

The Two Catholic Churches : an Anglican reflects

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As a non-Catholic I cannot judge whether Archer's thesis is substantially sound or not. What I can say, however, is that I hear the authentic sounds of the North East Church in his very stimulating and thought-provoking book. In much of what he says he is speaking for the entire Christian community in that area as it struggles to fulfil its ministry in a depressed region where high unemployment affects the quality of life.

What I have to write here I base not only on my own experience—my own working-class upbringing, my seven years as Vicar of St Nicholas, Durham, and as Prison Chaplain at Durham, and my general knowledge of working-class culture in the North-East—but also on the results of a special questionnaire. I sent this to twenty Anglican incumbents in working-class parishes in Newcastle and Durham, asking them for observations on decline, liturgy and styles of ministry, and for their reflections on church growth.¹

Although Archer was not concerned with the decline of an Anglican working class the evidence is clearly there. Let us take the churches of Benwell, which cluster together on the north of the Tyne. Thirty or so years ago there were ten churches in existence in South Benwell of various denominations, including at least two Anglican parishes. Today, there are *none* in the same area apart from one very small evangelical independent church which cannot afford to pay its own minister's salary. As well as the closure of churches, signalling their bleak failure to maintain a ministry among a solidly working-class populace, the service registers of churches in West Benwell indicate the same trend. West Benwell was, perhaps, more fortunate in having a substantial lower middle class to help it to cope with the gradual disappearance of working class support, but even there we find the same story. Twenty years ago the average attendance at the weekly parish Eucharist was 350, but had slumped to 50 ten years later. The present picture, however, is more encouraging and we shall look at the reason for that later.

The inner-city parishes of Newcastle convey the same message. Churches closed, or amalgamated, with the inevitable shift in ministry

from mission and service to maintenance and survival. The handful of Anglican churches in the heart of Newcastle battle against huge odds which threaten their existence. As one Newcastle vicar put it to me: 'My ministry is one constant battle and slog to keep the machine going. The committed young won't stay or they can't find employment and they have to move; the middle-aged have too many cares and can't be bothered; the old don't like the changes I have made to their beloved liturgy and won't come!' Some churches, however, report real numerical growth and put it down to a number of things—a discovery of the ministry of the laity, the impact of the charismatic movement, especially in terms of new songs and lively worship, and the vision of the clergy in stimulating growth. But the overall impression in the working-class districts is that of a church marginalised and of decreasing relevance to the lives of thousands around.

The general reasons for this decline are well known but I would like to underline four as of particular significance. First, the Anglican Church's relationship with its own working-class membership has been shameful (cf. Archer ch. 3). Its identification with the Establishment has long been noted by working-class people and the resulting legacy is generations of resentment, bitterness and misunderstanding. I can remember as a young boy asking my mother why we didn't go to church and I still recall her reply: 'It's not for the likes of us. You have to be dressed up to go. Anyway, I haven't got a hat and you haven't got a suit!' When I did my National Service in the RAF I recall watching a film with a thousand airmen in an open-air cinema in Fayid, Egypt. As an Anglican clergyman appeared on the screen with his dog-collar visible, whistles of derision greeted his arrival. The message was clear; he is not on our side, he represents them.

Second, increasing affluence combined with the secularization of our society have prised away from the church its former monopoly over the social life of the community. Take my former church at St Nicholas, Durham, which up to the 1930's played a very prominent role in the social life of the City. It ran Sunday school expeditions to the sea-side for poor families with hundreds packing the specially hired train. Church-centred entertainment—whist drives, musicals, parties, young people's organizations, etc—was often the focus of the close relationship between church and people. Although the service registers of St Nicholas's do not provide any grounds for thinking that it ever drew working-class people in vast numbers, the parish magazines show that it was appreciated for its Christian charity. But with increased leisure time, better standards of living, greater mobility, the church's benevolent hold over the social lives of working-class people was challenged and eventually removed. It is not necessary to spell this out. The evidence is all round us. Today 'Come on down!' has a richer liturgical meaning for most working-class people

than 'Lift up your hearts!'

A third reason developed partly alongside and partly out of the influence of secularization and increased wealth, namely, increasing educational opportunities, so challenging the Parson's peculiar authority in the parish. Formerly one of the few who were knowledgeable about people, books and things, his place was gradually shared by others and eventually eclipsed. No longer the only 'guru', people were free to listen to other voices of authority—or none at all! So, to this day we will find many older working-class Anglicans who will speak in reverential tones of the academic abilities of their Parson who dominated parish life in the 20's or 30's.

A fourth reason at the heart of working-class culture and one strangely ignored by the Church is that working-class people are practical, active people. On the whole, abstractions bore them. As non-book people they cannot understand an activity which is inactive! One North East working-class woman apologised to me for the non-attendance of her husband at church: 'The reason why he doesn't come is that he can't sing. He feels he is more useful at home!' The perception coming through that remark is of an understanding of Christianity which has more to do with engaging and doing than sitting, reading, praying and listening. This response helps us understand how in a non-book culture going to church and listening to others doing things, does not provide a bridge to people feeling alienated from others but becomes another chasm of separation. This fact is specially true of Anglicanism, which has not until recent times begun to tap the resources of working-class people to any significant degree. I recall with amazement being told at my theological college by the Pastoral Lecturer that the working class was not able to produce leaders. My mind flashed to my community in Dagenham with its flourishing Trade Union clubs and its Working Men's Associations with their energetic leadership. Today I would have no difficulty giving many similar examples from the North East as well. Whatever a working-class man may lack in sophistication he makes up in enthusiasm and practical common sense.

Thus, for those with eyes to see, a widening gulf between the Anglican Church and its working class had started to appear long ago. The Anglican Church unthinkingly assumed that the average working-class family was happy to step out of its own culture and worship in forms more acceptable to that of another. As long as a submissive working class was anchored economically to its ruling classes the status quo could be maintained. But the benefits conferred by a post-industrial society created a freedom which enabled the average family to reject this compulsion. It was now able to vote with its feet.

It is now time to explore ways in which the church might be more effective in its ministry in a working class culture.

1: *Moral Example.*

First, I reckon that an answer is connected with the church's moral and spiritual leadership. A church which compromises its own message of morality will forfeit its right to speak with authenticity in the neighbourhood. This is surely the lesson to be learned from the many examples of the Anglican Church's courtship with the Establishment. Of course, there are notable and brilliant exceptions to that but, by and large, we have lost the respect of ordinary people by our failure to live the gospel. My experience of working-class culture reveals a vivid recognition of rights and wrongs, fairness and unfairness; hypocrisy is a sin harshly condemned. Those who arrogate to themselves God's standards of goodness are the more severely condemned, therefore, when they fall short of the standards they preach. Now, it is true, as Archer points out, that the Roman Catholic Church can no longer speak with authority on behalf of a substantial Catholic group within the country. Along with other groups, such as the Anglican Church, it represents a modest minority. But this is not without advantages, above all the advantage of being able now to move beyond the narrow ecclesiastical and denominational concerns which plague us all, to the eternal, spiritual questions which are at the heart of human existence. The recent Gallup poll shows that whilst many are out of touch with organized Christianity, the majority believe in God, pray regularly and have some faith in Christ. The presence of a Christian folk religion is imbedded deeply within British society and should not be either ignored or despised. Perhaps this suggests that our starting point should not be about how we may win the working class back to us, but how the Church in all its denominational forms may really be the Church of Christ today. To put it another way, how may we live the gospel authentically before we have the nerve to preach it to others!

2: *Training for Ministry.*

Archer criticizes traditional forms of training for the priesthood based upon separation and seclusion. This is true also of Anglican ministry although the period of training is shorter and we have, in addition, an expectation that all ordinands have had some exposure to working life as well as some professional training. In spite of this requirement, we Anglicans have to admit that we do not prepare people adequately for working-class ministry. The Assistant Bishop of Newcastle makes this point when he writes: '... We have not been sufficiently flexible in the recruitment of clergy from working-class communities'. While this is so, the problem is much deeper than that of recruitment. Even when a working-class ordinand arrives at a theological college, the training and community living as well as the unspoken assumptions are all geared to produce middle-class clergy. Very few working-class ordinands can

survive the pervasive atmosphere, which can blunt the effectiveness of a person's ability to relate to his own class. The Rev Murray Haig, Rector of West Benwell, is most stringent in his criticisms of theological colleges. 'Our staff meeting felt that changes must start with recruitment and training. We think that the acceptance of people for training as clergy should be made on the grounds of spiritual maturity, not on academic ability. Training itself should be less academic—and if this proposition alone was accepted, it would enable the Church to recruit many more working-class people. Roland Allan, long ago, and Vincent Donovan (in *Christianity Rediscovered*) have indicated that the Church is usually 'up the spout' about methods of mission. Both these writers have said that the idea of bringing people out of the ordinary into the 'mission compound' for specialist treatment is sterile. What we have to do is not to bring people into church but to go out to people/institutions and christianize them—to take society seriously with its structures, as they exist, and make them Christian by process of infiltration. When we apply this principle to training for ministry, it puts a big question mark against pulling people out of their existing structures ... this merely perpetuates cultural barriers and preserves the specialists. Would it not be much better for them to 'do' theology where they are...?'

The force of this criticism has been underlined in the recent report *Faith In The City*. In it clergy in inner-city areas bitterly criticise the colleges for not providing them with training relevant for the situations they confront in urban areas. The colleges will have to address this need urgently in the days to come. However, the problem is more complex than most people imagine. No church can tolerate a situation in which there are two types of ministry—that which caters for working-class communities and that which caters for the rest. I contend that it would be disastrous to surrender our commitment to a form of training in which the conceptual content is high. We must send out people who know their faith and have a sound grounding in ancillary skills which will undergird their later ministry. Nevertheless, as a working-class product myself, I do hear and respond sympathetically to Mr. Haig's cry. The chasm between college and church is still too great and must be bridged. But how? Two things would make an enormous difference. The first would be substantial sandwich training to create a theological 'dialogue' between academic theology and the real experiences of ministry. Placements in parishes, of course, are already an important element in training. But a six-week placement in a three-year training is hardly adequate. More field experience, properly supervised and analysed by experienced tutors, is urgently needed. Second, there should be sufficient staff of proven parochial experience who have engaged first hand in the dialogue of which I speak. Unless this is done, we shall continue to have academic specialists preparing ordinands for situations of which they have no recent or direct experience.

3: Culture and Liturgy.

It is time we took the working-class culture more seriously. Archer points out the revolution in the Roman Catholic Church as the Latin Mass gave way to its modern English version. A mildly similar revolution has happened in the Church of England as the Prayer Book of 1662 gave way to the Alternative Services Book (ASB) of 1980. In both cases the section of the community which got most out of the changes was the middle class. The overwhelming reaction of my respondents was that the ASB catered for middle-class Christians and did not take into account working-class culture. The Assistant Bishop of Newcastle observes wryly, 'You need to be middle class to find your way around it to start with!' The senior curate of Chester-le-Street, which has a largely working-class congregation, contends that the ASB is 'not good for a non-book culture like Chester-le-Street although it affords greater flexibility and easier language than the BCP'. But the easier language mentioned does not mean that it is immediately accessible as a language totally suitable for ordinary people to express their hopes, wishes, fears and failings to Almighty God. The problem with the ASB is that, whereas a working-class congregation will find the ASB better for worship than the Book of Common Prayer, it falls short of the ideal because their own cultural experience has not been taken into consideration by the Liturgical Commission. When the Rev. Frank White speaks above of the ASB offering 'greater flexibility' I surmise that he is referring to the greater variety of options, which creates more variety as well as possibly being adapted to take on the flavour of the community. But, as he readily points out, it is still too wordy, too abstract and too passive for a working-class community. It is a strange fact that whereas our churches are taking more seriously now the existence of pluralism both with as well as without the denominational structures, we do not as yet understand that there exists a social pluralism which needs to be reckoned with. For example, although the ASB has a number of eucharistic prayers which express certain theological trends, it betrays no awareness that working-class communities may have their own ways of expressing their worship.

4: Buildings appropriate to the culture.

To quote the Assistant Bishop of Newcastle again: 'Buildings are a problem, many of which are alien to working-class people and have an air of otherness about them which does not relate to the life they know'. A recent exciting experiment in the North East has been the planting of 'ecclesial' communities in Chester-le-Street, Durham. Chester-le-Street is a huge community consisting of a number of different housing estates

with a substantial working-class population. The Anglican community is served by one historic building in the town centre. This congregation has deliberately planted new churches within the existing strongly defined communities, particularly in non-ecclesiastical buildings—such as public houses, schools, community centres and health clinics. So, to the question in my circular: ‘What evidence is there that in your church attendance has declined?’, the Rev Frank White replies: ‘It hasn’t—in fact it has increased dramatically as a result of the planting of new churches in non-church buildings’. For example, one of these congregations meets every Sunday morning in the month (apart from one) in the public bar of a public house for their morning service. Through the hospitality of the landlord they have sufficient rooms for Sunday schools as well as congregational worship. The place itself is obviously conducive to making people feel at home as well as dispelling the feeling of ‘other-worldliness’ engendered by traditional places of worship. Once a month this congregation will assemble with one or two of the other district churches and worship with the regular congregation at the parish church. In this way links with the Body are maintained and the ‘new’ congregation made to feel one with a more traditional approach in a traditional building.

This pattern is, of course, not without its questions. To what degree, in our world in which signs of transcendence are so markedly absent, is there a need for the elements of the cultic—space, colour, and faith symbols—to be more strongly emphasized so as to help people become more aware of the spiritual dimension and to stimulate faith? Some might even go further and argue that worship in a public house, community hall or whatever, may be sending out the wrong signals and creating a new breed of Christians who, inevitably, will turn to a house-church ecclesiology when they move away because traditional forms will be alien to their experience. The Chester-le-Street team, however, put two arguments forward in response. First, they declare their commitment to Anglicanism within these new structures. There is no evidence, they declare, that such Christians are any less committed to Anglicanism than those brought up in more traditional ways. Second, they ask is it not the case that the character of the New Testament church was very similar to this pattern, anyway? The New Testament reveals, they continue, the success of a missionary faith which grew in the strangest of places, by river banks, in homes, as well as in synagogues. What is markedly absent from the picture is the presence of religious buildings, as such. Whatever we might think about the Chester-le-Street experiment, there can be no doubting the moderate success of the enterprise in reaching working-class people.

5: Working-class leadership.

I have already contended above that working-class culture does produce its own types of leadership, which are just as effective as those of any other cultural class. Yet, the Church has not found it easy to harness the resources of such people. In the Chester-le-Street example given above it appears that the leadership of the church, the clergy and laity together, realised that the clergy could not man all these church centres alone and so they deliberately created greater participation by lay people at every level of parish life, from preaching and leadership to that of running Sunday schools and house meetings. While this inevitably called forth considerable organisation, the results have led to the flowering of all kinds of lay skills and release of the gifts of the clergy for the work for which they were trained.

Interestingly, in both Benwell and Chester-le-Street the need was soon recognized for the setting up of groups exclusively for men as well as women. This goes against a trend in middle-class culture which is calling for less separation of the sexes and greater participation together. The experience of these two places, however, is the need for separation if men are to be reached with the claims of the Christian faith. This is so for two reasons. First, as men are most notable for their absence from the life of the Church, and apt to regard it as the province of women anyway, they need to grow in their awareness of the faith as saying something to them as men (cf. Archer, page 115). Second, working-class men, usually less articulate, are less likely to talk if their wives or mothers are in a group with them. Both these North Eastern churches report that such groups for men have proved to be a bridge to established Christianity for some men as well as a means of nurturing leadership.

6: The Church as a charismatic community.

Archer notes the presence of the charismatic movement in the life of the Roman Catholic Church and signals that this is not the answer to the problems facing the Roman Catholic Church today. That may well be the case. However, there can be little doubt that the charismatic movement is still of very considerable significance in all the denominations. A considerable number of ordinands for the Church of England ministry now come from charismatic churches of all shades of churchmanship. The Rev Murray Haig mentioned above has no doubt about the importance of charismatic renewal for church growth. He has been Rector of West Benwell for nearly ten years and has seen the church grow substantially in a working-class community. He puts this down to a clear-cut charismatic ministry which is dependent on the theology that what God did in the New Testament period he can do today. He rejects the exclusivism of both Protestant 'Word' and Catholic 'Sacramental' approaches and finds them truly balanced in his Anglo-catholic

charismatic approach. He writes: 'How can the Church grow unless ministry is given back to the *laos*—with shared leadership—and every-member ministry as the fundamental principle along with prayer? That is why I think that the renewal movement is the only hope for the dear old C. of E.—for it seems to me that the renewal movement is alone in crossing denominational barriers, barriers of tradition (word/sacrament), and in its emphasis that every Christian has God-given spiritual gifts to be discovered, trained and used. What a nonsense it is to invest the Ministry in one person!'

I am prepared to agree with Mr Haig that the charismatic movement has a lot to offer a working-class community for all the reasons he presents. Its theological significance, I suggest, lies less in its doctrine of the Spirit than in its fresh approach to matters of ecclesiology, particularly worship and ministry. It overcomes the passivity that is associated with a great deal of middle-class religion and offers many ways for the worshipper to make his own contribution—with the music associated with renewal perhaps relating a little more contemporaneously with his experience.

In all these ways, and probably many more, all churches which are struggling to make a contribution to working-class communities may respond to their profit. But Archer's basic thesis is unimpaired—the situation facing us all, not only the Roman Catholic Church, is urgent. Whatever the reasons for our failure to hold on to the heart of the working-class person, we must endeavour to fight our way back into the sympathies of the working class in the North East and everywhere—and we can only do that together.

1 The writer is particularly grateful to the following Anglican clergy for their written responses to his questionnaire: the Assistant Bishop of Newcastle, the Rev. Murray Haig, the Rector of Chester-le-Street, the Rev. Ian Bunting, the Rev. Frank White and the Rev. Ian Palmer.