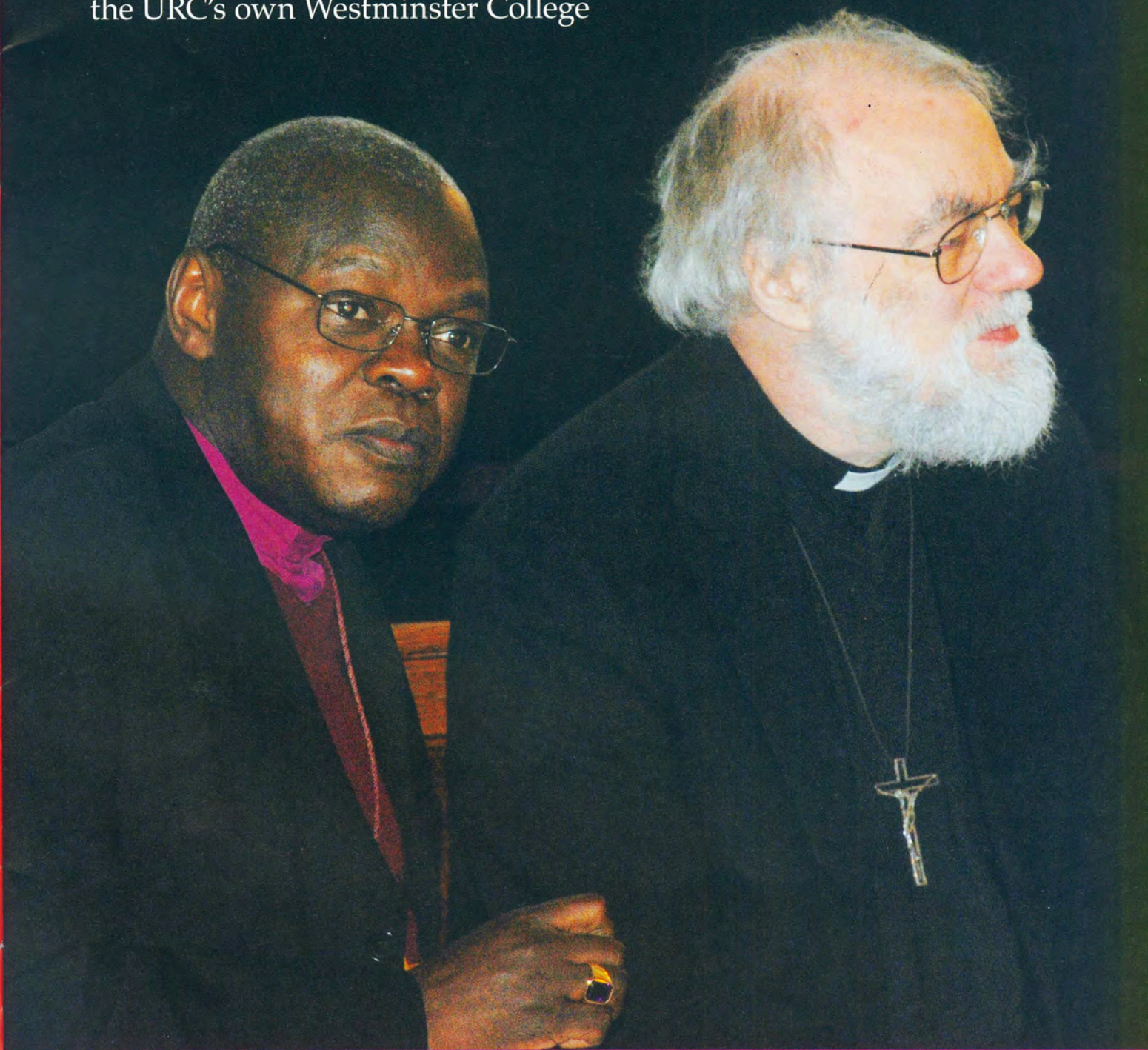


breakfast with the archbishops

Kay Parris reports on a special meeting at ^{Text} the URC's own Westminster College



Like most double acts, Rowan Williams and John Sentamu are chalk and cheese. Rowan the academic, John the populist. Measured Rowan, excitable John. Rowan the concerned commentator, John stuck in there - getting arrested (in Uganda under Idi Amin in the 70s), getting hate mail (when involved in the Stephen Lawrence enquiry), and getting ►

violent criminals convicted. Rowan the poet and biographer, John the stand up comic.

Apparently liking and complementing one another, they are a formidable team to represent the Church of England. And now – at a breakfast meeting at the United Reformed Church's own Westminster College, Cambridge, as part of a three-day joint visit to the town – they are about to share a rare public platform together.

The 300 student members of the Cambridge Theological Federation (of all Christian denominations) are buzzing with anticipation over their coffee and croissants. The hymns and Lord's Prayer resonate startlingly during the preliminary service taken by Susan Durber, principal of the college. I am briefly amazed by the sheer level and clarity of voices then realise – it's all those trainee ministers! The archbishops are among friends. No wonder they look so relaxed.

They are here to offer advice to these students, to reveal the key to pastoral success. The archbishop of York is first up, chatty, spontaneous, cracking jokes as he urges the students to remember where their calling comes from. "Each day when I wake up I say 'Good morning God!' – unlike many saying 'Good God it's morning!'"

The essence of his message is in his refrain: "Keep company with Jesus," and his challenge to the ministers of the future: "Be the highway for Christ to come into the hearts of people."

Rowan Williams urges the students to act as witnesses to the "spine tingling" opportunity presented in Revelation 3: "I set for you an open door", allowing us to move away from closed lives of materialism and anxiety.

He reminds them that they will be "a voice for the prayers, hopes and griefs of the community" and that by "weaving the intercessions of the community together", they will be "a voice for the humanity God has envisaged".

It is clear from the way the two archbishops grab and pat each others' arms encouragingly between addresses that they are close friends. But also I am struck by the impression that for all their public engagements, being here at Westminster College among student ministers and theologians is something that matters to them.

There is an element of nostalgia no doubt: both studied at Cambridge themselves. There is also a sense of respect for these mostly young people stepping forward to take on the tough challenge of ministry. Dr Williams warns they may be "the place where the tensions land" and may find themselves ensconced in battles inside and outside the church. "Unless you are with Jesus," he says, "God help you."

Inevitably a question comes from the floor: "How do you withstand attacks from the media?" Dr Williams hesitates, then leans into the microphone: "Er, I leave it to my friends."

"So do I! So do I!" calls Dr Sentamu, as he jumps forward to advocate, praising Williams' bravery and honesty during the Sharia law controversy, and hitting out at the British propensity for hysteria. Dr Williams relates the strength he draws from his personal faith and from reminding himself that: "I am answerable to Almighty God, not the editor of the Daily Mail."

They seem glad to be asked about the visit they have just made to the nearby Oakington immigrant detention centre, which has shocked them both. Dr Sentamu complains that the centre has changed from a fast-tracking facility for families seeking residence in Britain to a place of imprisonment, sometimes for months, for men only. This is where "inefficiency lands as cruelty," says Dr Williams.

Inter-faith dialogue

I have come to realise that we do start in very different places and we end in different places, but we see human beings in very compatible ways. We see them as able to receive the will of God, and we have the same sense of human dignity.

RW

Sharia fall-out

There is something very sick in the nation. I saw it with the death of Princess Diana when the Queen was bullied to come back to "her people". What, and leave her grandsons? And when David Beckham was vilified after the 1998 World Cup.

JS

The Sharia interview

One of the things I was trying to say, with limited success, and some would say with limited common sense, was that the law of the land, when it is working well, is working with and not against the different religious traditions.

RW

Human welfare

Human life is more worthwhile than we could possibly imagine, and if that's the case the social and political implications are immense. Yet much of the world is not organised on the basic vision that human beings are infinitely worthwhile.

RW



Susan Durber, Principal of Westminster College, pictured with the Archbishops of York and Canterbury

Reflecting on the position of the Church of England as the established religion of the country, the Archbishop of York makes it clear he likes things just the way they are: "The Queen in Parliament under God – let's keep it that way."

Rowan Williams has perhaps the more balanced perspective of someone whose family were Presbyterian until his teens, and who ministered for over a decade in the disestablished Church of Wales. He says: "Disestablishment would not kill the Church, but if it came as part of a global secularising agenda then Church and society would be the losers."

He seems to have some respect for the reformed tradition. After the meeting I ask him if he has a message for *Reform* readers and he replies: "The United Reformed Church has a special place in the history of the British Church. It has contributed greatly to the development of theology in the UK."

Back on the platform it's time to wrap up. No more questions allowed, a vote of thanks to our special guests. They grin broadly, point at each other and say: "It's goodbye from me, and it's goodbye from him."

KAY PARRIS IS EDITOR OF REFORM

Sexuality

I think we are getting things out of proportion. I know sex is important, but our description in church is not defined by gender, ethnicity or sexuality. Jesus is the only one who can say, "I condemn you". We can't say it. And Jesus doesn't say it. **JS**

Climate change

We have felt that the world was there to be squeezed and used by us, but this is shifting. We are beginning to understand the need to be back in touch with spirit – to ask what is the gift I can receive from this bit of world being just the way it is? **RW**

Government

At times they see us as a nuisance – as during the Iraq war, at times they see us as friends. During the Steven Lawrence enquiry for example, I think they felt we were open and honest and so it was easy to work with each other and to disagree. **JS**

The Queen

I have not pledged allegiance to government, but to the Queen. I can feel that sometimes she's saying, I don't believe this, they (the government) can't be serious. You can tell by the tone of her voice. She is amazing. She has seen them come and go. **JS**