

4: The Dioceses Commission, 1978-2002

Some Reflections on the Formation of a New Dioceses Commission

by *David Hebblethwaite*

1. The author's credentials to write on this topic are that he was Secretary to the 'old' Dioceses Commission from September 1984 to August 2002 – not the first Secretary (Keith Reading), but taking over while the initial membership under Sir William van Straubenzee was still in post. I worked with five Commissions under four chairmen. I then served as joint secretary (and later as consultant) to the working party which paved the way for the new Measure.¹³⁵
2. The Dioceses Commission was the product of the Dioceses Measure 1978. It was a 'maimed' body from the outset in that it was bereft of any power to suggest proposals or to indicate areas in episcopal and diocesan organization that might benefit from review. Its function was to report (on behalf of the Church nationally) on proposals advanced by diocesan bishops for changes in diocesan boundaries, creation (or abolition) of dioceses (!), creation or revival of suffragan sees and approval of formally constituted area schemes.
3. It had two initial high profile achievements – the London Area Scheme (1979) and the transfer of Croydon from Canterbury to Southwark (1984) – but in truth these had been largely designed in advance of the new Measure taking effect by the relevant diocesans (Ellison in London, and Stockwood and Coggan for Croydon – even though by the time it was implemented it was Bowlby and Runcie).¹³⁶ There followed a stream of other Area Schemes (Salisbury, Oxford, Chelmsford, Chichester, Southwark, Lichfield and Worcester¹³⁷) and a trickle of further suffragans (Wolverhampton, Warwick, Ludlow, Bolton and Brixworth; and later – though quite exceptionally – Ebbsfleet, Richborough and a revived Beverley). There was also a prolonged attempt at a significant reshaping of diocesan boundaries in the West Midlands which rumbled on from the inception of the Measure (the suffragan sees of Warwick and Ludlow were a part of it) – through a major consultation exercise,¹³⁸ on a par with the 1960s report on diocesan structures in the South-East,¹³⁹ to the eventual outcome in the transfer of one deanery from Lichfield to Worcester in 1993.

¹³⁵ *A Measure for Measures: In Mission and Ministry. Report of the Review of the Dioceses, Pastoral and related Measures* (GS 1528, 2004).

¹³⁶ 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).

¹³⁷ The Worcester Area Scheme was an oddity best seen as part of the West Midlands exercise.

¹³⁸ See *Episcopal Care in the West Midlands. The Report of the West Midlands Bishops' Commission* (Bramcote, Nottingham, 1987).

¹³⁹ *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 1965/67* (CA 1653, 1967).

4. The area schemes it processed fell into two distinct models. The London, Salisbury, Chichester and Oxford schemes retained geographical areas under the immediate pastoral oversight of the diocesan bishop (though only the London scheme gave the diocesan a sizeable area). The Lichfield, Southwark and Chelmsford schemes parcelled the whole diocese out to the care of suffragans, the diocesan retaining a 'general oversight'. The two models illustrate an unresolved tension between different styles of exercising episcopal ministry which are of wider ecclesiological significance. Are such schemes attempts to create what are in effect smaller dioceses without the administrative chore of doing so definitively or a mechanism for parcelling out the duties of episcopal assistants? Different diocesan bishops will, I suspect, always differ in their attitude to such matters (and no diocesan succeeding the bishop who first set up an area scheme was entirely comfortable with the model he inherited). A good many dioceses throughout the 1980s and 90s were known to be operating 'de facto' area schemes but steered well clear of setting them in the administrative straightjacket of a formal scheme (York, Manchester, Exeter, Norwich, Lincoln). It is, I judge, a wise change which has removed the formal establishment of such essentially internal administrative arrangements from the necessity of formal scrutiny at 'national' level.

5. The most high profile impetus for the Dioceses Measure 1978 was a perceived lack of any control over a proliferation of suffragan bishops – coupled with a growing trend towards these being full-time posts, rather than being linked with canonries or incumbencies. In truth there was no scrutiny other than a negotiation between the bishop concerned and the Crown (via Downing Street, which no doubt took soundings at Lambeth/Bishopthorpe). Among those concerned at this trend (no fewer than nineteen suffragan sees established or revived between 1945 and 1978) were the Church Commissioners, who were likely to incur added expense. There was, however, a determined lobby in the (then) new General Synod *not* to give the task of national scrutiny to the Church Commissioners, hence the establishment of an independent Commission (though bound in all cases to work closely with the Commissioners in producing a financial comment on whatever was being considered). The Commission laboured hard to bring critical scrutiny to bear on proposals for new suffragans – always pressing diocesans hard on questions of whether there really was need for their assistants to be episcopal, and the geographical and communications difficulties that might make oversight by the diocesan and existing suffragans difficult – but it was difficult to stand up to insistent diocesans who were increasingly being involved in active central church bodies and voluntary society initiatives. In any case, by 1979 few dioceses remained without have a suffragan so that refusal to agree a proposal could be characterized as 'unfair' and the move towards indigenous bishops in former overseas territories was causing the supply of assistant bishops retired from overseas to dry up. Nonetheless, by 1990 diocesan bishops were aware that the Dioceses Commission was no 'easy touch'. Its existence and delaying potential were openly resented in the House of Bishops, but since the Commission was an unavoidable obstacle to such proposals there were fewer of them and it had less and less to do in the 1990s.

6. The ‘old’ Commission made a number of reports to Synod. Two were entitled *Episcopacy and The Role of the Suffragan Bishop*,¹⁴⁰ but the most substantial report came in 1990.¹⁴¹ It is significant that although it touched on suffragan and area organization the main strand was the need for national scrutiny of proposals for boundary change (a subtext, also related to territoriality, was a need to hold together proposals for new episcopal posts and proposals for archdeaconries – no concern of the Dioceses Commission – which have been increasing in number at an even faster rate than suffragans). Just before the 1990 report the Commission had been involved in vetting proposals for a fourth suffragan for Chelmsford¹⁴² and had (straining its powers to be involved to the utmost) vainly tried to explore the seeming insurmountability of the River Lea, being reluctant to sanction a new post to minister to Outer London boroughs without reference to the relatively small territory assigned to the Bishop of Stepney in London. That exercise greatly frustrated the Commission since the only way to promote any consideration of *diocesan* boundaries (as opposed to areas within a diocese) was if neighbouring diocesan bishops co-operated to bring forward proposals, and that had not happened since the Croydon transfer.
7. The climate (financial, ecclesiological and sociological) has changed since 1990 and it is a boon that the new Measure allows a new Commission to look at such issues without being asked to comment on already formulated proposals coming from diocesan bishops in post. That is not to say that the task will be easy. No national body can fully enter into issues of local loyalty and sentiment (the protracted consultations in the West Midlands proved that) and the radical and largely imposed changes in diocesan patterns of the 19th Century are no longer possible in an age when all must be consulted at every stage. It must, however, be right for a national body with a wider perspective at the very least to pose pertinent questions as to the continuing viability of the existing pattern of dioceses. The tension will undoubtedly continue between the ‘ideal’ early model of the small city-size dioceses of Italy and Gaul in the early centuries and the large, varied and viable fiefdoms of later centuries in Northern Europe (of which historically England is a part). The provisions for ensuring shared administration in the new Measure need to be used to minimize such tensions.
8. A final thought from experience of the ‘old’ Measure. The 1978 Measure devoted much attention to the need for diocesan and *cathedral* structures in any new diocese. When new dioceses proliferated in the second half of the nineteenth century up until 1928, there was little attention paid (after St Albans and Truro in 1877) to full cathedral establishments. Since the early 1930s (after the last crop of new dioceses) there has been increasing attention to standardizing the nature of cathedral establishments, and that – including the potential dismantling of cathedral establishments if they are no longer ideally located (Ripon, Southwell) – could be a powerful factor inhibiting flexibility in changing patterns of diocesan organization. Despite the lack of ‘standardization’ the sheer pressure of local sentiment led to immense work and effort on behalf of new cathedrals from 1880 onwards.

¹⁴⁰ ‘Episcopacy and the Role of the Suffragan Bishop. A report by the Dioceses Commission’ (GS 551, 1983);

‘Episcopacy and the Role of the Suffragan Bishop. A second report by the Dioceses Commission’ (GS 697, 1985).

¹⁴¹ ‘The Dioceses Measure 1978: A Review. Report by the Dioceses Commission’ (GS 925, 1990).

¹⁴² Although the Commission very reluctantly agreed the proposal the then bishop did not proceed further, though a new archdeaconry was created.

Wherever any future bishop chooses to locate his cathedra will surely trigger equivalent effort, despite any exhortation to 'travel light' in structures. There needs to be careful thought about the location of the 'diocesan centres' in any reconfiguration: 'co-cathedrals' rather than 'pro-cathedrals' or 'ex cathedrals'.

9. These paragraphs are offered in some hope that the new arrangements might be better suited to their purpose than the old and to preserve the memory that the 'old' Commission was not as supine or as spineless as it was popularly supposed to have been. One thing is certain: any change in diocesan structures will be mired in controversy. My hope is that good ecclesiology, not economic pressure, will be the guiding principle for the future.

J. D. HEBBLETHWAITE

Secretary of the Dioceses Commission, 1984-2002

April 2008

Reports by the Dioceses Commission, 1978-2008

(a) General

‘Episcopacy and the Role of the Suffragan Bishop. A report by the Dioceses Commission’ (GS 551, 1983)

‘Episcopacy and the Role of the Suffragan Bishop. A second report by the Dioceses Commission’ (GS 697, 1985)

‘The Dioceses Measure 1978: A Review. Report by the Dioceses Commission’ (GS 925, 1990)

(b) Re-organization

Transfer of Croydon Archdeaconry (GS 637A, 1984)

Transfer of Himley Deanery (GS 1031, 1993)

(c) Area Schemes

London (GS 418, 1979)

Salisbury (GS 489, 1981)

Chelmsford (GS 597, 1983)

Oxford (GS 658, 1984)

Chichester (GS 662, 1984)

Southwark (GS 978, 1991)

Lichfield (GS 1029, 1992)

Worcester (GS 1030, 1992); Worcester (recission of area scheme: GS 1445, 2002)

(d) Suffragan Bishoprics

Lichfield (GS 389, 1978) – Wolverhampton

Coventry (GS 426, 1979) – Warwick

Hereford (GS 446, 1980; GS446A, 1981) – Ludlow

Manchester (GS 579, 1983) – Bolton

Peterborough (GS 782, 1987) – Brixworth

Provincial Episcopal Visitors (GS 1086, 1993) – Beverley, Ebbsfleet, Richborough

The report on the Chelmsford proposal mentioned in the text was never published since the Bishop did not pursue it. There were also unpublished reports on proposals from Leicester, Peterborough, Newcastle and Europe.

(e) Annual Reports

In addition to the reports listed above, attention is drawn to the succession of somewhat dry but, to the perceptive, interesting annual reports.