

The Situation In England Today

BY TALBOT MOHAN

"THE Ministry of the Church of England . . . is just dying on its feet."¹ This judgment by the Bishop of Southwell, is justified by the facts. During the first half of this century the numbers of clergymen on the active list fell from 19,000 to 15,500 (while the population increased by several millions). In 1886 there were 814 ordinations to the diaconate ; in 1956 there were 496 which was the highest for fifteen years, and of this number twenty-five per cent were over forty years of age. The average age of the clergy today is not less than fifty. To maintain our present poverty-stricken level, 600 men must be ordained every year. The figure for 1958 was 514. Even if 700 were forthcoming each year it would take many years to make any impression upon the situation.

The majority of churchgoers seem strangely unmoved, perhaps because they think of it as a passing phase which will right itself. But the trend of sixty years which shows no sign of change can hardly be classed as a temporary recession. In parishes which remain as independent units and where there has never been a curate it is understandable that they will not be very conscious of the shortage. Well-to-do parishes which are still able to attract an adequate supply of the best men will also be little moved. Even parishes such as St. James-the-Less, Bethnal Green, which in Bishop Watts-Ditchfield's day, had five curates and seven women workers, or that of Portsea, which in Archbishop Garbett's time, had sixteen curates, have accustomed themselves to much smaller staffs. It is in the country where the shoe pinches most, and in the many parishes of six to twelve thousand where help is impossible. The traditional boast of the English countryside that every parish has its own parson and church is, alas, no longer true. The parish church remains, but the parson must be shared by two, three, or even more parishes, with the result that the valued sense of propriety has gone, and the Sunday services have to be curtailed in spite of the minister's feverish dash from church to church. In one parish the geographical peculiarities involve a journey of nearly a hundred miles each Sunday. No wonder Bishop Barry reminds us of the saying that, "the Church is in danger of accepting the role of a sacramental filling station".²

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If we are to understand the deeper significance of this state of affairs we must consider not only its effect upon individual parishes, but we must see it against the background of the state of the nation. We live in an age of astonishing scientific achievement. New discoveries revolutionize our conception of time and space. The prospect before us is one of never-ending wonder, with fantastic possibilities of space-travel and the transformation of our mode of life. There is

promise of the abolition of poverty, the increase of leisure and pleasure, the conquest of disease, and the prolongation of life.

Already the pattern of life has been changed by the aeroplane, the motor car, radio, television, refrigerators, and washing machines. The welfare state undermines the sense of personal responsibility, and Sunday offers the obvious opportunity to enjoy the spice of life.

The exhilaration is heightened and its enjoyment increased by an extraordinary economic prosperity. We "have never had it so good". "The booming Fifties go out with a bang," said a London evening newspaper; the "bang" being the greatest Christmas spending spree in history. "Will it be the Golden Sixties?" asks *The Times*. Rarely has a new decade been greeted with such buoyant optimism. Stock markets are at new peaks. Industrial output in 1959 was ten per cent up on 1958. Wages continue to rise. *The Times* told of a foreman being dubbed as the "£100 a week man", and added: "But this estimate of his wages happens to be accurate". Other men on the job were averaging £30 to £40 a week and in some weeks more than £50.

Prosperity and righteousness do not go hand in hand. As material standards climb ever higher, moral standards are on the decline. Crimes of violence are on the increase; juvenile delinquency, the break up of home life, mental sickness—all plague the community and present bewildering problems to the State. We were shocked by the revelation of what was happening in our parks in daylight. Television, the press, and the cinema all contribute their share to the depression of ethical standards. A newspaper article on the cinema boasted of the new freedom to portray life as it is lived, untrammelled by the puritanical Hollywood code. There is no reason to believe that this decline is likely to be halted, unless disaster overtakes us, or revival rescues us. We Christians are being conditioned to acquiesce in these lower standards with a shrug of the shoulder. In this critical situation the Church's most public activity is with Canon Law: rearranging the furniture when the house is on fire. While we do not suggest that Bishop Barry has this in mind, these words from him are in any case relevant: "Far too much mental and spiritual vitality is being absorbed by ecclesiastical questions which are, at best, of secondary importance, and too often the primary issues are evaded. Faced with the daunting challenge of this time and perhaps uncertain what it ought to say about it, the Church will not unnaturally be tempted to follow the fatal line of least resistance and busy itself with administrative reform, forgetting the prior and more demanding claims. The overriding and inescapable question to which all policy must be subordinated, is how the masses of our population are to be converted to Christianity."²

Of course, our present prosperous era could be brought to an end either by a depression which might ruin thousands overnight and put millions out of work, or by a war too horrible to contemplate which could obliterate our civilization. If we are spared such disasters the continuance of our present prosperity and luxurious living threatens the spiritual quality of the nation. They induce softness, ease, and indolence. Christianity flourishes best in a hard climate and there is

little opposition to the Church today, but there is fierce opposition *within* the Church to the full implications of discipleship in dedicated commitment.

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The state of the nation is a challenge to the Church. We may ask what kind of church can meet this challenge. On the answer to this question will depend what kind of ministry we need and are likely to get. The contemporary situation calls for a church ready to proclaim God's Word: "Cry aloud, spare not, lift up thy voice like a trumpet and show my people their transgression" (Isa. lviii. 1). But the Church must also demonstrate through its own members in love the kind of religion which transforms life and is a testimony to the faith it professes. Bishop Hensley Henson said that English Christianity is the most Biblical and the least ecclesiastical of all the versions of the Christian religion. It was this kind of religion which gave our people that sense of responsibility to God which earned us the title of the most religious nation the world has ever known. The last generation to be influenced by the Evangelical revival is passing away and the general trend in the Church is a reversion to the Continental type of religion centred in sacraments, thus "clericalizing" the Church and leaving the broad masses of the people untouched.

The Biblical ministry described by Hensley Henson is not only effective in building character but by its own nature it is prolific in reproducing itself. As Bishop Barry says; "The Church in the Victorian age was rich in manpower beyond dreams of avarice." Today, we are told, it takes thirty parishes to produce one ordinand; but there are many parishes where this "Biblical" ministry is producing a steady flow of ordinands, as well as men and women for service overseas, and women for work in the Church at home. It is by no means exceptional for a single parish to have three or four men in training for the ministry. It cannot be doubted that Evangelicals are, in proportion to their relative numbers, providing more recruits than any other school of thought in the Church, and, said a diocesan bishop rather wryly, "they are some of the best men we are getting". There is a splendid and growing number of first-rate Evangelicals in training today, men of quality and ability with a strong sense of vocation and a deep spiritual understanding. It is one of the most encouraging signs of our time and gives great confidence for the future. But, strange to relate, those in places of authority in the Church are by no means pleased about this. They are indeed very worried. Their attitude is perhaps best explained in the Preface to the seventy-fifth issue of *Crockford*. The Editor writes: "A considerable number of actual and potential ordination candidates are biblical 'Fundamentalists' or so close to being so that no ordinary magnifying glass can detect any significant difference. . . . That no small proportion of the inadequate number of candidates now admitted into the Church's ministry should be committed to this erroneous dogmatism diminishes hope for the future appeal of the Church's message among normally minded and educated people. This state of affairs is a very difficult one for the Bishops."

The truth is that these men accept the Bible at its own evaluation

and believe it to be the Word of God. They are certainly not out of step with the Prayer Book or with Article VI of the Church's profession of faith. Their critics, on the other hand, start from the assumption that the Bible was written by reporters who did their best to interpret the mind of God according to the insights of their times. It therefore has no divine authority in itself for them, but only that which "the Church" allows.

These young men have passed through an experience which is far more revolutionary than a change of mind or a conversion to an idea. It can best be described as regeneration, a change so drastic and complete that nothing but a new creation is sufficient to explain it. Because this experience is so clearly revealed, expounded, and promised in Holy Scripture, confidence in the Bible is vindicated. It has also given them a new nature, a new love for God, a new assurance, a complete reorientation of hopes and ideals, and, above all, a passionate desire to lead others into this same satisfying and joyful experience. Hence their vocation to the ministry, and hence the steady flow of ordinands from the parishes where this Biblical and revolutionizing ministry is being exercised.

Surely it is men with this spiritual qualification which both the Church and the nation need today. The Church needs them to redress the balance of priorities, to recall her from an over-anxious concern with administrative detail to the great task of evangelism. The nation will not be won by an appeal for church-going. The great mass of those who used to be called the "working classes" are quite out of touch with the Church. We might almost describe them as the "untouchables"—not because we do not want to touch them, but because we seem unable to convince them of the relevance of the Church to their own need. They will only be moved by contact with those who can convince them of their fundamental need, and who can demonstrate in their own lives the power of God to meet this need. Once they are convinced, and have experienced for themselves the power of the living Christ, church-going will follow, provided there is a church where their vital experience is understood and their zeal is given an outlet.

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"Vocation" is a somewhat hackneyed word today, and words which are overworked have a habit of changing their meaning. We talk glibly about "vocations to the ministry", implying that "so many" people have offered for training; but they may not all have vocation. Vocation is not simply a desire for, or even an aptness for, the ministry. It is a *call*, and the call must come from God and should be recognized and confirmed by the Church. There are those in Holy Orders today who were convinced of their call but their subsequent experience does not confirm it. Their failure is not due to unfaithfulness, indeed they could be termed "faithful failures". They are true, loyal, earnest, and saintly but yet making little, if any, headway. It might be said that they have lost their vision; if so, it is disappointment rather than disobedience which is the cause. It may be that had the C.A.C.T.M. selection boards been in operation when they offered themselves for the ministry they would not now be in Holy Orders but

witnessing more effectively in a lay capacity. The Evangelical has to be particularly careful because the experience of conversion results in a natural desire for full-time service and it is easy to think that the ministry is the obvious choice ; " it is in fact nothing else but plain silly to turn a good and valuable church member, faithfully doing his job as a Christian layman, into a second-rate and frustrated parson ".⁵

It is not enough that a man should be converted and filled with enthusiasm to reach others. As the vicar of a parish he will need some administrative ability and the gifts of leadership. He must be able to guide and control his staff, win their confidence and inspire their loyalty. He will be responsible for the services of the church, for the oversight of its activities, for the initiation and direction of policy. He must carry with him his parochial church council. He must be alive to the needs of the whole parish and he must take his place in deanery and diocesan affairs. He may have to take a strong line in combating attempts to lower the standard of the Church's family life through concentration on its own enjoyment and the neglect of its corporate responsibilities for the evangelism of the whole parish. He ought to be able to preach convincingly to an intelligent congregation, and he should be " apt to teach " so that he can build them up in their holy faith. If his message is faithful it will not be popular and it will need more than sincerity to commend it : he will need love and a happy infectious enthusiasm to carry his people along with him. Not every man has all these qualities in equal measure, but they are the qualities that are needed, and he ought at least to be seen to possess some of them and be capable of growing into the possession of others as his ministry develops.

Where are such men to be found ? Without doubt primarily in the parishes where, as we have seen, a ministry of the right type will find them and bring them out. The schools are disappointing as a recruiting ground ; the grammar and secondary schools because there is little opportunity for the kind of work which is essential to produce the right result, and the public schools perhaps for the opposite reason that too much is done but it is often misplaced activity. A former Headmaster of Harrow explained that every visiting cleric preaching in the School Chapel felt he had a priceless opportunity to push the claims of the ministry, so that it fell on deaf ears. Nevertheless, a quite different type of activity has been successful in the evangelization and building up in the faith of schoolboys at Camps and Houseparties held in many places throughout Great Britain. A significant proportion of these boys have had the vocation to the Ministry presented to them in such a way that there have been added to the Ministry some excellent candidates of the very best type. It is not too much to say that from the Evangelical point of view this is one of the most encouraging features of the present time. Of course there are other fields to be harvested besides the parish and the school. Many men reach a decision through their contact with the Christian Union at the University, and a surprising number have come to spiritual consciousness while doing National Service.

Whatever criticisms may be levelled against the time spent on National Service by young men in general, it is certainly a most

valuable experience for intending ordinands thus to mix with men of all types in so intimate a way. With the ending of the system of National Service it would be a useful alternative if a period in industry or commerce were regarded as part of the necessary training. Every ordinand not over the age of twenty-five is now expected to read for a degree. This does not imply the assumption that the man who achieves a "first" will therefore be first-class, or that it is not recognized that some who could not obtain a degree might still be first-class parsons. In an age when the general standard of education open to all is so much higher, it is essential that the minister be at least the equal of his people intellectually. Older men, of which there is a considerable proportion among ordinands, are subject to the decision of their Bishop as to the length of training required, and usually go direct to a Theological College and not to a University.

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The problem of finance for training does not appear to be a very serious one. C.A.C.T.M. will give generous grants towards College fees, and considerable help is given by the various Ordination Funds. Some Colleges are finding that the scale of fees is insufficient for solvency; but when they increase their fees, C.A.C.T.M. are not always prepared to recognize the new scale, and either refuse to increase their grants or give only a slight increase, which leaves a gap which has to be provided for by the ordinands themselves. This causes some heart-burning, but the attitude of C.A.C.T.M. is understandable because an unlimited generosity could be misused by the colleges or by the students. It is inevitable that the ability to obtain the necessary finance for their education so easily induces in students something of the "Welfare State" attitude. On the other hand it must be remembered that these men are turning their backs on the vastly greater financial rewards which a secular occupation would offer, and an increasing number are taking secular jobs in vacations to help provide for themselves. This welcome development is not always approved by college principals!

Early marriage is a characteristic of a prosperous age, as every population expert knows. The authorities have frowned upon the early marriage of ordinands but without success, and they seem now to accept as inevitable the quite common event of marriage during training. This, of course, considerably complicates the financial situation. It is in the parish where this is felt most. Not only have the stipends of assistant curates increased (in some dioceses they are not far short of that of incumbents), but accommodation has to be provided. For a married curate with a family it means buying a house and, because of marriage and children's allowances, providing a considerable stipend. This is quite daunting for many parishes, and for some quite impossible. In consequence it is often the most needy parishes which are left without curates. Ordinands can't be blamed if they appear to go to parishes which are better able to pay.

In the meantime the desperate shortage of men continues. Clergy are working single-handed in many parishes of up to 10,000 or more. Inevitably the most difficult parishes, often in rather forbidding and

sordid surroundings, are the hardest hit. It is not surprising that vicars are often discouraged and even in despair, and occasionally break down under the strain. It is true that Evangelical colleges are full and that for several years there has been a steadily increasing number of first-rate men coming forward. We can thank God for this. But the over-all picture is by no means cheerful. The figure for ordinations in 1959 has just been published and it is very slightly down on 1958. There are signs of a recession which may be slight and temporary, but is nevertheless disturbing. At present a smaller total of men is attending selection centres. It is impossible to prophesy on such slender evidence, but, at least, it forbids us to assume that all is well, and it is a certain indication that we have not yet begun even to ensure the maintenance of the present numbers of our clergy. It is impossible to exaggerate the gravity of the situation. Not only is the parochial system which is the glory and privilege of the Church of England in danger of breaking down, but, what is far more serious, the Church is failing in her responsibilities and opportunities in a critical period of the nation's history. When the nation is threatened with the mortal dangers which affect luxurious living, and the world lives under the shadow of a war of total destruction, the Church is weak and her witness is enfeebled. Our most urgent task is to pray for a revival which could transform the situation, and that the Lord of the harvest will thrust out more labourers into the harvest.

¹ F. R. Barry: *Vocation and Ministry*, p. 62.

² *Op. cit.*, p. 164.

³ *Op. cit.*, p. ix.

⁴ *Op. cit.*, p. 71.

⁵ F. R. Barry: *Op. cit.*, p. 104.