

Our Own Others

Exploring the Nature, Purpose and Future of Anglican Dioceses

Dr Wendy Dackson, Director of Studies

Canterbury, United Kingdom

Introduction

I grew up with one Jewish and one Catholic parent. The officiant at their wedding was the Director of the New York Society for Ethical Culture. I was about seven before I realized that not all my classmates had both Jewish and Catholic cousins. I attended worship in a wide variety of traditions, with cousins and friends. As a family, we attended the local Reformed Church in America, where I quickly learned that the desired and expected answer to ‘what do you want to be when you grow up?’ was emphatically not ‘an Episcopalian.’ This is perhaps why I’m not as good at scholarly discussions about ecumenism or interfaith dialogue as I would like to be. For me, it’s less an area of academic exploration than something that happened at family dinners and sleepovers. Living with religious difference is simply a part of who I am.

Coming from a circle of relatives and friends in which difference could lead to sharp and irresolvable debate without undermining loyalty and affection may help explain my sadness at the current divisions in the Anglican Communion. Recently, the dioceses of San Joaquin and Pittsburgh have voted to withdraw from ECUSA, and to ask for primatial oversight from the Southern

Cone. Bishops from the Global South Anglican provinces continue to ordain priests in places where the local diocesan has not invited them to do so. At a more personal level, on my way back to Buffalo for Christmas, I was stranded overnight in Detroit. On the morning of Christmas Eve, riding the shuttle between the hotel and airport, my occupation came up with in conversation with the woman seated next to me. She said, ‘I’m an Anglican—not an Episcopalian. We split because the Episcopal Church is *wrong*.’

There is something not only sad, but ironic about this when we speak of Anglicanism. The Church of England, and the Episcopal Church, historically have been leaders in the efforts for ecumenical understanding and cooperation, and yet increasingly members of these churches are unable to show charity and toleration for those of their own denominations. I will not comment at length about the negative implications this state of affairs may have for either ecumenical cooperation or Christian witness. The breakdown is most dramatically seen at the international level, in things like GAFCON ‘s meeting immediately prior to the 2008 Lambeth Conference. Yet, I would argue that it is essential to reflect theologically on the nature, purpose and futures of the local diocese before wider issues concerning prospects for unity in the Anglican Communion can be addressed.

We have little sustained or disciplined theological reflection or analysis on dioceses. There is a great deal on episcopacy, and although this is necessary

and closely related, it is not the same thing. Theological reflection on the idea of the 'local' is emerging, but often this is taken to mean individual congregations, or perhaps all the churches in a given area, not distinguishing the different Christian traditions represented. I think this is important, given the historic Anglican commitment to making a cohesive pastoral provision for a geographic area which may contain a wide variety of economic, social and educational situations, in addition to a diversity of theological views—including spiritual and material concern for those who may never enter a church for worship.

Apart from news reports of diocesan breakdown or secession from their geographic province, my own work over the last two and a half years has made me aware of the need to think about what a diocese is, what purposes it serves, and what its enduring value for the future may be. Starting in June 2006, I worked as a researcher, examining clergy roles and identities within a single Church of England diocese. That certainly provided insight concerning the diversity of contexts within which ministers exercised their vocations and the tasks involved, but it did not immediately lead to reflection on the entity of 'diocese'. Nonetheless, there was a sense amongst many of the clergy that they were bound together by something more than a shared occupation, a single theological outlook, or accountability to the same bishop. One Forward in Faith priest with whom I spoke was eloquent about the impossibility of continuing as

an Anglican church without loyalty to the diocese, or participation in its life as far as conscience allowed. In my current work, training licenced ministers in the diocese of Canterbury, I am often struck by the clergy's commitment to local ministry beyond their own parishes.

I do not pretend that I can fill the gap that has become evident to me, and provide a comprehensive theology of diocese. All I can do in a short presentation is to begin an exploration, proposing some starting points, indicating some sources to draw on, and identifying some ways of proceeding. Nor is it my hope to propose a single form of 'diocese' which might become enshrined in anything resembling a pan-Anglican canon law. What I do propose is that sustained, patient reflection leading toward a theological rationale for the concept of diocese may lead to greater understanding within and between dioceses and provinces, and contribute to the well-being of the Anglican Communion as a whole.

Why a 'theology of diocese'?

Seven decades ago, Archbishop William Temple said that

The Church ought not to have to think about its principle of Order any more than a healthy man thinks about his spine. He knows he has one, but does not think about it until something is wrong. There is life to be

lived and work to be done. These should be the concern of our thought, and we ought to be able to take Order for granted.¹

Although I hesitate to lean heavily on metaphors of illness,² I think Temple's observation is pertinent for my task. It is obvious that something is not right with the way Anglican dioceses are working just now, and we need to pay attention to this. But as we want doctors who know about health to treat illness, we should know something more of 'diocese' than we do before we try to make them work properly, or (worse) abandon the concept entirely. It is equally obvious that organizing our church life according to diocesan structures is something of continuing value. Whereas other aspects of our Catholic inheritance have been questioned or jettisoned, this has not. As Anglicanism spread to become a worldwide fellowship of national churches, the impulse to retain a diocesan system has remained strong. Temple's image is of something that has a problem that ought to be healed and restored—but first, it must be understood.

It is important to distinguish the idea of a theology of diocese from the various theological positions that may be held by groups or individuals within that diocese. I am indebted to a conversation with Owen Thomas in November of 2008 which helped me form the central questions: What does the concept of

¹ William Temple, 'The Background of the Re-Union Problem', in *The York Quarterly*, Vol I No 1 (January 1930), 5.

² Having made several pointed public critiques of the guiding metaphor of illness in the *Windsor* report, I can only hope that I will use this with integrity and without privileging any particular party within the church, or leading to outcomes that disadvantage any groups or individuals.

‘diocese’ have to tell us about or life before God? What does it express about our deepest convictions about the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ? How does it help us order our lives according to what we believe? These are basic questions, but not simple ones.

The Christian beliefs that may be most applicable are the *incarnation* and the *communion of saints*. Incarnational theology, as it became influential in 19th and early 20th century Anglican thought, takes the ideas of place and particularity seriously. It has become popular in the last decade or so to assert that people no longer live in concrete localities—they live and work in different places, as well as in the ‘virtual space’ of the internet. However, we are still embodied creatures, existing in concrete contexts. It is still on behalf of embodied persons that the church exercises its ministry. The ‘communion of saints’, exists in the present and local, as well as throughout history. Whilst individual parishes or congregations may be relatively homogeneous, a diocese is perhaps the smallest unit of the church in which the communion of saints can be concretely experienced.

Taken seriously, the communion of saints means that we are required to deal with otherness. What resources are available to guide an inquiry into the theological meaning and value of a diocese? My own theological thinking has been influenced by Rowan Williams’s essay ‘On Theological Integrity’. A

summary of Williams' four criteria for integrity in theological discourse is as follows:

1. It does not conceal its true agenda, but rather truly talks about what it *says* it is talking about.
2. It is open to genuine response from the concerned parties, rather than a prescribed or predetermined one.
3. It declines to take "God's view" or claim to have a "total perspective."
4. It provides an "imaginative resource for confronting the entire range of human complexity."¹³

Inquiry and discussion conducted by such guidelines makes sure that a variety of viewpoints are considered, and no groups or individuals are privileged or disadvantaged by predetermined outcomes or hidden agendas. It will not blur the distinctions between viewpoints, and may even bring differences into sharper focus.

We should welcome, rather than fear, this. If we can understand and appreciate the differences between various Christian denominations, and work with those who are 'officially' other, I do not see a good reason why we cannot do the same with those who are within our own traditions. In Anglican Christianity, the smallest unit where a high degree of otherness is concretely experienced is the diocese.

The ministry of the bishop is an important part of the diocese, but the diocese exists with or without a bishop. Bradford Hinze's work on practices of dialogue in the Roman Catholic church outlines the partnership between bishop

and people, and indicates ways in which a structure of shared authority and mutual accountability has emerged since the Second Vatican Council. Anglican Christians have much to learn from this. Furthermore, such reflection will almost certainly result in a more developed theology of Episcopal ministry. It is already evident that ‘episcopacy’ and ‘diocese’ are related, but are not identical. A ‘Bishop Missioner’ for Fresh Expressions has no diocese, but oversees an initiative, and the Bishop of Ebbsfleet is not a diocesan, but serves at the permission of diocesan bishops to minister to those of a particular theological outlook. Furthermore, a vacancy in see does not mean the diocese is void. It continues its life through diocesan synod or other bodies.

Mapping the Territory

What will need to be examined to begin working toward a theology of diocese? I think it would be useful to begin by reviewing the history of representative dioceses in several provinces of the Anglican Communion. This study would compare the way dioceses have formed in the more obvious ‘daughters’ of the Church of England (such as ECUSA and the Anglican Church of Canada), and the same process in those churches which have joined the Communion less directly. Comparison of current canonical norms, including how new dioceses are formed, how they may be combined or cease to

exist will also be necessary. Finally, the relationship that the diocese has to its province, and to the See of Canterbury, will be explored.

I do not intend to supply a uniform definition or canonical norm for the entire Anglican Communion. Perhaps the only Communion-wide norm regarding dioceses (and provinces) should be how they relate to the See of Canterbury. Nor is a strategic exercise with prescriptive outcomes for the future of the Communion. The intention is to engage in patient, sustained reflection, by committed scholars in conversation with each other; therefore, it is not best conducted by a commission appointed to perform a particular task.

Summary

If the notion of ‘diocese’ were void of theological content, we would appoint regional managers as senior administrators. Bishops would then be free to exercise their ministry amongst those who shared their viewpoints on issues such as same-sex relationships and women’s ministries, crossing local boundaries based on compatibility. This way of organising life together would compromise the need to engage an otherness within the Anglican tradition, making it possible to believe that ‘all God’s people’—or at least ‘proper’ Anglicans—are those who share our opinions and do not challenge us in any way.

I am sure this is not what our life before God is about. I am also convinced we should give serious thought to the way we organize our ecclesial life together shows what we believe, as well as helps us live our beliefs more fully. So, this is an invitation to think together on the question, using resources from Anglican history and from the work of other denominations (particularly Roman Catholicism). I also recognize that this investigation will necessarily be open-ended, and may carry implications for the way we view ministry, especially the episcopate. Sustained reflection on the question of the meaning of a diocese, done by theologians for the benefit of the church, is one way of ensuring that our ecclesial structures are more than mere administrative conveniences.

¹Rowan Williams, On Christian Theology. Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), 2-6.