

## Where Now for the Church of England?

Cindy Kent

Marking the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity, Anglican deacon, Cindy Kent, writes of her personal experience of the Church of England, and why it gives her hope.

'In God's economy, nothing is wasted'. I'm not sure who I first heard use that phrase – for I usually do like to credit the person I'm plagiarising – but the more I think about it, the truer it is!

Looking at the situation the Church of England is in at the moment; seemingly being torn apart by differences of opinion about the role of women; the debates about homosexuality; the question of authority, I look at my opening phrase and realise how spot on it is.

Looking back over the years the Church has been 'rent asunder' by all sort of problems, and yet it's still here. In pre-Reformation times, people like me wouldn't have been able to read the Bible for myself, and I would have had to rely on the interpretation of scholars. Of people who had steeped themselves in the language and culture of the time and who would have been experts in that knowledge. They would know what a particular phrase, or piece of counsel meant. They would have known exactly whom the writing was for and why it was necessary. They would also explain how I could have applied it to my situation.

Nowadays, when you can get Bible passages online – from all sorts of weird and wonderful organisations, complete with their exegesis – things are different. Almost everyone, it seems, has his or her 'take' on what this or that passage meant. And everyone, it seems, is a Bible scholar! It's part of our eclectic society. We all know a little about something, but not a lot about anything.



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And so we have the different factions in the arguments that are convinced that *their* interpretation is the right one. And they say it with such conviction, and such force, that they are believed and followed. But, as the Archbishop of Canterbury said, "We recognise one another in one fellowship when we see one another 'standing under' the word of Scripture. Because of this recognition, we are able to consult and reflect *together* (my italics) on the interpretation of Scripture and to learn in that process. Understanding the Bible is not a private process or

something to be undertaken in isolation by one part of the family. Radical change in the way we read cannot be determined by one group or tradition alone." I believe we must continue to be 'a family' in the way we make decisions.

### *Family get-togethers*

We've just celebrated the wonderful feast of Christmas, which is my favourite time of year, when God broke into our world. I wonder how many of us had to endure the family get-together over the season? Was there a grumpy old uncle who did his best to spoil the day by complaining about everything not being as it was in his day? Was there the young teenager who didn't want to eat turkey because she thought it wasn't trendy, and only wanted to eat quorn?

And, without wishing to trivialise what's going on in the C of E at the moment, that's the situation we're in.

In most cases the grumpy uncle will have stayed the day out – and will return again next year. The young girl will have stayed too. The sad thing would be if they had left. There would have been a ‘stand off’ and the family split into those for and against. But I imagine in most cases everyone found ways of compromise. (Incidentally, I just ran that word through the Thesaurus and came up with give and take, cooperation and finding the middle ground.) I don’t feel we’ve done nearly enough of any of those things. There’s been too much of the ‘it’s my bat and ball and I’m taking it home to play with’.

### *Learning from the abolition of the slave trade*

In a brilliant lecture in Westminster Abbey last year, the Dean of Kings College, Richard Burridge, talked about the ending of the slave trade. It was only achieved, he said, when all parties got around the table and *listened and talked* to each other. When a slave and a slave owner met face to face and saw each other. As Martin Luther King’s dream said, ‘I have a dream that one day the sons of former slaves, and the sons of former slave owners will one day sit down together at the table of brotherhood’. And we have achieved that dream of his. And it was achieved by them meeting together. If only those on both sides of the arguments about women and homosexuality would get together and really listen to each other. Listen with open ears and look without blinkers and fight really hard against prejudice and pride.

### *I’ve joined this Church!*

I was made a Deacon as part of a huge Service of Ordination in June, in St Paul’s Cathedral. There

were 44 of us! The largest one yet. (The Church *is* alive and well...!) The Bishop of London said it warmed his heart to see so many people offering their lives in service to God. I’m just about getting used to wearing my dog-collar, and it’s interesting to see the different reactions from people – both those I know and strangers. I’ve had many warnings from well-intentioned friends not to wear my dog-collar when I’m out and about because I might get attacked by someone with a grudge against God or the Church. I’ve ignored them! On the contrary, I’ve found nothing but warmth and occasional humour, so far.

I believe I’ve joined a Church that is very much alive and kicking. It’s been here before with its various problems, in one way or another, and it will weather this storm.

My opening phrase is true. Everything that has happened to the Church over the centuries is shaping it into what it is now. We’ve learned so much and all the disagreements and schisms of the past have brought us to where we are now.

Bearing in mind that nothing is wasted, my hope and prayer is that we will build on what we’ve learned in the past, be prepared to take off our collective blinkers, and wake up and smell the communion wine!

*Cindy Kent has worked in religious broadcasting for over 30 years, after eleven years as the lead singer of The Settlers. She is training for the priesthood in the Church of England and was ordained deacon last year.*