

# Editorial

The future of theological training is once more the subject of discussion in the Church, as the proposals for the closure of certain colleges and the amalgamation of part-time courses contained in the Bishop of Lincoln's report, *A Way Ahead*, stir controversy among those most directly affected. The report itself is faulty in many places, and its critics have had little difficulty in pointing out its many weaknesses. Nobody should be surprised that the General Synod refused to receive it, and the House of Bishops, which is itself deeply divided on the matter, has now been forced to adopt an alternative strategy. It is well-known that financial considerations play a major part in decision-making of this kind, and the Church of England is currently in the throes of a major financial crisis, brought on by a combination of recession and bad management. There is an inevitable tendency in some circles to think that the resulting crisis is temporary, and will pass once these affairs are sorted out. However, there are a number of underlying issues which will not go away so easily, and which should not be lost sight of amid the charges of incompetence and bad faith which have been levelled at the authors of *A Way Ahead*.

First, there is no doubt that in the last thirty years, ministerial training has moved more and more to a part-time pattern. In 1960 almost nobody trained in that way; today, part-time courses account for a third of the total number of candidates. Moreover, women are better represented on them than they are in full-time colleges, probably because for many it is easier to manage evening classes and the odd weekend than it is to leave a husband and family at home. From the Church's point of view, these courses are attractive not merely because they are less costly, but also because they are less affected by churchmanship—or so it appears on the surface. On most courses, people of all types of Church background train together, and are forced to come to terms with their differences. Colleges, on the other hand, tend to reinforce a certain brand of churchmanship, and thus perpetuate divisions in the Church at large.

In the current controversy, it would be idle to pretend that churchmanship considerations are not in the forefront of most people's minds. Evangelicals feel that an attack on one of their colleges is an attack on their tradition as a whole, and they do not understand why, at a time when Evangelicals are stronger on the ground than ever before, they should have to suffer in this way. On the other hand, it is clear that Evangelical colleges already account for slightly more than half of the available places for training, and that if only non-Evangelical colleges were to be closed, the balance would be upset even more. The Bishop of Lincoln and his commission can fairly claim that they did not intend that Evangelicals should suffer unduly; on their proposals, the percentage of Evangelical places

would actually go up by about half a percentage point!

More important in the long term is the feeling among Evangelicals that part-time courses are biased against them. The teaching staff does not normally reflect the range of churchmanship among the students, and complaints are heard that much of the teaching is off-beat and fairly useless when it comes to ministry. Certainly those who want to be trained in the art of expository preaching will often have a hard time, though that is sadly true in most of the colleges as well. The content and range of the part-time courses currently available will have to be deepened and extended if Evangelicals are going to feel at home on them, and some provision will probably have to be made for specifically Evangelical content during the course of training. There is no reason, for instance, why part-time courses should not make available modules which could be taken in a specifically Evangelical (or Anglo-Catholic) environment; short courses run by groups like the Cornhill Trust in the City of London could easily be incorporated into the wider pattern of training, and might go a long way towards satisfying the demands of Evangelicals for a type of training suited to their needs.

As far as the future of colleges is concerned, it is becoming apparent that the Church cannot continue to fund them on the scale to which they have grown accustomed. When colleges were first established, it was understood that they would be spiritual finishing schools for (single) men who had graduated from one of the universities but who felt the need for further pastoral preparation for ministry. They did not actually become compulsory for ordinands until 1919, and they have always lived in a rather strange academic atmosphere. Those in the university cities have often been little more than residences for ordinands doing a theology degree; those who did not need to do this were, until relatively recently, free to spend a couple of years doing very little. Other colleges did their best to provide students with an academic training, though this was often of variable quality. Whatever may be said in defence of this aspect, the fact remains that graduates of colleges were—and still are—known for their churchmanship above all else, and the acceptability of any particular college is still measured largely in those terms.

Because of this, many Evangelicals see the issue as preserving their tradition within the Church of England. One would hope that academic training of quality is compatible with this aim, but the order of priorities should be clear to all concerned. There is no doubt that Evangelicals can and must fight for their colleges, particularly where these can be defended on academic grounds. In this connexion, it is worth noting that the Bishop of Lincoln's report put four of the six Evangelical colleges among the top seven, whereas none of the Anglo-Catholic colleges was so favoured. This again demonstrates that *A Way Ahead* cannot simply be regarded as anti-Evangelical, and Evangelicals will be doing themselves a disservice if they look at it in that way. Far more important for the future is the need to come

to terms with the changing patterns of training. For a variety of reasons, locally-based courses are bound to become more important in the future, and Evangelicals ought to be concentrating their energies on providing an acceptable training in and through them, rather than waste time and money trying to maintain a system which provides for a type of training now suitable only for a minority of candidates.

Books, tapes, videos and the like can and should be produced on a scale which will impose itself on the Church as a whole. Evangelicals have already succeeded in taking over most of the work among children and youth, and they have done so by adopting just this kind of strategy. A similar vision for ministerial training can and should produce similar results, with a commitment to bringing the Gospel to the nation. Evangelicals should be in the forefront of 'contextualized' learning, just as they should continue to strive for academic excellence in other ways. The two are not mutually exclusive, though admittedly the skills required to match one to the other are rare. Nevertheless, this is the way we should be heading. No doubt some of the colleges will survive, and those that do will have a good chance of being able to provide a first-class academic training for those who attend them. But for those who do not—and they will probably be more and more numerous in the days ahead—it is essential that a good, solid basis be provided for ministry. This is the challenge for the next century, and if Evangelicals are going to meet it adequately, it is as well that they begin to face the issues now, rather than continue to fight yesterday's battles.

**GERALD BRAY**