

SABBATICAL REPORT January to April 2010

Summary

This reflection is being written three weeks after my return to parish ministry. In the past few weeks there has been much to celebrate in the healthy life of the parish and in renewed strength and energy for parish ministry. Some lessons have been learned and are shaping my use of time; others have not yet found expression.

Organising the parish to enable me to get away was a much more complex and time-consuming process than I allowed for. This is partly because I was tired and not working particularly "smart" in the post-Christmas period, and partly because there were a number of routine tasks to be delegated.

The plan for my sabbatical was 6 weeks focussed on my PhD – aiming to write two chapters (20,000 words) , three weeks in Chicago visiting diverse churches working with interracial congregations and involved in community action, and ten days of "retreat".

I had looked forward to the solitude of a prolonged period of study. The reality was uncomfortable: I was confronted with myself! Not a surprise, but not especially pleasant, to discover how lost I felt once the diary was empty and the demands of parish and diocese were no longer present. It took time to adjust and this was not helped by the interruption of the Clergy Conference – which in retrospect could have taken place perfectly well without me! Once I was settled, I was able to build up a routine and I worked well. I enjoyed being immersed in my books, and the outcome has been a good one. It has also continued to give me confidence and has energised my continuing work.

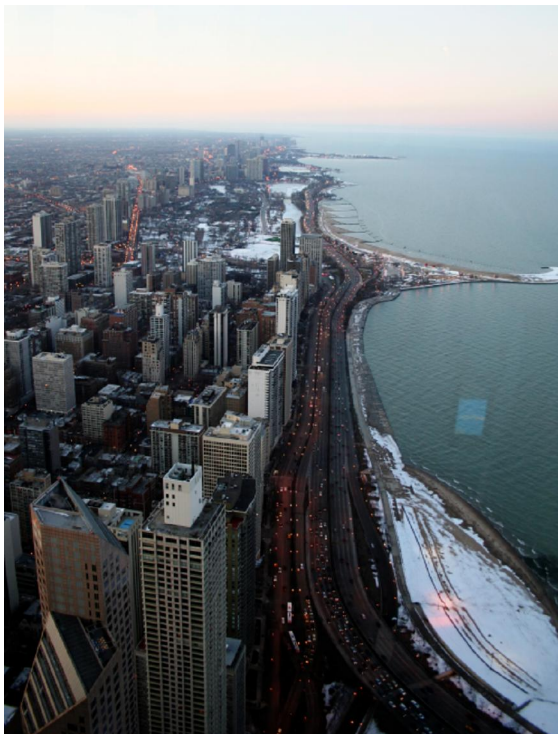
My trip to Chicago was an important part of the sabbatical mixture. It was a real adventure and very stimulating. There were benefits from visiting another culture, which enabled me to stand outside my own context, and to learn from good practice elsewhere. It has been very good to share some of the stories I heard in Chicago with my own parish, and I intend to keep doing this as the weeks continue. I also took photographs of everyone I met, so that I can show the congregation the faces of the storytellers. It was helpful to have a period of time on my return to process photographs and write a report for English Speaking Union (who gave me a grant), before Holy Week.

I spent Holy Week at Hilfield Friary, the "mother house" of the Franciscans. This was a far more significant visit than I expected both spiritually and emotionally. The friary played an important part in my vocational journey, I had been resident there in the vacations while training for ordination, had been involved in running retreats and missions over a period of ten years, but I had not visited for about eight years. I experienced a powerful re-connection with God's call and a freedom in prayer which was challenged to bring back into life in the parish.

The remainder of this report consists of an account of my visit to Chicago.

Chicago March 2010

Urban Stories



As the plane dipped below the clouds Lake Michigan came into view, a wide expanse of water punctuated by skipping white horses. The snow fringed beach gave way to the wide expressway encircling a palisade of glittering sky scrapers and beyond them street after street of urban low rise housing, parks and woodland, all laid out in the characteristic American grid pattern. We have arrived in Chicago.

Walking around the city centre on a bright winter morning, Chicago tells the story of its place among world cities: within a few blocks one can enjoy watching the skaters in Millenium Park, see the skyscrapers mirrored in an extraordinary sculpture by Anish Kapoor, stroll around the magnificent Art Museum, or visit a temple of commerce - Macy's department store, with its elegant Tiffany glass mosaic ceiling. Like most world cities, Chicago

tells more than one story. On every side street people rattle empty coffee cups, or sit dejectedly holding cardboard signs reading "help the homeless" or "hungry veteran, please help". Travelling on the elevated "L" train many journeys were interrupted by shuffling figures soliciting money for "a Sunday School trip" or to "assist a Mission" whose bare ankles and badly photocopied leaflets betrayed a need closer to hand.

My intention, in visiting Chicago, was to hear the narratives of the city and to reflect on them in the light of my own experience in a multi-cultural city in Britain. I live in Leicester, which is predicted to be the first city in Britain with a white minority. Chicago is already a city in which white people are in a minority (41%) and where African-Americans (36%) and people of Hispanic/Latino origin (26%) make up significant proportions of the population.¹

Paul Ricoeur, a French theologian who lived and taught in Chicago for many years, described human identity having a narrative quality: we not only describe who we are in the stories we tell, but shape our lives by absorbing stories from the surrounding culture. Sometimes we make choices about the stories we assimilate, but this is not always the case. In Chicago, one could not help but be aware of the role of power and money in the dominant narratives. I was grateful during my stay to have the opportunity to take a class at SCUPE (The Seminary Consortium for Urban Pastoral Education) taught by community activist and theologian Dr James A. Perkinson, which sharpened my political awareness and helped to crystallise my thinking during my visit.

¹ United States Census 2,000, the figures add up to more than 100% because they include those of dual heritage.

As I heard the stories of churches and individuals who have engaged with the issues of race, homelessness and hunger in Chicago, I became increasingly aware of the larger narrative in which these stories were located. My visit sharpened my awareness of the context in which I live and work. I became more aware of the role of the welfare state in the life of my community; of the way in which we educate our children as citizens of a multi-cultural, multi-faith Britain, and of my own ignorance of black theology, history and culture. I was inspired by stories of transformation, self-reliance and of compassion, and I heard stories of painful growth and easeful death.

Homelessness

During the period of my visit, the American Congress was debating Barak Obama's health proposals. This highlighted for me the contrast between the American narrative of independence and self-sufficiency, and our experience of the Welfare State as a collective enterprise. The structure of many lives in my parish is shaped by access to council housing, welfare benefits and a wide ranging health service so that very few fall through the net of public provision. In Chicago, where there the state guarantees neither housing nor health care, it was the issue of homelessness which struck me most forcibly.



A survey by the University of Chicago in 2006 suggested there may be as many as 20,000 people homeless in the city of 2.8 million.² Pacific Garden Mission is the largest homeless facility in the mid-West, providing accommodation for up to 700 people a night. To understand the context one needs to remember that Chicago operates a "no tolerance" policy so that homeless people may be arrested for vagrancy if they sleep, beg or drink on the streets of the city. If this happens, Pacific Garden Mission may well be the first port of call. Here men and women receive three meals a day and a bed for the night, before compulsory attendance at the gospel service in the morning. The Mission was founded in 1877 to "warn those who are idle,

encourage the timid, help the weak, be patient with everyone."³ and the neon sign proclaiming "Jesus Saves" still hangs over the doors. The Mission is entirely funded by donations and exemplifies the American "can do" attitude towards the provision of service, and the transformation of clients. A small proportion of those who live in the Mission participate in a year long Bible Study Programme incorporating education and counselling.

² <http://www.chicagohomeless.org/files/images/Homelessestimate2006.doc>

www.thechicagoalliance.org/.../2007_Homeless_Count_Summary_Report.pdf - accessed 20th March 2010.

³ 1 Thessalonians 5:14 (NIV)

Neighbourhoods

Chicago itself has a strong narrative identity, as a city built by pioneers, whose success has depended on the strength of the “working man” (in the steelyards, the cattle yards and on the railways) and the progress of technology (in the rise of the skyscraper and the growth of the city as a hub for commerce). Repeated waves of migration have created Irish, Polish, Ukrainian, Swedish, German and Chinese neighbourhoods, as well as more recent African American and Hispanic areas, and now “Boystown” which identifies itself as a gay and lesbian community area. The North Side is predominantly white neighbourhoods, the West – Hispanic and the South, African American. I stayed on the South Side for the first part of my visit and was not infrequently the only white person on the “L” train. The positive aspect of the neighbourhood pattern is that it gives people identity, community loyalty and a clearly defined culture. At its best, it means that the names of local heroes and heroines are commemorated in schools, housing projects and health centres, and depending where you live you might attend a high school named for Ignatius Loyola, Jose Fernandez, or Martin Luther King.



The Media Centre associated with the Lawndale church, home of the “hip hop” church

The “Hip Hop church” led by Phil Jackson, illustrates the positive appropriation of local culture: hip hop is about being “real, relevant and respectful”, and Phil’s purpose to be the best possible church reaching out to teens and young people in the hip hop culture.⁴ Similarly, Fr. Juan Reed told the story of building up his church so that it might more fully reflect the predominantly African American community around it.

However, the paradigm of neighbourhoods also leads to segregation. This was revealed in a brief conversation with a man in his forties, from a Polish catholic family living on the North Side. Despite growing up in Chicago in the 1960’s, the first time he ever met a black person was in high school, in his youth he never went south of 41st street, and even as an adult for many years never went south of 47th.

⁴ www.thahouse.org

In parallel, on the South Side, an elderly African American told how he had earned enough to buy his first home and was searching for a house in the Woodlawn Area (between 60th and 67th) in the 1950's. Despite the fact that Chicago "lifted its covenants" in 1948, when a ruling from the Supreme Court declared segregated housing areas illegal, it was still common to see notices saying "no blacks" alongside "For Sale" or "For Rent" signs. Such stories are also common among Afro-Caribbean members of my own church, but we now live in a community where it is not uncommon to have neighbours from several different cultures living in the same street.



Story tellers at First Presbyterian Church, Woodlawn

A visit to First Presbyterian Church, now situated in Woodlawn, offered a wonderful opportunity to hear a series of stories about a changing neighbourhood, the church's involvement with the community and the rise of the civil rights movement. During the 1960's this church worked alongside the notorious "Blackstone rangers" gang to attempt to defuse violence in the area and to offer positive opportunities for young people. The experiment ended very badly; with the arrest of some key players for fraud (the project was responsible for spending considerable sums in government grants). As they spoke to me, those who had been members and leaders of the church remembered the period in very different ways, some were captured by the possibilities opened up by a radical minister and others spoke more circumspectly and sadly of the impact of events on the church community. I was moved by the voices of those who had stayed, lived through change, and who were living through change again.

Communities and Narratives

Strong narratives help to give churches and communities an identity. I was aware of many occasions on which a clear narrative was driving church growth, for example, at All Saints Episcopal church, several people told me similar stories of the “re-birth” of the church before I heard the story from the Rector herself – and saw their phoenix logo. At Lakeview Lutheran, the identity of the church was tied to a series of narratives about hospitality and this was helping the church to welcome a new constituency of gay and lesbian people. As I visited a number of community projects I repeatedly heard the narrative of history and of community organizing, from men and women influenced by Saul Alinsky⁵ and Howard Thurman.⁶ The people of Woodlawn helped me to consider the problem of conflicting narratives and the ownership of those narratives, but we also considered the power of the shared story to hold a community in the past.



Volunteers in the food pantry at Breakthrough Christian Ministries

The predominant Christian story in the churches I visited was the story of “justice” which was being lived out in acts of service to the poor. There were homeless projects in the basements of churches, food pantries providing food in neighbourhoods where you would otherwise travel six miles to the nearest supermarket and where “it is easier to buy drugs on the streets than a fresh lettuce”, and many churches offering meals to the hungry. I was impressed by the preparedness of people to donate large amounts of money and volunteer considerable time and skill to these projects. This was the positive face of self-reliance, placing responsibility on individuals to act generously in the service of the poor.

⁵ The founder of Community Organising and author of *Rules for Radicals* who worked in the Woodlawn area prior to the 1960s.

⁶ The black church leader and writer who led the first multi-racial and multi-cultural church in America in the 1940s.

Church

Just as shelters, food pantries, and other programmes serving the community were set up as independent initiatives, so churches displayed a proud independence – even those which nominally belonged to historic denominations. This led to a more congregational approach than one would find in English Anglican churches (though we are not immune from it) and, once again, repeated narratives of self-sufficiency. As every church had to find the resources for its own ministry, I encountered relatively few small churches in the older denominations: while I visited a number of larger churches “serving the poor” I encountered few churches “of the poor”.

Even First Presbyterian, with its significant history of social engagement, was facing change in this respect. Established in 1833 and on its present site since 1926, the building is enormous: the sanctuary (the US term for the worship area) would seat at least 800, though the church has an average congregation of 40-50. It survives because the church has endowments, receives income from property in the area, and because at least some of the congregation have significant means.

Meanwhile, over the road, the Apostolic Church of God, an independent African American church, has grown from a “store front” church to a membership of 14,000. The enormous parking lots surrounding the church testify to the “gathered” nature of this congregation, and the website to its principle mission “to glorify God”.⁷ This church has grown as First Presbyterian has diminished, over the last thirty years.

There is hope, as the gentrification of the area is bringing in new young families (as indeed the newly appointed 30 yr old pastor will do) but the incomers put up house prices and change the nature of the area. The congregation must face the possibility that their church will become part of the “Hyde Park” university community (this most integrated of neighbourhoods and former home of President Obama is satirised by the phrase “black and white united against the poor” which I heard on more than one occasion). The economic needs of their existing neighbours are complex and contested, as Wal-Mart are seeking the opportunity to build a store in the area and the local community are torn between the need for jobs and the company’s reputation for exploiting workers.

Conclusion

My visit to Chicago heightened my appreciation of the role of story telling in the lives of churches and communities, while making me more critically aware of situations in which stories conflict, or where voices are unheard. I saw the value of culturally distinct communities and churches, while recognising the problems they create. I was particularly aware of the choices available to those who have economic freedom and the powerlessness of those who do not. English and American churches share the challenge of hearing and telling stories in diverse cultures and I greatly appreciated hearing new stories and recognising old ones.

⁷ http://www.acog-chicago.org/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=112&Itemid=141