HOW WE GOT TO WHERE WE ARE: THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE CLERGYMAN'S ROLE[1]

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The church declares and witnesses to a changeless God beyond the confines of time and space. However, at the same time the church responds to change in the same way as other social institutions, and it is impossible to understand the Church of England without reference to its history.

Many people have a static and idealised view of the church's history, in which the ideal of a clergyman in every parish—so often quoted during discussions about pastoral reorganisation—holds a prominent place. In Anglican history this only came close to realisation in the last quarter of the nineteenth century, and, by the period after the First World War, when the peak of 23,000 parochial clergy had been passed, pastoral reorganisation was already part of the church's life. History helps us to get these matters in perspective; it helps us to understand where we have come from, and some of the constraints within which we presently operate.

There are many words used to describe a minister of the Church of England—clergyman, minister, parson, clerk in holy orders, priest, vicar and curate are among the more common.

A fundamental distinction can be made between those terms which are theologically derived, such as 'priest', a definition grounded in the New Testament and subsequent development of the church's doctrine, and those which are not.

By contrast, the term 'clergyman' denotes an occupational role among other occupational roles in society, and is meanable to the same examination as other occupational roles. This double definition causes much confusion. This paper is not about the theology of ministry, but about the development of the clergyman's role in society.

I want to suggest that the role has passed through five identifiable stages:

- The clergyman as an upper servant;
- The clergyman as an occupational appendage of gentry status;
- The clergyman as a professional man;
- The clergyman as a church manager;
- The clergyman as a community development officer .

The Reformation was not simply the separation from Rome and Roman control in ecclesiastical affairs as a consequence of growing national self-awareness; it was also a consequence of a rising level of anti-clerical feeling which had been transformed in scale, temper and conviction in the sixteenth century. In effect, the Reformation deprofessionalised an occupational group which had already established a considerable degree of monopoly over their sphere of activity.

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[1] A paper delivered at the Society's London Conference on the Deployment of the Clergy on 25th March 2000.

The clergy of the late seventeenth and early eighteenth century were characterised by their poverty, the rusticity of their manners and their lack of learning Joseph Fielding described the clergyman as 'a parson on Sunday but on all other six days he might properly be called a farmer'. The curate of Lastingham in the early eighteenth century had a stipend of £20 per annum and sixteen children to support. His wife kept the local public house, and, as he records in an explanatory letter to the Archdeacon's Enquiry, his indirect clerical management and fiddle playing 'caused his parishioners to be imperceptibly led along the paths of piety and morality'. This period was characterised by the effects of patronage, plurality and non-residence. One of the sights of Oxford at this time was to sit on Magdalen Bridge and watch the clergy leaving the city to serve the parishes of south and west Oxfordshire. The church cottage opposite the lych gate (or in some cases, as at North Leigh, within the churchyard) was where the clergyman stayed on Saturday night. On the following day he conducted morning and evening prayer, and everything currently covered by the term 'parochial ministry' took place between these two services. After the evening prayer he remounted his horse to return to the city. The poverty of clergy incomes made it necessary for such clergy to be non-resident in order that they could serve as ushers in the local schools during the week. It needed three Acts of Parliament in the early nineteenth century to require clergy to live in their parishes.

In the late eighteenth century three changes substantially altered the position of the parochial clergy. Clerical incomes were derived either directly or indirectly from the price of agricultural commodities. The rising price of grain caused by urban expansion and the European wars made glebe and tithe significantly more profitable.

At the same time the latter stages of the enclosure movement also significantly increased clerical incomes. Enclosure Acts for a parish could be brought before Parliament speedily if they represented the agreement of all the interested parties. It was open to the clergy to hold out for the best arrangements possible, and there is much evidence that many clergy did this. By the end of this period seventeen per cent of all the land in Lincolnshire was glebe property.

At the same time many of the lesser gentry (sometimes called the parish gentry) were no longer able to provide a living for their sons. Such men required employment, and at a time when the total establishment of the Treasury was twenty-three; the War Office eighteen; the Board of Trade ten; the Admiralty eight and the Foreign Office twenty-three, there were few openings for men desiring such careers.

Lord Chesterfield in 1756 wrote to a father, presumably with several sons, who sought his advice. 'I entirely agree with you', wrote Lord Chesterfield, 'in your resolution to bring up all your sons to some profession or other'. He went on to suggest 'general rules by which I would point out to them the professions which I would wish them to apply to; I recommend the army and the navy to a boy of warm constitution, strong animal spirits and a cold genius; to one of quick, lively and distinguished parts—the law; to a good, dull and decent boy— the church'. This was the period in which younger sons went into the church—the period of the country clergy about whom Jane Austen wrote with such accuracy, for her father and brother were themselves country clergy.

It can be seen that increasingly understandings of the role of the clergyman were derived not simply from the Ordinal but also from the clergyman's role and status in contemporary society. At this time eighty per cent of all the magistrates' work in Oxfordshire was conducted by the large number of clerical magistrates whose role in the conduct of public affairs in the countryside was of considerable importance.

The role of the clergyman changed significantly in the early nineteenth century as it was increasingly modelled on that of the professional man. The professional man was the cultural hero of mid-Victorian society, and the clergy gradually adopted many of the principal characteristics of professionalisation. In a relatively short time they established expulsion procedures, retirement arrangements, professional organisations and professional journals. This was the period in which it was possible to speak of the development of 'rectory culture' as the clergy became a distinctive professional group. The last quarter of the nineteenth century saw the near universal adoption of clerical dress, and this was the period in which the diocese became an increasingly significant factor in English church life.

The role of the clergyman contracted as new professional roles—the country doctor, the local politician, the poor law guardian, the lay magistrate, the sanitary engineer and many others—took over elements of the role which the clergyman previously had performed. The clergyman's role was now focussed on those elements sanctioned by the Ordinal, which might be termed his charter role. Nowhere can this be seen more clearly than in church itself The newly appointed incumbent, trained at theological college, and conceiving of his role in professional terms, immediately attempted to transform the local church so that it complied to the new and different standards now being widely adopted. First the clerk was dismissed, and then the old musicians from the west gallery Many nineteenth-century diaries contain an account of the struggle which the new incumbent had in order to transform the musical life of the church. An organ was installed, paid for by local subscription and often (and frequently very inappropriately) sighted in the chancel. The offering of worship in the village community was no longer the symbiotic offering of the whole community, was but something performed at the front of the church to which the members of the congregation were passive onlookers. *Under the Greenwood Tree*, Thomas Hardy's famous account of the end of the Mellstock singers and band, contains in the introduction this comment: 'whilst the quality of church services clearly improved, this was achieved at the loss of an important union of interest between the clergyman and his parishioner'. The adoption of the professional model did much to improve standards, but it came at a price.

The publication of the Paul Report in 1964 signalled that new influences were at work within the church. Dr Leslie Paul was merely the most prominent of a number of people whose insights were drawn from the disciplines of systematic planning and corporate management, who sought to make the church both more effective and efficient. Paul's statistics showed that two-thirds of the Anglican clergy ministered in those areas where approximately one third of the population lived; the next twenty years saw a forty-three per cent decline in the number of clergy in the Hereford Diocese.

The Paul Report was followed by the Morely Report (1967) and the Pastoral Measure 1968, and John Tiller's prophetic report of 1983 which, though much denigrated at the time, has proved an accurate indicator of the way in which the church has been shaped in the last quarter of the twentieth century.

Like many organisations the church was increasingly centralised in its operation, and that made those who served, particularly in rural areas, feel increasingly marginalised. It became common to assume that courses at business schools and in management techniques were the needful training for clergy, and for rural deans, whose role became of increasing importance, to be regarded as 'the church's middle management'.

As the total number of stipendiary clergy declined, so clergy became responsible for larger pastoral units, and increasingly felt that their role was being redefined as that of a church manager. The attitude of the laity to this was ambivalent; whilst nobody wishes the church to be inefficient, there was a strong feeling that management was not the primary duty of a priest, and that if management was what was needed, many of the laity were significantly more skilled in this area. Like all professional bodies, the clergy developed at this time a sub-professional group which can in many respects be paralleled to other sub-professional groups in comparable roles. Non-stipendiary clergy conformed to the dilemma that has been observed in most sub-professional roles that the entry and professional standards required are often as high as those for the professional role, but that the range of responsibilities is strictly limited. This was certainly true in the early period, as the original tile ('Auxiliary Pastoral Ministry') makes clear.

In the last period it is possible to see that the church has again responded to significant changes taking place in society. All ancient institutions have experienced the processes of de-institutionalisation and de-professionalisation, particularly in the last two decades. The increasing tendency to regard work and work roles as the defining core of modern society has led to the re-definition of religious activity as a voluntary leisure pursuit, a non-work activity. Churches have increasingly displayed similarities to voluntary associational organisations in society—and again the clergyman's role has been redefined, not as a professional man, but as a community development worker. Such a person does not principally require the academic skills that were thought appropriate in a previous generation, but needs the gifts of personality to attract, motivate and build the voluntary associational organisation, to define its tasks, to resolve its conflicts and to identify its goals. When parishioners are selecting a new priest for a parish, it is these characteristics that they are anxious to discern.

It is noticeable that voluntary associational organisations are not infrequently run by women, who are often seen to be more likely to possess the personality configuration and types of characteristics noted above. It is no coincidence that at the time when the church became increasingly similar to many other voluntary associational organisations in society, so it included women in its leadership role.

The problems of the church are often regarded as those of change. In reality the problem is continuity and change. The church's history is not developmental in the sense that as it moves into a new era, it leaves the old behind. It tends to carry forward much that has been of significance in the previous era, thus the appointment of clergy is still in part governed by a process that has its roots in the patronage arrangements of Anglo-Saxon England. The problem of the church is always how to carry forward into the future those things that are valued from the past, whilst ministering to a constantly changing society.

The clergyman's role has changed and will continue to change, and this is an important background to any consideration of contemporary ministry.