

## **Editorial Matters**

In September 2002 it was clear that, with only a year to go, the vision for the first National Evangelical Anglican Congress (NEAC) in fifteen years still had not captured everyone's imagination. The *Anvil* editorial board wanted to support the initiative although many of the concerns which were to become public in the next year (the initial decision not to invite Rowan Williams, the breadth of speakers etc.) were already being voiced. The NEAC organisers faced a constant barrage of pressure and criticism: the whole concept was flawed, it was the wrong time, it was an impossible enterprise in the current climate, they were really pushing their own agenda (usually seen as a conservative one although of course others saw it differently). After four packed days in Blackpool I, and thousands of others, are grateful that Wallace Benn, Paul Gardner, Chris Green, Richard Bewes and many others persevered with their vision of gathering us again as evangelical Anglicans to worship, to talk together and to listen to God and to one another.

It is, of course, much too early to measure the impact and learn all the lessons of those few days. If nothing else, the great variety of seminars and forums and the importance of personal conversations made every person's NEAC experience unique. Nevertheless, given the significance of the gathering and the common themes I've heard from others as they reflected on what happened it seemed the best focus as I struggled to write my first editorial.

## **What defines us ? Bible, Cross & Mission**

One of the early struggles in planning NEAC was to determine its focus. The original aim of many, faced with the diversity of Evangelicalism, was to go 'back to basics' with a focus on the Bible and the Cross. Although it was never the intention to lose sight of our call to share the gospel in word and deed, some feared that this would happen with only this twin focus and that there would be too much introversion. In agreeing to add 'Mission' as a third strand, the Church of England Evangelical Council (CEEC) transformed the Blackpool gathering. There was a proper sense of the centrality of the cross and Christ's atoning death and on the supreme authority of Scripture – areas we perhaps do not always articulate as explicitly and fully as we should. But there was also a focus on our needy world and how the church is to respond and live out the gospel in obedience to God's Word. Although some would

wish 'Church' to be a more explicit focus, this triple focus has great potential as the centre to draw together all Evangelicals. It also, as the Archbishop of Canterbury's opening greeting demonstrated, provides significant common ground for dialogue and work with non-evangelical Anglicans.

It was, of course, quite clear that filling out these three key words would be like passing a ray of light through a prism. Some of the many colours that result were evident in the various NEAC presentations and this was one of NEAC's strengths. On the Bible, for example, although the language of 'inerrancy' was rarely used, the presentations by Graham Cray and David Peterson showed significant differences in emphases and tightness of definition. One weakness, however, for some was the lack of variety in patterns of teaching and applying Scripture during the Congress. If as Evangelicals we are seriously committed to Scripture then we must be committed to preaching Scripture. Here perhaps is an area in which the foundations laid at Blackpool can be built on in the future so that the differing strengths of, for example, the Proclamation Trust and the New Wine Network can be shared more widely.

On mission, there were mumblings after the first few days about the lack of any real engagement from the main stage with such vital issues as economic justice, AIDS, international relations. The impression some were getting was that only one of the different evangelical perspectives on mission presented in the last *Anvil* – that focussed on proclamation and personal salvation - was being presented. Chris Wright's excellent talk and passionate biblical defence of holistic mission and the final day's plea for mission to young people and our urban centres were among the later presentations that redressed that potential imbalance. What was most encouraging and challenging was a sense that, even with differences in understanding and focus, there was a real commitment to take the gospel out to a society which has lost its way and needs to hear and see God's good news. Again that needs to be built on with more practical sharing of initiatives from across the evangelical world.

### **Who are we ? Sociological and Theological Identity**

'Is there anyone else apart from me here under 30?' someone asked me after the first day. Clearly the Congress was aimed at church leaders and that must be taken into consideration but the sociological profile was rather disturbing. Jonny Baker, at the cutting edge of mission and ministry among young people, came to do a forum on 'Releasing the passion of youth'. With only a handful of people attending this, it was

what he called ‘the most depressing day of my year so far!!!!’. His web page continues with the following frightening comment

Being evangelical is about...a tribe and I don't belong to it and have absolutely no desire to belong to it...I was hunting around for pictures to represent the tribe I saw... and this was the best I could do - The evangelical tribe is conservative old men in suits - no disrespect to old people intended - I love them - but one look at the speakers in the programme given platform told you loads. I'm 38 and I was evidently a youth!

Given the vibrancy of groups like Soul Survivor, it is a shame that a National Congress could appear so sociologically unrepresentative and dominated by white, middle-class, middle-age and older males. How to avoid repetition of that impression is a crucial question for future evangelical gatherings.

At the start there was also much comment about the lack of women – especially younger women, ordained women and women leaders on the main stage or officiating at communion. That remains an important issue but one of the many positive developments that arose from those four days together was the creation of a network to provide support for ordained evangelical women – both permanent deacons and priests ([www.weac.org.uk](http://www.weac.org.uk)). The acknowledgment from the main stage on the final day that this was the first NEAC since the ordination of women and that although Evangelicals still had different views on this we needed to trust, love and support one another was a major breakthrough that few would have predicted even a few days beforehand.

There are, of course, also major questions about who we are theologically. Whether they are the more fluid ‘watercourses’ as in Graham Kings’s analysis in the last edition of *Anvil* or the more solidly demarcated ‘tribes’ that others speak about, it is clear that the diversity of Evangelicalism that began to be noticed at NEAC2 in Nottingham and became obvious at NEAC3 has not gone away. What was wonderful about NEAC4 was that these different groupings seemed to listen to each other. That wasn’t easy at times. Everyone likes to hear what they are used to hearing. Less conservative friends spoke of ‘peeling people off the ceiling’ after some of the input while one leading conservative was heard to say after a couple of days that it was an indictment on theology in the Church of England that by far the best teaching had come from two Australians ! Both, of course, were Sydney Australians.

Some were upset that this NEAC issued no statement. But that was partly because many thought it would be too difficult a task to frame anything but a bland statement without alienating a significant proportion of those present. All that was issued was a letter from the Steering Committee to the ‘suffering church’ in North America, with many unhappy that this part of the world gained so much attention and others were shown no similar sign of our solidarity with them in their distress. Although nothing was agreed, what happened in Blackpool was that people began to talk and listen to each other a little across some of the barriers that have appeared in recent decades. Many would have liked to have gone further and perhaps the organisers were too cautious here but the significance of that ‘small step’ should not be lost.

For some the fear that unity amidst our diversity was unattainable was increased due to misunderstandings surrounding the informal launch at NEAC of Fulcrum ([www.fulcrum-anglican.org.uk](http://www.fulcrum-anglican.org.uk)). This group was the fruit of nearly a year’s discussions between a number of people. We were concerned that many evangelical Anglicans felt neither represented nor resourced by existing groups and networks. There is clearly a need for innovative patterns of mission in our changing church and society. Wider church debates also require significant theological contributions by Evangelicals. Furthermore, under a new Archbishop, there is increasing media interest in Evangelicalism as the Church of England and Anglican Communion appear to be entering difficult times. In response to these challenges, Fulcrum’s stated aim is to ‘renew the evangelical centre’ – both the centre of Evangelicalism and the evangelical centre of Anglicanism. Although welcomed by many, for others its exact identity and role remains unclear. Concerns were understandably expressed that it could become simply another party or faction in the increasing Balkanisation of evangelical Anglican witness. If, however, it is genuinely ‘open’ and not simply ‘anti-conservative’ then it has great potential to fulfil its stated aims and strengthen committed evangelical witness in church and nation.

### **Where are we going? Local and National Renewal**

It is clear that many left Blackpool with a fresh vision and commitment to upholding and teaching the Bible, taking up their cross and following the crucified and risen Christ as he leads us in mission to England and all nations. How we do that together is perhaps the \$64,000 question! It is clear that any evangelical unity cannot be

uniformity. That is wrong theologically - unity is always the unity of a diverse body – and impossible given the variety so obvious at Blackpool. The challenge is, therefore, to build on NEAC4 and also draw in those who were not present. This needs to happen at both a local and a national level.

Locally, within Oxford diocese the crisis provoked in relation to the Bishop of Reading brought together Evangelicals (and non-Evangelicals) from across the different groupings. We are determined that this must now be built on in order to work together in mission, share our different strengths, hear the critiques of our fellow-Evangelicals and bring a constructive voice and witness within the wider church. There is a recognition that this cannot mean the imposition of any one particular way of doing things, whether conservative or charismatic or open. There is an honesty that some will do things that others will not be able to join and which may even make them feel uncomfortable. Most dioceses have Diocesan Evangelical Fellowships or Unions. A renewal of these (though in some cases that may feel more like death and resurrection!) offers the best way to take forward the vision of NEAC4 at a practical, grass-roots level of fellowship and united witness.

Nationally, the work of Eclectics and ICE is important but the focus will remain on the role and pattern of leadership that can be provided by CEEC. Anyone who has had anything to do with the CEEC in recent decades knows that this represents a real challenge. That it can do great work is not in question: the Saint Andrew's Day Statement (1995), for example, remains a classic contribution to the ongoing homosexuality debate. The effort that went into NEAC4 was monumental. That it is in need of some sort of institutional reform is also, however, not in question. How many *Anvil* readers, even after NEAC, know who is on CEEC, what CEEC does, or how their voice is heard on this body that has the best claim to represent Evangelicals within the Church of England?

For the few people really interested in it, the structure of the Council and its representative nature has been a major area of dispute in recent years. Certainly one of the difficulties in planning NEAC and in shaping CEEC's response to the appointment of Rowan Williams was that influence (some would say 'undue pressure') had to be brought on CEEC from outside its membership in the form of theological college principals, bishops, Alpha leaders and others. This undoubtedly increased tensions and damaged relationships. Ways therefore need to be found for such debates to take place *within* a more fully representative CEEC.

There are hopeful signs that reforms are taking place with, for example, the proper constitutional appointment of representatives from theological colleges and the incorporation of a representative from the New Wine Network on the NEAC Steering Committee. But major challenges still remain. When, this year, the CEEC elected six members to increase the expertise and representative nature of the body there was little fresh blood as those on CEEC largely re-elected their former colleagues who had lost their places as elected representatives for other constituencies. There is, here, the real risk of a self-perpetuating oligarchy. For many, the sociological composition of NEAC and the limited presence of ordained women was not unconnected to the make-up of CEEC.

Creative thinking is desperately needed if the great successes of Blackpool are not to be overcome by institutional inertia and the reappearance of some of the weaknesses that we now have the opportunity to overcome. For example, unless we can be sure that the Anglican Evangelical Assemblies (AEAs) will become at least as representative as NEAC4 in their composition, then their role in electing CEEC's main officers must be reviewed. Otherwise, accusations – whether well-founded or not – of CEEC being taken over by well-organised activists with a particular agenda will remain. It is also now rather bizarre that one of only two evangelical groupings with a seat by right on the CEEC is the declining Church Society whose leadership includes people who have left the Church of England. The charismatic element of Evangelicalism has been better integrated into CEEC through New Wine but the inclusion of the HTB/Alpha networks – long sought by many on CEEC – would strengthen us further as we move on from NEAC4. In short, a fresh recognition of the diversity of contexts and networks in which Anglican Evangelicalism is now embodied and at work is vital if CEEC is to be able to offer leadership and direction after Blackpool's Congress.

### **The Evangelical Future**

The prospects post-NEAC are much brighter for Evangelicals in the Church of England than many feared. There is undoubtedly a need to meet again and much sooner than 2018 or even 2013. Perhaps even a date before the next Lambeth Conference (set for 2008) would be good, although the work required would be immense. That, in part, is why rethinking CEEC's structures to enable it to fulfil its role better is so vital. There is also a need to continue dismantling some of the walls

that remain between us and to undermine further the caricatures we have of each other. If CEEC could now facilitate deeper and more honest dialogue and debate between different groups – as it did in the 1970s between charismatics and conservatives – that would be a further fruit of NEAC4.

But above all, NEAC4 refocused our identity and energies away from identifying ourselves over and against each other. There will hopefully be less tendency to speak of ‘so-called’ evangelicals and an end to internecine warfare between groups. We were drawn back to the Bible, the cross of Christ, and the mission of God. The real test for evangelical Anglicans at every level – as Christian disciples, church leaders, in our respective networks, in CEEC – is whether we can keep our focus there and re-direct our imagination and effort away from engaging only with each other or the wider church. Such engagement must only ever be a means to securing the end of sharing the holistic biblical gospel better with our society and providing meaning and direction for the millions of lost souls within it.

### **In this issue**

This issue’s four articles, quite unintentionally, connect to other matters raised at or by NEAC. Showing how much work Evangelicals still need to do in building good relationships with the media, much press focus at NEAC was on homosexuality and Rowan Williams. Our opening article is an excellent example of introducing and then critical engaging with our new Archbishop’s past writing in this area. The Limuru Statement from the summer 2003 meeting of the Evangelical Fellowship of the Anglican Communion sets thinking about mission in a proper global context. This is then given focus with Nick Jones’s article on Northern Nigeria. For many, one of the sadnesses of NEAC was the lack of time and freedom given to Archbishop Josiah Fearon and others from the Global South. With much media attention on Nigerian Anglicans, this article provides helpful background from recent personal experience of the Nigerian church. Finally, and aptly given recent conflicts among Anglicans, Colin Patterson follows his biblical study of conflict in the last issue with a more hands-on study of conflict in the Church of England.

**Andrew Goddard**