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Evangelical Episcopal Practice Today

To be an evangelical bishop is to face a double burden: criticised, as are all bishops, by those beyond the church, many bishops have had to face attack from their evangelical brethren. Peter Dawes offers an account of his own understanding of the most frequent areas of complaint. He defends a proper use of administrative resources, encourages clergy to rely on the informal networks they create as well as the diocesan centre for pastoral support and maintains that there is no case for increasing the number of bishops.

Being a bishop is a demanding task in the church. For much of this century the House of Bishops has largely been occupied by Anglo-Catholics and liberals. Only in the last twenty years have there been evangelical bishops in any number. Their arrival on the bench has coincided with a period in our history where the church has been subjected to intense criticism. The bishops have had their share of that. But it is not only by the media and the public that bishops as representatives of the church have been on the receiving end, but from Christians as well. I have decided to look at recent criticisms of bishops and particularly those that have been made by Evangelicals. It seems to me inevitable that in places I have mentioned my own practice but I hope it is not too intrusive.

Prelacy

This criticism came as something of a surprise. The full *Oxford English Dictionary* defines prelaty as 'government by prelates, bishops (as men of rank), often in a hostile sense', but, curiously, no example is given about what these critics have in mind. In Latimer's famous sermon, the main point of attack appears to be the laziness of bishops, not their misuse of authority.

Today I suppose what is in most people's minds is pomposity with an appearance of grandeur. This might be reflected in such matters as the stipends paid to bishops. The Commissioners use a formula which determines that they are paid about 1.8 times that of the average clergy stipend, though it should be noted that perhaps with less justification they are paid increased pensions. Some bishops live in historic buildings, or large palaces and castles, but, in most cases, the living accommodation for the bishop and his family is not excessive, and much of the rest of the building is either let out or used for other purposes. Most bishops have

one employee who acts as chauffeur/gardener and handyman, and some with very large gardens have extra help with them. It is important to note that these provisions are not part of the essence of being a bishop, but are decided through the General Synod. What the church has decided, the church could change.

Sometimes it is the dress of the bishop that comes under fire. Most bishops wear a purple shirt, a pectoral cross and a ring. Sixty years ago Bishop Barnes of Birmingham declared that he would dress simply, and abandoned cross and ring – but continued to sport top hat, frock-coat, apron and gaiters! In fact he would have given up those too, but found that they were expected of him. The mitre, worn in worship, is another target; but I count all these matters of dress trivial. If there is a criticism to be made about ‘prelacy’, it must contain more substance than episcopal garb. Surely such a charge must say something about what the acquiring of ‘rank’ does to the person concerned; do all the trappings lead him to a sense of sinful pride? Professor C. K. Barrett has written: ‘It takes a strong measure of Christian humility to make monarchical episcopacy work.’ And, as early as NT days, Christian leaders were warned not to ‘lord it’ over others. In the consecration service, the bishop promises to fashion his life in the way of Christ, while those present are enjoined to pray that he may display this example of a godly life – including the virtue of humility.

Management

It is a pity that in the church this word is used in a pejorative way of both parish clergy and bishops. Management is a totally neutral term; it can come in both good and bad forms. Thomas Clarkson, who was as active as William Wilberforce in the abolition of the slave trade, was later asked what was his own part in the campaign. ‘I was the manager of it’, he replied.

I think that the hostile use of this term implies that the bishop is spending more time on committees and administration than on those matters for which he was consecrated. The problem with committees comes in two parts: the first is within the diocese. Here there is, in fact, probably no committee at which his attendance is essential save the Bishop’s Council. In this respect the remedy is in the bishop’s own hands. I should add however that some hold that the bishop can exercise leadership at committees.

The difficulty comes elsewhere: in the workings of the General Synod and of the Church Commissioners there are many committees where it is believed that representatives from each of the three Houses should have membership. But there are only fifty three bishops (44 diocesans and 9 suffragans) to choose from. This is a very small pool. Then there are various matters dealing with ecumenical work and situations overseas where the archbishops need a bishop to act for them. The matter is further complicated because the burden does not fall equally on all. I served as a Church Commissioner; I was very unwilling, but Robert Runcie pressed me. Since I, too, had taken an oath of obedience, I eventually agreed. I also sat on one General Synod committee and chaired the Revision Committee for the Ordination of Women legislation, which dealt with over 500 amendments! This was a light load compared to some, since I was appointed at the age of sixty, and

there is a reluctance to ask bishops of that age to undertake special matters if they appear to have only a limited time on Synod. Younger bishops and those with special expertise often carry a very heavy burden. Then there is attendance at the House of Lords, which comes when one has acquired the necessary seniority in service.

And all this is done at a distance. It was one thing to pop up to London when I was Archdeacon of West Ham, and then get back home for an evening meeting or for correspondence. It is a different matter for bishops who live some distance from London.

I do not know what the answer is to all this. A bishop is not just a bishop of a diocese but of the Church of England and to a varying extent rightly has a national or international role. For all the criticisms levelled against it, I believe that overall the General Synod is doing a good job and that bishops should play their part. Perhaps the Synod meets too often – but that would be the subject of another article.

One of my worries about the Turnbull Report is that it might place an even greater burden on some bishops individually, and on the House of Bishops in general. Meanwhile, I hope that somewhere in Lambeth Palace there is a list kept of all the bishops, together with their extra-diocesan responsibilities. That would enable any gross inequalities to be adjusted.

Administration

I am always surprised to see how prominent this appears in criticism of bishops. Mervyn Haigh (once Bishop of Coventry) said: 'Good administration is there to make the pastoral possible, and without it the pastoral would find it hard to exist.' Stuart Blanch (of Liverpool and York), a man noted for his pastoral care, said: 'Administration rightly understood is just an instrument of pastoral care.'

This is obviously true. To take a simple example: if letters do not receive a reply (or only after a considerable delay), or if a person wanting to see the bishop cannot get an interview for some weeks – it is a serious lack of pastoral care, and the bishop's administration may be at fault. When I was in Derby, I told my secretaries to keep 9-10 a.m. free from engagements (as far as possible), so that anyone wanting to be seen in an emergency could be given an appointment in less than 24 hours. Similarly, when I was in Derby I tried to answer all letters within two days.

I think that the bishop's postbag has grown over recent years – people have learned to complain to the top. Of course, many matters are delegated to others: letters about churchyards, clergy houses and the like were acknowledged and passed to the archdeacon. But a complaint, for example, about the disposal of a school would need a draft from the Director of Education to cover the technicalities before the complainant received a full reply from the bishop.

Bureaucracy

Criticism under this heading sometimes includes the bishop as part of a vaguely defined 'centre' of the diocese over against the parishes. A diocesan bishop is allowed up to two and a half employees – either as secretaries or chaplains. Some bishops do not have a chaplain because they believe (rightly or wrongly) that that person may provide another layer between the bishop and those for whom he has to care.

Although not strictly relevant to this article let me comment on two other places which come under this criticism. The first is the staff of the various boards and councils. In view of the shortage of clergy there must be a question whether some of these posts which are now full-time should not now be combined with some parochial appointment. The second is the area of the diocesan office. In two dioceses of which I have had personal knowledge I can only say that they have been at full stretch, not least the diocesan secretary. The men and women who work in these offices deserve encouragement more than disapproval. Sadly they often are the recipients of sharp complaints when they are only carrying out the policy of a diocesan committee.

Pastoral care

I have touched on this matter above, but it requires more attention. Let me reflect upon my own experience of fifteen years as an incumbent of a parish. For the first thirteen years I never entered the diocesan office; I wasn't even sure where it was! Apart from one occasion, I never saw a bishop or archdeacon (excepting official events), and this did not bother me in the slightest. I trusted that they would be accessible to me if I needed them. I believed that I had been trained to run a parish and was happy to get on with it. Whenever I felt the need of help, I looked to the congregation (especially the churchwardens) and then to a group of six local clergy, of different denominations. This group (quite informal) met regularly for prayer and mutual help as well as for practical planning.

When I went to Derby, I commended these resources and others I found, and tried to create more. Two people were appointed (whose names were known) to whom clergy could go in confidence. If it was found that specialist counselling was needed, or other help, I provided the resources. This was all done in complete anonymity. Then, there was an appraisal scheme for the stipendiary clergy, conducted by the 'hierarchy', i.e. the bishops, archdeacons and provost. I visited the clergy chapters one year, and the deanery synods the next. The suffragan bishop alternated with me. From time to time a rural dean attended the staff meeting. Each year I sent a letter to the clergy, asking if there were any matters about which they wanted me to pray. Derby diocese was particularly fortunate in having an annual two-day residential conference at which I and the rest of the staff were present.

It is the little touches that matter: whenever the bishop meets any of the clergy, or speaks by phone, it is important to make time to enquire about them or their family, and how the parish is functioning.

We can overdo things. I heard the Head of Counselling at one of our largest hospices begin a talk to ordinands by saying: 'Today there is too much counselling.' She emphasised that people often have more inner resources than we give them credit for. But when the inner resources are stretched, it is sad indeed if local clergy cannot in the first place look to each other, or to a spiritual director, or to the rural dean, who is a part of the bishop's oversight.

The bishop also has a responsibility to the laity, but most often oversight here in the first instance will be exercised by the parish priest. Sadly sometimes the pastoral care of the laity is best served by the exercise of discipline by the bishop in regard to their parish minister and to that I now turn.

Discipline

The whole system is now under review. The main weakness with the present system for the discipline of clergy is that the only offences which can readily be dealt with are those concerning divorce or where there are criminal charges. Lazy clergy, who do the absolute minimum, and clergy who seem to live in a perpetual quarrel with their congregation, are thankfully rare. However, these provoke angry letters to the bishop from the laity who are then surprised to find that he has virtually no power, except by going through some prohibitively expensive legal processes.

In general, discipline is a matter for the bishop alone; this has advantages, for some offences are minor, the perpetrator is repentant and no-one else need know. But it is hard when the bishop finds himself both judge and jury. One thing is certain. In terms of pressure both of time and emotions this function takes more out of bishops than anything else.

It is sometimes saddening to find amongst evangelical clergy today that promises of obedience do not seem to mean very much. At times there seems to be a belief that if canon law stands in the way, so much for canon law. Bishops too must be careful that they themselves set a good example. It has sometimes been suggested that the suspension of livings has not always been within the guidelines envisaged.

Preaching and teaching

Here the criticism seems to be that the bishop should do more. My own experience was that I certainly was not doing any less than when I was in a parish! Of course, bishops repeat themselves at confirmations and institutions; but some addresses need special preparation, for a bishop is invited to many varied events. The bishop will also make public pronouncements in the diocesan newsletter and his Diocesan Synod address. In addition, he will be asked to speak on local radio and (less frequently) television. (How glad I am, that, being retired, I have not had reporters phoning me up and asking me about the theological implications of Dolly the cloned sheep!)

Traditionally, bishops have been 'teachers of the faith', a phrase that recalls such men as Augustine (among the Fathers) or Lightfoot (in the recent past). In my time as a bishop, I was acutely aware of my own intellectual limitations – to say nothing

of the advance of theological thinking, and my personal ignorance of other disciplines (like genetics). All I can say is that I tried, within my own limitations, to expound the Christian faith as the Church of England has received it.

Leadership

In my welcome meetings in Derby I said that becoming a bishop was like catching a train just as it is moving out, and then, when you are panting in the corner of the compartment, someone taps you on the shoulder and says: 'By the way, you are the driver.' But, perhaps 'driver' is too strong a word: to a large extent a diocese has a life of its own, just like that of a well-run parish which does not collapse when the vicar leaves. The main thrust of my own leadership (apart from teaching) was to uphold the parochial system in every way possible, though in passing it should be noted that with the shortage of stipendiary clergy there is a real threat to the parochial ministry. This applied particularly when I was patron of a benefice and had the task of seeing that the best person was appointed, as far as I could judge. Bishop Lesslie Newbigin says: 'The only real hermeneutic of the gospel is a community of people who believe it, celebrate it and live by it.' In the Church of England this is the congregation, with their clergy, set within the parish.

Bishops may wish to take some initiative of their own. Leslie Hunter set up the Industrial Mission in Sheffield. George Carey at Bath and Wells took five or six parish missions a year. I had a Bishop's Initiative each year, in which each parish was urged to take a part. Youth work, financial giving, the Decade of Evangelism and vocations to ordination were some. I also sought through the boards and councils to provide resources for the initiatives. I was most insistent that I did not wish to impose some extra burden on the parishes: rather the subjects chosen were all part of normal parish life. I took the view that there might be some benefit if all parishes tackled them at the same time and learned from each other. And I also tried to gather responses from the parishes and monitor the results.

The Bishop's Staff Meeting is sometimes seen as a contentious matter. I once received a letter from a clerical member of the Bishop's Council, suggesting that most decisions were taken privately at the Staff Meeting, whereas they should be taken at the Bishop's Council. I looked back at the minutes: most of the time in the Staff Meeting (after we had communion together and worked on a chapter of a theological work), we considered clergy in need and vacant livings in the diocese. All proposals of any substance go through the synodical system; if there are exceptions I am sure that alert synod members would soon pick them up.

The centre of unity

No-one could accept the office of bishop unless he wished to be a Father in God to everyone within his diocese. However, it has been suggested that evangelical bishops have let this consideration clash with their deepest convictions. I never found this myself, and I do not think it need be so. I recall the leading evangelical layman Professor Sir Norman Anderson being elected the first Chairman of the House of Laity: immediately he resigned from the Synod Evangelical Group and never came to it. He felt that it would not be honourable to do anything else. Yet

those, like myself, who served with him on the Synod never saw any abatement of his evangelical views, expressed as ever with firmness and courtesy. I remembered his example later when I became chairman of the Business Committee (which sets the Synod's agenda), and subsequently Chairman of the Appointments Committee (which appoints to all the committees and commissions). So I told the Evangelical Group that I was going to 'sit light' to it. Afterwards, I believe that I was not inhibited in speaking in ways that upheld my own evangelical convictions. As a bishop, I was not aware of acting against these convictions, either.

Fewer bishops or more

On the one hand there are those who are pointing out that while there are fewer and fewer 'indians' – clergy and laity – the 'chiefs' – bishops, archdeacons and cathedral staff – do not diminish. On the other hand there are those who are saying that the mission of the church would be enhanced if there were smaller dioceses and more bishops. It is helpful here to consider what it is that only a bishop can do. There are three things. The first is to ordain: this is now generally a yearly activity. The second is to institute a person to a parish. The third is to confirm. Today this is not an impossible task for one man in a number of dioceses, and it is easily accomplished with present staffing. The pastoral care of clergy and laity is an important task, but I have shown above that it need not require the multiplication of bishops. Smaller dioceses would be difficult to manage, for each would need to maintain its own administration for paying the clergy, maintaining the parsonage houses, managing glebe... the list goes on. In addition there is the knock-on effect on the whole synodical system. It is my belief that the church would not be helped by more bishops. It might even be possible to function with fewer.

Conclusion

I am fairly radical in the matter of church order. The NT shows no one set pattern. The threefold order of ministry is very ancient, it is the most widespread and it is consonant with Scripture. So we have to ask, within that order, what form of ministry would be most appropriate for the twenty-first century, and how much any changes would cost. I do not think that any far-reaching changes in the structure of the episcopate would greatly enhance the mission of the church. If, however, the community of which Lesslie Newbigin speaks is interpreted more widely than I have done in a previous paragraph, then living the gospel will imply learning from each other in love and being ready for whatever changes do seem right in the church for the furtherance of the gospel.

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