

2 Bishops and Dioceses in the Church of England

2.1 Introduction

- 2.1.1 Before entering into the Commission's review of the structure of the Church in Yorkshire, it will be appropriate to explore the Church of England's understanding of the role of bishops and the principles that have underlain the configuration of the English dioceses and attempts to reform it.
- 2.1.2 We shall begin by looking at the role of diocesan bishops (section 2.2) and then briefly survey the history of the formation of English dioceses, drawing attention to the underlying principles (sections 2.3 and 2.4). (The history is set out more fully in the paper 'Dioceses and Episcopal Sees in England: A Background Report for the Dioceses Commission', which is available on the Commission's web site.⁴) Accounts of the abortive attempts to reform the diocesan structure between 1967 and 1978 (section 2.5) and the work of the first Dioceses Commission (section 2.6) follow. In the light of this ecclesiology and history we shall then look briefly at the issues of suffragan bishops in general and area bishops in particular (section 2.7). Finally, we shall offer some concluding reflections (section 2.8).

2.2 The Role of the Bishop

- 2.2.1 The Church of England's understanding of the role of diocesan bishops in particular and of bishops in general is set out authoritatively in Canon C 18 (Of diocesan bishops), in the 1662 Ordinal and in the Common Worship Ordination Services.
- 2.2.2 It is not necessary to offer here an exhaustive account of all the elements of that role, which has been the subject of a number of reports – most recently *Episcopal Ministry: The Report of the Archbishops' Group on the Episcopate* (GS 944, 1990) and *Women Bishops in the Church of England? A Report of the House of Bishops' Working Party on Women in the Episcopate* (GS 1557, 2004), especially Chapter 2 ('Episcopacy in the Church of England').⁵ Instead, it will be sufficient to mention a number of key elements that are relevant to consideration of the nature and size of dioceses.
- 2.2.3 A diocesan bishop is 'the chief pastor of all that are within his diocese, as well laity as clergy, and their father in God' (Canon C18.1). In the Common Worship rite for the Ordination and Consecration of a Bishop the Introduction to the Declarations begins thus:

⁴ The report may be accessed from this page: www.diocom.org/background.

⁵ Chapter 11 of GS 944 is available from this page: www.diocom.org/background; GS 1557 is available at <http://www.cofe.anglican.org/info/papers/womenbishops.pdf>.

‘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.’

The bishop is not just the overseer and pastor of the clergy, but also the chief pastor of the laity, with whom he is expected to have a personal relationship. This means that the appropriate number of bishops cannot be determined solely by reference to the number of licensed ministers that they oversee – and still less to the number of clergy or even just stipendiary clergy. The number of laypeople and congregations is highly relevant.

2.2.4 The Introduction to the Declarations continues (building on Canon C 18.4):

‘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.’

It goes on to speak of the bishop baptizing and confirming, commissioning people for ministry and presiding over ordinations.

2.2.5 A diocese can therefore be said to be a ‘local church’ of which the diocesan bishop is the chief pastor and principal minister, able under his presidency to ordain ministers who can preach and minister the sacraments in and for it. In the Anglican (and catholic) understanding, an individual local congregation cannot do this for itself.

2.2.6 A bishop is a successor of the Apostles. (Both the 1662 Ordinal and the Common Worship Ordination Services make the connection between the Apostles and bishops.) An Apostle is ‘someone sent on a mission’, and in the Common Worship rite the Introduction to the service 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.’

A diocese can therefore also be said to be an area of mission led by the bishop. This means that the population of an area is also a highly relevant consideration when determining the number of bishops needed.

2.2.7 A bishop is also a minister of unity. The diocesan bishop in particular is a focus of unity for his own local church who also unites it with the Church throughout the ages and the Church throughout the world. The bishop’s representational ministry involves representing his diocese in the House of Bishops and in the Lambeth Conference, and potentially also in the House of Lords. All bishops are members of the college of bishops of the province, the national church and the whole Communion. Their ministry can never be purely local.

2.2.8 In addition to diocesan bishops, the Church of England has suffragan bishops and assistant bishops. Suffragan bishops have sees within the dioceses in which they serve. Some of them are ‘area bishops’ – bishops to whom oversight of a geographical area within the diocese has been formally delegated (the extent of the functions delegated varies from diocese to diocese). Assistant bishops do not have sees. A small number receive stipends and some are engaged in other work or ministries; most are retired. We shall return to the subject of suffragan bishops in section 2.7.

2.3 The English Dioceses to 1836

2.3.1 The ancient tradition, which continues in the Mediterranean countries to this day, is of small dioceses comprising a city or sizeable town and its hinterland. When Christianity came to Northern Europe, however, society here was organized on the basis of tribes or kingdoms rather than cities, so initially each tribe or small kingdom had a single bishop. Though Augustine’s Roman mission to England established sees in former Roman cities (Canterbury, Rochester, London, York, Dorchester), they were related to kingdoms. Bishoprics established by Irish missionaries from the North were essentially tribal in nature.

2.3.2 In his reform of the English diocesan structure in the 670s Archbishop Theodore divided the large kingdom-dioceses, but in creating smaller dioceses he had regard to political or tribal divisions (sub-kingdoms). In time Wessex was divided into counties (shires) and its original Diocese of Winchester was gradually divided into dioceses each covering a single county or a pair of counties.

2.3.3 After changes in the eleventh and twelfth centuries the diocesan map remained fixed from 1133 to 1540 – a period of just over three hundred years. In the South and West, diocesan boundaries almost all coincided fairly closely with county boundaries.⁶ In the Midlands and the North, by contrast, there were just five dioceses – the border dioceses of Durham and Carlisle and the three vast dioceses of Lincoln (from the Humber to the Thames), York (Yorkshire, Nottinghamshire, Lancashire north of the Ribble, South Cumberland and South Westmorland) and Coventry & Lichfield (most of the West Midlands, Chester and Lancashire south of the Ribble).

2.3.4 Between 1540 and 1542 Henry VIII founded six new dioceses. Four served single counties and one included Bristol and Dorset. Chester covered two counties and parts of three others. The Diocese of Westminster, which covered Middlesex, was suppressed in 1550, leaving the number of English dioceses at

⁶ Kent was split between Canterbury and Rochester, three dioceses each served a single county, four covered two each and Salisbury three. Worcester included Worcestershire, western Warwickshire and most of Gloucestershire, while Hereford covered Herefordshire and parts of Gloucestershire and Shropshire (the territory of the Magonsaetan that pre-dated the counties).

22. Thereafter the number of dioceses and their boundaries again remained constant for little short of 300 years.

2.3.5 In the ninety years from 1836 to 1927 the number of English dioceses almost doubled – from 22 to 42. In the last 83 years, by contrast, the number has remained constant and there have been only relatively minor boundary changes.

2.4 The Principles of Diocesan Configuration, 1836-1927

2.4.1 It will be seen that the configuration of the English dioceses has always been strongly influenced by the boundaries of the secular communities to which they relate. Before 1836, most dioceses were essentially coterminous with one or more counties. Even the vast dioceses of the Midlands and the North could, for the most part, be described by reference to county boundaries.

2.4.2 In establishing the Dioceses of Ripon (1836) and Manchester (1847) and adjusting the boundaries of most of the other dioceses, the Ecclesiastical Duties and Revenues Commission and its successor the Ecclesiastical Commissioners added a new criterion: social and economic geography. Essentially, the Commission concluded that in the urban and industrial areas the secular boundaries no longer reflected social realities. Therefore, Ripon included what is now West Yorkshire (and the northern part of the Borough of Barnsley), but other areas of the West Riding to the east and south remained in the Diocese of York. Similarly, Manchester included most of Lancashire but not the Furness Peninsula (which eventually became part of Cumbria in 1974) or most of the Liverpool area (which in 1847 was recognized as forming a distinct area socially and economically). These dioceses were still configured to local communities, but the judgement was that the historic county boundaries no longer reflected the reality of those local communities.

2.4.3 The 1830s reformers sought to reduce the size of the largest dioceses and make dioceses more equal in size, but for political reasons they felt unable to propose an overall increase in the number of dioceses. (The Dioceses of Bristol and Gloucester were united so that the Diocese of Ripon could be created without increasing the number of diocesan bishops; rejection of a similar merger to make way for Manchester delayed its creation until 1847.) The desire to reduce the size of the largest dioceses without increasing the overall number resulted in association of areas that had little or no natural relationship with each other and in the division of natural communities. Nottinghamshire became part of the Diocese of Lincoln, while not only Huntingdonshire but also Bedfordshire and West Suffolk joined the Diocese of Ely. Rochester became the diocesan see for Hertfordshire and Essex, losing its territory in Kent apart from the Deanery of Rochester itself. These unions of unrelated areas were quickly found to be unsatisfactory and were eventually undone.

- 2.4.4 From the 1840s onwards, high-church bishops raised expectations of what bishops would do.⁷ They visited the parishes to confirm and to institute incumbents, instead of holding mass confirmations in the cathedral and institutions in their own chapels. But such a style of episcopacy would only work – in a church whose only bishops were diocesans, many of them old men who would die in office – if the number of parishes in a diocese was sufficiently small and its territory sufficiently compact that the bishop could travel round it with ease. The population and the number of churches and parishes were in fact growing – especially in the urban and industrial areas – but the size of the new dioceses formed from the later nineteenth century onwards reflected not just this growth but also the new model of episcopacy, which very quickly became standard everywhere. The expectation of the clergy and parishes as to the ministry that they will receive from their bishops continues to be a relevant factor in determining the size of dioceses and the number of bishops.
- 2.4.5 The new model of episcopacy necessitated either assistant bishops or smaller dioceses or both. Suffragan bishoprics were revived from 1870 and acts of Parliament of 1875, 1876 and 1878 provided for six new dioceses. The last of these to be formed, in 1888, was Wakefield.
- 2.4.6 The early twentieth century saw an unprecedented number of new dioceses created: five before the First World War (two in 1905 and three – including Sheffield – in 1913), two in 1918/19 and no fewer than five in the four years from 1924 to 1927 – a total of twelve in 22 years. Not only the ‘diocesan revival’ with its new model of diocesan episcopacy but also the revival of the Convocations and the creation of central church structures, both voluntary and official, had greatly increased what was expected of diocesan bishops and hence their workload. These factors prompted calls for an increase in the number of dioceses. The burden imposed on bishops and indeed archdeacons by the Church’s national structures and church legislation continues to be a relevant factor in determining the number of bishops, archdeacons and dioceses.
- 2.4.7 By the end of the nineteenth century, the principle that dioceses should normally be coterminous with counties had become well established. It was not an absolute principle, however; it obviously did not apply to the largest and smallest counties, and it was generally accepted that in the urbanized industrial areas the (newer) social and economic unit should take precedence over the (older and often now outdated) secular administrative boundaries.
- 2.4.8 The Diocese of Birmingham (founded in 1905) was unusual among dioceses established to reflect a ‘natural unit’ in that the unit concerned was not one or

⁷ See A. Burns, *The Diocesan Revival in the Church of England, c. 1800-1870* (Oxford, 1999).

two counties but an urban area together with at least part of its rural hinterland, including portions of three counties.

- 2.4.9 In 1913 a committee was established to consider additional dioceses and adjustment of diocesan boundaries in the Province of Canterbury. A report was published in 1916. Its argument for increasing the number of dioceses was based primarily not on the number of clergy or churchgoers but on population. However, it was clear in resisting ‘any attempt to reconstruct our Dioceses on lines adopted from considerations of population and extent only, without regard to county, commercial, social and other ties’. The fact that half of the diocesan bishops had suffragan or assistant bishops was seen as an argument for smaller dioceses in which such episcopal assistance would not be needed. The fact that in many dioceses many churchpeople had ‘no adequate sense of a diocesan corporate life’ was another argument for smaller dioceses.
- 2.4.10 The committee was clear that the territory of all dioceses should if possible coincide with a county, a ‘great municipality’ or a clearly-marked division of a municipal area. It believed that ‘The laity will be more ready to realise their place in the Diocese, and to regard their Cathedral as the centre of local life, if the areas of ecclesiastical and civil responsibility coincide’ and also cited the advantages for co-operation with the secular authorities. It quoted with approval a report which argued that ‘One of the great advantages in reconstructing a Diocese on county lines is to be found in the power of co-operating with the system of the State.’ However, where industrial developments had submerged ancient boundaries, dioceses should correspond to modern social and economic units, including both the municipal centre and its urban and rural hinterlands, so that the diocese contains ‘the population which is unified by easy communications, by daily intercourse in social and business life, and by common interests’.⁸
- 2.4.11 The Church Assembly (established in 1920) set up a Committee on New Sees and Provinces, chaired by William Temple (then Bishop of Manchester) and this reported in 1922. Its principles for the formation of new sees, which it stressed were not rigid rules, may be summarized thus:
- Dioceses should generally consist of between 150 and 250 benefices, with between 200 and 300 clergy (bearing in mind that in a mainly urban diocese the number of clergy might be rather larger than in a mainly rural diocese).
 - New dioceses should not be so large as to require more than one suffragan.
 - No important town should be more than 25 miles and no village more than 30 or 35 miles from the ‘place of diocesan meetings’.

⁸ *The Dioceses of the Province of Canterbury, being the first report of the committee appointed to consider the need for the formation of new dioceses and the re-adjustment of existing boundaries* (London, 1916), pp. 20-22.

- If possible, a new diocese should contain a fair proportion of rural parishes.
- The whole of any county borough should be in the same diocese.

The report also made the important point that the most convenient unit for ‘spiritual supervision’ might be different from the most sensible unit for administration, and that it would therefore ‘very likely be necessary that certain dioceses should be grouped together for the purpose of finance and patronage on the ground that the best unit for spiritual supervision may often be too small for these purposes’.⁹

2.4.12 The report was criticized by the Bishop of Gloucester, A. C. Headlam, in an article in the *Church Quarterly Review*. In part, his objection to ‘little dioceses’ was that the diocesan bishop would be expected (in modern terms) to become a ‘micro-manager’: ‘The tendency would grow more and more for many things to be referred to him which the clergy may reasonably settle themselves’.¹⁰ Headlam also resisted those proposals that appeared to be based on in-house ecclesiastical arithmetic, paying insufficient attention to issues of identity affecting the wider community. In his view, the fundamental principle should be that ‘Where possible a Diocese should be conterminous with a county, or nearly so’, though he admitted that there were ‘certain cases where counties are too small, and certain cases where counties are too large’.¹¹ Of the twelve dioceses proposed by the Committee, six were the subject of Church Assembly Measures. Headlam accepted the need for two county dioceses (Derby and Leicester), as well as a Diocese of Blackburn to reduce Manchester to manageable proportions, but he objected that both Portsmouth and Guildford would be too small and would ‘have no cohesion at all’, being ‘purely artificial creations, divorced from the natural provincial life of the country’.¹²

2.4.13 These five dioceses (Blackburn, Derby, Guildford, Leicester and Portsmouth) came into being, but Parliament’s rejection of the proposed Diocese of Shrewsbury put an end to the creation of new dioceses. It was to be forty years before the diocesan structure was looked into again.

2.5 Renewed Discussion: 1967-1978

2.5.1 In 1965 an Archbishop’s commission was established under the chairmanship of Sir John Arbuthnot to look at the diocesan structure of South-East England (an area, bounded by the Dioceses of Winchester, Oxford, St Albans and Chelmsford, covering eleven dioceses – more than a quarter of the 42 in England). It was instructed to take as the minimum size a population of 900,000 or a total of 200 incumbencies, though it was free to recommend

⁹ *Report of the Committee on New Sees and Provinces* (NA 53, 1922), pp. 2,5.

¹⁰ A. C. Headlam, ‘Little Bishoprics’, *Church Quarterly Review*, 97 (1923), 146-163 at p. 147.

¹¹ Headlam, ‘Little Bishoprics’, p. 158.

¹² Headlam, ‘Little Bishoprics’, pp. 154-155.

exceptions and to consider as an alternative smaller dioceses co-operating together.¹³

2.5.2 The Commission's report, *Diocesan Boundaries*, was published in 1967. It identified a lack of general agreement within the Church of England about the optimum size of a diocese. Views depended on how diocesan episcopacy was understood. Those who believed that a diocesan bishop as father in God should spend a day a year in each parish and be in frequent contact with the clergy favoured small dioceses. Others thought it unnecessary for diocesan bishops to have such detailed involvement in the lives of their parishes. It was clear that smaller dioceses could only work if they shared administration and joint bodies for certain purposes. There was a related disagreement as to the desirability of suffragan bishops. For some the ideal was dioceses so small that suffragans would be unnecessary. The Commission, however, believed that each diocese should have a suffragan to whom episcopal powers could be delegated completely during the bishop's illness or absence.¹⁴

2.5.3 In the light of these considerations the Commission identified the following 'guiding principles' for the construction of dioceses:

- 'Pastoral considerations, bearing in mind the effective exercise of episcopate..., should pre-dominate.'
- Units of organization should be financially viable.
- 'Economy should be exercised wherever this can be done without harm to the main purpose.'
- 'Existing diocesan boundaries should not be disturbed unless there are clear advantages.'
- 'People who regard themselves as a natural group in lay life should so far as possible be kept together in one diocese.'
- 'Great regard must be paid to ease of communication. Minutes, not miles, are the important factor today.'
- 'We pay considerable regard to local government boundaries, particularly those of counties and the new London Boroughs, because we feel that mutual loyalties strengthen both Church and State. No London Borough should be split between two dioceses.'
- 'We do not think that an admixture of suburban, urban and rural livings is essential.'
- The bishop of a new diocese should have his *cathedra* in a parish church, with the minimal staffing for which the Cathedrals Measure 1963 provided.

¹³ *Diocesan Boundaries, being the Report of the Archbishop of Canterbury's Commission on the Organisation of the Church by Dioceses in London and the South-East of England, 1965/7* (CA 1653, 1967), pp. 9-10.

¹⁴ *Diocesan Boundaries*, pp. 14-20.

- Changes should facilitate co-operation with other churches.
- ‘In considering any alteration in diocesan boundaries we have regard to the direction in which the area looks in its secular affairs and whether the alteration will make it easier or more difficult for the cathedral to be the centre of worship and diocesan life.’¹⁵

2.5.4 With these Guiding Principles in mind, the Commission proposed five dioceses for Greater London, roughly equal in terms of population: London, Barking, Kensington, Southwark and Croydon. Much work would be shared between them, and there would be a college of bishops for the Greater London area, with a Regional Council chaired by the Bishop of London and a Regional Board of Finance (in addition to diocesan boards) to pay for shared services.¹⁶ Guildford would gain the area of Surrey that lies north of the Thames (i.e. the part of the former County of Middlesex that is now in Surrey) from the Diocese of London and the area of Surrey that lies south of London from the Diocese of Southwark. It would retain its small areas of Hampshire, but otherwise, diocesan boundaries should generally be rationalized so as to follow county boundaries where there were currently minor discrepancies. In view of the Diocese of Oxford’s area, number of parishes and number of clergy, and the fact that ‘In large parts of Berkshire and Buckinghamshire there is no sense of belonging to the Diocese of Oxford, and no real unity with it, or feeling of common purpose’, Oxford would be divided into three county dioceses, with shared administration and some joint boards and services. In each of the Greater London dioceses and the three dioceses formed from the Diocese of Oxford there would be a single suffragan, who in most cases would be one of the archdeacons.¹⁷ The report also showed how the South-East could be divided into smaller dioceses if that were preferred.

2.5.5 The fact that none of the proposals for change made in this 138-page report was implemented is sobering. When the Church Assembly considered it, debate was adjourned so that the Standing Committee could report on the issues raised.¹⁸ In response to the Standing Committee’s report, the Church Assembly commissioned three further pieces of work.

- a Cathedrals and New Dioceses Committee was formed to prepare such legislation as the dioceses concerned might request and also proposals for cathedrals for the new dioceses;
- the Standing Committee was asked to set up a committee to look at the London area and report on what proposals for it might be most generally acceptable;

¹⁵ *Diocesan Boundaries*, pp. 35-36.

¹⁶ *Diocesan Boundaries*, pp. 39-42, 76-79.

¹⁷ *Diocesan Boundaries*, pp. 47-75.

¹⁸ *Report by the Standing Committee on ‘Diocesan Boundaries’* (CA 1679, 1968).

- the Advisory Council on the Church's Ministry (ACCM) was asked to report on the most appropriate size for dioceses and to consider further the alternative of small dioceses.

2.5.6 The Cathedrals and New Dioceses Committee's first report (1969) included initial proposals for what eventually became the Dioceses Measure 1978.¹⁹ The report of the ACCM working party, *Bishops and Dioceses*, published in 1971, proposed different forms of episcopacy for different types of diocese:

- in the large urban areas, 'collegial episcopacy', in which a college of bishops would be (corporately) 'the bishop of the diocese';
- in many areas, small dioceses with a single bishop;
- in some rural areas, a 'team episcopate of bishop-archdeacons'.²⁰

The Cathedrals and New Dioceses Committee then produced a report on this report, which raised questions about some of the practicalities involved.²¹

2.5.7 The Standing Committee of the new General Synod decided that the best way to respond to these three reports was to commission a fourth report from one of its members, Canon Paul Welsby, summarizing their proposals and comments and formulating questions for the General Synod to engage with.²² His report, *Episcopacy in the Church of England*, was published in 1973. Canon Welsby described the division of responsibilities between diocesans and suffragans in nine dioceses, looked at the nature of episcopacy and asked a number of questions about how the Church of England viewed various aspects of it, and reviewed the proposals made in the recent series of reports for

- small dioceses without suffragans,
- small dioceses, grouped regionally,
- in large rural dioceses, suffragans with maximal powers, but with formal authority remaining with the diocesan, and
- for major conurbations a 'college of bishops' where authority would rest with the college rather than an individual diocesan.

To these he added, as a fifth possibility, the existing pattern in some dioceses of a diocesan with a single suffragan. Canon Welsby asked (a) whether the General Synod favoured small dioceses (with or without shared administration) as a matter of policy, and (b) whether episcopal collegiality at the diocesan level was 'sound in theology and workable in practice'. Though generally even-handed in his approach, he was critical of the ACCM working party's

¹⁹ *Report of the Cathedrals and New Dioceses Committee* (CA 1738, 1969).

²⁰ *Bishops and Dioceses (ACCM) The Report of the Ministry Committee Working Party on the Episcopate* (GS 63, 1971), pp. 25-32.

²¹ *Second Report of the Cathedrals and New Dioceses Committee* (GS 79, 1972).

²² *Episcopacy in the Church of England. A Consultative Document by Paul A Welsby* (GS 167, 1973).

theological arguments for its ‘college of bishops’ option as ‘misleading and confusing’ and the option itself as ‘open to question on pragmatic grounds’, since ‘the idea that a group of bishops can reach the kind of consensus which could be regarded as that of “the bishop of the diocese” ’ was ‘an unrealistic notion’ and the description itself therefore ‘a fiction, a misuse of terms’.²³

- 2.5.8 Canon Welsby argued against a ‘top-down’ approach to diocesan reorganization, advancing a number of arguments of principle and also pragmatic reasons for leaving the initiative with the dioceses. The General Synod should offer co-ordination and supervision, however, and make final decisions.²⁴
- 2.5.9 Canon Welsby’s report was debated by the General Synod in November 1973. In 1974 the Standing Committee published a report in which it drew conclusions from the debate. Its ‘broad conclusion’ was that ‘there is no one pattern of episcopal organisation to which the Church of England would wish to commit itself, to the exclusion of all others’. There should, however, be legislation enabling dioceses to establish systems of ‘area bishops’ and to establish machinery which could create new dioceses without the need for a Measure in each case.’ It was felt that ‘the diocese or dioceses concerned should ordinarily have the right of initiative in all matters affecting diocesan organisation’, but that ‘in all cases that the interest of the wider Church should be taken fully into account’. The eventual result was the Dioceses Measure 1978 which created the 1978-2008 Dioceses Commission.²⁵
- 2.5.10 Canon Welsby’s report had also looked at the possibility of changing diocesan boundaries to match the new local government boundaries that came into effect in 1974. In 1975 a supplementary report by the Standing Committee responded to this. It argued that episcopal areas, archdeaconries and deaneries should be reconfigured to match the new districts as far as possible, but did not consider it urgently necessary to redraw diocesan boundaries to correspond with the new counties. Among other reasons, it noted that the secular new boundaries might be modified in the light of experience and judged that at a time of ‘turmoil’ on the local government side of local partnerships it would not be helpful for the church side also to be subject to re-organization. The possibility of the question being revisited in due course was left open.²⁶

2.6 The First Dioceses Commission, 1978-2008

- 2.6.1 The new Dioceses Commission was duly established in 1978. Reflections on its work by David Hebblethwaite, its Secretary from 1984 to 2002 (after which

²³ P. A. Welsby, *Episcopacy in the Church of England: A Consultative Document* (GS 167, 1973), pp. 26-27.

²⁴ *Episcopacy in the Church of England*, pp. 29-33.

²⁵ *Episcopacy. Follow-up of the debate on Canon Welsby’s Consultative Document (GS 167): Report by the Standing Committee* (GS 214, 1974), pp. 3-4.

²⁶ *Episcopacy in the Church of England: A Supplementary Report by the Standing Committee* (GS 246, 1975).

date it did not meet for lack of business), form Chapter 4 of the paper ‘Dioceses and Episcopal Sees in England: A Background Report for the Dioceses Commission’ mentioned in para. 2.1.2 above.

- 2.6.2 An early result of the Dioceses Measure 1978 was the London Area Scheme (1979). This divided the Diocese of London into five episcopal areas, one (the Cities of London and Westminster) overseen directly by the Bishop of London and the other four by suffragan bishops, to whom a wide range of powers were delegated under the Scheme. The Scheme built on a history of increasing delegation since 1945, which had been formalized on an experimental basis in 1970.²⁷
- 2.6.3 Between 1981 and 1992 there were seven further area schemes: Salisbury (1981), Chelmsford (1983), Oxford (1984), Chichester (1984), Southwark, 1991), Lichfield (1992), Worcester (1992). The Worcester Area Scheme, which divided the Diocese of Worcester into two episcopal areas with the diocesan bishop retaining responsibility for one of them, was rescinded in 2002. In 2010 the Salisbury Area Scheme was rescinded in favour of instruments of delegation.
- 2.6.4 During the thirty-year existence of the first Dioceses Commission there were only two relatively minor reorganization schemes. In 1984 the Archdeaconry of Croydon was transferred from the Diocese of Canterbury to the Diocese of Southwark – the culmination of discussions that began with the Osmond Report of 1975.²⁸ A prolonged attempt at a significant reshaping of diocesan boundaries in the West Midlands ran on from the inception of the Commission in 1978 through a major consultation exercise to its eventual outcome – the transfer of one deanery from Lichfield to Worcester in 1993.²⁹ These were the only significant changes to the diocesan map of England since the 1920s.
- 2.6.5 Under the Dioceses Measure 1978 any change had to be instigated by the bishops of the dioceses concerned; the Dioceses Commission’s role was purely reactive. Very little change ensued, and the Dioceses, Pastoral and Mission Measure 2007 therefore created the present Dioceses Commission with a duty to review the size, boundaries and number of dioceses and power to bring forward reorganization schemes of its own volition.
- 2.6.6 The view was taken that the arrangements for episcopal oversight within dioceses should be a matter for the bishops and dioceses themselves. The Measure therefore enabled dioceses to amend or rescind existing area schemes without reference to the General Synod. Delegation of episcopal powers in

²⁷ *Diocesan Organisation in London: Report of the Archbishop’s Commission* (London, [1976]), p. 10; ‘Report of the Dioceses Commission: Diocese of London’ (GS 418, 1979), p. 1.

²⁸ See ‘The Report by the Commission on the Church in Croydon’ (1975) and *Diocesan Organisation in Greater London. Report of the Archbishop’s Commission* (1976).

²⁹ See *Episcopal Care in the West Midlands. The Report of the West Midlands Bishops’ Commission* (Bramcote, Nottingham, 1987) and ‘Himley Deanery: Report of the Dioceses Commission’ (GS 1031, 1992).

respect of geographical areas of dioceses would no longer involve the Dioceses Commission or the General Synod, thus providing maximum flexibility.

2.7 Suffragan Bishops

- 2.7.1 It will be convenient at this point to look briefly at the issue of suffragan bishops.
- 2.7.2 Most episcopal churches have at least some assistant, auxiliary or suffragan bishops, but the Church of England is unusual in having considerably more suffragan than diocesan bishops. As already mentioned, suffragan bishops were revived from 1870 onwards, but views as to the desirability of suffragan bishoprics varied. The Canterbury Province review that reported in 1916 regarded a diocese small enough for a diocesan bishop to oversee it on his own as the ideal. In the 1920s the Church Assembly committee argued that no diocese should be so large as to require more than one suffragan. In 1967 the Arbuthnot Commission recognized that for some the ideal continued to be dioceses so small that no suffragan would be necessary, because a diocese could have only one father in God, but argued that there should be a suffragan in each diocese to whom powers could be delegated at least when the diocesan was absent or ill. These issues were discussed in the ACCM report *Bishops and Dioceses* (GS 63, 1971) and again in Canon Welsby's 1973 report *Episcopacy in the Church of England* (GS 167).
- 2.7.3 Since the 1970s discussion has continued. Some emphasize the fact that legally all episcopal ministry in a diocese is exercised in virtue of powers delegated by the diocesan. On this view, the suffragan's ministry is an extension of that of the diocesan; the suffragan is involved in the diocesan's ministry and oversight, which is understood very personally. Others stress very much the suffragan's membership of a diocesan college of bishops and value the collegial nature of episcopal ministry within the diocese with more than one bishop. On this view the suffragan's ministry has its own independent basis in the ministry that is his by virtue of his ordination or consecration to the episcopate and his appointment to an episcopal see. The tendency to see the suffragan's ministry as an extension of that of the diocesan is likely to be greater where the suffragan's role is primarily one of giving general episcopal assistance to the diocesan. Conversely, the sense of an episcopal college within a diocese is likely to be greater where the suffragans are area bishops to whom oversight of a geographical area within the diocese has been formally delegated.
- 2.7.4 These issues were most recently discussed in *Episcopal Ministry: The Report of the Archbishops' Group on the Episcopate* (GS 944, 1990), and in the House of Bishops Occasional Paper 'Suffragan Bishops' (GS Misc 733, 2004).³⁰

³⁰ *Episcopal Ministry: The Report of the Archbishops' Group on the Episcopate* (GS 944, 1990), pp. 189-206: paras 423-469 and the House of Bishops Occasional Paper 'Suffragan Bishops' (GS Misc 733, 2004). Both documents are available on the Commission's web site from this page: www.diocom.org/background.

- 2.7.5 Some may question the implications of an area system for the unity and integrity of the diocese. Is it in fact a single ‘local church’ or is it in danger of becoming merely a federation of local churches? In order to reflect Anglican and catholic ecclesiology, the diocesan bishop’s role as ‘father in God’, ‘chief pastor’ and ‘principal minister’ must have real content and the diocese must have a true sense of common life. In our view, this is not incompatible with an understanding of each episcopal area as having a corporate identity, led in mission by the area bishop who, under the oversight of the diocesan bishop, is the chief pastor and principal minister within the episcopal area. Indeed, there is evidence in those dioceses that have area schemes that this can be achieved.
- 2.7.6 There has also been much discussion over the years of the merits and demerits of suffragan bishops also being archdeacons. Some have favoured this as an economical solution, or as a means of providing both the ministry of a suffragan bishop and the ministry of an archdeacon in an area insufficiently large or populous to justify two senior posts. Others note that episcopal and archidiaconal ministries are different in kind and are concerned that combining the two roles in a single person removes the benefits of co-operation between two individuals with distinct responsibilities. Some question whether all bishops have the necessary skills to be an archdeacon and vice-versa. The increasing burdens placed on bishops and archdeacons by secular and ecclesiastical legislation and expectations of good practice further limit the practicality of combining the two roles.

2.8 Concluding Reflections

- 2.8.1 In this second Chapter of our Report we have surveyed the history and principles that lie behind the configuration of the English dioceses, and the history of attempts over the last half century to reform it. We have also touched on discussions of the role of bishops and the desirability of having suffragan bishops. We now offer some brief reflections.
- 2.8.2 One reason for surveying the history is to draw attention to the considerations that have underlain proposals for diocesan reorganization, both successful and unsuccessful, over the years. These considerations have informed our thinking and we hope that they will also inform discussion of our report. The relative weight that is to be placed on each of them will in part depend on the circumstances of each case.
- 2.8.3 The foregoing account also shows that episcopacy and suffragan episcopacy have been the subject of extensive consideration in a number of reports over the last fifty years. We have made some comments but have not sought to duplicate or add to this material by producing a treatise or even a summary of our own.

- 2.8.4 Thirdly, our survey indicates that over the last hundred years and more a range of solutions have been proposed to the perceived problems with the configuration of dioceses in England. None of the proposals that have been made to us in the course of our review is novel and indeed it seems unlikely that a solution could be conceived that has not been considered – and either implemented or rejected – in the past. In our recommendations we shall seek to learn from models that are found to have worked and to build on them.
- 2.8.5 The Arbuthnot Commission’s 1967 report on South-East England prompted no fewer than seven further reports, of varying length, over the next eight years. In 1974 the Standing Committee concluded that ‘there is no one pattern of episcopal organisation to which the Church of England would wish to commit itself, to the exclusion of all others’. There is every indication that there continues to be a diversity of view within the Church of England on all of the key issues that those reports addressed.
- 2.8.6 In 2003 the Revd Gareth Miller published in the *Church Times* an article entitled ‘A Church Simplified and Renewed’, in which he advocated smaller dioceses, 114 in number, grouped in ten provinces largely corresponding to the nine English regions.³¹ Each would have only one bishop and one archdeacon. Administration would be carried out on a regional basis in ten provincial offices. The overall number of bishops would be slightly larger than at present, while the number of archdeacons would be the same. In the course of our review, reference has frequently been made to this article in conversation and correspondence, indicating that the school of thought which would eliminate suffragan bishops, significantly increase the number of dioceses and ensure that they were small enough to be overseen by a single bishop still enjoys support. In broader public debate, not least in the church press, others have argued for a significant reduction in the overall number of bishops – often for financial reasons. This would entail a very considerable reduction in what bishops are expected to do, both within the Church and in relating to society.
- 2.8.7 The proposal in the 1971 ACCM report *Bishops and Dioceses* for ‘collegial episcopacy’, whereby in large urban dioceses a college of bishops would corporately be ‘the bishop of the diocese’ has not featured in national-level discussions since it was criticized by Canon Welsby in his 1973 report, but some have advocated it in conversation with us. Canon Welsby criticized the theological arguments for it as ‘misleading and confusing’ and he regarded it as ‘open to question on pragmatic grounds’. A prior consideration for us is that, even if it were desirable to make it possible for a group of individuals to hold and exercise jointly the office of diocesan bishop, this would require primary legislation of a radical nature. Our review is conducted within the framework of the existing law relating to episcopacy.

³¹ The article is available here: <http://www.sarmiento.plus.com/documents/garethmiller.html>

2.8.8 In July 2009 the number of episcopal and senior clergy posts was the subject of debate in the General Synod. In our Annual Report for 2009 (GS Misc 950)³² we commented as follows:

21. The Commission also prepared a background paper (GS Misc 1733B) for the debate at the July 2009 Group of Sessions on the Bradford Diocesan Synod Motion about the number of episcopal and senior clergy posts. Many of the contributions to the debate were informed by divergent views about a number of distinct, but related, issues of principle:

- the optimum size and number of dioceses;
- the desirability or otherwise of suffragan bishops;
- the question of whether there is a desirable overall number of bishops (or of bishops and archdeacons) and if so, what that number is.

The debate demonstrated a lack of consensus within the Synod on these issues.

22. The Commission believes that the optimum number and size of dioceses in any region should be determined according to local circumstances rather than a 'one size fits all' national approach, though the issue of 'critical mass' may need to be addressed in some instances.

23. Whatever may be appropriate for particular areas, the Commission does not regard the complete phasing out of suffragan bishops throughout the Church of England – by creating additional small dioceses capable of being overseen by a diocesan bishop without the assistance of a suffragan or assistant bishop – as a realistic objective. (It recognizes, however, that some will continue to view this as desirable in principle.)

24. Given the growth of the demands placed on bishops and archdeacons by secular and church legislation, policies and expectations, the Commission does not anticipate a significant reduction in the overall number of bishops and archdeacons. However, the numbers of bishops and of archdeacons can be expected to vary as the Commission and diocesan bishops review the provision of oversight within particular regions and within individual dioceses.

25. The new arrangements for the funding of episcopal ministry, to be introduced in January 2011, should make it easier for dioceses to think afresh about the need for suffragan bishops and archdeacons to support the bishop in his oversight of the diocese and about the balance between episcopal and archidiaconal ministry.

2.8.9 After ten years in which efforts at the provincial and national levels to identify an agreed solution to the perceived problems with the diocesan structure of the Church of England had been unsuccessful, in approving the Dioceses Measure 1978 the General Synod effectively decided that the initiative should be left with the bishops and dioceses concerned. During the next thirty years very little change occurred. It was frustration with that situation that resulted in the

³² www.diocom.org/annual

establishment of the present Commission, with a power of initiative (unlike its predecessor) but without the power to take final decisions.

- 2.8.10 We believe that, especially in situations where a reconfiguration is likely to involve more than two dioceses, proposals from the Dioceses Commission, as an external body, may serve as a helpful catalyst. We are conscious, however, that any scheme will be submitted to the synods of the dioceses concerned, and ultimately to the General Synod (in which they are represented), for approval. This means that, if it is to have any chance of success, the review process must involve conversation with and in the dioceses concerned. It is in this spirit that we offer our proposals to the dioceses of Yorkshire for consideration.
- 2.8.11 The history suggests that opportunities for change occur at most only once in each generation. No proposals for change anywhere in England were brought forward at all for forty years after the rejection of the proposed Diocese of Shrewsbury, and, except for the transfer of the Croydon Archdeaconry to Southwark and of the Himley Deanery to Worcester, no significant change to the diocesan boundaries in the South-East has occurred in the forty years since the effective rejection of the Arbuthnot Commission's 1967 report. We see the publication of this report as a once-in-a-generation opportunity to shape the Church for its mission to the people of Yorkshire in the 21st century.