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Bishops

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Bishops

Paul Avis

This article examines the phenomenon of bishops in Christian theology, church history, and the present role, work, and identity of a bishop. The article tries to answer the questions: ‘what does a bishop do?’ and ‘what is a bishop for?’ The approach to answering this question assesses scriptural, historical, theological, liturgical, and ecumenical material, but it concentrates on the ministry of a bishop as an ecclesial practice, looking at it phenomenologically, functionally, and experientially. The role of bishops in the church and especially in church unity has been extensively discussed in ecumenical dialogue during the past century. But surprisingly – and in contrast to the literature on the ministry of priests and even (more recently) deacons – little has been written about the actual work and role of a bishop in the church and about what it is like to be a bishop: the unique episcopal experience (Avis 2015).

The article begins by looking at the origins of episcopacy in the New Testament and in the early Christian era, and goes on to survey the variegated evolution of episcopal ministry in the worldwide church. The article then concentrates on the common tasks and responsibilities of bishops, how the episcopate is related in theology and practice to the ministries of priests, deacons, and lay people in the church, and the role of bishops in the public square. In conclusion, the article briefly examines the way that the ecumenical movement and its theology has treated the perceived promise and problem of episcopacy for Christian unity.

Keywords: Episcopacy, Historic episcopate, Priests, Deacons, The pope, Apostolic succession, Ecumenism, Church unity, Authority, The Christian church

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1 Introduction

1.1 Phenomenology of bishops

Bishops are one of the salient phenomena of the Christian church. Throughout history they have been prominent in the public profile of the church, interacting with other bishops and with the papacy, with princes, kings and emperors. Potent bishops have been instrumental in momentous religious events, such as councils of the church, and have both generated and inflamed the controversies in theology and practice that gave rise to those councils and subsequently accompanied the reception of their teaching (Stephens 2015). A number of bishops of the early church were theologians whose writings have shaped Christian theology, including the teachings of the councils, and are still studied today. However, it is salutary to remember, in connection with the role of bishops in history, that normally bishops have not been able to either initiate or conduct such councils without the permission and direction of the civil ruler, a pattern that began with the Council of Nicaea in 325 CE under the Emperor Constantine I. Nevertheless, the title 'bishop' – and even more the title of 'archbishop' – still has a certain cache and carries prestige. So it is not surprising that these titles are not the sole preserve of the historic churches whose episcopates extend back in time to the early centuries of Christianity. Recently-founded independent, Pentecostal and African Instituted churches also relish these titles and use them and their accompanying regalia with aplomb. While bishops have been prominent historically in the public affairs of church and state, they have also (in many cases) been devoted pastors of their flocks, ministering word and sacrament, which is, after all, their primary calling.

1.2 Resistance to episcopacy

In approaching the topic of bishops, we should also bear in mind that there are some historic, mainstream churches that do not have bishops in their polity and do not want them. The Reformed tradition that originated in the Swiss Reformation (notably in the Geneva of John Calvin and Theodore Beza) enshrines the parity of presbyters in its trust deeds, and in recent times it has been reluctant to accept episcopacy even for the sake of Christian unity – though this has happened in certain of the United Churches of South Asia. The Reformed Church of Hungary is exceptional in retaining the ministry of bishops, albeit set within a synodical structure of governance. The Church of Scotland has on more than one occasion rejected proposals for closer unity with episcopally-ordered churches in Britain. During the Reformation and afterwards, bishops became a point of contention between various Protestant groupings, especially in England. Today, while all churches have some form of structured oversight (*episkopē*), not all have a personal episcopacy. So bishops are by no means a universal phenomenon of Christianity. Disputes between the churches about ecclesiastical polity, combined with asymmetrical structures of governance

and leadership, make aspirations to heal the wounds of disunity in the church very difficult to achieve (Avis 2022).

2 Origins

2.1 Historical and theological constraints

Despite the scholarly research of the past few centuries, the origins of the office of bishop in early Christian history remain somewhat obscure. While the Roman Catholic Church claims that St Peter was the first bishop of Rome and therefore the first pope, episcopacy as an institution – as distinct from an unstable and basically pragmatic set of functions – did not exist in the apostolic era, though a few antecedents of this ministry can be identified in the New Testament, as we shall see.

Modern biblical and historical scholarship tends not to accept attempts to validate episcopacy by appealing to the idea of an intentional foundation of the ordained ministry by Jesus Christ. Jesus and his first followers belonged to the Jewish *ekklēsia*, worshipping and teaching in the Jerusalem Temple and in various synagogues. Jesus could not 'found' the church because it already existed. He called the Jewish nation back to its covenant God in repentance and faith in the face of the imminent arrival of the reign of God, bringing judgement, spiritual renewal, and restoration. In view of the impending arrival of the transforming reign of God, any question of founding of new institutions for the long-term did not arise. The diversity of belief and practice and even of embryonic structures in early Christian literature and history shows that the apostolic age was in no position to appeal to any blueprint or template handed down by Jesus to his followers. However, the fact that Jesus founded neither church, nor ministry, nor episcopacy (nor papacy, for that matter) is not all that needs to be said. Rejected by the people and condemned by the authorities, Jesus gathered the eschatological community, the faithful remnant of the Jewish nation-church, binding them together with himself and with each other at the Last Supper in his covenantal, sacrificial death and resurrection which continues to be celebrated, proclaimed, and participated in at the Eucharist, which is continuous with the saving work of Christ and belongs within the Paschal Mystery (Avis 2020b).

2.2 New Testament antecedents of episcopal ministry

Some High Church theologies have always claimed that the apostles were the first bishops, or at least their forerunners. However, the theological mainstream has rarely perceived the matter to be that simple. The apostles were among those 'sent' (*apostellein*) by Jesus of Nazareth on a preaching and healing mission to announce the immanence of the reign of God (Mark 13:14; Luke 10:1). They were also witnesses to Christ's resurrection in the sense that he appeared to them after his crucifixion (as well as to certain women, notably Mary Magdalene). The message or preaching (*kerygma*) of the

apostles and others proclaimed Jesus as the crucified and resurrected Messiah (Christ). Obviously, bishops after the apostolic age could not be witnesses of the resurrection. But all bishops can be seen as successors of the apostles in several meaningful but limited senses: firstly, as proclaiming the apostolic gospel and teaching; secondly, as having pastoral responsibility for a number of Christian communities or churches; and finally, as ministers of Christian initiation and ordination. Bishops are not to be ranked with the apostles, but they exercise an apostolic ministry.

Probably the earliest biblical reference to the forerunners of bishops occurs in Paul's letter to the Philippians (1:1) where he greets 'the saints [*tois hagiois*] in Christ Jesus [...] with the overseers [*episkopois*] and deacons [*diakonois*]'. Although the NRSV translates *episkopois* as 'bishops' (as does the REB), it is certain that these local 'overseers' were not the same in function, status, or authority as the monarchical bishops that we see clearly for the first time early in the second century. The overseers were plural and local and their exact role within the Christian community is unknown. Their functions may have been basically the same as that of the 'elders' (*presbuteroi*) who are mentioned by Luke in (e.g.) Acts 11:30, 14:23, and 15:6. In Acts 20, Paul calls the elders (*presbuteroi*) of the church in Ephesus to meet him and when they do, he addresses them as *episkopoi*, those who have been appointed by the Holy Spirit (vv. 17, 28).

It is in the Pastoral Epistles that we first meet persons who somewhat resemble the later bishop: the 'apostolic delegates', as they are often called, Timothy and Titus. Titus has Paul's authority to appoint *presbuteroi* (NRSV 'elders') 'in every town' of Crete, though in the same breath they are called *episkopoi* (NRSV 'bishops'). As well as certain ethical qualities of character, they must have a grasp of true doctrine and be able to preach, teach and defend the faith in debate (Titus 1:5–9). Timothy, similarly, is given authority by Paul to instruct teachers, to regulate worship and to organize prayer. He is to exercise the oversight of elders, deacons and widows. The terms *presbuteroi* and *episkopoi* are apparently used interchangeably, just as they are by Luke (1 Tim 3:1–2; 5:1, 17; Acts 20:17, 28). So, in the persons of Titus and Timothy we have ministers who, though not styled apostles themselves, have apostolic authority. The scope of their ministry is more than local, though not itinerant (itinerancy was not a universal characteristic of apostolic ministry anyway) and exceeds that of elders and overseers in authority. Their work involved three dimensions preaching the gospel and teaching the faith; exercising discipline in various Christian communities; and being responsible for the organization and administration of those communities.

Apostolic delegates such as Timothy and Titus may be seen as marking a transitional stage between the apostles of the first century and the first monarchical bishops of the early second century. But the New Testament does not answer many of the questions that the church has brought to it over time. How many of its words for ministry were names

of offices? How many were intended to be permanent institutions? How many were simply synonyms for the same function? (cf. Bradshaw 2014: 170). These things are still unknown.

2.3 Emergence of the monarchical episcopate

At the end of the first century, a letter written by Clement of Rome mentions bishops, presbyters, and deacons as specific roles or ministries (*1 Clement* 42, 43; for early patristic texts see Louth 1987). A decade or two later, Ignatius of Antioch emerges as the first known monarchical bishop (the sole centre of authority). The letters that bear his name, written to various churches on his way to be martyred, express a typology in which the bishop is the type of God the Father. The bishop is the principle of unity and validates the celebration of the Eucharist. The presbyters constitute a kind of college around the bishop (it is presbyters who are identified typologically with the apostles here), while the deacons – depicted as types of Christ himself – are closely linked to the bishop. The later normative ecclesiological principles of (i) unity in the bishop, (ii) the bishop as father in God to the flock and to the clergy, together with (iii) a sacramental understanding of ministerial orders, can be seen already, in embryonic form, in the letters of Ignatius as he rallies the churches in the face of persecution. In Irenaeus (d. c.200–203), Bishop of Lyon, the principle of historical succession emerges clearly for the first time. However, it is not so much a succession of ordinations as of true teaching, handed on in the episcopal see as a defence against false teaching, particularly Gnosticism. In the writings of Cyprian (d. 258), Bishop of Carthage, the solidarity of the bishop and the presbyters is emphasized. The principles of the bishop as the centre of unity and of the collegiality of the episcopate (existing as a whole) were added to the emerging patristic ecclesiology, again in the confrontation with persecuting civil authority (Saint Cyprian 1971). Jerome (d. 420) states that the episcopate emerged from the presbyterate, at least in Alexandria (Brown 1971; Barrett 1996; Sullivan 2001; Stewart 2014). Clearly there was no formal ‘institution’ of episcopacy; it emerged in a sporadic way, either from above or from below, or possibly both, but in different parts of the Empire and at different times. In any case, its main New Testament connections are to the apostolate and the presbyterate.

3 The chequered history of bishops

Following the progressive establishment of Christianity as the official religion of the Roman Empire by Constantine, beginning in 313 CE, and the resulting cessation of persecution, bishops became closely associated with the state and had a role in the governance of society. This resulted in church law tending to emulate imperial law. With the consequent further spread of the church, bishops became more remote figures with wider responsibilities and presbyters took up the episcopal role of presiding at the Eucharist in the local assembly, a role delegated to them by the bishop. Thus, the priestly

character of the bishop's ministry, as president of the liturgical celebration, was now extended to the presbyters who came to be designated 'priests' (Zizioulas 2001).

In the medieval Latin Christian world, bishops had territorial, political, and sometimes military responsibilities, serving at imperial or monarchical courts for much of the year. Ecclesiastical advancement was the route to political power and influence. The original roles of bishops as principal ministers of word and sacrament and chief pastors of the flock were largely eclipsed. The Protestant Reformers reacted against what they regarded as a travesty and abuse of episcopal ministry. They condemned the early sixteenth-century bishops for being either absent from their sees, or if active, for persecuting the followers of the reform movement. Martin Luther, who had little interest in ecclesiastical structures, was content to retain bishops provided that they preached the gospel and ministered to their flocks. The Lutheran Reformation in Sweden retained episcopacy, as it did in Denmark (albeit with presbyteral ordination of bishops). However, John Calvin and his colleagues and successors in the Swiss Reformation wrote off the late medieval and Renaissance episcopate as having failed the church. Calvin proposed a basically pragmatic fourfold ministry which did not include bishops, while his successor in Geneva Theodore Beza developed this into a prescriptive system. However, Calvin too would have tolerated the ministry of sound bishops, if they had been available, and was not totally opposed in principle to episcopacy as he was to the papacy (Maruyama 2022).

In England, the institution of episcopacy survived the Reformation (albeit without most of its existing personnel), along with other structures inherited from the medieval church, including the diocesan and parish structure, priests and deacons, cathedral foundations, and canon law. Against the presbyterian reformists within the Church of England in the late sixteenth century, episcopacy was defended by Archbishop John Whitgift (d. 1604) on largely pragmatic grounds as suitable for its purpose and as ordained by the 'magistrate' (the sovereign). The parish-priest theologian Richard Hooker (d. 1600) defended episcopacy as 'apostolic', though not essential to the existence of a church (Avis 2002: ch. 2). Higher claims for episcopacy by divine right emerged after Hooker in reaction to absolutist claims for presbyterian church government. These claims were trumpeted militantly by the Tractarians from 1833 in a way that unchurched nonconformist ministries at home and Lutheran ministries abroad. Absolute claims for episcopacy in historical succession have never been part of official Anglican statements.

During the past millennium, the administration of the Roman Catholic Church has been progressively centralized and the authority of the papacy over all bishops has been tightened. The First Vatican Council (1869–1870) elevated the pope to be a kind of universal bishop. A balancing affirmation of episcopal collegiality was made by the Second Vatican Council, though the doctrine was emasculated in practice under the popes John Paul II and Benedict XVI. Since 2013, Pope Francis has been steadily reintroducing the

idea of ‘local’ (basically national) synods of bishops within a partly devolved ecclesiastical polity. Within Orthodoxy the first Holy and Great Synod of bishops for many centuries took place in Crete in 2016, though with notable absences, mainly owing to rivalry between Moscow and Constantinople.

4 Varied patterns of the bishop’s ministry

From a global perspective, there is considerable variety in how the identity of bishops is construed, regarding their lifestyle, their ministerial profile or ‘job description’, and their relationships with colleagues. This section explores the variety of forms bishop’s ministry takes in the world today.

4.1 Gender and celibacy

Most Lutheran and Methodist churches around the world allow both women and men into the episcopate. Among the historic churches, the bishops of the Roman Catholic and Orthodox churches must be male, but most Anglican churches now also ordain women to the episcopate, or are open to doing so, and the same applies to the Lutheran churches of the Nordic countries.

In the Orthodox churches, bishops tend to be drawn from the monastic orders because bishops alone among the clergy are required to be celibate on taking up office. Roman Catholic bishops are also required to be celibate, as are the clergy and religious orders. So probably the majority of bishops in the world today are required to be celibate. In Anglicanism, however (as in episcopal Lutheranism in the Nordic countries), bishops (like priests and deacons) may marry and most, whether male or female, are married. Bishops in other Protestant churches – notably Methodist and Pentecostal – are not required to be celibate.

4.2 Job description

The nature of a bishop’s role, ministry, and tasks also varies. A certain amount of administrative and even managerial competence is required of all bishops, as of leaders generally. Methodist bishops and most Lutheran bishops have executive responsibilities in connection with their conferences or synods respectively and their bishops approximate to CEOs, though they are also preachers and pastors. In some churches of the Anglican Communion, bishops exercise considerable executive authority in practice, though whether this is always provided for constitutionally is a moot point. Roman Catholic bishops also have considerable executive functions, in connection with the finances and policy of their diocese, because lay people have little or no place in Roman Catholic polity. The bishops of the Roman Catholic Church are also in charge of the cathedrals and the senior resident priest of a cathedral is the ‘administrator’ (rather than ‘dean’ as in Anglican

cathedrals). In the Church of England, the diocesan bishop ultimately oversees the life, worship, and mission of the cathedral, has a role in the appointment of its clergy, and has the right of formal visitation. But the bishop usually exercises their inherent oversight in a semi-detached way, with routine responsibility residing with the dean and chapter (the latter now includes lay people, appointed for their competence in various relevant fields). There is usually a constitutional division of labour between bishop and dean, with regard to celebrating major festivals, while ordination and confirmation services are necessarily allocated to the bishop, to preside and usually to preach.

The official documentary sources of the churches are a safe guide to what those churches expect of their bishops. These sources include ordinals, canons, and conciliar (or similar) statements. Academic study of ordination rites tends to focus on the liturgical variations among them, rather than what they contribute to the ecclesial identity of a bishop. Ancient sources in the East are sparse, which is probably because bishops themselves did not need to keep a copy of the rite by which they had been consecrated (Bradshaw 1990: 37). Modern ordinals often contain a 'job description' of the bishop's role. The Church of England's current *Common Worship Ordinal*, after affirming the royal priesthood of all the baptized, says:

> Bishops are ordained to be shepherds of Christ's flock and guardians of the faith of the apostles, proclaiming the gospel of God's kingdom and leading his people in mission [...] they are to gather God's people and celebrate with them the sacraments of the new covenant. Thus formed into a single communion of faith and love, the Church in each place and time is united with the Church in every place and time. (*Common Worship Ordinal*; 2021)

Thus this Anglican ordinal sees bishops as called to proclaim the gospel and to celebrate the sacraments and as representing the unity (or communion) and the historical continuity of the church.

Later in the same ordination service, the presiding archbishop (Canterbury or York) affirms the duties of a bishop and the qualities that are needed to carry them out:

> Bishops are called to serve and care for the flock of Christ. Mindful of the Good Shepherd, who laid down his life for his sheep, they are to love and pray for those committed to their charge, knowing their people and being known by them. As principal ministers of word and sacrament, stewards of the mysteries of God, they are to preside at the Lord's table and to lead the offering of prayer and praise. They are to feed God's pilgrim people, and so build up the Body of Christ. They are to baptize and confirm, nurturing God's people in the life of the Spirit and leading them in the way of holiness. They are to discern and foster the gifts

> of the Spirit in all who follow Christ, commissioning them to minister in his name. They are to preside over the ordination of deacons and priests, and join together in the ordination of bishops. As chief pastors, it is their duty to share with their fellow presbyters the oversight of the Church, speaking in the name of God and expounding the gospel of salvation. With the Shepherd's love, they are to be merciful, but with firmness; to minister discipline, but with compassion. They are to have a special care for the poor, the outcast and those who are in need. They are to seek out those who are lost and lead them home with rejoicing, declaring the absolution and forgiveness of sins to those who turn to Christ. Following the example of the prophets and the teaching of the apostles, they are to proclaim the gospel boldly, confront injustice and work for righteousness and peace in all the world. (*Common Worship Ordinal*)

The Catholic Code of Canon Law of 1983 (see 1997) provides a detailed job description for a bishop which is largely a distillation of the teaching of the Second Vatican Council, especially the 'Dogmatic Constitution on the Church' (*Lumen Gentium*) and the 'Decree on the Pastoral Office of Bishops in the Church' (*Christus Dominus*; Flannery 1992: 350–426; 564–590). The Code begins by defining a bishop, asserting the divine institution of the episcopate in succession to the apostles, and listing the three tasks of teaching, sanctifying, and governing: 'By divine institution, Bishops succeed the Apostles through the Holy Spirit who is given to them. They are constituted Pastors in the Church, to be the teachers of doctrine, the priests of sacred worship and the ministers of governance' (Code of Canon Law: : 375; 1997). A bishop exercises the offices of teaching and ruling 'only in hierarchical communion with the head of the College and its members'. A bishop is further described in strongly pastoral terms as entrusted with pastoral care for all the faithful, especially those who require extra support, as acting with humility and charity towards those not in full communion with the Catholic Church, as fostering ecumenism, and as exercising charity towards the non-baptized (Code of Canon Law; 1997: 383).

4.3 Sacramental role

A bishop is, by virtue of office, the principal minister of the sacraments within the diocese. They exercise pastoral authority, not so much by issuing instructions, but by ministering word and sacrament throughout the portion of the people of God entrusted to their care, presiding and preaching in the cathedral from time to time and in the churches of the diocese, as well as on ad hoc occasions elsewhere. It also falls to the bishop to ensure that the ministry of the word, of the sacraments and of pastoral care is carried out by the clergy of the diocese who are, in turn, licensed or otherwise authorized by the bishop for that purpose. As the principal minister of the sacraments within the diocese, the bishop is the minister of Christian initiation (the traditional order, which now varies somewhat, being catechesis-baptism-confirmation-Eucharist) and of ordination. In the Roman Catholic Church, confirmation may be (and usually is) delegated to priests, using holy oil that

previously has been liturgically blessed or sanctified by the bishop. In the Orthodox tradition, chrismation (anointing with oil) is part of the baptism initiation of an infant (as is Holy Communion) and is therefore usually carried out by the parish priest. In Anglicanism, by contrast, confirmation is not delegated, but is always administered by the bishop, preferably in the context of a complete rite of initiation. Bishops alone ordain deacons; bishops ordain priests (presbyters) in collaboration with other priests; several bishops together ordain new bishops, the archbishop, or other metropolitan presiding.

4.4 Legal responsibilities

Bishops administer the law (canons and other ecclesiastical legislation) of their church. The Orthodox make no new canons but affirm those of the early councils, as did the Holy and Great Orthodox Council in 2016. The Code of Canon Law of the Roman Catholic Church is substantial and detailed, even in its current form which originated in 1983 (Code of Canon Law; 1997). However, the pope can make new laws for the church at any time and frequently does so.

For the Church of England, as a church established by law, the laws of the church are the laws of the land; this is because the General Synod has authority, delegated by Parliament in successive steps since 1970, to pass Measures (which need to be approved by Parliament) and Canons arising from those Measures (which have to be approved by civil authority). The Church of England's Canons comprise a slim volume, but there is a body of ecclesiastical law beyond the Canons. Bishops are advised and assisted in legal matters by the diocesan Chancellor and in lesser matters by the Registrar. An Anglican bishop cannot give commands or instructions at whim, though some bishops attempt to push the boundaries. In the Church of England, bishops do not hold the central purse strings of the diocese. Each diocese has an elected Board of Finance, which is sometimes coterminous with the elected, advisory Bishop's Council, and overarching both bodies is the Diocesan Synod. By virtue of the Church of England's constitution and canons, bishops do not have an individual authority to create laws or dictate commandments, rather they are constrained to work consultatively and collaboratively with diocesan clergy and lay people and to lead by example, teaching, guidance, and persuasion. Other Anglican/Episcopal churches practise variations on the same basic principle of 'the bishop in synod'.

4.5 Relationships with colleagues

The traditional monarchical bishop (of which Ignatius of Antioch is the first known example) was the sole source of sacramental ministry, official teaching, and pastoral oversight within a diocese – in many ways the diocese's governor. The single-handed model of episcopal oversight has not proved to be sustainable, in terms of workload, reach, and competence, in the modern world. Roman Catholic dioceses sometimes have

auxiliary bishops and bishops are often assisted by a Vicar-General. Anglican dioceses sometimes have suffragan, assistant, or coadjutor bishops (the latter sometimes having the right of succession in the see after a period of overlap with their predecessor, as in the Episcopal Church), and many have archdeacons who are neither bishops nor distinctive or continuing deacons, but priests with regional administrative, pastoral, and oversight responsibilities on behalf of the bishop (archdeacons have been ordained deacon before being ordained priest and retain the order). Both the Roman Catholic Church and the Orthodox churches use titular bishops in other roles than diocesan ones, mainly administrative. In Anglicanism, one has to be ordained (in any order) to a 'title', a particular place and job of work. In the Church of England and other Anglican churches, even an archbishop has a see (though not the Presiding Bishop of the Episcopal Church).

Bishops are not completely unaccountable (in human terms), but must look to the metropolitan (an archbishop) of the archdiocese or 'province' who has visitatorial powers and can step in and override the diocesan bishop's authority if necessary. Roman Catholic bishops relate to the pope, albeit through the intermediary of the relevant Roman dicasteries (the curia), and hold their see at the pope's approval. There is a separate channel of communication and oversight through the Apostolic Nunciature, the Nuncio holding the ecclesiastical rank of (titular) archbishop. At their ordination to the episcopate, bishops of the Roman Catholic Church enter into 'hierarchical communion' with the Bishop of Rome and with all other bishops in communion with the 'See of Peter' and thus become members of the episcopal college. The Roman episcopate is designed as 'a hierarchical pyramid' (Rahner 1975).

4.6 Collegiality

Bishops also have a significant role outside their own diocese. Of course, they cannot wander around performing episcopal duties in another bishop's diocese, except by invitation of that bishop. But they exercise an episcopal ministry, along with other bishops, in the episcopal college, which may also form part of the governing body (General Synod, General Convention, etc.) of that church. In the Church of England, the whole College of Bishops (all serving diocesan and suffragan bishops) meets mainly for deliberative business and for mutual support. The House of Bishops, made up of all diocesans and nine suffragans elected by their peers, together with two *ex officio* suffragans, makes up one of the three Houses of the General Synod, along with the Houses of Clergy and Laity, where it has a special responsibility for doctrine, liturgy, and ministry. Analogous structures exist in other Anglican churches.

Although the notion of episcopal collegiality originates with the Roman Catholic Church and was affirmed in principle by the Second Vatican Council (known as Vatican II), the actual practice of collegiality in that church is embryonic. The college of bishops of that

church does not exist without its head, the pope. The national or regional synods of bishops are not empowered to take significant decisions for their churches. The Synod of Bishops has met several times since Vatican II, but always hitherto under the tight control of the Roman Curia. The College, with the pope at its head constitutes a 'juridical person' and makes church law (Rahner 1975: 156). Pope Francis has promoted a more consultative and (informally) representative form of synodality.

5 Theology

5.1 The wholly human bishop

Theologically, bishops have generally been seen as belonging to the 'highest' of the three orders of ministry in the church, though in truth all ministries, including lay ministries, must be held to be equal in value or status, theologically, and as simply differentiated in role. They are all modes of the ministry of Christ in his church, distributed according to one's calling. Some church people still tend to put their bishop on a pedestal and to treat the bishop with considerable deference – though the latter perception has begun to change as a result of the appalling sexual abuse scandals in the churches. Obviously, a bishop is first and foremost a human being, created in the image of God, though also morally frail and intellectually fallible, and is on the same journey of faith as other Christians. These wholly human bishops may be endeavouring to appear confident and capable in their duties, while also quite possibly struggling to overcome feelings of inadequacy, discouragement, and weariness in face of the huge task that confronts them. If they are thinking, reading persons (which every bishop should surely be), they may also have questions and doubts about aspects of the received faith, a predicament that is often compounded by a troubling awareness of lack of time to read theology and to be intellectually, emotionally, and physically refreshed.

5.2 The bishop as baptized Christian believer

A bishop is a baptized believer in Jesus Christ and a member of Christ's mystical body, just like any other Christian. A bishop, an archbishop, even a pope, needs and hopes to be saved in the same way as any other Christian, namely by grace through faith in the redemption accomplished by Jesus Christ. A bishop, like every other believer, is totally dependent on the sustaining, guiding, and empowering Holy Spirit in order to follow a life of discipleship. A bishop is not only a dispenser of the sacraments (that is Christ's role in any case, theologically speaking), but a recipient of the sacraments. A good bishop will make it clear to all that they are not a saint or a superhuman person, but one who wholly leans upon the Lord, being sustained by word, sacrament and Christian fellowship.

5.3 The bishop remains both deacon and priest

In churches with a threefold order, a bishop has been ordained deacon and (according to the standard theology of holy orders of such churches) remains a deacon, since they hold that the character of any order, once conferred by the church through the power of the Holy Spirit, cannot be removed. Through diaconal ordination, the bishop shares in the apostolic commissioning that Christ gives to his whole church to proclaim publicly the gospel in word and deed and to serve the needy (Acts 6:1–8). Additionally, a bishop normally has already been ordained a priest (presbyter), that is to say has already been ordained and commissioned to the apostolic ministry of reconciliation through word and sacrament (2 Cor 5:18–20). So a candidate for ordination as bishop is normally already a minister of word and sacrament, already ordered to the gospel ministry of reconciliation, and already an under-shepherd of Christ's flock (1 Pet 5:1–4), before being made a bishop in the church of God (Avis 2005).

5.4 Value-added bishops?

So what is added to this baptismal, diaconal and priestly catalogue of callings and ministries when a person undergoes ordination to the episcopate? As has already been noted, bishops are the principal ministers of word and sacrament to those people of God entrusted by the Holy Spirit, through the church, to their care for the time being. The responsibility to provide for and oversee the ministry of word, sacrament, and pastoral care within the diocese is laid upon them. We might say that bishops are responsible for 'quality assurance' in ministry throughout the diocese. Through ordination and by appointment to a see, they are given authority to exercise responsibilities that are wider than those of a priest/presbyter. To fulfil all these awesome responsibilities, bishops are endued with the Holy Spirit at their ordination – a pentecostal anointing that is now (whatever its classical antecedents) symbolized by the bishop's distinctive headdress: the mitre, shaped like tongues of fire which represent a divinely-imparted eloquence in proclaiming the gospel and teaching the faith.

In churches that maintain the historic episcopate (Roman Catholic, Orthodox, Anglican, and some Lutheran churches) bishops, by virtue of their order and office, are seen as bearers of the continuity of the church, both diachronic (through time) and synchronic (at the same time), and are (again, by order and office, not person) sacramental signs and agents of the church's unity and continuity. We will now consider the aspects of continuity and unity, diachronic and synchronic, in slightly more detail.

6 Bishops and the continuity and unity of the church

6.1 Diachronically considered

Diachronically speaking (that is to say, through time and history), bishops are a part of the apostolic succession. But they are not unique in this since the whole church and all its members are also part of the apostolic succession, being baptized into the one body. The whole church is apostolic or it is nothing. Apostolicity consists in the church's continuance in the permanent characteristics of the church of the apostles, as seen in all that it undertakes and undergoes. As the 'Lima' Faith and Order document, *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry* (BEM), stated:

> Apostolic tradition in the Church means continuity in the permanent characteristics of the Church of the apostles: witness to the apostolic faith, proclamation and fresh interpretation of the Gospel, celebration of baptism and the eucharist, the transmission of ministerial responsibilities, communion in prayer, love, joy and suffering, service to the sick and the needy, unity among the local churches and sharing the gifts which the Lord has given to each. (BEM: M34)

So the description of bishops as standing within the apostolic succession needs to be glossed or supplemented so as not to exclude the rest of the church from this attribute. To achieve this inclusiveness, without downplaying the ecclesiological significance of the episcopate, Anglicans have used the term 'the historic episcopate' in theological dialogue with other churches, especially those not episcopally ordered. The expression 'the historic episcopate' is intended to link the church of the present to the church of the past in the dimension of time and history, through the succession of ordinations, episcopal sees (cathedrals, dioceses), doctrine, and proclamation of the apostolic message, the gospel. The episcopate is one of the ways in which the continuity of the church through time is represented and maintained, so that the church of today is believed to be essentially the same church as the church of the apostles, the early martyrs, and the fathers and mothers of early Christianity. The church is a single living reality in spite of – and even because of – the bewildering changes, variations, and developments of history.

6.2 Synchronically considered

Synchronically speaking (that is to say, at the present time, or at any given time) bishops are seen by their churches as uniting the ministry of the church in themselves and holding it in one. As we have noted, all candidates for the episcopate in churches with a threefold order must normally have been ordained deacon and then priest prior to ordination as bishop (sequential ordination). A bishop remains a priest and a deacon and these orders represent significant dimensions of their calling and work. So there is a logic to Vatican II's statement that bishops embody the fullness of Holy Orders. In this respect, combined with their more prominent public presence than that of other clergy, episcopacy can be seen as the most fully representative ministry of the church. Bishops not only represent the

fullness of Christ's ministry in the church, as an ecclesial sign, but are intentional agents of its unity, engaged in reconciliation of the disaffected and wayward, and helping to hold the institution together. They do this not only individually, but corporately or collegially. Thus the episcopate symbolizes and embodies – not uniquely, but in a salient and public way – the unity and continuity of the church in the dimension of space, as well as of time.

6.3 Variations from the diachronic and synchronic norms

We should not overlook the fact that there are churches, mainly Methodist and Lutheran, that have bishops who: (i) do not stand within the historic episcopate (the episcopates of these churches are modern introductions): and (ii) have never been deacons but have been elevated to the episcopate directly from the presbyterate (*per saltum*), and therefore have not received the grounding in the apostolic commissioning of the ordained ministry that is given to deacons. Although these churches would probably not concede this point, such forms of episcopacy could be said to be equipped with a more pragmatic ecclesiological rationale than those of the historic traditions, and their bishops are understood somewhat differently from those churches with a traditional ecclesiology. As well as necessarily being pastors and preachers, they often have more executive authority and responsibility than most bishops within the more ancient traditions.

7 Ecumenical perspectives on bishops

The major Christian traditions (i.e. national or global churches; world communions) are not of one mind with regard to the polity of the church (its governance, shape, and structure), and in fact often differ from one another rather fiercely on principle about such matters (Avis 2022: ch. 4, 'Polity and Polemics'). Much blood has been shed in the past over differences in ecclesiastical polity. So it is no surprise that the episcopacy has figured significantly in ecumenical theological dialogue during the past century. This section explores some examples of these dialogues where the office of bishop has been a major issue and note their outcomes.

7.1 Faith and Order

So sensitive are issues of Faith and Order (as they are known), where questions of *episkopē* and episcopacy arise, that discussion of them was banned at the World Missionary Conference in Edinburgh 1910, which is widely regarded as the beginning of the ecumenical movement in its institutional, global form (Stanley 2009). That self-denying ordinance was necessary in order to obtain the participation of the Church of England and other (non-Roman Catholic), historic, episcopally-ordered churches. But this limitation was regarded – certainly in retrospect – as a failure to tackle some of the most divisive issues among the churches. At the (First) International Faith and Order Conference at Lausanne in 1927 and the Second Conference at Edinburgh in 1937,

episcopacy established its troublesome place in the ecumenical agenda (Rouse and Neill 1954: 407–441). In 1948, the inauguration of the World Council of Churches (WCC) in Geneva brought together episcopal communions and churches (Orthodox, Anglican, Nordic Lutheran) and non-episcopal Protestant churches. The most important product of the Faith and Order Commission of the WCC (of which the Roman Catholic Church has been formally involved since Vatican II, while not being a member of the WCC) is the document *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry* (BEM 1982), which will be returned to shortly.

7.2 The Lambeth Conference Quadrilateral

Meanwhile the Lambeth Conference of all bishops of the Anglican Communion, following the lead of the Protestant Episcopal Church of the USA (as it was then titled), had made a potential breakthrough. The 1888 Lambeth Conference promulgated the 'Lambeth Quadrilateral' as a basis for dialogue leading to reunion. The first three points referred in straightforward terms to the scriptures, the creeds, and the dominical sacraments. The fourth point of the Quadrilateral was more contentious: 'The Historic Episcopate, locally adapted in the methods of its administration to the varying needs of the nations and peoples called of God into the Unity of His Church'. The Lambeth Conference 1920 adapted this fourth point of the Quadrilateral in its landmark 'Appeal to All Christian People'.

Episcopacy was not named at this juncture; the fourth point (VII of the 'Appeal') simply refers to '[a] ministry acknowledged by every part of the Church as possessing not only the inward call of the Spirit, but also the commission of Christ and the authority of the whole body'. Thus the 'historic' aspect of episcopacy is downplayed but the office of bishop is introduced in persuasive and irenic terms, as supporting the continuity and unity of the church – no further claim or theological rationale being offered. The 'Appeal' then asks: 'May we not reasonably claim that the Episcopate is the one means of providing such a ministry?' The 'Appeal' makes no absolute claims for episcopacy:

> It is not that we call in question for a moment the spiritual reality of the ministries of those Communions which do not possess the Episcopate. On the contrary, we thankfully acknowledge that these ministries have been manifestly blessed and owned by the Holy Spirit as effective means of grace. But we submit that considerations of history and of present experience justify the claim which we make on behalf of the Episcopate. Moreover, we would urge that it is now and will prove to be in the future the best instrument for maintaining the unity and continuity of the Church.

For the text of the 'Appeal', including the Quadrilateral and commentary, see Coleman 1992: 45–48; Kinnamon and Cope 1997: 81–83. For context Stephenson 1978: ch. 9; Avis 2017; Avis 2021.

7.3 Multilateral and bilateral conversations

After the Second World War, both multilateral and bilateral conversations began or resumed in several parts of the English-speaking world on questions of doctrine (faith) and polity (order). In most cases these conversations or their successors have rumbled on to the present time, generating in at least some cases a valuable archive of ecumenical ecclesiology. The dialogues have succeeded in clarifying real differences, deepening mutual understanding and respect, and attaining genuine theological convergence (Avis 2010; Avis 2022). Given that a spectrum of beliefs and practices exists within most churches, it seems unreasonable, indeed perverse, to demand of others a greater degree of common faith and practice than we expect of ourselves. However, such flexibility is not possible when dealing with ecclesiastical polity: you either have bishops or you do not. Consequently, these dialogues have seldom brought church unity into being and where they have, it has not always included episcopacy (the notable exception being the United Churches of South Asia).

Dialogues between the Roman Catholic Church and all major Christian traditions, episcopal and non-episcopal, were made possible by the decree *Unitatis Redintegratio* of Vatican II (Flannery 1992) and are by definition international, since the Roman Catholic Church is a global and administratively-centralized church. Perhaps the most theologically fruitful dialogues have been those between the Roman Catholic Church on the one hand and the World Methodist Council, the Orthodox Churches, and the Anglican Communion on the other. In these dialogues, the main stumbling block has been the papal claim of authority to define doctrine and morals and to exercise jurisdiction over all churches. Thus it is the office of a particular bishop (i.e. of Rome), not of bishops as such, that has so far proved intractable (Kasper 2009). The reports of all the dialogues, national and international, have been published by the WCC and Eerdmans in four successive volumes of *Growth in Agreement* between 1984 and 2017.

7.4 *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry*

This section conducts a brief assessment of the significance of the ground-breaking document, *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry* (BEM), the fruit of decades of ecumenical theological dialogue. Published in 1982, BEM does not deal with the papacy, but its section on ministry opens up the possibility of a breakthrough between episcopally-ordered churches and those not so ordered. The document affirms that all churches possess a form of pastoral oversight (*episkopē*), while it also recognizes that (obviously) not all churches are ordered in the historic episcopate. It accepts that, if Christian unity is ever to come about, it will involve the historic episcopate, since the overwhelming majority of Christians in the world belong to churches that are so ordered. BEM therefore proposes that episcopal churches should feel able or free to recognize and endorse the authentic *episkopē* of non-episcopal churches, with whom they have reached agreement on other

– especially doctrinal – matters, and that the non-episcopal churches, who are partners in the dialogue, should in turn, feel free to embrace the historic episcopate.

Following the spirit, if not the exact method of BEM, the British and Irish Anglican Churches and most of the Nordic and Baltic Lutheran Churches entered into a relationship of ecclesial communion, with the interchangeability of members and ordained ministers (though not deacons at that stage), through the Porvoo Agreement, published in 1993 and ratified in 1996 (Together in Mission and Ministry: The Porvoo Common Statement with Essays on Church and Ministry in Northern Europe 1993). The episcopates of those Lutheran Churches which had lost the historic episcopate (notably that of Norway) were re-incorporated into it on the basis of their practice of ordaining a succession of bishops in the historic sees, coupled with their expressed intention to ordain within the historic episcopate in future. Denmark joined Porvoo later; Latvia has not joined.

The earlier Meissen Agreement (published 1988, ratified 1991) between the Evangelical Church of Germany (EKD), a federation of Lutheran, Reformed, and United German territorial churches (*Landeskirchen*), and the Church of England (only), has provided a model and template for other agreements (see Anglican-Methodist Covenant, below) with its combination of Acknowledgements and Commitments. However, to date, the Meissen Theological Conferences have not found a way to enable the EKD to embrace the historic episcopate and so make possible an interchangeable ordained ministry with the Church of England and so deepening of the bonds of unity already achieved (Meissen 1988).

7.5 Success and failure

Well before the publication of BEM, the reconciliation of episcopally- and presbyterally-ordained ministries was uniquely achieved in the United Churches of South Asia, most notably the Church of South India (1947; Rouse and Neill 1954) and the Church of North India (1970). In America, after an initial setback with the proposed ‘Concordat’ between the (now so named) Episcopal Church and the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA), the reconciliation of ordained ministries was achieved with *Called to Common Mission* in 2001 (An Agreement of Full Communion: Called to Common Mission). A comparable initiative between the Episcopal Church and the United Methodist Church (which is distinct from the Methodist Church of Great Britain), which would incorporate Methodist bishops into the historic episcopate, and so – at least eventually – make a common ordained ministry possible, has not, at the time of writing, attained its goal.

7.6 The British scene

In 1946, in an attempt to break the deadlock in English ecumenism, Archbishop of Canterbury Geoffrey Fisher appealed to the British Free Churches to ‘take episcopacy into [their] systems’ and to ‘try it out on their own ground’ (Fisher 1946). The main fruit

of Fisher's gesture was the 'Conversations', in two main phases, between the Church of England and the Methodist Church of Great Britain (which, unlike the international United Methodist Church, whose episcopate goes back to John Wesley's extracanonical presbyteral ordination of superintendents for America in the late eighteenth century, does not have bishops but has a twofold ministry of deacons and presbyters). The first phase, which attempted to unite the ordained ministries of the two churches on the basis of a common episcopate, ultimately failed in the Church of England's General Synod in 1972. The second phase culminated in the Anglican-Methodist Covenant, published in 2001, ratified in 2003 (*An Anglican-Methodist Covenant: Common Statement of the Formal Conversations Between the Methodist Church of Great Britain and the Church of England* 2001). No meaningful doctrinal differences were detectable between the two churches. Moreover, the British Methodist Conference had several times stated its willingness to accept episcopacy for the sake of unity.

The implementation of the Covenant was strongly embraced in many local situations and was supported and resourced centrally. The Joint Implementation Commission proposed, as a first step towards a common ordained ministry, that the President of the Methodist Conference – who is always a presbyter and has the fullest oversight responsibilities within British Methodism – be ordained bishop within the historic episcopate. Nevertheless, at the time of writing (over twenty years since the publication of the Covenant report in 2001), the two churches have not succeeded in reaching agreement over the full implementation of the Covenant, a Methodist episcopacy being the only major stumbling block.

8 The bishop's authority

Authority is inherent in the office of bishop. A bishop must have authority in order to do their job. Considering that bishops are normally presidents of the diocesan eucharistic community, overseers of the clergy together with their parishes, churches, and services, and also teachers of the faith and leaders in mission, they cannot be without some kind of authority. But what sort of authority do bishops possess in modern, democratic, egalitarian societies where many people are suspicious of historic institutions, averse to hierarchies, and often reluctant to commit themselves actively to causes outside the home or peer group (Avis 1992; 2015; 2019; 2020a)?

Bishops undoubtedly have a kind of authority, but they are not the only ones in the church with some kind of authority. Every Christian has the authority that comes with being a baptized disciple of Jesus Christ: the authority to discern the truth (*sensus fidei*), to play a part in the life, worship, governance and mission of Christ's church through sharing in Christ's threefold messianic office as prophet, priest, and king (Avis 2005). Consequently, the bishop's authority is not a quantum to be expended unilaterally, but a relationship that must be developed, maintained, and negotiated between the bishop, the clergy, the

Christian lay people, and the wider community. Furthermore, those who are placed in positions of authority continue to be under authority (cf. Matt 8:9). As such, bishops are accountable to a higher authority precisely for the way that they use their authority. They are given the authority to promote and implement the law codes, policies, and purposes of the church that they serve.

The churches in Western liberal democracies must be considered as, in effect, voluntary organizations, even when they are still 'established' by the law and/or constitution of the land (as in certain Nordic countries, Scotland, and England, as well as effectively in various dominantly Roman Catholic or Orthodox countries). So the authority of church leaders will need to be an attractive and persuasive form of authority, one that lures people towards the church and incentivizes them to carry out its work. Authenticity and integrity are the qualities that must run through every exercise of episcopal ministry. In modern liberal societies, bishops cannot command or direct their clergy, except where they are simply applying church law and policy, backed by legal sanctions. But that mode of canonical authority can apply only to the clergy, since most church law does not affect the laity. Within the socio-cultural matrix of culturally Western countries, decision-making in the church is increasingly participatory and representative, both informally through consultation and more formally through synodical processes. Synods, councils and church courts are a salient feature of the major Protestant churches. A more participative synodical polity than hitherto is currently being introduced within the Roman Catholic Church. Legal measures excepted, the authority that bishops enjoy in non-hierarchical societies is, therefore, largely a 'moral' authority.

Moral authority is authority expressed and constrained in a pastoral mode. Moral authority is authority that works by reasoned persuasion, dialogue, and making a case, but always listening and learning first. It marks a transposition of traditional unchallengeable authority into an authority that is formed by example, intellectual calibre, holiness, prayer, suffering for and with the people, and sharing their burdens. Finally, bishops, like all clergy and indeed all who exercise or offer leadership in any sphere, need to be constantly aware of the fraught connection between authority and power and the connection of both with styles and methods of leadership. Leadership is both a mode of authority and an expression of power and it is open to abuse unless underpinned by reasoned persuasion and the affirmation of the rights and privileges, the gifts and callings, of those who are (conditionally and temporarily) willing to be led. Authority is one expression of power – legitimated, warranted power; power voluntarily accepted. Even moral authority, which is essentially authority leading by example, persuasion, and the sharing of convictions, is open to abuse of various kinds. Bishops are called to tread the perilous but rewarding pathway of authority, power, and leadership.

9 Internal and external dimensions of the bishop's ministry

This section explores how Christians and non-Christians experience bishops, if and when they encounter them. Two questions will be discussed: what role, if any, do bishops play within Christian spirituality (a question that is seldom asked); and what role, if any, do bishops tend to play in civil society, public life, the shaping of public doctrine, and the mores and morals of contemporary Western society (a question that should be asked more often)?

9.1 Bishops in the life of the church

Bishops are regarded, theologically, by the churches that have them, as fathers (and mothers in some cases) in God to all the faithful. However, in churches with large dioceses, they are often fathers and mothers at a distance, exercising their spiritual parenthood through and by means of the parochial, cathedral, and sector-ministry clergy. These clergy will encounter their bishop at certain key points in their ministry (selection, ordination, licensing, ministerial review, visitations), as a pastor to pastors and the person to whom, in this world, they are accountable. However, most Christian lay people within the historic territorial churches of Europe will never meet their bishop in person and they may not even know their name. In liturgical churches, the bishop is prayed for by name in the Eucharist (either in the intercessions or in the Eucharistic Prayer or both), so at least in this way the ecclesiological principle of communion in the bishop is celebrated, proclaimed, and cemented. In these traditions, the bishop is not a visitor to a parish or cathedral but belongs there and is simply coming home. As the principal minister of word and sacrament within the diocese and the chief pastor of the flock, the bishop needs a symbolic base or seat. The cathedral is the seat (Latin *sedes*; hence 'the bishop's see') of the bishop, from which they teach and govern the diocese in conjunction with the diocesan synod and in collegiality with the parish clergy. Each parish church will contain the bishop's chair in the sanctuary (albeit, sadly for many parishes, it is vacant the vast majority of the time).

Episcopally-ordered churches normally honour and respect their bishops, regarding them with vague affection from afar. But the faithful are becoming increasingly less tolerant of the faults, failings, and sometimes misdemeanours of their bishops. High ranking bishops, archbishops, and cardinals (who are usually bishops) in the Roman Catholic Church and senior clerics in some Anglican churches have been discredited or permanently disgraced by the inept or corrupt manner in which they have responded to accusations of the sexual abuse of minors and vulnerable adults by clergy of the diocese for whom they were responsible. In the Roman Catholic Church, high-ranking ecclesiastics have been accused of sexual abuse of minors themselves. In both the Episcopal Church and the Church of England, bishops have been forced, exceptionally, to resign their see by discontented

clergy and senior lay people, not on grounds of criminal activity, but because of pastoral breakdown caused by misconceived and autocratic leadership styles.

9.2 Bishops in the public square

Bishops are not only the most representative ministers of the church and of Christ, theologically speaking; they are also those with the most salient public profile. Bishops – or, more realistically, archbishops – are often the only representatives of Christianity and of the church who can, albeit with considerable difficulty, obtain a public hearing. They therefore have a critical role as spokespersons for the Christian faith and for their church, a role of advocacy, proclamation, and apologetics.

One historical avenue for this public witness, that is now open to very few bishops, is at the centres of power – the court or the legislative structures of their country. It is now extremely rare for bishops to sit *ex officio* in a legislative body and, in any case, Roman Catholic Canon Law does not allow its bishops or priests to become formally involved in politics. However, twenty-six bishops of the Church of England currently sit in the Upper House (the House of Lords) of the United Kingdom Parliament – though they do not as a body align with a political party and its programme, and mainly contribute a broadly Christian, rather than ecclesiastically partisan, perspective on social and moral questions. Of course, elected lay persons in the legislatures, the media, and so on, who are Christians, bear witness in a general way to Christian truth. The political discourse of historically (now nominally) Christian countries is almost devoid of explicit ethical principles, let alone theological ones, and this ethical-theological desert presents an immense challenge, as well as a great opportunity, to the mission of the churches.

If any Christian leader, apart from the pope, is to obtain a public hearing, it will be an archbishop. However, churches as institutions, and their leaders in particular, in many societies increasingly lie under a cloud of distrust and suspicion. This is partly because many historic institutions are now viewed – not without reason – as self-serving if not corrupt and as bastions of undeserved privilege, and more radically because of repeated sexual and other abuse scandals and the inept or corrupt response of those in positions of responsibility. The institutionalized sphere of the sacred is regarded by many as infested with depravity and as being frequently invoked to cloak activities which prey on vulnerable persons. ‘Physician, heal thyself’ is the proverb that comes to mind.

Some bishops, including archbishops, find other outlets for their witness and teaching, especially through the social media and in television and radio broadcasting, though this may require dedicated church radio stations and TV channels. Bishops are called and ordained to teach and defend Christian truth. So they need to know what Christian truth is, to be able to articulate it and to commend it in an apologetic vein. Bishops of the early church were often theologians who left seminal writings to posterity. Throughout history,

bishops have shaped Christian theology and this tradition has continued until recently. The pressure on bishops to conform to secular models of executive leadership means that bishops often lack both aptitude and time to study, think and communicate theological truth (see further Williams 2012; Doyle 2022). In the major historic churches today, episcopacy as an institution faces the greatest challenge to its credibility for many years..

Attributions

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