Presidential address Nov 2026

Starting as I did in ministry at the youngest age you can, you may be unsurprised to hear that the letters to Timothy were especially helpful to me in working out healthy relationships in the church as I got started.

You will be familiar with 1 Tim 4:12 – *"Don't let anyone look down on you because you are young but set an example for the believers in speech, in conduct, in love, in faith and in purity… devote yourself to the public reading of scripture, to preaching and to teaching. Do not neglect your gift, which was given you through prophecy when the body of elders laid their hands on you."* I have returned to that passage time and again and particularly in working with dozens of young ordinands and curates as they have cut their teeth and worn the dog collar for the first time. This remains one of my chief delights to encourage young clergy and lay leaders to take their first steps in public ministry. We are blessed by many of these in our contexts across the diocese, you may have names and faces in mind as I speak and I know at a recent confirmation where tears flowed in the spirit in abundance some were receiving a clear call from God to his service even in that very moment. Alleluia. You will know that it is my prayer and hopeful aspiration that we will see many more young people join in our leadership pipelines in the coming years.

There were also more challenging passages of that same letter to navigate in those early days. Not least when I found myself at college shortly after the vote for women to be ordained priest had been passed at General Synod and some of my colleagues were still very openly wrestling with what this meant for them in the light of 1 Timothy 2. This was my own personal wrestle too having been discipled in a strong tradition of understanding the bible as the word of God and literally finding myself wondering whether I had got this right as I sat in in Wycliffe Hall Chapel when a visiting preacher came to speak on 1 Tim 2:9-10 and I was sitting immediately in front of him at the time, hair braided for neatness for the purposes of cycling around oxford and wearing the pearl earrings bought by my mum for my 21st birthday the year before.

This, however, was also the place where I learned the value of strong and enduring Christian friendship. A few of them female though there were not many of us training there then, but mostly male. In all of the difficult and complex times of wrestle around what this vocation I had sensed clearly coming from God meant, those male tutors, peers and lecturers and after that training incumbent, colleagues and even curate, all demonstrated to me that healthy encouraging supportive relationships between men and women, are a gift from God to be carefully curated, celebrated and nurtured.

So why have I chosen to share these things with you this morning? Well, because we have a message to the world through our relationships. As we think more about what it means to be those who are reconciled to God with each other for the world, we have

identified that safe and healthy relationships are key to the flourishing of all. It is not because of anything I have especially discovered as a 'problem' here, but that we have recognised even before the high profile and horrific cases on our news this week, that our relationships are key to the flourishing of everything in our common life.

And I do want to say a few things about this especially in view of what has been in our news this week. I will say them as sensitively as I know how because I also know that in any group of people of this size, there will be those who have experienced things that they never should have and that I know that this may have been as especially challenging week for you as a result. If that is you and you need some care and support, please speak to someone you trust in the break and know that you are not alone.

So to the ugly and horrifying realities shown through the conviction of Russell Brand and the serious and disturbing allegations against David Walliams. Now, neither may have especially been on your radar, nor may their types of entertainment been to your taste, but both have been household names now for several decades. Yes, that celebrity status does of course have a part to play in enabling their behaviours, but it all starts with our relationships and how we treat one another. And none of us is immune from getting this wrong. Much as it was a very different context from our own today, this is where I sought wisdom in those early twenties days, in gatherings of the British legion down the pub after remembrance, in PCC meetings with people 2 and 3 times my age and even with my close male colleague (who was a real gift having been ordained as long as I had been alive and started ministry as a curate at the same age as I did) (I still affectionately call him boss by the way and still sign off my messages, the curate.)

'Do not rebuke an older man harshly but exhort him as if he were your father. Treat younger men as brothers, older women as mothers and younger women as sisters with absolute purity.' Now, I do realise that for some, connotations of family are not always helpful, but the point is well made. There is an honouring here between men and women that is fundamental in the church and that can set an example for those of us who are followers of the lord Jesus in the places he calls us to serve.

Much has been made of the treatment of interns in the entertainment industry through these high-profile cases. Clearly, all the work we have been doing on safeguarding is relevant here. Setting good healthy culture means that it is much less likely that things can go wrong, but even where we are not in charge of what the culture looks like, the way we relate especially as men and women is an important consideration.

One of the aspects which I have emphasised as we have been thinking about our strategy and especially our work around children and young people, is the distinctive place and role that the church has in offering healthy intergenerational relationships. This is one of the true gifts of the church to wider society. To have church 'aunties and uncles' as some cultures refer to them is a beautiful thing. Many people have not known

a nurturing biological family and so this can be a challenging thing to introduce people to, in our churches, some will expect to be treated badly, be gossiped about, experience mistrust or disloyalty but Jesus says let it not be so with you…

One of the things I have not mentioned in relation to Brand is his baptism into the Christian faith in which he was photographed together with some high-profile Christians in the River Thames in 2024 after which Brand set himself up as a kind of spiritual guru writing books such as 'How to become a Christian in seven days.' This was a disturbing episode in which there will be those among us who even at the time, perceived a need for a quiet deep discipleship journey rather than public profiling of a seemingly newfound faith. To be clear and having been to HMP Rye Hill (a prison exclusively for those serving sentences for sexual offences) several times in the past year and a half, I have no doubt of the transforming power of God to change the lives of those who have committed the worst of the worst offences but for restoration to happen, the wrongs of the past must been addressed and most importantly of all, the impact on victims and survivors must be answered. This is something we take incredibly seriously here in Coventry diocese.

Tomorrow marks safeguarding Sunday resources have been shared on our website and you will be aware that this has been encouraged for all for some years now. As you gather tomorrow, wherever you are, please do spend a moment praying for the victims in these high profile cases and also for those in our communities who have suffered similarly. Most will never come forward but some will, and it is our prayer that we are a diocese in which those who need help and support will find it so that they can discover the restorative and healing love of Christ available to each one of us.

So what am I asking of us… well that as those who seek to be reconciled to God with each other for the world, we step into this moment. That we recognise what is happening around us. This is a moment to enable the voices of those who have suffered to be heard, and it is also a moment to ensure that we keep our eyes wide open and notice what is going on around us to prevent similar things happening again. We can never exclude the possibility that they will, but we can receive the mandate for change. To think would I want my daughter, sister, mother to be spoken of like that. To see whether the humour in the office is just banter or something worse and to have the courage to name it. To challenge the pervasive and permissive attitudes where men speak in derogatory ways of women and sometimes, women of men. I would also want to name the prevalence of the use of pornography which is not what bishops usually talk about but this matters as it is destroying lives: see https://nakedtruthproject.com/ whose facts page details the negative impact of porn:

One porn site boasted 54 billion visits in 2021, an average of 148 million per day.

That’s equivalent to the populations of Canada, Australia, Poland, and the Netherlands combined, every day.

As we seek to become those who are intent on growing the C of E in Coventry and Warwickshire reconciled to God, with each other, for the world may we honour him not only with our lips but also with our lives in living out safe and healthy relationship that all may flourish to the glory of God, today and for all our days to come.