

The role of Lay People in Church Governance - Scottish Episcopal Church

David Jasper

From the point of view of the Scottish Episcopal Church, as a member of the world-wide Anglican Communion, there are a number of ways of responding to the theme of this conference. From the perspective of the canons of the Church the answers are fairly clear and simple, though the larger implications are much less apparent. I will get on to the latter in due course. To start with the facts of the matter: each charge, or local church, has a vestry which is a largely elected lay body and which governs the local congregation in virtually all aspects of the life of the Church. The mission and ministry of the vestry, under canon law (canon 60), is to assist the priest in the spiritual life of the congregation – in other words it is not just a business committee. Apart from matters of stipend (clergy are essentially dependent on the giving of the laity for their material support, and without sufficient funds and income of its own a church, by and large, does not have its own priest), clergy are bound by Canon Law (canon 22) to consult with the laity over any significant changes which they may want to introduce – a measure specifically designed to counter clerical autocracy. At the diocesan level, dioceses are governed by a Synod which consists of the bishop, clergy with a pastoral charge and a lay representative elected by each congregation. These lay representatives have a clear voice in the election of the bishop, who must secure a majority in both the house of laity and the house of clergy to be elected. Among other things, diocesan synods are concerned with matters of liturgy, doctrine and canon law. The same, writ large at the provincial level, is true of the General Synod of the SEC.

In short, the laity has, for a long time, had a canonically required and active role in the governance of the Episcopal Church at all levels. So much for the facts of the matter: within the SEC it is pretty clear that the Bishop, each Rector of a charge and the Lay Vestry must, *de facto*, negotiate between themselves the balance of authority and power at their particular level of governance. Such negotiations can be extremely delicate as, for example, in a recent development that each charge within the diocese has its own distinct charitable status and therefore must conform to OSCR and Scottish law regarding an organised charity. (Similarly, each diocese and the General Synod is a separate charity). Thus a tension can arise between a “Canonical Church” and a “Charitable Body”, for charitable trusteeship increases the power of representative lay governance but may (and does) sometimes clash with the perceived ecclesiastical view of governance. To quote the words of one of the current Rectors in the

Diocese of Glasgow and Galloway, “The responsibility of a Rector as a manager of a charity is becoming increasingly difficult and is not attractive to those who seek ‘holy orders’.” More generally the Episcopal Church (like many institutions – I could instance the University, where I work) operates under increasing organisational constraints making the issue of ‘management’ ever more burdensome for laity, clergy and bishops and their relationships one with another. (A recently retired bishop in the Church of England remarked that by the end of his episcopate he had come to feel that the real power in the diocese was the legally required agency of HR – Human Resources - at every level of appointment and governance.)

So much for the increasing practical complexities of church governance. Before I respond to a number of the issues raised by Helen Costigane in her paper, allow me one further observation which specifically relates to liturgy and worship. It was in 1901 that the Anglican theologian and bishop Charles Gore wrote of the Eucharist in his book *The Body of Christ* that “in restoring to its proper prominence the communion of the people and their communion in both kinds, those who fixed our present service were still aiming at the same end of making the whole action, up to its culminating point in communion, common to priest and people according to their several functions.” The so-called Parish and People Movement of the early twentieth century in the Church of England brought about services which, apart from the sacramental celebration, are often almost entirely conducted by the laity – in readings, the leading of intercessory prayers and the administration of the elements. Yet – at the same time the wording of the Ordinal, the service of priestly ordination, is highly ambivalent as to the role and function of the priest in his or her (I will come back to that) relation to his/her ‘flock’, being ordained as both servant and shepherd, called to “*lead* his people in prayer and worship”, to teach, admonish and guide his people. The language may be properly scriptural, but in fact the ambivalences are quickly apparent. We ought not to forget that the Reformation roots of the Anglican Communion (of which the SEC is a member) include the translations of the Bible into English, by men like William Tyndale, precisely to undermine the authority of the priestly, sacerdotal power of the Church. Yet the ambivalences that remain may be illustrated by a recent debate in which I was involved in my capacity as Convenor of the SEC Doctrine Committee. A certain bishop in a very rural diocese where ordained priests are few and far between objected to the widespread practice of administration from the Reserved Sacrament, consecrated perhaps once a month by a visiting priest. For the rest of the time the liturgy was entirely conducted by lay people. He felt this as a real threat to his Episcopal authority. We pointed out that this was actually a common practice in the early

church, for very much the same reason, and theologically perfectly defensible – but it did highlight the dilemma of a church whose ordained ministry was shrinking in size from both a lack of vocations and the highly contentious issue of the training of ordinands (we no longer have full-time residential training of priests in the SEC – a real issue when it comes to the question of ‘formation’). Indeed, we have reached the point when we are even discussing what it actually means to be a priest as we move beyond the reality of a ‘clergy-led’ church. I recall a serious discussion with my own bishop as to what he really understood by the scriptural term “priesthood of all believers” and what this actually means in the context of our understanding of the ordained clergy. The fact that such a discussion can take place is not without significance.

It was as long ago as 1859 that John Henry, Cardinal Newman published his essay *On Consulting the Faithful in Matters of Doctrine*. Newman is careful to define how he is using the term ‘consult’, which, he says, “includes the idea of inquiring into a matter of *fact*, as well as asking a judgement.” Newman is clear that what is sought of the laity is their *belief* (‘the matter of fact’) “as a testimony to that apostolical tradition, on which alone any doctrine can be defined.” The Cardinal goes on to address the question why consult the laity at all. His answer is quite clear: “because the body of the faithful is one of the witnesses to the fact of the tradition of revealed doctrine, and because their *consensus* through Christendom is the voice of the Infallible Church.” I venture here a little outside my own brief as an Anglican (by quoting the good Cardinal) to join with Helen Costigane in her opening remarks on the Second Vatican Council, for it is clear that Newman’s voice sounds throughout the spirit of Vatican II, not least in his understanding of the role of the laity within the Church. Was the Council when the rot set in, then, as some, Helen reminds us, have thought – or the time when a prophetic voice of the nineteenth century at last began to be heard? This spirit also enlivens an early ecumenical publication of the Joint Liturgical Group of 1965, before there was any Roman Catholic membership in that Group. Moving from the general to the particular in its reference to the laity, the little book called *The Renewal of Worship* affirms that “we should remember that the corporate life and common worship of the Christian community both vitalizes and depends upon the spiritual life of its members. Public worship ought to enhance in every worshipper the sense of the grace of God, to be experienced in his [sic] own religious life and devotion. His own private prayers, of thanksgiving, penitence, assurance and intercession, ought to be a preparation for and a continuance of the prayers of the community.... It is not something *done for him* by priest and minister, but something which *he*

is doing.” What the laity do in their lives of prayer is fundamental to the life of the Church as a whole.

With this Anglican affirmation of the corporate life of the Church at every level – not simply within its governance (and I have not addressed the issue, acknowledged by Newman, of the place of theology and theological training) – I return now to Helen’s paper. There is clearly one issue in which our current experience, between the Roman Catholic and the Anglican Communion, is rather different. The SEC has had for some years women priests and has provision for electing a woman as bishop (though as yet no woman has actually been elected). With this exception, many women now hold positions of high authority within the ranks of the ordained clergy. Within the Church of England Anglicans find themselves within the ludicrous, and theologically incoherent, position of having women priests but not allowing women to be called to be bishops. Indeed, it is now rapidly becoming clear that the clerical profession within the SEC is rapidly becoming feminised as the percentage of women in training is far higher than that of men. This is not, of course, to say that prejudice does not still exist – and more widely than you might think – but by and large it is true to say that within the governance of the Episcopal Church (bishops apart) there is reasonable gender balance at all levels. Actually I think that our problem is complex, a bit different, and rather hard to define. First, the majority of our congregations are elderly, by and large, and have a high proportion of women. (Actually the role of younger people, often with families, is, in practice, extremely difficult to establish – with often two working parents, the pressures of life simply make it impossible for many younger people to offer the time or energy necessary for significant participation in the life of the Church.) The more elderly people from among the laity, more often than not women, often carry a high level of pastoral responsibility for the care of souls, much of it unrecognized. This, again, puts in perspective the role and priestly function of the diminishing number of ordained clergy. It is one thing to say, after *Lumen Gentium*, that “lay people share in the threefold mission of Christ, and in the entire teaching, sanctifying, and governing apostolate of the Church.” It is another to say that, *de facto*, they are often standing in for the priest or, more precisely, even redefining the understanding of the very nature of the Church itself. In the Episcopal Church the assumption that the ordained clergy are full-time and stipendiary is now largely a false one. Almost as many are like myself – people who earn their full-time living outside the church – or often retired (can priests retire? Theologically once a priest always a priest, but you can certainly reach the stage when practically the duties become simply beyond you) - and whose availability to the Church,

pastorally and in every other way, is highly limited. Who does the funerals, or the house visits? It will not be long – particularly given the huge problems of training and forming priests – before the slightly patronising idea that “lay people can be entrusted with pastoral responsibilities for the care of souls” might almost be turned around, for in many respects they are often much more experienced than the clergy themselves.... I speak for myself.

Then there is the question of finance and cost. I would say quite clearly that in the Episcopal Church, which does not have any significant residue of capital or ‘old money’ and which is facing declining income from parish giving as numbers and membership decline, is living on borrowed time. One senior clergyman in this diocese said to me the other day, “We have about ten years left.” Furthermore, as management becomes increasingly complex at all levels, so the need for skilled staff becomes ever more necessary. This takes us back to the question I posed at the outset. How to reconcile the tension between the Canonical Church and the Charitable Body – or, indeed, the Business that needs properly and professionally to manage its assets of buildings, its investments or pension schemes, and so on? Is, to put it frankly, the management of decline a process of gracefully, and legally, going through the motions of impending bankruptcy and obliteration, so that, like the once mighty Woolworths, we shall soon be forgotten, or can it be something else – a visionary process in which the sharp division between lay and ordained is blurred but reviewed with theological and spiritual clarity within the traditions to which we are bound and which we seek to maintain.

Helen reminds us of the problem identified by Paul Donovan – that the priest be accountable not just to the bishop but also to the parish and the community. But I wonder if we now need to go even further and acknowledge together, all of us, our larger accountability to God and the mission entrusted to all of us as the Church.

Thus, and in conclusion, I suggest that the issue is more than the advocacy of increased levels of lay participation. As an Anglican priest of nearly forty years standing, who has been a parish priest as well as a University chaplain and then a Professor (in which role my priesthood often remains hidden – students will often say, with some shock, “I have known you for the last three years and I never knew you were one of *them!*”), I am painfully aware that the Church I was ordained into actually no longer exists, at least as an institution within our society. It is regarded differently, and with much less respect, perhaps by most people, and inasmuch as it continues to imagine that things go on much as ever, it suffers sadly from delusions of relevance, its very public debates often strangely out of date or irrelevant to the

majority of people. We can address this in various ways. The first is the equivalent of shifting the deck chairs on the Titanic. That is – we keep things much as they have always been, because tradition, theology, our understanding of the nature of the sacraments, and so on seems to forbid anything else. We just adjust the proportions within the relationships between lay and ordained, so that the machinery of governance and what it supports in life and worship can putter on for little while longer and as long as the money lasts. Or we can take a more radical perspective and recognize that the Church of the future is not going to be like that of the past in its forms and governance – and that includes a radical review of what we actually *mean*, theologically, by such terms as priest, minister and laity. Again to go back to John Henry Newman in his *Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine* (written, incidentally when he was still an Anglican, though it probably was also the turning point towards Rome for him) – remember the principle that in order to remain the same, we have to be prepared to change.

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