

Bishop Richard Lewis – an appreciation

When Richard Lewis arrived in Suffolk in 1997, he was unknown to the majority of folk. With his engaging smile and down to earth approach he quickly established himself within the county. His approach to ministry could be framed by the title of a report he co-authored when an agricultural chaplain in Hereford, 'The people, the land and the Church'. He listened to people's stories, was alongside them when they were hurting and responded to them. He was at home talking to farmers about crops or livestock and he desired to be alongside those beyond the institution of the church as they searched for faith and meaning.

Often people commented that he lacked parochial experience, though he had worked in parishes alongside his diocesan roles in industrial and agricultural chaplaincy, and communications. In Suffolk, these experiences along with that gained as an archdeacon and suffragan bishop of Taunton equipped him for the role of Bishop of St Edmundsbury and Ipswich.

Clergy became used to a telephone call, e mail or card in response to prayer requests and many gained help from his pastoral support during crisis. The early years of his ministry in Suffolk were over shadowed by the death of his son Pete, but this too became a point of identity with many grieving parents who too, experienced bereavement.

One of the high points of his ten years in Suffolk was his time as president of Suffolk Agricultural Association. His knowledge and experience of the agricultural world was evident as he presented prizes and chatted with the recipients. When swine fever and foot and mouth struck the county, along with Bishop Clive Young he attended farmers meetings to hear their pain and stand with them. Even now, farmers remember their support in a time of crisis. He actively supported the development of the Addington Fund which was the brainchild of a retired clergyman. His experience as a Commissioner with the Rural Development Commission enabled him to see the diverse and hidden challenges of predominantly rural counties, which he highlighted in his maiden speech in the House of Lords.

He was passionate that the church should be as salt, yeast and light within the community. On arrival in Suffolk he heard a refrain from many people that due to financial cuts, the 'church had left the field'. Realising that there was an open door to work with local government, the voluntary sector and the business community he

set about building links so that the church soon had a voice in many initiatives in the county. With the growing move towards regionalisation within government he encouraged church leaders to engage with the regional development agency, resulting in the creation of a regional church, and later interfaith organisation to ensure that the voice of faith was active within the public square.

He was an active promoter of the idea of a Community Foundation for Suffolk, recognising that there were many people who would raise money in Suffolk for Suffolk. From humble beginnings the Foundation now makes grants of around £5m a year.

During the Ipswich murders of 2006, Ipswich Town FC approached him to say prayers for the town before a match with Leeds United. There was silence as he prayed, followed by the customary round of applause. Afterwards many Leeds fans said how they identified with the town having many years earlier endured the reign of terror of the Yorkshire Ripper.

He championed a more open, inclusive and tolerant church regardless of gender or sexuality. This led him to appoint many women to parochial posts and support the move towards women in the episcopate as well as taking a more liberal and inclusive approach on human sexuality.

During his time in Suffolk the Cathedral Millennium Project was completed. At first many questioned the wisdom of building a tower at the Cathedral. He offered private and public support to the dean, and the project committees as they sought to make the dream a reality. Its completion was marked by a visit from the Prince of Wales who had taken an active interest in the project.

Although he was self-deprecating of his own theological abilities, his smile and engaging ways hid a mind that could link theology, management practice and strategy. Many were frustrated that he refused to develop diocesan strategies, favouring 'frameworks' of overall objectives that would encourage churches to flourish in a diverse way. His telling (and retelling) of homely stories in his sermons brought faith alive and left questions hanging for later reflection. This preaching was shaped by a desire that people might work towards making sense of faith in a challenging and diverse world.

In announcing his retirement a year ahead of time it enabled his successor to be appointed and be in place for the Lambeth Conference. It also enabled many people throughout the county to say their goodbyes to a well-loved bishop. In retirement he and Sara first made their home in Norfolk before returning to Herefordshire.

The Revd Canon Graham Hedger