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LOOKING BEHIND O.L.M.

Edward Underhill

In November 2000 the Durham Diocesan Synod debated a motion on Ordained Local Ministry. The proposals were a response to falling clergy numbers and financial shortfalls. Despite being forcefully presented by the Diocesan hierarchy the motion was only passed by three votes with six abstentions. One of the contributors to the debate was Edward Underhill, Vicar of St. George's Gateshead the essence of whose speech has been reproduced below.

This diocese, like many another, had become myopic about "shared ministry". The "senior staff" talk about nothing else. Dean Hastings Rashdall once said "if you believed in episcopacy it didn't matter what else you disbelieved in the Church of England". I had come to the conclusion that, in Durham, so long as you believe in "shared ministry" and "collaboratedness", then one need never again teach much else. In the Diocesan Synod debate I offered three points which might have relevance in other dioceses and in more general aspects of the malaise we are all sharing.

Panic stations approach

First, we need to see at the outset that proposals for "Ordained Local Ministry" are just one more expediency-driven attempt in our "panic-stations" approach to shore up the position where we haven't enough quantity or quality in the supply of ordinands. Furthermore, when we do see a slight upturn in the graph of ordinand numbers we don't have sufficient money to pay for their training.

I suppose that if we had adequate supplies of first class ordinands and the money to pay for them, then we would prefer to have an educated full-time parson in every parish. They would need to be pastorally effective, teaching people to be a holy, learning, witnessing, and giving, people of God. In this way people will be converted and money will be given to pay quotas and maintain buildings.

The Principal of Moor Theological College is urging that, "We should give careful attention to our ecclesiology". Parishes are not "McDonalds franchises" - held from the diocese - a place where people can nip in for a quick snack from the sacramental buffet Table. The Church is not an ecclesiastical super-store where each assistant must wear their name-badges so as to be able to be identified. Rather, the parish is the trusted corner-shop in the neighbourhood in personal contact with individuals.

Of course there needs to be some rationalisation. But we've got rid of enough splendid parsonage houses and amalgamated enough adjacent parishes - areas of pastoral ministry - in our "management of decline" in the dioceses.

Crisis of confidence.

We need, secondly, to ask two prior questions and then do something about them.

How is it that we have lost the confidence of potential ordinands?

Why have we lost the confidence of givers?

Without going into the reasons and causes of it, the underlying problem is that there is a crisis of confidence in the Church.

If these problems were addressed and we had both a plentiful supply of quality ordinands and finance to support them then the present solution being offered - ordained local ministry - would not be needed. Neither would it be necessary to follow the policy of centralisation being followed in Durham and other dioceses. In Durham there is a proliferation of non-parochial posts and now, in desperation, the Bishop and "senior" staff have put in place a "Task Force" to arrange for parishes to be replaced by "localities". "The trouble", says the Bishop, "is people sitting on freeholds".

We need to attack the causes rather than the symptoms of the trouble. Otherwise the disease will be terminal.

Let us then be clear and see the "O.L.M." for what it is. Will it help to augment the numbers to enable Holy Communion to be administered each week in every parish?

There are other ways of doing this.

- ❑ Let Readers read - the Prayer of Consecration.
- ❑ Or, let the Congregations together read the Prayer - the "priesthood of all believers"?
- ❑ Or, have less frequent administrations and so leave more room for expository preaching (as was suggested from the floor in the Synod debate).
- ❑ Or, "Lay Administration"?

The relationship between Readers and any "O.L.M.s" must be sorted out. I can't see this being possible unless we train "O.L.M.s" in the same way we do now for Readers; then there's no need for "O.L.M.s". We have N.S.M - we have Readers, can we sustain another style and level?

Wrong priorities

In the third place let us notice that we are floundering about. Despite many reports and initiatives to do with ministry the Church hasn't moved a millimetre since the 1950s. The Church is being riven asunder. Young professional men and women are leaving the C of E in droves and moving into independency because they see that Anglican ecclesiology has become weak because it is expediency driven, (and because their tithes are too large, they say, to put into an over-centralised and "liberal" set-up.)

Many do not wish to go on like this much longer. Immediate and clear action must be taken to "put the men where the work is". Give Archdeacons parish cures and make a Suffragan Bishop similarly parish-based. We have far too many non-parochial people about the place; it's in the parishes that we need the men and women. This would be an effective and essential first step towards engineering the regaining of the confidence of the people in the pews. We must all want this to happen.

May a parish-man make a plea (and it is at the coal-face that the coal is won) for the exercise of some caution and restraint? Let us go a little more quietly, "cannily" and biblically. In a well-known article the late Durham Professor S.L. Greenslade concluded with three criteria which must control any assessment of our consideration of the development of Ministry and Church Order (as seen in Clement, Ignatius, Tertullian and Cyprian)

"how much of this development was

- (i) guided by the Holy Spirit
- (ii) relative to contemporary needs and therefore changeable
- (iii) a necessary expression of, or safeguard to, the Gospel always."

Three tests, parameters, that might serve us well as we seek to regain the essential and necessary match between "the ministry we need and the money required to pay for it" in the whole sweep of the Body of Christ.