Coventry Diocesan Guild – The Future of the Districts

A Discussion Paper

The last time there was any significant change to the District structure was in the mid-1980s, when the Rugby Deanery was carved out of the Coventry Archdeaconry, it becoming the Coventry District. The number of districts has been fluid, in terms of their number and of constituent towers, since the formation of the Guild, initially not having any districts; there were at one time four of them. That there are three of them, based on ecclesiastical boundaries, is not set in stone.

Things have changed in the last third of a century and I think that it is time to have another look at the structure to ensure that they still operate in a manner that is best for the Guild and also for the members that ring in the towers.

There is no intended personal agenda in me producing this paper, only a desire that we look at things to see what, if anything , can be done that will have a positive effect on ringing within the Diocese. Perhaps the most important starting point is that there is increasing difficulty in getting members to stand for office at all levels and therefore introducing more positions that would need to be filled has inherent problems. I would therefore suggest that not increasing the number of district officers. For instance, deciding to split the towers into more districts would involve fighting against this issue.

An outside influence on this process is the reorganisation of parishes within the Diocese itself. I am already aware that two parishes that are currently in the Rugby Deanery, Ryton on Dunsmore and Bubbenhall seem likely to join with Stoneleigh to form one benefice. It would therefore seem likely that either one parish will move to the Rugby Deanery or two to the Coventry Deanery. This presupposes that there are no major changes to come in the deanery structure of the diocese. I do not know if this is planned, but it is something that we need to consider.

I remember that one tower was refused permission some years ago to change districts, as they were not in the correct deanery to do so. This seemed wrong to me at the time and still does. The tower concerned was right on the edge of their district and worked with towers in the next. Therefore, I am suggesting that any diocesan boundary title is removed from the districts as soon as possible. We should have three districts, simply called that – “Coventry District”, “Rugby District” and “Warwick District”.

“What differences will this make?” you may well ask. The initial answer is, “Not much”. However, what it does do is remove the possibility of towers automatically moving districts due to changes at diocesan level. More importantly, it will remove these boundaries from the discussion about the future of the Districts. I feel that these boundaries constrict us from what we can do to improve matters and their removal is therefore an important first step.

There are issues across the Guild that needs our collective thoughts as to how to improve things, including:-

- The imbalance of towers in the districts. There are several societies that are smaller than the Warwick Archdeaconry and running this district must be a challenge for its officers at times. While the Warwick District is too large, it does not have two obvious “centres” about which it could be divided and, in any case, this would automatically require even more ringers to stand as district officers.

- There are towers on the edge of districts that are likely to cooperate with each other, but may feel restricted as they are in different districts, e.g. Rowington and Hatton are in the Coventry District, but Claverdon is in the Warwick Archdeaconry. Napton on the Hill is in the Warwick Archdeaconry, but its nearest towers include some in the Rugby Deanery and others that are in the Daventry Branch of the Peterborough Guild.

- Pockets of "ringing deserts".

- The availability of ringers that can teach is an issue in some areas.

- Coventry seems to be a barrier to movement in the Coventry District, and indeed the Guild. Getting ringers from the south to go to towers in the north, and vice versa appears to be an issue.

- We need to be aware of changing services patterns that might reduce the chances for service ringing and also the possibility of "Festival Churches" where the church remains open, but only has services for major festivals, such as Christmas and Easter, and not on "normal" Sundays. On top of this may well be an acceleration of churches being made redundant.

The important thing to remember is that there is not a "magic pill" solution. We should avoid having the idea that there is and that any proposed changes that are not perfect should not be put in place. Being less imperfect is an improvement.

In addition, what will work in one place may work not in another place. We have only one city, Coventry, in the Guild, The largest settlement in the county of Warwickshire is ……. Nuneaton. Both the towers in the town do not have a band of ringers. Their issues may need different solutions to the more rural areas in the south of the county.

What I feel we need are ideas that will help cooperation between towers. It is, for instance, better to have one practice/Sunday service ringing session that covers two or three towers on rotation, rather than having each tower struggling along with fewer ringers than ropes and restricted chances to practice and improve their call changes/methods.

I suggest that we need to look at things such as:-

- Facilitating towers to group together for their mutual benefit; often called "clustering". Give them support and encouragement to come together on a formal or informal basis for joint ringing.
  If this means that towers move districts, so be it. Could this lead to a sort of sub-district in the Coventry and Warwick Districts? The northern half and the southern half meet for ringing and the branch as a whole meet at given times in the year, for instance.
  What is currently noticeable is that the attendance at a Guild event is often heavily biased towards the district in which the meeting is held

- Are there ringers that have yet to return to ringing post-Covid restrictions? Why is this so and what can we do to encourage them to return?

- There are some bands that are "isolated" from the Guild. I would have thought that this might mean that they are more susceptible to collapsing if band numbers drop. How do we

encourage them to become involved with the Guild??

- Greater cooperation with adjoining societies. Our first two objectives are:

  a) Encouraging members to ring for services and on other appropriate occasions
  b) Supporting bands in the recruitment, retention and training of ringers

  Involving other societies in the process will only enhance ringing in the Guild and our towers reaching out will help other societies and this can only be a good thing. It can be mutually beneficial.

- The second stage of the dumb bells. The first stage, for the local tower is obvious; training ringers in that tower. There is a requirement that the dumb bells are made available to other towers to us and we should encourage and support this. Talking to a couple of ringers from other areas in the last few days, both have said that they had started a band at a tower and this lead directly to a nearby tower suddenly finding that they had people asking to learn to ring. How can we help with this "ripple effect"?

- The number of formal meetings. We have to under Charity Commission rules have an AGM each year, but what else we do is up to ourselves. I believe that we have to have a mid-year meeting, currently in October, each year for important matters, such as approving larger grants from the BRF. However, these meetings have got to a stage where they are far too long in length and, frankly, dull. We need to examine what is actually needed to be on the agenda and what might be removed, perhaps to be replaced by information sent to members. One thing might be the smaller grants awarded by the Trustees. They have been given the role to do this, with the Committee to be our "eyes and ears". Let them do it.
  The same applies at a district level. Apart from the important job of electing new members, what do we actually need to do from on AGM to the next?
  If we want ringers to stand for office they surely must first be willing to attend meetings in the first place. Let's not chase them off.

- The fear of failure. This is a difficult one. Things have been done the same was for a long time in ringing, perhaps too long in some cases. Having a go and not succeeding, while frustrating, should not be seen too negatively. It can show the way to success in the future by avoiding mistakes and using the learning experiences that were gained.

- Allied to this, negativity. It seems that ringing as a whole can sometimes be pessimistic about its future. We have elected close to 50 new and returning members in the last year. I have been told of towers that have a sort of recruitment problem in that they have too many at once! We will not attract ringers if we ask them to come to save a dying art. We need to be a living and breathing exercise if people are to join us. When I see some of the photographs that are put on publicity materials I cringe. They often seem to simply portray the stereotypical image of ringers – getting on in age! Get the youngsters involved. One of the great things about ringing is that it is based on ability and not age. Show this off and shout about it!

These are just my thoughts and they are presented to you in the way that I suggest a method when on a tower grab. If you get 6 random ringers on the end of the ropes and someone says, “What shall we ring?” you will get no answer. I always immediately say “London Minor”. Rarely does this get rung, but it does encourage otherwise mute ringers to say what they can actually ring well!

So, I say to you, “London Minor” – what is your response?

Mike Chester
President
11th July 2022.