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

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

The Church as People

Today's Church & Today's World

JOHN POULTON

Section IV

The five essays under this heading are in fact about the church as people *in the world*. The theme that church *qua* church is not the conclusion of the divine initiative keeps recurring. The church scattered is at least as central to it as the church gathered for worship or the church engaged in acts of official church-based service.

Ministry and people

Theologically this is summed up in two statements about origins and goals expressed in the New Testament. Professor Robert Grant of the Chicago Divinity School writes:

In Acts 17:26-27 the primal unity of all mankind is emphasized as well as the human quest for God. In John 11:51-52 we find that the death of Jesus was for the nation Israel, 'but not for the nation only, but to gather into one the scattered children of God'. Looking at the context suggests that both texts were written in times when unity was less than universal. The study of church history, too, casts doubt on the existence of a primitive golden age. What remains unquestionable is that the drive towards unity through reconciliation is central to Christian gospel. (p 170)

The constant theme in Scripture, and the experience of the church down the ages, is summed up in 2 Corinthians 5:19 as 'the gospel of reconciliation'. The early Genesis stories speak of mankind sinful and disobedient, at enmity with God and one another, in need therefore of reconciliation with God and neighbours. The human situation has not changed much. St Paul tells us of a cosmic change effected by the crucifixion of Jesus Christ. 'While we were enemies we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son' and 'now that we are reconciled, we shall be saved by his life' (Rom. 5:10 RSV). Since 'Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures' (1 Cor. 15:3), Paul can also say that 'in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them' (2 Cor. 5:19).

The reconciliation of human beings with God is obviously of supreme importance, but something needs to happen also in all human relationships.

For Paul the reconciliation between Jews and Gentiles was the very obvious first stage in all this. Reconciliation must achieve this miracle if the cross is to be seen as effective. 'He is our peace who has made us both one, and has broken down the dividing wall of hostility, by abolishing in his flesh the law of commandments and ordinances, that he might create

in himself one new man in place of the two, so making peace, and might reconcile us both to God in one body through the cross, thus bringing hostility to an end.' (Ephesians 3:14-16) (p 168)

Today, Professor Grant comments:

the first translation of reconciliation is called for in nearly every nation and city of the world. The two groups needing reconciliation are black and white. This is not the place for an analysis of means. It is simply the occasion for recalling that the goal is a Christian one and closely related to the goal for Jews and gentiles. Equally close at hand is the call to the reconciliation of rich with poor, nations with individuals, and men with women, not just in relation to marriage. We cannot get lost in generalities about groups and classes, however. We need reconciliation within groups, not just among groups. Churches with their rival claims need attention too. (p 169)

None of this is too obvious for comment. Indeed, the fact that a good deal of the reconciling aspects of the church's task has been taken on by governments and social agencies, and that psychiatrists and social workers now do so much of it, does not do Christians out of a job. 'There is enough reconciling for everyone.'

The question is: Are we ready to consider the effects it would have on churches were we to take this calling seriously? 'If the ministry of the people of God is a ministry of reconciliation, why do we need an organized church and organized services of worship? Must not we move on to desecralize our old ways of doing things?' (pp 169-70)

Professor Grant suggests what sort of clergy would be needed to bring this to pass. First, he believes, 'they ought to believe in God—and contagiously. Our ministers can be liberation theologians because they must constantly free their picture of God from the outmoded or the trendy, and from their picture of themselves.' (p 167) Secondly, they must believe in the church, also contagiously. 'This does not mean swallowing every dictate or tradition or current authority, nor populism. It means constantly and devotedly caring for the community as the representation of Christ's body in the world.' (p 167)

Above all, he concludes, we need to stop thinking of the ministry as that of the clergy alone. Lay ministry has been brought into existence by God as ministry for mission, ministry in the world. This is where gospel needs to be defined, not in cosily church-based terms. 'We need clearer understanding of church life in relation to the wider world.' (p 165)

Contrast that statement with one on 'Witness' in a 1970 document by the Joint Working Group between the Roman Catholic Church and the WCC:

Witness is the continuous act by which a Christian or a Christian community proclaims God's acts in history and seeks to reveal Christ as the true light which shines for every man. This includes the whole life: worship, responsible service, proclamation of the good news – all is done under the guidance of the Holy Spirit in order that men may be saved and be gathered into Christ's one and only body (Col. 1:18; Eph. 1:22-23), and attain life everlasting: to know the true God and him whom he has sent, Jesus Christ. (cf. John 17:3)

That clearly is the statement of an in-drag strategy. The feel of the Lambeth essays is that it is at best one-sided. True, but not the whole truth.

People as base-line

Martin Conway's article on 'The Church and Use of its Resources' carries the implications of a wider-based strategy further. His definition of church is 'that community, within the total community of men and women, which confesses Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour and therefore seeks to serve, in all that it and its members are and do and say, the loving purpose of God the Father to bring all things to the fulfilment he intends in his kingdom.' (p 196)

In fairly stark contrast to the 1970 definition of 'Witness' just quoted, he writes:

The church exists in order to serve God's kingdom, that culmination for which he created the entire natural order. His purposes are always wider and longer than ours, and it is those we are to serve, not our own. This puts a standing question mark over any striving for a 'bigger and better church'. The results we are after are not primarily in the church but in the world. All our decisions about the use of church resources deserve to be tested by their effectiveness in showing forth some first-fruits of the kingdom. (p 196)

What is being said here, and throughout this section of the Lambeth book, is that the essential context for all decisions about what the church should be doing is to be found in discerning what God is already doing in our world as a whole. This is unlikely ever to be very easy to achieve; but to concentrate instead on our established priorities and patterns is the surest way of failing.

Looking at mission in this way, we are likely to act with *people* as the base-line, the prime resource in any and every situation.

The church is for people and the resources it administers are for the sake of people, of what God intends for them. That suggests immediately that it really doesn't matter much whether there are many material resources or not. People can love and serve one another, as they can love and serve God, whether or no they have much by way of money, possessions, education and so forth. Is it not the clear thrust of Jesus' teaching—e.g. the instruction to the twelve in Luke 9:3, the lesson from the widow's gift in Luke 21:1-4, the parable of Dives and Lazarus in Luke 16—that it is those who are comparatively well off who need to look to their spiritual danger? (p 198)

Too often Anglican strategy seems to presuppose three concentric circles. Most important, in the inner ring, are the clergy. Surrounding them are the laity, and they in turn are surrounded by 'the world'. Most is spent on training and sustaining the clergy, followed by what it takes for them to do 'their' job (buildings, prayer-books, etc.). Only then, if there is anything over, does 'lay training' come into it. As good as nowhere are the chances of substantial resources going for mission in the surrounding world.

The church, writes Martin Conway,

needs to turn itself inside out and take those concentric circles in precisely the reverse order of priorities: first the world in general, its opportunities and needs as seen in the light of God's intentions; within that, active and committed Christians equipped as far as may be for the service and witness to which they are called; and within and for the sake of the laity a much smaller number of the ordained, trained and where appropriate freed from other work in order to give the back-up services that the total missionary demand on the laity may require. (pp 198-99)

On a 'people for people' basis, he suggests, the churches' joint approach to a new housing area should be first to look at the new community, then to send in (or recognize as there already) a Christian person or small group, then (if building has to happen) to consider a community centre with a worship space within it. In such ways reconciliation and the health of people-in-community can be fostered, and we avoid looking as if we cared most about ourselves.

Two factors militate against such a world-oriented view of mission and of people. There is first the given 'framework in which all too often the dead hand of "what has always been done before" outweighs any imaginative spark that could lead to a fresh and true grasp of a new possibility.' (p 195)

The other is our disunity. Again and again the writers under review stress how deeply our inability to look reconciled hinders our attempts to preach or minister reconciliation.

Martin Conway concludes with a plea to face the future *together*. Only so can our witness be authentic, or our service to community effective.

The 'real' to which Christians are properly devoted is that for which God has created us all, always truer and deeper than the state in which we have landed ourselves; a way of living governed by the free Spirit of Christ, not by the predictable princes of this world. Is not one of the tangible effects of commitment to Christ, of the death to self and the rising to new life in him, a freedom to decide freshly and differently about one's personal priorities? No less so with church leaders and the decisions entrusted to them. We never have to do things the way they have been done before. Indeed, in a rapidly changing world there will be a presumption that imitating the past is more likely to be damaging to effective mission than otherwise. A proper gratitude for one's heritage, whether of the past or from another country, is best incarnated in a fresh creativity geared to one's own immediate present and the future that God may be seeking to build out of that. (p 201)

Secular ecumenical movement

Professor John Pobee of Legon University, Ghana, writes on 'Christian Understanding of Community'. From the African background he suggests that to be a Christian is primarily to be a man (following Bonhoeffer). 'To be a Christian is to be a man "in the image and likeness of God", i.e. a man who shares in the creative work of God the Creator, a man with reason, prerogative dignity and the capacity to love. And justice is the removal of all contradictions of love. This means to be a "man for others",

living in a community, in relationship with others.' (p 186)

Community, he suggests, is 'a complex of human relationships, a system of interaction'. It grows when we are 'partners not patrons, brothers not benefactors'. (p 187) Here more tribal understandings can help us westerners. 'Whereas Descartes spoke western man's epistemology and ontology in saying that *Cogito ergo sum* i.e. I am thinking, therefore I exist, *homo africanus* theory of existence is *Cognatus ergo sum* i.e. I am related by blood, therefore I have my being, or I exist because I belong to a family group, a community.' (p 188)

Today is the day of the 'secular ecumenical movement', Professor Pobee writes. Within that, Christianity goes beyond ordinary experiences of kinship, and embraces all mankind. The church is thus a community, but not a separated community. It is to express and to be the embodiment of 'the spirit of neighbourhood and personal acquaintance.' (p 191) The church is to stand as brother and partner to all others in God's world, whether we act it out locally or globally. Its worship is 'to equip for mission' in that world.

The femininity of ministry

Bishop Barry Valentine (Ruperts Land, Canada) has a fascinating essay on 'Women and the Ministry'. He pleads that the subject be treated for itself and not narrowed to the specific issue of the ordination of women (but then cannot help referring back to that issue as he goes along).

He shows how so many of the caring, pastoring, supportive aspects of ministry are basically feminine attitudes. He urges a proper affirmation of the femininity of ministry as the essential background to our understanding and to a balanced experience for the church.

There is a deep reconciliation needed here, too. So much of the heat engendered by current controversies over the ordination issue reveals the inability of people to think themselves out of inherited stances. Bishop Valentine feels that in almost everyone the issue is met with ambivalence. The new factor is the extent to which individual women feel called now to make a personal case based on a sense of vocation. He suggests that to ignore the subject, or to refuse it full and open discussion, is to be less than incarnational in our approach.

Government by synod

Bishop D. M. Kennedy (Bombay) has the fairly thankless task of writing on 'Christian Ministry and Synodical Government'. Commenting on the CNI (Church of North India) experience of bringing episcopal, presbyterian and congregational polities together, he describes (with both feet on the ground) how 'the Headship of the Lord Jesus Christ over the church will in fact be reflected in the organizational church structure by a system of checks and balances.' (p 176) He concludes: 'The main problem facing

CHURCHMAN

any uniting church is how to combine the three traditional elements in church polity in such a way that, in fact, the spiritual and not the demonic predominates.' (p 176)

That, like much else in these essays, shows an earthly understanding of the church as an organization of ordinary human beings. People, people for others, people in whom the Light has begun to shine... the Light which shines on every man coming into the world. The tension is there throughout, between an overemphasis on the church and a concern for the world which may lose for Christians their distinctiveness. Perhaps it is right, certainly predictable, that Anglicans should exhibit this tension most obviously.

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