

Editorial

AT Church Assembly this month the Synodical Government legislation comes up for the definitive revision stage. Immediately after that the World Council of Churches representatives gather at Uppsala, and then at the end of July the Lambeth Conference starts. Originally we had intended to devote this editorial to Lambeth and Uppsala, but the appearance of the final Anglican-Methodist reunion proposals and of the Archbishops' Intercommunion report (both were published too late for consideration in this number) means that ecumenism will be prominent in our autumn number, and the appearance of Dr. Stephenson's excellent book on the first Lambeth Conference has meant that what was originally intended as an editorial has now grown into an article and is contained later in this number. We shall therefore devote our space here to Synodical Government.

People throughout the Church of England talk happily, and sometimes enthusiastically, about synodical government as though it were some great prize to be grasped and was just round the corner out of sight. The very fact that they talk like that shows both the looseness of their thinking and the confusion as to what is meant by synodical government. If we judge aright, what most of these people are enthusing about is the promise held out to them that soon the laity will be brought into church government on a par with the clergy, and that the traditional clerical domination of the Anglican scene will be rectified. Whether that will be the outcome is a matter of opinion, but it is by no means certain.

Most of the major reports currently before the Church of England are radical and far reaching. On the face of it the Synodical Government proposals are very modest, for in its Church Assembly the Church of England already has a perfectly good synodical body and has had it ever since just after the First World War. But appearances may be deceptive, and we shall not be surprised if synodical government proposals do not have far reaching, and perhaps unexpected, results. The real reasons behind synodical government moves, at the centre at any rate, are three: first, a desire to tidy up and streamline; second, a desire to reduce numbers; third, a desire to straighten out relations with the Convocations. We want to suggest here that at least six considerations arise from the proposals.

First, relations with the State. Readers of Dr. Stephenson's book will notice that the first Lambeth Conference was closely linked with synodical proposals in the colonies. Readers of the main synodical government report will note a dark hint on page 16 of impending changes in relationships with the State, and anyone who knows how Anglican policy works recognises that these little hints are frequently the most significant thing in a report. There is a separate Church and State Commission sitting at present; that Commission itself is heavily loaded with radicals, and almost certain to urge some change in relations with Parliament. This may or may not be a good thing, and

we incline to think not, but at this stage all churchmen need to realise to what synodical government proposals may lead. Were the Evangelicals and the Broad Churchmen who opposed the first Lambeth Conference and many of the synodical moves of the time on the grounds of a break with the State right or wrong? That issue bears very careful pondering.

Second, and closely related, the question of the basis of church membership, the basis of the lay voting franchise. This has already been settled after a very full debate in the February Church Assembly, and the existing baptismal franchise is to stay. Alternatives canvassed, especially from the House of Clergy, were confirmation, communicant status, and 'habitual worshipper' suggested by a small committee. Anything that meant counting church attendance was ruled out; in the event of a dispute, attendance would be virtually impossible to prove in a court, and such a test might lead to the most unedifying scenes of watching others for attendance records. Confirmation was the only live option to baptism, and it is well known that High Churchmen have been arguing for this for most of this century and indeed before that. In the end confirmation was rejected partly because there is a good deal of uncertainty about the future of confirmation, partly because, as the two official spokesmen for the synodical government said, it might mean a row with Parliament, and partly because many laity believed it wrong in principle. But two facts were significant about the debate. The House of Clergy was plainly out of step with the Bishops and the Laity, and the two official spokesmen of the Commission (both clergy) said they preferred confirmation (!) though they were against it now for pragmatic reasons. There seems to be a tendency in the House of Clergy to try to tighten up the boundaries of the church, to draw rigid, and hard and fast lines of demarcation. Several senior members of the House of Laity have expressed their concern about this, and it is to be feared that the same tendency is found among Evangelical clergy, especially the younger ones, so for this reason we especially welcome the warnings contained in the Archdeacon of Aston's article, particularly its second half. Evangelical clergy with their very definite (and right) views of conversion have not always balanced this with an adequate doctrine of the church as the company of the baptised, and there is some danger of a newly emerging sectarianism here. One thing is certain, if it does emerge; it will alienate the vast majority of the laity, especially those on the fringes. The decision to retain the baptismal franchise was a wise one, and we hope the matter may be regarded as settled.

Third, a great deal is made of stripping Convocations of their powers. Evangelicals are inclined to rejoice over this, and High Churchmen are rather alarmed. Far too much has been made of this issue. If the reader looks at, for example, the *Prayer Book (Alternative and Other Services) Measure*, it is plain that the laity have a full say in liturgical revision. The principle is established in law in that measure, and in practice it has been working for quite a few years. It is true there are certain procedural difficulties such as the order in which the Houses are consulted, making any comment which the Laity make, necessitate a reference back, but this is only a matter of procedure

and could easily be straightened out. The principle of equal participation in liturgical matters is established, and with a little more co-operation within Church House could easily be extended elsewhere. We believe there are grounds for retaining the Convocations and the House of Laity very much as they are, and not amalgamating them into one great new synod.

The reasons for this bring us to the fourth consideration, the grave and growing danger of bureaucratic domination in the new synod. The present set up is four houses of Convocation, two in Canterbury and two in York, a Church Assembly and a House of Laity. This does have the complication of making liaison a problem, though as a member of a Steering Committee, I can add from personal experience that the problem is not great and often exaggerated. But this arrangement has the great advantage of making the platform justify its case in every debate. That is important, for even at the moment it is virtually impossible to defeat the platform's proposals. It may soon become quite impossible short of a revolution. The question at issue is how to protect minorities from domination by the bureaucrats, and when we reflect on the number and radical nature of many changes being canvassed today and the fact that the Assembly controls a budget of about a million pounds a year these days, the question of adequate control by the church *as a whole* as against control by a few central figures in Church House and Lambeth is a matter of some moment. We believe retaining mandatory reference of certain matters to the House of Laity and the Convocations *sitting separately* provides a necessary system of checks and balances for minority views. It is undeniable that certain distinctive views have emerged in separate meetings of the House of Laity, and it is doubtful if this would have been so if everything was settled quickly in one vast synod. If the choice is between a streamlined structure such as the bureaucrats love and an adequate protection of minorities on a slower and more complex system, let us have the latter any day. Looked at in terms of practical politics, it may well be that Evangelicals, who are ceasing to be a small minority nowadays, will gain out of the present proposals, but opportunism is not an adequate ground for deciding. It should be settled on the principle of protecting minorities, regardless of who they are and regardless of whether we agree with them or not. We do not believe that adequate safeguards for minorities are built into the present measure, and no one has yet suggested better ones than retaining the mandatory reference of certain matters to the separate houses.

The fifth consideration concerns the local application of the synodical principle. With the disappearance of one of the twin poles of authority and influence in the nineteenth century parish, the squire and the vicar, the latter has been left in undisputed mastery, hence the current heavy clerical domination in the Church of England which discourages some of the best and ablest laity, channelling them into other spheres of service, and encourages the idle to sit back and leave it all to the vicar and his professional colleagues. In such a situation it is likely to be years before real synodical action takes root at all levels. This is of course an additional reason for ensuring adequate safeguards at

the centre, for the present method of referring important reports from the centre for diocesan and local discussions is at best a rather painful charade and at worst something of a confidence trick. The questions put are rarely satisfactory. The discussion is inadequate, and many of those who vote do not understand the complex issues at stake. Discussion at all levels of the church is right and important, but it is not likely to work adequately for some little while, and unless much more time is allowed, it is doubtful if it will ever work on these complicated major reports.

Sixth, the question of the relationship of bishops to the synodical structure. It seems one can rarely keep episcopacy out of any Anglican discussion, but in this particular case it is very important to get the relationship right, for on the verdict depends whether the Church of England settles for prelacy or synodical episcopacy. We are not going into the complex question of the position of the bishop in his diocesan synod, whether he should have a vote on his own which amounts to a veto, the right to withdraw certain items, etc. Here we concentrate on the exclusive right of the bishops to settle the *final* form of a doctrinal measure. Is that compatible with an equal partnership between bishops, clergy and laity? We think not, for it makes the bishops the arbiters of controversial (it would only happen in such cases) legislation, and the only redress the others have is to veto the whole measure at final approval, when often all they want is the change of a phrase. This seems neither equitable nor prudent. The power and influence of bishops has no doubt declined in the country at large, but in the church it has greatly increased. If the principle of synodical government is equal partnership, is it not right that equal partnerships of bishops, clergy and laity should determine matters at all levels of the church? To make one group a privileged class seems to be inviting prelacy in by the back door when it has only just been turned out by the front. The appropriate body to settle any such dispute at the final stage of a measure would surely be the Synod's Standing Committee on which bishops, clergy and laity are all represented.

Whether the synodical government measure in its present form is satisfactory, we believe there is good reason to doubt. The basic principle of partnership is right, but the application leaves much still to be desired.

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Readers may be interested to know that our fellow ecclesiastical and theological periodicals the Anglican *Church Quarterly Review* and the Methodist *London Quarterly and Holborn Review* have decided to come together as *The Church Quarterly*, the first issue of which appears this summer. We should like to wish this venture every success; the new joint editors will be the Revd. Michael Perry and the Revd. Gordon Wakefield, Anglican and Methodist respectively.

G.E.D.