

Pastoral Care and Counselling

Canon Leslie Virgo is a unique priest - but with his background it's no surprise.

Link initially went to interview him about his work as Diocesan Adviser on Pastoral Care and Counselling - but we discovered that he had a wider agenda for the interview.....

Meeting Canon Leslie Virgo - Diocesan Adviser on Pastoral Care and Counselling - can be disconcerting.

The sound of classical music seems to come from every room in the Rectory (Canon Virgo is also Rector of Chelsfield) and conversation with this quietly spoken, grey-bearded man takes sudden turns which end up with the interviewer in the Master Mind chair!

The man....

Brought up as a Baptist, his maternal grandparents founded the evangelical free church Bermondsey Gospel Mission.

On his father's side is a wealth of Celtic mysticism including a great-grandmother who is a witch in the Forest of Dean, a grandfather who was rescued in a blizzard by a talking donkey and an aunt who is a medium!

Joining the navy in wartime he 'broke away from God and the Baptist Church', then returned to be a Deacon in that church. Teaching from Jesuits followed, then home-coming to the Anglican church. Drawn into training by Bishop John Hughes, then Canon Missioner, he was ordained in 1958.

Leslie Virgo had a long training in analysis, including at the Tavistock and Langham Clinics and worked for ten years as a therapist and chaplain to a mental hospital.

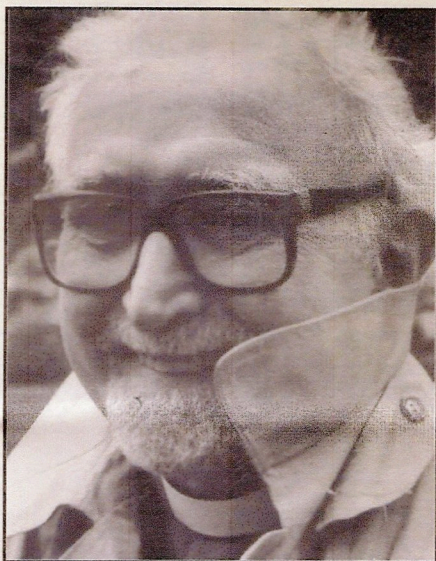
...his ministry

Part of the early structure of Counselling in Britain, he is a founder member of the Association for Pastoral Care and Counselling and one of the founders of the British Association for Counselling. Some 18 years ago he accepted the invitation of Bishop David Say to come to this diocese as Diocesan Adviser and Rector of Chelsfield.

His principle concern is enabling personal growth and development, and training others to do this. That involves him in facilitating organisations, training and supervision in the Church and the community.

A senior lecturer and examiner for London University, he runs an extra mural diploma course on Pastoral Studies at the Chelsfield Pastoral Centre.

On his arrival in the diocese he founded the West Kent Association for Pastoral Care & Counselling which has helped to establish counselling centres throughout the area.



The association holds regular training days and provides resource services.

Leslie Virgo is also heavily committed as therapist and counsellor to a great variety of people, including clergy and their families - who are by no means immune to stress and dis-stress.

While working at the mental hospital he pioneered a therapeutic response to alcoholism. This work continues today with people who are addicted and with their families.

"I am privileged to be with people in bed-rock experiences in their lives" he said.

On suffering

"We are held between Blessing and Curse, Creation and Chaos. The Cross expresses the tension between the opposites and is a symbol of that necessary suffering. We cannot know life without suffering; the Cross is the symbol of suffering contained in the Being and Love of God. We are required to 'share His suffering'.

"Pastoral care and counselling fails where it concentrates on individuals and ignores the society and structures that contain them.

He said "The Church also fails by not presenting to the world the starving and dying people's of the world as her first concern.

"It is as though the Church walks by on the other side - pre-occupied with internal matters of Synodical moment - making marginal situations that are worse than Auschwitz and Belsen.

"Pastoral care is care for the neighbour - the oppressed and starving are our neighbours.

Leslie Virgo believes that "The church and every Christian ought, before all else:

- * Pray and act for the disadvantaged - while they are sick, we cannot be well.
- * Work to get governments, particularly our own, to cancel third world debts that mean we get more in interest from them, than they get in aid from us.

"Why do we get violently reactive to abortion, yet seem to ignore the third world babies that starve to death in the womb?" - a typical Virgo question.

The Law

Basic to Leslie's theology and teaching is understanding the Summary of the Law.

"Acceptance and love of the self is necessary to properly love the neighbour" he said "and if the neighbour is not loved, God cannot be. It is also not possible to deny that which is not known. Self-knowledge comes before the ability to 'take up...deny...follow'" he said.

The London University Extra-Mural Pastoral Studies Course provides a foundation for care and counselling. It is open to anyone, particularly those engaged in pastoral work in churches or health care.

It is also part of the Open University Diploma in Religious Studies. The course involves 24 2-hour meetings, on Tuesday evenings at Chelsfield.

Applications and further enquiries to Canon Leslie Virgo, The Rectory, Skibbs Lane, Chelsfield, Kent BR6 7RH (Tel.: 0689 825749)

PROGRESSREPORT

Caring for people with AIDS

Many people will recall the work carried out by the Working Party on the Pastoral Care of People with AIDS, set up jointly by Rochester and Canterbury Dioceses. Chaired by the then Bishop of Maidstone, the working party published its report and recommendations in 1990. What has happened since then?

"Quite a lot" says the Rev. Andrew Deuchar, Adviser to the Joint Council for Social Responsibility. "For a start nearly half the clergy in the two dioceses have attended training days on HIV and AIDS, run with the help of the health authorities."

"By all accounts they were very successful, not just from the information gained but also the chance to air personal views - and to hear first hand what it is like to have the virus or lose a partner from AIDS."

Some parishes and deaneries have followed up these days of local level but says Andrew "we'd like to hear from more to enable a much wider audience to share their knowledge and feelings"