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Evangelical Structures for the Seventies

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IN A RECENT booklet under this title* Colin Buchanan examines the structures which will be needed by Evangelicals in the Seventies, and commends the role of Diocesan Evangelical Unions, the proposed Regional Councils, and the Church of England Evangelical Council, with its revised Constitution, as providing the required framework for mutual consultation. Professor Anderson contributes a Foreword.

There is much in this booklet to commend. Colin Buchanan starts by a useful discussion as to what an Anglican Evangelical is: distinguishing between those who are so by birth, those who are so on account of the formularies of the Church of England, and those who are so because of their understanding of the nature of the Church: but he wisely does not press the distinctions too far, for not all fall exactly in one category or another. In a section on 'Tasks and Emphases' he singles out Theological creativity and parochial effectiveness as the twin primary criteria of evangelical strength: it is refreshing in a booklet which is mainly about central structures to be thus reminded that what is achieved in the parishes is of primary concern. The former proctor who remarked that if their parishes were what they should be, evangelicals would sweep the Church of England, was right. It is good to see the emphasis laid by Mr. Buchanan on lay participation in the Diocesan Evangelical Unions and in the whole work of the Church: and especially good to be reminded by an evangelical that fellowship springs from shared enterprises, not from merely meeting.

But the heart of the booklet is concerned with the structures which are said to be required, and which are said to be now provided under the revised constitution of the CEEC. First there are the Diocesan Evangelical Unions. Instead of their traditional role which he sees as being orientated towards a clerical fellowship, Colin Buchanan argues that each should be politically orientated towards its own

*Northwood Christian Book Centre.

Diocese, with a Committee appraising issues before the Diocese, and members or parishes able to raise issues with that Committee, and if necessary at Diocesan Synod. It should accept responsibility for teaching at a supra-parochial level, and make diocesan expertise available as necessary. It should be alive to its electoral responsibilities, extend friendship to non-Anglican evangelicals, maintain supra-diocesan evangelical contacts (the Regional Councils & CEEC) and be adequately financed.

At the centre, the new Constitution of the CEEC is commended. Colin Buchanan accepts that the original CEEC could be accused of being self-appointing, and therefore unrepresentative; but obviously feels this stricture can no longer be levelled. The new membership is of nine persons elected by the old CEEC from among their members, six representatives of societies (CPAS, FEC, Church Society, Latimer House, EA, and SU), three representatives of Evangelical Theological Colleges, four representatives of Evangelical Missionary Societies, and also three proctors, three members of the House of Laity, and two M.P.s elected by the Council. Finally each Regional Council of the DEUs can elect one member, giving a further possible eight members. The task of the CEEC Colin Buchanan sees as 'policy making' in spite of what he calls the 'delicately-worded Object in the Constitution'; but a 'Policy-making' which is self-commendatory, rather than the writing of a party line of the old sort. Writing as a former member of the CEEC he clearly hopes that in due course there may be some sort of merger of the CEEC with Church Society, the latter becoming CEEC's executive arm.

Finally, Colin Buchanan devotes some time to the role of Regional Councils as channels of communication between DEUs and the CEEC. Eight regional areas have been tentatively defined: their origin being in a joint working party of the CEEC and the FDEU, consisting of five clergymen and one layman. Activities are suggested such as discussion of matters referred by CEEC or DEUs and the forwarding of opinions to them; co-ordination of DEU programmes; oversight of 'post-Keele' conferences; encouragement of the formation of DEUs, or encouragement of them to be on a clergy/lay integrated basis; mutual help between DEUs; co-ordination of election campaigns, regional advice to patronage boards. The suggestion of a working party that Regional Councils might also contain as observers members of the House of Laity, proctors, and members of CEEC and society representatives is quoted with some approval, as giving rise to a series of CEECs, one in each region. Discussions in the centre would interlock with those in the regions; documents could be circulated through the regions to representatives of each DEU. 'Thus in turn the continuing task of lively thrusting theological internal dialogue amongst evangelicals would be furthered. This is the end the structure must serve. This is how God will bring his word to bear upon us, and through us upon others.'

This peroration sounds fine: the only trouble with it is that it is a little hard to relate such fine sentiments with what has gone before, or with the situation as it currently confronts evangelicals in the Church of England. We pass this year from the era of the Church Assembly into so-called synodical government: a movement which started as a genuine attempt to give to the laity their rightful part in the government of the Church, but a movement which in the process of time has become the chosen vehicle with which some seek to accomplish quite other objectives. Prominent among these other objectives is the determined attempt being made to strengthen the hold on the national synod exercised by Church House, central councils, and the Church Commissioners. The last Church Assembly saw two aspects of this. There was the Rochester Committee's report, with proposals which would have savagely reduced the elected element in the Synod Standing Committee, which in turn was to appoint virtually all other Committees and Boards: and which would have given pronounced influence to the four (or is it five?) Commissioners who are proposed as Chairman of the four (or is it five?) main Boards of the Synod; and with them placed ex-officio on the Executive of the Standing Committee two Church Commissioners, meanwhile excluding from the Executive all elected members. It remains to be seen whether the Assembly will wear this shameless piece of centralism—it is significant that it can even be seriously proposed. Then there was the debate on the Theological Colleges with ACCM demanding, and narrowly getting, authority to ask the House of Bishops to withdraw grants from Theological Colleges which do not toe the line with regard to ACCM's reorganisation proposals: the whole thing being pushed through on the grounds that some crisis exists. Though challenged, ACCM did not explain what the precise nature of this crisis was. The laymen who are being given powers under synodical government appear to be mainly those in Church House and No. 1 Millbank.

Or there is the situation which confronts evangelicals in relation to the forthcoming election. Those members of the House of Laity who were so worried when Evangelicals and Anglo-Catholics disagreed on matters of principle over Canon Law and Liturgy: and who professed delight when the two sides were drawn together in debates on the Series II Communion Service and Burial Service, now apparently find their agreement more disturbing than their differences. So Lord March and his colleagues form a curious alliance to fight the election with a manifesto so vague that most of those they oppose could sign it. So firm is their opposition to parties that they must form one: and so resolute are they that elections should not be organised on party lines that they appoint a full-time organiser to do just that—a thing which to the best of my knowledge the groups they denounce never dreamed of doing. With that confusion of thought and principle which is the most endearing and maddening feature of the 'middle and hazy' in

the Church of England there is only one thing they will certainly achieve: the intensification of that which they profess to hate. Whether the elections show they are a force to be reckoned with remains to be seen: but no group can be too complacent about the likely outcome of the September voting.

Or one can look at the perennial type of problem; the preoccupation of the Church with its central committees and internal rules: its refusal to be outward looking and really realise its resources in lay and clerical manpower to bring the Word of God to bear in the parishes and in the whole social, and industrial, life of the nation. There is the distressing, and increasing tendency to contract out of being a national Church, treat ourselves as just a denomination, and hand things over to the British Council of Churches without any regard being paid as to whether they will do the job even more inadequately than we do. There is liturgical revision, embarked upon with no clear understanding as to where it was supposed to lead to. There are already signs that it may lead to liturgical chaos even worse than before. There are Church relations, with Anglican-Methodist proposals likely to be thrust early on the new synod to prove our leaders have learned nothing from experience, and are so keen on unity that they are prepared to divide the Church to achieve it by a particular method. Or on the most prosaic level there is the making of synodical government work at all levels: at Deanery level where Deanery synods are important, but have little to do; at Diocesan and national level, where the work has to be done by fewer people, with every possibility that men of ability in secular employment may find themselves increasingly unable to give the required time; with the result that lay representation will increasingly pass to the retired, the self-employed, and to paid Church officials and the like, or else that Church House and Diocesan Officials will increasingly take the work away from elected representatives.

Now what is Colin Buchanan telling us are the structures evangelicals need with which to deal with this sort of situation? He proposes that what is needed is a set of DEUs which appraise issues before Diocesan Synods, and take an interest in elections. He commends Regional Councils elected by these DEUs, and a CEEC partly self-appointed, partly appointed by Societies and Colleges, to which are added representatives of the Regional Councils and six members of the Synod elected by the rest of the CEEC. And this predominantly clerical body (meeting in London on a weekday when few laity can attend) seeks 'by discussion to reach a common mind on the issues of the day . . . and make its mind known . . .'.

At this point I must declare an interest. For some time I was a member of the CEEC before its reorganisation, and a very bad member indeed, because of my inability to attend more than a few of its meetings. I resigned at the time of its reorganisation mainly because I was increasingly unable to attend, and marginally because I felt its new

organisation missed the boat.

Does the system of structures envisaged really match up to the problem? I think not. I used to know the manager of a division of a large industrial concern who imagined that he controlled the whole complex organisation around him; when in truth it functioned quite independently of him. CEEC could be in the same position. The place where action will take place—even more in the future than now—is in the synods. It is there policy will be decided and debated: it is there that ideas must be sold: it is there that opportunities have to be recognised and seized. A body which is representative of societies and others, but not necessarily knowledgeable about what goes on in the synods may well be useful or necessary; but I fail to see that it is essentially the structure that evangelicals need.

The real trouble with the structure Colin Buchanan commends is that, for all its fine talk at the start about 'church-Anglicanism' among evangelicals, his structures do not take the Church seriously. The DEUs do not need a 'political arm' in the Diocesan Synod. Evangelicals ought to be in the synod doing their stuff as churchmen, and they are there responsible to their God, their conscience, and their electors—not to a DEU. They may, and will, wish to be aware of what evangelicals, and others, in the Diocese think: and the DEU may well be the means by which they discover this: but they are not, will not be, and should not be the arm of a DEU. Individual members of the DEU in the parishes may want matters raised at Deanery or Diocesan Synod. They have their representatives in the Synod whose duty it is to do just that. On matters where evangelicals may wish to act together, then doubtless the representative may well find the DEU a suitable medium for consultation: but the link between the individual and the Synod is his representative not the DEU. Let the members of the Church take the Church seriously, use its structures, and not try to be a church within a church.

Something similar may be said about DEUs organising elections. It is noted by some of us who are evangelical members of the House of Laity in the Assembly, that (with certain notable and commendable exceptions) evangelicals do worst in those lay elections where the DEU takes a hand. This is for two reasons. First, too many DEUs are run by the clergy who do not really understand the major differences between clerical and lay elections: this might be cured if Colin Buchanan gets his way and the DEUs really take the laity seriously. It remains to be seen whether they will. The second is that DEUs too often think of candidates who will represent them, and who think in terms of the evangelical voters being the only persons to whom they must appeal. They should think of candidates who are evangelicals certainly, but people who are also men of ability, who will commend themselves to the electorate on grounds of ability as well as on grounds of churchmanship. Such people get elected. I have no objection to DEUs

taking an interest in elections, provided they do it properly and give us men of ability: but a local layman is just as likely to find the right candidate.

Is the new constitution of CEEC really what is required? Predominantly the CEEC represents itself, and certain societies and colleges. They are excellent men, but not of necessity in touch with grass-roots opinion, and not of necessity in touch with the world of the synods. That the new constitution is less open to objection than the old I do not deny. But I believe that any constitution that elects three proctors and three lay members of the general synod, and call *them semi-representative*, and specifically requires it to be explained to them in what capacity they are on the Council lives in a world which has not yet taken synodical government seriously. Unless it does, it will not provide the structure evangelicals need.

The Regional Councils seem also largely useless, except as a stratagem to get eight elected representatives of the 'grass roots' on to CEEC. Like Deanery Synods, they are made a key link, but have little real function. Lay people of ability will have better things to do than attend. The suggestion that members of the House of Laity and Proctors might attend 'as observers' is almost impertinent. These people will be on the job, while the Regional Councils talk, and shuffle reports between DEU and CEEC.

What then are the structures that evangelicals need? They will not fight centralism in the synods by setting up a centralism of their own. Unless my reading of history and of the scriptures is at fault, the manner in which God helps his people is not over-frequently through Committees; it is by putting the right man in the right place at the right time with the right resources. When Israel were captives in Egypt, God did not set up a Commission. He called Moses. When Haman oppressed them, Esther was brought to the kingdom.

First and foremost, what is required is to get men of ability and of evangelical convictions on to the synods—Deanery, Diocesan, and General—and to see that such men understand the importance of this work, frustrating and time-consuming though much of it may be. They must include men who can provide the leadership which is required, and can exercise it, not only in a remote Committee room, but wherever the debate, the decisions and the opportunities occur.

Second, these men (and women) must be given the help that they need to enable them to fulfil their task. One part of this help is the provisions of means of consultation and advice, and to this end the structures of the DEUs (at Deanery and Diocesan level) and the CEEC (as a means of consulting the colleges and societies as it is at present constituted) have a part to play. It is important that the DEU should set out to help its Diocesan representatives, not to organise them: and the relationship between evangelical synod members and the DEU committee might well be given some thought. Likewise if the CEEC

wishes to be regarded as more than a means of consulting the societies it will have to look again at its constitution, at the place it gives to synod members, and at the time it meets. The other part of the help required is the provision to the synod members of the information, the scholarship, and the 'back-room' work they require. To this end Colin Buchanan could have made much more of Latimer House, and rather less of CEEC. Evangelicals require an appreciable extension of the type of work which Latimer House undertakes: and though it means adding to the burdens of those working in the synods, such work would benefit by having synod members more intimately involved in it. It is, after all, work not talk that produces the real results.

Finally, there has to be means whereby the activities of evangelicals in the various synods are co-ordinated. Information has to be communicated, and here the CEEC, DEUs, the societies, and the religious press all have a part to play. Policy has to be initiated, and the start will probably come from an individual—perhaps in a society or committee—or more likely working in the synods. Large Committees (including the Evangelical Group in the Church Assembly) have not been conspicuously successful at initiating policy. Those proposing policies will require ready means of consultation with evangelical colleagues as discussed in the paragraph above: but once the policy has survived this consultation, experience suggests it is best furthered by ad hoc groups of like-minded people whose enthusiasm has been aroused, rather than through formally constituted bodies. This will disappoint those who look for a tidy structure to solve problems: it may not surprise those who have observed what has occurred in the Assembly over the last 20 years. There remains only those occasions when a public statement of evangelical opinion is necessary. This is not often: but when required it must be done well, representatively, and quickly. If the CEEC really keeps in touch with opinion in the synods it could provide the representation, but one doubts, on past performance and on present proposals, if it can move with sufficient speed. Here a smaller Council, in touch with synod members, that can meet at short notice, consult widely, and be serviced by permanent staff, is surely required.