

Three Dioceses: A Companion Journey

Bishop Nigel reflects on his recent visits to Iowa and Swaziland. This article appeared recently in the Diocese of Iowa Newsletter.

They say that a companion is one who shows another where bread may be found. Reflecting on my autumn 2012 visits to our Companion Dioceses of Iowa and Swaziland I can say for sure that I was nourished. I certainly enjoyed new places, appreciating the warmth of the hospitality and I learned so much. I am still thinking about the people I met, the stories I listened to and those moments that challenged me.

The images of Sioux Mission, Davenport Cathedral and Anamosa State Penitentiary, of the Mpaka pre-school children, the Usuthu congregation and Ellinah's Consecration celebration, weave a colourful tapestry. However I find it difficult to summarise or come to conclusions and perhaps as Companions 'on the way' the most important thing is to keep the conversation going and the journey moving.

So thank you, Iowans, for welcoming Anne and me into your fascinating diocese and The Episcopal Church. Engaging theologically and socially with the clergy, attending the Diocesan Convention and my installation as a Canon of Des Moines were privileges indeed. Alan and Donna were kind hosts and you have are blessed with a bishop who engages with the opportunities and challenges of your diocese in a measured manner which is impressive to an episcopal visitor from Scotland.

As I said when with you, I believe that in some ways the Brechin – Iowa link has been 'sleeping' a bit. Thankfully it is awakening through Alan and myself spending time together, through Provost Jeremy's earlier visit to the Iowa clergy summer school and my exposure to so many folk through visits across the diocese. Fresh possibilities will emerge from these recent encounters. It would be great for example if we could get some exchanges of young people and clergy going again. We are looking forward to welcoming the Celtic Pilgrimage led by Barbara Schlachter to Brechin in July this year.

Because of our similarities and contrasts I believe that Iowa, Swaziland and Brechin dioceses are well matched. Each punches above its weight in the Province. Archbishop Thabo poignantly described Bishop Ellinah's ground-breaking election as 'little Swaziland's great gift to the whole of Africa'. We

navigate our way in political, economic and social conditions that do not privilege the Church.

Back here Brechin Diocese, even as a minority Christian voice, we are determined to grow a progressive Scottish Episcopal Church which engages with a wider audience and public issues of the day. We earn our place at the table, through our integrity, our arguments and our stickability to the tasks that need doing.

Because of self-evident need in recent years both my diocese and yours have tried to support people and projects in Swaziland and there has been a lot of coming and going of prayers, people, projects and money. Swaziland's political environment, economic injustices, poverty and ill-health are challenging context for such a beautiful country and eager people. We need to redouble our efforts to support Bishop Ellinah's fresh vision and strategy for her diocese.

In Brechin we view the radical disparity of Church resources between Africa and the USA with a mixture of concern and envy. Yet as Companion Dioceses our true wealth is in our prayers and the tears and smiles of our faith and personal relationships that money cannot buy.

As Christians, shaped in an episcopal tradition and Anglican history, our commitment to presence, outreach and communion bind us together. A balanced approach is important. We need to be truly local rather than narrowly congregational, effectively regional rather than denominational. Whilst it is important that we engage robustly and imaginatively with contemporary issues, we should also remember that each diocese is a member of the Church catholic, not a simply a pressure group.

Our dioceses have shared a companion journey for many years. Iowa and Brechin since 1982, Swaziland with Brechin and Iowa since 1989. We are family and so endure through changes of bishops and other personnel and periods of more or less inter-diocesan activity. In October 2013 I hope to welcome Bishop Ellinah and Bishop Alan to a Companion Celebration to be held here in Dundee, Scotland. The occasion will encompass worship, a synod and visits in the Diocese of Brechin. It will be another step along the way. Until then *'slan go foil'* as we say in Gaelic. Farewell until we meet again.

+Nigel

