

THE ORDAINED MINISTRY IN DIFFERENT TRADITIONS

By COLIN DAVEY

IS THE ORDAINED MINISTRY in some sort of crisis in our several traditions? Are there different versions of the same crisis, all relating to the need for the clarification of the roles of lay and ordained and the relationship between them? Or are there different crises caused by the different circumstances and structures to be found in different traditions? And in either case, has too little attention been given to issues of power, authority and accountability?

I shall attempt to give some answers to these questions in looking at the ordained ministry in some of the different traditions found in the member churches of the Council of Churches for Britain and Ireland (CCBI); but I shall also hope that the wider perspective offered may counteract any over-narrow focus on the current problems of any particular church. My own hunch is that a closer focus on the role of lay people would help to restore the role of the ordained to its proper perspective.

Issues, problems and crises

At a recent United Reformed Church consultation on an interim report, *Patterns of ministry*,¹ someone commented that the members of the working party which produced it were very confident in their vision of ministry, and therefore unrepresentative of the neurotic attitudes of so many in the URC, which brings together and continues to struggle with its Presbyterian and Congregational traditions! At that same consultation, there were murmurs of agreement when I raised the question of power and authority and what an earlier draft had called 'the hidden agenda about lay-clerical relations in the church'.

As well as debating questions of authority involved in 'seeking together the Mind of Christ', on the basis of the 1994 report, *The nature of the Assembly and the Council of the Baptist Union of Great Britain*,² the Baptist Union is currently facing the unexpected problem of too many ordained ministers and not enough viable congregations to support them all. This is partly a consequence of the autonomy both of its theological colleges and of its local churches.

The Church of England is dealing simultaneously with a number of issues to do with ordained ministry: from welcoming and doing justice to women priests in terms of their appointment to positions of responsibility, to offering pastoral oversight to parishes whose integrity refuses the ministry both of women priests and of bishops who have ordained them; from the loss of a significant proportion of central financial support for the maintenance of ordained ministry, to consequential questions about the viability of many parishes with small congregations; from what a Zambian priest working here describes as a lack of a sense of direction among many clergy who, he says, are greasing the wheels of maintenance where an overhaul is overdue, to the inability of many lay people to evangelize, because, unlike their Anglican brothers and sisters in Zambia, they do not talk about God quite naturally all the time; from the much publicized matter of sexuality and ordination, to the continuing issues of church and state.

The Church of Scotland is currently putting an emphasis on producing a more competent but less numerous ordained ministry, assisted by Readers rather than Auxiliary Ministers. This is a reminder that not only are there varieties of ordained ministry in all our churches – stipendiary and non-stipendiary, parish-based and chaplaincy or ‘sector’ ministry, traditional and pioneering – but also varieties of commissioned lay ministers as well as the ‘every member ministry’ of lay men and women at work, at home, in the neighbourhood.

Both the Anglican Church in Wales and the Presbyterian and other churches in Wales are struggling with an excess of buildings and the maintenance of ministry, particularly of rural ministry. Their investigations into possible co-operation in ‘Community Pastorates’ run up against the as yet unsolved problem of the non-interchangeability of clergy from episcopal and non-episcopal churches.

Meanwhile the New Testament Church of God, and the many other smaller black-minority Pentecostal and Holiness or African Independent Churches, give priority to evangelism and to lively preaching and worship, but face the massive costs of their rented or recently purchased and often heavily mortgaged buildings. For, as pioneers in Britain, they do not have the luxury of inherited premises or inherited financial subsidies. As a consequence, they are unable for the most part to pay their pastors as full-time stipendiary ministers, which gives them a double burden, of daily work to earn a living by, and of demanding ministry and pastoral care of others. In these circumstances, a different challenge is also being faced, as Rev. Dr Selwyn Arnold put it: ‘There had been such an emphasis on preparing people for heaven that we had

neglected to prepare them to live and participate in present-day British society' and in their 'struggle for survival' here.³

Another issue has been raised sharply by black Methodist, Anglican, URC and other ordinands and clergy, as Rev. Sonia Hicks has written:

Theological education pre-supposes a white middle-class identity. I am pleading for a realisation that black ministers will have to perform their ministries in a different context to white ministers and that, therefore there is a need for that context to be given some priority . . . regardless of where those black ministers perform their ministry . . . We need to develop the necessary skills which will help the black community, suffering under the ravages of racism, to stand tall.⁴

The Greek Orthodox Church struggles between preserving and promoting the use of the Greek language in worship and in the home, and introducing English-language services for the benefit of third- and fourth-generation children whose loyalty it wishes to retain.

Alongside these indications of issues, problems and crisis of various kinds in churches, it is also important to record that in many places in Britain there are lively and full churches with teams of devoted and sensitive clergy encouraging lay witness and ministry day by day.

Statistical and other factors

But are there some particular factors which make life especially difficult for ordained ministers today?

Statistics may be one pointer here. According to the *UK Christian Handbook*,⁵ which lists adult worshippers, churches/congregations, and full-time stipendiary ministers (but for black-majority churches the numbers include both the small number of stipendiary and the much larger number of non-stipendiary ministers), we find the following figures in descending order of size of members:

| <i>Church</i> | <i>Members</i> | <i>Churches</i> | <i>Ministers</i> |
|--|----------------|-----------------|------------------|
| <i>Church of England</i> | 1,483,000 | 16,285 | 12,587 |
| <i>Roman Catholic Church</i> <i>(England and Wales)</i> | 1,292,000 | 3,352 | 6,210 |
| <i>Church of Scotland</i> | 752,719 | 1,668 | 1,230 |
| <i>Methodist Church</i> | 408,107 | 6,950 | 2,382 |
| <i>Roman Catholic Church</i> <i>(Scotland)</i> | 268,508 | 464 | 1,014 |
| <i>Greek Orthodox Church</i> | 260,000 | 105 | 150 |
| <i>Church of Ireland</i> | 205,755 | 1,125 | 535 |

| <i>Church</i> | <i>Members</i> | <i>Churches</i> | <i>Ministers</i> |
|---|----------------|-----------------|------------------|
| <i>Baptist Union of Great Britain</i> | 148,128 | 2,118 | 1,779 |
| <i>United Reformed Church</i> | 114,692 | 1,808 | 995 |
| <i>Church in Wales</i> | 105,700 | 1,142 | 759 |
| <i>Presbyterian Church of Wales</i> | 59,815 | 1,012 | 127 |
| <i>Scottish Episcopal Church</i> | 55,484 | 295 | 225 |
| <i>Union of Welsh Independents</i> | 49,850 | 615 | 130 |
| <i>Council of African and Afro-Caribbean Churches</i> | 12,000 | 45 | 100 |
| <i>New Testament Church of God</i> | 6,600 | 105 | 214 |
| <i>New Testament Assembly</i> | 3,500 | 20 | 45 |
| <i>Russian Orthodox Church</i> | 2,200 | 24 | 18 |

This produces the following ratios of (a) average number of members per church/congregation; and (b) of stipendiary clergy per church:

(a) The highest average of adult members per church are:

| | |
|---|-------|
| <i>Greek Orthodox Church</i> | 2,476 |
| <i>Roman Catholic Church (Scotland)</i> | 578 |
| <i>Church of Scotland</i> | 451 |
| <i>Roman Catholic Church (England and Wales)</i> | 385 |
| <i>Council of African and Afro-Caribbean Churches</i> | 266 |
| <i>Scottish Episcopal Church</i> | 188 |
| <i>Church of Ireland</i> | 182 |
| <i>New Testament Assembly</i> | 175 |

There is then a big drop to:

| | |
|------------------------------------|----|
| <i>Church in Wales</i> | 92 |
| <i>Church of England</i> | 91 |
| <i>Russian Orthodox Church</i> | 91 |
| <i>Union of Welsh Independents</i> | 81 |

The lowest averages are then:

| | |
|-------------------------------------|----|
| <i>Baptist Union of GB</i> | 69 |
| <i>United Reformed Church</i> | 63 |
| <i>Presbyterian Church of Wales</i> | 59 |
| <i>Methodist Church</i> | 58 |

It is these first ratios which indicate the average size of congregational adult membership and therefore determine the financial viability including maintenance of buildings (subsidy permitting), size of pastoral responsibilities, and often the morale of local congregations and their stipendiary clergy. For example, as Robin Gill wrote,⁶ in the North-East of England there are twice as many Roman Catholics as Anglicans in church on a Sunday; but the Anglicans have four times as many churches.

(b) Those with the highest ratio of stipendiary ministers to churches are:

| | |
|---|------|
| <i>Roman Catholic Church in Scotland</i> | 2.18 |
| <i>Roman Catholic Church in England and Wales</i> | 1.85 |
| <i>Greek Orthodox Church</i> | 1.42 |
| <i>Baptist Union of Great Britain</i> | 0.83 |
| <i>Church of England</i> | 0.77 |
| <i>Scottish Episcopal Church</i> | 0.76 |
| <i>Russian Orthodox Church</i> | 0.75 |

Those with the lowest ratio of stipendiary ministers to churches are:

| | |
|-------------------------------------|------|
| <i>Methodist Church</i> | 0.34 |
| <i>Union of Welsh Independents</i> | 0.21 |
| <i>Presbyterian Church of Wales</i> | 0.12 |

This speaks for itself in terms of the provision or stretching of human resources, though to the ratios of stipendiary ministers should be added the many non-stipendiary clergy and commissioned lay readers and other lay pastoral ministers. Also, compared with their counterparts in 'gathered' churches, Church of England clergy and Church of Scotland ministers also have a sense of pastoral responsibility towards *all* who live within the parish boundaries of these 'established churches'. Greek Orthodox clergy have large communities to minister to from proportionately far fewer churches, which are well attended but extremely demanding. The distribution of population in rural and urban areas is another factor which may further compound any particular situation.

Another factor which affects the morale of ordained stipendiary clergy is the ambiguity often created by the combination of higher than average educational qualifications and professional standing, larger

than average tied houses (vicarages or manses), and much lower than average (for graduates) salaries or stipends. This may be felt more acutely at a time when churches as institutions and as employers are facing financial cut-backs. It may also be a factor affecting recruitment to full-time stipendiary ministry and producing a larger number of candidates than before for non-stipendiary training courses and ministry.

The current intellectual climate of uncertainty about absolutes in morals or metaphysics drives some to see the Church as a rock on which to build, while others see it as a rudderless raft in which to drift around on a sea of faith and doubt. This can create problems, for instance for 'liberal' Baptists seeking employment in 'evangelical' churches or for Anglicans on fixed-term contracts.

Power and authority

In January last year, on my way to a World Council of Churches' Faith and Order Standing Commission meeting in Switzerland, I spent an afternoon in Lausanne. I sat for a while in the bare Gothic cathedral there, which reminded me sharply that, like the 1989 changes in Eastern Europe, and with the same sort of popular involvement, the Reformation was not only a 'back-to-basics' religious renewal and revival, but also a violent and disruptive movement of social and political change involving a transfer of power. In 1536 the Bernese army had already taken possession of the city of Lausanne and had ejected its prince-bishop. A disputation was then held in the cathedral, the verdict of which was to 'suppress all idolatries, Papal ceremonies and human traditions and ordinances not in accordance with the Word of God'. Directly it was over, the mob stripped the cathedral of everything suggestive of 'the abomination'. This was 'Evangelicalism, if you will, but no less certainly municipal Caesaropapism on the familiar pattern', comments the French historian Émile Léonard,⁷ emphasizing the new sovereignty of some town councils in religious affairs, resulting from the Reformation.

If we can reread not only church history, but also the New Testament, as a series of struggles for power and authority, we shall be aware of the close links between doctrinal and constitutional issues (constitutions being essentially about power and authority, checks and balances). We shall not be afraid to notice the importance of constitutions or of each particular 'ecclesiastical polity', since in an institution like the Church, where, from the start, and wherever it is as all-embracing as it is called to be, tensions are bound to arise from a wide

social and ethnic mix of people, served by ministers, such as apostles, prophets, teachers, deacons, presbyters and bishops, with competing claims as interpreters of God's will as well as the main desire to dominate despite the divine command to serve.⁸

We can also observe, as Aristotle wrote,⁹ that any authority system can degenerate and lead to another one, which can do the same, and so on in a kind of cycle: benevolent monarchy becomes monstrous autocracy, or tyranny, and is overthrown; elected collective leadership, which succeeds, can become a dictatorial oligarchy or junta which a revolution removes; popular democracy in which all have a say can degenerate into mob rule, which then throws up a new leader, who may be benevolent or an autocrat. This is worth remembering when we are looking at the theological and constitutional arguments for episcopal, presbyterian and congregational forms of church government, and how they work out in practice (whatever the theory) at local, regional, national, international and universal levels.

Three recent discussions are relevant here. The first concerns the clarification in the United Reformed Church's interim report *Patterns of ministry* of the concept of 'the priesthood of all believers'. This emphasizes that 'it is the Church as a corporate body which shares in the high priesthood of Christ. The verse (1 Peter 2:9) is not speaking about the ministry of priesthood of Christians as individuals', although it is 'sometimes misunderstood as implying that "anyone can do anything"'.¹⁰ And it is that misunderstanding which caused 'an aberration in the history of Congregationalism' when R. W. Dale asked his church meeting to allow a lay man to preside at communion once a year 'as a reminder of the priesthood of all believers'. This was severely criticized, not least because it 'led only to the debasing of ministry'.¹¹

The second is a proper protest against 'An abuse of power', as a series of articles in *Modern Believing* is entitled.¹² Here a group of lay people, working under the auspices of the Association of Centres of Adult Theological Education, argue that 'one of the major evils which confronts us is clericalism or clericism which runs through the Church as sexism and racism run through society with similarly disabling effects, creating oppression and hindering the advancement of the Kingdom'.¹³ For, as Chris Peck writes:

The experience of lay people is that they are denied an equal share in the decision-making processes of the Church, equal access to resources of theology, spirituality and training and that they are seen

by clergy as being passive, needing teaching, unspiritual, untheological, unresponsive and ultimately irresponsible, unable to be trusted with the things that matter – the holy mysteries.¹⁴

The third is the Churches Together in England's *Called to be one* process, and the responses by its member churches to the questions: How do you understand the words 'visible', 'church', and 'unity'? For this has revealed a great divergence over whether the phrase 'local church' means 'congregation' (in the independent tradition) or 'diocese' (in the episcopal tradition). This reflects the history of struggles for power and authority and against the abuse of power in the Church. This is why independents dislike words like 'hierarchy', 'control', 'historic episcopate', 'papal supremacy' in relation to 'visible unity' as fiercely as the Eastern Orthodox or Anglicans dislike 'universal jurisdiction'. This is also why Roman Catholics try to defuse the situation by speaking of 'subsidiarity', or Anglicans by describing themselves as 'episcopally led but synodically governed'. The *koinonia* theology of the Church is immensely attractive because it speaks of churches and persons in relationships modelled on those of the Holy Trinity. The practical problem remains, however, both between and within each of our churches about processes of decision-making and how authority is actually exercised, and the part played by lay and ordained in this.

People first

In the 1995 Church of England Year Book's Review of the Year 1994, the Very Rev. Robert Jeffery writes: 'The quality of worship in many parishes (and the quality of preaching) leaves much to be desired. Real improvement in worship would reap great benefits. So would a common search for a relevant spirituality which took people's everyday life seriously.'¹⁵ This was certainly the conviction of those present at the November 1993 Consultation organized by the Council of Churches for Britain and Ireland at Dunblane, 'Thirsty in a Thirsty Land', who reported:

Under this theme we have explored the yearning both inside and outside the Church for a spirituality broad and deep enough to contain and channel our hopes and struggles, a spirituality which is neither privatised nor compartmentalised, but which relates to persons in community and which links faith to all aspects of human experience.¹⁶

I suspect that any thoroughgoing search by lay and ordained Christians together 'to equip God's people for work in his service'¹⁷ as

participants in God's mission to the world would help towards solving some of the several problems and crises we have been considering, not least by recalling the ordained to their proper role. For whether we are grappling with issues of power, authority and accountability within or between episcopal, presbyterian or congregational systems of church government; or exploring, preferably together, the viability of small congregations, the employability of clergy, and the shared use of inherited resources of people and premises; or doing justice to women and men of ethnic minority as well as majority communities in the light of their needs and circumstances, and the training and development of those among them ordained to stipendiary or non-stipendiary ministry, commissioned as lay people or committed as church members; *putting God's people first* will not only get our perspectives and priorities right. It will help the clergy to turn from 'vergers' concerned only with the maintenance of buildings and services into 'explorers' sharing in an adventurous journey together with others – provided that the focus is first and foremost on *discipleship and witness in people's everyday life*. For it is to prepare and be resourced for and to reflect on which model of Christian community gathers on church premises before and after being dispersed and sent out into the world. For, as my Salvation Army colleague on the British Council of Churches staff used to say of its church buildings, 'The Army was never meant to be confined to Barracks'.

It is equally important that lay Christians should be valued for their daily life and work, ministry and witness, wherever they are, and not only for their participation in those services, meetings and events which take place on church premises or within a parish's boundaries. Similarly, the quality of worship, preaching and congregational life is immeasurably enhanced by its being intertwined with and related to people's 'daily struggle for survival in present-day British society', as Selwyn Arnold put it.¹⁸ This also helps towards giving a better pastoral, theological and ecumenical account of the Church, its members and ministers, in line with the recommendations of the CCBI Unity, Faith and Order Post-Santiago Consultation at Swanwick last June, which declared: 'Any primary focus on ordained ministers rather than on the People of God marginalises lay people and suggests that we are mainly concerned with power, status and pay'. It therefore recommended:

The People of God, the bearers of apostolicity, should be the primary context of any consideration of ministry. Ways should therefore be

found to enable and make visible the ministry of all believers including children, and to discover appropriate forms of *Koinonia* to support the mission of the laity in the world.¹⁹

NOTES

¹ The United Reformed Church in the United Kingdom, *Patterns of ministry: interim report* (London: URC, 1994).

² Faith and Unity Executive Committee and Doctrine and Worship Committee, *The nature of the Assembly and the Council of the Baptist Union of Great Britain* (Didcot: The Baptist Union of Great Britain, 1994).

³ Selwyn Arnold, *From scepticism to hope: one black-led church's response to social responsibility* (Nottingham: Grove Books, 1992), p 35.

⁴ Sonia Hicks, 'Black involvement – on whose terms?' in Raj Patel, Maurice Hobbs, Greg Smith, *Equal partners? Theological training and racial justice* (London: CCBI, 1992), pp 61–2.

⁵ Peter Brierley and Val Hiscock (eds), *UK Christian handbook 1994/95* (London: Christian Research Association/EA/BFBS, 1995), pp 252ff, statistics for 1992). Church of Ireland statistics for 1990 taken from Val Hiscock, Peter Brierley, Boyd Myers and Lindsey Mansfield (eds), *Irish Christian handbook*, (Marc Europe, 1992), p 25. CCAC figures supplied by churches themselves.

⁶ Robin Gill in a *Church Times* article.

⁷ Émile G Léonard, *A history of Protestantism: vol I, The Reformation* (London and Edinburgh: Nelson, 1961), p 321.

⁸ Mark 10:35–45.

⁹ Aristotle, *Politics*.

¹⁰ *Patterns of ministry*, p 36.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p 38.

¹² *Modern Believing* vol XXXIII, no 4 (1992), vol XXXIV, nos 2, 3, 4, 5 (1993), vol XXXV, nos 1, 2 and 3 (1994), vol XXXVI, no 1 (1995).

¹³ *Ibid.*, vol XXXIII, no 4 (1992), p 30.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p 31.

¹⁵ *Church of England year book 1995* (London: Church House Publishing, 1995), p xxvi.

¹⁶ Report, *Thirsty in a thirsty land* (unpublished), to the CCBI representatives meeting.

¹⁷ Ephesians 4:12.

¹⁸ *From scepticism to hope*, p 35.

¹⁹ Unpublished 'Aide mémoire of the post-Santiago consultation' (20–21 June 1994, at the Hayes Conference Centre, Swanwick), p 4.