

CHURCH DISINHERITANCE

I just caught myself in time. I was going to write 'Disinheritance of Laity'. But the laity are *not a category, they are church*. 'Laos' means 'the people'. The Vatican II Council took its understanding of church as 'the people of God' from the bible, from Peter's first letter: 'You are an elect race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people'. All through history that reality must be more clearly expressed in practice in order that the church-as-is may become more truly church-as-given-to-be. For me, this has raised concerns and questions which I worked on for the World Council of Churches many moons ago. I draw on that material, then examine a contemporary situation.

The word 'church' can no longer be thought of as if there were two main sections – clergy and laity. Those of us who are ordained are an integral part of the people of God, without separate status. The work of the World Council of Churches and of the Vatican II Council have made it clear that we are one people. The ministry of those of us who are ordained exists at the heart of the church. Our ministry is designed to enable, resource and mature the definitive ministry which is united with that of the high Priesthood of Jesus Christ, that of the whole people of God.

There is now something like an agreed theology (surely a new gain itself not open to cancellation) which establishes that the whole People of God are participant in the ongoing ministry of Christ directly, not simply by grace and favour of an intermediate order of ordained persons. The Holy Spirit provides diversified gifts which lead to varieties of ministry, some emergent and short-lived, some structured and ongoing, distributed among the membership. The work of proclamation, of mission, of pastoral care, of self-forgetful service belongs to the total calling of the Church: and this has released the members into exploration of new relationship to the world, new forms of community and worship, new venturing in sacrifice and service. The People of God have become a pilgrim people again. They are not defined simply as the communities they have been in history (which would make unity a matter of building bridges between their set positions) but by the movement they are. The unity prepared for them comes from the future to meet them as they move forward in the unity they already possess – the new ground on which they walk making possible new priorities and new relationships here and now.

The Problem of Power

It is arguable that the whole Church cannot be released into its ministry as long as hierarchies, and their bureaucratic equivalents in non-episcopal churches, hold power which allows them the final voice about what may be promoted and what should be frustrated in the developing life of the Christian community.

Of course, recognized leadership is necessary. Moreover that leadership will not only be emergent – provided by those who come to the front, commended by their innate authority – but must also be expressed institutionally, if continuity is to be maintained.

But all God's people have gifts and ministries. Ordination cannot have the purpose of producing a separate elite, but of strengthening these ministries and in helping in the upbuilding of the Church that God's purpose may be fulfilled. It must be ministry within the ministries.

In your part of the world, is the life of the Church, as a total outgoing fellowship, being expressed so that the duality is overcome?

The whole matter amounts to this – we must hand over to laity power positions in the Church?

God forbid! Lay people can be at least as short-sighted and timid as the ordained. The new possibility which exists is of questioning the whole exercise of power in the Church, of finding alternatives.

Is this not a time for the whole Church to explore ways of exercising power genuinely in the form of a servant? Where do you see power being used in humble service of God and others; and leadership which does not assert itself but brings people alive?

The Church as Theological Community

It is good that the question, how one does theology today, is being given fresh attention. The theology market has presented itself as a restricted one. This denies the very character of theology.

The work of theology is to keep under examination our understanding of God's healing and upsetting presence in the world – as it has been discerned throughout history and as it is discerned today – as God subverts the present order in favour of a transformed order. Who can do this work? Academically-trained professional theologians have their part to play. We must continually re-receive our past so that it livingly relates to the present. We must continually bring the best scientific examination to bear on source documents. We must try to understand present events using available professional skills. But the main work of theology is more total. The Christian community, through their daily immersion in life, are in contact with God's healing and upsetting presence. Their reflection on questions and insights produced by their attempts to be his people, wherever they are and whatever they do, creates theology. This thinking is often in germ form. It needs to be checked and wrestled with in the community so that it gains clarity. It has to be related to the experience of Christians in the past and in other countries. It needs to be developed and matured, and special skills may need to be applied to help this process. But it *is* theology. To present only that as theology which is academically-weighted and seems to demand a language course to understand it, is to rob the People of God of their birthright.

Theology in the bible is rarely a sophisticated web of thought which only the specially educated can follow. It is poetry and drama, jewelled sayings in which succeeding centuries discover new fires, parable, story, disturbing question with no answer attached. For such theology a great variety of resources and experience, and the contribution of many cultures is required. The Church can offer this. No one group within it can.

It is time to pay more attention to what may be called "primary theology". By the adjective no value judgement is intended (as if other kinds of theology were secondary). The word is used, as in economics to describe what comes straight from the earth, as against what is produced by analysis, discovery of important components, and synthesis. Primary theology takes place at the growing places, through reflection and dialogue on what is happening there. It is done on the spot by those on the spot with those on the spot. It is part of the struggle for light of people who have to make choices and decisions in the secular world. Necessarily, the main work must fall to lay people. They are there.

Professional theologians who accept these terms and live at the growing places can be great strengths. Such was Hromadka, crucified for decades by the strain of seeking a politically relevant faith for his time and situation. Such was Takenaka, involved directly with disputing industrial workers and rioting students. There are theological colleges which allow the ferment and need of a metropolis and nation to explode

rawly into the curriculum, forcing its continual rethinking and reshaping. Admittedly, there are professional theologians and seminaries, who, without having this immediacy, have important clues about what is happening in the world and speak and write relevantly.

Yet lay women and men must step forward and tackle theological work as their own proper task. *Do you agree? Where do you see them doing this? What fruitful partnerships are being established between lay people and professionally trained theologians?*

But equipped lay members can be thought of in some ecclesiastical quarters as a real threat:

- They form an assertion that those academically trained in theology are not theologically omniscient; that they cannot process the “raw product” without losing its virtue; that they must accept the limitation of their contribution if they are also to accept its distinctive value
- they bring with them new priorities, and new points of entry into old priorities
- they bring a new language, or rather variety of languages
- they represent the need to walk in territory which is even more unfamiliar than changed theological landscapes in seminaries.

But how was the Church founded except by such lay people? Not many wise, not many learned (in any formal mental discipline) belonged to the apostolic band: but who can doubt their competence? Even Paul, with all his learning, wrought out his theology at white-heat on the anvil of controversy and suffering; it was formed like rock compacted by the volcanic upheavals he experienced.

Do you see time given to reflection and more adequate equipment, on the part of lay people as a distraction from the energy they must spend on trying to make the most creative choices and decisions in the world open to them; or do you see it as a way of helping them to handle these decisions and choices, and contribute to the whole upbuilding of the Church at the same time?

Do you think the whole People of God should be involved in the creation of acts of worship? Where and how is this taking place, to your knowledge, and with what results?

To provide the content of congregational worship, the whole range of experience represented by a congregation is relevant. There should be a direct drawing in of the actualities of daily life. One leader, from his or her limited experience, contacts and reading cannot supply this. Consider two elements in particular.

One is the acts of prayer. It will probably be readily agreed that the joys and longings of the membership of the Church must find voice in the prayers of thanksgiving and intercession. But one of the acts of prayer which suffers most from the lack of lay contribution is confession and absolution. People may come to worship longing to get rid of real burdens of sin and failure; and the prayers of confession may be so remote from their situation, or so general, that they go away still burdened. Prayers of confession cannot, of course, be too personally-aligned in public worship. But they can draw on real situations and real needs – and must do so if they are to produce release. Moreover the absolution may be pronounced by one person, but it will need to be confirmed and given exposition in the daily life of the congregation or it will lack convincing power. For instance, someone who has been to prison for one of those crimes which attracts the attention of the public, may offer

fervent confession and receive forgiveness: but the acceptance and support he will receive or fail to receive from the congregation thereafter will loose him or bind him still. To make absolution real is a responsibility of the Christian community. Another thing is the preaching. Opportunity exists, at the heart of worship, to give the Word of God free course. Those who wrestle to relate to the Bible and to the love of God their own life in the world, and the struggles of humankind in which they participate, have important contributions. People can build one another up in the faith, and spur one another on. From time to time, one voice may give testimony. But the richness of testimony requires many voices.

What place is given to women and young people? They make up a very large part of the Church.

The Equipping of the Whole Church

A real turn-about in the Church's understanding of itself in the last 20 years, has been the fresh realization that the life of the membership which tells most convincingly for or against the gospel, is the life they live in the world, at work, at leisure, in the institutions of society, in voluntary activities, in relationships in communities. *What kind of education or formation or equipping is needed to fit them for these responsibilities?*

The image of the Church gathered and scattered was of great service at one point of history – and could continue to be of service. It provided a reminder that the Church exists not only when and where members meet together, in worship or for consultation, but where they are immersed in the daily life of the world. One effect of this image, however, was to relate training or education to the gathering place, i.e. church premises. Assembling there in a new concern for the life of the world, people then issued out in witness and service. They thus remained identifiable as church.

But if the immersed laity, *in their immersion in the world's affairs*, are taken seriously, how can we put a finger on them, far less seek to provide equipment?

They are not in identifiable companies. They are bands of farmers, working with others in agricultural development projects. They are pressure groups in conflicts for women's liberation, the reinstatement of black, red and yellow cultures, human rights for prisoners. They are men and women undertaking family duties, fulfilling social responsibilities in offices, factories, sports field, homes, sea, the air. They are the unemployed, the cast aside, the neglected, the diseased. *How can one identify laity nowadays, when they are so various? How can they be educated, trained or what you will if they cannot be identified?*

At least two possible lines of answer suggest themselves.

1) *Must some lay people with potential for leadership be encouraged to extract themselves from their situations, gain more comprehensive equipment, and return to the same situations to be catalysts and resource persons there?*

2) *In the end must 'training' simply be whatever serves to liberate people? And if so, is anything as intentional, as conscious, as structured as the words 'training', 'formation', 'education', etc., convey, appropriate? Do people need, more than anything else, space, a chance to discover their gifts and their calling, and discover themselves? Do they not then need simply a supportive fellowship more than anything else? Is not the role of the Church to free them by giving them the necessary space and to offer the supportive fellowship?*

When space for growth is provided, there is room for the surprises God will spring. Training which does not leave room for unexpected developments, but tries to be

comprehensive and complete, may not leave space for the Holy Spirit to work.

One of the first things for the Church to do, on this assumption, would be to stop absorbing the energy and imagination of the members in church-based activity, treat them as adults, trust them to be the Church in all kinds of situations, expect them to develop initiatives, leave them to identify the resources they need, and be the supportive community. *Is it happening?*

Who make up the People of God?

For all its defects, the movement of thought and concern in the World Church in the last decades has been a movement outward, from a restricted view of the Church's character and function to a view which encompasses the whole family of God in the whole world. The Assemblies of the World Council of Churches, from its foundation in 1948, consisted at first largely of ecclesiastics, in positions of authority in their own churches. But a slow build up of lay contribution was going on. Laymen began to come fully into their own when dealing with subjects which called for secular expertise. Now there is a much more substantial use of lay specialists in the WCC; and steps are being taken to ensure that, among the representation at future assemblies, there is a much better proportion of young people, and of lay people who are not in church administration. What we need to go on to is a greater involvement of and care for the ordinary Church membership. They are to be nourished and built up. They are also to be listened to. They have much wisdom to offer. They can draw on a wide range, of experience of suffering and pleasure. They know what is in human nature, the treachery and self-forgetfulness in themselves and others. In the rough-and-tumble of daily life they are constantly touching and handling the things which can bring theology and worship alive and make them meaningful.

The poor have their place among the People of God – a special place. The neglected, the ignored, the downgraded, the unimportant, the rejected, outcasts, drop-outs, the unemployed – according to the Scriptures these are special people.

They are the judges of the earth. They throw into vivid relief the righteousness and unrighteousness of others. Look at the poor and you will know something about the judgement of God.

Theirs is the Kingdom. Only if we are lowly enough to receive from them will we be able to share the Kingdom. God's overwhelming love for the poor may be sufficient to rescue us as well. Are we not at a time when the great power for the future can be the poor, at last awakened, at last claiming the dignity of their humanity, at last taking their share in shaping human destiny?

The effective membership of the Church in the Northern Hemisphere has been largely middle class. *In what parts of the world do the poor really belong, and how are they helped to be a shaping power in church and in society?*

How are the less educated and less articulate helped to feel they have an important part to play in the life of the Church? What provision encourages and empowers them to play their part?

A Contemporary Question

The suggestion, in reports of the 2012 Assembly of the Church of Scotland, that Moderators should play a more prominent part as public spokespersons brings up questions about the kind of leadership which is apposite in the Christian community. A difference exists between leadership which is humble and enabling and that which is directive in character. Secularism can be deplored while secular power is quietly

coveted. Headlines can always be grabbed by the old firm of Ecclesiastical Eminences Pronouncing. The publicity gained can prove useful for church self-promotion. Internal church objectives can dominate. Agreed, there are exceptions. Archbishop Mario Conti recently condemned the shameful treatment of asylum-seekers. Archbishop Rowan Williams is always good value for money. But public interventions can also be quite trivial, out of place. In general the whole process is flawed, too related to church power positions. The Moderators should not be encouraged to adopt bad practice. They have the great benefit of short-term appointments (though I, personally, would like the time in office to be a bit longer). Much longer-term appointments can provide unwelcome opportunity for the build up of disfiguring power and deference in relationships.

Peter had his knuckles severely rapped when he took Jesus Christ to task, in the presence of other disciples, for failing to fulfil the anticipated role of the Messiah – a repetition of the original temptation in the desert. The one who had been blessed for recognising the promised messiah was scarified: ‘Out of my sight, ya Satan!’ That way of power is a recurring human temptation!

Jesus made clear to his followers the difference between leadership which is infected by the power-bug and leadership which he exemplified and advocated. He pointed to the rulers of the nations who got their way and still called themselves benefactors: ‘You are not to be like that. Instead the greatest among you should be like the youngest and the leader as the one who servesI am among you as one who serves’ (Luke 2.25-27). Servanthood has no status to bring to bear – its influence will depend on its own quality.

Way back in my life I was asked to take a service in Eton Public School. I took as the theme of the sermon people’s amazement at Jesus ‘because he taught them as one who had authority, not as the teachers of the law’. In the process of growing and maturing in life the pupils would come into contact with different kinds of authority. They should be alert to distinguish between what came from people in positions of authority, who might not have authority, and those who had authority but might not be in authority positions. What mattered was not accepting guidance from people just because of the positions they held but being guided by teaching and advice which had its own quality and substance, internal authority.

Afterwards the Deputy Master who was in charge, came to me visibly shaking with fury. He burst out: ‘That sermon was very bad for the boys. I will make it my business to see that you are never invited back’ and stamped out. I just thought ‘Some things do strike home’.

The Prefix ‘Epi’

At one point I wondered whether the prefix ‘epi’ as in ‘episcopos’ and ‘episcopos’ really needed to have connotations such as ‘oversight’ and ‘overseer’. The ‘over’ part did not seem to fit in with the servanthood which Jesus practised and commended. My Greek/English Lexicon confirmed that the sense of being ‘over’ was in place. But nuances of the prefix were investigated over five large pages. These produced variations of meaning. That which seemed to me to correspond best to New Testament use came from Jesus’ practice. He was described as being ‘moved with compassion’ for particular persons or for the multitude. He looked on people with concentrated caring attention which led to their healing and blessing. The word ‘episcopos’ translated ‘bishop’ was used in the New Testament along with the equivalent words ‘presbyter’ and ‘elder’ to describe one of the group who were not

‘over’ a congregation but at its heart, giving concentrated, caring attention to its wellbeing. If there are reasons for extracting and elevating bishops above others in a hierarchy, they appear as later developments. During Vatican II the ‘over’ sense seemed to be absent in the attitude of church leaders. Many, many, many bishops act with humility and grace, with no personal sense of being above others. But does not what may be personally expressed need to be made visible also in church structures? The sense of higher ranking attached to the office of bishop put the discussion of women bishops on a false footing from the start. To be a bishop in the New Testament sense is simply to give concentrated caring attention to the wellbeing of the church membership and its service in the world with ‘the greatest being like the youngest’. The idea of joining a higher echelon of churchmanship to which women might be privileged to enter put discussions askew.

Should ‘eminences’ have any place at all in a servant church?

Are not people in administrative positions, by that token, out of the flow of church life, liable to be out of touch – to that extent defective as perceivers of matters of significance and of effective ways of dealing with them?

Some pronouncements in the name of the church can be defective right from the start – where the advisory group behind them is quite unrepresentative: e.g. when that resource group is all-male or biased that way; where laity is underrepresented or not at all; where the old hold sway; where internal church concerns are promoted and self-advertising is an unacknowledged ingredient; where one church tradition asserts itself over others. The people of God are male and female, lay and ordained, young and old. It was not concern for the church which moved God to send the Son but love for the whole world. Any form of church which should vaunt itself over others needs to be reminded that it is the meek who will inherit the earth.

The Christian community is hotching with people who are variously gifted and have a wide range of competences and experience. They are the ones who have the resources to communicate the mind of Jesus Christ on particular matters of significance. The appropriate work of top administrators is not to be frontmen and frontwomen but to know church members and their aptitudes so well that people with the appropriate gifts and skills can be called on to contribute on matters where the Christian faith should make impact. Scottish Churches House did just that.

Main insights will come and do come from the body of the church. Where issues need to be faced which call for thought and action, those who have both mature faith and relevant forms of competence can be brought together in commissions and focus groups. Their judgements can be contributed to ongoing debates through an appointed spokesperson, usually the convener. The mind of Christ as understood by the church will be made known as these groups share insights with the larger community. It does happen. It should be regular practice on major matters.

For Reflection

The Trinity offers society and church a sign of relationships where ‘all power in heaven and in earth’ is exercised with loving restraint, with concern not to invade the integrity of human beings but to leave a space of freedom for genuine responses, whether positive or negative.

The Father remains invisible, refusing to put pressure to get conformity to his will on the part of those who are made in his likeness, by exercising an open prevailing display of power. As Kittel’s Theological Word Book make clear the Greek word for salvation ‘soteria’ has at its heart not a sense of turning people right around but of providing space to allow them freely to do so should they choose to adopt a different

way of life. There lies the difference between evangelism and proselytism. The Son was not pressed into service when he adopted a genuine human life with all its limitations. He emptied himself of the powers of Godhead accepting willingly the status of a 'doulos' a slave or a 'nothing! Remember - he warned disciples against adopting a top-down power approach like those of the rulers of the Gentiles – 'something not to be your way' he said. When they jostled for power places in the New Dispensation he went on 'the greatest among you must become like the youngest and the leader like on who serves. Who is greater, the one who is at the table or the one who serves? Is it not the one at the table? But I am among you as one who serves'. He made it clear that that kind of servanthood should mark the way of life of followers by washing the disciples' feet, saying: 'You call me Teacher and Lord. Fair enough – that's what I am. So if I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet you also ought to wash one another's feet'. As he faced the last week, twelve legions of angels who could have wiped out enemies were confined to barracks. The Holy Spirit is present and available to make known the mind of Christ if that should be asked for, and to accompany us on life's road as two disciples found Christ walking with them on the Emmaus road.

In the Trinity overbearing power is set aside with great courtesy. We are given space, our space.

Paul illustrated the life of the church by comparing it to a body where the working parts, whether substantial or insignificant, play their part in building up its life. In the body 'the eye cannot say to the hand: "I have no need of you" nor again the head to the feet "I have no need of you". On the contrary the members of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable'. The Head of the body is Jesus Christ, directly engaged with all the working parts – there is no neck furnished to transmit authoritatively the thinking of the Head to the rest of the body and feed back responses. As a group of small ecclesial communities put it as self-understanding of their manner of life: 'The People of God are self-convened before the Living-Word-In-Christ without human masters'.

Shaping and Equipping the Church

Are there ways in which the church can structure its life to avoid the top-down power shape of the rulers of the Gentiles (which produces a church in status layers, like a Michelin man)? Can that shape be abandoned, in favour of a one Head, one body representation? A top heavy church is singularly out of sync with the gospel

That would certainly have been given a move forward if serious heed had been given to an initiative taken by John XXIII while setting up the Vatican II Council. Through the Australian nun, Rosemary Goldie, the World Council of Churches was invited to select 15 people – Orthodox, Reformed (including Anglican) and Lutheran - to consult informally with an equivalent number of Roman Catholics on the church in the modern world. I co-chaired two of the 3-day meetings – the third of which was more of a tidying up event and preparation for the 1967 Laity Congress. The second gathering produced a completely unanimous resolution to which all participant churches were urged to give priority.

We the members of the Informal Consultation called jointly by the COPECIAL and the Department on the Laity of the World Council of Churches unanimously agree 1) that the training of the laity should be considered as a priority in the policy, programme and allocation of finance of the churches represented, and 2) that all suitable opportunities should be taken by the Roman Catholic, Orthodox and Protestant Churches to co-operate together in this field of lay training, and to share

insights, personnel, facilities and other resources of movements and centres.
That was over 40 years ago!