

Lay and Diaconal Administration of the Lord's Supper

(A report from the Diocesan Doctrine Commission.)

Introduction

1. The Archbishop of Sydney has asked the Doctrine Commission to consider further the question of lay and diaconal administration of the Lord's Supper in the light of matters that have been raised since the publication of the Commission's 1993 report, and to make a report to Synod in 1995. The members of the Commission are –

Bishop P.W. Barnett	The Rev E.A. Mathieson
The Rev S.S. Fifer	The Rev Dr P.T. O'Brien
Canon R.C. Forsyth	Bishop D.W.B. Robinson
Canon P.F. Jensen	Deaconess M.A. Rodgers
The Rev J.G. Mason	The Rev Dr J.W. Woodhouse

2. Two features of the 1993 report should be noted. First, it assumed and did not repeat many of the discussions and reports of the period since 1977 when lay administration has been under review in various ways. Second, it was particularly addressed to the situation in Sydney, and did not attempt to deal with the whole scope of the matter as it may be perceived elsewhere.

3. The definiteness with which other points of view have been advanced, and the skill with which they have been put, however, warrants acknowledgment and response.

4. Objections to diaconal and lay administration and the arguments advanced against it, are varied and complex. As is usual in a debate of this nature, there are those who assume the same side for very different reasons, or whose whole method of approach may be distinctive. Members of the Commission have taken part in a number of discussions, face to face and in writing, through which it has been possible to hear other points of view put with strength and in detail. The Commission itself has considered divergent points of view arising among its own members since 1993. It is not the function of this report to respond to all points of view in the same detail as they have been urged by their proponents, but to give the Archbishop and other readers an indication of the general positions being adopted and an assurance that the Commission has considered them and other matters drawn to its attention.

5. There are many ways in which the current debate can be introduced in summary form, but there are three main subject areas which demand attention. They are, first, the nature of the church, second, the nature of the ministry and third, the nature of the sacrament.

The Nature of the Church

6. Opposition to lay and diaconal administration of the Lord's Supper can arise from views about the nature of the church.

The Church in Time

7. It is argued that the church exists through time and that the introduction of diaconal and lay administration is a breach of a tradition which extends virtually without exception from the earliest records. Initially, the bishop presided at the eucharist. In due course, the presbyters assumed that function at his authorisation. But the instances of lay or diaconal administration are few and inconsequential. Union with our past is a highly significant factor in the identity of the church and in its faithfulness to God's revelation.

The Church in Space

8. In the first instance the bishop, and then the priest are seen to represent not just the local church, but the universal church of God. The Anglican Church is not congregational in its polity. The bishop unites the Diocese, and connects the church with the wider people of God. When he ordains a priest, he does so on the understanding that the priest may minister in many congregations. Lay administration is congregational, and endangers the universality of the church by uncoupling the minister from ordination by the bishop. Not surprisingly, it also threatens our unity with other members of the world-wide church.

The Church in Secular Society

9. The debate about lay (and diaconal) administration has taken a somewhat surprising turn. Although the theological objections have been strongly spoken and (to some extent) predictable, there has also been a realisation that there is a crisis being faced by most churches in the secular society, and that the practical responses made by various churches are not altogether dissimilar to diaconal and lay administration. The question is whether such responses are as theologically motivated and acceptable as lay and diaconal administration.

10. The issues facing the churches are to do with the diminishing number of nominal Christians, the increased focus on the local congregation, the expectation of a shared ministry by a better educated laity, and shortage of priests. Roman Catholics, Episcopalians and other Anglicans, Methodists and Presbyterians share these concerns.

11. In parts of the Roman Catholic communion SWAP is the answer - 'Sunday Worship in the Absence of a Priest'. Lay persons lead, preach and administer communion using previously consecrated elements. All but the words of institution are included in the service. In parts of the Anglican Church, 'local priests', 'extended communion' (in which consecrated elements are sent to the congregation for lay administration) have been developed in different locations.

12. These developments raise their own questions. Are such practices theologically acceptable? What is the basic difference between a 'local' priest and an episcopally authorised deacon or lay person? Why should the Lord's Supper depend upon an ordained priest more than on the assembled community?

The Nature of the Ministry

13. Under this heading there are two chief approaches, which may be called in turn the pastoral ministry and the priestly ministry. For some, consideration to do with both emphases tell against lay (and also diaconal) administration; for others the distinction itself is not valid; for others, one or other of these aspects is basic to their objections.

The Pastoral Ministry

14. The 1993 report of this Commission argued from the development of lay preaching for the necessity of allowing for lay administration. There are those, however, who have argued strongly that lay preaching itself has been a false development. The Reformation Settlement, encapsulated in the Book of Common Prayer, Articles of Religion and Canons, provides for a biblical pattern of ministry which includes such elements as the teaching gift and eldership. Priests are inducted by ordination into a distinct office, which involves the responsibility for the cure of souls in a particular place. This responsibility is exercised through the ministry of the word and the sacraments, and cannot, by its very nature be shared with lay persons who have not formally been given or taken the responsibility. The dissemination of teaching and administration amongst a wider group of persons confuses the role of the pastor and diverts attention from his responsibilities and his authority. The priest's ministry is in the church; the lay person's ministry is in the world. Since the Anglican Church adopted such a model of ministry and did so consistently with scripture, it is not possible to alter its provisions so radically as is inherent in the proposal for lay (and, by an extension of the same argument, diaconal) administration. It would, indeed, be better to return to a situation where the distinction between pastor and flock was more carefully delineated. Recourse to diaconal and lay administration should not be considered in default of a proper enhancement and use of the diaconate whose purpose is to provide assistance to the priest in his ministry.

The Priestly Ministry

15. There are also those who would argue that the ministry is priestly in the sense that only a priest has the power to preside at the Lord's Supper. There is a connection between the priest and the Lord which gives the priest a unique representational role. They would draw an ontological distinction between the lay person and the priest, which makes the exercise of priestly powers by a lay person invalid.

16. For some the emphasis is on the priest's role as representative of the whole church (being the representative of the bishop, paragraph 8). Since the Lord's Supper is understood as an activity of "the whole church", it is the bishop, or in his absence a priest, who must administer. Otherwise the catholic order of the Eucharistic community is fragmented.

The Nature of the Sacrament

17. While some objections to lay administration entail similar objections to lay preaching (paragraph 14), others recognise a difference between the ministry of the word and the ministry of the sacrament which may allow a non-priest to preach a sermon but not administer the sacrament. The ministry of the word is said to be an on-going long-term process, over which the priest has charge, but in which he may be assisted from time to time by others who may give various forms of instruction under his supervision. By contrast the sacrament of the Lord's Supper is, as to its meaning and significance, complete in itself on each occasion. While the priest may be assisted in this (for example in the distribution), to give up his leadership of any particular occasion would be as unacceptable as giving up his responsibility for the on-going ministry of the word.

Responses

18. Responses to the viewpoints indicated above can be found in the various reports and papers produced from 1978 to 1994 in connection with Sydney Synod's consideration of the matter. The following comments are offered in the context of more recent debate.

The Nature of the Church

19. The argument from the tradition of the church (paragraph 7) cannot be conclusive. The church is not entitled to lay down as necessary to salvation (and therefore unchangeable) something that cannot be established from scripture.

20. The unity of the universal church, insofar as this is expressed through the episcopate, would not necessarily be undermined by a change by our Church to allow lay and diaconal administration. Diaconal and lay administration, as envisaged, would not be congregational in the sense that is sometimes suggested (paragraph 8). Episcopal authorisation would be required, and the ministry would only be conducted at the invitation of the episcopally ordained and appointed minister. It could be argued that in this respect it would be the same as lay or diaconal preaching, and pose no greater threat to the unity of the world-wide church.

21. The various responses to practical problems noted above (paragraphs 9-12) have distinct theological difficulties. The Prayer Book's requirement that consecrated bread or wine "shall not be carried out of the Church" was certainly theologically motivated, and its intention is violated by the practice of "extended communion". In view of the stricture on reserving the sacrament in Article 28, it is doubtful whether extended communion could be authorised even by canon. On the other hand, the Ordinal does not envisage persons being ordained priest who are not both trained and equipped to oversee a congregation. By contrast the Commission's majority view is still that episcopally authorised diaconal and lay administration of the Lord's Supper is neither theologically inadmissible, nor inconsistent with episcopal order.

The Nature of the Ministry

22. The Commission rejects an ontological understanding of the distinction between lay person and priest, by which the difference between priest and lay person means that a priest is able to do something that a lay person inherently cannot do (paragraphs 15-16): in particular that the administration of the Holy Communion by a lay person would be invalid. The efficacy of the sacrament rests on "Christ's institution and promise", not on the worthiness of the minister (Article 26). There does not appear to be anything in Christ's institution of the sacrament which would render his promise invalid on the lips of someone other than a priest.

23. Thomas Cranmer's view of the distinction between priest and lay person is reflected in the following (*A Defence of the True and Catholic Doctrine of the Sacrament*, Book V, Chapter XI) –

Therefore Christ made no such difference between the priest and the layman, that the priest should make oblation and sacrifice of Christ for the layman, and eat the Lord's Supper from him, all alone and distribute and apply it as him liketh. Christ made no such difference; but the difference that is between the priest and the layman in this matter is only in the ministration; that the priest, as a common minister [ie servant] of the Church, doth minister and distribute the Lord's Supper unto other, and other receive it at his hands. ... As in a prince's house the officers and ministers [ie servants] prepare the table, and yet other, as well as they, eat the meat and drink the drink; so do the priests and ministers prepare the Lord's Supper, read the Gospel, and rehearse Christ's words; but all the people say thereto, Amen; all remember Christ's death, all give thanks to God, all repent and offer themselves an oblation to Christ, all take him for their Lord and Saviour, and spiritually feed upon him; and in token thereof, they eat the bread and drink the wine in his mystical [ie symbolic] Supper.

24. The Book of Common Prayer describes the priesthood as an "office". The office is one of oversight, responsibility for "the people committed to your charge". It is true that the priest exercises the responsibilities of his office chiefly through preaching the word of God and administering the sacraments. However the office is more than the particular activities of the office. A chairman who invites a member of a board to chair a particular meeting does not thereby cease to be the chairman of the board, nor is his office necessarily threatened.

25. The Commission is agreed that the office of priesthood is not properly understood in terms of representing the bishop (paragraphs 15-16). The priest's ministry is "his" ministry. His office and charge is to be a messenger, watchman, and steward of the Lord. However the Commission has not developed an agreed description of the precise relationship between the priest's and the bishop's office. It is perhaps relevant to note that the relationship assumed in the Book of Common Prayer involves the bishop, if present, pronouncing the Absolution and saying the Blessing, but he is not expected to say the Prayer of Consecration at Holy Communion.

26. As noted earlier, the 1993 Report of this Commission argued from the development of lay preaching for the necessity of allowing for lay administration. In defence of this, the following arguments are advanced –

27. The insistence that only the (or a) priest may ever administer the Lord's Supper may have had good reasons in the 16th century. For example, in a day of widespread illiteracy, limited theological

understanding, and a recently reformed church the traditional practice of restricting all public ministry to the clergy went some way to guard it from ignorance and superstition.

28. However to insist that the remnant of this arrangement (namely the prohibition now perceived around certain aspects of the Lord's Supper) must be preserved in order to retain a clear role for the priest (paragraph 14) is unjustified, and has led to a distorted view of the priest's role. To argue therefore that we must return to a situation where lay ministry in general is more restricted, for the sake of preserving the priest's identity, is equally unacceptable. Today we are blessed with many gifted and highly educated, theologically qualified lay people. While oversight of congregations is still rightly entrusted to fully trained and recognised (i.e. ordained) persons, competent lay persons now share in public ministry in many ways. This benefit need not be seen as a change of principle, but an accommodation to these new circumstances in which we find ourselves.

The Nature of the Sacrament

29. The argument about the inherent difference between the ministry of the word and the ministry of the Lord's Supper (paragraph 17) has difficulties. Just as there is a certain "completeness" to every occasion of the Lord's Supper, there is an important (though different) sense in which each occasion of the preaching of the word of God is "complete": the preacher knows nothing but Jesus Christ and him crucified, Christ who is "the whole counsel of God" is proclaimed, leading to repentance and faith. There is a completeness to this: it is not part of Christ that is proclaimed, repentance and faith are complete responses. On the other hand, as with preaching, there is a certain "incompleteness" to at least many occasions of the Lord's Supper. Frequently the "whole church" (whatever this might mean in our context) is not present. This is as true of the common early morning Lord's Supper as of the evening youth service. While one may well argue for the appropriateness of the Rector administering the Lord's Supper at a gathering of the whole parish, there is no good reason to suppose that every Lord's Supper should be like this, or that only the Rector (or another priest) should ever administer at one of the smaller occasions.

Conclusion

30. While the moves in Sydney towards allowing diaconal and lay administration of the Lord's Supper have stimulated a wide debate over major theological and pastoral questions, the Doctrine Commission is not aware of major new arguments being advanced. Furthermore, while certain aspects of the 1993 report have been challenged (particularly the assumption that the development of lay preaching is a good thing), the majority of the Commission still considers that the case for lay and diaconal administration of the Lord's Supper as presented in the 1993 and other reports is sound.

31. However there is an opinion within the Commission that diaconal and lay administration is not consistent with the doctrine and principles of the Book of Common Prayer and the Articles. This opinion is argued in the Minority Report which is appended.

For and on behalf of the majority of the members of the Diocesan Doctrine Commission

PAUL BARNETT
Chairman

21 July 1995

Minority Report

32. This Minority Report relates only to paragraphs 22 to 29 of the Majority Report.

The Nature of the Ministry

33. One member of the Commission takes a different view from the majority of the nature of the priest's office as set out in paragraphs 24 and 25. It is agreed that the office and ministry to which a priest is admitted by ordination is "his". On the other hand, the priest receives authority to preach the word of God and administer the holy sacraments from the bishop, and he is answerable to the bishop for the discharge of his ministerial duty, for which reason he promises due obedience to the bishop and other chief ministers who have "the charge and government" over him. Moreover the "cure" to which the priest is subsequently "lawfully appointed" by the bishop is one which he shares with the bishop. Something of this shared ministry is seen when the bishop is present at a communion service; for although he is not expected to say the Prayer of Consecration, he pronounces the Absolution and gives the Blessing. "Represent" may not be the right word to describe the priest's relation to the bishop, but the priest is not independent of the bishop.

34. The minority does not accept the distinction claimed between the "office" of the priest and the "particular activities" of the office. It is difficult to see that the terminology of the Prayer Book supports such a

distinction. "Office" seems to be used interchangeably with "order", "ministry", "function" and "work". Article 23 speaks particularly of "the office of public preaching (and) ministering the sacraments". The view in the Report implies that a priest could delegate (to a lay person) the tasks of preaching and ministering the sacraments without impairing his office. The minority disputes that this can be deduced from our formularies. The Ordinal expressly does not allow anyone to 'execute the Function' of priest without having been episcopally ordained. Article 26 says that we may use the ministry of those who have authority in the ministration of the Word and Sacraments because they minister in Christ's name, and "by his commission and authority", which neither Cranmer nor any of our formularies suggest can be said of lay people in any circumstances in church.

35. With regard to the arguments advanced in paragraphs 27 and 28, not all members of the Commission accept them, especially the view that the restrictions on lay people ministering in the 16th century were merely prudential and that no change of principle need be involved in now including lay persons in public ministry. The Ordinal and Articles themselves do not suggest this when they speak of "Christ's commission and authority" given to the Church's ministers. While recognizing that some of the conditions attaching to the priesthood (e.g. its "professional" character) have made the order somewhat rigid today, and that the diaconate has failed to supply the assistance to the priesthood envisaged by its charter, some believe that the special prerogative of "God's ministers" as set out in the Prayer Book and Articles is faithful to the doctrine of apostolic ministry expounded by St Paul in the New Testament, and that the move towards lay ministry in church requires far more justification in biblical terms than it has so far received.

The Nature of the Sacrament

36. It would certainly be wrong to press a distinction between the efficacy of preaching and the efficacy of the sacraments or between the holding forth of Christ crucified in both preaching and sacrament (see 1 Corinthians 1:22 and 11:26). But it remains true that whereas every sermon is different and represents a fraction of "the whole counsel of God" which is the subject of the apostolic teaching, the sign in the Lord's supper is precise and invariable, and the dominical word pointing to the thing signified hardly less so. There is a completeness in presentation and signification in the sacrament which is not paralleled in the ministry of the word. Besides, preaching is not confined to the meeting of the congregation, whereas the Lord's supper requires the congregation as its condition.

37. In this connection it needs to be recognized that the situation described in paragraph 29 as "incompleteness" to many occasions of the Lord's supper, though typical enough of many parishes in our Church today, is itself a departure from what is envisaged in the Book of Common Prayer. There, the Lord's supper is intended for all eligible communicants of the parish on every occasion of its administration. This is clear from a reading of the rubrics and exhortations. Except for the sick person who is "not able to come to the church", there is no provision for the administration of the sacrament for sub-groups within the congregation, whether at 8.00 a.m., or at evening youth services, or on any other occasion. The communion is the expression of "the body of Christ" in the parish, and "a sign of the love that Christians ought to have among themselves one to another" (Article 28). Insofar as the move for lay administration is motivated to meet needs created by the proliferation of communion services, or for "the smaller occasions", it is the underlying theology of the Lord's supper itself which calls for reexamination before we make confusion worse confounded by impairing the integrity of the ministry as well. We run the risk of having St Paul say to us: "This is not to eat the Lord's supper"! (1 Cor 11.20).

Conclusion

38. Whether or not "matters that have been raised since the publication of the Doctrine Commission's 1993 Report" include "major new arguments", weighty objections to lay and diaconal administration have been urged in a number of quarters during this period. Within the Commission itself evidence has been presented that the commonly held view of "lay ministry" within the New Testament church is not as well founded as generally thought, and the congruence with the New Testament of the exclusive view of ministry in church, evident in the Prayer Book and Articles, has been argued. The opinion of this minority report is that lay and diaconal administration is not consistent with the doctrine and principles of the Book of Common Prayer and the Articles.

DONALD ROBINSON