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Editorial

New patterns of ministry

The Church of England is undergoing a profound revolution arguably based on shallow thinking, motivated by a financial and manpower crisis. The revolution is the quite rapid attenuation of clergy in dioceses, resulting in the amalgamation of parishes, increasing strain on clergy, and a frustrated sense amongst many of them that the intensification of depersonalized cultic activities which they are asked to perform is not the task for which they have been ordained. The shallow thinking is the Sheffield Report, which seems to be accorded an extraordinary authority considering the slightness of its reasoning (cf. *Churchman* 94, pp.195–7 and 95, pp.54–61). In diocesan circles one sometimes gets the sense that the mark of significant success is the number of clergy that have been lost, the number of parishes that have been amalgamated, and the amount of money that has consequently been saved.

At the same time, the Church of England on the ground is experimenting with all sorts of new forms of ministry. There are Non-Stipendiary Ministries and Local Ordained Ministries; there is the employment of accredited lay ministers on a much wider scale than previously; there is the employment of unaccredited lay ministries to perform various functions in parishes which have been denied curates on the Sheffield quota; and of course there is the continued exploration of non-stipendiary lay ministry and the cultivation of charismatic gifts. Some of these have been given the blessing of the church; others have not. They just happen.

The problem is that while new official, semi-official and unofficial models are much in evidence, the church at large often seems to be reorganizing itself on the old model. This usually involves increasing the range of responsibilities expected of the ordained clergy—though all the evidence points to the fact that beyond a certain number of parishioners a minister becomes largely ineffective—but ignores for such structural purposes the new ministries, except those which have been ordained, and even then appearing to be very uncertain what to do with them if they are not stipendiary.

If resources are spread even more thinly, the evidence is that decline will in fact accelerate, and this of course increases the frustration both of clergy and laity. Surely the time has come for a rethink—a rethink of the nature of ministry, a rethink of the meaning of ordination, a rethink of the meaning of the diaconate, a rethink of lay ministry, and a rethink of what ministries are most appropriate to our cultural setting?

It was presumably this sense of frustration which caused the recent Anglican Evangelical Assembly to pass a motion that ‘appropriate lay persons’ should be allowed to preside at Holy Communion. That call

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has already been helpful, at any rate in that it has acted as a catalyst to debate. The motion, however, perhaps deliberately, left many questions unanswered, including the definition of 'appropriate persons'. In fact there is not yet a consensus in evangelical theology on ministry (cf. N.T. Wright, *Evangelical Anglican Identity: The Connection between Bible, Gospel and Church*, Latimer House, Oxford 1980, pp.30-3). Some evangelicals are inclined to take a high view of ordained ministry, emphasizing its ontological character. The ordained minister has, they stress, a calling from God recognized by the church to an office concerned with leadership, oversight and presidency. Others are inclined to argue, from the priesthood of all believers, a totally functional view of ministry. Ministry is thought of in terms of the functions recognized by the people of God. This emphasis has led to a very understandable and proper impatience with views of the ordained ministry which suggest that it gives access to all the functions. It has also sometimes led to an impatience with the whole idea of ordained ministry.

What is needed is a redrawing of boundaries which gives a proper place to both a functional and an ontological view of ministry. The problem is that models from the past, though they may have been discarded by the more theologically alert clergy and laity, still appear to control the institutional perceptions of the Church of England and thus the way restructuring happens on the ground. If the ordained ministry is not called to exercise all the functions of the body of Christ, cannot these functions be released in a way which does justice both to the theology of the priesthood of all believers, and to the experience many lay people have of God's gifts for ministry? This of course happens, but cannot these gifts be officially recognized in a way which effectively redraws the model of ministry, reduces the strain on those who are ordained, and comes to terms with cultural, economic and numerical realities? If this were to be done, might not our restructuring look entirely different? These are questions of the greatest moment. It is quite certain that Sheffield does not ask or answer them. The church will come to some major manpower crisis if it does not face them. That, of course, may be the only catalyst to action. It would, however, be both the way of wisdom and the way of prophetic faithfulness to seek to provide the answers before natural processes make the functioning of the institution increasingly unsatisfactory and impossible, and therefore God-denying and -dishonouring.

The Eclectic Society

1983 is the bicentenary of the foundation of the Eclectic Society. Started in 1783 by John Newton, it remained for the first fifteen years a London society with a small membership of Anglican evangelical clergymen, a few laymen, and even one or two nonconformist

ministers. Meetings were monthly, and issues of pastoral, spiritual and social concern were regularly debated. Gradually the Society widened beyond London and began to welcome country members, including Charles Simeon.

The new group had a significance far beyond its numbers. It debated, for example, on several occasions how best to propagate the gospel overseas at a time when the missionary challenge was only beginning to dawn. Indeed it was Simeon's participation in a debate on the question in 1796 which led to the conviction that it was necessary to establish an evangelical Anglican missionary society, and this was realized a few years later in the foundation of the Church Missionary Society. In 1799 the Eclectics debated the appropriateness of a journal, and again the debate resulted in action, because in 1802 the *Christian Observer*, an immediate predecessor of *The Churchman*, began to appear, with Eclectics taking a prominent part. It was a typical Eclectic production, concerned to make an evangelical contribution to the Church of England by those entirely committed to it, by reminding it of its great historical principles. Having made such a central contribution, and turned convictions arising out of discussion into effective actions, the Eclectic Society seems to have declined in importance and then to have disappeared altogether. Why and how this should have happened remains to be discovered.

It was, however, re-formed in 1955 by John Stott, and the name was chosen to make a direct identification with the objectives of such eminent evangelical fathers. There were of course many differences. The twentieth-century Society was for under-forties, for clergy or full-time lay workers, and was very strictly Anglican. Its influence remains to be measured by the historians, but there can be little doubt that in the watershed years of the early sixties it was extremely significant. Younger evangelicals needed a forum in which they could debate and explore outside the boundaries set by their elders. Their fresh understanding did much to shape the new directions explored further at Keele and Nottingham, and to re-emphasize a determination to make an evangelical contribution fully within, rather than half outside, the Church of England. In this sense modern Eclectics can very properly claim to stand in continuity with their forefathers of 1783.

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