistics, some of which predict that less than 1% of the population of England will attend Anglican services regularly by the mid 2040's.

The solution advocated by the present leadership of the Church is the *Renewal and Reform* programme, which has recently been welcomed by General Synod at its York meeting. Now, of course, renewal and reform are part of the DNA of the Church – or should be. The Church must be *semper reformanda* – always in the process of reforming and renewing its life. That watchword of the Reformation, an event whose 500th anniversary celebrations begin in October this year, should always be before us. There is, or should be, a constant dialogue between our inherited tradition and the ways in which contemporary society's concerns and understanding are expressed. All of which means that the Christian tradition, literally *that which is handed on*, is the true life-blood which ultimately comes from the living Heart of Christ, and constructive dialogue with contemporary thinking ensures that what is passed on and taught is something which actually makes sense in the context of our present culture.

So yes, of course, renewal and reform are constant imperatives for a Church faithful to Christ's Gospel, a Church *liberated by God's grace* – to use the strapline of the Lutheran World Federation's celebrations of the anniversary of the beginning of the Reformation.

But is what is being offered *truly* renewal and reform? I am not alone in my suspicions that it is not. The Dean of Christ Church Oxford, Martyn Percy, who was formerly Principal of one the Church of England's middle ground Theological Colleges, sounds some very

cogent warnings in his forthcoming book *The Future Shapes of Anglicanism* to be published in November. *It will take more to save the Church of England he writes than a blend of the latest management theory, secular sorcery with statistics, and evangelical up-speak.* He goes on to state that a cure for the ailing church *would require a much deeper ecclesial comprehension than the present leadership currently exhibit. There seems to be no sagacity, serious science or spiritual substance to the curatives being offered.*

These are very strong words and should be taken seriously. Whilst I think that he probably is putting the case against a little too strongly, I certainly share his great suspicion of the management strategy approach, especially given that the models proposed have already become outdated in the secular world of management! Maybe they were once in vogue (and I speak as one who has seen plenty of vogues in 'management strategy' and none of them has lasted very long) but the Church should be very wary indeed of turning Bishops into Chief Executive Officers. We have gone too far in that direction already. And I have a very deep suspicion, too, of *strategies of mission*. Of course we need a *vision*. We may even need *mission statements*. But what we must never forget is that the Church is a *living body comprised of **real people** who are inspired by the Holy Spirit and are in the process of becoming the visible presence of the Risen Christ.* That is, by definition, a *very messy business!* And *strategies* frequently deny this reality, treating human beings as commodities rather than complex personalities. Martyn Percy highlights the way in which he sees the Church of England becoming increasingly organisational, with bishops forced to operate like area managers rather than pastors, and equally becoming theologically narrower. *Narrow Anglicanism*, he writes, *is a contradiction in terms.* He is particularly concerned about the movement towards so called 'church planting' where (particularly) charismatic evangelical groups move in to traditional parishes and set up alternatives to the parish church, finally rendering it redundant.

All of us – no matter what our theological complexion – want to be agents of the Gospel. But one of the strengths of Anglicanism has always been that of balance and breadth. Our part of the Church claims to be both Catholic *and* Reformed, with a structure of worship which is recognisable everywhere and in which all may find a spiritual

home. If the present trends continue, combined with the obsessions about leadership models (which in themselves have the potential to be infected badly with the twin modern idols of power and celebrity status), management techniques and narrowing theological vision, the Church of England will fail to live out its vocation as a national church, open and generous towards *all*.

As part of one of the Church of England's dioceses, this *crisis* affects us in Europe too. It is a moment of *decision* – and we need to pray that we act wisely. All of us want to see lives touched by the Good News of Christ, and nourished sacramentally in their discipleship. But should this be achieved at the price of Anglican comprehensiveness? Or indeed, at the price of real pastoral care by the shepherds?

When it appears, Martyn Percy's book will make interesting, if uncomfortable, reading.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Alec Gordon". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style with a long horizontal stroke at the end.