

SPECIAL AGENDA IV

DIOCESAN SYNOD MOTIONS

THE FUTURE OF CHURCH OF ENGLAND RETREAT HOUSES

A background paper from the Diocese of Leicester and the Diocese of Peterborough

“This Diocesan Synod requests General Synod to:

- i) celebrate the contribution of the Diocesan Retreat Houses to the Retreat Movement, and to the mission of the Church and the spiritual well-being of the nation;
- ii) in the light of the closure of several Diocesan Retreat Houses, invite the Archbishops’ Council to review and to make recommendations for the future sustainability and development of the remaining Diocesan Retreat Houses; and
- iii) encourage the Archbishops’ Council and the other National Church Institutions, Dioceses, regional training partnerships and parishes to make full use of the Diocesan Retreat Houses for retreat, prayer, study, conferences and creative thinking for the future.”

Introduction

This motion, which arose from the Deanery of Framland in which Launde Abbey is set and which is supported by both Leicester and Peterborough Diocesan Synods, is a response to the ever greater opportunities and challenges placed upon Launde Abbey. Although described as the Diocesan Retreat House serving Leicester and now Peterborough, Launde has a regional and national profile. It is only one of three Diocesan Retreat Houses in the country that have 30 or more bedrooms and that can sleep more than 50 people. The responsibility for managing this national resource currently falls upon Leicester Diocese, with some support from Peterborough Diocese since the signing of a Covenant Agreement in 2007. Although Launde is both viable and sustainable as a ‘business’, like all the other Diocesan Retreat Houses, it can only maintain its buildings through the generosity of its supporting diocese, grant making bodies and individuals. This is despite the fact that the Church nationally benefits hugely from these wonderful resources which have been referred to as being jewels in the Church of England’s crown. The Archbishop of Canterbury described Launde Abbey as a “crucial spiritual powerhouse for the Church”¹. This is equally true of all retreat houses which are centres of prayer, spirituality, living ecumenism, outreach and mission.

Context²

The Diocesan Retreat House movement was begun by the Archbishops’ Commission on Evangelism which recommended that retreat houses should be established in every diocese. This was in direct

response to the failure of the National Mission of Repentance and Hope in 1916. The Commission pointed to the great contribution that retreat houses were already making to many clergy from all wings of the Church of England. The movement quickly expanded so that by 1935 there were 53 Anglican houses, both diocesan and community based. Although a number of these houses closed during the late 1930's and 1940's a new generation of retreat houses sprang up, so that by 1958 there were 58 Anglican houses. Between 20,000 and 30,000 people were making a retreat each year by the 1960's. The retreat movement started to have a significant affect upon the spirituality of the wider church.

Between 1962 and the present, retreat houses in general and diocesan retreat houses in particular have become centres for ecumenism. In 1968 the Association for Promoting Retreats conference was not only attended by representatives from the Anglican church as well as from the Roman Catholic and Methodist churches. This led to active co-operation between those who were engaged in the retreat movement in England culminating in the formation of the Retreat Association which promotes retreat amongst all the major denominations. This ecumenical movement has also been supported by the opening up of a variety of courses in spiritual direction for individuals from different spiritual and denominational traditions allowing and encouraging cross fertilisation of ideas and practice. These developments, along with the introduction of themed and other forms of retreats from the 1970's onwards, have led to an increasing diversity within the retreat house movement which is now completely ecumenical in Britain.

Retreat Houses, in that same period, have also opened their doors to many beyond the Church and have thus also acted as places of mission where faith has been awakened and a glimpse of God has been caught by many. However, it has to be acknowledged that this move to open the doors to individuals and groups beyond the Church has been partially caused by financial necessity to make the retreat house movement financially viable. This has had the side affect of not just making the houses places for mission but also places where there is less silence. This in turn could threaten the very *raison d'être* of the retreat houses as valued places of stillness and silence if it is not held in careful balance.

The Present Reality

From a survey³ conducted to prepare for this paper, the future of the Diocesan Retreat Houses looks very mixed with many of the larger houses reporting that they are operationally viable and sustainable from day to day business while the smaller houses seem to be struggling. However, nearly all the Houses reported the need for significant capital investment in their buildings if they are to prevent decline and to achieve growth in the future. It is believed that none of them could afford to carry out this capital work purely from their own reserves.

A Warden of a smaller retreat house states that they are at a 'standstill' while another reports that 'unless we develop further to increase income, the next five years will inevitably see a slow but sure decline'. The smaller houses report that lack of space is hindering their growth and financial viability, often turning groups away because of the lack of space. Despite the fact that nearly all the Wardens see potential growth in the market over the next two to five years and are generally positive about the future there is a realisation that without growth in size and greater economy of scale, some houses will not survive in the medium term.

The larger retreat houses, however, also state that they are in need of capital investment for refurbishment of existing buildings and the creation of new facilities to meet changing market needs. Operationally they are financially viable because they have accepted an increased percentage of secular business over the last ten to fifteen years. One retreat house reported having as much as 44% of their total business in 2007 coming from the secular market, while the average from those houses which reported figures was 16.7% for secular business (either not for profit or business). This growth in dependency of diocesan retreat houses on the secular market, although helping many to be sustainable on a day to day basis, has led to questions being raised as to their purpose as these secular groups have inevitably squeezed some church groups out.

Groups – whether church or secular – have tended to come to dominate retreat houses, as one Warden states, taking over the ‘space, and if conference or training groups, are rarely silent’. Retreat Houses are thus increasingly seen as ‘poorly suited for individual retreatants seeking silence’, one of their main purposes in the past. Another Warden states that they are concerned ‘for those people seeking quiet time and space as we are having to fill beds and look to be ‘full’ as much as possible to make the books balance. People with individual needs, who are grieving or taking time out of a stressful situation, find it more and more difficult to spend time here with us because of group bookings’.

There are now only 17 Diocesan Retreat Houses advertising in the Retreat Magazine (2008) down from 25 Diocesan Retreat Houses advertising in the Vision Magazine in 1981 (decline of 23%⁴). At least one of these Retreat Houses has only been saved by the diocese moving their diocesan offices into the Retreat House making the site dual use, while another is only viable due to receiving a sizeable grant each year towards its running costs. Alongside this decrease in Diocesan Retreat Houses has come the decline in retreat opportunities within Anglican religious houses – most notably Burford closed in 2008 and St. Francis House, Hemingford Grey is to be sold. In the open letter explaining why Hemingford Grey is to be sold Fr Nicholas states that ‘In order not just to survive but to grow into a healthy community at Mirfield, we have to undertake major building work here and finding the money for that demands that we sell one of our assets. St Francis House really is the only one we can sell. Although the House is excellently run the fact is that it loses money. All retreat houses do lose money unless they double up as conference centres which then compromises the nature of the house. We are having to find about £30,000 each year to subsidise it and we can’t afford it any longer. If we had increased the fees significantly we would have lost some of the clientele. The House has not had proper renovations for about 25 years. In the nature of such buildings we would have had to do that within the next five years and this would have been a major expense; at least half a million pounds, probably more. We could never have found that money.’

Most of the Houses however report that they are supported and valued by the diocese to which they are linked – with some even receiving financial support in the way of receiving the Warden’s stipend or an annual grant from their diocese. It is also common for the diocese to which the individual retreat house is attached to have representatives on Boards of Trustees, and where they are in existence, on Management Committees, which deal via delegated powers from the Trustees with operational rather than strategic issues. Many dioceses see their retreat house as a means of promoting spirituality within the diocese and use the Warden or other staff members of the retreat house as quasi-diocesan spirituality advisers. One Warden reported that their house was ‘commended in the work we do and told what an asset we are to the Diocese, both in a spiritual and supportive role’. However, the demands of the diocese placed upon busy Wardens create yet another demand upon people who are already often

working in exceptionally busy demanding roles, being responsible for the day to day management of the house and the spiritual needs of those staying in them.

In return for this support from the diocese the Retreat House often sets a lower rate of payment for church groups than for others who use them. However, some report that even though reduced rates resulting in a minimal surplus are given to diocesan and church groups they sometimes seek even greater discounts and try to play one retreat house off against another. One Warden states that there 'are misconceptions amongst Christian groups concerning the real cost of providing hospitality [which creates] a threat to the viability of maintaining ancient buildings resourced to meet modern standards of comfort'.

Many Retreat Houses report opportunities for mission within them. These mission opportunities are diverse. For instance, Launde Abbey has been working with Headteachers from the city of Leicester and the county of Leicestershire to welcome Primary School children on retreat while it has also hosted a number of important ethical conferences in partnership with other regional institutions which have resulted in a number of papers being published in leading journals. This is on top of the usual round of parish and church groups and many individuals coming to Launde. A Warden of another Retreat Houses sees the welcoming of the many social care and educational groups that use his Retreat House as a part of their 'commitment to service *'after the pattern of Christ'* [and their welcome] as a way for those attending those events to be *'welcomed as Christ himself'*". It is not uncommon as one Warden states that their House is 'used by diocesan and other groups, by mission organisations, and as a venue for clergy training and the new spiritual direction course.' This diverse use is both something to be rejoiced in but also to be questioned as to how far it fits with the purpose of a Retreat House. However, without it the wider mission of the Church would be the poorer for not having these spiritual powerhouses which are quietly going about their business, often unseen.

The Motion

It is clear that Diocesan Retreat Houses provide an important role within the Church and beyond its boundaries. As one Warden states, 'people find comfort, spirituality, space and a chance to explore their faith whilst staying at a retreat house, something that they cannot always do during everyday church life' and another states that the staff of his Retreat House 'delight in the fact that people with, according to their own admission, no church connection, regularly 'chat' with the Warden and other staff about their joys and sorrows'. Therefore, due to this vital and important calling, the Church should celebrate the contribution of the Diocesan Retreat Houses to the Retreat Movement and to the mission of the Church and spiritual well-being of the nation.

This paper is the first attempt to gather information on the state of the Retreat House movement and it shows that there is a need to review the Diocesan Retreat Houses. Such a review would allow the Church to gain a greater understanding of the huge resource for spirituality and mission that they offer and to look at how they can all be secured for the future. Such a review would also be able to look at how the load of managing these resources could be spread more equitably amongst the dioceses and encourage capital investment into them.

An immediate step that the Church can make to help secure their future in these uncertain financial times is of course to encourage their use. Whenever a Church group uses a secular venue unnecessarily,

it takes money away from the Retreat Houses they could be supporting and potentially threatens their very survival. The Church should be encouraged to make use of Diocesan Retreat Houses for retreat, prayer, study, conferences and creative thinking for the future.

The Conclusion

We hope that debate generated by this motion will raise the profile of the Diocesan Retreat Houses stimulating their further use. The review that the motion calls for will lead to a significant analysis of the future of these Houses as sacred spaces and places of spirituality and mission. It is hoped that the wider Church will support its Retreat Houses, these ‘spiritual powerhouses’, and consider how it can spread the onus of their demands on to a broader base of support.

Tim Blewett
The Warden of Launde Abbey
Chairperson on the Association for Promoting Retreats
Member of Framland Deanery Synod and Leicester Diocesan Synod.

¹ Rowan Williams, Statement of Support for Launde Abbey 2005

² Information supplied by Canon John Tyres 2008

³ Survey carried out by Tim Blewett, the Warden of Launde, November 2008

⁴ See Appendix One (below) for those Retreat Houses which advertised in Vision 1981 and in the Retreat Magazine 2008

APPENDIX ONE

The listing of Retreat Houses in Vision in 1981 and Retreats 2008 are as follows:

1981	2008	New Houses Advertised Since 1981
Bath and Wells, The Abbey House	Bath and Wells, The Abbey House	Chester, Foxhill (Note Chester also closed)
Birmingham, Wadderton		Gloucester, Glenfall House
Blackburn, Whalley Abbey	Blackburn, Whalley Abbey	
Bradford, Parcevall Hall	Bradford, Parcevall Hall	
Canterbury, St Gabriel's		
Carlisle, Rydal Hall	Carlisle, Rydal Hall	
Chelmsford, Pleshey	Chelmsford, Pleshey	
Coventry, Offa House	Coventry, Offa House	
Derby, Morley	Derby, Morley	
Ely, Bishop Woodford House	Ely, Bishop Woodford House	
Leicester, Launde Abbey	Leicester, Launde Abbey	
Lichfield, Shallowford House	Lichfield, Shallowford House	
Lincoln Diocese, Edward King		
Manchester, Crawshawbooth		
Newcastle, Shepherds Dene	Newcastle and Durham, Shepherds Dene	
Peterborough, Ecton House		
Portsmouth, Catherington		
Ripon, Barrowby		
Rochester, Graham Chiesman House		
Sheffield, Whirlow Grange	Sheffield, Whirlow Grange	
Southwark, Wychcroft (Training Centre)	Southwark, Wychcroft (Training Centre)	
St Albans, Verluam House		
Winchester, Old Alresford Place	Winchester, Old Alresford Place	
Worcester, The Old House		
York, Wydale	York, Wydale	