

The ecumenical importance of the office of a Bishop in the 21st century

The archbishop introduces the Church of England's service of ordination of bishops with these words:

'Bishops are ordained to be shepherds of Christ's flock and guardians of the faith of the apostles. Obedient to the call of Christ...they are to gather God's people and celebrate with them the sacraments of the new covenant. Thus formed into a single communion of faith and love, the Church in each place and time is united with the Church in every place and time.'

The archbishop thereby declares the role of a bishop in linking different expressions of church across the world and across the ages. The ecumenical aspect of the new bishop's calling is made explicit in the sixth ordination vow, which says:

'Will you promote peace and unity in the world and will you strive for the visible unity of Christ's Church?'

And the maintenance of relationships of communion is enacted in the laying on of hands which, over the 20th century, has grown to include bishops in communion such as Old Catholics and Scandinavian Lutherans. Archbishop Vercammen was part of this ceremony at my ordination in 2014.

The bishop is like a knot in a net. Aware that the net has in some places been torn, yet Bishops know ourselves to be nodal points, focuses of unity, in a society that spans the generations and crosses the globe. And I want to suggest that the inter-connected and transnational perspective casts an important light on episcopal mission and ministry as a whole.

Archbishops Rowan Williams and John Sentamu outline two sets of responsibilities for those made bishops in the Church of England. **Towards the Church**, the bishop has responsibility as a leader of mission, for maintaining unity, guarding doctrine and teaching the faith. **Towards the nation**, the bishop has responsibility for shaping the moral framework, expressing Christian values, and building faith capital. So there is an inward facing set of responsibilities concerned with leading mission on behalf of the church and an outward set of responsibilities concerned with shaping national moral life.

The Bishop of Winchester, Tim Dakin, argues that these two sets of responsibilities need to be supplemented by a third set concerned with bringing the perspective of the global context of the worldwide church. So the bishop looks **inward** at the local expression of church, **outwards** to the national culture but also looks **around** at the context provided by the global church. Dakin argues that whilst the primary roles of the bishop are intra-cultural, they must be approached from the perspective of the inter-cultural gospel.

Drawing on recent thinking in missiology, Dakin speaks of the particular responsibility of the bishop for facilitating the **translation** of a gospel which is for all cultures into each culture, and for guiding the process of **conversion** to the Lord Jesus Christ in particular cultural contexts. The inter-cultural perspective is then vital if we are to engage prophetically with a national culture.

This perspective may shine light on two areas of importance. Firstly, Christian involvement in shaping European political culture. It is disappointing that Christian influence in the European Union has not been stronger, despite the key role of Christian statesmen in its foundation and the ongoing presence of so many Christian MEPs. Sadly, religion in general, and Christianity in particular, have been seen within the EU not as a unifying force but as problematic and divisive. Those seeking to encourage European integration needed to build a broad transnational coalition in its favour, and usually they realised that the potentially divisive topic of religion was best downplayed, or avoided altogether. Moreover, religion has been seen as a divisive force within key member states – whether in Belgium and the Netherlands, with their Catholic, socialist and liberal ‘pillars’, in Germany where the Catholic CDU had to try to position itself as an inclusively Christian party, or in France with its commitment to *laïcité*. In building the EU, it has been safer to focus either on the technocratic aspects of building Europe or, if a more idealistic objective was needed, to concentrate on Europe as a peace project. By each representing, or appearing to represent, only a **sectional** interest group, the Christian communities together lost much of their prophetic voice within the political structures.

Secondly, a global perspective helps us understand secular modern Western Europe for what it is: an exception in a religious world, equally in need of evangelisation as able to support it elsewhere. In the Anglican Communion our average member is a black woman in her 20s living in the global south. But perhaps because of financial imbalances, we have been slow to recognise and accept this global shift in influence. We have only recently understood that mission is not about the gospel being taken from ‘here’ to ‘there’, but involves the gospel being translated into each culture, and converting all cultures including - especially – our own. We have much to learn about how to welcome migrants from the Global South so that they can give as well as receive, so they can take their place in our leadership structures and so we incarnate a church for all cultures. This is vital for the flourishing of the Western Church. Research in the Church of England suggests that only two dioceses are growing: the Diocese in Europe and the Diocese of London, in each case because of migrants from the Global South.

I have suggested, following Archbishop Rowan Williams, that the bishop is in the first place a leader in mission. This mission grows more challenging. Christendom is over, large proportions of our populations – maybe 50% - are unchurched with virtually no understanding of the gospel; church buildings are closing. Moreover, people are increasingly mobile, and many people are highly networked. Significant proportions of our populations relate more to members of their friendship groups and networks than to their physical neighbours.

So, in the Church of England, we operate models of mission which reach into friendship groups and peer groups rather than just parishes and localities. Christian communities in schools, youth churches, messy churches, churches in childrens centres, new monastic communities. We are running what Rowan Williams calls a ‘mixed economy’ of traditional church and networked church. It is thought that the equivalent of about two new territorial dioceses now belong to network churches.

To support mission to networks, the Church of England has personal episcopates alongside territorial episcopates. We have long had a bishop for the armed forces. We now have a

bishop for fresh expressions of church and bishops with particular interests in migrant communities. Episcopates based on persons are not intended to 'compete' with primary territorial structures, but to support and complement them. There have been similar developments during recent decades in the Roman Catholic Church. The Nicaean principle of 'one bishop for one city' expresses the mutual harmony and unity of the episcopate but the social conditions of today mean this must be expressed through networks as well as geographical territories.

In conclusion, bishops are leaders of mission and shapers of public ethics and culture in the nations. They lead from the perspective of the international and global church. Archbishop Joris was present in my episcopal ministry from its beginning and has always held me to account for my international and inter-communion engagement. We have not always agreed, but our encounters are invariably stimulating. I have indicated in my talk some of the adverse consequences for our witness and wellbeing if we lose the global perspective. I have spoken of the missional need for imaginative patterns of episcopacy. I look forward to continuing to work with episcopal colleagues in the service of the mission and unity of the church in Europe.

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