Does Continuing Ministerial Education Perpetuate Clericalism?

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This article sets out to pose some questions about the practice of Continuing Ministerial Education (CME) within the Church of England. It recognises both that CME is often a more developed activity within the Church of England than in other denominations; but the questions posed here would

seem to have parallels in other churches, allowing for differences of polity, church government and tradition.

The presenting problem is whether CME can be seen to buttress clericalism - the historic inequalities between ordained ministers and lay people within the church, and whether it is possible to identify ways in which CME may help undermine clericalism and offer new possibilities for the ministry and witness of Christians in the world,

Clericalism?

Anthony Dyson's critique of clericalism is a useful place to start; 'Clericalism in the modern English Church has never been as explicit and brutal as the clericalism of certain other cultures. But it has been and remains profound and subtle - so much so that clergy are often genuinely unaware of its existence. Nor has it declined as society has become more and more secular. If anything, in the process of secularisation, clericalism advances its own interests.'[1]

On this understanding, initiatives like CME are established in an organisational context in which the inequalities of clericalism are a fact of life. Moreover, I am unaware of any official statement defining CME in the Church of England which asserts the necessity of changing this.

The fundamental inequalities between clergy and lay people are, to a large degree, perpetuated within the institutional structures of the church at both diocesan and national level. It is not simply that more money is allocated to CME than for lay education, a point to be considered in greater detail later, but also that these two strands are within different administrative jurisdictions. In dioceses CME is placed alongside Reader training within the oversight of a Board of Ministry, while lay education for adults, young people and children is within the oversight of a Board of Education. This structure parallels the division of oversight at national level where CME and Reader training are the responsibility of the Advisory Board of Ministry while lay education falls to the Board of Education. A further layer of complexity is

that issues relating to the world of everyday life beyond the churches are frequently seen as the remit of a third structure nationally and locally, the Board for Social Responsibility. In order for there to be any working links between CME, lay education and social responsibility a further committee or consultative structure needs to be created. While this is possible, it imposes an organisational complexity on the enterprise and tends to suggest that such collaboration is the exception rather than the rule. This is ironic, to say the least, in a church which professes its commitment to the ideal of collaborative ministry between clergy and lay people.

These divisions reflect not only the dominant position of the clergy within the church, but also a dominance of 'ministerial' concerns over those relating to Christian witness and involvement in the world of everyday life beyond the church. Whereas the ordained ministry has long been serviced by an impressive structure geared to selection, training, ordination and, latterly, training after ordination, lay education in the same period has been essentially the education of children in day and Sunday schools. For over a century, unless they were preparing for some kind of authorised lay ministry as Readers or Parish Workers, there was no official provision for adults at all. Similarly, social responsibility issues were for many decades addressed by lay workers, usually women, and therefore not directly related to the work of parish clergy.[2] The recent growth of interest in lay ministries has partly disguised this neglect; but much of the energy is still directed towards training lay people for activities presided over by clergy within the church, rather than as self-motivating agents in the world outside, and structures still replicate old assumptions which are 'just common sense'.

Such deep-rooted 'common sense' assumptions are increasingly recognised as offering a powerful buttress to all kinds of discrimination, whether on grounds of race, gender, age, or status. Errol Lawrence, writing in the context of racism, has observed : 'In order that it may remain in the position of command, the ruling bloc needs to ensure that the "good sense" of the subordinated classes...does not become elaborated into a coherent, alternative and *generalised* set of ideas and practices...so as to effectively discount the possibility of change and to 'naturalise' the social order.'[3]

What is needed here is a challenge to the assumption that the structure in which discrimination operates is simply a 'common-sense' organisational one but this can only be done by exposing the patterns of interest which the organisation serves.

The Politics of Providing Support

In discussions about CME, I am impressed by the frequency with which the idea of 'support for clergy' is used as a rationale. What is often missing from these discussions is any effective distinction between professional and private life. Though ministry is an occupation in which the two elements are closely linked, there does need to be some effective working distance between them. Without this it becomes difficult, if not impossible, to identify what constitutes support for people as persons and support for them as workers, which in most other occupations would have an institutional expression in the roles of the personnel officer and the training officer. In the Church of England, which makes no such real distinction, CME officers labour under a strong temptation either to become clergy welfare officers or else to be enlisted to keep up clerical morale when difficult working conditions or changes of church structure, such as revisions of incumbents' 'freehold', are in the air.

What might help is a more modest view of the role of CME, recognising it as the means of helping clergy become more proficient in the work of ministry, which in turn requires the establishment of a coherent understanding of professional competence and ways in which these competences might be developed over a person's ministerial career. But this understanding must raise questions about the nature of ministry, specifically whether it is a clerical activity in which lay people may share on the clergy's terms, or whether it is the witness of the People of God, within which the clergy have certain tasks defined by the body as a whole. Attention focused on the personal, and sometimes pathological, aspects of ministry all too easily obscures the professional, public and power aspects. Anthony Dyson again:

> One frequently hears it said that the clergy are uneasy, disoriented, and uncertain

about their role and identity. This may be so. But It must also be said that clergy enjoy membership of a large and privileged elite, with almost total job security; that their 'special' character is reinforced by special forms of dress and address; and that they still have a widely acknowledged, symbolic and actual prominence in the life of congregations and of society at large. *These things are perpetuated by the methods by which clergy are trained. It is a training chiefly controlled by clergy in which clergy are socialised into all sorts of shared assumptions and attitudes.*[4]

If CME is to avoid being a matter of addressing a predominantly inward-looking clerical agenda it has to take as its starting-point the realities of life for people in the everyday world, for it is here that Christians, the vast majority of whom are lay people, are called upon to articulate their witness and discipleship. A proper professional training process for clergy must engage with such concerns as a matter of course. But this involves the virtual inversion of the present, predominantly clerical - and ecclesiastically - focused structure of 'normality' within the churches.

Money

The financing of training is highly indicative of attitudes towards the relative positions of clergy and lay-people within the church's scheme of priorities. In 1994 the diocese of Southwell was listed as having 230 stipendiary clergy and 311 churches [= congregations].[5] The budget for CME, including Post-Ordination Training, was £34,200, while the comparable amount for adult lay education was £17,700, both excluding salaries.[6] There is no reason to suppose this is untypical of other dioceses in the Church of England, then or since.

Money is not simply a question of budgetary provision. At a meeting of CME officers recently it became clear that most dioceses have no published criteria for making grants to clergy for CME, money generally being disbursed at the discretion of the CME Officer. The justification offered for this was that general criteria might effectively prevent some clergy from undertaking potentially beneficial projects. This system, if such it is, can hardly offer much in the way of accountability for the spending of not inconsiderable budgets.

The question of accountability is further highlighted by the granting of sabbaticals to clergy, where there seems to be some resistance to the idea that these are periods of study leave which ought to be arranged around carefully planned study projects which are subsequently written up and made available more widely to encourage reflection on the process of ministry and to promote good practice. The understanding in many quarters seems to be that sabbaticals are times for rest and recreation, in effect holidays with extra pay. A recent circular, having made reference to Exodus 21 and Deuteronomy 15 which, 'orders the land to remain fallow and slaves and debtors are to be freed,' went on to suggest:

> ...that a person today who is leading a busy, pressurised life and being required to 'produce the goods' day after day...should be released from this pressure, and be able to lie fallow...without being overtly productive. Secondly, that a person whose daily routine may be a kind of bind or bondage...should be set free for a while from that demand...[7]

It is significant, and frankly disturbing given Dyson's comments above, that clergy should be depicted using imagery of 'slaves and debtors'; one wonders what poor residents of the parishes in which they work would make of it.

In both cases this attitude to money appears to reflect a basic confusion between a pastoral desire to minister to clergy's perceived, and often self-defined, needs and a training agenda seeking to promote professional practice. Such imprecision can also serve to disguise genuine pastoral issues by allowing the church to camouflage pastoral care for clergy in difficulties or facing stressful situations under the cloak of education by granting them 'sabbaticals'. But it also obscures the question of whether the pressures and conflicts suffered by many clergy have at least some of their roots in clericalism itself; if so, such a process treats the symptoms while neglecting the disease.

Appraisal: what price affirmation?

Within the last decade most dioceses in the Church of England have set up

clergy appraisal, or ministerial review, schemes. A recent ABM report indicated that within the 43 dioceses only one had no such scheme and, within the remainder, 50 schemes were officially sanctioned, several dioceses reporting both a mandatory and a voluntary scheme.[8] The report also identified fifteen major categories within the schemes' published objectives, of which one, '[to] provide pastoral care, support, affirmation and/or encouragement' appears in 27 out of 48 cases.[9] Only seven of the twenty-seven was there any process of gathering information on a minister's work by consulting anyone other than the minister.[10] Although these schemes are not strictly within the purview of CME in all dioceses, there would nevertheless appear to be a good deal of involvement by CME officers in the process, either through training appraisers, working with those reviewed, or in other ways. At a recent meeting of a dozen or so CME officers involved in appraisal/review[11] schemes, the question was asked whether the schemes in each of the dioceses represented could, after all necessary qualifications and clarifications had been made, identify a minister as incompetent in at least some area of work. What was disturbing was the claim, by most of those present, both that their schemes had been specifically designed not to identify incompetence and that such a view was held to be inconsistent with the aims of appraisal/review.

Appraisal/review schemes are cited here because they seem to illustrate in very particular ways the circularity of the desire to offer support and affirmation to clergy which, I have argued, is a conflict of definitions at the root of much CME. The desire to offer such affirmation, however laudable, must be tempered by the professional reality that most clergy are not competent at everything and that a few may possess less overall competence than public ministry demands. An appraisal/review scheme which can offer affirmation only because it has not been designed to do anything else parallels Bonhoeffer's 'cheap grace'. The only affirmation worthy of the name is that which is offered in a context where failure as well as success is acknowledged to be possible and faced honestly. As Stephen Pattison has put it: 'The omniprevalence of failure in society is...rarely acknowledged as a phenomenon which afflicts pastoral care...This seem strangely at odds with the reality of pastoral ministry...'[12]

The sense that much of this affirmation is based upon information about the minister's work which they alone provide would make it of even more dubious value: alternatively, there is an objection to affirming the ministry of someone who may display disregard or hostility towards those with whom they work. Either way, this process reinforces clericalism by failing to pay attention to the context of the person's ministry and disallowing those within that context to have a voice. Encouragingly, the ABM Working Party recommended that such 'external' evidence should form a part of all new and revised schemes.[13]

Educationally as well as pastorally it would seem hazardous to attempt to avoid coming to terms with at least the possibility of failure, since it is often the recognition that all is not well, or at least is not as one imagined it, that opens up the possibility of learning and growth.

A Way Forward? A Whole Church Strategy

If, as this article suggests, there is reason to suppose that CME often perpetuates clericalism, can anything be done about it?

It could be instructive to consider briefly the practice of in-service training and appraisal for primary school teachers, which might offer an alternative model drawn from a context where appraisal is not directly linked to salary levels. In school education the basic document for these processes is the School Development Plan which sets out the aims and objectives of the school over the forthcoming year, with outline aims for the following two years. This is used as the basis for staff in-service training and development, and as a baseline against which to appraise teachers' work. Its usefulness lies in offering a corporate set of goals and strategies, rather than purely personal aims and interests which, though worthy in themselves, may lack any overall coherence, sense of priority or external information about how staff are carrying out the school's strategy.

Though this is only a thumbnail sketch, there seems to be a possibility of positing a similar process for CME. This would involve each church[14] formulating a set of goals and the processes necessary to address them, on the

basis of which all major education and development of lay people and authorised ministers, including clergy, could be based. This would also inform appraisal/review for clergy and for the parish. Such a set of goals would need to be based on as clear an understanding as possible not only of the congregation's internal interests, but also of the social, economic and political context of the area. It might focus on a general question such as, 'What is God doing in the world; and what is the church called to do to work with God?'

The theological underpinning of such a scheme is that it sets out to make the social environment the basic reference for the church and its ministry rather than the congregation, or the person of the minister. It also refers to the whole church and not simply to ordained ministers considered apart from their context, which reflects John Robinson's maxim:

> Just at the New Testament bids us have as high a doctrine of the ministry as we like, as long as our doctrine of the Church is higher, so it commands us have as high a doctrine of the Church as we may, providing our doctrine of the Kingdom is higher. And this conclusion is of no mere academic consequence. It must govern all our assessments as Christians...[15]

Such a process offers the opportunity to focus the church's ministry and witness outwards rather than inwards; by so doing it gives priority to the lives and experience of lay people rather than clergy. In order to draw up such a plan the church must gain some confidence in handling information about its social context, as might be provided by mission and social audits, information gathered by the church at clerical vacancies, and plans and programmes from outside the church, such as those produced by local authorities.[16] It thereby offers opportunities for the integration of theology and liturgy with social analysis and discipleship, in themselves important learning processes and objectives.

It might also liberate CME from the image of something which clergy do if they have the time or the inclination, but which is essentially peripheral to the work of ministry and the life of the church.

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Notes

1. Anthony Dyson, 'Clericalism, Church and Laity' in *All are Called:Towards a Theology of the Laity* (CIO Publishing,1985) p.15.
2. See, for example, Brian Heeney, *The Women's Movement in the Church of England 1850-1930* (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1988) and Penelope Hall & Ismene V. Howes, *The Church in Social Work* (Routledge & Kegan Paul 1965).
3. Errol Lawrence, ' Just plain common sense: the "roots" of racism' in Paul Gilroy (ed.) *The Empire Strikes Back; Race and Racism in 70's Britain* (Hutchinson ,1982) p.49f. [emphasis original]
4. *All are Called* op.cit p.15f. [emphasis mine]
5 *The Church of England Year Book 1994* p.132.
6. Southwell Diocesan Budget for 1994.
7. Memorandum by Canon John Townroe; Circular from the Council of S. Boniface College Trust: August 1996. [emphasis original]
8. *Ministerial Review: Its purpose and practice*. ABM Ministry Paper No.6, January 1994.
9. Not all schemes had published objectives.
10. This is slightly ambiguous as one diocese claimed both that it did, and did not, gather such information.
11. This construction has been used since there is a strong sense in some quarters that the term 'appraisal' is inappropriate.
12. Stephen Pattison, *A Critique of Pastoral Care* (London, SCM Press, 1988) p.145f.
13. *Ministerial Review* op.cit. para.86.
14. Though the discussion is primarily aimed at parochial contexts, there seem no reason to suppose it might not be used elsewhere.
15. John A.T. Robinson, ' Kingdom, Church and Ministry' in Kenneth Cragg (ed.) *The Historic Episcopate*(Dacre Press, A& C. Black 1954) p. 17.
16. A good deal of the inspiration for this process can be found in John Reader, *Local Theology; Church and Community in Dialogue* (SPCK, 1994).