

is, then let us know the way in which you are seeking to bring about change. We shall be delighted to hear from you.

## **TRAINING NEWLY ORDAINED MINISTERS**

**By Colin Buchanan**

The Church of England has much in its patterns of ministry about which to be embarrassed or even ashamed (not least in a system of diocesan episcopacy which often bears little relationship to its own public rationale). It has an appalling history of clericalism, an hierarchical caste-system, and a bizarre and ramshackle appointments system. It is compromised by the involvement of the State in many of these procedures; and it has made a virtue out of fudge, cheerfully invoking that new-fangled virtue as a theological principle to justify almost anything it wants to go on doing. I could go on at length ...

However, my purpose in putting up a fairly penitential beginning is simply to provide a contrasting back-cloth for an area in which I believe the Church of England does display a real strength, and in which she can cheerfully look competitors in the face. And my credential is that I am not a blind supporter of everything 'C of E', that I have grave criticisms to issue from within, and that therefore, when I blow a trumpet for something we do, I do so not out of Pavlovian or defensive reflex, but through actual conviction on the merits of the case.

I refer to the training of the newly ordained. I recognize in most 'mainstream' denominations in England the existence of a category of 'full-time' (or as we would say, stipendiary) ordained ministers; I think that in local pastoral situations their job descriptions are not too far from each other; and I find that, for instance, in local fraternals (or sororities) of ministers, people at least understand each other's language and can relate to each other's task. So I dare to hope that some evaluating of how 'we' do things may actually speak to other people's situations, and should not be written off as

merely the idiosyncratic eccentricities of a notoriously warped and solipsist denomination.

I write of the first three or four years after ordination, from the experience of being in that position myself (in the early 60's), twenty-one years on a College staff advising men and women completing their residential training prior to ordination, four years as a bishop with responsibility for post-ordination training, and latterly as a vicar with a little experience of having colleagues in training alongside me. The thirty-four years thus covered have been times of enormous change, so the actual experience gained may well be a diminishing asset, and I hope that is recognized. On the other hand, the time-span gives some hope of healthy comparisons within the life of the. C of E '.

The simple, basic truth is this - that the Church of England runs curacies! No-one can be ordained under normal rules without a 'title' (our lingo is awful); that is, without a job offered by a senior pastor, a vicar or rector. The system has a large amount of the voluntary and contractual in it: that is, no-one can be forced, or drafted, into a particular curacy; he or she receives an offer and accepts or rejects it. The senior pastor (with lay leaders) will interview an ordinand who has come 'with a view', and the ordinand will in turn interview them as a prospective set of colleagues among whom to exercise a ministry, and also to receive practical training. One assumes that all concerned are saying their prayers!

Once upon a time (say before 1970) that was all there was to it. A vicar would advertise, or would write to the principal of a College whom he happened to trust. The parish provided home (often digs for the single man) and stipend. Those whose vicar inspired confidence and whose treasurer could afford home and stipend 'got their man '. The bishop of the diocese was informed at some late stage and he would interview (or ask one of his chaplains to interview) the ordinand, possibly ask for 'deacon's essays', and then endorse the parish's man, in due course ordaining him. He had little choice. Bishops must often have felt like rubber stamps.

In the last quarter of a century all has changed. There is now a carefully balanced system. A central office knows over a year ahead how many will be ordained as stipendiaries in a particular year, and the officer concerned does a provisional division of that total among the forty-four dioceses of the Church of England in

accordance with a complex formula. The bishops {who may be allocated only two or three in a rural diocese, or many more in an urban one) have a chance to ask for, say, one more or one less than their provisional figures; the total distribution is agreed by the House of Bishops, and they pledge themselves then to live by it. The bishops then nominate their 'training parishes' which are to receive curates, and each diocese first of all tries to match its 'own' ordinands (i.e. those whom it originally sponsored) with these parishes; it then circulates the Colleges with the information concerning those not filled. College principals go over the list of vacancies with their final year ordinands, and try to find the best 'match' of a training vicar with a trainee curate. Interviews are arranged, and the appointment agreed. There is no 'directing' of labour, and in theory all are satisfied.

The payment of stipends is in most cases organised on a diocesan basis, so the diocesan authorities are in no way bound to send the curates to the parishes with the resources to pay them. Many should get their first training in the inner city or even in the countryside where there is rarely cash to spare to double the numbers of ministers. Money need not enter into the nominating of training parishes. Sadly, some dioceses (my own among them) have yet to grasp this principle.

Not every diocese necessarily observes the code which guides this process. I recall a Northern diocese which, during my time as a College principal, asked a man to visit a certain coastal parish. The vicar greeted our man with these words: 'I'm very glad to see you: the parish is clapped out; I'm clapped out; do come'. He didn't -and at intervals I found myself telling bishops that the parishes they were naming would be hopeless for training and should not have been named.

Equally not every principal advises ordinands on what to look for (one of the bees in my bonnet was that they must meet the previous curate, even if he or she had already left and gone elsewhere, and even if the relationships had been strained...). And not every ordinand heeds even good advice. So I do not want to pretend that all invariably goes well. But with the right care, prayer and flair, a very large number do.

The whole point of this short article resides in what happens next. The system is intended to bring junior ministers into nearly 'peer' position working in a team with a training vicar. The two of them

will pray together daily; the curate's conduct of worship, preaching, leading groups, taking funerals etc will be well monitored, and feedback will be given; the junior will be given good models by the senior; and the learning on the job will be a properly supervised training experience. A training vicar will be wholly secure (ideally!) and quite unthreatened by outstanding gifts in the new curate.

My experience of both Roman Catholic and Free Church models leads me to believe that there is a pattern of unrivalled value at the heart of this 'C of E' way of doing things. It is of course a function of the large, if residual, financial and human resources of the Church of England that such a pattern can be maintained -and it is also true that the whole concept of curacies arose in a period when the vicars were being sustained entirely by inherited trust finances -but 'accidents' of history are to be turned to our advantage today, and I believe we have developed a truly healthy pattern of warm maturing training relationships for the first three or four years of an assistant's ministry.

This does require a nationwide system on the one hand, and a genuinely freely chosen one-to-one relationship (which may or may not include husbands and wives) with a shared pastoral context on the other. I have encountered forms of initial supervision provided in Methodist, URC and Baptist circles, and I do not despise them - but the ministers are usually on their own with considerable pastoral and leadership responsibilities, and the supervisors are likely to be busy people, with their energies and interests elsewhere. They are needed, but in 'my' terms they are the equivalent of diocesan post-ordination training, and do not compare with the shared team approach. I have even known Anglican clergy (many of whom are experienced in our system) take new Free Church ministers under their wing, for their need is so often to have a local check on personal development and ministerial mores.

Am I arrogant? You can pummel me with hard cases, hurting relationships, unforeseen snags. I have dozens of well-documented cases myself -and when I was a College principal I tried to run a useful after-sales service for former students. But most of the bad cases arose from failure to interview appropriately or to ask the right questions; and not a few came from unworthy decisions ('I like this house/area/proximity to my mother' ...), or even heroic

ones ('I know I shall hate it, but I will serve the Lord here'). Whilst people are free to make their own decisions there will always be such errors, but I submit that beyond such mistakes there exist principles of enormous value in ministerial formation. I am not, I hope, blind (see my first paragraph). But at this point I am modestly proud of my usually rather unprincipled Church.

**The Revd Colin Buchanan** is a retired Anglican bishop and academic who specialised in liturgy. He served as the Principal of St John's College, Nottingham (1979–1985), the Bishop of Aston (1985–1989), and the Bishop of Woolwich (1996–2004).

## HAS THE C OF E GOT ITS ACT TOGETHER?

**By Rob Mackintosh.**

While I agree with the concept of a curacy as an 'apprenticeship' of sorts, and while it is quite possibly true that induction to ministry in the Church of England might be more thorough than that of other denominations, Colin Buchanan's article nevertheless begs some urgent and vital issues about the whole direction and content of Post Ordination Training, of which the curacy itself is obviously the centrepiece.

What model of ministry is being absorbed under the present system?

Watch the loneliness of the long-distance runner in action?  
And who coaches the 'coach'?

There is no consistency of procedures or practices across the dioceses. What role could or should the *deanery* (a collection of geographically related parishes under a rural dean) have in this process? And - I think the most crucial one - what of the role of the *local church* as a 'learning community', not just the 'medical model' of the 'body' (even if it is the 'body of Christ'), to 'practise' on?