Formation Conference

I'm delighted to be here today to mark the start of your Conference. The issue of formation is right at the heart of concern about the health of ministry today. I'm going to take the opportunity of speaking to you today as a way of expressing as a practitioner how it feels

I come from a long line of clergy of the Church of Ireland in Southern Ireland – through both my grandfathers and at least one great-grandfather. My mother would certainly have sought ordination had that been possible for her. I suspect that her vocation banged around in the family until it found a home with me. I'm very aware of living within that family tradition. I sometimes feel, ‘I have been here before’ At the age of seven, I joined the choir in the Cathedral in Enniskillen where I grew up. I was sight-reading and singing ‘grown up’ church music at a high level almost as soon as I could read. I learnt most of the psalms by heart and retain them to this day. I was opening my lips to sing the praises of God and, without realising it, also opening my heart. None of that was intentional, pre-planned or focused. But it was formation at a deep level

On the weekend before last, I was with one of my bishop-colleagues in our delightful College of the Holy Spirit on the island of Great Cumbrae in the Clyde. It was stimulating and enjoyable – partly because the students were a wonderful mix of age and background, of varying life experience, of family background rich in faith and none whatsoever. They are very different from how I was – richer in life experience – but unprepared by breeding and nurture for what they will face. And what they will face is challenging. I trained in England, returned to Northern Ireland to spend 29 intense years in ministry, most of it in one way or another close to the heart of the Troubles and then found myself called to this ministry in Scotland. With that background, people are surprised to hear me say that ministry in the Scottish Episcopal Church is the most challenging that I have experienced. When I say that, this is what I mean. People enter into authorised ministry in a society which is quite extraordinarily secular – quite unlike Ireland which is steeped in religion both good and bad; more secular too than England otherwise known as ‘down south’. And they launch their boat of ministry on behalf of a church which almost prides itself on being institution-light – or, as one of our clergy said to me, ‘We are not carried by the institution’ He might have added, ‘Nor are we protected by it; nor told who we are, what we are for and what is expected of us.’

In the Scottish Episcopal Church, we are now in the middle of re-casting our training for authorised ministry as ‘formation led’. We are very taken by words of Pope Francis which were addressed to the Bishops of Brazil earlier this year when he said,

‘It is important to devise and ensure a suitable formation,

One which will provide persons able to step into the night

Without being overcome by the darkness and losing their bearings;

Able to listen to people’s dreams without being seduced and to share their disappointments

Without losing hope and becoming bitter;

Able to sympathise with the brokenness of others without losing their own strength and identity’

As a bishop in Scotland, I am able to live much closer to the clergy who are my care than is possible for my bishop-colleagues in the Church of England. I see myself as a leader of mission. But I also see it as my role to try to help clergy to have creative and fulfilling ministry. I try to be alongside them in the trenches of ministry.

In doing that, I am rewarded with intensely close relationships with my clergy colleagues in ministry. My task is to pray for them, to support and sustain them, to go into battle for them when they need defending …

But to be honest, I have seen more than enough stress and distress among clergy. I fear that my efforts to shift the ministry paradigm towards mission and away from the chaplaining of a discrete community in a minority church has unintentionally contributed to that. I have seen clergy who simply didn’t know what to do and who left me unable to decide whether they were unwilling or unable. I have seen too many lose their spiritual anchors and I have come to learn that, when that happens, almost anything may happen next. I have seen clergy seemingly unaware of professional boundaries – some seduced by the apparently permissive culture of an apparently liberal church into thinking that there are no boundaries at all.

Our current literature says that we need clergy to be prayerful, integrated and resilient. I think quite a lot about the spiritual paradox which lies at the heart of this. Jesus told us that the one who loses his life for Jesus’ sake will save it. And yet I find myself trying to help clergy precisely to hold onto who they are at the deepest level and not to throw themselves away in the business of ministry.

Time is short but let me share with you two specifics which I think particularly deserve our attention.

It’s easy to talk about secular society as if that was a concept beyond question. I do question. I belong in the group who fear that it may be a concept invented by the churches to justify a decline which is in some measure self-inflicted. But nonetheless I think that we experience it in the indifference of others, in their incomprehension about what we are about, what we represent and the value of what we are trying to do. We experience it in the apparent inevitability of decline and therefore in the recognition that, in the understanding of most people, we are doomed to failure. Prayerful resilience therefore is at a premium I remember reading some material from the Alban Institute which described the inner voice which begins to erode and corrode the spiritual well-being of clergy: ‘it isn’t doing any good you know; nobody understands what you are doing; you deserve better’ We all experience a bit of that – but when it takes away spiritual balance, poise and resilience, we are vulnerable. Vulnerable? Well in the US but not so much here, clergy take money. They are vulnerable to addiction and to improper relationships. Or they become cynical and difficult. Or they just give up and see their time out.

Giving up is a bridge to the other specific which tests formation to breaking point – it’s the challenge not of changing paradigms but of living in more than one at the same time. Conventional patterns of church life are based on visible congregations, often with buildings. That’s what pays the stipend so it matters. We are therefore on some level pre-programmed to a pastoral paradigm in which the priest is the pastor who cares for the flock. What most of us are trying to do is not so much to change paradigm – rather to add a further paradigm in which the pastor equips the people for mission and ministry in the world beyond the church and in which the pastor acts on behalf of the church across the boundary. The formational challenge is in the reaction which that engenders. It’s taken me a long time to work out that the church’s standard thought patterns are adversarial. Say that you are interested in work among children and young people – you will immediately be attacked for not caring about older people. Propose a programme of mission in the community and you will be attacked for neglecting the flock. Skilful clergy can live in multiple paradigms. Skilful clergy learn how to please most of the people most of the time, unworthy as it is. But more in my experience are unfit for conflict and just can’t cope with it. The strident voice in the Vestry – for sometimes it is only one - pursues them once too often and they give up – they die inside. Others in the Vestry understand and know that what is being proposed is right. But they do not know how to challenge.

I offer you these thoughts because these issues are absolutely at the forefront of ministry for me and of reflection on ministry. I daily see the stress and distress which these issues cause for clergy and their families. I see younger and older people eager to throw themselves at the challenges of ministry and I pray that we shall be able to prepare them and form them in a way which will enable them to cope

I wish you well in your conference. We shall look forward to embracing what comes from your work as we reshape our training in the Scottish Episcopal Church.