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The Tiller Strategy: Local and Diocesan Priests

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The aim of this article is to explore John Tiller's idea of indigenous ministry and its relationship to stipendiary ministry. It is an idea which has been pressed in a missionary context for many years, most significantly by the evangelical Henry Venn (1796–1873) who in turn has been influential on the anglo-catholics Roland Allen and Herbert Kelly who have taken up the idea in recent times and applied it both to an overseas context and to this country.¹ Both Allen and Kelly urged locally ordained non-stipendiary ministry² and it may well be that their thinking has been influential on Tiller.

I entirely share Tiller's general objective of producing a church in which the whole people of God are involved in ministry and in which there is full indigenous leadership at the local level. It is a stimulating and creative vision and one which ACCM hopes will give rise to a wide-ranging debate (preface to Tiller Report). It is the purpose of this critique to question some of the detail of the vision and to make alternative suggestions which would radically affect the feel of the strategy while retaining its essential concept.

1. The Selection & Training of Local Clergy

In many ways the Tiller Report, while fundamentally radical, does have a conservative tone, particularly in relation to those areas closest to the administrative centre of the Church. There is, for example, the reluctance to suggest any very radical change in episcopal structures. Colin Buchanan has even suggested that Tiller may be politically motivated to ensure the necessary episcopal support.³ Equally, and perhaps for similar reasons, the well worn procedures for selection and training emerge relatively unscathed. As far as the proposals for indigenous local clergy go, the report concludes with regard to selection that the qualities being sought in priests remain the same 'whatever differences in training and in function there might be between diocesan and local priests' and that therefore all candidates for ordination 'should attend the same national selection procedures' (para. 254)⁴; and with regard to training that it should be 'through the present type of recognised part-time course, demanding though this would be' (para. 270). John Tiller is quite prepared to face the obvious

consequence that this will mean that many churches will not find local clergy very quickly (paras. 270 & 210).

He does not appear to have grappled sufficiently with the point perceived by Venn, Kelly and Allen that indigenous ministers should not be educated too far above their people or else they begin to lose contact. So Venn laid it down as a rule that a native pastor 'should never be trained up in habits and expectations too far removed above his countrymen'.⁵ Allen was clear that the standard of the clergy would not be maintained 'by laying emphasis . . . upon the peculiar technical education necessary for a cleric'.⁶ His vision was remarkably similar to that of Tiller's – a voluntary, local clergy – but he insisted that clergy should be selected for their evident spirituality and not because of their academic potential. Tiller, in examining the one attempt that the Church has made to find local clergy, admits that the vast majority of NSM's 'are drawn from the ranks of teachers and the professional groups, managers, administrators, and other non-manual workers' (para. 172, cf. para 63 of Hodge Report). What is evident from the Hodge Report is that this is so unsatisfactory to some bishops that they are taking unilateral action with regard to selection and training and bypassing the normal procedures. Hodge cites the fascinating fact that twelve per cent of those ordained as NSM's between 1971 and 1981 did not attend a selection conference⁷ and that 'the vast majority' of these undertook a course of local training and did not complete the GME essay scheme (para. 96). Such action, taken one suspects in the face of ACCM disapproval, is an interesting commentary on the bishops' confidence in the universality of priestly qualities discovered at selection conferences. If such a policy were to be followed more widely it would throw up the possibility of a much more truly indigenous clergy. John Tiller draws attention at the end of the report to the failure of the officiating priest in the funeral episode of 'The Boys from the Blackstuff' to articulate the feelings of the mourners. He urges that this demonstrates how the clergy 'must see their role in terms of enabling local people to articulate their own faith and make their own celebration' (para. 289). Surely it shows more fundamentally the need for clergy who are close to the people because they are of the people and this will certainly never be achieved in inner Liverpool through the present selection and training procedures.

2. Local Voluntary Clergy

There is running through the report the explicit and unquestioned assumption that local clergy should be voluntary (para. 168). There is, however, a point which is not established either by the evidence of history or of common sense. Very early in the life of the Church some measure of local stipendiary ministry seems to have emerged (1 Tim 5:18)⁸ and this would seem to be the constant experience of the great majority of Christians right across denominational and confessional

boundaries through the centuries. Such a development is undoubtedly dangerous because it can too easily involve the handing-over of the responsibilities of the whole body of Christ to the professional. Its proven dangers do not establish that it is to be eschewed. As a church grows and responsibilities accumulate, it is necessary to consider the possibility of some of those carrying out key functions becoming stipendiary. This does not mean, however, that they should necessarily cease to be local.

Venn spoke of 'the euthanasia of Mission' by which he meant the removal of those elements which belonged to another culture from the church which had been established. He did not think in terms of the abridgement of the role of the ordained ministry (cf. para 163 (8)), nor of it becoming non-stipendiary, nor of it becoming entirely local. A problem with Tiller is that he seems to equate indigenous with local. Indigenous certainly involves belonging to a particular culture or a social grouping but is it not possible, indeed desirable, that indigenous clergy be able to move to areas where their particular experiences and background could be used? It would reduce the problem of local priests becoming permanent fixtures which Tiller deals with by suggesting the possibility of 'temporary licences' (para. 213 (1)). The extreme difficulty of removing personnel unless positive and notorious incapacity is established makes it unlikely that temporary licensing would solve the problem.

The proposal that priests trained for particular indigenous ministries could be stipendiary and able to move within the areas for which the training equipped them, does not carry with it the assumption that all clergy will be stipendiary or fully stipendiary. It may well be right to encourage local voluntary clergy but it is surely unduly constricting to make it impossible for such to become stipendiary and remain as local priests. The Tiller strategy drives a dangerously sharp wedge between local voluntary and diocesan stipendiary clergy.

3. The Diocesan Maintained Priest

Diocesan 'maintained' clergy will nearly always be stipendiary (paras. 168, 196 & 197). One of the arguments Tiller uses, drawing on the Lima text, in favour of the distinction between local and diocesan clergy is that the early church knew '*both the travelling ministry of such missionaries as Paul and the local ministry of leadership in places where the Gospel was received*' (cf. para. 167). The distinction is an important one but it is not one which relates to being full-time or part-time. Paul took some pride in being non-stipendiary (Acts 18:3; 1 Cor. 9: 3-18; Thess. 2: 7-9) and, as we have already seen, the settled elders seem sometimes to have been stipendiary. If then there is no good reason why a 'local' priest should always be non-stipendiary, there is equally no good reason why the diocesan priest should nearly always be stipendiary. The local/diocesan distinction will inevitably be seen in the

report in maintained or financial terms and that is a great pity. There are hints that John Tiller has heard those who are much troubled by financial considerations. He says that what success there has been in increasing ordinands 'has resulted in anxiety about increasing costs' (para. 282) and he appears to see finance as a possible limiting factor to the number of stipendiary clergy which can be recruited (para. 174). Perhaps the linking of the local/diocesan to a voluntary/stipendiary distinction, which it seems difficult to justify in historic or strategic terms, is motivated by the prospect of a day when church resources will not be able to support even the numbers of stipendiary clergy which it has at present.

The report is reasonably clear however that the numbers of stipendiary clergy will ideally remain as at present (para. 174). In its strategy they would be members of diocesan teams engaged in specialist roles involving evangelism, community concerns, preaching, teaching counselling, training and being used as conductors of retreats, consultants and stimulators of the local church. They should also be seen 'as a support for the local Church with its indigenous ministry' (para.197), and they would be available to work in those churches which could not find people to undertake 'the appropriate training' to become local clergy (para. 270).

There are three problems here. Firstly the brief is vague and demands the greatest of confidence in the 'professional' qualities of the full-time clergy (para. 167). This confidence is considerably undermined by the uncertainty which Tiller argues is prevalent about this professional role. Of course his proposals are part of an attempt to redefine a professional model for ministry in twentieth century terms but it may be wondered whether the job specification is sufficiently precise.

Secondly, the brief if taken seriously would in fact involve diocesan clergy in a very substantial supporting relationship with local parishes. The danger with supports is that they prevent the development of the object they are supporting. The whole trust towards emphasizing the role of local leadership may be called in question by removing real power, influence and expertise one step away from the local parish. It was precisely to avoid this that the euthanasia of a mission principle was so important in Henry Venn's thinking. If the missionary remained, the church would depend on him. If he was removed, it would be able to stand on its feet. Roland Allen was even more emphatic on the importance of self-support, and at a very early stage, in a church's development. The analogy is not exact because diocesan professional clergy cannot be regarded as precise equivalents to missionaries from another culture but their role would have many similarities and would be open to many of the same charges.

Thirdly, the brief requires diocesan stipendiary clergy to operate precisely in the areas where history proves that they have been least

effective and conversely inhibits the development of local clergy where it can be argued they are most necessary. Of all the failures of the Church of England, surely the greatest is to transcend the social and class boundaries. It has comparatively recently been called 'the most snobbish church in Christendom'¹⁰ The 'professionalism' of the English clergy, which is a product of the nineteenth century, has in fact made it more difficult for them to cross such boundaries¹¹ and the consequence in terms of effective ministry to those outside the upper and middle classes both in rural¹² and urban areas has been proved beyond reasonable doubt. In his important recent study of South Lambeth Professor Cox establishes that in working class neighbourhoods at the turn of the century church attendance was unrelated to clerical deployment.¹³ Where it was related was in suburban Norwood.¹⁴ This, as Cox points out, questions, or at least modifies, the Paul Report thesis that more clergy would produce more worshippers.¹⁵ However Cox also establishes that even working class parishes, when they succeeded in mobilizing lay volunteers, increased the number of worshippers.¹⁶ If such conclusions are taken seriously they should surely be driving the Church to produce a strategy which would foster the development of indigenous clergy in precisely those areas where Tiller sees the involvement of the diocesan full-time clergy because nobody can be found with sufficient educational background. Outside missionaries will of course be necessary in the most deprived areas but not as long or even medium term pastors, but as evangelists and as very temporary supports for the emerging church.

Conclusion

In a sense this argument is about detail because it accepts the overall vision of a local church with an indigenous clergy. It is, however, very important detail because, if the Tiller argument is accepted, then the following consequences will emerge:

- i) The relatively high educational standards operating in selection and demanded for training will make indigenous clergy impossible in the areas where they are needed most.
- ii) The local church will be unduly hampered because it will be unable to introduce any stipendiary element into its ministry even though history establishes that this has generally been found to be necessary.
- iii) The diocesan maintained clergy will be separate caste, marked off by their special training and often operating in areas where it is established that they are likely to be least effective.

If, however, standards appropriate to areas would be accepted for selection and training, as is in some measure (but without official sanction) happening already; if the stipendiary/non-stipendiary dis-

inction could be uncoupled entirely from the local/diocesan distinction and if the development of indigenous churches in the areas of maximum weakness could be enthusiastically and prayerfully fostered then there would be a vision which would avoid the sharp distinctions of the Tiller strategy and would take even more seriously the claims for indigenous structures. In some ways such a revised strategy is more radical, particularly in relation to selection and training. In others ways it is less because it allows the perpetuation of a stipendiary element, perhaps a large one, in local churches and therefore does not necessarily demand the abolition of patronage and freehold.

NOTES

- 1 David M. Paton, ed., *Reform of the Ministry: A Study in the Work of Roland Allen*, Lutterworth, London 1968, pp. 81–2.
- 2 Vincent Strudwick, 'Local Ordained Ministry: Yesterday's Case for Tomorrow's Church', *Theology* 89, 1981, pp. 170–182.
- 3 Colin Buchanan, 'A Closer Look at this New Strategy for the Church's Future Ministry', *CEN* 14 October 1983, p. 8.
- 4 This assurance is not shared by some of the evidence considered by the recent report on NSM's. The Hodge Report quotes an archdeacon chairman of a selection conference speaking of NSM's as follows: 'I am bound to say that we felt considerable frustration in trying to determine their suitability because it became very clear that neither we, nor the men, nor their dioceses, all shared precisely the same views or expectations of such a ministry . . .' (Mark Hodge, *Non-Stipendiary Ministry in the Church of England*, General Synod, GS 583A, CIO, London 1983, para. 71).
- 5 Max Warren, ed., *To Apply the Gospel: Selections from the Writings of Henry Ven*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids 1971, p. 62.
- 6 R. Roland Allen, *The Case for Voluntary Clergy*, Eyre & Spottiswoode, London 1930, p. 249.
- 7 Hodge op. cit., p. 36, note 13.
- 8 cf. J.N.D. Kelly, *A Commentary on the Pastoral Epistles: 1 Timothy, 2 Timothy, Titus*, Adam and Charles Black, London 1963, p. 125.
- 9 WCC, Faith & Order paper no. 11, *Baptism, Eucharist & Ministry*, WCC, Geneva 1982, p. 25.
- 10 Daniel Jenkins, *The British: Their Identity & Their Religion*, SCM, London 1975, p. 81.
- 11 Esther de Waal, 'New Style Parson', *Theology* 82, 1979, pp. 169–175.
- 12 James Obelkevich, *Religion and Rural Society: South Lindsey, 1825–1875*, Clarendon Press, Oxford 1976.
- 13 Jeffrey Cox, *The English Churches in a Secular Society: Lambeth, 1870–1930*, OUP, New York 1982, p. 33.
- 14 *ibid.*, p. 37.
- 15 *ibid.*
- 16 *ibid.*, p. 43.

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