Starting with the episcopate: any chance of some serious ‘reformation’ in the Church of England?

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Abstract
The article argues for some much needed simplification of the episcopate, to shift resources to the ‘ground level’ and local communities, the ‘ordained’ clergy and other forms of ministry, especially the laity, who continue to disappear from the ‘Church’.

Keywords
housing, infrastructure, making churches usable, renewed attempts at ‘reform’, resources, revision

A preliminary comment
In this day and age we might perhaps have expected that proposals for a recharge of energy and a ‘revision’ of aspiration might have begun with attention to the kind of information needed by any outfit that aims to function well. At present, there are questions to be asked about why the information needed is either not available, or, where it is available, about what is to be done about how resources are distributed. It is simply vital for us to have some comprehension of ‘where we are at’. If we overlook the information available, or fail to persist in more being made...
public, we have no chance of understanding our present situation, let alone being able to discern how things could be better in what for the moment is a ‘national’ Church. Institutions matter, and one cardinal rule for their revitalization is to attend to what we have overlooked and what needs to change for the better. The prompt of a dismissal at the end of a liturgy reflects the conviction that ‘church’ (any variety) exists not for itself but for the non-church society in which we find ourselves. At the very least, laity and clergy together on the front line need the assurance that resources are fairly and honestly accounted for and distributed. As far as all too many of those who are attempting to stay within the Church of England are concerned, this is simply not possible at the moment, resulting in a loss of confidence in those we should be able to trust.

To begin

Some two centuries ago, there were far fewer bishops and many more churchgoers (by a factor of around five). There are many factors that precipitated a decline in churchgoing, but consecrating more bishops looks like yet another wrong recipe to arrest the decline. Moreover, the number and proportion of stipendiary to non-parochial clergy have rapidly increased in recent decades, and it is far from obvious why some of them could not and should not be replaced by members of the laity, not least given that the number of stipendiary parochial clergy has rapidly decreased. Without a deliberate effort to enable the laity to conduct ‘said’ services of Morning and Evening Prayer (BCP or Common Worship) – something that they are perfectly capable of doing, not least given the availability of information on the Church of England’s websites – parochial clergy find themselves with more formal liturgy to sustain in larger and larger groups of parishes. Has this become a possible incentive to find employment as stipendiary clergy, but emphatically minus non-parochial responsibilities? This is far from what someone like the Revd Nicolas Stacey in the 1960s might have hoped could be a result of getting the Church of England’s decision makers to think differently about how the ordained might be deployed. Being awarded the Cross of St Augustine in 2005 for ‘services to the Church’ – presumably for the changes he was able to make in ‘social services’ – was some sort of recognition of what he had been proposing. The last thing needed at the present time is a repeat of the ‘no change’ message he received.

The Church has long been vexed about how to finance the initial ‘training’ of its ordinands, without sustaining a required programme of ‘life-long learning’ characteristic of many citizens in their various roles in life. An increase in stipendiary non-parochial clergy was unlikely to have been predicted, although some may well be employed where congregations flourish, for example in cathedrals – situations that, apart from anything else, encourage theological and liturgical literacy, despite the indifference of some of the episcopate to anything of the kind. In the meantime, there seems to be a problem with the ‘secular’ employment of the ordained – yet another form of ‘outreach’ – again raising questions about the coordination of
clergy and laity in new patterns of ministry. Simply proposing more ordained clergy with or without ‘untrained’ laity is simply not radical enough; it is a major failure of the episcopate not to sort itself out and make available the resources needed to inaugurate and sustain a coordinated long-term project of serving better both the laity/ordained and our communities, whatever they are like.

To continue

Resources, however, lie at the root of some of the problems. In the *Church Times*, it was reported that the annual cost of the bishops rose by nearly £1 million in the four years to 2020. The average annual cost of maintaining one of the 42 ‘see houses’ rose from £61,079 in 2015 to £70,310 in 2020. Average expenses in 2020 amounted to £36,976, with £3,200 on meetings and hospitality; in 2019 (the last year unaffected by the pandemic), the figures were £53,446 and £15,238 respectively.

In an era when the Church of England is allegedly short of financial resources, there seems to be no proposal to dislodge and relodge bishops from houses of six bedrooms or more, not to mention the necessity of employing a gardener or contractor for the management of surrounding gardens – and there is no information on who actually has access to such gardens, and on what occasions. Are they managed as community gardens, perhaps? Once disposed of, there could be many uses for them. It must be obvious that the average annual cost of maintaining a see house would free up resources for which a rational justification could be provided – and some of those involved in property maintenance of see houses are no doubt skilled enough to find other employment.

Next, it appears that no central figure exists for the housing of suffragan bishops, and it is unclear why they are housed differently from diocesan bishops. The cost of their housing should be identifiable and made public within 12 months (i.e. by the end of April 2022 at the latest). This could provide some indication of comparable costs for housing a diocesan bishop, with justification for some necessary differences, if any.

Will the cost of £3,200 on meetings and hospitality now revert to the pre-pandemic figure of over £15,000? Who audits ‘official expenses’? Do these include first-class travel by train and plane? It is perfectly possible to get through a lot of paperwork in a second-class seat, along with the majority of the population.

Is the difference between ‘domestic’ and ‘official’ expenses transparently clear if everything is conducted under one roof? Discretionary funds may be used to support clergy in need. Who decides? To what extent – if at all – are such funds absorbed into the cost of an episcopal household? Who audits these funds?

Who reviews the need for the number of satellite staff – a chaplain (ordained or lay), a PA and ‘senior staff’, for example? Does this category include some of the stipendiary/non-parochial clergy who are needed as parochial clergy? How often are the job descriptions of this satellite group reviewed comprehensively so that adjustments can be made and carefully coordinated, with tasks superfluous to the
core agenda eliminated and staff either switched to new, unavoidable commitments or not replaced in due course? Is the core agenda communicated beyond episcopal council meetings throughout the diocese at parish/congregational level, not just to synods? Is comment invited and encouraged, and communications made in response?

What exactly is the justification for the eyewatering remuneration of another 97 people in London-based institutions? When was the necessity for their location and salary reviewed? And by whom? What plans are in place to shift some of the tasks involved out of London, with consequent re-evaluations of salary levels and pension contributions?

Money apart – but this is not unconnected – bishops need no more than a purple shirt and a clerical collar to be identified; they do not need a ring, pectoral cross, coat of arms or motto (they have an apparent inability to sign a letter in the customary way), convocation dress or mitre – the latter is a nineteenth-century addition anyway. Who pays for portraits? Many notable institutions manage with a black and white photograph. The elimination of deferential modes of address throughout the Church would be a start in the much needed simplification of how bishops are perceived and present themselves. Visible expressions of expected deference should be eliminated and avoided at all costs.

To conclude

Finally, there is the problem of infrastructure. For instance, many communities in England, as elsewhere, are reduced to perhaps one public bus service a week to go shopping, get to a post office, meet friends or visit a library, if one still exists. Some communities have no public transport at all and have made great efforts to support those without cars to get to GP surgeries or clinics for vaccinations, as well as to other appointments. The rhetoric of church multiplications needs to attend to the logistics of getting people from place to place and to the resources, both human and financial, that will be needed even if things change – which won’t be anytime soon, as far as one can tell.

Moreover, family members who have to spend 40 minutes each way pushing a buggy to get children to school may well be too exhausted at the weekend to make a comparable effort to get to a building that in certain crucial respects is unusable. In other words, church buildings (not just the church hall, if there is one) are going to need to be warm, to have lavatories with baby-changing facilities, to have wheelchair access, and so on, and that means that they will need to find the resources to survive applications for planning permission (which will take several years), assuming that they can find project managers to do the work for them (free of charge) as well as to fundraise to complete the project once permission is given. Much needed hospitality – such as drinks and snacks on arrival, not just at the end of a service – need at least kitchenette facilities. Just how much of the Church of England’s resources could and should be made available from money that, at present, is arguably directed at sustaining the episcopate to make churches
hospitable and usable, of which this is just one example? Or to shift time, energy and effort into supporting local community initiatives and to house services in a community room? It doesn’t take long to set up ‘church’ in a familiar place, given those with the generosity and grace to be willing to consider ordination or some other authorized role, with something to celebrate and something to say, with unequivocal support from a bishop or two.

**Notes**

1. See, for example, James M. M. Francis, *Busking the Gospel: ordained ministry in secular employment* (Durham: Sacristy Press, 2021); Jenny Gage, *Priests in Secular Work: participating in the missio Dei* (Durham: Sacristy Press, 2021).
2. *Church Times*, 16 July 2021.

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