

Article reprinted from *Cross†Way* Issue Autumn 2011 No. 122

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ANGLICAN EVANGELICAL JUNIOR CLERGY CONFERENCE REPORT

By John Richardson

As many readers of *Cross†way* will be aware, there is still a good supply of solidly Evangelical candidates going into the ministry of the Church of England. For this, we must be truly thankful.

Unfortunately, whilst these candidates are clear about their Evangelical identity, they are often much less clear about what it means to be ‘Anglican’.

Many of them come from churches with few traditional features of Anglican ‘culture’. The clergy rarely wear robes, the services are informal local concoctions rather than those ‘authorised or allowed by Canon’, the music is contemporary rather than traditional and the Book of Common Prayer nowhere to be seen.

More seriously, perhaps, many of them have little feel for the wider Church and little liking of its established structures. One can learn about the BCP or study the Thirty-nine Articles on a course, but if one’s basic attitude is that much of what goes on in the Church of England is a waste of everyone’s time, then such study will be of little help in practice.

The attitude of these candidates, moreover, is something they are learning from their ‘seniors’, who themselves often show a general disregard for the institution. The diocese is contemptible, the deanery a joke and as to bishops — who needs them?

Now all this is perhaps understandable. Forty-five years of Evangelical ‘engagement’ following the 1967 Keele NEAC seems to have produced very little by way of tangible results. As one bishop put it to a group of Evangelicals in our diocese not so long ago, despite changes at the grass roots, the institution remains resolutely Catholic and Liberal in the ‘corridors of power’.

But creating generation after generation of semi-detached Anglicans is hardly going to change that! And if this is all we are capable of, then not only will Evangelicalism remain on the institutional margins but many millions in this country will never get the chance to hear the gospel — not, at least, from a conventional Anglican.

All these thoughts about the future of the Church of England arise in relation to a project I undertook earlier this year, which resulted this July in the first ‘Anglican Evangelical Junior Clergy Conference’.

The initial thought was simply to gather a group of younger Evangelical clergy and to encourage them to launch some initiatives of their own. As the project developed, however, it became clear that something more would be required.

Many of the responses were from ordinands in training or from those considering ordination, and it was soon obvious that they felt considerable uncertainty about their own ‘Anglicanism’. Over the course of the conference itself, it also emerged that both they and the ordained clergy who attended felt a lack of leadership. Quite simply, they wanted senior Evangelicals to give them specific directions about what to do strategically for the future of the Church and the Evangelical constituency.

The Conference was deliberately modest in size and lasted for just forty-eight hours. In all, twenty-

five junior clergy and trainees attended, plus four ‘facilitators’ — myself, Melvin Tinker, Jonathan Fletcher and Professor Glynn Harrison, who is on the Crown Nominations Commission.

The programme was intense, with several ‘inputs’ on a variety of subjects, including using the occasional offices evangelistically and staying Evangelical through a lifetime of ministry. There were also opportunities for discussion. Meal-times were particularly important in this respect, with energetic conversations taking place over the excellent food provided at St Mark’s College, Audley End.

Throughout the period of preparation and the conference itself, a new approach to Evangelical strategy began to emerge. In particular, the initial welcome planned for the first night actually turned into a substantial paper not just on the post-war history of Evangelicalism (as was first intended) but a look back to the report produced during the war years and published in 1945 called *Towards the Conversion of England*.

This report was commissioned by the Church Assembly, and took its inspiration from Archbishop William Temple. As suggested by the title, its entire focus was on getting the English people converted and therefore on equipping the Church nationally for this task. Paragraph 1 set out the basis for this in refreshingly clear terms:

‘To evangelize is so to present Christ Jesus in the power of the Holy Spirit, that men shall come to put their trust in God through Him, to accept Him as their Saviour, and serve Him as their King in the fellowship of His Church.’¹

A some readers may be aware, Jim Packer actually critiqued this in his own *Evangelism and the Sovereignty of God*. Nevertheless, the great man’s concern was only with one issue, namely that evangelism *might* lead to conversion — it could not be defined as something which necessarily *would* produce the desired result. Apart from that caveat, however, this is surely not bad for a first paragraph in an official report!

Furthermore, the report also recognized the need for change in the Church itself. Thus paragraph 33 stated,

‘It will ... be realised that the really daunting feature of modern evangelism is not the masses of the population to be converted, but that most of the worshipping community are only half-converted. The aim of evangelism must be to appeal to all, within as well as without the Church, for that decision for Christ which shall make the state of salvation we call conversion the usual experience of the normal Christian.’

And other parts of the Report were just as frank about the problems:

‘... the Church is ill-equipped for its unparalleled task and opportunity. The laity complain of a lack of creative leadership among all ranks of the clergy. The spiritual resources of the worshipping community are at a low ebb. Above all, the Church has become confused and uncertain in the proclamation of its message, and its life has ceased to reflect clearly the truth of the Gospel.’²

If this looks depressingly familiar, we may comfort ourselves with the thought that the churches in Revelation didn’t get off lightly either. Yet before we excuse ourselves too easily, it is worth asking why, sixty-five years later, so little has changed.

What happened, of course, was that Archbishop Temple died unexpectedly and was replaced by Geoffrey Fisher, whose programme of revising Canon law has been described by one commentator

as ‘a glaring example of mistaken priorities’.³ And since then, the Church of England has devoted its energies successively to liturgical revision and the ordination (and now consecration) of women. The nearest it came to acknowledging the agenda of 1945 was the abortive ‘Decade of Evangelism’ in the 1980s.

Unfortunately, as Jonathan Fletcher pointed out in his talk to the Conference, Evangelicals themselves have scarcely challenged the ‘mainstream’ agenda. Rather, he observed, they have either ‘gone with the flow’ or adopted a ‘ghetto’ mentality, content to survive in the stronger parishes, but ignoring the wider issues.

Thus, it could be argued that whilst the Keele Congress committed Evangelicals to remaining within the Church of England, this had more impact negatively on themselves than positively on the institution. We have developed an ‘enclave’ mentality, trying to secure our own position (with perhaps a bit of ecclesiological guerilla warfare here and there in the form of church-planting), but we have not really had a vision that things really could or should be any better.

At the end of the Conference, therefore, a number of specific proposals were put forward, drawing inspiration from *Towards the Conversion of England* and also Bishop Samson Mwaluda’s *Reorienting a Church for Accelerated Growth*.⁴ These suggestions are aimed at fulfilling two goals: the proclamation of the gospel and the transformation of the Church.

Readers will be pleased to know that one of these suggestions was that people join Church Society, and I believe a number have already done so. Not least, this is because Church Society has a public voice, a journal and patronage of a significant number of parishes.

However, attendees were also urged to join their local diocesan Evangelical fellowships. In many areas these are moribund, yet they ought to be the place where Evangelicals — even those of different views — engage together and work to influence the lives of their own dioceses. And if there is any possibility of resolving the divisions currently plaguing Anglican Evangelicalism, this ought to manifest itself first at the local level, rather than in bodies like the Church of England Evangelical Council.

Overall, the message was to accentuate the positives in any situation, to get involved in the structures and deliberately to work for change, at the same time as using every opportunity to preach the gospel. To this end, the acronym ERIC was coined: Explain, Recruit, Initiate, Consult. So people would explain the agenda of proclamation and transformation, recruit others to share the same vision, take local initiatives, and share this on a national basis with others connected to the Conference and supportive of its aims.

Above all, the message was to move on from confrontation. The posture of the Conservative Evangelical wing of the Church of England has, for far too long, reflected an assumption that things can never get better. The mood at the end of the AEJCC was that, on the contrary, they certainly could. But to achieve this will require something quite different from what has gone before. Keele 1967 failed. It is surely to be hoped that Audley End 2011 might succeed!

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Endnotes:

- 1) Commission on Evangelism, *Towards the Conversion of England* (The Press and Publications Board of the Church Assembly, 1945).

- 2) *Ibid*, para 33.
- 3) Donald Gray, review of *Geoffrey Fisher, Archbishop of Canterbury 1945-1961*, by David Hein, *The Journal of Ecclesiastical History*, (2008) 59, 801.
- 4) Samson Mwaluda, *Reorienting a Church for Accelerated Growth: With Special Reference to the Anglican Diocese of Taita Taveta, Kenya* (Nairobi: Uzima, 2003)