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MANAGERS, PIGEON-HOLERS OR PASTORS AND TEACHERS OF THE WORD?

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The Trustees of the Church Society Trust have recently come across situations which raise very seriously the question as to what the current church hierarchy in some places thinks is its role. These experiences seemed to endorse the statement recorded in the church press some eighteen months ago by the Bishop of Southwark that he saw his job as managing rather than pastoring his clergy.

In parish A the Trust and PCC had recently agreed to the sale of the old and unsuitable rectory in order to purchase a more convenient benefice property for the use of the retired clergyman who was travelling some miles along country roads in all weathers to serve them on a 'house-for-duty' basis. When the deal was completed and the clergyman in question asked when he would be able to move in, he was informed by the archdeacon that it was now decided that it would not be a good idea. It was felt that it would be better to let the new property, and for the clergyman to continue living in his own retirement house and commute. When he protested to the archdeacon that the parishioners would be very angry at the diocesan authorities going back on their agreement in this way, the answer was, 'Well, let them be!' We are glad to report that when the clergyman protested to his bishop (with the support of the Trust) the archdeacon's decision was over-ruled.

In parish B we met a young man who is training for lay readership. He had just returned from a residential weekend which formed part of his training, and informed us that their time had been spent doing Myers-Briggs personality tests. While there is a certain (though some would question that) value in these tests, when one considers how short a time readers have for such weekends, surely there are more important items for the agenda of those who are preparing themselves for the ministry of the Word of God.

Experiences like these highlight what many would see as a dangerous trend in our church. Diocesan authorities appear in some cases to feel that the views of those at grass roots (who after all are expected to come up with the financial resources to enable those officials to function) do not matter. There is a danger of reverting to the attitude expressed by Monseigneur George Talbot writing in 1857 to Archbishop Manning, 'What is the province of the laity? To hunt, to shoot, to entertain. These matters they understand, but to meddle with ecclesiastical matters, they have no right at all.' The impression being given is that ministry is all about managing people and putting them into pigeonholes rather than preaching and teaching the Word of God so as to enable the people of God to grow to full maturity in Christ.