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REFORMING THE DIOCESE FROM WITHIN

By John Richardson

What can you do if you are a small group of evangelicals in a diocese where it seems that nothing organized by the institution ever reflects a sound theological agenda or is likely to feed the mass of God's people?

That was the question raised almost thirteen years ago at a committee meeting of the Chelmsford Diocesan Evangelical Association, following a diocesan conference for laypeople. By universal agreement it had been fantastically well-organized but lacked real 'substance'.

After listening to the discussion for several minutes, I was moved to ask, "Why don't we lay on something ourselves?" And that was how the Chelmsford Anglican Bible Conference was born.

During my time studying at Moore College in 1993, I had seen how important were the diocesan conferences at Katoomba. Not only were people brought together to hear good Bible teaching but they had an opportunity to mix with friends from other congregations.

Moreover, I was convinced that on principle we ought to let the Word of God do the work of God. If we really believed that God's Word had the power to change people and establish them in the faith, then by putting the teaching of the Bible at the heart of the diocese we would affect not only individuals but the diocese itself.

As is usually the case, the person who comes up with the idea is given the task of bringing it to fruition, so I soon found myself trying to organize something that had never been tried before. Administrative detail is not really my *forté*, so we were fortunate to have the early involvement of David Banting and the staff at St Peter's Harold Wood. From the outset, however, two principles were established.

The first was that speakers would be picked on the basis of being personally effective and biblically conservative. Contrary to an earlier suggestion, there would be no attempt at 'balance' regarding theology or churchmanship. Secondly, there would be a ten year 'sunset clause', after which we would consider whether to carry on.

Initially, the thought was to lay on a residential event similar to that run by the diocese. Very sensibly, however, one of those I approached for advice talked us round to just having a one-day conference.

The next thing was to consult around the diocese, and so a number of breakfast meetings were held to put the proposal to the evangelical constituency. Following a positive response, a larger organizing committee was then set up which deliberately included a representative spectrum of evangelicals.

Because this was to be a 'diocesan' conference, it was decided that the first one should take place at the Cathedral and should be opened by the diocesan bishop, the Rt Revd John Perry. After deciding on a speaker we were all set to go. The CDEA put up a loan to cover the initial costs and it was anticipated that ticket sales would cover the rest.

From there, it was downhill all the way — but not in a good sense!

To begin with, the cathedral was a very inconvenient venue and a lot of our initial budget had to be spent on staging and sound equipment. Then there was the problem of publicity. As we were not an 'official' event, we were not allowed to include leaflets in the diocesan mailing.

Despite all this, however, attendance was encouraging, with well over two hundred people present on the day. But as we began working on our second year, other problems arose. The organizing committee gradually began to shrink, and whatever the reason for this, we soon got to the stage where it consisted of myself, David Banting and Dick Farr.

Undoubtedly because of this, however, rumours began to reach us that the conference was being regarded as a 'Reform plot'. And certainly the attendees in subsequent years seemed to be coming from a narrow spectrum of churches rather than, as we had hoped, from across the diocese as a whole.

Even more discouragingly, numbers began to decline. We tried 'tweaking' the list of speakers, particularly to draw in those from the New Wine network, but after four years we were reaching merely double figures. In something like desperation, we decided to move back to the cathedral, but bookings for that year were so low that we cancelled that venue and shifted to Harold Wood.

At this point there was a serious danger that the whole project would be abandoned. Then a number of things happened.

First, we found a better venue, at the Central Baptist Church in Chelmsford. This had a fully-equipped auditorium, which allowed us to set up on Saturday morning and have everything ready by the time people began to arrive. 'Taking down' at the end of the day was equally straightforward. Immediately, the stress on the organizing committee and helpers was considerably reduced.

Then we got a gifted and committed administrator in the form of Carolan Casey. Carolan not only took care of the bookings process but had an eye for details, like providing name badges for attendees which also included the name of their church. She can also prepare bread pudding by the truck-load.

Gradually, the numbers began to pick up, the committee regained its confidence and our financial position strengthened. In 2010 we were able to invite Don Carson, who spoke on John's Gospel, and this year, in something of a *coup*, we had John Lennox speaking on Genesis. At one point we were actually putting people on a waiting list.

As we reached the end of our first ten years, therefore, it was clear that we had to carry on, and we have now recruited three younger ministers to the organizing committee (although we've lost Dick Farr to Rochester). In terms of the conference itself, therefore, we have definitely turned a corner. But have we succeeded in our aims?

From the outset, the conference was called the Chelmsford Anglican Bible Conference because it was aimed at Anglicans with the intention of changing the character of the Diocese of Chelmsford. My own view is that we have gone some way to achieving this, and by the grace of God we will do so even more.

First, we have established a core group of people who expect there to be an annual Bible conference in the diocese. Furthermore (and interestingly) over the past few years this group has become both younger and more 'male'.

Secondly, we have affirmed the principle of gathering together as members of the same diocese under the word of God.

Thirdly, we have demonstrated that it is possible for something good to be done on a diocesan basis, even if it has struggled to gain official recognition. However, even this is beginning to change! For several years we were quietly supported by David Hawkins, the Area Bishop of Barking. Then in 2010 we had a surprise visit from Bishop Stephen Cottrell who, even though he was not yet officially in post, turned up on the day to show his support.

Our hope is that we can go on building on this support and actually integrate the conference into the diocesan programme. Nevertheless, the choice of speakers will remain in the hands of the organizing committee. We have always taken a positive attitude to the diocese in offering the conference to them as a ‘service’. But quality-control remains paramount not only in terms of what we put on, but as something honouring to God himself.

The one real disappointment to me at the moment is that no other diocese has followed our example. We ourselves experienced many disappointments and encountered many pitfalls, but precisely because of this, we know what to do and what to avoid in order to run such conferences successfully.

So let me finish with a brief encouragement.

First and foremost, speakers must be chosen for the faithfulness to God’s Word. They need not all be conservative evangelicals, but they absolutely must be biblically conservative. Without this principle being established at the outset, there is simply no point in going any further.

Similarly, the organizing committee must consist of a trustworthy and carefully-selected group. Others may complain. If they do, they are free to set up a conference of their own.

Despite these *caveats*, however, it is important to present the project positively to the diocese as a whole. This is not about *competing* with the institution but about changing it. There are many people in our dioceses who rarely if ever hear sound Bible teaching. The aim must be to bring in as many of them as possible. Since this is about changing the denomination, however, the first emphasis must be on drawing in Anglicans. Other denominations are welcome, but Anglicans are the priority.

In addition to this prior understanding, you will need a good and central venue (though it doesn’t have to be an ‘Anglican’ building), some initial funds and a gifted administrator. Apart from that, you just need Bibles and someone to do the teaching.

When we launched the first CABC eleven years ago, I thought we would see growth year on year and achieve our goals within the first seven. Actually, it took much longer and was much harder than I anticipated. Yet if anyone asked me (and some have), “Should we bother in our diocese?” my answer would be, “Why do you even ask? If the thought has even occurred to you, this is no longer an option but a duty. God’s Word should be at the heart of every diocese. If no one else will do it, it is up to us to put it there.”

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