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MISSION AND ORDER IN A DECAYING CHURCH

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The moral and spiritual decay of the Church of England throws into sharp relief the interplay of mission and order. This is a crucial issue for the Church of England because without vibrant outreach and the gracious goodness of God the Church has no future. To be faithful to God, and to grow, a church has to be missionary, yet as it grows mission is not enough, people must be nurtured, fed and equipped for works of service. To be faithful as a church there must be order and one aspect of good order is godly oversight. When they work well oversight and order should safeguard a church against error of one sort or another. When they work badly oversight and order can destroy mission and cripple churches.

Gospel and Order

Mission initiatives are a growing phenomenon in the Church of England. They have largely arisen from the broad evangelical movement and are often the result of evangelical churches seeking to reach out in structured ways to particular groups of unreached people, or in particular places. However, two particular issues often have to be addressed; the deployment of clergy and parochial boundaries.

Deployment of clergy

These new 'mission initiatives' do create real problems once they start wanting ordained clergy. Clergy are in short supply and with numbers dwindling more and more this problem is not going to get better. There is a national system used to determine how many clergy should serve in each Diocese and within a Diocese they attempt in some way to allocate clergy fairly.

In the work of Church Society Trust we recognise that such a system has real value. We know that there are some parts of the country where it is very easy to find clergy to fill posts. In others, such as some northern towns, inner city and very rural areas, it can be very difficult and often impossible to find evangelical candidates, even when a Church desires a clear evangelical ministry. The deployment system is intended to ensure that some are not left without ministry and, as clergy numbers decline, this appears more and more attractive.

However, this system, for all its apparent fairness, now seems to be choking the Church to death. If a Church grows beyond a certain size it can be very difficult to secure more than one full-time ordained minister. Churches may feel strongly that they need such ministry but the system is against them. Different churches have responded to this in different ways. Many of course take on non-ordained staff and sometimes may end up requiring them to do things that are not strictly part of the way the Church of England has ordered itself. Others seek people who have been trained for ministry but who are not Church of England ordained and therefore will not count against the official figures for ministry. These, and others, are ways in which the churches are seeking to further mission when order seems to be handicapping it.

The absurdity of our system is that often we have churches where there is work to be done, a willingness to pay for ministry, and people who are willing to minister, but who are not, for one reason or another, prepared to be ordained at the present time. Thus our system is to some extent stifling the future ministry of the Church.

One particular area where this has impact is in the placement of curates. The convention is that having trained, clergy should not go back to minister in the church they were in beforehand. Again, there are good reasons for this, but the convention can also be detrimental. One of the justifications for such a policy is that it ensures that people have a broad experience of churches and ministry. There may be circumstances where this is appropriate, but sometimes people can have extensive experience of churches before ordination. The convention has proved particularly frustrating in relation to non-stipendiary ministry. A man who is an obvious leader in a church can be deterred from seeking ordination because that will mean them ceasing to be a leader in that church; they will have to move elsewhere. Likewise, where men are involved in particular mission initiatives and then seek training to validate and authorise a particular ministry they can find that they are expected to move out of this style of ministry to something else. Thus if they have particular skills the very act of authorising ministry can mean not employing those skills.

In these various ways our system is not serving us well, no matter how sensible the reasoning behind it may be.

Parochial Boundaries

The parochial system has many benefits but it has only ever been something created for the good order of the Church. Evangelicals have always maintained that when boundaries prevent people from hearing the gospel then those boundaries should not be respected. The presence of proprietary chapels is evidence that our forebears faced the same problems. I recently visited Lightbourne Evangelical Church for which the Society acts as Trustees. This was established well over a century ago precisely because the parish church had followed the Tractarian movement and therefore was no longer preaching the gospel. We can look further back and see the same dynamic in the evangelical revivals.

This problem has been on the agenda for evangelicals for a long time and it has finally led to legislation being drawn up which could go through within the next year or so which will allow much more use of new mission initiatives. There could be problems, particularly if a Diocesan Bishop is hostile, but the legislation has grown out of evangelical concerns.

Mission initiatives happen because God raises people up with particular gifts, vision and zeal. Very often those who drive such things are accused of being maverick and meet opposition. It is probably true that those with these gifts find it harder to play by the rules. Our dilemma is how we ensure that visionary and zealous leadership is not crushed or driven out of the Church of England. I think we must also admit that in parochial ministry it is very easy to become territorial and jealous of others, particularly when they enjoy apparent success and we do not. It is not easy to say with Paul 'Only that in every way, whether in pretence or in truth, Christ is preached; and in this I rejoice, yes, and will rejoice.' Phil 1.18.

Order and godly oversight

As Anglicans we recognise that Bishops are for the good of the church rather than something Scripture requires. Bishops should teach the faith, work for unity, drive out error and so on. It is said that a fish decays from its head down. We have good evidence from synodical votes as well as from anecdote that the Diocesan Bishops of the Church of England are more liberal than the parochial clergy who are in turn more liberal than the laity. The consequence of this is that many of our Bishops are incapable of fulfilling the task to which they were appointed. Moreover, the appointment process does not seem to require that they be capable. They are selected and appointed because they are deemed able to relate to different groups, or to have past involvement in civic ministry, but not because they match Biblical requirements and the expectations of The Ordinal.

The problem this produces is that those who have a particular duty to preserve order are unable to do so. They cannot exercise discipline in doctrinal matters because they themselves do not believe the Truth.

When a Bishop teaches error it is the duty of other presbyters to oppose them. Failure to do this is a breach of the duties laid on clergy. We therefore have a growing number of places where there is a breakdown in relationship between Bishops and parishes, including Worcester, Chelmsford, Southwark, Newcastle, Oxford and St. Albans. Because orthodox parishes are thus without godly oversight they are seeking in different ways to make up for this. The solution of course is simple, that we as a Church ensure that those who are appointed are truly converted men and uphold the teaching of Scripture.

Godly oversight is not just a requirement for church order; it affects our mission. What many people know of the Church of England is what they see or hear in the national media. When people discover that the Bishops have not stood up against Civil Partnerships and so on, this colours their understanding of what Christians believe and what the Church stands for. Thus the task of mission is made that much harder. Thus the false teaching of many in the Church of England and the failures of the Bishops undermines gospel ministry at the coalface. A church can only maintain its integrity if it makes it clear that it does not accept the errors that others promote. If it does not make the distinction clear it is itself likely to lead people into sin.

What we long for is genuine episcopal oversight, and we desire it because it is for the good of the church. We long for Bishops who enthusiastically support gospel work and are prepared to stick their neck out to see Biblical truth upheld. It is becoming increasingly difficult to find Bishops like this. Gradually people are waking up to just how far the Church of England has decayed and beginning to realise that we must act.