

The A.C.C.M. Report and the Future of the Ministry

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ONE OF THE most telling applications of the old parallel between human warfare and the life of the Church arises out of reflection on the immensity of the gap which so often seems to have existed in wartime between the appreciation of the situation made by governments and H.Q. staff on the one hand, and the hard facts of life as experienced by those actually involved in the fighting on the other. Often it has been necessary for a really monumental disaster or crisis to arise before the necessary radical questions about the overall conduct of affairs begin to be seriously asked at the higher levels, questions which have hitherto been constantly sidestepped in the interests of maintaining that complacent optimism which is the lifeblood of all large institutions.

The recently published A.C.C.M. report *The Place of Auxiliary Ministry Ordained and Lay*¹ seems likely to go down in history as an almost classical example of the latter procedure. However the saving factor is that the Church of England also seems likely to be moving at present towards a financial crisis of such magnitude that it will be forced to undertake a far more radical restructuring of its ministerial patterns than this report even begins to contemplate. In this situation the opportunity is there for a genuinely creative rethinking of the true nature of the Church's needs in the light of biblical priorities and of contemporary realities; the danger is of a merely negative kind of strategic withdrawal in function, of simply leaving as much as possible of the present institutional framework intact.

Since training for the ministry and the maintenance of the ministry are by far the largest items in the Church's annual budget, it is clear that what may be called the cost-effectiveness of our present structures is going to be one of the key issues in the fortunately inevitable, and inevitably prolonged, forthcoming debate. This article sets out to clear the ground in some measure by submitting the *Place of Auxiliary Ministry* report (PAM) to critical examination.

The most disturbing fact about this report is the claim made on

p. 4 that since it consists largely of an analysis of replies from various diocesan bodies and authorities 'much of what we have to say in our task of clarifying the issues to do with auxiliary pastoral ministry is not the personal opinions of a small working party but drawn from the considered mind of the diocesan leadership of the Church of England'. The inference is that therefore the conclusions of the report ought not to be questioned. The working party itself may perhaps be partly excused for its failure to make any serious attempt to evaluate the replies from the dioceses on the grounds of the timidity of its terms of reference, though it has certainly failed, by fairly general consent already, to 'clarify the issues'. If however the responsibility is to be placed on the authors of the replies, then there will be many who will feel themselves forced to the opposite inference, to the effect that the present 'diocesan leadership of the Church of England' is in worthy succession to the generals who around 1914 rejected the aeroplane, the machine gun and the tank as potentially decisive weapons of war. To many who are deeply concerned about the atmosphere of complacency which official reports such as PAM exhibit, the real urgency in the present situation lies not in the escalating financial crisis, but in the far more basic tragedy that in parish after parish, both pastorally and evangelistically, 'the sheep are looking up and are not being fed'; that, as Roland Allen pointed out long ago, the Church's supreme and urgent need is for dedicated, imaginative and flexible local ministerial leadership on a scale that cannot possibly ever be forthcoming so long as the Church remains wedded to its present professionalised ministerial system; and that this report which apparently represents the considered views of the diocesan leadership of the Church, expresses such a negative attitude towards such limited and carefully considered experimental developments which have already taken place, such as the initiative described in *Partners and Ministers*.³

Of course the large-scale ordination of 'non-professional' clergy^a is not a panacea which will instantly solve all the Church's problems. But it may be seriously suggested that it will in due course be found to be a *sine qua non* of a solution to its most serious problem of all: that of becoming once more a credible instrument for the pastoral care of its members and the evangelisation 'in depth' of our fellow-countrymen. If ministry is a matter of personal relationships rather than administration, the simple fact is that the sphere of any one man's significant ministry must of necessity be limited to tens (some would say a dozen or two) rather than hundreds, and that therefore for the Church to be in realistic contact with even its present signed-up membership would require a ministerial body *many times* its present strength.

One of the central suggestions of this report is that the forms of ministry needed can and should largely be fulfilled by laymen, and that to extend the scope of ordination much beyond the sphere of the present highly qualified and expensively trained professional group

would result in a lowering of standards and a 'clericalisation' of the Church. This latter suggestion is ingenuous. In fact the precise opposite is the case. It is those who wish to limit ordination to the type and numbers of men now being selected who are the true clericalists, for they wish to retain the de facto authority and leadership of the Church in the hands of the few, and to guard the mystique of the clerical office against devaluation, for 'when everybody's somebody, then no-one's anybody', and we should be back in the dangerously apostolic situation in which the first among us would truly be as the least. There are two absolutely decisive reasons why the present ministerial system effectually frustrates the development of the kind of flexible and accessible local ministry that is really needed:

First, really significant lay leadership of the kind called for in the report can simply never arise within the existing structures, since all the important aspects of leadership, authority and initiative are concentrated in the hands of the professional caste, who keep, or are in a position to keep, the layman in a position of perpetual dependence, with only the most limited forms of pastoral responsibility of his own. It is extremely important to be aware that this situation is largely irrespective of the will or attitude of any particular incumbent, but is an inevitable concomitant of the structure itself. Where the responsibility lies by law and by tradition, there it actually is, and no amount of preaching about the Body of Christ will make the slightest difference. When Auntie is sick, a visit from the street warden (or whatever he is called) simply will not do: it has to be the Vicar or the Curate. There can be no breaking through this situation except by the extension of ordination. Moreover the professional clergyman moves on to a new parish every few years, so that the lay leaders of a parish find themselves repeatedly and dispiritingly confronted with radical and often bewildering changes of policy, of liturgy and even of doctrine. There are a number of tragic examples of parishes in which imaginative incumbents have fostered truly revolutionary developments in lay leadership through house churches and in other ways, only to see it all collapse almost overnight as a result of the appointment of a new Vicar.

Secondly, the heart of the Church's spiritual and corporate life, as contemporary theology and liturgical reform of many traditions has been insisting for years, is the intimate eucharistic fellowship, in which the image and reality of the Body of Christ may not only be declared to be, but may actually be known and experienced as, the saving and transforming source of the new life to which Christians are called in and through their relationship with one another in Jesus Christ. Evangelism has come to be seen not simply as persuading people of the truth of certain doctrines, or even leading them into some kind of purely personal and individual conversion experience, but still more that they should know themselves called out of the hell of individual loneliness and isolation into the supportive and life-giving warmth of

the Christ-centred eucharistic fellowship. If this is so, how can it in any meaningful sense become a reality when one or two men authorised to preside at the eucharist are set down in the midst of twenty or thirty or fifty thousand people, and a Christian congregation of several hundreds? In this way the Church is committing itself to failure in its most fundamental mission before it has started. The following passage from Victor de Waal's book *What is the Church*⁴ is of such great relevance to this point that it is worth quoting at some length:

As the eucharist came less and less to be the sharing together of the common loaf, the image of the Church as Christ's body becomes a mere theological fiction. The sense of Christ's presence becomes localised, to be worshipped from afar, the preserve of the clergy who alone communicate regularly; and the Church as a whole ceases to think of itself as a sign of the kingdom.

The critical point was reached, as Father J. P. Audet has argued, when what he calls the *communauté de base*, the basic group of the Church's life, ceased to be modelled on the prototype of the 'household' and adopted the altogether different model of the 'crowd', a transition that is typified in architecture by the change from the house-church to the basilica, from a private to a public building. Whereas at the outset the group was of a size that corresponded to the conditions demanded by the ministries of the word and of the sacraments, if these were to be effective, now on the contrary these ministries had to be adapted to groups whose size was continually growing, and this was less and less successful. Thus what had been essentially family instruction became the public rhetoric of preaching, and the eloquent sacramental signs of communal life were, as we have seen, obscured. And here Father Audet makes a telling comparison:

'If you invite a small number of relations or friends to your house, you will ask them to sit down at your table and you will yourself serve them with the best food that you have. If you invite twenty-five people, whom you know in very different ways, I suppose you would provide a cold buffet. If fifty people came, to whom you are connected even more variously, you would alter the time of the occasion and would invite them, I should think, to a garden-party, and would arrange for refreshments. If two hundred people are invited, you might still give them a meal, but you would put the matter into the hands of professional caterers. As far as you are concerned, you would content yourself with greeter personally only some of your guests, and you would make a little speech of welcome to the assembled company . . . *What I want to underline is that numbers necessarily change the form and the content of human relationships. This is a law which we cannot avoid, and least of all perhaps in the delicate ministry of word and sacrament!*'⁵

De Waal continues: 'It is from this period that we can trace that view of the Church which regards its structures, its unity, and the authority exercised within it, primarily in terms of centralised power, whether in terms of papal Roman Empire whose provinces were governed in the name of a spiritual Caesar by his pro-consuls, the bishops: or of Protestant nations, in which the godly prince was the effective governor, and every

clergyman a representative of the establishment. Today that view survives in the assumption that the churches are primarily religious organisations in need of central government and bureaucracy, as is exemplified in all the great denominations of the West.

It is at this level that the question of the 'intrinsic validity' (PAM p. 7) of ordained non-professional ministries must be faced, and not in terms of peripheral and debatable questions such as that of 'the contribution ordination makes to the ordained minister's secular work'. Similarly, the issue of the so-called 'principle of congruity' (i.e. between holy orders and various forms of secular employment), of which the report makes a great deal, while not entirely non-existent, would be regarded by most Christians today who are really involved in secular affairs as of virtually no interest at all compared with the far greater and more problematic issue of the congruity between *Christian profession* as such and increasingly wide areas of secular involvement in which the Christian is faced with commitments and choices which are agonizingly problematic from an ethical point of view.

The most characteristic passage in PAM is the following, delivered with such serene assurance that there remains little that one can do except agree or disagree with it:

The general view is that full-time parochial ministry is the norm. One correspondent put it that 'the ethos of the Church of England is essentially parochial' and that 'the Church will always depend for its pastoral care on a ministry which is devoted simply and solely to that care and is constituted of men who have felt the call to devote their life to it'. There is a strong sense that the ordained ministry is one and that nothing should be done to divide it by making a second class ordained ministry or to lower the standing of the ordained ministry.

Even so was the decisive role of cavalry in war defended in military manuals prior to 1914!

The supportive arguments then alleged in favour of this position are predictably weak in the extreme:

'Mass priests' or 'sacrament men' 'were not wanted.' The implied allegation is absurd when seen against the background of the true reasons for needing more eucharistic ministers, which are indicated above.

Discipline: 'it was one thing to control a stipendiary curate, another to control a self-supporting auxiliary minister'. In view of the Church of England's total failure to discipline its stipendiary *incumbents*; during the last 100 years in particular, this suggestion is again almost laughably irrelevant. Obviously some measure of ministerial control is desirable and necessary, but this can and should be exercised, as it actually is, through the system of licensing to exercise ministry in a particular place or sphere. This is also the answer to the alleged difficulty arising from the current mobility of population: it is again only the clericalist who thinks that once a man has been ordained he possesses some kind

of inalienable right to exercise a sacramental and leadership role in the Church wherever he goes.

The question of expenses is equally trivial. Impoverished Christian communities, who depend almost wholly upon a non-professional ministry, such as the Baptists in Russia or the Pentecostals in Latin America, seem perfectly able to solve this one, so why should it be a problem in affluent Britain?

There is also the hoary objection, so often raised and reiterated here, that the non-professional minister will of necessity have little time or energy left over from his secular occupation to 'prepare for preaching, take some share in the occasional offices, visit, teach, say daily offices, play a proper part in chapter and synodical affairs', etc. This is a perfect example of the practice of setting up a question in such a way that the answer is bound to come out in a predetermined way, starting as it does from the unitary, jack-of-all-trades concept of the ministry which the present professionalism assumes as the norm, and which is so very different from the New Testament picture of the variety of gifts and ministries in the one Body.

Finally, something must be said about the question of *standards*, again a *leitmotif* in PAM, which here too achieves a resolute non-facing of the real issues. The key admission is made in one quotation that 'the standards which are at present required tend to be too exclusively intellectual and academic. Candidates for this type of ministry (why only this type?) should be tested for pastoral sensitivity, and group co-operation, as well as for intellectual ability' (p. 10). There is no mention of the very real problem which does indeed exist in selection and training both for the professional and the non-professional ministries, of *how* these qualities of spirituality, sensitivity and group leadership which most lay people would agree are far more decisive than the intellectual ones at present measured, can be tested and evaluated. It is our contention that in fact they cannot, except to a very limited extent and then only provisionally, but that a ministerial structure in which there was the requisite degree of flexibility and mobility, both as from professional to non-professional and vice versa, and between different functions *within* the overall sphere of the Church's ministry, would considerably modify the need for such careful a priori testing. This would of course presuppose a much greater emphasis on the importance, in specifying the Church's recognition of the specific form of a man's ministry, of *licensing* to a particular function, and a certain relativisation of the significance of the ritual, once-for-all act of ordination.

So far we have been considering the contents of the first and major chapter of the PAM report. The rest of it can be handled very much more briefly.

Chapter two of PAM, entitled 'Asking for More', is very much more obviously controversial in character, in that it explicitly criticises

and dismisses the Stepney/Woolwich report *Local Ministry in Urban and Industrial Areas (LMUIA)*⁶ and the experimental ordination project in East London which has attempted to meet the problem of establishing a truly local ministry in a thoroughly working-class area, and which is described by the Rev. Ted Roberts in his book *Partners and Ministers*. Here, in contrast to the realism and theological and pastoral sensitivity of both the Stepney/Woolwich report and of *Partners and Ministers*, PAM plumbs new depths of bathos and inconsequentiality of argument ('It is unlikely that the eternal appeal of the gospel of the carpenter of Nazareth could lose its force among those who in occupation and position in life are not far from him').

We shall not attempt a detailed critique of this chapter of PAM, since it has been far more authoritatively answered by the Stepney/Woolwich working party itself in a feature article in the *Church of England Newspaper* for April 13th 1973, p. 6. In sum, PAM suggests (1) that the principle of an indigenous Church with an indigenous ministry is an uncatholic and congregationalist one, and that (2) sociologically speaking 'it is open to question whether the working class does form a separate cultural entity at the present time'.

For a detailed answer to these affirmations, the reader is referred to the CEN article already mentioned. (1) is based upon a complete misunderstanding, not to say misrepresentation, of what advocates of the 'indigenous' principle are pleading for, a fact which appears at once on reference back to the LMUIA report and to *Partners and Ministers*, the authors of which show themselves if anything rather over-anxious to safeguard the 'catholic' or supralocal aspects of the nature of the Church. (2) arises out of a view of the sociological facts of life which few if any sociologists appear to support, rather particularly as far as the sphere of religion is concerned. In fact a devastating assembly of evidence against the view taken here by PAM has appeared at virtually the same time as PAM: John Benington's *Culture, Class and Christian Beliefs*.⁷

Chapter three of PAM consists of a series of pious reflections, such as might often have been heard from many a pulpit in the course of the last thirty years, starting from the position that 'the replies from the dioceses make it clear that the green light is showing for lay apostolate and lay ministry'. Unfortunately nothing could be further from the truth, for reasons which we have already stated. The true movement of thought of PAM is that since the primacy and normativeness of the professional ordained ministry as at present constituted must on no account be tampered with, the only way left by which we can hope to solve the mounting problems which none can deny is to make renewed appeals to the laity for dedication, commitment and sacrifice. The laity have been subjected to these appeals for many years now, and have put up with them with remarkable fortitude, but there are signs both at the parochial and at the diocesan level that they are beginning

to cry 'Enough'. In reality there can be no possible answer to this situation which does not include the giving of a far greater degree of autonomy and responsibility to the 'lay' leaders of the local Church; and this must, as we have seen, both for pastoral and sacramental reasons, in the long run mean their ordination. And it must regretfully be added that Fr. Kelly of Kelham was right when already in 1916 he described the office of Lay Reader as a 'familiar absurdity'. No-one has ever been able to explain satisfactorily why a man who has been recognised as fit to exercise the function of preaching, should be barred from the relatively straightforward activity of presiding at the Holy Communion.

Of course the authors of PAM are perfectly correct in saying that 'some men, ignorant of the demands of the lay apostolate, feel called to Christian service and interpret this call as a call to auxiliary ordained ministry. Some clergy, not appreciating the possibilities in the lay apostolate, tend to divert a vocation to Christian service into a vocation to the ordained ministry'. But this is a side-issue compared with the Church's urgent need for exploring the way forward to a real structural reform, of the kind that PAM consistently appears to want to block.

The working party appears to have been to some extent aware of the overwhelmingly negative impression created by the major sections of its report, when in the final chapter we find statements such as: 'auxiliary ordained ministry does have a proper and valuable place within the total ordained ministry', a sentence which is repeated almost verbatim in the final paragraph of all. The greater part of the chapter is however taken up with various practical considerations concerning the auxiliary ministry as at present constituted, and with reiterated calls for the maintenance of high standards, without any indication of what the criteria of 'high standards' might be. The report is in fact full of unexceptionable truths of this kind, which are never taken to the point at which they could actually begin to mean something. Throughout, the thinking appears to proceed from the assumption that to ordain a man necessarily means turning him into a 'clergyman'; and behind this one scents the pseudo-metaphysics of the sacramental character which has bedevilled Western 'catholic' thinking for so long, but which is now widely abandoned even in the Church of Rome.

¹ CIO. 1973. pp. 38. £0.25.

² CPAS. 1972. pp. 86. £0.50.

³ We prefer this term to 'auxiliary ministry', since it does not prejudge the issue of normativeness and of authority.

⁴ SCM Press. 1969. pp. 56-7.

⁵ Italics not in the original.

⁶ Mowbrays. 1972. pp. 23. £0.25.

⁷ Scripture Union. 1973. pp. 96. £0.60.