

Diocesan Boundaries

THE ARBUTHNOT REPORT

By C. W. J. BOWLES

THE title *Diocesan Boundaries* must suggest to many people a report which contains an arid discussion of a piece of ecclesiastical administration of little importance. For others it may raise hopes of rectifying some division inherited from the past when it was meaningful but which now stultifies certain parts of the Church's work. For others it may hold promise that important matters of principle affecting the constitution and life of dioceses are to be examined.

Those who compose the first group may possibly have their immediate reaction modified by glancing through this book published by the Church Information Office at four shillings and sixpence. Those in the second group will learn that, given the will to change on the part of those concerned, the local revision of diocesan boundaries will become much easier when the Pastoral Measure now on its way through Parliament receives the royal assent. Those in the third group will certainly find some matters of principle discussed, but it may strike them that the discussion is very limited. This is partly due to the fact that the Archbishop of Canterbury's Commission under the chairmanship of Sir John Arbuthnot was given very limited terms of reference. They were 'to recommend in the light of present conditions and of plans which may reasonably be expected to be carried out for development of the South-East and its component areas, what is likely to be the best organisation of the Church by dioceses' (p.9). The Commission's discussion, therefore, was limited to 11 dioceses out of the total of 43 in England.

No recommendations can possibly be made on this matter unless there is some general agreement about the size that dioceses ought to be. At present, those under discussion vary from London with 3,930,000 people and 496 incumbencies to Portsmouth with a population of 607,000 and 111 incumbencies. This disparity is obviously much too great even if it is allowed that various circumstances prevent any close approximation in numbers. The determining factors seem to be the nature of a bishop's work and the relationships he should have with his own parishes and the Church at large, but it is about these that there is great diversity of opinion in the Church of England. Some want a diocesan bishop to have the same intimate connection with the people in his congregations as the parish clergyman has with those who live in his parish. Others want to retain what has been envisaged as an ideal, namely, a limited number of bishops who because they are comparatively few can be of the calibre to be bishops of England, men of leadership both in Church and State.

The Commission was asked 'to take as the size of diocese ultimately to be reached not less than a total population of 900,000 or a total number of 200 incumbencies' (p. 9). We are not told how this standard was determined but it steers something of a middle course between the

current, conflicting opinions. There is nothing radical about it because there are at present 23 dioceses with a population of under 900,000 and 12 with under 200 incumbents, but it was wise to give this sort of guide so that, if the conclusions are accepted, experiment can be made with a larger number of dioceses of more uniform size without involving enormous disturbance of present patterns in a short space of time. The proposals that the Commission has made, if found satisfactory in practice, would point the way forward in other parts of the country.

The Commission was wisely given 'freedom to recommend exceptions' and this it has done in the instances of the three dioceses which it has proposed should be created out of the present diocese of Oxford. The reasons behind its proposals are cogently set out on pages 61-63 of the report. They are chiefly concerned with the effects of size and distance on the relationship between the Bishop and the present 504 incumbencies and the connection of the laity with the diocese as a body and its administration. While the new diocese of Oxford would become the third smallest in population (332,000) it would still have 179 incumbencies and the Bishop would still have his existing relationships to the university and an unusually large number of special, religious institutions. A division of the present diocese into two would have been arbitrary and awkward.

In considering changes the Commission had, as one of its guiding principles, that it should 'have regard to the direction in which the area looks in its secular affairs and whether the alteration will make it easier or more difficult for the cathedral to be the centre of worship and diocesan life' (p. 36, xi). It was in accordance with the first part of that statement that dioceses were in the past made coterminous with a county or, in some instances, with two or more counties, but the Commission recognises that secular affairs are not always organised now after this traditional pattern. Its proposals for London, Rochester, Southwark, Guildford and Chelmsford are accordingly based in part on the idea that 'there should be an ecclesiastical association of dioceses to form a counterpart to the civil authority now responsible for administering the Greater London area' (p. 24). This arrangement was chosen in preference to making the dioceses run along the main lines of communication going out from the centre of London. That would have produced the valuable coexistence in each diocese of parishes of different social types and allowed the easy transference of clergymen from one area to another with the possibilities of renewal which that creates, but the Commission decided to suggest other ways of securing such transference. Its approach to the Greater London area makes such good sense that it is surprising that they make so much of a point of retaining Lambeth in the new diocese of Croydon since it can no longer be in Canterbury. There are reasons of history for this, but the result is near absurdity in the second scheme that the Commission outlines for 30 much smaller dioceses in place of the present 11.

For the rest the Commission follows in the main county boundaries. By this means 'civic and ecclesiastical loyalties are mutually strengthened'. The report goes on to say, 'Representatives of councils have told us that in matters such as education and welfare services the position is greatly simplified when they can deal with a single

authority on the ecclesiastical side' (p. 22). This contrasts strongly with the statement from one of the Sub-Commissions about the small area of Hampshire in the present Guildford diocese: 'We have been told that the difficulties, for example over educational matters, that might have been expected to arise as a result of this area of Hampshire being in the diocese of Guildford have not in fact been experienced' (p. 52). The Sub-Commission has wisely brought to bear on its recommendations other considerations of secular relationships and distances from the diocesan centres. There are at present other instances where counties contain parts of different dioceses with no apparent unfortunate consequences, but the Sub-Commission concerned with the Oxford diocese seems to have been afraid of looking at this situation otherwise than gingerly. This draws attention to an unfortunate lack of co-ordination of thought between the Commission and its two Sub-Commissions. Might not the problem created by the size and shape of the Chichester diocese have been partly solved by the formation of a diocese composed of the archdeaconry of Hastings and the rural part of the diocese of Southwark? Perhaps the report of the Redcliffe-Maud Commission on local government areas will so alter the county system as to make possible a much more rational reorganisation of dioceses in accordance with the Arbuthnot Commission's guiding principles.

The Commission itself in some instances has not applied them with sufficient thoroughness or, perhaps more correctly, the Sub-Commissions have not accepted some of them. Neither in Chichester as it is nor in the proposed diocese of Reading can the cathedral be the centre of worship and diocesan life' (p. 36, xi). The area of Berkshire immediately south of Oxford looks to that city in secular affairs rather than to Reading and its main lines of communication run the same way. In civil affairs Sussex does not look to Chichester and the main lines of communication cut across the routes there. This conflicts with a further guiding principle of the Commission's: 'Great regard must be paid to ease of communication. Minutes, not miles, are the important factor to-day' (p. 35, vi). The Sub-Commission gives little indication of having applied this principle with any thoroughness to the diocese of Chichester. The calculation has to be made in hours and not minutes when it is a matter of the Bishop visiting many of the parishes in his diocese and of many clergymen going to see him. The strain of constant, long car journeys on bishops and archdeacons ought not to be overlooked.

Decisions about the size and shape of a diocese ought to be determined to a large extent by the nature of a diocesan bishop's proper place in the life of his diocese and of the Church at large. Views about this have varied from one period of history to another. The Commission properly discusses the question and its statement about it, though brief, is valuable. It is concerned chiefly with the family relationships within the diocese and the bishop's teaching, liturgical and pastoral functions (p. 17). In the light of this the figures given in the terms of reference (a population of 900,000, or a total number of 200 incumbencies) are fully big enough. It was wise, therefore, that the Commissions and Sub-Commissions were also told 'that they

should take in view an alternative of smaller dioceses including the need for co-operation between them, in the event of the adoption of a general policy of making them smaller' (p. 9). Such a scheme is worked out in detail and the 30 dioceses range in size from Hackney with a population of 1,277,440 and 152 incumbencies to Tonbridge with 169,000 and 66 incumbencies. It is noted that the latter area is one of potential development. The purpose of this scheme 'would be to increase the opportunities open to a diocesan bishop for direct pastoral care of his clergy and laity' (p. 101). The 30 dioceses would be grouped into 6 regions each with a regional council and a regional board of finance. This is because 'it would be impossible financially and undesirable for the Church to afford the normal administrative organisation for each small diocese' (p. 101). Each regional area would have an episcopal chairman who would have an auxiliary bishop attached to him who could deputise for any bishop in the region.

Such a scheme has great merits but it does not solve the problem of suffragan or auxiliary bishops which vexes so much the minds of many people, particularly clergymen, in the Church of England at present. The Commission is aware of it and discusses it (pages 17-20). It introduces a new element into the discussion when it says, 'In our view it is important that for each diocese there should be a bishop available to whom the powers of the diocesan bishop can be delegated completely in an emergency or in the event of the diocesan being absent for a period' (p. 19). It adds that 'a case can be made in some dioceses for combining the office of archdeacon and suffragan bishop' (p. 21). The Commission's recommendation for the 16 dioceses produced by its main scheme is 10 suffragans, 11 suffragan/archdeacons and 24 other archdeacons. This seems to conflict with the Commission's statement that 'there can be only one "Father in God" in a diocese' (p. 18).

The Commission also discusses archdeacons and suggests that 'in dioceses where there is more than one archdeacon there is sometimes a case for freeing one archdeacon to deal with the financial and material interests of the diocese as a whole, though where there is a suitably qualified layman to do the work we would not want to use clergy' (p. 21). Would it not be better to find the suitably qualified laymen and make every archdeacon a bishop? The crux of the matter is the territorial titles held by suffragans. If these were abolished and every archdeacon were an assistant bishop there would be a corporate *episcopate* in each diocese, but the bishop with the name of the see would clearly be the head of the family. This would be similar to team ministries in parishes. It is a pity that the Commission did not discuss this possibility.

We have noted, in connection with the scheme for smaller dioceses, that the Commission is concerned to avoid the reproduction in every new diocese of the present diocesan machinery. In chapter XII it indicates ways in which much of the administration could be arranged on a regional basis and suggests a regional council, under the chairmanship of the Bishop of London, for the Greater London Area. It would be responsible for 'the raising of finance by quota through the dioceses' and, among other matters, education, dilapidations, church building,

social responsibility and stewardship. The Commission rightly sees great possibilities in this: 'The organisation of these activities for the larger area would, we feel, release them from any danger of a too limited approach, and at the same time strengthen them by enabling them to command the services of a sufficient number of well-informed and able people who would secure for the Church's work a proper standing in relation to local authorities and other bodies' (p. 79). It would be striking if changes made to serve better the ends of personal, pastoral care were also to increase true fellowship in the Church and more effective witness. It would be an assistance to these ends if, as the Commission suggests, a Diocesan Equalisation Fund were set up 'to which richer dioceses could make contributions, either directly or indirectly, towards the financial assistance of less prosperous dioceses, thus mitigating the variations in diocesan financial capacity' (p. 81).

Anyone who has worked on the staff of a small diocese knows that while it is most valuable from a pastoral point of view its smallness is a hindrance to the movement of incumbents when need arises. There is never a sufficient number of vacancies at any one time to find the necessary square holes for all the square pegs who need to be moved for their own sakes or their parishes. The Commission is obviously aware of this because it thinks it 'essential that there should be arrangements between each London diocese and its neighbours for the interchange of clergy' (p. 81). Its proposal avoids the cumbersome and somewhat impersonal arrangements of regional patronage boards such as were suggested in the Paul Report. It 'would group dioceses in small consortia which will involve close liaison between the bishops concerned'. It adds the wise comment that 'interchange will be more easily effected when the field is limited to a small number of dioceses rather than being wide open' (p. 82).

Hesitations are often expressed about increasing the number of dioceses because it would seem to involve more cathedrals with more expenditure on buildings and on large staffs who would inevitably be drawn away from parishes. The Commission advises against the building of any new cathedral and it could with advantage have also advised against the enlargement of those parish churches which would serve as cathedrals, but it recommends additional man-power for them. It endorses the view of the Cathedrals Commission that in nearly every diocese there should be two residentiary canons engaged solely in cathedral work, but it adds the qualification that 'there should be only one such canon until the need for any additional help has been established beyond doubt' (p. 92). This seems to the writer to be committing the Church Commissioners to using too large a portion of their resources before the need for this expensive use of man-power has been demonstrated. Let there be no residentiary canon until the need for one 'has been established beyond doubt'.

One of the Commission's guiding principles is that 'existing diocesan boundaries should not be disturbed unless there are clear advantages to be gained from so doing' (p. 34, iv). Time spent on changing the machinery of the Church's life can easily deflect attention from its primary, evangelistic task, but in the judgment of the writer the main proposals in this report are sufficiently modest to justify something

like them being tried as a sort of pilot scheme. There is so much good sense, careful thinking and clear presentation of facts in this report that it ought not to be ignored.

Letter to the Editor

Dear Sir,

I have read with interest the animadversions of my friend Dr. Packer on my editorial in the summer issue. I did not in fact misconceive the purpose of the interim statement TOWARDS RECONCILIATION. What I strongly object to is the principle of procedure on which this as well as the 1963 report is based, namely, the acceptance of incompatible teachings and practices in the Church of England as not merely facts of reality but also valid options for which room must be found in any united church of the future. I am much concerned that evangelical spokesmen seem now to have approved this principle of procedure. I do not question the integrity of those who think in this way nor that they believe they are doing the right thing under the prevailing circumstances. But the decision to go with the current of co-existence, hoping (unrealistically, in my judgment) that all will at last end up in a harbour of united compatibility, is, I submit, a departure from the historic evangelical position. How can the doctrine of the Reformers co-exist with the doctrine of the mass and its accompaniments? This is what the co-signatories of the 1963 Dissentient View had in mind when they asserted that 'most Methodists would prefer to be visibly one with the Churches of the Reformation than with medieval and unreformed Christendom' (it is a sad commentary that our Church of England is no longer regarded as a church of the Reformation!) and, further, that 'to move from a Church committed to the evangelical faith into a heterogeneous body permitting, and even encouraging, unevangelical doctrines and practices, would be a step backward which not even the desirability of closer relations could justify'. For evangelicals to go with the tide of this report and interim statement is to all intents and purposes to bid farewell to the coherent biblical faith of our Prayer Book and Articles, so long treasured and handed down to us at great cost.

I do not follow Dr. Packer's reasoning that because a statement is unsigned it precludes, apparently, the appending of a dissentient view. And, while I agree that the doctrinal statements of the report are descriptive and not prescriptive, I find it difficult to understand why Dr. Packer adds that they are not permissive. Four views of Scripture are listed, ranging from the conservative to the radical, and, after stating the hope that 'a deeper and wider agreement on the nature of Scripture and tradition' may emerge in the united Church, the qualification is added that 'there can be no question of the exclusion of the views outlined above from the life of our Churches at any stage in the present scheme'. Is not this permissive? As for 'different positions regarding ministerial priesthood', although it is well known that this