



'Re-placing' bishops: an ecumenical and trinitarian approach to episcopacy

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The question of orders in Anglican/Uniting Church dialogue

IN 1981, THE CO-CHAIR OF the Anglican Uniting Church Ecumenical Dialogue Joint Steering Committee, Bishop Oliver Heyward, said he believed that difficulties in the dialogue between the two communions essentially related to orders.¹ This issue was focussed on the question of episcopacy which continued to be an ecumenical problem such that in 1992 it was 'shelved in the bilateral conversations'.² Certainly much of the energy of the dialogue to date has been invested in exploring the nature and understanding of ministerial order held in the two communions. Particularly important has been exploration of points of contact between a vision for episcopacy focused primarily personally and individually and that which sees episcopacy held primarily and permanently in a corporate expression, with individual and personal expressions of episcopacy being occasional and less essential expressions of the deeper corporate reality.³

The conversations to date have clearly understood that at a deeper level what is at stake is a fundamental vision of church. Without doubt, the structuring of the orders of the Church make an overwhelmingly strong statement about its understanding of its own being as a response to the Gospel. The Niagara report puts it like this:

All these requirements for the mission of the Church in time are given in Christ, yet need to be realised in history. Each one — the praise of the community, its faithfulness and continuity, its disciplined life together, its activity of nurture and its sense of goal and direction — must be focused in symbolic acts and structures.⁴

This is how it should be. The vision and energy of the Church is, to a large extent, expressed in and through its structures. The orders of the Church do not exist over or apart from the whole Church, but express its ministry and focus its call. It is precisely for this reason that the conversation about the appropriate expression in office of order of episcopacy is so significant. This is also the reason why the question of episcopacy and the forms it takes can be neither 'shelved' because it is too difficult to resolve, nor ignored because of its apparent irrelevance to the Christian gospel in the modern world. However, an Anglican and Uniting Church convergence on this issue will require some creative and courageous moves from both communions. This will have to occur at all levels of church life, but particularly at the local.

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Anglican episcopacy: a problem of theory or application?

What might have to change in the theological outlook of Australian Anglicanism for perseverance at the local level and more energy in other councils of the Church for renewed efforts with the Uniting Church in respect of the mutual recognition of ministries? From the Anglican side it is not enough to extol the virtues of an episcopal order focussed in the personal episcopacy of the diocesan bishop. Indeed, it is precisely the perceived lack of the 'personal' element in episcopacy that is problematic. The appeal to the 'personal' dimension may be good in theory but not so good in practice. Why is this the case? Until Anglicans attend to this both practically and theologi-

cally they can hardly expect a warm embrace of episcopacy from the people of the Uniting Church. Moreover, it is an evasion of the issue to suppose that the problem is simply one of improving the *application* of the theory. On this premise the Anglican Church neatly absolves itself from a more considered critique of its own theological and ecclesiological foundations for its structuring of episcopacy. The problem is both theoretical as well as practical. Better theology might make for improved practice.

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The argument of this article is that it is time for bishops in the Anglican Church to be 'replaced'. The obvious response is of course, with what? To which we might respond, with more bishops. Such a proposal is not particularly radical. It simply captures a primary though neglected sense of 'replace' — 'to restore to a previous place or position, to put back again in a place'.⁵ This is quite a different matter from removal and substitution. Rather, the accent is upon re-placing, or better, being properly placed. We want to argue that such episcopal replacement is a pastoral necessity for Anglicanism and a vital ecumenical imperative. It is founded upon a forward looking trinitarian ecclesiology that facilitates a move from an overly monarchical and impersonal episcopacy to a more collegial and integrated episcopacy *within* rather than on the periphery of the life of the Church.

Whilst this proposal may meet with general approval it can hardly be said that Anglican theological consciousness of the matter is particularly alive. The theology of the Anglican ordinal in *A Prayer Book for Australia* is instructive here. The prayer accompanying the laying on of hands for bishops (as well as deacons and priests) invokes the Holy Spirit 'upon your servant NN, whom we *set apart* . . . for the office and work of a bishop . . .'.⁶ The introduction of the notion of 'setting apart' is an unfortunate change from the previous ordinal and simply encourages the view that in Anglicanism ordination to Holy Orders involves a *displacement from* rather than a strategic *replacement within* the body of Christ. No doubt the latter is what is intended but in fact the liturgy points in the opposite direction and, judging by the actual experience on the ground, the notion of being 'set apart' seems to have been a self-fulfilling prophecy.

The truth of the matter is that ordination is about *being set in a new place* within the body of Christ, a place not at some

remove from the people of God but in fact more firmly within the web of ecclesial life for the sake of the gospel. Thus the bishop is set among the people as the 'chief minister' to be a pastor and teacher of the gospel. To give effect to this, bishops will have to be replaced both for the sake of the integrity and responsibilities of the office, and in the interests of a more honest conversation with other churches.

Episcopacy in Anglicanism: some historical and contemporary concerns

A serious concern of some who have reservations about the traditional episcopate is that it expresses an image of church about which they have fundamental and gospel concerns. The traditional episcopate, it is felt, images a church which is hierarchical, clericalised and patriarchal. Some of these concerns lie at the base of the strong reactions in 1991 of people in the Uniting Church to the prospect of introducing episcopacy in that communion.⁷ However, it is interesting that this response included a strong affirmation of the need for personal oversight through Presbytery Ministers and further suggestions as to how such pastoral oversight might be strengthened.

This of course strikes a cord with many Anglicans who criticise the traditional episcopate precisely because it has failed to deliver the pastoral goods. The bishop often seems reduced to a somewhat faceless administrator preoccupied with legal and technical matters to do with the functioning of the modern Anglican Diocese. What has tended to disappear are the personal, pastoral and teaching functions of the episcopate. These episcopal tasks were precisely those that the English Reformation recovered. Within the context of Tudor England this meant that bishops, as ministers of the Crown for the *spiritual* government of the nation, were 'to see to it that "the pure Word of God is preached, and the sacraments be duly administered according to Christ's ordinance" (Article 19)'.⁸ The episcopal ideal was thus quite clear: Bishops were not feudal magnates or court officials but pastors and teachers of the gospel.

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However, the Elizabethan Reformers' ideal remained for the most part simply an ideal. It is not surprising that the Anglican practice of episcopacy gave rise to Puritan criticisms of the *institution* of episcopacy. One result has been that Anglican discussion about episcopacy has been more preoccupied with polemics and apologetic about the origins and importance of episcopacy and far less with questions concerning the *practice* of episcopacy as it has continued to evolve with the spread of the Anglican communion throughout the world. As Stephen

Sykes has well said, 'Too much Anglican writing about bishops is about the episcopacy of a church which does not exist.'⁹

There is no doubt that there is a variety of expression of episcopal ministry in the church today. However the question remains as to what extent this emergent 'contextual episcopate' impacts upon the undergirding ecclesiology of Anglicanism and its traditionalist diocesan structure. The problems are systemic and until they are addressed at this level it will be difficult if not impossible to recover a genuinely personal, pastoral, teaching episcopate which finds its place within rather than at the periphery (albeit centralised administrative hub) of the life of the people of God in a given locality. What is thus required is a different practice of episcopate than the one experienced by most people of the Church today, one based on a collegial rather than a 'monarchical' episcopate.

The challenge: from monarchical to collegial episcopacy

The history of the development of the episcopate certainly evidences a shift from the collegial to the monarchical. Hans Küng puts it succinctly:

As early as the first letter of Clement prophets and teachers are passed over in pointed silence, the tasks of administering the community, of organising worship and of teaching were increasingly entrusted to the episkopoi (or elders) and their deacons. In this way the episkopoi, as the pastoral letters and the first letter of Peter show, assumed an authority which, apart of course from the

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fundamental nature of the apostolic witness and the directness of the apostolic mission, could only be compared with the apostles themselves. Thus, while the Church had been founded entirely on the apostles and prophets, and in its entirety had inherited the mantle of the apostles, the episkopoi or elders gradually came to be in a special degree the 'successors of the apostles' within the church. The apostolic succession of the whole church turned more and more into the apostolic succession of a particular ministry, especially after the disappearance of the prophets towards the end of the second century, and of the free teacher of the community in the third century, and after the teaching authority had become almost exclusively entrusted to the episkopoi

and their helpers. The fellowship of believers, the collegiality of all believers, of all those who had charisma and fulfilled their own ministries, the collegiality of the whole church, in short, gave place to the collegiality of a special ministry within the community: the collegiality of the leaders of the community, the episkopoi, or elders, who increasingly began to see themselves as distinct from the community, from the 'people'¹⁰

The reformed theologian Jürgen Moltmann maintains that the result of this historical development was that Western ecclesiologies have put their main emphasis on the authority of the Church's ministry, as opposed to that of the whole community:

The principle behind the monarchical episcopate is: one bishop — one church: *ubi Petrus — ibi ecclesia*. The theological justification runs: one God — one Christ — one Bishop — one Church. The bishop represents God towards the Church, just as Christ represents God. This certainly guarantees the Church's unity, but it also confines the Spirit to the ministry so that a Church which is itself charismatic can hardly develop at all, because it remains passive — the recipient of ecclesiastical ministrations.¹¹

Those who agree with Moltmann express anxiety about acceptance of the traditional episcopate because of the ecclesiology that usually comes with it. The concern is not about the expression of episcopate in a personal or individual way, but about its attendant ecclesiology, characterised, so often, by the development of hierarchy and a loss of the authority of the whole community.

On the other hand, churches that have maintained the traditional episcopal order point out that it enshrines the important truth that the Lordship of Christ is exercised not just in a corporate manner, but also in a personal manner. The bishop embodies the personal element, 'episcopate, ie. oversight or visitation, inheres in the whole body of Christ, but it is personalised in the bishop.'¹²

Episcopacy within a trinitarian ecclesiology

It seems that a theology of episcopate which will allow a way forward will be one grounded in a 'trinitarian ecclesiology', recognising that which is held in *koinonia* can also be expressed personally without the creation of 'monarchy'. The English Report, *Episcopal Ministry — The Report of the Archbishop's Group on The Episcopate 1990*, takes an important step in this direction with its affirmation:

We have set out our understanding of the Church's *koinonia*, as communion grounded in and modelled on the relational and ordered self-giving life of God the Holy Trinity and the sacrificial life of God the Son. We believe that it is within this broad understanding of the doctrinal context that the Church's ministry of oversight is best explored.¹³

The report falls somewhat short of its promising beginning insofar as it tends to develop the notion of an Episcopate 'grounded in and modelled on the relational ordered self-giving life of God' somewhat at the expense of the more important notion of the relationship between the Trinity and the being of Church as a whole. This latter relationship seems to be the presupposition of Charles Sherlock's recent discussion of 'the Episcopate of all believers'.¹⁴ Sherlock explores the practice of episcopate within the whole body of Christ and places the episcopate within this wider ecclesial frame. In the process he draws upon the recent discussions of the doctrine of the Trinity and ecclesiology.

Sherlock's approach has strong affinities with the 1955 proposal of the Scottish Reformed theologian Thomas Torrance, who argued for a 'corporate episcopate'.¹⁵ This corporate episcopate — including deacon, presbyters and bishops — was derived from the priesthood of Christ and expressed in a threefold form: the 'corporate priesthood of the whole Body', a 'corporate or collegial priesthood' arising out of the nature of eucharistic fellowship, and an 'episcopate' — 'not a higher priesthood but as a special gift for the oversight of the priesthood'. Torrance had hoped that his proposal would contribute to the unifying of the Congregational, Presbyterian and Episcopal types of ministry. He was ahead of his time, though his theology was more christologically grounded than Moltmann's more recent trinitarian approach to ministry and church.

Can a church which seeks to ground its ministries in a vision of the Triune God of the gospel allow its orders to accumulate trappings of hierarchy and exclusivism?

For Moltmann the Church is a 'lived' Trinity with diversity, order and particularity celebrated in unity without hierarchy. The persons of the Trinity are unique and distinct yet, at the same time, interdependent partners in mutual love. Their identity is 'neither presocial or asocial'¹⁶ but arises precisely in their koinonia, their 'social life', their relational dynamic, or perichoresis. Their interrelatedness, or perichoresis, is neither violation or intrusion, but love participating in the life of the beloved.

Within a trinitarian ecclesiology the orders of the Church give personal expression to that which is held in koinonia by the whole, without 'a hierarchy of subordinations and supraordinations'.¹⁷ Clearly such a theology must have its challenges for the praxis of those Churches which hold the traditional episcopacy. Can a church which grasps the sort of theology Moltmann espouses ever allow a bishop to be 'enthroned'? Can a church which seeks to ground its ministries in a vision of the

Triune God of the gospel allow its orders to accumulate trappings of hierarchy and exclusivism? And can a church which seeks to embody such a theology of God structure its institutional life in ways that seem to thwart rather than facilitate an episcopal practice which is genuinely set in the midst of the people for whom it exists under God? It may, but it certainly should not.

On the other hand, a Church which does seek to ground its ministries in a trinitarian ecclesiology will not readily abandon the personal expression of its episcopate and will not readily forsake its sense that what is held in koinonia also needs to be focused personally. Thus while there is much in the tradition of episcopal churches which will be challenged by the approach suggested here, there is much, also, which resonates with it.

'Oversight': the witness of scripture

The witness of Scripture is instructive in this respect. In using the designation 'episkopoi' the writers of the New Testament have basically adapted a secular term for one who has oversight or holds public office. But the New Testament usage is far from careless and the way the word is used significantly modifies and fills out its meaning. James Barr pointed out some time ago that theological thought of the type found in the New Testament finds its expression not so much in the individual word, but in the word combination or sentence.¹⁸

What is significant, looking at the way the New Testament writers use the language of episcopos, is that those bearing this title are never depicted simply as administrative officials. Their function seems to have been essentially pastoral and educational and the idea of 'oversight' is continually given content and modified by the language of 'diakonia', of shepherding and service.

This affirmation of the diaconal context of episcopate is preserved in the traditional maintenance of the priority of diaconal orders. The Bishop is called to be a servant. Church history witnesses to bishops over the centuries who have indeed been extraordinary examples of servant-shepherds. The diaconal context of episcopate is an important part of the tradition.

So too is the corporate and collegial. The earliest New Testament sources suggest a collegial leadership, with no distinction between elders and bishops (Phil. 1.1). The 'monarchical' episcopate began emerging for a variety of reasons in the second century. But it was probably not until something like the fifth to sixth centuries that the bishop as an overseer of a diocese of a large number of parishes led by presbyters became relatively uniform.¹⁹ The 'monarchical' image of the episcopate in the Anglican Church has been heightened by centuries of establishment, with bishops in England appointed by the crown, taking a place in secular government and accruing trappings of some privilege.

However, the tradition of a corporate expression of episcopacy has been maintained throughout, largely through the

importance attached to the Councils of the Church. In addition to this, Anglicans have always resisted the development of hierarchy within the episcopate, favouring a model in which all diocesan bishops constitute a fellowship of equals.

Anglican episcopacy in Australia: some challenges

Within Anglican/UC conversations in Australia, Keith Chittleborough has pointed out that, since the introduction of synodical government in the 19th century, 'episcopacy in the Anglican Church has been a rather different phenomenon . . .'²⁰ from its English counterpart. He argues that the result was a 'dispersal of authority, between bishop and Synod', reflecting an implicit, but coherent ecclesiology.²¹

The relationship between the personal expression of episcopate in the ministry of a bishop and that which is held by the whole church is focused in Australian Anglicanism through a long tradition of episcopal election. All Australian dioceses elect a diocesan bishop through synodical process, either directly, or representatively. If Chittleborough is right when he argues that there is a broadly accepted, if implicit, theology here, it must be that episcopate is held in the whole community, shared through a variety of its structures, and focussed personally through episcopal orders.

Many Anglicans would be quick to admit the obvious tensions between these elements of Anglican tradition and others which stress the 'rule of bishops' as an authority held for the Church rather than within it, which stress apostolic succession as the possession of episcopal order rather than being focused through it, and which result in an image of episcopacy which is probably more monarchical than diaconal.

Within Anglicanism dioceses will probably have to be restructured.

So Australian Anglicanism holds in tension images of episcopacy in which both servant and monarch dwell, in which sole authority and corporate responsibility co-exist, through which both hierarchy and collegiality can be created.

In the coming years, Anglicans will have their own reasons for continuing a careful rethinking of episcopal ministry. There will almost certainly continue to be a commitment to reserve some expressions of episcopate to personal expression in the order of bishop (e.g., confirmation and ordination). However, it may be that some of the centralist administrative functions we presently associate with the episcopate will find new expression as the Anglican Church comes to grips with structures that will empower its ministry into the next millennium.

Replacing bishops: some ecclesial and ecumenical implications

In terms of an Anglican dialogue with churches that have reservations about the need or benefit of adopting a system of episcopal orders, there is probably much encouragement in the growing support for a model in which the orders of the church are seen to give personal expression to that which is held in koinonia by the whole, without trappings of hierarchy and exclusivism. The critical strategic question is, how might this personal expression be realised? This is an ecclesiological issue of the highest importance.

Minimally it points to some hard thinking on the question of church structuring. This goes beyond merely removing some of the traditional administrative functions that have sapped the energy from pastoral and prophetic episcopal practice. Rather, something more fundamental is called for. Within Anglicanism dioceses will probably have to be restructured and *perhaps* multiplied for episcopacy to recover the personal pastoral dimension. In this restructuring bishops will have to be replaced within more workable ecclesial webs of life. This might look quite different in rural compared to urban areas, the latter requiring significant reordering.

This replacing requires some significant teasing out, only the barest outline can be offered here. At present dioceses are structured in terms of the category of 'space'. A diocese is a territorial space filled up with people of the church. The result is a 'territorial episcopacy'. But there are other ways of structuring church life episcopally. Canon Allan Brent of North Queensland explored the possibilities for a 'cultural episcopacy' which would have involved appointing bishops to subcultural groups. 'The study arose particularly from the appointment of bishops to aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities on a cultural rather than a territorial basis'.²²

In territorial episcopacy the focus is on filling up the allotted space, which can be vast and/or highly concentrated and complex. However, with such a focus attention to the quality of the interactions within the space inevitably becomes a secondary concern. Certainly where the category of 'space' dominates it is highly questionable whether a people's *sense of dwelling* in a place can emerge at all.²³ The strength of cultural episcopacy is its capacity to focus on a quite particular people group and this will be important in the future. However, such an approach can become inward looking with a consequent difficulty in attending to the quality of interactions across pre-determined boundaries.

Might there be room for what could be termed a 'relational' or perhaps 'natural' episcopacy? The focus here would not be territorial space nor cultural group but 'place', identified in terms of the quality of social interactions and the potential for enriched communal life in society. This at least is what a contemporary trinitarian approach would seem to require with its strong emphasis upon the social dynamic of the gospel of a God whose own being is not solitary but a communion of persons.²⁴ Yet in this proposal the natural features of the envi-

ronment and geography, the natural reach and mobility of the inhabitants and their sense of the place they occupy would be some of the criteria important in recognising and designating a natural place within which episcopal ministry could be exercised in its personal, pastoral and teaching dimensions.

The approach suggested above would lead to significant 'downsizing' of many urban Anglican dioceses. In fact without such an ecclesiological restructuring it would not be possible to 'replace' bishops in order to give effect to the kind of episcopal ministry identified in the present proposal. As we argued at the outset the question of episcopacy is an ecclesiological issue not simply one of order *per se*. To ignore this imports a dangerous abstractness into Anglican arguments for episcopacy and a consequent avoidance of self-critical theological reflection on the Church, a peculiar and unfortunate trait of Anglicanism.²⁵

A focus on 'relational episcopacy' would also highlight the convergences on the ground in the *practices* of episcopate within the various churches that inhabit natural places. Ultimately it might enable the churches to recognise each other's ministries, learn from each other and work together for the sake of the gospel. Certainly such a focus would render problematic Anglican tendencies to be dismissive of the ministries of other communions because of a perceived lack of episcopal ordering. At the level of praxis this is a shared problem.

Does the Anglican Church in Australia have the will and courage to live out of its theological vision of the incarnate triune God? What strategic changes need to occur to embody its vision more concretely and honestly for the sake of the gospel?

In terms of ecumenical dialogue these questions can be focussed quite sharply. In this respect the following questions, adapted from the Niagara report, seem an appropriate pointer to future discussions²⁶. (1) How do we see episcopate related to the whole people of God? (2) In light of our common mission, what needs to be reformed in our respective expressions of episcopate? (3) What can we do together in episcopate? How can we initiate and enable the joint exercise of episcopate as a gradual process?

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