

SMART ALECs

Are you ready to become a **SMART ALEC**? This is the third paper of a trilogy in which I have tried to initiate debates about the future of the church we love and serve. It is not that by nature I am a reactionary rebel, rather one who strongly believes that fundamental changes are needed within the church if it is to survive for generations of worshipping Episcopalians as yet unborn. In the first paper I pleaded for empowerment of the laity to adopt many of the responsibilities that are traditionally priestly, and for congregational members to offer themselves for training in those roles. In the second I suggested that a return of the Mass Priest would solve many of the difficulties associated with the provision of regular and frequent sacramental worship, particularly in widely spread, rural areas and islands. Now I ask you to question the very parochial structure that we as a church have inherited.

From Victorian times the church, by-and-large, has had a well-defined, geographical structure of parishes (charges), each one being the sacred and secular responsibility of its Cure-of-Souls, its parish priest. It has become transparently obvious that the modern church cannot support the financial burdens of such an excellent system and the result has been the diversity of pluralities and multiple benefices that we see around us. Even in the towns and cities of, for example, Scotland's Central Belt the purity seen within the parish system, where each incumbent was responsible for the pastoral care of those living within his parish boundaries, is no more. With increased mobility, church members travel, where the options allow, to worship in the church of their choice, or their churchmanship, or where their friends or family gather, or where they feel more 'at home'. This is not only true of regular worshippers but also for those who are humorously referred to as 'four-wheeler' Christians; those who attend in perambulators (buggies?) for Baptism, in limousines (stretched?) for Matrimony and in hearses (on biers?) for Burial. My contention is that it is time for the present structure of the parish

system to be dismantled. How would this proposal affect a rural and far-flung diocese such as ours?

As we have seen, the current system cannot and will not cope. A priest living in Glencoe cannot possibly be pastorally responsible for Christians living on Tiree! And, this is not a unique example. The introduction of suitably trained and warranted lay chaplains, readers and leaders, together with Mass Priests, will undoubtedly help to maintain the current, moribund system but only by propping up the inevitably unsustainable. This is where **ALEC** comes in – more about **SMART** later. In my proposal each worshipping community would become an **ALEC**, an **Autonomous Local Episcopal Church**. Its geographical area and number of communicant members would be largely undefined. It would be the place where the local people worship, meet for prayer or study, visit the sick, or offer four-wheeler and other services. Its responsibility would lie collectively with its Mass Priest (if it had one) together with all those who helped, in any way, to provide a service for church members – and that means 'service' in the widest sense of the word! It would finance itself, as far as it was able, and (hopefully) provide some funding for the maintenance of its Bishop and the essential structure of its diocese. While it would still receive episcopal oversight, it would not have direct links to any parish priest or parish grouping. The diocese would obviously need a few stipendiary clergy, particularly for its cathedral and in its principal centres of population. I suggest that, in our diocese, apart from the Bishop, about four of these could be sufficient – the Dean/Provost in Oban, one priest in Fort William (for the northern part of the mainland diocese) and one covering southern Argyll and the Mull of Kintyre. The fourth would be itinerant and have an overview of all the islands. These clergy would provide, insofar as they were able, the external support that an **ALEC** might need. This could include, for example, the provision of pre-consecrated, Eucharistic elements where no Mass Priest

existed, or the provision of other sacraments. They could also offer essential training, both practical and theoretical.

A central, diocesan, account, funded from stipendiary savings, reduced travelling expenses and the sale of redundant rectories and parsonages, would probably yield sufficient interest to obviate the financial haemorrhaging that this diocese (among others) currently suffers. Our bishop would no longer have palpitations when the word 'augmentation' was mentioned (especially in relation to his stipend!). Surplus funds could be used for vital, overseas missionary work.

Achieving such a reorganisation will take many years but the seeds for change must be sown.

So, your charge or parish becomes an **ALEC**. What's so **SMART** about that? Apart from the obvious, that it's a **SMART** thing to do, **SMART** can have any number of meanings and you can probably suggest a definition that is suitable for you. I offer a few for your consideration. Could yours be an **ALEC** that is:

Supportive, **Motivated**, **Attentive**, **Responsive**
and **There**?

Alternatively, could you claim that your **ALEC** is:

- ❖ Sacramental in its worship;
- ❖ **Missionary** in its outreach;
- ❖ **Apostolic** in its mission;
- ❖ **Realistic** in its endeavours; and
- ❖ **Traditional** in its teaching?

Perhaps you will be:

Spiritually **Mature** **Albeit** **Religiously** **Tolerant**.

Or, could you define your **ALEC** as:

- ❖ **Small** – in our numbers;
- ❖ **Mutual** – in our concern for each other;
- ❖ **Alive** – in our worship;
- ❖ **Realistic** – in our expectations; and
- ❖ **Transformed** – by the Holy Spirit?

These ideas are, of necessity, new and revolutionary, but, as I wrote earlier, a church that doesn't move forward, moves backwards: there is no option for standing still. Canon law may have to change to allow **ALECs** to have their new place within our church structures, but nary a General Synod passes when Canon law does not suffer some degree of refinement and adjustment.

Two thousand years ago, eleven frightened men, led by the power of the Holy Spirit, changed the world for ever. Today, external economic and statutory factors, which apply equally to churches as to secular organisations, demand our actions and reactions. Do we have the courage of the Apostles to look at our church in the light of the revolutionary and reforming changes that are necessary? Can we survive the next few generations, let alone into the next century, without such changes? Can our congregations be trusted to look after themselves without being under the umbrella of some distant and perhaps little known priest, an expensive Man of God who cannot begin to fulfil all the pastoral burdens laid upon him; or one who may not be adequately qualified to accomplish them? Becoming an **ALEC** must be the way to the future. Better still, be a **SMART ALEC**!

As before, I offer these proposals for discussion by the College of Bishops. It would be wonderful if they promoted a debate at General Synod so that all sections of our church may offer their thinking on their church's future. I commit them to your thoughts and prayers.