

CONFERENCE REPORTS

Ecclesiastical Law Society Residential Conference

Birmingham, 19–21 April 2013

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Members of the Ecclesiastical Law Society gathered in Birmingham from far and wide to discuss the future of parochial ministry in the Church of England and, more particularly, the extent and flexibility afforded to dioceses and parishes by current legislation. The Rt Revd Tim Dakin, Bishop of Winchester set the tone for many of the discussions to come, with his vision for a ‘Mission-shaped diocese’. He first reminded us of the original character of the Church and called us to rediscover the Church of England as a ‘fresh expression of the Benedictine mission movement’. Bishop Tim shared his vision for the leadership of his diocese, involving a stripping-back of committees, a clear focus on subsidiarity and a commitment to both modal and sodal structures working in tandem.

The primary talking point, however, was one particular tool proposed in this. A new archdeacon is proposed, without geographic portfolio, but instead tasked with facilitating innovative mission arrangements throughout the whole diocese. He or she would be empowered with a Bishop’s Mission Order (BMO) covering the entire diocese and financed by a charitable company controlled by the Diocesan Board of Finance. This would enable experimental planting of congregations and clergy with minimal legal procedures and great speed, similarly enabling the quick winding-up of any proposals that did not work, and is, arguably, the widest proposed scope of any BMO to date.

Saturday morning was given over to statistical analysis of the Church today. Some statistics can paint a gloomy picture and it is clear that the Church soon faces challenges given the tidal wave of clergy approaching retirement in 10–15 years’ time. However, many statistics provide great hope: midweek attendance of under-16s has increased dramatically and Fresh Expressions are attracting both new and lapsed churchgoers in significant numbers.

Peter Wagon from the Church Commissioners demonstrated the quite remarkable range of different options available under current legislation for a

whole range of innovative structures, though pointing out that pastoral re-organisation has been done in similar ways for 200 years. In recent years the focus for such arrangements has been on collaborative ministry and, lately, extra-parochial structures. While the current trend appears to be against team ministries (with more being dissolved than established in the last five years), this can perhaps be contrasted with the recent proposals from the Church in Wales to divide dioceses into Ministry Areas for resourcing of clergy. It was argued that a similar model to that proposed in Wales could operate in England under current legislation, with the deanery as the primary mission unit.

Much of the conference focused on the potential offered by BMOs and we heard first-hand from the Registrar tasked with establishing the very first, Martin Follett. His three examples from the Dioceses of Exeter and Truro demonstrated the broad range of ministries that can be authorised and supported via this route. A deanery in north Cornwall has used a BMO as something of an episcopal 'seal of approval' for pan-deanery work and sharing of resources across benefice boundaries. A BMO in Exeter is specifically focused on ministry to teenagers, meeting in various different church venues across the city. The Exeter Network Church is a flexible umbrella structure through which a wide range of outreach and mission is undertaken, including discussion groups, prayer meetings, street pastor initiatives and sports clubs. Meeting in a local school hall, it now has two Sunday services to cope with the numbers.

Having established that current legislation and a supportive bishop can help establish almost any ministry structure, a truly inspiring lecture from Professor Grace Davie (University of Exeter) outlined the wider sociological and cultural traits in the UK and Europe and examined what this might mean for reform in the Church of England.¹ In doing so, she sounded a caution against changing too much. We should not re-imagine the parish system to such an extent that we discard the word – the parish means things to people and the local community, even if they are not attending on Sunday. There was much discussion on the 'market' in religion, with society so accustomed to having an array of choices in every aspect of life. It is against this background that the growth of the large charismatic churches and in attendance at cathedral worship has been recorded. In view of declining active voluntary membership in all walks of life, perhaps the Church should not be too downhearted.

The Bishop of Lincoln, the Rt Revd Christopher Lowson, then gave his considered reflection on these matters in the largely rural context of his diocese. The English idyll of the parish church on the village green remains in the hearts of people and communities, but without the obligation to attend and

1 An article covering many of the points of this lecture may be found in this issue: G Davie, 'Belief and Unbelief: Two sides of a Coin', (2013) 15 *Ecc LJ* 259–266.

maintain it. Against this background, the role of stipendiary clergy, in declining numbers, will clearly be different in the future, with a greater focus on management and enabling lay ministry. In rural areas, this not only presents issues in training and preparation of clergy but also with attracting young clergy to posts in the first place, away from the suburban and urban parishes in which most found their calling. In contrast, the Bishop of Birmingham, the Rt Revd David Urquhart, focused on the particulars of innovative mission in the multicultural, primarily urban setting of his diocese, with particular reference to a new style of ecumenism he saw emerging. Local churches are coming together to face the joint challenge of reshaping mission, with a joint understanding that what has worked in the past may not work today.

All the speakers gave much to ponder, and a series of small-group sessions culminated in a Sunday morning plenary session chaired by Dr Will Adam and summed up by the Rt Revd John Gladwin. Delegates departed with a deeper understanding of what can be attained within and through the current legal structures available, and how these might be used imaginatively to face the challenges of the future.

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The Fourteenth Colloquium of Anglican and Roman Catholic Canon Lawyers

Rome, 26–27 April 2013

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The Fourteenth Colloquium of Anglican and Roman Catholic Canon Lawyers took place at the General Curia of the Order of Friars Minor, Rome, from 26 to 27 April 2013, where we enjoyed a characteristic Franciscan warm welcome and exceptional hospitality. The theme chosen for this year's Colloquium was 'Teaching canon law' in the two traditions. Representing the Anglican Communion were Professor Norman Doe, Anthony Jeremy, Professor Mark Hill QC, the Revd Dr Will Adam and Stephen Slack. From the Catholic Church the participants were Fr James Conn SJ, Fr Robert Ombres OP, Fr Fintan Gavin and Fr Aidan McGrath OFM, Secretary General of the Order of Friars Minor and our host.