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The Historic Episcopate, Locally Adapted

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PHILIP THOMAS

'The Historic Episcopate, Locally Adapted': An Element of Anglican tradition

In this article Philip Thomas looks at issues related to Anglican unity because of local adaptations to the traditions of the Church of England. He considers the benefit of these adaptations to church structures and a developing understanding of episcopacy. Thomas finds coherence for the office of bishop in its historicity, rather than in any contingent response to a cultural or historical situation. This leads him to suggest that the diversity that will assuredly be present at Lambeth, while uncomfortable, need not lead to disunity.

Introduction

Anglicanism has traditionally defined itself in ways which have included a commitment to episcopacy. The Lambeth Quadrilateral (1888) classically expresses the grounds of Anglican unity and the basis of its mission in terms of Scripture, the creeds, the sacraments of baptism and eucharist, and 'The Historic Episcopate, locally adapted in the methods of its administration to the varying needs of the nations and peoples called of God into the unity of His Church'. That statement was drawn directly from a report which had been received two years earlier by the Protestant Episcopal Church of the USA, and indirectly from a remarkable New York clergyman, William Reed Huntingdon, and drew upon nearly thirty years of debate in North America about how far the traditions of the Church of England could be appropriated to provide a basis for authentic Christian presence in a new cultural situation.

Over a century later that debate is still being joined within the Anglican Communion. In particular, the decision of some provinces to appoint women bishops raises the question of how far episcopacy remains a source or symbol of Anglican unity. The creation of various forms of extended episcopal oversight, not to mention the existence of bishops ministering in 'continuing' Anglican Churches, presents that question with added forcefulness. Is it the case, as some suggest, that Anglicanism is in the process of losing its grip on a 'historic' episcopate? Or are recent developments within Anglicanism simply the latest examples of episcopal ministry 'locally adapted'? And if that is so, are there limits beyond which further 'adaptation' cannot properly go?

Episcopacy undergoing change

The fact that episcopal leadership takes on different forms and functions should not be a problem. Within the NT there are different forms of apostleship evident – quite apart from the controversy over the true nature of an apostle. Such diversity is also apparent in writings of the Fathers concerning the office of bishops. The Church of England itself has long experience of the way in which the ‘historic episcopate’ is itself adapted by history, as is reflected in the observation of Gregory Dix about the way in which episcopacy has been exercised by people varying from missionary monks, to tribal wizards, royal counsellors, the torpid grandees of the eighteenth century, and Victorian philanthropists, right down to the ecclesiastical bureaucrats of his (and our?) own day.

Perhaps the most significant development of episcopacy within the Anglican Communion (which the Church of England has perhaps yet fully to appreciate) has been the way in which episcopal *leadership* has come to be exercised within forms of synodical *government*. It would be possible for different members of our communion to elaborate on the ways in which episcopacy has been adapted in the ‘method of its administration’ in different provinces. Some examples come readily to mind:

- (a) the ‘democratising’ of the episcopate in the founding constitution of the American Episcopal Church – and the example that this provided for other autonomous Anglican Churches which emerged during the nineteenth century;
- (b) the way in which the ethnic experiences of tribal eldership have been incorporated into the structures of (for instance) the church in Melanesia, and the Province of Aotearoa/New Zealand;
- (c) the challenge which African traditional religions have posed for western Christian institutions, leading to (in John Pobee’s estimation) a more ‘charismatic’ expectation of the episcopate;
- (d) the influence of prevailing political realities on the way leadership patterns are developed, e.g. the ‘federalism’ of Australian Anglicanism; the ‘Westminster’ ethos of the Church of England; the reflection of and reaction to tribal factors in parts of East and Central Africa.

More than just the structures within which episcopacy functions, a number of provinces have also developed their understanding of how the nature of episcopacy can be adapted to meet the varying needs of nations and peoples. Here the widespread creation of suffragan and area bishops in many parts of the Anglican Communion in response to the administrative demands of large dioceses is an example. Several bishops in some way ‘share’ episcopacy with clergy and laity within a single see. Conversely, there are also examples of bishops who exercise their ministry in more than one regional area. A notable initiative was shown by the way in which the Bishop of Aotearoa came to minister to Maori Anglicans in all seven dioceses of the Church of the Province of New Zealand, and even extended this to another province, obtaining the right to visit Maoris living in Australia. The role of the Church of England’s (and now the Church in Wales’) Provincial Episcopal Visitors – the ‘flying bishops’ – is analogous. In each of the

above instances, the jurisdiction of the diocesan bishop is *shared* voluntarily, and under conditions which are defined by synodical legislation of canon law. It is not *diluted*. Where *episcopate* is fulfilled by more than one bishop existing in a single territory, their ministry should be seen as *overlapping*. It is not exercised *in parallel*.

Episcopacy rooted in permanence

Amid the changing structures and expressions of episcopacy, what gives the office its coherence is the fact of its historicity. Yet the 'load-bearing adjective, historic' (as Gillian Evans has dubbed it), is itself open to several interpretations. Anglicans have necessarily been forced to assert the continuity of their ministry through the changing circumstances of the sixteenth century Reformation. The unbroken succession of their episcopal ordering was an important symbol of that conviction. However, where that aspect of episcopal order has become the principal, or even sole, element of its self-understanding, Anglicanism is at its least effective.

Ironically, it was also at its least catholic. As has been pointed out, the Fathers perceived at least three levels or strands of meaning for the role of bishops in the church.

(1) In the earliest tradition of Ignatius, the bishop represented the centre of unity for the eucharistic assembly. He was the point of reference for the doctrine and fellowship which identified the historic boundaries of Christian community. The understanding is mirrored in the way John Habgood likened episcopal authority to the definition of a mathematical point – as having position without magnitude.

(2) Irenaeus extended this function through history, as a link between Christ and his apostles and the local church. If the earlier position could be described as a geometric point, then this development was that of a vertical line, linking successive 'points' back to the founding moments of the Christian enterprise. That link was in both time and space. For Orthodoxy at least, apostolic succession has always been a matter of a historic succession in See (the office handed from generation to generation) as much as it has been to do with the tactile succession of consecration (an ordering of episcopacy in such a way as to demonstrate the authentic continuity of that progression).

(3) Developments under Cyprian can likewise be represented as a horizontal line, connecting the life and work of all bishops dispersed throughout the world. This solidarity, expressed collegially or in council, became the means for discerning and articulating the implications of the universal gospel at a particular point in history.

This third strand of understanding has dominated thinking about the church, particularly since Vatican II, but the variety of thinking about the historic episcopate in the Early Church needs to be remembered too. The bishop was a guardian and interpreter of apostolic teaching, the locus of fellowship for the local church, the focus of its unity and mission, its representative in councils of the universal church, and (with his fellow bishops and priests) part of the process for discerning and declaring the will of God in his own generation. It is in the combination of all these factors that the 'historic' nature of the episcopate is established. What is

more, as John Zizioulas has insisted,¹ in the eyes of the Fathers, episcopal ministry is committed to the future at the same time as it is connected to the past. It is in the syntheses of *historic* and *eschatological* faithfulness where the fullness of *episcopate* is to be found. The connectedness of the church to the apostolic community is guaranteed by being 'in Christ', not by the possession of particular norms of ministry or doctrine alone. But equally, eschatological consciousness does not fly in the face of history. It knows that it is through historical forms that the presence of the eschatological community is realised. The forms are not the reality, yet the reality itself is not formless.

Over recent generations Anglicans have also discovered, in the thought of E. W. Benson and its influence through to A. M. Ramsey and beyond, a similar enrichment to their notion of the historic episcopate. This has been reflected in the way the fourth clause of the Quadrilateral was expressed in the Appeal to All Christian People (1920): 'A ministry acknowledged by every part of the Church as possessing not only the inward call of the spirit, but also the commission of Christ and the authority of the whole body.' Again, the most recent discussion of the formula by the Lambeth Conference (1968) was content to look for 'Common acknowledgment of a ministry through which the grace of God is given to his people'.

The historic episcopate and a changing church

What can the above survey contribute to understanding the circumstances in which the Anglican Communion now finds itself, and especially the situations which have arisen since the inclusion of women in the priesthood and episcopate of many Anglican churches?

(1) The positing of a 'traditionalist' understanding of episcopacy in opposition to liberal or radical ideas which are then seen to undermine the inheritance of history is unhelpful. Anglican (and indeed Christian) 'tradition' has always been open to the varying interpretations of the episcopal office, and Anglicanism has from the first been quite openly positive about the way in which its connectedness with the past is the basis for a response to the changing needs and challenges of history. Mere resistance to change is no part of the Anglican tradition. 'Traditional Anglicanism' is certainly rooted in the past, but it is also responsive to the changing realities of history.

(2) In that response to history is by definition contingent and shaped by cultural considerations it is inevitable that any such response is likely to be contested. This is the price of cultural pluralism. If, for example, many provinces and the Anglican Communion as a whole have decided that women should be included in the priesthood and episcopate of their churches, then it must be possible for parts of the Communion and members of those provinces to dissent from that decision. This may have led to the impairment of the communion between churches and their bishops, but not necessarily its destruction. The experience of the Church of South India and similar reunion schemes right up to the Porvoo Declaration indicates that Anglicanism can manage a progressive transformation towards fully episcopal ordering. The inculturation of Anglicanism from a national church to a

1 *Being as Communion*, T.& T. Clark, Edinburgh, 1985, p171ff.

world communion (and the experience of Crowther as the first black bishop at a Lambeth Conference may parallel the position of women bishops in 1998?) is a further demonstration of the way in which apparently radical changes can be gradually absorbed into the mainstream of Anglican tradition.

(3) The role of bishops in such periods of transition is an indication of the interim nature of episcopacy itself. The existence of forms of extended episcopal oversight, the inability to discern what incomplete communion between provinces implies, and even the troublesome existence of Anglican bishops who do not consider themselves part of the Anglican Communion, is all a consequence of seeking to bear faithful witness in a pluralistic world. It is not just an administrative inconvenience. It can possibly be seen as an example of 'bearing in the body, the marks of the Lord Jesus', or even 'filling out the sufferings of Christ' in order that the movement towards eschatological fullness may be maintained in the church.

What is more, such situations should not be seen as simply domestic Anglican disturbances. In even the most harmonious of dioceses, Anglican bishops are invariably forced to share episcopal roles (or sadly, to exercise them in parallel) with Roman Catholic and Orthodox bishops, and increasingly with leaders of 'non-episcopal' or independent churches whose ministries quite evidently display the characteristics of *episcopate*. When the Eames Commission talked about 'partial communion' then that held Anglican and ecumenical implications. While the communion of the baptised is only partial, it is at the same time a real communion which must be nurtured. Wherever there is an over-lapping or parallel episcopacy it needs to be recognised as a *pragmatic* and *temporary* state of affairs. The ideal of all episcopacy, of all ministry, *converges* on the vision of 'one flock, one shepherd'.

(4) This leads to the last of the questions with which we began: whether there is any limit to the adaptability of the historic episcopate during the church's pilgrimage. My short answer is that the only limitation is a refusal to contemplate the possibility of further convergence. Stated positively, this reflects the inability to recognise the need for a progressive approximation towards the will of God. Negatively, it implies that no one position alone holds the guardianship of the authentic Anglican tradition.

Does this mean that anything goes, that, as it is sometimes claimed, Anglicans can tolerate anything but intolerance? Not at all. What it does suggest is that the way in which Anglican authority functions means that bishops who share much if not everything in common, are expected – with their clergy, laity, theologians and canonists – to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace, and to take part in the process of discerning, articulating and receiving the mind of Christ. It is in the 'family resemblance' of faith, liturgy and history, apprehended in terms of revelation, tradition and reason, that the Anglican identity is maintained. It is by sharing in the family disputes that the boundaries of Anglican development will be established. To decline that responsibility is to imply that some Anglicans hold the right or the responsibility to stretch out a hand to steady the ark of the Lord!

In this respect it is important that so-called Anglican 'traditionalists' are heard in forums like the Lambeth Conference (as is also perhaps some representation of

'continuing Anglican' bishops – on the analogy of the CSI bishops who attended Lambeth in the period when it was unclear whether they were part of the Anglican Communion or not?), for theirs can be a legitimate if not an alternative voice within the choral offering of Anglican work and prayer. Their presence will not make life comfortable but as Michael Ramsey said as his presidency of the 1968 Conference drew to a close, 'We don't have to have our doctrine of the Church tidy, we have to relate our doctrine of the Church to the doctrine of Grace – and to the doctrine of God – a mighty difficult thing to do.'

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