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DISCIPLINE IN THE LOCAL CHURCH

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‘No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful’ said the writer to the Hebrews (12:11). This is as true for the person called on to exercise discipline as the one on the receiving end, as a reading of Paul’s second letter to the Corinthians reveals. Yet the New Testament makes it plain that it is important if a church is to retain its spiritual health (see Matt 18:15-17 and 2 Tim 2:24-26). In this writer’s experience such disciplining as he has had to exercise has in some cases led to the consequence also spelt out in Hebrews: ‘Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it.’

One of the difficulties encountered by the pastor is that disciplining often has to be carried out under the seal of confidentiality. It is not always wise or appropriate to inform the wider church why a certain person has been told they are no longer welcome at the Lord’s Table. However, it should always be made clear to the ones concerned what they must do to put things right and be welcomed back into fellowship. On such occasions I have usually told them that I shall have to inform the Churchwardens in the strictest confidence.

These days many will expect this kind of discipline to be carried out in respect of matters such as sexual morality. The Book of Common Prayer requires ministers to debar from communion anyone who is seen to be ‘an open and notorious evil liver’, and also to deal similarly with those ‘betwixt whom he perceiveth malice and hatred to reign’. On one occasion two ladies were present for communion who had been at variance for fifteen years: the second one (who had not darkened the church door for that period) came in after I had begun the service, so I had no way of seeking to reconcile them before we began. It was Trinity 1 with the Prayer Book Epistle from 1 John 4:7ff, which I read with all the emphasis I could muster. To my great delight and relief, when we reached the point for them to come up to the Lord’s Table, one lady went across the chancel to the other and apologised for her behaviour and they came to the Table arm-in-arm, having settled their quarrel. Had they not done this I was on the point of saying I could not welcome them until they had healed the breach.

My other experience of a similar situation did not have such a happy outcome. A member of the congregation had launched a totally unjustified tirade against another member in a house group. The house group leader had been to see her to try to get her to apologise, but this was not forthcoming, so I was asked in to the situation. When I went to see the lady in question, I said that her behaviour was not what one expected of a Christian, at which she claimed that I was saying that she was not a Christian, and promptly left the church! I later learned that after I had moved on she returned to the fellowship in different circumstances.

What do you do when a young person says to you in public, ‘I wasn’t in church this evening as my boyfriend has come to live with me and we have been sorting out the flat, and I dare you to tell me that I have done anything wrong’? Faced with defiance, and aware that the arrangement did mean that they would not be leading celibate lives, I could only respond sadly that she would not be welcome to communion (which I knew

she valued) while the arrangement lasted. Because this happened in an urban area, she took herself off to another church where she was not known, and no questions were asked. Six months later, when the boyfriend (so called!) had moved on a contrite young lady returned to where she knew her true friends to be and we were glad to welcome her back.

In another context a new family began attending church, and the mother's tender conscience led her to confide in the minister. Her husband had left her for a homosexual relationship and the man she was living with had left his wife to live with her. In this case counselling led her to accept Christ into her life, and the man returned to his wife.

The modern vogue for co-habiting presents ministers with many problems. A person with a ministry in the church (a member of the music group) was found to be co-habiting, and was therefore not allowed to continue in that ministry until they got married. More commonly, I have found that couples bringing babies for baptism were in that situation. I did not feel that we could ask them to make the declaration 'I repent of my sins' unless they were prepared to do something to regularise their relationship. I know of one case where this led to the marriage of the couple in question but ministers faced with this scenario are usually in a no-win situation.

This article has inevitably been anecdotal but the two principles I believe it has highlighted have been that while there are not always tidy solutions, the church must be seen to support biblical standards of Christian lifestyle, and that there are occasions when God uses discipline to bring about repentance (and faith!). Both the Prayer Book and Canon Law (B16) require that the minister should inform the bishop of the situation and seek the bishop's ruling. The Canon then suggests that the bishop should arrange to interview the person. In some of the cases quoted above I did inform the appropriate bishop and received support for my action but I should be interested to hear of the experience of other clergy in this respect.

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