

Appendix 5:

The Church & The Clergy – Trends Towards Secularisation

1. Introduction:

1.1. One of the matters that the group felt that it was necessary to address was an assessment of the current state of relations between clergy and ringers. Further, we wanted to find out if there was a discernible trend towards secularisation of ringing. Whilst the first question is fairly straightforward, the second is more difficult because it depends upon what one considers ‘secularisation’ to be. It could be taken to be a measurable increase in the number of installations of bells hung for change ringing in non-church towers. Alternatively it could be taken to mean an increase, if any, in the number of ringers who take part in ringing purely as a social and recreational activity, and do not worship where they ring, or indeed at all.

1.2. As soon as one starts discussion relationships, one is immediately in difficulty in acquiring empirically useful data. Attitude is a hard thing to measure. If one individually speaks to several different members of a band of ringers about their Vicar’s attitude to the band, one gets answers that are quite variable. Attitude is a matter of perception, not of figures. However, that is not to say that useful information cannot be acquired. It is just that it must be treated with some caution.

2. Methodology:

- The first approach to researching the attitude of clergy to ringers was to approach a body of ringers who are both, that is the Guild of Clerical Ringers. It was anticipated that they would

have a keen interest in this issue. A letter was sent to the Secretary for circulation to the membership. The letter asked the following questions.

What is the perceived current state of the relationship between clergy and ringers in the broadest possible terms? We know that clergy vary from active ringers at one end of the scale to the positively hostile at the other end, with the great majority falling somewhere in the middle. We are very interested in any ideas as to where the true balance lies, and what we can do to keep the relationship in balance.

Is the reported decline in the number of worshippers in the Church of England reflected in the church attendance of ringers, or indeed in the strength and ability of local bands? Are fewer ringers attending worship than ten years ago? What is the attitude of clergy to the idea that perhaps if they want the bells rung, they are going to have to put up with mostly non-Service attending ringers?

- The second approach was to the Ministry Division of the Archbishops Council. Amongst other issues the letter that was sent to them enquired as to whether or not the Church of England would be interested in a centrally administered system of providing education on matters to do with bells and ringing to ordination trainees.
- The third approach was a fairly random aural survey of Church of England clergy who I just happened to meet during the period of the work. Just over 40 clergy were spoken to at some point during the period of this work. Most were from rural parishes around Lincolnshire, but a few were from inner cities and urban areas.

- Finally, a letter was sent to the Ringing World asking for direct contributions from readers. This was printed at the end of September 2001. The letter asked for information in the following areas, and included the following specific requests

Please can you make clear the precise nature of any ministry work in your church in which you are engaged, such as Clergy (Stipendiary, NSM, OLM, etc), Reader, Local Ministry Team, Parish Visitor and so forth. It would be helpful, but it is certainly not compulsory, if you would indicate your churchmanship or denomination. (Roman/Anglo-Catholic, Middle, low, Evangelical. Free, Methodist etc)

Please can you describe your perception of the general state of relations between clergy and ringers in your own tower, and in your area. Do you consider that you are valued, or perhaps just tolerated, or somewhere in between? Are your clergy actively involved in ringing matters, such as attending the annual belfry meeting?

What is your perception of how well educated your clergy are about ringers and ringing generally? What do you think that we can do towards clergy education on ringing matters?

Please can you give us some idea about how many of your regular ringers are also regular worshippers. We would like to know whether they worship at your church, or whether they attend Services elsewhere. If they go elsewhere, if possible we would like

to know why. Is the size and activity of your band associated with the size and activity of your congregation?

3. Results

3.1 The results of the approach to the **Guild of Clerical Ringers** have been a huge surprise. We received just one letter in reply. It was from a well-known and much respected retired Canon who has contributed much to ringing over his ministry. What he said set a trend for what was to come in the discussions with other clergy.

As for the relationship between clergy and ringers, in the C of E there is a whole body of 'peripheral people' from flower arrangers, bazaar stallholders, church cleaners, to men who cut the church yard grass who hardly if ever attend Services. On the whole, clergy tolerate all these people and accept them for what they are, and in these days of irreligion, the clergy seem to be tolerant of anyone who will come and do whatever, regardless of whether or not they regularly sit in a pew. We live in an age of a lack of commitment and of liberal views. Better to keep these relationships alive than to kill them with an overdose of dogmatism. I know that is in direct contrast to all my catholic upbringing and practice, but clergy who are ringers live in two worlds and have to be realistic in both.

3.2. This attitude of practicality over idealism coming from such a senior Anglo-Catholic was to resound strongly in other information that was subsequently offered. What is worrying is that there was so little interest from a body of ringers who one might have thought would have seized the opportunity to contribute to

this debate. Does this mean that they do not consider it to be important, or that replying was just one more piece of paper in the In-tray that was not essential? Alternatively did they consider that there is no issue of importance to address?

3.3. The approach to the **Ministry Division of the Church of England** produced the following response from the Theological Education Secretary, The Revd (since Rt. Revd) Dr David Way.

I am responding to this in my role as Theological Education Secretary within the Ministry Division. You will not be surprised that I receive a number of letters from a range of bodies urging the importance of a particular topic for the training of ordination candidates. Nonetheless it is important to try to offer the best possible training to our candidates for the sake of the Church.

The time allocated to the initial training of ordinands is surprisingly short, either full-time for two or three years depending upon age, or three years part time. The training, which is offered, has to concentrate on the most important central features, a substantial knowledge of scripture, theology and practical theology in connection with the life of prayer and worship. To this is added important practical training, for example, placements and parish attachments, and key skills such as preaching and leading worship.

The central policy with regard to training for the ministry is contained in the so-called Agreed Expectations published in Mission & Ministry (Ministry Division 1999). This is a very brief statement, and the items relevant to your enquiry are: 'Understanding of Anglicanism including ecclesiology, worship and liturgy in ecumenical context' and 'participation and leadership in

church life through practical experience, especially in the public leading of worship, teaching and preaching'. These two items cover a significant range of topics, but one of them would include working with volunteers, for example, church bell ringers, churchwardens, Sunday School teachers etc. We would also expect all candidates to undertake parochial placements during which they might well come into contact with bell ringers.

3.4 The letter went on to say that if ringers were keen to have more specific input into ordination training, by far the best way of going about it would be to approach training institutions directly to see if they could be persuaded to do something on ringing and ringers. It was not really within the ambit of central ministry training to organise this, but where ringers had personal contacts within colleges, they might make good use of them. It would appear that the role of ringers is not perceived to be a central one, and ringing is a peripheral activity on a level with Sunday School.

3.5. The random **aural survey of clergy** produced a volume of responses which had a surprising coherence about them. One of the things that was said time after time was along the lines of the following which came from a Lincolnshire Vicar. This was the approximate reaction of **about 75%** of the clergy spoken to.

I like the bells but I leave the ringers to get on with it. If they ring, they ring. If they don't, they don't. I don't have time to worry about the whys and wherefores. I have got far too much to do in ministry to have time to keep a running check on what my Tower Captain is up to. That's his job. I only get involved on request, or to sanction peal attempts and so forth. If the bells suddenly stopped ringing I would be disappointed, but I would not personally be in a position to

do anything about it. We've had ringers here for the last two hundred years, and I hope we shall have them for the next hundred.

3.6. A priest from the North West was a good deal less interested, and perhaps under even more pressure of work than the previous respondent. His response presents a worrying picture of inner city decline of the church, and there were half a dozen respondents who told a very similar story.

Bells are an irrelevance in my parish. This is an urban group of parishes where the population is overwhelmingly Muslim. Our bells don't have any meaning for them, and we have a constant struggle here even to exist. The ringers get on with it on the basis that they don't come to the PCC for any money, because we haven't got any, and that they don't upset the residents in the Council tower block opposite by too much ringing. I have no objection to bells or ringing, but if it stopped here it would make no difference either way. We are under siege.

3.7 Some respondents were entirely positive such as the following priest from Essex for whom bells are very important. This type of response was found to be representative of **about 20%** of the respondents.

I used to ring but I don't any more. I run three churches with no help except one elderly Reader. I don't have time to ring, but I love the bells and I remember my ringing days with great affection, particularly as a student when I could ring Surprise. I think that bells are an essential part of what the Church of England is all about. It is one of the greatest parts of our church heritage in the last five

hundred years. If my local band stopped ringing I would move heaven and earth to get the bells re-started again.

3.8. The open **letter to the Ringing World** produced the most responses. Again, there was a strong coherence to what was said and by whom, and several correspondents wrote at some length about their local situations. The first point of interest is that nearly all the replies were from ringers who were known to me, either personally or by reputation. As such they were people who had been contributors to ringing for quite some time, and thus could be relied upon to provide a picture based on broad experience.

3.9. One of the early replies was from Phillip George of the Huntingdon District of the Ely Diocesan Guild of Church Bell Ringers. During 1999 they conducted a survey of their towers, canvassing a total of 39, from which they had 38 responses. Huntingdon is probably a pretty representative mixed semi-urban and rural District. Amongst the data provided was the information that 32 of the 38 towers rated their relationship with their clergy as 'good', 'very good', or 'excellent'. Only 2 described it as 'poor'. About 75% reported that the ringers were regular worshippers and generally ringers were very heavily involved in other capacities in the churches. 66% had ringers on the PCC. Generally the situation in this District seems to be very good. It was commented by the contributor that they felt it was incumbent upon Tower Captains to make the effort to maintain relations with clergy whenever possible.

3.10 A reply in similar vein was provided by the Daventry Branch of the Peterborough Diocesan Guild through Mr Geoff Pullin. With one exception, clergy relations were reported to be very good. Incoming clergy receive a welcome letter from the Branch giving them details of who the officers are and where they may

contact people for further information and support. This appears to be a very good idea.

3.11 Probably the most interesting and comprehensive replies were received from a church in one of the 10% most socially deprived local authority wards in Britain. The parish has 10,000 residents speaking 200 languages! The lady Ringing Master has made it her business to cultivate the clergy and develop a relationship that once was indifferent, to a very good one. She simply applies the principle of 'getting stuck in' recruiting mostly from the congregation, but also having a couple of non-Christian ringers. This is a refreshing situation where the relationship could so easily be one of bare tolerance of ringers by clergy in the face of massive ministerial pressure and lurching from one crisis to another in the inner city.

3.12 Overall replies indicated that about **80%** of contributors thought that their relationship with their clergy was 'good' or better, and a very similar number thought that their clergy were well-educated on matters to do with ringing. There were a mere handful of replies which reported serious problems with clergy attitudes, and only one correspondent reporting a Vicar who was positively hostile. However, that Vicar was reported to be equally hostile to the choir, organist and PCC!

3.13 There was found to be a strong correlation between the state of the congregation and the state of the band. Generally a strong, active and well lead church reported a similarly active band of ringers. There were notable exceptions. One Tower captain said that the number of ringers in the tower on Sunday regularly exceeded the number in the congregation, but this must be a rarity.

3.14 It was mentioned by several respondents that there was a feeling that clergy who were enthusiastic about bells and ringing were more likely to be of middle

churchmanship or Anglo-Catholic in outlook. Evangelicals tended to be less interested, but one contributor said that he felt that this was more a reaction against the perceived interests of 'High' church than a reaction against bells and ringers as such. In general, the churchmanship of the clergy does not appear to be a contentious issue in any respect. What is much more important is the efforts of the ringers to maintain clergy relations, several writers reporting that 'suspicious' clergy had been converted to being enthusiastic about their bells.

3.15 There were very few reports of serious difficulties arising out of churchmanship issues. Two correspondents reported having lost ringers upon the appointment of a woman as Vicar, and another reported having *kept* a ringer who converted to Roman Catholicism and became a Roman Catholic Deacon. Several reported that their bands contained Methodists, one mentioned a Buddhist, and there were a selection of agnostics and atheists amongst the overwhelming majority of Church of England members. Almost all reported at least one member of the band as being non-Church of England in some respect, but there is nowhere near enough evidence to suggest that there is a trend towards secularisation here. The writer is believed to be the only non-Church of England priest in the position of Branch Ringing Master in the country.

4. Conclusions

4.1 The perceived relationship between ringers and clergy is on average good to very good. In a large minority of cases it is said to be excellent. Clergy who have churches with bells and ringers are generally well-informed about local ringing matters. This view is shared by ringers and their clergy. There is no crisis of confidence or general distrust in evidence.

4.2. There is strong evidence that a majority of ringers are worshippers at the church where they ring, or at one of the churches where they ring if they ring at

more than one. There is a feeling amongst the members of the Working Group that church attendance amongst ringers has increased over the last ten years. This may be related to the fact that more older recruits have been taught, especially as 'Millennium' ringers.

4.3 Issues of churchmanship and the ordination of women into the Church of England have produced no discernible effect on the general relationship between clergy and ringers. Toleration of differences of view appears strong.

4.4. There is no reported trend towards secularisation amongst church bands. There is no indication that the growth in the number of private 'mini-rings' is having any effect on the ringing of bells in churches. People who own mini-rings are invariably church bell ringers primarily.

5. Recommendations

5.1. The Central Council Publications Committee should make available to all Ordinands a simple information booklet about bells and ringing which can be distributed through the ministerial training centres.

5.2. Guilds and Associations which have ministry training centres within their territorial areas might like to explore the possibility of providing an annual lecture on ringing. This can be supported by the Central Council Education and Public Relations Committees if necessary.

5.3. Efforts should be made through Central Council publicity to generate awareness amongst ringers of the need to foster and maintain clergy relations. The policy of providing incoming clergy with letters of welcome and information should be encouraged. If the current good relationship is to continue, complacency is not an option.