

2019 16th November Diocesan Synod: Item 5, The Channel Islands

On 22nd January 2014, following the breakdown of the relationship between the Diocese of Winchester and the Deaneries of Guernsey and Jersey, the Archbishop of Canterbury announced that the Bishop of Dover would assume interim oversight of the Church of England in the Channel Islands. At the same time the Archbishop signalled that he would be appointing a Commission on the relationship of the Channel Islands to the wider Church of England. This did not start work until July 2018 and was chaired by Lord Chartres, the former Bishop of London. Their report was published on 9th October 2019. Their purpose was not to pass judgement on the unhappy sequence of events which precipitated the breakdown of relations but to focus on the possibility and shape of a future relationship conducive to the mutual flourishing of the Church in the Islands and the wider Church of England. The task now is to look forward, not back.

The 27 page report which also has 7 annexes, is available online. We have not circulated it in advance of this Synod but its publication was signalled to all Diocesan Synod members and given publicity widely across the Diocese. There are 7 recommendations, one of which is that the deaneries of Guernsey and Jersey should in future be attached to the Diocese of Salisbury.

The report considered a number of options but concluded that the ease of transport links with Salisbury, the fact that the diocese has two Suffragan Bishops, that Sarum College is a resource that is already used by the Channel Islands and our Diocesan Registry is also Winchester's Diocesan Registry and would therefore provide continuity as well as change all pointed to the new relationship being with Salisbury. Everyone is agreed that the Church in the Islands would be strengthened by such a relationship. This has my consent.

The Islands are very distinctive, with a strong ethos of self-determination having grown up partly through their unique history but also as a consequence of geography. De facto leadership of the church community has been exercised through the two Deans who have had quasi episcopal oversight and relate to independent legislatures in both islands. This distinctiveness needs to be set alongside changes in the Church of England which have resulted in greater regulation and accountability, particularly in relation to areas such as discipline, safeguarding, clergy terms of service and ministerial development. The Church in the Islands recognises that they are stronger within the framework of belonging to a Diocese. Christian life is better together.

Prior to the Reformation the Islands were part of the French diocese of Coutances, although Henry VII obtained a Papal Bull from Alexander VI in 1496 transferring them to Salisbury before a further Bull transferred them to Winchester. The report notes that there is considerable doubt about the authenticity of this later Papal Bull! Nevertheless, there is significant affection and gratitude for the relationship with Winchester which has now broken down and to which there is no return.

There was no episcopal visit of the Channel Islands for Confirmation from the Reformation until 1818. Then in July 1818, the 77 years old Bishop of Winchester being infirm, a visit for Confirmation was undertaken by the then 70 years old Bishop of Salisbury, John Fisher, who sailed from Weymouth with his family and confirmed 4000 in Jersey, 2400 on Guernsey and also visited Alderney and Sark. The intention was to ordain those who were adolescents and had been prepared for confirmation. However, the parents were so moved that they also wanted to be confirmed even though they had previously been admitted to Communion without episcopal confirmation. The trip took 5 weeks and the cost of travel was borne by the Navy, £125 9s 6d for HMS Tiber.

So, we have history and I was very moved to receive last week a copy of the new book by Jenny Head and Anne Johns about Channel Island woman who trained to teach in Salisbury between 1841 – 1978.

It is for the Archbishop of Canterbury to accept the recommendations of his Commission. However, I am not prepared to proceed without the support of the Diocese expressed through this Synod.

The Commission's report will be discussed in the Deanery Synods in Jersey and Guernsey later this month and at the beginning of December and by the Archbishops Council in early December. The proposal will then go to General Synod and the Island authorities for consideration and recommendation to the Privy Council. Should the proposals be approved, the earliest that the attachment to Salisbury could take formal effect would be the autumn of 2020. Until arrangements are finalised, Bishop Trevor Wilmot, the former Bishop of Dover, will continue interim episcopal oversight of the Islands.

The Commission report and recommendations has been warmly received. The Bishop of Winchester has been very gracious in welcoming the proposal for the Island deaneries to be given a fresh start with Salisbury. We are all committed to the flourishing of the Church in the Islands and think this offers an opportunity for the Church in the Islands to flourish.

If we welcome the report and commit to working with its recommendations the next task will be for the Diocesan Secretary and myself to work with the Deans of Jersey and Guernsey on a Memorandum of Understanding setting out the respective roles of Bishop and Dean, and between Diocese and their Deaneries. This will need to be relatively detailed so as to ensure that this new relationship will be cost neutral the Diocese of Salisbury. However, I expect the Channel Islands coming into the Diocese to be a significant gift to us and to them as we grow together in the way of Jesus Christ.

I warmly commend the Commission's Report and ask Synod to welcome it and to our commitment to work with its recommendations.