

*PAROCHIAL VISION – THE FUTURE OF THE ENGLISH PARISH*  
by NICK SPENCER, Carlisle, Paternoster Press, 2004, xvii +174 pp  
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This is a thought-provoking and stimulating book. The main thrust of its argument is that the parish system as a basis for the organisation of the Church of England's mission and ministry no longer fits the world as it now is. Rather, the author suggests, we should look to that Anglo-Saxon period of our history when the 'Minster Church' provided the basic model of the way the Church in this country ordered itself for pursuing its mission.

The chapter headings provide a brief survey of the course of the argument. 'The Rise and Fall of the English Parish' outlines the history of the development of the parish system, concluding with the statement that by the end of the Victorian period the 'parish system was dying'. 'Crushed by our own Heritage', the title of the next chapter, charts how the deep rootedness of the parish system which has enabled it to survive until today, is also the reason for its decreasing adequacy as a vehicle for the Church's mission. The 'Minster Church' provides a brief historical survey of the development of minster churches in the second half of the first millennium. Social, economic and religious factors combined to ensure the minster model fitted its context. Spencer points to the 'unique characteristics of the minster church – its combination of communal life, pastoral activity, missionary work, local focus, educational function and economic importance'. His conclusion is that 'minster churches dominated Anglo-Saxon England long before parishes did'. Their importance waned as later medieval society changed, and the elements once held together in the minster model began to be exercised in other ways, the parish model becoming more prominent.

Perhaps, Spencer goes on to argue in the next chapter, 'The Return to Minster Churches', the changes in British society over the last century or so, suggest that the minster's time might have come again. The increased mobility of people and for many people the experience of belonging to a variety of communities at the same time contrasts with the Church's continuing attempt to 'live in small, outdated, irrelevant, largely artificial administrative postal squares'. The Church needs rather, he says, to reflect in its operation both the need for rooted community whilst 'recognising people's broadened geographical horizons'. 'The minster system, with its dual perspective of the broad minster parish and numerous local Christian communities, reflects this balance'.

Minsters were primarily evangelistic in outlook; there was a collegiate structure and an emphasis on shared ministry which led into greater lay participation; minsters could provide the opportunity for ministers with specialisms working across a wider area; the collegiate structure could embrace a variety of theological traditions. In all this the author shows

how the essence of the minster approach resonates with much thinking about the nature of the Church today and its mission.

In pursuing this argument Nick Spencer raises not only practical questions about the best way to organise the Church for mission, but also questions about the nature of the Church.

At the practical level, in his analysis of some of the difficulties and opportunities we face in shaping the Church to relate more effectively to society as it now is, he has a great number of sensible things to say and good practical examples to give. Many of those practical approaches are already evident in the development of local ministry, in a much greater emphasis on evangelism, in the clustering of parishes to conform to the social realities, in the development of specialisms, and the recognition of the need to work in different ways in different contexts. These developments have arisen from below rather than being the result of a working to an external model. There is not much evidence that they have been hindered by the existence of the parish system.

It is in this area that I found a problem with the central thesis. There is in the thesis itself a difficult tension between drawing on a model from the past whilst recognising that for anything to take root it has to grow from what is now. It feels at times that the model taken from the past is being used to describe a very wide variety of situations, from St Thomas', Crookes, to Sunderland Minster. The first is indeed a church which has attracted large numbers from a wide area, with many local branches, the second is more a building which has been designated as a minster, and its ministers and people given the task of realising some of those characteristics of relating to the whole society of a city in the way the author describes. But these examples are very different and neither of their contexts obviously bears too much relation to that of Anglo-Saxon England.

The author very clearly recognises the other side of this tension, pointing out that this is 'not a strategy for the bishops to implement; rather it is for clergy and congregations to initiate and shape'. But it is not quite clear how the two aspects of the argument fit together, and, if the principles of flexibility and organic growth are to be followed, implying different development 'from inner city Manchester, through leafy Surbiton, ..... to a wholly rural Cumbria', how relevant it then becomes to use the word 'minster' as a description. Perhaps behind this tension are the more theological questions about the nature of the Church. It might have been helpful to have had those made more explicit.

The book is however extremely helpful in drawing attention to many of the issues underlying our current dilemmas. They are present in debates about how we finance the Church, about clergy freehold, about how we better use our resources of buildings and people, and about selection and training for ministry.

In so far as the minster model provides a framework for us to reflect on those issues and how we should be handling them in relating to current society it is useful, but just as that minster model emerged out of a particular economic, social and religious context, so we have to wrestle with what our context suggests is the best way for God's mission to be revealed in our age.

Bob Langley, Archdeacon of Lindisfarne

*THE LAW OF THE CHURCH IN WALES* by NORMAN DOE, Cardiff, University of Wales Press, 2002, xii + 390pp (£45) ISBN 0-7083-1748-0

The Church in Wales is a small member of the Anglican Communion, both geographically and in terms of membership. For example, Easter communicants for 2004 were 74,712, by contrast with around 1,500,000 attending Easter services in the Church of England. However, the foreword of this book, written by Archbishop Rowan Williams as Archbishop of Wales before his translation to Canterbury, is a reminder that proximity to England and its origins as part of the Church of England make the Church in Wales a particularly significant partner Church for the Church of England. The value of the Church in Wales as a subject for comparative study in ecclesiastical and canon law has been underlined by the presence in Cardiff of the Centre for Law and Religion and by the LLM programme in Canon Law at Cardiff University. It was therefore fitting that Professor Doe, the architect of those academic landmarks for the subject, should write a comprehensive study of the law of the Church in Wales.

This book may not have been intended so much as another academic *tour de force* following the author's seminal works on *The Legal Framework of the Church of England* (1996) and *Canon Law in the Anglican Communion* (1998) but rather, as the preface states, to provide 'a systematic and practical statement' of the law of this small denomination. In the time that it has taken for this review to catch up with it the book will already have proved its practical value for clergy and others concerned with the day-to-day administration of Church law in the principality. However, the volume is also of considerable interest for its still established neighbours over the immediate border, and for those interested in the law of Church and State much further afield. Professor Doe's lucid account of the law of the Church in Wales to some extent suggests how ecclesiastical law could change in England after disestablishment, but perhaps more instructive are examples of how the laws of the two Churches differ now. Such alternative models are valuable, not necessarily as examples to follow or indeed to avoid, although they may serve as both, but simply as points of comparison which may make for greater understanding of institutions elsewhere.

By way of contrast with the law of the Church of England, this book offers insight in three particular respects. There are the internal constitutional arrangements for a small national Church independent from the State. There