

34/99 Establishment of Congregations as Parishes

(A report from the Standing Committee.)

Background

1. At the first ordinary session of the 45th Synod, the Synod requested that a copy of the report from Standing Committee 33/98 *Establishment of Congregations as Parishes* (the "1999 report") and the proposed ordinance for the Recognised Churches Ordinance 1999, be sent for comment to -

- (a) the Indigenous Peoples' Ministry Committee;
- (b) the leadership of each multi-cultural congregation;
- (c) each parish council;
- (d) each Regional Council; and
- (e) the Archbishop.

Synod requested that the comments be sought with a view to the Standing Committee providing a report and bill for debate at the 2nd session of the 45th Synod. Synod also requested that the Standing Committee ensure that this matter be given high priority in the business agenda for that session of the Synod.

2. The Diocesan Secretary received in excess of 50 submissions on the proposed ordinance. The significant majority of submissions dealt with the principles identified in the 1999 report used to draft the ordinance. A smaller number of submissions provided detailed drafting suggestions regarding the ordinance or raised issues not directly connected with the principles identified in the 1999 report.

3. This report summarises the main issues raised in submissions dealing with the principles used to draft the ordinance.

Summary of Main Issues

4. The main issues raised in the submissions were whether -
- it is desirable, as a matter of Anglican polity, to pursue the objects of the proposed ordinance through the existing parish structure rather than by creating independent and non-territorial recognised churches
 - there is a need for greater and earlier involvement of regional councils, parish councils and other interested parties in the process of establishing recognised churches within the Diocese
 - the criteria of financial viability, as it is currently framed, would inappropriately exclude certain types of congregation from becoming recognised churches
 - the suggested minimum number of members necessary to establish a recognised church is too high

- the criteria of “distinctiveness” necessary to establish a recognised church runs contrary to the inclusive nature of gospel ministry
- it is desirable to ordain (and licence) a person specifically to be the minister of a recognised church
- there is a need for a recognised church to formally consult with a parish and other interested parties prior to it moving its meeting place into the parish
- there is a need to more fully address the relationship between recognised churches and existing parishes and the disputes that might arise between them
- recognised churches present a diminished view of the church to the extent they are unable or unwilling to discharge the customary responsibilities of a parish to the broader community (eg. chaplaincy, baptisms, funerals).

Recognised Churches and Anglican Policy

5. The Northern Regional Council considered that the ordinance is in line with overseas practice, including for example in the Protestant Episcopal Church of the United States and the Dioceses of Singapore and Hong Kong. The Council expressed the view that geographically limited congregations are “an anachronistic straightjacket”.

6. Other submissions expressed the view that the existing parish structure had failed to effectively reach the community and population at large with the gospel. One submission said -

“The value of the proposal in the bill can be thought of differently according to your starting point. If you start with the traditional, parochial, property related model, as we have it, you are forced to the conclusion that it has failed to make significant inroads into the community for the gospel. According to National Church Life Survey, the Anglican church, with this traditional model, is effectively reaching less than 2% of the Australian population, and in many parts of our diocese that number is very much smaller and falling. When you consider the resources tied up in this model and the relatively low return on these resources you have to ask why?

... Our diocese has struggled to penetrate the ethnic communities and to build really viable ethnic churches. This proposal both provides a pathway of recognition for such ministries which have been successful and opens up possibilities for new churches to embark on gospel initiatives without the burden of raising capital or being hemmed in by traditional Diocesan procedures.”

7. On the other hand a number of submissions expressed the view that there was no reason why the traditional parish structure

could not be used to provide “for a range of styles and ministries, which allow a great number of people from beyond the traditional parish boundary to attend their preferred congregation”. A submission along these lines suggested that -

“If the real reason for the move is to allow greater experimentation with formation of small groups which are distinctive, there are much safer ways to do this, by the Synod allocating money, employing staff, etc, and then preferably feeding these people into existing parishes.”

8. Other submissions noted the fundamental changes to our Anglican polity that the introduction of recognised churches will cause. For example -

“The proposed ordinance seems actually to be a challenge to the whole polity of the diocese and demands a discussion about a more fundamental level of change ... If we want to move in this direction, perhaps we need to toss the whole lot up in the air and re-examine the whole polity of the church in this diocese.”

9. One submission considered that by creating non-territorial units, the proposed ordinance moves away from establishing congregations as parishes. This, it was suggested, represented a “distortion of the spirit” of the Synod resolution.

Process for Recognition

10. The major issue regarding the proposed process for recognition of a recognised church related to the perceived lack of involvement of parishes and regional councils. This was expressed in one submission as follows -

“The exclusion of existing parishes from the entire process proposed by the ordinance is totally unacceptable. The only time an existing parish is to be consulted or notified is ‘*after a declaration under sub-clause*’ has been made. This means that in reality, an existing Parish is formally advised, after the fact, that a Recognised Church now exists within or near their boundaries.

... We are concerned that under the proposed ordinance the Regional Council will have a purely administrative role in the creation of recognised churches with no formal ability to recommend alternate courses of action. This would place too little reliance on the strategic planning and development roles of regional councils and correspondingly puts too much pressure on the Archbishop to be the sole arbiter of whether such congregations should be welcomed into the communion ...”

11. The submission from the South Sydney Regional Council was one of a number of submissions which supported the view that a

regional council should have a role in the planning and development of the congregation *prior* to recognition -

“The proposed legislation only gives a role to the Council at the end stage of the process. They are in effect asked to give a rubber stamp to a *fait accompli*. The congregation already exists, has met the criteria for recognition as far as they are aware and has applied to the Archbishop for his approval. A congregation that was rejected by a Regional Council having jumped through all those hoops should understandably feel badly done by. A Regional Council on its part would feel that it had been bypassed in the strategic planning and development of the congregation which is supposed to be part of its function. This is a recipe for a host of pastoral problems. These and related problems could be solved by involving the Regional Council at the ‘threshold stage’ of development. Long before a congregation meets all the recognition criteria, its leaders could inform the Regional Council of their plans and the way things are likely to develop. The Council would be in a position to encourage and support the initiative and talk to other interested parties who may want to know how the proposed ministry impacts upon them, eg. Rectors of other parishes in the area, or leaders of other similar ministries.”

12. On the other hand the view was expressed that -

“Many of the comments made of the ordinance’s provisions for the role of regional councils and the bishops may be true as far as they go, but they betray a top-down mentality of ministry which plainly does not cover the whole gamut of churches presently functioning. Of course there will be and should be churches started at the instigation of the bishop and/or the Regional Council - would that all our bishops could be freed to do this - the system hamstring them.

But the main aim of the ordinance is to make provision for the recognition (should they so wish) of the many (and increasing) number of churches not started in this way.”

Criteria for Recognition

Finance

13. The most significant concern expressed regarding the criteria for recognition of financial viability was that -

“the only groups that could fulfill those criteria will be made up of middle class people, which appear to be the assumed target group of those proposing the ordinance”.

This view was supported by the submission from the Sydney Anglican Indigenous Peoples' Ministry Committee which stated -

“the financial viability criteria will exclude Indigenous congregations as the amount required (financial support for the minister, assessments and housing provision) is way beyond the present capacity of such congregations”.

Minimum Number of Members

14. In his submission, the Archbishop indicated that some of the ethnic congregations in the Diocese will probably need to be recognised well before they reach the number of 120. This view was supported by the submission from the Anglican Chinese Worker and Clergy Fellowship which proposed a number of 50 communicants regularly attending Sunday service. A similar view was expressed by the Sydney Anglican Indigenous Peoples' Ministry Committee which stated that “there are no indigenous congregations in this country which reach the minimum of between 80 and 120 members”.

Distinctiveness

15. The most significant concern expressed in respect of the criteria of distinctiveness was expressed in the submission from the South Sydney Regional Council as follows -

“The Council was of the view that this concept [of distinctiveness] has not been sufficiently thought through and defined. Although there was general agreement that ethnic and language groups formed distinct congregations, there was concern about distinctiveness on the grounds of socio-economic, occupational or even age identity. This appears to be a different model of church from the New Testament where diversity seems to be a characteristic. There have been Christian fellowships of doctors, teachers, nurses, lawyers, etc. for years, but they have not pretended to be separate congregations.”

16. The Sydney Anglican Indigenous Peoples' Ministry Committee expressed the similar view that “whilst ministry must be culturally expressive, it must be based on inclusiveness rather than exclusiveness”.

17. The Georges River Regional Council submitted that the proposed criteria of “distinctiveness” would lead to exclusivity which

is not a gospel value unless “distinctiveness” is clearly communicated as a shorter term value for starting up rather than permanent. This idea was expressed in another submission -

“We believe the churches recognized under the Ordinance must be seen as transitional or even temporary. While distinctiveness may be a good basis for evangelism, it is a denial of the nature of the church: interest-based churches are the narrower and the poorer for that. Accordingly, recognised churches must be seen to have a limited existence, albeit the limitation of a generation or so: the creation of distinctive churches is not an end in itself.”

18. One submission, in referring to the point that “the homogenous principle breaks down” made the following observations -

“... this point needs to be more fully explained if it is to be the basis of discussion. But what I do like is the reference to the importance of ‘reaching everyone’ and ‘all the lost must be won’. I believe that is our commission and that we have to be inventive in our approach and not be tied down to obsolete and ineffective ways to reach out to all the lost. If this means following the homogenous principle for a while, so be it. If some circumstances later give way to diversity, so be it. We ought to remember that many of our present methods, by default, follow the homogenous principle. My 8am congregation tend to be older and more attracted to traditional forms of worship. The 10am congregation tend to be family based and allow for more flexible forms of worship suitable to them. Evening services tend to attract young people and be tailored to their tastes. This is a modification of the homogenous principle and in my view it is good.”

Suitable Minister

19. A number of submissions expressed concern regarding the proposed ordination of persons specifically for the purposes of leading a recognised church. One submission expressed this concern as follows -

“The proposed method of selection, and immediate ordination to the priesthood of the minister of a *Recognised Church* is another area of concern. Due to restrictive nature of the minister’s licence, and their inability in the normal course of events, to be appointed to a ‘normal’ Sydney Parish, the ordinance will effectively create a ‘fourth’ or ‘second class’ level of Ordination within the Diocese - that of a *Provisional Priest*”.

This is a significant departure from our present polity re ordination. Once a person is ordained, they usually

remain in holy orders for the rest of their life. However, a person so ordained under this proposed ordinance will not be permitted to function as a priest anywhere else in Sydney. Will they then become unordained? Will they be recognised by other Anglican Dioceses?

... The proposed ordinance places the Archbishop in a very difficult position in having to approve or disapprove of a person selected by a congregation for ordination, especially if such a person may have already been functioning as the Pastor of that congregation for quite some time."

20. In his submission, the Archbishop expressed the issue in different terms -

"There is a problem for the Archbishop in ultimately being presented with a person for ordination for whom there has been no supervision in the way we normally evaluate those whom we ordain. Certainly, the criteria of being able to create a church and bring it to the size required is an indication of ability, but that is not the only criterion we use. I believe it would be necessary for some supervision to be exercised over a person who is leading such a congregation so that if there were issues that might preclude an Archbishop from later accepting a person as fit for ordination, this would be known well beforehand."

21. In recognition that there are some people who have the gift of planting churches, the Wollongong Regional Council suggested that "such church planters be given specialist training, perhaps even be formed into teams, and authorised by the Archbishop for use by parishes and regional councils".

22. Support for the approach taken in the proposed ordinance was expressed in one submission as follows -

"As a CMS principle says 'Under God all will depend on the type of person sent out'. There are marvellously gifted and godly men and women being sent out from MTC and SMBC in these years, whose ministry must be supported, not hamstrung by even more regulation that we have at the moment.

As a denomination we are not very good at learning the lesson that is very stifling and counter-productive to try and tie down the future. We do not know what shape the life of our denomination will take in 10 or 15 years time. This must cause us to be careful in what we insist on and prescribe for people at the cutting edge of ministry. CESA has always functioned along the lines of sending the best people out and as the work grows under them, putting structures in place to support them. If that means 'temporary' ordination, or part-time ministry, as it

has meant in the past in our diocese and other parts of Australia, so be it.”

Mobility

23. The main issue expressed in respect of mobility of recognised churches related to the level of consultation with bodies effected by a move of the meeting place of a recognised church. One submission expressed the view that -

“[T]here should be a process of discussion with the parish into which they are moving their ministry prior to such move. Again, the recognised church should not require the approval of the ‘host’ parish to move into their area, but we should encourage a process of discussion and support between the two ministries if at all possible.”

Relationship with Existing Parishes and Dispute Resolution

24. A number of submissions expressed a concern as to how recognised churches will relate to existing parish ministries. The submission from the Georges River Regional Council expressed this concern as follows -

“Regional Council’s experience has been that where the various parties show good will, a common understanding and desire for Gospel growth to happen, a negotiation process will achieve harmonious results in the establishment of new churches.

Regional Council is very concerned that unless altered drastically the proposed ordinance has the potential to cause tense relationships and even schism.”

25. A variant of this view was expressed in another submission -

“We can imagine situations where a breakdown of relations within a parish might be addressed by an identifiable group (young people, professionals, an evening congregation) deciding to separate itself and then, because of its ability to demonstrate viability as a stand alone unit, re-establish itself as an Anglican congregation under the terms of the ordinance.”

26. One submission disputed the inevitability of such disputes while indicating -

“They may be likely in some cases but not inevitable and even if there are disputes, does this mean that the proposal is wrong?”

27. Another submission indicated that -

“Getting worked up over boundaries does not seem helpful when I consider, at best, our church reaches 200 on any one Sunday in a parish of 12,000. Even all the

Protestant Churches within these nominal boundaries (including a wide variety of theology) together reach only about 600.

So at best reckoning only 5% of the population are in Protestant Churches each week. So there is plenty for other church planting efforts. I hope I would have the grace to welcome any biblically based, Christ-honouring churches who set up in our little area of the world!"

Responsibilities and Benefits

28. A number of submissions considered that the recognised church established under the proposed ordinance would inherently be incapable of exercising the responsibilities of an existing parish to the community at large. This was expressed in one submission as follows -

"If the aim of this legislation is to enable the establishment of 'special types of churches' which can have no relationship with the local community (which the proposed Ordinance requires), then the life of such 'recognised church' can only be as good as the transient nature of the people who pay allegiance to the 'minister' appointed: rather than the present method of selection; bringing an incumbent 'the care of' and 'community ownership and recognition' for him, will likely result in such 'recognised church' probably being at best 'transient' and having little or no substance and reality in a society with an increasing need of depth and security - physical, emotional, temporal and spiritual."

29. This issue led another submission to remark that -

"The 'recognised church' could well drain off human-resources in a particular location and make the school and hospital ministry so much harder to maintain. It could be that the 'recognised church' would have all the advantages of a congregation of like-minded people but avoid the responsibilities for ministry in the [wider community]."

30. Similar sentiments led one submission to conclude that "we do not believe that such congregations should be afforded all the benefits of a parish".

For and on behalf of the Standing Committee

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