The Church of England: the north Devon experience in the 1920s[1]

Andrew Jones

The Church of England did not have a 'good' war. Inevitably, it was ill-prepared for conflict and slaughter on such a massive scale. Many chaplains quickly discovered that they had little in common with the men in the trenches; they discovered too, as did the clergy generally, that they lacked a theology that could marry together 'God', the cross, and the puzzle of two supposedly Christian nations (Britain and Germany) intent on defeating one another – at whatever cost. That the war – however justified in terms of national survival – was not remotely 'Christian' was something very few clergy were prepared to examine. The end of the war – victory – brought in tow a huge, collective sigh of relief: 'after the rage and turmoil of...war, everybody seemed glad to settle down to a peaceful life once more'.[2]

The peaceful life proved instantly elusive. Nationally, the Church was on the cusp of something entirely new. The Enabling Act of 1919 gave to the Church, through its new National Assembly, a measure of self-government that it had never before enjoyed. Within eight years, it was brought face-to-face with hard, political reality when parliament voted down the revised Prayer Book. Old questions of erastianism, pretty much dormant since the 1850s, resurfaced. How could a Church (any church) reconcile itself to such political interference, the more especially interference with its liturgy? And all the while, the Church was grappling (rather feebly) with the immense problems facing the country: recession, industrial disputes (culminating in the general strike of 1926), poverty and poor housing, and so forth. The voice of the Church, heard in its Assembly and in movements such as 'Life and Liberty', was a somewhat timid voice. The great mass of working men and working women, in so far as they paid any attention to the Church, simply saw it as 'on the side' of capital and the governing class. It had little to contribute to the concerns of the working-class.[3]

Locally – and this was particularly true of Devon – the rural parish remained the backbone of the Church. The county had its two main centres of population, Exeter and Plymouth; elsewhere; all was deep countryside with its scatter of small (and growing) market towns and fishing ports. The rural clergy – for it is on them that we shall focus – faced their own problems, two in particular. The first problem was their own poverty. Clerical incomes had been declining for forty years. The long agricultural depression (starting in the late 1870s) hit income from tithe and glebe. The Ecclesiastical Commission and Queen Anne's Bounty sought to alleviate clerical poverty. The Commission raised stipends (by augmenting benefices); it gave grants to maintain curates (especially in populous

[1] For the background to what follows: Andrew Jones, 'The Church of England and the Great War: The Clergy in North Devon', *The Devon Historian* 87 (2018), 59–69. I discuss the 'clerical mind' more fully in *Phillpotts Before Gorham: The Bishop of Exeter and his Clergy, 1831–1851* (South Molton, 2021), pp. 172-200. Long ago, George Eliot provided a typically deft and deep insight into the clerical mind in the scene at the clerical meeting in 'Amos Barton', ch. 6 (*Scenes of Clerical Life*, 1858). Notes: DHC = Devon Heritage Centre NDRO = North Devon Record Office.

[2] From the Abbotsham news in the *Hartland Deanery Magazine*, January 1921 (NDRO 1201/6/10).

[3] One of the dominant themes of E. R. Norman, *Church and Society in England, 1770–1970: A Historical Study* (Oxford University Press, 1976), which remains an essential guide to the Church in the 1920s.

parishes). In the 1920s, the Bounty Office took on particular responsibility for tithe.[4] This was a minefield, both for the tithe owners and for the historian. Such were the anomalies that it was still possible for a clergyman to redeem parochial tithes that had been impropriated (passed into lay hands) in the sixteenth century.[5] Clergy were encouraged to co-operate with tithe payers to seek redemption of tithe, especially where the annual sums paid to the clergy were trifling.[6] The second problem was the isolation of the rural ministry; an isolation exacerbated by the gulf between a university-educated clergy and a deeply entrenched, conservative, rural culture which was largely impervious to clerical attack.

A new, formal means of co-operation brought clergy and laity closer together. Parochial Church Councils (PCCs) were established in 1921.[7] Their principal objective was to relieve the incumbent of responsibility for the finances of the parish church. The minutes of their meetings illustrate (often in great detail) their success (or otherwise) in this objective. More generally, the duty of a PCC was to co-operate with the incumbent in promoting the church's mission in the parish. While the PCC minute-books form the backbone of any study of the Church locally, they stand alongside other sources: the reports of the annual diocesan conference; the monthly *Diocesan Gazette* (the mouth-piece for the bishop of the diocese); the minutes of ruri-decanal conferences (held in the respective deaneries once a year, sometimes twice); the minutes of deanery chapter meetings (usually quarterly); the minutes (where they survive) of clerical societies (informal meetings within a deanery where clergy came together for Bible study, discussion and fellowship); and, finally, parish magazines and deanery magazines. All provide us with an insight into the 'clerical mind' as well as providing us with valuable, incidental detail of the life of a parish church.

I shall use this source material to look at the clergy and their mindset. We shall examine the workings of the PCC and look at the corresponding mindset of the laity. We shall look at the problems surrounding money – to run the church and to run the diocese. We shall encounter the problems and possibilities of music in church and the quest for 'bright' services. We shall look at the subjects discussed at the diocesan conference and in the deanery chapters, And, lastly, we shall discuss the bishop of the diocese and the diocesan bureaucracy. All of this, then, needs to be reviewed in the light of the end of the war, and must be seen against the background of the national church: what were the lasting effects of the war, in Devon, and on the church at large.

(A word about bishops: the bishop of Exeter, 1916–36 was Lord William Gascoyne Cecil; the suffragan bishop of Crediton was Robert Edward Trefusis; a new suffragan see of Plymouth was created in the 1922. Its first bishop was Howard Masterman.)

The Clergy

The First World War brought an abrupt end to the Victorian church. We can all but see the clergy emerging, blinking, in 1919, into a new light of day, a new order for which they were ill-prepared. If the world around them had changed, the clergy had not. (The exceptions were those who had served as army chaplains and encountered at first hand all the horrors of warfare.) Of course, many clergy, including both bishops, lost sons on the Western Front – in this sense they were at one with the

[4] G. F. A Best, *Temporal pillars: Queen Anne's Bounty, the Ecclesiastical Commissioners and the Church of England* (Cambridge University Press, 1964), p. 461.
[5] *Exeter Diocesan Conference*, 1921, p. 17.
[6] Ottery deanery chapter minute-book, June 1919 (DHC 1612E add/DC5). The tithe payer could start the legal process of redemption; the tithe owner, the clergyman, could only suggest.
[7] Some parishes had established informal councils before 1921.

population at large. But this did not necessarily bring them closer to their flock. The distance posed by education, class and mindset was often too great to be bridged. The parish clergy remained inward-looking and defensive. They shared with their Victorian forebears a lack of grace in their public dealings with their parishioners – this is seen in the hectoring tone so many employed in the parish magazines. This absence of grace sprang directly from a prevalent theology. This was a theology of 'merit', in which church-going (and especially attendance at the Holy Communion) was 'rewarded' by God. Despite the 'theological shift' from Atonement to Incarnation in the middle years of the nineteenth century,[8] the parish clergy clung to substitutionary atonement as a model: the sacrifice of Jesus was the outcome of a vengeful God demanding punishment of sin. The hallmark of the Christian was 'conversion', a trust that Christ had removed sins on the cross. (The poverty of the church's theology is caught by Sir John Arkwright's famous hymn, 'O Valiant Hearts', where the deaths on the Western Front are treated as 'lesser calvaries' and the men killed are viewed as 'Christ-like', simply by virtue of their 'sacrifice'.)

We can take one example among many – the Revd Graham Clitheroe, vicar of Buckland Brewer, a very rural parish, south-west of Bideford. In 1921, he advertised a course of Lent services. He wrote:

> I must warn you that I will not address empty pews, and if the congregation is altogether unworthy, I shall discontinue the course... will you allow me to express the earnest hope that whist drives, dancing etc may be discontinued during the season of Lent?[9]

And the next month:

> In remote country parishes, a certain insularity of outlook cannot yet be avoided. To such people, I would say only...for goodness sake try and avoid the habit of thinking everything that is done in Buckland Brewer for the FIRST time must necessarily be wrong-doing (Clitheroe had been holding Lantern services).[10]

A little later:

> I hope every mother in the parish teaches her children both to pray and to learn simple passages of one of the gospels every day. She is certainly a very unworthy mother if she does not'.[11]

A year later:

> There are certain characteristic features of this parish which cause me frequent heart-searching and perplexity. I have never before met so many unbaptised persons or seen the great sacrament of Holy Baptism so lightly regarded as here.[12]

A priest with such an attitude towards his parishioners was hardly likely either to understand them or to gain their trust.

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[8] Boyd Hilton, *The Age of Atonement: The Influence of Evangelicalism on Social and Economic Thought, 1785–1865* (Oxford University Press, 1986), p. 253.

[9] Hartland deanery magazine, February 1921 (NDRO 1201/6/10).

[10] Ibid.

[11] Ibid. March 1921.

[12] Ibid. January 1923. In fairness to Clitheroe, he was not totally lacking in self-understanding. In March 1921, he wrote in the magazine: 'I am at home to men every Monday night at 8 pm and delighted am I to answer any queries or defend anything I have written here, or preached from my pulpit – if you will join me in a pipe of peace'.

Clitheroe, as I have said, was one among many. Here is the rector of Clovelly writing to his flock in 1923 and lamenting the inroads made by football on his Sunday school: 'such needless self-indulgence (.i.e. non-attendance) would be impossible at any of our public schools'.[13] Somehow, the clergy simply could not avoid such delightful condescension (and such an insight into their own schooling). We shall return to the clergy when we consider the subjects discussed at chapter meetings.

The Parochial Church Council

Church councils began their formal existence in 1921. Just as (in 1894) secular parish councils took over the role of the vestry, so now the PCC took over the role of the Easter vestry (with the sole exception of the election of churchwardens; all adult parishioners could vote for a people's warden; all other business was restricted to those parishioners whose names were on the (new) church electoral roll). Country parishes, with a limited number of committed members, usually avoided PCC sub-committees. Town parishes, with larger congregations, tended to subdivide. Barnstaple St Peter, for example, set up subcommittees for religious instruction and care of the youth, home and foreign missions, social service and the electoral roll. A maintenance subcommittee followed. The vicar, the wardens and the PCC secretary were ex-officio on all sub-committees. Significantly, at St Peter, the whole PCC constituted the finance committee.[14]

Indeed, the minute-books of PCCs are completely dominated by finance. They are a litany of ongoing repair and replacement and of endless fundraising: whist drives, dances, summer fetes, harvest teas or suppers and jumble sales. There was a studied formality as people grappled with the niceties of procedure. At High Bickington, south-east of Torrington, the council voted on proposals for the cost of the harvest tea and then on the time that tea was to be served. The minutes duly noted (Sept 1926) that the tea involved 8lb of butter, 6lb of cream, nine quarts of milk, twelve small loaves, six currant loaves, six brown loaves, an unspecified number of 'cut rounds' (basically, a bread roll to be topped with jam and cream), 20lb of fruit cake, 20lb of cherry cake, sixty small cakes, 6lb lump sugar, 2¾lb tea, one gallon of oil, and half a hundred-weight of coal. The hot water cost nine shillings and the dance music cost fifteen shillings. All the items purchased were carefully costed – amounting to £7 5s 6d. Tea was served to 101 adults and 52 children, bringing in receipts of £6 7s 0d. Leftovers were sold for 4s 2½d. Then, the dance was attended by 107 adults, each paying 1s 6d. All in all, the harvest made a profit of £7 6s 2½d. Later that year, an autumn jumble sale raised £17.[15]

Just occasionally, we see a PCC raising its eyes above a parapet: at Loxhore (a remote parish north of Barnstaple) in 1925, the PCC sought the co-operation of the Methodist chapel in organising the harvest tea. There was a slight element of *quid quo pro* as the council had agreed to let the Methodists use the church school for Sunday worship while the chapel was undergoing repair.[16]

For the most part, councils were inward-looking and protective of their own. In 1919, the anniversary of the end of the war was marked across the nation by special services in parish churches. At Chittlehamholt, a member of the parish meeting (an informal precursor to the PCC) proposed that the parish should combine in celebration with neighbouring Warkleigh (very rural parishes, to the south of South Molton). This found no favour, the motion was withdrawn and Chittlehampton made its own

[13] Ibid. January 1921.
[14] Barnstaple St Peter PCC minute-book (one of the parishes with an informal council pre-dating 1921), July 1920 (NDRO 3054A/PP 2, pp. 131-138).
[15] High Bickington PCC minute-book, September and November 1926 (NDRO 2849 add 3/8).
[16] Loxhore PCC minute-book, July 1925 (NDRO 1328 add/5/1).

remembrance.[17] Five years later, Newton Tracey made a not unreasonable request of its neighbour, Horwood, for the gift of a redundant churchyard gate. Horwood PCC considered the request. A gift was proposed. An amendment then proposed that an acknowledgement of half a crown be asked for the gate, and this was adopted.[18] All parishes and (nearly) all parishioners found giving a problem. At root, this was (again) a problem of theology. The idea that God *gave* was foreign. God *demanded*, and demands involved cost.

All PCCs were supposed to elect representatives to the ruri-decanal conference (yearly or biannually) and to the annual diocesan conference. (Incumbents were naturally *ex-officio* on both.) Most PCCs chose their representatives. Countisbury and Lynmouth, on the north coast and some sixty miles distant from Exeter did not, citing the time and the expense involved; and in 1922, when the diocesan conference was held in Plymouth, the vicar excused himself attendance.[19] One thing stands out clearly from the minute-books – there was never any reporting back by representatives to PCCs on debates, whether in the deanery meeting or in the conference. The three entities were almost entirely separate. At East Down (north of Barnstaple), the only detailed discussion minuted over the whole decade related to criticism of the sexton's cleaning of the church.[20]

PCCs united around two particular aspects of church life. The first was the church (or 'parish') crockery, kept for the summer fetes and harvest teas. This was very firmly church property. At Winkleigh, the vicar charged 2s 6d for its use by outside bodies (a charge that included the water-boiler). More generously, at Langtree (near Torrington), use of the china was free (though breakages were to be paid for). At Alverdiscott, in 1929, the crockery entailed a long discussion in which it was firmly laid down that it was *church* property and not *parish*. Ownership was everything. The second aspect was diocesan quota. This was the share of the diocesan budget allocated to each parish. In 1920, the overall amount budgeted was £9,500 (this rose to over £14,000 in 1922). For country parishes, the sums were not great but they were uniformly resented, frequently opposed, queried, and – on occasion – left unpaid.[21]

(One of the subjects that seldom if ever occurred in the PCC minute-books was that of war memorials. This must be because the vast number were erected by ad hoc village/parish committees, representing all shades of opinion rather than the narrowly Anglican. Of course, a memorial erected within a church or within a graveyard required both the agreement of the clergy and (from 1921) the PCC, and a faculty from the diocesan registry.[22])

Services and Singing

Deanery chapters discussed at length the role of the clergy, as leader of worship and as preacher and teacher. There was an understandable defensiveness to much of this: via the PCC the laity now had a collective voice. The PCC could not dictate to the incumbent,[23] but a sensible and sensitive incumbent

[17] Chittlehamholt parish meeting minute-book, 10 July 1919 (NDRO 1708A add/PX 2).
[18] Horwood PCC minute-book, December 1924 (NDRO 2977-7/1).
[19] Countisbury and Lynmouth PCC minute-book, April 1922 (NDRO 1911 add/PV 2).
[20] East Down PCC minute-book, December 1929 (NDRO 2006A/PV 2).
[21] Crockery: Chulmleigh deanery magazine, December 1927, Winkleigh (DHC 4678 uncatalogued); Langtree PCC minute-book, October 1925 (NDRO 1951A add 2/PP 4); Alverdiscott PCC minute-book, 1929 (NDRO 2976 add/PC 1). Quota: refusal to pay, Horwood PCC minute-book, 1925 (NDRO 2977-7/1); unfairness of allocation, Atherington PCC minute-book, 1923 (NDRO 1562A add 2/PP 1); resistance and refusal to pay, Chittlehampton PCC minute-book, 1925 (NDRO B472 add 2/115); paid in part, Barnstaple St Peter PCC minute-book, 1920 (NDRO 3054A/PP 2).
[22] Here, the definitive study is Todd Gray, *Lest Devon forgets* (Exeter, 2010).
[23] Ibid. p. 18.

listened. Sense and sensitivity were not an obvious hallmark of the clergy. In 1922, the new rector of Atherington, T. G. Sheldermine, wrote in the parish magazine:

> I have a great desire to improve the singing in the church... come and offer your services to me and if you don't mind me being candid, I will soon tell you whether you are likely to be of any use...just a little more "heartiness" would make all the difference to our services.[24]

The morning and evening services, matins and evensong, were usually choral. Matins in particular placed a strain on a rural choir – there were the psalm or psalms of the day, the *Venite*, the *Benedicite* or the *Te Deum,* the *Benedictus* or the *Jubilate,* and then the hymns and the versicles and responses. No wonder that the choir and congregation struggled. In 1927, the Ottery deanery chapter discussed holding a choral festival for the deanery, with an emphasis upon 'training' for morning and evening prayer: 'the psalms, versicles and hymns are often carelessly sung'.[25]

One of the fads of the 1920s was the 'hymn festival' (a precursor to *Songs of Praise* on BBC One). The subject was raised in the Totnes deanery chapter in December 1926. One of the clergy thought that congregational singing was not altogether popular and that people [in good Anglican fashion] liked to be left alone. Another thought [quite correctly] that three-quarters of the hymns in *Ancient and Modern* were not fit for human singing.[26] Herein lay a particular problem: there were very few hymns that a congregation knew well.[27]

In 1924, a layman addressed the Honiton ruri-decanal conference. His subject was 'the priest and the laity'. He rose to the challenge: 'the layman longed for a short, bright service and a ten-minute sparkling sermon'.[28] In the discussion, there was a predictable response from the clergy. A similar point was made, a little less forcefully, at Bishops Tawton (just south of Barnstaple), again in 1924. Mr J. C. Webber expressed dissatisfaction 'with the present state of the choir and the church services, which he hoped would be made brighter'.[29] 'Bright' and 'brighter' recur in the various minute-books: they express a frustration that was widely shared, if not always articulated.

Chapter and Conference

Deanery chapters (and clerical societies[30]) provided a safe space for discussion. Topics ranged from the frankly loony (Moses wrote the Pentateuch in Babylonian – i.e. cuneiform – script), through the problems of the day (particularly Prayer Book revision), to the comfortingly esoteric (on the word αναμνήσις [remembrance] in connection with the Lord's Supper).[31] Chapters and ruri-decanal conferences were always besieged by would-be speakers representing every kind of interest group

[24] Atherington parish magazine, January 1922 (NDRO 1562-10/36).
[25] Ottery deanery chapter minute-book, September 1927 (DHC 1612E add/DC 5).
[26] Totnes deanery chapter minute-book, December 1926 (DHC 4559E/3).
[27] The problem of unfamiliar hymns was raised at Bucks Mill, November 1922 (Bucks Mill PCC minute-book, NDRO 3447A/PP 1). At Instow, it was not until 1929 that morning and evening services began with a hymn (Instow PCC minute-book, NDRO 3064A/PP/8).
[28] Honiton deanery chapter and deanery conference minute-book, April 1924 (DHC 3483 uncatalogued).
[29] Bishops Tawton PCC minute-book, November 1924 (NDRO 1469 add 4/1/1).
[30] Clerical societies often pre-dated the emergence of the deanery chapter (these dated from the 1840s). They were (usually) monthly meetings where the clergy met to discuss a passage of the New Testament, have lunch and then hear a paper by one of their number on some topic of theology or church history. Those that survived into the 1920s were beginning to run out of steam.
[31] Barnstaple and Shirwell Clerical Society minute-book, May 1921 (NDRO 487/1); Honiton deanery chapter minute-book, June 1919 (DHC 3483 uncatalogued). In 1927, the Honiton chapter was treated to a paper on 'The authority of scripture in the writings of St Thomas Aquinas'.

within the wider Church.

In 1925, the Hartland and Torrington conference was addressed by a representative of the Industrial Christian Fellowship. The speaker made the rather rash claims that 'most work people love Christ but hate organised religion... many professing Christians are bad Christians because they are only half-timers or quarter timers'. This proved too much for one of the clergy present who – no doubt voicing what most if not all his colleagues felt – claimed that there was no space for 'another society: we are being crushed with societies'. He felt the ICF was 'very nebulous, a sort of jumbled-up affair. Did our Lord, he asked, start a lot of new societies?....in twenty years it will have disappeared'.[32]

The war had contributed greatly to the development of the social sciences. The 1920s was a time when the 'modern' caught the eye. In February 1921, one of the clergy in South Molton deanery chapter read a paper on 'Modern Pathology and the Doctrine of Sin'. The problem with this – as with so many similar subjects raised in other chapters – was that the 'modern' seldom appealed to the majority, suspicious of the new-fangled. The South Molton minutes recorded that 'a desultory discussion ranged from Plato's idea of Spirit to a possible Labour government's ideas on the regulation of prostitution'. Three months later, the chapter heard a paper on modern morality – 'if we accepted our Lord's standard [of sexual morality] hardly anyone would be living with his real life'; and in September, a paper on women's ministry. The speaker, the vicar of Chittlehamholt, was sure women were incapable of receiving the grace of Holy orders – yet, there should be a deaconess in every parish, especially to stem the tide of moral laxity.[33]

One of the tasks of the rural-decanal conference was to staff the various diocesan and clerical bodies that proliferated in the Church of England. The incumbent who had reacted so strongly to the Industrial Christian Fellowship was quite right: the church was awash with committees and societies for every conceivable subject and eventually. There was the standing committee of the ruri-decanal conference, the Diocesan Board of Finance, the diocesan Church Building Society, the diocesan Church Defence committee, the diocesan Foreign Missions committee, the Diocesan Quota committee, The Ringers' Guild, the diocesan House of Mercy, the Women Workers committee, The Union of Benefices committee, the deanery board of mission, the diocesan Dilapidations committee. Then every deanery or archdeaconry had its representatives and committees to support the various church organisations: Additional Curates, Church Pastoral-Aid, the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel, the Church Missionary Society, the Church of England Men's Society, the Mothers' Union, and so on and so on.[34] Little of this was new. The church simply inherited this bureaucracy from the mid-Victorian years.[35]

Bishop and Diocese

Lord William Gascoyne Cecil, second son of the third marquis of Salisbury, was bishop of Exeter from 1916 to 1936. His was 'easily the most extraordinary episcopal appointment of the twentieth century'; a man 'totally unsuited' to the office of a bishop.[36] He was considered more of an eccentric[37]

[32] Hartland and Torrington ruri-decanal conference minute-book, September 1925 (NDRO B913 uncatalogued).
[33] South Molton deanery chapter minute-book, February 1921, September 1921 (NDRO B533/1).
[34] This list comes from the Totnes deanery chapter minute-book, March 1927 (DHC 4559E/3); there is a similar (and longer) list of deanery secretaries in the Holsworthy deanery magazine, January 1929 (DHC 2466A – 5, uncatalogued).
[35] Andrew Jones, *Victorian North Devon: A Social History* (2010), p. 288.
[36] Wikipedia, 'Lord William Cecil (bishop)' <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lord_William_Cecil_(bishop)> [accessed 15 April 2024].
[37] He is the bishop who it is claimed would telephone his wife to discover either where he was or where he was meant to be.

than a nonentity. He lacked the breadth and vision of William Temple (bishop of Manchester and, from 1929, archbishop of York); he lacked the insight and intellectual rigour of Hensley Henson (bishop of Durham from 1930, and the ablest bishop on the bench). He tended to hector or to moralise:

> … is it not a monstrous shame that it should even be suggested that people whom our Lord calls adulterers and adulteresses [I.e divorcees] should be admitted to the Holy Communion?... I am making an appeal to the diocese to abolish party spirit in our church, more especially in the town of Plymouth… I confess that I have a great disappointment in the diocese. I believed that after the war everyone would be only too ready to sacrifice their own interests for the interest of the community....but in the church one finds the same spirit of frank selfishness… I have long found that they (party organisations) make diocesan life detestable.[38]

Theologically, he was naive:

> I have always believed the Germans were beaten by their own bad consciences. They knew they had done wrong and so lost heart… Christ is needed in the workshop and the mine… we need to pray earnestly that our Saviour would consecrate industry.[39]

All in all, he was hardly the man to respond sensibly and with sensitivity to the many problems facing his diocese and the wider Church and society in the 1920s.

The diocesan bureaucracy tried its best to meet the demands made upon it. Inevitably, these were mainly financial. The Board of Finance sought to increase stipends. This was done in two ways – through augmentation via the Ecclesiastical Commissioners and through the redemption of tithe via Queen Anne's Bounty. (Tithe was not abolished until 1936 and the two bodies were not united until 1948.) In earlier times, the patron of the living was expected to match a grant from the Commission (it was usually a condition of any augmentation). By the 1920s, augmentation was largely unconditional. The diocese also managed a hardship fund. In 1919, this distributed over £5,000 among 181 individuals. The fund relied on donations; these fell away considerably in the post-war depression. Emergency grants shrank to £1,355 in 1921.[40]

Parishes were expected to contribute towards the cost of any curate employed. Such was the pressure on income that the number of curates in Plymouth parishes (many very poor) fell from forty to thirteen between 1918 and 1921. Between 1914 and 1928, the number of clergy employed in the diocese declined by a quarter. In part, this stemmed from the move to unite small benefices (so that one incumbent served two or more parishes); in part from a general shortage of clergy throughout the Church of England (fewer men were being ordained); and in part from straightened diocesan budgets. We have seen that parishes resented paying quota to the diocese. In 1924, the Board of Finance complained that it was receiving only two-thirds of its budgeted income.[41]

Perhaps the most distinctive part of the diocese's work was in 'preventive and rescue' work – seeking to help unmarried mothers. In 1920, the Diocesan Association for the care of friendless girls operated a training home in Exeter, Melbourne House; St Olave's maternity home, in Exeter (with sixty-eight unmarried women and fifty-five babies, forty-two of which had been born there); St Mary's home in Exeter, with forty-one patients with venereal disease, ten of whom were unmarried; St Elizabeth's house in Exeter, opened as a refuge in October 1919 (eighteen girls were resident there); the Devon

[38] *Exeter Diocesan Gazette* xix, no. 7 (July 1920), xx, no. 2 (February 1921), xxii, no. 3 (February 1923).
[39] Ibid. xxi, no. 1 (Jan 1921); xx, no. 7 (July 1921).
[40] *Exeter Diocesan Conference* 18 May 1920, p. 7; Ibid. 13–14 June 1922, p. 19.
[41] Ibid. 3–4 June 1924, p. 23.

and Exeter home of refuge for the feeble-minded and mentally deficient; and the Devon House of Mercy at Bovey Tracey (with eighty-five penitents). In addition, there were refuges for women and girls in Torquay, Plymouth and Barnstaple.[42] It was by the standards of the time an impressive achievement.

The Wider World

One feature of the Church of England in the 1920s was that its two principal pressure groups – 'Life and Liberty' and COPEC (Conference on Politics, Economic and Citizenship) – were (on paper) far more 'radical' than the vast majority of the Church's membership.[43] The leader of the both movements was William Temple (the 1920s saw him rise to a commanding position in the Church). While Temple was inconsistent in his radicalism (he was always something of an establishment figure), he *was* prophetic. And, like all such, was way ahead of those to whom he appealed.

'Life and Liberty' emerged in wartime as a movement seeking an independence for the Church from parliamentary control. Something of the gulf between 'Life and Liberty' and the parish church in Devon is caught by an address to the Hartland and Torrington ruri-decanal conference in 1921. One of the organising secretaries for 'Life and Liberty' spoke, urging PCCs to study social problems – 'a paper once a month would be a good thing'. It did not occur to the speaker that this would be far beyond the competence or interest of most PCCs, nor that most PCCs met quarterly. One of the local clergy was brave enough to point to the 'shyness of country church councils' (which translates as an emphatic 'no thank you').[44]

It is interesting that COPEC, which met at Birmingham in 1924 under Temple's chairmanship, simply does not feature in any of the minute-books I have read. Such movements were remote from the concerns of country people; the discussion simply went over their heads. The one thing that *did* penetrate down (and could scarcely be avoided) was discussion of Prayer Book revision, culminating in the rejection of the revised book by parliament in 1927–28. This was confined to diocesan and ruri-decanal conferences (there was seldom any discussion at parish level). The clergy were (inevitably) divided; the bishop emphatically against revision.[45]

Those with wider experience of life than the average incumbent were aware that the proposed revision was little more than tinkering. At the Barnstaple and Shirwell Clerical Society in 1920, one of the members, a wartime chaplain, spoke 'with a knowledge of men's points-of view'. He felt the revision was far too timid; he wanted to get away from suffocating tradition; 'men were being driven away from Christianity… by the insufficiency of our services and teaching… much more was required'.[46]

Perspective

In conclusion, I am aware that I have glossed over or ignored many aspects of church life, perhaps especially the work of the Mothers' Union (which deserves a separate study). I am aware too that, in concentrating on north Devon, I have ignored the two main centres of population in the county. In

[42] Ibid. 18 May 1920, pp. 15–16.
[43] A repeated refrain in Norman, *Church and Society in England, 1770–1970: A Historical Study.*
[44] Hartland and Torrington ruri-decanal conference minute-book, July 1921 (NDRO B913 uncatalogued).
[45] The bishop's address to the diocesan conference in 1927 dwelt on his opposition (*Exeter Diocesan Conference,* 13–14 June 1927, pp. 5–9).
[46] Barnstaple and Shirwell Clerical Society minute-book, May 1920 (NDRO B487/1).

particular, Plymouth's experience was (in many ways, I imagine) different from rural Devon in general. This is caught for us by Anne Corry's essay on Plymouth and Prayer Book Revision – a conurbation with its many churches and clergy could sustain a debate in a way not found in the north of the county.[47] And Plymouth, of course, had a concentration of extremes of churchmanship not found elsewhere in the diocese.

Historical research deals firstly with its sources and only secondarily with narrative. Any narrative derived from those sources inevitably curtails them, just as the sources themselves are a curtailment of the events they seek to describe. I am particularly aware that I have interpreted my sources in a certain way. Could they be interpreted differently? Undoubtedly, if we decide that it is wrong to judge the past by the values and standards of the present. I suspect that the result would not be history, rather description. We cannot help but bring our current understanding of (a) the role of the Church and (b) the meaning of the Christian faith it espouses to bear upon the source material (knowing that a future generation will be equally critical of today's Church and its clergy). Indeed, in each generation the Church has to rediscover its purpose.

At this point, the clergy of the 1920s were at a particular disadvantage. The war accelerated social change, the more especially the growth of secularism and atheism. The really rapid decline of Christian faith did not set in until the 1960s, but the seeds were sown forty years before. The clergy were ill-equipped to descry change, to understand it, to embrace it or to challenge it. There were very few prophetic voices. And those that were raised (in the leadership of 'Life and Liberty' for example) failed to engage with working-class culture. The clergy generally were trapped within a conservative (and often naively fundamentalist) mindset that clung to 'Biblical certainties'.[48]

In the 'new' world of the 1920s, the clergy found themselves increasingly pushed to the margins of society and its social order. They were no longer leaders. (This was less evident in rural Devon than in the industrial towns or cities.) In particular, the war opened up a fault line that already existed in the Church and that was its relationship to men, particularly working men. The Church of England had become a church of women and children. Of course, men attended and men were on PCCs, but they tended to be middle class.[49] Many a country PCC had its retired lieutenant-colonel or brigadier; very few had an agricultural labourer. The war, with its mass mobilisation of working men, exposed the weakness of the hold of the church on men. The corollary of this was that clergy had become a 'third sex'. The bishop sought to in vain to counter such a perception.[50]

The source material available to us (and it survives in quantity) is a sociologist's dream. Pretty much wherever we look in Devon, we find the same patterns of understanding, of experience, of behaviour. Rural society was everywhere conservative, suspicious of the new, inward-looking and resentful of outside interference. The clergy who ministered in the parishes were often unsympathetic to this culture; they found it impenetrable and impervious to their version of 'the gospel'.

There is great scope for a much more detailed and wider-ranging study of the Church in its local

[47] I am grateful to Dr Julia Neville for allowing me to see Anne Corry's unpublished essay on '1928 Prayer Book Revision' in Plymouth (also in the Devon in the 1920s Research Collection), in which Anne describes the debate about the proposed prayer book, drawing heavily upon the (very full) local press reports.

[48] Historical criticism of the New Testament, led by German scholars (Rudolph Bultmann and Martin Dibelius) was beginning to take effective root in British universities; it took a long time to filter down into the pulpit.

[49] At Filleigh, just to the west of South Molton, Earl Fortescue and his wife, the countess, were both elected to the newly formed PCC (Filleigh PCC minute-book, April 1920, NDRO 3335/3/2).

[50] 'People have a distorted idea of what a clergyman should be – a kind of womanish-affected man, quite wrongly associated with the idea of priesthood' *Exeter Diocesan Gazette*, xix no. 11 (November 1920).

setting. One of the current drawbacks is the paucity of research into the Church in the 1920s. Above, I have attempted a tentative and rather shallow borehole. We need studies from other dioceses, and contrasting dioceses.