

THE MANCHESTER RESIDENTIAL CONFERENCE 14–16 MARCH 1997

NORMAN DOE

A hundred members of the Society (representing four Churches) met at the Manchester Conference Centre in March to consider the conference theme, *Practical Parish Problems: Gospel and Order*. It was certainly good news for the Society to congregate in northern England a third time for this the sixth residential conference. The Bishop of Manchester's welcome and Chancellor John Holden's introduction to Manchester at supper on Friday evening both typified the warmth of our reception. It was, however, a great shame that John Holden's predecessor as Chancellor, George Spafford, could not be there. The venue, accommodation and food were first class, equal to if not better than at previous conferences. The officers of the Society, particularly Dr Frank Robson (who braved the conference despite a recent spell in hospital), are to be congratulated on their hard work and organisation.

Mark Hill had raised, in his trenchant article on *Gospel and Order* in the January issue of the *Journal*, some fundamental questions about the role of theology and law in the life of the Church. These were taken up by the Archbishop of York who was accompanied on the podium by the Bishop of Chichester in his address, on the Friday night (p. 694–699). The address was excellent, scholarly, wide-ranging and critical. One of its central themes proposed that it ought not to be one of the functions of the makers of church law to cross every 't' and to dot every 'i'—such matters should be left to the sense of those charged with the application of law, an application which must be characterised by the pastoral values of sensitivity and flexibility. This is a radical view with, needless to say, important implications and it set the scene for much of the remainder of the weekend.

The proceedings on Saturday marked an innovation at the residential conferences—two short presentations (chaired with charming wit by the Venerable Hughie Jones) and discussion groups. After Archdeacon Michael Hill's exploration of the applicability of gospel to the administration of elements of the Church of England's property law, members joined groups on faculties, trusts, churchyards, listed buildings and conservation areas, and re-ordering. Archdeacon George Austin's presentation, in which he dealt with the applicability of rudimentary concepts of justice to the processing of clergy discipline cases, was followed by group discussions on baptism, liturgy and vesture, employment law and lay ministers, marriage discipline, clergy discipline and the role of bishops. This new participatory format was much appreciated and its success due not least to the stimulation provided by the group leaders. The sessions which I attended, on trusts (led by Nicholas Richens) and employment law (led by John Rees) were outstanding. Each group endeavoured to reduce its discussion to a single question and these were considered in the Open Forum, chaired by Chancellor Michael Goodman, on the Sunday morning. The questions were put to a panel composed of the Bishop of Durham, Archdeacons Hill and Austin, Peter Beesley, John Masing and Rupert Bursell. This again was an ambitious innovation and it was a shame that more time was not available for a deeper analysis.

Business at the Annual General Meeting the previous afternoon had been brisk and was efficiently transacted under the chairmanship of Bishop Christopher Hill and, along with the election of officers, brief feedback from the Working Parties and rosy reports of the Society's finances, Michael Goodman presented a report on the great success of the *Journal*. The meeting closed and Canon Peter Boulton, regally robed in red, led us to Evensong. Indeed, once more the liturgical side of

the conference was uplifting and at a celebration of the Holy Communion on Sunday morning the Bishop of Durham's sermon was much appreciated. The conference as a social occasion was both relaxing and effervescent, the bar becoming the night-spot of Manchester and Ryan Giggs's appearance, to meet his favourite ecclesiastical lawyers, was a nice touch, but could not (for me at least) quite assuage Wales' defeat by England that day at the last international match to be played at Cardiff Arms Park. The quite unprecedented spillage of wine on the tabletops at the Conference Dinner on Saturday night was a tribute to the generosity of the Manchester spirit which was fairly uproariously depicted in the Bishop of Hulme's speech to which Bishop Christopher Hill made a thoroughly entertaining reply.

On the first evening, after our arrival, the most sonorous alarm I have ever heard ushered the conference members outside the building. There was no fire. The conference itself, however, ignited a fundamental challenge for church law—how still, ten years into the life of the Society, Anglican church lawyers are struggling to construct from the apparent tensions between liberating gospel and ordering law a convincing ecclesiology of church law. This must surely now be a priority for the Society and is, I feel, a subject very worthy of treatment by a Working Party. The discussion groups too indicated the need for rigorous work in the areas they examined. All in all, then, the 1997 Manchester Conference was a great and pleasurable success. It may be that one anagram of Eric Cantona, perhaps Manchester's most celebrated contemporary poet, presents the challenge for members of this learned Society at its next residential conference—'RECIT(E) A CANON'.