

Islington 2015.

Epiphany

For the consideration of the Bishop's Council

Revival of the See of Islington.

In Capital Vision 2020, we committed ourselves to promote the creation of a hundred new worshipping communities within the Diocese by 2020. We have already reached double figures and it is clear that those ministering in such pioneering posts together with the existing cohort of church planters need knowledgeable support and mentoring in the early years. At the same time if the Diocese is to develop as a learning community then there must be ways of harvesting the experience, both positive and negative of those who have been called to re-imagine the church for the 21st century.

I am grateful for the work done by the Reverend Rick Thorpe, the Diocesan Adviser on Church Planting who has both supported those involved in new ventures and applied the lessons learnt for pioneers in training as well for many people beyond the Diocese who are interested in the London experience.

One of the most encouraging developments of 2014 has been the quickening of interest in the possibility of replicating aspects of what we have

learned in London to other parts of the country. In particular the usefulness of establishing “resource churches” in major conurbations has been recognized, following the success of the revival of the parish church of St Peter in the centre of Brighton under the leadership of the Reverend Archie Coates. A resource church concentrates energies and resources with the explicit intention of assisting the wider Diocese in missionary work. The Brighton plant has gained a deserved reputation for loyalty to the episcopate in the Diocese of Chichester and a new plant from Brighton to Hastings has proceeded without any of the hesitations which characterized the initial campaign.

As the whole church moves beyond rhetoric and anecdote to a serious commitment to the re-evangelisation of England it has become obvious that we need someone who can open up new possibilities; provide reinforcement for the oversight which already exists for pioneer ministries and disseminate the learning gained from new ventures in a form that is available to the whole church.

In the context of CV 2020 and the wider national needs I have submitted a proposal to the Dioceses Commission to permit the revival of the See of Islington.

As members of the Bishop's Council are aware, the population of London is increasing once again although not so explosively as it did in the 19th century. The population of Victorian London increased from just over a million in 1800 to 7 million by 1900. The old structures of church life were not adequate to the missionary challenge of such rapid and explosive growth. At the same time there was a recovery of a more energetic style of episcopal leadership and a new vision of the Diocese as an instrument of mission and this argued the case for an increase in the number of bishops.

At first there was a revival of some of the Sees left vacant since the end of the Elizabethan experiment with suffragan bishops. Bedford was created under the Suffragan Bishops' Act of 1534 but fell into abeyance between 1560 and 1879 when Walsham How was appointed to minister in East London. West London was the responsibility of the Bishop of Marlborough from 1888 – 1918. During this period some of the surviving Area Bishoprics with more appropriate titles were established, beginning with Stepney in 1895.

From 1898 – 1923, a former Rector of St George in the East, Charles Henry Turner occupied the See of Islington. When he died however the See went into abeyance. Research in the Winnington Ingram

papers preserved in the Lambeth Palace library has not yielded any illuminating information about the circumstances in which the decision was taken not to fill the See. Now in the vastly different circumstances of the 21st century the proposal is to revive Islington as a response to contemporary missionary challenges.

After experience at St Peter's Brighton, which has led to further church plants under the aegis of the Diocese of Chichester, similar initiatives have followed in Norwich, Lincoln and in the Bournemouth Area of the Diocese of Winchester. There are active dialogues and in some cases advanced plans for church plants in Birmingham, in the Salford Area of the Manchester Diocese, Liverpool, Gloucester, Oxford, Exeter in the Plymouth conurbation with its 30,000 students and in Guildford.

A "School of Church Planting and Church Growth" is being established in association with St Mellitus College and we hope to harvest the experience gained from the plants that have flourished and, just as important, those that have wilted. We have already recognised a distinction between first generation plants which depend heavily on "outside" help and finance and the second generation that spring from the initial impulse and which tend to be more indigenous. The particular

planting strategy pursued by HTB has not been without its critics. The work of John Wood for example in Tottenham presupposes a different much more locally based strategy. The success of planting however has stirred emulation in other parts of the church and there is currently an Anglo-Catholic planting group exploring the feasibility of recovering the 19th century tradition of establishing “daughter churches”.

A number of Deanery pilots are planned as a response to the General Synod’s work on “Intentional Evangelism” and we shall be experimenting with “porous” boundaries within the selected Deaneries. At the same time the further use of school buildings to house new congregations will be explored.

It is abundantly clear that crucial to the success of these initiatives is a supply of highly motivated, specially equipped and properly supported pioneer ministers. The entrepreneurial talent necessary and the ability to work without the support of long established structures require more and not less encouragement and oversight. Mentoring and building up a cadre of “alongside coaches” who will work with Area Bishops and the Diocesan Bishop to support pioneers has become an urgent necessity. The Bishop of Willesden has had a special responsibility for the oversight of pioneer

ministries of various kinds and with the growth of his national and pan-Diocesan work new arrangements are urgently needed.

The proposal is to revive the Bishopric of Islington, free from the territorial responsibilities and increasing administrative demands on Area Bishops in London but working collaboratively with episcopal colleagues to address the agendas opened up by the developments described above.

The Bishop of Islington would be available to harvest and share experience of church growth strategies. He or she would be available to the whole Church of England as a resource as the Church pursues its intentional evangelism programme but at the same time the new Bishop would have the credibility of being a practitioner actively involved in church planting and supervising the new School of Church Growth in association with the staff of St Mellitus both in London and at its Merseyside hub. In conjunction with the Diocesan and Area Bishops, +Islington would exercise particular oversight among pioneer ministers, working to build up an infrastructure to support individual ministers and provide resources for fresh initiatives.

The role is inherently episcopal but not territorial; thoroughly collegial but with an independent

sphere of responsibility. The work already being done in London and other Dioceses has always issued from invitations and there is no intention to intrude uninvited into anyone else’s jurisdiction.

The latest example of an appeal to “come over and help us” is a request from Bishop Moon Hing of West Malaysia for a team to establish a plant in Kuala Lumpur to provide an urban focus to the already well developed pattern of rural church planting in the Diocese. This is a new venture and undoubtedly there will be much to learn from it but there is no intention that the Bishop of Islington will aspire to treat “the world as his parish”.

The Archbishop of Canterbury has warmly welcomed the proposal and the Dioceses Commission will give final consideration to the revival of the See of Islington at its meeting in March. The new work will not fall as a charge on the Common Fund and can be financed in conjunction with the Church Commissioners and the existing block grant for episcopal ministry.

The need for such a role is urgent now but if it is not seen as necessary in the future then history could repeat itself and Islington could be put to sleep as it was in 1923.

The Bishop's Council is invited to comment on the proposal.

Richard Londin 6-i-2015