
Current Best Practice in Church Twinning as it has Emerged in the Experience of St Albans Diocese: Helen Hutchison

I begin this talk with a quotation from Martin Kitchen, writing in 2003 as Vice-Dean of Durham:

We live in days when it is becoming increasingly clear that we must either unite or perish. Ancient animosities do not provide us with the tools for global social harmony, so we must learn to listen, to look and to serve our neighbour, to grow up in our relationships, to speak good news and to think clearly across the boundaries of race and religion, sex, gender and orientation, wealth and poverty, social class and caste. Ordinary Christians must do this and so provide an example for those in positions of leadership to follow.

When I relate this paragraph specifically to our European work it seems to me that the work of twinning communities, whether civic or church-based, is as vital today as it was in the early days of the last century.

But, we also know from our own experience and from the comments made in your excellent Briefing on Church Twinning [*Faith in Europe Briefings* No. 13, June 2008 – Ed.], there are many difficulties sewn in among the extraordinary good things to come out of twinning. Difficulties like the decline in interest in ecumenism, the obstacles of language and the problems with involving the next generation.

Whilst I am absolutely not going to suggest that in St Albans we have found answers to any of these thorny problems, we are motivated by a strong belief in the value of what we are doing. John Henry Newman's aphorism in *Apologia Pro Vita Sua* 'Growth is the only evidence of life', really says it all.

Growth means refusing to stand still and say this is it. This is as good as it gets. What we must continue to do is to find new ways to listen and look, to serve our neighbours, to grow in our relationships and to think across boundaries.

In talking about our practice in St Albans Diocese I begin by giving some background about our structure followed by highlighting the ways in which we try to support and develop our links. Finally I will conclude with some wider observations.

St Albans Europe Group: History and Structure

There has been a Group devoted to Europe in our Diocese for many years, led in the beginning by the Rev. Juergen Bridstrup who made his home in England 40 years ago. Juergen cares deeply for European unity, driven by the experiences of his family in Europe going back three generations. He remains a valued member of our Group and is a pragmatic idealist who does not view everything about the EU in a rosy glow, but retains a passionate belief in the vision.

Juergen was followed as Chair by the Rev. Anders Berquist, who comes from Sweden and is married to the Rev. Jules who comes from Italy. The Berquists made a huge contribution to the work of the Group, particularly with our Italian links which now go from strength to strength both at parish level, where five parishes are twinned with the three Dioceses of Fano, Pessaro and Urbino in the Marche region of Italy, and at Diocesan level, where only this year we signed a covenant of friendship with the Dioceses in the presence of the Archbishop of Pesaro, Piero Coccia, at a packed Prayer for Christian Unity event in St Albans Cathedral.

When Anders moved to the Diocese of London I was asked to take over chairing the Group and I took up the role in 2002.

Although I had no previous experience of European church work I was a member of the study tour of the European Institutions in Strasbourg in 2001 led by Bishop Christopher Herbert and became enthused by what I saw of the work of the churches in Europe.

Three people in St Albans Diocese have been highly influential in the progress of this Group: Canon Richard Wheeler, our recently retired Diocesan SRO, with his huge knowledge of and commitment to Europe; Archdeacon Trevor Jones, who is an indefatigable supporter of our work; and of course, Christopher, Bishop of St Albans, whose drive and commitment to Europe are well known.

Christopher's gift for friendship has been at the heart of our Diocesan twinning relations: with Archbishop Martin Lind of Linköping in Sweden, with the Paderborn link in Germany, and culminating in the extraordinary

gesture, believed to be the first for a British bishop, to be made an honorary citizen of the Italian city of Fano, with whom the city of St Albans is also linked.

I would be the first to agree with Keith Archer in the Twinning Briefing, that 'having the support of the top brass', as he puts it, makes an immeasurable difference.

The Europe Group in St Albans is open to anyone with an interest and is made up mainly but not entirely of clergy. They are an amazing bunch of people, giving a huge amount of time and energy to this work, and I am proud to be speaking today on behalf of them all.

We have created four specific 'desks' covering Porvoo, Meissen, Italy and Taize, and each one of these is headed up by someone with a personal interest in the region and/or an ability to speak the language. Thus the Porvoo desk officer, Rev. Peter Budgell, oversees arrangements with our Linkoping link and deals direct with parishes requesting information on Porvoo links. He produced a guide for all parishes on the new link. Our Italian Desk Officer, Rev. Peter Wadsworth, liaises with the Italian linked parishes and is currently learning Italian. Our main link under Meissen is with the Paderborn Kirchenkreis and our Meissen Desk Officer, Rev. Jenny Pavyer, speaks fluent German and will represent us on the British Kirchentag Committee.

The outcome of this structure is twofold. Firstly, membership of the Group becomes more than just a talking shop, people are committed and responsibility is shared. Secondly, whilst this structure enables me to stay in the loop generally, I am also free to undertake the lead role in information dissemination, take a more proactive stance in terms of public relations and keep an eye on the wider picture.

I have brought copies of our Constitution along plus a poster showing the extent of our links across Europe. At the last count, now some years ago, we had 25 parish links plus our Cathedral link with Sweden and the Diocesan links I have already mentioned.

Supporting and Developing our Links

I propose now to talk you through the Constitution to show you how our current practice stands in relation to this. I don't know whether our Constitution is based on any kind of template for Diocesan European work generally or whether it is unique to our Diocese. If there were to be a Code of Practice, as Robin Blount suggests in his contribution to the Briefing, we

might do worse than use this Constitution as a starting point. I have certainly found it a helpful tool.

Thus its first purpose:

To consider and develop means by which members of the Church of England in this Diocese can arrive at a fuller understanding of the opportunities for, and benefits from, association with churches in all parts of Europe, within the context of public debate on the importance of unity within Europe.

From this I take a mandate not only to encourage and support local and Diocesan links to visit and learn what it is to be the Church in Sweden or Russia or Italy, to share worship, to undertake study together or to go on pilgrimages to each other's holy places, but also to encourage the involvement by individuals and parishes in the wider social and political debate about the importance of European unity.

It's a given, I think, that in the UK, when we talk about the European social and political context, we are generally starting from a very low base line. There are many reasons for this, not least the reluctance of successive governments to be open about the reality of the European Project for fear of losing votes. And there are certainly malign elements in the print media who consistently undermine the project by promoting stereotypes and prejudice and actively peddling misinformation about the role of European organisations.

According to the UK European Movement there are 500 anti-Europe organisations in the UK.

Before we can seriously encourage members of the C of E in our Diocese to participate in public debate on the importance of unity within Europe I believe we need to start with an education and information campaign. And we can do this at local level, thus getting below the radar, as it were, of national negative communications. Indeed I think we are meeting a need which is not being provided by our own government.

In St Albans we have begun this process by producing a quarterly newsletter for all parishes and all the Diocesan networks, carrying not only links news but also news about the European Constitution debate and the work of the churches in Brussels and Strasbourg. The newsletter *Around Europe* is backed up by our website on the Diocesan site where we can provide more detail.

We have been greatly helped in this work by three information outlets: the Council for Christian Unity's *European Bulletin* begun by Charles Hill, being maintained by Francis Bassett, and which I very much hope will continue under Charles' successor; and the *Faith in Europe Briefings* and links from there to the **CEC briefings**.

Again, if the ideas of Robin Blount for a national movement on church twinning were to be further considered, you could argue that the infrastructure is already in place to provide the necessary information for both informed dialogue and action.

When you recall that the UK only signed up to the European Social Charter in 1997 and the kind of political commentary that accompanied this in the UK press at the time it is hardly surprising that most people are completely unaware of just how much of our legislation in this sphere emanates from Brussels. Despite the fact that '80 per cent of the work of the Foreign Office is now related to Europe and a backbencher in the European Parliament has more power than a backbencher in the home Parliament' (Sir Stephen Wall, former British Ambassador to the EU, speaking on 23 June 2005), people in this country do not see the need either to engage with Europe or to influence its debate.

We know that the churches in Europe under the banners of CEC and COMECE we know are doing sterling work monitoring legislation and challenging it where we have something legitimate to say. But it's not just a matter of legislation. In a sense I believe that CEC and COMECE keep the vision of the founding fathers alive, a thorn in the side of the EU if you like, constantly reminding the EU of the wider picture, challenging the view that the EU is just about markets and material wellbeing.

If people in our islands were more aware of this perhaps in time we could affect a sea-change. If we can encourage our link relationships to take on board this wider picture, perhaps the church through its European links officers can be the mustard seed or the leaven in the lump of changing British attitudes to Europe.

Interestingly, because we work at local level, we find ourselves in the vanguard now. European parliamentarians are increasingly concerned that the whole European project is so large and complex that they are losing the support of the European public – as we have seen in the French and Irish referendums.

They want to engage with people at a much more local and individual level. And we have seen two examples of this. Last year we saw the launch of **Plan D**, the online debate for all European citizens to participate in debate about the future of the Union. This year the EU is funding local projects in all the member states under the heading of **Europe Direct**. We got involved in this locally through the Luton Business Competitive Centre and took part in a Sixth Form debate in a C of E secondary school about the place of religion in the EU. It's a small step. Small is beautiful, Schumacher said, and to this we could add, in European terms, local is beautiful!

Our Constitution requires us to build on and promote action on Porvoo and Meissen.

As I indicated at the beginning we have very strong links developing with Linköping Diocese in Southern Sweden and with Kirchenkreis Paderborn and also the Roman Catholic Moehler Institute in Paderborn.

Just to give you a flavour of how these are developing:

Following the formalisation of our link with Linköping last year, seven parishes are exploring the possibility of Swedish links. In October last year the Europe Group organised a training week for six clergy from Kisa who came to study our liturgy, worship, church finances and lay involvement. Some of our clergy and readers have already been over to Sweden for conferences the costs of which have been met by our hosts.

Our Meissen link grew out of personal contact with Paderborn's RC Institute through Juergen Bridstrup. A group of curates in CME have recently attended an ecumenical conference at the Roman Catholic Institute. Paralleling this development was a decision to explore a European Ecumenical Partnership under the Meissen Agreement with the Kirchenkreis Paderborn. So the slightly unusual thing about this partnership is that it focuses on Meissen and the EKD but also includes the Roman Catholic Institute. The next stage will be to progress this link at deanery and parish level.

Our Constitution also requires us to reflect on the theological, historical and cultural questions which arise.

We do this in the context of our links work but are also proactive in attending national meetings and conferences. We have an annual budget of £2000 which covers travel and conference costs plus our printing costs and hospitality for our visitors.

Recent conferences covered include 'Religious tradition and innovation in the post-Soviet world', 'What can cultural Europe do for political Europe' and 'Understanding Europe, belief and unbelief on our continent.' Reports on all these conferences are written up for our newsletter or are put on the website.

Finally, we are enjoined by our Constitution to relate our thinking and activities to the wider context of Europe and the international mission of the Board for Church and Society.

Without going into huge amounts of detail I shall just briefly list some of our activities in this sphere:

- The organisation of a week-long Diocesan seminar to Brussels in 2002 led by Bishop Christopher. We had meetings with CEC and COMECE and with the help of our MEP were able to meet and talk with a number of parliamentarians.
- Setting up a database of linguists in the Diocese willing to help interpret at meetings of foreign visitors.
- With the help of Francis Bassett and the then Churches Commission for Migrants in Europe we were able to put a European perspective into a Diocesan report on asylum seekers (2002).
- Following a number of preparatory Taize services in the Diocese, our Suffragan Bishop of Hertford led a group of young pilgrims to Taize (2004).
- A party of eight led by Peter Budgell visited Oslo to explore multi-cultural and faith issues with colleagues in the Church of Norway. A meeting took place with the Minister of State for Church and Cultural Affairs who also happened to be a seconded Minister in the Church of Norway (2005).
- During Britain's six-month Presidency of the EU in 2005 we organised a debate at St Albans Cathedral, with Shirley Williams as guest speaker. The public interest and turnout amply justified our decision to organise a forum of this quality, at a time when the opportunity to have a national public debate about Europe in this country was totally ignored.
- In 2006 we hosted a return visit to St Albans by the former Norwegian Secretary of State and her Minister of State after they failed to be re-

elected to the Norwegian parliament. This is part of an ongoing debate about a possible future link with Oslo Diocese.

- Also in 2006 we seized the opportunity to utilise two new initiatives to raise awareness about Europe particularly amongst young adults. Plan D, an internet debate launched by the European Commission, encourages citizens to contribute to the debate about the future of the EU. At the same time the churches of Europe launched a debate about priorities for Christians in the 21st century and a new vision for Europe leading to the Third European Ecumenical Assembly (3EEA) in Romania. We made presentations to a meeting of Rural Deans and lay Co-Chairs, organised a debate in Diocesan Synod, and planned an event for the 16-30 age range with a range of information leaflets and flyers linked to a website campaign. We tried to encourage on-line debate about a new vision for Europe between parish links suggesting that young people might take the lead on this. We completely failed to raise any interest whatsoever and our plans to take a message from the youth of our Diocese to Romania fell dead in the water!

However, we know we have to persevere. Electronic personal communications are the way of the future with young people and our Italian parish links are recognising this with web links in English and Italian carrying photographs of shared events.

But, there is no doubt that British youth and young adults are not engaged by Europe, whether inside our churches or outside. Peace in Europe is no longer sufficiently motivating for the young. New concerns like globalisation and the environment and global warming, as we heard from the young people at Sibiu, are perhaps the way forward.

Daniel Smith at the British Youth Council argues that we need to get the marketing right, delivering issues and core values in an interesting way and using art and music and outreach material and websites made by young people themselves.

How Can We Encourage a More European Outlook in These Islands?

Church twinning in the UK may be a tiny mustard seed but I believe it is more important than ever before that in our lives as Christians and in our parishes we are modelling ways of thinking and acting that include others rather than exclude them. And we are learning too to see how others see us.

A Turkish man taking part in the on-line discussion about the future of Europe which I referred to earlier wrote: 'You fear us, but you don't know us.' And Cardinal Kasper speaking at the 3EEA in Sibiu said: 'We don't know each other enough and we don't love each other enough.'

- For Europe to be truly inclusive it must ensure that the European identity is based on a respect for difference and diversity. *The Church has a role to play in that.*
- The world needs to be reminded about the social implications of the EU's drive to improve markets and raise living standards. *The Church has a role to play in that. It can contribute to the process at a UK local, regional and national level.*
- The world is confronting a common agenda shaped by the environmental crisis. *The churches, through our shared language of worship and coming together as different traditions, have a role to play in that.* We can, in the words of environmental campaigners, through our links think globally and act locally.

Pope Paul VI said about Europe: 'Institutions will never bring about a united Europe, that can only be done by people.'

Which brings me right back to where we started with Martin Kitchen's comments:

We must learn to listen and to look and to serve our neighbour, to grow up in our relationships, to speak good news and to think clearly across the boundaries. Ordinary Christians must do this and so provide an example for those in positions of leadership to follow.

Helen Hutchison is Chair of the Europe Group in St Albans Diocese. She is a writer and campaigner with a background in press and public relations work and formerly Senior Press Officer at the Equal Opportunities Commission. She has been involved with the Diocesan Board of Social Responsibility for many years, worked as a parish social responsibility officer for a St Albans church and collaborated with the local MP on campaigns on housing and homelessness, school safety issues and events such as Jubilee 2000.