

Bishop Graeme Knowles writes...

So, how did I come to be made Acting Diocesan Bishop? The answer is simple. I foolishly answered the telephone at 6.30pm on a Saturday evening! As I headed to the phone I said to my wife "It will be the bishop wanting me to do something". It was.

As the Bishop of Dunwich, Bishop Mike Harrison had recently been made Bishop of Exeter, our diocese, the county of Suffolk, would have no resident working bishop at the moment Bishop Martin Seeley retired after ten years in Suffolk. Someone had to fill the role. As I live in Bury St Edmunds it would seem that I was an obvious choice. It was, in effect, a done deal!

At midnight on Friday 28 February Bishop Martin Seeley retired as Bishop of St Edmundsbury and Ipswich after ten years in office. At one minute past midnight I became the Acting Diocesan Bishop of St Edmundsbury and Ipswich.

My ministry has taken me from Broadstairs in Kent to Leeds; from Leeds to Portsmouth; from Portsmouth to Carlisle; then to the Isle of Man and lastly to St Paul's Cathedral in London. I have been a parish priest, an archdeacon, a cathedral dean and a bishop. I have also been the CEO of a substantial charity supporting the clergy of the British Isles.

Following the retirement of Bishop Martin at the end of February this year, I became Acting Diocesan Bishop of St Edmundsbury and Ipswich. This is probably the first time that the bishop has been resident in Bury St Edmunds rather than in Ipswich!

At 73 I am learning to be a commuter rather late on in life as I travel to Ipswich to my office.

My task as Acting Diocesan Bishop is to guide the Anglican Church in Suffolk through the period during which a new permanent bishop is chosen. This process has already begun, involving people from our own diocese and those from the national Church. Working with a person specification and a job description crafted here in the diocese, they will at the end of April interview shortlisted candidates and I will be in post as an interim bishop for up to a year, likely less.

So, what does a bishop actually do?

The service used when a woman or man is made a bishop cites various themes that should be visible in the life of a bishop. They are to have a special care for the poor, the outcast and those who are in need. They are to proclaim the gospel boldly, confront injustice and work for righteousness and peace in the world. They are to be shepherds of Christ's flock. They are to be guardians of the faith of the apostles. They are to administer the sacraments and lead the people in mission. Above all they are to be a focus of unity within the Church as a whole.

At this point you might be tempted to throw up your hands and say that this is totally unrealistic and an impossible job. I would probably agree with you - but for one thing. The work of a bishop is not to be a one person gang.

Bishop Tim Stevens, formerly Bishop of Leicester now living in Bury St Edmunds too, has kindly agreed to assist me during this interim period. Bishop Tim knows Suffolk well, having been Bishop of Dunwich from 1995-1999. And going forward the new permanent Bishop will be supported by a strong team too.

The bishop is first and foremost an enabler, inspiring Christians to live up to their calling. The bishop is to call out the gifts and skills from congregations which can be used to deliver an amazing vision. But I want to go back to the notion that the bishop must be a focus of unity.

The world in which we live seems to become more and more fragmented. Division seems to be the order of the day. The Church is not an innocent party. Our divisions threaten our unity. It is therefore right and proper that in the person of a bishop we should seek and find the expression of unity. It will be no easy task in these challenging times. So we must look forward to receiving our new permanent bishop, looking to them to lead to become the community of faith and love that we are called to be in this world.

Bishop Graeme Knowles is the interim Bishop of St Edmundsbury and Ipswich following the retirement of Bishop Martin Seeley. A permanent Bishop is expected to be appointed later this year.