

## Defining ecclesiology – alarming developments in the Church of England



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The defining ecclesiology of the Church of England has been a battleground for centuries. Even the term Anglican has been strongly seen by some as a party within the Church of England and absolutely not synonymous with it.<sup>1</sup> Meanwhile, the Anglican Communion has sprung into existence, with huge differences in theological, liturgical, practical and existential facets. Yet, nonetheless, there are some things that are distinctly Church of England and, indeed, Anglican, that run through the different constituent churches – if not in terms of the theology, then at least in terms of praxis. The Chicago-Lambeth Quadrilateral<sup>2</sup> is a good indicator of some of these things, and it is clear that for centuries, these kinds of things matter. They matter, not because they become idols in themselves, but because they form part of the narrative that forms our historical and living tradition. Much of what has occurred during the coronavirus crisis has revealed what these elements of fundamental praxis are and pointed out places where they might be at risk. In a previous article I have interrogated the nature of the sacraments; in this article, I wish to consider the significant ecclesiological challenge that was laid down by the Archbishop of Canterbury on 15<sup>th</sup> July in his joint ‘Statement on Episcopal Consecrations’ with the Archbishop of York.

The Archbishop of Canterbury, in his statement,<sup>3</sup> said ‘after conversation with the House of Bishops, I have put forward new arrangements for the consecration of bishops’. It is confusing as to what this statement actually means and who made the decision – and what the long-term consequences will be. But it is the measure itself, and the way that this was presented as a *fait accompli* that is, perhaps, most concerning. The decision to remove the Metropolitan as chief consecrator is a substantial one – not simply a matter of a brief reorganisation in the context of coronavirus. It is true, of course, that episcopal ordinations and consecrations do not require the Metropolitan – they require three bishops as a minimum. However, in the historical tradition of the Church of England, the Metropolitan has exercised this right in both provinces, and to move away from this position is a fundamental attitudinal statement – something that carries with it, whether intended or unintended, a shift in the Church of England’s ecclesiological understanding.

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<sup>1</sup> Morris, J., ‘The Spirit of Comprehension: Examining the Broad Church Synthesis in England’, *Anglican and Episcopal History*, Vol.75, No.3, 2006, pp.423-443

<sup>2</sup> Episcopal Church of the USA, ‘Chicago-Lambeth Quadrilateral’  
[<https://episcopalchurch.org/library/glossary/chicago-lambeth-quadrilateral>] accessed 16<sup>th</sup> August 2020

<sup>3</sup> The Archbishop of Canterbury, ‘A Statement on Episcopal Consecrations’,  
[<https://www.archbishopofcanterbury.org/news/latest-news/statement-episcopal-consecrations>] accessed 16<sup>th</sup> August 2020

To pass such a measure by webpage statement, without any apparent consultation with the wider church (beyond ‘conversation’ with the House of Bishops) does not appear to be, in any sense, proper. The Archbishop may well have the authority to do this; he is not, however, exercising such authority appropriately within the norms of the Church of England by unilaterally (and at very best unicamerally) making such a decision. That there has not been wider concern raised by those in positions of authority in the Church of England simply speaks to a wider malaise. In this measure, there has been a genuine shift in how the provinces view themselves, made without consultation, yet this has not even received comment by anyone in the episcopacy (despite private reservations). There is a serious question as to why this is the case.

It appears that the shift in ecclesiology is borne out of the concept of ‘full sacramental communion’.<sup>4</sup> It is unclear, however, why a Metropolitan, ordained by a male bishop, is not in ‘full sacramental communion’ with the bishops who he ordains, male or female, affirming or traditionalist, and the statement from Forward in Faith adds further confusion, stating that the move enables traditionalists to have ‘the sacramental assurance and joy of full communion with the bishops who ordain them’.<sup>5</sup> It is not clear why ‘it is fitting that this well-established practice [priest and deacons being ordained by a male, often traditionalist, bishop] is being adopted as the norm for the consecration of traditional Catholic bishops, now that women have been admitted into the episcopate by the Church of England.’ There is much there to be unpacked, not least for the bishops of The Society and those priests under their care, but it is now very difficult to see what exactly this ‘sacramental assurance’ means. If it means that traditionalist bishops must be ordained separately from the remainder of the Church of England’s bishops, that is erring close to a third province. The point of this article is not to argue the rights or wrongs of that – but it is essential that the Church of England is clear, cogent and honest about decisions that are being made. Questions remain – if the sacrament of ordination cannot be accepted from a non-traditionalist bishop, can any of the sacraments be received from them? Does this now mean that a (male) diocesan will not be accepted as even the celebrant of the Eucharist in a traditionalist parish? In what sense, then, can we say we are in communion with one another whatsoever?

But this is not the key issue at stake, as whilst these particular issues as relate to traditionalists remain unsolved, there is a more fundamental issue, being that the Metropolitan of English provinces will no longer (according to the statement, although seemingly not in practice<sup>6</sup>) ordain bishops as chief consecrator. Thus, what might appear as a messy solution to a messy problem has now produced a problem in its own right. That the Archbishop will not ordain traditionalists may be a short-term solution, but this surely then doesn’t require the corollary that the Archbishop will no longer ordain any bishops

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<sup>4</sup> Paul Wilkinson, ‘Archbishops delegate consecrations in line with Five Guiding Principles’, *Church Times*, [<https://www.churchtimes.co.uk/articles/2020/17-july/news/uk/archbishops-delegate-consecrations-in-line-with-five-guiding-principles>] accessed 16<sup>th</sup> August 2020

<sup>5</sup> Forward in Faith, ‘Statement regarding the Consecration of the The Revd Prebendary Will Hazlewood’ [<https://www.forwardinfaith.com/fullposts.php?id=280>] accessed 16<sup>th</sup> August 2020

<sup>6</sup> Lindsay Pantry, ‘Consecration date confirmed at last for new Bishop of Doncaster’, *The Yorkshire Post* [<https://www.yorkshirepost.co.uk/heritage-and-retro/heritage/consecration-date-confirmed-last-new-bishop-doncaster-2931690>] accessed 16<sup>th</sup> August 2020

whatsoever. This produces a tear in the whole fabric of the Church of England, of all the agreements made in Synod, and indeed of the Five Guiding Principles themselves. The Church of England has come to a settled view on the ordination of women; it is not acceptable for Metropolitans to devise new arrangements that give the entirely opposite impression. At episcopal ordinations, bishops agree to 'join together in the ordination of bishops' (as per Common Worship<sup>7</sup>) – it is fundamental to the office of bishop to ordain others. Not to do so is not only not a political and ecclesiological necessity in this case, it is fundamentally against the promises made at their own episcopal ordinations.

For the Metropolitan to decline to ordain any bishops, the clear message is given that the Church of England is split into two factions – those who accept women's ordination and those who do not – and the Archbishop, in order to mediate between these two factions, must rise above them and not ordain whatsoever. This is demonstrably not the case (hence the Five Guiding Principles in the first place), and it is the responsibility of the Archbishop of Canterbury (and York) to embody within his or her ministry the settled mind of the Church. The Archbishop stated that this was a 'stepping forward to work within the Five Guiding Principles and we invite all to walk with us to embrace those principles and pray for an end to the divisions which remain in our church, for which we grieves [sic] and are repentant.' This is self-evidently not the case. The phrase 'in consultation with the Bishop of London' in the original statement presumably relates to the fact that she is the most senior female bishop, yet for the Church of England there is no such thing as a 'female bishop' – there is simply a bishop. The synodical process has been completed and a decision has been made – it would appear both dangerous and unwise to start to muddy the waters of something that has already been put into effect. Not only does this have practical effects, but it also begins to cast doubt on what communion with the Archbishop of Canterbury entails. It is not necessary to enable other bishops to be chief consecrator – this is already possible. However, the statement from the Archbishop makes this the norm, and it is this that is unacceptable.

Yet the ecclesiological confusion has been made even more acute by further actions of the Metropolitans. In the Province of York, two new bishops are to be consecrated on the same day (21<sup>st</sup> September 2020), yet in two separate services and with two separate chief consecrators, one of which is the Archbishop of York. No explanation has been given for this turn of events, quite possibly because there is no reasonable explanation. For these two services, the Archbishop of York will be chief celebrant, yet not chief consecrator for one; in the original missive from the Archbishop of Canterbury, he stated that whilst he would not be the chief celebrant or consecrator, he would nonetheless give the final blessing. This is not a reasonable state of affairs, and once again there is a total lack of transparency over the decisions and a lack of explanation. Yet this matters, because it speaks to the unity and ecclesiological integrity of the Church of England.

This particular issue is one that has brought out a set of wider questions about the way that the Church of England is ordered, and just as importantly, about the importance of certain elements of our ecclesiology. It is worth thinking through why these things truly matter.

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<sup>7</sup> The Church of England, 'Common Worship Ordination Services' [<https://www.churchofengland.org/prayer-and-worship/worship-texts-and-resources/common-worship/ministry/common-worship-ordination-services>] accessed 16<sup>th</sup> August 2020

Throughout much of the coronavirus pandemic, there have been a multiplicity of voices, and particularly voices from those in authority in Church of England structures, who have stated that those who worry about, or bring attention to, ecclesiological issues are either overstating a point, or that these issues aren't really that important after all. One such unedifying display was over church buildings; another over the long-term survival (or otherwise) of the parish structure. Arguments have frequently ranged from there being more important things to focus on, to caricaturing those who are concerned about the integrity of Anglican praxis as uninterested in mission and evangelism, to reducing the argument to a reference to the pandemic as a reason to change practice.

I would strongly argue that this is a false dichotomy. Many of the arguments about the fundamentals of praxis are not arguments in and of themselves: they fit into the category of 'arguments for'. That is, the issues at stake are not necessarily themselves key in and of themselves – but they are fundamental, because their outworking is so central to the nature and life of the Christian church. Parishes, for example, are not important simply because they have historically been in existence (although this is important in and of itself) – but they are of key import because they say something about the mission and ministry of the Church of England. Likewise, clergy openly refusing to say the Daily Office or who see their relationship to the Church as an unwanted irritation rather than integral to their role, seeing themselves instead as those whose sole role is to introduce others to their friend Jesus (yet ignore the very real ministerial demands, expectations and requirements of the role) – these are not only unprofessional, they speak to a changed ecclesiology by stealth. Arguments may well be overstated, and hyperbole employed, but this all speaks to an issue with the Church of England's way of being – its *modus*.

At the moment, the lack of openness of the Church of England's hierarchy to challenge and debate is quite stark. A key example of this was the Archbishop of Canterbury's brushing off of questions in synod as unimportant and as fundamentally irrelevant to the ministry and mission of the church.<sup>8</sup> To be sure, there have been enormous stressors on the Church and its ministers during the pandemic, and this must have leant an enormous strain on the hierarchy, and in particular the House of Bishops. The purpose of this critique is not to further add to that, but to argue that, if we are to survive as a serious organisation that values all its clergy and people, then we need to undergo a fundamental shift in the way we work. Yet that shift will require an act of *resourcement*, that is, a shift back to and a thorough investigation of the fundamentals of what the Church is, and what its mission and ministry is in the world, and then a reformulation of its structures and 'ways of working' around this. There is serious work to be done, and this is integral and essential to mission – not a sideshow or unimportant. The Archbishop, in his response to Synod, appears to have made this category error.

The Church of England has become an enormous monolith, with councils and boards and committees and a whole host of sometimes desperate measures to slow the decline. To criticise these structures, or, indeed, to seek to improve them, is not to criticise the people who work tirelessly, day in and day out, to achieve the unachievable. Those who keep the

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<sup>8</sup> Pat Ashworth, 'Welby browned off after grilling on church closures', *Church Times* [<https://www.churchtimes.co.uk/articles/2020/17-july/news/uk/welby-browned-off-after-grilling-on-church-closures>] accessed 16<sup>th</sup> August 2020

Church of England's show on the road are, to a very great degree, enormously hardworking, caring, honest, loving Christian people, who need our support rather than out constant criticism. Yet it is a total abrogation of responsibility on the side of both those within and those without the structures to equate believing the people are working enormously hard with the idea that the structures are fit for purpose. It has become abundantly clear that they are not. Yet it is also clear that senior clergy feel threatened by this challenge: we have to do better than this and find a way to have constructive discussions about structures and practice, and not people.

Too often during this pandemic, and before it, 'The Church of England' has said something, which is nothing of the sort. Who is this 'Church of England'? When church bodies speak, they should explain who they are – is it the Archbishops' Council, is it the House of Bishops? There is a shocking lack of transparency in decision-making processes, in appointments to positions of influence, in statements released. The recent fallout to the statement of the House of Bishops on LGBT people made it very clear that this lack of transparency is even there at the very highest level.<sup>9</sup> To disagree and know with whom it is that you disagree is sometimes irritating; to disagree yet not know from where the opposing statement even comes is extraordinarily frustrating.

On 18<sup>th</sup> August, it was reported that the Diocese of Chelmsford was planning to go ahead with ordinations outside the context of the Eucharist. This reported move was not only possibly illegal, but also another huge potential change to Anglican self-understanding, once again with the coronavirus pandemic being posited as just cause. In a statement on Twitter, the Archdeacon of West Ham stated that the original decision had been changed 'in the light of the latest advice'.<sup>10</sup> Unfortunately, whilst this episode appears to have been one done in good conscience (with a plan to hold a Eucharist prior to the ordinations themselves), this statement referring to 'advice' is very similar to the *ad clerum* from the same diocese, in which 'our own medical advice' was referred to (yet did not appear to exist) and in which the advice on closing churches was stated as 'instruction',<sup>11</sup> contradicting the Archbishop of Canterbury's statement on Easter Day.<sup>12</sup>

It is not that such decisions are not difficult, or that the coronavirus pandemic has not provided significant challenge; the problem is threefold, that established Anglican norms genuinely appear not to be central to church thinking, that decisions about them are made in such a way as to suggest they are not important, and that there is a blurred accountability and explanation whenever the decisions are made or challenged. In this case, helpful and prompt correspondence from the Bishop of Barking suggests that the decision was made to

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<sup>9</sup> Church News Ireland, 'CoE Archbishops: sorry for saying sex is only for married heterosexuals' [<http://www.churchnewsireland.org/news/irish-uk-news/coe-archbishops-sorry-for-saying-sex-is-only-for-married-heterosexuals/>] accessed 16<sup>th</sup> August 2020

<sup>10</sup> Elwin Cockett, Tweet [<https://twitter.com/elwincockett/status/1296036920712220672>] accessed 19<sup>th</sup> August 2020

<sup>11</sup> Chelmsford Diocese's Bishops Letter to Churches about the Latest Coronavirus Guidance, 25<sup>th</sup> March 2020 [<https://www.chelmsford.anglican.org/news/article/chelmsford-dioceses-bishops-letter-to-churches-about-the-latest-coronavirus>] accessed 19<sup>th</sup> August 2020

<sup>12</sup> Ed Thornton, 'We have given guidance, not instruction, says Welby on *Andrew Marr Show*', Church Times [<https://www.churchtimes.co.uk/articles/2020/17-april/news/uk/we-have-given-guidance-not-instruction-says-welby-on-andrew-marr-show>] accessed 19<sup>th</sup> August 2020

reverse the non-Eucharistic nature of the diaconal ordinations at the start of the month, based on legal advice. It is, surely, inconceivable that the Diocese of Chelmsford would have been given radically different initial advice to that given to the rest of the Church of England, and it thus appears that the legality of proceedings was considered secondary and indeed was not even checked before sending out details to ordinands. Once again, it appears that fear about coronavirus has led to a willingness to see ecclesiological norms as unimportant – the concept that having a Eucharist followed by individual non-Eucharistic ordinations is in-keeping with established Church of England practice is far-fetched. The two grounds given for the adoption of the original plan – straightforward logistics and safer hygiene – are bizarre. It is highly unlikely that the original plan would have been safer - if the Church cannot celebrate such a Eucharist safely, then it most certainly should not be ordaining people (and the safety will not have changed whatever legal advice has been given). But the other ground is more concerning – ‘more straightforward logistics’. Logistics surely cannot trump ecclesiological concerns. Yet the ecclesiological dimension should have been (and clearly was not) at the heart of the decision-making process in the first place: it is simply not reasonable to describe the current public health situation as requiring such extraordinary measures.

Just as importantly, it is absolutely essential that, when such an unorthodox suggestion is made, those making it are held to account, and the integrity of the Church of England and its living tradition is taken seriously in any such decisions - and is seen to be taken seriously. Coronavirus or no coronavirus, a decision to ordain outside the Eucharist, with whatever mitigations, is not one that should be made behind closed doors by any single diocese or without the agreement of the people of God. In the twenty-first century, not to even consult about such an unorthodox move is totally unacceptable. Such a move should not have had to be stopped by legal means – it should never have been decided upon in such an unaccountable way. Decisions like these – ordinations, consecrations – are decisions and acts of the whole church, and this is why (for all its faults) we have synodical governance. They cannot, if we are to be a church, be decided in the way they appear to be – not least because it is unfair to members of the episcopal college and other senior clergy who feel duty bound to both make these decisions, and then defend them. It is abundantly clear that we are not functioning as we ought – if we were, then these ecclesiological ‘never events’ (to borrow NHS jargon) would never occur. Fundamental to the right *action* of a church in a crisis is right *understanding* – the coronavirus crisis has revealed that we are not in that position at the moment. A focus on ecclesiology and norms in times of crisis does not diminish the work of the Church of England – it strengthens it.

As a Christian community, we should also be at the forefront of openness, accountability, transparency and integrity. Parish priests should be able to easily find out what, how, and why the different structures in Church House and elsewhere work and the etiology of the decisions made – yet this is demonstrably not the case. This transparency needs to permeate throughout our structures, and in the statements that senior clergy make – without this, it is difficult to see how we can ever argue that we are a ‘safe’ church. A paternalist, ask-no-questions, dishonest and dissembling attitude has been, and is in the process of being, stamped out of medicine and medical training, and it cannot have long left in the Church of England if it is to survive as a body. Decisions made without explanation, and statements that accuse dissenters of not caring about the real issues and only caring

about 'church' things must stop – especially from clergy in positions of responsibility or representation. As described above, a criticism of the way things have been done (especially when out of keeping with Anglican norms) does not inevitably indicate a personal criticism – to suggest that no criticism is allowable because, for example, people have been working hard or attending many meetings is a total dereliction of duty. People who disagree with decisions should neither be told to remain silent or be given inaccurate, misleading or dissembling non-explanations. Yet this has begun to feel like the norm. We appear to have gone from a church that defends the institution in all circumstances to one that has become defensive through opacity of process. This is, not least, an issue for safeguarding, yet this is simply a symptom of a wider sickness. An opaque church is not a safe church. Dissent should be turned into discussion, and yet the forum, and willingness, for this appears not to exist.

Concerns have recently been aired about the funding and accountability of Fresh Expressions and other forms of pioneer ministry, and whatever the rights and wrongs of the individual situations, what has become abundantly clear is that many people feel distinctly disempowered by the development of schemes that do not appear to sit within clear lines of authority, and which can often feel (rightly or wrongly) as a threat to the usual functioning of the Church. There are few clergy who oppose trying new things – nonetheless, many clergy feel threatened and have genuine concern for the order and life of the parish when they are forced into particular new modes of operation, or are told that the Sunday Eucharist is now simply a form of 'inherited church'. Likewise, many people who are leading these initiatives are themselves bemused by the idea of huge amounts of money being put into them. Yet at heart, there is a question about power – where it lies and how it is properly exercised and held accountable. The opaque way that decisions are made and put into effect, that 'success' is measured, and that the programme of the Church of England is designed more widely, leads to many more conflicts and opponents than it does to collaborators and willing and courageous risk-takers.

Much innovation in the Church of England is good, and holy, and right, and is driven by people who are Gospel-centred. Yet too often it is presented in a one-size-fits-all form, in which new forms of liturgy (or the lack of it) are presented as 'the only' solution to the Church's falling congregation numbers. Mission becomes unidimensional, and clergy become fed up and demotivated. The fault of this almost certainly does not lie at the door of those suggesting new initiatives, or the clergy who feel disrupted – but there is a desperate need to remodel the Church of England's structures and ways of working, and ways of training, in order to enable priests to refocus on ministry and mission, enable bishops to refocus on pastoral care, teaching and celebrating the sacraments, and deacons to refocus on bringing the Church into the world. Shallow documents and initiatives will simply not do this.

The Church must, then, change to rebuild itself for the twenty-first century. This change, however, does not mean calling the basics of ministry and mission 'inherited church' and throwing out the baby with the bathwater; neither does it mean ossifying and obsessing over particular 'traditions' which are no longer living. The living, inherited traditions of the Church of England are at its heart – the structures must be made to serve these, rather than the other way around. The Church of England needs to rediscover its central purpose and the key things that make 'the Church', rather than an endless obsession with 'new ways of

being [the] Church'. We cannot find new ways of being the Church without finding, reliving and making fit for purpose those things which form the core of our identity as the Church of England. Lots of thinking is being done about this at the moment, yet too often it is denigrated by those who suggest that the key thing is to keep 'the show on the road'. This is nonsense: there is no 'show' if this work is not done.

We must, as a Church, stop making policy on the fly. We must stop denigrating tradition as 'the past', and we must find ways of testing new ideas in the fire of the tradition and praxis of the Church of England. We must continue to form a Church that is in continuity with a living tradition, and in which ecclesiology is seen as fundamental to the day-to-day life of the church and the training of its ministers. And we must have the confidence to change our minds, be open and transparent about the past, present and future, and listen to those with whom we disagree. We must recognise that we are not, as a body, currently fit for purpose, yet we are, nonetheless, unworthy guardians of the saving truth of the death and resurrection of the Lord. We must be a church that places integrity at our centre – and, if we set our faces towards it, by the help of God, we will.

*Feast of the Decollation of St John the Baptist  
29<sup>th</sup> August 2020*