

MINISTRY IN THE MELTING

The Bishop of Woolwich welcomes the decline in the number of ordinands and suggests a few approaches to priesthood

"When are you going to send us another curate?" The answer, if the Bishop is honest, is increasingly likely to be "Never".

I sat through a day recently listening to theological college principals and representatives of their governing bodies discussing the implications of the 30 per cent drop in a single year of candidates recommended for training for ordination in the Church of England. The prevailing atmosphere was that we were bound to be "optimistic", step up recruiting, and plan on the assumption that this was merely a "trough". It was lack of faith to believe that it represented a permanent trend.

Of course, no one can be sure. I personally suspect that this is the writing on the wall, and that the statistics are symptomatic of much deeper and wider forces. But I am not for that reason pessimistic.

On the contrary, in contrast with what one has seen, for instance, in Sweden or large parts of the United States--where nothing looks like cracking the traditional structures however irrelevant--the great, and unexpected, hope is the rapidity in England with which the old is dissolving. Indeed, if it were not for the injection of vast sums from the Church Commissioners, our inherited system, with its thousands of consecrated buildings and full-time parsons living on their benefices, would in many areas have collapsed long since.

The short-fall of men and money from the parishes now puts a big question mark against the whole future. But if we act only because we are forced to from economic motives we shall merely prove the Marxists right and derive no spiritual benefit from it. The source of hope is that even in situations of relative strength many of our most intelligent ordinands, clergy and laity are rebelling against a system which, they feel, condemns the church to the periphery of the modern world and its ministry to what Gibson Winter calls "residential chaplaincies to family life". Here, for instance, is a typical letter I have just received from the vicar of an inner suburban parish:

"Various streams of thought and experience have converged to bring me to the point at which I have to ask myself whether I can spend the rest of my life operating a system which, in certain aspects, may be a definite hindrance to the Kingdom.

"I should be most grateful if I could come and talk about these matters with you--not in terms of escape from the parochial situation, but of possible experiments and developments."

In discussion, he told me that he felt himself in an increasingly

Cleveland, Ohio lost over 10 per cent of her white population as the false position as a professional paid to mind the pool and keep it full. He wanted to explore the possibility of taking a year to complete the necessary qualifications, and then teaching in a comprehensive school while remaining vicar. But not, as he said, in order to "escape from the parochial situation". It was to crack open the professional line which is at the moment restricting ministry within the Body of Christ to those on one side of it.

The corollary of this approach was not to say to the Bishop, "When are you going to send us another curate?" (though in the present situation, with clergy ordained without a trade and in the absence of any real lay ministry, it may be essential for the present curate to stay on while his vicar trains). Its corollary was to say to the local church, "This is a corporate decision. I can only consider it if you too are prepared to train to 'enter the ministry'."

What this involves can, I believe, only be discovered by trying. One would have to start by asking what Christian ministry in and to "the main stream of life" in that community really means; what are the needs, what are the skills and resources available, what are the insights, technical and theological, that would have to be acquired? It may result in groups and courses for many different things--most, including those in adult lay theology, properly provided not by the church but by the local authority.

There would be no firm line between those training for the priesthood and for any other kind of ministry - only a variety of different specialisms. The Apostolic function is not the paternalistic one of sending curates but of saying, as in Acts 6: "Look out from among you men of good repute whom we may appoint". And the primary responsibility of the diocese must be to organise the training and care of what in the future must, I am convinced, be the main ministry of the local church. There will of course continue to be an essential place for the man, ordained or lay, released for full time ministry, residential or functional, on the pay-roll of the church. But such financial support cannot be taken for granted, as it is at the moment, in the act of ordination. Above all there will remain a need, and a growing need, for theological specialists, male and female, for whom our colleges of theology, fewer and larger, and for the most part round university centres, must continue to cater. (Question: Is there any case for separate colleges for men and women - or indeed for councils or boards of women's ministry?)

It is because I see this as a much more relevant pattern that I welcome the creaks in the present system, painful though the process is. But if reform is not to be stultified at least two other things have got to "give".

The first is the mystique of "character" and "indelibility" with which, since the middle ages, we have surrounded and isolated "holy" orders. Ours is an age which thinks in functional terms. As John Taylor put it in last month's CMS News-Letter: "An ad hoc response is the only kind of obedience which rings true to many of the liveliest young Chris-

Cleveland, Ohio lost over 18 per cent of her white population in the core city in the same ten-year interim, and gained a quarter of a million or approximately 70 per cent in the Negro group. These data suggest that the core city is rapidly becoming a ghetto to encompass the marginal and the disadvantaged for the total of the society.

2) All large cities are faced with severe financial problems. This gain of high welfare cost populations and the loss to the suburbs of low welfare cost populations has brought such an attrition of resource that these communities are all in serious financial difficulties. All of them have by-passed their statehouses and gone to Washington for funds with which to meet their problems. The shift of population from the rural to the city has been so great that inequities caused by it have triggered the Supreme Court ruling of "One man, one vote."

To use New York and her environs again as the illustration, New York City spent the equivalent of approximately \$1,100 per child on welfare services other than education in contrast to Nassau County where the expenditure was some \$325.00. The school system of New York City deteriorated in its competitive position with the suburbs to the point that it is conservatively estimated that it would take one-fifth billion dollars per year additional to bring her back to the competitive status of 1940.

At the same time that low welfare cost populations are moving from the inner cities, there is a deliberate attempt to keep the minority group encapsulated within the core area and at the same time siphon off the industries which do not contaminate suburbs, and which add to their tax base. Mahwah, N.J. stands as a classic example. They induced the Ford Motor Company to build their new plant in that community. As soon as the contract was signed, which would add 50% to the tax base of the community, the city fathers passed a zoning ordinance to the effect that one could not build residences in the community on sites less than an acre in size. This has since been raised to two acres. Hence one cannot build there for less than \$30,000. The community, then has the increment in taxes from the plant, but has none of the responsibility for the industrial population which works there. They are encapsulated in the core cities of New York City, Newark, N.J., and Paterson, N.J. The 5000 people who work there meet the commuters who live there twice each day as they interchange on Route 17. On almost any arterial route into the city one can observe the two-way traffic as those who come into the city to man the filing cabinets interchange with the residents who are commuting in car pools to the industries in the suburbs. This financial aspect of the city, and its inability to financially provide a quality of encounter as people come together, is one of the greatest issues before the American people.

3) All large cities are increasingly "muscle bound in their own rituals" as bureaucratization stifles their capacity for flexibility in meeting new needs. The Policeman's Benevolent Association becomes a power bloc in New York City with sufficient leverage to prevent any review or reform within the law enforcement organization. The teachers organization becomes a vested interest in education which precludes assigning teachers to areas of need and makes impossible the orchestration of resources with-

serve. Everything must be done to build up indigenous leadership, but where it is impracticable to say "Look out from among you", the Church must be able to say, "I am among you as one - or as half a dozen - that minister".

Such ministers will be like the new-style missionaries of whom John Taylor writes: "Their location and their terms of service will be determined by (their secular) contracts: their relationship to the local church will be that of any layman seeking ways of missionary obedience in fellowship with other Christians in his place of work and neighbourhood". And what he goes on to say applies, *mutatis mutandis*, just as much to the Church at home: "I no longer see a missionary society as primarily a recruiting agent for an overseas Church, nor as a means of getting people overseas, who would not otherwise go, but as a fraternity of men and women each of whom is bound in a common commitment, specific and exacting enough to create a profound sense of membership among those who share it".

And yet to channel a single penny of the money fed into the dioceses through the Church Commissioners to such a housing association is legally impossible. It is all tied up to benefices and salaries and the provision of churches. And it is so compartmentalised that one cannot use benefice income for curates' housing or money from pulling down a church for building a hall. The new Pastoral Measure which the Church Assembly is to begin nibbling at next week will have to be far more radical if the C of E is to be flexible enough for the ministry of the future.

The hope lies in the fact that none of this makes sense except ecumenically. Certainly the Methodists will not tolerate what Anglicans have learned to put up with - as God forbid that we should be saddled with their (self-imposed) rule-book. And while the talks go on at the top, let the rest of us see to it locally that the eggs cannot be unscrambled.

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