

Churchman

EDITORIAL I

Should there be another NEAC? According to current plans, evangelical leaders of the Church of England are planning to mount a National Anglican Evangelical Congress (or will they call it 'Conference'?) in September 2002. Initial plans have already been made, and it appears that there will even be a couple of introductory books on the model of NEAC 2, from 1977. The first NEAC was held ten years before that, at Keele in 1967, and has been regarded ever since as a turning point in the life of the Church. On the one hand, it demonstrated the strength of the evangelical wing, which could assemble about a thousand delegates at a time when other branches of the church could probably have mustered only a fraction of that number. It also showed that there was a new evangelical generation, which was ready to break out of the mould established by its forefathers and join in the wider life of the Church of England. At the time, this meant participating in liturgical revision, which was still in its initial stages, and in the preparations for the establishment of the General Synod, which finally came into being in 1970. The assumption was that evangelical influence could best be spread if Evangelicals entered the mainstream of church life, and many subsequently did so.

The result, which is now plain for all to see, is that people of evangelical backgrounds advanced to the highest levels of the Church, broadening their spiritual outlook with each upward move. Today it is no longer unusual to meet bishops who have been leading Evangelicals in the past, and there is a modest but recognizable smattering of them across the Church as a whole. It remains true that they are still stronger on the ground than elsewhere, but that is not necessarily a bad thing. After all, Evangelicalism is about nothing so much as reaching the nation for Christ, and the ground is where the action (or inaction) is. Faithful preaching and teaching in the parishes is what will produce the next generation of evangelical leaders, not reports in General Synod, however carefully crafted they may be. This is not to belittle the efforts of those who engage in such tasks, but simply to remind ourselves of where the focus of our efforts must continue to lie. Without believers there can be no Church – a rather obvious fact which unfortunately does not always seem to have penetrated the minds of those who are prone to tolerate the kind of 'liberal' and 'progressive' thinking which tends to help people find reasons to leave (or ignore) the Church, not enter it.

Unfortunately, it is not clear that NEAC 1 was a great success. It has generally been regarded as the cause of a division among Evangelicals which persists to this day, and which is characterized by 'openness' (or the opposite) to other theological currents within the Church of England. The 'open' Evangelicals portray themselves as the progressives and tend to caricature the rest as theological troglodytes, whereas their opponents see them as opportunists at best and renegades at worst. Neither caricature is entirely accurate of course, but there is little doubt that behind the exaggerations there does lurk some form of truth, which has dogged Anglican Evangelicalism for nearly a generation and contributed to the sense of unease and lack of purpose which is currently so widespread in evangelical ranks.

NEAC 2 was a repeat performance of NEAC 1, held at Nottingham in 1977, and is famous for having been the hermeneutics congress. It was there that Anglican Evangelicals were presented with the so-called 'new hermeneutic' and persuaded to accept it hook, line and sinker, with the emphasis very definitely on the last of these. The evangelical interpretation of the Bible was to be sorely tested over the ordination of women, when the 'new hermeneutic' was widely used to try to convince them that the Bible said what it quite plainly did not. It is perhaps still too early to tell whether this kind of interpretation has really sunk Evangelicalism or not, but it certainly did nothing to further the cause, and in many circles NEAC 2 is now regarded as a mistake, whatever its long or short term impact may have been.

NEAC 3, held at Caistor in 1988, was a different kind of event altogether, being more like Spring Harvest or Greenbelt than a symposium of the intellectual heavy-weights of evangelical Anglicanism. It marked a change of style as much as anything else, and demonstrated to anyone who may still have doubted it that 'charismatic' influences, in the broadest sense, had come to stay. Indeed, to a large extent they had come to take over, and since that time a moderate charismaticism may be said to have become the norm in evangelical circles. There are pockets of resistance to this of course, but increasingly they have become conscious of the fact that that is precisely what they are – islands of traditionalism which have stood out against the tidal wave rising ever higher around them. Whether NEAC 3 can be credited with any of this is difficult to say. More probably, it reflected something which was already happening on a large scale, and did its bit to encourage the flow even further, but whatever the truth of the matter may be, things had moved much

further in the 1980s than they had in the previous decade.

Since 1988 the zest for large national congresses (or conferences) has diminished, but now it seems that interest has revived and that we are in for NEAC 4. The inspiration for this has clearly come from the previous three events, which as may be seen from the above account of them, is not altogether encouraging. Its style promises to be closer to NEAC 1 and 2 than to NEAC 3, which is probably a good thing, but the risk is that its overall influence is likely to be closer to that of NEAC 3 than to its predecessors. The main reason for this is that Evangelicalism is now so much more diversified than it was 30 years ago. It is hard to chart a new direction when every point of the compass is already being explored by somebody wearing an evangelical label! But it is also true that the main impetus driving popular Evangelicalism today does not come from the brain in the way that it did then, and it may be doubted whether seminars, papers and statements will appeal to any but a small and unrepresentative minority. That risk may not be as great as it seems, but the organizers of NEAC 4 would do well to bear in mind the fact that if that is the kind of congress/conference they are planning, they will to some extent be missionaries to their own constituency.

What is NEAC 4 trying to achieve? Is it worth making the effort? Will it succeed? From the look of things so far, it seems that NEAC 4 wants to regroup Evangelicals around the fundamentals of the Christian faith, notably the authority of Scripture and the atoning work of Christ. There is no doubt that these are Evangelical essentials which need stressing, and the men behind NEAC 4 deserve all the support which they can get to make this agenda come to life. However, it is not so much a reaffirmation of traditional positions which is needed as a re-application of those positions to the challenges which we face today. This has long been the evangelical malaise, especially where Scripture is concerned. There is little point going on (and on) about such matters as infallibility and inerrancy, if there is no recognized means of interpreting the text for today's needs. Theory has to be translated into practice, but the problem with this is that many Evangelicals have grown used to living with dichotomies in this area. They will happily reaffirm the theory, but are much less likely to accept the practical consequences in any consistent way. The sexual chaos of our time is a case in point – how many Evangelicals are prepared to put the New Testament into practice where divorce and remarriage (not to mention extramarital cohabitation, homosexuality etc) are

concerned? There is a soft underbelly here which we have inherited from the wider culture in which we live, but will NEAC 4 be able to tackle this effectively? All the resolutions in the world will not alter behaviour, and it is that which is the ultimate test.

Questions of this kind may be somewhat unfair, but we must recognize that as Evangelicals we cannot avoid asking some hard questions about the ways in which we put our faith into practice. If Christians do not stand out from the surrounding culture by living a biblical lifestyle, nothing they say is liable to make much of an impression, and the world will not be converted to Christian values. A culture in which it is possible, even chic, to have a 'spirituality' without allowing that to affect personal behaviour is not one in which Evangelicals can feel at home, and yet that seems to be increasingly prevalent. The double standard which we in Britain have come to associate with 'New Labour', but which in fact pervades our whole society, is the greatest challenge which we face, not least because it demands hard choices which most people prefer to avoid if they possibly can. In an age when 'inclusivism' is among the highest virtues, the straight and narrow way is bound to appear unattractive, yet that is the way our Saviour trod – and the way he expects us to follow.

Is it worth having another jamboree of the NEAC variety? If the organizers want to tackle the weaknesses of current evangelical thought and practice, as they appear to do, then surely they ought to be given every encouragement. A few days at Butlins (or wherever) will not change the world, but if needs can be identified a start can be made which will bear fruit in the longer term. Above all, NEAC 4 needs to inspire a new generation, which can rise up and do the work which was envisaged back in 1967 but which somehow seems to have gone astray since then. To say that the formula has been tried and failed is not in itself a persuasive argument against it, as long as we learn from past mistakes and put them right. The greatest optimists are often those who start at the bottom and work up – expecting little or nothing, they may be pleasantly surprised, and if that encourages them to go on, then so much the better!

Success is impossible to predict in advance, and much will obviously depend on expectations. Realistically, what we should be looking for is a renewed sense of urgency in the task of mission, based on a recovery of the centrality

of the atoning work of Christ in our lives and in our preaching. We should then expect to see such a sense of urgency channelled into new initiatives designed to translate the eternal gospel into the language of today at every level. The organizers of NEAC 4 cannot create such a scenario, but they can and should be prepared for it. Many years ago, when the late Archbishop Donald Coggan issued his call to the nation, there was a tremendous response from the public, but the initiative fizzled out because nobody had prepared for that outcome and so they did not know how to react. If NEAC 4 is to make a lasting difference, its steering committee must do everything it can to avoid that fate. We wish them well, and look forward to seeing Evangelicals once more confidently expressing the faith of Christ crucified to a nation which has seldom been in greater need of hearing that saving message.

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