

## ***Contending for the faith***

*Reflections on retirement*

*By David Banting, Anglican Mainstream*

*[Editor's note: This is a valuable memoir and analysis of recent Church of England history from one of its leading evangelical clergymen.]*

In the booklet *Why I am an Anglican* (Orthos no 23, 2006), I wrote of the decades of my life that I was a cradle Anglican (aged 0-18), a converted Anglican (18-28), a convinced Anglican (28-38), a concerned Anglican (38-48), and a contending Anglican (48-58). I finished by hoping that on retirement (at the time of writing, another decade away at 68) I would end a contented Anglican, and not a contentious Anglican. I am now retired and remain an Anglican, but I fear (still) not contented, though I trust not contentious.

### **The witness of Reform**

As I approach 70 at the end of this year, my retirement continues as I begin to stand down from a number of responsibilities and commitments over the last 25 years – in July this year Anglican Mainstream Trustees (since 2004), also in July General Synod (since 2000), in December CPAS Patronage Trustees (since 1995), and in January next year probably CEEC, the CofE Evangelical Council (since 1996). All of these were foreshadowed and underpinned by my involvement with Reform from its emergence in 1993 till its merger into Church Society in 2018 – I was a member of the Reform Council for those 25 years, its National Chairman 2000-07 and a Trustee 2007-18. I have written elsewhere (on the occasion of Reform's Silver Jubilee, in CEN 8/3/2018: *Reform – gadfly, catalyst, or agent of change?*) of my debt and gratitude to Reform for the value, focus and stimulus of its vision for 'the re-evangelisation of the nation' and to that end for 'the reform and renewal of the national Church' by the Word and the Spirit of God.

At the time Reform rattled the bars of the powers-that-be. In all honesty it unsettled a good number of fellow evangelicals, perhaps especially those who had heeded the call of the first National Evangelical Anglican Congress at Keele in 1967 to join in more positively with the institutions of the CofE to make their evangelical influence felt from *within*. Bishop Michael Baughen hastily called a big public meeting of Evangelical Anglican Leaders early in 1995 to show the strength of Evangelicals, many now recognised within the structures as Bishops, who felt Reform's presence was unhelpful and unnecessary. He felt that Reform only divided or weakened the effectiveness of Evangelicals in the CofE. I well remember my father-in-law Philip Hacking standing nervous and lonely in the wings waiting to address the conference. Philip was a most unlikely first full Chairman for Reform – he seemed to come from no known stable. For a start he was so evidently from Blackburn and fed by the Keswick Convention (of which he was Chairman 1985-93). He was as well known in evangelical circles outside the CofE as he was within. He would always use the phrase Anglican evangelical ('stressing the noun') rather than evangelical Anglican. He was a distinctive champion of parish ministry in faithful expository preaching (before the rise of the Proclamation Trust) and relentless pastoral visiting, and his world of mission was parish missions and Keswick and other local Bible Conventions rather than Universities, though he was Chairman of Mission England Sheffield with Billy Graham in 1985.

Many now acknowledge that, though the presenting issues that brought Reform into being were money (remember 'quota-capping'?) and issues around the ordination and oversight of women in the Church in 1992, Reform was prescient in recognising the underlying challenge to the authority of the Scriptures and to the faith 'once delivered'. By 1997 the spotlight was well and truly on issues of sex and sexuality, as the Anglican Communion woke up to the challenge and culture of homosexuality, with the Kuala Lumpur Statement of 1997 from the Global South and the Lambeth Conference in 1998 in Nairobi (esp Statement 1.10). Though 2000-05 (my first election to General Synod) did see the very first steps in debate towards the consecration of women as Bishops, the quinquennium was dominated by Issues in Human Sexuality.

### **The Coalition of Reform and New Wine, and the emergence of Anglican Mainstream**

From its outset I had found Reform's aim enormously clarifying. It impacted me as a breath of fresh air after nearly 15 years in ordained ministry to refocus and regalanise my priorities and energies. When Reform was founded in 1992/3, I had recently turned 40 and was still in the early years of my first incumbency. Reform came to me as both a wake-up call and a sudden growing-up for me. I was still looking to 'the good and great' of the generation above me (the John Stotts, Dick Lucases, the Michael Greens, etc) to give the lead and 'tell me what to think'. But my curates and their generation were not looking to those grandfather figures, but to their training incumbents of my generation to take a lead, to hold the line, and do the thinking! Reform was both the catalyst and the vehicle for that stepping-up. That decade precipitated me into turning concern for the wider scene into contending on a wider stage. In 2000 I became Chairman of Reform, though I have always maintained that that only happened because I stepped back fractionally slower than all the others on the Council at the time. That same year I was surprised to be elected also onto General Synod. Both responsibilities came on top of a new incumbency (St Peter's' Harold Wood) and a new diocese (Chelmsford), and plunged me into the maelstrom of 'contending for the faith', in a way and at a level that I could never have imagined. It was the 'Reading incident' of 2003/4 (Jeffery John's initial appointment to, and then withdrawal from, the See of Reading) that brought Anglican Mainstream into being as 'a network of networks' to witness to and contend for orthodoxy in doctrine and practice within the CofE. As the Chairman of Reform I was asked to join, as was John Coles, the then Chair of New Wine, a partnership and coalition that we determinedly tried to model in the face of mounting pressures and issues within the Church.

### **Contending on two fronts**

Those issues had two fronts for me: **one was ministry** – how the partnership of women and men in ministry should best be expressed was *one* of the presenting issues for Reform, so I was in at the deep end of the early rounds of the debate over Women Bishops, but I was equally exercised in the revision of the Ordinal for Common Worship; the other was **the teaching of the Church** and the marked rise and pressure from revisionism, particularly in 'Issues in Human Sexuality' and now seen more sharply as issues of Marriage, Gender and Identity, but also in areas of the uniqueness of Christ and the authority of Scripture. I lost my seat on General Synod in 2005 ('damaged by exposure', was my New Wine friend Paul Harcourt's encouraging assessment) and handed over the Chair of Reform to Rod Thomas in 2007 (at that date I did have some worries that I was in danger of becoming merely contentious in spirit). But neither of those eventualities deterred Chris Sugden from keeping me on in Anglican Mainstream. The debates in General Synod steamed-rolled on, and in 2010, as it was clear that the Women Bishops debate was approaching its climax, I was re-elected to General Synod. The Anglo-Catholic constituency had largely collapsed in Chelmsford

diocese (many had left for the Ordinariate in the Roman Catholic Church), and I seemed to gather the votes of both traditional Catholics and conservative Evangelicals, at least enough to be re-elected. I continued to have valuable support in Diocesan and General Synod debates from John Dunnett from his New Wine and CPAS base, and I hold the likes of him, John Coles and Paul Harcourt as close friends and great partners in and for the gospel.

### **The Women Bishops Settlement**

Reform and New Wine made different applications and took different paths through the Women Bishops debate. For Reform, the issue was not so much the ordination of women (as is so often supposed or stated), as headship or oversight, in summary not so much ordination as oversight. Oversight focuses, in Anglican polity, on incumbency and episcopacy and not ordination as such, and tracks back to marriage. However, New Wine friends were emphatic in their support for 'proper provision' for their conservative colleagues, right through the final stages – the unexpected crash of the legislation in November 2012 (by just two votes in the House of Laity), the eventual Women Bishops Settlement of November 2014, the re-creation of the See of Maidstone in 2015 and the commitment to the Five Guiding Principles and Mutual Flourishing. When I retired in May 2018, Bishop Rod Thomas asked me to be his Pastoral Advisor in the Northern Province, and that has been an indescribable privilege and opportunity which I see as 'helping to win the peace'.

### **The current arena of Gender, Identity and Same-Sex Marriage**

The new General Synod (2015-20, but now extended to 2021, as we know) shocked the wider Church (and frankly itself) in early 2017 by not even 'taking note' of the House of Bishops' careful position paper on 'Marriage and Same-Sex Relationships'. That precipitated a significant repositioning of approach from the Bishops (which eventually has given us a 'suite of resources' for learning that we know as *LLF, Living in Love and Faith*) and a distinct stoking up of the content and emotion of the issues. The last eighteen months of this extended Synod have had to be online, which has 'scotched the snake, not killed it' and have certainly ensured that it will end as a whimper. However, the elections for the new Synod (2021-26) will leave no-one in any doubt how conflicted the Church has become, at least in the synodical expression of its life and mind.

### **Scripture's call for wisdom – and the next generation**

But as I retire from both GS and AM, I have a few reflections. I find I have lost heart for the chase of debate and politics, but I trust that my deep sadness for the state of the Church is more a thing of my older age than of true assessment of where things stand or are going. I pray for a new generation of witnesses and contenders with spirit for the fray and a strong wisdom for the political arena. Several Scriptures come to mind:

- **1 Thessalonians 5.21 and the need for careful understanding:** *Test everything, and hold fast to that which is good.* This implies rigorous self-examination of our own conservative position as well – the Oliver Cromwell quotation cuts both ways: *I beseech you, in the bowels of Christ, think it possible you may be mistaken* (letter of 3 August 1650 to the Church of Scotland, shortly before the battle of Dunbar)
- **2 Timothy 2.7 and the need for deep insight:** *Reflect on what I am saying, for the Lord will give you insight.* We really need to do the thinking for ourselves (in the spirit of Philippians 2.12).

- **Hebrews 5.14 and the need for mature discernment:** ... *the mature, who by constant use have trained themselves to distinguish good from evil.* This involves mental *and* emotional intelligence.

I have just had to preach on 1 Timothy 1 and 6 and false teachers. They reminded me that the issue of false teaching is nothing new and that there was no 'golden age' in the Church, even in its earliest generations. Vigilance in teaching the faith and refuting error is forever needed if the Church is to remain healthy and growing. Persistently false teachers (a very specific word is used in 1 Timothy 1.3 & 6.3) are to be challenged and avoided, and if necessary, disciplined, but those in error (who err, ie stray) and those who fail (ie who fall into sin or transgress) – usually a more common scenario – will need to repent and accept correction and possible discipline, but be treated 'gently' with a view to restoration and 'winning them back' (see variously Matthew 18.15-17, Galatians 6.1, 1 Thessalonians 5.14, 2 Thessalonians 3.14-15). However, in turn those who contend for the soundness of the Church's doctrine are themselves called to be humble and honest ('there but for the grace of God go I') and to be visibly committed to build up the Church in the unity of truth, love and peace. They should strive more than most for a mature self-awareness and strategic wisdom in how to be both faithful in their witness and relational in their interactions, in how to embody Jesus' words about doves and serpents.

I end up musing on whether another *City of God* perspective is needed. In AD 410 the city of Rome was sacked by the Visigoths, sending shockwaves through the whole Roman Empire. The Romans saw it as punishment for abandoning traditional religion in favour of the new religion of Christianity. 20 years later in AD 430, Augustine the Bishop of Hippo in North Africa lay dying as the Vandals laid siege to the city, but not before he had finished his greatest work *The City of God* in response to the pagans' accusation and to console Christians. Christianity was not responsible for the sack of Rome, it was the reason for the city and Empire's success, and, while earthly empires would never last, the City of God would endure. It is no exaggeration to say that that book and its vision of reality and truth sustained the Church for the next 1000 years through what history used to call the Dark Ages.

We need a new generation of wise and bold contenders for the faith and of writers and prophets to 'out-think, out-live and out-die' the world (to poach the historian T R Glover's words), but now also the dissident and revisionist voices and trajectories within the Church. In Alister McGrath's 1993 book *The Renewal of Anglicanism*, he quotes (on pp. 112-3) Professors John MacQuarrie and Stephen Sykes (later Bishop of Ely), both well-respected Anglican theologians, but neither known as conservative, who argue that liberalism is essentially a negative, even destructive, trend in Anglicanism – a 'cuckoo in the nest', a trend 'that leads to a type of theology that is parasitic' and corrosive to the main body of the faith and truth in the form of either or both catholicism and evangelicalism, 'in the sense that it criticises the tradition without making any contribution of its own to what ought to be a growing and expanding tradition'. So it is for those who inhabit the historic tradition of the faith to rise up in a new generation of witnesses, stewards and watchmen.

In 2018, Reform merged *with* Church Society, and it looks after three years as though it is in effect merged *into* Church Society. Church Society has indeed upheld the Reformed faith of the CofE for some 150 years, but it is innately, because constitutionally, committed to staying and fighting from within the Church. Reform had a 'twin-track' approach, which is currently expressed in ReNew (*within*) and AMiE (Anglican, but *outside* the CofE). The Anglican Mission in England (AMiE) emerged in the 2000s and was recognised by GAFCON in 2011. Under the aegis of the GAFCON Primates, AMiE is now one of two Convocations (diocese-in-the-making), the other being the Anglican Convocation in Europe (ACE), both under the GAFCON-recognised new Anglican structure

of ANiE (the Anglican Network in Europe), under its Bishop Andy Lines. Meanwhile, Anglican Mainstream is no longer a 'network of networks'. It has slimmed, but sharpened its focus in rigorously promoting historic Christian Marriage and Family Life and values and in galvanising and resourcing all who will engage robustly and Christianly with the massive cultural wars in the West.

As we enter the second generation in the C21st, the Church of England Evangelical Council (CEEC) is in stronger shape than for many years in its representing and co-ordinating orthodox evangelical Anglicans in the CofE and in its thinking and contending for the faith, as well as in its organisation and leadership with a full-time National Director and Administrator. Its partners in the dioceses (Diocesan Evangelical Fellowships – DEFs) and on General Synod (Evangelical Group on General Synod – EGGS, with the smaller more sharply conservative and lay-led 1990 Group) are also in good heart. But we do need the next generation of movers and shakers, leaders and thinkers, to step up to be the gad-flies, catalysts, and prophets that the Church has always needed for its health and renewal – that Reformation principle of *ecclesia reformata semper reformanda* (the reformed Church ever needs to be reformed). Gad-flies will still be unpopular and swatted, but necessary for the 'sleepy, wayward horse' of the Church. Catalysts will still be largely unseen, but critical for the 'chemical reactions' needed for change. Prophets will still be typically lonely, but ever witnessing to the uncomfortable call and challenge of the Lord God Almighty for his Church and world to be renewed.

As I hand over my baton to others in Anglican Mainstream (and elsewhere in coming months), I thank God for so many partnerships in the gospel over these years. I have had some great opportunities and occasions, in five different countries and four different continents. My prayer is always for the 'word of the Lord to speed on and triumph' (2 Thessalonians 3.1-3), doing its work in the world and in the Church, despite all that is thrown or rises up against it. So it matters who is 'on the Lord's side', unafraid and unashamed of him and his words. Our baptism testifies that he ever needs 'faithful soldiers and servants' to the end of their lives.

*A Dios for now*

*David Banting (July 2021)*