

Canon John Townroe's Report to the St Boniface Council
Friday, 5th March 2010

First, about St Boniface Lodge. There have been several major improvements to the house in the past year, as you have heard. Especially the double-glazing that has been put into the windows which did not have it before. The insulation in the roof that has been there for 50 years is now, not surprisingly, wearing thin. When it is brought up to modern standards, as it soon will be, there should be a great benefit. It is really good news that the government will pay for it – and pay in full, thanks to the Inspector using his discretionary fund in our favour. The installation of showers in the bathroom and the little-used storeroom has already made a big difference to the usefulness of the Lodge for visitors as well as to the comfort of living in it.

Particular thanks goes to David Prior who has supervised all these matters splendidly and with such thoughtfulness.

The Lodge continues to serve as the centre for the Trust in various ways – the archives increase in a room set aside for them. Daily traffic takes place on Trust business by meetings, visits, mail and telephone. The house acts also as a vantage point for keeping an eye on Trust property around.

For myself, I grow more and more grateful to the Trust for letting me live here where my ministry can actually develop, despite the limitations of age.

I have been reflecting on my life and thinking about the state of the Church and society today, compared with how I remember them in the 1920's and 1930's. I would like in this report to share some findings and to suggest something for the Trust's future.

The Church of England that I knew at first-hand in town and country in the 20's and 30's was in London in the parishes of Hampstead and Child's Hill, and in the countryside in the Constable Country of Dedham Vale on the borders of Essex and Suffolk. The Church gave the impression of great strength. It was like an anchorage in society, a fixed point or moral reference point. If it was not always adhered to, it was yet generally respected. The Rector or Vicar was at the centre of parish life, also generally respected, often wielding considerable temporal as well as spiritual power. Parochial Church Councils had only recently appeared on the scene, having been introduced through the Church Assembly (the fore-runner of the General Synod) by the Enabling Act of 1919 which gave the laity a share in parochial administration. Their duty in law was "to co-operate with the incumbent in promoting in the parish the whole mission of the Church, pastoral, evangelistic, social and ecumenical". Fine words – but in the 1920's and 30's, PCC's had hardly made a dent in the sides of a clerically-dominated Church. Power, position, privilege, possessions – these made an easy breeding-ground for the infection of complacency, worldly pride and the assumption of superiority.

Here lay the shadow-side of the strength of the Church of England as a national institution at that time. Solid, but apt to be stolid. Liable to being unaware, and therefore insensitive. There were glorious exceptions. I am painting the picture with a broad brush. But I believe it is broadly true.

I remember an incident in 1932, when I was 12 years old which illustrates what I am saying. I took part in pushing leaflets into the front-doors of every house in the parish, appealing for money in support of the Bishop of London's campaign to build

45, yes, 45, new churches in the developing areas of the Diocese. Most of the houses we canvassed had no connection at all with the church, most were indifferent if not hostile, with no reason to want 45 more churches; and yet here we were expecting them to pay up for the Bishop's scheme.

My point is that this fragment of history typifies an attitude prevailing in the Church at that time. It was an expression of an institution sure of itself, too often unaware of the realities around it, and therefore insensitive in its behaviour.

The pattern of Sunday worship was remarkably unchanged from Victorian times. It was still very widely 8.00, 11.00 and 6.30 – 8.00am Holy Communion for the devout, 11.00am Matins and Sermon for the well-to-do, 6.30pm Evensong for servants and other working people. Services were very formal. The slightest deviations were frowned upon. Lay participation was minimal.

I stress that there were exceptions, but in general I have to say that I found the atmosphere of the Church stuffy, straight-laced and in thrall to the past. The fresh air of the Spirit was hard to find. We heard little about the Holy Spirit as a living reality with dynamic power to change the life of church and society; little about the Church as a pilgrim people of God on the move.

You will understand from this why I do not grieve over some imaginary glory-days in the past.

But what of the scene today? Is it any better? Some say no. I get reports that there is a sense of anxiety around – a deep sense – in Church and nation. Anxiety over the apparent decline of the Church in numbers and in authority. I get letters from old students in despair over what is happening to the church, as they see it. What they say is very like the cry of Thomas Arnold of Rugby when he said “When I think of the Church, I could sit down and pine and die!” That was in 1832! I can understand their feelings, but I do not share them. Arnold said also “The Church as it now stands, no human power can save”. It seems that he really did mean that the Church was finished. However, surely his words can have another and truer meaning: no human power did save the church in the 1830's – but it was saved, it was revived, it was brought to new life by a Power beyond human power.

Such renewal seems normally to come, if it comes, through humiliation, in this case through the humbling of the churches. Their pretensions, or complacency, have to be swept away. It is as if the ground has to be cleared before new seed can be sown. Today we are seeing the humbling of the Churches. Think of Ireland, think of Austria, of Germany, think of some parts of America. In England, the temporal or worldly power, position, status of the church has been diminished. Some further humbling is probably on its way. But already the ground is clearer than it was for new growth. I believe there are some green shoots appearing in many, if not all, places. Weak, frail, but with evidence of new vitality, a greater openness in general, and particularly to new ideas following upon humbler admission of our perplexities. The Church of England is beginning, despite weakness, to emerge into new life. An interesting letter appeared on January 16th in the Roman Catholic journal, The Tablet, warning people that the Church of England is not to be written off: “Many Dioceses in the Church of England are working out a vision, inspired by the Holy Spirit and grounded in structures, of how to operate in the next 20-50 years”.

So what about St. Boniface Trust in the midst of these events?

Thankfully, we inherit from our Founder, James Erasmus Phillips, a tradition of “supporting the weak” out of slender resources. James Erasmus had an aristocratic background, but was penniless apart from the little he earned as a Curate in Wilton. But it was there that he began to collect money and helpers to educate and prepare for ministry men of no means and no status, who otherwise had no hope of getting qualified, despite a genuine vocation. When he became Vicar of Warminster and continued the same enterprise in St. Boniface Missionary College, it was always in the same basis. He had to beg for money. What he set up was never grand or pretentious. And so it went on through the following 150 years. And so it is today. Thank God we have been able for years to support the weak out of comparatively slender means. We have been able to make grants from modest resources to many hundreds of people in genuine need, across the world and at critical moments in their lives.

Here I would like to say how much I admire the painstaking work done by the Local Committee to scrutinize the applications for grants, and to sort out the genuine from the very doubtful. Hours and hours are spent over it without hurrying, even when the list is very long.

The task of making personal grants must surely go on. However are there any other directions in which we should steer the ship? I believe there may be, or at least that we should be open, actively open, to receiving new ideas. For one thing, it seems appropriate in our 150th anniversary year to put the question, in order to keep moving on, if this is indicated. In other words, let the Spirit blow us forwards wherever it may take us, carrying with us so, to speak, all that is best in our tradition of mission and of supporting the weak and needy.

How in practice can we do it? I have a preliminary suggestion to make. This Council represents in its members a wealth of experience to draw upon. Could we therefore arrange a pooling of ideas and exchange our thoughts with a view to action?

For example, could we as a Council, each one of us, undertake to devote some time, each in our own way, to thinking about and being in the Spirit actively open to receiving ideas for fresh directions? If we agreed on this, perhaps we could then, each of us, send our findings and suggestions to the Secretary? And to do this in the next few months in time for our gathering at the Anniversary Celebrations in July?

Finally on a personal note, I want to thank each one of you for the kind greetings and good wishes conveyed on your behalf to me by the Chairman on my 90th birthday last month. Thank you very much.

John Townroe