

3: Suffragan Bishoprics

Origins

Before the Reformation, English diocesan bishops were commonly assisted by bishops who had been consecrated to sees ‘*in partibus infidelium*’ (parts of the world which had been Christian but which were now under Muslim control and no longer had a Christian population).¹²² The separation of the English Church from Rome meant that this was no longer possible. In order to respect the ancient tradition that a bishop cannot be consecrated for episcopal ministry in general but only to a specific see, the Suffragan Bishops Act 1534 provided that certain specified towns ‘shall be taken and accepted for sees of bishops suffragan to be made in this realm’.¹²³ (The term ‘suffragan’ originally referred to diocesan bishops in relation to their metropolitan, but was now used additionally to refer to the bishops of such sees in relation to their diocesans.) The act provides that the diocesan bishop wishing to have a suffragan shall ‘name and elect’ two ‘honest and discreet spiritual persons being learned and of good conversation’ and present them to the King in a petition, requesting His Majesty ‘to give to one such of the said two persons as shall please His Majesty such title, name, style and dignity of bishop of such of the sees ... specified [in the act] as the King’s Highness shall think most convenient for the same’. The King is empowered to give to one of two persons named in the bishop’s petition ‘the style, title and name of a bishop’ of such of the sees as he thinks most convenient and expedient. (The reason for that phrase is that the see would not necessarily be situated within the diocese concerned – just as the sees *in partibus infidelium* had not been.)

Twelve suffragan bishops were appointed in the 1530s and one in 1545 following the death of the first Bishop of Dover that year. Only three suffragans were appointed during the reign of Elizabeth I: a Bishop of Nottingham in 1567 (translated to Carlisle in 1570), a Bishop of Dover in 1569 and a Bishop of Colchester in 1592. Only the latter lived on into the reign of James I, dying in 1608.¹²⁴ Thereafter, the office lapsed.

From the 1830s onwards, high churchmen and Tractarians called for the appointment of suffragan bishops. The leading ecclesiastical reformer, Bishop Blomfield of London, opposed this, however. In his 1838 Charge to his clergy he commented, ‘The objections to appointing suffragans are so obvious, that I need not urge them in detail.’¹²⁵ Use was made instead of former colonial bishops as assistant bishops, but this was criticized as encouraging homesick bishops in the colonies to desert their posts. There was also a financial incentive for reviving suffragan bishoprics rather than creating new dioceses: suffragan bishoprics could be held with deaneries, canonries or benefices at negligible cost, whereas diocesan bishops cost over £4,000 a year. Finally, suffragan bishops could be appointed without dividing historic dioceses that represented natural (if overlarge) units. However, these considerations could be countered with others, both arguments of principle (concerning the nature of diocesan episcopacy) and practical considerations (for example, regarding the likely aspirations of suffragan bishops to succeed

¹²² For a list of bishops ‘in partibus’ see E. B. Fryde, D. E. Greenaway, S. Porter and I. Roy (eds), *Handbook of British Chronology* (3rd edn: Cambridge, reprinted 2003), pp. 284-287.

¹²³ In the quotations spelling, capitalization and punctuation have been modernized.

¹²⁴ *Handbook of British Chronology*, pp. 287-288.

¹²⁵ Blomfield, 1838 Charge, p. 27, quoted by Best, *Temporal Pillars*, p. 319.

their own or other dioceses).¹²⁶ In 1868 the Lower House of the Convocation of Canterbury resolved that the use of ex-colonial bishops as assistant bishops was to be deplored, both because it postponed reform and because it tended to encourage resignations from colonial sees.¹²⁷

It was not the desirability of suffragan bishops but the unwillingness or inability of the government to agree to the creation of new diocesan sees that led to the revival of suffragan bishops from 1870. For political reasons, Gladstone's government did not feel able to accede to the growing calls for new dioceses. As a second best the bishops therefore proposed in 1869 that the government exercise its power to appoint suffragan bishops.¹²⁸ The government agreed (as this could be done without legislation) and in 1870 Bishops of Dover and Nottingham were appointed to assist the Archbishop of Canterbury and the Bishop of Lincoln in their respective dioceses. Though Gladstone publicly declared that the Crown was free to choose either of the two names proposed by the diocesan bishop, in practice the first-named candidate was invariably appointed – except in 1888 when the second candidate for a suffragan bishopric in the Diocese of Exeter (whom the bishop had not even informed of his nomination) was chosen in preference.

At first, the limited number of suffragan sees identified in the Suffragan Bishops Act caused difficulties. Some dioceses had no suffragan sees within their limits, and the Bishop of London's two suffragans, therefore, were the Bishop of Bedford and the Bishop of Marlborough. This difficulty was remedied by the Suffragans Nomination Act 1888, which permitted the addition by Order in Council of other sees to the list contained in the 1534 act. The Suffragan Bishops Act 1898 made it lawful to appoint as suffragan bishop a person already in episcopal orders. Section 6 of the Church of England (Legal Aid and Miscellaneous Provisions) Measure 1988 made it possible to change the name of an existing diocesan or suffragan see, and this was replaced by a comparable provision in the Dioceses, Pastoral and Mission Measure 2007, section 11.

Growth in Numbers

In his unpublished study of Walter Baddeley (Bishop of Whitby, 1947-1954, and Blackburn, 1954-1960), Anthony Hodgson has looked at the office of suffragan bishop during the century from 1870. In 1892 the Church of England Year Book listed 14 suffragan and 4 assistant bishops. In most cases, the post was 'funded' by the suffragan also holding a residentiary canonry or the incumbency of a wealthy living. (This was also true of most archdeacons: of the 78 archdeacons in 1892, 21 were residentiary canons and 51 were incumbents; only four held no other office.) Combination of a suffragan or assistant bishopric with an archdeaconry was also common: nine of the eighteen suffragan or assistant bishops were also archdeacons.

During the twentieth century the number of suffragan bishoprics increased, as documented by the table opposite. It needs to be borne in mind that no new dioceses were created after 1927, despite recommendations in 1922 and again in 1967 that the number of dioceses should be increased. This is clearly one of the reasons for the growth in the number of suffragan bishoprics during the sixty years from 1927 to 1987.

¹²⁶ Burns, *The Diocesan Revival in the Church of England*, pp. 193, 196, 203, 210-214.

¹²⁷ Chadwick, *The Victorian Church*, 2, p. 344.

¹²⁸ Marsh, *Victorian Church in Decline*, p. 101.

Numbers of Suffragan Bishops in England in the Twentieth Century

1901	9	(<i>Episcopal Ministry</i> , p. 186 [†])
1921	21	(<i>Episcopal Ministry</i> , p. 186)
1928	26	(<i>Episcopacy and the Role of the Suffragan Bishop</i> , p. 7)
1941	38	(<i>Episcopal Ministry</i> , p. 186)
1947	41	(<i>Episcopacy and the Role of the Suffragan Bishop</i> , p. 7)
1961	44	(<i>Episcopal Ministry</i> , p. 186)
1966	49	(<i>Episcopal Ministry</i> , p. 186)
1970	54	(<i>Bishops and Dioceses</i> , p. 5)
1973		Total number of suffragans and stipendiary assistants: 64, [‡] only three English dioceses had none. (<i>Episcopacy in the Church of England</i> , p. 9)
1974	59	(<i>Episcopal Ministry</i> , p. 186)
1983	62	plus two stipendiary assistant bishops (<i>Episcopacy and the Role of the Suffragan Bishop</i> , p. 7)
from 1987	64	(following creation of the see of Brixworth)
from 1993	67	including the three Provincial Episcopal Visitors

There is also a suffragan bishop in the Diocese in Europe
and there is currently a stipendiary assistant bishop in the Diocese of Newcastle.

[†] *Episcopal Ministry. The Report of the Archbishops' Group on the Episcopate* (GS 944, 1990).
The 1901 figure needs to be treated with caution; Anthony Hodgson has identified 20 suffragan sees that were occupied in that year.

[‡] Chandler, *The Church Commissioners in the Twentieth Century*, p. 187, gives different figures for 1972: 46 suffragans and 9 assistants, but these seem too low.

Caution is needed in counting only suffragan bishoprics rather than suffragans and full-time assistants together, since the latter have declined in number owing to a fall in the number of Englishmen returning to England having served as a bishop overseas. In some cases, a 'new' suffragan bishopric represented the replacement of a full-time assistant bishop with a suffragan. Excluding the Provincial Episcopal Visitors, the total number of suffragan bishops is 64, with just one stipendiary assistant bishop; in 1973 the total number of suffragans and stipendiary assistants was 64. Thus, though five suffragan sees were established under the Dioceses Measure 1978 between 1978 and 1987, apart from the PEVs the overall number of suffragans and stipendiary assistant bishops is now only one higher than it was in 1973, thirty-five years ago.

Funding

As indicated above, suffragan bishoprics were originally funded in most cases by being held together with a residentiary canonry or a parochial living. From 1943, however, the Church Commissioners were empowered to pay all or part of a suffragan bishop's stipend. In the mid-twentieth century, the sources of funding of suffragan bishops' stipends were:

- other preferments not annexed to the see (62.5% of the total funding)
 - 13 archdeaconries, 11 canonries, 16 benefices;
- preferments legally annexed to suffragan sees;
- resources of diocesan sees;
- diocesan boards of funding and other diocesan bodies;
- the Church Commissioners;
- the City Parochial Charities Fund;
- a variety of trusts.¹²⁹

The stipends of suffragan bishops varied greatly and unfairly. From 1 April 1956, therefore, a minimum stipend for all suffragan bishop was established, with a grants from the Commissioners towards the stipend of each and towards the costs of house rents, rates and repairs. In 1965 the Commissioners agreed a new plan to ensure that there would be at least one full-time episcopal assistant for every diocesan bishop. In time, the Commissioners' contribution towards the cost of suffragans increased from half to three-quarters of the cost of stipends and expenses, with assistant bishops costing them three-quarters as much as suffragans.¹³⁰ Eventually, it was agreed that the Commissioners would pay the full cost of the stipends and working costs of suffragan bishops and those assistant bishops whom they agreed to fund, the Commissioners, while the dioceses would be responsible for their housing.

Increased funding by the Church Commissioners is likely to have played its part – together with the failure to create any new dioceses after 1927 and the decline in the availability of former overseas bishops for appointment as assistant bishops – in the growth in the number of suffragan bishoprics. It would seem that after 1978 the need for a report by the Dioceses Commission and approval by the General Synod played its part in first reducing and then halting that growth.

The Role of the Suffragan Bishop

As mentioned in Section 2 of this report, the role of the suffragan bishop was examined by a number of reports during the twentieth century. The following extract from the Pilling report *Talent and Calling* (2007)¹³¹ is also relevant:

¹²⁹ A. Chandler, *The Church Commissioners in the Twentieth Century. The Church Commissioners and the Politics of Reform, 1948-1998* (Woodbridge, 2006), p. 133.

¹³⁰ Chandler, *The Church Commissioners in the Twentieth Century*, pp. 134, 184-185.

¹³¹ *Talent and Calling. A review of the law and practice regarding appointments to the offices of suffragan bishop, dean, archdeacon and residentiary canon* (GS 1650, 2007), pp. 43-46.

- 5.1.3 The office of suffragan bishop is distinct from the other senior offices to which diocesan bishops appoint (archdeacon, dean and residentiary canon) not only in respect of the bishop's role in making the appointment but also in its nature.
- 5.2.1 One difference is that whereas the 'core' duties of archdeacons and (to some extent at least) deans and residentiary canons are laid down in canon and statute law, Canon C 20 ('Of Bishops Suffragan') merely says that a suffragan bishop is to do 'such things pertaining to the episcopal office as shall be delegated to him by the bishop of the diocese to whom he shall be suffragan' (para. 1), shall 'use, have, or execute only such jurisdiction or episcopal power or authority in any diocese as shall be licensed or limited to him to use, have, or execute by the bishop of the same' (para. 2) and shall reside in the diocese unless the bishop licenses him to live elsewhere (para. 3).
- 5.2.2 This means that the role of suffragan bishop varies considerably from diocese to diocese, and [where there is no area scheme under the Dioceses Measure 1978¹³²] may be changed by the diocesan bishop and especially by a new diocesan bishop.
- 5.2.3 Suffragan bishops may be said to fall into five different categories:
- suffragan bishops who give general episcopal assistance to the diocesan;
 - suffragan bishops to whom the diocesan delegates responsibility for certain aspects of the life of the diocese;
 - suffragan bishops to whom the diocesan delegates (informally or more formally) varying degrees of responsibility for geographical areas;
 - suffragan bishops to whom oversight of geographical areas has been delegated by a scheme under the Dioceses Measure 1978;¹³³
 - the Provincial Episcopal Visitors appointed under the Episcopal Ministry Act of Synod 1993.

The only suffragan bishop who does not fall into one of these categories is the Bishop of Dover, to whom the Archbishop of Canterbury has delegated responsibility for day-to-day oversight of the Diocese of Canterbury as a whole (rather than just an area within it). [This delegation has been made by instrument rather than by means of an scheme under

¹³² [Under the Dioceses, Pastoral and Mission Measure 2007 the words in square brackets are no longer relevant. See the following footnote.]

¹³³ The position on delegation of the diocesan bishop's functions to suffragan bishops is subject to section 13 of the Dioceses, Pastoral and Mission Measure 2007. It replaces almost all the previous legislation on the subject, including that on area schemes, and gives the diocesan bishop power to delegate such of his functions as he thinks fit (with very few exceptions) to a suffragan (or assistant) bishop, either for the diocese as a whole or in relation to a particular area. In most cases the diocesan synod must approve the delegation, but the section does not require the consent of or consultation with any central church body. Existing area schemes will continue on a transitional basis, but the Measure gives the diocesan bishop power to revoke or amend them, subject to the approval of the diocesan synod.

the Dioceses Measure 1978 and therefore does not bind the Archbishop or his successors.]

- 5.2.4 There are at least two ways in which the role of suffragan bishops can be viewed.¹³⁴ 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, seeing episcopal ministry within the diocese as collegial. On this view the suffragan's ministry has its own independent basis in the ministry which 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. By contrast, the sense of an episcopal college within a diocese is likely to be greater where the suffragans are area bishops whose duties are defined by a scheme under the Dioceses Measure 1978.

¹³⁴ For a discussion of the issues, see *Episcopal Ministry: The Report of the Archbishops' Group on the Episcopate* (London, 1990), pp. 189-206: paras 423-469 and the House of Bishops Occasional Paper 'Suffragan Bishops' (GS Misc 733, 2004).