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Are the Clergy Being Deployed Fairly?

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Introduction

Since 1975 the Church of England has been committed to 'fair shares' in the deployment of its clergy. This was a consequence of the general acceptance given to the report now widely referred to as the Sheffield Report.¹ In 1979 the House of Bishops reaffirmed its commitment to the 'Sheffield' objective of 'fair shares',² and from the accompanying report it is clear this is equated to supporting a particular formula in the Sheffield Report.³ Other reports, in the intervening period, had continued to use the ideas of the original report, and had continued to use the same formula.

Although there has been some disquiet about the effects of the Sheffield deployment recommendations, few people have challenged the basic assumption that the original formula was fair or that it would remain fair. We believe that it is no longer likely to be fair, even in its own terms. Some short cuts were inevitable in the original report, but it is staggering that six years later no proper study of the problems of a fair allocation, or of possible alternative deployment formulae, has been presented.

'Fairness', in terms of all the reports, implies deploying the clergy between dioceses according to four statistics: the diocesan population, the area of the diocese, the electoral roll of the diocese and the number of places of worship in the diocese. These figures were standardized by being divided by their arithmetic mean, taken over the forty-three dioceses (itself a questionable practice, as the diocese of London was treated equally with the diocese of Sodor and Man) to give four factors, each one the ratio of a particular diocese's statistic to the national average diocese. The four factors were then weighted in the proportions 8, 1, 3, 3. These proportions were considered fair initially because when applied to the 1973 figures:

- i) they allocated more men to 'urban' dioceses and less to 'rural' dioceses;
- ii) no diocese lost or gained more than one hundred men.

It is this combination of criteria for fairness which looks increasingly curious as the years pass. Is this still a justifiable interpretation of fairness? Does it still lead to the same proportions, and hence the same formula?

The historic deployment

The Sheffield report did not examine the relationship between the four factors and the existing deployment of clergy in 1973. Instead, it referred to the variations between dioceses in the ratio of clergy to population. Although there were substantial variations in this ratio, it was nevertheless true that in 1973 three-quarters of the variation in the numbers of clergymen from one diocese to another could be accounted for by the variations in population.

In fact, 95 per cent of the variation in the numbers of clergymen from one diocese to another can be accounted for by the differences in the populations and the numbers of places of worship in the dioceses taken together. If these two figures are standardized in the same way as in the Sheffield Report, and then given a weighting of approximately 1:1, they yield an allocation formula which corresponds closely to the pattern in 1973. This shows that the church has historically deployed men where the population is, and where the places of worship are.

Furthermore, this formula, where it deviated from the existing deployment, allocated more men to 'urban' areas and less to 'rural' areas without creating any differences of more than one hundred men. In other words, a standardization of the existing pattern in 1973 seems to satisfy the fairness criteria as well as the Sheffield proportions.

Of course, everyone knows that some clergymen were ministering to parishes of five hundred or less and others to parishes of ten thousand or more. However, these facts are obscured by the aggregated diocesan data because most dioceses include a mixture of urban and rural areas. It is the balance between the two that varies. To see the large variations one must look at smaller units, and an obvious unit between the parish and the diocese is the deanery.

The deanery is also a convenient and appropriate level for planning and co-operation, but so far figures have not been presented at this level. Of course, many dioceses do examine problems and calculate statistics at the deanery level, but this was not taken into account when the Sheffield formula was devised. A study of the effects of different formulae on deaneries (if they were applied to them) would almost certainly highlight difficulties not considered in the report and thereby change the view of fairness. However, there is a technical problem in examining deaneries. Given the large number of deaneries, the analysis must be computer-based. Although the Bishop of Sheffield's working group used the computer, it could not examine deanery data. Even now it could not easily examine deanery data because the data are not stored in any convenient format.

In contrast to most organizations, the Church of England has not yet sought to exploit fully its computers by developing an integrated information system. Some of the data collected at parochial level is

processed by computer, but the different topics of information are handled independently so that it is impossible to draw together the information on any one parish or deanery. If the computerized records were linked together into an integrated parish information system, this would provide more information for diocesan planning and a more detailed examination of clergy deployment could be made with—as an almost certain consequence—a fairer plan.

The future position

One aspect of the Sheffield Report that deserves special commendation is the prediction of the total number of clergymen. Based on the 1973 figures, the group predicted a loss of about two thousand men, leaving 10,936 clergymen in 1980. At the time of writing, it appears there will be about 10,950 men in 1980.⁴ This exceptionally good forecast encourages acceptance of the most recent predictions that there will continue to be between 10,500 and 11,000 full-time clergymen for the next four or five years, and possibly until the end of the decade.⁵

If the total numbers do remain as stable as this suggests, then the need for a deployment formula becomes less acute; but, equally, the opportunity for redeployment between dioceses is much improved. The main problem would then be to find the finance to pay for everyone, and clearly the predictions would be upset without a substantial improvement in the church's income. The 15 per cent drop in clergy numbers has to a small extent disguised the effect of inflation over the last few years; when the numbers are stable the income must at least keep pace with inflation.

Although the Sheffield formula produces figures for the future, there is no consideration given to changes in the pattern of ministry. Indeed, several authors have attacked the Sheffield Report on this point and, clearly, significant changes in the role of clergymen would upset the basis of the formula.⁶ Ideally, the planning of clergy deployment should encompass a policy for the future role of the clergy, but it is probably more realistic to assume that the changes of the next few years will not significantly affect the requirements for clergy in different dioceses in a disproportionate way.

The Sheffield proportions

Assuming that the total number of men is fairly stable, their deployment between the dioceses depends on the four factors and the proportions in which they are weighted.

The original report clearly stated that the proportions being recommended were as 'a first step' formula. No doubt the group was aware that the proportions might be challenged, and only claimed that they were 'intrinsically sensible'.⁷ Perhaps the members realized

that if they repeated the whole exercise every four years, say, then the proportions would change. It is likely that if the exercise had been repeated in 1978, using identical criteria, then different proportions, and hence different allocations, would have resulted. The reason for this is simply that the figures they would have been working from would have changed, so that the net changes produced by the formulae tested would be different.

In fact, the proportions are unstable over time, in the sense that if the criteria are reapplied at different times they will yield different proportions. This is because the fairness criteria take account of the present position which, of course, changes. So, even if the original proportions were fair, it is difficult to claim they are still fair.

However, the fairness of the criterion which causes all this trouble is far from self-evident. Is it fair to expect a small diocese, with 100 to 200 clergymen, to lose a hundred men, when the maximum loss of a large diocese, with 300 to 400 clergymen, is also a hundred men? This point is recognized for the first time in the 1979 report, where the percentage change required for each diocese is shown. Surely it would have been fairer to work in terms of percentage changes right from the start? Certainly this would have yielded different proportions.

A criterion based on a maximum percentage could have been devised, but would also have led to proportions that were unstable over time. The problem really arises because there is little theoretical or experimental basis to the formula. It was very much an *ad hoc* formula which worked at the time. There are several ways the proportions could have been given a sounder basis. Indeed, the case for including the non-population factors is not argued strongly in the Sheffield Report (paras 19-27). Without these factors the deployment formula would be based solely on population (implying a proportion 1:0:0:0) and this can be given some theological basis.

A theological argument could also be made for a deployment based on serving existing congregations at the same time as reaching out to the unchurched populations, and theological debate could take place over the relative weights of the two. Rigid adherence to the Sheffield proportions inhibits such a debate taking place.

It may also be possible to determine the average contributions to a clergyman's workload of each of the factors considered. Together with the theological considerations, these could then be incorporated into an allocation formula which was seen to be desirable and fair in the long term.

The second stage of such a study would be to find a fair way of reaching that long term allocation over time.

The rate of change

The rate at which a diocese can change its clergy numbers is con-

strained in several ways. First, there are legal restraints involved, including those safeguarding incumbents. Then, and probably more important, changes in the manpower available will necessarily involve pastoral changes, which will take time and some of which will only be possible when the opportunity arises. Together, these would suggest there is a minimum time-period over which certain changes can be made, and plans for redeployment should be based on a suitable span of years. Yet the Sheffield Report seemed to select 1980 as its target date for a major redeployment simply because it was the beginning of a decade. Unfortunately, there are unpleasant consequences of setting unrealistic target dates and some of these have been experienced by dioceses over the last few years.

The unpleasant and possibly unfair consequences arise mainly because there is a shortage of opportunities for redeployment. Such opportunities usually occur when there are vacancies. However, it is not appropriate to use every vacancy for some restructuring; indeed some situations where vacancies occur will be best replaced with the same staffing level. But if there is pressure for a fast rate of change, then dioceses may be forced to make unsuitable pastoral changes simply because a vacancy has occurred, and this can lead to a feeling of unfairness within the diocese.

The problems associated with changing staff levels too quickly are not special to the church. Government and educational establishments are being forced to freeze vacancies in order to cut down on staff, and all too often the vacancies occur in the wrong area. This leads to serious imbalances and unfairness in these organizations which can only be rectified over a long time-period. It also leads to a substantial distortion of the normal age structure of staff and this is likely to be the same for the Church of England.

If retiring men are not replaced at all by young men, then the average age of clergymen in the diocese increases. Thus, using the direction of deacons as a major means of implementing redeployment could lead to an unfair age structure in many dioceses and to serious problems later when an attempt is made to rectify it. Again, the extent of this problem hinges on the speed at which the dioceses are expected to implement the reallocation of men.

There is no reason now why an appropriate rate of change cannot be calculated, using the clergy register. The calculation would need to involve an estimate of likely retirements, likely movements between dioceses, and the proportion of vacancies which can reasonably and fairly lead to a change in staffing levels. If it turns out that an appropriate rate based on existing trends is too slow, then it is necessary to try and alter some of the factors involved. For instance, the expected number of voluntary movements of men between dioceses might be increased or decreased by different policies. In other words, it might be necessary to adopt policies which positively

encourage clergymen to move voluntarily from overstuffed areas to understuffed areas. It is not difficult to envisage the sort of policies this might involve and, as the 1979 report notes, there are present pressures in exactly the opposite direction.⁸

A fairer approach

Although questions of fairness are always open to debate, it would seem that the 'fair shares' formula of the Sheffield Report is not now as fair as it is sometimes claimed. Indeed, there would appear to be several steps the Church of England could take to devise a formula that would be fairer.

Firstly, there is confusion about the objectives of the whole exercise. The aim may be to produce 'fair shares' of clergymen in all the dioceses but it is not at all clear how this is translated into the specific proportions and timing. A clear statement of how the aim is translated into specific objectives, and how these objectives relate to the actual numbers, would convince some sceptics at least. Of course, such clear statements could be controversial, but that would focus debate on the basic issues and the numbers and dates would thereby gain credibility.

Secondly, the weighting of different factors being considered should be firmly based, and not dependent on unstable criteria. This implies perhaps both a theological and an experimental examination of the consequences of different weightings. At the very least, some consideration should be given to how the pressures on clergymen vary with the different factors.

Thirdly, a comprehensive analysis of the present situation at the deanery level should be undertaken. This is possible with co-operation between the central bodies and sensible use of their computing facilities. Such a study would reveal the true extent of the problem, the variations within dioceses as opposed to between dioceses, and give dioceses some guide as to the consequences, for deaneries as well as for the diocese as a whole, of the allocation proposed.

Fourthly, the clergy register should be used to provide details of movement-patterns of clergy. This would help to establish a fair rate of change for dioceses and so set a reasonable target date for making the necessary reallocations. Since the clergy register is already in computer-readable form, this process can be done using well-established methods from industrial planning.

Fifthly, the deployment policy should take into account any likely changes in the role of the clergy and be linked to a supportive policy which encourages redeployment. The major supportive policy at the moment involves the distribution of deacons, but this could have long-term drawbacks. It is probably more important to have a policy which encourages the movement between dioceses by clergy of all

ages. This would be fairer to dioceses and to the men who are going to move.

Most of these steps are theoretically feasible, although the technical resources to carry them out are limited. In particular, the detailed analysis required for such a planning exercise may be beyond the present means of the central bodies. However, there are church members who are skilled in various aspects of planning and who could and would offer assistance. In a matter such as the deployment of the clergy, it would obviously help to have some of the analysis undertaken by sympathetic experts. Indeed, high-calibre computing and statistical assistance can only improve the quality of the analysis, enabling the responsible body to be better informed and hence to recommend fairer allocations.

Perhaps the simplest step would be to co-ordinate a group of suitably talented and qualified persons who would be prepared to provide regular advice on planning matters. If the Church of England is to engage in numerical planning studies, like the Sheffield Report, then it ought to ensure it can call on the expertise to have it done properly. To continue to promote a planning scheme on the grounds of fairness when it lacks proper technical justification, is not fair.

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NOTES

- 1 General Synod, *Deployment of the Clergy: The Report of the House of Bishops' Working Group*, GS 205 (CIO, London 1974).
- 2 General Synod, House of Bishops, *Minutes*, HB(79)M3, London 1979, p. 2.
- 3 General Synod, Ministry Co-ordinating Group, *Deployment of the Clergy: Progress Achieved Towards the Sheffield Targets*, GS Misc. 109 (CIO, London 1979).
- 4 GS Misc. 109 (1979). Table 79/3, col. 6.
- 5 *idem.* cols 7-12.
- 6 e.g. E. S. Kessler (ed.) *Deployment for Mission*, Urban Theology Unit (1975), paras 15, 16, 17; D. Wasdell, *Let My People Grow*, Urban Church Project (1975), para. F.
- 7 GS 205, *op. cit.*, p. 10.
- 8 GS Misc 109, pp. 6-7.