

Shared Conversations – January 2016 – A personal reflection – Rev John Dunnett

There is much that can be said by way of positive endorsement regarding the process and conduct of the Shared Conversations. Those facilitating the Conversations had prepared well and offered a warm and positive welcome. Introductions were clear and care had obviously been taken in enabling us all to both arrive and begin the process of conversation well. The 'pace' of the three days was about right – and for myself the balance between engagement and reflection was pitched helpfully.

As a Chelmsford Proctor I participated in the conversations between Chelmsford and London dioceses and it will not surprise the reader to hear that this constituency contained substantial diversity with regard to convictions, beliefs and voices. However, I think it is fair to say that by and large these differences were expressed courteously, positively and in an atmosphere of acceptance and good listening. There was much laughter – a freedom to say and hear difficult things and genuine friendship and collegiality was both expressed and built. Part of the reason for this may – of course – have been that the conversation was exactly that. We all knew that this was not a decision making forum – simply one of listening, reflecting and sharing. As such there was no 'pressure' for an outcome – something that will be significantly different when it comes to General Synod discussions/decisions in the future. Whether this same courtesy and cordiality can be maintained then will be a substantial challenge. I hope and pray that it might be – and would certainly want to do everything I can to contribute to the graciousness we experienced in our three days.

By way of evaluation/critique, I would like to offer the following comments.

Primarily, I would want to record my continuing disappointment that we do not appear to be travelling this journey on the basis of substantial scriptural engagement. We talked about our approach to Scripture, our experience of reading Scripture and how Scripture, tradition and reason interact – but we did not in any of the conversations sessions open up our Bibles and ask 'What does it say?' (Yes of course Scripture was read and shared in our collective worship). This appears to be in contradiction to the Pilling Report which suggested that the process 'should continue to involve profound reflection on the interpretation and application of Scripture'. Reference was made to the resources provided by Ian Paul and Loveday Alexander – but it was only nominal – there was no attempt to engage with the substantive content of these resources. My fear in this is that we are nurturing a culture in which discussion appears to be increasingly focused around experience and self-reflection – rather than attempting to put ourselves 'under' Scripture. I've always accepted that we cannot read Scripture except through the lens of our own experience and (limited) understanding... but I believe we may be in danger of creating a 21st century hermeneutic which gives to experience an unacceptable hegemony.

Secondly, it was noticeable that – again in the main sessions – there was little reference to the wider church/Anglican Communion as a 'touchstone' from which to draw wisdom/reflection. It needs to be said that this Shared Conversation was taking place immediately after the January Primates Gathering – and so there was conversation about the Gathering/communiqué... but not as a way of informing our reflections and conversations... rather (and largely) of a more negative and political nature. Indeed, some suggested that the inclusion of the resource paper regarding the Church of Scotland (Grace and Truth/Resource 4) suggested that the outcome of the Shared Conversation process was more likely to align with the solution described therein than with the majority Communion position.

Returning home after the Shared Conversations I found myself:

- Grateful for the very careful way in which those responsible for chairing the conversation had done so

- Appreciative of the vision to create 'space' where experience could be shared
- Aware of the radically different (and possibly contradictory) hermeneutics being used by different people
- Grateful that we'd been able to express difference in a positive way
- Fearful that it is not going to be possible to 'square the circle' when it comes to decision making re issues of human sexuality.

Rev John Dunnett