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BIBLE AVAILABILITY

The following is extracted from a General Synod briefing paper prepared by Tim Cox.

The motion put to Synod was:

That this Synod, believing in the importance of Scripture, desire that anyone entering a church building or attending a church service should have easy and unfettered access to one of the versions of the Bible ... and would request all dioceses to take steps to give effect to this desire in their churches.

Background

Whenever I am away from home, I try my hardest to attend at least one church in the area in which I am staying. Whilst the primary purpose of this is to enable me to worship God, I also welcome the opportunity to see if there are any positive things I can take away to help improve my own church and worship. I enjoy the variety of a broad spectrum of services and sometimes have visited 2 or 3 very different churches in the same weekend.

Although I invariably take a Bible with me – usually in an electronic form – all too often when I have visited churches, I have been dismayed to discover that they don't have any Bibles available in order for people to follow the passages and the sermon. Sometimes they have the passages printed in their noticesheet, sometimes they even have Bibles available – but have them locked away in a cupboard without the key being available.

The saddest thing about this is that whilst our churches fail to make available the Scriptures; Hotels, Prisons, Schools, Hospitals, and even offices can often be found to have a Gideon's Bible available for each and every visitor.

Making the Bible available

God must want his people to read his Word; throughout the course of time he has always spoken in their language. Through Old Testament authors, he spoke in Hebrew, the language his people understood best. In the New Testament, he spoke in Koine Greek, the trade language of the 1st century. Today he continues to speak to people in many languages.

As the gospel spread so the Bible was translated into other languages including Latin. Missionaries would often freely translate parts of the Scriptures into the language of the people they were seeking to win, this was true of the missionaries to the pagan Anglo-Saxon tribes. In later years the Church resisted the translation of the Bible, which became a major issue at the Reformation.

In 1536 King Henry VIII ordered Bibles to be placed in every church. This caused great excitement and crowds gathered to see it done. The decree was repeated in the time of Edward VI when all restrictions on the translation and publication of the Bible were also ended. Nearly 50 editions of the Bible, in whole or in part, appeared in the six years of Edward's reign.

The Importance of Scripture

The importance of the Word of God is clear in the Bible itself.

These were more noble than those in Thessalonica, in that they received the word with all readiness of mind, and searched the scriptures daily, whether those things were so.

-Acts 17: 11 (King James Version)

All scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work.

-2 Timothy 3:16-17 (Revised Standard Version)

You shall therefore lay up these words of mine in your heart and in your soul, and you shall bind them as a sign on your hand, and they shall be as frontlets between your eyes. You shall teach them to your children, talking of them when you are sitting in your house, and when you are walking by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise.

Deuteronomy 11:18-21 (English Standard Version)

The importance was also affirmed at the coronation of the Queen to whom the Archbishop presented a Bible saying:

'Our gracious Queen: to keep your Majesty ever mindful of the law and the Gospel of God as the Rule for the whole life and government of Christian Princes, we present you with this Book, the most valuable thing that this world affords.'

The sad reality

Despite the easy access to Bibles and its importance to Christians it is not always available in our churches.

A priest was asked to cover a service in another church; he was handed 7 books in order to lead the Eucharist: none of them were the Bible, and the only Bible easily accessible was the one he had brought.

A Priest-in-Charge of a new second church looked for a Bible in order to show a member of his new congregation the Christmas carol readings; no Bible was available in the entire church and the collection of Lectionary readings on the Lectern were unable to perform the desired function. Bibles had not been introduced partly on the grounds of cost, although the church possessed 3 complete sets of vestments, each set costing in the order of £600-£1000. Subsequently 40 Bibles were presented to the church by the priest's original church and have been extensively used since being made available.

One church, whose Parochial Church Council had previously provided Bibles, chose to remove them on the grounds that 'they were too difficult to dust'.

At a public service involving a local Council, no Bibles could be made available; instead the passages printed were an eclectic revision of a paraphrastic version of the Bible.

It was these, and other similar experiences, which motivated the motion.

Bible Engagement

"If God spare my life, ere many years I will cause a boy who drives the plough to know more of the scriptures than you do." - William Tyndale.

There has never before been a time when we have enjoyed such free access to God's Holy Scriptures. Bibles can now be obtained incredibly cheaply. Bulk packs of 20 Bibles (suitable for regular use in worship) can be easily bought and delivered – from a wide variety of places and irrespective of the version required – for between £5 and £10 per Bible. Many bulk packs are specifically discounted for use in Churches.

"Without the availability there can't be the engagement, and without the engagement, the Bible can't perform its transformative work. If there are no bibles available, then it implicitly gives out the message that we don't value the core texts of all the Christian Churches." -Revd Dr David Spriggs.

Through the Bible God speaks directly to every man, woman and child, but unless people have the

Bible in their heart language, they cannot read his message of life, hope and salvation. Thousands of languages still don't have a single verse of Scripture, although it is available in 2,426 languages. Of these, 429 have a complete Bible, another 1,144 have the New Testament, and 853 others have at least one book of the Bible. In addition to more than 1,900 active projects, translation work needs to begin in over 2,200 languages of which there are 196 million native speakers. Wycliffe Bible Translators are currently involved with about 1,415 languages (around 73% of all translation work currently being done).

Noticesheet & IT not enough

Printing the passage on the noticesheet is extremely helpful, allowing people to take the passage home with them; however, if this is done instead of having Bibles available, it prevents preachers from being able to direct congregations to other relevant texts, and from examining the preceding or following verses. By having the scriptures to hand, people are enabled to follow the passages, ensure the veracity of what is spoken, and read more of the context of a particular reading as well as following the preacher's points to related, contributory and background texts.

Large numbers of churches are still open at times other than for services and one in 20 are open permanently. Surely we should be working to try to touch the lives of people walking into a church building by giving the greatest gift we can – access to God's word.

Summary

The motion was passed by an overwhelming majority of synod members. It sets a marker regarding the importance of the scriptures, to promote the use of good translations, and to encourage churches to make Bibles easily available – both in their buildings and at their services.

Now it rests with Dioceses, Deaneries, Parishes and you the reader to do something about it.

“A church without bibles is a church without its foundations; you may as well go and build it on the sand like the foolish man.” -N E Waterworth

The full background paper and the audio of the debate, are available on the CofE website.
<http://www.cofe.anglican.org/news/gsf080212pm.html>

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