

## **Reconciliation: Three Different Diocesan Needs**

When it comes to working towards reconciliation within an Anglican Diocese, there are at least three different needs:

- How to engage with inequalities in society and strengthen local communities;
- How to address escalated or protracted parish conflicts; and
- How to change the culture of how Christians handle tensions and conflict.

This handout offers a brief reflection on some options to address these three different needs. It highlights Reconciliation Initiatives' (RI) distinctive offering in relation to the first of these, through our *Reconciling Mission* programme; and offers some pointers on the other two, including through what is offered by Bridge Builders.

### **1. Engaging with inequalities in society and strengthening local communities**

This is essentially a *missional* challenge. Since the economic crisis of 2008, with the ensuing austerity measures by central government, there has been an increase in social hardship and inequalities. The Covid-19 viral pandemic and cost-of-living crisis is compounding matters. Added to this are the ongoing environmental issues facing the world, which compound inequalities, and a heightened awareness of racial injustice.

The *Reconciling Mission* programme has been developed by RI to help address this challenge. It is also intended as a viable approach for the emerging future of the church, amidst the ongoing disruptions. The *Reconciling Mission* programme connects with the enduring five Anglican marks of mission, with a particular emphasis on offering good news to the world around these three marks, as part of proclaiming the good news of the kingdom of God:

- Responding to human need by loving service;
- Transforming unjust structures of society, challenging violence of every kind and pursuing peace and reconciliation; and
- Striving to safeguard the integrity of creation, & sustain and renew the life of the earth.

The *Reconciling Mission* programme offers a framework for understanding the church's mission as part of a journey towards greater reconciliation in society, which reflects God's reconciling work in the world. This framework incorporates addressing basic human needs, raising awareness of injustice, challenging the system, and negotiating change as elements in releasing a foretaste of heaven here on earth. These will typically involve addressing conflict in the world, and hence there is a direct connection with improving how Christians handle tensions and conflict (see item 3 below).

The *Reconciling Mission* programme offers practical tools to enable the church to engage more deeply with local neighbourhoods. This emerged as a priority during the pandemic. The approach draws on an asset-based development model, which explores a community's gifts and strengths, and works to strengthen relationships across a neighbourhood. Through such an approach, the church can help to address inequalities and play a part in promoting greater reconciliation within society, especially at a local level.

Further information on the *Reconciling Mission* programme is given on a separate handout.



## **2. Addressing escalated or protracted parish conflicts**

This is essentially a complex *ministry* challenge. There will always be occasional local parish conflicts where the tensions escalate to such a degree that outside help is needed. Sometimes these conflicts are protracted and long-standing. Typically, an approach may be made to the Bishop or Archdeacon, with a request for them to intervene in addressing the conflict. However, such conflicts are often complicated and time-consuming to address, requiring time which senior staff rarely have available to give.

One option is for the Diocese to establish a small team of mediators who can respond to such situations. Bridge Builders has produced a booklet entitled 'Making Mediation Work in the Church of England' which provides guidance on establishing a diocesan mediation team. The type of 'fire-fighting' work that is involved in addressing escalated conflicts requires some significant mediatory skills and expertise to address effectively. One route is to gather a small pool of local professional mediators. Another route is to train up a group from within the Diocese, for example via Bridge Builders' foundational and advanced training courses.

## **3. Changing the culture of how Christians handle tensions and conflict**

This is fundamentally a *discipleship training* challenge. Within much of the church there is a prevailing culture of niceness which means that Christians, including clergy, can be reluctant to face and address conflict. However, the nature of any community life is that there will always be some relational conflicts and tensions over differences: these are inevitable.

Organisations such as Bridge Builders and Place for Hope offer foundational training for clergy to equip them with confidence, new thinking and process skills to enable them to face into tensions and conflict, and to work more effectively with others amidst disagreement. In 2016, Bridge Builders published a training resource with CPAS, *Growing Bridgebuilders: Changing How We Handle Conflict* (230 copies in circulation, but currently out of print), to equip those who have been trained to share learning with others in the churches which they serve.

Some Dioceses have developed their own local training for clergy and lay people on handling tensions and conflict, and this can be a cost-effective way to share skills and learning. Alternatively, services such as Bridge Builders can be commissioned to run tailored training for specific groups.

In addition, there are some useful publications, such as my book *Bridgebuilding: Making Peace with Conflict in the Church* (Canterbury Press, 2019), which offers access to discussion questions for group study and reflection.

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