
For a book about a system this is remarkably unsystematic. It must be a complex mission to go forth eager to change something un-identified. For the authors appear not to have an agreed even a working definition of ‘parish’. Yet as its adjective, ‘parochial’, shows, it swings between being value neutral – pertaining to the parish – or judgemental – a blinkered vision. If you ask about a parish, the building and the vicar will be included. Sometimes there may be a reference to the congregation. For many their spiritual world seems to locate itself through place. That is why, for example, if parishioners bring a child for christening (their word), they may present themselves as ‘members’, even if they never attend. But this book is not about the parish system. It has more to do with Fresh Expressions. This body has the support of the Archbishop of Canterbury and the Director (also editor) was recently given significant time to address the General Synod. This work focuses the report *A Mission-Shaped Church* and its wish for ‘a mixed economy’ of ministry. And it is a mixture indeed.

The first section, on understanding the context, is the most complete. Martyn Percy, Sarah Savage and Grace Davie present a wide-ranging look at the identity of the parish, a perspective on the complications of history and context, on the roles of the clergy and the patterns of religion in northern Europe. The essays are clear and to the point. Without saying as much, they note that context is not a neutral background against which the church performs. Both interact and the notion of ‘church’ is constantly being negotiated. In England a distinctive approach to ministry has emerged and this will condition any mission. Summed up these chapters aver, ‘Nothing is as simple as it seems’. The next section, on theological resources, begins with Rowan Williams’ essay on theological resources for examining ‘church’ (this use is a mark of the current scene). Then we have Graham Cray on church life founded on a theology of mission, followed by Steven Croft on serving, sustaining and connecting – themes in a mixed economy ministry. The Archbishop’s essay is the most elegant and without a footnote. He essentially asks again of the New Testament, ‘What was it that the recipients of the epistles could have believed that they expressed in this fashion?’ The Bishop of Maidstone, by contrast, ominously begins, ‘Theology lies at the heart of all church life’. It does not, of course. He was chairman of the group that produced the report. But he makes assumptions. For example: ‘we live in a multi-cultural, multi-faith environment...
with confusing elements of secularism and spirituality’. But what if that era is coming to an end and is now is proving mistaken? Christians have usually tried to avoid assigning too much finality to one particular context. Steven Croft writes on ministries, lay and ordained, and orders – deacon, priest and bishop. He comes down in contemporary fashion in favour of the historic threefold orders, with especial reference to that of deacon. But it all lies inside the church. What about the main, if not only, ‘order’ known to most – ‘vicar’? The final section is on ways forward, the first being a robust affirmation of the traditional parish by Roger Gamble, Canon Missioner of Manchester. In the context of this book it is a striking piece, confident that the existing parish set-up is sufficiently flexible to accommodate people of various perspectives. His argument, however, is vulnerable because ordinands are still not trained in Anglican ecclesiology to discern such a pattern. Another member of Fresh Expressions, Michael Moynagh, explores how we might disseminate the wisdom accumulating from the range of activity that is around. He favours networking. George Lings, discusses how newly formed groups mature and then what happens to them. Ann Morisy writes with helpful examples about how to manage a mixed economy church, of which there are more than most of us realise. The volume ends with the Bishop of Peterborough exploring the possibility of a missionary diocese structured through the diocese, deaneries and parishes. There is a concise but instructive short piece by The Registrar of the Province of Canterbury, John Lees, on legal matters and the editor draws conclusions.

The cornerstone of the parish system is not geographical; it is the freedom it assigns to the incumbent. Parish priests are free from interference and provided they stay within the law, they can do almost whatever they wish. The variety of opportunities, which Fresh Expressions suggests it offers, is essentially a restatement of what has been the case since at least the sixteenth century and maybe earlier. On the deanery, too, the points made by Bishop Cundy have been oft repeated, sometimes tried, and found wanting. The confusion in the Church is between policy making and action. Much turmoil in the Church of England could have been more profitable if we had addressed this issue. The Archbishops’ Council and the bishops still seem stuck on this dilemma. The (rural) deanery cannot sustain the conflicting expectations of it, much of it displaced from the parishes or the bishop. Vixerunt fortis ante Agamemnon: there were mighty men before Agamemnon. The absence of reference to any predecessors makes me wonder: did the authors know and discount them? Or did they not know of them and their impact? One thinks of Tom Allan, Ernie Southcott, Austen Williams, Eric James, Joe Williamson