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A table of contents for *The Churchman* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_churchman_os.php

Pastoral Reorganisation since the Industrial Revolution

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PASTORAL REORGANISATION is today a common experience in Anglican parishes, and the Pastoral Measure, a comprehensive measure extending its scope still further, was passed by Parliament in 1968 and recently came into force. In many areas, two or more small parishes are now held in plurality by a single rector or vicar, or have been permanently united in a single parish. In other small parishes there is no incumbent because presentation has been suspended until a vacancy occurs in neighbouring parishes, when one or other of these methods of joining parishes can be put into effect. On the other hand, there are parishes where a housing-estate has greatly increased the population, as a result of which a new 'conventional district' or parish has been separated off. The fresh departures made by the Pastoral Measure allow parishes to be joined in a new way, to form 'group ministries' or 'team ministries', and make it lawful for a patron to be deprived of his patronage rights and for an incumbent to be deprived of his freehold where this will facilitate pastoral reorganisation.

Pastoral reorganisation, however, is no new thing. It has been going on at least since the beginning of the seventeenth century, when steps had to be taken to relieve the poverty of the clergy. Shortage of money to pay the clergy has been a problem to the Church of England ever since the reign of Elizabeth I, and the course taken to remedy it in the Jacobean period was the encouragement of pluralities (see R. G. Usher, *The Reconstruction of the English Church*, London, Appleton, 1910). Pluralities became in time a scandal, and a limit of two livings was placed upon them in the Pluralities Act of 1838, though it has since become necessary to relax this limit in the Pluralities Measure of 1930. The number of pluralities is now more or less stable at about 900: these comprise about 1900 benefices.

With the onset of the Industrial Revolution in the middle of the eighteenth century, the Church of England found itself faced with the new problem of the shift of the population to the manufacturing towns. It is often said that the response of the church to the Industrial Revolution was a feeble one, and that this was particularly true of the Church of England. K. S. Inglis, in an analysis of the census of Religious

Worship (1851), has shown that, generally speaking, church attendance was by then lowest in the industrial centres, and that Nonconformist attendance was higher there than Anglican, the bulk of Nonconformist attendance being Methodist (*Patterns of Religious Worship in 1851*, Journal of Ecclesiastical History, vol XI, 1960). Another work by the same author, *Churches and the Working Classes in Victorian England* (London, Routledge, 1963), acknowledges the amount that was done even by the Church of England, but singles out the Evangelicals for condemnation on account of their alleged indifference to the physical needs of the masses—a charge which is refuted in detail in Kathleen Heasman's book *Evangelicals in Action: an Appraisal of their Social Work in the Victorian Era* (London, Bles, 1962). It is no doubt true that more could have been done by the churches, and that much that was done dealt with the effects rather than with the causes of poverty and suffering, but political and legislative action for the eradication of these causes was not entirely neglected (witness the Factory Acts, in the enactment of which the Evangelical Shaftesbury was instrumental), and a great deal had to be done which political and legislative action alone could not achieve. Nor were the spiritual needs of the industrial masses ignored, and it was with these primarily in view that, within the national church, mission rooms were built, the campaign against pew-rents was waged, the Church Army was formed, the offices of reader and deaconess were restored and pastoral reorganisation was undertaken.

In the Church Building Act of 1818, parliament set aside a million pounds for the provision of additional churches in populous districts. Church Building Commissioners were appointed for the purpose, and the act further authorised them to recommend the division of parishes and the separation of new ecclesiastical districts within parishes. A second Church Building Act in 1819 authorised the uniting in an ecclesiastical district of parts of several parishes, and safeguarded the rights of the existing patrons. Further Church Building Acts, dealing with particular aspects of the matter, followed in 1822, 1824, 1827, 1831, 1832, 1838, 1839, 1840, 1844, 1845, 1846, 1848, 1851 and 1854, and there were New Parishes Acts in 1843, 1844 and 1856, and Amendment Acts to both groups in 1869 and 1884. The grants made by the Commissioners were to be augmented according to ability from local sources, and might take the form either of gifts or of loans. Provisions were also made for the rebuilding, extending or demolishing of existing churches, for the acquisition of land, for the provision of parsonage houses, and for the raising of funds to supply stipends for ministers. Under the New Parishes Acts, the patronage might be assigned to anyone willing to help in providing the new church or in endowing the new living. The funds of the Commissioners (merged with the Ecclesiastical Commissioners in 1856, by which time they had founded six hundred new churches) were augmented from such sources as the

endowments of sinecures and Queen Anne's Bounty, and between 1868 and 1880 they created some seventy new parishes each year, and between then and 1900 about thirty-five each year. An interesting impression of some of the new churches they built, economical but designed by leading architects of the day, is given in John Betjeman's *English Parish Churches* (London, Collins, 1968), and a full record of the first period of their activities has been compiled by M. H. Port (*Six Hundred New Churches*, London, SPCK, 1961). Other church builders were at work independently. In 1858 it was reported that 3,150 churches had been built in the past half century. In 1876 it was reported that 7,144 churches had been restored since 1840. To match this building programme, efforts were made to increase the number of the clergy. The figures for 1851, 1861 and 1881 respectively were 17,320 19,198 and 21,663. By the end of the century, some provision of these kinds had been made for all the new centres of population, though the place that the church had held in the lives of the industrial worker's rural ancestors had not been re-established, as it has not to this day. The decay of faith within the church, as well as outside it, is doubtless partly to blame for this, but a further factor was the overall growth of the national population, now proceeding faster than any new provision that could be made. Between the census of 1801 and that of 1851, the population of England and Wales had risen from nearly nine million to nearly eighteen million. At the census of 1881 the figure was nearly twenty-six million. It has since risen to over forty-three million.

The long course of legislation which we have described was practically all repealed and replaced by the New Parishes Measure of 1943, which has itself been to a great extent repealed and replaced by the Pastoral Measure. Only in the Pastoral Measure is provision made for a new parish to be created before the building of a new church is undertaken, and for the initiative in the whole matter to be taken by the diocese not the Commissioners, though in other sorts of pastoral reorganisation the diocese has been taking the initiative for over a hundred years.

The founding of so many new churches and parishes naturally called for the provision of more rural deaneries and dioceses, and this too followed in due course. The dioceses of Birmingham, Blackburn, Bradford, Chelmsford, Coventry, Derby, Guildford, Leicester, Liverpool, Manchester, Newcastle, Portsmouth, Ripon, St. Albans, St. Edmundsbury and Ipswich, Sheffield, Southwark, Southwell, Truro and Wakefield have all been founded since 1836. In addition, suffragan bishops began to be appointed again in 1870. The work of Bishop Walsham How, who was suffragan bishop of Bedford (and, in effect, of East London) from 1879 to 1888, made a deep impression. The Suffragans Nomination Act of 1888 made it possible for suffragan bishops to be appointed in dioceses other than those covered by sixteenth century legislation, and wide use has since been made of this provision.

After this period of expansion, the period of retrenchment has followed. As early as 1838 the Pluralities Act, among its many provisions, revived sixteenth and seventeenth century legislation for the union of neighbouring parishes of small population and small endowments, where such a union was proposed by the bishop and approved by the archbishop and the patrons. Further legislation on the matter followed, but by 1923 the age-old problem of shortage of money, combined with the new problem of shortage of clergy, made another Union of Benefices Act necessary, extending the scope of the previous ones, and authorising in addition the alteration of parish boundaries. An Amendment Measure was passed in 1936, and the important Pastoral Reorganisation Measure in 1949. Between 1961 (the first year for which figures are available) and 1967, a total of 306 schemes for unions of benefices were completed, affecting 657 benefices, as against only 199 schemes disuniting benefices or creating separate ecclesiastical districts or parishes. (For these and other figures quoted, see M. H. McQueen and others, *Parson, Parish and Patron*, Abingdon, Marcham Manor Press, 1968, pp. 61, 62, 130, 131, and G. Kitson Clark, *The Making of Victorian England*, London, Methuen, 1962, pp. 66, 169, 170.) The Pluralities Measure of 1930, to which reference was made earlier, is also relevant here. All these acts and measures have been repealed and replaced by the Pastoral Measure, which in general continues their provisions, and provides for the new experiment of team and group ministries. It remains to be seen whether these will become just another episode in the same sad (though necessary) story of retrenchment.

One more factor has entered into pastoral reorganisation in recent days—war devastation. The Diocesan Reorganisation Committees Measure of 1941 and the Reorganisation Areas Measure of 1944 (with its Amendment Measures) concern the revision of parochial boundaries, and of pastoral provision, in areas damaged in the war. War devastation (by which industrial areas were greatly affected, of course) gave a very strong impetus to pastoral reorganisation. This legislation was therefore of much importance. Now, however, like the rest, it has been largely superseded by the Pastoral Measure.

A period of retrenchment like the present reminds the church of its continuing duty to make the best use of its resources, but it also challenges the Church to call upon the Lord of the harvest that it may once more enter an era of missionary advance in this land.