

Editorial

(Written in 1995)

What is the way ahead for Evangelicals in the Church of England? The Leaders' Conference held in London in January 1995 offered the prospect of a rosy future for a group which has spent much of the twentieth century in the ecclesiastical wilderness. The measure of evangelical 'success' was clear enough – whereas twenty-five years ago there were few if any bishops who were prepared to stand out as Evangelicals, the number has grown to the point where it represents a very sizeable chunk of the episcopal bench. Of course, 'Evangelical' has to be understood in a particular sense; in this case it means someone who was converted under an evangelical ministry and whose friends are mostly of a similar type. It most emphatically does not mean that the individual concerned holds a recognisably Reformed theology, or indeed any recognisable theology at all. *Those* Evangelicals are the recently organised members of Reform, who are not represented in the House of Bishops now, and are unlikely ever to be so honoured. Quite apart from their distressingly narrow theology, the members of Reform are simply not nice. Indeed, they are critical, even of the Bishop of Chester who spares no effort to tell us all how much he dislikes criticism.

It is quite true that there is much about Reform which is less than perfect. To some degree, it is a coalition of different interests which have come together because of a mutual sense of dissatisfaction with what is happening in the Church of England. Nevertheless, that sentiment is real, and it is based on a good deal more than temperament, or hurt feelings after the decision to ordain women to the ministerial priesthood. For example, it is not unrelated to a widespread perception that the evangelical bishops have been less than distinguished in the public stand they have taken for the Gospel. One cannot help but remember that Cuthbert Bardsley, when he was Bishop of Coventry, had a national reputation as an evangelist, something which is not true of any current evangelical diocesan. Why not, when evangelism is supposed to be at the heart of evangelical concerns?

The truth is that we have reached the middle of the Decade of Evangelism with very little to show for it, and the evangelical bishops have done nothing very much to further the cause which should so so dear to them. If it is true that we have been distracted by other things, like the ordination of women, then why have the Evangelicals played along with the politics when they could – and probably should – have been pointing the Church in an altogether different direction? Reform most definitely has a case when it suggests that the Church has got its priorities mixed up, and

when it points out that those Evangelicals who help to shape national Church policies have followed the lead given by others, rather than stood out for what are supposed to be their own convictions.

When it comes to the crunch, the only weapon Reform can use to make its voice heard is the financial one. It so happens that a great number of the largest and wealthiest churches have a ministry which is of the Reform type, whether or not they are officially linked to the organisation. Furthermore, an increasing number of lay people (at the opposite end of the pecking order from the bishops, it is true, but still not totally insignificant in the sight of God) are fed up with what they see as the indecisiveness and compromise of the Church Leadership. They want their hard earned cash to go to where it will do the most good, not to diocesan machines which will do little except prolong the current malaise. For reasons which few people seem to understand, the diocesan quota that parishes are asked to pay each year is a voluntary contribution, not a compulsory levy, so it is quite possible for a parish to opt out and send its money elsewhere without breaking the law. Poorer parishes have not paid their quotas in years, and now the wealthier ones are starting to follow suit.

Gradually, it seems that a church within the Church may be coming into being. If wealthy parishes target their giving, and even start to form partnerships with ministries which are not subject to episcopal oversight, an evangelical subchurch may emerge which has only the most tenuous of links with the official diocesan structure. The evangelical bishops are probably right to fear this development, and to resist it as much as they can, because if it happens, there will be even less evangelical influence on the Church of England than there has been in the past half century. But rather than plead for acceptance from the evangelical rank and file, the bishops would do well to put their own House in order first. It is one thing to say that there is no principle of episcopal collegiality which ties the hands of Evangelicals; it is quite another to see them at work laying the foundations for a lasting impact on the Church.

For that to happen, the key area is that of ministerial training. For a generation, the pattern of residential, largely academic training has been whittled away. Non-residential courses are now providing a much higher proportion of ordained clergy than ever before, and the extension of the priesthood to women probably means that this trend will continue. It is now only a matter of time before the residential colleges (or most of them) become an anachronism which a slimline Church cannot afford. But what are the evangelical bishops doing to ensure that these courses are staffed by Evangelicals using doctrinally orthodox teaching materials? To what extent are they the preserve of instructors who are liberal to the point of eccentricity, and who use their posts to promote a kind of training which is remote indeed from Scripture and the tradition of the Church? Here is an area where evangelical bishops have a golden opportunity to prove their

worth, and where they have signally failed to make any lasting impression.

But here too, it is those Evangelicals who are least under the episcopal thumb who are doing the most to remedy the situation, as the Cornhill and Alpha courses demonstrate all too clearly. At what point will they be integrated into the wider pattern of ministerial training, or will they be kept in ecclesiastical limbo by a hierarchy which regards them as insufficiently academic? Can we not find even one evangelical bishop who might be prepared to bypass ABM and send a candidate or two to Cornhill? Or one evangelical bishop who might be prepared to use Alpha courses (or something similar) to train effective lay leaders in parishes where an ordained ministry cannot be supported financially on a regular basis? Here at least is an area where, with a little courage and imagination, the evangelical bishops can provide the Church with effective leadership which will long outlive their tenure of office. What about it, chaps?

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