Foreword
Rod Thomas, Chairman of Reform

Bishops are increasingly being invested with a significance which is alarming for the health of the Church. They, rather than the apostolic teaching they are charged to uphold, are presented as the foci of unity in the Church. Their patronage and powers are being extended as the autonomy of local presbyters is weakened. Their 'jurisdictional' powers are zealously protected even when some flexibility might help to protect unity in the wake of disagreements over the consecration of women as bishops.

Yet in declaring unease over present episcopal developments, Reform is sometimes heard as being, at heart, opposed to episcopacy itself. Occasionally we are accused of being 'congregational'. This is where Mark Burkill's booklet is so helpful. He carefully reviews the history of how episcopacy has developed and shows that while it cannot be regarded as 'essential' to the life of the church, it is nevertheless a wise way to order our affairs. Godly bishops help to provide wise leadership as they maintain their presbyteral teaching roles (since Biblical teaching is essential to church life and witness); as they provide pastoral help and guidance; and as they lead in mission.

Mark's booklet highlights the benefits of a biblical approach to episcopacy and helps us to see how we can support godly bishops. However, he also demonstrates how the role of bishops has started to be misconstrued to the great detriment of the Church. He finishes with a plea that something which is a secondary feature of church life should not be regarded as primary. The more the wider church heeds this call, the more flexible we can become to meet the challenges of mission in our secular age.

Better Bishops
Mark Burkill

The Reform covenant, written in 1993, stated that there was a need to radically reform the present shape of episcopacy. The years since then have not diminished this need. Indeed several Church of England reports have tended to echo that desire. Some of these have been concerned with the selection of bishops or their financing, but the prospect of women bishops has led to the entire basis of current episcopal ministry being investigated.

The problem is that it is one thing to be uneasy about the existing practice of episcopacy but quite another to see what changes will be effective for the promotion of the Christian faith in this country. For a reform of episcopacy to be effective there needs to be some consideration given to the key principles that should drive it. There is the danger on the one hand of thinking that we just need better, biblical people to be bishops. And on the other hand some may grow so impatient with the current shape of episcopal ministry that they may wish to abolish bishops altogether. Yet the need to be clear about good Christian leadership cannot be avoided by abolishing bishops. And the ministry of godly bishops may still be undermined if there is no clear idea of what they should be doing and what lies at the heart of their ministry.

This booklet aims to distinguish key biblical principles for episcopacy on the one hand from elements within its current practice which simply reflect past social and traditional forms in which bishops have exercised their ministry on the other. We will therefore need to look at the biblical principles for congregational leadership that are found within the New Testament. Then we will need to see how the ministry of bishops developed in the early centuries of the Christian church, along with how this ministry was viewed in England at the time of the Reformation. We will also need to note how episcopacy became a mark of Anglican identity in the 19th century. It is this recent attachment to Anglican identity that has made the reform of episcopacy so difficult. By distinguishing the key elements of episcopal ministry from historical baggage we will be in a position to suggest ways in which the current practice can be effectively reformed.

Biblical teaching on church leadership and order

As we look to the Bible to find its teaching on church leadership and order we need to consider carefully what we are expecting to find there. Just as the Christian life is not intended to be lived through a rigid list of rules so we must not expect the New Testament to provide a blueprint for church order that will solve all our problems. This is especially important when it comes to the question of episcopacy as some will conclude that the New Testament is inadequate to guide us when they discover that the distinguishing of bishops from presbyters is something that took place by and large after the New Testament period. However if we recognise that the New Testament does not intend to give us a blueprint for church government we are free to allow bishops as a godly form of Christian leadership so long as their ministry is consonant with the Scriptures through being governed by broader New Testament principles.

The Old Testament of course provides patterns for the care and direction of the people of God through human leadership. However the nature of that ministry changes radically in the New Testament because the role of the high priest is fulfilled in the person of Jesus Christ. Within the New Testament congregational leaders are termed elders/presbyters or overseers/bishops. That these terms are basically identical is clearly seen in the way Paul at Miletus sends to Ephesus for the elders of the church (Acts 20:17) and yet he refers to these same elders as overseers when he is addressing them (Acts 20:28). Similarly in 1 Peter 5:1-2 we find the apostle Peter addressing elders and urging them to serve as overseers. Roger Beckwith points out that this link between presbyter and bishop was not forgotten and that Cranmer knew full well they were 'but one office at the beginning of Christ's religion' (Beckwith 2003 pp12-13). The Anglican report 'Episcopal Ministry' does not realise that Cranmer and Hooker were aware of this (1990 pp158-160).

Sometimes people may think that it is odd to have two words which are basically used to refer to the same task of congregational leadership and ministry. However before these words became so weighed down by historical baggage there was no need to exercise the precision that we wish to impose on them. After all we happily use words like 'flat' and 'apartment' to describe very similar dwellings. Yet we can imagine how these words could develop more distinctive meanings if necessary.

The origin of the word presbyter or elder comes from the world of the Jewish synagogue. It is easy to see how Christian congregations, arising out of the world of Judaism, would readily use this word to refer to those who taught and led them. This link with the past means that those who think that the first Christians did not need order or institutions are mistaken. It is a straightforward social reality that human groups need leadership and direction, so it is not surprising that the word 'elder' or 'presbyter' was used to describe those who led the first Christian gatherings. The word 'overseer' however appears to come more from the contemporary secular world. Perhaps as Christians began to emerge from the Gentile world it became natural to use such a word in congregations with a majority of Gentile converts. However in practice the two words referred to the same ministry, which we may therefore call that of the presbyter-bishop, as the New Testament evidence shows.

It is not only important to recognise such features of the words used to describe Christian leadership in the New Testament, we must also note how the presbyter-bishop exercised his ministry. The key role that the New Testament leader had was that of teaching. The health of the Christian community depended on the teaching of the Word of God. Of course this was not simply the imparting of knowledge, but involved pastoral direction based on that teaching. Indeed the word 'overseer' or 'bishop' contains this implication. That this is how the presbyter-bishop exercised his ministry is amply demonstrated by the Pastoral Epistles. The congregation of sheep was shepherded by the Chief Shepherd exercising his rule through under-shepherds teaching the word of the Chief Shepherd. It is noteworthy that when Paul was concerned about the future health of

the Ephesian Christians he committed them to 'God and the word of his grace' (Acts 20:32), rather than to a particular form of church organisation.

Of course the teaching of that word would carry no authority if the presbyter-bishops did not themselves set an example of godly living. It would also become rather hollow if the leaders of the Christian congregations were not prepared to exercise appropriate discipline in line with the word they taught amongst those who professed to be disciples of Jesus. That is why Timothy is urged to 'watch his life and doctrine closely' (1 Tim 4:16), and why he is not only urged to 'preach the word in season and out of season' but also to 'correct, rebuke and encourage' alongside that (2 Tim 4:2).

This outline of the biblical evidence about the leadership ministry of the presbyter-bishop shows why the common idea of the bishop as 'sign and focus of unity and communion' (eg in Episcopal Ministry pp160-161) is misunderstood. A bishop, and indeed any other church leader, can only be a focus of unity insofar as he teaches Christ's word faithfully, sets a godly example, and exercises discipline in accordance with the Word of God. When bishops do not do this then they will do immense damage to the Christian community and far from being a focus of unity, the Bible encourages us to view such leaders as wolves (Acts 20:29-30).

The development of episcopacy in the early church

We have seen that the biblical evidence points to church leaders who were presbyter-bishops and who maintained the health of the Christian community by teaching the Scriptures. We now need to understand the development of the distinction between bishop and presbyter that occurred in the early centuries of the Church. The position of Lightfoot, as expressed in his book 'The Christian Ministry', is well known and widely accepted. In his view the bishop developed as a distinct individual among the presbyters because sociologically it was natural that a collective leadership would need a president or chairman. In fact the New Testament already recognises this sociological reality within the roles of people like Titus. Furthermore Archbishop Ussher in the 17th century proposed the interesting argument that the angel of each of the seven churches in the book of Revelation is the church's bishop (see Benn 2002 p20). Other theories that tend to deny the original identity of bishops and presbyters have been proposed in which the apostles appointed the first bishops, but these have not found much favour.

Nevertheless the development of bishops among the Christian congregations still has to be explained when we observe that Jewish synagogues never developed in a similar manner. There must be something distinctive in the practice of Christianity which encourages the development of a distinct episcopacy. Roger Beckwith very helpfully illuminates this in his chapter entitled 'From Presbyter-Bishops to Bishop and Presbyters' (Beckwith 2003 pp55-63). He points out that the focus on elders having teaching responsibility led to them having responsibility for ordination. There needed to be some way of preventing a free for all with individual elders ordaining their pupils. The Jewish community resolved this issue by concentrating ordination into the hands of a national patriarch in the first few centuries AD. However the Christian community by the nature of its mission to the Gentiles inevitably could not look for such a geographically centralised solution. So the natural solution was to look to the chief elder to undertake this responsibility.

The other distinctive feature of Christian congregational life was the celebration of the Lord's Supper. Partaking in the Lord's Supper was a sign of being part of the Christian community and therefore the issue of discipline naturally related to its practice. It is not difficult to see how decisions relating to church discipline might need to be focussed in a single individual. This could give further impetus to the development of a distinct role for a single individual who was called 'bishop'. The nature of the gospel and Christian discipleship can therefore be seen as leading to this development in which a distinct episcopacy arises.

In seeing the development of the distinctive episcopacy along these lines we must note that its features are essentially sociological. In other words it was simply a wise and

effective way of ruling and shepherding the flock of God, and it was not given any doctrinal or theological significance. It is especially important to appreciate this when we consider the next significant development in the practice of episcopal ministry.

This development came about simply through the advance of the work of the gospel within the Roman Empire. To begin with Christian congregations arose within the cities and towns of the Roman Empire. Within those cities and towns there would be a group of presbyters who led the congregations. As we have seen, from among their number one came to have a more distinctive role and the word 'bishop' became attached to this individual. However in the course of time the Christian community would seek to evangelise the villages and areas round about the towns. For this it would be natural to use the presbyters from within the urban Christian congregation. As the Christianisation of the Roman Empire proceeded apace during the fourth century AD these presbyters came to reside permanently in the villages they served. And in this way the plural presbyterate was replaced as the norm by the sole presbyterate.

In fact the organisation of the Christian churches naturally began to mirror the organisation of secular society. To begin with the sphere of authority and activity that came from a city bishop was known as a 'parish', but later on the secular word 'diocese' was used instead (see Burkill 2005 p6 and the entries in the Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church). Furthermore the significance of major cities in the Empire was recognised by the creation of archbishops and even patriarchs. This mirroring of secular society would have taken place even in the remote British Isles. However in this case the departure of Roman legions and the arrival of Anglo Saxons changed that. Both bishoprics and cities lapsed. Whereas in France the Roman structure of church organisation appears to have survived, in Britain it did not.

This explains why, when Christianity took root once again in this country, the organisation of the Church differed from areas like France. To this day France has many episcopal sees, whereas Britain has far fewer. This is because the evangelisation of Britain was done through Anglo Saxon kingdoms. As the Church developed, its organisation again mirrored the structure of the society in which it was taking root. Bishops and their sees were therefore appointed in relation to Anglo Saxon kingdoms. As kingdoms like Wessex grew in size and power they were subdivided into smaller administrative units called shires, and these shires in turn came to be dioceses.

It is the failure to recognise the way in which church organisation in general was accommodated to social realities, and in particular the way in which bishops and their dioceses did this, which lies at the heart of so much confusion about the significance and role of bishops today. Time and again we are told that the diocese is in fact the parish or the local church. This is an anachronistic understanding of these terms which leads to sociological absurdities in the organisation of ministry today.

Modern Anglican literature is riddled with this misunderstanding. Paul Avis states that in Anglicanism the diocese is regarded as the local church (The Anglican Understanding of the Church 2000 p64). It is not surprising therefore to find the ARCIC report claiming that both Anglicans and Roman Catholics are agreed on this: 'The unity of local communities under one bishop constitutes what is commonly meant in our two communities by "a local church"' (Final Report 1982 p55). The report on choosing diocesan bishops called 'Working with the Spirit' (2001) makes the same assumption (p7 section 1.27), as does the earlier report from 1990 entitled 'Episcopal Ministry' (p160 section 351). It is good to note that some recent reports have been more cautious on this point though. Thus the report 'A Measure for Measures' (2004) is prepared to concede that the term 'local church' has two senses (see pp115,123). And there is in fact a certain recognition of the true historical position in the 2004 Women Bishops report (pp15,24 sections 2.3.7 & 2.4.2).

In seeking to reform the practice of episcopacy today the sociology and history that goes with the early development of bishops must be grasped. If it is not then we lose the flexibility of structure which we need to evangelise our society today and we forget the need to set bishops free to make teaching and preaching their ministry priority.

The understanding of episcopacy in the Church of England at the Reformation

In seeking to understand the proper Anglican view of episcopacy we should note to begin with the focus we find in Article 19 of the 39 Articles. This is the article which is simply entitled 'Of the Church'. It says 'The visible Church of Christ is a congregation of faithful men, in the which the pure Word of God is preached, and the Sacraments be duly administered according to Christ's ordinance in all those things that of necessity are requisite to the same'. It is striking in view of common assumptions today that no mention is made of the necessity or otherwise of episcopacy or indeed any other form of church order. This in itself is a very significant point.

The way the Anglican tradition addresses the question of order may be seen in the Preface to the Ordinal of the Church of England which famously states 'It is evident unto all men diligently reading holy Scripture and ancient authors that from the Apostles' time there have been these Orders of Ministers in Christ's Church; Bishops, Priests and Deacons'. It is not often appreciated what this careful statement is and is not saying. It is not arguing or insisting that bishops are essential to the existence of the Christian community. It is simply acknowledging that 'bishop' is a scriptural word, and that a distinctive episcopal ministry arose in the time of the apostles (hence the reference to 'ancient authors'). This is the characteristic position of the early generation of Reformers in the Church of England. It is also to be noted that the statement speaks of 'these Orders of Ministers' and not of 'three Orders of Ministers'. The latter is often assumed, but in fact the Church of England Reformers viewed bishops and priests as being of the same order, which is why bishops are consecrated rather than ordained.

It is important to appreciate that the English Reformers, in line with the history outlined above, did not claim that a binding pattern of church order is to be found in Scripture. They would therefore take issue with those who insisted that presbyterianism was the church order to be followed, just as they would take issue with any who insisted that bishops were essential to the life of the Christian community. The point is that the Reformers understood very clearly that it is the gospel that creates and establishes the church, rather than a particular form of Church government. To think otherwise would be to align oneself with the error of the Roman Catholic Church. Apostolic succession comes from fidelity to the doctrine of the apostles rather than an unbroken episcopal succession. Thus John Jewel, Bishop of Salisbury and celebrated author of 'An Apology for the Church of England', puts it like this: 'Succession, you say, is the chief way, for any Christian man to avoid antichrist. I grant you, if you mean the succession of doctrine' (Avis 1982 p130).

The practical implications of this understanding are seen in various ways. It means for example that the non-episcopal ministries of other churches can be accepted. What is important is what the minister teaches, not so much the way he was ordained. It means that in certain circumstances bishops may be dispensed with. Certainly bishops are helpful for the leading of God's people, but they can never be regarded as essential. This also explains why the Reformers viewed bishops and priests as belonging to the same fundamental order of ministry.

There is no space in this booklet to provide full evidence that the Reformers held these views about episcopacy but if the reader wishes to pursue this further then a good place to start is Paul Avis' section entitled 'The Reformed Episcopate in Anglican Theology' (pp115-130) in his book 'The Church in the Theology of the Reformers' (Avis 1982). Richard Hooker is often regarded as the theologian to look to for an Anglican view on any matter. It may be unwise to place so much reliance upon him alone but the principle which lies behind his understanding of bishops is summarised by Avis in this way: 'According to Richard Hooker, polity is alterable, doctrine unchangeable; mere ecclesiastical arrangements are not on the same footing as divine truth' (Avis 1982 p117). Hooker certainly wishes to commend the ministry of bishops but he never makes the mistake of giving their presence a doctrinal significance. Similarly even someone like John Whitgift, the late 16th century Archbishop of Canterbury, can say 'It is plain that any one form or kind of external government perpetually to be observed is nowhere in the scripture prescribed to the church' (Cross 1969 pp64-5, and also quoted by David

Holloway in his talk on the Reform of the Episcopate at the Reform National Conference in 1996).

It was the insistence that scripture did prescribe the precise government of the Church (whether by advocates of the episcopal or presbyteral form) that caused so much trouble later on. In the 17th century positions on episcopacy began to harden. Faced with bad experiences of bishops, and indeed tyranny, some Puritans turned to presbyterianism. Their rejection of bishops was understandable but it was a mistake to think that the key to reforming the Church lay in changing its form of government. On the other hand the developing high church insistence on the necessity of bishops contributed to the English Civil War and the disastrous fracture of the Christian community following 1662.

The question of episcopacy and its reform at this time suffered from becoming highly politicised. This may explain why the relationship between bishops and the government of the nation was never tackled. The ministry of bishops was still dominated by the prelatical understanding inherited from earlier times, and no attempt was made to remove the medieval lord element from the practice of episcopal ministry. In an atmosphere in which church government had become so contentious it is instructive to read how Archbishop Ussher sought to reform episcopal practice. He sought to apply biblical principles to the needs of his own day in a way which still commends itself today. An introduction to his tract on Episcopacy can be found in Wallace Benn's St Antholin lecture 'Usher on Bishops' (Benn 2002).

Nevertheless despite the failure of such practical attempts to conform episcopacy to biblical principles we still find in the Reformation period that there is a clear understanding amongst many leaders of the Church of England of the way in which episcopacy should be operated. Notwithstanding the severe controversies of their own day they saw that the gospel of Christ is what creates and nurtures the Christian community, rather than the presence of bishops. Church structures (ecclesiastical polity as Hooker called it) could be adapted to the needs and circumstance of the Christian community, but the basic Christian message was not to be changed. The Church requires order and good government, and bishops are a godly way of achieving that end, but Hooker warns that the authority of bishops can be taken away by the Church if they are 'proud, tyrannical and unreformable' (Laws VII.v.8).

The 19th century search for Anglican identity

If the Reformers of the Church of England were so clear about the principles of episcopal ministry, one might wonder why it is that these principles have been lost sight of to a large extent today. I believe the answer lies in the way that the 19th century refashioned Anglican identity so as to stress secondary features of church life (such as episcopacy) rather than staying with the doctrinal position that had been the basis of that identity hitherto.

It comes as a surprise to many to hear that the word 'Anglicanism' was not used before the 1830s (see Burkill 2005 p42, Norman 2004 pxii). That does not mean that the Church of England did not exist before that date of course! It simply reflects the way in which a refashioning of Anglican identity was underway at that time. There are various factors behind this. One is the growing impact of non-Anglican churches in English life, another is the expanding British Empire. As Anglican ministry expanded overseas and free churches grew in number and influence, Anglicans rubbed shoulders with Christians from other backgrounds. That experience highlighted the question of what justified the particular traditions of Anglican church life, including bishops. Furthermore the Oxford Movement served to stress the importance of bishops and other features of church government to a degree that had not occurred before.

The net result of this desire to define Anglican identity was that whereas in 1800 the Church of England was very much the Established Church, by 1900 it was much more of a denomination. And one of the defining features of this denomination was the practice of episcopal ministry. This had already begun to appear in the way that the term 'Episcopal' was used to define certain churches in America and Scotland during the 18th

century but it was in the 19th century that this feature became prominent in defining what it was to be Anglican.

It is hard to grasp today just how much our current understanding of Anglicanism has been shaped by this 19th century quest for Anglican identity. The focus on the secondary features of church life as being determinative of Anglican identity has meant that it is almost impossible to reform them without being accused of undermining the essence of the Church of England. We have so accepted the view that the Church of England's unity is secured by maintaining secondary features of church life rather than by biblical doctrine and the gospel that even evangelicals end up defending such features to the death.

A further illustration of this can be seen in the way the Anglican view on some matter is determined. The default position is that this comes from bishops or synods. Of course one would expect bishops and synods to have a key role in expressing what the Bible teaches about some matter of controversy, but what has now happened is that the opinions of bishops and synods are seen as determining doctrine and belief. When a denomination has come to locate its identity in its leaders and government rather than in faithfulness to Scripture this is what results. This helps us understand why many had great reservations about the establishment of the Lambeth Conference in 1868 and indeed synods in general at that period. Bishops and synods have to be held accountable to the doctrinal foundations of the Church of England if they are to find their proper place within an Anglican identity.

That the proper historical perspective on bishops and their ministry has been lost sight of is amply demonstrated in modern church reports. It is this blinkered vision that prevents effective reform of the episcopacy. The report 'Episcopal Ministry' (1990) for example states that 'through the office of a bishop, the Church is maintained and strengthened in unity in its service of God and its witness to the world' (p160, section 351). It similarly declares that the bishop is a 'living representative of the unity and universality of the church' (p165, section 363). However the sad reality is that episcopacy cannot bear this weight in and of itself. Bishops will only maintain and strengthen the unity of the Christian community insofar as they are faithful teachers of the gospel and Scripture. This is why the Ordinal calls upon new bishops 'to banish and drive away all erroneous and strange doctrine contrary to God's Word'.

Similarly the report 'Resourcing Bishops' (2001) in its historical introduction can say 'this function of the bishop as a sign and focus of unity quickly became central to the meaning of episcopacy' (p17 section 2.3.6) without any qualification as to the faithfulness of that bishop. The 2004 report 'Women Bishops in the Church of England?' is a good deal more careful, and acknowledges that there are several views on episcopacy within the Church of England, including the one propounded here (see section 2.6, pp33-41). However there is little likelihood of episcopacy being effectively reformed within the Church of England if the organisational features and canons relating to the role of bishops are seen as essential to Anglican unity and identity. No wonder George Carey could write before he became Archbishop of Canterbury: 'My experience of the episcopate so far is that the bishop's office is almost totally conditioned by past practices' (Ogilvie 1991 p13).

How episcopal ministry should be reformed today

A vision for the reform of the ministry of bishops in the present time can be articulated if we are willing to bear in mind basic biblical principles about episcopal ministry, alongside the way its ancient practice was consonant with the New Testament, and we do not make the mistake of making secondary features essentials. We must remember that bishops are of the same order as priests/presbyters, and therefore should essentially be engaged in pastoring through preaching and teaching. Episcopal ministry (as distinct from that of presbyters) emerged from a desire to conform the organisation of the Christian community to that of the society it was seeking to reach with the gospel. Therefore its practice today should reflect the sociological characteristics of present day communities and networks. The bishop today should have a ministry that is not

essentially different from that of the vicar/rector, but the sphere in which he exercises this ministry will differ.

The local church leader naturally relates primarily to the local congregation, however the bishop's distinctive ministry comes from his additional, connectional role. The following general points can be made in relation to this:

- It is possible for a committee or other group to take on the responsibility for this connectional role, but it can be argued sociologically that an individual (who is properly accountable within a plural leadership and to godly synods) is best for this. Bishops can be a wise form of church government. Remember that this appears to be the best explanation for the distinction between bishop and presbyters that developed in the early Church.

- A bishop will be responsible for pastoring local church ministers. He can provide support and encouragement to those facing difficulties, as well as being the primary means of exercising loving scriptural discipline when this is necessary.

- A bishop will be well placed to help in cases of pastoral breakdown between a minister and his congregation, if his own ministry is respected for its godly example. He can provide essential backing to a minister who is struggling with opposition to his gospel work. He can provide ways through an impasse created by a minister's folly or lack of experience.

- A bishop can have a supervisory role in the selection, training and ordination of new ministers. He cannot possibly take on all this work himself but his pastoral wisdom and experience will be key when it comes to making final decisions about who is suitable for ministry and how they should be prepared for this work.

- A bishop should have a role as a spokesman (of the Word of God) for the Christian community in relation to the wider world. If the structures of the Christian community are adaptable to the natural units in which society itself is operating then there will be natural opportunities to speak biblical truth into the public square. This shows how a bishop can genuinely lead the Christian community in mission.

These points help us see what we should be looking for in bishops today and the sort of priorities they should be encouraged to have. More specific points can be made which relate to the reform of the episcopate and its practice today, although these would require a radical shake up of the institution that may be impossible for many to countenance:

- It is best to have the bishop exercising a proportion of his ministry from a base within a local congregation. In this way the basic preaching/teaching role of a bishop cannot be avoided.

- Synodical and chapter meetings of godly clergy and lay people exist to serve as a check on sinfulness and folly in bishops. Although synods (and bishops) must not be allowed to contradict biblical teaching, they can provide godly wisdom when the Christian community and its leaders are faced with major issues. Bishops must not be allowed to be tyrants and there must be effective means of holding them accountable to Scripture.

- The spheres of bishops' ministries should be adapted to the natural networks of society wherever these are to be found – counties, towns, cities, London boroughs. Non-geographical networks and communities should not be ignored (it is right that we have a bishop to the armed forces for example). This probably means that the

number of bishops should be greatly multiplied. If administration and organisation are not seen as key to their ministry then this need not be alarming.

- The role of bishops in relation to local and national government needs to be reexamined. Prelatical elements need to be dispensed with, while effective channels of communication to various levels of government must be encouraged.

- The system of appointing bishops needs to be reformed so as to produce candidates who will meet the biblical criteria for episcopal ministry. However no particular form of appointment, whether by election or consultation, can guarantee this.

In seeking reform of the practice of episcopacy today therefore two principles need to be borne in mind:

(a)

Bishops are to minister in their own sphere in conformity to New Testament principles of pastoring through the preaching and teaching of the Word of God. Their spheres of ministry should be designed to conform to natural social networks.

(b)

Bishops are not to be viewed as essential to the existence of the Christian community, whereas biblical teaching is. Bishops can only maintain the unity of the Christian community if they are willing to set a godly example and teach and exercise discipline in accordance with the Word of God. When they do that they will soon find that they are accorded real respect from Christian ministers and their congregations.

If there is not the will for current church leadership to reform the practice of episcopacy along the lines of these two principles, then it may be that congregations will have to develop it from the ground up.

Mark Burkill

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