

## BOOK REVIEWS

---

### **The Church of England in the Twentieth Century: The Church Commissioners and the Politics of Reform, 1948–1998**

ANDREW CHANDLER

Boydell Press, Woodbridge, 2006, xii + 542 pp (hardback £35.00) ISBN: 978-1-84383-165-5

The Church Commissioners are one of the oldest charitable bodies in England, tracing their parentage back to the generous provision made by Queen Anne in 1704. They are also currently the second largest, valued in their most recent annual report at some £5.4 billion, although, as Dr Andrew Chandler reveals, there has never been enough to support fully the nationwide parochial system, bishoprics, cathedrals and other responsibilities allotted by the Church of England to the new trustee corporation created by church and state in the 1947 Measure that finally combined Queen Anne's Bounty with the Ecclesiastical Commissioners. The history of these earlier bodies has been well documented in GFA Best's *Temporal Pillars* (Cambridge, 1964). Dr Chandler is concerned with the first fifty years of the new institution, from its radical new approach to investment to the National Institutions Measure of 1998, and its implications for the role of the Commissioners within new structures of central governance.

The popular perception of the work of the Church Commissioners is perhaps inevitably focused on their success or failure as a provider of financial support for the mission of the Church. Although in recent years a far greater proportion of the running costs have been raised by the giving of members of its congregations, the Church still depends very heavily on the resources provided by the Commissioners. As Chandler shrewdly observes, money embarrasses the Church. The Church is embarrassed if it appears to be wealthy. Equally it loses face if it fails to steward its resources wisely, and the media routinely remind us of the losses briefly incurred in the property markets in the early 1990s, although the results over fifty years are an outstanding achievement. Chandler puts the events of the 1990s into their proper historical perspective, including the pressures that brought about the losses sustained and the prosperity that preceded the crisis.

The half century in question was a time of considerable growth for the Church Commissioners, in contrast to the less effective management of the predecessor bodies, which led to their combination in 1947 as one corporation. The cautious investment policies of the past were not producing the kind of income needed to support the clergy, many of whom experienced real poverty as the

value of their local endowments declined steeply. Chandler notes that, in 1948, the Commissioners had just £1,146,946 in the bank and £100 million in holdings.

Under the leadership of Sir Malcolm Eve and Archbishop Geoffrey Fisher, the decision was taken to move from the security of gilt-edged bonds, with their low returns, and to venture – cautiously at first – into the stock market. Fisher approached the Chancellor of the Exchequer, Rab Butler, who in turn put Eve in touch with the governor of the Bank of England, and a panel of senior city figures was formed to provide the Commissioners with free but immensely valuable investment advice. From this point onwards, as the Estates and Finance Committee gained confidence and experience, it seemed that everything the Commissioners touched turned to gold.

However embarrassing it might be for the Church to have money, it was put to good and effective use throughout the great period of reform during which Geoffrey Fisher presided as Chairman of the new Church Commissioners. Most, if not all, of the necessary improvements to the life of the Church required money: to augment stipends, to improve clergy housing, to provide pensions, to sustain the ministry of bishops and cathedrals, and so much more which had fallen into neglect during the lean years of the Depression, the ending of Tithe and the War. Endless detailed and painstaking work was required to deal with the unspectacular practicalities of church life, and Fisher chaired the Commissioners in person, determined to ensure that the Church would be in good shape for the growing challenges of the century.

The success of the Estates and Finance Committee became a byword in the Church Assembly and in the General Synod which replaced it. Money could be found for many purposes that advanced the Church's ministry indirectly, such as the Church Urban Fund, as well as for more obvious causes, such as the building of new churches and the provision of stipends and parsonages. The pressure for more money grew and grew as the Synod sought to improve stipends, provide better pensions and address new areas of mission. As the demands rose, the Church Commissioners attempted to keep pace, and did so successfully until the end of the 1980s.

There was, however, a fundamental flaw in the constitution of the 1947 Measure that established the Commissioners. This provided only for a very limited supervision by the Board of its Assets Committee. Chandler describes how finally the hubris of those who drove investment decisions, unrestrained by the Board or by the Committee itself, led to the taking of risks that proved highly damaging. It took some time and a change of senior management to recover, and very nearly resulted in the abolition of the Commissioners as a body.

But the work of the Commissioners is about much more than the management of investments, however vital these are for pensions and for the support

of the Church's ministry. A valuable proportion of the book describes the less well-known but equally important trusteeship exercised by the Commissioners in respect of both the parochial system and its clergy, and also the historic estate of churches, cathedrals and houses. It is a trust exercised on behalf of the whole nation, and the Commissioners are therefore answerable to Parliament, exemplified in Chandler's analysis by the close scrutiny of the Commissioners by the House of Commons' Social Security Committee, following the crisis of 1990–1991.

A series of reforming Measures, most notably the 1983 Pastoral Measure, required the Commissioners to oversee the operation of local ministry, from the erection of a new church to the disposal of those that had become redundant, and all that lay in between, including parsonages, parish and deanery boundaries, pastoral reorganisation, glebe and the establishment of a central stipends authority. Chandler utilises his extensive study of the Commissioners' vast archive to illustrate the sheer variety, complexity and dogged detail of the affairs of so many parishes, churches and people.

Most of the work is routine and uncontroversial but, from time to time, the Commissioners' Pastoral Division is required to adjudicate in disputes over pastoral reorganisation or the disposal of redundant churches, and these sometimes become causes célèbres into which the Commissioners become drawn, and may find their judgement scrutinised by the courts and criticised by MPs. But Chandler pays tribute to the skilled and efficient work of the Division, which has assisted the Church to complete a considerable amount of pastoral reorganisation, the formation of team and group ministries, and the sensitive disposal (in conjunction with the state) of numbers of church buildings that are no longer required as parish churches.

Chandler's main theme and conclusion is that the success of the Church Commissioners, taken as a whole over the fifty years from their formation, derives from the pattern that was adopted in their early years of a practical approach both to finance and to the administration of church life, epitomised by the personal chairmanship and close involvement of Archbishop Fisher. He has been criticised elsewhere for his occupation with what are said to be 'domestic' issues, such as the reform of canon law, but his attention to the details of church life resulted in immeasurable benefits for a Church that was badly in need of such reforms and improvements. The modern Church of England is in debt to his modernising archiepiscopate, and this book is a substantial tribute to Fisher's recognition that these things must first be dealt with, before more imaginative schemes can be taken in hand.

The final sections of the book are concerned with the politics of reform of a different kind: the process which was set up by Archbishop George Carey to examine the role of the national institutions following the Commissioners' financial crisis, and the solution, which took shape as the National

Institutions Measure of 1998. Until that point, all diocesan bishops were ex-officio Church Commissioners, with the Archbishop of Canterbury in the chair. Chandler's judgement is that the 'apotheosis' of the Church Commissioners was the period from 1948–1961, when Fisher chaired the Commissioners, unlike those who followed him.

Chandler argues that the addition of the Archbishops' Council in 1998 to the existing national institutions – the Church Commissioners and General Synod – did not clarify the relationships of these bodies, for the Council itself had been given few powers to act independently, while the Commissioners continued to exercise the pastoral functions which all acknowledged they did very well. Nor was it clear how the new Council would in any way safeguard the Church's endowments – the issue that had prompted the reforms – or what authority it would have to spend money of which the Commissioners remained trustees. Chandler suggests that the new arrangements have disrupted the coherence of the Church of England's administration, at the centre of which the Church Commissioners once sat, permeating the ecclesiastical landscape, and that Fisher alone understood their significance as an agency for the governance of such a diverse institution as the Church of England.

STEPHEN TROTT

Rector of Pitsford with Boughton, Church Commissioner

doi: 10.1017/S0956618X08001257

### **The Warburton Lectures Delivered at Lincoln's Inn 1995–2005**

Honourable Society of Lincoln's Inn, London, 2006, ix + 180 pp (hardback £15.00) ISBN: 9780-9540619-2-0

William Warburton established the Warburton Lectures in 1768, with those invited charged with providing 'A lecture in the form of a sermon to prove the truth of revealed religion in general and of the Christian in particular from the completion of those prophecies in the Old and New Testament which relate to the Christian Church especially to the apostasy of papal Rome'. There is clearly much to interrogate in this job description, and it is perhaps not to be regretted that none of the lectures included in this volume fully meet the original aims of the trustees. On my reading, the apostasy of Rome is entirely absent from the eleven lectures collected in this volume and, while many are broadly apologetic in tenor, none seeks to show the fulfilment of biblical prophecy. The decision of lecturers not to follow the letter of the charge