



The Latimer Trust

PO Box 26685
London N14 4XQ

Chairman: The Rev'd Dr Mark Burkill
administrator@latimertrust.org
www.latimertrust.org

Biblical Truth for Today's Church

The Latimer Trust. Registered Charity No. 1084337

This document contains the opinions of the author(s) at the time of original publication. Permission to quote or publish in any other form must be sought from the author.

LATIMER COMMENT 08

THE TILLER REPORT ON THE MINISTRY

A Strategy for the Church's Ministry (London, C.I.O., 1983), by J. E. Tiller, is much the most comprehensive, well-researched and thoughtful report on the ministry with which the General Synod (or the Church Assembly) has been presented. As general secretary of ACCM, John Tiller is exceptionally conversant with the facts of the present situation, he is also abreast of the most recent thinking, and has clearly studied all previous reports and policy documents since the Paul Report of 1964 (including the new report by Mark Hodge on the Non-Stipendiary Ministry, or NSM), together with a great deal of background literature, sociological and other. He is by no means uncritical of what he has been reading or of recent policy in the church, and as an evangelical he often views questions in a manner refreshingly different from what we have become accustomed to in official reports.

His basic premises are two:

(i) The dioceses need a minimum of 11, 600 full-time clergy to support the present parochial structure (p. 20f.), but the numbers in fact fell from 15, 488 in 1961 to 10, 789 in 1982 and are continuing to decline, though less steeply. They may level out in the late 1980's and return to the present level in 10 years' time (assuming that ordinations have by then overtaken losses), but to get up to the desired level of 11, 600 will not be possible, on present trends, till about the year 2006. In the meantime, the present strain on the clergy and their families will continue, and the countryside will continue to be denuded of clergy in the interests of fairer distribution. This is what has happened under the Sheffield formula, whereas Leslie Paul, who called for fairer distribution, envisaged additional clergy being put into the towns, not the country clergy being moved there. See pp. 5, 20f., and appendix 2.

(ii) Although the numbers of the clergy have been dangerously low, there has been a modest recovery in the number of baptisms, confirmations and communicants since the 1976 figure, though still falling far short of the 1960 figure. The recovery seems to show that the health of the church is less dependent on the numbers of the full-time clergy than Leslie Paul thought (p. 21f.). This encouraging development must be due to increased lay activity, though the NSM has contributed. Local lay initiative should be further promoted by every possible means, and a 'ministry roll' should be drawn up for each parish, on which all the baptised would be eligible to have their names placed, with a view to suitable training and service, (pp. 63, 79f.).

He sees point (ii) as in principle the remedy to point (i), but he asks himself whether it can become the complete remedy without radical changes in the church, and concludes that it cannot. A more moderate policy would only have the effect of continuing to supplement the hard-pressed parochial clergy with a degree of help from NSMs, readers and the laity generally (p. 5), whereas radical change would be necessary before lay ministry could achieve the growth required (p. 157f.). The sort of radical change he proposes is to abolish patronage and the parson's freehold, and to withdraw the full-time clergy from their parochial base, placing them instead on the 'strength' of the diocese (p. 135).

Thus far, it is simply the old Fenton-Morley scheme, proposed in the report Partners in Ministry (1967). But instead of proposing to fill the vacuum, thus created in the parishes, by team-ministries of diocesan clergy, he proposes to fill it, as far as possible, by an unpaid local ministry of NSMs, readers and laity,

which will help form a joint local leadership in each parish. As far as priests (or presbyters) are concerned, these will be sharply separated into local priests, whose duties will be primarily pastoral and administrative, and who will always be unpaid, and diocesan priests, whose duties will mainly be missionary and educational, and who will often be paid. All parishes will thus have need for the ministry of diocesan priests, but the diocesan priests will be most needed where the church and its local leadership is weakest, i. e. in what may be regarded as missionary areas. See pp. 103-105, 115-125.

It is noteworthy that, in making these proposals, Canon Tiller refrains from making other proposals which have been discussed of recent years in the church. He is against the abolition of the diaconate (ch. 14); he does not recommend lay celebration of communion (p. 120f.); he is cautious about local ecumenical projects (p. 138); he does not favour reducing the size of dioceses or abolishing suffragan bishoprics (p. 93f); he wants the parish to continue as a unit in some form (pp. 76-78); and he does not want to see deaneries changed into team ministries, but rather into group ministries, since deaneries (unlike dioceses) are reasonable-sized units of local co-operation (p. 137).

The new stress which the report lays on the part to be played by the laity is very welcome. A true theology of the church, however, will preserve an important complementary role for the ministry of the ordained pastor-teachers whom the New Testament calls presbyters (elders). Whether this role is properly preserved by the report, with its local clergy (basically pastors), its diocesan clergy (basically preachers and teachers), and its bishops (basically long-range administrators), seems very doubtful. This diversification of tasks may be pragmatically tidy, but is it theologically sound?

The reasoning which underlies the interesting proposals of the report seems also to be open to question on some practical points. For

(a) If there is a prospect that the crisis in numbers of the full-time clergy will only last until about the year 2006, there are a difficult 23 years ahead, but there is an end in sight. Should one make radical changes just to meet temporary problems? There have been grave temporary shortages of clergy in earlier centuries, but they have been overcome in time, without radical changes.

(b) If the laity are already responding to the shortage of clergy, even without radical changes, and so much so that there has been a modest recovery in the numbers of baptisms, confirmations and communicants, can one not hope that as the shortage goes on they will respond more and more? And may not the response of the laity be due not simply to the shortage of clergy but also to a growing recognition of their own significant role in the church? If so, they will increasingly seek to exercise that role, whether or not the full-time clergy are withdrawn from the parishes.

Also, there seem to be certain weaknesses and inconsistencies in the proposals of a rather serious kind. For

(c) If the deanery is a reasonable-sized unit of local co-operation, whereas the diocese is too large to be realistically regarded as an expression of the local church, why is the report against reducing the size of dioceses nearer to that of deaneries, or making the suffragan bishop the diocesan bishop of a smaller diocese? This would have (along with some dangers) many advantages. The bishop would become more like what he really is, a presiding presbyter, and he would be delivered from the danger of making long-distance decisions without local knowledge and without regard to local opinion.

(d) If patronage and the parson's freehold are abolished, the maintenance of the tradition of a parish will wholly rest upon the congregation and the unpaid local ministry, the role of which is not to be primarily educational but pastoral and administrative. Education is to be the task of the diocesan clergy, not of the local ministry, and as the diocesan clergy will be attached to the diocese, not to the parish or deanery, and will be at the bishop's disposal, it is hard to think that the education they give to the parishes will not be in accordance with the bishop's views.

(e) Incidentally, this seems a strange time to propose once more the abolition of patronage. Ever since the abolition of patronage was first proposed by the Paul report and the Fenton-Morley report in the 1960s, we have had a series of proposals on the matter brought before the Church Assembly and the General Synod, each one less radical than its predecessor. The latest was in the Benefices Measure, in which there was to be an alternative to patronage for which parishes could opt, but the General Synod recently decided to delete even this proposal, and to confine the Benefices Measure to a modest reform of

the system we have. To propose, after all this, that the church should go back to square one and consider abolition once again, does not seem likely to be received with much favour.

(f) Something of the same kind applies to the parson's freehold. Various limits have been placed on this in recent years, whereby age and infirmity, misdemeanour, a breakdown of the pastoral relationship, or the introduction of a scheme of pastoral reorganization, can each bring the parson's freehold to an end. To abolish what is now hedged about by such careful safeguards is hard to justify, and seems like a waste of the time and thought that have been devoted to preserving the benefits of the freehold without its abuses.

Various questions arising out of the Tiller report have now been posed by ACCM, and the General Synod in February 1984 resolved not to answer these questions before sending them down to the dioceses and deaneries for an opinion. The questions are rather vaguely framed, but one hopes that at the local level they will be given a very specific answer. This, I think, is something which the author of the report would himself welcome.

Roger Beckwith