

“Synodical government: lay leadership and the episcopate”

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The recent Report of the Church of Wales Review (hereafter “the Report”) observed that “[u]nlike other churches in the Anglican Communion it does not have a fully developed system of synodical government. This may save it from some of the cumbersomeness of the system, as experienced elsewhere, but it means that there is no proper flow of ideas and resolutions from parish or deanery to Diocese and from there to the Governing Body and the Representative Body.” (*Church of Wales Review* (July 2012) 4) The implication was that the constitutional arrangements of the Church limited the upward movement of ideas, from both clergy and laity, with the episcopate having a stronger role. To redress this balance, the following was recommended:

“Recommendation I

- 1) The Governing Body and bishops should make it clear, if necessary by Constitutional amendment, that motions can come from parishes, and deaneries (or whatever body might replace them), to Diocesan Conferences, and from Diocesan Conferences to the Governing Body, and that such motions would be welcome.
- 2) Consideration should be given to renaming the Diocesan Conference a Synod, and in the light of the development of Area Ministries, a new system of elections may need to be established.” (*Church of Wales Review* (July 2012) 5)

Although the Church is episcopally-led, in that the bishops retain the collegial and individual leadership roles traditional to the episcopacy, in most of the constituent churches of the Anglican Communion the Church is synodically governed. The purpose of synodical government is to facilitate the full participation of the laity in the government of the Church (Lambeth Conference (hereinafter “L.C.”) 1867, Res. 4, 5, 8, 10; L.C. 1897, Res. 24; L.C. 1920, Res. 14, 43; L.C. 1930, Res. 53. Synods were utilised in the Anglican Communion from 1785; the Canon Edward Norman, “Authority in the Anglican Communion” (1998)). It is not merely not a matter of concession to “fashionable theories of representation” ( Stephen Sykes, “Introduction; Why Authority?”, in the Stephen Sykes (ed.), *Authority in the Anglican Communion* (1987), 20; the John Howe, *Highways and Hedges* (1985), 50f), though this may have influenced the choice of synodical government at times in the history of the church. Even when monarchical episcopacy prevailed, representation and participation remained important aspects of Church government, at least insofar as synods and convocations gave a voice to the junior clergy, if not to the the laity also. All members of the church, the *laos*, are equally important, even if their roles and functions differ. Synodical government involves the whole of the people of God in the process of church governance.

Although synodical government, which the Report recommends the Church in Wales consider adopting, is not new – indeed it is quite the reverse – it withered in the middle ages to early modern times, and was only comparatively recently that it was restored. In 1857

William Gladstone (the former Chancellor of the Exchequer and later Prime Minister of the United Kingdom) (David Bebbington, *William Ewart Gladstone: Faith and Politics in Victorian Britain* (1993)) advised Bishop George Selwyn (the first Bishop of New Zealand) to utilise a synodical form of government (Stephen Sykes, "Introduction; Why Authority?", in the Stephen Sykes (ed.), *Authority in the Anglican Communion* (1987), 20), and Selwyn himself thought that strong lay participation was essential in a Church (John H. Evans, *Churchman Militant* (1964), 138-41, 146-7, 163-4). Indeed, the earliest movement towards a church synod outside of the British Isles had already occurred in New Zealand. Selwyn had promoted a conciliar process for governance in 1844, and called a synod of clergy and laity (but not the indigenous Māori laity) for 1857 (William Sachs, *The Transformation of Anglicanism* (1993), 191-3; See also Fred Schneider, "The Anglican Quest for Authority: Convocations and the Imperial Factor, 1850-60" (1976) 9(2) *Journal of Religious History* 141). This was because of the absence of the regular (or established) constitutional authority of convocations and Parliament, as found in the Church of England at that time – although the former were then moribund. This necessitated a consideration of ancient forms of church government (as then understood), as had been required in the American colonies after 1777 (*Terrett v. Taylor*, 13 U.S. (9 Cranch) 43, 47 (1815)). The model of synodical government subsequently adopted in New Zealand became a model elsewhere (For the theological basis of synods see the Canon Keith S. Chittleborough, "Towards a Theology and Practice of the Bishop-in-Synod", in the Stephen Sykes (ed.), *Authority in the Anglican Communion* (1987), 144-62). It is justifiable, indeed laudable, from a theological perspective, though there is no compelling argument that this model must be followed.

One might, however, observe two points which ought to be considered. The first is the rationale for adopting the synodical model, and the second is the nature of the relationship between Bishop and synod.

For the first, the Report recommends the Church in Wales consider a synodical form of government, principally because not having a fully developed synodical system means that there is "no proper flow of ideas and resolutions from parish or deanery to Diocese and from there to the Governing Body and the Representative Body." (*Church of Wales Review* (July 2012) 4) It might be questioned whether this is a theological or ecclesiological justification, since a flow of ideas might be achieved through other means (such as through existing structures). Perhaps rather than merely considering synodical government there might be reason for re-examining the fundamental constitution of the Church in Wales, with its Governing Body and Representative Body.

To cite the example of New Zealand again, not only did it lead in the revival of synodical government in the nineteenth century, it also led in the development of a constitution based on contemporary social and political ideas. In common with the practice of most Anglican churches, the national synod in New Zealand originally had three houses, for bishops, clergy, and laity (as proposed by Governor Grey to Bishop Selwyn in 1850; (1852) V *Colonial Church Chronicle* 161). Since 1992 it has departed from this norm in having separate governmental structures for Pakeha (non-Māori), Māori, and Polynesian cultures or Tikanga. The Diocese of Polynesia covers many independent Pacific island nations. Many Anglicans in that Tikanga (these might be described as racial, or more accurately ethno-cultural groupings (social organisations, with aspects of language, laws, principles, and procedures in common) are not "Polynesians", but Indians, Melanesians, Europeans, amongst others. The Māori and Pakeha churches cover the mainland of New Zealand, and the two hierarchies sit side-by-side in the same geographical space.

The circumstances of the church in New Zealand have led to a unique bi-focal government, one which emphasises the cultural traditions of the Church, as well as the unity of the Church derived from its doctrine and formularies. The underlying reasons are expressed in detail in the preamble to the Constitution of the Church (with its emphasis upon the separateness of missionary and settler hierarchies and histories, and on the political consequences of colonisation). This states that:

This Church has developed in New Zealand from its beginnings when Ruatara introduced Samuel Marsden to his people at Oihi in the Bay of Islands in 1814, first in expanding missionary activity as Te Hahi Mihinare in the medium of the Māori language and in the context of Tikanga Māori, initially under the guidance of the Church Missionary Society, and secondly after the arrival of George Augustus Selwyn in 1842 as a Bishop of the United Church of England and Ireland spreading amongst the settlers in the medium of the English language and in the context of their heritage and customs and being known as the Church of England, so leading to a development along two pathways which found expression within Tikanga Māori and Tikanga Pakeha;

AND WHEREAS (6) by the Treaty of Waitangi, signed in 1840, the basis for future government and settlement of New Zealand was agreed, which Treaty implies partnership between Māori and settlers and bicultural development within one nation; (Constitution of the Church in New Zealand Preamble. This “implied partnership and bicultural development” has been recognised only since the late twentieth century, particularly by the Church and the courts)

The principles of partnership and bicultural development was deemed to require the Church to organise its affairs within each of the Tikanga of each partner to the Treaty of Waitangi (these are the Crown and Māori, though it is taken now to imply Pakeha society and the national Government, and those Māori people; see Hayward, Janine, “In search of a treaty partner: who, or what, is ‘the Crown?’” (1995) Victoria University of Wellington Ph.D. thesis). Although missionary activities long existed among the Māori, the first bishop with a specific ministry to Māori was only appointed in 1928, when the first Bishop of Aotearoa was consecrated (though he served as a bishop only in one diocese, the Diocese of Waiapu). A measure of autonomy as “te Pihopatanga o Aotearoa” (the bishopric of Aotearoa) was provided in 1978, and new forms of mission and ministry have since emerged. The Anglican Church in Aotearoa, New Zealand and Polynesia currently comprises the Māori dioceses (te Pihopatanga o Aotearoa), seven dioceses in New Zealand, and the Diocese of Polynesia. Each of the three elements or Tikanga has its own archbishop, each of whom is a primate of the province.

God’s people in New Zealand are perceived as belonging to three separate, yet linked, traditions. The executive and legislative authority is divided amongst them, so that no group alone may prevail over the others. This is a unique division of authority along might be seen as racial grounds, for the Māori and Pakeha (and Pasifika) hierarchies are parallel (that of Polynesia comprises various islands of the South Pacific, centred on Fiji). The 1992 Constitution does not however draw “racial” distinctions, per se. Rather it speaks of the “provision of ministry to those who wish to be ministered to within Tikanga Māori” or

“within Tikanga Pakeha” or “within the Tikanga of the Diocese of Polynesia”. Thus ministry is a matter of cultural preference and territoriality, not a “racial” definition (there are Pakeha who opt for Tikanga Māori ministry and vice versa). This is a reflection of the political and social foundations of the secular State in New Zealand, as much as of any theological considerations. However, it has some significant consequences, which are not entirely satisfactory. For instance, the numerically much smaller Māori, and Polynesian churches can prevail over the larger Pakeha church, and the system is comparatively cumbersome and complex. Recent discourse suggests that the model may be changed. But the way in which different linguistic traditions were dealt with may still prove instructive for the Church in Wales.

While it may be true that there is “no proper flow of ideas and resolutions from parish or deanery to Diocese and from there to the Governing Body and the Representative Body” (*Church of Wales Review* (July 2012) 4), it would be unfortunate if a new arrangement were to create any additional complexities or problems, particularly as the rationale for change has not been fully considered or debated.

The second question is nature of the relationship between Bishop and synod, and is potentially more difficult to address. The Bishop is the chief pastor of a diocese, with teaching and pastoral, as well as liturgical functions. A synodical government model which divides authority between bishop and people, however defined, can present theological as well as practical difficulties. We may have moved from the monarchical model of episcopacy common in the middle ages to a more democratic model – for ecclesiological if not social or political reasons – but that does not mean that the Bishop should be reduced to the status of *primus inter pares* among the people of God, and liable, like the Pakeha Tikanga in New Zealand, to be outvoted by other sections of the church, even on matters of theology and liturgy.

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