

Rev Ian Meredith
St Mary's Church, Portchester

Report on E.M.D.L. (Sabbatical): February – April 2017

The dark side

Before I went, I found a paper called 'the dark side of the sabbatical' which I shared with the PCC. This said that during a prolonged period of absence from the primary leader of a church, there can be special difficulties arising in a church: power struggles, insecurity, lack of leadership; and when the minister returns there can be problems: it was good to be without you! We can do well without you! The minister himself wonders – have they changed, have I changed? Many of my colleagues return to say they are going to a new job – the break gives them time to reflect, what it's like to live without the church.

Balance

Not work, not study, not a holiday – something which touches all these, but is different. Personal spiritual life – marriage and family – friends – reading – relaxation – reflection on ministry.

In summary: 12 weeks: 7 of these were spent based at home, 5 were away from home: 2 separate weeks at a Retreat Centre; 1 week walking in Wales; 2 weeks in USA.

Sundays were spent attending other churches: 8 different churches around Fareham/Portsmouth, 2 in America.

My personal renewal

I had for a while become interested in the idea of 'Mindfulness' which I know is in vogue at present, but I felt it was something I should be looking at. I find at times I can be quite stressed; and don't focus easily on the present: my mind tends to race about, either into the past or into the future. I find I do this when praying, and when talking to people. Mindfulness is a form of meditation whereby focusing on your breathing, you find you are able to defeat distracting thoughts and stay in the moment. I have noticed a difference, but I need to keep working on this.

Retreats

The first week was at a Christian based retreat centre in Dorset called 'Othona'. I had never heard of it before, but an internet set discovered it offered a 'Quiet Week' – with no programme right at the start of my sabbatical.

Lee Abbey

Two weeks later I was on retreat at Lee Abbey in Devon, a Christian conference centre with an Anglican foundation, broadly evangelical and charismatic, and a lot better for me spiritually. The speaker for the week was John Pritchard, retired Bishop of Oxford, and the subject was 'Prayer'

Wales

Two weeks after that I went to North Wales for a week on my own.

I was given the use of a holiday home at Treardur Bay on Anglesey, which was a base to explore.

The first day I visited the cathedrals of Bangor and St Asaph. St Asaph was an interesting reconnection with my roots. The surname Meredith comes from Denbighshire, the area covered by the Diocese of St Asaph, but the cathedral was founded by St Kentigern who is also Glasgow's patron saint and the founder of its cathedral.

While there I joined in a school visit for a monastic project similar to what we have done here. Were there ideas we could use here?

Another day was spent walking the West Wales coastal path, part of which is also the Pilgrims Route to the holy island of Bardsey. The walk was along the Llyn Peninsula and was some 8 miles taking most of the day. At last I reached **Aberdaron**. This was where pilgrims for Bardsey Island arrived before taking the boat over to the holy island. But more special for me, it was the place where one of my favourite poets, the poet-priest, RS Thomas ministered: St Huwans Church:

America

I was two and a half weeks in USA. I had two particular interests which took me to America. The first one was the idea of 'Christ in the Margins', and in particular Christian recovery ministry to alcoholics and drug addicts. This led me to the city of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. It was at Pittsburgh that one of the leading inspirational figures behind the founding of AA was a minister – Rev Sam Shoemaker. It was through Sam Shoemaker that Bill Wilson one of the founders of AA came to faith, and Shoemaker helped him compose the 12 Steps to Recovery. Pittsburgh was of course famous for steel making, and Shoemaker's slogan was, 'Let's make Pittsburgh as famous for Christ as it is for steel.' He was Rector of Calvary Episcopal Church, an incredible cathedral-like building, and still the home to one of the largest AA groups in America.

But since the close of the steel industry, Pittsburgh has fallen on hard times, and the drug and alcohol problem is large. But I'm glad to say that the Church is responding, and almost every live church has a Christian based 12 Step Recovery group – it is one of the fastest growing ministries in the American Church, and I was able to visit several groups.

Trinity School for Ministry

While I was at Pittsburgh I attended a week of lectures at Trinity School for Ministry, an evangelical Anglican seminary at Ambridge, a suburb of Pittsburgh. There are around 250 students, and I found the standard of theological learning along with spiritual life, very high.

At Pittsburgh, I also attended **two churches** and got to know them and their ministries well. Both were Anglican churches, but at totally opposite ends of the social spectrum.

The first was **St Stephens Church**, in the white middle-class suburb of Sewickley. This is a congregation of almost 2000 people, where they have 4 services to accommodate them. The first is held on Saturday evening, and then there are three on Sunday: 8.00am Said Holy Communion; 9.30am Parish Eucharist and 11.00am Contemporary service. The church is full for every service, but the Saturday evening and Sunday 11.00am are so large that they can't be held in the church, but in the auditorium.

The building facilities are amazing and include a welcoming foyer, classrooms, nursery, bookshop, large kitchen, library, lecture theatre, children's chapel, parish offices, etc,

The second was at down-town Pittsburgh, called '**Shepherds Heart**'. This is a church which is basically an outreach ministry to people at the bottom: mainly black, homeless, alcoholics (not all in recovery!), people with mental health issues.

As well as having a Sunday night worship service, this is followed by a two course cooked meal; there is a free breakfast every day of the week as well as counselling and care.

Americans honour their war veterans more than we do in the UK, but many veterans, especially those traumatised by war, don't receive the care they should. Part of Shepherds Heart church building has been converted in accommodation for Veterans, including kitchen and recreation facilities.

The third week I attended a conference **at Indianapolis, Indiana**. This was organised by a group of Christian leaders called the Gospel Coalition, and the theme was a commemoration of Martin Luther and the 500th anniversary of the Reformation, and the legacy of that today. Speakers included Don Carson, John Piper and Tim Keller.

There were 8,500 attending the conference, and what was heartening was the proportion of young people – 57% were under the age of 29!

Visiting Different churches

It was a great privilege for me to be able to visit 8 different churches in the Portsmouth/Fareham area. I particularly chose churches I knew had a reputation for being lively, larger, growing and attracting people. As well as wanting to see what was around, I wanted to know what they were doing that we at St Mary's were not, and were there things we could learn from them and use here.

I attended all these churches in a very positive frame of mind, rather than with any critical spirit. I want to share finally, but in general terms, what some of the good things were, but also things which were not so good.

These were 3 Anglican churches (St Jude's, Southsea; Holy Rood, Stubbington and Harbour Church); the 5 Free Churches were: Fareham Community Church, Fareham New Life Baptist, Portsmouth Family Church, Portsmouth Oasis Elim Church, and Cosham Baptist.

Firstly, and positively. It was heartening to see that all these churches had in the main, congregations far younger than ours; I would say in each case, at least two thirds under the age of 50. There were lots of families and people in their 30s – 50s. All had very good music groups; and excellent building facilities; apart from one; all had full time or part time youth and family workers. Some had very good mid-week outreach and discipling ministry.

The more negative – apart from the official welcoming teams at the door, once inside, on most occasions no one spoke to us. When I arrived here 4 years ago, I was told of all these churches and the sort of numbers attending their main service. I'm afraid that there has been quite a bit of decline

in several of them, particularly in the Free Churches since then; and others I sense have remained static in numbers for the past few years. I wonder if some of the newer churches start with great enthusiasm and a spurt of growth for many years, but then run out of steam and momentum. I am told that a number of Christians who join from other churches (as opposed to the younger converts) who attend them, tend to move around the churches. Where I did have conversations, this was borne out by personal experience of those who shared.

There was no church where I experienced what I would call a moment of ‘awe and wonder’ - certainly the supernaturalism of the 1970s and 1980s charismatic renewal has largely departed. But perhaps this sense of ‘awe’ is not something you can create anyway – it’s either there or it’s not. Such moments tend to come in times of quiet and silence, and there wasn’t much of that to be found in any of the churches – the largest part of the service consisted in talking – either in preaching, sharing, notices (which in some took a considerably long time), presentations, etc.

Generally speaking, the Anglican churches are doing better in the Fareham area, but the Free Churches are doing better in the city of Portsmouth, where the Anglicans are not doing so well. Where the Church generally in Portsmouth is growing is in the planting of new churches. So perhaps there is an optimum number for a congregation in this area, above which no one has yet been able to grow.



Trinity School for Ministry, Ambridge, Pennsylvania



St Stephens, Sewickley, Pittsburgh



Shepherds Heart, Downtown, Pittsburgh



12 Step Recovery Groups

