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A table of contents for *The Churchman* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_churchman_os.php

Necessary Reforms in the Church Assembly

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THE Church Assembly came into existence after the passing of the Enabling Act, 1919. This was preceded by an intensive campaign throughout the country under the auspices of the Life and Liberty Movement, directed by such men as the present Bishop of Lichfield, the present Dean of Lichfield (F. A. Iremonger), the late "Dick" Shepherd and men of that ilk—mainly ex-Army Chaplains who during the war became thoroughly disgruntled with the state of "C. of E." religion as revealed in the army. They were determined not to let sleeping dogs lie, and they began a crusade which was undoubtedly helped by the publication of the Five Reports, issued after the National Mission of 1916. They dealt with The Teaching Office of the Church, The Worship of the Church, The Evangelistic Work of the Church, Christianity and the Industrial Problem, and The Administrative Reform of the Church. They make interesting reading even to-day, and they provoked much discussion when they first appeared. The last one is particularly important for it not only dealt with the hindrances and difficulties in the Church's administrative system, but it also clearly laid down the general principles of reform.

The recommendations which have been put into operation include the Reform of the Sale of Advowsons, The Formation of Diocesan Boards of Patronage, The Legal Establishment of Parochial Church Councils and the Right of Women to vote for and serve on all councils and committees of the Church which include representatives of the laity. The recommendations which have not yet been adopted are : A Greater Cathedral Chapter in every Diocese to act as an official Council of Advisers to the Bishop, Institution to a Benefice to be for a term of years (ten was recommended),

the Bishop not to hold Patronage in any other Diocese, a Minimum Stipend for every Incumbent of £400 per annum to be obtained partly by a compulsory union of some benefices and partly by a re-arrangement of the larger incomes, the Amalgamation of Queen Anne's Bounty with the Ecclesiastical Commission, an Advisory Council for the Appointment of Bishops and, lastly, that Bishops as well as Clergy should retire at 70.

Some of the members of the Committee made reservations in signing this Report. One member objected to Archbishops, Bishops, Deans and Chapters making any appointments to Parochial Cures, and he also suggested that the Primate should be elected by the Bench of Bishops. Another, held strongly that "the Parson's Freehold" is held on the tenure of regulated legal service, which can be terminated if the conditions are not fulfilled. A well-known layman (Sir Charles Nicholson) thought that a Bishop's pension should not be a direct charge on the funds of the Ecclesiastical Commissioners. "Is it more important that a Bishop should have a pension provided in this way, or that the stipends of incumbents should be raised?" He had no doubt a satisfactory Bishop's pension could be provided by contributory insurance.

The memorandum of the then Dean of Carlisle (Dr. Rashdall) is concerned with his reasons for not assenting to most of the recommendations in this Report. He is entirely against interference with the existing system of appointing Bishops and other dignitaries. "What is wanted is not more caution, but more boldness in such appointments." He dissents *in toto* to a time limit for incumbents—"The independence and security of tenure possessed by the beneficed clergyman, when once a benefice is secured, constitute one of the chief attractions which, in spite of the great and increasing deterrents to the clerical career (not all of a pecuniary or worldly nature) still attract some men of high education and strong character to the ministry of the Church." He further states—"The wish that the Church should at the earliest possible moment recover freedom of legislation through its own representative assemblies, seems to involve the very questionable historical assumption that the Church of England ever possessed such powers of legislation as are contemplated. . . . Nor do I sympathize

with the desire to increase the powers of the Episcopate as a whole (as distinct from those of the individual Bishop in his own diocese) and to abolish the jurisdiction of the Judicial Committee of the Privy Council. . . . That jurisdiction has been the great security for the comprehensiveness of the Church of England in the past and its retention was never more necessary than at the present moment. The distinctive views of each recognized party in the Church in turn have been condemned by the purely ecclesiastical Courts . . . and in every case their condemnation has been reversed by the Judicial Committee. . . ."

It will be seen from these quotations (which are not altogether out of date to-day) that when the Church Assembly came into existence, it had the advantage of much information in regard to the urgent reforms which were necessary, and some solutions had been offered of problems which needed immediate attention.

The Assembly has now been at work for twenty years, and we are justified in asking whether it has fulfilled the high hopes centred in it at its inception. There is no doubt about its financial success, for last year its income amounted to £121,329, nearly all of which came from Diocesan Quotas. The expenditure steadily goes up from year to year and the objective is a minimum income of £145,000 per annum, which is to be allocated for Central Office Expenses, Commissions and Special Committees, Convocation Expenses, Organization, Training for the Ministry, The Missionary Council, Press and Publications Committees, Legal Board and Parliamentary Expenses, and Statistical Returns of Parochial Work. We cannot fail to be impressed by the size of the machine which has come into existence. Are we getting value for the money which is being spent? Of course it is absurd to say that all the money is being wasted, but we must face the question whether it is being used in the best possible way. There is an obvious danger of bureaucratic control. The permanent officials are well dug in with good offices and with salaries fixed and regular, in line, that is, with the Civil Service generally. Their policy therefore will always be one of very cautious progress and officious centralization. The elected members of the Assembly have little opportunity for independent action and in the House of Clergy they are overwhelmed by the weight of the ex-

officio members who, because of their position, will not favour any too drastic a disturbance of the *status quo*.

There are clear signs of a general uneasiness at the growing burdens and restrictions which are being placed on the parochial clergy. One of the most serious challenges to their personal independence and to the religious privileges of the laity is to be seen in the Clergy (National Emergency Precautions) Measure. We all have a high regard and respect for the Episcopate, but all the bishops are over-worked and liable to make mistakes, and any further extension of their power and authority must be closely scrutinized. It is now decided that in the event of "a period of emergency" the Bishop will have power to give directions as to the use or disuse of any church, chapel or other place of public worship in his diocese, and to require any clerk in holy orders serving in any parish or place, to serve in some other parish or place where in the opinion of the Bishop, his help is most needed. It will be noted that the change in the original title of this measure really enlarges its scope and gives additional power to the bishops in any kind of national emergency.

There was very little discussion in the Church Assembly on this Measure of such far-reaching importance. It is true that the Archdeacon of Dudley (all honour to him), moved that the Bishop should seek the advice of a duly appointed Committee of parochial clergy before acting on these regulations, but his resolution was not accepted by those in authority, and the supposed safeguard which *has* been inserted, does not interfere with the bishop's absolute discretion to act as he thinks best.

It has been suggested that if any curb is put on the bishop's power, the principle of episcopal authority is challenged, but for good or for ill that has already been done in regard to their Patronage, by the appointment of clerical and lay advisers under the Benefices (Exercise of Rights of Presentation) Measure.

The fact that it is possible for Measures of great importance to pass through the Assembly almost without discussion and free from amendments, has given rise to much comment throughout the country. There are many who think that the method of election to the House of Laity needs drastic revision, and that *all* the members of the House

of Clergy should be elected. If this latter suggestion is not yet possible, the ex-officio members who at present constitute more than a third of the House, should be reduced in number. Moreover, it is not unreasonable in these democratic days, to ask that a rule be made forbidding ex-officio members to introduce measures and to vote for or against them. Their advice can rightly be given in the discussion on any Measure, but the elected members alone, who are answerable to those who have elected them as their representatives, should decide its fate.

Another reform long overdue is in connection with the Church's financial system. It is a truly gigantic task. Much has been done in recent years to remedy some gross abuses, but much still remains to be done. When the Church Assembly really becomes the Parliament of the Church, I suppose it will have full control of the Church's revenues. In the meantime is it too much to ask that the parochial clergy should be represented on the governing bodies of the Ecclesiastical Commission and Queen Anne's Bounty?

The provision for the retirement of the clergy should be carefully re-considered and improved, and the Clergy Pensions (Widows and Dependents) Measure, 1936, is not an entirely satisfactory solution of a problem which has existed for many generations.

I do not wish to end this paper on a pessimistic critical note. We have great cause for thanksgiving in the fact that during the past forty years great progress has been made in material prosperity. It is, however, much more satisfactory to notice the great awakening of new spiritual forces. The Church of England is going on from strength to strength. Its bishops and clergy are now drawn from every section of Society, and curiously enough, from every denomination. At a recent Rural-decanal Conference in a provincial town, when a somewhat controversial issue was being discussed, several clergy, one after the other stressed their Free Church ancestry and gloried in it! Who can say what the future holds in store for us? Perhaps afar off, one Great United Church, with the "Free" Churches properly incorporated within it, and not so far off, the Church of England at last universally recognized as the body which is the religious expression of the national life and fully authorized to state it publicly.