

**The Ely-Northelbian Link****by the Revd Dr John-David Yule**

Good afternoon. I've been asked to say a few words to you about the practicalities of a link between a Church of England Diocese and a Lutheran Landeskirche.

The Church of England diocese is the Diocese of Ely in what we sometimes call 'Mid-Anglia'. This is a largely rural diocese with the only large settlements being the university town of Cambridge and the southern suburbs of the city of Peterborough, which, of course, has its own diocese and its own cathedral just a few hundred metres to the north on the other bank of the River Nene or Nene.

The German Church is the Nordelbische Evangelisch-Lutherische Kirche (NEK), known to us in England as the Northelbian Church or the Church of the North Elbe. This church was formed a little over a quarter of a century ago by the amalgamation of the churches of Hamburg and Schleswig-Holstein and a couple of smaller churches (Eutin, Lübeck and the district of Harburg - taken in from Hannover) and itself looks set to be absorbed in the near future into a new Church of the North (die Nordkirche) together with the Mecklenburg and Pomeranian Churches. Especially on the western side of Northelbia, including the low-lying North Freisland Islands, the landscape is remarkably similar to that of the English Fenland, although Ely no longer has a working oil-field.

Like many international partnership and twinning arrangements, the Ely-North Elbe link grew out of a personal friendship, in this case that between Bishop Gordon Roe and Bishop Hans-Christian Knuth who were at the time the co-chairmen of the Meissen Commission. The link was very clearly rooted in the Meissen process and can be regarded as an exercise in exploring how some of the possibilities enabled by Meissen might be realised in practice on the ground.

The link came into being in the summer of 1991 and it so happens that my wife was invited to join the English (Ely-Northelbian) committee (as opposed to the German (Northelbian-Ely) committee) in the autumn of that year.

How does the link express itself in practice?

The link is a many-stranded rope. There is strength both in interdependence and in independence and diversity. As time has moved on, some strands have strengthened and developed while others have flourished briefly and then faded away. Much of this, of course, has been influenced by the comings and goings of individual people, and in particular, church leaders. The retirement and, soon after, the death of Gordon Roe represented a great loss, both to the diocese of Ely and to the link, but others have stepped into his place and there is great hope for pushing forward with future developments, particularly once the dust has settled on current reorganisation of responsibility for the link on the Northelbian side.

From the beginning, partnerships have been set up between individual parishes. Although these have sometimes been perhaps over dependent on the relationships that have been built up between individual ministers and pastors, some links have taken natural root in the parishes and continued even after changes of clerical leadership.

The Diocese of Ely has something of a problem in setting up formal inter-parish links in that many of our churches in our rural heartland are very small and find it difficult to sustain a sufficiently intense relationship with what is often a larger and more socially active Gemeinde in the partner church.

But inter-parish twinnings are by no means everything in an inter-church link.

At a diocesan level, an important element is mutual participation in significant events in the life of the churches. Involvement in special celebrations (such as the events marking the 900th anniversary of the Diocese of Ely last year), enthronements and retirements, and ordinations is a mark of the significance afforded to the link at the highest level. With all of these events and exchanges, there are, of course, certain continuing theological

constraints on what is possible. As, for instance, Anglicans in attendance at Lutheran ordinations are strictly instructed to keep their hands behind their backs at any sign of the laying on of hands.\*

Other expressions of the link have included “Shadowing and Sharing”, where, short of a making a formal inter-parish link, individual clergy from one parish have spent a few weeks shadowing a colleague in the other church, with the process then being reversed.

The Auslandsvikariat programme has seen North Elbian clergy in training spending up to a year embedded in a parish in the Diocese of Ely. This has been very positive in building good understanding and strong relationships. Though it has, again, sometimes highlighted some of the technical theological problems that the Meissen process has not yet succeeded in resolving.

The inability of Lutheran clergy to celebrate an Anglican eucharist has been the cause of much heart-searching and pain. And one Auslandsvikarin that I know was not even allowed to baptise during her stay in Cambridge.

Indeed, frustrations such as these at an inter-parish level led to an interesting and imaginative development: the setting up of a Local Ecumenical Partnership (LEP), somewhat extending the meaning of the word ‘Local’ because it involves the parishes of the Ely Team Ministry in England and those the Süd-Tondern Kirchenkreis in the coastal region south of the Danish border. This means that for the pastors of the designated churches, there is complete interchangeability of ministers and ministries.

The Ely-Northelbian link has also found expression in the area of Post-Ordination Training with group visits in first one then the other direction on a roughly annual basis. Established clergy have also visited the partner church for periods of sabbatical research and training.

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\*Bishop Knuth also has particularly fond memories of a visit he made to China in 1995 accompanied by Gordon Roe.

Some contacts are rather more one-off than continuing. Thus several representatives of the Diocese of Ely were invited to join the 'Erlassjahr 2000' motorcade as it travelled through Schleswig-Holstein from Flensburg to Hamburg and on to Cologne before the G8 Summit Meeting of 1999. If you ever wanted to see Church of England clergy doing street theatre in the middle of a major town or city, this was your opportunity.

The Diocese of Ely made a particular effort to support the Kirchentag in Hamburg in 1995, having a stall explaining the link in the Market of Possibilities. In turn the Northelbian Church invited representatives of all its partner churches to a pre-Kirchentag conference at Ratzeburg in 2003 and then to be their guests at the first Ecumenical Kirchentag in Berlin. Ely is already planning to support the Northelbian Church at the Hamburg Kirchentag 2013.

The world-wide partner churches of the Northelbian Church were also invited to participate in a Partner-Church Consultation on the future structures of the NEK in 2005. Fortunately this was conducted in the medium of the English language. A principal finding of the PKK was that the Northelbian Church perhaps needed to concentrate its efforts less on the business of changing its structures and more on the development of its spirituality.

Other visits and exchanges take place with a more specialist agenda, sometimes without the awareness of the respective link committees. There have been visits concerned to explore the Ministry of Healing, share about the local farming practices and patterns of rural ministry. Other exchanges have focussed on issues of spirituality.

There have been various youth exchanges. One Northelbian pastor regularly brings his confirmation candidates to the 'Rave in the Nave' which is held each July in the Cathedral at Ely. (This is a regularly over-subscribed, noisy, colourful and decidedly Christian event which is organised by Youth Officer of the Diocese of Ely.) The previous Children's Officer of the diocese also made several

visits to Northelbia demonstrating and teaching the techniques of Godly Play to children's specialists in the Northebian Church.

So much for the joys of the Ely-Northelbian Link. What about the challenges and the frustrations?

The biggest challenge is that of a not insignificant indifference to the whole process.

Some at least English church leaders ask, 'Why? What's the point of getting to know the followers of a different church tradition in an equally cold part of northern Europe? What has this got to do with our mission as Christians?'

For a generation which grew up in the shadow of the Second World War there was perhaps a particular reason why developing contacts and friendships with the churches of Germany might seem a good thing. But that generation is no longer at the cutting edge of theological or church-development thinking. Today, in a Church of England which sees itself as having woken up to a need for a renewed focus on mission, many ask the question 'What does partnership with a European church have to do with the mission-focus of my church?' And the honest truth is that we have yet to find an answer to the question, 'What does mission-shaped partnership look like?'

On the German side, too, a number of pastors greet the prospect of involvement in partnership with the Church of England with a measure of indifference or even hostility. One can speculate as to the reasons why. Some, I suspect, are suspicious of Anglicans as representing a crypto-Catholicism (and I remember being told early on in my acquaintance with the NEK that the only theological principal which unites the Northelbian Church is a strong determination that whatever it is that they are, they know that they are not Catholic).

Others are suspicious that Anglicans are far too Evangelikal - which means they are seen as employing an old-fashioned sin-and-redemption view of the Christian outlook rather than promoting in the first instance the Church's social agenda - what many in the English Church would call 'Kingdom values'. Though I am reminded that not a few Northelbian pastors decline to use language which speaks of God's kingdom (the Reich Gottes). I am reminded also that I have been told that 'Evangelikal' is almost a term of abuse in the Northelbian Church.

The issue of language also presents a considerable challenge to the greater development of English-German church links. When a Northelbian pastor visited my parishes a few years ago, he had no difficulty in preaching a memorable sermon in English unaided, whereas my contribution in return required a considerable joint effort of translation. This has been a considerable problem also for the Ely-Süd-Tondern LEP, where there are only four or five qualifying clergy on the English side as against over fifty in the Süd-Tondern Kirchenkreis, many of whom speak a competent English.

Funding is also a major challenge in this area, as indeed it is across the board in matters concerning the link. For all its current financial problems, the NEK is immensely better off than the English diocese and this makes it far easier to release clergy for long-term visits and fund exchanges in general. Indeed, the link has always depended disproportionately on the generous support of the German church. However, the straightening of the financial circumstances of the Northelbian Church have found its turning for help and advice to the English churches over matters of fundraising, the use of volunteers and unpaid ministry.

A simple practical and cultural difference between the two societies in which our churches live can be found in the rather more highly developed tradition of Gastfreundschaft in the German context. In purely practical terms, many more German homes seem to have a dedicated guest room or even guest suite than I guess is the case in England. Our English visitors can find

themselves somewhat embarrassed at this. Reciprocity in matters of hospitality is not always easy.

There are other areas of cultural and social difference. For instance, in the context of youth exchanges and contacts, there are areas of difficulty concerning health and safety and child protection. The standards of vetting required prior to substantial contact with children in the two countries are different. Taking the credentials of visiting youth workers and helpers on trust may be good ecumenism but of questionable legality.

There is just one last difference between our two churches that our links and exchanges haven't really yet found a way of transforming to advantage. The work of the Church of England is very largely concentrated on matters of faith and religion. The Northelbian Church by contrast has at its heart the "twin pillars" of pastoral work and Diakonie (Diakonisches Werke) - something akin to social work. The Northelbian Church is a big player in the provision of social services, often under contract to the state or federal government. By contrast, the Diocese of Ely employs only three or four part-time social workers. The question is how to make more of what is so large a part of the work of the Northelbian Church.

So, what of the future?

Well, there are challenges, certainly: there are challenges for the LEP over the amalgamation (Fusion) of the Süd-Tondern Kirchenkreis into a new and much larger unit; there are challenges over the current transfer of responsibility for European partnerships from the Kirchenamt in Kiel to the NMZ (the Nordelbisches Missionszentrum (für Weltmission und Kirchlichen Weltdienst)) in Othmarschen, Hamburg; there are changing faces and the retirement of old friends.

But there are always new friends to be made, new possibilities to be explored. And, I suppose there is always the challenge and opportunity before us - how to put mission at the centre of our plans and our partnership.

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