

Reflection -

What the Tories could learn from St Mellitus - Charles Moore writes in The Daily Telegraph about the college founded by Bishop Chartres and Archbishop Welby



Just as the season of Advent began last week, I found myself in a large church in Earl's Court. (I was there to give a speech about Baroness Thatcher and God – two strong characters whose relationship interests me.) The church is dedicated to St Jude, the patron saint of lost causes. Sometimes people put the Church of England in that sad category over which St Jude presides.

But although the Earl's Court church is still called St Jude's, what goes on inside it has the name of a different saint. It is called St Mellitus College – Mellitus being the first bishop of London – and it is heaving with youthful activity. What is happening there is the very opposite of a lost cause. It may be the future of the Church of England.

St Mellitus College was formed in 2007 by Mellitus's latest successor, Richard Chartres – the man who preached at the marriage of Prince William and Kate Middleton and at the funeral of Margaret Thatcher. His diocese and that of Chelmsford got together with the famous evangelical church of Holy Trinity Brompton, which nurtured the Alpha Course and the new Archbishop of Canterbury, Justin Welby. They formed the

first wholly non-residential theological college.

The idea – which, like most “new” things, is actually extremely old – is to train would-be priests in theology while at the same time making them work in parish churches. The study is academically rigorous – Hebrew, Greek and all that – but always

balanced by ministering to actual people. It is the godly version of learning clinical medicine scientifically while also treating patients.

It is also new in combining the Anglo-Catholic wing of the

Church of England with the evangelical Protestant wing. Two groups which had traditionally been at war had come to see that their differences were mostly trivial. They realised they were united in what they like to call “a generous orthodoxy”. Indeed, at St Mellitus, they aren't distinct groups at all any more. You will find them attending services which are “charismatic” and involve waving your arms in the air, and others which are liturgically Catholic, with what used to be called “bells and smells” (incense).

From my university days in the Seventies, I remember Anglo-Catholics as rather camp and evangelicals as rather hearty, socially uniform and anti-intellectual. Talking to

From my university days in the Seventies, I remember Anglo-Catholics as rather camp and evangelicals as rather hearty, socially uniform and anti-intellectual.

today's students, who are multi-ethnic, multinational and no longer male-dominated, I observed none of these characteristics. They were friendly, humorous and full of keen questions, seeking straight answers. Some of them, struggling into the church with an enormous Christmas tree, stopped to join that sort of conversation.

The most obvious success of St Mellitus is in terms of numbers. At present, there are only about 1,200 people training to be clergy in the whole Church of England, divided between 25 theological colleges and regional courses. Of this number, 142 are currently being trained at St Mellitus, and its figures are rising fast. Nine students entered in its first year, 70 last year. The college also has a new campus in the North-West, established by Justin Welby when he was Dean of Liverpool.

In the next 10 years, 40 per cent of the current serving Anglican clergy will retire. So, to keep the present levels, new ordinations across the C of E need to rise by more than 10 per cent a year. At St Mellitus last year, they rose by 30 per cent. This is starkly against the long-term broader trend, in which vocations have been dropping for 50 years.

Why this success? Partly, it is a simple matter of commitment. One of the difficulties for the liberal wing of the Church of England is that it has a natural tendency to weaken itself: if you are highly sceptical about traditional religious formulations, you are much less likely to devote yourself to a clerical career. At St Mellitus, the students feel no such postmodern angst. They have an unironical approach to their life and work.

It is rather touching, on their website, to see these sane, pleasant young people talking about things like "bringing God's grace to the people of Woking" (no suggestion – I hasten to add – that Woking is strikingly more sinful than anywhere else). They do not speak in a cloyingly born-again way, but in a matter-of-fact one. They are businesslike, almost as if they were helping improve delivery systems for Sainsbury's or Tesco. They want to get on with the job.

There is something else one notices, about getting the right relationship between the present and the past. Being firmly based in mainstream, Biblical Christianity, St Mellitus College owes nothing, in one sense, to modernity. Like all orthodox Christians, it teaches that the life, death and resurrection of Jesus 2,000 years ago are all that is needful.

On the other hand, it is a curse of many traditional churches that they mistake their mere customs for the truth and start quarrelling about secondary matters, losing touch with the world as it is. When Jesus argues

with the Pharisees, he criticises them for not being able to read the "signs of the times". It feels as if St Mellitus College does read those signs – the desire for unadorned, unfussy speech; a readiness in electronic communication; a classless openness to all. The idea is to understand the way we live now in order to communicate how we can hope to live for ever. The creed has modernised without damaging its essence.

In secular terms, this is what the Conservatives are constantly trying to do, and constantly bungling. They should study the example of St Mellitus, and apply it to the wicked world of politics.

In the next 10 years, 40 per cent of the current serving Anglican clergy will retire. So, to keep the present levels, new ordinations across the C of E need to rise by more than 10 per cent a year. At St Mellitus last year, they rose by 30 per cent.

