

THE TRAINING OF ARCHDEACONS

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A few months ago there was a national conference for all the archdeacons of the Church of England. We number just over a hundred and of these eighty were present. On the following weekend *The Church Times* had a cartoon on its front page showing two anxious clergy, one saying to the other, 'What bothers me is what the other twenty-two were doing!' Such is the reputation of archdeacons, who bear something of the character of that God whom the small boy once famously described as the Person who goes around seeing what you are up to and then telling you to stop.

Such a negative view of the office is almost inevitable in view of an archdeacon's close association with the law. Individual practitioners of the law might be the most estimable, liberal and compassionate of people, but their business is usually to tell people where they have to stop. There may be room for some interpretation of the law, as a Chancellor does when he faces a mound of faculty applications or even a humble incumbent as he tries to decide whether a particular memorial stone falls within diocesan regulations. There will be occasions too, particularly in the interplay between ecclesiastical and common law, where laws are mutually antipathetic to one another. For example the unrepealed section of the Regulations concerning Marriage and Divorce passed by the Upper and Lower Houses of Canterbury Convocation in May 1957 still states that 'the Church of England is competent to enact such a discipline of its own in regard to marriage as may from time to time appear most salutary and efficacious' and that therefore 'the Church should not allow the use of [the Marriage Service] in the case of anyone who has a former partner still living'. Yet civil law permits any cleric to use the full Marriage Service for any parishioners, divorced or not, and an increasing number of clergy are deciding for the civil, rather than the ecclesiastical, option. Furthermore a wise archdeacon, who has probably spent much of his ministry as a parish priest, will, in doubtful cases, give the parish the benefit of the doubt or even hold a telescope to his blind eye. Officially the PCC may need to apply for a faculty to hang a picture of a late, respected Rector in the vestry, but most archdeacons will hope that their opinion will not be invited.

Nevertheless in the end an archdeacon, with his Chancellor, is the guardian of ecclesiastical law and he fails in his duty if he either does not know the law or neglects to tell people where to stop. (I trust my readers will forgive the continued use of the male personal pronoun. There is, I am glad to say, one female archdeacon and I trust there will in due course be more. But the lexicographical dilemmas of using other forms of pronoun are well-known.) When considering what training he may need for such a task it is important first to distinguish between local, usually diocesan, regulations and the law of the Established Church. The former can cause easily as much anxiety and sheer hard work as the latter and the consequences upon an archdeacon's raw nerves rather heavier to bear because more frequently attended to.

And here we come to the most frustrating stumbling-block lying in the path of those who would train archdeacons. There are forty-four dioceses in the Provinces of Canterbury and York—and forty-four ways of managing diocesan affairs. An archdeacon coming new to one diocese, for instance, will be immediately involved in all kinds of appointments. It will usually be a diocese where there is no area episcopal system and where the suffragan bishop is, as described in my dictionary, 'a bishop considered as an assistant, or as subject, to his metropolitan'. An archdeacon always has a geographical area in his charge and in this sort of diocese he will

manage the entire appointing process. He will do all the formal negotiations under the Patronage (Benefices) Measure 1986 with patrons, the appointing bishop and the parish representatives. He will keep a close eye on the 'Hardaker List', the monthly General Circulation List of those clergy who are seeking a move, will be in touch with candidates, interview them, obtain their references, show them round the parishes and shepherd them through all the nerve-wracking processes. Yet in the next-door diocese where there is a formal or informal area system he might do none of those tasks, and might even meet the new incumbent for the first time at the Institution Service. How does one train people for two such disparate experiences? Not easily, is the answer.

But before I expand on the training of archdeacons, let me describe a little more clearly first the tasks that fall to him out of diocesan regulations and then those arising out of his authority in the Church of England.

Within the diocese there can be few jobs which are more ruthlessly ecclesiastical. None of the specific responsibilities of the archdeacon falls outside the Church. The bishop will have, whether he seeks it or not, a civic role, the incumbent spends much of his or her time with members of the public or secular organisations, all of whom are marginal to the life of the Church, and churchwardens, wonderfully faithful as the vast majority of them are, will serve the Church only in their spare time. The archdeacon may choose to engage in a secular role like joining a model railway group, supporting the arts or becoming involved in a social or environmental campaign, but the exercise of his role is almost exclusively ecclesiastical. It is bishop, clergy and churchwardens he has to deal with. It is the endless series of church meetings he has to chair or attend. You have to love the Church to be an archdeacon!

In a training document I have recently published (*Oculus Episcopi—A Handbook for New Archdeacons*, privately distributed) I list the committees that an archdeacon might be invited to be involved with, over and beyond the statutory bodies, like this: 'Readers, Hospitals, Prison, University and Industrial Chaplains, Ordination Candidates, Cathedral bodies, Retirement, Diocesan Records, Churchyards and Wildlife, Women's Ministry, Social Responsibility, Arts and Leisure, Continuing Ministerial Training, Children and Youth Work, Overseas Missions, Schools and Education, Stewardship or the Diocesan Retreat House'. I conclude, 'People do like the recognition of a member of the Senior Staff on their Committee and the archdeacon is a sort of 'catch-all' who is often considered to have very little else to do!'

The care of the clergy and their families within the archdeaconry is an essential part of the archdeacon's task, and any archdeacon worth his salt puts it at the top of his priorities. Bishops always claim to love 'a pastoral archdeacon', though too few understand that one of the most pastoral tasks that an archdeacon can fulfil is the maintenance of efficient administration. Ask the incumbent who cannot get an authoritative reply to a simple request or who sees all his initiatives wider than his parish fall into a diocesan black hole. At the same time it cannot be denied that pastoral care is put to severe test at times, such as when an archdeacon has to maintain the law of the Church in a parochial dispute where the incumbent is on the other side of the argument.

Another non-statutory responsibility will be the oversight of clergy housing. There is a professional surveyor in each diocese who attends to all the technical work but it will be the archdeacon who, as he often is quite properly placed to do, straddles the gap between the parish and 'the Diocese' (which is often mythically viewed as a growling dragon whose main task is to sit at a distance from every parochial setting, its mouth open, swallowing money). Where their housing is concerned, clergy vary from the pernickety who complain at every dripping tap and expect somebody else to clean their gutters, to those who are wonderfully content

with sub-standard conditions and need, for their spouse's sake, to be jogged out of their complacency. It is often the archdeacon who has to maintain the even hand and ensure that diocesan policy is not only carried out but, better still, understood.

The statutory tasks of the archdeacon fall under three heads: faculty jurisdiction, visitations and inspections, and clergy discipline. Readers of this journal will be familiar with the intricacies of faculty procedures and will not need me to remind them that this planning procedure of the Church of England is constantly under the threat of government which so often sees any other source of power as a threat. The Church stoutly resisted being enfolded in secular planning law in the late 1980s but only at the expense of an even tighter control in the shape of the revision of the faculty jurisdiction by the Care of Churches and Ecclesiastical Jurisdiction Measure 1991 (see ss. 11–19, Schs 7, 8) and the new Faculty Jurisdiction Rules 1992, SI 1992/2882. Revised procedures for the ecclesiastical 'exemption' were introduced by the Department of National Heritage in 1994 (see the Ecclesiastical Exemption (Listed Buildings and Conservation Areas) Order 1994, SI 1994/1771, and a statement from the Department in July 1994).

The archdeacon is at the sharp end of all this legislation. He is the one who has to stand face-to-face with the churchwarden who is bewildered by the necessity of applying for a faculty because the PCC wants to move the altar two or three feet from the wall or with the incumbent who remains totally intransigent over any faculty application and only gives way when the archdeacon refuses to sign his English Heritage grant application. He is in a peculiarly delicate position on the Diocesan Advisory Committee. Here the archdeacon is crucially important because he is likely to be the only person present who knows all of the churches intimately and who probably knows some of the quirks of the PCC submitting the application. But he is also representing three bodies simultaneously: the court, in his capacity as an officer of the Chancellor's court and as a granter of faculties; the parishes because he is probably the only voice present able to speak for the particular parish in question, and the Diocesan Advisory Committee itself of which he is a voting member. Any archdeacon may gradually and carelessly fall into the habit of speaking for one of these constituencies only and thereby undermines his own role. Consistory Courts, happily, rarely cross an archdeacon's path. If they do, his role in court may vary considerably from one hearing to the next, sometimes simply as a channel of information for the Chancellor; sometimes to explain the position of the Diocesan Advisory Committee and at other times more proactively as petitioner or party opponent.

The annual Archdeacon's Visitation each May looms large in an archdeacon's year, though those summoned do not always view it with a similar enthusiasm. The information acquired directly from the churchwardens in the Articles of Enquiry can be enormously valuable in assessing the health of the diocese and the Charge gives an opportunity to address, say, four hundred churchwardens and all the clergy each year, an opportunity never vouchsafed to any diocesan or suffragan bishop. Most archdeacons are properly aware of Canon E1, para 4 where churchwardens are charged with spiritual as well as temporal duties, and will wish to lay this office at the churchwardens' door in the Charge.

Canon F 18 requires each archdeacon to 'survey the churches, chancels, and churchyards within his jurisdiction at least once in three years, either in person or by the rural dean'. A Report in 1992 by an organisation called MarcEurope (of which more anon) showed that a half of archdeacons did this personally but most of the rest required it of their rural deans. Since the average archdeaconry has about a hundred and fifty churches these parish inspections are a not inconsiderable task.

Finally there is the issue of clergy discipline. Informally there is a great deal that the archdeacon can do to head off trouble before it reaches any formal procedure.

The issue might involve a team ministry where relationships between the team members are in danger of breaking down; a group of parishioners who come complaining about the behaviour of the incumbent; a furious parishioner somewhat unreasonably refused a memorial stone by the parish priest; a parish priest suspected of having an affair with a parishioner; or an incumbent determined to practise a rigid baptismal policy against the wishes of his PCC. An archdeacon who is familiar enough with his parishioners and clergy to be able to pick up these sort of potential flash points and head them off will save himself a lot of heartache later on when positions have hardened.

Every archdeacon prays that he may delivered from formal procedures with respect to clergy discipline. Practised under the Ecclesiastical Jurisdiction Measure 1963 and the Incumbents (Vacation of Benefices) Measure 1977 with an amendment in 1993, the area is a minefield. Fortunately Canon C 18 para 7 makes clear that the diocesan bishop is ultimately responsible for disciplinary matters, though an archdeacon may find himself involved as 'authorised complainant' under section 19 of the 1963 Measure where a member of the clergy has been guilty of misconduct or neglect. In such a dangerous place an archdeacon has to recall, as I mention in my *Oculus Episcopi*, that 'legal autarchy is only for the foolhardy'.

Even though the Venerable Raymond Ravenscroft wrote very ably about the role of the archdeacon in the July 1995 issue of this *Journal* (3 Ecc LJ 379), I felt I could not talk about the training of archdeacons until, by a further description of the task, I had made it obvious how difficult it is to describe and how often it is practised in quite different ways in different dioceses. The structure is clear, the practice is unpredictable. So what training is actually in place at the moment?

When I came into this post nine years ago there was virtually nothing. I had the great good fortune to inherit a part-time secretary who had been working with my predecessor for five years so I was able to find my way about the filing system quite quickly and could ask her privately what on earth I was supposed to do with this and that demand. In addition, as doubtless most people in a new post find, I had kind archidiaconal colleagues who put me right. My diocesan bishop, in response to my enquiry, said, 'Everyone knows what an archdeacon does', though anyone who has read thus far will not be surprised to hear that I replied, 'But I don't'.

About eighteen months or two years later the then Archbishops' Adviser for Bishops' Ministry, Canon Norman Todd, on his own initiative I understand, put on a voluntary three-day course for new archdeacons which I attended. It used material published by the Edward King Institute for Ministry Development in association with an American theological seminary, and focused less on the content of an archdeacon's task than on his attitudes towards its various strands. Certainly it was useful for understanding my own nature and the unconscious ways I had become used to confronting any task, but its main benefit for me was the public recognition it gave to my office and to the necessity of some training for it.

So far as I know no further such courses took place. Partly this was because the training of archdeacons was only vaguely alluded to in the job description of the Archbishops' Adviser. There was a feeling at the time that 'something ought to be done about it', but nobody was given the responsibility for managing the process. Indeed there was, and remains, a hesitation about making any collective approach to the training of archdeacons. 'They wouldn't like to have any sort of outside interference', I have heard it said. I am quite aware that archdeacons thoroughly enjoy the reputation they have of being something of a 'mafia', skilled in skulduggery, worming their way into the heart of Church government, loving the machinations of smoke-filled rooms, but there is surely no reason why others with authority outside their ranks should take this fantasy so seriously.

Another initiative was taking place about the time I was appointed. The

Ecclesiastical Law Society had recently come into being, and at its inaugural meeting at Corpus Christi College, Cambridge, a working party was set up charged with the task of examining the training of archdeacons. Papers were produced at the first residential conference of the Society at Nottingham in 1989, and in due course the chairman of the working party, David Cheetham, the Registrar of the Diocese of St Albans, produced a short handbook of about a dozen A4 pages. Since George Newsom's book *Faculty Jurisdiction of the Church of England* had just been produced (1988)—and has now run into a second edition (1993)—there were the beginnings of a corpus of material to fill a very considerable vacuum.

About now too some of the archdeacons' regional meetings started a training initiative. John Burgess, then Archdeacon of Bath, was deeply involved, and Brian Smith, then Archdeacon of Craven, organised a study day at St Paul's in London in about 1991 at which David Cheetham was one of the speakers. Later his handbook was one of the discussion documents for a report that MarcEurope published, encouraged by Gordon Kuhrt, then Archdeacon of Lewisham. It was that report, *Archdeacons and Their Work*, by Boyd Myers which kept all these initiatives on the road. *Archdeacons and Their Work* shared the results of a questionnaire sent out to 109 archdeacons of whom a remarkable 87 replied. It describes, as best it can, the work undertaken by archdeacons across the country and is clearly a seminal document for those who wish to become involved in the training of archdeacons. When it discussed training needs it said that most new appointees (in fact all but two respondents) would welcome an information pack which ought, they felt, to contain a summary of legal material and legal Measures, the conduct of archdeacons' regional meetings, a book list, the work of an archdeacon and 'particular diocesan initiatives'. I hope this article has already made clear that this last item would be impossible to provide in a nationally-focused information pack. Where training was concerned the report says, 'Law was identified by some archdeacons as an area in which they particularly needed training'. Sixty per cent of them too said that they would welcome a biennial national consultation and an occasional newsletter and mailing.

Since then there have been episodic national consultations for archdeacons, of which the event mentioned at the beginning of this article was one, though I am not entirely clear whether they have been organised by MarcEurope or by an enthusiastic core of archdeacons themselves, nor whether the events so described can be called 'training' rather than an excuse for archdeacons to meet one another informally. In addition there is an occasional newsletter distributed to archdeacons, though not on any observed regular basis.

I became involved in the matter because of my concern for experienced incumbents who suddenly found themselves inexperienced archdeacons. My concern eventually filtered through to Canon Michael Austin, who is the current Archbishops' Adviser for Bishops' Ministry. I put to him a proposition that I might write a 'Handbook for New Archdeacons' and he has been energetic in assisting me in this process, having been to visit me on several occasions. The handbook *Oculus Episcopi* is now in print, and I hope that this *Journal* might be reviewing it in due course. The Handbook covers all the matters referred to in this article and includes a suggestion that each new archdeacon might have a 'mentor', that is, an experienced archdeacon who could put him in the picture before his appointment, spend a day with him a month or two into his new job and then be available to him in the event of any need for advice.

As I say, Canon Austin has been most conscientious in keeping this project on the road and has won the support of the House of Bishops' Training Committee, whose Chairman writes a foreword to the Handbook. But there is a suspicion that the bishops are tending to handle the project with a long spoon. For example, the Handbook is to be published on A4 paper in a loose-leaf format, rather than in

some more durable form, and it is intended that its circulation should be limited to new archdeacons alone. Now the bishops are rightly concerned for Michael Austin's workload, which is considerable, nor do they see the training of archdeacons as anything but a minor part of his job. But they also seem to fear that archdeacons as a whole will resent any interference in the way they perform their task.

Resentment over training is a declining emotion in the Church at large and I judge it time that the House of Bishops review the whole area with some care and put in motion processes which will eventuate in a rational training programme for new and existing archdeacons in which all will be obliged to participate.