

'Partners in Ministry'

BY MARTIN PARSONS

THE Report of the Commission on the Deployment and Payment of the Clergy asks that the recommendations it makes should be seen and judged together. They are not piecemeal, unrelated proposals. We probably need to go further and suggest that the whole Report be evaluated alongside the Pastoral Measure, the Report on Government by Synod, and the proposals for Anglican-Methodist Reunion. It is part of the total change which is envisaged in order to equip the Church to advance the Kingdom of God in the 1970s.

We can have nothing but admiration for the purpose behind the Report, namely to ensure that the Church of England shall use its resources to far better advantage. That this involves a more effective deployment of man-power and a more realistic distribution of money is obvious. The Church was left high and dry by the Industrial Revolution and it must not be allowed to miss the tide again. It may be questioned whether the Commission looked as far forward as the planners in other spheres of life are doing, but it certainly had its eye on the future. Recognising quite rightly that worship of contemporary trends can be a form of idolatry, it nevertheless resists every temptation to nostalgic conservatism.

While respecting the desire that the Report should be considered as a comprehensive whole, it is still possible to analyse the proposals in detail without removing them from their context. In what follows we shall say little about the payment of the clergy, but concentrate rather on deployment, and in particular on the proposed abolition of patronage and substitution of appointment by Diocesan Ministry Commissions.

Patronage has an honourable ancestry. In very early times the local lord would feel it his duty to build a church for his people and, with due authority from the bishop, to appoint and maintain a clergyman. The advowson thus created passed, with the whole estate, from father to son and so came to be treated as property. Patronage could be disposed of like any other property, either by gift or by sale. In one way or another livings passed into the hands of the Crown, University Colleges and other corporate bodies, as well as Bishops and Cathedral Chapters. But a large number remained in the possession of individual patrons.

Every system can be abused, and in times of spiritual lukewarmness is likely to be abused. The low level of Christian life in the Church of England in the eighteenth century may have been exaggerated by some historians through too much generalisation. Yet it was undoubtedly a period of spiritual barrenness and moral decay, and this was reflected in the scandalous way in which patronage was bought and sold. This unholy traffic became a means of securing a position of ease and comparative affluence for some younger son who had no

intention of performing more than the minimum of duties, and often not even that.

Meanwhile the labours of a tiny minority of godly pastors, among whom Charles Simeon was pre-eminent, were bringing young men of deep conviction and consecration into the Ministry. There was a turning of the tide, but Simeon says he 'saw some of the most efficient and Godly clergy in the Church remaining unbeneficed, whilst utterly worthless and useless idlers were able to secure important livings for the sake of the loaves and fishes'. It was Simeon who wrote to the Bishop of Oxford words which might have found a place in the Fenton Morley Report: 'The greatest reform that the Church needs is an improvement in the method of appointment to the cure of souls!'

The story of the founding of his Trust is too well-known to need repeating. With the highest of motives he used what wealth he had to acquire livings. In his own words, 'They purchase *incomes*, I purchase *spheres*, wherein the prosperity of the Established Church, and the Kingdom of Our Blessed Lord, may be advanced; and not for a season only, but if it please God in perpetuity also'. Preaching at the Centenary Celebrations in Holy Trinity, Cambridge in 1936, Archbishop Cosmo Lang used these words: 'He was no narrow partisan. He could wish, he said—and how cordially we must echo his wish—that 'names and parties were buried in eternal oblivion'. Nor was it for any mere party reason that he founded his famous Trust. We must remember the times in which he lived. Men were ordained to the Sacred Ministry with the least possible scrutiny of their motives or fitness.' (He then quoted Simeon's words to the Bishop of Oxford already cited.) 'No better manual for all patrons of Benefices could be found than the Deed which declared his Trust. I am bound to add that in my experience his trustees have been loyal to the spirit of this Trust.'

The abuses which Simeon set out to reform now no longer exist. The argument is therefore put forward that what has been a good system in its day is not relevant to the present or future. Seldom has so much been said with such brevity as in the words on page 24 of the Report: 'The present system of patronage will, therefore, need to be superseded'. Private patronage, the Commission assures us, 'has outlived its usefulness, and now constitutes a hindrance to the mission of the Church'. If this is really so, then the sooner it is abolished the better. But we need to be assured that it will be replaced by something better. The Report is able to list a number of points in which patronage has been effective in the past, and it would be a pity if any of these assets were lost.

First, private patronage has served to secure a lay influence in appointments. The majority of individual patrons are lay people, often with deep roots in the local community. Most patronage trusts have laymen serving on them, though strangely enough the proto-type of the modern Public Trusts has been exclusively clerical since Charles Simeon founded it in 1836. This apparent weakness is partly offset by the encouragement of lay participation from the parishes, with very close consultation not merely by correspondence or P.C.C. resolution but by personal visits to the vacant parishes.

It is not to be denied that Diocesan Ministry Commissions could also encourage lay influence. But it has to be remembered that the chairman is the bishop of the diocese, suffragan bishops and archdeacons are members, and the rest are representatives of the clergy and laity from each archdeaconry, chosen by the synod. The twenty elected members have a distinct numerical advantage over the ex-officio members, but anyone with any experience of diocesan committees knows that the weight carried by the dignatories is considerable. In a matter like the appointment of clergymen it could be expected that the lay element would defer to those who are presumed to know about these things. As to consultation with lay people in the parishes, the scant regard sometimes given to local opinion when matters of pastoral reorganisation are under discussion does not promise well for the lay voice being heard.

In one respect the proposals make provision for lay participation which goes beyond anything that has hitherto been suggested. It is thought that among the twenty chosen members of the Commission there should be some from the community at large. It is not specified that they should be church people, or even Christians. A trade union official, a welfare officer, or a teacher may well be a good judge of character and able to assess the ordinary needs of the neighbourhood in which he serves. But unless he is also a committed Christian he is quite unable to evaluate the spiritual state of a parish or the message which a prospective incumbent will preach.

One outcome of lay influence through private patronage has been, the Report tells us, 'a considerable movement of clergy across the country'. This is surely an enormous advantage. In some branches of the Anglican Communion where a different, and apparently more rational, system of appointment is followed the diocese tends to become a water-tight compartment. Private patrons are gloriously free from 'diocesanism', a horrid word for a rather horrid thing. A simple illustration may help. As I write I have before me a list of six livings in six different dioceses recently filled by one body of Trustees. In every case the man appointed comes from another diocese, and in every case the bishop appears glad to welcome a man from outside.

There is a real danger that this kind of cross-fertilization between dioceses will cease if the proposal for Diocesan Ministry Commissions goes through. Leslie Paul wanted Regional Boards, which would give somewhat wider scope for manoeuvre. There is, of course, provision for a Central Ministry Commission, but so much of the responsibility is in the hands of the Diocesan body that in-breeding would seem to be inevitable.

The Report goes on to tell us that patronage has made it possible for the unorthodox and those wedded to minority opinions to find preferment. It is to be hoped that the word 'unorthodox' is not used in its literal meaning for it would be a pity to commend anything which had given encouragement to the promulgation of wrong teaching. Minority opinions are another matter. The few are not always wrong any more than they are always right. Simeon held minority opinions at Cambridge, and without the freehold would never have survived the early opposition to his ministry. Patronage, the Report says, has

enabled certain kinds of churchmanship to root themselves in the parishes.

Although this is listed as one of the positive contributions of patronage in the past, there is an underlying trend in the Report which suggests a dislike for too much variety. The Commission pays lip service to the glory of the Church's comprehensiveness. It hopes that variety of churchmanship will find representation on the Diocesan Ministry Commission. It emphasises that the character of individual parishes must be respected. But it warns against perpetuating certain types of churchmanship unchanged, when they should grow and develop. It is this last point which causes some concern. In the Church of England today growth and development usually seems to be towards a central and less well-defined position. Such a movement away from definiteness is looked upon as a growing up into spiritual maturity. A movement in the opposite direction, which could equally be maintained to be growth and development, is often represented as an unhappy change of churchmanship. The wording of the Report need not bear this interpretation, but experience of the way the wind blows is not reassuring to those whose growth towards maturity has included a deepening of certain doctrinal convictions. These may be at either end of the scale, and their convictions may be held with love and tolerance. But it is a pity if their right to exist is not fully recognised. This might be one of the effects of the setting up of D.M.C.'s.

The Commission grants that patronage has cost the Church little in money. Compared with the cost of the proposed new bodies with possibly—one would have thought inevitably—full-time secretaries, this is a point to be considered. Patrons may accept the bouquets offered to them by the Commission for their care and concern, and their voluntary, unpaid labours. The new proposals would certainly involve the Church in heavy additional expenditure, and we ought to ask ourselves whether there can be the same degree of care and concern as is possible under the present system. This is not to say that patronage as we know it has always been ideally administered. There is plenty of room for improvement.

Clearly there is need for reform. Many of the suggestions put forward by the Commission are excellent. We need a more rational system of payment. Compulsory retirement from office at seventy is long overdue, and voluntary retirement on full pension after forty years of service, at whatever age, is very desirable. Greater pastoral care of the clergy is needed, and the idea of the suffragan/archdeacon may commend itself. Ways must be found whereby the claims of all clergymen are carefully considered, and the keeping of a central register has everything to commend it. Yet if ever the movement of men became like the moving of pawns on a chess board, in the belief that this was strategy, it would turn the whole operation into a vast impersonal machine.

The Commission is anxious to avoid this. It speaks movingly of the danger of the overall look being achieved at the cost of sensitivity to individual persons. It wants to see real pastoral concern. Yet many will wonder whether the complicated machinery envisaged can do even as much in this direction as the present system, with all its

possible pitfalls, has been able to do. Let changes come, and come speedily. But let them not be of the kind which destroy what the past has given before we know that what is put in its place is going to work. Evolutionary change has been the genius of the Church of England, as the architecture of many ancient churches witnesses.

If there has been criticism of the Report in this article there can be none for the basic aims of the Commission. We can all agree with the statement that 'the needs of the Church, as it faces the tremendous challenge of the latter half of the twentieth century, must have priority'. The words occur as a summing up of the section which demolishes patronage. It is interesting to compare with this the words of Charles Simeon: 'It is for the *people* and for the *Church of God* that we are to provide'. He charged his Trustees that 'when they shall be called upon to appoint to a living, they consult nothing but the welfare of the people for whom they are to provide, and whose eternal interests have been confided to them'. If Diocesan Ministry Commissions ever come, they might do worse than have Simeon's Charge written into their constitutions.

Letter to the Editor

Sir,

In evaluating Dr. Hughes' editorial comments, printed in the Summer issue, on the Anglican-Methodist Unity Commission's Interim Statement, the following points should be borne in mind.

1. An inter-church commission, like any other responsible body, is bound by its terms of reference. This commission has been told simply to tidy up the 1963 scheme (see pp. 77f.). The fact that its offering is 'little more than a rehash of the 1963 Report' should not therefore cause surprise, let alone 'disappointment': what else could one expect? Equally, it is gratuitous to opine that its members 'have been happy to cast themselves in the role of apostles of equivocation' when they are simply doing their appointed job of spelling out the basis of the equivocal 1963 Service of Reconciliation.

2. The Statement, like the Interim Statement of the first commission, is unsigned. Also, it is put forward on an explicitly provisional basis: 'nothing stated here necessarily represents the final thoughts of the Commission' (p. 3). It should not, therefore, be thought 'surprising' that it contains 'no note of dissent from either Anglican or Methodist'. (The 1958 Interim Statement contained none either.) The Statement is a fragment: a specimen of work in progress, put out to test opinion and secure reactions (p. 2) which will guide the commission in composing its final report. Whether all members of the commission will be able to recommend the 1963 scheme when the tidying-up process is complete is something which they themselves cannot be expected to know, let alone to say, till that point is reached.

3. The doctrinal statements are not confessional in intent. If they purported to set up new standards of faith for the two churches as they advance through full communion into union, they could fairly be