



## Bishop David Walker reflects on empirical theology

*Bishop David Walker reflects on empirical theology when Leslie J Francis was installed as an Honorary Distinguished Canon of Manchester Cathedral at evensong on Sunday, 29 January 2017. Bishop David Walker drew attention to the key contribution made by the St Mary's Centre to the field of empirical theology.*

There is something quite marvellous in the way that chunk of the New Testament written by or attributed to St Paul, and which begins with the theological magnum opus of the Epistle to Rome, ends with a letter to an individual about what should be done regarding a particular escaped slave who has since become a Christian. We might be tempted to see it as a descent from the sublime to the ridiculous. Paul, who has begun by contemplating the great eternal truths of God in Jesus Christ is now, as a self-confessed old man and prisoner, reduced to pleading to be allowed to hold on to his new found friend. Let me suggest then, a very different view; that the letter to Philemon is Paul at his best. Indeed, that it shows us where the author's true strength, and the strength of most Christian theology, lies in that it is built from a response to a real life situation. Paul reflects on the context of his developing relationship with Onesimus, and from that he is able to contribute wisdom about the relationships that bind Christians into one body, and advice as to how this should voluntary supersede property rights over a slave.

Once we've seen Paul doing it in this very brief and specific epistle, we can see how the same is happening in much better known passages. He has seen evidence of how the church in Corinth is fracturing over the differences in social class that affect its Eucharistic practice, and over differences between the more intellectual and more emotional dimensions of worship that create disorder and disunity at its gatherings. Out of those very specific situations we get the institution narrative essential to just about every Eucharist since, and the passage on faith, hope and love which remains the foundation stone for Christian virtue in every age and place.

In much of his writing Paul is responding to problems he has seen or about which someone has written to him. It's fair to say that if the Early Church had not been so prone to get things wrong, the New Testament would be both much shorter and much poorer. You and I learn from the reflections of Paul, and others, on their many mistakes.

Paul, of course, does not start in a vacuum. He is exceptionally well read and rooted in the Jewish scriptures and the rabbinic tradition. He can call on his experience as a Pharisee *par excellence*. And he shows his capacity to observe and engage with the philosophical and religious traditions of both Athens and Rome. Paul brings together the particular data of his situation with this vast intellectual hinterland and literature, and from that are born some of the most enduring theological writings of all time.

Some of us call that dialogue between data and evidence by the name of Empirical Theology, and so it has been highly appropriate that the Church of England lectionary should offer us the letter to Philemon which exemplifies it, on the night when we admit The Revd Professor Leslie Francis, one of its foremost exponents, to a distinguished canonry in Manchester Cathedral. For longer than he or I care to remember, he has encouraged lay and ordained Christians to investigate the contexts of their places of ministry, to apply the best academic resources to that study, and to produce writings that allow those practitioners to be better vicars, schoolteachers, readers and bishops, to contribute to the corpus of knowledge, and to disseminate their findings for the practical benefit of church and society.

Earlier this week, Leslie Francis and I spent two days together in Coventry. Along with us were around thirty men and women, each of them engaged in some programme of study based on that methodology. We discussed the challenges faced by vicars who have multiple churches in their care. We looked at how an Adventist pastor might conduct a survey to explore the contrasting pastoral expectations of two congregations whose majority memberships were drawn from different continents. We explored the subject of the spiritual pain experienced in the context of a hospice, and how a chaplain might respond. We helped a member think about a project to explore whether and how it might be possible to ordain someone with learning disabilities. We looked at the link between ethos and spirituality in schools. And we launched a book about the experiences of young people being educated for life in religiously diverse societies.

A couple of years ago the Church of England produced a report called, "From Anecdote to Evidence", together with the detailed research findings that lie behind it. Because the report is based on evidence, it has been possible to have a proper argument with it, and to commission follow-up research that can test whether particular findings are robust, and what might lie behind them. It's a huge step forward for a Church that all too readily falls back upon the vicar's bright idea, or what some other vicar claims has worked in another parish, or what the bishop was told would work thirty years ago. Yet, I suspect in part because it is in the nature of evidence that it can be challenged, we are still far too often as a church making our decisions and planning our mission and ministry in a largely evidence free world.

For centuries, natural philosophers who studied the movements of the planets founded their understanding on the basis that as a circle was the most perfect shape God had designed, then planetary orbits must be circular. As observational techniques became better, and the lack of simple circularity grew more obvious, they produced ever more complex systems of wheels within wheels,

on which the courses of the heavenly bodies must be described. When prior belief comes face to face with evidence, it is the evidence that is more likely to be discarded or ignored than the preconception.

The work of Professor Francis, and those who work alongside him in academic institutions and churches across the world, has been to show that evidence is not our enemy but our friend. It is only our enemy when we would rather hold on to a fond falsehood than embrace the truth. Under his supervision, my own research is grounded in statistical analysis and the testing of hypotheses. Its purpose though is not simply to satisfy academic curiosity but, as with the work of my research colleagues, to inform the church, so that it can do mission better. When we understand the beliefs, attitudes, motivations and differences of the people around us, we are far more fitted to engage with them and serve them than when we constrain them within some preconception of how we would have them be – which is often as a pale imitation of ourselves. St Paul took a very different course of action. Far from trying to make Gentile Christians into a reflection of his own, strongly Jewish rooted, faith in Jesus, he set out to understand their backgrounds and to build a church shaped for them. There are large groups within our society that we are not reaching effectively with the Gospel at present. I am absolutely convinced that the route to more effective engagement does not lie in just shouting the same messages louder and more stridently, but in understanding and tailoring the way we phrase the Good News, to put it into the best format and language, incarnation even, that we can.

For as long as I've been a Church of England clergyman, the church has been concerned about the pressure of the demands made of its ordained ministers, and the negative effects that can ensue. When I arrived as Bishop of Manchester, I was cheered to discover that a survey of clergy wellbeing had just been carried out, under the leadership of the archdeacons. Each year since then we have repeated the survey, and each year we have sought to extract one or two key findings from the results, and to dig deeper into them in order to help clergy thrive better. Professor Francis has assisted us this year in the analysis of the data. By his wisdom we will understand better and do better.

In the early 1830s, whilst Frederick Engels was studying the urban working classes of Manchester from a desk less than a hundred yards from here, other citizens of this first truly industrial city were beginning also to reflect on the experiences and challenges of a mechanised age. Medical men formed the Ancoats Dispensary, where the numbers and types of injuries and ailments suffered by the working poor were first given attention. And leaders of different walks of life banded together to found the Manchester Statistical Society. Its third ever president, who served exactly 180 years ago, was the Revd Edward Stanley. Three other clerics were to follow him down the succeeding years, including a Roman Catholic bishop. The Society continues to meet monthly through the winter season, and our home venue is the Cathedral Visitor Centre. Manchester's attention to evidence plays a vital part in its ongoing success as a city.

So it is a great pleasure that we are able to welcome Professor Leslie Francis as an honorary distinguished canon of this cathedral foundation. His appointment reaffirms that this city and this diocese take evidence seriously. And in that we remain faithful to the path set out in our scriptures.