



Wyoming Link Visit June 2019

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Purpose of the visit

In the last year the collaboration between Leicester and Wyoming has been focussed on developing Fresh Expressions of Church. A group of Wyoming Pioneer Scouts visited Leicester in 2018 to learn from the pioneering experience in Leicester. Out of this growing relationship we have an increasing awareness of other areas of shared experience that can provide mutual learning and support.

I spent three weeks travelling extensively around the Diocese of Wyoming guided by Rev Bobbe Fitzhugh to become more familiar with the context, to deepen relationships, to develop ideas for future collaboration and begin to flesh out a future programme that takes into account respective diocesan priorities.



Wyoming Context

The geography of Wyoming is dominated by the Rocky Mountains in the west and upland plains across the rest of the state. Agriculture is mainly centred on cattle ranching and with rich natural resources industry is focussed around oil, gas and coal mining. Tourism plays an important part in the economy with Yellowstone and the Grand Teton National Parks on the western border of the state.



Wyoming is predominantly rural with small, dispersed communities along with the larger settlements of Cheyenne the state capital, Laramie dominated by the University of Wyoming and Casper. In the centre of the state is the Wind River Reservation; home to members of the Shoshonie and Arapaho Indian tribes. Wyoming has low levels of ethnic diversity where 90% of residents are white and 66% identify as practicing Christians.



Revenues from the fuel industry means that the state is well-funded resulting in low taxation which along with its beautiful scenery makes Wyoming an attractive place for wealthy people to settle. Social issues present around social isolation for those living in small communities leading to mental health issues and high levels of suicide.

Poverty among those on low incomes such as those servicing the tourist economy can mean that a number of people find it challenging to provide for their basic needs.

The Episcopal Church exists alongside other Christian denominations and the Mormon Church.

The Episcopal Diocese of Wyoming

There are 46 Episcopal churches throughout the state, the cathedral is located in Laramie, the diocesan offices in Casper and the diocesan retreat house, Thomas the Apostle Centre, near the northern city of Cody. 20% of churches have full-time stipendiary clergy, 41% have non-stipendiary clergy and the rest rely on supply priests to provide sacramental ministry. Senior Wardens hold responsibility for the day-to-day running of their churches.



Worship is largely liturgical and Eucharistic which provides a valued and unifying identity for Episcopalians. Churches vary in size from several hundred members to those serving small rural communities with congregations in single figures. Church architecture is hugely varied with traditional log-built churches, stone buildings that reflect European heritage and more modern designs. These buildings are generally well equipped with kitchens and large social spaces. Smaller congregations face the challenge of meeting the cost of maintaining their historic buildings.



A number of churches are experiencing dwindling numbers of worshippers in an increasingly secularised culture. Bishop John has spearheaded the development of pioneer ministry and Fresh Expressions to share faith with those alienated from mainstream church. This initiative is being supported by the appointment of the Reverend Bobbe Fitzhugh as Missioner for Fresh Expressions of Faith and funding to support the development of pioneering projects.

The Episcopal Church's is well respected within communities for its impressive record in social action. Each of the 21 churches I visited is engaged in serving its community (even one with a membership of 2!) these projects included:

- Food banks
- Thrift shops
- Holiday hunger projects
- Diaper and period poverty provision
- Suicide prevention
- Youth and children's work
- Social gatherings for older people and the widowed
- Community prayer spaces
- Soup kitchens
- Community events
- Hospitality and rescue services for travellers in need.



The context of the diocese means that few churches are able to support a stipendiary priest. Vocations are discerned locally and ordinands receive training that is largely context based through the Iona School; a distance-learning package supported by the Seminary of the South West and delivered over 10 weekends a year at the diocesan centre in Casper. This programme has generated over 50 vocations to ordination and is now being used to train lay leaders as well. The Iona programme is cost-effective and provides high-quality theological training; the residential elements create strong collegial relationships that go on to support priests in their future ministry.



Areas for future collaboration

Fresh Expressions of Faith—provide the opportunities for this to be a mutual learning experience.

Social action—every church in Wyoming is doing something to serve their community even very small rural churches which could be huge encouragement for rural churches in Leicester.

Leadership—as we each develop new patterns of shared leadership we can explore questions around how spiritual leadership is exercised and by who?

Vocation and training—both diocese have moved to context-based training and are discerning how to develop vocations to lay and ordained ministry.

Rural ministry—enabling the flourishing of small churches in rural communities is highly relevant in Wyoming and Leicester and could be a rich seam of collaboration.

Discipleship—in both diocese we are recognising the importance of effective discipleship within mainstream churches and FXC to grow faith and to inspire mission and loving service to the world.

Next steps

A visit of Wyoming Pioneer to Leicester in 2020 to link with a national conference and establish opportunities for mutual learning and support between Leicester and Wyoming Pioneers.

Arrange a visit to Wyoming later in 2020 or spring 2021 which could focus on rural ministry, social action or around vocation and discipleship.

Inter-cultural experience for curates in 2020.